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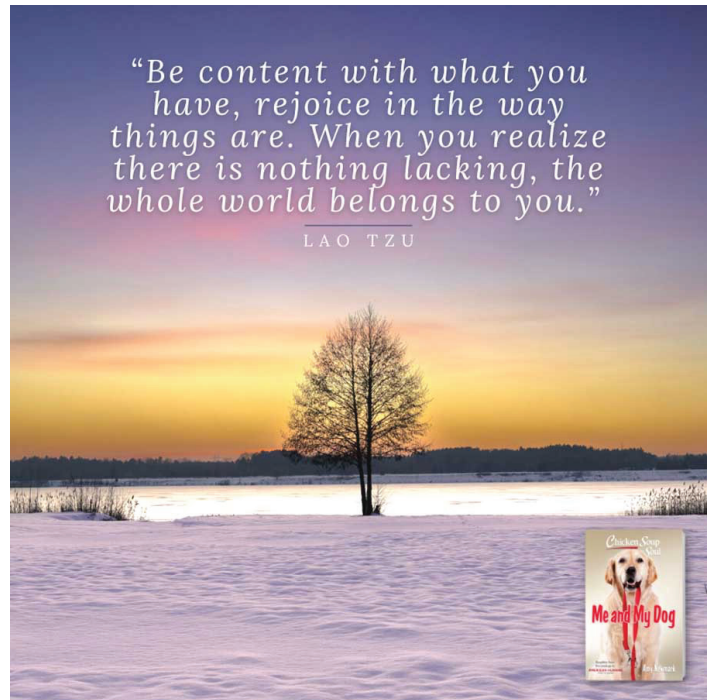
Thursday, Feb. 22

Senior Menu: Hamburger chow mein, chow mein noodles, vegetable stir fry blend, peaches.
School Breakfast: Muffins.
School Lunch: Sloppy joes, spudsters.
Girls Basketball Region 1A: Groton Area at Aberdeen Roncalli, 7 p.m.
State Wrestling at Sioux Falls

Friday, Feb. 23

Senior Menu: Salmon loaf, oven roasted potatoes, mixed vegetables, oranges, vanilla pudding, whole wheat bread.
School Breakfast: Stuffed bagels.
School Lunch: Fish nuggets, tri taters.
State Wrestling at Sioux Falls
Boys Basketball hosts Aberdeen Christian: One junior high game at 4 p.m., JV at 6 p.m., Varsity game to follow.

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



"Be content with what you have, rejoice in the way things are. When you realize there is nothing lacking, the whole world belongs to you."

LAO TZU

Saturday, Feb. 24

Robotics VRC state competition, 609 Cliff Avenue
Harrisburg, 10 AM State Wrestling at Sioux Falls
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. 25

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, 9 a.m.; Sunday School, 10:15 a.m.; Choir, 6 p.m.
St. John's Lutheran: Worship at St. John's at 9 a.m. and Zion at 11 a.m.; Sunday School at 9:45 a.m.
United Methodist: Worship at Conde, 8:30 a.m.; and at Groton, 10:30 a.m.; Coffee hour, 9:30 a.m.; Sunday School, 10:30 a.m.

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

In partnership with [smartasset](#)

Health officials from the University of Alabama at Birmingham said yesterday they would pause all in-vitro fertilization treatments following a ruling by the state's supreme court to extend legal rights to frozen embryos used in the procedure.

Nvidia Corp. reported highly anticipated fourth-quarter earnings yesterday that smashed records for both its quarterly and full-year results, boosted by strong demand for its semiconductors amid an artificial intelligence boom. The California chipmaker saw record fourth-quarter revenue of \$22.1B, up 22% from the previous quarter and 265% from the previous year. The company's fourth-quarter net income was \$12.3B, up 769% from \$1.4B a year ago. Nvidia shares rose 9% in after-hours trading.

The voice boxes of baleen whales evolved a unique set of structures to communicate sound underwater, according to a study published yesterday. The discovery solves a 50-year-old mystery that has puzzled researchers since the first baleen whale songs were recorded in 1967.

Sports, Entertainment, & Culture

Beyoncé becomes first Black woman to top Billboard country music chart with single "Texas Hold 'Em". "Vultures 1" album from Ye, formerly known as Kanye West, and Ty Dolla \$ign debuts at No. 1 on Billboard 200 album chart, marking Ye's 11th No. 1 album and Ty Dolla \$ign's first.

Jury selection begins in trial of "Rust" armorer Hannah Gutierrez-Reed over the 2021 shooting death of cinematographer Halyna Hutchins. Ewen MacIntosh, known for playing Keith Bishop in original UK series of "The Office," dies at 50.

BuzzFeed sells Complex to e-commerce platform NTWRK in \$108.6M all-cash deal, plans to lay off 16% of remaining workforce. Apple releases new iPhone app for tracking sports scores from major teams and leagues.

Science & Technology

Intuitive Machines lander reaches lunar orbit, expected to attempt to make controlled descent this afternoon; would mark the first private sector effort to successfully land a spacecraft on the moon.

Researchers develop ultralight implantable pacemaker that can be controlled by light; device is expected to reduce complications in many heart surgeries.

Food scientists create genetically modified potato that does not produce acrylamide, a carcinogen formed during the processing of cold-stored potato chips; technique may be extended to other processed starches.

Business & Markets

US stock markets close mixed (S&P 500 +0.1%, Dow +0.1%, Nasdaq -0.3%); Federal Reserve meeting minutes from January indicate officials see risks in cutting rates too soon.

Boeing replaces head of 737 Max program; announcement comes less than two months after a 737 Max 9 aircraft door plug blew out during an Alaska Airlines flight. Rivian shares fall 15% in after-hours trading after company says it expects electric vehicle production to be flat this year, plans to lay off 10% of workforce.

IRS to begin auditing corporate private jets, believes some owners overstate deductions when sometimes using the aircraft for personal use. Jeff Bezos nets \$8.5B after completing sale of 50 million Amazon shares.

Politics & World Affairs

Chinese police investigating unauthorized leak of documents from a private security contractor tied to the Chinese government, which appear to reveal hacking activity and tools used by authorities to surveil dissidents.

A 22-year-old protester dies in India amid clashes between farmers and police as farmers continue their march to the capital of New Delhi after failing to reach an agreement with the federal government over guaranteed crop prices.

Biden administration cancels \$1.2B in federal student debt for roughly 153,000 people who borrowed less than \$12K and have made payments for at least 10 years.

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



State Wrestling Qualifiers

Groton Area will be sending four boys and one girl to the state wrestling tournament with two Doland girls who wrestle on the Groton team. The top 16 in the state qualify in the girl's division. The top four in the region for the boys qualify for state. The state tournament is this weekend in Sioux Falls.

Pictured left to right are Christian Ehresmann, Korbin Kucker, Walker Zoellner, Wyatt Hagen, Liza Krueger and Doland's girls Reganne Miles and Kyla Logan. (Photo courtesy Alexa Schuring)



Dacotah Bank donates to Groton Area

Student Needs Account

Dacotah Bank of Groton donated \$325 to the Groton Area High School Students Needs Account.

The donation came from three-pointers and free throws made at the Moberge-Pollock double header played in Groton on February 10.

Dacotah Bank paid \$5 for each free throw made and \$10 for each three-pointer made.

For Groton Area, 10 free throws were made for \$50 and 13 three-pointers were made for \$130. For Moberge-Pollock, 23 free throws were made for \$115 and three three-pointers were made for \$30.

Receiving the donation is Groton Area Superintendent Joe Schwan. Making the presentation are Dacotah Bank employees Tammy Locke and Heidi Locke. (Courtesy Photo)

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The Life of Russell Sass

Memorial services for Russell Sass, 68, of Groton will be 11 a.m., Friday, February 23, 2024 at St. Elizabeth Ann Seton Catholic Church. Father Gregory Tschakert will officiate. Military honors will be provided by Groton American Legion Post #39. Visitation will be held at Paetznick-Garness Funeral Chapel on Thursday from 5-7 p.m. with a prayer service at 7:00 p.m. Deacon Greg Sass will lead.

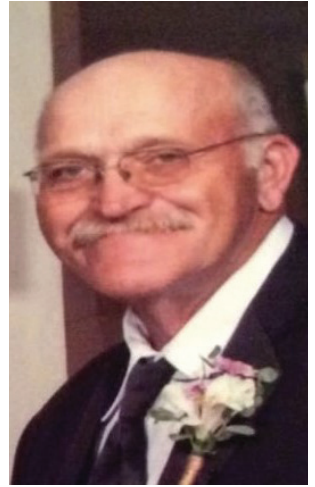
Russell passed away February 19, 2024 at Sanford Medical Center in Sioux Falls, surrounded by his family. He graciously gave life to others as a donor.

Russell Patrick was born on March 22, 1955 in Webster, South Dakota to Raymond F. and Pauline (Gaikowski) Sass. He attended school in Webster, graduating in 1973. Russ farmed for several years before enlisting in the US Marine Corps, where he served from 1980-1984. Following his honorable discharge, he returned to the Webster area. On November 15, 1985 he was united in marriage with Darlene Heupel and together they were blessed with two sons. Russ began driving truck for Hyman Freight Ways, later working for Mitzel and Sons in Aberdeen. He later drove for 3M, New Deal Tire and Full Circle Ag before his retirement.

Russ enjoyed spending time in the outdoors, hunting and fishing. He also enjoyed card and board games, building model cars/airplanes and spending time with his family.

Celebrating his life is his wife, Darlene of Groton, his sons, Jacob of Aberdeen, Ethan (Sarah) of Aberdeen, three grandchildren, Brooklynn, Shane and Harley, his siblings, Jim (Janet) Sass of Annadale, VA, Jerry (Ricky) Sass of Bigfork, MT, Ron (Judy) Sass of Florence, MT, Allan (Pat) Sass of Webster, Gene Sass of Milbank, Dwayne Sass of Webster, Greg (Nancy) Sass of Rapid City, Bob (Melinda) Sass of Rapid City, Becky (Jack) Vander Poel of Jasper, MN, Barb (John) Bauman of Maple Plain, MN and Mary (Jay) Aadland of Webster. Russ is also survived by 28 nieces and nephews.

Preceding him in death were his parents, an infant child and infant grandchild, Alex.



Groton Township

Groton Township Notice of Annual Meeting

NOTICE OF ANNUAL MEETING AND ELECTION IN GROTON TOWNSHIP

Notice is hereby given that the annual Groton Township Annual and Election of Officers will be held Tuesday, March 5, 2024, at the Groton Community Center. Meeting at 1 p.m. followed by election of officers. Sealed bids will be accepted for gravel, loaded and delivered, to designated places in Groton Township. The township board reserves the right to inspect the gravel before awarding the bid.

Bids must be addressed to Jeff Howard, Township Clerk, 40829 131st Street, Groton, SD 57445, sealed and plainly marked "Bid for Gravel." Separate bids will be accepted for mowing weeds along road ditches, removal of snow and blading. Bidders are to furnish township with name and address of insurance agent.

Bids will be opened by the Board of Supervisors, Tuesday, March 5, 2024, at 1 p.m.

The board reserves the right to accept or reject any or all bids.

Jeff Howard, Township Clerk

Names Released in Yankton County Fatal Crash

What: Two vehicle fatal crash

Where: SD Hwy 50, Mile marker 393, 7 miles east of Yankton, SD

When: 8:49 p.m., Saturday, February 17, 2024

Driver 1: Michael Jerome Myers, 45-year-old male from Sioux Falls, SD, fatal injuries

Vehicle 1: 2002 Ford Van

Seat Belt Used: No

Driver 2: Alex Richard Heine, 29-year-old male from Fordyce, NE, life-threatening injuries

Vehicle 2: 2021 Chevrolet Tahoe

Seat Belt Used: Yes

Passenger: Emily E. Heine, 28-year-old female from Fordyce, NE, minor injuries

Seat Belt Used: Yes

Yankton County, S.D.- A 45-year-old man died Saturday evening in a two-vehicle crash in Yankton County.

Preliminary crash information indicates a Ford van driven by Michael J. Myers of Sioux Falls was traveling eastbound in the westbound lanes of SD Highway 50 near Gayville. At the same time, a Chevrolet Tahoe driven by Alex R. Heine of Fordyce, Nebraska, was traveling westbound in the westbound lanes of Highway 50. The vehicles crashed head-on.

Myers received fatal injuries. He was not wearing a seatbelt. Heine was wearing a seatbelt and received serious life-threatening injuries and was flown by helicopter to a Sioux Falls hospital. The passenger in the Tahoe, Emily Heine, was transported to a nearby hospital with minor injuries. She was also wearing a seatbelt.

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.

Gov. Noem Signs Bills into Law

PIERRE, S.D. – Governor Kristi Noem signed the following six bills into law:

SB 14 expands authorization for the conditional taking of coyotes from snowmobiles;

SB 68 amends certain provisions pertaining to the South Dakota Retirement System to comply with federal law;

SB 69 amends certain provisions pertaining to the South Dakota Retirement System;

HB 1034 requires hydrogen pipelines to be permitted by the Public Utilities Commission;

HB 1049 authorizes the Board of Regents to accept and use easement proceeds for the purposes authorized by the 2022 Session Laws, chapter 198; and,

HB 1128 requires a zoning authority to determine that a well is an established well that has not been abandoned in making a permitting decision.

Governor Noem has signed 77 bills into law this legislative session.

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Boys Basketball Game

Aberdeen Christian @ Groton Area

Friday, February 23rd, 2024

Game Times/Locations: Main Court in Arena

- 4:00PM → Boys JH (Groton's 7th Graders)
- 6:00PM → Boys JV
 - o *Halftime Entertainment: Sugar Babes and Sweet Sensations*
- 7:45PM → Boys Varsity
 - o *Halftime Entertainment: FCCLA Shoot for a Pop*

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

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

CONCESSIONS: Will be available

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

**Team Benches – Groton: South Bench
Aberdeen Christian: 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

JH Game Officials: Jesse Zak, Jordan Carson

Varsity Officials: Luke Andersen, Bret Buck, Terry Duffy

Announcer: Mike Imrie

Scoreboard: Kristen Dolan

Official Book: Alexa Schuring

Shot Clock Operator: Joe Schwan

National Anthem: Groton Area 5th Grader, Charli Jacobsen

Thank you, Alexa Schuring, Athletic Director

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Good Luck Lady Tigers in Region 1A

Location: Aberdeen Roncalli

Teams: Groton Area vs. Aberdeen Roncalli

Time: 7 p.m.

Free watching on GDILIVE.COM

Sponsors for tonight's game:



**Bary Keith at Harr Motors
BK Custom Ts & More
Blocker Construction
Dacotah Bank
Dan Richardt at Groton Ford
Farmers Union Coop
Groton Ag Partners
Groton Chamber
Groton Chiropractic Clinic
Groton Daily Independent
Groton Ford
Hanlon Brothers
John Sieh Agency
Krueger Brothers
Lori's Pharmacy
Professional Management Services
S & S Lumber
Spanier Harvesting & Trucking
Sun & Sea Travel
The Meat House
Witte Exteriors LLC**



SOUTH DAKOTA SEARCHLIGHT

<https://southdakotasearchlight.com>

Lawmakers wade into landowner-hunter relations with plan for special elk licenses

BY: JOSHUA HAIAR - FEBRUARY 21, 2024 5:36 PM

There aren't enough elk in the state for all the hunters who want to shoot them, yet in some areas, farmers and ranchers complain of too many elk trampling cornfields, breaking fences and eating livestock feed.

The state Senate advanced legislation Wednesday that supporters say would ease both problems. But opponents say the bill could diminish elk populations while granting special treatment to some hunters seeking highly coveted licenses.

The bill would create extra licenses for South Dakota landowners and their lessees to hunt a female elk every year on agricultural land in the Prairie Elk Units. The units include much of the land west of the Missouri River, but not the Black Hills.

The Senate advanced the bill on a 28-6 vote, sending it to a House committee.

Tom Kirschenmann, director of wildlife for the state Department of Game, Fish and Parks, testified in favor of the bill during an earlier Senate committee hearing.

"The areas where this tag would be used or implemented would be areas where the population is high," Kirschenmann said.

He added that some landowners are complaining about damages caused by elk, telling the department "enough is enough."

The bill is controversial in the broader hunting community.

The allocation of elk hunting licenses is managed through a lottery system, overseen by Game, Fish and Parks. The system is designed to maintain the elk population by limiting the number of hunters in the field each season.

There were about 40,000 resident applicants for 3,500 licenses last year. Landowners already have first preference on half of those licenses, and the bill would create an extra class of licenses for landowners.

Kirschenmann said the bill would help manage the elk population more effectively. Additionally, he said landowners who are granted the new licenses may become more receptive to allowing other hunters with regular elk licenses onto their land.

Opponents fear the legislation could lead to overharvesting, potentially threatening the elk population's sustainability. Additionally, they say there is no language in the bill guaranteeing the public will get more opportunities to harvest an elk in return, and they predict a request in the future to allow landowners and lessees to sell their elk licenses to paying customers.

George Vandel formerly held the same position as Kirschenmann. Vandel now lobbies for the South Dakota Wildlife Federation, which advocates for resident hunting opportunities, more habitat and greater public access to that habitat.

During the bill's initial committee hearing, Vandel said there is nothing in the bill that guarantees it would create more opportunity for the public to harvest an elk.

"We don't see the assurances that those things are going to happen," he said. He reminded the committee that the state's elk are managed by the state on behalf of the public.

"We would like to see more assurances," Vandel said. "We didn't have any opportunity for input as this bill was coming forward."

Corrections secretary pushed on ballooning costs for prison projects

Increases tied to inflation, officials tell budget committee

BY: JOHN HULT - FEBRUARY 21, 2024 4:37 PM

PIERRE – Lawmakers peppered the Department of Corrections secretary with questions on Wednesday morning about the growing gap between initial and current price points for two new state prisons.

Secretary Kellie Wasko told lawmakers that the state will have a “guaranteed maximum price” in November for the men’s prison. Barring a legal victory by the local opponents to the prison project who’ve sued the state over site selection, the prison will be built on an undeveloped patch of cropland in Lincoln County. It would replace the oldest areas of the state penitentiary in Sioux Falls.

Regardless of the location, the proposed 1,500-capacity prison would be the costliest state-funded capital project in South Dakota history.

The cost keeps changing, though. The current amount of allocated funds sits at \$567 million, Wasko told the budget-setting Joint Appropriations Committee on Wednesday. The Bureau of Finance and Management told the same committee earlier this session that the cost could grow to \$700 million.

The initial projection, as presented in 2022 by an architecture and engineering firm called DLR in a facilities review, was \$338 million.

The new 288-capacity women’s prison in Rapid City, meanwhile — for which there’s already been a groundbreaking to relieve overcrowding at the existing women’s prison in Pierre — had \$60 million set aside last year by lawmakers. On Wednesday, Wasko presented a project cost of \$87 million.

Taken together, the costs thus far for the projects have swollen from an initial \$398 million to at least \$654 million – a 64% increase.

Lawmakers push back on budget

Both figures caught the attention of Rep. John Mills, R-Brookings, who ultimately offered the lone “no” vote on a bill to further fund the women’s prison project.

The DLR report served as the basis for two years of discussions on the new prisons. The report says new prisons are needed to manage South Dakota’s growing inmate population and the safety of staff at the 143-year-old state penitentiary in Sioux Falls, and Mills said he agrees.

That doesn’t mean he’s ready to accept a price tag hundreds of millions of dollars higher than the report’s estimates.

“I remain very concerned about the costs,” Mills said. “I believe they’re highly inflated.”

Wasko said more than once during the hearing that “DLR is not a construction company,” and stressed that the current figures came from designers and construction managers who are closer to what will become the final products.

With an assist from State Engineer Stacy Watters, Wasko explained that DLR based its costs on inflation rates from 2021, and that further price hikes were tied to subsequent inflation.

“When we actually tracked the integrated record inflation from ‘21, ‘22, ‘23 and ‘24, we were closer to seven and a half to 8%,” Watters told the committee.

Mills wasn’t satisfied, though. He noted that the state of Nebraska is also building a new prison with 1,500 beds at a cost of \$350 million.

“What explains the difference between ours at \$567 (million)?” Mills said.

Wasko told Mills she’d spoken with the project manager for that prison to prepare for Wednesday’s hearing, and she said one major difference is in the security level of the inmates who will be housed in the Nebraska facility. That campus is only partially for maximum security inmates, and includes medium-security areas and a 600-bed “camp.”

Higher-security inmates require costlier security measures on the construction side, Wasko said.

“We are doing a multi-custody facility, which we house at our highest custody level, because those are

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the beds that are lacking right now," she said.

She also pointed out that Nebraska's site is very near electricity, water and sewer lines, that all the building materials are available within 50 miles of the site, and that their cells are precast and will be "stacked like Legos."

"I would think that all those things would be available to us," Mills said. "They do precast in Sioux Falls."

The "infrastructure and trade demands" in South Dakota are "significantly different," Wasko said.

Sen. Jim Bolin, R-Canton, wanted assurances that the "guaranteed maximum price" presented in November would mean that the general contractor would "eat" any overruns.

Watters and Wasko said the November guarantee would mean just that.

Rep. Tony Venhuizen, R-Sioux Falls, questioned the \$39 million the DOC committed to a consultant for the design of the prison. He noted that the South Dakota State Capitol lifted its design from Montana to save money.

"I don't know what we pay these people an hour, but if we pay \$500 an hour, \$39 million would employ 38 people for an entire year," Venhuizen said.

Watters told Venhuizen that at least a dozen people are working on the design full-time, and that the contract runs three and a half years.

Women's prison adjusted to shave off costs

The committee did not vote to allocate funding to the men's prison project on Wednesday, though it's expected to this week. When it does, it will deposit money into an incarceration construction fund, where it will build interest until construction of the men's prison begins, sometime in 2025.

That interest could add around \$5 million to the bank for the project. That "incarceration construction fund" currently sits at about \$366 million.

The women's prison project in Rapid City has begun spending its state funds already, having broken ground last year. Last year's lawmakers offered \$60 million for that project, but the costs have grown there, as well.

For construction alone, one price point presented last year stood at \$75 million, which Wasko said prompted the DOC to shave costs by adjusting the roof materials used for two buildings. That brought the costs down to \$72 million.

"The only option to get under \$60 million would have been to remove one of the housing units," which Wasko said wouldn't work, because the women's prison in Pierre is so overcrowded that it can no longer offer programming or classes to inmates.

The new facility will free up space for programming, as well as for a mothers-and-infants program for inmate moms.

The total \$87 million price tag includes the purchase price for the land in Rapid City and for design, she told the committee.

The committee ultimately voted to fund the women's prison project, but not before a handful of lawmakers mentioned the importance of keeping an eye on costs. Senate Bill 50 would pull \$20.8 million from the incarceration construction fund for use in the women's prison project, put \$20.8 million back into the fund for future use, and allocate \$2.4 million in federal American Rescue and Recovery Act dollars for water and sewer infrastructure.

Before casting his vote against that funding, though, Mills argued that the committee ought to ask some difficult questions about the ballooning costs.

DLR may not be a construction company, Mills said, but that doesn't mean the figures from its report are to be taken lightly when state dollars are on the line.

"Architects don't stay in business if their numbers are wrong," Mills 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.

Q&A: The long road to 'Short Walk,' a new podcast on the Ravensborg accident and impeachment

BY: SETH TUPPER - FEBRUARY 21, 2024 7:00 AM

Jason Ravensborg's commitment to crisscrossing the state in his car led to his success and his downfall, according to the producer of a new podcast about the former South Dakota attorney general.

Before Ravensborg's involvement in a crash that killed a pedestrian, he defined himself in part by the long drives he made to political and official functions.

"One thing I'm good at is driving," Ravensborg said at a public meeting just months before the crash.

Details like that are woven throughout Lee Strubinger's deeply researched and reported podcast, "Short Walk," about Ravensborg's rise and fall. All nine episodes were released Tuesday on multiple podcast platforms.

In 2020, Ravensborg was driving home to Pierre from a Republican fundraising dinner in Redfield when he struck and killed Joe Boever, who was walking alongside a rural stretch of highway near Highmore.

Ravnsborg told investigators he didn't know what he'd hit and denied being distracted by his smartphone. He drove home that night in a borrowed vehicle and said he didn't find Boever's body until the next morning, upon his return to the accident scene.

Investigators said Ravensborg had been using his smartphone during the drive. They also cast doubt on Ravensborg's story about not finding the body on the night of the accident, with details including the presence of Boever's glasses ending up in Ravensborg's car after Boever's face impacted the windshield.

Ravnsborg eventually pleaded no contest to making an illegal lane change and using his phone while driving — both misdemeanors — and was impeached and removed from office in 2022.

Strubinger, a reporter for South Dakota Public Broadcasting, covered the story from beginning to end and was still covering it last week, when Ravensborg appeared before the state Supreme Court to argue against the suspension of his law license.

Following are portions of a South Dakota Searchlight interview with Strubinger about the podcast. Searchlight's questions and Strubinger's answers have been edited for length and clarity.

What's the value of taking a deep dive back into this story and retelling it in an episodic format?

I think the value is, because it was such a busy time that we were all in at that moment, to just sort of take a step back and explain, "here's what happened with this," because at the time it was COVID, it was Trump's impeachment, it was Governor Kristi Noem's rising national profile, all those things. So to just kind of pluck this particular story out and put it all in one location for people to sit down and listen, and to try and tell what happened — I still think there's some misconceptions about the entire thing, and so this was a chance to step back and tell a fuller story.

What are the misconceptions?

People still tell me to this day that they think he was drunk the night of the accident. Having covered state politics, if he had even had one beer, I think we would know it, because people talk. It was a small enough event that the people who were at this particular thing, somebody would have said, "Yeah, he had some alcohol while he was there."

And I think there was this perception that, "Well, of course they threw him out, because he killed that guy." But we barely got to the Senate trial and even then, everything was in Ravensborg's favor until it got to the Senate, and on the first impeachment article, they barely approved that one [with no votes to spare on a vote that required a two-thirds majority].

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Ravnsborg rejected attempts by other Republicans to get him to resign. The eventual public release of investigative materials seemed designed, in part, to put further pressure on him. If he had resigned early on, would some of those details have stayed confidential?

Maybe not, because early on the governor did make a commitment to release the investigation file. So maybe it would have, maybe it wouldn't have, but his defiance certainly didn't help him in that regard.

And one of the things that kind of sticks out to me just in terms of this whole story is that the very thing that helped him get to this particular point in his political career was ultimately what ended up bringing him down in the long run. He was coming home from a Lincoln Day dinner. He built his name ID by going to Lincoln Day dinners across the state, doing ballot question explanations, running for US Senate — all those things, getting in front of these party officials who would ultimately end up nominating him for this position. And that thing that he was doing ultimately led to his downfall.

Has Ravensborg ever fully expressed remorse for the accident?

There is a question out there of whether he has apologized to the family. One of the things that we don't know is the terms of the civil suit that was settled between him and [Joe Boever's widow] Jenny Boever, so that could have come with an apology. I don't really know.

There is a level of remorse there, because he said he was sorry the accident occurred. It's an interesting apology, but you know one of the things that he said at the recent hearing on the fate of his law license was that it's been 1,200 and some-odd days since the accident, and he marks every day on his calendar and says a prayer for Joe Boever and himself. And that really stuck with me, the fact that Jason Ravensborg starts his day every day thinking about this particular incident that happened in the blink of an eye. And so I think that's definitely a window into something — whether you call it remorse or not — that he's going to deal with for the rest of his life.

You devoted an episode to Joe Boever, the man who was killed in the accident. Why was it important for you to do that?

I guess I was so dissatisfied with typing his name over and over in news stories and not really knowing anything about it, and so one of the things that I went out to try and do is to understand, on some level, who he was as a person, and just to kind of get an idea of how he lived his life.

For example, people talked about him struggling with depression, and I wondered, what did that look like? It turns out it looked a lot different than how I originally thought. This guy read a lot of philosophy and was very well read, and he thought about the role of society, and he was kind of an outsider, a bit of an outcast. So I just thought it was worthwhile to tell a little bit more about who this person was.

The night of the accident, Boever had driven his pickup into a ditch and had gotten a ride back into town. Then he walked back out to the pickup and was ultimately struck and killed by Ravensborg's car. Apparently we'll never know why Boever walked back out to his pickup that night?

I thought I had pieced it together. But when I ran it by the family, they didn't seem to think that was particularly the case. And so we won't ever really know. The only indicators that inform how I think about it is in his truck was his depression medication and his rolling tobacco. And so my thought was maybe he was walking out to his truck to go get that stuff. But he was walking back toward town, and those two items were still in his vehicle. So that doesn't quite add up.

As part of producing the podcast, you went out to the accident scene at about the same time of night as the accident happened. What was that like?

I tried to do — in radio we do these things called a stand-up. And I tried to express a certain, you know, "can you believe everything that led to this moment" type of thing, and I got to a certain point that I

just didn't have any words left. It was very haunting and surreal to be there in that moment, to just sort of stand there and listen to the crickets, and the weather was perfect, the sky was clear. And it was just really kind of haunting.

**This story has so many layers politically, legally, ethically and morally.
What are the lasting lessons we can take from it?**

I think one of the lasting lessons here is that in a state with such one-party rule, you're going to have to face these kinds of uncomfortable things when it comes to members of your own party.

And I guess I'm thinking a lot about Will Mortenson and how he's House majority leader now, but at the time, he was in his first term in office and brought impeachment articles against the attorney general while House Democrats in Congress were considering impeachment articles against former President Donald Trump [drawing intense anti-impeachment criticism from Republicans]. The timing couldn't have been worse politically. But he stuck with it, and a lot of people lauded him for his efforts in doing this whole thing. So I guess a lesson is, politically, don't be afraid to do the right thing.

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

Biden unveils latest round of student loan cancellation to aid 153,000 borrowers

BY: JENNIFER SHUTT - FEBRUARY 21, 2024 5:15 PM

President Joe Biden expanded his push to eliminate student loan debt Wednesday, saying during a speech the initiative is part of a campaign promise to address the "broken" system.

"While a college degree is still a ticket to a better life, that ticket is too expensive," Biden said. "And too many Americans are still saddled with unsustainable debt in exchange for a college degree."

Biden, who made his remarks while on a trip to California that also included fundraising for his 2024 campaign, argued that canceling student loan debt not only helps those who receive the benefit directly, but those in their communities.

"When people's student debt is relieved, they buy homes, they start businesses, they contribute, they engage in the community in ways they weren't able to before and it actually grows the economy," Biden said.

The latest round of student debt forgiveness includes nearly 153,000 borrowers and a total of \$1.2 billion in debt, according to a fact sheet from the White House.

Those receiving loan forgiveness are enrolled in the Saving on a Valuable Education or SAVE repayment plan, have been paying back their loans for at least 10 years and originally took out less than \$12,000 in loans.

This week's actions bring total student loan cancellation by the Biden administration to \$138 billion for nearly 3.9 million people, according to the fact sheet.

Repayments tied to income, family size

The so-called SAVE Plan allows borrowers to set their student loan repayments based on their income and family size, not the amount of student loan debt they hold.

"The SAVE plan ensures that if borrowers are making their monthly payments, their balances cannot grow because of unpaid interest," according to the White House's fact sheet. "And, starting in July, undergraduate loan payments will be cut in half, capping a borrower's loan payment at 5% of their discretionary income."

Education Secretary Miguel Cardona said on a call with reporters Tuesday there are about 7.5 million people enrolled in the SAVE Plan and that 4.3 million don't have a monthly payment.

"Many SAVE forgiveness recipients come from lower- and middle-income backgrounds," Cardona said.

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"Many took out loans to attend community colleges. Some were at high risk for delinquency and default. That's why the actions we're announcing today do matter."

Cardona said those eligible for this round of student debt cancellation would receive an email from Biden telling them about the move.

New FAFSA rollout criticized

Louisiana Republican Sen. Bill Cassidy said in a written statement the latest round of student loan forgiveness is misguided.

"The Biden Department of Education has been unable to fulfill their basic responsibilities mandated by Congress and essential to families, like implementing FAFSA," Cassidy said, referring to the application college students fill out to access student aid, including grants, scholarships and loans.

The Biden administration's efforts to revamp the form have been marred by delays and errors.

"Instead, they have spent a considerable amount of time prioritizing their student loan schemes to shift someone else's debt onto taxpayers that chose not to go to college or already paid off their loans," Cassidy added. "This is unfair, manipulative and a cynical attempt to buy votes."

Cassidy is the ranking member on the U.S. Senate's Health Education Labor and Pensions Committee, often referred to as the HELP Committee.

Supreme Court decision

Biden, speaking at the Julian Dixon Library in Culver City, California, criticized the U.S. Supreme Court for blocking his original student loan forgiveness plan.

"Early in my term, I announced a major plan to provide millions of working families with debt relief for their college student debt," Biden said. "But my MAGA Republican friends in the Congress, elected officials and special interests stepped in and sued us. And the Supreme Court blocked it. But that didn't stop me."

Biden said the justices' opinion in that case led him to "pursue alternative paths" for student debt relief, which includes the announcement he made Wednesday.

Canceling some student loan debt, Biden said, is about giving people a chance.

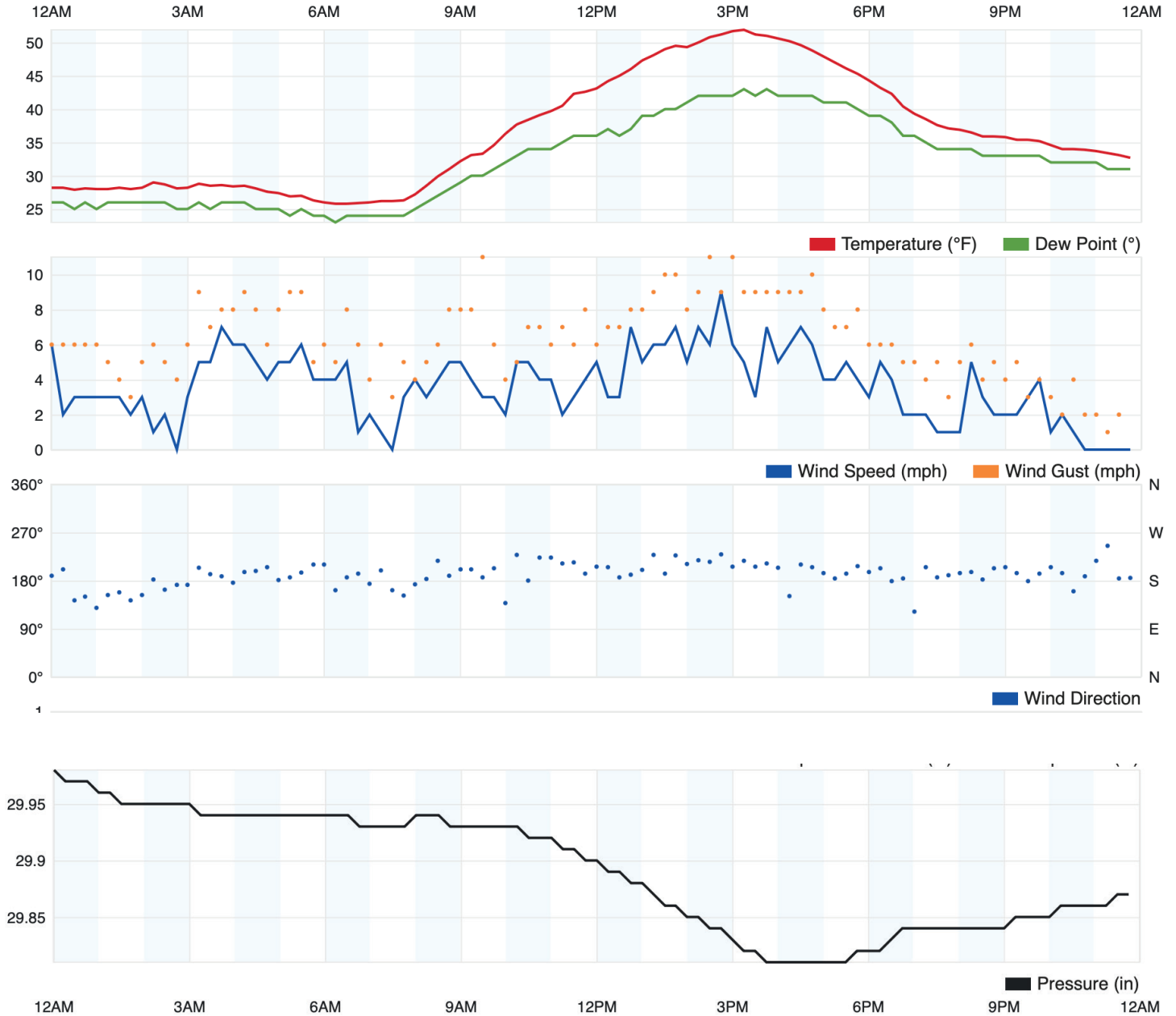
"That's all we're doing ... giving people a chance, a fighting chance to make it, because no one who is willing to work hard in America should be denied the opportunity to have that chance."

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

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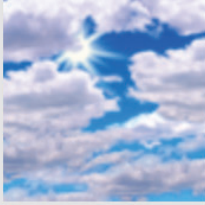



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Yesterday's Groton Weather Graphs



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Today	Fri	Sat	Sun	Mon
				
49 °F 26 °F	37 °F 23 °F	55 °F 26 °F	47 °F 32 °F	61 °F

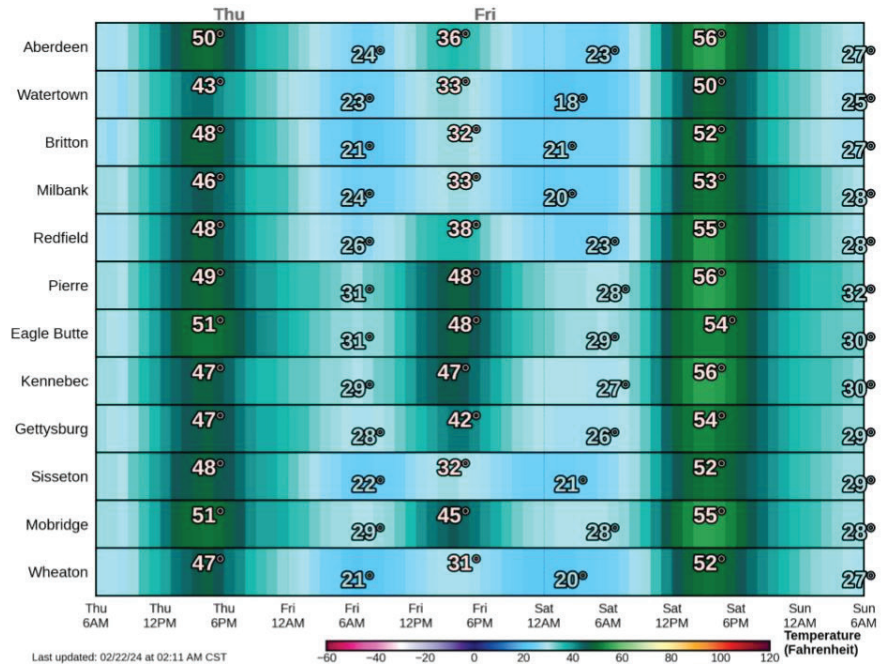


Still Dry ... Still Mild

February 22, 2024

3:25 AM

Next Shot At Moisture: Late Monday/Tuesday



Seasonally mild temperatures will continue, even with a cold front on Friday knocking us much of us down closer to average. Dry conditions for the next few days, with some limited moisture potential for early next week.

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Yesterday's Groton Weather

High Temp: 52 °F at 3:08 PM

Low Temp: 26 °F at 6:21 AM

Wind: 11 mph at 9:27 AM

Precip: : 0.00

Day length: 10 hours, 48 minutes

Today's Info

Record High: 60 in 2021

Record Low: -24 in 1918

Average High: 31

Average Low: 9

Average Precip in Feb.: 0.47

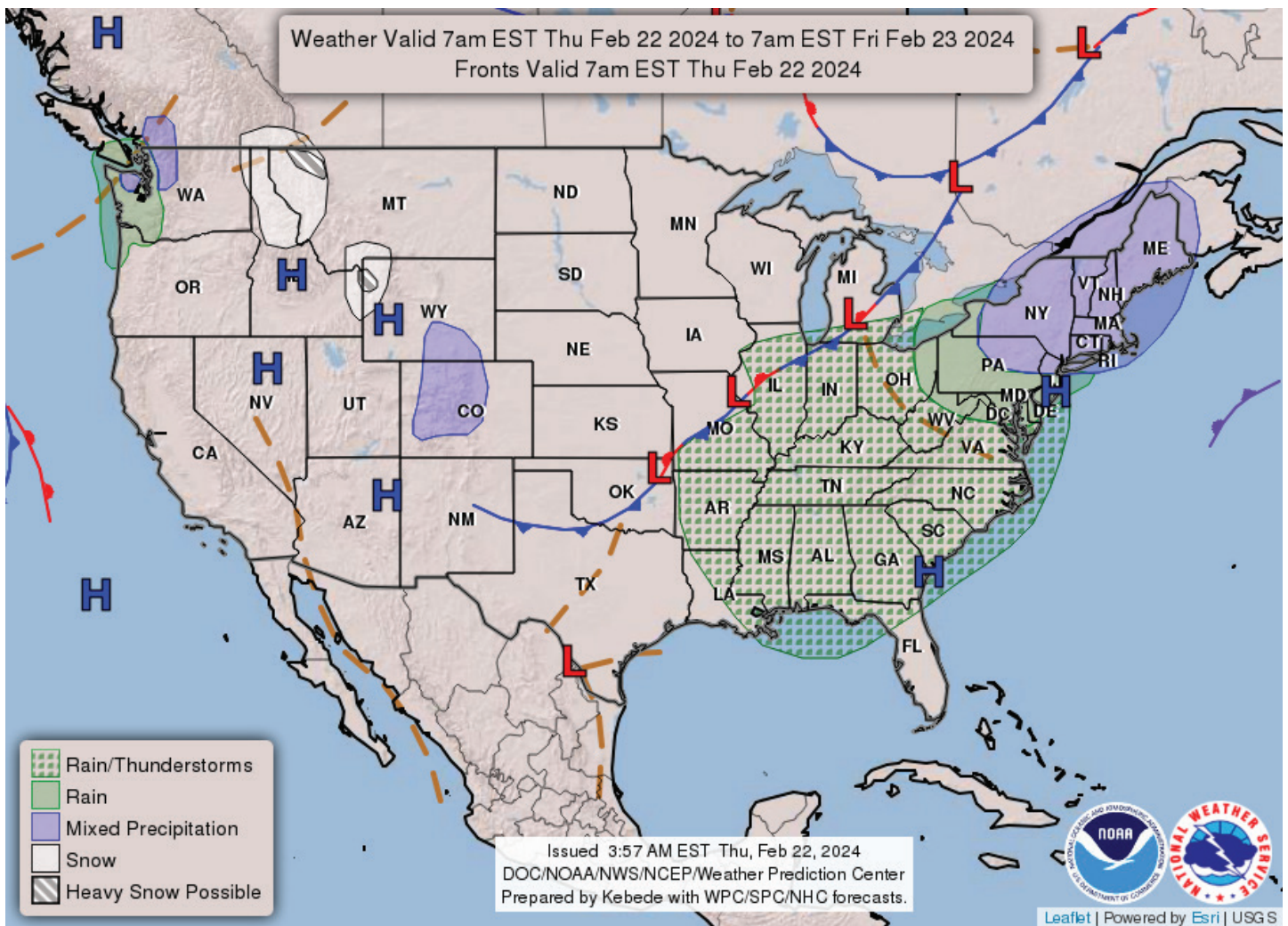
Precip to date in Feb.: 0.07

Average Precip to date: 1.02

Precip Year to Date: 0.07

Sunset Tonight: 6:10:20 pm

Sunrise Tomorrow: 7:19:44 am



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Today in Weather History

February 22, 1914: Heavy snow fell across parts of central and north-central South Dakota with 6 to 12 inches of accumulations. Snowfall amounts included 6 inches at Timber Lake and Onida, 7 inches at Kennebec, and 12 inches at Murdo.

February 22, 2000: High temperatures across central and northeast South Dakota were in the 50s and 60s. Record highs occurred at Watertown, Pierre, and Kennebec. Watertown rose to 65 degrees, Pierre rose to 69 degrees, and Kennebec warmed to 71 degrees late in the afternoon. Other high temperatures include; 55 degrees at Sisseton, 59 degrees at Aberdeen, and 64 degrees at Timber Lake.

1773: According to David Ludlum, "The memorable Cold Sabbath in New England history" took place on February 22, 1773. "Many persons froze extremities while going to church."

1998: Seven tornadoes struck east-central Florida late on this day and early on the 23rd. Three of the tornadoes were rated F3 on the Fujita scale. Twenty-four people were killed in Kissimmee alone. A total of 42 people were killed, 265 injured, and the total damage was \$106 million.

1936 - Although heat and dust prevailed in the spring and summer, early 1936 brought record cold to parts of the U.S. Sioux Center IA reported 42 inches of snow on the ground, a state record. (20th-22nd) (The Weather Channel)

1971: One of the worst snowstorms in Oklahoma history dumped up to 3 feet of snow on northwest Oklahoma from February 20nd to February 22. By the time the snow ended on the 22nd, the city of Buffalo had 36 inches of snow on the ground, setting the state record for storm-total snowfall. Winds of 30 to 50 mph caused snowdrifts up to 20 feet high. Follett, Texas, picked up 26 inches while Amarillo recorded 14 inches.

1986 - A twelve siege of heavy rain and snow, which produced widespread flooding and mudslides across northern and central California, finally came to an end. The storm caused more than 400 million dollars property damage. Bucks Lake, located in the Sierra Nevada Range, received 49.6 inches of rain during the twelve day period. (Storm Data)

1987 - A storm moving northeastward out of the Gulf of Mexico began to spread heavy snow across the Middle Atlantic Coast Region. Thunderstorms in northern Florida produced wind gusts to 65 mph in Alachua County. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

1988 - Dry weather prevailed across the nation, with windy conditions from the Central Rockies to northern New England. Winds gusted to 58 mph at Cleveland OH, and reached 63 mph at Erie PA. Winds in the Central Rockies gusted to 120 mph at Mines Peak CO and Rendezvous Peak WY. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

1989 - Strong northwesterly winds ushering cold arctic air into the north central U.S. produced snow squalls in the Great Lakes Region, with heavy snow near Lake Michigan. Totals in northwest Indiana ranged up to 24 inches at Gary, and up to 16 inches buried northeastern Illinois. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

1990 - Thunderstorms developing along and ahead of a cold front produced severe weather from southern Mississippi to North Carolina. One thunderstorm spawned a tornado just prior to dawn which touched down near Opp AL injuring ten persons and causing half a million dollars damage. Thunderstorm winds injured four persons south of Troy AL, and five people at Columbus GA. Thunderstorm winds gusted to 76 mph at Dothan AL. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

Daily Devotionals

Seeds of Hope

OBSTACLES CAN BE OPPORTUNITIES

Centuries ago, a king had a group of his soldiers place a large stone in the middle of a road during the night. They worked in silence, following his orders, because he wanted no one to see them place a sack beneath the stone.

The next day he sat silently in a balcony where no one could see him and watched as the people passed by. All of them looked at the stone, paused a moment, and then walked around it. Some became angry and wanted to know who could possibly have a reason to interrupt their lives with such a horrible inconvenience. Others cursed the stone, thinking that their oaths would make a difference, and the stone would move under its own power.

Finally, an elderly peasant paused, looked at the stone, and then summoned all of his strength and pushed it out of the way. To his surprise, he discovered a purse beneath the stone. When he opened it, he discovered many gold coins and a note from the king. The note read: "Whoever moves this stone is entitled to the coins in this purse."

God works "in everything," according to the Apostle Paul, "for our good." It does not mean that whatever happens to us is "good." But that "good" will come to us if we fulfill His purpose for our lives as we grow into His likeness.

Prayer: Give us, Dear Father, the vision to see every obstacle in life as an opportunity to grow into Your likeness. May we face each barrier we face as a gift for our growth. In Jesus' Name, Amen.

Scripture For Today: And we know that God causes everything to work together for the good of those who love God and are called according to his purpose for them. Romans 8:28



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:
02.20.24

5 45 55 58 68 7

MegaPlier: 2x

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:
\$525,000,000

NEXT DRAW: 1 Days 17 Hrs 56
Mins 9 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

LOTTO AMERICA

WINNING NUMBERS: 02.21.24

2 6 26 40 43 1

All Star Bonus: 4x

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:
\$3,270,000

NEXT DRAW: 2 Days 16 Hrs 41
Mins 9 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

LUCKY FOR LIFE

WINNING NUMBERS: 02.21.24

20 21 29 43 45 13

TOP PRIZE:

\$7,000/week

NEXT DRAW: 16 Hrs 56 Mins 9
Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

DAKOTA CASH

WINNING NUMBERS: 02.21.24

2 5 6 10 20

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:
\$20,000

NEXT DRAW: 2 Days 16 Hrs 56
Mins 9 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

POWERBALL

DOUBLE PLAY

WINNING NUMBERS: 02.21.24

23 49 51 54 58 11

TOP PRIZE:
\$10,000,000

NEXT DRAW: 2 Days 17 Hrs 25
Mins 9 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

POWERBALL

WINNING NUMBERS: 02.21.24

4 27 33 41 42 14

Power Play: 2x

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:
\$376,000,000

NEXT DRAW: 2 Days 17 Hrs 25
Mins 9 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

News from the Associated Press

Wednesday's Scores

The Associated Press

BOYS PREP BASKETBALL

Lakota Tech 94, St Francis 66

McLaughlin 60, Wakpala 52

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

Editorial Roundup: South Dakota

By The Associated Press undefined

Yankton Press & Dakotan. February 19, 2024.

Editorial: Reading Proficiency Continues Decline

This is something some of you may not wish to read, or perhaps can't read.

The recently released 2023 South Dakota KIDS Count Data Profile reported that the number of fourth graders in the state who are reading at a non-proficient level increased from 64% to 68% from 2022. And that, obviously, is bad news.

However, the worse news may be that the rise in non-proficiency cannot be blamed solely on the COVID-19 pandemic and distance learning, as this rise in non-proficiency was in place before the health emergency arrived.

The one morsel of consolation is that South Dakota's rise mirrored the national trend, which also increased from 64% to 68%. So, we are not alone.

Nevertheless, officials across the state are concerned, according to a report from Rapid City television station KOTA.

"That's a really scary statistic because early-grade level reading is a huge indicator for overall lifetime success," said Black Hills Reads director Hanna Glissendorf. "It impacts graduation rates; it impacts whether you're going to find a good career in life."

As stated above, this rise in non-proficiency cannot be tied solely to COVID-19. According to an article on the Hechinger Report website published back in late 2021, reading proficiency had been dropping for a few years before the coronavirus arrived.

"Even before the pandemic, nearly two-thirds of U.S. students were unable to read at grade level," the article noted. "Scores had been getting worse for several years. ... The pandemic made a bad situation worse."

In general, there could be several culprits in this decline, including the rise in electronic devices such as smartphones and tablets, which — despite possessing the great potential to enhance literacy — can serve up numerous alternatives to reading. Also, the general decline in long-form reading (such as reading a book) may also contribute to the decline.

Perhaps the more pressing question is, what can be done about it?

The KOTA story suggested that parents can do a lot to address the trend. Citing a study by the Child Mind Institute, the story noted that "the important thing is to let (your child) hear you say different words and to talk to them while reading the book."

Having access to books is also important.

"The best way to get kids to love reading and to want to read is just to make sure they have the opportunity to read whatever they want and to read as many books as they want," Glissendorf said. "What I've seen is that families will use this challenge as a way to make sure that they're reading to their kids every night, and it just makes it so that these kids actually want to read, and it just makes them more excited about the process."

The schools and the parents can make an impact on the reading skills of children, and the best time to start is now.

END

A Colorado man died after a Gila monster bite. Opinions and laws on keeping the lizard as a pet vary

By MEAD GRUVER Associated Press

A Colorado man who died after getting bitten by a Gila monster was hardly alone in having the gnarly looking lizard for a pet.

They're legal to own in most states, easily found through breeders and at reptile shows, and widely regarded for their striking color patterns and typically easygoing personality.

But while 34-year-old Christopher Ward's death Friday may have been the first from a Gila monster in the U.S. in almost a century, the creature's bite is well-known to be excruciating — and venomous. For that reason, some question the wisdom of keeping the species as pets.

"It's like getting your hand slammed, caught in a car door," Arizona State University professor Dale DeNardo said of the lizard's bite. "Even that initial pain is extended for an hour. Then you get the typical days of soreness, throbbing pain. It's much worse than any bee, wasp or scorpion."

A Gila monster enthusiast who has studied the reptiles for decades, DeNardo said even he wouldn't want to have one in his house.

Within minutes of Ward's pet lizard named Winston biting down on his hand without letting go, Ward was vomiting and couldn't breathe, according to a report by the animal control officer who interviewed his girlfriend.

He was put on life support but didn't pull through, dying less than four days after the bite.

Ward's girlfriend told animal control they bought Winston at a reptile exhibition in Denver in October and another Gila monster named Potato from a breeder in Arizona in November. She relinquished the lizards to be taken to a South Dakota reptile sanctuary after the bite.

Colorado requires a permit to keep a Gila (pronounced HE-la) monster. Only zoological-type facilities are issued such permits, however, and Ward apparently didn't have one for his lizards, said Colorado Parks and Wildlife spokesperson Kara Van Hoose.

By being sold at a reptile show, Winston may have slipped through the cracks of state enforcement. Colorado Department of Natural Resources agents sometimes attend shows to make sure illegal animals aren't for sale.

"It does happen from time to time," Van Hoose said. "We've confiscated some from those."

Online, breeders sell Gila monsters for \$1,200 and up after hatchlings emerge in the fall. While it's possible that some people catch wild Gila monsters to keep as pets, DeNardo said roads and habitat loss to home construction are the reptiles' biggest threats.

The lizards' natural habitat ranges from northern Mexico across Arizona and into parts of California, Nevada, New Mexico and Utah. While declining population is sometimes considered a concern — perhaps down to several thousand in the wild — Gila monsters are not protected as a threatened or endangered species.

States such as Maine and Kentucky prohibit keeping Gila monsters as pets, while others such as Montana don't even require permits for them. Many states fall in between, requiring a permit to have the animals.

One such permit-holder is Colorado Gators, a reptile sanctuary and tourist attraction not far from Great Sand Dunes National Park and Preserve in rural southern Colorado. The facility with a source of naturally warm groundwater takes in alligators and other rescued, confiscated and abandoned reptiles, including a Gila monster after the death of a pet store owner.

Owner Jay Young counts himself among Gila monster fans.

"Only certain people, of course, should have them and in places where they can legally have them," Young said. "But they're just adorable. Just look at that little face. One of the cutest lizards, for sure."

They can live at least 20 years on a diet of small rodents and quail eggs, living in a smallish aquarium of 15-20 gallons (57-76 liters), Young said.

In the wild, Gila monsters spend as much as 95% of the time underground to conserve water in hot, dry weather, coming out more frequently in wet weather, DeNardo said.

For their size, up to 22 inches (56 centimeters), Gila monsters travel widely, ranging over an area as big as 100 or more U.S. football fields in pursuit of prey including bird eggs in nests high up in cactuses. To get there, they conserve energy, maintaining a slow but steady pace for a lizard.

Because they're slow, they rely on their painful venom for defense, often giving a warning hiss before their strike.

"It's never accidental," DeNardo said. "You've got to be messing with them."

Before Ward, the last person to die of a Gila monster bite, around 1930, may have had cirrhosis of the liver, DeNardo said. A yet-to-be released autopsy report may show if the venom from Ward's lizard killed him outright or whether an underlying condition, such as an allergy, was a factor.

"I highly suspect that this one is going to be similar," DeNardo said, "that this person had some underlying cause that made him more susceptible."

US Congress members praise Taiwan's democracy in a visit that's certain to draw China's scrutiny

By KEVIN FREKING and SIMINA MISTREANU Associated Press

TAIPEI, Taiwan (AP) — A group of United States Congress members met with Taiwan's president Thursday in a show of bipartisan support that's certain to draw scrutiny from China, which opposes such visits and sees them as a challenge to its claim of sovereignty over the self-governing island.

A visit by then-House Speaker Nancy Pelosi to Taiwan two years ago resulted in China dispatching warships and military aircraft to all sides of the democratic island, and firing ballistic missiles into the waters nearby.

In a meeting Thursday with Taiwanese President Tsai Ing-wen, Rep. Mike Gallagher, the Republican chair of the House Select Committee on the Chinese Communist Party, highlighted the bipartisan support for the U.S.-Taiwan partnership, which he described as "stronger and more rock-solid than ever now."

The U.S., like most countries, doesn't formally recognize Taiwan as a country but maintains robust informal relations with the island and is bound by its own laws to provide it with the weapons it needs to defend itself.

Gallagher thanked Tsai, who is nearing the end of her second and last term in office, for her leadership in Taiwan and for distinguishing herself "as a leader within the free world."

Tsai thanked the U.S. for continuing to help Taiwan strengthen its self-defense capabilities.

"Together we are safeguarding freedom and democracy and maintaining regional peace," she said, adding that she hoped to see more exchanges between the U.S. and Taiwan in a range of domains.

The delegation, led by Gallagher, R-Wis., and Raja Krishnamoorthi, D-Ill., was expected to be in Taiwan for three days as part of a larger visit to the Indo-Pacific region. Other members include Reps. John Moolenaar, R-Mich.; Dusty Johnson, R-S.D.; and Seth Moulton, D-Mass.

Consisting of some of Congress' staunchest critics of China, the bipartisan delegation was to meet with other senior Taiwanese leaders and members of civil society to discuss U.S.-Taiwan relations, regional security and trade, among other issues of mutual interest.

Krishnamoorthi said Taiwan is one of the United States' "closest friends" and a role model for democracy, after Lai Ching-te emerged victorious as Taiwan's president-elect and vowed to safeguard the island's de facto independence from China and further align it with other democracies.

"It's one of the most robust, most vibrant, one of the most exciting democracies in the world," Krishnamoorthi said. "And this year, when half of the world's population will be going to the polls to vote, you provided a role model for how elections should be conducted, and for that we salute you on this peaceful transfer of power, and you are an exemplar of democracy."

Krishnamoorthi is the House Select Committee on the Chinese Communist Party's ranking Democrat. The

committee was formed in 2023 and has held numerous hearings focused on human rights, trade, cyber intrusions and other issues central to the rising tensions between the two superpowers.

Earlier in February, the Commerce Department announced that for the first time in more than two decades, Mexico surpassed China as the leading source of goods imported by the United States. In 2023, then-House Speaker Kevin McCarthy hosted Taiwan's president in a rare high-level meeting on U.S. soil.

The shows of support for Taiwan reflect the growing willingness by many in Congress to confront China on a range of issues as economic relations between the two nations deteriorate.

Taiwan has been under "hybrid" pressure from China, especially in the military and economic spheres, Foreign Minister Joseph Wu said at a news conference following the meeting.

The support Taiwan receives from both parties in the U.S. is a bulwark against military conflict with China, Gallagher said.

But, he added, democracies like those in Taiwan and the U.S., while sometimes messy, remain "unbeatable."

Taiwan was part of the \$95-billion aid package that passed the Senate on Feb. 13, but has stalled in the House. That package, which focused on Ukraine and Israel, included \$1.9 billion to replenish U.S. weapons provided to Taiwan. Another \$3.3 billion would go to build more U.S.-made submarines in support of a security partnership with Australia and the United Kingdom.

Albanian Parliament approves controversial deal to hold migrants for Italy

By LLAZAR SEMINI Associated Press

TIRANA, Albania (AP) — Albania's Parliament on Thursday approved a deal for the country to hold thousands of asylum seekers rescued in international waters by Italy while their applications are processed, despite protests from opposition lawmakers and human rights groups.

Under the five-year deal, Albania would shelter up to 3,000 migrants at any one time. With asylum requests expected to take around a month to process, the number of asylum-seekers sent to Albania could reach up to 36,000 in a year.

The idea of sending asylum seekers outside the EU is controversial. The deal was endorsed by European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen but has been widely criticized by human rights groups. Albania is currently seeking EU membership.

The agreement, signed in November between Albanian Prime Minister Edi Rama and Italian Premier Giorgia Meloni, is part of Meloni's efforts to share the burden of addressing migration with other European countries.

The Parliament, dominated by Rama's left-wing Socialist Party, voted 77 to zero to approve the deal, with 63 members of parliament marked not present. Most of the conservative opposition, which refused to participate, sat in the hall and tried to disrupt the vote with whistles. The president will also issue a decree as the final step of approval.

Rama himself was not present at the vote.

A group of 30 lawmakers attempted to block ratification by appealing to the Constitutional Court, but in late January the court said a deal could go ahead. Conservative lawmakers have repeatedly disrupted voting since October to protest the Socialist government.

Gazment Bardhi of the opposition Democrats declined to say anything about the agreement, which they have opposed earlier.

Mesia Doda of the small Justice, Integration, Unity Party, whose three members voted for the deal, said that "we are talking about a country that always has supported us in our path."

Italy's lower chamber of parliament approved the deal in January, followed by the Senate earlier this month.

Two processing centers will be set up in Albania at a cost to Italy of more than 600 million euros (about \$650 million) over five years. The facilities would be fully run by Italy while it fast-tracks their asylum re-

quests. Meloni has said she expects them to become operational by the spring of 2024.

Italy would remain legally responsible for the migrants throughout the process, and would welcome them if they are granted international protection or organize their deportation from Albania if refused.

Those picked up within Italy's territorial waters, or by rescue ships operated by non-governmental organizations, would retain their right under international and EU law to apply for asylum in Italy and have their claims processed there.

Rama has said that Albania stands beside Meloni in a sign of gratitude on behalf of Albanians who found refuge in Italy and "escaped hell and imagined a better life" following the collapse of communism in Albania in the 1990s.

Italy has sought help from other EU nations to handle the increasing number of arrivals. Data from Italy's Interior ministry showed that migrant arrivals in Italy jumped 50% in 2023 from the previous year. About 155,750 migrants reached Italian shores last year, including more than 17,000 unaccompanied minors, compared to 103,850 in 2022.

Live updates | Attackers open fire in the West Bank, killing 1 Israeli and wounding others

By The Associated Press undefined

Three gunmen opened fire Thursday morning on the road near a checkpoint in the Israeli-occupied West Bank, killing one Israeli and wounding at least eight, police said, as violence persists in the territory. Two of the attackers were killed and a third was found later and detained.

Benny Gantz, a member of Israel's War Cabinet, said late Wednesday that new attempts are underway to reach a cease-fire deal between Israel and Hamas that could pause the war in Gaza. But unless Hamas agrees to release the remaining Israeli hostages in Gaza, he said, Israel will launch a ground offensive into the crowded southern city of Rafah during the upcoming Muslim holy month of Ramadan.

Israel's war in Gaza has driven some 80% of the population of 2.3 million from their homes. Most heeded Israeli orders to flee south and around 1.5 million are packed into Rafah near the border with Egypt.

The war began when Hamas-led militants stormed into southern Israel on Oct. 7, killing some 1,200 people and taking around 250 hostage. About a fourth of some 130 captives still being held are believed to be dead. Israel has laid waste to much of the Palestinian territory in response. Gaza's Health Ministry estimates more than 29,000 Palestinians have been killed.

Currently:

- Iran accuses Israel of a sabotage attack after explosions strike a natural gas pipeline.
- United Airlines says it will restart flights to Israel in March.
- Spain's prime minister discusses the Israel-Hamas war with Morocco's king.
- An attempt by U.K. lawmakers to vote on a cease-fire in Gaza descends into chaos.
- Find more of AP's coverage at <https://apnews.com/hub/israel-hamas-war>.

Here's the latest:

YEMENI REBELS SET A SHIP ABLAZE IN GULF OF ADEN AS ISRAEL INTERCEPTS ANOTHER HOUTHII ATTACK IN RED SEA

DUBAI, United Arab Emirates — A suspected missile attack by Yemen's rebels set a ship ablaze in the Gulf of Aden on Thursday as Israel intercepted what appeared to be another Houthi attack near the port city of Eilat on the Red Sea.

The rebels have escalate their assaults over the Israel-Hamas war in Gaza. Thursday's attack in the Gulf of Aden saw two missiles fired, according to the British military's United Kingdom Maritime Trade Operations center.

Ship-tracking data analyzed by The Associated Press identified the vessel ablaze as a Palau-flagged cargo ship named Islander. It had been coming from Thailand bound for Egypt and previously sent out messages saying "SYRIAN CREW ON BOARD" to potentially avoid being targeted by the Houthis.

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The ship's Liberian-listed owners could not be immediately reached for comment.

Meanwhile, sirens sounded early Thursday morning over Israel's city of Eilat, followed by videos posted online of what appeared to be an interception in the sky overhead. The Israeli military later said the interception was carried out by its Arrow missile defense system, which intercepts long-range ballistic missiles.

Israel did not identify what the fire was, nor where it came from.

UN TRADE AGENCY SAYS SUEZ CANAL TRAFFIC OF CONTAINER SHIPS DROPS BY 2/3

GENEVA — A top U.N. trade body says weekly container-ship traffic through the Suez Canal has plunged by more than two-thirds from peak levels as shipping companies avoid the Red Sea over attacks on shipping by Yemen's Houthi rebels.

The U.N. Conference on Trade and Development said the traffic has declined by 67% from peak levels while overall traffic — including tanker transits and gas carriers — has fallen by 42%.

UNCTAD also highlighted the impact on trade, especially of African countries such as Djibouti, Kenya and Tanzania, which count on the flow of goods through the canal. It also underscored the environmental fallout as ships reroute southward around Africa.

Jan Hoffmann, head of UNCTAD trade logistics, said the combined effect of the longer distances that ships travel around the Cape of Good Hope and the faster speeds at which they travel to make up lost time have caused "exponentially more" carbon emissions.

UNCTAD said it estimates that higher fuel consumption could result in as much as a 70% increase in greenhouse gas emissions for a Singapore-Rotterdam round trip, for example.

ATTACKERS OPEN FIRE ON A BUSY WEST BANK CHECKPOINT, LEAVING 1 DEAD AND AT LEAST 8 WOUNDED

TEL AVIV, Israel — Israeli police say three gunmen opened fire on the road near a checkpoint in the Israeli-occupied West Bank, killing one Israeli and wounding at least eight, including several critically.

Police said the attackers took advantage of the slow morning traffic around 7:30 a.m. Thursday on the main highway east of Jerusalem and opened fire with automatic weapons at cars waiting near a checkpoint.

Security forces at the site killed two of the gunmen. A third was found and detained during searches of the area afterward.

Suspected Houthi rebel missile sets cargo ship ablaze. Israel intercepts separate attack near Eilat

By JON GAMBRELL Associated Press

DUBAI, United Arab Emirates (AP) — A suspected missile attack by Yemen's Houthi rebels set a ship ablaze in the Gulf of Aden on Thursday as Israel intercepted what appeared to be another Houthi attack near the port city of Eilat, authorities said.

The attacks come as the rebels escalate their assaults over Israel's war against Hamas in the Gaza Strip.

The attack Thursday in the Gulf of Aden saw two missiles fired, the British military's United Kingdom Maritime Trade Operations center said. It said the unnamed ship was ablaze, without elaborating.

Ship-tracking data analyzed by The Associated Press identified the vessel ablaze as a Palau-flagged cargo ship named Islander. It had been coming from Thailand bound for Egypt and previously sent out messages saying "SYRIAN CREW ON BOARD" to potentially avoid being targeted by the Houthis.

"The missile attack led to a fire onboard and coalition military assets were responding to the incident," the private security firm Ambrey said.

The ship's Liberian-listed owners could not be immediately reached for comment.

Meanwhile, sirens sounded early Thursday morning over Eilat, followed by videos posted online of what appeared to be an interception in the sky overhead.

The Israeli military later said the interception was carried out by its Arrow missile defense system.

Israel did not identify what the fire was, nor where it came from. However, the Arrow system intercepts long-range ballistic missiles with a warhead designed to destroy targets while they are in space.

The system "successfully intercepted a launch which was identified in the area of the Red Sea and was

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en route to Israel," the Israeli military said. "The target did not cross into Israeli territory and did not pose a threat to civilians."

The Houthis did not immediately claim either attack. They typically acknowledge assaults they conduct hours afterward.

Eilat, on the Red Sea, is a key port city of Israel. On Oct. 31, Houthis first claimed a missile-and-drone barrage targeting the city. The rebels have claimed other attacks targeting Eilat, which have caused no damage in the city.

Since November, the rebels have repeatedly targeted ships in the Red Sea and surrounding waters over Israel's war against Hamas. They have frequently targeted vessels with tenuous or no clear links to Israel, imperiling shipping in a key route for trade among Asia, the Mideast and Europe. Those vessels have included at least one with cargo for Iran, the Houthis' main benefactor.

Despite a month of U.S.-led airstrikes, Houthi rebels remain capable of launching significant attacks. This week, they seriously damaged a ship in a crucial strait and downed an American drone worth tens of millions of dollars. The Houthis insist their attacks will continue until Israel stops its combat operations in the Gaza Strip, which have enraged the wider Arab world and seen the Houthis gain international recognition.

On Wednesday, ships in the Red Sea off the Houthi-held port city of Hodeida in Yemen reported seeing an explosion, though all vessels in the area were said to be safe, the UKTMO said. The UKMTO earlier reported heavy drone activity in the area.

The U.S. military's Central Command acknowledged shooting down a Houthi bomb-carrying drone during that time. U.S. airstrikes separately targeted seven mobile anti-ship cruise missiles and one mobile anti-ship ballistic missile prepared to target ships in the Red Sea, Central Command said.

The U.S. State Department criticized "the reckless and indiscriminate attacks on civilian cargo ships by the Houthis" that have delayed humanitarian aid including food and medicine bound for Ethiopia, Sudan and Yemen. That includes the Sea Champion, a ship carrying corn and other aid to both Aden and Hodeida.

"Contrary to what the Houthis may attempt to claim, their attacks do nothing to help the Palestinians," State Department spokesperson Matthew Miller said in a statement. "Their actions are not bringing a single morsel of assistance or food to the Palestinian people."

Yulia Navalnaya once avoided the limelight. Now she's Russia's newest opposition leader

By EMMA BURROWS Associated Press

LONDON (AP) — Yulia Navalnaya used to avoid the cameras, staying in the background while her husband, Russian opposition leader Alexei Navalny, rose to become President Vladimir Putin's greatest foe.

But following his death in prison last week, she stepped onto a stage normally reserved for senior politicians in Munich and vowed that Putin and his allies would be brought to justice over his death. Later she solemnly vowed: "I will continue the work of Alexei Navalny."

It was an ambitious statement from a woman who once said in an interview with the Russian edition of Harper's Bazaar that her "key task" was caring for the couple's children and home.

Yulia Navalnaya's new job will be leading the Russian opposition through one of the darkest and most turbulent times in its history.

The opposition is fractured, and Navalny's death dealt it a serious blow. The question now is whether Navalnaya can rally her husband's troops and work with other opposition groups to mount any kind of successful challenge to Putin, who is on a path to serve another six years in the Kremlin after the presidential election in March.

Putin has increasingly cracked down on freedom of speech and smothered dissent within Russia, jailing opponents and critics.

Navalnaya has experience standing up to Putin. She and Navalny were married for more than 20 years, and she was at his side as he helped lead the biggest protests in Russia since the collapse of the Soviet Union and through subsequent jail sentences.

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She has accused Putin of killing her husband — a suggestion Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov dismissed as “unfounded” and “insolent.”

The risk to Navalny’s life had been “discussed extensively” with his wife and close team ahead of his 2021 return to Russia from Germany, where he received treatment for poisoning with a nerve agent, said Vladimir Ashurkov, a longtime friend of the Navalnys and a co-founder of Navalny’s Anti-Corruption Foundation.

Even so, “it was a big decision” for Navalnaya to continue her husband’s work, he said.

In their marriage, she was “the rock” Navalny relied upon. They “had an understanding” that Navalnaya would not be politically active and would stay out of the limelight, Ashurkov said.

Navalny returned to Russia from Germany, analysts suggested, because he knew it would be difficult to be perceived as a legitimate opposition leader abroad.

His widow is unlikely to travel to Russia because of security concerns and now faces a similar conundrum in figuring out how to lead her husband’s organization from exile.

On Friday, shortly after news of Navalny’s death broke, she met a woman in a similar situation — Belarusian opposition leader Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya.

Tsikhanouskaya picked up the political baton from her husband, Belarusian opposition leader Syarhei Tsikhanouski, in 2020 after he was jailed in the run up to Belarus’ presidential election.

She ran a successful campaign but fled Belarus after longtime President Alexander Lukashenko declared himself the winner in an election widely regarded in the West as fraudulent.

“We understood each other without any words,” Tsikhanouskaya said about Navalnaya. Tsikhanouskaya said she has no idea about her husband’s condition, or whether he is dead or alive.

“It’s so difficult when you feel such huge pain, but you have to ... give interviews to encourage the democratic world to make decisive actions,” Tsikhanouskaya said in an Associated Press interview.

Operating from abroad for almost four years already, Tsikhanouskaya said living in political exile is challenging. It’s “very important not to lose connection with the people inside the country,” she said.

That will be tough, particularly inside Russia, where most Russians still get their news from Kremlin-controlled state media.

Although he was Russia’s most famous opposition leader — charismatic and cracking jokes even while serving a 19-year prison sentence — Navalny almost never appeared on state television, which carried only the briefest mention of his death.

The Kremlin is likely to adopt the same approach to Navalnaya, effectively cutting her off from the Russian people via a state-backed information blockade.

Since Putin invaded Ukraine, the scope for dissent in Russia has narrowed even further. Russian authorities have tightened speech restrictions and jailed critics, often ordinary people, sometimes for decades. Hundreds of people who laid flowers in Navalny’s memory were detained, and persuading Russians to take a collective public stand against Putin will be almost impossible.

While Navalnaya has dominated headlines since her husband’s death, her challenge will be “to stay relevant” when interest inevitably fades, said Graeme Robertson, a professor of political science at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill and author of a book about Putin and contemporary Russian politics.

She could do that, Robertson suggested, by supporting Navalny’s volunteers and political networks in Russia to keep them “underground but alive,” as well as choosing a goal to focus on in the short term.

Striding Monday into a meeting of the European Union’s Foreign Affairs Council, Navalnaya wasted no time in demonstrating what that goal — and her leadership of Navalny’s organization — might look like.

Sitting next to the EU’s foreign policy chief, she called on Western leaders not to recognize the results of March’s presidential election, to sanction more people in Putin’s circle and to do more to help Russians who have fled abroad.

Navalny’s Anti-Corruption Foundation generated headlines in Western and independent Russian media in recent years with a series of slick videos that turned otherwise dull corruption investigations into internet blockbusters.

But the organization failed to attract broader support from the Russian population or to produce political

change, nor did it set out a strategy for how it would govern.

Tsikhouskaya, who is viewed by several states as Belarus' democratic leader, said she made building democratic institutions and representing Belarusians inside Belarus a priority.

That includes a transitional cabinet and platforms where "all the parties, all the forces are represented," she said, apparently encouraging Navalnaya to do the same.

Navalnaya could be the person to unite the Russian opposition, which is known "for its disagreements and squabbles," Ashurkov suggested.

"She has a very high reputation," he said.

The tasks ahead of her are daunting, and she will navigate them while grieving for her husband and fighting for the return of his body.

"By killing Alexei, Putin killed half of me, half of my heart and half of my soul," she said. "But I still have the other half, and it tells me that I have no right to give up."

Desperate for soldiers, Ukraine weighs unpopular plan to expand the draft

By SAMYA KULLAB and SUSIE BLANN Associated Press

LYMAN, Ukraine (AP) — When the Russian army mounted a full-scale invasion two years ago, Ukrainian men zealously rushed to recruitment centers across the country to enlist, ready to die in defense of their nation.

Today, with Russia in control of roughly one-quarter of Ukraine and the two armies virtually deadlocked along a 1,000-kilometer (620-mile) front line, that spirit to enlist has faded: Many Ukrainian men are evading the draft by hiding at home or trying to bribe their way out of the battle.

Along the frigid and muddy front line, commanders say their army is too small and made up of too many exhausted and wounded soldiers. As the war enters its third year, the most urgent and politically sensitive challenge pressing on Ukraine is whether it can muster enough new soldiers to repel an enemy with far more fighters at its disposal.

Russia's population is more than three times as large as Ukraine's, and President Vladimir Putin has shown a willingness to force men to the front if not enough volunteer.

The lack of soldiers isn't Ukraine's only predicament — it is also desperate for Western military aid, which has been harder to come by as the war drags on. But mobilizing enough soldiers is a problem only Ukraine can solve.

The parliament is considering legislation that would increase the potential pool of recruits by about 400,000, in part by lowering the enlistment age from 27 to 25. But the proposal is highly unpopular, forcing elected officials to grapple with questions that cut to the heart of nationhood: Can they convince enough citizens to sacrifice their lives? And, if not, are they willing to accept the alternative?

A Ukrainian soldier fighting near the city of Avdiivka -- where soldiers retreated last week to save lives -- said his unit was recently outnumbered by about 5 to 1 when dozens of Russian soldiers stormed their position, killing everyone but himself and two others.

"We were almost completely defeated," said Dima, who refused to provide his last name for security reasons.

Roughly 800 kilometers (500 miles) away, a 42-year-old man afraid of being sent to the front hides at home outside of Kyiv, distressed. "I feel a sort of a guilt for being a man ... I cannot feel myself free," said Andrii, who insisted on using his first name only to speak about dodging the draft.

Tens of thousands of other eligible Ukrainian men are estimated to be evading the draft, at home or abroad.

WHO WILL DIG THE TRENCHES?

Because there aren't enough new recruits, soldiers on the front line aren't getting enough rest in between rotations. Two years of grueling battles have left men fatigued and more susceptible to injury. When there

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are new recruits, they are too few, too poorly trained and often too old, according to interviews with two dozen Ukrainian soldiers, including six commanders.

Commanders say they don't have enough soldiers to launch offensives, and barely enough to hold positions amid intensifying Russian assaults.

Brigades of 3,000-5,000 soldiers are typically fighting with only 75% of their full strength, according to Vadym Ivchenko, a lawmaker who is part of the parliament's national security, defense and intelligence committee.

Igor Ivantsev, 31, was among a dozen men treated recently at a field hospital near the front. He has been wounded twice in the span of four months. His body aches when he carries his machine gun, but doctors deem him fit to serve. Ivantsev said that of the 17 men he enlisted with, most are dead; the rest are like him, wounded.

Ivantsev's commander, who would only provide his first name, Dmytro, said his exhausted and depleted company is working overtime to dig deeper trenches and build better locations from which to counter constant Russian artillery. "We have no people, nowhere to get them from," Dmytro said.

At the start of the war, soldiers were rotated every two weeks for one week of rest, he said. But now his soldiers fight for a month, then get four days of rest.

"We are not made of steel," said Ivantsev.

A PLAN TO DRAFT MORE MEN

The legislation being discussed in parliament would enable the military to draft more men so that those already enlisted can get more rest or even be relieved of duty.

An estimated 300,000 Ukrainian soldiers are currently fighting along the front line, while others serve elsewhere, lawmakers said. Putin has said twice as many Russian troops are in Ukraine.

The Ukrainian military seeks to mobilize up to 500,000 more men, but realizing how unpopular such a move would be, lawmakers are treading carefully. Over a thousand amendments have been attached to draft legislation that even President Volodymyr Zelenskyy has yet to publicly endorse.

Under the draft legislation, any individual who fails to respond to call up notices could potentially have their bank accounts frozen and their ability to travel outside the country restricted.

Lawmakers critical of the legislation, including Ivchenko, say the military hasn't adequately explained how a surge in conscription will meaningfully change the outcome of the war. The two countries have been at a near standstill for months following a failed counteroffensive by the Ukrainians over the summer. But the Russians have recently taken the initiative.

"Will this law be enough for the armed forces to change the situation on the battlefield?" asked Ivchenko.

DRAFT DODGERS

The legislation's toughest sell are men like a 35-year-old website creator who insisted on anonymity to discuss his decision to hide at home in a suburb of Kyiv rather than join the war effort.

He refuses to fight, he said, because he doesn't want to kill people; his plan is to raise enough money to escape Ukraine.

The legislation being considered in parliament would, in theory, leave less room for men like him to hide by requiring all draft-eligible citizens to check in with the government via an electronic-tracking system. This system could also help balance a disparity in which recruitment patrols disproportionately target poor, rural areas to force draft dodgers to enlist.

Ivan senses the government closing in.

"It's a feeling that everyone wants to throw you in a meat grinder," he said.

Trial to determine if Texas school's punishment of a Black student over his hair violates new law

By JUAN A. LOZANO Associated Press

ANAHUAC, Texas (AP) — A trial is set to be held Thursday to determine if a Black high school student in Texas can continue being punished by his district for refusing to change his hairstyle, which he and his family say is protected by a new state law that prohibits race-based hair discrimination.

At issue is whether Darryl George's monthslong punishment for violating his Houston-area school district's dress code policy limiting the length of boys' hair violates the CROWN Act.

The bench trial is being held before state District Judge Chap Cain III in Anahuac after the Barbers Hill school district filed a lawsuit seeking clarification of the new law. The trial was scheduled to last one day, with Cain expected to issue a decision soon after its conclusion.

The CROWN Act, which took effect in September, prohibits race-based hair discrimination and bars employers and schools from penalizing people because of hair texture or protective hairstyles including Afros, braids, locs, twists or Bantu knots.

"I love my hair, it is sacred and it is my strength," George has said in court documents.

The Barbers Hill school district said George's long hair, which he wears in tied and twisted locs on top of his head, violates its dress code policy because it would fall below his shirt collar, eyebrows or earlobes when let down. The district has said other students with locs comply with the length policy.

George, an 18-year-old junior, has not been in his regular classroom at Barbers Hill High School in Mont Belvieu since Aug. 31. Instead he has either been serving in-school suspension or spending time in an off-site disciplinary program.

In court documents, the school district maintains its policy does not violate the CROWN Act because the law does not mention or cover hair length.

In a paid ad that ran in January in the Houston Chronicle, Barbers Hill Superintendent Greg Poole wrote that districts with a traditional dress code are safer and have higher academic performance and that "being an American requires conformity."

But Allie Booker, George's attorney, has argued the Texas lawmakers who wrote the CROWN Act had safeguarding hair length in mind as many of the hairstyles protected by the new law require hair to be long.

Several of the lawmakers who wrote the CROWN Act were expected to testify on behalf of George.

One of them, state Rep. Rhetta Bowers, said in an affidavit that "length is protected because it is essentially why protective styles are worn."

George's family has also filed a formal complaint with the Texas Education Agency and a federal civil rights lawsuit against Gov. Greg Abbott and Attorney General Ken Paxton, along with the school district, alleging they failed to enforce the CROWN Act. The lawsuit is before a federal judge in Galveston.

Barbers Hill's hair policy was previously challenged in a May 2020 federal lawsuit filed by two other students. Both withdrew from the high school, but one returned after a federal judge granted a temporary injunction, saying the student showed "a substantial likelihood" that his rights to free speech and to be free from racial discrimination would be violated if the student was not allowed to return to campus. That lawsuit remains pending.

Slayings of tourists and Colombian women expose the dark side of Medellin's tourism boom

By ASTRID SUAREZ Associated Press

MEDELLIN, Colombia (AP) — The lush valley enveloping Medellin was once the heart of a brutal war involving the Colombian government, drug cartels and a smattering of other armed groups.

But a sharp dip in violence in the country's second-biggest city has attracted a flood of tourists to its vivid colors, busy cafes and booming nightlife. About 1.4 million visited last year, many of them American.

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Now the tourism boom has presented officials with a new set of dark challenges, including an uptick in sex trafficking and the killing of tourists and Colombian women after rendezvous on dating apps.

"This area has spun out of control," Medellin Mayor Federico Gutiérrez said recently while touring a park known for the sex trade.

Sex and drug tourism has long been a problem in Medellin, but the dangers came to a head late last year. Between November and December, eight American men were killed, many after meeting local women who are often used as pawns by criminal groups that target foreigners.

The killings prompted the U.S. Embassy in Bogota to warn in January that some tourists had been slipped drugs and were later robbed or killed. American officials cautioned men against using dating apps. The apps offer a way to seek out sex workers, whose business is not criminalized in Colombia.

Medellin lead prosecutor Yiri Milena Amado Sanchez said most of the recent killings followed similar scripts: A tourist contacts a local woman through social media or a dating app. When they meet, the man is handed a drink spiked with a substance such as scopolamine, which can cause people to fall unconscious and block their memories. The victims lose their belongings and, in some cases, their lives.

Of the killings, the most is known about the death of Tou Ger Xiong, an activist and comedian from Minnesota who went on a date with a Medellin woman, police say.

After meeting the woman, Xiong was kidnapped on Dec. 10, tortured, beaten and robbed. Despite his family paying a ransom for his release, he was taken to a nearby wooded area and thrown down a 250-foot cliff. He was found dead the next day.

Colombian authorities have not suggested that he was involved in prostitution. They said Xiong went out several times with the woman, who has been charged in the case, along with two men.

Friends and relatives described Xiong as a gregarious man who loved to travel, especially to Colombia, where he had friends.

"It's almost like a second home; he loved it there," his brother, Eh Xiong, told the Star Tribune of Minneapolis, adding that his brother knew about the U.S. government warnings, but that he assumed only "the best in people."

Just this year, authorities have investigated the deaths of five more tourists, including a Dutch visitor found dead in a hotel, three Americans and a Lithuanian, who may have died by suicide.

Foreigners, too, have been behind some of the violence.

Earlier this month, the body of 20-year-old Colombian Laura Lopera was found jammed inside a suitcase. Authorities say her middle-aged Canadian ex-boyfriend, whom she met on a dating app, was likely behind the death.

Gutiérrez, the Medellin mayor, said the boyfriend fled the country and is now being pursued by Interpol. The Associated Press contacted the suspect over social media but did not receive a response.

The Canadian Embassy in Bogota said it was tracking the case but could not share more information due to privacy concerns.

"How sad and painful it is to learn of another femicide," Gutiérrez wrote on X, formerly Twitter. "I send my solidarity to her family."

The rise in tourism has also coincided with an uptick in sexual exploitation and trafficking in a place where rates of violence against women are already sky-high. In 2023, the city documented 1,259 cases of possible sexual exploitation of minors, a nearly 60% increase from the year before, according to data collected by the city.

Much of the city's sex work is also fueled by poverty and a migration crisis from neighboring Venezuela. Vulnerable women often sell sex to make ends meet. That was the case for one young sex worker, who fled economic crisis in Venezuela five years ago.

Every weekend, she walks dressed up through Lleras Park, which is surrounded by clubs frequented by foreign tourists. The small park is a hub for Medellin's sex industry.

"An American will pay 100 or even 200 dollars for sex, but a Colombian never pays that much," she said, speaking on condition of anonymity for security reasons.

Far from making a lucrative salary, she needed to scrape together at least \$50 to pay for the room where

she lives with her 8-year-old daughter and her mother.

"Some think that we are going to harm them," she said, referring to the crimes against tourists. "But not all of us are criminals."

On a recent night, dozens of police officers and local government officials patrolled the park, accompanied by Mayor Gutiérrez.

They asked for identification from women entering the park through police checkpoints. Most were let through, but a couple of teenagers were stopped and taken into a van. When the police left, the area once again filled with sex workers of different ages.

Despite the rise in sex tourism, many visitors to Medellín are pulled in by its vibrant culture, the stunning natural beauty of the valley and the city's complicated history.

In a hillside neighborhood known as Comuna 13, hundreds of people take walking tours each day to see the area's transformation.

The neighborhood was once a battleground for fighting among drug cartels, leftist guerrillas, military forces and government-linked paramilitary groups. The dead were buried in mass graves.

While the area still struggles with gang problems, tourists walk through colorful streets connected by electric staircases. Visitors take photos of intricate murals painted by local artists and shop for handicrafts in small stores.

In the middle of a tour, 38-year-old Ola Aiyedun of New York stopped to take some pictures with two friends. He said he wasn't worried about safety or the warning to avoid dating apps because he didn't come to Colombia in search of a partner.

"Colombia has more to offer than just women," Aiyedun said.

Amid fentanyl crisis, Oregon lawmakers propose more funding for opioid addiction medication in jails

By CLAIRE RUSH Associated Press

PORTLAND, Ore. (AP) — Kendra Sawyer spoke with her dad from the Deschutes County jail and told him she loved him. Six hours later, in the throes of opioid withdrawal, the 22-year-old took her own life.

A year later, Sawyer's father, Kent, is left wondering whether his daughter, troubled as she was, might still be alive if the jail hadn't failed to provide her with medicine to ease the agony of her withdrawal, as he claimed in a recently filed lawsuit.

"Kendra was screaming in pain and crying for hours and hours, and nobody was doing anything," Sawyer said. "No one truly deserves to die in a painful way."

Oregon jails could soon see a rise in the number of inmates struggling with opioid addiction like Kendra, if efforts are successful during this legislative session to roll back Measure 110, the state's first-in-the-nation drug decriminalization law that legalized the possession of "personal use" amounts of illicit drugs such as heroin. In response, state lawmakers from both parties are pushing for more funding for medications used to treat opioid addiction in jails.

The measure, passed by voters in 2020, has come under fire as Oregon struggles with a fentanyl crisis that's fueled one of the nation's biggest spikes in overdose deaths, and overhauling it is a top priority during this year's legislative session.

The latest proposal would allow jails seeking to create or expand medication treatment programs to apply for grants from a \$10 million fund. It has bipartisan support and the backing of public health advocates and some in law enforcement.

"This is a policy that sets politics aside and that really is about what jails need to take care of people," said Democratic state Rep. Pam Marsh, who drafted the measure. "If we are serious about providing treatment for people, it's an obvious gap to fill."

In Lincoln County, for example, the jail currently spends nearly \$50,000 a month — or more than \$1,600 a dose — on addiction medication for 30 inmates, Marie Gainer, the corrections sergeant who oversees

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the program, said in an email. The jail program on Oregon's rural Pacific Coast, about 130 miles (210 kilometers) southwest of Portland, treated 91 inmates last year, she said.

Backers of jail-based treatment programs say they save lives by allowing people to continue or start recovery while incarcerated.

Roughly 60% of people in American jails have substance use disorders, federal data shows, and overdose is a leading cause of death for people newly released, partly because their tolerance diminishes when they're not using behind bars.

Yet just under a quarter of jails provide opioid addiction medication to people who had prescriptions before incarceration, and even fewer — 19% — offer treatment for people without prior prescriptions, according to the most recent federal data from the 2019 Census of Jails.

Courts, however, have recently ruled that withholding addiction treatment medication from inmates with prior prescriptions violates federal law, and more states and local counties have taken steps to expand access.

In Washington state, for example, lawmakers want to dedicate an additional \$7.4 million to the issue, on top of the \$7.5 million already approved in the biennial budget last year. Part of the proposed boost would come from opioid settlement funds, a month after the state attorney general announced a nearly \$150 million settlement with drugmaker Johnson & Johnson. If passed by the Legislature, the supplemental funding would double the number of jails providing medication, from 19 to 38, Gov. Jay Inslee's office said in an email.

Other states — including New York, Vermont, Maryland and Utah — have passed laws requiring jails to provide medication for opioid use disorder to people who already had prescriptions when they were jailed.

When Utah's law took effect last May, Colin Conner, who struggled with opioid addiction for years, had been in a Salt Lake City jail for nearly two months. By that point the jail had already discontinued his methadone, which he had been prescribed before his arrest, his father said.

Cut off from his medication, Colin went through agonizing withdrawal, Jon Tyler Conner said. His cravings returned and his drug tolerance decreased. Just days after his release last June, he died of a fentanyl overdose at the age of 32.

"If they would have treated him as they should have by law, he would have been on his methadone. He wouldn't have died," said Conner, who lives in Seattle.

The Salt Lake County Sheriff's Office said in an emailed statement that it couldn't comment "due to the potential threat of litigation."

In Oregon, Sawyer filed a federal lawsuit against Deschutes County alleging wrongful death and negligence in his daughter Kendra's death. It accused the county of failing to treat her physical and mental health needs. According to the complaint, records that included information about Kendra previously attempting suicide were available to intake officers during her booking.

Sawyer's lawyer, Ryan Dreveskracht, said he is still waiting for Kendra's medical records but has seen no evidence that she received withdrawal medication.

Deschutes County "does not agree with the allegations in the complaint and intends to vigorously defend the lawsuit," county counsel David Doyle said in an email.

Jails in other states have had success with offering opioid addiction medication behind bars.

Since 2018, New York's Saratoga County jail has provided such medication for inmates who had prescriptions at booking, and in 2020 it started administering it to people without prior prescriptions who were identified as having an opioid addiction during intake screening.

Ben Deeb, who oversees the program, said participants have had a recidivism rate of 16% since it began.

"That proves that when you give people the medications they need, you provide the education, trauma therapy and peer support they need ... that they succeed," he said. "This needs to be what corrections looks like."

States have a key role to play in boosting funding for such treatment in jails that is often overlooked, said Jonathan Larsen, legal program manager for the Center for Public Health Research at Temple Uni-

versity in Philadelphia.

"At the end of the day, we already know how to treat this," he said.

In Oregon, Sawyer knows his lawsuit won't bring Kendra back. But he hopes his daughter's story sparks change and raises awareness.

"A little more action can save a lot more lives," he said.

New York AG says she'll seize Donald Trump's property if he can't pay \$454 million civil fraud debt

By MICHAEL R. SISAK Associated Press

NEW YORK (AP) — Donald Trump could be at risk of losing some of his prized properties if he can't pay his staggering New York civil fraud penalty. With interest, he owes the state nearly \$454 million — and the amount is going up \$87,502 each day until he pays.

New York Attorney General Letitia James told ABC News on Tuesday that she will seek to seize some of the former president's assets if he's unable to cover the bill from Judge Arthur Engoron's Feb. 16 ruling.

Engoron concluded that Trump lied for years about his wealth as he built the real estate empire that vaulted him to stardom and the White House. Trump denies wrongdoing and has vowed to appeal.

"If he does not have funds to pay off the judgment, then we will seek judgment enforcement mechanisms in court, and we will ask the judge to seize his assets," James, a Democrat, said in an interview with ABC reporter Aaron Katersky.

Trump's ability to pay his mounting legal debts is increasingly murky after back-to-back courtroom losses. In January, a jury ordered him to pay \$83.3 million for defaming writer E. Jean Carroll.

Trump claimed last year that he has about \$400 million in cash — reserves that would get eaten up by his court penalties. The rest of his net worth, which he says is several billion dollars, is tied up in golf courses, skyscrapers and other properties, along with investments and other holdings.

But don't expect James to try to grab the keys to Trump Tower or Mar-a-Lago immediately. Trump's promised appeal is likely to halt collection of his penalty while the process plays out.

Here's a look at where things stand in the wake of Trump's costly verdict.

COULD THE STATE REALLY SEIZE TRUMP'S ASSETS?

Yes. If Trump isn't able to pay, the state "could levy and sell his assets, lien his real property, and garnish anyone who owes him money," Syracuse University Law Professor Gregory Germain said.

Seizing assets is a common legal tactic when a defendant can't access enough cash to pay a civil penalty. In a famous example, O.J. Simpson's Heisman Trophy was seized and sold at auction in 1999 to cover part of a \$33.5 million wrongful death judgment against him.

Trump could avoid losing assets to seizure if he has enough cash — or is able to free up enough cash — to pay his penalty and mounting interest.

How much he has isn't clear because most information about Trump's finances comes from Trump himself via his government disclosures and the annual financial statements that Engoron has deemed fraudulent.

Trump reported having about \$294 million in cash or cash equivalents on his most recent annual financial statement for the fiscal year ending June 30, 2021.

After that, according to state lawyers, he added about \$186.8 million from selling his Washington, D.C. hotel in May 2022 and the rights to manage a New York City golf course in June 2023. Part of Trump's penalty requires that he give those proceeds to the state, plus interest.

Engoron's decision last week spared Trump's real estate empire from what the Republican front-runner deemed the "corporate death penalty," reversing a prior ruling and opting to leave his company in business, albeit with severe restrictions including oversight from a court-appointed monitor.

James didn't specify to ABC which of Trump's assets the state might want to seize, though she noted that her office happens to be right across the street from a Trump-owned office building in Lower Manhattan that was the subject of some of the fraud allegations in her lawsuit.

"We are prepared to make sure that the judgment is paid to New Yorkers," James told ABC. "And yes,

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I look at 40 Wall Street each and every day.”

HOW WILL AN APPEAL AFFECT TRUMP'S PENALTY?

With Trump promising to appeal, it's unlikely he'll have to pay the penalty — or face the prospect of having some of his assets seized — for a while. If he wins, he might not have to pay anything.

Under state law, Trump will receive an automatic stay if he puts up money, assets or an appeal bond covering the amount he owes. A stay is a legal mechanism halting enforcement of a court decision while the appeals process plays out.

“Even if we choose to appeal this – which we will – we have to post the bond, which is the full amount and some, and we will be prepared to do that,” Trump lawyer Alina Habba told Fox News on Monday.

Trump's lawyers can also ask the appeals court to grant a stay without obtaining a bond or with a bond for a lower amount.

In his Georgia election interference criminal case, Trump paid \$20,000 — or 10% — for a \$200,000 release bond. After losing at a first trial involving Carroll last year, Trump put \$5.55 million in escrow to cover the cost of the judgment while he appeals. He has said he would appeal the \$83.3 million January verdict but has yet to do so.

“If he can't post a bond or meet the appellate division's bonding requirements, then I would expect him to file bankruptcy to take advantage of the automatic stay on collection,” Germain said. “But that's a couple of chess moves away, so we will just have to see what happens.”

Trump's vow to appeal all but assures the legal fight over his business practices will persist into the thick of the presidential primary season as he tries to clinch the Republican nomination in his quest to retake the White House.

The appeal is also likely to overlap with his criminal trial next month in his New York hush-money case, the first of his four criminal cases to go to trial.

Trump can't appeal yet because the clerk's office at Engoron's courthouse must first file paperwork to make the verdict official. Once that happens, Trump will have 30 days to appeal and get the penalty stayed, or pay up. Trump's lawyers wrangled Wednesday with state lawyers and the judge over what that paperwork should say. Trump lawyer Cliff Robert told Engoron in a letter late Wednesday that he wants enforcement of the penalty delayed 30 days “to allow for an orderly post-Judgment process, particularly given the magnitude of Judgment.”

DOES TRUMP REALLY OWE \$87,502 A DAY IN INTEREST?

With each passing day, Trump owes an additional \$87,502 in interest on his civil fraud penalty. By Thursday, that'll be an extra \$525,000 since the decision was issued on Feb. 16. The interest will continue to accrue even while he appeals. Barring court intervention or an earlier resolution, his bill will soar to a half-billion dollars by August 2025.

Trump's underlying penalty is \$355 million, the equivalent of what the judge said were “ill-gotten gains” from savings on lower loan interest and windfall profits from development deals he wouldn't have been able to make if he'd been honest about his wealth.

Under state law, he is being charged interest on that amount at an annual rate of 9%.

As of Wednesday, Trump owed just over \$99 million in interest, bringing his total to just under \$454 million — that's \$453,981,779 to be exact, according to the Associated Press' calculations. Trump's interest will keep accruing until Trump pays. Trump owes the money individually and as the owner of corporate entities that were named as defendants in James' lawsuit.

Engoron said the interest Trump owes on about half of the total penalty amount — pertaining to loan savings — can be calculated from the start of James' investigation in March 2019. Interest on the remaining amount — which pertains to the sale of Trump's Washington hotel and Bronx golf course rights — can be calculated starting in May 2022 or June 2023.

In all, Engoron ordered Trump and his co-defendants to pay \$363.9 million in penalties, or about \$464.3 million with interest. The total bill increases by \$89,729 per day, according to AP's calculations.

Trump's sons, Eric and Donald Jr., must each pay about \$4.7 million, including interest, to the state for their shares of the Washington hotel sales. Weisselberg was ordered to pay \$1 million — for half of the

\$2 million severance he's receiving — plus about \$100,000 in interest.

Until they pay, Weisselberg is on the hook for another \$247 per day, while Trump's sons each owe an extra \$990 per day, according to AP's calculations.

How AI health care chatbots learn from the questions of an Indian women's organization

By THALIA BEATY Associated Press

NEW YORK (AP) — Komal Vilas Thatkare says she doesn't have anyone to ask about her most private health questions.

"There are only men in my home — no ladies," said the 32-year-old mother and housewife in Mumbai. "I don't speak to anyone here. So I used this app as it helps me in my personal problems."

The app she uses is powered by artificial intelligence running on OpenAI's ChatGPT model, that Myna Mahila Foundation, a local women's organization, is developing. Thatkare asks the Myna Bolo chatbot questions and it offers answers. Through those interactions, Thatkare learned about a contraceptive pill and how to take it.

Thatkare is one of 80 test users the foundation recruited to help train the chatbot. It draws on a customized database of medical information about sexual health, but the chatbot's potential success relies on test users like Thatkare to train it.

The chatbot, currently a pilot project, represents what many hope will be part of the impact of AI on health care around the globe: to deliver accurate medical information in personalized responses that can reach many more people than in-person clinics or trained medical workers. In this case, the chatbot's focus on reproductive health also offers vital information that — because of social norms — is difficult to access elsewhere.

"If this actually could provide this nonjudgmental, private advice to women, then it could really be a gamechanger when it comes to accessing information about sexual reproductive health," said Suhani Jalota, founder and CEO of the Myna Mahila Foundation, which received a \$100,000 grant from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation last summer to develop the chatbot, as part of a cohort of organizations in low- and middle-income countries trying to use AI to solve problems in their communities.

Funders like the Gates Foundation, the Patrick J. McGovern Foundation and Data.org, are seeking to build up this "missing middle" in AI development, especially in areas like health and education. These philanthropic initiatives offer developers access to AI tools they otherwise could not afford so they can solve problems that are a low priority for corporations and researchers — if they are on their radars at all — because they don't have high profit potential.

"No longer can the global north and high-income countries drive the agenda and decide what does and does not need to be addressed in local communities in the global south," wrote Trevor Mundel, president for global health at the Gates Foundation in an October online post, adding, "We cannot risk creating another chasm of inequity when it comes to AI."

The Associated Press receives financial support for news coverage in Africa from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation.

The Myna Mahila Foundation recruited test users like Thatkare to write real questions they have. For example, "Does using a condom cause HIV?" or "Can I have sex during periods?" The foundation's staff then closely monitor the chatbot's responses, developing a customized database of verified questions and answers along the way that helps improve future responses.

The chatbot is not yet ready for wider release. The accuracy of its responses is not good enough and there are issues with translation, Jalota said. Users often write questions in a mix of languages and may not provide the chatbot with enough information for it to offer a relevant response.

"We are not yet fully sure on whether or not women can understand everything clearly and whether or not it's fully medically accurate all of the information that we're sending out," Jalota said. They are considering training some women to help ask the chatbot prompts on behalf of someone else, though still aim

to improve the chatbot so it can be released on its own.

Dr. Christopher Longhurst, chief medical officer at the UC San Diego Health, has led the implementation of AI tools in health care settings and said it is important to test and measure the impact of these new tools on patient health outcomes.

"We can't just assume or trust or hope that these things are going to be good. You actually have to test it," Longhurst said. He thinks the promise of AI in health care is overestimated in the next two to three years, "But I think long term, over the next decade, AI is going to be as impactful as the introduction of penicillin in health care."

Jalota's team consulted with other projects funded by the Gates Foundation that were designing chatbots for health care settings so they could solve similar problems together, said Zameer Brey, interim deputy director for technology diffusion for the Gates Foundation.

The Myna Mahila Foundation is also partnering with another Gates grantee to propose developing privacy standards for handling data for reproductive health. The foundation, which is working with an outside technology firm to develop the chatbot, is also considering other steps to help ensure the privacy of users.

"We've been discussing whether we should delete messages within a certain time frame of women sending it to add to this privacy," Jalota said, as some women share phones with family members.

South Carolina's Republican primary:

What to watch as Haley tries to upset Trump in her home state

By BILL BARROW Associated Press

COLUMBIA, S.C. (AP) — Nikki Haley's best-case scenario for her home state's Republican primary might be to do well enough to make the March 5 Super Tuesday slate somewhat competitive against Donald Trump.

An upset in South Carolina, though, is a longshot in a state where Republicans like their former governor but love the former president.

Trump is looking to complete an early state sweep after scoring big wins in Iowa, New Hampshire and Nevada. For Haley, who was twice elected South Carolina governor and then served as Trump's U.N. ambassador, she has a chance to narrow the margin and dampen Trump's momentum.

Here's a look at what to watch in Saturday's primary.

Can Donald Trump deliver another home-state knockout?

Nikki Haley circled Feb. 24 on her calendar months ago. Her bid always hinged on building support through the first three contests and then, as she told voters in Iowa and New Hampshire, winning "my sweet state of South Carolina."

She has recalibrated recently. Rather than predict victory, she talks of how far she's come and promises to continue to Super Tuesday. "There were 14 candidates in this race," she says. "I've defeated 12 of the fellas, and I have just one more to catch up to."

Trump shrugs it off, predicting at a Fox News town hall that he would win "bigly."

"Everybody knows you can't lose your home state," he said.

There's a certain déjà vu to it all that should give Haley pause. In 2016, three Trump rivals made home-turf primaries their points of pride. Two even won: then-Ohio Gov. John Kasich and Texas Sen. Ted Cruz. Trump sailed to the nomination anyway.

Florida Sen. Marco Rubio, meanwhile, stuck around until his home-state primary, which followed Trump's Super Tuesday domination. Rubio got thrashed — and that was before Trump had made the Mar-a-Lago estate in Palm Beach his permanent residence.

Will independents and Democrats make the race close — or closer?

South Carolina has no party registration, and Republicans hold an open primary. That means the only voters who are not eligible Saturday are the 126,000 or so who cast Democratic primary ballots on Feb. 3. That's significantly less than the 500,000-plus who voted Democratic in 2020, meaning plenty of anti-Trump votes are theoretically available to Haley.

She has not explicitly asked Democrats to help. But she steps right up to the line, telling every audience

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about open primary rules as she tries to build a wide coalition.

Haley touts her conservative credentials — enacting tax cuts and a voter identification law as governor — while recalling her bipartisan coordination to take down the Confederate banner from state Capitol grounds after a racist massacre at a Charleston church in 2015. She hammers the 77-year-old Trump as chaotic and washed-up but says she voted for him twice and was proud to serve as his U.N. ambassador. She calls herself “pro-life” but does not “judge anyone who is pro-choice” and is not calling for a national abortion ban.

That may be the only rational strategy to defeat Trump. It also could leave Haley without a natural base. “She ran for governor as a tea party ally, and then she became one of the same good ole boys,” insisted Tim Foster, a Trump supporter and retired deputy sheriff from Spartanburg. Foster took Haley to task, especially for taking down the Confederate battle flag: “She’s a very different person now than she was when I voted for her.”

Antjuan Seawright, a top Democratic campaign veteran, meanwhile, said Democrats, especially Black voters who anchor the party in South Carolina, take Haley at her word when she scoffs at people calling her a “moderate.”

“We remember who Nikki Haley was,” Seawright said, including her positions on the battle flag before the Charleston killings. “The only reason that flag came down is because of that tragedy ... We aren’t saving her from Donald Trump. There’s an old saying that fits here: What goes around often comes around.”

Can Haley get Joe Biden’s Charleston-Columbia coalition?

If Haley makes it close, the precincts to watch are in metro Charleston and greater Columbia. Those are places Trump did not carry in the 2016 primary, even though he swept South Carolina’s 50 delegates. Columbia and its suburbs are home to a diverse population, including Black voters, university students and college-educated whites — in short, the coalition that helped President Joe Biden defeat Trump in 2020.

The Charleston area stands out for its moderates. When Biden won the 2020 Democratic primary in South Carolina, his support from Black voters got most of the attention. But he drew critical backing from Charleston’s white voters who hail from the ideological middle of the electorate that does not align with Trump.

Call them Biden Republicans or Haley Democrats or some combination. But if Haley is going to narrow Trump’s margin, she needs a similar boost from the same kinds of voters.

Do Trump’s comments on veterans linger?

Trump asked recently where Haley’s husband has been on the campaign trail. The answer: Maj. Michael Haley is deployed with the South Carolina Army National Guard. He has served previously in Afghanistan.

Haley pounced on the comment. Retired Brig. Gen. Don Bolduc, who already had been traveling with Haley, made emotional pleas in his introductions of the candidate, recounting Trump’s history of mocking veterans, including 2008 GOP nominee and Vietnam POW John McCain.

“That is not what presidents do. It’s absolutely wrong,” Bolduc said of Trump, who took multiple medical and student deferments during Vietnam. “It tears us apart.”

The immediate question is how many South Carolina veterans react like Bob Crawford, who retired after 36 years in the Navy. “It’s an insult to every service member that’s on active duty, and he’s an insult to this country,” said Crawford, who voted for Trump in 2016 and, reluctantly he said, in 2020. Not this time, Crawford explained, after attending a Haley rally: “She convinced me.”

Regardless of whether Trump has any consequences in South Carolina, it is worth remembering the latest barbs because they give fresh material to Biden and Democrats for the general election campaign.

“If it’s a rematch, I’ll vote for Biden,” Crawford said.

How do Trump and Haley handle the results?

When Haley got to 43% of the vote in New Hampshire, she celebrated as if she had won. And Trump got angry, accusing her of lying to voters.

Trump has mellowed since. Asked in a Fox News town hall Tuesday why Haley has not withdrawn, he was matter of fact: “I don’t think she knows how to get out.”

To be clear, Haley insists she is staying at least through Super Tuesday, maybe longer. “We don’t do

coronations in America," she has said often in South Carolina.

The tone Tuesday night, if Haley indeed sticks around, could set the course for the rest of the primary campaign, however long it lasts.

Be wary, though, of predictions about what an extended primary means for the fall. In 2016, Democratic runner-up Bernie Sanders waged a bitter fight with nominee Hillary Clinton well after she amassed an insurmountable delegate lead. Conventional wisdom says that helped cost Clinton the election. Except among Republicans, second-place finisher Cruz also stayed in long after the nomination was settled, and Cruz did not enthusiastically embrace Trump, who still ultimately defeated Clinton.

In 2020, Biden pulled away from other Democrats in March but still faced plenty of skeptics within his party, especially on his left flank. Trump, then the incumbent, had no primary opposition at all. Biden defeated him anyway.

In short, there are too many variables in a long campaign to know what Haley's endurance will mean the rest of the way.

An online dump of Chinese hacking documents offers a rare window into pervasive state surveillance

By FRANK BAJAK and DAKE KANG Associated Press

Chinese police are investigating an unauthorized and highly unusual online dump of documents from a private security contractor linked to the nation's top policing agency and other parts of its government — a trove that catalogs apparent hacking activity and tools to spy on both Chinese and foreigners.

Among the apparent targets of tools provided by the impacted company, I-Soon: ethnicities and dissidents in parts of China that have seen significant anti-government protests, such as Hong Kong or the heavily Muslim region of Xinjiang in China's far west.

The dump of scores of documents late last week and subsequent investigation were confirmed by two employees of I-Soon, known as Anxun in Mandarin, which has ties to the powerful Ministry of Public Security. The dump, which analysts consider highly significant even if it does not reveal any especially novel or potent tools, includes hundreds of pages of contracts, marketing presentations, product manuals, and client and employee lists.

They reveal, in detail, methods used by Chinese authorities used to surveil dissidents overseas, hack other nations and promote pro-Beijing narratives on social media.

The documents show apparent I-Soon hacking of networks across Central and Southeast Asia, as well as Hong Kong and the self-ruled island of Taiwan, which Beijing claims as its territory.

The hacking tools are used by Chinese state agents to unmask users of social media platforms outside China such as X, formerly known as Twitter, break into email and hide the online activity of overseas agents. Also described are devices disguised as power strips and batteries that can be used to compromise Wi-Fi networks.

I-Soon and Chinese police are investigating how the files were leaked, the two I-Soon employees told The Associated Press. One of the employees said I-Soon held a meeting Wednesday about the leak and were told it wouldn't affect business too much and to "continue working as normal." The AP is not naming the employees — who did provide their surnames, per common Chinese practice — out of concern about possible retribution.

The source of the leak is not known. The Chinese Foreign Ministry did not immediately respond to a request for comment.

A HIGHLY IMPACTFUL LEAK

Jon Condra, an analyst with Recorded Future, a cybersecurity company, called it the most significant leak ever linked to a company "suspected of providing cyber espionage and targeted intrusion services for the Chinese security services." He said organizations targeted by I-Soon — according to the leaked material — include governments, telecommunications firms abroad and online gambling companies within China.

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Until the 190-megabyte leak, I-Soon's website included a page listing clients topped by the Ministry of Public Security and including 11 provincial-level security bureaus and some 40 municipal public security departments.

Another page available until early Tuesday advertised advanced persistent threat "attack and defense" capabilities, using the acronym APT — one the cybersecurity industry employs to describe the world's most sophisticated hacking groups. Internal documents in the leak describe I-Soon databases of hacked data collected from foreign networks around the world that are advertised and sold to Chinese police.

The company's website was fully offline later Tuesday. An I-Soon representative refused an interview request and said the company would issue an official statement at an unspecified future date.

I-Soon was founded in Shanghai in 2010, according to Chinese corporate records, and has subsidiaries in three other cities, including one in the southwestern city of Chengdu that is responsible for hacking, research and development, according to leaked internal slides.

I-Soon's Chengdu subsidiary was open as usual on Wednesday. Red Lunar New Year lanterns swayed in the wind in a covered alleyway leading to the five-story building housing I-Soon's Chengdu offices. Employees streamed in and out, smoking cigarettes and sipping takeout coffees outside. Inside, posters with the Communist Party hammer and sickle emblem featured slogans that read: "Safeguarding the Party and the country's secrets is every citizen's required duty."

I-Soon's tools appear to be used by Chinese police to curb dissent on overseas social media and flood them with pro-Beijing content. Authorities can surveil Chinese social media platforms directly and order them to take down anti-government posts. But they lack that ability on overseas sites like Facebook or X, where millions of Chinese users flock to in order to evade state surveillance and censorship.

"There's a huge interest in social media monitoring and commenting on the part of the Chinese government," said Mareike Ohlberg, a senior fellow in the Asia Program of the German Marshall Fund. She reviewed some of the documents.

To control public opinion and forestall anti-government sentiment, Ohlberg said, control of critical posts domestically is pivotal. "Chinese authorities," she said, "have a big interest in tracking down users who are based in China."

The source of the leak could be "a rival intelligence service, a dissatisfied insider, or even a rival contractor," said chief threat analyst John Hultquist of Google's Mandiant cybersecurity division. The data indicates I-Soon's sponsors also include the Ministry of State Security and China's military, the People's Liberation Army, Hultquist said.

LOTS OF TARGETS, LOTS OF COUNTRIES

One leaked draft contract shows I-Soon was marketing "anti-terror" technical support to Xinjiang police to track the region's native Uyghurs in Central and Southeast Asia, claiming it had access to hacked airline, cellular and government data from countries like Mongolia, Malaysia, Afghanistan and Thailand. It is unclear whether the contact was signed.

"We see a lot of targeting of organizations that are related to ethnic minorities — Tibetans, Uyghurs. A lot of the targeting of foreign entities can be seen through the lens of domestic security priorities for the government," said Dakota Cary, a China analyst with the cybersecurity firm SentinelOne.

He said the documents appear legitimate because they align with what would be expected from a contractor hacking on behalf of China's security apparatus with domestic political priorities.

Cary found a spreadsheet with a list of data repositories collected from victims and counted 14 governments as targets, including India, Indonesia and Nigeria. The documents indicate that I-Soon mostly supports the Ministry of Public Security, he said.

Cary was also struck by the targeting of Taiwan's Health Ministry to determine its COVID-19 caseload in early 2021 — and impressed by the low cost of some of the hacks. The documents show that I-Soon charged \$55,000 to hack Vietnam's economy ministry, he said.

Although a few chat records refer to NATO, there is no indication of a successful hack of any NATO country, an initial review of the data by the AP found. That doesn't mean state-backed Chinese hackers

are not trying to hack the U.S. and it's allies, though. If the leaker is inside China, which seems likely, Cary said that "leaking information about hacking NATO would be really, really inflammatory" — a risk apt to make Chinese authorities more determined to identify the hacker.

Mathieu Tartare, a malware researcher at the cybersecurity firm ESET, says it has linked I-Soon to a Chinese state hacking group it calls Fishmonger that it actively tracks and which it wrote about in January 2020 after the group hacked Hong Kong universities during student protests. He said it has, since 2022, seen Fishmonger target governments, NGOs and think tanks across Asia, Europe, Central America and the United States.

French cybersecurity researcher Baptiste Robert also combed through the documents and said it seemed I-Soon had found a way to hack accounts on X, formerly known as Twitter, even if they have two-factor authentication, as well as another for analyzing email inboxes. He said U.S. cyber operators and their allies are among potential suspects in the I-Soon leak because it's in their interests to expose Chinese state hacking.

A spokeswoman for U.S. Cyber Command wouldn't comment on whether the National Security Agency or Cybercom were involved in the leak. An email to the press office at X responded, "Busy now, please check back later."

Western governments, including the United States, have taken steps to block Chinese state surveillance and harassment of government critics overseas in recent years. Laura Harth, campaign director at Safeguard Defenders, an advocacy group that focuses on human rights in China, said such tactics instill fear of the Chinese government in Chinese and foreign citizens abroad, stifling criticism and leading to self-censorship. "They are a looming threat that is just constantly there and very hard to shake off."

Last year, U.S. officials charged 40 members of Chinese police units assigned to harass the family members of Chinese dissidents overseas as well as to spread pro-Beijing content online. The indictments describes tactics similar to those detailed in the I-Soon documents, Harth said. Chinese officials have accused the United States of similar activity. U.S. officials including FBI Director Chris Wray have recently complained about Chinese state hackers planting malware that could be used to damage civilian infrastructure.

On Monday, Mao Ning, a Chinese Foreign Ministry spokeswoman, said the U.S. government has long been working to compromise China's critical infrastructure. She demanded the U.S. "stop using cybersecurity issues to smear other countries."

Alabama hospital puts pause on IVF in wake of ruling saying frozen embryos are children

By KIM CHANDLER Associated Press

MONTGOMERY, Ala. (AP) — Alabama's largest hospital paused in vitro fertilization treatments Wednesday as providers and patients across the state scrambled to assess the impact of a court ruling that said frozen embryos are the legal equivalent of children.

The University of Alabama at Birmingham health system said in a statement that it must evaluate whether its patients or doctors could face criminal charges or punitive damages for undergoing IVF treatments. "We are saddened that this will impact our patients' attempt to have a baby through IVF," the statement from spokeswoman Savannah Koplon read.

Doctors and patients were gripped by a mixture of shock, anxiety and fear as they weighed how to proceed in the wake of the ruling by the all-Republican Alabama Supreme Court that put in question the future of IVF.

"Disbelief, denial, all the stages of grief. ... I was stunned," said Dr. Michael C. Allemand, a reproductive endocrinologist at Alabama Fertility, which provides IVF services.

Allemand said they are having daily discussions about how to proceed. He said IVF is often the best treatment for patients who desperately want a child, and the ruling threatens doctors' ability to provide that care.

"The moments that our patients are wanting to have by growing their families — Christmas mornings

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with grandparents, kindergarten, going in the first day of school, with little back-backs— all that stuff is what this is about. Those are the real moments that this ruling could deprive patients of,” he said.

Gabby and Spencer Goidel of Auburn, Alabama, turned to IVF after three miscarriages. The Alabama ruling came down on the same day Gabby began a 10-day series of daily injections ahead of egg retrieval, with the hopes of getting pregnant through IVF next month.

“When I saw this ruling, I got very angry and very hurt that it could potentially stop my cycle. People need to know this is affecting couples — real-life couples who are trying to start families, who are just trying to live the quote, unquote American dream,” Gabby Goidel, 26, said. She said her clinic is continuing to provide treatment for now but is reviewing the situation on a day-by-day basis.

Justices — citing language in the Alabama Constitution that the state recognizes the “rights of the unborn child” — said three couples could sue for wrongful death when their frozen embryos were destroyed in an accident at a storage facility.

“Unborn children are ‘children’ ... without exception based on developmental stage, physical location, or any other ancillary characteristics,” Justice Jay Mitchell wrote in Friday’s majority ruling. Mitchell said the court had previously ruled that a fetus killed when a woman is pregnant is covered under Alabama’s Wrongful Death of a Minor Act and nothing excludes “extrauterine children from the Act’s coverage.”

Alabama Chief Justice Tom Parker, in a scripture-draped concurring opinion, wrote that, “even before birth, all human beings bear the image of God, and their lives cannot be destroyed without effacing his glory.”

While the court case centered on whether embryos were covered under the wrongful death of a minor statute, some said treating the embryo as a child — rather than property — could have broader implications and call into question many of the practices of IVF.

“If this is now a person, will we be able to freeze embryos?” Barbara Collura, CEO of RESOLVE: The National Infertility Association, said.

The fertility clinic and hospital in the Alabama case could ask the court to reconsider the decision or ask the U.S. Supreme Court to review the matter if they believe there is a conflict with federal law.

The Alabama Supreme Court decision partly hinged on anti-abortion language added to the Alabama Constitution by voters in 2018, stating it is the “policy of this state to ensure the protection of the rights of the unborn child.”

Eric Johnston, an anti-abortion activist and lawyer who helped draft the constitutional language, said the “purpose of that was more related to abortion.”

He said it was intended to clarify that the Alabama Constitution does not protect the right to abortion and eventually laid the groundwork for Alabama to ban abortions when states regained control of abortion access. However, opponents of the constitutional amendment warned in 2018 that it was essentially a personhood measure that could give rights to fertilized eggs.

“Modern science has raised up this question about well is a fertilized egg that is frozen -- is that a person? And that’s the ethical, medical, legal dilemma that we’ve got right now,” Johnston said.

“It’s a very complicated issue,” he added.

To keep whales safe, Coast Guard launches boat alert system in Seattle

By MANUEL VALDES Associated Press

SEATTLE (AP) — Photographer Matt McDonald had lived on Puget Sound for years, but had never seen a whale, so he was elated when he spotted a giant marine mammal just off Seattle’s waterfront one evening.

The excitement was short-lived. As McDonald tracked the whale in his camera’s viewfinder, a state ferry that dwarfed the animal came into the frame. The next morning he saw on the news that the humpback whale had died in the collision he witnessed.

“I still remember the moment of when they crossed paths and my heart just sinking like, ‘Oh my God, the ferry just ran over the whale,’” he recalled of the 2019 encounter. “I wish there was something I could have done.”

Now, five years later, there is.

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The U.S. Coast Guard has launched a pilot program to alert ships to whale sightings in Washington state's Salish Sea. The goal of the agency's "cetacean desk" is to keep the marine mammals safe from boat strikes and reduce noise in the highly transited inland seawaters by collecting sightings from civilians and mariners.

The program, which began official operations in December, comes at a time when visits by humpback whales and sea mammal-hunting orcas increase as their populations rebound.

Fed by the Pacific Ocean, the Salish Sea is a maze of islands and canals that make up the inland waters between Washington state and British Columbia, including Puget Sound. Two groups of orcas — one that preys on salmon and the other on sea mammals — as well as baleen whales have cruised these waters since time immemorial and are now often visible from Seattle's shoreline.

But these waters are now also home to major American and Canadian ports, and nearly 300,000 vessels crisscrossed the area in 2023, from commercial container ships to cruise ships to ferries, according to the Coast Guard. That number doesn't include private boats.

The new whale desk reduces the risk of collisions by combining sightings by mariners and civilians on whale-watching apps and data from underwater listening devices into an integrated system that will send out alerts to commercial vessels and regional ferries through a mobile app. The alerts will not go out to private or recreational boats.

"We're focusing on empowering the ship operators with the situational awareness ... so they're able to slow down preemptively, perhaps give a little bit of a wider berth to an area with a recently reported whale," said Lt. Commander Margaret Woodbridge, who is managing the whale desk.

The Salish Sea is an "incredible area that has a lot of a rich diversity of whale species here," Woodbridge added. "And also a lot of economic activity on the waterways. And so we're really trying to help both thrive."

People who spot whales can download one of two apps that will feed into the Coast Guard's Puget Sound Vessel Traffic Service. Mariners can use radio frequencies and a phone tip line when they spot whales. Participation in the program is voluntary for ships.

The whale desk is modeled to match the Canadian Coast Guard's "Marine Mammal Desk." Both American and Canadian desks are built on the backbone of the Whale Report Alert System (WRAS), a program developed by Canada-based Ocean Wise that incorporates sightings from publicly available apps and other sources, such as tracking information used by whale watching boats.

Work on the four-year pilot program began years ago as state and federal agencies including the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration grappled with how to help the endangered population of southern resident killer whales, U.S. Sen. Maria Cantwell said Wednesday.

The southern residents, which number just 75, use echolocation to hunt salmon. But ship noise disrupts that. By slowing down, vessels reduce the noise they make.

"We kept pushing NOAA. What else can we do? What else can we do?" said Cantwell, a Washington state Democrat who shepherded the legislation that created the whale desk. "When we realized that vessel noise might be part of the situation, people start talking. ... The Coast Guard is already like, 'we know where everybody is,' and we're just asking them now to take on a different responsibility: where everybody, including orcas, are."

"It's really a bit of a watershed moment," Kevin Bartoy, who has been chief sustainability officer for Washington state ferries for about a decade, said of the alert system.

The collision between the humpback whale and the ferry was shocking for Bartoy, but it underlined the need for a widely used and available alert system. He said the ferry system had already joined WRAS but it wasn't widely used in Washington then. The day of the 2019 collision there had been only one alert of a whale in the area, he said.

Now the more integrated network has resulted in an exponential increase of sightings. Woodbridge, of the Coast Guard, said reports spiked by 585% when comparing December 2022 and December 2023 when the desk launched and now that WRAS has sightings from the apps.

"The amount of sightings now that we get on any given day is incredible," Bartoy added. "We can know

essentially where a whale is at any time.”

But work is not done. The whale desk is currently mostly based on what people can see, leaving spotting the animals at night and in inclement weather much harder.

Bartoy said studies are underway in Canada and Washington to start testing land-based thermal cameras that could potentially spot whales at night by seeking their warmth in the waters as well as a more robust underwater listening — or hydrophone — system to pick up whale songs.

John Calambokidis, senior biologist at the Cascadia Research Collective, said baleen whales, like humpbacks, are especially susceptible to ship collisions at night because they spend twice as much time near the surface then.

Another way to keep whales safe is to adjust shipping lanes where possible, said Calambokidis. Through tagging, biologists know where humpback whale routinely congregate, but shifting shipping lanes is not currently being widely discussed, he said.

Late last year, a young humpback whale visited the waters off Seattle for several days and its visit provided an excellent example of what can happen when ship operators work together, said Jeff Hogan, formerly of the Soundwatch Boater Education Program.

Hogan shadowed the humpback as it breached, and ferries and other boaters adjusted their routes in real time to steer clear of the young whale, he said.

“The fact that the Coast Guard is watching elevates everyone’s behavior. It sets a standard of responsibility,” Hogan said. “We want these animals to be here. We have to make the space for them to go about their lives.”

How is an ex-FBI informant charged with lying about Bidens allegedly linked to Russian intelligence?

By LINDSAY WHITEHURST Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — The explosive allegations at the center of an impeachment inquiry into President Joe Biden were false, federal prosecutors said, and came from an ex-FBI informant who said he was in touch with Russian intelligence.

The informant, Alexander Smirnov, is “actively peddling new lies that could impact U.S. elections,” federal prosecutors said Wednesday, as they appealed to a judge to keep him behind bars ahead of trial on charges alleging he lied to the FBI about a phony multimillion-dollar bribery scheme involving the Bidens and the Ukrainian energy company Burisma.

Defense attorneys have not directly addressed prosecutors’ claims about Russian intelligence contacts but said they look forward to defending him at trial. Republicans in Congress have distanced themselves from Smirnov’s claims and resisted calls to end the impeachment inquiry.

Here’s a look at what’s known about Smirnov, the case against him and fears about potential effects on U.S. elections:

WHO IS ALEXANDER SMIRNOV?

Smirnov had been an informant since 2010, growing close to an FBI handler he spoke to “nearly every day,” prosecutors said in court documents. He met with Burisma executives starting in the spring of 2017 because the company was interested in buying an American company and making an initial public offering on a US stock exchange, according to court documents.

Prosecutors say he has access to more than \$6 million, with some money held in the name of his long-time partner. His recent reports to his handler included the guest lists from parties on mega yachts with Russian oligarchs, prosecutors said.

He holds dual Israeli-US citizenship and lived in Israel for more than a decade, later moving to Los Angeles and finally Las Vegas in 2022, prosecutors said.

WHAT IS HE ACCUSED OF?

Smirnov has been charged with falsely reporting that Burisma executives paid Hunter and Joe Biden \$5 million each around 2015 after hiring Hunter Biden to sit on its board and “protect us” from an investiga-

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tion by the then-Ukrainian prosecutor general. The charges were filed by the Justice Department special counsel who has separately filed gun and tax charges against Hunter Biden.

No evidence has emerged that Joe Biden acted corruptly or accepted bribes in his current role or previous office as vice president.

Smirnov, meanwhile, had only routine business dealings with Burisma, and they did not start until 2017 after the prosecutor general was gone and when Joe Biden was unable to influence U.S. policy since he was out of office, prosecutors said.

Smirnov "expressed bias" against Joe Biden before he made the bribery allegations in June 2020, years after they supposedly occurred, prosecutors said. An FBI field office investigated the allegations and recommended the case be closed in August 2020, according to charging documents.

Smirnov's defense attorneys have said he is presumed innocent, and they successfully pushed for his release from jail ahead of trial. U.S. Magistrate Judge Daniel Albregts in Las Vegas said Tuesday he was concerned about Smirnov's access to money but that federal guidelines require him to fashion "the least restrictive conditions" ahead of trial. Prosecutors are appealing that decision.

WHAT TIES ARE THERE TO RUSSIAN INTELLIGENCE?

Prosecutors laid out in court documents "extensive and extremely recent," contact Smirnov said he had with people aligned with Russian intelligence.

Smirnov had told his FBI handler that he had been in touch with "multiple" other foreign intelligence services, including officials linked to Russian intelligence, according to court documents.

As recently as December, court documents state he was relaying details about meetings with Russian officials, one of whom said the country's intelligence services had intercepted calls from prominent Americans that "the Russian government may use as 'kompromat' in the 2024 election, depending on who the candidates will be," using a word for compromising material.

That echoed a previous bogus story from months before when he pushed his handler to investigate whether Hunter Biden had been recorded in a Ukrainian hotel, prosecutors said. The president's son has never traveled to Ukraine, according to court documents.

"What this shows is that the misinformation he is spreading is not confined to 2020. He is actively peddling new lies that could impact U.S. elections after meeting with Russian intelligence officials in November," prosecutors wrote in court documents.

National security experts have warned for years that foreign governments — primarily Russia, China and Iran — want to undermine the U.S. and see elections as a way to do it.

In a threat assessment late last year, Microsoft warned Russia remains "the most committed and capable threat to the 2024 election," with the Kremlin seeing next year's vote as a "must-win political warfare battle" that could determine the outcome of its war against Ukraine.

WHAT ARE REPUBLICANS SAYING?

Smirnov'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.

They became a flashpoint in Congress in July as Republicans demanded the FBI release the unredacted form, a so-called FD-1023, documenting the unverified allegations. Republican Rep. James Comer of Kentucky had subpoenaed the form as Republicans deepened their probe ahead of the 2024 presidential election. Republicans acknowledged they couldn't confirm if the allegations were true but said they were significant in their investigation of Hunter Biden.

The allegations of Russian contact with the source of those allegations should be a death knell for the impeachment inquiry, said Democratic Rep. Jamie Raskin of Maryland. "It appears like the whole thing is not only obviously false and fraudulent but a product of Russian disinformation and propaganda," he said.

Republicans, on the other hand, have downplayed the importance of Smirnov's allegations. Judiciary Committee Chairman Rep. Jim Jordan, R-Ohio, pointed to Smirnov's long track record as an FBI source but said the impeachment inquiry goes beyond his allegations. The case against him "doesn't change the fundamental facts" at issue in the impeachment probe, he said.

White House weighing executive actions on the border — with immigration powers used by Trump

By SEUNG MIN KIM and COLLEEN LONG Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — The White House is considering using provisions of federal immigration law repeatedly tapped by former President Donald Trump to unilaterally enact a sweeping crackdown at the southern border, according to three people familiar with the deliberations.

The administration, stymied by Republican lawmakers who rejected a negotiated border bill earlier this month, has been exploring options that President Joe Biden could deploy on his own without congressional approval, multiple officials and others familiar with the talks said. But the plans are nowhere near finalized and it's unclear how the administration would draft any such executive actions in a way that would survive the inevitable legal challenges. The officials and those familiar with the talks spoke to The Associated Press on condition of anonymity to comment on private ongoing White House discussions.

The exploration of such avenues by Biden's team underscores the pressure the president faces this election year on immigration and the border, which have been among his biggest political liabilities since he took office. For now, the White House has been hammering congressional Republicans for refusing to act on border legislation that the GOP demanded, but the administration is also aware of the political perils that high numbers of migrants could pose for the president and is scrambling to figure out how Biden could ease the problem on his own.

White House spokesperson Angelo Fernández Hernández stressed that "no executive action, no matter how aggressive, can deliver the significant policy reforms and additional resources Congress can provide and that Republicans rejected."

"The administration spent months negotiating in good faith to deliver the toughest and fairest bipartisan border security bill in decades because we need Congress to make significant policy reforms and to provide additional funding to secure our border and fix our broken immigration system," he said. "Congressional Republicans chose to put partisan politics ahead of our national security, rejected what border agents have said they need, and then gave themselves a two-week vacation."

Arrests for illegal crossings on the U.S. border with Mexico fell by half in January from record highs in December to the third lowest month of Biden's presidency. But officials fear those figures could eventually rise again, particularly as the November presidential election nears.

The immigration authority the administration has been looking into is outlined in Section 212(f) of the Immigration and Nationality Act, which gives a president broad leeway to block entry of certain immigrants into the United States if it would be "detrimental" to the national interest of the United States.

Trump, who is the likely GOP candidate to face off against Biden this fall, repeatedly leaned on the 212(f) power while in office, including his controversial ban to bar travelers from Muslim-majority nations. Biden rescinded that ban on his first day in office through executive order.

But now, how Biden would deploy that power to deal with his own immigration challenges is currently being considered, and it could be used in a variety of ways, according to the people familiar with the discussions. For example, the ban could kick in when border crossings hit a certain number. That echoes a provision in the Senate border deal, which would have activated expulsions of migrants if the number of illegal border crossings reached above 5,000 daily for a five-day average.

House Speaker Mike Johnson, R-La., has also called on Biden to use the 212(f) authority. Yet the comprehensive immigration overhaul Biden also introduced on his first day in office — which the White House continues to tout — includes provisions that would effectively scale back a president's powers to bar immigrants under that authority.

Schools say dress codes promote discipline. But many Black students see traces of racism

By CHEYANNE MUMPHREY AP Education Writer

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For as long as schools have policed hairstyles as part of their dress codes, some students have seen the rules as attempts to deny their cultural and religious identities.

Nowhere have school rules on hair been a bigger flashpoint than in Texas, where a trial this week is set to determine whether high school administrators can continue punishing a Black teenager for refusing to cut his hair. The 18-year-old student, Darryl George, who wears his hair in locs tied atop his head, has been kept out of his classroom since the start of the school year.

To school administrators, strict dress codes can be tools for promoting uniformity and discipline. But advocates say the codes disproportionately affect students of color and the punishments disrupt learning. Under pressure, many schools in Texas have removed boys-only hair length rules, while hundreds of districts maintain hair restrictions written into their dress codes.

Schools that enforce strict dress codes have higher rates of punishment that take students away from learning, such as suspensions and expulsions, according to an October 2022 report from the Government Accountability Office. The report called on the U.S. Department of Education to provide resources to help schools design more equitable dress codes.

In stringent public school dress codes, some see vestiges of racist efforts to control the appearance of Black people dating back to slavery. In the 1700s, South Carolina's "Negro Act" made it illegal for Black people to dress "above their condition." Long after slavery was abolished, Black Americans were still stigmatized for not adopting grooming habits that fit white, European beauty standards and norms.

Braids and other hairstyles carry cultural significance for many African Americans. They served as methods of communication across African societies, including to identify tribal affiliation or marriage status, and as clues to safety and freedom for those who were captured and enslaved, historians say.

Black Americans have a variety of hair textures that can require chemicals, time and equipment to style or make straight. Some common natural styles include afros, braids, cornrows or locs. But many have felt pressure to straighten curly hair or keep it cut short.

Whether in professional workplaces, social clubs or schools, research has shown that such beauty norms and grooming standards have inflicted physical, psychological and economic harm on Black people and other people of color.

Dress codes are built upon regulations that stretch back decades, which explains why they often are complex, said Courtney Mauldin, a professor at Syracuse University's School of Education.

"Schools were not designed with Black children in mind," she said. "Our forefathers of education were all white men who set the tone for what schools would be ... and what the purposes are of schooling — one of those being conformity. That's one of the key ideas that was actually introduced in the 1800s."

In some cases, students and advocates have pushed back successfully.

In 2017, then-15-year-old Black twins, Deanna and Mya Cook, were punished for wearing box braids with extensions at their charter school in Malden, Massachusetts. The sisters were told their hair did not comply with the school dress code. The American Civil Liberties Union of Massachusetts filed a complaint, and the state attorney general said the school policies against extensions and other hairstyles appeared to violate racial discrimination laws.

"You don't expect to get in trouble for your hair," said Mya Cook, now 22 and a recent graduate from University of Massachusetts Dartmouth. "But we see it happen. Administrators are able to retaliate against students and use that as a form of control and oppression. And since there's no policy in place, they're able to get away with it."

Schools with higher percentages of Black and Hispanic students are more likely to enforce strict dress codes, and schools in the South are twice as likely to enforce strict dress codes as those in the Northeast, according to the GAO report. In the subregion including Texas, Oklahoma, Arkansas and Louisiana, 71% of public schools have strict dress codes — the highest in the country, the report said.

School districts have argued that strict dress codes increase academic performance, encourage discipline and good hygiene and help to limit distractions.

At Barbers Hill High School in Mont Belvieu, Texas, where Darryl George is a junior, Superintendent Greg Poole has compared the district's grooming policies to military practices. In a full-page advertisement in the

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Houston Chronicle last month, Poole said service members “realize being an American requires conformity with the positive benefit of unity, and being part of something bigger than yourself.”

George has been serving either in-school suspension or spending time at an off-site disciplinary program since the end of August. His family was denied a religious exemption and has argued his locs have cultural significance.

George’s family has also filed a formal complaint with the Texas Education Agency and a federal civil rights lawsuit against Gov. Greg Abbott and Attorney General Ken Paxton, along with the school district. The lawsuits allege the state and district failed to enforce the CROWN Act, which prohibits race-based hair discrimination and took effect in Texas in September.

Asking students to change how they wear their hair for the sake of uniformity is a proxy for racism, said U.S. Rep Bonnie Watson Coleman, a New Jersey Democrat who has championed the CROWN Act.

“To be confronted with this unnecessary discrimination, which has nothing to do with your ability to learn, has nothing to do with your ability to sit in a classroom, has nothing to do with your ability to thrive academically, is wrong,” she said.

In 2020, the same high school told a Black male student that he had to cut his dreadlocks to return to school or participate in graduation. In recent years several other Texas high schools have told Black students their hair violated dress code policies. The ACLU has filed lawsuits in a couple cases, including against Magnolia Independent School District, which ultimately ended up removing their hair restrictions from the dress code.

In 2020, the ACLU of Texas identified 477 school districts with boys-only hair length rules. Since then, half have removed the restrictions from their policies, according to an ACLU report. It argues for more equitable dress codes, noting Black students are more likely to face disciplinary action.

Hair length rules applying to boys at Texas schools also unfairly target transgender and non-binary students, said Chloe Kempf, an attorney at the ACLU of Texas.

The trial Thursday is being held in state court in Anahuac, Texas, to decide whether George’s high school is violating the CROWN Act through dress code restrictions limiting the length of boys’ hair. The decision is expected to set precedent in a state where several districts have similar policies.

WikiLeaks’ Assange faces wait to find out whether he can challenge extradition to the US

By JILL LAWLESS and SYLVIA HUI Associated Press

LONDON (AP) — WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange won’t find out until next month at the earliest whether he can challenge extradition to the U.S. on spying charges, or if his long legal battle in Britain has run out of road.

Two High Court judges said Wednesday they would take time to consider their verdict after a two-day hearing in which Assange’s lawyers argued sending him to the United States would risk a “flagrant denial of justice.”

Attorneys for the U.S., where Assange has been indicted on espionage charges, said he put innocent lives at risk and went beyond journalism in his bid to solicit, steal and indiscriminately publish classified U.S. government documents.

Assange’s lawyers asked the High Court to grant him a new appeal — his last roll of the legal dice in the saga that has kept him in a British high-security prison for the past five years.

The judges overseeing the case reserved their decision, and a ruling on Assange’s future is not expected until March at the earliest.

If judges Victoria Sharp and Jeremy Johnson rule against Assange, he can ask the European Court of Human Rights to block his extradition — though supporters worry he could be put on a plane to the U.S. before that happens, because the British government has already signed an extradition order.

The 52-year-old Australian has been indicted on 17 charges of espionage and one charge of computer misuse over his website’s publication of a trove of classified U.S. documents almost 15 years ago. American

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prosecutors allege Assange encouraged and helped U.S. Army intelligence analyst Chelsea Manning steal diplomatic cables and military files that WikiLeaks published, putting lives at risk.

Lawyer Clair Dobbin, representing the U.S. government, said Wednesday that Assange damaged U.S. security and intelligence services and "created a grave and imminent risk" by releasing the hundreds of thousands of documents — risks that could harm and lead to the arbitrary detention of innocent people, many of whom lived in war zones or under repressive regimes.

Dobbin added that in encouraging Manning and others to hack into government computers and steal from them, Assange was "going a very considerable way beyond" a journalist gathering information.

Assange was "not someone who has just set up an online box to which people can provide classified information," she said. "The allegations are that he sought to encourage theft and hacking that would benefit WikiLeaks."

Assange's supporters maintain he is a secrecy-busting journalist who exposed U.S. military wrongdoing in Iraq and Afghanistan. They have long argued that the prosecution is politically motivated and he won't get a fair trial in the U.S.

Assange's lawyers argued on the first day of the hearing on Tuesday that American authorities are seeking to punish him for WikiLeaks' "exposure of criminality on the part of the U.S. government on an unprecedented scale," including torture and killings.

Lawyer Edward Fitzgerald said there is "a real risk he may suffer a flagrant denial of justice" if he is sent to the U.S.

Dobbin said the prosecution is based on law and evidence, and has remained consistent despite the changes of government in the U.S. during the legal battle.

She added that the First Amendment does not confer immunity on journalists who break the law. Media outlets that went through the process of redacting the documents before publishing them are not being prosecuted, she said.

Assange's lawyers say he could face up to 175 years in prison if convicted, though American authorities have said the sentence is likely to be much shorter.

Assange was absent from court on both days because he is unwell, WikiLeaks said. Stella Assange, his wife, said he had wanted to attend, but was "not in good condition."

Assange's family and supporters say his physical and mental health have suffered during more than a decade of legal battles, including seven years in self-exile in the Ecuadorian Embassy in London.

"Julian is a political prisoner and he has to be released," said Stella Assange, who married the WikiLeaks founder in prison in 2022.

"They're putting Julian into the hands of the country and of the people who plotted his assassination," she added, referring to unproven claims by Assange's lawyers that he was a target of a CIA plot to kidnap or kill him while he was in the Ecuadorian Embassy.

Supporters holding "Free Julian Assange" signs and chanting "there is only one decision — no extradition" protested outside the High Court building for a second day.

Assange's legal troubles began in 2010, when he was arrested in London at the request of Sweden, which wanted to question him about allegations of rape and sexual assault made by two women. In 2012, Assange jumped bail and sought refuge inside the Ecuadorian Embassy.

The relationship between Assange and his hosts eventually soured, and he was evicted from the embassy in April 2019. British police immediately arrested and imprisoned him for breaching bail in 2012. Sweden dropped the sex crimes investigations in November 2019 because so much time had elapsed.

A U.K. district court judge rejected the U.S. extradition request in 2021 on the grounds that Assange was likely to kill himself if held under harsh U.S. prison conditions. Higher courts overturned that decision after getting assurances from the U.S. about his treatment. The British government signed an extradition order in June 2022.

Meanwhile, the Australian parliament last week called for Assange to be allowed to return to his homeland.

Andrew Wilkie, an Australian lawmaker who attended the hearing, said he hoped that sent a strong message to the U.K. and U.S. governments to end the legal fight. "This has gone on long enough," he said.

At least 14 confirmed dead after an illegal open-pit gold mine collapses in Venezuela

LA PARAGUA, Venezuela (AP) — The collapse of an illegally operated open-pit gold mine in central Venezuela killed at least 14 people and injured several more, state authorities said Wednesday, as some other officials reported an undetermined number of people could be trapped.

Bolivar state Gov. Angel Marcano told local reporters that 14 bodies had been removed so far and authorities knew of at least 11 people injured.

"We continue to carry out rescue work," he said, with relatives demanding swift rescue efforts.

The accident took place in the Angostura municipality Tuesday, when a wall collapsed at a mine known as Bulla Loca, which can only be reached by an hours-long boat ride.

Angostura Mayor Yorgi Arciniega said late Tuesday that he planned to take "some 30 caskets" to a community near the mine, indicating that officials feared the death toll could rise into the dozens.

Relatives of the miners gathered in La Paragua, the closest community to the mine, to ask the government to send aircraft to the remote location to rescue the injured and recover bodies.

"We are here waiting, please, for the government to support us with helicopters, planes, anything," said Karina Ríos, whose daughter's father was trapped in the collapse. "There are quite a few dead, there are people wounded. Why don't they give us support, where are they?"

Ríos said she is worried that bodies could quickly decompose because of the area's conditions.

Venezuela's government in 2016 established a huge mining development zone stretching across the middle of the country, to add new revenues alongside its oil industry. Since then, mining operations for gold, diamonds, copper and other minerals have proliferated within and outside that zone.

Many mines operate outside or on the margins of the law. They offer lucrative jobs for ordinary Venezuelans, but conditions are brutal.

Miner Carlos Marcano, 71, survived the collapse and arrived at a triage medical tent in La Paragua Wednesday. He said the desperate situation at the mine "was terrifying."

"One would not want a colleague, a human being, to die like that," he said. "Some of us made it. There are a few wounded, but there are still a number of dead who have not been rescued and are buried there."

Seattle police officer who struck and killed graduate student from India won't face felony charges

By GENE JOHNSON Associated Press

SEATTLE (AP) — Prosecutors in Washington state said Wednesday they will not file felony charges against a Seattle police officer who struck and killed a graduate student from India while responding to an overdose call — a case that attracted widespread attention after another officer was recorded making callous remarks about it.

Officer Kevin Dave was driving 74 mph (119 kph) on a street with a 25 mph (40 kph) speed limit in a police SUV before he hit 23-year-old Jaahnavi Kandula in a crosswalk on Jan. 23, 2023.

In a memo to the Seattle Police Department on Wednesday, the King County prosecutor's office noted that Dave had on his emergency lights, that other pedestrians reported hearing his siren, and that Kandula appeared to try to run across the intersection after seeing his vehicle approaching. She might also have been wearing wireless earbuds that could have diminished her hearing, they noted.

For those reasons, a felony charge of vehicular homicide was not warranted: "There is insufficient evidence to prove beyond a reasonable doubt that Ofc. Dave was consciously disregarding safety," the memo said.

It remains possible that city prosecutors could file lesser charges, such as negligent driving. Tim Robinson, a spokesman for the Seattle City Attorney's Office, said Wednesday that the case had not been referred to it for possible misdemeanor prosecution, and the Seattle Police Department did not immediately respond to an emailed inquiry about whether it might refer the case to that office.

Kandula's death ignited outrage, especially after a recording from another officer's body-worn camera surfaced last September, in which that officer laughs and suggests that Kandula's life had "limited value" and the city should "just write a check."

Diplomats from India as well as local protesters sought an investigation. The city's civilian watchdog, the Office of Police Accountability, found last month that the comments by Officer Daniel Auderer — the vice president of the Seattle Police Officers Guild — damaged the department's reputation and undermined public trust on a scale that is difficult to measure.

Seattle Police Chief Adrian Diaz is weighing Auderer's punishment.

The comments were "derogatory, contemptuous, and inhumane," wrote Gino Betts Jr., director of the accountability office.

In a statement to the office, Auderer acknowledged that his remarks — during a call with Mike Solan, the police union's president — sounded callous, but that they were intended to mock a legal system that would try to put a value on Kandula's life.

King County Prosecutor Leesa Manion called Kandula's death heartbreaking, but she said Auderer's "appalling" comments did not change the legal analysis of whether Dave should be charged.

"It is the Office of Police Accountability that bears the responsibility of disciplinary investigation and proceedings relating to Officer Auderer's comment," rather than the prosecutor's office, Manion said.

The Seattle Police Officers Guild did not immediately respond to an email seeking comment. The union has said the comments were "highly insensitive" but also taken out of context.

Kandula was a graduate student at Northeastern University's Seattle campus.

Private US spacecraft enters orbit around the moon ahead of landing attempt

By MARCIA DUNN AP Aerospace Writer

CAPE CANAVERAL, Fla. (AP) — A private U.S. lunar lander reached the moon and eased into a low orbit Wednesday, a day before it will attempt an even greater feat — landing on the gray, dusty surface.

A smooth touchdown would put the U.S. back in business on the moon for the first time since NASA astronauts closed out the Apollo program in 1972. The company, if successful, also would become the first private outfit to ace a moon landing.

Launched last week, Intuitive Machines' lander fired its engine on the back side of the moon while out of contact with Earth. Flight controllers at the company's Houston headquarters had to wait until the spacecraft emerged to learn whether the lander was in orbit or hurtling aimlessly away.

Intuitive Machines confirmed its lander, nicknamed Odysseus, was circling the moon with experiments from NASA and other clients. The lander is part of a NASA program to kickstart the lunar economy; the space agency is paying \$118 million to get its experiments on the moon on this mission.

On Thursday, controllers will lower the orbit from just under 60 miles (92 kilometers) to 6 miles (10 kilometers) — a crucial maneuver occurring again on the moon's far side — before aiming for a touchdown near the moon's south pole. It's a dicey place to land with all the craters and cliffs, but deemed prime real estate for astronauts since the permanently shadowed craters are believed to hold frozen water.

The moon is littered with wreckage from failed landings. Some missions never even got that far. Another U.S. company — Astrobotic Technology — tried to send a lander to the moon last month, but it didn't get there because of a fuel leak. The crippled lander came crashing back through the atmosphere, burning up over the Pacific.

A rundown on the moon's winners and losers:

FIRST VICTORIES

The Soviet Union's Luna 9 successfully touches down on the moon in 1966, after its predecessors crash or miss the moon altogether. The U.S. follows four months later with Surveyor 1. Both countries achieve more robotic landings, as the race heats up to land men.

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APOLLO RULES

NASA clinches the space race with the Soviets in 1969 with a moon landing by Apollo 11's Neil Armstrong and Buzz Aldrin. Twelve astronauts explore the surface over six missions, before the program ends with Apollo 17 in 1972. Still the only country to send humans to the moon, the U.S. hopes to return crews to the surface by the end of 2026 or so, a year after a lunar fly-around by astronauts.

CHINA EMERGES

China, in 2013, becomes the third country to successfully land on the moon, delivering a rover named Yutu, Chinese for jade rabbit. China follows with the Yutu-2 rover in 2019, this time touching down on the moon's unexplored far side — an impressive first. A sample return mission on the moon's near side in 2020 yields nearly 4 pounds (1.7 kilograms) of lunar rocks and dirt. Another sample return mission should be launching soon, but this time to the far side. Seen as NASA's biggest moon rival, China aims to put its astronauts on the moon by 2030.

RUSSIA STUMBLES

In 2023, Russia tries for its first moon landing in nearly a half-century, but the Luna 25 spacecraft smashes into the moon. The country's previous lander — 1976's Luna 24 — not only landed, but returned moon rocks to Earth.

INDIA TRIUMPHS ON TAKE 2

After its first lander slams into the moon in 2019, India regroups and launches Chandrayaan-3 (Hindi for moon craft) in 2023. The craft successfully touches down, making India the fourth country to score a lunar landing. The win comes just four days after Russia's crash-landing.

JAPAN LANDS SIDEWAYS

Japan becomes the fifth country to land successfully on the moon, with its spacecraft touching down in January. The craft lands on the wrong side, compromising its ability to generate solar power, but manages to crank out pictures and science before falling silent when the long lunar night sets in.

PRIVATE TRIES

A privately funded lander from Israel, named Beresheet, Hebrew for "in the beginning," crashes into the moon in 2019. A Japanese entrepreneur's company, ispace, launches a lunar lander in 2023, but it, too, wrecks. Astrobotic Technology, a Pittsburgh company, launches its lander in January, but a fuel leak prevents a landing and dooms the craft. Astrobotic and Intuitive Machines plan more moon deliveries.

United Airlines says after a 'detailed safety analysis' it will restart flights to Israel in March

CHICAGO (AP) — United Airlines says it plans to resume flights to Israel next month, reviving a route that was suspended in October at the start of the Israel-Hamas war.

The airline said Wednesday that it will start flights from Newark, New Jersey, to Tel Aviv with a stop in Munich on March 2 and March 4. United said it hopes to begin daily service on March 6 and to add a second daily flight as soon as May.

American Airlines and Delta Air Lines also stopped flying to Tel Aviv after the war started and have not announced when service might resume. Germany's Lufthansa and its affiliates Austrian Airlines and Swiss brought back flights to Tel Aviv in January, followed by Air France. Other European carriers have said they plan to restart flights to Israel this spring.

United said it conducted "a detailed safety analysis" and consulted security experts and government officials in both countries before deciding to resume the flights. The airline said it also worked with the two unions that represent its pilots and flight attendants.

The Chicago-based airline said it will evaluate whether to resume flights this fall to Israel from San Francisco, Chicago and Dulles airport outside Washington, D.C.

Boeing ousts head of 737 jetliner program weeks after panel blowout on a flight over Oregon

SEATTLE (AP) — Boeing said Wednesday that the head of its 737 jetliner program is leaving the company in an executive shake-up weeks after a door panel blew out on a flight over Oregon, renewing questions about safety at the company.

Boeing announced that Ed Clark, who had been with the company for nearly 18 years and led the 737 program since early 2021, was leaving immediately.

Clark oversaw the factory in Renton, Washington, where final assembly took place on the Alaska Airlines 737 Max 9 involved in last month's accident. Federal investigators said bolts needed to help keep a panel called a door plug in place were missing after repair work on the plane.

Katie Ringgold, a vice president in charge of delivering 737s to airlines, will succeed Clark as vice president and general manager of the 737 program and the Renton factory, according to an email to employees from Stan Deal, the CEO of Boeing's commercial airplanes division.

The company announced several other appointments, including naming longtime executive Elizabeth Lund to the new position of senior vice president for commercial airplanes quality.

The moves are part of the company's "enhanced focus on ensuring that every airplane we deliver meets or exceeds all quality and safety requirements," Deal said in his email to staff. "Our customers demand, and deserve, nothing less."

The blowout of a panel on the Alaska Airlines Max 9 has led to more scrutiny of Boeing by regulators, Congress and airlines.

The Federal Aviation Administration grounded all Max 9s in the U.S. for about three weeks for inspections of the emergency door panels, and the agency is limiting Boeing production until other quality concerns are resolved. FAA Administrator Mike Whitaker said Boeing is not paying enough attention to safety as it tries to build more planes to meet demand from airlines.

The CEOs of Alaska Airlines and United Airlines — the two U.S. carriers affected by the Max 9 grounding — expressed outrage and frustration with the company. They asked what Boeing intends to do about improving the quality of its manufacturing.

"We caused the problem and we understand that," Boeing CEO David Calhoun said on Jan. 31. "We understand why they are angry and we will work to earn their confidence."

Calhoun said the company has increased inspections in its plants and at suppliers, appointed a retired Navy admiral to review quality management, and shut down the 737 assembly line for one day so workers could discuss quality and safety.

Criticism of Boeing has reached levels not seen since the aftermath of two deadly crashes involving Max 8 jetliners in Indonesia and Ethiopia in 2018 and 2019. The crashes killed 346 people and led to the ouster of Boeing's then-CEO.

Shares of The Boeing Co., which is based in Arlington, Virginia, closed down 1% on Wednesday. They have lost 19% — and about \$27 billion in stock-market value — since the door blowout.

Silent brain changes precede Alzheimer's.

Researchers have new clues about which come first

By LAURAN NEERGAARD AP Medical Writer

WASHINGTON (AP) — Alzheimer's quietly ravages the brain long before symptoms appear and now scientists have new clues about the dominolike sequence of those changes — a potential window to one day intervene.

A large study in China tracked middle-aged and older adults for 20 years, using regular brain scans, spinal taps and other tests.

Compared to those who remained cognitively healthy, people who eventually developed the mind-robbing disease had higher levels of an Alzheimer's-linked protein in their spinal fluid 18 years prior to diagnosis,

researchers reported Wednesday. Then every few years afterward, the study detected another so-called biomarker of brewing trouble.

Scientists don't know exactly how Alzheimer's forms. One early hallmark is that sticky protein called beta-amyloid, which over time builds up into brain-clogging plaques. Amyloid alone isn't enough to damage memory — plenty of healthy people's brains harbor a lot of plaque. An abnormal tau protein that forms neuron-killing tangles is one of several co-conspirators.

The new research, published in the *New England Journal of Medicine*, offers a timeline for how those abnormalities pile up.

The study's importance "cannot be overstated," said Dr. Richard Mayeux, an Alzheimer's specialist at Columbia University who wasn't involved in the research.

"Knowledge of the timing of these physiological events is critical" for testing new ways of treating and maybe eventually even preventing Alzheimer's, he wrote in an accompanying editorial.

The findings have no practical implications yet.

More than 6 million Americans, and millions more worldwide, have Alzheimer's, the most common form of dementia. There's no cure. But last year a drug named Leqembi became the first approved with clear evidence that it could slow the worsening of early Alzheimer's — albeit for a few months.

It works by clearing away some of that gunky amyloid protein. The approach also is being tested to see if it's possible to delay Alzheimer's onset if high-risk people are treated before symptoms appear. Still other drugs are being developed to target tau.

Tracking silent brain changes is key for such research. Scientists already knew that in rare, inherited forms of Alzheimer's that strike younger people, a toxic form of amyloid starts accumulating about two decades ahead of symptoms and at some point later tau kicks in.

The new findings show the order in which such biomarker changes occurred with more common old-age Alzheimer's.

Researchers with Beijing's Innovation Center for Neurological Disorders compared 648 people eventually diagnosed with Alzheimer's and an equal number who remained healthy. The amyloid finding in future Alzheimer's patients was the first, 18 years or 14 years prior to diagnosis depending on the test used.

Differences in tau were detected next, followed by a marker of trouble in how neurons communicate. A few years after that, differences in brain shrinkage and cognitive test scores between the two groups became apparent, the study found.

"The more we know about viable Alzheimer's treatment targets and when to address them, the better and faster we will be able to develop new therapies and preventions," said Claire Sexton, the Alzheimer's Association's senior director of scientific programs. She noted that blood tests are coming soon that promise to also help by making it easier to track amyloid and tau.

Trump faces warning signs that his fundraising prowess may have limits in 2024 campaign

By BRIAN SLODYSKO Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Donald Trump's legendary ability to raise massive sums of political cash may be on a collision course with a new and unpleasant reality.

Campaign finance reports released this week flashed bright warning lights, showing two key committees in his political operation raised an anemic \$13.8 million in January while collectively spending more than they took in. A major driver of those costs was millions of dollars in legal fees from Trump's myriad of court cases.

The latest numbers offer only a partial snapshot of the Trump operation's finances because other branches won't have to disclose their numbers until April. But Trump's diminished cashflow presents an alarming picture of the overwhelming favorite to be the GOP's presidential nominee, particularly to would-be donors who aren't eager to subsidize Trump's legal challenges.

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Despite threats of vengeance by Trump, some are instead backing his last standing rival, former U.N. Ambassador Nikki Haley, who outraised Trump's primary campaign committee by nearly \$3 million last month.

In a statement, Trump spokeswoman Karoline Leavitt did not directly address the campaign's finances. "President Trump's campaign is fueled by small dollar donors across the country from every background who are sick and tired of Crooked Joe Biden's record-high inflation, wide open border invasion, crime and chaos," Leavitt said. "Voters don't want four more years of misery and destruction."

When asked specifically about the numbers, a Trump spokesman texted a link to a Fox News story published Tuesday, stating that Trump was expected to raise \$6 million at a fundraiser held that day.

Legal fees dominated Trump's January expenditures, amounting to \$3.7 million of the roughly \$15 million spent by the two committees. One of the committees, Save America, held nearly \$2 million in unpaid legal debts, the records show.

Save America was also bolstered with a cash infusion from a pro-Trump super PAC, which accounted for almost all of the money it raised in January.

The committee received another \$5 million "refund" installment from the super PAC "Make America Great Again Inc.," which was initially seeded through a \$60 million from Save America in the fall of 2022. Instead, Trump campaign officials opted to claw that money back in installments, a running total that has now reached \$47 million, records show.

That left Trump's two committees with \$36.6 million in cash on hand compared to Biden's \$132 million stockpile, which he and the Democratic National Committee raised \$42 million for in January.

"His endless drama and legal bills will deplete the Republican Party and bring even more electoral losses," Haley's communications director, Nachama Soloveichik, said in a statement.

The latest tranche of legal bills comes at a sensitive time, as Trump is orchestrating a takeover of the cash-strapped Republican National Committee, where he plans to install his daughter-in-law, Lara Trump, as the party's No. 2 official. Some donors and RNC committee members worry that Trump may soon turn to the RNC to help cover his legal bills, too, considering Trump has made claims of legal persecution a pillar of his campaign.

"Every single penny will go to the No. 1 and the only job of the RNC. That is electing Donald J. Trump as president of the United States," Lara Trump said during a recent interview on the conservative network NewsMax.

The RNC is facing headwinds of its own, reporting \$8.7 million on hand at the end of January, reports show.

What's not clear is how much of a drag his prodigious legal spending will be on his, or the RNC's, finances.

Though Trump's financially strained position is unusual for the odds-on favorite to clinch a major party's nomination, there is ample time for a turnaround. It's still early in the campaign and — assuming he becomes the nominee — he will be able to raise money in concert with the RNC, which should allow a single donor to write a check worth upwards of \$1 million. That's an advantage that Biden and the DNC currently hold over him.

Over the past year, he's also used pivotal moments in his ongoing legal drama, including his indictment hearings, to open a spigot of campaign cash from his large base of conservative supporters. Many chip in small amounts online.

Trump approached the 2024 race with over \$100 million, a lot of it raised in the early days after his 2020 loss to Biden, when he bombarded supporters with solicitations for an "election defense fund."

His current cash woes place him in a familiar, if unwelcome, position that echoes the 2020 presidential race, when he and his aides blew through \$1 billion and a large cash advantage over Biden with little to show. This time, legal fees have proven to be a drain, costing over \$80 million over the past two years, records show.

Democrats have reacted with glee.

"It's been a tough couple of weeks if you are Donald Trump and also like money," said Ammar Moussa, a Biden campaign spokesman. "The RNC had its worst fundraising year in decades, is hemorrhaging cash, and now Trump enters the general election with the weakest operation in recent history."

It's an election year, and Biden's team is signaling a more aggressive posture toward the press

By DAVID BAUDER AP Media Writer

NEW YORK (AP) — Occupants of the White House have grumbled over news coverage practically since the place was built. Now it's Joe Biden's turn: With a reelection campaign underway, there are signs that those behind the president are starting to more aggressively and publicly challenge how he is portrayed.

Within the past two weeks, an administration aide sent an unusual letter to the White House Correspondents' Association complaining about coverage of a special counsel's report on Biden's handling of classified documents. In addition, the president's campaign objected to its perception that negative stories about Biden's age got more attention than remarks by Donald Trump about the NATO alliance.

It's not quite "enemy of the people" territory. But it is noticeable.

"It is a strategy," said Frank Sesno, a professor at George Washington University and former CNN Washington bureau chief. "It does several things at once. It makes the press a foil, which is a popular pattern for politicians of all stripes."

It can also distract voters from bad news. And while some newsrooms quickly dismiss the criticism, he says, others may pause and think twice about what they write.

THE WHITE HOUSE OBJECTS TO THE FRAMING OF STORIES

The letter from Ian Sams, spokesman for the White House counsel's office, suggested that reporters improperly framed stories about the Feb. 8 release of Special Counsel Robert Hur's report. Sams pointed to stories by CBS News, The Wall Street Journal, The Associated Press and others emphasizing that Hur had found evidence that Biden willfully retained and disclosed classified material. Sam wrote that much of that so-called evidence didn't hold up and was negated by Hur's decision not to press charges.

He said it was critical to address it when "significant errors" like misstating the findings and conclusions of a federal investigation of a president occur.

It was Sams' second foray into press criticism in a few months; last fall he urged journalists to give more scrutiny to House Republicans and the reasons behind their impeachment inquiry of Biden.

"Everybody makes mistakes, and nobody's perfect," Sams told the AP. "But a healthy back and forth over what's the full story helps make both the press and the government sharper in how the country and world get the news they need to hear."

Kelly O'Donnell, president of the correspondents' association and an NBC News correspondent, suggested Sams' concerns were misdirected and should be addressed to individual news organizations.

"It is inappropriate for the White House to utilize internal pool distribution channels, primarily for logistics and the rapid sharing of need-to-know information, to disseminate generalized critiques of news coverage," O'Donnell said.

In a separate statement, Biden campaign spokesman T.J. Ducklo criticized media outlets for time spent discussing the 81-year-old president's age and mental capacity, an issue that was raised anew when Biden addressed the Hur report with reporters. He suggested that was less newsworthy and important than Trump's NATO comments. Americans deserve a press corps that covers Trump "with the seriousness and ferocity this moment requires," said Ducklo, who resigned from the White House in 2021 for threatening a reporter.

To be fair, deadline times likely affected the initial disparity in coverage that Ducklo pointed out. And Trump's remarks have hardly been ignored by media outlets.

On Wednesday, Biden's campaign issued a statement headlined "Full of Malarkey," that criticized The Times for a fact check it ran on some of the president's statements about the economy. The campaign said the newspaper "continues to give Trump a pass on lies."

A.G. Sulzberger, publisher of The Times, noted in an interview with the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism that Biden's team had been "extremely upset" about its coverage lately. "We're not anyone's opposition," he said, "and we're not anyone's lapdog."

HOW MUCH IS THE PRESIDENT AVAILABLE?

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The criticism comes amid the backdrop of unhappiness among some journalists about how much Biden is made available for questions — an issue that surfaced again when Biden turned down an opportunity to appear before tens of millions of Americans in an interview during the Super Bowl pregame show.

The 33 news conferences Biden has given during the first three years of his presidency is lower than any other American president in that time span since Ronald Reagan, said Martha Kumar, a Towson University professor emeritus and expert on presidents and the press. Similarly, the 86 interviews Biden has given is lower than any president since she began studying records with Reagan. By comparison, Barack Obama gave 422 interviews during his first three years.

Instead, Biden prefers more informal appearances where reporters ask a few questions, with comparatively little opportunity for follow-up, she said: The 535 such sessions that Biden conducted was second only to Trump's 572.

One example followed Biden's remarks Friday after the death of Russian dissident Aleksey Navalny. Another was Biden's early evening availability following the release of Hur's report, a chaotic scene where reporters tried to shout one another. The president's performance, and remarks about his forgetfulness that were made in Hur's report, led to more questions about the impact of age on his ability.

"It did not serve him well," Kumar said. Some on Biden's team, meanwhile, believe the president showed a combativeness in the face of criticism that Americans will appreciate.

Sesno said he can understand the Biden team's worry that the president's fitness for the job becomes a story they lose control of, much like former President Gerald Ford's stumbles led to the perception that he was a bumbler. Nikki Usher, a media professor at the University of San Diego, said she was surprised that Biden's team hadn't become more aggressive earlier.

"He needs to jump out in front of the narrative," Usher said.

The Biden pushback seems mild in comparison to Trump's epic badmouthing of news organizations like CNN and The New York Times. Republican voters, in general, are much more apt to respond to efforts that make journalists the villain. Democrats, meanwhile, tend to have a greater appreciation for the press' role in a democracy, Usher says, so the Biden team has to be more careful with attacks.

Particularly with the age issue, there's only so much that the president's team can say, Sesno said: "People will make up their minds based on what they see and hear from Joe Biden."

Why isn't desperately needed aid reaching Palestinians in Gaza?

By JOSEPH KRAUSS Associated Press

From the earliest days of the Israel-Hamas war, the United States and much of the international community have pressed Israel to allow more humanitarian aid into the Gaza Strip. But as the fighting rages on with no end in sight, the humanitarian catastrophe there has only worsened.

United Nations agencies and aid groups say the ongoing hostilities, the Israeli military's refusal to facilitate deliveries and the breakdown of order inside Gaza make it increasingly difficult to bring vital aid to much of the coastal enclave.

The World Food Program said Tuesday it has paused food deliveries to isolated northern Gaza, where the U.N. children's agency says one in six children are acutely malnourished. A U.N. report in December found that a quarter of Gaza's 2.3 million people are starving.

"You find that there are people who have missed meals for a day or two days or three days — they have severe hunger," Matthew Hollingworth, country director for WFP, said Wednesday. "But you also have people who have acute hunger, that is, they are not eating for a week."

Hollingworth described the halt as a "temporary pause" and said the WFP was talking to "all the parties" to resume aid shipments. "We have to flood the area with assistance, if we're going to mitigate and stop a famine," he said.

Footage from Gaza in recent weeks has shown scenes of chaotic desperation with hundreds of people surrounding trucks and emptying them. Some Palestinians say they have resorted to making bread out of animal fodder. New mothers say baby formula is hard to come by or unaffordable.

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Israel denies it is restricting the entry of aid and has shifted the blame to humanitarian organizations operating inside Gaza, saying hundreds of trucks filled with aid sit idle on the Palestinian side of the main crossing. The U.N. says it can't always reach the trucks at the crossing because it is at times too dangerous.

The U.N. has called on Israel to open more crossings, including in the north, and to improve the coordination process.

Here's a look at how the situation grew so dire.

WHY DOES GAZA DEPEND ON AID?

Gaza has been under an Israeli and Egyptian blockade since Hamas seized power from rival Palestinian forces in 2007. Israel said the blockade was needed to keep the militant group from importing arms, while critics decried it as a form of collective punishment.

Even before the war, Gaza's unemployment rate hovered around 50% — among the highest in the world — and years of isolation along with four previous wars devastated the private sector. Still, around 500 trucks entered each day, carrying commercial goods, fuel and aid.

Israel imposed a complete siege after Hamas' Oct. 7 attack and said nothing would enter until it released the estimated 250 hostages taken that day. Seeking to put pressure on Hamas, it claimed the group was hoarding food and supplies and could care for the general population if it truly wanted.

Israel later relented under U.S. pressure and began allowing dozens of trucks to enter each day from the Rafah crossing between Egypt and Gaza. But aid groups said they faced a cumbersome inspection process that allowed only a trickle of aid to enter even as needs mounted, with some 80% of Palestinians displaced from their homes. Israel says the inspections are needed for security reasons.

In December, following more U.S. pressure, Israel reopened its own Kerem Shalom crossing with Gaza, the territory's main cargo terminal, and streamlined the inspection process. But even then, the average number of trucks entering a day was only a third of the prewar level.

COGAT, the military body that oversees Palestinian civilian affairs, says there are no restrictions on importing humanitarian aid. It also denies that right-wing Israeli protests at the crossings in recent weeks have succeeded in blocking aid.

Instead, the main obstacles now appear to be on the other side of the fence.

WHY CAN'T ORGANIZATIONS DISTRIBUTE AID INSIDE GAZA?

Once aid trucks enter Gaza, there's often not much further they can go.

Israel has isolated northern Gaza since the opening days of the ground offensive in late October after ordering its population to flee to the south. Tens of thousands of people remained there, despite the flattening of entire neighborhoods and severe shortages of food and water.

Aid groups say the Israeli military often denies their requests to access northern Gaza, and that even when it is granted, little protection is provided.

The drive from southern Rafah to Gaza City, in the north, used to take around 45 minutes. It now takes several hours because of ongoing hostilities and roads that have been damaged, blocked or closed by the army.

Earlier this month, a U.N. official accused Israeli forces of firing on a food convoy. Hamas-run police had provided security escorts to protect the convoys from crowds or bandits — and, according to Israel, were themselves siphoning off aid.

But U.N. officials say the escorts vanished after recent Israeli airstrikes targeting security forces in the southern border city of Rafah, where most aid operations are concentrated and where more than half of Gaza's population has sought refuge from fighting elsewhere.

Israel has vowed to expand the ground offensive to Rafah in the coming weeks, which aid groups say would be catastrophic.

HOW HAS THE UNRWA CONTROVERSY AFFECTED AID DELIVERIES?

The largest provider of humanitarian aid in Gaza is the U.N. agency for Palestinian refugees, known as UNRWA. Last month, Israel said 12 of its employees took part in the Oct. 7 attack, prompting the United States and other donors to suspend funding.

UNRWA immediately fired the 10 surviving employees and has launched investigations. It denies Israeli

allegations that it collaborates with or turns a blind eye to Hamas, and says Israel has not shared evidence implicating the 12 fired employees. It says if funding is not restored it will have to halt operations in April.

In the meantime, the agency says Israel has imposed a number of financial restrictions that hinder its operations and is holding up a shipment of food that could sustain 1.1 million people for a month.

Israel has called for UNRWA to be disbanded, but no other U.N. agencies or aid groups are capable of immediately replacing it.

Election officials in the US face daunting challenges in 2024. And Congress isn't coming to help

By CHRISTINA A. CASSIDY Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — With election season already underway, some state election officials are expressing frustration that Congress has yet to allocate federal money they have come to rely on to help cover the costs of securing their systems from attacks, updating equipment and training staff.

Election officials face a long list of challenges this year, including potential cyberattacks waged by foreign governments, criminal ransomware gangs attacking computer systems and the persistence of election misinformation that has led to harassment of election officials and undermined public confidence.

Michigan Secretary of State Jocelyn Benson said it was "demoralizing and disappointing" that the federal government hasn't committed to investing in this year's presidential election.

"We are managing federal elections that are the foundation of who has power at the federal level and trying to manage a lot of different competing risks and challenges that have only escalated in recent years," said Benson, a Democrat. "It makes us feel like we're on our own."

Since the 2016 election and the federal government's decision to add the nation's voting systems to its list of critical infrastructure, Congress has sent \$995 million to states for election administration and security needs.

In Colorado, the money has been used to develop a system for voters to track their ballots and pay for training for election officials. Florida officials designated the money for increasing security of the state's voter registration system. Elsewhere, federal money has been used to replace voting machines and add cybersecurity staff.

Most of that was allocated ahead of the 2020 election, as states rushed to boost cybersecurity defenses, and has been exhausted. A separate \$400 million was required to be spent on pandemic-related election costs in 2020.

The last chunk of election-related funding was \$75 million approved by Congress in December 2022. State allocations ranged from \$5.8 million for California to \$1 million for Nevada.

"Los Angeles elections alone costs \$75 million," said Kathy Boockvar, the former chief elections official in Pennsylvania. "I don't think election officials have had expectations of \$400 million. People have hoped for \$75 million, and it's unclear whether even that will come."

PARTISAN BUDGET DISPUTES

Federal budget negotiations have been mired in partisan disputes, with agencies mostly operating on spending levels approved for 2023. Congress has been able to approve only temporary funding plans, which cover a few months at a time. The next deadline is March 1, when the most recent temporary funding plan expires for some departments and a week later for others. The government faces a potential shutdown if new funding is not approved.

Even if a deal is reached, there's no guarantee of new money for elections. House Republicans last year listed election security grants as "wasteful spending" and did not allocate money for it in their spending proposal. Instead, they have been focused on legislation that would ban private organizations from providing money to election offices.

"Americans deserve to have confidence in our elections, which means elections should be free from undue private influence," U.S. Rep. Bryan Steil, a Wisconsin Republican who chairs the Committee on House Administration, said at a recent hearing.

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A \$75 million Senate proposal for election security is being negotiated as part of the final spending package.

"Administering free and fair elections is year-round work that takes planning and resources, and election officials on the front lines of our democracy need a steady stream of funding so that they can do things like replace aging equipment, strengthen cybersecurity, and keep pace with new technology," U.S. Sen. Amy Klobuchar, a Democrat from Minnesota, said in a statement.

TOUGH DECISIONS

In North Carolina, state election officials have had to make some tough decisions as the needs have outpaced state and federal funding.

North Carolina's State Board of Elections has reduced its cybersecurity staff by one employee and has been forced to cut back in other areas to meet some of the needs for election security, said Karen Brinson Bell, the agency's executive director. A team of six employees that had been handling election data has been reduced to just one full-time position, with another person helping part-time. Some eliminated positions were funded by federal grants that are no longer available.

"Every effort we've put forward for cybersecurity has come through federal funding, and without that continuous funding and no new funding through the (North Carolina) legislature, it's hard to sustain a strong cyber posture," Brinson Bell said.

During its recent meeting, the National Association of Secretaries of State passed a resolution calling on Congress to provide sufficient money to help officials address cybersecurity threats.

West Virginia Secretary of State Mac Warner, a Republican, said he does not support federal money for elections because "typically, it comes with strings attached."

Mississippi Secretary of State Michael Watson, also a Republican, said he would welcome federal assistance for cybersecurity needs if there was flexibility on how states spent it.

"I don't necessarily mind a partnership there with some funding, as long as states are the ones that have the ability to spend those dollars — because what happens in Mississippi may be a little bit different than Minnesota or Maine or California," Watson said.

SUSTAINABLE PROGRAMS

Kim Wyman, the former secretary of state in Washington, said federal officials should heed the lessons of the 2000 election -- when some election offices were well-funded and others less so. She said the Help America Vote Act of 2002, approved by Congress in the aftermath of the ballot confusion in Florida, leveled the playing field with \$3.2 billion in federal money going to the states. A similar investment is needed now, she said.

Wisconsin election officials have used previous federal money to provide grants to local election offices that have helped them boost their technology support and training. They also have been able to buy new voting equipment and mail ballot envelopes, said Meagan Wolfe, the nonpartisan administrator of the Wisconsin Elections Commission.

New Mexico has used federal money to help cover the costs of its election security program. Secretary of State Maggie Toulouse Oliver, a Democrat, said election officials need predictability.

"When we create programs, we want to be able to sustain those programs, not just for a year or for two years. We want to sustain them for the long term," she said.

In Minnesota, the state has used federal money to create grants for local election officials for voting system upgrades, including electronic pollbooks and tabulators. Minnesota Secretary of State Steve Simon said he was concerned about the lack of federal funding and the message that sends about the nation's priorities.

"Nobody I know is looking for Congress to fund state elections," said Simon, a Democrat. "What we are looking for -- for election security and other purposes -- is for them to be a partner in helping us to fill some gaps."

Woman who says she was abused spiritually and sexually by a once-famous Jesuit demands transparency

By NICOLE WINFIELD Associated press

ROME (AP) — One of the first women who accused a once-exalted Jesuit artist of spiritual, psychological and sexual abuse went public Wednesday to demand transparency from the Vatican and a full accounting of the hierarchs who covered for him for 30 years.

Gloria Branciani, 59, appeared at a news conference with one of the most prominent Vatican-accredited lawyers in Rome, Laura Sgro, to tell her story in public for the first time. She detailed the alleged abuses of the Rev. Marko Rupnik, including his fondness for three-way sex "in the image of the Trinity" which, if confirmed, could constitute a grave perversion of Catholic doctrine known as false mysticism.

Rupnik has not commented publicly about the allegations, but his Rome art studio has said the allegations were unproven and media reports about the case a defamatory "lynching."

Rupnik's mosaics decorate churches and basilicas around the world, including at the Catholic shrine in Lourdes, France, the forthcoming cathedral in Aparecida, Brazil, and the Redemptoris Mater chapel of the Apostolic Palace.

The Jesuits kicked him out of the order last year after he refused to respond to allegations of spiritual, psychological and sexual abuses by about 20 women, most of whom, like Branciani, were members of a Jesuit-inspired religious community he co-founded in his native Slovenia that has since been suppressed.

The Rupnik scandal has grabbed headlines for more than a year over speculation that he received preferential treatment from a Vatican dominated by Jesuits: From Pope Francis to the Jesuits who headed the Vatican office responsible for sex crimes and sacramental crimes that twice essentially let him off the hook.

Under pressure as the scandal grew, Francis in October decided to reopen the case and Branciani is due to soon testify before the Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith. Sgro said that she didn't know what the possible lines of investigation are since the Dicastery's proceedings are secret even to victims and their lawyers.

Branciani, who first denounced Rupnik in 1993 and then left the Slovene community, called for the full story of the Rupnik scandal and cover-up to come out in public, including the documentation. She said that she believed that the pope was still in the dark about the details and that even he would be served by the truth.

"He (Rupnik) was always protected by everyone, and everything that you could accuse him of was either minimized or denied," she said. "We hope that our testimony ... will stimulate a greater transparency and a consciousness by everyone, and also maybe the pope, who wasn't really aware of the facts that occurred."

Francis, in a 2023 interview with The Associated Press, said he had intervened in the case only on procedural grounds and didn't know the details.

Rupnik's former Jesuit superior, the Rev. Johan Verschueren, said he had no contact for a lawyer for Rupnik. There was no immediate response to an email seeking comment from his Centro Aletti art studio and ecumenical center in Rome, which has strongly defended him. The Koper, Slovenia diocese, which welcomed Rupnik after he was expelled from the Jesuits, referred to an October statement saying he hadn't been convicted by any tribunal and was presumed innocent.

The Vatican press office offered an update on the investigation after Branciani's press conference, saying the Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith had "just received the latest elements" of documentation from several institutions, including some not previously heard from.

"It will now be a matter of studying the documentation acquired in order to be able to identify what procedures will be possible and useful to implement," the statement said.

In the news conference, Branciani described a textbook case of manipulation of conscience, sexual abuse and false mysticism, which the doctrine office has a tradition of prosecuting. After saying she underwent years of psychological manipulation, grooming and sexual advances, including while Rupnik painted the face of Jesus, she said she eventually lost her virginity to him.

At one point, she said that according to Rupnik, "Our relationship wasn't exclusive but had to be a rela-

tion in the image of the Trinity.”

“And so as proof that our relations were truly in freedom, we had to invite another sister to live sexually with us because this sister would have had the significance of the third person of the Trinity, the Holy Spirit who united our way of relating with one another. And he even proposed the name of the sister,” she said.

The Vatican dicastery handles crimes of sexual abuse of minors as well as sacramental crimes. In the 1950s, it sanctioned a French Dominican priest, the Rev. Thomas Philippe, for false mysticism and other crimes after he perverted Catholic spirituality, religious art and sex to justify his abuse of women by claiming that Jesus and Mary were involved in incestuous sexual relationships.

The office actually took the first, and only, Vatican action against Rupnik in 2020, when it declared him excommunicated for having committed one of the most serious crimes in church law, using the confessional to absolve a woman with whom he had engaged in sexual relations.

The excommunication was lifted two weeks later and Rupnik paid an indemnization to the woman. The following year, after nine members of the Slovene community accused him of other abuses, the dicastery chose not to prosecute him on the grounds that the alleged abuses occurred too long ago. The office routinely waives the statute of limitations for old cases involving abuse of minors.

The outcome underscored how the Catholic hierarchy routinely refuses to consider spiritual and sexual abuse of adult women as a crime that must be punished, but rather a lapse of priestly chastity that can be forgiven, without considering the trauma it causes victims.

Branciani was joined at the press conference by another former member of the Slovene Loyola Community, Mirjam Kovac, who had served as a secretary to the community's founder and had also reported the abuses.

The event was organized by BishopAccountability, a U.S. group that documents the abuse crisis. Its co-founder Anne Barrett-Doyle called for a full public accounting of the Rupnik cover-up along the lines of the 2020 Vatican report into the coverup of ex-Cardinal Theodore McCarrick, which documented bishops, cardinals and even popes who downplayed or dismissed his misconduct for decades.

A young man dies as clashes erupt between police and protesting farmers in India

By ALTAF QADRI and KRUTIKA PATHI Associated Press

SHAMBHU, India (AP) — Clashes between farmers and police in India left one protester dead Wednesday as the farmers resumed their march to the capital after talks with the government failed to end an impasse over their demands for guaranteed crop prices.

Indian farmers began their protest march last week but were stopped some 200 kilometers (125 miles) from New Delhi as police fired rounds of tear gas.

The 21-year-old farmer, identified as Subhkaran Singh, succumbed to a head injury, medical superintendent H S Rekhi at Rajindra Hospital in nearby Punjab state, told the Press Trust of India news agency. He said two others who got injured were in stable condition. Singh died after clashes between security forces and farmers erupted in Khanauri, a town in the state of Punjab, reported PTI.

Punjab's shared borders with the state of Haryana have become protest sites for the farmers attempting to reach New Delhi. The majority of the protesting farmers are from the two states.

Haryana police in a post on X, formerly Twitter, said 12 officers were injured after protesters attacked them with sticks and pelted them with stones. The post added that protesters used chili powder to set stubble on fire, making it difficult for the officers to breathe.

Last week, the farmers paused their protest and hunkered down near the town of Shambhu, close to the border between Punjab and Haryana, as their unions engaged in discussions with government ministers. They rejected a proposal offering them five-year contracts of guaranteed prices on a set of certain crops, including maize, grain legumes and cotton, and decided to resume their march on Wednesday.

Authorities are set on containing the demonstration, which has renewed the movement from over two years ago when tens of thousands of farmers camped out on the outskirts of the city for over a year, forc-

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ing Prime Minister Narendra Modi to repeal new agriculture laws in a major reversal for his government. Last week, authorities barricaded highways leading to New Delhi with cement blocks, metal containers, barbed wire and iron spikes to prevent the farmers from entering. On Wednesday, the farmers arrived at the barricades with bulldozers and excavators to try and push through.

Jagjit Singh Dallewal, one of the farmers leading the march, said they did not want any violence, but condemned the federal government over the massive security measures.

"We want to reach New Delhi in a peaceful manner. The government should remove the barricades," he said.

The protest organizers say the farmers are seeking new legislation that would guarantee minimum prices for 23 crops. The farmers believe this would help stabilize their income. They are also pressing the government to follow through on promises to waive loans and withdraw legal cases brought against them during the earlier 2021 protests.

The government protects agricultural producers against sharp falls in farm prices by setting a minimum purchase price for certain essential crops, a system that was introduced in the 1960s to help shore up food reserves and prevent shortages. The system can apply up to 23 crops, but the government usually offers the minimum price only for rice and wheat.

Several talks so far have failed to break the deadlock. But Arjun Munda, one of the ministers negotiating with the farmers, said they were willing to hold another round of discussions and that the government wanted to maintain peace.

The protests come at a crucial time for India, which is gearing up for national election in the coming months, with Modi's ruling party widely expected to secure a third successive term.

"It is the prime minister's responsibility, who has been elected with majority votes, to handle the situation and accept our demands," Sarwan Singh Pandher, a farm leader, told PTI.

The farmers are an influential voting bloc and particularly important to Modi's base — especially in Northern Haryana and several other states with a substantial farming population, where his Bharatiya Janata Party enjoys wide support.

A brain pacemaker helped a woman with crippling depression. It may soon be available to more people

By LAURA UNGAR AP Science Writer

NEW YORK (AP) — Emily Hollenbeck lived with a deep, recurring depression she likened to a black hole, where gravity felt so strong and her limbs so heavy she could barely move. She knew the illness could kill her. Both of her parents had taken their lives.

She was willing to try something extreme: Having electrodes implanted in her brain as part of an experimental therapy.

Researchers say the treatment — called deep brain stimulation, or DBS — could eventually help many of the nearly 3 million Americans like her with depression that resists other treatments. It's approved for conditions such as Parkinson's disease and epilepsy, and many doctors and patients hope it will become more widely available for depression soon.

The treatment gives patients targeted electrical impulses, much like a pacemaker for the brain. A growing body of recent research is promising, with more underway — although two large studies that showed no advantage to using DBS for depression temporarily halted progress, and some scientists continue to raise concerns.

Meanwhile, the Food and Drug Administration has agreed to speed up its review of Abbott Laboratories' request to use its DBS devices for treatment-resistant depression.

"At first I was blown away because the concept of it seems so intense. Like, it's brain surgery. You have wires embedded in your brain," said Hollenbeck, who is part of ongoing research at Mount Sinai West. "But I also felt like at that point I tried everything, and I was desperate for an answer."

"NOTHING ELSE WAS WORKING"

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Hollenbeck suffered from depression symptoms as a child growing up in poverty and occasional homelessness. But her first major bout happened in college, after her father's suicide in 2009. Another hit during a Teach for America stint, leaving her almost immobilized and worried she'd lose her classroom job and sink into poverty again. She landed in the hospital.

"I ended up having sort of an on-and-off pattern," she said. After responding to medication for a while, she'd relapse.

She managed to earn a doctorate in psychology, even after losing her mom in her last year of grad school. But the black hole always returned to pull her in. At times, she said, she thought about ending her life.

She said she'd exhausted all options, including electroconvulsive therapy, when a doctor told her about DBS three years ago.

"Nothing else was working," she said.

She became one of only a few hundred treated with DBS for depression.

Hollenbeck had the brain surgery while sedated but awake. Dr. Brian Kopell, who directs Mount Sinai's Center for Neuromodulation, placed thin metal electrodes in a region of her brain called the subcallosal cingulate cortex, which regulates emotional behavior and is involved in feelings of sadness.

The electrodes are connected by an internal wire to a device placed under the skin in her chest, which controls the amount of electrical stimulation and delivers constant low-voltage pulses. Hollenbeck calls it "continuous Prozac."

Doctors say the stimulation helps because electricity speaks the brain's language. Neurons communicate using electrical and chemical signals.

In normal brains, Kopell said, electrical activity reverberates unimpeded in all areas, in a sort of dance. In depression, the dancers get stuck within the brain's emotional circuitry. DBS seems to "unstick the circuit," he said, allowing the brain to do what it normally would.

Hollenbeck said the effect was almost immediate.

"The first day after surgery, she started feeling a lifting of that negative mood, of the heaviness," said her psychiatrist, Dr. Martijn Figee. "I remember her telling me that she was able to enjoy Vietnamese takeout for the first time in years and really taste the food. She started to decorate her home, which had been completely empty since she moved to New York."

For Hollenbeck, the most profound change was finding pleasure in music again.

"When I was depressed, I couldn't listen to music. It sounded and felt like I was listening to radio static," she said. "Then on a sunny day in the summer, I was walking down the street listening to a song. I just felt this buoyancy, this, 'Oh, I want to walk more, I want to go and do things!' And I realized I'm getting better."

She only wishes the therapy had been there for her parents.

THE TREATMENT'S HISTORY

The road to this treatment stretches back two decades, when neurologist Dr. Helen Mayberg led promising early research.

But setbacks followed. Large studies launched more than a dozen years ago showed no significant difference in response rates for treated and untreated groups. Dr. Katherine Scangos, a psychiatrist at the University of California, San Francisco, also researching DBS and depression, cited a couple of reasons: The treatment wasn't personalized, and researchers looked at outcomes over a matter of weeks.

Some later research showed depression patients had stable, long-term relief from DBS when observed over years. Overall, across different brain targets, DBS for depression is associated with average response rates of 60%, one 2022 study said.

Treatments being tested by various teams are much more tailored to individuals today. Mount Sinai's team is one of the most prominent researching DBS for depression in the U.S. There, a neuroimaging expert uses brain images to locate the exact spot for Kopell to place electrodes.

"We have a template, a blueprint of exactly where we're going to go," said Mayberg, a pioneer in DBS research and founding director of The Nash Family Center for Advanced Circuit Therapeutics at Mount Sinai. "Everybody's brain is a little different, just like people's eyes are a little further apart or a nose is a

little bigger or smaller.”

Other research teams also tailor treatment to patients, although their methods are slightly different. Scangos and her colleagues are studying various targets in the brain and delivering stimulation only when needed for severe symptoms. She said the best therapy may end up being a combination of approaches.

As teams keep working, Abbott is launching a big clinical trial this year, ahead of a potential FDA decision. “The field is advancing quite quickly,” Scangos said. “I’m hoping we will have approval within a short time.”

But some doctors are skeptical, pointing to potential complications such as bleeding, stroke or infection after surgery.

Dr. Stanley Caroff, an emeritus professor of psychiatry at the University of Pennsylvania, said scientists still don’t know the exact pathways or mechanisms in the brain that produce depression, which is why it’s hard to pick a site to stimulate. It’s also tough to select the right patients for DBS, he said, and approved, successful treatments for depression are available.

“I believe from a psychiatric point of view, the science is not there,” he said of DBS for depression.

MOVING FORWARD

Hollenbeck acknowledges DBS hasn’t been a cure-all; she still takes medicines for depression and needs ongoing care.

She recently visited Mayberg in her office and discussed recovery. “It’s not about being happy all the time,” the doctor told her. “It’s about making progress.”

That’s what researchers are studying now — how to track progress.

Recent research by Mayberg and others in the journal *Nature* showed it’s possible to provide a “readout” of how someone is doing at any given time. Analyzing the brain activity of DBS patients, researchers found a unique pattern that reflects the recovery process. This gives them an objective way to observe how people get better and distinguish between impending depression and typical mood fluctuations.

Scientists are confirming those findings using newer DBS devices in a group of patients that includes Hollenbeck.

She and other participants do their part largely at home. She gives researchers regular brain recordings by logging onto a tablet, putting a remote above the pacemaker-like device in her chest and sending the data. She answers questions that pop up about how she feels. Then she records a video that will be analyzed for things such as facial expression and speech.

Occasionally, she goes into Mount Sinai’s “Q-Lab,” an immersive environment where scientists do quantitative research collecting all sorts of data, including how she moves in a virtual forest or makes circles in the air with her arms. Like many other patients, she moves her arms faster now that she’s doing better.

Data from recordings and visits are combined with other information, such as life events, to chart how she’s doing. This helps guide doctors’ decisions, such as whether to increase her dose of electricity – which they did once.

On a recent morning, Hollenbeck moved her collar and brushed her hair aside to reveal scars on her chest and head from her DBS surgery. To her, they’re signs of how far she’s come.

She makes her way around the city, taking walks in the park and going to libraries, which were a refuge in childhood. She no longer worries that normal life challenges will trigger a crushing depression.

“The stress is pretty extreme at times, but I’m able to see and remember, even on a bodily level, that I’m going to be OK,” she said.

“If I hadn’t had DBS, I’m pretty sure I would not be alive today.”

Rape and sexual assault took place during Hamas attack, Israeli association says

By MELANIE LIDMAN Associated Press

TEL AVIV, Israel (AP) — The Association of Rape Crisis Centers in Israel on Wednesday said it has found evidence of “systematic and intentional” rape and sexual abuse during the Hamas attack on Oct. 7 that

ignited the war in Gaza.

The report said the attacks were more widespread than earlier thought, taking place at a series of locations across southern Israel.

"In some cases, rape was conducted in front of an audience, such as partners, family, or friends, to increase the pain and humiliation for all present," it said.

Orit Sulitzeanu, the executive director of the association, said that in many cases, the bodies of male and female victims, including their genitals, were severely mutilated.

The report, published on Wednesday, did not specify the number of cases it had documented or identify any victims, even anonymously. Sulitzeanu said victim identification was difficult because many were killed after being assaulted, and first responders were so overwhelmed by the scale of death and destruction that they did not document signs of sexual abuse.

The report's authors said they based their research on confidential and public interviews with officials and first responders, as well as media reports. Sulitzeanu said they also relied on "confidential sources" but declined to say whether they had spoken to victims.

An Associated Press investigation also found that sexual assault was part of an atrocity-filled rampage by Palestinian militant group Hamas and others who killed about 1,200 people, most of them civilians, and took around 250 hostages on Oct. 7. Hamas has rejected allegations that its gunmen committed sexual assault.

According to the Israeli report, which was submitted to the United Nations and U.N. investigators carrying out a similar investigation, the sexual and gender-based violence occurred in four main places – a music festival where over 360 people were killed, communities near the Gaza border, Israeli military bases that were overrun by Hamas and places where hostages were held in Gaza.

Over 100 hostages were released during a weeklong cease-fire. Some of the hostages have described being groped or mistreated by their captors.

Sulitzeanu says the purpose of the report was to document how the sexual violence was similar across multiple sites, indicating it was organized and directed by Hamas.

The association represents multiple rape crisis centers across Israel.

Can a healthier plant-based burger combat falling US sales? Beyond Meat hopes so

By DEE-ANN DURBIN AP Business Writer

Beyond Meat is revamping its signature plant-based burger, hoping that healthier ingredients will help it boost flagging U.S. sales.

The El Segundo, California-based company said Wednesday its new Beyond Burger patties and Beyond Beef grounds cut saturated fat by 60% by switching from canola and coconut oils to avocado oil. The new beef products also have less sodium and more protein.

The new products go on sale in the U.S. this spring.

Beyond Meat has updated its products before; this is the fourth generation of the Beyond Burger. But Beyond Meat Founder and CEO Ethan Brown said this is the biggest leap forward the brand has made since the Beyond Burger went on sale in 2016.

Brown said the company spent years developing the new recipe with input from nutritionists and doctors, trying to provide the benefits of plant-based eating in a burger that mimics the taste and texture of animal meat.

"Health is one of the top drivers to the plant-based meat category, and we feel a deep responsibility to deliver on that expectation for the consumer," Brown told The Associated Press.

Beyond Meat is also under pressure to reverse declining U.S. sales. In the first nine months of 2023, the company's U.S. revenue dropped 34% on weak consumer demand. The company said in November it was cutting 19% of its workforce and considering cutting some products, like jerky, and reducing its

operations in China.

Beyond Meat's sales have been rising in Europe, where it sells burgers and nuggets at McDonald's. In the first nine months of last year, its international revenue rose 17%. But that hasn't been enough to offset the U.S. losses. McDonald's has tested Beyond Meat burgers in the U.S. but hasn't made them a permanent menu item.

Inflation is one reason U.S. buyers turned to cheaper sources of protein in recent years. But U.S. consumers' doubts about the health of plant-based meat – fed partly by advertising from the meat industry – has also been a consistent problem. The outgoing Beyond Burger contains 25% of the recommended daily intake of saturated fat, for example, and 17% of the recommended intake of sodium.

The new Beyond Burger significantly improves that health profile. It has 2 grams of saturated fat, or 10% of the recommended daily intake, and 14% of the recommended intake of sodium. A single patty has 230 calories, which is the same as the outgoing burger.

For comparison, a Kroger-brand 80/20 beef patty has less sodium but 9 grams of saturated fat — or 45% of the recommended intake — and 290 calories. The new Beyond Burger also has less saturated fat and sodium and than its chief plant-based rival, Impossible Foods' Impossible Burger.

Beyond Meat – which has always used pea protein to make its burgers -- added lentils, rice and faba beans to the new burger to improve chewiness and boost protein. The burgers now have 21 grams of protein, compared to 19 grams of protein in both the 80/20 beef patty and the Impossible Burger.

Beyond Meat's shares rose nearly 4% in morning trading Wednesday. The company reports its full-year 2023 earnings on Feb. 27.

Alexei Navalny's mother files lawsuit with a Russian court demanding release of her son's body

By The Associated Press undefined

The mother of Russian opposition leader Alexei Navalny has filed a lawsuit at a court in the Arctic city of Salekhard contesting officials' refusal to release her son's body, Russia's state news agency Tass reported Wednesday.

A closed-door hearing has been scheduled for March 4, the report said, quoting court officials.

Lyudmila Navalnaya has been trying to retrieve her son's body since Saturday, following his death in a penal colony in Russia's far north a day earlier. She has been unable to find out where his body is being held, Navalny's team reported.

On Wednesday, Navalnaya laid flowers and a picture of her son at a monument dedicated to journalists in Salekhard, close to the prison where Navalny died. Floral tributes that Navalnaya had left a day earlier at the town's memorial to the victims of repression had been cleared away overnight, while several police officers continued to keep watch close to the monument.

Navalnaya appealed to Russian President Vladimir Putin Tuesday to release her son's remains so that she could bury him with dignity.

"For the fifth day, I have been unable to see him. They wouldn't release his body to me. And they're not even telling me where he is," a black-clad Navalnaya, 69, said in the video, with the barbed wire of Penal Colony No. 3 in Kharp, about 1,900 kilometers (1,200 miles) northeast of Moscow.

"I'm reaching out to you, Vladimir Putin. The resolution of this matter depends solely on you. Let me finally see my son. I demand that Alexei's body is released immediately, so that I can bury him like a human being," she said in the video, which was posted to social media by Navalny's team.

Russian authorities have said the cause of Navalny's death is still unknown and refused to release his body for the next two weeks as the preliminary inquest continues, members of Navalny's team said.

They accused the government of stalling to try to hide evidence. On Monday, Navalny's widow, Yulia, released a video accusing Putin of killing her husband and alleged the refusal to release his body was part of a cover-up.

"They are cowardly and meanly hiding his body, refusing to give it to his mother and lying miserably," she said.

Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov rejected the allegations of a cover-up, telling reporters that "these are absolutely unfounded, insolent accusations about the head of the Russian state."

Navalny's death has deprived the Russian opposition of its best-known and inspiring politician less than a month before an election that is all but certain to give Putin another six years in power. Many Russians had seen Navalny as a rare hope for political change amid Putin's unrelenting crackdown on the opposition.

Since Navalny's death, about 400 people have been detained across in Russia as they tried to pay tribute to him with flowers and candles, according to OVD-Info, a group that monitors political arrests. Authorities cordoned off some of the memorials to victims of Soviet repression across the country that were being used as sites to leave makeshift tributes to Navalny. Police removed the flowers at night, but more keep appearing.

Several men who were detained at memorials to Navalny were also ordered to report to their local army recruitment office, where Russian authorities are actively recruiting volunteer soldiers and updating records of men eligible for service, according to Go by the Forest, an activist group helping Russians to avoid military service.

Peskov said police were acting "in accordance with the law" by detaining people paying tribute to Navalny.

Over 75,000 people have submitted requests to the government asking for Navalny's remains to be handed over to his relatives, OVD-Info said.

UN top court shouldn't urge Israel to immediately withdraw from Palestinian-claimed lands, US says

By MIKE CORDER Associated Press

THE HAGUE, Netherlands (AP) — The United States said Wednesday the United Nations' top court should not issue an advisory opinion that says Israel should "immediately and unconditionally withdraw" from territories sought for a Palestinian state.

Acting State Department legal adviser Richard Visek said the 15-judge panel at the International Court of Justice should not seek to resolve the decades-long Israeli-Palestinian conflict "through an advisory opinion addressed to questions focusing on the acts of only one party."

Visek spoke on the third day of hearings at the court into a request by the General Assembly for a non-binding advisory opinion on the legality of Israel's policies in the occupied territories.

He said the court "can address the questions before it within the established framework based on the land for peace principle and within the parameters of established principles of occupation law."

Visek added that the court's opinion "will have consequences for the parties to the conflict and for the ongoing efforts of all of those working to achieve a durable peace."

Earlier this week, Palestinian Foreign Minister Riad Malki called on the court to uphold the Palestinian right to self-determination and declare "that the Israeli occupation is illegal and must end immediately, totally and unconditionally."

The idea of land for peace has been the cornerstone of U.S.-led diplomacy for decades and was the basis of the Camp David Accords between Israel and Egypt, in which Israel withdrew from the Sinai Peninsula in return for peace and recognition.

The same principle has been applied to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, but the peace process has repeatedly stalled because of Palestinian attacks, Israel's expansion of settlements in occupied territory, and the inability of the two sides to agree on thorny issues like final borders, the status of Jerusalem and the fate of Palestinian refugees.

The U.S. arguments at the world court came a day after Washington vetoed an Arab-backed and widely supported U.N. resolution demanding an immediate humanitarian cease-fire of the Israel-Hamas war in the embattled Gaza Strip, saying it would interfere with negotiations on a deal to free hostages held by

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militant Palestinian group Hamas.

The vote in the 15-member Security Council was 13-1, with the United Kingdom abstaining. It reflected the strong support from countries around the globe for ending the war, which started when Hamas militants invaded southern Israel on Oct. 7, killing about 1,200 people and taking nearly 250 others hostage. Since then, more than 29,000 Palestinians have been killed in Israel's retaliatory military offensive, according to the Gaza Health Ministry, which says the vast majority were women and children.

"Hamas's attacks, hostage-taking and other atrocities, the ongoing hostilities and the suffering of Palestinians in Gaza and the violence in the West Bank reinforce the United States resolve to urgently achieve a final peace that includes the full realization of Palestinian self-determination," Vissek said.

Vissek's comments were preceded Wednesday by condemnations of Israel's policies by representatives of Colombia, Cuba and Egypt. Along with the Palestinians, a total of 51 nations and three international organizations are scheduled to speak at the hearings. The court will likely take months to issue its non-binding advisory opinion.

The Palestinians argue that Israel's open-ended military occupation has violated the prohibition on territorial conquest and the Palestinians' right to self-determination, and has imposed a system of racial discrimination and apartheid.

On Tuesday, South Africa argued that Israel's policies amount to apartheid against the Palestinians and that Israel's occupation of land sought for a Palestinian state is "inherently and fundamentally illegal." Israel rejects such claims.

In a written submission filed last year, Israel argued that the questions put to the court are prejudiced, ignore "Israel's right and duty to protect its citizens," fail to address Israeli security concerns or acknowledge past agreements with the Palestinians to negotiate "the permanent status of the territory, security arrangements, settlements, and borders."

Israel captured the West Bank, east Jerusalem and the Gaza Strip in the 1967 Mideast war. The Palestinians seek all three areas for an independent state. Israel considers the West Bank to be a disputed territory and says its future should be decided in negotiations.

Israel has also built settlements across the West Bank, many of which resemble fully developed suburbs and small towns. The settlements are home to more than 500,000 Jewish settlers, while around 3 million Palestinians live in the territory. The international community overwhelmingly considers the settlements to be illegal.

Israel has also annexed east Jerusalem, home to the city's most sensitive holy sites, and considers the entire city to be its capital. The annexation is not internationally recognized.

Today in History:

February 22, US hockey team beats USSR in 'Miracle on Ice'

By The Associated Press undefined

Today in History

Today is Thursday, Feb. 22, the 53rd day of 2024. There are 313 days left in the year.

Today's Highlight in History:

On Feb. 22, 1980, the "Miracle on Ice" took place in Lake Placid, New York, as the United States Olympic hockey team upset the Soviets, 4-3. (The U.S. team went on to win the gold medal.)

On this date:

In 1630, English colonists in the Massachusetts Bay Colony first sampled popcorn brought to them by a Native American named Quadequina for their Thanksgiving celebration.

In 1732, the first president of the United States, George Washington, was born in Westmoreland County in the Virginia Colony.

In 1784, a U.S. merchant ship, the Empress of China, left New York for the Far East to trade goods with China.

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In 1935, it became illegal for airplanes to fly over the White House.

In 1959, the inaugural Daytona 500 race was held; although Johnny Beauchamp was initially declared the winner, the victory was later awarded to Lee Petty.

In 1967, more than 25,000 U.S. and South Vietnamese troops launched Operation Junction City, aimed at smashing a Vietcong stronghold near the Cambodian border. (Although the communists were driven out, they later returned.)

In 1987, pop artist Andy Warhol died at a New York City hospital at age 58.

In 1997, scientists in Scotland announced they had succeeded in cloning an adult mammal, producing a lamb named "Dolly." (Dolly, however, was later put down after a short life marred by premature aging and disease.)

In 2010, Najibullah Zazi (nah-jee-BOO'-lah ZAH'-zee), accused of buying beauty supplies to make bombs for an attack on New York City subways, pleaded guilty to charges including conspiring to use weapons of mass destruction. (Zazi faced up to life in prison but spent nearly a decade after his arrest helping the U.S. identify and prosecute terrorists; he was given a 10-year sentence followed by supervised release.)

In 2016, the City Council of Charlotte, North Carolina, voted 7-4 to pass a new law allowing transgender people to choose public bathrooms that corresponded to their gender identity.

In 2017, the Trump administration lifted federal guidelines that said transgender students should be allowed to use public school bathrooms and locker rooms matching their chosen gender identity.

In 2020, Bernie Sanders scored a resounding win in Nevada's presidential caucuses, cementing his status as the Democrats' front-runner.

In 2021, the number of U.S. deaths from COVID-19 topped 500,000, according to Johns Hopkins University.

Today's birthdays: Actor Paul Dooley is 96. Actor James Hong is 95. Actor John Ashton is 76. Actor Miou-Miou is 74. Actor Julie Walters is 74. Basketball Hall of Famer Julius Erving is 74. Actor Ellen Greene is 73. Former Sen. Bill Frist, R-Tenn., is 72. Former White House adviser David Axelrod is 69. Actor Kyle MacLachlan is 65. World Golf Hall of Famer Vijay Singh is 61. Actor-comedian Rachel Dratch is 58. Actor Paul Lieberstein is 57. Actor Jeri Ryan is 56. Actor Thomas Jane is 55. TV host Clinton Kelly is 55. Actor Tamara Mello is 54. Actor-singer Lea Salonga is 53. Actor Jose Solano is 53. International Tennis Hall of Famer Michael Chang is 52. Rock musician Scott Phillips is 51. Singer James Blunt is 50. Actor Drew Barrymore is 49. Actor Liza Huber is 49. Rock singer Tom Higgenson (Plain White T's) is 45. Rock musician Joe Hottinger (Halestorm) is 42. Actor Zach Roerig is 39.