

Groton Daily Independent

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Death Notice: Dennis Furman

Dennis Furman, 73, of Groton passed away February 2, 2024 at Avera St. Lukes Hospital, Aberdeen. Services are pending with Paetznick-Garness Funeral Chapel, Groton.

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.
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.

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



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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US Labor Market Sizzles

The US economy added 353,000 nonfarm jobs in January, exceeding economist estimates of 185,000 jobs and up from December's upwardly revised 333,000 jobs, according to government data released yesterday. The unemployment rate held steady at 3.7% for the third consecutive month.

The latest jobs report comes after the Federal Reserve this week continued to keep its benchmark federal-funds rate at a range between 5.25% and 5.5%. The Fed's decision marks the fourth straight meeting in which the central bank has opted to hold rates at the highest level in more than two decades. The Fed tentatively plans to lower rates three times this year, though Chairman Jerome Powell said a rate cut is unlikely to come by the group's next meeting in March. The core personal consumption expenditures price index—the Fed's preferred inflation gauge—rose to 2.9% year-over-year in December; the Fed is targeting a 2% annual rate.

Most of the jobs in January were added in professional and business services (74,000), healthcare (70,000), and retail trade (45,000). Average hourly earnings grew 4.5% year-over-year in January, up from 4.1% in December.

US begins retaliatory strikes in Iraq, Syria in response to Jordan attack.

US forces struck more than 85 targets affiliated with Iran-backed militants, including command and control centers as well as missile storage facilities, according to officials. The airstrikes come after three American soldiers were killed in a drone attack at a US military base in Jordan last weekend.

US judge postpones Trump's 2020 election interference trial.

Former President Donald Trump's federal trial, brought by Justice Department Special Counsel Jack Smith, was set to begin March 4 but has now been pushed indefinitely. The delay comes as Trump's claim of presidential immunity makes its way through a federal appeals court.

CIA leaker sentenced to 40 years in prison.

Former CIA officer Joshua Schulte, 35, was sentenced over espionage charges and possession of child sexual abuse material. He was previously convicted of sending a series of US government classified information to whistle-blowing platform WikiLeaks, which began publishing the information in 2017. Schulte's actions are considered the largest theft of classified information in the CIA's history.

Carl Weathers, actor from 'Rocky,' dies at 76.

Weathers was a former NFL linebacker who became an actor and starred as boxer Apollo Creed in the "Rocky" movies with Sylvester Stallone. Weathers also had roles in "Happy Gilmore," "Predator," and most recently, the Disney+ hit series "The Mandalorian." He died peacefully in his sleep, per a statement from his family.

Three people indicted in \$400M FTX cryptocurrency hack.

The Justice Department has reportedly charged three people for conspiring to steal dozens of people's identities and for allegedly being behind the mystery multimillion-dollar hack. The hack occurred in November 2022 on the same day cryptocurrency exchange FTX, once valued at \$32B and led by disgraced founder Sam Bankman-Fried, filed for bankruptcy.

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First 3D-printed functional human brain tissue created.

Scientists at the University of Wisconsin-Madison are the first to develop the 3D-printed brain tissue, which grows and behaves like a natural brain tissue. The group used a new 3D-printing method, stacking layers of tissue horizontally rather than vertically and using a softer bio-ink (see 101). The model will allow scientists to better study neurological diseases, including Alzheimer's and Parkinson's.

Michael Jordan's championship sneakers sell for record \$8M.

A set of six Nike Air Jordans, known as the Dynasty Collection and worn by the basketball legend during the Chicago Bulls' six winning NBA championship games in the 1990s, sold for \$8,032,800. The figure is a global auction record for game-worn sneakers and is the second highest price paid for Jordan's sports memorabilia, behind a game-worn jersey that sold for \$10.1M in 2022.

Tesla to patch 2.2 million US vehicles in software recall.

The recall is due to the font size of a warning light on its vehicles' displays. Federal safety regulators said the small font size can make safety information difficult to read, increasing the likelihood of crashes. Tesla said it wasn't aware of crashes caused by the font issue, which will be fixed by an over-the-air software update.

Humankind(ness)

Dear readers—

We're taking a moment this week to remember our dear friend and colleague, Pierre Lipton, who unexpectedly passed away one year ago tomorrow.

Pierre accomplished more in 26 years than most do in a lifetime—a world traveler, speaker of multiple languages, valedictorian, Forbes 30 under 30 honoree, start-up founder, and more.

What folks may not have seen from the outside was his consistent desire to drive positive impact in the lives of others. At 1440, Pierre pushed for our employee wellness program, employee happiness interviews, vacation incentives, and more. Outside 1440, he cared deeply about making the world a better place, devoting his time and energy to issues he was passionate about—physical health in underserved communities, food security, animal welfare, and the environment.

These are just a few examples of how Pierre turned the spirit of human kindness into daily action. He was humble and took time to deeply connect with people, lifting others up, and helping them succeed.

Pierre passed away after completing a marathon in Arizona. He was doing what he loved. He is deeply missed by his family, partner, friends, colleagues, dog Appa, and many others.

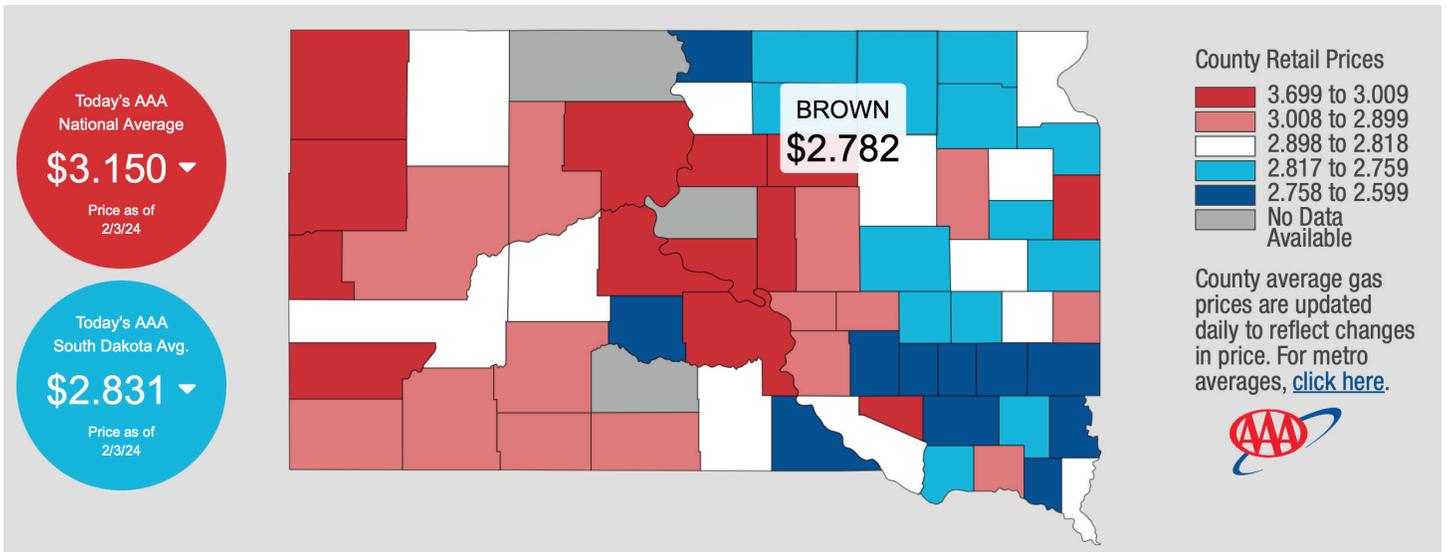
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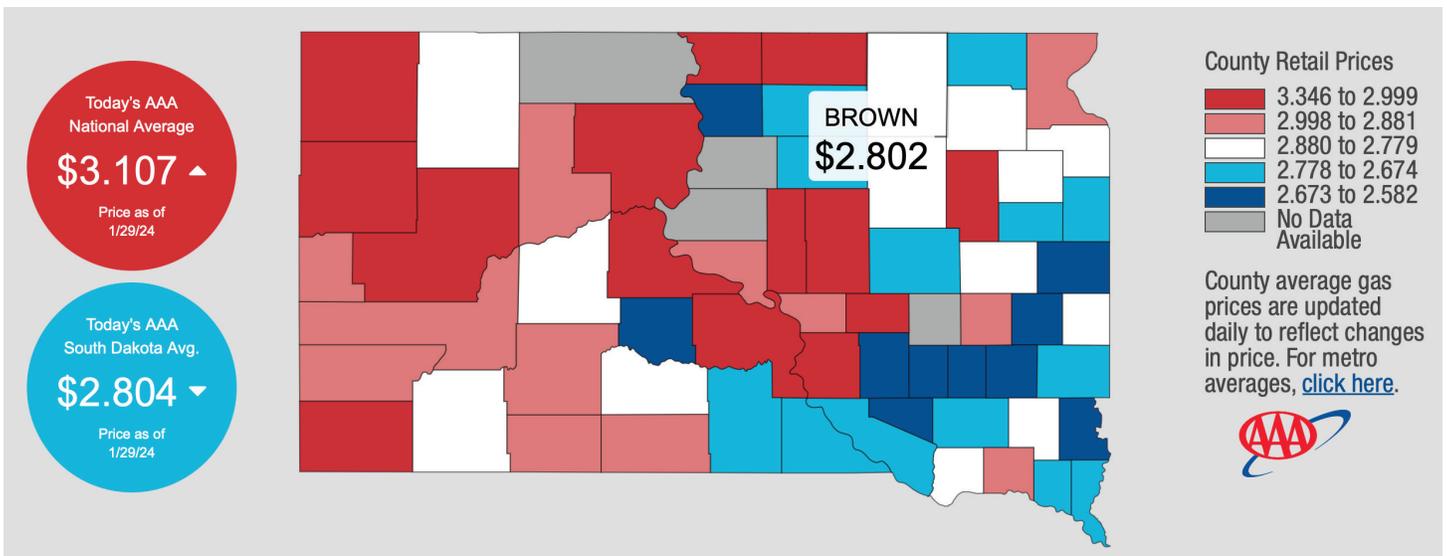
South Dakota Average Gas Prices

	Regular	Mid-Grade	Premium	Diesel
Current Avg.	\$2.831	\$2.993	\$3.458	\$3.592
Yesterday Avg.	\$2.833	\$2.991	\$3.473	\$3.589
Week Ago Avg.	\$2.827	\$3.005	\$3.469	\$3.613
Month Ago Avg.	\$2.935	\$3.125	\$3.621	\$3.740
Year Ago Avg.	\$3.429	\$3.562	\$4.029	\$4.447

This Week



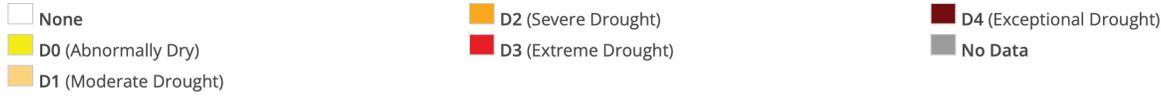
Two Weeks Ago



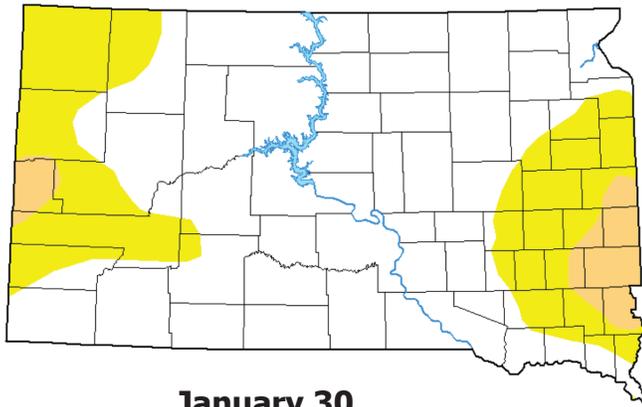
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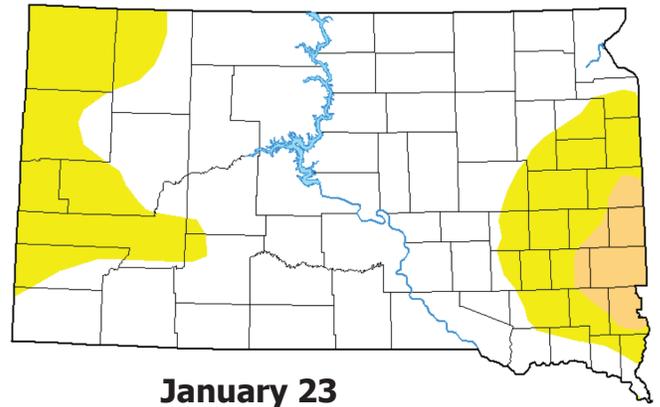
Drought Classification



Drought Monitor



January 30



January 23

Most of the region was dry this week, with only portions of central Colorado, far southwest Kansas, and northern North Dakota recording normal to above-normal precipitation. Temperatures were near normal over much of Kansas and central Nebraska and were 5-10 degrees above normal for most of the rest of the region. Most of the region did not see any changes to the drought status this week. Moderate drought was introduced over portions of western South Dakota and central Wyoming due to the ongoing dry winter and lack of snow. Abnormally dry conditions were improved in central Colorado based on the short-term improvements being observed there.

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GHS Wrestling

Groton Grapplers go 3-0 at Lyman Quad

Groton Area 41, Bennett County 36

- 285: Gaviin Englund (Groton Area) wins by forfeit.
- 106: Aiden Strom (Groton Area) over Ruger Smokov (Bennett County) (TF 21-5 4:00)
- 113: Maddux Risse (Bennett County) over Lincoln Krause (Groton Area) (Fall 0:41)
- 120: Double Forfeit
- 126: Lyle Noel (Bennett County) over Donavon Block (Groton Area) (Fall 4:00)
- 132: Walker Zoellner (Groton Area) wins by forfeit.
- 138: Gavin Risse (Bennett County) wins by forfeit.
- 144: Tel Gropper (Bennett County) wins by forfeit.
- 150: Christian Ehresmann (Groton Area) over Jordan Risse (Bennett County) (Fall 1:06)
- 157: Talon Krolikowski (Bennett County) over Easten Ekern (Groton Area) (Fall 0:00)
- 165: Korbin Kucker (Groton Area) wins by forfeit.
- 175: Ben Hoeft (Groton Area) wins by forfeit.
- 190: Ethan Harris (Bennett County) over Isaiah Scepaniak (Groton Area) (Fall 0:30)
- 215: Charlie Frost (Groton Area) wins by forfeit.

Groton Area 60, Lyman 15

- 215: Charlie Frost (Groton Area) over Ayden Brakke (Lyman) (Fall 3:44)
- 285: Gaviin Englund (Groton Area) wins by forfeit.
- 106: Wyatt Hagen (Groton Area) wins by forfeit.
- 113: Lincoln Krause (Groton Area) wins by forfeit.
- 120: Royal Lulf (Lyman) wins by forfeit.
- 126: Donavon Block (Groton Area) wins by forfeit.
- 132: Walker Zoellner (Groton Area) wins by forfeit.
- 138: Braydon Oldenkamp (Lyman) wins by forfeit.
- 144: Double Forfeit
- 150: Christian Ehresmann (Groton Area) over Aja Middletent (Lyman) (Fall 0:53)
- 157: Easten Ekern (Groton Area) wins by forfeit.
- 165: Rory McManus (Lyman) over Korbin Kucker (Groton Area) (Dec 4-3)
- 175: Ben Hoeft (Groton Area) over Jaydin Sorensen, (Lyman) (Fall 0:35)
- 190: Isaiah Scepaniak (Groton Area) wins by forfeit.

Groton Area 45, Marion/Freeman 33

- 190: Isaiah Scepaniak (Groton Area) wins by forfeit.
- 215: Charlie Frost (Groton Area) over Raymond Arnold (Marion/Freeman) (Fall 3:17)
- 285: Gaviin Englund (Groton Area) over Ricky Salis (Marion/Freeman) (Fall 1:18)
- 106: Logun Pankratz (Marion/Freeman) over Wyatt Hagen (Groton Area) (SV-1 3-1)
- 113: Brody Gossen (Marion/Freeman) over Lincoln Krause (Groton Area) (Fall 0:32)
- 120: Easton Tschetter (Marion/Freeman) wins by forfeit.
- 126: Donavon Block (Groton Area) over Finley McConniel (Marion/Freeman) (Dec 8-6)
- 132: Keaton Prehiem (Marion/Freeman) over Walker Zoellner (Groton Area) (Fall 2:46)
- 138: Axle Schultz (Marion/Freeman) wins by forfeit.
- 144: Alaric Knittel (Marion/Freeman) wins by forfeit.
- 150: Christian Ehresmann (Groton Area) wins by forfeit.
- 157: Easten Ekern (Groton Area) wins by forfeit.
- 165: Korbin Kucker (Groton Area) wins by forfeit.
- 175: Ben Hoeft (Groton Area) wins by forfeit.

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NSU Wrestling

Ranked Battle Does Not Fall in No. 18 Wolves Favor

Aberdeen, S.D. – The No. 18 Northern State University wrestling team faced off against No. 13 the University of Mary from Wachs Arena Friday evening in front of a rowdy crowd. The Wolves won four weights with four separate matches coming down to the final seconds; however, they ultimately fell in the dual.

THE QUICK DETAILS

Final Score: NSU 15, MARY 19

Records: NSU 7-10 (2-3 NSIC), MARY 9-4 (5-2 NSIC)

HOW IT HAPPENED

The Marauders jumped out to a 6-0 lead through the first two weights before the duo of Mogle and Turnquist got to work with two bonus point wins

Braydon Mogle scored early and often, defeating Kaden DeCoteau in a 12-2 major decision; and the Wolves were quickly within two of the Marauders

No. 2 Wyatt Turnquist worked his usual magic on top, turning Kaden Renner for 12 nearfall points and a 15-0 technical fall win at 3:35 in the match

UMary tied the dual at 157-pounds despite a closely contested decision (4-2) between No. 4 Devin Bahr and No. 11 Braydon Huber, with Huber notching the 2-point edge

Chase Bloomquist grabbed the lead again for the Wolves, scoring right out of the gate against Leo Mushinsky with a 3-1 lead in the first period; the redshirt junior ultimately defeated Mushinsky in an 8-3 decision

Seth Brossard extended the Wolves lead (15-9) with an upset victory at 174-pounds; the graduate student took control early and sat down No. 8 Max Bruss in a 12-5 decision

The University of Mary rallied back in the final three weights, with three of their nationally ranked wrestlers, to secure the dual victory; despite third period battles by Sam Kruger and Nathan Schauer

FINAL RESULTS

Match Summary

	NSU	MARY
125 Jaden Verhagen (UMary) over Landen Fischer (Northern State) (Dec 7-4)	0	3
133 #5 Reece Barnhardt (UMary) over Jason Henschel (Northern State) (Dec 8-1)	0	3
141 Braydon Mogle (Northern State) over Kaden DeCoteau (UMary) (MD 12-2)	4	0
149 #2 Wyatt Turnquist (Northern State) over Kaden Renner (UMary) (TF 15-0 3:35)	5	0
157 #11 Braydon Huber (UMary) over #4 Devin Bahr (Northern State) (Dec 4-2)	0	3
165 Chase Bloomquist (Northern State) over Leo Mushinsky (UMary) (Dec 8-3)	3	0
174 Seth Brossard (Northern State) over #8 Max Bruss (UMary) (Dec 12-5)	3	0
184 #11 Wyatt Lidberg (UMary) over Sam Kruger (Northern State) (Dec 9-6)	0	3
197 #6 Matt Kaylor (UMary) over Tyson Lien (Northern State) (MD 16-3)	0	4
285 #8 Luke Tweeton (UMary) over Nathan Schauer (Northern State) (Dec 4-2)	0	3

Dual Meet Score

15 19

UP NEXT

Northern State returns to Wachs Arena today facing off against No. 4 Wisconsin Parkside. Match start time is set for 4 p.m. with a pair of extra matches taking place 20 minutes prior.

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GHS Boys' Basketball

Vermillion sets back Groton Area in boys hoop action

Groton Area came out firing on all cylinders, but Vermillion squashed the Tiger threat with a 13-point rally in the second quarter as the Tanagers defeated Groton Area in boys basketball action, 60-51. The game was played Friday in Groton.

Groton Area jumped out to an 8-0 lead and held an 18-11 lead after the first quarter. Groton Area took a 21-13 lead before the lid flopped on the hoop for Groton Area and Vermillion scored the next 13 points to take a 26-21 lead. Vermillion led, 31-25 at half time. In the second quarter, Vermillion made eight of 11 field goals for 73 percent and Groton Area made two of 13 for 15 percent.

The Tanagers opened up a 12-point lead at 40-28 in the in the third quarter and led, 49-39, going into the fourth quarter. Groton Area cut the lead down to five at 54-49, but was unable to capitalize on Vermillion's three fourth quarter turnovers.

Lane Tietz led Groton Area with 22 points, four rebounds, one assist, two steals and one block. Jacob Zak had 18 points, four rebounds and one assist. Keegen Tracy had four points, eight rebounds and one assist. Gage Sippel had three points, five rebounds and one steal. Kassen Keough had two points and one steal. Ryder Johnson had two points, seven rebounds, four assists, two steals and two block shots.

Groton Area made nine of 28 two-pointers for 32 percent, seven of 23 three-pointers for 30 percent, 12 of 14 free throws for 86 percent, had 28 rebounds, 12 turnovers, seven assists, six steals, 20 team fouls and three blocks.

Three-Pointers: Tietz - 4, Zak - 3.

Vermillion had four players in double figures with Trey Hansen leading the way with 16 points, Conner Roerig and Carter Hansen each had 13, Zoan Robinson had 10 and Bryson Skogsberg six.

Vermillion made 21 of 44 field goals for 48 percent, 11 of 16 free throws for 69 percent, had 10 turnovers and 12 team fouls.

Three-Pointers: Roerig - 1, Skogsberg - 1, Trey Hansen - 2, Carter Hansen - 1.

Groton Area won the junior varsity game, 39-31. Groton Area had a 10-point run in the first half and led it, 22-14, at half time. Groton led, 33-22, after the third quarter.

Gage Sippel led Groton Area with 17 points while Easton Weber had nine, Kassen Keough six, Jayden Schwan four, Blake Pauli two and Logan Warrington one.

Three-Pointers: Keough - 2, Weber - 3.

Groton Area made 16 of 31 field goals for 52 percent, two of three free throws for 67 percent, had 17 turnovers and 14 team fouls.

Gabe Larsen led Vermillion with eight points while Kade Reuvers had seven, Landon Cerny six, Luke Jensen and Trenton Thomas each had three and Spencer Blanchette and Frankie Orr each had two points.

Three-Pointers: Reverse - 1, Thomas - 1, Jensen 1, Larsen - 2.

Vermillion made 12 of 35 field goals for 34 percent, two of 10 free throws for 20 percent, had 11 turnovers and seven team fouls.

Groton Area won the C game, 38-37. The game was tied at 12 after the first quarter. Groton Area scored eight straight points in the second quarter to take a 22-20 lead at halftime. The Tigers led, 31-27, after the third quarter.

Karson Zak led Groton Area with 15 points while Jayden Schwan had 11, Easton Weber seven, and scoring two points apiece were Logan Warrington, Ryder Schelle and Ethan Kroll.

Groton Area made 12 of 34 field goals for 35 percent, 10 of 16 free throws for 63 percent, had six turnovers and seven team fouls.

Three-Pointers: Zak - 1, Schwan - 2, Weber - 2.

Spencer Blanchette led Vermillion with 17 points while Luke Jensen had 13, Trequin Thomas had five and Lucas Solomon three.

Vermillion made 15 of 33 field goals for 45 percent, two of four free throws for 50 percent, had 11

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turnovers and six team fouls.

Three-Pointers: Blanchette - 3, Jensen - 1, Solomon - 1.

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



The Groton Area boys varsity team gathers during a timeout during the game Friday against Vermillion. (Photo by Elizabeth Varin)



Groton Area senior Logan Ringgenberg steals the ball being passed to Vermillion senior Conner Roerig during the game Friday.

(Photo by Elizabeth Varin)

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Groton Area sophomore Ryder Johnson looks to pass during the game Friday against Vermillion. (Photo by Elizabeth Varin)



Groton Area senior Jacob Zak dribbles while looking to his teammates to pass during the game Friday against Vermillion. (Photo by Elizabeth Varin)



Groton Area senior Logan Ringgenberg steps in from of Vermillion senior Conner Rorig, who drives to the net during the game Friday. (Photo by Elizabeth Varin)

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Groton Area sophomore Ryder Johnson jumps to rebound the ball during the game Friday against Vermillion. (Photo by Elizabeth Varin)



Groton Area sophomore Keegan Tracy passes the ball during the game Friday against Vermillion. (Photo by Elizabeth Varin)

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Groton Area sophomore Ryder Johnson jumps to block Vermillion senior Zoan Robinson's shot during the game Friday. (Photo by Elizabeth Varin)



Groton Area senior Lane Tietz dribbles past Vermillion senior Zoan Robinson during the game Friday. (Photo by Elizabeth Varin)

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Groton Area sophomore Ryder Johnson looks to pass during the game Friday against Vermillion. (Photo by Elizabeth Varin)



Groton Area senior Lane Tietz drives the ball toward the hoop during the game Friday against Vermillion. (Photo by Elizabeth Varin)

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Groton Area senior Logan Ringgenberg jumps to block a shot from Vermillion senior Zoan Robinson during the game Friday. (Photo by Elizabeth Varin)



Groton Area senior Lane Tietz jumps for a shot during the game Friday against Vermillion. (Photo by Elizabeth Varin)

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Groton Area sophomore Keegen Tracy drives the ball toward the hoop during the game Friday against Vermillion. (Photo by Elizabeth Varin)



Groton Area sophomore Ryder Johnson jumps to rebound the ball while Vermillion sophomore Trey Hanson jumps for it too during the game Friday. (Photo by Elizabeth Varin)

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Groton Area senior Lane Tietz drives the ball toward the hoop during the game Friday against Vermillion. (Photo by Elizabeth Varin)



Groton Area seniors Lane Tietz (No. 10) and Logan Ringgenberg (No. 42) jump to block a shot from Vermillion junior Carter Hansen during the game Friday. (Photo by Elizabeth Varin)

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Groton Area senior Lane Tietz dribbles the ball down the court with Kassen Keough just ahead of him during the game Friday against Vermillion. (Photo by Elizabeth Varin)



Groton Area senior Lane Tietz yells for sophomore Keegen Tracy to pass during the game Friday against Vermillion. (Photo by Elizabeth Varin)



Groton Area sophomore Ryder Johnson passes the ball while Vermillion sophomore Trey Hansen (No. 33) and senior Zoan Robinson (No. 23) try to block during the game Friday. (Photo by Elizabeth Varin)

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Groton Area senior Lane Tietz and sophomore Kassen Keough drive the ball down the court during the game Friday against Vermillion. (Photo by Elizabeth Varin)



Groton Area sophomore Gage Sippel makes a free throw during the game Friday against Vermillion. (Photo by Elizabeth Varin)



Groton Area sophomore Keegen Tracy drives the ball toward the net while Vermillion senior Conner Roerig steps in his way during the game Friday. (Photo by Elizabeth Varin)

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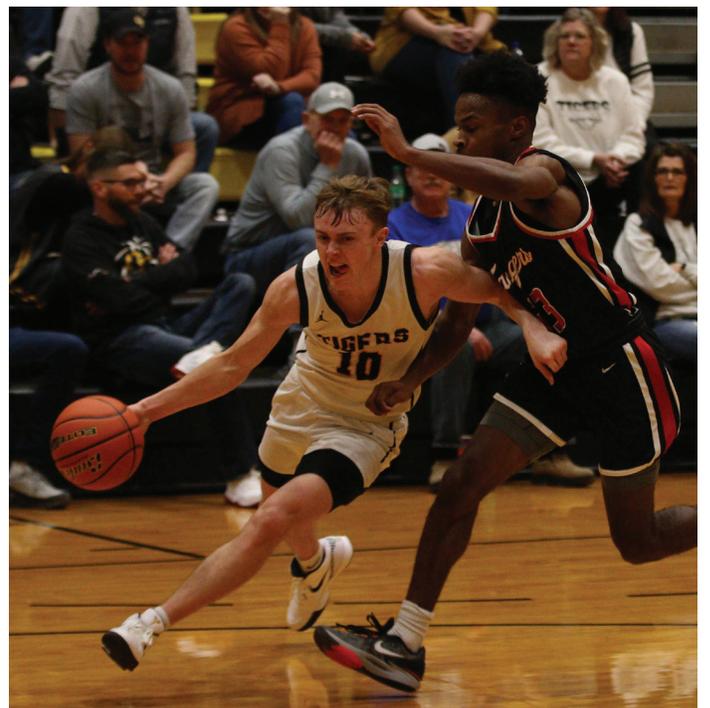
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Groton Area sophomore Ryder Johnson jumps to shoot the ball while Vermillion sophomore Trey Hansen races to block him during the game Friday. (Photo by Elizabeth Varin)



Groton Area sophomore Keegen Tracy drives the ball toward the net while Vermillion senior Conner Roerig steps in his way during the game Friday. (Photo by Elizabeth Varin)



Groton Area senior Lane Tietz drives the ball toward the net while Vermillion senior Zoan Robinson tries to block him during the game Friday. (Photo by Elizabeth Varin)

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Groton Area junior Blake Pauli looks to pass during the game Friday against Vermillion.

(Photo by Elizabeth Varin)



Groton Area senior Jacob Zak drives the ball toward the net while Vermillion junior Carter Hansen attempts to block him during the game Friday. (Photo by Elizabeth Varin)

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Groton Area senior Jacob Zak jumps for a shot during the game Friday against Vermillion. (Photo by Elizabeth Varin)



Groton Area senior Lane Tietz drives the ball toward the net while Vermillion senior Zoan Robinson tries to block him during the game Friday. (Photo by Elizabeth Varin)

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Groton Area sophomore Keegen Tracy and Vermillion senior Zoan Robinson try to rebound the ball during the game Friday. (Photo by Elizabeth Varin)



Groton Area senior Lane Tietz takes a shot while Vermillion senior Zoan Robinson races to stop him during the game Friday. (Photo by Elizabeth Varin)

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Groton Area senior Lane Tietz jumps for a shot during the game Friday against Vermillion. (Photo by Elizabeth Varin)



Groton Area senior Lane Tietz tries to rebound the ball during the game Friday against Vermillion. (Photo by Elizabeth Varin)

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Vermillion sophomore Trey Hansen attempts a shot while Groton Area senior Lane Tietz tries to block him during the game Friday. Also pictured are Keegen Tracy and Colby Dunker. (Photo by Elizabeth Varin)



Groton Area senior Lane Tietz tries to block a shot by Vermillion senior Zoan Robinson during the game Friday. (Photo by Elizabeth Varin)

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Groton Area sophomore Ryder Johnson jumps for a shot during the game Friday against Vermillion. (Photo by Elizabeth Varin)



Groton Area senior Colby Dunker jumps for a shot during the game Friday against Vermillion. (Photo by Elizabeth Varin)

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Groton Area cheerleaders and fans cheer on the team during the game Friday against Vermillion. (Photo by Elizabeth Varin)



Groton Area senior Lane Tietz drives the ball toward the net while Vermillion junior Carter Hansen tries to stop him during the game Friday. (Photo by Elizabeth Varin)

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Groton Area sophomore Gage Sippel jumps to rebound a shot during the game Friday against Vermillion. (Photo by Elizabeth Varin)



Groton Area senior Jacob Zak puts pressure on Vermillion sophomore Trey Hansen during the game Friday. (Photo by Elizabeth Varin)



Groton Area senior Lane Tietz looks to pass while Vermillion junior Carter Hansen tries to block during the game Friday. (Photo by Elizabeth Varin)

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Groton Area senior Jacob Zak throws the ball in to play during the game Friday against Vermillion. (Photo by Elizabeth Varin)



Groton Area senior Lane Tietz jumps to shoot while Vermillion senior Conner Roerig tries to block during the game Friday. (Photo by Elizabeth Varin)

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Groton Area senior Lane Tietz passes the ball to sophomore Kassen Keough during the game Friday against Vermillion. (Photo by Elizabeth Varin)

Varin)



Groton Area senior Lane Tietz shots while Vermillion junior Carter Hansen tries to block during the game Friday.(Photo by Elizabeth Varin)



Groton Area senior Jacob Zak jumps to block a shot from Vermillion sophomore Trey Hansen during the game Friday. (Photo by Elizabeth Varin)

Varin)

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The Groton Area boys varsity basketball team comes together at the end of a time out during the game Friday. (Photo by Elizabeth Varin)

Northern hires Associate Dean of Nursing



Dr. Lyncee Monson

Aberdeen, S.D. – Dr. Lyncee Monson has been hired as Associate Dean of Nursing to launch and direct the Bachelor of Science in Nursing degree program at Northern State University.

“Dr. Monson is a welcomed addition to the College of Arts and Sciences. She brings a wealth of knowledge as a practitioner in the area as well as an educator at both a private and a public university,” said Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences Dr. Alyssa Kiesow.

Northern recently received approval from the South Dakota Board of Regents to start the bachelor’s degree program, in order to address the critical workforce needs in the community, region and state. The program also received approval from the South Dakota Board of Nursing.

“I am very excited that Northern has hired Dr. Monson as our Associate Dean of Nursing to launch our BSN program. She has deep experience in the nursing field, in both the clinical and educational areas. Dr. Monson has a passion for nursing education in Aberdeen and this region of the state, having most recently served as a faculty member and the

site coordinator for the SDSU accelerated nursing program on Northern’s campus,” said Provost and Vice President for Academic Affairs Dr. Mike Wanous.

Monson has 18 years of experience in academics and has been a nurse for 23 years. In addition to teaching, Monson works at Avera in the intensive care unit.

“I feel it is important to maintain an active practice to be an effective nurse leader and educator in a healthcare system that is continually changing,” Monson said.

Monson earned her Doctorate of Nursing in 2022 from Northern Kentucky University, her Master of Science in Nursing in 2014 from Western Governor’s University and her Bachelor of Science in Nursing in 2001 from Presentation College. She is a registered nurse who holds certifications as both a certified critical care registered nurse and certified nurse educator.

Having lived in the Groton, S.D. area her whole life, Monson is invested in the region. She has two daughters, Hailey and Hannah. Hailey is following her mother’s footsteps and is currently studying nursing at SDSU. Hannah is a senior in high school and also plans to go into nursing.

“This is a huge endeavor, but I enjoy confronting challenges with creative solutions, collaborative networking, and meticulous organization,” Monson said. “The goal is to build a robust program through a multistep approach— this includes the creation of an innovative and comprehensive curriculum that supports the values of this community, reflects the mission of Northern, and aligns with accreditation standards,” Monson said.

The new bachelor’s degree will be housed in the soon-to-be-built Northern Business and Health Innovation Center. The BSN program will officially start Fall 2025, with the option for students to start their pre-nursing courses in Fall 2024.

“The next steps will also include finalizing the building project, organizing clinical placements, securing final approval from regulatory bodies, and assembling qualified faculty and staff,” Monson said.

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Landon Johnson replaces one of the fixtures at the skating rink. The warm weather; however, has closed the skating rink. (Photo by Paul Kosel)



SOUTH DAKOTA SEARCHLIGHT

<https://southdakotasearchlight.com>

State apologizes, pays transgender advocacy group \$300,000 for discrimination

Transformation Project filed lawsuit over canceled health worker contract

BY: JOHN HULT - FEBRUARY 2, 2024 12:39 PM

The state of South Dakota has issued an apology letter and a \$300,000 payment to a transgender advocacy group for the abrupt cancellation of a Department of Health contract in 2022.

Those are the terms of a settlement agreement inked Thursday in a federal discrimination lawsuit filed by The Transformation Project shortly after the cancellation.

The group had a contract with the state, paid for with federal funds, to provide community health worker services to the LGBTQ+ community from its Sioux Falls headquarters.

The cancellation came on Dec. 16, 2022, shortly after a conservative news outlet contacted Gov. Kristi Noem to ask why the state had signed the \$136,000 contract.

Department of Health Secretary Joan Adam resigned in the wake of the controversy, though neither she nor the state would comment on the reason for her departure.

The Transformation Project's lawsuit cited Noem's public comments on transgender people and her response to the conservative news outlet, made through spokesperson Ian Fury, as proof that the decision was discriminatory in nature.

"The contract was signed without Gov. Noem's prior knowledge or approval," Fury told the outlet.

The state offered a series of alleged failures on the part of The Transformation Project as reasons for the cancellation, but the lawsuit argued that those reasons were meant to put "a thin gloss" of legitimacy on a discriminatory action.

Apology: Group was treated 'differently'

The community health worker hired through the contract, Jack Fonder, was also named as a plaintiff in The Transformation Project's lawsuit.

As part of the settlement, the current Department of Health secretary wrote an apology letter to Fonder and the project's director, Susan Williams.

"On behalf of the State of South Dakota, I apologize that the Transformation Project's contract was terminated and for treating the Transformation Project differently than other organizations awarded Community Health Worker contracts," Secretary Melissa Magstadt wrote in the Jan. 17 letter.

She went on to "emphasize that all South Dakotans are entitled to equal treatment under the law — regardless of their race, color, national origin, religion, disability, age, or sex."

The settlement agreement spells out the \$300,000 payment — a figure more than double the amount of the contract, and enough to cover the attorney fees associated with the lawsuit.

The document also has the state agreeing "not to discriminate against the Transformation Project in violation of state or federal law with respect to any service, program, or activity that the State provides."

The state "does not admit liability for the claims pleaded in the Litigation, but admits that the State treated the Transformation Project differently than other organizations awarded Community Health Worker contracts."

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'We are vindicated'

The nonprofit lauded the settlement on Friday as proof that it had followed through on its obligations under the contract.

"We are vindicated as the government has acknowledged what we knew the very day we learned of our contract's cancellation: that we did not break any procedures and we did not fail to meet the terms of the CHW contract in any way," Williams said in a statement to South Dakota Searchlight. "To put it simply, the government canceled our contract because of the very population we serve – the transgender community."

Brendan Johnson, the former U.S. attorney for South Dakota who represented the advocacy group, called the settlement a win for non-discrimination.

"This settlement marks a significant milestone in our ongoing commitment to civil rights advocacy," said Johnson, of Robins Kaplan LLP. "We commend the resiliency of the LGBTQ+ community and remain committed to vigorously upholding their rights."

The Transformation Project has been an outspoken advocacy group for that community, and Fonder's contracted role was intended to help members with health system navigation, health promotion and coaching, and education. The federal funds used to pay Fonder's contract were earmarked for certain targeted groups, including the LGBTQ+ community.

In a Friday statement, Fonder called the moment "an exciting time in history" for South Dakota's trans community.

"I assumed the role of CHW with the intention of providing trans people in our community with the resources they require to succeed in this state, little realizing that doing so would result in my own outing as a trans man for standing up for what is right," Fonder said. "We promise to keep up the battle for transgender rights and to make sure they have access to the resources they require."

Eighty percent of LGBTQ+ youth in South Dakota report they've experienced discrimination for their sexual orientation or gender identity, according to The Transformation Project. Fifty-three percent of LGBTQ+ youth in South Dakota have seriously considered suicide in the past year and 19% report attempting suicide in the same timeframe – higher than for other youth in South Dakota. About 75% of LGBTQ+ youth also report experiencing anxiety and 58% report symptoms of depression.

"When our organization became a target of discrimination, we knew that we had to fight back, not just on behalf of our Community Health Worker, but on behalf of the entire population of transgender people across South Dakota," wrote Williams, the Transformation Project director. "This settlement sends some clear and strong messages: that discrimination against transgender people will not be tolerated in South Dakota, and that when the government discriminates against transgender people, there are consequences. We hope that this is a message that reverberates across our state."

The settlement will allow the group to keep Fonder on staff as a community health worker – a position he kept even after the dissolution of the contract. The group will continue to apply for future contracts with the state, Williams said.

Fury, Gov. Noem's spokesperson, did not respond to a request for comment.

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.

COMMENTARY

Parents and pediatricians. Not politicians.

**We don't co-parent with our legislators.
Why are they making medical decisions for our kids?**

SAMANTHA CHAPMAN

Like any parent, I've spent a lot of time at the doctor's office over the years. From routine well-baby visits and annual exams to (thankfully fewer) urgent-care situations, I know my way around the clinic. My husband and I have had many questions and great conversations with our doctors regarding the best care for our kiddos.

But you know who's never been a part of these conversation? Our legislators.

Medical decisions should be made between patients, their parents and their doctors – not politicians.

But across the country and right here in South Dakota, lawmakers have been sticking their noses into matters they shouldn't – specifically health care decisions that have been traditionally reserved for parents.

Last year, South Dakota lawmakers passed legislation that prohibits doctors from providing life-saving gender-affirming health care to trans youth, essentially putting the government in charge of making vital health care decisions for our kids.

We don't co-parent with our legislators. Why are they making medical decisions for us?

This year, there's a bill that would give children's medical decisions back to parents. Senate Bill 216 would give parents the authority to make medical decisions on behalf of their children with gender dysphoria.

Like all health care, health care for transgender youth is individualized and based on the needs of each particular person. Research shows that providing appropriate care to trans kids improves mental health outcomes, including decreased rates of depression and anxiety, substance use and suicide attempts. Parents, physicians and medical experts have explained again and again how South Dakota's cruel and unconstitutional law is causing immense and irreversible harm across our state.

Senate Bill 216 would amend last year's gender-affirming care ban to allow doctors to provide puberty blockers or hormonal treatment – nonsurgical medical care consistent with prevailing medical and scientific standards – to trans kids only with parental consent.

Gender-affirming care saves lives. Transgender kids, like all kids, deserve a chance to experience joy, learn in a safe environment, get the health care that they need, and survive into adulthood. The current law substitutes the state's judgment for that of loving parents who are following the guidance of their children and the advice of doctors.

Freedom is a family value – at home, at school, and at the doctor's office. And it includes freedom for parents to make decisions about their children's health care.

As advocacy manager for the American Civil Liberties Union of South Dakota, Samantha Chapman builds the ACLU's public education and advocacy programs through coalition-building, leadership development, communication and lobbying. She ensures that supporters of the ACLU of South Dakota have the tools, information, and opportunities to be effective advocates on issues like abortion rights, Indigenous justice, criminal justice reform, and LGBTQ+ and Two Spirit rights. Samantha joined the ACLU of South Dakota in December 2022 with six years of professional advocacy and health care communications experience.

Miners, environmental advocates unite behind bill to increase financial protections

BY: JOSHUA HAIAR - FEBRUARY 2, 2024 2:13 PM

PIERRE — A bill to dramatically increase the state's financial protections against some types of abandoned mines has achieved the rare feat of uniting miners and environmental advocates.

The bill passed the Senate on Thursday by a vote of 28-3 and is headed to a House committee.

The legislation addresses sand, gravel and construction-aggregate mines. Mine operators already have to post a surety, which is cash or a financial instrument the state can seize to clean up a mine if the operator doesn't complete the work.

For the types of mines addressed in the bill, that surety is currently \$500 per acre or a statewide "blanket" of \$20,000 — amounts that haven't changed since the 1980s.

Those amounts would go up to \$3,850 per acre and \$300,000, respectively, if the legislation becomes law. "After more than 40 years, some of the provisions need to be updated," said Mike Lees, administrator of the state Minerals and Mining Program.

Lees testified recently to the state Senate Agriculture and Natural Resources Committee, which voted 6-1 to advance the bill to the full Senate. The legislation includes additional provisions to modernize and streamline portions of the state's sand, gravel and construction-aggregate mining laws.

Lees said the estimated cost to restore a small sand and gravel mine to a natural-looking condition — a process known as reclamation — is \$3,300 to \$5,500 per acre. For a large quarry, the estimate goes up to \$20,000 per acre.

That means the cost to reclaim the 21,000 acres' worth of sand and gravel mines in the state could be in the hundreds of millions, even though the state only holds \$4 million worth of sureties for those mines. With higher sureties of \$3,850 per acre, the state would hold \$81 million.

Because the proposed increases are so substantial, the bill includes a two-year deferment for mine operators to adjust to the higher sureties, and a five-year staggered increase for the statewide blanket bond.

Representatives of both the mining industry and conservation and environmental groups spoke in support of the bill.

"This is long overdue," said Paul Lepisto of the Izaak Walton League of America, a conservation group.

The lone no vote came from Sen. Joshua Klumb, R-Mitchell. He said that while he agrees "with most of the stuff in the bill," he's worried it infringes on the property rights of mine operators who own their land.

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.

U.S. retaliates for killings of troops by launching military strikes at Iraq and Syria

BY: JENNIFER SHUTT - FEBRUARY 2, 2024 6:17 PM

WASHINGTON — The U.S. military on Friday took a first round of retaliatory action following the deaths of three American troops by striking facilities in Iraq and Syria, according to a statement from President Joe Biden.

"The United States does not seek conflict in the Middle East or anywhere else in the world," Biden said. "But let all those who might seek to do us harm know this: If you harm an American, we will respond."

Biden said Friday marked the beginning of the U.S. response to the deaths in late January of Sgt. William Jerome Rivers, Spc. Kennedy Ladon Sanders and Spc. Breonna Alexsondria Moffett, all of whom were from bases in Georgia.

Dozens of U.S. troops were also injured in the drone attack at a base in Jordan that was carried out by groups supported by Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps, the Pentagon said.

The U.S. response, Biden said, "will continue at times and places of our choosing."

Return of soldiers' bodies

The announcement on Friday evening came just hours after Biden traveled to Dover Air Force base in Delaware to oversee the return of the three soldiers' bodies to the United States and talk with their families.

The attack struck more than 85 targets at three facilities inside Iraq and four inside Syria, according to National Security Council Coordinator for Strategic Communications John Kirby and Lt. Gen. Douglas A. Sims, director for operations at the Joint Chiefs Staff.

The U.S. military used a B-1 bomber and more than 125 precision-guided missiles during the attack, which lasted about 30 minutes, Kirby said.

"This wasn't just a message-sending routine tonight," Kirby said on a call with reporters. "This was about degrading capability — taking away in a more robust way than we have in the past ... capabilities by the (Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps) and militant groups."

Kirby said repeatedly on the call the United States doesn't seek a broader conflict or a war, arguing that bombing militant groups' locations would reduce their ability to strike.

"If you're taking away capability of an adversary who's trying to kill your troops and act against your interest in the region... then you are, by default, working to de-escalate the tensions," Kirby said.

Sims said the timing of the attack centered on the weather.

"This was designed around the weather; when we had our best opportunity as it related to the weather," Sims said. "Good weather presented itself today and as a result, this took place."

Sims later clarified that the U.S. military's "munitions are very precise and don't take a lack of cloud cover" in order to be used.

"In an interest of ensuring that we're hitting all the right targets and that we're avoiding unnecessary casualties, it's good for us to have clear weather to allow us to see those targets as we develop them," Sims said.

The strikes were made, he said, "with an idea that there would likely be casualties associated with people inside those facilities."

Kirby said the "targets were carefully selected to avoid civilian casualties and based on clear, irrefutable evidence that they will connect it to attacks on U.S. personnel in the region."

'All necessary actions'

Defense Secretary Lloyd J. Austin reinforced the president's message that Friday's strikes were only the start of America's response to the attacks and attempted attacks on troops.

"The President has directed additional actions to hold the (Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps) and affiliated militias accountable for their attacks on U.S. and Coalition Forces," Austin said in a statement.

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"These will unfold at times and places of our choosing."

"We do not seek conflict in the Middle East or anywhere else, but the President and I will not tolerate attacks on American forces," Austin added. "We will take all necessary actions to defend the United States, our forces, and our interests."

House speaker slams Biden

U.S. House Speaker Mike Johnson, a Louisiana Republican, criticized Biden's handling of the U.S. response, which he said should have been "clear and forceful."

"Unfortunately, the administration waited for a week and telegraphed to the world, including to Iran, the nature of our response," Johnson said. "The public handwringing and excessive signaling undercuts our ability to put a decisive end to the barrage of attacks endured over the past few months."

Johnson called on Biden to "stand firmly against those who would harm Americans, propagate terror, or threaten our allies."

"Now is the time for President Biden to wake up to the reality that his policy of placating Iran has failed," Johnson added. "To promote peace, America must project strength."

U.S. Senate Armed Services Committee Chairman Jack Reed, a Rhode Island Democrat, said in a statement the response was "strong" and "proportional."

"In fact, the 85 targets struck tonight mark a greater number than the prior administration," Reed said. "Iran's proxy forces in Syria and Iraq have been dealt a significant blow, and Iranian-linked militias around the Middle East should understand that they, too, will be held accountable."

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

Trump federal election interference trial delayed pending appeal

BY: JACOB FISCHLER - FEBRUARY 2, 2024 4:46 PM

A federal judge on Friday officially postponed former President Donald Trump's trial on charges he conspired to overturn the 2020 election results.

The trial, which had been scheduled to begin March 4, will be delayed while an appeals court rules on Trump's claim that he can't be prosecuted because the charges stem from actions he took in his official capacity as president, according to a court order signed by U.S. District Judge Tanya S. Chutkan.

Chutkan made official a widely expected change in schedule as Trump's appeal of Chutkan's pretrial ruling denying his presidential immunity claims remained pending. The U.S. Court of Appeals for the D.C. Circuit heard oral arguments on the issue Jan. 9 but has yet to issue a ruling.

Chutkan did not set a new trial date, saying the court would set a new schedule "if and when" the appeals court requires it.

Experts say Trump is unlikely to prevail in his claims of immunity, but the weeks-long delay caused by the appeal will push the case deeper into an election year. That could allow Trump, the leading GOP candidate for president, to consolidate political support and possibly regain the presidency and its pardon power before a trial is completed.

A four-count federal indictment last year after an investigation by U.S. Special Counsel Jack Smith accused Trump of conspiring to subvert his 2020 reelection loss to Joe Biden, eventually leading to the Jan. 6, 2021, attack on the U.S. Capitol.

For weeks after the election, he fed his supporters a stream of lies that he won the election but was denied a second term by voter fraud, the indictment said. He worked with attorneys, a U.S. Department of Justice official and a political consultant to organize slates of false presidential electors in seven states Biden won to take the place of Biden electors and pressured Vice President Mike Pence to reject the legitimate electors, according to the indictment.

Late last year, Trump asked to dismiss the charges, saying he could not be prosecuted for any actions

he took as president. Chutkan denied that claim, a ruling Trump appealed to the D.C. Circuit.

The appeals court appeared skeptical of Trump's argument at Jan. 9 oral arguments, with one judge asking if his presidential immunity claim would extend to a president who ordered a Navy SEAL team to assassinate a political rival.

Trump also faces federal charges that he mishandled classified documents, Georgia state charges related to election interference and New York state charges related to alleged hush money payments in his 2016 White House run.

Trump's legal problems have not hurt him with Republican voters and he appears well on the way to a third Republican presidential nomination after decisively winning the first two contests in Iowa and New Hampshire.

The scrapped trial date in the federal election interference case was the day before Super Tuesday, when the most delegates are awarded as several states hold primaries and caucuses.

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

Child care costs far outpace wages, but dependent care tax credit stuck at 2001 rate

U.S. House voted to expand child tax credit this week, but isn't considering increase for dependent care

BY: KELCIE MOSELEY-MORRIS - FEBRUARY 2, 2024 12:15 PM

The U.S. House of Representatives voted overwhelmingly Wednesday evening to assist low-income families through an expansion of the child tax credit and the bill now awaits approval in the Senate. But some organizations are also highlighting a separate tax credit for child and dependent care, which they say is not providing adequate assistance to families and providers amid rising costs.

The National Association of Tax Professionals supports expansion of the child and dependent care credit, said Tom O'Saben, the organization's director of tax content and government relations. As it is, the credit has not kept up with inflation, he said, and Congress is currently not discussing its expansion alongside the child tax credit.

It's easy to confuse the two credits, but advocacy groups such as the First Five Years Fund say it's important to know the difference and understand why both are needed to help families. The child tax credit is meant to support families with the costs of raising a child, and it is commonly used to assist with everyday expenses.

The child and dependent care tax credit is meant to offset the cost of child care for working families, and only the cost of formal child or dependent care qualifies, not informal arrangements for care with family members or others.

"More and more people are having the discussion of, is it worth it to me to work outside the home when I've got to pay \$25,000 in child care?" O'Saben said. Some clients he sees as a tax professional are paying as much as \$35,000 per year for two children.

Right now, his only recommendation to help those clients is to take advantage of pre-tax flex spending accounts through their employers if they have them, but those are capped at \$5,000 per year, so it can only provide a fraction of what many families need.

A report from Bank of America in October showed the average child care payment per household has increased 30% since 2019, with families earning between \$100,000 and \$250,000 experiencing the largest increase. A January 2023 report from the U.S. Department of Labor also called monthly prices across the country for child care "untenable" and said counties with more expensive child care prices had lower rates of maternal employment.

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According to data from the Bureau of Labor Statistics, child care costs have increased 214% since 1990, while the average family income has risen 143%.

Expansion bill with bipartisan authors has not received a hearing in Congress

Congress temporarily increased the child care tax credit through the American Rescue Plan Act in 2021. It was the first time the credit had been adjusted since 2001, during former President George W. Bush's administration. Instead of \$3,000 for one child and \$6,000 for two or more children, the credit increased to \$8,000 and \$16,000, respectively, for qualifying expenses. The amount of the credit varies based on the taxpayer's adjusted gross income.

During that time, the credit was also refundable, so a taxpayer could claim the full credit even if it exceeded the amount of taxes owed to the federal government and receive the remainder as a refund.

"It was coming to be more in line with reality, but it lasted for one year," O'Saben said. "If I was to bet on this back at the end of 2021, I would've bet that Congress would've extended that provision, because it was so family positive."

But Congress couldn't reach a deal to extend either the child care credit or the general child tax credit, and only one is up for expansion now, if it clears the Senate.

There is a bill that has been introduced in Congress to address the expansion of the child care credit, sponsored by Democrat Rep. Salud Carbajal of California and Republican Rep. Lori Chavez-DeRemer of Oregon. It was introduced in July, but has not received a hearing. A group of 85 child care providers and employers and business leaders from states across the country also sent a letter to members of the Senate Committee on Finance and House Ways and Means expressing their support for expansion of the child care credit. The states included Kansas, Kentucky, Idaho, Texas, Utah and Ohio, among others.

State and local government must step in too, advocacy group says

Michael Cassidy, director of policy reform and advocacy at the Annie E. Casey Foundation, told States Newsroom both credits are important, but it may take time to reach both goals, and it will require more than just federal investment.

Some states have made efforts to continue the same level of assistance that the federal government provided through the pandemic, such as Minnesota, where Democratic Gov. Tim Walz approved a \$1.3 billion package to assist child care providers with wage enhancements and allow more families to qualify for financial assistance with costs. But in other states, such as Texas, \$2.3 billion in federal aid went unused, and in Missouri and Louisiana, the amounts budgeted from federal aid didn't make significant inroads in helping providers and families.

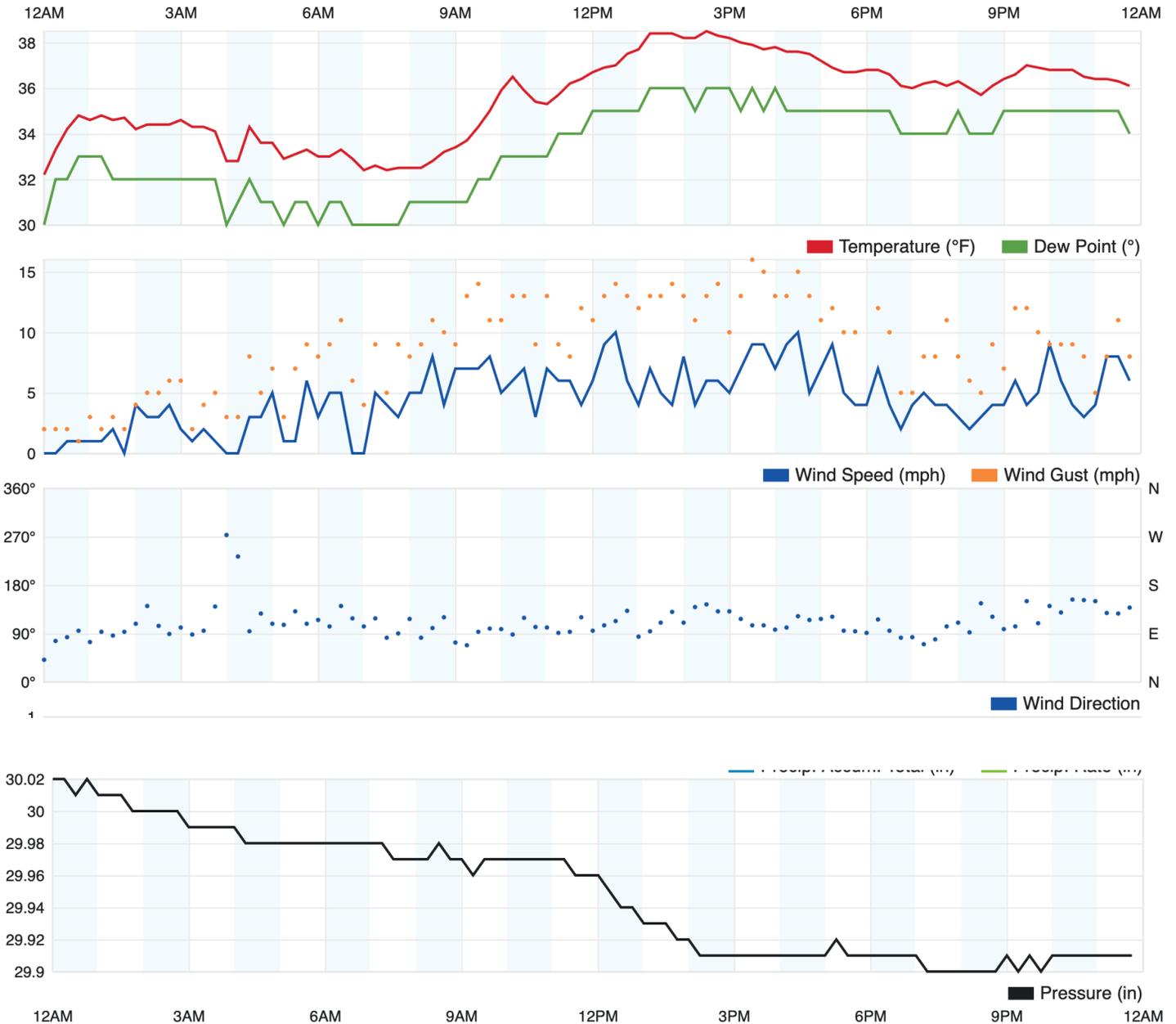
"The pandemic and our recovery out of it have revealed the huge challenges we have in this country regarding child care. I think everybody saw that," Cassidy said. "It's a policy thicket that has vexed this country for decades ... so transitioning from this faltering child care system to a functioning one is going to take some investment at the state, local and national levels."

Kelcie Moseley-Morris is an award-winning journalist who has covered many topics across Idaho since 2011. She has a bachelor's degree in journalism from the University of Idaho and a master's degree in public administration from Boise State University. Moseley-Morris started her journalism career at the Moscow-Pullman Daily News, followed by the Lewiston Tribune and the Idaho Press.

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Yesterday's Groton Weather Graphs



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Sat Feb 3	Sun Feb 4	Mon Feb 5	Tue Feb 6	Wed Feb 7	Thu Feb 8	Fri Feb 9
41° F 32° F	44° F 29° F	49° F 37° F	53° F 37° F	49° F 36° F	42° F 29° F	37° F 24° F
SE 10 MPH	E 6 MPH	S 17 MPH	S 16 MPH	ESE 11 MPH	N 15 MPH	NNW 13 MPH
				20%	60%	40%



Morning Fog Followed By Light Rain Showers

February 3, 2024

3:05 AM

Measurable moisture limited to western/central South Dakota

Today



Cloudy - Dense Fog - Drizzle/Showers
Highs: 38 to 42°

Tonight



Cloudy & Foggy
Lows: 29 to 35°

Sunday



Cloudy & Foggy
Highs: 40 to 46°

Probability of Precipitation Forecast (%)

	2/3 Sat						
	3am	6am	9am	12pm	3pm	6pm	9pm
Aberdeen	10	10	5	10	5	0	0
Britton	10	5	5	5	5	0	0
Brookings	5	0	0	0	0	0	0
Chamberlain	15	10	10	20	20	15	20
Clark	10	5	5	0	5	0	0
Eagle Butte	10	20	30	45	35	30	30
Ellendale	10	5	5	5	5	0	0
Eureka	10	10	10	15	10	5	5
Gettysburg	10	10	20	25	5	10	10
Huron	5	10	10	10	10	5	5
Kennebec	10	15	15	20	25	20	20
McIntosh	10	10	15	35	35	30	30
Milbank	10	0	0	0	0	0	0
Miller	10	10	15	15	10	10	10
Mobridge	10	10	15	25	15	10	10
Murdo	10	15	25	35	35	35	35
Pierre	10	20	20	25	20	20	20
Redfield	10	5	5	10	10	5	5
Sisseton	10	0	0	0	0	0	0
Watertown	10	0	5	0	0	0	0
Webster	10	5	5	0	0	0	0
Wheaton	10	0	0	0	0	0	0



National Weather Service
Aberdeen, SD

The combination of fog, low clouds will continue, with drizzle and light rain showers becoming more common, especially across western and central South Dakota. Warmer weather is expected to start the work week however.

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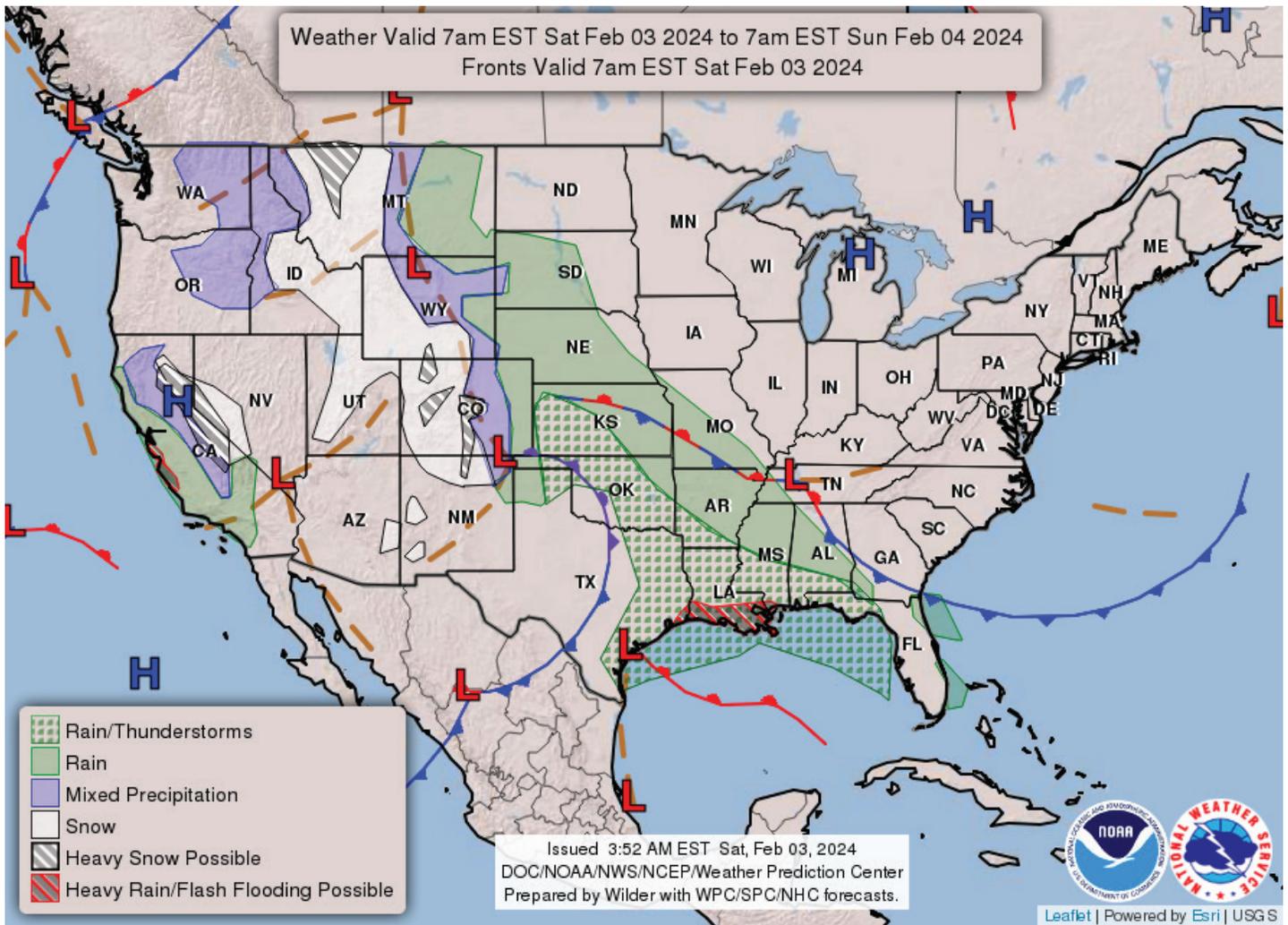
Yesterday's Groton Weather

High Temp: 39 °F at 2:25 PM
Low Temp: 32 °F at 12:00 AM
Wind: 17 mph at 10:20 AM
Precip: : 0.00

Day length: 9 hours, 53 minutes

Today's Info

Record High: 58 in 1991
Record Low: -38 in 1893
Average High: 25
Average Low: 3
Average Precip in Feb.: 0.06
Precip to date in Feb.: 0.00
Average Precip to date: 0.61
Precip Year to Date: 0.00
Sunset Tonight: 5:42:57 pm
Sunrise Tomorrow: 7:48:06 am



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Today in Weather History

February 3, 1997: A winter storm dropped from 6 to 15 inches of snow across central and northeast South Dakota and west-central Minnesota, deepening the already expansive snowpack. The wind came up from the north at 20 to 30 mph during the morning of the 4th, causing blowing and drifting snow blocking some roads, and making travel hazardous if not impossible. Several vehicles got stuck or went off the road. Due to the massive snowfall, a roof collapsed in Aberdeen, damaging a car. Many schools started late or were canceled, adding to the number of days missed for the season. Some snowfall amounts included 5 inches at Wheaton, 6 inches at Britton, Summit, Webster, Browns Valley, Artichoke Lake, and Ortonville, 7 inches at Aberdeen, 6 SE McIntosh, Pollock, Timber Lake, 8 inches at Leola, Ipswich, Eagle Butte, and Gettysburg, 9 inches at Miller and Mellette, 10 inches at Mobridge, Watertown, Clear Lake, Pierre, Kennebec, and Onida, and 11 inches at Clark and Blunt. Snowfall amounts of a foot or more included 12 inches at Highmore, Bryant, and Gann Valley, 13 inches at Faulkton, 14 inches at 23 N Highmore and Murdo, and 15 inches at 1 SE Stephan.

1844: Boston Harbor was so thick with ice on this date that a channel had to be cut through the ice for the "Britannia" ship to leave with 30,000 letters for England.

1917 - Downtown Miami, FL, reported an all-time record low of 27 degrees. (David Ludlum)

1947: The record-low temperature for continental North America was recorded in Snag in the Yukon Territory, Canada. The temperature was 81.4 degrees below zero.

1947 - The temperature at Tanacross, AK, plunged to a record 75 degrees below zero. (David Ludlum)

1959: At 12:55 am Central Time, a plane took off from runway 17 at the Mason City, Iowa airport, carrying the lives of Buddy Holly, Ritchie Valens, and J. P. "The Big Bopper" Richardson. At the time of departure, the weather was reported as light snow, a ceiling of 3,000 feet with sky obscured, visibility 6 miles, and winds from 20 to 30 mph. At around 9:35 am, Hubert Jerry Dwyer spotted the wreckage less than 6 miles northwest of the airport. The three musicians and the pilot died from this crash.

1987 - Wintry weather was confined to freezing drizzle and light snow in the northeastern U.S., and light rain and snow in the western U.S. (The National Weather Summary)

1988: Arctic air continued to invade the central U.S. The temperature at Midland, Texas, plunged from a record high of 80 degrees to 37 degrees in just three hours. Morning lows in the higher elevations of Wyoming were as cold as 38 degrees below zero. Heavy snow blanketed southwestern Colorado, with 16 inches reported at Steamboat Springs.

1989 - A winter storm brought heavy snow and high winds to the western U.S. Up to three feet of snow blanketed the Sierra Nevada of California, and buried parts of northeastern Washington State under three feet of snow in five days. High winds across Washington State reached 75 mph, with gusts to 105 mph. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

1989 - Severe cold gripped the north central U.S. The morning low of 29 degrees below zero at Casper WY was a record for the month of February. Wisdom MT hit 53 degrees below zero. Missoula MT reported a wind chill reading of 85 degrees below zero. (The National Weather Summary)

1990 - Thunderstorms developing ahead of a cold front produced severe weather over the central Gulf coast states during the afternoon and evening hours. Thunderstorms spawned seven tornadoes in Alabama, including one which touched down north of Birmingham injuring fifteen people and causing nearly three million dollars damage. A tornado at Margaret injured eleven persons and caused a million dollars damage. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

Daily Devotionals

Seeds of Hope

THAT DOESN'T LOOK LIKE ME!

A young mother went to Mr. Duffy, asking him to do a portrait of her so that her children would know what she looked like as a young lady. Mr. Duffy was known for his "idealized" paintings - painting his clients as they could be if they were "ideal," not real.

When she returned after several months of waiting, she was shocked by what she saw. Angrily she said, "That doesn't look like me."

"I know," he replied graciously, "but try your best to look as lovely as it does."

Mr. Duffy saw in the mother what she could become. So, when he painted her portrait, he brought out the best in her, the "ideal." His goal? He wanted to help her achieve her best.

One day after Andrew met and accepted Jesus as the Messiah, he brought Simon to meet Him. As Jesus looked intently at him, He saw an "ideal" disciple and said, "You are Simon, the son of John - but you will from now on be called Cephas (which means Rock)."

Jesus saw not only who Simon was at that moment in time, but who he could and would one day become. That is the reason He gave him a new name. Peter was not always a "solid rock" during his days with Jesus. But, that is what he became: "rock-solid" as he grew in Christ.

Fortunately, Christ always sees more in us than we see in ourselves. He sees us as we can be - rock-solid - in our witness for and work with Him. Come. Follow Me! The future awaits.

Prayer: Lord, may we walk with You, in faith, believing that You have great plans for our lives. May we trust You completely and become "rock-solid" disciples. In Jesus' Name, Amen.

Scripture For Today: You are Simon, the son of John - but you will from now on be called Cephas (which means Rock). John 1:42



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:
02.02.24

11 22 42 64 69 18

MegaPlier: 3x

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:
\$358,000,000

NEXT DRAW:

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: 16 Hrs 26 Mins 27 Secs

PREVIOUS RESULTS

LUCKY FOR LIFE

WINNING NUMBERS:
02.02.24

1 12 24 37 47 6

TOP PRIZE:

\$7,000/week

NEXT DRAW: 16 Hrs 41 Mins 27 Secs

PREVIOUS RESULTS

DAKOTA CASH

WINNING NUMBERS: 01.31.24

1 19 22 25 34

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:
\$36,000

NEXT DRAW: 16 Hrs 41 Mins 27 Secs

PREVIOUS RESULTS

POWERBALL

DOUBLE PLAY

WINNING NUMBERS: 01.31.24

13 15 18 21 58 25

TOP PRIZE:
\$10,000,000

NEXT DRAW: 17 Hrs 10 Mins 27 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: 17 Hrs 10 Mins 27 Secs

PREVIOUS RESULTS

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News from the  Associated Press

Friday's Scores

The Associated Press

GIRLS PREP BASKETBALL

Bennett County 62, St Francis 39
Brandon Valley 51, Rapid City Central 42
Bridgewater-Emery 49, Gayville-Volin High School 47
Britton-Hecla 44, Langford 29
Canton 65, Canistota 40
Colman-Egan 58, Estelline-Hendricks 35
Ethan 71, Kimball-White Lake 29
Flandreau 49, Sioux Valley 37
Florence-Henry 57, Tri-State, N.D. 21
Harrisburg 46, Aberdeen Central 40
Herreid-Selby 58, Aberdeen Christian 34
Hitchcock-Tulare 48, Sunshine Bible Academy 17
Irene-Wakonda 41, Menno 38
James Valley Christian 58, Faulkton 42
Mitchell 50, Sturgis Brown 35
Mt. Vernon/Plankinton 60, Chamberlain 41
Newell 35, Edgemont 31
Parkston 68, Gregory 44
Pine Ridge 69, St. Stephens, Wyo. 46
Potter County 47, Sully Buttes 39
Rapid City Christian 58, Chadron, Neb. 46
Sioux Falls O'Gorman 47, Rapid City Stevens 35
Sioux Falls Washington 46, Watertown 41
Spearfish 55, Huron 39
Tripp-Delmont-Armour 53, Marty 44
Viborg-Hurley 62, Corsica/Stickney 49
Wall 72, Kadoka 45
Webster 49, Redfield 41, OT
West Central 66, Madison 26

BOYS PREP BASKETBALL

Aberdeen Central 56, Harrisburg 54
Bon Homme 46, Avon 45
Brandon Valley 63, Rapid City Central 29
Bridgewater-Emery 58, Gayville-Volin High School 45
Britton-Hecla 64, Langford 38
Canton 65, Canistota 50
Castlewood 49, Dawson-Boyd, Minn. 46
Chamberlain 58, Mt. Vernon/Plankinton 49
Clark-Willow Lake 50, Sisseton 45
Corsica/Stickney 64, Scotland 29
Ethan 52, Kimball-White Lake 36
Faulkton 56, James Valley Christian 51

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Gregory 60, Parkston 48
Hitchcock-Tulare 61, Sunshine Bible Academy 49
Marty 58, Tripp-Delmont-Armour 51
McCook Central-Montrose 49, Garretson 47
Menno 42, Irene-Wakonda 38
Milbank 51, Aberdeen Roncalli 45
New Underwood 64, Crazy Horse 34
Pierre 61, Yankton 34
Pine Ridge 76, St. Stephens, Wyo. 51
Potter County 54, Sully Buttes 43
Rapid City Christian 58, Chadron, Neb. 46
Rapid City Stevens 63, Sioux Falls O'Gorman 56
Sioux Falls Christian 90, Sioux Falls Jefferson 62
St Francis 82, Bennett County 50
Vermillion 60, Groton 51
Viborg-Hurley 75, Freeman Academy-Marion 33
Wall 67, Kadoka 49
Watertown 56, Sioux Falls Washington 53
Little Moreau Conference Tournament=
Dupree 53, Little Wound 48
Faith 71, Harding County 43
Lemmon High School 83, Timber Lake 60

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

An Iranian-backed militia official downplays the US strikes in Iraq, hints at deescalation

By ABDULRAHMAN ZEYAD and ALI JABAR Associated Press

BAGHDAD (AP) — An Iraqi militia official on Saturday hinted at a desire to de-escalate tensions in the Middle East following retaliatory strikes launched by the United States against dozens of sites in Iraq and Syria used by Iranian-backed militias and the Iranian Revolutionary Guard.

Hussein al-Mosawi, spokesperson for Harakat al-Nujaba, one of the main Iranian-backed militias in Iraq, in an interview with The Associated Press in Baghdad condemned the U.S. strikes, saying Washington "must understand that every action elicits a reaction." But he then struck a more conciliatory tone, saying that "we do not wish to escalate or widen regional tensions."

Mossawi said the targeted sites in Iraq were mainly "devoid of fighters and military personnel at the time of the attack." Suggesting there was not too much damage could allow him to justify the lack of a strong response.

Syrian state media reported that there were casualties from the strikes but did not give a number. Rami Abdurrahman, who heads the Britain-based Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, said that 23 people were killed in the Syria strikes, all rank-and-file fighters.

Iraqi government spokesperson Bassim al-Awadi said in a statement Saturday that the strikes in Iraq near the Syrian border killed 16, including civilians, and there was "significant damage" to homes and private properties.

Iraq's foreign ministry announced Saturday it would summon the U.S. embassy's chargé d'affaires — the ambassador being outside of the country — to deliver a formal protest over U.S. strikes on "Iraqi military and civilian sites."

The air assault was the opening salvo of U.S. retaliation for a drone strike that killed three U.S. troops in Jordan last weekend. The U.S. has blamed that on the Islamic Resistance in Iraq, a coalition of Iranian-

backed militias.

Iran, meanwhile, has attempted to distance itself from the attack, saying that the militias act independently of its direction.

Iraqi spokesperson al-Awadi condemned the strikes as a violation of Iraqi sovereignty, particularly since some of them targeted facilities of the Population Mobilization Forces. The PMF, a coalition of Iranian-backed militias, was officially brought under the umbrella of the Iraqi armed forces after it joined the fight against the Islamic State in 2014, but in practice it continues to operate largely outside of state control.

The Popular Mobilization Forces said in a statement Saturday that one of the sites targeted was an official security headquarters of the group. In addition to 16 killed, it said 36 had been wounded, "while the search is still ongoing for the bodies of a number of the missing."

The Iraqi government has been in a delicate position since a group of Iranian-backed Iraqi militias calling itself Islamic Resistance in Iraq — many of whose members are also part of the PMF — began launching attacks on U.S. bases in Iraq and Syria on Oct. 18. The group described the strikes as retaliation for Washington's support for Israel in the war in Gaza.

Iraqi officials have attempted behind the scenes to rein the militias in, while also condemning U.S. retaliatory strikes as a violation of the country's sovereignty and calling for an exit of the 2,500 U.S. troops in the country as part of an international coalition to fight IS. Last month, Iraqi and U.S. military officials launched formal talks to wind down the coalition's presence, a process that will likely take years.

One of the main Iran-backed militias, Kataib Hezbollah, said it was suspending attacks on American troops following Sunday's strike that killed the U.S. troops in Jordan, to avoid "embarrassing" the Iraqi government.

Paris police chief says man who wounded 3 in knife and hammer attack may have mental health issues

By HELENA ALVES and JOHN LEICESTER Associated Press

PARIS (AP) — A man armed with a knife and a hammer wounded three people Saturday in an early morning attack at the bustling Gare de Lyon train station in Paris, another nerve-rattling security incident in the Olympic host city before the Summer Games open in six months.

The man, carrying residency papers from Italy and medicines suggesting he was undergoing treatment, was quickly taken into police custody following the attack at 7:35 a.m. in one of the station's cavernous halls, authorities said. Millions of passengers ride the transport hub's high-speed trains that link Paris to other cities and its commuter train services to the suburbs and towns in the Paris region.

"This individual appears to suffer from psychiatric troubles," said Laurent Nunez, the Paris police chief who is also in charge of the massive security operation for the July 26-Aug. 11 Olympic Games.

While stressing that the police investigation was still in its early stages, Nunez said: "There are no elements that lead us to think that this could be a terrorist act."

The suspect attacked passersby with a hammer and a knife, seriously wounding one person and two others more lightly, Nunez said. A fourth person who was "very shocked" could also be counted as lightly injured, he said.

The most seriously hurt person was undergoing surgery, he said.

Passersby intervened to help railway police officers detain the suspect, who is in police custody, Nunez said. He said the suspect was carrying residency papers delivered in Italy, allowing him to travel legally to other European countries. The man's nationality was not given.

Investigators are analyzing the knife and hammer, the Paris prosecutor's office said. It said the police investigation is looking at a potential preliminary charge of attempted murder.

Posting on social media, Interior Minister Gerald Darmanin described the attack as an "unbearable act" and thanked those who detained the assailant.

Security in Paris is being ramped up as it prepares to welcome 10,500 Olympians and millions of visitors for the first Olympic Games in a century in the French capital.

The Games are to open with a massive open-air ceremony along the River Seine on July 26, a major

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security challenge in the city that has been repeatedly hit by terror attacks, most notably in 2015.

Most recently, a man targeted passersby near the Eiffel Tower in December, killing a German tourist with a knife and injuring two others.

US hits hard at militias in Iraq and Syria, retaliating for fatal drone attack

By TARA COPP, LOLITA C. BALDOR and ABDULRAHMAN ZEYAD Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — The U.S. military launched an air assault on dozens of sites in Iraq and Syria used by Iranian-backed militias and the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Friday, in the opening salvo of retaliation for the drone strike that killed three U.S. troops in Jordan last weekend.

The massive barrage of strikes hit more than 85 targets at seven locations, including command and control headquarters, intelligence centers, rockets and missiles, drone and ammunition storage sites and other facilities that were connected to the militias or the IRGC's Quds Force, the Guard's expeditionary unit that handles Tehran's relationship with and arming of regional militias. And President Joe Biden made it clear in a statement that there will be more to come.

The U.S. strikes appeared to stop short of directly targeting Iran or senior leaders of the Revolutionary Guard Quds Force within its borders, as the U.S. tries to prevent the conflict from escalating even further. Iran has denied it was behind the Jordan attack.

It was unclear what the impact will be of the strikes. Days of U.S. warnings may have sent militia members scattering into hiding. With multiple groups operating at various locations in several countries, a knockout blow is unlikely.

Though one of the main Iran-backed militias, Kataib Hezbollah, said it was suspending attacks on American troops, others have vowed to continue fighting, casting themselves as champions of the Palestinian cause while the war in Gaza shows no sign of ending.

"Our response began today. It will continue at times and places of our choosing," Biden warned, adding, "let all those who might seek to do us harm know this: If you harm an American, we will respond." He and other top U.S. leaders had been saying for days that any American response wouldn't be just one hit but a "tiered response" over time.

National Security Council spokesman John Kirby said the targets "were carefully selected to avoid civilian casualties and based on clear, irrefutable evidence that they were connected to attacks on U.S. personnel in the region." He declined to detail what that evidence was.

The strikes took place over about 30 minutes, and three of the sites struck were in Iraq and four were in Syria, said Lt. Gen. Douglas Sims, director of the Joint Staff.

U.S. Central Command said the assault involved more than 125 precision munitions, and they were delivered by numerous aircraft, including long-range B-1 bombers flown from the United States. Sims said weather was a factor as the U.S. planned the strikes in order to allow the U.S. to confirm it was hitting the right targets and avoiding civilian casualties.

It's not clear, however, whether militia members were killed.

"We know that there are militants that use these locations, IRGC as well as Iranian-aligned militia group personnel," Sims said. "We made these strikes tonight with an idea that there there would likely be casualties associated with people inside those facilities."

Syrian state media reported that there were casualties but did not give a number. The UK-based Syrian Observatory for Human Rights reported that 18 militants were killed in the Syria strikes.

Iraqi army spokesman Yahya Rasool said in a statement that the city of al-Qaim and areas along the country's border with Syria had been hit by U.S. airstrikes. The strikes, he said, "constitute a violation of Iraqi sovereignty and undermine the efforts of the Iraqi government, posing a threat that will pull Iraq and the region to undesirable consequences."

Kirby said that the U.S. alerted the Iraqi government prior to carrying out the strikes.

The assault came just hours after Biden and top defense leaders joined grieving families to watch as the remains of the three Army Reserve soldiers were returned to the U.S. at Dover Air Force Base in

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Delaware.

Just Friday morning, Iran's hard-line President Ebrahim Raisi reiterated earlier promises by Tehran to potentially retaliate for any U.S. strikes targeting its interests. We "will not start a war, but if a country, if a cruel force wants to bully us, the Islamic Republic of Iran will give a strong response," Raisi said.

In a statement this week, Kataib Hezbollah announced "the suspension of military and security operations against the occupation forces in order to prevent embarrassment to the Iraqi government." But that assertion clearly had no impact on U.S. strike plans. Harakat al-Nujaba, one of the other major Iran-backed groups, vowed Friday to continue military operations against U.S. troops.

The U.S. has blamed the Islamic Resistance in Iraq, a broad coalition of Iran-backed militias, for the attack in Jordan, but hasn't narrowed it down to a specific group. Kataib Hezbollah is, however, a top suspect.

Some of the militias have been a threat to U.S. bases for years, but the groups intensified their assaults in the wake of Israel's war with Hamas following the Oct. 7 attack on Israel that killed 1,200 people and saw 250 others taken hostage. The war has led to the deaths of more than 27,000 Palestinians in the Gaza Strip, and has inflamed the Middle East.

Iran-backed militia groups throughout the region have used the conflict to justify striking Israeli or U.S. interests, including threatening civilian commercial ships and U.S. warships in the Red Sea region with drones or missiles in almost daily exchanges.

Speaking to reporters on Thursday, Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin said "this is a dangerous moment in the Middle East." He said the U.S. will take all necessary actions to defend its interests and people, and warned, "At this point, it's time to take away even more capability than we've taken in the past."

As of Tuesday, Iran-backed militia groups had launched 166 attacks on U.S. military installations since Oct. 18, including 67 in Iraq, 98 in Syria and now one in Jordan, according to a U.S. military official. The last attack was Jan. 29 at al-Asad airbase in Iraq, and there were no injuries or damage.

The U.S., meanwhile, has bolstered defenses at Tower 22, the base in Jordan that was attacked by Iran-backed militants on Sunday, according to a U.S. official. While previous U.S. responses in Iraq and Syria have been more limited, the deaths of the three service members in Jordan crossed a line, the official said.

That attack, which also injured more than 40 service members — largely Army National Guard — was the first to result in U.S. combat deaths from the Iran-backed militias since the war between Israel and Hamas broke out. Tower 22 houses about 350 U.S. troops and sits near the demilitarized zone on the border between Jordan and Syria. The Iraqi border is only 6 miles (10 kilometers) away.

Also Friday, the Israeli military said its Arrow defense system intercepted a missile that approached the country from the Red Sea, raising suspicion it was launched by Yemen's Houthi rebels. The rebels did not immediately claim responsibility.

And a U.S. official said the military had taken additional self-defense strikes inside Yemen Friday against Houthi military targets deemed an imminent threat. Al-Masirah, a Houthi-run satellite news channel, said British and American forces conducted three strikes in the northern Yemeni province of Hajjah, a Houthi stronghold.

Hamas deploys police, distributes funds in sign of resurgence in Gaza areas Israeli troops have left

By NAJIB JOBAIN and SAMY MAGDY Associated Press

RAFAH, Gaza Strip (AP) — Hamas has begun deploying police forces and making partial salary payments to some of its civil servants in Gaza City in recent days, resurfacing in areas from which Israel had withdrawn the bulk of its troops a month ago, four residents and a senior official in the militant group said Saturday.

Signs of a Hamas resurgence in the Gaza Strip's largest city underscore the group's resilience despite Israel's deadly air and ground campaign against it over the past four months. Israel has said it's determined to crush Hamas militarily and prevent it from returning to power in Gaza, an enclave it has ruled since 2007.

In recent days, Israeli forces renewed strikes in the western and northwestern parts of Gaza City, includ-

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ing in areas where some of the salary distributions were reported to have taken place.

Four Gaza City residents told The Associated Press that in recent days, uniformed and plainclothes police officers deployed near police headquarters and other government offices, including near Shifa Hospital, the territory's largest. The residents said they saw both the return of civil servants and subsequent Israeli airstrikes near the makeshift offices.

The return of police marks an attempt to reinstate order in the devastated city after Israel withdrew a significant number of troops from northern Gaza last month, a Hamas official told AP, speaking on condition of anonymity because he was not authorized to talk to the media.

The official said the group's leaders had given directions to reestablish order in parts of the north where Israeli forces had withdrawn, including helping prevent the looting of shops and houses abandoned by residents who had heeded repeated Israeli evacuation orders and headed to the southern half of Gaza.

During Israel's ground offensive, many homes and buildings were left half-standing or reduced to piles of scrap, rubble and dust.

Saeed Abdel-Bar, a resident of Gaza City, said a cousin received funds from a makeshift Hamas office near the hospital that was set up to distribute \$200 payouts to government employees, including police officers and municipal workers.

Since seizing control of Gaza nearly 17 years ago, Hamas has been operating a government bureaucracy with tens of thousands of civil servants, including teachers, traffic cops and civil police who operate separately from the group's secretive military wing.

The partial salary payments of \$200 for at least some government employees signal that Israel has not delivered a knock-out blow to Hamas, even as it claims to have killed more than 9,000 Hamas fighters.

Ahmed Abu Hadrous, a Gaza City resident, said Israeli warplanes struck the area where the makeshift office is located multiple times earlier this week, including Saturday morning.

The strikes come roughly a month after Israeli military leaders said they had broken up the command structure of Hamas battalions in the north, but that individual fighters were continuing to carry out guerrilla-style attacks.

Meanwhile, combat continued in southern Gaza on Saturday.

At least 17 people, including women and children, were killed in two separate airstrikes overnight in Gaza's southernmost town of Rafah, on the border with Egypt, according to the registration office at a hospital where the bodies were taken.

The first strike hit a residential building east of Rafah, killing at least 13 people from the Hijazi family. The dead included four women and three children, hospital officials said. The second strike struck a house in the Jeneina area of Rafah, killing at least two men and two women from the Hams family.

The 17 bodies were taken to the Abu Yousef al-Najjar hospital, the main health facility in Rafah, and were seen by an AP journalist.

The Health Ministry in Gaza said Saturday that 107 people were killed over the preceding 24-hour period, bringing the wartime total to 27,238. More than 66,000 people have been wounded.

More than half of Gaza's population of 2.3 million has taken refuge in Rafah and surrounding areas. A United Nations official on Friday said Rafah was becoming a "pressure cooker of despair."

Israel's defense minister warned earlier this week that Israel might expand combat to Rafah after focusing for the last few weeks on Khan Younis, the largest city of southern Gaza. While the statement has alarmed aid officials and international diplomats, Israel would risk significantly disrupting strategic relationships with the United States and Egypt if it were to send troops into Rafah.

The U.N. satellite center said Friday that its latest analysis of available imagery indicated more than 69,000 structures in Gaza – nearly one-third of all structures in the territory – have been at least moderately damaged in nearly four months of fighting.

Israeli leaders have said they will keep fighting until Hamas, which has ruled Gaza since 2007, is crushed, even while agreeing to long pauses that are accompanied by the release of hostages.

International mediators continue to work to close wide gaps between Israel and Hamas over a proposed cease-fire deal put forth this week, nearly four months since Hamas and other militants captured about 250

hostages during their deadly Oct. 7 attack on southern Israel that triggered the war.

Hamas continue to hold dozens of captives, after more than 100 were released during a one-week truce in November. Those releases were in exchange for 240 Palestinian prisoners.

The conflict has leveled vast swaths of the tiny coastal enclave, displaced 85% of its population and pushed a quarter of residents to starvation.

Meanwhile, United States — which has negotiated tenants of the deal along with Israel, Egypt and Qatar — launched an air assault on dozens of sites in Iraq and Syria used by Iranian-backed militias and the Iranian Revolutionary Guard late Friday, in the opening salvo of retaliation for the drone strike that killed three U.S. troops in Jordan last weekend.

Planned road across Kenyan park creates split between environmental costs and financial gains

By CARLOS MUREITHI Associated Press

ABERDARE RANGE, Kenya (AP) — In a dense layer of green thousands of feet above sea level, cedar, podo and hegeina trees pattern the landscape, thick moss hanging from their branches and feathery lichen attached to their barks. Numerous streams and rivers flow between them, plunging over steep waterfalls. Buffaloes, bushbucks and monkeys roam in search of pastures.

This is the Aberdare Range, a forest and mountain range in central Kenya that's one of the country's main water sources and a key wildlife habitat.

But it may not remain the same.

The Kenyan government wants to build a 32-mile tarmac road to connect two counties, and the country's environmental agency, the National Environment Management Authority, issued an environmental impact assessment license for the project last month. The project would cut through 15 miles of closed canopy forest and likely increase vehicle traffic into animal paths.

Residents are optimistic the project could improve their lives. But scientists and conservationists fear irreparable damage to the ecosystem. Threatened tree species could get cut down, animals could get hit by vehicles, the road would cut across moorlands — fragile areas for water catchment — and invasive species and pollutants could enter the park through vehicles.

Those in favor of the project, including Kenyan President William Ruto, say it carries economic benefit, arguing that by directly connecting the agricultural counties of Nyeri and Nyandarua, the road would increase trade and uplift livelihoods. Most Kenyans live on a few dollars a day, and in the rural, agricultural areas where the roads will connect, the proposed project has supporters.

To transport farm produce and other goods from Nyeri town in Nyeri county to Ndunyu Njeru town in Nyandarua county and back, Francis Kibue, a lorry driver based in Nyeri, circumvents the Aberdare Range using a tarmac road, covering a distance of 118 miles. But the road through the forest and national park would reduce the journey to 40 miles.

"If you use the new road, you can even do two trips. Because you'll go, arrive, come back, get more goods, and go back," he said.

The proposed tarmac road, named Iithe–Ndunyu Njeru Road, would upgrade of a backbreaking dirt road that's usually used by visitors to the forest and park but rarely by the general public.

In Ndunyu Njeru, a small farming town that's dotted with single-story buildings, chief Grace Ngige said she has "no objection to the road. It's development." She added a raft of reasons: increased trade between Nyeri and Nyandarua, better access to the Nyeri market for farmers, less distance to cover by students who study in Nyeri, and more tourists from the east for Nyandarua.

In both towns, operators of matatus, vans that transport people, are excited about the prospects of the road, saying it would open up new routes on both sides, bringing in more business.

"We feel very happy, and we thank the country's leaders for coming together and deciding to open this road," said matatu operator Patrick Maina in Ndunyu Njeru.

President Ruto has firmly pushed for the construction to start. On different occasions since taking office

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in 2022, he has called out opposition to the construction plan, insisting that the project proceed before receiving environmental approval by NEMA and objections by conservationists.

"Do you want us to build this road or to wait until the judiciary tells us to do so?" he asked at an event last month, before instructing an official of the roads ministry to allocate funds for the construction.

Environmentalists and political analysts say that is tantamount to political interference and may have affected NEMA's independence in decision-making.

In response to written questions, Ali Mohamed, Kenya's special climate envoy, said the president is "committed to sustainability and gives priority to matters climate action and environmental conservation."

The proposed construction also brings attention to national concern on the president's recent trend of defying and criticizing courts and other independent bodies that make decisions against his administration's plans. He has repeatedly threatened to remove judges he accuses of frustrating his projects.

"It is simply intimidation," said Herman Manyara, a Nairobi-based political analyst. "Once you have established institutions to ensure regulations are followed, those institutions must be respected."

The license issued by NEMA since Ruto's comments has given environmentalists cause for concern. It's valid for two months, "time within which the project shall commence," it says.

NEMA says the road width should be reduced from 40 meters (131 feet) to 25 meters (82 feet). But conservationists say any upgrade of the existing road to make it open to all traffic would be detrimental. According to the license, 75 hectares (185 acres) of bamboo, 14 hectares (35 acres) of montane forest and 14 hectares of moorlands would be destroyed in the construction.

Conservationists have long called for the Kenya National Highways Authority — who first proposed the road in 2009 — to find alternative routes across and around the Aberdare Range that have minimum environmental impact. Some have set up online petitions.

As one of Kenya's five major water towers — places that absorb and store water naturally then release it into rivers and lakes — the Aberdare Range provides most of the water used in the capital, Nairobi, and also supplies water to the Seven Forks hydroelectric power stations, key generators of electricity in the country.

The road may attract human settlement, and with time, fires and grazing would suppress the growth of the vegetation that enables the Aberdare Range to catch rain, said Simon Onywere, associate professor of environmental planning and management at Kenyatta University. The potential damage would take decades to reverse, he said.

"Water is everything. If we live via water, we must not add something that reduces our ability to use it," he said.

The forest reserve also has Indigenous trees such as the sycamore fig and African cherry, and threatened species like parasol tree, Monterey Pine and African cherry. It has some of the fewer than 100 remaining critically endangered mountain bongos in the world, alongside rhinos, elephants, buffaloes, lions, leopards and others. UNESCO classifies the Aberdare Mountains as a World Heritage Site.

The 296-square-mile Aberdare National Park also attracts thousands of local residents and foreigners who pay park fees to see animals roam. Tourism is a major income earner for the country, with hundreds of thousands of people employed in the sector.

"This is the one road that a lot of people that come here to see the wildlife will take," said Isabelle Aron, a tourist visiting the park. "Turning that into commercial is going to be taking away from why people come to the Aberdares."

The moorland areas where the road would pass through have large populations of elephants that "cross almost all over," said Christian Lambrechts, executive director of Rhino Ark, a conservation trust, adding that it would destroy their habitats and cause disturbance to them during and after construction, endangering both the animals and road users.

Conservationists are urging for development not to come at the cost of the environment.

"The disconnect between man and the environment," said Onywere, "is that he's not able to see what the environment is doing for him."

Small Texas border city lands unsolicited spotlight in state-federal showdown over border security

By VALERIE GONZALEZ Associated Press

EAGLE PASS, Texas (AP) — As a ceremony with the blaring horns of mariachi musicians and rhythmic click-clack of horse hooves was about to begin, Mayor Rolando Salinas took a moment to reflect that his Texas border city is “more than just the immigration crisis that you see in the media.”

Cowboys and cowgirls from Eagle Pass and Piedras Negras, Mexico, met Friday on one of their two international bridges to begin a weeklong ride to the San Antonio Stock Show & Rodeo. The annual ritual is a point of local pride even as Eagle Pass draws wide attention for a showdown between Texas Gov. Greg Abbott and the Biden administration over policing the border for illegal crossings.

“It shows you the connectivity between the United States and Mexico,” Salinas said as he observed final preparations for the annual “La Cabalgata Internacional La Grande.”

A few hours later, about 200 advocates were in a festive mood in the nearby town of Quemado ahead of a “Take Back Our Border” rally on Saturday. Connie Hinton, 56, said she showed up with her father from Austin, Texas, because “they need to get the people that are here illegally under control.”

The rally, which began with a trucker convoy in Virginia, was the latest sign of how an unprecedented migrant surge has shaken Eagle Pass, a sprawling town of warehouses and decaying houses that many big retailers have overlooked.

Mission: Border Hope, a group that helps migrants with travel plans after they are released by the Border Patrol with notices to appear in immigration court, has seen daily arrivals plummet to about 20 in recent days from highs of about 1,200, director Valeria Wheeler said.

The group’s shelter closed ahead of Saturday’s rally out of fears of unrest, even though rally organizers said they planned a peaceful protest.

Since early January, when Texas seized control of city’s Shelby Park on the banks of Rio Grande, Eagle Pass has been at the center of an extraordinary turf war between Texas’ Republican governor and the Democratic White House.

The park, made up of playing fields and a boat ramp at the end of the downtown business district and next to a golf course, is closed. U.S. Border Patrol agents are denied entry.

U.S. Homeland Security Secretary Alejandro Mayorkas said Friday that the governor’s actions were “unconscionable.”

“It is unconscionable for a public official, to deliberately refuse to communicate, coordinate, collaborate with other public officials in the service of our nation’s interests, and to refuse to do so with the hope of creating disorder for others,” Mayorkas said in an interview with The Associated Press.

Eagle Pass, with about 30,000 people, has become a major corridor for illegal crossings in recent years, making it a target for Abbott’s enforcement. The community lies in the Border Patrol’s Del Rio, Texas, sector, which is often the busiest of the agency’s nine divisions on the Mexican border. In a record-high month of nearly 250,000 arrests for illegal crossings in December, Del Rio tallied 71,095 arrests, second only to Tucson, Arizona. San Diego in California was a distant third.

Visitors have struggled to find hotel rooms as the state law enforcement presence surges, with budget chains charging more than \$200 per night, said Jorge Barrera, president of the Eagle Pass Chamber of Commerce.

“Obviously everybody likes growth,” Barrera said. “But when it’s a little too fast, it’s little bit hard for the community to be able to keep up.”

On Friday, there were no migrants to be found on the grassy fields of Shelby Park as Texas National Guard members unspooled razor wire atop train containers dotting the riverbanks. About 200 migrants arrived Thursday, according to the mayor, a sharp drop from December.

A divided U.S. Supreme Court allowed the Border Patrol to cut razor wire that Texas installed, for now, but the state continues to erect more. The federal government argued the wire impedes its ability to patrol

the border, including aiding migrants in need.

The Biden administration told the Supreme Court that "Texas has effectively prevented Border Patrol from monitoring the border" at Shelby Park. The state has defended the seizure, with Attorney General Ken Paxton saying he "will continue to defend Texas's efforts to protect its southern border" against the federal government's attempts to undermine it.

At a ranch outside Eagle Pass where Abbott sympathizers gathered ahead of Saturday's rally, vendors sold Donald Trump-inspired MAGA hats and Trump flags. A homemade sign read, "The federal government has lost its way. Their job is to protect the states."

Julio Vasquez, pastor of Iglesia Luterana San Lucas in Eagle Pass, said Abbott's campaign is a waste of money because migrants "come with empty hands asking for help."

Alicia Garcia, a lifelong Eagle Pass resident who avoids Shelby Park but attended Friday's annual rodeo-themed festival at the nearby international bridge, questioned the value of Abbott's efforts because many asylum-seekers are released by U.S. authorities to argue their cases in immigration court.

"What's with the show?" said Garcia, 38. "Better to just break everything down if they are still crossing."

Support of SC's Black voters symbolically important to Biden as campaign looks ahead to swing states

By AYANNA ALEXANDER Associated Press

CHARLESTON, S.C. (AP) — The Democrats' first primary of the 2024 presidential contest contains little mystery. South Carolina propelled President Joe Biden to the Democratic nomination four years ago and he faces only token opposition when voting concludes Saturday.

What's at stake for Biden is the depth of support he receives from Black voters. They made up half the party's primary electorate in the state in 2020 and gave him a resounding victory, a win he rewarded by moving South Carolina to the front of the party's nominating process. In the general election, Biden was backed by 91% of Black voters nationwide, according to AP VoteCast.

Whether he enjoys a similar level of support this year has implications far beyond South Carolina.

His approval rating among Black adults is 42% in the latest Associated Press-NORC Center for Public Affairs Research poll, a substantial drop from the first year of his presidency. That's a potentially troubling sign as he prepares for a rematch against former President Donald Trump, the GOP front-runner.

Biden will need to energize Black voters in the key swing states of Georgia, Michigan, Wisconsin and Pennsylvania.

His campaign is not taking the first primary state for granted. Biden and Vice President Kamala Harris have been visiting in the lead-up to the primary and have promised to keep advocating for the interests of the Black community.

Interviews with a wide array of Democratic-leaning Black voters in three South Carolina cities ahead of Saturday's primary revealed general support for the president. But they also provided warning signs: Voters want Biden to spell out his priorities for a second term while expressing concerns about his age and how he is handling inflation and the economy.

GENERATIONAL DIVIDE

Younger Black voters said they want Biden to represent their concerns and to see them prioritized if he wins a second term.

Alexandrea B. Moore, a 22-year-old senior at South Carolina State University, said Biden could have been more transparent about the challenges he faced in fulfilling his promise of widespread student loan forgiveness, a plan that ultimately was struck down by the Supreme Court.

"If Biden wants to be able to regain the trust of the U.S. citizens, then there does need to be a little bit of transparency on why things didn't go the way that they were promised to us," she said.

Kailyn Wrighten, a 22-year-old senior at South Carolina State, expressed a frustration shared by most younger voters interviewed — that Biden decided to run for reelection rather than make way for a new generation of Democrats.

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"This is something we've worked up to for 18 years and kind of finally being able to exercise this, and you're like, 'This is what I'm left with right now?'" she said.

STUDENT LOANS, ECONOMY

Biden's faltering attempts to push a broad plan for student loan forgiveness and his handling of the economy came up repeatedly as top-of-mind issues in interviews with more than a dozen voters.

Sheridan Johnson cast an early vote for Biden in Columbia. She applauded the fact that his administration reduced some loans, but is hoping for more.

"I'm waiting for that to pass because I really need some student loans forgiven," said Johnson, 53.

Biden's initial plan was struck down by the Supreme Court. The administration then developed a repayment plan set to take effect this month.

Inflation remains a major concern. While price hikes have cooled in recent months and the economy is growing, that has not had a significant trickle-down effect on Americans' outlook or benefited Biden.

Laverne Brown, a 69-year-old retiree in Columbia, said Biden needs clear messaging to show voters what he has done to improve the economy and demonstrate "a concern for the working people."

TOO OLD?

Age concerns came up frequently in the interviews, and not just among younger voters.

Polling has consistently shown a broad lack of excitement about the prospects for a Biden-Trump rematch. The age of the candidates – Biden is 81, and Trump 77 – is among the top concerns.

"They're as old as I am, and to have these two guys be the only choices, that's kind of difficult," said Charles Trower, a 77-year-old from Blythewood, S.C. "But I would much rather have President Biden than even consider the other guy."

VOTING RIGHTS, ABORTION, OVERDOSES

Some of the nation's most divisive and personal issues – voting rights, abortion and the overdose epidemic -- also were among the top talking points for many of the Black voters interviewed.

Several noted the failure of Democrats to pass voting rights legislation during the first two years of Biden's presidency as a response to restrictive laws passed by several Republican-controlled states. Democrats' slim majority in the Senate was not enough to overcome a Republican filibuster.

"Every state in the nation, every territory should be subject to the Voting Rights Act," said Seth Whipper, 74, a former Democratic state representative who was contacted last week by voting rights activists during a community canvassing event in Charleston. "It's just that important."

Biden and Harris have been focusing on the stakes for abortion rights in this year's election, a message that appeared to resonate with voters.

"I believe they should have a right not to have the government interfere in their lives," said Tony Thomas, who is 71 and cast his ballot at an early voting site in Columbia.

Fentanyl, which along with other synthetic opioids is the leading culprit in an overdose crisis killing Americans at a record rate, concerns Sandra Trower, a 75-year-old from Blythewood, just outside the state capital.

She wants Biden to figure out how fentanyl is flooding the country and why so many people are addicted.

"That's the biggest thing for me," she said. "There are too many young people and even middle-aged people who are dying from fentanyl."

Biden looks for a big win in South Carolina's Democratic primary after pushing for state to go first

By WILL WEISSERT and MEG KINNARD Associated Press

COLUMBIA, S.C. (AP) — President Joe Biden is looking for an easy win in South Carolina's Democratic primary that officially kicks off his party's nominating process on Saturday, validating a new lineup he championed to better empower Black voters who helped revive his once-foundering 2020 campaign.

Biden is overwhelmingly favored against Minnesota Rep. Dean Phillips and self-help author Marianne

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Williamson. Yet the long and sometimes contentious process that saw the Democratic National Committee officially replace Iowa with South Carolina in its presidential primary's leadoff spot has made what's unfolding noteworthy.

The GOP's South Carolina primary won't be held until Feb. 24.

Arguing that voters of color should play a larger role in determining the Democratic presidential nominee, Biden championed a calendar beginning in South Carolina. The state is reliably Republican, but 26% of its residents are Black.

"South Carolina, you are the first primary in the nation and President Biden and I are counting on you," Harris said Friday during a campaign stop at historically Black South Carolina State in Orangeburg, after the president and first lady Jill Biden had also recently campaigned in the state.

In the 2020 general election, Black voters made up 11% of the national electorate, and 9 in 10 of them supported Biden, according to AP VoteCast, an expansive survey of that election's voters.

Biden pushed for South Carolina to go first followed three days later by Nevada. The new calendar also moves the Democratic primary of Michigan, a large and diverse swing state, to Feb. 27, before the expansive field of states voting on March 5, known as Super Tuesday.

South Carolina was also where Biden reversed his fortunes with a resounding victory during the 2020 Democratic primary after defeats in Iowa, New Hampshire and Nevada.

Many Black Democrats in South Carolina are still loyal to Biden after he was No. 2 to the nation's first Black president, Barack Obama. The state's senior congressman, Democrat Jim Clyburn, long one of Congress' most powerful Black leaders, remains a close Biden friend and ally.

"I wouldn't be here without the Democratic voters of South Carolina, and that's a fact," Biden said at the state's Democratic Party's "First-in-the-Nation" celebration dinner last weekend. "You're the reason I am president."

The DNC sponsored a six-figure ad campaign across the state and Nevada to boost enthusiasm for the president among Black and Latino voters. Nevada's population is 30% Latino.

Black voters interviewed during the recent early voting period listed a range of reasons for supporting Biden, from his administration's defense of abortion rights to appointing Black jurists and other minorities to the federal courts. Some echoed Biden's warnings that former President Donald Trump, the heavy front-runner for the Republican nomination, would threaten democracy as he continues to push lies that the 2020 vote was stolen.

"We can't live with a leader that will make this into a dictatorship. We can't live in a place that is not a democracy. That will be a fall for America," said LaJoia Broughton, a 42-year-old small business owner in Columbia. "So my vote is with Biden. It has been with Biden and will continue to be with Biden."

Some voters said they were concerned about the 81-year-old Biden's age, as many Americans have said they are in public polling. Trump is 77. Both men have had a series of public flubs that have fueled skepticism about their readiness.

"They're as old as I am and to have these two guys be the only choices, that's kind of difficult," said Charles Trower, a 77-year-old from Blythewood, South Carolina. "But I would much rather have President Biden than even consider the other guy."

New Hampshire held a primary last week that defied the new calendar and wasn't sanctioned by the DNC. Still, Biden won the state via write-in and a big South Carolina victory could begin to allay concerns of a majority of voters, as even most Democrats don't want him seeking a second term.

In the meantime, the Democratic establishment — and even potential presidential hopefuls who could have competed against the president from the left or middle — have lined up behind Biden. The DNC also isn't planning primary debates, while Phillips has challenged his name not appearing on primary ballots in Florida and North Carolina.

The president's reelection campaign says it's already focusing on November's general election, and Harris used her Friday appearance, saying of Trump "it is on us then to recognize the profound threat he poses to our democracy and to our freedoms."

"Across our nation, our fundamental freedoms are at stake," Harris said. "It does not have to be this way."

Trump has in turn accused Biden of threatening democracy, while downplaying his role in promoting falsehoods about election fraud embraced by the rioters who stormed the Capitol on Jan. 6, 2021.

Biden's campaign, the DNC and its other fundraising arms announced raising \$97-plus million in the final three months of last year and entered 2024 with \$117.4 million in cash on hand. Trump amassed about \$130 million in 2023's final quarter and had \$42-plus million to start the election year.

The RNC chairwoman calls for unity as the party faces a cash crunch and attacks by some Trump allies

By THOMAS BEAUMONT and BRIAN SLODYSKO Associated Press

LAS VEGAS, Nevada (AP) — Facing a cash crunch and harsh criticism from a faction of far-right conservatives, Republican National Committee Chairwoman Ronna McDaniel on Friday called for the party to unite behind the goal of defeating President Joe Biden.

McDaniel spoke at the RNC's winter meeting in Las Vegas behind closed doors on Friday, addressing a gathering of state chairmen and other top party members in what's expected to be a critical swing state in the November election.

"We Republicans will stick together, as united as the union our party long ago fought to preserve," McDaniel said, according to people who were in the room and disclosed her remarks on condition of anonymity to discuss a private gathering. "We'll have our battles ahead of us, but they're good battles, and they're worth fighting for."

McDaniel's appeal for unity comes as former President Donald Trump and his allies push the party to get behind him and effectively end the primary even though he still faces a final major rival, former U.N. Ambassador Nikki Haley. While McDaniel has fought off opponents before, winning a competitive race for a fourth term as chairwoman last year, she's now facing Trump supporters on the far right who are creating parallel efforts that could conflict with the national party.

Campaign finance disclosures released this week show the RNC had just \$8 million in the bank and \$1 million in debt. While the Trump campaign heads into 2024 with \$42 million cash on hand, Biden's political operation reported raising \$97.1 million in the final months of 2024 across the various committees it uses to fundraise and ended the year with \$117.4 million on hand.

Biden is already working with the Democratic National Committee, which partners automatically with the incumbent president. An effort by Trump allies to have the RNC this week declare Trump the "presumptive nominee" was withdrawn after it drew criticism because Haley is still running.

Trump has previously backed McDaniel, though his campaign and the RNC have disagreed at times. Trump declined to participate in party-sponsored primary debates before this year's Iowa caucuses.

But there's long been tension between the party establishment and some people who consider themselves Trump's strongest supporters.

McDaniel faced a week of withering attacks launched by far-right figures spearheaded by the group Turning Point, a glitzy and well-funded organization founded by 30-year-old media figure Charlie Kirk, who was part of an unsuccessful effort to oust McDaniel last year.

Days before the party's winter meeting convened, Turning Point hosted a counterprogramming event and training session at a casino across Las Vegas Boulevard dubbed "Restoring National Confidence," a play on the RNC's initials. The invite-only event drew nearly 400 attendees aligned with the group, including some RNC members, as well as state and local Republican Party chairs.

Kirk, who hosts a popular radio show, is part of a faction of conservatives who've openly stoked a feud with the RNC, which they have blasted for spending lavishly and being out of touch with the party's grass-roots base. That, they argue, led to losses in 2018 and 2020 as well as underwhelming results in 2022.

Some Turning Point supporters have become RNC members, while the group is actively recruiting others, an effort that, if successful, would give the group more sway over the direction of the party and perhaps a stronger say in the party's chair.

"We know a pack of losers when we see it: top to bottom, the entire RNC staff in its current form," Kirk said Thursday on his radio show.

"They don't even know what winning is," he added.

Inside the RNC meeting, some members, including those who have been critical of McDaniel, said the Turning Point effort was ill-advised.

"Attacking the brand and the chair doesn't advance our fundamental goal of winning elections," said Mississippi national committeeman Henry Barbour, who has at times criticized McDaniel.

And McDaniel's allies note that the Democratic National Committee was in debt to the tune of \$5 million in the early days of the 2020 race, when the party was trying to return a Democrat to the White House.

Turning Point is looking to expand its influence and reach beyond the youth movement, with mixed results. The group has struggled in its adopted home state of Arizona, where many of its preferred candidates failed to win in statewide races that many saw as winnable.

Its leaders have also come under scrutiny over their own spending practices, including charter jet travel, offering lucrative salaries and paying to host Kirk's wedding reception in 2021. Turning Point is currently trying to raise \$108 million for a three-state get-out-the-vote campaign in Wisconsin, Arizona and Georgia that would operate parallel to efforts that are already underway.

RNC spokeswoman Emma Vaughn dismissed the challenges as coming from people complaining online.

"Outside noise might be what keyboard warriors and the Democrats are focused on," she said. "Chairwoman Ronna McDaniel and the entire Republican National Committee are laser-focused on beating Biden this fall."

Hamas demands Israel release Marwan Barghouti, a man some Palestinians see as their Nelson Mandela

By JULIA FRANKEL Associated Press

JERUSALEM (AP) — He's viewed by some Palestinians as their Nelson Mandela, and he's a prime candidate to become their president in the future. He's also the highest-profile prisoner held by Israel.

Now Marwan Barghouti's freedom is at stake in cease-fire negotiations between Hamas and Israel. Hamas leaders demanded Friday that Israel release Barghouti, a leader of the militant group's main political rival, as part of any deal to end the fighting in Gaza.

The demand brings new attention to Barghouti, who plays a central role in Palestinian politics even after spending more than two decades behind bars. His release could lay the groundwork for his eventual election to national office.

Hamas' gambit to free him appears to be an attempt to rally public support for the militant group as well as a recognition of his status as a uniquely unifying Palestinian figure.

"Hamas wants to show to the Palestinian people that they are not a closed movement. They represent part of the Palestinian social community. They are trying to seem responsible," said Qadoura Fares, who heads the Palestinian Ministry of Prisoner Affairs in the occupied West Bank and has long been involved in negotiations over prisoner releases.

Senior Hamas official Osama Hamdan called for Barghouti's release as international mediators try to push Israel and Hamas toward an agreement after nearly four months of war.

Israel is seeking the release of more than 100 hostages still held by Hamas in Gaza. Hamas is demanding an end to Israel's devastating military offensive and the release of thousands of Palestinian prisoners.

The war broke out Oct. 7, when Hamas fighters crossed into Israel, killing some 1,200 people and dragging 250 hostages back to Gaza. The Hamas attack triggered an Israeli ground and air campaign that has killed more than 27,000 Palestinians, according to local health officials, and triggered a humanitarian catastrophe in Gaza.

Over 100 hostages were released during a weeklong truce in November. Israel estimates 136 hostages remain in captivity, though 20 have been pronounced dead. With protests calling for the hostages' im-

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mediate release sweeping Israel, and fears that time is running out to bring them home safely, pressure is mounting on Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu to reach a deal.

For Palestinians, the plight of their imprisoned loved ones is deeply emotional. While Israel considers "security prisoners" to be terrorists, Palestinians widely see them as heroes battling Israeli occupation. Virtually every Palestinian has a friend, relative or acquaintance who has been imprisoned.

The Israeli human rights group HaMoked says Israel is currently holding nearly 9,000 security prisoners. Hamas seeks the release of all of them. But in his remarks Friday, Hamdan mentioned only two by name — Barghouti and Ahmad Saadat.

Saadat heads a small faction that killed an Israeli Cabinet minister in 2001 and is serving a 30-year sentence for allegedly participating in attacks.

Palestinians see the 64-year-old Barghouti, a member of Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas' Fatah party, as a natural successor to the 88-year-old Abbas, who leads the internationally recognized Palestinian Authority, the self-ruled government that administers parts of the Israeli-occupied West Bank.

Abbas, whose forces in Gaza were overrun by Hamas in 2007, hopes to regain control of the territory after the war. But he is deeply unpopular because of corruption within the authority and because of his security coordination with the Israeli army.

Palestinians have not held elections since 2006, when Hamas won a parliamentary majority.

Fares, a Barghouti supporter, said that if Barghouti is released, he could become a consensus candidate in a round of new elections that Hamas, Fatah and other Palestinian factions could rally behind. A wartime opinion poll published in December showed Barghouti to be the most popular politician among Palestinians, ahead of both Abbas and Hamas' leader, Ismail Haniyeh.

Israelis see Barghouti as an arch-terrorist, and convincing Israel to free him will be an uphill battle.

Barghouti, a leader in the West Bank during the second Palestinian uprising in the early 2000s, is serving five life terms for his role in several deadly attacks. During that uprising, Palestinian militants carried out deadly suicide bombings and shooting attacks targeting buses, restaurants, hotels and Israelis driving in the West Bank, eliciting crushing Israeli military reprisals.

In 2002, Barghouti was arrested on multiple counts of murder. He did not offer a defense, refusing to recognize the court's authority. Since then, he has repeatedly thrust himself into the spotlight.

In 2021, he registered his own list for parliamentary elections that were later called off. A few years earlier, he led more than 1,500 prisoners in a 40-day hunger strike to call for better treatment in the Israeli prison system. From jail, he has continued to call for a Palestinian state in the West Bank, Gaza and east Jerusalem — lands Israel seized in the 1967 war.

Barghouti was born in the West Bank village of Kobar in 1962. While studying history and politics at Bir Zeit University, he helped spearhead student protests against the Israeli occupation.

He emerged as an organizer in the first Palestinian uprising, which erupted in December 1987, but Israel eventually deported him to Jordan. He returned to the West Bank in the 1990s, as part of interim peace agreements that were meant to pave the way for a Palestinian state but got bogged down by the end of the decade when a second uprising erupted.

Barghouti was seen as political leader of the armed wing of Fatah at the time.

Israel has previously rejected calls to free him. It refused to include him in a 2011 exchange of more than 1,000 Palestinian prisoners for a single soldier held captive in Gaza by Hamas, said Fares, who was party to the negotiations. Yehya Sinwar, the current Hamas leader in Gaza and a mastermind of the Oct. 7 attack, was freed in that exchange.

The 2011 negotiations revolved around the release of a single hostage. With the lives of over 100 hostages now hanging in the balance, there is more pressure than ever on Israel to release Palestinian prisoners. That may make conditions ripe for a deal that could simultaneously win Barghouti's release and bolster Hamas' standing among Palestinians.

"Hamas is more strong and more clever than ever before," Fares said. "They understand how necessary it is for the Palestinian people to have consensus."

Europe's farmers are struggling, but some sympathetic consumers have difficulty affording their food

By JADE LE DELEY Associated Press

BOUSSY-SAINT-ANTOINE, France (AP) — Truck driver Jeremy Donf understands French farmers are struggling and he wants to support local food producers. But like many consumers, buying French produced food isn't always an option.

Farmer protests across Europe this week have highlighted how farmers and households are both hurting these days because of multiple factors, including persistent inflation, high interest rates and volatile energy prices.

"We understand their anger because we value farmers. What are we going to do if they are not here? We won't eat. Such protests are important," Donf said.

But as he weighed Spanish-grown lemons in his suburban Paris supermarket, Donf noted that most of the produce around him was imported. And when French-grown food is available, not everyone can afford it. In a Paris market this week, Moroccan clementines and Polish mushrooms cost about half the price of their French counterparts.

The farmer protests drew widespread public support in France, even from truckers like Donf whose livelihood was threatened by the highway blockades that were part of the protests. Donf lives in the Paris suburb of Boussy-Saint-Antoine but comes from the French Indian Ocean island of Reunion, where farming is important and many people buy directly from local farmers.

Governments including France, Spain and Greece agreed in recent days to pump hundreds of millions of euros into the farming sector to calm the protesters. The EU also granted concessions to farmers, sensitive to voter concerns ahead of European Parliament elections in June.

At a nearby farmers' market this week, several shoppers specifically chose more expensive French meat and vegetables over cheaper imports, in part spurred by the recent protests.

"I am well aware that it's not easy for some people to spend more money on food, but since my pension allows me to do it, I decided to favor high-quality (French) products," said Patrick Jobard, a retiree.

Prices for wheat, corn and other grain — except rice — are lower than they were before Russia's invasion of Ukraine drove global food commodity costs to record highs in 2022, which worsened hunger worldwide but helped farmers' bottom lines.

Consumers, meanwhile, aren't seeing big benefits from lower prices for wheat and other food commodities traded on global markets because the price surge that's been seen at the grocery store is tied to other costs after food leaves the farm, said Joseph Glauber, senior research fellow at the International Food Policy Research Institute.

Things like energy costs and higher wages for labor have been "affecting every step of food processing, all the way to the retail shelves," he said.

With prices having fallen, farmers are getting less for what they grow than they used to and are facing uncertainty from volatile energy prices.

That's especially hard for farmers in Europe, because of the loss of inexpensive Russian natural gas and trade disruption as Yemen's Houthi rebels attack ships in the Red Sea, he said.

The Red Sea is a critical trade route between Asia and Europe, so farmers in the European Union, Ukraine and Russia are facing the fallout from shipping companies diverting vessels on longer journeys around the tip of southern Africa.

"Those costs get passed back to producers," said Glauber, former chief economist at the U.S. Department of Agriculture.

Not only that, interest rates are high, making it more expensive to borrow to buy farm equipment and other necessities. European farmers also face climate regulations that can drive up costs that aren't being borne by competitors in the U.S. and elsewhere.

However, farmers in major economies like Europe and the U.S. do get government money for growing food, while "a bulk of agriculture around the world is unsubsidized. And they're competing in this environ-

ment," Glauber said.

Economies have slowed, especially in Europe, so food inflation has eased, but "people still think back two years ago and say, 'Boy, this this meat is still very expensive relative to what I was paying two years ago,'" he said.

Cheaper imports are a big concern for farmers around Europe.

In France, a big focus of the farmers' anger was the massive Rungis trading center, Europe's biggest food market. It provides food to many Paris restaurants and supermarkets but is also seen as a symbol of globalized food chains.

A group of farmers from the rural southwest camped out with their tractors outside its gates this week, and later pushed past armored vehicles guarding the site, leading to 91 arrests.

"I chose to come here, because it's a highly symbolic place, a food symbol," said Jean-Baptiste Chemin, a grain and orchard farmer who drove there in his tractor from the Lot-et-Garonne region of southern France. Nearby stood a placard reading, "We are nourishing you and we are dying."

When police came to detain him, he joked with them in his distinctive southern accent that he wouldn't object to being taken to a police station. "I already traveled 600 kilometers (360 miles) anyway."

Connor McDavid wins the NHL All-Star Skills competition he helped revive

By STEPHEN WHYNO AP Hockey Writer

TORONTO (AP) — Connor McDavid played a big role in redesigning the NHL All-Star skills competition. Then he dominated the new version.

The reigning and three-time MVP took home the \$1 million prize while showing once again why he is considered the best hockey player in the world. And he did so as a local hero in the arena where he grew up watching games, to the delight of his hometown crowd.

McDavid helped the league and union fix the skills competition after thinking in previous years it had gotten "a little gimmicky, a little out there." With his assist, it went back to the basics, and the Edmonton Oilers captain shined with the spotlight on him.

"I thought it was entertaining," McDavid said. "I know from a competitive side, it definitely got competitive out there. I was huffing and puffing. Guys were working hard, trying to put on a good show. I feel like we did that. I think we can feel good about it. Ultimately, it's up to the fans, and hopefully they enjoyed it."

McDavid finished first in the fastest skater, winning that event for the fourth time in his career, and stick-handling, and he went 4 for 4 in accuracy shooting.

"Obviously he's the epitome of competitiveness on a daily basis, so I'm not surprised," Oilers teammate Leon Draisaitl said.

Three players from the Western Conference rival Colorado Avalanche also put on a show. Nathan MacKinnon won the one-timers event, while Cale Makar had the hardest shot at 102.56 mph. Goaltender Alexandar Georgiev made nine saves — on McDavid — in one on one to win \$100,000.

"It's a really fun challenge," Georgiev said. "I love going against Connor. Congratulations to him. He's awesome, so fun to watch."

The prize money was one of the new wrinkles at the redesigned skills competition that featured just 12 players and was supposed to be streamlined and simplified.

"I think guys like it," Draisaitl said. "I don't know how it was received on TV, but I thought it was good."

Fans cheered Maple Leafs All-Stars Auston Matthews and William Nylander and booed Nikita Kucherov multiple times when they didn't appreciate his lack of effort in the passing and stick-handling events. Kucherov even waved to the crowd after finishing dead last in the stick-handling race — over 44 seconds, well behind McDavid's winning time of 25.755 seconds and slower than David Pastrnak, who missed the net.

"You sit there for like three hours and then you get to go stick-handle," Kucherov said. "That was kind of tough."

Unsurprisingly, Kucherov was one of four players eliminated after the first six events. The Tampa Bay

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Lightning winger and 2019 MVP enjoyed being booed.

They also applauded McDavid, a native of Richmond Hill in suburban Toronto who rooted for the Leafs as a kid.

"Toronto fans have always showed a lot of love to me when I've been in town, and it means a lot," McDavid said. "The building means a lot. The fans have always treated me really well, and it means a lot to hear them cheer."

Connor Bedard, the top pick in the draft by the Chicago Blackhawks and the front-runner for NHL rookie of the year before breaking his jaw Jan. 5, made a surprise appearance as a passer for the one-timers event, along with Sidney Crosby, the player he grew up idolizing. Bedard was picked to participate before the injury.

"You feel for him," said McDavid, who like Crosby, Bedard and MacKinnon was a No. 1 pick. "I'm sure he's wishing he could partake in some of the events. It was great to see him on the ice and looking healthy and looking like he's close to coming back."

Leafs alumni Doug Gilmour and Steve Thomas and Toronto Professional Women's Hockey League players and Canadian Olympians Sarah Nurse and Blayre Turnbull served as passers in accuracy shooting. Nurse and Turnbull were among the players who took part in the PWHL 3-on-3 showcase Thursday night.

On Friday night, Deputy Commissioner Bill Daly presented McDavid with a large novelty check. He gets real money, and the humble 27-year-old said he hadn't put much thought into how he'd spend it.

"I'm going to have some teammates back home that are going to be very interested in what I'm going to do with it, but I'm going to have to try to figure it out," McDavid said.

A look at Las Vegas' glitzy Allegiant Stadium, the host for Chiefs vs. 49ers Super Bowl

By MARK ANDERSON AP Sports Writer

LAS VEGAS (AP) — Las Vegas Raiders owner Mark Davis called his new home the Death Star in 2020 — and the name stuck.

Allegiant Stadium, with its black facade, in fact resembles the ominous space station from the "Star Wars" movie franchise that was capable of destroying planets.

The futuristic stadium takes center stage on Feb. 11 when the Kansas City Chiefs and San Francisco 49ers meet in the first-ever Super Bowl in Las Vegas.

And like the unique city that surrounds it, the stadium has some features that set it apart from others around the NFL. Among the most notable is the playing surface.

Because the Raiders insist on playing on grass, even in a dome, the field spends most of the time outside in sunlight and is rolled in on a tray for games. Last year's Super Bowl host, the Arizona Cardinals' stadium, uses a similar transfer system.

The NFL takes over management of the field when it comes to the Super Bowl, and the playing surface is monitored closely. No one wants a repeat of what happened last year in Glendale. Players slipped on that grass in the Super Bowl, which the Chiefs won 38-35 over the Philadelphia Eagles.

"This surface has been nurtured from the sod farm all the way to the Super Bowl," said Jeff Miller, NFL executive vice president for communications. "Its maintenance is measured by a series of tools and metrics. ... Our field manager expert has been on top of this for many weeks and is on site frequently and will be throughout the next couple of weeks in anticipation of the game."

Former longtime NFL groundskeeper George Toma, known as the "Sodfather," was critical of how the field was maintained last year, but expressed confidence in new field director Nick Pappas.

"You'll see at Las Vegas now, they'll have the best playing field ever," Toma said.

Toma, who turned 95 on Friday, said he wasn't in the best of health.

"Last year, I told my ground crew, 'I doubt I'll be here with you next year. If I'm in heaven, I'll be looking down and seeing what a beautiful field you have or I'll be in hell looking up and seeing what type of roots system you have,'" Toma said.

Other notable stadium features include:

—Huge lanai doors on the north end facing Interstate 15 and the Strip. Those doors, which are 80 by 215 feet, can be opened to create more of an outdoor element, but have remained closed during Raiders games even late in the season when temperatures cool.

—The Al Davis Memorial Torch is 92 feet high and surrounded by a circular bar. It's an electronic torch "lit" before every Raiders home game. Former heavyweight champion and current Henderson resident Mike Tyson and recording artist and actor Ice Cube were among those who turned on the torch this season. The NHL's Vegas Golden Knights and the WNBA's Las Vegas Aces also had the honors after winning their leagues' championships.

The tradition traces back to 2011 when John Madden lit an actual torch when the team was based in Oakland, California. Another torch remains lit outside the Raiders headquarters in Henderson, Nevada.

—In front of the torch, in an area that overlooks the end zone seats, the Raiders' 19-person band performs before games and plays in timeouts throughout. Sometimes other performers such as Lil Wayne, Rick Ross and Joseph "Rev Run" Simmons join the band at halftime.

—Every NFL stadium has VIP seating, but Allegiant has some of its most exclusive seating actually located on the field just beyond the north end zone. There are 29 booths, each sitting up to 15 people. Fans who occupy those booths receive wait service, access to private bars and a special entrance.

Carl Weathers, linebacker-turned-actor who starred in 'Rocky' movies and 'The Mandalorian,' dies

By MARK KENNEDY AP Entertainment Writer

NEW YORK (AP) — Carl Weathers, a former NFL linebacker who became a Hollywood action movie and comedy star, playing nemesis-turned-ally Apollo Creed in the "Rocky" movies, facing off against Arnold Schwarzenegger in "Predator" and teaching golf in "Happy Gilmore," has died. He was 76.

Matt Luber, his manager, said Weathers died Thursday. His family issued a statement saying he died "peacefully in his sleep."

"Carl Weathers will always be a legend," Schwarzenegger wrote on Instagram. "An extraordinary athlete, a fantastic actor and a great person. We couldn't have made 'Predator' without him. And we certainly wouldn't have had such a wonderful time making it."

Comfortable flexing his muscles on the big screen in "Action Jackson" as he was joking around on the small screen in such shows as "Arrested Development," Weathers was perhaps most closely associated with Creed, who made his first appearance as the cocky, undisputed heavyweight world champion in 1976's "Rocky," starring Sylvester Stallone.

"It puts you on the map and makes your career, so to speak. But that's a one-off, so you've got to follow it up with something. Fortunately those movies kept coming, and Apollo Creed became more and more in people's consciousness and welcome in their lives, and it was just the right guy at the right time," he told The Daily Beast in 2017.

Most recently, Weathers has starred in the Disney+ hit "The Mandalorian," appearing in all three seasons.

"We lost a legend yesterday," Stallone wrote in an Instagram message that included a video tribute. The actor stood before a painting of him and Weathers boxing and said, "Carl Weathers was such an integral part of my life, my success ... I give him incredible credit and kudos.

"When he walked into that room and I saw him for the first time, I saw greatness. ... I never could have accomplished what we did with 'Rocky' without him."

Stallone ended his video tribute by saying: "Apollo, keep punching."

Creed, who appeared in the first four "Rocky" movies, memorably died in the ring of 1984's "Rocky IV," going toe-to-toe with the hulking, steroid-using Soviet Ivan Drago, played by Dolph Lundgren. Before he entered the ring, James Brown sang "Living in America" with showgirls and Creed popped up on a balcony in a Star-Spangled Banner shorts and waistcoat combo and an Uncle Sam hat, dancing and taunting Drago.

A bloodied Creed collapses in the ring after taking a vicious beating, twitches and is cradled by Rocky as

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he dies, inevitably setting up a fight between Drago and Rocky. But while Creed is gone, his character's son, Michael B. Jordan's Adonis Creed, would lead his own boxing trilogy starting in 2015.

Weathers went on to 1987's "Predator," where he flexed his pecs alongside Ventura, Schwarzenegger and a host of others, and 1988's nouveau blaxploitation flick "Action Jackson," where he trains his flame-thrower on a bad guy and asks, "How do you like your ribs?" before broiling him.

"We lost an icon," former "Predator" co-star Jesse Ventura wrote on X, formerly Twitter. "Carl Weathers was a phenomenal talent, a true professional and a dear friend."

He later added a false wooden hand to play a golf pro for the 1996 comedy classic "Happy Gilmore" opposite Adam Sandler and starred in Dick Wolf's short-lived spin-off series "Chicago Justice" in 2017 and in Disney's "The Mandalorian," earning an Emmy Award nomination in 2021. He also voiced Combat Carl in the "Toy Story" franchise.

Sandler hailed his friend on social media, calling him a "great man" and "a true legend" — "So much fun to be around always. Smart as hell. Loyal as hell. Funny as hell."

Weathers grew up admiring actors such as Woody Strode, whose combination of physique and acting prowess in "Spartacus" made an early impression. Others he idolized included actors Sidney Poitier and Harry Belafonte and athletes Jim Brown and Muhammad Ali, stars who broke the mold and the color barrier.

"There are so many people that came before me who I admired and whose success I wanted to emulate, and just kind of hit the benchmarks they hit in terms of success, who created a pathway that I've been able to walk and find success as a result. And hopefully I can inspire someone else to do good work as well," he told the Detroit News 2023. "I guess I'm just a lucky guy."

Growing up in New Orleans, Weathers started performing in plays as early as grade school. In high school, athletics took him down another path but he would reunite with his first love later in life.

Weathers played college football at San Diego State University — he majored in theater — and went on to play for one season in the NFL, for the Oakland Raiders, in 1970.

"When I found football, it was a completely different outlet," says Weathers told the Detroit News. "It was more about the physicality, although one does feed the other. You needed some smarts because there were playbooks to study and film to study, to learn about the opposition on any given week."

After the Raiders, he joined the Canadian Football League, playing for two years while finishing up his studies during the offseason at San Francisco State University. He graduated with a B.A. in drama in 1974.

After appearing in several films and TV shows, including "Good Times," "The Six Million Dollar Man," "In the Heat of the Night" and "Starsky & Hutch," as well as fighting Nazis alongside Harrison Ford in "Force 10 From Navarone," Weathers landed his knockout role — Creed. He told The Hollywood Reporter that his start in the iconic franchise was not auspicious.

He was asked to read with the writer, Stallone, then unknown. Weathers read the scene but felt it didn't land and so he blurted out: "I could do a lot better if you got me a real actor to work with," he recalled. "So I just insulted the star of the movie without really knowing it and not intending to." He also lied that he had any boxing experience.

Later in life, Weathers developed a passion for directing, helming episodes of "Silk Stalkings" and the Lorenzo Lamas vehicle "Renegade." He directed a season three episode of "The Mandalorian."

Weathers introduced himself to another generation when he portrayed himself as an opportunistic and extremely thrifty actor who becomes involved with the dysfunctional clan at the heart of "Arrested Development."

The Weathers character likes to save money by making broth from discarded food — "There's still plenty of meat on that bone" and "Baby, you got a stew going!" — and, for the right price, agrees to become an acting coach for delusional and talent-free thespian Tobias Funke, played by David Cross.

Weathers is survived by two sons.

Fani Willis acknowledges a 'personal relationship' with prosecutor she hired in Trump's Georgia case

By KATE BRUMBACK Associated Press

ATLANTA (AP) — Fulton County District Attorney Fani Willis acknowledged in a court filing on Friday having a "personal relationship" with a special prosecutor she hired for the Georgia election interference case against former President Donald Trump but argued there are no grounds to dismiss the case or to remove her from the prosecution.

Willis hired special prosecutor Nathan Wade in November 2021 to assist her investigation into whether the Republican ex-president and others broke any laws as they tried to overturn his loss in the 2020 presidential election in Georgia. Since Trump and 18 others were indicted in August, Wade has led the team of lawyers Willis assembled to prosecute the case.

Among the acts listed in the indictment was a Jan. 2, 2021, phone call in which Trump urged fellow Republican Secretary of State Brad Raffensperger to help "find" the 11,780 votes needed to overturn his election loss to Democrat Joe Biden. Trump has pleaded not guilty, and his attorneys have said he was within his rights to challenge election results.

The filing was the first time that Willis or Wade has directly addressed the allegations of a relationship in the nearly four weeks since they first surfaced in a filing by a defendant in the election case. In an affidavit accompanying the filing, Wade said that in 2022, he and the district attorney had developed a personal relationship in addition to their "professional association and friendship."

But he also said that he had never lived with Willis or shared a financial account or household expenses with her. He said that none of the funds paid to him as part of the job have been shared with Willis, an attempt to undercut defense lawyer claims of a conflict of interest.

Wade described himself and Willis as "both financially independent professionals; expenses or personal travel were roughly divided equally between us."

"At times," Wade said, "I have made and purchased travel for District Attorney Willis and myself from my personal funds. At other times District Attorney Willis has made and purchased travel for she and I from her personal funds."

"I have no financial interest in the outcome of the 2020 election interference case or in the conviction of any defendant," he wrote.

The Friday filing by Willis' team came in response to a motion filed last month by defense attorney Ashleigh Merchant, who represents Trump co-defendant Michael Roman. The motion alleged that Willis and Wade were in an inappropriate romantic relationship that created a conflict of interest. It said Willis personally profited from the case, saying she had paid Wade more than \$650,000 for his work and then benefited when Wade used his earnings to pay for vacations the pair took together.

Roman asked the judge to dismiss the case and to have Willis and Wade and their offices barred from further prosecuting the case. Trump and at least one other co-defendant, Georgia attorney Robert Cheeley, have filed motions to join Roman's effort to dismiss the indictment and remove Willis from the case.

Fulton County Superior Court Judge Scott McAfee, who's presiding over the election case, has set a Feb. 15 hearing on Roman's motion. Willis and Wade are among a dozen witnesses Merchant has subpoenaed to testify at that hearing, and Friday's filing says the district attorney plans to ask McAfee to toss out those subpoenas.

The Friday filing asks McAfee to dismiss the motions without a hearing, saying they "have no merit."

Steve Sadow, Trump's lead attorney in the Georgia case, said Willis is asking the judge "to turn a blind eye to her alleged personal and financial misconduct" and says her only goal is to stop the Feb. 15 hearing. Though she admitted to the relationship, Sadow said, "she fails to provide full transparency and necessary financial details."

Merchant filed an initial response to the prosecution filing Friday. She argued that a hearing is needed because Roman has the right to cross-examine and test the prosecution's claims. She listed questions she would ask Wade that suggest she believes his relationship with Willis began earlier than he asserted and that the pair had lived together at certain times.

Willis' team's filing argues that Willis has no financial or personal conflict of interest that justifies removing her or her office from the case. The filing calls the allegations "salacious" and says they "garnered the media attention they were designed to obtain."

Anthony Michael Kreis, a Georgia State University law professor who's been following the case, said this was "as strong a response as she could have made," noting that the filing acknowledged the relationship, explained the timing and addressed the financial issues.

"I'm just left with the question of why did they not respond sooner," he said. "As a legal matter, I think it's done. As a political matter, it still seems a little messy."

Trump and other critics of Willis have capitalized on allegations about the relationship between Willis and Wade, using them to try to cast doubt on the legitimacy of the case. The former president has also accused Willis — and the prosecutors in three other criminal cases against him — of engaging in political attacks as he appears poised to become the 2024 Republican nominee for president.

Willis, an elected Democrat, is up for reelection this year. The personal relationship with Wade does seem to contradict a statement she said while running to become district attorney in 2020. During an appearance on public access television, she said, "I certainly will not be choosing people to date that work under me, let me just say that."

Roman's motion questions Wade's qualifications to be involved in a complex prosecution under Georgia's anti-racketeering law.

The response from the district attorney fiercely defended Wade's qualifications to lead the prosecution team, saying he "has long distinguished himself as an exceptionally talented litigator with significant trial experience."

Exhibits attached to the filing include pictures of awards Wade has received over the years for his legal work. Willis also attached Facebook posts from Merchant in 2016 supporting Wade's campaign to become a Cobb County Superior Court judge. In one post, Merchant described Wade as "ethical" and said he has "demonstrated his ability to be fair and impartial."

During an address at a historic Black church in Atlanta about a week after Roman's motion was filed, Willis suggested that questioning of Wade's qualifications and her decision to hire him was rooted in racism.

In joining Roman's motion, Trump attorney Steve Sadow had accused her of inappropriately injecting racism into the case. Willis' filing in response says her public comments were "well within all legal and ethical rules and guidelines."

Sadow rejected that, saying, "Apparently, the DA believes she can make public out-of-court statements about race, this case, and the defendants whenever she wants, and the Court is powerless to punish her by disqualification."

Biden is 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.

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"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 modernizing 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 in jeopardy 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.

Johnson has argued Biden already has enough authority to stop illegal border crossings, but without congressional backing, many actions he could take would likely be challenged in court. Trump and Biden alike used emergency authority from the COVID-19 pandemic, known as Title 42, to quickly turn back migrants at the border. With the public health emergency now over, Biden can't use those powers.

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 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."

Federal judge in DC postpones Trump's March trial on charges of plotting to overturn 2020 election

By ERIC TUCKER Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — A federal judge in Washington formally postponed Donald Trump's March trial on charges of plotting to overturn the 2020 election as a key legal appeal from the former president remains unresolved in the courts.

U.S. District Judge Tanya Chutkan on Friday vacated the March 4 trial date in the case brought by Justice Department special counsel Jack Smith but did not immediately set a new date.

The move opens the door for a separate prosecution in New York, charging Trump in connection with hush money payments to a porn actor, to proceed first. That case has long been seen as arguably the least legally perilous of the four indictments Trump faces, with the alleged misconduct less grave than accusations of mishandling classified documents or plotting to subvert a presidential election.

The postponement in Washington comes as a federal appeals court has yet to resolve a pending appeal from Trump arguing that he is immune from prosecution for actions he took in the White House. It is not clear when the three-judge panel might rule, but a ruling in favor of prosecutors that permits the case to move forward is expected to be appealed by the Trump team, likely resulting in additional delays.

For both sides, timing is of the essence. Trump, who faces four indictments and 91 felony counts, is looking to push his criminal cases back as he enjoys front-runner status in the race for the 2024 Republican presidential nomination. Smith's team, meanwhile, is hoping to be able to prosecute Trump this year before the November election. If Trump is elected while the case is pending, he could presumably order

the Justice Department to drop it and could potentially try to seek a pardon for himself.

The Washington case had been expected to take place first, but it has been delayed for weeks by Trump's appeal on grounds that he is shielded from prosecution — a claim that has been vigorously disputed by Smith's team. The appeals court heard arguments on Jan. 9 and appeared skeptical of a Trump lawyer's position. Though the court has said it intended to work quickly, it has not yet issued a ruling.

The judge in the New York case, the first of four indictments filed against Trump last year, has long resisted defense demands that he postpone the March 25 start date in light of the conflicting trial date in Washington, figuring — correctly — that the former president's legal calendar might change as the trial neared.

Trump is due back in court in Manhattan on Feb. 15 for a pretrial hearing where final details are expected to be ironed out. All signs point to the New York case starting on time. Trump's lawyers and prosecutors have been discussing jury selection procedures with the judge and some witnesses have said they've been told to be ready to testify.

The New York case involves steps Trump allegedly took to hide payments that were made on the Republican's behalf to suppress damaging stories before his 2016 win over Democrat Hillary Clinton, namely logging them as legal expenses. While a guilty verdict would give Trump another historic moniker as the first former president convicted of a crime, potentially complicating his campaign to return to the White House, there's no guarantee of prison time.

Trump critics and rival campaign aides have long bemoaned that Manhattan District Attorney Alvin Bragg's indictment was the first, believing that it helped blunt the political impact of more serious charges that followed because voters tuned out or grew confused by the myriad cases.

Bragg has eschewed his case's "hush money" label, opting in recent weeks to describe it as another Trump "election interference" case — albeit, this one involving behind-the-scenes maneuvering during Trump's first campaign for the White House in 2016.

Trump, meanwhile, faces dozens of felony charges in Florida accusing him of illegally retaining classified documents at his Mar-a-Lago estate. That case is set for trial on May 20 but could still be postponed. Another case in Georgia, brought by Fulton County District Attorney Fani Willis, accuses him of plotting to overturn that state's 2020 election. No trial date has been set.

Hamas says it's studying Gaza cease-fire proposal, but appears to rule out key provisions

By BASSEM MROUE and SAMY MAGDY Associated Press

BEIRUT (AP) — Hamas officials said Friday that the group is studying a proposed cease-fire deal that would include prolonged pauses in fighting in Gaza and swaps of Israeli hostages for Palestinian prisoners, but the militants appeared to rule out some key components.

Hamas remains committed to its initial demands for a permanent cease-fire, the group's top political leader Ismail Haniyeh and a senior Beirut-based official, Osama Hamdan, said. Hamdan also said the group seeks the release of thousands of Palestinian prisoners being held for acts related to the conflict with Israel, including those serving life sentences.

He mentioned two by name, including Marwan Barghouti, a popular Palestinian uprising leader seen as a unifying figure. Hamdan's comments on the prisoners were the most detailed demands yet raised by the group in public.

The insistence on large-scale prisoner releases and an end to the fighting in Gaza put the group at odds with the multi-stage proposal that officials from Egypt, Israel, Qatar and the United States put forth this week. That proposal does not include a permanent cease-fire.

After days of expressing optimism over progress toward a deal, mediators were still working to close wide gaps between Israel and Hamas. U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken planned to fly to the region Sunday to help push the efforts, making stops in Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Qatar, Israel and the West Bank, the State Department said.

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Haniyeh said in a statement Friday that negotiations must “completely end” the Israeli offensive in Gaza and bring the withdrawal of Israeli forces — demands that Israel has rejected.

Referring to the proposal for successive pauses in fighting, Hamdan told Lebanon’s LBC television: “There is no way that this will be acceptable by the resistance.”

Israeli leaders have said they will keep fighting until Hamas, which has ruled Gaza since 2007, is crushed, even while agreeing to long pauses that are accompanied by the release of hostages.

Hamas and other militants captured about 250 hostages during their deadly Oct. 7 attack on southern Israel that triggered the war. They continue to hold dozens of captives, after more than 100 were released during a one-week truce in November. Those releases were in exchange for 240 Palestinian prisoners.

Since Israel’s offensive began, more than 27,000 Palestinians have been killed and 66,000 wounded, according to Gaza’s Health Ministry. The conflict has also leveled vast swaths of the tiny coastal enclave, displaced 85% of its population and pushed a quarter of residents to starvation.

Hamdan also said Hamas wants to free Palestinian prisoners of all factions — not just those affiliated with the militant group. In addition to Barghouti, he named Ahmed Saadat, the head of the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine, a small PLO faction.

The prisoner release is a “national cause, not only for Hamas,” he said.

Both Barghouti and Saadat were convicted of involvement in fatal attacks during the second Palestinian uprising against Israel’s occupation a generation ago.

Alluding to additional points of dispute, Hamdan also said that Israel is carving out a buffer zone on the Gaza side of the border. Israel has not acknowledged such plans officially, but satellite photos show new demolition in a 1-kilometer-wide (0.6-mile-wide) swath within Gaza along the border with Israel.

As the war nears the four-month mark, fighting continued in the southern city of Khan Younis. The Israeli military said Friday that its efforts focused on fighters, weapons and infrastructure in the city, a key target of Israel’s ground offensive in recent weeks.

Israeli fire hit the headquarters of the Palestinian Red Crescent at Khan Younis’ Amal Hospital on Friday, killing four people, including a Red Crescent staffer, the organization said. It was the third staff member killed this week.

Israeli troops have surrounded the hospital for 12 days amid heavy bombardment and gunfire, and supplies are running out, the Red Crescent said. It called for a safe corridor to evacuate patients.

Tens of thousands of residents of Khan Younis and surrounding areas have fled south to the town of Rafah, on the border with Egypt, where already more than a million people from across Gaza have taken refuge. Israeli Defense Minister Yoav Gallant said Thursday that after Israeli troops seize Khan Younis, they will move on Rafah, though he did not give a time frame. That prospect has raised fears about where the population would go to find safety.

The United Nations said Rafah is becoming a “pressure cooker of despair.”

“We fear for what comes next,” said Jens Laerke, spokesman for the U.N. Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs. “It’s like every week we think, you know, it can’t get any worse. Well, go figure. It gets worse.”

Another Hamas official said Friday that the group would give its reply on the cease-fire proposal “very soon” and ask for several unspecified changes. He refused to give any details on what they’re seeking or how many hostages would be released in return for how many prisoners.

Qatar and Egypt have been serving as mediators between Israel and Hamas. A senior Egyptian official familiar with the discussions described the multi-stage proposal, which he said Hamas had sent positive signals about. The Egyptian official and the Hamas official spoke on condition of anonymity because the indirect talks are still ongoing.

The proposal, according to the Egyptian official, includes an initial cease-fire of six to eight weeks during which Hamas would release elderly hostages, women and children in return for hundreds of Palestinians jailed by Israel.

Throughout that phase, negotiations would continue on prolonging the cease-fire and releasing more prisoners and hostages. Israel would allow the number of aid trucks entering Gaza to increase up to 300

daily — from a few dozen currently — and let displaced Gaza residents gradually return to their homes in the north, according to the proposal.

Senators reach a deal on border policy bill. Now it faces an uphill fight to passage

By STEPHEN GROVES Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Senate negotiators on Friday reached a deal on a proposal to overhaul the asylum system at the U.S. border with Mexico, clearing the way for Democratic and Republican Senate leaders to begin the difficult task of convincing Congress to pass a national security package that will include tens of billions of dollars for Ukraine and immigration enforcement, as well as funding for Israel and other American allies.

Sen. Chris Murphy, the lead Democratic negotiator, posted on social media Friday that a deal had been reached and that text of the bill would be released over the weekend. Senators are still working on finishing the rest of the package, which was initiated by a request from President Joe Biden for \$110 billion for wartime aid for allies, domestic defense manufacturing, humanitarian assistance for conflicts around the world and managing the influx of migrants at the U.S.-Mexico border.

Senators are preparing for a key test vote on the package next week, but it already faces a steep climb through Congress. Republicans in both chambers have balked at compromises on border security policy. Senate Republicans had initially demanded that the package include border policy changes, but Donald Trump, the GOP's likely presidential nominee, has become a vocal opponent of the legislation.

"Republicans said the border is a priority and we should craft a bipartisan bill to help control the border. We did that. We have a deal," Murphy said on the platform X, formerly Twitter. He added: "It's decision time."

The core group of negotiators has been laboring for months to craft a package that can win support from a bipartisan coalition of moderates in Congress. As they prepared to allow the details of the bill to be scrutinized, it remained to be seen whether they could cobble together the requisite votes from both sides of the aisle.

"The criticisms are based on rumors and misconceptions," Sen. Kyrsten Sinema, an Arizona independent who was central to crafting the bill, said on Thursday.

Senate Democrats, increasingly wary of the political vulnerabilities facing Biden and their party on immigration, have become more comfortable with the contours of the package, though progressive and Hispanic members of the House are still expected to oppose the border policy changes in droves if it passes the Senate.

The wartime aid for Israel could also divide Democrats. Sen. Bernie Sanders, an independent of Vermont, said Friday he would push to strip funding for offensive weaponry for Israel from the package while maintaining funds for defensive systems.

On the right, many conservatives oppose both continued funding for Ukraine as well as compromises on border enforcement. House Speaker Mike Johnson has repeatedly declared he won't compromise on hardline border enforcement measures, but he has said he will not pass final judgment until he is able to read the bill.

As GOP lawmakers view the political repercussions of enacting immigration laws in the midst of an election year, many Trump allies have argued that Congress does not even need to act because presidents already have enough authority on the border. And in a sign they will try to stop the bill from advancing to a final vote, some have lobbied leaders to give them weeks to make further changes through committee hearings.

"I think we've pretty much been held hostage by the Republican leadership. The Republican leadership pushed this on us," Sen. Tommy Tuberville, a Republican of Alabama, said Thursday on Steve Bannon's "War Room" podcast. "And now if we don't pass something, we're going to look bad in the eyes of the American people. But I'm just telling people right now we do not need a border policy. We already have one intact."

The legislation largely focuses on a challenge that both Republican and Democratic administrations

have grappled with: How to tamp down the growing number of people who come to the border seeking asylum, which offers protection from persecution for race, religion, political affiliation or membership in a discriminated group.

Asylum is a key part of international law and the U.S.'s ability to advance human rights, but the system has become overwhelmed in recent years, creating years-long waits for asylum cases to be heard, even though many migrants fail to prove their asylum case in the end.

The bill seeks to address that, according to Sinema, by making it tougher for people to enter the asylum system, dramatically speeding up the process, and denying them the ability to apply for asylum if illegal border crossings grow to become unmanageable for authorities. Most migrants who seek asylum would receive an initial interview, known as a credible fear screening, within days of arriving at the border. They would then either be expelled from the country or given a work permit during a months-long wait to have their case heard by an immigration judge.

Immigration advocates are concerned the proposal would deprive asylum seekers of the ability to make full cases, especially when they have just made arduous and often traumatic journeys to get to the U.S.

Taylor Swift could make it from Tokyo to the Super Bowl. Parking her private jet could be 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.

Even the Japanese Embassy in Washington, D.C., seems to be rooting for her.

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). Scrutiny about her jet travel has drawn some criticism for greenhouse gas emissions.

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.

WHAT DOES JAPAN SAY?

The Japanese Embassy in Washington posted a brief social media statement Friday on official letterhead that managed to incorporate three Swift song titles - "Speak Now", "Fearless" and "Red" — in a light-

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hearted acknowledgment of the attention Swift's travel plans have drawn.

"If she departs Tokyo in the evening after her concert, she should comfortably arrive in Las Vegas before the Super Bowl begins," it said.

Yuki Sugiyama, second secretary at the Embassy, confirmed to The Associated Press that he made the post on Instagram and X, the platform formerly known as Twitter. He said Swift's travel arrangements were a private matter.

"The embassy has no comment on that part," Sugiyama said.

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 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.

Towering over the Grammys is a Los Angeles high-rise tagged with 27 stories of graffiti

By JOHN ANTCZAK Associated Press

LOS ANGELES (AP) — Graffiti has risen to high art in downtown Los Angeles: Taggers have covered at least 27 stories of an unfinished high-rise development.

The vandalism is the latest twist in the saga of the three-tower project across the street from where the Grammy Awards will be hosted Sunday, the Crypto.com Arena — which is near the Los Angeles Convention Center and the L.A. Live dining and events complex in the city's expanding entertainment district.

The towers were going to house a hotel and luxury condos, but the project stalled in 2019 when the Beijing-based developer ran out of money, the Los Angeles Times reported.

City officials say the graffiti is not there to stay.

The Police Department's Central Division said in a social media post that officers met with the property management and representatives of the area's City Council district to collaborate on efforts to better secure the property.

"The measures will be implemented immediately and the graffiti will be removed," it said.

Taggers were reported to be seen at the property repeatedly this week, according to the police department.

A police helicopter crew spotted more than a dozen people trespassing and possibly spray-painting the building at 12:43 a.m. Tuesday, the statement said. Two men, ages 35 and 25, were arrested by patrol units, issued citations and released.

On Thursday, suspects were reported spray-painting a site on the 30th floor and officers were told the suspects fled in a vehicle. Officers ultimately stopped the vehicle and cited the driver for failure to yield, police said. The passenger was questioned and released.

A fire set off by a gas explosion in Kenya kills at least 3 people and injures 280 others

By TOM ODULA Associated Press

NAIROBI, Kenya (AP) — Liquid petroleum gas cylinders exploded in an illegal depot in a residential area of the Kenyan capital, officials said Friday, setting off a late-night inferno that killed at least three people and injured 280 others. The death toll was expected to rise.

The depot in Nairobi had twice been demolished, and the owner had been found guilty of operating an illegal gas refilling business in May, but continued to do business, officials said. That raised suspicions — in a country where corruption is endemic — that bribes were paid to ignore the operation.

At least 24 people were critically injured, the Kenya Red Cross said, after a huge fireball erupted from the gas depot and rapidly spread, burning homes and warehouses. Some gas cylinders were thrown hundreds of meters (yards), sparking separate fires in the neighborhood.

The Petroleum Institute of East Africa said a magistrates' court sentenced the owner of the illegal depot to a year in prison or a fine of \$3,076. That was despite a precedent set by Kenya's High Court in which those found guilty of operating an illegal gas facility should be sentenced to a minimum of five years in prison or a fine of at least \$61,500.

Despite the law providing for mandatory forfeiture, the magistrate also released all motor vehicles, including two liquid petroleum gas tankers, together with confiscated LPG that had a net weight of 4,660 kilograms (more than 10,000 pounds), the PIEA said.

The institute said one of the tankers that was "unprocedurally released" was involved in the explosions and fire that broke out.

"The proprietor continued operating the illegal storage and refilling facility without even the bare minimum safety standards and qualified LPG personnel as required by law leading to this unfortunate catastrophe which could have been avoided should the letter and spirit of the law have been followed," it said.

Local resident Charles Mainge said "the government knew this liquid petroleum gas plant was existing in a residential area but they did nothing."

"They should make sure this doesn't happen again," he said.

Witnesses said they heard a sound they suspected was gas leaking before at least two explosions and the fire, which broke out at around 11.30 p.m. local time Thursday. Cellphone videos taken by witnesses showed the fireball erupting right next to apartment buildings. People were heard screaming.

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.

A gas cylinder sent flying through the air set off a fire that burned down a nearby garment and textile warehouse, he said. Several other vehicles and businesses were damaged by the blaze.

At the scene after daybreak, houses and shops were burned out. The roof of a four-story residential building about 200 meters (650 feet) from the scene of the explosion was broken by another flying gas

cylinder. Electrical wiring lay on the ground.

Nothing remained in the burned-out gas depot except the shells of several trucks.

Local resident Alfred Juma said neighbors told him they suspected there was a gas leak, and he heard a loud noise from a cylinder in the depot next to his house when he came outside.

"I started waking up neighbors asking them to leave," he said.

Juma said he warned the driver of a car not to drive through the area, but the driver insisted and his vehicle stalled because of the gas fumes.

"He attempted to start the car three times and that's when there was an explosion and the fire spread ... setting off other explosions," he said.

The shell of the vehicle was lying on its side in the aftermath.

Juma said he grabbed two children and they took shelter in a sewage ditch until the explosions ended. His family hadn't been at home, but Juma lost everything that he owned in the fire.

Mainge, the local resident, said neighborhood residents had previous concerns about the gas site operating in the area. He said there were at least two main explosions from the depot, the second of which knocked him and others off their feet after they left their houses to see what was happening.

Police and the Kenya Red Cross reported three deaths and that number may rise, said Wesley Kimeto, the Embakasi police chief.

The government said that 280 people were taken to several hospitals with injuries. At least 25 of the injured were children.

Police had moved people out the area and were preventing them from returning to their homes, resident Caroline Karanja said. She said the smell and the smoke were choking and she would have to stay away for a while because she had young children.

The Energy and Petroleum Regulatory Authority said the gas storage site had applied for construction permits to build a plant and operate there in March, June and July.

"All applications were rejected as they did not meet the set criteria for an LPG storage and filling plant in that area," the authority said in a statement Friday. "The main reason for the rejection was failure of the designs to meet the safety distances stipulated."

One of the stipulations was that the gas business submit a risk assessment called a "blast profile," which would estimate how surrounding areas would be impacted in the event of an explosion, the regulatory authority said. The gas storage business never submitted those assessments, it said.

The continued operation of the gas depot is likely to put authorities' enforcement of regulations under heavy scrutiny. Officials at the county government have been accused of taking bribes to overlook building codes and other regulations.

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

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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 Vampirás" and "Desde Gayola."

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 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."

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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-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.

Slays 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

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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."

The US didn't just avoid a recession — it's adding hundreds of thousands of new jobs

By PAUL WISEMAN AP Economics Writer

WASHINGTON (AP) — The nation's employers delivered a stunning burst of hiring to begin 2024, adding 353,000 jobs in January in the latest sign of the economy's continuing ability to shrug off the highest interest rates in two decades.

Friday's government report showed that last month's job gain — roughly twice what economists had predicted — topped the December gain of 333,000, a figure that was itself revised sharply higher. The unemployment rate stayed at 3.7%, just above a half-century low.

Wages rose unexpectedly fast in January, too. Average hourly pay climbed a sharp 0.6% from December, the fastest monthly gain in nearly two years, and 4.5% from January 2023. The strong hiring and wage growth could complicate or delay the Federal Reserve's intention to start cutting interest rates later this year.

The latest gains showcased employers' willingness to keep hiring to meet steady consumer spending. It comes as the intensifying presidential campaign is pivoting in no small part on views of President Joe Biden's economic stewardship. Public polls show widespread dissatisfaction largely because even though inflation has sharply slowed, most prices remain well above pre-pandemic levels. Some recent surveys, though, show public approval gradually improving.

"America's economy is the strongest in the world," Biden said Friday. "Today, we saw more proof, with another month of strong wage gains and employment gains of over 350,000 in January, continuing the strong growth from last year."

This week, the Fed took note of the economy's durability, with Chair Jerome Powell saying "the economy is performing well, the labor market remains strong." The central bank made clear that while it's nearing a long-awaited shift toward cutting interest rates, it's in no hurry to do so.

The details in Friday's jobs report pointed to broad hiring gains across the economy. Professional and

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business services, a category that includes managers and technical workers, added 74,000 jobs. Healthcare companies added 70,000, retailers 45,000, governments at all levels 36,000 and manufacturers 23,000.

The unemployment rate has now come in below 4% for two straight years, the longest such streak since the 1960s.

"Overall, the labor market remains strong and continues to defy expectations of a softening," said Rubeela Farooqi, chief U.S. economist at High Frequency Economics. "For Fed officials, these data strongly support patience on rate cuts. Policymakers will be in no rush to lower rates if job and wage growth continue to be robust over coming months."

Acting Labor Secretary Julie Su brushed aside any concerns that last month's wage growth might prove inflationary.

"Wage growth has now been consistently beating inflation," Su told The Associated Press. "Working people and families have more money in their pockets. They have more security."

Julia Pollak, chief economist at the job marketplace ZipRecruiter, noted that not everything in the January report was consistent with gangbuster job growth. She pointed out, for example, that Americans worked an average of 34.1 hours a week last month, the lowest such figure since 2010 excluding the COVID-19 recession.

"When consumer demand slackens, companies often cut workers' hours before they cut payroll," Pollak said. "Today's reading could be a warning sign that demand for workers is softening and that job cuts are looming."

That said, she suggested that the decline in work hours might simply reflect January winter storms that kept some people away from work.

To fight inflation, the Fed raised its benchmark rate 11 times beginning in March 2022. The higher borrowing costs were widely expected to boost unemployment and likely cause a recession. Yet the economy has managed to deliver enough job growth to avoid a downturn without accelerating inflation pressures. Inflation cooled throughout 2023, making it likelier that the Fed would achieve a "soft landing" — taming inflation without derailing the economy.

January's blowout job gain is all but sure to cause the Fed to take a cautious approach toward cutting its key interest rate, which affects many consumer and business loans. A March rate cut now seems definitely off the table.

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 low, hiring is still solid and the unemployment rate is still consistent with a healthy economy.

Indeed, some companies are still struggling to fill positions. Ryan Parnow, general manager of Blue Rocket LLC, in Coralville, Iowa, said that hiring workers to do commercial and residential cleaning remains a struggle even though the company is raising pay and offering year-end bonuses, ranging from \$750 to \$2,000, for new hires as well as existing staffers.

For a window washer job it posted a few weeks ago, Blue Rocket brought in six applicants for interviews, including one who walked out in the middle of the conversation. The others rejected job offers. Now, the company has to start again from scratch.

"It frustrating," Parnow said. "I am spending more time on the job site."

While jobs are plentiful in most sectors of the economy, those that offer attractive perks — like the ability to work from home — are drawing particular interest. Among the beneficiaries have been Anthony Pappaly, who began looking for a job in corporate communications or public relations after leaving the Coast Guard in November.

"I was noticing new job postings all the time," said Pappaly, 30. "I also noticed just a swarm of people going to the same jobs ... especially the hybrid jobs or the work-from-home jobs."

Pappaly landed at Upbring, a Texas nonprofit that runs programs to help children across the state. He

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works from home most days and likes the flexibility to occasionally visit his mother in California and work from her home.

Upbring, with 1,100 employees, has managed to fill jobs by increasing its recruiting staff, offering work-from-home options where possible, raising pay and surveying employees about their top priorities, said Carolyn Paganoni, who oversees its human resources staff.

Competition for top talent remains tough, said David Lewis, an executive at Wed Society, an Oklahoma-based media franchise brand that promotes wedding vendors. To compete for job applicants, the company has raised pay by up to 15% in the past two years.

"It's costing more money to find top talent," Lewis said. "If you're looking for sheer number of applicants, it's up. But what it seems to be is people that are currently employed looking to trade up as opposed to unemployed people needing a job."

Punxsutawney Phil predicts an early spring at Groundhog Day festivities

PUNXSUTAWNEY, Pa. (AP) — Punxsutawney Phil predicted an early spring on an overcast Friday morning at Gobbler's Knob in Pennsylvania, the scene of the largest and best-known Groundhog Day celebration in the United States.

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.

Just after sunrise Friday, the Punxsutawney Groundhog Club announced Phil did not see his shadow, which will usher in early springlike weather. The groundhog seeing his shadow presages six more weeks of winter, according to the group.

Before the announcement, President Tom Dunkel, in the traditional top hat and tuxedo worn by the club's inner circle, explained that his cane, handed down from previous presidents, including his father, gave him the power to speak "Groundhog-ese" and that Phil would tell him which of two scrolls to use. At Dunkel's direction, the crowd helped fire-up the groundhog with repeated chants of "Phil!" before a club member pulled the groundhog from a door in a stump on the stage and held it aloft.

Dunkel and other club members leaned over the stump where the groundhog sat before Dunkel pointed to one of two scrolls with the cane and announced that they had a decision.

Vice President Dan McGinley read the decision, written in verse and filled with quips about the groundhog's envy for humans' opposable thumbs and hopes to garner some Punxsutawney Phil write-in votes in 2024, from the chosen scroll and announced, "Glad tidings on this Groundhog Day, an early spring is on the way!"

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. A bundled-up crowd, some wearing groundhog-themed hats, watched musical performances and fireworks as they waited for sunrise and the appearance of Punxsutawney Phil.

Pennsylvania Gov. Josh Shapiro took the stage before Phil to urge people around the world watching the festivities to come to Punxsutawney next year. Shapiro also announced the famed groundhog is the new official meteorologist for Pennsylvania.

"Punxsutawney is the center of the universe right now and I love that you're all here," Shapiro said.

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%.

As the morning progressed, something like a groundhog consensus emerged, backing Punxsutawney Phil's prognostication of an early spring. Among more than a dozen reports of weather predicting groundhogs in the U.S. and Canada early Friday, 10 were on Phil's side and just three warned of six more weeks of winter.

Octoraro Orphie in Quarryville, Pennsylvania, a rival of the Punxsutawney groundhog for more than a century, says the cold will be around for awhile. But groundhogs in Staten Island, New York; Nova Scotia and Quebec in Canada; Connecticut, Georgia, Illinois and Ohio were all on Phil's side — an early spring.

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.

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. Unless 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.

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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."

Tesla recalling nearly 2.2M vehicles for software update to fix warning lights that are too small

By TOM KRISHER AP Auto Writer

DETROIT (AP) — Tesla is recalling nearly all of the vehicles it has sold in the U.S. because some warning lights on the instrument panel are too small.

The recall of nearly 2.2 million vehicles announced Friday by the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration is a sign of stepped-up scrutiny of the electric vehicle maker. The agency also said it has upgraded a 2023 investigation into Tesla steering problems to an engineering analysis, a step closer to a recall.

Documents posted Friday by the agency say the warning light recall will be done with an online software update. It covers the 2012 through 2023 Model S, the 2016 through 2023 Model X, the 2017 through 2023 Model 3, the 2019 through 2024 Model Y and the 2024 Cybertruck.

The agency says that the brake, park and antilock brake warning lights have a smaller font size than required by federal safety standards. That can make critical safety information hard to read, increasing the risk of a crash.

Tesla has already started releasing the software update, and owners will be notified by letter starting March 30.

NHTSA says it found the problem in a routine safety compliance audit on Jan. 8.

Tesla has identified three warranty claims potentially related to the problem, but has no reports of crashes or injuries.

Shares of Tesla Inc., which have been in a downward trend since July and slumped after the company's fourth quarter earnings report last week, fell another 2.7% in early trading Friday to levels not seen since May of last year.

In December, NHTSA pressured Tesla into recalling more than 2 million vehicles to update software and fix a defective system that's supposed to ensure drivers are paying attention when using Autopilot.

Documents said the update will increase warnings and alerts to drivers.

The recall came after a two-year investigation by NHTSA into a series of crashes that happened while

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the Autopilot partially automated driving system was in use. Some were deadly.

The agency says its investigation found Autopilot's method of making sure that drivers are paying attention can be inadequate and can lead to "foreseeable misuse of the system."

The added controls and alerts will "further encourage the driver to adhere to their continuous driving responsibility," the documents said.

But safety experts said that, while the recall is a good step, it still makes the driver responsible and doesn't fix the underlying problem that Autopilot isn't reacting to stopped vehicles. They say that Tesla's driver monitoring system that relies on detecting hands on the steering wheel doesn't stop drivers from checking out.

Tesla says on its website that its Autopilot and "Full Self-Driving" systems cannot drive the vehicles, and that human drivers must be ready to intervene at all times.

In February of last year, NHTSA also pressed Tesla to recall nearly 363,000 vehicles with its "Full Self-Driving" system because it can misbehave around intersections and doesn't always follow speed limits.

The recall was part of part of a larger investigation into Tesla's automated driving systems.

It raised questions about CEO Elon Musk's claims that he can prove to regulators that cars equipped with "Full Self-Driving" are safer than humans, and that humans almost never have to touch the controls.

Musk at one point had promised that a fleet of autonomous robotaxis would be in use in 2020. The latest action appears to push that development further into the future.

In addition, Tesla is recalling more than 1.6 million Model S, X, 3 and Y electric vehicles exported to China for problems with their automatic assisted steering and door latch controls.

China's State Administration for Market Regulation announced the recall in early January. It said Tesla Motors in Beijing and Shanghai would use remote upgrades to fix the problems.

The recall is due to problems with the automatic steering assist function and applies to 1.6 million imported Tesla Model S, Model X, Model 3 and Model Ys.

When the automatic steering function is engaged, drivers might misuse the combined driving function, increasing a risk of accidents, the notice said.

The recall to fix the door unlock logic control for imported Model S and Model X EVs affects 7,538 vehicles made between Oct. 26, 2022 and Nov. 16, 2023. It is needed to prevent door latches from coming open during a collision.

Tesla was the top seller of electric vehicles in the world last year, but China's BYD beat the company in the fourth quarter. BYD is the leader in the booming China market.

The steering investigation upgrade, also announced Friday in documents, covers more than 334,000 Tesla vehicles.

The probe was opened in July of last year after the agency received a dozen complaints about loss of steering control in 2023 Model Y and 3 vehicles. Now the agency says it has 115 complaints, and it received another 2,176 after requesting information from the company.

Agency documents say drivers are reporting loss of steering control, often accompanied by messages showing that power assisted steering has been reduced or disabled. Some complained of an inability to turn the steering wheel, while others said it required more effort.

A message was left Friday seeking comment from Tesla.

In one case a driver told NHTSA that they couldn't complete a right turn and ran into another vehicle.

The agency said there have been multiple allegations of Teslas blocking intersections or roadways. Over 50 vehicles had to be towed, according to the consumer complaints.

Many of the complaints reported the problem happened between 5 mph and 35 mph. The highest reported speed that alleged an inability to turn was 75 mph, the documents said.

The agency said it is looking into possible steering rack failures.

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Today in History: February 3, the day the music died

By The Associated Press undefined

Today in History

Today is Saturday, Feb. 3, the 34th day of 2024. There are 332 days left in the year.

Today in History:

On Feb. 3, 1959, which would become known as "the day the music died," rock-and-roll stars Buddy Holly, Ritchie Valens and J.P. "The Big Bopper" Richardson died in a small plane crash near Clear Lake, Iowa.

On this date:

In 1865, President Abraham Lincoln and Confederate Vice President Alexander H. Stephens held a ship-board peace conference off the Virginia coast; the talks deadlocked over the issue of Southern autonomy.

In 1913, the 16th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution, providing for a federal income tax, was ratified.

In 1917, the United States broke off diplomatic relations with Germany, the same day an American cargo ship, the SS Housatonic, was sunk by a U-boat off Britain after the crew was allowed to board lifeboats.

In 1943, during World War II, the U.S. transport ship SS Dorchester, which was carrying troops to Greenland, sank after being hit by a German torpedo in the Labrador Sea; of the more than 900 men aboard, only some 230 survived.

In 1966, the Soviet probe Luna 9 became the first manmade object to make a soft landing on the moon.

In 1988, the U.S. House of Representatives handed President Ronald Reagan a major defeat, rejecting his request for \$36.2 million in new aid to the Nicaraguan Contras by a vote of 219-211.

In 1994, the space shuttle Discovery lifted off, carrying Sergei Krikalev (SUR'-gay KREE'-kuh-lev), the first Russian cosmonaut to fly aboard a U.S. spacecraft.

In 1995, the space shuttle Discovery blasted off with a woman, Air Force Lieutenant Colonel Eileen Collins, in the pilot's seat for the first time in NASA history.

In 1998, a U.S. Marine plane sliced through the cable of a ski gondola in Italy, causing the car to plunge hundreds of feet, killing all 20 people inside.

In 2006, an Egyptian passenger ferry sank in the Red Sea during bad weather, killing more than 1,000 passengers.

In 2009, Eric Holder became the first Black U.S. attorney general as he was sworn in by Vice President Joe Biden.

In 2013, Christopher Dorner, a fired Los Angeles police officer launched a revenge war on law enforcement and the families of those he blamed for ending his career, killing four people during a 6-day manhunt that ended with his suicide in a mountain cabin.

In 2018, linebacker Ray Lewis and receiver Terrell Owens were among eight people voted into the Pro Football Hall of Fame.

In 2020, in closing arguments at President Donald Trump's first impeachment trial, Democratic prosecutors urged senators to stop a "runaway presidency" and recognize Trump's actions in Ukraine as part of a pattern of behavior that would allow him to "cheat" in the 2020 election; Trump's defenders accused Democrats of trying to undo the 2016 election and said voters should decide Trump's fate.

In 2021, country music star Morgan Wallen was suspended from his label and his music was pulled by radio stations and streaming services after a video surfaced showed him shouting a racial slur.

Today's birthdays: Football Hall of Famer Fran Tarkenton is 83. Actor Blythe Danner is 81. Football Hall of Famer Bob Griese is 79. Singer-guitarist Dave Davies (The Kinks) is 77. Actor Morgan Fairchild is 74. Actor Pamela Franklin is 74. Actor Nathan Lane is 68. Rock musician Lee Ranaldo (Sonic Youth) is 68. Actor Thomas Calabro is 65. Rock musician/author Lol Tolhurst (The Cure) is 65. Actor-director Keith Gordon is 63. Actor Michele Greene is 62. Country singer Matraca Berg is 60. Actor Maura Tierney is 59. Actor Warwick Davis is 54. Actor Elisa Donovan is 53. Reggaeton singer Daddy Yankee is 48. Actor Isla Fisher is 48. Human rights activist Amal Clooney is 46. Singer-songwriter Jessica Harp is 42. Actor Matthew Moy is 40. Rapper Sean Kingston is 34. Actor Brandon Micheal Hall is 31.