

Groton Daily Independent

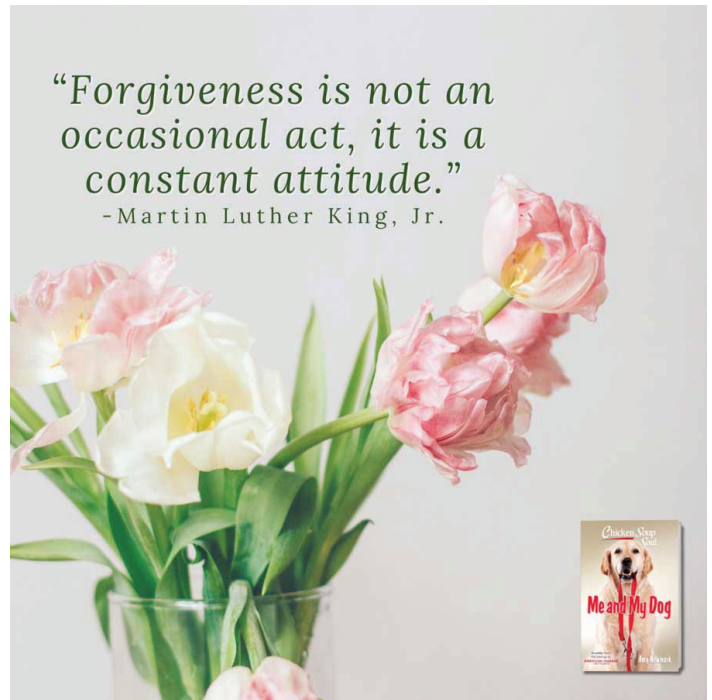
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Tuesday, March 5

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.

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



"Forgiveness is not an occasional act, it is a constant attitude."

-Martin Luther King, Jr.

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

OPEN: Recycling Trailer in Groton

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

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1440

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The Supreme Court ruled unanimously yesterday to restore former President Donald Trump's name on Republican primary ballots. The ruling overturns a Colorado decision disqualifying Trump under the 14th Amendment's insurrection clause for his role in the events of Jan. 6, 2021. The court's decision applies nationwide, including reversing decisions in Maine and Illinois.

Haiti has been under a three-day state of emergency amid clashes with armed gangs who are calling for Prime Minister Ariel Henry to resign. A curfew was initiated Sunday night after the gangs—who reportedly control 80% of the capital city of Port-au-Prince—stormed two prisons Saturday, killing at least 12 people and releasing an estimated 4,000 federal inmates.

JetBlue and Spirit Airlines announced they are terminating their \$3.8B merger, citing the unlikelihood of meeting legal and regulatory approvals by the agreement's July deadline. The news follows a federal judge's block in January ruling the merger would have driven up fares for price-conscious travelers and hurt competition. The airlines appealed the decision, and a hearing had been set for June. JetBlue will pay Spirit a \$69M termination fee.

Sports, Entertainment, & Culture

Chris Mortensen, longtime NFL journalist for ESPN, dies at 72. Brit Turner, founding member of Southern rock band Blackberry Smoke, dies of cancer at 57.

Six-time NFL All-Pro center Jason Kelce retires after 13 seasons. Denver Broncos to release nine-time Pro Bowl QB Russell Wilson after just two seasons with the team.

Meghan, Duchess of Sussex, tapped to headline South by Southwest opening day panel; SXSW kicks off this Friday from Austin.

Science & Technology

Google-backed Gravity Mobility opens the fastest electric vehicle charging stations in the US for public use; New York City stations can provide a 200-mile charge in five minutes. AI startup Anthropic releases Claude 3, saying its new chatbot is more powerful than OpenAI's ChatGPT.

Scientists grow organoids—miniature, three-dimensional structures that mimic key functions of different organs—from stem cells derived from the amniotic fluid of active pregnancies.

Engineers create the world's smallest QR code; embedded pattern, with feature sizes close to one-thousandth of a millimeter, is only readable using infrared light.

Business & Markets

US stock markets close lower (S&P 500 -0.1%, Dow -0.3%, Nasdaq -0.4%) ahead of jobs report this week. Tesla shares fall 7% amid declining sales in China.

Apple fined nearly \$2B by the European Commission, which sided with Spotify in finding the App Store restricted competition for music-streaming apps; Apple expected to appeal fine, which represents 0.5% of its global annual revenue.

Elon Musk sued by former Twitter executives for \$128M in total unpaid severance, claiming Musk didn't have cause to fire them after his 2022 takeover. Boeing sued for \$1B in damages by Alaska Airlines passengers who experienced door blowout in January, citing the incident caused PTSD and physical injuries.

Politics & World Affairs

Israeli forces raid West Bank city of Ramallah, considered to be largest such operation in years. UN report finds reasonable grounds to believe Hamas committed sexual violence in Oct. 7 raid, may be ongoing. Red Sea underwater cables providing internet and telecommunications to a quarter of Asia, Europe, and Middle East damaged; no group has claimed responsibility.

France becomes first country in the world to codify the right to an abortion in its constitution. First over-the-counter birth control pill to be available in US stores this month, comes after Food and Drug Administration's July approval.

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Groton City Council Meeting Agenda

March 5, 2024 – 7:00pm
City Hall – 120 N Main Street

(IF YOU WOULD LIKE TO CALL IN TO THIS MEETING, PLEASE MAKE PRIOR ARRANGEMENTS TO DO SO BY CALLING CITY HALL 605-397-8422)

1. Approval of Agenda
2. Public Comments - pursuant to SDCL 1-25-1
(Public Comments will offer the opportunity for anyone not listed on the agenda to speak to the council. Speaking time will be limited to 3 minutes. No action will be taken on questions or items not on the agenda.)
3. Budget Pay Request – Jaromir & Jana Simunek
4. Open Sealed Bids for 2024 Street Resurfacing Project
5. Open 2024 Gravel Quotes
6. Department Reports
7. Discussion Regarding Police Department's 2017 Ford Explorer
8. Follow-Up Discussion Regarding Childcare
9. Approval to Enable Thrillshare's 'Alerts' Feature
10. Surplus Safe in History Room
11. Resolution Acknowledging the Assignment of Ordinance No. 669 from NorthWestern Corporation to NorthWestern Energy Public Service Corporation
12. Approval to Replace Employers Mutual with Reliance Standard for Employee Life Insurance
13. Minutes
14. Bills
15. Select Equalization Meeting Date – March 19, 2024
16. Announcement: City Offices to be Closed on March 29th and April 1st, 2024 for Good Friday and Easter Monday
17. Executive session personnel & legal 1-25-2 (1) & (3)
18. Begin Accepting Applications for Full-Time Public Works Laborer
19. Second Reading of Ordinance No. 775 – 2024 Summer Salaries
20. Adjournment

Names Released in Hughes County Fatal Crash

What: Single vehicle fatal crash
Where: 620 N. Euclid Ave, Pierre, SD
When: 9:46 a.m., Friday, March 1, 2024

Driver 1: Keven Karl Klein, 57-year-old male from Pierre, SD, no injuries
Vehicle 1: 2010 Dodge Caravan
Seatbelt Use: No

Pedestrian 1: Rocky Lane Bowker, 60-year-old male, from Eagle Butte, SD, fatal injuries

Hughes County, S.D.- A pedestrian suffered fatal injuries Friday morning in a single vehicle crash in Pierre, SD.

Preliminary crash information indicates Keven K. Klein, the 57-year-old male driver of a 2010 Dodge Caravan suffered a seizure and blacked out while driving. The vehicle left the road, striking a pedestrian, Rocky L. Bowker, before crashing into fencing at an apartment building. Bowker died as a result of his injuries.

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

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

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**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**



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BK Custom Ts & More
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Lori's Pharmacy
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Rix Farms / R&M Farms
S & S Lumber
Spanier Harvesting & Trucking
Sun & Sea Travel
The Meat House
Witte Exteriors LLC**

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BROWN COUNTY
BROWN COUNTY COMMISSION AGENDA
REGULAR MEETING TUESDAY

March 5, 2024 8:45 A.M.

COMMISSIONER'S CHAMBERS, COURTHOUSE ANNEX - 25 MARKET STREET, ABERDEEN SD

1. Call To Order - Pledge of Allegiance
2. Approval of Agenda
3. Opportunity of Public Comment
4. Mike Scott, Landfill Manager
 - a. Open Bids for Waste Tire Removal
 - b. Open Bids for Wood Waste Grinding
 - c. Equipment Purchase
 - d. Set Dates for Free Spring Residential Cleanup/Waive Fees
5. Consent Calendar
 - a. Approval of General Meeting Minutes of February 27, 2024
 - b. Claims
 - c. HR Report
 - d. Travel Request
 - e. Approve & Authorize Advertising for Weed & Pest Chemical Bids
 - f. Lease
 - g. Abatement
 - a. Authorize Advertising Public Hearing for Special Event Malt Beverage License
 - b. Landfill Tonnage Report for February
6. Other Business
7. Executive Session (if requested per SDCL 1-25-2)
8. Adjourn

Brown County Commission Meeting

Please join my meeting from your computer, tablet, or smartphone.

<https://meet.goto.com/BrCoCommission>

You can also dial in using your phone. United States: [+1 \(872\) 240-3311](tel:+18722403311)

Access Code: 601-168-909 #

Get the app now and be ready when your first meeting starts: <https://meet.goto.com/install>

Public comment provides an opportunity for the public to address the county commission but may not exceed 3 minutes.

Public comment will be limited to 10 minutes (or at the discretion of the board).

Public comment will be accepted virtually when the virtual attendance option is available.

Official Recordings of Commission Meetings along with the Minutes can be found at

<https://www.brown.sd.us/node/454>



Here's the four ballot measures South Dakota voters could have a say on this election

By Stu Whitney

South Dakota News Watch

What started as a cavalcade of petition campaigns for South Dakota's November 2024 ballot has become more manageable for voters to follow.

Of the eight citizen-led ballot questions approved for circulation, three will definitely meet the signature threshold to make the ballot, according to News Watch analysis and interviews with political leaders and ballot sponsors.

Those three measures are the constitutional amendment to legalize abortion, the constitutional amendment to establish open primaries and the initiated measure to eliminate South Dakota's sales tax on groceries. That comes with the caveat that legal challenges could still occur, particularly with the abortion bid.

The latest effort to legalize recreational marijuana in South Dakota is making a late surge in signature gathering and also has a chance to qualify for the 2024 ballot, according to News Watch analysis of all the petition campaigns.

"People are discovering how hard it is to actually get something on the ballot," said South Dakota Open Primaries chairman Joe Kirby, a Sioux Falls businessman and government reform advocate. "Getting tens of thousands of signatures, especially given South Dakota weather, is not an easy task."

The citizen-led measures will be joined by one legislative resolution from the 2023 session, a proposal to change outdated male-only references to South Dakota's governor and other officials in the state constitution and statutes.

Legislators also passed Senate Joint Resolution 501 during the current session, an effort to amend the constitution to impose work requirements for Medicaid eligibility.

That means five or six ballot questions will be put to voters in the general election on Nov. 5. That's on par with the average number (5.6) qualifying for on-cycle South Dakota ballots since 2000. The highest numbers of certified ballot measures during that period were 11 in 2006 and 10 in 2016.

The number of verified signatures needed to qualify initiated measures for the ballot is 17,508, which represents 5% of the total vote for governor in the last gubernatorial election. Constitutional amendments require 35,017, which is 10%.

The deadline to submit signatures is May 7, and they must be certified by the Secretary of State's office before officially making the ballot. In the case of the abortion amendment, it's anticipated that legal challenges to certification will necessitate judicial review.

Here's a look at the status of this year's citizen-led ballot efforts:

Likely headed for 2024 ballot

Open primaries

The campaign to establish "top-two" primaries for governor, Congress and state legislative and county races is well-funded and largely non-partisan, guided by political veterans representing Republicans, Democrats and Independents.

It's also staying under the radar as the proposed abortion amendment draws most of the headlines and counter-messaging.

"It's nice to have more controversial issues out there," said Kirby. "But I think what's really happened for us is that the stars have aligned. Republican leadership in South Dakota sees this as a solution to some

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of their problems.”

The theory is that open primaries, rather than incentivizing candidates from taking extreme positions to win a partisan primary, will help lower the volume to produce officeholders more reflective of the general electorate.

This comes at a time when ultra-conservative factions such as the South Dakota Freedom Caucus have gained more traction within the Republican ranks.

Freedom Caucus chairman Aaron Aylward, a state representative from Harrisburg, told News Watch in January that the proposal would essentially create “two general elections in South Dakota” and thus was unnecessary.

“If the backers of this amendment are worried about having options at the ballot box, why isn’t the focus placed on getting people from all parties ready for the general election?” Aylward said.

The only other public opposition so far has come from South Dakota Republican Party chair John Wiik and U.S. Sen. Mike Rounds, who told News Watch in a March 1 statement that “our current primary system has served us well.”

Republicans Sen. John Thune and Rep. Dusty Johnson told News Watch that they will not be taking a public stance on the proposed amendment.

South Dakota Open Primaries has collected about 42,000 signatures as of March 1 and expects to meet its goal of 50,000, said Kirby. The group has several dozen volunteers but gets the “vast majority” of its signatures using paid circulators.

The petition drive has been boosted by the support of Unite America, a nonprofit based in Denver that advocates for election reform and has contributed about \$450,000 to the open primary effort in South Dakota.

Abortion amendment

There has been plenty of political friction surrounding this effort to reverse the state’s near-total abortion ban and enshrine access to abortion in the South Dakota Constitution.

Opposition has come from expected places, such as a “Decline to Sign” campaign from anti-abortion group Life Defense Fund and legislative efforts to allow petition signers to withdraw signatures that have already been submitted to the Secretary of State for certification.

Dakotans for Health, the progressive group behind the petition, told News Watch that it will likely file a lawsuit if House Bill 1244 allowing signature withdrawal passes. Groups such as the League of Women Voters of South Dakota have questioned the bill’s constitutionality and emergency clause, which would allow it to take effect immediately and not be referred to voters.

The abortion amendment also has received pushback from unexpected sources. Organizations such as Planned Parenthood North Central States and American Civil Liberties Union of South Dakota, steadfast advocates of abortion rights, have expressed concern about the amendment’s language and timing.

Getting enough raw signatures won’t be a problem for Dakotans for Health, which has used volunteer and paid circulators to compile more than 50,000 signatures as of March 1, according to co-founder Rick Weiland. He added that most of those signatures have gone through in-house validation as the group prepares for legal challenges as part of the certification process.

“There’s a pretty narrow strike zone, and we’re well aware of that,” said Weiland, referring to the heightened scrutiny the amendment faces. “But we’re confident we’ll make it and the voters will get a chance to decide.”

A November 2023 poll of registered voters co-sponsored by South Dakota News Watch showed a potentially close race, with 45.6% of respondents supporting the proposed constitutional amendment and 43.6% opposed.

Rep. Jon Hansen, R-Dell Rapids, who serves as vice president of South Dakota Right to Life and co-chair of the Life Defense Fund, viewed those results as a positive for the anti-abortion movement.

“This poll makes clear that the majority of South Dakotans do not support the extreme abortion amendment, including the majority of women who have decided to oppose it,” Hansen said in an emailed state-

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ment to News Watch after the poll was released.

Grocery tax repeal

Dakotans for Health is also sponsoring an initiated measure to prohibit the state from collecting sales tax on "anything sold for human consumption, except alcoholic beverages and prepared food."

The statewide poll in November co-sponsored by South Dakota News Watch showed that 61% of registered voters support the proposal, which would eliminate the 4.2% state sales tax on groceries. The measure would not affect the up to 2% sales tax on groceries charged by municipalities in South Dakota.

The proposal is staunchly opposed by the Republican-dominated Legislature, which approved a cut in the state's general sales tax rate from 4.5% to 4.2% during the 2023 session that's due to expire in 2027.

The fiscal note for the grocery tax measure indicates it could reduce annual state sales tax receipts by \$124 million. Opponents said that could stress the state's budget when combined with the rate change on general sales tax.

Weiland notes that Gov. Kristi Noem promised a grocery tax cut as part of her 2022 re-election campaign, a plan ultimately rejected by lawmakers. The governor took the rare step of testifying for her grocery tax

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.

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

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repeal bill during the 2023 session, insisting that the budget was strong enough to absorb lost revenue and that voters wanted the tax repealed.

"She's taken a lot of wind out of the sails of the opposition," said Weiland, who said his group has collected more than 20,000 signatures for the measure. "She has made it clear that this will not be a financial burden and that it's something that the people want."

Jim Terwilliger, Noem's top budget official as commissioner of the Bureau of Finance and Management, told News Watch that Noem doesn't support the ballot initiative because of concerns about the wording.

He added that the governor "still believes a repeal of the grocery tax is the best tax relief for South Dakota families if it is done in a responsible manner," though she didn't mention the repeal in her budget message or State of the State address as part of the 2024 session.

Too close to call at the moment Marijuana legalization

Two pot-related measures were approved for circulation: one to legalize the "possession, use and distribution of marijuana" for recreational use and another to repeal South Dakota's medical marijuana program.

Neither sponsor responded to interview requests from News Watch or provided estimates of signature totals. Of the two, the initiated measure to legalize recreational pot is considered a viable contender to make the ballot.

Petitions for the cause have become more visible in recent days at signature gathering sites such as the Minnehaha County Administration Building.

There's plenty of recent history with this issue. South Dakotans rejected an effort to legalize recreational pot in 2022, sending Initiated Measure 27 to defeat with 53% of voters against it.

That signaled a reversal from 2020, when pro-legalization Amendment A passed with 54% of the vote, clearing the way for recreational marijuana to hit the market. Medicinal pot was also approved by voters that year in an initiated measure.

Noem's administration challenged the recreational marijuana amendment, saying it violated the state's requirement that constitutional amendments deal with just one subject. That argument prevailed in a 4-1 decision at the South Dakota Supreme Court.

Not ready this time around Protection of ballot measures

A proposed constitutional amendment that would prohibit the Legislature from repealing or amending voter-passed measures for at least seven years won't see the ballot in 2024.

Sponsor Brian Bengs, who ran for U.S. Senate as a Democrat in 2022, told News Watch that his group is "not aggressively gathering additional signatures" at the moment. He added that the petition effort could re-emerge for 2026 or later.

The Initiated Measures Protection Amendment was conceived as a means of preventing state legislators from trying to thwart the will of voters.

Bengs said his group collected "many thousands of signatures" but encountered people who incorrectly concluded that the measure was connected to the proposed abortion amendment.

"To preclude such confusion and increase the chance that each initiative is objectively assessed by voters on its own merit, we have transitioned to a passive approach to signature collection," said Bengs.

South Dakota Legislature term limits

State Sen. Brent Hoffman, R-Hartford, did not provide a specific update for how many signatures his group has collected for the proposed amendment that would limit state legislators to eight years in each chamber or a maximum total of 16 years.

"Since I've been focused on service in the Legislature, our statewide team of volunteers will wait until the end of the session to release data or a statement," Hoffman told News Watch.

That period of inactivity, with the deadline looming May 7, points to a steep uphill climb for the measure to make the ballot.

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South Dakota 2024 election schedule

South Dakotans will vote on the ballot issues in the Nov. 5 general election.

Statewide races in the June 4 primary election include a Republican race for U.S. House of Representatives between incumbent Rep. Dusty Johnson and challenger Justin McNeal and a Democratic primary between Zach Kovach and Bert Olson. Republican Kristie Fiegen, chair of the Public Utilities Commission, also is up for re-election.

Here are key dates in this year's election schedule:

April 19: Absentee voting begins for primary election

May 7: Ballot measure deadline

May 20: Voter registration deadline for primary election

June 4: Primary election

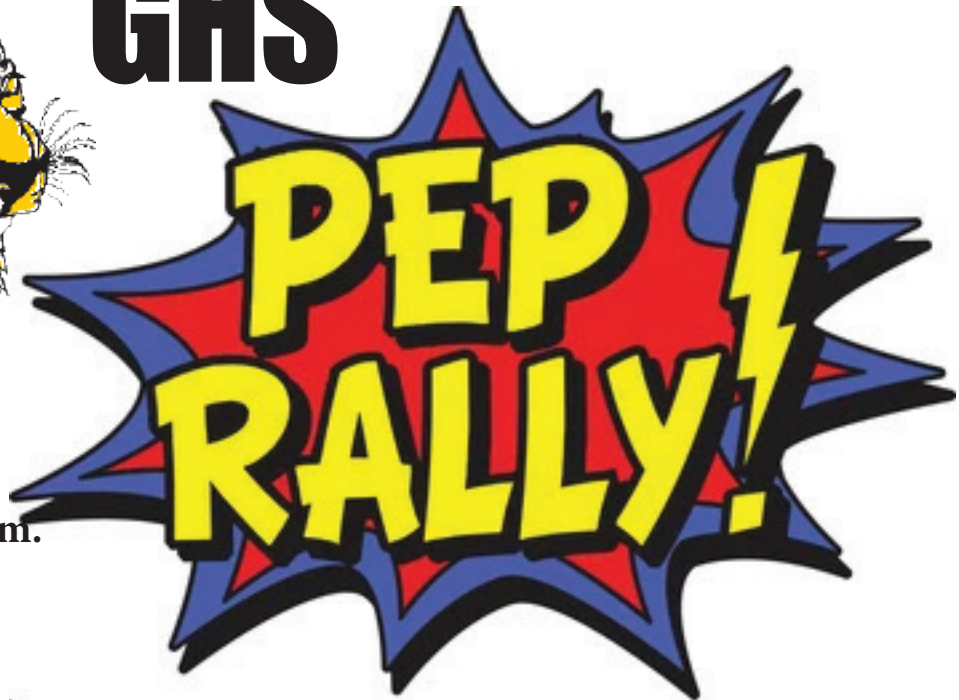
Sept. 20: Absentee voting begins for general election

Oct. 21: Voter registration deadline for general election

Nov. 5: General election



GHS



**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

That's Life/Tony Bender: Grandpa's spurs

I was cleaning out a closet when I found the painting I had given to my grandfather almost 25 years ago. It was painted by an old fiddler, Vernon Thompson from White Earth, in the North Dakota Badlands.

The painting depicts a rearing horse, a cowboy hanging on for dear life, and another startled team of horses pulling a wagon as some kind of alien—a Ford Model-T—chugs toward them. It reminded me of the age my grandfather was born into, a transition from the era of the horse to the machine age. That painting hung on Grandpa's living room wall until he died, and then I got it back.

I paired it on the wall with another western painting by Del Iron Cloud, but no matter how I arranged them, the arrangement was missing something.

"Maybe an old lariat," my sister, who had stopped by for a visit, suggested. "Maybe even a hat."

"I was thinking that, too," I said, "and maybe even spurs."

For a moment, I allowed myself to imagine my grandfather's spurs hanging on the wall, but they were long gone, surely in the more worthy hands of a son or daughter.

I admired that old Russian. He was rakishly handsome to the end, blonde hair gone silver, steely-blue eyes that could stop you as dead as his lever-action 30-30 Winchester. It was his saddle gun, the cracked stock held together by a bolt and a hexagon-shaped nut, worn smooth over the years.

I remember as a boy watching him spot something in the field I couldn't see. Only when the pack of wild dogs began scattering from the dirt kicked up under them, did I even see what he was shooting at 250 yards away if it was a foot. Years later, after I bounced my first shot in front of a puzzled buck 80 yards away with that very same rifle, I understood the level of skill it took to loft those shells with such accuracy at such a distance.

Even when he was well into his 70's, he still regularly rode Chopper, a big chestnut quarter horse every bit as tough and ornery as my grandfather seemed to be if you didn't wait around long enough for the twinkle in his eye and the chuckle that emerged from a sly grin along with a puff of pipe smoke.

For years he rolled his own cigarettes—the cowboy way. Then, in the interest of his health, he used lemon drops to wean himself from the habit. In his later years, though, he took up smoking again because, you know, at that point, what the hell.

As a rite of spring, Chopper would dump him the first time out, and Grandpa would get right back on, each to prove to the other that he still could.

I filled one spot on the wall with an old brown Stetson that looked like it jumped right out of Vernon Thompson's painting. But still there was a void.

It turned out my mother had the spurs, and she delivered them to me last Sunday along with a bonus—Chopper's bit. The spurs had some rust, the leather was hard and dry, and so, perfect. I tacked them up with the bit and then, finally, the wall looked right. A touchstone. A place where memories are stirred.

Some people might remember him as impenetrably stubborn, intimidating, and he could be. He reveled in nature's solitude, in the bite of the wind, the caress of the sunshine after the rain, in the satisfaction of a problem solved with a welding torch and an inventor's soul.

Good intentioned young ministers tried to save him, but they didn't understand that he'd already found God. He just hadn't found church.

I don't think I have put Vaseline on the lens of my memory the way photographers used to do to smooth all the lines of fading beauties. I don't think I have softened the focus, either.

The view of a grandson is naturally idyllic and vested in truth. With the benefit of time and seasoning, is it possible to know our grandparents at their best. Some grow bitter, some spoil outright, unable to reconcile unrequited dreams with reality, but most emerge better, more patient, wiser. When the world is working right, this wisdom, the ache of regret, absorbed and passed on, makes successive generations better. And in time, we will all be holy.

Those spurs connect me. For you it might be a tea cup, a faded portrait, a watch passed from wrist to wrist. There is power in such talismans, real power that reminds us who we are, and more importantly, who we ought to be.



SOUTH DAKOTA SEARCHLIGHT

<https://southdakotasearchlight.com>

Noem signs ban on foreign-owned ag land; lawmakers busy as final week begins

BY: JOSHUA HAIAR, MAKENZIE HUBER AND SETH TUPPER - MARCH 4, 2024 9:27 PM

PIERRE — Governor Kristi Noem signed a bill Monday that bans ownership of agricultural land in South Dakota by people, companies and governments from six countries, while legislators sent her a flurry of other bills as the annual legislative session's final week began.

The ban on foreign ownership includes China.

"Their goal is to dominate the world, and the way they do that is by taking out America," Noem said during a bill-signing ceremony at the Capitol.

Under an existing state law dating to 1979, foreign people and governments were already barred from owning more than 160 acres of agricultural land in the state — with exceptions for land that's inherited or held as security for debt, for foreign people and governments whose right to hold land is secured by treaties, and for foreigners who've established residency in the United States.

The new bill goes further, adding a total ban on any agricultural land ownership in South Dakota by China, Russia, Iran, North Korea, Cuba and Venezuela.

The bill also bans those countries from leases and easements, with exceptions for agricultural research on land up to 320 acres, or contract livestock feeding "at an animal feeding operation, by a family farm unit, a family farm corporation, or an authorized farm corporation."

The bill says there is no limit on the acreage of easements or leases for other countries. An easement is a voluntary agreement granted by landowners for access to their land.

Recent federal data says foreigners have 380,000 acres of ag land holdings in South Dakota; however, the same data lists the foreign "percent of ownership" as zero for 266,000 of those acres, suggesting they may be easements or leases. Some of those easements are for wind energy projects undertaken by companies from Europe and Canada.

Following are updates on some other bills acted on by the Legislature on Monday. This year's lawmaking session ends Thursday, except for a day later in the month to consider any gubernatorial vetoes.

State public defender office

A bill to establish a statewide public defender office is headed to the governor after the House voted to accept Senate amendments. The Senate had amended the bill to include \$3 million in one-time funds to reimburse counties for their current costs defending criminal defendants who can't afford an attorney.

Counties currently shoulder the entire burden for those types of cases. A summer task force called attention to that situation and recommended creation of a state office.

The new statewide public defender office would cost the state \$1.4 million annually. The office would take over criminal appeals; "habeas corpus" appeals, which are filed to challenge a suspect's detention; and child abuse and neglect appeals. Counties would still be responsible for other types of cases.

Quantum computing research

The House voted to send a bill to the governor that includes about \$3 million for a proposed Center for Quantum Information Science and Technology. The governor asked for \$6 million in her budget proposal in December, but lawmakers amended the amount downward.

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Rather than a physical place, the "center" would be a collaboration among researchers at some of the state's public universities.

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

Civics center

A proposal to establish a civics engagement center at Black Hills State University in Spearfish was defeated in the state Senate on a 16-17 vote.

The center aimed to prepare students for participation in political and civic life through a multidisciplinary approach.

"All of our universities need to be promoting civic engagement," rather than just one, said Sen. Reynold Nesiba, D-Sioux Falls.

The legislation would have allowed BHSU to collaborate with the state Board of Regents and Northern State University in Aberdeen, which operates a similar center, to develop curricula, organize civic events, and provide learning opportunities. The initiative sought to utilize \$880,000 and three new full-time positions already requested by the Board of Regents for the creation of the center.

Phonics funding

A bill is headed to the governor that would provide \$6 million in state funding to the Department of Education to train teachers in Phonics-based reading instruction. The Senate gave the bill its final legislative approval Monday.

Future Fund oversight

The state Senate has sent legislation to Noem's desk aimed at enhancing oversight of a fund she has sole control over.

The bill targets the Future Fund. It's a pool of money derived from an employer-paid tax, and the money is designated by state law for research and economic development initiatives.

The governor has had exclusive discretion over the use of the funds, without the need for approval from a board or lawmakers, a practice that distinguishes it from other funds managed by the state.

The newly passed legislation mandates that the Governor's economic development office submit biannual reports to lawmakers. These reports must include information on each award or grant issued from the fund, covering the recipient's name, the awarded amount, location, purpose (specifically related to research or economic development), the projected economic impact, and the number of jobs expected to be created.

Voter residency and registration deadline

Signaling that a long fight over voter residency might be over for this year, the House tabled a bill without comment Monday that would have repealed a residency requirement imposed last year. The bill also would have moved the voter registration deadline from 15 days prior to an election to 30 days.

Last year, lawmakers adopted a 30-day residency requirement that some lawmakers believe is illegal. Courts in other states have struck down local and state residency requirements that affected Americans' right to vote in national elections. The tabling of the bill means the residency requirement will stay in effect unless the Legislature takes further action on it in the next several days, and the registration deadline will stay at 15 days prior to elections.

Porn summer study

A previously failed bill that would have mandated age verification for individuals accessing pornographic websites turned into an issue for a summer study.

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The bill, which sparked considerable debate over privacy and enforcement mechanisms, was “smoked out” – a legislative maneuver to revive a dead bill. That led to an amendment, transforming the bill into a directive for a “summer study” rather than an immediate law.

“We need to make sure we’re actually going to be doing something about it,” Sen. Lee Schoenbeck, R-Watertown, said to his Senate colleagues.

The revised bill mandates a summer committee to study the implications and potential strategies for enforcing age verification on adult websites. The legislation now goes back to the House for consideration of amendments.

Permanent tax cut

The House approved a last-ditch effort to make South Dakota’s reduced sales tax rate permanent. The chamber approved the effort in a 62-8 vote, sending it to the Senate.

The last-minute bill would set South Dakota’s state sales tax rate at a permanently reduced 4.2%. The House passed a state sales tax reduction from 4.5% to 4.2% last legislative session, before a sunset clause was added in the Senate to make the tax cut expire in 2027. Senators urged caution at the time with talk of a potential recession, preferring to wait to make any permanent decisions until after hundreds of millions of federal pandemic aid is fully spent.

Undoing petition signatures

The Senate approved a bill that would allow people to retract their signatures from ballot-question petitions. It comes in response to a proposed ballot measure to restore abortion rights. The House must now consider the bill in its amended version.

The bill includes an emergency clause for immediate enactment to impact the upcoming Nov. 5 election.

Amendments made to the bill address some of the opponents’ concerns by mandating that signature withdrawal requests be signed, notarized, and submitted before petition certification. Despite these changes, critics warn of potential litigation designed to undermine the abortion ballot measure, questioning the appropriateness of the emergency clause, which puts the bill into law immediately upon being signed.

Money for health care providers

The House adjusted the amount of a proposed technology equipment grant program for providers serving elderly residents down from \$3 million to \$2 million and passed it along for Senate consideration of the amendment.

The House also approved allocating \$5 million of remaining federal American Rescue Plan Act money for telemedicine grants to nursing facilities and assisted living centers. That bill is headed to the governor.

Cybersecurity for local governments

Gov. Noem will have a chance to consider using \$7 million in state money to fund cybersecurity work for local governments, after her administration turned down federal funding for the same purpose.

The House gave the bill its final legislative approval Monday, sending it to the governor’s desk.

Forest grants

After a lengthy debate, the House narrowly rejected a bill to use \$6 million in remaining federal American Rescue Plan Act money on grants for loggers and sawmill operators in the Black Hills, where logging has declined in the face of changing forest conditions.

Some House members noted that the governor’s Bureau of Finance and Management has cast doubt on whether the use of the funds is a qualifying one under ARPA rules. Approving the spending could put the state on the hook later if the federal government disapproves, some representatives said.

State House bans senator for breach of decorum

BY: JOSHUA HAIAR AND MAKENZIE HUBER - MARCH 4, 2024 7:42 PM

A state senator has been banned from the House of Representatives floor and lobby for the last week of the 2024 legislative session for placing a bottle of syrup on another lawmaker's desk.

Sen. Tom Pischke, R-Dell Rapids, was informed of the action Monday in a letter from Speaker of the House Hugh Bartels, R-Watertown. Pischke's action was a violation of decorum, Bartels said.

Pischke placed the bottle of syrup on Rapid City Republican Rep. Kristin Conzet's desk days after Conzet motioned to defeat a commemoration celebrating the late Nancy Green, whose likeness was used to create the Aunt Jemima advertising character, which was formerly used on syrup and other products.

The commemoration was introduced by Rapid City Republican Rep. Phil Jensen with co-sponsors Pischke and Sen. Jim Mehlhaff, R-Pierre. It stated, in part, "that Nancy Green was a remarkable woman whose story has been sadly erased by politics." However, some lawmakers saw the resolution as intentionally provocative.

The Aunt Jemima brand was discontinued in 2021 in response to criticism that the caricature of a Black woman perpetuated outdated and offensive portrayals of African Americans.

In South Dakota, it only takes one lawmaker to table commemorations.

The House ban is an "overreaction," Pischke said.

"I was simply giving a gift to my good friend," he told South Dakota Searchlight.

Banning Pischke from the floor was the "only recourse," Bartels told South Dakota Searchlight.

"Decorum is probably one of the biggest rules in the House that we try and enforce, and the Senate does as well," Bartels said. "Everything decorum-wise matters in the Legislature, whether it's the last day or the last five minutes."

A member of Senate leadership told South Dakota Searchlight there is no plan to discipline Pischke in the Senate.

Proposed carbon pipeline adds more ethanol plants as lawmakers debate regulations

BY: JOSHUA HAIAR - MARCH 4, 2024 7:03 PM

A company hoping to build a carbon dioxide pipeline added eight more ethanol plants as partners Monday, while South Dakota legislators took action on bills that could affect the project.

Summit Carbon Solutions announced a new partnership with Valero Energy. Valero is headquartered in Texas and operates 15 oil refineries in the United States, Canada and the United Kingdom. It's also the world's second-largest corn ethanol producer.

The \$8 billion pipeline project is poised to be the world's largest carbon capture and storage endeavor and could qualify for up to \$18 billion in federal tax credits. The federal government has made those credits available for entities pulling the heat-trapping greenhouse gas, carbon dioxide, out of the atmosphere. The gas is emitted when ethanol is made.

Valero will integrate plants located in Iowa, Nebraska, Minnesota and South Dakota into Summit's project, which will now encompass 57 ethanol plants across the upper Midwest. The pipeline would transport liquefied carbon dioxide from the plants to an underground sequestration site in North Dakota.

The decision comes after Valero's former partner, Navigator CO2 Ventures, failed to obtain a permit in South Dakota and withdrew its pipeline project. That project aimed to transport carbon to a storage site in Illinois.

The Summit project has faced regulatory challenges and opposition from some landowners, and has suffered permit rejections in North Dakota and South Dakota. A permit decision is imminent in Iowa. The company has said it is working to refine its proposal to meet South Dakota requirements and plans to resubmit an application.

Legislative action on pipelines

A bill introducing more stringent requirements for companies seeking access to private land passed the state Senate on a 29-4 vote Monday. The bill now goes back to the House for consideration of amendments.

Under the proposed legislation, any person or entity must have a pending or approved siting permit application with the state before conducting examinations or surveys. The bill also requires a 30-day advance written notice to property owners, detailing the scope of the survey, anticipated entry date and duration, survey types, and contact information for the responsible party.

In addition, the legislation proposes financial compensation for landowners, mandating a one-time \$500 payment by carbon pipeline companies to property owners for entry onto private land, along with compensation for any damages incurred. Property owners would have the right to contest the survey or examination by filing a lawsuit in circuit court within 30 days of receiving notice, and could later request the survey results.

Another bill, which passed the Senate 24-9 and is also headed back to the House for consideration of amendments, 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.

The bill says carbon pipeline easements would automatically terminate if no permit has been granted by the Public Utilities Commission within five years from their effective date.

Lastly, Senate Bill 201 is awaiting action by a committee of lawmakers to reconcile different House and Senate versions of the legislation.

The conference committee, appointed Monday, includes Senators Casey Crabtree of Madison, David Wheeler of Huron, and David Johnson of Rapid City, and Representatives Will Mortenson of Fort Pierre, Oren Lesmeister of Parade, and Scott Moore of Ipswich.

The bill would force the state's Public Utilities Commission to overrule counties if their pipeline rules are too burdensome. The commission of three elected officials is responsible for pipeline permitting in the state.

Current law says the PUC "may" overrule counties' setbacks, which are mandatory minimum distances between pipelines and other features. 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.

Some senators feel the current version of the bill is too burdensome for the project. As originally introduced by the Senate, the bill would have removed counties' power to impose setbacks on projects including carbon pipelines. The bill was amended by a House committee.

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

Petitions circulate in at least 18 counties to eliminate vote tabulators and require hand counting

BY: MAKENZIE HUBER - MARCH 4, 2024 6:19 PM

South Dakotans who say they're concerned about election security are racing to require counties to hand-count ballots in this year's general election. Petitions are circulating or have circulated in 18 of the state's 66 counties, according to a group coordinating the effort, and the group said people in eight more counties have asked for information about the petitions.

State law allows citizens to petition their local governments – counties and municipalities – to put a proposed law to a public vote. The petitions require signatures from 5% of registered voters in a jurisdiction.

Petitions asking voters to require hand counts have been completed and turned in to Lawrence and McPherson counties. Based on current law, county commissioners must accept the petitions once signatures are verified and put the issue to a public vote at the primary election June 4 rather than schedule an earlier special election, since the primary will be less than three months away after county commissions

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accept the petitions.

If local voters approve the initiatives, hand-counting would then be required in their jurisdiction during the Nov. 5 general election.

Hand counting to be used in 2024 election

Some South Dakotans have been pushing for election reform and hand counting since the 2020 election, after then-President Donald Trump lost and claimed that the 2020 election was "stolen" from him. Trump filed more than 60 lawsuits contesting either the election or the way it was administered. None of the cases succeeded, and he's currently under criminal prosecution for allegedly attempting to subvert the election.

The latest effort in South Dakota is organized by South Dakota Canvassing Group, which offers draft language to petition circulators that would require counties to use only paper ballots, to hand count all ballots, to prohibit electronic voting devices except those needed for disabled voters, and to prohibit the use of electronic tabulating machines.

Some people pushing for more election security believe tabulators and other electronic machines used for elections are vulnerable to hackers and cheating and are connected to the internet. Auditors and other election officials say the machines are not connected to the internet and are secure; in fact, South Dakota law prohibits connecting tabulating machines to the internet.

Jessica Pollema, president of South Dakota Canvassing, said a "whole new breed of citizen has awakened" after the 2020 election, and they're determined to change election laws.

"These citizens who have been disenfranchised by their county commissioners – not listening or addressing their concerns – found another way to bring it to a vote of the people of South Dakota," Pollema said.

Lawrence County resident Nichole Braithwait said she's been trying to meet with her county commissioners for months regarding election concerns, but she's been met with resistance. So, she and another resident in Butte County turned to the petition process to force the conversation.

Braithwait has been circulating her petition since fall 2023 and turned in a stack of roughly 1,300 signatures to the Lawrence County Auditor's Office last Monday. A copy of her petition was posted a couple of weeks ago on the South Dakota Canvassing website and has been widely shared in the weeks since. South Dakota Canvassing held a hand-counting demonstration at the state Capitol earlier in the current legislative session.

Three South Dakota counties hand-counted ballots in all or some of their precincts in the 2022 election: Fall River, Butte and Tripp counties, all of which have populations below 11,000. Both methods of counting proved accurate enough, though hand counting took several election workers and took hours to complete.

County commissioners and auditors across the state have continued to field accusations that electronic tabulators aren't secure or accurate, and that they should invest the money and manpower to hand-count ballots.

Fall River County Commissioner Deb Russell, who has served on the board for 14 years, motioned during the commission's Feb. 14 meeting to hand-count ballots at the June primary, even though she told South Dakota Searchlight she is confident tabulators are accurate and faster. The motion passed unanimously.

"I'm not sure the people we're dealing with believe that anything but a hand count would work," Russell said.

Russell said commissioners anticipated there'd be another push for hand-counting ballots in the 2024 election, so they increased the auditor's budget to cover extra costs.

Fall River County Auditor Sue Ganje, who has served as auditor since 2005 and has been involved with elections since 1984, said she doesn't expect any problems with hand counting during the primary and "wasn't going to argue" against it.

"I knew it was going to happen. I knew how it was going to come out," she said.

Ganje hopes to use a tabulator to audit hand-counting during the primary election to prove the accuracy of the machines, though she is waiting for auditors to approve that.

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Bill would let commissioners reject petition: 'They can see us in court'

The petitions turned in to Lawrence and McPherson counties not only ban tabulators and require votes to be hand counted in elections, but also prohibit the use of all electronic devices in elections – including devices to help disabled people vote. South Dakota Canvassing has since updated its petition templates with an exemption for devices used by disabled people.

But the two petitions turned in to county auditors last week violate state and federal law, some legal experts say.

State law requires an electronic ballot marking system be available if a candidate for a federal office is on the ballot.

The Help America Vote Act of 2002 requires that each polling place for a federal election provide a voting device allowing voters with disabilities to vote independently and privately, according to the Secretary of State's website.

In South Dakota, all counties are equipped with EXPRESSVote machines for disabled voters. Voters who are blind or have poor eyesight can use braille to read the ballot, can increase the font size on the screen, or listen to audio explanations of the ballot information. Voters who can't hold a pen can press the screen to fill out their ballot.

"The ExpressVote keeps no record of votes," according to the secretary of state website. "They are a paper-based electronic ballot marker – an 'electronic pen.' Most voters find it to be intuitive and user-friendly."

The machine does not allow overvoting and is not connected to the internet.

Lawmakers are working in the final week of the 2024 session to pass a bill that would allow county commissioners or city finance officers to reject a completed petition if they decide it violates state or federal law. Petitioners could appeal the decision in court. The bill, if passed with an emergency clause, would apply to Lawrence and McPherson counties.

"We want to make sure we're not passing something that we know from the start is illegal, because then the county or city will have to defend something they know is illegal," South Dakota Association of County Commissioners lobbyist Eric Erickson told lawmakers in a committee hearing for the bill last week. "And often, if you're messing with someone's constitutional rights you're stuck paying attorney fees on both sides."

The bill passed the Senate 27-6 Monday morning and will go to the House next, where it's expected to receive action during this final week of the legislative session.

Braithwait said the bill is a way to stifle South Dakota Canvassing's voice and "shut us down." Braithwait and other members of the group weren't aware of the bill before it was amended and voted on in a committee last week, meaning they weren't able to testify against it.

"It's unfortunate that legislators want to have this visceral reaction to citizens that are exercising their rights and they're trying to change the law halfway through this," Braithwait said. "We will continue petitioning and they can see us in court."

However, Braithwait said she hopes to clarify and amend the language of the Lawrence County petition that has already been turned in to make an exception for EXPRESSVote machines and allow disabled voters to use them. If county commissioners don't allow her to make such an amendment, then she plans to continue with the petition as planned and will take the matter to the courts.

But the petitions filed in Lawrence and McPherson counties aren't "legally sound," said Sara Frankenstein, a private lawyer specializing in election law.

In addition to the possible violation regarding disability rights, several other requirements outlined in the petition don't "jibe" with the language in state statute, which could create problems. For example, she said, the way "tabulation" is written in the petition means something different than the definitions in state law.

"If that petition passed and was called to a vote, then we'd have to campaign on the legality of something that shouldn't ever be put to a vote anyway," Frankenstein said. "What a waste of campaign dollars that these poor people are going to have to put up to not pass something illegal."

South Dakota's John Thune enters race to succeed McConnell as U.S. Senate GOP leader

BY: ARIANA FIGUEROA - MARCH 4, 2024 5:12 PM

WASHINGTON — Republican U.S. Sen. John Thune of South Dakota announced Monday that he plans to run for U.S. Senate GOP leader.

"I hope to be," Thune said in an interview with KELOLAND News, a news outlet in his home state. "I'm going to do everything I can to convince my colleagues."

Currently the No. 2 Republican in the Senate, Thune is the second Senate Republican to jockey for the role following Kentucky Sen. Mitch McConnell's announcement last week that he would step down as minority leader, ending nearly two decades of leadership.

While speculation has swirled, only Sen. John Cornyn of Texas so far has formally announced his ambition to lead Senate Republicans.

"I have learned a lot during my time both in and out of Senate leadership," Cornyn said in a statement, according to the Texas Tribune.

"Throughout my time I've built a track record of listening to colleagues and seeking consensus, while leading the fight to stop bad policies that are harmful to our nation and the conservative cause."

Thune recently endorsed former President Donald Trump, the front-runner for the 2024 GOP presidential nomination, following earlier endorsements by Cornyn and another potential Republican in the race, John Barrasso of Wyoming.

Barrasso's aides did not respond to a request for comment on whether he will run for GOP leader.

Senate Republicans will select a new leader in November.

"As we look at a new generation of consistent, principled, conservative leadership in the United States Senate that empowers our Senate Republicans that put the check and balance against ... what has been a very liberal Schumer-Biden agenda," Thune said. "I'm prepared to lead that effort."

U.S. Supreme Court strikes down Colorado 14th Amendment ruling, clearing Trump for ballot

BY: CHASE WOODRUFF - MARCH 4, 2024 9:23 AM

Former President Donald Trump must be placed on Colorado's 2024 ballot, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled unanimously on Monday, striking down a first-of-its-kind holding by the Colorado Supreme Court that the Republican front-runner is disqualified from office under a Civil War-era insurrection clause.

"Because the Constitution makes Congress, rather than the States, responsible for enforcing Section 3 (of the 14th Amendment) against federal officeholders and candidates, we reverse," justices wrote in the unsigned, "per curiam" opinion.

The ruling — which comes just one day before Colorado holds its presidential primary election on Super Tuesday, March 5 — brings an end to a six-month legal saga that began in Denver District Court and sent shockwaves through American politics during its fast-tracked ascent through the judicial system.

Six Republican and unaffiliated Colorado voters, backed by the nonprofit Citizens for Responsibility and Ethics in Washington, filed a lawsuit last September alleging that Trump's actions in relation to the Jan. 6 attack on the U.S. Capitol disqualify him from office under Section 3. The clause prohibits a person who "engaged in insurrection" after taking an oath to support the Constitution from holding office again.

In a 4-3 majority opinion issued Dec. 19, the Colorado Supreme Court sided with the plaintiffs, ordering Colorado Secretary of State Jena Griswold not to certify Trump's candidacy for the state's 2024 Republican presidential primary. The historic ruling, which drew furious condemnations from leading Republicans and even some centrist and liberal commentators, set the stage for similar decisions by Maine's secretary of

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state later in December and an Illinois judge last week.

Monday's ruling will likely result in the reversal of those decisions and spell an end to similar Section 3 challenges in at least a dozen other states, with the justices citing the "disruption" and "chaos" that would ensue if states were allowed to enforce the clause against federal candidates.

Trump said in a radio interview Monday morning that he was "very honored by a nine-to-nothing vote."

Representatives from CREW said in a press call they were "still digesting" the particulars of the court's ruling, but faulted the court for taking what they called a "procedural off-ramp" to allow Trump on the ballot.

"The Supreme Court removed an enforcement mechanism, and in letting Trump back on the ballot, they failed to meet the moment," CREW president Noah Bookbinder said in a statement. "But it is now clear that Trump led the Jan. 6 insurrection, and it will be up to the American people to ensure accountability."

The Colorado ruling never took effect, because the justices stayed their order pending U.S. Supreme Court review, and Trump still appeared on GOP primary ballots, which were mailed to Colorado voters beginning Feb. 12. Monday's U.S. Supreme Court ruling ensures that all votes cast by Colorado primary voters for Trump — the overwhelming favorite for his party's nomination following the withdrawal of nearly all of his major rivals from the race — will be counted.

"I am disappointed in the U.S. Supreme Court's decision stripping states of the authority to enforce Section 3 of the 14th Amendment for federal candidates," Griswold wrote on X following the ruling. "Colorado should be able to bar oath-breaking insurrections from our ballot."

"In accordance with this decision, Donald Trump is an eligible candidate on Colorado's 2024 Presidential Primary," Griswold said.

Court split on enforcement

Though all nine U.S. Supreme Court justices agreed on the outcome of the case, the opinions released Monday show a divide over how far the court should have gone to settle key issues relating to the enforcement of Section 3.

In his appeal to the U.S. Supreme Court, Trump's attorneys challenged the Colorado ruling on a variety of grounds. In addition to arguing that enforcement of Section 3 required an act of Congress, Trump's team put forward a theory that Section 3's reference to "officer(s) of the United States" did not include the presidency, and disputed claims that the Jan. 6 attack was an "insurrection" and Trump "engaged" in it.

Monday's ruling is silent on the latter two questions, an outcome that the plaintiffs' attorneys sought to portray as a victory on Monday.

"The Supreme Court was given the opportunity to exonerate Donald Trump for engaging in insurrection. Donald Trump asked them to exonerate him for engaging in insurrection," Bookbinder said in a press call. "And they did not do that. There is not a single sentence from a single justice, in that opinion that came out today, taking substantive issue with the findings of the Colorado Supreme Court that Donald Trump engaged in insurrection."

But five Republican-appointed justices — Chief Justice John Roberts and Justices Clarence Thomas, Samuel Alito, Neil Gorsuch and Brett Kavanaugh — appeared to back strict limitations on how the insurrection clause can be enforced. Citing a precedent known as Griffin's case, an 1869 circuit court opinion authored by Chief Justice Salmon P. Chase, they wrote that it was "necessary" for Congress to enact enforcing legislation pursuant to Section 5 of the 14th Amendment, which states that "Congress shall have power to enforce, by appropriate legislation, the provisions of this article."

"The Constitution empowers Congress to prescribe how those determinations should be made," the ruling says, referring to the Enforcement Act of 1870 and Section 2383 of the U.S. Code, a statute prescribing a criminal penalty for "rebellion or insurrection," as appropriate uses of the Section 5 power.

That interpretation appears to rule out the possibility that Section 3 could be enforced by federal courts or by Congress through other means, such as by refusing to seat insurrectionist members or declining to certify the election of an insurrectionist president. In a separate opinion, Justice Amy Coney Barrett wrote that she did not join the other conservative justices in deciding that issue. And in a third opinion, the three

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Democratic-appointed members of the court — Justices Sonia Sotomayor, Elena Kagan and Ketanji Brown Jackson — called the majority’s Section 5 findings “as inadequately supported as they are gratuitous.”

“Today, the majority goes beyond the necessities of this case to limit how Section 3 can bar an oathbreaking insurrectionist from becoming President,” the liberal justices wrote. “Although we agree that Colorado cannot enforce Section 3, we protest the majority’s effort to use this case to define the limits of federal enforcement of that provision.”

‘Other avenues’

Following the 14th Amendment’s ratification in 1868, Section 3 was aggressively enforced against hundreds of ex-Confederates for a period of several years. But a series of amnesty measures approved by Congress largely rendered it moot by 1871, and it was enforced in only a handful of cases in the ensuing 150 years.

The unprecedented events of Jan. 6, 2021, when a pro-Trump mob stormed the U.S. Capitol to disrupt the certification of President Joe Biden’s victory in the 2020 election, revived interest in the clause among legal scholars. In another case brought by CREW in 2022, a New Mexico court removed from office a GOP county commissioner who had participated in the attack. Monday’s ruling bars states from enforcing Section 3 against candidates for president or other federal offices, but does not preclude them from enforcing it against state and local officeholders.

Colorado was singled out by CREW as a “good venue” for a 14th Amendment case against Trump because of provisions in its election code requiring only candidates who are eligible to assume office to be placed on the ballot. Challenges in several other states, including Minnesota and Michigan, had been rejected by the courts.

Trump was indicted last year by federal prosecutors who allege that his “pervasive and destabilizing lies” about the 2020 election “targeted a bedrock function of the United States federal government.” That case is still pending, as is a separate election interference case against Trump in Fulton County, Georgia.

In briefs and oral arguments before the U.S. Supreme Court last month, the Colorado plaintiffs had argued that Section 3, like many other measures in the Constitution, is “self-executing,” and that Griffin’s case was wrongly decided. Donald Sherman, CREW’s executive vice president and chief counsel, said Monday that the majority’s interpretation contradicts the consensus view of historians and constitutional scholars.

“The text of Section 3 does not say any of this,” Sherman said. “The majority opinion is reading words into this provision that clearly are not there.”

Proponents of Trump’s disqualification said they will closely scrutinize the court’s opinion and evaluate other ways that Section 3 could be enforced.

“We certainly expect there will be interest in Congress as to whether there is a practical path forward for congressional action,” Bookbinder said. “And we’ll be looking into what other avenues there might be, whether it’s rooted in the 14th Amendment or otherwise, to try to protect democracy from those who have attacked it.”

As xylazine surges, some lawmakers want jail time for dealers and people who use the drug

South Dakota passes bill adding animal sedative to controlled substances list

BY: AMANDA HERNÁNDEZ - MARCH 4, 2024 9:07 AM

Legislators in a handful of states are offering bills to address the rise in the misuse of xylazine, a cheap animal sedative not intended for human consumption.

Xylazine, or “tranq,” can induce blackouts and cause lesions that sometimes result in severe infections or amputations, and it can even lead to death. The opioid overdose-reversal drug naloxone does not work on xylazine, which drug dealers often find through the dark web and other illicit channels, rather than getting it from veterinary offices. Although xylazine isn’t classified by the federal government as a controlled

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substance, it also isn't approved for human use.

Several states — including Indiana, New York, South Carolina, Virginia and Wisconsin — are considering bills. The legislation ranges from classifying xylazine as a controlled substance — which is the kind of bill South Dakota legislators passed and Gov. Kristi Noem recently signed — to stiffening criminal penalties for possession and distribution, as well as legalizing testing strips so people who intend to take drugs can make sure they aren't tainted by xylazine.

Other states — Florida, Ohio, Pennsylvania and West Virginia — have already added xylazine to their lists of controlled substances, which adds tighter controls to the storage and movement of the drug for veterinary use.

The accessibility and affordability of xylazine, which can be bought online from Chinese suppliers for \$6 to \$20 per kilogram, make it an attractive option for drug traffickers, according to the federal Drug Enforcement Administration. Xylazine is frequently used as an adulterant to enhance the psychoactive effects of other drugs, such as fentanyl. Yet many people who use such drugs don't realize that xylazine has been mixed in.

Public health experts and harm reduction advocates, who work with people who use drugs to help them avoid the worst outcomes, warn that criminalizing xylazine or categorizing it as a controlled substance will just exacerbate the fear and stigma associated with the drug, isolating people who use it and discouraging them from seeking treatment.

"Scheduling drugs and making things illegal has never had any meaningful effect ... on people actually ingesting drugs or the amount of drugs showing up in the drug supply," said Colin Miller, the community liaison and social/clinical research specialist at the University of North Carolina Street Drug Analysis Lab. "Xylazine is just like the latest in a long line of these examples."

Danielle German, an associate professor at the Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health, agreed that ratcheting up penalties will do more harm than good, "even if the legislation is coming from a place of good and wanting to help."

"That increased perception of penalty — we've seen over and over and over again that that's what pushes people away from the resources that we most want them to be able to access," German said.

State action

Nevertheless, several states are embracing a get-tough approach.

In South Dakota, Republican Gov. Kristi Noem in February signed legislation classifying xylazine as a controlled substance, with fines and penalties of up to two years in prison for using, manufacturing and distributing the drug, while still allowing for veterinary use.

A similar bill is pending in South Carolina, where manufacturing or distributing the drug for other than veterinary use would bring a felony charge and up to 10 years imprisonment. Virginia lawmakers are considering legislation with similar penalties.

In New York state, legislation would place xylazine in the category of the most dangerous controlled substances, which would carry stiffer criminal penalties for both possession and distribution.

In Indiana, a bill making its way through the legislature would criminalize the possession and distribution of xylazine, with potential punishment of jail time. It would add steeper penalties for repeat offenders. The bill exempts use and distribution for veterinary purposes.

"I fully support other harm reduction avenues, such as [the opioid overdose-reversal drug] Narcan and test strips," said Indiana Republican state Rep. Jennifer Meltzer, the bill's author. "I just believe that we also need to go after the bad actors. ... Having a criminal effect will hopefully deter individuals that are dealing or maybe even individuals who are now only seeking out xylazine, to get the help that they need."

Another bill in Indiana would have legalized testing strips for all controlled substances, including xylazine, but it died in the Senate. Meltzer, one of the bill's co-authors, plans to work with the Democratic lead author of that bill to get it passed during the next legislative session.

But in Wisconsin, legislation to legalize xylazine testing strips is awaiting the governor's signature.

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Xylazine's spread

Xylazine was first detected in other drugs in Puerto Rico in the early 2000s, according to the DEA. Now, the drug can be found across the states, though available research suggests that xylazine-involved overdose deaths are primarily concentrated in the eastern United States, especially in the Northeast.

The University of North Carolina Street Drug Analysis Lab tests drug samples sent by over 150 harm reduction and syringe exchange programs across 35 states and publishes those results publicly. Between January 2021 and February 2024, the lab found xylazine in lab-confirmed fentanyl samples from 15 states. Some of the samples analyzed were submitted to the lab because people suspected the presence of xylazine, Miller wrote in an email to Stateline.

The states with the highest number of fentanyl samples that tested positive for xylazine are North Carolina, 148; New York, 148; Michigan, 66; Pennsylvania, 38; and Washington, 20.

But some harm reduction advocates and public health experts argue that focusing too heavily on xylazine could inadvertently facilitate the entry of other, potentially stronger and more harmful drugs into the illicit drug supply. They warn that what states are doing now to curb xylazine use repeats a strategy that has had limited success with substances such as fentanyl.

"Because we hyper-focused on fentanyl for so long, the criminal drug market responded with a more lethal and potent substance to adulterate and then dominate the supply," said Sarah Laurel, the founder and executive director of Savage Sisters Recovery, a Philadelphia nonprofit that offers free services to people experiencing homelessness and substance use.

Philadelphia is one of the cities that has been hit hardest by the surge in xylazine use. In 2022, the Philadelphia Department of Public Health found that xylazine was involved in 480, or more than a third, of the 1,413 unintentional overdose deaths. Almost every death in which xylazine was found also involved fentanyl, according to the agency.

"The same thing will happen if we have a new focus on xylazine. They are just going to find a new substance that is going to satisfy the demand," Laurel said.

Instead, some advocates say states should focus more on expanding access to substance use treatment services and mobile drug-checking equipment, such as mass spectrometers that can analyze ingredients within a drug mixture.

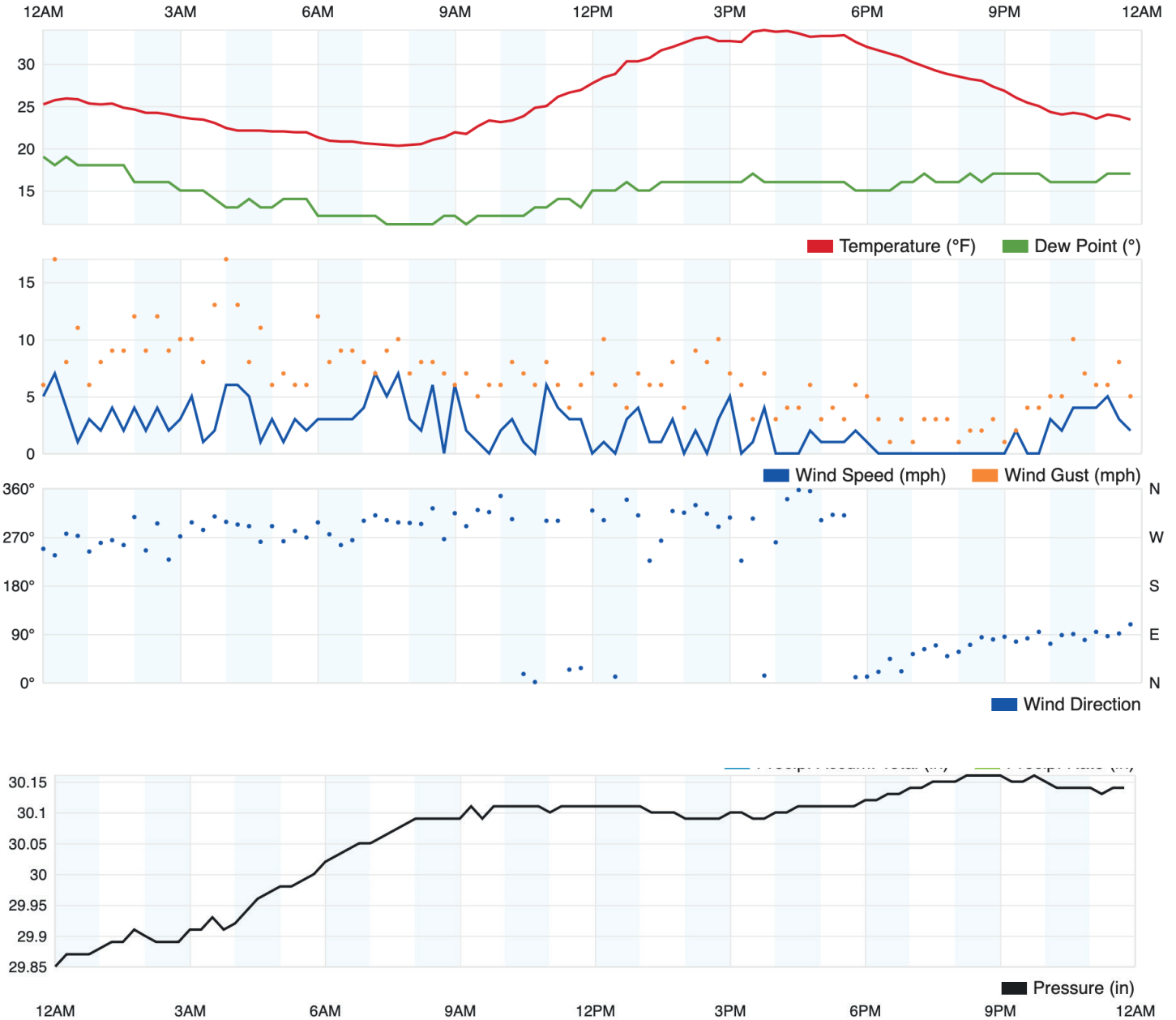
"You can't say that you want people to stop using drugs and then every time I call for a detox bed, there's not a bed," said Alixe Dittmore, the housing and shelter capacity building coordinator with the National Harm Reduction Coalition.

"We have incredibly punitive and prohibitive services," Dittmore said. "You really have to holistically look at it when you're worried about how many folks are passing away."

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Yesterday's Groton Weather Graphs



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Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday
			
44 °F 24 °F	53 °F 20 °F	37 °F 18 °F	40 °F 18 °F

Tuesday: Snow likely, mainly before 8am. Cloudy through mid morning, then gradual clearing, with a high near 43. East wind 10 to 14 mph becoming north in the afternoon. Chance of precipitation is 60%. New snow accumulation of less than a half inch possible.

Tuesday Night: A slight chance of snow after 4am. Increasing clouds, with a low around 22. North wind 9 to 16 mph becoming east southeast after midnight. Chance of precipitation is 20%.

Wednesday: A slight chance of rain and snow before 11am, then a chance of rain. Partly sunny, with a high near 53. Breezy, with a south wind 23 to 28 mph becoming west northwest 11 to 16 mph in the afternoon. Winds could gust as high as 38 mph. Chance of precipitation is 30%.

Wednesday Night: A chance of rain and snow before 9pm, then a chance of snow between 9pm and 3am, then a slight chance of freezing rain after 3am. Partly cloudy, with a low around 19. North northwest wind 8 to 14 mph. Chance of precipitation is 30%.

Thursday: Mostly sunny, with a high near 37. North wind 8 to 11 mph.

Thursday Night: Partly cloudy, with a low around 17. North northeast wind around 11 mph.

Friday: Sunny, with a high near 40. North wind around 10 mph.

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Yesterday's Groton Weather

High Temp: 34 °F at 3:36 PM

Low Temp: 20 °F at 7:25 AM

Wind: 17 mph at 12:13 AM

Precip: : 0.00

Day length: 11 hours, 26 minutes

Today's Info

Record High: 74 in 2000

Record Low: -22 in 1919

Average High: 36

Average Low: 14

Average Precip in March.: 0.12

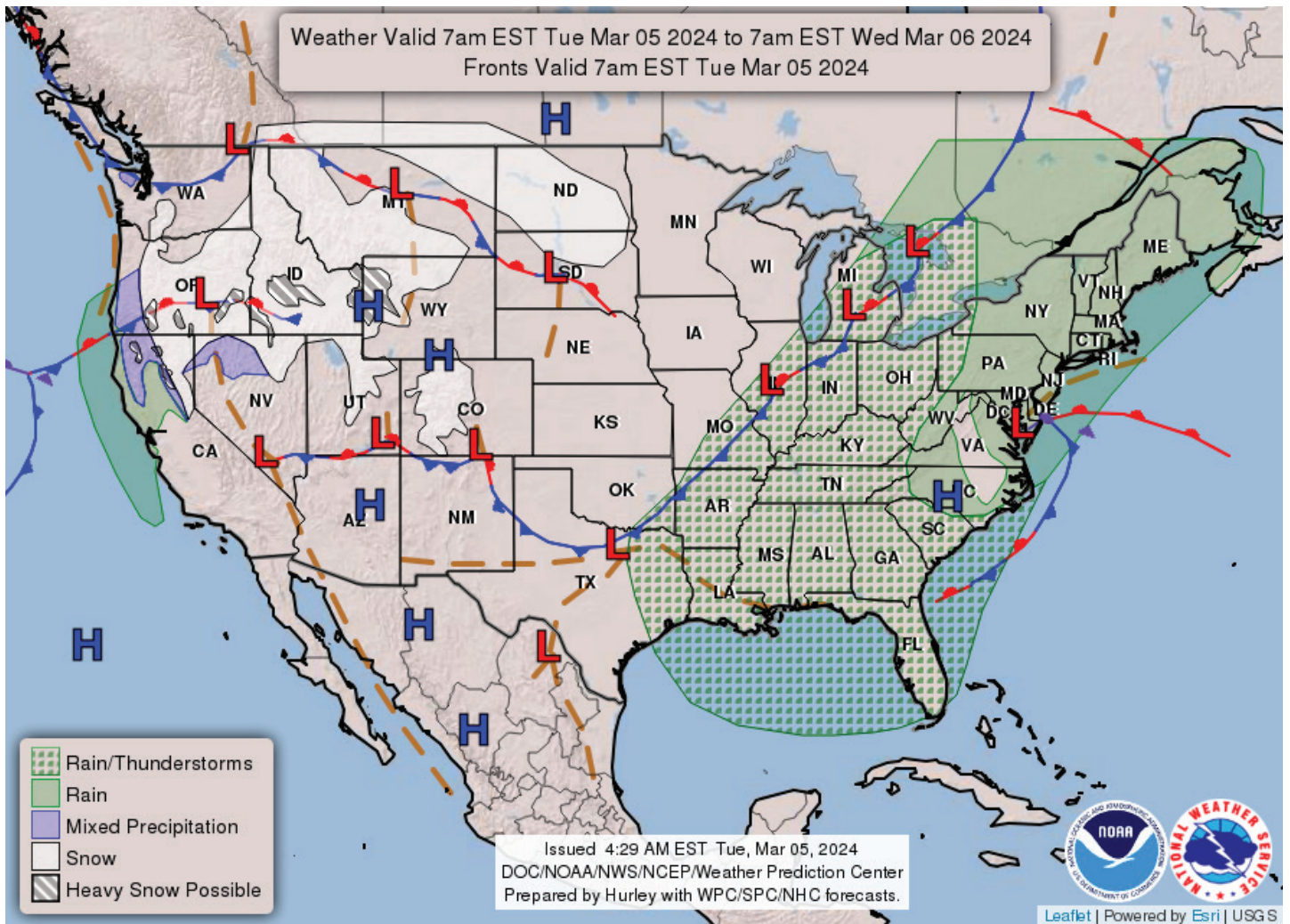
Precip to date in March: 0.00

Average Precip to date: 1.29

Precip Year to Date: 0.07

Sunset Tonight: 6:26:58 pm

Sunrise Tomorrow: 6:58:33 am



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Today in Weather History

March 5, 1966: The historic blizzard of 1966, which started on March 2, ended in the Dakotas. North Dakota saw severe livestock losses, with an estimated 18,500 cattle, 7,500 sheep, and 600 hogs killed. On a farm in eastern North Dakota, 7,000 turkeys perished. The total damage to livestock was estimated at nearly \$4 million. In South Dakota, an estimated 50,000 cattle, 46,000 sheep, and 1,800 hogs were killed by this storm. Most of the deaths occurred in the state's central and northern parts.

1894: The low temperature of 36 degrees in San Diego, California, on this day was their lowest on record for March.

4-6, 1959: In Iowa, the record-breaking snowstorm on March 4-6 began with light snow in western Iowa on the morning of the 4th, then spread across the state and intensified with heavy snow falling from the night of the 4th through the 5th and into the early morning on the 6th in eastern Iowa. The snowfall and its subsequent effects were less severe in western Iowa and grew progressively worse, moving eastward. In central Iowa, snowfall amounts were generally 6 to 10 inches. In contrast, in eastern Iowa, a swath of about 12 to 20 inches of snow fell roughly from Appanoose County through Tama County and north-east to Allamakee County. Reported storm total snowfall amounts included 12.9 inches at Waterloo, 14.5 inches at Decorah, 16.0 inches at Oelwein, 17.0 inches at Oskaloosa, 17.6 inches at Dubuque, 19.8 inches at Marshalltown, where 17.8 inches fell in just 24 hours, and 22.0 inches at Fayette where 21.0 inches fell in 24 hours. Winds strengthened steadily during the storm, with speeds reaching 30 to 50 mph at times and causing extensive blowing and drifting of snow. Drifts 6 to 10 feet deep were common, and in north-eastern Iowa, a few locations reported drifts 15 to 20 feet deep.

1959: Near blizzard conditions occurred over northern and central Oklahoma. Up to seven inches of snow fell and winds up to 50 mph created snow drifts 4 to 8 feet deep. In Edmond, a bus slid off the road into a ditch and overturned, injuring 16 people. The image below is from Storm Data.

1960 - Eastern Massachusetts greatest March snowstorm of record began to abate. The storm produced record 24 hour snowfall totals of 27.2 inches at Blue Hill Observatory, 17.7 inches at Worcester, and 16.6 inches at Boston. Winds gusted to 70 mph. (3rd-5th) (The Weather Channel)

1962 - A tremendous storm raged along the Atlantic coast. The great Atlantic storm caused more than 200 million dollars property damage from Florida to New England. Winds along the Middle Atlantic Coast reached 70 mph raising forty foot waves, and as much as 33 inches of snow blanketed the mountains of Virginia. The Virginia shoreline was rearranged by historic tidal flooding caused by the combination of the long stretch of strong onshore winds and the Spring Tides. (David Ludlum)

1966: A plane crashes near Mount Fuji in Japan after severe turbulence. Aviation-safety.net said the probable cause was, "The aircraft suddenly encountered abnormally severe turbulence over Gotemba City, which imposed a gust load considerably over the design limit." All 124 people on board were killed in the crash.

1972: Palm Springs, California, recorded a high of 100 degrees, the earliest the city has ever hit the century mark.

1987 - A storm in the western U.S. produced heavy rain and high winds in California. Up to six inches of rain soaked the San Francisco Bay area in 24 hours, and winds gusted to 100 mph at the Wheeler Ridge Pumping Plant near the Tehachapi Mountains. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

1989: A F2 tornado killed one person and injured six others in Heard County, Georgia. A stronger F3 tornado injured 23 persons and caused more than \$5 million in damage around Grantville, Georgia.

1998: A thunderstorm dropped dime to golfball size hail along its track from McLain to Leakesville, Mississippi. The most severe damage was around the city of Leakesville. Hail depth was six to twelve inches throughout the city. The elementary school in Leakesville reported hail drifts to the bottom of the school's windows.

1990 - Thunderstorms over eastern Colorado, developing ahead of a major storm system, produced up to three inches of small hail around Colorado Springs in the late morning and early afternoon. Strong thunderstorms swept through southeastern sections of the Denver area during the evening hours. These strong thunderstorms also produced up to three inches of small hail, along with wind gusts to 50 mph, and as much as 2.4 inches of rain. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data) 2007: The morning temperature dropped to 51 degrees below zero at Key Lake, Saskatchewan, Canada.

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Daily Devotionals

Seeds of Hope

THE MIRACLE WORKER

Twelve ministers boarded a flight in Miami for New York. Shortly after takeoff, the plane encountered a terrible unexpected storm. The people onboard became frightened as the aircraft bounced and shifted with the currents.

One of the clergymen called to a flight attendant and said, "Tell the Captain that everything will be okay because twelve ministers from Miami are onboard."

Politely excusing herself, she phoned the Captain with the news. A moment later, she returned to the minister and said, "The Captain asked that I tell you that he was honored to have all of you on board the flight. But he also asked that I tell you that he would rather have four dependable jet engines."

Jesus, our Savior, was a miracle worker. He specialized in accomplishing supernatural things for God through ordinary people and ordinary things. What He did then He can do now. Neither He nor his power has changed. What was then, is today, and will be forever.

When He fed the five thousand, He used the lunch of a small boy to feed the hungry crowd. He took that small insignificant gift and accomplished one of His greatest miracles. The lesson in that miracle for us? No one is ever too young and no gift too small for God to accept, bless, and use to accomplish great things that will honor Him.

Prayer: Father, may we realize that it is not the size of our gift that matters, but our willingness to allow You to do great things through us. Give us willing hearts. In Jesus' Name, Amen.

Scripture For Today: When the people saw him do this miraculous sign, they exclaimed, "Surely, he is the Prophet we have been expecting!" John 6:1-14



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: 17 Hrs 18 Mins 34 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

LOTTO AMERICA

WINNING NUMBERS:

03.04.24

4 5 8 22 47 6

All Star Bonus: 2x

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:

\$2,000,000

NEXT DRAW: 1 Days 16 Hrs 33 Mins 34 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

LUCKY FOR LIFE

WINNING NUMBERS:

03.04.24

3 9 17 30 42 15

TOP PRIZE:

\$7,000/week

NEXT DRAW: 16 Hrs 48 Mins 34 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

DAKOTA CASH

WINNING NUMBERS:

03.02.24

3 10 20 32 35

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:

\$20,000

NEXT DRAW: 1 Days 16 Hrs 48 Mins 34 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

POWERBALL

DOUBLE PLAY

WINNING NUMBERS:

03.04.24

3 19 29 53 59 4

TOP PRIZE:

\$10,000,000

NEXT DRAW: 1 Days 17 Hrs 17 Mins 34 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

POWERBALL

WINNING NUMBERS:

03.04.24

36 42 50 52 67 26

Power Play: 2x

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:

\$485,000,000

NEXT DRAW: 1 Days 17 Hrs 17 Mins 34 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

News from the Associated Press

South Dakota Sen. John Thune jumps into race to succeed McConnell as Senate leader

By MARY CLARE JALONICK Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — South Dakota Sen. John Thune is entering the race to be the next Republican leader of the U.S. Senate once Sen. Mitch McConnell steps away from the post in November.

Thune, currently the No. 2 Senate Republican, told local news outlets that he is interested in the job. He said in an interview with South Dakota's Keloland News that "I hope to be" the next leader and will do everything he can to convince his colleagues to support him.

He told another local news outlet, Dakota News Now, that McConnell stepping down is "a chance for a reset and I'd like to be a part of it."

His announcement sets up an expected race with Texas Sen. John Cornyn, who held the No. 2 leadership post until he was term-limited five years ago. The two men have long hinted at their interest in replacing McConnell, but they have made their campaigns official in light of McConnell's announcement last week that he would not seek reelection as GOP leader when his term ends in November.

Other senators could jump into the race as well, including Wyoming Sen. John Barrasso, who is currently No. 3 in leadership behind McConnell and Thune.

Republican senators haven't chosen a new leader since 2007, when McConnell was elected — before most current GOP senators took office. Much of the campaigning will likely take place in private and in one-on-one meetings, as the contenders work to convince each of their GOP colleagues to back them on a secret ballot. The election will take place in a closed-door conference meeting at some point after the November elections.

Thune has at times sparred with former President Donald Trump, the current front-runner for the GOP presidential nomination. In the days before the Jan. 6, 2021, attack on the Capitol, Thune told reporters that Trump's efforts to overturn his 2020 election defeat would "go down like a shot dog" in the Senate.

Since then, Trump declined to endorse Thune's reelection bid in 2022 and Thune endorsed South Carolina Sen. Tim Scott over Trump in the presidential primary. But after Scott dropped out and it has become more likely that Trump will be the party's nominee this year, Thune has said he would back the former president.

Thune told Dakota News Now that Trump "has taken some swipes" but "I just think in the end, I worked with him well when he was president before."

The four-term senator mulled retirement in 2022 but ultimately decided to come back to the Senate as it became clear he had a chance to become leader.

Like Cornyn, Thune said he would work to make sure individual senators have more of a voice in decisions. That has been a frequent complaint from rank-and-file members under McConnell, particularly as massive year-end spending bills that are introduced by leadership and quickly passed through both chambers have become more common.

Announcing his intention to run on Friday, Cornyn said he believes "the Senate is broken — that is not news to anyone."

It is so far unclear who will have an advantage in the race. Thune could have the advantage of incumbency as McConnell's current deputy. But Barrasso has tracked furthest to the right of the three, becoming the first of them to endorse former President Donald Trump for the GOP presidential nomination.

Cornyn has drawn attention for his fundraising, having raised a total of \$13 million for incumbents, the party's Senate campaign arm and Senate Republican nominees already in the 2024 cycle.

But Thune has amassed a campaign war chest of \$17.8 million — a sum that he is also likely to use as campaign contributions to fellow Republicans as he mounts the bid for leader.

While McConnell still enjoys support from the majority of his caucus, he announced his plan to step aside last week after facing louder and increasing criticism from some within his party who have said it is

time for a change in leadership.

McConnell was also at odds with Trump, whom he has said was "practically and morally responsible" for the Capitol attack. The two haven't spoken since before then, and Trump frequently bashes him publicly.

"Believe me, I know the politics within my party at this particular moment in time," McConnell said in a floor speech last week. "I have many faults, misunderstanding politics is not one of them."

Influx of firefighters, cooler weather in Texas Panhandle helps keep wildfires in check

By VALERIE GONZALEZ Associated Press

McALLEN, Texas (AP) — An influx of hundreds of firefighters and more favorable weather conditions on Monday helped authorities in the Texas Panhandle keep the largest wildfire in state history from threatening more homes and communities, fire officials said.

Strong winds spread flames and led to the evacuation of the small town of Sanford on Sunday while airplanes dropped fire retardants to stop a blaze that was quickly contained thanks to hundreds of firefighters who were deployed on the ground, said Deidra Thomas, a spokeswoman for the Hutchinson County Emergency Management.

"Yesterday had we not had the resources we had, that fire could have been catastrophic," Thomas said Monday. "We're in a really good position today and tomorrow and hopefully through the rest of the week.

"The weather is going to be favorable, the winds are going to be much lower, the humidity is coming up, and that's fantastic news for us."

Although officials have not released an official cause of the largest fire, the Smokehouse Creek fire that scorched more than 1 million acres and destroyed dozens of homes near the towns of Stinnett and Canadian, a lawsuit filed Friday in Hemphill County alleges a downed powerline near the town of Stinnett on Feb. 26 sparked the blaze.

The lawsuit, filed on behalf of Stinnett homeowner Melanie McQuiddy against Xcel Energy Services Inc. and two other utilities, alleges the blaze started "when a wooden pole defendants failed to properly inspect, maintain and replace, splintered and snapped off at its base."

A spokesperson for Xcel said in a statement there is no official determination for the causes of any of the fires in the Texas Panhandle and that investigations are ongoing.

As of Sunday afternoon, the Smokehouse Creek fire was 15% contained and two other fires were at least 60% contained. Strong winds, dry grass and unseasonably warm temperatures fed the blazes.

A cluster of fires have burned across more than 1,900 square miles (4,921 square kilometers) in rural areas surrounding Amarillo. The largest blaze, Smokehouse Creek, accounting for nearly 1,700 square miles (4,400 square kilometers), 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 late Sunday warned of an elevated fire risk through Monday in the area due to winds of 15-20 mph (24-32 kph).

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.

The organization has heard estimates of more than 150 homes being affected in the county, noting the

fires extend to at least five other counties, said Julie Winters, executive director for Hutchinson County United Way. .

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.

The Latest | At least 17 killed in an Israeli airstrike in southern Gaza

By The Associated Press undefined

An Israeli airstrike killed at least 17 people in the southern Gaza city of Khan Younis on Tuesday, Palestinian officials said, adding that a total of 97 people had died in the last 24 hours.

First responders with the Civil Defense circulated footage of rescuers pulling dead and wounded people from the rubble of a house, including a child with blood on his face who was not moving. The nearby European Hospital said Tuesday that it had received 17 bodies overnight.

The Israeli military said in a statement on Tuesday that it was carrying out targeted raids on militant infrastructure in Khan Younis while trying to evacuate civilians from the area.

The latest fatalities brought the overall Palestinian toll from the nearly five-month war to 30,631, according to Gaza's Health Ministry. It does not differentiate between civilians and combatants in its figures but says women and children make up around two-thirds of the total casualties. It says over 72,000 people have been wounded.

Israel launched its offensive after Hamas-led militants stormed across the border on Oct. 7, killing some 1,200 people, mostly civilians, and abducting around 250. Over 100 hostages were released last year in exchange for 240 Palestinians imprisoned by Israel.

Currently:

- Vice President Harris hosts Israeli war Cabinet member as the US pushes to get more aid into Gaza.
- A UN envoy says there are 'reasonable grounds' to believe Hamas committed sexual violence on Oct. 7.
- Israel escalates its criticism of a U.N. agency in Gaza. It says 450 of its workers are militants.
- Netanyahu leaned on his top rival to help unify Israel. Now, Benny Gantz is more popular.
- Find more of AP's coverage at <https://apnews.com/hub/israel-hamas-war>.

Here's the latest:

AT LEAST 17 KILLED IN KHAN YOUNIS IN SOUTHERN GAZA STRIP

RAFAH, Gaza Strip — Palestinian officials say an Israeli airstrike has killed at least 17 people in the southern Gaza city of Khan Younis.

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Israel says it tries to avoid harming civilians and blames the high toll on Hamas because the militants operate in dense, residential areas. The military rarely comments on individual strikes.

The military said in a statement on Tuesday that it was carrying out targeted raids on militant infrastructure in Khan Younis while trying to evacuate civilians from the area.

5 THAIS WERE INJURED IN A MISSILE ATTACK FIRED FROM LEBANON

BANGKOK — Thailand's Ministry of Foreign Affairs has confirmed that five Thais were injured by an anti-tank missile fired from Lebanon on Monday.

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Three of them were seriously injured and were being treated at Rambam Medical Center in Haifa. The number was revised down from seven injured after the Thai Embassy in Tel Aviv confirmed two were non-Thais, the ministry said in a statement Tuesday.

The Hotline for Refugees and Migrants, an Israeli advocacy group, said a man from India was killed in Monday's attack. It said Israel was not doing enough to protect migrant workers hired for agricultural work in border areas under fire.

Farm workers from Asian countries have flocked to Israel in recent years, drawn by higher wages. Several foreign workers were among those killed and abducted in Hamas' Oct. 7 attack out of Gaza, which triggered the war.

Israel and Lebanon's Hezbollah militant group have traded fire nearly every day since the start of the war in Gaza. Hezbollah, an ally of Hamas, says it is trying to pin down Israeli forces in the north to aid the Palestinian group.

Hezbollah did not immediately claim responsibility for Monday's strike.

Coast-to-coast Super Tuesday contests poised to move Biden and Trump closer to November rematch

By WILL WEISSERT Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — President Joe Biden and former President Donald Trump are poised to move much closer to winning their party's nominations during the biggest day of the primary campaign on Tuesday, setting up a historic rematch that many voters would rather not endure.

Super Tuesday elections are being held in 16 states and one territory — from Alaska and California to Vermont and Virginia. Hundreds of delegates are at stake, the biggest haul for either party on any single day.

While much of the focus is on the presidential race, there are also important down-ballot contests. California voters will choose candidates who will compete to fill the Senate seat long held by Dianne Feinstein. The governor's race will take shape in North Carolina, a state that both parties are fiercely contesting ahead of November. And in Los Angeles, a progressive prosecutor is attempting to fend off an intense reelection challenge in a race that could serve as a barometer of the politics of crime.

But the premier races center on Biden and Trump. And in a dramatic departure from past Super Tuesdays, both the Democratic and Republican contests are effectively sealed this year.

The two men have easily repelled challengers in the opening rounds of the campaign and are in full command of their bids — despite polls making it clear that voters don't want this year's general election to be identical to the 2020 race. A new AP-NORC Center for Public Affairs Research poll finds a majority of Americans don't think either Biden or Trump has the necessary mental acuity for the job.

"Both of them failed, in my opinion, to unify this country," said Brian Hadley, 66, of Raleigh, North Carolina.

Neither Trump nor Biden will be able to formally clinch their party's nominations on Super Tuesday. The earliest either can become his party's presumptive nominee is March 12 for Trump and March 19 for Biden.

The final days before Tuesday demonstrated the unique nature of this year's campaign. Rather than barnstorming the states holding primaries, Biden and Trump held rival events last week along the U.S.-Mexico border, each seeking to gain an advantage in the increasingly fraught immigration debate.

After the Supreme Court ruled 9-0 on Monday to restore Trump to primary ballots following attempts to ban him for his role in helping spark the Capitol riot, Trump pointed to the 91 criminal counts against him to accuse Biden of weaponizing the courts.

"Fight your fight yourself," Trump said. "Don't use prosecutors and judges to go after your opponent."

Biden delivers the State of the Union address on Thursday, then will campaign in the key swing states of Pennsylvania and Georgia.

The president will defend policies responsible for "record job creation, the strongest economy in the world, increased wages and household wealth, and lower prescription drug and energy costs," White House communications director Ben LaBolt said in a statement.

That's in contrast, LaBolt continued, to Trump's "Make America Great Again" movement, which consists

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of "rewarding billionaires and corporations with tax breaks, taking away rights and freedoms, and undermining our democracy."

Biden's campaign called extra attention to Trump's most provocative utterances on the campaign trail, like when he evoked Adolf Hitler in suggesting that immigrants were "poisoning the blood" of the U.S. and said he'd seek to serve as a dictator during his first day back in the White House.

Trump recently told a gala for Black conservatives that he believed African Americans empathized with his four criminal indictments, drawing a sharp rebuke from the Biden campaign and top Democrats around the country for comparing personal legal struggles to the historical injustices Black people have faced in the U.S.

Trump has nonetheless already vanquished more than a dozen major Republican challengers and now has only one left: Nikki Haley, the former president's onetime U.N. ambassador who was also twice elected governor of her home state of South Carolina.

Haley has hoppedscotched across the country, visiting at least one Super Tuesday state almost daily for more than a week and arguing that her base of support — while far smaller than Trump's — suggests the former president will lose to Biden.

"We can do better than two 80-year-old candidates for president," Haley said at a rally Monday in the Houston suburbs.

Haley has maintained strong fundraising and notched her first primary victory over the weekend in Washington, D.C., a Democrat-run city with few registered Republicans. Trump tried to turn that victory into a loss for the overall campaign, scoffing that she had been "crowned queen of the swamp."

Though Trump has dominated the early Republican primary calendar, his victories have shown vulnerabilities with some influential voter blocs, especially in college towns like Hanover, New Hampshire, home to Dartmouth College, or Ann Arbor, where the University of Michigan is located, as well as in some areas with high concentrations of independents.

Still, Haley winning any of Super Tuesday's contests would take an upset. And a Trump sweep would only intensify pressure on her to leave the race.

Biden has his own problems, including low approval ratings and polls suggesting that many Americans, even a majority of Democrats, don't want to see the 81-year-old running again. The president's easy Michigan primary win last week was spoiled slightly by an "uncommitted" campaign organized by activists who disapprove of the president's handling of Israel's war in Gaza.

Allies of the "uncommitted" vote are pushing similar protest votes elsewhere. One to watch is Minnesota, which has a significant population of Muslims, including in its Somali American community, and liberals disaffected with Biden. Gov. Tim Walz, a Biden ally, told The Associated Press last week that he expected some votes for "uncommitted" on Tuesday.

While Biden is the oldest president in U.S. history, his reelection campaign argues that skeptics will come around once it is clear it'll be him or Trump in November. Trump is 77 and faces his own questions about age that have been exacerbated by flubs like over the weekend when he mistakenly suggested he was running against Barack Obama.

That hasn't shaken Trump's ardent supporters' faith in him.

"Trump would eat him up," Ken Ballos, a retired police officer who attended a weekend Trump rally in Virginia, said of a November rematch, adding that Biden "would look like a fool up there."

China sets an economic growth target of around 5% but acknowledges it will not be easy to achieve

By KEN MORITSUGU and ELAINE KURTENBACH Associated Press

BEIJING (AP) — China aims to achieve 5% economic growth this year, Premier Li Qiang said Tuesday, acknowledging that it will be a challenging goal in difficult times.

In his address to the annual session of the National People's Congress, Li outlined plans to boost spending

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on developing advanced technology, fortifying China's military and supporting the economy, among many other longstanding goals. But there was no big package of stimulus to help boost markets and reassure worried investors.

Li, presenting an annual report on the past year and future plans, said the government would continue with a "pro-active fiscal policy and prudent monetary policy," suggesting no major change in the leadership's approach to the economy.

He did unveil a plan to boost growth by issuing long-term bonds over the next several years, starting with 1 trillion yuan (about \$139 billion) this year. The money would be spent to implement "major national strategies" and fortify security "in key areas."

Li said the government plans a "new development model" for the housing market, including building government-subsidized housing in a bid to ease a prolonged real estate slump that has been a major drag on the economy. That appeared to confirm reports that authorities plan to use public funds to buy up some of China's legions of unoccupied apartments and turn them into affordable housing.

"The foundation for China's sustained economic recovery is not yet stable, with insufficient effective demand, overcapacity in some industries, weak social expectations, and still many risks and hidden dangers," Li told delegates to the annual session of the congress, China's ceremonial legislature, in Beijing's majestic Great Hall of the People, adjacent to Tiananmen Square.

The government released a draft budget that included 1.67 trillion yuan (\$231 billion) in defense spending — a rise of 7.2% that matches the pace of increase in 2023 and reflects a continued focus on security as well as the economy.

China's economy grew at a 5.2% pace last year, but that was on top of just 3% annual growth rate in 2022, when millions of people were locked down for weeks and some businesses were ordered to close as the country endured the worst disruptions from the COVID-19 pandemic. Replicating the same growth rate this year will be more difficult, because the economy is starting from a higher base.

"Achieving this year's targets will not be easy," Li said, referring not only to economic growth and other goals including raising incomes, creating 12 million jobs and making the economy more energy efficient in pursuit of climate goals.

China has set a 2.5% goal for reducing its energy consumption, after having failed to meet its target for a 2% cut in 2023.

Xi Jinping, China's most powerful leader in decades, heads the party and has installed loyalists like Li in top posts to strengthen its grip on the economy and society. Xi, 70, is in his third five-year term as party general secretary and may hold that post for life.

The meetings of the national congress run for about a week and are China's biggest political events of the year. The congress only endorses policies already set by top leaders, but it provides a platform to showcase the party's accomplishments and to build support for its aims.

Leaders have been emphasizing the need to raise consumer spending to help drive the economy. But the consumption-led recovery it was counting on after anti-pandemic controls ended in late 2022 has faded and most forecasts are for growth to slow this year.

Falling housing prices and worries over jobs have left many families either reluctant or unable to spend more. China's real estate market is in crisis after many developers defaulted on their debts following a crackdown on excess borrowing.

Li said the government would defuse such risks and provide support to local governments whose finances have been strained by high spending on anti-virus measures and lower tax revenues due to the downturn in land right sales.

China should not lose sight of "worst case scenarios," Li said.

But he reiterated calls for greater confidence despite China's challenges, noting the country's vast market of about 1.4 billion people, its advanced manufacturing capacity and its massive workforce.

"The underlying trend of economic recovery and long-term growth remains unchanged and will not change," he said. "So we must be more confident and more assured of ourselves."

Among the dozens of projects Li listed in his roughly 30-page Chinese-language report — 55 pages in

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English — China plans a program this year for “worry-free consumption” to encourage people to spend more. Households will be encouraged to trade in old cars and appliances and buy new ones.

Li also said the government would focus on employment, a pressing concern for the many people whose jobs became more precarious during the pandemic and many young Chinese who are struggling to find work after leaving school. Plans include unemployment insurance and other social support, loans and subsidies to companies able to create many jobs.

The government also plans to provide support for local governments facing “economic difficulty,” he said, suggesting that Beijing will limit damage from debts of cash-strapped cities and regions that have been rising sharply.

What you should know from the opening of China’s legislature

By HUIZHONG WU Associated Press

BEIJING (AP) — China’s Premier Li Qiang promoted an image of confidence as he announced modest economic growth goals for the world’s second largest economy, at one of the country’s most important political gatherings.

Li addressed a few thousand delegates of the country’s rubber-stamp legislature, the National People’s Congress, which met in Beijing.

It’s a time when the government reviews the work of the past year, and crucially reveals targets and goals for the coming year, especially in its approach to its economy, military budget and Chinese society.

Here are some key takeaways from Li’s address Tuesday.

STABLE ECONOMIC GROWTH

The government’s overall approach to the economy will not change, as the goals by the government for 2024 signal that they want to stabilize growth. Li announced that the GDP growth target was 5% this year — a modest target that is still going to be difficult. China is grappling with an economic slowdown and a real estate market in crisis after a crackdown on excess borrowing led to a liquidity crisis among developers.

“This year’s targets are virtually the same as last year, reflecting policy stasis in Beijing as the central leadership delays any significant economic policy decisions until the Third Plenum later in the year,” said Neil Thomas, a fellow on Chinese Politics at the Asia Society.

TOUGHER LANGUAGE ON TAIWAN

Li’s report had stronger language on Taiwan, a self-ruled island that China considers its own.

Missing from this year’s report was the word “peace.” Last year, the premier had called for “advanc(ing) the process of China’s peaceful reunification.” This year, Li said they will “be firm in advancing the cause of China’s reunification.”

Overall, the language this year was tougher, said Arthur Zhin-Sheng Wang, a professor at Taiwan’s Central Police University who’s an expert on cross-Straits relations.

Dropping the word “peace” combined with the phrase “resolutely opposing Taiwan independence,” is what signals a stronger stance, Wang said. Last year, the work report had more language about promoting the prosperity of both sides as well, while this year only had a brief nod.

Taiwan held presidential elections in January and elected Lai Ching-te to be its next president, giving the Democratic Progressive Party a third term. The party’s platform maintains that Taiwan is already independent of China.

Taiwan and China have been ruled separately since 1949, when the Nationalist government of Chiang Kai-shek retreated to the island after losing a civil war on the mainland to Mao Zedong’s communist forces.

DEFENSE SPENDING RISING 7.2%

The government announced an increase of 7.2% in the military budget, the world’s second-highest behind the United States at 1.6 trillion yuan (\$222 billion). China’s defense budget has more than doubled since 2015, but in recent years it has dialed down the increase in defense spending as economic growth slowed.

MIGRANT WORKERS

China's rural and urban populations have long been divided by the hukou, a registration and identification system through which social benefits are allocated, such as health insurance and schools. Cities and urban areas generally have better social benefits than rural ones.

For the first time in recent years, the government's work report mentioned that it would want to make it easier for migrant workers with rural hukou registrations to be able to change their hukous to urban ones. While hukou reform has long been discussed, the mention in the government report signals that it could be higher on the agenda of the central authorities.

CONFIDENCE

In spite of the slowing economy, and U.S. export controls on several tech-related industries, such as semi-conductors, Li struck a note of confidence in his report.

"The Chinese people have the courage, wisdom, to overcome any difficulties or obstacles," he said. "China's development will surely endure storms and plough through the waves, (and) the future is promising."

Industrial fire and multiple explosions shoot debris into the air in Detroit suburb

CLINTON TOWNSHIP, Mich. (AP) — A fire raging at an industrial facility caused multiple explosions that rocked suburban Detroit on Monday night and sent debris shooting far into the air, prompting police to implore residents to stay inside.

The debris fell as far as a mile (1.6 kilometers) away, the Clinton Township Police Department said on Facebook. Authorities said they didn't know exactly what was burning or the potential health effects from it.

"We can not stress enough the danger that is happening right now," one police post said. "Please, please, please stay inside and out of the vicinity."

Police said the fire was burning near 15 Mile Road and Groesbeck Highway. News helicopter videos showed a massive, bright orange area of fire with bursts of flames within the blaze that looked like explosions.

Macomb County Executive Mark Hackel told WDIV-TV late Monday that the explosions started around 9 p.m. at the Select Distributors plant and that Clinton Township officers and firefighters immediately responded.

"They understand some type of CO2 or propane explosions were taking place at the facility, and again, it was just continuous explosions, as well as the fire," Hackel said.

After 11 p.m., he told the news outlet that the fire had been contained.

"Their concern right now is — obviously they're taming the fire, but now, what's going on with that air quality?" Hackel said. "We have a HAZMAT unit that's out trying to test the air quality so we can get further updates."

Kevin Felster told The Detroit News he was on his way to Clinton Township when he saw the fire and heard the explosions. He said he got out of his car and saw pieces of metal — from the size of a spray can to the size of a car wheel — on the ground.

"It was heavy stuff and it was all charred black," Felster said. "I guarantee you ... if that came flying through the air at any velocity at all, it would just shatter your head like nothing."

It wasn't immediately known if anyone was injured.

Select Distributors is a wholesale supplier of novelties, phone accessories and other merchandise to discount stores, dollar stores, wholesalers and other stores, according to its website.

The business didn't immediately respond to an email seeking comment.

Joleen Vultaggio said she heard the explosions from 8 miles (12.8 kilometers) away at her home in Sterling Heights.

"It just freaked me out because it wasn't like one boom, it was continuous and it was very intense," she said.

Small plane with several aboard crashes in Nashville and all were killed

NASHVILLE, Tenn. (AP) — Several people aboard a single-engine plane died Monday when the aircraft crashed near an interstate highway in Nashville, Tennessee, authorities said.

The pilot made an emergency call to John C. Tune Airport around 7:40 p.m., reported engine trouble and was given clearance to make an emergency landing, Metro Nashville Police Department spokesman Don Aaron said. A short time later the pilot radioed that the aircraft would not reach the airport, he said.

The plane burst into flames when it crashed in a grassy median just off Interstate 40 and behind a Costco on the city's westside. The crash scene was about 3 miles (4.8 kilometers) south of the general aviation airport.

"It appears that everyone on board perished," Aaron said.

The exact number of victims was not immediately known, he said. Authorities also were working to determine from where the plane originated.

There were no injuries to drivers on the interstate, Nashville Fire Department spokesperson Kendra Loney said. Authorities said no vehicles or buildings on the ground were damaged.

The National Transportation Safety Board and the Federal Aviation Administration will investigate.

Alabama lawmakers aim to approve immunity laws for IVF providers

By KIM CHANDLER Associated Press

MONTGOMERY, Ala. (AP) — Alabama lawmakers, who face public pressure to get in vitro fertilization services restarted, are nearing approval of immunity legislation to shield providers from the fall out of a court ruling that equated frozen embryos to children.

Committees in the Alabama House of Representatives and the Alabama Senate on Tuesday will debate legislation to protect providers from lawsuits and criminal prosecution for the "damage or death of an embryo" during IVF services. Republican Sen. Tim Melson, the sponsor of the Senate bill, said Monday they are hoping to get the proposal approved and to Gov. Kay Ivey on Wednesday.

"We anticipate the IVF protections legislation to receive final passage this week and look forward to the governor signing it into law," Ivey spokeswoman Gina Maiola said.

Three major IVF providers paused services in the wake of an Alabama Supreme Court ruling last month that three couples, who had frozen embryos destroyed in an accident at a storage facility, could pursue wrongful death lawsuits for their "extrauterine children." The ruling, treating an embryo the same as a child or gestating fetus under the wrongful death statute, raised concerns about civil liabilities for clinics.

The court decision also caused an immediate backlash. Across the country, groups raised concerns about a court ruling recognizing embryos as children. Patients in Alabama shared stories of having upcoming embryo transfers abruptly canceled and their paths to parenthood put in doubt.

Republicans in the GOP-dominated Alabama Legislature are looking to the immunity proposal as a solution to clinics' concerns. But Republicans have shied away from proposals that would address the legal status of embryos created in IVF labs.

Alabama providers have supported the possible passage of the proposed immunity bill.

"Let's get IVF restarted ASAP," Fertility Alabama, one of the providers that had to pause services, wrote in a social media post urging support for the bill. A telephone message to the clinic was not immediately returned Monday.

However, The American Society for Reproductive Medicine, a group representing IVF providers across the country, said the legislation does not go far enough.

Sean Tipton, a spokesman for the organization, said Monday that the legislation does not correct the "fundamental problem" which he said is the court ruling "conflating fertilized eggs with children."

House Democrats proposed legislation stating that a human embryo outside a uterus can not be considered an unborn child or human being under state law. Democrats last week argued that was the most direct way to deal with the issue. Republicans have not brought the proposal up for a vote.

The GOP proposals state that "no action, suit, or criminal prosecution for the damage to or death of an

embryo shall be brought for "providing or receiving services related to in vitro fertilization." The legislation would apply retroactively except in cases where litigation is already under way.

The House and Senate last week approved nearly identical versions of the bills. The House version includes lawsuit protections not just for IVF services, but also the "goods" or products used in IVF services.

The Senate sponsor of the bill, Melson, said last week that he was uncomfortable exempting products — which he said could include the nutrient-rich solutions used in IVF to help embryos develop. He noted there were accusations that a faulty batch of a storage solution caused embryos to be lost.

McConnell weighs endorsing Trump. It's a stark turnaround after the Jan. 6, 2021, attack

By LISA MASCARO AP Congressional Correspondent

WASHINGTON (AP) — Senate leader Mitch McConnell is the highest-ranking Republican in Congress who has yet to endorse Donald Trump's bid to return to the White House — having once called the defeated president "morally responsible" for the Jan. 6, 2021 Capitol attack.

But that's potentially about to change.

McConnell's political team and Trump's campaign have been in talks over not only a possible endorsement of the former president but a strategy to unite Republicans up and down the party's ticket ahead of the November election, according to a person familiar with the situation and granted anonymity to discuss it.

How, when or where McConnell would endorse Trump is less head-spinning than the idea that it could happen at all: A stunning rapprochement for two men who have not spoken since McConnell enraged Trump by declaring Joe Biden the legitimate winner of the 2020 presidential election.

But a fast-moving series of events ahead of Super Tuesday's elections have been set in motion by McConnell's own sudden announcement he would step down as leader next session and as Trump is on track to move closer toward the GOP nomination.

Taken together, it lays bare the lengths that McConnell, the longest-serving Senate leader and an ever calculating politician, will go as he works to win back Republican control of the Senate in what could be among his final acts in power.

"I still have enough gas in the tank to thoroughly disappoint my critics, and I intend to do so with all the enthusiasm which they have become accustomed," McConnell said last week in announcing his decision to step aside as leader for the next session.

Not long ago, it appeared Trump would have few fans politically lining up behind his bid to return to the White House, particularly from the halls of Congress.

In the aftermath of the Jan. 6, 2021, attack on the Capitol, key Republicans, including McConnell, signaled unequivocally they were done with Trump.

In a scathing speech during the Senate impeachment trial on charges Trump incited the insurrection at the Capitol, McConnell decried Trump's intemperate language and the "entire manufactured atmosphere of looming catastrophe" and "wild myths" about a stolen election.

"The leader of the free world cannot spend weeks thundering that shadowy forces are stealing our country and then feign surprise when people believe him and do reckless things," said McConnell after the mob siege.

Still, McConnell declined to vote to convict Trump of the impeachment charges in the Senate trial, saying it was for the courts to decide, since the defeated president by then was out of office. "He didn't get away with anything yet," McConnell said in the February 2021 speech.

Trump is now charged in several cases including a federal indictment of conspiring to defraud the U.S. and obstruct an official proceeding related to the Jan. 6 attack on the Capitol by supporters trying to stop Congress from certifying the 2020 election. Trump has appealed claiming immunity.

The first sign that McConnell was leaving the door open to reuniting with Trump came in early 2023 when he was asked about Trump's potential return to the presidential campaign. At the time, McConnell suggested he would support the Republican Party's eventual nominee, declining to name names or mention Trump.

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But endorsements matter to Trump, who has assigned key campaign staff in charge of roping in support from elected officials in what has become a two-way political street. The GOP leaders are also relying on Trump to support — or at least not attack — their own nominees for the House and Senate.

As McConnell is weighing his decision to endorse Trump despite his concerns over Jan. 6, he is watching core Republican voters flock to the former president. And he is wary of being the one to try to stand in their way.

It's not just McConnell but the other Republican leaders on Capitol Hill who have all quickly fallen in line as Trump emerges ever so close to again becoming the party's nominee at the top of their party ticket this November.

Republican Speaker Mike Johnson traveled to Mar-a-Lago last month to meet with Trump at his private club about House races as the new speaker works to keep his slim GOP House majority.

The other House Republican leaders endorsed Trump as the former president's team pushed for backing ahead of the Iowa, New Hampshire and other early contests. Senate Republican leaders did the same.

And Republican Sen. Steve Daines of Montana, the chairman of the Senate GOP campaign arm who is a friend, hunting and fishing partner to the president's oldest son, Don Trump, Jr., had told others as far back as 2022 he hoped Trump would run again. He became the first member of Senate GOP leadership to endorse him.

When Daines traveled to Mar-a-Lago for his own visit in February 2023, he told Trump the most important thing he could do for Trump was deliver a Senate majority to confirm Cabinet nominees and approve conservative policies, according to another person familiar with the situation and granted anonymity to discuss it. Daines remains close to Trump, and the two speak often, the person said.

"I'm encouraging the Republican Party to unite behind President Trump," Daines said in a recent statement to the media, including AP.

McConnell's past political distaste for Trump appears to be no match for the GOP leader's desire to win back a Senate majority for Republicans one more time as he prepares to exit the leadership stage.

The two have traded harsh words since even before McConnell's 2021 speech, with Trump deriding the now 82-year-old as an "Old Crow."

But in recent weeks Trump has refrained from name-calling McConnell, or using racial slurs against McConnell's wife, Elaine Chao, the former Trump Transportation Secretary, who resigned in the aftermath of the Jan. 6 attack.

While representatives for McConnell and Trump had restarted the conversation, first McConnell had his announcement last week about stepping aside as GOP leader.

Once that project was done, the person said, McConnell's team could turn its attention to this next one.

Democrats make play for veteran and military support as Trump homes in on GOP nomination

By JAMES POLLARD Associated Press/Report for America

CHARLOTTE, N.C. (AP) — Highway signs welcome drivers entering North Carolina to "the nation's most military friendly state," and veterans here know they're being courted. But in a state where camouflage-colored appeals have become commonplace, recent efforts by progressive groups to cut into what has long been a reliably red constituency face an early test on Super Tuesday.

Among the 16 states and one territory casting ballots in Tuesday's 2024 presidential primaries and caucuses are some with the nation's highest rates of active-duty service members and largest populations of veterans: Texas, California, Virginia and North Carolina. But Tar Heel State veterans interviewed in the runup to the primary season's biggest voting day varied in their politics, even if they agreed that their military service informed their opinions.

Ryan Rogers, who fought in Afghanistan and Iraq, says the Biden administration mishandled the August 2021 attacks on Kabul's airport that killed at least 60 Afghans and 13 U.S. troops. The right-leaning

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independent voter from eastern North Carolina fears the blasts signaled a weakness that could endanger U.S. troops overseas.

"I don't care what side you're on," he said. "You better be strong."

But Ric Vandett, a 78-year-old Vietnam veteran from Hickory, won't vote for President Joe Biden's predecessor, Donald Trump. The left-leaning independent voter said he cannot forget Trump's refusal to acknowledge defeat in the 2020 election, which he blames for the Jan. 6 attacks on the U.S. Capitol.

"We came extremely close to a major constitutional crisis on Jan. 6," he said. "I'm afraid to see that happen again."

Recent statements by Trump have fueled Democrats' sense that there's an opening among voters with strong military ties, even if that gap hasn't surfaced during his march toward the GOP nomination.

Ahead of South Carolina's Republican primary, Trump said he "would encourage" Russia "to do whatever the hell they want" to NATO countries that don't meet defense spending targets. He also questioned why the husband of rival Nikki Haley wasn't joining her on the campaign trail, though Michael Haley was then deployed with the South Carolina Army National Guard.

Haley responded that Trump knows "nothing about" serving the country. Trump handily defeated Haley in South Carolina, just like every state primary and caucus to date. Her only win came on Sunday in Washington, D.C.

Trump benefited from the bloc's support in the 2020 general election. AP VoteCast found that about 6 in 10 military veterans said they voted for Trump then, as did just over half of those with a veteran in the household.

Among voters in this year's South Carolina Republican primary, AP VoteCast found that close to two-thirds of military veterans and people in veteran households voted for Trump over Haley.

Still, progressive groups are citing Trump's unorthodox foreign policy and past comments to argue that he's no friend to Americans in uniform. Any significant departure from the more conservative constituency of veterans and military families could spell trouble for Trump in a November rematch with Biden.

The Democrats will have to work for that support, according to Cal Cunningham, North Carolina Democrats' 2020 nominee for U.S. Senate and an Army reservist who served in Iraq and Afghanistan. Winning over this community is always challenging, Cunningham said, because people with military experience tend to value a culture more aligned with the "hierarchical" GOP than the "egalitarian" Democrats.

Their ability to do so could help determine which candidate receives North Carolina's 15 electoral votes this fall.

"It's going to be part of where the presidency is won and lost," Cunningham said.

Trump's weekend rally in Greensboro was protested by Common Defense, a progressive organization founded in 2016 to engage veterans as more than just "political props." The group said Trump's "alarming disregard for the core tenets of democracy" goes against their oaths.

The Biden campaign has also ratcheted up attacks over Trump's history of disparaging remarks about the armed forces.

"I call them patriots and heroes. The only loser I see is Donald Trump," said Biden, angrily wagging his finger during the South Carolina Democratic Party's fundraising dinner, in reference to reports that his predecessor described the American war dead at a French cemetery as "losers" and "suckers."

VoteVets, a liberal political action committee, is planning a \$10 million to \$15 million push targeting veterans and military families in key battleground states, according to co-founder Jon Soltz. A 60-second ad invoking former President Ronald Reagan to attack Republicans over blocking Ukraine aid will hit airwaves soon, Soltz said.

Soltz, a U.S. Army officer in the Iraq War, said the GOP lost its status as "the party of the military" during the Trump era. Anyone who claims to support service members "just can't vote" for someone with a "ridiculous amount of deferments" who "trashes" the likes of the late U.S. Sen. John McCain, he said.

Some veterans who oppose Biden say Trump has better defended the country's priorities despite past comments. Rogers, the Afghanistan and Iraq veteran, didn't like Trump's description of McCain as "not a war hero," but said he's voting "on a strong America" and not "what comes out of the man's mouth."

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"I've been the guy on the ground," he said. "I've lost Marines because of decisions."

The modern GOP has grown skeptical of foreign entanglements. So have many former military members, according to John Byrnes, a senior adviser for a conservative advocacy group called Concerned Veterans for America.

Ken Deery, a Charlotte resident whose Army career took him from Missouri to Germany in the 1980s, said he sought to defend the "American way" against the Soviet Union. That dream — affordable home ownership and education, for example — isn't possible nowadays, he said.

"We've got global wars starting up all over the place. Any one of these could blossom into a world war," said Deery, who described himself as libertarian. "And that's all on Biden's watch."

Biden supporters say they trust his administration more to navigate the wars in Russia and Gaza than Trump — who as president bucked tradition by currying favor with Russian President Vladimir Putin.

Liberal veterans also point to 2022 legislation that extended health care services to millions who served at military bases exposed to toxic "burn pits," but who had often seen their disability claims denied. Considered the largest expansion of benefits in three decades, the law added hypertension to the list of ailments presumably caused by exposure to chemicals used during the Vietnam War.

For Sandra Williams, who spent most of her five years with the Army in Georgia, it "means a lot" that Biden pushed that to the forefront. She said the law opened up medical services for several relatives.

Williams plans to back Biden and disagrees that Trump has the country's best interests at heart. She said the United States "almost turned into a laughingstock" and "lost our credibility" under Trump.

What's certain is that veterans do tend to vote. According to the Census Bureau, they cast ballots at rates 8 percentage points higher than non-veterans in the last presidential election.

Those votes should not be taken for granted, cautioned Allison Jaslow, CEO of Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans of America. In a survey of over 2,500 members, the non-partisan organization found that nearly three-fourths of respondents were dissatisfied with democracy.

Jaslow said veterans are so politically engaged because they want their sacrifices "to be worth it." She said some politicians claim they're "for the troops" but lack "the guts" to fully debate the cost of going to war.

"I think it's fair for the average veteran to feel like our service was taken for granted," she said.

North Korea threatens to take military moves in response to US-South Korean drills

By HYUNG-JIN KIM Associated Press

SEOUL, South Korea (AP) — North Korea called the ongoing South Korean-U.S. military drills a plot to invade the country, as it threatened Tuesday to take unspecified "responsible" military steps in response.

The North's warning came a day after the South Korean and U.S. forces kicked off their annual computer-simulated command post training and a variety of field exercises for an 11-day run. This year's drills were to involve 48 field exercises, twice the number conducted last year.

In a statement carried by state media, the North's Defense Ministry said it "strongly denounces the reckless military drills of the U.S. and (South Korea) for getting more undisguised in their military threat to a sovereign state and attempt for invading it."

An unidentified ministry spokesperson said North Korea's military will "continue to watch the adventurist acts of the enemies and conduct responsible military activities to strongly control the unstable security environment on the Korean Peninsula."

The spokesperson didn't say what measures North Korea would take, but observers say North Korea will likely carry out missile tests or other steps to bolster its war capability.

South Korea's Defense Ministry said later Tuesday that its drills with the United States is a regular, defensive training. A ministry statement said South Korea will make an overwhelming response if North Korea launches direct provocations against it during the drills.

North Korea views its rivals' major military drills as invasion rehearsals, though South Korean and U.S.

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officials have repeatedly said they have no intentions of attacking the North. North Korea has previously reacted to South Korean-U.S. exercises with launches of a barrage of missiles into the sea.

South Korea's Joint Chiefs of Staff said last week that this year's military drills with the United States were designed to neutralize North Korean nuclear threats and would involve live-firing, bombing, air assault and missile interception drills.

Concerns about North Korea's nuclear program have grown in the past two years, as the North has test-launched missiles at a record pace and openly threatened to use nuclear weapons preemptively. The U.S. and South Korea have expanded their military exercises and increased the deployment of powerful U.S. military assets like aircraft carriers and nuclear-capable bombers in response.

This year, North Korea performed six rounds of missile tests and artillery firing drills. North Korean leader Kim Jong Un also declared his country won't seek reconciliation with South Korea and vowed to scrap the country's long-running goal of peaceful unification with South Korea. Kim said North Korea would take a more aggressive military posture along the disputed sea boundary with South Korea.

Experts say North Korea could believe a bigger weapons arsenal would provide it with a greater leverage in future diplomacy with the United States. They say North Korea is desperate to win an international recognition as a nuclear state, a status that it would think helps it win relief of U.S.-led economic sanctions.

North Korea is expected to further dial up tensions with more missile tests and warlike rhetoric this year as the U.S. and South Korea head into major elections. North Korea may stage limited provocation near the tense border with South Korea this year, experts say.

Miami Beach is breaking up with spring break — or at least trying to

By DAVID FISCHER Associated Press

MIAMI BEACH, Fla. (AP) — Miami Beach is trying to break up with spring break, but it's not yet clear whether spring break will take the hint.

After three consecutive years of spring break violence, Miami Beach officials are implementing monthlong security measures aimed at curbing the chaos, including parking restrictions for non-residents and closing sidewalk cafes on busy weekends. The city has warned visitors to expect curfews, bag searches at the beach, early beach closures, DUI checkpoints, and arrests for drug possession and violence.

But business owners in the city's world-famous South Beach neighborhood are now concerned that they'll lose money during one of the busiest times of the year, and civil rights advocates say the restrictions are an overreaction to large Black crowds.

Many of the city's restrictions aren't new, but in past years, they were instituted as emergency measures during the unofficial holiday — not measures put in place ahead of time.

"The status quo and what we've seen in the last few years is just not acceptable, not tolerable," Miami Beach Mayor Steven Meiner said.

Meiner said crowds have become unmanageable despite a robust police presence. He said the city, which is situated on a barrier island across the bay from Miami, can only hold so many people, and that capacity has often exceeded what's safe for both visitors and residents during the break.

Most spring break activity centers around a 10-block stretch of Ocean Drive known for its art deco hotels, restaurants and nightclubs.

David Wallack, owner of Mango's Tropical Cafe, said Miami Beach has always thrived on celebration, and choking visitor access will turn the vibrant, eclectic city into a retirement community.

"I believe we need to create something big, another big event in March because March has fallen off the edge of the cliff," Wallack said.

Wallack and others have proposed a large music festival during the third week of spring break — when aimless and unruly crowds tend to reach their climax — with the hope that attendees will disperse the loitering mobs.

Meiner said the city has spent millions of dollars on concerts and other events in the past with little effect in mitigating the violence. He said businesses suffer when violent mobs gathering along Ocean

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Drive force them to close, adding that the people who are primarily causing the problems aren't spending money in the city anyway.

"They're not staying in the hotels," Meiner said. "They're not visiting our businesses."

Some civil rights advocates, however, believe the restrictions are racially motivated.

South Beach became popular among Black tourists about two decades ago as promoters organized Urban Beach Week during the Memorial Day weekend. Many locals have complained about violence and other crime associated with the event, which led to an increased police presence. But the event's continued popularity correlates to a bump in Black tourism throughout the year.

Stephen Hunter Johnson, an attorney and member of Miami-Dade's Black Affairs Advisory Board, said city officials are only cracking down so hard because many of the visitors are Black.

"Everybody loves this idea that they are free from their government intruding on them," Johnson said. "But amazingly, if the government intrudes on Black people, everyone's fine with it."

Miami Beach's mayor rejects the notion that the city's actions have anything to do with race.

"I have a moral obligation to keep people safe, and right now, it is not safe," Meiner said.

In the Florida Panhandle, the longtime spring break destination of Panama City Beach has experienced a similar escalation in violent crime, but Police Chief Eusebio Talamantez attributes that to people taking advantage of the environment, not actual college students on spring break.

"When you think of spring break, you might think of vacation, a collegiate break, maybe some fistfights and some keg stands," Talamantez said. "It has evolved into shootings, mass riots, rape and homicide."

Panama City Beach's violence came to a head in 2015 when a house party shooting left seven people wounded. The city subsequently banned alcohol on the beach and cracked down on unpermitted events, among other things. Local businesses sued the city later that year, claiming the new rules unfairly targeted events popular with Black visitors, but the lawsuit was dropped several months later.

Talamantez said the measures were somewhat successful, but a massive hurricane in late 2018 and COVID-19 lockdowns in 2020 disrupted the city's ability to manage crowds once pandemic restrictions were lifted, leading to a resurgence in the violence.

A renewed crackdown in 2023, however, led to a 44% reduction in crime, and the city is imposing similar rules this year. Talamantez said he doubts anything Miami Beach is doing will be more strict than the enforcement measures in Panama City Beach.

"We're just trying to create an environment that says loud and clear in big bold letters that we are a municipality of law and order," Talamantez said. "And law and order does not go away just because you're on spring break."

Vice President Harris hosts Israeli war Cabinet member as the US pushes to get more aid into Gaza

By AAMER MADHANI and SEUNG MIN KIM Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Vice President Kamala Harris met on Monday with a member of Israel's wartime Cabinet who came to Washington in defiance of Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu as the Biden administration intensifies its efforts to push more humanitarian aid into war-battered Gaza.

White House officials said Benny Gantz, a centrist political rival of Netanyahu, requested the meeting and that the Democratic administration believed it was important that Harris sit down with the prominent Israeli official despite Netanyahu's objections.

President Joe Biden, Harris and other senior administration officials have become increasingly blunt about their dissatisfaction with the mounting death toll in Gaza and the suffering of innocent Palestinians as the war nears the five-month mark.

"The president and I have been aligned and consistent from the very beginning," Harris said in an exchange with reporters shortly before meeting with Gantz. "Israel has a right to defend itself. Far too many Palestinian civilians, innocent civilians have been killed. We need to get more aid in, we need to get hostages out. and that remains our position."

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The White House, in a statement following the meeting, said Harris and Gantz discussed the urgency of completing a hostage deal to free more than 100 people believed still to be in captivity in Gaza following Hamas' Oct. 7 attack on Israel. She also reiterated the administration's support for a temporary extended cease-fire that would facilitate the release of hostages and allow for a surge of humanitarian assistance throughout Gaza.

Although Gantz holds many of the same hardline views as Netanyahu, he has been seen as more open to compromise on critical issues, including the increased delivery of humanitarian assistance.

The meeting comes after the U.S. on Saturday carried out the first of what are expected to be ongoing airdrops of humanitarian aid into Gaza.

The moment is reflective of the increasingly awkward dynamics in the U.S.-Israel relationship, with the U.S. forced to fly badly needed aid past its close ally as it looks to ramp up assistance for desperate civilians in Gaza. The first airdrop occurred just days after more than 100 Palestinians were killed as they were trying to get food from an Israel-organized convoy.

The White House agreed to the meeting with Gantz even as an official from Netanyahu's nationalist Likud party said Gantz did not have approval from the prime minister for his meetings in Washington. Netanyahu gave Gantz a "tough talk" about the visit — underscoring a widening crack within Israel's wartime leadership.

"We have been dealing with all members of the war Cabinet, including Mr. Gantz," White House national security spokesman John Kirby said. "We see this as a natural outgrowth of those discussions. We're not going to turn away that sort of opportunity."

In addition to his talks with Harris, Gantz met with White House national security adviser Jake Sullivan and National Security Council Middle East coordinator Brett McGurk. Gantz also met with Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell and on Tuesday will sit down with Secretary of State Antony Blinken.

Gantz, just before the start of his White House meetings, told a reporter with Israel's public broadcaster Kan: "There will be an open and honest conversation between two friendly and important countries and partners."

Biden is at Camp David, the presidential retreat just outside Washington, until Tuesday as he prepares to deliver the annual State of the Union address later this week.

Over the weekend, Harris issued a forceful call for a temporary cease-fire deal in Gaza, which administration officials say would halt fighting for at least six weeks. She also increased pressure on Israel not to impede the aid that workers are trying to get into the region. The White House has been advocating for that framework deal for weeks.

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.

Biden faces mounting political pressure at home over his administration's handling of the Israeli-Hamas war, which was triggered when militants in Gaza launched an attack, killing 1,200 people and taking about 250 people hostage.

In last week's Michigan presidential primary, more than 100,000 Democratic primary voters cast ballots for "uncommitted." Biden still easily won the state's primary, but the "uncommitted" vote reflected a coordinated push by voters on the left to register their dissatisfaction with the president's unwavering support for Israel as its military operations in Gaza have left more than 30,000 Palestinians dead. The vote totals raise concerns for Democrats in a state Biden won by only 154,000 votes in 2020.

Gantz, who polls show could be a formidable candidate for prime minister if a vote were held today, is viewed as a political moderate. But he has remained vague about his view of Palestinian statehood — something that Biden sees as essential to forging a lasting peace once the conflict ends but that Netanyahu adamantly opposes.

It is also assumed that when the heavy fighting subsides, Gantz will leave the government, which would increase pressure for early elections.

Since Gantz joined Netanyahu's three-minister war Cabinet in October, U.S. officials have found him to be easier to deal with than either Netanyahu or Defense Minister Yoav Gallant.

Until now, calls for elections have been muted due to the war, but analysts think that when Gantz leaves the government, it will send a signal to the Israeli public that the need for national unity has passed and efforts to oust Netanyahu's government can begin in earnest.

For his part, Gantz was aiming 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. Gantz is scheduled to head to London for meetings after his U.S. visit.

It was unclear if Gantz during his White House talks diverged from Netanyahu's stances on Palestinian statehood or carrying out an expanded operation in the southernmost Gaza city of Rafah. The Biden administration has repeatedly warned Israel against a Rafah operation without a plan to protect civilians, and the White House said Harris reiterated that position in her meeting with Gantz.

"I don't doubt there are some administration officials who believe just by meeting with Gantz they are undermining Netanyahu," said Richard Goldberg, a senior adviser at the Foundation for Defense of Democracies, a conservative Washington think tank. "But if Gantz carries the government's line on key issues of disagreement, these meetings are net-negative for the White House while helpful back home for Gantz."

Gangs in Haiti try to seize control of main airport in newest attack on key government sites

By EVENS SANON and PIERRE-RICHARD LUXAMA Associated Press

PORT-AU-PRINCE, Haiti (AP) — Heavily armed gangs tried to seize control of Haiti's main international airport on Monday, exchanging gunfire with police and soldiers in the latest attack on key government sites in an explosion of violence that includes a mass escape from the country's two biggest prisons.

The Toussaint Louverture International Airport was closed when the attack occurred, with no planes operating and no passengers on site.

Associated Press journalists saw an armored truck on the tarmac shooting at gangs to try and prevent them from entering airport grounds as scores of employees and other workers fled from whizzing bullets.

It wasn't immediately clear as of late Monday whether the attack, which was the biggest one in Haiti's history involving the airport, was successful.

Last week, the airport was struck briefly by bullets amid ongoing gang attacks, but gangs did not enter the airport nor seize control of it.

The attack occurred just hours after authorities in Haiti ordered a nighttime curfew following violence in which armed gang members overran the two biggest prisons and freed thousands of inmates over the weekend.

"The secretary-general is deeply concerned by the rapidly deteriorating security situation in Port-au-Prince, where armed gangs have intensified their attacks on critical infrastructure over the weekend," said U.N. spokesman Stephane Dujarric.

A 72-hour state of emergency began Sunday night. The government said it would try to track down the escaped inmates, including from a penitentiary where the vast majority were in pre-trial detention, with some accused of slayings, kidnappings and other crimes.

"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, the acting prime minister.

Gangs already were estimated to control up to 80% of Port-au-Prince, the capital. They are increasingly coordinating their actions and choosing once unthinkable targets like the Central Bank.

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

Dujarric said the secretary-general stressed the need for urgent action, especially in providing financial support for the mission, "to address the pressing security requirements of the Haitian people and prevent the country from plunging further into chaos."

Haiti's National Police has roughly 9,000 officers to provide security for more than 11 million people, ac-

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According to the U.N. They are routinely overwhelmed and outgunned.

The deadly weekend 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 international airport and national soccer stadium.

But the attack on the National Penitentiary late Saturday shocked Haitians. All but 98 of the 3,798 inmates being held at the penitentiary escaped, according to the Office of Citizen Protection. Meanwhile, at the Croix-des-Bouquets prison, 1,033 escaped, including 298 convicts.

The office said late Monday that it was seriously concerned about the safety of judges, prosecutors, victims, attorneys and others following the mass escape.

It added that it "deplored and condemned the policy of nonchalance" demonstrated by government officials amid the attacks.

Following the raid at the penitentiary, three bodies with gunshot wounds lay at the prison entrance Sunday.

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 people who chose to stay in prison are 18 former Colombian soldiers accused of working as mercenaries in the July 2021 assassination of Haitian President Jovenel Moïse.

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

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

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

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

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. On Sunday night, it urged all American citizens to depart as soon as possible.

The Biden administration, which has refused to commit troops to any multinational force for Haiti while offering 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 the proposed U.N.-backed security mission to be led by that East African country.

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

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

UN envoy says 'reasonable grounds' to believe Hamas committed sexual violence on Oct. 7

By EDITH M. LEDERER Associated Press

UNITED NATIONS (AP) — The U.N. envoy focusing on sexual violence in conflict said in a new report Monday that there are "reasonable grounds" to believe Hamas committed rape, "sexualized torture," and other cruel and inhumane treatment of women during its surprise attack in southern Israel on Oct. 7.

There are also "reasonable grounds to believe that such violence may be ongoing," said Pramila Patten, who visited Israel and the West Bank from Jan. 29 to Feb. 14 with a nine-member technical team.

Based on first-hand accounts of released hostages, she said the team "found clear and convincing information" that some women and children during their captivity were subjected to the same conflict-related

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sexual violence including rape and “sexualized torture.”

The report comes nearly five months after the Oct. 7 attacks, which left about 1,200 people dead and some 250 others taken hostage. Israel’s war against Hamas has since laid waste to the Gaza Strip, killing more than 30,000 people, according to Gaza’s Health Ministry. The U.N. says a quarter of Gaza’s 2.3 million people face starvation.

Hamas has rejected earlier allegations that its fighters committed sexual assault.

Patten stressed at a press conference launching the report that the team’s visit was not to investigate allegations of sexual violence but to gather, analyze and verify information for Secretary-General Antonio Guterres’ annual report on sexual violence in conflict and for the U.N. Security Council.

Her key recommendation is to encourage Israel to grant access to the U.N. human rights chief and the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Palestinian territories and Israel “to carry out full-fledged investigations into the alleged violations” — and she expressed hope the Security Council would do this.

Patten said the team was not able to meet with any victims of sexual violence “despite concerted efforts to encourage them to come forward.” While the number of victims remains unknown, she said, “a small number of those who are undergoing treatment are reportedly experiencing severe mental distress and trauma.”

However, team members held 33 meetings with Israeli institutions and conducted interviews with 34 people including survivors and witnesses of the Oct. 7 attacks, released hostages, health providers and others.

Based on the information it gathered, Patten said, “there are reasonable grounds to believe that conflict-related sexual violence occurred during the 7 October attacks in multiple locations across Gaza periphery, including rape and gang rape, in at least three locations.”

Across various locations, she said, the team found “that several fully naked or partially naked bodies from the waist down were recovered – mostly women – with hands tied and shot multiple times, often in the head.”

While this is circumstantial, she said the pattern of undressing and restraining victims “may be indicative of some forms of sexual violence.”

At the Nova music festival and its surroundings, Patten said, “there are reasonable grounds to believe that multiple incidents of sexual violence took place with victims being subjected to rape and/or gang rape and then killed or killed while being raped.”

“There are further accounts of individuals who witnessed at least two incidents of rape of corpses of women,” Patten said. “Other credible sources at the Nova music festival site described seeing multiple murdered individuals, mostly women, whose bodies were found naked from the waist down, some totally naked,” some shot in the head, some tied to trees or poles with their hands bound.

On Road 232 — the road to leave the festival — “credible information based on witness accounts describe an incident of the rape of two women by armed elements,” Patten said. Other reported rapes and gang rapes couldn’t be verified and require investigation.

“Along this road, several bodies were found with genital injuries, along with injuries to other body parts,” she said. “Discernible patterns of genital mutilation could not be verified at this time but warrant future investigation.”

She said “the mission team also found a pattern of bound naked or partially naked bodies from the waist down, in some cases tied to structures including trees and poles, along Road 232.”

People fleeing the Nova music festival also attempted to escape south and sought shelter in and around kibbutz Reim where Patten said there are “reasonable grounds” to believe sexual violence occurred.

The mission team verified the rape of a woman outside a bomb shelter and heard of other allegations of rape that could not yet be verified.

At Kibbutz Be’eri, Patten said, her team “was able to determine that at least two allegations of sexual violence widely repeated in the media, were unfounded due to either new superseding information or inconsistency in the facts gathered.”

These included a highly publicized allegation that a pregnant woman's womb was reportedly ripped open before being killed with her fetus stabbed inside her, Patten said.

Another was "the interpretation initially made of the body of a girl found separated from the rest of her family, naked from the waist down," she said. "It was determined by the mission team that the crime scene had been altered by a bomb squad and the bodies moved, explaining the separation of the body of the girl from the rest of her family."

Patten said further investigation is needed of allegations, including of bodies found naked and in one case gagged, at kibbutz Be'eri to determine if sexual violence occurred.

At Kibbutz Kfar Aza, Patten said, verification of sexual violence was not possible. But she said "available circumstantial information – notably the recurring pattern of female victims found undressed, bound, and shot – indicates that sexual violence, including potential sexualized torture, or cruel, inhuman and degrading treatment, may have occurred."

Patten stressed that "the true prevalence of sexual violence during the Oct. 7 attacks and their aftermath may take months or years to emerge and may never be fully known."

Patten said the team, which also visited the West Bank, received information from institutional and civil society sources as well as through interviews "about some forms of sexual violence against Palestinian men and women in detention settings, during house raids and at checkpoints."

The head of the U.N. agency for Palestinian refugees on Monday said hundreds of Palestinians detained by Israel after Oct. 7 attacks have reported a broad range of ill-treatment from having pictures taken of them naked to being threatened with electrocution.

Phillipe Lazzarini told a news conference his agency, known as UNRWA, had put together an unpublished internal report based on information from detainees returning to Gaza "completely traumatized by the ordeal."

He said some had been detained for a couple of weeks, some for several months.

"We heard stories of people not only having been systematically humiliated," the UNRWA commissioner general said. "People have been being obliged to be pictured naked."

Donald Trump wins North Dakota Republican caucuses, adding to victories going into Super Tuesday

By JACK DURA Associated Press

BISMARCK, N.D. (AP) — Donald Trump won the North Dakota Republican presidential caucuses on Monday, adding to his string of victories heading into Super Tuesday.

The former president finished first in voting conducted at 12 caucus sites, ahead of former U.N. Ambassador Nikki Haley. The result puts Trump back on the winning track, which was briefly interrupted on Sunday when Haley notched her first victory of the campaign in the District of Columbia's primary.

The White House hopefuls now turn their attention to Super Tuesday, when results will pour in from 16 states and one territory in contests that amount to the single biggest delegate haul of any day in the presidential primary. Trump and President Joe Biden, a Democrat, are dominating their races and are on track to winning their nominations later this month.

Under North Dakota's rules, candidates are eligible to win delegates if they finish with at least 20% of the vote. However, a candidate who wins at least 60% of the vote receives all of the state's 29 delegates.

Four candidates were on the ballot, including Trump and Nikki Haley. The other candidates, who have received little attention, were Florida businessman David Stuckenberg and Texas businessman and pastor Ryan Binkley, who recently ended his campaign.

North Dakota Gov. Doug Burgum, who ended his unsuccessful presidential campaign in December, was speaking on Trump's behalf Monday night. He endorsed Trump before the Iowa caucuses.

"I think we're going to send a message that is going to be a kickoff to tomorrow, which is President Donald Trump is going to close this out, this is going to be the end of the trail, and we're going to say we

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have a nominee, and let's go after it, and beat Joe Biden in the fall," Burgum said in a virtual address to caucusgoers.

Retired music teacher and librarian Karen Groninger, of Almont, said Monday that she voted for Trump, calling him the best choice. The 76-year-old cited Trump's 2020 speech at the annual March for Life anti-abortion event in Washington, D.C. — the first by a sitting president — and his border policies.

Longtime Republican state Sen. Dick Dever, of Bismarck, said he voted for Haley, but added she was unlikely to win. The retired factory representative, 72, said, "I hear an awful lot of people say that they really liked Trump's policies but they don't like the way he conducts himself, and I think he's gone overboard a bit."

Caucus voters were encouraged to be paying party members, but those who wouldn't pay \$50 for annual membership were asked to sign a pledge to affiliate with the party, caucus Chair Robert Harms said.

North Dakota is the only state without voter registration. The caucuses followed official state voter identification protocols, such as providing a driver's license. Voting was done only in person and on printed ballots, which were hand-counted.

In 2016, it was a North Dakota delegate who helped Trump secure the number needed for the Republican presidential nomination.

He swept North Dakota's three electoral college votes in 2016 and 2020, winning about 63% and 65% of those votes, respectively.

As president, Trump visited Bismarck and Mandan in 2017 to talk about tax cuts, and he campaigned twice in Fargo in 2018 for Republican Kevin Cramer in the then-congressman's successful Senate bid against Democratic Sen. Heidi Heitkamp.

North Dakota's Democratic-NPL Party is holding a presidential primary almost entirely by mail, with mail-in voting from Feb. 20 to March 30, and limited in-person voting for residents of Indian reservations. Biden, Rep. Dean Phillips and six others are on the ballot.

A third party will count ballots in Fargo on March 30, with results available on the party's website afterward. Sen. Bernie Sanders won the Democratic caucuses in 2016 and 2020.

Supreme Court temporarily blocks Texas law that allows police to arrest migrants

By ACACIA CORONADO and LINDSAY WHITEHURST Associated Press

AUSTIN, Texas (AP) — Texas' plans to arrest migrants who enter the U.S. illegally and order them to leave the country is headed to the Supreme Court in a legal showdown over the federal government's authority over immigration.

An order issued Monday by Justice Samuel Alito puts the new Texas law on hold for at least next week while the high court considers what opponents have called the most dramatic attempt by a state to police immigration since an Arizona law more than a decade ago.

The law, known as Senate Bill 4, had been set to take effect Saturday under a decision by the conservative-leaning 5th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals. Alito's order pushed that date back until March 13 and came just hours after the Justice Department asked the Supreme Court to intervene.

"Make no mistake: S.B. 4 bypasses federal immigration authority and threatens the integrity of our nation's constitution and laws," a coalition of groups that sued over the law, including the American Civil Liberties Union, said in a statement.

Republican Gov. Greg Abbott signed the law in December as part of a series of escalating measures on the border that have tested the boundaries of how far a state can go to keep migrants from entering the country.

The law would allow state officers to arrest people suspected of entering the country illegally. People who are arrested could then agree to a Texas judge's order to leave the country or face a misdemeanor charge for entering the U.S. illegally. Migrants who don't leave after being ordered to do so could be arrested again and charged with a more serious felony.

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The Justice Department told the Supreme Court that the law would profoundly alter “the status quo that has existed between the United States and the States in the context of immigration for almost 150 years.” It went on to argue that the law would have “significant and immediate adverse effects” on the country’s relationship with Mexico and “create chaos” in enforcing federal immigration laws in Texas.

The federal government cited a 2012 Supreme Court ruling on an Arizona law that would have allowed police to arrest people for federal immigration violations, often referred to by opponents as the “show me your papers” bill. The divided high court found that the impasse in Washington over immigration reform did not justify state intrusion.

The Supreme Court gave Texas until March 11 to respond.

In a statement Monday, the Texas Attorney General’s Office said the state’s law mirrored federal law and “was adopted to address the ongoing crisis at the southern border, which hurts Texans more than anyone else.”

The federal government’s emergency request to the Supreme Court came after a federal appeals court over the weekend stayed U.S. District Judge David Ezra’s sweeping rejection of the law.

In a 114-page ruling Thursday, Ezra rebuked Texas’ immigration enforcement and brushed off claims by Republicans about an ongoing “invasion” along the southern border due to record-high illegal crossings.

Ezra added that the law violates the U.S. Constitution’s supremacy clause, conflicts with federal immigration law and could get in the way of U.S. foreign relations and treaty obligations.

According to Ezra’s ruling, allowing Texas to supersede federal law due to an “invasion” would “amount to nullification of federal law and authority — a notion that is antithetical to the Constitution and has been unequivocally rejected by federal courts since the Civil War.”

Republicans who back the law have said it would not target immigrants already living in the U.S. because the two-year statute of limitations on the illegal entry charge would be enforced only along the state’s border with Mexico.

Texas has been arresting migrants for years under a different program that is based on criminal trespass arrests.

Though Ezra said some might sympathize with Texas officials’ concerns about immigration enforcement by the federal government, he said that was not enough to excuse a violation of the U.S. Constitution.

The battle over the Texas immigration law is one of multiple legal disputes between Texas officials and the Biden administration over how far the state can go to patrol the Texas-Mexico border and prevent illegal border crossings.

Several Republican governors have backed Abbott’s efforts, saying the federal government is not doing enough to enforce existing immigration laws.

Some of Abbott’s attempts to impede illegal border crossings have included a floating barrier in the Rio Grande — which Ezra previously blocked and is part of an ongoing legal battle— and placing razor wire along the state’s boundary with Mexico. State guard officers have also blocked U.S. Border Patrol agents from accessing a riverfront park in Eagle Pass that was previously used by federal agents to process migrants.

___ Whitehurst reported from Washington.

Immigration judges union, a frequent critic, is told to get approval before speaking publicly

By ELLIOT SPAGAT Associated Press

SAN DIEGO (AP) — A 53-year-old union of immigration judges has been ordered to get supervisor approval to speak publicly to anyone outside the Justice Department, potentially quieting a frequent critic of heavily backlogged immigration courts in an election year.

The National Association of Immigration Judges has spoken regularly at public forums, in interviews with reporters and with congressional staff, often to criticize how courts are run. It has advocated for more independence and free legal representation. The National Press Club invited its leaders to a news conference about “the pressures of the migrant crisis on the federal immigration court system.”

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The Feb. 15 order requires Justice Department approval "to participate in writing engagements (e.g., articles; blogs) and speaking engagements (e.g., speeches; panel discussions; interviews)." Sheila McNulty, the chief immigration judge, referred to a 2020 decision by the Federal Labor Relations Authority to strip the union of collective bargaining power and said its earlier rights were "not valid at present."

The order prohibits speaking to Congress, news media and professional forums without approval, said Matt Biggs, president of the International Federation of Professional & Technical Engineers, an umbrella organization that includes the judges' union. He said the order contradicted President Joe Biden's "union-friendly" position and vowed to fight it.

"It's outrageous, it's un-American," said Biggs. "Why are they trying to silence these judges?"

The Justice Department and its Executive Office for Immigration Review, as the courts are called, did not immediately respond to requests for comments on McNulty's order, which was addressed to union leaders Mimi Tsankov and Samuel B. Cole.

Tsankov, the union president and a judge in New York, declined comment, saying a recent policy change prevented her from speaking to the media or anyone outside the Justice Department unless she sticks to approved "talking points." Cole, the union's executive vice president and a judge in Chicago, said McNulty's order "bars me from speaking to you about this" without approval.

News organizations including The Associated Press have frequently sought comment from the judges union for stories on how the courts operate. Unlike civil or criminal courts, case files are not public and immigrants can close many hearings to the public to protect privacy. The courts are part of the Justice Department.

An exploding backlog that tops 3 million cases has judges taking five to seven years to decide cases, a potential incentive for people with weak asylum claims who can obtain work permits while waiting for decisions.

The Trump administration stripped the judges union of collective bargaining rights it won in 1979, eight years after it was founded. The Trump administration clashed with the union, which sought more independence and resisted a since-rescinded target for each judge to finish 700 cases a year.

The union hopes to regain bargaining rights from the federal board, said Biggs, whose organization has continued to advocate on its behalf. "We have not missed a beat representing them and that will continue," he said.

McNulty, a career government official who became chief judge last year and oversees about 600 judges in 68 locations, indicated her order was a response to "recent awareness of your public engagements," without elaborating.

Tsankov testified at a Senate hearing in October and speaks regularly with reporters. She was scheduled to appear with Cole at a National Press Club news conference in October, which was postponed.

Russell Dye, spokesperson for the House Judiciary Committee's Republican chair, Rep. Jim Jordan, said the Justice Department "is now censoring immigration judges because the Biden Administration doesn't want the American people to know about its gross mismanagement of the U.S. immigration court system." He said the administration "chose to try to restrict the free speech of immigration judges."

The Latest | UN report says there's credible evidence of sexual violence during Oct. 7 Hamas attack

By The Associated Press undefined

A United Nations report has found credible allegations that sexual assaults took place during the Oct. 7 Hamas attack on southern Israel.

A team led by the U.N. special envoy for sexual violence in conflict, Pramila Patten, found "reasonable grounds" to believe Hamas committed rape and "sexualized torture." Patten presented the report Monday at the United Nations.

The U.N. team did not meet with any victims of sexual violence "despite concerted efforts to encourage them to come forward," and Patten said much of the evidence was circumstantial. The team conducted

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interviews with survivors and witnesses of the Oct. 7 attacks, released hostages, health providers and others, Patten said.

The report comes nearly five months after the Oct. 7 attacks, which left about 1,200 people dead and some 250 others taken hostage.

Israel's war against Hamas has since laid waste to the Gaza Strip, killing more than 30,000 people, according to Gaza's Health Ministry. The U.N. says a quarter of Gaza's 2.3 million population faces starvation.

A top member of Israel's wartime Cabinet has been meeting with U.S. officials in Washington while talks are underway in Egypt to broker a cease-fire in Gaza before the Muslim holy month of Ramadan begins next week.

Currently:

- Israel escalates its criticism of a U.N. agency in Gaza. It says 450 of its workers are militants.
- Netanyahu leaned on his top rival to help unify Israel. Now, Benny Gantz is more popular.
- A 4-year-old Gaza boy lost his arm – and his family. Half a world away, he's getting a second chance.
- Strikes along Israel-Lebanon border kill 4 people as U.S. envoy visits Beirut to press a cease-fire.
- Find more of AP's coverage at <https://apnews.com/hub/israel-hamas-war>.

Here's the latest:

UNRWA SAYS HUNDREDS OF PALESTINIANS DETAINED BY ISRAEL REPORT MISTREATMENT

UNITED NATIONS – Hundreds of Palestinians detained by Israel after Hamas' surprise Oct. 7 attacks have reported a broad range of ill-treatment from having pictures taken of them naked to being threatened with electrocution, the head of the U.N. agency for Palestinian refugees said Monday.

Phillipe Lazzarini told a news conference his agency, known as UNRWA, had put together an unpublished internal report based on information from detainees returning to Gaza "completely traumatized by the ordeal."

He said some had been detained for a couple of weeks, some for several months, and UNRWA provided them with food, dignity kits and clothes and debriefed them on their experiences.

"We heard stories of people not only having been systematically humiliated," the UNRWA commissioner general said. "People have been being obliged to be pictured naked,"

Lazzarini said they have also been subjected to verbal and psychological abuse, there has been "a threat of use of electrocution," as well as "a lot of sleep deprivation or use of extreme noise to prevent people to sleep."

The New York Times, which first reported the story, said the detainees included men and women aged 6 to 82. It quoted the report as saying some detainees died in detention.

U.N. ENVOY SAYS 'REASONABLE GROUNDS' TO BELIEVE HAMAS RAPED WOMEN ON OCT. 7

UNITED NATIONS – The U.N. envoy focusing on sexual violence in conflict says there are "reasonable grounds" to believe Hamas committed rape, "sexualized torture," and other cruel and inhuman treatment of women during its surprise attack in southern Israel on Oct. 7.

There are also "reasonable grounds to believe that such violence may be ongoing," said Pramila Patten, who visited Israel and the West Bank from Jan. 29 to Feb. 14 with a nine-member team.

In a report released Monday, she said the team "found clear and convincing information" that some hostages have been subjected to the same forms of conflict-related sexual violence including rape and "sexualized torture."

Patten's report said the team's visit "was neither intended nor mandated to be investigative in nature." While team members held 33 meetings with Israeli institutions and conducted interview with 34 people including survivors and witnesses of the Oct. 7 attacks, released hostages, health providers and others, she said it was not able to meet with any victims of sexual violence "despite concerted efforts to encourage them to come forward."

Based on the information it gathered, Patten said, "there are reasonable grounds to believe that conflict-related sexual violence occurred during the 7 October attacks in multiple locations across Gaza periphery, including rape and gang rape, in at least three locations." She named the Nova Music Festival, Route 232,

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the key route from the festival and kibbutz Reim.

Across various locations, she said, the team found "that several fully naked or partially naked bodies from the waist down were recovered – mostly women – with hands tied and shot multiple times, often in the head."

ISRAEL SAYS 450 UNRWA EMPLOYEES ARE MEMBERS OF MILITANT GROUPS IN GAZA

JERUSALEM — Israel ramped up its criticism of the embattled U.N. agency for Palestinian refugees Monday, saying 450 employees of UNRWA were members of militant groups in the Gaza Strip, though it provided no evidence to back up its accusation.

Major funders have withheld hundreds of millions of dollars from the agency since Israel accused 12 of its employees of participating in the Oct. 7 Hamas attacks on Israel that killed 1,200 people and left about 250 others hostage in Gaza, according to Israeli authorities.

UNRWA, which employs roughly 13,000 people in Gaza, is the biggest aid provider in Gaza.

The accusations Monday were a significant escalation in the attacks on the agency. Rear Adm. Daniel Hagari, Israel's chief military spokesperson, did not provide names or other evidence to back up the vastly increased number of UNRWA employees it said were militants.

"Over 450 UNRWA employees are military operatives in terror groups in Gaza — 450. This is no mere coincidence. This is systematic. There is no claiming, we did not know," Hagari said.

Juliette Touma, director of communications for UNRWA, had no direct comment on the Israeli allegations.

"UNRWA encourages any entity that has any information on the very serious allegations against UNRWA staff to share it with the ongoing U.N. investigation," she said.

ISRAELI STRIKES IN LEBANON KILL 3 HEZBOLLAH MEDICS

BEIRUT — Lebanon's state media says an Israeli airstrike in southern Lebanon killed three paramedics from the health arm of the militant group Hezbollah.

The strike Monday afternoon hit the office of Hezbollah's Islamic Health Society in the Lebanese border village of Odaisseh.

The attack came hours after a missile strike blamed on the militants in Lebanon killed at least one foreign worker and wounded others in northern Israel.

The deadly violence Monday came as a senior U.S. envoy visited Beirut and warned that a Gaza truce wouldn't necessarily apply to conflict along the Lebanon-Israel border. Amos Hochstein urged the parties to reach a lasting cease-fire at the border following meetings Monday with Lebanese leaders.

Since the Israel-Hamas war started, Hezbollah has been exchanging fire with Israel almost daily, displacing thousands of people and spiking fear that the conflict may spread through the region. In northern Israel, 60,000 people have evacuated, the Israeli government says.

Since the Israel-Hamas war began, more than 215 Hezbollah fighters and nearly 40 civilians were killed on the Lebanese side while in Israel, nine soldiers and 10 civilians were killed in the attacks.

UNITED STATES FACES BACKLASH AT U.N. FOR VETOING CEASE-FIRE

UNITED NATIONS – The United States is facing intense criticism for its veto of a U.N. Security Council resolution demanding an immediate cease-fire in Gaza, with many countries pointing to 2.2 million Palestinians in desperate need of food and children dying of starvation.

Under a General Assembly resolution adopted in 2022, any country that vetoes a resolution has to explain why. U.S. deputy ambassador Robert Wood told the 193-member world body the United States does not believe the resolution "would have resulted in a cease-fire" – and could disrupt ongoing negotiations for a temporary cease-fire.

He said the U.S. is continuing to negotiate on its proposed resolution for a temporary cease-fire, release of hostages taken during Hamas' Oct. 7 attack in southern Israel, and spurring humanitarian aid to Gaza.

It would also condemn Hamas for the "horrific attacks," something the U.N. has not done, which Israel's U.N. Ambassador Gilad Erdan decried along with the U.N.'s failure to condemn alleged sexual violence against women during its invasion. Erdan showed the assembly brief videos from released hostages, first responders and law enforcement officials and asked, "What if these were your daughters, your grand-

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daughters? Would you continue to ignore them or would you demand immediate action?"

Riyad Mansour, the Palestinian U.N. ambassador, accused Israel of committing war crimes and crimes against humanity against the Palestinian people, saying "Israel has unleashed death against 2.3 million Palestinians under multiple forms – indiscriminate bombing, summary executions, disease dehydration and starvation."

Mansour spoke of two Palestinian children he named who died of malnutrition, one just two months old who died Monday. "Look at our children, look at yours, and look what agony they are enduring," he said, his voice breaking. "This has to stop, for God's sake."

He said Israel must be held accountable and asked every country and its workers not to load ships and planes with weapons and ammunition going to Israel. And he said "the entire enterprise of settlements and settlers should be sanctioned -- don't allow a single one of them to get a visa to visit any of your countries."

Assembly President Dennis Francis, who opened the meeting which has about 75 countries scheduled to speak, called the situation in Gaza, "Catastrophic! Unconscionable! Shameful!" He reiterated the demand by the assembly — where there are no vetoes — for an immediate humanitarian cease-fire.

BELGIUM JOINS AID AIRDROP EFFORTS FOR GAZA

BRUSSELS — Belgium has decided to airdrop aid into Gaza and dispatched a military transport plane on Monday to begin delivering emergency support, after U.S. cargo aircraft dropped food over the weekend.

The foreign ministry said that "due to the difficulties of access and the complex situation on the ground, the Belgian government has approved an airdrop operation for emergency aid."

Belgian Defense Minister Ludivine Dedonder in a post on X, formerly Twitter, said "40 military personnel will be deployed to carry out several drops in the coming days."

The A400M transport plane was due to travel first to Jordan, which is coordinating efforts to supply aid by air, and from there be used to drop food and "hygiene products" into Gaza.

Since the war began, Israel has barred entry of food, water, medicine and other supplies, except for a trickle of aid entering the south from Egypt at the Rafah crossing and Israel's Kerem Shalom crossing.

The U.N. says a quarter of Gaza's 2.3 million people face starvation. Aid officials have said that airdrops are not an efficient means of distributing aid and are a measure of last resort.

3 RED SEA UNDERWATER DATA CABLES CUT AS HOUSHI ATTACKS CONTINUE

DUBAI, United Arab Emirates — Three underwater sea cables providing internet and telecommunications around the world have been cut in the Red Sea as the waterway remains a target of Yemen's Houthi rebels, officials said Monday.

A statement by Hong Kong-based HGC Global Communications acknowledged the cuts but did not say what caused the lines to be severed.

There has been concern about the cables being targeted in the Houthi campaign, which the rebels describe as an effort to pressure Israel to end its war on Hamas in the Gaza Strip. The Houthis have denied attacking the cables.

HGC Global Communications said the cuts had affected 25% of the traffic flowing through the Red Sea. It described the Red Sea route as crucial for data moving from Asia onward to Europe and said it had begun rerouting traffic.

PALESTINIANS SAY A 16-YEAR-OLD WAS KILLED IN WEST BANK

RAMALLAH, West Bank — The Palestinian Health Ministry says Israeli forces killed a 16-year-old in the West Bank, the second Palestinian minor to be killed in the occupied territory in recent days.

The Israeli military said security forces conducting a six-hour operation in Ramallah opened fire after Palestinians hurled rocks and firebombs at them. It said a female member of Israel's paramilitary Border Police was lightly wounded.

The Palestinian Health Ministry identified the deceased as Mustafa Abu Shalbak. On Saturday, Mohammed Zeid, 13, was shot dead by Israeli forces north of Ramallah, according to the ministry. The army said its forces opened fire after someone tried to throw a firebomb at them.

Violence has surged in the Israeli-occupied West Bank since the Oct. 7 Hamas attack that sparked the

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war in Gaza. Israeli forces have carried out near-nightly arrest raids that often set off violent confrontations. The Health Ministry says 420 Palestinians have been killed in the West Bank since the start of the war.

Israel captured the West Bank, Gaza and east Jerusalem in the 1967 Mideast war. The Palestinians want all three territories for their future state.

HAMAS CALLS ON PALESTINIANS TO RISE UP DURING RAMADAN

BEIRUT — Hamas is calling on Palestinians in Israel and the West Bank to rise up against Israel during the upcoming Muslim holy month of Ramadan.

Hamas spokesman Osama Hamdan, speaking to reporters in Beirut on Monday, said Palestinians should “make every moment of Ramadan a confrontation.”

The U.S., Qatar and Egypt have been trying for weeks to broker a cease-fire between Israel and Hamas in Gaza and to convince the militant group to release some of the scores of hostages it is still holding from the Oct. 7 attack that sparked the war.

The mediators hope to broker a truce before Ramadan, which is expected to begin around March 10.

The month of dawn-to-dusk fasting is a time of heightened prayer, reflection and charity for Muslims around the world, but Israeli-Palestinian tensions often spike over access to a major holy site in Jerusalem.

Hamas has repeatedly called for a broader uprising in the occupied West Bank, where violence has surged since the start of the war, and among Israel’s own Palestinian minority.

Hamdan did not provide any specifics about the ongoing cease-fire negotiations. Addressing his remarks to Israel and its top ally, the United States, he said: “What they have not gained in the battlefield, they will not gain through political machinations.”

The war began when Hamas-led militants broke through Israel’s defenses on Oct. 7 and stormed into several communities near Gaza, killing some 1,200 people, mostly civilians, and abducting around 250 hostages. Hamas freed over 100 hostages during a weeklong November cease-fire in exchange for the release of 240 Palestinian prisoners.

Gaza’s Health Ministry says the war has killed over 30,000 Palestinians. Around 80% of Gaza’s population of 2.3 million have been driven from their homes.

A FOREIGN WORKER IS KILLED IN MISSILE FIRE FROM LEBANON

KIRYAT SHMONA, Israel — Israeli rescuers say a foreign worker was killed and several others wounded by an anti-tank missile fired from Lebanon.

The Magen David Adom rescue service said Monday it was treating seven people, including two in serious condition. Associated Press reporters saw the Israeli army transporting several Thai workers, some limping and bleeding, to ambulances near the northern Israeli town of Kiryat Shmona.

According to the Hotline for Refugees and Migrants, an Israeli advocacy group, the man who was killed was from India. It said Israel was not doing enough to protect migrant workers hired for agricultural work in border areas under fire.

Israel and Lebanon’s Hezbollah militant group have traded fire nearly every day since the start of the war in Gaza. Hezbollah, an ally of Hamas, says it is trying to pin down Israeli forces in the north to aid the Palestinian group.

Hezbollah did not immediately claim responsibility for Monday’s strike.

The Lebanese group said in statements Monday that it had stopped two attempts by Israeli forces to cross into Lebanese territory overnight and that it had launched an artillery attack on an Israeli barracks.

Also on Monday, U.S. envoy Amos Hochstein arrived in Beirut to meet with Lebanese officials in an attempt to tamp down tensions.

The near-daily clashes between Hezbollah and Israeli forces have killed more than 200 Hezbollah fighters and at least 37 civilians in Lebanon. Around 20 people have been killed on the Israeli side, including civilians and soldiers.

Tens of thousands of people on both sides of the border have been forced to flee their homes because of the ongoing fighting. Israel has vowed to continue attacking Hezbollah, even if there is a cease-fire in Gaza, in order to push its fighters away from the border.

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Farm workers from Asian countries have flocked to Israel in recent years, drawn by higher wages. Several foreign workers were among those killed and abducted in Hamas' Oct. 7 attack out of Gaza, which triggered the war.

AP Decision Notes:

What to expect in Super Tuesday's presidential nominating contests

By ROBERT YOON Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — With contests in 16 states and American Samoa, the Super Tuesday primaries will be the largest day of voting of the year outside of the November election. Just how "super" it is may be a matter of perspective.

Both Democratic President Joe Biden and Republican front-runner Donald Trump hope to amass a string of lopsided victories that will help them move beyond the primaries and focus on their expected general election rematch. On the other hand, Nikki Haley faces a tough slate of contests mostly in the types of reliably Republican-voting states where she has struggled to win support or in states where party rules heavily favor the former president.

Super Tuesday has the largest delegate haul of any day in the primary calendar, representing more than one-third of the total delegates available in each party's nomination process and more than 70% of the delegates needed to mathematically clinch either party's nomination. Neither Trump nor Biden will be able to claim the title of "presumptive nominee" on Super Tuesday. The earliest that could happen is March 12 for Trump and March 19 for Biden. Trump would need to win about 90% of the nearly 1,100 delegates at stake through March 12 in order to clinch the nomination that day. Biden would need to win about 77% of the nearly 2,300 delegates at stake through March 19 to ensure his nomination by that date.

Alabama, Arkansas, California, North Carolina and Texas will hold state primaries on Tuesday. Among the most notable down-ballot races is the one in California to succeed the late Democratic Sen. Dianne Feinstein. Vying to replace her are Democratic Reps. Barbara Lee, Katie Porter and Adam Schiff and Republican Steve Garvey, a former baseball star. Vote-counting in California is famously slow. It's not unusual for only about half of the vote to be counted by the morning after the election.

Super Tuesday at a glance:

DECISION NOTES

The Associated Press will declare winners in presidential and state primaries on Super Tuesday only when it's determined there is no scenario that would allow the trailing candidates to close the gap. If a race has not been called, the AP will continue to cover any newsworthy developments, such as candidate concessions or declarations of victory. In doing so, the AP will make clear that it has not yet declared a winner and explain why.

In the presidential contests, Biden and Trump have dominated their respective races for the nomination. Biden has won every contest so far by wide margins. His closest race was in New Hampshire, where he skipped the primary but still won by more than 40 percentage points when supporters mounted a write-in effort on his behalf. In Michigan, where a protest vote resulted in "Uncommitted" winning two delegates, Biden still received more than 81% of the statewide vote. Trump has won seven of the eight contests in which he and Haley both appeared on the ballot. His 11-point win in New Hampshire was the narrowest of his victories.

Haley has performed best in Democratic-leaning areas, as evidenced by her win in the Washington, D.C., primary on Sunday, her first of the campaign. Outside the Beltway, she has also benefited from independents and Democrats participating in Republican primaries, suggesting that her strongest performances could come in places with open primaries, which are not limited to participation by registered Republicans.

In noncompetitive contests, the AP may in some cases be able to determine the winners relatively quickly based on the first vote returns of the night. Factors include the size of the lead in those initial returns, backed by an AP analysis of historical vote returns to determine how different those updates can be from final results.

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Other factors include fundraising and ad spending, the type of contest and who is allowed to participate, the state's voting history and political geography and, in some cases, publicly available early voting data showing how many pre-Election Day votes were cast and from what areas. Once the polls have closed, if initial vote results received from key locations throughout the state confirm that the frontrunner or expected winner is indeed ahead by an overwhelming margin, the AP may declare a winner in that contest.

SUPER TUESDAY DELEGATES AT STAKE

Democrats: 1,420

Republicans: 854

DEMOCRATIC PRESIDENTIAL CONTESTS (16)

STATE-RUN PRIMARIES (14): Alabama, Arkansas, California, Colorado, Maine, Massachusetts, Minnesota, North Carolina, Oklahoma, Tennessee, Texas, Utah, Vermont, Virginia

PARTY-RUN PRESIDENTIAL PREFERENCE VOTES AND CAUCUSES (2): Iowa, American Samoa

REPUBLICAN PRESIDENTIAL CONTESTS (15)

STATE-RUN PRIMARIES (13): Alabama, Arkansas, California, Colorado, Maine, Massachusetts, Minnesota, North Carolina, Oklahoma, Tennessee, Texas, Vermont, Virginia

PARTY-RUN PRESIDENTIAL PREFERENCE VOTES AND CAUCUSES (2): Alaska Caucuses, Utah Caucuses

STATES WITH PRIMARIES FOR STATE & LOCAL OFFICES (5)

Alabama, Arkansas, California, North Carolina, Texas

SUPER TUESDAY TIMELINE

6 p.m. EST: Results expected in Iowa

7 p.m. EST: Polls close in Vermont and Virginia. Caucuses convene in Alaska (Republicans only)

7:30 p.m. EST: Polls close in North Carolina

8 p.m. EST: Polls close in Alabama, Maine, Massachusetts, Oklahoma and Tennessee. Most polls close in Texas.

8:30 p.m. EST: Polls close in Arkansas

9 p.m. EST: Polls close in Colorado and Minnesota. Last polls close in Texas. Caucuses convene in Utah (Republicans only)

10 p.m. EST: Polls close in Utah (Democrats only)

11 p.m. EST: Polls close in California. Voting is expected to end in Utah (Republicans only)

12 a.m. EST: Voting ends in Alaska (Republicans only)

ALABAMA

PRESIDENTIAL PRIMARY (D): Biden, Dean Phillips, Uncommitted. 52 delegates at stake.

PRESIDENTIAL PRIMARY (R): Trump, Haley, David Stuckenberg, Uncommitted, Ryan Binkley, Chris Christie, Ron DeSantis, Vivek Ramaswamy. 50 delegates at stake.

STATE PRIMARY KEY RACES: Supreme Court chief justice (R), U.S. House Districts 1 and 2.

WHO CAN VOTE: Any registered voter. Voters do not register by party.

FIRST VOTES REPORTED (2022 Primaries): 8:23 p.m. EST

LAST ELECTION NIGHT UPDATE: 3:06 a.m. ET with 99% of the total vote counted

ALASKA

PRESIDENTIAL CAUCUSES (R): Trump, Haley, Ramaswamy. 29 delegates at stake.

WHO CAN VOTE: Registered Republicans only

ARKANSAS

PRESIDENTIAL PRIMARY (D): Biden, Phillips, Marianne Williamson, three others. 31 delegates at stake.

PRESIDENTIAL PRIMARY (R): Trump, Haley, Stuckenberg, Binkley, Doug Burgum, Christie, DeSantis, Asa Hutchinson, Ramaswamy. 40 delegates at stake.

STATE PRIMARY KEY RACES: Supreme Court chief justice; U.S. House District 3 (R)

WHO CAN VOTE: Any registered voter. Voters do not register by party.

FIRST VOTES REPORTED (2022 Primaries): 8:44 p.m. EST

LAST ELECTION NIGHT UPDATE: 3:18 a.m. EST with 99% of the total vote counted

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CALIFORNIA

PRESIDENTIAL PRIMARY (D): Biden, Phillips, Williamson, and five others. 424 delegates at stake.

PRESIDENTIAL PRIMARY (R): Trump, Haley, Stuckenberg, Binkley, Christie, DeSantis, Hutchinson, Ramaswamy, Rachel Swift. 169 delegates at stake.

STATE PRIMARY KEY RACES: U.S. Senate (full term and unexpired term), various U.S. House districts

WHO CAN VOTE: Only registered Republicans in the Republican presidential primary. Registered Democrats and unaffiliated voters in the Democratic presidential primary. All registered voters in the state primaries.

FIRST VOTES REPORTED (2022 Primaries): 11:11 p.m. EST

LAST ELECTION NIGHT UPDATE: 6:10 a.m. EST with 48% of total vote counted

COLORADO

PRESIDENTIAL PRIMARY (D): Biden, Phillips, Williamson, noncommitted delegate, five others. 72 delegates at stake.

PRESIDENTIAL PRIMARY (R): Trump, Haley, Binkley, Christie, DeSantis, Hutchinson, Ramaswamy. 37 delegates at stake. The Supreme Court on Monday rejected efforts in Colorado and other states to use Section 3 of the 14th Amendment to remove Trump from the ballot.

WHO CAN VOTE: Registered party members plus unaffiliated voters

FIRST VOTES REPORTED (2022 Primaries): 9:04 p.m. EST

LAST ELECTION NIGHT UPDATE: 4:05 a.m. ET with 90% of total vote counted

IOWA

PRESIDENTIAL PREFERENCE VOTE (D): Biden, Phillips, Williamson, uncommitted. 40 delegates at stake. All voting conducted by mail between Jan. 12 and March 5.

WHO CAN VOTE: Registered Democrats only

NOTES: Iowa Democrats moved away from their traditional caucus system this year after party rules rearranged the calendar and barred the state from holding a presidential nominating event in January. Democrats in the state still held caucuses to conduct party business that month, but its presidential nominating contest became a preference vote conducted by mail with results released on Super Tuesday.

MAINE

PRESIDENTIAL PRIMARY (D): Biden, Phillips. 24 delegates at stake.

PRESIDENTIAL PRIMARY (R): Trump, Haley, Binkley, DeSantis, Ramaswamy. 20 delegates at stake. The Supreme Court on Monday rejected efforts in Maine and other states to use Section 3 of the 14th Amendment to remove Trump from the ballot.

WHO CAN VOTE: Registered party members plus unaffiliated voters

FIRST VOTES REPORTED (2022 Primaries): 8:17 p.m. EST

LAST ELECTION NIGHT UPDATE: 2:16 a.m. EST with 82% of total vote counted

NOTES: Maine law dictates presidential primaries be conducted by ranked-choice voting, in which voters are asked to rank candidates in order of preference. If no candidate receives at least 50% of the vote, low-ranking candidates are eliminated and their voters are reassigned to other candidates by that order of preference until one candidate obtains a majority.

However, the Republican Party is basing its presidential delegate allocation on the first round of voting and will not consider any results of ranked-choice voting. In the unlikely event that the Maine GOP primary proceeds to ranked-choice rounds, AP will follow the party's preference and declare a winner based on the first round of voting.

MASSACHUSETTS

PRESIDENTIAL PRIMARY (D): Biden, Phillips, Williamson, no preference. 92 delegates at stake.

PRESIDENTIAL PRIMARY (R): Trump, Haley, no preference, Binkley, Christie, DeSantis, Hutchinson, Ramaswamy. 40 delegates at stake.

WHO CAN VOTE: Registered party members plus unaffiliated voters

FIRST VOTES REPORTED (2022 Primaries): 8:04 p.m. EST

LAST ELECTION NIGHT UPDATE: 3:33 a.m. EST with 83% of total vote counted

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MINNESOTA

PRESIDENTIAL PRIMARY (D): Biden, Phillips, Williamson, uncommitted, six others. 75 delegates at stake.

PRESIDENTIAL PRIMARY (R): Trump, Haley, Christie, DeSantis, Ramaswamy. 39 delegates at stake.

WHO CAN VOTE: Any registered voter. Voters do not register by party.

FIRST VOTES REPORTED (2022 Primaries): 9:19 p.m. EST

LAST ELECTION NIGHT UPDATE: 2:21 a.m. EST with 100% of the total vote counted

NORTH CAROLINA

PRESIDENTIAL PRIMARY (D): Biden, no preference. 116 delegates at stake.

PRESIDENTIAL PRIMARY (R): Trump, Haley, No Preference, Binkley, Christie, DeSantis, Hutchinson, Ramaswamy. 74 delegates at stake.

STATE PRIMARY KEY RACES: Governor (Democratic and Republican)

WHO CAN VOTE: Registered party members plus unaffiliated voters

FIRST VOTES REPORTED (2022 Primaries): 7:38 p.m. EST. Super Tuesday results may be reported later than in previous elections because of a new state law requiring elections officials to wait until polls close before tabulating pre-Election Day votes.

LAST ELECTION NIGHT UPDATE: 12:52 a.m. EST with 99% of total vote counted

OKLAHOMA

PRESIDENTIAL PRIMARY (D): Biden, Phillips, Williamson, and three others. 36 delegates at stake.

PRESIDENTIAL PRIMARY (R): Trump, Haley, Stuckenberg, Binkley, Christie, DeSantis, Hutchinson, Ramaswamy. 43 delegates at stake.

WHO CAN VOTE: Parties decide who may vote in the primaries. Only registered Republicans in the Republican primary. Registered Democrats and independents in the Democratic primary.

FIRST VOTES REPORTED (2022 Primaries): 8:10 p.m. EST

LAST ELECTION NIGHT UPDATE: 12:33 a.m. EST with 99.9% of the total vote counted

TENNESSEE

PRESIDENTIAL PRIMARY (D): Biden, uncommitted. 63 delegates at stake.

PRESIDENTIAL PRIMARY (R): Trump, Haley, Stuckenberg, uncommitted, Binkley, Christie, DeSantis, Hutchinson, Ramaswamy. 58 delegates at stake.

WHO CAN VOTE: Any registered voter. Voters do not register by party.

FIRST VOTES REPORTED (2022 Primaries): 8:02 p.m. EST

LAST ELECTION NIGHT UPDATE: 3:45 a.m. EST with 99.7% of the total vote counted

TEXAS

PRESIDENTIAL PRIMARY (D): Biden, Phillips, Williamson, and five others. 244 delegates at stake.

PRESIDENTIAL PRIMARY (R): Trump, Haley, Stuckenberg, uncommitted, Binkley, Christie, DeSantis, Hutchinson, Ramaswamy. 150 delegates at stake.

STATE PRIMARY KEY RACES: U.S. Senate and various U.S. House districts

WHO CAN VOTE: Any registered voter. Voters do not register by party.

FIRST VOTES REPORTED (2020 Presidential Primaries): 8:10 p.m. EST

LAST ELECTION NIGHT UPDATE: 3:21 a.m. EST with 93% of total vote counted

UTAH

PRESIDENTIAL PRIMARY (D): Biden, Phillips, Williamson, and two others. 30 delegates at stake.

PRESIDENTIAL CAUCUSES (R): Trump, Haley, Binkley. 40 delegates at stake.

WHO CAN VOTE: Parties decide who may vote in the primaries. Registered Democrats and unaffiliated voters in the Democratic primary. Registered Republicans only in the Republican caucuses.

FIRST VOTES REPORTED (2022 Primaries): 10:03 p.m. EST

LAST ELECTION NIGHT UPDATE: 1:46 a.m. EST with 83% of the total vote counted

VERMONT

PRESIDENTIAL PRIMARY (D): Biden, Phillips, Williamson, and three others. 16 delegates at stake.

PRESIDENTIAL PRIMARY (R): Trump, Haley, Binkley, Christie, DeSantis, Ramaswamy. 17 delegates at stake.

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WHO CAN VOTE: Any registered voter. Voters do not register by party.

FIRST VOTES REPORTED (2022 Primaries): 7:21 p.m. EST

LAST ELECTION NIGHT UPDATE: 2:16 a.m. EST with 96.4% of total vote counted

VIRGINIA

PRESIDENTIAL PRIMARY (D): Biden, Phillips, Williamson. 99 delegates at stake.

PRESIDENTIAL PRIMARY (R): Trump, Haley, Binkley, Christie, DeSantis, Ramaswamy. 48 delegates at stake.

WHO CAN VOTE: Any registered voter. Voters do not register by party.

FIRST VOTES REPORTED (2022 Primaries): 7:09 p.m. EST

LAST ELECTION NIGHT UPDATE: 9:15 p.m. EST with 99.5% of the total vote counted

AMERICAN SAMOA

PRESIDENTIAL CAUCUSES (D): Six delegates at stake.

UNCOMMITTED ON THE BALLOT

DEMOCRATS: Alabama, Colorado (as "Noncommitted Delegate"), Iowa, Massachusetts (as "No Preference"), Minnesota, North Carolina (as "No Preference"), Tennessee

REPUBLICANS: Alabama, Massachusetts (as "No Preference"), North Carolina (as "No Preference"), Tennessee, Texas

ARE WE THERE YET?

As of Super Tuesday, there will be 132 days until the Republican National Convention in Milwaukee, 167 days until the Democratic National Convention in Chicago and 245 until the November general election.

California ski resort workers tunnel their way into the office after getting 10 feet of snow

By JULIE WATSON, SCOTT SONNER and JOHN ANTCZAK Associated Press

RENO, Nevada (AP) — Going to the office has been no small feat for Jon Slaughter's marketing team at Sugar Bowl, requiring the employees to dig down several feet and then tunnel through to the front door after a powerful blizzard dumped more than 10 feet (3 meters) of snow on the Northern California ski resort.

It was even more dramatic when they went upstairs and opened another door to the outside on the second level of the office building and were confronted by a solid wall of snow from floor to well above the door frame. His team posted a video of the door opening on X and wrote: "We've got some digging to do."

"They've been chipping away at it since Friday, and had to tunnel down to the downstairs door to get in," Slaughter said. "It definitely keeps you on your toes."

The ski resort nestled 7,000 feet (2,134 meters) up among mountain peaks 46 miles (74 kilometers) west of Reno recorded the highest amounts of snow from the storm that began barreling into the region Thursday and was finally dissipating on Monday as it moved through the Sierra Nevada, according to the National Weather Service in Sacramento.

The weekend blizzard caused traffic backups and closures on Interstate 80 and other roadways and shut down ski resorts from the Mammoth Mountain Ski Area to Sugar Bowl with the warning covering a 300-mile (480-kilometer) stretch of the mountains. It also left thousands of homes and businesses without power as fierce winds lashed the Sierra.

A long stretch of I-80 from west of Lake Tahoe over Donner Summit to the Nevada state line reopened to all but big rigs late Monday morning, but chains or snow tires were required, the California Highway Patrol's Truckee office said. The mountain pass, which can be perilous in snow, is named for the infamous Donner Party, a group of pioneers who resorted to cannibalism after getting trapped there in the winter of 1846-1847.

Sugar Bowl along with many other resorts including Palisades Tahoe, the largest resort on the north end of Lake Tahoe, were also slowly reopening lifts after safety checks.

Skiers and snowboarders had already been lining up since the weekend for what were considered to be

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epic conditions of deep powder.

Palisades was among several ski mountains that closed most or all chairlifts over the weekend because of snow, wind and low visibility. Palisades' four-day snow total was nearly 8 feet (2.4 meters), according to the weather service.

Stretches of other mountain highways in the area remained closed for the fourth day in a row, including part of the Mt. Rose Highway connecting Reno to Lake Tahoe and California Highway 89 on the west side of the lake, where Homewood ski resort has received more than 7 feet (2.1 meters) of snow since Thursday night.

Westbound lanes of I-80 in suburban Sparks were temporarily closed during the Monday morning commute due to crashes caused by icy conditions, the Nevada Highway Patrol said. And I-580 between Reno and Carson City remained closed in the Washoe Valley where the patrol said it was continuing to help motorists recover vehicles abandoned over the weekend. There were no immediate reports of any serious injuries.

The blizzard was yet another late-season shot in the arm for California's snowpack, a vital part of the state's water supply.

The water content of the snowpack on Monday stood at 104% of the average to date and 94% of the April 1 average, when it is normally at its peak, according to online data from the California Department of Water Resources.

And more snow was forecast to be on the way.

Winter storm warnings were issued for a new, less powerful system expected to arrive later in the day and last into Tuesday night, and was likely to bring periods of moderate mountain snow, the weather service said.

Kevin Dupui, who lives in Truckee, about 10 miles (6 kilometers) west of Sugar Bowl, said his snow blower broke, but it doesn't matter because there's nowhere to put all the snow anyway. "We just move it around," he said Sunday.

Residents were snowmobiling and cross-country skiing in the streets. Power has been restored to thousands who lost service but some outages continue.

Some people turned up at Sugar Bowl at 8 a.m. on Sunday but had to wait until 2 p.m. when crews were able to finally open one lift, leaving them only a couple of hours to ski but Slaughter said he's sure it was worth it given the conditions.

He hoped to hit the slopes himself ahead of the next storm.

"It just keeps coming," Slaughter said. "It looks like it's going to be snowing most of this week. So if people cannot make powder turn today, there's plenty more coming for you."

France becomes the only country to explicitly guarantee abortion as a constitutional right

By BARBARA SURK and NICOLAS GARRIGA Associated Press

PARIS (AP) — French lawmakers on Monday overwhelmingly approved a bill to enshrine abortion rights in France's constitution, making it the only country to explicitly guarantee a woman's right to voluntarily terminate a pregnancy

The historic move was proposed by President Emmanuel Macron as a way to prevent the kind of rollback of abortion rights seen in the United States in recent years, and the vote during a special joint session of France's parliament drew a long standing ovation among lawmakers.

The measure was approved in a 780-72 vote in the Palace of Versailles. Abortion enjoys wide support in France across most of the political spectrum, and has been legal since 1975.

Many female legislators in the hall smiled broadly as they cheered. While a small group of protesters stood outside the joint session, there were jubilant scenes of celebrations all over France as women's rights activists hailed the measure promised by Macron within hours of the Dobbs ruling by the U.S. Supreme Court in 2022.

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The U.S. decision has reverberated across Europe's political landscape, forcing the issue back into public debate in some countries at a time when far-right nationalist parties are gaining influence.

Both houses of France's parliament, the National Assembly and Senate, had separately adopted a bill to amend Article 34 of the French Constitution, but the amendment needed final confirmation by a three-fifths majority in the special joint session. The measure specifies that "the law determines the conditions by which is exercised the freedom of women to have recourse to an abortion, which is guaranteed."

The French measure is seen as going a step further than was the case in the former Yugoslavia, whose 1974 constitution said that "a person is free to decide on having children." Yugoslavia dissolved in the early 1990s, and all its successor states have adopted similar measures in their constitutions that legally enable women to have an abortion, though they do not explicitly guarantee it.

In the lead-up to the vote, French Prime Minister Gabriel Attal addressed the more than 900 lawmakers gathered for the joint session in Versailles, and called on them to make France a leader in women's rights and set an example for countries around the world.

"We have a moral debt to women," Attal said. He paid tribute to Simone Veil, a prominent legislator, former health minister and key feminist who in 1975 championed the bill that decriminalized abortion in France.

"We have a chance to change history," Attal said in a moving and determined speech. "Make Simone Veil proud," he said to a standing ovation.

None of France's major political parties have questioned the right to abortion, including Marine Le Pen's far-right National Rally party and the conservative Republicans.

Le Pen, who won a record number of seats in the National Assembly two years ago, said on Monday that her party planned to vote in favor of the bill but added that "there is no need to make this a historic day."

A recent poll showed support for abortion rights among the French public at more than 80%, consistent with previous surveys. The same poll also showed that a solid majority of people are in favor of enshrining it in the constitution.

A group of about 200 anti-abortion protesters gathered soberly in Versailles ahead of the vote, some holding a banner reading: "I too was an embryo."

A larger crowd of women's rights activists gathered at Trocadero Plaza overlooking the Eiffel Tower, letting out a collective cry of joy as the vote results came in. Others celebrated around France even before the joint parliamentary session began.

Sarah Durocher, a leader in the Family Planning movement, said Monday's vote is "a victory for feminists and a defeat for the anti-choice activists."

"We increased the level of protection to this fundamental right," said Anne-Cécile Mailfert of the Women's Foundation. "It's a guarantee for women today and in the future to have the right to abort in France."

The government argued in its introduction to the bill that the right to abortion is threatened in the United States, where the Supreme Court in 2022 overturned a 50-year-old ruling that used to guarantee it.

"Unfortunately, this event is not isolated: In many countries, even in Europe, there are currents of opinion that seek to hinder at any cost the freedom of women to terminate their pregnancy if they wish," the introduction to the French legislation says.

"It may not be an issue in France, where a majority of people support abortion," said Mathilde Philip-Gay, a law professor and a specialist in French and American constitutional law. "But those same people may one day vote for a far-right government, and what happened in the U.S. can happen elsewhere in Europe, including in France."

Inscribing abortion into the French Constitution "will make it harder for abortion opponents of the future to challenge these rights, but it won't prevent them from doing it in the long run, with the right political strategy," Philip-Gay added.

"It only takes a moment for everything we thought that we have achieved to fade away," said Yael Braun-Pivet, the first female president of the French parliament, in her address to the joint session.

Amending the constitution is a laborious process and a rare event in France. Since it was enacted in 1958, the French Constitution has been amended 17 times.

The justice minister said the new amendment will be formally inscribed into the Constitution at a public

ceremony at Vendome Plaza in Paris on Friday — International Women's Day.

Transit of migrants through the Darien Gap resumes as Colombian boat companies end work stoppage

By ASTRID SUÁREZ and MANUEL RUEDA Associated Press

BOGOTÁ, Colombia (AP) — Migrants bound for the U.S. are once again crossing the Darien Gap in large numbers, officials in Colombia said on Monday, after being stranded for much of last week in a small town along the country's Caribbean coast due to a work stoppage by local boat captains.

Johann Wachter Espitia, deputy mayor of Necoclí, said that 3,000 migrants have left the town since Friday on boats headed towards the Darien jungle, with another 400 people waiting and sleeping in tents, as they gather money to pay for their tickets.

From Necoclí migrants board boats that take them to two remote villages, where the treacherous trails that cross the Darien Gap begin.

The dense and roadless rainforest divides South America from Central America and in recent years it has become a common, yet perilous route for hundreds of thousands of South Americans, Asians and Africans headed to the United States.

From Monday to Thursday of last week transit across the Darien dwindled as boat companies in Necoclí went on strike over the arrest of two of their boat captains by Colombia's navy.

The captains had been intercepted after they left Necoclí in two boats carrying around 150 migrants and were accused by authorities of transporting migrants in unsafe conditions, and of contributing to human trafficking.

The two companies operating boat services from Necoclí towards the Darien Gap stopped their services in protest for four days. They resumed activities on Friday after holding several meetings with municipal and national government officials, who were concerned over the large numbers of migrants stranded in the small town. According to Colombia's Human Rights Ombudsman, around 8,000 migrants were stranded in Necoclí by Thursday, generating the potential for a public health crisis.

According to Wachter Espitia, the companies agreed to a request that migrants boarding their boats register on a government app. More details on the conditions for transporting migrants will be discussed in another meeting later this week, he said.

Colombia has long allowed migrants from different nations to transit through its territory without visas.

But the South American nation has come under increasing pressure from U.S. officials to stem the flow of migrants headed north, as record numbers of people seek asylum at the U.S. border.

Last year 520,000 people crossed the Darien Gap on foot, according to authorities in Panama, where most migrants register with officials in villages on the northern side of the jungle before they continue their journey to the United States.

Panama's Security Minister Juan Pino said Monday that the number of migrants crossing the Darien could increase this year, with more than 73,000 crossings registered in the first two months of 2024, a 52% increase from the same period last year. Most of those crossings this year have been Venezuelans escaping their nation's economic crisis, followed by migrants from Haiti, China and Ecuador.

Despite its growing popularity, the Darien Gap continues to be a dangerous route where migrants have drowned while crossing swollen rivers and are exposed to robberies, sexual violence and tropical diseases.

On Friday Doctors Without Borders said it had treated 233 victims of sexual violence at its health posts in the Darien Gap during the first two months of this year.

In a report published last year, Human Rights Watch said the Colombian side of the Darien is run by the Gulf Clan, a drug trafficking group that is taking a hefty cut from the fees that migrants must pay to guides and porters that lead them to the border with Panama.

Eagles center Jason Kelce retires after 13 NFL seasons and 1 Super Bowl ring

By DAN GELSTON AP Sports Writer

PHILADELPHIA (AP) — Jason Kelce needed only seconds to burst into tears.

Kelce's eyes flooded each time he relayed a story about backyard football games with his brother, the love he felt from his parents and the devotion of his coaches — even a band teacher — that shaped him along way. But it was his career with the Philadelphia Eagles that choked up Kelce the most. The Super Bowl. The parade. His beloved offensive line coach.

All of the memories, the wins, the brotherhood — both with his fellow Eagles players and younger brother Travis, a tight end for the Kansas City Chiefs — consumed Kelce to the point where he needed about 45 minutes to reach the inevitable conclusion that everyone inside a crowded auditorium knew was coming from the moment a news conference was announced.

It was time to retire.

The 36-year-old Kelce officially called it quits Monday at the Eagles' NovaCare Complex, ending a 13-year career spent entirely with Philadelphia in which he became not only one of the great centers of his era who played a key role in the franchise's lone Super Bowl championship but a beloved Philly personality and popular podcast host.

"Let's see how long this lasts," said Kelce, wearing a sleeveless Eagles T-shirt, before he burst into tears and needed several moments to compose himself at the news conference attended by his parents, Ed and Donna, wife Kylie and Travis, who was wearing sunglasses inside the auditorium. Eagles coach Nick Sirianni sat behind reporters.

"I have been the underdog my entire career," Kelce said. "And I mean it when I say it, I wish I still was."

With Travis in the house, Kelce naturally had to pay homage to Taylor Swift, his brother's girlfriend.

"It's only too poetic I found my career being fulfilled in the city of brotherly love, I knew that relationship all too well," Kelce said in a nod to Swift's song "All Too Well." He also referenced lyrics to Swift's "Wildest Dreams."

Kelce was a sixth-round pick out of Cincinnati in the 2011 draft. The burly, bushy-haired and bearded Kelce has been a stalwart of the offensive line since he was drafted and as an Iron Man after he missed most of the 2012 season with a partially torn MCL and torn ACL.

The moment that endeared him for life to the Philly faithful came at the Super Bowl parade following the 2017 season when he dressed as one of Philadelphia's famed Mummies, and he delivered a fiery, profane speech that whipped the crowd into a frenzy.

"No one likes us! No one likes us! No one likes us! We don't care," Kelce exclaimed that day in February 2018. "We're from Philly! (Expletive) Philly. No one likes us! We don't care!"

Kelce recalled that moment Monday, saying: "I won't forget the parade and what it meant to the city of Philadelphia. The joy in our community and the closure it gave so many."

"That wasn't my speech," Kelce said. "It was Philadelphia's."

The Kelce brothers played each other in the Super Bowl two seasons ago, which was won by the Chiefs — "I won't forget falling short to the Chiefs," Jason said Monday — and co-host the "New Heights with Jason & Travis Kelce" podcast. Jason attended the Chiefs' playoff game in frigid Buffalo temperatures this season. He ripped off his shirt and chugged beers as he sat in a suite with Swift.

It was the Jason Kelce way.

He's been a showman off the football field, singing the national anthem at a 76ers game, partying with the Phillie Phanatic and pounding a beer to a roaring ovation at a Phillies postseason game.

But it was his work on the offensive line that made him a star. Kelce ended his career by making 156 straight starts, and he earned six All-Pro Team selections.

He was part of Philadelphia's core four of stars that have experienced droughts and championship runs, multiple coaches and one of the worst collapses in the city's sports history. Fletcher Cox and Brandon Graham are the lone holdovers from former coach Andy Reid's last season with the Eagles in 2012. Lane

Johnson completes the four veteran anchors and was a rookie in former coach Chip Kelly's first season in 2013.

Kelce is the first one to call it quits.

Sirianni added to Kelce's lore by shipping a keg of beer to the center's home to entice him to return in 2022.

"No Keg videos this year," Kelce wrote Monday morning on social media.

Eagles fans came prepared to toast Kelce with a cold one.

Kelce and his family were greeted by cheering fans — and yes, one even brought a keg of beer — outside the complex.

He thanked a long list of mentors from his high school football, hockey and lacrosse coaches and his old band teachers at Cleveland Heights (Ohio) high school for putting up with a "rambunctious kid that was will full of immaturity, stupidly and cockiness."

He thanked his coaches at Cincinnati for believing he could play center, a fortuitous decision that made him a great fit in Philadelphia, then thanked his four coaches with the Eagles.

Kelce choked up again thanking Eagles owner Jeffrey Lurie for his leadership and general manager Howie Roseman for drafting him. He shared memories of his Eagles career and said he would never forget the day Reid called to tell him Kelce had been drafted by the Eagles. Kelce's father rushed into a room, "with tears streaming down his face," in a pure joy of the moment.

He never made the Eagles regret their decision.

"Has there ever been a more perfect marriage between a player, a city and a team," Lurie said in a statement.

Eagles O-line coach Jeff Stoutland attended the news conference and later shared a hug with Kelce. Kelce singled out Stoutland several times during his speech, and the coach responded with a heartfelt note on social media.

"I'm so proud of the player you've worked to become and legacy you've built. I will miss having you by my side. It's been my honor & I congratulate you on an incredible career," Stoutland wrote.

Kelce, who made seven Pro Bowls, and former Pittsburgh Steelers Dermontti Dawson and Mike Webster are the only centers since the 1970 merger to earn All-Pro nods five times. Dawson and Webster are both in the Pro Football Hall of Fame.

Kelce played 193 regular-season games for the Eagles.

"It has always been a goal of mine to play my whole career in one city," Kelce said. "I couldn't have dreamt of a better one if I tried."

Settlement in Wisconsin fake elector case offers new details on the strategy by Trump lawyers

By SOPHIA TAREEN Associated Press

Two attorneys for then-President Donald Trump orchestrated a plan for fake electors to file paperwork falsely saying the Republican won Wisconsin in a strategy to overturn Joe Biden's 2020 victory there and in other swing states, according to a lawsuit settlement reached Monday that makes public months of texts and emails.

Under their agreements, Kenneth Chesebro and Jim Troupis turned over more than 1,400 pages of documents, emails and text messages, along with photos and video, offering a detailed account of the scheme's origins in Wisconsin. The communications show how they, with coordination from Trump campaign officials, replicated the strategy in six other states including Georgia, where Chesebro has already pleaded guilty to charges stemming from the 2020 election.

The agreements settle a civil lawsuit brought by Democrats in 2022 against the two attorneys and 10 Republicans in Wisconsin who posed as fake electors. The Republicans settled in December.

"Our democracy demands better than this," said Scott Thompson, one of the plaintiffs' attorneys who helped negotiate the agreements. "That is why this lawsuit ... consistently sought transparency, account-

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ability and deterrence. We can't let this happen again."

There is no admission of wrongdoing or liability in the agreements in which Chesebro and Troupis promise to never participate in similar efforts involving future presidential campaigns. Troupis must also pay an undisclosed amount to the plaintiffs.

Troupis said Monday in an emailed statement that the "alternate elector ballots" were "a reasonable course of action" given that the 2020 results were appealable to the U.S. Supreme Court.

"The settlement was made to avoid endless litigation, and nothing in today's settlement constitutes an admission of fault, nor should it," he added.

Phone and text messages left Monday for Chesebro weren't immediately returned.

Electors are people appointed to represent voters in presidential elections. The winner of the popular vote in each state determines which party's electors are sent to the Electoral College, which meets in December after the election to certify the outcome.

The documents show how Chesebro and Troupis, Trump's attorney in Wisconsin, used arcane laws in rationalizing and drafting the false certificates for the fake electors. They also reveal how the two strategized ways to delay deadlines for certifying electoral votes and sway public opinion, including floating ideas on conservative talk radio.

In November 2020, as they were awaiting a decision from the then-conservative leaning Wisconsin Supreme Court on Trump's effort to invalidate thousands of votes in the state, Chesebro suggested to Troupis that they contact conservative radio hosts in Milwaukee and Madison: "Mostly to maximize the chance that SCOW (Supreme Court of Wisconsin) justices hear about this quickly and prejudge the case?"

He ended with a winking emoji.

The fake elector efforts are central to an August federal indictment filed against Trump alleging he tried to overturn results of the 2020 election. Federal prosecutors, investigating his conduct related to the Jan. 6, 2021, U.S. Capitol riot, have also said the scheme originated in Wisconsin. Trump also faces charges in Georgia and has denied wrongdoing.

Michigan and Nevada have criminally charged fake electors, but there's no known criminal investigation in Wisconsin.

Wisconsin Attorney General Josh Kaul, a Democrat, has suggested he's relying on federal investigators while also not ruling out a state probe. Attorneys who negotiated the settlement said information in the documents has already been provided to Kaul's office.

Monday's agreements were announced by Georgetown University Law Center's Institute for Constitutional Advocacy and Protection, Law Forward and the Madison-based Stafford Rosenbaum law firm.

According to the plaintiffs' attorneys, the documents show how Troupis, an attorney who has represented the Republican Party of Wisconsin and is a former judge, was deeply involved in the origins of the effort.

Trump lost Wisconsin to Biden, a Democrat, by fewer than 21,000 votes.

At Troupis' urging, Chesebro drafted memos in the final months of 2020 detailing how to prepare the fake elector certificates and how they should be signed. The documents include a 10-minute video of the fake electors who cheer and take photos as they cast and sign ballots for Trump at the Wisconsin State Capitol.

There are no direct communications with Trump in the documents, but there are exchanges with top campaign aides and Trump attorney Rudy Giuliani.

A day after Chesebro shares a Dec. 6 memo on strategies, Troupis follows up via text: "I have sent it to the White House this afternoon. The real decision makers."

There's a brief mention of a Dec. 15 afternoon meeting with Trump in the Oval Office that both men attended with others. Days later, Chesebro refers to Trump's social media post summoning followers to Washington on Jan. 6, saying "Be there, will be wild!"

"Wow. Based on three days ago, I think we have a unique understanding of this," Chesebro texts Troupis.

Trump campaign officials did offer their assessment of each state's progress on the fake elector plan.

"Wisconsin appears to be the most organized state so far," concludes a Dec. 11, 2020, email from Trump campaign associate general counsel Joshua Findlay to Chesebro.

"This all came out of Wisconsin and expanded to other states," said attorney Mary McCord with George-

town's institute, who helped negotiate the settlement. "That was a significant part of the narrative that led to the violence on Jan 6."

After the deadly attack at the Capitol, the attorneys discussed falsely deflecting blame from Trump supporters to members of the anti-fascist movement, among others.

"It'd be nice if Trump surrogates could get across that without antifa's role in the actual breaking in ... the scene at the Capitol would have been entirely peaceful. And that Trump could not (have) reasonably foreseen this," Chesebro wrote in a text to Troupis.

He added, "The President can put this behind him if he invites Biden and (Vice President Kamala) Harris over for coffee on inauguration morning and attends the (virtual) inauguration."

Government and outside investigations have uniformly found there was no evidence of widespread voter fraud that could have swung the 2020 election. But Trump has continued to spread falsehoods about the election.

Takeaways from Trump's Supreme Court win: He stays on ballot, but his legal peril is just starting

By NICHOLAS RICCARDI Associated Press

DENVER (AP) — Former President Donald Trump gained a clear win at the U.S. Supreme Court on Monday, which unanimously ruled that states don't have the ability to bar him — or any other federal candidates — from the ballot under a rarely-used constitutional provision that prohibits those who "engaged in insurrection" from holding office.

The decision shuts down a push in dozens of states to end Trump's candidacy through a clause in the 14th Amendment, written to prevent former Confederates from serving in government after the Civil War.

But it may open the door to further electoral uncertainty, exposing more state officials to disqualification under the provision and setting up a constitutional showdown should Trump win the election.

Facing four separate criminal trials, Trump's legal peril may just be beginning. So is the Supreme Court's role in that process.

Here are some takeaways:

A TECHNICAL, BUT STILL BIG, WIN

The most significant thing the court did Monday was to overturn a Colorado Supreme Court ruling from December that Trump was not eligible to be president because he violated the insurrection clause, Section 3, of the 14th Amendment.

This will also stop efforts to kick him off the ballot in Illinois, Maine and other states. Had the Supreme Court let the Colorado ruling stand, it could have triggered a new wave of litigation that might have left Trump disqualified in many states.

The high court avoided addressing that politically contentious issue of whether Trump played a role in the Jan. 6 attack on the U.S. Capitol that would have barred him from seeking office. The ruling is almost devoid of references to Jan. 6 or insurrection, and doesn't address whether Trump committed such an act by sparking the attack on the Capitol.

Instead it focuses on the technical, procedural question of who gets to decide an election challenge under Section 3.

All nine justices agreed that is the purview of Congress. But a narrower majority of five went further, ruling it can only be done through legislation. That exposes significant splits underneath the unanimous majority, and points toward the greatest uncertainty the ruling creates.

A TIME BOMB FOR JAN. 6, 2025?

One possible outcome that the case presented was the prospect of unelected judges disqualifying the man dominating who has already received hundreds of thousands of votes in the nominating process.

But another potential nightmare is that if Congress is the only entity that can determine whether a presidential hopeful is indeed disqualified for engaging in "insurrection," that it makes that determination on Jan. 6, 2025, when required to certify a possible Trump victory in the presidential election.

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The high court shut down the first possibility, but may have left the door open to the second one. The five-justice majority — all from the court's conservative wing — said Congress can implement Section 3 through legislation, "subject of course to judicial review." (That means the court reserves for itself the right to have the final say.)

That triggered a dissent from the court's three liberals, who complained that that "shuts the door on other potential means of federal enforcement."

That would appear to include a rejection of Trump's electors should he win the election -- but multiple legal experts said Monday that it wasn't that clear, and the only way to know may be for Congress to try.

FEELING THE HEAT

The 14th Amendment case is one of two putting the high court squarely in the midst of the ongoing presidential election. Last week, the court agreed to hear Trump's appeal of a federal ruling that he's not entitled to immunity from criminal charges for his attempt to overturn the 2020 election.

Trump's trial on those charges was originally scheduled to begin Monday, but has been postponed because of the battle over his immunity challenge. The high court taking up his appeal in late April raises the possibility that trial won't conclude until after the presidential election.

The justices' discomfort over being put in the middle of the nation's partisan divide came through in a brief, but notable, concurring opinion by Justice Amy Coney Barrett.

Though one of the court's conservatives, she didn't agree with the majority's ruling that Congress can only enforce Section 3 through legislation. But she didn't want to sign onto the liberals' dissent, either, instead warning against focusing too much on partisan divisions.

"...this is not the time to amplify disagreement with stridency," Barrett wrote. "The Court has settled a politically charged issue in the volatile season of a Presidential election. Particularly in this circumstance, writings on the Court should turn the national temperature down, not up."

"For present purposes, our differences are far less important than our unanimity: All nine Justices agree on the outcome of this case," she concluded. "That is the message Americans should take home."

ACTION IN THE STATES

The court's ruling shuts off using Section 3 against federal officials absent action by Congress but it leaves open the ability of states to use the provision against their own state officials, noting there's a rich record after the Civil War of just those sorts of actions.

That's already begun anew in the post-Jan. 6 era. The first disqualification under Section 3 in more than a century came in 2022, when a New Mexico court removed Couy Griffin, who was convicted of entering the Capitol grounds on Jan. 6 while leading a group called "Cowboys for Trump," from his rural county commission.

The group that brought that case, Citizens for Ethics and Responsibility in Washington, next filed the Colorado case against Trump. They said they were eager to continue filing Section 3 cases against lower-level Jan. 6 participants.

TRUMP'S LEGAL TRAVAILS AHEAD

Few observers expected the Supreme Court to keep Trump off the ballot. But he's facing far more perilous legal road ahead.

The first of Trump's criminal trials, for allegedly falsifying business records to pay hush money to an adult film actress during the 2016 presidential campaign, is scheduled to start in New York later this month. The former president is also appealing a New York judge's ruling that he pay \$355 million for fraud committed by his businesses, and verdict that he pay a writer \$83 million for defaming her after she sued him for sexual assault.

Depending on how and how quickly the high court rules on Trump's immunity claim, he could still face charges for trying to overturn the 2020 election in Washington DC before this November's election.

Two more cases are more likely to come later – in Atlanta where Trump faces state charges for his 2020 election plot, and in Florida where he's tentatively scheduled for a May trial on improper retention of classified documents after leaving the presidency, but the trial date is expected to be postponed.

Monday was a win Trump needed to continue his campaign, but his days in court are far from over.

History-rich Pac-12 marks the end of an era as the conference basketball tournaments take place

By MARK ANDERSON AP Sports Writer

LAS VEGAS (AP) — Tara VanDerveer managed to compartmentalize her emotions as she chased down and eclipsed Mike Krzyzewski's all-time wins record earlier this season, determined to focus only on the moment ahead.

And that's how the Hall of Fame Stanford coach is approaching the final Pac-12 Conference women's basketball tournament.

Or perhaps it's just too painful to think about this power conference really making the big split at season's end.

"I just can't even wrap my head around that," said VanDerveer, whose team moved up to No. 2 in the latest AP Top 25 rankings on Monday.

VanDerveer, the face and voice of modern-day Pac-12 basketball, isn't alone in her feelings. Her resume of three national championships over nearly four decades gives her words added weight as the self-labeled Conference of Champions says goodbye to a historic past with this month's men's and women's tournaments.

No longer tying together the teams is a conference history that includes UCLA's run of 10 national championships in 12 years under John Wooden with stars Lew Alcindor (later Kareem Abdul-Jabbar) and Bill Walton. Or USC's Cheryl Miller becoming the Naismith Player of the Year three times while elevating women's basketball onto the national stage.

The conference's more recent history isn't as glorious, but in 2021, the Stanford women beat Arizona by a single point in all-Pac-12 national title game. And the UCLA men made the Final Four the same season before losing to Gonzaga on a banked-in, buzzer-beating heartbreaker from near midcourt.

Maybe each side will go out on a high note this year.

No. 5 Arizona is the clear front-runner on the men's side, which plays its conference tournament March 13-16. Six ranked teams, including three in the top 10, make up the Pac-12 women's tournament, which is Wednesday through Sunday.

"This conference is one of the most competitive in the country," Stanford graduate student Hannah Jump said. "I think you can't really go into any game and think, 'Oh, we got this one.' It's just going to prepare us for down the road, with the NCAA Tournament coming up (and) Pac-12 tournament."

After those tournaments, attention turns to the future as 10 schools depart, four each for the Big Ten and Big 12 and two — Stanford and Bay Area rival California — for the Atlantic Coast Conference. Only Oregon State and Washington State will remain, though they will continue to play under the Pac-12 banner even while aligning with the mid-major West Coast Conference for basketball.

"I'm really sad that our conference won't exist because I think it's the best conference in college athletics," California women's coach Charmin Smith said. "But the fact that we're going to the same conference (ACC with Stanford) ... we'll still have this rivalry."

Because their conference tournament is first, the Pac-12 women's teams will have to deal with the massive change that's to come a little sooner. Coaches and players were asked in recent weeks what the end of this era means while the men's teams will likely face similar inquiries soon on the Pac-12's last hurrah.

"We all grew up with the Pac-8, Pac-10, Pac-12, and to see it go away is something sad," Arizona men's coach Tommy Lloyd said. "But I'm also excited for new horizons, so we're not going to get sentimental about it. You and I can get sentimental at the end of the year and shed a tear, but now it's business."

The Wildcats' prime competition could come from surprising Washington State, the only other ranked men's team at No. 18 and one of the two teams that technically will remain in the Pac-12 after this season.

Cougars coach Kyle Smith insisted his team needed to "put our heads down" and concentrate on the task at hand, which for now means trying to make a strong run in the league tournament and perhaps even win it.

Reality at some point will set in.

For some schools, that is the realization of a future in which Oregon-Ohio State will be a conference game, and there will be a natural excitement that comes with such marquee matchups — despite all the

new cross-country travel and challenging schedules.

But so much will be left behind for a conference that traces its roots to a Portland, Oregon, hotel in 1915. UCLA coach Cori Close recalled a different meeting in 2012 when Pac-12 women's basketball was at its low point, and the conference coaches agreed on a set of principles to raise the league's profile.

They did just that, and Close could only shake her head and close her eyes thinking it will soon be over after helping take the Pac-12 from "being the last of the Power Fives and then raising up to be the first." "Now to see it come to fruition have sustained excellence," Close said, "I'm really humbled and proud to be a part of that."

Both sets of men's and women's teams have one last chance to make the conference proud. Then it all changes.

Pentagon leaker Jack Teixeira pleads guilty under a deal that calls for at least 11 years in prison

By ALANNA DURKIN RICHER Associated Press

BOSTON (AP) — Massachusetts Air National Guard member Jack Teixeira pleaded guilty on Monday to leaking highly classified military documents about the war in Ukraine and other national security secrets under a deal with prosecutors that calls for him to serve at least 11 years in prison.

Teixeira, of North Dighton, Massachusetts, pleaded guilty to six counts of willful retention and transmission of national defense information under the Espionage Act nearly a year after he was arrested in the most consequential national security leak in years.

The 22-year-old admitted illegally collecting some of the nation's most sensitive secrets and sharing them with other users on Discord, a social media platform popular with people playing online games.

U.S. District Judge Indira Talwani scheduled sentencing for September in Boston's federal court and said she would decide then whether to formally accept the agreement, which calls for a prison sentence between 11 and nearly 17 years. Prosecutors said they plan to seek the high end of that range.

"Mr. Teixeira callously disregarded the national security of the United States and he betrayed his solemn oath to defend the country and the trust of the American people he swore to protect," Matt Olsen, assistant attorney general for national security, told reporters after the hearing.

The stunning security breach 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 leaks embarrassed the Pentagon, which tightened controls to safeguard classified information and disciplined members found to have intentionally failed to take required action about Teixeira's suspicious behavior.

Teixeira smiled at his father before being led out of the courtroom with his hands and legs shackled, wearing orange jail garb and black rosary beads around his neck. He stood flanked by defense attorneys through much of the hearing and occasionally leaned down to speak into the microphone to answer questions from the judge.

Michael Bachrach, an attorney for Teixeira, told reporters they will push for a sentence of 11 years. Bachrach described Teixeira as a "kid," adding that the defense will show at sentencing that his youth played a significant role in his conduct.

"He is significantly remorseful for his conduct. He has accepted full responsibility for his conduct," Bachrach said.

In an emailed statement, Teixeira's family said: "It is unfathomable to think your child would ever be involved in something so serious, but he has taken responsibility for his part in this, and here we are."

"Our focus now remains on Jack – his protection, health, and well-being, and taking care of whatever is in his best interest," they said.

Teixeira, who was part of the 102nd Intelligence Wing at Otis Air National Guard Base in Massachusetts, worked as a cyber transport systems specialist, essentially an information technology specialist responsible for military communications networks. He remains in the Air National Guard in an unpaid status, an Air Force official said.

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Authorities said he first typed out classified documents he accessed and then began sharing photographs of files that bore SECRET and TOP SECRET markings. Prosecutors also said he tried to cover his tracks before his arrest, and authorities found a smashed tablet, laptop and Xbox gaming console in a dumpster at his house.

The leak exposed to the world unvarnished secret assessments of Russia's war in Ukraine, including information about troop movements in Ukraine and the provision of supplies and equipment to Ukrainian troops. Teixeira also admitted posting information about a U.S. adversary's plans to harm U.S. forces serving overseas.

Acting Massachusetts U.S. Attorney Josh Levy told reporters Monday he would not speculate on Teixeira's 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.

In exchange for Teixeira's guilty plea, prosecutors agreed not to charge him with further Espionage Act violations. As part of the deal, Teixeira must participate in a debrief with members of the intelligence community, the Defense Department and the Justice Department about the leaks.

Teixeira has been behind bars since his April arrest. The judge denied his request for release from jail last year 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 facilitate his escape.

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 notes, there was no follow-up to ensure the notes 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.

Apple gets fined nearly \$2 billion by the EU for hindering music streaming competition

By KELVIN CHAN AP Business Writer

LONDON (AP) — The European Union leveled its first antitrust penalty against Apple on Monday, fining the U.S. tech giant nearly \$2 billion for unfairly favoring its own music streaming service by forbidding rivals like Spotify from telling users how they could pay for cheaper subscriptions outside of iPhone apps.

Apple muzzled streaming services from telling users about payment options available through their websites, which would avoid the 30% fee charged when people pay through apps downloaded with the iOS App Store, said the European Commission, the 27-nation bloc's executive arm and top antitrust enforcer.

"This is illegal. And it has impacted millions of European consumers who were not able to make a free choice as to where, how and at what price to buy music streaming subscriptions," Margrethe Vestager, the EU's competition commissioner, said at a news conference in Brussels.

Apple — which contests the decision — behaved this way for a decade, resulting in "millions of people who have paid two, three euros more per month for their music streaming service than they would otherwise have had to pay," she said.

It's the culmination of a bitter, yearslong feud between Apple and Spotify over music streaming supremacy. A complaint from the Swedish streaming service five years ago triggered the investigation that led to the 1.8 billion-euro (\$1.95 billion) fine.

The decision comes the same week new rules take effect to prevent tech giants from cornering digital markets.

The EU has led global efforts to crack down on Big Tech companies, including three fines for Google

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totaling more than 8 billion euros, charging Meta with distorting the online classified ad market and forcing Amazon to change its business practices.

Apple's fine is so high because it includes an extra lump sum to deter it from offending again or other tech companies from carrying out similar offenses, the commission said.

It's not the only penalty that the tech giant could face: Apple is still trying to resolve a separate EU antitrust investigation into its mobile payments service by promising to open up its tap-and-go mobile payment system to rivals.

Apple hit back at the commission and Spotify, saying it would appeal Monday's fine.

"The decision was reached despite the Commission's failure to uncover any credible evidence of consumer harm, and ignores the realities of a market that is thriving, competitive, and growing fast," the company said in a statement.

It said Spotify stood to benefit from the EU's move, asserting that the Swedish streaming giant met over 65 times with the commission during the investigation, holds a 56% share of Europe's music streaming market and doesn't pay Apple for using its App Store.

"Ironically, in the name of competition, today's decision just cements the dominant position of a successful European company that is the digital music market's runaway leader," Apple said.

Spotify said it welcomed the EU fine, without addressing Apple's accusations.

"This decision sends a powerful message — no company, not even a monopoly like Apple, can wield power abusively to control how other companies interact with their customers," Spotify said in a blog post.

The commission's investigation initially centered on two concerns. One was the iPhone maker's practice of forcing app developers selling digital content to use its in-house payment system, which charges a 30% commission on all subscriptions.

Those fees have turned into a significant part of Apple's services division, which generated \$85 billion in revenue during the company's last fiscal year ending in September.

Various legal and regulatory developments in the U.S. as well as Europe that are threatening to undercut Apple's commissions from the App Store have been weighing on the company's stock, which has fallen by 9% so far this year while the tech-driven Nasdaq composite index has gained 8%. Apple's shares declined 2.5% in Monday's trading in the U.S.

But the EU later pivoted its focus to concentrate on how Apple prevents app makers from telling their users about cheaper ways to pay for subscriptions that don't involve going through an app.

The investigation found that Apple banned streaming services from telling users about how much subscription offers cost outside of their apps, putting links in their apps to pay for alternative subscriptions or even emailing users to tell them about different pricing options.

"As a result, millions of European music streaming users were left in the dark about all available options," Vestager said, adding that the commission's investigation found that just over 20% of consumers who would have signed up to Spotify's premium service didn't do so because of the restrictions.

The fine comes just before new EU rules are set to kick in that are aimed at preventing tech companies from dominating digital markets.

The Digital Markets Act, due to take effect Thursday, imposes a set of do's and don'ts on "gatekeeper" companies including Apple, Meta, Google parent Alphabet, and TikTok parent ByteDance — under threat of hefty fines.

The DMA's provisions are designed to prevent tech giants from the sort of behavior that's at the heart of the Apple investigation. Apple has already revealed how it will comply, including allowing iPhone users in Europe to use app stores other than its own and enabling developers to offer alternative payment systems.

Vestager warned that the commission would be carefully scrutinizing how Apple follows the new rules.

"Apple will have to open its gates to its ecosystem to allow users to easily find the apps they want, pay for them in any way they want and use them on any device that they want," she said.

Supreme Court restores Trump to ballot, rejecting state attempts to ban him over Capitol attack

By MARK SHERMAN Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — The Supreme Court on Monday unanimously restored Donald Trump to 2024 presidential primary ballots, rejecting state attempts to ban the Republican former president over the Capitol riot.

The justices ruled a day before the Super Tuesday primaries that states cannot invoke a post-Civil War constitutional provision to keep presidential candidates from appearing on ballots. That power resides with Congress, the court wrote in an unsigned opinion.

Trump posted on his social media network shortly after the decision was released: "BIG WIN FOR AMERICA!!!"

The outcome ends efforts in Colorado, Illinois, Maine and elsewhere to kick Trump, the front-runner for his party's nomination, off the ballot because of his attempts to undo his loss in the 2020 election to Democrat Joe Biden, culminating in the Jan. 6, 2021, attack on the Capitol.

Colorado Secretary of State Jena Griswold expressed disappointment in the court's decision as she acknowledged that "Donald Trump is an eligible candidate on Colorado's 2024 Presidential Primary."

Trump's case was the first at the Supreme Court dealing with a provision of the 14th Amendment that was adopted after the Civil War to prevent former officeholders who "engaged in insurrection" from holding office again.

Colorado's Supreme Court, in a first-of-its-kind ruling, had decided that the provision, Section 3, could be applied to Trump, who that court found incited the Capitol attack. No court before had applied Section 3 to a presidential candidate.

The justices sidestepped the politically fraught issue of insurrection in their opinions Monday, but some Trump critics pointed to the silence on that topic as a victory of sorts because the court failed to absolve him of responsibility for the Capitol riot.

The court held that states may bar candidates from state office. "But States have no power under the Constitution to enforce Section 3 with respect to federal offices, especially the Presidency," the court wrote.

While all nine justices agreed that Trump should be on the ballot, there was sharp disagreement from the three liberal members of the court and a milder disagreement from conservative Justice Amy Coney Barrett that their colleagues went too far in determining what Congress must do to disqualify someone from federal office.

Justices Sonia Sotomayor, Elena Kagan and Ketanji Brown Jackson said they agreed that allowing the Colorado decision to stand could create a "chaotic state by state patchwork" but said they disagreed with the majority's finding a disqualification for insurrection can only happen when Congress enacts legislation. "Today, the majority goes beyond the necessities of this case to limit how Section 3 can bar an oath-breaking insurrectionist from becoming President," the three justices wrote in a joint opinion.

It's unclear whether the ruling leaves open the possibility that Congress could refuse to certify the election of Trump or any other presidential candidate it sees as having violated Section 3.

Derek Muller, a law professor at Notre Dame University, said "it seems no," noting that the liberals complained that the majority ruling forecloses any other ways for Congress to enforce the provision. Rick Hasen, a law professor at the University of California-Los Angeles, wrote that it's frustratingly unclear what the bounds might be on Congress.

Hasen was among those urging the court to settle the issue so there wasn't the risk of Congress rejecting Trump under Section 3 when it counts electoral votes on Jan. 6, 2025.

"We may well have a nasty, nasty post-election period in which Congress tries to disqualify Trump but the Supreme Court says Congress exceeded its powers," he wrote.

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.

Trump had been kicked off the ballots in Colorado, Maine and Illinois, but all three rulings were on hold

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awaiting the Supreme Court's decision.

The case is the court's most direct involvement in a presidential election since *Bush v. Gore*, a decision delivered a quarter-century ago that effectively handed the 2000 election to Republican George W. Bush. And it's just one of several cases involving Trump directly or that could affect his chances of becoming president again, including a case scheduled for arguments in late April about whether he can be criminally prosecuted on election interference charges, including his role in the Capitol riot. The timing of the high court's intervention has raised questions about whether Trump will be tried before the November election.

The arguments in February were the first time the high court had heard a case involving Section 3. The two-sentence provision, intended to keep some Confederates from holding office again, says that those who violate oaths to support the Constitution are barred from various positions including congressional offices or serving as presidential electors. But it does not specifically mention the presidency.

Conservative and liberal justices questioned the case against Trump. Their main concern was whether Congress must act before states can invoke the 14th Amendment. There also were questions about whether the president is covered by the provision.

The lawyers for Republican and independent voters who sued to remove Trump's name from the Colorado ballot had argued that there is ample evidence that the events of Jan. 6 constituted an insurrection and that it was incited by Trump, who had exhorted a crowd of his supporters at a rally outside the White House to "fight like hell." They said it would be absurd to apply Section 3 to everything but the presidency or that Trump is somehow exempt. And the provision needs no enabling legislation, they argued.

Trump's lawyers mounted several arguments for why the amendment can't be used to keep him off the ballot. They contended the Jan. 6 riot wasn't an insurrection and, even if it was, Trump did not go to the Capitol or join the rioters. The wording of the amendment also excludes the presidency and candidates running for president, they said. Even if all those arguments failed, they said, Congress must pass legislation to reinvigorate Section 3.

The case was decided by a court that includes three justices appointed by Trump when he was president. They have considered many Trump-related cases in recent years, declining to embrace his bogus claims of fraud in the 2020 election and refusing to shield tax records from Congress and prosecutors in New York.

The 5-4 decision in *Bush v. Gore* case more than 23 years ago was the last time the court was so deeply involved in presidential politics. Justice Clarence Thomas is the only member of the court who was on the bench then. Thomas has ignored calls by some Democratic lawmakers to step aside from the Trump case because his wife, Ginni, supported Trump's effort to overturn the 2020 election results and attended the rally that preceded the storming of the Capitol by Trump supporters.

First over-the-counter birth control pill in US begins shipping to stores

By MATTHEW PERRONE AP Health Writer

WASHINGTON (AP) — The first over-the-counter birth control pill will be available in U.S. stores later this month, allowing American women and teens to purchase contraceptive medication as easily as they buy aspirin.

Manufacturer Perrigo said Monday it has begun shipping the medication, Opill, to major retailers and pharmacies. A one-month supply will cost about \$20 and a three-month supply will cost around \$50, according to the company's suggested retail price. It will also be sold online.

The launch has been closely watched since last July, when the Food and Drug Administration said the once-a-day Opill could be sold without a prescription. Ireland-based Perrigo noted there will be no age restrictions on sales, similar to other over-the-counter medications.

Opill is an older class of contraceptive, sometimes called minipills, that contain a single synthetic hormone, progestin, and generally carry fewer side effects than more popular combination estrogen and progestin pills.

The launch gives U.S. women another birth control option amid the legal and political battles over reproductive health, including the reversal of *Roe v. Wade*, which has upended abortion access across the

U.S. Opill's approval is unrelated to the ongoing court battles over the abortion pill mifepristone. And anti-abortion groups have generally emphasized that they do not oppose contraceptives to prevent pregnancies.

Birth control pills are available without a prescription across much of South America, Asia and Africa.

The drug's approval came despite some concerns by FDA scientists about the company's results, including whether women with certain medical conditions would understand that they shouldn't take the drug.

Dr. Verda Hicks, president of the American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists, in a statement, said studies have shown that patients, including adolescents, can effectively screen themselves to use the pills.

Trillions of gallons leak from aging drinking water systems, further stressing shrinking US cities

By TAMMY WEBBER Associated Press

Trillions of gallons are lost from aging drinking water systems across the U.S., underscoring an economic and public health reckoning after decades of deferred maintenance and disinvestment that leave some communities struggling to provide reliable service.

The problem is especially acute in older industrial and rural areas in the eastern half of the country that have experienced significant population and industrial decline that leave behind poorer residents, vacant neighborhoods and too-large water systems.

In the Detroit enclave of Highland Park, where the population halved in the past 20 years, an estimated 70% of the water is lost from pipes up to 120 years old. Several Chicago suburbs likely are losing more than 40% of water. And some Georgia systems are losing more than 80% of their treated drinking water, said Sunil Sinha, a water researcher at Virginia Tech.

A January cold snap caused water line breaks in dozens of communities, including Memphis, Tennessee, and an Arkansas town that was without water for two weeks. But systems crack and leak year-round.

Jackson, Mississippi's system almost collapsed in August 2022, leaving many of the 150,000 residents without water for weeks. Even before that, it was losing an estimated 65% of water, including millions of gallons gushing from broken pipes for years, said Ted Henifin, the water system's federally appointed third-party manager.

"The waste and cost to ratepayers if you're losing 50 or 60 percent of your water, it's enough to make your blood boil," said Eric Oswald, drinking water director at Michigan's Department of Environment, Great Lakes and Energy. He said water loss affects many shrinking and older Michigan communities.

Yet water loss has drawn less scrutiny than issues like lead service lines and overflowing sewers, although it has serious consequences: Communities buy or treat far more water than they otherwise would; water in oversized systems can become stagnant, requiring lines to be flushed; and loss of pressure from pipe breaks can allow contamination to enter the system.

Experts say investment often is deferred because raising water rates is unpopular, but also because it's difficult to borrow money and struggling communities must spend scarce resources on other needs, such as fire protection and police.

Such communities often are "between a rock and a hard place," said John C. Young, who helped manage Flint, Michigan's recovery efforts after its lead crisis. He now oversees the water and sewer board in Prichard, Alabama, — which loses about 60% of its treated water — after it was sued for defaulting on a \$55 million loan.

There is no comprehensive accounting of water loss nationally, and no federal regulations require communities to control it, said Virginia Tech's Sinha, who along with the U.S. Geological Survey is studying the nation's water loss.

It's often called "nonrevenue water," meaning it goes unbilled, like water used for firefighting. But in many older towns, most lost water is probably seeping from the system, experts said.

About a dozen states require water systems to report losses, including Georgia, where some communi-

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ties lose 85% or more, Sinha said. Limiting losses to 10% or less is a reasonable goal, he said.

"If you are losing 30%, 40% or 50% ... why (is it not) shocking?" he said.

Illinois officials want to hire staff to ensure communities using Lake Michigan water annually report use and loss. The state has no certified records after 2017, when several communities reported significant nonrevenue water — up to 52% in Maywood, west of Chicago.

"It's a huge problem because infrastructure is rapidly deteriorating," said Loren Wobig, director of water resources at the Illinois Department of Natural Resources.

Yet struggling communities often are at a disadvantage when seeking funding.

They can't rely solely on higher water rates, because shrinking population and industry leave too few customers, and those who remain usually are poorer and minority.

In Prichard, which has lost 60% of its population, water users saw a 22% rate increase last year that hasn't generated enough revenue to run the system, let alone fix it, said Young, the receiver.

Struggling communities' leaders say obtaining funding is difficult, including when matching funds are required. Communities also suffer when bond ratings are downgraded, making it difficult to borrow money for infrastructure. And some have variable interest rates that can hurt them in the long run, said Saqib Bhatti, co-executive director of the Action Center on Race and the Economy.

"It's really a downward spiral," Bhatti said. "For cities where the population is shrinking and there are high rates of poverty — predominantly black and brown cities — it becomes really hard to actually come up with the money for those investments."

Despite billions in available federal and state infrastructure grants and low- and zero-interest loans, disadvantaged communities often lack staff, money or expertise to complete reports required of applicants.

Many poor communities like Prichard will need state and federal money that they don't have to repay to supplement other measures, said Young.

Jackson received \$600 million in federal funding. In Highland Park, Michigan, the state brokered a proposed deal to provide \$70 million.

Even so, many communities will continue to struggle unless they shrink infrastructure or attract new residents and industry.

Downsizing is difficult for logistical reasons and because neighborhoods targeted likely would be majority African-American areas that saw little investment, said Joseph Schilling, senior researcher at the Urban Institute.

"When you have a long legacy of environmental injustice, racial segregation and exclusionary zoning, any new initiatives have to be done with the community," Schilling said.

Some Prichard officials want to move residents from Alabama Village, where almost one-fifth of the city's water loss is thought to be occurring and three dozen houses remain out of more than 100. They say it could also create opportunities for redevelopment.

That angers residents, who say they weren't told about the water loss even as utility bills climbed or about health risks from low water pressure, said attorney Roger Varner, who sued on behalf of city residents.

"Those are the ones who have been wronged the most because they're saying, 'Wait, wait. I pay my water bill, I paid off my home, I've got every right to be here and you're telling me because you haven't done your job I have to ... move?'" said Varner.

Many struggling cities won't consider downsizing water systems because they hope industry and residents will return, said Oswald from Michigan's environment department.

"You don't want to cast doubt on those kinds of grandiose plans," he said. "But ... we've got systems that have 300 percent more capacity than the water they deliver."

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 used to be an outgoing boy, she said, and he's clever like his late father, who was an engineer. Now he's often withdrawn and breaks into tears easily. He wonders why they don't have a home like the kids he sees on YouTube.

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 broke out. But he says he doesn't want to go to kindergarten anymore because he's afraid to leave his aunt's side.

His flight 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, including in Iraq and Afghanistan.

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.

When the war in Gaza erupted in October, Montanti knew she had to help. "But quite frankly, I said, 'How? How will I ever get these kids out when they can't even get out of Gaza?'"

Montanti had never laid eyes on Omar, but she understood that children like him were being severely wounded every day.

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. Some 1,200 people were killed and about 250 taken hostage.

Israel has laid waste to much of Gaza in response. In less than five months of war, Israel's military has created a staggering humanitarian crisis and 80% of Gaza's 2.3 million people have fled their homes. One assessment suggests half of the coastal enclave's buildings have been damaged or destroyed.

The number of people killed in Gaza rose above 30,000 Thursday, with more than 70,000 wounded, the Health Ministry said. The ministry does not differentiate between civilians and combatants in its figures 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.

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Two weeks into the war, Omar's family narrowly escaped death. Minutes before it was flattened by an Israeli airstrike, they evacuated the Gaza City apartment they'd bought just months earlier. His aunt's family rushed out of the building next door. It too was bombed.

Homeless, 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, in central Gaza. The explosion peeled the skin from his face, exposing raw pink layers peppered with deep lacerations. His left arm could not be saved below the elbow. His parents, 6-year-old sister, grandparents, two aunts and a cousin were killed.

Omar was pinned beneath the rubble as rescuers dug with their hands through soot-blackened concrete. Finally they reached his little body, still warm, bleeding but somehow alive, and lifted him to safety. He was the only survivor.

As the weeks passed, Omar lay on a bed in a hospital corridor with his arm wrapped in bandages — even as his child's mind somehow imagined it might grow back. The collapsing health care system in Gaza could provide only rudimentary care for the burns on his leg and torso.

"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 humanitarian team in Gaza.

Israel and Egypt have tightly restricted the movement of people out of Gaza, allowing just a few hundred to exit each day, mostly those with foreign citizenship. Some Palestinians have been able to get out by using private brokers. The World Health Organization says 2,293 patients — 1,498 wounded and 795 who were ill — have left Gaza for medical treatment, with 1,625 companions. Roughly 8,000 more are on a waiting list, the U.N. refugee agency says.

Chouiki began reaching out to contacts in the Palestinian, Israeli and Egyptian governments. He got new passports issued for Omar and Abu Kuwaik, and Israeli security clearance for the aunt to accompany her nephew from Gaza to Egypt.

Abu Kuwaik was taking a leap of faith. Permission to leave Gaza came while Montanti was still working to get U.S. government approval for Omar to fly to New York.

"He cried and cried and begged me to take him back to my kids," Abu Kuwaik said. "Eventually we got him into the ambulance and drove toward the border."

After waiting nervously while their paperwork was examined, they were loaded into an Egyptian ambulance and whisked across the Sinai desert.

Once safely in 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.

Omar's wounds are healing, but he remains deeply traumatized. At Shriners Children's Hospital in Philadelphia, he had skin graft surgery for the severe burn on his leg. A constellation of gray shrapnel scars remain scattered across his face, looking almost like freckles.

He was eager to be fitted with his new prosthetic arm, and approached it as it lay on a table Wednesday, smiling mischievously as he reached out to touch it. "My arm is nice."

"The kids, they feel whole," Montanti said. "Psychologically it means so much."

Shriners is currently treating two other kids from Gaza, one an American citizen trapped there when the war began. There are plans to bring another child from Gaza, a 2-year-old boy whose leg was amputated above the knee. He'll be accompanied by his mother, leaving behind family for the sake of her child.

Omar and his aunt boarded a plane back to Cairo a day after the boy got his arm. With them was a member of her extended family who has a home in Egypt, where they'll stay while trying to secure 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. And the flimsy tent they share with 40 others of-

fers 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." Her family often has to walk to the Kuwaiti Hospital, a hub for journalists, to get a signal.

After coming back 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 return to.

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

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 a 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 — 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 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-lonelines' 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.

Claudine Gay's resignation in January as Harvard's first Black president following accusations of antisemitism 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 reinvention.

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.

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"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."

6 in 10 US adults doubt mental capability of Biden and Trump, AP-NORC poll finds

By JOSH BOAK and AMELIA THOMSON-DEVEAUX Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — A poll finds that a significant share of U.S. adults doubt the mental capabilities of 81-year-old President Joe Biden and 77-year-old Donald Trump, the former president and current Republican front-runner in what could be a rematch of the 2020 election.

More than 6 in 10 (63%) say they're not very or not at all confident in Biden's mental capability to serve effectively as president, turning his coming State of the Union address into something of a real-time audition for a second term. A similar but slightly smaller share (57%) say that Trump lacks the memory and acuity for the job.

The findings from a new survey by The Associated Press-NORC Center for Public Affairs Research point to a tough presidential election in which issues such as age and mental competence could be more prevalent than in any other political contest in modern times.

People's views of Biden's memory and acuity have soured since January 2022, when about half of those polled expressed similar concerns. (That survey didn't ask a similar question about Trump.)

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%). And Democrats are generally more concerned about Biden's mental capabilities than Republicans are with Trump's, raising the stakes of Biden's upcoming speech to a joint session of Congress on Thursday.

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.

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 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."

Trillions of gallons leak from aging drinking water systems, further stressing shrinking US cities

By TAMMY WEBBER Associated Press

PRICHARD, Ala. (AP) — Water bubbles up in streets, pooling in neighborhoods for weeks or months. Homes burn to the ground if firefighters can't draw enough water from hydrants. Utility crews struggle to fix broken pipes while water flows through shut-off valves that don't work.

For generations, the water infrastructure beneath this southern Alabama city was corroding, cracking and failing — out of sight and seemingly out of mind — as the population shrank and poverty rose. Until it became impossible to ignore.

Last year residents learned a startling truth: Prichard loses over half, sometimes more than 60%, of the drinking water it buys from nearby Mobile, according to a state environmental report that said "the state of disrepair of Prichard's water lines cannot be overstated." Residents and experts say it also imposes a crippling financial burden on one of the state's poorest cities, where more than 30% live in poverty.

"It's a heartbreaking situation," said community activist Carletta Davis, recounting how residents have been shocked by monthly water bills totaling hundreds or thousands of dollars. "I see people struggling with whether or not they have to pay their water bills or whether or not they can buy food or whether or not they can get their medicine."

Prichard's situation is dire, but hardly unique.

Across the U.S., trillions of gallons of drinking water are lost every year, especially from decrepit systems in communities struggling with significant population loss and industrial decline that leave behind poorer residents, vacant neighborhoods and too-large water systems that are difficult to maintain.

Jackson, Mississippi, was already losing an estimated 65% of its water — including millions of gallons that had been gushing from broken pipes for years, turning some areas into wetlands — when the system almost collapsed in 2022, said Ted Henifin, the water system's federally appointed third-party manager.

Many communities — especially older industrial and rural areas in the eastern half of the country — are facing a similar economic and public health reckoning after decades of deferred maintenance and disinvestment, experts say.

In the Detroit enclave of Highland Park, where the population halved in the past 20 years and is 83%

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smaller than its 1930s heyday, an estimated 70% of the water is lost from pipes up to 120 years old. Several Chicago suburbs likely are losing more than 40% of water. And some Georgia systems are losing more than 80% of their treated drinking water, said Sunil Sinha, a water researcher at Virginia Tech.

A January cold snap caused water line breaks in dozens of communities where aging infrastructure could no longer withstand freezing temperatures, including Memphis, Tennessee, and an Arkansas town that had no water for two weeks. But systems crack and leak year-round as time and neglect take a toll.

Yet water loss has drawn less public scrutiny than issues like lead service lines and overflowing sewer systems, although it also has significant consequences: Communities buy or treat far more water than they otherwise would, passing costs to customers; water in oversized systems moves more slowly and can become stagnant, requiring lines to be flushed to prevent bacteria buildup, which wastes more water; and loss of pressure from pipe breaks can allow contamination to enter the system.

"The waste and cost to ratepayers if you're losing 50 or 60 percent of your water, it's enough to make your blood boil," said Eric Oswald, director of the drinking water division at Michigan's Department of Environment, Great Lakes and Energy. He said Michigan communities large and small are losing significant amounts of water, mainly tied to industry and population loss.

Experts say needed investment often is deferred because raising water rates to fix systems is politically unpopular, but also because it's difficult to borrow money and poorer communities often have to spend scarce resources on other needs, such as fire protection and police.

"If the choice is building a school or putting in a transmission main, you build a school," said John C. Young, a former water executive who helped manage Flint, Michigan's recovery efforts after its lead-contaminated water crisis. He recently was appointed to oversee the beleaguered Prichard water and sewer department — already shaken by an embezzlement scandal — after it was sued by a bank for defaulting on a \$55 million loan.

Struggling cities, Young said, are "kind of between a rock and a hard place."

LACK OF DATA

Lisa McGuire picked her way past charred remains of the home where she and her husband, Tony McGuire, spent 28 years, pointing out where the living room, bathroom and kitchen once stood.

She rushed home from the hospital where she was visiting her husband last April after a neighbor called her about the fire. She found Prichard firefighters standing there, an empty hose attached to a hydrant. They eventually got water from a hydrant down the street, McGuire and neighbors said, but it was too late.

"I lost everything," including two dogs that were trapped in the house and now are buried under a tree in the backyard, McGuire said, wiping away tears. "I want to come back home."

For years, water problems in the neighborhood, called Alabama Village, were obvious, especially when children waded through standing water on their way to school or when water pressure was too low to take a shower, residents say.

Last year, reports from an engineering firm and the Alabama Department of Environmental Management said almost one-fifth of Prichard's water loss was in Alabama Village, which once had more than a hundred homes but now only has three dozen.

But the city still doesn't know precisely where the rest of the water is being lost.

In fact, many cities, towns and states don't know exactly how much water disappears after being treated, or why. It's called "nonrevenue water" because it's not being billed, including water used for firefighting and filling municipal swimming pools — or when meters fail or residents and businesses connect illegally. But in many older towns, like Prichard, most lost water is probably leaking from the system, said Young, the court-appointed receiver.

There is no comprehensive accounting of water loss nationally, and no federal regulations requiring communities to control it, said Sinha, the Virginia Tech researcher, who is working with the U.S. Geological Survey on a study to quantify the scope of the nation's water loss.

About a dozen states require water systems to report losses, including Georgia, where some communities report losses of 85% or more, Sinha said. At first, he thought there had been a mistake, but "Georgia

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(environmental officials) said, 'No, that is real.'"

Even smaller losses should be unacceptable, said Sinha, noting some communities that draw and treat their own water don't regard losses as an emergency because it's cheaper than fixing leaks. Limiting losses to 10% should be the goal, he said.

"If you are losing 30%, 40% or 50% ... why (is it not) shocking?" he said. "I mean, what kind of society is it?"

In Illinois, communities getting water from Lake Michigan are required to annually report use and loss, but the state has no certified records after 2017, when several places reported significant levels of non-revenue water — up to 52% in Maywood, west of Chicago.

The state gets an annual water allotment under the Great Lakes Compact, so losses could affect whether additional communities can draw water in the future.

State officials are trying to hire staff to enforce the reporting requirement, while water loss continues to worsen in old and shrinking Chicago suburbs.

"It's a huge problem because infrastructure is rapidly deteriorating," said Loren Wobig, director of the office of water resources at the Illinois Department of Natural Resources. "It needs attention and it needs it now."

FUNDING CHALLENGES

Yet struggling communities with the worst water systems often are at significant disadvantage when it comes to fixing problems.

They can't rely solely on higher water rates, because shrinking population and industry leave too few customers on distribution systems built for much larger communities. Experts say those who remain usually are poorer and minority residents, who already spend a greater portion of income on water and power, meaning rate increases can trigger more water theft and population loss.

In Prichard, which has lost 60% of its peak population and where many downtown buildings are vacant, water users saw a 22% rate increase last year that hasn't come close to generating enough revenue to run the system, let alone fix it, said Young, the receiver. He's conducting an affordability study and established a program to assist residents struggling to pay water and sewer bills.

Adding to the challenges: Costs escalate every year that maintenance and replacement is deferred. But leaders of struggling communities say the cards have been stacked against them.

Prichard Mayor Jimmy Gardner said some loans and grants require recipients to match the funding, which would mean diverting money from other needs.

"I always tell people ... follow the dollars and where they're going and what communities they are going in, and you will find that in most states ... the underserved and underrepresented communities are not getting those dollars," Gardner said.

Cities also suffer when their bond ratings are downgraded — sometimes even when they haven't missed payments — making it more difficult to borrow or repay money for infrastructure fixes. And some have been talked into variable interest rates that hurt them in the long run, said Saqib Bhatti, co-executive director of the Action Center on Race and the Economy.

"It's really a downward spiral," Bhatti said. "For cities where the population is shrinking and there are high rates of poverty — predominantly black and brown cities that have historically been underinvested in — it becomes really hard to actually come up with the money for those investments."

Some communities have faced mismanagement allegations, including in Prichard, where several former Water Works and Sewer Board employees are charged with embezzling money. But the system is so precarious — with an annual operating deficit of \$5 million and hundreds of millions in capital improvement needs — that the alleged corruption had almost no impact, Young said.

Despite billions in available federal and state infrastructure grants and low- and zero-interest loans, disadvantaged communities often lack staff, money or expertise to complete audits and engineering reports required of applicants. The Environmental Protection Agency has established a technical assistance program to help.

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For Prichard and many other poor communities, state and federal money that doesn't have to be repaid will be needed to supplement other measures, said Young, who plans to ask the EPA "for as much as I can get" for Prichard.

Jackson, for example, has received \$600 million in federal funding. And Michigan recently brokered a proposed deal that includes \$70 million to upgrade Highland Park's water infrastructure, including replacing water mains and service lines. The city, which buys Lake Huron water, had been in a years-long dispute over \$58 million in unpaid water bills.

DIFFICULT CHOICES

Angela Adams drives around potholes, past mounds of household debris and abandoned houses, and sometimes through flooded streets to reach her home of 30 years in Prichard's Alabama Village.

She never considered leaving, even as neighbors died or moved away, roads turned from asphalt to dirt and houses were torn down or burned. Her fondest memories are here, where she raised three children and loves watching squirrels and woodpeckers in her large, fenced yard.

But now, there's talk of seizing residents' property and paying them to move to help stem the city's water loss and create redevelopment opportunities. The city already has banned additional water hookups in the neighborhood, where water has been flowing from a faulty water main into the city's sewer system, making it difficult to adequately treat waste.

"I'm at an age where I'm planning on retiring. I'm too old to go buy another house," said Adams, 59, who said a leaky city water line flooded her back yard last year. "All I want to do is sit on my front porch, drink my coffee and mind my business like I've been doing."

Advocates for moving residents include the mayor, who said it could allow the city to redevelop the area, perhaps to store shipping containers for nearby ports. Developers have expressed an interest, but "if we move someone, we need to make sure we're placing them somewhere ... where they can continue to live a wholesome life."

The idea of moving is particularly infuriating to residents who say they were never told about the extent of water loss even as utility bills climbed, or about health risks from low water pressure, said attorney Roger Varner, who filed a class action lawsuit on behalf of city residents. They shouldn't lose homes, some in families for generations, because of lack of investment and mismanagement, he said.

"Those are the ones who have been wronged the most because they're saying, 'Wait, wait. I pay my water bill, I paid off my home, I've got every right to be here and you're telling me because you haven't done your job I have to ... move?'" said Varner.

Even so, Young, who now oversees Prichard's water and sewer system, said moving residents from Alabama Village — built more than 80 years ago to house local shipyard workers — must be considered to save money and possibly generate revenue. He's also exploring whether a private company might partner with Prichard to run the system, whether the nearby Mobile Area Water and Sewer System might take it over, or whether a treatment plant could be built so the city could draw and process its own water.

Shrinking water infrastructure is rare because of logistical challenges and because neighborhoods most likely targeted often are majority African-American areas that saw little investment, said Joseph Schilling, senior researcher at the Urban Institute.

"In places like Flint, where the whole city was traumatized by environmental injustices, it's hard to talk about decommissioning infrastructure," said Schilling. "When you have a long legacy of environmental injustice, racial segregation and exclusionary zoning, any new initiatives have to be done with the community."

But struggling cities also resist talk of downsizing water systems because they hold out hope industry and residents will return, said Oswald from the Michigan environment department.

"You don't want to cast doubt on those kinds of grandiose plans but, I mean, we've got systems that have 300 percent more capacity than the water they deliver," he said. "It's hard to maintain that, and at the end of the day it's the poor ratepayers who wind up having to subsidize it."

Young said fixing water infrastructure in America's struggling cities will take much more money and won't happen quickly.

"Because you've underinvested in this system for decades and decades ... it's going to take decades to bring it back," he said.

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 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.

John Kerry reflects on time as top US climate negotiator and 'major breakthrough' in climate talks

By SETH BORENSTEIN AP Science Writer

WASHINGTON (AP) — Time was running out and U.S. Climate Envoy John Kerry knew it.

International climate talks in mid-December were stuck with no agreement to phase out oil, gas and coal, fossil fuels that are the root cause of global warming.

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The United Nations sponsored conference official end date, a day after Kerry's 80th birthday, was fast approaching. What's more, Kerry's Chinese counterpart, Xie Zhenhua, who helped craft past deals with him, announced that he was retiring. Opportunity could be slipping away at the summit known as COP28, being held in Dubai.

"It made me bear down and get to a lot more meetings, one-on-one and otherwise, and frankly dragged a few other people into the effort to persuade and make the difference," Kerry recalled during a recent interview with The Associated Press, given ahead of his retirement this week.

In the heat of negotiations, the energy minister of Saudi Arabia, an oil-rich nation that has long opposed diplomatic attempts to limit fossil fuels, agreed on language about "transitioning away" from the carbon-belching energy supplies.

"Don't get excited yet," Kerry recalled telling himself. He had seen victories slip away at the last moment before.

This time it didn't.

Instead, the deal struck turned out to be what Kerry now calls the high point of the world's 30-year effort to curb ever-worsening climate change. All in just 48 hours.

"This was a major breakthrough," Kerry said, one that made him ready to leave his climate diplomacy job after three years. In January, Kerry announced plans to step down and Wednesday will be his last in office.

Sitting in his U.S. State Department office with cavernous ceilings, wood paneled walls festooned with modern art and photographs, Kerry reflected on his years leading America's efforts to combat climate change and detailed why he believed the Dubai agreement was so important.

In the landmark 2015 Paris Agreement, which Kerry, at the time secretary of state, signed with a granddaughter on his lap, nations were only required to enact plans they wrote up. That allowed countries like China to leave out major things, like the need to reduce emissions of methane, a powerful greenhouse gas.

"We now have an agreement globally that we have to transition away from fossil fuel, that we have to do it with urgency, immediately in this decade, beginning now, and that we have to do it by including all greenhouse gases," said Kerry.

Still, not everyone is enamored with international climate efforts so far.

"Overblown," said climate negotiations historian Joanna Depledge, referring to Kerry's assessment of Dubai as the high point of climate diplomacy.

"Have you seen oil and gas prices shift in response to the adoption of the Dubai Consensus?" Depledge of the University of Cambridge in England said in an email. "No, nor have I. We are making incremental progress. That's great. But a whole new track? No."

Depledge said Kerry will be remembered as "a force for good in the negotiations," turning the page on low points, such as previous U.S. administrations pulling out — twice — from international climate agreements.

Kerry said the second time the U.S. pulled out of an agreement, when former President Donald Trump removed America from the Paris accord soon after taking office in 2017, the country's reputation was damaged, as were international efforts to fight climate change. But today Kerry said he assures leaders of other countries that even if a candidate like Trump, who is running for re-election, were to win, "no one person can reverse what the world is doing now."

"Why? Because the marketplace writ large all around the world, presidents, prime ministers, monarchs, kings, leaders of countries have all decided they're moving in this direction, some at a different pace. But they are moving," Kerry said.

It's "a vast change in the marketplace," he added.

Despite stepping down as America's top climate negotiator, Kerry won't completely leave the climate scene. He plans to attend the next round of negotiations later this year in Baku, Azerbaijan, though White House senior adviser John Podesta will be leading the U.S. delegation.

Kerry said he hopes to shift from making deals to making them work.

Putting into action plans to reduce the use of fossil fuels and increase renewable energies is key and won't be done so much by the public sector, where Kerry has spent nearly half a century, but instead by the private sector, he said.

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The world needs to spend \$2 trillion to \$5 trillion a year combatting climate change in various ways. However, finding that amount of money won't be easy.

"That's one of the reasons why I am so focused on the private sector," Kerry said. "The private sector does have — manages — trillions of dollars."

That Kerry wants to stay connected to climate after stepping down isn't surprising to those who have followed his career.

Rice University historian Douglas Brinkley, who wrote a 2004 biography of Kerry, said the environment isn't just a job or politics for the former U.S. senator, whose conservation interest goes back to the first Earth Day in 1970: "This has become the kind of heart and soul of what he feels he was put on the planet to do."

While Kerry will continue with climate developments in some capacity, he won't be joined by Xie, raising questions about future deals, as the relationship between the two was key in accomplishing so much.

Former United Nations climate chief Christiana Figueres said the special relationship Kerry had with his Chinese counterpart was something the modern world hasn't seen in decades. The closest analog was the Camp David accords in the 1970s that brought Israel and Egypt together, she said.

"What was very particular about their relationship was the high degree of trust," Figueres told the AP. "As we know in geopolitics, especially in the relationship between the U.S. and China over the many years, trust is not a common factor."

When China and the United States agree on a bilateral climate deal, as they did before the 2015 Paris accord and before Dubai's agreement, other countries feel more obligated to join in, Kerry said.

After inaction during the Trump administration between 2017 and 2021, Kerry, then in his late 70s and having had prostate cancer, would fly to China during the COVID-19 pandemic.

"Men in moon suits met us," Kerry recalled. "We were swabbed and separated and isolated, but we met and we worked on the climate issue and we were able to come to agreement."

Kerry's more than 40 years in the public eye, which included some agonizing lows, no doubt helped prepare him for the ups and downs of climate negotiations. After decades in the Senate, in 2004 Kerry lost the presidential election to incumbent George W. Bush.

"I simply determined to myself within a day that I wasn't going to go down a self-pitying, crying-in-your-teacup path," said Kerry, who has been characterized in the media as stiff. "I was going to go back to work and life goes on."

Though he said climate is "as close as anything else to my heart," Kerry ticked off non-climate accomplishments in his career, starting with his work as a prosecutor in Massachusetts and with YouthBuild, a program that trains young people and works on affordable housing in more than 200 communities. He also cited peace efforts in Vietnam, where his military service and protests first thrust him into public life, and El Salvador.

After so many accomplishments, in politics, diplomacy and climate, is he ready to truly retire?

"I know how to veg on a couch and watch the football games. You know, have a good time," Kerry said with little emotion. "But that doesn't last that long."

Instead, he said he is much happier when doing something constructive.

"I think our minds and our souls were meant to be that," he said.

Today in History: March 5, Stalin dies after long USSR reign

By The Associated Press undefined

Today in History

Today is Tuesday, March 5, the 65th day of 2024. There are 301 days left in the year.

Today's highlight in history:

On March 5, 1953, Soviet dictator Josef Stalin died after three decades in power.

On this date:

In 1770, the Boston Massacre took place as British soldiers who'd been taunted by a crowd of colonists

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opened fire, killing five people.

In 1849, Zachary Taylor was inaugurated as the 12th president of the United States. (The swearing-in was delayed by a day because March 4 fell on a Sunday.)

In 1868, the impeachment trial of President Andrew Johnson began in the U.S. Senate, with Chief Justice Salmon P. Chase presiding. Johnson, the first U.S. president to be impeached, was accused of "high crimes and misdemeanors" stemming from his attempt to fire Secretary of War Edwin M. Stanton; the trial ended on May 26 with Johnson's acquittal.

In 1933, in German parliamentary elections, the Nazi Party won 44 percent of the vote; the Nazis joined with a conservative nationalist party to gain a slender majority in the Reichstag.

In 1946, Winston Churchill delivered his "Iron Curtain" speech at Westminster College in Fulton, Missouri, in which he said: "From Stettin in the Baltic, to Trieste in the Adriatic, an 'iron curtain' has descended across the continent, allowing police governments to rule Eastern Europe."

In 1963, country music performers Patsy Cline, Cowboy Copas and Hawkshaw Hawkins died in the crash of their plane, a Piper Comanche, near Camden, Tennessee, along with pilot Randy Hughes (Cline's manager).

In 1970, the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons went into effect after 43 nations ratified it.

In 1979, NASA's Voyager 1 space probe flew past Jupiter, sending back photographs of the planet and its moons.

In 1982, comedian John Belushi was found dead of a drug overdose in a rented bungalow in Hollywood; he was 33.

In 1998, NASA scientists said enough water was frozen in the loose soil of the moon to support a lunar base and perhaps, one day, a human colony.

In 2004, Martha Stewart was convicted in New York of obstructing justice and lying to the government about why she'd unloaded her Imclone stock just before the price plummeted; her ex-stockbroker, Peter Bacanovic, also was found guilty in the stock scandal. (Each later received a five-month prison sentence.)

In 2013, Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez, Latin America's most vocal and controversial leader, died in Caracas at age 58 after a struggle with cancer.

In 2018, Los Angeles police arrested a man on charges that he stole Frances McDormand's Oscar trophy after the Academy Awards a night earlier; the award was returned to the actress. (The charges would later be dismissed.)

In 2020, Palestinian officials closed the Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem over fears of the coronavirus. Officials ordered a cruise ship with 3,500 people aboard to stay back from the California coast until passengers and crew could be tested; a traveler from its previous voyage died of the coronavirus.

In 2021, California relaxed guidelines for reopening outdoor venues, clearing the way for fans to attend opening-day baseball games and return to Disneyland nearly a year after coronavirus restrictions shut down major entertainment spots.

In 2022, a promised cease-fire in the Ukrainian port city of Mariupol collapsed amid scenes of terror in the besieged town. The number of people fleeing the country reached 1.4 million just 10 days after Russian forces invaded.

Today's birthdays: Actor Paul Sand is 92. Actor James B. Sikking is 90. Actor Fred Williamson is 86. Actor Samantha Eggar is 85. Actor Michael Warren is 78. Singer Eddy Grant is 76. Rock musician Alan Clark (Dire Straits) is 72. Actor-comedian Marsha Warfield is 70. Magician Penn Jillette is 69. Actor Adriana Barraza is 68. Actor Talia Balsam is 65. Rock singers Charlie and Craig Reid (The Proclaimers) are 62. Pro Football Hall of Famer Michael Irvin is 58. Actor Paul Blackthorne is 55. Rock musician John Frusciante is 54. Singer Rome is 54. Actor Kevin Connolly is 50. Actor Eva Mendes is 50. Actor Jill Ritchie is 50. Actor Jolene Blalock is 49. Model Niki Taylor is 49. Actor Kimberly McCullough is 46. Actor Karolina Wydra is 43. Singer-songwriter Amanda Shires is 42. Actor Dominique McElligott is 38. Actor Sterling Knight is 35. Actor Jake Lloyd is 35. Actor Micah Fowler is 26.