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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.

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



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.
Special School Board meeting, 7 a.m.

Friday, March 1

School Breakfast: Biscuits.
School Lunch: Cheese pizza, green beans.
Boys Region 1A: 7 p.m.: Groton Area vs. Aberdeen Roncalli in Groton.

Saturday, March 2

Thrift Store open 10 a.m. to 1 p.m.
Catholic: SEAS Confession, 3:45-4:15 p.m.; SEAS Mass, 4:30 p.m.

OPEN: Recycling Trailer in Groton

The recycling trailer is located west of the city shop. It takes cardboard, papers and aluminum cans.

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1440

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The US Supreme Court today will hear arguments on the fate of bump stocks, a modification that allows semi-automatic rifles to fire continuously with one pull of the trigger.

Intuitive Machines' Odysseus lander, the first-ever commercial spacecraft to land on the moon, stopped transmitting yesterday, several days earlier than intended. The historic mission returned US spacecraft to the moon after a 50-year hiatus but likely did not meet some goals after it tipped onto its side while landing near the lunar south pole last week.

A federal jury in New York yesterday convicted two men in the 2002 murder of hip-hop pioneer Jason Mizell, also known as Jam Master Jay. Mizell, who as a DJ made up one-third of the iconic group Run-DMC, was shot and killed at his Queens recording studio at age 37. The case remained unsolved for decades amid a lack of evidence and stalled investigations until 2020.

Sports, Entertainment, & Culture

Sony's PlayStation division to lay off 900 employees, roughly 8% of its workforce after missing its sales target for the PS5 console. Disney's film production president Sean Bailey steps down after 15 years.

Willie Nelson and Bob Dylan headline 2024 Outlaw Music Festival Tour; see full list of performers and concert dates.

Spotify generates \$4.5B for independent labels and artists. Sean "Diddy" Combs accused by male music producer of sexual assault, now the fifth such lawsuit against Combs.

Science & Technology

OpenAI asks judge to dismiss key part of New York Times copyright infringement lawsuit, accusing the news organization of "hacking" ChatGPT to produce copyrighted results.

Hearing live music triggers more brain activity in regions responsible for processing emotions than recordings of the same song, MRI study suggests.

Researchers find striped marlin communicate with each other by changing the shade of their stripes during high-speed hunting; discovery sheds light on the evolution of predatory group behaviors in fish.

Business & Markets

US stock markets close mixed (S&P 500 +0.2%, Dow -0.3%, Nasdaq +0.4%) as investors await this week's inflation data.

Macy's to close 150 underperforming namesake stores, or about 30% of its total stores, by 2026; company expects to add new locations of higher-end department store Bloomingdale's and beauty chain Bluemercury.

Apple cancels decadelong project to develop autonomous electric vehicle, pivots to artificial intelligence. Financial Times launches new investment arm for media and technology companies, makes first investment in future-of-work startup Charter.

Politics & World Affairs

Former President Donald Trump wins Michigan GOP primary, taking an estimated 66% of the vote—as of early returns—followed by former South Carolina Gov. Nikki Haley at 30%. President Joe Biden wins Democratic primary, roughly 15% goes to "uncommitted," with voters protesting US role in Israel-Hamas war.

House Speaker Mike Johnson (R, LA-4) expresses optimism for federal funding deal following White House meeting; Ukraine funding remains sticking point ahead of Friday night deadline. Biden and Trump to make separate trips to US-Mexico border tomorrow.

Hamas leaders downplay cease-fire talks following comments by US officials that a deal could be reached within days.

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

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Conde National League

Feb. 26 Team Standings: Braves 27, Tigers 25, Cubs 20½, Mets 18, Giants 15, Pirates 14½

Men's High Games: Russ Bethke 220, Aaron Severson 192, Chad Furney 191

Men's High Series: Russ Bethke 549, Aaron Severson 488, Chad Furney 484

Women's High Games: Suzi Easthouse 188, Joyce Walter 181, Vickie Kramp 177

Women's High Series: Sam Bahr 487, Vickie Kramp 477, Suzi Easthouse 468

158 +/- ACRE LAND AUCTION

WEST HANSON TWP., BROWN CO., SD

We will offer at Public Auction the following land located from Groton SD, (Intersection of Hwy 12 & Hwy 37) 8 miles south on Hwy 37 & 3 miles west on 141st St. Watch for auction signs on:

THURSDAY, MARCH 14th, 2024 SALE TIME: 11:00 A.M.

Auctioneer's Note: This auction presents the opportunity to purchase 158 +/- acres of productive tillable land located in West Hanson Twp., Brown Co., SD. The farm is free for possession for the 2024 crop year. This auction will be held live on-site w/online bidding available.

This 158+/- acres of land, according to FSA information, has 156.85+/- cropland acres and is made up of predominately Class II soils with a Surety AgriData soil productivity index of 76.8. Per FSA information, this farm has a soybean base of 78.6 acres and a PLC yield of 25 bu., and a wheat base of 78.6 acres and a PLC yield of 35 bu. There is approximately 40+/- acres that are planted to winter wheat and this crop will go to the new buyer(s).

Legal Description: SE ¼ of Sec. 28, T-122-N, R-61-W, West Hanson Twp., Brown Co., SD

For additional information, terms, drone video, aerial, soil & plat maps and FSA-156EZ, please visit

www.burlagepeterson.com, or contact Auctioneers.

MAKE PLANS TO ATTEND THIS AUCTION AND COME PREPARED TO BUY!

TERMS: Visit burlagepeterson.com for full sale terms. Possession for 2024.

Gary and Sharon Van Riper Charitable Remainder Annuity Trust – Owners
First Bank & Trust – Trustee

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Gov. Noem Signs Bills Blocking Central Bank Digital Currency

PIERRE, S.D. – Today, Governor Kristi Noem signed two bills that block a Central Bank Digital Currency (CBDC) from being utilized in South Dakota.

“In South Dakota, we will always protect the economic Freedom of our people,” said Governor Noem. “I VETOED last year’s UCC bill because it limited economic Freedom and put South Dakotans at risk. I’m proud that we have been able to work together over the past year to create legislation that prioritizes our people, their security, and their Freedoms.”

Last year, Governor Noem was the first governor in the nation to VETO the Uniform Commercial Code (UCC) bill for two reasons:

It needlessly limited the economic Freedom to use cryptocurrency; and

It opened the door to the risk that the federal government could adopt a Central Bank Digital Currency (CBDC).

These two bills satisfy both reasons for Governor Noem’s VETO last year.

HB 1163 amends provisions of the Uniform Commercial Code (UCC), into law. HB 1161 regulates the acceptance of a central bank digital currency to further strengthen the laws protecting South Dakotans from CBDCs.

Name Released in Charles Mix County Fatal Crash

What: Single vehicle fatal crash

Where: 37582 285th St., 2 miles east of Geddes, SD

When: 2:23 a.m., Saturday, February 24, 2024

Driver 1: Kenneth William Schnabel, 57-year-old male from Geddes, SD, fatal injuries

Vehicle 1: 2014 Chevrolet Equinox

Seatbelt Use: No

Charles Mix County, S.D.- A 57-year-old Geddes, SD man died early Saturday morning in a single vehicle crash in Charles Mix County.

Preliminary crash information indicates Kenneth W. Schnabel, the driver of a 2014 Chevrolet Equinox was traveling west on 285th Street, about two miles east of Geddes, SD, when the vehicle entered the north ditch where it hit an approach and went airborne then rolled several times. Schnabel died as a result injuries sustained in the crash. He was not wearing a seatbelt.

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

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

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Front row: Hayden Zoellner, Eeve Grant, Grant Cleveland, Connor Kroll , Jameson Penning, Hayden Harder

Back Row: Garrett Schultz, Logan Clocksene, Illyanna Dallaire, Kira Clocksene, Axel Warrington, Corbin Weismantel

State VRC Robotics Tournament concludes Groton season

The South Dakota State VRC Robotics tournament was an exciting one! Our teams had ups and downs but was a fun tournament and an exciting end to our season. A lot of cheering in the stands! The game was played on Saturday, February 24th in Harrisburg, SD.

G-Force (9050A – Haden Harder, Connor Kroll & Grant Cleveland) – What a day they had! This team comprised of 6th & 7th graders really played and performed at their best. After struggling at a few tournaments throughout the season; this final tournament they ended the elimination round with 6 wins, 2 losses! They passed the round of Round 16, won the quarter finals 59 to 0, due to a disqualification on the other team. Their team's final game was the semi-finals which was a hard loss, a final score of 68 to 108.

Gearheads (9050B - Eeve Grant, Kira Clocksene, Logan Clocksene, Hayden Zoellner) They played hard and were focused on the game, but struggled with the competition, playing against some difficult teams throughout the tournament. They ended the elimination round with 2 wins, 6 losses. The game to get into the Round of 16 was lost, 59 to 103.

Galaxy (9050E - Illyanna Dallaire, Axel Warrington, Corbin Weismantel) This team worked very hard in the week ahead of this tournament with a redesign, to focus on a more defensive strategy, however with a similar upgrade issue as Gladiators, they were hit even harder before the game had even started. This team was fortunate enough to have several other team leaders/coaches assist, but unfortunately the timing was too long as they weren't able to get their robot up in good standings in time and they had to miss their first match. After eliminations, they were able to move up to 4 wins, 4 losses. They won the 1st game in the Round of 16 - 95 to 75 by some great defensive strategy but lost in the quarter finals, 38 to 85.

Gladiators (9050 F - Garrett Schultz – Jameson Penning) The tournament started on a low note, after attempting to do a computer upgrade on equipment their programming crashed. After assistance from the other teams, it was corrected, and they were off. After Elimination, they score 6 wins & 2 losses. They were able to skip the Round of 16 and won quarter-finals, however this was where the game got exciting. They lost initially in semi-finals, but due to field issues they were allowed to replay. In the follow-up game they came up in points, barely missing the win by scoring 97 to 107. They were noted as having a very consistent game throughout, with an announcer comment being made about Jameson Penning, "Is that a man or a machine?"

As final activities to our season, Groton Robotics is going on a field trip to 3M in early March to get a tour with Kyle Weber, an active participant in many of our home tournaments in the past. We will also be having a pinning ceremony to celebrate our first year of high school students qualifying to letter in Robotics!

- Melissa Schultz

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Region 1A Boys Basketball

Groton Area powers in 15 three-pointers in win over Redfield

Groton Area made 15 three-pointers as the Tigers defeated Redfield in the first round of the Region 1A basketball tournament held Tuesday in Groton, 70-17.

The Tigers will play Aberdeen Roncalli in the semifinal game on Friday in Groton, 7 p.m.

Coach Brian Dolan said, "We need to take care of ourselves and play defense. We talked a lot about being disciplined. Disciple finishes hard work. We worked hard. Now we have to have the discipline to finish what we started back in June when we went to our first team camp together. And we have to be ready to go on Friday. We hope to have a great crowd on Friday."

Groton Area jumped out to a 24-0 first quarter lead, a 43-5 lead at half time and a 59-11 lead after the third quarter.

Lane Tietz led the Tigers with 19 points, one rebound, four assists and two steal. Keegen Tracy had seven points, one rebound, one assist and one steal. Kassen Keough had six points, two rebounds and two assists. Jacob Zak had five points, two assists and two steals. Logan Ringgenberg had five points, three rebounds and two steals. Colby Dunker had five points, four assists and one steal. Holden Sippel had five points and two steals. Turner Thompson had five points and one steal. Ryder Johnson had four points, three rebounds, one assist and one steal. Karson Zak had four points, six rebounds and two assists. Jayden Schwan had three points, four rebounds, one assist and two steals. Gage Sippel had one point, three rebounds, three assists and two blocks. Logan Warrington had one point, one rebound and one steal. Blake Pauli had one rebound and two assists.

Groton Area made 11 of 17 two-pointers for 65 percent, 15 of 33 three-pointers for 45 percent, three of six free throws for 50 percent, had 25 rebounds, seven turnovers, 22 assists, 15 steals, four team fouls and two block shots.

Three-Pointers: Jacob Zak - 1, Lane Tietz - 5, Ryder Johnson - 1, Tracy 1, Ringgenberg - 1, Dunker - 1, Keough - 2, Holden Sippel - 1, Thompson - 1, Shwan - 1.

Justin Ratigan led Redfield with eight points while Tristen O'Daniel had five and Grady Hulscher and Micah Zastrow each had two points.

- Paul Kosel

South Dakota Prep Media basketball polls for Feb. 26

Class A

1. Sioux Falls Christian (16), 20-0, 80; 2. Hamlin, 17-3, 63; 3. Pine Ridge, 18-1, 47; 4. Sioux Valley, 18-2, 30; 5. Dakota Valley, 17-3, 15.

Others receiving votes: Hot Springs 4, **Groton Area 1.**

Class B

1. Castlewood (12), 17-3, 75; 2. White River (3), 18-2, 64; 3. De Smet (1), 17-3, 49; 4. Wessington Springs, 19-1, 25; 5. Howard, 17-3, 15.

Others receiving votes: Leola/Frederick Area 8, Viborg-Hurley 3, Dell Rapids St. Mary 1.

Class AA

1. Mitchell (16), 19-1, 80; 2. Harrisburg, 17-3, 64; 3. Brandon Valley, 15-5, 45; 4. Sioux Falls Washington, 13-7, 26; 5. Sioux Falls Roosevelt, 14-6, 21.

Others receiving votes: Watertown 4.



SOUTH DAKOTA SEARCHLIGHT

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Rounds attempts to stop beef imports from Paraguay

BY: SEARCHLIGHT STAFF - FEBRUARY 27, 2024 10:20 AM

U.S. Senators Mike Rounds, R-South Dakota, and Jon Tester, D-Montana, said Tuesday that they have filed a Congressional Review Act resolution that would overturn the Biden administration's recent decision to lift a ban on beef imports from Paraguay.

Congress can use CRA resolutions to overturn final rules issued by federal agencies by a simple majority vote.

Rounds said in a news release that the move is necessary to protect the safety of the beef supply. He said Paraguay has a history of struggles with foot and mouth disease.

"Consumers across America should be able to confidently feed their families beef that they know has met the rigorous standards required in the United States," Rounds said.

Rounds and Tester said their resolution is supported by the South Dakota Farm Bureau Federation, South Dakota Farmers Union, National Cattlemen's Beef Association, United States Cattlemen's Association, R-CALF USA, Livestock Marketing Association and National Farmers Union.

The U.S. Department of Agriculture's final rule allowing the imports says that after a risk analysis, the department's Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service "concluded that fresh beef can be imported safely from Paraguay under certain conditions."

Those conditions include verifying that foot and mouth disease has not been diagnosed in the exporting region in the past 12 months, the meat comes from premises where the disease has not been present during the lifetime of any of the animals, and the animals were inspected before and after death.

Medicaid work requirement question will appear on South Dakota ballots in November

In party-line votes, Legislature sends measure to general election

BY: SETH TUPPER - FEBRUARY 27, 2024 4:59 PM

South Dakotans will vote on Medicaid work requirements in the Nov. 5 general election.

The measure would not immediately impose work requirements on Medicaid recipients who qualify under recently expanded income guidelines, but would authorize state officials to impose work requirements if they so choose and if the federal government allows it.

On Tuesday at the Capitol in Pierre, the state House of Representatives voted 63-7 to send the measure to the ballot. The seven no votes came from the chamber's seven Democrats. The measure previously passed the Senate 28-4, with the four no votes coming from that chamber's four Democrats.

The Legislature does not need approval from the governor to place a measure on the ballot, so the House vote was the final action.

Rep. Tony Venhuizen, R-Sioux Falls, was the prime sponsor in the House.

"What we're voting on today doesn't say we're going to do a work requirement," Venhuizen said. "It doesn't say we have to do one. It doesn't even necessarily say we want to do one. What it says is, it shouldn't be in our constitution that we can't ever do one."

Medicaid is a joint federal-state health insurance program for low-income adults, children, pregnant women, elderly adults and people with disabilities.

South Dakota voters approved a citizen-proposed constitutional amendment in 2022 that expanded Med-

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icaid eligibility. That measure included language saying the state “may not impose greater or additional burdens or restrictions on eligibility or enrollment standards.”

The ballot question voters will consider this November would tack an exception onto the end of that prohibition, allowing the state to impose a work requirement on any person “who has not been diagnosed as being physically or mentally disabled.” The exception would also acknowledge that the state could do so only “to the extent permitted” by the federal government.

As Venhuizen explained, the Biden administration is not approving the waivers that states need to impose the work requirements.

“We know, though, that the time will come again when the federal government allows these to be considered,” Venhuizen said.

One of the Democratic no votes came from Rep. Kady Wittman, of Sioux Falls, who described the measure as an insult to voters who approved Medicaid expansion.

“I think the fact that we are even considering this resolution is deeply offensive to every individual that voted yes,” she said. “I know it’s offensive to me, insinuating that I did not understand what I was voting on.”

The measure joins one other question that legislators have already placed on this November’s ballot. That measure would replace numerous male pronouns in the state constitution — reflecting the notion held by the state’s founders that only men would ever hold statewide office — with gender-neutral terms or the titles of the offices referenced.

Citizens groups are circulating petitions for another eight ballot questions in hopes of gaining enough signatures from registered voters to include them in the general election. Those measures include efforts to change political primaries to open primaries, re-establish abortion rights, repeal the state sales tax on food, and legalize recreational marijuana.

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

State Senate advances millions for water, prison construction, nursing homes and more

BY: JOSHUA HAIAR AND MAKENZIE HUBER - FEBRUARY 27, 2024 6:47 PM

PIERRE — The state Senate advanced spending bills Tuesday that include millions to build a new men’s prison, fund water and wastewater projects, and keep nursing homes afloat, among other priorities.

One bill would allocate \$10 million in federal American Rescue Plan Act funding for water infrastructure at the proposed men’s prison site in rural Lincoln County.

The bill passed the Senate on a 27-6 vote. It would also move \$226 million to a state fund for the construction of the prison.

Sen. John Wiik, R-Big Stone City, said the current penitentiary in Sioux Falls “is being held together by ratchet straps and plywood.” He said “it’s time to look to the future” and this bill is a “solid first step.”

The Senate also approved other spending bills, sending them to the House as legislators work to finalize a budget. The annual legislative session ends next week, except for a day later in March to consider any vetoes from the governor.

Water infrastructure

Another bill would allocate \$89.38 million of ARPA funds to water and wastewater infrastructure projects, plus another \$28 million if previously approved uses of ARPA funds go unspent prior to the law’s deadlines.

“This is true economic development, reaching into every corner of our state,” said Sen. Helene Duhamel, R-Rapid City. The bill passed on a 31-2 vote.

ARPA funds must be allocated by the end of 2024 and spent by the end of 2026.

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The 2022 Legislature passed a bill appropriating \$600 million in ARPA funding to the state Board of Water and Natural Resources. The funding was earmarked for projects on the State Water Plan.

The board has since awarded 210 grants across the state totaling \$600 million, covering over one-third of \$1.67 billion worth of total project costs.

Wildfires, logging

A bill that would provide \$1.4 million in state funds to build maintenance shops for the state Wildland Fire Suppression Division in Rapid City and Hot Springs passed unanimously.

Another bill would provide an as-yet undetermined amount of ARPA funds to create a "healthy forest critical infrastructure relief and grant program."

That bill also unanimously passed. The bill was approved with \$1 of funding to keep it alive so talks on the dollar amount can continue.

Sen. Randy Deibert, R-Spearfish, said the plan is to "promote forest health," and help loggers and sawmills survive reduced logging levels in the Black Hills. He said the logging industry does "not have contracts in front of them to sustain existence."

"We need a bridge to keep these people afloat," Diebert said of the 250 workers depending on the legislation.

Nursing homes, assisted living facilities

The Senate unanimously supported a \$5 million effort to provide technology grants to nursing homes and assisted living facilities across the state with remaining federal ARPA funds. The bill came as a recommendation out of the long term care summer study committee, which explored ways to support the industry.

The grants would be distributed by the state Department of Health and would need to be allocated by the end of 2024 to comply with federal ARPA funding stipulations.

The Senate also voted 30-3 to approve \$3 million in a complementary bill, also a result of the summer study, that would provide grants to improve technology and patient monitoring at such facilities. The technology grants would not use ARPA dollars.

The grants would fund remote patient monitoring devices, fall detection technology, medical alerts and sensors, AI powered programs for risk detection, medication and other monitoring systems, prime sponsor of the bills Sen. Sydney Davis, R-Burbank, told lawmakers.

"Clinical innovation in long term care is critical to the sustainability of the industry," Davis said.

Cybersecurity support for counties, cities

The Senate voted 28-5 to support a \$7 million effort to bolster local governments' cybersecurity. The effort was one of the top priorities to come out of the county funding summer study committee last year.

The \$7 million price tag is roughly what South Dakota would have received from the federal government over the last three years if South Dakota had enrolled in a federal grant program aimed at bolstering local government cybersecurity.

The amount would cover the development of a centralized email system, similar to an existing email system for schools. Leftover funds could be used to strengthen the state's Project Boundary Fence program, where cybersecurity experts from Dakota State University test local governments' cybersecurity and offer recommendations to better protect themselves.

Quantum Computing

A bill to support research into quantum computing passed on a 32-1 vote. The bill would provide \$3.03 million.

According to the MIT Technology Review, regular computers use bits, which are a stream of electrical or optical pulses representing 1s or zeros. Quantum computers achieve much faster processing power by using qubits, which are typically subatomic particles such as electrons or photons.

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The bill would fund a new Center for Quantum Information Science & Technology. The center would not be a physical location, but rather a partnership among Dakota State University in Madison, South Dakota Mines in Rapid City, South Dakota State University in Brookings, and the University of South Dakota in Vermillion.

Funding for victims shelters, services

The Senate voted 30-3 to allocate \$5 million to sexual assault, domestic violence and children's shelters in South Dakota. The bill is a result of decreased federal funding for such organizations over the last few years and minimal state funding for such services — the state puts \$225,000 toward the Domestic and Sexual Abuse program annually.

Such organizations requested \$17 million in funding this year, yet were awarded about \$9.2 million from the federal government. South Dakota provides minimal funding toward such programs. Grants would go through the Attorney General's Office to address organizations' needs ineligible for federal funding.

"The unpredictability of the federal funding source and the growing need for these services call for an examination of the state's contribution to services that assist the victims of domestic abuse and sexual assault," said Sen. Jean Hunhoff, R-Yankton.

Airport terminals

The Senate voted 31-2 to allocate \$19.5 million in state funds to improve airport terminals across the state. Sen. David Johnson, R-Rapid City, said grants would support terminal improvement, expansion and future capacity demands.

Child care study

The Senate tabled a bill that would require the Department of Social Services to conduct an in-depth, state-wide study on child care accessibility and costs.

The bill's prime sponsor, Sen. Tim Reed, R-Brookings, told lawmakers before he requested the bill be tabled that DSS committed to providing the information and research in a report without requiring additional funding from the Legislature.

Reed said a statewide task force will continue working toward addressing the state's child care crisis, which costs the state an estimated \$329 million loss in productivity. Reed intends to use information obtained from the department to inform future legislation.

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

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

A partial government shutdown is days away.

There's no agreement on federal funding yet.

BY: JENNIFER SHUTT AND ARIANA FIGUEROA - FEBRUARY 27, 2024 5:54 PM

WASHINGTON — President Joe Biden huddled with top congressional leaders at the White House on Tuesday amid a crunch over government funding as well as a familiar stalemate over assistance to two major allies — and no solution immediately in sight.

Lawmakers leaving the meeting, which lasted about an hour, said it was worthwhile, even though it didn't lead to any agreements that would avoid a partial government shutdown from beginning this weekend, or clear a Senate-passed package of aid to Ukraine, Israel and Taiwan.

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"It was a productive meeting on the government shutdown, we are making good progress ... (and) the speaker said unequivocally he wants to avoid a government shutdown," Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer of New York said following the meeting, referring to House Speaker Mike Johnson, a Louisiana Republican.

Johnson faces tensions and demands in the House. Congressional leaders and the Biden administration have agreed to total spending levels for each of the dozen annual appropriations bills, but far-right conservative lawmakers are pressuring Johnson to include policy riders that Democrats have said are unacceptable.

Schumer said it's likely Congress will need to approve another continuing resolution, or CR, to avoid a partial government shutdown.

Those stopgap spending bills continue the prior fiscal year's funding levels and policy until Congress reaches agreement on full-year spending bills.

Johnson, who has remained noncommittal on putting assistance to Ukraine on the House floor for a vote, said House Republicans are still "pursuing and investigating all the various options on that."

"We will address that in a timely manner," Johnson said at the White House of the global supplemental package.

"The first priority of the country is our border and making sure it's secure," Johnson said, adding that he's "optimistic" the House can prevent a partial shutdown.

Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell, a Kentucky Republican, said after returning to the Capitol that the meeting went well.

"Well, mainly we talked about keeping the government open, which I think we all agree on," McConnell said. "And I think we're making some real headway on the appropriations process."

Time is short and the House does not return from recess until Wednesday night.

Congress has until Friday at midnight to either pass the Agriculture-FDA, Energy-Water, Military Construction-VA and Transportation-HUD spending bills, or to pass a stopgap spending bill for the federal agencies funded within those four bills.

Congress has until March 8 to pass the other eight remaining appropriations bills for the fiscal year that began back on Oct. 1, otherwise those departments and agencies would begin a shutdown.

'Hope springs eternal'

McConnell said during a press conference Tuesday afternoon he believes Congress could pass the four bills due Friday without using a stopgap spending bill to extend that deadline.

"I think we're getting close on the first four bills, hopefully that won't require another short-term CR," McConnell said. "And hope springs eternal."

Schumer, speaking at a separate press conference inside the Capitol on Tuesday afternoon, said negotiators on the full-year government spending bills are "greatly narrowing the ground of where the disputes are."

"A key here is making sure that the government doesn't shut down, which means extending government funding after the deadlines if we can't reach agreement," Schumer said.

A White House statement on the meeting said Biden "emphasized that the only path forward is through bipartisan funding bills that deliver for the American people and are free of any extreme policies."

"The President also emphasized the urgent need for Congress to continue standing with Ukraine as it defends itself every day against Russia's brutal invasion," the White House statement said. "He discussed how Ukraine has lost ground on the battlefield in recent weeks and is being forced to ration ammunition and supplies due to Congressional inaction."

Global aid stalled

The Senate voted 70-29 in mid-February to approve a \$95 billion emergency spending bill that would provide military and humanitarian assistance to Ukraine, Israel and Taiwan.

The vote came after months on hold as Oklahoma Republican Sen. James Lankford, Connecticut Democratic Sen. Chris Murphy and Arizona independent Sen. Kyrsten Sinema negotiated a bipartisan bill to

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address border security and immigration policy at the insistence of GOP leaders.

Republican senators ultimately blocked that compromise agreement from moving forward, saying it didn't go far enough. Johnson's opposition to the agreement was one of the factors that toppled the bipartisan compromise.

Johnson has been skeptical about passing the Senate-approved assistance package ever since, saying it should include measures to address border security and U.S. immigration.

Johnson said Tuesday following the White House meeting that he met one-on-one with the president and pushed for the southern border to be addressed.

"They understand the catastrophe at the border is affecting everyone and it is top of mind for all the American people," he said.

Schumer said the discussion about assistance to Ukraine was "the most intense I've ever encountered in my many meetings in the Oval Office," because of the "urgency of supporting Ukraine and the consequences to the people of America, to America's strength if we don't do anything."

Schumer said that while Johnson said he wants policy changes at the southern border, "we made it clear to him, we can't tarry for the war could be lost" in Ukraine.

McConnell said during the afternoon press conference that he hopes the House will take up the Senate-approved Ukraine bill and pass it without making change, since if they were to amend the legislation, it would have to go back to the Senate, slowing down the process.

"Not only do we not want to shut the government down, we don't want the Russians to win in Ukraine," McConnell said. "And so we have a time problem here. And the best way to move quickly and get the bill to the president would be for the House to take up the Senate bill and pass it."

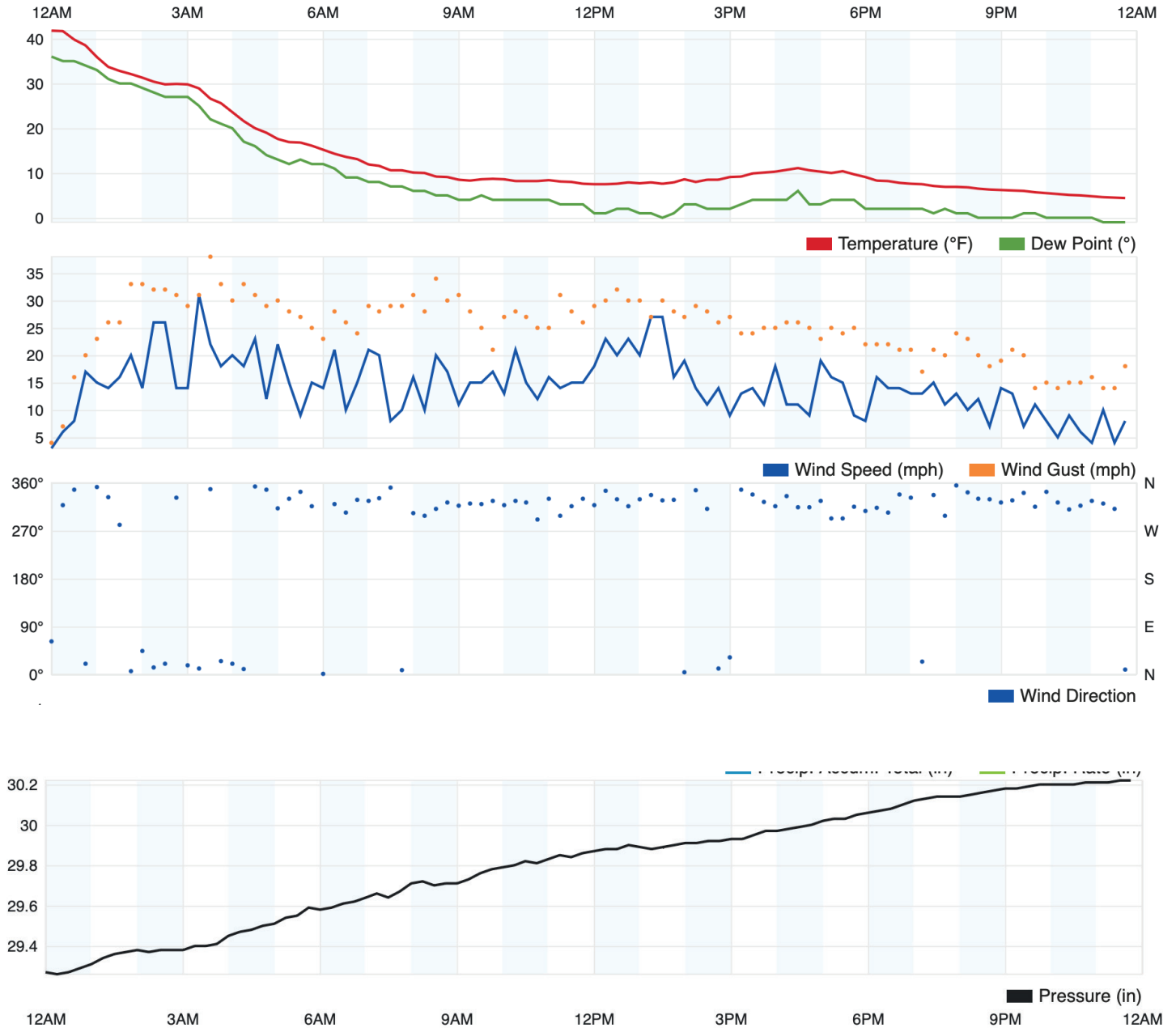
Jennifer covers the nation's capital as a senior reporter for States Newsroom. Her coverage areas include congressional policy, politics and legal challenges with a focus on health care, unemployment, housing and aid to families.

Ariana covers the nation's capital for States Newsroom. Her areas of coverage include politics and policy, lobbying, elections and campaign finance.

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Yesterday's Groton Weather Graphs



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Today



Sunny

Tonight



Clear

Thursday



Sunny

Thursday
Night



Clear

Friday



Sunny

High: 26 °F

Low: 20 °F

High: 53 °F

Low: 30 °F

High: 61 °F



Warming Up...

February 28, 2024

2:21 AM

and remaining dry

A graphic showing a sun behind a tree on the left and a tall pine tree on the right, with a blue semi-transparent box in the center containing the forecast text.

Today
➤ Highs 20s east, 30s west

Thursday
➤ Warmer, Highs in the 50s

Friday
➤ Mild with highs 55-65°

Saturday
➤ Cooler, Highs 45-55°



National Weather Service
Aberdeen, SD

Today will be cold, but it'll start warming up for Thursday through Saturday as a ridge of high pressure aloft builds over the Northern Plains.

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Yesterday's Groton Weather

High Temp: 42 °F at 12:13 AM

Low Temp: 4 °F at 11:27 PM

Wind: 38 mph at 3:27 AM

Precip: : 0.00

Day length: 11 hours, 07 minutes

Today's Info

Record High: 59 in 1934

Record Low: -27 in 1962

Average High: 33

Average Low: 12

Average Precip in Feb.: 0.62

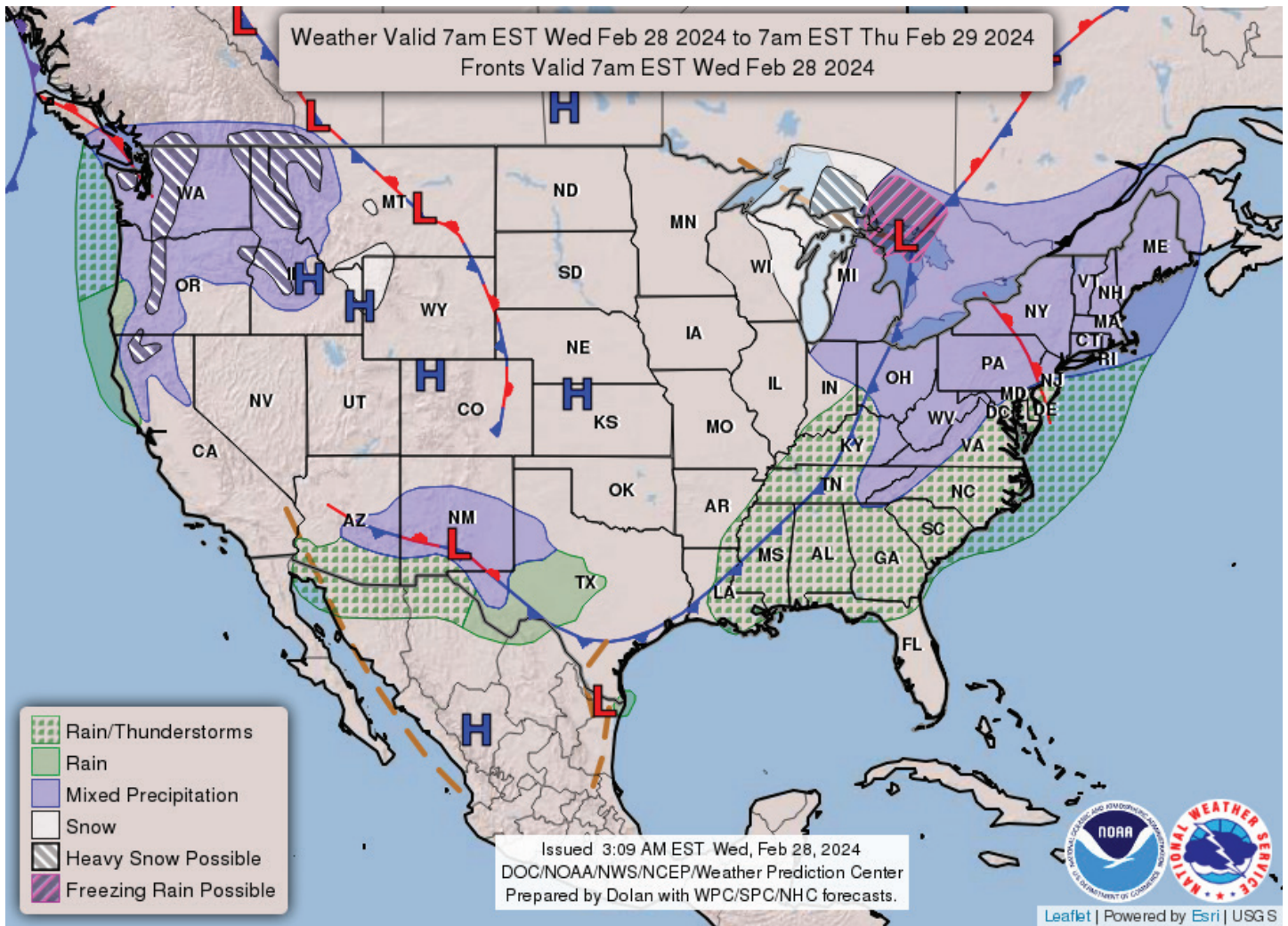
Precip to date in Feb.: 0.07

Average Precip to date: 1.17

Precip Year to Date: 0.07

Sunset Tonight: 6:18:44 pm

Sunrise Tomorrow: 7:09:22 am



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Today in Weather History

February 28, 2007: Another late February low-pressure system crossed the central plains and spread heavy snow 6 to 11 inches across northeast South Dakota and west-central Minnesota. As a result, many schools and college classes were canceled, and many events were postponed. In addition, road conditions became deplorable, with some accidents occurring along with ditched vehicles. The snow continued into the first day of March and ended in the morning. Snowfall amounts included 6 inches at Aberdeen, 7 inches at Wilmot and Artichoke Lake, 8 inches at Conde, Watertown, Milbank, 9 inches at Browns Valley and Wheaton, and 11 inches at Clark. This heavy snow event was followed by more snowfall and blizzard conditions that developed across the area during the afternoon and evening of March 01.

1846: William S. Forrest, in "Historical and Descriptive Sketches of Norfolk and Vicinity" in 1853, recorded the Great Gust of 1846. The Great Gust was a severe coastal storm that produced 5 feet waves in Norfolk.

1900: A massive storm produced record snow from Kansas to northwest Ohio and southern Michigan from February 27 to March 01. The observation at the University of Kansas in Lawrence reported 15 inches of snow on the 27th was "phenomenal; only one heavier snowfall has been recorded for any month, a depth of 16 inches on February 11th and 12th, 1894." (CD). The Coop near Wamego, KS, in the northeast part of Kansas, a record-breaking 24 inches fell in just 12 hours! Other snowfall amounts in Kansas include 19.0" in Abilene, 18.7" in Topeka, 18.0" in McPherson, and 18.0" in Ellinwood. Topeka saw 17.3" on February 27, the most recorded in 24 hours.

In Missouri, heavy snow fell over a considerable portion of the state on the 27th and 28th. From Bates, Cass, Jackson, and Platte counties in the west, to St. Charles, Lincoln, Pike, Ralls, Marion, Lewis, and Clark counties to the east, snowfall ranged from 10 to over 20 inches. The snow drifted severely in many places, and where the fall of snow exceeded 10 inches, railroads were blocked, and county roads rendered impassable for several days. A Coop in Darksville, in northern Randolph County, reported drifts from 6 to 8 feet deep in many places. Houstonia Pettis County's drifts were the worst for more than 30 years. Snowfall amounts in Missouri include 22" in Miami, 20" in Richmond, 13.9" in Columbia, and 13" in Kansas City and Jefferson City.

The storm probably gave central and northern parts of Illinois some of the highest snowfall totals since 1830-1831. (CD) The Coop in Astoria measured an astonishing 37.8 inches with this storm! Coatsburg saw 26 inches. Other snowfall amounts include 21" near Normal, 17.5" in Springfield, and 13" near Jacksonville.

Heavy snow, freezing rain, and sleet occurred in Indiana from February 28 to March 01. In South Bend, 16" of snow fell, prompting street-car employees to work all night to keep the tracks open. As a result, railroad traffic was delayed on all lines. Fairmount and Greensburg reported ice and sleet covered the ground on the 28th. Marion, in Grant County, observed the heaviest sleet storm in many years. Some snowfall amounts include 21" at Valparaiso Waterworks, 18" in Syracuse, Angola, and Fort Wayne, and 16" in South Bend and Huntington.

Northwestern Ohio and southern Michigan saw heavy snowfall from February 27 to March 01. The Coop in Wauseon Water Plant recorded 20.5" of snow. Toledo received 20.2 inches. Grape, Michigan, west-northwest of Monroe, said the heavy snow made all roads impassable. Mail could not be delivered from Grape to Monroe due to badly drifted snow. Some snowfall amounts from southern Michigan include 18" in Hillsdale, Grape, and Somerset, 14" in Detroit, 13" in Lansing, and 12" in Kalamazoo.

1952: A powerful Nor'easter hit Cape Cod with winds of 70-80 mph and snowfall amounts of 12-20 inches. These conditions created 12 feet drifts.

1959: In early December 1958, temperatures fell below freezing and remained there until late February. Over 49 inches of snow fell in that time, with very little in the way of melting. The snow absorbed some rain in February and added to the weight on the roof of the Listowel Arena in Ontario, Canada. As a result, the roof collapsed on February 28, 1959, during a hockey game. Seven young players, a referee, and a recreation director (Reginald Kenneth McLeod) were killed in the tragic collapse. Click [HERE](#) for more information.

1962: Wilmington, North Carolina, reached a high temperature of 85 degrees. This is the warmest temperature on record during February.

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Daily Devotionals

Seeds of Hope

GIVING AND RECEIVING

Little Amy was pleased that her teacher came to visit her farm. Taking her through the barn and out into the pasture, she pointed with pride to a cow that was quietly chewing its cud.

Filled with pride, she said to her teacher, "That's my cow!"

"Oh, how wonderful, Amy," she commented. "Does she give milk?"

"Not really," replied Amy. "We have to take it from her."

Some Christians are like Amy's cow - there is something good in them, but it has to be taken from them - as milk from a cow. Could this be true because we allow the influence of the things of this world, rather than the influence of God's Word, control us?

All of us are encouraged to hold on to whatever we possess as tightly as possible. We are constantly advised to invest our money wisely in "things" that are safe, so when we advance in age, we will have enough to survive.

But the writer of Proverbs has a different viewpoint: "It is possible to give freely and become more wealthy." What did he mean?

God always blesses and enriches the lives of those who give freely of their time, treasures, and talents in service to others. When we give to others, we are only sharing with them what God has given us, and providing space in our lives for more of His blessings.

Prayer: Help us, Lord, to believe in Your Word and trust in Your ways. Open our hearts to share the blessings You have given us with those in need. In Jesus' Name, Amen.

Scripture For Today: Give freely and become more wealthy; be stingy and lose everything. The generous will prosper; those who refresh others will themselves be refreshed. Proverbs 11:24-25



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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The Groton Independent Printed & Mailed Weekly Edition

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WINNING NUMBERS

MEGA MILLIONS

WINNING NUMBERS: 02.27.24

6 18 26 27 49 4

MegaPlier: 3x

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:

\$607,000,000

NEXT 2 Days 17 Hrs 28
DRAW: Mins 33 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

LOTTO AMERICA

WINNING NUMBERS:

02.26.24

21 30 36 38 49 1

All Star Bonus: 2x

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:

\$3,490,000

NEXT 16 Hrs 43 Mins 33
DRAW: Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

LUCKY FOR LIFE

WINNING NUMBERS: 02.27.24

10 16 28 45 46 5

TOP PRIZE:

\$7,000/week

NEXT 16 Hrs 58 Mins 33
DRAW: Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

DAKOTA CASH

WINNING NUMBERS:

02.24.24

5 7 18 20 27

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:

\$20,000

NEXT 16 Hrs 58 Mins 33
DRAW: Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

POWERBALL

DOUBLE PLAY

WINNING NUMBERS:

02.26.24

1 3 8 30 41 8

TOP PRIZE:

\$10,000,000

NEXT 17 Hrs 27 Mins 33
DRAW: Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

POWERBALL

WINNING NUMBERS:

02.26.24

24 29 42 51 54 16

Power Play: 3x

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:

\$412,000,000

NEXT 17 Hrs 27 Mins 32
DRAW: Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

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News from the  Associated Press

Tuesday's Scores

The Associated Press

BOYS PREP BASKETBALL=

SDHSAA Playoffs=

Class A Region 1=

Semifinal=

Aberdeen Roncalli 54, Waubay/Summit 50

Groton 70, Redfield 17

Milbank 57, Sisseton 32

Tiospa Zina 71, Webster 53

Class A Region 2=

Semifinal=

Clark-Willow Lake 51, Great Plains Lutheran 39

Flandreau 62, Estelline-Hendricks 44

Hamlin 79, Florence-Henry 36

Sioux Valley 71, Deuel 33

Class A Region 3=

Semifinal=

Baltic 63, McCook Central-Montrose 40

Dell Rapids 65, Tri-Valley 45

Sioux Falls Christian 81, Garretson 57

West Central 62, Madison 52

Class A Region 4=

Semifinal=

Dakota Valley 87, Parker 51

Lennox 62, Beresford 45

Tea 73, Canton 54

Vermillion 77, Elk Point-Jefferson 70, OT

Class A Region 5=

Semifinal=

Bon Homme 48, Wagner 45

Hanson 66, Mt. Vernon/Plankinton 43

Parkston 68, Kimball-White Lake 56

Sanborn Central-Woonsocket 48, Platte-Geddes 43

Class A Region 6=

Semifinal=

Cheyenne-Eagle Butte 73, Miller 59

McLaughlin 50, North Central 31

Mobridge-Pollock 62, Dupree 45

Stanley County 67, Crow Creek Tribal School 63

Class A Region 7=

Semifinal=

Lakota Tech 60, Little Wound 54

Mahpiya Luta Red Cloud High School 64, St Francis 54

Pine Ridge 87, Bennett County 36

Winner 56, Todd County 20

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Class A Region 8=

Semifinal=

Custer 67, Hill City 53

Rapid City Christian 77, Lead-Deadwood 37

St Thomas More 54, Belle Fourche 23

Class B Region 1=

Semifinal=

Aberdeen Christian 67, Northwestern 57

Leola-Frederick High School 70, Wilmot 41

Warner 57, Hitchcock-Tulare 53

Waverly-South Shore 55, Britton-Hecla 53

Class B Region 2=

Semifinal=

Castlewood 73, Oldham-Ramona-Rutland 43

DeSmet 72, Arlington 34

Deubrook 73, James Valley Christian 69

Wolsey-Wessington 75, Iroquois-Lake Preston 49

Class B Region 3=

Semifinal=

Bridgewater-Emery 55, Ethan 43

Chester 42, Canistota 37

Dell Rapids St Mary 69, Colman-Egan 50

Howard 73, Mitchell Christian 35

Class B Region 4=

Semifinal=

Centerville 75, Freeman Academy-Marion 55

Freeman 62, Menno 24

Gayville-Volin High School 73, Alcester-Hudson 71

Viborg-Hurley 79, Scotland 29

Class B Region 5=

Semifinal=

Corsica/Stickney 61, Marty 56

Gregory 76, Burke 47

Tripp-Delmont-Armour 54, Andes Central/Dakota Christian 38

Wessington Springs 62, Avon 36

Class B Region 6=

Semifinal=

Faulkton 61, Herreid-Selby 35

Highmore-Harrold 39, Ipswich 31

Lower Brule 63, Sully Buttes 38

Potter County 64, Lyman 37

Class B Region 7=

Semifinal=

Jones County 67, Crazy Horse 43

Philip 64, New Underwood 38

Wall 71, Kadoka 60

White River 98, Oelrichs 19

Class B Region 8=

Semifinal=

Bison 65, Lemmon High School 22

Faith 69, Tiospaye Topa 37
Harding County 64, Wakpala 55
Timber Lake 64, Takini 37

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

Man to plead guilty in 'killing spree' of eagles and other birds for feathers prized by tribes

By MATTHEW BROWN Associated Press

A Washington state man accused of helping kill more than 3,000 birds — including eagles on a Montana Indian reservation — then illegally selling their carcasses and feathers intends to plead guilty to illegal wildlife trafficking and other criminal charges, court documents show.

Federal prosecutors say Travis John Branson and others killed about 3,600 birds during a yearslong "killing spree" on the Flathead Indian Reservation and elsewhere. Feathers and other parts of eagles and other birds are highly prized among many Native American tribes for use in sacred ceremonies and during powwows.

Branson of Cusick, Washington, will plead guilty under an agreement with prosecutors to reduced charges including conspiracy, wildlife trafficking and two counts of unlawful trafficking of eagles, according to court documents filed Tuesday. The documents did not detail how many birds he will admit to killing.

A second suspect, Simon Paul of St. Ignatius, Montana, remains at large after an arrest warrant was issued when he failed to show up for an initial court appearance in early January. His attorney, Dwight Schulte, declined to comment Tuesday.

The defendants are accused of selling eagle parts on a black market that has been a long-running problem for U.S. wildlife officials. Illegal shootings are a leading cause of golden eagle deaths, according to a recent government study.

Immature golden eagle feathers are especially valued among tribes, and a tail set from one of the birds can sell for several hundred dollars, according to details disclosed during a separate trafficking case in South Dakota last year in which a Montana man was sentenced to three years in prison.

A grand jury in December indicted the two men on 15 criminal charges. They worked with others — who haven't been named by authorities — to hunt and kill the birds and on at least one occasion used a dead deer to lure an eagle that was killed, according to the indictment.

Federal officials have not said how many eagles were killed or what other kinds of birds were involved in the scheme, which they say began in 2015 and continued until 2021. The indictment included details on only 13 eagles and eagle parts that were allegedly trafficked by the defendants.

Branson, who was released from custody following a Jan. 8 court appearance, faces years in prison and substantial fines under the terms of the plea agreement. He also would be responsible for complete restitution of damages, including from offenses that would be dismissed under the plea deal.

Branson did not respond to a message left at a publicly listed phone number for him. His attorney, Assistant Federal Defender Andrew Nelson, declined to comment on the agreement.

Text messages obtained by investigators showed Branson and others telling buyers he was "on a killing spree" to collect more eagle tail feathers for future sales, according to the indictment. Prosecutors described Paul as a shooter and shipper of eagles for Branson.

Bald eagles are the national symbol of the United States, and both bald and golden eagles are widely considered sacred by American Indians. U.S. law prohibits anyone without a permit from killing, wounding or disturbing eagles, or taking their nests or eggs. Even taking feathers found in the wild can be a crime.

Federally recognized tribes can apply for permits with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to take a bald or golden eagle for religious purposes, and enrolled tribal members can apply for eagle feathers and other parts from the National Eagle Repository. But there's a lengthy backlog of requests that eagle researchers say is driving the black market for eagle parts.

The operator of a tribal feather repository in Oklahoma said law enforcement officials need to be prosecuting those who buy the feathers — not just traffickers — if they want to disrupt the market.

“The buyers need to be made examples of,” said Bill Voelker, a member of the Comanche Nation and executive director of Sia: The Comanche Nation Ethno-Ornithological Initiative in Cyril, Oklahoma. “That’s the only way they’re going to tackle it so there’s less of this going on and fewer birds losing their lives.”

South Dakota voters asked to approve work requirement for Medicaid expansion

By JACK DURA Associated Press

South Dakota voters will decide this fall whether the state can impose work requirements on certain low-income people receiving Medicaid health care coverage, which would modify the program expansion voters approved in 2022.

The Republican-controlled Legislature has put the measure on the November ballot, with the state House approving the resolution in a 63-7 vote on Tuesday. The Senate previously adopted it, 28-4.

South Dakota Republican lawmakers want to add a work requirement for adults who are not physically or mentally disabled but who are eligible for Medicaid under the expansion of the government-sponsored program that voters approved in 2022 under a ballot initiative. The change, which took effect last summer, greatly increased the number of people in the state who qualify for Medicaid.

Even if voters approve the measure, the federal government will have to sign off on a work requirement.

The expansion was previously opposed by both Republican Gov. Kristi Noem and the GOP-controlled Legislature, which defeated a proposed Medicaid expansion earlier in 2022.

The 2022 constitutional amendment expanded Medicaid eligibility to people who earn up to 138% of the federal poverty level, which the state Department of Social Services says is up to \$41,400 for a family of four.

Republican Rep. Tony Venhuizen, a prime sponsor of the work requirement measure, described it as a “clarifying question” for voters on a specific point.

“When you listen to the opposition on this, you hear people who very clearly want people to go on Medicaid expansion and stay on it for a long period of time as their plan for health care, and I just don’t think that’s the purpose of social programs in South Dakota. We want to give people a hand up to a better life,” Venhuizen said.

Details of and exemptions from the work requirement are “like step 10,” he told a House panel Monday during a hearing for the resolution. “What we’re talking about today is step one.”

Supporters also have pointed out that other assistance programs, such as food benefits, have work requirements.

Opponents have said a work requirement would be unnecessary, ineffective and against the will of voters in 2022. South Dakota has a 2% unemployment rate, behind only Maryland and North Dakota, according to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics in January.

“Who is not working? Who is on Medicaid and is not working? And I can answer that for you, it’s the poorest of the poor,” said Democratic Rep. Kady Wittman, who called the measure’s consideration “deeply offensive to every individual that voted yes” for Medicaid expansion in 2022.

The expanded eligibility took effect July 1, 2023. Nearly 20,000 people have since enrolled. More people are expected to enroll. The department estimated 52,000 new people would qualify for Medicaid expansion when it opened.

Funeral of Russian opposition leader Alexei Navalny to be held on Friday, his spokesperson says

By The Associated Press undefined

The funeral of Russian opposition leader Alexei Navalny, who died earlier this month in a remote Arctic penal colony, will take place on Friday in Moscow after several locations declined to host the service, his spokesperson said.

His funeral will be held at a church in Moscow's southeast Maryino district on Friday afternoon, Kira Yarmysh said Wednesday. The burial is to be at a nearby cemetery.

Navalny died in mid-February in one of Russia's harshest penal facilities. Russian authorities said the cause of his death at age 47 is still unknown, and the results of any investigation are likely to be questioned abroad. Many Western leaders have already said they hold Russian President Vladimir Putin responsible for his death.

Yarmysh spoke of the difficulties his team encountered in trying to find a site for a "farewell event" for Navalny.

Writing on X, formerly known as Twitter, she said most venues said they were fully booked, with some "refusing when we mention the surname 'Navalny,'" and one disclosing that "funeral agencies were forbidden to work with us."

Ivan Zhdanov, the director of Navalny's Anti-Corruption Foundation, said the funeral was initially planned for Thursday — the day of Putin's annual address to Russia's Federal Assembly — but no venue would agree to hold it then.

"The real reason is clear. The Kremlin understands that nobody will need Putin and his message on the day we say farewell to Alexei," Zhdanov wrote on Telegram.

Out-of-control wildfires scorch Texas Panhandle, prompt shutdown of nuclear weapons facility

By JIM VERTUNO Associated Press

A series of wildfires swept across the Texas Panhandle early Wednesday, prompting evacuations, cutting off power to thousands, and forcing at least the temporary shutdown of a nuclear weapons facility as strong winds, dry grass and unseasonably warm temperatures fed the blazes.

An unknown number of homes and other structures in Hutchinson County were damaged or destroyed, local emergency officials said. The main facility that assembles and disassembles America's nuclear arsenal shut down its operations Tuesday night but said it would reopen for normal operations on Wednesday.

"We have evacuated our personnel, non-essential personnel from the site, just in an abundance of caution," Laef Pendergraft, a spokesperson for National Nuclear Security Administration's Production Office at Pantex, said during a news conference. "But we do have a well-equipped fire department that has trained for these scenarios, that is on-site and watching and ready should any kind of real emergency arise on the plant site."

Early Wednesday Pantex posted on X, formerly known as Twitter, that the plant "is open for normal day shift operations" and that all personnel were to report for duty according to their assigned schedule.

Pantex is about 17 miles (27.36 kilometers) northeast of Amarillo and some 320 miles (515 kilometers) northwest of Dallas. Since 1975 it has been the U.S. main assembly and disassembly site for its atomic bombs. It assembled the last new bomb in 1991 while disassembling thousands.

Republican Gov. Greg Abbott issued a disaster declaration for 60 counties as the largest blaze, the Smokehouse Creek Fire, burned nearly 400 square miles (1,040 square kilometers), according to the Texas A&M Forest Service. That is more than twice its size since the fire sparked Monday.

Authorities have not said what might have caused the blaze, which tore through sparsely populated counties surrounded by rolling plains.

"Texans are urged to limit activities that could create sparks and take precautions to keep their loved

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ones safe," Abbott said.

The weather forecast provided some hope for firefighters — cooler temperatures, less wind and possibly rain on Thursday. But for now, the situation was dire in some areas.

In Borger, a community of about 13,000 roughly 25 miles (40.23 kilometers) north of Pantex, Hutchinson County emergency management services personnel planned a convoy to take evacuees from one shelter to another ahead of expected power outages and overnight temperatures in the 20s.

As the evacuation orders mounted, county and city officials live-streamed on Facebook and tried to answer questions from panicked residents. Officials implored them to turn on their cellphones' emergency alerts and be ready to evacuate immediately. They described some roads as having fire on both sides and said resources were being stretched to their limit.

People posted in the Facebook chat about their streets and communities, hoping for good news but more often the answer was either that an area had suffered damage or there wasn't any indication yet of how it had fared.

Texas state Sen. Kevin Sparks said an evacuation order was issued for Canadian, a town of about 2,000 about 100 miles (160 kilometers) northeast of Amarillo. Later Tuesday, the Hemphill County Sheriff's Office urged anyone who remained in Canadian to shelter in place or at the high school gym because roads were closed.

Evacuations were also ordered in nearby Miami, and schools in Canadian and Miami announced closures Wednesday. East of Canadian, fire officials across the border in the area of Durham, Oklahoma, also encouraged people to evacuate because of the fire.

Evacuations were also happening in Skellytown, Wheeler, Allison and Briscoe, according to the National Weather Service in Amarillo.

About 40 miles (64 kilometers) southwest of Canadian, city officials in Pampa on Facebook suggested that residents evacuate to the south and said buses were available. Officials said personnel were still fighting the fire Tuesday night but that residents of Pampa could return home.

"They were able to get the fire stopped north of town," weather service officials said on X, formerly known as Twitter.

To the west, at least some residents in the small city of Fritch in Hutchinson County were told to leave their homes Tuesday afternoon because of another fire that had jumped a highway.

"Everything south of Highway 146 in Fritch evacuate now!" city officials said on Facebook.

On Tuesday evening, the fires were 20 to 25 miles (32 to 40 kilometers) from Amarillo, and wind was blowing wildfire smoke into the city, which could affect people with respiratory issues, weather service officials said.

The National Weather Service issued red flag warnings and fire danger alerts for several other states through the midsection of the country, as high winds of over 40 mph (64 kph) combined with warm temperatures, low humidity and dry winter vegetation to make conditions ripe for wildfires.

In central Nebraska, a mower sparked a prairie fire that has burned a huge swath of grassland roughly the size of the state's largest city of Omaha, state officials said Tuesday.

The Latest | Families of hostages held in Gaza launch a 4-day march to demand their freedom

By The Associated Press undefined

The families of hostages held in Gaza and their supporters are launching a four-day march from southern Israel to Jerusalem to demand their loved ones be set free.

The march comes as negotiations are underway in Qatar to bring about a deal between Hamas and Israel that would lead to a cease-fire in exchange for the release of hostages. U.S. President Joe Biden has said such a deal was at hand but officials from Israel and Hamas were skeptical of his optimism.

Negotiators from the U.S., Egypt and Qatar are working on a framework deal under which Hamas would free some of the dozens of hostages it holds, in exchange for the release of Palestinian prisoners and a

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six-week halt in fighting. During the temporary pause, negotiations would continue over the release of the remaining hostages.

The war has unleashed a humanitarian catastrophe in Gaza and sparked global concern over the situation in Rafah, Gaza's southernmost town along the border with Egypt, where 1.4 million Palestinians have sought safety from Israel's daily bombardments.

Nearly 30,000 Palestinians have been killed after almost five months of Israel's war in the Gaza Strip, according to the Health Ministry, which does not distinguish in its count between fighters and noncombatants. Israel says it has killed 10,000 militants, without providing evidence.

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

Currently:

- Israel and Hamas indicate no deal is imminent after Biden signals Gaza cease-fire could be close.
- A deal between Israel and Hamas appears to be taking shape. What would it look like?
- What would a new Palestinian government in the West Bank mean for the war in Gaza?
- U.S. sanctions Iranian deputy commander, Houthi member and ships that transport Iranian oil.
- Qatar's emir to discuss Gaza and hostages with Macron during a state visit to France.
- Biden implores Congress to avoid a government shutdown, send urgent aid to Ukraine and Israel.
- Find more of AP's coverage at <https://apnews.com/hub/israel-hamas-war>

Here's the latest:

HAMAS FIRES ROCKETS INTO NORTHERN ISRAEL

JERUSALEM — Hamas has fired rockets into northern Israel in what it says is retaliation for the killing of one of its top leaders in an airstrike in Beirut in January.

Hamas' armed wing said it fired 40 Grad rockets at an Israeli military base and an army barracks. The Israeli military says it identified around 10 launches and intercepted a number of them. Israeli media said a building was damaged in the northern town of Kiryat Shmona.

The military said it struck the sources of the rocket fire as well as a Hezbollah arsenal and military structures. There were no immediate reports of casualties on either side.

Hezbollah has traded fire with Israel on a near-daily basis since Hamas' Oct. 7 attack triggered the war in Gaza. The relatively low-intensity exchanges have displaced tens of thousands of people on both sides of the border and raised fears of a wider conflict.

Hezbollah is the dominant power in southern Lebanon. Hamas and other Palestinian factions have a smaller presence there and are believed to require at least tacit approval from Hezbollah to carry out military operations.

FAMILIES OF HOSTAGES LAUNCH 4-DAY MARCH TO DEMAND THEIR FREEDOM

TEL AVIV, Israel — The families of hostages held in Gaza and their supporters are launching a four-day march from southern Israel to Jerusalem to demand their loved ones be set free.

The march comes as negotiations are underway in Qatar to bring about a deal between Hamas and Israel that would lead to a cease-fire in exchange for the release of hostages. U.S. President Joe Biden has said such a deal was at hand but officials from Israel and Hamas were skeptical of his optimism.

Hostages freed in a late-November deal, some of whom still have relatives held in Gaza, are joining the march Wednesday. The march will end near the official residence of Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu later this week.

In its Oct. 7 attack, Hamas abducted roughly 250 people, according to Israeli authorities, including men, women, children and older adults. Roughly 100 were freed about 50 days into their captivity. Some 130 hostages remain and Israel says about a quarter of them are dead.

The plight of the hostages has deeply shaken Israelis, who see in them an enduring symbol of the state's failure to protect its citizens from Hamas' assault.

OVER HALF A MILLION PALESTINIANS IN GAZA ARE A STEP AWAY FROM FAMINE, U.N. SAYS

UNITED NATIONS — At least one quarter of Gaza's population — 576,000 people — are one step away from

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famine, and virtually the entire 2.3 million population needs food, a top U.N. humanitarian official says. And as grim as the picture is now, U.N. humanitarian coordinator Ramesh Ramasingham told the U.N. Security Council on Tuesday that "there is every possibility for further deterioration."

He said one in six children under the age of two in northern Gaza -- the initial target of Israel's offensive following Hamas' surprise attack in southern Israel on Oct. 7 -- are suffering from "acute malnutrition and wasting," where the body becomes emaciated from a lack of nutrition.

Ramasingham said the rest of Gaza's population is relying on "woefully inadequate humanitarian food assistance to survive."

He reiterated the U.N.'s urgent call for a cease-fire. If nothing is done, he said, humanitarian officials fear "widespread famine in Gaza is almost inevitable," and many more people will die.

He said Israeli military operations, insecurity, extensive restrictions on the entry and delivery of essential goods including food, water and medicine, have decimated food production and agriculture. These factors have also crippled the commercial sector which was a key provider of daily needs in Gaza, he said.

At this stage, he said, "very little will be possible" as long as the fighting keeps going and as an Israeli offensive into southern Gaza looms. Some 1.4 million people who fled the fighting have taken refuge in the area around Rafah, the southernmost city in Gaza. Israel has vowed to push into Rafah, which it calls a Hamas stronghold.

TWO BABIES STARVE TO DEATH IN NORTHERN GAZA AS ALARM GROWS OVER WORSENING HUNGER
GAZA CITY, Gaza Strip — Two infants died from dehydration and malnutrition at Kamal Adwan Hospital in Gaza City, said the spokesman for Gaza's Health Ministry, Ashraf al-Qidra. He warned that infant mortality threatens to surge.

"Dehydration and malnutrition will kill thousands of children and pregnant women in the Gaza Strip," he said.

The U.N. Population Fund said the Al Helal Al Emirati maternity hospital in Gaza's southernmost town of Rafah reported that newborns were dying because mothers were unable to get prenatal or postnatal care.

Premature births are also rising, forcing staff to put four or five newborns in a single incubator. Most of them do not survive, it said, without giving figures on the numbers of deaths.

QATAR'S EMIR WARNS OF 'RACE AGAINST TIME' FOR HOSTAGE RELEASE DEAL

PARIS — The emir of Qatar spoke Tuesday of "a race against time" to secure hostage releases as part of the diplomatic push for a cease-fire in Gaza in which his country is playing a key role.

Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad Al Thani spoke during a state visit to France at a dinner in his honor hosted by French President Emmanuel Macron. Al Thani noted that their two countries are working intensely on Gaza diplomacy but also spoke soberingly about the mounting casualties.

"The world sees a genocide of the Palestinian people. Hunger, forced displacement, savage bombardments are used as weapons. And the international community still hasn't managed to adopt a unified position to end the war in Gaza and provide the strict minimum of protection for children, women and civilians," the Qatari leader said, speaking through a translator.

South Africa accuses Israel of committing genocide against the Palestinians, and has filed a case at the United Nations' top court. Israel adamantly denies the genocide allegations and says it is carrying out operations in accordance with international law.

"We are in a race against time to bring the hostages back to their families and at the same time we must work to put an end to the suffering of the Palestinian people," Al Thani said.

HEZBOLLAH FIRES MISSILE AT ISRAELI MILITARY SITE, AND ISRAEL STRIKES TARGETS IN LEBANON
JERUSALEM — The Israeli military says an anti-tank missile launched from Lebanon has landed "in the area" of an air-control installation in northern Israel.

The army says the strike did not harm the site's capabilities. It says it is now striking Hezbollah targets in Lebanon.

The army says it detected a total of 20 launches from Lebanon on Tuesday. It says some were intercepted by air defense systems while others landed in open areas.

Hezbollah claimed two strikes on the Meron air control installation Tuesday, the first of which it said was

in retaliation for Israel's strikes on the Baalbek area deep inside Lebanese territory on Monday.

The militant group claimed the second strike "led to the damage and complete destruction" of some of the facility's "technical and espionage equipment."

Both sides' battlefield claims could not be independently verified.

Israel and the Lebanese militant group have been exchanging fire almost daily since the war between Israel and Hamas erupted on Oct. 7. Israel's defense minister this week vowed to step up the attacks on Hezbollah.

HUMANITARIAN AID IS AIR-DROPPED INTO GAZA BY MILITARY PLANES FROM JORDAN, UAE, EGYPT AND FRANCE

LONDON — Jordan said it air-dropped humanitarian aid directly into the Gaza Strip on Tuesday, the latest relief drop orchestrated by the country's military during the war.

Three C-130 cargo planes from the Jordanian air force took part alongside one plane each from the United Arab Emirates, Egypt and France.

The packages contained "relief and food aid" and were released by planes flying at low altitude above Gaza's Mediterranean shoreline, the Jordanian military said in a statement. One aircraft brought medical supplies and fuel to a Jordanian-run field hospital in southern Gaza.

Videos posted on social media showed crowds eagerly gathered along the beach in Gaza, and aid packages dangling from parachutes slowly descending into the water offshore. A few Palestinians paddled out in small boats to retrieve the aid and distribute it to people waiting on shore, many of them children.

Last week, a Jordanian Air Force plane delivered a U.K.-funded aid shipment directly to a hospital in northern Gaza.

Most humanitarian aid for Gaza goes through the Rafah border crossing with Egypt. The United Nations says 138 truckloads of aid entered Gaza on Tuesday. Aid groups said they've faced a cumbersome inspection process that allows only a trickle of aid to enter even as needs mounted. Israel says the inspections are needed for security reasons.

Zelenskyy will co-host summit in Albania seeking more war support from southeastern Europe

By LLAZAR SEMINI Associated Press

TIRANA, Albania (AP) — Ukraine's president will co-host a summit with Albania's government on Wednesday that is meant to encourage further support for Kyiv by southeastern European countries, as signs of fatigue grow two years after Russia's full-scale invasion.

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy arrived before midnight Tuesday on the latest stop in an international tour that saw him in Saudi Arabia earlier Tuesday to push for a peace plan and the return of prisoners of war from Russia.

Zelenskyy on Wednesday called Albanian Prime Minister Edi Rama "Ukraine's unwavering friend" in a message on X, formerly Twitter, adding the two would "discuss defense and political cooperation, support for the Peace Formula, and security agreements."

"I will propose supporting Ukraine's efforts to achieve just and lasting peace, as well as organizing the Global Peace Summit in Switzerland," he said, referring to the summit.

Zelenskyy is accompanied by Foreign Minister Dmytro Kuleba.

Rama wrote on Facebook that he was proud to welcome Zelenskyy for "a solidarity meeting and to further the commitment of our democracies against Russian aggression."

Securing further support is key to Ukraine's leader while his country faces battlefield challenges. Zelenskyy on Sunday announced that 31,000 Ukrainian soldiers have been killed in action since Russia's invasion — the first time that Kyiv had confirmed the number of its losses.

Ukraine has urged Western leaders to increase the joint production of weapons and ammunition, improve Ukrainian air defenses and put new pressure on Russia via expanded sanctions. The head of NATO has

said the U.S.-led military alliance has no plans to send troops to Ukraine, and Germany, Poland and other countries this week have said the same.

Thirteen countries from southeastern Europe, including some of Ukraine's neighbors, are expected to attend the Albania summit, along with officials from the European Union and other international institutions.

U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken visited Albania earlier this month.

But not all the countries are in full support for Ukraine in its war against Russia. Kremlin ally Serbia is the only European country that has refused to align with EU sanctions following Russia's invasion. It continues signing cooperation agreements with Moscow.

Albania, a NATO member since 2009 and a candidate for EU membership, has voiced its full support for Kyiv against Russia's invasion. It has provided military assistance in the form of ammunition and training of Ukrainian military. It was among the first countries offering shelter to Ukrainian refugees. It has joined international sanctions against Russian officials and institutions.

As a non-permanent member of the United Nations Security Council in the last two years, Albania joined the U.S. in initiating resolutions against Russia's invasion.

Michigan takeaways: Presidential primaries show warning signs for Trump and Biden

By JOEY CAPPELLETTI Associated Press

LANSING, Mich. (AP) — Joe Biden and Donald Trump easily won their party's primaries in Michigan, but Tuesday's results showed that both candidates have cause for concern in their bid to win the swing state in November.

An "uncommitted" vote in Michigan's Democratic primary was the first indication of how backlash over President Biden's handling of the Israel-Hamas war in Gaza might impact his reelection campaign. Trump won his primary by a large margin, but support for rival Nikki Haley once again showed that some Republican voters may have misgivings about giving the former president another four years in the general election.

Here are some takeaways from Michigan:

Biden, Trump each move closer to party's nomination

Michigan was the last major primary state before Super Tuesday, and both sides were watching closely for implications for the November general election in one of the few genuine swing states left in the country.

Biden has now cruised to victories over lesser known candidates in South Carolina, Nevada and New Hampshire, which he won in a write-in campaign. Tuesday's results show that his standing is still strong in Michigan, which Biden returned to the Democratic column in 2020.

Trump has swept all five of the early state contests, including South Carolina, the home state of rival Haley. He now heads into Super Tuesday, when 15 states and one territory hold Republican nominating contests, as the overwhelming favorite to lock up the Republican nomination.

Michigan was one of three so-called blue wall states, including Wisconsin and Pennsylvania, that Trump won in 2016. He predicted a big win beforehand.

Just 16 of Michigan's 55 Republican presidential delegates will be determined by the primary results, while the remaining delegates will be allocated during a March 2 convention. Trump's anticipated dominance at the state convention, where grassroots activists will play a key role, will decide the allocation of the remaining 39 GOP delegates.

Some Democrats express anger over Gaza with 'uncommitted' vote

Michigan has become the focal point of Democratic frustration regarding the White House's actions in the Israel-Hamas conflict. It has the largest concentration of Arab Americans in the nation.

That anger came through loud and clear on Tuesday as some voters marked "uncommitted" on their ballot in the Democratic primary. Biden still dominated the primary, but the result could be a concern in a state he won by less than 3% in 2020 and likely can't afford to lose this year.

Organizers of the "uncommitted" movement had purposely kept expectations low, having only seriously begun their push a few weeks ago. The "Listen to Michigan" campaign that organized the push said they

were hoping for 10,000 votes, pointing to Trump's win of less than 11,000 votes in 2016 to show the significance of that number.

When Barack Obama ran for reelection in 2012, the last time a Democratic presidential incumbent sought re-election, the "uncommitted" option received close to 21,000 votes — or 11 percentage points.

The "uncommitted" vote totals would need to be between 20 and 30 percentage points for Democrats to worry about their impact in November, said Richard Czuba, a pollster who has long tracked Michigan politics.

"Twenty percent gets my attention. If it rises to 25%, that gets a lot more attention and if it rises above 30%, I think that's a signal that Joe Biden has pretty substantial issues in his base," said Czuba.

Much of the "uncommitted" vote was expected to come from the east side of the state, in communities such as Dearborn and Hamtramck, where Arab Americans represent close to half of the population. Biden won Dearborn by a roughly 3-to-1 advantage in 2020 and Hamtramck by a 5 to 1 margin.

Some Republicans still oppose Trump

Despite Trump's clear victory in Michigan, Haley still saw significant support from the swing state's Republicans.

Some of her best results came in Oakland and Kent counties, where Democrats have been gaining ground in recent years, contributing to their recent statewide success. She also performed better in counties where the state's largest universities are located, Washtenaw and Ingham counties.

Trump has dominated in primaries with help from his base but his strength among general election voters remains unclear. The former president has appeared in Michigan regularly in the eight years since he became president, while Haley only began stumping in the state over the weekend.

AP VoteCast reveals that a large portion of Trump's opposition within the Republican primaries has come from voters who abandoned him before this year.

All three statewide Republican candidates that Trump endorsed in the 2022 midterms were crushed by Democratic incumbents.

Idaho set to execute Thomas Eugene Creech, one of the longest-serving death row inmates in the US

By REBECCA BOONE Associated Press

BOISE, Idaho (AP) — The hour of Thomas Eugene Creech's death has been set, and it is rapidly approaching.

On Wednesday morning Idaho prison officials will ask the 73-year-old if he would like a mild sedative to help calm him before his execution at the Idaho Maximum Security Institution south of Boise. Then, at 10 a.m. local time, they will bring him into the execution chamber and strap him to a padded medical table.

Defense attorneys and the warden will check for any last-minute court orders that would halt the execution of Creech, who is one of the longest-serving death row inmates in the U.S.

Barring any legal stay, volunteers with medical training will insert a catheter into one of Creech's veins. He'll be given a chance to say his last words, and a spiritual advisor may pray with him. Then the state will inject a drug intended to kill the man who has been convicted of five murders in three states and is suspected in several more.

Creech has been imprisoned since 1974 and was originally sentenced to death for the shooting deaths of John Wayne Bradford and Edward Thomas Arnold. That sentence, however, was changed to life in prison after the state's sentencing law was found unconstitutional.

Then, in 1983, he was sentenced to death for the murder of David Dale Jensen, who was 22, disabled and serving time for a car theft when Creech beat him to death at the Idaho State Penitentiary on May 13, 1981.

Jensen's family members described him as a gentle soul who loved hunting and being outdoors during Creech's clemency hearing last month. Jensen's daughter was just 4 years old when he died, and she

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spoke about how painful it was to grow up without a father, piecing together everything she knows about her dad from other people's descriptions and memories.

In court documents filed late last week, Idaho officials said Creech's spiritual advisor would be allowed to stand next to Creech with a hand on his shoulder during the execution. The Episcopal bishop will also be able to silently pray over Creech but won't be allowed to hold his hand or make any noise once the administration of the lethal injection chemical begins, according to the court document. Creech will also be allowed to wear a crucifix, according to the document, and his wife will be seated in the witness area where he can make eye contact with her.

Creech's supporters have pushed to have his sentence converted to life without parole, saying he is a deeply changed man who has become a kind and supportive force inside the Idaho Maximum Security Institution cell block where he lives. Several years ago he married the mother of a correctional officer, and former prison staffers said he was known for writing poetry and frequently expressing gratitude for the work done by correctional officers.

During his clemency hearing, Ada County Deputy Prosecuting Attorney Jill Longhorst did not dispute that Creech can be polite and friendly with correctional officers. But she said he is a psychopath — a man who can be charming and likeable but who lacks remorse and empathy for others.

Creech's attorneys filed a flurry of late appeals hoping to forestall his execution or have his sentence converted to life without release. They included claims that his clemency hearing was unfair, that it was unconstitutional to kill him because he was sentenced by a judge rather than a jury, and that he received ineffective assistance of counsel.

But judges in four courts who reviewed the petitions so far have found no grounds for leniency. Creech's last chance hinges on a petition to the U.S. Supreme Court filed late Monday night, asking that the execution be put on hold so the high court can weigh Creech's claim that prosecutors lied during his clemency hearing, violating his due process rights.

In addition to the Idaho murders, Creech has been convicted of killing both William Joseph Dean in Oregon and Vivian Grant Robinson in California in 1974. He was also charged with killing Sandra Jane Ramsamooj in Oregon that year, but the charge was later dropped in light of his other murder sentences.

In 1973, Creech was tried for the killing of 70-year-old Paul Schrader in Tucson, Arizona, but was acquitted of the crime. Authorities still believe him to be responsible for Schrader's death, and say that Creech provided information that led them to bodies of two people near Las Vegas and one person near Baggs, Wyoming.

Creech's execution will be the second in the U.S. this year, according to the Death Penalty Information Center. The first was in Alabama last month, when Kenneth Eugene Smith became the first death row inmate to be executed using nitrogen gas. Alabama officials said the method would be humane and predicted death would take place within a few minutes, but Smith seemed to remain conscious for several minutes and appeared to shake and writhe in agony for at least two minutes.

Another execution in Texas is also scheduled for Wednesday — Ivan Cantu was sentenced to die for the fatal shooting of his cousin, James Mosqueda, and his cousin's girlfriend, Amy Kitchen. Cantu has maintained he is innocent.

Idaho's death penalty was established in 1864, about 26 years before the territory became a state. Since that time, 29 executions have been carried out, according to the Death Penalty Information Center, including the state's last hanging in 1957.

Executions became rare in the following decades. Though dozens of people have been sentenced to death row since the 1970s, Creech will be only the fourth to be executed by the state since 1957, all of them by lethal injection.

Keith Eugene Wells, 31, was executed in 1994 for the murders of John Justad and Brandi Rains committed in Boise just four years earlier; he had given up his appeals and demanded to be put to death. Paul Ezra Rhoades was executed in 2011 for the 1987 murders of Stacy Dawn Baldwin and Susan Michelbacher in eastern Idaho. Rhoades was also convicted of killing Nolan Haddon that year, and authorities said they suspected him in other deaths as well. Richard Albert Leavitt was executed in 2012 for the 1984 murder

of Danette Jean Elg in eastern Idaho.

After Creech's execution, just seven people will remain on Idaho's death row. A handful of those sentenced to death in the state in the past 50 years have died of natural causes, and at least two were exonerated of those crimes. Many others have had their sentences reduced on appeal.

Earlier this year Idaho lawmakers considered adding the death penalty as a possible sentence for people convicted of lewd conduct with a child, but the legislation did not make it through the House of Representatives.

Rocket fire reported off Yemen in Red Sea in a new suspected attack by Houthi rebels

By JON GAMBRELL Associated Press

DUBAI, United Arab Emirates (AP) — A rocket exploded late Tuesday night off the side of a ship traveling through the Red Sea off the coast of Yemen, authorities said, the latest suspected attack to be carried out by Yemen's Houthi rebels.

The attack comes as the Houthis continue a series of assaults at sea over Israel's war on Hamas in the Gaza Strip and as the U.S. and its allies launch airstrikes trying to stop them.

The British military's United Kingdom Maritime Trade Operations center, which oversees shipping in the Mideast, reported the attack happened about 110 kilometers (70 miles) off the coast of the Houthi-held port city of Hodeida. The rocket exploded several miles off the bow of the vessel, it said.

"The crew and vessel are reported to be safe and are proceeding to next port of call," the UKMTO said.

The private security firm Ambrey reported that the vessel targeted appeared to be a Marshall Islands-flagged, Greek-owned bulk carrier in the area at the time. Another ship, a Panama-flagged, Emirati-owned chemical tanker was nearby as well, Ambrey said.

The Associated Press could not immediately identify the vessels involved.

The Houthis typically take several hours to claim their assaults and have not yet done so for the assault late Tuesday.

Meanwhile, the U.S. military's Central Command said an American and an allied warship shot down five Houthi bomb-carrying drones in the Red Sea on Tuesday night.

The drones originated "from Houthi-controlled areas of Yemen and (it was) determined they presented an imminent threat to merchant vessels and to the U.S. Navy and coalition ships in the region," Central Command said in a statement.

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

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

On Saturday, Central Command said a Houthi attack on a Belize-flagged ship on Feb. 18 caused an 18-mile (29-kilometer) oil slick and 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 Houthis, a Zaydi Shiite group, seized Yemen's capital in 2014 and have battled a Saudi-led coalition since 2015. Their Zaydi people ran a 1,000-year kingdom in Yemen up until 1962.

Thousands expected at memorial service for 3 slain Minnesota first responders

By STEVE KARNOWSKI Associated Press

ST. PAUL, Minn. (AP) — Thousands of law enforcement officers, firefighters and paramedics are expected to pack a Minnesota church on Wednesday for a memorial service for three first responders who were gunned down while responding to a report of a domestic incident at a home with seven children inside.

The Minneapolis suburb of Burnsville has been in mourning in the week and a half since police Officers Paul Elmstrand and Matthew Ruge, both 27, and firefighter-paramedic Adam Finseth, 40, were slain. Investigators say Shannon Gooden, 38, opened fire on them without warning during a standoff at his home, then later killed himself.

“On February 18th, our worlds were completely shattered. It was the darkest day in our police and fire department history. And it is still nearly impossible for us to comprehend,” Burnsville Police Chief Tanya Schwartz said at a briefing on service arrangements Monday, as she thanked the community for its outpouring of support.

The service will be at the nondenominational Grace Church in suburban Eden Prairie, one of the largest churches in the Minneapolis area. Because of the overflow crowd expected there, officials have encouraged the public to instead watch the livestream from home or at Prince of Peace Lutheran Church in Burnsville. The livestream will be viewable on the Grace Church website and its YouTube channel.

A procession of public safety vehicles will head from the Eden Prairie church after the service to Burnsville, where it will pass a fire station, police headquarters and the Burnsville church. Officials encouraged people to line the route to pay their respects.

“So much of this memorial service will be like nothing Minnesota has ever seen,” Minnesota Department of Public Safety spokesperson Howie Padilla told reporters, citing the expected attendance of not only law enforcement officers but firefighters and paramedics as well.

Authorities have made only limited information about the incident public, citing the ongoing investigation.

According to the Minnesota Bureau of Criminal Apprehension, which is leading the investigation, police were dispatched to the home around 1:50 a.m. Sunday, Feb. 18. Gooden refused to leave but said he was unarmed and that he had children inside. Officers entered and negotiated with him for about 3 1/2 hours to try to persuade him to surrender. But just before 5:30 a.m., the BCA says, Gooden opened fire on officers inside without warning.

The BCA said Elmstrand and Ruge, and Sgt. Adam Medicott, 38, are believed to have been first shot inside the home. Medicott and another officer, who was not injured, returned fire from inside the home, wounding Gooden in the leg.

Ruge and Medicott were shot a second time as officers made their way to an armored vehicle in the driveway, according to the BCA. Finseth, who was assigned to the SWAT team, was shot while trying to aid the officers, it said. Elmstrand, Ruge and Finseth were pronounced dead at a hospital. Medicott survived and is recovering at home.

The BCA said Gooden had “several firearms” and shot more than 100 rounds before killing himself. A court document filed by a BCA agent said the initial 911 call was “regarding an alleged sexual assault allegation.” Authorities have not provided further details about that.

Court records show Gooden wasn’t legally allowed to have guns because of his criminal record and had been entangled in a yearslong dispute over his three oldest children. The children in the house were ages 2 to 15 years.

States promise to help disabled kids. Why do some families wait a decade or more?

By JOHN HANNA Associated Press

TOPEKA, Kan. (AP) — When Lilly Miller was in elementary school, teachers told her parents they needed to immediately sign up their youngest daughter, who has Down syndrome, for a wait list so the state would pay for a day program when she grew up. The teachers predicted a six-year wait.

The Millers have been waiting 10 years. Lilly is now 21 and has aged out of special education programs in the public schools in their hometown of Wichita, Kansas. Her parents, also teachers, have hired a home caregiver. A day program, where she would learn new job skills or flex existing ones while socializing, would cost between \$1,500 and \$2,000 a month, Marvin Miller said.

Across the U.S., hundreds of thousands of children, adolescents and young adults with physical or intellectual disabilities are waiting for state-covered services. In Kansas, legislative committees planned Wednesday to consider proposals for higher funding. But even with more funds, it could take years to eliminate the state's waiting lists.

The services, which include day programs, employment assistance, and home care, are designed to foster independence and build work skills. Without them, Marvin Miller said, his youngest daughter isn't getting enough social interaction. "We've actually seen her regress."

"Someday, I won't be around anymore, and that's a parent's greatest fear," Miller said during an interview. "I want her to be at the place where, if something should happen in 15 years when I'm gone, she will still have a community of supports and friends and all the things that we take for granted when we work in jobs and have neighbors."

Parents across the U.S. have been stalled getting services for toddlers who are delayed developmentally. But many parents of children with intellectual or physical disabilities also must think years into the future.

At least 692,000 people with physical or intellectual disabilities are waiting for services in at least 40 states, according to a November 2023 survey by KFF, a health policy research group. Federal law doesn't require states to provide home and community based services, and what they cover varies.

Kansas expects to spend \$776 million under its current budget on such services for the disabled. That funding would have to jump by roughly 54% to about \$1.2 billion annually to eliminate waiting lists.

But Kansas also has seen its budget surpluses balloon since mid-2020 and they're now projected to approach \$4.5 billion by the end of June. Democratic Gov. Laura Kelly and the Republican-controlled Legislature both advocate big tax cuts, although they haven't been able to agree on the details.

Neil Romano, a National Council on Disability member, said it's "simply responsible" to help families so parents can be more productive in their jobs or attend to more family needs — even take weekend breaks.

"You're not just providing help for that family and that child," he said. "You're providing help for the community."

Kansas has separate in-home and community services programs for physically and developmentally disabled residents, together serving about 15,000 people. As of mid-February, the two waiting lists totaled about 7,500 people. That figure has grown 37% over the past five years, even with increases in funding.

Outside Topeka, Rick and Anna Elskamp's oldest daughter Sheridan is now 23, and the family recently received word in December that she was off the waiting list for intellectually disabled Kansas residents — after 10 years. A month later, after more administrative hoops, they said, they were still paying for day services themselves.

They said navigating the state's social services system has been time-consuming and, Rick Elskamp said, "All their acronyms and abbreviations are a whole new language."

The budget committee in the Republican-controlled Kansas Senate was set Wednesday to consider a proposal from the Democratic governor for an additional \$23 million to shrink the state's waiting lists by a total of 500 people.

When Kelly outlined her proposal earlier this month — weeks after presenting a proposed \$25.6 billion budget without it — Republicans in the GOP-controlled House already had been working on a plan twice

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as large. That plan was on the House budget committee's agenda Wednesday.

But disability rights advocates want lawmakers to be even more aggressive, particularly in attacking the more persistent and larger waiting list for people with intellectual disabilities. They'd like to spend roughly \$85 million more in the next budget, reduce both lists by a total of 1,600 people and eliminate both lists in five years.

Instead of shrinking the waiting list for people with intellectual disabilities by 250 or 500, their plan would reduce it by 1,100 people.

"Very typically, 300 to 400 people can be added to the waiting list in any one year," said Rocky Nichols, executive director of the Disability Rights Center of Kansas, a former legislator. "So 500 slots may not reduce the waiting list much at all."

Oklahoma struggled for years to provide services to residents with intellectual disabilities and had 5,100 people on a waiting list, with some families waiting up to 13 years. With state revenue collections at record highs in 2022, lawmakers increased provider rates by 25% — and poured extra money into covering more people. It hopes to provide services to everyone who was on that list as of this spring.

Kansas lawmakers approved an additional \$283 million over the past five years on home and community-based services — but 90% of it went to increasing rates paid to providers, according to legislative researchers.

Officials said the state needed first to build up its network of providers and make sure they could attract enough workers.

"It is very difficult to solve the waiting list problem without also addressing the workforce problem," said Alice Burns, associated director of KFF's program on the medically uninsured and state Medicaid programs.

But Nichols and other advocates said Kansas has seen its waiting lists grow because it hasn't at the same time committed funds specifically to covering more individuals. Burns agreed that states have to do that as well.

The funding issues in Kansas aren't likely to be resolved for at least another month. Parents like Miller, Padding and the Elskamps are juggling their advocacy with their jobs and caring for their children.

Sheridan Elskamp's parents said they don't leave her at home alone because cognitively, she's 6 or 7 years old. When she was in high school, they arranged their work schedules so one of them was home when she was out of school and Anna Elskamp took a demotion at her credit union job so that her schedule was flexible.

Marvin Miller considers his family fortunate, although he and his wife haven't been able to save for retirement and he drives a 1999 truck. Besides teaching, he's an ordained Assemblies of God minister, filling in at rural churches or for churches that are between permanent pastors.

"As a society, I think we owe it to take care of..." he said, searching for the right words, "our most vulnerable members, and to help them become successful."

A deal between Israel and Hamas appears to be taking shape.

What would it look like?

By SAMY MAGDY and TIA GOLDENBERG Associated Press

CAIRO (AP) — Israel and Hamas are inching toward a new deal that would free some of the roughly 130 hostages held in the Gaza Strip in exchange for a weeklong pause in the war, now in its fifth month.

U.S. President Joe Biden says a deal could go into effect as early as Monday, ahead of what is seen as an unofficial deadline — the start of the Muslim holy month of Ramadan, around March 10.

A deal would bring some respite to desperate people in Gaza, who have borne a staggering toll, as well as to the anguished families of Israeli hostages taken during Hamas' Oct. 7 attack that sparked the war.

Here is a look at the emerging agreement.

OUTLINE OF THE DEAL

According to a senior official from Egypt, a six-week cease-fire would go into effect, and Hamas would agree to free up to 40 hostages — mostly civilian women, at least two children, and older and sick cap-

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tives. Israel would release at least 300 Palestinian prisoners held in Israeli jails, the official said.

Israel would also allow displaced Palestinians to return to certain areas in northern Gaza, which was the first target of Israel's ground offensive and suffered widespread destruction, according to the official from Egypt, which is mediating the deal along with the U.S. and Qatar.

The Egyptian official said aid deliveries would be ramped up during the cease-fire, with 300 to 500 trucks entering the beleaguered territory per day, far more than the daily average number of trucks entering since the start of the war.

The deliveries to areas across Gaza would be facilitated by Israel, whose forces would refrain from attacks on them and on police escorting the aid convoys, said the official, who spoke on condition of anonymity because he was not authorized to discuss details of the talks with journalists.

STICKING POINTS

Despite Biden's optimism, both sides continue to posture ahead of any final agreement even as talks continue in Qatar. Both Israeli and Hamas officials downplayed any sense of progress.

Israel and Hamas have been far apart on their terms for a deal in the past, dragging out negotiations that appeared to have momentum.

Israel wants all female soldiers included in the first phase of hostage releases, according to an Israeli official who spoke on condition of anonymity because of the ongoing talks. Hamas views all soldiers as more significant bargaining chips and is likely to press back on this demand. The Egyptian official said the female soldiers were at this point being held off until after the first release.

The Egyptian official said the sides also are discussing how many Palestinians would be allowed to return to northern Gaza and whether to limit their return to women and men over 50.

Talks are also pinning down which areas of Gaza that Israel would withdraw troops from, the Egyptian official said, adding that Israel wants Hamas to refrain from using those it left as staging grounds for attacks. It also wants Hamas to stop firing rockets at southern Israel. Hamas has so far rejected both demands, the official said.

The emerging deal leaves a door open for Israel to operate in the southern border town of Rafah once it expires. More than half of Gaza's population has fled to the southern city on the Egyptian border. Israel wants to destroy what it says are the few Hamas battalions left standing there.

WHAT REMAINS TO BE NEGOTIATED?

During the temporary cease-fire, both sides would negotiate toward an extension of the deal that the Egyptian official said would include the release of all the female soldiers in exchange for a higher number of imprisoned Palestinians, including those serving long sentences for deadly attacks.

After the female soldiers, Israel will seek to free male soldiers for whom Hamas will likely demand a high price. Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has vowed not to agree to a deal at any cost. But the families of the hostages, whose plight has deeply shaken Israelis, are likely to ramp up pressure if others are freed.

The U.S. hopes the new deal will be a launching pad for implementing its vision for a postwar Gaza that would eventually lead to the creation of a Palestinian state. It wants Gaza to be governed by a revamped Palestinian Authority, which administers part of the Israeli-occupied West Bank. On Monday, it took a first step that could usher in U.S.-backed reforms by disbanding the self-rule government.

Israel wants to retain overall security control in the Gaza Strip and has rejected having world powers impose a state on it.

US asylum restriction aimed at limiting claims has little impact given strained border budget

By ELLIOT SPAGAT Associated Press

TUCSON, Ariz. (AP) — Inside giant white tents that house about 1,000 migrants near Tucson International Airport, Border Patrol agents demonstrate clockwork efficiency to release detainees within two days of arrest with orders to appear in immigration courts at their final destinations. Agents transmit information

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from the field to colleagues who prepare court papers while migrants are bused hours away to a processing center, minimizing time in custody.

Notably missing from the operations hub in the busiest corridor for illegal crossings into the U.S. are asylum officers who do initial screenings, which are intended to weed out weak claims that don't meet narrowly prescribed grounds for seeking protection, such as race, religion and political opinion.

Asylum officers were instructed nearly a year ago to apply a higher screening standard on those who cross the border illegally after passing through another country, such as Mexico, but they are too understaffed to have much impact. The Biden administration hails the higher standard as a cornerstone of its border policy in legal challenges, but its application in only a small percentage of arrests shows how budgets can fail to match ambitions.

Strained budgets continue to loom large as the White House again considers sweeping measures to limit asylum at the border.

The failure of a \$20 billion spending plan on border security this month has caused the administration to assess its priorities. U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement, facing a \$700 million hole this year, is considering cutting the number of detention beds from 38,000 to 22,000 and facilitating fewer deportation flights. These possible steps were first reported by The Washington Post and confirmed to The Associated Press by a U.S. official who spoke on the condition of anonymity because they were not authorized to discuss it publicly.

The failed spending package crafted by Senate negotiators would have given \$4 billion to U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services, including to add 4,338 asylum officers to screen applicants and make final decisions on claims — more than four times current staffing.

Arrests for illegal border crossings from Mexico plunged 42%, to the second-lowest monthly rate of Joe Biden's presidency, a month after the higher standard replaced COVID-19 pandemic-related asylum restrictions. The rule "is working as intended and has already significantly reduced encounters at the border," Blas Nuñez-Neto, assistant homeland security secretary for border and immigration policy, said in a court filing at the time.

Asylum-seekers subject to tougher screenings had a 59% pass rate through September, down from 85% in the five years before the pandemic, Nuñez-Neto said in another court filing that called the policy a success.

While that suggests the policy has made a difference, its scope has been limited. Officers interviewed only 57,700 migrants under the new rule through September, according to Nuñez-Neto. That represents only about 15% of the nearly 365,500 migrants released by Border Patrol from June to September with notices to appear in immigration court.

The Department of Homeland Security declined this week to provide more recent numbers. It insists that the higher screening standard is working as intended, while acknowledging it has failed to keep pace with unprecedented migration flows and calling on Congress to adequately fund the efforts.

Asylum officers did more than 130,000 screenings, known as "credible fear interviews," at the border during the 2023 budget year, which was more than double the year before. But more than 600,000 migrants were released with notices to appear in immigration court in that time and another 300,000 with orders to report to an immigration office for a court date, a practice that has largely ceased.

Mbala Giodi, a migrant from Angola, waited hours after crossing the border from Mexico in the mountains east of San Diego for agents to take him to a holding station, where he spent two days. He was released at a San Diego transit center and told he would have a chance to explain his reasons for fleeing his southern Africa homeland in court, with an initial hearing scheduled in New York in May.

"There wasn't much problem," said Giodi, 42, who calls himself a victim of government repression for being a student protestor in Angola.

To even put the higher screening standard into effect, Citizenship and Immigration Services added about 1,000 staff to assist an existing 850 or so asylum officers, training former asylum officers and other employees for short stints, said Michael Knowles, spokesman for the National Citizenship and Immigration Services Council. The union represents workers at the agency, which also oversees work visas, green

cards, citizenship applications and asylum claims that originate away from the border.

Assigning so many employees to border cases extended wait times for other services, he said. Weekend overtime was mandatory, as was holiday work.

"We're so overwhelmed and there's so much pressure," Knowles said. "Part of the border crisis is they didn't hire enough of us to do the work."

A lack of resources hampered another Biden policy that took effect in June 2022, empowering asylum officers to make final rulings on claims, not just screenings. It aimed to ease the workload of immigration judges, whose backlog of more than 3 million cases has allowed asylum-seekers with weak claims to stay in the United States for years — with eligibility for work permits — while their cases wind through the system.

Fewer than 6,000 asylum cases had been decided under the 2022 policy by the end of September.

"That is a very important program that got very little support," Knowles said.

Advocates for asylum-seekers have sued over application of the higher screening standard. They argue that it unfairly penalizes those who cross the border illegally while a heavily oversubscribed online appointment system, called CBP One, is virtually the only way to come through an official port of entry. The standard remains in effect while a judge's ruling declaring the policy illegal is under appeal. The case may reach the Supreme Court.

While migration flows dropped immediately after the higher standard took effect, border arrests increased in five of the last six months of 2023 as migrants and smugglers adjusted to realities on the ground, peaking at an all-time high of 250,000 in December.

A small drone flies into a damaged Fukushima reactor for the first time to study its melted fuel

By MARI YAMAGUCHI Associated Press

TOKYO (AP) — A drone small enough to fit in one's hand flew inside one of the damaged reactors at the wrecked Fukushima Daiichi nuclear power plant Wednesday in hopes it can examine some of the molten fuel debris in areas where earlier robots failed to reach.

Tokyo Electric Power Company Holdings also began releasing the fourth batch of the plant's treated and diluted radioactive wastewater into the sea Wednesday. The government and TEPCO, the plant's operator, say the water is safe and the process is being monitored by the International Atomic Energy Agency, but the discharges have faced strong opposition by fishing groups, as well as a Chinese ban on Japanese seafood.

A magnitude 9.0 quake and tsunami in March 2011 destroyed the plant's power supply and cooling systems, causing three reactors to melt down. The government and TEPCO plan to remove the massive amount of fatally radioactive melted nuclear fuel that remains inside each reactor — a daunting decommissioning process that's already been delayed for years and mired by technical hurdles and a lack of data.

To help fill in that data, a fleet of four drones were set to fly one at a time into the hardest-hit No. 1 reactor's primary containment vessel.

TEPCO has sent a number of probes — including a crawling robot and an underwater vehicle — inside each of the three reactors, but got hindered by debris, high radiation and inability to navigate them through the rubble, though they were able to gather some data in recent years.

In 2015, the first robot to go inside the reactor got stuck on a grate. Some helpful information came from the mission, but the crawling robot had to be abandoned.

Wednesday's drone flight comes after months of preparations and training that began in July at a nearby mockup facility outside of the plant.

The drones, each weighing only 185 grams (6.5 ounces), are highly maneuverable and the blades hardly stir up dust, making it a popular model for factory safety checks. It's nearly a square of about 18 centimeters (7 inches) on both sides, 5 centimeters (2 inches) thick, and carries a front-loaded high definition camera to send live video and a higher-quality images to an operating room.

In part due to battery life, the drone investigation inside of the reactor is limited to a 5-minute flight each.

TEPCO officials said they plan to use the new data to develop technology for future probes as well as

a process to remove the melted fuel from the reactor in the coming years. The data will also be used in the investigation of how exactly the 2011 meltdown occurred.

First, two drones were to inspect the area around the exterior of the main structural support in the vessel, called the pedestal, before deciding if the other two could be sent inside to the area previous probes could not reach.

The pedestal is directly under the reactor's core. Officials hope to film the core's bottom to find out how overheated fuel dripped there in 2011.

About 880 tons of highly radioactive melted nuclear fuel remain inside the three damaged reactors. Critics say the 30- to 40-year cleanup target set by the government and TEPCO for Fukushima Daiichi is overly optimistic. The damage in each reactor is different, and plans need to be formed to accommodate their conditions.

TEPCO's goal is to remove a small amount of melted debris from the least-damaged No. 2 reactor as a test case by the end of March by using a giant robotic arm, but was forced to delay due to difficulty removing a deposit blocking its entry. That monthslong postponement comes in addition to its already nearly two-year delay, underscoring the difficulty and uncertainty of the decommissioning process.

Supreme Court to hear challenge to bump stock ban in high court's latest gun case

By LINDSAY WHITEHURST Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — The Supreme Court on Wednesday will hear a challenge to a Trump-era ban on bump stocks, a gun accessory used in a Las Vegas massacre that was the deadliest mass shooting in modern U.S. history.

A Texas gun shop owner argues the Trump administration didn't follow federal law when it reversed course and banned bump stocks, which allow semi-automatic weapons to fire rapidly like machine guns.

The Biden administration is defending the ban, saying regulators were right to revise previous findings and ban bump stocks under laws against machine guns dating back decades.

Federal appeals courts have been divided over the bump stock rule, which marks the latest gun case to come before the Supreme Court. The case offers a fresh test for a court with a conservative supermajority to define the limits of gun restrictions in an era plagued by mass shootings.

The justices are weighing another case challenging a federal law intended to keep guns away from people under domestic violence restraining orders, stemming from a landmark 2022 decision in which the six-justice conservative majority expanded gun rights.

The bump stock case, however, is not about directly Second Amendment gun rights. Instead, the plaintiffs argue that the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives overstepped its authority in imposing the ban.

"If Congress had passed this law, the NCLA would not be bringing this lawsuit," said Mark Chenoweth, president of the New Civil Liberties Alliance. His group represents Michael Cargill, a Texas gun shop owner and Army veteran. He bought two bump stocks in 2018, during the rulemaking process, then turned them over and sued after the rule became final the following year, according to court documents.

The ban was a switch for the ATF, which had previously decided bump stocks should not be classified as machine guns and therefore not be banned under federal law.

That changed, though, after a gunman in Las Vegas attacked a country music festival with assault-style rifles, many of which were equipped with bump stocks and high-capacity magazines. More than 1,000 rounds were fired into the crowd in 11 minutes, killing 60 people and injuring hundreds more.

Marisa Marano, 42, survived the shooting at the show she attended with her sister, but still struggles with the massacre's lasting effects on her life and community. "I will never forget the sound of a machine gun firing into the crowd that night as Gina and I ran for our lives," said Marano, who is now a volunteer for the group Moms Demand Action and hopes the Supreme Court upholds the ban.

"The bump stock rule is simply common sense," said Billy Clark, an attorney with the gun-safety group Giffords.

Bump stocks are accessories that replace a rifle's stock, the part that rests against the shoulder. They harness the gun's recoil energy so that the trigger bumps against the shooter's stationary finger, allowing the gun to fire rapidly.

They were invented in the early 2000s, one of a growing number of devices that came onto the market after the expiration of the 1994 measure known as the federal assault weapons ban and were designed to "replicate automatic fire ... without converting these rifles into 'machineguns,'" the Justice Department wrote in court documents.

Between 2008 and 2017, the ATF decided that while bump stocks allowed a gun to fire faster, it didn't transform them into machine guns. The agency revisited the issue at the urging of then-president Donald Trump after the Las Vegas shooting and decided that the rapid fire they enabled did make guns into illegal machine guns.

The plaintiffs argue that rifles with bump stocks are different from machine guns since the shooter still has to exert pressure on the weapon to keep the rapid fire going and the trigger keeps moving, so the accessories don't fall under laws against machine guns.

The government, on the other hand, pointed out that traditional machine guns also require pressure from the shooter. The Justice Department also argues that since the shooter's finger stays still while the gun fires multiple shots, guns with bump stocks fall in the legal definition of machine guns.

There were about 520,000 bump stocks in circulation when the ban went into effect in 2019, requiring people to either surrender or destroy them, at a combined estimated loss of \$100 million, the plaintiffs said in court documents.

Federal appeals courts have come to different decisions about whether the regulation defining a bump stock as a machine gun is constitutional.

A panel of three judges on the federal appeals court in Washington, D.C., upheld the ban, finding that "a bump stock is a self-regulating mechanism that allows a shooter to shoot more than one shot through a single pull of the trigger."

But the New Orleans-based 5th Circuit Court of Appeals invalidated the ban, finding that the definition of machine guns under the National Firearms Act and Gun Control Act does not apply to bump stocks.

The Supreme Court took up an appeal of the 5th Circuit's decision.

The case also comes at a time when the 6-3 conservative majority has been increasingly skeptical of the powers of federal agencies. This term, the justices also are weighing challenges to aspects of the Consumer Financial Protection Bureau and the Securities and Exchange Commission.

A decision is expected by early summer.

Hunter Biden to appear for closed-door interview with Republicans conducting impeachment inquiry

By FARNOUSH AMIRI Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Hunter Biden is set to appear Wednesday on Capitol Hill for a closed-door deposition with lawmakers, a critical moment for Republicans as their impeachment inquiry into his father and their family's business affairs teeters on the brink of collapse.

The deposition will mark a decisive point for the 14-month Republican investigation into the Biden family, which has centered on Hunter Biden and his overseas work for clients in Ukraine, China, Romania and other countries. Republicans have long questioned whether those business dealings involved corruption and influence peddling by President Joe Biden, particularly when he was vice president.

Yet after conducting dozens of interviews and obtaining more than 100,000 pages of documents, Republicans have yet to produce direct evidence of misconduct by the president. Meanwhile, an FBI informant who alleged a bribery scheme involving the Bidens — a claim Republicans had cited repeatedly to justify their probe — is facing charges from federal prosecutors who accuse him of fabricating the story.

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Despite the stakes of their investigation, it's unclear how much useful information Republicans will be able to extract from Hunter Biden during the deposition. He is under federal investigation and has been indicted on nine federal tax charges and a firearm charge in Delaware, which means he could refuse to answer some questions by asserting his Fifth Amendment rights.

The task of interviewing Hunter falls primarily to Reps. James Comer and Jim Jordan, the GOP chairmen leading the impeachment investigation. They first subpoenaed Hunter Biden in November, demanding that he appear before lawmakers in a private setting. Biden and his attorneys refused, warning that his testimony could be selectively leaked and manipulated. They insisted that Hunter Biden would only testify in public.

On the day of the subpoena, Hunter Biden not only snubbed lawmakers waiting for him in a hearing room — he did also while appearing right outside the Capitol, holding a press conference where he denounced the investigation into his family.

Both sides ultimately agreed in January to a private deposition with a set of conditions. The interview with Hunter Biden will not be filmed and Republicans have agreed to quickly release the transcript.

"Our committees have the opportunity to depose Hunter Biden, a key witness in our impeachment inquiry of President Joe Biden, about this record of evidence," Comer, chair of the House Oversight Committee, said in a statement to The Associated Press. "This deposition is not the conclusion of the impeachment inquiry. There are more subpoenas and witness interviews to come."

Hunter will be the second member of the Biden family questioned by Republicans in recent days. They conducted a more than eight-hour interview last week with James Biden, the president's brother. He insisted to lawmakers that Joe Biden has "never had any involvement," financially or otherwise, in his business ventures.

Looming large over the interview are developments on the other side of the country in Nevada, where federal prosecutors this month indicted an FBI informant, Alexander Smirnov, who claimed there was a multimillion-dollar bribery scheme involving the president, his son Hunter and a Ukrainian energy company. Prosecutors in court documents assert that Smirnov has had "extensive and extremely recent" contact with people who are aligned with Russian intelligence.

Smirnov's attorneys have said he is presumed innocent.

Republicans pressed the FBI last summer over the informant's claims, demanding to see the underlying documents and ultimately releasing the unverified information to the public. The claim was cited repeatedly in letters that House Republicans sent to impeachment witnesses.

Many GOP lawmakers say they have yet to see evidence of the "high crimes and misdemeanors" required for impeachment, despite alleged efforts by members of the Biden family to leverage the last name into corporate paydays domestically and abroad.

But the Republican chairmen leading the impeachment effort remain undeterred by the series of setbacks to their marquee investigation. Jordan, the chair of the House Judiciary Committee, said last week that the informant's indictment "does not change the fundamental facts" that the Biden family tried to benefit off the family name in several overseas businesses.

And Comer told Fox News on Tuesday that Smirnov was never "a key part of this investigation."

Both Comer and Jordan have insisted for the past year that their investigation and inquiry is focused solely on Joe Biden and what actions, if any, he took while as vice president or president to benefit his family. But at nearly every turn, their probe has had a consistent and heavy focus on Hunter Biden. Several lines of inquiry have been opened into Hunter's international business affairs, his artwork sales and even his personal life and on-and-off battle with addiction.

Meanwhile, Hunter Biden has no shortage of legal headaches off Capitol Hill as he faces criminal charges in two states from a special counsel investigation. He's charged with firearm counts in Delaware, alleging he broke laws against drug users having guns in 2018, a period when he has acknowledged struggling with addiction. Special counsel David Weiss filed additional charges late last year, alleging he failed to pay about \$1.4 million in taxes over three years.

He has pleaded not guilty in both cases.

South Korean and US troops will begin major exercises next week in response to North Korean threats

By HYUNG-JIN KIM Associated Press

SEOUL, South Korea (AP) — South Korean and U.S. troops will begin their expanded annual military drills next week in response to North Korea's evolving nuclear threats, the two countries said Wednesday, a move that will likely enrage North Korea because it views its rivals' joint training as an invasion rehearsal.

In recent months, North Korea has inflamed animosities on the Korean Peninsula with fiery rhetoric and continued missile tests. While it's unlikely for North Korea to launch full-blown attacks against South Korea and the U.S., observers say the North could still stage limited provocations along the tense border with South Korea.

On Wednesday, the South Korea and U.S. militaries jointly announced that the allies will conduct Freedom Shield exercise, a computer-simulated command post training, and a variety of separate field training, from March 4-14.

Col. Lee Sung-Jun, a spokesperson for South Korea's Joint Chiefs of Staff, told reporters that the allies' drills are designed to bolster their joint capabilities to prevent North Korea from using its nuclear weapons. He said the allies are to carry out 48 field exercises this spring, twice the number conducted last year, and that this year's drills would involve air assault, live-firing and bombing training.

"Our military is ready to punish North Korea immediately, strongly and to the end in the event of its provocation, and we'll further strengthen our firm readiness through the upcoming drills," Lee said.

Col. Isaac L. Taylor, a spokesperson for the U.S. military, said the allies' exercises have been defensive in nature and that there is solid evidence that "a high readiness rate" helps ensure deterrence.

North Korea didn't immediately respond to the drills' announcement. North Korea has reacted to previous major South Korea-U.S. military drills with its own missile tests.

North Korea has sharply intensified its weapons testing activities since 2022 in part of its efforts to expand its nuclear and missile arsenals. This year, the North already conducted six rounds of missile tests — five of them reportedly involving cruise missiles — and other weapons launches.

Lee, the South Korean military spokesperson, said that the upcoming South Korea-U.S. drills would involve training to detect and shoot down North Korean cruise missiles. Analysts say North Korea would likely use cruise missiles to attack incoming U.S. warships in the event of a conflict, as well as U.S. military installations in Japan. The North's weapons tests in 2022 and 2023 largely focused on ballistic weapons systems.

Experts say North Korea believes a bigger weapons arsenal would allow it to pressure the U.S. and South Korea more effectively to make concessions like sanctions relief when diplomacy resumes. They expect North Korea to ramp up its testing activities and other provocations this year as both the U.S. and South Korea head into major elections.

South Korea and the U.S. have responded to the North's testing spree with expansions of their bilateral military drills and trilateral exercises involving Japan. U.S. and South Korean officials have repeatedly warned that any nuclear attack by North Korea against them would spell the end of the North's government led by Kim Jong Un.

In a telephone call earlier Wednesday, South Korean Defense Minister Shin Wonsik and U.S. Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin condemned North Korea's missile tests and reaffirmed the need to maintain an overwhelming joint defense posture, according to the South Korean Defense Ministry. The Pentagon said Austin reaffirmed the ironclad U.S. extended deterrence commitment to the defense of South Korea.

Trump and Biden won Michigan. But 'uncommitted' votes demanded attention

By SEUNG MIN KIM and COREY WILLIAMS Associated Press

DEARBORN, Mich. (AP) — President Joe Biden and former President Donald Trump won the Michigan

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primaries on Tuesday, further solidifying the all-but-certain rematch between the two men — yet early results from the state were highlighting some of their biggest political vulnerabilities ahead of the November general election.

A vigorous “uncommitted” campaign organized by activists disillusioned with Biden’s handling of the war in Gaza was making headway. It had already far surpassed the 10,000-vote margin by which Trump won Michigan in 2016, a goal set by organizers of this year’s protest effort.

As for Trump, he has now swept the first five states on the Republican primary calendar. But there were early signs that Trump was continuing to struggle with some influential voter blocs who have favored former U.N. Ambassador Nikki Haley in previous contests. Haley’s strongest performance Tuesday night came in areas with college towns like Ann Arbor, home to the University of Michigan, and suburbs around Detroit and Grand Rapids.

For Biden, the notable percentage of “uncommitted” voters could signal weakness with parts of the Democratic base in a state he can hardly afford to lose in November. Trump, meanwhile, has underperformed with suburban voters and people with college degrees, and faces a faction within his own party that believes he broke the law in one or more of the criminal cases against him.

Michigan has the largest concentration of Arab Americans in the nation. More than 310,000 residents are of Middle Eastern or North African ancestry. Nearly half of the Detroit suburb of Dearborn’s roughly 110,000 residents claim Arab ancestry.

Both the White House and Biden campaign officials have made trips to Michigan in recent weeks to talk with community leaders about the Israel-Hamas war and how Biden has approached the conflict, but those leaders have been unpersuaded.

A robust grassroots effort began just a few weeks ago to encourage voters to select “uncommitted” as a way to register objections to the death toll caused by Israel’s offensive. Nearly 30,000 people have died in Gaza, two-thirds of them women and children, according to Palestinian health officials.

That push has been backed by officials such as Democratic Rep. Rashida Tlaib, the first Palestinian American woman in Congress, and former Rep. Andy Levin.

“Uncommitted” votes were hovering around the 15% mark needed to qualify for delegates statewide. It was too soon to say whether the campaign would collect delegates locally.

In a statement, Biden did not directly acknowledge the “uncommitted” effort. Instead he touted the progress his administration has achieved for Michigan voters, while warning that Trump is “threatening to drag us even further into the past as he pursues revenge and retribution.”

“This fight for our freedoms, for working families, and for Democracy is going to take all of us coming together,” Biden said. “I know that we will.”

Trump won the state by just 11,000 votes in 2016 over Democratic candidate Hillary Clinton, and then lost the state four years later by nearly 154,000 votes to Biden. Organizers of the “uncommitted” effort wanted to show that they have at least the number of votes that were Trump’s margin of victory in 2016, to demonstrate how influential the bloc can be.

“It is not lost on me that this president has softened his language and begun to recognize Palestinian suffering. But what is not enough is lip service. What we need is a withdrawal of support” for Israel, Dearborn Mayor Abdullah Hammoud said as votes rolled in Tuesday night.

“Tonight, we will watch the votes tally. But what’s most important is to understand that the White House is listening,” Hammoud said.

Rep. Debbie Dingell, D-Mich., a prominent Biden supporter in the state, said the president’s campaign was well aware of its challenges in Michigan ahead of Tuesday night. She stressed that outreach needed to continue to not just the Arab American and Muslim communities, but other coalitions that will be critical for Democrats in November.

“We have to talk to young people,” Dingell said, pointing to Washtenaw County, where Ann Arbor is located. “Women who turned out in record numbers last year, and get in the union halls.” Dingell also noted that Trump was underperforming among Republican primary voters, underscoring his general elec-

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tion weaknesses in the critical swing state.

Trump's victory in Michigan over Haley, his last major primary challenger, after the former president defeated her by 20 percentage points in her home state of South Carolina on Saturday. The Trump campaign is looking to lock up the 1,215 delegates needed to secure the Republican nomination sometime in mid-March.

Trump's dominance of the early states is unparalleled since 1976, when Iowa and New Hampshire began their tradition of holding the first nominating contests. He has won resounding support from most pockets of the Republican voting base, including evangelical voters, conservatives and those who live in rural areas. But Trump has struggled with college-educated voters, losing that bloc in South Carolina to Haley on Saturday night.

Trump did not travel to the state Tuesday night. He instead called into a Michigan GOP election night watch party in Grand Rapids, where he stressed the importance of the state in the general election and said the results Tuesday evening were "far greater than anticipated."

"We have a very simple task: We have to win on Nov. 5 and we're going to win big," Trump said, according to a campaign transcript. "We win Michigan. we win the whole thing."

But Haley campaign spokeswoman Olivia Perez-Cubas said the Michigan results were a "flashing warning sign for Trump in November."

"Let this serve as another warning sign that what has happened in Michigan will continue to play out across the country. So long as Donald Trump is at the top of the ticket, Republicans will keep losing to the socialist left. Our children deserve better."

Still, even senior figures in the Republican Party who have been skeptical of Trump are increasingly falling in line. South Dakota Sen. John Thune, the No. 2 Senate Republican who has been critical of the party's standard-bearer, endorsed Trump for president on Sunday.

Shaher Abdulrab, 35, an engineer from Dearborn, said Tuesday morning that he voted for Trump. Abdulrab said he believes Arab Americans have a lot more in common with Republicans than Democrats.

Abdulrab said he voted four years ago for Biden but believes Trump will win the general election in November partly because of the backing he would get from Arab Americans.

"I'm not voting for Trump because I want Trump. I just don't want Biden," Abdulrab said. "He (Biden) didn't call to stop the war in Gaza."

Haley has vowed to continue her campaign through at least Super Tuesday on March 5, pointing to a not-insignificant swath of Republican primary voters who have continued to support her despite Trump's tightening grip on the GOP.

She also outraised Trump's primary campaign committee by almost \$3 million in January. That indicates that some donors continue to look at Haley, despite her longshot prospects, as an alternative to Trump should his legal problems imperil his chances of becoming the nominee.

Two of Trump's political committees raised just \$13.8 million in January, according to campaign finance reports released last week, while collectively spending more than they took in. Much of the money spent from Trump's political committees is the millions of dollars in legal fees to cover his court cases.

With nominal intraparty challengers, Biden has been able to focus on beefing up his cash reserves. The Biden campaign and the Democratic National Committee announced last week that it had raised \$42 million in contributions during January from 422,000 donors.

The president ended the month with \$130 million in cash on hand, which campaign officials said is the highest total ever raised by any Democratic candidate at this point in the presidential cycle.

The Republican Party is also aligning behind Trump as he continued to be besieged with legal problems that will pull him from the campaign trail as the November election nears. He is facing 91 criminal charges across four separate cases, ranging from his efforts to overturn the results of the 2020 presidential election, which he lost, to retaining classified documents after his presidency to allegedly arranging secret payoffs to an adult film actor.

His first criminal trial, in the case involving hush money payments to porn actor Stormy Daniels, is sched-

uled to begin on March 25 in New York.

2 men convicted of killing Run-DMC's Jam Master Jay nearly 22 years after rap star's death

By JENNIFER PELTZ and CEDAR ATTANASIO Associated Press

NEW YORK (AP) — More than 20 years after Run-D.M.C. star Jam Master Jay was brazenly gunned down in his recording studio, two men close to him were convicted Tuesday of murder, marking a moment authorities had long awaited in one of the hip-hop world's most elusive cases.

An anonymous Brooklyn federal jury found Karl Jordan Jr. and Ronald Washington guilty of killing the pioneering DJ in 2002 over what prosecutors characterized as revenge for a failed drug deal.

The musician, born Jason Mizell, worked the turntables in Run-D.M.C. as it helped hip-hop break into the pop music mainstream in the 1980s with such hits as "It's Tricky" and a fresh take on Aerosmith's "Walk This Way."

Like the slayings of rap icons Tupac Shakur and the Notorious B.I.G. in the late 1990s, there were no arrests for years. Authorities were deluged with tips, rumors and theories but struggled to get witnesses to open up.

"It's no mystery why it took years to indict and arrest the defendants," Breon Peace, the top federal prosecutor in Brooklyn, told reporters after Tuesday's verdict. He said key witnesses "were terrified that they would be retaliated against if they cooperated with law enforcement."

"Their strength and resolve in testifying at this trial were a triumph of right over wrong and courage over fear," Peace added.

Jordan, 40, was Mizell's godson. Washington, 59, was an old friend who was bunking at the home of the DJ's sister at the time of the shooting on Oct. 30, 2002. Both men were arrested in 2020 and pleaded not guilty.

"Y'all just killed two innocent people," Washington yelled at jurors following the guilty verdict. Jordan's supporters also erupted at the verdict, cursing the jury.

Defense lawyers said they asked the judge to set aside the verdict and acquit them.

"My client did not do this. And the jury heard testimony about the person who did," one of Washington's lawyers, Susan Kellman, told reporters.

The men's names, or at least their nicknames, have been floated for decades in connection to the case. Authorities publicly named Washington as a suspect in 2007. He told Playboy magazine in 2003 he'd been outside the studio, heard the shots and saw "Little D" — one of Jordan's monikers — racing out of the building.

Relatives of Mizell welcomed the verdict and lamented that his mother did not live to see it.

"I feel like I was carrying a 2,000-pound weight on my shoulders. And when that verdict came today, it lifted it off," said Carlis Thompson, Mizell's cousin, who wiped away tears after the verdict was read. "The wounds can start to heal now."

Mizell had been part of Run-D.M.C.'s anti-drug message, delivered through a public service announcement and such lyrics as "we are not thugs / we don't use drugs." But according to prosecutors and trial testimony, he racked up debts after the group's heyday and moonlighted as a cocaine middleman to cover his bills and habitual generosity to friends.

"He was a man who got involved in the drug game to take care of the people who depended on him," Assistant U.S. Attorney Artie McConnell said in his summation.

Prosecution witnesses testified that in Mizell's final months, he had a plan to acquire 10 kilograms of cocaine and sell it through Jordan, Washington and a Baltimore-based dealer. But the Baltimore connection refused to work with Washington, according to testimony.

Prosecutors said Washington and Jordan went after Mizell for the sake of vengeance, greed and jealousy.

Two eyewitnesses, former studio aide Uriel Rincon and former Mizell business manager Lydia High, testified that Washington blocked the door and ordered High to lie on the floor. She said he brandished a gun.

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Rincon identified Jordan as the man who approached Mizell and exchanged a friendly greeting moments before shots rang out and one bullet wounded Rincon himself. Three other people, including a teenage singer who had just stopped by the studio to tout her demo tape, testified that they were in an adjoining room and heard but didn't see what happened.

Other witnesses testified that Washington and Jordan made incriminating statements about the Mizell killing after it happened.

Neither Washington nor Jordan testified. Their lawyers questioned key prosecution witnesses' credibility and their memories of the long-ago shooting, noting that some initially denied they could identify the attackers or had heard who they were.

"Virtually every witness changed their testimony 180 degrees," Kellman told the judge during legal arguments.

The witnesses said they had been overwhelmed, loath to pass along secondhand information or scared for their lives.

The trial shed limited light on a third defendant, Jay Bryant, who was charged last year after prosecutors said his DNA was found on a hat at the scene. They assert that he slipped into the studio building and let Washington and Jordan in through fire door in the back so they could avoid buzzing up.

Bryant has pleaded not guilty and is headed toward a separate trial.

Testimony suggested that he knew someone in common with his co-defendants, but there's no indication that Bryant was close with Mizell, if indeed they ever met.

Bryant's uncle testified that his nephew told him he shot Mizell after the DJ reached for a gun, a scenario no other witnesses described.

McConnell said Bryant was "involved, but he's not the killer." Prosecutors' theory doesn't even place Bryant in the studio, though that's where authorities found the hat with DNA from him and other people — but not the other defendants, according to court filings.

One of Jordan's lawyers, Michael Hueston, said in his summation that Bryant "is literally reasonable doubt."

The verdict comes a month before the 40th anniversary of Run-D.M.C.'s self-titled debut album, which included a track titled "Jam Master Jay," Peace noted. The song lauded Mizell as "on his way / to be the best DJ in the US of A."

The group — also featuring Darryl "DMC" McDaniels and Joseph Simmons, known as DJ Run and Rev. Run — became the first rappers with gold and platinum albums and was the first hip-hop outfit with a video in regular rotation on MTV.

While the case may complicate Mizell's image, Syracuse University media professor J. Christopher Hamilton says it shouldn't be blotted out.

If he was indeed involved in dealing drugs, "that doesn't mean to say his achievements shouldn't be lauded," Hamilton said, arguing that acceptance from local underworld figures was a necessity for successful rappers of the '80s and '90s.

"You don't get these individuals without them walking through the gauntlet of the street," Hamilton said.

\$1B donation makes New York medical school tuition free and transforms students' lives

By MICHAEL CASEY Associated Press

First year student Samuel Woo had been considering a career in cardiology so he would be able to pay off his medical school debt until the announcement this week of a generous donation that will remove tuition fees at his New York City school.

Now, without the fear of crippling student debt, the 23-year-old whose parents emigrated from South Korea said Tuesday that he can afford to pursue his dream of providing medical services to people living on the streets.

"I was definitely very emotional and it changes a lot," said Woo, who had been working as a tutor and at a cafe to help cover his costs.

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Ruth Gottesman, a former professor at the Albert Einstein College of Medicine and the widow of a Wall Street investor, announced Monday that she is donating \$1 billion to the school in the Bronx. The gift means that four-year students immediately go tuition free, while everyone else will benefit in the fall.

Another first year, Jade Andrade, whose parents emigrated from the Philippines to rural Virginia, had a similar reaction.

"A big wave of relief just came over me and, you know, everyone surrounding me in the auditorium," Andrade said.

Both students expressed hope that Gottesman's generous gift would open doors for more low-income students from immigrant families who could not otherwise have afforded to pursue a career in medicine.

The donation is notable not just for its size — possibly the largest to any U.S. medical school, according to Montefiore Einstein, the umbrella organization for Albert Einstein College of Medicine and the Montefiore Health System — but also because the school is located in one of the most impoverished parts of the city and the state of New York.

"There are people here in the Bronx who are first generation, low-income students who really want to be doctors and want to pursue medicine and want to practice here, but just aren't able to have the opportunity, whether that's financial reasons or lack of resources," Woo said. "I'm hoping that the free tuition helps alleviate some of the pressure of those students and encourages them to think of medicine as, you know, a potentially acceptable field."

Andrade, 30, called the announcement liberating.

"Growing up in an immigrant household, there are very few life decisions that you make without thinking of the financial aspects of it in terms of, you know, 'Is this like a worthy investment of my time? This is something I want to do, but can I afford it?'" she said.

But once you remove the financial burden: "Anyone can dream bigger."

Astonished students and faculty rose to their feet, clapping, cheering, some crying, after Gottesman, 93, announced her donation. She has been affiliated with the college for 55 years and is the chairperson of its board of trustees.

School officials said they hoped free tuition would attract a diverse pool of applicants, though it has no plans to change its admissions policy. They said the donation should last for perpetuity, since interest earned means the lump sum will continue to grow. All students will qualify for the free tuition.

Tuition at the school is currently \$63,000 a year, leaving graduating students with mountains of debt that can take decades to repay. The Education Data Initiative says medical graduates on average leave school with \$202,453 in debt.

Other schools in decidedly wealthier areas have also benefitted from generous donations.

In 2018, Kenneth and Elaine Langone gave \$100 million to the NYU Grossman School of Medicine that went to an endowment fund to make tuition free for all current and future medical students. And in 2023, the Langones gave \$200 million to the NYU Grossman Long Island School of Medicine to endow a full-tuition scholarship program and guarantee free tuition for all medical students. Kenneth Langone is a co-founder of Home Depot.

UCLA's David Geffen School of Medicine offers merit-based scholarships thanks to some \$146 million in donations from the recording industry mogul.

Gottesman credited her late husband, David "Sandy" Gottesman, for leaving her with the financial means to make the donation. David Gottesman built the Wall Street investment house First Manhattan and was on the board of Warren Buffett's Berkshire Hathaway. He died in 2022 at age 96.

"I feel blessed to be given the great privilege of making this gift to such a worthy cause," said Gottesman, a pioneer in the field of learning disabilities.

Woo said he called his mother immediately after the announcement.

"I feel like she asked me a bunch of questions because that's what immigrant parents do," he said. "But afterwards, when I clarified I'm not going to pay for tuition anymore, she was very happy."

A quarter of Gaza's population is one step from famine and aid trucks are looted, UN says

By EDITH M. LEDERER Associated Press

UNITED NATIONS (AP) — At least one quarter of Gaza's population — 576,000 people — are one step away from famine and virtually the entire population desperately needs food resulting in some aid trucks being shot at, looted and overwhelmed by hungry people, top U.N. officials said Tuesday.

The officials from the U.N. humanitarian office and the U.N.'s food and agriculture organizations painted a dire picture of all 2.3 million people in Gaza facing crisis levels of food insecurity or worse, and civil order breaking down especially in the north where food and other humanitarian supplies are scarce.

And as grim as the picture is today, U.N. humanitarian coordinator Ramesh Ramasingham told the U.N. Security Council that "there is every possibility for further deterioration."

He said that in addition to a quarter of Gaza's population close to famine, 1 in 6 children under the age of two in northern Gaza are suffering from "acute malnutrition and wasting," where the body becomes emaciated.

Carl Skau, deputy executive director of the World Food Program, said that is "the worst level of child malnutrition anywhere in the world." And he warned that "If nothing changes, a famine is imminent in northern Gaza" -- the initial target of Israel's military offensive following Hamas' surprise attack in southern Israel on Oct. 7 that killed some 1,200 people and led to about 250 being taken captive.

In the latest example of the breakdown of civil order, Skau said WFP resumed deliveries to northern Gaza for the first time in three weeks on Feb. 18, and hoped to send 10 trucks a day for seven days to address immediate food needs and provide some reassurance to people that sufficient food would be arriving.

But on both Feb. 18 and Feb. 19, he said, WFP convoys faced delays at checkpoints, gunfire and other violence and the looting of food.

"At their destination, they were overwhelmed by desperately hungry people," he said.

Skau said "the breakdown in civil order, driven by sheer desperation, is preventing the safe distribution of aid — and we have a duty to protect our staff."

As a result, he said, WFP has suspended aid deliveries to the north until conditions are in place to ensure the security of its staff and the people receiving assistance.

Maurizio Martina, the Food and Agriculture Organization's deputy director general, described the horrific state of farmland, greenhouses, bakeries and irrigation systems that are essential to produce, process and distribute food.

Since Oct. 9 — two days after the Hamas attacks — "the government of Israel's reinforced blockade has included stopping or restricting food, electricity and fuel supplies, as well as commercial goods," he said.

This has affected the entire food supply chain in different ways, Martina said.

As examples, he said, severe restrictions on fuel shipments are crippling water supplies and the functioning of desalination plants, with the water supply at only 7% of pre-October levels. Fuel shortages have also crippled the production and delivery of food and electricity, and seriously hampered the ability of bakeries to produce bread, he said.

Martina said the collapse of agricultural production in the north is already happening and in the most likely scenario will be complete by May. And as of Feb. 15, over 46% of all crop land in Gaza was assessed to be damaged, he said.

The FAO official presented more alarming figures from Israel's offensive -- a high number of animal shelters and sheep and dairy farms destroyed, over one-quarter of water wells destroyed, and 339 hectares of greenhouses destroyed. And he said the war has also heavily impacted the harvest of olives and citrus fruits, a key Palestinian money earner.

As for animals, Martina said, many livestock owners report substantial losses, all poultry have likely been slaughtered, and as many as 65% of calves and 70% of beef cattle are assumed to have died.

Israel's deputy U.N. ambassador Brett Miller told the council that while fighting Hamas it is doing "all it can to care for civilians," and is working constantly to ensure the entry of humanitarian aid from numer-

ous countries and U.N. agencies.

Since the Oct. 7 attacks, he said, Israel has facilitated the delivery of 254,000 tons of humanitarian aid including 165,000 tons of food. "There is absolutely no limit – and I repeat there is no limit – to the amount of humanitarian aid that can be sent to the civilian population of Gaza," he said.

Miller countered that 20 bakeries throughout Gaza are producing over 2 million pita breads a day.

He accused the U.N. of refusing to deliver aid to northern Gaza, and some U.N. officials of trying to shift the blame to Israel.

In recent days, Miller said, 508 trucks have been waiting to cross into Gaza with Israeli approval. "So where is the U.N. and its aid agencies? How can it be that Israel is libelously held responsible for a situation that is clearly the U.N.'s fault?" he asked.

U.N. humanitarian coordinator Ramasingham, WFP's Skau and FAO's Martina all had a similar response: The first step to eliminating the looming threat of famine is a ceasefire so humanitarian workers can enter Gaza.

"If nothing is done, we fear widespread famine in Gaza is almost inevitable," Ramasingham said, and the Palestinian death toll which has reached almost 30,000 "will have many more victims." That figure from the Gaza Health Ministry doesn't distinguish between civilians and combatants, though the U.N. says the majority are women and children.

Shooting stuns indigenous whaling village on Alaska's desolate North Slope

By MARK THIESSEN Associated Press

ANCHORAGE, Alaska (AP) — A shooting that killed two adults and severely wounded two others has stunned a tiny Alaska Native whaling village above the Arctic Circle, where parents were told they could keep their children home from school Tuesday to hug them.

A 16-year-old boy has been charged as an adult with two counts each of first-degree murder and attempted murder in the late Sunday shooting in Point Hope, a remote Inupiat whaling community on Alaska's northwest coast, bordering the Chukchi Sea.

The teen, Guy Nashookpuk, made his initial court appearance by telephone Tuesday. He spoke only to say "Yes ma'am" when asked questions by Magistrate Judge Colleen Baxter.

He was assigned a public defender, who entered not guilty pleas on his behalf. Baxter set bail at \$1 million and scheduled a preliminary hearing for March 8. State law allows minors 16 and older to be tried in adult court on murder charges.

North Slope Borough police found a man and woman dead and two other men wounded when officers responded to a shooting at a Point Hope home at 11:35 p.m. Sunday, charging documents said. One witness told officers she saw the teen enter the home with a handgun and begin shooting. Others said they saw him flee on a four-wheeler.

Nine minutes later, the teen's father escorted him to the police station and reported "that his son had told him that he did it," court documents said.

The teen was interviewed with his parents present and admitted the shooting, the documents said. No motive was detailed.

Point Hope, with a population of about 675, sits on a triangular spit of land that juts into the Chukchi Sea. It is about 700 miles (1,126 kilometers) northwest of Anchorage and 200 miles (322 kilometers) from Russia.

The community, known as Tikigaq in Inupiaq, is laid out in a treeless grid around the Tikigaq School — "Home of the Harpooners." This weekend's shooting prompted the closure of the school on Monday. Attendance Tuesday was not required.

"It is totally optional if you'd rather keep your kids home to hold, hug, and explain the circumstance to them," North Slope Borough Mayor Josiah Patkotak said in a Facebook post.

The local cemetery is surrounded by a fence made of whale bones stuck upright in the tundra, and remnants of prehistoric sod-house villages sit nearby.

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A state-owned air strip provides the only year-round access. Barges arrive in the summer with food, fuel and other items for year-round use. Locals travel by skiffs, boats made of animal skins, snowmobiles and four-wheelers.

The peninsula is one of the longest continually inhabited Inupiat areas of North America, with some of its earliest residents crossing the Siberian land bridge about 2,000 years ago for bowhead whaling, the borough website said.

Residents still participate in subsistence hunts for bowhead whales, according to the Alaska Eskimo Whaling Commission. And as in most of Alaska, firearms are commonly used to hunt caribou, moose, seals, walrus and polar bears.

And shootings aren't unheard of: Last May, a police officer shot and killed a man in Point Hope after the man opened fire on residents and buildings and refused to drop the weapon.

Patkotak said the borough fire department would fly in emergency medical services staff from the other seven communities in North Slope Borough — an area roughly the size of Wyoming — to provide on-call EMS services to cover for Point Hope staff. He said they might be traumatized by the shooting, since they're often closely related to those they serve.

"Our small communities are intertwined in immeasurable ways dating back generations," Patkotak said.

Maniilaq Association, a nonprofit corporation that provides health, tribal and social services to residents in northwest Alaska, sent behavioral health counselors to meet with Point Hope residents for the rest of the week. The Assembly of God church in Point Hope also offered two services Monday.

"In the days ahead, we will come together as a community to heal and support one another," the North Slope Borough said in a statement posted to social media.

Ka'ainoa Ravey, who travels rural Alaska teaching food safety and cooking as part of a technical education program, just spent three weeks in Point Hope working with a dozen high school students. Among the dishes they tried were polar bear meat tostadas. He left Sunday morning, before the shooting.

"The community is very close and tightknit to where almost everybody is cousins," Ravey said.

Life there feels slow, he said, and bored kids roam the streets at night.

"It almost seems like the rest of the world kind of forgets about them," he said. "So that's why when something like this hits, it's just huge. It's like a devastating blow to the community."

The killing of a Georgia nursing student is now at the center of the US immigration debate

By JEFF AMY, ELLIOT SPAGAT and WILL WEISSERT Associated Press

ATHENS, Ga. (AP) — Laken Riley was a 22-year-old nursing student out on her morning run at the University of Georgia when authorities say a stranger dragged her into a secluded area and killed her, sending shockwaves through campus as police searched for a suspect.

The arrest of a Venezuelan man who entered the U.S. illegally and was allowed to stay to pursue his immigration case put the tragedy at the center of the 2024 presidential campaign.

Former President Donald Trump blamed President Joe Biden and his border policies for the Augusta University student's fatal beating. A conservative news site blasted "open-border elites" for accepting the deaths of women such as Riley as "collateral damage."

It is familiar ground for Trump, who launched his 2016 White House bid by saying Mexicans were "bringing crime. They're rapists. And some, I assume, are good people." As president, he created an office for families whose loved ones were victims of violent crimes committed by immigrants, which was quickly dismantled under Biden.

The debate over the nation's broken immigration system has emerged as a major campaign issue amid an unprecedented migration surge that has strained budgets in cities including New York, Chicago and Denver and divided some Democrats. Trump has dialed up his anti-immigrant rhetoric to say migrants are "poisoning the blood" of the country. And he and other Republicans have suggested migrants are committing crimes more often than U.S. citizens even though the evidence does not back up those claims.

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Biden has criticized Republicans for turning against a bipartisan border security deal after Trump decried it. He will visit the Texas border city of Brownsville on Thursday, while Trump will be in another Texas border city, Eagle Pass.

On his social media site, Trump posted, "Crooked Joe Biden's Border INVASION is destroying our country and killing our citizens! The horrible murder of 22-year-old Laken Riley at the University of Georgia should have NEVER happened!"

"He's an animal that came in," Trump said Tuesday on Michigan's WFDF radio station.

Democrats have been more muted, with many expressing sorrow for Riley's death and some accusing Trump of exploiting a tragedy and using xenophobic rhetoric for political gain.

The White House extended "deepest condolences" to Riley's family. "People should be held accountable to the fullest extent of the law if they are found to be guilty," said spokesperson Angelo Fernández Hernández.

U.S. Sen. Lindsey Graham, a Trump ally, predicted Riley's death is "gonna change this election as much as anything."

"That's a parent's worst nightmare," the South Carolina Republican said.

Many studies have found immigrants are less drawn to violent crime than native-born citizens. One published by the National Academy of Sciences, based on Texas Department of Public Safety data from 2012 to 2018, reported native-born U.S. residents were more than twice as likely to be arrested for violent crimes than people in the country illegally.

Another in the journal *Criminology* analyzed multiple data sources from 1990 to 2014 to conclude that increases in illegal immigration were generally in sync with reductions in violent crime or had no significant correlation.

A study published last year by the National Bureau of Economic Research, a private group, found immigrants have been incarcerated at a lower rate than U.S.-born white men since 1960.

"Whereas Democrats are increasingly more positive when talking about immigrants and pointing to their contributions to the U.S., Republicans remain negative and increasingly focus on crime and legality issues when they talk about immigrants," said Ran Abramitzky, a Stanford University economics professor who has studied links between immigration and crime, referring to analyses of congressional statements going back decades.

Jon Feere, a former U.S. Immigrations and Customs Enforcement official in the Trump administration who now is director of investigations at the Center for Immigration Studies, dismissed the research. He pointed to migrants who don't have legal permission to be in the U.S., saying they are committing crimes just by being here.

"This type of fallout's going to going to continue for many years to come, even beyond this administration," Feere said. "And they can continue to ignore it, but the American people are paying attention."

Families of victims have heartbreaking stories.

Don Rosenberg, a retired entertainment and publishing executive, lost his son, 25-year-old son, Drew, in 2010, when a Honduran man who was in the country illegally repeatedly struck him with his car in San Francisco and tried to flee. As he spoke with families whose loved ones were killed by immigrants, he concluded authorities were ignoring them, even protecting perpetrators.

"I thought my case was an anomaly. No, my case was the rule," said Rosenberg, president of Advocates for Victims of Illegal Alien Crime.

Rosenberg says the high-profile cases won't resonate with voters until news organizations give them more exposure "because Trump only talks to people who support Trump."

The man accused of killing Riley, Jose Ibarra, was arrested for illegal entry in September 2022 near El Paso, Texas, amid an unprecedented surge in migration and released to pursue his case in immigration court. At the time, the Border Patrol was releasing migrants with orders to appear at an immigration office, not even scheduling court appearances. That practice, which added years to how long it takes to resolve an immigration case, largely ceased in February 2023.

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It is unclear if Ibarra, 26, followed those instructions or applied for asylum. Federal officials say he was arrested by New York police in August for child endangerment and released, though New York officials said Sunday they had no record of the arrest.

Ibarra was living in Athens, Georgia, when Riley was killed last week. His attorney has not responded to requests for comment.

Trump first mentioned the killing on Friday, calling it part of what he has labeled "Biden migrant crime." It comes after a group of migrants brawling with police in New York touched off a political furor and renewed debate over policies that limit cooperation with federal immigration authorities.

The influential conservative site Breitbart News linked Riley's death to other women who were killed by people in the country illegally, including Kate Steinle, who was shot at a crowded San Francisco pier in 2015. "Their deaths were all 100% preventable," the site said.

San Francisco apologizes to Black residents for decades of racist policies

By JANIE HAR Associated Press

SAN FRANCISCO (AP) — Supervisors in San Francisco formally apologized Tuesday to African Americans and their descendants for the city's role in perpetuating racism and discrimination, with several stating that this was just the start of reparations for Black residents and not the end.

The vote was unanimous with all 11 board members signed on as sponsors of the resolution.

"This historic resolution apologizes on behalf of San Francisco to the African American community and their descendants for decades of systemic and structural discrimination, targeted acts of violence, atrocities," said Supervisor Shamann Walton, "as well as committing to the rectification and redress of past policies and misdeeds."

San Francisco joins another major U.S. city, Boston, in issuing an apology. Nine states have formally apologized for slavery, according to the resolution.

"We have much more work to do but this apology most certainly is an important step," said Walton, the only Black member of the board and chief proponent of the resolution.

It is the first reparations recommendation of more than 100 proposals made by a city committee to win approval. The African American Reparations Advisory Committee also proposed that every eligible Black adult receive a \$5 million lump-sum cash payment and a guaranteed income of nearly \$100,000 a year to remedy San Francisco's deep racial wealth gap.

But there has been no action on those and other proposals, and some supervisors Tuesday took a dig at public safety measures on next week's March 5 city ballot that they say would harm Black residents.

Supervisor Dean Preston represents the historically Black Fillmore neighborhood, which was razed in the last century and resulted in the displacement of residents. He said that some leaders who back the apology still want to build "unaffordable housing for mostly wealthy, white people" on public land.

He also referenced two measures backed by Mayor London Breed, who is Black, including one to screen welfare recipients for drug addiction and another to give more powers to the police department.

"People want an apology," he said. "But they also want a commitment not to repeat harms."

The mayor has also said she believes reparations should be handled at the national level, and facing a budget crunch, her administration eliminated \$4 million for a proposed reparations office in cuts this year.

The resolution contains findings, including property redlining, the razing of the Fillmore neighborhood in the name of urban renewal, and intentional policies and practices by the city that robbed Black residents of opportunities to build generational wealth.

Black people, for example, make up 38% of San Francisco's homeless population despite being less than 6% of the general population, according to a 2022 federal count. There are about 46,000 Black residents in San Francisco.

In 2020, California became the first state in the nation to create a task force on reparations. The state committee, which dissolved in 2023, also offered numerous policy recommendations, including methodologies to calculate cash payments to descendants of enslaved people.

But reparations bills introduced by the California Legislative Black Caucus this year also leave out financial redress, although the package includes proposals to compensate people whose land the government seized through eminent domain, create a state reparations agency, ban forced prison labor and issue an apology.

Reparations advocates are urging San Francisco to move faster in adopting changes made by the city reparations committee, including policies to improve education, employment and housing options for Black people.

Cheryl Thornton, a city employee who is Black, said that an apology alone does little to address current problems, such as shorter lifespans for Black people.

"That's why reparations is important in health care," she said. "And it's just because of the lack of healthy food, the lack of access to medical care and the lack of access to quality education."

20 years since NHL's record-setting brawl, fighting is down across the league but not going anywhere

By STEPHEN WHYNO AP Hockey Writer

Minnesota's Marcus Foligno took a hit, delivered one of his own to Chicago's Jarrod Tinordi, and the two big guys dropped the gloves. Outdoors in front of 82,000 people in the Meadowlands, it took even less for Matt Rempe and Matt Martin to spice up the Rangers-Islanders showdown with a fight.

When Morgan Rielly cross-checked Ridly Greig for firing a slap shot into an empty net? Some pushing and shoving. Nothing more.

"How there wasn't a brawl there, I don't know how everyone didn't start fighting," wondered Todd Simpson, a 50-year-old retired player who piled up more than 1,300 penalty minutes in 580 NHL games. "That should've been a big fight."

All of these situations were over the past month alone, riveting reminders that fighting is alive and well in the NHL even if it is diminished in many ways. It has been 20 years since Simpson and his Ottawa teammates got into a fight fest at Philadelphia, a game that still holds the NHL record with an astounding 419 penalty minutes. Of 40 players who suited up, 23 got at least two minutes of penalty time. Many got far more.

Those kinds of massive clashes are long gone, faded like the cheap shots and blood in "Slap Shot." Like the beloved movie, however, fighting is warmly remembered, even desired, by many fans of the game and cheering on the brawls remains common. Those fans need not worry: Even in the NHL, which has fewer and fewer spots for goons these days, fighting is rare but certainly not gone, with a fight coming roughly every four or five games across the league.

Many see a permanent place for it in a sport that values standing up for teammates, even as they have watched some of the biggest fighters left shells of themselves by repeated blows to the head.

"It doesn't happen often, but you still have to have it," said Vancouver Canucks coach Rick Tocchet, whose 237 career fights rank 21st all-time. "When I played, you could really use as intimidation. You can still use it a little bit today but not as much. The staged fighting and all that stuff, that doesn't work anymore. But there is a time and place for it."

FIGHTING ON THE WANE

The NHL does not publicly list penalties by type, including fighting and other major infractions. According to HockeyFights.com, there have been 219 fights this season through Monday with 63 more projected before the playoffs begin for a total of 282, which would be a sharp drop from the 789 in 2003-04. That is a 200% decrease over 20 years and significantly down from 645 as recently as 2010-11.

Rule changes are part of the reason. The institution of the salary cap in 2005 made it more difficult for a team to pay a player whose skills were limited to throwing punches and protecting stars. In 2013, it became illegal to take a helmet off to fight and mandatory visors were grandfathered in.

"It's obviously evolved a lot where guys like myself back in the day no longer exist — one-dimensional fighters no longer exist," said Riley Cote, who fought 50 times in 156 games with Philadelphia from 2007-10 and countless other times in the minor leagues. "It's been a natural progression. ... I'm not sure at the

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NHL level they'll ever fully phase it out, but they're doing a pretty good job of trying."

No one expects a fighting ban, like the ejection and suspension policies that exist in college and internationally. NHL Commissioner Gary Bettman has said the fighting helps keep tensions from boiling over.

"Fighting, in the spontaneous sense, tends to act as a bit of a thermostat when things happen in the course of the game," Bettman said in 2013. Discussing a fight between Jarome Iginla and Vincent Lecavalier, Bettman said, "I'd rather them be punching each other than swinging sticks at each other."

WILL FIGHTING SURVIVE?

A 2011 survey by the NHL Players' Association and CBC found that 98% of players at that time didn't support the total elimination of fighting. A vast majority of those players are now out of the league, replaced by a generation that has made hockey faster and more skilled than ever — but still willing to drop the gloves on occasion and wanting that option.

"It always needs to be in the game," said St. Louis Blues captain Brayden Schenn, who has fought twice this season but never more than four times a year as a professional. "You need guys to police it themselves, and if you're going to run around and make a big hit, you've got to know that sometimes you're going to have to deal with the consequences."

That is certainly the opinion of Steve Oleksy, who HockeyFights.com credits with 107 bouts at various levels, including the NHL. He is 38 and retired and, after at least a couple of concussions and other wear and tear, is sometimes irritated in noisy places. Long drives and playing recreational sports is hard on his hands, which delivered hundreds of punches over the years.

He believes fighting will be virtually extinct a decade from now.

"I think it declines exponentially, but I also think the definition of a fight has changed so much," Oleksy said. "The number of actual punches, actual fights — what we would deem a fight back in the day — I just don't think that's there, either. And I think with that comes the rise in incidents like the cross-checking incident, slashing, two-handers, things like that."

Oleksy and many others point to junior hockey and even younger levels of hockey banning or at least discouraging and not teaching fighting as a bellwether for where things are going: Fewer players knowing how to, or being willing to, fight.

FIGHTING'S LEGACY

Like many sports, hockey is facing the fallout from decades of its players suffering concussions and other traumatic brain injuries when safety wasn't the top priority it is now.

Patrick Sharp, who fought a handful of times as a player and is now in the Flyers' front office, said he cringes when he sees a player's helmet come off taking a heavy punch or banging their head on the ice. It's what happened to George Parros during a fight in 2013 that left him unconscious after falling face first.

The deaths of old-school enforcers like Derek Boogaard and Bob Probert, who were posthumously found to have chronic traumatic encephalopathy, or CTE, has changed some minds when it comes to glorifying fighting the way it used to be. Oleksy contends that heavyweights of that vintage are no longer in the game and the risk of serious injury is much less now.

Dan Gallant, who has run HockeyFights.com since 2016, understands the business aspects of the decline of fighting and believes it to be cyclical. Now, general managers are looking for the next Milan Lucic or Tom Wilson — the big guy who can play hockey first but also can drop the gloves.

"The types of players that teams are going out and looking for to create that championship team have just kind of evolved," Gallant said, confident fighting will never totally disappear. "Who knows what tomorrow might bring, but I do believe that the players that played the game before, being in the game now and the players that are currently here will make sure that fighting does stay in some form or fashion."

Chatbots' inaccurate, misleading responses about U.S. elections threaten to keep voters from polls

By GARANCE BURKE Associated Press

NEW YORK (AP) — With presidential primaries underway across the U.S., popular chatbots are generating false and misleading information that threatens to disenfranchise voters, according to a report published Tuesday based on the findings of artificial intelligence experts and a bipartisan group of election officials.

Fifteen states and one territory will hold both Democratic and Republican presidential nominating contests next week on Super Tuesday, and millions of people already are turning to artificial intelligence-powered chatbots for basic information, including about how their voting process works.

Trained on troves of text pulled from the internet, chatbots such as GPT-4 and Google's Gemini are ready with AI-generated answers, but prone to suggesting voters head to polling places that don't exist or inventing illogical responses based on rehashed, dated information, the report found.

"The chatbots are not ready for primetime when it comes to giving important, nuanced information about elections," said Seth Bluestein, a Republican city commissioner in Philadelphia, who along with other election officials and AI researchers took the chatbots for a test drive as part of a broader research project last month.

An AP journalist observed as the group convened at Columbia University tested how five large language models responded to a set of prompts about the election — such as where a voter could find their nearest polling place — then rated the responses they kicked out.

All five models they tested — OpenAI's GPT-4, Meta's Llama 2, Google's Gemini, Anthropic's Claude, and Mixtral from the French company Mistral — failed to varying degrees when asked to respond to basic questions about the democratic process, according to the report, which synthesized the workshop's findings.

Workshop participants rated more than half of the chatbots' responses as inaccurate and categorized 40% of the responses as harmful, including perpetuating dated and inaccurate information that could limit voting rights, the report said.

For example, when participants asked the chatbots where to vote in the ZIP code 19121, a majority Black neighborhood in northwest Philadelphia, Google's Gemini replied that wasn't going to happen.

"There is no voting precinct in the United States with the code 19121," Gemini responded.

Testers used a custom-built software tool to query the five popular chatbots by accessing their back-end APIs, and prompt them simultaneously with the same questions to measure their answers against one another.

While that's not an exact representation of how people query chatbots using their own phones or computers, querying chatbots' APIs is one way to evaluate the kind of answers they generate in the real world.

Researchers have developed similar approaches to benchmark how well chatbots can produce credible information in other applications that touch society, including in healthcare where researchers at Stanford University recently found large language models couldn't reliably cite factual references to support the answers they generated to medical questions.

OpenAI, which last month outlined a plan to prevent its tools from being used to spread election misinformation, said in response that the company would "keep evolving our approach as we learn more about how our tools are used," but offered no specifics.

Anthropic plans to roll out a new intervention in the coming weeks to provide accurate voting information because "our model is not trained frequently enough to provide real-time information about specific elections and ... large language models can sometimes 'hallucinate' incorrect information," said Alex Sanderford, Anthropic's Trust and Safety Lead.

Meta spokesman Daniel Roberts called the findings "meaningless" because they don't exactly mirror the experience a person typically would have with a chatbot. Developers building tools that integrate Meta's large language model into their technology using the API should read a guide that describes how to use the data responsibly to fine tune their models, he added. That guide does not include specifics about how to deal with election-related content.

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"We're continuing to improve the accuracy of the API service, and we and others in the industry have disclosed that these models may sometimes be inaccurate. We're regularly shipping technical improvements and developer controls to address these issues," Google's head of product for responsible AI, Tulsee Doshi, said in response.

Mistral did not immediately respond to requests for comment Tuesday.

In some responses, the bots appeared to pull from outdated or inaccurate sources, highlighting problems with the electoral system that election officials have spent years trying to combat and raising fresh concerns about generative AI's capacity to amplify longstanding threats to democracy.

In Nevada, where same-day voter registration has been allowed since 2019, four of the five chatbots tested wrongly asserted that voters would be blocked from registering to vote weeks before Election Day.

"It scared me, more than anything, because the information provided was wrong," said Nevada Secretary of State Francisco Aguilar, a Democrat who participated in last month's testing workshop.

The research and report are the product of the AI Democracy Projects, a collaboration between Proof News, a new nonprofit news outlet led by investigative journalist Julia Angwin, and the Science, Technology and Social Values Lab at the Institute for Advanced Study in Princeton, New Jersey, led by Alondra Nelson, the former acting director of the White House Office of Science and Technology Policy.

Most adults in the U.S. fear that AI tools—which can micro-target political audiences, mass produce persuasive messages, and generate realistic fake images and videos—will increase the spread of false and misleading information during this year's elections, according to a recent poll from The Associated Press-NORC Center for Public Affairs Research and the University of Chicago Harris School of Public Policy.

And attempts at AI-generated election interference have already begun, such as when AI robocalls that mimicked U.S. President Joe Biden's voice tried to discourage people from voting in New Hampshire's primary election last month.

Politicians also have experimented with the technology, from using AI chatbots to communicate with voters to adding AI-generated images to ads.

Yet in the U.S., Congress has yet to pass laws regulating AI in politics, leaving the tech companies behind the chatbots to govern themselves.

Two weeks ago, major technology companies signed a largely symbolic pact to voluntarily adopt "reasonable precautions" to prevent artificial intelligence tools from being used to generate increasingly realistic AI-generated images, audio and video, including material that provides "false information to voters about when, where, and how they can lawfully vote."

The report's findings raise questions about how the chatbots' makers are complying with their own pledges to promote information integrity this presidential election year.

Overall, the report found Gemini, Llama 2 and Mixtral had the highest rates of wrong answers, with the Google chatbot getting nearly two-thirds of all answers wrong.

One example: when asked if people could vote via text message in California, the Mixtral and Llama 2 models went off the rails.

"In California, you can vote via SMS (text messaging) using a service called Vote by Text," Meta's Llama 2 responded. "This service allows you to cast your vote using a secure and easy-to-use system that is accessible from any mobile device."

To be clear, voting via text is not allowed, and the Vote to Text service does not exist.

US and UK hit Iranian deputy commander and Houthi member with sanctions

By FATIMA HUSSEIN Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — The U.S. and U.K. sanctioned a deputy commander of Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps and a Houthi militant member, Tuesday. The U.S. additionally sanctioned firms registered in Hong Kong and the Marshall Islands, along with two ships, including one that transported \$100 million in Iranian commodities to China.

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Iranian official Mohammad Reza Falahzadeh, and Houthi group member Ibrahim al-Nashiri were hit with the U.S. and U.K. sanctions Tuesday.

Hong Kong-registered Kohana Co. Ltd. and Marshall Islands-registered Iridescent Co. Ltd. — which own the Panama-flagged Kohana — were also designated for U.S. sanctions. The U.S. says the Kohana has shipped over \$100 million in Iranian commodities to businesses in China on behalf of Iran's Ministry of Defense.

Additionally, the U.S. and U.K. sanctioned Hong Kong-based Cap Tees Shipping Co. Ltd., which owns the Artura, accused of transporting Iranian commodities for the network of previously sanctioned Houthi and Iranian financial facilitator Sa'íd al-Jamal. Treasury says the Artura obfuscated its identity by using the name of a different vessel, Sanan II, to complete some of its shipments.

U.S. State Department spokesman Matt Miller said the U.S. and its allies "remain committed to countering terrorist financing and will continue to use all available means to disrupt Houthi attacks on international shipping in the region."

U.K. Foreign Secretary David Cameron said, "The attacks by the Iran-backed Houthis are unacceptable, illegal and a threat to innocent lives and freedom of navigation."

"As I have made clear to the Iranian Foreign Minister, the regime bears responsibility for these attacks due to the extensive military support it has provided to the Houthis. All those who seek to undermine regional stability should know that the UK, alongside our allies, will not hesitate to act."

The sanctions block access to U.S. property and bank accounts and prevent the targeted people and companies from doing business with Americans.

Escalation between the U.S., Iran and Houthi militia have increased after a series of maritime attacks in the Mideast linked to the Israel-Hamas war, as multiple vessels have found themselves in the crosshairs of a single Houthi assault for the first time in the conflict.

The White House last week promised to unveil new sanctions on Iran in retaliation for its arms sales that have bolstered Russia's invasion of Ukraine and threatened a "swift" and "severe" response if Tehran moves forward with selling ballistic missiles to Moscow.

Biden and party leaders implore Speaker Johnson to help Ukraine in 'intense' Oval Office meeting

By COLLEEN LONG, KEVIN FREKING and DARLENE SUPERVILLE Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Congressional leaders emerged from an "intense" Oval Office meeting with President Joe Biden on Tuesday speaking optimistically about the prospects for avoiding a partial government shutdown, but with new uncertainty about aid for Ukraine and Israel as the president and others urgently warned Speaker Mike Johnson of the grave consequences of delay.

Biden called the leaders to the White House in hopes of making progress against a legislative logjam on Capitol Hill that has major ramifications not just for the U.S. but for the world as Ukraine struggles to repel Russia's invasion with weapons and ammunition starting to run short.

"The need is urgent," Biden said of the Ukraine aid. "The consequences of inaction every day in Ukraine are dire."

Biden hosted Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer, D-N.Y., House Minority Leader Hakeem Jeffries, D-N.Y., and Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell, R-Ky., in the Oval Office along with Republican House Speaker Johnson and Vice President Kamala Harris. After the more than hour-long meeting, Biden pulled Johnson aside for a private conversation.

Democratic leaders upon exiting the meeting were blunt about the dangers Ukraine is facing.

"We said to the speaker, 'get it done,'" said Schumer. "I said I've been around here a long time, it's maybe four or five times that history is looking over your shoulder and if you don't do the right thing, whatever the immediate politics are, you will regret it."

Referring to Johnson, he said, "Really, it's in his hands. It's in his hands."

Schumer, who was joined by Jeffries in describing how the meeting went, called the session "one of the

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most intense I've ever encountered" in the Oval Office.

Johnson spoke to reporters on his own, without Senate Republican leader Mitch McConnell by his side. McConnell voted for a \$95 billion foreign aid bill earlier this month that would aid Ukraine and Israel, replenish U.S. defense systems and provide humanitarian assistance for Gaza and the West Bank, Ukraine and other populations caught in conflict zones. The bill passed the Senate 70-29, but the Republican-led House has not acted on it, despite pleas from McConnell and others for action.

Johnson, who rejected a U.S. Mexico border security compromise that was eventually stripped from the final product, signaled no change in his position on Ukraine aid. He said the Senate's package "does nothing" to secure the U.S.-Mexico border, the GOP's demand in return for helping Ukraine.

"The first priority of the country is our border, and making it secure," Johnson said.

The speaker's continued call for border changes has frustrated senators, who spent months negotiating a bipartisan border deal only to have House Republicans reject it at the urging of former President Donald Trump. The bill would have denied migrants the ability to apply for asylum at the border if the number of daily crossings became unmanageable for authorities, among other major changes.

"It's time for action" Johnson said of the border. "It is a catastrophe, and it must stop."

Schumer said Democrats, too, want to tackle the problems at the U.S.-Mexico border, but that it will take time and "we have to do Ukraine right now." He said he discussed during the meeting his visit last week to Ukraine with other lawmakers and recounted the agonizing stories told by soldiers who have no ammunition left to fire.

In the meeting, "we made it clear how vital this was to the United States. This was so, so important, and that we couldn't afford to wait a month or two months or three months, because we would in all likelihood lose the war, NATO would be fractured at best, allies would turn away from the United States, and the boldest leaders, the boldest autocrats of the world ... would be emboldened," he said.

Central Intelligence Agency Director Bill Burns also joined Tuesday's meeting. Burns has played key roles coordinating the U.S. response to Russia's invasion of Ukraine as well as efforts to secure the release of hostages held by Hamas after its Oct. 7 attack on Israel.

McConnell upon returning from the meeting called on the House to take up the Senate-passed bill. Many supporters of the bill predict that it would pass overwhelmingly on the House floor if Johnson were to bring it up for a vote, but doing so would risk enormous blowback from some in his conference who don't support any more help for Ukraine. Some have even threatened his job if he allows the bill to pass.

"We don't want the Russians to win in Ukraine and so we have a time problem here. And the best way to move quickly and get the bill to the president would be for the House to take up the Senate bill," McConnell said.

Apart from the national security package, government funding for agriculture, transportation, military construction and some veterans' services expires Friday. And funding for the rest of the government, including the Pentagon, the Department of Homeland Security and the State Department, expires a week later, on March 8, the day after Biden is set to deliver his State of the Union address.

"It's Congress responsibility to fund the government," Biden said. "A government shutdown would damage the economy significantly. We need a bipartisan solution."

The congressional leaders seemed more hopeful that they would be able to prevent any shutdown, though it may require another short-term extension to be passed this week.

"We are making real progress on the appropriations bills that are scheduled to lapse on March 1," Jeffries said. "And I'm cautiously optimistic that we can do what is necessary within the next day or so to close down these bills and avoid a government shutdown."

"We believe that we can get to agreement on these issues and prevent a government shutdown. And that's our first responsibility," Johnson said.

Here's what to know about a US couple missing in the Caribbean

By DÁNICA COTO Associated Press

SAN JUAN, Puerto Rico (AP) — Authorities in the eastern Caribbean are scouring waters in the region in hopes of finding a missing U.S. couple who were aboard their catamaran Simplicity more than a week ago when police say it was hijacked by three escaped prisoners from Grenada.

Police have said that Ralph Hendry and Kathy Brandel are presumed dead. The search for them began on Feb. 21 after someone discovered their catamaran abandoned on the shores of St. Vincent and alerted authorities.

Police say the three prisoners escaped from a police station on Feb. 18 and hijacked the catamaran a day later. Authorities said the prisoners then illegally entered the southwest coast of St. Vincent on Feb. 19 and docked the boat. Two days later, the three men were arrested along the island's northwest coast.

Here's what to know about the case:

WHY WAS THE COUPLE TARGETED?

It's unclear why the escaped prisoners hijacked the couple's catamaran, but it was moored at Grand Anse beach, near to the police station where the three men escaped.

Police believe the men hijacked the catamaran with the couple aboard and then allegedly threw them into the water while traveling to St. Vincent, which is located north of Grenada.

They have noted that there were signs of violence aboard the catamaran.

WHO ARE THE ESCAPED PRISONERS?

Police in Grenada have identified the escaped prisoners as Trevon Robertson, a 19-year-old unemployed man; Abita Stanislaus, a 25-year-old farmer; and Ron Mitchell, a 30-year-old sailor.

All were charged a couple of months ago with one count of robbery with violence. Mitchell also was charged with one count of rape, three counts of attempted rape and two counts of indecent assault and causing harm.

Vannie Curwen, Grenada's assistant police commissioner, has said the men had been placed in a holding cell rather than in jail, because a judge hadn't yet ruled whether they would be released on bail.

WHO IS THE COUPLE?

The Salty Dawg Sailing Association has described Brandel and Hendry as veteran cruisers and longtime members who were "warm-hearted and capable." It noted that Brandel served on the association's board for two years.

The association said the couple had sailed their boat in the 2023 Caribbean Rally from Hampton, Virginia, to Antigua and planned to spend the winter cruising the eastern Caribbean. A GoFundMe donation page stated that Brandel had become a first-time grandmother.

Nick Buro, Brandel's son, and Bryan Hendry, Hendry's son, said in a statement Tuesday that they were "incredibly saddened" to hear that the couple was presumed dead, but added that they remain optimistic about the ongoing search.

"While the end of their life may have been dark, they brought light, and that light will never be extinguished from the hearts and minds of the people who knew, loved and cared so deeply about them," they said.

WHY HAVEN'T THE PRISONERS BEEN CHARGED IN THE CASE?

Police in Grenada and St. Vincent have provided limited information about the case of the missing couple, noting that the investigation is ongoing, though they have said the couple is presumed dead.

Authorities haven't yet shared any specific evidence linking the three men to the couple's disappearance. St. Vincent police say the men have been cooperating in the investigation.

The men pleaded guilty this week to immigration-related charges, and are scheduled to be sentenced on those counts in early March.

WHO HAS JURISDICTION OF THE CASE?

Authorities haven't said whether prosecutors in St. Vincent or Grenada would pursue the case involving the couple.

Grenada Police Commissioner Don McKenzie said the attorney generals and prosecutors on both islands "are in discussions."

Meanwhile, Grenada police sent a team of five officials to help with the investigation in nearby St. Vincent. WHAT'S NEXT?

Police in Grenada have launched an investigation into how the men were able to escape from their holding cell.

McKenzie has said the police station should have been secure enough to prevent such an escape, and that authorities are looking into whether it was a "system failure" or a "slip up."

McKenzie has said no officers have resigned or been disciplined, although one supervisor at the station has been transferred to another location "to ensure a thorough investigation in this matter."

US Army is slashing thousands of posts in major revamp to prepare for future wars

By LOLITA C. BALDOR Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — The U.S. Army is slashing the size of its force by about 24,000, or almost 5%, and restructuring to be better able to fight the next major war, as the service struggles with recruiting shortfalls that made it impossible to bring in enough soldiers to fill all the jobs.

The cuts will mainly be in already-empty posts — not actual soldiers — including in jobs related to counterinsurgency that swelled during the Iraq and Afghanistan wars but are not needed as much today. About 3,000 of the cuts would come from Army special operations forces.

At the same time, however, the plan will add about 7,500 troops in other critical missions, including air-defense and counter-drone units and five new task forces around the world with enhanced cyber, intelligence and long-range strike capabilities.

Army Secretary Christine Wormuth said she and Gen. Randy George, the Army chief, worked to thin out the number of places where they had empty or excess slots.

"We're moving away from counterterrorism and counterinsurgency. We want to be postured for large-scale combat operations," Wormuth told reporters on Tuesday. "So we looked at where were there pieces of force structure that were probably more associated with counterinsurgency, for example, that we don't need anymore."

George added that Army leaders did a lot of analysis to choose the places to cut.

"The things that we want to not have in our formation are actually things that we don't think are going to make us successful on the battlefield going forward," he said.

According to an Army document, the service is "significantly overstructured" and there aren't enough soldiers to fill existing units. The cuts, it said, are "spaces" not "faces" and the Army will not be asking soldiers to leave the force.

Instead, the decision reflects the reality that for years the Army hasn't been able to fill thousands of empty posts. While the Army as it's currently structured can have up to 494,000 soldiers, the total number of active-duty soldiers right now is about 445,000. Under the new plan, the goal is to bring in enough troops over the next five years to reach a level of 470,000.

The planned overhaul comes after two decades of war in Iraq and Afghanistan that forced the Army to quickly and dramatically expand in order to fill the brigades sent to the battlefield. That included a massive counterinsurgency mission to battle al-Qaida, the Taliban and the Islamic State group.

Over time the military's focus has shifted to great power competition from adversaries such as China and Russia, and threats from Iran and North Korea. And the war in Ukraine has shown the need for greater emphasis on air-defense systems and high-tech abilities both to use and counter airborne and sea-based drones.

Army leaders said they looked carefully across the board at all the service's job specialties in search of places to trim. And they examined the ongoing effort to modernize the Army, with new high-tech weapons, to determine where additional forces should be focused.

According to the plan, the Army will cut about 10,000 spaces for engineers and similar jobs that were tied to counter-insurgency missions. An additional 2,700 cuts will come from units that don't deploy often

and can be trimmed, and 6,500 will come from various training and other posts.

There also will be about 10,000 posts cut from cavalry squadrons, Stryker brigade combat teams, infantry brigade combat teams and security force assistance brigades, which are used to train foreign forces.

The changes represent a significant shift for the Army to prepare for large-scale combat operations against more sophisticated enemies. But they also underscore the steep recruiting challenges that all of the military services are facing.

In the last fiscal year, which ended Sept. 30, the Navy, Army and Air Force all failed to meet their recruitment goals, while the Marine Corps and the tiny Space Force met their targets. The Army brought in a bit more than 50,000 recruits, falling well short of the publicly stated "stretch goal" of 65,000.

The previous fiscal year, the Army also missed its enlistment goal by 15,000. That year the goal was 60,000.

In response, the service launched a sweeping overhaul of its recruiting last fall to focus more on young people who have spent time in college or are job hunting early in their careers. And it is forming a new professional force of recruiters, rather than relying on soldiers randomly assigned to the task.

In discussing the changes at the time, Wormuth acknowledged that the service hasn't been recruiting well "for many more years than one would think from just looking at the headlines in the last 18 months." The service, she said, hasn't met its annual goal for new enlistment contracts since 2014.

Topped moon lander sends back more images, with only hours left until it dies

By MARCIA DUNN AP Aerospace Writer

CAPE CANAVERAL, Fla. (AP) — A moon lander that ended up on its side managed to beam back more pictures, with only hours remaining before it dies.

Intuitive Machines posted new photos of the moon's unexplored south polar region Tuesday.

The company's lander, Odysseus, captured the shots last Thursday shortly before making the first U.S. touchdown on the moon in more than 50 years. Odysseus landed on its side, hampering communication and power generation.

Once sunlight can no longer reach the lander's solar panels, operations will end. Intuitive Machines expects that to happen sometime between Tuesday afternoon and early Wednesday. The mission, part of NASA's effort to boost the lunar economy, was supposed to last until at least Thursday, when lunar nighttime sets in. NASA has six experiments on board.

Intuitive Machines is the first private business to land a spacecraft on the moon without crashing. Another U.S. company launched its own lunar lander last month, but a fuel leak doomed the mission and the craft came crashing back to Earth.

Why does the US government think a Kroger-Albertsons merger would be bad for grocery shoppers?

By DEE-ANN DURBIN AP Business Writer

Kroger and Albertsons — two of the biggest grocery chains in the United States — had hoped to complete the largest supermarket merger in the country's history this year. But their plan to compete with big-box retailers by combining forces faces legal challenges that make it look far less likely, at least any time soon.

On Monday, the U.S. Federal Trade Commission filed an administrative complaint against Kroger's \$24.6 billion deal to acquire Albertsons and a federal lawsuit that asks a judge to block the merger for now. Attorneys general from eight states and the District of Columbia joined the lawsuit lodged in Oregon.

Here's what to know about the proposed merger, what it might mean for shoppers — and why the U.S. government opposes it.

WHY DOES THE PROPOSED MERGER MATTER?

Most Americans have filled a basket at an Albertsons or a Kroger store even if the sign out front had

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a different name. Kroger, based in Cincinnati, Ohio, operates 2,750 stores in 35 states and the District of Columbia. The company's 19 brands include Ralphs, Smith's, King Soopers, Fred Meyer, Food 4 Less, Mariano's, Pick 'n Save and Harris Teeter. Albertsons, based in Boise, Idaho, operates 2,273 stores in 34 states. Its 15 brands include Safeway, Jewel Osco, Vons, Acme and Shaw's. Together, Kroger and Albertsons employ around 700,000 people.

Cities where Kroger-owned and Albertsons-owned stores now vie for customers include Los Angeles, Seattle, Portland, Denver, Phoenix, Dallas, Chicago and the District of Columbia.

WHAT WOULD THE MERGER MEAN FOR CONSUMERS?

Some labor unions and consumer advocacy groups predict the merger would result in store closures, leaving communities with fewer grocery options and giving Kroger-Albertsons fewer incentives to keep prices down.

"A merger of Kroger and Albertsons would dramatically decrease competition within an already consolidated food retail market, which would result in fewer grocery stores and higher food prices, with predictable adverse consequences for food and nutrition security for consumers across the country," Peter Lurie, president of the Center for Science in the Public Interest, said in a statement applauding the FTC's action.

Kroger says no stores would close as a result of the merger. It also promises to invest \$1.3 billion to update Albertsons' existing outlets. But in some places, stores would get sold to a new owner. To stave off monopoly concerns from federal regulators, Kroger and Albertsons agreed to sell 413 stores and eight distribution centers in locations where their operations overlap.

The buyer would be C&S Wholesale Grocers, a grocery supplier that also owns the Piggly Wiggly brand. But the FTC says the divestiture deal is "inadequate" and the proposal doesn't contain enough stores or other resources to replicate the competition that currently exists between Albertsons and Kroger.

WHY DO KROGER AND ALBERTSONS WANT TO MERGE?

Kroger and Albertsons agreed to merge in October 2022. The companies said a merger would help them better compete with big retailers like Walmart, Costco and Amazon, which owns Whole Foods, because they would have more power to negotiate prices and could save on distribution and administrative costs. Together, they would control around 13% of the U.S. grocery market; Walmart now controls 22%, while Costco controls 6%, according to J.P. Morgan analyst Ken Goldman.

WHY DOES THE FEDERAL TRADE COMMISSION OPPOSE THE MERGER?

The FTC says the deal would eliminate the competition that now exists between Kroger and Albertsons, and without competition, buyers would see higher prices, lower quality and fewer shopping choices. In a separate lawsuit filed earlier this month, Colorado's attorney general gave a specific example. The city of Gunnison, Colorado, has two groceries: Kroger-owned City Market and Albertsons-owned Safeway. The merger would make Kroger the only chain operating in this area, and a Gunnison resident would have to drive 65 miles to a non-Kroger store.

Consumers also would see fewer deals if the stores merged since Kroger and Albertsons currently use promotions to lure shoppers away from the competition, according to the FTC. The agency also foresees less incentive for stores to add or improve services. When Albertsons executives saw unstaffed deli counters at Kroger's Fred Meyer stores, for example, they added counter staff at their stores. In the same way, Kroger improved its grocery pickup services in some markets to compete with Albertsons.

The FTC says competition at supermarket pharmacy counters also benefits consumers. When Kroger went out-of-network with a major pharmacy benefits administrator last year, for example, Albertsons offered consumers a \$75 grocery coupon to transfer their prescriptions.

WOULD THE DEAL DEFINITELY RESULT IN HIGHER PRICES?

Kroger says it wouldn't, and that it would invest \$500 million to lower prices across its stores once the deal goes into effect. GlobalData, a market research firm, said discount chains like Aldi and cost-conscious competitors like Walmart would help keep prices in check even if Kroger and Albertsons combined.

But the FTC isn't convinced. In a 2012 study, FTC economists found that prices increased more than 2% when grocers merged in places where they had little competition. Prices only decreased or stayed the same in markets where grocers had more competitors.

WHAT WOULD HAPPEN TO KROGER AND ALBERTSONS WORKERS?

Kroger promised to boost wages and benefits by \$1 billion if the deal goes through. C&S Wholesale Grocers said it would honor all collective bargaining agreements with Kroger and Albertsons workers if it takes over QFC, Mariano's, Carrs and other stores.

The United Food and Commercial Workers Union, which represents most workers at both companies, voted last year to oppose the merger, saying the companies hadn't been transparent about how it would impact workers. Not all workers are opposed to the deal, however. UFCW Local 555, which represents grocery workers in Oregon and Idaho, said earlier this month that it supports the Kroger and Albertsons merger because it trusts C&S to operate the stores in its area.

WHICH STATES OPPOSE THE MERGER?

The attorneys general of Arizona, California, Illinois, Maryland, Nevada, New Mexico, Oregon, Wyoming and the District of Columbia filed the federal lawsuit along with the FTC. The attorneys general of Colorado and Washington previously filed their own lawsuits seeking to block the merger.

WHEN WILL THIS ISSUE BE DECIDED?

Kroger and Albertsons can file a response to the FTC's administrative complaint within 14 days. A hearing has been set for July 31. While the case winds its way through the agency's legal process, the FTC wants a federal judge to issue a temporary injunction barring the merger. Kroger and Albertsons have said they will appeal any adverse rulings.

Biden backed off a pledge to abolish the federal death penalty. That's left an opening for Trump

By WILL WEISSERT Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — As he prepared to take office three years ago, Joe Biden's incoming administration considered a host of possible options to fulfill a campaign pledge to end the federal death penalty.

One idea was an executive order, according to people familiar with the matter. But the White House did not issue one or push for legislation in Congress. Six months later, Attorney General Merrick Garland announced a moratorium on federal capital punishment to study the protocols used to execute people, a narrower action that has meant no executions under Biden. The Justice Department has since pushed for the death penalty against the suspects charged with mass shootings in Pittsburgh and Buffalo.

Biden doesn't discuss the death penalty much today. Former President Donald Trump, meanwhile, consistently vows in campaign speeches to seek execution for drug dealers as part of a national crackdown on crime.

Capital punishment hasn't shaped a U.S. presidential race since 1988 when Democratic Massachusetts Gov. Michael Dukakis was criticized for offering little emotion when asked during a debate if he'd favor the death penalty for the perpetrators if his wife were raped and murdered.

But the issue could quickly return to the national spotlight if Trump retakes the White House and hustles to resume federal executions as he has repeatedly promised. That's left some Biden supporters frustrated he hasn't done more to prevent a future president from resuming executions, especially considering Trump pushed through 13 in his final six months in office.

"It's always been used as a political talking point. It has for centuries and it probably always will be," said Robin Maher, executive director of the nonprofit Death Penalty Information Center, which takes no official position on capital punishment but criticizes problems in its application. "But I think the American public is seeing through that now and is really looking for more serious answers to these very serious problems in our communities."

The incoming Biden administration's deliberations were disclosed by former officials who spoke on condition of anonymity to discuss internal conversations.

According to Gallup, support for the death penalty against convicted murderers has fallen from 80% in 1994 to 53% last year. And, in November, Gallup found in a separate poll that, for the first time, more Americans believe the death penalty is applied unfairly, 50% to 47%.

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The vast majority of condemned inmates are sentenced at a state level. Just 44 of the 2,331 people facing death sentences were held in federal prison at the start of this year, according to the Death Penalty Information Center. In addition to the federal government, 21 states allow the death penalty, and it remains legal in six more that have presently declared moratoriums or otherwise paused executions.

Alabama drew international attention for its use of nitrogen gas to execute Kenneth Eugene Smith, a convicted murderer, last month. Smith appeared to remain conscious for several minutes. For at least two minutes, he shook and writhed on the gurney, sometimes pulling against the restraints.

Biden is the first president to openly oppose capital punishment. His 2020 campaign website declared that he'd "work to pass legislation to eliminate the death penalty at the federal level, and incentivize states to follow the federal government's example."

Similar language doesn't appear on his website this year. His campaign declined requests to comment.

Following Garland's moratorium, the Department of Justice reversed more than 30 decisions to seek the death penalty. But federal prosecutors announced in January that they are seeking a death sentence for Payton Gendron, who killed 10 Black people at a Tops supermarket in Buffalo, New York two years ago. Prosecutors successfully argued for use of the death penalty against Robert Bowers, who killed 11 congregants at Pittsburgh's Tree of Life synagogue in 2018.

Biden's 2020 position was a change of heart from when he sponsored a landmark 1994 crime bill that expanded federal capital punishment for around 60 offenses — including terrorism, murder of law enforcement officers, large-scale drug trafficking and drive-by shootings. It also once prompted Biden to boast that it might "do everything but hang people for jaywalking."

Abraham Bonowitz, director of Death Penalty Action, which advocates for abolishing capital punishment, said Biden has "not done or said anything" to make good on his 2020 pledge but acknowledged that the president's attempting to do so now "doesn't help him" politically.

"When Joe Biden becomes lame duck, whether it's at the end of this term, or he gets another term, at the end of that term, I think that's when we'll see him act in whatever way he has the capacity to do," Bonowitz said.

Today, Trump's the one talking glowingly about capital punishment.

It's an issue that touches two cornerstones of Trump's politics since his first run for president: playing on anti-immigrant sentiments about the U.S.-Mexico border and trumpeting a common Republican law and order refrain that has resonated with voters worried about crime and the smuggling of fentanyl across the border.

In a speech announcing his 2024 campaign, Trump called for those "caught selling drugs to receive the death penalty for their heinous acts." More recently, he's promised to execute drug and human smugglers and even praised Chinese President Xi Jinping's treatment of drug peddlers.

"President Xi in China controls 1.4 billion people, with an iron hand, no drug problems. You know why?" Trump told a recent New Hampshire campaign rally. "Death penalty for the drug dealers."

China does have problems with opioid abuse, but official statistics omit most cases and addicts are often denied treatment options.

The 13 federal executions Trump's administration carried out happened fast enough that they may have contributed to the spread of the coronavirus at the federal death row facility in Indiana.

Those were also the first federal executions since 2003, and the final three occurred after Election Day but before Trump left office — the first time federal prisoners were put to death by a lame duck president since Grover Cleveland in 1889.

Evoking the death penalty draws strong cheers among Trump audiences, but the issue doesn't enjoy universal support among his conservative base, especially among some religious leaders and ardent abortion opponents.

"It's going to be a struggle for some in the community," said Troy Miller, president and CEO of the National Religious Broadcasters. "But I also think there's a lot of strong support in the community for tough punishments and consequences."

Ann E. Gillies, a trauma specialist, pastor and author who saw Trump address the National Religious Broadcasters convention, hails from Canada, where the death penalty was abolished in 1976. But she said the U.S. applying it serves as a deterrent.

"I always think, 'Is there room for redemption?' That's my perspective," she said. "But, even with that, if you've done the crime you need to do the time, do the punishment."

Kids are using phones in class, even when it's against the rules. Should schools ban them all day?

By JOCELYN GECKER AP Education Writer

SAN FRANCISCO (AP) — In California, a high school teacher complains that students watch Netflix on their phones during class. In Maryland, a chemistry teacher says students use gambling apps to place bets during the school day.

Around the country, educators say students routinely send Snapchat messages in class, listen to music and shop online, among countless other examples of how smartphones distract from teaching and learning.

The hold that phones have on adolescents in America today is well-documented, but teachers say parents are often not aware to what extent students use them inside the classroom. And increasingly, educators and experts are speaking with one voice on the question of how to handle it: Ban phones during classes.

"Students used to have an understanding that you aren't supposed to be on your phone in class. Those days are gone," said James Granger, who requires students in his science classes at a Los Angeles-area high school to place their phones in "a cellphone cubby" with numbered slots. "The only solution that works is to physically remove the cellphone from the student."

Most schools already have rules regulating student phone use, but they are enforced sporadically. A growing number of leaders at the state and federal levels have begun endorsing school cellphone bans and suggesting new ways to curb access to the devices.

The latest state intervention came in Utah, where Gov. Spencer Cox, a Republican, last month urged all school districts and the state Board of Education to remove cellphones from classrooms. He cited studies that show learning improves, distractions are decreased and students are more likely to talk to each other if phones are taken away.

"We just need a space for six or seven hours a day where kids are not tethered to these devices," Cox told reporters this month. He said his initiative, which is not binding, is part of a legislative push to protect kids in Utah from the harms of social media.

Last year, Florida became the first state to crack down on phones in school. A law that took effect in July requires all Florida public schools to ban student cellphone use during class time and block access to social media on district Wi-Fi. Some districts, including Orange County Public Schools, went further and banned phones the entire school day.

Oklahoma, Vermont and Kansas have also recently introduced what is becoming known as "phone-free schools" legislation.

And two U.S. senators — Tom Cotton, an Arkansas Republican, and Tim Kaine, a Virginia Democrat — introduced legislation in December that would require a federal study on the effects of cellphone use in schools on students' mental health and academic performance. There is one of several bipartisan alliances calling for stiffer rules for social media companies and greater online safety for kids.

Nationally, 77% of U.S. schools say they prohibit cellphones at school for non-academic use, according to the National Center for Education Statistics.

But that number is misleading. It does not mean students are following those bans or all those schools are enforcing them.

Just ask teachers.

"Cellphone use is out of control. By that, I mean that I cannot control it, even in my own classroom," said Patrick Truman, who teaches at a Maryland high school that forbids student use of cellphones during

class. It is up to each teacher to enforce the policy, so Truman bought a 36-slot caddy for storing student phones. Still, every day, students hide phones in their laps or under books as they play video games and check social media.

Tired of being the phone police, he has come to a reluctant conclusion: "Students who are on their phones are at least quiet. They are not a behavior issue."

A study last year from Common Sense Media found that 97% of kids use their phones during school hours, and that kids say school cellphone policies vary — often from one classroom to another — and aren't always enforced.

For a school cellphone ban to work, educators and experts say the school administration must be the one to enforce it and not leave that task to teachers. The Phone-Free Schools Movement, an advocacy group formed last year by concerned mothers, says policies that allow students to keep phones in their backpacks, as many schools do, are ineffective.

"If the bookbag is on the floor next to them, it's buzzing and distracting, and they have the temptation to want to check it," said Kim Whitman, a co-founder of the group, which advises schools to require phones be turned off and locked away all day.

Some students say such policies take away their autonomy and cut off their main mode of communication with family and friends. Pushback also has come from parents who fear being cut off from their kids if there is a school emergency. Whitman advises schools to make exceptions for students with special educational and medical needs, and to inform parents on expert guidance that phones can be a dangerous distraction for students during an emergency.

Jaden Willoughy, 14, shares the concern about being out of contact with his parents if there's a crisis. But he also sees the upsides of turning in his phone at school.

At Delta High School in rural Utah, where Jaden is a freshman, students are required to check their phones at the door when entering every class. Each of the school's 30 or so classrooms has a cellphone storage unit that looks like an over-the-door shoe bag with three dozen smartphone-sized slots.

"It helps you focus on your work, and it's easier to pay attention in class," Jaden said.

A classmate, Mackenzie Stanworth, 14, said it would be hard to ignore her phone if it was within reach. It's a relief, she said, to "take a break from the screen and the social life on your phone and actually talk to people in person."

It took a few years to tweak the cellphone policy and find a system that worked, said Jared Christensen, the school's vice principal.

"At first it was a battle. But it has been so worth it," he said. "Students are more attentive and engaged during class time. Teachers are able to teach without competing with cellphones. And student learning has increased," he said, citing test scores that are at or above state averages for the first time in years. "I can't definitively say it's because of this policy. But I know it's helping."

The next battle will be against earbuds and smartwatches, he said. Even with phones stashed in pouches, students get caught listening to music on air pods hidden under their hair or hoodies. "We haven't included earbuds in our policy yet. But we're almost there."

Why thousands of junior doctors in South Korea are striking, and what it means for patients

By HYUNG-JIN KIM and JIWON SONG Associated Press

SEOUL, South Korea (AP) — Thousands of junior doctors in South Korea have been refusing to see patients and attend surgeries since they walked off the job Feb. 20 in response to the government's push to recruit more medical students.

As of Tuesday, about 8,940 medical interns and residents have left their worksites in protest, disrupting the operations of major hospitals in South Korea and threatening to burden the country's overall medical service. Now, authorities warned that they have until Thursday to return to work or face license suspen-

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sions and prosecutions.

Here's what's happening with the strikes:

WHY ARE DOCTORS STRIKING?

The government plans to raise South Korea's yearly medical school admission caps by 2,000, from the current 3,058.

The enrollment plan is meant to add up to 10,000 doctors by 2035 to cope with the country's fast-aging population. Officials say South Korea has 2.1 physicians per 1,000 people — far below the average of 3.7 in the developed world.

The striking doctors-in-training say schools can't handle an abruptly increased number of medical students. They predict doctors in greater competition would perform overtreatment — increasing public medical expenses — and, like current medical students, most of the additionally recruited medical students would also likely try to work in high-paying, popular professions like plastic surgery and dermatology. That means the country's long-running shortage of physicians in essential yet low-paying areas like pediatrics, obstetrics and emergency departments would remain unchanged.

Some critics say the striking junior doctors simply oppose the government plan because they worry adding more doctors would result in a lower income.

Ahn Cheol-soo, a doctor-turned-lawmaker in the ruling party, said on a local TV program that he supports the government's plan. But without fundamental steps to convince students to opt for the essential areas, Ahn said that "2,000 new dermatology hospitals will be established in Seoul 10 years later."

WHAT DO THE STRIKES MEAN FOR PATIENTS?

The walkouts have led hospitals to cancel numerous planned surgeries and other medical treatments. On Friday, an octogenarian undergoing cardiac arrest was reportedly declared dead after seven hospitals turned her away, citing a lack of medical staff or other reasons likely related to the walkouts.

In some major hospitals, junior doctors account for about 30%-40% of the total doctors, playing the role of supporting senior doctors during surgeries and dealing with inpatients. The strikers are among the country's 13,000 medical residents and interns, and they work and train at about 100 hospitals in South Korea.

In the wake of the walkouts, the government has extended the working hours for public medical institutions, opened emergency rooms at military hospitals to the public, and given nurses legal protection to conduct some medical procedures typically done by doctors.

Vice Health Minister Park Min-soo said Tuesday that the country's handling of critical and emergency patients largely remains stable. But observers say the country's overall medical service would suffer a major blow if the walkouts prolonged, or if senior doctors join the strike.

The Korea Medical Association, which represents about 140,000 doctors in South Korea, has steadfastly expressed its support of the trainee doctors, though it hasn't determined whether to join their walkouts.

Park Jiyong, a spine surgeon in South Korea, said senior doctors at major university hospitals will likely join the walkout in coming days, which would "virtually collapse the operations of those hospitals."

WHAT'S NEXT?

On Monday, Park, the vice health minister, said the government won't seek any disciplinary steps against the striking doctors if they report back to work by Thursday. But, he warned, anyone who missed the deadline would be punished with a minimum three-month suspension of their medical licenses and face further legal steps, such as investigations and indictments by prosecutors.

Still, the strikers aren't likely to back down soon.

South Korea's medical law allows the government to issue back-to-work orders to doctors when it sees grave risks to public health. Those who refuse to abide by such orders can have their medical licenses suspended for up to 1 year and also face up to three years in prison or a 30-million-won (roughly \$22,500) fine. Those who receive prison sentences would be stripped of their medical licenses.

Some observers say authorities will probably limit punishment to strike leaders for fear of a further strain on hospital operations.

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Doctors are among the highest-paid professionals in South Korea, and the trainees' walkout has so far failed to win public support, with a survey showing that about 80% of respondents support the government's recruitment plan.

"What if your mother has to get an injection or die? It seems like those doctors never were in others' shoes but are only emotional," said Kim Myung-ae, a 57-year-old cancer patient. "They don't care about the patients but only the benefits they get as doctors in this country."

Today in History: February 28

Pope Benedict XVI becomes first pope in six centuries to resign

By The Associated Press undefined

Today in History

Today is Wednesday, Feb. 28, the 59th day of 2024. There are 307 days left in the year.

Today's Highlight in History:

On Feb. 28, 2013, Benedict XVI became the first pope in 600 years to resign, ending an eight-year pontificate. (Benedict was succeeded the following month by Pope Francis.)

On this date:

In 1844, a 12-inch gun aboard the USS Princeton exploded as the ship was sailing on the Potomac River, killing Secretary of State Abel P. Upshur, Navy Secretary Thomas W. Gilmer and several others.

In 1849, the California gold rush began in earnest as regular steamship service started bringing gold-seekers to San Francisco.

In 1911, President William Howard Taft nominated William H. Lewis to be the first Black Assistant Attorney General of the United States.

In 1953, scientists James D. Watson and Francis H.C. Crick announced they had discovered the double-helix structure of DNA.

In 1972, President Richard M. Nixon and Chinese Premier Zhou Enlai issued the Shanghai Communique, which called for normalizing relations between their countries, at the conclusion of Nixon's historic visit to China.

In 1975, 42 people were killed in London's Underground when a train smashed into the end of a tunnel.

In 1993, a gun battle erupted at a religious compound near Waco, Texas, when Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms agents tried to arrest Branch Davidian leader David Koresh on weapons charges; four agents and six Davidians were killed as a 51-day standoff began.

In 1996, Britain's Princess Diana agreed to divorce Prince Charles. (Their 15-year marriage officially ended in August 1996; Diana died in a car crash in Paris a year after that.)

In 2009, Paul Harvey, the news commentator and talk-radio pioneer whose staccato style made him one of the nation's most familiar voices, died in Phoenix at age 90.

In 2012, Republican Mitt Romney won presidential primary victories in Arizona and Michigan.

In 2014, delivering a blunt warning to Moscow, President Barack Obama expressed deep concern over reported military activity inside Ukraine by Russia and warned "there will be costs" for any intervention.

In 2018, students and teachers returned under police guard to Florida's Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School as classes resumed for the first time since a shooting that killed 17 people.

In 2020, the number of countries touched by the coronavirus climbed to nearly 60. The Dow Jones Industrial Average finished the week 12.4% lower in the market's worst weekly performance since the 2008 financial crisis.

In 2022, Russian forces shelled Ukraine's second-largest city, rocking a residential neighborhood, and closed in on the capital, Kyiv, in a 17-mile convoy of hundreds of tanks and other vehicles.

Today's birthdays: Architect Frank Gehry is 95. Singer Sam the Sham is 87. Actor-director-dancer Tommy Tune is 85. Hall of Fame auto racer Mario Andretti is 84. Actor Kelly Bishop is 80. Actor Stephanie Beacham is 77. Writer-director Mike Figgis is 76. Actor Mercedes Ruehl is 76. Actor Bernadette Peters is 76. Former

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Energy Secretary Steven Chu is 76. Actor Ilene Graff is 75. Nobel Prize-winning economist Paul Krugman is 71. Basketball Hall of Famer Adrian Dantley is 69. Actor John Turturro is 67. Rock singer Cindy Wilson is 67. Actor Rae Dawn Chong is 63. Actor Maxine Bahns is 55. Actor Robert Sean Leonard is 55. Rock singer Pat Monahan is 55. Author Daniel Handler (aka "Lemony Snicket") is 54. Actor Tasha Smith is 53. Actor Rory Cochrane is 52. Actor Ali Larter is 48. Country singer Jason Aldean is 47. Actor Geoffrey Arend is 46. Actor Melanie Chandra (TV: "Code Black") is 40. Actor Michelle Horn is 37. MLB relief pitcher Aroldis Chapman is 36. Actor True O'Brien is 30. Actor Madisen Beaty is 29. Actor Quinn Shephard is 29. Actor Bobb'e J. Thompson is 28.