

# Groton Daily Independent

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## Wednesday, Feb. 28

Senior Menu: Beef broccoli sir fry, rice, cauliflower, five cup salad, whole wheat bread.

School Breakfast: Cereal.

School Lunch: Chef salad.

Groton CM&A: Kids' Club, Youth Group and Adult Bible Study begins at 7 pm

Emmanuel Lutheran: Soup Supper (Sarah Circle serving), 6 p.m.; Worship, 7 p.m.

St. John's Lutheran: Confirmation at 3:45 p.m. Lent Service at 7 p.m.

United Methodist: Community coffee hour, 9:30 a.m.; confirmation, 6 p.m.; Lent Bible Study, 7 p.m.

## Thursday, Feb. 29

Senior Menu: Baked pork chop, sweet potatoes, vegetable capri blend, chocolate pudding with banana, whole wheat bread.

School Breakfast: Breakfast pizza.

School Lunch: Pasta with meat sauce.

Girls SoDak 16

Emmanuel Lutheran: Northern Plains Pastor's Meeting, 7 p.m.

## Friday, March 1

**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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## 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.

## Tuesday, February. 27

Senior Menu: Hamburger cabbage roll hot dish, corn, pears, muffin.

School Breakfast: Scones.

School Lunch: Chicken legs, mashed potatoes.

Boys Region 1A at Groton: 6 p.m.: Groton Area vs. Redfield, 7:15: Waubay-Summit vs. Aberdeen Roncalli

Thrift Store open 3 p.m. to 6 p.m.

Food Pantry open 4 p.m. to 8 p.m.

United Methodist: Bible Study, 10 a.m.

**Groton Daily Independent**  
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# 1440

The Supreme Court will hear arguments today over whether states can bar social media companies from moderating political content on their platforms, one of three social media disputes before the court this term.

Hungary's parliament is set to vote on Sweden's NATO bid today, a move that would pave the way for Sweden to become the 32nd country to join the transatlantic military alliance.

In partnership with [smartasset™](#)

A widely used drug treating chronic severe asthma also significantly reduces reactions to many common food allergens, new research presented yesterday revealed. Marketed under the brand name Xolair, the drug is the first preventive treatment that protects users from accidental life-threatening exposures.

## Sports, Entertainment, & Culture

"Oppenheimer" wins top film prize for best cast at Screen Actors Guild Awards while "Succession" and "The Bear" bring home top television awards.

Kenneth Mitchell, actor known for roles in "Star Trek: Discovery" and "Jericho," dies at 49 from complications of ALS. Golden Richards, Super Bowl-winning wide receiver, dies at 73.

NFL's 2024 salary cap to rise to record \$255M per team, a 13.6% increase over 2023.

## Science & Technology

Odysseus moon lander lands horizontally after likely catching one of its feet on the surface during final descent; craft remains functional and is generating power.

Brain stimulation using low-frequency ultrasound may help treat certain brain disorders, including assisting in regaining control of motor functions after accidents.

Researchers demonstrate a hypothetical cyberattack capable of causing smartphones to catch on fire while charging; approach manipulates signals from wireless chargers, causing rapid heating of the battery.

## Business & Markets

Markets end Friday mixed (Dow +0.2%, S&P 500 +0.0%, Nasdaq -0.3%), but all three major indexes end week up, led by Nvidia's strong earnings.

Investor Warren Buffett issues annual letter for Berkshire Hathaway shareholders, pays tribute to former partner Charlie Munger.

US regulators accuse tax giant H&R Block of deceptive marketing and making it unreasonably difficult to downgrade services once customers realized upgraded options weren't necessary.

## Politics & World Affairs

Former President Donald Trump wins South Carolina GOP primary over the state's former Gov. Nikki Haley, 60% to about 40%; Haley says she will remain in the race, Michigan primary set for tomorrow.

Israeli officials to consider evacuation plan for the southern Gazan city of Rafah this week, ahead of a planned operation; an estimated 1 million refugees are in the immediate area. US, UK forces launch wave of strikes against Houthi rebels in Yemen, the fourth such mission in recent weeks.

Russia returns body of deceased opposition leader Alexei Navalny to family; Navalny died in an Arctic prison Feb. 16. Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy says an estimated 31,000 troops have been killed since Russia invaded the country two years ago.



## Eminent domain is the latest front in carbon pipeline fight

Bart Pfankuch

South Dakota News Watch

Some of the most contentious, emotionally charged debates during the 2024 South Dakota legislative session have been about property rights and whether a private company can use eminent domain to force a carbon dioxide pipeline onto land against the owner's will.

The heated discussions are driven by a proposal from Summit Carbon Solutions to run 470 miles of a 1,900-mile underground pipeline across eastern South Dakota. The pipe would carry liquified carbon dioxide gas from regional ethanol plants to North Dakota, where it would be stored deep underground and kept out of the atmosphere.

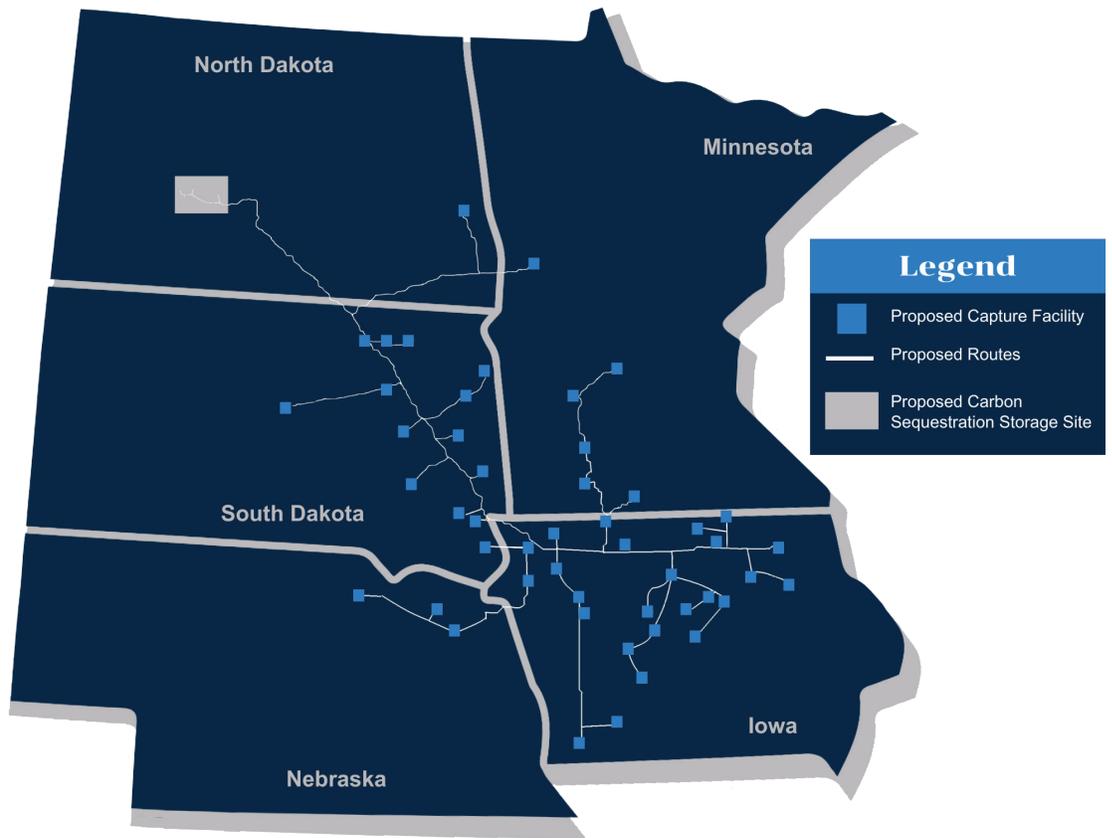
In all, lawmakers are weighing 10 bills related to the pipeline and eminent domain, which requires landowners to be paid for the use of their land but gives them little legal recourse to stop it.

"The core of the issue is about taking people's lands, and it's starting to infringe on the American way," Joy Hohn, whose family farm west of Sioux Falls near Hartford is on the proposed pipeline route, told News Watch.

"Prior to this, our eminent domain laws were for projects that were for the good of the people and that benefit the public. But when you have an out-of-state, foreign-backed company using the threat of eminent domain in their dealings, it's not good and people are really fired up about that."

Kirk Yackley, who farms northeast of Pierre near Onida, said he has heard of landowners being bullied, but said he had a good experience with Summit representatives.

Yackley is one of the roughly 3 out of 4 South Dakota landowners along the route who have signed voluntary easements allowing the CO2 pipeline on their land, according to Summit. In his case, the line



**This map shows the route of the carbon dioxide pipeline proposed by Summit Carbon Solutions** (Image: Courtesy Summit Carbon Solutions)

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would cut across about a half-mile of his family's 9,000-acre farm.

"They were very professional and respectful," he said of Summit representatives.

## Summit plans to refile for pipeline permit

The state Public Utilities Commission in September rejected Summit's application after regulators said there were too many conflicts between the proposed route and county guidelines for setbacks between utility projects and existing structures.

Summit officials have said they will refile their permit request once they iron out differences and obtain the voluntary easements needed to site the project. They're also supporting a change in state law to eliminate the ability of counties to regulate pipeline locations.

"We continue to work with landowners and community leaders across the state to find a mutually agreeable path," Sabrina Zenor, a spokeswoman for Summit, wrote in an email to News Watch. "We heard the South Dakota PUC's request to work with counties."

Summit hopes to receive voluntary easements from 100% of property owners along the route, she said. The company has secured them from 75% of South Dakotans, and the documents would apply when the company resubmits an application to the state PUC, Zenor wrote.

Voluntary easement rates in other states include 72% in Nebraska, 75% in Iowa, and 90% in North Dakota and Minnesota, she wrote.



**Joy Hohn and her brother, Orrin Geide, both of Hartford, S.D., are opposed to the use of eminent domain to build a pipeline across their family's land, and are also concerned about the safety of the CO2 pipeline.** (Photo:

Courtesy Joy Hohn)



"The core of the issue is about taking people's lands, and it's starting to infringe on the American way. Prior to this, our eminent domain laws were for projects that were for the good of the people and that benefit the public.

Joy Hohn, who runs a family farm near Hartford

Another company, Navigator CO2 Ventures, dropped its proposal for a pipeline in the region, leaving Summit as the only active project. The companies hope to qualify for billions of dollars in federal tax credits aimed at reducing greenhouse gasses.

Some scientists question the efficacy and value of carbon capture and sequestration pipelines, arguing the federal subsidies could be used in more proven, efficient ways to reduce climate change.

But supporters said the pipelines will help the atmosphere and provide foundational support to the U.S. ethanol industry and the corn growers who back it.

South Dakota produces \$2.9 billion worth of ethanol annually. Summit's plan would collect CO2 from nearly three dozen ethanol plants, including a handful in the state.

Backers also have said the pipeline is a key component of the proposed \$1 billion

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Gevo plant in northeast South Dakota at Lake Preston that would use corn to make biofuels for the airline industry.

## Legislator opinion mixed on eminent domain

At one point during this legislative session, the debate over property rights became so emotional that Rep. Steven Duffy, a Rapid City Republican, said he and another lawmaker had to leave the committee hearing together in order to maintain their safety.

Duffy said the temperature of the debate has fallen since then, but concerns among affected landowners remain high.

One of the leading eminent domain opponents, Rep. Jon Hansen, a Dell Rapids Republican, sponsored House Bill 1219, which would prohibit the use of eminent domain specifically for pipelines that would carry carbon dioxide.

"It's about protection of our people, the people of South Dakota," he said. "It's about saving South Dakotans from being the subject of hundreds of lawsuits, condemnation lawsuits, simply for owning land and saying no thank you to a purchase offer."

Eminent domain was intended to allow legal taking of private land while also providing appropriate compensation for government projects that serve a public good and not for private companies that seek to turn a profit, Hansen said.

"This bill is about protecting South Dakota landowners' constitutional private property rights from, frankly, the bullying and harassment we have seen inflicted on our people in this state by an out-of-state, for-profit, foreign-backed company over the last year," he said.

A committee rejected the bill by a 7-6 vote, but it was ultimately moved forward without a formal recommendation. It could still be heard on the floor of the House of Representatives through a procedure known as a "smoke out."

Duffy, a member of the House Commerce & Energy Committee, said he opposed the bill to prohibit use of eminent domain for carbon dioxide pipelines because pipeline companies already have invested upwards of \$70 million to get their project sited and approved in South Dakota and four other states.

"Whether you should have eminent domain for private industry, that's a different issue. But I don't think it's fair to say we should change the rules now," Duffy said Feb. 17 at a legislative cracker barrel in Rapid City.

Reform of eminent domain laws might be needed, but it sends a negative message to business and industry if the state changes the laws once a development process has begun, he said.

"It probably does need to be looked at down the road. But I think it's not fair to change it right now in the middle of the game," Duffy said. "That sends a signal to other people that South Dakota may not be business friendly. If they followed the rules, and I assume they did ... it's hard for me to say, 'OK, now you can't (use eminent domain.)'"



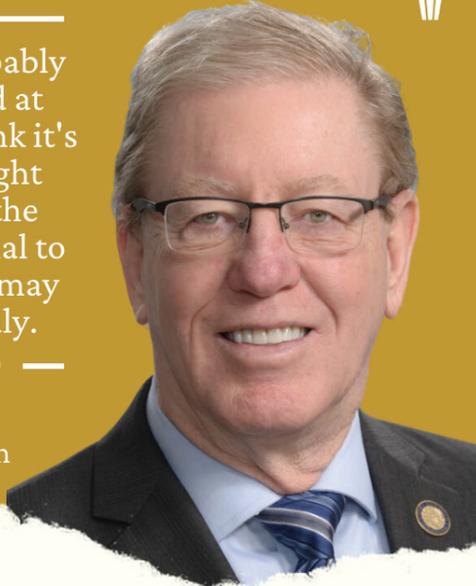
**Opponents of the CO2 pipeline and the use of eminent domain have organized and remain vocal in their opposition. Betty Strom of Sioux Falls, S.D., owns land along the pipeline route and made her positions known outside a hearing in 2022.** (File photo: Courtesy Argus Leader)

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— “ —  
(Eminent domain) probably does need to be looked at down the road. But I think it's not fair to change it right now in the middle of the game. That sends a signal to other people that (we) may not be business friendly.

— ” —  
Rep. Steven Duffy,  
a Rapid City Republican



## State vs. local control also part of the debate

Another highly contentious eminent domain bill, Senate Bill 201, would provide a statewide framework for approval of pipeline projects.

The measure was co-sponsored by Senate Majority Leader Casey Crabtree of Madison and House Majority Leader Will Mortensen of Pierre. The two Republicans have said the measure would streamline the pipeline siting process while also providing protections for landowners and financial help for counties where pipelines are laid.

The bill would bar counties from passing structure setback rules that make pipelines virtually impossible within their boundaries but also provide surcharge payments to counties and require companies to pay for damages to landowners.

In a recent newsletter to constituents, Crabtree called the bill a “comprehensive solution that protects landowner rights and establishes clear infrastructure guardrails.”

“South Dakota is open for business, which means we don’t set up roadblocks for projects through regulation, red tape, excessive fees, and indefinite timelines. We provide fairness and certainty in the process for landowners and businesses,” Crabtree wrote.

And yet, the measure faces opposition from many landowners who said it would eliminate local control and the ability of individual counties to regulate and possibly ban pipelines within their borders.

A few counties, including Brown, Lincoln and McPherson, have passed or considered measures that would ban pipelines or enforce setback rules that could make the pipelines unfeasible within their borders.

“It’s stripping away local control,” Hohn said. “It would take away county ordinances that were put in place by a handful of counties that took great care to make sure the intelligent land use and economic development was looked at for their long range plans.”

## Some landowners unify in opposition

Craig Schaunaman, a former lawmaker whose Brown County farm is on the Summit pipeline route, said he faced eminent domain and condemnation proceedings after Summit sought to build the CO2 pipeline across 2.5 miles of his grain farm south of Aberdeen.

Summit representatives did not share his “South Dakota values” and did not deal with him in good faith, he said. Schaunaman said as many as 200 South Dakota landowners are facing or have faced eminent domain proceedings due to their opposition to the pipeline project.

“South Dakota has always had an open door for business, but what we haven’t always been is for sale,” he said. “It’s our land. And I think if it goes beyond the government taking it, I should be able to say yes or no. Now we seem to have changed that direction and anybody who wants an economic benefit can come in, condemn the land and take it. And philosophically I can’t agree with that.”

Some landowners opposed to the pipeline said it can make their land difficult to farm and also brings health risks associated with possible leaks of the toxic, liquified CO2.

A number of them have organized.

They regularly drive to hearings in Pierre and have formed a group called Landowners for Eminent Domain

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Reform. They also created a website to share stories of how they have willingly allowed government use of their land for public projects but believe using eminent domain for business is against South Dakota values. Some have shared that they are enduring sleepless nights as they said they battle to protect their land and livelihoods.

"If you want to stand up for what is rightfully yours, it's very time consuming and a financial burden," Hohn told News Watch.

According to the Institute for Justice, a nonprofit legal group that monitors eminent domain cases nationwide, the Fifth Amendment to the U.S. Constitution allows for eminent domain only for "public use" and with compensation provided to the property owner. But the institute notes that a 2005 U.S. Supreme Court case, *Kelo V. New London*, expands eminent domain to allow government and even private entities to use eminent domain for projects that will produce more taxes or new jobs.

The institute gives South Dakota an A grade due to a 2006 state Supreme Court ruling regarding the right of a landowner to prevent hunters from accessing their land that the institute believes weakened the applicability of the *Kelo* ruling in South Dakota.

The president of one of South Dakota's largest agricultural groups, Doug Sombke of the South Dakota Farmers Union, said the public at large should be concerned that under current eminent domain laws, their personal property including land, homes and even cars could be taken without consent by private companies seeking a profit.

"This is not just a farmland issue, this is real for every South Dakotan who owns anything because this can happen to your home, business or any property you own," he said. "Somebody can come in for private gain, a for-profit business, and they could literally come in and wipe out your whole neighborhood and the only alternative you have is to determine what that property was worth."

## Farmer had good experience with Summit

Yackley, the Sully County farmer who signed a voluntary easement with Summit, said company representatives who visited with him answered his questions and made some concessions during the easement negotiation process.

He said he isn't sure of the value and efficacy of the carbon capture process, but he believes the pipeline will help protect the state ethanol industry while boosting the overall state agricultural economy.

Yackley said he received a settlement that would pay him significantly higher than market value for the land where the pipeline would be built.



**Poet Biofuels, whose plant in Chancellor, S.D., is shown here, has entered a partnership with Summit Carbon Solutions to provide CO2 from its 12 plants in Iowa and five in South Dakota to the pipeline if it is built.** (Photo: Bart Pfankuch / South Dakota News Watch)

He testified in 2023 before the Legislature in favor of the Summit project, but he doesn't begrudge any landowner of their right to deny Summit access to their land or their ability to say no to the company.

"I have two neighbors who are dead set against the pipeline," Yackley said. "And I told them to go ahead, that it's their right to fight it."

Yackley also said he has heard from people he knows well that Summit representatives did pressure them to allow the pipeline on their land.

"I've got friends up north that I trust, and they tell me they were bullied (by Summit). And I believe them because they had no reason to lie to me," he said. "We just didn't have that, and I'm sorry that they did."

— This article was produced by South Dakota News Watch, a non-profit journalism organization located online at [sdnewswatch.org](http://sdnewswatch.org).

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## Weekly Vikings Roundup

By Jordan Wright

Last week we reviewed the 2023 Minnesota Vikings' offense, so this week we turn our attention to the defense and special teams.

In 2022, the Vikings had one of the best records in the NFL, but also one of the worst defenses. Ed Donatell, who is a Vic Fangio disciple, had been brought in as defensive coordinator. Unfortunately for everyone involved, the Vikings' defense sputtered in the biggest moments, leading to the firing of Donatell after only one season.

Enter Brian Flores.

Flores was an assistant under Bill Belichick from 2008 to 2018 before he left to become the Head Coach of the Miami Dolphins. Flores helped turn the Dolphins around, leading them to their first back-to-back winning seasons since 2003. Flores was fired after the 2021 season and later filed a class-action lawsuit against the NFL. After spending a year away from football, he was brought in by the Vikings to replace Donatell as the defensive coordinator.

In 2022, the Vikings ranked near the bottom in every statistical category, including 31st in total yards allowed and 28th in points allowed. Under Flores in 2023, the Vikings took a big step forward - finishing 16th in yards per game and 14th in points allowed per game.

**Defensive Line:** D-line was perhaps the weakest link on the Vikings' defense, so Flores devised a scheme to overcome that weakness - simply not using defensive linemen. Some teams run a 4-3 defense (four defensive linemen), some teams run a 3-4 (three defensive linemen). The Vikings decided to play with one or zero defensive linemen nearly one-third of the time, something that has never been seen in the NFL. Harrison Phillips was the lone bright spot on the d-line, finishing sixth on the team with 92 tackles.

**Outside Linebacker:** Danielle Hunter was the Vikings' best player on defense, finishing 5th in the league with 16.5 sacks and earning his fourth trip to the Pro Bowl. Marcus Davenport was brought in through free agency to be Hunter's counterpart, but because of injury Davenport only played in four games last season. D.J. Wonnum was the only other pass rusher to make an impact, finishing with eight sacks.

**Middle Linebacker:** Jordan Hicks was having a resurgent year before injury derailed his season. Ivan Pace Jr., an undrafted rookie, was the second-best middle linebacker on the Vikings' roster - partly because of his skill and athleticism, partly because there wasn't a ton of talent at the position to begin with.

**Cornerback:** Byron Murphy was brought in through free agency, and while he is a solid CB, he doesn't exactly strike fear into the hearts of opposing offenses. Murphy played in 14 games last season and had three interceptions. Second-year CB Akayleb Evans started 15 games opposite Murphy but only had one interception. Andrew Booth, the Vikings' 2nd round pick in 2022, was healthy all season but only started one game - leading him to fall behind rookie Mekhi Blackmon on the depth chart.

**Safety:** Another position that forced Brian Flores to adapt was safety. Due to talent limitations at other positions, Flores started three safeties all season - Harrison Smith, Camryn Bynum, and Josh Mettellus. 2022 first-round pick Lewis Cine was a healthy scratch most weeks, playing in only seven games, and only managing one tackle all season. Smith is one of the best players to ever put on a Vikings jersey, but at 35 years old he's starting to slow down. Luckily, Bynum and Mettellus appear ready to handle the job.

**Special Teams:** Greg Joseph only hit 80% of his field goals in 2023, ranking 30th in the NFL, although he was perfect on kicks under 40 yards (excluding extra points). The Vikings' punt unit was better, as Ryan Wright finished 11th in the league with an average punt of 48.7 yards. Running back Kene Nwangwu was the Vikings' primary kick returner, averaging 25.3 yards per return (8th best among players with at least three kick returns).

## "The Nagging Cough"

"I've got this cough that just won't go away," my patient says, and I know this story all too well. Chronic cough, a cough that lasts more than two months, is a common ailment which in most cases is benign. But for the patient it is both bothersome and worrisome.

If your cough has lasted for less than two months it may just be the residual effect of an upper respiratory infection. Dry cough after having one of many viruses can last for weeks and weeks, and the only cure is time.

In patients who do have chronic cough, my first task is taking a good history. Are or were they a heavy smoker? If so I will be more apt to rule out cancer and consider

lung imaging. I will also be suspicious of chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD) which can be diagnosed by breathing tests. But many of these patients have no or little smoking history so are at low risk for those things. Why are they coughing? I can think of a few common reasons.

Mild asthma often causes cough at nighttime, in the cold, or with activity; it isn't always accompanied by wheezing. Simple breathing tests in the office can help us diagnose asthma, and it can be greatly helped with inhaled medications.

Post-nasal drip is extremely common, and we have probably all experienced it with a cold or allergies. For patients who have this chronically, the mucous produced in the nose drains down the throat, causing irritation to the upper airway and an annoying cough. If this seems likely, I suggest the patient tries a steroid nasal spray every day for a month or two, and if that resolves the cough we have our answer.

Gastroesophageal reflux disease, or GERD, doesn't always cause classic heartburn. As the stomach acid creeps up the esophagus, especially when lying flat at night, it can get high enough to irritate the upper airway and cause cough. As with post-nasal drip, sometimes we just try treating this ailment with an acid reducing medication for a couple months to see if this cures the cough.

Finally, a commonly used type of medication can actually cause benign cough as a side effect. ACE inhibitors like lisinopril are excellent drugs for hypertension and heart disease, but around 5-10% of people will get a dry cough with it. If so, the cough resolves when we stop the med.

Back to my patient. "Tell me more about your cough," I say. "I'm confident we can figure out what is going on, even if it takes a little time."



Kelly Evans-Hullinger, MD

Kelly Evans-Hullinger, M.D. is part of The Prairie Doc® team of physicians and currently practices internal medicine in Brookings, South Dakota. Follow The Prairie Doc® at [www.prairiedoc.org](http://www.prairiedoc.org) and on Facebook featuring On Call with the Prairie Doc® a medical Q&A show providing health information based on science, built on trust, broadcast on SDPB and streaming live on Facebook most Thursdays at 7 p.m. central.

## Boys basketball action photos from Aberdeen Christian Game



**Groton Area sophomore Ryder Johnson moves to block Aberdeen Christian sophomore Becker Bosma during the game Friday evening.** (Photo by Elizabeth Varin)



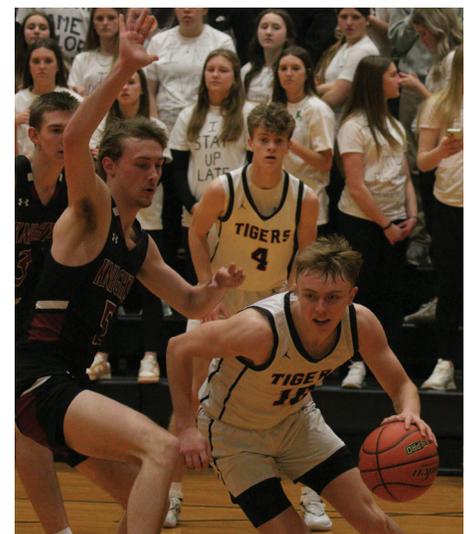
**Groton Area sophomore Ryder Johnson jumps to block a shot from Aberdeen Christian sophomore Becker Bosma during the game Friday evening.** (Photo by Elizabeth Varin)



**Groton Area senior Jacob Zak passes the ball to a teammate during the game Friday evening.** (Photo by Elizabeth Varin)



**Groton Area sophomore Keegen Tracy moves the ball down the court during the game Friday evening.** (Photo by Elizabeth Varin)



**Groton Area senior Lane Tietz drives toward the net during the game Friday evening.** (Photo by Elizabeth Varin)

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**Groton Area's Keegen Tracy (No. 1), Ryder Johnson (No. 1), Logan Ringgenberg (No. 42), Jacob Zak (No. 22) and Lane Tietz (No. 10) look toward the net during the game Friday evening.** (Photo by Elizabeth Varin)



**Groton Area senior Lane Tietz drives the ball toward the net during the game Friday evening.**

(Photo by Elizabeth Varin)

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Groton Area senior Lane Tietz drives the ball toward the net during the game Friday evening. (Photo by Elizabeth Varin)



Groton Area senior Lane Tietz runs the ball down the court during the game Friday evening. (Photo by Elizabeth Varin)



Groton Area fans cheer after a last second shot at the end of the third quarter during Friday evening's basketball game. (Photo by Elizabeth Varin)

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**Groton Area senior Jacob Zak jumps for a shot while Aberdeen Christian sophomore Becker Bosma jumps to try and block it during the game Friday evening. Also pictured is Logan Ringgenberg.** (Photo by Elizabeth Varin)



**Groton Area sophomore Keegen Tracy jumps to block Aberdeen Christian freshman Luke Kaiser's shot during the game Friday evening.** (Photo by Elizabeth Varin)



**Groton Area sophomore Keegen Tracy looks for a teammate to pass to while Aberdeen Christian sophomore Becker Bosma blocks during the game Friday evening.** (Photo by Elizabeth Varin)

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



**Groton Area senior Lane Tietz passes the ball to a teammate during the game Friday evening.** (Photo by Elizabeth Varin)



**Groton Area cheerleaders walk along the crowded bleacher during the game Friday evening.** (Photo by Elizabeth Varin)

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**Groton Area senior Lane Tietz jumps after a ball about to go out of bounds during the game Friday evening.** (Photo by Elizabeth Varin)



**Groton Area sophomore Ryder Johnson moves around an Aberdeen Christian player during the game Friday evening.** (Photo by Elizabeth Varin)



**Groton Area fans cheer during the game Friday evening.** (Photo by Elizabeth Varin)

Varin)

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



**Groton Area senior Jacob Zak looks for a teammate to pass to during the game Friday evening.** (Photo by Elizabeth Varin)



**Groton Area sophomore Ryder Johnson passes the ball to a teammate during the game Friday evening.** (Photo by Elizabeth Varin)



**Groton Area sophomore Keegen Tracy looks for a teammate to pass to during the game Friday evening.** (Photo by Elizabeth Varin)

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**Groton Area sophomore Keegen Tracy looks for a teammate to pass to during the game Friday evening.** (Photo by Elizabeth Varin)



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



**Groton Area senior Jacob Zak passes to sophomore Keegen Tracy during the game Friday evening.** (Photo by Elizabeth Varin)



**Groton Area players high-five after the game Friday evening.** (Photo by Elizabeth Varin)

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## EARTHTALK ™

Dear EarthTalk: Why are some companies backing off their previously stated commitments to cut greenhouse gas emissions? How can we get them to turn it back around? -- K.V., Detroit, MI

In February 2024, three major investment companies stepped back from efforts to limit climate-damaging emissions. JPMorgan Chase's and State Street's investment arms have both quit a global investor alliance encouraging companies to avoid emissions, and BlackRock has largely limited its involvement. These companies aren't the only ones backing out on climate agreements. In 2023, Amazon dropped an effort to zero out emissions of half its shipments by 2030, BP scaled back on its plan to reduce emissions by 35 percent by the end of 2030 and Shell Oil dropped an initiative to build a pipeline of carbon credits and other carbon-absorbing projects. There are hundreds of companies across the world backtracking on commitments toward green policies, despite growing concerns that the planet is reaching a crisis point.

The lack of government policy surrounding corporate emissions makes it easy for companies to abandon their promises. Net Zero Tracker, a group that monitors progress on corporate and government climate pledges, examined more than 1,000 companies that have made pledges to zero out their emissions by 2050. The group found that less than 4 percent of the 1,000 companies were doing the bare minimum to be considered in line with the goals of the 2015 Paris agreement. The rest of the companies were not even meeting the so-called "starting line criteria" laid out by the United Nations. The "starting line" calls for companies to track their carbon footprint across supply chains, cut emissions, create a plan for using carbon offsets, and have annual reports on meeting climate targets.

It's obvious that letting companies make their own policies regarding greenhouse gas emissions is not effective. More government issued policies are crucial to making a real dent in carbon emissions. One recently-passed law in the U.S. is the Inflation Reduction Act, provides hundreds of billions of dollars in tax subsidies to companies using wind and solar power, electric vehicles, or other carbon capture technologies. The idea is that by making it cheaper to go green, companies will find polluting a less attractive option.

Another method of corporate accountability is carbon pricing, which is putting a blanket tax on each ton of greenhouse gasses emitted by a company. Then there's the oldest, most reliable method of accountability, mass protest. There are many climate action groups like Mission Possible Partnership or First Movers Coalition, that are looking to force companies to cut emissions. Most companies originally claimed to implement green policies to appeal to public interest. If the public continues to thoroughly and unrelentingly push the matter, companies will be forced to truly administrate green policies.



**Hundreds of companies across the world are backtracking on commitments toward green policies, despite growing concerns that the planet is reaching a crisis point.** Credit: Sandor Somkuti.



## SOUTH DAKOTA SEARCHLIGHT

<https://southdakotasearchlight.com>

### Corrections secretary: New women's prison could be filled with addicts on day one

**Warning comes after more than a decade of debate on South Dakota drug laws**

**BY: JOHN HULT - FEBRUARY 25, 2024 7:00 AM**

PIERRE – The state's new women's prison may well be full when it opens, South Dakota's corrections secretary said this week, a reality largely attributable to the prevalence of drug abuse in the penal population.

The new prison will free up space for addiction treatment, but the secretary said she's concerned about the potential for more crowding in the women's facilities if the state doesn't find a way to address its approach to substance abuse.

Lawmakers heard those warnings during debate on funding for the Rapid City minimum security prison, which passed the full Senate this week after a hearing in the budget-setting Joint Appropriations Committee.

Senate Bill 50 would provide additional money needed to cover the project's \$87 million price tag, after legislators set aside a portion of the money last year. Lawmakers have allocated another \$567 million for a proposed new men's prison in Lincoln County, to replace the aging penitentiary in Sioux Falls.

Few lawmakers have questioned the need. The state's only women's prison, located in Pierre, houses twice the number of inmates it's designed for, packed into classrooms and a gymnasium. The state currently pays Hughes County to hold more than 70 female inmates at the county jail.

The new prison will have an addiction wing, and its existence will open up space for treatment in the current prison.

But some are concerned that a new facility for women in a state that imprisons most of its female convicts for drug use could set the state up for more costly prison projects.

"We need new facilities, because we currently have incredible overcrowding," defense lawyer lobbyist Terra Larson said. "But I just want you guys to think about the fact that if you build it, they will fill it, and we may or may not be back here again."

Corrections Secretary Kellie Wasko, when asked about growth projections in the female inmate population, said she'd like to see her agency collaborate with lawmakers and the Unified Judicial System on diversion programs for addicts.

"If we don't do something to address the substance use in South Dakota, we're going to open up a facility and we're going to be right at capacity," Wasko said.

#### History of concern over harsh drug laws

A consulting firm called the DLR Group hinted at the same issue in the report it issued on prison facilities in 2022. The report has served as the basis for discussions on new prisons in South Dakota, and it identified the women's prison as the area of highest need.

At the time of the study, 60% of female inmates were imprisoned for drugs. The state had acknowledged, the report says at the outset, that "absent significant criminal justice reform, as the state's population continues to grow, the prison population may surpass the operating capacities."

In the latest annual report from the Department of Corrections, drug possession and drug ingestion mark the highest-level felony for 69% of the women imprisoned in South Dakota for a nonviolent offense. Such

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offenses represent 81% of all crimes committed by female inmates in the state.

It's not the first time South Dakota's approach to drug use has drawn scrutiny or sparked debate. Drug policy questions bubbled in the background as the Pierre facility packed more and more women into its cells, classrooms and recreation areas.

A crime trends report from February 2023, the latest available on the corrections website, shows a 66% increase in drug crimes since 2013 – the same year former Gov. Dennis Daugaard signed a sweeping criminal justice reform bill into law designed in part to hold the need for new prisons at bay.

"Absent a change in approach, South Dakota should expect to have more than 4,500 inmates by 2022," the state's 2012 Criminal Justice Initiative Work Group's final report reads. It also suggests that without reform, the state would need new prisons in that same time frame.

As of January, there were 3,690 inmates incarcerated in South Dakota prisons in total, well below the feared-for figure of 4,500.

The female inmate population, however, has far surpassed the report's projections for what might happen without reform. For women, the report said the state would reach its "female system capacity of 498 beds by 2015."

In 2015, the female population hovered at around 400. By 2016, the figure hit nearly 500. There were 558 women in Department of Corrections custody as of January.

## Warnings from defense lobby, ACLU

The 2013 reforms created a presumption of probation for drug possession. But they did not remove felony penalties for drug possession, as defense lawyers had suggested it should during task force meetings on the issue in 2012. Nor did it repeal South Dakota's ingestion law, the only one in the nation that allows prosecutors to charge people with felony drug possession for a failed drug test.

Opponents warned the reform backers – a group that included every arm of state government as well as sheriffs, police chiefs and prosecutors – that failure to address the state's harsh drug laws would blunt the impact of reforms.

"It is clear that the bill is missing an opportunity to save significant taxpayer dollars, reduce the burden on our prisons, and stem this tide of the low-level nonviolent offenders who occupy our prison beds," said Tiffany Campbell, then a policy director for the American Civil Liberties Union of South Dakota.

Several attempts to repeal South Dakota's ingestion law have come to Pierre in the intervening years, but none – including the most recent in 2023 – have landed on the governor's desk.

Michael Winder, spokesperson for the Department of Corrections, did not respond to emails from South Dakota Searchlight requesting an interview with or statements from Secretary Wasko clarifying the kinds of steps the agency might want to take to address the state's approach to drug crimes and its impact on prison populations.

## New facilities would offer treatment

Nonviolent offenses and violent offenses alike tend to have ties to substance abuse. When speaking to legislators during committee hearings, Wasko has repeatedly stressed the importance of addiction treatment for female inmates.

"Honestly, 98% of the females in our custody have a substance use disorder," Wasko said this week.

On the Senate floor, Sioux Falls Democrat Reynold Nesiba worried aloud that the state's new prison could make it easier to ignore the impact of the state's ingestion and possession laws on women struggling with addiction.

"I worry that we're trying to arrest our way out of a public health problem," Nesiba said.

Nesiba supported the bill, but said he did so in hopes that a new building would help inmates change their lives through rehabilitation in a way they can't in the current cramped quarters.

"We need them to get well. We need them to take care of their families. We need them back in the workforce. We want them to be rehabilitated, and to be all that they can possibly be," Nesiba said. "I'm

hoping this new facility allows us to do that.”

The bill’s sponsor, Big Stone City Republican John Wiik, said addressing addiction and repeat offenses has to start with a new building. His arguments on the floor for SB 50 revolved around the notion that conversations about recidivism, addiction or incarceration’s impact on society at large can’t begin in earnest until the immediate need for more space is addressed.

“We certainly can’t deal with any of these issues when we have women sleeping in a gymnasium,” Wiik said.

Sen. Helene Duhamel, R-Rapid City, said she has full confidence that Wasko, a nurse by training who came to the job of secretary in South Dakota after decades in corrections in Colorado, will not drop the ball on drug treatment or rehabilitation.

“She is building, in the plan for the women’s facility in Rapid City, a whole wing dedicated to addiction treatment,” Duhamel said. “I think it’ll be a big improvement, and put corrections into a correctional facility.”

*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.*

## **GOP backs voting by mail, yet turns to courts to restrict it in battleground states**

**BY: ZACHARY ROTH - FEBRUARY 25, 2024 2:00 PM**

Fearing that Democrats hold a crucial edge in ballots cast before Election Day, national Republicans are working to convince their voters to take advantage of mail and early voting this year.

“We can’t play catch up. We can’t start from behind. We can’t let Dems get a big head start and think we’re going to win it all on Election Day,” Republican National Committee chair Ronna McDaniel said in November on a conference call aimed at promoting the group’s Bank Your Vote initiative to encourage early and mail voting. “Things happen on Election Day.”

But the party’s army of lawyers is, more quietly, sending a very different message. The RNC is fighting in courtrooms and legal filings in key election battlegrounds across the country to make it harder to cast a mail ballot and to have it counted.

On Feb. 20, attorneys for the RNC were in a federal courtroom in Philadelphia, in a bid to require that Pennsylvania throw out mail ballots with missing or incorrect dates.

Eleven days earlier, they filed a lawsuit challenging several provisions of Arizona’s newly adopted election rules, including a rule allowing voters who have not shown proof of citizenship to cast a mail ballot.

And that same day, they asked a court in Georgia to uphold a state law that imposes stricter rules on mail voting.

Separately, in recent months the RNC has asked courts to let it join the defense of laws in Ohio, Wisconsin, and North Carolina that similarly impose tighter rules on mail voting (judges in the latter two states denied the requests, while the Ohio motion was approved).

The party also has sued to block a New York law that lets people vote by mail without an excuse (the state’s Supreme Court this month dismissed the complaint). And it has formally weighed in against proposed changes to Nevada’s election rules, including one that makes it easier for election officials to prevent volunteer observers from disrupting the counting of mail ballots.

In January, the RNC went further than ever, filing a lawsuit in Mississippi that it has said aims to obtain a nationwide ban on mail ballots that arrive after Election Day. RNC lawyers stated plainly in their complaint that Republicans’ interests are at stake because mail voting tends to favor Democrats.

### **States with close races targeted**

Though it’s received relatively little attention, the RNC’s legal onslaught could have a major impact on the 2024 elections.

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Pennsylvania, Georgia, Arizona, Wisconsin, North Carolina, and Nevada are all set to be among the closest states in this year's presidential race, while Pennsylvania, Ohio, Arizona, Wisconsin, and Nevada host pivotal U.S. Senate contests. New York, meanwhile, is home to several swing congressional districts that could determine control of the U.S. House.

And the legal effort against mail voting has been matched by a legislative one. Thirteen states, including Florida, Texas, North Carolina, Arizona, and Ohio, have passed 16 bills to restrict mail voting since the start of 2023, according to a database run by the Voting Rights Lab.

It all amounts to a multi-pronged effort to suppress voting by mail, voting advocates say — one that could threaten access to the ballot this fall, especially for Democrats, who are now more likely than Republicans to use mail voting. At its core are legal arguments aimed at convincing judges to interpret the law in ways that are explicitly adverse to voters.

The push sits uneasily alongside an RNC campaign to convince GOP voters to embrace mail and early voting. But it's right in keeping with former President Donald Trump's years-long, evidence-free campaign against voting by mail.

"In courtrooms and state legislatures across the country, Republicans are doing everything in their power to restrict mail-in voting," said Marc Elias, a prominent Democratic election lawyer, in a statement. "The RNC's legal strategy is clear. The Republican Party no longer seeks to earn the support of a majority of the American electorate. Instead, they are launching a legal assault on our democracy."

A spokesman for the RNC did not respond to a request for comment.

## A muddled message on mail voting

In 2020, many states loosened rules on mail voting in response to COVID-19. That year's election saw record high turnout despite the pandemic, with nearly half of all voters casting a mail ballot — a huge increase from around 22% in 2016.

Even with COVID-19 tamed, many states have kept their more liberal mail voting rules in place, or, like New York, have passed new laws expanding access to mail ballots.

While leading Democrats have embraced mail voting, Trump has repeatedly denounced it, falsely claiming it opens the door to massive fraud.

"MILLIONS OF MAIL-IN BALLOTS WILL BE PRINTED BY FOREIGN COUNTRIES," Trump tweeted in June 2020, adding that the result would be a "RIGGED" election.

It's true that several of the extremely rare instances of proven voter fraud have involved mail voting. But there's no evidence of systematic mail voter fraud of the kind that Trump has claimed threatens the integrity of a presidential election.

A voter fraud database run by the Heritage Foundation, a conservative think tank, lists 279 cases of "fraudulent use of absentee ballots," going back to 1988 — since which time hundreds of millions of mail ballots have been cast.

Meanwhile, GOP lawyers have gone to the mat to try to put the mail voting genie back in the bottle.

"We've watched Democrats systematically try to codify those post-COVID changes that they made, and we've been in the courts trying to keep those pre-COVID protections in place for our elections," RNC chair Ronna McDaniel explained in October. "There's been a battle waged."

It's not surprising, then, that Democrats have in recent elections used mail voting at significantly higher rates than Republicans. So pronounced is the split that in 2020, President Joe Biden won the mail vote in 14 out of 15 states analyzed by 538.com, while Trump likewise won the Election Day vote in 14 out of 15.

That's led the GOP to fret that it now often goes into Election Day already trailing by a significant margin. In response, the RNC last year launched the Bank Your Vote initiative to encourage Republicans to vote early or by mail.

The effort includes websites in all 50 states, and even an ad recorded by Trump — albeit without much visible enthusiasm.

"Sign up and commit to voting early," Trump says. "We must defeat the far left at their own game."

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But Trump has continued to muddy that message.

"You know, we have these elections that last for 62 days," Trump declared last month in his victory speech after the Iowa caucuses. "And if you need some more time, take as much time as you want. And so many bad things happen. We have to get rid of mail-in ballots because once you have mail-in ballots, you have crooked elections."

## RNC court filings

The RNC's legal assault on mail voting suggests a similar view. In several court filings, RNC lawyers have suggested that tight safeguards are needed to ensure mail voting doesn't allow for fraudulent votes.

Ohio's law that restricts who can return a mail ballot on behalf of a voter should be upheld, the RNC argued in one typical filing, because it guards against "an increased risk of voter fraud and other irregularities."

The Republican bid to restrict mail voting is part of a larger effort by the party since 2020 to devote more resources to "election integrity" — tighter election rules that prioritize anti-fraud measures over access. It includes a year-round election integrity legal department, which has said it worked with over 90 law firms and participated in nearly 100 lawsuits during the 2022 cycle.

So far this cycle, the RNC has paid over \$4 million to two top Republican law firms, Consovoy McCarthy and Wiley Rein, according to FEC records. Thomas McCarthy, a co-founder of Consovoy McCarthy, is listed on RNC motions in the Mississippi, Georgia and Wisconsin cases, among others.

The focus on "election integrity" comes as McDaniel, the RNC chair, is reported to be stepping down at the end of the month. Trump's choice to replace her, North Carolina GOP chair Michael Whatley, has stressed the importance of tight voting rules for Republican success, States Newsroom has reported.

## Chipping away at mail votes

The most far-reaching of the RNC's cases is the lawsuit it filed with other Republicans in January against a Mississippi law that allows mail ballots that arrive up to five days after an election to be counted, as long as they're postmarked by Election Day.

Federal law sets Election Day as the Tuesday after the first Monday in November, the suit argues, so by extending the election past that day, Mississippi is violating federal law.

The RNC has said the goal is to obtain a ruling from a judge that bars post-Election-Day ballots from being counted not just in Mississippi but nationwide. The 5th Circuit, which contains Mississippi, is known as perhaps the most conservative judicial circuit in the country.

Election law experts have said it's unlikely, but not impossible, that a court could accept the RNC's argument.

If the case were to reach the Supreme Court, at least one justice appears friendly. In 2020, when the court upheld Wisconsin's ban on late-arriving ballots, Justice Brett Kavanaugh wrote that states have the right to set election deadlines "to avoid the chaos and suspicions of impropriety that can ensue when thousands of absentee ballots flow in after election day and potentially flip the results of an election."

Mississippi is one of 18 states — including key battlegrounds like Ohio, Nevada, Virginia, Texas, and New York — plus the District of Columbia, that count ballots that arrive after Election Day. (North Carolina last year passed a law that restricts mail voting in several ways, including by banning ballots that arrive after Election Day. It's that law that the RNC sought unsuccessfully to help defend from a court challenge by Democrats, which is ongoing.)

The number of votes at issue could be significant. In 2020, the U.S. Postal Service said it processed nearly 190,000 ballots in the two days after the election. Most of those, it said, were in states that allow late-arriving ballots.

The Mississippi lawsuit makes clear that, despite the Bank Your Vote campaign, Republicans want to curtail mail voting because they think it gives Democrats an edge.

"Because voting by mail is starkly polarized by party, [allowing late-arriving ballots] directly harms Plaintiffs," the RNC's lawyers wrote in the complaint. "For example, according to the MIT Election Lab,

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46% of Democratic voters in the 2022 General Election mailed in their ballots, compared to only 27% of Republicans. That means the late-arriving mail-in ballots that are counted for five additional days disproportionately break for Democrats.”

## **Pennsylvania case also crucial**

The Pennsylvania case is another that could reverberate. In November 2022, the state Supreme Court ruled — in response to a suit filed by the RNC and other Republicans — that over 10,000 mail ballots on which the voter had neglected to write the date on the outer envelope, or had written an incorrect date, must be rejected.

The state’s NAACP chapter filed its own suit in federal court in response. The RNC quickly intervened, arguing that the state Supreme Court’s ruling should be upheld. A district court ruled for the NAACP in November, finding that the Civil Rights Act bars states from rejecting votes based on immaterial paperwork errors. The RNC appealed, arguing for a narrower interpretation of the landmark civil rights law, setting up the Feb. 20 hearing.

In a sign that the case could have an impact beyond Pennsylvania, 17 Republican-led states last month submitted an amicus brief in support of the RNC’s position.

The other cases may not have the same reach as those two. But together, they broadly aim to tighten the rules around mail voting to a degree that could significantly chip away at mail votes.

RNC lawyers have marshaled a range of arguments in these cases.

They have claimed, unsuccessfully, that New York’s law expanding access to mail voting violates the state’s constitution, which bans no-excuse mail voting. They’ve said Georgia’s new deadline to apply for a mail ballot of seven days before Election Day doesn’t violate the federal law barring deadlines of fewer than 11 days, because the federal government lacks the authority to regulate these deadlines.

No mail voting rule appears too small to escape the notice of RNC lawyers. This month’s lawsuit against Arizona targets a new rule that lets voters who registered without proof of citizenship — and therefore, under Arizona law, can vote in federal elections only — receive a mail ballot, arguing that state law bars these voters from voting by mail.

And they’ve submitted comments to a Nevada commission, criticizing a proposed rule there that gives election officials more power to ensure the counting process for mail ballots isn’t disrupted. The new powers could let election officials infringe on the public’s right to witness the counting, the group’s lawyers assert.

Meanwhile, supporters of mail voting say Republican fears about an influx of Democratic mail votes may be misplaced.

“Americans have used mail ballots for over a hundred years because they provide a safe and convenient way to ensure the right to vote,” said Barbara Smith Warner, the executive director of the National Vote at Home Institute, which advocates for mail voting. “Research has demonstrated time and time again that voting at home increases voter participation and turnout for all, with no partisan advantage for any side.”

“Attacks on mail ballots are red herrings to distract from their true intent — making it harder for citizens to vote, and sowing distrust in our elections,” Smith Warner said.

*Zachary Roth is the National Democracy Reporter for States Newsroom.*

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## SOUTH DAKOTA SEARCHLIGHT

<https://southdakotasearchlight.com>

**Enjoying our legislative coverage? Consider supporting it.**

A colleague recently told me that he once heard somebody describe the annual legislative session as the harvest season for state government reporters. That's an apt description of the way South Dakota Searchlight does legislative coverage.

### How we approach the session

We rotate staffers in and out of Pierre, so that we have somebody on the ground for all 38 days of lawmaking. Those of us who aren't in Pierre are listening to the audio feeds from the Capitol.

We start our mornings covering committee hearings, spend our afternoons listening to floor debates, and pass the rest of our time reading bills, tracking down lawmakers for questions, and writing and editing stories. We conclude our work in the evening with the formulation of our coverage plan for the next day.

### The results

There are still two weeks left in this year's session, and so far we've published 169 stories, briefs or commentaries about legislative topics ranging from the governor's State of the State address, to budget hearings, to coverage of 92 individual pieces of legislation.

We've made all of those stories free to read on our website, as a service to South Dakotans. We've also made them free for other media outlets to republish.

### How you can help

How do we fund all of this work? We don't sell advertisements or subscriptions. As a nonprofit, we depend entirely on grants and donations.

If you appreciate our legislative coverage, consider supporting it with a recurring or one-time contribution. Seth Tupper, editor



**Searchlight Senior Reporter John Hult takes notes during a budget hearing at the Capitol in Pierre.** (Courtesy of Lee Strubinger)

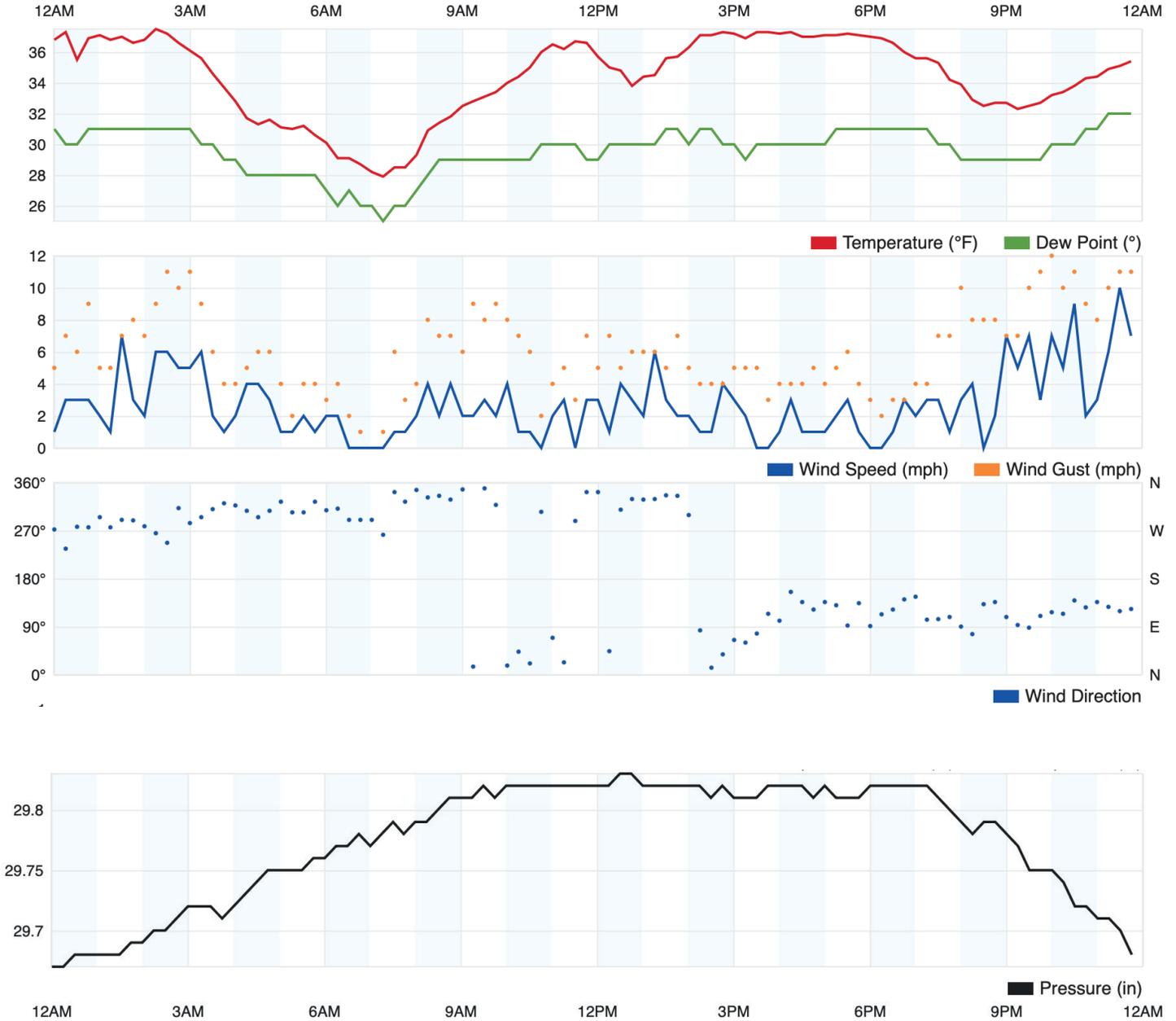
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## Yesterday's Groton Weather Graphs



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Today	Tue	Wed	Thu	Fri
				
63 °F 13 °F	21 °F ↓↓ 3 °F	29 °F 21 °F	54 °F 33 °F	63 °F



## A Big Change Coming

February 26, 2024

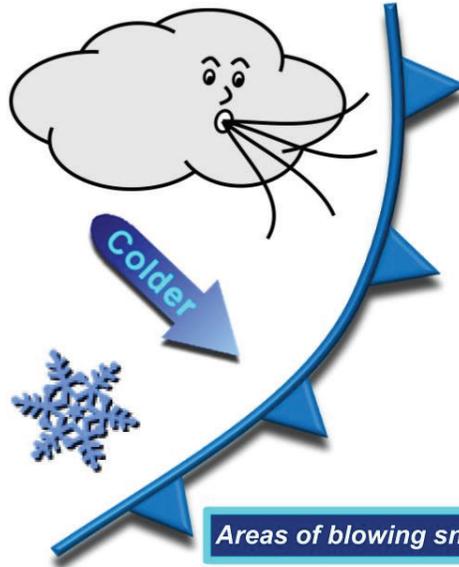
2:16 AM

Mild today, cold Tuesday...but warming back up toward the end of the week

**Today**



Record or near record warmth, Highs in the 60s



## Tuesday

Blustery and much colder with light snow possible

Northwest winds 25-50mph

Highs in teens and 20s

Areas of blowing snow possible late tonight & Tuesday

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

National Weather Service  
Aberdeen, SD

It will be very mild today, with a few new record highs possible. Tuesday will be much colder and windy behind a cold front.

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## Yesterday's Groton Weather

High Temp: 38 °F at 2:15 AM

Low Temp: 28 °F at 7:14 AM

Wind: 12 mph at 9:52 PM

Precip: : 0.00

Day length: 11 hours, 01 minutes

## Today's Info

Record High: 65 in 1896

Record Low: -20 in 1962

Average High: 33

Average Low: 11

Average Precip in Feb.: 0.57

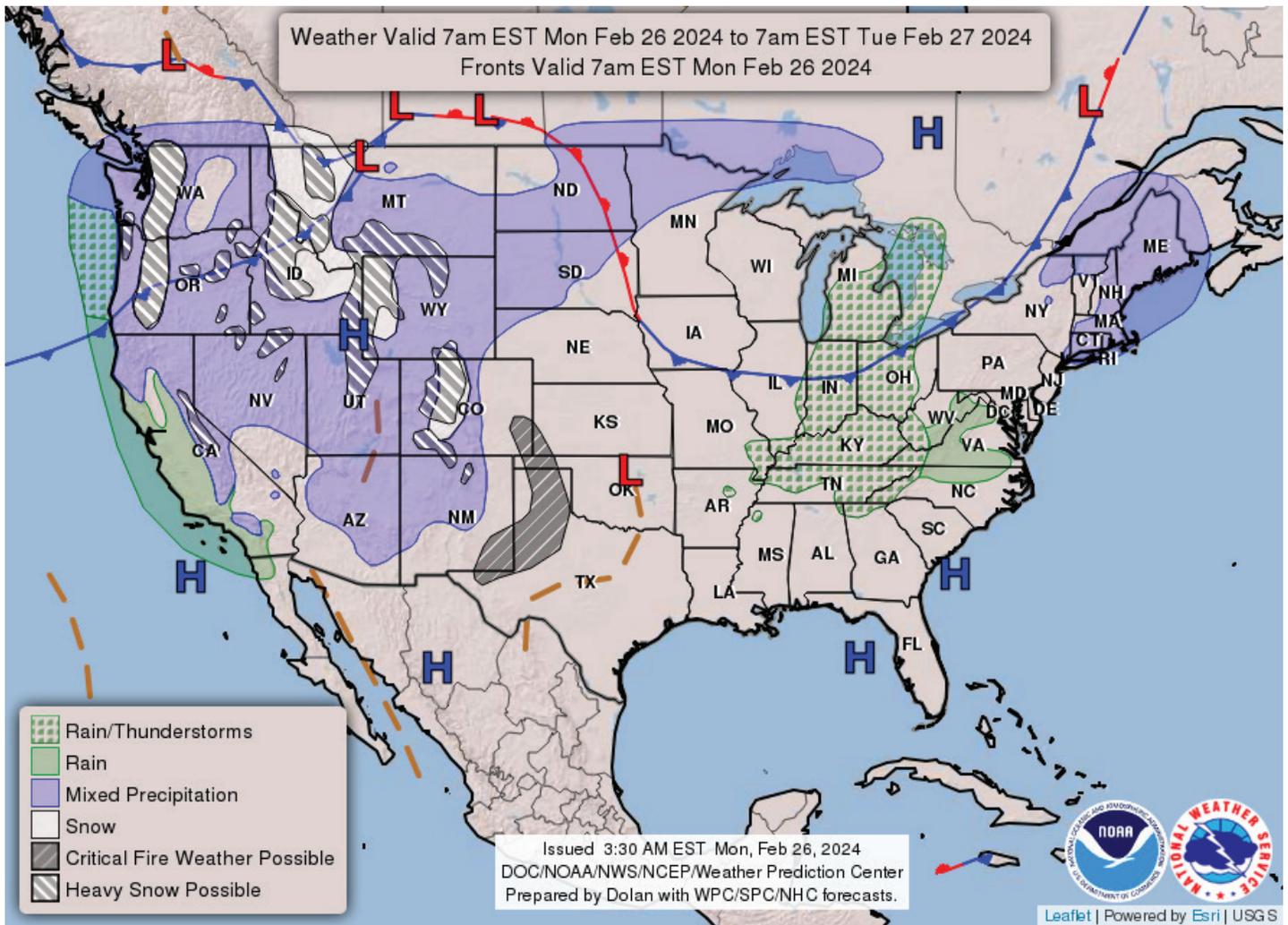
Precip to date in Feb.: 0.07

Average Precip to date: 1.12

Precip Year to Date: 0.07

Sunset Tonight: 6:15:57 pm

Sunrise Tomorrow: 7:12:52 am



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## Today in Weather History

February 26, 1995: Heavy snow fell on the 26th and 27th in western and central South Dakota near the state's northern border. McLaughlin received 14 inches, Eureka 12 inches, and McIntosh 11 inches. Snowfall amounts dropped to two to four inches about 20 miles south of the northern border.

February 26, 1998: A substantial area of low pressure moved across central and northeast South Dakota from the morning of the 26th to the morning of the 27th. As the low moved northeast, cold north winds of 25 to 35 mph gusting to 45 mph caused widespread rain to change over to snow. Many roads became icy and poor visibilities in snow and blowing snow, and low wind chills developed. Four to 8 inches of snow fell across the counties bordering the Missouri River and in far western McPherson and far western Edmunds counties. Many area schools were dismissed early or canceled. Some residents, especially West River, lost power during the storm. Many McIntosh residents were without power for over 24 hours. Numerous activities and sports events were canceled. Some car accidents did not result in injury. A semi rolled onto its side northwest of Gettysburg on the 26th. Ranchers also experienced some calving problems as a result of the winter storm. Some snowfall amounts included 4 inches at Selby, Herreid, and Mobridge, 5 inches at Isabel, 6 inches at Gettysburg, 7 inches about 11 miles east of Hosmer, and 8 inches at McIntosh. Due to the heavy snow and strong winds, some large drifts also developed, especially West River.

February 26, 2009: A vigorous but relatively fast-moving winter storm system tracked across South Dakota Wednesday night and Thursday. Even with the reasonably quick movement of the system, storm total snowfall amounts were quite impressive. In fact, during the peak of the snowstorm, snowfall rates of 1" to 2" per hour were observed!

1910: Parts of Washington State were amid a storm that produced 129 inches of snow at Laconia between the 24th and the 26th, a single storm record for the state. A series of storms began on the 23rd and led to a deadly avalanche on March 1. Late on the 28th, the snow had changed to rain, setting the stage for disaster.

1972 - The Buffalo Creek disaster occurred in the Buffalo Creek Hollow of Logan County in West Virginia. A coal slag dam on the Middle Fork of Buffalo Creek burst sending a fifty foot wall of water down a narrow valley killing 125 persons and causing 51 million dollars damage. Three days of rain atop a six inches snow cover prompted the dam break. (David Ludlum) (The Weather Channel)

1987 - A slow moving storm in the southwestern U.S. spread heavy snow from the southern and central Rockies into the Central High Plains Region. Totals in Colorado ranged up to 62 inches at Purgatory. Colorado Springs CO reported a February record of 14.8 inches of snow in 24 hours. Lander WY received four inches in one hour, 13 inches in seven hours, and a record storm total of 26 inches. High winds created near blizzard conditions at Colorado Springs. Fairplay CO reported 43 inches of snow, with drifts ten feet high. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

1988 - Eight cities in the central and western U.S. reported new record high temperatures for the date, including Lamoni IA with a reading of 67 degrees. Temperatures in North Dakota were as warm as those in Florida. (The National Weather Summary)

1989 - An upper level weather disturbance brought snow to parts of the central U.S. which just one day earlier were enjoying temperatures in the 60s. Snowfall totals in Missouri ranged up to nine inches at Rolla. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

1990 - Unseasonably cold weather followed in the wake of the winter storm in the northeastern U.S. Ten cities reported record low temperatures for the date, including Syracuse NY with a reading of 10 degrees below zero. Freezing temperatures in southeastern Virginia caused considerable damage to plants and fruit trees. The barometric pressure reading of 30.88 inches at Wilmington NC was February record for that location. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

2004 - A major snowstorm dumps up to 20 inches of snow in the Charlotte metropolitan area. Charlotte's third largest snowstorm on record accumulates 11.6 inches at the airport.

2011: The tallest tree in Wales falls after a wind storm. Located on the Lake Vyrnwy Estate, this 124-year-old Douglas fir stood at 63.7 m (208.9 feet). The tree reportedly was leaning over and had two substantial cracks in the main trunk. This tree would be carved into a giant hand.

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Daily Devotionals

## Seeds of Hope

### ADVANCE!

When Caesar crossed the English Channel from Gaul and landed on the shore, he knew that the odds were against his winning the impending battle. After thinking of the seriousness of the situation, he did a strange thing.

After he landed on the shore, he had all of his men get off of the ships and gather around him. He then ordered all but a few to move forward and not look back. Then, he ordered the remaining few to stay with him. At his command, they were to set fire to all of the ships.

After the first party made their way forward, he issued the order to set the ships ablaze. When the ships were blazing, he then gave another command for the men to turn around and see the burning ships.

The men were stunned as they looked at the burning vessels. They realized that they were now stranded in enemy territory and could not retreat to safety. There was nothing that they could do but advance and fight. And they did! With every ounce of strength they possessed, they fought their way forward and won!

When we face overwhelming challenges and difficult decisions, we must look to God and ask Him a simple question: What is the best way to advance and win the battle. He knows what we should do. However, we must trust in Him, His advice, and His strength to be victorious.

Prayer: Each day, Lord, we face tasks that are trying and problems that are perplexing. May we look to You for Your insight and wisdom as we face life's demands. In Jesus' Name, Amen.

Scripture For Today: Trust in the Lord with all your heart; do not depend on your own understanding. Seek his will in all you do, and he will show you which path to take. Proverbs 3:5-6



We all need the encouragement, comfort, and peace that comes through God's grace. Our daily devotionals, known as Seeds of Hope, have been a means through which thousands of people have experienced this grace. Each devotional comes from God's Word and we pray this good "seed" finds good soil in your heart. Our aim is that the Seeds of Hope will be a great source of daily encouragement to you and that God will use them to draw you near to Him

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## WINNING NUMBERS

### MEGA MILLIONS

WINNING NUMBERS:  
02.23.24

4 6 40 41 60 11

MegaPlier: 5x

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:  
**\$563,000,000**

NEXT 1 Days 17 Hrs 26  
DRAW: Mins 46 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

### LOTTO AMERICA

WINNING NUMBERS:  
02.24.24

10 19 30 33 52 10

All Star Bonus: 3x

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:  
**\$3,360,000**

NEXT 16 Hrs 41 Mins 46  
DRAW: Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

### LUCKY FOR LIFE

WINNING NUMBERS:  
02.25.24

3 13 14 17 26 12

TOP PRIZE:  
**\$7,000/week**

NEXT 16 Hrs 56 Mins 46  
DRAW: Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

### DAKOTA CASH

WINNING NUMBERS:  
02.24.24

5 7 18 20 27

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:  
**\$20,000**

NEXT 2 Days 16 Hrs 56  
DRAW: Mins 46 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

### POWERBALL

DOUBLE PLAY

WINNING NUMBERS:  
02.24.24

5 6 16 34 35 17

TOP PRIZE:  
**\$10,000,000**

NEXT 17 Hrs 25 Mins 46  
DRAW: Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

### POWERBALL

WINNING NUMBERS:  
02.24.24

3 8 40 53 58 3

Power Play: 3x

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:  
**\$391,000,000**

NEXT 17 Hrs 25 Mins 46  
DRAW: Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

## News from the Associated Press

### Warm weather brings a taste of spring to central and western United States

By MARGERY A. BECK Associated Press

OMAHA, Neb. (AP) — A warm front swept springlike weather across a large swath of the country Sunday in what is usually one of the coldest months of the year, sending people out of their homes to enjoy the rare winter respite but also bringing increased wildfire danger.

In Omaha, Nebraska, the temperature Sunday broke 65 degrees (18.3 degrees Celsius) on a day when the average high temperature is around the freezing mark, according to the National Weather Service.

"Omaha is having its second warmest February on record in its 154-year history of tracking weather," National Weather Service meteorologist Michaela Wood said Sunday. "And there's a chance of beating the record yet tomorrow, when we're looking at a high temperature of around 80."

The sunny warmth brought Stacy Lawson, and her husband, Hugh Lawson, of Omaha, outside for a game of pickleball with friends. But they weren't the only ones.

"Outdoor courts are prime real estate when it's warm," Stacy Lawson said. "The first one we tried was already filled."

The Lawsons and their competitors, Tim and Andrea Driscoll, had a hard time remembering the last year they were able to play outside in February.

"In Nebraska, February is both the shortest and longest month of the year," Tim Driscoll deadpanned.

While the warmer-than-usual temperatures may have provided a break from harsh winter conditions, it didn't come without some concerns. The National Weather Service cited the warmth, along with low humidity, winds gusting more than 35 mph (56 kph) in places, and dry winter vegetation in issuing fire danger alerts in an area stretching across parts of 11 states.

Red flag warnings and fire weather watches were issued in parts of New Mexico, Colorado, Texas, Oklahoma, up to Kansas, Nebraska, South Dakota, and east to Iowa, Illinois and Missouri. Nearby states, including parts of Arkansas, Minnesota and Wisconsin, were issued hazardous weather outlooks because of an increased fire danger, according to weather service maps.

Grass fires were reported in the Colorado Springs, Colorado, area on Sunday as a red flag warning was in effect for much of the eastern part of the state.

A fire has burned approximately 3 square miles (2.6 square kilometers) of land at the Fort Carson Army post south of Colorado Springs. The fire started in an area where artillery can land or hand grenades and guns are used in training exercises, said spokesperson John Switzer. The cause of the fire is under investigation, and no buildings were immediately threatened.

A much smaller brush fire was burning on the grounds of the U.S. Air Force Academy north of Colorado Springs, spokesperson Katherine Spessa said. No buildings are threatened, but some pre-evacuation instructions were being given, she said.

A grassfire whipped up by high winds closed Interstate 25 near the Colorado-Wyoming border for about an hour Saturday before it was extinguished, according to the Wyoming Highway Patrol.

The unusually early warm spell could telegraph trouble ahead, Wood said. The Climate Prediction Center says there is an elevated chance of higher-than-normal temperatures and lower-than-normal rain for the region through the end of summer.

"If we keep going in this trend, we could go back into a drought, and that would be a big concern — especially when it comes to fire risk," she said.

Temperatures reached into the 60s in Denver, Chicago and Des Moines, Iowa, on Sunday, and Kansas City, Missouri, saw temperatures in the mid-70s. The unseasonably warm conditions saw plenty of people heading outdoors to play in local parks, wash their cars and even get an early jump on lawn care.

In Chicago, people who would normally be in winter gear to fight off the city's famously bitter winter

winds instead frolicked around Lake Michigan's shores in light jackets or even shorts and T-shirts.

Bethany Scheiner, 53, took advantage of the weather to head with her 14-year-old son to Lincoln Park in Chicago so he could practice his football punting skills.

"It's so unusual," Scheiner said of the warm weather. "I mean, this is the month we all go away to get away from the Chicago winter."

The warmup is expected to bring some record-breaking high temperatures Monday, Wood said. But by Tuesday night, a cold front will drop the region back into winter, with wind chills below zero and snow in much of the central part of the country by Wednesday.

## **Israel's air force says it struck deep inside Lebanon after Hezbollah shot down a drone**

By BASSEM MROUE Associated Press

BEIRUT (AP) — The Israeli military said Monday its air force was striking targets of the militant Hezbollah group "deep inside Lebanon," where residents reported explosions near the northeastern city of Baalbek.

The strikes are among the deepest into Lebanon since the Israel-Hamas war began more than four months ago. They come a day after Israel's Defense Minister Yoav Gallant vowed to step up attacks on Lebanon's Hezbollah even if a cease-fire is reached with Hamas in the Gaza Strip.

Lebanese security officials said Israel's air force carried out three airstrikes on the outskirts of the village of Buday, near Baalbek, targeting a convoy of trucks. Buday is a Hezbollah stronghold. There was no immediate word on casualties.

A Hezbollah official confirmed that three strikes hit near Baalbek. The officials spoke on condition of anonymity because he was not authorized to talk to reporters.

The Israeli army said further details will follow.

The airstrikes near Baalbek came hours after Hezbollah said its fighters on Monday shot down an Israeli drone over its stronghold in a province in southern Lebanon. Another missile fired by Hezbollah toward the drone was intercepted by Israel, and landed near a synagogue in a town close to Nazareth in northern Israel. There were no injuries or damage.

Hezbollah has been exchanging fire with Israeli troops along the border since the Israel-Hamas broke on Oct. 7.

The strike on Baalbek, because of its location deep inside Lebanon, is the most significant one since the early January airstrike on Beirut that killed top Hamas official Saleh Arouri.

Hezbollah, which has been exchanging fire with Israel throughout the war in Gaza, has said it will halt its nearly daily attacks on Israel if a cease-fire is reached in Gaza.

## **Fatigue and frustration as final do-over mayoral election looms in Connecticut's largest city**

By SUSAN HAIGH Associated Press

BRIDGEPORT, Conn. (AP) — It's been nearly four months since a judge tossed out the results of a Democratic mayoral primary in Connecticut's largest city due to allegations of ballot stuffing, sending voters repeatedly back to the polls and thrusting Bridgeport into an unflattering national spotlight.

Many frustrated local voters say they just want it settled for good.

A do-over general election on Tuesday will mark the fourth time registered Democrats have voted for the city's next mayor, after the judge voided the initial primary over surveillance footage that appears to show a supporter of incumbent Mayor Joe Ganim putting multiple absentee ballots into a drop box.

For those counting, there have now been two primaries and one general election, which didn't count.

"It's very embarrassing," said Luis DeJesus, 56, a lifelong Bridgeport resident who previously had voted for the main challenger in those races, John Gomes.

DeJesus said he is "really fed up" with the past results in which Ganim appeared to have won — and

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likely won't vote again on Tuesday.

"I'm really sorry. I can't do it," he said. "I can't do it for only one person."

Ganim went to prison for corruption during his first stint as mayor and then regained his old job eight years ago in a remarkable political comeback. The mayor has denied knowledge of the alleged ballot box stuffing and called for statewide election reforms.

Gomes, who had worked as Ganim's acting chief administrative officer, successfully sued to overturn the Sept. 12 primary showing he lost to his former boss by 251 votes out of 8,173 cast. That meant the results of the subsequent November general election didn't count and another primary was held in January, which again was won by Ganim.

Gomes is now running as an independent for the fourth face-off.

It's just the latest election controversy in Bridgeport, a working-class Democratic stronghold of more than 148,000 residents. Accusations of absentee ballot manipulation date back to at least 1986, when five of the city's Democrats were arrested for collecting and possessing other people's ballots.

This scandal, though, became a national talking point when the drop-box surveillance videos were first made public. Now the subject of multiple investigations, the videos have fueled skepticism about the security of U.S. elections as well as conspiracy theories involving the 2020 presidential election, even as election experts contend what happened in Bridgeport is unique to the city and shouldn't be seen as evidence of widespread problems.

Voter turnout has been relatively steady, albeit low, throughout the prior three elections. But Nick Roussas, owner of Frankie's Diner, a Bridgeport institution since 1946, said many of his customers are just tired of the ongoing saga.

"There's election fatigue," said Roussas, who says he likes both Ganim and Gomes and allows them to campaign in his restaurant.

While he can't vote because he doesn't live in Bridgeport, Roussas said he believes the "city is moving in the right direction," noting the streets are in better condition, efforts are underway to address blight and there has been new economic development.

To date, there have been no charges or arrests over the ballot mishandling allegations that resulted in this protracted mayoral race. That lack of accountability has only worsened voter apathy, cynicism and disenfranchisement among voters, said Callie Gale Heilmann, founder, president and co-director of Bridgeport Generation Now Votes, a local social action network that is supporting Gomes' candidacy.

After recently sending texts to supporters urging them to vote for a fourth time, the group received responses such as "I'm not voting," "I voted the other times, and it doesn't matter" and "Gomes should accept that he lost."

"There's the sense that it doesn't matter," said Gemeem Davis, the organization's vice president and co-director. "The people who get up on Election Day and walk to the polls to make their voices heard, they don't matter. And it's because the political culture around here, around absentee ballots, has dehumanized folks. ... Because it's not even about what they want. It's about how to get their ballot."

Bridgeport Generation Now Votes is reminding voters that the court determined there was enough evidence to order a new primary and "redo democracy," Heilmann said.

"And aren't we so lucky that we can? Because in authoritarian dictatorships, you most certainly cannot," she said. "The elections are stolen and then that's it."

Despite the controversy surrounding his campaign, Ganim, who accused the Gomes campaign of also committing election law violations, has managed to shore up key support for another term in the closing days. Democratic U.S. Sens. Richard Blumenthal and Chris Murphy, as well as U.S. Rep. Jim Himes have endorsed Ganim, as well as Lamond Daniels, a former Democratic rival for mayor.

Democratic Gov. Ned Lamont announced he is backing Ganim as well. Last week Lamont, who in 2018 defeated Ganim in a Democratic primary for governor in every community except Bridgeport, publicly endorsed his former rival, citing their "strong working relationship."

"He's a good mayor for me to work with. We're getting a lot done together. I hope he's given another

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four years," Lamont said during a ceremony for a new technical high school in Bridgeport. His running mate, Lt. Gov. Susan Bysiewicz, appeared at a get-out-the-vote rally for Ganim on Saturday.

Aside from Gomes, Ganim faces Republican David Herz in Tuesday's election.

Brian Carey, 70, a resident of Bridgeport for more than 30 years and an independent, has now voted in two general elections for mayor, since only Democrats can vote in the primaries. Last week, he filled out his absentee ballot at City Hall.

"If you don't vote, you can't complain," said Carey, who declined to say he who voted for.

He has hope Bridgeport elections will change for the better after being in the spotlight.

"You go through phases and you have issues with certain politicians, both local and national," Carey said. "I'm hoping that after this round, we won't have any more silliness."

## Human Rights Watch accuses Israel of blocking aid to Palestinians in violation of a UN court order

By WAFAA SHURAF, TIA GOLDENBERG and KAREEM CHEHAYEB Associated Press

RAFAH, Gaza Strip (AP) — Israel has failed to comply with an order by the United Nations' top court to provide urgently needed aid to desperate people in the Gaza Strip, Human Rights Watch said Monday, a month after a landmark ruling in The Hague ordered Israel to moderate its war.

In a preliminary response to a South African petition accusing Israel of genocide, the U.N.'s top court ordered Israel to do all it can to prevent death, destruction and any acts of genocide in Gaza. It stopped short of ordering an end to its military offensive that has triggered a humanitarian catastrophe in the tiny Palestinian enclave. Israel vehemently denies the charges against it, saying it is fighting a war in self-defense.

One month later and nearly five months into the war, preparations are underway for Israel to expand its ground operation into Rafah, Gaza's southernmost town along the border with Egypt, where 1.4 million Palestinians have flooded into in search of safety.

Early Monday, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's office said the army had presented to the War Cabinet its operational plan for Rafah as well as plans to evacuate civilians from the battle zones. It gave no further details.

The situation in Rafah, where dense tent camps have sprouted to house the displaced, has sparked global concern and Israel's allies have warned that it must protect civilians in its battle against Hamas.

Also Monday, Palestinian Prime Minister Mohammed Shtayyeh said he was submitting his government's resignation. The move, which still must be accepted by President Mahmoud Abbas, could open the door to U.S.-backed reforms in the Palestinian Authority, which the U.S. wants to rule postwar Gaza but in a revitalized shape.

In its ruling last month, the International Court of Justice ordered Israel to follow six provisional measures, including taking "immediate and effective measures to enable the provision of urgently needed basic services and humanitarian assistance to address the adverse conditions of life faced by Palestinians in the Gaza Strip."

Under the orders, Israel also must submit a report on what it is doing to adhere to the measures within a month. While Monday marked a month since the court's orders were issued, it was not immediately clear whether Israel had handed in such a report. The Israeli Foreign Ministry had no immediate comment.

Human Rights Watch said Israel was not adhering to the court's order on aid provision, citing a 30% drop in the daily average number of aid trucks entering Gaza in the weeks following the court's ruling. It said Israel was not adequately facilitating fuel deliveries to hard-hit northern Gaza and blamed Israel for blocking aid from reaching the north, where the World Food Program said last week it was forced to suspend aid deliveries because of increasing chaos in the isolated part of the territory.

"The Israeli government has simply ignored the court's ruling, and in some ways even intensified its repression, including further blocking lifesaving aid," said Omar Shakir, Israel and Palestine director at Human Rights Watch.

Echoing Human Rights Watch, the Association of International Development Agencies, a coalition of over

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70 humanitarian organizations working in Gaza and the West Bank, said aid deliveries have slowed since the court's ruling, with almost no aid reaching areas in Gaza north of Rafah.

Israel denies it is restricting the entry of aid and has instead blamed humanitarian organizations operating inside Gaza, saying hundreds of trucks filled with aid sit idle on the Palestinian side of the main crossing. The U.N. says it can't always reach the trucks at the crossing because it is at times too dangerous.

Netanyahu's office also said Monday the War Cabinet had approved a plan to deliver humanitarian aid safely into Gaza in a way that would "prevent the cases of looting." It did not disclose further details.

The war, launched after Hamas-led militants rampaged across southern Israel, killing 1,200 people, mostly civilians, and taking roughly 250 people hostage, has unleashed unimaginable devastation in Gaza.

Nearly 30,000 people have been killed in Gaza, two thirds of them women and children, according to the Health Ministry in Hamas-run Gaza which does not distinguish in its count between fighters and non-combatants. Israel says it has killed 10,000 militants, without providing evidence.

Fighting has flattened large swaths of Gaza's urban landscape, displacing about 80% of the territory's 2.3 million people who have crammed into increasingly smaller spaces looking for elusive safety.

The crisis has pushed a quarter of the population toward starvation and raised fears of imminent famine, especially in the northern part of Gaza, which was the first focus of Israel's ground invasion and where starving residents have been forced to eat animal fodder and search for food in demolished buildings.

"I wish death for the children because I cannot get them bread. I cannot feed them. I cannot feed my own children," Naim Abouseido yelled in anguish as he waited for aid in Gaza City. "What did we do to deserve this?"

Bushra Khalidi, with U.K. aid organization Oxfam, told The Associated Press that it had verified reports that children have died of starvation in the north in recent weeks, which she said indicated aid was not being scaled up despite the court ruling.

Israel said that 245 trucks of aid entered Gaza on Sunday, less than half the amount that entered daily before the war.

But Human Rights Watch, citing U.N. figures, said that between Jan. 27 and Feb. 21, the daily average of trucks entering stood at 93, compared to 147 trucks a day in the three weeks before the world court's ruling. The daily average dropped further, to 57, between Feb. 9 and 21, the figures showed.

Aid groups say deliveries continue to be hobbled by security issues. The French aid groups Médecins du Monde and Doctors Without Borders each said that facilities belonging to them were struck by Israeli forces in the weeks following the court order.

United Nations agencies and aid groups say the hostilities, the Israeli military's refusal to facilitate deliveries and the breakdown of order inside Gaza make it increasingly difficult to get vital aid to much of the coastal enclave. In some cases, crowds of desperate Palestinians have surrounded delivery trucks and stripped the supplies off them.

The U.N. has called on Israel to open more crossings, including in the north, and to improve the coordination process.

## Facing backlash over IVF ruling, Alabama lawmakers look for a fix

By KIM CHANDLER Associated Press

MONTGOMERY, Ala. (AP) — Lawmakers began scrambling for ways to protect Alabama in vitro fertilization services after multiple providers paused treatment in the wake of a state Supreme Court ruling that frozen embryos could be considered children under a state law.

Facing a wave of shock and anger from the decision, legislators prepared separate proposals in the House and Senate that would seek to prevent a fertilized egg from being recognized as a human life or an unborn child under state laws until it is implanted in a woman's uterus.

Justices ruled last week that three couples who had frozen embryos destroyed in a mishap at a storage facility could pursue wrongful death claims for their "extrauterine children." Justices cited sweeping language that the GOP-controlled Legislature and voters added to the Alabama Constitution in 2018 saying

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that the state recognizes the "rights of the unborn child."

Senate Minority Leader Bobby Singleton, a Democrat, said Republicans helped create the situation in their push to enact some of the most stringent anti-abortion laws in the country. The result, he said, was eliminating 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.

Former President Donald Trump joined the calls for Alabama lawmakers to act Friday and said he would "strongly support the availability of IVF."

State Republican lawmakers said they were working on a solution.

"Alabamians strongly believe in protecting the rights of the unborn, but the result of the State Supreme Court ruling denies many couples the opportunity to conceive, which is a direct contradiction," House Speaker Nathaniel Ledbetter said.

Republican state Sen. Tim Melson, who is a doctor, said his proposal seeks to clarify that a fertilized egg is a "potential life" and not a human life until it is implanted in the uterus.

"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.

House Minority Leader Anthony Daniels, a Democrat, introduced legislation to clarify that a "human egg or human embryo that exists in any form outside of the uterus shall not, under any circumstances, be considered an unborn child" under state law.

"This is just the first step in unwinding this predicament our state has placed itself in," Daniels said.

Melson said he was not surprised that the state is seeing unintended consequences from the constitutional language. Supporters said it was intended to block abortion if the states ever gained control of the issue. But opponents warned it was essentially a "personhood" measure that would establish "constitutional rights for fertilized eggs."

Alabama Gov. Kay Ivey said the state wants to foster a culture of life and that includes "couples hoping and praying to be parents who utilize IVF."

Alabama Attorney General Marshall does not intend to prosecute IVF providers or families based on the state Supreme Court ruling, Chief Counsel Katherine Robertson said in a statement.

The court's ruling, treating the embryos the same as 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. Three in vitro fertilization providers in Alabama paused their services in the aftermath of the ruling.

Gabby Goidel, who was days from an expected egg retrieval appointment, was told Thursday that her provider would not continue doing embryo transfers.

"I started crying," said Goidel, who swiftly traveled with her husband to Texas to try to continue the IVF cycle with a provider there. The Alabama ruling is "not pro-family in any way," Goidel said.

At the Fertility Institute of North Alabama, Dr. Brett Davenport 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.

The court ruled only that 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.

## Live updates | Israeli military presents a plan for a Rafah offensive to the War Cabinet

By The Associated Press undefined

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's office said that the army had presented to the War Cabinet its operational plan for a ground offensive into Rafah, Gaza's southernmost town along the border with Egypt, where 1.4 million Palestinians have sought safety.

The situation in Rafah, where dense tent camps have sprouted to house the displaced, has sparked global concern and Israel's allies have warned that it must protect civilians in its battle against Hamas.

Netanyahu's office also said the War Cabinet had approved a plan to deliver humanitarian aid safely into Gaza in a way that would "prevent the cases of looting." It did not disclose further details.

The war began after Hamas-led militants rampaged across southern Israel on Oct. 7, killing 1,200 people, mostly civilians, and taking about 250 others hostage.

Nearly 30,000 people in Gaza, two thirds of them women and children, have been killed, according to the Health Ministry in the Hamas-run enclave, which does not distinguish in its count between fighters and noncombatants. Israel says it has killed 10,000 militants, without providing evidence.

Currently:

- Human Rights Watch accuses Israel of blocking aid to Gaza in violation of a UN court order.
- Palestinian prime minister submits government's resignation, a move that could open door to reforms.
- Israel vows to target Lebanon's Hezbollah even if a cease-fire is reached with Hamas in Gaza.
- Find more of AP's coverage at <https://apnews.com/hub/israel-hamas-war>.

Here's the latest:

90 PEOPLE REPORTED KILLED ACROSS GAZA IN THE LAST 24 HOURS

RAFAH, Gaza Strip — The bodies of 90 people killed in Israel's bombardment have been brought to hospitals in the war-wrecked Gaza Strip in the past 24 hours, the Health Ministry in the Hamas-run territory reported Monday.

Hospitals had also received 164 wounded, it said.

The fresh fatalities brought the death toll in Gaza to 29,782 since the Israel-Hamas war began on Oct. 7, the ministry said in its daily briefing. The ministry doesn't differentiate between civilians and combatants, but said two thirds of the dead are children and women.

Another 70,043 had been wounded since Oct. 7, it said.

The ministry said many casualties remain under the rubble and first responders have been unable to retrieve them amid the relentless bombing.

The war began after Hamas-led militants rampaged across southern Israel, killing 1,200 people, mostly civilians, and taking roughly 250 people hostage.

## Hungary's parliament set to ratify Sweden's NATO accession in final step toward membership

By JUSTIN SPIKE Associated Press

BUDAPEST, Hungary (AP) — Hungary's parliament is to vote Monday on ratifying Sweden's bid to join NATO, likely bringing an end to more than 18 months of delays that have frustrated the alliance as it seeks to expand in response to Russia's war in Ukraine.

Hungary's government submitted the protocols for approving Sweden's entrance to NATO in 2022, but the matter has stalled in parliament since then over opposition by governing party lawmakers. Unanimous support among all NATO members is required to admit new countries, and Hungary is the only one of the alliance's 31 members that has not given its backing.

Prime Minister Viktor Orbán, a right-wing nationalist who has forged close ties with Russia, has said that criticism of Hungary's democracy by Swedish politicians had soured relations between the two countries and led to reluctance among lawmakers in his Fidesz party.

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But the vote on Monday is widely expected to approve Sweden's membership in NATO, removing the final hurdle after it first applied to join the alliance in May 2022.

Ulf Kristersson, Sweden's prime minister, met with Orbán on Friday in Hungary's capital, where they appeared to reach a decisive reconciliation. Following their meeting, they announced the conclusion of a defense industry agreement which will include Hungary's purchase of four Swedish-made JAS 39 Gripen jets and the extension of a service contract for its existing Gripen fleet.

Orbán said the additional fighter jets "will significantly increase our military capabilities and further strengthen our role abroad" and will improve Hungary's ability to participate in joint NATO operations.

"To be a member of NATO together with another country means we are ready to die for each other," Orbán said. "A deal on defense and military capacities helps to reconstruct the trust between the two countries."

Monday's vote on Sweden's NATO accession is just one matter on a busy agenda for lawmakers in the Hungarian parliament. A vote is also scheduled on accepting the resignation of President Katalin Novák, who stepped down earlier this month in a scandal over her decision to pardon a man convicted of covering up a string of child sexual abuses.

After accepting Novák's resignation, lawmakers are expected to confirm Tamás Sulyok, the president of Hungary's Constitutional Court, as the country's new president.

Some opposition parties have said they will not participate in a vote to confirm a new president. But Sulyok was nominated by Orbán's Fidesz party, which has a two-thirds majority in parliament and is expected to easily approve his presidency.

A presidential signature is required for approval of Sweden's NATO bid to take effect, but it was unclear when that final endorsement would take place.

Hungary's allies in NATO and the European Union have put increasing pressure on it in recent months to drop its opposition to Sweden's membership. Last weekend, a bipartisan group of U.S. senators visited Hungary and announced it would submit a joint resolution to Congress condemning Hungary's alleged democratic backsliding and urging Orbán's government to immediately lift its block on Sweden's trans-Atlantic integration.

## At Paris gathering, Western leaders to show unity for Ukraine and signal 'that Russia cannot win'

By SYLVIE CORBET Associated Press

PARIS (AP) — More than 20 European heads of state and government and other Western officials are gathering in a show of unity for Ukraine, signaling to Russia that their support for Kyiv isn't wavering as the full-scale invasion grinds into a third year.

French President Emmanuel Macron, hosting the conference Monday in Paris, said he wants to discuss strengthening aid and ways to "give credibility to the fact that Russia cannot win in Ukraine."

"We are at a critical moment," Macron said this weekend.

"With Ukraine having limited resources, we must reinforce the munitions, the military resources, what we send," he said. "But we must also think about how we manage this effort over time and how we ensure that Russia does not win."

A top French official said the conference isn't aimed at making new commitments in terms of weapon deliveries and financial aid, but rather at better coordinating support for Kyiv and ensuring that aid promises are kept. The official spoke on condition of anonymity to discuss the conference details and goals.

Ukraine President Volodymyr Zelenskyy is expected to attend via videoconference, Macron's office said. The more than 20 European heads of state and government include German Chancellor Olaf Scholz and Polish President Andrzej Duda. The United States will be represented by its top diplomat for Europe, James O'Brien, and the U.K. by Foreign Secretary David Cameron.

European nations are worried the U.S. will dial back support as aid for Kyiv is teetering in Congress. They also have growing concerns that former U.S. President Donald Trump might return to the White House

and allow Russia to expand its aggression on the continent.

The Paris conference comes after France, Germany and the U.K. recently signed 10-year bilateral agreements with Ukraine to send a strong signal of long-term backing as Kyiv works to shore up Western support.

## Global economy is weighed down by war, uncertainty and instability, trade chief warns

By JON GAMBRELL Associated Press

ABU DHABI, United Arab Emirates (AP) — The head of the World Trade Organization warned on Monday that war, uncertainty and instability are weighing down the global economy and urged the bloc to embrace reform as elections across nearly half the world's population could bring new challenges.

WTO Director-General Ngozi Okonjo-Iweala sought to offer some praise for her organization as it held its biennial meeting in the United Arab Emirates, even as it faces pressure from the United States and other nations.

But she was blunt about the risks ahead, as higher prices for food, energy and other essentials sting people's pockets, "fueling political frustration."

"People everywhere are feeling anxious about the future and this will be felt at the ballot box this year," she said.

None are perhaps more critical for the WTO than the U.S. presidential election on Nov. 5.

Running again is former President Donald Trump, who threatened to withdraw the U.S. from the WTO and repeatedly levied tariffs — taxes on imported goods — on perceived friends and foes alike. A Trump win could again roil global trade.

Okonjo-Iweala did not mention Trump by name, but offered a warning about attacks against multilateralism.

"The multilateral trading system, which I term a global public good since it was created 75 years ago, continues to be misconstrued some quarters and undermined," she said.

But even if President Joe Biden is re-elected, the United States has deep reservations over the WTO. The U.S. under the past three administrations has blocked appointments to its appeals court, and it's no longer operating. Washington says the WTO judges have overstepped their authority too often in ruling on cases.

The U.S. also has criticized China for still describing itself as a developing country as it did when it joined the WTO in 2001. Washington, Europe and others say that Beijing improperly hampers access to emerging industries and steals or pressures foreign companies to hand over technology. The U.S. also says China floods world markets with cheap steel, aluminum and other products.

The WTO's member-nations will discuss a deal to ban subsidies that contribute to overfishing, extending a pause on taxes on digital media such as movies and video games, and agricultural issues while meeting this week in the Emirati capital of Abu Dhabi.

Also on Monday at the opening session, Comoros and Timor-Leste joined the WTO, bringing the number of nations in the bloc to 166.

But headwinds remain for the organization and the world's economy, particularly as the recovery from the coronavirus pandemic remains uneven across nations.

Okonjo-Iweala made no mention of Israel's war on Hamas in the Gaza Strip, though she noted the ongoing disruptions to shipping caused by Yemen's Houthi rebels in the Red Sea over the conflict.

"Shipping disruptions in vital waterways like the Red Sea and the Panama Canal are a new source of delays and inflationary pressure," she said.

WTO is also hampered by its voting format, with major decisions requiring consensus — meaning countries must actively vote in favor for proposals to take effect.

"If we thought the world looked tough in mid-2022, when we were slowly emerging from the pandemic and the war in Ukraine had shaken food and energy security, we are in an even-tougher place today," Okonjo-Iweala said.

## Seoul gives young doctors 4 days to end walkouts, threatening prosecutions or suspended licenses

By HYUNG-JIN KIM Associated Press

SEOUL, South Korea (AP) — Junior doctors in South Korea have four days to end their walkouts, the government said Monday, or they could face prosecution or have their medical licenses suspended.

About 9,000 medical interns and residents have stayed off the job since early last week to protest a government plan to increase medical school admissions by about 65%. The walkouts have severely hurt the operations of their hospitals, with numerous cancellations of surgeries and other treatments.

Government officials say adding more doctors is necessary to deal with South Korea's rapidly aging population. The country's current doctor-to-patient ratio is among the lowest in the developed world.

The strikers say universities can't handle so many new students and argue the plan would not resolve a chronic shortage of doctors in some key but low-paying areas like pediatrics and emergency departments.

Vice Health Minister Park Min-soo said during a televised briefing Monday that the government won't seek any disciplinary action against striking doctors if they return to work by Thursday.

"We want them to return to work by the end of this month, Feb. 29. If they return to the hospitals they had left by then, we won't hold them responsible" for any damages caused by their walkouts, Park said. "It's not too late. Please, return to patients immediately."

But he said those who don't meet the deadline will be punished with a minimum three-month suspension of their medical licenses and face further legal steps such as investigations and possible indictments.

Under South Korea's medical law, the government can issue back-to-work orders to doctors and other medical personnel when it sees grave risks to public health. Refusing to abide by such an order can bring suspensions of their licenses and up to three years in prison or 30 million won (\$22,480) in fines. Those who receive prison sentences would be stripped of their medical licenses.

Hyeondeok Choi, a partner at the law firm Daeryun which specializes in medical law, said it's highly unlikely the government will suspend the licenses of all doctors on strike, as that would cause "an enormous medical vacuum." Other observers said authorities would likely punish strike leaders.

There are about 13,000 medical interns and residents in South Korea, most of them working and training at 100 hospitals. They typically assist senior doctors during surgeries and deal with inpatients. They represent about 30% to 40% of total doctors at some major hospitals.

The Korea Medical Association, which represents about 140,000 doctors in South Korea, has said it supports the striking doctors, but hasn't determined whether to join the trainee doctors' walkouts. Senior doctors have held a series of rallies voicing opposition to the government's plan in recent days.

Earlier this month, the government announced universities would admit 2,000 more medical students starting next year, from the current 3,058. The government says it aims to add up to 10,000 doctors by 2035.

Striking doctors have said they worry doctors faced with increased competition would engage in over-treatment, burdening public medical expenses.

A public survey showed that about 80% of South Koreans back the plan. Critics suspect doctors, one of the best-paid professions in South Korea, oppose the recruitment plan because they worry they would face greater competition and lower incomes.

Park said the country's medical service for emergency and critical patients remain stable, with public medical facilities extending their working hours and military hospitals opening emergency rooms to ordinary patients. But local media reported that an octogenarian suffering a cardiac arrest was declared dead last Friday after seven hospitals turned her away citing a lack of medical staff or other reasons likely related to the walkouts.

Hwang Byung-tae, a 55-year-old laryngeal cancer patient, said he has regularly visited a Seoul hospital for treatment for four years. Last week, he said he had to leave the hospital without receiving an anti-cancer injection because of the walkouts.

Hwang accused both the government and doctors of holding the lives of patients hostage. "It's patients like me who end up suffering and dying, not them," Hwang said.

## What recession? Professional forecasters raise expectations for US economy in 2024

NEW YORK (AP) — This year looks to be a much better one for the U.S. economy than business economists were forecasting just a few months ago, according to a survey released Monday.

The economy looks set to grow 2.2% this year after adjusting for inflation, according to the National Association for Business Economics. That's up from the 1.3% that economists from universities, businesses and investment firms predicted in the association's prior survey, which was conducted in November.

It's the latest signal of strength for an economy that's blasted through predictions of a recession. High interest rates meant to get inflation under control were supposed to drag down the economy, the thinking went. High rates put the brakes on the economy, such as by making mortgages and credit card bills more expensive, in hopes of starving inflation of its fuel.

But even with rates very high, the job market and U.S. household spending have remained remarkably resilient. That in turn has raised expectations going forward. Ellen Zentner, chief U.S. economist at Morgan Stanley and president of the NABE, said a wide range of factors are behind the 2024 upgrade, including spending by both the government and households.

Economists also more than doubled their estimates for the number of jobs gained across the economy this year, though it would still likely be down from the previous one.

Offering another boost is the fact that inflation has been cooling since its peak two summers ago.

While prices are higher than customers would like, they're not increasing as quickly as they were before. Inflation has slowed enough that most of the surveyed forecasters expect interest rate cuts to begin by mid-June.

The Federal Reserve, which is in charge of setting short-term rates, has said it will likely cut them several times this year. That would relax the pressure on the economy, while goosing prices for stocks and other investments.

Of course, rate changes take a notoriously long time to snake through the economy and take full effect. That means past hikes, which began two years ago, could still ultimately tip the economy into a recession.

In its survey, NABE said 41% of respondents cited high rates as the most significant risk to the economy. That was more than double any other response, including fears of a possible credit crunch or a broadening of the wars in Ukraine or the Middle East.

## Survivors and families of 94 migrants who died in shipwreck off Italy call for truth a year later

By GIADA ZAMPANO and VALERIA FERRARO Associated Press

CROTONE, Italy (AP) — Survivors and family members of victims of a tragic shipwreck a year ago that killed 94 migrants, including 35 minors, just a few meters off Italy's southern coast, returned for three days of commemorations ending Monday, calling for truth and justice.

A torchlight vigil, a photo exhibition and a protest march were among events at the nearby town of Crotona organized by a group of activists named Network Feb. 26 after the date of the tragedy. Most of the dead hailed from countries in the Middle East or South Asia.

"One year after the carnage, their right to the truth, to justice and to be reunited with their families has not been guaranteed yet," the group wrote on its Facebook page.

On Feb. 26 last year, a wooden boat departed from Turkey carrying about 200 migrants and sank just a few meters (yards) off the coast of southern Calabria while trying to land on the seaside resort beach of Steccato di Cutro.

Network Feb. 26 includes over 400 associations that have repeatedly asked the Italian government to seek the truth about one of the deadliest migrant shipwrecks in the Mediterranean.

The group has denounced repeated policy failures and alleged violations of human rights by Italian and

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EU authorities, seen as the main cause behind the long string of deaths of migrants who face risky trips to reach European coasts in their search for a better life.

Activists have also complained that some of the relatives and survivors were denied the right to return to Croton for the anniversary of the shipwreck, due to difficulties in obtaining proper documents.

"When we met (Italian Premier Giorgia Meloni ) in Rome after the tragedy, (she) promised that her staff would (work) to reunite us and our families, but that has never happened," said Haroon Mohammadi, 24, a survivor from Herat, Afghanistan, who lost some of his friends in the shipwreck.

Mohammadi now lives in Hamburg, Germany, where he has obtained a one-year residence permit, and hopes to continue to study economics at a university there.

"It's very difficult for me to be back here, but I came to honor friends and relatives we've lost. ... We became like a family following that day," he told The Associated Press.

Many of the dead and survivors had fled Afghanistan, Iran, Pakistan and Syria, hoping to join family members in Italy and other Western European countries.

After the shipwreck, the right-wing government of Meloni approved a decree establishing a new crime — people smuggling that causes the death of migrants — punishable by up to 30 years in prison, and pledged to further toughen its battle against illegal immigration.

On Sunday, hundreds of people, including a group of about 50 survivors and relatives of the victims, marched in Croton despite heavy rain with a banner asking to "stop deaths at sea." Demonstrators also stopped to pay homage in front of PalaMilone, a sports complex that hosted the victims' caskets.

On Saturday, Croton's Pitagora Museum inaugurated a photo exhibit titled "Dreams Cross the Sea," featuring 94 photographs, one for each of the victims.

## UNANSWERED QUESTIONS

In the early hours of Feb. 26, the boat named Summer Love sank just a few meters (yards) from the coast of the southern Calabria region, while trying to land on the nearby beach. Authorities say the shipwreck resulted in the deaths of at least 94 of the 200 on board. Eighty passengers survived and about 10 were considered missing. Dozens of young children were onboard and almost none survived.

The shocking accident raised several questions over how EU border agency Frontex and the Italian coastguard responded to it.

Six days after the tragedy, Meloni told journalists that "no emergency communication from Frontex reached Italian authorities," who she said were not warned that the vessel was in danger of sinking.

However, a Frontex incident report later indicated that Italian authorities told the EU agency at the time of the sighting that the case was not considered an emergency.

The Cutro shipwreck soon became a stark illustration of the fatal dangers faced by migrants as they try to reach European coasts on overcrowded and fragile boats, after paying smugglers for costly trips.

A total of 2,571 migrants died at sea in 2023, according to figures from the International Organization for Migration. Nearly 100 people have been reported missing or dead in the Mediterranean since the beginning of 2024, more than double the toll recorded last year during the same period, the IOM said.

## RAGE AND HOPE

Over the past year, Cutro survivors and relatives of the victims have voiced their rage, stressing that the tragedy could have been avoided if authorities reacted earlier to the migrants' desperate calls for help.

Their testimonies on the tragedy have challenged both the Italian government and the international community to find new solutions to the migration crisis.

Meanwhile, the local community, which offered burial niches for some of the victims, expressed a deep solidarity and commitment to helping survivors and honoring the lost.

"My name is Mojtaba. I was born on Feb. 26, 2023. I feel I'm 1 year old today," said survivor Mojtaba Rezapour Moghaddam, a 47-year-old Iranian who is building a new life in Croton with the help of locals and aid groups.

Moghaddam fears the smugglers on board the Summer Love — after being arrested and sentenced — will be able to go back to Turkey and restart their illegal trafficking activities.

His almost-fatal trip to Italy costed him about 9,000 euros, but he recalled that others on the boat

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had paid even more.

## TRIALS PENDING

Earlier in February, a Croton magistrate sentenced Gun Ufuk, a 29-year-old Turkish citizen accused of being one of the people smugglers on the vessel, to 20 years in prison and a 3 million euro fine. Ufuk was arrested in March last year after being identified in Austria, to where he had managed to escape.

Ufuk chose a fast-track trial, while the other three alleged smugglers who survived the shipwreck are undergoing ordinary procedures, which may last several months, if not years.

Their trial was recently adjourned to April 10 to enable testimony from three survivors who are in Hamburg and will testify via videoconference.

Meanwhile, a second investigation launched by prosecutors in Crotona into alleged delays in the rescue operations is expected to wrap up in a month's time. That probe involves three police officers from the Italian tax and border police and an additional three people whose identities are unknown.

## Leaders are likely to seek quick dismissal as Mayorkas impeachment moves to the Senate

By MARY CLARE JALONICK Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — For the third time in five years, senators will be sworn in as jurors for an impeachment trial. But the chamber is expected to spend far less time on the charges against Homeland Security Secretary Alejandro Mayorkas than the ones brought against former President Donald Trump — or maybe no time at all.

The Republican-controlled House impeached Mayorkas by a single vote margin on Feb. 13, recommending that Mayorkas be removed from office over his handling of the U.S.-Mexico border. With two articles of impeachment, the House charge that Mayorkas has “willfully and systematically” refused to enforce existing immigration laws and breached the public trust by lying to Congress and saying the border was secure.

Democrats say the charges amount to a policy dispute, not the “high crimes and misdemeanors” laid out as a bar for impeachment in the Constitution.

The 214-213 vote, a narrowly successful second try after the House had rejected the effort a week earlier, was the first time in nearly 150 years a Cabinet secretary had been impeached. And while the Senate is now obligated to consider the charges, Senate leaders have shown little interest in spending much time on the matter. Two-thirds of the Senate would be needed to convict Mayorkas, and not a single Democrat has signaled support for the impeachment push.

Still, there is a process that senators have to follow under the rules for impeachment, and all Democrats would likely have to stick together to dismiss the charges completely.

A look at next steps and the Senate's options once the Mayorkas impeachment moves across the Capitol:

### CONVENING AN IMPACHMENT TRIAL

Under impeachment rules, a group of House managers — members who act as prosecutors and are appointed by the speaker — will deliver the impeachment charges by reading the articles on the Senate floor, usually after making a ceremonial walk across the Capitol with the articles in hand.

House Speaker Mike Johnson, R-La., has not yet said when that will happen, but it could be as soon as this week, when the Senate returns to session after a two-week recess.

Senators will later be sworn in as jurors, likely the next day. The Senate must then issue a summons to the official who is being tried to inform them of the charges and ask for a written answer. But Mayorkas would not have to appear in the Senate at any point.

After that, the rules generally allow the Senate to decide how to proceed. Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer, D-N.Y., hasn't yet said what he will do, but he is expected to try and dismiss the trial in some manner, if he has the votes. Democrats control the Senate, 51-49.

### VOTING TO DISMISS THE CHARGES

If Schumer can muster a simple majority, Democrats could dismiss the trial outright or move to table the

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two articles, ending the House's effort and allowing the Senate to move on to other business.

Getting to 51 votes would require every single Democrat and the chamber's three Independents to vote to dismiss, or potentially fewer if any Republicans join them.

While several GOP senators have questioned the need for a trial, it's unclear whether any of them would go as far as to vote to dismiss the charges right at the start.

Some Republicans are vocally opposed to that approach. In a letter last week, Utah Sen. Mike Lee said in a letter to Senate Republican Leader Mitch McConnell that Democrats should not be able to "shirk their Constitutional duty."

But McConnell has little control over the process. If Democrats stick together and vote, they can dismiss the trial — only a simple majority is required.

In Trump's second impeachment shortly after the Jan. 6, 2021 attack on the Capitol, Sen. Rand Paul, R-Ky., raised an objection that the trial was unconstitutional because Trump had already left office, effectively a move to dismiss it. Most Republicans voted in support of Paul's objection.

## REFERING TO COMMITTEE

If Democrats are not able to dismiss the trial or table the articles, there is a second option: They could follow the precedent of several impeachment trials for federal judges over the last century and hold a vote to create a trial committee that would investigate the charges.

While there are no hard rules on how to form a trial committee, the Senate has in the past passed a resolution authorizing the party leaders to each recommend six senators and a chairperson to run it. Those committees had the ability to call witnesses and issue final reports to the Senate ahead of eventual trials.

While there is sufficient precedent for this approach, Democrats are likely to try and avoid a trial if they can halt the process completely, especially in a presidential election year where immigration and border security are top issues.

Echoing Trump's defense during his impeachments, Schumer has called the House effort a "sham."

"House Republicans failed to produce any evidence that Secretary Mayorkas has committed any crime," Schumer said. "House Republicans failed to show he has violated the Constitution. House Republicans failed to present any evidence of anything resembling an impeachable offense."

## MOVING TO A TRIAL

If the Senate were to proceed to a trial, senators would be forced to sit in their seats for the duration, maybe weeks, while the House impeachment managers and lawyers representing Mayorkas make their cases. The Senate is allowed to call witnesses, as well, if it so decides. Senators also have an opportunity to question the two sides before a final vote on whether to convict.

While the right flank of the Senate's GOP conference is lobbying for that scenario, senators in both parties have said they don't think it's the best use of the chamber's time. And some Republicans have suggested the process was not serious enough in the House.

North Carolina Sen. Thom Tillis said earlier this month that he thinks Mayorkas has fallen short but that "there's a lot of time that goes into a thoughtful impeachment process, and a couple of hearings in a month, or month and a half doesn't seem like it fits that bill."

## Moscow ally Serbia cracks down on anti-war Russians living in the Balkan country

By DUSAN STOJANOVIC and JOVANA GEC Associated Press

ROGACA, Serbia (AP) — When Elena Kuposova signed an open letter against Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, she didn't expect a backlash in her newly adopted home state of Serbia.

After all, Serbia is formally seeking to join the European Union while adopting all the democratic values that go along with the membership, she thought. Now, she sees she was wrong.

Two years after signing the letter, the 54-year-old Russian woman is appealing an expulsion order after she was declared a threat to the national security of Serbia and her residency permit was revoked. The

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beleaguered literature translator said the only reason she could think of is the anti-war petition that she had signed.

"I am not an activist, but I did sign an anti-war letter when the Russian aggression in Ukraine just started," she said in an interview. "Even not being an activist, I couldn't just be quiet about it. So, I just put my name on the open letter where it was said that the war is a crime, and we must all unite to stop it."

Koposova is not alone. Serbia opened its borders in recent years to tens of thousands of Russians fleeing the government of President Vladimir Putin and the war in Ukraine. Russian pro-democracy activists in the Balkan country now say at least a dozen recently faced entry bans or had their residency permits revoked on grounds that they pose a threat to Serbia's security.

At least eight others are afraid to speak publicly about their legal problems with the Serbian authorities, fearing it could only jeopardize their chance of remaining in the country together with their families, Russian anti-war campaigners say.

"It was very sudden, very shocking," Koposova said of the moment she received the expulsion order, which did not explain the reason for the measure, only declaring that she poses "a threat to national security" and that she must leave the country within 30 days.

She and her husband have built a modern house on a piece of land in a remote village outside Belgrade where they live with two children, ages 6 and 14, who are attending local school and preschool classes.

Rights activists say the residency problems point to a close relation between Serbia's increasingly autocratic president, Aleksandar Vučić, and Putin, despite Serbia's formal EU bid. Vučić has refused to join Western sanctions against the traditional Slavic ally while allowing Moscow propaganda outlets such as RT and Sputnik to spread their narrative throughout the Balkans.

"The authorities in Belgrade and the authorities in Moscow are politically very close," said Predrag Petrović, research coordinator at the Belgrade Centre for Security Policy, an independent think tank that has sought an explanation from the Interior Ministry about the measures against the Russians.

"People who are critical of Putin's regime present a big threat to the regime in Moscow," Petrović said. "This is why these people are being targeted by the Serbian authorities."

Serbian officials so far haven't commented about the reported cases involving Russian citizens, and Serbia's Interior Ministry hasn't responded to an email from The Associated Press requesting an interview or a comment on the issue.

Since the war in Ukraine started two years ago, many Russians came to Serbia because they don't need visas to enter the friendly Balkan state, a potential stepping stone for possible future emigration to the West. Many were dodging the draft, while others, like the Koposova family, who came earlier, simply were fed up with Putin's government and sought a better life somewhere outside of Russia.

Peter Nikitin, one of the founders of the pro-democracy Russian Democratic Society, himself spent two days at Belgrade airport last summer when his entry permit was revoked, although he has a Serbian wife and has lived in Serbia for seven years. Nikitin was later allowed into the country, but a legal procedure regarding his residency papers is ongoing.

"I have no doubt that this is being done on direct orders from Russia, either via the embassy or directly from Moscow," insisted Nikitin, whose group has also organized protests against the war in Ukraine and demonstrations demanding freedom for political prisoners including Alexei Navalny, a Russian opposition leader and a Putin critic who died on Feb. 16 in an Arctic penal colony in Russia.

Nikitin said other anti-war activists who faced scrutiny by Serbian authorities include fellow founder of the RDS group, Vladimir Volokhonsky, who now lives in Germany.

Also under sanctions were Yevgeny Irzhansky, who organized concerts by anti-Putin bands in Serbia and who has since moved to Argentina with his wife, and Ilya Zernov, a young Russian who was banned from returning to Serbia after being attacked by a far-right Serbian nationalist when he tried to erase a wall painting calling for death to Ukraine in downtown Belgrade.

Nikitin said that the goal of these measures is to intimidate anti-war campaigners.

"The only explanation for that is that they want to scare everyone," he said. "Because if you can't sign an anti-war letter, then there's really nothing you can do. And it does have a chilling effect."

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"The point is the anti-war Russians are not protesting here against anyone in Serbia," Nikitin said. "We are only concerned with our own country and with our neighboring country, which is suffering from our country right now."

Serbia's close relations with Russia date back centuries and the two countries also share a common Slavic origin and Orthodox Christian religion. Russia has supported Serbia's bid to retain its claim on Kosovo, a former province that declared independence in 2008 with Western backing.

Serbia and Russia also maintain close links between their security services.

Former Serbian state security chief Aleksandar Vulin, who was sanctioned by the U.S. for aiding Russia's "malign" influence in the Balkan region, recently received a decoration from the Federal Security Service of Russia for close cooperation between the two spy agencies. Vulin reportedly was involved in wiretapping prominent Russian opposition activists who met in Belgrade on the eve of the war in Ukraine and who were later jailed in Russia.

For Kuposova, the decision by Serbian authorities to kick her out of the country, means that she and her family could lose everything if her appeal is rejected.

The family can't go back to Russia because they have sold all their property, are now labelled as anti-Putin and her husband could be drafted into the army to fight in Ukraine, Kuposova said.

"This house is our only house, the only house that our kids have," she said, with tears in her eyes.

## **Ex-FBI informant charged with lying about Bidens will appear in court as judge weighs his detention**

By AMY TAXIN and ALANNA DURKIN RICHER Associated Press

LOS ANGELES (AP) — A former FBI informant charged with fabricating a multimillion-dollar bribery scheme involving President Joe Biden's family is set to appear in a California federal court on Monday as a judge considers whether he must remain behind bars while he awaits trial.

Special counsel David Weiss' office is pressing U.S. District Judge Otis Wright II to keep Alexander Smirnov in jail, arguing the man who claims to have ties to Russian intelligence is likely to flee the country.

A different judge last week released Smirnov from jail on electronic GPS monitoring, but Wright ordered the man to be re-arrested after prosecutors asked to reconsider Smirnov's detention. Wright said in a written order that Smirnov's lawyers' efforts to free him was "likely to facilitate his absconding from the United States."

In an emergency petition with the 9th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals, Smirnov's lawyers said Wright did not have the authority to order Smirnov to be re-arrested. The defense also criticized what it described as "biased and prejudicial statements" from Wright insinuating that Smirnov's lawyers were acting improperly by advocating for his release.

Smirnov is charged with 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.

In urging the judge to keep Smirnov locked up, prosecutors said the man has reported to the FBI having contact with Russian intelligence-affiliated officials. Prosecutors wrote in court filings last week that Smirnov told investigators after his first arrest that officials associated with Russian intelligence were involved in passing a story to him about Hunter Biden.

Smirnov, who holds dual Israeli-U.S. citizenship, is charged by the same Justice Department special counsel who has separately filed gun and tax charges against Hunter Biden.

Smirnov has not entered a plea to the charges, but his lawyers have said they look forward to defending him at trial. Defense attorneys have said in pushing for his release that he has no criminal history and has strong ties to the United States, including a longtime significant other who lives in Las Vegas.

In his ruling last week releasing Smirnov on GPS monitoring, U.S. Magistrate Judge Daniel Albregts in Las Vegas said he was concerned about his 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 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. 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 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.

## **Air Force member in critical condition after setting himself on fire outside Israeli embassy in DC**

By DIDI TANG and MICHAEL BALSAMO Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — An active-duty member of the U.S. Air Force was critically injured Sunday after setting himself ablaze outside the Israeli Embassy in Washington, D.C., while declaring that he “will no longer be complicit in genocide,” a person familiar with the matter told The Associated Press.

The man, whose name wasn’t immediately released, walked up to the embassy shortly before 1 p.m. and began livestreaming on the video streaming platform Twitch, the person said. Law enforcement officials believe the man started a livestream, set his phone down and then doused himself in accelerant and ignited the flames. At one point, he said he “will no longer be complicit in genocide,” the person said. The video was later removed from the platform, but law enforcement officials have obtained and reviewed a copy.

The person was not authorized to publicly discuss details of the ongoing investigation and spoke to the AP on condition of anonymity.

Police did not immediately provide any additional details about the incident.

The incident happened as Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu is seeking the cabinet approval for a military operation in the southern Gazan city of Rafah while a temporary cease-fire deal is being negotiated. Israel’s military offensive in Gaza, however, has drawn criticisms, including genocide claims against the Palestinians.

Israel has adamantly denied the genocide allegations and says it is carrying out operations in accordance with international law in the Israel-Hamas war.

In December, a person self-immolated outside the Israeli consulate in Atlanta and used gasoline as an accelerant, according to Atlanta’s fire authorities. A Palestinian flag was found at the scene, and the act was believed to be one of “extreme political protest.”

In a statement, the Metropolitan Police Department in Washington said its officers had responded to the scene outside the Israeli Embassy to assist U.S. Secret Service officers and that its bomb squad had also been called to examine a suspicious vehicle. Police said no hazardous materials were found in the vehicle.

## **Daniel Suarez edges Blaney, Busch in thrilling 3-wide finish to claim Cup Series win at Atlanta**

By CHARLES ODUM AP Sports Writer

HAMPTON, Ga. (AP) — Daniel Suarez hoped but wasn’t certain he was the winner after the closest finish ever at Atlanta Motor Speedway.

Then came the photo evidence: Suarez edged Ryan Blaney and Kyle Busch in a three-wide blur at the line to win a crashed-filled NASCAR Cup Series race on Sunday.

The second career win in 253 Cup races for Suarez set off a celebration that included a long series of congratulations from other drivers for the popular native of Monterrey, Mexico.

“It was a very special moment,” said Suarez, who entered this contract year with his future seemingly

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uncertain with Trackhouse Racing.

"I was just hoping. I saw the tower and thought I was first. I thought I had it but then they said there was a review."

The review confirmed the first win for Suarez since June 2022 at Sonoma. It was his first victory on a speedway, but he said he's not satisfied after locking up a spot in the playoffs in only the second race of the year.

"Some people actually told me you can relax, now you're in the playoffs," Suarez said. "Hell no! My goal is to win more than one race. This is not relaxing here. ... The goal is for you to not be surprised when the 99 is in victory lane."

Busch, who won Saturday's Trucks race, moved to the middle between Blaney, the 2023 Cup champion, and Suarez to set up the dramatic finish. Blaney was second, only 0.003 seconds behind, and Busch was third.

"It was fun racing, but just a couple inches short," Blaney said. "I'm happy for Daniel, though. That was fun racing him and Kyle. That was fun."

Suarez gave credit to Busch, another Chevrolet driver, for providing a late push.

"It's good to see Daniel get a win," Busch said. "We were helping each other being Chevy team partners and working together there. Shows that when you do have friends and you can make alliances that they do seem to work, and that was a good part of today."

A massive pileup of at least 16 cars on the second lap was the biggest in the history of Atlanta Motor Speedway and set the pace for a procession of wrecks. The crash left many cars heavily taped for the remainder of the afternoon.

The intensity picked up when Austin Cindric went to the bottom of the track in his Team Penske Ford for a four-wide pass to take the lead with 50 laps remaining.

Michael McDowell, who on Saturday won his first pole in his 467th start, won the first stage but collided with Daytona 500 champion William Byron while trying to slow down to enter pit row in the second stage. McDowell suffered right front damage and each car fell one lap behind before McDowell made his way back to the lead midway through the final stage. He finished eighth.

## THE CLOSE FINISH

In addition to Atlanta's closest finish, it was the closest finish at any 1.5-mile track and the third-closest Cup finish since electronic scoring was established in 1993.

There were 10 cautions and an Atlanta-record 48 lead changes.

## GILLILAND'S BEST RACE

Todd Gilliland led 58 laps, the most of his career and especially notable for a third-year driver who led a combined 11 laps in his first two seasons. He finished 26th.

The 23-year-old Gilliland, a North Carolina native, looked at home on the Atlanta track with a "Georgia Peanuts" logo on the hood of his Front Row Motorsports Ford.

## LOGANO, ELLIOTT START AT BACK

After qualifying second on Saturday, Joey Logano had to start at the back of the field and serve a pass-through penalty for a safety violation with his gloves. Chase Elliott, who qualified 28th, also was pushed to the back row, one spot ahead of Logano, following unapproved adjustments to the engine sensor on his Hendrick Motorsports Chevrolet.

Two Ford drivers for Stewart-Haas Racing, Noah Gragson and Ryan Preece, had items from their cars confiscated for inspection on Friday. Rulings from NASCAR could come next week.

Elliott, who earned his first win at his Atlanta home track in 2022, started stage 3 in fourth place. Elliott was eighth when he was tapped from behind by Ross Chastain's Chevrolet and sent into a spin that ended his hopes of winning.

## LAP 2 MELEE

Suarez was part of the 16-car pileup at the start of the second lap. Josh Williams' Chevrolet was taken to the garage while expected contenders Alex Bowman, Austin Dillon, Tyler Reddick, Elliott, Bubba Wallace and Christopher Bell also remained in the race with damaged vehicles.

The beneficiary was Logano, who served his pass-through penalty during the caution and emerged in 20th place at the restart. Logano's dramatic recovery continued as he was 12th at the end of the first stage, won by McDowell.

Logano's luck ran out on the final lap of Stage 2 when he drifted into the path of Chris Buescher's Ford and Hamlin's Toyota. Cindric won the stage.

UP NEXT

The Cup Series moves to Las Vegas next weekend.

## Supporters of Brazil's Bolsonaro stage huge demonstration to defend him amid investigations

By FELIPE CAMPOS MELLO and MAURICIO SAVARESE Associated Press

SAO PAULO (AP) — Supporters of former President Jair Bolsonaro staged a huge rally jamming a main avenue in Brazil's biggest city Sunday to defend him against legal challenges that could put him in jail.

The far-right leader said in a speech that he seeks "pacification to erase the past," taking a more conciliatory tone than when he was in office.

Bolsonaro is seeking to show his base is resilient as he is being investigated by federal police over his alleged role in the Jan. 8, 2023, attacks on government buildings by his supporters over his election loss. He wants the dozens of people still in jail for those incidents to get pardons.

Bolsonaro is also accused of illegally receiving jewels from Saudi Arabia during his presidency.

His supporters filled blocks of the city's Paulista Avenue. Independent observers from a research group at the University of Sao Paulo estimated 185,000 people joined in. Brazil's military police put the crowd size even bigger.

Many of the participants complained Bolsonaro is being persecuted by Brazil's Supreme Court and claimed President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva unfairly won his narrow victory in the 2022 election.

Some also carried Israeli flags as a show of defiance to the current president, who has received widespread criticism at home for comparing Israel's military offensive in Gaza to the Holocaust.

"What I seek is pacification, it is erasing the past," Bolsonaro said in a speech as he held an Israeli flag himself. "It is to seek a way for us to live in peace and stop being so jumpy. Amnesty for those poor people who are jailed in Brasilia. We ask all 513 congressmen, 81 senators for a bill of amnesty so justice can be made in Brazil."

Bolsonaro denied that he and his supporters attempted a coup when rioters assaulted government buildings a year ago.

"What is a coup? It is tanks on the streets, weapons, conspiracy. None of that happened in Brazil," he said.

Bolsonaro is barred from running for office until 2030 due to two convictions of abuse of power, but he remains active in Brazilian politics as the main adversary for left-of-center Lula. As this year's mayoral elections loom, candidates have split between the two leaders.

Some of Bolsonaro's allies aiming to unseat Lula in the 2026 elections also attended, including influential governors Tarcisio de Freitas of Sao Paulo state and Romeu Zema of Minas Gerais state. But other key politicians and business executives who aligned with him during his 2019-2022 presidency did not show up.

Carlos Melo, a political science professor at Insper University in Sao Paulo, predicted the pro-Bolsonaro event would not help the former president's legal situation.

"The fact that Bolsonaro doesn't yield any power now reduces what he can do. Beforehand, we feared he could use the force of the armed forces. Now that is ruled out," Melo said. "This new reality does not favor him with unpredictability and drama."

The event showed, though, that Bolsonaro's message still resonates with many Brazilians, some of whom evidently favor any coup attempt that would put him in charge. One man paraded wearing a military hat and shouted: "Brazil, nation, hail our forces. The armed forces didn't sleep!"

Federal police investigations also include military generals among those who are alleged to have plotted a pro-Bolsonaro coup with the riots in the capital city of Brasilia last year.

Other Bolsonaro supporters believe Brazil faces the risk of radicalism under Lula, who also governed for two terms in 2003-2010.

"It is a country that was taken over by a communist party," hairstylist Simone da Silva Sampaio said, in a reference to the president's Workers' Party. "We're living terrible days in this place, where we are silenced. We don't have the right to speak about the truth that happens here."

Workers' Party chairwoman Gleisi Hoffmann was one of the few high profile adversaries of the former president to make comments about the pro-Bolsonaro event in Sao Paulo.

"When he speaks about amnesty for those sentenced for the riots of Jan. 8, Bolsonaro aims at his own impunity. He cannot defend interests that are not his own," Hoffman said on her social media channels. "We should not have any complacency with coup mongers, starting from their boss."

## **Biden is summoning congressional leaders to the White House to talk Ukraine and government funding**

By SEUNG MIN KIM Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — President Joe Biden will convene the top four congressional leaders at the White House on Tuesday to press lawmakers on passing an emergency aid package for Ukraine and Israel, as well as averting a looming government shutdown next month, according to a White House official.

The top four leaders include House Speaker Mike Johnson, R-La., Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer, D-N.Y., House Minority Leader Hakeem Jeffries, D-N.Y., and Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell, R-Ky.

During the meeting, the president will discuss the "urgency" of passing the aid package, which has bipartisan support, as well as legislation to keep the federal government operating through the end of September, said the White House official, who was granted anonymity to discuss a meeting not yet publicly confirmed.

The Republican-led House is under pressure to pass the \$95 billion national security package that bolsters aid for Ukraine, Israel as well as the Indo-Pacific. That legislation cleared the Senate on a 70-29 vote earlier this month, but Johnson has been resistant to putting up the aid bill for a vote in the House.

"This is one of those instances where one person can bend the course of history. Speaker Johnson, if he put this bill on the floor, would produce a strong, bipartisan majority vote in favor of the aid to Ukraine," Jake Sullivan, the White House national security adviser, said Sunday on ABC's "This Week."

Sullivan stressed that Ukrainians need weapons and ammunition to fend off Russian forces, and that in his personal conversations with the speaker, he "has indicated that he would like to get the funding for Ukraine."

Separate from the national security package, the first tranche of government funding is due to expire Friday. The rest of the federal government, including agencies such as the Pentagon, Department of Homeland Security and the State Department, expires on March 8.

In a letter to his colleagues sent Sunday, Schumer said there was not yet an agreement to avoid a partial shutdown of the agencies whose funding expires this week. That includes the departments of Transportation, Housing and Urban Development, Agriculture and Veterans Affairs.

"While we had hoped to have legislation ready this weekend that would give ample time for members to review the text, it is clear now that House Republicans need more time to sort themselves out," Schumer wrote in the letter. The Senate majority leader called on Johnson to "step up to once again buck the extremists in his caucus and do the right thing" by greenlighting funding to keep the government open.

Johnson said Schumer's letter was "counterproductive" and said Democrats were pushing their own unrealistic policy demands.

"This is not a time for petty politics," Johnson said in a statement. "House Republicans will continue to work in good faith and hope to reach an outcome as soon as possible, even as we continue to insist that our own border security must be addressed immediately."

## Off to Michigan, Haley is staying in the race despite Trump's easy primary win in South Carolina

By THOMAS BEAUMONT and MEG KINNARD Associated Press

TROY, Mich. (AP) — Republican presidential candidate Nikki Haley says it's not "the end of our story" despite Donald Trump's easy primary victory in South Carolina, her home state where the onetime governor had long suggested her competitiveness with the former president would show.

Defying calls from South Carolina Republicans to exit the race, Haley traveled Sunday to Michigan, which holds its primary on Tuesday, speaking to a hotel ballroom packed with hundreds of supporters.

In the less than 24 hours following her Saturday night loss to Trump, Haley's campaign said that she had raised \$1 million "from grassroots supporters alone," a bump they argued "demonstrates Haley's staying power and her appeal to broad swaths of the American public."

But with Sunday also came the end of support for Haley's campaign from Americans for Prosperity, the political arm of the powerful Koch network.

In a memo first reported by Politico and obtained by The Associated Press, AFP Action senior adviser Emily Seidel wrote that, while the group "stands firm behind our endorsement" of Haley, it would "focus our resources where we can make the difference," redirecting spending toward U.S. Senate and House campaigns and away from Haley's presidential bid.

"Given the challenges in the primary states ahead, we don't believe any outside group can make a material difference to widen her path to victory," Seidel wrote.

AFP Action had endorsed Haley's campaign in November, promising to commit its nationwide coalition of activists — and virtually unlimited funds — to helping her defeat Trump, with door knockers fanning out across early-voting states and sending out dozens of mailers on her behalf.

With his win Saturday in the first-in-the South contest, Trump has now swept every primary or caucus on the GOP early-season calendar that awards delegates. His performances have left little maneuvering room for Haley, his former U.N. ambassador.

"I have never seen the Republican Party so unified as it is right now," Trump said in a victory night celebration in Columbia.

Haley insists she is sticking around even with the growing pressure to abandon her candidacy and let Trump focus entirely on Democratic President Joe Biden, in a 2020 rematch.

In addition to the rally in vote-rich Oakland County, Michigan, northwest of Detroit on Sunday evening, she scheduled a Monday event in Grand Rapids, a western Michigan Republican hub. Ahead of the first event on Sunday evening, dozens of supporters filed into a Troy hotel ballroom, festooned with campaign signs and featuring a guitar-playing duo to entertain the crowd, rather than Haley's typical classic rock rally playlist, although speakers eventually blared with the campaign's familiar soundtrack.

Taking the stage, Haley gave the roughly half-hour speech typical of her events, although she added a few touches specific to the Michigan audience. Calling Biden's incentivizing of electric vehicle programs "corporate welfare," Haley asked attendees in this state where the auto industry is a major economic driver about the unfairness of any requirement to switch to electric.

"What about the fact that maybe we all don't want to drive an electric car?" Haley asked the crowd, which affirmed her line of questioning. "Have you seen how expensive they are?"

The Biden administration has voiced a goal of ensuring that EVs make up half of all new car sales by 2030. Last month, the White House announced it was awarding \$623 million in grants to states, local governments and tribes to help build an electric vehicle charging network across the nation.

In another tweak to her argument, as she pushes forward through the next batch of states to vote, Haley reiterated her comments from Saturday night that the fact she nearly notched 40% in South Carolina shows the stark percentage of voters who don't favor Trump, something she says would make it hard for him to win the general election.

"He's not going to get that 40% if he's going and calling out my supporters and saying they're 'barred permanently from MAGA,'" Haley said, referencing Trump's comments directed at anyone who funded her

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campaign. "He's not going to get the 40% by calling them names."

Asa Hutchinson, a Trump critic and former Arkansas governor who dropped out of the GOP presidential race after Iowa's leadoff caucuses in January, said he thought Haley should stay in. "The challenge is that she did everything she could in South Carolina," he said Sunday on CNN's "State of the Union."

Haley has pledged to keep going through at least the batch of primaries on March 5, known as Super Tuesday. "But it's got to accelerate because you run into the delegate wall. And the delegate wall is March 5," Hutchinson said. "So she's got to prove herself."

South Carolina's most prominent Republicans stood with Trump, including U.S. Rep. Nancy Mace, who endorsed him this past week.

To U.S. Rep. Russell Fry, "this has always been a primary in name only" and that Trump was never in jeopardy of losing to Haley. Fry said Trump would be the GOP nominee and the latest election results were "just further validation of that."

Texas Gov. Greg Abbott, a Trump ally, said Trump was on "a pathway" to being able to clinch the nomination by mid-March. "I would say the wind is strongly" at his back, Abbott told CNN.

Not all voters in South Carolina want Haley to end her campaign.

Irene Sulkowski of Daniel Island said she hoped Haley would soldier on, suggesting the former governor would be a more appealing general election candidate than Trump despite his popularity among the GOP base that powers the primary season.

"They're not thinking, 'Who do you want to represent us in the general election?'" said Sulkowski, an accountant. "And they need to have a longer-term view."

## Idaho is set to execute a death row inmate after nearly half a century behind bars

By REBECCA BOONE Associated Press

BOISE, Idaho (AP) — For nearly 50 years, Idaho's prison staffers have been serving Thomas Eugene Creech three meals a day, checking on him during rounds and taking him to medical appointments.

This Wednesday, some of Idaho's prison staffers will be asked to kill him. Barring any last-minute stay, the 73-year-old, one of the nation's longest-serving death row inmates, will be executed by lethal injection for killing a fellow prisoner with a battery-filled sock in 1981.

Creech's killing of David Jensen, a young, disabled man who was serving time for car theft, was his last in a broad path of destruction that saw Creech convicted of five murders in three states. He is also suspected of at least a half-dozen others.

But now, decades later, Creech is mostly known inside the walls of the Idaho Maximum Security Institution as just "Tom," a generally well-behaved old-timer with a penchant for poetry. His unsuccessful bid for clemency even found support from a former warden at the penitentiary, prison staffers who recounted how he wrote them poems of support or condolence and the judge who sentenced Creech to death.

"Some of our correctional officers have grown up with Tom Creech," Idaho Department of Correction Director Josh Tewalt said Friday. "Our warden has a long-standing relationship with him. ... There's a familiarity and a rapport that has been built over time."

Creech's attorneys have filed a flurry of last-minute appeals in four different courts in recent months trying to halt the execution, which would be Idaho's first in 12 years. They have argued Idaho's refusal to say where its execution drug was obtained violates his rights and that he received ineffective assistance of counsel.

A three-judge panel of the 9th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals on Friday rejected an argument that Creech should not be executed because he was sentenced by a judge rather than a jury. His attorneys vowed to keep fighting to save him from execution and said Creech had become a friend over the last 25 years.

"Ultimately, it will be impossible for the state to execute the Tom Creech of 1974," said Deborah A. Czuba, the Federal Defender Services of Idaho attorney who leads the capital defense unit. "He died inside Tom a long time ago, replaced by a harmless, remorseful and compassionate man who evolved into a valued,

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respected and beloved member of the prison community in which he has lived and been punished for 50 years.”

It's not clear how many people Creech, an Ohio native, killed before he was imprisoned in Idaho in 1974. At one point he claimed to have killed as many as 50 people, but many of the confessions were made under the influence of now discredited “truth serum” drugs and filled with outlandish tales of occult-driven human sacrifice and contract killings for a powerful motorcycle gang.

Official estimates vary, but authorities tend to focus on 11 deaths.

In 1973, Creech was tried for the murder of 70-year-old Paul Schrader, a retiree who was stabbed to death in the Tucson, Arizona, motel where Creech was living. Creech used Schrader's credit cards and vehicle to leave Tucson for Portland, Oregon. A jury acquitted him, but authorities say they have no doubt he was responsible.

The next year, Creech was committed to Oregon State Hospital for a few months. He earned a weekend pass and traveled to Sacramento, California, where he killed Vivian Grant Robinson at her home. Creech then used Robinson's phone to let the hospital know he would return a day late. That crime went unsolved until Creech later confessed while in custody in Idaho; he wasn't convicted until 1980.

After he was released from the Oregon State Hospital, Creech got a job at a church in Portland doing maintenance work. He had living quarters at the church, and it was there he shot and killed 22-year-old William Joseph Dean in 1974. Authorities believe he then fatally shot Sandra Jane Ramsamooj at the Salem grocery store where she worked.

Creech was finally arrested in November 1974. He and a girlfriend were hitchhiking in Idaho when they were picked up by two painters, Thomas Arnold and John Bradford. Creech shot both men to death and the girlfriend cooperated with authorities.

While in custody, Creech confessed to a number of other killings. Some appeared to be fabricated, but he provided information that led police to the bodies of Gordon Lee Stanton and Charles Thomas Miller near Las Vegas, and of Rick Stewart McKenzie, 22, near Baggs, Wyoming.

Creech initially was sentenced to death for killing the painters. But after the U.S. Supreme Court barred automatic death sentences in 1976, his sentence was converted to life in prison.

That changed after he killed Jensen, who was serving time for car theft. Jensen's life hadn't been easy: He suffered a nearly fatal gun injury as a teen that left him with serious disabilities including partial paralysis.

Jensen's relatives opposed Creech's bid for clemency. They described Jensen as a gentle soul and a prankster who loved hunting and spending time outdoors, who was “the peanut butter” to his sister's jelly. His daughter, who was 4 when he was killed, spoke of how she never got to know him, and how unfair it was that Creech is still around when her father isn't.

Creech's supporters, meanwhile, say decades spent in a prison cell have left him changed. One death row prison staffer told the parole board last month that while she cannot begin to understand the suffering Creech dealt to others, he is now a person who makes positive contributions to his community. His execution date will be difficult for everyone at the prison, she said, especially those who have known him for years.

“I don't want to be dismissive of what he did and the countless people who were impacted by that in real significant ways,” said Tewalt, the corrections director. “At the same time, you also can't be dismissive of the effect it's going to have on people who have established a relationship with him. On Thursday, Tom's not going to be there. You know he's not coming back to that unit — that's real. It would be really difficult to not feel some sort of emotion about that.”

## **In water-stressed Singapore, a search for new solutions to keep the taps flowing**

By VICTORIA MILKO and DAVID GOLDMAN Associated Press

SINGAPORE (AP) — A crack of thunder booms as dozens of screens in a locked office flash between live video of cars splashing through wet roads, drains sapping the streets dry, and reservoirs collecting

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the precious rainwater across the tropical island of Singapore. A team of government employees intently monitors the water, which will be collected and purified for use by the country's six million residents.

"We make use of real-time data to manage the storm water," Harry Seah, deputy chief executive of operations at PUB, Singapore's National Water Agency, says with a smile while standing in front of the screens. "All of this water will go to the marina and reservoirs."

The room is part of Singapore's cutting-edge water management system that combines technology, diplomacy and community involvement to help one of the most water-stressed nations in the world secure its water future. The country's innovations have attracted the attention of other water-scarce nations seeking solutions.

A small city-state island located in Southeast Asia, Singapore is one of the most densely populated countries on the planet. In recent decades the island has also transformed into a modern international business hub, with a rapidly developing economy. The boom has caused the country's water consumption to increase by over twelve times since the nation's independence from Malaysia in 1965, and the economy is only expected to keep growing.

With no natural water resources, the country has relied on importing water from neighboring Malaysia via a series of deals allowing inexpensive purchase of water drawn from the country's Johor River. But the deal is set to expire in 2061, with uncertainty over its renewal.

For years Malaysian politicians have targeted the water deal, sparking political tensions with Singapore. The Malaysian government has claimed the price at which Singapore purchases water — set decades ago — is too low and should be renegotiated, while the Singaporean government argues its treatment and resale of the water to Malaysia is done at a generous price.

And climate change, which brings increased intense weather, rising seas and a rise in average temperatures, is expected to exacerbate water insecurity, according to research done by the Singaporean government.

"For us, water is not an inexhaustible gift of nature. It is a strategic and scarce resource," Singapore Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong said at the opening of a water treatment facility in 2021. "We are always pushing the limits of our water resources. And producing each additional drop of water gets harder and harder, and more and more expensive."

Seeking solutions to its water stresses, the Singaporean government has spent decades developing a master plan focusing on what they call their four "national taps": water catchment, recycling, desalination and imports.

Across the island, seventeen reservoirs catch and store rainwater, which is treated through a series of chemical coagulation, rapid gravity filtration and disinfection.

Five desalination plants, which produce drinking water by pushing seawater through membranes to remove dissolved salts and minerals, operate across the island, creating millions of gallons of clean water every day.

A massive sewage recycling program purifies wastewater through microfiltration, reverse osmosis and ultraviolet irradiation, adding to drinking supply reservoirs. Dubbed "NEWater", the treated wastewater now provides Singapore 40% of its water, with the government hoping to increase capacity to 55% of demand in years to come. To help build people's confidence in the safety, Singapore's national water agency collaborated with a local craft brewery to create a line of beer made from treated sewage.

Innovation has been possible partially because of the involvement of private businesses, Seah said. "Sometimes private sectors may have a different way of doing things, and you can learn from them. Industry involvement in us is very important," Seah said.

Getting community participation and buy in has been an effective method to improved awareness and conservation as well, Seah said.

In 2006 the government launched the Active, Beautiful, Clean Waters Program, which transformed the country's water systems into more public areas. Through the program, residents can kayak, hike and picnic on the reservoirs, giving a greater sense of ownership and value to the country's water supplies.

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Several water facilities now have public green spaces on the roofs where the public can picnic amid big lush green lawns.

In schools, children are taught about best practices for water use and conservation. Schools hold mock water rationing exercises where water taps are shut off and students collect water in pails.

The international community has tapped into Singapore's water innovation as well. The country has become a global hub for water technology, as home to nearly 200 water companies and over 20 research centers and hosts a biennial International Water Week.

Water technology developed and used in Singapore, such as portable water filters, water testing technology and flood management tools, have been exported to over 30 countries, including Indonesia, Malaysia and Nepal.

But not all of the solutions used in Singapore will be relevant to other countries, especially those with less-developed infrastructure concedes Seah.

Despite the leaps that Singapore has made in its journey for water security, Seah warns that continued progress is essential for the island.

"After more than two decades we are still constantly analyzing the water," he said. "We can never be complacent."

## **Netanyahu says a cease-fire deal would only delay 'somewhat' an Israeli military offensive in Rafah**

By TIA GOLDENBERG, WAFAA SHURFAFA and SAMY MAGDY Associated Press

TEL AVIV, Israel (AP) — An Israeli military offensive in Gaza's southernmost city of Rafah could be "delayed somewhat" if a deal is reached for a weekslong cease-fire between Israel and Hamas, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu said Sunday, and claimed that total victory in the territory would come within weeks once the offensive begins.

Netanyahu confirmed to CBS that a deal is in the works, with no details. Talks resumed Sunday in Qatar at the specialist level, Egypt's state-run Al Qahera TV reported, citing an Egyptian official as saying discussions would follow in Cairo with the aim of achieving the cease-fire and release of dozens of hostages held in Gaza as well as Palestinians imprisoned by Israel.

Meanwhile, Israel is nearing the approval of plans to expand its offensive against the Hamas militant group to Rafah on the Gaza-Egypt border, where more than half the besieged territory's population of 2.3 million have sought refuge. Humanitarian groups warn of a catastrophe. Rafah is Gaza's main entry point for aid. The U.S. and other allies say Israel must avoid harming civilians.

Netanyahu has said he will convene the Cabinet this week to approve operational plans that include the evacuation of civilians to elsewhere in Gaza.

"Once we begin the Rafah operation, the intense phase of the fighting is weeks away from completion. Not months," Netanyahu told CBS. "If we don't have a deal, we'll do it anyway." He said four of the six remaining Hamas battalions are concentrated in Rafah.

U.S. national security adviser Jake Sullivan told NBC that President Joe Biden hadn't been briefed on the Rafah plan. "We believe that this operation should not go forward until or unless we see (a plan to protect civilians)," Sullivan said.

Early Monday, Netanyahu's office said the army had presented to the War Cabinet its "operational plan" for Rafah as well as plans to evacuate civilians from the battle zones. It gave no further details.

His office also said the War Cabinet had approved a plan to deliver humanitarian aid safely into Gaza.

United Nations agencies and aid groups say the hostilities, the Israeli military's refusal to facilitate deliveries and the breakdown of order inside Gaza make it increasingly difficult to get vital aid to much of the coastal enclave. In some chaotic scenes, crowds of desperate Palestinians have surrounded delivery trucks and stolen the supplies off them.

Heavy fighting continued in parts of northern Gaza, the first target of the offensive, where the destruction is staggering.

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"We're trapped, unable to move because of the heavy bombardment," said Gaza City resident Ayman Abu Awad.

He said that starving residents have been forced to eat animal fodder and search for food in demolished buildings. In nearby Jabaliya, market vendor Um Ayad showed off a leafy weed that people pick from the harsh, dry soil and eat.

"We have to feed the children. They keep screaming they want food. We cannot find food. We don't know what to do," she said.

Philippe Lazzarini, commissioner general of the U.N. agency for Palestinians, said it has not been able to deliver food to northern Gaza since Jan. 23, adding on X, formerly Twitter, that "our calls to send food aid have been denied."

Israel said that 245 trucks of aid entered Gaza on Sunday — less than half the amount that entered daily before the war.

## DETAILS OF THE PROPOSED DEAL

A senior official from Egypt, which along with Qatar is a mediator between Israel and Hamas, has said the draft cease-fire deal includes the release of up to 40 women and older hostages in return for up to 300 Palestinian prisoners, mostly women, minors and older people.

The official, speaking on condition of anonymity to discuss the negotiations, said the proposed six-week pause in fighting would include allowing hundreds of trucks to bring desperately needed aid into Gaza every day, including the north. He said both sides agreed to continue negotiations during the pause for further releases and a permanent cease-fire.

Negotiators face an unofficial deadline of the start of the Muslim holy month of Ramadan around March 10, a period that often sees heightened Israeli-Palestinian tensions.

Hamas says it has not been involved in the latest proposal developed by the United States, Egypt and Qatar, but the reported outline largely matches its earlier proposal for the first phase of a truce.

Hamas has said it won't release all of the remaining hostages until Israel ends its offensive and withdraws its forces from the territory, and is demanding the release of hundreds of Palestinian prisoners, including senior militants. Netanyahu has rejected those conditions.

Israeli Defense Minister Yoav Gallant on Sunday made clear that a cease-fire deal for Gaza wouldn't affect the military's daily low-level clashes with the Lebanese militant group Hezbollah, a Hamas ally.

"We will continue the fire, and we will do so independently from the south," he said while visiting the Northern Command.

Israel declared war after the Oct. 7 Hamas attack on southern Israel in which militants killed about 1,200 people, mostly civilians, and took around 250 hostages. More than 100 hostages were released in a cease-fire deal in November. More than 130 remain in captivity, a fourth of them believed to be dead.

Families have followed the negotiations with hope and anguish.

"It feels like Schindler's list. Will he be on the list or not?" Shelly Shem Tov, the mother of Omer, 21, told Israeli Army Radio of his chances of being freed.

Israel's air and ground offensive has driven around 80% of Gaza's population from their homes, putting hundreds of thousands at risk of starvation and the spread of disease. The Health Ministry in Hamas-ruled Gaza says 29,692 Palestinians have been killed in the war, two-thirds of them women and children.

The ministry's death toll doesn't distinguish between civilians and combatants. Israel says its troops have killed more than 10,000 militants, without providing evidence.

## NEWBORNS DYING IN RAFAH

The war has devastated Gaza's health sector. Less than half of hospitals even partially function.

At the Emirates Hospital in Rafah, three to four newborns are placed in each of its 20 incubators, which are designed for just one.

Dr. Amal Ismail said two to three newborns die in a single shift, in part because many families live in tents in rainy, cold weather. Before the war, one or two newborns in incubators there died per month.

"No matter how much we work with them, it is all wasted," she said. "Health conditions in tents are very bad."

## Israel vows to target Lebanon's Hezbollah even if cease-fire reached with Hamas in Gaza

By MELANIE LIDMAN and ABBY SEWELL Associated Press

TEL AVIV, ISRAEL (AP) — Israel's defense minister vowed Sunday to step up attacks on Lebanon's Hezbollah militant group even if a cease-fire is reached with Hamas in the Gaza Strip.

Hezbollah, which has been exchanging fire with Israel throughout the war in Gaza, has said it will halt its nearly daily attacks on Israel if a cease-fire is reached in Gaza.

But Israeli Defense Minister Yoav Gallant said that anyone who thinks a temporary cease-fire for Gaza will also apply to the northern front is "mistaken."

"We will continue the fire, and we will do so independently from the south, until we achieve our goals," Gallant said. He said there is a simple aim: to push Hezbollah away from the Israeli border, either through a diplomatic agreement or by force.

Hezbollah began striking Israel almost immediately after Hamas triggered the fighting in Gaza with a deadly attack along Israel's southern border from the Gaza Strip on Oct. 7. Tens of thousands of civilians on both sides of the Israel-Lebanon border have been displaced by the continued cycle of Hezbollah rocket and missile attacks and Israeli airstrikes and artillery fire.

Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah said in a speech earlier this month that the group would adhere to a cease-fire in southern Lebanon if a cease-fire should be reached in Gaza. But he said it would resume and escalate attacks if Israel continued to strike in Lebanon after any agreement with Hamas.

A Lebanese security official said Sunday that five Hezbollah members were killed in two separate Israeli airstrikes on trucks in the border area between Lebanon and Syria. The official spoke on condition of anonymity because he was not authorized to share the information with journalists. Hezbollah announced that three of its fighters had been killed, but did not say where.

The Israeli military did not acknowledge the strikes on the Lebanon-Syria border but announced that it had struck several sites in southern Lebanon in response to missile launches and that it targeted a "terrorist cell" in the town of Blida.

Gallant said Israel's targeting of Hezbollah commanders has significantly weakened the group's ability to attack Israel.

About 200 Hezbollah fighters and 35 civilians in Lebanon have been killed in nearly five months of daily low-level clashes between the Lebanese militant group and Israeli forces against the backdrop of the Israel's war with Hamas, a Hezbollah ally. In Israel, nine soldiers and nine civilians have been killed in Hezbollah attacks.

Most of the fighting between Hezbollah and Israel has been confined to the area within a few kilometers on either side of the border.

Diplomats from the United States and European countries have presented a series of proposals in hopes of producing a deal that would tamp down the border conflict.

The ideas mostly hinge on a Hezbollah pullback a few kilometers from the border, a beefed-up Lebanese army presence in the border region, and negotiations over border points where Lebanon maintains Israel has been occupying small areas of Lebanese territory since withdrawing its forces from the rest of southern Lebanon in 2000.

Eventually, the plans could lead into a demarcation of the land border between Lebanon and Israel, following the maritime border deal reached in 2022.

The most recent of these proposals, put forward by France, would involve Hezbollah withdrawing its forces 10 kilometers (6 miles) from the border, said a Lebanese government official who spoke on condition of anonymity because they were not authorized to discuss the negotiations.

Lebanon is still studying the proposal, and Hezbollah officials have indicated they are willing to consider it, but both government and Hezbollah officials have said there would be no agreement on the border before there is a cease-fire in Gaza.

## Belarusians vote in a tightly controlled election as the opposition calls for its boycott

By YURAS KARMANAU Associated Press

TALLINN, Estonia (AP) — Sunday's tightly controlled parliamentary and local elections in Belarus are set to cement the hard-line rule of the country's authoritarian leader, despite a prominent opposition leader's call for a boycott.

President Alexander Lukashenko has ruled Belarus with an iron hand for nearly three decades and on Sunday announced that he will run for the presidency again next year. He accuses the West of trying to use the vote to undermine his government and "destabilize" the nation of 9.5 million people.

Most candidates belong to the four officially registered parties: Belaya Rus, the Communist Party, the Liberal Democratic Party and the Party of Labor and Justice. Those parties all support Lukashenko's policies. About a dozen other parties were denied registration last year.

Belarusian opposition leader Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya, who is in exile in neighboring Lithuania after challenging Lukashenko in the 2020 presidential election, urged voters to boycott the elections.

"There are no people on the ballot who would offer real changes because the regime only has allowed puppets convenient for it to take part," Tsikhanouskaya said in a video statement. "We are calling to boycott this senseless farce, to ignore this election without choice." Tikhanovskaya's video address was broadcast in public places throughout Belarus on Saturday after opposition activists were able to gain access to some 2,000 screens used for advertising. Viasna Human Rights Center reported Sunday that a number of employees at the company that owned the screens have been arrested in Minsk.

Sunday's balloting is the first in Belarus since the contentious 2020 vote that handed Lukashenko his sixth term in office and triggered an unprecedented wave of mass demonstrations.

Protests swept the country for months, bringing hundreds of thousands into the streets. More than 35,000 people were arrested. Thousands were beaten in police custody, and hundreds of independent media outlets and nongovernmental organizations were shut down and outlawed.

Lukashenko has relied on subsidies and political support from his main ally, Russia, to survive the protests. He allowed Moscow to use Belarusian territory to send troops into Ukraine in February 2022.

The election takes place amid a relentless crackdown on dissent. Over 1,400 political prisoners remain behind bars, including leaders of opposition parties and renowned human rights advocate Ales Bialiatski, who won the Nobel Peace Prize in 2022.

The opposition says the early balloting that began Tuesday offers fertile ground for the vote to be manipulated, with ballot boxes unprotected for five days.

Election officials said Sunday that over 40% of the voters had cast ballots during early voting from Tuesday to Saturday. As of 9 p.m. local time, turnout was 72.98%, meeting the 50% threshold needed under Belarusian law in order for the vote to stand, according to the Belarusian Central Election Commission. Turnout in the Belarusian capital, Minsk, was notably lower than in other Belarusian regions, only reaching 61.54%. By comparison, the area with the next lowest turnout, the wider Minsk region, recorded 74.20%.

The Viasna Human Rights Center said students, soldiers, teachers and other civil servants were forced to participate in early voting.

"Authorities are using all available means to ensure the result they need — from airing TV propaganda to forcing voters to cast ballots early," said Viasna representative Pavel Sapelka. "Detentions, arrests and searches are taking place during the vote."

Speaking during Tuesday's meeting with top Belarusian law enforcement officials, Lukashenko alleged without offering evidence that Western countries were pondering plans to stage a coup in the country or to try to seize power by force. He ordered police to beef up armed patrols across Belarus, declaring that "it's the most important element of ensuring law and order."

After the vote, Belarus is set to form a new state body — the 1,200-seat All-Belarus Popular Assembly that will include top officials, local legislators, union members, pro-government activists and others. It will have broad powers, including the authority to consider constitutional amendments and to appoint

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election officials and judges.

Lukashenko was believed a few years ago to be considering whether to lead the new body after stepping down, but his calculus has apparently changed, and he announced on Sunday that he will run in next year's presidential election.

"Tell (the opposition) that I will run. And the more difficult the situation, the more actively they will disturb our society ... the more strain they put on you, myself and society, the sooner I will run in these elections," the strongman leader told reporters as he cast his ballot in the Belarusian capital, according to state media.

For the first time, curtains were removed from voting booths at polling stations, and voters were banned from taking pictures of their ballots. During the 2020 election, activists encouraged voters to photograph their ballots in a bid to prevent authorities from manipulating the vote in Lukashenko's favor.

Belarusian state TV aired footage of Interior Ministry drills in which police detained a purported offender who was photographing his ballot and others who created an artificial queue outside a polling station.

Belarus for the first time also refused to invite observers from the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe to monitor the election. Belarus is a member of the OSCE, a top trans-Atlantic security and rights group, and its monitors have been the only international observers at Belarusian elections for decades.

Since 1995, not a single election in Belarus has been recognized as free and fair by the OSCE.

The OSCE said the decision not to allow the agency's monitors deprived the country of a "comprehensive assessment by an international body."

"The human rights situation in Belarus continues to deteriorate as those who voice dissent or stand up for the human rights of others are subject to investigation, persecution and frequently prosecution," it said in a statement.

Observers noted that authorities have not even tried to pretend that the vote is democratic.

The election offers the government an opportunity to run a "systems test after massive protests and a serious shock of the last presidential election and see whether it works," said Artyom Shraibman, a non-resident scholar at the Carnegie Russia Eurasia Center. "The parliament will be sterile after the opposition and all alternative voices were barred from campaigning. It's important for authorities to erase any memory of the protests." In a statement, a U.S. State Department official described the elections as a "sham."

"The United States condemns the Lukashenko regime's sham parliamentary and local elections that concluded today in Belarus. The elections were held in a climate of fear under which no electoral processes could be called democratic," said spokesman Matthew Miller.

"The United States again calls on the Lukashenko regime to end its crackdown, release all political prisoners, and open dialogue with its political opponents. The Belarusian people deserve better."

## What would happen without a Leap Day? More than you might think

By LEANNE ITALIE AP Lifestyles Writer

NEW YORK (AP) — Leap year. It's a delight for the calendar and math nerds among us. So how did it all begin and why?

Have a look at some of the numbers, history and lore behind the (not quite) every four year phenom that adds a 29th day to February.

BY THE NUMBERS

The math is mind-boggling in a layperson sort of way and down to fractions of days and minutes. There's even a leap second occasionally, but there's no hullabaloo when that happens.

The thing to know is that leap year exists, in large part, to keep the months in sync with annual events, including equinoxes and solstices, according to the Jet Propulsion Laboratory at the California Institute of Technology.

It's a correction to counter the fact that Earth's orbit isn't precisely 365 days a year. The trip takes about

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six hours longer than that, NASA says.

Contrary to what some might believe, however, not every four years is a leaper. Adding a leap day every four years would make the calendar longer by more than 44 minutes, according to the National Air & Space Museum.

Later, on a calendar yet to come (we'll get to it), it was decreed that years divisible by 100 not follow the four-year leap day rule unless they are also divisible by 400, the JPL notes. In the past 500 years, there was no leap day in 1700, 1800 and 1900, but 2000 had one. In the next 500 years, if the practice is followed, there will be no leap day in 2100, 2200, 2300 and 2500.

Still with us?

The next leap years are 2028, 2032 and 2036.

WHAT WOULD HAPPEN WITHOUT A LEAP DAY?

Eventually, nothing good in terms of when major events fall, when farmers plant and how seasons align with the sun and the moon.

"Without the leap years, after a few hundred years we will have summer in November," said Younas Khan, a physics instructor at the University of Alabama at Birmingham. "Christmas will be in summer. There will be no snow. There will be no feeling of Christmas."

WHO CAME UP WITH LEAP YEAR?

The short answer: It evolved.

Ancient civilizations used the cosmos to plan their lives, and there are calendars dating back to the Bronze Age. They were based on either the phases of the moon or the sun, as various calendars are today. Usually they were "lunisolar," using both.

Now hop on over to the Roman Empire and Julius Caesar. He was dealing with major seasonal drift on calendars used in his neck of the woods. They dealt badly with drift by adding months. He was also navigating a vast array of calendars starting in a vast array of ways in the vast Roman Empire.

He introduced his Julian calendar in 46 BCE. It was purely solar and counted a year at 365.25 days, so once every four years an extra day was added. Before that, the Romans counted a year at 355 days, at least for a time.

But still, under Julius, there was drift. There were too many leap years! The solar year isn't precisely 365.25 days! It's 365.242 days, said Nick Eakes, an astronomy educator at the Morehead Planetarium and Science Center at the University of North Carolina in Chapel Hill.

Thomas Palaima, a classics professor at the University of Texas at Austin, said adding periods of time to a year to reflect variations in the lunar and solar cycles was done by the ancients. The Athenian calendar, he said, was used in the fourth, fifth and sixth centuries with 12 lunar months.

That didn't work for seasonal religious rites. The drift problem led to "intercalating" an extra month periodically to realign with lunar and solar cycles, Palaima said.

The Julian calendar was 0.0078 days (11 minutes and 14 seconds) longer than the tropical year, so errors in timekeeping still gradually accumulated, according to NASA. But stability increased, Palaima said.

The Julian calendar was the model used by the Western world for hundreds of years. Enter Pope Gregory XIII, who calibrated further. His Gregorian calendar took effect in the late 16th century. It remains in use today and, clearly, isn't perfect or there would be no need for leap year. But it was a big improvement, reducing drift to mere seconds.

Why did he step in? Well, Easter. It was coming later in the year over time, and he fretted that events related to Easter like the Pentecost might bump up against pagan festivals. The pope wanted Easter to remain in the spring.

He eliminated some extra days accumulated on the Julian calendar and tweaked the rules on leap day. It's Pope Gregory and his advisers who came up with the really gnarly math on when there should or shouldn't be a leap year.

"If the solar year was a perfect 365.25 then we wouldn't have to worry about the tricky math involved," Eakes said.

WHAT'S THE DEAL WITH LEAP YEAR AND MARRIAGE?

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Bizarrely, leap day comes with lore about women popping the marriage question to men. It was mostly benign fun, but it came with a bite that reinforced gender roles.

There's distant European folklore. One story places the idea of women proposing in fifth century Ireland, with St. Bridget appealing to St. Patrick to offer women the chance to ask men to marry them, according to historian Katherine Parkin in a 2012 paper in the Journal of Family History.

Nobody really knows where it all began.

In 1904, syndicated columnist Elizabeth Meriwether Gilmer, aka Dorothy Dix, summed up the tradition this way: "Of course people will say ... that a woman's leap year prerogative, like most of her liberties, is merely a glittering mockery."

The pre-Sadie Hawkins tradition, however serious or tongue-in-cheek, could have empowered women but merely perpetuated stereotypes. The proposals were to happen via postcard, but many such cards turned the tables and poked fun at women instead.

Advertising perpetuated the leap year marriage game. A 1916 ad by the American Industrial Bank and Trust Co. read thusly: "This being Leap Year day, we suggest to every girl that she propose to her father to open a savings account in her name in our own bank."

There was no breath of independence for women due to leap day.

SHOULD WE PITY THE LEAPLINGS?

Being born in a leap year on a leap day certainly is a talking point. But it can be kind of a pain from a paperwork perspective. Some governments and others requiring forms to be filled out and birthdays to be stated stepped in to declare what date was used by leaplings for such things as drivers licenses, whether Feb. 28 or March 1.

Technology has made it far easier for leap babies to jot down their Feb. 29 milestones, though there can be glitches in terms of health systems, insurance policies and with other businesses and organization that don't have that date built in.

There are about 5 million people worldwide who share the leap birthday out of about 8 billion people on the planet. Shelley Dean, 23, in Seattle, Washington, chooses a rosy attitude about being a leapling. Growing up, she had normal birthday parties each year, but an extra special one when leap years rolled around. Since, as an adult, she marks that non-leap period between Feb. 28 and March 1 with a low-key "whew."

This year is different.

"It will be the first birthday that I'm going to celebrate with my family in eight years, which is super exciting, because the last leap day I was on the other side of the country in New York for college," she said. "It's a very big year."

## What killed Flaco the owl? New York zoologists testing for toxins, disease as contributing factors

By CEDAR ATTANASIO Associated Press

NEW YORK (AP) — New York City's celebrity owl Flaco died from a traumatic impact, zoologists confirmed a day after he reportedly flew into a building, with further testing planned to determine if the Eurasian eagle-owl may have been sick.

What happened in Flaco's final hours is top of mind for his fans across the city, who cheered him on as he defied the odds by fending for himself despite a life in captivity. Police are still seeking to arrest whoever let him out of his enclosure at the Central Park Zoo a year ago.

Flaco had been in good physical shape, the necropsy found, succeeding in catching prey even though he had no experience hunting because he came to the zoo as a fledgling 13 years earlier. According to the necropsy report released Saturday, the owl weighed 1.89 kilograms (4.1 pounds), just 2% less than when he was last measured at the zoo.

Flaco was found dead Friday on a sidewalk after apparently hitting a building on Manhattan's Upper West Side.

"The main impact appears to have been to the body, as there was substantial hemorrhage under the sternum and in the back of the body cavity around the liver," the report said.

The Central Park Zoo put the blame squarely on the person who cut open Flaco's enclosure. But they're investigating illness as a possible factor, and plan to release an update in around two weeks.

"This will include microscopic examination of tissue samples; toxicology tests to evaluate potential exposures to rodenticides or other toxins; and testing for infectious diseases such as West Nile Virus and Avian Influenza," the zoo's statement said.

Eulogies from his admirers poured in over the weekend. So did speculation about which of the many urban threats to wildlife may have contributed to his death.

Flaco fans who listened for his nightly hooting in on the Upper West Side reported he'd gone quiet in the days before his death, and theorized that he may have been ill.

## **31,000 Ukrainian troops killed since the start of Russia's full-scale invasion, Zelenskyy says**

KYIV, Ukraine (AP) — Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy said Sunday that 31,000 Ukrainian soldiers have been killed in action in the two years since Russia launched its full-scale invasion.

Zelenskyy said that the number was far lower than estimates given by Russian President Vladimir Putin's government.

"31,000 Ukrainian military personnel have been killed in this war. Not 300,000, not 150,000, not whatever Putin and his deceitful circle have been lying about. But nevertheless, each of these losses is a great sacrifice for us", Zelenskyy said at the "Ukraine. Year 2024" forum in Kyiv.

The Ukrainian leader said that he wouldn't disclose the number of troops that were wounded or missing. He also said that "tens of thousands of civilians" had been killed in occupied areas of Ukraine, but said that no exact figures would be available until the war was over.

"We don't know how many of our civilians they killed. We don't," he said.

It's the first time that Kyiv has confirmed the number of its losses since the start of Russia's full-scale war on Feb. 24, 2022.

Russia has provided few official casualty figures. The most recent data from the Defense Ministry, published in January 2023, pointed to just over 6,000 deaths, although reports from U.S. and U.K. officials put that number significantly higher.

A U.S. intelligence report declassified in mid-December 2023 estimated that 315,000 Russian troops had been killed or wounded in Ukraine. If accurate, the figure would represent 87% of the roughly 360,000 troops Russia had before the war, according to the report.

Independent Russian news outlet Mediazona said Saturday that about 75,000 Russian men died in 2022 and 2023 fighting in the war.

A joint investigation published by Mediazona and Meduza, another independent Russian news site, indicates that the rate of Russia's losses in Ukraine is not slowing and that Moscow is losing about 120 men a day.

## **At least 15 Catholic worshippers were killed in an attack during a service in northern Burkina Faso**

By CHINEDU ASADU Associated Press

ABUJA, Nigeria (AP) — At least 15 Catholic worshippers were killed in a Burkina Faso village on Sunday when gunmen attacked a community as they gathered for prayers in the country's conflict-hit northern region, church officials said.

The violence in the village of Essakane was a "terrorist attack" that left 12 of the Catholic faithful dead at the scene, while three others died later as they were being treated for their wounds, according to a statement issued by Abbot Jean-Pierre Sawadogo, vicar-general of the Catholic Diocese of Dori, where

the attack happened.

No further details were provided about the attack, which no group claimed responsibility for. But suspicion fell on jihadis who have frequently attacked remote communities and security forces, especially in the northern region.

"In this painful circumstance, we invite you to pray for the rest in God for those who have died in faith, for the healing of the wounded and ... for the conversion of those who continue to sow death and desolation in our country," Sawadogo said in a statement.

About half of Burkina Faso is outside government control as jihadi groups have ravaged the country for years. Fighters have killed thousands and displaced more than 2 million people, further threatening the stability of the country that had two coups in 2022.

The country's junta has struggled to restore peace in violence hot spots since the first coup in January 2022, the number of people killed by jihadis has nearly tripled compared with the 18 previous months, according to a report by the Africa Center for Strategic Studies in August.

In addition to the junta's limited capacity, the security situation also has been worsened by the country's porous borders with Mali and Niger, both of which are also run by juntas and which also struggle with security crises.

## **US and British strikes on Houthi sites in Yemen answer militants' surge in Red Sea attacks on ships**

By LOLITA C. BALDOR and TARA COPP Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — The U.S. and Britain struck 18 Houthi targets in Yemen, answering a recent surge in attacks by the Iran-backed militia group on ships in the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden, including a missile strike this past week that set fire to a cargo vessel.

According to U.S. officials, American and British fighter jets on Saturday hit sites in eight locations, targeting missiles, launchers, rockets, drones and air defense systems. The officials spoke on condition of anonymity in order to provide early details of an ongoing military operation.

This is the fourth time that the U.S. and British militaries have conducted a combined operation against the Houthis since Jan. 12. But the U.S. has also been carrying out almost daily strikes to take out Houthi targets, including incoming missiles and drones aimed at ships, as well as weapons that were prepared to launch.

The U.S. F/A-18 fighter jets launched from the USS Dwight D. Eisenhower aircraft carrier, which is currently in the Red Sea, officials said.

"The United States will not hesitate to take action, as needed, to defend lives and the free flow of commerce in one of the world's most critical waterways," said U.S. Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin. "We will continue to make clear to the Houthis that they will bear the consequences if they do not stop their illegal attacks."

The Houthis denounced the "US-British aggression" and vowed to keep up its military operation in response. "The Yemeni Armed Forces affirm that they will confront the US-British escalation with more qualitative military operations against all hostile targets in the Red and Arabian Seas in defense of our country, our people and our nation," it said in a statement.

The Houthi-run media reported that a man was killed and six of his family were wounded in Maqbanah district in Taiz province.

The U.S., U.K., and other allies said in a statement the "necessary and proportionate strikes specifically targeted 18 Houthi targets across 8 locations in Yemen" that also included underground storage facilities, radar and a helicopter.

U.K. Defense Secretary Grant Shapps said RAF Typhoon jets engaged in "precision strikes" aimed at degrading Houthi drones and launchers. Shapps said it came after "severe Houthi attacks against commercial ships in the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden, including against the British-owned MV Islander and the

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MV Rubymar, which forced the crew to abandon ship." It's the fourth time Britain has joined in the U.S.-led strikes.

The strikes have support from the wider coalition, which includes Australia, Bahrain, Canada, Denmark, the Netherlands and New Zealand.

President Joe Biden and other senior leaders have repeatedly warned that the U.S. won't tolerate the Houthi attacks against commercial shipping. But the counterattacks haven't appeared to diminish the Houthis' campaign against shipping in the region, which the militants say is over Israel's war against Hamas in the Gaza Strip.

"Our aim remains to de-escalate tensions and restore stability in the Red Sea, but we will once again reiterate our warning to Houthi leadership: we will not hesitate to continue to defend lives and the free flow of commerce in the face of continued threats," said the Saturday statement.

The Houthis have launched at least 57 attacks on commercial and military ships in the the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden since Nov. 19, and the pace has picked up in recent days.

"We've certainly seen in the past 48, 72 hours an increase in attacks from the Houthis," Pentagon spokeswoman Sabrina Singh said in a briefing Thursday. And she acknowledged that the Houthis have not been deterred.

"We never said we've wiped off the map all of their capabilities," she told reporters. "We know that the Houthis maintain a large arsenal. They are very capable. They have sophisticated weapons, and that's because they continue to get them from Iran."

There have been at least 32 U.S. strikes in Yemen over the past month and a half; a few were conducted with allied involvement. In addition, U.S. warships have taken out dozens of incoming missiles, rockets and drones targeting commercial and other Navy vessels.

Earlier Saturday, the destroyer USS Mason downed an anti-ship ballistic missile launched from Houthi-held areas in Yemen toward the Gulf of Aden, U.S. Central Command said, adding that the missile was likely targeting MV Torm Thor, a U.S.-Flagged, owned, and operated chemical and oil tanker.

The U.S. attacks on the Houthis have targeted more than 120 launchers, more than 10 surface-to-air-missiles, 40 storage and support building, 15 drone storage building, more than 20 unmanned air, surface and underwater vehicles, several underground storage areas and a few other facilities.

The rebels' supreme leader, Abdul Malik al-Houthi, announced this past week an "escalation in sea operations" conducted by his forces as part of what they describe as a pressure campaign to end Israel's war on Hamas.

But while the group says the attacks are aimed at stopping that war, the Houthis' targets have grown more random, endangering a vital waterway for cargo and energy shipments traveling from Asia and the Middle East onward to Europe.

During normal operations, about 400 commercial vessels transit the southern Red Sea at any given time. While the Houthi attacks have only actually struck a small number of vessels, the persistent targeting and near misses that have been shot down by the U.S. and allies have prompted shipping companies to reroute their vessels from the Red Sea.

Instead, they have sent them around Africa through the Cape of Good Hope — a much longer, costlier and less efficient passage. The threats also have led the U.S. and its allies to set up a joint mission where warships from participating nations provide a protective umbrella of air defense for ships as they travel between the Suez Canal and the Bab el-Mandeb Strait.

In Thursday's attack in the Gulf of Aden, the Houthis fired two missiles at a Palau-flagged cargo ship named Islander, according to Central Command said. A European naval force in the region said the attack sparked a fire and wounded a sailor on board the vessel, though the ship continued on its way.

Central Command launched attacks on Houthi-held areas in Yemen on Friday, destroying seven mobile anti-ship cruise missiles that the military said were prepared to launch toward the Red Sea.

Central Command also said Saturday that a Houthi attack on a Belize-flagged ship on Feb. 18 caused an 18-mile (29-kilometer) oil slick and the. military warned of the danger of a spill from the vessel's cargo of fertilizer. The Rubymar, a British-registered, Lebanese-operated cargo vessel, was attacked while sailing

through the Bab el-Mandeb Strait that connects the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden.

The missile attack forced the crew to abandon the vessel, which had been on its way to Bulgaria after leaving Khorfakkan in the United Arab Emirates. It was transporting more than 41,000 tons of fertilizer, according to a Central Command statement.

The Associated Press, relying on satellite images from Planet Labs PBC of the stricken vessel, reported Tuesday that the vessel was leaking oil in the Red Sea.

Yemen's internationally recognized government on Saturday called for other countries and maritime-protection organizations to quickly address the oil slick and avert "a significant environmental disaster."

## Consumers are increasingly pushing back against price increases — and winning

By CHRISTOPHER RUGABER AP Economics Writer

WASHINGTON (AP) — Inflation has changed the way many Americans shop. Now, those changes in consumer habits are helping bring down inflation.

Fed up with prices that remain about 19%, on average, above where they were before the pandemic, consumers are fighting back. In grocery stores, they're shifting away from name brands to store-brand items, switching to discount stores or simply buying fewer items like snacks or gourmet foods.

More Americans are buying used cars, too, rather than new, forcing some dealers to provide discounts on new cars again. But the growing consumer pushback to what critics condemn as price-gouging has been most evident with food as well as with consumer goods like paper towels and napkins.

In recent months, consumer resistance has led large food companies to respond by sharply slowing their price increases from the peaks of the past three years. This doesn't mean grocery prices will fall back to their levels of a few years ago, though with some items, including eggs, apples and milk, prices are below their peaks. But the milder increases in food prices should help further cool overall inflation, which is down sharply from a peak of 9.1% in 2022 to 3.1%.

Public frustration with prices has become a central issue in President Joe Biden's bid for re-election. Polls show that despite the dramatic decline in inflation, many consumers are unhappy that prices remain so much higher than they were before inflation began accelerating in 2021.

Biden has echoed the criticism of many left-leaning economists that corporations jacked up their prices more than was needed to cover their own higher costs, allowing themselves to boost their profits. The White House has also attacked "shrinkflation," whereby a company, rather than raising the price of a product, instead shrinks the amount inside the package. In a video released on Super Bowl Sunday, Biden denounced shrinkflation as a "rip-off."

Consumer pushback against high prices suggests to many economists that inflation should further ease. That would make this bout of inflation markedly different from the debilitating price spikes of the 1970s and early 1980s, which took longer to defeat. When high inflation persists, consumers often develop an inflationary psychology: Ever-rising prices lead them to accelerate their purchases before costs rise further, a trend that can itself perpetuate inflation.

"That was the fear — that everybody would tolerate higher prices," said Gregory Daco, chief economist at EY, a consulting firm, who notes that it hasn't happened. "I don't think we've moved into a high inflation regime."

Instead, this time many consumers have reacted like Stuart Dryden, a commercial underwriter at a bank who lives in Arlington, Virginia. On a recent trip to his regular grocery store, Dryden, 37, pointed out big price disparities between Kraft Heinz-branded products and their store-label competitors, which he now favors.

Dryden, for example, loves cream cheese and bagels. A 12-ounce tub of Kraft's Philadelphia cream cheese costs \$6.69. The store brand, he noted, is just \$3.19.

A 24-pack of Kraft single cheese slices is \$7.69; the store label, \$2.99. And a 32-ounce Heinz ketchup bottle is \$6.29, while the alternative is just \$1.69. Similar gaps existed with mac-and-cheese and shredded

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cheese products.

"Just those five products together already cost nearly \$30," Dryden said. The alternatives were less than half that, he calculated, at about \$13.

"I've been trying private-label options, and the quality is the same and it's almost a no-brainer to switch from the products I used to buy a ton of to just the private label," Dryden said.

Alex Abraham, a spokesman for Kraft Heinz, said that its costs rose 3% in the final three months of last year but that the company raised its own prices only 1%.

"We are doing everything possible to find efficiencies in our factories and other parts of our business to offset and mitigate further price increases," Abraham said.

Last week, Kraft Heinz said sales fell in the final three months of last year as more consumers traded down to cheaper brands.

Dryden has taken other steps to save money: A year ago, he moved into a new apartment after his previous landlord jacked up his rent by about 50%. His former apartment had been next to a relatively pricey grocery store, Whole Foods. Now, he shops at a nearby Amazon Fresh and has started visiting the discount grocer Aldi every couple of weeks.

Samuel Rines, an investment strategist at Corbu, says that PepsiCo, Kimberly-Clark, Procter & Gamble and many other consumer food and packaged goods companies exploited the rise in input costs stemming from supply-chain disruptions and Russia's invasion of Ukraine to dramatically raise their prices — and increase their profits — in 2021 and 2022.

A contributing factor was that millions of Americans enjoyed solid wage gains and received stimulus checks and other government aid, making it easier for them to pay the higher prices.

Still, some decried the phenomenon as "greedflation." And in a March 2023 research paper, the economist Isabella Weber at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst, referred to it as "seller's inflation."

Yet beginning late last year, many of the same companies discovered that the strategy was no longer working. Most consumers have now long since spent the savings they built up during the pandemic.

Lower-income consumers, in particular, are running up credit card debt and falling behind on their payments. Americans overall are spending more cautiously. Daco notes that overall sales during the holiday shopping season were up just 4% — and most of it reflected higher prices rather than consumers actually buying more things.

As an example, Rines points to Unilever, which makes, among other items, Hellman's mayonnaise, Ben & Jerry's ice cream and Dove soaps. Unilever jacked up its prices 13.3% on average across its brands in 2022. Its sales volume fell 3.6% that year. In response, it raised prices just 2.8% last year; sales rose 1.8%.

"We're beginning to see the consumer no longer willing to take the higher pricing," Rines said. "So companies were beginning to get a little bit more skeptical of their ability to just have price be the driver of their revenues. They had to have those volumes come back, and the consumer wasn't reacting in a way that they were pleased with."

Unilever itself recently attributed poor sales performance in Europe to "share losses to private labels."

Other businesses have noticed, too. After their sales fell in the final three months of last year, PepsiCo executives signaled that this year they would rein in price increases and focus more on boosting sales.

"In 2024, we see ... normalization of the cost, normalization of inflation," CEO Ramon Laguarta said. "So we see everything trending back to our long-term" pricing trends.

Jeffrey Harmening, CEO of General Mills, which makes Cheerios, Chex Cereal, Progresso soups and dozens of other brands, has acknowledged that his customers are increasingly seeking bargains.

And McDonald's executives have said that consumers with incomes below \$45,000 are visiting less and spending less when they do visit and say the company plans to highlight its lower-priced items.

"Consumers are more wary — and weary — of pricing, and we're going to continue to be consumer-led in our pricing decisions," Ian Borden, the company's chief financial officer, told investors.

Officials at the Federal Reserve, the nation's primary inflation-fighting institution, have cited consumers' growing reluctance to pay high prices as a key reason why they expect inflation to fall steadily back to their 2% annual target.

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"Firms are telling us that price sensitivity is very much higher now," Mary Daly, president of the Federal Reserve Bank of San Francisco and a member of the Fed's interest-rate setting committee, said last week. "Consumers don't want to purchase unless they're seeing a 10% discount. ... This is a serious improvement in the role that consumers play in bridling inflation."

Surveys by the Fed's regional banks have found that companies across all industries expect to impose smaller price increases this year. The New York Fed says companies in its region plan to raise prices an average of about 3% this year, down from about 5% in 2023 and as much as 7% to 9% in 2022.

Such trends suggest that companies were well on their way to slowing their price hikes before Biden's most recent attacks on price gouging.

Claudia Sahm, founder of SAHM Consulting and a former Fed economist, said, "consumers are more powerful than President Biden."

## **Biden and Utah's governor call for less bitterness and more bipartisanship in the nation's politics**

By DARLENE SUPERVILLE Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — President Joe Biden and Utah Gov. Spencer Cox disagree on many issues but they were united Saturday in calling for less bitterness in politics and more bipartisanship.

"Politics has gotten too personally bitter," said Biden, who has practiced politics since he was elected to the U.S. Senate in 1972. "It's just not like it was." The Democratic president commented while delivering a toast to the nation's governors and their spouses at a black-tie White House dinner in their honor.

Biden said what makes him "feel good" about hosting the governors is "we have a tradition of doing things together. We fight like hell, we make sure that we get our points across. At the end of the day, we know who we work for. The objective is to get things done."

Cox, a Republican and chairman of the National Governors Association, preceded Biden to the lectern beneath an imposing portrait of Abraham Lincoln above the fireplace in the State Dining Room.

The Utah governor said the association "harkens back to another time, another era, when we did work together across partisan lines, when there was no political danger in appearing with someone from the other side of the aisle and we have to keep this, we have to maintain this, we cannot lose this," he said.

Cox leads an initiative called "Disagree Better" that aims to reduce divisiveness. He had joked earlier in the program that he and Biden might be committing "mutually assured destruction" by appearing together at the White House since they're both up for reelection this year.

He told Biden that as state chief executives, governors "know just a very little bit of the incredible burden that weighs on your shoulders. We can't imagine what it must be like, the decisions that you have to make, but we feel a small modicum of that pressure and so, tonight, we honor you."

Biden said he remembered when lawmakers would argue by day and break bread together at night. He is currently embroiled in stalemates with the Republican-controlled House over immigration policy, government funding and aid for Ukraine and Israel.

Cox went on to say that his parents taught him to pray for the leader of the country.

"Mr. President, I want you to know that our family prays for you and your family every night," he said. "We pray that you will be successful because if you are successful that means that United States of America is successful and tonight we are always Americans first, so thank you."

Colorado Gov. Jared Polis, a Democrat who is the association's vice chairman, also offered a toast.

"We have a lot more in common and a lot more that brings us together as Americans for love of country and love of the people of our country," he said.

Vice President Kamala Harris and her husband, Doug Emhoff, were among Cabinet secretaries and White House officials who sat among the governors. The group included North Dakota Gov. Doug Burgum, who in December ended his bid to become the Republican presidential nominee and challenge Biden.

Guests dined on house-made burrata cheese, an entree choice of beef braciolo or cod almandine and lemon meringue tart with limoncello ice cream for dessert.

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After dinner, the program moved to the East Room for a performance by country singer Trisha Yearwood. The governors, in Washington for their annual winter meeting, heard from Biden and Harris on Friday during a separate session at the White House.

## **The pope delivers Sunday prayers from the Vatican window a day after suffering a mild flu**

VATICAN CITY (AP) — Pope Francis was well enough on Sunday to celebrate his weekly Angelus prayer from the Vatican window overlooking St. Peter's Square, a day after cancelling his engagements because of a mild flu.

A brief announcement on Saturday from the Vatican press office said the 87-years-old pontiff was forced to scrap a planned audience with the Roman deacons as a precautionary measure due to a "mild, flu-like condition."

On Sunday, Francis, who over the past few months had to cancel some of his activities and one international trip due to fragile health, concluded his Angelus prayer with his usual salutes to the waving crowd.

In his address, Francis remembered "with sorrow" the second anniversary of the start of what he called "a large-scale war in Ukraine."

"So many victims, wounded, destruction, distress, tears in a period that is becoming terribly long and whose end is not yet in sight," the pope said.

"It is a war that is not only devastating that region of Europe, but also unleashing a global wave of fear and hatred," he added. "I plead for that little bit of humanity to be found to create the conditions for a diplomatic solution in the search for a just and lasting peace."

The pontiff also prayed for those involved in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and "for so many war-torn people, and to concretely help those who suffer. ... Let us think of so much suffering, let us think of the wounded, innocent children."

## **California's Senate primary could fell two prominent Democrats and elevate Republican Steve Garvey**

By MICHAEL R. BLOOD AP Political Writer

LOS ANGELES (AP) — California's Senate race was expected to be a three-way Democratic prizefight, but the possibility of a record-low turnout is elevating the chances of Republican Steve Garvey, a former baseball star, and could derail the congressional careers of two prominent progressives.

In a year headlined by a likely presidential rematch that many Americans are dreading, California voters thus far have been sluggish to return mail-in ballots that were sent to 22 million homes earlier this month. The relative trickle of ballots has tended to come from older, white, conservative-leaning homeowners, a sweet spot for Republicans such as Garvey, a one-time National League MVP who played for the Los Angeles Dodgers and the San Diego Padres.

For months, Rep. Adam Schiff has had the fundraising and polling edge in a crowded Democratic field. Garvey's ascent has imperiled the political prospects of Reps. Barbara Lee and Katie Porter. The top two finishers in the March 5 contest, regardless of party, advance to the general election in November in the liberal-leaning state.

"We're at a real risk of losing," Porter's campaign warned in fundraising emails. Without more financial support, the plea went, "Katie is out of Congress for good."

Schiff was a leading voice in the two impeachments of former President Donald Trump. Lee is a former chair of the Congressional Black Caucus. Porter has drawn attention on social media with her sharp questioning of tech CEOs in Capitol Hill hearings.

After the death of Democratic Sen. Dianne Feinstein in September, all three entered the race. Porter is leaving her swing district in Southern California as Democrats try to regain control of the House, where Republicans now hold a slim edge.

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Presidential elections usually drive Democratic turnout in California, but that hasn't been the case this year, with President Joe Biden and Republican Donald Trump on track for a second matchup in which both are viewed unfavorably by many voters.

"This is a low-interest, low-turnout kind of election cycle. That generally creates an electorate that is older, more conservative, whiter," said Paul Mitchell of Political Data Inc., a research firm that closely tracks voting trends and works with Democrats, independent candidates and academics.

While the dynamic could shift by the time primary voting ends, Mitchell said it's possible that Garvey ends up with the highest total as the Democratic candidates splinter votes on the left.

"I don't see a surge of Democratic turnout coming in the end, but there could be a surge of Republican voters in the end," Mitchell said. He said that could be driven by those voters influenced by Trump's unsupported claims of election fraud who will vote in-person rather than through the mail.

Schiff told reporters recently that he was concerned "for the sake of our democracy" about a low turnout. His campaign has sent 3 million texts and made over 50,000 phone calls to potential supporters so far.

Last spring, the race looked like it would revolve around Schiff, Porter and Lee, who are largely indistinguishable on policy but bring different backgrounds and styles to the contest. Garvey, after years of flirting with politics, entered the race in October and gave Republicans a recognizable name on the ballot. He retired from baseball nearly four decades ago, in 1987, and had to overcome the resurfacing of tawdry details about his private life, including having two children with women he wasn't married to, that had undercut the clean-cut public persona he cultivated in his Dodger days.

A Republican hasn't won a Senate race in California since 1988, and registered Democrats hold a 2-to-1 advantage over Republicans statewide.

In all, more than two dozen names will appear on the Senate ballot for the six-year term that begins next year. Many of those candidates are political unknowns.

The race was once anticipated as a showcase of Democratic rivalries on the party's left wing. That never materialized.

Schiff emerged as the establishment pick with endorsements from former House Speaker Nancy Pelosi, most of California's congressional delegation and former Democratic Sen. Barbara Boxer. His fundraising prowess — he had \$35 million on hand at the end of the year — has allowed him to roll out a steady stream of TV and digital ads, backed by a barrage from supportive super political action committees.

According to data from media tracking firm AdImpact, Schiff's campaign has had almost a 2-to-1 advertising advantage over his nearest rival, spending \$28.2 million through Wednesday, followed by Porter at \$14.6 million. Lee had \$1.3 million in buys.

Porter's campaign has accused Schiff and his supporters of running ads intentionally spotlighting Garvey to lift the former baseball star's profile with Republicans, on the premise that having a GOP opponent would presumably be an easier match for Schiff in the fall.

"Garvey himself hasn't run a single TV ad, but his name and face are all over California's TVs thanks to this cynical play," Porter's campaign said in an email.

Porter, who presents herself as a suburban soccer mom out to protect the middle class, has warned that "billionaires, establishment politicians and corporate special interests are trying to buy this race, and it looks like their plan might work."

Schiff defends his ads and told reporters that Garvey has attacked him in debates and interviews. "I'm not going to ignore him."

Lee, a longtime standard-bearer in the party's progressive wing, has struggled to raise money. The lack of cash has left Lee, who has proposed a \$50-an-hour federal minimum wage and was the only member of Congress to vote against authorizing military force after the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks, lagging in polling.

Democratic pollster Ben Tulchin calls Lee and Porter "iconic liberal stars," but says Schiff's financial advantage appears decisive.

Porter spent nearly \$29 million to defend her district in coastal Orange County in 2022, while Schiff was running in a safe Democratic district.

"You have three talented, impressive Democrats running," Tulchin said, "but only one can win."

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## Today in History: February 26 World Trade Center bombed in 1993

By The Associated Press undefined

Today in History

Today is Monday, Feb. 26, the 57th day of 2024. There are 309 days left in the year.

Today's Highlight in History:

On Feb. 26, 1993, a truck bomb built by Islamic extremists exploded in the parking garage of the North Tower of New York's World Trade Center, killing six people and injuring more than 1,000 others. (The bomb failed to topple the North Tower into the South Tower, as the terrorists had hoped; both structures were destroyed in the 9/11 attack eight years later.)

On this date:

In 1815, Napoleon Bonaparte escaped from exile on the Island of Elba and headed back to France in a bid to regain power.

In 1904, the United States and Panama proclaimed a treaty under which the U.S. agreed to undertake efforts to build a ship canal across the Panama isthmus.

In 1942, "How Green Was My Valley" won the Academy Award for Best Picture of 1941, beating out nine other films, including "The Maltese Falcon" and "Citizen Kane."

In 1945, authorities ordered a midnight curfew at nightclubs, bars and other places of entertainment across the nation.

In 1952, Prime Minister Winston Churchill announced that Britain had developed its own atomic bomb.

In 1966, South Korean troops sent to fight in the Vietnam War massacred at least 380 civilians in Go Dai hamlet.

In 1987, the Tower Commission, which had probed the Iran-Contra affair, issued its report, which rebuked President Ronald Reagan for failing to control his national security staff.

In 1998, a jury in Amarillo, Texas, rejected an \$11 million lawsuit brought by Texas cattlemen who blamed Oprah Winfrey's talk show for a price fall after a segment on food safety that included a discussion about mad cow disease.

In 2005, Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak ordered his country's constitution changed to allow presidential challengers in an upcoming fall election.

In 2012, Trayvon Martin, 17, was shot to death in Sanford, Florida, during an altercation with neighborhood watch volunteer George Zimmerman, who said he acted in self-defense. (Zimmerman was later acquitted of second-degree murder.)

In 2013, a hot air balloon burst into flames during a sunrise flight over the ancient Egyptian city of Luxor and then plummeted 1,000 feet to earth, killing 19 tourists.

In 2014, Republican Arizona Gov. Jan Brewer vetoed a bill pushed by social conservatives that would have allowed people with sincerely held religious beliefs to refuse to serve gays.

In 2016, New Jersey Gov. Chris Christie stunned the Republican establishment by endorsing Donald Trump for president.

In 2017, At the Academy Awards, "Moonlight," an LGBT coming of age drama, won three Oscars, including best picture of 2016 (in a startling gaffe, the musical "La La Land" was mistakenly announced as the best picture winner before the error was corrected).

In 2018, President Donald Trump, who had been highly critical of the law enforcement response to the Florida school shooting, told a roomful of governors at the White House that if he had been there, he would have rushed in, unarmed.

In 2020, the World Health Organization reported that the number of new coronavirus cases outside China had exceeded the number of new infections in China for the first time.

Today's birthdays: Actor-director Bill Duke is 81. Singer Mitch Ryder is 79. Actor Marta Kristen (TV: "Lost in Space") is 79. Rock musician Jonathan Cain (Journey) is 74. Singer Michael Bolton is 71. The president of Turkey, Recep Tayyip Erdogan (REH'-jehp TY'-ihp UR'-doh-wahn), is 70. Actor Greg Germann is 66. Sen.

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Tim Kaine, D-Va., is 66. Bandleader John McDaniel is 63. Actor-martial artist Mark Dacascos is 60. Actor Jennifer Grant is 58. Rock musician Tim Commerford (Audioslave) is 56. Singer Erykah Badu (EHR'-ih-kah bah-DOO') is 53. Actor Maz Jobrani (TV: "Superior Donuts") is 52. R&B singer Rico Wade (Society of Soul) is 52. Olympic gold medal swimmer Jenny Thompson is 51. R&B singer Kyle Norman (Jagged Edge) is 49. Actor Greg Rikaart is 47. Rock musician Chris Culos (O.A.R.) is 45. R&B singer Corinne Bailey Rae is 45. Pop singer Nate Ruess (fun.) is 42. Former tennis player Li Na is 42. Latin singer Natalia Lafourcade is 40. Actor Teresa Palmer is 38.