

Groton Daily Independent

Friday, Feb. 23, 2023 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 242 ~ 1 of 60

- [1- Upcoming Events](#)
- [2- 1440 News Headlines](#)
- [3- Region 1A Girls' Basketball](#)
- [4- Groton Township Notice of Annual Meeting](#)
- [5- Legislators from Rosebud Sioux Tribe Release Statements About Flag](#)
- [6- Boys Basketball information for today's game](#)
- [7- SD Search Light: Out-of-staters will pay more to title a vehicle if governor signs bill passed by lawmakers](#)
- [7- SD Search Light: West River lawmakers want state cash to prevent East River-level pollution in Black Hills waters](#)
- [9- SD Search Light: Legislators seek health care workforce report to address impending shortage](#)
- [10- Weather Pages](#)
- [14- Daily Devotional](#)
- [15- Subscription Form](#)
- [16- Lottery Numbers](#)
- [17- News from the Associated Press](#)



*“For every mountain
there is a miracle.”*

ROBERT H. SCHULLER

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.

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.

Groton Daily Independent

PO Box 34, Groton SD 57445

Paul's Cell/Text: 605-397-7460

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.

Monday, Feb. 26

Senior Menu: Chicken tetrazzini, carrots, pineapple tidbits, bread stick.

School Breakfast: Pancake on stick.

School Lunch: Pork chops, peas.

Senior Citizens Meet at the Groton Community Center with potluck at noon.

Planning and Zoning Board Meeting, 6 p.m.

Pantry Open 11 a.m. to 3 p.m.

Emmanuel Lutheran: Bible Study, 6:30 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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Groton Daily Independent

Friday, Feb. 23, 2023 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 242 ~ 2 of 60

1440

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The US has warned Russia not to deploy nuclear weapons in space, noting it would violate a 1967 treaty that bars weapons of mass destruction in space. It marks the first indication of the Biden administration's approach to Rep. Mike Turner's (R, OH-10) warning last week alluding to a "serious national security threat."

The Odysseus spacecraft successfully reached the lunar surface yesterday, becoming the first-ever private-sector mission to land on the moon while remaining operational. Its arrival also represents the first US-built spacecraft to land on the moon in more than 50 years, following the final Apollo mission in 1972.

Daytime talk show host Wendy Williams has been diagnosed with primary progressive aphasia and frontotemporal dementia, according to her representatives. Williams, 59, was diagnosed last year and currently resides in an undisclosed care facility.

Sports, Entertainment, & Culture

Vice Media, which filed for bankruptcy protection in May 2023, announces it will stop publishing content on its news site Vice.com and plans to cut hundreds of jobs.

Yale becomes second Ivy League university to reverse pandemic-era test-optional policy, will require submission of standardized test scores for admission.

Tiger Woods' son Charlie, 15, falls short in pre-qualifying event for next week's Cognizant Classic, failing in bid to qualify for his first PGA Tour event.

Science & Technology

AT&T network experiences hourslong outage across the US, cause remains unclear as of this writing; an estimated 70,000 people affected, less than 1% of the network's estimated 100 million people serviced.

Researchers discover antibody capable of neutralizing venom from a wide variety of snake species across the globe; discovery may lead to universal antidote for snakebites.

New advanced CRISPR tool edits strands of short-lived RNA instead of DNA, allowing gene editing without the risk of causing permanent errors in a cell's genetic code.

Business & Markets

US stock markets close higher (S&P 500 +2.1%, Dow +1.2%, Nasdaq +3.0%), S&P 500 hits another high after Nvidia's blockbuster earnings report Wednesday; Nvidia rises 16%. Japan's Nikkei stock index breaks 1989 record, closing at all-time high of over 39,000. Europe's benchmark Stoxx 600 index closes at all-time high.

Reddit files to list initial public offering on New York Stock Exchange, invites power users to invest; company's market debut is expected in March and will mark the first major tech IPO of the year. Reddit strikes \$60M deal allowing Google to train AI models on the online discussion site.

Vaccine-maker Moderna shares rise 15% after company reports better-than-expected quarterly profit despite decline in sales of its COVID-19 vaccine.

Politics & World Affairs

Israel agrees to resend negotiators to participate in Qatar-mediated cease-fire talks to pause fighting in the Gaza Strip; meeting comes ahead of a multilateral weekend summit in Paris. Gaza death toll nears 30,000 according to the Hamas-run Health Ministry; see updates on the war here.

State appeals court rules New York law allowing green card-holding noncitizens to vote in local elections unconstitutional. Texas judge finds Houston-area high school dress code, which resulted in a student's suspension over the length of his dreadlocks, did not violate state law; case gained national attention beginning in August.

Mexican President Andrés Manuel López Obrador publicly releases address of local New York Times bureau, following report by the paper US officials had investigated his potential ties with drug cartels.

Groton Daily Independent

Friday, Feb. 23, 2023 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 242 ~ 3 of 60

Region 1A Girls' Basketball

Roncalli advances to SoDak16

Aberdeen Roncalli won the Region 1A semifinal game Thursday night with a 44-35 win. The game was played at Aberdeen Roncalli. Groton Area girls finish the season 14-8.

Roncalli got the early lead with an intense crowd giving the Lady Cavaliers the momentum as Clare Crawford and Ava Hanson each hit a three-pointer. Sydney Leicht hit a buzzer beater three-pointer to cut Roncalli's lead to five at 16-11 at the end of the first quarter.

Groton Area closed to within two at 18-16 and 25-23 in the second quarter and Roncalli had a 27-23 lead at half time. Roncalli outscored Groton Area, 7-6, in the third third quarter to lead, 34-29 at the end of the third quarter. The Cavaliers opened up an 11-point lead in the fourth quarter, 41-31 and would go on for the win.

Sydney Leicht had three three-pointers and led the Tigers with 10 points and one rebound. Jaedyn Penning had 10 points, five rebounds, one assist and two steals. Jerica Locke had one three-pointer, ending with eight points, seven rebounds, one assist and one steal. Kennedy. Hansen had four points, one assist and one steal. Rylee Dunker had two points, four rebounds and one steal. Faith Traphagen had one point, two rebounds and one steal. Brooklyn Hansen had one assist and Laila Roberts and Taryn Traphagen each had one rebound.

Groton Area made just two of 22 fields in the second half



Rylee Dunker easily outjumps Roncalli's Ava Hanson for the opening tip off. (Photo by Paul Kosel)

and finished the game making 26 percent of its field goals while Roncalli was 16 of 34 for 47 percent. In two-pointers, Groton Area was eight of 27 for 30 percent, four of 18 in three-pointers for 22 percent, seven of 13 from the line for 54 percent, had 21 rebounds, 12 turnovers, four assists, six steals and 16 team fouls.

Maddie Huber and Ava Hanson each had 11 points for Roncalli while McKenna O'Keefe and Camryn Bain each had seven points, Claire Crawford had six points and Gabby Thomas added two points.

The Cavaliers had 16 turnovers and 18 team fouls.



The GHS cheerleaders were in full force at the game Thursday night at Aberdeen Roncalli. (Photo by Paul Kosel)

Groton Daily Independent

Friday, Feb. 23, 2023 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 242 ~ 4 of 60

Roncalli will advance to the SoDak16 with a 19-3 record.

The game was broadcast live on GDILIVE.COM, sponsored by Bary Keith at Harr Motors, BK Custom Ts & More, Blocker Construction, Dacotah Bank, Dan Richardt from Groton Ford, Farmers Union Coop, Groton Ag Partners, Groton Chamber, Groton Chiropractic Clinic, 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 MeatHouse, Witte Exteriors LLC. Shane Clark did the play-by-play assisted by Paul Kosel and Jeslyn Kosel ran the camera.

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

Legislators from Rosebud Sioux Tribe Release Statements About Flag

Democratic Representative Eric Emery and Senator Shawn Bordeaux released the following statements after the Rosebud Sioux Tribal Council said it wants their flag to be removed from the State Capitol.

Rep. Eric Emery (District 26A)

"As the elected representative of South Dakota District 26A, I am deeply committed to advocating for the rights and dignity of the Sicangu Oyate (Rosebud Sioux Tribe). Their demand for the return of their tribal flag from the custody of the State of South Dakota and Governor Kristi Noem is not just a matter of administrative procedure, it is a fundamental assertion of their sovereignty and identity. The Sicangu Oyate's flag is not merely a piece of cloth but a sacred emblem embodying their heritage, sovereignty, and collective identity. It is a testament to their resilience in the face of historical injustices and serves as a beacon of the wisdom passed down through generations. Its return is an act of respect and a crucial acknowledgment of their autonomy and self-determination as a sovereign nation.

"I believe swift and decisive action, grounded in mutual respect and understanding, is necessary to address this issue. The dialogue between the Sicangu Oyate and the South Dakota government must be characterized by openness, empathy, and a genuine commitment to reconciling past injustices. It is imperative that Governor Noem and the State of South Dakota heed the voice of the Sicangu Oyate and engage in meaningful negotiations toward a resolution that upholds their dignity and rights.

"I am dedicated to amplifying the voices of the Sicangu Oyate and all constituents. I pledge to ensure that their concerns are heard and acted upon. Upholding justice and equity, especially for historically marginalized communities like the Sicangu Oyate, is not just a duty but a moral imperative.

"In an era where cultural sensitivity and reconciliation are paramount, it is incumbent upon all of us to honor the requests of Indigenous communities and work towards understanding and solidarity. Let us stand in solidarity with the Sicangu Oyate in their pursuit of justice and dignity and work together to restore their flag. By doing so, we pave a path towards a future where the rights and aspirations of all Indigenous peoples are not only respected but celebrated.

"The return of the Sicangu Oyate's flag is a symbolic gesture that carries profound significance. It is a tangible expression of their sovereignty and self-determination, having centuries of tradition and history within it. Its restoration is a step towards healing the wounds of the past and forging a path toward a more just and equitable future.

"As we embark on this journey towards reconciliation, it is essential that we center the voices and experiences of Indigenous communities. We must listen with open hearts and minds, acknowledging past injustices and committing ourselves to building a more inclusive and equitable society.

"In conclusion, I urge Governor Noem and the State of South Dakota to heed the call of the Sicangu Oyate and engage in sincere dialogue toward a resolution. Let us honor the requests of Indigenous communities and stand in solidarity with them as we work towards a future where all peoples are treated with dignity, respect, and equality."

Sen. Shawn Bordeaux (District 26)

"I can totally understand how the Rosebud Sioux Tribe was offended by the Governor's comments regarding reservations being sanctuaries for cartels coming across the border," said Sen. Bordeaux. "Removing their flag from the Capitol shows how gravely offended the tribe's elected leadership is of the comments. I suggest we find a better way to communicate with tribal leaders."

Groton Daily Independent

Friday, Feb. 23, 2023 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 242 ~ 6 of 60

We will be livestreaming the junior varsity and varsity game today on GDILIVE.COM. If anyone is interested in sponsoring the seventh grade game, text Paul at 605-397-7460. It is \$25. Sue Gerlach is sponsoring the junior varsity game today.

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



SOUTH DAKOTA SEARCHLIGHT

<https://southdakotasearchlight.com>

Out-of-staters will pay more to title a vehicle if governor signs bill passed by lawmakers

BY: JOSHUA HAIAR - FEBRUARY 22, 2024 3:57 PM

Tens of thousands of out-of-staters title their vehicles in South Dakota, because it's cheaper and easier. "This has resulted in South Dakota becoming a haven for non-residents that choose to avoid higher taxes and fees, vehicle emissions inspections, or to get a title that their home state would not be able to issue to that particular individual," said Rep. Roger Chase, R-Huron.

He is the prime House sponsor of a bill aiming to charge non-residents an extra \$100 fee. It earned its final legislative approval Thursday when the House of Representatives passed it 59-10 and sent it to the governor for her consideration.

Non-residents currently pay the same amount as residents, said Chase.

Another reason people choose to title their vehicles in South Dakota is the lack of safety inspections, according to Rosa Yaeger, director of the South Dakota Motor Vehicle Division. She testified when the bill went before the Senate Transportation Committee and said non-residents are creating burdensome work for staff already busy helping residents.

Half of the revenue from the extra \$100 fee for non-residents would go to the county in which the vehicle is registered, and the other half would go to the state. Chase said the additional revenue could help departments hire more staff.

To avoid the \$100 charge, people would need to have a South Dakota identification card or a physical address in the state.

As of 2018, more than 58,000 vehicles with out-of-state addresses were registered in South Dakota.

Joshua Haiar is a reporter based in Sioux Falls. Born and raised in Mitchell, he joined the Navy as a public affairs specialist after high school and then earned a degree from the University of South Dakota. Prior to joining South Dakota Searchlight, Joshua worked for five years as a multimedia specialist and journalist with South Dakota Public Broadcasting.

West River lawmakers want state cash to prevent East River-level pollution in Black Hills waters

BY: JOHN HULT - FEBRUARY 22, 2024 1:16 PM

PIERRE – Water quality advocates want lawmakers to pump \$5 million into the creation of a Black Hills watershed program that would prevent its streams from turning out as polluted as those in eastern South Dakota.

House Bill 1235 came from Rep. Scott Odenbach, R-Spearfish, and Sen. Red Dawn Foster, D-Pine Ridge. Its impetus is a lack of coordinated watershed protection efforts in the west, Odenbach said Wednesday, and a recognition that South Dakota "has a lot of work to do" to address pollution.

Odenbach cited the most recent Integrated Water Quality Report, produced biennially by the state Department of Agriculture and Natural Resources to ensure continued access to federal clean water funding. In 2022, 78% of the state's water bodies were listed as "impaired" for one or more of their beneficial uses, such as recreation, wildlife habitat or drinking water.

Groton Daily Independent

Friday, Feb. 23, 2023 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 242 ~ 8 of 60

Institutions like the East Dakota Water Development District dispense grant funding for watershed protection and pollution mitigation, the Spearfish Republican told the Joint Appropriations Committee, directing money to projects specific to certain watersheds. The northern Black Hills has no comparable organization to coordinate efforts for its own waters. The West Dakota Water Development District covers a portion of the central Black Hills in Pennington County.

A monetary spur for the creation of a northern Black Hills watershed protection program from the Department of Agriculture and Natural Resources is needed sooner rather than later, Odenbach said.

Polluted waters are more likely to be found in eastern South Dakota, according to the integrated report.

"I want to do this to get ahead of the explosion in development in the Black Hills," Odenbach said. "I want to have a program like they've had and done so well with in eastern South Dakota ... frankly, I don't want Spearfish Creek to look like the Big Sioux River."

Another supporter, Spearfish Republican Sen. Randy Deibert, told the committee that the west lacks the abundant water resources of eastern South Dakota. That makes the need for pollution control even more important, Deibert said.

"In most of the state, you have rivers. What we have are creeks," Deibert said.

Most water body impairment in eastern and western South Dakota is tied to "nonpoint source pollution," meaning pollution that flows from a variety of sources, rather than a single point like factories or a city's wastewater treatment plant. Point source pollution is regulated; nonpoint source pollution is not.

A good share of that nonpoint source pollution is tied to livestock waste, which flows into surface waters through runoff or is dropped directly by cattle standing in a creek.

In the east, that pollution has been tackled with cash, offered to livestock owners to fence off water bodies or to plant vegetated buffer strips to "clean" runoff on its way to the water.

Backers of HB 1235 would like to see similar efforts launched in the Black Hills. Eastern South Dakota started from behind with its mitigation efforts, which has made it difficult to move the needle for larger water bodies like the Big Sioux River.

"It's easier to keep something clean than it is to come in and clean it up after the fact," said Jay Gilbertson, manager of the East Dakota Water Development District.

The bill specifies that grants would be made available to encourage the placement of riparian buffers. Many waterways in the Black Hills are not impaired, and "we'd like to keep it that way," Gilbertson said.

Representatives from the Sierra Club and Izaak Walton League also testified in support of the bill, pointing to the importance of mitigation efforts, water quality testing and monitoring efforts in the preservation of the state's natural resources. Clean water is important to tourism, they noted, which represents a larger share of the West River economy.

"What you will find in many, many areas is that water bodies are tested extremely infrequently, if at all," said Guy Larson, lobbyist for the Sierra Club. That organization contributes data from the Yankton area to the state's water quality map.

Foster urged her fellow lawmakers to consider the importance of clean water in centuries-old Lakota ceremonial traditions as they ponder funding for pollution prevention.

As the west grows in population, Foster said, the state must move to protect the way of life that draws people, and to protect the traditions of its first residents.

"It is important, not only to the recreational, economic and environmental, but to the spiritual relationships that we have there," Foster said.

HB 1235 had no opponents, and questions from appropriators largely revolved around East River mitigation efforts and how they might translate to West River waters.

Appropriators deferred action on HB 1235.

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.

Legislators seek health care workforce report to address impending shortage

BY: MAKENZIE HUBER - FEBRUARY 22, 2024 10:53 AM

A resolution that would instruct the state Department of Health to issue a report on the state of South Dakota's health care workforce is sailing through the Legislature.

The resolution, recommended by a group of legislators that studied South Dakota's long-term care industry last summer, passed unanimously out of the House Health and Human Services Committee on Thursday before being placed on the House consent calendar. That means the resolution is likely to pass the House without debate.

As South Dakota's population ages, health care organizations and legislators recognize the need for a bolstered health care workforce, especially nurses, to handle increased demand for services.

Brookings Republican Rep. Mellissa Heermann, who sat on the summer study committee, said such data would have been instrumental in recommending legislation to help sustain the long-term care industry in South Dakota.

"In a few conversations we just butted up against a wall, just needing more information and not wanting to make strategic decisions on assumptions. So I think this will be incredibly valuable," Heermann said.

The report would require the health department to analyze recruitment metrics, educational programs, demographic information and projections, migration data, and other information to identify patterns, gaps and opportunities for strengthening the state's health care workforce.

It would include data on nurses, physicians, physical therapists and chiropractors — any health care profession that has a state oversight board, said Sen. Jean Hunhoff, R-Yankton, who carried the resolution in the Senate and chaired the summer study committee.

While the resolution only requires a report be submitted to the Legislature and governor by December, Hunhoff said the plan is to continue the report annually. Reports on Indiana's health care industry serve as the inspiration for South Dakota's effort.

The Department of Health will absorb the cost of developing this year's report, but the Legislature might have to appropriate money for it in the future, Hunhoff added.

"I'm just asking that we start collecting the right data so that as we're making our decisions on requests from health care providers ... we have that concrete data to present to all of you," Hunhoff said. "Then, you'd feel much better in making a decision on how we expend those dollars."

Lobbyists representing health care organizations supported the resolution. The state Department of Health did not testify, and there were no opponents.

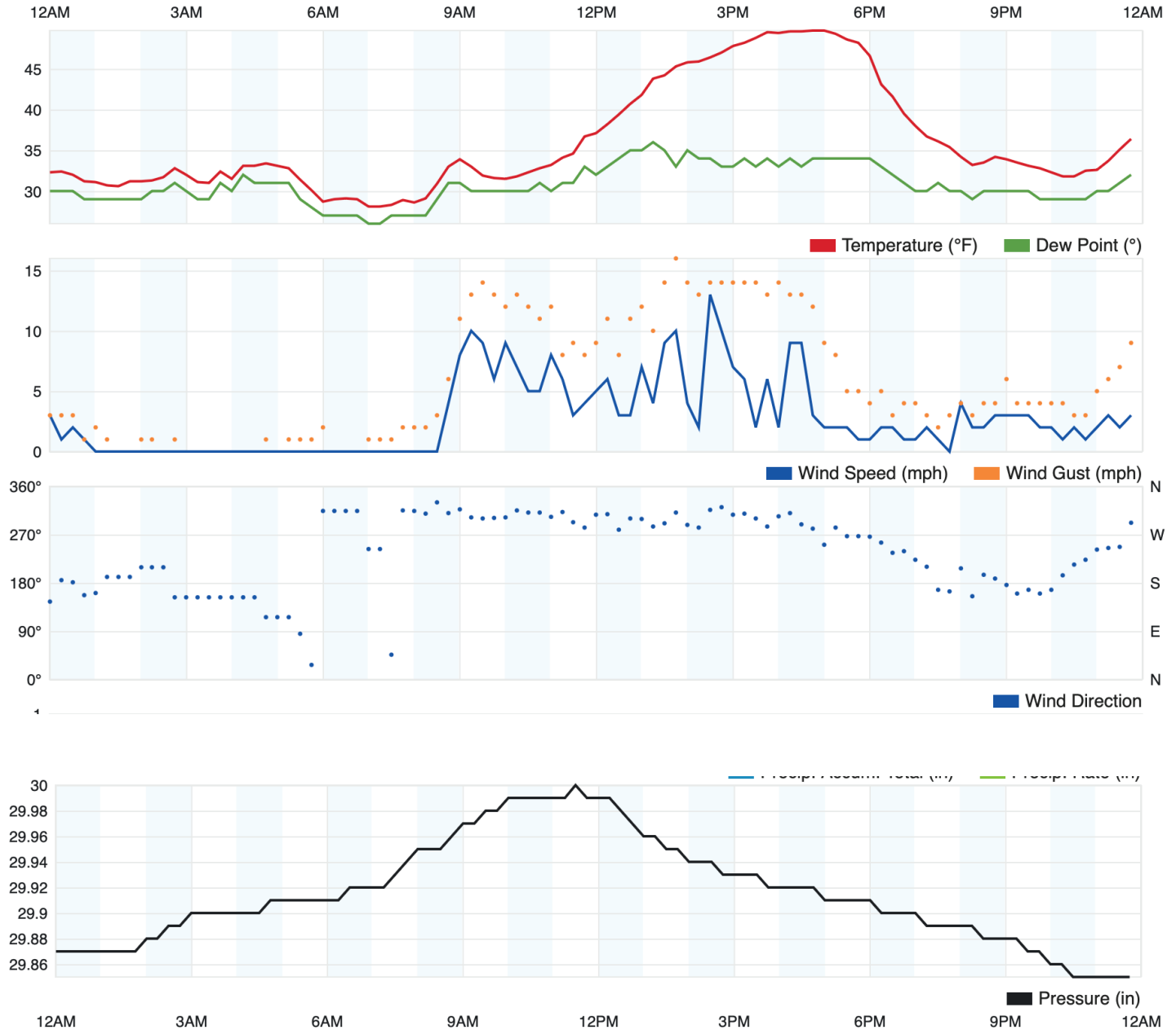
"It'll be profound once we have all that information," said Tim Rave, president and CEO of the South Dakota Association of Healthcare Organizations. "We'll bring all of that information together in one house and then we can have a very comprehensive overview of where we're at in this state and our challenges."

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

Groton Daily Independent

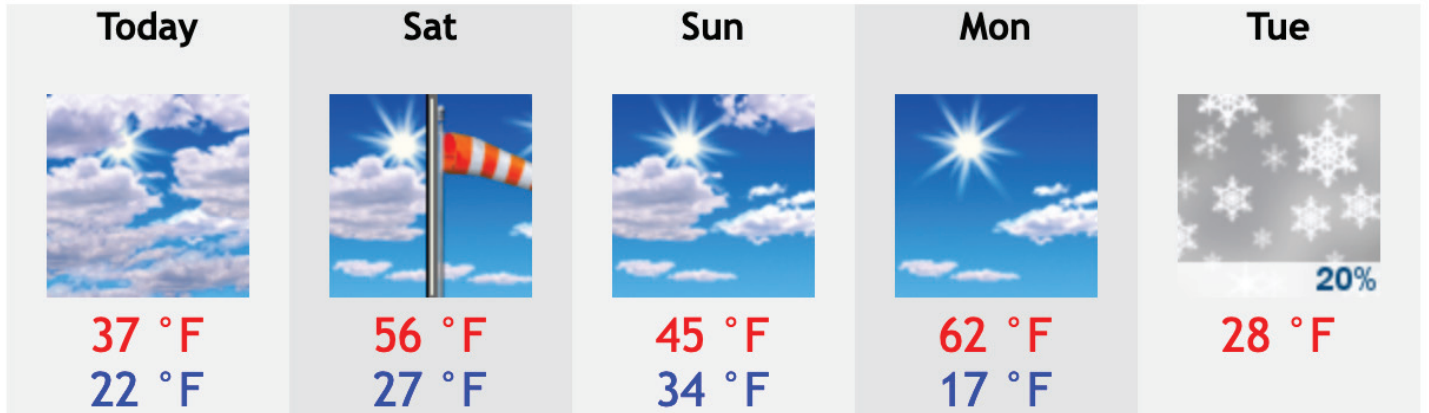
Friday, Feb. 23, 2023 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 242 ~ 10 of 60

Yesterday's Groton Weather Graphs

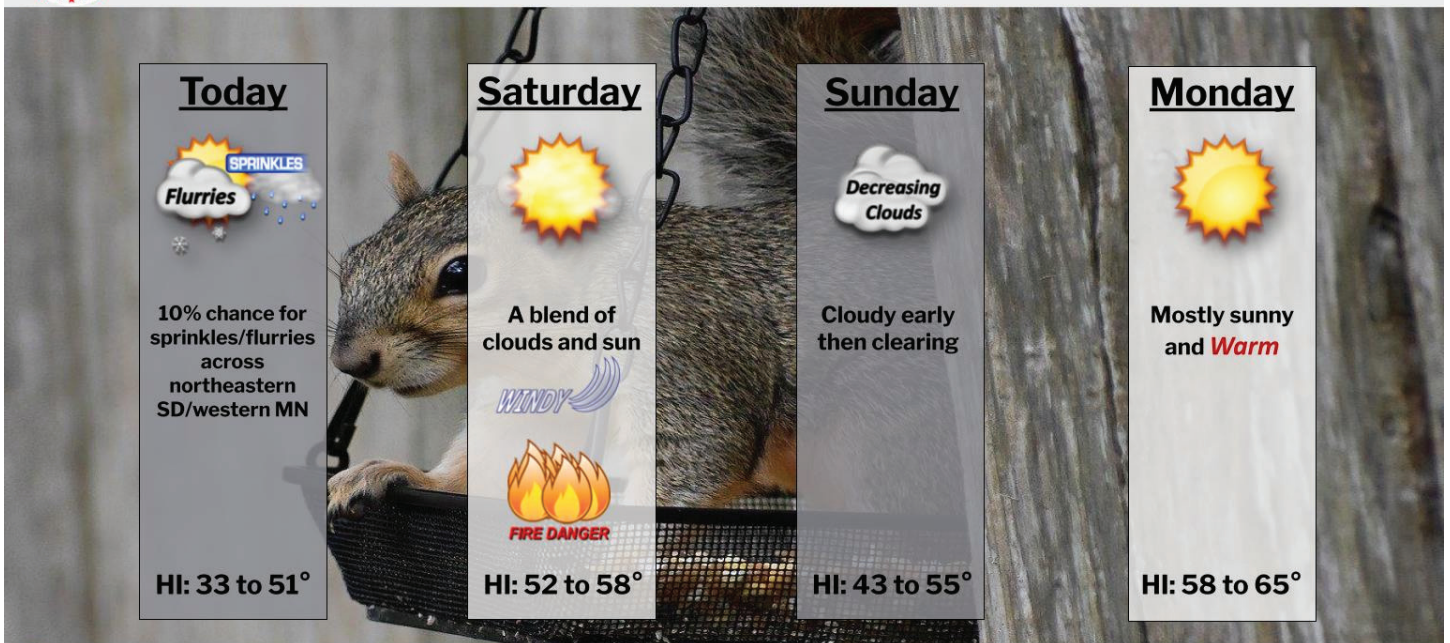


Groton Daily Independent

Friday, Feb. 23, 2023 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 242 ~ 11 of 60



4-Day Forecast February 23, 2024 5:07 AM



National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration
U.S. Department of Commerce

National Weather Service
Aberdeen, SD

A passing cold front plunging south will bring isolated (10%) flurries/sprinkles across parts of northeastern SD into west central MN today. Wind gusts of 35-45 mph are expected across the forecast area Saturday afternoon into the evening. With the gusty winds and overall a snow-free ground, there is an increased risk for fire concerns, mainly from north central to south central SD. We see quite the warmup on Monday with highs in the 60s! (You read that right!) Near record to record temps are possible!

Groton Daily Independent

Friday, Feb. 23, 2023 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 242 ~ 12 of 60

Yesterday's Groton Weather

High Temp: 50 °F at 4:08 PM

Low Temp: 28 °F at 7:22 AM

Wind: 16 mph at 1:45 PM

Precip: : 0.00

Day length: 10 hours, 52 minutes

Today's Info

Record High: 60 in 1976

Record Low: -25 in 1910

Average High: 31

Average Low: 10

Average Precip in Feb.: 0.49

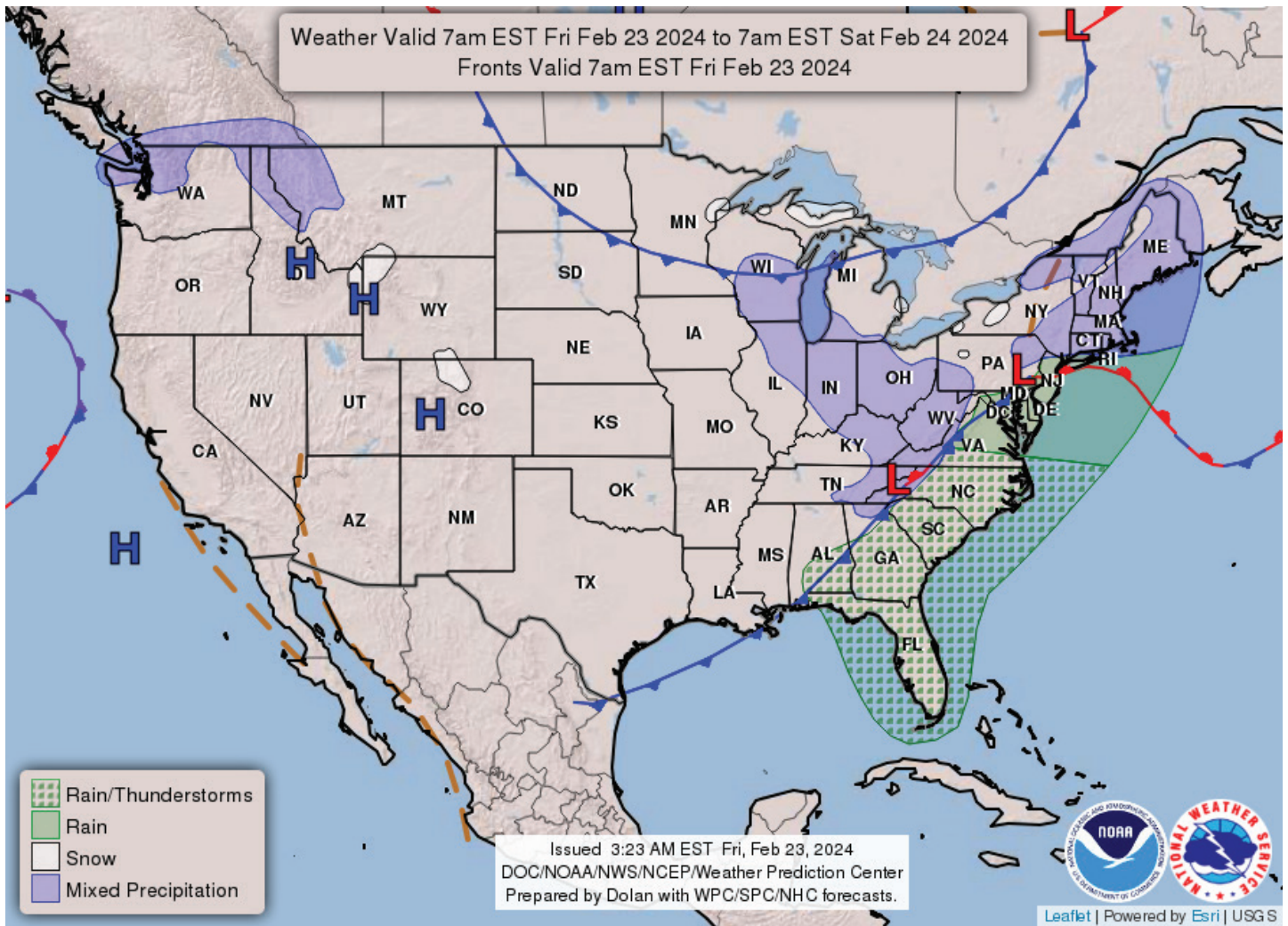
Precip to date in Feb.: 0.07

Average Precip to date: 1.04

Precip Year to Date: 0.07

Sunset Tonight: 6:11:45 pm

Sunrise Tomorrow: 7:18:02 am



Groton Daily Independent

Friday, Feb. 23, 2023 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 242 ~ 13 of 60

Today in Weather History

February 23, 1977: A storm center developed over Colorado the morning of the 22nd and moved to southeast Nebraska by midnight Wednesday the 23rd, with snow and rain entering southern Minnesota. The low-pressure center advanced to Iowa by sundown and weakened somewhat with precipitation across Minnesota. Snow fell over the north, and a combination of rain and freezing rain was in the south. The low then intensified over southeast Minnesota during the nighttime of Thursday the 24th before continuing northeast into Wisconsin with snow and blowing snow over much of the state before ending on the 26th. There was a combination of rain, freezing rain, and the winds over southern Minnesota, with 4 to 12 inches of snow in the north. Freezing rain and the heavy icing on power lines caused the worst power failure in a decade in the twin cities, with 125,000 homes affected. Power outages occurred over numerous areas of southern and central Minnesota. Many roads were ice-covered with multiple vehicle accidents and cars in the ditch. Many roads were blocked or closed, with numerous schools closed. The ice storm also damaged many trees.

February 23, 2007: A strong area of low pressure tracking across the central plains brought widespread snowfall to parts of central and much of northeast South Dakota along with west-central Minnesota. The precipitation initially began as freezing rain and sleet late in the evening of the 23rd as it lifted across the area through the morning of the 24th. The freezing rain and sleet then changed over to snow during the morning of the 24th. Thundersnow also occurred at some locations across the area. Snowfall amounts of 6 to 15 inches occurred by the end of the storm. Travel conditions became tough when the roads were slippery from the freezing rain and then the heavy snow. The South Dakota State Emergency Management, Highway Patrol, and Department of Transportation issued a travel advisory for no travel for Interstate-90 and many highways in central South Dakota. There were numerous accidents along the interstate. Some snowfall amounts included 7 inches at Browns Valley, 9 inches at Bryant, Webster, Wheaton, Artichoke Lake, and Tintah, 10 inches at Toronto, Roy Lake, Garden City, and Ortonville, 11 inches at Faulkton, 12 inches at Watertown, and 15 inches at Clear Lake.

February 23, 2010: Pierre sets a new record with a streak of 84 consecutive days with high temperatures failing to reach 40 degrees.

February 23, 2012: An area of low-pressure sliding across the region brought heavy snow to much of central and north-central South Dakota. As a result, travel became difficult, with many schools canceled.

1802 - A great snowstorm raged along the New England coast producing 48 inches of snow north of Boston. Three large ships from Salem were wrecked along Cape Cod. (David Ludlum)

1887: The Central Bureau of Meteorology of Rome began receiving the first reports of a massive earthquake from northern Italy Observers. The estimated magnitude earthquake of 6-7 killed at least 600 people in southern France and northern Italy.

1936 - A severe blizzard in the Sierra Nevada Range closed Donner Pass. It stranded 750 motorists and claimed seven lives. (David Ludlum)

1977: A rare February tornado touched down briefly in Mason City, Iowa, inflicting F1 damage on a home and injuring one person inside. This is the only known February tornado on record in Iowa.

1989 - Nineteen cities in the central U.S. reported new record low temperatures for the date, including Lincoln NE with a reading of 19 degrees below zero. (The National Weather Summary)

1990 - A fast moving storm produced near blizzard conditions in Michigan. Snowfall totals ranged up to 9.5 inches in Allegan County, wind gusts reached 74 mph at Ann Arbor, and five foot snow drifts were reported around Saginaw. The Michigan AAA records showed more than 5000 traffic accidents reported, a near record for one day. There were several chain reaction collisions. One near Pontiac involved a hundred cars. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

1995: Cyclone Bobby slams into the Western Australia coast, causing widespread flooding on February 23-24th, 1995. Some areas report up to 12 inches of rain from the storm.

Groton Daily Independent

Friday, Feb. 23, 2023 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 242 ~ 14 of 60

Daily Devotionals

Seeds of Hope

FROM TRIALS TO TRIUMPH

What do you do when you have a difficult time pleasing someone?

George Crum was the chef at a famous country club in Saratoga Springs, New York. One evening there was a guest who ordered fried potatoes to go with his meal. When his order of fries was served, he asked the waiter to return it to the kitchen saying they were too thick. This happened several times. Crum became frustrated. But he did not give up.

Challenged, he took his sharpest knife, sliced some potatoes wafer-thin, deep-fried them in boiling oil, and sprinkled salt on them. Then he had the waiter take them to the guest. The guest sampled them, smiled and decided to pass them around the table to his friends. Everyone enjoyed them and ordered more. The "potato chip" was born that evening and has become one of our favorite snacks.

There are times in all of our lives when people irritate us or bother us. It seems like nothing we do will ever please them or meet the standards they have set for us. No matter what we do or how hard we try, it is not going to be good enough. So, we are tempted to give up or quit. Paul said, "God causes all things to work together for our good." This includes the most painful problems and difficult demands of life. In all things we must trust Him, be willing to do our best, and leave the results to Him. He, not others, knows what is best for our lives.

Prayer: Thank You, Father, for giving us problems to solve and challenges to meet, so we can grow strong. Help us to be patient, to be polite, and to persevere. 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

Groton Daily Independent

Friday, Feb. 23, 2023 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 242 ~ 15 of 60

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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: 16 Hrs 41 Mins 2 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: 1 Days 15 Hrs 56 Mins 2 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

LUCKY FOR LIFE

WINNING NUMBERS:
02.22.24

2 4 6 34 47 8

TOP PRIZE:
\$7,000/week

NEXT DRAW: 16 Hrs 11 Mins 2 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

DAKOTA CASH

WINNING NUMBERS: 02.21.24

2 5 6 10 20

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:
\$20,000

NEXT DRAW: 1 Days 16 Hrs 11 Mins 2 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

POWERBALL

DOUBLE PLAY

WINNING NUMBERS: 02.21.24

23 49 51 54 58 11

TOP PRIZE:
\$10,000,000

NEXT DRAW: 1 Days 16 Hrs 40 Mins 2 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: 1 Days 16 Hrs 40 Mins 2 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

Groton Daily Independent

Friday, Feb. 23, 2023 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 242 ~ 17 of 60

News from the  Associated Press

Thursday's Scores

The Associated Press

BOYS PREP BASKETBALL

Brandon Valley 64, Huron 43

GIRLS PREP BASKETBALL

Brandon Valley 58, Huron 43

Hancock, Minn. 71, West Central 54

Harrisburg 71, Watertown 41

SDHSAA Playoffs=

Class A Region 1=

SODAK Qualifier=

Aberdeen Roncalli 44, Groton 35

Sisseton 64, Milbank 43

Class A Region 2=

SODAK Qualifier=

Flandreau 46, Sioux Valley 30

Florence-Henry 57, Hamlin 46

Class A Region 3=

SODAK Qualifier=

Sioux Falls Christian 71, West Central 54

Tri-Valley 48, Garretson 37

Class A Region 4=

SODAK Qualifier=

Tea 56, Elk Point-Jefferson 51

Vermillion 47, Lennox 42

Class A Region 5=

SODAK Qualifier=

Hanson 50, Parkston 40

Mt. Vernon/Plankinton 49, Wagner 28

Class A Region 6=

SODAK Qualifier=

Miller 43, McLaughlin 35

Mobridge-Pollock 56, Crow Creek Tribal School 39

Class A Region 7=

SODAK Qualifier=

Red Cloud, Neb. 75, Lakota Tech 27

Winner 61, Todd County 26

Class A Region 8=

SODAK Qualifier=

Belle Fourche 55, Rapid City Christian 45

Hill City 39, St Thomas More 35

Class B Region 1=

SODAK Qualifier=

Northwestern 49, Leola-Frederick High School 47

Warner 64, Britton-Hecla 31

Groton Daily Independent

Friday, Feb. 23, 2023 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 242 ~ 18 of 60

Class B Region 2=

SODAK Qualifier=

Arlington 64, Iroquois-Lake Preston 32

James Valley Christian 39, Deubrook 30

Class B Region 3=

SODAK Qualifier=

Colman-Egan 49, Howard 43

Ethan 70, Chester 53

Class B Region 4=

SODAK Qualifier=

Centerville 43, Viborg 35

Gayville-Volin High School 36, Freeman 34

Class B Region 5=

SODAK Qualifier=

Andes Central/Dakota Christian 54, Avon 39

Tripp-Delmont-Armour 53, Wessington Springs 49

Class B Region 6=

SODAK Qualifier=

Herreid-Selby 54, Highmore-Harrold 38

Lyman 69, Potter County 40

Class B Region 7=

SODAK Qualifier=

Kadoka 53, White River 50

Wall 68, Philip 22

Class B Region 8=

SODAK Qualifier=

Harding County 62, Timber Lake 26

Lemmon High School 50, Faith 39

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

Mims, Mayo power South Dakota State to 97-70 victory over Denver

By The Associated Press undefined

BROOKINGS, S.D. (AP) — Matthew Mims had 21 points, Zeke Mayo scored 20 and South Dakota State rolled to a 97-70 victory over Denver on Thursday night.

Mims shot 6 for 10 (4 for 7 from 3-point range) and 5 of 7 from the free-throw line for the Jackrabbits (16-12, 9-4 Summit League). Mayo made 6 of 14 shots and all eight of his free throws, adding five rebounds. Charlie Easley hit three 3-pointers and scored 15.

Touko Tainamo finished with 22 points to lead the Pioneers (15-14, 6-8). Tommy Bruner added 21 points and two steals. Jaxon Brenchley totaled 17 points and six rebounds.

Brown scores 27, Kansas City takes down South Dakota 82-78

By The Associated Press undefined

VERMILLION, S.D. (AP) — Jamar Brown had 27 points in Kansas City's 82-78 victory against South Dakota on Thursday night.

Brown also added five rebounds and six steals for the Roos (13-15, 7-6 Summit League). Khristion Courseault scored 22 points and added 10 assists. Cameron Faas shot 3 for 11, including 3 for 10 from beyond the arc to finish with 11 points, while adding three steals.

Kaleb Stewart finished with 25 points and four assists for the Coyotes (10-18, 3-10). Isaac Bruns added 13 points and three steals for South Dakota. Lahat Thioune also had 11 points and 10 rebounds.

GOP lawmakers try to thwart abortion rights ballot initiative in South Dakota

By JACK DURA Associated Press

PIERRE, S.D. (AP) — South Dakota's Republican-led Legislature is trying to thwart a proposed ballot initiative that would enable voters to protect abortion rights in the state constitution. The initiative's leader says the GOP efforts threaten the state's tradition of direct democracy.

Supporters need about 35,000 valid signatures submitted by May 7 to qualify for the November ballot. Dakotans for Health co-founder Rick Weiland said they already have more than 50,000.

Republican lawmakers say the language is too extreme and overwhelmingly adopted a resolution opposing the initiative after grilling Weiland during a committee hearing.

INITIATIVE WOULD ALLOW MOST ABORTIONS

South Dakota outlaws all abortions except to save the life of the mother under a trigger ban that took effect in 2022 after the U.S. Supreme Court overruled *Roe v. Wade*.

If voters approve it, the three-paragraph addition to the South Dakota Constitution would ban the state from regulating abortion in the first trimester and allow regulations for the second trimester "only in ways that are reasonably related to the physical health of the pregnant woman." The state could regulate or prohibit third-trimester abortions, "except when abortion is necessary, in the medical judgment of the woman's physician, to preserve the life or health of the pregnant woman."

"We looked at the rights that women had for 50 years under *Roe v. Wade*, basically took that language and used it in our amendment," Weiland said.

Seven states have had abortion-related ballot measures since the *Dobbs* decision, and voters favored abortion rights in all of them. Four of those -- in California, Michigan, Ohio and Vermont -- enshrined abortion rights in their constitutions.

WHAT HAS BEEN THE RESPONSE?

The South Dakota Legislature's resolution opposing the initiative says the measure "would severely restrict any future enactment of protections for a pregnant woman, her child, and her healthcare providers," and "would fail to protect human life, would fail to protect a pregnant woman, and would fail to protect the child she bears."

Republican House Majority Leader Will Mortenson said they approved the resolution to help the public by pointing out "some of the unintended or intended, maybe, consequences of the measure so that the public could see what it does in practical effect."

Republican Rep. Jon Hansen — who co-chairs the Life Defense Fund, formed to defeat the initiative — said its language goes too far and "bans reasonable, commonsense, bipartisan protections that this state has had in place for decades."

"When *Roe v. Wade* was the law of the land, we could at least have protections to say if there's going to be an abortion, it needs to be done by a physician, under a physician's supervision, in an inspected facility," Hansen said. "You can't have those protections in the first trimester of this proposed constitutional amendment. That's insane. That's way too extreme."

Weiland said the language conforms with *Roe v. Wade* and efforts to say otherwise are misleading and ill-informed.

Democratic House Minority Leader Oren Lesmeister said voters, not lawmakers, should decide. Democratic Senate Minority Leader Reynold Nesiba also supports the initiative.

The American Civil Liberties Union of South Dakota, however, is not supporting the initiative, telling its supporters in a December email that the language "isn't sufficient to restore abortion access in South Dakota."

TRYING TO REMOVE SIGNATURES

The South Dakota House on Tuesday passed a bill by Hansen that would allow signers of initiative petitions to withdraw their signatures. It now goes to the Senate.

Hansen said the bill is about people being misled or "fraudulently induced" to sign petitions. Weiland

Groton Daily Independent

Friday, Feb. 23, 2023 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 242 ~ 20 of 60

said Hansen's bill is an attack on direct democracy. Hansen said, "This is a right squarely in the hands of the person who signed; if they want to withdraw, they can withdraw."

Democratic lawmakers on Thursday brought up concerns about potential abuses and class-action lawsuits over signature removals. They said state laws already exist to ensure ballot initiatives are done properly.

A VIDEO FOR DOCTORS

The Senate will soon weigh a House-passed bill that would require the state Department of Health, which answers to Republican Gov. Kristi Noem, to create an informational video, with consultation from the state attorney general and legal and medical experts, describing how the state's abortion laws should be applied.

Republican Rep. Taylor Rehfeldt said she brought the bill to provide clarification after questions from providers about when they can intervene to save a pregnant woman's life. The purpose is to "just talk about women's health, what the law says and what the health care and legal professional opinions are, surrounding what our law currently says," Rehfeldt said.

Weiland said he is skeptical, not knowing what the video would include.

"Hopefully it's enough guidance for doctors to be able to make these medical decisions," he said.

EPA approves year-round sales of higher ethanol blend in 8 Midwest states

By SCOTT McFETRIDGE Associated Press

DES MOINES, Iowa (AP) — Drivers in eight Midwestern states will be able to fuel up with a higher blend of ethanol throughout the year under a final rule announced Thursday by the Environmental Protection Agency.

The biofuels industry and farming groups, with support of Midwest governors, sought the end of a summertime ban on sales of gasoline blended with 15% ethanol for years. The higher blend has been prohibited because of concerns it could worsen smog during warm weather.

The move reflects the importance of ethanol to agriculture. The fuel additive consumes roughly 40% of the nation's corn crop, so higher sales of ethanol could mean greater profits for corn farmers.

The rule, which takes effect in April 2025, will apply in Illinois, Iowa, Minnesota, Missouri, Nebraska, Ohio, South Dakota and Wisconsin. Those states grow the bulk of the U.S. corn crop and are home to much of the nation's ethanol production.

The EPA said it delayed implementation of the new rule because of concerns there wasn't enough supply to meet demand this summer. Ethanol producers welcomed the change but criticized the EPA for that delay.

"While we are pleased to see EPA has finally approved year-round E15 in these eight states, we are extremely disappointed by the agency's needless decision to delay implementation until 2025," the Renewable Fuels Association, a trade group, said in a statement. "It's helpful to finally have some certainty about 2025 and beyond, but what happens this summer?"

Most gasoline sold across the country is blended with 10% ethanol, though 15% blends are becoming increasingly common, especially in the Midwest. E15 summer sales still will not be allowed in most of the country during summer, though agricultural groups are pushing for a nationwide policy change.

The biofuels industry and politicians of both parties have portrayed ethanol as a product that helps farmers, reduces prices at the pump and lessens greenhouse gas releases because the fuel burns more cleanly than straight gasoline. However, environmentalists and others have said increased ethanol production can increase carbon releases because it results in more corn production, leading to increased use of fertilizer and greater releases of nitrate. Synthetic and natural fertilizers also are a leading source of water pollution.

The EPA has approved sales of E15 for cars and trucks manufactured after 2000. Grow Energy, another bioenergy trade association, estimates the higher blend will cost consumers 15 cents a gallon less than 10% ethanol.

Petroleum refiners have opposed the Midwest-specific rules, saying a special blend in one region would increase costs and could lead to tighter fuel supplies.

The American Petroleum Institute, a trade group, said a national standard was needed.

"We are concerned this piecemeal approach could weaken the resiliency of the region's fuel supply chain," Will Hupman, a vice president at the group said in a statement. "We continue to call on Congress to pass the bipartisan Nationwide Consumer and Fuel Retailer Choice Act, which would bring much needed consistency to the marketplace by allowing for the year-round sale of E15 nationwide, preserving access to E10 and eliminating the need for regional or state-specific waiver petitions."

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 is 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.

Two years ago, a visit by then-House Speaker Nancy Pelosi to Taiwan 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.

In Beijing, Foreign Ministry spokesperson Mao Ning said that China opposes any form of official exchange between the U.S. and Taiwan. "Taiwan is an inalienable part of Chinese territory," she said.

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.

Native American tribes gain new authority to stop unwanted hydropower projects

By MICHAEL PHILLIS Associated Press

Federal regulators have granted Native American tribes more power to block hydropower projects on their land after a flurry of applications were filed to expand renewable energy in the water-scarce U.S. Southwest.

Previously, the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission granted developers approval to move ahead with planning even if tribes objected. That practice came to an end last week. Now, a new commission policy allows tribes to quickly veto proposals, forcing businesses to cooperate if they want the federal government to grant them exclusive rights to their hydropower projects.

"This is the acknowledgement and respect of tribal sovereignty, which is critical," said George Hardeen, spokesperson for the Navajo Nation's president's office.

The Federal Energy Regulatory Commission recently rejected seven proposals for projects on the Navajo Nation, which stretches 27,000 square miles (69,000 square kilometers) across Arizona, New Mexico and Utah. When it issued those rejections, the commission also announced the policy change, handing tribes the same power as federal agencies to block projects.

"It applies anywhere that a hydropower project might be proposed on tribal lands throughout the United States," said Aaron Paul, an attorney with Grand Canyon Trust, a conservation group.

The Hopi Tribe, which is completely surrounded by Navajo, urged the commission to cement the policy announcement in a formal rule, worrying a different administration would be less favorable to tribes and change the policy.

The hydropower projects are essentially big batteries that generate energy when demand is high and there aren't a lot of other renewable sources like solar and wind available. Hydropower can be turned on when it is needed and works by releasing water from an upper reservoir to a lower one.

At a later point when the electric grid has excess power, water is pumped in a loop back up to the higher reservoir, recharging the battery.

Developers have expressed new interest in building these pumped hydropower projects as coal-fired plants shut down in the Southwest. The canyons, towering mesas and dramatic river valleys in the area are ideal terrain because the projects require moving water between different elevations.

Environmental groups and some members of the Navajo Nation argue the projects require enormous amounts of water — particularly in a part of the country that already doesn't have enough. Roughly one-third of the 175,000 people on the Navajo Nation don't have running water at home.

People are sensitive to how scarce water is, and "they would more likely say 'no' to these kinds of projects," Hardeen said.

Some of the proposals that were rejected came from Nature and People First. For example, the company told federal regulators it wanted to build the Black Mesa East project on the Navajo reservation in Arizona that would have two upper reservoirs with a combined capacity of 100,000 acre-feet and a single, lower

Groton Daily Independent

Friday, Feb. 23, 2023 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 242 ~ 23 of 60

reservoir with the same total storage capacity. An acre-foot of water serves two or three homes annually.

The project was proposed near a home site lease that Jheremy Young's family has held for generations. He's happy the commission blocked it. The area around the mesa is rugged, quiet and vast, and water has to be hauled in.

"That's where my dad came from, that's where his father came from," Young said. "The sentimental value of the land — the story, the history — were the biggest concern."

The Navajo Nation told federal regulators the company hadn't consulted with the correct tribal authorities or addressed key concerns about water use and harm to golden eagle and other species' habitats. Hardeen said now, developers will first need to go through the Navajo Nation Division of Natural Resources.

Denis Payre, president and CEO of Nature and People First, said the commission's decision was "undeniably disheartening." The company secured support from local Navajo communities and talked with Navajo government officials for a project he said would create jobs.

"Developing pumped storage projects is inherently challenging; this additional obstacle threatens to halt our collective efforts," Payre said.

The company submitted a proposal for a much larger project than it intends to construct, giving it flexibility to build a smaller project on the piece of land it finds is best after study and tribal consultation.

That approach and using that amount of water engenders opposition, according to the Center for Biological Diversity, an environmental group.

"If you are going to propose a small project, actually propose a small project," said Taylor McKinnon, the center's Southwest director.

The Federal Energy Regulatory Commission also rejected proposals from Rye Development, which said it values tribal consultation and will continue to study opportunities on tribal land.

Malcolm Woolf, president and CEO of the industry group National Hydropower Association, said he supported tribes' right to stop unwanted projects. But he said the new policy could halt planning too soon.

The commission denied preliminary permits for the seven projects, which only recognize a business is first in line to develop a project and allows further studies. Developers have to consult with tribes before they can be granted a license and start building.

Companies don't want to navigate a complicated permitting process and spend years working with a tribe only for another business to swoop in and win rights to the project at the last minute, Woolf said.

One company quickly caught up in the new policy is Pumped Hydro Storage, which wants a preliminary permit for a project near the Little Colorado River on Navajo Nation land in Arizona. In light of its new policy, the commission asked for more input from those it potentially impacts before they decide what to do.

The company's manager, Steve Irwin, said pumped storage is important but hard to build on the Navajo Nation's land.

"There's no clear pathway to doing business on the reservation," Irwin said. "It's almost like you have to have 100% unanimous consensus. It's not majority, it's got to be 100%, and it's like, you are never going to get 100%."

Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer is in Ukraine to meet Zelenskyy as US aid hangs in the balance

By MARY CLARE JALONICK Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer is in Ukraine to try to reassure President Volodymyr Zelenskyy and other officials that Congress will deliver another round of U.S. aid, even as a package that would provide \$60 billion is stalled in the U.S. House.

Schumer's surprise trip Friday comes at a perilous time for Ukraine. Zelenskyy has said that delays in aid from the U.S. and other Western countries are creating an opening for Russia to make advances on the battlefield, with Ukrainian forces running dangerously low on ammunition and weaponry.

Lawmakers from both parties have traveled to Europe in the last week to promise that the United States will not desert Ukraine and other European allies. Yet the path ahead is far from certain. The Senate passed

Groton Daily Independent

Friday, Feb. 23, 2023 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 242 ~ 24 of 60

a \$95 billion package to aid Ukraine, Israel and Taiwan last week, but House Speaker Mike Johnson, R-La., has not yet put forward a plan for passing it in the House.

In an interview before his trip, Schumer, D-N.Y., told The Associated Press that he plans to tell Ukrainian officials that "we're going to win this fight, and America is not abandoning them."

"I feel I have to be there because it's so crucial," Schumer said. "We are right at a vortex, a critical turning point in the whole West. And if we abandon Ukraine, the consequences for America are severe."

The Senate passage of the aid package last week came after the collapse of a broader framework that would have combined the aid with changes to American border policies. The Senate quickly moved ahead with just the foreign aid portion, passing it on a 70-29 vote, with 22 Republicans in support.

But GOP opponents of aiding Ukraine are a vocal faction in the House, where Republicans have narrow control and former President Donald Trump, the front-runner for the GOP presidential nomination, holds more sway. Trump has opposed the aid package and urged Republicans to vote against it.

Schumer is in the western city of Lviv where he and four other Democratic senators are expected to meet with Zelenskyy and other top officials. Sens. Richard Blumenthal of Connecticut, Michael Bennet of Colorado, Maggie Hassan of New Hampshire and Jack Reed of Rhode Island are joining him on the trip. Reed is the chairman of the Senate Armed Services Committee.

The visit comes days after senators and House lawmakers from both parties traveled to the Munich Security Conference to try to assuage European leaders, including Zelenskyy, who are closely watching the U.S. developments. The conference coincided with Ukraine withdrawing troops from the eastern city of Avdiivka after months of intense combat.

Johnson is caught between a wide swath of his Republican members who support the Ukraine aid and a vocal faction on the right who strongly oppose it. Some House Republicans have threatened to try to remove him from his job if he puts the aid package up for a vote. He has said he "won't be rushed" into a decision.

House Republicans have floated possible ways to push the aid to passage, including by scaling it back, but no plan has so far emerged. It remains unclear how Johnson – only months into the job after replacing ousted Speaker Kevin McCarthy — will navigate the deep divisions within his party.

Republicans who oppose the aid say that the money is better spent in the U.S. and that it should be paired with legislation to curtail record numbers of crossings at the southern border. They rejected the proposed Senate compromise on border policy, saying it was not tough enough, and some of them want to see the House try again to tackle that issue before moving to the national security package.

In the Senate, a group of Republicans opposed to the foreign aid kept the chamber open all night to rail against it before the final vote. Some of them echoed Russian President Vladimir Putin in calling for a negotiated end to the war.

Sen. J.D. Vance, R-Ohio, part of the increasingly isolationist wing of the GOP, traveled to the Munich conference to make his case. He countered Zelenskyy's pleas by saying that additional money wouldn't "fundamentally change the reality" on the ground.

"Can we send the level of weaponry we've sent for the last 18 months?" Vance asked. "We simply cannot. No matter how many checks the U.S. Congress writes, we are limited there."

Schumer said opposition to the aid "may be the view of Donald Trump and some of the hard right zealots. But it is not the view of the American people, and I don't think it's the view of the majority of people in the House or Senate."

He said he plans to tell Zelenskyy and other officials that he will push the House to act, and that "they shouldn't give up and we're not giving up." He said he hoped to gather new detail on the trip that could help convince reluctant lawmakers.

President Joe Biden has continued to tell Zelenskyy that he will get the aid to Ukraine. But he has expressed concerns about whether the House would be able to pass the aid before Russia takes more Ukrainian territory.

"The idea now when they are running out of ammunition that we're going to walk away, I find it absurd," Biden told reporters after speaking to Zelenskyy last weekend.

Schumer said he is "greatly worried" about what could happen if Congress doesn't act. "They're hurting," he said of Ukraine. "And I think by us being there, we're giving them strength and giving them hope that America is still fighting for them."

Live updates | Israeli strikes kill 100 Palestinians in 24 hours as officials hold cease-fire talks

By The Associated Press undefined

More than 100 Palestinians were killed in Israeli strikes on the Gaza Strip over a 24-hour period, the Health Ministry in the Hamas-run territory said Friday.

Hamas political leader Ismail Haniyeh held talks with Egyptian officials about a possible cease-fire in Gaza and an exchange of hostages held by the militants for Palestinians imprisoned in Israel, according to a Hamas statement Friday morning.

During Hamas' Oct. 7 attack on southern Israel, militants killed about 1,200 people and took some 250 hostages. Roughly half of the hostages were released during a weeklong cease-fire in November. About 100 hostages remain in captivity, in addition to the bodies of 30 others who were killed on Oct. 7 or died in captivity.

Israel's subsequent offensive in Gaza has killed more than 29,000 Palestinians and driven some 80% of the territory's 2.3 million people from their homes. Most heeded Israeli orders to flee south, and around 1.5 million are packed into Rafah near the border with Egypt.

European diplomats have ramped up calls for a cease-fire as alarm grows over the worsening humanitarian crisis in Gaza.

Currently:

- Mideast cease-fire efforts gain steam as a U.S. envoy visits. Mediators report 'encouraging' signs.
- Denmark records its highest number of antisemitic incidents since WWII, part of a grim European trend.
- A Houthi rebel attack sets a cargo ship ablaze and forces Israel to intercept another attack near Eilat.
- Find more of AP's coverage at <https://apnews.com/hub/israel-hamas-war>.

Here's the latest:

2 DEAD IN ISRAELI DRONE STRIKE ON A CAR IN THE OCCUPIED WEST BANK

JERUSALEM — A Palestinian man wounded in an Israeli drone strike on a car in the occupied West Bank died of his injuries, bringing the number of people killed in the attack to two.

The two men, their bodies wrapped in the flags of the militant group Islamic Jihad, were buried Friday in the Jenin refugee camp.

The Israeli military said one of those killed, identified as Yasser Hanoun, was about to carry out a shooting attack when the strike hit his car late Thursday. It alleged that Hanoun was previously involved in several shooting attacks targeting Israeli settlements and army posts.

Violence has escalated in the West Bank since the start of the Israel-Hamas war in Gaza, triggered by a deadly Hamas attack on southern Israel on Oct. 7. Since then, about 400 Palestinians have been killed by Israeli fire in the West Bank, most as part of near-daily arrest raids by troops searching for suspected militants.

NORWAY'S FOREIGN MINISTER CALLS FOR A STOP TO INJUSTICES AGAINST PALESTINIANS

COPENHAGEN, Denmark — Norwegian Foreign Minister Espen Barth Eide said Friday that Israel's occupation and the Israeli settlements "are the biggest obstacles to a two-state solution, which is the only solution to the conflict between Israel and Palestine."

In a comment to Norway's submission to the International Court of Justice, Barth Eide said "the injustice to which the Palestinians are subjected must stop."

He added that "while the eyes of the world are focused on the horrific war in Gaza, the situation in the West Bank, including East Jerusalem, is also very serious."

MORE THAN 100 PALESTINIANS WERE KILLED IN 24 HOURS, THE HEALTH MINISTRY IN GAZA SAYS

Groton Daily Independent

Friday, Feb. 23, 2023 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 242 ~ 26 of 60

DEIR AL-BALAH, Gaza — Israeli airstrikes in central and southern Gaza killed at least 68 Palestinians, health officials and an Associated Press journalist said, and another 24 bodies were trapped under rubble.

In all, 104 Palestinians were killed over the past 24 hours, the Health Ministry in Hamas-run Gaza said Friday. The overall death toll since the Oct. 7 start of the war rose to 29,514. Though the count does not differentiate between civilians and combatants, the ministry has said women and children account for about two-thirds of those killed.

The strikes were reported in the southern city of Rafah, the central town of Deir al-Balah and the refugee camp of Nuseirat.

In Deir al-Balah, bodies draped in white or black burial shrouds were laid out in the courtyard of the Al-Aqsa Martyrs' Hospital, as relatives wept nearby. The bodies were later collected by relatives and taken for burial after brief prayers.

Outside the hospital, a man held the body of an infant killed in one of the strikes.

ISRAEL AIMS TO BUILD 3,300 NEW HOUSES IN SETTLEMENTS IN THE OCCUPIED WEST BANK

JERUSALEM — Israel plans to approve the construction of more than 3,300 new homes in settlements in the occupied West Bank, a senior Cabinet minister from the far-right wing of the government announced.

Approval of new construction is bound to elicit condemnation from the United States at a time when the relationship between the allies is fraught because of disagreements over the course of Israel's war on Hamas in the Gaza Strip.

Finance Minister Bezalel Smotrich said in a statement late Thursday that the new construction is meant as a response to a fatal Palestinian shooting attack near Jerusalem earlier in the day. He said Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and Defense Minister Yoav Gallant participated in the discussion leading to the decision.

The homes are to be built in the settlements of Maale Adumim, Efrat and Kedar, Smotrich said.

Consecutive Israeli governments have expanded settlements in east Jerusalem and the West Bank — war-won territories the Palestinians seek for a future state. Construction has accelerated under Netanyahu's current right-wing government, which includes settlers such as Smotrich in key positions.

2 HEZBOLLAH MEMBERS ARE KILLED IN AN ISRAELI STRIKE ON A SOUTHERN BORDER VILLAGE IN LEBANON

BEIRUT — The paramedics arm of Lebanon's militant Hezbollah group says two of its members were killed in an Israeli strike on a southern border village early Friday.

The Islamic Health Society identified the two as Hussein Khalil and Mohammed Ismail, saying they were killed when the group's office in the village of Blida was directly hit, a day after an Israeli airstrike on the southern Lebanese village of Kfar Rumman killed two members of Hezbollah's elite Radwan Force, including a local official who was identified as Hassan Saleh.

Hezbollah later said it retaliated the attack on Blida by launching two explosive drones at an Israeli army post in the northern town of Kiryat Shmona, claiming it scored direct hits.

Since the Israel-Hamas war began on Oct. 7, the Lebanon-Israel border has been witnessing daily exchanges of fire between Hezbollah and Israeli troops. Since then, nearly 200 Hezbollah fighters and at least 40 civilians have been killed.

NETANYAHU PUBLISHES DETAILS OF HIS PLAN FOR POSTWAR GAZA

JERUSALEM — Israel will control security in a demilitarized Gaza Strip and play a role in civilian affairs after its war on Hamas ends, according to a plan Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu submitted to his Cabinet for approval.

While lacking specifics, the plan marks the first time he has presented a formal postwar vision. Netanyahu's insistence on an open-ended Israeli role in running Gaza runs counter to key U.S. proposals for a revitalized Palestinian autonomous government eventually governing both Gaza and the Israeli-occupied West Bank as a precursor to statehood.

The plan, published by the prime minister's office, was presented to Cabinet ministers late Thursday. It reiterates that Israel is determined to crush Hamas, the militant group that overran the Gaza Strip in 2007. Polls have indicated that a majority of Palestinians don't support Hamas, but that the group has deep roots

in Palestinian society. Critics say Israel's goal of eliminating Hamas is unattainable.

It calls for freedom of action for Israel's military across Gaza after the war to thwart any security threat and says Israel would establish a buffer zone inside Gaza — likely to provoke U.S. objections.

The plan also envisions Gaza being governed by local officials who it says would "not be identified with countries or entities that support terrorism and will not receive payment from them."

It's not clear if any Palestinians would agree to fill such sub-contractor roles. Over the past decades, Israel has repeatedly tried and failed to set up hand-picked local Palestinian governing bodies.

HAMAS LEADER LEAVES EGYPT AFTER HOLDING TALKS WITH EGYPTIAN OFFICIALS OVER A POSSIBLE CEASE-FIRE

BEIRUT — Hamas says its political leader, Ismail Haniyeh, has left Egypt after holding talks with Egyptian officials about a possible cease-fire in the Gaza Strip and an exchange of hostages held by the militants for Palestinians imprisoned in Israel.

The statement released early Friday by Hamas did not say whether Haniyeh's talks with Egyptian intelligence chief Abbas Kamel about ways of ending the war, a hostage deal and the flow of aid to Gaza were successful or led to a breakthrough.

The talks in Cairo came ahead of a high-level meeting expected over the weekend in Paris, where international mediators will present a new proposal. The United States, Egypt and Qatar have been struggling for weeks to find a formula that could halt Israel's devastating offensive in Gaza, but now face an unofficial deadline as the Muslim holy month of Ramadan approaches.

Israel seeks a phased deal, including a temporary pause in fighting in exchange for the release of some of the roughly 100 hostages still held by militants since the brutal Oct. 7 Hamas attack on southern Israel. Israel has vowed to keep fighting until Hamas is crushed.

Hamas initially demanded to end the war, now in its fifth month, before hostages can be released. Hamas has said that it would release the Israeli hostages in return for the all Palestinian prisoners in Israeli jails. Israel rejected that demand, and mediators have been working on a new deal.

Belarus cracks down on clergy who supported protests of its authoritarian leader

By YURAS KARMANAU Associated Press

TALLINN, Estonia (AP) — The Rev. Viachaslau Barok was a familiar face in Rasony, a town in northern Belarus near the Russian border, overseeing construction of its Roman Catholic church and celebrating Mass daily for two decades.

He got into trouble in December 2020, the height of anti-government demonstrations, when he posted a caricature of authoritarian President Alexander Lukashenko and another official on social media. He spent 10 days in jail.

When security services raided his church in July 2021, however, he knew it was time to leave the country.

Barok is among dozens of clergy — Catholic, Orthodox and Protestant — who have been jailed, silenced or forced into exile for protesting the 2020 election that gave Lukashenko a sixth term. That disputed vote triggered mass demonstrations, beatings of protesters and a crackdown on dissent — tensions that increased in 2022, when Belarus ally Russia invaded Ukraine.

The pro-Kremlin Lukashenko, who lashed out against any church officials siding with the protesters, last month signed into law a measure requiring all religious organizations in the country of 9.5 million to reregister with authorities or face being outlawed if their loyalty to the state is in doubt.

Anastasiia Kruope, a Human Rights Watch researcher for Europe and Central Asia, said the law gives authorities "more tools and possibilities for repressions."

In the last three years, at least 74 clergy have been arrested, fined or deported, according to the Viasna human rights center, even before the new law took effect.

"It's clear that the number of priests subject to repression will grow, (as the government tries) to force

Groton Daily Independent

Friday, Feb. 23, 2023 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 242 ~ 28 of 60

the church's loyalty," Barok told The Associated Press. "The authorities want to demonstrate to the Vatican their unlimited power within Belarus."

The media-savvy priest had over 7,000 followers on YouTube before he was visited by security operatives who had a search warrant, and he chose exile in Poland over arrest.

Thousands have fled Belarus since 2020 as police detained more than 35,000 people. Scores have been labeled extremists, and Viasna said there are over 1,400 political prisoners.

While Orthodox Christians make up about 80% of the population, just under 14% are Catholic and 2% are Protestants.

Catholic and Protestant clergy who supported the protests and sheltered demonstrators at their churches became targets of repression, but even some Orthodox priests condemned the crackdown.

In a famous incident amid the protests on Aug. 26, 2020, about 100 people took refuge from police in the landmark Sts. Simon and Helena Catholic Church, a red-brick structure just off the main government square in Minsk. Weeks later, the church again became the focus when dozens of women dressed in white joined its senior priest, the Rev. Uladislau Zavalnyuk, in forming a human chain around it.

But the "Red Church," as it is known, has held no services since September 2022, when it was ordered closed. Authorities cited unpaid utility bills and the need for repairs after a minor fire that month, even though its priests say there was little damage.

Lukashenko, who has ruled Belarus for nearly 30 years and describes himself as an "Orthodox atheist," lashed out at dissident clergy during the 2020 protests, urging them to "do their jobs," and not fuel unrest. "People should go to churches to pray! Orthodox churches, Catholic churches — they're not for politics," he said.

Ten Catholic priests were arrested last year, including the Rev. Henrykh Akalatovich, a 70-year-old who is in solitary confinement despite a cancer diagnosis, facing 20 years on treason charges.

A report last year by Aid to the Church in Need, a Catholic organization tracking persecution of the faithful, named Belarus as the second-largest jailer of Catholic priests, behind only Nicaragua.

The crackdown also affected the Belarusian Orthodox Church, which is subordinate to Moscow's Patriarch Kirill, a close Kremlin ally. A prominent cleric, Archbishop Artemy Kishchenko, of Hrodna in western Belarus, was stripped of all church posts and forced to retire in 2021 for condemning the repression as well as attempts by Moscow and Minsk to use the church as a political tool.

Russia's Feb. 24, 2022, invasion of Ukraine prompted further clerical splits after Lukashenko allowed Belarusian territory to be used to send troops into its neighbor.

Days afterward, Archpriest Georgy Roy and 24 Belarusian Orthodox priests, alongside counterparts from Russia and elsewhere, called for a cease-fire. Anti-war statements by Roy, who presided at Hrodna's main Orthodox cathedral and lectured at a prestigious seminary, came under fire from church and secular leaders.

Last year, he fled the country with his wife and four children, citing fears for their safety. He now ministers to Belarusians in Vilnius, the Lithuanian capital, and pledges allegiance to the Orthodox patriarch in Turkey, rather than Russia.

In an interview with AP, Roy accused the Orthodox church in Russia and Belarus of legitimizing what he described as Moscow's aggressive expansionist ideology.

"The name of Christ is called on to justify war, bloodshed, violence and untruths," he said, adding that Russian Orthodox leaders "serve that ideology, but I cannot reconcile myself to this horror and live in this sin."

He said Belarusian authorities openly seek to bring the clergy into line, repeatedly summoning them for "preventive" political talks, checking websites and social media, and having security services monitor sermons.

The government lists 3,417 registered religious communities and organizations in Belarus; membership in unregistered ones was made a criminal offense in 2022, punishable by up to two years in jail.

The new law, which gives the government broad powers over religious denominations and groups, requires them to reapply for state registration and says they must have had at least one parish operating for 30 years.

The law also bars anyone accused of what Minsk deems extremist or terrorist activity from heading a religious organization. It prohibits any secular symbols at services or using churches for any purpose other than worship.

Alexander Rumak, commissioner for Religious and Ethnic Affairs, told the Belarusian Security Council in September that authorities must ensure "the spiritual security" of society, as a way of "maintaining stability and calm in the country."

Analysts say the restrictions are part of a broader campaign to quash dissent ahead of parliamentary elections, being held Sunday, as well as next year's presidential vote.

The United Nations sent a letter to the government objecting to the law, saying it violates the country's obligations to ensure religious freedom, but it got no response, said Anaïs Marin, the U.N. special rapporteur on Belarus.

Marin told AP the law would allow authorities "to simply destroy" the remnants of civil society that "are not yet underground, not in prison or exile."

The Rev. Zmitser Khvedaruk called the law "the most repressive in Europe," expressing concern that his and other Protestant churches will be the main targets, given their popularity among younger Belarusians.

He told AP that many Protestant churches already face a difficult choice — "either cease their activities or return to the dark Soviet times, when Protestant churches in fact operated underground and gathered illegally in people's homes, (when) believers prayed under the threat of criminal prosecution."

Last year, authorities bulldozed the Pentecostal New Life Church on Minsk's outskirts because they suspected its congregation supported the opposition. Founded in 2002 in a converted cowshed, its pastor, the Rev. Viachaslau Hancharenka, was fined and detained after officials said its social media platforms carried "extremist" content.

The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom last month condemned what it called Minsk's repressive course, urging President Joe Biden and Congress to "prioritize religious freedom" as it holds Belarus accountable "for its gross human rights violations."

Human rights campaigners say clergy and their flocks are under threat for raising funds and helping political prisoners. Barok — the priest who fled to Poland — discovered that because authorities deem his social media posts to be "extremist," anyone viewing or reposting them faces six years in jail.

"I dream of returning to my church in Rasony," Barok said. "But I can't while the state arrests priests for carrying their cross and calling evil 'evil.'"

Thousands of Ukrainians live in agony and uncertainty as they search for their missing loved ones

By HANNA ARHIROVA Associated Press

KYIV, Ukraine (AP) — Iryna Reva stares at her phone, replaying the last video her 25-year-old son Vladyslav sent her from the front line before the volunteer soldier disappeared 19 months ago in a battle with Russian forces in Ukraine's eastern Donetsk region.

Reva is one of the thousands of Ukrainians desperately seeking news of loved ones who have disappeared in the two years since Russia's full-scale invasion began. According to Ukraine's National Police, more than 30,000 people have been reported missing in the last 24 months.

"Up to this day, I am searching for my son," Reva said. "He is alive to me. Regardless of the circumstances, there is no evidence that he has perished."

The last time Reva spoke to her son, she begged him not to take part in a battle the next morning. "Don't go, say your arm hurts," she told him over the phone.

"Mom, I'm sorry. I love you very much," Vladyslav replied. "I'm going into battle. I don't know if I'll be back."

"I'll be out of touch. Pray," were his last words to her.

The missing include soldiers like Vladyslav lost on the battlefield, but also civilians and children who have

Groton Daily Independent

Friday, Feb. 23, 2023 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 242 ~ 30 of 60

vanished in a variety of circumstances. For many relatives, the agonizing uncertainty and relentless search for answers has already gone on for two years with no end in sight.

Inna Usenko left her hometown of Mariupol on a business trip the day before the war began in 2022. She lost contact with her brother, Herman Sikorskyi, on March 1 as Russia laid siege to the eastern city and thousands of civilians were trapped. Several weeks later, a Russian airstrike hit the house where he had lived.

"I don't know what to think, whether he's alive or not," she said. "I understand perfectly well that if I were there, he would have come to me, and maybe something would have been different, so I feel guilty all the time."

In an attempt to find her brother, Usenko filed a missing person's report with the occupation authorities, the Russian Federation and the Russian Red Cross. From her home, which is now in Spain, she came to Ukraine to file a police report and provide DNA to Ukrainian authorities. Despite the efforts, neither side was able to provide her with any information.

"I would like, of course, to believe that he is alive," Usenko said, adding that the uncertainty not only drains her but also affects close friends, relatives and his children.

The International Committee of the Red Cross says since February 2022 its team has been contacted more than 100,000 times by families searching for their loved ones.

"That doesn't mean a hundred thousand missing people. But this gives you an idea of just the amount of suffering that this creates on both sides," Achille Després, a spokesperson at the ICRC in Kyiv, said.

For relatives looking for information, the official search often begins with submitting a DNA sample. Andrii Levytskyi, head of forensics at the National Police's main investigation department, said more than 18,000 DNA samples of relatives of servicemen and civilians have been collected and processed.

DNA is a vital part of establishing the status of the missing person, especially if they are military. Even if fellow soldiers said they witnessed a soldier killed in battle, it's not enough to confirm the death, said Petro Yatsenko, the head of a press office at the Coordination Headquarters for the Treatment of POWs.

"Until we have the body, until we have DNA analysis, this person will have the status of missing," he said. He said they have had cases in which soldiers were found wounded in captivity, despite testimony from their comrades that they were killed in battle.

Over the past two years, numerous volunteer projects have arisen to aid in the search for missing people, often serving as a last resort for relatives who receive no official information from authorities.

Mariia Reshetova, who runs the Search for the Missing project under the Kateryna Osadcha Foundation, said they have around 1,000 open cases and have already closed hundreds.

She said that while they receive new applications daily, the influx has dwindled compared to the initial months of the war when the project was launched. However, the geography of missing civilians has not changed. Cases originate from both liberated regions like Kyiv, and those still occupied. Many open cases relate to people missing in Mariupol.

"You can't stop searching ... because there is always a chance that some information will be found," Reshetova said.

Tetiana Khvostenko's husband Oleh was last seen in the summer of 2022 in the occupied city of Dniprodne in the Zaporizhzhia region when the Russian military detained him as he went to pick up his car. From that point, he vanished.

Oleh's relatives, who remained in the occupied territory and therefore can't be named for security concerns, tried to get information about why he was detained. They visited the military commandant's office many times learning he'd been handed over to the Russian Federal Security Service, or FSB. From there, the trail went cold.

For the past year and seven months, Tetiana and her son Klim have been living in limbo, devoid of any new information about Oleh's fate.

"For 36 years, I've had a man by my side. And now he is gone. It's like being without an arm or a leg, I don't know. It's hard," Tetiana said.

Groton Daily Independent

Friday, Feb. 23, 2023 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 242 ~ 31 of 60

The Khvostenkos hope that Oleh is alive, perhaps detained like thousands of other civilians from occupied territories held without charge in Russian prisons and areas of seized territories as an investigation by The Associated Press conducted last year found.

The family contacted the relevant institutions on both sides, international organizations including the Red Cross, and even directly inquired into places of captivity, to see if Oleh was being held there.

"We've actually reached out to a lot of places, and the responses are pretty much the same," said Oleh's son Klim.

"And that's what makes it all the more difficult because there's no result. We're not a step closer," he said.

Trump's lawyers call for dismissal of classified documents case, citing presidential immunity

WASHINGTON (AP) — Former President Donald Trump's legal team filed multiple motions Thursday night urging a Florida judge to dismiss the criminal case charging him with illegally retaining classified documents, claiming in part that presidential immunity protects him from prosecution — an argument they have already submitted to the U.S. Supreme Court in his election interference case.

Lawyers Christopher Kise and Todd Blanche wrote that the charges "turn on his alleged decision to designate records as personal under the Presidential Records Act (PRA) and to cause the records to be moved from the White House to Mar-a-Lago." Since Trump made this decision while he was still in office, they wrote, it "was an official act, and as such is subject to presidential immunity."

Trump faces dozens of felony counts in federal court in Florida accusing him of illegally hoarding classified documents at his Mar-a-Lago estate and obstructing government efforts to retrieve them. The case is currently set for trial on May 20, but that date could be pushed back.

Trump's lawyers also argued that Attorney General Merrick Garland's appointment of special counsel Jack Smith to investigate the former president was "unlawful" and grounds for dismissal of the documents case.

Smith's other case against Trump was unveiled in August when the former president was indicted in Washington on felony charges for working to overturn the results of the 2020 election in the run-up to the violent riot by his supporters at the U.S. Capitol on Jan. 6, 2021.

The case had been set for trial on March 4 in federal court in Washington. But that date was canceled amid an appeal by Trump on the legally untested question of whether a former president is immune from prosecution for official acts taken in the White House. Trump's lawyers have asked the Supreme Court to intervene, but it's not clear if the justices will.

A June 2023 indictment charging Trump with dozens of felony counts alleges that investigators found boxes of sensitive documents recklessly stored at Mar-a-Lago in spaces including a ballroom, a bathroom and shower, his bedroom and a storage room. Prosecutors have said the documents he stowed, refused to return and in some cases showed to visitors risked jeopardizing not only relations with foreign nations but also the safety of troops and confidential sources.

Trump faces four criminal indictments in four different cities as he vies to reclaim the White House. The cases total 91 felony counts.

Relatives of hostages in Gaza endure a nightmare, but dream their loved ones will be freed

By TIA GOLDENBERG Associated Press

KIBBUTZ BE'ERI, Israel (AP) — Gillian and Pete Brisley are picking up the pieces of their shattered lives. They are cleaning up the house where their daughter and granddaughters were killed by Hamas on Oct. 7 in hopes that their son-in-law — believed to be held captive in Gaza — may have something to come home to.

The broken glass from the militants' break-in has been cleaned up. Their dead relatives' clothes still need to be packed away.

Groton Daily Independent

Friday, Feb. 23, 2023 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 242 ~ 32 of 60

"We really didn't want him to come back and see the state it was in," said Gillian Brisley, whose daughter Lianne, 48, was shot at her home in Kibbutz Be'eri during Hamas' rampage, along with two daughters: Noiya, 16; and Yahel, 13. "All we can do is hope and pray that he is in Gaza. And at some time he will come back."

Dozens of families whose relatives were taken to Gaza as hostages have endured a nightmare beyond their comprehension. Nearly five months into the Israel-Hamas war, they remain hopeful that the remaining hostages will be released, but are growing increasingly desperate for a resolution. After the fits and starts of multiple rounds of negotiations, they fret that both Israelis and the world are losing interest in their struggle.

"We are worried all the time," said Ofri Bibas Levy, whose nephews Ariel, 4, and Kfir, 1 — the youngest hostage — were taken captive along with their parents. "We've been on this roller coaster for four months and never knowing what to expect."

When Hamas-led militants stormed through southern Israel in October, they killed 1,200 people, mostly civilians, and kidnapped roughly 250 people, including women, children and older adults, according to Israeli authorities.

The deadliest attack in Israel's history set off the war in Gaza that has killed more than 29,000 Palestinians, most of them women and children, according to local health officials, and triggered a humanitarian catastrophe.

More than 100 hostages, mostly women, children and foreign nationals, were freed in a late November deal that also brought about a weeklong halt in the fighting and the release of 240 Palestinians imprisoned by Israel. Negotiations to bring about the release of the remaining hostages have stalled.

Israel believes that of the 134 remaining hostages, at least 30 were killed on Oct. 7 or died in captivity. Since the war began, Israeli forces have freed three of them. Hostages are believed to be held deep inside Hamas' extensive tunnel network in Gaza, or in other hideouts. Israeli forces killed three hostages in December, mistaking them for militants.

The plight of the hostages has deeply traumatized Israelis, who view them as an enduring symbol of the state's failure to protect civilians during Hamas' onslaught.

Their families have mounted a domestic and international campaign to raise awareness about their loved ones' ordeals and keep the issue in the public consciousness. At weekly protests in Tel Aviv and elsewhere, the families' calls for their release have grown increasingly anguished. Many liken their protracted captivity to a death sentence.

After contending with the initial trauma of the grisly deaths of their relatives and the destruction of their communities, these families were thrust into a public role as advocates for the hostages' release. That advocacy has faced mounting challenges as time goes by.

Negotiations meant to secure their release have seen varying levels of momentum. Most recently, talks led by the United States, Qatar and Egypt have been hobbled by the vast chasm between Israel's and Hamas' terms for a deal.

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has vowed to continue the war until "total victory," which he says means destroying Hamas' governing and military capabilities and freeing the hostages. He says both of those aims are best met with intense and prolonged military pressure. But criticism from within his Cabinet has emerged about that position, with one top official saying the hostages can only be freed through talks.

Critics also say Netanyahu is letting political considerations guide his negotiating tactics, saying he is beholden to the far-right flank of his government. They say he does not have the hostages' best interests in mind because he sees them as a constant reminder of his failure to protect Israelis.

"Netanyahu is doing his best to defend himself. Oct. 7 is not convenient for him," said Nahum Barnea, a veteran columnist with the Yediot Ahronot daily. "The hostages remain as something that burdens him in a way."

Netanyahu says he is working at all times to free the hostages.

"Your loved ones are always in my mind. I look you in your eyes, I look at their photos, the heartbreaks

and aches," he said earlier this month.

Some of Netanyahu's allies have increasingly communicated the message that their priority is not to free the hostages. Finance Minister Bezalel Smotrich sparked outrage after he told Israel's public broadcaster Kan on Tuesday that the release of hostages is "not the most important thing," saying destroying Hamas took precedence.

Politics has also crept into the hostage families' struggle, even though they have labored to keep it a consensus issue. Some Netanyahu supporters have taken to social media to portray the families as a threat to his rule.

Some relatives of hostages say they've been berated in the streets by Netanyahu supporters. A prominent political strategist who has steered the families' struggle since it began stepped down this week over concerns that his past involvement in anti-government campaigns would taint their approach.

Hostage families say they are astounded by what they see as global apathy to an ongoing war crime. The families have traveled to major capitals around the world over the past five months, trying to galvanize support for their cause, only to be dwarfed by massive protests supporting Palestinians in Gaza — and even seeing posters bearing the photos of their loved ones torn down.

"Whatever people think about the political complexities and about the Middle East, it's a baby," said Eylon Keshet, a relative of baby Kfir Bibas. "How can people be so silent about it?"

Gillian and Pete Brisley, who live in South Wales, say they've tried to engage authorities in the United Kingdom to assist, but describe "all talk and no action."

Bullet holes mark most of the walls at the home of their daughter and son-in-law, Eli Sharabi. The oven door is shattered, and the TV screens too. Nearby homes were torched by militants, and their roofs blasted off during fighting on Oct. 7. As the Brisleys spoke, smoke could be seen rising over the skies of Gaza as the booms from Israeli strikes echoed.

The Brisleys have collected their daughter's childhood teddy bear and her shawls, but they still need to clean the deck and the sofa cushions in the top room.

"The hope is that Eli is alive," said Gillian. Sharabi's brother, Yossi, died in captivity.

"You have to have hope. If you haven't got hope, you haven't got anything," she said.

A love affair unraveled before a Black transgender woman was fatally shot in rural South Carolina

By JAMES POLLARD Associated Press/Report for America

COLUMBIA, S.C. (AP) — A Black transgender woman and the guy she was secretly dating had just been pulled over in rural South Carolina. Dime Doe, the driver, was worried. She already had points against her license and didn't want another ticket to stop her from getting behind the wheel. Daqua Lameek Ritter, whom she affectionately called "my man," frequently relied on her for rides.

Everything seemed to turn out OK: Doe sent a text message to her mother that afternoon saying she got a \$72 ticket but was "alright."

Hours later, police found her slumped over in the driver's seat of her car, parked in a driveway off a secluded road. Her death on Aug. 4, 2019, is now the subject of the nation's first federal trial over an alleged hate crime based on gender identity, which started Tuesday.

Much of what transpired in the roughly two-and-a-half hours between the last time Doe was seen and the discovery of her body remains unclear. But as prosecutors wrap up their case this week, more details are emerging about the furtive connection between the 24-year-old Doe — remembered by friends as an outspoken party lover with long lashes and blunt bob hairstyles — and Ritter, a man whose distinctive left wrist tattoo is captured in body camera footage from the traffic stop.

The U.S. Department of Justice alleges that Ritter fatally shot Doe to prevent further exposure of their affair in a small country town where the rumor mill was already churning. Text exchanges between the pair show Ritter tried to dispel gossip of the dalliance in the weeks preceding Doe's death. He also followed the investigation of her killing while coyly answering his regular girlfriend's questions, according to

Groton Daily Independent

Friday, Feb. 23, 2023 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 242 ~ 34 of 60

testimony given during the trial.

It was no secret in Allendale, South Carolina — a town of 8,000 people — that Doe had begun her social transition as a woman shortly after graduating high school, according to testimony from her close friends. Doe started dressing in skirts, getting her nails done and wearing extensions. She and her friends went out drinking. They discussed boys they were seeing.

One of those boys was Ritter, who came from New York to stay with his grandmother in Allendale during the summertime. Doe and Ritter started to grow close over the course of those visits, leaving Delasia Green — Ritter's regular girlfriend in the summer of 2019 — with a "gut feeling" that something was up.

Ritter initially told Green that he and Doe were cousins, the girlfriend testified this week. But then one day, she found messages on his phone from an unsaved number that spoke of "getting a room." She assumed they were from Doe.

When Green confronted Ritter, he became upset and told her that she shouldn't question his sexuality, she said.

Yanna Albany, Doe's cousin, testified that she too had a relationship with Ritter that summer but ended it after about three weeks when Doe told her she was also seeing him. Albany said when she broke up with Ritter, he turned red, threatened to beat Doe for "lying on him" and used a homophobic slur.

Nonetheless, Doe's relationship with Ritter seemed to grow stronger after the entanglement, Albany said. Other friends said Doe never mentioned any drama between the two.

Still, texts obtained by the FBI suggest that Ritter sought to keep their connection under wraps as much as possible. He would remind Doe to delete their communications from her phone, and the majority of the hundreds of texts sent in the month before her death were removed.

Shortly before Doe's death, the text messages started getting tense. In a July 29, 2019, message, she complained that Ritter did not reciprocate her generosity toward him. He replied that he thought they had an understanding that she didn't need the "extra stuff." He also told her that Green had recently insulted him with a homophobic slur. In a July 31 text, Doe said she felt used and that Ritter should never have let his girlfriend find out about them.

Ritter's defense attorneys said the sampling of messages introduced by the prosecution represented only a "snapshot" of their exchanges. They pointed to a July 18 text in which Doe encouraged Ritter, and another exchange where Ritter thanked Doe for one of her many kindnesses.

But witnesses delivered other potentially damning testimony against Ritter.

On the day Doe died, a group of friends saw the defendant ride away in a silver car with tinted windows — a vehicle that Ritter's acquaintance Kordell Jenkins testified he had seen Doe drive previously. When Ritter returned to play cards several hours later, Jenkins said he wore a new outfit and appeared "on edge." It was a buggy summer day, and the group of four began building a fire in a barrel to smoke out the mosquitoes.

At one point, Ritter emptied his book bag into the barrel, Jenkins testified. He said he couldn't see the contents, but assumed they were items Ritter no longer wanted, possibly the clothes he'd worn earlier that day.

When the two ran into each other the following day, Jenkins said he could see the silver handle of a small firearm sticking out from the waistline of Ritter's pants. He said Ritter asked him to "get it gone."

Defense attorneys argued it was preposterous to think that Ritter would ask someone he barely knew to dispose of an alleged murder weapon.

But soon after Doe died, Allendale was abuzz with rumors that Ritter had killed her.

Green testified that when he showed up later that week at her cousin's house in Columbia, he was dirty, smelly and couldn't stop pacing. Her cousin's boyfriend gave Ritter a ride to the bus stop, presumably so he could return to New York. Before he left, Green asked him if he had killed Doe.

"He dropped his head and gave me a little smirk," Green said.

Ritter monitored the fallout from Doe's death from New York, according to FBI Special Agent Clay Trippi, citing Facebook messages between Ritter and a friend from Allendale, Xavier Pinckney. On Aug. 11, Pinckney told Ritter nobody was "really talking," which Trippi said he took as a reference to scant cooperation

with police.

But by Aug. 14, Pinckney was warning Ritter to stay away from Allendale because he'd been visited by state police. He later said that somebody was "snitching."

Trippi testified that his sources never again saw Ritter in Allendale for the summers following Doe's death.

In January 2023, federal officials charged Ritter with a "hate crime for the murder of a transgender woman because of her gender identity," using a firearm in connection with the hate crime and obstruction of justice. They also charged Pinckney with obstructing justice, saying he provided false and misleading statements.

Collapse of illegal gold mine in Venezuela lays bare feelings of abandonment in rural communities

By REGINA GARCIA CANO Associated Press

LA PARAGUA, Venezuela (AP) — The collapse of an illegally operated gold mine in a remote area of central Venezuela has exposed the sense of abandonment felt by small or rural communities bypassed by a quasi-economic renaissance seen in the South American country's capital and cities.

People in La Paragua, the closest community to Bulla Loca, an open-pit mine where dozens of men and women worked at any given time, repeatedly expressed frustration with the government Thursday as funerals began for some of the victims of Tuesday's collapse.

With at least 16 people killed, the accident Tuesday is one of the worst in Venezuela's poorly regulated mining industry, which has grown in response to the dwindling of oil production in the OPEC nation. And the government's slow response felt like an insult to people who have gone from mine to mine over the years in search of the income they cannot find in La Paragua.

"It is disrespectful because (President) Nicolás Maduro said on national television that he had sent everything that the people of La Paragua needed, and we want everyone to know about the vile lie that they made against our people," Yulimar Soto said, referring to the president's comments Wednesday about the collapse.

Soto was among dozens of people who gathered Thursday outside a restaurant where they believed the state's governor, Ángel Marcano, was dining. The group demanded to speak with the ally of Maduro, and at one point banged on a vehicle parked outside. Intelligence service agents with assault weapons and police responded to the scene.

Officials have said 16 people were also injured in the collapse of the remote Bulla Loca mine, which had been in operation for only a few months. People returning from the mine either by boat or government helicopters said the number of deaths was likely much higher because people were still thought to be trapped and the days are passing.

Venezuela's economy came undone last decade as a result of deep mismanagement of state revenues, corruption and economic sanctions. But after Maduro's administration eased currency controls and people adopted the U.S. dollar as unofficial currency, Caracas, the capital, began to see restaurants, furniture stores, skyscrapers, entertainment venues and more open up. A-list concerts returned in 2022.

But few outside Caracas have benefitted.

La Paragua is dusty and poor, with mostly one-story homes and businesses. There are a few gold exchange businesses where miners can sell the gold they find.

Venezuelans practically consider gasoline a birthright since their motherland has the world's largest proven oil reserves. But in La Paragua, sitting next to a river by the same name, people buy gasoline from street vendors as the only station in town suffers from chronic shortages. And the bag of subsidized food the government hands out does not come once a month, like in many Caracas neighborhoods.

"Do you know what forces us to get in there?" said Margara Sanchez, whose brothers-in-law, uncles and cousins work at the mine. "The need that the people of La Paragua are experiencing. The only livelihood that the town has is mining. Help is needed!"

Area residents once worked in agriculture, but that ended when financing dried up as a result of Ven-

ezuela's economic crisis and fuel and seeds virtually disappeared.

The government in 2016 established a huge mining development zone stretching across the central area of the country to supplement flagging revenue from its dominant oil industry, which has seen production decline to near its lowest levels in decades as a result of mismanagement, corruption and, more recently, U.S. sanctions.

Since then, mining operations for gold, diamonds, copper and other minerals have proliferated. Many are wildcat mines, operating on the margins of the law.

Despite brutal conditions and the presence of criminal gangs, ordinary Venezuelans continue to flock to mining centers in hopes of getting rich quick and escaping poverty.

Alicia Ledezma, a representative of the Indigenous community where the mine is located, said that all the injured miners had been evacuated by Thursday night but that as many as 20 individuals could still be buried.

Every resident of La Paragua seems to know someone who works at the mine. As funeral processions took place Thursday, people on the streets commented on the deceased who had just been driven by. They joined neighbors at the cemetery and waited by the river to see if any friends were arriving by boat after abandoning the mine, perhaps for good.

"I have all my friends there," Sheila Reyes said. "La Paragua is a small town, so we are all friends."

Private lander makes first US moon landing in more than 50 years

By MARCIA DUNN AP Aerospace Writer

CAPE CANAVERAL, Fla. (AP) — A private lander on Thursday made the first U.S. touchdown on the moon in more than 50 years, but managed just a weak signal back until flight controllers scrambled to gain better contact.

Despite the spotty communication, Intuitive Machines, the company that built and managed the craft, confirmed that it had landed upright. But it did not provide additional details, including whether the lander had reached its intended destination near the moon's south pole. The company ended its live webcast soon after identifying a lone, weak signal from the lander.

"What we can confirm, without a doubt, is our equipment is on the surface of the moon," mission director Tim Crain reported as tension built in the company's Houston control center.

Added Intuitive Machines CEO Steve Altemus: "I know this was a nail-biter, but we are on the surface and we are transmitting. Welcome to the moon."

Data was finally starting to stream in, according to a company announcement two hours after touchdown.

The landing put the U.S. back on the surface for the first time since NASA's famed Apollo moonwalkers.

Intuitive Machines also became the first private business to pull off a lunar landing, a feat achieved by only five countries. Another U.S. company, Astrobotic Technology, gave it a shot last month, but never made it to the moon, and the lander crashed back to Earth. Both companies are part of a NASA-supported program to kick-start the lunar economy.

Astrobotic was among the first to relay congratulations. "An incredible achievement. We can't wait to join you on the lunar surface in the near future," the company said via X, formerly Twitter.

Intuitive Machines "aced the landing of a lifetime," NASA Administrator Bill Nelson tweeted.

The final few hours before touchdown were loaded with extra stress when the lander's laser navigation system failed. The company's flight control team had to press an experimental NASA laser system into action, with the lander taking an extra lap around the moon to allow time for the last-minute switch.

With this change finally in place, Odysseus descended from a moon-skimming orbit and guided itself toward the surface, aiming for a relatively flat spot among all the cliffs and craters near the south pole.

As the designated touchdown time came and went, controllers at the company's command center anxiously awaited a signal from the spacecraft some 250,000 miles (400,000 kilometers) away. After close to 15 minutes, the company announced it had received a weak signal from the lander.

Launched last week, the six-footed carbon fiber and titanium lander — towering 14 feet (4.3 meters) —

carried six experiments for NASA. The space agency gave the company \$118 million to build and fly the lander, part of its effort to commercialize lunar deliveries ahead of the planned return of astronauts in a few years.

Intuitive Machines' entry is the latest in a series of landing attempts by countries and private outfits looking to explore the moon and, if possible, capitalize on it. Japan scored a lunar landing last month, joining earlier triumphs by Russia, U.S., China and India.

The U.S. bowed out of the lunar landscape in 1972 after NASA's Apollo program put 12 astronauts on the surface. Astrobotic of Pittsburgh gave it a shot last month, but was derailed by a fuel leak that resulted in the lander plunging back through Earth's atmosphere and burning up.

Intuitive Machines' target was 186 miles (300 kilometers) shy of the south pole, around 80 degrees latitude and closer to the pole than any other spacecraft has come. The site is relatively flat, but surrounded by boulders, hills, cliffs and craters that could hold frozen water, a big part of the allure. The lander was programmed to pick, in real time, the safest spot near the so-called Malapert A crater.

The solar-powered lander was intended to operate for a week, until the long lunar night.

Besides NASA's tech and navigation experiments, Intuitive Machines sold space on the lander to Columbia Sportswear to fly its newest insulating jacket fabric; sculptor Jeff Koons for 125 mini moon figurines; and Embry-Riddle Aeronautical University for a set of cameras to capture pictures of the descending lander.

The opposition alliance that aimed to oust Modi appears to be cracking just before India's elections

By KRUTIKA PATHI and SHEIKH SAALIQ Associated Press

NEW DELHI (AP) — Last year more than two dozen opposition parties in India came together to take on Narendra Modi, one of the country's most popular prime ministers in generations. But the broad alliance, beset with ideological differences and personality clashes, is cracking at a crucial time, just months before the country votes in a national election.

Riven by rivalries, political defections and ideological clashes, the INDIA alliance, formed to unseat Modi and defeat his Bharatiya Janata Party's electoral juggernaut, is in shambles, analysts say. Meanwhile, support for Modi is on the rise after he opened a Hindu temple in northern Ayodhya city last month, fulfilling his party's long-held Hindu nationalist pledge.

Led by the Indian National Congress party that once dominated the country's politics, the unity front includes over two dozen powerful regional parties that are direct rivals to each other in some states. Their differences have only grown sharper as the election approaches, bolstering Modi's shot at securing a third consecutive term.

"The opposition is in disarray. They're looking very weak and not at all cohesive," said Arati Jerath, a political commentator.

Analysts say talks on seat-sharing within the alliance have gone cold, in part due to the Congress party's demands of fielding its own candidates in a majority of the seats, even in states where it is weak. This triggered two of the alliance's key partners in West Bengal and Punjab states to say they would contest seats there alone.

India has a first-past-the-post multiparty electoral system in which the candidate who receives the most votes wins. In 2019, Modi's party received 37% of the votes, but won 303 of the 543 seats. The opposition is hoping to consolidate the splintered vote among the parties by fielding a single primary candidate in each constituency against the BJP in the elections, which are expected to take place in April and May.

Meanwhile the recent defection of Nitish Kumar, the chief minister of eastern Bihar state and one of the architects of the INDIA alliance, to Modi's party dealt another unexpected blow.

"Modi's party has been successful in exposing distrust within the opposition alliance. It is cannibalizing the opposition parties from within by engineering these defections and draining them from the ground," said Gilles Verniers, a scholar of Indian politics and a senior fellow at the New Delhi-based Centre for Policy Research.

Verniers said the opposition has failed to find common ground and craft a narrative that could challenge Modi.

“From the start, the opposition alliance had to be more than just electoral arithmetic. But most parties are putting their own interests ahead and are looking to consolidate their positions in the states where they are strong. They are not ceding space to each other,” he said.

The fracturing of the opposition alliance also stems from problems that have long plagued the dynastic Congress party, which is struggling to stay relevant among voters. In the 2019 election, the party secured a paltry 52 seats in Parliament.

In contrast, Modi has presented himself as an outsider cracking down on the political elite. The 73-year-old leader has also increasingly mixed religion with politics in a formula that has resonated deeply with India’s majority Hindu population even if it undermines the country’s secular roots.

While the Congress’ main leader, Rahul Gandhi — scion of the influential Gandhi family — has drawn large crowds along two cross-India walks in recent months, poll experts question whether it would actually translate into votes.

The Congress party also recently lost in key state polls where it fought directly against the BJP. Meanwhile, an emboldened Modi told Parliament earlier this month that his BJP was aiming for 370 seats in the upcoming polls, and their National Democratic Alliance would target 400 out of the 543 seats.

The opposition acknowledges there have been setbacks but claim they also been unfairly targeted and in a manner that belies the country’s democratic principles.

Shashi Tharoor, a lawmaker from the Congress party, pointed to a spree of raids, arrests and corruption investigations against alliance leaders in some states by federal agencies that the opposition says are politically motivated.

India’s main financial investigation agency has launched probes against many key opposition leaders, all of whom are political opponents of the BJP. Meanwhile, some investigations against erstwhile opposition leaders who later switched their allegiance to the ruling party have been dropped.

“The government is not a believer in a level playing field,” said Tharoor. “There is not a single investigation, known or continuing, against anyone in the ruling party.”

Modi’s party denies using law enforcement agencies to target the opposition and says the agencies act independently.

According to Tharoor, the harassment of the opposition fits into a larger, more troubling picture for India in which its democratic and secular foundations are under threat.

“The BJP has embarked on a very serious and far-reaching project to change the very character of the Indian nation,” he said.

Political experts question why the opposition has failed to make key issues, including rising unemployment and economic discontentment, resonate with the more than 900 million voters.

Even as India’s economy expands, joblessness among its large and young workforce has posed a significant challenge for Modi’s government. This was on stark display last month, when thousands of Indians vied for construction jobs in war-hit Israel.

“They seem to lack the fire, the will to win, which the BJP have in ample quantities,” said Jerath, the political commentator. “Today, unless there is a popular uprising against the ruling party over economic distress, Modi looks well set to win a third term comfortably.”

More Alabama IVF providers pause treatment after court ruling on frozen embryos

By KIM CHANDLER Associated Press

MONTGOMERY, Ala. (AP) — Additional in vitro fertilization providers in Alabama paused services Thursday, sending patients scrambling to make other plans in the wake of a state Supreme Court ruling that said frozen embryos could be considered children under state law.

Doctors and patients have been grappling with shock and fear this week as they try to determine what

Groton Daily Independent

Friday, Feb. 23, 2023 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 242 ~ 39 of 60

they can and can't do after the ruling by the all-Republican Alabama Supreme Court. Three clinics have announced pauses on services while another facility assured patients that IVF treatment could continue. State legislators also began looking for a way to protect IVF services in the state.

The University of Alabama at Birmingham system, Alabama Fertility Services and The Center for Reproductive Medicine, in conjunction with a related hospital system Infirmiry Health, announced a pause on IVF treatments.

"We understand the burden this places on deserving families who want to bring babies into this world and who have no alternative options for conceiving," Infirmiry Health CEO Mark Nix said.

Gabby Goidel, who was days from an expected egg retrieval appointment, got a call Thursday morning from her provider telling her that they would not be able to do an embryo transfer if they successfully retrieved eggs.

"I freaked out. I started crying. I felt in an extreme limbo state. They did not have all the answers. I did not obviously have any answers," Goidel said.

Goidel, who experienced three miscarriages and turned to IVF as a way she and her husband could fulfill their dream of becoming parents, found a place in Texas that will continue her care and plans to travel there Thursday night.

"It's not pro-family in any way," Goidel said of the Alabama ruling.

At the Fertility Institute of North Alabama, Dr. Brett Davenport urged patients not to panic and said his clinic will continue providing IVF. But he also urged state policymakers to act and remove the uncertainty for providers.

"What we do could not be any more pro-life. We're trying to help couples who can't otherwise conceive a child," Davenport said.

Davenport said he believes they are on safe legal ground to continuing transferring embryos to a woman. The uncertainties, in his view, surround what clinics can do with frozen embryos that aren't immediately used.

Patients might decide to create fewer embryos or skip genetic testing if they are uncomfortable having embryos deemed genetically abnormal "being in a holding state, not knowing when we can thaw them or what we can do with them," Davenport said.

Justices last week said three couples, who had frozen embryos destroyed in a mishap at a storage facility, could pursue wrongful death claims for their "extrauterine children." The finding, treating the embryos similar to a child or gestating fetus under the wrongful death statute, raised questions about what legal liabilities clinics could face during IVF processes, including the freezing, testing and disposal of embryos.

Justices cited the wording of the wrongful death statute along with language added to the Alabama Constitution in 2018 saying that the state recognizes the "rights of the unborn child."

"Unborn children are 'children' ... without exception based on developmental stage, physical location, or any other ancillary characteristics," Justice Jay Mitchell wrote in an opinion.

Alabama lawmakers began scrambling for a potential solution, proposing multiple pieces of legislation.

Republican state Sen. Tim Melson, who is a doctor, said he is not surprised by the unintended consequences of the 2018 constitutional language and intends to file legislation to protect IVF services in the state. Melson said his proposal seeks to clarify that a fertilized egg has legal protections under the statutes once it is implanted in the uterus but until then is a "potential life."

"I'm just trying to come up with a solution for the IVF industry and protect the doctors and still make it available for people who have fertility issues that need to be addressed because they want to have a family," Melson said.

Senate Minority Leader Bobby Singleton, a Democrat, said Republicans' quest to make stringent anti-abortion laws and policies may have eliminated a path for people to become parents.

"At the end of the day, the Republican Party has to be responsible for what they have done," Singleton said.

The court decision decided only if embryos are covered under Alabama's wrongful death statute, said Mary Ziegler, a legal historian at the University of California, Davis School of Law. The court did not say

embryos had full constitutional rights, she said, or at least not yet.

"I think people in Alabama are rightly expecting that this is the tip of the iceberg though, and this ruling will lead to more down the road," Ziegler said. She also said anti-abortion groups and politicians have been pushing to get some sort of ruling through the federal courts "that a fetus is a constitutional rights holder."

"It's not just about in-vitro and it's not just about Alabama. It's part of this nationwide movement too," she said.

Rachel Rebouche, dean of Temple University Beasley School of Law in Philadelphia, sees the ruling as "emblematic of the long march toward fetal personhood."

"This may not be the case that launches it, but this is a very strategic decision on the part of anti-abortion forces because they know that personhood bills have failed," Rebouche said.

Dr. John Storment, a reproductive endocrinologist in Lafayette, Louisiana, said the Alabama decision could affect whether fertility doctors want to move to or stay in that state.

"I don't think that any doctor knowing that there's a potential for criminal prosecution would even want to be in that position," he said. "There's 49 other states and many other countries they could practice in without the same threat."

4 charged in transporting suspected Iranian-made weapons. 2 SEALs died in intercepting the ship

By DENISE LAVOIE and MATTHEW BARAKAT Associated Press

RICHMOND, Va. (AP) — Four foreign nationals were arrested and charged Thursday with transporting suspected Iranian-made weapons on a vessel intercepted by U.S. naval forces in the Arabian Sea last month. Two Navy SEALs died during the mission.

The criminal complaint unsealed Thursday in U.S. District Court in Richmond alleges that the four defendants — who were all carrying Pakistani identification cards — were transporting suspected Iranian-made missile components for the type of weapons used by Houthi rebel forces in recent attacks.

"The flow of missiles and other advanced weaponry from Iran to Houthi rebel forces in Yemen threatens the people and interests of America and our partners in the region," Deputy Attorney General Lisa Monaco said in a news release.

U.S. officials said that Navy Special Warfare Operator 1st Class Christopher J. Chambers was boarding the boat on Jan. 11 and slipped into the gap created by high waves between the vessel and the SEALs' combatant craft. As Chambers fell, Navy Special Warfare Operator 2nd Class Nathan Gage Ingram jumped in to try to save him, according to U.S. officials familiar with what happened.

"Two Navy SEALs tragically lost their lives in the operation that thwarted the defendants charged today from allegedly smuggling Iranian-made weapons that the Houthis could have used to target American forces and threaten freedom of navigation and a vital artery for commerce," Monaco said.

Attorney General Merrick B. Garland pledged that the Justice Department "will use every legal authority to hold accountable those who facilitate the flow of weapons from Iran to Houthi rebel forces, Hamas, and other groups that endanger the security of the United States and our allies."

Muhammad Pahlawan is charged with attempting to smuggle advanced missile components, including a warhead he is accused of knowing would be used by the Houthi rebels against commercial and naval vessels in the Red Sea and surrounding waters. He is also charged with providing false information to U.S. Coast Guard officers during the boarding of the vessel.

Pahlawan's co-defendants — Mohammad Mazhar, Ghufuran Ullah and Izhar Muhammad — were also charged with providing false information.

Pahlawan's attorney, Assistant Supervisory Federal Public Defender Amy Austin, said Pahlawan had an initial appearance in U.S. District Court Thursday and is scheduled to be back in court Tuesday for a detention hearing. She declined to comment on the case.

"Right now, he's just charged with two crimes and we're just at the very beginning stages, and so all we know is what's in the complaint," Austin said when reached by phone Thursday.

Groton Daily Independent

Friday, Feb. 23, 2023 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 242 ~ 41 of 60

According to prosecutors, Navy forces boarded a small, unflagged vessel, described as a dhow, and encountered 14 people on the ship on the night of Jan. 11, in the Arabian Sea off the Somali coast.

Navy forces searched the dhow and found what prosecutors say was Iranian-made weapons, including components for medium range ballistic missiles and anti-ship cruise missiles.

All 14 sailors on the dhow were brought onto the USS Lewis B. Puller after Navy forces determined the dhow was not seaworthy. They were then brought back to Virginia, where criminal charges were filed against four and material witness warrants were filed against the other 10.

According to an FBI affidavit, Navy forces were entitled to board the ship because they were conducting an authorized "flag verification" to determine the country where the dhow was registered.

The dhow was determined to be flying without a flag and was therefore deemed a "vessel without nationality" that was subject to U.S. law, the affidavit states.

According to the affidavit, the sailors on the dhow admitted they had departed from Iran, although at least one of the men initially insisted they departed from Pakistan.

The affidavit states that crew members had been in contact multiple times by satellite phone with a member of Iran's paramilitary Revolutionary Guard.

AT&T says the outage to its US cellphone network was not caused by a cyberattack

By MICHELLE CHAPMAN AP Business Writer

AT&T said the hourslong outage to its U.S. cellphone network Thursday appeared to be the result of a technical error, not a malicious attack.

The outage knocked out cellphone service for thousands of its users across the U.S. starting early Thursday before it was restored.

AT&T blamed the incident on an error in coding, without elaborating.

"Based on our initial review, we believe that today's outage was caused by the application and execution of an incorrect process used as we were expanding our network, not a cyber attack," the Dallas-based company said.

Outage tracker Downdetector noted that outages, which began at about 3:30 a.m. ET, peaked at around 73,000 reported incidents. AT&T had more than 58,000 outages around noon ET, in locations including Houston, Atlanta and Chicago. The carrier is the country's largest, with more than 240 million subscribers.

By 9 p.m. ET, the reports on AT&T's network were fewer than 1,000.

Cricket Wireless, which is owned by AT&T, had more than 9,000 outages at one point but the reports had also tailed off later in the afternoon. Users of other carriers, including Verizon and T-Mobile, also reported issues but those companies said their networks were operating normally and the problems were likely stemming from customers trying to connect to AT&T users.

During the outage, some iPhone users saw SOS messages displayed in the status bar on their cellphones. The message indicates that the device is having trouble connecting to their cellular provider's network, but it can make emergency calls through other carrier networks, according to Apple Support.

The Federal Communications Commission contacted AT&T about the outage and the Department of Homeland Security and FBI were also looking into it, National Security Council spokesman John Kirby said.

The FBI acknowledged it had been in touch with AT&T. "Should we learn of any malicious activity we will respond accordingly," the agency said.

The outage also raised concerns on Capitol Hill.

"We are working to assess today's disruption in order to gain a complete understanding of what went wrong and what can be done to prevent future incidents like this from occurring," said a statement issued by Cathy McMorris Rodgers, a Washington Republican who chairs the House Energy and Commerce Committee, and Ohio Republican Bob Latta, chair of the Communications and Technology Subcommittee.

Ex-FBI source accused of lying about Bidens and having Russian contacts is returned to US custody

By LINDSAY WHITEHURST, RIO YAMAT and KEN RITTER Associated Press

LAS VEGAS (AP) — A former FBI informant who claims to have links to Russian intelligence and is charged with lying about a multimillion-dollar bribery scheme involving President Joe Biden's family was again taken into custody Thursday in Las Vegas, two days after a judge released him.

Alexander Smirnov, 43, was arrested Thursday morning while meeting with his lawyers at their offices in downtown Las Vegas. It came after prosecutors asked a judge in California, where the case originally was filed, to reconsider Smirnov's custody status while he awaits trial. No hearing was held before he was arrested.

His attorneys, David Chesnoff and Richard Schonfeld, said in a statement they want an immediate hearing on his detention and will again push for his release. A judge in Las Vegas gave prosecutors until Friday afternoon to respond to Smirnov's motion for a new hearing.

A copy of the arrest warrant that Smirnov's lawyers included as an exhibit in their request for the new hearing shows he was arrested on the same charges — making a false statement and creating a false and fictitious record.

Prosecutors have accused Smirnov of falsely telling his FBI handler that executives from the Ukrainian energy company Burisma had paid President Biden and Hunter Biden \$5 million each around 2015. The claim became central to the Republican impeachment inquiry of President Biden in Congress.

Smirnov has not entered a plea to the charges, but his lawyers have said their client is presumed innocent and they look forward to defending him at trial.

A spokesman for Justice Department special counsel David Weiss, who charged Smirnov, confirmed Thursday that Smirnov had been arrested again, but did not have additional comment. Smirnov is in the custody of U.S. Marshals in Nevada, said Gary Schofield, the chief marshal in Las Vegas.

Smirnov, who has dual U.S.-Israeli citizenship, was first arrested last week in Las Vegas, where he now lives, while returning from overseas.

As part of their push to keep him in custody, prosecutors said Smirnov told investigators after his first arrest that "officials associated with Russian intelligence were involved in passing a story" about Hunter Biden. They said Smirnov's self-reported contact with Russian officials was recent and extensive, and said he had planned to meet with foreign intelligence contacts during an upcoming trip abroad.

In his ruling Tuesday to release Smirnov on GPS monitoring, U.S. Magistrate Judge Daniel Albregts in Las Vegas said he was concerned about Smirnov's access to what prosecutors estimate is \$6 million in funds, but noted that federal guidelines required him to fashion "the least restrictive conditions" ahead of his trial. Smirnov was also ordered to stay in the area and surrender his passports.

"Do not make a mockery out of me," Albregts said to Smirnov, warning that he'd be placed back into the federal government's custody if he violated any of his conditions. His lawyers say he had been "fully compliant" with his release conditions.

Prosecutors quickly appealed to U.S. District Judge Otis Wright in Los Angeles.

"The circumstances of the offenses charged — that Smirnov lied to his FBI handler after a 10-year relationship where the two spoke nearly every day — means that Smirnov cannot be trusted to provide truthful information to pretrial services," prosecutors wrote in court documents. "The effects of Smirnov's false statements and fabricated information continue to be felt to this day. Now the personal stakes for Smirnov are even higher. His freedom is on the line."

Smirnov had been an informant for more than a decade when he made the explosive allegations about the Bidens in June 2020, after "expressing bias" about Joe Biden as a presidential candidate, prosecutors said.

But Smirnov had only routine business dealings with Burisma starting in 2017, according to court documents. No evidence has emerged that Joe Biden acted corruptly or accepted bribes in his current role or previous office as vice president.

While his identity wasn't publicly known before the indictment, Smirnov's claims have played a major part

Groton Daily Independent

Friday, Feb. 23, 2023 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 242 ~ 43 of 60

in the Republican effort in Congress to investigate the president and his family, and helped spark what is now a House impeachment inquiry into Biden. Republicans pursuing investigations of the Bidens demanded the FBI release the unredacted form documenting the unverified allegations, though they acknowledged they couldn't confirm if they were true.

Democrats called for an end to the probe after the Smirnov indictment came down last week, while Republicans distanced the inquiry from his claims and said they would continue to "follow the facts."

Smirnov's lawyers say he has been living in Las Vegas for two years with his longtime girlfriend and requires ongoing treatment and daily medications for "significant medical issues related to his eyes." He lived in California for 16 years prior to moving to Nevada.

Atlanta is the only place in US to see pandas for now. But dozens of spots abroad have them

By JULIE WATSON Associated Press

SAN DIEGO (AP) — It will still be months before the San Diego Zoo gets new pandas, the first such bears sent to the United States by China in decades.

For now, the only U.S. zoo left with any is in Atlanta. But globally there are many places to check out the cuddly black-and-white bundles of fur as they munch on bamboo, climb trees and lounge on their backs.

The bear is native to China, where it is considered a national treasure.

Here are some of the places where pandas can be seen, including possibly in the wild in China.

ATLANTA

Zoo Atlanta has four pandas, including the first twins born in the United States in more than a quarter century. Giant pandas typically care for only one cub when twins are born in the wild, which usually leads to just one twin surviving.

Ya Lun and Xi Lun and their parents, Lun Lun and Yang Yang, could be heading back to China in late 2024 unless the loan agreement is extended.

MEXICO CITY

The only other place in the Americas where people can see pandas is in Mexico City at the Chapultepec Zoo.

Xin Xin is the last panda in Latin America and is not on loan from China. That's because she's the only remaining bear descended from the giant pandas China gifted to foreign countries during the 1970s and 1980s. The second-generation Mexican-born panda traces her lineage to Pe Pe and Ying Ying, who arrived at the zoo in 1975.

QATAR

One of the last countries that China sent pandas to was Qatar in 2022, ahead of the Middle Eastern country hosting the World Cup.

The pair reside in an indoor enclosure in the desert nation designed to duplicate conditions in the dense forests of China's mountainous Sichuan province. Eight-hundred kilograms (nearly 1,800 pounds) of fresh bamboo is flown in each week to feed them.

Jing Jing, the male, was given the Arabic name Suhail. Si Hai, the female, was given the Arabic name Thuraya.

MOSCOW

In 2019, the Moscow zoo welcomed its first pair of pandas, a male named Ru Yi and a female named Ding Ding. Chinese President Xi Jinping leased the pandas during an official visit that was to show a "sign of respect and trust."

BERLIN

The Berlin zoo is home to Jiao Qing and Meng Meng, who arrived in Berlin in 2017. They gave birth to twins, the first panda cubs born in Germany. Those cubs have since returned to China.

CHINA

Giant pandas are limited to six mountainous areas of southwestern China in the provinces of Sichuan,

Gansu, and Shanxi. A total of 34 pandas were born last year at two bases in Sichuan, including at Chengdu Research Base of Giant Panda Breeding, a popular tourist destination in Chengdu, the capital of Sichuan province.

More than 1,800 are estimated to exist in the wild, where they are threatened chiefly by habitat loss. About 420 others live in captivity in zoos and reserves, the majority within China.

US is imposing more than 500 new sanctions on Russia's war machine, indicts Russian businessmen

By FATIMA HUSSEIN and ELLEN KNICKMEYER Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — The Treasury Department plans to impose more than 500 new sanctions on Russia and its war machine on Friday as the U.S. vows to keep up its financial pressure on Moscow with the war entering its third grueling year.

The sanctions represent the largest single tranche of penalties since Russia's invasion of Ukraine on Feb. 24, 2022. They come on the heels of a series of new arrests and indictments announced by the Justice Department on Thursday that target Russian businessmen, including the head of Russia's second-largest bank, and their middlemen in five separate federal cases.

The Biden administration is seeking to demonstrate its unwavering support for Ukraine, even though Republican lawmakers allied with former President Donald Trump are blocking vital additional U.S. military aid.

The White House had promised major sanctions in response to the death last week of Russian President Vladimir Putin's most prominent critic, opposition leader Alexei Navalny, in an Arctic penal colony. Biden said Thursday after meeting with Navalny's wife and daughter that the sanctions would be "against Putin, who is responsible for his death."

The planned sanctions were previewed by two administration officials who spoke on condition of anonymity before their release on Friday. Additional sanctions are expected from the State Department as well.

Thousands of sanctions have already been imposed on Russian officials, businessmen, banks, companies and entire industries since the start of the war.

Out of the Justice Department, the cases announced Thursday include charges unsealed in New York against sanctioned Russian banker Andrei Kostin and "two of his U.S.-based facilitators." The facilitators, Vadim Wolfson and Gannon Bond, were arrested Thursday.

Kostin, the longtime president of state-owned VTB Bank, is charged with engaging in a scheme to evade sanctions and launder money to support two superyachts. He, along with the two others, is also accused of trying to evade sanctions by concealing his ownership of a home in Aspen, Colorado. The indictment says Wolfson and Bond arranged to sell the house and provide Kostin with about \$12 million from the sale.

Michael Khoo, a co-director of the department's Task Force KleptoCapture, said on a call with reporters that the announcement was meant to send a message to Russian President Vladimir Putin that "we're not going away" and "we can play the long game as well" so long as the war continues.

The KleptoCapture task force enforces the economic restrictions within the U.S. imposed on Russia and its billionaires.

The Justice Department says over the past two years it has secured court orders for the restraint, seizure, and forfeiture of nearly \$700 million in assets and has charged more than 70 people with violating sanctions and export controls.

The United States has been able to transfer more than \$5 million of seized Russian assets to Europe in support of Ukraine's defense, U.S. officials said Thursday. But the process of justifying each confiscation of alleged illicit assets in court is a painstaking one by law, playing out over years.

"The Justice Department is more committed than ever to cutting off the flow of illegal funds that are fueling Putin's war and to holding accountable those who continue to enable it," Attorney General Merrick B. Garland said in a statement.

The U.S. and other allies of Ukraine had hoped to cripple and isolate Russia's economy with a succession of sanctions targeting its financial sector and sources of revenue, including oil sales. But Putin has

Groton Daily Independent

Friday, Feb. 23, 2023 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 242 ~ 45 of 60

worked with Iran and others to blunt the impact of the international sanctions, so that the International Monetary Fund reports Russia's economy growing at an unexpectedly healthy pace.

Also Thursday, an indictment was unsealed in Washington, D.C., charging Vladislav Osipov with bank fraud connected to operating a 255-foot luxury yacht owned by sanctioned Russian oligarch Viktor Vekselberg. Osipov, a Russian national, lives in Switzerland. The State Department has offered a reward of up to \$1 million for information leading to his arrest or conviction.

The indictment identifies the superyacht as the Tango, the first belonging to a sanctioned Russian with close ties to the Kremlin to be seized at the request of the U.S. government following Russia's invasion of Ukraine.

In Florida, Serhiy Kurchenko, a sanctioned pro-Russian Ukrainian metals magnate, was indicted for trying to evade sanctions that prevent him from doing business in the United States. He and Kostin are believed to be in Moscow and thus unlikely to face U.S. justice.

Also in Florida, a civil forfeiture complaint was filed against two luxury condos in Bal Harbour owned by sanctioned Russian businessman Viktor Perevalov, the co-owner of a Russia-based construction company that was sanctioned for building a highway in Crimea, a Ukrainian peninsula that Russia seized in 2014.

And in Georgia, Feliks Medvedev pleaded guilty earlier this month to helping launder over \$150 million on behalf of Russian clients through bank accounts he controls. Medvedev, a Russian citizen, lives in Buford, Georgia.

Mideast cease-fire efforts gain steam as US envoy visits. Mediators report 'encouraging' signs

By JOSEF FEDERMAN, SAMY MAGDY and WAFAA SHURAF A Associated Press

JERUSALEM (AP) — International efforts to broker a cease-fire between Israel and Hamas appeared to gain new momentum Thursday as the White House said a visit by a senior envoy with Israeli leaders was "going well" and other mediators reported encouraging signs from the warring parties.

The new signs of progress came ahead of an expected summit this weekend in Paris, where mediators plan to present a new proposal. The U.S., Egypt and Qatar have been struggling for weeks to find a formula that could halt Israel's devastating offensive in Gaza, but now face an unofficial deadline as the Muslim holy month of Ramadan approaches.

White House Mideast envoy Brett McGurk held talks throughout the day with Israeli leaders and families of Israeli hostages held by Hamas.

"The initial indications we're getting from Brett are these discussions are going well," said White House spokesman John Kirby.

A Western diplomat involved in the efforts said both sides want a pause. "What we have heard from our partners is that they are willing to give concessions," she said, speaking on condition of anonymity to discuss closed-door diplomacy. "Time is pressing them."

In new fighting, Israeli strikes killed over 70 people in southern and central Gaza, Palestinian health officials said.

Tensions were also rising in the Israeli-occupied West Bank, where three Palestinian gunmen opened fire on morning traffic at a highway checkpoint, killing one man and wounding five others, Israeli police said.

Israel declared war after Hamas militants stormed across the border on Oct. 7, killing some 1,200 people and taking 250 others hostage. The Israeli offensive has left over 29,000 Palestinians dead, caused widespread destruction, displaced an estimated 80% of Gaza's population and fueled a humanitarian disaster.

Roughly half of the hostages were released during a weeklong cease-fire in November. About 100 hostages remain in captivity, in addition to the bodies of 30 others who were killed on Oct. 7 or died in captivity.

Israel is demanding the release of the remaining hostages as part of any pause but has vowed to press ahead with the offensive until Hamas' military and governing capabilities are destroyed. Hamas wants an end to the war, a full withdrawal of troops and the release of thousands of Palestinian prisoners Israel is holding.

Groton Daily Independent

Friday, Feb. 23, 2023 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 242 ~ 46 of 60

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has dismissed the Hamas demands as "delusional." But in recent days, Israeli leaders have begun to voice cautious optimism and Hamas has signaled it is softening its demands.

Defense Minister Yoav Gallant, a member of Israel's three-man War Cabinet, indicated some flexibility. "We will expand the authority given to our hostage negotiators," he said.

At the same time, he warned that the Israeli army "is preparing the continuation of intense ground operations."

Benny Gantz, who sits on the War Cabinet with Gallant and Netanyahu, has said that if there is no hostage deal, Israel will launch a ground offensive into Gaza's southernmost town, Rafah, during the Muslim holy month of Ramadan, which begins around March 10.

A top Hamas official, meanwhile, voiced hope for "lots of breakthroughs" in the near future.

More than half of Gaza's population of 2.3 million is crowded into Rafah after fleeing fighting elsewhere in the territory. Israel has said it will evacuate them before attacking. But it is not clear where they would go, with much of the rest of the tiny Mediterranean enclave consumed in combat.

The U.S. has urged Israel not to invade Rafah – believed to be Hamas' last major stronghold – without a plan to protect civilians. Kirby said that McGurk was pressing the Israelis for details.

The foreign ministers of 26 European countries on Thursday called for a pause in fighting leading to a longer cease-fire.

CEASE-FIRE

Both the Western diplomat and an Egyptian official said they have seen "encouraging" signs from Israel and Hamas.

The Egyptian official said Egypt, Qatar and the U.S. would craft a renewed proposal at the talks in Paris, expected on Friday or Saturday.

He said mediators managed to water down demands of both sides, including the number of Palestinian prisoners Israel would release in return for women and elderly hostages during a preliminary six-week cease-fire. He said "the discussions are encouraging."

He said another sticking point is whether displaced Palestinians could return to their homes in northern Gaza. He said Israel, which is still battling in areas of the north, was showing flexibility.

He also said both sides agreed to continue indirect negotiations for a permanent cease-fire – something Israeli officials in public have ruled out.

Moussa Abu Marzouk, a senior Hamas official, said the negotiations were focused on "our people." He called for Palestinians to be allowed to return to their homes in northern Gaza and a "redeployment" of Israeli forces from residential areas.

"If this is achieved, things can move on an excellent and good way," he said. "Therefore we say there might be lots of breakthroughs in the near future."

Israeli media said the War Cabinet agreed late Thursday to send a delegation to the Paris talks.

WEST BANK SHOOTING AND RAMADAN TENSIONS

Thursday's shooting came at a checkpoint on a West Bank highway where the gunmen opened fire on cars in the morning rush-hour traffic jam. An Israeli man in his 20s was killed and five others wounded, including a pregnant woman. Security forces killed two of the gunmen and detained the third, police said.

Hamas praised the attack in Jerusalem and said it was a "natural response" to Israel's ongoing war in Gaza and raids in the West Bank. But the militant group did not claim responsibility for the attack.

Tensions are rising in the West Bank ahead of Ramadan, which in the past has seen increased clashes, often in connection to restrictions imposed on Palestinian worshippers going to the Al-Aqsa Mosque in Jerusalem's Old City during the holy month.

Israel's hardline national security minister, Itamar Ben-Gvir, has called for tight restrictions on Muslim prayers this year. But no final decisions have been made.

Tempers are likely to be even more volatile this year over the Gaza war and spiraling violence in the West Bank.

Late Thursday, the Palestinian Health Ministry in the West Bank said one man was killed and 15 wounded, two critically, in an Israeli attack on a car in the Jenin refugee camp. The Israeli military had no immediate

Groton Daily Independent

Friday, Feb. 23, 2023 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 242 ~ 47 of 60

comment, but it often operates in the area in what it says is a crackdown on militants.

BOMBARDMENT CONTINUES

Late Thursday, Palestinian health officials said at least 27 people were killed in airstrikes in the central Gaza town of Deir al-Balah. Ambulances rushed victims to the Al-Aqsa Martyrs' Hospital.

A small child was rushed into the hospital on a stretcher, while a youth, covered in black soot, was treated as he sat on the floor in the entrance of the building.

Strikes in central and southern Gaza earlier Thursday had killed at least 48, including 14 children and 8 women, according to hospital officials there.

Gaza's Health Ministry, meanwhile, said Israeli forces have repositioned around southern Gaza's largest hospital – a week after storming into the facility in what Israel said was a search for signs of Israeli hostages.

The ministry said Israeli forces had moved out of the Nasser Hospital in Khan Younis, but were effectively besieging it and restricting movement for staff and patients. The complex is now grappling with severe shortages, including a lack of drinking water, food, electricity, oxygen, and necessary medical supplies, it said.

The Israeli military said that troops were no longer in the hospital, but that the area remained "an active battle zone."

Some Republicans are voicing doubt over Alabama IVF ruling. Democrats see an opportunity

By CHRISTINE FERNANDO Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Some Republicans joined Democrats in expressing alarm over a ruling this week by the Alabama Supreme Court that jeopardized future access to in vitro fertilization, giving allies of President Joe Biden new fuel for their efforts to center abortion access in the presidential election.

"We've got to talk about making sure we don't take away women's rights to IVF, women who are child-bearing age and want to give birth to children," said GOP Rep. Nancy Mace, who was campaigning this week for former President Donald Trump in South Carolina. She added, "I'll be working very hard to make sure that doesn't happen."

Democrats and left-leaning interest groups have banked on abortion rights as a major motivator for voters in the upcoming presidential election and fight for control of Congress. They believe abortion can be a winning issue as the debate widens to include increasing concerns over miscarriage care, access to medication, access to emergency care and now IVF treatments.

The GOP has struggled to talk about the issue while abortion-rights advocates have won races even in conservative-leaning states. Reproductive rights groups on Thursday compared the Alabama ruling to the impact of the Supreme Court's Dobbs ruling that overturned Roe v. Wade and nullified a federally guaranteed right to abortion.

"This has hit a nerve in a way I haven't seen since Dobbs," said Mini Timmaraju, head of the abortion rights group Reproductive Freedom for All. "And it's because folks didn't believe this could happen but it's happening."

Biden issued a statement Thursday that called the Alabama decision a "direct result of the overturning of Roe v. Wade." And Vice President Kamala Harris, in the middle of her "Fight for Reproductive Freedoms" tour, accused Republicans of hypocrisy.

"On the one hand, the proponents are saying that an individual doesn't have a right to end an unwanted pregnancy and, on the other hand, the individual does not have the right to start a family," she told an audience in Grand Rapids, Michigan.

The all-Republican Alabama Supreme Court ruled Wednesday that frozen embryos created through IVF are considered children under state law, potentially exposing families and clinics to criminal charges or punitive damages. In response, the state's largest hospital and at least two other providers paused IVF treatments as they scrambled to assess the ruling's impact.

Groton Daily Independent

Friday, Feb. 23, 2023 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 242 ~ 48 of 60

Trump did not speak publicly about the ruling and his campaign did not immediately respond to a request for comment. The dominant front-runner in the Republican primary, Trump has for months resisted calls from anti-abortion advocates to support a national ban because he says it would be unpopular with the general public. The Biden campaign and abortion rights advocates last week seized on a news report that Trump had privately suggested support for a 16-week ban.

Former U.N. Ambassador Nikki Haley, Trump's last major primary challenger, sided with the Alabama Supreme Court in a Wednesday interview with NBC News, saying "Embryos, to me, are babies." A day later, she told CNN she did not want to shut down IVF treatments and that "Alabama needs to go back and look at the law."

"One, you want to make sure that embryos are protected and respected in the way that they're supposed to be," Haley said. "Two, you want to make sure that parents have the rights to make those decisions with their doctor as they go through in what they're going to do."

New Hampshire Gov. Chris Sununu, a Republican, called the ruling "scary" while speaking at the POLITICO Governors Summit on Thursday. Alabama state Sen. Tim Melson, also a Republican, said he intends to file legislation to protect IVF services in the state.

But other Republicans backed the Alabama court ruling and suggested they would encourage women not to use IVF.

Catalina Stubbe, the national director of Moms for Liberty, a nonprofit that advocates for parental rights in education and has targeted discussions of race and LGBTQ identity in schools, said she empathized with women who want to be biological mothers through in vitro fertilization but felt they should adopt instead.

"There are many other options that moms can definitely take in consideration instead of IVF," said Stubbe, who emphasized she was describing her position and not her group's. "This is sad to create a life just to end up like an experiment for a laboratory."

IVF is a common process by which people attempt to become pregnant, especially for couples having trouble conceiving, LGBTQ couples and people trying to prevent passing on terminal genetic illnesses or high risks of cancer. It is responsible for about 84,000 babies a year, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

Legislation and court rulings defining life as beginning at fertilization or that give embryos legal rights may limit parts of the IVF process, including the removal of embryos that fail to implant in the uterus or the disposal of unused embryos.

Fertility doctors have been raising alarm bells over the risks of losing IVF access since *Roe v. Wade* was overturned as many patients frantically moved frozen embryos to states with more permissive abortion laws — a process that comes with increased cost, complexity and risk of damage to embryos.

Democratic Sen. Tammy Duckworth of Illinois, who has conceived two daughters through IVF, urged Congress to pass a bill introduced last month aiming to protect IVF access.

The Democratic Legislative Campaign Committee encouraged Alabamans to vote for Democratic candidate Marilyn Lands in a special election next month for a state legislative seat.

"This could be a determining factor in who is elected president and could have a big impact in who serves in Congress," said Kathleen Sebelius, a Democratic former Kansas governor and secretary of U.S. Health and Human Services.

At the annual Conservative Political Action Conference meeting on Thursday, Lala Mooney of Charles Town, West Virginia, said she "absolutely" agrees with the Alabama ruling.

"Embryos are a potential child," said Mooney, whose son is Republican U.S. Rep. Alex Mooney. "And the moment they're fertilized, I think they become human beings."

But Pat Parsley, a 76-year-old from Georgetown, South Carolina, who was waiting to hear from Haley at a campaign event Thursday afternoon, said she wants the former South Carolina governor to win the nomination but condemned the Alabama ruling.

"I think that is really scary. It's scary for women. It's scary for families," said Parsley, who also said she believes abortion should be up to women. "I'm glad I'm not a young woman right now. I hate to say that."

I mean, what young women are facing: We've gone backwards."

Kremlin critic Alexei Navalny's mother says she's resisting pressure to agree to a secret burial

By The Associated Press undefined

The mother of Russia's late opposition leader Alexei Navalny said Thursday that she has seen her son's body and that she is resisting strong pressure by authorities to agree to a secret burial outside the public eye.

Lyudmila Navalnaya said investigators allowed her to see her son's body in the city morgue. She said she reaffirmed the demand to give Navalny's body to her and protested what she described as authorities trying to force her to agree to a secret burial.

"They are blackmailing me, they are setting conditions where, when and how my son should be buried," she said in a video statement from the Arctic city of Salekhard. "They want it to do it secretly without a mourning ceremony."

Navalny's spokesman, Kira Yarmysh said on X, formerly Twitter, that his mother was also shown a medical certificate stating that the 47-year-old politician died of "natural causes." Yarmysh didn't specify what those were.

Navalny, Russia's most well-known opposition politician, suddenly died in an Arctic prison last week, prompting hundreds of Russians across the country to stream to impromptu memorials with flowers and candles. The Russian authorities have detained scores of them as they seek to suppress any major outpouring of sympathy for President Vladimir Putin's fiercest foe before the presidential election he is almost certain to win.

Across the ocean in San Francisco, U.S. President Joe Biden met with Navalny's widow Yulia Navalnaya and 20-year-old daughter Dasha and expressed "condolences for their devastating loss."

"To state the obvious, he was a man of incredible courage," Biden said after the meeting. "It's amazing how his wife and daughter are emulating that."

Navalny's mother has filed a lawsuit at a court in Salekhard contesting officials' refusal to release her son's body. A closed-door hearing has been scheduled for March 4. On Tuesday, she appealed to Putin to release her son's remains so that she could bury him with dignity.

In the video released Thursday, Navalnaya said that she had spent nearly 24 hours in the Salekhard office of the Investigative Committee, where officials told her that they have determined the politician's cause of death and have the paperwork ready, but she has to agree to a secret funeral.

"They want to take me to the outskirts of the cemetery to a fresh grave and say: 'Here lies your son.' I don't agree to this. I want you too — to whom Alexey is dear, for whom his death was a personal tragedy — to have the opportunity to say goodbye to him," she said.

Navalnaya accused the authorities of threatening her: "Looking into my eyes, they say that if I do not agree to a secret funeral, they will do something with my son's body. Investigator Voropayev openly told me: 'Time is not on your side, the corpse is decomposing,'" she said, reiterating her demand to release her son's body "immediately."

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 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.

Earlier Thursday, imprisoned opposition figure Vladimir Kara-Murza urged Russians not to give up after

Groton Daily Independent

Friday, Feb. 23, 2023 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 242 ~ 50 of 60

Navalny's death, and he alleged that a state-backed hit squad was taking out the Kremlin's political opponents, according to a video posted to social media.

Kara-Murza, a British-Russian citizen, is serving a 25-year sentence for treason at Penal Colony No. 7 in the Siberian city of Omsk. His comments came as he appeared via a video link in a court hearing over a complaint against Russia's Investigative Committee for what he believes were two poisoning attempts against him. He alleges the committee didn't properly investigate the attempts.

Kara-Murza is one of multiple opposition figures who have either been imprisoned, forced to flee the country or killed. He was convicted over publicly criticizing Russia's invasion of Ukraine and was handed a stiff sentence as part of a crackdown against critics of the war and freedom of speech.

"We owe it ... to our fallen comrades to continue to work with even greater strength and achieve what they lived and died for," Kara-Murza said in the video, which was shared by the Russian Sota telegram channel.

Kara-Murza says the attempts to poison him took place in 2015 and 2017. In the first, he nearly died of kidney failure, although no cause was determined. He was hospitalized with a similar illness in 2017 and put into a medically induced coma. His wife said doctors confirmed he was poisoned.

According to the video shared by Sota, Kara-Murza alleged there is a "death squad within the Federal Security Service, a group of professional killers in the service of the state, whose task is to physically eliminate political opponents of the Putin regime."

He said investigative journalists had shown the group of FSB officers participated in his poisoning, as well as Navalny's poisoning with a nerve agent in 2020 and the surveillance of opposition politician Boris Nemtsov before he was shot and killed in 2015 on a bridge near the Kremlin.

The Kremlin has denied any involvement in the illnesses and deaths of the opposition figures, including Navalny.

Before meeting with Biden, Navalny's widow said Thursday on her Instagram account that she had flown to visit her daughter, who is a student at Stanford University.

"My dear girl, I came to hug you and support you, and you sit and support me" she wrote under a photo of herself and Dasha lying on a carpet.

Describing her daughter as "strong, brave and resilient," Navalnaya said the family would "definitely cope with everything." She also has a 15-year-old son, Zakhar.

In a video on Monday, Yulia Navalnaya also accusing Putin of killing her husband and alleged the refusal to release his body was part of a cover-up.

Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov rejected the allegations, calling them "absolutely unfounded, insolent accusations about the head of the Russian state."

Biden said Thursday that the U.S. on Friday will be announcing sanctions "against Putin, who is responsible for his (Navalny's) death."

Houthi rebel attack sets cargo ship ablaze, forces Israel to intercept another attack near Eilat

By JON GAMBRELL Associated Press

DUBAI, United Arab Emirates (AP) — Yemen's Houthi rebels launched attacks Thursday on both Israel and a ship traveling through the Gulf of Aden, setting the vessel ablaze and again demonstrating their ability to launch assaults despite facing U.S.-led airstrikes targeting their forces.

The rebels' supreme leader, Abdul Malik al-Houthi, announced an "the escalation in sea operations" conducted by his forces as part of what they describe a pressure campaign to end Israel's war on Hamas in the Gaza Strip. But the Houthis' targets have grown more random since their attacks began in November, endangering a vital waterway for cargo and energy shipments traveling from Asia and the Middle East onward to Europe.

The attack Thursday in the Gulf of Aden saw two missiles fired at a Palau-flagged cargo ship named Islander, the U.S. military's Central Command said. A European naval force in the region described the attack

Groton Daily Independent

Friday, Feb. 23, 2023 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 242 ~ 51 of 60

as sparking a fire and wounding one sailor on board the vessel, though the ship is continuing on its way.

The Islander 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. Other vessels similarly have sent messages identifying their crews as Muslims or not affiliated with Israel to try and avoid rebel attacks.

Meanwhile, sirens sounded early Thursday morning over the southern Israeli port 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.

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

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.

Houthi Brig. Gen. Yahya Saree claimed the attacks in a statement late Thursday night.

The Houthis "persist in upholding their religious, moral and humanitarian duties towards the Palestinian people and in defense of their beloved Yemen in the face of American-British aggression," Saree said in a prerecorded statement. "Military operations will not stop unless the aggression stops and the siege on the Palestinian people in the Gaza Strip is lifted."

Saree also claimed a drone attack on a U.S. warship in the region. Central Command said it and an allied warship shot down six Houthi drones in the Red Sea. France's military claimed downing two of the Houthi drones.

Since November, the rebels have repeatedly targeted ships in the Red Sea and surrounding waters over the Israel-Hamas war. Those vessels have included at least one with cargo for Iran, the Houthis' main benefactor, and an aid ship later bound for Houthi-controlled territory.

Despite a month of U.S.-led airstrikes, Houthi rebels remain capable of launching significant attacks. This week, they severely 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.

Al-Houthi, the rebels' leader, gave a televised speech in which he described an escalation in their attacks. "Missiles, drones and military boats have been activated, and submarine weapons have been introduced into our operations at sea, which is worrying to the enemy," he said. Central Command in recent days acknowledged destroying an underwater bomb-carrying Houthi drone.

Al-Houthi also denied his forces were allowing some vessels pass through the waterways by Yemen unharmed after paying protection money.

"The enemy failed in the face of our operations at sea," he said. "He was not able to prevent them, nor was he able to deter them, nor was he able to limit or reduce them."

The Houthis, a Zaydi Shiite group, seized Yemen's capital in 2014 and have battled a Saudi-led coalition since 2015. Their Zaydi people ran a 1,000-year kingdom in Yemen up until 1962.

The U.S. State Department has 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 that was recently targeted.

"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."

Wendy Williams diagnosed with same form of dementia as Bruce Willis

By ANTHONY McCARTNEY AP Entertainment Writer

LOS ANGELES (AP) — Former talk show host Wendy Williams has been diagnosed with the same form of dementia that actor Bruce Willis has, a statement released Thursday on behalf of her caretakers says.

The statement said the 59-year-old's diagnoses of primary progressive aphasia and frontotemporal dementia "have already presented significant hurdles in Wendy's life" and have behavioral and cognitive impacts.

"Wendy is still able to do many things for herself. Most importantly she maintains her trademark sense of humor and is receiving the care she requires to make sure she is protected and that her needs are addressed. She is appreciative of the many kind thoughts and good wishes being sent her way," the statement attributed to her care team said.

The statement on Williams' health was issued on PR Newswire. A representative listed on the release, Jennifer Hanley, referred questions back to the statement when contacted by The Associated Press.

The announcement came a day after a cover story in People magazine quoted Williams' family about the nature of her struggles, ahead of a Lifetime documentary set to air Saturday.

"The people who love her cannot see her," People quoted Williams' sister Wanda as saying. "I think the big (question) is: How the hell did we get here?" The family said a court-appointed legal guardian was the only person with unfettered access to Williams.

The article said the Lifetime documentary crew, which set out in 2022 to chronicle Williams' comeback, stopped filming in April 2023 when, her manager "and jeweler" Will Selby says in footage for the film, she entered a facility to treat "cognitive issues." Her son says in the documentary that doctors had connected her cognitive issues to alcohol use, People reported.

Her family told People they don't know where she is and cannot call her themselves, but she can call them.

The Association for Frontotemporal Degeneration describes FTD as a group of brain disorders caused by degeneration of the frontal and/or temporal lobes of the brain that affects behavior, language and movement. Aphasia, a brain disorder that can lead to problems speaking or understanding words, can be a symptom of it. The association describes frontotemporal degeneration as "an inevitable decline in functioning," with an average life expectancy of seven to 13 years after the onset of symptoms.

FTD usually occurs in people in their 40s, 50s and early 60s. It can affect a person's personality, causing a loss of inhibition or inappropriate behavior. It is sometimes mistaken for depression or bipolar disorder, and can take years to diagnose.

There are no treatments to slow or stop the disease, but some interventions can help manage symptoms.

The association was involved in the disclosure of Willis' diagnosis in February 2023, hosting a statement posted by the actor's family.

"We thank Wendy Williams for having the courage to make her diagnosis public and raise awareness of the disease," association CEO Susan Dickinson said in a statement. "We know that a diagnosis like this can be heartbreaking, but she is not alone. While there may not be a cure, every day we are working to improve care and research into treatments for this disease."

Thursday's statement credited Weill Cornell Medicine in New York with the care and expertise Williams received. Weill Cornell declined comment.

Williams rose to fame in part due to her no-boundaries approach to her life, which included sharing personal details about her health, plastic surgery and cocaine addiction — the subject of her 2003 memoir, "Wendy's Got the Heat."

A hallmark of "The Wendy Williams Show," which competed for viewers with Ellen DeGeneres' show, was her signature phrase, "How you doin'?" She transitioned to television after a successful career as a radio host, known for her hot takes on gossip and skewering of celebrities, including a contentious 2003 interview with Whitney Houston.

In 2022, Williams' self-titled daytime talk show ended because of her ongoing health issues. Sherri Shepherd, who filled in for Williams as a guest host, received her own show.

Williams said in 2018 that she had been diagnosed years before with Graves' disease, which leads to the overproduction of thyroid hormones and can cause wide-ranging symptoms and affect overall health.

New Hampshire man convicted of killing daughter, 5, whose body has not been found

By KATHY McCORMACK Associated Press

MANCHESTER, N.H. (AP) — A New Hampshire man was convicted of second-degree murder Thursday in the death of his 5-year-old daughter, who police believe was killed nearly two years before she was reported missing in 2021 and whose body was never found.

Adam Montgomery, 34, did not attend the trial and wasn't present when jurors returned their verdict. He had proclaimed his innocence, saying in court last year in an unrelated case that he loved Harmony Montgomery "unconditionally."

"I am grateful to the judge, jury, and Department of Justice for delivering justice for Harmony," New Hampshire Gov. Chris Sununu said in a statement. "Adam Montgomery is a monster and deserves to spend the rest of his life in prison."

Adam Montgomery's attorneys earlier acknowledged his guilt on two lesser charges, that he "purposely and unlawfully removed, concealed or destroyed" her corpse and falsified physical evidence, but said he didn't kill his daughter. The jury also convicted him of assaulting Harmony Montgomery in 2019 and of tampering with the key prosecution witness, his estranged wife and stepmother of his daughter, Kayla Montgomery.

Investigators believe Harmony Montgomery was slain in December 2019, though she wasn't reported missing for almost two years. Kayla Montgomery testified that the body was hidden in the trunk of a car, a cooler, a ceiling vent and a workplace freezer before Adam Montgomery disposed of it.

Defense attorney James Brooks deferred comment to Caroline Smith, the main attorney representing Adam Montgomery. She did not immediately respond to a request for comment.

Adam Montgomery had custody of the girl. Her mother, Crystal Sorey, who was no longer in a relationship with him, said the last time she saw Harmony Montgomery was during a video call in April 2019. She eventually went to police, who announced they were looking for the missing child on New Year's Eve 2021.

Photos of the girl were widely circulated on social media. Police eventually determined she had been killed.

"I'm relieved that there's some justice being served," Sorey told WMUR-TV on Thursday. "Obviously, it's not over. I have a little bit of peace knowing that he's being held accountable because he thought he was so untouchable and that she didn't matter, that nobody would miss her. He was so wrong, he was so wrong."

She said she still wants to find the remains of her daughter so she can finally bring her home.

"We've still got to find her," police Chief Allen Aldenberg said Thursday. "This girl deserves better than the life she had."

Harmony Montgomery's case has exposed weaknesses in child protection systems and provoked calls to prioritize the well-being of children over parents in custody matters. Harmony was moved between the homes of her mother and her foster parents multiple times before Adam Montgomery received custody in 2019 and moved to New Hampshire.

"I still firmly believe that some people in some other agencies need to be held accountable. And I'm asking for that," Aldenberg said, referring to child welfare officials in Massachusetts and New Hampshire. "This little 5-year-old girl, she deserves somebody to be held accountable that failed along the way because we wouldn't be standing here today if other people had done their job."

Kayla Montgomery is serving an 18-month prison sentence after pleading guilty to perjury charges related to the investigation into the child's disappearance and agreed to cooperate with prosecutors. She testified that her husband killed Harmony Montgomery on Dec. 7, 2019, while the family lived in their car after being evicted from their home.

Kayla Montgomery testified that her husband repeatedly punched Harmony Montgomery in the face and head because he was angry that she was having bathroom accidents in the car.

The couple noticed the girl was dead hours later when the car broke down, at which time Adam Montgomery put her body in a duffel bag, Kayla Montgomery had testified.

For the next three months, she testified, Adam Montgomery moved the body from container to container

Groton Daily Independent

Friday, Feb. 23, 2023 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 242 ~ 54 of 60

and place to place. According to his wife, the locations included the trunk of a friend's car, a cooler in the hallway of his mother-in-law's apartment building, the ceiling vent of a homeless shelter and a workplace freezer.

Lead detective John Dunleavy said Thursday that while he considered the conviction a win, it did not feel complete since Harmony Montgomery was still missing.

"We didn't find her," he said. "I will be on the job for some time, I still have about 15 years left. And as long as I'm a police officer, I'm going to continue to look for her."

Prosecutor Benjamin Agati said at a news conference that the trial does not end the search for the girl. He said that after analyzing the mileage Adam Montgomery took with the rental truck into Massachusetts, there are about 26 miles (42 kilometers) that he could have covered where her remains might be.

"She is somewhere along that route," he said, pointing out previous searches in the Revere, Massachusetts, area. "Those are still our big areas of search."

Agati said that although Montgomery didn't attend his trial, state law would typically require him to attend his sentencing, and they would be making a filing with the court to ensure that he would attend.

He said that when Adam Montgomery is sentenced in the coming months, he should face a minimum sentence on the murder charge of 35 years to life, a tougher sentence because of his daughter's young age. He said that would be consecutive with armed criminal charges for which he is already serving a minimum sentence of more than 33 years.

Asked if that meant Adam Montgomery was never getting out of prison, the prosecutor said: "It's a lot of time, and I hope I'm not practicing at the time that that minimum date ever comes around."

Texas school legally punished Black student over hairstyle, judge says

By JUAN A. LOZANO Associated Press

ANAHUAC, Texas (AP) — A Black high school student's monthslong punishment by his Texas school district for refusing to change his hairstyle does not violate a new state law that prohibits race-based hair discrimination, a judge ruled on Thursday.

Darryl George, 18, has not been in his regular Houston-area high school classes since Aug. 31 because the district, Barbers Hill, says the length of his hair violates its dress code.

The district filed a lawsuit arguing George's long hair, which he wears in tied and twisted locs on top of his head, violates its 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.

After about three hours of testimony in Anahuac, state District Judge Chap Cain III ruled in favor of the school district, saying its policy is not discriminatory because the CROWN Act does not say that exemptions for long hair can be made for hairstyles that are protected by the law, including locs. And he said courts must not attempt to rewrite legislation.

"Judges should not legislate from the bench and I am not about to start today," Cain said.

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.

The judge encouraged George to ask the state Legislature or the school board to address the issue.

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.

Allie Booker, George's attorney, said she planned to seek an injunction in the federal lawsuit to stop George's punishment and that she also would appeal Thursday's decision.

For most of the school year, George, a junior, has either served in-school suspension at Barbers Hill High School in Mont Belvieu or spent time at an off-site disciplinary program.

"The Texas legal system has validated our position that the district's dress code does not violate the CROWN Act and that the CROWN Act does not give students unlimited self-expression," Barbers Hill Su-

perintendent Greg Poole said in a statement.

The district did not present any witnesses, instead only submitting evidence that included an affidavit from the district's superintendent defending the dress code policy. Its attorneys argued that the dress code policy does not violate the CROWN Act because the law does not mention or cover hair length.

Before the trial, George and his mother, Darresha George, said they were optimistic.

Wearing locs is "how I feel closer to my people. It's how I feel closer to my ancestors. It's just me. It's how I am," George said.

After the ruling, George and his mother cried and declined to speak with reporters.

Candice Matthews, a spokesperson for George's family, said the 18-year-old asked her as he left the courthouse: "All because of my hair? I can't get my education because of my hair?"

Testifying for George, Democratic state Rep. Ron Reynolds, one of the co-authors of the CROWN Act, said that while the protection of hair length was not specifically mentioned in the CROWN Act, it was inferred.

"Anyone familiar with braids, locs, twists knows it requires a certain amount of length," Reynolds said.

It is "almost impossible for a person to comply with this (grooming) policy and wear that protective hairstyle," he said.

Reynolds said he was disappointed by the ruling, and that he would file a bill for a new version of the CROWN Act that specifically mentions protections for hair length.

"The purpose of the legislation is to protect students like Darryl ... the same students that Barbers Hill has discriminated against because of their locs, their braids and their twists," Reynolds said.

U.S. Rep Bonnie Watson Coleman, a New Jersey Democrat who has tried to get a federal version of the CROWN Act passed, called Thursday's decision "a terrible interpretation of the CROWN Act."

"This is what we mean by institutional racism," Coleman said on X.

In his statement, Poole pushed back against allegations that the district's dress code is racist, saying such allegations undermine "efforts to address actions that violate constitutionally protected rights."

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

Barbers Hill's hair policy was also 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 there was "a substantial likelihood" that his rights to free speech and to be free from racial discrimination would be violated if he was barred. That lawsuit is pending.

Putin takes a flight in nuclear-capable bomber in a tough message to the West ahead of election

MOSCOW (AP) — Russia's President Vladimir Putin on Thursday took a co-pilot's seat in a nuclear-capable strategic bomber on a flight that appeared aimed at bolstering his image ahead of next month's election he's all but certain to win.

Putin's 30-minute flight in a Tu-160M supersonic strategic bomber also seemed intended to send a reminder of Russia's nuclear might amid soaring tensions with the West over the fighting in Ukraine.

Putin, 71, who is running as an independent candidate, relies on a tight control over Russia's political system that he has established during 24 years in power. Friday's death of imprisoned Russian opposition leader Alexei Navalny sent a chilling reminder of the Kremlin's ruthless crackdown on dissent and dealt a heavy blow to the beleaguered Russian opposition.

On Thursday, Putin, clad in a flight suit, boarded the warplane at a snow-covered airfield of an aircraft-making plant in the Volga River city of Kazan that has built the heavy bombers since the Soviet times.

The plant has received state orders to produce a modernized version of the Tu-160 bomber that first flew in the 1980s and was code-named Blackjack by NATO.

The aircraft Putin flew was one of the first such revamped bombers built, equipped with new engines and avionics and designated Tu-160M.

Speaking to reporters after the flight, Putin praised the new aircraft as "excellent," noting that it has big

Groton Daily Independent

Friday, Feb. 23, 2023 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 242 ~ 56 of 60

improvements compared to the initial version.

Thursday's flight marked at least the third time he got in a cockpit of a warplane. In 2000, he took a co-pilot's seat in a Su-27 fighter to fly to Chechnya during separatist fighting there and in 2005 he co-piloted a Tu-160 during military drills.

As part of the Kremlin efforts to project an image of an action-loving and physically strong leader, Putin also took a co-pilot's seat in an amphibious plane, flew a paraglider and drove a racing car and heavy trucks.

He also drove a heavy truck to a meeting in Kazan on Thursday, one of a series of campaign trips ahead of the March 15-17 presidential election.

With prominent critics who could challenge him either jailed or living abroad and most independent media banned, Putin's reelection is all but assured. He faces a token opposition from three other candidates nominated by Kremlin-friendly parties represented in parliament.

Ohio mom who left toddler alone when she went on vacation pleads guilty to aggravated murder

An Ohio mother who left her 16-month-old daughter home alone in a playpen for 10 days last summer while she went on vacation pleaded guilty on Thursday to aggravated murder.

Kristel Candelario, 32, also pleaded guilty to child endangerment as part of a plea deal with Cuyahoga County prosecutors, who agreed to dismiss two murder counts and a felonious assault charge. Candelario now faces a life term when she's sentenced March 18.

Authorities have said Candelario left her daughter, Jaily, in their Cleveland home when she went on vacation to Detroit and Puerto Rico in June 2023. When she returned 10 days later, she found the girl was not breathing in the playpen and called 911. Emergency responders found the child was "extremely dehydrated" and pronounced her dead shortly after they arrived.

An autopsy by the Cuyahoga County medical examiner's office determined that the toddler had died of starvation and severe dehydration.

'Little dark secret': DEA agent on trial accused of taking \$250K in bribes from Mafia

By JIM MUSTIAN and JOSHUA GOODMAN Associated Press

BUFFALO, N.Y. (AP) — The way prosecutors tell it, Joseph Bongiovanni went to work for years with a "little dark secret."

Behind the veneer of a veteran U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration agent, they alleged, was a turn-coat on the take from the Buffalo Mafia, offering an "umbrella of protection" that derailed investigations of his childhood friends, covered for a sex-trafficking strip club and even helped a connected high school English teacher keep his marijuana-growing side hustle.

In a federal trial that began this month, prosecutors portrayed Bongiovanni as a greedy racist who pocketed more than \$250,000 in cash-stuffed envelopes over a decade and threw his colleagues off by opening bogus case files and encouraging them to spend less time investigating Italians and more time on Blacks and Hispanics, "n----- and s-----" he was alleged to have called them. When authorities finally unmasked him in 2019, he hastily retired and wiped his cellphone clean.

"Sometimes the DEA doesn't get it right," Assistant U.S. Attorney Joseph Tripi told jurors. "He was able to manipulate everyone because, in law enforcement, there's a certain amount of trust that's inherent. He did it under the watch of supervisors who under-supervised him."

The 59-year-old Bongiovanni has denied the counts of bribery, conspiracy and obstruction of justice that could land him behind bars for life, charges his attorney says are built on lies "so fanciful they don't just strain credibility, they rip it apart."

The trial is the latest gut punch to the 4,100-agent DEA, which has seen at least 16 agents brought up on federal charges since 2015, a parade of misconduct that has revealed gaping holes in the agency's supervision.

Groton Daily Independent

Friday, Feb. 23, 2023 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 242 ~ 57 of 60

The crimes have included child pornography, drug trafficking, leaking intelligence to defense attorneys and selling firearms to cartel associates, an Associated Press analysis found. One carried a "Liberty or Death" flag and flashed his badge outside the Capitol on Jan. 6. Another infiltrated the DEA in Chicago and helped traffickers smuggle thousands of kilos of cocaine from Puerto Rico to New York.

At least three veteran agents are serving prison sentences of a decade or longer, including one who laundered money for cartels in Colombia and spent lavishly on expensive sports cars and Tiffany jewels, and an Arkansas-based agent recorded taking a bribe inside a Las Vegas casino.

The cases, coming amid an epidemic of more than 100,000 fatal drug overdoses a year, often present yearslong headaches for the U.S. Justice Department to determine whether any investigations were tainted when rogue agents betrayed the badge.

"We should not expect to see this much crime in one law enforcement agency," said Rachel Moran, an associate professor at the University of St. Thomas School of Law in Minneapolis. "The common thread I see here is a lack of oversight and accountability."

The DEA declined to comment. DEA Administrator Anne Milgram is herself the subject of an ongoing Inspector General inquiry examining whether the agency improperly hired some of her past associates.

Like other DEA scandals, the Bongiovanni case underscores recurring questions about the agency's hiring standards and ability to root out corruption. Background checks didn't turn up Bongiovanni's prior drug use and ties to Italian organized crime in his native Buffalo, prosecutors said, and not a single member of law enforcement was on to him until a trafficker paying for Bongiovanni's protection was arrested by another agency. "He's got that little dark secret," Tripi said.

The trial, expected to last two months, is part of a broader sex-trafficking prosecution that has taken sensational turns, including an implicated judge who killed himself after the FBI raided his home, law enforcement dragging a pond in search of an overdose victim and dead rats planted outside the home of a government witness who prosecutors allege was later killed by a fatal dose of fentanyl.

Bongiovanni was raised in a tight-knit Italian American community in North Buffalo and known as a "door kicker" in the DEA, defense attorney Parker MacKay said, "not the type to sit in front of a computer."

In his high school yearbook, Bongiovanni said he wanted to be a billionaire. But prosecutors said he went through financial struggles during his two-decade career that made him vulnerable to taking bribes.

His protection ranged from providing an "all clear" assuring trafficker friends they were not on law enforcement's radar to leaking intelligence and opening fictitious cases that made it appear he was investigating them or relying on them as informants, prosecutors said, a sort of catch-and-kill tactic that prevented other law enforcement agencies from pursuing their own cases. This also positioned Bongiovanni to receive notice any time another agency became interested in one of the targets, a process known as deconfliction.

Bongiovanni also is accused of vouching for criminals, filing bogus reports and swiping a sensitive DEA case file on organized crime that he stored in his basement after his abrupt retirement.

Among the rackets Bongiovanni is accused of protecting is Pharoah's Gentlemen's Club, a strip club outside Buffalo described by prosecutors as a haven for drug use and sex trafficking. Bongiovanni was childhood friends with the owner, Peter Gerace Jr., who authorities allege has close ties to both the Buffalo Mafia and the notoriously violent Outlaws Motorcycle Club.

Prosecutors said Gerace had the agent on speed dial for advice when he needed to cover up the overdose of a stripper. The evidence includes a voicemail in which Gerace asks Bongiovanni about tracing a drug dealer's cellphone. "Is there a way to ping it like police do?" he said, according to court records. "I just want to know if you could do that or not."

Gerace attorney Mark Foti said his client "denies all charges and looks forward to confronting the government's evidence at his trial."

The long list of witnesses in the case includes dozens of federal law enforcement officers and a public school teacher of 30 years who admitted running a marijuana-growing operation while receiving confidential information from Bongiovanni.

Prosecutor Tripi said Bongiovanni had two sets of rules, one for cronies lining his pockets and another for everyone else.

"He did just enough legitimate work to avoid detection," he said. "He almost got away with it."

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 rose to become Russia's most prominent opposition figure and President Vladimir Putin's greatest foe.

But following the death in prison last week of Alexei Navalny, 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 the 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.

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.

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 couple 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 while 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 Siarhei 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

Groton Daily Independent

Friday, Feb. 23, 2023 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 242 ~ 59 of 60

-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.

Pundits on Russian state television have already tried to discredit her, suggesting she was wearing too much makeup and that she should have covered her hair to mourn Navalny, in line with Russian Orthodox tradition.

Social media posts disparaging Navalnaya and her relationship with her husband also popped up nearly simultaneously on accounts operated by Russian state media, as well as other accounts with no obvious connection to the Kremlin that have long pushed Russian propaganda, according to Reset, which is a London-based nonprofit that studies online misinformation and propaganda.

Since Putin's forces 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.

Tsikhanouskaya, 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."

Groton Daily Independent

Friday, Feb. 23, 2023 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 242 ~ 60 of 60

Today in History: February 23

Mississippi grand jury declines new charges in Emmett Till killing

By The Associated Press undefined

Today in History

Today is Friday, Feb. 23, the 54th day of 2024. There are 312 days left in the year.

Today's Highlight in History:

On Feb. 23, 2007, a Mississippi grand jury refused to bring any new charges in the 1955 slaying of Emmett Till, the Black teenager who was beaten and shot after being accused of whistling at a white woman, declining to indict the woman, Carolyn Bryant Donham, for manslaughter.

On this date:

In 1685, composer George Frideric Handel was born in present-day Germany.

In 1822, Boston was granted a charter to incorporate as a city.

In 1836, the siege of the Alamo began in San Antonio, Texas.

In 1861, President-elect Abraham Lincoln arrived secretly in Washington to take office, following word of a possible assassination plot in Baltimore.

In 1903, President Theodore Roosevelt signed an agreement with Cuba to lease the area around Guantanamo Bay to the United States.

In 1942, the first shelling of the U.S. mainland during World War II occurred as a Japanese submarine fired on an oil refinery near Santa Barbara, California, causing little damage.

In 1945, during World War II, U.S. Marines on Iwo Jima captured Mount Suribachi, where they raised two American flags (the second flag-raising was captured in the iconic Associated Press photograph.)

In 1954, the first mass inoculation of schoolchildren against polio using the Salk vaccine began in Pittsburgh as some 5,000 students were vaccinated.

In 1998, 42 people were killed, some 2,600 homes and businesses damaged or destroyed, by tornadoes in central Florida.

In 2011, in a major policy reversal, the Obama administration said it would no longer defend the constitutionality of the Defense of Marriage Act, a federal law banning recognition of same-sex marriage.

In 2020, Ahmaud Arbery, a 25-year-old Black man, was fatally shot on a residential Georgia street; a white father and son had armed themselves and pursued him after seeing him running through their neighborhood. (Greg and Travis McMichael and neighbor William "Roddie" Bryan were convicted of murder, aggravated assault and other charges and were sentenced to life in prison.)

In 2021, golfer Tiger Woods was seriously injured when his SUV crashed into a median and rolled over several times on a steep road in suburban Los Angeles.

In 2023, a federal judge handed singer R. Kelly a 20-year prison sentence for his convictions of child pornography and the enticement of minors for sex but said he would serve nearly all of the sentence simultaneously with a 30-year sentence imposed a year earlier on racketeering charges.

Today's birthdays: Football Hall of Famer Fred Biletnikoff is 81. Author John Sandford is 80. Actor Patricia Richardson is 73. Former NFL player Ed "Too Tall" Jones is 73. Rock musician Brad Whitford (Aerosmith) is 72. Singer Howard Jones is 69. Rock musician Michael Wilton (Queensryche) is 62. Country singer Dusty Drake is 60. Actor Kristin Davis is 59. Former tennis player Helena Sukova is 59. Actor Marc Price is 56. TV personality/businessman Daymond John (TV: "Shark Tank") is 55. Actor Niecy Nash is 54. Rock musician Jeff Beres (Sister Hazel) is 53. Country singer Steve Holy is 52. Rock musician Lasse Johansson (The Cardigans) is 51. Film and theater composer Robert Lopez is 49. Actor Kelly Macdonald is 48. Rapper Residente is 46. Actor Josh Gad is 43. Actor Emily Blunt is 41. Actor Aziz Ansari is 41. Actor Tye White (TV: "Greenleaf") is 38. Actor Dakota Fanning is 30.