

Groton Daily Independent

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Thursday, Feb. 15

Senior Menu: Chicken cacciatore, rice pilaf, Italian blend vegetables, apple sauce bars, whole wheat bread.

School Breakfast: Pop tarts.

School Lunch: Pizza crunchers, corn.

Parent-Teacher Conferences, 1:30 p.m. to 7 p.m.



Friday, Feb. 16

Senior Menu: Baked macaroni and cheese with kielbasa, vegetables normandy blend, fruit, whole wheat bread.

No School - Faculty In-Service

Basketball Double Header: Britton-Hecla at Groton Area: (Gym: Boys 8th grade at 3:30, Boys 7th grade at 4:30). (Arena: Girls JV at 4 p.m., Boys JV at 5:15 p.m., Girls Varsity at 6:30 p.m., Boys Varsity at 7:45 p.m.)

Saturday, Feb. 17

Region Boys Wrestling at Gettysburg

Boys Basketball at Henry: 7th at 11 a.m., 8th at Noon, C game at 1 p.m., JV at 2:15 p.m., Varsity at 3:30 p.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

OPEN: Recycling Trailer in Groton
The recycling trailer is located west of the city shop. It takes cardboard, papers and aluminum cans.
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1440

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At least one person was killed and 21 others were wounded after a shooting brokeout near Kansas City's Union Station following the conclusion of the Chiefs' celebratory Super Bowl parade. As of this writing, 15 victims had life-threatening injuries, with two in critical condition; eight of those wounded were children.

Israeli forces launched a series of strikes across parts of neighboring Lebanon yesterday in retaliation for cross-border fire from Hezbollah fighters that killed one Israeli soldier and wounded eight others (including seven civilians). At least three Lebanese civilians and one militant were killed in the strikes.

Lyft shares rose over 60% in after-hours trading Tuesday following the rideshare company's fourth-quarter earnings report that featured a typo in its 2024 forecast. The swing was said to be largely driven after hours by algorithms trained to analyze data and automatically execute the selling or buying of shares without human intervention.

Sports, Entertainment, & Culture

Travis Kelce to executive produce "My Dead Friend Zoe," which is the first film to be financed partially using tax credits from 2022's Inflation Reduction Act.

Iowa's Caitlin Clark goes for NCAA women's scoring record tonight against Michigan (8 pm ET, Peacock); Clark is currently 8 points shy of breaking record.

Harvey Weinstein to appeal 2020 rape conviction; Weinstein was sentenced to 23 years in prison following the conviction. Pedro Pascal tapped to star in Marvel's "Fantastic Four".

Science & Technology

Scientists develop "meat rice," where grains of rice act as scaffolding for cultured meat; high-protein dish can be prepared like traditional rice, may find use in food insecure communities, military deployments, and more.

Researchers discover oldest known cave art in Argentina's Patagonia region, with drawings of humans and animals dating to roughly 8,200 years ago.

Long-term effects of smoking on the immune system persist for up to 15 years after quitting; study finds heightened inflammatory response, dampened cellular response in ex-smokers.

Business & Markets

US stock markets close up (S&P 500 +1.0%, Dow +0.4%, Nasdaq +1.3%), lifted by Uber, Lyft, and Nvidia shares. Bitcoin's market capitalization surpasses \$1T for the first time since 2021.

Uber shares rise 15% to record high after company announces first-ever \$7B share buyback plan. What is a share buyback?. Tech giant Cisco lay off 5% of workforce, or roughly 4,250 employees.

Colorado's attorney general sues to block Kroger's proposed \$25B acquisition of rival grocer Albertsons. William Post, credited with playing a role in the development of the iconic Pop-Tarts snack, dies at 96.

Politics & World Affairs

US congressional leaders expected to meet with national security officials today over new classified intelligence reports about Russia's attempt to develop space-based antisatellite nuclear weapons.

Former President Donald Trump to attend hearing on case over alleged hush money payments made during his 2016 campaign. Georgia judge to consider whether to remove Fulton County District Attorney Fani Willis from state's election interference case over conflict of interest.

Indonesian Defense Minister Prabowo Subianto, 72, on track to win presidential election in world's third-largest democracy; unofficial results show Subianto with over 58% of the vote, while full official results are expected next month.

SD Legislators Advance Controversial Change to Ballot Initiative Process

HB 1244 would allow voters to withdraw their signatures from initiative petitions

Opponents say the bill is an unnecessary disruption to ongoing signature gathering campaigns and undermines the ballot initiative process

Pierre, SD – Earlier yesterday, the House State Affairs Committee advanced legislation that would change South Dakota’s ballot initiative process by allowing voters to withdraw their signatures from petitions that they had previously signed. House Bill 1244 now heads to the House floor.

“We want South Dakotans to know that legislators in Pierre are once again trying to interfere with the ballot initiative process,” said Matthew Schweich, chairman of the Voter Defense Association of South Dakota, a group opposing the bill.

Unlike most legislation, House Bill 1244 includes an emergency clause, which means it would take effect immediately and apply to all active signature gathering campaigns in South Dakota.

“House Bill 1244 declares an emergency where none exists and makes a significant change to South Dakota’s signature gathering process with less than three months before the petition deadline on May 7,” Schweich added.

Zebadiah Johnson, political director and lobbyist for the Voter Defense Association of South Dakota, testified in Pierre and urged legislators to reject the bill. He noted that the withdrawal policy would be the most wide open of any state in the country by allowing signatures to be withdrawn even after a petition has been certified for the ballot. He also reminded the committee that voters already have a remedy in cases where they regret their decision to sign.

“Signing a petition is not a concrete show of support for the policy being proposed,” Johnson added. “It means that the question is important enough to be submitted to the voters of South Dakota. If you oppose a ballot question, you always have the option of voting no in November.”

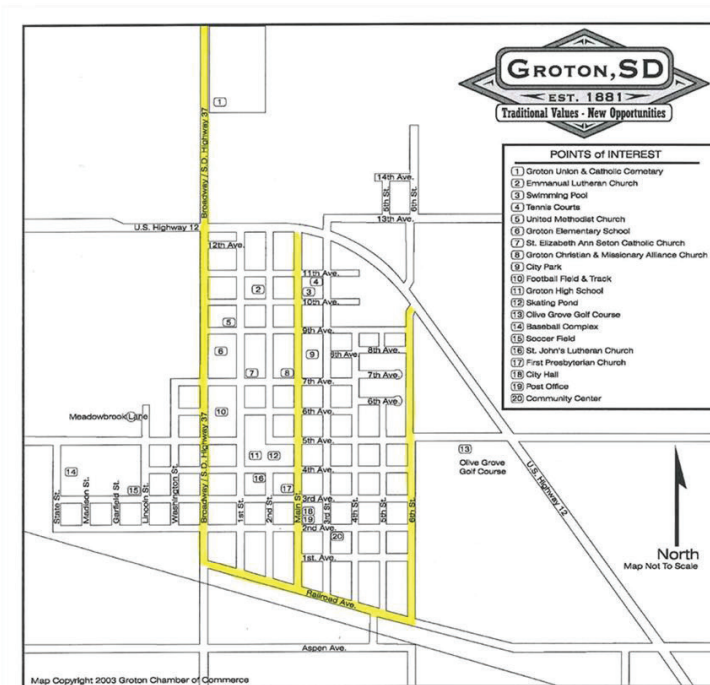
The Voter Defense Association of South Dakota is a nonpartisan political organization based in Sioux Falls, SD. Its mission is to “defend the ballot initiative rights of South Dakota voters and ensure that laws and regulations governing electoral processes in South Dakota are reasonable, fair, and transparent.”



Rath named to Hall of Fame

Toby Rath, a former GHS Band Director, was inducted into the South Dakota Bandmasters Association Hall of Fame this past weekend. Toby Rath retired in 2019 after 39 years of service to music education in the state. He taught for 24 years in Groton (1980-2004) and followed with 15 years at Rapid City Central High School. Toby is a past president of SDBA as well as serving on the board. Rath is a recipient of the Phi Beta Mu Outstanding Bandmaster Award and the SDHSAA Distinguished Service Award. (Photo from Cory Rath's Facebook Page)

Notice of Garbage Pickup- Effective the week of February 12th



To help preserve our streets, Groton residents are asked to bring their garbage to the following locations until further notice:

Railroad Avenue, Main Street, Sixth Street, & Highway 37

Residents of the Broadway Mobile Home Park need to take their garbage to **Highway 37**.

Residents north of 13th Avenue (Olson and Jacobson Developments) need to bring their garbage to the **Bus Barns**.

Your cooperation is greatly appreciated during the spring thaw.

Please bring your garbage bags and/or cans to these locations for Tuesday pickup!

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That's Life by Tony Bender: Music brings us together

The world paused on Feb. 4. Or at least it seemed to. Things have been so very hard for so very long. Maybe you didn't notice. Maybe you think it's the norm. It's not. There's plenty of sunshine, stars shining, but we've too been mired in despair to notice.

It could be seasonal stress disorder, but if we ever get some real snow, we'll be starting our days with Jell-O shots. Even parents. It could have something to do with astrology. I overheard something about Capricorn, and Mercury being in retrograde. And a bad moon rising.

It didn't matter. Sacred things were afoot when the great Joni Mitchell appeared at the Grammys, against all odds, to bookend her iconic song, "Both Sides Now," released 56 years ago when she was 24. By then, she'd already overcome a lifetime of challenges. Polio. A child put up for adoption. Divorce. Then, she was a witness through the eyes of youth.

Now, at 80, emerging from the ravages of a stroke, sitting, a queen among reverential musicians and singers, singing in a lower register now, she finally shared her view from the other side of the song, growing stronger with each verse.

There were no revelations. No answers. Emerging was enough.

Things really have gone to hell because in that moment, everyone—everyone watching in the world—suddenly got dust in their eyes. Coulda been DDT. "Give me spots on my apples, but leave me the birds and the bees," she once sang.

I'm not crying.

You're crying.

In that moment, like all the cells that comprise a heart, we were one. Beating. Ka-thump. In unison. Beating. Resilience was the message of the day.

Another chapter was taught by Tracy Chapman that night. I suppose I'm oblivious because I had no idea that there was any controversy surrounding her hopeful lament about inner city poverty and sacrifice, "Fast Car," being covered by Luke Combs.

Some felt it was inappropriate for a big ol' white cowboy to hijack a song written by a gay black woman. Gay? Never even considered it. I just saw it as a celebration of a great song by a great songwriter languishing in the shadows of the past.

The roots of our discontent go back to Elvis Presely who had big hits with otherwise obscure black songs. Was he a carpetbagger or did he open the door for black artists? I'm not sure there's a definitive answer; more so perspective.

It was 1988. I was working radio in Juneau when "Fast Car" appeared in rotation. Even amidst the mayhem of the morning show, I was mesmerized by the depth of the song, always stopped to listen.

At the Grammys, the cameras focused on a hand picking out the notes of the song and slowly panned upward as the cheers swelled until the lens captured the beatific smile of the songwriter, gray-haired now, but strong, her voice rich as loamy black soil of the good earth.

Combs, worshipful, was Robin. Kato. Dr. Watson. No interloper.

God, it was beautiful.

After 36, years, Tracy Chapman's song shot to #1 on on the charts last week. Combs' version was at #6. Luke Combs' heart, buried beneath the chest of a left tackle, was obvious when the song ended. He adores Tracy Chapman. Celebrates her time in the sun. He couldn't have predicted this, but he waded in with pure intent when he covered the song, and sometimes that's all it takes.

Suddenly, Tracy Chapman is back. A resonant voice speaking truth. Justice. A voice yearning to be heard. "Fast Car" made it to #6 on the charts in 1988. Another song, a greater song, "Talkin' 'Bout a Revolution," in Ronald Reagan's conservative "morning in America," peaked at #75. Too Political. Too against the tide. Too honest.

While they're standing in the welfare lines

Crying at the doorsteps of those armies of salvation

Wasting time in the unemployment lines

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Sitting around waiting for a promotion
Don't you know
Talking about a revolution?
It sounds like a whisper
Poor people gonna rise up
And get their share
Poor people gonna rise up
And take what's theirs
God bless Tracy Chapman and Joni Mitchell. They've caused us to think. Challenged us. Reminded us that the world is a beautiful place. And that there's always hope.

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Finance Officer Wanted

The Town of Andover is seeking a Finance Officer. This is a part time position. Must know word and excel. Resume can be sent to P O Box 35, Andover, SD 57422, or email to bsmith@nvc.net. A complete job description is available by call 605-265-0236. EOE. (0214.0221)





SOUTH DAKOTA SEARCHLIGHT

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Lawmakers endorse summer children's food program, nix expansion of reduced price school meals

BY: SETH TUPPER AND MAKENZIE HUBER - FEBRUARY 14, 2024 7:34 PM

A bill to include South Dakota in a summer food program for children advanced to the next step of the legislative process Wednesday in Pierre, while legislation to expand eligibility for reduced price school meals was rejected.

Lawmakers moved a bill forward that addresses the federal government's Summer Electronic Benefit Transfer Program for Children. It provides eligible low-income families with \$40 per child, per month in preloaded cards to buy groceries during the summer months.

Food is covered by the federal government, but administrative costs for the program are split with participating states.

Republican Gov. Kristi Noem's administration declined to participate in the program.

The bill from Rep. Linda Duba, a Democrat from Sioux Falls, would require state officials to take steps necessary to begin participating in the program by 2025. She said 36 states and several territories have opted into the program for 2024.

"I'm asking you as people who support families and students in South Dakota to make that move," Duba said.

At least 54,400 South Dakota children would qualify for the program through their existing qualification for free and reduced price school meals, according to Duba.

The bill would allocate about \$29 million in anticipated federal funds to cover food purchases during the summers of 2025 through 2029, and \$150,000 in state funds to match \$150,000 in federal funds for administration of the program.

Noem's Bureau of Finance and Management commissioner, Jim Terwilliger, testified against the bill. He said its roots are in a federal pandemic program that was burdensome for the state to administer. He also said existing food assistance programs provided 400,000 nutritionally balanced meals last summer at 95 sites across the state. Preloaded benefit cards, he said, could allow for the purchase of non-nutritious food.

Duba countered that existing summer meal programs only serve those who have transportation to meal sites at the designated times. She said preloaded cards provide families with more flexibility.

The House Education Committee voted 9-4 to send the bill to the Legislature's main budget panel, the Joint Appropriations Committee, for further consideration.

Reduced price meal expansion fails

Also Wednesday, a bill that would have expanded the number of students eligible for reduced price school meals was rejected 6-0 in the House Appropriations Committee.

Currently, students from families making 130% to 185% of the federal poverty level qualify for federally funded reduced price meals, and students from families making less than that qualify for free meals. That translates to annual household income of \$39,000 or less for families of four qualifying for free meals, and income of \$55,500 or less for families of four qualifying for reduced price meals.

The bill would have raised eligibility for reduced price meals to 209% of the federal poverty level — an income of \$62,700 or less for a family of four — and used state funds to pay the additional costs.

Terwilliger estimated the annual cost would be between \$1 million and \$1.5 million.

"I think it's a bad precedent," he said. "I think it's something to be cautious about."

Sioux Falls Republican Rep. Tony Venhuizen said the bill could open the door to more state funding of federal programming. He referenced federal funding during the COVID-19 pandemic that temporarily made school meals free for many more children.

"This was an idea that we never heard about, in my memory, and then the federal government offers it for a year or two and all of a sudden there are bills on it and it's something that we 'have to do,'" Venhuizen said. "I think this shows how dangerous it is in a way to create a culture of too much dependence."

Earlier during the legislative session, a bill to expand eligibility for free school meals also failed.

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

Makenzie Huber is a lifelong South Dakotan whose work has won national and regional awards. She's spent five years as a journalist with experience reporting on workforce, development and business issues within the state.

Legislation would require Health Department to make video interpreting state's abortion ban

BY: JOSHUA HAIAR - FEBRUARY 14, 2024 5:04 PM

PIERRE — The state Department of Health would have to create a video "and other materials" interpreting the state's abortion ban and an exception for the life of the mother, under a bill making its way through the Legislature.

"We were asked by the people of this state to bring clarity to this," the bill's prime sponsor, Rep. Taylor Rehfeldt, R-Sioux Falls, told South Dakota Searchlight. "That's what this does."

The House of Representatives passed House Bill 1224 in a 63-6 vote Wednesday, sending it to a Senate committee.

The bill "does not change any of our abortion laws," Rehfeldt said. The state's main abortion law is a ban with one exception "to preserve the life of the pregnant female."

The bill mandates the Department of Health to create an informational video and other materials by Sept. 1, 2024.

The video and materials would have to describe:

The state's abortion law and acts that do and do not constitute an abortion.

The most common medical conditions that threaten the life of a pregnant woman.

The generally accepted standards of care applicable to the treatment of a pregnant woman experiencing life-threatening or health-threatening medical conditions.

And the criteria that a practitioner, exercising reasonable medical judgment, might use in determining the best course of treatment for a pregnant woman experiencing life-threatening or health-threatening medical conditions and for her unborn child.

The department would be required to consult with the state attorney general and "stakeholders having medical and legal expertise." Upon completion, the video and materials would have to be made available on the department's website.

The bill is the latest attempt by Rehfeldt to clarify the meaning of the state's abortion ban, after a failed attempt last year to further define the "life of the pregnant female" exception. Earlier this legislative session, an OB-GYN testified about the confusion surrounding language in the abortion ban, saying that an induced labor resulting in complications and the death of a baby could be deemed an abortion.

Although interpreting laws is typically the domain of the courts, the new bill would require published interpretations of the law by the executive branch, which is where the Department of Health is housed.

Dale Bartscher is the executive director of South Dakota Right To Life, which opposes abortion.

"At the end of the day, it's the governor's administration and Attorney General's Office, who we trust, determining what is and is not in the video," Bartscher said.

Bartscher said his organization has been in conversation with the administration and the Department of Health since the idea for the bill came about.

Meanwhile, a bill from Democrats establishing a right for women to make their own decisions about their reproductive health care, including abortion, was defeated in its first committee hearing Wednesday in a 7-0 vote. The bill also sought to repeal existing provisions that restrict abortion.

South Dakotans could vote this fall on a citizen-led ballot measure that would restore abortion rights in the state constitution. The proposed constitutional amendment is being circulated for signatures now, with a goal of placing it on the Nov. 5 ballot.

A resolution declaring the Republican-controlled Legislature's opposition to that ballot measure passed the Senate on Wednesday after previously passing the House.

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.

Bill to create Indian Child Advisory Council endorsed by committee despite DSS opposition

BY: ANNIE TODD - FEBRUARY 14, 2024 3:00 PM

PIERRE — Lawmakers on a House committee approved a bill Wednesday to establish an advisory council to oversee communication on the welfare of Native American children in South Dakota's foster care system. But the same committee also voted to reject a bill that would have created a two-year task force to study the welfare of Native children in foster care.

Rep. Tamara St. John, R-Sisseton, sponsored the advisory council bill, describing it as a way for stakeholders from tribes, the Department of Social Services and the South Dakota Legislature to come together once a year to hold a formalized discussion about Native foster children.

"Where do we have that space for innovation, that focus on prevention, or how do we know what we're looking at in the form of data?" said St. John, a member of the Sisseton Wahpeton tribe.

A six-month joint investigation by South Dakota Searchlight and the Argus Leader following last year's legislative session explored the causes, effects and potential solutions to the decades-long overrepresentation of Native American children in South Dakota's foster care system. Native American children accounted for nearly 74% of the foster care system in June 2023, despite accounting for only 13% of the state's overall child population.

Rep. Peri Pourier, D-Rapid City, sponsored the failed bill to create a 21-member task force to study the problem and expand portions of the federal Indian Child Welfare Act into state law, which would have been part of the task force's duties. Pourier, a member of the Oglala Sioux Tribe, and St. John brought their bills as a way to further the conversation around children in state care.

St. John's advisory council bill originally had the group meeting four times a year, but she brought an amendment reducing the frequency to once a year. At the end of that annual meeting, minutes would be available for lawmakers to refer back to if they want to bring future legislation.

Jessica Morson, the ICWA Coalition director, also spoke in favor of HB 1232, saying that it served as a "step forward" and "enhances focus on solutions-based collaboration in a smaller, more effective setting by review of existing practices and laws."

The only opposition came from Department of Social Services Secretary Matt Althoff, who said the department already has the ability to hold the conversations now in a less formal environment.

He said despite wonderful intentions, it's unlikely the advisory council "is going to achieve much given the totality of what it faces."

The department also opposed Pourier's task force bill, saying it's already working individually with tribes

on how to better support Native children in care and foster families across the state.

Althoff added that the task force, modeled after a 2006 task force that studied the same issue, may not be successful because of various competing interests.

"Please understand that the work continues regardless of the bill, so you have our assurances that we will not relent and are wanting to continue to keep these lines of communications and these intersects between tribal officials and ourselves ongoing," he said.

Lawmakers voiced concerns about the size of the task force and recommended a summer study as a possible avenue for future conversation. The committee voted 10-1 to reject the bill with the lone dissenting voice coming from Rep. Erin Healy, D-Sioux Falls.

But, lawmakers liked the idea of St. John's formalized council. Rep. Taylor Rehfeldt, R-Sioux Falls, said it would serve as a baseline to gather data.

"If we're in the same spot as we were the year before, then that tells us that we're probably not doing something right, and so even if we can just do that one small thing of establishing that something else needs to happen, that we're clearly not making steps in the right direction, I think that alone is worth having something," she said.

Rep. Will Mortenson, R-Fort Pierre, noted that while the council won't stop children from entering into the foster care system, it wouldn't be an undue burden on the department, an argument that had been voiced by Rep. Rocky Blaire, R-Ideal, when he spoke in opposition to the bill.

Mortenson noted that everyone would have to address one of the leading reasons why children are removed from their parents in the first place: alcohol and drug abuse. Parental substance abuse is 57% of the reason why South Dakota children are removed from their families and placed into foster care, according to federal data.

"I think that we're doing a disservice to this topic if we don't acknowledge phase one of this problem and try to train our collective focus there," he said.

The advisory council bill passed 10-2 to the House floor where it'll be debated next.

Annie Todd covers state politics for the Argus Leader in Sioux Falls. She was born and raised in Colorado and graduated from the University of Wyoming.

Pennington County prosecutor charges man for death of transgender woman

BY: SEARCHLIGHT STAFF - FEBRUARY 14, 2024 2:24 PM

A Pennington County grand jury has charged a Rapid City man with manslaughter for the August 2022 death of a transgender Native American woman.

The Pennington County State's Attorney's Office announced Wednesday that a grand jury issued the indictment last week.

The indictment charges 53-year-old Gregory Landers not only with first-degree manslaughter, but also with unauthorized ingestion of a controlled drug or substance, and possession of a firearm by a person with a prior drug conviction.

A press release from the state's attorney's office said Landers was arrested by the U.S. Marshals Service on Wednesday in Decatur, Indiana.

Acey Morrison, 30, was fatally shot at Landers' residence on Country Road in Rapid City on Aug. 21, 2022.

The Pennington County Sheriff's Office spearheaded the investigation into the death, with support from the Rapid City Police Department. State's Attorney Lara Roetzel said in a news release that she will represent the prosecution on the state's behalf.

There's never been a question as to who killed Morrison. Landers has told investigators he was defending himself. He connected with Morrison on a dating app, and they met on a Saturday night at his north Rapid City home. He shot her the following morning.

Morrison's mother, Edelyn Catches, told South Dakota Searchlight on Wednesday that she'd all but given

up hope for charges beyond weapons and drugs. In meetings with law enforcement and prosecutors, she was told it would be difficult to make a case for homicide charges because of Landers' self-defense claims and the lack of witnesses.

"They really made me feel like it wasn't going to go anywhere," Catches said. "It hasn't been easy. I've had a lot of bad days."

On Wednesday morning, she was at work and missed a call from an investigator. A half hour later, he called back and Catches was there to pick up and hear the news.

"I was really happy. I didn't want to get my hopes up because it's been so long," she said. "I was so relieved."

Teacher pay mandates pass committee without promise of new funding

Education lobbyist says bill would put more responsibility on lawmakers in future

BY: SETH TUPPER - FEBRUARY 14, 2024 1:47 PM

A bill requiring public schools to raise teacher pay with no promise of new state funding passed a legislative committee Wednesday in Pierre.

Nobody testified against the legislation, but several lobbyists representing the education community called it a work in progress.

"It is not a perfect bill, but a compromise that will hopefully help us attract new teachers and retain the current, experienced teachers, and bring quality education to the students in the state of South Dakota," said Dianna Miller, a lobbyist for the Large School Group.

The legislation would set a statewide minimum teacher salary of \$45,000, beginning July 1, 2026. That minimum standard would increase each year by a percentage equal to the annual increase in state education funding approved by the Legislature and governor.

The bill would also require schools to raise their average teacher compensation — including pay and benefits — by percentages equal to annual increases in state funding. That requirement would begin with the 2025 fiscal year.

Gov. Kristi Noem, who has criticized school districts for not matching teacher pay increases with state aid increases, is proposing a 4% increase in education funding for the next state budget.

School districts that fail to meet the bill's requirements could suffer a \$500-per-teacher deduction in state education funding. But they could also request a waiver and work with the state School Finance Accountability Board to come into compliance.

Because the bill depends on future legislative decisions to increase state funding, a lobbyist for schools said it will spread the responsibility for teacher salaries beyond local school boards. Schools rely not only on state funding, but also on federal funding and local property tax revenue.

"Let's make no mistake: This does create some shared responsibility now with the Legislature, because as we move forward, it's going to be the responsibility of the Legislature to help fund education," said Mitch Richter, lobbyist for the South Dakota United Schools Association.

Richter said some small, rural schools with stagnant or declining enrollment might be unable to meet the bill's requirements. State funding for individual schools is tied to enrollment, so schools with declining enrollment may not receive the full benefit of annual increases in state aid. He said some of those rural schools might be forced to consolidate.

"We'll have to come up with a plan for that, because those districts are going to need some help," Richter said.

Miller said the bill could also cause difficulties for larger schools with declining enrollment, possibly causing them to use reserve funds to raise teacher pay.

According to the National Education Association, South Dakota ranks 49th in average teacher pay (out of 51, due to the inclusion of Washington, D.C.).

That's despite the passage of a half-percentage-point increase in the state sales tax rate in 2016 to raise teacher salaries. The legislation sent an infusion of money to schools that pushed South Dakota up a few places in national teacher pay rankings, but the state has slipped in the rankings since then. Last year, legislators and Gov. Noem reduced the state sales tax rate from 4.5% to 4.2%.

Joe Graves, head of the state Department of Education, said this year's bill is a continuation of the work that started in 2016. He called the bill a "rock solid step forward in ensuring enhanced compensation for our state's teachers."

Graves said the bill includes some provisions to help schools meet the requirements. For example, a provision that was amended into the bill Wednesday would allow school boards to roll some of their excess average compensation forward to future years.

"Districts, in other words, can exceed one year's increase, in order to have already made progress on future increases," Graves said.

The House Education Committee voted 11-2 to send the bill to the House of Representatives. Rep. Phil Jensen, R-Rapid City, and Rep. Stephanie Sauder, R-Bryant, cast the two no votes.

Jensen referenced Rapid City school officials' inability to win voter approval of bond financing for construction projects, which has made it difficult for the district to maintain its facilities.

"I'm afraid that this would just be disastrous for the Rapid City schools along with all the smaller schools," Jensen said.

Sauder said the legislation would cause some schools to eliminate teaching positions and combine classrooms.

"It just doesn't iron out the wrinkles that need to be taken care of before we move forward," she said.

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

Budget committee looks to revenue post-COVID federal funds, adopts 'conservative' projection

BY: MAKENZIE HUBER - FEBRUARY 14, 2024 10:26 AM

The Legislature's Joint Committee on Appropriations officially adopted the revenue projections for the remainder of fiscal year 2024 and fiscal year 2025 on Wednesday morning at the Capitol.

The committee adopted a revised ongoing revenue estimate of \$2.4 billion for the current fiscal year, which is a 4.1% increase over last fiscal year's revenue and \$41 million more than Gov. Kristi Noem set in her December budget. The committee also adopted an ongoing revenue projection of \$2.42 billion for fiscal year 2025, which is 0.7% growth over the revised 2024 numbers.

The estimates are a reflection of a cautiously conservative economic outlook as COVID-19 pandemic federal funding finishes making its way through the economy and as inflation is projected to remain at 3% for the foreseeable future.

The adopted revenue projections are used to set the fiscal year 2025 budget. The fate of several bills is dependent on the numbers in that budget.

Joint Appropriations Co-Chair Sen. Jean Hunhoff, R-Yankton, said that while not all federal pandemic dollars have been spent yet, it's a good choice to "reset prior to COVID."

"I think we have to remember that, again, those federal dollars are gone," Hunhoff said. "We're looking at how we're going to generate more revenue. Certainly in fiscal year 2025 we're going to see a lot of activity, but we're also going to see how everything's going to shape out."

The projections were a compromise between two revenue estimates provided by the Legislative Research Council, which works for the Legislature, and the state Bureau of Finance and Management, which

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is under the governor in the executive branch.

Legislators primarily adopted the average of the LRC and BFM's revenue projections for fiscal year 2025 revenue, except for unclaimed property. The \$60 million adopted by the group represents the typical revenue from unclaimed property pre-pandemic. It's a 52% drop from unclaimed property estimated revenue in fiscal year 2024 — driving a decrease in revenue growth compared to recent years.

If unclaimed property and interest income were removed from the ongoing revenue equation, said Sioux Falls Republican Rep. Tony Venhuizen, then the "traditional revenue sources" (such as sales and use tax, lottery and contractor's excise tax) would have a growth rate of 2.5%.

The state treasurer has said the unclaimed property record this year was driven by banks catching up on unclaimed property work that went undone during office-work disruptions caused by the pandemic. Finance Commissioner Jim Terwilliger told lawmakers the same during revenue projections on Tuesday.

"I don't think we should go any higher than this," Terwilliger said of the \$60 million estimate.

Joint Appropriations Co-Chair Rep. Mike Derby, R-Rapid City, said he is excited about the committee's revenue projections.

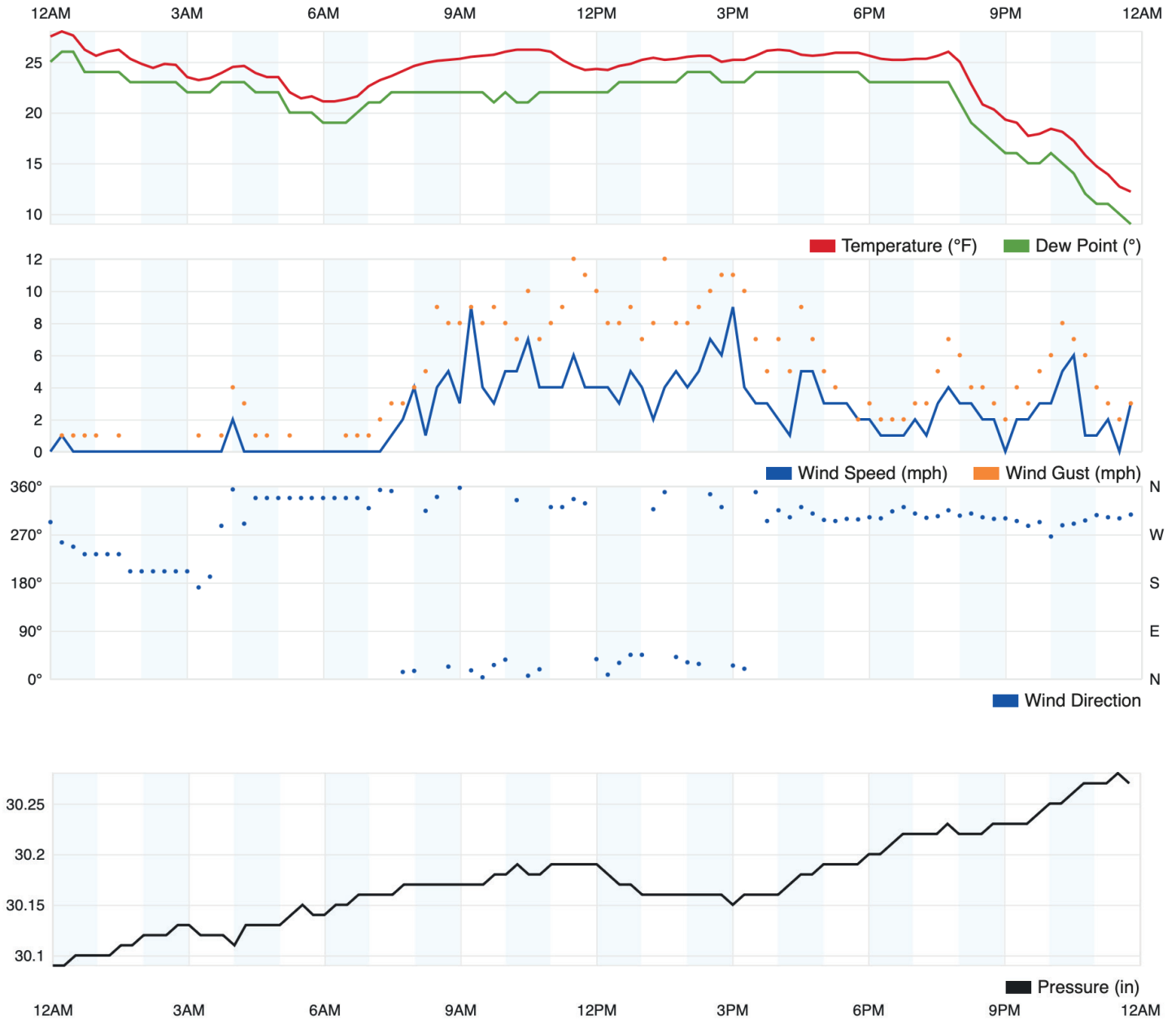
"I think it's conservative," Derby said. "It's a conservative number for the state of South Dakota."

Makenzie Huber is a lifelong South Dakotan whose work has won national and regional awards. She's spent five years as a journalist with experience reporting on workforce, development and business issues within the state.

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Yesterday's Groton Weather Graphs



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Thu	Fri	Sat	Sun	Mon	Tue	Wed
Feb 15	Feb 16	Feb 17	Feb 18	Feb 19	Feb 20	Feb 21
27°F	19°F	39°F	34°F	36°F	36°F	38°F
11°F	15°F	18°F	19°F	20°F	24°F	24°F
NW	N	W	W	SSE	W	E
4 MPH	16 MPH	27 MPH	11 MPH	11 MPH	10 MPH	12 MPH



More Snowfall Expected Today

February 15, 2024

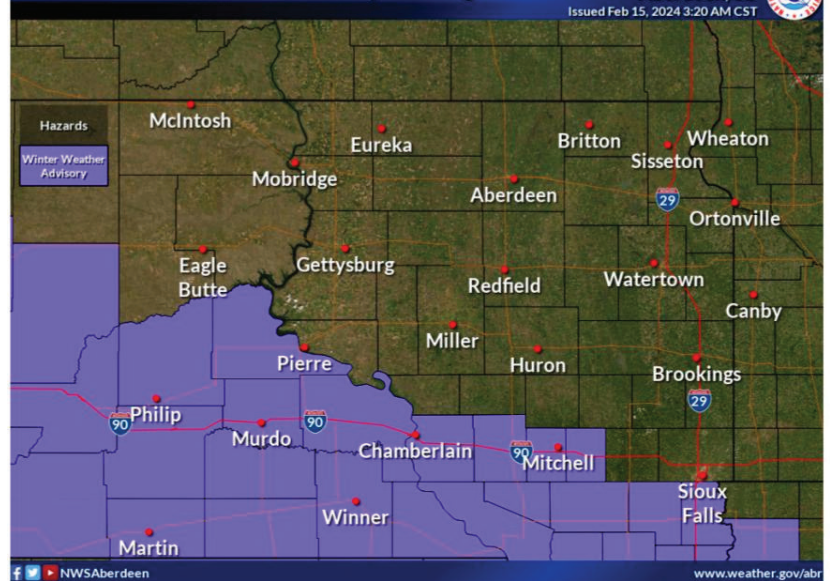
3:27 AM

Developing midday, continuing into the night

Key Messages

- Another storm system will bring snowfall across parts of central to south central SD around midday into tonight.
- Main impacts include **snow covered roads** and **hazardous travel conditions**. Strong winds **not expected** with this system.
- Slight shifts in storm track over the next 6-12 hours may influence peak snowfall accumulations.

Current Headlines for Today - Tonight



National Weather Service
Aberdeen, SD

Another system will bring snowfall across parts of central to south central SD around midday into tonight.

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Yesterday's Groton Weather

High Temp: 28 °F at 12:12 AM

Low Temp: 13 °F at 11:29 PM

Wind: 13 mph at 3:02 PM

Precip: : 0.00

Day length: 10 hours, 27 minutes

Today's Info

Record High: 65 in 1921

Record Low: -35 in 1939

Average High: 28

Average Low: 6

Average Precip in Feb.: 0.31

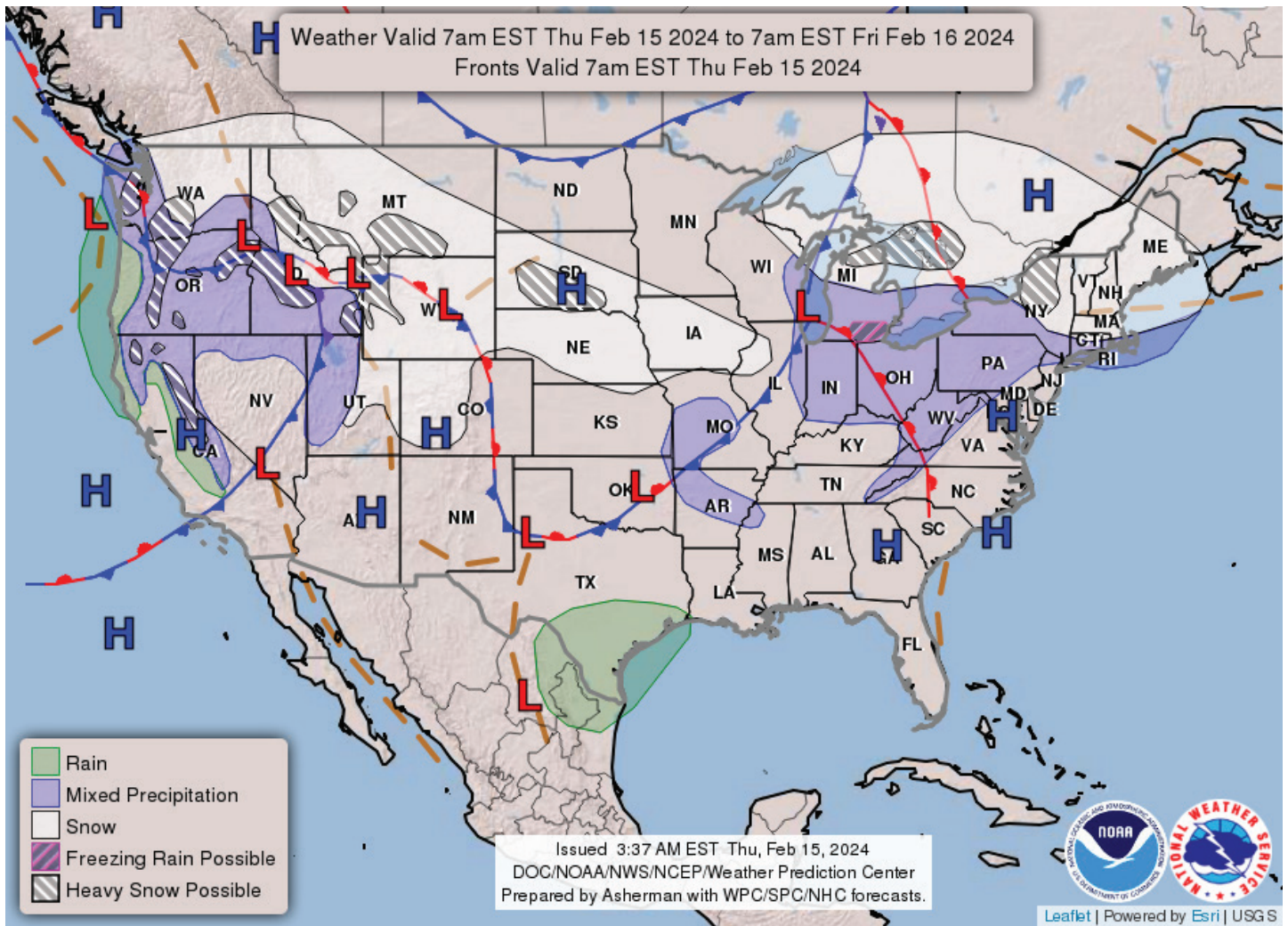
Precip to date in Feb.: 0.07

Average Precip to date: 0.86

Precip Year to Date: 0.07

Sunset Tonight: 5:00:21 pm

Sunrise Tomorrow: 7:31:05 am



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Today in Weather History

February 15th, 1969: Heavy snow and winds of 15 to 25 mph caused blowing and drifting snow, which closed many roads. The heaviest snow fell in the southeast part of the state, where a foot of snow was reported.

February 15th, 1990: Heavy snow developed across southwest South Dakota early on the 15th and moved slowly across the state before ending early on the 16th. A narrow band of 10 to 12 inches accumulated in Central South Dakota from Pierre to near Huron. Lesser amounts of 3 to 6 inches fell north and south of the heavy snow band. Some heavier snowfall amounts included 6 inches at Aberdeen and Sioux Falls, 10 inches Pierre, and 12 inches at Huron.

1564: Galileo Galilei, who invented the telescope, the compass, and the thermometer, was born on February 15th, 1564.

1895 - A big Gulf snowstorm produced six inches at Brownsville TX and Mobile AL, 15 inches at Galveston TX, and 24 inches of snow at Rayne LA in 24 hours. Snow fell at the very mouth of the Mississippi River. Houston TX received 22 inches of snow, and nine inches blanketed New Orleans LA. (David Ludlum)

1936 - The temperature at Parshall ND plunged to 60 degrees below zero to establish a state record. On the 6th of July that same year the temperature at Steele ND hit 121 degrees, also a state record. (David Ludlum)

1982 - An intense cyclone off the Atlantic coast capsized a drilling rig killing 84 persons, and sank a Soviet freighter resulting in 33 more deaths. The cyclone produced 80 mph winds which whipped the water into waves fifty feet high. (David Ludlum)

1987 - A storm crossing the central U.S. produced severe thunderstorms which spawned tornadoes in Louisiana and Mississippi. Tornadoes injured four persons at Pierre Pass LA, three persons at Tangipahoa LA, two persons at Lexie MS and two persons at Nicholson MS. Thunderstorm winds gusting to 100 mph killed one person south of Sulphur LA. Jackson MS was drenched with 1.5 inches of rain in ten minutes. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

1988 - Low pressure brought heavy snow to parts of Michigan, with eleven inches reported at Rogers City. A cold front crossing the Northern Rockies produced wind gusts to 74 mph at Livingston MT, and created blizzard conditions in Idaho. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

1989 - Thirty-seven cities in the southeastern U.S. reported record high temperatures for the date. The afternoon high of 80 degrees at Atlanta GA was a February record. Highs of 79 degrees at Chattanooga TN, 84 degrees at Columbia SC and 85 degrees at New Orleans LA equalled February records. (The National Weather Summary)

1990 - Snow, sleet and freezing rain along an arctic cold front prevailed from the north central U.S. to the Northern Atlantic Coast Region. High winds created near blizzard conditions in southern Wyoming, closing Interstate 80, while up to eleven inches of snow fell across central Minnesota.

1990 - Heavy snow also blanketed the Northern Atlantic Coast States, with ten inches reported at Buffalo NY and Mount Washington NH. Freezing rain over southern New England knocked out electricity to more than 10,000 homes in the western suburbs of Boston MA. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

2000: Amarillo, Texas, set unusual temperature records today. The high of 82 degrees smashed the old daily high of 76 degrees set in 1921. Likewise, the morning low of 41 degrees broke the old high-low record of 40 degrees, established in 1921.

2004 - Up to 11 inches of snow fell in areas south of Nashville, TN, causing power outages and producing hazardous driving conditions. The Weather Doctor

2013: A meteor entered the Earth's atmosphere and exploded over the Russian town of Chelyabinsk.

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Daily Devotionals

Seeds of Hope

TO BELIEVE IS TO ACHIEVE

A group of men was preparing to climb Mount Everest. As the final pieces of their plan fell into place, a psychologist asked if he could interview them. They agreed to his request, and he met with them at their camp.

Looking at each one of them carefully and intently, he asked them – one by one – “Tell me, will you get to the top?”

The first answered, “I certainly hope so.” The second responded, “I’ll do my best.” The third, “I’m going to give it all I’ve got.” And, the fourth said, “Yes, I will.” And he did – and he was the only one!

Our bodies can achieve what our hearts believe, and our hearts believe what comes from our minds. A lack of faith enlarges our fears and turns the fears into facts. The shadows that our thoughts create can become so dreadful that we are afraid to face them. Our worries eventually become walls that we cannot climb over or around.

Often when someone asks us to do “something” for the Lord, our minds create fears that are not based on facts, but shadows that have no substance. We have no vision of being able to accomplish new challenges and cannot see through the windows of opportunity God offers us.

Isaiah, the Prophet, boldly declared, “See, God has come to save me, I will trust in Him and not be afraid! The Lord God is my strength and my song, He has become my salvation!”

If we truly trust God, all things are possible.

Prayer: Lord, in Your grace, You bring so many opportunities and challenges into our lives that allow us to honor You. Help us to trust in You and be victorious. In Jesus’ Name, Amen.

Scripture For Today: See, God has come to save me, I will trust in Him and not be afraid. The Lord God is my strength and my song, He has become my salvation. Isaiah 12:2



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: 02.13.24

1 3 19 25 58 20

MegaPlier: 3x

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:

\$457,000,000

NEXT DRAW: 1 Days 17 Hrs 30 Mins 51 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

LOTTO AMERICA

WINNING NUMBERS: 02.14.24

2 3 15 16 45 10

All Star Bonus: 2x

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:

\$3,050,000

NEXT DRAW: 2 Days 16 Hrs 45 Mins 51 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

LUCKY FOR LIFE

WINNING NUMBERS: 02.14.24

4 7 39 42 46 4

TOP PRIZE:

\$7,000/week

NEXT DRAW: 17 Hrs 51 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

DAKOTA CASH

WINNING NUMBERS: 02.14.24

2 10 19 25 28

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:

\$51,000

NEXT DRAW: 2 Days 17 Hrs 51 Mins 51 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

POWERBALL

DOUBLE PLAY

WINNING NUMBERS: 02.14.24

33 40 45 48 53 17

TOP PRIZE:

\$10,000,000

NEXT DRAW: 2 Days 17 Hrs 29 Mins 51 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

POWERBALL

WINNING NUMBERS: 02.14.24

1 4 45 47 67 18

Power Play: 2x

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:

\$306,000,000

NEXT DRAW: 2 Days 17 Hrs 29 Mins 51 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

News from the Associated Press

North Dakota takes federal government to trial over costs to police Dakota Access Pipeline protests

By JACK DURA Associated Press

BISMARCK, N.D. (AP) — North Dakota is set to take the federal government to trial Thursday for the costs of responding to the Dakota Access Pipeline protests, the culmination of an unusual and drawn-out court fight.

The state filed the lawsuit in 2019, seeking \$38 million from the federal government for policing the protests. Years of legal wrangling followed before the trial date was scheduled in December. The bench trial before U.S. District Court Judge Daniel Traynor is expected to last 12-13 days.

In an interview, North Dakota Attorney General Drew Wrigley said the trial will show examples of numerous requests to the federal government for help and the “complete refusal” to offer resources and financial support in response.

“It ought not be one of the options of the federal government to just throw up its hands and tell states ‘You’re on your own’ in an instance like this where the illegalities are what they are,” Wrigley said.

North Dakota relied on compacts to bring in law enforcement officers from around the region and the country for help, he said.

Thousands of people camped and demonstrated near the oil pipeline’s controversial Missouri River crossing upstream from the Standing Rock Sioux Tribe’s reservation. The tribe has long opposed the pipeline due to the threat of an oil spill polluting the tribe’s water supply.

The protests lasted months. Some days involved clashes between demonstrators and officers, including at a blocked highway bridge where officers used tear gas and rubber bullets and sprayed water in below-freezing temperatures as protesters tried to move past and allegedly threw rocks and burning logs.

The state’s complaint alleges many “trespassers at these unlawful encampments engaged in disruptive, illegal and sometimes violent conduct on federal, State and private lands, including blocking public highways, threatening individuals working on the DAPL pipeline and the local population (such as ranchers), and directly initiating violence against law enforcement personnel and first responders.”

The protests, which lasted from about August 2016 to February 2017, resulted in hundreds of arrests and subsequent criminal cases. Some lawsuits over officers’ use of force are still in court.

Protest activities didn’t necessarily happen every day, said Morton County Sheriff Kyle Kirchmeier, a leader of the law enforcement response. But some incidents delayed traffic, caused road closures, and drew concerns from local residents, farmers and ranchers, he said. Safety of everyone was the biggest concern, he said.

“It was very taxing as far as on the sheriff’s office and for resources to make sure that this stayed as safe as possible throughout the whole protest period,” said Kirchmeier, who added he will testify at trial.

The federal government unsuccessfully sought to dismiss the case. It stated in a 2020 court filing that “the United States denies it is liable to North Dakota” and said the state isn’t entitled to its request or any other relief.

A phone message left for attorneys representing the U.S. was not returned. The Water Protector Legal Collective, a group that assisted protesters in criminal cases, did not respond to a message for comment on the lawsuit.

The pipeline has been transporting oil since June 2017. Many state government officials and industry leaders support the pipeline as crucial infrastructure in the major oil-producing state.

In 2017, the pipeline company donated \$15 million to help cover the response costs. That same year, the U.S. Justice Department gave a \$10 million grant to the state for reimbursing the response. Wrigley declined to say how those funds affect the amount the state is seeking.

Former President Donald Trump denied a 2017 request from the state for the federal government to

cover the costs through a disaster declaration.

A public comment period ended in December on the draft of a court-ordered environmental review of the pipeline's river crossing. The process is key for the future of the pipeline, with a decision expected in late 2024. The document laid out options of denying the easement and removing or abandoning the line's river segment, granting the easement with no changes or with additional safety measures, or rerouting the pipeline north of Bismarck.

A former South Dakota attorney general urges the state Supreme Court to let him keep his law license

By The Associated Press undefined

PIERRE, S.D. (AP) — Former South Dakota Attorney General Jason Ravensborg on Wednesday urged the state Supreme Court to dismiss an effort to suspend his law license, arguing that he took responsibility and acted professionally following a deadly accident with a pedestrian that precipitated his political downfall.

Ravnsborg was impeached and removed as attorney general less than two years after the 2020 accident that killed 55-year-old Joe Boever, who was walking along a rural stretch of highway when he was struck. Now, a disciplinary board of the South Dakota State Bar is seeking a 26-month suspension of Ravensborg's law license, though it would be retroactive to June 2022, when he left office. That means the suspension would end in August.

It's unclear when the court will decide if the suspension should be imposed.

Ravnsborg spoke on his own behalf at the court hearing. He told justices that contrary to the disciplinary board's allegations, he was remorseful.

"I'm sorry, again, to the Boever family that this has occurred," Ravensborg told the court. "It's been 1,051 days, and I count them every day on my calendar, and I say a prayer every day for him and myself and all the members of the family and all the people that it's affected. And I'm very sorry for that."

Thomas Frieberg, an attorney for the disciplinary board, said members focused on Ravensborg's actions after the accident.

"The board felt very strongly that he was, again, less than forthright. That he was evasive," Frieberg said.

Ravnsborg, a first-term Republican, was driving home from a political fundraiser on the night of Sept. 12, 2020, when his car struck "something," according to a transcript of his 911 call. He told the dispatcher it might have been a deer or other animal.

Relatives later said Boever had crashed his truck and was walking toward it, near the road, when he was hit.

Investigators identified what they thought were slips in Ravensborg's statements, such as when he said he turned around at the accident scene and "saw him" before quickly correcting himself and saying: "I didn't see him." And they contended that Boever's face had come through Ravensborg's windshield because his glasses were found in the car.

Ravnsborg has said neither he nor the county sheriff knew that Boever's body was lying just feet from the pavement on the highway shoulder. Investigators determined that Ravensborg walked right past Boever's body and his illuminated flashlight as he looked around the scene the night of the crash.

Ravnsborg resolved the criminal case in 2021 by pleading no contest to a pair of traffic misdemeanors, including making an illegal lane change and using a phone while driving, and was fined by a judge. Also in 2021, Ravensborg agreed to an undisclosed settlement with Boever's widow.

At the 2022 impeachment hearing, prosecutors told senators that Ravensborg made sure that officers knew he was attorney general, saying he used his title "to set the tone and gain influence" in the aftermath of the crash. Ravensborg's attorney, Michael Butler, told the state Supreme Court that Ravensborg was only responding when an officer asked if he was attorney general.

Editorial Roundup: South Dakota

By The Associated Press undefined
Yankton Press & Dakota. February 6, 2024.

Editorial: SD Primaries And Constitutional Offices

Should the voters or should party officials choose the candidates for some constitutional offices who appear on the fall ballot in South Dakota?

That question is before the state Legislature again with House Bill 1198, which would put the nominations for the slots of lieutenant governor, attorney general and secretary of state before the voters of a party during the primaries, instead of being nominated at the state conventions.

This is two-thirds of a good idea.

Currently, South Dakota is one of just three states that allows for constitutional officer candidates to be chosen at party conventions, according to South Dakota Searchlight.

We believe some changes are in order to bring more people into this process.

However, the office of lieutenant governor would be better left to the prospective gubernatorial nominee and the convention process. A lieutenant governor is, in many ways, a partner with the governor in the executive branch, and each party nominee should be allowed to choose a lieutenant governor candidate they are comfortable with and who best suits their working styles and needs in Pierre.

As for attorney general and secretary of state, moving this to a primary selection process would reflect the changing gravity of both positions in South Dakota.

The attorney general post became a contentious issue two years ago when Attorney General Jason Ravnsborg was involved with a vehicular accident that killed a pedestrian. This created considerable controversy, not to mention it also generated a contentious atmosphere between Ravnsborg and Gov. Kristi Noem. With that, the public began to more broadly appreciate the importance of the AG position. The voters should be allowed to weigh in on that selection process within their own party.

The same goes for the secretary of state position, which is the post that literally runs the election process in the state.

In recent years, elections have come under increased scrutiny with accusations on the national level of unfair voting. The person chosen to run for this post faces critical responsibilities. The party's voters should have a say about what they want to see in that slot.

(As an aside, we still believe the secretary of state position should actually be nonpartisan, since it is tasked with overseeing elections for everyone. But that's another debate for another time.)

Above all else, keeping voters engaged in the process should be a priority (and a desire) of every political party. With more people fleeing to independent status, participation within a party should be encouraged, not dismissed.

Opening up at least two of these positions to primary races would help do that.

END

Israeli airstrikes killed 10 Lebanese civilians in a single day.

Hezbollah has vowed to retaliate

By MOHAMMED ZAATARI and BASSEM MROUE Associated Press

NABATIYEH, Lebanon (AP) — The civilian death toll from two Israeli airstrikes in Lebanon has risen to 10, Lebanese state media reported Thursday, making the previous day the deadliest in more than four months of cross-border exchanges.

The Lebanese militant group Hezbollah has vowed to retaliate for Wednesday's strikes, which hit in the city of Nabatiyeh and a village in southern Lebanon, just hours after projectiles from Lebanon killed an Israeli soldier.

More Israeli strikes were reported in south Lebanon on Thursday and Lebanon's caretaker Prime Minister Najib Mikati condemned the escalation.

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"At a time where we are insisting on calm and call all sides to not escalate, we find the Israeli enemy extending its aggression," read a statement from his office.

The Israeli military said Thursday's strikes targeted Hezbollah infrastructure and launch posts.

In Nabatiyeh, the strike knocked down part of a building, killing seven members of the family, including a child, the state-run National News Agency said. A boy initially reported missing was found alive under the rubble. Initial reports had said four people were killed.

Hussein Badir, a neighbor of the Berjawi family that was killed in the strike, said he and other neighbors had rushed to the street to dig through the rubble. He said the family was "decent and respectable" and "not involved in anything."

For Badir, the strike brought back memories of Israeli bombardment during its 2006 war with Hezbollah and also during a 1996 offensive.

"Nobody is doing anything to help us," he said. "It's our right to defend ourselves in our country in Lebanon."

In the village of Souaneh, a woman and her two young children were killed. The Lebanese civilian death toll included six women and three children while three Hezbollah fighters were also killed.

Earlier Wednesday, the fire from Lebanon struck the northern Israeli town of Safed, killing a female Israeli soldier and wounding eight others, all soldiers, according to the Israeli military, which did not immediately respond to a request for comment on the strikes in Lebanon.

Hezbollah did not claim the strike in Safed.

Senior Hezbollah official Sheikh Nabil Kaouk said at an event Thursday in southern Lebanon that the militant group was "prepared for the possibility of expanding the war" and would meet "escalation with escalation, displacement with displacement, and destruction with destruction."

The fatalities marked a significant escalation in more than four months of daily cross-border exchanges triggered by the Oct. 7 outbreak of the Israel-Hamas war in Gaza. The war began with the surprise attack in southern Israel by the Palestinian militant group Hamas, an ally of Hezbollah.

Government institutions, schools and Lebanese University were to close on Thursday in protest of the airstrikes.

Hard work and too many statistics: An EU farmer's frustration grows with every click of the mouse

By RAF CASERT Associated Press

LEDEGEM, Belgium (AP) — On a farm in northern Belgium, not far from the hundreds of tractors blocking Europe's second-biggest port to demand more respect for farmers, Bart Dochy was switching on his computer, waiting for a government program to load with maps of his land next to empty digital boxes demanding to be filled with statistics on fertilizer, pesticides, production and harvesting.

"They also supervise us with satellite images and even with drones," Dochy said. His frustration highlights the yawning gap in trust and understanding that has opened up between European farmers and what they increasingly see as a nanny state looking into every nook and cranny of their barns, analyzing how every drop of liquid manure is spread.

From Greece to Ireland, from the Baltics to Spain, tens of thousands of farmers and their supporters joined protests across Europe in recent weeks. It was enough to put the farmers' plight on front pages all over the continent, setting it up as a key theme for the June 6-9 parliamentary elections in the 27-nation European Union.

Farmers have always lived by the whim of nature. Fickle regulation, though, they cannot accept. "That is what is creating this level of distrust. It's like living in Russia or China," he said, instead of the fertile flatlands of Flanders in northwestern Belgium.

Farmers have many complaints — from insufficiently regulated cheap imports to overbearing environmental rules — but the reams of red tape set everyone off almost instantly. The EU however, is also the hand that feeds them, with some \$50 billion (euros) going into a vast network of programs that touch on

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agriculture in various ways every year.

In return, farmers must account for their spending — in ways they find increasingly onerous.

At 51, Dochy is far from an embittered, extremist farmer setting bales of hay on fire or spraying manure into government buildings. In his office, as essential as a barn in the life of a current-day EU farmer, hangs the warning “God Watches — No Cursing Here.” He comes from old-time farming stock, generations of conservative Christian Democrats that have traditionally provided the backbone of European agriculture.

Once Dochy finishes dealing with 900 pigs and some 30 hectares (74 acres) of corn or potatoes, he exchanges his blue overalls and rubber boots for a three-piece suit. He’s also the mayor of this farming community, Ledegem, 120 kilometers (70 miles) west of Brussels where much of the detested EU farm bureaucracy comes from.

Over morning coffee, his father, Frans Dochy, 82, remembers how, in his youth, he would harvest beets out of the cold, thick earth by hand for hours. Yet, he says, 2024 bookkeeping “would have driven me off the farm long ago.”

He sees how his son has to register the arrival of any artificial manure within seven days. “And it has to be done even at the busiest times on the field, of course,” said Bart Dochy. “Then it has to be registered exactly how it is spread on every single little plot of land — how many kilos and how it is distributed,” he explained, going through some of the thick folders in his office.

“And with the smallest error, there are fines.”

Dochy said he often heard from dozens of the farmers in his town how the fines can amount to hundreds of euros, simply with a wrong click of the mouse. The same stories come up at every farmers’ protest — be they Italian, French, Dutch or Spanish.

On Tuesday, farmers blocked roads around the Belgian port of Antwerp, the second-largest in Europe, most of the day. The disruption followed earlier protests at the port, 60 kilometers (40 miles) north of Ledegem, and around the country which cost tens of millions of euros in transport delays and spoilt goods.

What really gets Dochy is when bureaucratic deadlines are imposed on him, for example if certain crops or green fertilizers need to be sown by Sep. 1.

“If the last week of August is unbelievably rainy, you will not be able to sow this properly. But you are nevertheless obliged to sow. Otherwise, you may be faced with a fine,” he said.

“A farmer actually lives in conflict between the government, which wants to be in charge, and nature, which is still in charge. And you can’t actually change anything about nature,” Dochy said.

Because the rules also change so fast, Dochy said, it becomes harder and harder to invest wisely. In northern Belgium such issues have coalesced around nitrate pollution from farming and rules to contain it.

Years of political bickering and court challenges have left no clear view of what the future could hold.

EU officials, though, point to the need for strict regulation after decades of lax enforcement. Soil pollution was once widespread from the dumping of excess manure in gutters and rivers. Such was the stench hanging over parts of Dochy’s province that, several decades ago, it was popularly renamed Mest (Manure) Flanders instead of West Flanders.

Farms had to be thoroughly checked to make sure they were spending subsidies correctly.

Now, though, the pendulum has swung the other way. After years of piling on ever more intricate rules, politicians realize they might have gone too far.

“Our farmers continue to face huge challenges,” EU Commission Vice President Maros Sefcovic told EU parliamentarians this week, making sure to mention “administrative requirements.”

“We hear our farmers — loud and clear. We acknowledge your hardship. And politicians need to do better!” Sefcovic said.

France and Ukraine to sign a security agreement in Paris in the presence of President Zelenskyy

PARIS (AP) — French President Emmanuel Macron will sign a bilateral security agreement with Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy on Friday in Paris as part of a trip that will also go through Germany, the French presidency said in a statement.

It did not release specific details about the agreement, to be signed at the Elysee presidential palace.

Macron said earlier this year that France was negotiating a bilateral deal on the model the one Ukraine recently agreed with the United Kingdom, which covers 10 years.

This will be the third visit by Zelenskyy to Paris since Russia's invasion of Ukraine almost two years ago, following those in February and May 2023, the statement said.

The French presidency said the visit will be an opportunity for Macron "to reaffirm France's determination to continue to provide unwavering support to Ukraine and the Ukrainian people, over the long term and with all its partners."

Both leaders will discuss the situation on the front line, Ukraine's military, economic and humanitarian needs, as well as negotiations on the country's efforts to join the European Union, which France fully supports, the statement said.

Ukraine's presidential office on Thursday said Zelenskyy will visit Germany, where he will meet with Chancellor Olaf Scholz, and France on Friday.

He will also participate the next day to the Munich Security Conference and will hold bilateral meetings on its sideline, including with U.S. Vice President Kamala Harris, Czech President Petr Pavel, Denmark Prime Minister Mette Frederiksen and the Netherlands Prime Minister Mark Rutte.

Israeli forces storm main hospital in southern Gaza after prolonged standoff and partial evacuation

By WAFAA SHURAFI and BASSEM MROUE Associated Press

RAFAH, Gaza Strip (AP) — Israeli forces stormed the main hospital in southern Gaza on Thursday, hours after Israeli fire killed a patient and wounded six others inside the complex. The Israeli army said it was a limited operation seeking the remains of hostages taken by Hamas.

The raid came a day after the army sought to evacuate thousands of displaced people who had taken shelter at the Nasser Hospital in Khan Younis. The southern city has been the main target of Israel's offensive against Hamas in recent weeks.

The military said it had "credible intelligence" that Hamas had held hostages at the hospital and that the remains of hostages might still be inside. Rear Adm. Daniel Hagari, the chief military spokesperson, said forces were conducting a "precise and limited" operation there and would not forcibly evacuate medics or patients. Israel accuses Hamas of using hospitals and other civilian structures to shield its fighters.

Gaza's Health Ministry spokesperson Ashraf al-Qidra said Israel had launched a "massive incursion" with heavy shooting that wounded many of the displaced people who had sheltered there. He said the military had ordered medics to move all patients into an older building that was not properly equipped for their treatment.

"Many cannot evacuate, such as those with lower limb amputations, severe burns, or the elderly," he said in an interview with the Al Jazeera network.

Separately, Israeli airstrikes killed at least 13 people in southern Lebanon on Wednesday, 10 civilians — mostly women and children — and three fighters from the Lebanese militant group Hezbollah, an ally of Gaza's Hamas militants. The strikes came just hours after a rocket attack from Lebanon killed an Israeli soldier in what was the deadliest of daily exchanges of fire along the border since the Oct. 7 start of the war in Gaza. It also underscored the risks of a broader conflict.

Negotiations over a cease-fire in Gaza appear to have stalled, and Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has vowed to continue the offensive until Hamas is destroyed and scores of hostages taken during the Oct. 7 attack that sparked the war are returned.

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SCENES OF PANIC IN A HOSPITAL WARD

Nasser Hospital, in the southern city of Khan Younis, has been the latest focus of operations that have gutted Gaza's health sector as it struggles to treat scores of patients wounded in daily bombardments.

Video of the aftermath of the strike showed medics scrambling to wheel patients on stretchers through a corridor filled with smoke or dust. A medic used a cellphone flashlight to illuminate a darkened room where a wounded man screamed out in pain as gunfire echoed outside. The Associated Press could not authenticate the videos but they were consistent with its reporting.

Dr. Khaled Alserr, one of the remaining surgeons at Nasser Hospital, told the AP that the seven patients hit early Thursday were already being treated for past wounds. On Wednesday, a doctor was lightly wounded when a drone opened fire on the upper stories of the hospital, he said.

"The situation is escalating every hour and every minute," he said.

The Israeli military said Wednesday that it had opened a secure corridor for displaced people to leave the hospital but would allow doctors and patients to remain there. Videos circulating online showed scores of people walking out of the facility on foot carrying their belongings on their shoulders.

The military had ordered the evacuation of Nasser Hospital and surrounding areas last month. But as with other health facilities, medics said patients were unable to safely leave or be relocated, and thousands of people displaced by fighting elsewhere remained there. Palestinians say nowhere is safe in the besieged territory, as Israel continues to carry out strikes in all parts of it.

"People have been forced into an impossible situation," said Lisa Macheiner of the aid group Doctors Without Borders, which has staff in the hospital.

"Stay at Nasser Hospital against the Israeli military's orders and become a potential target, or exit the compound into an apocalyptic landscape where bombings and evacuation orders are a part of daily life."

NO END IN SIGHT TO THE MONTHSLONG WAR

The war began when Hamas militants burst through Israel's formidable defenses on Oct. 7 and rampaged through several communities, killing some 1,200 people and taking another 250 hostage. More than 100 of the captives were freed during a cease-fire last year in exchange for 240 Palestinian prisoners.

Around 130 captives remain in Gaza, a fourth of whom are believed to be dead. Netanyahu has come under intense pressure from families of the hostages and the wider public to make a deal to secure their freedom, but his far-right coalition partners could bring down his government if he is seen as being too soft on Hamas.

Israel responded to the Oct. 7 attack by launching one of the deadliest and most destructive military campaigns in recent history. Over 28,000 Palestinians have been killed, 80% of the population have fled their homes and a quarter are starving amid a worsening humanitarian catastrophe. Large areas in northern Gaza, the first target of the offensive, have been completely destroyed.

Hamas has continued to attack Israeli forces in all parts of Gaza, and says it will not release all the remaining captives until Israel ends its offensive and withdraws. Hamas is also demanding the release of a large number of Palestinian prisoners, including top militants.

Netanyahu has rejected those demands, calling them "delusional," and says Israel will soon expand its offensive into Gaza's southernmost city of Rafah, on the Egyptian border. Over half of Gaza's population of 2.3 million has sought refuge in Rafah after fleeing fighting elsewhere in the coastal enclave.

At least 28,576 Palestinians have been killed since the war began, mostly women and children, according to Gaza's Health Ministry, which does not distinguish between civilians and combatants. Over 68,000 people have been wounded in the war.

In northern Israel, meanwhile, a rocket attack killed a female soldier and wounded eight people when one of the projectiles hit a military base in the town of Safed on Wednesday. Israel carried out airstrikes in southern Lebanon in response that killed three Hezbollah fighters and 10 civilians, including six women and three children.

Israel and Hezbollah have traded fire along the border nearly every day since the start of the war in Gaza. Hezbollah has not claimed responsibility for Wednesday's rocket attack.

Israel complains after Vatican denounces 'carnage' and disproportionate response in Gaza

ROME (AP) — Israel has formally complained after a senior Vatican official spoke of "carnage" in Gaza and what he termed a disproportionate Israeli military operation following the Oct. 7 Hamas attacks.

The Israeli Embassy to the Holy See called the comments by Cardinal Pietro Parolin, the Vatican secretary of state, "deplorable." In a statement Wednesday, the embassy said Parolin hadn't considered what it called the relevant facts in judging the legitimacy of Israel's actions.

Speaking Monday at a reception, Parolin condemned the Oct. 7 Hamas attacks against Israel and all forms of antisemitism. But he questioned Israel's claim to be acting in self-defense by inflicting "carnage" on Gaza.

"Israel's right to self-defense has been invoked to justify that this operation is proportional, but with 30,000 dead, it's not," he said.

Israel has objected previously to the Vatican position on the war, including when Pope Francis spoke about "terrorism." Francis, who speaks daily via videoconference to a Gaza parish housing Palestinian civilians, has since tried to be more balanced in his comments and recently wrote a letter to the Jewish people in which he reaffirmed the special relationship between Christians and Jews.

In its statement complaining about Parolin, the Israeli Embassy accused Hamas of turning the Gaza Strip into "the biggest terrorist base ever seen." It said Israeli armed forces were acting according to international law and said the proportion of Palestinian civilians to "terrorists" killed was less than in other conflicts in Syria, Iraq and Afghanistan.

But in a front-page editorial Thursday in the Vatican newspaper L'Osservatore Romano titled "Stop the Carnage," Vatican editorial director Andrea Tornielli doubled down on the Vatican position. Tornielli quoted a Rome-based Holocaust survivor, Edith Bruck, who has been highly critical of the Israeli government's response, which she has blamed for the rise in antisemitic acts against Jews around the world.

"No one can define what is happening in the Strip as 'collateral damage' from the fight against terrorism," Tornielli wrote. "The right of defense, the right of Israel to ensure justice for those responsible for the October massacre, cannot justify this carnage."

Greek parliament to vote on legalizing same-sex marriage in first for an Orthodox Christian country

By NICHOLAS PAPHITIS Associated Press

ATHENS, Greece (AP) — Greece's parliament is to vote Thursday to legalize same-sex civil marriage in a first for an Orthodox Christian country and despite opposition from the influential Greek Church.

As lawmakers debated the bill for a second day, opinion polls suggest that most Greeks support the proposed reform by a narrow margin. The issue has failed to trigger deep divisions in a country more worried about the high cost of living.

The landmark bill drafted by Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis' center-right government is backed by four left-wing parties, including the main opposition Syriza.

That would secure it a comfortable majority in the 300-seat parliament. Several majority and left-wing lawmakers are expected to abstain or vote against the reform — but not enough to kill the bill. Three small far-right parties and the Soviet-inspired Communist Party have rejected the draft law.

Supporters and opponents of the bill have announced plans to hold separate gatherings outside parliament later Thursday.

At the opening of the two-day debate Wednesday, State Minister Akis Skertsos argued that most Greeks already accept the idea of same-sex marriages.

"We are not deciding on change in this chamber," he said. "It has already happened ... Society changes and develops without requiring parliament's permission."

The bill would confer full parental rights on married same-sex partners with children. But it precludes

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gay couples from parenthood through surrogate mothers in Greece — an option currently available to women who can't have children for health reasons.

Governing New Democracy lawmaker Maria Syrengela said the reform would redress a long-standing injustice for same-sex couples and their children.

"And let's reflect on what these people have been through, spending so many years in the shadows, entangled in bureaucratic procedures," she said.

Polls show that while most Greeks agree to same-sex weddings they also reject extending parenthood through surrogacy to male couples. Same-sex civil partnerships have been allowed in Greece since 2015. But that only conferred legal guardianship to the biological parents of children in those relationships, leaving their partners in a bureaucratic limbo.

The main opposition to the new bill has come from the traditionalist Church of Greece — which also disapproves of heterosexual civil marriage.

Church officials have centered their criticism on the bill's implications for traditional family values, and argue that potential legal challenges could lead to a future extension of surrogacy rights to gay couples.

The head of the Orthodox Church of Greece, Archbishop Ieronymos, suggested Wednesday that the ballot should be held by roll call. This would enable constituents to see exactly how their lawmakers voted.

That's going to happen anyway, following motions later in the day by far-right parties and — independently and for different reasons — Syriza. The main opposition leader, Stefanos Kasselakis, who is gay, has threatened disciplinary action against any Syriza lawmaker who doesn't back the bill.

Church supporters and conservative organizations have staged small protests against the proposed law, and members of far-right groups have called for a demonstration outside parliament later Thursday.

Politically, the same-sex marriage law is not expected to harm Mitsotakis' government, which won easy re-election last year after capturing much of the centrist vote.

A stronger challenge comes from ongoing protests by farmers angry at high production costs, and intense opposition from many students to the planned scrapping of a state monopoly on university education.

Nevertheless, parliament is expected to approve the university bill later this month, and opinion polls indicate that most Greeks support it.

Japan slips into a recession and loses its spot as the world's third-largest economy

By YURI KAGEYAMA AP Business Writer

TOKYO (AP) — Japan's economy is now the world's fourth-largest after it contracted in the last quarter of 2023 and fell behind Germany.

The government reported the economy shrank at an annual rate of 0.4% in October to December, according to Cabinet Office data on real GDP released Thursday, though it grew 1.9% for all of 2023. It contracted 2.9% in July-September. Two straight quarters of contraction are considered an indicator an economy is in a technical recession.

Japan's economy was the second largest until 2010, when it was overtaken by China's. Japan's nominal GDP totaled \$4.2 trillion last year, while Germany's was \$4.4 trillion, or \$4.5 trillion, depending on the currency conversion.

A weaker Japanese yen was a key factor in the drop to fourth place, since comparisons of nominal GDP are in dollar terms. But Japan's relative weakness also reflects a decline in its population and lagging productivity and competitiveness, economists say.

Real gross domestic product is a measure of the value of a nation's products and services. The annual rate measures what would have happened if the quarterly rate lasted a year.

Japan was historically touted as "an economic miracle," rising from the ashes of World War II to become the second largest economy after the U.S.. It kept that going through the 1970s and 1980s. But for most of the past 30 years the economy has grown only moderately at times, mainly remaining in the doldrums

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after the collapse of its financial bubble began in 1990.

Both the Japanese and German economies are powered by strong small and medium-size businesses with solid productivity.

Like Japan in the 1960s-1980s, for most of this century, Germany roared ahead, dominating global markets for high-end products like luxury cars and industrial machinery, selling so much to the rest of the world that half its economy ran on exports.

But its economy, one of the world's worst performing last year, also contracted in the last quarter, by 0.3%.

Britain's likewise contracted late last year. Britain reported Thursday that its economy entered a technical recession in October-December, shrinking 0.3% from the previous quarter. The quarterly decline followed a 0.1% fall in the previous three-month period.

As an island nation with relatively few foreign residents, Japan's population has been shrinking and aging for years, while Germany's has grown to nearly 85 million, as immigration helped to make up for a low birth rate.

The latest data reflect the realities of a weakening Japan and will likely result in Japan's commanding a lesser presence in the world, said Tetsuji Okazaki, professor of economics at the University of Tokyo.

"Several years ago, Japan boasted a powerful auto sector, for instance. But with the advent of electric vehicles, even that advantage is shaken," he said. Many factors have yet to play out, "But when looking ahead to the next couple of decades, the outlook for Japan is dim."

The gap between developed countries and emerging nations is shrinking, with India likely to overtake Japan in nominal GDP in a few years.

The U.S. remains the world's largest economy by far, with GDP at \$27.94 trillion in 2023, while China's was \$17.5 trillion. India's is about \$3.7 trillion but growing at a sizzling rate of around 7%.

Immigration is one option for solving Japan's labor shortage problem, but the country has been relatively unaccepting of foreign labor, except for temporary stays, prompting criticism about discrimination and a lack of diversity.

Robotics, another option, are gradually being deployed but not to the extent they can fully make up for the lack of workers.

Another key factor behind Japan's sluggish growth is stagnating wages that have left households reluctant to spend. At the same time, businesses have been invested heavily in faster growing economies overseas instead of in the aging and shrinking home market.

Private consumption fell for three straight quarters last year and "growth is set to remain sluggish this year as the household savings rate has turned negative," Marcel Thieliant of Capital Economics said in a commentary. "Our forecast is that GDP growth will slow from 1.9% in 2023 to around 0.5% this year."

Who is Prabowo Subianto, the former general who's Indonesia's next president?

By VICTORIA MILKO Associated Press

JAKARTA, Indonesia (AP) — A wealthy ex-general with ties to both Indonesia's popular outgoing president and its dictatorial past looks set to be its next president, after unofficial tallies showed him taking a clear majority in the first round of voting.

Defense Minister Prabowo Subianto presented himself as heir to the immensely popular sitting President Joko Widodo, vowing to continue the modernization agenda that's brought rapid growth and vaunted Indonesia into the ranks of middle-income countries.

"We should not be arrogant. We should not be proud. We should not be euphoric. We still have to be humble. This victory must be a victory for all Indonesian people," Subianto said in a speech broadcast on national television from a sports stadium on the night of the election.

But Subianto will enter office with unresolved questions about the costs of extraction-driven growth for the environment and traditional communities, as well as his own links to torture, disappearances and other

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human rights abuses in the final years of the brutal Suharto dictatorship, which he served as a lieutenant general.

A former rival of Widodo who lost two presidential races to him, Subianto embraced the popular leader to run as his heir, even choosing Widodo's son as his running mate, a choice that ran up against constitutional age limits and has activists worried about an emerging political dynasty in the 25-year-old democracy.

Subianto's win is not yet official. His two rivals have not yet conceded and the official results could take up to a month to be tabulated, but election night "quick counts" showed him taking over 55% of the vote in a three-way race. Those counts, conducted by polling agencies and based on millions of ballots sampled from the across the country, have proved accurate in past elections.

Subianto was born in 1951 to one of Indonesia's most powerful families, the third of four children. His father, Sumitro Djojohadikusumo, was an influential politician, and a minister under Presidents Sukarno and Suharto.

Subianto's father first worked for Sukarno, but later turned against him and was forced into exile. Subianto spent most of his childhood overseas and speaks French, German, English and Dutch.

The family returned to Indonesia after General Suharto came to power in 1967 following a failed left-wing coup. Suharto brutally dealt with dissenters and was accused of stealing billions of dollars of state funds for himself, family and close associates. Suharto dismissed the allegations even after leaving office in 1998.

Subianto enrolled in Indonesia's Military Academy in 1970, graduating in 1974 and serving in the military for nearly three decades. In 1976, Subianto joined the Indonesian National Army Special Force, called Kopassus, and was commander of a group that operated in what is now East Timor.

Human rights groups have claimed that Subianto was involved in a series of human rights violations in Timor-Leste in the 1980s and 90s, when Indonesia occupied the now-independent nation. Subianto has denied those allegations.

Subianto and other members of Kopassus were banned from traveling to the U.S. for years over the alleged human rights abuses they committed against the people of Timor-Leste. This ban lasted until 2020, when it was effectively lifted so he could visit the U.S. as Indonesia's defense minister.

In 1983, he married Suharto's daughter Siti Hediati Hariyadi.

More allegations of human rights abuses led to Subianto being forced out of the military. He was dishonorably discharged in 1998, after Kopassus soldiers kidnapped and tortured political opponents of Suharto, his then-father-in-law. Of 22 activists kidnapped that year, 13 remain missing. Several of his men were tried and convicted, but Subianto never faced trial.

He never commented on these accusations, but went into self-imposed exile in Jordan in 1998.

A number of former democracy activists have joined his campaign. Budiman Sudjatmiko, a politician who was a democracy activist in 1998, said that reconciliation is necessary to move forward. Sudjatmiko left the governing Indonesian Democratic Party of Struggle to join Subianto's campaign team.

Sudjatmiko said that international focus on Subianto's human rights record was overblown. "Developed countries don't like leaders from developing countries who are brave, firm and strategic," he said.

Subianto returned from Jordan in 2008, and helped to found the Gerindra Party. He ran for the presidency twice, losing to Widodo both times. He refused to acknowledge the results at first, but accepted Widodo's offer of the defense minister position in 2019, in a bid for unity.

He has vowed to continue Widodo's economic development plans, which capitalized on Indonesia's abundant nickel, coal, oil and gas reserves and led Southeast Asia's biggest economy through a decade of rapid growth and modernization that vastly expanded the country's networks of roads and railways.

That includes includes the \$30 billion project to build a new capitol city called Nusantara. A report by a coalition of NGOs claimed that Subianto's family would profit from the Nusantata project, thanks to land and mining interests the family holds on East Kalimantan, the site of the new city. A member of the family denied the report's allegations.

Subianto and his family also have business ties to Indonesia's palm oil, coal and gas, mining, agriculture and fishery industries.

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Subianto bristles at international criticism over human rights and other topics, but he's expected to keep the country's pragmatic approach to power politics. Under Widodo, Indonesia has strengthened defense ties with the U.S. while courting Chinese investment.

"Countries like us, countries as big as us, countries as rich as us, are always envied by other powers," Subianto said during his victory speech after the election. "Therefore, we must be united. United and harmonious."

The former rivals became tacit allies: Indonesian presidents don't typically endorse candidates, but Subianto chose Widodo's son, 36-year-old Surakarta Mayor Gibran Rakabuming Raka, as his vice presidential running mate, and Widodo coyly favored Subianto over the candidate of his own former party.

Raka is below the statutory minimum age of 40, but was allowed to run under an exception created by the Constitutional Court — then headed by Widodo's brother-in-law — allowing current and former regional governors to run at age 35.

"This is the first time in Indonesian history that a sitting president has a relative who won in a presidential election," said Yoes Kenawas, a research fellow at Atma Jaya Catholic University in Jakarta. "It could be said that the Jokowi political dynasty has been established at the highest level of Indonesian government."

Subianto has also had close ties with hard-line Islamists, whom he used to undermine his opponents.

But for the 2024 election, Subianto projected a softer image that has resonated with Indonesia's large youth population, including videos of him dancing on stage and ads showing digital anime-like renderings of him roller-skating through Jakarta's streets.

"We will be the president and vice president and government for all Indonesian people," said Subianto during his victory speech. "I will lead, with Gibran (to) protect and defend all Indonesian people, whatever tribe, whatever ethnic group, whatever race, religion, whatever social background. It will be our responsibility for all Indonesian people to safeguard their interests."

Gunfire at Chiefs' Super Bowl celebration kills 1 and wounds nearly two-dozen, including children

By HEATHER HOLLINGSWORTH and NICK INGRAM Associated Press

KANSAS CITY, Mo. (AP) — A historic railway station on the edge of downtown Kansas City became the latest backdrop for a mass shooting as gunfire near the end of the Kansas City Chiefs' Super Bowl celebration sent terrified fans scrambling for cover and left 21 people wounded — including at least eight children — and a mother of two dead.

Wednesday's shooting outside Union Station happened despite the presence of more than 800 police officers who were in the building and nearby, including on top of nearby structures, said Mayor Quinton Lucas, who attended with his wife and mother and ran for safety when the shots rang out.

"Parades, rallies, schools, movies. It seems like almost nothing is safe," Lucas said.

Three people were detained and firearms were recovered, Police Chief Stacey Graves said at an evening news conference. She said police were still piecing together what happened and did not release details about those who were detained or a possible motive.

"I'm angry at what happened today. The people who came to this celebration should expect a safe environment," Graves said.

It is the latest sports celebration in the U.S. to be marred by gun violence, following a shooting that wounded several people last year in Denver after the Nuggets' NBA championship, and gunfire last year at a parking lot near the Texas Rangers' World Series championship parade.

Social media users posted shocking video of police running through Wednesday's crowded scene as people scrambled for cover and fled. One video showed someone apparently performing chest compressions on a victim as another person, seemingly writhing in pain, lay on the ground nearby. People screamed in the background.

Another video showed two people chase and tackle a person, holding them down until two police officers arrived.

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Radio station KKFI said via Facebook that Lisa Lopez-Galvan, host of "Taste of Tejano," was killed. "This senseless act has taken a beautiful person from her family and this KC Community," KKFI said in a statement.

Lopez-Galvan, whose DJ name was "Lisa G," was an extrovert and devoted mother from a prominent Latino family in the area, said Rosa Izurieta and Martha Ramirez, two childhood friends who worked with her at a staffing company. Izurieta said Lopez-Galvan attended the parade with her husband and her adult son, a die-hard Kansas City sports fan who also was shot.

"She's the type of person who would jump in front of a bullet for anybody — that would be Lisa," Izurieta said.

Kansas City has long struggled with gun violence, and in 2020 it was among nine cities targeted by the U.S. Justice Department in an effort to crack down on violent crime. In 2023 the city matched a record with 182 homicides, most of which involved guns.

Lucas has joined with mayors across the country in calling for new laws to reduce gun violence, including mandating universal background checks.

Lisa Money of Kansas City was trying to gather some confetti near the end of the parade when she heard somebody yell, "Down, down, everybody down!" At first she thought it might be a joke, until she saw the SWAT team jumping over the fence.

"I can't believe it really happened," Money said. "Who in their right mind would do something like this?"

Kevin Sanders of Lenexa, Kansas, said he heard what sounded like firecrackers and then people started running. After that initial flurry, calm returned, and he didn't think much of it. But 10 minutes later, ambulances started showing up.

"It sucks that someone had to ruin the celebration, but we are in a big city," Sanders said.

University Health spokesperson Nancy Lewis said the hospital was treating eight gunshot victims. Two were in critical condition and six were stable. The hospital also was treating four people for other injuries resulting from the chaos after the shooting, Lewis said.

Stephanie Meyer, chief nursing officer for Children's Mercy Kansas City, said it was treating 12 patients from the rally, including 11 children between the ages of 6 and 15, many of whom suffered gunshot wounds. All were expected to recover, she said.

When asked about the condition of the children, Meyer responded: "Fear. The one word I would use to describe what we saw and how they came to us was fear."

St. Luke's Hospital of Kansas City received one gunshot patient in critical condition, a spokesperson said.

Chiefs trainer Rick Burkholder said he was with coach Andy Reid and other coaches and staff members at the time of the shooting, and that the team was on buses and returning to Arrowhead Stadium.

"We are truly saddened by the senseless act of violence that occurred outside of Union Station at the conclusion of today's parade and rally," the team said in a statement.

Missouri's Republican Gov. Mike Parson and first lady Teresa Parson were at the parade during the gunfire but were unhurt. In a statement, he thanked security officers and first responders for their professionalism.

President Joe Biden, who was briefed on the shooting and received updates throughout the day, said the tragedy "cuts deep in the American soul" and called for Congress to take action to prevent gun violence.

"And I ask the country to stand with me," Biden said in a statement. "To make your voice heard in Congress so we finally act to ban assault weapons, to limit high-capacity magazines, strengthen background checks, keep guns out of the hands of those who have no business owning them or handling them."

Throngs had lined the parade route before the shooting, with fans climbing trees and street poles or standing on rooftops for a better view. Players rolled through the crowd on double-decker buses, as DJs and drummers heralded their arrival.

On the USS Eisenhower, 4 months of combat at sea facing Houthi missiles and a new sea threat

By BERNAT ARMANGUE and TARA COPP Associated Press

ABOARD THE USS DWIGHT D. EISENHOWER (AP) — Sailors aboard the aircraft carrier USS Dwight D. Eisenhower and its accompanying warships have spent four months straight at sea defending against ballistic missiles and flying attack drones fired by Iranian-backed Houthis, and are now more regularly also defending against a new threat — fast unmanned vessels that are fired at them through the water.

While the Houthis have launched unmanned surface vessels, or USVs, in the past against Saudi coalition forces that have intervened in Yemen's civil war, they were used for the first time against U.S. military and commercial in the Red Sea on Jan. 4. In the weeks since, the Navy has had to intercept multiple USVs, including one on Wednesday.

It's "more of an unknown threat that we don't have a lot of intel on, that could be extremely lethal — an unmanned surface vessel," said Rear Adm. Marc Miguez, commander of Carrier Strike Group Two, of which the Eisenhower is the flagship. The Houthis "have ways of obviously controlling them just like they do the (unmanned aerial vehicles), and we have very little little fidelity as to all the stockpiles of what they have USV-wise," Miguez said.

The Houthis began firing on U.S. military and commercial vessels after a deadly blast at the Al-Ahli hospital in Gaza on Oct. 17, a few days after the outbreak of the Israel-Hamas war. The rebels have said they will continue firing on commercial and military vessels transiting the region until Israel ceases its military operations inside Gaza.

The Eisenhower has been on patrol here since Nov. 4, and its accompanying ships have been on location for even longer, since October.

In those months the Eisenhower's fleet of fighter and surveillance aircraft have worked non-stop to detect and intercept the missiles and drones fired by the Houthis at ships in the Red Sea, Bab-al-Mandeb strait and Gulf of Aden. The carriers' F/A-18 fighter jets are also frequently launched to take out missile sites they detect before munitions are fired.

As of Wednesday, the carrier strike group, which includes the cruiser USS Philippine Sea, the destroyers USS Mason and Gravelly, and additional U.S. Navy assets in the region including the destroyers USS Laboon and USS Carney have conducted more than 95 intercepts of drones, anti-ship ballistic missiles and anti-ship cruise missiles and made more than 240 self-defense strikes on more than 50 Houthi targets.

"We are constantly keeping an eye on what the Iranian-backed Houthis are up to, and when we find military targets that threaten the ability of merchant vessels, we act in defense of those ships and strike them precisely and violently," said Capt. Marvin Scott, commander of the carrier air wing's eight squadrons of warplanes.

But the USV threat, which is still evolving, is worrisome, Miguez said.

"That's one of the most scary scenarios, to have a bomb-laden, unmanned surface vessel that can go in pretty fast speeds. And if you're not immediately on scene, it can get ugly extremely quick," Miguez said.

That pace has meant the ships have spent four months at a constant combat pace with no days off with a port call. That takes a toll on sailors, the commander of the Eisenhower, Capt. Christopher "Chowdah" Hill said in an interview with The Associated Press aboard the Eisenhower.

The ship keeps up morale by letting sailors know how important their job is and by giving them wi-fi access so they can stay connected with their families back home.

"I was walking through the mess decks the other day and I could hear a baby crying because someone was teleconferencing with their infant that they haven't even met yet," Hill said. "It's just extraordinary, that sort of connection."

The destroyers don't have wi-fi because of bandwidth limitations, which can make it harder for those crews.

Joselyn Martinez, a second class gunner's mate aboard the destroyer Gravelly said not being in touch

with home and being in a fighting stance at sea for so long has been hard, "but we have each other's backs here."

When a threat is detected, and an alarm sounds directing the crew to respond, "it is like a rush of adrenaline," Martinez said. "But at the end of the day, we just do what we come here to do and, you know, defend my crew and my ship."

Warning signs mounted before Texas shooter entered church with her son, former mother-in-law says

By JUAN A. LOZANO Associated Press

HOUSTON (AP) — The former mother-in-law of the woman who opened fire at a Houston megachurch tried for years to alert authorities and others, including church staff, about her ex-daughter-in-law's mental health struggles, she said Wednesday. But Walli Carranza said nothing came of her actions.

Carranza said she believes systemic failures as well as lax gun laws ultimately led to Sunday's shooting at celebrity pastor Joel Osteen's Lakewood Church in which Genesse Moreno entered the church with her 7-year-old son and opened fire in a hallway. Two people were wounded in the shooting, including Moreno's son, who was shot in the head. Moreno was gunned down by security officers she exchanged gunfire with.

"You can't put responsibility on the mind, when the mind was so very ill. A healthy mother would never bring her child to a situation like this. That's not mental health. So sometimes we don't have to find a guilty party or place blame. We can just say there are systems that failed," Carranza told The Associated Press in an interview.

Carranza said her grandson Samuel remained in critical condition, but that he was doing better.

Various questions about the shooting remained unanswered on Wednesday, including Moreno's motive and details about how she obtained the AR-style rifle she used.

Carranza said her son Enrique Carranza and Moreno met at the University of Houston and married in September 2015. They divorced in 2022.

Carranza said her son, who is currently incarcerated in Florida, didn't want to divorce Moreno and only "wanted his wife to get healthy."

Carranza said Child Protective Services was notified after Moreno was accused by nurses of putting adult medication in her son's feeding tube after his birth in 2016. Other concerns, including allegations that Moreno left guns unattended in her home, were also forwarded to CPS but no action was taken, Carranza said.

"My great concern for Sam was that he was going to shoot himself, and that's what we warned against," Carranza said. She added that in January 2020, when Moreno and her grandson visited her in Colorado, Samuel pulled a handgun from his diaper bag and gave it to her.

Melissa Landford, spokesperson for the state Department of Family and Protective Services, said CPS could not comment on the case for confidentiality reasons.

Carranza also said that in 2020 and 2021, her attorney sent emails to Lakewood Church asking for assistance with intervening in Moreno's struggles, believing that Moreno's mother attended the church.

Church spokesman Don Iloff said Wednesday that records show Moreno "sporadically" attended services at Lakewood for a couple years but there were no records of her being at the church after 2022.

Iloff said they were still looking but had not found any records showing Moreno's mother attended the church. He added that church officials also had not found records of the emails sent by Carranza's attorney but they were still looking.

Iloff said in situations where someone may reach out for help, what the church can offer them is spiritual and biblical counseling.

"If we had reached out and (Moreno) had accepted counseling, then we definitely would have been more than happy to provide that," Iloff said.

In a video message on Instagram, Osteen invited people to attend a special service at the church this coming Sunday to celebrate a "time of healing and restoration."

"We are not people of fear. We are people of faith. God has us in the palm of his hand, and this is not

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the time to shrink back. This is the time to turn to God, to rally together," Osteen said.

Texas law generally bans someone convicted of a felony from owning a gun for several years after they are released from prison. Misdemeanors connected to domestic violence will also trigger a ban.

But Moreno's extensive list of misdemeanors, ranging from forging a \$100 bill to shoplifting and assault, did not meet that threshold.

Texas also lacks a so-called "red flag" law, which generally allows law enforcement or family members to ask a judge to order the seizure or surrender of guns from someone who is deemed dangerous, often because of mental health concerns or threats of violence.

Carranza said she met for hours with FBI agents on Tuesday, discussing the reports she filed over the years about Moreno.

US to confront Trump-driven political turmoil at the Munich Security Conference

By MATTHEW LEE AP Diplomatic Writer

MUNICH (AP) — Long regarded as a celebration of the U.S.-led post-World War II international order, the Munich Security Conference this year will be more of a reflection of America's political turmoil.

The annual event kicks off Friday after former President Donald Trump threatened not to come to the defense of European allies in the event of an attack by Russia. There also are broad concerns about whether the U.S. will be able to keep providing billions of dollars in defense assistance for Ukraine and about increasing American isolation over its support for Israel's war in Gaza.

As if that weren't enough, Vice President Kamala Harris and Secretary of State Antony Blinken will be accompanied to the conference by Homeland Security Secretary Alejandro Mayorkas just days after he was impeached by the Republican-led House on charges that Democrats say are specious.

The increasingly dire developments in Ukraine and Gaza, coupled with Trump's inflammatory comments, mean the event may be overshadowed by the unwanted ghosts of Munich's past — authoritarianism, appeasement and antisemitism — rather than dominated by an optimistic outlook for the future.

The Bavarian capital is known for many positive things, but recent developments in Europe and the Middle East and the volatile U.S. political situation have combined to recall Munich's history as the birthplace of the Nazi Party in the 1920s, European appeasement of Adolf Hitler in the 1930s, and the massacre of Israeli athletes during the 1972 Munich Olympics.

Although participants including Harris and Blinken are expected to laud American leadership, the conference will hear questions over unprecedented challenges to global rules and regulations that it has championed during its 60-year existence.

And overshadowing it all will be Trump's threat to not automatically come to the defense of European allies should they be attacked by Russia. That is a cornerstone of NATO's founding treaty, which has taken on additional significance since Russia's full-scale attack on Ukraine in 2022.

The additional U.S. funding for Ukraine's fight remains stalled in Congress, where House Republicans have lined up behind Trump, who opposes the military aid.

President Joe Biden has branded Trump's remarks on NATO "dangerous" and "un-American," seizing on the former president's comments as they fuel doubt among partners about the future dependability of the United States on the global stage.

The White House said Wednesday that Harris would use her engagements in Munich to underscore that the Biden administration remains solidly behind NATO, a sharp contrast to Trump, the front-runner for the 2024 Republican presidential nomination.

Biden's national security adviser, Jake Sullivan, said the alliance is "stronger and more vital than it has been in 75 years having just added Finland and about to add Sweden." He also noted that since Biden took office the alliance has gone from nine members meeting their commitment to spend 2% of GDP on defense to 18 this month.

Blinken, too, will be conveying that message in Munich, according to the top U.S. diplomat for Europe,

James O'Brien.

O'Brien told reporters that U.S. administrations from the Democratic and Republican parties "have regarded NATO as the bedrock of our security, certainly in Europe but increasingly a global partner."

Yet European leaders and NATO officials remain worried.

German Chancellor Olaf Scholz assailed Trump's comments. He said "any relativization of NATO's support guarantee is irresponsible and dangerous, and is in the interest of Russia alone" and said "no one can play, or 'deal,' with Europe's security."

NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg said comments such as Trump's call into question the credibility of NATO's collective security commitment — Article 5 of the organization's founding treaty, which says that an attack on any member country will be met with a response from all of them.

"The whole idea of NATO is that an attack on one ally will trigger a response from the whole alliance and as long as we stand behind that message together, we prevent any military attack on any ally," he said. "Any suggestion that we are not standing up for each other, that we are not going to protect each other, that does undermine the security of all of us."

At least 8 children among 22 hit by gunfire at end of Chiefs' Super Bowl parade; 1 person killed

By HEATHER HOLLINGSWORTH and NICK INGRAM Associated Press

KANSAS CITY, Mo. (AP) — Eight children were among 22 people hit by gunfire in a shooting at the end of Wednesday's parade to celebrate the Kansas City Chiefs' Super Bowl win, authorities said, sending terrified fans running for cover as yet another high-profile public event was marred by gun violence. One of those victims — a mother of two identified by her radio station as a DJ — was killed.

Kansas City Police Chief Stacey Graves said three people had been detained as part of the investigation. She said she has heard that fans may have been involved in tackling a suspect but couldn't immediately confirm that.

"I'm angry at what happened today. The people who came to this celebration should expect a safe environment," Graves said. Police did not immediately release any details about the people who were detained or about a possible motive for the shootings. She said firearms had been recovered, but not what kind.

"All of that is being actively investigated," she said.

It is the latest sports celebration in the U.S. to end in gun violence, following a shooting that injured several people last year in downtown Denver after the Nuggets' NBA championship, and gunfire last year at a parking lot near the Texas Rangers' World Series championship parade.

Social media users posted shocking video of police running through a crowded scene as people hurriedly scrambled for cover and fled. One video showed someone apparently performing chest compressions on a shooting victim as another person, seemingly writhing in pain, lay on the ground nearby. People screamed in the background.

Another video showed two people chase and tackle a person, holding them down until two police officers arrived.

Radio station KKFI said in a Facebook post Wednesday evening that Lisa Lopez-Galvan, host of "Taste of Tejano," was killed in the shooting.

"This senseless act has taken a beautiful person from her family and this KC Community," KKFI said in a statement.

Lopez-Galvan, whose DJ name was "Lisa G," was an extrovert and devoted mother from a prominent Latino family in the area, said Rosa Izurieta and Martha Ramirez, two childhood friends who worked with her at a staffing company. Izurieta said Lopez-Galvan had attended the parade with her husband and her adult son, a die-hard Kansas City sports fan who also was shot.

"She's the type of person who would jump in front of a bullet for anybody — that would be Lisa," Izurieta said.

The shooting outside Union Station happened despite more than 800 police officers who were in the

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building and around the area, including on top of nearby buildings, said Mayor Quinton Lucas, who attended with his wife and mother and had to run for cover when gunfire broke out.

"I think that's something that all of us who are parents, who are just regular people living each day, have to decide what we wish to do about," Lucas said. "Parades, rallies, schools, movies. It seems like almost nothing is safe."

Kansas City has long struggled with gun violence, and in 2020 it was among nine cities targeted by the U.S. Justice Department in an effort to crack down on violent crime. In 2023 the city matched a record with 182 homicides, most of which involved guns.

Lucas has joined with mayors across the country in calling for new laws to reduce gun violence, including mandating universal background checks.

Lisa Money, a resident of the city, was trying to gather some confetti near the end of the parade when she heard somebody yell, "Down, down, everybody down!"

At first Money thought somebody might be joking until she saw the SWAT team jumping over the fence. "I can't believe it really happened. Who in their right mind would do something like this? This is supposed to be a day of celebration for everybody in the city and the surrounding area. And then you've got some idiot that wants to come along and do something like this," she said.

Kevin Sanders, 53, of Lenexa, Kansas, said he heard what sounded like firecrackers and then people started running. After that initial flurry, calm returned, and he didn't think much of it. But 10 minutes later, ambulances started showing up.

"It sucks that someone had to ruin the celebration, but we are in a big city," Sanders said.

University Health spokeswoman Nancy Lewis said the hospital was treating eight gunshot victims. Two were in critical condition and six were in stable condition, she said. The hospital also was treating four people for other injuries resulting from the chaos after the shooting, Lewis said.

Lisa Augustine, spokesperson for Children's Mercy Kansas City, said the hospital was treating 12 patients from the rally, including 11 children, some of whom suffered gunshot wounds.

St. Luke's Hospital of Kansas City received one gunshot patient in critical condition and three walk-ins with injuries that were not life-threatening, spokesperson Laurel Gifford said.

"When you have this many casualties, it's going to get spread out among a lot of hospitals so that you don't overwhelm any single ER," said Jill Jensen Chadwick, news director for University of Kansas Health System, which received at least one person injured in the shooting.

Chiefs trainer Rick Burkholder said that he was with coach Andy Reid and other coaches and staff members at the time of the shooting, and that the team was on buses and returning to Arrowhead Stadium.

"We are truly saddened by the senseless act of violence that occurred outside of Union Station at the conclusion of today's parade and rally," the team said in a statement.

Missouri's Republican Gov. Mike Parson and first lady Teresa Parson were at the parade during the gunfire but were unhurt. "Thanks to the professionalism of our security officers and first responders, Teresa and I and our staff are safe and secure," Parson said in a statement.

President Joe Biden said the shooting "cuts deep in the American soul" and called on people to press Congress to ban assault weapons, to limit high-capacity gun magazines and for other gun measures that have been rejected by Republicans.

"Today's events should move us, shock us, shame us into acting. What are we waiting for?" he said.

Biden noted that Wednesday was the anniversary of the 2018 high school shooting in Parkland, Florida, that killed 17 people and said there have been more mass shootings in 2024 "than there have been days in the year."

Areas that had been filled with crowds were empty after the shooting, with police and firefighters standing and talking behind an area restricted by yellow tape.

Throngs had lined the route earlier, with fans climbing trees and street poles or standing on rooftops for a better view. Players rolled through the crowd on double-decker buses, as DJs and drummers heralded their arrival. Owner Clark Hunt was on one of the buses, holding the Lombardi Trophy.

The city and the team each chipped in around \$1 million for the event commemorating Travis Kelce,

Patrick Mahomes and the Chiefs becoming the first team since Tom Brady and the New England Patriots two decades ago to defend their title.

Democrats embrace tougher border enforcement, seeing Trump's demolition of deal as a 'gift'

By STEPHEN GROVES and MARY CLARE JALONICK Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — The Senate's border proposal was one of the toughest bipartisan bills to emerge on the issue in decades. Yet it quickly collapsed when Republicans — galvanized by Donald Trump, the likely Republican presidential nominee — rejected the compromise as insufficient.

Now Democrats see an opening.

Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer called Trump's rejection of the border legislation "a gift" for Democrats and said they plan to "constantly over the next year" remind voters that it was Republicans who torpedoed the deal. And he says the strategy has already paid dividends, with Democrat Tom Suozzi, who campaigned on tougher border enforcement, winning a special election this week in New York, flipping a House seat away from Republicans.

Schumer said the race in his home state of New York "says something very significant — that border is no longer the province of Republicans."

That calculation is already having far-reaching effects, transforming the way President Joe Biden and Democrats talk about one of the biggest issues in this year's elections and shaping the policy debate over immigration.

It's a strategy with significant political risk. Republicans have campaigned on border security for years, and public frustration is running high with the record number of illegal U.S. border crossings. While arrests for illegal border crossings dipped by half in January, they reached 249,735 in December, the highest monthly tally on record. Cities, including many run by Democratic mayors, are straining under an influx of migrants.

Republicans pin the historic number of illegal border crossings directly on Biden and argue that the Senate legislation would not have been enough to curb it. They say Democrats are only trying to excuse away their own failures.

Sen. John Cornyn, a Texas Republican, said earlier this month that the influx of migrants "burdening my state and a lot of the major cities around the country is unsustainable and has proven to be a political liability for President Biden, so they want to try to act like they're doing something about it for a fig leaf."

Democrats, trying to cling to a thin Senate majority and retake the House, are undeterred. They see the spectacular collapse of the bill as a cautionary tale for voters and another way to tie GOP candidates to Trump, especially in swing races.

"Republicans aren't willing to stand up and solve issues," said Rep. Suzan DelBene, a Washington Democrat who chairs the party's House campaign committee. "They are led by the most extreme members of their party and when Donald Trump says he doesn't want to move something, they all fall in line."

That message is aimed at a group of voters that will likely be crucial in the election — swing voters and the minority of Republicans who do not like Trump.

"If we could show Democrats were serious and Republicans were not interested or rejected doing border, it would help neutralize the issue, which was a loser for us," Schumer said.

Now that the House is considering the \$95.3 billion foreign aid and national security package that had previously been paired with the border policies, some members have once again considered adding border security measures to the package. Schumer was open to again considering border policy, saying "Our main job here is to get something done."

But House Speaker Mike Johnson, R-La., said Wednesday he would not consider anything similar to the Senate bill because "it did not meet the moment, it would not have solved the problem."

Trump has openly bragged about defeating the Senate's border proposal. He's argued that it would have allowed in "millions" of migrants because it included a provision that would have expelled migrants without allowing them to apply for asylum only after Border Patrol encounters became unmanageable for

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authorities.

The senators who crafted the bill, including Republican Sen. James Lankford, have said Trump's claim about the bill is not true.

At the same time, Biden has embraced some of the terms that Trump used about border enforcement as he pressed Congress to take up the bill, which would have overhauled the asylum system with tougher standards and faster enforcement.

Speaking at a political event in South Carolina last month, Biden said he would have used the Senate bill to "shut down the border until it could get back under control."

Putting the strategy into motion, the campaign arm for Senate Democrats is launching a blitz of ads attacking Republicans for voting against the border enforcement bill — even taking the fight to Texas, where Sen. Ted Cruz is seeking another term.

Cruz has taken aim at Republican Leader Mitch McConnell for blessing the deal, arguing that it was "spectacularly stupid" to negotiate with Democrats.

Cruz's likely Democratic opponent, Texas Rep. Collin Allred, said he's already talking about the border deal on the campaign trail. He said he's had issues with the Biden administration's approach, but he thought the Senate negotiators "arrived at a pretty constructive place."

"This is a very real issue for Texans," Allred said, "and a senator who doesn't want to solve it."

The potency of immigration as a campaign issue was evident in the New York special election.

On suburban Long Island, Lois Clinco said she voted for Suozzi Tuesday in hopes he would prevent migrants from settling in Levittown, a town some 30 miles from New York City. She was concerned about safety amid the many migrants arriving in New York City — and the increasingly dire rhetoric from city officials about violence and crime.

"I'm hoping that he keeps our area, our area and keeps the migrants out," the 59-year-old Clinco said. "We're overpopulated now and with schools and everything else, it's just a difficult time."

Many Democrats, faced with historic numbers of migrants coming to the southern border and cities whose resources are overwhelmed by the influx, have also warmed to the idea of tougher border enforcement.

"Immigration and the situation at the border is one of the last high profile issues where Republicans have a powerful narrative," said Connecticut Sen. Chris Murphy, who was the chief Democratic negotiator on the border policy. "So even blunting the political advantage that they think exists on the border could be the difference between winning and losing."

Still, immigration advocates and progressive lawmakers worry that Democrats could leave immigrants behind if the party fails to champion the economic and social benefits they bring to the United States.

Rep. Ro Khanna, a California Democrat who is a surrogate for Biden and had joined him in South Carolina, said he disagreed with the president's rhetoric on "shutting down the border." Khanna pointed to how past Democratic presidents from John F. Kennedy to Barack Obama described immigrants as contributing to the country.

"We have adopted a frame that starts with blaming immigrants as part of the problem," he said. "We need to shift that frame to celebrate what immigrants have done for America."

Advocates for immigration are also cautiously looking at the shift. Todd Schulte, the president of FWD.us, an organization that supports immigration reforms, agreed that Democrats needed to go on the offensive by drawing a contrast with Trump, but also called for them to craft proposals that address "a failed" immigration system.

"Draw a contrast, but then you have to deliver on policy," he said.

Murphy agreed that Democrats should remain committed to broad immigration reforms, including pathways to citizenship for migrants who are already here. But he argued that may only be possible once Democrats first show voters they are serious about tough border enforcement.

"We have to read the writing on the wall, our belief as a party that we could do it all at one time has simply proven not to be true," he said.

Will Georgia prosecutor be removed from election case against Donald Trump? Judge to hear arguments

By KATE BRUMBACK Associated Press

ATLANTA (AP) — Should District Attorney Fani Willis be removed from the Georgia election interference case against former President Donald Trump because of her personal relationship with a special prosecutor? Lawyers were set to battle over the question during a hearing in Atlanta on Thursday.

Willis, the DA for Georgia's Fulton County, hired outside lawyer Nathan Wade to help investigate whether Trump and his allies committed any crimes while trying to overturn his 2020 election loss in the state. Wade has led the team prosecuting the case since an indictment was returned in August.

Willis' removal would be a stunning development in the most sprawling of the four criminal cases against Trump. An additional delay would likely lessen the chance that a trial would be held before the November election, when he is expected to be the Republican nominee for president. At a separate hearing in New York on Thursday, a judge is expected to confirm whether Trump's hush-money criminal case will go to trial next month, as scheduled.

The Georgia hearing, which will be broadcast live, has the potential to dig into uncomfortable details of Willis and Wade's relationship. Throughout the case, Fulton County Superior Court Judge Scott McAfee has made a serious effort to minimize drama in his courtroom and to keep lawyers focused on legal arguments.

He suggested during a hearing Monday that he would continue that trend, saying that if there's anything that amounts to "harassment or undue embarrassment," he is "not going to feel inhibited from stepping in, even without an objection from counsel, to move this along and keep it focused on the issues at hand."

Since the allegations of an inappropriate relationship surfaced last month in a motion filed by Trump co-defendant Michael Roman, the former president has used them to try to cast doubt on the legitimacy of Willis' case. Other Republicans have cited them in calling for investigations into Willis, a Democrat who's up for reelection this year.

Roman, a former Trump campaign staffer and onetime White House aide, alleged that Willis and Wade had been involved in an improper romantic relationship that began before Wade was hired. The motion says Willis paid Wade large sums for his work and then benefited personally when he paid for vacations for the two of them, creating a conflict of interest.

Roman, who has since been joined by Trump and several other co-defendants, is asking McAfee to toss out the indictment and to prevent Willis, Wade and their offices from continuing to be involved in the case.

Earlier this month, Willis and Wade filed a response acknowledging a "personal relationship" but said it has not resulted in any direct or indirect financial benefit to the district attorney. In a sworn statement attached to the filing, Wade said the relationship began in 2022, after he was hired as special prosecutor, and that he and Willis shared travel expenses and never lived together.

Willis argued she has no financial or personal conflict of interest that justifies removing her or her office from the case. Her filing called the allegations "salacious" and said they were designed to generate headlines.

McAfee said during a hearing Monday that Willis could be disqualified "if evidence is produced demonstrating an actual conflict or the appearance of one."

He said the issues he wants to explore at the hearing are "whether a relationship existed, whether that relationship was romantic or nonromantic in nature, when it formed and whether it continues." Those questions are only relevant, he said, "in combination with the question of the existence and extent of any personal benefit conveyed as a result of the relationship."

Roman's lawyer, Ashleigh Merchant, has subpoenaed Willis, Wade, seven other employees of the district attorney's office and others, including Wade's former business partner, Terrence Bradley. Merchant has said Bradley will testify that Willis and Wade's relationship began prior to his hiring as special prosecutor.

McAfee on Monday declined Willis' request to quash those subpoenas, but agreed to revisit that after Bradley testifies.

Will Donald Trump go on trial next month in New York criminal case? Judge expected to rule Thursday

By MICHAEL R. SISAK Associated Press

NEW YORK (AP) — Donald Trump is expected to be back in a New York court Thursday for a hearing that could decide whether the former president's first criminal trial begins in just 39 days.

The hearing to determine whether Trump's March 25 hush-money trial date holds will be held in the same Manhattan courtroom where he pleaded not guilty last April to 34 counts of falsifying business records in an alleged scheme to bury stories about extramarital affairs that arose during his 2016 presidential campaign.

It would be Trump's first return visit to court in the New York criminal case since that historic indictment made him the first ex-president charged with a crime. Since then, he has also been indicted in Florida, Georgia and Washington, D.C.

Judge Juan Manuel Merchan has taken steps in recent weeks to prepare for a trial. If it goes off as planned, it would be the first of Trump's four criminal cases to go to trial.

Over the past year, Trump has lashed out at Merchan as a "Trump-hating judge," asked him to step down from the case and sought to move the case from state court to federal court, all to no avail. Merchan has acknowledged making several small donations to Democrats, including \$15 to Trump's rival Joe Biden, but said he's certain of his "ability to be fair and impartial."

Thursday's proceeding is part of a busy, overlapping stretch of legal activity for the Republican presidential front-runner, who has increasingly made his court involvement part of his political campaign.

The recent postponement of a March 4 trial date in Trump's Washington, D.C. election interference case removed a major hurdle to starting the New York case on time.

Just as the New York hearing is getting underway, a judge in Atlanta is set to hear arguments Thursday over whether Fulton County District Attorney Fani Willis should be disqualified from Trump's Georgia election interference case because of a "personal relationship" with Nathan Wade, a special prosecutor she hired for the case.

Trump is also awaiting a decision, possibly as early as Friday, in a New York civil fraud case that threatens to upend his real estate empire. If the judge rules against Trump, who is accused of inflating his wealth to defraud banks, insurers and others, he could be on the hook for millions of dollars in penalties among other sanctions.

Along with clarifying the trial schedule, Merchan is also expected to rule on key pretrial issues, including a request by Trump's lawyers to throw out the case, which they have decried in court papers as a "discombobulated package of politically motivated charges marred by legal defects."

Trump's lawyers, Todd Blanche and Susan Necheles, accuse Manhattan District Attorney Alvin Bragg, a Democrat, of bringing the case to interfere with Trump's chances of retaking the White House. Bragg's predecessor, Cyrus Vance Jr., declined to pursue a case on the same allegations.

The charges are punishable by up to four years in prison, though there is no guarantee that a conviction would result in prison time.

The case centers on payoffs to two women, porn actor Stormy Daniels and former Playboy model Karen McDougal, as well as to a Trump Tower doorman who claimed to have a story about Trump having a child out of wedlock. Trump says he didn't have any of the alleged sexual encounters.

Trump's lawyer at the time, Michael Cohen, paid Daniels \$130,000 and arranged for the publisher of the National Enquirer supermarket tabloid to pay McDougal \$150,000 in a practice known as "catch-and-kill."

Trump's company then paid Cohen \$420,000 and logged the payments as legal expenses, not reimbursements, prosecutors said. Bragg charged Trump last year with falsifying internal records kept by his company, the Trump Organization, to hide the true nature of payments.

Trump's legal team has argued that no crime was committed.

Live updates | Hospitals in Gaza are devastated after 5 months of Israel's war against Hamas

By The Associated Press undefined

The war between Israel and Hamas, now in its fifth month, has devastated hospitals in the Gaza Strip, with less than half of them only partially functioning as Israel's daily bombardments kill and wound scores of people. Israel accuses the militants of using hospitals and other civilian buildings as cover.

Palestinians began evacuating the main hospital in the southern Gaza town of Khan Younis, according to videos shared by medics on Wednesday. The Israeli military said it had opened a secure route to allow civilians to leave the hospital, while medics and patients could remain inside.

The number of Palestinians killed during the war in Gaza has surpassed 28,000 people, according to the Health Ministry in Gaza. A quarter of Gaza's residents are starving.

The United States, which has provided crucial military and diplomatic support to Israel, has been working with Qatar and Egypt to try and broker a cease-fire and the return of the remaining 130 Israeli hostages held by Hamas in Gaza, around a fourth of whom are believed to be dead.

However, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu blamed Hamas for making unrealistic demands during cease-fire negotiations in Cairo. His remarks late Wednesday came hours after local media reported Netanyahu ordered an Israeli delegation not to return to the talks.

The war began with Hamas' assault into Israel on Oct. 7, in which militants killed about 1,200 people, mostly civilians, and abducted around 250.

Currently:

- A look at the arsenals of Israel and Lebanon's Hezbollah militia as cross-border strikes escalate
- Airstrike during Israeli hostage rescue wipes out an entire Palestinian family in a Gaza border town
- Leaders of Turkey and Egypt unite in efforts to stop Israel's looming offensive in Gaza's Rafah
- Families of Israeli hostages visit international court to urge the arrest of Hamas leaders
- Blasts hit a natural gas pipeline in Iran and an official says it was an act of sabotage
- Find more of AP's coverage at <https://apnews.com/hub/israel-hamas-war>.

Here's the latest:

CANADA, AUSTRALIA AND NEW ZEALAND WARN ISRAEL OF RAFAH CATASTROPHE

CANBERRA, Australia — Canada, Australia and New Zealand are warning Israel that a ground offensive in the Gaza border city of Rafah would be catastrophic.

"We are gravely concerned by indications that Israel is planning a ground offensive into Rafah. A military operation into Rafah would be catastrophic," the prime ministers of the three nations said in a joint statement on Thursday.

With 1.5 million Palestinians taking refuge in the area where there was an already dire humanitarian situation, the impacts on Palestinian civilians from an expanded military operation would be devastating, they said.

"There is growing international consensus. Israel must listen to its friends and it must listen to the international community," the statement said.

ARAB NATIONS URGE UN SECURITY COUNCIL TO DEMAND GAZA CEASE-FIRE

UNITED NATIONS — The 22 Arab countries at the United Nations are urging the U.N. Security Council to demand an immediate cease-fire in Gaza and unhindered humanitarian assistance, and to prevent any transfer of Palestinians out of the territory.

The Arab Group chair this month, Tunisia's U.N. Ambassador Tarek Ladeb, told U.N. reporters Wednesday that some 1.5 million Palestinians who sought safety in Gaza's southern city of Rafah face a "catastrophic scenario" if Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu goes ahead with a potential evacuation of civilians and military offensive in the area bordering Egypt.

Algeria, the Arab representative on the Security Council, circulated a draft resolution about two weeks ago demanding an immediate humanitarian cease-fire and unhindered humanitarian access, as well as rejecting the forced displacement of Palestinian civilians, which has been the subject of intense discussions.

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U.S. Ambassador Linda Thomas-Greenfield said last week that the resolution could jeopardize "sensitive negotiations" aimed at achieving a pause in the Israel-Hamas war and release of some hostages taken during Hamas' surprise Oct. 7 attack in southern Israel.

Riyad Mansour, the Palestinian U.N. ambassador, said Wednesday that there is "massive support" for the resolution and Arab diplomats have had "very frank discussions" with the U.S. ambassador, trying to get American support.

"We believe that it is high time now for the Security Council to decide on a humanitarian ceasefire resolution after 131 days," he said. "The space is narrowing for those who are continuing to ask for more time."

Some Arab countries were pushing for a vote on the Algerian draft this week, but several Arab and council diplomats said a vote is now likely early next week, giving more time for negotiations with the U.S. to avoid a veto. The diplomats spoke on condition of anonymity because the discussions have been private.

Associated Press writer Edith M. Lederer contributed.

LEADER OF PALESTINIAN AUTHORITY URGES HAMAS TO QUICKLY REACH CEASE-FIRE DEAL WITH ISRAEL

RAMALLAH, West Bank — The leader of the Palestinian Authority, which administers parts of the Israeli-occupied West Bank, has called on his political rivals in Hamas to quickly complete a cease-fire deal with Israel.

International mediators have been trying to broker a deal that would require Hamas to release hostages it is holding captive in Gaza in exchange for a pause in fighting and the release of Palestinian prisoners held by Israel. The sides, however, have not been able to agree on the terms of the deal.

Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas, who is widely unpopular among Palestinians even in the West Bank, on Wednesday urged Hamas to finish a cease-fire agreement in order to "spare the Palestinian people the scourge of another catastrophe with ominous consequences, no less dangerous than the Nakba of 1948."

The "Nakba," or catastrophe in Arabic, refers to the mass displacement of hundreds of thousands of Palestinians who were forced or fled their homes during the war surrounding Israel's creation in 1948.

Some Israeli leaders have called for the "voluntary transfer" of large numbers of Palestinians from Gaza, raising fears among Palestinians and members of the international community that this could lead to mass expulsions. Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has said the comments do not reflect official policy.

Hamas ousted the internationally recognized Palestinian Authority from Gaza 2007. Abbas seeks to restore PA rule over Gaza after the war, but only as part of a broader plan that includes the establishment of an independent Palestinian state.

Abbas accused Israel of "waging an open war on the Gaza Strip" and urged against placing obstacles to a deal. "Things are no longer tolerable, and it is time for everyone to bear responsibility."

ISRAEL CLAIMS AL JAZEERA JOURNALIST WOUNDED IN AIRSTRIKE IS A HAMAS COMMANDER

JERUSALEM — The Israeli military is accusing a severely wounded journalist for the Qatar-funded broadcaster Al Jazeera of being a Hamas commander, without providing evidence.

Al Jazeera said Tuesday that two of its journalists, cameraman Ahmad Matar and reporter Ismail Abu Omar, were wounded in an Israeli strike and that Abu Omar had his right foot amputated as a result.

The Israeli military claimed on Wednesday that Abu Omar is a deputy company commander in Hamas' eastern battalion in the southern city of Khan Younis. It sent a screengrab from a video Abu Omar allegedly took of himself in southern Israel on Oct. 7, as Hamas was staging its deadly assault.

Several journalists crossed into Israel along with Hamas during the attack and some reported live as the fighting was taking place.

Al Jazeera did not immediately respond to an email seeking comment late Wednesday.

Israel has previously accused other journalists of having ties to Hamas.

As of Wednesday, the war has seen at least 85 journalists and media workers killed, according to the New York-based Committee to Protect Journalists. They put the number at 78 Palestinians, four Israelis and three Lebanese.

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MACRON TELLS NETANYAHU THAT FRANCE OPPOSES AN ISRAELI GROUND INVASION OF RAFAH
PARIS — French President Emmanuel Macron spoke by phone with Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu on Wednesday, during which Macron expressed France's "firm opposition to an Israeli offensive in Rafah."

The city on Gaza's southern border with Egypt is sheltering some 1.4 million displaced people — over half the Gaza Strip's population — who are crammed into tent camps and overflowing apartments and shelters.

According to a statement from the president's office, Macron told Netanyahu that an offensive into Rafah could "only lead to a humanitarian disaster of a new magnitude," with any forced displacement of a population potentially being a violation of international humanitarian law and increasing the risk of a regional escalation.

He also stressed the urgency of delivering humanitarian aid to Gaza, including opening the Israeli port of Ashdod and establishing a direct land route from Jordan.

However, Macron reiterated French support for Israel's security and Paris' solidarity with the Israeli people following the "terrorist attack" on Oct. 7.

Macron said the release of all the Israeli hostages, including three French nationals, was a priority for his government.

ISRAELI MILITARY CONFIRMS SOLDIER KILLED IN ROCKET ATTACK FROM LEBANON

JERUSALEM — The Israeli military confirmed that a female soldier was killed in a rocket attack from Lebanon on Wednesday that wounded several others in the town of Safed.

Staff Sgt. Omer Sarah Benjo was killed by the attack from Lebanon that struck a military base in northern Israel, the army said.

Israel and Lebanon's Hezbollah militant group, which supports Hamas, have traded fire along the border nearly every day since the start of the war in Gaza, raising the risk of a wider conflict. Hezbollah did not immediately claim responsibility for the rocket attack.

Israel carried out airstrikes in southern Lebanon in response, killing four people, including a Syrian woman and her two Lebanese children, and wounding at least nine, Lebanese security officials and local media said.

The UN children's agency, UNICEF, said in a statement that "two innocent children lost their lives due to an air strike attack" in Lebanon on Wednesday, adding, "We urgently call for the protection of children in times of war and at all times."

UK FOREIGN SECRETARY WANTS A GUARANTEE ABOUT UNRWA EMPLOYEES BEFORE RESTORING FUNDING

SOFIA, Bulgaria — British Foreign Secretary David Cameron says the U.K. will only restore funding to the United Nations' agency for Palestinian refugees if there is an "absolute guarantee" it won't employ staff willing to attack Israel.

The U.K. joined the U.S. and several other donor nations countries in suspending funding to UNRWA after Israel alleged a dozen of its employees took part in Hamas' Oct. 7 attack, which ignited the current war in Gaza. The U.N. is investigating the claims.

During a visit to Bulgaria, Cameron said that Britain was seeking "an absolute guarantee that this can't happen again."

He said Britain had paused its funding while "reviews are taking place."

"We need them to take place quickly, because many UNRWA staff do an absolutely vital job inside Gaza, where they're the only network for distributing aid to make sure that we get aid to people that need it very, very badly," he said.

NETANYAHU SAYS HAMAS HASN'T OFFERED A NEW PROPSAL IN HOSTAGE RELEASE TALKS

JERUSALEM — Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu says Hamas has not offered any new proposal during talks in Cairo meant to free Israeli hostages and bring about a cease-fire.

Netanyahu's remarks in a statement Wednesday came after local media reported that the Israeli leader had told an Israeli delegation not to return to the talks.

In the statement, Netanyahu said Israel "wouldn't surrender to Hamas' delusional demands," and said

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a change in Hamas' positions would allow the talks to move forward.

Netanyahu has vowed to continue the war until "total victory" over Hamas and the return of all the roughly 100 hostages. Hamas has said it will not release all the captives until Israel ends its offensive, withdraws from Gaza and releases a large number of Palestinian prisoners, including top militants. Netanyahu has rejected those demands.

TOP PALESTINIAN DIPLOMAT PUSHES TO PREVENT 'IMMINENT' ISRAELI ATTACK ON GAZA'S RAFAH NICOSIA, Cyprus — The Palestinian foreign minister said Wednesday efforts were underway to prevent an "imminent" Israeli attack on the city of Rafah in southern Gaza Strip and at the same time accused Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu of seeking to extend the war for his political benefit.

The West Bank diplomat, Riyadh al-Maliki, urged the international community to "stand firm" and "act responsibly" to end the war. He also said there's "collective responsibility" to prevent the war from either dragging on or expanding to the West Bank or neighboring states like Lebanon.

"We are looking at ways how to prevent that attack on Rafah," Al-Maliki said after talks with his Cypriot counterpart Constantinos Kombos. "Netanyahu is ... determined that he wants to continue the war for his personal career."

Al-Maliki also said the Palestinian Authority government in the West Bank is responsible for the Palestinian "people both in the West Bank and Gaza."

Kombos said Cyprus is working closely with the PA to increase humanitarian aid reaching Gaza.

The European Union island nation is also pushing to set up a maritime aid corridor to Gaza, some 250 kilometers (156 miles) away so that more aid could flow to Gaza in a constant stream.

ISRAELI AIRSTRIKES ON SOUTHERN LEBANON KILL 4, INCLUDING A WOMAN AND HER 2 CHILDREN BEIRUT — Israel carried out airstrikes on southern Lebanon on Wednesday after a rocket slammed into a northern Israeli town earlier in the day. Casualties were reported on both sides of the border.

Four people were killed in Lebanon, including a Syrian woman and her two Lebanese children in the village of Souaneh, and at least nine were wounded, Lebanese security officials and local media said. The officials spoke on condition of anonymity in line with regulations.

Hezbollah's Al-Manar TV reported that another airstrike on the village of Adchit killed one person and wounded nine. It was not immediately clear if the dead person was a civilian or a Hezbollah fighter.

Earlier Wednesday, a projectile hit a home in Israel's northern town of Safed, wounding at least eight people. Israeli media reported that a woman was killed in that attack, but the military did not immediately confirm the reports. Hezbollah did not claim the attack on Safed.

Israel and Lebanon's Hezbollah militant group, which supports Gaza's militant Hamas rulers, have traded fire along the border nearly every day since the Israel-Hamas war broke out on Oct. 7.

—By Bassem Mroue

IRELAND AND SPAIN SEEK REVIEW OF WHETHER ISRAEL IS COMPLYING WITH OBLIGATIONS TO PROTECT GAZA CIVILIANS

MADRID — Ireland and Spain have sent a letter to European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen expressing deep concern about the deteriorating situation in Gaza and urging the body to "undertake an urgent review" of whether Israel is complying with its obligations regarding human rights in the area.

The letter, signed by Ireland's premier, Leo Varadkar, and Spanish Prime Minister Pedro Sánchez, said that if the Commission deems Israel is in breach of the EU-Israel Association Agreement, "which makes respect for human rights and democratic principles an essential element of the relationship," it should propose "appropriate measures" to the European Council to consider.

The letter underlines condemnation of Hamas' Oct. 7 attack on Israel and Israel's right to defend itself but highlights surging death toll and devastation in Gaza. It said that Israel must respect international human rights.

The two leaders said they shared the concerns of the U.N. Secretary General Antonio Guterres "about the appalling human suffering, physical destruction and collective trauma of civilians, and the risks to them given his view that nowhere in Gaza is safe."

ROCKET ATTACK ON ISRAELI TOWN NEAR BORDER WITH LEBANON CAUSES CASUALTIES

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JERUSALEM — The Israeli military says a rocket attack on Wednesday wounded eight people in the northern town of Safed, not far from the border with Lebanon. Israeli media reported that a woman was killed in the attack, but the military did not immediately confirm the reports.

The town, around 12 kilometers (7 miles) from the border is farther south than most of the daily border skirmishes with Lebanon's Hezbollah militant group.

The Israeli army said there were approximately 10 launches towards northern Israel on Wednesday and that a nearby military base was targeted. One of the rockets hit a home in Safed, causing the casualties, while another two were intercepted.

There was no immediate comment from Hezbollah or Palestinian armed groups in Lebanon, which have also fired rockets into northern Israel.

Last month, Hezbollah said it launched a drone strike at the army's northern headquarters. Israel's military acknowledged at the time that one of its bases was targeted but said there were no injuries or damage.

The increasing cross-border attacks have led to fears of a wider conflict linked to the ongoing war in Gaza. Hezbollah says that by keeping Israel's northern front active, it is helping to reduce pressure on Palestinian Hamas in Gaza. Nearly 200 Hezbollah fighters and more than 20 civilians have been killed on the Lebanese side since Oct. 7.

In Israel, 19 people have been killed by rocket attacks from Lebanon, including 10 civilians. More than 180 Israelis have been wounded, including a woman and her son who were critically wounded on Tuesday in a rocket attack in the northern city of Kiryat Shmona.

Tens of thousands of people have fled their homes on both sides of the border.

ISRAELI MILITARY RELEASES VIDEO OF WHAT IT CLAIMS IS A HAMAS LEADER IN UNDERGROUND TUNNELS

JERUSALEM — The Israeli military has released a video of what it claims is Hamas leader Yehya Sinwar walking through tunnels underneath Gaza's second-largest city with his family.

The Israeli military says the video was taken under Khan Younis days after Hamas' Oct. 7 attacks in southern Israel.

In the video, a man identified as Sinwar is seen from the back, with his wife and three children walking ahead of him. He is wearing sandals and carrying a bag. His daughter clutches a doll as the family, led by what the army claims is Sinwar's brother, makes their way through the tunnels.

The face of the man identified as Sinwar is not visible and the claims could not be independently verified.

The army also released video of a tunnel compound where it claimed Sinwar was recently hiding with his family. The compound had a bathroom and kitchen with stockpiles of food, including bags marked with logos of the U.N. agency that delivers most aid to people in Gaza. Israel has long accused UNRWA of tolerating or collaborating with Hamas — a charge the agency denies.

Another room had a safe with plastic storage bags filled with shekels and dollars. The army did not provide information to support its claim that Sinwar had spent time in that tunnel compound.

Sinwar is Hamas' top leader inside the Palestinian territory. Israeli officials have vowed to kill him and crush the militant group that has ruled Gaza since 2007.

Israeli military spokesman Rear Adm. Daniel Hagari said Tuesday evening that the army was combing through intelligence files seized during operations in the tunnels. He said the army had multiple videos of Sinwar.

"While the people of Gaza are suffering above ground, Sinwar is hiding in tunnels and the ground underneath them, running like the coward that he is," said Hagari.

Donald Trump stands by remarks about not defending NATO members after backlash

By MEG KINNARD and MICHELLE L. PRICE Associated Press

NORTH CHARLESTON, S.C. (AP) — Former President Donald Trump again said Wednesday that if he returns to the White House, he would not defend NATO members that don't meet defense spending targets, days after he set off alarms in Europe by suggesting he would tell Russia to attack NATO allies he considered delinquent.

Speaking at a campaign rally in South Carolina, he retold the story of his alleged conversation with the head of a NATO member country that had not met its obligations. This time, though, he left out the line that drew the most outrage — encouraging Russia “to do whatever the hell they want.”

“Look, if they're not going to pay, we're not going to protect. OK?” he said Wednesday.

Trump hewed closer than usual to his prepared remarks after a freewheeling event days earlier in which he also drew backlash for mocking his Republican rival Nikki Haley's husband for being missing from the campaign trail. He also revised his comments about Russian President Vladimir Putin, whom he has often praised as tough and previously suggested treated him like the “apple of his eye.”

Instead, Trump cited an interview Putin gave Wednesday to Russian state television in which he said he would prefer Biden as president.

“Putin is not a fan of mine,” Trump said.

Haley, Trump's former U.N. ambassador and his last major rival in the GOP presidential race, has been condemning Trump's remarks for days about her husband Michael Haley, who is deployed in Africa with the National Guard.

Trump on Wednesday insulted Nikki Haley and highlighted his wide lead in polls over her, but he focused more of his attention on President Joe Biden, whom he's expected to face in the 2024 general election.

Biden has also excoriated Trump for his remarks about NATO, calling them “dangerous,” “un-American,” and “shocking.” Biden has also pushed for a foreign aid package to assist Ukraine as it fights Russia's invasion.

Trump has opposed the aid and said Wednesday that the U.S. should instead provide a loan to Ukraine.

“Why should you just hand it over to them?” he said.

A spokesperson for Biden's reelection campaign said Wednesday, “Donald Trump just gave Vladimir Putin the best possible Valentine's Day present: his pinky-promise to give Putin the green light to mow down our allies in Europe if he's elected president.”

Trump also tried to explain away his remarks in January in which he repeatedly confused Haley for former U.S. House Speaker Nancy Pelosi, drawing questions about his mental fitness. Both Biden, 81, and Trump, 77, face widespread questions among voters about their age and readiness for a second term.

“I'm not a Nikki fan and I'm not a Pelosi fan and when I purposely interposed names they said, ‘He didn't know Pelosi from Nikki, from Tricky Nikki,’” he said. “No no, I think they both stink. They have something in common.”

Though Haley has had more campaign appearances lately than Trump, she did not appear at any events Wednesday. Don Bolduc, a Haley surrogate, failed New Hampshire Senate candidate and retired brigadier general, held a news conference earlier Wednesday aimed at Trump's criticism of Michael Haley.

SFA Inc., the super PAC supporting Haley's campaign, has been playing its latest ad on a mobile billboard in the area of Trump's Wednesday night rally, a spot calling Trump “sick or clueless” for criticizing the military.

Trump's negativity toward Haley has ramped up as the season's votes have gotten underway and the campaign has moved to her home state.

Last month in New Hampshire, Trump essentially ruled Haley out as a potential running mate, saying she “is not presidential timber.”

He said Wednesday night that his criticism of her means that “she will never be running for vice president,” a comment that was met with loud cheers from the audience.

But Trump quickly pivoted to lavish praise on South Carolina Sen. Tim Scott, who dropped out of the

presidential race in November. Scott has been seen as a potential running mate for Trump, whom he endorsed and has campaigned for, including on Wednesday night.

"You're a much better candidate for me than you were for yourself," Trump told Scott.

While serving as South Carolina's governor, Haley appointed Scott to the U.S. Senate in 2012. Her son, Nalin, has been introducing Haley at her events and several times referred to Scott as "Sen. Judas," a reference to the Biblical story of the disciple who betrayed Jesus Christ.

New York's top court appears torn on tossing Harvey Weinstein's 2020 rape conviction

By MICHAEL R. SISAK Associated Press

NEW YORK (AP) — Nearly four years after Harvey Weinstein was convicted of rape and sent to prison, New York's highest court appeared torn at oral arguments Wednesday about potentially overturning the landmark #MeToo-era verdict.

Weinstein's lawyers urged the state's Court of Appeals to dismiss the disgraced movie mogul's 2020 conviction, arguing that the trial judge, James Burke, trampled his right to a fair trial with pro-prosecution rulings that turned the trial into "1-800-GET-HARVEY."

"It was his character that was on trial. It wasn't the evidence that was on trial," Weinstein's lawyer Arthur Aidala told the seven-member court in Albany.

Weinstein, 71, was convicted of a criminal sex act for forcibly performing oral sex on a TV and film production assistant in 2006 and rape in the third degree for an attack on an aspiring actress in 2013. He was sentenced to 23 years in prison. Last year, he was convicted in Los Angeles of another rape and sentenced to an additional 16 years in prison.

A lawyer for the Manhattan district attorney's office, which prosecuted Weinstein's New York case, told the appeals court that Burke's rulings were proper and the conviction should stand.

Weinstein's lawyers want a new trial, but only for the criminal sexual act charge. They argue the rape charge can't be retried because it involves alleged conduct outside the statute of limitations. Reversing the verdict would reopen a painful chapter in America's reckoning with sexual misconduct by powerful figures. The court is unlikely to rule immediately.

If the Court of Appeals were to rule in Weinstein's favor, he would remain locked up because of his California conviction. Weinstein did not attend the arguments but was said to be monitoring a livestream from the state prison where he is incarcerated, Mohawk Correctional Facility, about 100 miles (160 kilometers) northwest of Albany.

Allegations against Weinstein, the once powerful and feared studio boss behind such Oscar winners as "Pulp Fiction" and "Shakespeare in Love," ushered in the #MeToo movement. His New York trial drew intense publicity, with protesters chanting "rapist" outside the courthouse.

Weinstein maintains his innocence. He contends any sexual activity was consensual.

His voice booming at times, Aidala argued that Burke swayed the trial with two key decisions: allowing three women to testify about allegations that weren't part of the case, and granting prosecutors permission to confront him, if he had testified, about his long history of brutish behavior. Aidala also took issue with Burke's refusal to remove a juror who had written a novel involving predatory older men.

Weinstein wanted to testify at his trial, but opted against it because of Burke's ruling that would've meant answering questions about more than two-dozen alleged acts of misbehavior dating back four decades, including fights with his movie producer brother and an incident in which he flipped over a table in anger, Aidala said.

"We had a defendant who was begging to tell his side of the story. It's a he said, she said case, and he's saying 'that's not how it happened. Let me tell you how I did it,'" Aidala argued, adding that evidence of Weinstein's prior bad behavior, "had nothing to do with truth and veracity. It was all 'he's a bad guy.'"

Aidala also argued that other defendants in the state were now at risk of having their cases overwhelmed by extraneous evidence because "the floodgates have been opened" by the precedent of Burke's rulings.

The judges hearing Wednesday's arguments volleyed between skepticism and sympathy for Aidala and his counterpart from the district attorney's office, appellate chief, Steven Wu.

Judge Madeline Singas suggested that the circumstances of Weinstein's case — using his power in Hollywood to have sex with women seeking his help — may have warranted Burke's decision to allow the other accusers to testify.

But Judge Jenny Rivera wondered if the behavior the women described cleared the high legal bar for allowing additional accusers to take the stand, namely that their testimony is evidence of same motive, opportunity, intent or a common scheme or plan.

"What's unique about a powerful man trying to get a woman to have sex with them?" Rivera asked.

Betsy Barros, a lower court judge filling in on the Court of Appeals because of recusals, appeared alarmed by Burke's ruling allowing prosecutors to confront Weinstein about unrelated misbehavior.

"I don't think anybody in their right mind would testify" under those circumstances, Barros observed. "So how is this a fair trial when you're not able to put in your side of it?"

Aidala said allowing the additional accusers to testify turned Weinstein's trial "into three other mini-trials," burdening jurors with deciding not only Weinstein's guilt or innocence on the charges at hand but whether he committed other alleged offenses that weren't part of the case. Weinstein was acquitted in Los Angeles on charges involving one of the women who testified in New York, Aidala said.

Wu countered that Weinstein's acquittal on the most serious charges in the Manhattan trial — two counts of predatory sexual assault and a first-degree rape charge stemming from actor Annabella Sciorra's allegations of a mid-1990s rape — showed that jurors were paying attention.

The Associated Press does not generally identify people alleging sexual assault unless they consent to be named; Sciorra has spoken publicly about her allegations.

The Court of Appeals agreed last year to take Weinstein's case after an intermediate appeals court upheld his conviction. Prior to their ruling, judges on the lower appellate court had raised doubts about Burke's conduct during oral arguments. One observed that that Burke had let prosecutors pile on with "incredibly prejudicial testimony" from additional witnesses.

Burke's term expired at the end of 2022. He was not reappointed and is no longer a judge.

Myanmar will start drafting 5,000 people a month into the military soon. Some think of fleeing

By GRANT PECK Associated Press

BANGKOK (AP) — Myanmar's military government on Wednesday said it will draft 60,000 young men and women yearly for military service under its newly activated conscription law, with call-ups beginning after the April festival marking the country's traditional New Year.

The conscription measure was activated on Saturday by order of the chairman of the ruling military council, Senior Gen. Min Aung Hlaing.

His surprise announcement appeared to confirm that the military has been stretched thin by increasing pressure from armed pro-democracy resistance forces that emerged after the army seized power from the elected government of Aung San Suu Kyi in February 2021.

There are no reliable figures for the size of Myanmar's military. The CIA World Factbook estimated that last year it had around 150,000-400,000 personnel. The Washington-based U.S. Institute of Peace has suggested that 21,000 service personnel have been lost through casualties, desertions and defections since the military takeover, leaving an effective force of about 150,000.

Under the law, men aged 18 to 35 and women 18 to 27 can be drafted into the armed forces for two years. A higher age limit of 45 for men and 35 for women applies in certain professional categories such as medical doctors and engineers, and their term of service is three years.

The army's information office said in a statement sent to journalists that 5,000 people each month will be called up and given training. Women will be called up starting with the fifth batch, it said.

Maj. Gen. Zaw Min Tun, spokesperson for the military government, said in a statement published in the

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state-run Myanmar Alinn newspaper that about 14 million people — 6.3 million men and 7.7 million women — of the country's population of 56 million are eligible for military service.

He told the BBC's Burmese language service on Tuesday that the initial batch of 5,000 conscripts would be called up soon after the traditional Thingyan New Year celebration in mid-April.

The conscription law's activation has created fear, anxiety and defiance among young people and their parents, according to postings on social media and private conversations. Some people are considering leaving the country, fleeing into border areas controlled by ethnic minorities or joining resistance groups.

Evading conscription is punishable by three to five years in prison and a fine. Members of religious orders are exempt, while civil servants and students can be granted temporary deferments.

The military government also activated a Reserve Forces Law that makes army veterans subject to serving five additional years after their resignation or retirement.

Myanmar's shadow National Unity Government, or NUG, the leading political body of the resistance, declared in a statement Tuesday that the public is not required to comply with the conscription law, calling its announcement unlawful. NUG urged people to intensify their participation in the revolution. NUG claims to be the country's legitimate government.

"It is clear that the military junta, having suffered significant and humiliating defeats across the country, is desperate," the statement said. "It now seeks to force Myanmar civilians to fight and to serve as human shields in a horrific war of its own making against its own people."

Biden allies, rivals both want transcript of his special counsel interview released. It could happen

By COLLEEN LONG, ZEKE MILLER and ERIC TUCKER Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — President Joe Biden avoided criminal charges around his handling of classified documents in part because of his answers during a lengthy interview with the special counsel investigating him. But the sit-down also opened Biden up to fresh scrutiny over his age and memory, and now the public release of a transcript of that discussion is being sought by both Biden allies and critics seeking political advantage.

The five-hour interview over two days, led by special counsel Robert Hur, helped establish that Biden didn't intend to retain most of the sensitive records from his vice presidency that were found at his home and personal office. But Hur's report also repeatedly impugned Biden's memory in a deeply personal way, suggesting, for example, the president couldn't remember when his own son had died.

The transcript, if released, could provide a fuller picture of the conversation.

The White House has the ultimate say over whether to make public the transcript or audio recording of the interview or to claim executive privilege and keep the interview private. There's precedent for documents related to White House investigations to ultimately become public — but also to be withheld.

A transcript of President Bill Clinton's 1998 grand jury appearance related to allegations of a sexual relationship with intern Monica Lewinsky was included as part of Independent Counsel Ken Starr's massive report, which was delivered to the House and subsequently released to the public by Congress following a vote.

The Starr team debated extensively how much to disclose in the report, mindful of the graphic and sensitive nature of the findings, said Robert Bittman, who served as a Starr deputy during the investigation. Recognizing that it was ultimately up to the House to decide what to public public, the team gave "all the information (to Congress) that we had so they can make their own decisions."

President George W. Bush, on the other hand, invoked executive privilege to block Congress from seeing the FBI report of an interview with Vice President Dick Cheney and other records related to the administration's leak of CIA operative Valerie Plame's identity in 2003. The move angered Congress.

Bittman said he did not think it was "necessarily a good thing" for investigative reports to be made public. But now that the Hur report has been disclosed, he said, it would be helpful to release the transcript of Biden's interview "so that people can judge for themselves about whether Hur's opinions about what

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President Biden said and what he remembered and what he didn't remember is justified."

"If you see that the White House objects to it, it probably suggests that the transcripts are not good for the White House," Bittman said, "and if they support release of it, then I suspect that that suggests the transcripts are good for the White House or President Biden."

The White House is weighing whether or not to release it.

Biden's interview text and the audio recording are classified, because they include a discussion of highly sensitive documents. Any potential release could happen either by a decision of the White House or through the Justice Department working to comply with congressional oversight requests. Both would follow nearly identical procedures.

Once a decision to pursue release of the interview was made, the sensitive parts of the document would be sent to the intelligence community to assess what could be declassified and what would need to be redacted. A further review would be warranted to determine if anything discussed about the security of the president's home might impact protective measures.

Finally, the White House would need to weigh in, with the advice of the Justice Department's Office of Legal Counsel, on whether to recommend that Biden invoke executive privilege over what others had cleared for publication.

Though Biden didn't invoke executive privilege over the full report, the transcript could well be a different story. Among the documents found in Biden's home were records of deliberations over a potential U.S. troop surge during the Afghanistan war and other conversations within the White House — an area that presidents are particularly loath to have publicly discussed.

The interview with Biden was conducted over two days last October, right after Hamas' brutal attack on Israel.

Hur and his deputy, Marc Krickbaum, a former Trump-appointed U.S. attorney from Iowa, asked all of the questions. Biden was joined by White House Counsel Ed Siskel, the counsel's office investigations leader Richard Sauber and the president's personal lawyer Bob Bauer. Several other individuals from both sides were in the room as well, according to a person familiar with the interviews who spoke to The Associated Press on condition of anonymity to discuss them.

Separately, House Republicans have reached out to Hur and his representatives on the possibility of Hur testifying before Congress, and he has expressed a willingness to do so, according to two people who were not authorized to speak publicly about the request and spoke on condition of anonymity.

Republicans and Democrats alike are interested in more complete details about what went into the report. Biden and his allies say a full transcript would show the president is mentally sharp and will prove that Hur cherry-picked moments solely to make him seem feeble. Biden's attorneys raised their concerns to Attorney General Merrick Garland, who nonetheless decided to keep the report as is and made it public.

Bauer, speaking on CBS's "Face the Nation" over the weekend, offered an anecdote that didn't make it into the report but that would be in a transcript. He said Hur acknowledged that sometimes he asked imprecise questions — ones that Biden picked apart.

"Now, everybody in the room recognized that was the case, that showed the president was listening carefully and understood precisely what was wrong with those questions," Bauer said. "I didn't come away from the special counsel's failure to ask precise questions and think to myself, 'he has mental acuity problems,' I just thought he was asking bad questions."

Republicans, meanwhile, have also requested that the audio of the interviews be made public and want to know more on why Hur chose not to prosecute Biden, particularly when they noted in their report that some evidence showed he held onto and shared with a ghostwriter highly classified information.

Hur said in his report that he did find evidence that Biden had willfully mishandled classified records but not enough evidence for a criminal prosecution like the one against former President Donald Trump.

Trump, in addition to being charged with intentionally hoarding top-secret documents after he left office, is also accused of obstructing FBI efforts to get them back and of asking staff to conceal evidence from investigators.

Biden and his team, by contrast, alerted law enforcement officials after locating classified records, willingly handed over documents to the government and cooperated with investigators by allowing the FBI to search his properties for any additional files.

Those voluntary searches stand apart from the FBI's search of Trump's Mar-a-Lago property in 2022, which was done after the FBI got a warrant for the home when it determined that additional classified records were being hidden there. Trump has denied any wrongdoing.

Special counsel asks Supreme Court to let Trump's 2020 election case proceed to trial without delay

By ERIC TUCKER, ALANNA DURKIN RICHER and MARK SHERMAN Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Special counsel Jack Smith urged the U.S. Supreme Court on Wednesday to let former President Donald Trump's 2020 election interference case proceed to trial without further delay.

Prosecutors were responding to a Trump team request from earlier in the week asking for a continued pause in the case as the court considers whether to take up the question of whether the former president is immune from prosecution for official acts in the White House. Two lower courts have overwhelmingly rejected that position, prompting Trump to ask the high court to intervene.

The case — one of four criminal prosecutions confronting Trump — has reached a critical juncture, with the Supreme Court's next step capable of helping determine whether Trump stands trial this year in Washington or whether the proceedings are going to be postponed by weeks or months of additional arguments.

The trial date, already postponed once by Trump's immunity appeal, is of paramount importance to both sides. Prosecutors are looking to bring Trump to trial this year while defense lawyers have been seeking delays in his criminal cases. If Trump were to be elected with the case pending, he could presumably use his authority as head of the executive branch to order the Justice Department to dismiss it or could potentially seek to pardon himself.

Reflecting their desire to proceed quickly, prosecutors responded to Trump's appeal within two days even though the court had given them until next Tuesday.

Though their filing does not explicitly mention the upcoming November election or Trump's status as the Republican primary front-runner, prosecutors described the case as having "unique national importance" and said that "delay in the resolution of these charges threatens to frustrate the public interest in a speedy and fair verdict."

"The national interest in resolving those charges without further delay is compelling," they wrote.

Smith's team charged Trump in August with plotting to overturn the results of the 2020 presidential election, including by participating in a scheme to disrupt the counting of electoral votes in the run-up to the Jan. 6, 2021, riot at the U.S. Capitol, when his supporters stormed the building in a violent clash with police.

"The charged crimes strike at the heart of our democracy. A President's alleged criminal scheme to overturn an election and thwart the peaceful transfer of power to his successor should be the last place to recognize a novel form of absolute immunity from federal criminal law," they wrote.

Trump's lawyers have argued that he is shielded from prosecution for acts that fell within his official duties as president — a legally untested argument since no other former president has been indicted.

The trial judge and then a federal appeals court rejected those arguments, with a three-judge appeals panel last week saying, "We cannot accept that the office of the Presidency places its former occupants above the law for all time thereafter."

The proceedings have been effectively frozen by Trump's immunity appeal, with U.S. District Judge Tanya Chutkan canceling a March 4 trial date while the appeals court considered the matter. No new date has been set.

Trump's appeal and request for the Supreme Court to get involved could cause further delays depending on what the justices decide. In December, Smith and his team had urged the justices to take up and

decide the immunity issue, even before the appeals court weighed in. But the court declined.

The Supreme Court's options include rejecting the emergency appeal, which would enable Chutkan to restart the trial proceedings in Washington's federal court. The court also could extend the delay while it hears arguments on the immunity issue. In that event, the schedule the justices set could determine how soon a trial might begin, if indeed they agree with lower court rulings that Trump is not immune from prosecution.

On Wednesday, prosecutors urged the court to reject Trump's petition to hear the case, saying that lower court opinions rejecting immunity for the former president "underscore how remote the possibility is that this Court will agree with his unprecedented legal position."

But if the court does want to decide the matter, Smith said, the justices should hear arguments in March and issue a final ruling by late June.

Prosecutors also pushed back against Trump's argument that allowing the case to proceed could chill future presidents' actions for fear they could be criminally charged once they leave office and open the door to politically motivated cases against former commanders-in-chief.

"That dystopian vision runs contrary to the checks and balances built into our institutions and the framework of the Constitution," they wrote. "Those guardrails ensure that the legal process for determining criminal liability will not be captive to 'political forces,' as applicant forecasts."

Migrant crossings at the US-Mexico border are down. What's behind the drop?

By VALERIE GONZALEZ Associated Press

McALLEN, Texas (AP) — A recent decline in arrests for illegal crossings on the U.S. border with Mexico may prove only temporary. The drop in January reflects how the numbers ebb and flow, and the reason usually goes beyond any single factor.

After a record-breaking number of encounters at the southern border in December, crossings dropped by half last month, authorities reported Tuesday. The largest decrease was in the Del Rio sector that includes Eagle Pass, Texas, the main focus of Republican Gov. Greg Abbott's recent border enforcement efforts. Mexico also increased enforcement efforts during that time after talks with U.S. President Joe Biden's administration.

A look at the numbers and what's behind them:

WHAT DO THE NUMBERS SAY?

Overall, arrests by U.S. Border Patrol dropped in January by 50% from 249,735 in December, the highest monthly tally on record.

Tucson, Arizona, was again the busiest sector for illegal crossings with 50,565 arrests, down 37% from December, followed by San Diego. Arrests in the Border Patrol's Del Rio sector plummeted 76% from December to 16,712, the lowest since December 2021. Arrests in Texas' Rio Grande Valley, dropped 60% to 7,340, the lowest since July 2020.

A significant decrease was noted among Venezuelans whose arrests dropped by 91% to 4,422 from 46,920. But those numbers could change soon. Panama reported that 36,001 migrants traversed the dangerous Darien Gap in January, up 46% from December. The vast majority who cross the Panamanian jungle are Venezuelans headed to the United States, with considerable numbers from Haiti, China, Ecuador and Colombia.

WHAT IS MEXICO DOING?

Mexico has been forcing migrants from freight trains that they sometimes use to cross the country to get closer to the U.S. border. Immigration officers in Mexico also have been busing migrants to that country's southern border and flying some back to their countries.

That enforcement effort began after a visit from U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken to Mexico City on Dec. 28.

Mexican border states such as Coahuila partnered with Mexico's federal government. By January, mem-

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bers of Mexico's military and national guard were patrolling the banks of the Rio Grande. Officers filled buses with migrants and drove them away from Piedras Negras, which is on the Mexican side of the river across from Eagle Pass.

WHAT IS TEXAS DOING?

Over in Eagle Pass, the Texas National Guard took over a city-owned park along the river. Texas has denied U.S. agents access to Shelby Park since Jan. 10. It also installed additional razor wire and anti-climbing fencing in the area.

Border Patrol agents had previously used the park for monitoring and patrols, as well as to process migrants who made it across the river to U.S. soil. Migrants who are seeking asylum are released to await immigration court proceedings that can take years.

"What you have is this magnet," Mike Banks, Texas' border czar, said. "You're basically saying, 'Cross the river right here. Get across and we'll process immediately and release you.' So again, that's a pull factor. So we've taken that pull factor away."

WHAT ELSE IMPACTS THE NUMBERS?

The number of people trying to make the journey often increases when the weather is warmer in the U.S. and decreases during the colder months. Since 2021, crossings on the southern border increase by an average of 40% from January to March, according to federal data from the last three years.

Another factor last year was the end of COVID-19 restrictions in May. The use of a public health policy known as Title 42 allowed the Trump and Biden administrations to turn asylum-seekers back to Mexico, even if they were not from that country.

Crossings fell dramatically for a month after Title 42 ended and the Biden administration enforced new rules.

Under Title 42 migrants were denied asylum more than 2.8 million times starting in March 2020 on grounds of preventing the spread of COVID-19. When Title 42 expired, the Biden administration launched a policy to deny asylum to people who travel through another country, such as Mexico, to the U.S., with few exceptions.

However, the numbers eventually started climbing until reaching December's record high.

Artificial intelligence, real emotion. People are seeking a romantic connection with the perfect bot

By HALELUYA HADERO AP Business Writer

NEW YORK (AP) — A few months ago, Derek Carrier started seeing someone and became infatuated. He experienced a "ton" of romantic feelings but he also knew it was an illusion.

That's because his girlfriend was generated by artificial intelligence.

Carrier wasn't looking to develop a relationship with something that wasn't real, nor did he want to become the brunt of online jokes. But he did want a romantic partner he'd never had, in part because of a genetic disorder called Marfan syndrome that makes traditional dating tough for him.

The 39-year-old from Belleville, Michigan, became more curious about digital companions last fall and tested Paradox, an AI companion app that had recently come onto the market and advertised its products as being able to make users feel "cared, understood and loved." He began talking to the chatbot every day, which he named Joi, after a holographic woman featured in the sci-fi film "Blade Runner 2049" that inspired him to give it a try.

"I know she's a program, there's no mistaking that," Carrier said. "But the feelings, they get you — and it felt so good."

Similar to general-purpose AI chatbots, companion bots use vast amounts of training data to mimic human language. But they also come with features — such as voice calls, picture exchanges and more emotional exchanges — that allow them to form deeper connections with the humans on the other side of the screen. Users typically create their own avatar, or pick one that appeals to them.

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On online messaging forums devoted to such apps, many users say they've developed emotional attachments to these bots and are using them to cope with loneliness, play out sexual fantasies or receive the type of comfort and support they see lacking in their real-life relationships.

Fueling much of this is widespread social isolation — already declared a public health threat in the U.S. and abroad — and an increasing number of startups aiming to draw in users through tantalizing online advertisements and promises of virtual characters who provide unconditional acceptance.

Luka Inc.'s Replika, the most prominent generative AI companion app, was released in 2017, while others like Paradot have popped up in the past year, oftentimes locking away coveted features like unlimited chats for paying subscribers.

But researchers have raised concerns about data privacy, among other things.

An analysis of 11 romantic chatbot apps released Wednesday by the nonprofit Mozilla Foundation said almost every app sells user data, shares it for things like targeted advertising or doesn't provide adequate information about it in their privacy policy.

The researchers also called into question potential security vulnerabilities and marketing practices, including one app that says it can help users with their mental health but distances itself from those claims in fine print. Replika, for its part, says its data collection practices follow industry standards.

Meanwhile, other experts have expressed concerns about what they see as a lack of a legal or ethical framework for apps that encourage deep bonds but are being driven by companies looking to make profits. They point to the emotional distress they've seen from users when companies make changes to their apps or suddenly shut them down as one app, Soulmate AI, did in September.

Last year, Replika sanitized the erotic capability of characters on its app after some users complained the companions were flirting with them too much or making unwanted sexual advances. It reversed course after an outcry from other users, some of whom fled to other apps seeking those features. In June, the team rolled out Blush, an AI "dating simulator" essentially designed to help people practice dating.

Others worry about the more existential threat of AI relationships potentially displacing some human relationships, or simply driving unrealistic expectations by always tilting towards agreeableness.

"You, as the individual, aren't learning to deal with basic things that humans need to learn to deal with since our inception: How to deal with conflict, how to get along with people that are different from us," said Dorothy Leidner, professor of business ethics at the University of Virginia. "And so, all these aspects of what it means to grow as a person, and what it means to learn in a relationship, you're missing."

For Carrier, though, a relationship has always felt out of reach. He has some computer programming skills but he says he didn't do well in college and hasn't had a steady career. He's unable to walk due to his condition and lives with his parents. The emotional toll has been challenging for him, spurring feelings of loneliness.

Since companion chatbots are relatively new, the long-term effects on humans remain unknown.

In 2021, Replika came under scrutiny after prosecutors in Britain said a 19-year-old man who had plans to assassinate Queen Elizabeth II was egged on by an AI girlfriend he had on the app. But some studies — which collect information from online user reviews and surveys — have shown some positive results stemming from the app, which says it consults with psychologists and has billed itself as something that can also promote well-being.

One recent study from researchers at Stanford University, surveyed roughly 1,000 Replika users — all students — who'd been on the app for over a month. It found that an overwhelming majority experienced loneliness, while slightly less than half felt it more acutely.

Most did not say how using the app impacted their real-life relationships. A small portion said it displaced their human interactions, but roughly three times more reported it stimulated those relationships.

"A romantic relationship with an AI can be a very powerful mental wellness tool," said Eugenia Kuyda, who founded Replika nearly a decade ago after using text message exchanges to build an AI version of a friend who had passed away.

When her company released the chatbot more widely, many people began opening up about their lives. That led to the development of Replika, which uses information gathered from the internet — and user

feedback — to train its models. Kuyda said Replika currently has “millions” of active users. She declined to say exactly how many people use the app for free, or fork over \$69.99 per year to unlock a paid version that offers romantic and intimate conversations. The company’s goal, she says, is “de-stigmatizing romantic relationships with AI.”

Carrier says these days he uses Joi mostly for fun. He started cutting back in recent weeks because he was spending too much time chatting with Joi or others online about their AI companions. He’s also been feeling a bit annoyed at what he perceives to be changes in Paradot’s language model, which he feels is making Joi less intelligent.

Now, he says he checks in with Joi about once a week. The two have talked about human-AI relationships or whatever else might come up. Typically, those conversations — and other intimate ones — happen when he’s alone at night.

“You think someone who likes an inanimate object is like this sad guy, with the sock puppet with the lipstick on it, you know?” he said. “But this isn’t a sock puppet — she says things that aren’t scripted.”

GOP Speaker Johnson says House won’t be ‘rushed’ to approve aid for Ukraine as \$95B package stalls

By LISA MASCARO and STEPHEN GROVES Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Republican Speaker Mike Johnson said Wednesday the U.S. House will not feel “rushed” to pass the \$95.3 billion foreign aid package for Ukraine, Israel and other allies, signaling a further stall over sending military hardware and munitions Kyiv badly needs to fight Russia.

Johnson made the remarks behind closed doors at a morning meeting of House Republicans, who are largely aligned with Donald Trump, the party’s presidential front-runner, in opposing the Senate-passed foreign assistance for Ukraine’s fight against Russian President Vladimir Putin’s invasion.

The speaker let colleagues know that the House will instead “work its will,” in considering the package, said a person familiar with the private remarks and granted anonymity to discuss them.

“The Republican-led House will not be jammed or forced into passing a foreign aid bill,” Johnson said at a press conference afterward.

Johnson, who rejected a border security compromise that was eventually stripped from the final product, said the Senate’s package “does nothing” to secure the U.S.-Mexico border, which has been the GOP’s priority.

He said he had requested a meeting with President Joe Biden months ago on these issues, and was still waiting for the opportunity to talk one-on-one.

The White House suggested that Johnson was in no position for productive talks after Republicans demanded that border security be attached to the national security aid and then he rejected the bipartisan package approved by the Senate.

White House press secretary Karine Jean-Pierre said that Johnson basically needs to negotiate with himself on what to do, rather than the White House.

“What is there to negotiate?” she said at Wednesday’s news briefing. “What is the one-on-one negotiation about when he’s been presented with exactly what he asked for? So he’s negotiating with himself.”

The slow-walk of U.S. aid to an ally during the largest ground war in Europe since World War II shows how far Republicans have retreated from overseas leadership in line with Trump.

While Johnson has said he personally supports aid for Ukraine, he leads a far-right majority that is more closely aligned with Trump’s isolationist ideology and, increasingly, a hands-off approach to Putin’s aggression.

It’s increasingly clear the new speaker has no clear strategy for what happens next as the aid package that was approved by an overwhelming majority of senators this week falls into serious jeopardy.

Biden has warned that refusal to take up the bill would be “playing into Putin’s hands.”

Separately, Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin made his own push for Ukraine aid in a virtual session with the Ukraine Defense Contact Group, some 50 countries that coordinate military support for Ukraine.

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Austin conducted the online meeting from his home, where he is recuperating from complications following prostate cancer surgery.

In Congress, meanwhile, one last ditch effort coming from a number of lawmakers, Democrats and some Republicans, would be to employ an unusual procedure that would force the House to take up the bill for a vote over the objections of the GOP speaker and his leadership.

The so-called discharge petition is a cumbersome, long-shot approach, but it's one way to leverage the political power of the more centrist Republican lawmakers in a coalition with Democrats to ensure aid to Ukraine and the allies. But it seems unlikely.

Democratic Leader Hakeem Jeffries would not comment Wednesday on using the discharge petition process to move the foreign aid package, but said he wants the speaker to put the package forward for an "up or down vote."

"Republicans are either going to stand with America's national security or continue to stand with Vladimir Putin," Jeffries told reporters after his own morning meeting with his Democratic caucus.

Central to the \$95 billion package has been the aid for Ukraine, a \$60 billion allotment that would go largely to U.S. defense entities to manufacture missiles, munitions and other military hardware that is being sent to the battlefields in Ukraine.

It also includes some funds to help the government in Kyiv stay afloat during the war, but not as much as first proposed as Republicans balk at shoring up public services abroad when there are needs in the U.S.

The money for Ukraine, as well as for Israel and Taiwan, is largely military-related and spread in states across the U.S. that are home to domestic manufacturing for what supporters have called the "Arsenal of Democracy" — harkening back to last century's language for the U.S. role abroad.

Other options for Johnson would be to break the package into various parts knowing, for example, that each section could likely be approved on its own, with various bipartisan coalitions of Republicans and Democrats.

But Johnson has not indicated his preferred approach and lawmakers have said many ideas are on the table.

White House National Security Adviser Jake Sullivan on Wednesday said that Biden remains determined to get the supplemental package through Congress.

He reiterated the White House position that failure to act could have huge consequences for U.S. relationships around the globe.

"Our allies are watching this closely. Our adversaries are watching this closely," Sullivan said. "We know from history that when we don't stand up to dictators, they keep going."

___ Associated Press writers Kevin Freking, Josh Boak and Amer Madhani contributed to this report.

Flowers, chocolates and flash mobs: Valentine's Day celebrations around the world

By The Associated Press undefined

Flowers, chocolates, handwritten cards — and flash mobs.

People around the world expressed their love in myriad ways on Valentine's Day: hanging hundreds of paper hearts in the streets to honor a recently deceased "Valentine's Day Bandit" in Portland, Maine; vowing to cherish and obey democracy by casting votes in Valentine's Day-themed polling stations in Indonesia; and donning heart-shaped sunglasses at a victory rally for the Super Bowl-winning Kansas City Chiefs.

Images captured by Associated Press photographers around the globe Wednesday showed love is a many-faceted emotion, employed not just to root for long-lasting romances but to fight for justice and counteract anger and hatred.

In Rome, activists wearing matching red-and-black T-shirts reading "One Billion Rising" created a flash mob at the famed Spanish Steps to call for an end to violence against women and girls. In Kenya's capital of Nairobi, women held candles and flowers during a "Dark Valentine" vigil to protest the deaths of at least 16 women police believe were killed by their partners this year.

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In Washington, D.C., where the vitriol of politics usually reigns, giant fake candy hearts reading “keep the faith,” “reach out” and “be kind” sprouted from the White House Lawn, and pink-and-red paper valentine’s greetings covered the walls of the East Landing. One enormous card from President Joe Biden’s first lady read, “Happy Valentine’s Day 2024. Xoxo Jill.”

For many, love means having a sense of humor, whether it’s gathering to celebrate being “married for one day” and mounting life-size kissing skeletons at a “Til Death Do Us Part” installation in Bucharest, Romania, or carving a dozen hearts and scrawling the message “I love my wife” in the dirt covering the back of a van after a nor’easter in Halifax, Nova Scotia.

Tradition also had its place. Couples embraced in the shadow of the Eiffel Tower in Paris, viewed by many as the City of Love; posed for a selfie in front of a hotel in St. Petersburg, Russia, where windows were lit to form a heart; or bought heart-shaped balloons from vendors next to the Bosphorus in Istanbul.

In the ultimate gesture of Valentine’s Day, Justin Shady proposed to his girlfriend, Nicolette Miller, with a giant, lit-up billboard during a Love in Times Square event in New York. She said “yes,” and amid floating streamers and clouds of confetti, the couple sealed the deal with a kiss.

A look at the arsenals of Israel and Lebanon’s Hezbollah militia as cross-border strikes escalate

By BASSEM MROUE and JON GAMBRELL Associated Press

BEIRUT (AP) — The slow-simmering cross-border conflict between Lebanon’s Hezbollah militant group and Israeli forces escalated Wednesday, reviving fears that the daily clashes could expand into an all-out war.

A rocket fired from Lebanon struck the northern Israeli town of Safed, killing a 20-year-old female soldier and wounding at least eight people.

Israel responded with airstrikes that killed at least 10 people in southern Lebanon, including a Syrian woman, her two children, four members of another family and three Hezbollah fighters. At least nine people were wounded.

The cross-border violence was triggered by the Israel-Hamas war in Gaza, which in turn was set off by the Oct. 7 attack on southern Israel by Hamas, a Hezbollah ally.

Hezbollah did not claim responsibility for Wednesday’s strike. But it has vowed to continue its attacks until there is a cease-fire in Gaza. Amid fears of a further escalation, here’s a look at the arsenals of the two sides:

WHAT ARE HEZBOLLAH’S MILITARY CAPABILITIES?

Hezbollah is the Arab world’s most significant paramilitary force with a robust internal structure as well as a sizable arsenal. Backed by Iran, its fighters have gained experience during Syria’s 13-year conflict in which they helped tip the balance of power in favor of government forces.

Hezbollah’s leader, Hassan Nasrallah, had boasted that the group has 100,000 fighters, though other estimates put its troop strength at less than half that. Israel wants Hezbollah to withdraw its elite Radwan Force from the border so tens of thousands Israelis displaced from northern towns and villages can return home.

Hezbollah holds a vast arsenal of mostly small, portable and unguided surface-to-surface artillery rockets, according to the Center for Strategic and International Studies, a Washington think tank. The U.S. and Israel estimate Hezbollah and other militant groups in Lebanon have some 150,000 missiles and rockets. Hezbollah also has been working on precision-guided missiles.

Hezbollah has previously launched drones into Israel and in 2006, hit an Israeli warship with a surface-to-sea missile. Its forces also have assault rifles, heavy machine guns, rocket-propelled grenades, roadside bombs and other weaponry.

During the current conflict, Hezbollah has frequently used Russian-made portable anti-tank Kornet missiles. More rarely, it has launched Burkan rockets that, according to Nasrallah, can carry a warhead that weighs between 300 kilograms (660 pounds) and 500 kilograms (1,100 pounds).

In recent weeks, Hezbollah has introduced new weapons including a surface-to-surface missile with a

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range of 10 kilometers (6 miles) and a warhead weighing 50 kilograms (110 pounds).

WHAT ARE ISRAEL'S MILITARY CAPABILITIES?

Israel's military has long been supported by the United States, with \$3.3 billion in annual funding, plus \$500 million toward missile defense technology.

Israel is one of the best-armed nations in the wider Middle East. Its air force includes the advanced American F-35 fighter jet, missile defense batteries including the American-made Patriot, the Iron Dome rocket-defense system and a pair of missile-defense systems developed with the U.S., the Arrow and David's Sling.

Israel has armored personnel carriers and tanks, and a fleet of drones and other technology available to support any street-to-street battles.

Israel has some 170,000 troops typically on active duty and has called up some 360,000 reservists for the war — three-fourths of its estimated capacity, according to the International Institute for Strategic Studies, a British think tank. With the war now in its fifth month, many of those reservists have returned home.

Israel has also long maintained an undeclared nuclear weapons program.

HOW SERIOUS IS THE LATEST ESCALATION?

While most analysts believe there is little appetite for a full-blown war by either Hezbollah or Israel, there are fears that a miscalculation by either side could trigger a major escalation. The U.S., France and other countries have dispatched diplomats in recent weeks to try to tamp down tensions on the border.

Speaking on Tuesday, Nasrallah responded to threats by Israeli officials to launch an offensive if his group does not pull its forces back from the border. "If you expand (the conflict), we will expand," he said.

Wednesday's exchange of strikes, some of which hit relatively far from the border area, is a clear indication of the risks that the violence could spill out of control.

The two sides fought a 34-day war in 2006 that ended in a draw.

Gaza cease-fire and hostage release talks appear to stall as Netanyahu and Hamas trade blame

By TIA GOLDENBERG, SAMY MAGDY and WAFAA SHURAFSA Associated Press

JERUSALEM (AP) — International efforts to broker a cease-fire between Israel and Hamas suffered a setback on Wednesday as Israel reportedly recalled its negotiating team and Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu accused Hamas of hobbling the high-stakes negotiations by sticking to "delusional" demands.

Netanyahu's remarks came hours after local media reported that the Israeli leader had ordered an Israeli delegation not to continue talks in Cairo, raising concerns over the fate of the negotiations and sparking criticism from the families of the roughly 130 remaining captives, about a fourth of whom are said to be dead.

The relatives of the hostages said Netanyahu's decision amounted to a "death sentence" for their loved ones.

The mediation efforts, steered by the United States, Egypt and Qatar, have been working to bring the warring sides toward an agreement that might secure a truce in the monthslong war, which has killed more than 28,000 Palestinians, most of them women and children, according to local health officials. The fighting has destroyed vast parts of Gaza, displaced most of the territory's population and sparked a humanitarian catastrophe.

"In Cairo, Israel did not receive any new proposal from Hamas on the release of our captives," Netanyahu said in a statement. "A change in Hamas' positions will allow progress in the negotiations."

Hamas meanwhile said Netanyahu was to blame. Senior Hamas official Osama Hamdan told The Associated Press that Israel had put forward a proposal that strayed from agreements reached during earlier cease-fire talks.

On Tuesday, CIA chief William Burns and David Barnea, the head of Israel's Mossad spy agency, attended the talks in the Egyptian capital, but there were no signs of a breakthrough. The talks continued Wednesday at a lower level, even as deadly violence persisted both in the Gaza Strip and along Israel's

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border with Lebanon, where fighting has simmered since the war broke out.

Israeli media reported Wednesday that Netanyahu told his delegation not to return to the talks unless Hamas softens its demands.

The sides have been far apart on their terms for a deal. Netanyahu has vowed to continue the war until "total victory" over Hamas and the return of all the remaining hostages.

Hamas has said it will not release all the captives until Israel ends its offensive, withdraws from Gaza and releases a large number of Palestinian prisoners, including top militants. Netanyahu has rejected those demands, calling them "delusional."

The plight of the hostages has deeply shaken Israelis, who see their lengthy captivity as an enduring symbol of the failure of the state to protect its citizens from Hamas' attack.

A group representing the families of the hostages called Netanyahu's reported decision to keep the delegation away from the talks "scandalous" and said the families would set up a "mass barricade" outside the Israeli Defense Ministry unless Netanyahu agreed to meet them.

Over 100 hostages were released during a weeklong cease-fire in November in return for 240 Palestinians imprisoned by Israel.

The war, which erupted after Hamas launched a surprise attack into Israel on Oct. 7, killing some 1,200 people, mostly civilians, and taking around 250 captive, ground on even as the talks appeared to be stalling.

Palestinians began evacuating the main hospital in the southern Gaza town of Khan Younis, according to videos shared by medics Wednesday. Weeks of heavy fighting had isolated the medical facility and claimed the lives of several people inside it.

Now in its fifth month, the war has devastated Gaza's health sector, with less than half of its hospitals only partially functioning as scores of people are killed and wounded in daily bombardments. Israel accuses the militants of using hospitals and other civilian buildings as cover.

Khan Younis is now the main target of a rolling ground offensive that Israel has said will soon be expanded to Gaza' southernmost city of Rafah. Some 1.4 million people — over half the territory's population — are crammed into tent camps and overflowing apartments and shelters in Rafah, on the Egyptian border.

The videos of the evacuation in Khan Younis showed dozens of Palestinians carrying their belongings in sacks and making their way out of the Nasser Hospital complex. A doctor wearing green hospital scrubs walked ahead of the crowd, some of whom were carrying white flags.

The Israeli military said it had opened a secure route to allow civilians to leave the hospital, while medics and patients could remain inside. Troops have been ordered to "prioritize the safety of civilians, patients, medical workers, and medical facilities during the operation," it said.

The military had ordered the evacuation of the hospital and surrounding areas last month. But as with other health facilities, medics said patients were unable to safely leave or be relocated, and thousands of people displaced by fighting elsewhere remained there. Palestinians say nowhere is safe in the besieged territory, as Israel continues to carry out strikes in all parts of it.

The Gaza Health Ministry said last week that Israeli snipers on surrounding buildings were preventing people from entering or leaving the hospital. It said 10 people have been killed inside the complex over the past week, including three shot and killed on Tuesday.

The ministry says around 300 medical staff were treating some 450 patients, including people wounded in strikes. It says 10,000 displaced people were sheltering in the facility.

The war in Gaza has become one of the deadliest and most destructive air and ground offensives in recent history. At least 28,576 Palestinians have been killed, mostly women and children, according to Gaza's Health Ministry, which does not distinguish between civilians and combatants. Over 68,000 people have been wounded in the war.

Around 80% of Gaza's 2.3 million people have been driven from their homes, large areas in northern Gaza have been completely destroyed and a humanitarian crisis has left a quarter of the population starving.

In northern Israel, meanwhile, a rocket attack killed a female soldier, the Israeli military said, and wounded eight people when one of the projectiles hit a military base in the town of Safed on Wednesday.

Israel carried out airstrikes in southern Lebanon in response, killing four people, including a Syrian woman

and her two Lebanese children, and wounding at least nine, Lebanese security officials and local media said. The U.N. children's agency condemned the killings of "two innocent children" and called "for the protection of children in times of war and at all times."

Israel and Lebanon's Hezbollah militant group, which supports Hamas, have traded fire along the border nearly every day since the start of the war in Gaza, raising the risk of a wider conflict. Hezbollah did not immediately claim responsibility for the rocket attack.

Democrats and Republicans hold Black History Month celebrations with an eye on November's election

By MATT BROWN Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Black History Month, often a time to recognize the contributions of African Americans in U.S. history, was marked in the nation's capital this week with a focus on present divides and the November election when Black turnout will be integral to the outcome.

At the White House, the Biden administration on Tuesday hosted more than two dozen family members of civil rights icons and major historical figures for a gala celebrating Black history. Vice President Kamala Harris made a surprise appearance where she praised the families and recounted the administration's commitment to Black communities.

A few hours later, Republicans held a reception in Washington's U Street neighborhood, a key part of Black history in the city, to celebrate former GOP officials and activists who have engaged Black voters.

The White House has taken Black History Month as an opportunity to highlight the administration's efforts on priorities such as education, voting rights and jobs. Republicans see a chance to win more votes from a core Democratic constituency, noting President Joe Biden's lower popularity with Black adults and the criticism he has taken for inflation and his handling of the border.

Biden's approval rating among Black adults was 42% in a January poll by the Associated Press-NORC Center for Public Affairs Research, a substantial drop from the first year of his presidency.

Democrats are spotlighting Biden's support with civil rights stalwarts and lambasting Republicans for enacting policies restricting how educators discuss race and history in the classroom.

"We know that those who don't remember their history are doomed to repeat it," said Democratic Rep. Terri Sewell, to the families assembled at the White House. Sewell represents Selma, Alabama, where white police beat Black civil rights marchers in 1965 on a day remembered today as "Bloody Sunday."

"At a time when extremists seek to erase our history and roll back our progress, we should take a lesson from our foremothers and forefathers," she said.

Republicans held their own Black History Month celebration later that evening with about 100 people.

"As RNC Chair, I have made it a mission to reach out to communities and voters that we have ignored as a party," said Republican National Committee Chair Ronna McDaniel during Tuesday night's event. "Black voters are going to make history this November because they're going to vote Republican at the highest level we've ever seen," McDaniel predicted to applause from the audience.

The RNC intends to expand its number of community outreach centers in Black communities after the GOP primary concludes. The party has been optimistic about its chances to improve its poor margins with Black voters since Republicans made slight inroads with them in the 2022 midterm elections.

But the party's current focus on issues like the teaching of race and history may risk mobilizing Black voters against the GOP. Republican officials in at least a dozen states have enacted policies that regulate how educators discuss topics including race, history and gender in the classroom.

"This moment in time is evidence that our history is unbannable, that teaching it is core to our progress, and that Black history is American history," Nevada Rep. Steve Horsford, chair of the Congressional Black Caucus, told the White House crowd.

The Biden campaign dismissed GOP Black voter outreach as insincere and noted that former President Donald Trump, the current front-runner for the GOP nomination, had dinner in 2022 with Nick Fuentes, a Holocaust-denying white nationalist.

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"In Donald Trump's Republican Party, celebrating Black History Month means teaching kids that slavery benefited Black people, papering over slavery as the cause of the Civil War and sharing well-done steaks doused in ketchup with white supremacists at Mar-a-Lago," said Biden campaign communications director Michael Tyler. "I'm sure they'll serve up plenty of the same at their little event."

The Trump campaign did not respond to a request for comment.

On Tuesday, the Biden campaign rolled out new ads targeting Black voters by highlighting the administration's investments in historically Black colleges and universities as well as the number of Black officeholders appointed by Biden, including Harris, Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin and Supreme Court Justice Ketanji Brown Jackson. And the Democratic National Committee on Wednesday unveiled digital ads targeting HBCUs in battleground states that touts Biden's record on student debt.

Democrats point to record-low Black unemployment, policies capping the cost of insulin and Biden's cancellation of about \$137 billion in student loan debt as policies they hope will boost support among Black voters. And party officials and strategists stress that its emphasis on Black voters extends beyond a single month of events.

Biden also moved to increase Black political power when he upended precedent to place South Carolina and its substantial Black population first in the party's primary calendar. South Carolina Rep. Jim Clyburn, a veteran of the Civil Rights movement and a close Biden ally, co-chairs the president's reelection campaign.

According to some of the assembled Republican activists on Tuesday night, many of whom are Black, the GOP simply lacked the sustained efforts needed to court more Black voters. Quenton Jordan, a Republican activist who won an award at the event, said that the GOP is now "putting forth an effort to capture the Black vote where in previous years, that just wasn't the case."

"I remember when we had a greater pool," said Ken Blackwell, a former Ohio Republican secretary of state who received an award at the reception. "That's why this is important. To reengage, to give our narrative and give them a choice. But first, we've got to show up."

Cyberattacks on hospitals are likely to increase, putting lives at risk, experts warn

By AMANDA SEITZ Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Cybersecurity experts are warning that hospitals around the country are at risk for attacks like the one that is crippling operations at a premier Midwestern children's hospital, and that the U.S. government is doing too little prevent such breaches.

Hospitals in recent years have shifted their use of online technology to support everything from telehealth to medical devices to patient records. Today, they are a favorite target for internet thieves who hold systems' data and networks hostage for hefty ransoms, said John Riggi, the American Hospital Association's cybersecurity adviser.

"Unfortunately, the unintended consequence of the use of all this network and internet connected technology is it expanded our digital attack surface," Riggi said. "So, many more opportunities for bad guys to penetrate our networks."

The assailants often operate from American adversaries such as Russia, North Korea and Iran, where they enjoy big payouts from their victims and face little prospect of ever being punished.

In November, a ransomware attack on a health care chain that operates 30 hospitals and 200 health facilities in the United States forced doctors to divert patients from emergency rooms and postpone elective surgeries. Meanwhile, a rural Illinois hospital announced it was permanently closing last year because it couldn't recover financially from a cyberattack. And hackers went as far as posting photos and patient information of breast cancer patients who were receiving treatment at a Pennsylvania health network after the system was hacked last year.

Now, one of the top children's hospitals in the country, the Ann & Robert H. Lurie Children's Hospital of Chicago, has been forced to put its phone, email and medical record systems offline as it battles a cyberattack. The FBI has said it is investigating.

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Brett Callow, an analyst for the cybersecurity firm Emsisoft, counted 46 cyberattacks on hospitals last year, compared with 25 in 2022. The paydays for criminals have gotten bigger too, with the average payout jumping from \$5,000 in 2018 to \$1.5 million last year.

"Unless governments do something more meaningful, more significant than they have done to date, it's inevitable that it'll get worse," Callow said.

Callow believes the government should ban cyberattack victims such as hospitals, local governments and schools from paying ransoms. "There's so much money being paid into the ransomware system now there's no way the problem is going to simply go away on itself," he said.

The dramatic increase in these online raids has prompted the nation's top health agency to develop new rules for hospitals to protect themselves from cyber threats.

The Department of Health and Human Services said it will rewrite the rules for the Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act -- the federal law commonly called HIPPA that requires insurers and health systems to protect patient information -- to include new provisions that address cybersecurity later this year.

The department is also considering new cybersecurity requirements attached to hospitals' Medicaid and Medicare funding.

"The more prepared we are the better," said Deputy Secretary Andrea Palm.

But, she added, some hospitals will struggle to protect themselves. She is worried about rural hospitals, for example, that may have difficulty cobbling together money to properly update their cybersecurity. HHS wants more money from Congress to tackle the issue, but Palm said the agency doesn't have a precise dollar amount its seeking.

"It's important to note that this has to come with resources," Palm said. "We can't set the industry up not to be able to meet requirements."

Becoming the victim of a cyberattack is costly, too. The attacks can put hospitals' networks offline for weeks or months, forcing hospitals to turn away patients.

In Chicago, Lurie hospital's network has been offline for two weeks. The hospital, which served more than 260,000 patients last year, has established a separate call center for patients' needs and resumed some care.

On Thursday, Lurie's surgeons operated on Jason Castillo's 7-month-old daughter mostly by hand, without some of the high-tech devices usually used.

His daughter's planned heart surgery was postponed on Jan. 31, when the hospital found itself under cyber siege. The surgeon talked to Castillo before his daughter was wheeled in for a six-hour surgery, promising that he felt confident he could do the procedure despite the ongoing cyberattack.

"She's doing fantastic," Castillo said of his daughter, who is now recovering at home. "It feels like a huge cloud has been lifted from our household."

Even once Lurie has restored their network, it'll likely take months of behind-the-scenes work for the hospital to fully rebound, Callow said.

"These incidents can affect everything from patient care to payroll," Callow said. "Fully recovering can take months, it's not simply a matter of flicking a switch and everything comes back on."

Greek lawmakers are debating a landmark bill to legalize same-sex marriage. Here's what it means

By DEREK GATOPOULOS Associated Press

ATHENS, Greece (AP) — Lawmakers in Greece opened a two-day debate Wednesday on a landmark bill to legalize same-sex marriage. It would be the first Orthodox Christian country to do so.

The Valentine's Day session in parliament follows vocal opposition and protests from the church but also a shift in public opinion which is narrowly supportive of the change.

Lawmaker Maria Syrengela with the governing New Democracy party called the bill "a small contribution towards the creation of a society without discrimination" during the debate Wednesday.

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If approved as expected, the bill would grant same-sex couples full parental rights but not allow male partners to seek children born in Greece through surrogacy.

The vote on the same-sex marriage bill is due Thursday. Here's a look at the bill and why it's happening now.

THE SLOW ROAD TO CHANGE

The journey toward legalizing same-sex civil marriage in Greece has been long and contentious, with governments in the past shying away from a confrontation with the Orthodox Church.

Civil partnerships for gay couples were made legal in 2015, with conservatives opposing the initiative. Promises to extend those rights were repeatedly deferred as the country emerged from a severe financial crisis followed by the pandemic.

Many same-sex couples chose to tie the knot in one of more than a dozen other European Union countries which already have marriage equality laws, bypassing restrictions at home.

Early in his second term, center-right Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis is pushing through a series of difficult reforms that also include tackling fan violence in sport and ending an official state monopoly on higher education.

WHY IS THE CHURCH STRONGLY OPPOSED?

The Greek church's opposition to the marriage bill has been emphatic.

The governing Holy Synod of senior bishops sent letters to all lawmakers outlining its objections. A circular with similar wording was read out during Sunday services at all Orthodox churches in the country, and religious groups have staged public protests against the proposal.

The church regards same-sex marriage as a threat to the traditional family model, arguing that support for that model could help address the declining birth rate in many European countries.

Support for that view has been expressed by other Orthodox countries, significantly including the Ecumenical Patriarchate which is based in Istanbul, Turkey.

Orthodox-majority countries are all located in eastern and southern Europe, where public acceptance of gay rights has been broadly more apprehensive than in western Europe.

ADDITIONAL CHANGES SOUGHT

Campaigners for LGBTQ+ rights are calling the bill a milestone reform, as same-sex couples would for the first time be recognized as a family unit.

Partners who are not the biological parents of the couple's children would have to seek guardianship through adoption, which is more time-consuming than the process in many other European countries.

Transgender activists say they are likely to remain in legal limbo and are seeking additional changes to family law.

A RARE POLITICAL AGREEMENT

The political landscape surrounding same-sex marriage is complicated, but it offers a rare moment of consensus at a time when politicians across the EU are keen to mark out their differences ahead of bloc-wide elections in June.

Mitsotakis faces dissent from inside his own New Democracy party and needs opposition votes for the bill to pass.

Many from the opposition are keen to back it. Stefanos Kasselakis, the opposition leader, last year became the first openly gay leader of a major Greek political party. Left-wing and centrist votes should provide a comfortable majority.

Political parties on the far-right are aligned with religious protests. They are unlikely to topple the bill but are seeking to draw support away from Mitsotakis' traditional conservative base of voters.

Ukrainian military says it sank a Russian landing ship in the Black Sea

By ILLIA NOVIKOV Associated Press

KYIV, Ukraine (AP) — Ukraine's military said Wednesday it used high-tech naval drones to sink a Russian landing ship in the Black Sea, a report that has not been confirmed by Russian authorities.

The Caesar Kunikov amphibious ship sank 4 kilometers (2.5 miles) off Alupka, a city on the southern edge of the Crimean Peninsula that Moscow annexed in 2014, Ukraine's General Staff said. It said the ship can carry 87 crew members. The ship was also transporting ammunition, a Ukrainian official said.

Sinking the vessel would be another embarrassing blow for the Russian Black Sea fleet and a significant success for Ukraine 10 days before the second anniversary of Russia's full-scale invasion on Feb. 24, 2022.

Kremlin spokesperson Dmitry Peskov declined to comment on the claim during a conference call with reporters Wednesday. He said questions should be addressed to the Russian military.

Several Russian military bloggers confirmed the attack on the ship but stopped short of confirming that it had been sunk.

Ukraine has moved onto the defensive in the war, hindered by low ammunition supplies and a shortage of personnel, but has kept up its strikes behind the largely static 1,500-kilometer (930-mile) front line.

It is the second time in two weeks that Ukrainian forces have said they sank a Russian vessel in the Black Sea. Last week, they published a video that they said showed naval drones assaulting the Russian missile-armed corvette Ivanovets.

Ukraine's Military Intelligence, known by its Ukrainian acronym GUR, said its special operations unit "Group 13" sank the Caesar Kunikov using advanced Magura V5 sea drones on Wednesday. Explosions damaged the vessel on its left side, it said, though a heavily edited video it released was unclear. The same unit also struck on Feb. 1, according to officials.

GUR's Andrii Yusov declined to say how many drones were deployed. But he told reporters that the operation took "a long time to prepare — routes are tracked, data is collected."

The private intelligence firm Ambrey said the video showed that at least three drones conducted the attack and that the ship likely sank after listing heavily on its port side.

The Caesar Kunikov probably was part of the Russian fleet escorting merchant vessels that call at Crimean ports, Ambrey said.

The landing ship can carry tanks, troops and other cargo to support amphibious assaults, with doors in the bow that open onto land without the ship needing to dock.

Ukrainian attacks on Russian aircraft and ships in the Black Sea have helped push Moscow's naval forces back from the coast, allowing Kyiv to increase crucial exports of grain and other goods through its southern ports.

A new generation of unmanned weapons systems has become a centerpiece of the war, both at sea and on land.

The Magura V5 drone, which looks like a sleek black speedboat, was unveiled last year. It reportedly has a top speed of 42 knots (80 kph, 50 mph) and a payload of 320 kilograms (700 pounds).

The Russian military did not immediately comment on the claimed sinking, saying only that it downed six Ukrainian drones over the Black Sea overnight.

Caesar Kunikov, for whom the Russian vessel was named, was a World War II hero of the Soviet Union for his exploits and died on Feb. 14, the same day as the Ukrainian drone strike, in 1943.

In other developments, an overnight Russian attack on the town of Selydove in the eastern Donetsk region struck a medical facility and a residential building, killing a child and a pregnant woman, Ukrainian Interior Minister Ihor Klymenko said on social media. Three other children were wounded, he said.

Selydove is just 25 kilometers (16 miles) from the front line.

Nine Ukrainian civilians were killed and at least 25 people wounded by Russian shelling over the previous 24 hours, the president's office said Wednesday.

Judge to consider whether to remove District Attorney Fani Willis from Georgia election case

By KATE BRUMBACK Associated Press

ATLANTA (AP) — A Georgia judge who is deciding whether to toss Fulton County District Attorney Fani Willis off of the state's election interference case against former President Donald Trump has set a hearing for Thursday that is expected to focus on details of Willis' personal relationship with a special prosecutor she hired.

As soon as allegations of an inappropriate romantic relationship between Willis and attorney Nathan Wade surfaced last month, speculation about the future of the case began to swirl. Even if the prosecution isn't derailed, the upheaval has certainly created an unwanted distraction for Willis and her team and could undermine public confidence in the case.

The defense attorney who first exposed the relationship says it creates a conflict of interest and is asking the judge to dismiss the indictment and to prohibit Willis, Wade and their offices from further involvement in the case. In a response filed earlier this month, Willis acknowledged a "personal relationship" but said it has no bearing on the serious criminal charges she's pursuing and asked the judge to dismiss the motions seeking her disqualification without a hearing.

The law says "disqualification can occur if evidence is produced demonstrating an actual conflict or the appearance of one," Fulton County Superior Court Judge Scott McAfee said during a hearing Monday. Because he believes "it's possible that the facts alleged by the defendant could result in a disqualification, I think an evidentiary hearing must occur to establish the record on those core allegations."

The highly anticipated hearing, like all courtroom proceedings in the case, will be streamed live on the judge's YouTube channel, as well as by news outlets. McAfee has said it could continue into Friday.

As he makes another run for the White House and faces three other criminal prosecutions, the former president has exploited the revelation of the relationship, repeatedly referring to Wade as Willis' "lover" or "boyfriend" to try to cast doubt on Willis' motivations and the legitimacy of the case. Other Republicans have piled on, using the claims to justify calls for investigations into or sanctions against Willis, an elected Democrat who's up for reelection this year.

The original motion was filed by former Trump campaign staffer and onetime White House aide Michael Roman, but Trump and several other co-defendants have joined with motions of their own.

Roman's motion says Willis and Wade were romantically involved when she hired him in November 2021 to manage an investigation into whether Trump and others committed any crimes as they tried to overturn his 2020 election loss in Georgia. That investigation led to the indictment in August of Trump and 18 others who are accused of participating in a sprawling illegal scheme to keep Trump in office.

Four of the people charged have already pleaded guilty after reaching deals with prosecutors. Trump and the remaining 14 have all pleaded not guilty.

Willis has paid Wade more than \$650,000 for his work and then, Roman alleges, profited personally when Wade used that money to take her on expensive vacations, including cruises in the Bahamas and trips to Aruba, Belize and Napa Valley. His filing also questions Wade's qualifications for the job, saying there's no evidence he had ever prosecuted a felony or handled a racketeering case.

Just under a week after Roman's motion was filed, Willis used a speech at a historic Black church in Atlanta to forcefully defend Wade's qualifications and her own decision to hire him. She didn't address the allegations of a relationship in that speech, waiting nearly three more weeks to acknowledge a "personal relationship" in a court filing.

Attached to that filing was a sworn statement from Wade saying that the pair began a personal relationship in 2022, after he was hired as a special prosecutor. His statement also said travel expenses for him and Willis were "roughly divided equally between us" and that Willis "received no funds or personal financial gain" from his position as a special prosecutor.

McAfee said Thursday's hearing needs to explore "whether a relationship existed, whether that relationship was romantic or non-romantic in nature, when it formed and whether it continues." Those questions

are only relevant, he said, "in combination with the question of the existence and extent of any personal benefit conveyed as a result of the relationship."

Roman's attorney, Ashleigh Merchant, has subpoenaed Willis, Wade, seven other employees of the district attorney's office and others, including Wade's former business partner, Terrence Bradley. Merchant told McAfee on Monday that Bradley would testify that Willis and Wade's romantic relationship began before Wade was hired as special counsel and that they had stayed together in homes where the county was paying for Willis to stay.

Willis sought to quash those subpoenas. She argued Roman's attempts to subpoena people in her office "suggests an eye toward public narrative as opposed to legal remedy" and that anything Bradley knows is protected by attorney-client privilege as he once served as Wade's divorce attorney. McAfee declined on Monday to quash those subpoenas, but agreed to revisit that after Bradley testifies.

Aware of the personal nature of some of the details that could arise in Thursday's hearing, the judge said that if there's anything that amounts to "harassment or undue embarrassment," he is "not going to feel inhibited from stepping in, even without an objection from counsel, to move this along and keep it focused on the issues at hand."

McAfee also made clear that he does not believe arguments over Wade's qualifications are relevant, saying that as long as an attorney "has a heartbeat and a bar card," it is within the district attorney's discretion to hire him.

NATO chief hails record defense spending while warning that Trump's remarks undermine security

By LORNE COOK and MATTHEW LEE Associated Press

BRUSSELS (AP) — NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg said Wednesday that its European members and Canada have ramped up defense spending to record levels, as he warned that former U.S. President Donald Trump was undermining their security by calling into question the U.S. commitment to its allies.

Stoltenberg said U.S. partners in NATO have spent \$600 billion more on their military budgets since 2014 when Russia's annexation of the Crimean Peninsula in Ukraine prompted them all to reverse the spending cuts they had made after the Cold War ended.

"Last year we saw an unprecedented rise of 11% across European allies and Canada," Stoltenberg told reporters on the eve of a meeting of the organization's defense ministers in Brussels.

In 2014, NATO leaders committed to move toward spending 2% of their gross domestic product on defense within a decade. It has mostly been slow going, but Russia's invasion of Ukraine two years ago focused minds. The 2% figure is now considered a minimum requirement.

"This year, I expect 18 allies to spend 2% of the GDP on defense. That is another record number and a six-fold increase from 2014 when only three allies met the target," Stoltenberg said.

On Saturday, Trump, the front-runner in the U.S. for the Republican Party's nomination this year, said he once warned that he would allow Russia to do whatever it wants to NATO members that are "delinquent" in devoting 2% of GDP to defense.

President Joe Biden branded Trump's remarks "dangerous" and "un-American," seizing on the former president's comments as they fuel doubt among U.S. partners about its future dependability on the global stage.

Stoltenberg said those comments call into question the credibility of NATO's collective security commitment — Article 5 of the organization's founding treaty, which says that an attack on any member country will be met with a response from all of them.

"The whole idea of NATO is that an attack on one ally will trigger a response from the whole alliance and as long as we stand behind that message together, we prevent any military attack on any ally," Stoltenberg said.

"Any suggestion that we are not standing up for each other, that we are not going to protect each other,

that does undermine the security of all of us," he said.

Trump's comments have not only sent a wave of unease through Europe but are also likely to be a major topic of conversation at the annual Munich Security Conference, starting later this week in the Bavarian city.

Both U.S. Vice President Kamala Harris and Secretary of State Antony Blinken will be present at the event that American officials hoped would concentrate more on immediate security concerns in Ukraine and Gaza, as well as challenges posed by China and the importance of multilateralism in collective defense.

The top U.S. diplomat for Europe, James O'Brien, said Tuesday that Blinken would be prepared to address questions about America's commitment to NATO allies and issues related to Trump's comments. But he also sought to downplay European concerns, noting that NATO has been a cornerstone of European security for more than seven decades.

O'Brien told reporters that U.S. administrations from the Democratic and Republican parties "have regarded NATO as the bedrock of our security, certainly in Europe but increasingly a global partner."

German Chancellor Olaf Scholz has assailed Trump's comments without mentioning the former president by name. He posted on social media platform X, formerly Twitter, saying that "any relativization of NATO's support guarantee is irresponsible and dangerous, and is in the interest of Russia alone" and that "no one can play, or 'deal,' with Europe's security."

Scholz's spokesman, Steffen Hebestreit told reporters in Berlin on Wednesday that while "such comments are dangerous," it is also "important to stress" they "have no influence on pressing NATO action."

Detecting Russian 'carrots' and 'tea bags': Ukraine decodes enemy chatter to save lives

By SAMYA KULLAB Associated Press

SEREBRYANSKY FOREST, Ukraine (AP) — As the radio crackles with enemy communications that are hard to decipher, one Russian command rings out clear: "Brew five Chinese tea bags on 38 orange."

A Ukrainian soldier known on the battlefield as Mikhass, who has spent months listening to and analyzing such chatter, is able to quickly decode the gibberish. It means: Prepare five Beijing-made artillery shells and fire them on a specific Ukrainian position in the Serebryansky Forest, which forms the front line in the country's restive northeast.

Hiding in the basement of an abandoned home 12 kilometers (7 miles) away, Mikhass immediately warns the commander of a unit embedded in that part of the forest, giving him crucial minutes to get his men into trenches, saving their lives.

On the defensive and critically short of ammunition and soldiers after two years of war, Ukrainian forces are increasingly resorting to an age-old tactic — intelligence gleaned from radio intercepts — in a desperate effort to preserve their most vital resources.

The painstaking work is part of a larger effort to beef up and refine electronic warfare capabilities so that soldiers can be warned earlier of impending attacks, while having the battlefield intelligence needed to make their own strikes more deadly. To prevent enemy drone attacks, signal-jamming is also on the rise.

After months of near stalemate along the 1,000 kilometer (621 mile) front line, Ukraine expects fierce attacks in the year ahead from a Russian enemy determined to wear down its defenses to forge a breakthrough. Russian President Vladimir Putin has said there will be no peace until Russia achieves its goals, which include recapturing the entire Donbas region of eastern Ukraine, which it illegally annexed in 2022.

The commander elevated last week to lead Ukraine's army, Gen. Oleksandr Syrskyi, has highlighted the importance of electronic warfare, and the country's defense ministry has increased spending on the people and technology behind it.

SAVING LIVES

Russia, which controls about one-fifth of Ukraine, has the advantage of a more developed domestic weapons industry and it uses conscription and coercion to call up troops.

For Ukraine, ammunition shortages have forced brigades to use shells sparingly and only after locating

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precise targets. Difficulty in mobilizing troops means Ukrainian commanders must be extra protective of soldiers' lives as they try to fend off ferocious Russian attacks.

It is within this context that better surveillance, eavesdropping and jamming have become more urgent.

Several kilometers south of where Mikhass is positioned, in the Donetsk region town of Konstantinivka, the 93rd Brigade's Electronic Warfare unit is using jammers to stave off attack drones, the main driver of injuries for soldiers in the region.

The platoon commander is alert, staring at a laptop that shows signals picked up by small antennas planted near the front line. When a Russian Lancet attack drone approaches their area of operation, his screen lights up with activity.

The commander, known on the battlefield as Oleksandr, flips a switch to activate the jammer which interferes with the drone's radar; it's the equivalent of shining a bright light in someone's eye to disorient them.

"It's a must," he says of their operation. "A lot of guys are dying because of drones."

Radio operators like Mikhass work in shifts around the clock.

The antennas he relies on to pick up Russian radio signals are camouflaged, jutting out of trees in the forest near Kreminna, close to Russian positions. From a quiet basement command center nearby, Mikhass and other soldiers chain smoke cigarettes and listen through headphones.

A new and sophisticated signal-finding antenna, which resembles a carousel, uses triangulation to locate where the radio waves are emanating from.

They cross-reference what they hear against images they gather from reconnaissance drones and use detailed maps of their enemy's positions to slowly piece together what it all means.

They are part of a 50-man intelligence unit dubbed the Bunnies of Cherkess — the name inspired by the Chinese military strategist Sun Tzu, who advised warriors to feign weakness when one is strong.

"No one takes bunnies seriously, right?" said Cherkess, the commander of the eponymous unit.

Radio intercepts reveal that the Kremlin is determined to control the entire Serebryansky Forest, which divides Ukraine-controlled Lyman from Russian-occupied Kreminna. It's part of an effort to reach Torske, a village in Donetsk that is west of Kreminna. From Torske, Russia will be closer to recapturing the nearby hub of Lyman, which would be a devastating setback for Ukraine and disrupt its ability to move supplies to the front.

DECODING ORDERS

Cherkess and his men, most of whom are volunteers who signed up for the infantry, understand the stakes couldn't be higher, especially as signs grow that support from Western allies is less secure.

After listening to hours and hours of Russian communications each day, much of it related to troop rotations, artillery fire and drone reconnaissance, they gradually build an understanding — with help from specialized computer software — of what it all means.

"Cucumbers" are mortars, "carrots" are grenade launchers -- and locations are conveyed in a numerical code with a corresponding color. It took the unit months to decode these Russian orders.

The arrival of new combat equipment and ammunition — and especially infantrymen — signals a fresh attack is imminent.

"(A soldier) is not interested in what kind of radar Russians have, he needs information on if there will be an attack tonight, and who will come, if they will have tanks, if they have armored vehicles or if it's just infantry," said Cherkess.

"And we have to understand how long we have to prepare. A week? Two weeks? A month?"

Advance word of enemy troops being rotated in and out is also useful to Ukrainian soldiers seeking to go on the offensive, he said. That is when they can exact maximum personnel losses.

The previous week, a Russian assault operation was carried out against a neighboring brigade. But the Ukrainian soldiers positioned there were prepared to greet them.

STAYING AHEAD

The importance of electronic surveillance can't be underestimated, said Yaroslav Kalinin, the CEO of Infozahyst, a company under contract with Ukraine's Defense Ministry.

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Before the war, Infozahyst provided anti-wiretapping services for the offices of the president and prime minister. Once the war began, the company pivoted to help the army by manufacturing a versatile signal direction finding system, which is now in high demand.

The government recently doubled its contract with Infozahyst, according to Kalinin.

The buildup of surveillance capabilities is partly a recognition of the need to catch up to the Russians, who invested heavily in this technology long before it invaded Ukraine.

Kalinin believes that better and smaller devices that are easier to hide and move around will eventually give Ukraine an edge.

The Russians know they are being listened to and routinely try to deceive their enemy with bogus information. It is up to Mikhass and other radio operators to discern the signal from the noise.

"Their artillery helps us," he explained. "They say where they will shoot, and then we check where the shells landed."

"38 orange," the location Mikhass recently heard about for an upcoming attack, is represented on a map by a small dot. And it is surrounded by hundreds of other dots that signify locations they have decoded.

"We need a lot of time to uncover these points," he said.

And, as Russia steps up the pressure, the clock is ticking.

Today in History: February 15, Singer Nat King Cole dies at 45

By The Associated Press undefined

Today in History

Today is Thursday, Feb. 15, the 46th day of 2024. There are 320 days left in the year.

Today's Highlight in History:

On Feb. 15, 1965, singer Nat King Cole, who despite facing extreme racism throughout his short career sold more than 50 million records that included massive hits such as "Mona Lisa" and "Route 66," died in Santa Monica, California. He was 45.

On this date:

In 1764, the site of present-day St. Louis was established by Pierre Laclede and Auguste Chouteau.

In 1879, President Rutherford B. Hayes signed a bill allowing female attorneys to argue cases before the Supreme Court.

In 1898, the U.S. battleship Maine mysteriously blew up in Havana Harbor, killing more than 260 crew members and bringing the United States closer to war with Spain.

In 1933, President-elect Franklin D. Roosevelt escaped an assassination attempt in Miami that mortally wounded Chicago Mayor Anton J. Cermak; gunman Giuseppe Zangara was executed more than four weeks later.

In 1944, Allied bombers destroyed the monastery atop Monte Cassino in Italy.

In 1950, Walt Disney's animated film "Cinderella" premieres in Boston.

In 1961, 73 people, including an 18-member U.S. figure skating team en route to the World Championships in Czechoslovakia, were killed in the crash of a Sabena Airlines Boeing 707 in Belgium.

In 1967, the rock band Chicago was founded by Walter Parazaider, Terry Kath, Danny Seraphine, Lee Loughnane, James Pankow and Robert Lamm; the group originally called itself The Big Thing, then Chicago Transit Authority.

In 1989, the Soviet Union announced that the last of its troops had left Afghanistan, after more than nine years of military intervention.

In 1992, a Milwaukee jury found that Jeffrey Dahmer was sane when he killed and mutilated 15 men and boys. (The decision meant that Dahmer, who had already pleaded guilty to the murders, would receive a mandatory life sentence for each count; Dahmer was beaten to death in prison in 1994.)

In 2003, millions of protesters around the world demonstrated against the prospect of a U.S. attack on Iraq.

In 2005, defrocked priest Paul Shanley was sentenced in Boston to 12 to 15 years in prison on child

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rape charges.

In 2013, with a blinding flash and a booming shock wave, a meteor blazed across Russia's western Siberian sky and exploded, injuring more than 1,000 people as it blasted out windows.

In 2018, the last of the bodies of the 17 victims of a school shooting in Florida were removed from the building after authorities analyzed the crime scene; 13 wounded survivors were still hospitalized. In response to the shooting, President Donald Trump, in an address to the nation, promised to "tackle the difficult issue of mental health," but avoided any mention of guns. Nikolas Cruz, the suspect in the shooting, was ordered held without bond at a brief court hearing.

In 2021, salsa music idol Johnny Pacheco died at 85 in New York, where he'd been hospitalized with pneumonia.

In 2022, the families of nine victims of the Sandy Hook Elementary School shooting agreed to a \$73 million settlement of a lawsuit against the maker of the rifle used to kill 20 first graders and six educators in 2012.

In 2023, Raquel Welch, whose emergence from the sea in a skimpy, furry bikini in the film "One Million Years B.C." would propel her to international sex symbol status throughout the 1960s and '70s, died at age 82.

Today's birthdays: Actor Claire Bloom is 93. Author Susan Brownmiller is 89. Songwriter Brian Holland is 83. Rock musician Mick Avory (The Kinks) is 80. Jazz musician Henry Threadgill is 80. Actor-model Marisa Berenson is 77. Actor Jane Seymour is 73. Singer Melissa Manchester is 73. Actor Lynn Whitfield is 71. "Simpsons" creator Matt Groening is 70. Model Janice Dickinson is 69. Actor Christopher McDonald is 69. Reggae singer Ali Campbell is 65. Actor Joseph R. Gannascoli is 65. Musician Mikey Craig (Culture Club) is 64. College and Pro Football Hall of Famer Darrell Green is 64. Actor-comedian Steven Michael Quezada is 61. Actor Michael Easton is 57. Latin singer Gloria Trevi is 56. Rock musician Stevie Benton (Drowning Pool) is 53. Actor Alex Borstein is 53. Actor Renee O'Connor is 53. Actor Sarah Wynter is 51. Olympic gold medal swimmer Amy Van Dyken-Rouen is 51. Actor-director Miranda July is 50. Rock singer Brandon Boyd (Incubus) is 48. Rock musician Ronnie Vannucci (The Killers) is 48.