

Groton Daily Independent

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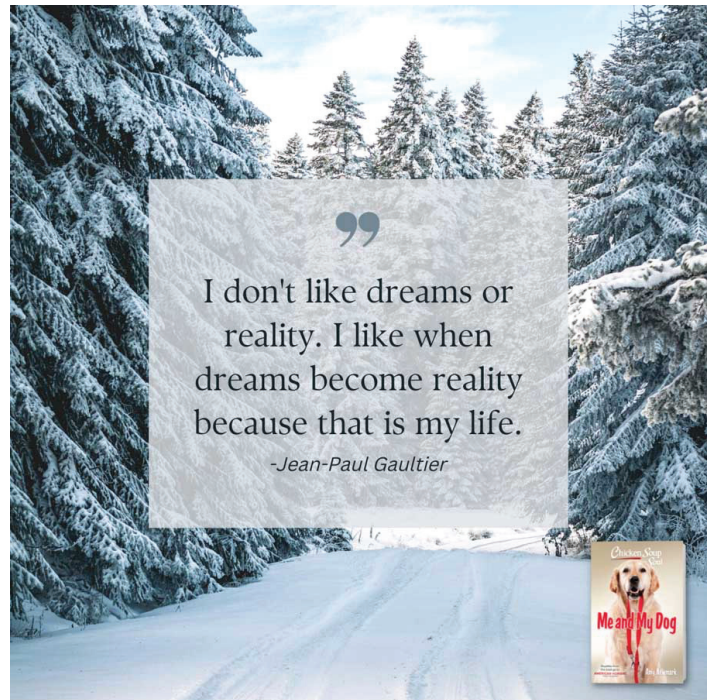
Friday, Feb. 16

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.)

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



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.

Sunday, Feb. 18

Open Gym: Grades JK-8 2:00-3:30 [Students accompanied by adults] Grades 6-12 3:30-5:00

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

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

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

Emmanuel Lutheran: Worship with communion, 9 a.m.; No Sunday School; Choir, 6 p.m.

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

OPEN! Recycling Trailer on 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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A decision in a civil trial against former President Donald Trump and the Trump Organization is expected today, marking the end of a case that may limit the company's ability to operate in the state of New York.

Iowa's Caitlin Clark broke the NCAA Division I women's basketball scoring record last night, passing 3,527 points minutes into the first quarter in the Hawkeyes' game against Michigan. The previous record-holder was former Washington Huskies player Kelsey Plum.

Private US aerospace company Intuitive Machines successfully launched a phone-booth-sized robotic lunar lander early yesterday, hoping to land roughly 180 miles from the moon's south pole Thursday. If successful, the Odysseus mission would mark the first-ever private lunar landing and the first US soft landing (reaching the surface via a controlled descent) since the final Apollo mission in 1972.

Sports, Entertainment, & Culture

Kansas City officials say an escalated personal dispute was responsible for shootout that killed one person and wounded 21 others following Chiefs Super Bowl parade Wednesday.

Rock & Roll Hall of Famer Rod Stewart sells full song catalog and some name and likeness rights for nearly \$100M. Soccer star Kylian Mbappé informs Paris Saint-Germain that he'll depart the club at the end of this season.

Don Gullett, former MLB pitcher and three-time World Series winner, dies at 73. College baseball season kicks off today; see full preview and storylines.

Science & Technology

OpenAI unveils text-to-video platform known as Sora, which turns AI prompts into realistic footage with complex details up to one minute long.

Rising US suicide rate has been driven by increased access to potent opioids and decreased social safety net, large-scale analysis finds; roughly 50,000 Americans died by suicide in 2023.

Undeciphered wooden tablets provide evidence of a written language among the Indigenous culture on Easter Island prior to the first arrival of Europeans. What are the Rongorongo tablets?

Business & Markets

US stock markets close up (S&P 500 +0.6%, Dow +0.9%, Nasdaq +0.3%); S&P 500 closes at another record high. Shares of AI companies, including Arm Holdings, rally after Nvidia discloses stakes in them Wednesday; comes a day after Nvidia exceeds Alphabet in market value.

US retail sales fell 0.8% month-over-month in January, a larger-than-expected drop and down from a 0.4% gain in December. Average 30-year fixed-rate mortgage rises to 6.77%, the highest in 10 weeks. The US eases restrictions on banking giant Wells Fargo following 2016 scandal.

Japan officially enters a recession, slips to fourth behind Germany on list of world's largest economies. The UK slips into a recession after latest data show economy failed to grow for two consecutive quarters.

Politics & World Affairs

Israeli forces advance into Nasser Hospital in the Gaza city of Khan Younis, reportedly searching for the remains of hostages. Death toll from Israeli airstrike in neighboring Lebanon rises to 10 civilians, three Hezbollah fighters.

Former FBI informant, said to be at center of tip alleging illicit foreign business dealings by President Joe Biden and son Hunter Biden, reportedly arrested for lying to federal officials.

Greece becomes first Orthodox Christian country to legalize same-sex marriage, provide parental rights for same-sex couples.

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All games will be broadcast on GDILIVE.COM

Double Header Basketball Game

Britton-Hecla @ Groton Area

Friday, February 16th, 2024

Game Times/Locations:

Main Court in Arena	Main Court in Old Gym
- 4:00PM → Girls JV	- 3:30PM → 8 th Grade Boys
- 5:00PM → Boys JV	- 4:30PM → 7 th Grade Boys
- 6:15PM → Girls Varsity	
○ Halftime Entertainment: Sugar Babes and Sweet Sensations	
- 7:45PM → Boys Varsity	
○ Halftime Entertainment: Groton High School Dance Team	

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

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

CONCESSIONS: Will be available

LOCKER ROOM: Britton-Hecla BOYS will use the last locker room down the JH hallway. Britton-Hecla GIRLS will be in the JH Girl's locker room located in the old gym.

Team Benches – Groton: South Bench
Britton-Hecla: North Bench

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

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

Old Gym →

JH Officials: Jesse Zak, Mike Siegler, Jordan Carson

JH Scoreboard: Joe Schwan

New Gym →

JV Official: Kristi Zoellner, Logan Huber, Layton Holmstrom

JV Scoreboard: Kristen Dolan

JV Book: Alexa Schuring

JV Shot Clock: Ryan Tracy

Varsity Officials: Austin Sumption, Derek Barondeau, Mike Schmidt

Announcer: Tom Woods

Varsity Scoreboard: Kristen Dolan

Official Book: Alexa Schuring

Shot Clock Operator: Kristi Zoellner

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

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Gov. Noem Signs E15 Fuel Tax Refund into Law Signs Six Other Bills

PIERRE, S.D. – Yesterday, Governor Kristi Noem held a bill signing ceremony for SB 78, which provides for an E15 fuel tax refund.

“Renewable fuels are a very important part of America’s all-of-the-above energy supply, and ethanol is vital to South Dakota’s future. The Biden Administration’s policies have driven gas prices up for South Dakotans, and this bill will provide our citizens with needed relief,” said Governor Noem. “It will make higher ethanol blends more readily available, bringing prices down at the pump. We’re committed to an all-of-the-above approach to energy that doesn’t pick winners and losers but lowers prices for all South Dakotans.”

Governor Noem was joined by the bill’s prime sponsors, Senator Casey Crabtree and Representative Drew Peterson, as well as leaders from the state’s ethanol industry. A photo from the bill signing can be found [here](#).

Governor Noem also signed the following six bills into law:

SB 16 makes appropriations for water and environmental purposes and to declare an emergency;

SB 28 modifies tax refunds for elderly persons and persons with a disability, to make an appropriation therefor;

SB 35 provides that certain personal information of a lottery prize winner may only be used for advertising or promotion with the winner’s consent;

HB 1077 provides for the disbursement of the catastrophic county poor relief fund to the participating counties in the event of the discontinuance of the fund;

HB 1124 provides for the temporary filling of water development district board positions created as a result of population increases, and;

HB 1145 modifies brand registration and use laws.

Governor Noem has signed 71 bills into law this legislative session.

2024 Flood Outlook Released

The spring flood outlook for rivers and streams in portions of central and northeast South Dakota as well as west central Minnesota has been released.

The chance of river flooding is below normal (< 50%) over the next 90 days, largely due to lack of snowpack.

The flood threat through this spring, both in location and severity, will still be dependent on future rain or snowfall. Therefore, this report will be updated on February 29 and again on March 14.

Death Notice: Susan Kurth

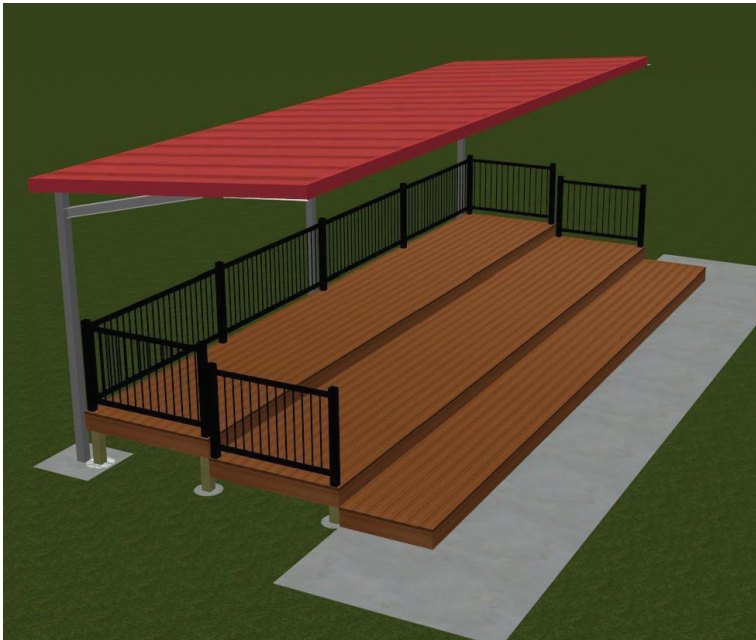
Susan Kurth, 77, of Groton passed away February 15, 2024 surrounded by her family at home. Services are pending with Paetznick-Garress Funeral Chapel, Groton.

Petition being circulated to put Groton Area opt-out to a vote

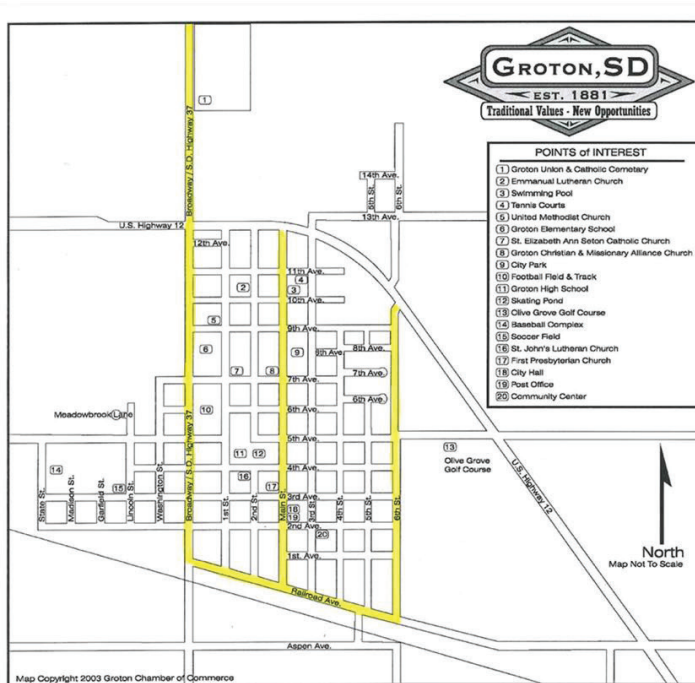
The \$1.25 million opt-out resolution passed by the Groton Area School Board could be going to a vote of the people. A petition is currently being circulated to put the measure on the ballot. The opt-out amount is the maximum that the board would use and under its proposal, would use less in several of the 10-year opt-out period.

Shade Shelters coming to Groton Baseball Complex

The Groton Baseball/Softball Foundation is in the process of installing three new shade structures at the Groton Baseball Complex. There will be one shade structure for each field. The bases were poured last fall and the support poles arrived yesterday. The follow photos are from the Groton Baseball/Softball Foundation 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!



South Dakota's teacher shortage a matter of pay and pipeline While the Legislature works to address teacher pay, groups like Educators Rising tap current students to consider a future career in education

By Jackie Hendry
South Dakota News Watch / SDPB

HARRISBURG, S.D. – Education is not immune to South Dakota's ongoing workforce challenges. While much of the Legislature's focus is on teacher salaries, some are working to grow the pool of future teachers.

Around 300 teaching positions sat vacant around the state as of last month, according to the Associated School Boards of South Dakota. It's a shortage Secretary of Education Joseph Graves has never seen in his decades as a teacher and administrator.

"It's always been difficult to fill certain positions," he said earlier this month in an interview with South Dakota Public Broadcasting. "If you had a high school instrumental music position, or you had an upper level math, upper level science – those could be difficult at any time in history."

In the past decade or so, though, Graves said there were fewer and fewer candidates for commonly easy-to-fill positions.

"When I began in my superintendency over 30 years ago, we would have file cabinets full of elementary applicants," he said. "When those (positions) began to be in a shortage, we knew we were in a real definite teacher shortage. And in fact, I think the teacher shortage right now is historically unprecedented."

The blue ribbon promise of higher teacher pay

Graves was superintendent of the Mitchell School District when the half-cent sales tax increase brought forth by a blue ribbon task force took effect in 2017. The increased tax revenue was meant to bolster teacher salaries.

"It definitely made it easier to hire teachers," said Graves. "It also moved us from 51st in the nation for our teacher pay to 47th. What we've noticed, though, in the last couple years is this drifting back down."

With South Dakota now back to 49th in the nation for teacher pay, Gov. Kristi Noem's administration wants to ensure school districts allocate the increased funding to teachers, rather than other needs.

"Yes, I know that schools have their own challenges," Noem said in her 2024 State of the State address. "But the blue ribbon recommendation wasn't just that teacher pay would go up. The blue ribbon promise was that teachers would be the first priority, that they would be paid more. So let's do it."

While legislative efforts to keep the promises of the blue ribbon task force are ongoing in Pierre, other efforts to recruit future teachers play out across the state. When schools saw the state's investment in



High school junior Katelyn Christopherson explains worksheets to second graders at Explorers Elementary in Harrisburg, S.D. Christopherson is a state officer with Educators Rising South Dakota, a group that encourages high schoolers to consider a teaching career.

(Photo: Krystal Schoenbauer / South Dakota Public Broadcasting)

education following the task force, some administrators wondered how to ensure the pool of future educators continued to meet demand.

"We get this bump in pay, everybody's heading in the right direction, but we weren't seeing an increase in kids choosing education as a career path," said Travis Lape, director of innovative programs for the Harrisburg School District. "Teachers are always very good at telling kids other opportunities besides our own career."

Finding future teachers through Educators Rising

To help spread the word about the benefits of a career in education, Lape was part of a group of teachers and administrators that established the first South Dakota chapter of a group called Educators Rising.

The national organization launched in 2015 and has since amassed more than 30,000 participating students and teachers. Its mission is to encourage high school students to pursue a teaching career through skill development and hands-on experience. It offers competitions related to public speaking and other teaching skills at state and national conferences.

While considering ways to leverage Harrisburg career and technical education programs, Lape remembered his own experience with Future Farmers of America as a high schooler.

"I didn't have cows and pigs – I didn't grow up like that – but I had the leadership side. So parliamentary procedure, public speaking, job interviews. Those were the events that I thrived in, in FFA," said Lape.

He also traveled to state and national conferences as a student thanks to his involvement with FFA. "I got to see the world through the organization. And I said, 'We don't have that for education.'"

Lape is now state director of Educators Rising South Dakota, which over the past six years has grown to more than 350 student members spread across 50 chapters in the state.

Some schools treat it like any other extra curricular club with a teacher advising. Others, like Harrisburg High School, offer it as an extension of existing career and technical education classes, which weave competition material into classroom assignments.

'Our future teachers are in our schools'

One competition area centers on lesson planning and development. High school students create a lesson plan and deliver it in a real classroom, while judges review a recording of the lesson during competition.

Katelyn Christopherson, a junior at Harrisburg High School and a state officer with Educators Rising South Dakota, placed third last year at the national Educators Rising conference for her lesson plan geared toward middle schoolers.

This year, Christopherson created a lesson plan that uses ice cream to explain states of matter, which she recently presented to second graders at Explorer Elementary in Harrisburg.

"The thing I pride myself on when I do these lesson plans is making sure I have multiple different ways to learn it because everybody is so different," said Christopherson.

Her lesson plan included a demonstration of an ice cream recipe, a YouTube video, and a coloring worksheet. Christopherson fielded questions from students and managed the classroom as the students' full-time teacher observed.

"I feel like there's no other real way to understand this is what you want to do," said Christopherson. She enjoys the hands-on experience and connections she's made with students in other districts through Educators Rising South Dakota.

"I feel like something that pushes people away from education is, you know, the money or just some



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other factor," said Christopherson. "But if we're putting that spark in and also people are working towards it – because obviously we don't do it for the money – but I feel like by encouraging those people in other ways that want to be teachers, I feel like we can even help the shortage even more."

While pay is an important retention measure for teachers, Lape said giving students an opportunity to explore a teaching career early is a critical part of ensuring there's a pool of potential educators for years to come.

"There's a national statistic out there that says almost 60% of teachers live and work within 20 miles of where they grew up," said Lape. "Our future teachers are in our schools."

How to watch 'South Dakota Focus'

The next episode of "South Dakota Focus" airs on Thursday, Feb. 22, at 8 p.m. Central time / 7 p.m. Mountain time. It can be viewed on SDPB-TV 1, Facebook, YouTube and SD.net.

The episode includes:

- How policy makers hope to address the teacher shortage this legislative session
- High schoolers getting first-hand teaching experiences through Educators Rising South Dakota
- A former Sioux Falls student who now leads her own classroom and welcomes current Teacher Pathway students to observe

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Contact Clay at 605-492-3615 or clayb@sundialmanor.com

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(0214.0221)

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)



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2024 Spring Load Restrictions – Release #2

(Restrictions scheduled for week of Feb. 19-23, 2024)

PIERRE, S.D. – New spring load limit restrictions will apply to the road segments and at the indicated weight limit shown in the table below. The effective date of any load restriction is determined by weather and road conditions.

2024 STATE HIGHWAY SPRING LOAD LIMIT RESTRICTIONS

(Restrictions Scheduled for Weeks of Feb. 19-23, 2024)

Effective Date	Highway	Location	Begin/End MRM	Length	Posting	Region
Feb. 20, 2024	S.D. Highway 79	S.D. 168 to Jct. S.D. 20 west of Reva	150.70 to 199.32	48.6	8 Tons/Axle	Rapid City
Feb. 20, 2024	S.D. Highway 63	From Jct. U.S. 212 north to Jct. S.D. 20	173.67 to 204.91	31.2	6 Tons/Axle	Pierre
Feb. 20, 2024	S.D. Highway 63	McLaughlin at Kenel Road, north to North Dakota state line	252.98 to 260.62	7.6	6 Tons/Axle	Pierre
Feb. 20, 2024	S.D. Highway 271	U.S. 12, north to S.D. 130	162.44 to 166.43	4.0	6 Tons/Axle	Pierre
Feb. 20, 2024	S.D. Highway 271	East of Java to Campbell Co. line	166.82 to 173.74	6.9	6 Tons/Axle	Pierre
Feb. 20, 2024	S.D. Highway 271	From Jct. S.D. 10 to North Dakota state line	189.91 to 203.70	13.8	6 Tons/Axle	Pierre
Feb. 20, 2024	S.D. Highway 1806	From Jct. U.S. 12, south to Memorial Entrance	359.75 to 363.43	3.7	6 Tons/Axle	Pierre
Feb. 20, 2024	S.D. Highway 1806	From Jct. U.S. 12, north to Kenel	364.61 to 386.83	22.2	6 Tons/Axle	Pierre

County Road Information:

SDDOT personnel remind motorists that county road posted load limits are not determined or enforced by the state. Please use the county information provided on the South Dakota Truck Info website to contact the county superintendent for questions or concerns.

Deuel County Fatal Crash

What: Two vehicle fatal crash

Where: SD Hwy 15, Mile marker 129, 2 miles west and 1 mile north of Toronto, SD

When: 11:38 a.m., Wednesday, February 14, 2024

Driver 1: Female, 68, Fatal injuries

Vehicle 1: 2012 Chevrolet Impala

Seat Belt Used: Under investigation

Driver 2: Male, 62, No injuries

Vehicle 2: 2016 Peterbilt Conventional Semi

Seat Belt Used: Under investigation

Deuel County, S.D.- A 68-year-old Toronto, SD woman died Wednesday afternoon in a two-vehicle crash in Deuel County.

The names of the people involved have not been released pending notification of family members.

Preliminary crash information indicates the driver of a 2012 Chevrolet Impala was traveling south on SD 15, lost control on icy roads and slid across the center line directly in front of a 2012 Peterbilt semi. The front of the semi struck the passenger side of the Impala. Both vehicles went off the roadway into the west ditch. The driver of the Impala was pronounced deceased on scene. There were no passengers in the vehicle. The driver of the Peterbilt had no injuries. Seatbelt use is under investigation for both drivers.

The South Dakota Highway Patrol is investigating the crash. All information released so far is only preliminary.

The Highway Patrol is an agency of the South Dakota Department of Public Safety.



SOUTH DAKOTA SEARCHLIGHT

<https://southdakotasearchlight.com>

Senate panel moves to limit local authority in pipeline regulation

Supporters say 'compromise' protects counties, doesn't scuttle development

BY: JOHN HULT - FEBRUARY 15, 2024 3:17 PM

A bill limiting the right of counties to regulate pipeline setbacks advanced out of a state Senate committee on Thursday morning.

Senate Bill 201 would bar counties from enacting local zoning rules strict enough to regulate gas or liquid pipelines out of existence, but would also allow counties to levy a per-foot surcharge on pipeline companies and codify certain landowner protections for things like disrupted drain tile.

The bill passed the Senate Commerce and Energy Committee on a 7-2 vote, taken before a packed house of supporters and opponents, the latter of whom applauded loudly enough after one round of testimony to cause the chair to call for order.

The crowd and its occasional emotion were animated by one of the most controversial topics to whisk through the Capitol halls both this year and last. In 2023, there were two carbon dioxide pipeline projects in the works for South Dakota, both of which would transport carbon produced by ethanol plants to sites in other states for underground sequestration. Doing so would open the door to billions in federal tax credits for the pipeline companies and their partners.

Since last year's session, one of those companies – Navigator CO2 Ventures – has tapped out. The Public Utilities Commission denied its permit last fall, and the announcement of the project's shuttering came shortly thereafter.

In the process of making its decision on the pipeline, the commission said it would not overrule restrictive county zoning ordinances that the pipeline companies have argued amount to a ban of their business.

The remaining pipeline company seeking a route through South Dakota, Summit Carbon Solutions, had representatives and supporters on hand for Thursday's hearing.

The pipeline debates taking place this year in Pierre have also included more discussion of and comments from another economic development project linked to carbon sequestration: a sustainable aviation fuel plant proposed for Lake Preston by a company called Gevo.

Gevo would use corn to create its fuel, and the company has said the project is worth at least \$1 billion.

Sen. Casey Crabtree, R-Madison, is the bill's prime sponsor. He said his proposal strikes a balance between South Dakota's respect for property rights and its need for economic development.

"The best kind of compromise: One that does not compromise our South Dakota values," Crabtree said.

Backers: Ethanol's future tied to carbon sequestration

Summit and Gevo representatives each testified that allowing local governments to set required distances between buildings and pipelines inappropriately usurps federal and state regulatory authority. They also argued that local ordinances enacted as they seek permits and negotiate right-of-way payments from landowners along proposed pipeline routes amount to "changing the rules of the game" in a way that unfairly upends project planning.

For Gevo in particular, the stakes were made clear on Thursday: Without a pipeline, the company will take its business elsewhere.

"There are other states in the nation that have embraced carbon capture and sequestration, and we have identified other sites," said Kent Hartwig, director of government affairs for Gevo.

Brett Koenecke, the South Dakota lawyer for Summit, told lawmakers that the "byzantine" regulations

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created at the county level have created a "Balkanized" regulatory framework that essentially papers the pipeline project out of existence.

County commissioners are governing as activists, Koenecke said.

"You can look at the Facebook posts of the anti-project people and find the county commissioners posting actively in those areas," he said. "And so I'm here to tell you there's no pathway forward for this project that involves discretion at the county level."

Several agricultural and economic development lobbyists also testified in favor of the bill. Carbon sequestration, they said, as incentivized by the federal government in the interest of lessening the climate impact of heat-trapping carbon dioxide, is the way corn farmers will thrive in a country where vehicles are becoming more fuel efficient or going electric. Two out of every three rows of South Dakota corn is used to produce ethanol.

Higher-value sustainable aviation fuel and tax payouts for existing ethanol operations will keep corn alive, they said. If South Dakota makes it too difficult to take advantage of carbon credits, other states will be happy to fill the void and reap the benefits.

"We're not only competing with other industries, but we're competing with other ethanol plants," said Matt McCauley of the South Dakota Ethanol Producers Association.

Opponents: Local control sacred, works for citizens

Amanda Radke, a pro-farm blogger and speaker, drew cheers for her testimony on SB 201, a measure she said would strip property owners of their rights through state government fiat. She argued that New York, California, Michigan and Illinois have rules similar to those proposed in SB 201, and asked the committee if they wanted South Dakota to join that club.

She isn't an affected landowner, she said, but rather an advocate who stands with landowners opposed to the pipeline.

"To put the boot on the neck of these families is wildly inappropriate," Radke said.

Brown County Commissioner and former lawmaker Drew Dennert was on hand to defend his county's decision to pass a restrictive zoning ordinance.

He spoke of a local who'd be unable to expand a ranch if Summit were to complete its project, as he wouldn't be able to build within 1,000 feet of the area on his property under which the pipeline might run.

"As commissioners, we acted on behalf of our citizens and in the best interests of our county's unique situation," Dennert said. "Our ordinance makes sense for our community."

Lawmakers push bill to full Senate

Sen. Crabtree countered during his rebuttal that the bill as amended creates a host of landowner and county protections, including causes of action for disrupted drain tile and the counties' ability to charge pipeline companies annual fees. Drain tile is used under farm fields to remove excess moisture.

The law does not leave counties flat-footed or leave landowners with no recourse, he said.

"I would not have brought this legislation if I thought it did that," Crabtree said.

Sen. Lee Schoenbeck, R-Watertown, moved to pass the bill onto the Senate floor, saying the state should not allow local activism to endanger agriculture's viability.

"This is about trying to bring order to these projects that are really important to agriculture in South Dakota," Schoenbeck said.

The bill's emergency clause, which would allow it to take effect immediately with the governor's signature rather than on the typical date of July 1, would address "the timeliness issue." Without order and certainty, Gevo could walk away.

Crabtree stressed that the emergency clause signals the importance of carving out rules of the road in short order.

"Putting those in as quickly as possible is important for all sides," Crabtree said.

John is the senior reporter for South Dakota Searchlight. He has more than 15 years experience covering criminal justice, the environment and public affairs in South Dakota, including more than a decade at the Sioux Falls Argus Leader.

Spearfish, Standing Rock receive grants as Biden sends nearly \$1 billion to airports

BY: JACOB FISCHLER - FEBRUARY 15, 2024 6:00 AM

The Biden administration will send close to \$1 billion to airports across the country to upgrade terminal facilities, Transportation Secretary Pete Buttigieg announced Thursday. Among the recipients are the city of Spearfish and the Standing Rock Sioux Tribe.

The Standing Rock Airport will receive \$700,000 out of \$800,000 needed for a project near Fort Yates, North Dakota. John Pretty Bear, a member of the Standing Rock Sioux Tribal Council, told the North Dakota Monitor the grant will be used for a new pilots lounge. He added the accessory building is another important step in expanding the use of the tribal airport.

"It's going to open the door where we're going to have more abilities with the airport, too," Pretty Bear said.

He also said in five or six years the tribe has plans to add a maintenance building that will attach to the new pilots lounge and expand the airport footprint further.

In South Dakota, the city of Spearfish will receive \$1.95 million toward the \$6.7 million construction of an approximately 3,300-square-foot general aviation terminal building.

The \$970 million in grants will go to 144 airports in 44 states and three territories. Earmarked for terminal improvements, Buttigieg and other administration officials said the grants would fund projects to improve the passenger experience and create jobs.

The administration has worked to improve the air travel experience, Buttigieg told reporters Wednesday.

"Part of that better travel experience is to invest in our physical infrastructure to improve the airports that represent the beginning and end of every passenger's journey and airports that are a key economic engine for workers who show up there every day and communities that rely on those airports to sustain their connectedness and their competitiveness," Buttigieg said.

The grants will fund a variety of projects, ranging from building new terminals or concourses to making bathrooms bigger, Buttigieg said.

The funds would also help improve baggage systems and security screening areas, expand public transit options, build solar energy infrastructure and increase accessibility, Buttigieg said.

"This funding is real," said Shannetta Griffin, the Federal Aviation Administration's deputy administrator for airports. "We are changing lives."

Buttigieg and Griffin briefed reporters on the grant selections on the condition their comments not be made public until Thursday.

The FAA received more than 600 applications for grants asking for a total of \$14 billion, Griffin said.

Infrastructure law

The funding is authorized by the infrastructure law enacted in 2021. The grant selections this week represent the third round of roughly \$1 billion of annual grant funding under the program. The law's airport terminal program provides \$5 billion over 5 years.

The total costs for the projects selected this year are more than \$10.3 billion, meaning the grants announced Thursday cover an average of about 9.4% of total project costs.

Separate funding is available for aviation operations. The infrastructure law provides \$25 billion in funding for airports, including the terminal grants.

Buttigieg highlighted grants to small airports in Appleton, Wisconsin, and on the Standing Rock Reservation that spans portions of North Dakota and South Dakota.

The Appleton International Airport will receive \$3.4 million for a \$78 million overhaul that includes adding four gates, updating buildings and improving access.

The largest grant in this year's selections will go to Fort Lauderdale International Airport in Florida. A \$50 million grant will be put toward a \$221 million terminal connector.

Large grants will also go to major hubs, including \$40 million for Chicago's O'Hare International Airport,

\$36 million for the Phoenix airport, \$35 million for Washington Dulles International Airport in Northern Virginia and \$26.6 million for Denver's airport.

Buttigieg will be in Charlotte, North Carolina, on Thursday to announce a \$27 million grant for that city's airport to replace passenger boarding bridges.

— *The staffs of South Dakota Searchlight and the North Dakota Monitor contributed to this report.*

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

U.S. House passes bill to reverse Biden pause of some liquified natural gas exports

SD's Johnson votes yes with all other Republicans

BY: JACOB FISCHLER - FEBRUARY 15, 2024 7:18 PM

The U.S. House voted Thursday to approve a bill that would preempt the Biden administration's move last month to pause new approvals for some liquified natural gas exports.

Nine Democrats voted with every Republican in favor of the bill, which the chamber approved 224-200. The bill would remove the federal requirement that the Department of Energy considers an LNG export permit in the public interest before allowing a project to move forward.

Democrats voting for the bill were Yadira Caraveo of Colorado, Jim Costa of California, Henry Cuellar, Vicente Gonzalez and Marc Veasey of Texas, Jared Golden of Maine, Rick Larsen and Marie Gluesenkamp Perez of Washington and Mary Peltola of Alaska.

The bill does not appear likely to win the 60 votes needed to advance in the Senate, even if some Democrats would support it.

The bill, sponsored by Texas Republican August Pfluger, targets a recent endeavor by President Joe Biden's administration to pause new Energy Department permits for LNG exports to non-free-trade-agreement countries. The pause has no specified end date and would be in place while the department reviews its criteria for its public-interest evaluations.

Like many of Biden's energy policies, the move drew the ire of Republicans and some energy-state Democrats who said it would reduce domestic natural gas production.

European market

Advocates for the measure say LNG releases fewer climate-changing emissions than coal and other fossil fuels, and U.S. production and exportation of the fuel closes more of the European market to Russian-sourced LNG.

"President Biden has issued executive orders and given direction to the federal agencies across the government to shut down American energy production, even at the expense of jobs, economic development, national security and the climate," South Carolina Republican Jeff Duncan said Thursday.

Releasing more American supply would hamper Russian President Vladimir Putin's efforts to raise money for that country's invasion of Ukraine, Duncan said. Russia is a large exporter of natural gas.

"Putin and his energy oligarchs are exporting to Europe 40% more than they did before the war in Ukraine," Duncan said. "That's 40% more money flowing right into the pocket of Vladimir Putin to fund his war with Ukraine. I would rather that money flow into the pockets of American energy producers and tax bases and communities all around this country."

Duncan, the chairman of the House Energy and Commerce Subcommittee on Energy, Climate and the Grid, and other Republicans said Thursday the pause was an election-year ploy to gain favor with environmental groups and was not a well-informed policy goal.

The bill would reverse the pause by revoking the Energy Department's authority to review export applications.

Instead, approvals for new exports would be overseen only by the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission. Under the bill, FERC would be required to deem all LNG exports in the public interest.

Bill would gut key protection, Dems say

Democrats lined up on the floor Thursday to oppose the bill, which they said would remove a critical environmental guardrail.

"Ensuring that LNG exports are in America's best interest is something we should all want," Energy and Commerce ranking Democrat Frank Pallone of New Jersey said. "Instead, we're here considering a bill that does the opposite."

The bill "goes so much further" than simply reversing the administration's pause by requiring that FERC find any proposed LNG export in the public interest, the subcommittee's ranking Democrat, Colorado's Diana DeGette, said.

"It says all LNG exports must be in the public interest," DeGette said. "And it prohibits the Department of Energy from finding otherwise."

If increased exports lead to higher rates for U.S. consumers or "exorbitant" release of pollution, the department would be powerless to stop expansion, she said.

The pause does not impact current LNG exports, which are ample, DeGette added. The U.S. is the world's leading producer of LNG. Exports have tripled since 2019.

The Biden administration opposes the bill, the White House Office of Management and Budget said in a Tuesday statement.

The bill would undermine the administration's ability to ensure exports are aligned with economic, energy security, geopolitical and environmental goals, the statement said.

"The Administration believes that the critical protections current law provides, which this legislation would repeal, should be retained to protect residential and industrial consumers and national and domestic energy security," the statement said.

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

Trump's calendar becoming crowded as legal battles escalate in New York, D.C.

BY: ASHLEY MURRAY AND JACOB FISCHLER - FEBRUARY 15, 2024 2:07 PM

WASHINGTON — Former President Donald Trump's days fighting criminal charges in two courts could be arriving soon.

Special Counsel Jack Smith urged the U.S. Supreme Court on Wednesday not to pause federal election interference proceedings and a New York state judge on Thursday set a late March trial date on charges related to hush money allegations.

If the New York trial date holds, it will mark the first time a former U.S. president has been put on trial, even as he campaigns to be returned to office.

In the District of Columbia, Smith in a brief to the Supreme Court on Wednesday asked justices to deny Trump's request to further delay proceedings in the case that alleges he tried to overturn the 2020 presidential election results.

A speedy trial is in the public's interest and the 2024 Republican presidential front-runner's claims of absolute immunity and protection under the impeachment clause lack the merit needed for the justices to grant a stay, Smith said.

"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," Smith wrote in the 40-page filing.

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Rather, the Supreme Court should treat Trump's application for delay as a petition for the justices to speedily review and resolve the questions presented in the singular case, Smith said.

"Delay in the resolution of these charges threatens to frustrate the public interest in a speedy and fair verdict — a compelling interest in every criminal case and one that has unique national importance here, as it involves federal criminal charges against a former President for alleged criminal efforts to overturn the results of the Presidential election, including through the use of official power," Smith wrote.

If the justices decide to grant Trump's request to stay trial proceedings, they should also immediately move to hear the immunity appeal and expedite that schedule, Smith said. He added that the court should set oral arguments in the case for March, "consistent with the Court's expedition of other cases meriting such treatment."

Case proceedings have been delayed for months as Trump's request for criminal immunity has wound through the lower courts.

Smith underlined his own arguments for speed by filing his brief six days ahead of a deadline set by the Supreme Court.

New York trial to start March 25

That delay has not affected a separate criminal proceeding against Trump on New York state charges he falsified business records by paying hush money to adult film star Stormy Daniels during his 2016 White House campaign.

That case is set to proceed to jury selection on March 25 under an order Judge Juan M. Merchan signed Thursday.

The judge overseeing the federal election interference case in the District of Columbia, U.S. District Judge Tanya S. Chutkan, had originally set March 4 as the start date for that trial. The charges stem from a four-count criminal indictment brought by a federal grand jury in August.

When Chutkan denied Trump's immunity petition in early December, the former president appealed to the U.S. Court of Appeals for the D.C. Circuit.

Smith cites a 'radical claim'

The three-judge federal appeals panel unanimously denied Trump's request in a Feb. 6 opinion that found the former president's arguments "unsupported by precedent, history or the text and structure of the Constitution."

On Monday, Trump asked the Supreme Court to pause all proceedings in district court while he petitions the appeals court to escalate his case to a full-judge panel — a move that Smith says holds no merit.

The unanimous appeals ruling, issued by the three judges who were appointed by both Democratic and Republican administrations, clearly signals that Trump's "radical claim" will not be successful before a full appeals court, Smith argued.

"That position finds no support in constitutional text, separation-of-powers principles, history, or logic," Smith wrote. "And if that radical claim were accepted, it would upend understandings about Presidential accountability that have prevailed throughout history while undermining democracy and the rule of law."

Former presidents have long understood themselves to be subject to criminal prosecution following their terms, Smith said, meaning Trump's argument that anything short of full immunity would cause untold damage to the power of the presidency should be rejected.

Even after President Richard Nixon's Watergate scandal "removed any doubt" of a former president's criminal liability, no president until Trump has claimed that fear of post-presidency prosecution had any impact on Oval Office decision-making, Smith said.

Watergate, which also dealt with a president's unlawful attempts to remain in power, led to a criminal investigation and Nixon accepting a pardon for criminal activities arising from his conduct, Smith said.

"The Nation's tradition is therefore clear: Presidential conduct that violates the criminal law to achieve the end of remaining in power may be subject to a prosecution."

New York case

A trial on the federal election interference charges — one of four criminal trials pending against Trump — has been delayed from its initial start date following a months-long detour on the immunity issue.

That delay has allowed another trial to likely be the first to open against the former president, the one in New York state court.

Following the Thursday hearing in the case, Trump posted to his social media platform, Truth Social, to deny the charges and claim the state charges — as he says about all the criminal allegations he faces — are politically motivated.

“Just left the Courthouse in Manhattan,” Trump wrote. “Biden’s DOJ people have taken control of the case. There was NO CRIME, and almost all legal scholars are saying that. It’s Election Interference, the Dems 2024 way of cheating!”

Trump has denied having an affair with Daniels.

Trump also faces federal charges in South Florida that he improperly handled classified documents and refused to turn them over to authorities after he left office and state election interference charges in Georgia making similar allegations as the federal election interference case.

The Supreme Court heard another Trump case last week related to Colorado’s decision to remove him from the state’s presidential primary ballot. The state’s Supreme Court ruled in December that Trump should be disqualified from the race under a provision of the U.S. Constitution’s 14th Amendment that bars insurrectionists from holding office.

A decision is expected soon.

Ashley Murray covers the nation’s capital as a senior reporter for States Newsroom. Her coverage areas include domestic policy and appropriations.

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

Expanded child tax credit could be in place quickly if passed by Congress, IRS chief says

BY: ASHLEY MURRAY - FEBRUARY 15, 2024 1:53 PM

WASHINGTON — Internal Revenue Service Commissioner Danny Werfel told lawmakers Thursday on Capitol Hill that his agency is “poised to move quickly” on a bipartisan tax bill that would temporarily expand the child tax credit and revive several corporate tax breaks.

But, he cautioned, taxpayers should not wait to file.

The Tax Relief for American Families and Workers Act received overwhelming support in the U.S. House last month, in a 357-70 vote, and is now in the hands of the Senate, which has taken no action yet.

Werfel testified before the tax-writing U.S. House Committee on Ways and Means, where lawmakers asked for his guarantee that, if enacted, taxpayers would see the benefits of the new law this filing season.

The IRS is “paying close attention” to the legislation’s progress, the commissioner told the lawmakers.

“We may be able to start implementations (as) early as six to 12 weeks after passage, depending on the bill’s final language, but taxpayers should not wait for this legislation to file their returns. We will take care of getting any additional refunds to taxpayers who have already filed. They won’t need to take additional steps,” Werfel said in his opening remarks.

If passed, the legislation would expand the child tax credit by incrementally raising the refundable portion cap — meaning how much families could see in a refund check — from \$1,800 to \$1,900 to \$2,000 each tax year from 2023 to 2025.

In the realm of corporate tax cuts, the bill would extend several provisions from the 2017 tax law, many of which are winding down or have expired. Among them are reinstating full expensing for domestic research

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and development costs, allowing 100% bonus depreciation for equipment purchases and speeding up the time frame for certain business deductions.

No need for amended returns

During his questioning, Committee Chair Jason Smith, a Missouri Republican, asked Werfel to affirm that the IRS could handle the new changes with minimal disruption to the 2023 filing season.

"We worked with your team to make sure the bill did not place a new burden on taxpayers, and can be implemented without delay. Can you confirm that taxpayers do not need to file amended returns to obtain the adjustments the bill makes, further speeding things up?" Smith asked.

"Yes," Werfel answered.

Both Smith and Werfel compared the workload to the swift system-wide adjustments the IRS had to make when the government issued stimulus checks and monthly child tax credit installments to taxpayers during pandemic relief efforts.

"The number of taxpayers affected here is a fraction of those affected in those other programs. Given that, can you confirm the administrative adjustments needed to implement the tax relief for (the) American Families and Workers Act are a much lighter lift for the IRS than for those other programs?" Smith asked.

"Yes," Werfel said. "And Mr. Chairman, the work that we did to implement the payments that you referred (to), allowed us to build additional capacity to make us even more ready for this change."

Werfel was sworn in as the 50th commissioner of the IRS in March. His term runs until 2027.

Status in the Senate

The bill's fate in the Senate remains unclear.

Senate Republicans, including Mike Crapo of Idaho, ranking member of the Senate Committee on Finance, are taking issue with a child tax credit "look-back" provision for fear that it would decrease the program's work incentives.

The provision would allow taxpayers to calculate their credit based on either this year's or the previous year's annual income, depending on which is higher.

Experts see the option as a safeguard of the family's child tax credit against a sudden job loss, health issue or other situations that could interrupt steady work.

Senate Finance Committee Chair Ron Wyden of Oregon wants to "move as quickly as possible" on the bill, spokesman Ryan Carey told States Newsroom this month.

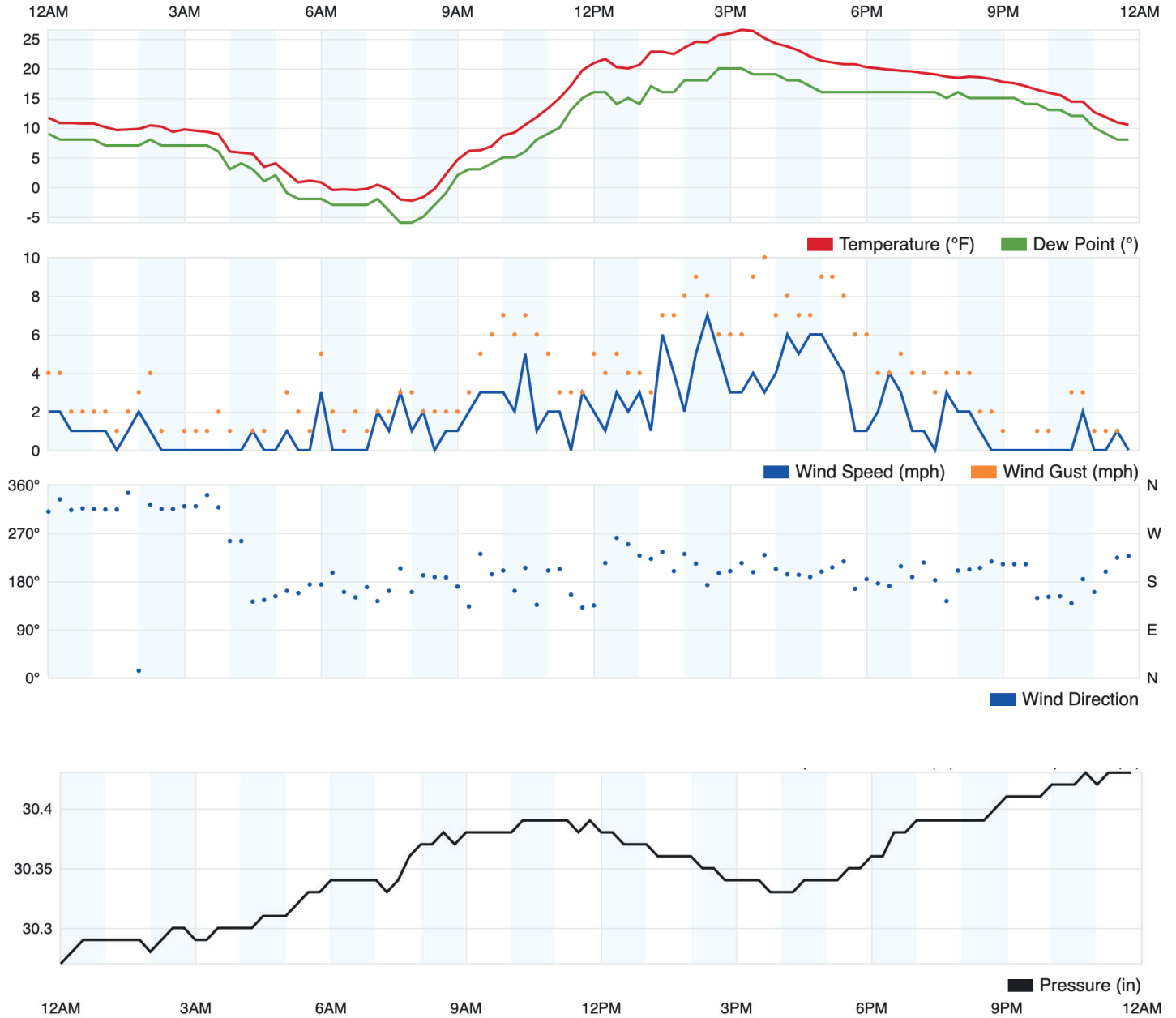
As of Feb. 11, no decisions had been made on a committee markup of the bill.

Ashley Murray covers the nation's capital as a senior reporter for States Newsroom. Her coverage areas include domestic policy and appropriations.

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Yesterday's Groton Weather Graphs



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Thu Feb 15	Fri Feb 16	Sat Feb 17	Sun Feb 18	Mon Feb 19	Tue Feb 20	Wed 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



Brief Cool Down

February 16, 2024

3:30 AM

Arctic air Today but strong winds bring milder air back for Saturday.

Today

Clearing. Breezy (NW Gusts 20-35)
Highs: 14 to 22°

Tonight

Clear. Breezy (NW Gusts 20-35)
Lows: 7 to 13°

Saturday

Clear. Windy (NW Gusts 30-55)
Highs: 30 to 41°

	Wind Gust Forecast (mph)																
	2/16 Fri					2/17 Sat					2/18 Sun						
	9am	12pm	3pm	6pm	9pm	12am	3am	6am	9am	12pm	3pm	6pm	9pm	12am	3am	6am	9am
Aberdeen	21	20	23	21	21	22	23	28	36	44	43	26	22	18	14	13	10
Britton	18	21	25	22	22	22	22	22	31	43	44	26	21	17	15	13	12
Brookings	10	17	22	17	16	18	21	23	29	35	36	30	28	22	18	14	10
Chamberlain	16	20	22	15	12	15	18	21	24	30	31	26	23	22	16	13	9
Clark	18	21	22	20	20	23	23	26	31	38	39	30	23	20	17	14	10
Eagle Butte	21	24	26	25	29	32	35	40	38	43	43	33	35	28	21	16	12
Ellendale	22	25	28	23	23	25	26	33	43	49	48	30	25	24	20	15	13
Eureka	22	30	35	25	28	28	30	35	37	46	46	32	29	24	21	15	12
Gettysburg	22	25	26	22	24	28	29	35	35	41	43	31	28	23	20	16	10
Huron	21	22	22	16	14	17	21	22	26	31	33	28	25	22	18	14	10
Kennebec	18	22	24	17	18	24	26	33	35	39	39	30	26	23	17	13	10
McIntosh	25	29	37	33	37	39	39	43	47	54	55	39	36	30	22	15	9
Milbank	15	20	22	18	20	21	22	28	33	43	43	28	24	20	18	17	16
Miller	18	20	22	16	20	24	26	35	38	43	43	31	28	21	18	15	12
Mobridge	21	22	26	25	25	28	29	33	32	43	40	31	25	21	16	12	8
Murdo	17	22	24	21	23	28	30	35	35	38	39	31	28	22	18	16	13
Pierre	15	20	23	16	18	23	24	25	28	35	36	29	25	17	13	10	8
Redfield	20	20	22	17	18	22	23	26	31	38	38	28	22	18	15	13	10
Sisseton	18	21	24	21	23	26	26	35	44	48	46	30	26	24	22	20	16
Watertown	15	18	22	20	20	22	24	29	32	40	41	29	25	20	18	15	13
Webster	21	22	26	23	24	25	26	35	38	47	49	35	26	23	21	17	15
Wheaton	18	21	23	18	18	21	22	23	29	37	38	23	20	18	18	17	17

Arctic air will briefly spread across the area, with highs some 10 to 20 degrees below normal. That cold air is replaced Saturday thanks to strong winds, resulting in highs as much as 10 degrees above average.

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Yesterday's Groton Weather

High Temp: 27 °F at 3:23 PM

Low Temp: -2 °F at 7:49 AM

Wind: 10 mph at 2:06 PM

Precip: : 0.00

Day length: 10 hours, 30 minutes

Today's Info

Record High: 56 in 1981

Record Low: -40 in 1936

Average High: 29

Average Low: 7

Average Precip in Feb.: 0.33

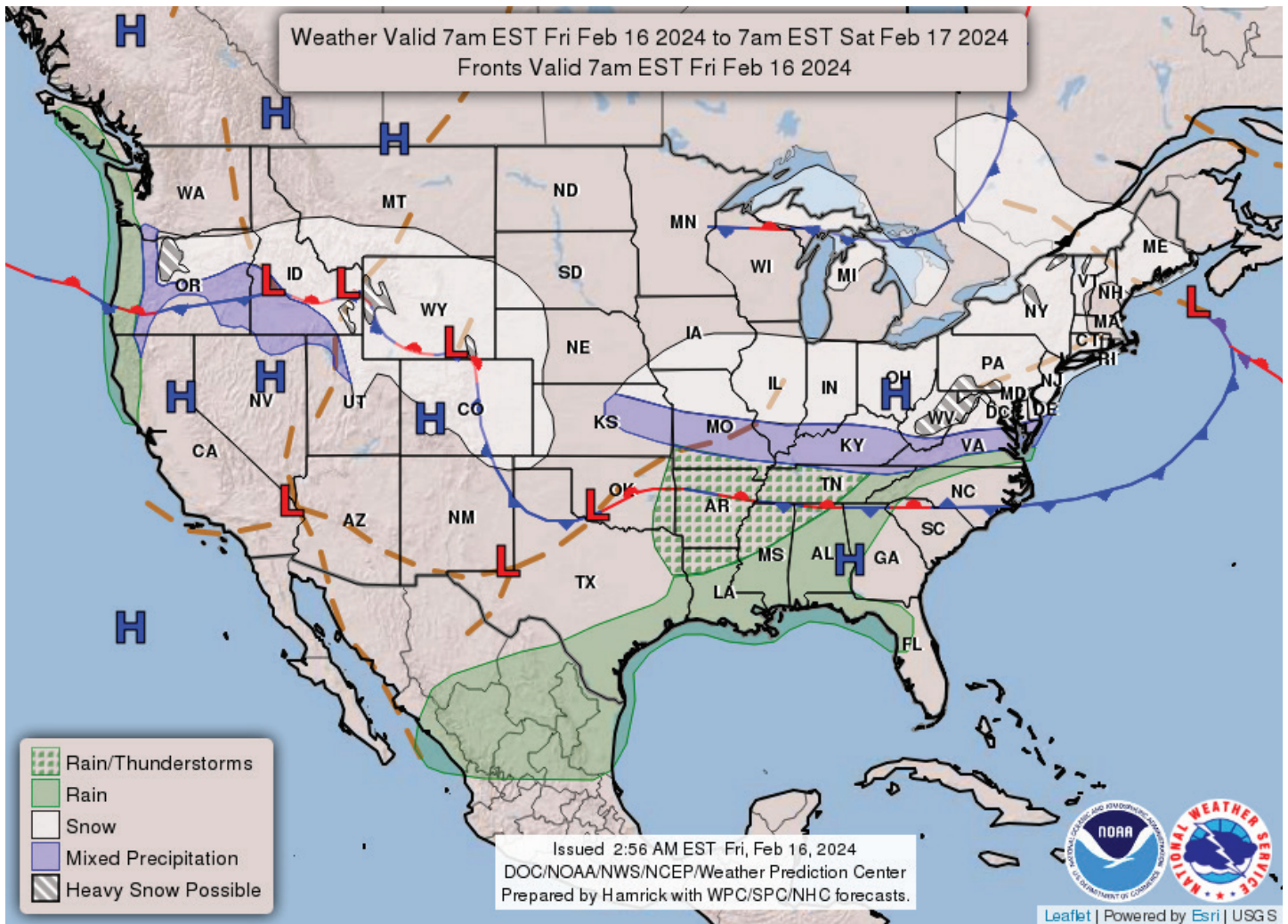
Precip to date in Feb.: 0.07

Average Precip to date: 0.88

Precip Year to Date: 0.07

Sunset Tonight: 6:01:47 pm

Sunrise Tomorrow: 7:29:31 am



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Today in Weather History

February 16th, 1969: Freezing drizzle and thick fog formed a heavy glaze on utility lines resulting in several broken power and telephone lines across northern South Dakota.

1898: A series of wildfires swept through South Carolina on February 16-17, 1898. Unconfirmed reports indicate that 14 people were killed, numerous homes and sawmills burned, and up to 3,000,000 acres of forest land were charred from Aiken County, S.C. to Chatham County, N.C., and east to Marlboro County, S.C. There were probably a dozen wildfires raging at the same time driven by a 40 mph wind.

1899 - Washington D.C. received 1.26 inches of rain in six hours atop a snow cover more than 30 inches deep making it the soggiest day of record. (Sandra and TI Richard Sanders - 1987)

1903: Pokegama Dam, Minnesota saw three straight days with low temperatures 50° below zero or colder, including 59° below zero on the 15th. The minus 59° established a state record for the lowest measured temperature in Minnesota. Pokegama Dam held the record until February 2nd, 1996 when the temperature fell to 60° below zero at Tower.

1943: Record cold prevailed in the northeastern United States. The mercury plunged to 37°F below zero at Concord, New Hampshire, and to -39 degrees at Portland, Maine. The morning low of -32°F at Falls Village, Connecticut, established a state record. The Connecticut record low was tied on January 22nd, 1961, when Coventry fell to -32°F.

1987 - A winter storm produced snow and ice in the Ohio Valley and the Appalachian Region. Snowfall totals in Virginia ranged up to 14 inches around Farmville, while Granville NC reported eight inches of sleet and ice. Freezing rain in eastern North Carolina caused extensive damage to power lines. Gales lashed the coast of Virginia and North Carolina. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

1988 - Santa Ana winds in southern California gusted to 50 mph in the Rancho Cucamonga area. Quiet weather prevailed across the rest of the nation. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

1989 - A surge of arctic air produced all-time record high barometric pressure readings of 31.08 inches at Duluth MN, 30.97 inches at Chicago IL and 30.94 inches at South Bend IN. Readings of 31.00 inches at Milwaukee WI and 30.98 inches at Rockford IL tied their all-time records. Unseasonably warm weather prevailed across the southeastern U.S. Highs of 81 degrees at Athens GA, 87 degrees at Charleston SC, 85 degrees at Macon GA, and 86 degrees at Savannah GA were records for February. (The National Weather Summary)

1990 - Strong thunderstorms developing ahead of an arctic cold front produced severe weather across the southeastern U.S. between mid morning on the 15th and early evening on the 16th. Thunderstorms spawned thirteen tornadoes, including one which, prior to dawn on the 16th, injured eleven persons near Carrollton GA. There were also 121 reports of large hail or damaging winds. A late afternoon thunderstorm on the 15th produced baseball size hail at Jackson MS, and prior to dawn on the 16th, a thunderstorm produced high winds which injured four persons at Goodwater AL. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

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Daily Devotionals

Seeds of Hope

DIG DEEPER!

Henry was caught up in the gold rush. Shortly after arriving in California, he found a mine, staked a claim, and began digging. One day he found some ore, became excited, and believed he had struck it rich. He knew, without any doubt, that fame and fortune would soon be his.

He kept digging for a few weeks but eventually became discouraged and wanted to quit. Finally, a stranger approached him and offered to purchase his mine. In a moment of frustration, he agreed to sell his rights for \$11,000.00.

The new owner was excited about his purchase and began to dig where Henry stopped. And he kept digging for years and years. Eventually, the Comstock Mine produced 340 million dollars of gold!

Wanting to encourage the church in Galatia, the Apostle Paul wrote, "So don't get tired of doing what is good. Don't get discouraged and give up, for we will reap a harvest of blessings at the appropriate time."

We have all faced those times in our lives when we become discouraged and distressed at doing what we believe is the right thing to do. No one offers a word of thanks or encouragement, and there are no visible results to accompany our hard work. But Paul reminds us to keep on keeping on and doing good and then trust God for the results. Giving in or giving up or giving out is the sure way to forfeit the blessing that God will award us for being faithful.

Prayer: Heavenly Father, may we be faithful to You in what You ask us to do. Protect us from allowing discouraging moments to destroy us and doubts to defeat us. In Jesus' Name, Amen.

Scripture For Today: So don't get tired of doing what is good. Don't get discouraged and give up, for we will reap a harvest of blessings at the appropriate time. Galatians 6:9



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: 17 Hrs 36 Mins 43 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: 1 Days 16 Hrs 51 Mins 42 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

LUCKY FOR LIFE

WINNING NUMBERS: 02.15.24

17 41 42 45 46 16

TOP PRIZE:

\$7,000/week

NEXT DRAW: 17 Hrs 6 Mins 42 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

DAKOTA CASH

WINNING NUMBERS: 02.14.24

2 10 19 25 28

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:

\$51,000

NEXT DRAW: 1 Days 17 Hrs 6 Mins 42 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

POWERBALL

DOUBLE PLAY

WINNING NUMBERS: 02.14.24

33 40 45 48 53 17

TOP PRIZE:

\$10,000,000

NEXT DRAW: 1 Days 17 Hrs 35 Mins 42 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: 1 Days 17 Hrs 35 Mins 42 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

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News from the  Associated Press

Thursday's Scores

The Associated Press

BOYS PREP BASKETBALL

Aberdeen Roncalli 46, Deuel 34
Andes Central-Dakota Christian 54, Kimball-White Lake 41
Canistota 63, Irene-Wakonda 39
Deubrook 55, Elkton-Lake Benton 41
Florence-Henry 56, Sisseton 34
Freeman 72, Gayville-Volin High School 63
Freeman Academy-Marion 73, Menno 49
Gregory 61, Platte-Geddes 32
Hamlin 52, Clark-Willow Lake 38
Harding County 66, Hulett, Wyo. 52
Howard 54, Viborg-Hurley 53
Ipswich 48, Potter County 34
Lemmon High School 70, Bison 25
Oldham-Ramona-Rutland 41, Flandreau Indian 10
Parkston 52, Mt. Vernon/Plankinton 39
Rapid City Christian 71, Hill City 69
Sanborn Central-Woonsocket 63, Iroquois-Lake Preston 38
Sioux Falls Christian 93, Sioux Center, Iowa 64
Sioux Valley 97, Garretson 45
Sturgis Brown 46, Rapid City Central 44
Sully Buttes 67, Faulkton 60
Tea 53, Yankton 41
Tripp-Delmont-Armour 50, Ethan 49
Wall 55, Philip 43
Waubay/Summit 40, Great Plains Lutheran 36
Waverly-South Shore 63, Redfield 36
Wolsey-Wessington 69, Hitchcock-Tulare 31

GIRLS PREP BASKETBALL

Aberdeen Roncalli 54, Deuel 43
Andes Central-Dakota Christian 53, Kimball-White Lake 43
Burke 71, Gregory 50
Canistota 53, Irene-Wakonda 32
Custer 63, Lead-Deadwood 33
Dell Rapids St Mary 59, Bridgewater-Emery 45
Elkton-Lake Benton 49, Deubrook 26
Estelline-Hendricks 65, Castlewood 61, 20T
Ethan 59, Tripp-Delmont-Armour 32
Freeman 62, Gayville-Volin High School 37
Great Plains Lutheran 38, Waubay/Summit 33
Hamlin 51, Clark-Willow Lake 44
Harding County 66, Hulett, Wyo. 17
Hitchcock-Tulare 52, Wolsey-Wessington 49

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Howard 63, Viborg-Hurley 56, OT
Huron 54, Sioux Falls Lincoln 32
Lemmon High School 86, McIntosh 12
Leola-Frederick High School 60, North Central 30
McCook Central-Montrose 61, Madison 56
Menno 51, Freeman Academy-Marion 40
Milbank 60, Webster 37
Miller 42, Highmore-Harold 34
Northwestern 55, Herreid-Selby 35
Oldham-Ramona-Rutland 69, Flandreau Indian 26
Potter County 57, Ipswich 42
Rapid City Central 58, Sturgis Brown 23
Rapid City Christian 55, Hill City 49
Sanborn Central-Woonsocket 41, Iroquois-Lake Preston 39
Sioux Falls Jefferson 43, Marshall, Minn. 41
Sioux Valley 58, Garretson 35
Sisseton 62, Florence-Henry 54
Sully Buttes 56, Faulkton 51
Tea 82, Yankton 55
POSTPONEMENTS AND CANCELLATIONS=
Douglas vs. Spearfish, ppd.
Jones County vs. Lyman, ppd.
Lakota Tech vs. White River, ccd.

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

Courseault scores 17, leads Kansas City over South Dakota State 72-67

By The Associated Press undefined

KANSAS CITY, Mo. (AP) — Khristion Courseault scored 17 points and Kansas City beat South Dakota State 72-67 on Thursday night.

Courseault also contributed five assists for the Kangaroos (12-15, 6-6 Summit League). Jamar Brown scored 16 points with two 3-pointers, adding 10 rebounds. Jayson Petty had nine points.

The Jackrabbits (14-12, 7-4) were led by Zeke Mayo with 19 points. William Kyle III added 15 points and five blocks. Charlie Easley contributed 13 points, eight rebounds and four assists.

Fidler's 23 help Omaha beat South Dakota 91-84

By The Associated Press undefined

OMAHA, Neb. (AP) — Frankie Fidler scored 23 points as Omaha beat South Dakota 91-84 on Thursday night.

Fidler also contributed six rebounds and six assists for the Mavericks (13-14, 6-6 Summit League). JJ White scored 18 points while shooting 7 for 10, including 3 for 5 from beyond the arc. Marquel Sutton had 14 points and was 5 of 10 shooting and 4 of 8 from the free throw line.

Bostyn Holt led the Coyotes (10-16, 3-8) in scoring, finishing with 22 points. Lahat Thioune added 20 points and six rebounds for South Dakota. In addition, Kaleb Stewart finished with 18 points and four assists.

14 GOP-led states have turned down federal money to feed low-income kids in the summer. Here's why

By JONATHAN MATTISE and GEOFF MULVIHILL Associated Press

Lower-income families with school-age kids can get help from the federal government paying for groceries this summer, unless they live in one of the 14 states that have said no to joining the program this year.

The reasons for the rejections, all from states with Republican governors, include philosophical objections to welfare programs, technical challenges due to aging computer systems and satisfaction with other summer nutrition programs reaching far fewer children.

The impact falls on people like Otibehia Allen, a single mom of five in Clarksdale, Mississippi, who makes too much to qualify for some public assistance programs. She could have received \$480 in aid over three months this summer if her state participated.

"It would have helped us a whole lot, especially with the boys," Allen said. "They're growing children. They eat a lot."

Many states have rejected federal funds on principle or for technical reasons. In 2021, 26 states cut short the enhanced unemployment benefits people received during the coronavirus pandemic. Twenty-two states have turned down the mostly federally funded expansion of Medicaid eligibility to provide health insurance to more lower-income adults. A dozen of those states have reconsidered and expanded Medicaid.

The Summer EBT program, a response to increased child hunger when school is out, involves much less money. The federal government launched pilot versions in 2011, expanded it nationally during the pandemic and then Congress made it permanent within a spending bill adopted in December 2022. States must split the administrative costs 50/50, and the federal government funds the benefits, which are expected to cost \$2.5 billion this year and help feed 21 million children.

Another 10 million eligible kids live in states that turned down the funding.

For each of three summer months, families with children in free or reduced-price school lunch programs will get \$40 per qualifying child on an electronic benefits transfer — or EBT — card. It can only cover groceries and food from farmers' markets.

Family size determines the income limits. A family of three making under about \$46,000 would qualify in most of the country.

States had until the end of 2023 to decide whether they would join this summer. They can enroll in future years even if they skip it in 2024. Vermont plans to do that after replacing a state computer system.

The spending measure provided some broad outlines a year earlier and the U.S. Department of Agriculture shared details with the states throughout 2023. But the interim final rules were not published until Dec. 29, timing that some states said proved problematic for deciding whether to join.

The Texas Health and Human Services Commission said late rulemaking factored into its opting out, along with needing lawmakers to approve funding for the state's administrative cost share. Texas lawmakers aren't scheduled to convene this year. Spokesperson Thomas Vazquez said via email that Texas would consider joining later.

It's the other way around in Tennessee, which opted into the lunch program for 2024 but doesn't plan to continue in 2025.

Like leaders in other states, Republican Gov. Bill Lee's office said the initiative is a pandemic-era benefit and that other food programs already exist.

But Food Research and Action Center, an advocacy group targeting hunger, has found that the main federally funded summer nutrition program doesn't reach most qualified children. During the summer of 2022, it fed only one of every nine children served by the free or reduced-price lunch program nationwide during the 2021-2022 school year.

Wyoming Superintendent of Public Instruction Megan Degenfelder said she turned down the Summer EBT card funds because she wanted to prioritize the current summer meals programs, which require minimal state funding.

"I generally prefer those meals getting directly to kids," she told The Associated Press. "At the feeding

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sites, we know that's happening."

Still, she said the summer sites in her rural state need improvement. In 2022, they served about 9,400 summer lunches daily, which is only one-fifth of the daily average for free and reduced price lunches in the 2021-22 school year. Six of Wyoming's 23 counties have no sites. And even though the federal government last year started letting families take home a week's worth of meals for children, Wyoming sites offered only in-person meals.

Wyoming's share of administrative costs this year would have been about \$1.1 million, and about \$690,000 annually in the future, Defenfelder said.

Republican governors currently lead all the rejecting states, but Louisiana had a Democrat with one week left in his term when the deadline hit.

In some places, the rejections have had a partisan edge.

In Mississippi, one of the states with the most food insecurity for children, some 324,000 children — including four of Allen's — would have been eligible.

Republican Gov. Tate Reeves' office declared it an unnecessary big government program, saying that if Washington D.C. Democrats had their way, "Americans would still be locked down, subjected to COVID vaccine and mask mandates, and welfare rolls would've exploded."

Allen, who works as a transportation dispatcher and scheduler, thinks Reeves' priorities are misplaced. She pointed to the state's implementation of an abortion ban in 2022.

"Why do you care so much about my uterus and how many babies I'm having or aborting?" Allen said. "Why is that a concern when I still have to feed this child, but you're not helping me do that?"

The rejections have drawn backlash.

In Nebraska, Republican Gov. Jim Pillen sparked a firestorm of criticism when he justified rejecting the money by explaining, "I don't believe in welfare." But he reversed course on Monday and said the state would join the program after a Democratic lawmaker introduced a bill to require participation. He said he was swayed by hearing stories about hunger from high school students.

Lisa Davis, senior vice president of the No Kid Hungry Campaign for Share Our Strength, said she believes all the states can be persuaded to join in the coming years.

"Childhood hunger is one of the few issues that brings everyone together," she said.

The remaining holdouts are Alabama, Alaska, Florida, Georgia, Idaho, Iowa, Louisiana, Mississippi, Oklahoma, South Carolina, South Dakota, Texas, Vermont and Wyoming.

Officials in Iowa's two most populous counties are requesting the state-rejected funds anyway, though the program offers no pathway to fund local governments instead of states.

In Iowa's rejection, Gov. Kim Reynolds said it was not a long-term solution.

"An EBT card does nothing to promote nutrition at a time when childhood obesity has become an epidemic," the Republican said in a statement.

But Crystal FitzSimons, director of school programs at Food Research and Action Center, cited research that families buy more nutritional food when their grocery subsidies increase.

"It's a missed opportunity when kids are going hungry," she said.

Trial begins for North Dakota's effort to recoup costs of policing Dakota Access pipeline protests

By JACK DURA Associated Press

BISMARCK, N.D. (AP) — Opening statements began Thursday in the trial of North Dakota's lawsuit against the federal government 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. The bench trial before U.S. District Court Judge Daniel Traynor is expected to last 12 to 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

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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.

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 because of the threat of an oil spill polluting the tribe's water supply.

The protests lasted from about August 2016 to February 2017. 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.

In court, Special Assistant Attorney General Paul Seby said the Obama-era federal government allowed and encouraged an "unpermitted, massive and long-term occupation of federal lands." The protests drew a 230-day response that involved 178 agencies, resulted in 761 arrests and required a four-day cleanup of the camp and 600 bins to remove 9.8 million pounds of trash, he said.

"North Dakota was left to deal with this crisis on its own," Seby said.

The state relied on compacts to bring in law enforcement officers from around the region and the country for help, Wrigley said. Then-Gov. Jack Dalrymple activated the North Dakota National Guard in September 2016.

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."

Assistant U.S. Attorney Jane Bobet Rejko said U.S. Army Corps of Engineers officials "acted reasonably given limited options at their disposal" during the protests, which she called "unique, unpredictable and hard to control."

Much of the case appears focused on two 2016 Corps statements related to a special use permit and a "free speech zone" for demonstrators. Bobet Rejko said those statements had no effect on the protests. North Dakota's claim is "greatly overstated" and can't show the Corps statements caused the state to incur the \$38 million of response costs, she said.

Seby outlined a litany of witnesses who will testify, including Dalrymple and Gov. Doug Burgum and law enforcement and emergency response leaders.

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.

UK voters deliver double blow to Rishi Sunak, electing Labour lawmakers in two special elections

By JILL LAWLESS Associated Press

LONDON (AP) — Beleaguered British Prime Minister Rishi Sunak on Friday urged voters and his party to stick with him, after two English districts elected opposition-party lawmakers in seats that Sunak's Conservatives had held for years.

The results will worsen fears among Conservatives that, after 14 years in power, the party is heading for a drubbing when a national election is held in less than a year. The Tories consistently lag between 10 and 20 points behind the left-of-center Labour Party in opinion polls.

Labour candidate Damien Egan won the House of Commons seat of Kingswood in southwest England, and Labour's Gen Kitchen took Wellingborough in the country's center, results announced Friday showed. The Conservatives won both by large margins at the last national election in 2019 but saw support collapse in Thursday's special elections.

Reform U.K. — formerly known as the Brexit Party — came third, leaving the Conservatives facing pressure from the right as well as the left.

"Stick with our plan, because it is starting to deliver the change that the country wants and needs," Sunak said.

"We've clearly been through a lot over the past couple of years as a country, but I genuinely believe at the start of this year we're pointing in the right direction," he told reporters.

Labour leader Keir Starmer said the results "show people want change."

Thursday's elections replaced two lawmakers who left suddenly, one in protest, the other under a cloud.

Lawmaker Chris Skidmore quit the Kingswood seat last month to protest Sunak's lack of commitment to green energy. Long-serving Wellingborough legislator Peter Bone was ousted over allegations of bullying and sexual misconduct.

The Conservatives have now lost 10 by-elections since the last general election, more than any administration since the 1960s. That includes six defeats — and one win — since Sunak took office in October 2022. He replaced Liz Truss, who rocked the economy with a plan for unfunded tax cuts and lasted just seven weeks in office.

Sunak, the fifth Conservative leader since 2016, has restored a measure of stability, but failed to revive the governing party's popularity.

The Conservatives have been in power nationally since 2010, years that saw austerity following the world banking crisis, Britain's divisive decision to leave the European Union, a global pandemic and a European war that triggered the worst cost-of-living crisis in decades.

Polls show the Conservatives are losing support across the country, from affluent southern voters turned off by Brexit to working-class northern voters who switched from Labour for the 2019 election, when then-Prime Minister Boris Johnson promised to spread prosperity to long-neglected areas.

Those promises remain largely unmet, and Britain's economic growth has come to a virtual standstill, with the country slipping into recession at the end of 2023 for the first time since the onset of the coronavirus pandemic. That limits the government's scope for wooing voters with pre-election tax cuts.

"In Kingswood, as across the country, 14 years of Conservative government have sucked the hope out of our country with a feeling that no matter how hard you work, you just can't move forward," Egan said in his victory speech. "It doesn't have to be this way -- you know it, I know it, we all know it."

Conservative Party chairman Richard Holden called the results "very disappointing," though the party said the low turnout — less than 40% of eligible voters cast ballots — was a sign British electors are not enthusiastic about Labour.

But University of Strathclyde polling expert John Curtice said the results confirmed that the Conservatives are in "very, very considerable electoral trouble."

"The Conservatives are going to have to defeat the historical record to come back from where they are," he told the BBC.

The Conservative losses may embolden Sunak's many rivals in the fractious party, who are already positioning themselves for the leadership contest that would likely follow an election defeat. Some even want to oust Sunak sooner, replacing him with a low-tax, low-immigration right-winger who might win back voters from Reform, which wants to curb migration, cut taxes and scrap green-energy measures. Others warn that foisting another unelected leader on the country might backfire.

Sunak's only consolation is that Labour is also experiencing turbulence. Last week the party watered down a key green investment pledge, saying the Conservatives had left the economy too weak to honor the commitment.

Starmer also is struggling to stamp out allegations of antisemitism within the party. This week the party disowned its candidate for another special election after a newspaper published remarks he had made during a local party meeting claiming that Israel allowed Hamas' Oct. 7 attack to happen as a pretext to invade Gaza.

Critics say it's evidence Labour has not rooted out the antisemitism that festered under previous leader Jeremy Corbyn, a staunch supporter of the Palestinians and a critic of Israel. It's unclear whether the controversy has hurt Labour in opinion polls.

4 patients die as oxygen runs out in Gaza hospital seized by Israeli forces, health officials say

By WAFAA SHURAFI and BASSEM MROUE Associated Press

RAFAH, Gaza Strip (AP) — The storming by Israeli troops of southern Gaza's main hospital brought chaos to hundreds of staff and patients inside, as health officials Friday said four people in intensive care died after their oxygen cut off. Troops were searching the facility, where the military said it believes the remains of hostages abducted by Hamas might be located.

The raid came after troops had besieged Nasser Hospital in the southern city of Khan Younis for nearly a week, with staff, patients and others inside struggling under heavy fire and dwindling supplies, including food and water. Hours before troops seized the hospital Thursday, Israeli fire killed a patient and wounded six others inside the complex, staff said.

Negotiations over a cease-fire in Gaza, meanwhile, appear to have stalled, and Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu on Friday pushed back hard against the U.S. vision for after the war — particularly its calls for the creation of a Palestinian state. After speaking overnight with President Joe Biden, Netanyahu wrote on X that Israel will not accept "international dictates regarding a permanent settlement with the Palestinians."

He said that if other countries unilaterally recognize a Palestinian state, it would give a "reward to terrorism." Netanyahu has repeatedly rejected creation of a Palestinian state.

Netanyahu has vowed to continue the offensive and expand it to the Gaza city of Rafah, near Egypt, until Hamas is destroyed and scores of hostages taken during the militants' Oct. 7 attack are freed. In their phone call, Biden again cautioned Netanyahu against moving forward with a military operation in Rafah before coming up with a "credible and executable plan" to ensure the safety of Palestinian civilians, the White House said.

With the war showing no sign of ending, the risk of a broader conflict grew as Israel and Lebanon's Hezbollah militant group had deadliest exchange of fire along the border since the start of the Israel-Hamas war. Israel launched airstrikes into southern Lebanon for a second day on Thursday after killing 10 civilians and three Hezbollah fighters on Wednesday in response to a rocket attack that killed an Israeli soldier and wounded several others.

SCENES OF PANIC IN HOSPITAL

Nasser Hospital was the latest in a series of hospitals Israeli forces have besieged and stormed during the war, claiming Hamas was using them for military purposes. The assaults have gutted Gaza's health sector as it struggles to treat a constant stream of people wounded in daily bombardments.

Israeli troops, tanks and snipers have surrounded Nasser Hospital for at least a week, with food, water

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and supplies inside dwindling and fire from outside killing several people inside, according to health officials.

Troops moved into the hospital Thursday after the military said it had "credible intelligence" that Hamas had held hostages there and that the hostages' remains 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.

Later Thursday, Hagari said troops were still searching the hospital. He said dozens of militants were arrested from the hospital grounds, including three who participated in the Oct. 7 attack. He also said troops found grenades and mortar shells, and that Israeli radar determined that militants fired mortars from the hospital grounds a month ago. The claims could not be independently confirmed.

A released hostage told The Associated Press last month that she and over two dozen other captives had been held in Nasser Hospital.

International law prohibits the targeting of medical facilities, though they can lose those protections if they are used for military purposes. Even then, Israel must take precautions and follow principles of proportionality, the U.N. Human Rights Office said, adding that "as the occupying power" Israel has the duty to maintain medical facilities.

As they searched, troops ordered the more than 460 staff, patients and their relatives to move into an older building in the compound that isn't equipped to treat patients, the Gaza Health Ministry said. They were "in harsh conditions with no food or baby formula" and severe water shortages, it said.

Four patients in the intensive care unit died early Friday because electricity was cut, stopping oxygen supplies for them, the ministry said. It had earlier warned that six patients in the ICU and three infants in incubators were in danger because fuel for generators was on the verge of running out. "The Israeli occupation is responsible for the lives of patients and staff as the compound now is under its full control," the ministry said.

Raed Abed, a wounded patient who was among those who left the hospital Wednesday, said days of siege had left the facility with no water or food, "Garbage is everywhere. Sewage has flooded the emergency ward."

Still suffering from a severe stomach wound, Abed said he and others waited outside for hours as troops made those leaving pass by five at a time, arresting some and making them strip to their underwear, he said. Finally, he walked for kilometers (miles) until he reached the border town of Rafah, where he was put in a hospital. Lying in a bed there, he wheezed in pain from his wound as he spoke.

NO END IN SIGHT TO THE WAR

The war began when Hamas militants on Oct. 7 burst out of Gaza and attacked several Israeli communities, killing some 1,200 people and taking another 250 hostage. More than 100 captives were freed during a cease-fire in November in exchange for 240 Palestinian prisoners. Around 130 hostages remain in Gaza, a fourth of whom are believed to be dead.

Israel responded to the Hamas attack with one of the deadliest and most destructive military campaigns in recent history.

At least 28,663 Palestinians have been killed, mostly women and children, and more than 68,000 wounded, according to Gaza's Health Ministry, which does not distinguish between civilians and combatants. Some 80% of the population has been driven from 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.

Israeli media reported that CIA Director William Burns flew to Israel to meet with Netanyahu to discuss efforts for a cease-fire.

Hamas says it will not release all the remaining captives until Israel ends its offensive, withdraws and frees Palestinian prisoners, including top militants.

Netanyahu has rejected those demands and says Israel will soon expand its offensive into Rafah, Gaza's southernmost city. Over half of Gaza's population of 2.3 million has sought refuge in Rafah after fleeing fighting elsewhere.

Multiple airstrikes hit Rafah overnight, destroying homes where families were sheltering and killing at least 11 people, according to health officials.

Ukraine's Zelenskyy will sign security agreements with Germany, France as Kyiv shores up support

By GEIR MOULSON Associated Press

BERLIN (AP) — Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy is expected to sign bilateral security agreements with Germany and France on Friday as Kyiv works to shore up Western support nearly two years after Russia launched its full-scale war.

The Ukrainian leader was welcomed by Chancellor Olaf Scholz at the German chancellery in Berlin and was set to continue to Paris to meet French President Emmanuel Macron.

The bilateral security and long-term support agreements follow a security agreement between Ukraine and the U.K. signed when British Prime Minister Rishi Sunak visited Kyiv last month. That accord covers the next 10 years.

Zelenskyy will continue Saturday to the Munich Security Conference, an annual gathering of high-ranking security and foreign policy officials, where he plans meetings with U.S. Vice President Kamala Harris among others.

The security agreements appear aimed primarily at sending a message of long-term solidarity as Ukraine has moved onto the defensive in the war, hindered by low ammunition supplies and a shortage of personnel.

A French official, speaking anonymously because he was not allowed to disclose the details of the deal, said ahead of Zelenskyy's trip that the agreement with Paris aims to "provide long-term support" to Ukraine as well as sending a "message of determination." He said it will include financial and economic support, in addition to military and security commitments.

The U.K.-Ukraine agreement pledged to help build up Ukraine's defense manufacturing and to provide "swift and sustained security assistance" if Russia attacks again, though it doesn't go into great detail.

European allies have appealed to the U.S. Congress in recent days to approve a package that includes 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 are being sent to the battlefields in Ukraine. The package faces resistance from House Republicans.

Scholz traveled to Washington a week ago to underscore the urgency of releasing U.S. funding. After meeting President Joe Biden, he said: "We shouldn't beat around the bush: support from the United States is indispensable for the question of whether Ukraine will be in a position to defend itself."

Germany is now the second-biggest supplier of military aid to Ukraine after the U.S., and Scholz has called recently for other European countries to step up with more weapons deliveries.

Zelenskyy has made one previous visit to Berlin since the Russian invasion in February 2022, in May last year. Friday's trip will be his third to Paris since the invasion, following visits in February and May 2023.

Live updates | Biden warns Israel not to attack Rafah without plan to protect civilians

By The Associated Press undefined

President Joe Biden has again cautioned Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu against moving forward with a military operation in the southern Gaza city of Rafah without a "credible and executable plan" to protect civilians.

However, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu vowed early on Friday to reject "international dictates" on a long-term resolution of Israel's conflict with the Palestinians.

Israeli troops entered the main hospital in southern Gaza on Thursday in what the army said was a limited operation seeking the remains of hostages taken by Hamas in the militants' attack on Oct. 7 that started the war.

Israeli troops, tanks and snipers had surrounded the hospital compound in the town of Khan Younis for at least a week, with heavy fire all around it, killing several people inside the compound in recent days,

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according to health officials. Israel accuses Hamas of using hospitals and other civilian structures to shield its fighters.

Also Thursday, Israel launched airstrikes in southern Lebanon for a second day after killing 10 civilians and three Hezbollah fighters the day before in response to a rocket attack that killed an Israeli soldier and wounded several others in northern Israel. Wednesday was the deadliest of daily exchanges of fire along the border since the Oct. 7 start of the war in Gaza.

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. About 1,200 people, mostly civilians, were killed and around 250 abducted in Hamas' attack on Israel on Oct. 7.

Currently:

- Israeli forces storm the main hospital in southern Gaza, saying hostages were likely held there.
- Israeli airstrikes killed 10 Lebanese civilians in a single day. Hezbollah has vowed to retaliate.
- A look at the arsenals of Israel and Lebanon's Hezbollah militia as cross-border strikes escalate.
- On the USS Eisenhower, four months of combat at sea facing Houthi missiles.
- Families of Israeli hostages visit international court to urge the arrest of Hamas leaders
- Find more of AP's coverage at <https://apnews.com/hub/israel-hamas-war>.

Here's the latest:

SATELLITE IMAGES SHOW EGYPT IS BUILDING A WALL NEAR GAZA STRIP

Egypt is building a wall and is leveling land near its border with the Gaza Strip ahead of a planned Israeli offensive targeting Rafah, satellite images analyzed Friday by The Associated Press show. Egypt hasn't publicly acknowledged the construction but has warned Israel not to forcibly expel the Palestinians now displaced in Rafah into Egypt.

But the images from the Egyptian side of the border in the Sinai Peninsula suggest Cairo is preparing for just that scenario, something that could threaten its 1979 peace deal with Israel.

Cairo officials did not respond to requests for comment Friday from the AP. The satellite images, taken Thursday by Maxar Technologies, show construction ongoing on the wall, which sits along the Sheikh Zuweid-Rafah Road some 3.5 kilometers (2 miles) west of the border with Gaza.

The images show cranes, trucks and what appear to be precast concrete barriers being set up along the road.

NETANYAHU REJECTS 'INTERNATIONAL DICTATES' ON CONFLICT WITH PALESTINIANS

JERUSALEM — Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu says Israel will not accept what he portrayed as "international dictates" regarding a resolution of the conflict with the Palestinians.

Writing early Friday on X, Netanyahu said such a resolution can only be the result of negotiations. He also said Israel opposes a unilateral recognition of statehood, claiming it would amount to a "huge reward" for the militant group Hamas following its deadly Oct. 7 attack on Israel.

Netanyahu leads a right-wing coalition that is fiercely opposed to a Palestinian state arising alongside Israel. During his years as prime minister, there were no significant high-level negotiations with the Palestinians. He has boasted that he has been instrumental over the years in preventing Palestinian statehood.

The two-state solution has broad international support, but international diplomatic efforts were long dormant, with successive U.S. presidents reluctant to spend political capital on a seemingly intractable conflict.

This changed after the Oct. 7 attack that triggered Israel's destructive war on Hamas in Gaza. Western diplomats have renewed a push for Palestinian statehood as part of a post-war scenario. Recognition of a provisional Palestinian state as an interim step has been floated, including by Britain's foreign secretary.

Netanyahu wrote Friday that "Israel rejects outright international dictates regarding a permanent settlement with the Palestinians."

ISRAELI HOSTAGE IN GAZA IS CONFIRMED DEAD BY HIS KIBBUTZ

JERUSALEM — An Israeli kibbutz says one of its residents who was kidnapped by Hamas has been pronounced dead.

Yair Yaakov, 59, was captured from his home in Kibbutz Nir Oz on Oct. 7 when Hamas militants staged

a attack on southern Israel that killed roughly 1,200 people and took 250 others hostage.

His partner, Meirav Tal, and two of his children, Yagil and Or, were also taken captive but released during a brief cease-fire in November.

Nir Oz was hit hard on Oct. 7, with dozens of residents taken hostage.

The kibbutz said Thursday that Yaakov had been killed on Oct. 7 and his body was being held in Gaza.

"He was energetic, loved life, and often enjoyed music with a cold beer. He was a loving father to his children," the kibbutz said.

It did not say how it had determined the death, but families are typically notified of intelligence assessments by the Israeli military.

Over 100 hostages are still held captive in the Gaza Strip after 121 were released during the cease-fire. The remains of roughly 30 others either killed on Oct. 7 or who died in Hamas captivity are believed to be in Gaza.

Satellite photos show Egypt building a wall near Gaza Strip as Israeli offensive on Rafah looms

By JON GAMBRELL Associated Press

DUBAI, United Arab Emirates (AP) — Egypt is building a wall and is leveling land near its border with the Gaza Strip ahead of a planned Israeli offensive targeting the border city of Rafah, satellite images analyzed Friday by The Associated Press show.

Egypt, which has not publicly acknowledged the construction, repeatedly has warned Israel not to forcibly expel the over 1 million Palestinians now displaced in Rafah across the border into its territory while it battles the militant group Hamas for a fifth month.

However, the preparations on the Egyptian side of the border in the Sinai Peninsula suggest Cairo is preparing for just that scenario, something that could threaten its 1979 peace deal with Israel that's been a linchpin for regional security.

The Egyptian government did not respond to requests for comment Friday from the AP. The Egyptian Foreign Ministry on Feb. 11 issued a statement warning Israel over its possible Rafah offensive and its "displacement of the Palestinian people."

The satellite images, taken Thursday by Maxar Technologies, show construction ongoing on the wall, which sits along the Sheikh Zuweid-Rafah Road some 3.5 kilometers (2 miles) west of the border with Gaza. The images show cranes, trucks and what appear to be precast concrete barriers being set up along the road.

Those satellite images correspond to features seen in a video released by the London-based Sinai Foundation for Human Rights on Feb. 12. The video shows a crane lifting concrete walls into place along the road.

Nearby as well, construction crews appear to be leveling and clearing ground for an unknown purpose. That can also be seen in imagery from Planet Labs PBC of the area. The Wall Street Journal, quoting anonymous Egyptian officials, described "an 8-square-mile (20-square-kilometer) walled enclosure" being built in the area that could accommodate over 100,000 people.

Hard-line officials within Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's government have raised the possibility of pushing Palestinians out of the Gaza Strip, something strongly opposed by Israel's main ally, the United States. The Gaza Strip and the occupied West Bank are lands the Palestinians hope to have for their future state.

The Israeli military referred questions regarding Egypt's construction to Netanyahu's office, which did not immediately respond.

A report by Israel's Intelligence Ministry, drafted just six days after Hamas' Oct. 7 attack from the Gaza Strip that killed 1,200 people and saw over 250 others taken hostage, included a proposal of moving Gaza's civilian population to tent cities in the northern Sinai, then building permanent cities and an undefined humanitarian corridor.

In the time since, the Israel-Hamas war has laid wide swaths of the seaside enclave to waste and killed more than 28,600 people, mostly women and children, according to the Health Ministry in Gaza.

Greece just legalized same-sex marriage.

Will other Orthodox countries join them any time soon?

By PETER SMITH and DASHA LITVINOVA Associated Press

Greece has become the first majority-Orthodox Christian nation to legalize same-sex marriage under civil law. At least for the near future, it will almost certainly be the only one.

Eastern Orthodox leadership, despite lacking a single doctrinal authority like a pope, has been united in opposing recognition of same-sex relationships both within its own rites and in the civil realm. Public opinion in majority Orthodox countries has mostly been opposed, too.

But there are some signs of change. Two small majority-Orthodox countries, Montenegro and Cyprus, have authorized same-sex unions in recent years, as did Greece in 2015 before upgrading to this week's approval of full marital status.

Civil unions may become more common among Orthodox countries gravitating toward the European Union. They remain off the table in Russia, which has cracked down on LGBTQ+ expression, and countries in its orbit.

Following is a summary of church positions and public opinion in the Orthodox world, followed by the situation in individual majority-Orthodox lands.

THE ORTHODOX WORLD

Eastern Orthodoxy is a socially conservative, ancient church with elaborate rituals and a strict hierarchy. Churches are mostly organized along national lines, with multiple independent churches that share ancient doctrine and practices and that both cooperate and squabble.

Roughly 200 million Eastern Orthodox live primarily in Eastern Europe and neighboring Asian lands, with about half that total in Russia, while smaller numbers live across the world. Like other international church bodies, Orthodoxy has confronted calls for LGBTQ+ inclusion.

A 2016 statement by a council of most Orthodox churches called marriage between a man and a woman "the oldest institution of divine law" and said members were forbidden from entering same-sex unions.

In countries where they are a majority, Orthodox believers overwhelmingly said society should not accept homosexuality or approve same-sex marriage, according to surveys conducted in 2015 and 2016 by the Pew Research Center, a Washington-based think tank.

Greek Orthodox showed relative tolerance, with half of Orthodox saying homosexuality should be accepted and a quarter favoring same-sex marriage. In more recent polls, Greeks overall narrowly supported the marriage law.

The Greek law validates marriage in the civil realm but doesn't require any church to perform such rites. Nevertheless, Greece's Orthodox leadership unanimously opposed the law in January, saying the "duality of genders and their complementarity are not social inventions but originate from God."

Greek Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis acknowledged the church's position but said, "We are discussing the decisions of the Greek state, unrelated to theological beliefs."

Civil unions may be in some Orthodox countries' near future, said George Demacopoulos, director of the Orthodox Christian Studies Center at Fordham University in New York.

"In terms of civil marriage, I think the countries that are in the European Union will eventually all do it," Demacopoulos said. "My guess is the assemblies of bishops in those countries will offer some resistance to the measure, and depending on where you are, that may or may not delay it."

UKRAINE

In Ukraine, same-sex couples cannot register their status legally.

In 2023, the issue became acute as many LGBTQ+ people joined Ukraine's armed forces. That year, a bill was introduced in Parliament to establish civil partnerships for same-sex couples, providing basic rights such as compensation if one of the partners is killed in action.

The All-Ukrainian Council of Churches and Religious Organizations — which includes Ukraine's two rival Orthodox churches — opposed the draft law, contending that some international entities are using the country's current vulnerability to force unwanted changes.

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The legislation remains pending.

The European Court of Human Rights ruled in 2023 that Ukraine violated the rights of a same-sex couple who sought legal protections provided to married heterosexual couples.

Ukraine is majority Orthodox, with various religious minorities.

RUSSIA

In increasingly conservative Russia, President Vladimir Putin has forged a powerful alliance with the Russian Orthodox Church and has made "traditional family values" a cornerstone of his rule, juxtaposing them with "perversions" of the West.

Putin effectively outlawed same-sex marriages in the 2020 constitutional revision that added a clause stipulating that marriage is a union of a man and a woman.

In 2013, the Kremlin adopted what's known as the "gay propaganda" law, banning any public endorsement of "nontraditional sexual relations" among minors.

After sending troops into Ukraine in 2022, Russian authorities ramped up a campaign against what it called the West's "degrading" moral influence, in what rights advocates saw as an attempt to legitimize the war.

Patriarch Kirill of Moscow has assailed LGBTQ+ rights. As head of the Russian Orthodox Church, he oversees the world's largest Orthodox flock. He depicted his country's invasion of Ukraine as part of a metaphysical struggle against a liberal agenda that included "gay parades."

In November, Russia's Supreme Court effectively outlawed LGBTQ+ activism, labeling what the government called the LGBTQ+ "international movement" as an extremist group and banning it in Russia.

In 2021, a survey by Russia's top independent pollster, the Levada Center, showed that only 33% of Russians completely or somewhat agree that gay men and women should enjoy the same rights as heterosexuals, a decrease from earlier years.

BELARUS

The Belarus Family Code defines marriage as a "union between a man and a woman." There is also no legislation prohibiting discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender identity.

Homosexuality was decriminalized in Belarus in 1994, but the LGBTQ+ community faces heavy stigma and high suicide rates, advocates say.

Human rights groups report hundreds of cases of the KGB — the country's main domestic security agency — trying to recruit gay people and threatening to out them.

SERBIA AND MONTENEGRO

Serbia and Montenegro, two conservative Balkan nations where the Serbian Orthodox Church holds huge influence, have had mixed results addressing LGBTQ+ rights as part of efforts to join the European Union.

Tiny Montenegro passed a bill in 2020 allowing same-sex partnerships — not marriage and with fewer rights. In Serbia, a similar draft law never made it to a parliamentary vote.

The Serbian Orthodox Church, which maintains close relations with the Russian church, has opposed the idea of same-sex marriages.

Serbia's President Aleksandar Vucic has said he would not sign off a bill on same-sex marriages, although Serbia has had an openly lesbian prime minister for years. Activists have been campaigning for legal partnerships.

Pride marches in Serbia are routinely banned or held under tight security. In Montenegro, though same-sex partnerships are allowed, the highly male-oriented society of 620,000 people remains divided over the issue.

ROMANIA AND MOLDOVA

Romania is one of the few European Union members that allows neither same-sex marriage nor civil unions, despite a growing social acceptance of LGBTQ+ people.

In 2023, the European Court of Human Rights ruled that Romania had failed to enforce same-sex couples' rights by not legally recognizing their relationships.

In early February in Romania, LGBTQ+ activists were allegedly assaulted while holding a peaceful protest outside the Bucharest headquarters of the country's far-right AUR party.

In 2018, Romania held a referendum — backed by the Orthodox Church — on whether to narrow the constitutional definition of marriage from a “union of spouses” to a “union between one man and one woman.”

Rights campaigners urged Romanians to boycott the vote, which failed due to low turnout.

In neighboring Moldova, which isn’t an EU member but has official candidate status, neither same-sex marriages nor unions are allowed.

Large majorities in both countries are Orthodox.

BULGARIA

Public opinion in Bulgaria is mostly hostile to gay people and more so to same-sex marriages. In the Balkan country, patriarchal family traditions still predominate.

The European Court of Human Rights last year found that Bulgaria’s government was violating European human rights law in failing to legally recognize same-sex couples. The court also ruled that Bulgaria is obliged to adopt legal recognition for same-sex couples, but Bulgaria shows no signs of implementing the decision.

Leaders of the Bulgarian Orthodox Church, which includes about 80% of Bulgarians, condemned the ECHR ruling and called on the government not to give in.

Bulgaria’s constitution explicitly prohibits the recognition of same-sex marriage. Amending the constitution requires a two-thirds majority in parliament on three consecutive votes. Such a scenario seems remote.

Migrant’s 3 brutal years trying to reach Italy inspired the Oscar-nominated film ‘Io Capitano’

By TRISHA THOMAS Associated Press

CASTEL VOLTURNO, Italy (AP) — Mamadou Kouassi’s searing, epic journey over African deserts, through illegal prisons and across the Mediterranean Sea in a smugglers’ boat informed Italian director Matteo Garrone’s Oscar-nominated film “Io Capitano.” Some episodes that the Ivorian migrant witnessed on his three-year odyssey were too strong to make the final cut.

Garrone’s film, which is nominated in the best international feature film category, traces the journey of two teenage boys who follow the migrant route from Senegal across the Niger desert to Libya, where they board a rusty smugglers’ boat packed with migrants.

Smugglers force one of the teenagers to “captain” the boat, because as a minor he won’t be jailed in Italy.

In the movie, no one dies on the perilous passage. But on Kouassi’s boat, “people died. And I was lucky to survive.”

Kouassi, who completed his journey in 2008 and advised Garrone on the film, provided horrific details of torture that contribute to the film’s powerful message, including prisoners being burned and beaten, as well as his experience as a slave laborer working as a mason on the desert villa of a wealthy Libyan.

More graphic episodes were cut, including repeated rapes of women by traffickers along the route, or scenes of migrants who can’t provide family contacts for traffickers to extort being driven back to the desert and left to die.

“Matteo removed it because we want the film to reach a wide audience,” Kouassi explained.

Garrone’s previous films include the 2008 organized crime drama “Gomorrah,” and the 2019 fantasy “Pinochio” starring Roberto Benigni. The Italian director cast two Senegalese high school students, Seydou Sarr and Moustapha Fall, to play the teenage protagonists. Sarr won the Marcello Mastroianni prize for best emerging actor at the Venice Film Festival, where the film premiered.

In the film, the boys are lured to Europe by a dream of becoming singers fueled by TikTok videos. In real life, the actors had little knowledge of the horrors of the migrant route before they began filming in their native Senegal.

“Matteo made this movie to let you see what happens in fact, the reality of what we (Africans) suffer to come to Europe,” Sarr said.

Sarr and Fall's lives have been overturned by the sudden success of the film, and have been splitting their time since filming between Garrone's mother's beach house near Rome and touring cities promoting "Io Capitano." Both nurture dreams of continuing in acting and Sarr hopes to become a soccer star.

The 40-year-old Kouassi, on the other hand, has continued his work as a cultural mediator in the city of Castel Volturno, near Naples, helping immigrants get work papers and health care. He already has a sequel in mind: his life after arriving in Italy, where he was among the legions of young Africans exploited working 10-hour days picking tomatoes and oranges for as little as 10 euros a day.

His dream is that "Io Capitano" will influence migrant policy around the globe by focusing public attention on the often untold-horrors.

He notes the attention placed on the thousands of people who die crossing the central Mediterranean each year, while no one knows how many people die in the deserts. "And these prisons, nobody knows how many people are dying inside," he said.

Kouassi, the two young actors and the director are currently in the United States promoting "Io Capitano" in its Oscar campaign. During recent screenings in Los Angeles, San Francisco and New York, he said audience members were moved by the movie's depiction of migrants' hardships, many walking away with the determination that "something must be done."

"We think that this film, 'Io Capitano,' should be one of the powerful instruments for governments, for the whole world, to change the policy of migration," Kouassi said.

In addition, Kouassi has been invited to schools in Italy to talk to students after screening the film.

"I have to be the voice of people because if nobody starts to let people understand what we face before coming to Europe, people would think that we just take the boat and we enter Europe," Kouassi said, "So for me it was important to explain the beginning."

For him, getting the message out is worth more than any industry award.

"To win, for example, the statute of the Oscar is important. But change is more important," he said.

Brazil's health agents scour junkyards and roofs for mosquitos to fight dengue epidemic

By DIANE JEANTET Associated Press

RIO DE JANEIRO (AP) — The small team of state public health workers slalomed between auto parts strewn across a Rio de Janeiro junkyard, looking for standing water where mosquitoes might have laid their eggs.

They were part of nationwide efforts to curtail a surge in Brazil of the mosquito-borne illness of dengue fever during the country's key tourist season that runs through the end of February.

Paulo Cesar Gomes, a 56-year-old entomologist, found some mosquito larvae swimming in shallow rainwater inside a car bumper.

"We call this type of location a strategic point" because of the high turnover in items converging from all over, he said. "It's difficult not to have mosquitoes here."

Earlier in the month, just days before Rio kicked off its world-famous Carnival festivities, the city joined several states and the country's capital in declaring a public health epidemic over this year's greater-than-normal number of cases of dengue.

"We had more cases in January than any other January," Ethel Maciel, head of health surveillance at Brazil's Health Ministry, said in an interview with The Associated Press.

So far this year, Brazil has recorded 512,000 cases nationwide, including both confirmed and likely cases — nearly four times more than those registered in the same period a year ago.

There have been 425 deaths under investigation for dengue so far this year, with 75 confirmed, as compared with just over 1,000 for all of 2023.

Dengue is a viral infection transmitted to humans through the bite of infected mosquitoes. Frequent rains and high temperatures, which accelerate the hatching of mosquito eggs and the development of larvae, make the famously hot city of Rio especially susceptible to outbreaks.

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Many who are infected never develop symptoms, but dengue can cause high fever, headache, body aches, nausea and a rash, according to the World Health Organization. While most get better after a week or so, some develop a severe form that requires hospitalization and can be fatal.

Health workers like Gomes, equipped with masks and plastic gloves, meticulously combed the junkyard on a hot morning, gently kicking and shaking piled up auto parts looking for any trace of the *Aedes aegypti* mosquito that can spread dengue.

Whenever he saw standing water Gomes grabbed a hand pipette out of his bag and looked for larvae, which he collected in a white plastic container. Captured mosquitos and larvae are kept alive and brought to a city laboratory to be tested for dengue.

At locations with positive tests, health agents spray the walls with a product that kills mosquitos and then monitor the location for weeks.

Maciel, from the Health Ministry, said the first warning about a possible epidemic came in September.

Brazil's leading research institute, the state-funded Oswaldo Cruz Foundation, or Fiocruz, came up with several scenarios indicating that Brazil could have as many as 4.2 million cases this year, up from 1.6 million in 2023.

Maciel said the surge is due to excessive heat and intense rain, both possible effects of climate change or El Niño, a natural, temporary and occasional warming of part of the Pacific that shifts weather patterns across the globe.

Maciel also cited the circulation of four dengue virus serotypes at the same time, one of which authorities had not seen in 15 years.

In Rio, more than 80% of mosquito breeding sites are located in residential properties, health officials say. So, efforts to combat dengue must start in homes, and raising awareness is key, said Mário Sérgio Ribeiro, a health surveillance official for Rio de Janeiro state.

State officials launched a "10 minutes that save lives" initiative to encourage residents to inspect their homes, offices and places of worship for any standing water.

Health workers and volunteers went door to door, pacing up and down the narrow streets of Rio's Tabajara working-class neighborhood, or favela, to spread the word. They distributed leaflets and climbed on rooftops, looking for containers with rainwater.

One elderly woman, Vilza da Costa, told the AP she believes she contracted the disease.

"It started with a fever, then my body was itching all over, weakness, and a lot of pain. I was in a very bad way," she said. "There are a lot of mosquitoes here."

During Carnival, which ended Wednesday, health employees welcomed visitors with free repellent. A van with a giant crossed off mosquito and the words "Against Dengue Everyday" opened and closed the parades several nights, for millions of TV viewers to see.

Maciel said the effect of Carnival will not be known for another week. Even though dengue is not transmissible from person to person, increased tourism can boost the spread of the disease to locations that had not been affected.

It's not clear if the cases have reached a peak and now "are going to start going down, or if the worst-case scenario is indeed happening," Maciel said.

Southern Israel was filled with blood and death. Brilliant red wildflowers now bloom among the ashes

By MELANIE LIDMAN Associated Press

REIM, Southern Israel (AP) — Each year as spring approaches, wildflowers erupt across Israel, a splash of color before the punishing Middle Eastern summer. Nowhere is the show more dramatic than in southern Israel, near Gaza, where brilliant red anemones burst forth with such intensity that rolling hills seem to be covered in red carpets.

Along the Gaza border, the flowers, which look like poppies, have been crowned with their own festival, Darom Adom, or Scarlet South. It's been a major economic engine and source of local pride for nearly

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two decades, bringing hundreds of thousands to a little-visited and conflict-scarred part of Israel.

This year, even as explosions ring out and tanks churn across the fields as the war in Gaza drags into its fifth month, the flowers have burst forth with intensity. But the festival has been canceled, another war casualty.

For festival organizer Vered Libstein, everything is different.

Libstein lived in Kfar Azza, a kibbutz on the Gaza border hit hard by the Oct. 7 Hamas attack that started the war. She lost her husband, Ofir Libstein, her 19-year-old son, Nitzan, her mother, Bilha Epstein, and her nephew, Netta Epstein.

Ofir Libstein was on the kibbutz's local security team and one of the first confirmed deaths on Oct 7. It took 12 days to find Nitzan's body.

Seeing the dramatic red blooms return after so much loss pierces her heart, Libstein said as she walked through a field.

"On one side it's hard, but on the other side it just proves to us that life is stronger than everything, and it renews itself, and we'll need to find the strength to renew ourselves as well," she said.

Hamas killed some 1,200 people and kidnapped around 250 during the Oct. 7 attack. Israel responded by launching one of the deadliest and most destructive air-and-ground offensives in recent history. Over 28,500 Palestinians have been killed, mostly women, children and young teens, according to Gaza's Health Ministry, which does not distinguish between civilians and combatants in its count.

Libstein founded the Darom Adom festival with her husband 19 years ago, around the time when Palestinian militants started launching frequent rockets into Israel from Gaza. The flowers were a way to build pride and attract visitors.

The blooms are a symbol of resilience for Palestinians as well as Israelis. Palestinian artwork features the red flowers, whose black-and-white center and green leaves are the colors of the Palestinian flag. In 2013, an Israeli conservation group ran a popular vote that named the red anemone Israel's national flower.

The Darom Adom Festival started as a volunteer hotline helping hikers find the most concentrated blooms. It quickly grew, spawning its own tourism company and becoming one of Israel's largest nature events, Libstein said.

It usually features a packed schedule of concerts, organized hikes, bike rides, races, kids' events, foodie markets, art galleries and farm visits. Events are spread over four weeks in January and February, when the blooms are at their peak.

In recent years, Darom Adom has drawn over 400,000 visitors and accounted for more than 80% of local tourism income for the year, according to the financial paper Globes.

Anemones grow across Israel, in whites, purples and pinks, but in the south they only bloom in bright scarlet. The festival name is also a nod to the "red alert" sirens that warn of incoming rockets.

Although the festival was canceled this year, some local businesses and artisans have organized pop-up markets. Israelis can order anemone bulbs to grow at home, though some are still making the trek south.

"It's really beautiful, to see this blooming, because when we came here everything was totally burned," said Moshe Federman, who spent three months as a reserve soldier at the nearby site of the music festival where 364 people were killed.

While charred remains of trees still dot the landscape, riots of red flowers peak out from between the slender trunks of new eucalyptus saplings. A few weeks ago, relatives of those killed at the music festival planted trees on the Jewish holiday honoring trees.

Nearby, a memorial at the music festival site has photos of the victims arranged on stands in a semi-circle around a stage, as if they were dancing together. It's become a pilgrimage site for visitors to grapple with the aftermath of the bloodiest day in Israel's history.

Federman said it was strange to be back as a civilian with his wife, seeing the newly planted trees and wildflowers. He paused next to a tree in honor of a victim he knew.

"It's growing anew. I guess that's part of life," he said.

As Anat Katz, a New Yorker visiting her daughter who lives in Tel Aviv, walked around the memorial, she

said the flowers were beautiful, but their red blooms felt too bright, reminding her of blood and death.

"The flower is pulling at our strings both ways, the beauty and the conflict of it," she said.

"We see them popping up everywhere we go, so that feels a little hopeful in a place that feels like a real hit in the stomach," Katz added. "There's something that feels cyclical, how they're alive right now, how they're blooming at a time when it doesn't feel like there's a lot of blossoming."

Today, Libstein visits the south sporadically. She lives with much of the Kfar Azza community in a hotel north of Tel Aviv. She is helping oversee their move into mobile homes on a kibbutz about 20 kilometers (12 miles) east of Kfar Azza, while their houses, many of which were badly damaged, are rebuilt.

It's strange to be among the flowers she and her husband helped turn into a symbol of the region, without him and away from the home she loves during the most beautiful time of year.

The yellow dandelions blooming among the anemones remind her of the 134 hostages believed still held in Gaza, she said. Yellow ribbons have emerged as a symbol of the protests demanding their release.

Libstein said even though nature is marking the passage of time, it's impossible to move on while members of her community are still held captive.

"It's a symbol to us about the importance of blooming again, but it will take a long time," she said.

Caitlin Clark of Iowa breaks the NCAA women's career scoring record with a signature 'logo 3'

By ERIC OLSON AP Sports Writer

IOWA CITY, Iowa (AP) — Caitlin Clark wasted no time becoming the NCAA women's career scoring leader Thursday night, taking less than three minutes to score the eight points she needed to break Kelsey Plum's record.

The Iowa star who has brought unprecedented attention to women's basketball surpassed the record with her signature shot — a 35-foot 3-pointer that hit nothing but the bottom of the net.

And Clark didn't let up from there. She finished with a school-record 49 points, tied her career best with nine 3-pointers and had 13 assists in No. 4 Iowa's 106-89 victory over Michigan.

Hawkeyes coach Lisa Bluder took Clark out of the game with 1:46 left, shortly after she made her final 3, and she went to the bench to an ovation from the sellout crowd at Carver-Hawkeye Arena.

"I don't know if you could script it any better," Clark said. "Just to do it in this fashion, I'm very grateful and thankful to be surrounded by so many people who have been my foundation in everything I've done since I was a young little girl. You all knew I was going to shoot the logo 3 for the record."

Clark's huge night put her at 3,569 points and within 80 of her next milestone, Lynette Woodard's major women's college scoring record of 3,649.

The record-breaker was a 3 off the dribble on the left wing near the Mediacom Court logo with 7:45 left in the first quarter.

"Warming up, my shot just felt good, so I knew it was going to be kind of one of those nights," she said. "I played with a little more pep in my step."

Clark set the record in 126 games, 13 fewer than Plum, who finished with 3,527 points in four seasons at Washington from 2013-17. Woodard starred at Kansas from 1977-81, an era when women's sports were governed by the Association for Intercollegiate Athletics for Women. Pearl Moore of Francis Marion holds the overall women's record with 4,061 points from 1975-79. Woodard and Moore played before the 3-point line was introduced.

Iowa has four regular-season games left, plus the Big Ten Tournament and the NCAA Tournament. Barring injury, Clark, a senior who averages 32.8 points per game, is all but certain to pass Woodard. And she has the option to return for a fifth season of college basketball because of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Fans started chanting "One more year! One more year!" while Clark, who is projected as the No. 1 overall pick in the WNBA draft, was doing a postgame television interview.

"I paid them," Bluder said, drawing laughs. "I thought it was a pretty good chant."

Among those offering congratulations on social media were former president Barack Obama and LSU

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star Angel Reese, who shared the spotlight with Clark in last season's national championship game won by the Tigers. The Big Ten Network put out a congratulatory compilation video that included Tom Brady and Peyton and Eli Manning.

Iowa won the tip and Clark, guarded by Laila Phelia, drove to the basket and banked in a shot from the right side. Clark hit a 3 from the left wing on Iowa's next possession. The Hawkeyes turned the ball over twice before Clark took a pass from Gabbie Marshall in transition, stopped and and shot from deep.

When the ball went through, the fans — many of them standing and holding up phones to capture the moment — let loose a huge roar.

"It was absolutely perfect," Bluder said, "for her to go over and reach this record with a logo 3."

Bluder called a timeout shortly thereafter, and Clark hugged teammates and coaches during a brief celebration.

"That was never really my goal, to get it done really fast," Clark said. "I hit my first couple shots, and I was able to get another one up pretty fast. It was nice to get it done there fairly quick so we could move on and focus on winning the basketball game."

Clark, who scored 40 points or more for the 12th time, had 23 in the first quarter and went on to play one of her best games. She scored or assisted on 79 points, the most by a Division I women's player in at least 25 years, according to OptaSTATS.

Clark and her dynamic play have captivated the nation for two seasons. Last year, she led the Hawkeyes to the NCAA title game and was named AP player of the year. More than just her pursuit of the record, her long 3-pointers and flashy passes have raised interest in the women's game. Arenas have been sold out for her games, home and away, and television ratings have never been higher.

It's all been more than Clark imagined when the 6-foot guard from West Des Moines stayed in state and picked Iowa over Notre Dame in November 2019.

Though her basketball obligations and endorsement deals (State Farm ads, etc.) have put demands on her time, she said she is the same person who showed up on campus four years ago. She still cleans her apartment, does laundry, plays video games, hangs out with friends and does schoolwork.

Her run to the record could have come earlier, but it arrived back at Carver-Hawkeye, where ticket resale prices for the game ranged from hundreds of dollars into the thousands. As usual, fans showed up early outside the arena, many wearing black-and-gold No. 22 jerseys and holding signs paying homage.

Mya Anderson and her friend, Ellie Steffensen, both 12, and their moms made the six-hour drive from Canton, South Dakota, to see Clark break the record.

"I think she's inspired a lot of people," Mya said.

"Yeah, a lot of little girls," Ellie added.

Mya and Ellie both play basketball, and both said they try to do some of the things Clark does on the court, like shoot long 3s.

"But I'm not as good as her," Ellie said.

Kelly Jared of Manchester, Iowa, said she likes everything about Clark and expects her impact on the women's game to endure.

"She's taken it to a new level," Jared said. "The aspirations and goals that the current players and future players have, she has set that bar way up in the sky. And it's perfect, because they will work to attain them. As far as the fans, there's excitement for the people who never watched women's basketball. My son isn't a basketball fan, but he watched Caitlin last year and he was sold. He absolutely loves her."

Fani Willis to return to the witness stand as she fights an effort to derail Trump's election case

By KATE BRUMBACK and ALANNA DURKIN RICHER Associated Press

ATLANTA (AP) — Allegations of misconduct have taken center stage in Donald Trump's 2020 Georgia election case, thrusting top prosecutors' private lives into the spotlight and forcing them to answer deeply personal questions in court as they try to defend against efforts to derail the high-stakes case.

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Fulton County District Attorney Fani Willis is set to return to the witness stand Friday, as the case that was supposed to be about efforts to overturn Georgia's presidential election results has become embroiled in controversy over the love lives of the prosecutors seeking to hold Trump accountable.

During fiery and sometimes combative testimony Thursday, Willis was grilled by lawyers about her romantic relationship with special prosecutor Nathan Wade, which defense attorneys allege presents a conflict of interest that should force Willis off the case.

Willis forcefully pushed back against claims of impropriety, at times getting visibly upset as lawyers questioned her about everything from her finances to trips she has taken with Wade. The judge at one point had to call a break in testimony as tempers flared. Willis accused a defense attorney of trying to smear her, raising papers in front of her and shouting, "It's a lie!"

"Do you think I'm on trial? These people are on trial for trying to steal an election in 2020. I'm not on trial no matter how hard you try to put me on trial," Willis told defense attorney Ashleigh Merchant.

The probing questions for Willis and for Wade, who testified before her, underscored the extent to which the prosecutors are themselves now under a public microscope, with revelations about their personal lives diverting attention away from Trump's own conduct. The allegations also provided an opening for Republicans to try to cast doubt on the legitimacy of one of four criminal cases Trump is facing as he vies to reclaim the White House in November.

It's unclear when the judge might rule on whether Willis and her office should be disqualified from the case. Judge Scott McAfee said during a hearing Monday that Willis could be disqualified "if evidence is produced demonstrating an actual conflict or the appearance of one."

Willis, who had previously tried to avoid testifying, agreed to do so Thursday after a former friend and co-worker testified that Willis and Wade's relationship began earlier than they had claimed.

Robin Yeartie, who previously worked in the district attorney's office, testified that she saw Willis and Wade hugging and kissing before he was hired as special prosecutor in November 2021. Wade and Willis both testified that they didn't start dating until 2022 and that their relationship ended months ago.

During personal and uncomfortable testimony that spanned hours, Wade also admitted to having sex with Willis during his separation from his estranged wife, even though he had claimed in a divorce filing that wasn't the case.

Wade, who took the stand after the judge refused to quash a subpoena for his testimony, testified that he and Willis traveled together to Belize, Aruba and California and took cruises together, but said Willis paid him back in cash for some travel expenses that he had charged to his credit card.

"She was very emphatic and adamant about this independent, strong woman thing so she demanded that she paid her own way," Wade said.

Willis' removal would be a stunning development in the most sprawling of the four criminal cases against Trump.

If Willis were disqualified, a council that supports prosecuting attorneys in Georgia would need to find a new attorney to take over. That successor could either proceed with the charges against Trump and 14 others or drop the case altogether. Even if a new lawyer went forward with the case, it would very likely not go to trial before November, when Trump is expected to be the Republican nominee for president.

Willis and Wade's relationship was first revealed by Merchant, an attorney for Trump co-defendant Michael Roman, a former campaign staffer and onetime White House aide. Merchant has alleged that Willis personally profited from the case, paying Wade more than \$650,000 for his work and then benefiting when Wade used his earnings to pay for vacations the pair took together.

Verdict in Donald Trump's civil fraud trial expected Friday, capping busy week of court action

By MICHAEL R. SISAK Associated Press

NEW YORK (AP) — A verdict is expected Friday in Donald Trump's New York civil fraud trial, adding to a consequential week on the former president's legal calendar.

Trump could be hit with millions of dollars in penalties and other sanctions in the decision by Judge Arthur Engoron, who has already ruled that the former president inflated his wealth on financial statements that were given to banks, insurers and others to make deals and secure loans.

New York Attorney General Letitia James is seeking \$370 million and a ban on Trump and other defendants from doing business in the state. A penalty like that could potentially wound the real estate empire that helped Trump craft his image as a savvy billionaire businessman and vaulted him to fame and the White House.

Engoron is set to rule after 2½ months of testimony from 40 witnesses, including Trump. Closing arguments were held Jan. 11. The judge is deciding the case because juries are not allowed in this type of lawsuit and neither James' office nor Trump's lawyers asked for one.

Engoron is expected to release his decision Friday, barring unforeseen circumstances that would necessitate a delay, court officials said.

It has already been a big week in court for Trump. On Thursday, a different New York judge ruled that Trump will stand trial March 25 on charges that he falsified his company's records as part of an effort to buy the silence of people with potentially embarrassing stories about alleged infidelity. Trump says he is innocent.

If the schedule holds, it will be the first of his four criminal cases to go to trial.

Also Thursday, a judge in Atlanta heard arguments on whether to remove Fulton County District Attorney Fani Willis from Trump's Georgia election interference case because she had a personal relationship with a special prosecutor she hired.

James' office has estimated that Trump exaggerated his wealth by as much as \$3.6 billion. State lawyers contend Trump used the inflated numbers to get lower insurance premiums and favorable loan terms, saving at least \$168 million on interest alone.

Trump has denied wrongdoing and his lawyers have said they'll appeal if Engoron rules against him.

The Republican presidential front-runner testified Nov. 6 that his financial statements actually understated his net worth and that banks did their own research and were happy with his business. During closing arguments in January, he decried the case as a "fraud on me."

Engoron is deciding six claims in James' lawsuit, including allegations of conspiracy, falsifying business records and insurance fraud. State lawyers alleged that Trump exaggerated his wealth by as much as \$3.6 billion one year.

Before the trial, Engoron ruled on James' top claim, finding that Trump's financial statements were fraudulent. As punishment, the judge ordered some of his companies removed from his control and dissolved. An appeals court has put that on hold.

Because it is civil, not criminal in nature, there is no possibility of prison time.

Biden is going to the site of last year's train derailment in Ohio. Republicans say he took too long

By JOSH BOAK Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — For over a year, President Joe Biden waited for what the White House said was the right moment to visit East Palestine, Ohio, facing criticism that he was ignoring the victims of an explosive fire caused by a train derailment.

On Friday, the president goes to the village of 5,000 at the invitation of its mayor and as the Environmental Protection Agency is on the verge of finishing an extensive cleanup paid for by the train company,

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Norfolk Southern. Republicans have blasted Biden for not visiting sooner and there are some enduring tensions in the community.

"The president has always said when the time is right and when it made sense for him to go, he would go," White House press secretary Karine Jean-Pierre said. "And so, that's what he's doing."

Ahead of the trip, Jean-Pierre said in response to a question that Biden has "no concerns about drinking the water" in the town, where chemicals and hazardous waste spread because of the fire. She noted that EPA Administrator Michael Regan drank the water during an earlier visit.

Democrat Biden is venturing into Republican territory amid a reelection campaign. Aides say it's a chance for Biden to hear from the community, talk about his efforts to hold Norfolk Southern accountable and push for passage of a rail safety law. A number of administration officials have visited over the past year.

"It's been a year of challenge, but a year of solidarity," Regan said in a statement. "I'm proud of East Palestine, a community that has embodied resilience, hope and progress."

During Biden's visit, there will be a separate rally for former President Donald Trump, the Republican front-runner. Trump won nearly 72% of the vote in Ohio's Columbiana County, which includes East Palestine.

Mike Young, the rally's coordinator, described the grass-roots event as "anti-Biden." He said he delivered water to the community after the disaster and the president should have been an immediate presence on the ground.

"The sentiment from residents has been: Where were you a year ago?" Young said. "Too little, too late. And now Biden shows up at election time."

The visit will be Biden's first trip interacting with everyday voters since a special counsel's report last week questioned the mental fortitude of the 81-year-old president. East Palestine has emerged as a test of his ability to bridge political divides and publicly show that he's up for the burdens of the presidency.

The EPA engaged in an intense cleanup and says the community's air, water and soil are now safe.

It removed more than 176,000 tons of hazardous waste. More than 49 million gallons of water, rainfall and snowmelt were removed or treated. The federal agency is also collecting 2,500 samples to ensure that the cleanup has succeeded.

Norfolk Southern said it has spent roughly \$1.1 billion in its response to the derailment. Since the fire began on February 3, 2023, and caused hazardous chemicals to mix, the company says it has invested \$103.2 million in the community, including \$21 million distributed to residents.

Still, there are some in the community who say more work must be done.

On Thursday, community activists sent Biden a letter that asked him to issue a major disaster declaration for the community, as well as provide long-term health care for residents, increased environmental testing and relocation funding for those who wish to leave.

Krissy Hylton, 49, is among those worried about returning to their homes.

Hylton, an assistant manager at a convenience store, said she would tell Biden about her health concerns. The EPA testing says her home should be safe, but she said she has independent tests that point to a risk of chemical exposure. She worries about where she will live once the lease on a rental home paid for by Norfolk Southern ends in May.

"My home is not safe to go back to," she said between sobs. "This has been devastating. No matter what day it says on the calendar, it's still February 3, 2023, to me. Because I have no answers. I have more questions."

Gun rights are expansive in Missouri, where shooting at Chiefs' Super Bowl parade took place

By SUMMER BALLENTINE and DAVID A. LIEB Associated Press

JEFFERSON CITY, Mo. (AP) — The shooting that wounded more than 20 people and killed one during the Kansas City Chiefs' Super Bowl victory parade occurred in a state with few gun regulations and historic tension over how major cities handle crime.

The shooting, which Kansas City police on Thursday said appeared to stem from a dispute between

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several people, happened despite the presence of more than 800 police officers on hand.

Notably, dozens of policymakers from Missouri and neighboring Kansas were caught in the chaos as throngs of fans scattered at the sound of gunshots. Lawmakers and elected officials who witnessed the havoc firsthand included Republican Missouri Gov. Mike Parson and Democratic Kansas Gov. Laura Kelly, whose security detail heard the shots after she'd gotten in her car to leave, a spokesperson said.

Democratic Missouri state Rep. Maggie Nurrenbern of Kansas City said she was inside the city's historic Union Station when the shooting began. She said she and her sister ran and used their bodies to hide and shield fleeing children.

"I'm hurt. I'm angry," Nurrenbern wrote in a post on the social media platform X, formerly Twitter. "And I'm more resolved than ever to make sure kids can grow up in a Missouri free from gun violence."

But what, if any, action Missouri's Republican-led Legislature will take in response to the shooting is unclear.

"Policing a free nation is difficult," GOP state Rep. Lane Roberts said Thursday. "So when we try to do things that augment the efforts of our police agencies without treading on the rights of other people, it can be a real difficult balance."

Here's a look at Missouri's gun policies and how elected officials want to address crime:

A PRO-GUN STATE

Missouri has some of the most expansive guns rights among states as a result of a series of measures passed by the Republican-led Legislature over the past few decades.

Before the GOP won full control of the Legislature in the 2002 elections, concealed weapons were outlawed and handguns could be purchased only after a background check and permit from local sheriffs. Republican lawmakers repealed those restrictions within their first decade of power, and gun shops saw rising sales.

Missouri currently has no age restrictions on gun use and possession, although federal law largely prohibits minors from carrying handguns.

Voters fortified gun rights in 2014, approving a constitutional amendment placed on the ballot by lawmakers making the right to bear arms "unalienable" and subjecting any restrictions "to strict scrutiny."

Two years later, the Republican supermajority in Missouri's Legislature overrode a veto of then-Gov. Jay Nixon, a Democrat, to allow most adults to carry concealed guns without needing a permit. The legislation also created a "stand-your-ground" right, expanding the legal use of guns in self-defense.

A 2021 Missouri law pressed gun rights even further, prohibiting local police from enforcing federal gun restrictions. The measure got struck down by a federal judge last year and remains on hold while under appeal.

WHAT ARE LAWMAKERS DOING?

Current Republican legislative leaders have expressed little interest in any laws that would restrict firearm use and possession in Missouri.

Rep. Roberts — a former police chief from southwestern Missouri who later joined the Legislature — last year proposed limiting children from openly carrying guns in public without parental supervision in an effort to combat rising crime in St. Louis. The bill failed by a 104-39 vote. Only one Republican voted in support of it.

Republican House Speaker Dean Plocher abruptly left a news conference Thursday after being asked by reporters for details on the GOP strategy for addressing crime and when questioned about last year's vote on children carrying firearms.

A rare exception to Republicans' fierce resistance to gun regulations is an effort to crack down on celebratory gunfire, which has been an issue in Kansas City.

Missouri's Legislature last year passed a bill to make shooting a firearm within city limits a misdemeanor for the first offense, with exceptions. The bill was named after 11-year-old Blair Shanahan Lane, who was dancing with a sparkler on July 4, 2011, outside her suburban Kansas City home and was struck in the neck by a stray bullet.

Blair's Law was part of a sweeping crime bill that was later vetoed by Parson for unrelated reasons. The Missouri House gave approval to similar legislation just two days before the Chiefs' parade.

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Other Republican-backed bills advancing in the House would exempt guns and ammunition from sales tax and allow people with concealed gun permits to bring weapons onto public transportation. House Majority Leader Jonathan Patterson said earlier this week that “it’s common sense to allow lawful concealed carrying permit holders to be able to protect themselves” on buses and trains.

A BROADER DEBATE

A large portion of the Kansas City metropolitan area is in Kansas, and a 43-year-old prominent DJ who was killed Wednesday lived on the Kansas side.

The most visible and active gun safety movement in Kansas is in the Kansas City area. But Kansas law favors gun rights as much as Missouri’s does, and Kansas added an amendment to fortify gun rights in its constitution four years before Missouri did — with 88% of the vote.

Now, Republican state Attorney General Kris Kobach and a majority of the state’s GOP lawmakers are pushing for another amendment to make those protections even stronger.

“Having armed citizens affords a greater degree of protection in any situation,” Kobach told reporters Thursday. “We need good citizens to be armed, to help, because there just aren’t enough law enforcement officers to protect everybody, everywhere and every time.”

During a hearing last month before a House committee, critics predicted the change would prevent the state from prohibiting even convicted felons or domestic abusers from having guns.

“That’s the really scary part of it,” said Rep. Jo Ella Hoyer, a Kansas City-area Democrat who was at the parade with her 11-year-old son. “We could lose any current gun laws we have.”

GUNS AND CRIME IN KANSAS CITY

The number of killings in Kansas City rose to a record level last year, up to 182. Kansas City police data show there were 12 more killings in 2023 than in 2022 and three more than the previous all-time high of 179 in 2020. The police department data does not include officer-involved killings.

Kansas City elected officials are limited in what they can do.

Kansas City, with a population of about 508,000, about 28% Black, is the only Missouri city without local control of its police force. It’s believed to be the largest city in the U.S. in that situation, the mayor’s office has said.

Leaders in the largely Democratic city don’t hire the police chief or determine how the department spends its tax dollars. A 1930s-era law gives that power to a five-member board largely appointed by the Missouri governor, who since 2017 has been a Republican.

Missouri law also prohibits cities from enacting more stringent regulations on guns than state law does, although Kansas City bans gunfire within the city.

In recent years, mayors of both Kansas City and St. Louis have fought for control of their cities’ public safety policies with primarily Republican lawmakers who argue high crime rates in the cities mean local leaders are failing. GOP lawmakers have also repeatedly rebuffed requests to allow urban areas to adopt stricter gun policies compared to the rest of the state.

Mexico will likely elect a woman as its next president, but money to govern is already being spent

By MARK STEVENSON Associated Press

MEXICO CITY (AP) — Mexico is almost certain to elect its first female president in June — both leading candidates are women — but it’s almost equally as certain that she won’t have much room to act independently of outgoing President Andrés Manuel López Obrador.

The populist president has continued proposing new, expensive projects in the closing months of his administration, before he leaves office on Sept. 30. He will also leave a lot of big-ticket projects unfinished.

That will probably leave his successor with her hands tied for much of her six-year term. Even if opposition candidate Xóchitl Gálvez wins, a mountain of financial commitments will weigh on her. The candidate of López Obrador’s party, former Mexico City mayor Claudia Sheinbaum, leads in polls. A third male candidate from a small party has almost no chance of winning.

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"The next administration will inherit a country with a financial hole that will limit the maneuvering room throughout the next term," said Moody's Analytics Director Alfredo Coutiño. "In order to deactivate the current fiscal vulnerability, the incoming administration will have to adjust fiscally (spending or taxes) in 2025."

López Obrador has said that before he steps down, he'll expropriate U.S.-owned Vulcan Materials, a move which could cost the Mexican government as much as \$1.9 billion if the Alabama-based quarry company wins an ongoing international arbitration complaint against Mexico.

Then there is a yet-to-be-fleshed-out promise to bring passenger trains back to Mexico before he leaves office. On Nov. 20, López Obrador published a decree stating that if private freight operators refuse to run passenger service, the government would step in to do so.

While the trains would have to run on tracks run by the private concessionary operators — Mexico folded its money-losing state-run railroads in the late 1990s — the government would probably have to buy the trains, fix up stations and set up a ticket-selling scheme.

The money-losing ideas keep coming. On Dec. 26, López Obrador launched a state-owned airline at a time when most countries have decided to shut down or sell off their own. With guaranteed ultra-low ticket prices on flights to little-used, government-run airports, the prospects for hemorrhaging cash are endless.

To cap it all off, on Feb. 5 he announced the government would guarantee workers retirement at full pay.

The plan, once explained, was less generous than originally depicted. Only workers in official retirement plans would have their pensions topped up, and only to the level of the median wage of registered employees to about \$10,000 per year. Still, that will probably cost billions of dollars.

On that same day Sheinbaum, who is running for López Obrador's Morena party and is viewed as his most devoted follower, claimed she would carry out the president's programs, and add a few of her own.

"Of course these (López Obrador's programs) are the foundations, the base of what our government will be, and what's more we are going to present other proposals," Sheinbaum said.

But almost as soon as she spoke, evidence emerged that she won't have the financial power to do so.

A few days later, Moody's rating service downgraded the debt of the national oil company, Petroleos Mexicanos, or Pemex, even further into junk bond status.

Moody's based that on "projections of the government's further deterioration in fiscal conditions in 2024," due to "a material increase in the deficit, fueled by social spending, persistently high borrowing costs, and augmented expenditures in flagship projects."

Consider what the next president will find on her plate: She will have to finish an oft-delayed, \$20 billion oil refinery plagued by cost overruns. There's a similarly priced, 950-mile (1,530-kilometer) railway meant to run in a rough loop around the Yucatan peninsula to connect beach resorts and archaeological sites. López Obrador considers both to be his flagship projects, but the train is far from finished.

Work also won't be completed on modernizing other oil refineries, or on a train service leading into Mexico City, or yet another train service crossing from the Pacific to the Gulf of Mexico. A host of other building projects are still unfinished as well.

López Obrador claimed at the start of his administration in 2018 that all these projects would be finished by the time he left office, and that all would be paid for out of government cost-cutting and reducing corruption. That turned out not to be true.

"In fact, last year we finished with a budget deficit of 3.4% of GDP, the highest since 1989," said Gabriela Siller, the director of analysis at Nuevo Leon-based Banco Base. "This year they are predicting a deficit of 4.9% of GDP, the highest since 1988, and debt means more borrowing. Their numbers don't add up."

The infrastructure projects — the planes and trains — are unlikely to ever turn a profit at the current pace.

For example, the first section of the Maya Train project on the Yucatan peninsula carried about 1,780 foreign tourists in its first two months, or about five per train run.

The original plan stated tourists would be the train's most lucrative source of income, but now officials are suggesting the train's revenue could come from short commuter runs or freight shipments. The peninsula has little industry and nothing suggests there is an urgent need for trains to carry shipments of sunscreen.

López Obrador has defended his free spending ways and increased debt, saying it was less than the

debt his predecessors had piled up.

"We are going to be lower in the percent of borrowing than (Enrique) Peña and (Felipe) Calderon," the president said in September.

Mexico's debt currently is around 50% of its GDP. While that doesn't sound high compared to the United Kingdom and United States, who are both around 100%, Mexico has additional debt held by the state-owned oil company and doesn't have unlimited access to low-cost borrowing, like the U.S. does.

Historian Lorenzo Meyer wrote in the newspaper El Universal that López Obrador's actions were not "an attempt to limit his successor's freedom of action, but rather as a productive investment of the huge political capital he has built up to help the new administration start off."

The biggest bombshell ever handed by an outgoing president to his successor in Mexico came on Sept. 1, 1982, when President José López Portillo, who had three months left in office, announced that he was expropriating the entire banking industry amid a currency devaluation and debt crisis.

His successor, Miguel de la Madrid, spent his entire six-year term struggling to deal with the fallout and paying the huge debt to bank owners.

López Obrador's debt mountain, while less dramatic, is "a way of setting the political agenda for the next administration, a way of placing his imprint on the next administration," said Siller, the analysis chief at Banco Base.

Dispute may have led to the mass shooting after the Chiefs' Super Bowl parade, police say

By HEATHER HOLLINGSWORTH, SCOTT McFETRIDGE and JOSH FUNK Associated Press

KANSAS CITY, Mo. (AP) — The mass shooting that unfolded amid throngs of people at the Kansas City Chiefs' Super Bowl celebration, killing one person and wounding almost two dozen others, appeared to stem from a dispute between several people, authorities said Thursday.

Police Chief Stacey Graves said the 22 people injured Wednesday ranged between 8 and 47 years old, with half under 16. A mother of two was killed.

Police said they detained three juveniles but released one who they determined wasn't involved in the shooting, leaving two in custody. No charges have been filed. Police are looking for others who may have been involved and are calling for witnesses, victims and people with cellphone video of the violence to call a dedicated hotline.

"We are working to determine the involvement of others. And it should be noted we have recovered several firearms. This incident is still a very active investigation," Graves said at a news conference.

The shooting outside Union Station occurred despite the presence of more than 800 police officers who were in the building and area, including on top of nearby structures, said Mayor Quinton Lucas, who attended with his wife and mother and ran for safety when the shots were fired. But he doesn't expect to cancel the upcoming St. Patrick's Day parade.

"We have parades all the time. I don't think they'll end. Certainly we recognized the public safety challenges and issues that relate to them," Lucas said.

Wednesday's celebration was the third such parade since 2020, and the others had no violence.

People packed the parade route, with fans climbing trees and street poles for a better view. Players rolled through on double-decker buses as DJs and drummers heralded their arrival.

Video taken from a building overlooking the celebration shows thousands of fans clad in red Chiefs gear milling about in a park in front of Union Station. As shots ring out and repeat, they suddenly scatter amid screams.

Some of those who flee return to help people on a street, sidewalk and grassy area. People nearby continue to scatter frantically even after the gunfire stops, but fans farther away remain, apparently not sure of what has happened.

The police chief said 1 million people likely attended the parade, which occurred in a city of about 470,000 people and a metropolitan area of about 2 million, but stressed that the violence was wrought by just a

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handful of people.

"The law enforcement response was exemplary. Those in attendance also responded," Graves added.

Among them was Trey Filter, who was walking to the car with his family when he heard yells of "get him." Filter, 40, saw a fleeing person, prompting him and another bystander to try to tackle him. Filter eventually jumped on top of the person.

"I don't know what the hell I was thinking," the owner of an asphalt and concrete company recalled. "We was like, 'We got him.' I'll always remember that. And then they started screaming, 'There's a gun!'"

The gun fell near his wife, Casey Filter, who picked it up. At that point the fleeing person was under a dogpile about 10 feet (3 meters) away.

Trey Filter, who lives outside Wichita, Kansas, was still processing the melee Thursday. But he was glad there wasn't more carnage.

"I'm sure there were a thousand other men there that would have done it," he said.

Police didn't identify Filter as a man who intervened or specifically say whether the person he tackled was a suspect.

Wednesday's rally had just ended and music was still blaring when the shots erupted. Many people initially thought they were hearing fireworks. But then chaos ensued. Some in the crowd hit the ground while others leapt over barriers and sprinted, some carrying children in their arms.

The crowd was so massive that normalcy returned quickly, with some unsure what had happened. But then ambulances arrived, and officers rushed in with guns drawn. Some of the less seriously injured were driven away on golf carts.

The stunned crowd — some in tears — slowly gathered their belongings, trying to figure out how to get home. Strangers comforted each other as police put up crime scene tape where moments earlier there had been a joyous celebration.

Hank Hunter, a Kansas high school sophomore, said he heard shots in the distance while watching the rally with a friend. Initially, they didn't know what it was, but then, "like a chain reaction," people started hitting the ground.

They ran to jump over a barricade, and his friend slammed his head into the concrete, Hunter said. A security guard ushered his friend into Union Station, which was closed to the general public, as the Chiefs players and coaches prepared to leave on buses. There, coach Andy Reid consoled his friend and "just tried to comfort him and calm him down."

One video of the shooting's aftermath that was posted on social media showed someone apparently performing chest compressions on a victim as another, seemingly writhing in pain, lay on the ground nearby. People screamed in the background.

The slain woman was identified by radio station KKFI-FM as Lisa Lopez-Galvan, host of "Taste of Tejano."

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.

"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.

University Health Truman Medical Center reported that three people with gunshot wounds were still being treated there Thursday, including two in critical condition. One was a man who survived only because staff got him to the operating room within five minutes of arrival, Dr. Dustin Neel said.

St. Luke's Hospital spokesperson Emily Hohenberg said one gunshot victim was upgraded from critical to serious condition.

Children's Mercy Kansas City said three children remained there. It had received 11 children ages 6 to 15, nine of whom were shot. All were expected to recover.

Stephanie Meyer, the hospital's chief nursing officer, said Thursday that the children are scared and will need mental health support. The hospital's staff members are also struggling.

"They're struggling just like you and I are, and unbelievably heartbroken that this has happened in our backyard," said Dr. Stephanie Burrus, the hospital's chief wellbeing officer. "And we all train for this, we're all prepared to take care of these children. But it doesn't negate the fact that it's still not normal for people to see many, many people wounded by gunshots."

Israeli forces storm the main hospital in southern Gaza, saying hostages were likely held there

By WAFSA SHURAF, BASSEM MROUE and MELANIE LIDMAN 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 seeking the remains of hostages taken by Hamas.

The raid on Nasser Hospital came after troops had besieged the facility for nearly a week, with hundreds of staff, patients and others inside struggling under heavy fire and dwindling supplies, including food and water. A day earlier, the army ordered thousands of displaced people who had taken shelter there to leave the hospital in the city of Khan Younis, the focus of Israel's offensive against Hamas in recent weeks.

The war shows no sign of ending, and the risk of a broader conflict grew as Israel and Lebanon's Hezbollah militant group stepped up attacks after a particularly deadly exchange on Wednesday.

The military said it had "credible intelligence" that Hamas had held hostages at Nasser Hospital and that the hostages' remains 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.

A released hostage told The Associated Press last month that she and over two dozen other captives had been held in Nasser Hospital. International law prohibits the targeting of medical facilities; they can lose those protections if they are used for military purposes, though operations against them still must be proportional to any threat.

As troops searched hospital buildings, they ordered the more than 460 staff, patients and their relatives to move into an older building in the compound that isn't equipped to treat patients, the Gaza Health Ministry said. They were "in harsh conditions with no food or baby formula" and severe water shortages, it said.

Six patients were left in intensive care, along with three infants in incubators with no staff to attend to them. The ministry said fuel for generators would soon run out, endangering their lives.

Separately, Israel launched airstrikes into southern Lebanon for a second day after killing 10 civilians and three Hezbollah fighters on Wednesday in response to a rocket attack that killed an Israeli soldier and wounded several others.

It was the deadliest exchange of fire along the border since the start of the Israel-Hamas war. Israel and Hezbollah — an ally of Hamas — have traded fire daily, raising the risks of a broader conflict.

Hezbollah has not claimed responsibility for Wednesday's rocket attack. Sheikh Nabil Kaouk, a senior member of the group, said it is "prepared for the possibility of expanding the war" and would meet "escalation with escalation, displacement with displacement, and destruction with destruction."

Negotiations over a cease-fire in Gaza, meanwhile, appear to have stalled, and Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has vowed to continue the offensive and expand it to the Gaza city of Rafah, near Egypt, until Hamas is destroyed and scores of hostages taken during the militants' Oct. 7 attack are freed.

In a phone call Thursday, President Joe Biden again cautioned Netanyahu against moving forward with a military operation in Rafah before coming up with a "credible and executable plan" to ensure the safety of Palestinian civilians, the White House said Thursday,

SCENES OF PANIC IN HOSPITAL

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Nasser Hospital has been the latest focus of Israeli military operations that have gutted Gaza's health sector as it struggles to treat a constant stream of people wounded in daily bombardments.

Israeli troops, tanks and snipers have surrounded the hospital for at least a week, and fire from outside has recently killed several people inside, according to health officials.

"There's no water, no food. Garbage is everywhere. Sewage has flooded the emergency ward," said Raed Abed, a wounded patient who was among those who left Nasser Hospital on Israeli orders Wednesday.

Still suffering from a severe stomach wound, Abed said he initially collapsed as he got out of his hospital bed and tried to leave. He then waited outside for hours as troops made those leaving pass by five at a time, arresting some and making them strip to their underwear, he said. Finally, he walked for miles until he reached the border town of Rafah, where he was put in a hospital. Lying in a bed there, he wheezed in pain from his wound as he spoke.

Overnight, a strike slammed into one of Nasser Hospital's wards, killing one patient and wounding six others, Dr. Khaled Alserr, one of the remaining surgeons there, told the AP.

Video showed medics scrambling to move patients down a corridor filled with smoke or dust, while in a dark room a wounded man screamed in pain as gunfire echoed outside.

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

The international aid group Doctors Without Borders said its staff had to flee the hospital Thursday, leaving patients behind, and that one staffer was detained at an Israeli checkpoint.

Troops were still searching the hospital hours after the entered, military spokesman Hagari said. He said dozens of militants were arrested from the hospital grounds, including three who participated in the Oct. 7 attack. He also said troops found grenades and mortar shells, and that Israeli radar determined that militants fired mortars from the hospital grounds a month ago.

NO END IN SIGHT TO THE WAR

The war began when Hamas militants on Oct. 7 burst out of Gaza and attacked several Israeli communities, killing some 1,200 people and taking another 250 hostage. More than 100 captives were freed during a cease-fire in November in exchange for 240 Palestinian prisoners.

Around 130 hostages remain in Gaza, a fourth of whom are believed to be dead. Netanyahu has come under intense pressure from hostages' families 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. Dozens of hostages' relatives protested and blocked traffic Thursday outside the military's headquarters, where the War Cabinet also meets.

Israel responded to the Hamas attack with one of the deadliest and most destructive military campaigns in recent history.

At least 28,663 Palestinians have been killed, mostly women and children, and more than 68,000 wounded, according to Gaza's Health Ministry, which does not distinguish between civilians and combatants. Some 80% of the population has been driven from 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.

Israeli media reported that CIA Director William Burns flew to Israel to meet with Netanyahu to discuss efforts for a cease-fire.

Hamas says it will not release all the remaining captives until Israel ends its offensive, withdraws and frees Palestinian prisoners, including top militants.

Netanyahu has rejected those demands and says Israel will soon expand its offensive into Rafah, Gaza's southernmost city. Over half of Gaza's population of 2.3 million has sought refuge in Rafah after fleeing fighting elsewhere.

Airstrikes late Wednesday in central Gaza killed at least 11 people, including four children and five women, according to hospital records. Relatives gathered around bodies wrapped in white shrouds outside Al-Aqsa Martyrs Hospital in the central town of Deir al-Balah before the remains were placed in a truck to be taken for burial.

One man struggled to let go, lying down and holding one of the bodies on the truck as he wept.

Greece becomes first Orthodox Christian country to legalize same-sex civil marriage

By NICHOLAS PAPHITIS Associated Press

ATHENS, Greece (AP) — Greece on Thursday became the first Orthodox Christian country to legalize same-sex civil marriage, despite opposition from the influential, socially conservative Greek Church.

A cross-party majority of 176 lawmakers in the 300-seat parliament voted late Thursday in favor of the landmark bill drafted by Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis' center-right government. Another 76 rejected the reform while two abstained from the vote and 46 were not present in the house.

Mitsotakis tweeted after the vote that Greece "is proud to become the 16th (European Union) country to legislate marriage equality."

"This is a milestone for human rights, reflecting today's Greece — a progressive, and democratic country, passionately committed to European values," he wrote.

Scores of supporters of the reform who had gathered outside parliament and were watching the debate on a screen cheered loudly and hugged as the vote result was announced.

"This took a long time to be adopted in our country ... but at least it happened and that's what is important," said a man who only gave his first name, Nikolas. "We are no longer invisible."

Earlier, people opposed to the bill had also protested nearby, holding prayer books and religious icons.

Opinion polls suggest that most Greeks support the reform by a narrow margin, and the issue has failed to trigger deep divisions in a country more worried about the high cost of living.

The bill was backed by four left-wing parties, including the main opposition Syriza.

"This law doesn't solve every problem, but it is a beginning," said Spiros Bibilas, a lawmaker from the small left-wing Passage to Freedom party, who is openly gay.

It was approved despite several majority and left-wing lawmakers abstaining or voting against the reform. Three small far-right parties and the Stalinist-rooted Communist Party rejected the draft law from the start of the two-day debate.

"People who have been invisible will finally be made visible around us. And with them, many children (will) finally find their rightful place," Mitsotakis told lawmakers ahead of the evening vote.

"Both parents of same-sex couples do not yet have the same legal opportunities to provide their children with what they need," he added. "To be able to pick them up from school, to be able to travel, to go to the doctor, or take them to the hospital. ... That is what we are fixing."

The bill confers full parental rights on married same-sex partners with children. But it precludes gay couples from parenthood through surrogate mothers in Greece — an option currently available to women who can't have children for health reasons.

Many LGBTQ+ rights advocates have criticized that limitation, as well as the absence of any provision for transgender people.

Psychologist Nancy Papathanasiou, scientific co-director of Orlando LGBTQ+, which advocates for LGBTQI mental health, echoed that concern but said the new law confers a very important sense of equality.

"Discrimination is the most pervasive risk factor for mental health," she said. "So just knowing that there is less discrimination is protective and promotive for LGBTQI mental health."

Maria Syrengela, a lawmaker from the governing New Democracy, or ND, said the reform redresses 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.

Dissidents among the governing party included former Prime Minister Antonis Samaras, from ND's conservative wing.

"Same-sex marriage is not a human right ... and it's not an international obligation for our country," he told parliament. "Children have a right to have parents from both sexes."

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.

Church supporters and conservative organizations have staged small protests against the proposed law. Far-right lawmaker Vassilis Stigas, head of the small Spartans party, described the legislation Thursday as "sick" and claimed that its adoption would "open the gates of Hell and perversion."

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.

Delay tactics and quick trips: Takeaways from two Trump case hearings in New York and Georgia

By JILL COLVIN and ADRIANA GOMEZ LICON Associated Press

NEW YORK (AP) — Donald Trump's unprecedented tangle of overlapping trials was on full display Thursday with simultaneous court hearings in New York and Georgia.

In Manhattan, a judge ruled that Trump's hush-money case will begin on March 25, making it the first of his indictments to go to trial. So there are 39 days before he becomes the first former president in U.S. history to be tried on criminal charges.

By that time, Trump could very well have won enough Republican delegates to be his party's presumptive nominee.

In Atlanta, attorneys grilled a special prosecutor on the Georgia election interference indictment against Trump over the prosecutor's romantic relationship with Fulton County District Attorney Fani Willis, trying to get Willis and her office thrown off the case.

Tuesday's hearings previewed what a general election campaign will look like as Trump flies back and forth from courtrooms and campaign rallies and blurs the lines between the two.

On his way into court into New York, Trump proclaimed his innocence but posed what will be the fundamental question of the presidential campaign going forward.

"How can you run for election if you're sitting in a courthouse in Manhattan all day long?" he asked.

Here are other takeaways from two courtrooms on Thursday:

DELAY, DELAY, DELAY

As they have with all of his cases, Trump's lawyers vigorously argued to delay the proceedings, citing the political calendar and Trump's other cases, including one in Washington over his efforts to overturn the results of the 2020 election that is effectively on hold pending the outcome of an appeal.

Trump attorney Todd Blanche repeatedly cast the March 25 date as unfair and unrealistic, asking Judge Juan Merchan to hold off on making a decision. It would be impossible, he argued, for Trump and his attorneys to adequately prepare given the combined "millions of pages of discovery" across Trump's cases.

Blanche echoed Trump's longstanding claims of politicization, asserting that being forced to sit inside a courtroom during primary season amounted to "election interference."

"The fact that we are now going to spend, President Trump is now going to spend, the next two months working on this trial instead of out ... on the campaign trail running for president is something that should not happen in this country," Blanche said.

Merchan rejected his arguments.

JUGGLING ACT

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The New York trial will last about six weeks, according to Merchan. That means Trump will be expected to be in court from March 25 through the first week or so of May from 9:30a.m. to 4:30p.m. every day except for Wednesday.

Asked how he planned to balance the campaign trail with the trial, Trump told reporters he'll campaign in the evening.

"We'll just have to figure it out. I'll be here during the day and I'll be campaigning during the night," he said.

In reality, that's not much different from what he's been doing all along.

He attended court in New York on Tuesday having held a rally the night before in South Carolina, which hosts the next Republican primary on Feb. 24.

Throughout his campaign, Trump has kept a far lighter campaign schedule than most of his Republican rivals. Many weeks, he holds just one or two public events — a schedule that his last remaining rival, Nikki Haley, has tried to highlight. She noted Trump's Wednesday trip to her home state was just his second in 80 days.

Trump has also repeatedly chosen to appear in court even when not required. He spent days voluntarily sitting in on his New York civil fraud trial and a defamation case that ended with him being ordered to pay an additional \$83.3 million to writer E. Jean Carroll after a jury found him liable of sexually assaulting her.

OFFICE ROMANCE

The Atlanta hearing, meanwhile, took on the tone of a soap opera even without Trump present. Thousands of people watched livestreams online and on cable news. And "Fani Willis" was a trending topic on Google and X, formerly Twitter.

A former friend and coworker of Willis, the chief prosecutor of Fulton County, testified there was "no doubt" that Willis and Wade were involved in a romantic relationship after seeing the two hugging and kissing years before he was hired as special prosecutor and before he officially filed for divorce.

Nathan Wade, the special prosecutor, filed for divorce in 2021 but told the court his marriage "was irretrievably broken" in 2015 when his wife had an affair. They agreed, he said, to stay together until their children moved out to go to college.

Ashleigh Merchant, the attorney for Trump co-defendant Michael Roman who filed the motion for removal, asked about trips and expenses Willis and Wade took together and whether Willis paid back. Wade was asked if he ever talked about their relationship with other people.

"We are private people," Wade said. "Our relationship was not a secret, just private."

Another attorney questioned Wade about when he began having "sexual relations" with Willis, who acknowledged under questioning that he had sex with Willis during his separation from his estranged wife, even though he had claimed that wasn't the case in divorce filings.

The hours of questioning played into a time-honored Trump strategy when under investigation. He has spotlighted extramarital affairs and other personal details of investigators, agents, prosecutors and judges he sees as enemies in attempts to discredit and humiliate them publicly.

'I'M NOT A HOSTILE WITNESS'

Willis took the stand right after Wade and immediately accused Merchant, the attorney for co-defendant Roman, of repeatedly lying and wrongly seeking salacious details about her personal life.

"It's highly offensive when someone lies on you, and it's highly offensive when they try to implicate that you slept with somebody the first day you met with them, and I take exception to it," she told Merchant.

Willis often confronted Merchant during the testimony, accusing her repeatedly of lying and stating in annoyance the attorney was not listening to her answers.

"I'm not a hostile witness," Willis said before the judge said she was an "adverse witness" opposing the attorney.

She testified at length about her romantic relationship with Wade, mentioning how much she paid for flights to Miami and how he liked wine while she preferred Grey Goose vodka. She said their relationship ended last summer but they remained friends.

As Merchant tried to get more details, Willis was defiant and her voice rose.

"Do you think I'm on trial? These people are on trial for trying to steal an election in 2020," she said. "I'm not on trial no matter how hard you try to put me on trial."

THE COURT AS THE CAMPAIGN

Thursday's hearings underscored how Trump had turned his court appearances into the heart of his campaign message. The strategy has been successful in a GOP primary season filled with voters who overwhelmingly support him.

But it is unclear whether the tactic will be as effective in a general election. The suburban and independent voters Trump needs to win over are far more wary of electing a man who could be a convicted felon by the time both parties hold their conventions this summer.

Still, Trump could be bolstered by the fact that what is widely seen as his weakest legal case will now be coming first. The case, which centers on years-old accusations that Trump sought to bury stories about extramarital affairs that arose during his 2016 presidential campaign, is complicated and carries far less severe penalties than his other cases, including charges in Florida related to his hoarding of highly classified documents.

Haley's campaign, meanwhile, tried to capitalize on the hearings, with her spokeswoman Olivia Perez-Cubas noting that, as Trump was in a New York courtroom, "Nikki was making her way to Texas to raise more money and campaign in the Super Tuesday state."

"That's what voters can expect from the two candidates, in a nutshell. One who is embattled by chaos, drama, and personal grievances. And another who understands the stakes, is fighting to earn every vote, and who is putting it all on the line for this country," she said.

In fiery testimony, Fani Willis hits back at misconduct claims that threaten future of Trump case

By KATE BRUMBACK and ALANNA DURKIN RICHER Associated Press

ATLANTA (AP) — Fulton County District Attorney Fani Willis took the witness stand Thursday and forcefully pushed back against what she described as "lies" about her romantic relationship with a special prosecutor during an extraordinary hearing over misconduct allegations that threaten to upend one of four criminal cases against Donald Trump.

A visibly upset Willis, who originally fought to stay off the witness stand, agreed to testify after a previous witness said her relationship with special prosecutor Nathan Wade began earlier than they had claimed. The district attorney's testimony grew heated under questioning from a defense attorney who's trying to remove Willis from Trump's 2020 election interference case, with the prosecutor at one point raising papers in front of her and shouting: "It's a lie!"

"Do you think I'm on trial? These people are on trial for trying to steal an election in 2020. I'm not on trial no matter how hard you try to put me on trial," Willis told defense attorney Ashleigh Merchant. At another point, Willis said, "Merchant's interests are contrary to democracy."

Willis is expected to return to the witness stand on Friday to continue answer questions.

The probing questions for Willis and for Wade, who testified before her, underscored the extent to which the prosecutors who pledged to hold Trump accountable are themselves now under a public microscope, with revelations about their personal lives diverting attention away from Trump's own conduct and raising questions about the future of the case as Trump vies to reclaim the White House.

The revelation of Willis and Wade's romantic relationship has provided an opening for Trump and his Republican allies to try to cast doubt on the legitimacy of Willis' case, which the former president has characterized as politically motivated. Other Republicans have cited them in calling for investigations into Willis, a Democrat who's up for re-election this year.

Trump and his co-defendants have argued that the relationship presents a conflict of interest that should force Willis off the case. Wade sought to downplay the matter, casting himself and Willis as "private people."

"There is nothing secret or salacious about having a private life," Wade said. "Nothing."

Robin Yeartie, a former friend and co-worker of Willis, testified earlier Thursday that she saw Willis and Wade hugging and kissing before he was hired as special prosecutor in November 2021. Wade and Willis both testified that they didn't start dating until 2022, and that their relationship ended months ago.

During personal and uncomfortable testimony that spanned hours, Wade also admitted to having sex with Willis during his separation from his estranged wife, even though he had claimed in a divorce filing that wasn't the case.

That admission and Yeartie's testimony together threaten to undermine the prosecutors' credibility as they prepare for trial in the case accusing Trump and others of conspiring to overturn the 2020 presidential election results in Georgia.

If Willis were disqualified, a council that supports prosecuting attorneys in Georgia would find a new attorney to take over who could either proceed with the charges against Trump and 14 others or drop the case altogether.

Willis and Wade's relationship was first revealed by Merchant, an attorney for Trump co-defendant Michael Roman, a former campaign staffer and onetime White House aide. Merchant has alleged that Willis personally profited from the case, paying Wade more than \$650,000 for his work and then benefiting when Wade used his earnings to pay for vacations the pair took together.

Wade, who took the stand after the judge refused to quash a subpoena for his testimony, testified that he and Willis traveled together to Belize, Aruba and California and took cruises together, but said Willis paid him back in cash for some travel expenses that he had charged to his credit card.

"She was very emphatic and adamant about this independent, strong woman thing so she demanded that she paid her own way," Wade said.

Wade was pressed by defense attorneys to answer uncomfortable questions about his relationship with Willis, prompting objections from the district attorney's office. The hearing began with lengthy sparring between lawyers over who must answer questions.

Willis' removal would be a stunning development. Even if a new lawyer went forward with the case, it would very likely not go to trial before November, when Trump is expected to be the Republican nominee for president. At a separate hearing in New York on Thursday, a judge ruled that Trump's hush-money criminal case will go ahead as scheduled with jury selection starting on March 25.

In a court filing earlier this month, Willis' office insisted that she has no financial or personal conflict of interest and that there are no grounds to dismiss the case or to remove her from the prosecution. Her filing called the allegations "salacious" and said they were designed to generate headlines.

Judge Scott 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."

FBI informant charged with lying about Joe and Hunter Biden's ties to Ukrainian energy company

By LINDSAY WHITEHURST and LISA MASCARO Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — An FBI informant has been charged with fabricating a multimillion-dollar bribery scheme involving President Joe Biden, his son Hunter and a Ukrainian energy company, a claim that is central to the Republican impeachment inquiry in Congress.

Alexander Smirnov falsely reported to the FBI in June 2020 that executives associated with the Ukrainian energy company Burisma paid Hunter and Joe Biden \$5 million each in 2015 or 2016, prosecutors said in an indictment. Smirnov told his handler that an executive claimed to have hired Hunter Biden to "protect us, through his dad, from all kinds of problems," according to court documents.

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Prosecutors say Smirnov in fact had only routine business dealings with the company in 2017 and made the bribery allegations after he "expressed bias" against Joe Biden while he was a presidential candidate.

Smirnov, 43, appeared in court in Las Vegas briefly Thursday after being charged with making a false statement and creating a false and fictitious record. He did not enter a plea. The judge ordered the courtroom cleared after federal public defender Margaret Wightman Lambrose requested a closed hearing for arguments about sealing court documents. She declined to comment on the case.

The informant's claims have been central to the Republican effort in Congress to investigate the president and his family, and helped spark what is now a House impeachment inquiry into Biden. An attorney for Hunter Biden, who is expected to give a deposition later this month, said the charges show the probe is "based on dishonest, uncredible allegations and witnesses."

The top Democrat on the House Oversight Committee, Rep. Jamie Raskin of Maryland, called for an end to the Biden impeachment inquiry.

Raskin said the allegations from the Republicans against Biden "have always been a tissue of lies built on conspiracy theories." He called on Speaker Mike Johnson, Oversight Committee Chairman James Comer and House Republicans "to stop promoting this nonsense and end their doomed impeachment inquiry."

Comer, R-Ky., downplayed the importance of the informant, who had figured centrally to the start of the probe.

"To be clear, the impeachment inquiry is not reliant on the FBI's FD-1023," Comer said in a statement, referring to the form documenting Smirnov's allegations.

The chairman said the inquiry "is based on a large record of evidence, including bank records and witness testimony," including interviews this week. He said the committee will continue to "follow the facts" and determine whether to proceed with articles of impeachment against Biden.

In the indictment, prosecutors say that Smirnov had contact with Burisma executives, but it was routine and actually took place in 2017, after President Barack Obama and Biden, his vice president, had left office -- when Biden would have had no ability to influence U.S. policy.

Smirnov "transformed his routine and unextraordinary business contacts with Burisma in 2017 and later into bribery allegations against Public Official 1, the presumptive nominee of one of the two major political parties for President, after expressing bias against Public Official 1 and his candidacy," the indictment said.

He repeated some of the false claims when he was interviewed by FBI agents in September 2023 and changed his story about others and "promoted a new false narrative after he said he met with Russian officials," prosecutors said.

If convicted, Smirnov faces a maximum penalty of 25 years in prison.

The charges were filed by Justice Department special counsel David Weiss, who has separately charged Hunter Biden with firearm and tax violations.

The Burisma allegations became a flashpoint in Congress as Republicans pursuing investigations of President Joe Biden and his family demanded the FBI release the unredacted form documenting the allegations. They acknowledged they couldn't confirm if the allegations were true.

Comer had subpoenaed the FBI last year for the so-called FD-1023 document as Republicans deepened their probe of Biden and his son Hunter ahead of the 2024 presidential election.

Working alongside Comer, Republican Sen. Chuck Grassley of Iowa released an unclassified document that Republicans at the time claimed was significant in their investigation of Hunter Biden. It added to information that had been widely aired during Donald Trump's first impeachment trial involving Trump attorney Rudy Giuliani's efforts to dig up dirt on the Bidens ahead of the 2020 election. After Grassley released the document, the White House said the claims in it had been "debunked for years."

The impeachment inquiry into Biden over his son's business dealings has lagged in the House, but the panel is pushing ahead with its work.

Hunter Biden is expected to appear before the committee later this month. His attorney, Abbe Lowell, said he had long warned the probe was based on "lies told by people with political agendas, not facts. We were right and the air is out of their balloon."

A judge set a detention hearing for Feb. 20 for Smirnov, who was arrested at the Las Vegas airport after arriving in the U.S. from overseas.

US eases restrictions on Wells Fargo after years of strict oversight following scandal

By KEN SWEET AP Business Writer

NEW YORK (AP) — The Biden administration eased some of the restrictions on banking giant Wells Fargo, saying the bank has sufficiently fixed its toxic culture after years of scandals.

The news sent Wells Fargo's stock up sharply Thursday as investors speculated that the bank, which has been kept under a tight leash by regulators for years, may be able to rebuild its reputation and start growing again. The bank's shares closed up 7.2% to \$52.04, its highest level since March 2022, in extremely active trading.

The Office of the Comptroller of the Currency, the regulator of big national banks like Wells Fargo, on Thursday terminated a consent order that had been in place since September 2016. The order required the bank to overhaul how it sold financial products to customers and provide additional consumer protections, as well as employee protections for whistleblowers.

That consent order was put into place after a series of newspaper and government investigations in 2016 found Wells Fargo to have a poisonous sales culture that pressured employees into selling multiple products to customers even though the products were not needed. Employees — who worked at "stores" not bank branches — were forced to open millions of unauthorized accounts. Customers had their identities stolen and their credit scores impacted. Of the millions of customers effected, a disproportionate number were non-English speaking Americans.

The scandal severely tarnished the reputation of San Francisco-based Wells Fargo, which eight years ago was considered one of the best-run banks in the country by investors and analysts.

Since the scandal broke, Wells Fargo overhauled its board of directors and management, paid more than a billion dollars in fines and penalties, and has spent eight years trying to show the public that the bad practices are a thing of the past. The scandal led to unionization efforts at some branches as employees protested how managers pushed unreasonable sales goals.

In a brief statement Thursday, the Comptroller of the Currency said that Wells Fargo's "safety and soundness" and "compliance with laws and regulations does not require the continued existence of the Order."

The decision is a major victory for Wells Fargo's management and Charles Scharf, who took over as CEO in 2019.

"Confirmation from the OCC that we have effectively implemented what was required is a result of the hard work of so many of our employees, and I'd like to thank everyone at Wells Fargo involved for their dedication to transforming how we do business," Scharf said in a prepared statement.

Citigroup banking analyst Keith Horwitz said in a note that the OCC's decision was "positive proof" that Wells Fargo's management was making the right decisions to fix the company's culture.

There remains in place a Federal Reserve consent order against Wells Fargo as well as a requirement by the Fed that bank grow no bigger than its current size until it fixes its sales culture. The Fed declined to comment, but the OCC's decision is likely to pressure the Fed to make its own decision regarding its restrictions on Wells Fargo.

Including the Fed's order, Wells Fargo still has eight consent orders that govern its operations. That's down from 14 when Scharf took over the bank. Management says they still have work to do.

"We've changed the company across a number of dimensions," said Scott Powell, Well Fargo's chief operating officer, in an interview. Powell joined the bank roughly around the same time as Scharf.

"We're doing better for customers and employees and we keep working to address the risk issues that are still outstanding."

Trial over lavish NRA spending nears jury, Wayne LaPierre's lawyer calls it a political witch hunt

By PHILIP MARCELO Associated Press

NEW YORK (AP) — The National Rifle Association and its ex-CEO were caught “with their hands in the cookie jar,” a lawyer with the New York Attorney General’s Office said Thursday, at the conclusion of a civil trial accusing the gun rights group’s executives of wildly misspending millions of dollars on private flights, vacations and other lavish perks.

Earlier in closing arguments to the Manhattan jury, an attorney for Wayne LaPierre, the powerful non-profit advocacy organization’s long-serving leader, had dismissed the case as a political witch hunt by New York Attorney General Letitia James. The NRA’s lawyer, meanwhile, said it could not be held accountable for LaPierre’s actions.

Assistant Attorney General Monica Connell countered that the NRA and its executives were doing everything they could to deny, deflect and soften the blow of the accusations.

“They’re going to try to get you to think about anything except what happened to those cookies,” she said. “They’re going to blame anyone else but themselves.”

The case, which unfolded over a six-week trial, now heads to the jury, which is expected to begin deliberations Friday after receiving verdict instructions from the judge.

State lawyers said at the trial that LaPierre, who announced his resignation just days before the trial opened in early January, billed the NRA more than \$11 million for private jet flights and spent more than \$500,000 on eight trips to the Bahamas over a three-year span. They also say he authorized \$135 million in NRA contracts for a vendor whose owners showered him with free trips to the Bahamas, Greece, Dubai and India, and gave him access to a 108-foot (33-meter) yacht.

Testifying over multiple days, LaPierre claimed he hadn’t realized the travel tickets, hotel stays, meals, yacht access and other luxury perks counted as gifts, even as he conceded he wrongly expensed private flights for his family and accepted vacations from vendors doing business with the NRA without disclosing them.

During Thursday’s closing arguments, LaPierre’s lawyer P. Kent Correll argued that LaPierre’s use of private flights was necessary for safety reasons, given his prominence in the contentious gun debate. The costly flights were not for personal gain, but to raise huge sums of money for the organization and gun rights causes broadly, he said.

“He was a visionary. He was a genius,” Correll said, dismissing the state’s allegations.

He also argued James had called the NRA a “terrorist organization” and campaigned on a promise to destroy it.

“This is a story made up by a person with an agenda that wanted him off the field,” said Correll, as he dinged James, a Democrat, for not even being present in court Thursday. “If this case was so important, why wouldn’t she be here?”

But Connell, the state’s lawyer, countered that if LaPierre truly had concerns for his safety, he should have raised them with the NRA’s board and received approval for the expenses.

The NRA’s lawyer, meanwhile, argued that the organization worked to address problems soon after they came to light through whistleblower complaints.

“When the fraud was discovered, it dug in. It turned over the rocks it was told not to overturn,” Sarah Rogers said. “The NRA left no stone unturned.”

“If this was a case about corruption,” Rogers added, “it wasn’t by the NRA.”

Connell argued that the NRA isn’t absolved of the misdeeds of its former executives. The organization allowed LaPierre to step down without any sanction, and many of the long-serving board members who enabled his actions still remain, she said.

“Saying sorry now doesn’t mean they didn’t take the cookies,” Connell said. “They cannot walk away from his conduct.”

Lawyers for LaPierre’s co-defendants argued that their clients had acted in the best interests of the NRA

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and didn't breach their duties to the organization, as James' office claimed.

"The man was doing his job, and he was doing it well," said William Fleming, a lawyer for NRA general counsel John Frazer, who James' office says made false statements and ignored whistleblower complaints against LaPierre.

Connell challenged that notion, saying Frazer, who attended law school at night while working at the NRA by day, simply wasn't qualified to provide legal counsel for an organization of the NRA's magnitude.

Mark Werbner, a lawyer for retired NRA finance chief Wilson Phillips, said his client had "acted honorably" even as James's office has said Phillips, among other things, secured a deal worth more than \$1 million that benefited his girlfriend.

"The state wants to put him in bankruptcy," Werbner said, referring to the state's request that the defendants be ordered to repay the NRA. "He doesn't deserve to be made penniless."

The trial cast a spotlight on the leadership, culture and finances of the NRA, which was founded more than 150 years ago in New York City to promote riflery skills. The group has since grown into a political juggernaut that influences federal law and presidential elections.

James filed the lawsuit in 2020 under her authority to investigate nonprofits registered in the state. Her office argues that LaPierre dodged financial disclosure requirements while treating the NRA as his personal piggy bank.

During that time, according to state lawyers, LaPierre consolidated power and avoided scrutiny by hiring unqualified underlings, routing expenses through a vendor, doctoring invoices, and retaliating against board members and executives who questioned his spending.

Former NRA President Oliver North, best known for his central role in the Iran-Contra scandal of the 1980s, was among the prominent witnesses to take the stand. He testified he was ousted from the NRA after raising red flags.

Besides paying back the NRA, James' office also wants the defendants banned from serving in leadership positions at any charitable organizations conducting business in New York.

Another former NRA executive turned whistleblower, Joshua Powell, settled with James' office last month, agreeing to testify at the trial, pay the NRA \$100,000 and forgo further involvement with nonprofits.

The NRA, meanwhile, remains a strong but tarnished political force. In recent years, the advocacy group has been beset by financial troubles, dwindling membership, board member infighting and lingering questions about LaPierre's leadership.

Before Russia's satellite threat, there were Starfish Prime, nesting dolls and robotic arms

By TARA COPP Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — What would it mean if Russia used nuclear warheads to destroy U.S. satellites? Your home's electrical and water systems could fail. Aviation, rail and car traffic could come to a halt. Your cellphone could stop working.

These are among the reasons why there was alarm this week over reports that Russia may be pursuing nuclear weapons in space.

The White House has said the danger isn't imminent. But reports of the new anti-satellite weapon build on longstanding worries about space threats from Russia and China. So much of the country's infrastructure is now dependent on U.S. satellite communications — and those satellites have become increasingly vulnerable.

It would also not be the first time a nuclear warhead has been detonated in space, or the only capability China and Russia are pursuing to disable or destroy a U.S. satellite.

Here's a look at what's happened in the past, why Russia may be pursuing a nuclear weapon for space now, and what the U.S. is doing about all the space threats it faces.

THE PAST: STARFISH PRIME AND PROJECT K

Both Russia and the U.S. have detonated nuclear warheads in space. In the 1960s, little was known

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about how the relatively new weapons of mass destruction would act in the Earth's atmosphere. Both countries experimented to find out. The Soviet tests were called Project K and took place from 1961 to 1962. The U.S. conducted 11 tests of its own, and the largest, and first successful, test was known as Starfish Prime, said Stephen Schwartz, a non-resident senior fellow at the Bulletin of Atomic Scientists.

Starfish Prime launched in July 1962, when the U.S. sent up a 1.4-megaton thermonuclear warhead on a Thor missile and detonated it about 250 miles (400 kilometers) above the Earth.

The missile was launched about 800 miles (1,300 kilometers) from Hawaii but the effects from the tests were seen around the equator.

"The large amount of energy released at such a high altitude by the detonation caused widespread auroras throughout the Pacific," according to a 1982 Department of Defense report on the tests.

The blast disabled several satellites, including a British one named Ariel, as radioactive particles from the burst came in contact with them. Radio systems and the electrical grid on Hawaii were temporarily knocked out, said Hans Kristensen, director of the Nuclear Information Project at the Federation of American Scientists. The debris left satellites in its path malfunctioning "along the lines of the old Saturday matinee one-reeler," the 1982 report said.

When the former Soviet Union conducted its own test as part of Project K, it did so at a slightly lower orbit and "fried systems on the ground, including underground cables and a power plant," Kristensen said.

The U.S. and the Soviet Union signed a nuclear test ban treaty a year later, in 1963, which prohibited further testing of nuclear weapons in space.

White House national security spokesman John Kirby declined to say Thursday whether the emerging Russian weapon is nuclear capable, noting only that it would violate an international treaty that prohibits the deployment of "nuclear weapons or any other kinds of weapons of mass destruction" in orbit.

SATELLITE ATTACKS TODAY

It's the ability to do that kind of damage that makes it logical that the Russians would want to put a warhead in space, especially if they see their military and economy weakened after fighting a U.S.-backed Ukraine for the past two years, said John Ferrari, a nonresident senior fellow at the American Enterprise Institute.

A space-based weapon that could cripple U.S. communications and the U.S. economy could be an intimidating equalizer, and would just be the latest development from both Russia's and China's efforts to weaponize space, he said.

In the past few years China has tested a satellite with a robotic arm that can maneuver to a system, grab it, and move it out of orbit.

Russia has developed a "nesting doll" satellite that opens up to reveal a smaller satellite, and then that one opens to reveal a projectile capable of destroying nearby satellites. In 2019, the Russians maneuvered a nesting doll near a U.S. satellite.

When one of those nesting doll systems "parks next to one of our high-value NRO capabilities, they are now holding that asset at risk," the deputy chief of space operations of the U.S. Space Force, Lt. Gen. DeAnna Burt, said at a 2022 space conference. NRO is the National Reconnaissance Office.

Russia also generated headlines around the world when it conducted a more traditional anti-satellite test in 2021, where it shot down one of its own systems. As with the Starfish test, the impact created a large cloud of orbiting debris that even put the International Space Station at risk for awhile.

THE NEW SPACE FORCE

The quickly evolving threat in space was one of the main drivers behind establishing the U.S. Space Force, Pentagon spokesman Maj. Gen. Pat Ryder said at a briefing Thursday. In the years since its 2019 creation, the service has focused on developing a curriculum to train its service members, called Guardians, on detecting threats from space and wargaming scenarios on what conflict in space would look like.

The creation of the Space Force elevated spending on satellite systems and defenses. Previously, when space needs were spread among the military services, spending on a new satellite would have to compete for funding with ships or fighter jets — and the services had a more immediate need for the aircraft and vessels, Ferrari said.

But there's more work to be done, and the revelation that Russia may be pursuing a nuclear weapon for space raises critical questions for Congress and the Defense Department, Ferrari said. If Russia uses a nuclear weapon to take out satellites and that cripples the U.S. economy, does that justify the U.S. bombing Russian cities in return?

"How do you respond to that? You have no good option," Ferrari said. "So now it's a question of, 'What is the deterrence theory for this?'"

Trump's New York hush-money case will start March 25.

It's the first of his criminal trials

By MICHAEL R. SISAK, JENNIFER PELTZ, JAKE OFFENHARTZ and ERIC TUCKER Associated Press
NEW YORK (AP) — Donald Trump's hush-money trial will go ahead as scheduled with jury selection starting March 25, a New York judge ruled Thursday, turning aside demands for delay from the former president's defense lawyers, who argued it would interfere with his campaign to retake the White House.

The decision means that the first of Trump's four criminal prosecutions to proceed to trial is a case centered on years-old accusations that he sought to bury stories about extramarital affairs that arose during his 2016 presidential run. Other cases charge him with plotting to overturn the results of the 2020 election and illegally hoarding classified documents at his Florida estate.

In leaving the trial date intact, Judge Juan Manuel Merchan pointed to the recent delay in the separate prosecution in Washington related to efforts to undo the 2020 election. That case, originally set for trial on March 4, has been effectively frozen pending the outcome of Trump's appeal on the legally untested question of whether a former president enjoys immunity from prosecution for actions taken while in office.

Noting that he had resisted defense lawyer urgings from months ago to postpone the trial, Merchan said, "In hindsight, frankly, I'm glad that I took that position, because here we are and the D.C. case did not go forward." He said he decided to stick with the trial date after speaking last week with the judge in the Washington case, Tanya Chutkan.

The hush-money trial is expected to last six weeks, Merchan said.

Assuming the New York case remains on schedule, it will open just weeks after the Super Tuesday primaries, colliding on the political calendar with a time period in which Trump will be looking to sew up the Republican race and emerge as the presumptive nominee in this year's presidential contest. His attorneys cited that schedule in urging the judge to reconsider the March trial date.

"We strenuously object to what is happening in this courtroom," said defense lawyer Todd Blanche, adding that "the fact that we are now going to spend, President Trump is now going to spend, the next two months working on this trial instead of out on the campaign trail running for president is something that should not happen in this country."

Trump made a similar case after leaving the courtroom, telling reporters that "instead of being in South Carolina and other states campaigning, I'm stuck here."

"We'll just have to figure it out," he added. "I'll be here during the day and I'll be campaigning during the night."

In fact, Trump has repeatedly attended court proceedings where his presence was not required and he went to court Thursday voluntarily. The judge had said he could join remotely by video from Georgia, where he was contemplating attending a simultaneous hearing in his criminal case there.

Thursday marked Trump's first return visit to court in the New York 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.

The hearing was held amid 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. On Monday, for instance, he voluntarily attended a closed hearing in a Florida case charging him with hoarding classified records.

A separate hearing was unfolding in Atlanta on Thursday as a judge considered arguments on whether

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to toss Fulton County District Attorney Fani Willis off the state's election interference case because of a personal relationship with a special prosecutor she hired.

The New York case has long been considered the least legally perilous of the four indictments filed against Trump last year, with the alleged misconduct — generally known to the public for years — seen by many as less grave than accusations of mishandling classified documents or plotting to subvert a presidential election.

Chutkan officially delayed the Washington case last month, with the Supreme Court now weighing the immunity question. There's no new date. The classified documents case in Florida is set for trial May 20, but that date could be moved. No trial date is scheduled in the Atlanta case.

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 Biden, but said he's certain of his "ability to be fair and impartial."

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 also rejected a request by Trump's lawyers to throw out the case.

Trump's lawyers accuse Manhattan District Attorney Alvin Bragg, a Democrat, of bringing the case to interfere with Trump's political chances. Bragg's predecessor, Cyrus Vance Jr., declined to pursue a case on the same allegations.

Trump is charged with 34 felony counts of falsifying business records. Each count carries a potential punishment of up to four years in prison, but 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.

Russia has obtained a 'troubling' emerging anti-satellite weapon, the White House says

By AAMER MADHANI and ZEKE MILLER Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — The White House publicly confirmed on Thursday that Russia has obtained a "troubling" emerging anti-satellite weapon but said it cannot directly cause "physical destruction" on Earth.

White House national security spokesman John Kirby said U.S. intelligence officials have information that Russia has obtained the capability but that such a weapon is not currently operational. U.S. officials are analyzing the information they have on the emerging technology and have consulted with allies and partners on the matter.

"First this is not an active capability that's been deployed and though Russia's pursuit of this particular capability is troubling, there is no immediate threat to anyone's safety," Kirby said. "We're not talking about a weapon that can be used to attack human beings or cause physical destruction here on Earth."

The White House confirmed its intelligence after a vague warning Wednesday from the Republican head of the House Intelligence Committee, Ohio Rep. Mike Turner, urged the Biden administration to declassify

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information about what he called a serious national security threat.

Kirby said that the process of reviewing and declassifying aspects of the Russian capability was underway when Turner "regrettably" released his statement.

"We have been very careful and deliberate about what we decide to declassify downgrade and share with the public," he added.

Russia has downplayed the U.S. concern about the capability.

In Moscow, Kremlin spokesperson Dmitry Peskov described the claims about a new Russian military capability as a ruse intended to make the U.S. Congress support aid for Ukraine.

"It's obvious that Washington is trying to force Congress to vote on the aid bill by hook or by crook," Peskov said in remarks carried by Russian news agencies. "Let's see what ruse the White House will use."

Kirby said the capability is space based and would violate the international Outer Space Treaty, which more than 130 countries have signed onto, including Russia. He declined to comment on whether the weapon is nuclear capable. The treaty prohibits the deployment of "nuclear weapons or any other kinds of weapons of mass destruction" in orbit or "station weapons in outer space in any other manner."

The White House said it would look to engage the Russians directly on the concerns. Even as the White House sought to assure Americans, Kirby acknowledged it was a serious matter.

"I don't want to minimize the potential here for disruption," Kirby said.

White House national security adviser Jake Sullivan briefed lawmakers Thursday on Capitol Hill on the Russian threat.

After the meeting, Turner said Sullivan spoke to lawmakers about the administration's options in addressing the threat.

"I think the bottom line is that we all came away with a very strong impression that the administration is taking this very seriously and that the administration has a plan in place," Turner said. "We look forward to supporting them as they go to implement it."

Connecticut Rep. Jim Himes, the ranking Democrat on the House Intelligence Committee, called the threat "pretty standard stuff" in terms of the national security threats that the intelligence panel deals with.

"This is not a threat for today, tomorrow, next week or next month," Himes said.

Himes said he respected Turner's decision to warn Congress at large about the threat but had expressed concern in advance about taking it public on social media. "And my concern was specific that if we did that, we would be staring into a whole lot of cameras and microphones," Himes told the reporters and camera crews outside the secure briefing room. "And here we are."

Republican House Speaker Mike Johnson, who also attended Thursday's briefing with Sullivan, said that lawmakers raised concerns about the threat with the Biden administration last month and requested a meeting with Biden to discuss it. He called Thursday's meeting "informative" and said Sullivan had assured leaders the White House will remain in close contact with lawmakers about the matter.

"It's not a matter that can involve delay," Johnson said. "It's something we have to address seriously and on an immediate basis, and we are."

The White House did not hide its frustration with how Turner went about sharing concerns about the threat.

"We make decisions about how and when to publicly disclose intelligence in a careful deliberate and strategic way, in a way that we choose," Kirby said.

"We're not going to be knocked off that process, regardless of what, in this particular case has found its way into the public domain," he added. "I can assure you that we will continue to keep members of Congress as well as our international partners and all of you and the American people as fully informed as possible."

White House officials said the U.S. intelligence community has concerns about a broad declassification of the intelligence. The U.S. has been aware of Russia's pursuit of anti-satellite capability going back at least months, if not a few years. Biden has been regularly briefed by his national security team on the issue, including on Thursday.

The U.S. has frequently downgraded and unveiled intelligence findings about Moscow's plans and opera-

tions over the course of its nearly two-year war with Ukraine.

Such efforts have been focused on highlighting plans for Russian misinformation operations or to throw attention on Moscow's difficulties in prosecuting its war against Ukraine as well as its coordination with Iran and North Korea to supply it with badly needed weaponry.

Intelligence officials assessed that starting with private engagement on the Russian anti-satellite threat could have been a more effective approach, Kirby said.

"We agree with that, which is consistent, of course, with the manner in which we have conducted downgrades of information in the past," Kirby said. "This administration has put a lot of focus on doing that in a strategic way, a deliberate way. And in particular, when it comes to Russia."

Some far-right members of Congress and allies of former President Donald Trump claimed that information about the Russian threat only surfaced to help President Joe Biden win passage of additional funding for Ukraine's war effort, as well as funding for Israel and Taiwan. A \$95 billion package that includes aid for Ukraine, Israel and Taiwan is stalled in the Republican-controlled House.

"Does anyone really believe that there is a serious Russian threat that magically leaks about 30 seconds after the Speaker said they're not going to take up funding another \$60 billion in Ukraine?" said Donald Trump Jr., the president's son, in a social media post. "Is anyone stupid enough to buy this at this point? Textbook deep state propaganda!"

Rep. Marjorie Taylor Greene, R-Ga., another Trump ally, suggested the government was leaking the intelligence "in order to pressure Congress to make certain votes, protect it's own power to spy on it's own citizens."

Other lawmakers, however, including some on the House Intelligence Committee, defended Turner's handling of the situation. The panel had voted earlier in the week to make the information available to lawmakers.

"The public has an interest in knowing," said Rep. Dan Crenshaw, R-Texas, a Navy veteran who serves on the intelligence panel.

US investigators visit homes of two Palestinian-American teens killed in the West Bank

By JULIA FRANKEL Associated Press

JERUSALEM (AP) — The families of two Palestinian-American teenagers killed in separate but eerily similar incidents in the West Bank say investigators from the American Embassy have visited their homes to look into the shootings.

Launching American probes into the killings of Mohammad Khmour and Tawfic Abdel Jabbar reflects what appears to be a lack of confidence in the Israeli justice system to properly investigate the cases. Rights groups have long said that Israeli investigations into killings of Palestinians rarely lead to prosecutions, and the State Department has previously called for an "expeditious" and "thorough" Israeli investigation into Abdel Jabbar's killing.

Both shootings happened as the Biden administration signals a desire to crack down on settler violence in the volatile territory.

Khmour, who was born in Hollywood, Florida, was shot last Saturday while driving with a cousin on a hillside in Biddu, the town just outside of Jerusalem where Khmour had lived since the age of 2, relatives said.

Seeking some fresh air after studying, Khmour joined the cousin on a drive to the forested hillside where villagers often barbecued, his brother Hamed Khmour said.

In videos and photos taken before the shooting and seen by The Associated Press, the boys joked around, taking photos of each other for social media and eating chocolate-covered waffles.

The boys were returning to the village, Hamed said, when they heard gunfire. At least one shot came through the car window, hitting Mohammad squarely in the head.

Hamed said his cousin told the family that the shots came from a white Mitsubishi with an Israeli license plate parked on a road below the hill, a vehicle that villagers said they had seen before. Hamed said the

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car was across the security fence separating Biddu from Israeli territory. The cousin then managed to escape and run back to the village.

A video taken directly after the incident and seen by The Associated Press showed a group of men pulling a body out of the car, littered with shattered glass and stained with blood. Hamed said Mohammad was pronounced dead at a Ramallah hospital late Saturday night.

Ahmad Khmour, Mohammad's father, said he did not know if Israel had begun investigating the case and had heard nothing from Israeli officials.

The Israeli military referred questions to the Shin Bet internal security service, which did not respond to requests for comment.

But U.S. Embassy officials visited the home and the scene of the shooting Thursday, taking pictures of the car Khmour was driving and the scene around it, Mohammad's father said. He said the officials told the family they are preparing a report on the incident.

The U.S. Office of Palestinian Affairs wrote on X, formerly Twitter, that it was "devastated" by the killing and called for "a quick, thorough, and transparent investigation, including full accountability."

Khmour lived in Biddu with his mother and four brothers. He hoped to go back to the U.S. to study law once he finished his final year of high school, Hamed said.

"Mohammad was a simple kid, like any other kid. He had dreams. He loved cars," said Hamed. "He never fought with anyone. Everyone liked him."

The shooting came nearly a month after the killing of Tawfic Abdel Jabbar, also a 17-year-old Palestinian-American shot while driving down a dirt road close to his village in the northern West Bank.

The sole passenger in the vehicle said the shooting was unprovoked, describing apparent Israeli fire hitting the back of the vehicle before it overturned several times. The incident prompted an expression of concern from the White House and an uncommonly quick pledge from the Israeli police to investigate.

But Israeli police have still not released any new findings in the case.

A video shared with the AP by Abdel Jabbar's father raised new questions of the police's original theory, which never mentioned that the teen had been shot while driving.

Instead, the police said that a civilian, an off-duty police officer and a soldier had targeted people "purportedly engaged in rock-throwing activities" along a main West Bank thoroughfare.

The video, which the father said was taken moments after the shooting, shows two Israeli soldiers standing about 20 meters (yards) from the vehicle, guns cocked — indicating that soldiers were in the vicinity that day.

Abdel Jabbar's father said that Israeli investigators took the vehicle into custody for under a week before returning it.

He said that last week U.S. Embassy investigators collected medical and legal reports issued by the Ramallah prosecutor's office and the hospital that treated Abdel Jabbar.

The reports indicated that the cause of Tawfic's death was a gunshot wound to the right side of the head.

Tawfic was from Gretna, Louisiana, and had been in the West Bank for under a year. Like Khmour, he was planning to return to the U.S. for college.

In an unrelated incident, Israel arrested a 46-year-old Palestinian-American woman, also from Gretna, last week for alleged incitement in posts on social media. The woman's family says they have not seen or heard from her since.

National Security Council spokesperson John Kirby said a week ago that he was "confident" that Ambassador Jack Lew was looking into Samaher Esmail's case, as well as circumstances around the detention of two Palestinian-Americans in Gaza that Israel says are affiliated with Hamas.

"Obviously, this is the kind of thing we take very seriously, so we'll be talking to our Israeli counterparts and trying to get information, more context here about what happened," he said.

The deaths come as violence surges across the occupied territory. Since the shock attack by Hamas militants on Oct. 7 from Gaza into southern Israel, Israel has held the West Bank in a tight grip.

Biden's administration has provided military and diplomatic support for Israel's war against Hamas. Still, the administration has condemned rising violence by Israeli settlers against Palestinians in the West Bank,

most recently releasing sanctions targeting four settlers.

Since Oct. 7, 395 Palestinians have been killed in the West Bank by Israeli fire, according to Palestinian health officials. Most have been killed in clashes during near nightly Israeli army raids aimed at suspected militants.

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 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

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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 Thieli 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."

More people die after smoking drugs than injecting them, US study finds

By MIKE STOBBE AP Medical Writer

NEW YORK (AP) — Smoking has surpassed injecting as the most common way of taking drugs in U.S. overdose deaths, a new government study suggests.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention called its study published Thursday the largest to look at how Americans took the drugs that killed them.

CDC officials decided to study the topic after seeing reports from California suggesting that smoking fentanyl was becoming more common than injecting it. Potent, illicit versions of the painkiller are involved in more U.S. overdose deaths than any other drug.

Some early research has suggested that smoking fentanyl is somewhat less deadly than injecting it, and any reduction in injection-related overdose deaths is a positive, said the study's lead author, Lauren Tanz.

But "both injection and smoking carry a substantial overdose risk," and it's not yet clear if a shift toward smoking fentanyl reduces U.S. overdose deaths, said Tanz, a CDC scientist who studies overdoses.

Illicit fentanyl is an infamously powerful drug that, in powder form, increasingly has been cut into heroin or other drugs. In recent years, it's been a primary driver of the U.S. overdose epidemic. Drug overdose deaths in the U.S. went up slightly in 2022 after two big leaps during the pandemic, and provisional data for the first nine months of 2023 suggests it inched up last year.

For years, fentanyl has mainly been injected, but drug users have increasingly smoked it. People put the powder on tin foil or in a glass pipe, heated from below, and inhale the vapor, explained Alex Kral, a RTI International researcher who studies drug users in San Francisco.

Smoked fentanyl is not as concentrated as fentanyl in a syringe, but some drug-takers see upsides to smoking, Kral said. Among them: People who inject often deal with pus-filled abscesses on their skin and risk infections with hepatitis and other diseases.

"One person showed me his arms and said, 'Hey, look at my arm! It looks beautiful! I can now wear T-shirts and I can get a job because I don't have these track marks,'" Kral said.

CDC investigators studied the trend by using a national database built from death certificates, toxicology reports and reports from coroners and medical examiners.

They were able to get suitable data from the District of Columbia and 27 states for the years 2020 to 2022. From those places, they got information on how drugs were taken in about 71,000 of the more than 311,000 total U.S. overdose deaths over those three years — or about 23%.

The researchers found that between early 2020 and late 2022, the percentage of overdose deaths with evidence of smoking rose 74% while the percentage of deaths with evidence of injection fell 29%. The number and percentage of deaths with evidence of snorting also increased, though not as dramatically as smoking-related deaths, the study found.

It's complicated to map out exact percentages of deaths that occurred after smoking, injecting, snorting or swallowing drugs, experts say. In some cases a person may have used multiple drugs, taken different ways. In other cases, no drug-taking method was identified.

The study found that in late 2022, of the deaths for which a method was identified, 23% of the deaths

occurred after smoking, 16% after injections, 16% after snorting, and 14.5% after swallowing.

Tanz said she feels the data is nationally representative. Data came from states from every region of the country, and all showed increases in smoking and decreases in injecting. Smoking was the most common route in the West and Midwest, and roughly tied with injecting in the Northeast and South, the report said.

Kral described the study as "mostly good" but said it has limitations.

It can be difficult to ascertain the how and why of an overdose death, especially if no witness was present. Injections might be more commonly reported because of injection marks on the body; to detect smoking "they likely would need to find a pipe or foil on the scene and decide whether to write that down," he said.

Kral also noted that many people who smoke fentanyl use a straw to inhale vapors from the burning powder, and it's possible investigators saw a straw and assumed it was snorted.

Penn Museum buries the bones of 19 Black Philadelphians, causing a dispute with community members

By GRAHAM LEE BREWER Associated Press

PHILADELPHIA (AP) — For decades, the University of Pennsylvania has held hundreds of skulls that once were used to promote white supremacy through racist scientific research.

As part of a growing effort among museums to reevaluate the curation of human remains, the Ivy League school laid some of the remains to rest last week, specifically those identified as belonging to 19 Black Philadelphians. Officials held a memorial service for them on Saturday.

The university says it is trying to begin rectifying past wrongs. But some community members feel excluded from the process, illustrating the challenges that institutions face in addressing institutional racism.

"Repatriation should be part of what the museum does, and we should embrace it," said Christopher Woods, the museum's director.

The university houses more than 1,000 human remains from all over the world, and Woods said repatriating those identified as from the local community felt like the best place to start.

Some leaders and advocates for the affected Black communities in Philadelphia have pushed back against the plan for years. They say the decision to reinter the remains in Eden Cemetery, a local historic Black cemetery, was made without their input.

West Philadelphia native and community activist Aliy A. Muhammad said justice isn't just the university doing the right thing, it's letting the community decide what that should look like.

"That's not repatriation. We're saying that Christopher Woods does not get to decide to do that," Muhammad said. "The same institution that has been holding and exerting control for years over these captive ancestors is not the same institution that can give them ceremony."

Woods told the crowd at Saturday's interfaith commemoration at the university's Penn Museum that the identities of the 19 people were not recorded, but that the process of interment in above-ground mausoleums "is by design fully reversible if the facts and circumstances change." If future research allows any of the remains to be identified and a claim is made, they can be "easily retrieved and entrusted to descendants," he said.

"It will be a very happy day if we can return at least some of these fellow citizens to their descendants," Woods said.

At a blessing and committal ceremony later at Eden Cemetery, about 10 miles southwest of the museum in Collingdale, Renee McBride Williams, a member of the community advisory group, said she was "relieved that finally the people who created the problem are finding a solution."

"In my home growing up, when you made a mistake, you fixed it – you accepted responsibility for what you did," she said.

"We may not know their names, but they lived, and they are remembered, and they will not be forgotten," said the Rev. Charles Lattimore Howard, the university's chaplain and vice president for social equity & community.

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As the racial justice movement has swept across the country in recent years, many museums and universities have begun to prioritize the repatriation of collections that were either stolen or taken under unethical circumstances. But only one group of people often harmed by archaeology and anthropology, Native Americans, have a federal law that regulates this process.

In cases like that between the University of Pennsylvania and Black Philadelphians, institutions maintain control over the collections and how they are returned.

The remains of the Black Philadelphians were part of the Morton Cranial Collection at the Penn Museum. Beginning in the 1830s, physician and professor Samuel George Morton collected about 900 crania, and after his death the Academy of Natural Sciences of Philadelphia added hundreds more.

Morton's goal with the collection was to prove — by measuring crania — that the races were actually different species of humans, with white being the superior species. His racist pseudoscience influenced generations of scientific research and was used to justify slavery in the antebellum South.

Morton also was a medical professor in Philadelphia, where most doctors of his time trained, said Lyra Monteiro, an anthropological archaeologist and professor at Rutgers University. The vestiges of his since-disproven work are still evident across the medical field, she said.

"Medical racism can really exist on the back of that," Monteiro said. "His ideas became part of how medical students were trained."

The collection has been housed at the university since 1966, and some of the remains were used for teaching as late as 2020. The university issued an apology in 2021 and revised its protocol for handling human remains.

The university also formed an advisory committee to decide next steps. The group decided to rebury the remains at Eden Cemetery. The following year, the university successfully petitioned the Philadelphia Orphans' Court to allow the burial on the basis that the identities of all but one of the Black Philadelphians were unknown.

Critics note the advisory committee was comprised almost entirely of university officials and local religious leaders, rather than other community members.

Monteiro and other researchers challenged the idea that the identities of the Philadelphians were lost to time. Through the city's public archives, she discovered that one of the men's mothers was Native American. His remains must be repatriated through the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act, the federal law regulating the return of Native American ancestral remains and funerary objects, she said.

"They never did any research themselves on who these people were, they took Morton's word for it," Monteiro said. "The people who aren't even willing to do the research should not be doing this."

The university removed that cranium from the reburial so it can be assessed for return through NAGPRA. Monteiro and others were further outraged to discover the university had already interred the remains of the other Black Philadelphians last weekend outside of public view, she said.

Members of the Black Philadelphians Descendant Community Group, which was organized by people including Muhammad who identify as descendants of the individuals in the mausoleum, said in a statement they are "devastated & hurt" that the burial took place without them.

"In light of this new information, they are taking time to process and consider how best to honor their ancestors at a future time," the group said, adding that members plan to offer handouts at Saturday's memorial with information they have gathered on the individuals in the mausoleum.

"To balance prioritizing the human dignity of the individuals with conservation due diligence and the logistical requirements of Historic Eden Cemetery, laying to rest the 19 Black Philadelphians was scheduled ahead of the interfaith ceremony and blessing," the Penn Museum said in a statement to The Associated Press.

Woods said he believes most of the community is happy with the decision to reinter the remains at Eden Cemetery, and it is a vocal minority in opposition. He hopes that eventually all the individuals in the mausoleum will be identified and returned.

"We encourage research to be done moving forward," Woods said, noting the remains of the Black

Philadelphians were in the collection for two centuries and, along with his staff, he felt the need to take more immediate action with those remains.

"Let's not let these individuals sit in the museum storeroom and extend those 200 years anymore," he said.

Even if all the crania are identified and returned to the community, the university has a long way to go. More than 300 Native American remains in the Morton Cranial Collection still need to be repatriated through the federal law. Woods said the museum recently hired additional staff to expedite that process.

Red flags, missed clues: How accused US diplomat-turned-Cuban spy avoided scrutiny for decades

By JOSHUA GOODMAN and JIM MUSTIAN Associated Press

MIAMI (AP) — Manuel Rocha was well known in Miami's elite circles for an aristocratic, almost regal, bearing that seemed fitting for an Ivy League-educated career U.S. diplomat who held top posts in Argentina, Bolivia, Cuba and the White House. "Ambassador Rocha," as he preferred to be called, demanded and got respect.

So former CIA operative Félix Rodríguez was dubious in 2006 when a defected Cuban Army lieutenant colonel showed up at his Miami home with a startling tip: "Rocha," he quoted the man as saying, "is spying for Cuba."

Rodríguez, who participated in the 1961 Bay of Pigs invasion in Cuba and the execution of revolutionary "Che" Guevara, believed at the time that the Rocha tip was an attempt to discredit a fellow anti-communist crusader. He said he nonetheless passed the defector's message along to the CIA, which was similarly skeptical.

"No one believed him," Rodríguez said in an interview with The Associated Press. "We all thought it was a smear."

That long-ago tip came rushing back in devastating clarity in December when the now-73-year-old Rocha was arrested and charged with serving as a secret agent of Cuba stretching back to the 1970s — what prosecutors called one of the most brazen and long-running betrayals in the history of the U.S. State Department.

Rocha was secretly recorded by an undercover FBI agent praising Fidel Castro as "El Comandante" and bragging about his work for Cuba's communist government, calling it "more than a grand slam" against the U.S. "enemy." And to hide his true allegiances, prosecutors and friends say, Rocha in recent years adopted the fake persona of an avid Donald Trump supporter who talked tough against the island nation.

"I really admired this son of a bitch," an angry Rodríguez said. "I want to look him in the eye and ask him why he did it. He had access to everything."

As Rocha pleaded not guilty from jail this week to 15 federal counts, FBI and State Department investigators have been working to decipher the case's biggest missing piece: exactly what the longtime diplomat may have given up to Cuba. It's a confidential damage assessment, complicated by the often-murky intelligence world, that's expected to take years.

The AP spoke with two dozen former senior U.S. counterintelligence officials, Cuban intelligence defectors, and friends and colleagues of Rocha to piece together what is known so far of his alleged betrayal, and the missed clues and red flags that could have helped him avoid scrutiny for decades.

It wasn't just Rodríguez's tipster — whom he refused to identify to the AP but says was recently interviewed by the FBI. Officials told the AP that as early as 1987, the CIA was aware Castro had a "super mole" burrowed deep inside the U.S. government. Some now suspect it could have been Rocha and that since at least 2010 he may have been on a short list given to the FBI of possible Cuban spies high up in foreign policy circles.

Rocha's attorney did not respond to messages seeking comment. The FBI and CIA declined to comment. The State Department said in a statement it will continue to work with relevant agencies to "fully assess the foreign policy and national security implications of these charges."

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"This is a monumental screw-up," said Peter Romero, a former assistant secretary of state for Latin America who worked with Rocha. "All of us are doing a lot of soul searching and nobody can come up with anything. He did an amazing job covering his tracks."

HUMBLE BEGINNINGS

Before he was charged with being a Cuban agent, Rocha's life embodied the American dream.

He was born in Colombia and at age 10 moved with his widowed mother and two siblings to New York City. They lived for a while in Harlem while his mother worked in a sweatshop and got by with the help of food stamps.

A talented soccer player with a sharp intellect, he won a scholarship for minorities in 1965 to attend The Taft School, an elite boarding school in Connecticut. Overnight he was catapulted from what he called a "ghetto" engulfed in race riots to a refined world of American wealth.

"Taft was the best thing that happened to my life," he told the school's alumni magazine in 2004.

But as one of only a few minorities at the school, Rocha says he suffered discrimination — including a classmate who refused to room with him — something that fueled a grudge that friends suspect may have led him to admire Castro's revolution.

"I was devastated and considered suicide," he told the alumni magazine.

From Taft, he went to Yale, where he graduated with honors with a degree in Latin American studies, and then on to graduate work at Harvard and Georgetown.

It's not clear exactly how Rocha may have been recruited by Cuba but prosecutors say it happened sometime in the 1970s when he was still racking up degrees and American college campuses were teeming with students sympathetic to leftist causes.

In 1973, the year he graduated from Yale, Rocha traveled to Chile, where prosecutors say he became a "great friend" of Cuba's intelligence agency, the General Directorate of Intelligence, or DGI. That same year, the CIA helped topple the Castro-backed socialist government of Salvador Allende, replacing it with a brutal military dictatorship.

Around the same time, Rocha entered the first of his three marriages, to an older Colombian woman he barely spoke about to friends, and who is now under scrutiny for possible ties to Cuba, according to those who have been questioned by the FBI. The AP was unable to reach the woman or locate any record of their marriage.

'ALL PART OF A PLAN'

After joining the foreign service in 1981, one of Rocha's first overseas postings was as a political-military affairs officer in Honduras, where he advised the Contras in their fight against Cuba-backed leftist rebels in neighboring Nicaragua.

In 1994, he went to the White House to work as director of Inter-American Affairs on the National Security Council, with responsibility for Cuba. That same year, he wrote a memo, "A Calibrated Response to Cuban Reforms," urging the Clinton administration to begin dismantling U.S. trade restrictions, according to Peter Kornbluh, a national security expert who interviewed Rocha for a 2014 book.

The secretary of state planned to announce the policy overhaul following the U.S. midterm elections, according to Kornbluh. But that speech was never delivered. Republican hardliners who took control of Congress enacted legislation in 1996 hardening the embargo and blocking any effort to improve relations with Havana.

From Washington, Rocha was dispatched to Havana, where he served for two years as the principal deputy of the U.S. Interests Section. It was a perilous time — in the wake of the 1996 aerial shootdown of a "Brothers to the Rescue" propaganda plane over Cuba that killed four Castro opponents — and the DGI would have had almost unfettered access to the diplomat.

Rocha's biggest known favor to Cuba, intentional or not, came during his final and most important diplomatic post, as U.S. ambassador to Bolivia, when he intervened in the country's presidential election to help a Castro protégé.

At an embassy event in 2002, Rocha inserted into his carefully scripted remarks a warning to Bolivians

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that voting for a narco-trafficker — a not-so veiled reference to coca grower-turned-presidential candidate Evo Morales — would lead the U.S. to cut off all foreign assistance.

"I remember it vividly. I was so uncomfortable," said Lilita Ayalde, a fellow foreign service officer who later served as U.S. ambassador to Paraguay and Brazil. "I told him it wasn't appropriate for the ambassador to say these remarks with elections just around the corner."

The backlash was immediate. Bolivians deeply resented the idea of the U.S. interfering in their elections, and Morales, until then a long shot, surged in the polls and almost won. Three years later when he did prevail, he credited Rocha with being his "best campaign chief."

Today, Ayalde wonders whether Rocha's last hurrah as a foreign service officer was an act of self-sabotage, done at the direction of a foreign power to further damage the U.S.' standing in Latin America, traditionally referred to as "Washington's backyard."

"Now that I look back," she said, "it was all part of a plan."

SUPER MOLE?

As early as 1987, when Rocha was a few years into his ascendant career, the U.S. was made aware of a Cuban "super mole" burrowed into the Washington establishment, according to Brian Latell, a former CIA analyst.

The information was provided by Florentino Aspillaga, who defected while heading the DGI's office in Bratislava, now the capital of Slovakia.

Before Aspillaga died in 2018, he told the CIA that four dozen Cubans it recruited were actually double agents — or "dangles" in spy parlance— carefully selected by the DGI to penetrate the U.S. government. Latell said Aspillaga also spoke of two highly productive spies inside the State Department.

While Aspillaga didn't know any of their names, the revelation sent shockwaves through the CIA.

"One of Aspillaga's major revelations was that Fidel Castro himself was serving to a large degree as Cuba's spymaster," Latell said.

Enrique Garcia, who defected to the U.S. in the 1990s, also caught wind of the clandestine spy ring while running Cuban agents in Latin America. He said the documents he saw, which carried "Top Secret" and State Department markings, were so valuable that they were sent directly to Castro's residence, bypassing the interior minister who oversaw the DGI.

"I have no doubt Rocha was part of that ring," said Garcia, who told the FBI about the spy ring years ago.

Jim Popkin, author of "Code Name Blue Wren," a book about Ana Montes, the highest-level U.S. official ever convicted of spying for Cuba, said his intelligence sources recently told him that Rocha's name was on a short list of at least four possible Cuban spies that had been in the FBI's hands since at least 2010. AP was not able to independently confirm that.

"The FBI has been aware of Rocha for a dozen years," Popkin said. "That's likely what stirred interest that led to his arrest years later."

Peter Lapp, who oversaw FBI counterintelligence against Cuba between 1998 and 2005, and wrote a book on Montes, "Queen of Cuba," said he was unaware whether Rocha had been on the bureau's radar. But he acknowledged that in the national security hierarchy, Cuba is often an afterthought to Russia, China and more dangerous threats.

At the time of Rodríguez's 2006 tip about Rocha spying for Cuba, for instance, U.S. counterintelligence investigators were occupied with the U.S. war in Iraq, the airstrike that killed al-Qaida leader Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, and controversial detention and interrogation programs overseas.

"You don't get promoted to the senior ranks of the FBI counterintelligence division by focusing on Cuba," Lapp said. "But it's a country we ignore at our peril. Not only are the Cubans really good at human intelligence but they are experts at brokering information to some of our biggest adversaries."

'I HAVE ACCESS'

Following his retirement from the foreign service in 2002, Rocha embarked on a lucrative career in business, racking up a number of senior positions and consulting jobs at private equity firms, a public relations agency, a Chinese automaker and even a company in the cannabis industry.

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"I have access to just about every country in the region or know how to get it," he bragged to the Miami Herald in 2006.

From 2012 to 2018, he served as president of Barrick Gold's subsidiary in the Dominican Republic, overseeing production at the world's sixth-largest gold mine. Rodríguez's mementos of his one-time friendship with Rocha include a photo of the former diplomat in a hard hat lugging around a freshly extracted chunk of gold.

John Feeley, who worked under Rocha when he joined the State Department and eventually became ambassador to Panama, remembers his former mentor urging him to reject pro bono work in retirement and instead chase a paycheck.

"He was openly and vocally motivated by making money in his post-foreign service career," Feeley said, "which wasn't typical among former diplomats."

One business that has received new scrutiny in the wake of Rocha's arrest was a venture he headed with a group of offshore investors to buy up at a steep discount billions of dollars in claims against Cuba's government for farmland, factories and other properties confiscated during the communist revolution.

Rocha and his partner said that there was no way the Cuban government would ever pay up and that the U.S. government was unlikely to help, recalled claim holder Carolyn Chester, whose father was a former AP journalist and later close to deposed Cuban dictator Fulgencio Batista.

Chester remembered how the pair rolled up to meet her in Omaha, Nebraska, in a limousine and delivered a polished presentation in which they played off one another "like a tag team."

While his partner presented the facts of their offer for a claim to a farm and other seized property, "Rocha would tug on our heartstrings," recounting a supposed meeting they had with Chester's parents years before in Washington.

Chester, who ultimately decided not to sell, said the meeting left her with doubts about Rocha, in part because she was all but certain her father's poor health would have kept her parents from making such a trip to Washington. And she found it strange that Rocha and his partner spoke as if "they knew for sure" of the intentions of Cuban officials.

The idea, according to Rocha's former business partner, Tim Ashby, was to "kill communism with capitalism" by swapping the claims for land concessions, leases and joint ventures in Cuba at a time when the communist island was desperate for foreign investment.

"For Cuba, there was a lot more at play," said Ashby, a lawyer and former senior official in the U.S. Commerce Department. "This was crucial to normalizing relations with the U.S."

The investment group would eventually spend around \$5 million buying up nine claims valued at over \$55 million, Ashby said. But the venture collapsed after some claim holders complained to the George W. Bush administration that they thought they were being bamboozled. In 2009, the Treasury Department moved to bar the transfer of any certified claims against Cuba.

That didn't stop Rocha from continuing to make money. Records show that since 2016 alone, Rocha and his current wife spent more than \$5.2 million to buy a half-dozen apartments in high-rise buildings in Miami's financial district. This month, four of those properties were transferred entirely into his wife's name, a move former law enforcement officials said could potentially shield them from government seizure.

In hindsight, Ashby acknowledged he was taken in by the image his former partner wanted the world to see.

"He was fiercely anti-communist and a staunch, early, Trump supporter," he said. "Rocha was the last person I would have suspected of being a Cuban spy."

Recession has struck some of the world's top economies.

The US keeps defying expectations

By STAN CHOE and CHRISTOPHER RUGABER AP Business Writers

NEW YORK (AP) — As some of the world's biggest economies stumble into recession, the United States keeps chugging along.

Both Japan and the United Kingdom said Thursday their economies likely weakened during the final three months of 2023. For each, it would be the second straight quarter that's happened, which fits one lay definition for a recession.

Yet in the United States, the economy motored ahead in last year's fourth quarter for a sixth straight quarter of growth. It's blown past many predictions coming into last year that a recession seemed inevitable because of high interest rates meant to slow the economy and inflation.

Give much of the credit to U.S. households, who have continued to spend at a solid rate despite many challenges. Their spending makes up the majority of the U.S. economy. Government stimulus helped households weather the initial stages of the pandemic and a jump in inflation, and now pay raises are helping them catch up to high prices for the goods and services they need.

On Thursday, a report showed that fewer U.S. workers filed for unemployment benefits last week. It's the latest signal of a remarkably solid job market, even though a litany of layoff announcements has grabbed attention recently. Continued strength there should help prop up the economy.

Of course, risks still loom, and economists say a recession can't be ruled out. Inflation could reaccelerate. Worries about heavy borrowing by the U.S. government could upset financial markets, ultimately making loans to buy cars and other things more expensive. Growing losses tied to commercial real estate could mean big pain for the financial system.

But, for now, the outlook continues to appear better for the United States than many other big economies. The mood on Wall Street is so positive that the main measure of the U.S. stock market, the S&P 500 index, topped the 5,000 level last week for the first time.

"First and foremost, it's important to emphasize that the market's performance is more a reflection of a thriving economy rather than unwarranted 'animal spirits' from investors," according to Solita Marcelli, chief investment officer, Americas, at UBS Global Wealth Management.

When it upgraded its forecast for global growth in 2024 a couple weeks ago, the International Monetary Fund cited greater-than-expected resilience in the U.S. economy as a major reason.

Several unique characteristics of the U.S. economy have sheltered it from recessionary storms, analysts say. The U.S. government provided about \$5 trillion in pandemic aid in 2020-2021, far more than overseas counterparts, which left most households in much better financial shape and supported consumer spending well into 2023.

The Biden administration has also subsidized more construction of manufacturing plants and infrastructure through additional legislation passed in 2021 and 2022 that was still having an impact last year. About one quarter of the U.S. economy's solid 2.5% growth in 2023 was made up of government spending. Republican critics, however, charge that the extended spending contributed to higher inflation.

"We had some policies that I do think helped us a lot," said Diane Swonk, chief economist at KPMG. "But also the structure of our economy is so much different."

Americans have been better protected from rising rates than U.K. counterparts, for example, because most U.S. homeowners with mortgages have long, 30-year fixed rates. As a result, the Federal Reserve's rapid rate hikes of the past two years -- which have lifted mortgage rates from around 3% to about 6.7% -- have had little effect on many U.S. homeowners.

Yet their British counterparts carry mortgages that have to be renewed every two to five years. They've struggled with rapidly rising mortgage rates as the Bank of England has lifted borrowing costs to combat inflation.

Catherine Mann, a member of the Bank of England's interest-rate setting committee, said Thursday that the U.K. economy's slowdown should be temporary. There are already signs in business surveys that the

economy is picking back up, she added.

"The data we have today is rear-view mirror," she said on the sidelines of an economic conference in Washington. Forward-looking reports "are all looking good." Like the Fed, the Bank of England is considering reducing its benchmark rate once it is confident inflation is under control.

Another benefit for the United States is that it experienced a surge in immigration in recent years, which has made it easier for businesses to fill jobs, potentially expand their operations, and has led to more people earning wages -- and then spending those earnings.

Japan, by contrast, is rapidly aging and has seen its population shrink for years, as it is less open to foreign labor. A declining population can act as a powerful drag on economic growth.

In Europe, consumer sentiment is weak among consumers who are still feeling the effects of higher energy prices caused by the war in Ukraine.

Even China, whose economy is growing faster than the United States', is under heavy pressure. Its stock markets have been among the world's worst recently due to worries about a sluggish economic recovery and troubles in the property sector.

The U.S. economy faces its own challenges. Its growth is forecast to cool this year as big hikes to interest rates by the Federal Reserve make their way fully through the system.

A report on Thursday may have given a nod to that. Sales at U.S. retailers slumped by more in January from December than economists expected.

Some pillars of support for consumer spending may be weakening. Student loan repayments have resumed, consumers have largely spent their pandemic stimulus money and credit-card balances are high.

Perhaps most frustrating is the fact that prices for things at the market are still much higher than they were before the pandemic. Lower inflation means prices are rising less quickly from here, not that they're falling back to where they used to be.

Coping with inflation remains U.S. consumers' top concern, except for those making more than \$150,000, according to a recent survey by Morgan Stanley.

When McDonald's CEO Chris Kempczinski discussed his company's latest quarterly results, he said he's not seeing much change in behavior among middle- and upper-income customers. But "where you see the pressure with the US consumer is that low-income consumer, so call it \$45,000 and under. That consumer is pressured."

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 vessels in the Red Sea on Jan. 4. In the weeks since, the Navy has had to intercept and destroy multiple USVs.

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

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they will continue firing on ships transiting the region until Israel ceases its military operations inside Gaza. The Eisenhower has been on patrol here since Nov. 4, and some of its accompanying ships have been on location for even longer, since October.

In those months the Eisenhower's fleet of fighter and surveillance aircraft has worked non-stop to detect and intercept the missiles and drones fired by the Houthis at ships in the Red Sea, Bab el-Mandeb Strait and Gulf of Aden. The carrier's 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 Gravely, and additional U.S. Navy assets in the region, including the destroyers USS Laboon and USS Carney — has 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.

On Thursday, U.S. Central Command reported that the strike group had intercepted and destroyed seven additional anti-ship cruise missiles and another explosive USV prepared to launch against vessels in the Red Sea.

A commercial vessel in the Gulf of Aden reported a suspected Houthi attack, and the crew and ship were able to safely continue their journey after an explosion occurred near the ship, the United Kingdom Maritime Trade Operations center reported. Houthi military spokesman Brig. Gen. Yahya Saree later claimed the attack, asserting without evidence that the rebels' missiles struck the vessel. He identified the targeted vessel as the Barbados-flagged bulk carrier Lycavitos, owned by the British firm Helikon Shipping. The company declined to comment.

"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.

U.S. Central Command also reported Thursday that the U.S. Coast Guard cutter Clarence Sutphin Jr. boarded a vessel in the Arabian Sea that was bound for Yemen on Jan. 28 and seized medium-range ballistic missile parts, explosives, USV components and military-grade communications equipment.

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 Gravely, 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."

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.

Israel's military said it killed a senior commander with the militant Hezbollah group's elite Radwan Force, Ali Dibs, who it says played a role in an attack inside Israel last year that unnerved Israelis, as well as other attacks directed at Israel over the past four months. It said Dibs was killed Wednesday along with his deputy Hassan Ibrahim Issa, as well as another Hezbollah operative, in a strike in the southern city of Nabatiyah.

Hezbollah confirmed three of its fighters were killed and released photos of Dibs and Issa without giving information about their roles in the group. A Lebanese security official said Dibs escaped a drone strike in Nabatiyah last week. The official spoke on condition of anonymity in line with regulations.

Hezbollah has vowed to retaliate for Wednesday's strikes, which hit Nabatiyah and a village in southern Lebanon, just hours after projectiles from Lebanon killed an Israeli soldier.

On Thursday evening, Hezbollah said it carried out its "initial response" by firing "tens of Katyusha rockets" on the northern Israeli town of Kiryat Shmona. There was no immediate word on casualties from the town, where most residents have joined the tens of thousands who have fled the area since the fighting began in October.

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

"At a time when we are insisting on calm and call on all sides not to 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. Lebanese state media said Israel's air force carried out strikes near the border towns of Labbouneh, Wadi Slouqi, Majdal Selm and Houla, according to the Lebanese state-run National News Agency, or NNA.

The Israeli army would continue to respond to Hezbollah's regular attacks, said spokesperson Avi Hyman from Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's office. "Our message to Hezbollah has and always will be: Don't try us."

The U.N. peacekeeping force deployed along the Lebanon-Israel border, known as UNIFIL, expressed concerns over the latest "exchanges of fire," and urged all sides involved to halt hostilities to prevent further escalation.

"Attacks targeting civilians are violations of international law and constitute war crimes," UNIFIL's spokesman Andrea Tenenti said in a statement. "The devastation, loss of life, and injuries witnessed are deeply concerning."

In Nabatiyah, the strike demolished part of a building, killing seven members of the same family, including a child, the NNA said. A boy initially reported missing was found alive under the rubble. First 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 two young children were killed. The Lebanese civilian death toll included six women and three children as well as the three Hezbollah fighters.

Amal Atwi, whose son was killed in Souaneh, said martyrdom has become a way of life in southern

Lebanon. "He's my only son and I have no one else," she said. "Let Israel take as much as they want, and we have more to give. Let's see who will get tired first. It will be them, not us."

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.

Hezbollah did not claim the strike in Safed. On Thursday, the group said its fighters attacked four Israeli posts along the border.

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.

Key points of AP report into missed red flags surrounding accused US diplomat-turned-Cuban spy

By JOSHUA GOODMAN and JIM MUSTIAN Associated Press

MIAMI (AP) — Friends and colleagues of Manuel Rocha knew him for an aristocratic, almost regal, bearing that was fitting for an Ivy League-educated career U.S. diplomat who held top posts across Latin America.

So former CIA operative Félix Rodríguez was dubious in 2006 when a defected Cuban Army lieutenant colonel showed up at his Miami home and told him Rocha was actually a Cuban spy.

"No one believed him," Rodríguez said, adding he passed the tip along to a similarly skeptical CIA. "We all thought it was a smear."

That exchange took on new relevance after Rocha was arrested in December and charged with serving as a secret agent of Cuba since the 1970s. In the weeks since, FBI and State Department investigators have been working to decipher the case's biggest missing piece: exactly what the longtime diplomat may have given up to Cuba.

Here are some key findings from an Associated Press investigation into Rocha's alleged betrayal and the missed red flags that could have helped him avoid scrutiny for decades.

WHO IS MANUEL ROCHA?

The Justice Department's case against Rocha dates back to 1973, the year he graduated from Yale. The FBI says he traveled to Chile that year and became a "great friend" of Cuba's intelligence agency, the General Directorate of Intelligence, or DGI.

Authorities also are scrutinizing the first of Rocha's three marriages that began around that time, according to those who have been questioned by the FBI.

Rocha was born in Colombia and at age 10 moved with his widowed mother and two siblings to New York City. A talented soccer player with a sharp intellect, he won a scholarship for minorities in 1965 to attend The Taft School, an elite boarding school in Connecticut, catapulting him overnight into a refined world of American wealth.

But as one of the few minorities at the school, Rocha says he suffered discrimination, something that friends now suspect may have fueled a grudge that led him to admire Fidel Castro's revolution.

WHAT DID HE DO FOR CUBA?

Prosecutors have ranked Rocha's betrayal among the most brazen in U.S. foreign service history. But the 15-count indictment offers few details about what he allegedly did for Cuba.

What is known is that an undercover FBI agent secretly recorded Rocha praising Fidel Castro as "El Comandante" and calling his work for Cuba's communist government "more than a grand slam" against the U.S. "enemy."

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One former colleague, Liliana Ayalde, recalled a 2002 controversy in which Rocha, then serving as ambassador to Bolivia, intervened in that country's presidential election to help a Castro protégé.

Rocha warned Bolivians that voting for a narco-trafficker — a not-so veiled reference to coca grower-turned-presidential candidate Evo Morales — would lead the U.S. to cut off all foreign assistance.

The comments amounted to Rocha's biggest known favor for Cuba. Ayalde, who later served as U.S. ambassador to Paraguay and Brazil, now wonders whether it was an act of self-sabotage, done at the direction of a foreign power to further damage the U.S.' standing in Latin America.

"Now that I look back," she said, "it was all part of a plan."

Rocha's attorney did not respond to messages seeking comment.

WHAT RED FLAGS WERE MISSED?

Authorities are conducting a damage assessment that's expected to take years, retracing Rocha's steps and speaking with former colleagues and officials about their interactions with him.

Among those they interviewed is Rodríguez, the former CIA operative who participated in the 1961 Bay of Pigs invasion in Cuba and the execution of revolutionary "Che" Guevara.

Rodríguez told the AP that he believed at the time he received the tip from the Cuban defector in 2006 it was an attempt to discredit a fellow anti-communist crusader.

"I want to look him in the eye and ask him why he did it. He had access to everything," an angry Rodríguez said.

It wasn't just Rodríguez's tipster — whom he refused to identify to the AP but says was recently interviewed by the FBI. Officials told the AP that as early as 1987, the CIA was aware Castro had a "super mole" burrowed deep inside the U.S. government.

Some now suspect it could have been Rocha and that since at least 2010 he may have been on a short list given to the FBI of possible Cuban spies high-up in foreign policy circles.

The FBI and CIA declined to comment, and the State Department didn't respond to requests.

"This is a monumental screw-up," said Peter Romero, a former assistant secretary of state for Latin America who worked with Rocha. "All of us are doing a lot of soul searching and nobody can come up with anything. He did an amazing job covering his tracks."

6 people are killed, 18 injured by a missile strike in the Russian city of Belgorod, officials say

By ILLIA NOVIKOV and EMMA BURROWS Associated Press

KYIV, Ukraine (AP) — A missile strike on the Russian city of Belgorod near the Ukraine border on Thursday killed six people, including a child, and injured 18 others, a Russian official said. It was the latest in exchanges of long-range missile and rocket fire in Russia's war on Ukraine.

Hours earlier, Russia fired two dozen cruise and ballistic missiles at a broad area of Ukraine, hitting multiple regions after a midnight strike in Ukraine's northeast killed five people in an apartment building, authorities said.

Five of the 18 people injured in Belgorod, a city of around 340,000 people, were children, regional Gov. Vyacheslav Gladkov said on Telegram. Tass news agency reported that 15 people were hospitalized.

A shopping center and a school stadium were hit in Belgorod, according to Roman Starovoi, the governor of Russia's Kursk region, which is next to Belgorod. "There are many casualties: dead and wounded," he said on Telegram.

Russia's Ministry of Defense said air defense systems destroyed 14 missiles over the Belgorod region that were launched by Ukraine using a RM-70 Vampire multiple launch rocket system.

Belgorod city, 25 miles (40 kilometers) north of the Ukrainian border, has been a regular target of Ukrainian fire, putting its residents on edge. Dozens of people were killed and injured in an attack there over Russia's New Year holiday weekend.

Those assaults have undermined President Vladimir Putin's attempts to reassure Russians that life in the country is largely going on as normal.

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In Ukraine, five people were killed and 10 were wounded in the nighttime attack on the village of Velykyi Burluk, in the Kharkiv border region, regional Gov. Oleh Syniehubov said.

Hours later, missiles targeted the capital Kyiv, the southern Zaporizhzhia region and Lviv in western Ukraine, among other places. The Ukrainian air force said it intercepted 13 of the 26 missiles fired across the country.

Frequent Russian long-range bombardments are occurring as the almost two-year war has become bogged down in mostly trench and artillery warfare, which is destructive but is not bringing much change to the 1,500-kilometer (930-mile) front line.

Thursday's salvos on Ukraine were notable for the geographic spread of its targets and the wide variety of missiles deployed by the Kremlin's forces.

Ukraine President Volodymyr Zelenskyy says that one of his priorities is improving Ukraine's air defense systems. He is due in France on Friday to sign a bilateral security agreement as part of his efforts to ensure continuing Western military support.

Zelenskyy's office announced he would also travel Friday to Berlin for talks with German Chancellor Olaf Scholz.

On Saturday, Zelenskyy will give a speech at the annual Munich Security Conference in Germany. He also is to hold bilateral meetings there with U.S. Vice President Kamala Harris and some European leaders as well as heads of major corporations.

The Russian missiles used on Thursday included Iskander ballistic missiles, Kalibr cruise missiles, guided aviation missiles and adapted S-300 anti-aircraft missiles.

Ukraine has also struck targets in Russian territory deep behind the front line. A fire broke out at an oil depot in Russia's Kursk region after an attack by a Ukrainian drone, Starovoit, the governor, said Thursday. There were no casualties, he said.

The Russian bombardment came a day after Ukraine's military said it used high-tech naval drones to sink a Russian navy ship in the Black Sea, in what would be a significant success for Ukraine days before the second anniversary of Russia's full-scale invasion on Feb. 24, 2022.

The Thursday morning barrage injured four people in the southern Zaporizhzhia region, where public infrastructure was hit, officials said. Explosions were also heard in Kyiv.

In Lviv, two schools, a kindergarten and 18 residential buildings were damaged, injuring three people, Mayor Andrii Sadovyi said.

In response to the long-range attacks, neighboring Poland's army said it has taken steps to ensure the safety of the country's airspace.

"All necessary procedures to ensure the safety of Polish airspace have been launched. ... We warn that Polish and allied aircraft have been activated, which may result in increased noise levels, especially in the south-eastern part of the country," the army's Operational Command said in a statement.

Today in History: February 16 Fidel Castro becomes premier of Cuba

By The Associated Press undefined

Today in History

Today is Friday, Feb. 16, the 47th day of 2024. There are 319 days left in the year.

Today's Highlight in History:

On Feb. 16, 1959, Fidel Castro became premier of Cuba a month and a-half after the overthrow of Fulgencio Batista.

On this date:

In 1862, the Civil War Battle of Fort Donelson in Tennessee ended as some 12,000 Confederate soldiers surrendered; Union Gen. Ulysses S. Grant's victory earned him the moniker "Unconditional Surrender Grant."

In 1918, Lithuania proclaimed its independence from the Russian Empire. (Lithuania, which was occupied by the Soviet Union, then Nazi Germany, then the Soviet Union again during World War II, renewed its

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independence in 1990).

In 1923, the burial chamber of King Tutankhamen's recently unearthed tomb was unsealed in Egypt by English archaeologist Howard Carter.

In 1945, American troops landed on the island of Corregidor in the Philippines during World War II.

In 1960, the nuclear-powered radar picket submarine USS Triton departed New London, Connecticut, on the first submerged circumnavigation by a vessel.

In 1961, the United States launched the Explorer 9 satellite.

In 1996, eleven people were killed in a fiery collision between an Amtrak passenger train and a Maryland commuter train in Silver Spring, Maryland.

In 1998, a China Airlines Airbus A300 trying to land in fog near Taipei, Taiwan, crashed, killing all 196 people on board, plus seven on the ground.

In 2001, the United States and Britain staged air strikes against radar stations and air defense command centers in Iraq.

In 2009, in Stamford, Connecticut, a 200-pound chimpanzee named Travis went berserk, severely mauling its owner's friend, Charla Nash; Travis was shot dead by police.

In 2011, bookstore chain Borders filed for Chapter 11 bankruptcy protection and said it would close nearly a third of its stores. (Borders closed all of its remaining stores in September 2011.)

In 2012, New York Times correspondent and former Associated Press reporter Anthony Shadid, a two-time Pulitzer Prize winner, died of an apparent asthma attack in Syria while reporting on the uprising against its president; he was 43.

In 2017, in the first full-length news conference of his presidency, Donald Trump denounced what he called the "criminal" leaks that took down his top national security adviser, Michael Flynn.

In 2018, in an indictment, special counsel Robert Mueller accused 13 Russians of an elaborate plot to disrupt the 2016 U.S. presidential election with a huge but hidden social media trolling campaign aimed in part at helping Donald Trump.

In 2023, Tim McCarver, the All-Star catcher and Hall of Fame broadcaster who during 60 years in baseball won two World Series titles with the St. Louis Cardinals, died at age 81.

Today's birthdays: Jazz/pop singer-actor Peggy King is 94. Actor William Katt is 73. Actor LeVar Burton is 67. Actor-rapper Ice-T is 66. International Tennis Hall of Famer John McEnroe is 65. Rock musician Andy Taylor is 63. Rock musician Dave Lombardo (Slayer) is 59. Actor Sarah Clarke is 53. Olympic gold medal runner Cathy Freeman is 51. Actor Mahershala Ali is 50. Rapper Lupe Fiasco is 42. Actor Chloe Wepper is 38. Pop-rock singer Ryan Follese (Hot Chelle Rae) is 37. Sen. John Ossoff, D-Ga., is 37. Rock musician Danielle Haim is 35. Actor Elizabeth Olsen is 35.