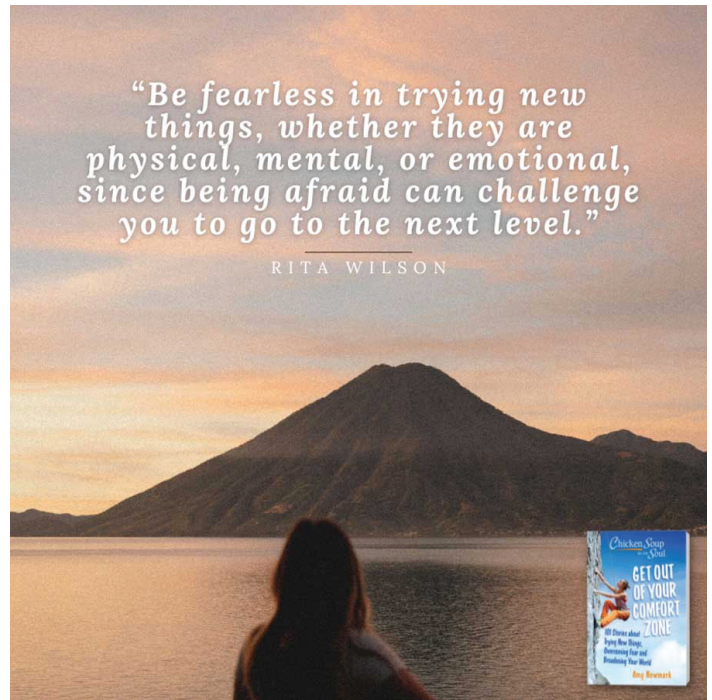


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Monday, March 4

School Lunch: French bread pizza, corn.
Pantry Open 11 a.m. to 3 p.m.
Senior Menu: Beef noodle stroganoff, mixed vegetables, fruit cocktail, cookie, whole wheat bread.
Emmanuel Lutheran: Bible Study, 6:30 a.m.

Tuesday, March 5

School Breakfast: Surfs up waffles.
School Lunch: Oriental chicken, rice.
Boys Basketball SoDak16 at Watertown: Groton Area vs. Dell Rapids at 6 p.m.
Thrift Store open 3 p.m. to 6 p.m.
Food Pantry open 4 p.m. to 8 p.m.
City Council Meeting, 7 p.m.
Senior Menu: Creamed chicken, au grain potatoes, peas and carrots, pineapple/strawberry ambrosia.
St. John's Lutheran: Ladies Aid LWML, 1 p.m.

Wednesday, March 6

School Breakfast: Tiki egg bake.
School Lunch: Turkey gravy, mashed potatoes.
Groton Chamber Meeting, Noon at City Hall
Senior Menu: Chicken fried steak, mashed potatoes with gravy, oriental blend vegetables, baked apples, whole wheat bread.
Emmanuel Lutheran: Sarah Circle, 5 p.m.; Soup Supper, 6 p.m. (Sunday school host); Lenten worship, 7 p.m.; Luther League, 6:15 p.m.
St. John's Lutheran: Confirmation, 3:45 p.m.; Lent Service, 7 p.m.
United Methodist: Communion coffee hour, 9:30 a.m.; Confirmation, 6 p.m.; Lent Bible Study, 7 p.m.
Groton CM&A: Kids' Club, Youth Group and Adult Bible Study begins at 7 pm

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

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

In partnership with [smartasset™](#)

The US military successfully made its first airdrop of humanitarian supplies into the Gaza Strip over the weekend, with officials saying the cargo included food supplies sufficient for close to 40,000 meals. The delivery, expected to be the first of many, came two days after a deadly scene unfolded as Palestinian crowds rushed to receive supplies from a convoy of trucks. United Nations officials have said one-quarter of Gaza's 2.3 million people are on the brink of famine.

An Oregon bill to reinstate criminal penalties for hard drugs is heading to Gov. Tina Kotek's (D) desk. HB 4002 will, if signed, upend a 2020 voter initiative to decriminalize possession of small amounts of fentanyl, heroin, methamphetamine, and other drugs.

A major blizzard shut down much of California's Sierra Nevada over the weekend as nearly 200 mph winds and snow up to 12 feet deep blocked roads, shuttered ski resorts, and knocked out power for thousands. Early readings suggest the precipitation could mark one of the region's 10 snowiest days since the 1970s.

Sports, Entertainment, & Culture

Iowa's Caitlin Clark passes LSU's Pete Maravich's all-time, men's or women's, NCAA basketball scoring record. LeBron James becomes first NBA player to top 40,000 points.

"Dune: Part Two" hauls in \$81.5M at the US domestic box office, the biggest film opening of 2024. Paolo Taviani, iconic Italian film director, dies at 92.

Singer-songwriter Raye wins top prizes of artist and album of the year at 2024 Brit Awards, the UK's highest profile music awards show.

Science & Technology

Eleventh-century astronomical device reveals both Hebrew and Islamic inscriptions, making it one of the oldest examples of scientific exchange between the two cultures.

Researchers demonstrate AI-enabled computer virus capable of stealing personal data and hopping between different email clients by targeting generative AI programs.

Solo killer whale observed preying on a juvenile great white shark without any companions; behavior was previously only seen in packs.

Business & Markets

Markets surge Friday (Dow +0.2%, S&P 500 +0.8%, Nasdaq +1.1%) as money moves into tech stocks; Nasdaq notches all-time high during intraday trading, S&P 500 passes 5,100 for the first time.

Saudi Arabia and Russia to extend oil supply cuts of a combined 1.5 million barrels per day through June; crude oil price currently around \$80 per barrel, down from close to \$120 in June 2022.

Lawyers who led successful case arguing a recent pay package for Tesla CEO Elon Musk should be voided ask presiding judge for \$5.6B in company stock as compensation for legal fees.

Politics & World Affairs

The Supreme Court could decide today on former President Donald Trump's eligibility to run for office; the decision would come the day before Super Tuesday. Nikki Haley projected to notch first primary win against Trump in DC.

Congressional leaders unveil proposed bills to partially fund the US government until the fall; bills allocate \$450B in funding and make cuts to the FBI, Environmental Protection Agency, and other lines; next shutdown deadline is Friday, March 8.

Haitian gangs free roughly 4,000 prisoners as deaths from gang violence believed to have doubled last year. Pakistan's Shehbaz Sharif appointed prime minister.

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Enrich and Table Talk Volunteers (L to R) Becky Knecht, Bridget Flihs, Laurie Mitchell, Topper Tastad, April Abeln, Kari Bartling, Pat Miller, Diane Warrington, Pam Rix and Eunice McColister. (Photo by Dorene Nelson)

Benefits of Enrich Groton SoDak Inc presented at Table Talks

On Wednesday, February 28, 2024, Enrich Groton SoDak Inc. joined volunteers at Table Talks and served over five dozen Groton Area High School students, supplying a delicious, home-cooked meal of goulash, bread, corn, and bars to students in grades 9-12.

During the meal a presentation was given on The Pantry and on Common Cents Community Thrift Store. After hearing what is being done in Groton to help others, the young people were encouraged to volunteer their help and services too.

Enrich Groton SoDak Inc. is the nonprofit organization that runs The Pantry and Common Cents Community Thrift Store in Groton. The Board of Directors for Enrich Groton SoDak is as follows: Chairman Lance Larsen; Vice Chairman Alfred "Topper" Tastad; Secretary April Abeln; and Treasurer Nancy Larsen with Kari Bartling and Karyn Babcock as members at large. The Pantry Manager is Pat Miller, and Common Cents Community Thrift Store (CCCTS) Manager is Diane Warrington.

The mission of Enrich Groton SoDak Inc., a nonprofit organization, is to serve the needs of our community through acts of giving and enrichment.

The Pantry, located inside the Community Center, first opened on May 9, 2022. It is open on Mondays from 11 A.M. – 3 P.M. and on Tuesdays from 4 to 8 P.M.

Approximately 50 to 70 families visit every month. Eighteen senior food boxes are delivered monthly. The Pantry is affiliated with Feeding SD. Holiday food boxes were delivered to 50 families in 2023. Twelve thousand pounds of items were donated in 2023.

Common Cents, located inside the Groton Police Department, opened on September 6, 2022. The thrift store is open on Tuesdays from 3 to 6 P.M. and on Saturdays from 10 A.M. to 1 P.M. There is a huge selection of items to choose from including clothing to furniture. All of the proceeds from the thrift store benefit The Pantry.

In January 2024, seventy-one families were served at the Pantry. This number included eighty-one children, eighty-five adults, and thirty-five seniors with over 2,000 pounds of groceries being given out.

We are continually grateful for our wonderful volunteers for lending a hand to these families and to the amazing donations we have received to help continue our mission!

"True heroism is remarkably sober, very undramatic. It is not the urge to surpass all others at whatever cost, but the urge to serve others at whatever cost." Arthur Ashe

- Dorene Nelson

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Pat Miller giving Enrich Groton, SD, message at Table Talks. (Photo by Dorene Nelson)



GHS

PEP RALLY!

**Tuesday
March 5**

2:50 p.m. to 3:10 p.m.

GHS Arena

Livestreamed on

GDILIVE.COM

GDI Subscription or Ticket required to watch

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**Good Luck Tigers in the SoDak 16
Livestreamed FREE on GDILIVE.COM!**

6 p.m.: Tues., Mar. 5, Watertown Civic Center

Groton Area vs. Dell Rapids



Sponsored by

**Bary Keith at Harr Motors
BK Custom Ts & More
Blocker Construction
Dacotah Bank
Farmers Union Coop
Groton Ag Partners
Groton Chamber
Groton Chiropractic Clinic
Groton Daily Independent
Groton Ford
Hanlon Brothers**

**John Sieh Agency
Krueger Brothers
Lori's Pharmacy
Professional Management Services
Rix Farms / R&M Farms
S & S Lumber
Spanier Harvesting & Trucking
Sun & Sea Travel
The Meat House
Witte Exteriors LLC**

"Sexual function and aging"

As husband and wife urologists, we talk a lot about sex (mainly at work). There are several issues that commonly arise in our patients that can lead to a less than satisfactory sex life. The great news is many treatment options exist.

There are many factors affecting men and women as they age that can interfere with sexual relations. In women, vaginal dryness, prolapse and incontinence are most common. A decrease in circulating estrogen in peri and post-menopausal women leads to atrophy, or dryness, of the vagina that can result in pain. Symptomatic pelvic organ prolapse can create physical barriers to intercourse. Embarrassing urinary incontinence is another reason some shy away from intimacy.

Nearly all women who are experiencing painful vaginal dryness or dyspareunia (pain with intercourse) can be safely treated with a vaginal estrogen cream. Unlike hormone replacement therapy (HRT), vaginal estrogen poses few risks and can safely be administered without fear of cancer, stroke or clotting problems. The cream is placed in the vagina several times weekly at night, helping to improve tissue quality and relieve symptoms of pain and dryness.

For women who struggle with a vaginal bulge, many options exist to maintain sexual function. A pessary can be fitted in some women who are able to remove it themselves. More often, outpatient surgery is used to restore normal anatomy and maintain sexual function if desired.

Incontinence, the involuntary leakage of urine, has many causes and several treatment options exist depending on the type.

Diagnosing and treating male urologic factors are also key to maintaining intimacy. Erectile dysfunction (ED) is common in aging men for a variety of reasons including but not limited to vascular, hormonal and psychologic issues. Certain treatments for an enlarged prostate or prostate cancer can also lead to ED. The backbone of therapy for erectile dysfunction includes pills like Viagra or Cialis. For some men who do not respond well to these medications or have side effects that are intolerable, penile injections provide a simple and effective solution. As a last resort, surgical options are also available.

Peyronies disease is another issue we frequently see in men that affects sexual quality of life. This is caused by deposits of scar tissue in the penis. This scar tissue can frequently cause curvature with erection, which makes sex difficult or painful. Excellent non-operative and operative treatments exist which can restore a couple's sexual quality of life.

Whether sexual intercourse remains a priority in your relationship as you age is a very personal decision and is ultimately up to you. If you are suffering from conditions interfering with your ability to be sexually active, many treatment options exist and we encourage you to speak with your doctor about these issues.

-D. Joseph Thum and Lauren Wood Thum are both board certified Urologists at Urology Specialists in Sioux Falls, SD. Dr. Joseph Thum also sees patients in Worthington. In their free time, they enjoy the outdoors and spending time with their sons and German Shepherds. Follow The Prairie Doc® at www.prairiedoc.org and on Facebook featuring On Call with the Prairie Doc® a medical Q&A show providing health information based on science, built on trust, on SDPB and streaming live on Facebook most Thursdays at 7 p.m. central.



Dr. Lauren Wood Thum and Dr. Dennis Joseph Thum

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NSU Women's Basketball

Wolves Fall Short in Postseason Contest Against Mustangs

Sioux Falls, S.D. – The Northern State University women's basketball team dropped their Sunday matinee to Southwest Minnesota State, 86-75 in the quarterfinal round of the NSIC Basketball Tournament. Through 40 minutes of play, the contest saw nine tie scores and 13 lead changes, but an early deficit kept the win out of reach for the Wolves.

THE QUICK DETAILS

Final Score: NSU 75, SMSU 86

Records: NSU 20-9, SMSU 19-11

Attendance: N/A

HOW IT HAPPENED

Northern State racked up 22 points in the first quarter, 15 in the second, 17 in the third, and 21 in the fourth

They shot 41.8% from the floor, 10.0% from the 3-point arc and 75.0% from the foul line

NSU tallied 48 points in the paint, 34 rebounds, 18 points off turnovers, 17 assists, ten bench points, and seven steals

Madelyn Bragg led the team with 32 points and eight rebounds, connecting on 50.0% of her field goal attempts

Rianna Fillipi and Alayna Benike notched 14 and ten points, along with five and seven rebounds respectively

In addition, Fillipi dished out a team leading five assists

Deontee Smith led the Wolves off the bench with eight points and three rebounds

The Mustangs out-rebounded the Wolves by three and were efficient offensively, shooting 50.0% from the floor

NORTHERN STATE STATISTICAL STANDOUTS

Madelyn Bragg: 32 points, 8 rebounds, 2 assists, 2 blocks, 2 steals

Rianna Fillipi: 14 points, 5 rebounds, 5 assists, 2 steals

Alayna Benike: 10 points, 7 rebounds, 3 assists

Brynn Alfson: 9 points, 7 rebounds, 3 assists

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Democratic Leadership Column: Elections and Landowner Rights

by Minority Leader Rep. Oren Lesmeister (District 28A)

Hello from week eight of the 2024 Legislative Session. We are getting down to the wire to debate the rest of the legislation on the docket as we also consider appropriations bills.

First though, I wanted to bring attention to something that happened to fellow Minority Leader Sen. Reynold Nesiba's election board bill. This week, his legislation was hog housed to change the voter registration deadline from 15 days before an election to 30. Sen. Nesiba asked for the bill to be tabled because he did not agree with that change. Usually, when a sponsor asks for their bill to be tabled, our colleagues agree to that. I have never seen that not honored until this week.

Assistant Minority Leader Rep. Erin Healy and I tried to table it again, but that motion also failed on party lines. House State Affairs then allowed the new prime sponsor to present the bill and pass it out of committee, despite several county auditors and even Sen. Nesiba himself testifying against it. I believe what happened was a blatantly ugly maneuver by my Republican colleagues. They picked one of the last Democratic bills out there to do this to when they had all kinds of vehicle bills to pick from. I found the whole thing very disrespectful to Sen. Nesiba. I hope my Republican colleagues apologize to him as well as remove this change to the voter registration deadline, which I believe will make it even more of a burden to vote.

This week also saw a nearly two hour debate on the House floor concerning landowner rights, local control and pipelines. As I said on the floor, every single one of us understands the enormity of our decision on SB 201 and its impact on the proposed CO2 pipeline, future projects, counties and landowners. None of us took that decision lightly. This is an issue that has divided neighbors, farmers, agriculture groups and even families. There are still more discussions happening over SB 201 since it will now head into a conference committee.

I was also disheartened this week over the discussions about a Medicaid work requirement. Republicans are worried that people will just live off of Medicaid, but the Department of Social Services Secretary said they've already seen a churn on Medicaid expansion, meaning people are on it for a few months and then get off the program. I brought up the fact that we couldn't spend \$150,000 and hire six more full-time employees to implement the Summer EBT program, but DSS and the sponsor couldn't tell us how much it would cost to enforce a work requirement.

This final week, much of the focus will be on the budget. Rep. Linda Duba tells me committee members are hashing out the details with only a few issues that lawmakers are trying to find a compromise. We are hoping to see the final budget early this coming week.

by Minority Whip Sen. Liz Larson (District 10)

After a short crossover day, we are now deep into the appropriation process as we also clear the calendar and work through the remaining bills. So far, we've debated some very important funding for airports, community support centers, fire fighting, water/sewage infrastructure, telemedicine, assisted living, a Quantum Information Science facility, new prisons and a new initiative for Indigent Legal Fees.

First though, I wanted to discuss an issue on the national level about the increasing concern over whether families can still use in vitro fertilization. As many of you know, IVF clinics in Alabama have had to halt their services after the state Supreme Court ruled that embryos are children. I am concerned that South Dakota does not have robust laws to protect IVF services for families struggling with infertility. While we are at the end of the session now, we need to be vigilant about this issue and stand with South Dakotans who are relying on IVF to grow their families.

We saw a big win this week to help people who are experiencing homelessness. Two bills, sponsored by Democrats, are now on the Governor's desk waiting for her signature. I carried a bill on the floor for Republican Rep. Tyler Tordsen to waive the fee for a birth certificate. As a companion bill, Republican

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Sen. David Wheeler carried Democratic Rep. Kady Wittman's bill to provide free ID cards. These are very small financial investments that can have a big impact on an individual's life. These are great pieces of legislation that are hand ups for people who are trying to get their lives back on track. This was a win across the board.

Another win for all of South Dakota are the bills allocating the rest of the money the state received from the American Rescue Plan Act. This includes funding for our water infrastructure and to keep our forests healthy. On the Senate floor, Minority Leader Sen. Reynold Nesiba thanked the Biden-Harris Administration for this once in a lifetime investment in water and waste water treatment in South Dakota. He reminded everyone that Republicans in Congress voted against ARPA, but thanked Republicans in South Dakota for being good stewards of these funds.

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
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Weekly Vikings Roundup

By Jordan Wright

With the NFL Combine over, teams are getting ready for the start of free agency. To get YOU ready, we will be breaking down the Vikings' roster, starting with the offense today and the defense next week. We'll break down each position to get a better idea of where we stand, and what to expect.

Quarterback – Perhaps the biggest question mark for the Vikings to address this offseason. Kirk Cousins has been the team's starting QB for six seasons now, and while he has consistently been good, the team only has one playoff win to show for it. Cousins will turn 36 years old by week one and is coming off an Achilles injury that derailed his 2023 season. Cousins is not under contract for 2024 and will likely command a contract north of \$40 million per year. Will the Vikings bring him back? Or will they turn to the draft to find his replacement? Behind Cousins are Nick Mullens and Jaren Hall. Both Mullens and Hall have potential, but neither is ready to be the team's starting signal caller.

Running Back – The Vikings released 2023 starting RB Alexander Mattison this past week, signaling the desire to upgrade the position. Currently, the depth chart consists of Ty Chandler, Kene Kwangwu, DeWayne McBride, and Myles Gaskin. Chandler was drafted by the Vikings in 2022 and showed promise last season. Kwangwu is the team's primary kick-return specialist, but he is consistently injured. McBride and Gaskin are practice squad players, and while it's always possible one of them takes a giant leap this offseason, neither should be counted on this season. The Vikings will likely look to bring in another RB to challenge Chandler atop the depth chart, and there are quite a few good options in free agency.

Full Back – CJ Ham made the Pro Bowl last season and is signed through 2025.

Wide Receiver – Maybe the strongest position on the team, but that doesn't mean there aren't question marks. Justin Jefferson is entering his fifth season and needs an extension – one that will likely make him the highest-paid, non-QB in the league. We're talking somewhere in the range of \$35 million per year. Jordan Addison had a great rookie season and should continue to get better in year two. Jalen Nailor is entering year three and will be given the first opportunity to replace the departing KJ Osborn as the team's WR3. Beyond that, the depth chart is wide open. Six receivers are already on the roster and will be competing for the final two or three roster spots: N'Keal Harry, Trishton Jackson, Malik Knowles, Dontavian Jackson, Daylen Baldwin, and Thayer Thomas.

Tight End – There are currently only two tight ends on the roster, so the Vikings will need to bring in one or two more this offseason. T.J. Hockenson is one of the best tight ends in the league, and recently signed a contract extension, while Josh Oliver was brought in last offseason during free agency. It wouldn't surprise me if the Vikings brought back Johnny Mundt or Nick Muse on cheap contracts to fill out the TE depth chart.

Offensive Line – Four of the five starting offensive linemen from last season are still under contract (left tackle Christian Darrisaw, center Garrett Bradbury, right guard Ed Ingram, and right tackle Brian O'Neill). Dalton Risner, who was brought in halfway through the 2023 season to replace Ezra Cleveland, will likely be brought back. However, behind those starting five, there is little depth. The Vikings will need to bring in at least two capable backups to fill in when injuries inevitably happen. The most likely scenario, just like at tight end, is the Vikings electing to bring back their pending free agents like Oli Udoh, David Quisenberry, Blake Brandel, Austin Schlottmann, and Chris Reed.



B-21 Ellsworth expansion getting mixed support in Pierre

Bart Pfankuch

South Dakota News Watch

BOX ELDER, S.D. – The 2024 South Dakota Legislature considered two spending measures for construction projects aimed at preparing for an influx of military personnel and civilians arriving with the launch of the new B-21 Raider bomber program at Ellsworth Air Force Base.

The state funds were proposed in one bill to help build a new elementary school to accommodate rapid student population growth in Box Elder and through another measure that would include the Rapid City Regional Airport in a funding package to aid expansion of airports across the state.

In this tight budget year, lawmakers rejected the plan to spend up to \$15 million to help pay for a new \$60 million elementary school in the Douglas School District, which serves many families that live and work in and around the base.

But as the 2024 legislative session winds down, legislators are still considering a proposal to spend up to \$90 million in state funds to offset costs of expansion projects at municipal airports across the state. At the Rapid City Regional Airport, some of it could help pay for \$220 million in planned improvements and expansions to prepare for expected large increases in passengers and flights due to the launch of the B-21 program at nearby Ellsworth.

Ellsworth was officially chosen in June 2021 as the main base of operations and training location for the Air Force's new B-21 Raider bomber, a \$700 million long-range stealth jet with nuclear capabilities that is intended to replace the B-1B Lancer bomber that has been based at Ellsworth for years.

BRAC memories, worries still fresh

In pitching the spending packages, lawmakers from western South Dakota argued that state financial support is needed for the school and airport projects to accommodate the B-21 program and to ensure the long-range viability of the base that was nearly closed by the federal government during the Base Realignment and Closure process in 2005-2006.

Sen. Helene Duhamel, R-Rapid City, sponsored Senate Bill 204 to help fund the proposed elementary school, starting at a \$15 million request and then reducing the ask to \$5 million after debate. Duhamel reminded members of the Senate Education Committee of the harrowing process South Dakota leaders



The B-21 Raider was unveiled to the public at a ceremony Dec. 2, 2022 in Palmdale, Calif. (Photo: U.S. Air Force)

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The new Air Force B-21 Raider bomber program will be headquartered at Ellsworth Air Force Base in Box Elder, S.D. The \$700 million planes are built by Northrop Grumman. (Photo: Northrop Grumman)

went through in trying to keep Ellsworth off the final BRAC list in 2006. Duhamel said the effort required support from the South Dakota congressional delegation, state officials and local leaders to persuade the federal government to keep Ellsworth open.

"This did not happen by accident," Duhamel testified. "It was hard work, investment with an eye on the future and a willingness to help when needed."

When the 2005 BRAC process began, Ellsworth was home to about 3,500 active duty personnel, 800 civilian employees and created a \$350 million annual impact in South Dakota, Duhamel said. Saving the base protected jobs and revenue across the region, and now helping the local school system and regional airport would show the Air Force that Ellsworth is valued not only within the military but by South Dakota and the local community as well, she said.

"It's time to help again," Duhamel said, pointing out that the annual economic impact of the base will rise to \$480 million a year once the B-21s arrive. "South Dakota needs to do its part to support the military when the military supports us."

Military wants to see local investment

Scott Landguth, executive director of the South Dakota Ellsworth Development Authority, told lawmakers that local investments are an important factor for the military when it decides whether to maintain or expand its bases. Air Force officials often ask about local "quality of life" issues, which includes the local school system, he said.

Ellsworth has obtained greater stability by aggressively seeking new and expanded roles within the Air Force, Landguth said. Examples include the addition of the Air Force Financial Services Center at Ellsworth in 2007, adding the command and control mission for the MQ-9 Reaper drone program to the base in 2010 and the 2015 opening of the 35,000-square-mile Powder River Training Complex, a major airspace training expansion northwest of Ellsworth.

"We've always been on the offensive so we're not back to where we were (with BRAC)," Landguth said. "The quality of schools is definitely on the radar of the Air Force because they want their airmen and families to be taken care



The Douglas School District plans to build a new elementary school to accommodate rapid growth expected to follow the B-21 program expansion at Ellsworth Air Force Base, but it likely will have to do so without state funding. (Photo: Bart Pfankuch /

South Dakota News Watch)

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of. And they want the communities where they are investing to be part of that.”

Ellsworth colonel: Investments help ease stress

Col. Derek Oakley, commander of the 28th Bomb Wing at Ellsworth, said at a recent meeting in Rapid City that the Air Force will embark on nearly three dozen individual construction projects on the base at an estimated cost of at least \$1.5 billion.

The B-21 program will add more than 4,000 new military personnel, families and civilian workers to the base over the next 20 years, bringing the total base population to nearly 12,000 people, Oakley said.

The Air Force projected in its B-21 Economic Impact Statement that development of the new bomber program at Ellsworth will create nearly 600 local jobs and almost \$24 million in local economic impact. Once the bombers arrive, some state officials estimate the program will create an annual benefit of \$480 million to the state.



**\$700 MILLION
B-21 SET
TO LAND IN
ELLSWORTH**

Raider Bomber Fact Sheet

Type: Penetrating strike stealth bomber, new backbone of Air Force bomber force
Mission: Long-range strike, intelligence, surveillance, reconnaissance, electronic attack, communications
Cargo: Dual-capable for nuclear and conventional weapons, and personnel
Command: Air Force Global Strike Command; main operating/training site at Ellsworth Air Force Base, South Dakota
Inventory: Planned for minimum 100 aircraft
Cost: \$692 million per plane (2022 dollars)
Name: Reference in honor of Doolittle Raiders from WWII

Source: U.S. Air Force



Officials at Rapid City Regional Airport hope to receive some state funding to help pay for expansion projects needed in part to accommodate growth at nearby Ellsworth Air Force Base, which could result in more flights in and out of the airport. (Photo: Rapid City Regional Airport)

As on-base preparations take off, signs of growth are visible throughout Box Elder, which for years has had strong population growth but not significant retail or commercial development. New houses and apartments are being rapidly constructed, and the town of 12,000 a few miles east of Rapid City has several new businesses already built or in progress, including a McDonald's, a Starbucks, a Pizza Hut, new bank branches and at least two major gas station/convenience stores.

During a November luncheon hosted by the Black Hills Forum and Press Club, Oakley spoke of the importance of making sure base personnel are well cared for as they take on extended duties due to the B-21 preparations and eventual arrival.

Oakley stressed the importance of ensuring that existing airmen and airwomen, as well as the new arrivals, are not overworked or face hardships outside their work lives.

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"It's a lot to put on their backs for airmen right now," Oakley told News Watch in an interview. "Our biggest challenge is keeping them engaged and not overworking them. We talk about mental health and taking care of our airmen on and off the base, making sure they have the right time off and things like that."

South Dakota officials, lawmakers oppose school money

Many of those new military personnel have young children, and Douglas schools will have an estimated enrollment increase of 1,500 in the next 15 years, said superintendent Kevin Case.

The district has already spent \$6.2 million on planning for the new elementary school, he said. The federal government is expected to pay about \$40 million of the \$60 million total construction cost. The district has a limited tax base upon which to draw, and sought the state money to make the deal

complete, Case said.

But Morgan Gruebele, a budget analyst with the state Bureau of Finance and Management, told senators it would be unfair to provide extra state money to Douglas schools when other districts across the state are not receiving it.

She also noted that the district currently carries no debt, has an existing capital fund of \$2.4 million, accepted \$10 million in COVID-era funding and received \$24.8 million in "impact aid" that the federal government provided Douglas in 2023 to cover lost property tax revenues due to the base's presence in the district.

"Douglas has many funding sources," Gruebele said in opposing the spending measure. "If the state would decide to fund the Douglas school construction, there would be many other schools wondering why they didn't receive state support for their projects."

The Senate Education Committee passed the bill on a 5-2 vote, but the Joint Appropriations Committee rejected it in an 11-7 vote.

FAA funding dip a reason for state aid to airports

As of Feb. 28, the proposal to use state funding to expedite expansion of airports statewide still had life in the Legislature.

The Joint Appropriations Committee passed Senate Bill 144 on a 15-2 vote, but lowered the funding level to \$1 prior to passage. Passing the bill with no meaningful funding allows for negotiations to continue by appropriators to find a fund-



Construction is already underway in the terminal expansion project at Rapid City Regional Airport, which expects growth in passengers and flights associated with the arrival of the B-21 Raider bomber program at nearby Ellsworth Air Force Base. (Photo: Courtesy Rapid City

Regional Airport)

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ing level that will be acceptable to the full Legislature and Gov. Kristi Noem.

Initially, the measure would have provided \$90 million over five years for airport projects that the state Aeronautics Commission deemed appropriate. The sponsor submitted an amendment cutting the spending to \$30 million, but appropriators so far have not decided on a spending level.

Airport officials told lawmakers the state money is needed because funding from the Federal Aviation Administration has been stagnant and is not sufficient to make expensive improvements needed to accommodate passenger growth, especially in the Sioux Falls and Rapid City markets.

The Sioux Falls Airport Authority in 2022 approved a \$170 million, two-phase plan to add eight new gates to the airport as well as other improvements, including a concourse expansion. State money is needed to help pay for those improvements, Sioux Falls Regional Airport ex-



Col. Derek Oakley, commander of the 28th Bomb Wing at Ellsworth Air Force Base, spoke about the base expansion during a Black Hills Forum and Press Club meeting in Rapid City, S.D., in November (Photo: Bart Pfankuch /South Dakota

News Watch)

“ We certainly expect an influx of travelers ... due to the base. I would say that the state funding is critical if you want to expand the airports because federal funding doesn't cover every part of every project.

”
Megan Johnson, spokeswoman for the R.C. Regional airport



ecutive director Dan Letellier told lawmakers.

\$220M plan includes more California flights

The Rapid City Regional Airport in late 2023 embarked on a three-phase expansion effort estimated to cost \$220 million over the next few years, according to Megan Johnson, spokeswoman for the airport.

The first phase, now underway, would redo the aging baggage handling and Transportation Security Administration checkpoint areas at a cost of \$83 million, Johnson said. Future projects would add five new gates and upgrades to the rental and baggage claim areas, she said.

Johnson told News Watch that the airport expansion is

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driven by steadily rising passenger counts in recent years but also due to the expectation that departures and arrivals will need to increase to accommodate growth from the B-21 program.

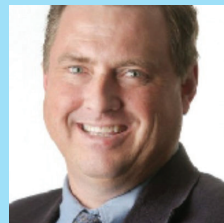
"We certainly expect an influx of travelers, families and support personnel due to the base," she said. "I would say that the state funding is critical if you want to expand the airports because federal funding doesn't cover every part of every project."

Airport officials expect to see increased arrivals, especially from Southern California, where the B-21 planes are built. The airport recently announced the launch of a new Allegiant Airlines direct flight between Rapid City and Los Angeles that will start in June.

"When we speak to airlines, we have to provide a case for service to new cities," Johnson said. "When we speak with airlines, we tell them, 'Hey, we have Ellsworth Air Force Base and they're bringing in these new jets.'"



The U.S. Air Force expects to spend \$1.5 billion on nearly three dozen individual construction projects to prepare for the arrival of the B-21 Raider bomber program at Ellsworth Air Force Base in Box Elder, S.D. (Photo: Bart Pfankuch / South Dakota News Watch)



Bart Pfankuch, Rapid City, S.D., is the content director for South Dakota News Watch. A Wisconsin native, he is a former editor of the Rapid City Journal and also worked at newspapers in Florida. Bart has spent more than 30 years as a reporter, editor and writing coach. Contact Bart at bart.pfankuch@sdnewswatch.org.

EARTHTALK ™

Dear EarthTalk: How are researchers using wildlife to track environmental conditions and monitor climate change?

-- Jane P., South Bend, IN

Scientists currently rely mainly on a complex network of satellites, ocean buoys, weather stations and balloons to help predict the weather and the effects of climate change, but it might not be the best solution. What if instead of using satellites and weather stations to study the planet, scientists used animals? Imagine a world where a pigeon could help gather information on air pollution.

That world already exists. In Mongolia, pigeons equipped with sensors fly around the capital city of Ulaanbaatar and help measure the air quality. Tagged elephant seals help provide nearly 80 percent of all available information on ice depth and ocean salinity in Antarctica. Geolocation sensors, often attached to animals via collars or tags, can provide scientists with near endless amounts of information on wildlife and the environment. The sensors, equipped with GPS and other advanced technology, offer a lens directly into the habitats that animals inhabit.

Using wildlife to track environmental conditions only highlights the shortcomings of current methods of collecting climate data. While satellites can gauge temperatures at the surface of a cloud-covered jungle canopy, they cannot reveal the conditions on the ground. Not the way that a monkey would be able to. Most weather stations are built on flat land and in developed areas, not in the mountainous regions that are heavily affected by climate change. However, mountain goats or birds with sensors can easily monitor the temperatures of the region. Wildlife geolocation sensors can help fill critical data gaps, particularly in more remote areas of the planet.

Equipping fish, birds, seals and other animals with sensors can offer highly localized and timely data that current tech cannot. The sensors can provide data on animal behavior and migration patterns along with data on environmental conditions impacted by climate change. They can improve scientists' measurements on air temperature, ocean salinity, air pollution and biodiversity. Rather than using satellites to capture images of the planet's surface, scientists can study animal decisions and preferred conditions to sense the quality and health of ecosystems. Studying the environmental conditions that drive animals' movements can offer a lens directly into the habitats themselves.

Thanks to action by the Max Planck Institute of Animal Behavior, thousands of birds and animals are already outfitted with sensors, but the opportunities that wildlife tracking presents have not yet been fully realized. To implement geolocation sensors on a wider scale there must be collaboration between government agencies and the science community. The data that the sensors could provide the scientific world would be more accurate, timely, cost-effective and non-invasive than the more popularized current methods. Wildlife tracking provides an opportunity for revolution in conservation efforts, environmental monitoring and research on climate change.



In Mongolia, pigeons equipped with sensors fly around the capital city of Ulaanbaatar and help measure the air quality. Credit: Pexels.com.



SOUTH DAKOTA SEARCHLIGHT

<https://southdakotasearchlight.com>

Opposition to pipeline could derail landowner protections, House leader warns

BY: JOSHUA HAIAR - MARCH 3, 2024 7:00 AM

PIERRE — With most of this year's legislative session in the rearview mirror, some lawmakers are making a final push on a trio of bills they describe as an effort to balance the interests of both opponents and proponents of a carbon dioxide pipeline.

In Republican-dominated South Dakota, the bills have pitted the party's traditional support for economic expansion and lower regulatory burdens against its commitment to property rights and local governance. The issue becomes even more complex and contentious when Republican views on federal spending to combat climate change are factored in.

Those complex motivations led some Republicans to file and support bills that would block or significantly hinder carbon pipelines. That legislation failed. House Majority Leader Will Mortenson, R-Fort Pierre, said if lawmakers don't pivot to support the remaining bills — which would bolster protections for landowners, without blocking projects — they risk accomplishing nothing on the issue this session.

"All this opposition can lead us to a place where we get nothing done for farmers, nothing done for ethanol, that we get nothing done for counties, nothing done for regulatory certainty," Mortenson said Thursday during a leadership press conference. "If we want to kill everything, that's where we're headed."

Mortenson is a prime sponsor on the three remaining bills, along with Senate Majority Leader Casey Crabtree, R-Madison.

One of their bills, Senate Bill 201, was sent to a conference committee Thursday that will work to reconcile the House and Senate differences, while the other two bills in the package underwent amendments in the Senate Commerce and Energy Committee. That leaves all three bills pending with just one week left in the legislative session, aside from a day later in March to consider vetoes.

All the bills are related to a multi-billion-dollar pipeline proposed by Summit Carbon Solutions, which is headquartered in Iowa. It would collect carbon dioxide from ethanol plants in South Dakota and some neighboring states and pipe it to North Dakota for underground storage. The project would take advantage of billions in available federal tax credits that incentivize the removal of heat-trapping carbon dioxide from the atmosphere.

Summit plans to apply again for a permit in South Dakota after its initial application was denied by utility regulators, in part due to conflicts with county ordinances that require minimum distances known as "setbacks" between pipelines and other features.

The project has also faced opposition from landowners concerned about safety, including risks associated with potential leaks, and property rights. Summit could go to court and use the power of eminent domain to gain access to land from unwilling South Dakota landowners. Bills to prevent Summit from using eminent domain have failed each of the past two legislative sessions.

Setbacks and county surcharges

As currently written, Senate Bill 201 would force the state's Public Utilities Commission (PUC) to overrule counties if their pipeline rules are too burdensome. The commission of three elected officials is responsible

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for pipeline permitting in the state.

The House of Representatives approved its version of the bill 40-30 on Wednesday after a nearly two-hour debate.

Current law says the PUC "may" overrule counties' setbacks. The legislation says the commission "must" overrule setbacks if they "are unreasonably restrictive in the view of existing technology, factors of cost, or economics, or needs of parties," or if the county actions are preempted by federal law.

As originally introduced, the bill would have removed counties' power to impose setbacks on projects including carbon pipelines. The bill was amended by a House committee.

The bill also allows counties to impose a surcharge on pipeline companies of \$1 per linear foot.

Proponents say the bill balances economic development with property rights. Opponents fear it undermines those rights and local control.

Predicting a bumpy road ahead for the bill, Rep. Chris Karr, R-Sioux Falls, said during the House floor debate, "I can about imagine what's going to happen to this thing when it goes to conference."

Surveying protections

Three bills considered Thursday by the Senate Commerce and Energy Committee would add protections for private property owners when pipeline companies conduct surveying, ensure better terms for landowners in agreements with pipeline companies, and add financial protections for landowners subjected to eminent domain.

Two of the bills were amended and one was defeated.

One bill that passed the committee 8-1 would amend the state's laws regarding land surveys on private property for public utility projects.

The bill stipulates that any person or entity looking to conduct an examination or survey on private property must have a pending or approved siting permit application with the state.

Secondly, the bill mandates a 30-day written notice to the property owner. The notice must include a detailed description of the property areas to be examined, the anticipated date and time of entry, the duration of presence on the property, the types of surveys and examinations to be conducted, and the contact information of the person or agent responsible for the entry.

Furthermore, the bill introduces financial compensation for landowners. As originally introduced, any utility seeking to enter private property for surveys would have to make a one-time payment of \$500 to the property owner, in addition to covering any damage caused during the examination. The bill was amended Thursday to say the \$500 requirement would only apply to carbon pipelines.

Property owners would also be given the right to challenge the survey or examination by filing an action in circuit court within 30 days of receiving the written notice. Additionally, upon request, the results of the survey or examination would have to be shared with the property owner.

The legislation excludes the state or its political subdivisions from the requirements, focusing instead on private entities.

Easements

Another bill that passed 7-2 specifies how carbon pipeline easements are to be granted, recorded and terminated. An easement is an agreement to access private land. Summit says it has easements with about 75% of the landowners on its route in South Dakota.

As originally written, the bill said carbon pipeline agreements would not be allowed to exceed 50 years and would automatically terminate if not used for the transportation of carbon dioxide within five years from their effective date. Plus, landowners would be entitled to annual compensation for granting the easement, set at a minimum of \$1 per foot of pipeline each year the pipeline is active.

However, both the 50-year easement cap and the minimum \$1 per-foot compensation were removed by the committee.

Sen. Casey Crabtree, R-Madison, said "we know the lifetime of this is 50 years, easily," and therefore a

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more reasonable cap should be determined at a later date. He said the \$1 per linear foot surcharge for counties in Senate Bill 201 would translate to \$42 million for all impacted counties "that can be used to offset property taxes" for landowners.

Pipeline opponents felt the changes were unfair, with Chase Jensen of Dakota Rural Action calling the amended legislation "lip service bills" that do not accomplish a true compromise between pipeline opponents and proponents.

Another bill was defeated 6-3. It would have required entities using eminent domain to cover some legal costs for landowners.

A divided party

Comments on the House floor Wednesday showed how far apart some Republicans are on the legislation and the broader issues in play.

Rep. Scott Odenbach, R-Spearfish, said proponents of SB 201 are "rolling over for Biden's Green New Deal." He said the pipeline and carbon sequestration are part of "an effort to define carbon as a building block of life and to be able to regulate everything we do."

Mortenson later reminded fellow lawmakers that "we're not setting federal climate policy today." He said during Thursday's leadership press conference that if what comes out of a conference committee is not an authentic compromise that helps landowners, he will back out of the deal.

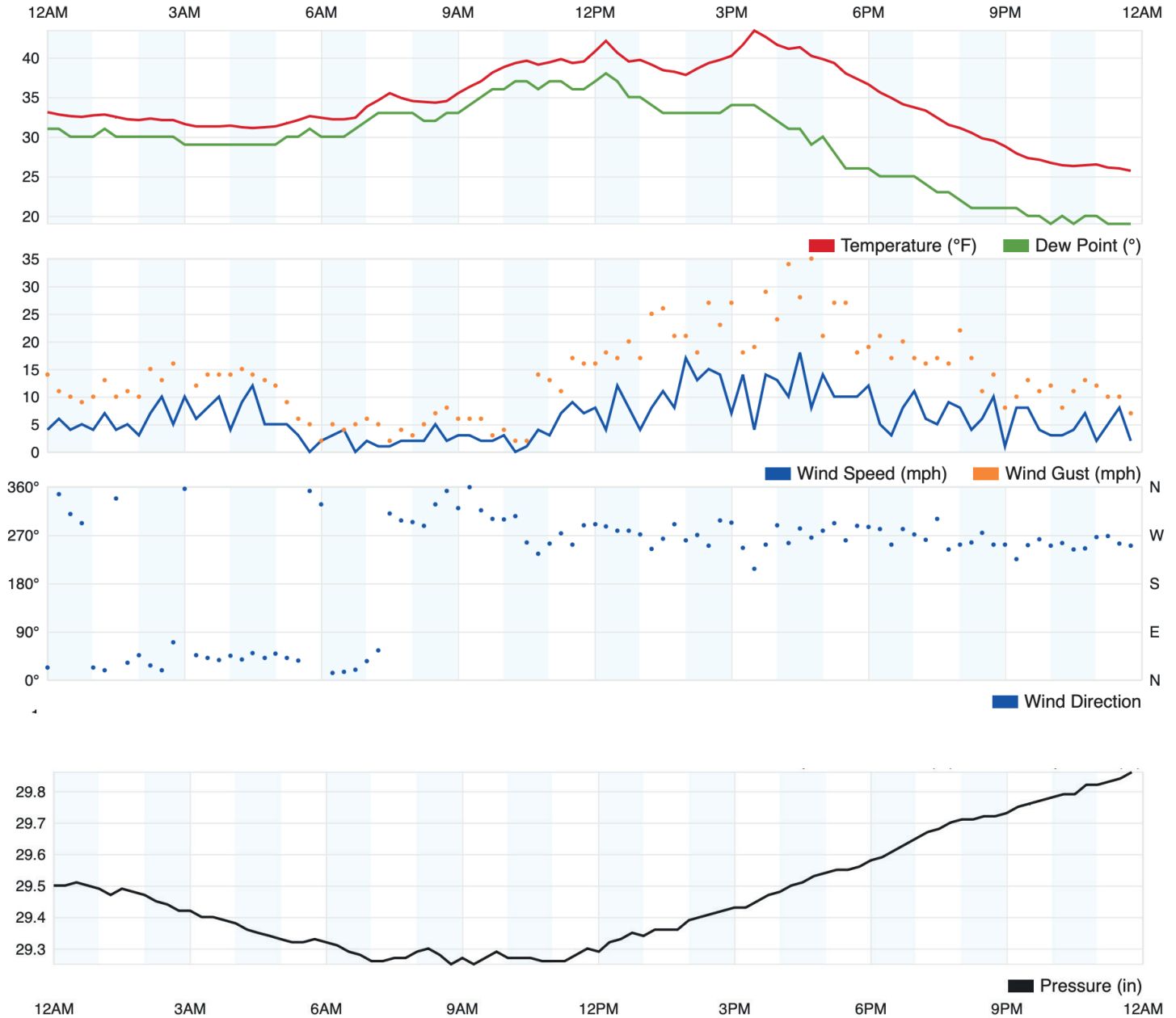
"If there's not real benefit in this for the farmers, then I'm out," he said. "There's definitely a line in the sand for me."

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.

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Yesterday's Groton Weather Graphs



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Today



Partly Sunny

High: 39 °F

Tonight



Partly Cloudy
then Slight
Chance Snow

Low: 20 °F

Tuesday



Chance Snow

High: 41 °F

Tuesday
Night



Mostly Clear
then Slight
Chance Snow

Low: 23 °F

Wednesday

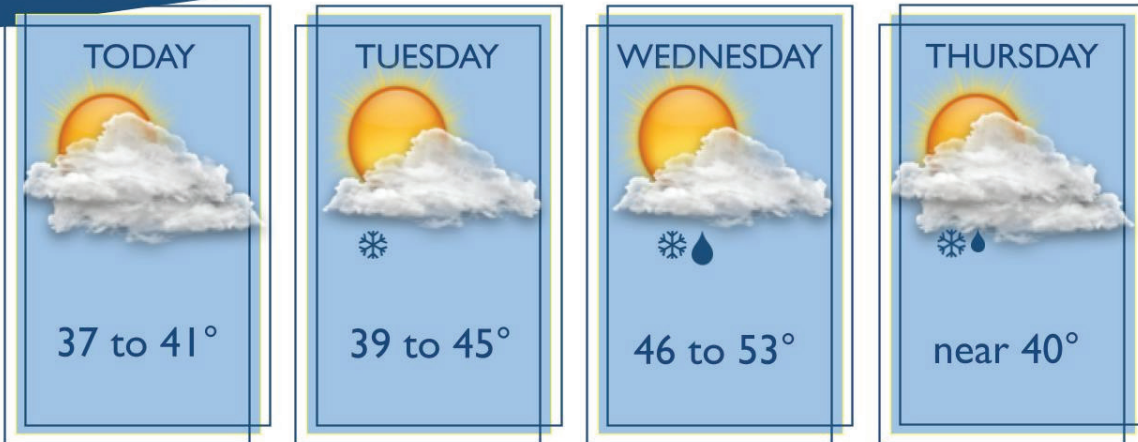


Breezy.
Chance Snow
then Chance
Rain/Snow

High: 49 °F

Weather Outlook

Aberdeen, SD
weather.gov/aberndeen



Only small (20-30%) chance of precipitation overnight through Tuesday morning, and Tuesday night through Thursday.

Little to no accumulation is expected, with mainly dry weather continuing.

Dry high pressure will remain in control of our weather today, with temperatures topping out in the upper 30s to near 40 degrees. A weak area of low pressure will bring our next 20 to 30 percent chance of light snow to the area overnight into Tuesday. Little to no accumulation is expected at this time.

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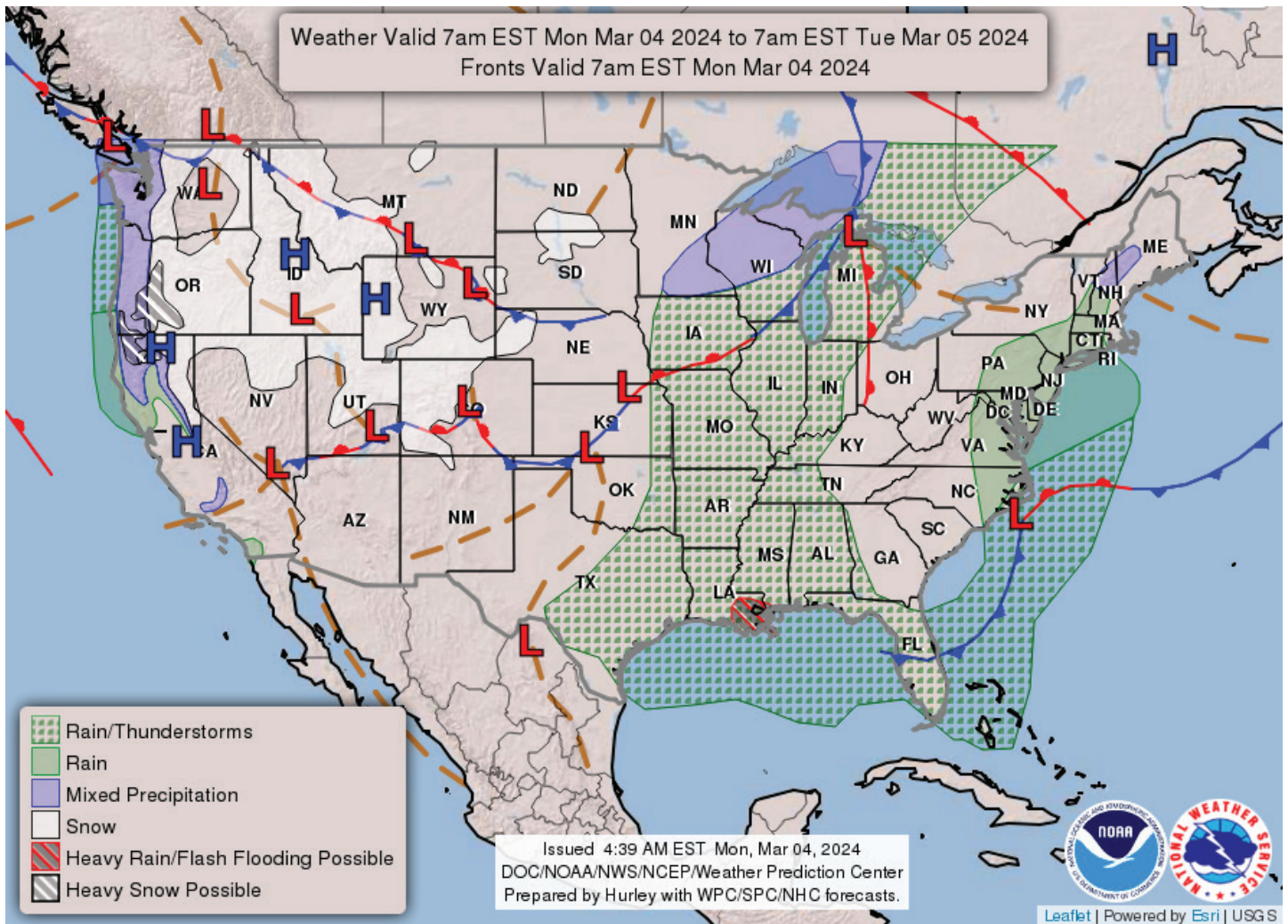
Yesterday's Groton Weather

High Temp: 44 °F at 3:30 PM
Low Temp: 26 °F at 11:28 PM
Wind: 35 mph at 4:42 PM
Precip: : 0.00

Day length: 11 hours, 23 minutes

Today's Info

Record High: 73 in 1905
Record Low: -23 in 1917
Average High: 35
Average Low: 14
Average Precip in March.: 0.10
Precip to date in March: 0.00
Average Precip to date: 1.27
Precip Year to Date: 0.07
Sunset Tonight: 6:25:37 pm
Sunrise Tomorrow: 7:00:23 am



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Today in Weather History

March 4, 1994: Two to five inches of snow fell across northeast and part of central South Dakota from the 3rd into the 4th. This new snowfall, combined with the already deep and expansive snowpack and winds of 20 to 40 mph, brought widespread blowing and drifting snow. Visibilities were reduced to near zero at times, making travel treacherous. Snowdrifts blocked many roads. Many schools, as well as several highways, were closed. Several vehicles became stuck and had to be pulled out. Some snowfall amounts included 4 inches at Clear Lake, Britton, Waubay, and Wilmot; and 5 inches at Onida, Blunt, Highmore, Miller, and Milbank.

1841: President William Henry Harrison was sworn into office on a cloudy, cold, and blustery day. His speech lasted one hour and 40 minutes, and he rode a horse to and from the Capitol without a hat or overcoat. Unfortunately, he died from pneumonia a month later, or did he?

1873: The second inauguration of Ulysses S. Grant remains Washington, DC's record cold March day. The low was 4 degrees, and by noon with the sunshine, the temperature was 16 degrees. Wind chills were around 30 degrees below zero. The 40 mph winds made his inaugural address inaudible to most on the platform with him.

1899: Cyclone Mahina, aka "The Bathurst Bay Hurricane" in Australia, was credited with producing the highest storm surge on record worldwide. The cyclone, with an estimated central pressure of 911 millibars or 26.90 inches of mercury, caused a 42.6-foot surge when it came ashore on the coast of northern Australia. The storm killed as many as 400 people and is Australia's deadliest cyclone.

1909 - Though fair weather was forecast, President Taft was inaugurated amidst a furious storm. About ten inches of wet snow disrupted travel and communications. The storm drew much criticism against the U.S. Weather Bureau. (David Ludlum)

1953 - Snow was reported on the island of Oahu in Hawaii. (The Weather Channel)

1960: Eastern Massachusetts' most significant March snowstorm occurred on March 4-5th, 1960. The storm produced record 24-hour snowfall totals 27.2 inches at Blue Hill Observatory, 17.7 inches at Worcester, and 16.6 inches at Boston. Winds gusted to 70 mph

1966 - A severe blizzard raged across Minnesota and North Dakota. The blizzard lasted four days producing up to 35 inches of snow, and wind gusting to 100 mph produced snow drifts 30 to 40 feet high. Bismarck ND reported zero visibility for 11 hours. Traffic was paralyzed for three days. (2nd-5th) (The Weather Channel)

1971: A potent storm system blasted the northeastern U.S. on March 3-5th, 1971. The barometric pressure dropped to 28.36 inches at Worcester, MA, for the lowest pressure recorded at that location.

1983: Brownsville, Texas, recorded a high of 100 degrees, the earliest the city has ever hit the century mark.

1987 - Rain and high winds prevailed in the northwestern U.S. A wind gust to 69 mph at Klamath Falls OR was their highest in 25 years, and winds at the Ashland Ranger Station in the Siskiyou Mountains of northern California reached 85 mph. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

1988 - Snow and freezing rain made travel hazardous in Ohio and Indiana. A six car pile-up resulted near Columbus OH, with seven injuries reported. Up to two inches of ice glazed central Indiana. Up to ten inches of snow blanketed northern Ohio. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

1989 - Thunderstorms produced severe weather in the Lower Mississippi Valley. A strong (F-3) tornado injured five persons near Brownsville MS, and killed seven cows and two hogs in one pasture. Thunderstorm winds gusted to 90 mph at Canton MS. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

1990 - A Pacific cold front working its way across the western U.S. produced heavy snow over parts of Idaho, Nevada and Utah. Up to eleven inches of snow blanketed the valleys of northwest Utah, while 12 to 25 inches fell across the mountains of northern Utah. Up to six inches of snow blanketed the valleys of east central Nevada, while more than a foot of snow was reported in the high elevations. In Idaho, 6 to 8 inches of snow was reported around Aberdeen and American Falls. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

2004 - An F0 tornado 2 miles north of Muldrow breaks a record stretch of days without a reported tornado, 292 days.

2008 - Only two days after reaching 78 degrees, St. Louis receives nearly a foot of snow in seven hours, the biggest snowstorm in 15 years.

Daily Devotionals

Seeds of Hope

TURNING DEAF EARS

Roger was sent home from school with a note from his teacher. "Mrs. Arnold," the note read, "your son was involved in an incident in the cafeteria today. He and two other students took the food from another student's tray and would not allow him to eat. He has been assigned a week of detention starting tomorrow."

After reading the note to Roger, Mrs. Arnold said, "Son, why did you do such a thing?"

After a moment's thought, he replied, "Mom, the other guys asked me to help them, and I thought it would be fun!"

"Shame on you, Roger," said his mother. "When you are asked to do things that are wrong, you should turn a deaf ear."

"But Mom," he protested, "I can't do that. I don't have a deaf ear."

It is difficult to go through one day without being tempted by Satan to disobey God. He's always there presenting one opportunity after another to get us to turn from the Lord and accept his invitation to break God's laws and harm ourselves and others. However, being tempted is not a problem. Giving in to the temptation to disobey God's commandments is.

Perhaps we can describe temptation as Satan peeking into the keyhole of our heart, trying to find a "weak spot." He then enters without any warning or notice and will only leave when asked. We must be alert and aware of his subtle skills to lead us astray.

Prayer: Alert us, Lord, to the subtleties of Satan when he begins to tempt us to follow him and turn from You. May we fill our hearts with Your truths and stay strong. In Jesus' Name, Amen.

Scripture For Today: And do not bring sorrow to God's Holy Spirit by the way you live. Remember, he has identified you as his own, guaranteeing that you will be saved on the day of redemption. Ephesians 4:25-31



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

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WINNING NUMBERS

MEGA MILLIONS

WINNING NUMBERS: 03.01.24

15 33 37 55 61 24

MegaPlier: 4x

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:

\$650,000,000

NEXT DRAW: 1 Days 17 Hrs 29 Mins 31 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

LOTTO AMERICA

WINNING NUMBERS:
03.02.24

9 19 35 38 45 3

All Star Bonus: 2x

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:

\$3,720,000

NEXT DRAW: 16 Hrs 44 Mins 31 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

LUCKY FOR LIFE

WINNING NUMBERS:
03.03.24

3 18 20 42 45 8

TOP PRIZE:

\$7,000/week

NEXT DRAW: 16 Hrs 59 Mins 31 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

DAKOTA CASH

WINNING NUMBERS:
03.02.24

3 10 20 32 35

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:

\$20,000

NEXT DRAW: 2 Days 16 Hrs 59 Mins 32 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

POWERBALL

DOUBLE PLAY

WINNING NUMBERS:
03.02.24

18 31 36 43 61 10

TOP PRIZE:

\$10,000,000

NEXT DRAW: 17 Hrs 28 Mins 32 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

POWERBALL

WINNING NUMBERS:
03.02.24

3 18 27 36 53 12

Power Play: 2x

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:

\$460,000,000

NEXT DRAW: 17 Hrs 28 Mins 32 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

News from the Associated Press

Texas firefighters battle flames stoked by strong winds as warnings are issued across the region

VALERIE GONZALEZ Associated Press

McALLEN, Texas (AP) — Strong winds spread flames on Sunday and prompted at least one evacuation while airplanes dropped fire retardant over the northern Texas Panhandle as firefighters worked to stop the largest wildfire in state history.

As of Sunday afternoon, the Smokehouse Creek fire, which has burned more than 1 million acres (404,685 hectares), was 15% contained. Two other fires that have burned a combined 180,000 acres (72,843 hectares), were 60% contained.

Authorities have not said what ignited the fires, but strong winds, dry grass and unseasonably warm temperatures fed the blazes.

A cluster of fires has burned across more than 1,900 square miles (4,921 square kilometers) in rural areas surrounding Amarillo, while the largest blaze spilled into neighboring Oklahoma.

U.S. Homeland Security Secretary Alejandro Mayorkas on Sunday said the federal government has devoted funds, equipment and personnel to assist with battling the fires, but warned more extreme weather could be coming.

"More than a million acres have burned. And we are in winter, and this is the largest fire in Texas history," Mayorkas said during a CNN interview. "We, as a country and as a world, have to be ready for the increasing effects of extreme weather caused by climate change. It's a remarkable phenomenon, and it will manifest itself in the days to come, and we have to prepare for it now."

The National Weather Service on Sunday issued red flag warnings — signifying extreme fire risk due to warm temperatures, low humidity and strong winds — across much of the central U.S., including Texas and its neighboring states of New Mexico and Oklahoma.

Red flag warnings also covered nearly all of Nebraska and Iowa, along with large swaths of Kansas, Missouri and South Dakota. Smaller portions of Colorado, Wyoming, Minnesota and Illinois also were under red flag warnings.

Strong winds spread the flames, prompting an evacuation order to be issued in Sanford, a Texas town of a little more than 100 residents, according to a post by the Amarillo office of the National Weather Service on X, formerly Twitter.

As firefighters fought the unprecedented wildfires, humanitarian organizations pivoted to victims who have lost their homes and livelihoods. Residents began clearing affected property on Saturday and by Sunday the extent of the loss began mounting.

Donations ranging from \$25 to \$500 have been critical for the Hutchinson County United Way Wildfire Relief Fund, which is dispersing proceeds to displaced families.

"We already know that a large group of people are uninsured who lost their homes. So without monetary assistance, it's going to be very hard for them to start back over," said Julie Winters, executive director for Hutchinson County United Way.

The organization has heard estimates of more than 150 homes being impacted in the county, noting the fires extend to at least five other counties, Winters said.

A steady outpouring of donated clothing, water and hot meals quickly overwhelmed one community in the affected area. The city of Borger, Texas, urged people in a social media post to redirect donation efforts from food and water to clean-up supplies including shovels, rakes, gloves and trash bags.

Tim Scott lost his own presidential bid.

But he's gotten Donald Trump's attention for vice president

By JILL COLVIN Associated Press

COLUMBIA, S.C. (AP) — The biggest winner of the Republican primary season so far, besides Donald Trump, might be Tim Scott.

The South Carolina senator failed in his own bid for president. But his enthusiastic campaigning for the former president has been generating buzz about Scott's prospects as Trump's potential pick for a running mate.

Scott played a starring role in his home state's Feb. 24 primary election, hyping the crowd about Trump at rallies and in interviews. During a Fox News town hall, Trump, who rarely likes to share the spotlight, taped a segment in which he and Scott appeared together on stage in matching red ties, a visual that made them look like they were already a ticket.

"A lot of people are talking about that gentleman right over there," Trump told the audience earlier in the program when asked who was on his vice presidential shortlist, pointing to Scott, who was sitting in the front row, smiling wide.

Trump's march to the Republican nomination has brought forward a slew of vice presidential hopefuls. Some have been openly jockeying for the spot for more than a year now, flying themselves to Trump's rallies and campaigning for him across early-voting states. If Trump wins the White House, he will be constitutionally ineligible to run again, making his vice president a nearly automatic front-runner in 2028.

But any potential contender to join Trump must consider the political fate of his last running mate, former Vice President Mike Pence. He became a pariah among many Trump supporters for refusing to go along with Trump's debunked voter fraud theories and for trying to stop the certification of the 2020 election that Trump lost to Democrat Joe Biden.

Scott, 58, has refused to talk about whether he would have acted differently during the Jan. 6 insurrection and sidestepped questions about the vice president's role in elections. Scott voted in favor of certifying the 2020 results and said during a presidential debate last year that Pence had done the right thing.

"The one thing we know about the future is that the former president, fortunately, he'll be successful in 2024, he won't be facing that situation again," he said in a February television interview.

Trump has offered mixed public signals about his search for a running mate as he closes in on the Republican nomination, saying at one point that he had already made his choice, only to later walk that back. In an interview Tuesday with Michigan's WJR-AM radio, Trump said he was in "no rush" to make an announcement. He added: "I want to keep you guessing."

Aides who once insisted it was too early to discuss the role declined to comment this past week. A spokesman pointed to Trump's public comments.

Beyond Scott, Trump met Monday with South Dakota Gov. Kristi Noem, whom he has said is on his shortlist, at his Mar-a-Lago club in Florida. She told The Dakota Scout that the two had had "a good, long conversation" in which they had talked "a little bit about 2024."

Noem has told fellow Republicans that she may be chosen as vice president, according to two people familiar with the comments who spoke on condition of anonymity to discuss the private conversations.

The efforts have also been playing out publicly.

This year's main stage at the Conservative Political Action Conference outside Washington had the feel of a reality TV-style open audition. Among them were New York Rep. Elise Stefanik, who labeled her upstate congressional district "Trump and Elise Country," and Ohio's JD Vance, who has become one of Trump's top allies in the Senate. Also appearing were former Trump rival Vivek Ramaswamy, who maintains strong support with the "Make America Great Again" base, Florida Rep. Byron Donalds, whom Trump has hailed as "a superstar with a tremendous future," and Arizona Senate candidate Kari Lake.

Noem and Ramaswamy tied for first in CPAC's annual straw poll, an unscientific survey that nonetheless offers a gauge of the leanings of the party's activist base. (Former Hawaii Rep. Tulsi Gabbard, Stefanik and Scott made up a second tier.)

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Others sometimes mentioned as potential picks include Ben Carson, Trump's former housing secretary; North Dakota Gov. Doug Burgum, who endorsed Trump after ending his own bid for the nomination; Trump's former press secretary, Arkansas Gov. Sarah Huckabee Sanders; and Sen. Marsha Blackburn of Tennessee.

Aides and allies have said Trump, who demands loyalty from those who work for him, is looking for someone who can serve as effective cheerleader and surrogate, but also someone who won't overshadow him in the role. While Trump has expressed interest in choosing a woman, his campaign is also trying to attract more minority voters, particularly Black and Hispanic men.

Scott is the Senate's only Black Republican and speaks often about his hardscrabble roots. He was raised by a single mother who worked long hours as a nurse's assistant to provide for him and his brother after her divorce from their father.

Describing himself as a "born-again believer," Scott often quotes Scripture at campaign events, weaving his reliance on spiritual guidance into his stump speech.

People familiar with their relationship say Trump and Scott have developed a strong rapport. The two spent extensive time together on the road in recent weeks and have developed what South Carolina Sen. Lindsey Graham, who has been pushing Trump to pick Scott, recently described as good "chemistry."

Scott plans to continue to campaign on Trump's behalf beyond South Carolina, including appearances on Fox News Channel, where he is a frequent guest.

"I want to do what's really best for the country," he said when asked by The Wall Street Journal whether he was interested in serving as Trump's vice president.

Scott's decision to endorse Trump came at a crucial moment — before the New Hampshire primary in January — and was a major blow to Trump rival Nikki Haley, who had been counting on the state to try to halt Trump's march to the nomination.

At one rally, Trump joked that Scott "must really hate" Haley to choose the former president over the onetime U.N. ambassador who as South Carolina governor had selected Scott for an open Senate seat.

Scott came to the microphone unprompted and said, "I just love you!"

Scott ran a lackluster White House campaign despite entering the race with a massive war chest and an optimistic message. The vice presidential debate is arguably a candidate's most important campaign duty and Scott received poor reviews for his performances in the GOP matchups, seeming to disappear from the stage.

But the senator has been far more animated in the surrogate role — a fact Trump has pointed out again and again.

"He has been much better for me than he was for himself. I watched his campaign and he doesn't like talking about himself. But boy does he talk about Trump," he said at the Fox town hall.

South Carolina Gov. Henry McMaster said he had listened to Trump "talk about how great Tim Scott is."

"You've probably heard him say he makes a better candidate for the president than he does by himself. But that's Tim Scott's nature. He doesn't like to boast or brag or put himself out. He just likes to talk about others and the issues and he's very good at it," McMaster said.

Trump's public affinity for Scott hasn't gone away after the South Carolina primary.

Appearing Thursday on Fox News during a visit to the U.S.-Mexico border, Trump was asked by host Sean Hannity if he would consider Texas Gov. Greg Abbott for vice president. He turned to Abbott, who was next to him, and praised him as a "spectacular" man who offered an endorsement months ago.

Then, he shifted to talking about Scott.

"He's a very good man," he said. "For me, he's unbelievable."

As Biden prepares to address the nation, more than 6 in 10 US adults doubt his mental capability

By JOSH BOAK and AMELIA THOMSON-DEVEAUX Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — A poll finds that a growing share of U.S. adults doubt that 81-year-old President Joe Biden has the memory and acuity for the job, turning his coming State of the Union address into something of a real-time audition for a second term.

Roughly 6 in 10 say they're not very or not at all confident in Biden's mental capability to serve effectively as president, according to a new survey by The Associated Press-NORC Center for Public Affairs Research. That's a slight increase from January 2022, when about half of those polled expressed similar concerns.

By the same token, nearly 6 in 10 also say they lack confidence in the mental capability of former President Donald Trump, the 77-year-old Republican front-runner.

For many voters, this year's election looks like a showdown for the world's toughest job between two men who are well beyond the standard retirement age. The next president will probably need to steer through global conflicts, fix domestic emergencies and work with a dysfunctional Congress.

Biden is likely to address those challenges and more in his State of the Union address on Thursday as he tries to convince Americans that he deserves another term.

Going into the big event, just 38% of U.S. adults approve of how Biden is handling his job as president, while 61% disapprove. Democrats (74%) are much likelier than independents (20%) and Republicans (6%) to favor his performance. But there's broad discontent on the way Biden is handling a variety of issues, including the economy, immigration and foreign policy.

About 4 in 10 Americans approve of the way Biden is handling each of these issues: health care, climate change, abortion policy and the conflict between Russia and Ukraine. But people are less satisfied by Biden's handling of immigration (29%), the conflict between the Israelis and the Palestinians (31%) and the economy (34%) — all of which are likely to come up in the speech before a joint session of Congress.

Nearly 6 in 10 (57%) Americans think the national economy is somewhat or much worse off than before Biden took office in 2021. Only 3 in 10 adults say it's better under his leadership. Still, people are more optimistic about the state of their own bank accounts: 54% say their personal finances are good.

Many respondents to the survey were deeply pessimistic about their likely choices in November because of age and the risk of cognitive decline.

Paul Miller, himself 84, said Biden is just too old — and so is Trump.

"He doesn't seem to have the mental whatever to be a president," Miller said of Biden. He added that Trump is "too old, too, and half crazy."

The retiree from Carlisle, Pennsylvania, said he voted for Trump in 2020 but he wouldn't do so again.

"I don't think I'm going to vote for either one of them," he said. "I hope somebody else is available."

The president faces added pressure about his age after unflattering descriptions of him contained in a special counsel's report that did not recommend criminal prosecution of Biden for his mishandling of classified records, unlike Trump who was indicted for keeping classified material in his Florida home. The report said that Biden's memory was "hazy," "fuzzy," "faulty," "poor" and had "significant limitations."

Biden has tried to deflect concerns by joking about his age and taking jabs at Trump's own gaffes. Yet the president's age is a liability that has overshadowed his policy achievements on infrastructure, manufacturing and addressing climate change.

About one-third of Democrats said they're not very or not at all confident in Biden's mental capability in the new survey, up from 14% in January 2022. Only 40% of Democrats said they're extremely or very confident in Biden's mental abilities, with approximately 3 in 10 saying they're "somewhat" confident.

And in a major risk for Biden, independents are much more likely to say that they lack confidence in his mental abilities (80%) compared with Trump's (56%).

Republicans are generally more comfortable with Trump's mental capabilities than Democrats are with Biden's. In the survey, 59% of Republicans are extremely or very confident that Trump has the mental abilities to be president. An additional 20% are somewhat confident, and 20% are not very or not at all

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confident.

But if there is one thing Democrats and Republicans can agree upon, it's that the other party's likely nominee is not mentally up to the task. About 9 in 10 Republicans say Biden lacks the mental capability to serve as president, while a similar share of Democrats say that about Trump.

Part of Biden's problem is that his policies have yet to break through the daily clutter of life.

Sharon Gallagher, 66, worries about inflation. She voted for Biden in 2020, but believes he has not done enough for the economy. She also feels Trump is a bit too quick to anger. The Sarasota, Florida, resident said she doesn't have the bandwidth to really judge their policies.

"I don't pay enough attention to politics to even know," Gallagher said. "I have grandchildren living with me and I have children's shows on all day."

Justin Tjernlund, 40, from Grand Rapids, Michigan, said Biden "seems like he's mostly still there," but even if he was in decline he has "a whole army of people to help him do the job." Tjernlund said he voted for Trump in 2020 and plans to do so again because the Republican is "interesting" and "refreshing."

Still, because of both candidates' ages, Greg Olivo, 62, said he plans to focus on Vice President Kamala Harris and whomever Trump, if he's the nominee, picks for a running mate.

"Keep a close eye on the vice president," said the machinist from Valley City, Ohio, who voted for Biden in 2020 and would do so again. "Because that person will probably be the president in four years, one way or another."

The poll of 1,102 adults was conducted Feb. 22-26, 2024, using a sample drawn from NORC's probability-based AmeriSpeak Panel, which is designed to be representative of the U.S. population. The margin of sampling error for all respondents is plus or minus 4.1 percentage points.

Haiti orders nightly curfew trying to restore calm after a weekend of violence and prison break

By EVENS SANON and PIERRE-RICHARD LUXAMA Associated Press

PORT-AU-PRINCE, Haiti (AP) — Authorities have ordered a nighttime curfew in an attempt to regain control of Haiti's streets after an explosion of violence during the weekend, including gunmen from gangs overrunning the country's two biggest prisons and freeing their inmates.

A 72-hour state of emergency began Sunday night, and the government said it would set out to find the killers, kidnappers and other violent criminals that it reported escaped from prison.

"The police were ordered to use all legal means at their disposal to enforce the curfew and apprehend all offenders," said a statement from Finance Minister Patrick Boivert, who is serving as acting prime minister.

Prime Minister Ariel Henry traveled abroad last week to try to salvage support for bringing in a United Nations-backed security force to help stabilize Haiti in its conflict with increasingly powerful crime groups.

The emergency decree was issued after a deadly weekend that marked a new low in Haiti's downward spiral of violence. At least nine people had been killed since Thursday — four of them police officers — as gangs stepped up coordinated attacks on state institutions in Port-au-Prince, including the country's international airport and the national soccer stadium.

But the attack on the National Penitentiary late Saturday was a big shock Haitians, even though they are accustomed to living under the constant threat of violence.

Almost all of the estimated 4,000 inmates escaped, leaving the normally overcrowded prison eerily empty Sunday with no guards in sight and plastic sandals, clothing and furniture strewn across the concrete patio. Three bodies with gunshot wounds lay at the prison entrance.

In another neighborhood, the bloodied corpses of two men with their hands tied behind the backs lay face down as residents walked past roadblocks set up with burning tires.

Among the few dozen that chose to stay in the prison are 18 former Colombian soldiers accused of working as mercenaries in the July 2021 assassination of Haitian President Jovenel Moïse. Amid the fight-

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ing Saturday night, several of the Colombians shared a video pleading for their lives.

"Please, please help us," one of the men, Francisco Uribe, said in the message widely shared on social media. "They are massacring people indiscriminately inside the cells."

On Sunday, Uribe told journalists who walked into the normally highly guarded facility, "I didn't flee because I'm innocent."

Colombia's foreign ministry called on Haiti to provide "special protection" for the men.

A second Port-au-Prince prison containing around 1,400 inmates was also overrun.

Gang gunmen also occupied and vandalized the nation's top soccer stadium, holding one employee hostage for hours, Haiti's soccer federation said.

Gunfire was reported in several neighborhoods in the capital. Internet service for many residents was down as Haiti's top mobile network said a fiber optic cable connection was slashed during the rampage.

In the space of less than two weeks, several state institutions have been attacked by the gangs, which are increasingly coordinating their actions and choosing once unthinkable targets like the Central Bank. As part of coordinated attacks by gangs, four police officers were killed Thursday.

After gangs opened fire at Haiti's international airport last week, the U.S. Embassy said it was halting all official travel to the country and on Sunday night urged all American citizens to depart as soon as possible. The embassy said it would also cancel until Thursday all consular appointments.

The Biden administration, which has steadfastly refused to commit troops to any multinational force while offering instead money and logistical support, said it was monitoring the rapidly deteriorating security situation with grave concern.

The surge in attacks follows violent protests that turned deadlier in recent days as the prime minister went to Kenya seeking to move ahead on a proposed U.N.-backed security mission in Haiti to be led by that East African country.

Henry took over as prime minister following Moise's assassination and has repeatedly postponed plans to hold parliamentary and presidential elections, which haven't happened in almost a decade.

Haiti's National Police has roughly 9,000 officers to provide security for more than 11 million people, according to the U.N. They are routinely overwhelmed and outgunned by gangs, which are estimated to control up to 80% of Port-au-Prince.

Jimmy Chérizier, a former elite police officer known as Barbecue who now runs a gang federation, has claimed responsibility for the surge in attacks. He said the goal is to capture Haiti's police chief and government ministers and prevent Henry's return.

The prime minister, a neurosurgeon, has shrugged off calls for him to resign and didn't comment when asked if he felt it was safe to come home.

Masked shooters kill 4 people and injure 3 at an outdoor party in California, police say

KING CITY, Calif. (AP) — A group of men in masks opened fire at an outdoor party in central California, killing four people and injuring three others Sunday evening, police said.

Police responded to a reported shooting around 6 p.m. in King City and found three men with gunshot wounds who were pronounced dead in a front yard, the King City Police Department said in a statement.

Four other people sustained gunshot wounds, including a woman who died after being transported to Mee Memorial Hospital in King City, about 106 miles (170 kilometers) south of San Jose.

The three injured men were transported to Natividad Hospital in Salinas, police said.

Several people were at the party outside a residence when three men with dark masks and clothes got out of a silver car and fired at the group. The suspects, who were not immediately identified, then fled the scene in the car.

The investigation is ongoing, police said.

The Supreme Court could decide Monday whether Trump can be barred from the 2024 ballot

By MARK SHERMAN Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Former President Donald Trump could learn Monday whether the Supreme Court will let him appear on this year's ballot as the leading Republican presidential candidate tries to close in on his party's nomination.

The justices are expected to decide at least one case Monday, with signs strongly pointing to resolution of the case from Colorado that threatens to kick Trump off some state ballots because of his efforts to overturn his election loss in 2020. Any opinions will post on the court's website beginning just after 10 a.m. EST.

Trump is challenging a groundbreaking decision by the Colorado Supreme Court that said he is disqualified from being president again and ineligible for the state's primary, which is Tuesday.

The resolution of the case on Monday, a day before Super Tuesday contests in 16 states, would remove uncertainty about whether votes for Trump will ultimately count. Both sides had requested fast work by the court, which heard arguments less than a month ago, on Feb. 8.

The justices seemed poised then to rule in Trump's favor.

The Colorado court was the first to invoke a post-Civil War constitutional provision aimed at preventing those who "engaged in insurrection" from holding office. Trump also has since been barred from primary ballot in Illinois and Maine, though both decisions, along with Colorado's, are on hold pending the outcome of the Supreme Court case.

The Supreme Court has until now never ruled on the provision, Section 3 of the 14th amendment.

The court indicated Sunday there will be at least one case decided Monday, adhering to its custom of not saying which one. But it also departed from its usual practice in some respects, heightening the expectation that it's the Trump ballot case that will be handed down.

Except for when the end of the term approaches in late June, the court almost always issues decisions on days when the justices are scheduled to take the bench. But the next scheduled court day isn't until March 15. And apart from during the coronavirus pandemic when the court was closed, the justices almost always read summaries of their opinions in the courtroom. They won't be there Monday.

Separately, the justices last week agreed to hear arguments in late April over whether Trump can be criminally prosecuted on election interference charges, including his role in the Jan. 6, 2021, attack on the U.S. Capitol. The court's decision to step into the politically charged case, also with little in the way of precedent to guide it, calls into question whether Trump will stand trial before the November election.

The former president faces 91 criminal charges in four prosecutions. Of those, the only one with a trial date that seems on track to hold is his state case in New York, where he's charged with falsifying business records in connection with hush money payments to a porn actor. That case is set for trial on March 25, and the judge has signaled his determination to press ahead.

Harris is to meet with Israeli Cabinet official who is in Washington despite Netanyahu's rebuke

By AAMER MADHANI and SEUNG MIN KIM Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Vice President Kamala Harris on Monday is hosting a member of Israel's wartime Cabinet who is visiting Washington in defiance of Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu.

Benny Gantz, a centrist political rival of Netanyahu, is sitting down with several senior Biden administration officials this week, including Harris, Secretary of State Antony Blinken and Jake Sullivan, the White House national security adviser. President Joe Biden is at Camp David, the presidential retreat just outside Washington, until Tuesday.

An official from Netanyahu's far-right Likud party said Gantz did not have approval from the prime minister for his meetings in Washington and that Netanyahu gave the Cabinet official a "tough talk" — underscor-

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ing the widening crack within Israel's wartime leadership nearly six months into the Israel-Hamas war.

In her meeting with Gantz, Harris plans to press for a temporary cease-fire deal that would allow for the release of several categories of hostages being held by Hamas. Israel has essentially agreed to the deal, according to a senior Biden administration official, and the White House has emphasized that the onus is on Hamas to come on board.

"Given the immense scale of suffering in Gaza, there must be an immediate cease-fire for at least the next six weeks, which is what is currently on the table," Harris said during an appearance in Selma, Alabama, on Sunday. "This will get the hostages out and get a significant amount of aid in."

Harris continued: "This would allow us to build something more enduring to ensure Israel is secure and to respect the right of the Palestinian people to dignity, freedom and self-determination."

For his part, Gantz intends to strengthen ties with the U.S., bolster support for Israel's war and push for the release of Israeli hostages, according to a second Israeli official. The officials spoke on condition of anonymity because they weren't allowed to publicly discuss the disputes within the Israeli government.

The meetings also come as the U.S. begins a series of airdrops of aid into Gaza, just days after dozens of Palestinians were killed as they were trying to get food from an Israel-organized convoy. The first drop on Saturday included about 38,000 meals into southwest Gaza, and White House officials have said those airdrops will continue to supplement truck deliveries, while they also work on sending aid via sea.

In Selma on Sunday, Harris called on Israel to "do more to significantly increase the flow of aid."

"No excuses," she said. "They must open new border crossings. They must not impose any unnecessary restrictions on the delivery of aid."

Harris previously met Gantz at the Munich Security Conference in 2022.

China seeks ways to revive slowing economy and salvage property market as annual congress convenes

By DAKE KANG and ELAINE KURTENBACH Associated Press

BEIJING (AP) — It's clear that China's efforts to build confidence in its slowing economy will top the agenda of its ceremonial national legislature, which convenes Tuesday in Beijing.

What remains unclear is how the ruling Communist Party can navigate toward stronger, sustained growth as China's workforce is aging, relations with Washington are fraught, and housing construction — a main driver of the economy — is in crisis.

Hopes for a strong, consumer-led recovery after severe anti-virus controls ended in late 2022 have not been fulfilled. Local governments are mired in trillions of dollars of debt and direct investment by foreign companies in China fell by about 80% last year.

As more than 5,000 leaders from across China are gathered in Beijing for the year's biggest political events, the mood on the streets and in financial markets remains glum.

That's in contrast to official messaging as the country marks 75 years from the People's Republic founding in 1949.

"We are confident of consolidating and enhancing the recovering and growing trend of the economy," the party newspaper People's Daily wrote in a commentary Saturday.

"We are fully capable of turning pressure into a driving force, accumulating and turning advantages into victorious trends and steering the advance of the great ship of the economy while braving wind and waves," it added.

For videographer Wang Tao, the question is what the leadership will do about jobs. At 41, he's struggling to find work in a labor market where companies tend not to hire anyone over 35.

"At first I thought it was difficult only for older people like me, but later I found out that many young people ... are having a hard time finding work," Wang said. "The general employment situation is grave."

The congress endorses decisions already made by top leaders, providing a platform to publicize government plans and instruct officials on what they should do back home.

China's most powerful leader in decades, Xi Jinping, will preside. He has installed loyalists in top posts to

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strengthen the party's control over the economy and society. Xi, 70, is in his third five-year term as party general secretary and may hold that post for life.

Premier Li Qiang is expected to announce an official economic growth target when the National People's Congress convenes Tuesday in Beijing's ornate Great Hall of the People. State media suggest it will be about 5%, on par with last year's 5.2% growth.

Many economists are forecasting much slower growth of 4% or less. In 2022, it dipped to 3%, the second-lowest level since at least the 1970s.

Li's annual work report will include plans for "promoting high-quality development and advancing Chinese modernization," the official Xinhua News Agency reported.

Many in China are hoping that will mean more government spending, said Logan Wright of the Rhodium Group, an independent research firm.

"Everyone will be watching for whether there is significant fiscal stimulus on offer," Wright said. But spending alone won't suffice. "The time to solve the short-term problems and prevent them from becoming long-term problems is now. So what is the plan?" Wright said.

The downturn in the property market followed a crackdown on excess borrowing by real estate developers. Dozens since have defaulted on their debts. The largest, Country Garden, faces liquidation proceedings. Another, China Evergrande, is being liquidated with more than \$300 billion in debt.

Plunging tax revenues from property sales are also weighing on the financial system. To encourage more property lending, the central bank has cut its five-year prime loan rate. Many cities have relaxed controls on property deals imposed earlier to cool price bubbles, and some 6,000 property projects have been green-lighted for lending.

"The property market has been such a significant source of China's growth and now it has gone into reverse," Wright said, though he noted there are signs the market is stabilizing. "If you look at how China is responding to this, it is indicative of a more severe slowdown than what the official data would suggest."

The problems deepened with shocks from the pandemic, when anti-virus controls led some cities into weekslong shutdowns and factories ended up with huge backlogs. Now, instead of soaring prices, China is trying to fend off a potentially debilitating cycle of deflation, or chronically falling prices.

Exports, another main driver of growth, dropped in 2023 for the first time in seven years, even as the U.S. economy remained defied forecasts that it would fall into recession.

Despite official indications that China's yearslong anti-monopoly and data security crackdowns on technology companies have ended, entrepreneurs are jittery. Many small businesses complain they cannot collect on bills owed to them, and bankruptcies have soared.

Meanwhile, global companies have been shifting investments to countries like India and Vietnam to minimize risks from China-U.S. political tensions and the party's tighter domestic controls, in some cases raiding the Chinese offices of foreign businesses.

"The system is not that transparent and the lack of transparency creates a lot of uncertainty," said James Zimmerman, a lawyer and former head of the American Chamber of Commerce in Beijing. That's particularly true when it comes to issues of national security, he said, where just conducting research for due diligence can land people in jail.

Xi's talks with President Joe Biden and U.S. business leaders at a regional summit in San Francisco in September conveyed the message that "China is open for business," Zimmerman said, "but there was nothing in there in his presentation that got to specifics about what reform and what type of changes are going to happen, you know, to give people the comfort level."

These challenges come at a time of transition.

China's workforce has been shrinking for over a decade, putting pressure on an economy that still relies on labor-intensive industries. With housing prices falling and stocks prices limping along, even middle-class families are scrimping rather than spending.

"Spending power is worse than before, probably because we didn't make money during the pandemic," said Jiang Yingjie, a salesperson in Beijing.

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One strategy would be to shift more national wealth into workers' pockets, says Michael Pettis, a leading expert on the Chinese economy and professor at Beijing University.

"The problem in China has been the same problem for the last 10 years ... and that is that domestic demand driven by consumption is very weak," he said. Meanwhile, excess investment in construction is yielding diminishing returns.

"So this year is really a year in which they try to figure those imbalances out. They want to raise consumption. But it's very hard to do that because that involves a major redistribution of income," Pettis said.

Worries that China may try to export its way out of its troubles are already raising alarm in the U.S. and Europe, as Chinese banks step up lending to manufacturers of electric vehicles, solar panels and many other industrial products. The issue already features highly in talks between Beijing and Washington.

"If you manufacture more and more and you don't consume it, then you need trade surpluses to absorb it," Pettis said.

Some Chinese localities are trying another approach, creating affordable housing programs that invest in unoccupied apartments. Such a move can counter growing inequality and free up more income for spending.

"I think it has to be a combination of short and longer-term measures.," said Louis Kuijs, Asia-Pacific chief economist at S&P Global. "I think anything that can be done to pump momentum into the economy will be helpful."

Nikki Haley wins the District of Columbia's Republican primary and gets her first 2024 victory

By MEG KINNARD and WILL WEISSERT Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Nikki Haley has won the Republican primary in the District of Columbia, notching her first victory of the 2024 campaign.

Her victory Sunday at least temporarily halts Donald Trump's sweep of the GOP voting contests, although the former president is likely to pick up several hundred more delegates in this week's Super Tuesday races.

Despite her early losses, Haley has said she would remain in the race at least through those contests, although she has declined to name any primary she felt confident she would win. Following her loss in her home state of South Carolina, Haley remained adamant that voters in the places that followed deserved an alternative to Trump despite his dominance thus far in the campaign.

The Associated Press declared Haley the winner Sunday night after D.C. Republican Party officials released the results. She won all 19 delegates at stake.

"It's not surprising that Republicans closest to Washington dysfunction are rejecting Donald Trump and all his chaos," Haley spokesperson Olivia Perez-Cubas said in a statement, noting that Haley became the first woman to win a Republican primary in history.

Washington is one of the most heavily Democratic jurisdictions in the nation, with only about 23,000 registered Republicans in the city. Democrat Joe Biden won the district in the 2020 general election with 92% of the vote.

Trump's campaign issued a statement shortly after Haley's victory sarcastically congratulating her on being named "Queen of the Swamp by the lobbyists and DC insiders that want to protect the failed status quo."

Haley held a rally in the nation's capital on Friday before heading back to North Carolina and a series of states holding Super Tuesday primaries. She joked with more than 100 supporters inside a hotel ballroom, "Who says there's no Republicans in D.C., come on."

"We're trying to make sure that we touch every hand that we can and speak to every person," Haley said.

As she gave her standard campaign speech, criticizing Trump for running up federal deficit, one rallygoer bellowed, "He cannot win a general election. It's madness." That prompted agreement from Haley, who argues that she can deny Biden a second term but Trump can't.

While campaigning as an avowed conservative, Haley has tended to perform better among more moderate and independent-leaning voters.

Four in 10 Haley supporters in South Carolina's GOP primary were self-described moderates, compared

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with 15% for Trump, according to AP VoteCast, a survey of more than 2,400 voters taking part in the Republican primary in South Carolina, conducted for AP by NORC at the University of Chicago. On the other hand, 8 in 10 Trump supporters identified as conservatives, compared to about half of Haley's backers.

Trump won an uncontested D.C. primary during his 2020 reelection bid but placed a distant third four years earlier behind Sen. Marco Rubio of Florida and former Ohio Gov. John Kasich. Rubio's win was one of only three in his unsuccessful 2016 bid. Other more centrist Republicans, including Mitt Romney and John McCain, won the city's primaries in 2012 and 2008 on their way to winning the GOP nomination.

More mountain snow expected even as powerful blizzard moves out of Northern California

By BROOKE HESS and CHRISTOPHER WEBER Associated Press

TRUCKEE, Calif. (AP) — A powerful blizzard that closed highways and ski resorts had mostly moved through the Sierra Nevada by early Monday but forecasters warned that more snow was on the way for Northern California mountains.

Sections of Interstate 80 to the west and north of Lake Tahoe were still shut down late Sunday, with no estimate for reopening, the California Highway Patrol said.

The CHP office in South Lake Tahoe warned motorists that tire chains for improved traction are required on routes through the mountains, where more than 7 feet (2.1 meters) of snow fell over the weekend.

Blizzard warnings had mostly expired but scattered thunderstorms were likely and another 2 feet (60 centimeters) of snow was possible at higher elevations, the National Weather Service office in Sacramento said.

"Mountain travel is HIGHLY discouraged!" the office warned.

The multiday storm caused traffic backups and closures on I-80 and many other roadways, shut down ski resorts for two days, and left thousands of homes and businesses without power.

By Sunday night, Pacific Gas & Electric had restored electricity to all but about 4,400 Northern California customers, while NV Energy had reduced its outages to roughly 1,000 homes and businesses across the state line in Nevada.

Palisades Tahoe, the largest resort on the north end of the lake, was among several ski mountains that closed most or all chairlifts for a second straight day Sunday because of snow, wind and low visibility. Palisades reported a three-day snow total of 6 feet (1.8 meters), with more falling.

"We will be digging out for the foreseeable future," officials said on the resort's blog.

Kevin Dupui, who lives in Truckee, just northwest of Lake Tahoe, said his snow blower broke, but it doesn't really matter because there's nowhere to put all the snow anyway. "We just move it around," he said Sunday.

Dupui said residents and tourists seem to be mostly heeding warnings to stay home. "The roads haven't been that safe, so we don't really want people driving around," he said.

Another Truckee resident, Jenelle Potvin, said at first some cynical locals thought "there was a little too much hype" made about the approaching storm. But then the unrelenting snow began Friday night.

"It was definitely a blizzard. And we woke up to a lot of snow yesterday and it never let up," Potvin said Sunday. Her neighbors were snowmobiling and cross-country skiing in the streets.

In the eastern Sierra, the Mammoth Mountain Ski Area was closed Sunday as winds of up to 70 mph (113 kph) made it too difficult for ski patrol to complete avalanche mitigation, the resort said. More than 3 feet (nearly 1 meter) of snow fell over three days, and more was on the way.

Weather service meteorologist William Churchill on Saturday called the storm an "extreme blizzard" for the Sierra Nevada but said he didn't expect records to be broken.

The storm began barreling into the region Thursday. A widespread blizzard warning through Sunday morning covered a 300-mile (480-kilometer) stretch of the mountains. A second, weaker storm was forecast to bring additional rain and snow between Monday and Wednesday, forecasters said.

California authorities on Friday shut down 100 miles (160 kilometers) of I-80, the main route between Reno and Sacramento, because of "spin outs, high winds, and low visibility." There was no estimate when the freeway would reopen from the California-Nevada border west of Reno to near Emigrant Gap, California.

Rudy Islas spent about 40 minutes shoveling his car out before heading to work at a coffee shop in Truckee on Sunday morning. Neither he nor his customers were fazed by the snow, he said.

"To be honest, if you're a local, it's not a big deal," he said. "I think a lot of people are used to the snow and they prepare for it."

Texas firefighters battle flames stoked by strong winds as warnings are issued across the region

VALERIE GONZALEZ Associated Press

McALLEN, Texas (AP) — Strong winds spread flames on Sunday and prompted at least one evacuation while airplanes dropped fire retardant over the northern Texas Panhandle as firefighters worked to stop the largest wildfire in state history.

As of Sunday afternoon, the Smokehouse Creek fire, which has burned more than 1 million acres (404,685 hectares), was 15% contained. Two other fires that have burned a combined 180,000 acres (72,843 hectares), were 60% contained.

Authorities have not said what ignited the fires, but strong winds, dry grass and unseasonably warm temperatures fed the blazes.

A cluster of fires has burned across more than 1,900 square miles (4,921 square kilometers) in rural areas surrounding Amarillo, while the largest blaze spilled into neighboring Oklahoma.

U.S. Homeland Security Secretary Alejandro Mayorkas on Sunday said the federal government has devoted funds, equipment and personnel to assist with battling the fires, but warned more extreme weather could be coming.

"More than a million acres have burned. And we are in winter, and this is the largest fire in Texas history," Mayorkas said during a CNN interview. "We, as a country and as a world, have to be ready for the increasing effects of extreme weather caused by climate change. It's a remarkable phenomenon, and it will manifest itself in the days to come, and we have to prepare for it now."

The National Weather Service on Sunday issued red flag warnings — signifying extreme fire risk due to warm temperatures, low humidity and strong winds — across much of the central U.S., including Texas and its neighboring states of New Mexico and Oklahoma.

Red flag warnings also covered nearly all of Nebraska and Iowa, along with large swaths of Kansas, Missouri and South Dakota. Smaller portions of Colorado, Wyoming, Minnesota and Illinois also were under red flag warnings.

Strong winds spread the flames, prompting an evacuation order to be issued in Sanford, a Texas town of a little more than 100 residents, according to a post by the Amarillo office of the National Weather Service on X, formerly Twitter.

As firefighters fought the unprecedented wildfires, humanitarian organizations pivoted to victims who have lost their homes and livelihoods. Residents began clearing affected property on Saturday and by Sunday the extent of the loss began mounting.

Donations ranging from \$25 to \$500 have been critical for the Hutchinson County United Way Wildfire Relief Fund, which is dispersing proceeds to displaced families.

"We already know that a large group of people are uninsured who lost their homes. So without monetary assistance, it's going to be very hard for them to start back over," said Julie Winters, executive director for Hutchinson County United Way.

The organization has heard estimates of more than 150 homes being impacted in the county, noting the fires extend to at least five other counties, Winters said.

A steady outpouring of donated clothing, water and hot meals quickly overwhelmed one community in the affected area. The city of Borger, Texas, urged people in a social media post to redirect donation ef-

forts from food and water to clean-up supplies including shovels, rakes, gloves and trash bags.

Trump keeps making incendiary statements. His campaign says that won't change.

By JILL COLVIN and BILL BARROW Associated Press

GREENSBORO, N.C. (AP) — He's argued his four criminal indictments and mug shot bolstered his support among Black voters who see him as a victim of discrimination just like them.

He's compared himself to Russian opposition leader Alexei Navalny, who died in an Arctic prison imprisoned by Vladimir Putin, and suggested that he is a political dissident, too.

And in nearly every public appearance, he repeats falsehoods about the election he lost.

Candidates on the verge of winning their parties' nominations generally massage their messaging and moderate positions that may energize hardcore primary voters but are less appealing to a broader audience. In political terms, they "pivot."

Not Donald Trump. The former president is instead doubling down on often-incendiary rhetoric that offends wide swaths of voters, seeming to be doing little to rein in his most irascible and oftentimes self-defeating instincts. That's even as some of his most loyal allies have suggested he shift his focus and tone down rhetoric that risks offending independent voters and people outside his base.

"Donald Trump is Donald Trump. That's not going to change," said senior campaign adviser Chris LaCivita. "Our job is not to remake Donald Trump."

LaCivita and other top campaign officials instead say their role is to provide the organization "to amplify and to force project" Trump's message.

The campaign, he said, had already assumed a general election posture before voting began, running ads attacking President Joe Biden before the Iowa caucuses. So while Trump is now talking less about his last remaining GOP rival, former U.N. Ambassador Nikki Haley, his campaign is focused on building out a general election infrastructure as it turns its focus from early voting states to November battlegrounds.

That includes efforts to take over the Republican National Committee, with plans to consolidate the party's and campaign's fundraising, political operations, communications and research operations. LaCivita is in line to become the RNC's chief operating officer while retaining his role on the campaign.

"The campaign's pivot," LaCivita said, "is just a realization that we've already secured what we need to win. That manifests itself in not only the messaging but the mechanics." He said to expect "more of the same" after Trump clinches the nomination, which is expected later this month.

Trump's hardest edges, no matter how familiar to Americans nine years after he first ran for president, produce welcome fodder for Biden's reelection team, which wants to motivate disaffected Democrats and independent voters by warning about a second Trump term.

Trump's speeches at rallies can stretch for two hours as he meanders between policy proposals, personal stories and jokes, attacks on his opponents and complaints that he is being persecuted by the courts, and dire warnings about the country's future. Trump often adds asides that were not in his prepared remarks. But some of his most divisive comments are part of his script.

He has bragged about nominating three Supreme Court justices who voted to end a national right to abortion, even as he urges Republicans not to be too extreme on an issue Democrats have credited for several victories. In promising to carry out the largest deportation operation in U.S. history, he has talked about immigrants "poisoning the blood of our country," echoing Adolf Hitler. And he once described his enemies as "vermin," language opponents deride as authoritarian.

At one rally this past weekend, Trump went so far as to cast Biden's handling of the border as "a conspiracy to overthrow the United States of America."

"Donald Trump is still Donald Trump — the same extreme, dangerous candidate voters rejected in 2020, and they'll reject him again this November regardless of the team he has around him," said Biden spokesman Kevin Munoz.

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Trump's advisers have at times encouraged him to speak less about grievance and retribution and more about his vision for a second term. But after three campaigns for the White House and four years in office, Trump is set in his ways. Former aides learned long ago that trying to pressure Trump to rein in his impulses often only led him to dig in deeper. And his campaign team seems to respect and trust the former president's political instincts, pointing to his sweep of the GOP primaries so far.

Trump spokesman Steven Cheung said Trump would not change. Americans "deserve a president who will not sugarcoat what's happening in the world," he said.

Interviews with Republicans, including Trump supporters and those still backing Haley's beleaguered bid, reflect concerns that Trump risks fumbling a clear opportunity against Biden, who faces low approval ratings and widespread voter questions about his age and readiness for a second term.

"At some point (Trump) needs to take the spotlight off himself," said Tom Davis, a former Virginia congressman who backs Haley. Davis noted improving economic indicators but said Biden remains burdened by concerns about inflation and "has been bad on the border" and "terrible on the deficit."

Even Trump voters seem to recognize the problem: According to AP VoteCast data, about half of Republicans in conservative South Carolina — including about a quarter of Trump's own supporters — are concerned he is too extreme to win the general election. While Trump dominates among conservative voters, those voters represented just 37% of the electorate in the November 2020 presidential election.

Trump held rallies Saturday in North Carolina and Virginia, two states that hold primaries on Super Tuesday but are also potential swing states in November's general election.

Both states highlight Trump's potential problems in November: He dominates among conservatives, especially in rural and small-town America, but struggles with more moderate voters in more urban settings.

North Carolina Gov. Roy Cooper, a Democrat who was re-elected in 2020 even as Trump won his state, said he welcomes the contrast between Trump and Biden.

"Do you want a president who wakes up every morning thinking about the American people?" he asked in an interview. "Or do you want a president who wakes up every morning thinking about himself?"

Biden won Virginia in 2020. A year later, Virginians elected Republican Glenn Youngkin as governor. Youngkin emphasized education and economic policy, and attracted urban and suburban moderates who rejected Trump. Some of the states' suburban and exurban congressional districts have become more favorable to Democrats in the Trump era.

Notably, Youngkin has not endorsed Trump. He declined an interview request through aides.

Former Speaker Newt Gingrich, a Trump ally who sometimes speaks to the former president, compared 2024 to 1980, when Republican Ronald Reagan won a landslide over Democratic incumbent Jimmy Carter, who was saddled with inflation, high unemployment and international conflict. Reagan, dubbed "the happy warrior," won 44 states and a new Republican Senate with "a positive vision," Gingrich said, that was about more than Carter's record.

"When you have the kind of numbers Biden has, what people need is about 70% positive, 30% anti-Biden," Gingrich said, insisting Trump could usher in a Republican wave like when he beat Hillary Clinton in 2016.

Just as possible, however, is a repeat of 2018, when Republicans lost the House majority, or 2020, when Trump lost and Democrats reclaimed Senate control, or 2022, when Republicans lost winnable Senate races and failed to flip the chamber.

South Carolina Sen. Lindsey Graham suggests Trump and his campaign should "just keep doing what they're doing."

But Graham himself has pivoted. After he ran for president in 2016, Graham vowed that "if we nominate Trump, we will get destroyed." Now, he is a Trump confidant.

"Everybody that wants to give him advice, he beat like a drum," Graham said at Trump's South Carolina victory party.

Pentagon leak suspect Jack Teixeira is expected to plead guilty in federal court

By ALANNA DURKIN RICHER Associated Press

BOSTON (AP) — Jack Teixeira, the Massachusetts Air National Guard member accused of leaking highly classified military documents about Russia's war in Ukraine and other national security secrets, is expected to plead guilty on Monday in federal court.

The 22-year-old is due to appear in Boston's federal courthouse for a change of plea hearing nearly a year after he was arrested in the case stemming from the most consequential national security leak in years.

Teixeira, of North Dighton, Massachusetts, has been behind bars since his April arrest in the case that raised alarm over America's ability to protect its most closely guarded secrets and forced the Biden administration to scramble to try to contain diplomatic and military fallout.

The leak led the Pentagon to tighten controls to safeguard classified information, and the Air Force disciplined 15 personnel as its inspector general found last year that multiple officials intentionally failed to take required action about Teixeira's suspicious behavior.

Teixeira had previously pleaded not guilty to six counts of willful retention and transmission of national defense information under the Espionage Act. Each count is punishable by up to 10 years in prison.

A judge last year ordered Teixeira to remain behind bars while he awaits trial after prosecutors revealed he had a history of violent rhetoric and warned that U.S. adversaries who might be interested in mining Teixeira for information could help him escape.

Teixeira remains in the Air National Guard in an unpaid status, the Air Force said.

Neither prosecutors nor defense attorneys have provided further details about Teixeira's plea agreement. An attorney for Teixeira has not responded to messages seeking comment.

Teixeira was part of the 102nd Intelligence Wing at Otis Air National Guard Base in Massachusetts when authorities say he illegally collected military secrets and shared them with other users on Discord, a social media platform popular with people playing online games. Teixeira worked as a "cyber transport systems specialist," essentially an IT specialist responsible for military communications networks.

Authorities said he first typed out classified documents he accessed and then began sharing photographs of files that bore SECRET and TOP SECRET markings. The leak exposed to the world unvarnished secret assessments of Russia's war in Ukraine, the capabilities and geopolitical interests of other nations and other national security issues.

Prosecutors have said little about an alleged motive. But members of the Discord group described Teixeira as someone looking to show off, rather than being motivated by a desire to inform the public about U.S. military operations or to influence American policy.

Prosecutors have said Teixeira continued to leak government secrets even after he was warned by superiors about mishandling and improper viewing of classified information. In one instance, Teixeira was seen taking notes on intelligence information and putting them in his pocket.

The Air Force inspector general found that members "intentionally failed to report the full details" of Teixeira's unauthorized intelligence-seeking because they thought security officials might overreact. For example, while Teixeira was confronted about the note, there was no follow up to ensure the note had been shredded and the incident was not reported to security officers.

It was not until a January 2023 incident that the appropriate security officials were notified, but even then security officials were not briefed on the full scope of the violations.

A 4-year-old Gaza boy lost his arm – and his family. Half a world away, he's getting a second chance

By DREW CALLISTER Associated Press

NEW YORK (AP) — Omar Abu Kuwaik is far from his home in Gaza. The 4-year-old's parents and sister were killed by an Israeli airstrike, when he lost part of his arm.

He's one of the lucky ones.

Through the efforts of family and strangers, Omar was brought out of Gaza and to the United States, where he received treatment, including a prosthetic arm. He spent his days in a house run by a medical charity in New York City, accompanied by his aunt.

It was a small measure of grace in a sea of turmoil for him and his aunt, Maha Abu Kuwaik, as they looked to an uncertain future. The grief and despair for those still trapped in Gaza is never far away.

Abu Kuwaik is glad she could do this for her beloved brother's son, whom she now considers her fourth child.

But it was a terrible choice. Going with Omar meant leaving her husband and three teenage children behind in a sprawling tent camp in Gaza's southernmost city of Rafah. With Israel carrying out strikes in areas where it told civilians to take shelter, including Rafah, Abu Kuwaik knows she might never see her family again.

"My kids love Omar so much," she said. "They told me, 'We're not children anymore. Go, let Omar get treated. It's what's best for him. It's his only chance.'"

Omar was an outgoing boy, she said, and he's clever like his late father, an engineer. Now he's often withdrawn and breaks into tears easily.

Ask Omar a question, and he covers his ears with his right hand and the stump of his left arm, declaring, "I don't want to talk."

"Kindergarten was nice," he eventually admits, "and I was happy on the first day." He started school just weeks before the war. But he doesn't want to go to kindergarten anymore. He's afraid to leave his aunt's side.

Flying to New York may have given him a new dream, though.

"When I grow up, I want to be pilot," Omar said, "so I can bring people places."

Omar was the first Palestinian child from Gaza taken in by the Global Medical Relief Fund. The Staten Island charity's founder, Elissa Montanti, has spent a quarter-century getting hundreds of kids free medical care after they lost limbs to wars or disasters.

Each child started out as a stranger. Each one joined what she calls her "global family," and will come back to the U.S. for new prosthetic limbs as their bodies grow. Her charity sponsors everything except the medical treatment, which is donated, primarily by Shriners Children's Hospital of Philadelphia.

The deadliest round of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict in decades was sparked Oct. 7 when Hamas-led militants broke through Israel's security barrier around Gaza and stormed into Israeli communities. Around 1,200 people were killed and some 250 taken hostage.

Israel has laid waste to much of Gaza in response. In five months of war, 80% of Gaza's 2.3 million people fled their homes.

The death toll in Gaza topped 30,000 Thursday, with more than 70,000 wounded, the Health Ministry said. The ministry does not differentiate between civilians and combatants but says women and children make up around two-thirds of those killed. Israel blames civilian deaths on Hamas, saying militants operate among the population.

Two weeks into the war, Omar and Abu Kuwaik narrowly escaped death. The two families evacuated their Gaza City apartments just before Israeli airstrikes flattened the buildings.

With only the clothes on their backs, the families split up to stay with different relatives. But in wartime, seemingly trivial decisions — like where to seek shelter — have outsized consequences.

On Dec. 6, two Israeli airstrikes slammed into Omar's grandparents' home in the Nuseirat refugee camp. The explosion peeled the skin from his face. His left arm could not be saved below the elbow. He had

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burns on his leg and torso. His parents, 6-year-old sister, grandparents, two aunts and a cousin were killed. Omar was pinned beneath the rubble. Rescuers dug until they found his little body, still warm, bleeding but somehow alive.

"Our view was, anywhere is better for him than being in Gaza," said Adib Chouiki, vice president of Rahma Worldwide, a U.S.-based charity, who heard about Omar from the group's team in Gaza.

Israel and Egypt tightly restrict movement of people out of Gaza, allowing just a few hundred to exit each day, mostly those with foreign citizenship. The World Health Organization says 2,293 patients – 1,498 wounded and 795 ill – have left Gaza for medical treatment alongside 1,625 companions. Yet roughly 8,000 patients remain on a waiting list to go abroad, according to the U.N. refugee agency.

Chouiki began reaching out to contacts in the Palestinian, Israeli and Egyptian governments. He got new passports for Omar and Abu Kuwaik, and Israeli security clearance for them to travel to Egypt.

An ambulance brought them to the border, where an Egyptian ambulance whisked them across the Sinai desert.

Inside an Egyptian military hospital, Omar and his aunt waited for weeks until U.S. Customs and Border Protection gave them the green light to fly to New York on Jan. 17.

At Shriners Children's Hospital in Philadelphia, Omar had skin graft surgery for the burn on his leg. He was eager to get his new prosthetic arm Wednesday, smiling mischievously as he reached out to touch it. "My arm is nice."

Omar and his aunt boarded a plane to Cairo the next day, accompanied by a member of her extended family. They'll stay at his home in Egypt while seeking more permanent housing.

"I almost don't sleep," Abu Kuwaik said. "I think about Omar and I think about my kids, and the conditions they're living in back there in the tents."

Food is scarce. Israel's near-total blockade of Gaza has pushed more than half a million Palestinians toward starvation and raised fears of imminent famine. The flimsy tent her family shares with 40 other people offers little protection from rain and wind, she said. When one person gets sick, illness spreads like wildfire.

The war has repeatedly knocked out cellphone and internet service in Gaza, but Abu Kuwaik keeps in touch "when there's network."

With their return to Egypt, Omar and his aunt's futures are unclear; they might be stuck in exile.

For Abu Kuwaik, though, there's no home for Omar to go back to.

"I cannot imagine ... that I go back back to Gaza," she said. "What would his life be? Where is his future?"

5 key issues at stake in the upcoming 2024 Mexican elections

By MARK STEVENSON Associated Press

MEXICO CITY (AP) — Mexico is almost certainly about to get its first woman president.

Ruling-party candidate Claudia Sheinbaum leads in polls on the race leading to the June 2 vote. The second-place candidate is also a woman. A man running for a small third party essentially has no chance of winning.

Popular President Andrés Manuel López Obrador is barred by law from running for another six-year term, and Sheinbaum is running for his Morena party. Businesswoman, senator and Indigenous Affairs official Xóchitl Gálvez has an uphill battle, backed by a coalition of all the main opposition parties.

Sheinbaum, Mexico City's former mayor, has a doctorate in energy engineering and a long career in leftist politics. Gálvez helped her family by selling tamales in the street as a girl. She went on to earn a degree in computer engineering and start her own tech companies.

Whoever wins, here are the issues and stakes.

HOW COULD MEXICO'S ELECTION AFFECT MIGRATION?

Most migrants to the United States come over the border with Mexico to Texas, New Mexico, Arizona and California. Mexico has agreed to some things that it isn't legally obligated to do, such as deploying its National Guard to arrest migrants, and accepting the return of non-Mexicans who pass through on their

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way to the U.S.

Migration isn't much of an issue in Mexico, outside of calls for the fair treatment of Mexicans in the U.S. Mexico's next president will almost certainly have latitude in deciding either to stop cooperating with the United States, or crack down harder on migrants heading north. Either would be a big change and migration is already certain to be a key issue for whoever wins the White House in November.

COULD MEXICO'S VOTE AFFECT THE FLOW OF DRUGS?

Instead of confronting the drug cartels, López Obrador has adopted what is for him the pragmatic policy of increasing government hand-outs to drain the pool of recruits for cartels seeking gunmen. But many poor, addicted or neglected youths can still be convinced to pick up a gun.

Under López Obrador, anti-drug cooperation has been limited by nationalism; he doesn't like the DEA in his country and denies that Mexico produces fentanyl, the opioid that kills over 70,000 Americans each year.

The next president could take that view to an even greater extreme or decide to cooperate more as evidence mounts that drug cartels are incompatible with domestic peace.

HOW WILL MEXICO'S VOTE AFFECT ITS ECONOMY?

In the 1980s, the United States could threaten to close the border any time the Mexican government displeased Washington. Those days are over. U.S. appliance, auto-parts and automotive factories have moved to Mexico, and they need daily shipments of parts.

As López Obrador put it, "they couldn't last, maybe a day, but not a week" with a closed border. Mexico — not China — is now the United States' biggest trading partner, and U.S. markets rely on Mexico for fresh produce and many other things. The economic relationship may now simply be "too big to fail."

Mexico also depends on the money sent home by citizens living abroad — mostly in the United States. Last year, Mexican migrants sent home a record \$63.3 billion. Income from remittances surpasses what Mexico earns from tourism and exports of oil and most manufactured goods.

WILL MEXICO'S VOTE SHOW A NEW LATIN POPULISM?

Latin America has seen periodic swings from left to right for decades. Free-spending presidents friendly to Iran or Russia have been quickly replaced by neoconservatives, and vice versa.

A populist wave appears to have interrupted the region's normal pendulum swings with two key events in recent months — the overwhelming reelection of El Salvador's hardline president Nayib Bukele, and the victory for libertarian firebrand Javier Milei in Argentina.

A victory for Morena on June 2 could entrench populism for 12 years in Mexico, essentially reviving the old idea of a charismatic, nationalist, hand-out regime as the perennial party in power.

Hungary has kept its populist president in power for nearly 15 years, but the world record is held by Mexico's old ruling Institutional Revolutionary Party, or PRI, which held the presidency for — wait for it — 71 uninterrupted years.

WILL MEXICAN DEMOCRACY SURVIVE?

López Obrador has tried mightily to eliminate checks and balances, regulatory oversight and the role of non-governmental organizations. He has accumulated more centralized power than any president since the heyday of the PRI in the 1970s, an era for which he expresses open nostalgia.

His main tool of governance has been the army, which has built a portfolio of railways, an airline, airports and hotels. Mexico's army, unlike many other Latin American nations', has not become involved in politics through coups or candidacies since the 1940s. But many worry that the Morena party's continued dominance might endanger that old arrangement.

Whoever wins, the outgoing president is leaving a pile of ambitious, unfinished projects, obligations and debt. López Obrador has pledged to retire entirely from politics after he leaves office, but few people believe that a man who has basically spent every waking minute for the last 30 years driving toward his political goals will give that up so easily.

4 new astronauts head to the International Space Station for a 6-month stay

By MARCIA DUNN AP Aerospace Writer

CAPE CANAVERAL, Fla. (AP) — Four astronauts headed to the International Space Station on Sunday where they will oversee the arrivals of two new rocketships during their half-year stint.

SpaceX's Falcon rocket blasted off from Kennedy Space Center, carrying NASA's Matthew Dominick, Michael Barratt and Jeanette Epps and Russia's Alexander Grebenkin.

The astronauts should reach the orbiting lab on Tuesday. They will replace a crew from the U.S., Denmark, Japan and Russia, who have been there since August.

"When are you getting here already?" space station commander Andreas Mogensen asked via X, formerly Twitter, after three days of delay due to high wind. SpaceX Launch Control termed it "fashionably late."

There was almost another postponement Sunday night. A small crack in the seal of the SpaceX capsule's hatch prompted a last-minute flurry of reviews, but it was deemed safe for the whole mission.

The new crew's six-month stay includes the arrival of two rocketships ordered by NASA. Boeing's new Starliner capsule with test pilots is due in late April. A month or two later, Sierra Space's Dream Chaser, a mini shuttle, should arrive. It is for delivering cargo to the station, but not passengers yet.

Epps was originally assigned to fly Boeing's Starliner, which got bogged down with problems and stalled. NASA finally switched her to SpaceX.

"I am in a New York state of mind right now, it is amazing," she said upon reaching orbit, referring to the Billy Joel song.

Epps, who is from Syracuse, N.Y., is the second Black woman assigned to a long station mission. She said before the flight that she is especially proud to be a role model for Black girls, demonstrating that spaceflight "is an option for them, that this is not just for other people."

An engineer, she worked for Ford Motor Co. and the CIA before becoming an astronaut in 2009. Epps should have launched to the space station on a Russian rocket in 2018, but was replaced for reasons never publicly disclosed.

Also new to space are Dominick, a Navy pilot, and Grebenkin, a former Russian military officer.

Barratt, a doctor on his third mission, is the oldest full-time astronaut to fly in space. He turns 65 in April.

"It's kind of like a roller coaster ride with a bunch of really excited teenagers," Barratt said after reaching orbit. As for his age, he said before the flight, "As long as we stay healthy and fit and engaged, we're good to fly."

Flight controllers are monitoring a growing cabin leak on Russia's side of the space station. The leak has doubled in size in the past few weeks and the area has been sealed off, NASA program manager Joel Montalbano said. He stressed there is no impact to station operations or crew safety.

Black women struggle to find their way in a job world where diversity is under attack

By TERRY TANG and MICHAEL CASEY Associated Press

BOSTON (AP) — Regina Lawless hit a professional high at 40, becoming the first director of diversity and inclusion for Instagram. But after her husband died suddenly in 2021, she pondered whether she had neglected her personal life and what it means for Black woman to succeed in the corporate world.

While she felt supported in the role, "there wasn't the willingness for the leaders to take it all the way," Lawless said. "Really, it's the leaders and every employee that creates the culture of inclusion."

This inspired her venture, Bossy and Blissful, a collective for Black female executives to commiserate and coach each other on how to deal with misogynoir, a specific type of misogyny experienced by Black women, or being the only person of color in the C-suite.

"I'm now determined to help other women, particularly women of color and Black women, to see that we don't have to sacrifice ourselves for success. We can find spaces or create our own spaces where we

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can be successful and thrive," said Lawless, who is based in Oakland, California.

Many women in Lawless' group have no workplace peers, making them the "Onlys" — the only Black person or woman of color — which can lead to feelings of loneliness or isolation.

"Getting together helps us when we go back and we're the 'only-lonelies' in a lot of our organizations," Lawless said.

With attacks on diversity, equity and inclusion initiatives raging, Black women looking to climb the corporate ladder face a more hostile landscape than ever. Aside from having to constantly prove themselves and talk in a manner that can't be labeled as angry or emotional, obtaining top managerial positions doesn't stop the double dilemma of racial and gender pay gaps. All this adds up to disproportionate representation of Black female senior leadership.

Dr. Claudine Gay's resignation in January as Harvard's first Black president following accusations of anti-Semitism and plagiarism was just the latest in a revolving door of Black women who have been aggressively questioned or abandoned after achieving a career pinnacle.

Black female professionals also were hit hard when an administrator at a historically Black college in Missouri accused the school's white president of bullying and racism then took her own life. This led some to build networking groups and mentorships. For others it triggered an exodus to entrepreneurship and re-invention.

In Boston, Charity Wallace, 37, a biotech professional, and Chassity Coston, 35, a middle school principal, reflected on their own career struggles in light of Gay's ordeal. Wallace said she was being more cognizant of her mental health, and that's where their young Black professionals group, sorority sisters and family come in.

"It's a constant fight of belonging and really having your girlfriends or your homegirls or my mom and my sister. I complain to them every day about something that's going on at work," Wallace said. "So having that circle of Black women that you can really vent to is important because, again, you cannot let the things like this sit. We've been silenced for too long."

Coston said she mourned Gay's resignation and, fearing something similar could happen to her, she reconsidered her future in education. But she didn't want to give up.

"Yes, we're going to continue to be scorned as Black people, as Black women. It's going to continue to happen. But we can't allow that," Coston said. "I'm speaking from my strength right now because that wasn't always how I felt in my stages of grief. We have to continue to fight just like Rosa (Parks), just like Harriet (Tubman)."

Gay struggled despite her resume full of accomplishments, Wallace said.

"I can't imagine how she felt trying to do that and getting all these accolades, her degrees that she has, the credentials, and it just seemed like even that was not enough for her to stay," Wallace said.

The backlash to DEI efforts is only amplified with clashes over identity politics. Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist Nikole Hannah-Jones' tenure bid at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill stalled in 2021 because of her work with the 1619 Project, a collection of essays on race. The 2022 confirmation hearings for Ketanji Brown Jackson, the first Black woman confirmed to the Supreme Court, drew criticism for their harsh and race-based questioning.

President Joe Biden emphatically stating he only would consider a Black woman for the high court deepened resentment toward DEI, said Johnny Taylor, CEO of The Society for Human Resource Management.

"Contrast and compare a CEO standing in front of his workplace or her workplace saying, 'I'm only gonna consider, the next candidates will only be this,'" Taylor said. "That created some real tension."

Black women are questioning whether it's even worth trying for top positions, said Portia Allen-Kyle, chief advisor at social justice organization Color of Change. Extreme scrutiny and online vitriol are high prices to pay.

"What I've heard from quite a few Black women — family, friends and otherwise — is a little bit of feeling of frustration at the idea that excellence is not enough," Allen-Kyle said. "The 'Work twice as hard, be twice as good ... maybe you'll be able to be accepted on your merit.' That lesson that maybe that's not

the case is hard and frustrating and disappointing all around.”

The number of Black women in the workforce is in danger of shrinking because of a lack of support and opportunities, according to advocates.

Black women comprise 7.4% of the U.S. population but they occupy only 1.4% of C-suite positions and 1.6% of senior vice-president roles, according to a 2020 report from Lean In, “The State of Black Women in Corporate America.” U.S. Census data shows Black women working year-round and full-time in 2021 made 69 cents for every dollar a white man got. Meanwhile, white women made 80 cents on the dollar.

Lawless, who left Instagram/Meta in August, thinks more Black women will decide to be their own boss rather than enter a traditional workplace.

“There’s going to be a chilling effect and you’re going to see more Black women pivot and go into entrepreneurship, which we’re already doing at higher rates,” Lawless said. “Corporations have a real problem. They’ve lost more women at the director and above level since the pandemic.”

Even self-made businesses cannot avoid DEI resistance. The Fearless Fund, a small venture capital firm, is embroiled in a lawsuit accusing a grant program for Black women-owned companies of discrimination. The litigation has scared away potential investors, according to the firm’s founders.

Job openings for diversity officers and similar positions have declined in recent months. The combined share of venture capital funding for businesses owned by Black and Latina women has dipped back to less than 1% after briefly surpassing that threshold — at 1.05% — in 2021, according to the nonprofit advocacy group digitalundivided.

Stephanie Felix, of Austin, Texas, just started her own DEI consulting firm in January. It’s not something the 36-year-old, who worked in DEI for company review website Glassdoor, initially saw for herself.

“People say there’s risk in leaving but there’s also a lot of risk in staying,” Felix said.

Colleagues, family and even Felix herself had reservations about her career leap. But she said she has too often seen DEI hires go from “office pet to office threat.” Their arrival was heralded as a new chapter, but senior leaders wouldn’t come through with promised resources or authority to effect change.

“I applaud women that choose to step away and choose themselves. I applaud myself for it too,” Felix said. “Even though it’s not easy, it gives you more sovereignty over your life which is, in my mind, definitely worth it.”

South Korea takes steps to suspend licenses of striking doctors after they refuse to end walkouts

By HYUNG-JIN KIM Associated Press

SEOUL, South Korea (AP) — South Korea’s government began steps Monday to suspend the medical licenses of thousands of striking junior doctors, days after they missed a government-set deadline to end their joint walkouts, which have severely impacted hospital operations.

Nearly 9,000 medical interns and residents have been on strike for two weeks to protest a government push to sharply increase the number of medical school admissions. Their action has led to hundreds of canceled surgeries and other treatments and threatened to burden the country’s medical service.

On Monday, officials were sent to dozens of hospitals to formally confirm the absence of the striking doctors as the government began steps to suspend their licenses for at least three months, Vice Health Minister Park Min-soo told a briefing.

Park said authorities will later notify the striking doctors of their expected license suspensions and give them a chance to respond. He suggested the license suspensions would take weeks to go into effect.

“Despite repeated appeals by the government and other parts of society, the number of trainee doctors returning to work is very insignificant. Starting from today, we begin the execution of law with the on-site inspection,” Park said.

Park again repeated the government’s call for the doctors to end their walkouts.

“We again strongly urge them to return to patients by not ignoring the pains of patients hovering between life and death — and their families,” he said.

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South Korea's government earlier ordered the striking doctors to return to work by Feb. 29. South Korea's medical law allows the government to make such back-to-work orders to doctors when it sees grave risks to public health. Anyone who refuses to follow such orders can be punished with a suspension of his or her license for up to one year, and three years in prison or a 30 million won (roughly \$22,500) fine.

Last month, the South Korean government announced it would raise the country's medical school enrollment cap by 2,000 starting next year, from the current 3,058. Officials said it's urgent to have more doctors to deal with a fast-aging population and resolve a shortage of physicians in rural areas and essential yet low-paying specialties like pediatrics and emergency departments.

Officials say South Korea's doctor-to-population ratio is one of the lowest among developed countries.

But many doctors have opposed the plan, arguing universities can't offer quality education to such an abrupt increase in students. They also say adding so many new doctors would also increase public medical expenses since greater competition would lead to excess treatments. They also predict newly added students would also want to work in high-paying, popular professions like plastic surgery and dermatology.

Critics say many doctors oppose the government plan simply because they worry adding more doctors would result in a lower income.

The striking junior doctors are a small fraction of the country's 140,000 doctors. But they account for 30-40% of the total doctors at some major hospitals, where they assist senior doctors while training.

Senior doctors have staged a slew of street rallies supporting the young doctors but haven't joined their walkouts. Police said they were investigating five ranking members of the Korea Medical Association, a body that represents South Korean doctors, for allegedly inciting and abetting the walkouts.

Rival of Netanyahu visits US, signaling wider cracks in Israel's wartime leadership

By TIA GOLDENBERG, WAFAA SHURFA and SAMY MAGDY Associated Press

TEL AVIV, Israel (AP) — Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu rebuked a top Cabinet minister arriving in Washington on Sunday for talks with U.S. officials, according to an Israeli official, signaling widening cracks within the country's leadership nearly five months into its war with Hamas.

The trip by Benny Gantz, a centrist political rival who joined Netanyahu's wartime Cabinet following Hamas' Oct. 7 attack, comes as friction between the U.S. and Netanyahu is rising over how to alleviate the suffering of Palestinians in Gaza and what the postwar plan for the enclave should look like.

An official from Netanyahu's far-right Likud party said Gantz's trip was planned without authorization from the Israeli leader. The official, who spoke on condition of anonymity, said Netanyahu had a "tough talk" with Gantz and told him the country has "just one prime minister."

Gantz is scheduled to meet on Monday with U.S. Vice President Kamala Harris and national security adviser Jake Sullivan and on Tuesday with Secretary of State Antony Blinken, according to his National Unity Party. A second Israeli official speaking on condition of anonymity said Gantz's visit is intended to strengthen ties with the U.S., bolster support for Israel's war and push for the release of Israeli hostages.

In Egypt, talks were underway to broker a cease-fire before the Muslim holy month of Ramadan begins next week.

Israel did not send a delegation because it is waiting for answers from Hamas on two questions, according to a third Israeli government official who spoke on condition of anonymity. Israeli media reported that the government is waiting to learn which hostages are alive and how many Palestinian prisoners Hamas seeks in exchange for each.

All three Israeli officials spoke anonymously because they weren't authorized to discuss the disputes with the media.

The U.S. began airdrops of aid into Gaza on Saturday, after dozens of Palestinians rushing to grab food from an Israel-organized convoy were killed last week. The airdrops circumvented an aid delivery system hobbled by Israeli restrictions, logistical issues and fighting in Gaza. Aid officials say airdrops are far less effective than deliveries by truck.

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U.S. priorities in the region have increasingly been hampered by Netanyahu's Cabinet, which is dominated by ultranationalists. Gantz's more moderate party at times acts as a counterweight.

Netanyahu's popularity has dropped since the war broke out, according to most opinion polls. Many Israelis hold him responsible for failing to stop the Oct. 7 cross-border raid by Hamas, which killed 1,200 people, mostly civilians, and took roughly 250 people as hostages into Gaza, including women, children and older adults, according to Israeli authorities.

More than 30,000 Palestinians have been killed since the war began, around two-thirds of them women and children, according to Gaza's Health Ministry, which does not distinguish between civilians and fighters. Around 80% of the population of 2.3 million have fled their homes, and U.N. agencies say hundreds of thousands are on the brink of famine.

Israelis critical of Netanyahu say his decision-making has been tainted by political considerations, a charge he denies. The criticism is particularly focused on plans for postwar Gaza. Netanyahu wants Israel to maintain open-ended security control over Gaza, with Palestinians running civilian affairs.

The U.S. wants to see progress on the creation of a Palestinian state, envisioning a revamped Palestinian leadership running Gaza with an eye toward eventual statehood.

That vision is opposed by Netanyahu and the hard-liners in his government. Another top Cabinet official from Gantz's party has questioned the handling of the war and the strategy for freeing the hostages.

Netanyahu's government, Israel's most conservative and religious ever, has also been rattled by a court-ordered deadline for a new bill to broaden military enlistment of ultra-Orthodox Jews. Many of them are exempted from military service so they can pursue religious studies. Hundreds of Israeli soldiers have been killed since Oct. 7, and the military is looking to fill its ranks.

Gantz has remained vague about his view of Palestinian statehood. Polls show he would earn enough support to become prime minister if a vote were held today.

A visit to the U.S., if met with progress on the hostage front, could further boost Gantz's support.

Israel and Hamas are negotiating over a possible new cease-fire and hostage release deal. Vice President Harris said on Sunday it is now up to Hamas to agree to it. "Given the immense scale of suffering in Gaza, there must be an immediate cease-fire for at least the next six weeks, which is what is currently on the table," Harris said.

Israelis, deeply traumatized by Hamas' attack, have broadly backed the war effort as an act of self-defense, even as global opposition to the fighting has increased.

But a growing number are expressing their dismay with Netanyahu. Some 10,000 people protested late Saturday to call for early elections, according to Israeli media. Such protests have grown in recent weeks, but remain much smaller than last year's demonstrations against the government's judicial overhaul plan.

If the political rifts grow and Gantz quits the government, the floodgates will open to broader protests by a public that was already unhappy with the government when Hamas struck, said Reuven Hazan, a professor of political science at Hebrew University in Jerusalem.

At least 12 people were killed, including five women and two children, in an Israeli strike on Sunday that hit a house in the Nuseirat refugee camp in central Gaza, according to an Associated Press journalist at Al-Aqsa Hospital in Deir al-Balah. And two Israeli strikes southwest of Deir al-Balah killed at least five people and destroyed an aid truck, according to witnesses and staff at the hospital.

Amid concerns about the wider regional conflict, White House senior adviser Amos Hochstein was going to Lebanon on Monday to meet officials, according to an administration official who was not authorized to comment. White House officials want Lebanese and Israeli officials to prevent tensions along their border from worsening.

The US and South Korea begin large military drills to boost readiness against North's threats

By HYUNG-JIN KIM Associated Press

SEOUL, South Korea (AP) — South Korea and the United States began large annual military exercises Monday to bolster their readiness against North Korean nuclear threats after the North raised animosities with an extension of missile tests and belligerent rhetoric earlier this year.

The South Korean and U.S. forces began a computer-simulated command post training called the Freedom Shield exercise and a variety of field exercises for an 11-day run, the South Korean Defense Ministry said.

North Korea had no immediate response to the major annual drills it regards as a rehearsal for invasion. The North has staged provocative weapons tests in the past in reaction to its adversaries' joint drills.

South Korea's military said last week that it would conduct 48 field exercises with the U.S. forces this spring, twice the number conducted last year, and that they would involve live-firing, bombing, air assault and missile interception drills.

Since early 2022, North Korea has conducted more than 100 rounds of missile tests to modernize its arsenal as talks with the United States and South Korea have been stalled for an extended period. In response, the United States and South Korea have expanded their training exercises and increased the deployment of powerful U.S. military assets such as aircraft carriers and long-range nuclear-capable bombers.

This year, North Korea carried out six rounds of missile tests and barrage of artillery firing drills. Its leader Kim Jong Un also said North Korea would scrap its long-standing goal of peaceful unification with South Korea and take a more aggressive military posture along the disputed sea boundary with South Korea. He also vowed to "annihilate" South Korea and the United States if provoked, a threat that he had previously issued.

The North Korean steps raised worries that it might make provocations along the tense Korean sea and land borders. But experts say the prospect for a full-blown attack by North Korea is dim as the North knows its military is outmatched by U.S. and South Korean forces.

North Korea's moves to raise tensions are likely related to upcoming elections planned by its rivals: the U.S. presidential election in November and South Korea's parliament election in April. North Korea believes an advanced nuclear arsenal will increase its leverage in future diplomacy and it can win concessions like the easing of international sanctions, experts say.

Haiti declares a curfew as it tries to restore order after weekend jailbreak, explosion of violence

By EVENS SANON and PIERRE-RICHARD LUXAMA Associated Press

PORT-AU-PRINCE, Haiti (AP) — Haiti's government declared a state of emergency and nighttime curfew late Sunday in a bid to regain control of the streets after an explosion of violence over the weekend saw armed gang members storm the country's two biggest prisons.

The 72-hour state of emergency went into immediate effect as the government said it would set out to find the killers, kidnappers and other violent criminals that it reported escaped from the prison.

"The police were ordered to use all legal means at their disposal to enforce the curfew and apprehend all offenders," said a statement from Finance Minister Patrick Boivert, who is serving as acting prime minister.

Prime Minister Ariel Henry traveled abroad last week to try to salvage support for a bringing in a United Nations-backed security force to stabilize the country in its conflict with increasingly powerful crime groups.

The decree capped a deadly weekend that marked a new low in Haiti's downward spiral of violence. At least nine people had been killed since Thursday — four of them police officers — as gangs stepped up coordinated attacks on state institutions in Port-au-Prince. Targets included police stations, the country's international airport, even the national soccer stadium.

But the siege Saturday night of the National Penitentiary came as a shock even to Haitians accustomed to living under the constant threat of violence. Almost all of the estimated 4,000 inmates fled during the

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jailbreak, leaving the normally overcrowded facility eerily empty Sunday with no guards in sight and plastic sandals, clothing and furniture strewn across the concrete patio. Three bodies with gunshot wounds lay at the prison entrance.

In another neighborhood, the bloodied corpses of two men with their hands tied behind the backs lay face down as residents walked past roadblocks set up with burning tires.

Among the few dozen that chose to stay in the prison are 18 former Colombian soldiers accused of working as mercenaries in the July 2021 assassination of Haitian President Jovenel Moïse. Amid the clashes Saturday night, several of the Colombians shared a video pleading for their lives.

"Please, please help us," one of the men, Francisco Uribe, said in the message widely shared on social media. "They are massacring people indiscriminately inside the cells."

On Sunday, Uribe told journalists who walked breezily into the normally highly guarded facility, "I didn't flee because I'm innocent."

Colombia's foreign ministry called on Haiti to provide "special protection" for the men.

In the absence of official information, inmates' family members rushed to the prison to check on loved ones.

"I don't know whether my son is alive or not," said Alexandre Jean as she roamed around the cells looking for any sign of him. "I don't know what to do."

The violence Saturday night appeared to be widespread, with several neighborhoods reporting gunfire.

A second Port-au-Prince prison containing around 1,400 inmates was also overrun. Gang gunmen also occupied and vandalized the nation's top soccer stadium, taking one employee hostage for hours, Haiti's soccer federation said in a statement. Internet service for many residents was down as Haiti's top mobile network said a fiber optic cable connection was slashed during the rampage.

In the space of less than two weeks, several state institutions have been attacked by the gangs, which are increasingly coordinating their actions and choosing once unthinkable targets like the Central Bank. As part of coordinated attacks by gangs, four police officers were killed Thursday.

After gangs opened fire at Haiti's international airport last week, the U.S. Embassy said it was halting all official travel to the country and on Sunday night urged all American citizens to depart as soon as possible. The embassy said it would also cancel until Thursday all consular appointments.

The Biden administration, which has steadfastly refused to commit troops to any multinational force while offering instead money and logistical support, said it was monitoring the rapidly deteriorating security situation with grave concern.

A National Security Council official said violence serves only to delay a democratic transition while destroying the lives of thousands. The official, who spoke on condition of anonymity, reiterated U.S. support for elections, inclusive governance and the restoration of democracy.

The epicenter of the latest violence Saturday night was Haiti's National Penitentiary, which was holding several gang leaders. Amid the exchange of gunfire, police appealed for assistance.

"They need help," a union representing police said in a message on social media bearing an "SOS" emoji repeated eight times. "Let's mobilize the army and the police to prevent the bandits from breaking into the prison."

The clashes follow violent protests that turned deadlier in recent days as the prime minister went to Kenya seeking to move ahead on a proposed U.N.-backed security mission in Haiti to be led by that East African country.

Henry took over as prime minister following Moïse's assassination and has repeatedly postponed plans to hold parliamentary and presidential elections, which haven't happened in almost a decade.

Haiti's National Police has roughly 9,000 officers to provide security for more than 11 million people, according to the U.N. They are routinely overwhelmed and outgunned by gangs, which are estimated to control up to 80% of Port-au-Prince.

Jimmy Chérisier, a former elite police officer known as Barbecue who now runs a gang federation, has claimed responsibility for the surge in attacks. He said the goal was to capture Haiti's police chief and

government ministers and prevent Henry's return.

The prime minister, a neurosurgeon, has shrugged off calls for his resignation and didn't comment when asked if he felt it was safe to come home.

Super Tuesday's dominance highlights how presidential selection process can exclude many US voters

By GARY FIELDS Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — As an independent, Christian Miller can't vote in Pennsylvania's closed presidential primary in April. He said it wouldn't matter even if he could.

"You're not really voting for anything," said Miller, who left the Democratic Party in 2022. "Every election I've ever seen, the candidates have been decided by the time they get to Pennsylvania."

Pennsylvania is a crucial presidential swing state and the fifth most populous in the country. And yet holding a primary so much later than other states means its voters often have little say in choosing the presidential contenders. It's the same for voters in much of the rest of the country.

That dynamic is even more pronounced this year with the front-runners for both major parties in overwhelming position to become the presumptive nominees not long after Super Tuesday, traditionally the biggest day on the election calendar when 16 states hold contests.

Academics and democracy analysts said the presidential primary system, in which a small percentage of the nation's voters often determines the candidates, is one of several quirks that make the United States stand out. To some, it raises questions about whether the world's oldest and most prominent democracy might also be among the least representative.

Voter attitudes might be different if the U.S. were more like many countries in the European Union that give all voters a slate of candidates from different parties and then hold a run-off with the top vote-getters, said Danielle Piatkiewicz, deputy chief operating officer at the Alliance of Democracies Foundation, a Denmark-based think tank.

"You don't have the frustrations of where it's an either or system," she said. "Usually you can find a political party that meets your needs."

Attention to America's primary system is especially notable this year, a historic one for elections around the world and as polls have consistently shown a deep lack of enthusiasm for a rematch between Democratic President Joe Biden and his predecessor, Republican Donald Trump.

As Tuesday's contests near, Biden and Trump appear on their way to securing their parties' nominations even though just eight states will have awarded delegates through presidential primaries or party caucuses by then.

Paula Stevens, 73, is one of those voters unhappy with the candidate options and frustrated that the contests are likely to be decided by the time she is able to vote on March 19, the date of Ohio's primary.

Grocery shopping north of Columbus, Stevens said she will pass on this year's presidential contest. She registered Republican in 2016 specifically to vote against Trump, but can't support Biden this year.

"There's no choice," she said.

Nick Troiano, founding executive director of the group Unite America, said the system also fails to engage independent voters, who are prohibited from voting in presidential primaries in 22 states. That's 24 million voters who end up "stuck with the party nominees" without selecting them, he said.

He said gerrymandering of congressional and state legislative districts highlights another consequence of independents being excluded from many party primaries.

"The primaries are really the only elections that matter because the districts are so uncompetitive these days," he said.

More than 80% of congressional districts are decided in the primary because the districts lean so heavily in favor of one party or the other. But a much smaller percentage of voters cast ballots in those races: "So we have a rule of the minority, not the majority," he said.

It's yet another aspect of elections in the U.S. that sets the country apart. In most states, a partisan

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legislature draws the legislative and congressional districts and can do so in a way that ensures it will hold onto, and perhaps expand, its power.

The U.S. is "pretty close to the only democracy in the world" that has the participants of the government controlling the redistricting process and making the rules, said Michael Miller, a political scientist who specializes in democratization at George Washington University. "For a huge swath of our country, it's still parties picking what's best for the current party in control."

What several experts said they find most striking about the U.S. compared to some other democracies is that the right to vote is not enshrined in the Constitution.

The amendments make it illegal to deny specific groups the right to vote, "but there is no provision in the Constitution that gives you the right to vote generally, other than the anti-discrimination provisions," said Paul Smith, vice president of the Campaign Legal Center.

What is there is "not the same as saying every citizen has the right to vote and to participate in a free and fair electoral process. If I could wave a wand, I would start there," said Nathan Stock, associate director of the Carter Center's Conflict Resolution Program. "That lack of a codified right allows for a lot of other mechanisms, voter suppression, all kinds of issues that at this point are fairly unique to American democracy."

Other concerns include the hyper partisanship prevalent in the country's politics and the stagnant nature of the government. The Economist Intelligence Unit's Democracy Index, which ranks 167 countries and territories on measures such as political culture and political participation, lists the U.S. as a flawed democracy in its 2023 report.

The report warned that if Biden faces Trump again in the general election "a country that was once a beacon of democracy is likely to slide deeper into division and disenchantment."

There is one notable bright spot. Despite hurdles to voting and a selection process for presidential candidates that can exclude much of the country, Miller, of George Washington University, said the actual administration of elections is "exceptional in the United States."

That is despite years of attacks from Trump, who falsely blames his loss in 2020 on widespread voter fraud and whose drumbeat of election lies has persuaded a majority of Republicans to believe Biden was not elected legitimately.

"Despite the growing distrust of the system because of extreme partisanship, there's really no evidence of any real fraud occurring," he said, noting the dedicated professionals running the systems.

"Even well-established democracies have much higher degrees of errors or even some degrees of violence," he said. "We don't really have that — so far, anyway."

Key Northern California highway closed as snow continues to fall in the blizzard-hit Sierra Nevada

By BROOKE HESS and CHRISTOPHER WEBER Associated Press

TRUCKEE, Calif. (AP) — A major highway was closed and ski resorts were shut down Sunday as the effects of a powerful blizzard continued to cause problems across the Sierra Nevada, and forecasters warned that more heavy snow was on the way for Northern California.

Sections of Interstate 80 to the west and north of Lake Tahoe were made impassable by blowing snow piling up in lanes, with no estimate for reopening, the California Highway Patrol said.

The CHP office in South Lake Tahoe warned motorists that tire chains for improved traction are required on routes through the mountains, where more than 7 feet (2.1 meters) of snow fell over the weekend. The online warning Sunday was accompanied by a photo of a big rig without chains stuck in whiteout conditions on a local road.

"Trying to bypass chain control, no no no!!" the agency said on X, formerly Twitter. "Dangerous and not smart."

A blizzard warning was in effect until midnight for some areas above 6,500 feet (1,980 meters), while lower elevations were under a winter storm warning with another 2 feet (60 centimeters) of snow pos-

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sible, the National Weather Service office in Sacramento said. "Mountain travel is HIGHLY discouraged!" the office warned.

The multiday storm caused traffic backups and closures on I-80 and many other roadways, shut down ski resorts and left thousands of homes and businesses without power.

By Sunday evening, Pacific Gas & Electric had restored electricity to all but about 4,800 Northern California customers, while NV Energy had reduced its outages to roughly 1,000 homes and businesses across the state line in Nevada.

Palisades Tahoe, the largest resort on the north end of the lake and site of the 1960 Winter Olympics, was among several ski mountains that closed most or all chairlifts for a second straight day Sunday because of snow, wind and low visibility. Palisades reported a three-day snow total of 6 feet (1.8 meters), with more falling.

"We will be digging out for the foreseeable future," officials said on the resort's blog.

Kevin Dupui, who lives in Truckee, just northwest of Lake Tahoe, said his snow blower broke, but it doesn't really matter because there's nowhere to put all the snow anyway. "We just move it around," he said Sunday.

Dupui said residents and tourists seem to be mostly heeding warnings to stay home. "The roads haven't been that safe, so we don't really want people driving around," he said.

Another Truckee resident, Jenelle Potvin, said at first some cynical locals thought "there was a little too much hype" made about the approaching storm. But then the unrelenting snow began Friday night.

"It was definitely a blizzard. And we woke up to a lot of snow yesterday and it never let up," Potvin said Sunday. Her neighbors were snowmobiling and cross-country skiing in the streets. "But, yeah, we went from 0 to 100 pretty fast."

In the eastern Sierra, the Mammoth Mountain Ski Area was closed Sunday as winds of up to 70 mph (113 kph) made it too difficult for ski patrol to complete avalanche mitigation, the resort said. More than 3 feet (nearly 1 meter) of snow fell over three days, and more was on the way.

Weather service meteorologist William Churchill on Saturday called the storm an "extreme blizzard" for the Sierra Nevada but said he didn't expect records to be broken.

The storm began barreling into the region Thursday. A widespread blizzard warning through Sunday morning covered a 300-mile (480-kilometer) stretch of the mountains. A second, weaker storm was forecast to bring additional rain and snow between Monday and Wednesday, forecasters said.

California authorities on Friday shut down 100 miles (160 kilometers) of I-80, the main route between Reno and Sacramento, because of "spin outs, high winds, and low visibility." There was no estimate when the freeway would reopen from the California-Nevada border west of Reno to near Emigrant Gap, California.

Rudy Islas spent about 40 minutes shoveling his car out before heading to work at a coffee shop in Truckee on Sunday morning. Neither he nor his customers were fazed by the snow, he said.

"To be honest, if you're a local, it's not a big deal," he said. "I think a lot of people are used to the snow and they prepare for it."

Firefighters keep up battle to stamp out largest wildfire in Texas history

VALERIE GONZALEZ Associated Press

McALLEN, Texas (AP) — Planes dropped fire retardant over the Texas Panhandle on Sunday and a small community was ordered to evacuate as firefighters kept up efforts to stamp out the largest wildfire in state history while contending with new blazes.

Strong winds spread the flames further, prompting an evacuation order to be issued in Sanford, a town of a little more than 100 residents, according to the Amarillo office of the National Weather Service, which posted on X. A cluster of fires has burned more than 1,900 square miles (4,900 square kilometers) in rural areas surrounding Amarillo, including the largest blaze spilling into neighboring Oklahoma.

As firefighters battle to contain the unprecedented wildfires, humanitarian organizations are pivoting their attention to victims who have lost their homes and livelihoods in the blazes.

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Residents began clearing affected property on Saturday, and by Sunday the extent of the loss began mounting.

Julie Winters, the executive director for Hutchinson County United Way, said the organization has heard estimates of over 150 homes being impacted in the county, noting that the fires extend to at least five other counties.

"We already know that a large group of people are uninsured who lost their homes. So without monetary assistance, it's going to be very hard for them to start back over," Winters said.

About 70 families from Fritch, Texas, approached the organization on Friday during an event, but Winters believes many others will come forward in the days and weeks ahead.

"Our goal is just for the long term of trying to get people back into shelters," Winters said.

A steady outpouring of donated clothing, water, and hot meals quickly overwhelmed one city in the affected area. By Sunday, the city of Borger urged people to redirect their donation efforts from food and water to clean-up supplies.

"We DO NOT NEED ANY MORE WATER OR DRINKS," the city said in a social media post. "We remain in need of clean-up material such as shovels, rakes, gloves, and heavy-duty trash bags. We continue not accepting clothing. Other clothing drop-off places have been inundated and have stopped accepting."

Monetary donations from people ranging from \$25 to \$500 have been critical for the Hutchinson County United Way Wildfire Relief Fund, which is dispersing proceeds to displaced families.

"I think sometimes what people don't understand in a small rural community is that there is no temporary housing," Winters said. "We don't have real property like that and we don't even have hotels that can take care of those things."

Winters said the fires remind her of the similar devastating effects from the 2014 fire in Fritch when numerous families also lost their homes and were unable to return.

"How do you get people back into homes so that they can stay in our community and not have to move somewhere else?" Winters said.

During an interview with CNN on Sunday, U.S. Homeland Security Secretary Alejandro Mayorkas said the federal government has devoted funds, equipment and personnel to assist with battling the fires, but warned that more extreme weather could be coming.

"More than a million acres have burned. And we are in winter, and this is the largest fire in Texas history," Mayorkas said. "We, as a country and as a world, have to be ready for the increasing effects of extreme weather caused by climate change. It's a remarkable phenomenon, and it will manifest itself in the days to come, and we have to prepare for it now."

As of Sunday afternoon, the Smokehouse Creek fire, which has burned over 1 million acres, was 15% contained. Two other fires that have burned a combined 180,000 acres (72843.49 hectares), were 60% contained. Authorities have not said what ignited the fires, but strong winds, dry grass and unseasonably warm temperatures fed the blazes.

The National Weather Service issued red flag warnings — signifying extreme fire risk due to warm temperatures, low humidity and strong winds — across much of the central U.S. on Sunday, including Texas and its neighboring states of New Mexico and Oklahoma. Red flag warnings also covered nearly all of Nebraska and Iowa, along with large swaths of Kansas, Missouri and South Dakota. Smaller portions of Colorado, Wyoming, Minnesota and Illinois were also under red flag warnings.

Kamala Harris leads Bloody Sunday memorial as marchers' voices ring out for voting rights

By KIM CHANDLER Associated Press

SELMA, Ala. (AP) — Vice President Kamala Harris told thousands gathered for the 59th anniversary of the Bloody Sunday attacks on civil rights marchers in Selma, Alabama, that fundamental freedoms, including the right to vote, are under attack in America even today.

Harris joined those gathered at the foot of the Edmund Pettus Bridge, where voting rights activists were

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beaten back by law enforcement officers in 1965. The vice president praised the marchers' bravery for engaging in a defining moment of the civil rights struggle.

"Today, we know our fight for freedom is not over, because in this moment we are witnessing a full on attack on hard-fought, hard-won freedoms, starting with the freedom that unlocks all others, the freedom to vote," Harris said.

She criticized attempts to restrict voting, including limits on absentee voting and early voting, and said the nation is again at a crossroad.

"What kind of country do we want to live in? Do we want to live in a country of freedom, liberty and justice? Or a country of injustice, hate and fear?" Harris asked, encouraging people to answer with their vote.

She paid tribute to the civil rights marchers who walked across the bridge in 1965 knowing they would face certain violence in seeking "a future that was more equal, more just and more free."

Decisions by the Supreme Court and lower courts since 2006 have weakened the Voting Rights Act of 1965, which was passed in the wake of the police attacks in Selma. The demonstrators were beaten by officers on the Edmund Pettus Bridge on March 7, 1965, as they tried to march across Alabama to support voting rights.

Harris drew parallels between those who worked to stifle the Civil Rights Movement and "extremists" she said are trying to enact restrictions on voting, education and reproductive care.

She said other fundamental freedoms under attack include "the freedom of a woman to make decisions about her own body," a reference to state abortion bans. She also stressed the Biden administration's support for a six-week ceasefire in Gaza to "get the hostages out and a significant amount of aid in."

Under a blazing blue sky, Harris then led the crowd across the Edmund Pettus Bridge in the march that concludes the annual commemoration. Thousands followed, sometimes singing hymns and anthems of the Civil Rights Movement including, "Ain't Gonna Let Nobody Turn Me 'Round."

Earlier Sunday, Attorney General Merrick Garland spoke at a Selma church service marking the anniversary of the attack by Alabama law officers on civil rights demonstrators. He said recent court decisions and certain state legislation have endangered voting rights in much of the nation.

"Since those (court) decisions, there has been a dramatic increase in legislative measures that make it harder for millions of eligible voters to vote and to elect representatives of their choice," Garland told worshippers at Selma's Tabernacle Baptist Church, the site of one of the first mass meetings of the voting rights movement.

"Those measures include practices and procedures that make voting more difficult; redistricting maps that disadvantage minorities; and changes in voting administration that diminish the authority of locally elected or nonpartisan election administrators," he said. "Such measures threaten the foundation of our system of government."

The march and Garland's speech were among dozens of events during the Selma Bridge Crossing Jubilee, which began Thursday and culminated Sunday.

The commemoration is a frequent stop for Democratic politicians paying homage to the voting rights movement. Some in the crowd gathered to see Harris speak about the upcoming November election and what appears to be a looming rematch between President Joe Biden and former President Donald Trump.

Khadidah Stone, 27, part of a crowd gathered at the bridge Sunday in light rain before the march, said she sees the work of today's activists as an extension of those who were attacked in Selma in 1965. Stone works for the voter engagement group Alabama Forward, and was a plaintiff in the Voting Rights case against the state that led to creating a second Alabama congressional district with a substantial number of Black voters. Voters will cast their first ballots in that district on Tuesday.

"We have to continue to fight, because they (voting rights) are under attack," Stone said.

Nita Hill wore a hat saying "Good Trouble," a phrase associated with the late Rep. John Lewis, who was beaten on the bridge during Bloody Sunday. Hill, 70, said it is important for Biden supporters to vote in November.

"I believe Trump is trying to take us back," said Hill, a retired university payroll specialist.

Decades ago, images of the violence that at the bridge stunned Americans, which helped galvanize

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support for passing the Voting Rights Act of 1965. The law struck down barriers prohibiting Black people from voting.

U.S. Rep. James Clyburn, a Democrat of South Carolina who is leading a pilgrimage to Selma, said he is seeking to "remind people that we are celebrating an event that started this country on a better road toward a more perfect union," but the right to vote is still not guaranteed.

Clyburn sees Selma as the nexus of the 1960s movement for voting rights, at a time when there currently are efforts to scale back those rights.

"The Voting Rights Act of 1965 became a reality in August of 1965 because of what happened on March 7th of 1965," Clyburn said.

"We are at an inflection point in this country," he added. "And hopefully this year's march will allow people to take stock of where we are."

Congressional leaders come out with 6 spending bills in a drive to avoid a partial shutdown

By KEVIN FREKING Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Congressional leaders on Sunday came out with a package of six bills setting full-year spending levels for some federal agencies, a step forward in a long overdue funding process beset by sharp political divisions between the two parties as well as infighting among House Republicans.

The release of the text of legislation over the weekend was designed to meet the House's rule to give lawmakers at least 72 hours to study a bill before voting. And it's a promising sign that lawmakers will avoid a partial shutdown that would kick in at 12:01 a.m. Saturday for those agencies covered under the bill, such as Veterans Affairs, Agriculture, Transportation, Justice and others.

Congressional leaders hope to complete votes on the package this week and continue negotiations on the remaining six annual spending bills to pass them before a March 22 deadline. The price tag for the package out Sunday comes to about \$460 billion, representing less than 30% of the discretionary spending Congress looks to approve for this year. The package still being negotiated includes defense spending.

House Speaker Mike Johnson highlighted some key policy and spending wins for conservatives, even as many of his GOP colleagues consider the changes inadequate. Some House Republicans had hoped the prospect of a shutdown could leverage more concessions from Democrats.

Overall, this year's spending bills would keep non-defense spending relatively flat with last year's bill, despite the rise in inflation, and some \$70 billion less than what President Joe Biden originally sought.

"House Republicans secured key conservative policy victories, rejected left-wing proposals, and imposed sharp cuts to agencies and programs critical to President Biden's agenda," Johnson said in a prepared statement.

Earlier this year, Johnson and Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer announced an agreement on the top-line spending levels for this year's discretionary spending, which comes to more than \$1.6 trillion. But that agreement didn't address potential policy mandates placed within the bills. That's where negotiations have focused in recent weeks.

Democrats staved off most of the policy riders that House Republicans sought to include. For example, they beat back an effort to reverse the FDA's decision that allows the abortion pill mifepristone to be sold in retail pharmacies, instead of only in hospitals, clinics and medical offices. Democrats also said the bill would fully fund a nutrition program for low-income women, infants and children known as WIC, providing about \$7 billion for the program, a \$1 billion increase from the previous year.

"Throughout the negotiations, Democrats fought hard to protect against cuts to housing and nutrition programs, and keep out harmful provisions that would further restrict access to women's health, or roll back the progress we've made to fight climate change," Schumer, D-N.Y., said in support of the legislation.

House Republicans were able to achieve some policy wins, however. One provision, for example, will prevent the sale of oil in the Strategic Petroleum Reserve to China.

Another provision strengthens gun rights for certain veterans. Under current law, the VA must send a

beneficiary's name to the FBI's National Instant Criminal Background Check System whenever a fiduciary is appointed to help manage someone's benefits. This year's spending package prohibits the VA from transmitting that information unless a relevant judicial authority rules that the beneficiary is a danger to himself or herself, or others.

Still, some of the more conservative members of the House GOP have been critical of the spending bills, and many voted against the short-term extension Congress passed last week that avoided a shutdown and allowed negotiations to continue.

"We all promised we wouldn't do this crap when we got up here," Rep. Eric Burlison, R-Mo., said as the short-term extension was debated. "The American people have demanded responsible spending and border security for years, but we fail them. When will we heed the calls of our constituents to rein in the wasteful spending, secure the borders, and defeat the bureaucracy targeting them?"

The short-term extension last week was the fourth in recent months. The vote to approve it was 320-99, but House Republicans were divided, with 113 in support and 97 against. The Senate approved the extension, 77-13.

The votes being teed up on spending bills come five months after the budget year began.

Iowa's Caitlin Clark breaks Pete Maravich's NCAA Division I scoring record

By ERIC OLSON AP Sports Writer

Caitlin Clark stood alone at the free-throw line on Sunday and made the foul shots that put her atop the all-time NCAA Division I scoring chart.

The flash and pizzazz of her game have made her the biggest name in all of college basketball. Yet it was two free throws after a technical foul that pushed Clark past the late Pete Maravich's 54-year-old record in No. 6 Iowa's 93-83 win over No. 2 Ohio State.

Clark entered the game in Iowa City needing 18 points to pass Maravich's total of 3,667, amassed in just 83 games over three seasons at LSU (1967-70). She finished with 35 to run her total to 3,685 in 130 games.

Maravich's mark fell four days after Clark broke Lynette Woodard's major college women's record when she scored 33 points against Minnesota on Wednesday.

"Just to be in the same realm of all these players who have been so successful, whether it's Pete or Kelsey Plum or Lynette Woodard — all these people have just given so much to the game," Clark said. "Hopefully somebody comes after me and breaks my records and I can be there supporting them."

Best known for her long 3-pointers, Clark was called on to go to the foul line after Cotie McMahon was assessed a technical for giving her a little push during a dead ball with less than a second to go in the first half.

Clark had no immediate reaction after the second shot went through, as if it hadn't sunk in yet. She said she knew the record had fallen only after it was announced.

It didn't matter to her that she made history with two free throws rather than a half-court logo 3-pointer.

"That's like the hardest thing to do in basketball is to make free throws with nobody (around you) at the free-throw line," she said.

She had gotten off to a slow start Sunday. Her first shot was a 3-pointer that bounced off the rim. She missed a layup and from deep on the right wing before making a 3 from the left side for her first basket.

After starting 2 for 7, she made 3 of her next 4 shots — including three straight 3s, each deeper than the previous.

Woodard was among those at Carver-Hawkeye Arena to help Clark celebrate senior day. Also on hand were basketball great Maya Moore, who was Clark's favorite player, and Baseball Hall of Fame pitcher Nolan Ryan.

"It's a great time for women's basketball," Woodard said in a television interview. "Caitlin is leading the way. As she was chipping away, I said records are made to be broken. Also, they're made to be honored."

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Because of her, my records are being honored. She's gone beyond that now, she's gone beyond Pete ... I passed her the baton to go ahead and burst through that ceiling, and I'm so happy for her."

On Thursday, Clark announced she would enter the 2024 WNBA draft and skip the fifth year of eligibility available to athletes who competed during the COVID-19 pandemic. She is projected to be the No. 1 overall pick by the Indiana Fever, and the WNBA already is seeing a rise in ticket sales.

Logitix, which researches prices on ticket resale platforms, reported an average sale price of \$598 for a ticket to Sunday's game purchased since Feb. 1.

Kiran Nanjappa, who was born in Cedar Rapids, Iowa, and now lives in Denver, said he paid more than \$200 for his ticket.

"She's a truly once-in-a-lifetime player," he said. "I've been watching Iowa basketball for 40 years, and I've never seen a player like her, men's or women's. I'll just say this — I paid more to see her today than I paid to see Michael Jordan three times at the end of his career. And I never thought I'd say that."

Clark is all but assured of one or two more appearances at the arena in Iowa City. Iowa is projected to be a No. 2 seed for the NCAA Tournament, meaning it would be at home for the first two rounds.

Pearl Moore of Francis Marion owns the overall women's record with 4,061 points from 1975-79 at the small-college level in the AIAW. Moore had 177 points at Anderson Junior College before enrolling at Francis Marion.

Clark is 376 points behind Moore, and she has two to nine more games left in an Iowa uniform, depending on how far the Hawkeyes advance in the Big Ten and NCAA tournaments.

The fall of Maravich's record is subject to scrutiny.

Maravich's all-time scoring mark is one of the more remarkable in sports history. There was no shot clock or 3-point line in his era. The 3-point line was adopted in 1986.

Maravich averaged 44.2 points per game. He scored more than 60 in a game four times, topping out at 69 against Alabama on Feb. 7, 1970.

LSU coach Kim Mulkey, who grew up in Louisiana and played at Louisiana Tech, said after her team's win over Kentucky on Sunday that comparing Maravich and Clark would be like comparing apples and oranges.

"What Clark has done is unbelievable and her name will be right up there at the top," Mulkey said. "But he played over here with no 3-point line, three years, and I don't think we need to make too much of, 'Well, she passed him because he's a man.' She's who she is, and that's awesome. Lord knows when I (coached) against her: 'Are you kidding me? What a generational talent.'"

Clark averages 28.3 points for her career. Her biggest output was 49 points against Michigan on Feb. 15, when she passed Kelsey Plum as the NCAA women's Division I career scoring leader.

Clark has 55 games with at least 30 points, the most of any player in men's or women's college basketball over the last 25 years. She has six triple-doubles this season and 17 in her career.

"What Caitlin's done has been amazing. She's fantastic player, great for the women's game and basketball in general," Maravich's eldest son, Jaeson, told The Associated Press last week.

Trader Joe's chicken soup dumplings recalled for possibly containing permanent marker plastic

NEW YORK (AP) — More than 61,000 pounds of steamed chicken soup dumplings sold at Trader Joe's are being recalled for possibly containing hard plastic, U.S. regulators announced Saturday.

The Agriculture Department's Food Safety and Inspection Service noted that the now-recalled dumplings, which are produced by the California-based CJ Foods Manufacturing Beaumont Corp., may be contaminated with foreign materials — "specifically hard plastic from a permanent marker pen."

The recall arrives after consumers reported finding hard plastic in the Trader Joe's-branded products, FSIS said. To date, no related illnesses or injuries have been reported.

FSIS urged consumers to check their freezers. The 6-ounce "Trader Joe's Steamed Chicken Soup Dumplings" under recall were produced on Dec. 7, 2023 — and can be identified by their side box labels with

lot codes 03.07.25.C1-1 and 03.07.25.C1-2.

In an online notice about the recall, Trader Joe's asked consumers to throw the impacted dumplings away or return them to any store location for a full refund.

A spokesperson for CJ Foods Manufacturing Beaumont Corp. told The Associated Press that the company was investigating the issue, which happened during the manufacturing process. In an emailed statement, the food maker added that "customer safety remains our No. 1 priority."

Foreign object contamination is one of the the top reasons for food recalls in the U.S. today. Beyond plastic, metal fragments, bits of bugs and more "extraneous" materials have prompted recalls by making their way into packaged goods.

In Hawaii, coral is the foundation of life. What happened to it after the Lahaina wildfire?

By AUDREY McAVOY Associated Press

Abraham "Snake" Ah Hee rides waves when the surf's up and dives for octopus and shells when the water is calm. The lifelong Lahaina, Hawaii, resident spends so much time in the ocean that his wife jokes he needs to wet his gills.

But these days Ah Hee is worried the water fronting his Maui hometown may not be safe after the deadliest U.S. wildfire in a century scorched more than 2,000 buildings in August and left behind piles of toxic debris. He is concerned runoff could carry contaminants into the ocean where they could get into the coral, seaweed and food chain.

"Now with all these things happening, you don't know if the fish is good to eat," Ah Hee said.

Scientists say there has never been another instance of a large urban fire burning next to a coral reef anywhere in the world and they are using the Maui wildfire as a chance to study how chemicals and metals from burned plastics, lead paint and lithium-ion batteries might affect delicate reef ecosystems.

The research, which is already underway in the waters off Maui, could ultimately help inform residents, tourists and coastal tropical communities worldwide as climate change increases the likelihood of extreme weather events of the kind that fueled the wildfire.

A bill before the state House would provide long-term funding for water quality monitoring in hopes of providing answers for residents whose lives are closely tied to the ocean.

For now, state officials are urging the public to limit their exposure to the ocean and seafood until scientists understand what might be making its way through the food chain.

"I know a lot of people keep asking, 'Is the water safe? Can we go out? Is it safe to fish and eat the fish?'" said Russell Sparks, Maui aquatic biologist at the state Department of Land and Natural Resources. "We just want to reinforce the message that we know it's frustrating, but if people can be patient. We've never encountered anything like this."

Coral reefs are sometimes called the "rainforests of the sea" because they are so crucial for healthy oceans. They are made up of stony corals, which are hard skeletons formed by thousands of individual living coral polyps that symbiotically host algae. Fish, crabs and other species find refuge in their midst. Scientists say one-fourth the ocean's fish depend on healthy coral reefs, which also protect shoreline communities from powerful waves during storms.

One of Hawaii's oldest stories, the centuries-old chant called The Kumulipo, reflects the central role of coral in the island chain. It says a coral polyp was the first living being to emerge from the darkness of creation. Starfish, worms, sea cucumber and other species followed. Humans came last.

"So the first form of life is a coral polyp. That is your foundation. The foundation of life is a coral," said Ekolu Lindsey, a Lahaina community advocate who has long pushed to restore coral reefs, fishing and traditions in his hometown.

Lahaina's coral reefs had challenges even before the fire, including overfishing, abuse from kayak and stand-up paddleboard tours, warm ocean temperatures and sediment flows from fallow fields and construction sites, Lindsey said.

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Much of the coral offshore of the burn zone was already degraded prior to August, Sparks said, but there were some patches of nice reef, like in an area north of Lahaina Harbor towards Mala Wharf.

Sea Maui, a whale watching and snorkeling tour company, frequently took snorkelers to the Mala Wharf reef in the past, where they would often see turtles and sometimes monk seals. Now, the company's boats avoid the reef due to concerns about runoff and out respect for the town, said Phil LeBlanc, partner and chief operating officer.

"We're not into disaster tourism," said LeBlanc, who instead sends tours south to Olowalu or north to Honolulu Bay.

University of Hawaii at Manoa researchers obtained a \$200,000 grant from the National Science Foundation to test the water soon after the fire.

In October, they placed 20 sensors off West Maui that measure temperature, salinity, oxygen, turbidity and chlorophyll every five minutes. They have six sensors measuring where water is flowing for clues on where contaminants might travel and accumulate, said Andrea Kealoha, a Manoa professor and Maui native who is leading the research project.

The Hui O Ka Wai Ola citizen science group collects additional samples, including after heavy rain events. Researchers are taking tissue fragments from fish, seaweed and coral for signs of heavy metals and contaminants from burned wood, metal and plastics.

Their grant covers work through August. So far they don't have enough data to draw conclusions but aim to release some results within a month.

Kealoha suspects scientists may detect contaminants accumulating in plants and animals over the next two to five years. Degraded reefs and lower water quality could emerge over the same time frame and she is pressing for a long-term monitoring plan that could be supported with state funds, she said.

The wildfire's effects may also stretch beyond Maui, because scientists believe currents carry water from Lahaina waters to nearby Lanai and Molokai.

"Fish that you collect to eat off of a reef on Molokai may very well have compounds that washed into the water from rainfall in Lahaina and got transported to ocean currents across the channel and onto the reefs of neighboring islands," said Eric Conklin, the Nature Conservancy's director of marine science for Hawaii and Palmyra.

Authorities have been trying to limit harmful runoff. The U.S. Army of Corps of Engineers is removing rubble and ash. The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency applied a soil stabilizer to prevent ash and dust from dispersing. Maui County officials placed protective barriers alongside storm drains and coastal roads to block debris.

Lindsey, the community advocate, lost his house in the blaze. Immediately after the fire, he was more focused on where he would live and the well-being of his family than the reef. But he also observed that the environment shapes his spiritual, mental and physical health.

He recalled how seeing turtles, seals and hundreds of crab marks on the beach fronting the remnants of his house prompted him to go surfing two months after the fire. January's heavy rains, and unknowns about runoff, have kept him out of the water since. But he still believes in nature's capacity to heal.

"When you see resources return like I did, it just fills your heart," Lindsey said. "Wow, we really messed this place up and would we leave it alone, nature will fix itself."

After 10 years of trying, a Palestinian woman had twins.

An Israeli strike killed them both

By WAFAA SHURAFI and SAMY MAGDY Associated Press

RAFAH, Gaza Strip (AP) — It took 10 years and three rounds of in vitro fertilization for Rania Abu Anza to become pregnant, and only seconds for her to lose her five-month-old twins, a boy and a girl.

An Israeli strike hit the home of her extended family in the southern Gaza city of Rafah late Saturday, killing her children, her husband and 11 other relatives and leaving another nine missing under the rubble,

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according to survivors and local health officials.

She had woken up at around 10 p.m. to breastfeed Naeim, the boy, and went back to sleep with him in one arm and Wissam, the girl, in the other. Her husband was sleeping beside them.

The explosion came an hour and a half later. The house collapsed.

"I screamed for my children and my husband," she said Sunday, as she sobbed and cradled a baby's blanket to her chest. "They were all dead. Their father took them and left me behind."

She closed her eyes, leaned her head against the wall and patted the bundle in a calming gesture that, finally, she'd had the chance to give.

Israeli airstrikes have regularly hit crowded family homes since the start of the war in Gaza, even in Rafah, which Israel declared a safe zone in October but is now the next target of its devastating ground offensive.

The strikes often come without warning, usually in the middle of the night.

Israel says it tries to avoid harming civilians and blames their deaths on the Hamas militant group because it positions fighters, tunnels and rocket launchers in dense residential areas. But the military rarely comments on individual strikes, which often kill women and children.

The military on Sunday didn't comment on this attack but said it "follows international law and takes feasible precautions to mitigate civilian harm."

Of the 14 people killed in the Abu Anza house, six were children and four were women, according to Dr. Marwan al-Hams, director of the hospital where the bodies were taken. In addition to her husband and children, Rania also lost a sister, a nephew, a pregnant cousin and other relatives.

Farouq Abu Anza, a relative, said about 35 people were staying at the house, some of whom had been displaced from other areas. He said they were all civilians, mostly children, and that there were no militants among them.

Rania and her husband, Wissam, both 29, spent a decade trying to get pregnant. Two rounds of IVF had failed, but after a third, she learned she was pregnant early last year. The twins were born on Oct. 13.

Her husband, a day laborer, was so proud he insisted on naming the girl after himself, she said.

"I didn't get enough of them," she said. "I swear I didn't get enough of them."

Less than a week earlier, Hamas-led militants had stormed into southern Israel in a surprise attack, rampaging through communities, killing some 1,200 people — mostly civilians — and taking around 250 hostages, including children and a newborn.

Israel responded with one of the deadliest and most destructive military campaigns in recent history. The war has killed over 30,000 Palestinians, according to Gaza's Health Ministry. Around 80% of Gaza's population of 2.3 million have fled their homes, and a quarter of the population faces starvation.

The ministry said last month that more than 12,300 Palestinian children and young teens had been killed in the war, about 43% of the overall toll. Women and children together make up three quarters of those killed. The ministry does not differentiate between civilians and combatants in its tallies.

Israel claims to have killed over 10,000 Hamas fighters but has not provided evidence.

For the children who survive, the war has made life hellish, humanitarian workers say, with some in northern Gaza beyond the reach of care.

"The sense of helplessness and despair among parents and doctors in realizing that lifesaving aid, just a few kilometers away, is being kept out of reach, must be unbearable, but worse still are the anguished cries of those babies slowly perishing under the world's gaze," UNICEF regional director Adele Khodr said in a statement Sunday.

Until Saturday, the Abu Anza family had been relatively fortunate. Rafah has been spared the immense destruction of northern Gaza and the southern city of Khan Younis, where Israeli tanks and ground troops have fought militants block by block after waves of airstrikes.

Rafah is also in the shrinking area of Gaza where humanitarian aid can still be delivered.

But Israel has said Rafah will be next, and the roughly 1.5 million people who have sought refuge there will be relocated, without saying where.

"We have no rights," Rania said. "I lost the people who were dearest to me. I don't want to live here. I want to get out of this country. I'm tired of this war."

Immigration 'parole' is a well-worn tool for US presidents. It faces a big test in 2024 elections

By GISELA SALOMON Associated Press

Joe Biden has made more use of immigration "parole" than any American president to bypass an uncooperative Congress, but he's hardly the first.

The presidential power has been a centerpiece of Biden's strategy to channel immigrants through new and expanded legal pathways and discourage illegal crossings, a radical difference from his rival Donald Trump.

Biden granted at least 1 million temporary visits, which generally include eligibility to work. Trump has said during his campaign to return to the White House that he would end the "outrageous abuse of parole."

Parole, which was created under a 1952 law, allows the president to admit people "only on a case-by-case basis for urgent humanitarian reasons or significant public benefit." It has been ordered 126 times by every president since then except for Trump, according to David Bier of the pro-immigration Cato Institute.

The Associated Press spoke with immigrants who arrived during four major parole waves over the past 72 years.

HUNGARY, 1956

Edith Lauer was a 14-year-old student when she left Budapest with her parents and older sister Nora in November 1956. Her parents felt unsafe after Soviet tanks invaded, crushing a short-lived revolt against the Moscow-controlled government. Many fled, including about 32,000 who were paroled in the United States.

"They knew that if they waited around, they would be arrested, (possibly) tried in a communist trial ... and or executed," Lauer, 81, recalled from her home in Cleveland.

The four went to a military base in Munich, where they stayed for weeks until her mother's cousin sponsored them and offered his house in Silver Spring, Maryland.

Edith Lauer arrived by military plane at Camp Kilmer, New Jersey, a former army camp converted to Hungarian refugee housing.

"My God, this is freedom, democracy, it was just a totally different world," she remembers thinking. "I recognize that very, very soon, and ... everybody was so welcoming and so wonderful."

Her father, a lawyer and the only one in the family who spoke English, became a librarian at the Library of Congress. Her mother started as a dishwasher and went on to work at a laboratory producing serum from monkeys.

In 1963, Lauer married an American student she met at the University of Maryland who later became a corporate executive. She graduated from Texas A&M University and became a teacher. She has two daughters and two grandchildren, and founded a nonprofit organization to promote understanding of her people.

VIETNAM, 1975

The Vietnam War era produced an exodus from Southeast Asia that brought parole to about 340,000 people.

Kim-Trang Dang was a 25-year-old law student working as teacher when she left Saigon with her then-husband, two siblings and five other family members. Her father and two sisters had left days earlier. It was April 1975, just before the capital of South Vietnam fell to North Vietnamese communist forces.

They drove a half-hour in the middle of the night to a river port where a boat was waiting. There were bombs, and fire in the streets, but they were told a U.S. military ship was going to pick them up at sea.

They went to Subic Bay, the Philippines, and then Guam, before being transferred to a camp at Fort Chaffee, a military installation in western Arkansas where they stayed for about a month waiting for a sponsor who could take them out to live in the U.S.

The sponsor offered them his house in Tampa, Florida. Kim-Trang got a job at a shrimp factory, where she spent eight hours a day pulling off shrimp skin and had English classes at night. She moved to San Diego

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in the 1980s and got a job as a social worker at a Catholic organization, where she retired after 23 years. Kim-Trang, 73, has three U.S.-born children and five grandchildren.

"I'm happy that I have a freedom here, and I don't live under the communism," she said. "When I met them, the Americans were really nice ... They opened their arms to us. If they don't open their arms, we don't know where to go."

She had her own business taking care of the elderly. Now, she volunteers as president of a Vietnamese service organization. She became a U.S. citizen in 1980.

CUBA, 1980

Mabel Junco, who arrived at Key West, Florida in a fishing boat rented by her uncle, was one of about 125,000 Cubans who got parole in 1980. They were processed at refugee camps in South Florida.

Junco's family disapproved of the Cuban government and in April 1980 leader Fidel Castro unexpectedly announced that any Cuban who wanted could leave the island from the port city of Mariel.

Mabel, then 11, relied on an uncle who had lived in Miami for almost 10 years. He rented a fishing boat for her, her parents, and older sister, who was 16. They left their home in Havana for the port city of Mariel and found the boat was in bad shape, and full of people.

Mabel, her mother and her sister boarded another boat carrying women and children. Her father and uncle stayed in the damaged boat, which was towed by another until a U.S. Coast Guard vessel rescued them. After a night of sailing, they reunited in Key West as part of what became known as the Mariel boat lift.

After about three months at the uncle's house, the family moved into a rented one-bedroom apartment. The parents obtained work permits and would leave early in the morning and return at night. The two girls walked to and from school alone, cooked and did housework.

The mother, who was a seamstress in Cuba, worked in a clothing factory in Miami. The father drove trucks, like he did in Cuba, until a few years later he opened a transportation company for the elderly. Four years later the family had their own house, with a room for each person.

"In Cuba things were very difficult, very bad," said Junco, now 55 and a teacher in Jacksonville, Florida. "Here life has given us many opportunities, we have fought forward ... my parents always taught us that you come to work, and you do not get anything free from the government."

Junco married a Cuban who left the island when he was three years old. They have two daughters, 30 and 26.

VENEZUELA, 2023

Berioskha Guevara has no words to describe her happiness living in the United States. After decades of fear as a political opponent in Venezuela and struggles to buy staples like milk and bread, the 53-year-old chemist feels she is dreaming.

Guevara and her 86-year-old father came to the U.S. under the sponsorship of her brother, a pharmacist who left after Hugo Chavez took power in 1999.

"Now we are like in paradise," said Guevara, who arrived in July 2023. "I can't stop smiling, making plans, thanking God because without parole I would never have been able to live my dreams as I am living them now."

More than 7.7 million Venezuelans have fled the country as it went into an economic tailspin over the last decade. They are increasingly headed to the United States, which prompted the Biden administration to offer parole to 30,000 people a month from Cuba, Haiti, Nicaragua and Venezuela.

Texas and 20 other states sued, saying the administration "effectively created a new visa program — without the formalities of legislation from Congress" but does not challenge large-scale parole for Afghans and Ukrainians. A judge has yet to rule after an August trial.

In Venezuela, Guevara graduated in 2003 with a bachelor's degree in chemistry and for the last decade worked at a foreign private oil company earning \$200 a month. It was a relatively good salary for Venezuelans, but inflation was very high, and food scarce. She worried about being arrested for being an opponent of the government.

In the U.S., four months after filing for work authorization, she got a job at a supermarket. She is looking for work that would use her chemistry background while living with her father in her brother's one-bedroom apartment in Orlando, Florida.

A Supreme Court decision could come Monday in a case about barring Trump from the 2024 ballot

By MARK SHERMAN Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — A Supreme Court decision could come as soon as Monday in the case about whether former President Donald Trump can be kicked off the ballot over his efforts to undo his defeat in the 2020 election.

Trump is challenging a groundbreaking decision by the Colorado Supreme Court that said he is disqualified from being president again and ineligible for the state's primary, which is Tuesday.

The resolution of the case on Monday, a day before Super Tuesday contests in 16 states, would remove uncertainty about whether votes for Trump, the leading Republican candidate for president, will ultimately count. Both sides had requested fast work by the court, which heard arguments less than a month ago, on Feb. 8,

The Colorado court was the first to invoke a post-Civil War constitutional provision aimed at preventing those who "engaged in insurrection" from holding office. Trump also has since been barred from primary ballot in Illinois and Maine, though both decisions, along with Colorado's, are on hold pending the outcome of the Supreme Court case.

The Supreme Court has until now never ruled on the provision, Section 3 of the 14th amendment.

The court indicated Sunday there will be at least one case decided Monday, adhering to its custom of not saying which one. But it also departed from its usual practice in some respects, heightening the expectation that it's the Trump ballot case that will be handed down.

Except for when the end of the term nears in late June, the court almost always issues decisions on days when the justices are scheduled to take the bench. But the next scheduled court day isn't until March 15. And apart from during the coronavirus pandemic when the court was closed, the justices almost always read summaries of their opinions in the courtroom. They won't be there Monday.

Any opinions will post on the court's website beginning just after 10 a.m. EST Monday.

Separately, the justices last week agreed to hear arguments in late April over whether Trump can be criminally prosecuted on election interference charges, including his role in the Jan. 6, 2021, attack on the U.S. Capitol. The court's decision to step into the politically charged case, also with little in the way of precedent to guide it, calls into question whether Trump will stand trial before the November election.

The former president faces 91 criminal charges in four prosecutions. Of those, the only one with a trial date that seems poised to hold is his state case in New York, where he's charged with falsifying business records in connection with hush money payments to a porn actor. That case is set for trial on March 25, and the judge has signaled his determination to press ahead.

A woman clutching an infant is found in the rubble of Ukraine building after Russian drone strike

By SUSIE BLANN and JOANNA KOZLOWSKA Associated Press

KYIV, Ukraine (AP) — President Volodymyr Zelenskyy urged Western allies to boost Ukraine's air defenses after a Russian drone strike destroyed an apartment block in the southern port city of Odesa and killed at least 11 people. Officials on Sunday said the bodies of a boy — and a young woman clutching an infant — were pulled from Saturday's rubble.

"The mother tried to cover the 8-month-old child with her own (body). She tried to save them. They were found in a firm embrace," said a Telegram post published on the interior ministry's official channel. Separately, the governor of the Odesa region, Oleh Kiper, said the other child was 10.

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On Saturday, Ukrainian authorities said another baby was among those killed after falling debris from an Iranian-made drone hit the building — one of eight Russian drones reported by officials. Later that day, Zelenskyy said a second child aged 2 had also died.

"Delays in the delivery of weapons to Ukraine, as well as air defense to protect our people, unfortunately result in such losses," Zelenskyy wrote on X, formerly known as Twitter.

More people may still be trapped, the Odesa branch of Ukraine's main emergency service said on Facebook. Kiper said rescue workers continued to comb through the site.

Elsewhere in Ukraine, regional authorities reported that a 58-year-old man died under rubble after Russian forces overnight shelled his village in the southern Kherson province. Another civilian man, 38, was killed in a Russian artillery strike in the neighboring Zaporizhzhia region, local Gov. Ivan Fedorov said.

On Sunday afternoon, Donetsk regional Gov. Vadim Filashkin said a Russian airstrike on the eastern town of Kurakhove wounded 16 people and damaged 15 high-rise apartment blocks.

REPORTS OF EXPLOSIONS AT AN OIL DEPOT IN CRIMEA

In Russian-occupied Crimea, loud explosions were heard near an oil depot in the early hours Sunday, according to a local pro-Kyiv Telegram news channel. Kremlin-installed officials in the territory said a nearby stretch of highway was closed for about eight hours.

Videos shared with pro-Ukrainian channel Crimean Wind showed explosions lighting up the sky, followed by booms. The channel said they were taken by residents near Feodosia, a coastal town in northeastern Crimea. It was not immediately possible to verify the circumstances in which the videos were shot.

An anti-Russian, Crimean Tatar-led underground group claimed that the blasts destroyed a pipeline, causing "colossal" damage.

The group, Atesh — which means "fire" in Crimean Tatar — did not directly claim responsibility for the strike and said it had learned about its consequences from informers among Russian-appointed officials. Authorities in Kyiv did not immediately acknowledge the claims.

Traffic was halted early Sunday along a four-lane Russian federal highway near Feodosia, according to an adviser to Crimea's Kremlin-installed leader. The Telegram post by Oleg Kryuchkov gave no reasons for the move.

More than eight hours later, Crimea's local transport minister reported that traffic had partially resumed. A bridge that connects Crimea to Russian territory was also closed to traffic for about two hours early Sunday.

Russia's defense ministry did not comment on the reports but claimed that 38 Ukrainian drones were intercepted overnight into Sunday over the peninsula.

CHINA'S UKRAINE ENVOY HOLDS TALKS IN MOSCOW

In Moscow, China's special envoy on Ukraine held talks on Saturday evening with senior Russian diplomats in the first leg of a European trip that will also take him to Brussels, Poland, Germany and France, Chinese and Russian state media reported.

China's foreign ministry said Special Representative Li Hui and Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Mikhail Galuzin agreed that negotiations are the only way to end the fighting in Ukraine.

Li's trip, the second since May, comes as Kyiv seeks Beijing's participation in peace talks that Switzerland is trying to organize. China claims it is neutral in Russia's war on Ukraine but maintains close ties with Moscow, with frequent state visits and joint military drills.

On Sunday, Turkish Foreign Minister Hakan Fidan said it was time to start discussing a cease-fire between Moscow and Kyiv, claiming that "both sides have now reached the limits of the results they can achieve through war."

Speaking at a news conference, Fidan said that such a move would not mean recognizing Russia's occupation of parts of Ukraine.

"We believe that it is time to separate the issues of recognition of the occupation and sovereignty from the cease-fire issue," he said.

Organized crime attacks on local candidates raise fears Mexico may face its bloodiest elections ever

By FABIOLA SÁNCHEZ Associated Press

MEXICO CITY (AP) — As Mexico prepares for the largest elections in its history, organized crime is once again preying on local candidates across swaths of the country where cartels dominate, raising concerns among experts that these could be Mexico's bloodiest elections ever.

Julián López, coordinator for the Citizen Movement party in the southern state of Guerrero, experienced it first hand when rifle-toting gunmen abducted him and two colleagues while they were driving on Feb. 7. The 43-year-old López was beaten, stripped of his possessions, made to kneel near a remote garbage dump and ultimately abandoned in the middle of the night.

Two mayoral hopefuls in the town of Maravatio in neighboring Michoacan state were not so fortunate. They were killed by gunmen within hours of each other Monday. One was from the governing Morena party of President Andrés Manuel López Obrador, the other from the conservative National Action Party. A third mayoral hopeful from that town was abducted and found dead in November.

On Feb. 10, a man running for Congress for the Morena party in the sprawling Mexico City suburb of Ecatepec was fatally shot in the street alongside his brother. He had allegedly received threats from a local union.

A month earlier, on Jan. 5, the local leader of the Institutional Revolutionary Party and candidate for mayor of Suchiate, Chiapas, was killed. The same day, in the northwestern state of Colima, a mayoral candidate of the Citizen Movement party in Armeria was shot by gunmen while in his vehicle.

López, the candidate in Guerrero, has refused to travel in armored vehicles with armed security since his abduction.

"How will it look to see a leader moving around the state of Guerrero with armed officials and in armored cars?" he asked. "I don't think that's the way to get closer to the people or promote citizen participation."

Thousands of local candidates find themselves in a similar quandary ahead of the June 2 elections, which will occur in all 32 jurisdictions, with more than 20,000 positions up for grabs, making it Mexico's largest election, according to the National Electoral Institute.

While federal authorities offer security details to national candidates, those running for local offices — the ones that drug cartels really want to control — are completely exposed and acutely aware of the optics of running from within a security bubble.

The group Data Civica had tallied 30 attacks on political hopefuls and party officials from September — when most started pre-campaign activities — through Feb. 10. Its spokesperson, Itxaro Arteta, said they were "worried" after recording eight attacks on pre-candidates in January, more than double what they had seen before in that month since 2018.

Political scientist Manuel Pérez Aguirre coordinates the College of Mexico's Violence and Peace Seminar's research into electoral violence. Their investigation around the killings of 32 local candidates in the 2021 elections found that the lethal electoral violence is "predominantly local, because 85% of the victims were running for municipal posts."

"Local power is extremely important to organized crime," Pérez Aguirre said. "That's why they look to establish control at the municipal level."

Those local candidates have become more vulnerable under the security regime of the current president. López Obrador created the quasi-military National Guard, disbanded the federal police and what remains of local police forces can put up little resistance to heavily armed cartels.

"Local power has really been abandoned and municipal police haven't really been strengthened," Pérez Aguirre said.

López Obrador was dismissive of the concerns of growing electoral violence earlier this week following the killings in Maravatio. "The same tendency of declining crimes is going to continue, above all homicides," he said.

He said the federal government would protect candidates for president, governor and Congress, and he asked state and local governments to provide security for those running for local posts.

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Guillermo Valencia, president of the Institutional Revolutionary Party in Michoacan said Saturday, "Four candidates have already resigned on me and I'm struggling to find candidates in other (races)," he said. The party's candidate for Congress in the port of Lazaro Cardenas already asked for protection, he said.

In Maravatio where the three potential candidates from other parties were already killed, Valencia said he's trying to pact with two other opposition parties to present a common candidate.

"In Michoacan and Mexico democracy is threatened," he said.

Political risk firm Integralia Consultores published a report in February noting that some parts of the country faced higher risk of organized crime interfering in elections because of an accumulation of illegal markets, conflict among armed groups and weak rule of law.

Cartels have diversified beyond the drug trade. They extort protection payments from all sizes of businesses and even local government. They exert their will not only through political assassinations but also by financing the campaigns of candidates who will allow them to operate or even putting up their own candidates, according to Integralia's report.

Marko Cortés, national president of the National Action Party, demanded more federal security for those participating in the elections as he condemned the killing of his party's candidate in Maravatio this week.

"It can't be that they're killing candidates from different parties," he said. "No one is protecting them, there are no risk maps, there are no protocols or security mechanisms and the indifference of those governing now continues."

Because of the violence, at least two candidates from his party have dropped out of the June election race. He declined to say where out of concern for their safety.

But López, who survived his abduction, refused to back down.

"We absolutely cannot surrender, we can't give up," he said. "Those of us who believe things can get better have to continue working."

'Dune: Part Two' brings spice power to the box office with \$81.5 million debut

By LINDSEY BAHR AP Film Writer

Movie theaters were looking for a savior and "Dune: Part Two" is delivering on the promise. Armed with sandworms, big screen spectacle and the star power of Timothée Chalamet, Denis Villeneuve's science fiction epic stormed the North American box office this weekend earning \$81.5 million in ticket sales, according to studio estimates Sunday.

Internationally, it earned \$97 million, bringing its global debut to \$178.5 million.

"Denis made a really extraordinary and special film and it's been really exciting to see people respond," said Mary Parent, a producer on both "Dune" films and chairman of worldwide production at Legendary. "It was made for the big screen and it feels like it's being received as a cinematic event."

It's the first major hit of 2024, and one that was sorely needed by exhibitors. Although there have been holdovers from December that have continued to earn, like Warner Bros.' "Wonka" (also starring Chalamet) and Sony's romantic comedy "Anyone But You," the box office is in a bit of a drought. In the first two months of 2024, no films have crossed \$100 million domestically. The highest earning movies have been "The Beekeeper," "Bob Marley: One Love" and "Mean Girls."

"Dune 2" rode a wave of great reviews (94% on Rotten Tomatoes) into a marketplace that was essentially free of competition. Warner Bros. released it in 4,071 locations in the U.S. and Canada, where audiences across the board gave it the highest PostTrak marks and an A CinemaScore. According to exit data, men accounted for 59% of opening weekend ticket buyers and 64% were over the age of 25. The sequel was primarily financed by Legendary and its production budget, previously reported to be in the \$122 million range, is closer to \$190 million.

"It really captured the marketplace," said Jeff Goldstein, Warner Bros. president of domestic distribution. "It's a cultural moment globally."

Premium large format screens like IMAX and 70mm accounted for 48% of the opening weekend business.

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It marked a March record for IMAX, which made up \$18.5 million of the overall take. Villeneuve filmed the movie using IMAX cameras. Unlike "Oppenheimer," it was shot on digital, but with the extra time with the strike delay they were able to make film prints as well and the film format is proving a popular draw for audiences.

"Our most iconic film locations are virtually sold out for weeks," said IMAX CEO Rich Gelfond.

The \$81.5 million debut is also a record for its director Villeneuve, and stars Chalamet, Austin Butler and Rebecca Ferguson.

Originally planned for an October 2023 release, Warner Bros. bumped the movie to March amid the Hollywood strikes that would have prevented its starry cast from doing the promotional circuit. The global promo tour has been on hyperdrive for about a month, driving conversations with buzzy interviews, the viral sandworm-inspired popcorn bucket and eye-popping fashion moments from the stylish young cast – peaking with Zendaya's silver cyborg showstopper (vintage Mugler) in London. They've made stops in Mexico City, South Korea, Abu Dhabi and New York City.

"We worked very hard to be ready for that (original) date but we very much felt that, especially with this incredible cast, that it was worth waiting for," Parent said.

Goldstein added that there was "a lot of debate" over whether or not to release it during the strikes but they knew that they needed the cast to "fully realize the movie."

"You don't make movie stars any place other than theaters," Goldstein said. "Cinemas, on the big screen with the big sound and that shared experience makes a big star, or show the talent of a big star anyway."

The first "Dune" opened under complicated conditions in October 2021. It was one of the last films of Warner Bros.' divisive plan to simultaneously debut its major movies in theaters and on its streaming platform. And yet it still earned over \$40 million in its first weekend and went on to gross over \$400 million worldwide.

"Denis Villeneuve is up there with Christopher Nolan as a filmmaker whose name alone inspires people to go to the movie theater," said Paul Dergarabedian, the senior media analyst for Comscore.

This weekend, he added, "moves the needle in a big way."

Going into the weekend the box office was down about 20% from the same point last year (when "Avatar: The Way of Water," a 2022 release, was lifting everything). The closest equivalent this year is "Wonka," still a hit, but not as big as "Avatar 2." After the "Dune" weekend, the deficit will be closer to 13%.

"It shows how important one movie can be to the overall health of the industry," Dergarabedian said. "But this is not a one-hit wonder for March. It's a momentum business. Now we're going to get the wind back in the sails as we head further into March, April and the summer movie season."

Warner Bros. is one of those studios that will be back in short order with another big film, in "Godzilla x Kong" at the end of March, followed by "Furiosa" in May, the "Beetlejuice" sequel in September and the "Joker" sequel in October.

"This is our year," Goldstein said. "Exhibitors are fighting for their lives but we can be clever and collaborative with them to keep our business relevant to audiences."

Estimated ticket sales for Friday through Sunday at U.S. and Canadian theaters, according to Comscore. Final domestic figures will be released Monday.

1. "Dune: Part Two," \$81.5 million.
2. "Bob Marley: One Love," \$7.4 million.
3. "Ordinary Angels," \$3.9 million.
4. "Madame Web," \$3.2 million.
5. "The Chosen: Season 4, Episodes 7-8," \$3.2 million.
6. "Migration," \$2.5 million.
7. "Demon Slayer: Kimetsu No Yaiba – To the Hashi," \$2.1 million.
8. "Wonka," \$1.7 million.
9. "Argylle," \$1.4 million.
10. "The Beekeeper," \$1.1 million.

A chunk of Republican primary and caucus voters say they wouldn't vote for Trump as the GOP nominee

By LINLEY SANDERS, JESSE BEDAYN and AMELIA THOMSON-DeVEAUX Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — A small but substantial chunk of Republican primary and caucus voters say they would be so dissatisfied if Donald Trump became the party's presidential nominee that they would not vote for him in November's general election, according to AP VoteCast.

An analysis of the data shows that many of those voters were unlikely to vote for Trump, some even before this year, but it still points to potential problems for the former president as he looks to consolidate the nomination and pivot toward an expected rematch with Democratic President Joe Biden.

According to AP VoteCast surveys of the first three head-to-head Republican contests, 2 in 10 Iowa voters, one-third of New Hampshire voters, and one-quarter of South Carolina voters would be so disappointed by Trump's renomination that they would refuse to vote for him in the fall.

This unwillingness to contemplate a presidential vote for Trump isn't confined to voters in the earliest states.

Lee and Bill Baltzell defected from the Republican Party to register as independents a year ago. They attended a rally for supporters of Trump's last major rival, former U.N. Ambassador Nikki Haley, last week in Centennial, Colorado, to encourage her to keep running against Trump.

"We don't know that Trump will run into more legal problems and be disqualified, and I'd rather not see Biden in there for another four years," said Bill Baltzell, 60.

If it's between Biden and Trump, Lee Baltzell, 58, said she would consider writing in an alternative.

"I don't know. I did not vote for Biden the last time; I don't know that I could do it this time. But I don't know if I could vote for Trump."

Opposition from voters like the Baltzells hasn't slowed Trump's march toward the nomination, but it could be an issue for him later on. It's not clear how much of a problem, though, because a dive into the numbers shows that many of the "never-Trump" voters in the early states were unlikely to vote for him in the general election to begin with.

Many of the voters who said they wouldn't vote for Trump as the nominee aren't Republicans at all. In the first three head-to-head contests, anywhere from 17% to 31% of the voters who said they wouldn't support Trump in the general election identified as Democrats, and between 14% and 27% identified as independents.

Even for some of those Republicans, voting for Trump was already a tough sell. Anywhere between one-half and two-thirds of the staunchly anti-Trump voters in the early contests said they had voted for Biden in 2020.

Then there is the fact that primaries tend to draw out the people with the most passionate opinions. Voter turnout in primaries and caucuses, particularly ones that are relatively uncompetitive, is typically lower than it would be in a general election.

Still, about 1 in 10 early contest voters who said they supported Trump in the 2020 general election said they wouldn't be doing so this year.

One question, though, is whether that means they would vote for Trump's opponent instead.

"I won't vote for Trump, I'll just say that. I voted for him twice; I could never vote for him again," said Linda Binkley, 74, a registered Republican who isn't pleased by the prospect of a Trump vs. Biden matchup. She added, "I'm not sure I can vote for Biden."

If Trump becomes the nominee, he will likely need to win over some of the moderates who supported Biden in 2020 if he wants to return to the White House. From that perspective, even a small amount of opposition from within his own party — not to mention broader skepticism among independents — could be a problem in the future.

How speechwriters delve into a president's mind: Lots of listening, studying and becoming a mirror

By SEUNG MIN KIM Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Speechwriting, in one sense, is essentially being someone else's mirror.

"You can try to find the right words," said Dan Cluchey, a former speechwriter for President Joe Biden. "But ultimately, your job is to ensure that when the speech is done, that it has a reflection of the speaker."

That concept is infinitely magnified in the role of the presidential speechwriter. Over the course of U.S. history, those aides have absorbed the personalities, the quirks, the speech cadences of the most powerful leader on the globe, capturing his thoughts for all manner of public remarks, from the mundane to the historic and most consequential.

There are few times in a presidency that the art — and the rigorous, often painful process — of speechwriting is more on display than during a State of the Union, when the vast array of a president's policy aspirations and political messages come together in one, hour-plus carefully choreographed address at the Capitol. Biden will deliver the annual address on Thursday.

It's a process that former White House speechwriters say take months, with untold lobbying and input from various federal agencies and others outside the president's inner circle who are all working to ensure their favored proposals merit a mention. Speechwriters have the unenviable task of taking dozens of ideas and stitching them into a cohesive narrative of a president's vision for the year.

It's less elegant prose, more laundry list of policy ideas.

Amid all those formalities and constraints of a State of the Union address, there is also how a president executes the speech.

Biden's biggest political liability remains his age (81) and voters' questions about whether he is still up to the job (his doctor this past week declared him fit to serve). His every word is watched by Republican operatives eager to capture any misspeak to plant doubt about Biden's fitness among the public.

"This year, of course, is an election year. It also comes as there's much more chatter about his age," said Michael Waldman, who served as a speechwriter for President Bill Clinton. "People are really going to be scrutinizing him for how he delivers the speech, as much as what he says."

Biden will remain at Camp David through Tuesday and is expected to spend much of that time preparing for the State of the Union. Bruce Reed, the White House deputy chief of staff, accompanied Biden to the presidential retreat outside Washington on Friday evening.

The White House has said lowering costs, shoring up democracy and protecting women's reproductive care will be among the topics that Biden will address on Thursday night.

Biden likely won't top the list of the most talented presidential orators. He has thrived the most during small chance encounters with Americans, where interactions can be more off the cuff and intimate.

The plain-spoken Biden is known to hate Washington jargon and the alphabet soup of government acronyms, and he has challenged aides, when writing his remarks, to cut through the clutter and to get to the point with speed. Cluchey, who worked for Biden from 2018 to 2022, said the president was very engaged in the speech drafting process, all the way down to individual lines and words.

Biden can also come across as stiff at times when standing and reading from a teleprompter, but immediately loosens up and appears more comfortable when he switches to a hand-held microphone mid-remark. Biden has also learned to navigate a childhood stutter that he says helped him develop empathy for others facing similar challenges.

To become engrossed in another person's voice, past presidential speechwriters list things that are critical. One is just doing a lot of listening to the principal, to get a sense of his rhythms and how he uses language.

Lots of direct conversation with the president is key, to try and get inside the commander in chief's thinking and how that leader frames arguments and make their case.

"This is not an act of impression, where you're simply just trying to get the accent down," said Jeff Shesol, another former Clinton speechwriter. "What you really are learning to do and need to learn to do — this is true of speechwriters in any role, but particularly for a president — is to understand not just how he

sounds, but how he thinks.”

Shesol added: “You’re absorbing not just the rhythms and cadences of speech, but you’re absorbing a worldview.”

Then there is always the matter of the speech-giver going rogue.

Biden is often candid, and White House aides are sometimes left to clean up and clarify what he said in unvarnished moments. But other times when he deviates from the script, it ends up being an improvement on what his aides had scripted.

Take last year’s State of the Union. Biden had launched into an attack prepared in advance against some Republicans who were insisting on requiring renewal votes on popular programs such as Medicare and Social Security, which would effectively threaten their fate every five years.

That prompted heckling from Republicans and shouts of “Liar!” from the audience.

Biden immediately pivoted, egging on the Republicans to contact his office for a copy of the proposal and joking that he was enjoying their “conversion.”

“Folks, as we all apparently agree, Social Security and Medicare is off the — off the books now, right? They’re not to be touched?” Biden continued. The crowd of lawmakers applauded. “All right. All right. We got unanimity!”

Speechwriters do try and prepare for such moments, particularly if a president is known to speak ex-temporaneously.

Shesol recalled that Clinton’s speechwriters would draft remarks that were relatively spare, to account for him veering off on his own. The writers would write a clear structure into the speech that would allow Clinton to easily return to his prepared remarks once his riff was over.

“Clinton used to liken it to playing a jazz solo and then he’s going back to the score,” Waldman added.

Cluchey, when asked for his reaction when his former boss would go off-script, described it as a “ballet with several movements of, you know, panic, to ‘Wait a minute, this is actually very good,’ and then ‘Oh man, he really nailed it.’”

Biden is “at his best when he’s most authentically, most loosely, just speaking the plain truth,” Cluchey said. “The speechwriting process even at its best has strictures around it.”

What to watch for as China’s major political meeting of the year gets underway

By KEN MORITSUGU Associated Press

BEIJING (AP) — One burning issue dominates as the 2024 session of China’s legislature gets underway this week: the economy.

The National People’s Congress annual meeting, which opens Tuesday, is being closely watched for any signals on what the ruling Communist Party might do to reenergize an economy that is sagging under the weight of expanded government controls and the bursting of a real-estate bubble.

That is not to say that other issues won’t come up. Proposals to raise the retirement age are expected to be a hot topic, the state-owned Global Times newspaper said last week. And China watchers will parse the annual defense budget and the possible introduction of a new foreign minister.

But the economy is what is on most people’s minds in a country that may be at a major turning point after four decades of growth that propelled China into a position of economic and geopolitical power. For many Chinese, the failure of the post-COVID economy to rally strongly last year is shaking a long-held confidence in the future.

A CEREMONIAL ROLE

The National People’s Congress is largely ceremonial in that it doesn’t have any real power to decide on legislation. The deputies do vote, but it’s become a unanimous or near-unanimous formalizing of decisions that have been made by Communist Party leaders behind closed doors.

The congress can be a forum to propose and discuss ideas. The nearly 3,000 deputies are chosen to

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represent various groups, from government officials and party members to farmers and migrant workers. But Alfred Wu, an expert on governance in China, believes that role has been eroded by the centralization of power under Chinese leader Xi Jinping.

"Everyone knows the signal is the top," said Wu, an associate professor at the National University of Singapore and a former journalist in China. "Once the top says something, I say something. Once the top keeps silent, I also keep silent."

Nonetheless, the reports and speeches during the congress can give indications of the future direction of government policy. And while they tend to be in line with previous announcements, major new initiatives have been revealed at the meeting, such as the 2020 decision to enact a national security law for Hong Kong following major anti-government protests in 2019.

A TARGET FOR GROWTH

The first thing the legislature will do on Tuesday is receive a lengthy "work report" from Premier Li Qiang that will review the past year and include the government's economic growth target for this year.

Many analysts expect something similar to last year's target of "around 5%," which they say would affirm market expectations for a moderate step up in economic stimulus and measures to boost consumer and investor confidence.

Many current forecasts for China's GDP growth are below 5%, but setting a lower target would signal less support for the economy and could dampen confidence, said Jeremy Zook, the China lead analyst at Fitch Ratings, which is forecasting 4.6% growth this year.

Conversely, a higher target of about 5.5% would indicate more aggressive stimulus, said Neil Thomas, a Chinese politics fellow at the Asia Society Policy Institute.

There will be positive messages for private companies and foreign investors, Thomas said, but he doesn't expect a fundamental change to Xi's overall strategy of strengthening the party's control over the economy.

"Political signals ahead of the National People's Congress suggest that Xi is relatively unperturbed by China's recent market troubles and is sticking to his guns on economic policy," he said.

A NEW FOREIGN MINISTER, MAYBE

China's government ministers typically hold their posts for five years, but Qin Gang was dismissed as foreign minister last year after only a few months on the job. To this day, the government has not said what happened to him and why.

His predecessor, Wang Yi, has been brought back as foreign minister while simultaneously holding the more senior position of the Communist Party's top official on foreign affairs.

The presumption has been that Wang's appointment was temporary until a permanent replacement could be named. Analysts say that could happen during the National People's Congress, but there's no guarantee it will.

"Wang Yi enjoys Xi's trust and currently dominates diplomatic policymaking below the Xi level, so it would not be a shock if Wang remained foreign minister for a while longer," Thomas said.

The person who has gotten the most attention as a possible successor is Liu Jianchao, a Communist Party official who is a former Foreign Ministry spokesperson and ambassador to the Philippines and Indonesia. He has made several overseas trips in recent months including to Africa, Europe, Australia and the U.S., increasing speculation that he is the leading candidate.

Other names that have been floated include Ma Zhaoxu, the executive vice foreign minister. Wu said it likely depends on whom Xi and Wang trust.

"I don't know how Wang Yi thinks about it," he said. "If Wang Yi likes somebody like Liu Jianchao or likes somebody like Ma Zhaoxu. And also Xi Jinping. So it's more about personal relations."

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Today in History: March 4

Abraham Lincoln's second inauguration

By The Associated Press undefined

Today in History

Today is Monday, March 4, the 64th day of 2024. There are 302 days left in the year.

Today's highlight in history:

On March 4, 1865, President Abraham Lincoln was inaugurated for a second term of office; with the end of the Civil War in sight, Lincoln declared:

"With malice toward none, with charity for all, with firmness in the fight as God gives us to see the right, let us strive on to finish the work we are in, to bind up the nation's wounds, to care for him who shall have borne the battle and for his widow and his orphan (tilde) to do all which may achieve and cherish a just and lasting peace among ourselves and with all nations."

On this date:

In 1789, the Constitution of the United States went into effect as the first Federal Congress met in New York. (The lawmakers then adjourned for lack of a quorum.)

In 1863, the Idaho Territory was created.

In 1917, Republican Jeannette Rankin of Montana took her seat as the first woman elected to the U.S. House of Representatives, the same day President Woodrow Wilson took his oath of office for a second term (it being a Sunday, a private ceremony was held inside the U.S. Capitol; a second, public swearing-in took place the next day).

In 1933, Franklin D. Roosevelt took office as America's 32nd president.

In 1966, John Lennon of The Beatles was quoted in the London Evening Standard as saying, "We're more popular than Jesus now," a comment that caused an angry backlash in the United States.

In 1981, a jury in Salt Lake City convicted Joseph Paul Franklin, an avowed racist and serial killer, of violating the civil rights of two Black men, Ted Fields and David Martin, who'd been shot to death. (Franklin received two life sentences for this crime; he was executed in 2013 for the 1977 murder of a Jewish man, Gerald Gordon.)

In 1987, President Ronald Reagan addressed the nation on the Iran-Contra affair, acknowledging that his overtures to Iran had "deteriorated" into an arms-for-hostages deal.

In 1994, in New York, four extremists were convicted of the 1993 World Trade Center bombing that killed six people and injured more than a thousand. Actor-comedian John Candy died in Durango, Mexico, at age 43.

In 1998, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled that sexual harassment at work can be illegal even when the offender and victim are of the same gender.

In 2012, Vladimir Putin scored a decisive victory in Russia's presidential election to return to the Kremlin and extend his hold on power.

In 2015, the Justice Department cleared Darren Wilson, a white former Ferguson, Missouri, police officer, in the fatal shooting of Michael Brown, a Black 18-year-old, but also issued a scathing report calling for sweeping changes in city law enforcement practices.

In 2017, President Donald Trump accused former President Barack Obama of tapping his telephones during the 2016 election; an Obama spokesman declared that the assertion was "simply false."

In 2018, "The Shape of Water" won four Oscars including best picture, an award announced by Warren Beatty and Faye Dunaway a year after they were caught up in the erroneous announcement that "La La Land" and not "Moonlight" had won for best picture.

In 2020, federal health officials investigated a suburban Seattle nursing home at the center of a coronavirus outbreak.

In 2022, Russian troops seized the biggest nuclear power plant in Europe after a middle-of-the-night attack that set it on fire and briefly raised worldwide fears of a catastrophe in the most chilling turn in Moscow's invasion of Ukraine to that point.

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Today's birthdays: Actor Paula Prentiss is 86. Movie director Adrian Lyne is 83. Singer Shakin' Stevens is 76. Author James Ellroy is 76. Former Energy Secretary Rick Perry is 74. Singer Chris Rea is 73. Actor/rock singer-musician Ronn Moss is 72. Actor Kay Lenz is 71. Musician Emilio Estefan is 71. Movie director Scott Hicks is 71. Actor Catherine O'Hara is 70. Actor Mykelti (MY'-kul-tee) Williamson is 67. Actor Patricia Heaton is 66. Sen. Tina Smith, D-Minn., is 66. Actor Steven Weber is 63. Rock musician Jason Newsted is 61. Actor Stacy Edwards is 59. Rapper Grand Puba is 58. Rock singer Evan Dando (Lemonheads) is 57. Actor Patsy Kensit is 56. Sen. James Lankford, R-Okla., is 56. Gay rights activist Chaz Bono is 55. Actor Andrea Bendewald is 54. Actor Nick Stabile (stah-BEEL') is 54. Country singer Jason Sellers is 53. Jazz musician Jason Marsalis is 47. Actor Jessica Heap is 41. Actor Scott Michael Foster is 39. TV personality Whitney Port is 39. Actor Audrey Esparza is 38. Actor Margo Harshman is 38. Actor Josh Bowman is 36. Actor Andrea Bowen is 34. Actor Jenna Boyd is 31.