

# Groton Daily Independent

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## Monday, March 11

School Breakfast: oatmeal.  
School Lunch: Chicken nuggets, mashed potatoes.  
School Board Meeting, 6 p.m., at the Columbia Legion Hall  
Pantry Open 11 a.m. to 3 p.m.  
Senior Citizens Meet at the Groton Community Center, 1 p.m.  
Senior Menu: Tater tot hot dish, green beans, grape juice, pineapple tidbits, whole wheat bread.  
Emmanuel Lutheran: Bible Study, 6:30 a.m.  
United Methodist: PEO Meeting (outside group), 7 p.m.

## Tuesday, March 12

School Breakfast: Breakfast sandwich.  
School Lunch: Scalloped potatoes, ham steak.  
Pep Rally, 2:45 p.m., GHS Arena  
Middle School Talent Show, 7 p.m., GHS Gym  
Thrift Store open 3 p.m. to 6 p.m.  
Food Pantry open 4 p.m. to 8 p.m.  
Senior Menu: New England ham dinner, fruit, cookie, dinner roll.  
Emmanuel Lutheran: Council, 6 p.m.  
United Methodist: Bible study, 10 a.m.

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



## Wednesday, March 13

School Breakfast: French toast.  
School Lunch: Tacos.  
Senior Menu: Salisbury steak, mashed potatoes with gravy, peas, apricots, whole wheat bread.  
Emmanuel Lutheran: Soup supper, 6 p.m. (Nigeria Circle to host); Lenten worship, 7 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

## Thursday, March 14

No School - Spring Break  
State BBB Tournament at Rapid City: 7 p.m. Central Time: Groton Area vs. Hamlin  
Groton Lions Club meeting, 104 November. Main, 6 p.m.  
Senior Menu: Spaghetti with meat sauce, corn, garlic toast, chocolate cake, fruit.

## **OPEN:** Recycling Trailer in Groton

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

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# 1440

In partnership with **smartasset**

The first US military vessel carrying construction supplies to build a temporary dock along the Gazan coast set off from Virginia Saturday, headed toward the Middle East. It marks the first step of a plan to directly deliver humanitarian aid to civilians in Gaza, announced by President Joe Biden during Thursday's State of the Union.

"Oppenheimer" was the big winner at the 2024 Academy Awards (also known as the Oscars, see overview here) last night, taking home the ceremony's top prize of best picture. The film also nabbed six other awards, including best actor (Cillian Murphy), best supporting actor (Robert Downey Jr.), and best director (Christopher Nolan). "Oppenheimer" (see overview and backstory) had been up for 13 Oscars in all.

OpenAI CEO Sam Altman formally rejoined the company's board of directors four months after he was temporarily booted from the company during a chaotic five-day period that stunned Silicon Valley. A third-party probe concluded Friday found no wrongdoing on Altman's part that would have justified his removal.

## Sports, Entertainment, & Culture

The Czech Republic's Krystyna Pyszková crowned Miss World 2024; Yasmina Zaytoun of Lebanon named runner-up.

US women's national soccer team tops Brazil 1-0 to win 2024 CONCACAF Gold Cup.

Last week's State of the Union address pulls in 32 million viewers, up 18% from 2023. "Kung Fu Panda 4" leads weekend box office with \$58M as "Dune: Part Two" crosses \$157M in total box office receipts in its second week.

## Science & Technology

US health regulators delay approval for closely watched Alzheimer's treatment donanemab; clinical trials showed 35% slowing of cognitive decline, more than double the incidence of brain swelling versus a placebo.

Restored coral reefs—where new coral is transplanted into damaged reefs—can grow as quickly as healthy reefs within four years of planting, new study shows.

Computer scientists discover new method to multiply large matrices (data sets with many rows and columns); approach likely to lead to efficiency gains and lower power usage for applications like ChatGPT.

## Business & Markets

Markets close down Friday (Dow -0.2%, S&P 500 -0.7%, Nasdaq -1.2%); tech-heavy Nasdaq driven down by Nvidia drop (-5.5%), Dow finishes worst week since October. HelloFresh shares drop 42% on worse-than-expected decline in revenue.

Justice Department opens criminal probe into January door blowout incident aboard a Boeing 737 Max. Boeing says documents related to removal of key bolts during assembly either were lost or never filed.

India to lift tariffs on imports from the European Free Trade Association—made up of Switzerland, Norway, Iceland, and Liechtenstein—in exchange for \$100B from the four nations over the next 15 years.

## Politics & World Affairs

US military evacuates nonessential embassy personnel from Haiti. The US, the UK, and France shoot down 28 Houthi drones in the Red Sea. Pope calls for Ukrainians to wave "white flag" and end war with Russia.

French President Emmanuel Macron endorses bill that would allow France to engage in medically assisted deaths, joining Switzerland, Belgium, and the Netherlands; bill will go to parliament in May.

Irish voters reject government-proposed referendums to redefine parts of the constitution; first proposal was to redefine families to include nonmarried partners, second would have scrapped phrase on women's "life within the home".

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## Weekly Vikings Roundup

By Jordan Wright

NFL free agency starts this week – and may have already begun depending on when you are reading this. Last week we evaluated the offensive side of the ball, so this week we turn our attention to the defense.

**Defensive Line** – After Mike Zimmer left in 2022, the Vikings switched from a 4-3 defense to a 3-4 alignment. The 3-4 defense attempts to counter the offensive line with only three defensive linemen (a nose tackle and two defensive ends), which allows an extra defender to rush the passer or drop into coverage. In theory, it's a great scheme – but only if the defense has the correct type of players to run it. Unfortunately for the Vikings, they don't. Harrison Phillips is the best defensive lineman on the roster, but he has been asked to play out of position at nose tackle. If the Vikings can acquire a true nose tackle and move Phillips to defensive end, it would go a long way toward improving the defensive line. Besides Phillips, the Vikings have Jaquelin Roy, Dean Lowry, Patrick Jones, and Andre Carter II on the D-line – none of whom are difference-makers.

**Outside Linebacker** – The other change in a 3-4 defense involves the pass rushers. In a 4-3, pass rushers were labeled as defensive ends and usually lined up on the defensive line with their hands in the dirt. In a 3-4 defense, those players are moved to the outside linebacker position, where they can either rush the passer or drop into coverage. Last season Danielle Hunter and D.J. Wonnum were the starting OLB, but they are both free agents this offseason, so finding pass rushers will be a top priority for the Vikings.

**Inside Linebacker** – Last season, Jordan Hicks and undrafted rookie Ivan Pace Jr. were the team's primary inside linebackers. Hicks was playing well until an injury forced him to miss four games, but he will be 32 years old when the season starts and he is currently a free agent. Ivan Pace Jr. played well as a rookie and will enter training camp penciled in as one of the two starting inside linebackers. Luckily for the Vikings, the inside linebacker position has been de-valued in the modern NFL, so finding another capable starter in free agency won't be terribly expensive.

**Cornerback** – One of the few positions on the team that has good depth, cornerback will be low on the list of needs this offseason. Byron Murphy was brought in a year ago and is a capable starter, but the other CB position is wide open. Andrew Booth Jr. was a second-round pick in 2022 but has only managed to start two games these past two seasons. Akayleb Evans, a fourth-round pick from that same draft, started 15 games last season but saw a decline in play as the year rolled on. Mekhi Blackmon, a third-round pick in the 2023 draft, worked his way up the depth chart and eventually started three games last season. Those three players will be in the mix to be a starter this season, while A.J. Green, Theo Jackson, NaJee Thompson, Jay Ward, Jaylin Williams, and Joejuan Williams will battle it out to make the final roster.

**Safety** – Harrison Smith has been one of the best safeties in the league since he was drafted in 2012, but he is 35 years old and has a massive cap hit this year (\$19.2M) and next year (\$22M). I expect we'll hear something any day now regarding Smith, whether that is him retiring or the team asking him to take a pay cut. Camryn Bynum is the other starting safety for the Vikings and has started every game the past two seasons. Josh Metellus could be considered the team's third starting safety. Metellus was the team's Swiss army knife, lining up all over the field from safety to slot cornerback to linebacker and even some snaps as a pass rusher. Lewis Cine is the other safety on the roster, and to say he has been a disappointment would be an understatement. In the 2022 draft, the Vikings were in position to draft safety Kyle Hamilton, who is already considered one of the best safeties in the league. Instead, the team decided to trade down and draft Lewis Cine. Before his horrific injury in week four of the 2022 season, Cine was relegated to special teams. Although he was healthy to begin the 2023 season, he still couldn't see the field on defense, as he was a healthy scratch 10 games last season and didn't get any snaps on defense until week 17. Luckily, if Harrison Smith leaves, there are a ton of good sa

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## The Life of Alvera Weisenberger



Memorial Services for Alvera Weisenberger, 88, of Groton will be 10:30 a.m., Tuesday, March 12th at Paetznick-Garness Funeral Chapel, Groton. Rev. Jeremy Yeadon will officiate. Inurnment will follow in St. John's Lutheran Cemetery, Bowdle. Vera passed away March 6, 2024 at her home in Groton.

Alvera Ramona Bauer was born on September 16, 1935 in Bowdle to Andrew and Lena (Bear) Bauer. She attended school in Bowdle. On November 1, 1953 she was united in marriage with LeRoy Weisenberger at the Lutheran Church in Bowdle. The couple made their home in Groton and were blessed with a son, Terry. Vera ran a cleaning business and drove school bus for 31 years. Outside of work, she enjoyed playing cards, collecting ceramic geese and tending to flowers in her yard, along with decorating the outside with lights. In earlier years, she was active in the Ladies Aid at St. John's Lutheran Church and liked to bowl. Vera loved to visit and have coffee with friends.

Celebrating her life is her husband of 70 years, LeRoy, her son, Terry (Judy) Weisenberger of Illinois, step-granddaughters, Caitlin Rickey, Erin Taylor and great-great grandchildren, Stanley and Everette Taylor, and her sister, Dolly (Ronnie) Dick of Aberdeen.

Preceding her in death were her parents and three brothers, Alvin, Ed and Raymond.

## 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 141<sup>st</sup> St. Watch for auction signs on:

**THURSDAY, MARCH 14<sup>th</sup>, 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](http://www.burlagepeterson.com), or contact Auctioneers.

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

**TERMS:** Visit [burlagepeterson.com](http://burlagepeterson.com) for full sale terms. Possession for 2024.

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

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PETERSON**  
Auctioneers & Realtors, LLC.



## "This Isn't the Baby Blues"

Transitioning to become a parent can be one of the most pivotal changes in a person's life. Rarely are the hard moments of this change talked about enough. For example, did you know 1 in 5 women and 1 in 10 men suffer from postpartum depression? Parents of any culture, race, age, or income level can be affected. We commonly hear and get confused about postpartum depression being the "baby blues". This is a common misconception. The baby blues are very common and happen to 80% of women in postpartum. This occurs within the first few days and lasts a few weeks. The baby blues will usually go away with rest and time.

Postpartum depression and postpartum anxiety are much more serious and will not get better without some sort of treatment. Postpartum depression and postpartum anxiety usually last weeks to months or sometimes years after childbirth, if not treated. Some of the red flags or symptoms one can look out for include: frequent shame, guilt, and sadness; feelings of rage, irritability; scary unwanted thoughts; lack of interest in caring for baby; difficulty in bonding with baby; loss of interest, joy, or pleasure in things you used to enjoy; disturbances in sleep and appetite; constant worry; racing thoughts; feelings of dread; physical symptoms like nausea, dizziness, and hot flashes; and possible thoughts of harming yourself or your baby. If you identify with any of these symptoms, please reach out to your doctor or mental health professional in your area. You know you best and if you don't feel like yourself, there is no shame in asking for help.

Becoming well and mentally healthy again are possible with treatment. Some of the common treatments for a person struggling with postpartum depression or anxiety can be seeing a counselor, medication management, bright light therapy, cognitive behavioral therapy, couples therapy, support from others, exercise, adequate sleep, healthy diet, yoga, and relaxation strategies. A healthy support network of friends/family can be so helpful for new moms and/or parents. Here are some tips on supporting your loved ones throughout this transition: Reassure her, this is not her fault, she will get better; Encourage her to talk about feelings; Help with housework without being asked; Encourage her to take some time for herself; Be realistic about what time you will be home, and come home at that time; Help her reach out to others for support; Schedule some dates with her and work together to find a babysitter; Offer simple affection and physical comfort.

There are so many resources available especially at [postpartum.net](http://postpartum.net) or by dialing 988. Please know this is a transition and transitions are temporary. With help, you can be well. Take care of yourself.

Elizabeth provides counseling for individuals and families — primarily adolescents and adults in an outpatient setting at Avera Behavioral Health in Brookings, SD. She is a certified perinatal mental health therapist and works with depression, anxiety, stress management, trauma, interpersonal conflict, adolescent issues and women's issues. She is also certified to teach Bringing Baby Home workshops through the Gottman Institute. Her practice includes trauma-informed counseling, individual dialectical behavior therapy, cognitive behavioral therapy, emotion freedom technique, and solution-focused and mindfulness strategies. Follow The Prairie Doc® at [www.prairedoc.org](http://www.prairedoc.org) and Facebook featuring On Call with the Prairie Doc® a medical Q&A show providing health information based on science, built on trust, streaming live on Facebook and SDPB most Thursdays at 7 p.m. central.



Elizabeth A. Milton, LPCC, LPC-MH, MS



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This bond was posted in 1889, prior to South Dakota even becoming a state, for \$500 for the school district to build a school house. Dale Flihs came across this historic bond which was found in a box of miscellaneous stuff from Bob Meister's house. Dale said he plans to give it to the school and is going to ask Don Donley if he could build a frame for it.



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## Spring District Legion Auxiliary Meeting held in Groton



**District 4 President Jan Seibel presented District Four Member of the Year to Marlene Eimers, Redfield Unit. Pic Madsen, Eimers, and Seibel.** (Courtesy photo from Jan Seibel)



**Unit 39 presented Emma Schinkel a Youth Hero Award for saving a boy's life at the pool this past summer. Pictured are District 4 President Jan Seibel, Emma Schinkel, Dept. President Patsy Madsen.** (Courtesy photo from Jan Seibel)



**Tami Zimney and Karyn Babcock, Groton Unit members, are conducting the memorial service for 18 deceased district four members.** (Courtesy photo from Jan Seibel)



**These are the Auxiliary members that were in attendance of the district meeting held Sunday, March 3 in Groton.** (Courtesy photo from Jan Seibel)

**The Auxiliary will be helping Post 39 celebrate their 105th birthday with an ice cream cake on Monday, March 11 at 7. All auxiliary and post members are encouraged to attend!**

## EARTHTALK ™

Dear EarthTalk: How does better broadband access in rural areas help the climate? P.C., via email

Broadband is another term for high-speed internet. According to the Federal Communications Commission (FCC), consumers should have access to download speeds of at least 25 Megabits per second (Mbps) and upload speeds of three Mbps to meet this definition. That's enough to browse the web, check email, and stream lower-resolution video. Giving more people access to broadband, especially in rural areas, has myriad environmental and economic benefits.

In rural areas, broadband access is limited by existing infrastructure and a lack of financial motivation for Internet service providers (ISPs) to offer services to a smaller number of subscribers. "A lot of times rural areas don't have high priority because they don't have the population threshold," says Illinois State University geography professor John Kostelnick to The Daily Yonder. Approximately 3.6 billion people worldwide don't have access to a stable internet connection, and an estimated 80 percent of those live in rural areas. The adverse effects of a lack of connection in a digital world go beyond missed social and professional opportunities. Lack of broadband access in rural areas is also harmful to the climate.

Better broadband access can reduce emissions from cars and public transit as people go online to fulfill various needs. An hour-long commute to the office is swapped for work from home. An online university allows students to study from anywhere. TeleHealth replaces a doctor's office visit. Technologies such as smart thermostats and electric water heaters can reduce energy use, particularly in older buildings.

The benefits aren't limited to individuals. Broadband is an essential tool for so-called "precision agriculture," whereby collecting and analyzing on-farm data informs decision-making for improved resource use. Nitrogen fertilizer, for instance, releases nitrous oxide, which is 300 times more potent as a greenhouse gas than carbon dioxide per ton. With precision agriculture, farmers can optimize their fertilizer application and reduce emissions, with the side benefit of improved water quality from reduced run-off. Likewise, broadband-enabled precision forestry can improve land management by sensing and deploying resources and people to minimize damage from wildfires, pests, and plant diseases.

Other options exist for increased broadband access, but choices may be limited where you live. Satellite internet is costly, spotty in bad weather, and has data caps. Mobile hotspots have data limits, too, and require cell towers. Some opt to join community networks for stable, reliable connections, where private entities collaborate with governments and communities to set up networks for underserved populations.

Barriers to broadband access include physical and regulation obstacles. Rivers and wooded regions complicate the set-up and maintenance of necessary equipment. Obtaining permits for laying cable is complex since their installation involves compliance with zoning, historic preservation, and other laws. The Bipartisan Policy Center, a non-profit that helps policymakers work across party lines to craft bipartisan solutions, calls for more attention and funding from policymakers. Federal and local governments have programs that offer incentives for ISPs in rural areas.

But continued advocacy is crucial. For instance, the FCC's Affordable Connectivity Plan provides discounts on broadband services for eligible rural households—and its future is not certain beyond 2024 unless Congress approves additional funding. Bridging the broadband access gap "creat[es] opportunities to lower net greenhouse emissions while bolstering rural economies," reports the Bipartisan Policy Center. Individuals can narrow the digital divide by engaging with local groups, pushing for policy changes, putting their money into building more internet connections, and helping others learn how to use the internet. Together, these efforts will ensure everyone has access to the opportunities and benefits of digital connectivity while contributing to a greener future.



**Giving people in rural areas access to broadband Internet allows for more telecommuting and as such saves on carbon emissions.** Credit: Julia

M. Cameron, Pexels.com.





## SOUTH DAKOTA SEARCHLIGHT

<https://southdakotasearchlight.com>

### Child care bills fail but give rise to optimism about study and task force

**BY: MAKENZIE HUBER - MARCH 10, 2024 7:00 AM**

All three bills addressing the child care crisis failed during this year's legislative session, but the session was still a success, said Sen. Tim Reed, R-Brookings.

Reed has been leading the legislative effort to study the problem and has formed an informal task force to find potential solutions. The 2024 legislative session ended Thursday, except for a day on March 25 to consider vetoes.

South Dakota suffers an estimated \$329 million loss in productivity due to its inadequate child care landscape, according to a study from ReadyNation, a nonprofit organization focused on business and economic development across the country. South Dakota businesses aren't "producing what they want to produce" because of child care limitations, Reed told South Dakota Searchlight earlier this year.

Communities from Rapid City to Platte to Madison are struggling to keep child care facilities open and affordable for families in South Dakota. And out of the roughly 58,000 children who qualify for income-based child care assistance in South Dakota, only 5% actually receive the subsidy, according to a study from South Dakota Kids Count.

Two of the failed bills would have made it easier for some low-income parents to receive child care assistance (one bill was tabled at Reed's request), and the third would have required the state Department of Social Services to conduct a study of child care costs throughout the state.

Reed said the bills making it easier for some low income parents to receive child care assistance were addressed through email conversations with the department after the bills' introduction. Child care experts alerted Reed and others that parents who are homeless and looking for a job have trouble meeting child care subsidy rules that require them to work or attend school. Additionally, parents who are afraid to contact an abusive ex may have difficulty complying with requirements to pursue child care support before qualifying for assistance.

After those discussions, Reed said there needed to be more communication from the department and awareness among child care providers and parents who qualify for assistance about what exceptions are already in place.

"I think sometimes the rules can be a little hard to decipher, but they are correct and they do state what needs to be stated," Reed told South Dakota Searchlight.

The department already studies child care in South Dakota to set its reimbursement rate for the child care assistance program. It conducts a market based study in addition to a cost analysis. The department recently started a workforce study, at the request of the governor.

Reed said the department has agreed to expand its work to meet the needs of the proposed study. The department and the task force will meet later this month to outline what is needed in the report.

"The main success is getting that child care study done, because it's going to give us the base to know what's needed and how much it's going to cost to provide so we can start disseminating that information out to the business community and everyone else," Reed said.

The study report will be published in October, Reed said, and the task force will try to finish its work at

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the same time. The group's scope will cover the state's role in supporting and regulating child care, how other states are addressing the crisis, and its economic impact. Once the study report is published, Reed plans to use the information to inform possible legislation or work with private and nonprofit partners to address the crisis outside of state government.

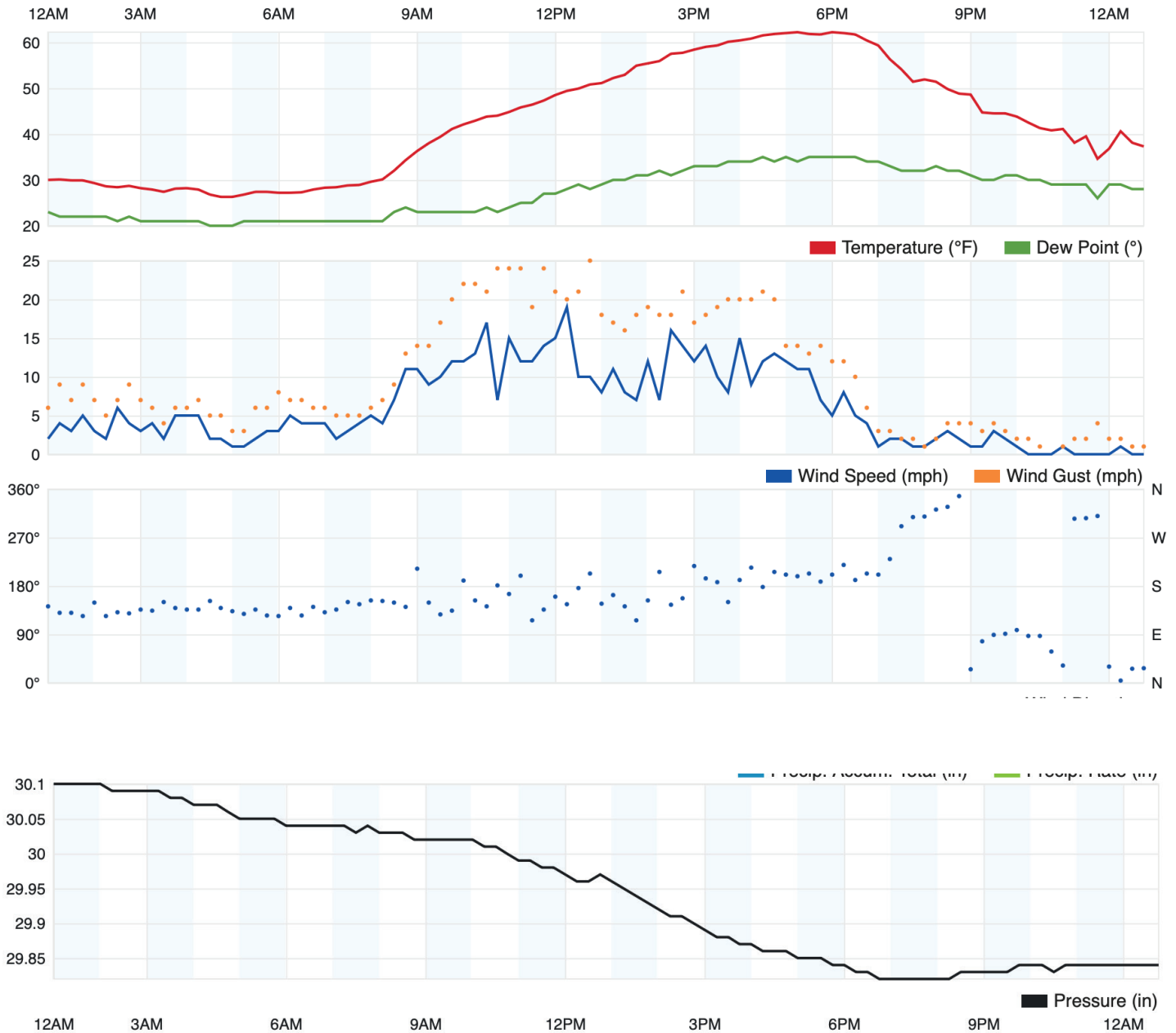
"I think this is going to be a lot more about the whole state coming together than the Legislature doing something to solve the issue," Reed said. "We don't have the funding at the state level to just start subsidizing child care more."



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## Yesterday's Groton Weather Graphs



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Today

Tonight

Tuesday

Tuesday Night

Wednesday



Mostly Sunny

High: 69 °F



Partly Cloudy

Low: 31 °F



Mostly Sunny

High: 60 °F



Mostly Cloudy

Low: 34 °F



Chance Rain

High: 52 °F



## High to Very High Fire Danger Today

March 11, 2024  
3:32 AM

Today

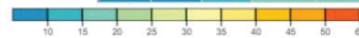
Upper 60s to Low 70s

South winds becoming North in the afternoon  
15-25 mph



### Maximum Wind Gust Forecast (mph)

	3/11 Mon						
	3am	6am	9am	12pm	3pm	6pm	9pm
Aberdeen	5	10	15	17	15	14	15
Britton	7	10	15	18	17	13	15
Brookings	5	3	7	25	26	22	8
Chamberlain	3	7	8	22	23	20	7
Clark	2	12	16	21	21	16	14
Eagle Butte	7	13	17	24	24	20	13
Ellendale	3	8	15	15	13	14	14
Eureka	13	15	17	14	18	17	12
Gettysburg	13	16	15	23	23	20	10
Huron	6	8	16	23	23	20	8
Kennebec	7	10	14	22	25	20	9
McIntosh	7	12	18	22	24	18	10
Milbank	7	7	10	16	20	15	15
Miller	6	10	13	17	21	20	9
Mobridge	7	13	10	21	22	16	9
Murdo	7	16	23	25	25	18	9
Pierre	6	8	14	21	22	16	8
Redfield	5	9	17	20	18	16	12
Sisseton	12	8	15	18	18	12	20
Watertown	5	6	12	20	22	15	14
Webster	6	12	16	20	18	13	18
Wheaton	6	6	12	17	17	13	15



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

Today will be extremely dry with highs much above average. This will increase fire danger. Tuesday will be cooler but still above average.



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## Yesterday's Groton Weather

High Temp: 62 °F at 4:58 PM

Low Temp: 26 °F at 4:53 AM

Wind: 25 mph at 10:04 AM

Precip: : 0.00

Day length: 11 hours, 45 minutes

## Today's Info

Record High: 71 in 2016

Record Low: -27 in 1948

Average High: 39

Average Low: 17

Average Precip in March.: 0.27

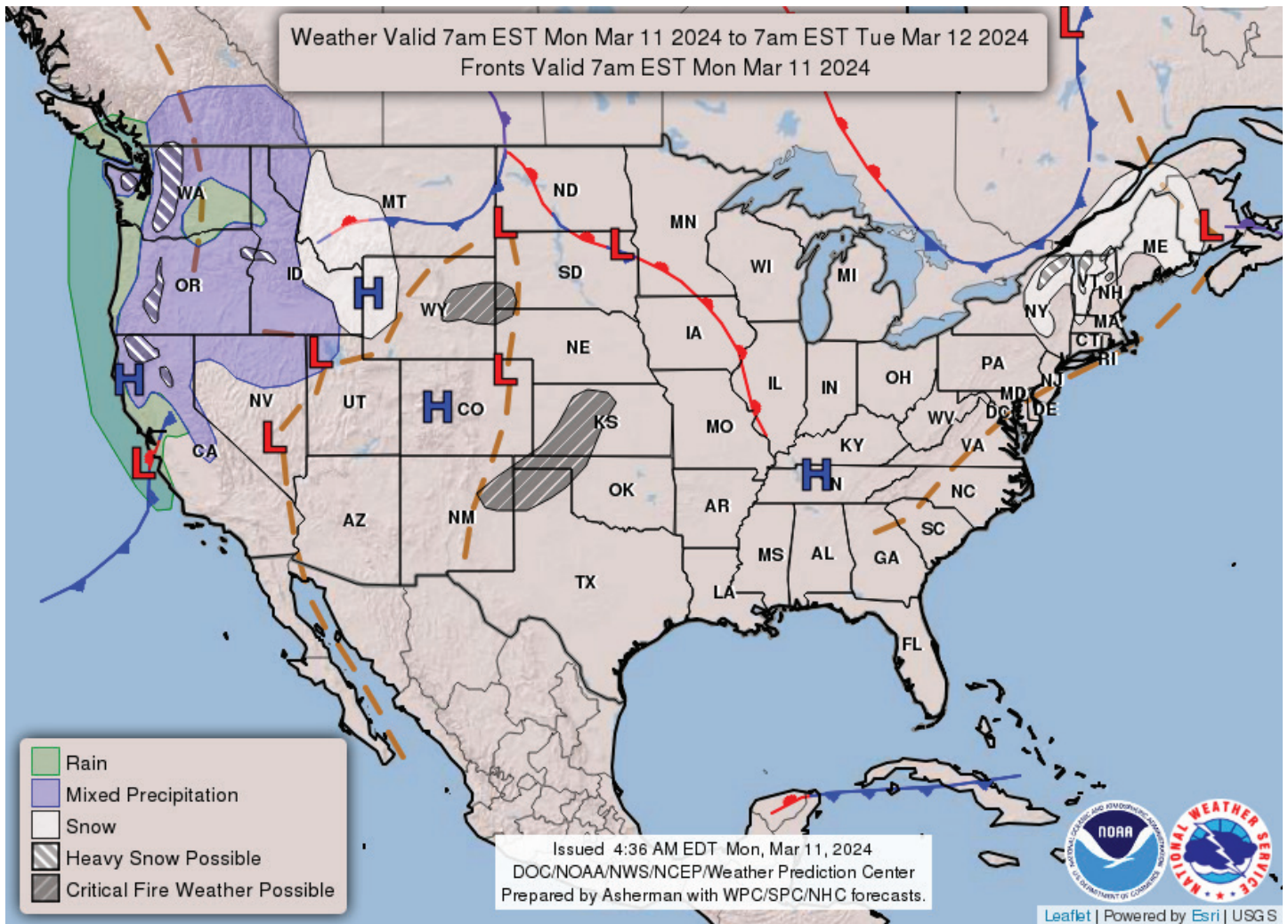
Precip to date in March: 0.00

Average Precip to date: 1.44

Precip Year to Date: 0.07

Sunset Tonight: 7:35:03 pm

Sunrise Tomorrow: 7:47:26 am



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## Today in Weather History

March 11, 1991: A developing winter storm, centered to the south of the Black Hills, caused heavy snow to fall on the northern Black Hills from the evening of March 11 until the morning of March 12. Snowfall totals of 3-9 inches were reported, including 9 inches at Custer, 8 inches at Deerfield, and 8 inches at Lead.

March 11, 2011: A very intense low-pressure area moving across North Dakota brought widespread blizzard conditions to central and northeast South Dakota. The low-pressure area brought 1 to 3 inches of snowfall to the region. The new snow combined with 30 to 50 mph winds with gusts to 60 to 70 mph brought widespread whiteout conditions. Traffic was brought to a standstill, with many motorists having to be rescued and taken to a shelter. Hundreds of cars were stranded on mainly Highway 12 and Interstate 29. Two people traveling on Highway 10 in McPherson County told about how they became stuck and were picked up by another vehicle and that it took them over 2 1/2 hours to travel just a few miles to safety. Interstate-29 was closed from Watertown to Sisseton from 6 pm on the 11th until noon on the 12th. Many events were affected, including the Girl's State Basketball Tournament in Watertown. There were several overturned semis along with several vehicle accidents across the area. Some of the highest wind gusts included 56 mph at Watertown; 58 mph at Mobridge, Sisseton, and Faulkton; 59 mph at Aberdeen; 61 mph at Bowdle; 66 mph near Hillhead, and 71 mph west of Long Lake.

1888: The Great Blizzard of 1888 paralyzed the east coast from the Chesapeake Bay to Maine on March 11 through the 14th. The blizzard dumped as much as 55 inches of snow in some areas, and snowdrifts of 30 to 40 feet were reported. An estimated 400 people died from this blizzard.

1911 - Tamarack, CA, reported 451 inches of snow on the ground, a record for the U.S. (David Ludlum)

1917: At 3:02 pm on Sunday, March 11, 1917, many New Castle lives were changed forever. In just a few terrifying minutes, 22 people were killed, hundreds were injured, 500 homes were damaged or destroyed, and many of the city's triumphant greenhouses were leveled in what would be part of \$1 million suffered in property damage.

1948 - Record cold followed in the wake of a Kansas blizzard. Lows of -25 degrees at Oberlin, Healy and Quinter established a state record for the month of March. Lows of -15 at Dodge City, -11 at Concordia, and -3 at Wichita were also March records. (The Weather Channel)

1953: An F4 tornado cut an 18-mile path through Haskell and Knox counties in Texas. Seventeen people were killed, and an eight-block area of Knox City was leveled.

1962 - One of the most paralyzing snowstorms in decades produced record March snowfalls in Iowa. Four feet of snow covered the ground at Inwood following the storm. (David Ludlum)

1987 - Unseasonably cold weather prevailed in the southeastern U.S., and a storm over the Gulf of Mexico spread rain and sleet and snow into the Appalachian Region. Sleet was reported in southern Mississippi. (The National Weather Summary)

1988 - A blizzard raged across the north central U.S. Chadron NE was buried under 33 inches of snow, up to 25 inches of snow was reported in eastern Wyoming, and totals in the Black Hills of South Dakota ranged up to 69 inches at Lead. Winds gusted to 63 mph at Mullen NE. Snow drifts thirty feet high were reported around Lusk WY. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

1989 - Twenty-one cities in the central and southwestern U.S. reported new record high temperatures for the date. The afternoon high of 95 degrees at Lubbock TX equalled their record for March. (The National Weather Summary)

1990 - Forty-four cities in the central and eastern U.S. reported record high temperatures for the date. Record highs included 71 degrees at Dickinson ND and Williston ND, and 84 degrees at Lynchburg VA, Charleston WV and Huntington WV. Augusta GA and Columbia SC tied for honors as the hot spot in the nation with record highs of 88 degrees. A vigorous cold front produced up to three feet of snow in the mountains of Utah. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

2006 - Phoenix's record run for dry days finally ends at 143 days. The last measured rain fell on October 18, 2005. Not only did the rain break the dry spell, the 1.40 inches that fell was a record amount for the date.

2011: On March 11, 2011, a 9.0 magnitude earthquake off the Pacific coast of Japan generated a tsunami. This series of ocean waves sped towards the island nation, with waves reaching 24 feet high. The result was devastation and utter destruction.



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Daily Devotionals

## Seeds of Hope

### **RUINED BUT RECLAIMED**

One of the most magnificent statues in the world is David. It is considered by many to be the masterpiece of Michelangelo. The story of its completion, however, is far different from that of its beginning.

The block of marble from which he fashioned the statue was once marred and discarded by another artist. It had been so mutilated that it was cast aside as worthless.

When Michelangelo looked at the piece of marble, he saw possibilities and promises - not something that had been rejected because someone thought it was ruined. And, from what others trashed, he brought forth a real treasure.

It is like those of us who become Christians. We "become new persons... (We) are not the same anymore for the old life is gone. A new life has begun!"

It is difficult to grasp the reality of that verse of Scripture. Perhaps it is because our size does not change, and our shape remains the same. But, the moment we are born again, the Holy Spirit gives us a new life, and we are "made new" on the inside. Then, through the power of the Holy Spirit, we are empowered to think differently, see things differently, and act differently because "a new life has begun."

Once our lives were a shambles, shaped and scarred by sin. But the God of all creation recreated us. Now, all things in us and about us are new!

Prayer: Thank You, Heavenly Father, that You took us, recreated us, and gave us a new life. Your grace has transformed us into Your likeness. Thank you! In Jesus' Name, Amen.

Scripture For Today: This means that anyone who belongs to Christ has become a new person. The old life is gone; a new life has begun! 2 Corinthians 5:17



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:  
03.08.24

19 20 22 47 58 1

MegaPlier: 3x

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:  
**\$735,000,000**

NEXT 1 Days 17 Hrs 29  
DRAW: Mins 16 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

### LOTTO AMERICA

WINNING NUMBERS:  
03.09.24

3 27 33 37 52 9

All Star Bonus: 3x

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:  
**\$2,100,000**

NEXT 16 Hrs 44 Mins 16  
DRAW: Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

### LUCKY FOR LIFE

WINNING NUMBERS: 03.10.24

1 6 26 36 47 4

TOP PRIZE:

**\$7,000/week**

NEXT 16 Hrs 59 Mins 16  
DRAW: Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

### DAKOTA CASH

WINNING NUMBERS:  
03.09.24

11 13 15 19 24

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

NEXT 2 Days 16 Hrs 59  
DRAW: Mins 16 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

### POWERBALL

DOUBLE PLAY

WINNING NUMBERS:  
03.09.24

41 43 49 55 67 20

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

NEXT 17 Hrs 28 Mins 16  
DRAW: Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

### POWERBALL

WINNING NUMBERS:  
03.09.24

30 36 49 52 63 16

Power Play: 5x

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:  
**\$532,000,000**

NEXT 17 Hrs 28 Mins 16  
DRAW: Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

## News from the Associated Press

### **Fidler scores 34, Omaha knock offs North Dakota in Summit League Tournament 73-72**

By The Associated Press undefined

SIOUX FALLS, S.D. (AP) — Frankie Fidler's 34 points, including the go-ahead bucket with 3.2 seconds left, led Omaha over North Dakota 73-72 on Sunday in the Summit League Tournament.

Sixth-seeded Omaha plays No. 7 seed Denver in the semifinals on Monday.

Fidler, on the left side, dribbled toward the block where he picked up his dribble, reverse-pivoted toward the baseline and the pivoted back into the lane and dropped in the winner.

Fidler also contributed 10 rebounds for the Mavericks (15-17). Marquel Sutton finished 5 of 10 from the field to add 13 points. Nick Davis had 12 points and shot 4 of 7 from the field and 4 for 9 from the free-throw line.

The Fightin' Hawks (18-14) were led in scoring by Treysen Eaglestaff, who finished with 18 points. B.J. Omot added 14 points, seven rebounds and three steals for North Dakota. Tsotne Tsartsidze finished with 13 points and four assists.

Fidler scored 12 points in the first half and Omaha went into the break trailing 36-32. Fidler's 22-point second half helped Omaha finish off the one-point victory.

### **Blue's 15 help St. Thomas knock off North Dakota State 68-58 in Summit League Tournament**

By The Associated Press undefined

SIOUX FALLS, S.D. (AP) — Kendall Blue had 15 points in St. Thomas' 68-58 victory against North Dakota State on Sunday night in the Summit League Tournament.

No. 4 seed St. Thomas plays top-seeded South Dakota State in the semifinals on Monday.

Blue shot 6 for 7, including 3 for 3 from beyond the arc for the Tommies (19-12, 1-0 Summit League). Ryan Dufault scored 14 points while shooting 5 of 6 from the field and 4 for 6 from the foul line. Carter Bjerke shot 4 for 5 from beyond the arc to finish with 12 points.

Jacari White led the Bison (15-16, 0-1) in scoring, finishing with 16 points. Noah Feddersen added 11 points, two steals and two blocks for No. 5 seed North Dakota State. Tajavis Miller also had eight points.

St. Thomas took the lead with 12:57 to go in the first half and did not relinquish it. The score was 42-22 at halftime, with Blue racking up 13 points. St. Thomas used a 10-0 run in the second half to build a 22-point lead at 59-37 with 7:58 left in the half before finishing off the win.

### **China's congress ends with a show of unity behind Xi's vision for national greatness**

By ELAINE KURTENBACH and KEN MORITSUGU Associated Press

BEIJING (AP) — China's national legislature wrapped up its annual session Monday with the usual show of near-unanimous support for plans designed to carry out ruling Communist Party leader Xi Jinping's vision for the nation.

The weeklong event, replete with meetings carefully scripted to allow no surprises, has highlighted how China's politics have become ever more calibrated to elevate Xi.

Monday's agenda lacked the usual closing news conference by the premier, the party's No. 2 leader. The news conference has been held most years since 1988 and was the one time when journalists could directly question a top Chinese leader.

The decision to scrap it emphasizes Premier Li Qiang's relatively weak status. His predecessors played

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a much larger role in leading key economic policies such as modernizing state companies, coping with economic crises and leading housing reforms that transformed China into a nation of homeowners.

The nearly 3,000-member National People's Congress approved a revised State Council law that directs China's version of the cabinet to follow Xi's vision. The vote was 2,883 to eight, with nine abstentions. Other measures passed by similarly wide margins. The most nays were recorded for the annual report of the supreme court, which was approved by a 2,834 to 44 vote.

In brief closing remarks, Zhao Leji, the legislature's top official, urged the people to unite more closely under the Communist Party's leadership "with comrade Xi Jinping at its core."

The party leaders who run the State Council used to have a much freer hand in setting economic policy, Neil Thomas, a Chinese politics fellow at the Asia Society Policy Institute, said in an emailed comment.

"Xi has been astonishingly successful in consolidating his personal hold over the party, which has allowed him to become the key decisionmaker in all policy domains," he said.

As the party champions innovation and self-reliance in technology to build a modern, wealthy economy, it is leaning heavily on more overtly communist ideology that harkens to past eras. Xi has fortified the party's role across the spectrum, from culture and education to corporate management and economic planning.

"Greater centralization of power has arguably helped Xi to improve central government effectiveness," Thomas said, "but the benefits may be outweighed by the costs of stifling political discussion, disincentivizing local innovation and more sudden policy shifts."

Along with following the guidance of Xi Jinping Thought and other party directives, developing "new quality productive forces" — a term coined by Xi last September — emerged as a catchphrase at this year's congress.

The term suggests a prioritizing of science and technology as China confronts trade sanctions and curbs on access to advanced know-how in computer chips and other areas that the U.S. and other countries deem to be national security risks.

On the diplomatic front, China kept Wang Yi as foreign minister. He had stepped back into the post last summer after his successor, Qin Gang, was abruptly dismissed without explanation after a half-year on the job.

Analysts thought the Communist Party might use the annual congress to appoint a new foreign minister and close the book on an unusual spate of political mishaps last year that also saw the firing of a new defense minister after a few months on the job.

The Organic Law of the State Council was revised for the first time since its adoption in 1982. The revision calls for the State Council to "uphold the leadership of the Communist Party of China." It also adds the governor of China's central bank to the body.

Echoing words seen in just about every proposal, law or speech made in China these days, it spells out that China's highest governing officials must adhere to the party's guiding ideology, which refers back to Marxism-Leninism and Mao Zedong Thought and culminates in Xi's philosophy on "Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for a New Era."

Alfred Wu, an expert on Chinese governance at the National University of Singapore, said the revision institutionalizes previously made changes, making it harder to reverse them. He described the congress as a "one-man show" that shows Xi's determination to create a system in which the party leads on policy, diminishing the role of the State Council and the legislature.

"His determination is very clear," Wu said. "He is willing to change everything."

During this year's congress, many provincial meetings were opened to the media for the first time since the COVID-19 pandemic, though they were carefully scripted with prepared remarks and none of the spontaneity once glimpsed in decades past.

The contrast with polarized politics in the U.S. and robust debate in other democracies could not be more stark: China's political rituals, void of any overt dissent, put unity above all.

Marching orders endorsed by the congress include calls to ensure national security and social stability at a time when job losses and underpayment of wages have sparked a growing number of protests.



## **Palestinians in Gaza begin Ramadan with hunger worsening and no end in sight to the Israel-Hamas war**

By WAFAA SHURAFI and SAMY MAGDY Associated Press

RAFAH, Gaza Strip (AP) — Palestinians began fasting for Ramadan on Monday as the Muslim holy month arrived with cease-fire talks at a standstill, hunger worsening across the Gaza Strip and no end in sight to the five-month-old war between Israel and Hamas.

Prayers were held outside amid the rubble of demolished buildings late Sunday. Some people hung fairy lights and decorations in packed tent camps, and a video from a U.N.-school-turned-shelter showed children dancing and spraying foam as a man sang into a loudspeaker.

But there was little to celebrate after five months of war that has killed over 30,000 Palestinians and left much of Gaza in ruins. Families would ordinarily break the daily fast with holiday feasts, but even where food is available, there is little beyond canned goods and the prices are too high for many.

"You don't see anyone with joy in their eyes," said Sabah al-Hendi, who was shopping for food on Sunday in the southernmost city of Rafah. "Every family is sad. Every family has a martyr."

The United States, Qatar and Egypt had hoped to broker a cease-fire ahead of the normally joyous month of dawn-to-dusk fasting that would include the release of dozens of Israeli hostages and Palestinian prisoners, and the entry of a large amount of humanitarian aid, but the talks stalled last week.

Hamas is demanding guarantees that any such agreement will lead to an end to the war, while Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has vowed to continue the offensive until "total victory" against the militant group and the release of all the remaining hostages.

The war began when Hamas-led militants stormed into southern Israel on Oct. 7, killing some 1,200 people, mostly civilians, and taking around 250 hostage. Hamas is still believed to be holding around 100 captives and the remains of 30 others following an exchange last year.

The war has driven around 80% of Gaza's population of 2.3 million people from their homes and pushed hundreds of thousands to the brink of famine. Health officials say at least 20 people, mostly children, have died from malnutrition and dehydration in northern Gaza.

Israeli forces have largely sealed off the north since October, and aid groups say Israeli restrictions, ongoing hostilities and the breakdown of law and order have made it nearly impossible to safely deliver desperately needed food in much of the territory.

Israel has meanwhile vowed to expand its offensive to the southern city of Rafah, where half of Gaza's population has sought refuge, without saying where civilians would go to escape the onslaught. President Joe Biden has said an attack on Rafah would be a "red line" for him, but that the United States would continue to provide military aid to Israel.

Biden acknowledged in his annual Ramadan message that the holy month comes "at a moment of intense pain."

"As Muslims gather around the world over the coming days and weeks to break their fast, the suffering of the Palestinian people will be front of mind for many. It is front of mind for me," he said.

The United States and other countries have begun airdropping aid in recent days, but humanitarian groups say such efforts are costly and insufficient. The U.S. military has also begun transporting equipment to build a sea bridge to deliver aid, but it will likely be several weeks before it is operational.

A ship belonging to Spanish aid group Open Arms carrying 200 tons of food aid was expected to make a pilot voyage to Gaza from nearby Cyprus, though it was not clear when it would depart. Israel says it welcomes the sea deliveries and will inspect Gaza-bound cargo before it leaves Cyprus.

The ship in Cyprus is expected to take two to three days to arrive at an undisclosed location in Gaza. The food is being supplied by the World Central Kitchen, a U.S. charity founded by celebrity chef José Andrés, which said construction work on a jetty in Gaza began Sunday. Once the ship reaches Gaza, aid will be offloaded by a crane, placed on trucks and driven north.

The United States has provided crucial military support to Israel and shielded it from international calls for a cease-fire while urging it to do more to avoid harming civilians and facilitate humanitarian aid.

The Health Ministry in Gaza said that at least 31,045 Palestinians have been killed since the war began. The ministry doesn't differentiate between civilians and combatants in its count, but says that women and children make up two-thirds of the dead.

Israel blames the civilian death toll on Hamas because the militants fight in dense, residential areas and position fighters, tunnels and rocket launchers near homes, schools and mosques. The military says it has killed 13,000 Hamas fighters, without providing evidence.

Speaking on Saturday to MSNBC, Biden said Israel had the right to respond to the Oct. 7 attack but that Netanyahu "must pay more attention to the innocent lives being lost." He added that "you cannot have 30,000 more Palestinians dead."

## Al-Qaida's Yemen branch says leader Khalid al-Batarfi dead in unclear circumstances

By JON GAMBRELL Associated Press

DUBAI, United Arab Emirates (AP) — The leader of Yemen's branch of al-Qaida is dead, the militant group announced late Sunday, without giving details.

Khalid al-Batarfi had a \$5 million bounty on his head from the U.S. government over leading the group, al-Qaida in the Arabian Peninsula, through years that saw him imprisoned, freed in a jailbreak, and governing forces in Yemen amid that country's grinding war.

Though believed to be weakened in recent years due to infighting and suspected U.S. drone strikes killing its leaders, the group known by the acronym AQAP has long been considered the most dangerous branch of the extremist group still operating after the killing of founder Osama bin Laden.

Al-Qaida released a video showing al-Batarfi wrapped in a white funeral shroud and al-Qaida's black-and-white flag.

Militants offered no details on the cause of his death and there was no clear sign of trauma visible on his face. Al-Batarfi was believed to be in his early 40s.

"Allah took his soul while he patiently sought his reward and stood firm, immigrated, garrisoned, and waged jihad for His sake," the militants said in the video, according to the SITE Intelligence Group.

The group made the announcement on the eve of Ramadan, the Muslim holy fasting month that Yemen will begin Monday.

In the announcement, the group said Saad bin Atef al-Awlaki would take over as its leader. The U.S. has a \$6 million bounty on him, saying al-Awlaki "has publicly called for attacks against the United States and its allies."

The Yemen branch of al-Qaida has been seen by Washington as the terror network's most dangerous branch ever since its attempt in 2009 to bomb a commercial airliner over the United States. It claimed responsibility for the 2015 deadly attack in Paris on the French satirical weekly Charlie Hebdo. But their overseas operations have waned in recent years.

"Although in decline, AQAP remains the most effective terrorist group in Yemen with intent to conduct operations in the region and beyond," a recent United Nations report on al-Qaida said.

Estimates provided to the U.N. put AQAP's total forces as numbering between 3,000 and 4,000 active fighters and passive members. The group raises money by robbing banks and money exchange shops, as well as smuggling weapons, counterfeiting currencies and ransom operations, according to the U.N.

Al-Batarfi took over as the head of the branch in February 2020. He succeeded leader Qassim al-Rimi, who was killed by a U.S. drone strike ordered by then-President Donald Trump. Al-Rimi had claimed responsibility for the 2019 attack at the U.S. Naval Air Station Pensacola in which a Saudi aviation trainee killed three American sailors.

Under al-Batarfi, AQAP fell further under the influence of al-Qaida fighter Saif al-Adl, now believed to have led the militant group after the killing of Ayman al-Zawahiri in a U.S. drone strike in Afghanistan in 2022. That came as Yemen has been locked in a war between the Houthi rebels, who hold the capital, Sanaa, and a Saudi-led coalition backing the country's exiled government based in Aden.

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"Since 2020, Saif al-Adel has been able to convince al-Batarfi of his strategic approach, focused on confronting Western states and their allies in Yemen — the Saudi-led coalition, the Aden-based government, the United Arab Emirates and its allies — rather than confronting the Iranian-backed Houthi movement," a 2023 report by the Sanaa Center for Strategic Studies said.

Al-Adl is believed to be in Iran, part of a longtime al-Qaida presence in the Islamic Republic. That's long been denied by Tehran but backed up by documents seized in the 2011 U.S. raid in Pakistan that killed bin Laden, who orchestrated the Sept. 11, 2001, attacks on the U.S.

Al-Batarfi's ties to al-Adl had strained relations in AQAP, experts say. However, it has seen the militants become armed with bomb-carrying drones — something the Houthis now use to target shipping in the Red Sea amid the Israel-Hamas war in the Gaza Strip.

AQAP "developed unmanned aerial systems capabilities, establishing a specialized drone unit, with operational training from the Houthis," a U.N. report from January says. "It prioritizes liberating its prisoners to replenish ranks; in September, the Houthis released several AQAP members and explosives experts."

The Shiite Zaydi Houthis have previously denied working with AQAP, a Sunni extremist group. However, AQAP targeting of the Houthis has dropped in recent years while the militants continue to attack Saudi-led coalition forces.

Yemen's history and tribal structure long has seen alliances rapidly shift, something its late strongman President Ali Abdullah Saleh referred to as "dancing on the heads of snakes."

Al-Batarfi, born in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, traveled to Afghanistan in 1999 and fought alongside the Taliban during the U.S.-led invasion. He joined AQAP in 2010 and led forces in taking over Yemen's Abyan province, according to the U.S.

In 2015, he was freed after an AQAP raid that saw the militants capture Mukalla, the capital of Yemen's largest province, Hadramawt, amid the chaos of the war. A photo at the time showed al-Awlaki with a Kalashnikov rifle, posing inside a government palace there.

AQAP was later pushed out of Mukalla but has continued attacks and been the target of a U.S. drone strike campaign since the administration of then-President George W. Bush.

In 2020, there had been claims that al-Batarfi had been detained, which later were denied. In 2021, he appeared in a militant video and referred to the Jan. 6 riot at the U.S. Capitol as "only the tip of the iceberg of what will come to them, God willing."

## 'Oppenheimer' crowned best picture at an Academy Awards shadowed by war

By JAKE COYLE AP Film Writer

LOS ANGELES (AP) — "Oppenheimer," a solemn three-hour biopic that became an unlikely billion-dollar box-office sensation, was crowned best picture at a 96th Academy Awards that doubled as a coronation for Christopher Nolan.

After passing over arguably Hollywood's foremost big-screen auteur for years, the Oscars made up for lost time by heaping seven awards on Nolan's blockbuster biopic, including best actor for Cillian Murphy, best supporting actor for Robert Downey Jr. and best director for Nolan.

In anointing "Oppenheimer," the Academy of Motion Pictures Arts and Sciences did something it hasn't done for more than a decade: hand its top prize to a widely seen, big-budget studio film. In a film industry where a cape, dinosaur or Tom Cruise has often been a requirement for such box office, "Oppenheimer" brought droves of moviegoers to theaters with a complex, fission-filled drama about J. Robert Oppenheimer and the creation of the atomic bomb.

"For better or worse, we're all living in Oppenheimer's world," said Murphy in his acceptance speech. "I'd like to dedicate this to the peacemakers."

As a film heavy with unease for human capacity for mass destruction, "Oppenheimer" also emerged — even over its partner in cultural phenomenon, "Barbie" — as a fittingly foreboding film for times rife with



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cataclysm, man-made or not.

Sunday's Oscars at the Dolby Theatre in Los Angeles unfolded against the backdrop of wars in Gaza and Ukraine, and with a potentially momentous U.S. election on the horizon. Awards for the documentary winner, "20 Days in Mariupol," and best international film, "The Zone of Interest," brought geopolitics into the Oscar spotlight.

The most closely watched contest went to Emma Stone, who won best actress for her performance as Bella Baxter in "Poor Things." In what was seen as the night's most nail-biting category, Stone won over Lily Gladstone of "Killers of the Flower Moon." Gladstone would have become the first Native American to win an Academy Award.

Instead, Oscar voters couldn't resist the full-bodied extremes of Stone's "Poor Things" performance. The win for Stone, her second best actress Oscar following her 2017 win for "La La Land," confirmed the 35-year-old as arguably the preeminent big-screen actress of her generation. The list of women to win best actress two or more times is illustrious, including Katharine Hepburn, Frances McDormand, Ingrid Bergman and Bette Davis.

"Oh, boy, this is really overwhelming," said Stone, who fought back tears and a broken dress during her speech.

Sunday's broadcast had razzle dazzle, including a sprawling song-and-dance rendition of the "Barbie" hit "I'm Just Ken" by Ryan Gosling, with an assist on guitar by Slash and a sea of Kens who swarmed the stage.

But protest and politics intruded on an election-year Academy Awards. Late during the show, host Jimmy Kimmel read a critical social media post from former president Donald Trump.

"Thank you for watching," said Kimmel. "Isn't it past your jail time?"

Nolan has had many movies in the Oscar mix before, including "Inception," "Dunkirk" and "The Dark Knight." But his win Sunday for direction is the first Academy Award for the 53-year-old filmmaker. Addressing the crowd, Nolan noted cinema is just over a hundred years old.

"Imagine being there 100 years into painting or theater," said Nolan, who shared the best-picture award with Emma Thomas, his wife and producer. "We don't know where this incredible journey is going from here. But to know that you think that I'm a meaningful part of it means the world to me."

Downey, nominated twice before (for "Chaplin" and "Tropic Thunder"), also notched his first Oscar, crowning the illustrious second act of his up-and-down career.

"I'd like to thank my terrible childhood and the academy, in that order," said Downey, the son of filmmaker Robert Downey Sr.

"Barbie," last year's biggest box-office hit with more than \$1.4 billion in ticket sales, ultimately won just one award: best song (sorry, Ken) for Billie Eilish and Finneas' "What Was I Made For?" It's their second Oscar, two years after winning for their James Bond theme, "No Time to Die."

Protests over Israel's war in Gaza snarled traffic around the Dolby Theatre in Los Angeles, slowing stars' arrival on the red carpet and turning the Oscar's attention toward the ongoing conflict. Some protesters shouted "Shame!" at those trying to reach the awards.

Jonathan Glazer, the British filmmaker whose chilling Auschwitz drama "The Zone of Interest" won best international film, drew connections between the dehumanization depicted in his film and today.

"Right now, we stand here as men who refute their Jewishness and the Holocaust being hijacked by an occupation which has led to conflict for so many innocent people, whether the victims of October the 7th in Israel, or the the ongoing attack on Gaza, all the victims, this dehumanization, how do we resist?"

A year after "Navalny" won the same award, Mstyslav Chernov's "20 Days in Mariupol," a harrowing chronicle of the early days of Russia's invasion of Ukraine, won best documentary. The win, a first for The Associated Press and PBS' "Frontline," came as the war in Ukraine passed the two-year mark with no signs of abating.

Chernov, the Ukrainian filmmaker and AP journalist whose hometown was bombed the day he learned of his Oscar nomination, spoke forcefully about Russia's invasion.

"This is the first Oscar in Ukrainian history, and I'm honored," said Chernov. "Probably I will be the first director on this stage to say I wish I'd never made this film. I wish to be able to exchange this (for) Rus-

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sia never attacking Ukraine.”

In the early going, Yorgos Lanthimos’ Frankenstein-riff “Poor Things” ran away with three prizes for its sumptuous craft, including awards for production design, makeup and hairstyling and costume design. “Poor Things” fared second best to “Oppenheimer,” with a total of four awards.

Kimmel, hosting the ABC telecast for the fourth time, opened the awards with an monologue that emphasized Hollywood as “a union town” following 2023’s actor and writer strikes, drew a standing ovation for bringing out teamsters and behind-the-scenes workers — who are now entering their own labor negotiations.

The night’s first award was one of its most predictable: Da’Vine Joy Randolph for best supporting actress, for her performance in Alexander Payne’s “The Holdovers.” An emotional Randolph was accompanied to the stage by her “Holdovers” co-star Paul Giamatti.

“For so long I’ve always wanted to be different,” said Randolph. “And now I realize I just need to be myself.”

Though Randolph’s win was widely expected, an upset quickly followed. Hayao Miyazaki’s “The Boy and the Heron” won for best animated feature, a surprise over the slightly favored “Spider-Man: Across the Spider-Verse.” Miyazaki, the 83-year-old Japanese anime master who came out of retirement to make “The Boy and the Heron,” didn’t attend the ceremony. He also didn’t attend the 2003 Oscars when his “Spirited Away” won the same award.

Best original screenplay went to “Anatomy of a Fall,” which, like “Barbie,” was penned by a couple: director Justine Triet and Arthur Harari. “This will help me through my midlife crisis, I think,” said Triet.

In adapted screenplay, where “Barbie” was nominated — and where some suspected Greta Gerwig would win after being overlooked for director — the Oscar went to Cord Jefferson, who wrote and directed his feature film debut “American Fiction.” He pleaded for executives to take risks on young filmmakers like himself.

“Instead of making a \$200 million movie, try making 20 \$10 million movies,” said Jefferson, previously an award-winning TV writer.

The Oscars belonged largely to theatrical-first films. Though it came into the awards with 19 nominations, Netflix was a bit player. Its lone win came for live action short: Wes Anderson’s “The Wonderful Story of Henry Sugar,” based on the story by Roald Dahl.

The win for “Oppenheimer” offered Hollywood a chance to celebrate despite swirling storm clouds in the film industry. Nolan’s film debuted last year just as actors joined screenwriters in a prolonged strike over streaming economics and artificial intelligence. The actors’ strike ended in November, but little of Hollywood’s unease subsided. Streaming has proved less lucrative for most studios not named Netflix.

But “Barbenheimer” was the kind of unplanned phenomenon Hollywood needs more of. The two films could also give a lift to the Oscar telecast, which has historically benefitted from having big movies in contention. The Academy Awards’ largest audience ever came when James Cameron’s “Titanic” swept the 1998 Oscars.

## **A Turkish artisan has kept the Istanbul skyline lit during Ramadan for decades. He may be the last**

By ROBERT BADENDIECK and EMRAH GUREL Associated Press

ISTANBUL (AP) — In the heart of Istanbul, on top of the towering minarets that dot the city’s skyline, 68-year-old Kahraman Yildiz toils away at a craft that has illuminated the Muslim holy month of Ramadan for generations.

Yildiz, a master of Mahya, the unique Turkish tradition of stringing religious messages and designs between minarets, is facing the twilight of a practice deeply ingrained in Turkish culture that is also taken for granted.

For half a century, Yildiz has been a guardian of this art form, creating intricate designs that light up the night sky, encouraging faith and charity among observers. His works carry messages that are meant for

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the faithful during Ramadan, a time of reflection and community.

However, with no apprentice as a successor in sight, the future of Mahya hangs in the balance.

Officials saw the crescent moon Sunday night in Saudi Arabia, home to the holiest sites in Islam, marking the start of the holy fasting month of Ramadan for many of the world's 1.8 billion Muslims. The sacred month, which sees those observing abstain from food and water from sunrise to sunset, marks a period of religious reflection, family get-togethers and giving across the Muslim world. Seeing the moon Sunday night means Monday is the first day of the fast.

The Mahya art form is thought to be at least 400 years old, originating in the time of the Ottoman Sultans and originally prepared with oil candles.

According to Yildiz, the ancient tradition not only served as a visual spectacle but also carried spiritual messages. "At a time when there was no television, cinema, or newspapers, Mahyas existed as the visual medium," he said.

Yildiz took on the mantle after his mentor, the last Ottoman Mahya, passed away. The transition from oil candles to lightbulbs was done during his mentor's time.

Although countless mosques in Turkey hang up Ramadan lighting with religious messaging and some even use LED lighting, only nine still benefit from the traditional Mahya craft and Yildiz. All nine of these mosques are historical Ottoman mosques.

"I take a list of the appropriate text and write them into the template. ... We create a string of writing and organize the bulbs. Then we set up a mechanism between the minarets and throw our ropes," Yildiz explained, shedding light on his methodology.

Despite his dedication, Yildiz is concerned about the future of Mahya.

"I hope this art will never end, it is a 400-year-old Ottoman art, and it is a Turkish invention," he said, adding that he would gladly pass along his trade to the younger generation if they were willing.

As Yildiz rushes up and down the slender minarets of Grand Mosques to light up the Istanbul skyline every Ramadan, the future of Mahya remains uncertain, with no apparent successor in sight. Yet, what is certain is his commitment to keep his craft alive and lift up spirits with his messages.

## **Exhaustion, dwindling reserves and a commander who disappeared: How Ukraine lost Avdiivka to Russia**

By ALEX BABENKO, HANNA ARHIROVA, SUSIE BLANN and LORI HINNANT Associated Press

SLOVIANSK, Ukraine (AP) — One Ukrainian brigade had defended the same block of industrial buildings for months without a break. Another had been in Avdiivka for nearly the entire two years of the war, bone-tired but with no replacements to relieve them.

Ammunition was low, and the Russians conducted dozens of airstrikes every day, using "glide bombs" to obliterate even fortified positions.

Russian soldiers came in waves: First lightly armed grunts, to force the Ukrainian defenders to spend precious bullets, followed by well-trained soldiers. Sometimes groups of Russians popped out of tunnels in front of them and opened fire.

As morale plummeted, a battalion commander — in charge of hundreds of men — vanished under murky circumstances, according to law enforcement documents seen by The Associated Press. One of the soldiers with him was found dead. The commander and another soldier with them have not been seen since.

Within a week, Ukraine had lost Avdiivka, the city in the Donetsk region that it had been defending since long before Russia's full-scale invasion. Nearly surrounded and vastly outnumbered, the Ukrainians made the decision to withdraw and avoid the same kind of deadly siege soldiers experienced in the port city of Mariupol's Azovstal steel mill, where thousands were taken captive or killed.

The Associated Press interviewed 10 Ukrainian soldiers to reconstruct how dwindling ammunition, overwhelming Russian numbers and military mismanagement led to the worst Ukrainian defeat in a year. The same problems pose risks for Ukraine's near future.

"We weren't so much physically exhausted as psychologically, being chained to that place," said Viktor



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Biliak, an infantryman with the 110th Brigade who had been in the area since March 2022.

His unit was on the southern outskirts of Avdiivka, in a position called Zenith. Normally the men would dig fortifications, but Biliak said there were constant Russian attacks, and no energy or equipment beyond hand shovels.

A soldier named Oleh arrived in mid-October with the 47th Brigade. Ill-trained Russian infantry, wearing new uniforms and marching in rows, made easy targets, he said. The Ukrainian equipment worked and ammunition supplies were enough to return fire.

But by the end of November, during a major Russian assault, the Ukrainians realized something had changed: The skies filled with glide bombs, unguided Soviet-era weapons retrofitted with a navigational targeting system, as well as motion-sensing explosive drones that could enter buildings and hunt down personnel.

With ammunition stocks running low, the Ukrainians fought back with whatever caliber of ammunition was left in the warehouses. For every shell they fired, the Russians fired eight or nine, the men said.

"The longer it went, the more we got this stew of shells for all kinds of weapons," Oleh said.

Among the Ukrainian soldiers, the idea of defeat took seed.

Hundreds of Ukrainian forces withdrew to Avdiivka's coke plant after repeated Russian onslaughts last fall. The Soviet-era factory, a warren of alleys, railways and tunnels, was a near-perfect defensive position.

But as the new year began, even the coke plant felt vulnerable.

Ukrainian brigades try to rotate men out of direct front-line positions after a matter of days or a week at most. And brigades with long-term engagements are supposed to be pulled back and reinforced to allow them to replace people lost to death or injury, rest their nerves and resupply.

That didn't happen in Avdiivka.

As officials in Kyiv argued over the delicate question of expanding the draft, many of the soldiers in the east felt abandoned by Western allies who no longer sent weapons, by their high command, and by fellow Ukrainians.

In addition to endless frontal assaults, Russian soldiers started popping up, opening fire on the Ukrainians before disappearing.

"They just kept throwing themselves at the coke plant, leaving piles of their corpses there. Mountains of bodies and heaps of smashed equipment," said Maksym, a soldier in the Presidential Brigade.

But the Russians had a seemingly limitless supply of men and ammunition. The Ukrainian men saw their options narrowing.

With the constant pressure and the lack of foreign help, there was talk of retreat, Oleh said. "Their constant assaults exhausted us."

The 3rd Assault Brigade arrived early in the second week of February, with orders to head to the coke plant. By the time the seasoned Ukrainian fighters got there, Russian troops had nearly closed a wide pincer around it.

On Feb. 8, Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy fired Ukraine's military chief, Gen. Valerii Zaluzhnyi. It was the biggest shake-up of the military since the start of the war.

The next day just outside Avdiivka, officers fighting to save the town gathered in a command post a few kilometers (miles) from the coke plant. There was a heated discussion and the commander and two soldiers got into a car. What happened next is unclear, at a time when emotions were running high and Russian saboteurs were appearing behind the Ukrainian lines.

Authorities don't believe the missing officer had classified information or military hardware on him when he disappeared with the two others. One of the soldiers was found dead nearby of gunshot wounds. The commander and the other man vanished.

The AP is not naming the men to avoid endangering anyone who might be prisoner.

On Feb. 15, Biliak received the order for a nighttime retreat for the 110th Brigade from his point on the southern flank of Avdiivka. He had been at the same intersection for just under two years.

"It would have been joyful if it had happened earlier. We were always ready to drop everything and flee

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from there because we had known for a long time that the end was coming," Biliak said. "But then we already knew it was too late, and it was out of desperation."

The 3rd Assault Brigade received the command to retreat from the coke plant the next day.

On Feb. 17, Russia claimed control of Avdiivka and its coke plant.

Ukraine's new military chief, Col. Gen Oleksandr Syrskiy released a statement Feb. 29 emphasizing the importance of experienced and decisive commanders and noting that an inspection of Donetsk had revealed "certain miscalculations in mastering the situation and assessing the enemy."

## Why the AP retracted the first official photo of the Princess of Wales since her abdominal surgery

By BRIAN MELLEY Associated Press

LONDON (AP) — The first official photo of Kate, the Princess of Wales, since she underwent abdominal surgery nearly two months ago, was pulled from circulation by The Associated Press and several other news organizations because the image appeared to have been manipulated.

Kensington Palace had issued the image Sunday as speculation swirled on social media about the whereabouts of the oft-photographed princess who hadn't been seen in public since December.

But efforts to tamp down rumors and supposition may have backfired after royal observers noticed inconsistencies in the photo's details.

While there was no suggestion the image was fake, AP pulled the photograph from circulation because it did not meet its photo standards. Kensington Palace declined to comment.

WHAT HAPPENED?

The photo appeared on social media channels for the Prince and Princess of Wales at 9 a.m. along with a message from Kate wishing everyone a happy Mothers' Day, which was celebrated Sunday in the United Kingdom.

The release of the photo followed weeks of gossip on social media about what had happened to Kate since she left a hospital Jan. 29 after a nearly two-week stay following planned surgery. She hadn't been seen publicly since Christmas Day.

The photo showed a healthy looking Kate seated in a chair surrounded by her smiling three children. It was credited to her husband, Prince William, heir to the throne, and was said to have been taken earlier in the week in Windsor.

"Thank you for your kind wishes and continued support over the last two months," she said.

The story quickly became a top news story in Britain and the photo had almost 50 million views on the X social media platform by the end of the day.

But close study of the image revealed inconsistencies that suggested it had been altered, for instance in the alignment of Princess Charlotte's left hand with the sleeve of her sweater.

By early evening, AP and other news agencies, including Getty, Reuters and AFP, decided to remove the image after examining it more closely.

WHY DID THE AP 'KILL' THE IMAGE?

AP's editorial standards state that images must be accurate. AP does not use altered or digitally manipulated images.

AP's news values and principles explain that minor photo editing, including cropping and toning and color adjustments, are acceptable when necessary for clear and accurate reproduction and should maintain the authentic nature of the photograph.

Changes in density, contrast, color and saturation levels that substantially alter the original scene are not acceptable. Backgrounds should not be digitally blurred or eliminated by burning down or by aggressive toning. The removal of "red eye" from photographs is not permissible.

When AP determined the photo appeared to have been manipulated, it issued what is known as a "photo kill," an industry term that retracted the image and instructed clients to remove the photo from their systems.

"At closer inspection it appears that the source has manipulated the image," the AP said in its advisory. "No replacement photo will be sent."

## **GOP lawmakers resist calls to tweak abortion bans. Some say they'll clarify the laws' few exceptions**

By KIMBERLEE KRUESI Associated Press

NASHVILLE, Tenn. (AP) — In Republican-led states across the U.S., conservative legislators are refusing to reevaluate abortion bans — even as doctors and patients insist the laws' exceptions are dangerously unclear, resulting in denied treatment to some pregnant women in need.

Instead, GOP leaders accuse abortion rights advocates of deliberately spreading misinformation and doctors of intentionally denying services in an effort to undercut the bans and make a political point. At the same time, however, some states are taking steps that they say will provide more clarity about when abortions can be legally performed.

The Republican-controlled South Dakota Legislature wants to create a video in which medical experts — and the state's attorneys — would explain to doctors and patients when abortions can be legally performed. The measure was passed last month and is now awaiting the signature of Republican Gov. Kristi Noem, who has indicated she will sign it.

The first-in-the-nation idea is wholeheartedly supported by SBA Pro-Life, one of the country's largest anti-abortion groups, which says the video will help to combat "confusion caused by the abortion industry."

"South Dakota is showing the rest of the nation how to protect women's lives from the misinformation surrounding abortion laws," said the organization's public affairs director in South Dakota, Kelsey Pritchard.

Oklahoma and Kentucky are also taking steps to clarify their abortion bans, though in both states the attorneys general, not physicians, are the ones dictating the terms.

In Oklahoma, the AG sent out a memo in 2022 informing prosecutors and police that doctors should have "substantial leeway" to provide certain abortions. Last year, the office added that patients don't have to be "septic, bleeding profusely, or otherwise close to death" — but reiterated a past warning that doctors should be prosecuted if there's evidence they violated the law by providing an abortion when a woman's life wasn't actually in danger.

Kentucky's attorney general has stated that miscarriages and ectopic pregnancies — when a fertilized egg grows outside the uterus — are both exempted from the state's abortion ban, but has been silent on the majority of other pregnancy complications that physicians and patients have pointed out.

Since the U.S. Supreme Court overturned the constitutional right to abortion in 2022, states have been free to enact their own restrictions. South Dakota is among the 14 that ban abortion at all stages of pregnancy. The law does allow an abortion exception to save the life of the mother, but like similar statutes in other states, it does not clearly define which pregnancy complications are considered life-threatening.

State Republican Rep. Taylor Rehfeldt, a nurse anesthetist, said she decided to propose the informational video after hearing from physicians about the ongoing confusion. She said the video offered the best solution because any attempt to tweak the abortion ban itself would provoke strong disagreement among her GOP colleagues.

It remains to be seen how much help the video will be to patients and doctors, however. It's not expected to specifically list pregnancy complications that would legally qualify women for abortions, and it's unclear if it will contain a legal disclaimer warning that anyone who watches the video may still face potential criminal charges.

"It's not going to deal with hard calls," said Greer Donley, an associate professor at the University of Pittsburgh School of Law who is an expert on abortion law. "They actually don't want to deal with the hard calls because their movement is not sure ... how those hard calls should be resolved."

South Dakota Republican state Sen. Erin Tobin, one of the measure's proponents, acknowledged to a Senate panel last month that the video will not contain specific examples.

"That's the problem with health care, is that there are so many different circumstances, that you have to allow doctors discretion," Tobin said.

As some states mull how to clarify — without weakening — their abortion bans, abortion rights advocates



in several states continue to challenge the bans with lawsuits.

Twenty Texas women denied abortions are suing the state seeking clarification, while advocates filed a lawsuit in Tennessee arguing that the state ban's vaguely defined exceptions put pregnant women's lives at risk.

Tennessee Attorney General Jonathan Skrmetti pushed back. He argued that it wasn't the law, per se, that is harming women but rather "other factors like doctors' independent choices not to provide permissible abortions."

The lawsuit is ongoing, with attorneys expected to make their arguments before a three-judge panel next month on whether the state ban should be temporarily blocked as the legal battle continues or if the case should be dismissed entirely.

Donley spurned the idea that doctors bear the responsibility for endangering patients.

"I completely reject any narrative that there's any sort of provider out there that's intentionally harming women and pregnant people for the sake of a news story," she said. "That's just not happening. But are mistakes being made because people are terrified? Yeah, probably."

In Texas, a pregnant woman whose fetus had a fatal condition went straight to the state supreme court last year to request an exemption from the Lone Star State's strict ban. The court denied Katie Cox's request — forcing her to go out of state to get an abortion — but did urge the Texas Medical Board to issue guidance to doctors on how to interpret the law.

"While the judiciary cannot compel executive branch entities to do their part, it is obvious that the legal process works more smoothly when they do," the justices wrote.

And yet, the medical board, comprising 19 members appointed by the governor, has so far not offered any sort of guidance.

Republican Gov. Greg Abbott is a vocal abortion opponent.

Frustrated with the board's inaction, Amy and Steven Bresnen, a couple who are lawyers and lobbyists, filed a petition in January asking it to clarify what circumstances qualify as medical exceptions to the state's abortion ban.

"Pregnant females in life-threatening situations and the health care providers otherwise willing to save their lives simply cannot be required to stand idly in the void when the TMB (Texas Medical Board) has the authority to act and the duty to regulate medicine in this state in the public interest," the petition states.

The board is expected to meet later this month and will likely address the petition, Steven Bresnen said.

"Nobody has put them on the spit to make them make a formal decision," he said. "If they decline to, they have to explain why."

## **At US universities, record numbers of Indian students seek brighter prospects — and overseas jobs**

By COLLIN BINKLEY and KRUTIKA PATHI Associated Press

Pranay Karkale is spending years of savings and \$60,000 in student loans to pursue a master's degree in the United States, yet he considers himself lucky. At home in India, it's common to hear about families selling off their land to send children to universities overseas.

Karkale was willing to do whatever it took once he got into Johns Hopkins University. A degree from a prestigious U.S. college, he believed, would open doors to a better job and higher pay than he would find in India.

"I don't feel like I would have gotten the same level of education that I get here," said Karkale, 23.

Historic numbers of students from India are studying at foreign universities as a fast-growing, aspirational generation of young people looks for opportunities they can't find at home. India estimates 1.5 million students are studying at universities elsewhere — an eightfold increase since 2012 — with no country attracting more than the U.S.

It represents a loss for India, with many students seeing universities as stepping stones for careers overseas, but a boon for American schools. As record-setting enrollment by students from China has ebbed,

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U.S. universities have turned to India as a new source of full-price tuition payments.

India's economy is growing, but joblessness remains persistent even for college graduates. Jobs are being created in fields such as construction and agriculture, but they don't meet the demands of a newly educated workforce, said Rosa Abraham, an economist at the Azim Premji University.

"I think many young people today feel like the economy isn't meeting their potential, their aspirations, and so they want to try their chances abroad if they can," she said.

India's own higher education system is also short on capacity. As its population surges, competition for admission to India's top universities has become frenzied. Acceptance rates at some elite Indian universities have fallen as low as 0.2%, compared to 3% at Harvard University and 4% at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology.

Lokesh Sangabattula, who is pursuing a Ph.D. in materials science at MIT, is among many hoping to land jobs inside the U.S. There's little demand for materials scientists in India, he said, and at best he figures he could become a professor. It's a similar story for engineers, which India generates in huge numbers without the industry to employ them.

"We produce engineers whose degrees don't have value, so people leave the country," he said.

Universities in Canada, Australia and the United Kingdom also are seeing surging interest, but none more than the U.S., where universities enroll nearly 269,000 students from India. With that number soaring, including a 35% increase in the 2022-23 academic year, India is on the verge of replacing China as the largest international presence on U.S. college campuses.

The vast majority are coming for graduate programs, often in science, math and engineering — fields that have faced persistent labor shortages in the U.S. — though undergraduate numbers also are rising as India's middle class expands. One selling point is the chance to work in America for up to three years after graduating, a benefit provided by the U.S. government and known as optional practical training.

For Karkale, staying in India never felt like an option. As an undergraduate in India, he became interested in engineering management, which merges engineering and leadership skills. It's a growing industry in the U.S. and Europe, but Karkale, who is from the western Indian state of Maharashtra, couldn't find any master's programs in India.

At Hopkins, he's gaining professional work experience arranged by the school, a rarity at Indian universities, he said. Ultimately he wants to return to India, but the most appealing jobs are elsewhere. After graduating, he plans to work in the U.S. for at least a year or two.

If he could find the right job in India, he added, "I would hop right back."

The surge has helped the bottom line of American colleges, which charge international students higher tuition rates. It comes as many Americans sour on higher education, citing concerns about student debt and the perception of liberal bias at universities. The number of students coming from China has been declining as a result of chilly political ties and a stagnant Chinese economy.

In India, American universities have become a common presence at college fairs. Many are spending big to gain name recognition in India, and they are fanning farther across the country to recruit in smaller cities and towns, where demand to study abroad has been rising.

Still, for the vast majority of India's young people, an overseas education remains out of reach. The cost of a U.S. education is a fortune for most, and Indian banks have scaled back on student loans in response to high default rates.

Even for those who can afford it, the student visa process presents roadblocks. At the U.S. embassy in New Delhi, student applicants are routinely turned away.

On a recent Friday, Daisy Cheema slumped her shoulders and sighed as she left the embassy. She spent weeks preparing for a visa interview after getting accepted to Westcliff University, a for-profit college in California. She hired an agency to help, but her visa was rejected with no reason provided; she just received a slip of paper saying she could reapply.

Cheema, 22, hoped to gain work experience in the U.S. before returning to India to support her family. Her parents, who own a gas station in the northern Indian state of Punjab, were going to pay with their

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savings.

"I feel terrible right now," said Cheema, holding back tears. "But I will prepare more and try again. I'm not giving up."

America's shift toward Indian students is visible on campuses like the University of Texas, Dallas, where enrollment from China fell from about 1,200 to 400 over the past four years. Meantime, enrollment from India grew from about 3,000 to 4,400.

Rajarshi Boggarapu came to the U.S. to get a master's degree in business analytics and chose UT-Dallas in part because of its large Indian population. He borrowed \$40,000 for tuition, which he sees as an investment in his future.

"We value education more than anything else back in India," he said.

Like many U.S. universities, Johns Hopkins is deepening ties with India. It has hosted Indian diplomats to discuss health and engineering partnerships and is part of a new task force formed by the Association of American Universities to promote exchange with India.

Before he came to the U.S., Karkale had concerns about the political climate, but the campus made him feel welcome. When he couldn't return home for Diwali, the Hindu festival of lights, he was surprised to find a campus celebration that drew hundreds of students and staff.

In a campus gym adorned with colorful flowers and lamps, Karkale watched as student groups performed dances to a mix of new and old Indian music. There was a Hindu prayer ceremony. And when the dance floor opened up, Karkale joined in.

"It was a memorable evening," he said. "It made me feel right at home."

## Youth activist groups jointly endorse Biden.

### They say his achievements matter more than his age

By WILL WEISSERT Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Jack Lobel is a college sophomore who will be voting in his first presidential election this fall, casting a ballot for Joe Biden.

At 19, he's six-plus decades Biden's junior, which isn't lost on him. But Lobel is spokesperson for Voters of Tomorrow, one of 15 youth organizations that announced Monday that they are jointly endorsing the reelection of the oldest president in U.S. history — defying polls consistently showing voter concerns about the 81-year-old Biden's age.

"If age were really a concern we would not see this much energy around these groups," said Lobel, an urban studies major in New York. As he worked on hammering out the joint endorsement this week he was also writing a paper for his American urban politics class and taking a midterm in his voting and political behavior class.

"President Biden comes before midterms and exams and papers," Lobel said, only half-joking.

The joint endorsement is meant as a show of political strength for Biden, who would be 86 by the end of the second term he's seeking — after Super Tuesday all but cemented a November rematch of the 2020 election between him and former President Donald Trump.

The groups' affinity for the president is little surprise given that young people tend to be more left-leaning than many other voting blocs. Still, it may soften the blow of many voters' concerns about Biden's age. A recent Associated Press-NORC Center for Public Affairs Research survey found that 63% of Americans believe Biden lacks mental capability to serve effectively as president, though 57% felt similar about Trump, who is 77.

In the first ad of a \$30-million, post-Super-Tuesday, swing-state advertising blitz, Biden makes no excuses for his age, but says he's been more effective as president than Trump was.

"Young voters are critical to President Biden's winning coalition and together, we will defeat Donald Trump and continue to build a future that works for every single American," said Biden's reelection campaign manager, Julie Chavez Rodriguez, in a statement first shared with The Associated Press.



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Joining Voters of Tomorrow formally supporting Biden is NextGen PAC, Planned Parenthood Action Fund, Blue Future, Jr. Newtown Action Alliance, Path to Progress, Students Demand Action, Team ENOUGH, Voices of Gen-Z and Dream for America. They are doing so with more traditional, party-aligned youth organizations, the Young Democrats of America, College Democrats of America, Democratic Youth Coalition, Grassroots Dems HQ and High School Democrats of America.

Monday's announcement follows similar joint endorsements the Biden campaign received last year from labor unions, environmental activists, abortion rights advocates and gun safety proponents — and some of the endorsing youth organizations are affiliated with groups that already backed the president in previously.

The president's campaign said that the earlier endorsements were the first of their kind to be made jointly and so early in the cycle. Monday's announcement is coming later, but still gives young supporters eight months to mobilize behind Biden now that it's clear he'll face Trump in November.

Trump and top Republicans have blasted Biden as being too old to handle a second term. A Super PAC backing the former president released an ad bluntly declaring, "If Biden wins, can he even survive till 2029?" That's despite Trump making gaffes himself lately, including suggesting he's running against Barack Obama.

But Aalayah Eastmond, a survivor of the 2018 Parkland school shooting in Florida and co-founder of Team ENOUGH, said Biden's age wasn't a consideration in the endorsement given that "our only concern is whether we go forward or backward on one of the most pressing issues of our time."

"What's most important to America's youth is having a president who listens to our concerns and knows how to deliver on solutions that improve our lives," Eastmond said.

The activist groups plan to pool resources to hire hundreds of young organizers, mobilize affiliates and chapters on 1,000-plus campuses and at state and local levels, and make more than 155 million direct voter contacts via phone calls, texts or in person, Lobel said.

He said that job creation and the economy were top concerns, noting that "young voters are still voters." Still, Lobel also said that especially important to his age group are Biden administration efforts to cancel student debt for millions of Americans, protect abortion rights and promote green energy and public works projects around the country.

"As GenZers, these are the numbers we care about," Lobel said. "We're voting based on what he's delivering for us."

## The Democratic protest vote movement over the Israel-Hamas war spreads from Michigan to other states

By JOEY CAPPELLETTI Associated Press

LANSING, Mich. (AP) — The protest-vote movement over President Joe Biden's handling of the Israel-Hamas war has spread to several states and raised more questions about whether a small but significant number of Democrats angry at Biden might abandon him in November.

A week after 101,000 Michigan voters chose "uncommitted" on their ballots, so did roughly 263,000 voters in the five Super Tuesday states where similar ballot options were available. Minnesota, which had the most organized effort outside of Michigan, saw 1 in 5 Democratic voters mark the "uncommitted" option, a higher percentage than the 13% who voted uncommitted in Michigan.

Organizers are watching the state of Washington's primary on Tuesday to see how many voters select "uncommitted." And a "Leave It Blank" campaign has formed for Georgia's Tuesday primary that's intended to have the same effect, as is a "uninstructed" vote in Wisconsin's April 2 primary.

Supporters of the protest argue anger over the war could endanger Biden's chances in swing states like Michigan against former President Donald Trump in their likely rematch. Biden's allies believe disaffected Democrats will return to the president's fold when faced with a choice between him and Trump, who the president's campaign has argued is a threat to democracy and is planning a sweeping set of policy changes that would attack liberal priorities.

While the reasons for voters favoring unpledged delegates over Biden may differ, the choice has been increasingly pushed as a protest vote against Biden's handling of the conflict in Gaza, where more than

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30,000 people have been killed, two-thirds of them women and children, in Israel's offensive following Hamas' Oct. 7 attack that killed 1,200 people.

"We wanted to show that these voters not only morally matter but politically matter as well. Because if they sit out the election, which it seems like many of them might, that would have severe consequences for Biden," said Waleed Shahid, a Democratic strategist who first organized the effort in Michigan.

Lauren Hitt, a Biden campaign spokeswoman, said following the Super Tuesday primaries that the president "believes making your voice heard and participating in our democracy is fundamental to who we are as Americans."

"He shares the goal for an end to the violence and a just, lasting peace in the Middle East. He's working tirelessly to that end," Hitt added.

As Biden's supporters are quick to point out, the "uncommitted" vote isn't a historical anomaly. In 2012, over 400,000 people cast their ballots as "uncommitted" or "no preference," expressing discontent with then-President Barack Obama's reelection. Biden has won every state's primary contest so far and is on track to clinch the nomination this month.

Still, the single-issue campaign has alarmed some of Biden's closest allies.

"Obama's results were just randomized. This is showing that there are particular groups of our coalition that are upset," said Rep. Ro Khanna, a Biden surrogate and cease-fire supporter.

In late January, Shahid circulated a seven-page memo to nearly 100 pro-Palestinian leaders and organizations nationwide with a plan to leverage Michigan's substantial Arab American population to create maximum electoral disruption.

Michigan's dual role as an early primary state and a pivotal swing state in November provided an ideal situation for attracting national media attention and influential political figures. Coming less than a month before Michigan's Feb. 27 primary, the Jan. 29 memo proposed a plan requiring a budget of approximately \$237,000 to "politicize and electoralize discontent" for Biden's support of Israel.

Over 100,000 people voted "uncommitted" on Feb. 27, far exceeding a 10,000 vote goal that had been intentionally set low. Khanna, the California congressman, said Biden's recent references to a potential cease-fire were a "direct result" of the grassroots movement in Michigan.

Biden announced at his State of the Union speech that the U.S. would build a floating pier to deliver aid to Gaza as Israel has restricted the flow of food and other goods at land ports.

While the state's primary was a success for organizers, Shahid said his memo "had nothing beyond Michigan."

Hoping to capitalize on the momentum generated in Michigan, small "uncommitted" campaigns on shoestring budgets began to pop up across the country.

In Minnesota, organizers began making phone calls to voters just five days before the state's Super Tuesday primary, operating on a \$20,000 budget. The last-minute push secured 46,000 "uncommitted" votes, comprising 19% of the total vote share and earning 11 delegates bound for the Democratic national convention.

Minnesota voter Sarah Alfaham voted in the state's Democratic primary — as she has for many years — but opted to mark "uncommitted" on her ballot.

"Joe Biden has not done enough to earn my vote and not done enough to stop the war," said Alfaham.

Marcus Casillas, 29, was one of the 51,000 people that voted uncommitted in Colorado's March 5 primary. The aerospace engineer was inspired by Michigan voters, and chose "uncommitted" rather than another Democratic candidate because "being part of a more organized protest vote seemed appropriate."

"I firmly believe that in order for me to vote for someone, they need to earn the vote," he said.

The largest effort outside of Michigan has taken place in Washington state, which is set to hold its primary Tuesday. The biggest labor union in Washington, the chapter of the United Food and Commercial Workers, has endorsed voting "uncommitted" in the primary, as have some local Democratic leaders.

The impact of Washington's uncommitted movement could be blunted by the fact that its primary is mostly conducted by early mail-in ballots. Close to a million ballots had been turned in as of Thursday, according to the Washington Secretary of State.

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But organizers in different states say they feel they've already exceeded expectations.

"One of the coolest comments that I've read is people saying this is the most organized they've seen Democrats in a really long time," said Asma Nizami, a spokesperson for Minnesota's "uncommitted" campaign. "We're doing it across state lines and we're doing it together."

## **An effort to get aid to Gaza by sea is moving ahead. But the first ship is still waiting in Cyprus**

By WAFAA SHURAFI and SAMY MAGDY Associated Press

DEIR AL-BALAH, Gaza Strip (AP) — A U.S. Army vessel carrying equipment to build a temporary pier in Gaza was heading to the Mediterranean on Sunday, after U.S. President Joe Biden announced plans to increase aid deliveries by sea to the besieged enclave where hundreds of thousands of Palestinians are going hungry.

The new push for aid came as the Muslim holy month of Ramadan was set to begin Monday in much of the world after officials in Saudi Arabia saw the crescent moon. Hopes for a new cease-fire by Ramadan faded days ago with negotiations apparently stalled.

The opening of the sea corridor, along with airdrops by the U.S., Jordan and others, reflected growing alarm over Gaza's deadly humanitarian crisis and a new willingness to bypass Israeli control over land shipments. But aid officials say that air and sea deliveries can't make up for a shortage of land routes. Aid trucks entering Gaza daily are far below the 500 entering before the war.

A ship belonging to Spanish aid group Open Arms and carrying 200 tons of food aid was expected to make a pilot voyage to Gaza from nearby Cyprus "as soon as possible," but not Sunday, said Linda Roth, a spokesperson for partner organization World Central Kitchen. There was no explanation after Cyprus' president had said it would leave then.

Israel says it welcomes the sea deliveries and would inspect Gaza-bound cargo before it leaves Cyprus. Israeli Defense Minister Yoav Gallant reviewed preparatory work off Gaza's coast on Sunday.

Biden has stepped up public criticism of Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, saying he believes that Netanyahu is "hurting Israel more than helping Israel" in his approach to the Israel-Hamas war in Gaza, now in its sixth month.

Speaking on Saturday to MSNBC, the U.S. president expressed support for Israel's right to pursue Hamas after the militants' Oct. 7 attack on southern Israel. But Biden said that Netanyahu "must pay more attention to the innocent lives being lost." He added that "you cannot have 30,000 more Palestinians dead."

The Health Ministry in Gaza said that at least 31,045 Palestinians have been killed since the war began. The ministry doesn't differentiate between civilians and combatants in its count, but says that women and children make up two-thirds of the dead. The ministry is part of the Hamas-run government, and its figures from previous wars have largely matched those of U.N. and independent experts.

Palestinian casualties continued to rise. The Civil Defense Department said 10 people were killed Sunday in an Israeli airstrike on a house of the Ashour family in the Tal al-Hawa area of Gaza City. Dust-covered bodies were placed onto blankets.

Elsewhere, the bodies of 15 people, including women and children, were taken to the main hospital in the central town of Deir al-Balah, according to an Associated Press journalist. Relatives said they were killed by Israeli artillery fire toward a tent camp for displaced Palestinians in the coastal area near the southern city of Khan Younis.

Israel rarely comments on specific incidents during the war. It maintains that Hamas is responsible for civilian casualties, because the militant group operates from within civilian areas.

Meanwhile, U.S. efforts began to set up the temporary pier in Gaza for sea deliveries. U.S. Central Command said that a first U.S. Army vessel, the General Frank S. Besson, left a base in Virginia on Saturday and was on its way to the Eastern Mediterranean with equipment for construction.

U.S. officials said that it would likely be weeks before the pier is operational.

The sea corridor is backed by the European Union together with the United States, the United Arab



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Emirates and other countries. The European Commission has said that U.N. agencies and the Red Cross will play a role.

The ship in Cyprus is expected to take two to three days to arrive at an undisclosed location in Gaza. The World Central Kitchen spokesperson said that construction work began Sunday on the jetty for it.

A member of the charity said on X, formerly Twitter, that once the ship's barge reaches Gaza, aid would be offloaded by a crane, placed on trucks and driven to northern Gaza, which has been largely cut off from aid shipments and was the first focus of Israel's military offensive.

Israel declared war on Oct. 7 after Hamas militants killed about 1,200 people, mostly civilians, and took 250 hostages. Israel's air and ground offensive has devastated large parts of Gaza and displaced about 80% of the population of 2.3 million.

The U.S. and regional mediators Egypt and Qatar had hoped to have a six-week cease-fire in place by Ramadan. A deal would have seen Hamas release some Israeli hostages, Israel release some Palestinian prisoners and aid groups be given access for a major influx of aid.

In a speech broadcast Sunday, Hamas' top leader Ismail Haniyeh blamed Israel for the failure to reach a deal before Ramadan and said that the militant group is keen to resume negotiations in any framework as long as it guarantees a permanent cease-fire.

## Portugal is in suspense after an election produces no clear winner and a surging populist party

By BARRY HATTON Associated Press

LISBON, Portugal (AP) — Portugal's political future is hanging in the balance after a general election Sunday, with two moderate mainstream parties closely contesting the race and set to wait weeks for a decision on the winner after an unprecedented surge in support for a populist party that finished third.

The center-right Social Democrat-led Democratic Alliance won 79 seats in the 230-seat National Assembly, Portugal's Parliament, after all votes cast in Portugal were counted.

The center-left Socialist Party, in power the past eight years, got 77 seats.

The deciding votes will come from voters abroad to distribute the final four parliamentary seats after an election night full of suspense. That count could take more than two weeks.

The hard-right Chega (Enough) party came in third with 48 seats, a milestone result that presented an unprecedented challenge to politics-as-usual, underscoring a drift to the right in the European Union.

Smaller parties took the rest of the vote in an election that saw turnout rise to 66%, the highest level in Portugal for years.

The moderate Social Democrats and Socialists have alternated in power for decades in Portugal, and the surge in support for a radical right party pointed to a significant shift in Portugal's political landscape and likely heralded a period of political uncertainty.

A minority government that has fewer than 116 seats in Parliament is at the mercy of opposition parties when it tries to pass legislation. Chega's support could hold the key to a functioning government for the Social Democrats.

Chega, just five years old, tripled its vote from the last election in 2022. The result positioned the party as a kingmaker that potentially could hand the Social Democrats a parliamentary majority.

Whatever happens, Chega can no longer be ignored despite attempts to shun it by the mainstream parties.

"One thing is for sure tonight, the two-party system in Portugal is finished," said Chega leader Andre Ventura.

He insisted that the Social Democrats should ally with Chega in parliament to create a majority. "We have a mandate to govern," he said.

But Social Democrat leader Luis Montenegro, who likely would become prime minister if his alliance wins, said he would keep his campaign promise to shut out Chega and refuse to negotiate power-sharing with the populists. He said he expected to form a government on his own.

Ventura, a former law professor and television soccer pundit, has said he is prepared to drop some of

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his party's most controversial proposals — such as chemical castration for some sex offenders and the introduction of life prison sentences — if that enables his party's inclusion in a possible governing alliance with other right-of-center parties.

His insistence on national sovereignty instead of closer European Union integration and his plan to grant police the right to strike are other issues that could thwart his ambitions to enter a government coalition, however.

Chega ran its campaign largely on an anti-corruption platform. Graft scandals triggered the early election after former Socialist leader António Costa resigned in November after eight years as prime minister amid a corruption investigation involving his chief of staff. Costa hasn't been accused of any crime.

That episode appeared to have hurt the Socialists at the ballot box.

Public frustration with politics-as-usual had already been percolating before the outcries over graft. Low wages and a high cost of living — worsened last year by surges in inflation and interest rates — coupled with a housing crisis and failings in public health care contributed to the disgruntlement.

The discontent has been further stirred up by Chega.

Sonia Ferreira, a 55-year-old financial manager voting in Lisbon, said the ballot is "decisive" because the continent needs to halt the growth of hard-right parties.

"We are seeing very extremist movements across the European Union and we must all be very careful," she said.

The Social Democrats, too, were embarrassed just before the campaign by a graft scandal that brought the resignation of two prominent party officials.

Meanwhile, voters have expressed alarm at Portugal's living standards as financial pressures mount.

An influx of foreign real estate investors and tourists seeking short-term rentals brought a spike in house prices, especially in big cities such as the capital Lisbon where many locals are being priced out of the market.

The economy feels stuck in a low gear. The Portuguese, who have long been among Western Europe's lowest earners, received an average monthly wage before tax last year of around 1,500 euros (\$1,640) — barely enough to rent a one-bedroom flat in Lisbon. Close to 3 million Portuguese workers earn less than 1,000 euros (\$1,093) a month.

The number of people without an assigned family doctor, meantime, rose to 1.7 million last year, the highest number ever and up from 1.4 million in 2022.

Ventura, the Chega leader, cannily plugged into the dissatisfaction and has built a following among young people on social media.

Ventura has had a colorful career. He has gone from a practicing lawyer and university professor specializing in tax law to a boisterous television soccer pundit, an author of low-brow books and a bombastic orator on the campaign trail.

## Muslims spot Ramadan crescent moon in Saudi Arabia, meaning month of fasting starts Monday for many

By JON GAMBRELL Associated Press

DUBAI, United Arab Emirates (AP) — Officials saw the crescent moon Sunday night in Saudi Arabia, home to the holiest sites in Islam, marking the start of the holy fasting month of Ramadan for many of the world's 1.8 billion Muslims.

The sacred month, which sees those observing abstain from food and water from sunrise to sunset, marks a period of religious reflection, family get-togethers and giving across the Muslim world. Seeing the moon Sunday night means Monday is the first day of the fast.

Saudi state television reported that authorities there saw the crescent moon. Soon after, multiple Gulf Arab nations, as well as Egypt, Sudan, Syria and Yemen followed the announcement to confirm they as well would start fasting on Monday. North American Muslims also will begin their fast Monday.

Leaders shared messages of congratulations the month had begun.

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However, there are some Asia-Pacific countries like Australia, Brunei, Indonesia, Malaysia and Singapore, that will begin Ramadan on Tuesday after failing to see the crescent moon. Oman, on the easternmost edge of the Arabian Peninsula, similarly announced Ramadan would begin Tuesday. Jordan will also begin Ramadan on Tuesday.

This year's Ramadan comes as the Middle East remains inflamed by the Israel-Hamas war in the Gaza Strip. That's raised fears the conflict may spark unrest far beyond the current borders of the war.

Saudi King Salman specifically pointed to the Israel-Hamas war in remarks released to the public after the Ramadan announcement.

"As it pains us that the month of Ramadan falls this year, in light of the attacks our brothers in Palestine are suffering from, we stress the need for the international community to assume its responsibilities, to stop these brutal crimes, and provide safe humanitarian and relief corridors," the king said.

U.S. President Joe Biden also recognized the beginning of the holy month, saying that "Jill and I extend our best wishes and prayers to Muslims across our country and around the world," but he also turned to the conflict in Gaza.

"As Muslims gather around the world over the coming days and weeks to break their fast, the suffering of the Palestinian people will be front of mind for many. It is front of mind for me," Biden said.

Meanwhile, inflation and high prices of food around the world since the pandemic began continue to pinch.

In Saudi Arabia, the kingdom had been urging the public to watch the skies from Sunday night in preparation for the sighting of the crescent moon. Ramadan works on a lunar calendar and moon-sighting methodologies often vary between countries, meaning some nations declare the start of the month earlier or later.

However, many Sunni-dominated nations in the Middle East follow the lead of Saudi Arabia, home to Mecca and its cube-shaped Kaaba that Muslims pray toward five times a day.

In Iran, which views itself as the worldwide leader of Islam's minority Shiites, authorities typically begin Ramadan a day after Sunnis start. Already, the office of Iran's Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei announced Ramadan will start on Tuesday, according to the state-run IRNA news agency.

"This year, Ramadan will coincide with Nowruz," said Tehran resident Robabeh Khodkameh, referring to the Persian New Year that begins March 20. "Since the old days, we have a custom of thoroughly cleaning homes for Nowruz, and making everything look new. This year, since it's also Ramadan, we'll clean our hearts too and use it as a fresh start for things."

Only Sunnis in Iraq and Lebanon will begin fasting Monday, while Shiites will begin Tuesday.

During Ramadan, those observing typically break their fast with a date and water, following the tradition set by the Prophet Muhammad. Then they'll enjoy an "iftar," or a large meal. They'll have a pre-dawn meal, or "suhour," to sustain themselves during the daylight hours.

Ramadan is the ninth month of the Islamic lunar calendar; the month cycles through the seasons and the months in the Gregorian calendar.

Muslims try to avoid conflict and focus on acts of charity during the holy month. However, the war in the Gaza Strip is looming large over this year's Ramadan for many Muslims.

The war began Oct. 7 with Hamas' attack on Israel that killed around 1,200 people and saw 250 others taken hostage. Israel responded with a grinding war targeting the Gaza Strip that so far has seen more than 30,000 Palestinians reported killed and an intense siege of the seaside enclave cutting off electricity, food and water.

Scenes of Palestinians praying before bombed-out mosques and chasing after food airdropped by foreign nations continue to anger those across the Middle East and the wider world. The U.S. has been pressuring Israel, which relies on American military hardware and support, to allow more food in as Ramadan begins. It also plans a sea corridor with other partners.

The war, as well as Israeli restrictions on Muslims praying at Jerusalem's Al-Aqsa Mosque, Islam's third-holiest site, may further inflame militant anger. The site is also known as the Temple Mount, which Jews consider their most sacred site. The Palestinian territories will begin Ramadan on Monday as well.



The Islamic State group, which once held a self-described caliphate across territory in Iraq and Syria, has launched attacks around Ramadan as well. Though now splintered, the group has tried to capitalize on the Israel-Hamas war to raise its profile.

War also continues to rage across Sudan despite efforts to try and reach a Ramadan cease-fire.

## **All 5 aboard dead after small private jet crashes and burns in rural Virginia woods, police say**

RICHMOND, Va. (AP) — A small private jet crashed in woods and burned Sunday afternoon near a small airport in rural Virginia, killing all five people aboard, police said.

The twin-engine IAI Astra 1125 went down amid trees along an airport road in Hot Springs, a community in the shadow of the Allegheny Mountains, killing the pilot and three other adults along with a child, Virginia State Police said in a statement.

Police and other emergency responders converged on the site in Bath County after the crash occurred about 3 p.m.

A state police spokesman told The Associated Press that the plane caught fire on impact. Investigators were working to confirm the origin of the flight and where it was flying to, Sgt. Rick Garletts said by email Sunday evening.

"Small crash site, everything is burnt, meaning the tail numbers are unidentifiable," Garletts said, adding state police were working with the Federal Aviation Administration and the National Transportation Safety Board to try to identify the flight details and the occupants.

An FAA statement gave no preliminary information on the circumstances of the crash and said that the agency and the NTSB will investigate. Hot Springs is located about 165 miles (265 kilometers) west of the Virginia capital city, Richmond.

Local reports showed what appeared to be plumes of white smoke rising from an impact site. The airport was closed in the aftermath of the crash.

Police said they had no further details and planned no further updates Sunday evening as the investigation continues.

## **No. 1 South Carolina wins SEC Tournament over No. 8 LSU 79-72 in game marred by skirmish, ejections**

By PETE IACOBELLI AP Sports Writer

GREENVILLE, S.C. (AP) — It was a Southeastern Conference Tournament celebration like no other in South Carolina's history: Six subdued players in white championship hats stood on the podium while the rest of their teammates remained in the locker room.

"It was heartbreaking," guard Te-Hina Paopao said after the Gamecocks' 79-72 victory over No. 8 LSU was marred by a fourth-quarter fight that led to South Carolina leading scorer and rebounder Kamilla Cardoso being ejected.

MiLaysia Fulwiley, a freshman named the tournament's MVP, scored a career-high 24 points as South Carolina won its eighth tournament crown in the past 10 seasons.

"We couldn't have done it without them," Paopao said of missing Cardoso, Chloe Kitts, Tessa Johnson and Sakima Walker from the typically joyous postgame ceremony. "It was very hard for us, just a lot of emotions. We really wanted them to celebrate with us."

Kitts, Johnson and Walker were ejected for leaving the bench during the incident, which was sparked with just over two minutes left when the 6-foot-7 Cardoso shoved 5-10 Flau'jae Johnson of LSU after an intentional foul.

Paopao said the whole group celebrated behind the scenes.

"We're a team," she said. "We're going to bounce back from that learn from our mistakes."

South Carolina (32-0) was ahead 73-66 when Fulwiley stole the ball from Johnson, who wrapped her up

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and was called for a foul. Johnson then bumped South Carolina's Ashlyn Watkins, and the 6-foot-7 Cardoso rushed over and pushed the 5-10 Johnson to the ground. Players from both benches rushed toward them.

Gamecocks coach Dawn Staley said Johnson came up to her after the game to apologize, telling Staley, "I'm not that type of player."

Staley, too, apologized on behalf of her program to the remaining South Carolina fans who filled the arena all weekend.

Staley's assessment of the dustup?

"What you saw were two highly competitive teams and they did not handle it well," she said.

The penalties, Staley said, were appropriate and she will spend time the next week or so before the NCAA Tournament reminding her players not to give in to emotions at heated times.

"People see that this is now part of our game," she continued. "We have to fix it."

Cardoso, too, apologized on social media after the game. The SEC did not open locker rooms to reporters.

"My behavior was not representative of who I am as a person or the South Carolina program, and I deeply regret any discomfort or inconvenience it may have caused. I take full responsibility for my actions," she posted.

Cardoso and three of her teammates were ejected. Two LSU players — Aalyah Del Rosario and Janae Kent — who logged minutes in the game and came off the bench were also sent off. South Carolina was left with six players and the Tigers five.

Cardoso can be expected to miss time in the NCAA Tournament for her actions. The Gamecocks enter March Madness as the clear-cut No. 1 seed and the only undefeated team left in Division I, men or women. And they did it against the defending national champion Tigers and SEC player of the year Angel Reese.

It was South Carolina's eighth tournament crown in the past 10 seasons and its 16th straight win over LSU (28-5), including all four meetings since Kim Mulkey became the Tigers' coach three seasons ago.

Fulwiley, the speedy, flashy freshman, put on a show in her first SEC Tournament and was named its most valuable player. She hit two 3s as South Carolina used a 24-11 run between the first and second quarters to move in front for good.

LSU cut a 13-point deficit to 67-66 on Johnson's foul shots with 4:36 to play. But Raven Johnson followed with a basket and Bree Hall added two more buckets to extend the margin.

Aneesah Morrow led LSU with 19 points. Reese had 15 points and 13 rebounds, her third straight double-double in the tournament.

Reese, who hasn't won in four tries against South Carolina including as a sophomore at Maryland, believes the defending national champion Tigers are poised for another strong run in March Madness.

"We're not scared of South Carolina," she said. "Anybody who sees us should be scared. We're in a good place right now."

Mikayla Williams, the SEC freshman of the year, played for the first time since injuring her foot four games ago. She scored two points in eight minutes.

The Tigers were without Last-Tear Poa, the junior guard who had taken on Williams' starting spot as the first-year player rested her foot. Poa suffered a concussion late in LSU's semifinal win over Mississippi on Saturday night when her head hit the floor. She needed a stretcher to leave the court and was taken to a hospital and released Saturday night.

## BIG PICTURE

LSU: The Tigers have to be tired of coming up second to South Carolina. They've finished behind them in the standings in each of Mulkey's three seasons now have lost the SEC Tournament to the Gamecocks. Perhaps they'll get another crack at them in the NCAA Tournament.

South Carolina: The Gamecocks continue to excel despite that, as coach Dawn Staley says, they don't know what they don't know. They are filled with confidence and can be expected to show that in the NCAA Tournament.

## **Biden cajoles Netanyahu with tough talk, humanitarian concerns but Israeli PM remains dug in**

By AAMER MADHANI, TIA GOLDENBERG and ZEKE MILLER Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — President Joe Biden has stepped up public pressure on Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's government, warning he's "hurting Israel" and speaking candidly about "come to Jesus" conversations with the leader over the growing humanitarian crisis in Gaza.

Despite Biden's increased displays of frustration, Israeli officials and Middle East analysts say no signs are emerging that Biden can push Israel, at least in the short term, to fundamentally alter how it's prosecuting the conflict that is entering a new dangerous phase.

"He has a right to defend Israel, a right to continue to pursue Hamas," Biden said of Netanyahu in an MSNBC interview. "But he must, he must, he must pay more attention to the innocent lives being lost as a consequence of the actions taken. He's hurting...in my view, he's hurting Israel more than helping Israel."

The president had hoped to have an extended cease-fire in place by the start of the Muslim holy month of Ramadan, which is set to begin Monday. Biden administration officials see a deal on a temporary truce in exchange for dozens of hostages as a crucial step toward finding an eventual permanent end to the conflict.

But with no deal emerging, Biden acknowledged last week that he has become more concerned about the prospect of violence in east Jerusalem. Clashes have erupted during Ramadan in recent years between Palestinians and Israeli security forces around Jerusalem's Old City, home to major religious sites sacred to Jews, Christians and Muslims and the emotional epicenter of the Middle East conflict.

Biden this weekend warned Netanyahu that an attack on Rafah—where hundreds of thousands of displaced Gazans have congregated—would be a "red line" and that Israel "cannot have 30,000 more Palestinians dead." At the same time, he said that his commitment to Israel's defense is sacrosanct.

The president's blunt comments came after he was caught on a hot mic following his State of Union address on Thursday telling a Democratic ally that he's told Netanyahu they will have a "come to Jesus" talk about the humanitarian situation in Gaza.

The U.S. this month began airdrops and announced it will establish a temporary pier to get badly needed aid into Gaza via sea. U.N. officials have warned at least one quarter of Gaza's 2.3 million people are one step away from famine. The extraordinary measures to get aid into Gaza have come as Israel has resisted U.S. calls to allow more in via land routes.

And in a move that irritated Netanyahu, Vice President Kamala Harris last week hosted a member of Israel's wartime Cabinet, Benny Gantz, who came to Washington in defiance of the prime minister. U.S. officials said that Harris, and other senior advisers to Biden, were blunt with Gantz about their concerns about an expected Rafah operation.

Netanyahu on Sunday pushed back against Biden's latest comments.

"Well, I don't know exactly what the president meant, but if he meant...that I'm pursuing private policies against the majority, the wish of the majority of Israelis, and that this is hurting the interests of Israel, then he's wrong on both counts," Netanyahu said in a clip of an interview with Politico, released by the prime minister's office on Sunday.

Biden's stepped up criticism of the prime minister's handling of the war has been an intentional effort to signal to Netanyahu that the U.S. president is running out of patience with the mounting death toll and lack of aid flow into Gaza, according to a U.S. official familiar with the president's thinking. The official was not authorized to comment publicly and requested anonymity.

Elsewhere in Israel, the reaction to Biden's public venting of frustration was mixed.

Israeli opposition leader Yair Lapid said he wasn't surprised by Biden's remarks. Lapid on Sunday accused Netanyahu of pandering to his base and said the prime minister had narrow political interests in mind, like placating the far-right members of his Cabinet.

The U.S. "lost faith in Netanyahu and it's not surprising. Half of his Cabinet has lost faith in him as has the majority of Israel's citizens," Lapid, who briefly served as prime minister in 2022, told Israeli Army



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Radio. "Netanyahu must go."

Israeli Foreign Minister Israel Katz downplayed Biden's comments, saying the U.S. backed Israel's war aims and that was what mattered. "We must distinguish rhetoric from the essence," he told Israeli Army Radio.

Eytan Gilboa, an expert on U.S.-Israel relations and professor at Israel's Bar-Ilan University, said Biden's decision to scale up aid to Gaza and warn Israel about an incursion into Rafah undermined support for Israel's aims of dismantling Hamas' military and governing capabilities and freeing the hostages. He said it relieved Hamas of pressure to agree to a temporary cease-fire deal.

He said Biden's harsher comments of late came out of a frustration with Netanyahu over his reluctance to accept the U.S. vision for a postwar Gaza. Biden has called for Middle East stakeholders to reinvigorate efforts to find a two-state solution, one in which Israel would co-exist with an independent Palestinian state, once the current war ends.

Netanyahu, however, has consistently opposed establishing a Palestinian state throughout his political career.

Gilboa said Biden's remarks were made with an eye on his reelection and were aimed at appeasing progressive Democrats. The president is facing growing pressure from the left-wing of his party to use the United States' considerable leverage as Israel's chief patron to force Netanyahu toward a permanent cease-fire.

More than 100,00 Michigan Democrats cast "uncommitted" ballots in the state's primary last month, part of a coordinated effort in the battleground state intended to show Biden that he could lose much-needed support over frustration with his administration's approach to the Israel-Hamas war.

"Netanyahu earned that criticism, but on the other hand when (Biden) criticizes Netanyahu personally, he thinks he improves his standing among progressives," Gilboa said.

But Aaron David Miller, a senior fellow at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, said that pointed criticism of the Netanyahu government has limited value for Biden politically.

"Words without deeds are not going to bring those voters back," Miller said. "The hemorrhaging is going to continue as long as the pictures in Gaza don't change."

Gilboa said that even if a different government were running Israel, such as a more moderate figure like Gantz, Biden would still find a leadership intent on entering Rafah and defeating Hamas.

"They wouldn't do things significantly different," he said. "Is there anyone of sound mind here who is willing to leave Hamas in Gaza? That won't happen."

Biden administration officials pushed back against the idea that the president has become more outspoken in his criticism of Netanyahu with an eye on his 2024 prospects.

It's not lost on Biden that Israelis across the political spectrum remain as hawkish as Netanyahu about eliminating Hamas. Still, Biden believes that by speaking out more forcefully he can sway the Israelis to do more to reduce the death toll and alleviate suffering of innocent Palestinians as Israel carries out its operations, according to the U.S. official.

Biden, who last traveled to Israel soon after Hamas' launched its Oct. 7 attack on Israel, said in the MSNBC interview that he was open to travelling to Israel again to speak directly to the Knesset.

Privately, Biden has expressed a desire to aides to make another trip to Israel to try to circumvent Netanyahu and take his message directly to the people. One possibility discussed internally for a presidential trip is if a temporary cease-fire agreement is reached. Biden could use the moment to press the case directly to Israelis for humanitarian assistance in Gaza and begin outlining a path toward a permanent end to the fighting, officials said.

## Nationwide review finds patchwork, 'broken' systems for resolving open records disputes

By JOSH KELETY/AP, ERIC SCICCHITANO/CNHI NEWS and CARSON GERBER/CNHI NEWS  
HUNTSVILLE, Ala. (AP) — Dana Holladay-Hollifield has worked as a nurse in Alabama for years, but never was her pay as low as it was at Huntsville Hospital.

She wondered what executives at the not-for-profit facility were making, so she filed a public records request to find out. The hospital is governed by a public board, she said, and therefore subject to the state's open records law.

Many months and roadblocks later, Holladay-Hollifield faced a decision: File a costly lawsuit to get the information, or give up.

"This is supposed to be easy to access," she said. "I've got three kids; I'm taking care of my mother-in-law and my husband. I mean, I don't have a spare \$10,000."

Holladay-Hollifield's predicament represents what experts say is a fundamental breakdown of American democracy: the fact that, in most states, the most effective — and often only — option for residents to resolve open government disputes is to sue.

"Unfortunately, in the United States, almost everywhere, you have to go to court to enforce these laws. And that's just wrong," said David Cuillier, director of the Joseph L. Brechner Freedom of Information Project at the University of Florida. "If the system requires the average person to hire an attorney to make democracy work, then it's really broken."

A nationwide review of procedures by The Associated Press and CNHI News, timed to Sunshine Week, found that fewer than a third of states have offices that can resolve residents' complaints by forcing agencies to turn over documents or comply with open meetings requirements.

In most states, residents have just one meaningful option when they believe an agency is illegally withholding public information: to wage a legal battle. This system has a chilling effect, discouraging private citizens from finding out about everything from police investigations to how elected officials make decisions and spend taxpayer money.

Alabama is one of these states.

Holladay-Hollifield began seeking records from Huntsville Hospital, which is overseen by the Health Care Authority of the City of Huntsville, a public corporation, in early 2023. She petitioned its governing board, where an attorney repeatedly rebuffed her request. She then contacted numerous local public officials, but none could help.

Finally she consulted a lawyer, who told her a lawsuit would likely cost thousands of dollars.

Joe Campbell, general counsel for the Huntsville Hospital system, said the facility's administration and board have tried to provide Holladay-Hollifield with appropriate responses without "compromising their fiduciary obligations to protect the hospital."

"We have notified her in writing that we contend executive salaries are confidential and not subject to an open record request," Campbell said in an email.

However, J. Evans Bailey, a media law attorney in Montgomery, says significant Alabama Supreme Court rulings have held that all health care authorities in the state are subject to its public records law.

"If you are subject to the open records law, and you have a document that shows what the salaries are of various executives or higher level people in your government entity, that should be an open record," Bailey said.

### SYSTEMS LACK TEETH

The AP and CNHI's 50-state review uncovered a patchwork of systems for resolving open government disputes. Some states, like Arizona and Indiana, have offices that can review residents' complaints but can't compel agencies to comply with their findings.

Others give their attorneys general authority to issue opinions or take matters to court, though experts say they rarely pursue litigation or prosecution.

"That's one of the real challenges with any of these laws is that even when they have enforcement tools

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built in, civil liability or criminal liability, that they are so rarely enforced," said Chip Stewart, a media law professor at Texas Christian University.

Beyond private citizens, these systems can cost taxpayers.

When LaPorte County, Indiana, Prosecutor Sean Fagan took office in January 2023, one of his first requests was to access emails from the office's prior administration to review details about ongoing cases.

The problem? Those emails are on servers controlled by county commissioners, who refused to hand them over.

The Indiana Attorney General, the state public access counselor and the Indiana Prosecuting Attorneys Council all agreed the state's Access to Public Records Act gave Fagan the legal right to obtain the emails.

Commissioners still refused to provide them. The county attorney warned a lawsuit was likely. So did Indiana Public Access Counselor Luke Britt, whose job is to oversee compliance with public access laws.

"LaPorte County seemingly thumbed its nose at the position of this office and other state officials on this matter before, which may ultimately leave its resolution to the courts in what will likely result in expensive litigation," Britt wrote in an opinion calling on the board to release the emails.

The warnings became reality in June when Fagan sued commissioners.

But because Fagan is a LaPorte County employee, taxpayers there and around the state are on the hook to pay for the litigation. The attorney general's office has contracted outside representation for Fagan, and commissioners have used public dollars to hire an attorney.

## PRICE OF WINNING

Pennsylvania is one of few states with a robust office for resolving open records disputes. The Office of Open Records reviews appeals and issues binding decisions, which can be appealed in court. Some experts describe the office as one of the better systems for handling such complaints.

Still, there can be costly and time-consuming hurdles.

Simon Campbell, a prolific records requester from the Philadelphia suburbs, saw a request of his challenged at the Pennsylvania Supreme Court, a rare venue for open records appeals.

He won.

A Feb. 21 opinion affirmed that the Pennsylvania Interscholastic Athletic Association — a nonprofit regulating athletics for 350,000 middle school and high school students — is a public entity subject to the state's Right to Know Law. The ruling facilitated the pending release of thousands of financial documents and correspondence.

Campbell's involvement was as a hobbyist, one with a mean streak for bureaucrats stymying public access. He took up a stalled fight first waged by The (Sunbury) Daily Item, a CNHI affiliate.

It took four years and, according to Campbell, cost tens of thousands of dollars in legal fees he won't recoup.

"We can't have a society in which private citizens have to pay private lawyers to defend the law that the General Assembly enacts, yet that is exactly the case we have here," he said.

## HARD TO NAVIGATE

Beyond varying vastly from state to state, systems for resolving open government disputes can be complicated and daunting to navigate. They also can carry hefty fees for those seeking information.

Thomas Mattson, a videographer from Salem, Massachusetts, routinely requests body camera footage from local police agencies. The requests, he said, are often denied under investigatory exemptions.

In Massachusetts, the Supervisor of Records with the Secretary of the Commonwealth can issue decisions in records disputes, though the attorney general and the courts are the ultimate enforcer in such cases.

Mattson has appealed dozens of denials to the supervisor of records and said a letter from the office is often enough to get compliance.

But, he is commonly met with fees, sometimes hundreds of dollars.

"That's how they deter people from seeking these records," Mattson said. "This is what I do, but the average person would just give up out of frustration."

## NO DOLLARS TO LOSE

When Illinois updated its Freedom of Information Act laws in 2010, it was heralded by government



watchdog groups as a national model for how states should approach public access policies.

The law allows the state's public access counselor to issue "binding" opinions that can require agencies to turn over documents or follow open meetings rules. If officials don't comply, the attorney general can take them to court. Civil penalties can reach up to \$5,000 per offense.

It is one of the few state offices with such enforcement powers in transparency disputes.

That authority saved Ellen Moriarty, of suburban Chicago, around \$1,000 in attorney fees after she was denied a copy of a settlement agreement by the Homer Township Trustee's Office.

After multiple attempts to mediate the issue, the chief deputy attorney general issued a binding opinion in January requiring the trustees to comply with the request immediately.

"I can't tell you how happy I am that the attorney general is going to see this through the end," she said.

Moriarty also knows what can happen when those binding opinions aren't issued.

In 2022, she filed a separate complaint after the township wouldn't provide receipts for what she saw as suspicious activity regarding attorney fees.

In that case, the attorney general sided with Moriarty but issued a nonbinding opinion. A year and a half later, she still hasn't received any documents from the township, she said.

To enforce the opinion, Moriarty would have to sue.

"I'm just a homeowner in the township who is concerned about how our money's being spent," she said. "I don't have dollars to lose just so I could see some records."

## US forces fly in to beef up security at embassy in Haiti and evacuate nonessential personnel

By EVENS SANON Associated Press

PORT-AU-PRINCE, Haiti (AP) — The U.S. military said Sunday that it had flown in forces to beef up security at the U.S. Embassy in Haiti and allow nonessential personnel to leave.

The aircraft flew to the embassy compound, the U.S. Southern Command said, meaning that the effort involved helicopters. It was careful to point out that "no Haitians were on board the military aircraft." That seemed aimed at quashing any speculation that senior government officials might be leaving as the gang attacks in Haiti worsen.

The neighborhood around the embassy in the capital, Port-au-Prince, is largely controlled by gangs.

"This airlift of personnel into and out of the Embassy is consistent with our standard practice for Embassy security augmentation worldwide, and no Haitians were on board the military aircraft," according to the Southcom statement.

In many cases, nonessential personnel can include the families of diplomats, but the embassy had already ordered departure for nonessential staff and all family members in July. The personnel ferried out of the embassy may have simply been rotating out, to be refreshed by new staff.

The statement Sunday said that the United States remains focused on aiding Haitian police and arranging some kind of U.N.-authorized security deployment. But those efforts have been unsuccessful so far.

Haiti's embattled prime minister, Ariel Henry, traveled recently to Kenya to push for the U.N.-backed deployment of a police force from the East African country to fight the gangs. But a Kenyan court ruled in January that such a deployment would be unconstitutional.

Henry, who is facing calls to resign or form a transitional council, remains unable to return home. He arrived in Puerto Rico on Tuesday after he was unable to land in the Dominican Republic, which borders Haiti.

On Saturday, the office of Dominican President Luis Abinader issued a statement saying that "Henry is not welcome in the Dominican Republic for safety reasons." The Dominican Republic, which shares the island of Hispaniola with Haiti, has closed its land border.

"Given the current situation, the presence of the Haitian prime minister in the Dominican Republic is not considered appropriate," according to the statement, adding that "this decision reflects the firm position of the Dominican government to safeguard its national security and stability."

The statement described the security situation in Haiti as "totally unsustainable" and said that it "poses

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a direct threat to the safety and stability of the Dominican Republic.”

The statement predicted “the situation could deteriorate even further if a peacekeeping force is not implemented urgently to restore order.”

Caribbean leaders have called for an emergency meeting Monday in Jamaica on what they called Haiti’s “dire” situation. They have invited the United States, France, Canada, the United Nations and Brazil to the meeting.

Members of the CARICOM regional trade bloc have been trying for months to get political actors in Haiti to agree to form an umbrella transitional unity government.

CARICOM said Friday that while regional leaders remain deeply engaged in trying to bring opposition parties and civil society groups together to form a unity government, “the stakeholders are not yet where they need to be.”

“We are acutely aware of the urgent need for consensus to be reached,” according to the statement. “We have impressed on the respective parties that time is not on their side in agreeing to the way forward. From our reports, the situation on the ground remains dire and is of serious concern to us.”

In February, Henry agreed to hold a general election by mid-2025, and the international community has tried to find some foreign armed force willing to fight gang violence there.

CARICOM has also pushed Henry to announce a power-sharing, consensus government in the meantime, but the prime minister has yet to do so even as Haitian opposition parties and civil society groups are demanding his resignation.

Henry, a neurosurgeon, was appointed as Haiti’s prime minister after the July 2021 assassination of President Jovenel Moïse.

It was unclear whether Henry would be in Jamaica for the CARICOM meeting.

In Port-au-Prince, meanwhile, police and palace guards worked Saturday to retake some streets in the capital after gangs launched major attacks on at least three police stations.

Guards from the National Palace accompanied by an armored truck tried to set up a security perimeter around one of the three downtown stations after police fought off an attack by gangs late Friday.

Sporadic gunfire continued Saturday, and one woman writhed in pain on the sidewalk in downtown Port-au-Prince with a gunshot wound after a stray bullet hit her in the leg.

The unrelenting gang attacks have paralyzed the country for more than a week and left it with dwindling supplies of basic goods. Haitian officials extended a state of emergency and nightly curfew on Thursday as gangs continued to attack key state institutions.

But average Haitians, many of whom have been forced from their homes by the bloody street fighting, can’t wait. The problem for police in securing government buildings is that many Haitians have streamed into them, seeking refuge.

“We are the ones who pay taxes, and we need to have shelter,” said one woman, who didn’t give her name for safety reasons.

Another Port-au-Prince resident, who also did not give his name, described Friday’s attacks.

“They (the gangs) came with big guns. We have no guns and we cannot defend ourselves. All of us, the children are suffering,” said the man.

## **Police remove 34 bodies from English funeral home and arrest 2 for fraud and preventing burial**

By BRIAN MELLEY Associated Press

LONDON (AP) — Nearly three dozen bodies were removed from a funeral home in northern England, and a man and woman were arrested Sunday on suspicion of fraud and preventing a lawful burial, police said.

Humberside Police announced the developments after five days of investigation at three branches of Legacy Funeral Directors in Hull and East Yorkshire.

Assistant Chief Constable Thom McLoughlin said 34 bodies had been taken to a mortuary in Hull for identification.

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A 46-year-old man and 23-year-old woman, whose identifies weren't disclosed by authorities, were arrested on suspicion of preventing a lawful and decent burial, fraud by false representation and fraud by abuse of position.

No other details were available about the nature of the suspected crimes.

In the U.S. there have been several sensational cases of funeral home operators being arrested after dozens of bodies and cremated remains were found on their properties.

Nearly 200 decaying bodies were discovered piled up last year in a bug and maggot infested funeral home in Colorado and the owners face hundreds of charges, including abuse of a corpse. Prosecutors said some relatives had received fake ashes instead of the cremated remains of their loved ones.

Humboldt police said 350 people had contacted them since Friday after they asked families who had lost loved ones to contact investigators if they had concerns.

"Please be reassured that my staff and officers are working around the clock to deal with the unprecedented inquiries generated as a result of this incident," McLoughlin said. "Families affected continue to be supported by family liaison officers at what we appreciate is an extremely distressing time for all involved."

A website for the business said it was family run and had been established in 2010 and then expanded. The last news update on the website — from 2021 — said that despite uncertainty with COVID-19 services could continue and it was planning to open a fourth branch.

"As an independent funeral director, we are able to create a unique farewell for loved ones, with more flexibility and less constraint than our competitors," the website said. "With such breadth of experience, you and your family are assured the best service and care available."

An email sent to the funeral home by The Associated Press seeking comment wasn't immediately returned and a phone listed for the business rang unanswered.

## **UN envoy Giandomenico Picco, who helped end the Iran-Iraq war and won hostage releases, has died**

By MICHAEL WEISSENSTEIN Associated Press

Former U.N. diplomat Giandomenico Picco, whose negotiating skills helped resolve some of the thorniest crises of the 1980s and 1990s, including the Iran-Iraq war and the kidnappings of Westerners by Hezbollah in Lebanon, has died.

Picco passed away peacefully Sunday after a long illness, his son, Giacomo Picco, said. He was 75.

Picco worked at the United Nations from 1973 until 1992. Javier Pérez de Cuéllar of Peru, the fifth secretary-general of the world body, appointed him to his executive office in 1982, and he eventually became assistant secretary-general for political affairs.

Picco represented Pérez de Cuéllar in negotiations between New Zealand and France after the Greenpeace flagship Rainbow Warrior was sunk by French secret agents in 1985. At the time of its sinking, the vessel was protesting French nuclear tests in the Pacific.

The following year, he became the chief U.N. official in charge of negotiating the truce in the war between Sunni-majority Iraq and Shiite-majority Iran. More than 1 million people were killed in the conflict that began when Iraqi dictator Saddam Hussein invaded his neighbor in 1980 and featured trench warfare, waves of attacks by Iranians and chemical weapons assaults by Iraq.

Picco also played a role in Afghanistan, helping facilitate the 1989 withdrawal of Soviet forces after Moscow's 1979 invasion of that country.

Picco's understanding of and relations with Iran allowed him to negotiate the release of hostages kidnapped by groups with ties to the Islamic Republic, including Terry Anderson, the bureau chief in Beirut for The Associated Press, who was held the longest — from 1985 to 1991.

The mission was not without risk. In 1987, Anglican church envoy Terry Waite disappeared from Beirut while trying to win the release of the hostages and was held captive himself — also until 1991.

As Pérez de Cuéllar's special envoy, Picco faced that risk with personal bravery and an understanding of diplomacy and the Middle East.

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"When asked for the difference in my approach to securing the release of the hostages to that of Terry Waite, I responded, 'He went to Beirut from the West and I went to Beirut from the East.' In those days, the East began in Teheran," Picco wrote in his 1999 biography, "Man without a Gun: One Diplomat's Secret Struggle to Free the Hostages, Fight Terrorism, and End a War."

In a 2013 BBC interview, Picco described how at one point in the negotiations he traveled to Beirut, where an Iranian diplomat told him he would meet with the kidnappers that night.

The car came to a screeching halt, he said, and a bag was put on his head.

"Then I was thrown into the boot of the car, something which I don't recommend to anybody," recalled the 6-foot-4 Picco, known for dressing elegantly.

"Of course I knew that I could be taken," he said. "At that point I had no choice. I had invested quite a bit of time, and my own belief that what I was doing was right."

Picco eventually negotiated a deal in which the militias would release 10 Western hostages, including Anderson, over several months. In return, Israeli-backed forces in southern Lebanon freed dozens of Arab prisoners.

Picco was born in Udine, in northeastern Italy, near both Austria and the former Yugoslavia. It was a location that influenced his ability to triangulate the needs of different groups and to resolve difficult problems, according to friends and family.

"He was dealing with the hostage-takers, the kidnappers, he was able to draw on this background," said longtime friend, John Connorton, an attorney with experience in international relations. "Gianni Picco could relate to all kinds of people."

Picco had political science degrees from the University of Padua and the University of California, Santa Barbara, along with the universities of Prague and Amsterdam.

As importantly, his son said, he was equipped with deep empathy and curiosity.

"He was just a curious individual. It doesn't matter who you were, he could always learn something from somebody," said Giacomo Picco, who works in finance in New York.

After joining the world body, the elder Picco became the political affairs officer of the U.N. peacekeeping force in Cyprus. Pérez de Cuéllar brought him to U.N. headquarters in New York in 1981.

"Different from government diplomacy, we don't try to score a political point in favor of one or another," Picco said in a 1991 interview about the U.N.'s role. "We would like to develop a situation where at the end, everybody wins. And if indeed everybody wins, then we have all won."

In an interview earlier this year, Anderson said Picco was selected for the hostage negotiations because "I guess the secretary-general thought that if he could talk to the Afghans and the Iranians and the Russians and the Iraqis, he could talk to anybody, and he did."

"He broke the logjam, is what he did, and he did it at great risk," Anderson added. "He was one of the most brilliant men I ever knew."

In his book, Picco describes how a longtime relationship with Pérez de Cuéllar took him to Afghanistan when his mentor got the "thankless Afghan brief" after the Dec. 26, 1979, Soviet invasion. Helping run the U.N.'s Office of Special Political Affairs, de Cuéllar asked Picco to develop a road map for peace in the country.

The experience taught him about the role of the diplomat, Picco wrote.

"Our job, then, was to fill the gap, nurture coalition politics in a way that would end the bloodshed," he wrote. "It's fine to emphasize the good-officer role of the secretary-general, but then it's up to each of his representatives to stretch the confining rubber band as far as possible without snapping it. This is critical to understanding what we did in Afghanistan."

On Dec. 12, 1991, President George Bush presented Picco with the Presidential Award for Exceptional Service.

"His skillful diplomacy with Middle Eastern governments and officials and representatives of the hostage holders has resulted in freedom for many individuals held in the region outside the due process of law, including six Americans," said Maj. John Wissler, reading Picco's citation. "His personal courage in the face of danger and his dedication to the mission represent the best tradition of international civil service."



In 1994, Picco left the U.N. to become the chief executive officer of international consulting firm GDP Associates.

A regular lecturer at conferences and universities, and the author of numerous publications on foreign affairs, Picco received honorary degrees and awards from at least five governments.

Working for an international body without the money or military power of major nations, Picco said he had to be armed with his own commitment, neutrality and dedication to winning innocents' freedom.

"I did like a lot to execute my own ideas. I don't think it was really fair to think about something and then ask somebody else to do it. It's not very courageous," Picco said in a 2017 talk in New York.

## **Pope Francis' 'white flag' comment is met by criticism from Ukraine and its allies**

By SUSIE BLANN Associated Press

KYIV, Ukraine (AP) — Ukrainian and allied officials Sunday criticized Pope Francis for saying that Kyiv should have the "courage" to negotiate an end to the war with Russia, a statement many interpreted as a call for Ukraine to surrender.

The foreign ministers of Ukraine and Poland, a vocal ally of Kyiv, condemned the pope's remarks. And a leader of one of Ukraine's Christian churches on Sunday said that only the country's determined resistance to Moscow's full-scale invasion, launched by Russian President Vladimir Putin on Feb. 24, 2022, had prevented a mass slaughter of civilians.

In an interview recorded last month with Swiss broadcaster RSI and partially released on Saturday, Francis used the phrase "the courage of the white flag" as he argued that Ukraine, facing a possible defeat, should be open to peace talks brokered by international powers.

"Our flag is blue and yellow. We live, die and win under it. We will not raise other flags," Ukrainian Foreign Minister Dmytro Kuleba posted on Sunday on X, formerly known as Twitter.

Polish Foreign Minister Radek Sikorski tweeted: "How about, for balance, encouraging Putin to have the courage to withdraw his army from Ukraine? Peace would immediately ensue without the need for negotiations."

In his tweet, Kuleba urged the Holy See to "not repeat historical mistakes" as he alleged that the Vatican didn't do enough to resist Nazi Germany. Yet he also invited Francis to Ukraine, saying the pope's visit would show support for the "more than a million Ukrainian (Roman) Catholics, more than 5 million Greek Catholics, all Christians and all Ukrainians."

The head of Ukraine's Greek Catholic Church, Archbishop Sviatoslav Shevchuk, said Sunday that surrender isn't on the minds of Ukrainians.

"Ukraine is exhausted, but it stands and will endure. Believe me, it never crosses anyone's mind to surrender. Even where there is fighting today: listen to our people in Kherson, Zaporizhzhia, Odesa, Kharkiv, Sumy," Shevchuk said while meeting with Ukrainians in New York City. He mentioned the regions that have been under heavy Russian artillery and drone attacks.

Shevchuk also spoke of the brutality of Moscow's invasion, referencing the town near Kyiv where Russian occupation left hundreds of civilians dead in the streets and in mass graves. He argued that the gruesome scenes seen in Bucha would have been "just an introduction" if not for Ukrainians' fierce resistance as Russian troops marched on the capital in February 2022.

Vatican spokesman Matteo Bruni on Saturday clarified that the pope supported "a stop to hostilities (and) a truce achieved with the courage of negotiations," rather than an outright Ukrainian surrender. Bruni said that the journalist interviewing Francis used the term "white flag" in the question that prompted the controversial remarks.

"I think that the strongest one is the one who looks at the situation, thinks about the people and has the courage of the white flag, and negotiates," Francis said, when asked to weigh in on the debate between those who say that Ukraine should agree to peace talks and those who argue that any negotiations would legitimize Moscow's aggression.

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Kyiv remains firm on not engaging directly with Russia on peace talks, and Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy has said multiple times that the initiative in peace negotiations must come from the country that has been invaded.

Throughout the war, Francis has tried to maintain the Vatican's traditional diplomatic neutrality, but that has often been accompanied by apparent sympathy with the Russian rationale for invading Ukraine, such as when he noted that NATO was "barking at Russia's door" with its eastward expansion.

In the RSI interview, Francis insisted that "negotiations are never a surrender."

"When you see that you are defeated, that things are not going well, you have to have the courage to negotiate," he said.

During the Angelus prayer on Sunday from the window overlooking St. Peter's Square, Francis said that he was praying "for peace in the tormented Ukraine and in the Holy Land."

"Let the hostilities which cause immense suffering among the civilian population cease as soon as possible," he said.

Elsewhere, both Ukraine and Russia reported civilian deaths on Sunday after overnight trading drone, missile and shelling attacks that also caused a fire at a Russian oil depot and targeted Ukrainian power stations, according to officials.

Ukrainian air defenses overnight shot down 35 out of 39 drones launched by Russia, air force commander Mykola Oleshchuk reported, following a 4½-hour barrage that officials said also targeted power stations.

Two people died under rubble after Iranian-made Shahed drones around midnight struck private homes and state offices in Dobropillya, a large Ukrainian-held town in the east, authorities said. A 66-year-old man was also reported killed by shelling in Chasiv Yar, northeast of Dobropillya.

In Myrnohrad, another eastern Ukrainian town, 11 civilians were wounded after Russian missiles overnight struck residential buildings, the local prosecutor's office reported. It also posted photos of rubble lining the courtyard outside a high-rise apartment building, its windows blown out, and of cars parked outside that appeared reduced to piles of twisted metal.

A woman also died in Russia's Kursk region, which borders Ukraine, after shells fired from Ukraine set her house on fire, while her husband suffered severe burns, local Gov. Roman Starovoit reported.

Starovoit also said that debris from a downed Ukrainian drone sparked a fire at an oil depot in the Kursk region.

Nine Ukrainian drones targeted the Belgorod region, another southern Russian province that borders Ukraine, overnight and on Sunday, according to local Gov. Vyacheslav Gladkov. Later on Sunday, Russia's Defense Ministry said that three drones in total were shot down over the northern Leningrad and Novgorod regions, well over 1,000 kilometers (620 miles) from the Ukrainian border.

Earlier on Sunday, Russian media reported on a fire at an aircraft hangar near the main airport in St Petersburg, just kilometers (miles) from the Leningrad region, without specifying what caused it. According to the reports, two people were hospitalized with burns, and flights were briefly diverted away from the airport, Pulkovo.

## **DOJ opens criminal investigation into the Alaska Airlines 737 plane blowout, report says**

By GENE JOHNSON Associated Press

SEATTLE (AP) — The Department of Justice has launched a criminal investigation into the Boeing jetliner blowout that left a gaping hole on an Alaska Airlines plane this January, the Wall Street Journal reported on Saturday.

Citing documents and people familiar with the matter, the newspaper said investigators have contacted some passengers and crew — including pilots and flight attendants — who were on the Jan. 5th flight.

The Boeing plane used by Alaska Airlines suffered the blowout seven minutes after takeoff from Portland, Oregon, forcing the pilots to make an emergency landing. Boeing has been under increased scrutiny since

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the incident, when a panel that plugged a space left for an extra emergency door blew off a Max 9 jet. There were no serious injuries.

"In an event like this, it's normal for the DOJ to be conducting an investigation," Alaska Airlines said in a prepared statement. "We are fully cooperating and do not believe we are a target of the investigation." Boeing declined to comment. DOJ did not immediately reply to a request for comment.

The Journal reported that the investigation would assist the Department's review of whether Boeing complied with a previous settlement that resolved a federal investigation into the safety of its 737 Max aircraft following two deadly crashes in 2018 and 2019.

In 2021, Boeing had agreed to pay \$2.5 billion, including a \$244 million fine, to settle an investigation into the crashes of flights operated by Lion Air and Ethiopian Airlines. The company also blamed two employees for deceiving regulators about flaws in the flight-control system.

Boeing has acknowledged in a letter to Congress that it cannot find records for work done on the door panel of the Alaska Airlines plane.

"We have looked extensively and have not found any such documentation," Ziad Ojakli, Boeing executive vice president and chief government lobbyist, wrote to Sen. Maria Cantwell on Friday.

The company said its "working hypothesis" was that the records about the panel's removal and reinstallation on the 737 MAX final assembly line in Renton, Washington, were never created, even though Boeing's systems required it.

The letter, reported earlier by The Seattle Times, followed a contentious Senate committee hearing Wednesday in which Boeing and the National Transportation Safety Board argued over whether the company had cooperated with investigators.

The safety board's chair, Jennifer Homendy, testified that for two months Boeing repeatedly refused to identify employees who work on door panels on Boeing 737s and failed to provide documentation about a repair job that included removing and reinstalling the door panel.

"It's absurd that two months later we don't have that," Homendy said. "Without that information, that raises concerns about quality assurance, quality management, safety management systems" at Boeing.

Cantwell, a Democrat from Washington, demanded a response from Boeing within 48 hours.

Shortly after the Senate hearing, Boeing said it had given the NTSB the names of all employees who work on 737 doors — and had previously shared some of them with investigators.

In the letter, Boeing said it had already made clear to the safety board that it couldn't find the documentation. Until the hearing, it said, "Boeing was not aware of any complaints or concerns about a lack of collaboration."

In a preliminary report last month, the NTSB said four bolts that help keep the door plug in place were missing after the panel was removed so workers could repair nearby damaged rivets last September. The rivet repairs were done by contractors working for Boeing supplier Spirit AeroSystems, but the NTSB still does not know who removed and replaced the door panel, Homendy said Wednesday.

The Federal Aviation Administration recently gave Boeing 90 days to say how it will respond to quality-control issues raised by the agency and a panel of industry and government experts. The panel found problems in Boeing's safety culture despite improvements made after two Max 8 jets crashed in 2018 and 2019, killing 346 people.

## **Biden's big speech showed his uneasy approach to abortion, an issue bound to be key in the campaign**

By CHRISTINE FERNANDO Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Reproductive freedom took center stage during Biden's State of the Union address, but abortion rights advocates had mixed reactions, raising concerns about the president trying to capitalize on what will be a central campaign issue while avoiding using the word "abortion."

Abortion rights have proved to be a potent issue driving voters to the polls and boosting Democrats

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since the U.S. Supreme Court ended a constitutional right to the procedure nearly two years ago. The issue could be pivotal in the presidential race and congressional contests this year.

During Thursday's speech, Biden deviated from his prepared remarks, skipping over the word "abortion" and instead using the phrases "reproductive freedom" or "freedom to choose."

The word was used once in his prepared remarks, when he introduced Kate Cox, first lady Jill Biden's State of the Union guest and a Texas woman who was forced to flee the state for an abortion after finding out her fetus had a fatal condition. The text had Biden saying, "Because Texas law banned abortion." Instead, he said "Because Texas law banned her ability to act."

It's common for elected officials, especially Biden, to go off script or make in-the-moment tweaks for a host of reasons.

"By not saying the word 'abortion,' it implies that it's taboo or something to be ashamed of," said Kellie Copeland, executive director of Pro-Choice Ohio. "It's stigmatizing and harmful. The president should do better."

Amy Hagstrom Miller, president and CEO of Whole Woman's Health, which manages abortion clinics in Maryland, Minnesota, New Mexico and Virginia, said there was an "uproar" across the organization as staff members texted their reactions to each other.

"Abortion is what we provide and what people are being denied," she said. "People don't call us for a reproductive freedom appointment. They don't ask for a bodily autonomy visit or a choice procedure. They call for abortion care, and abortion is a professional medical term for the health care we provide. Avoiding the word just shows the power of the historical stigma around abortion."

The pushback over how he addressed the issue in his State of the Union speech is the latest example of Biden's fraught history with the topic. Many in the abortion rights movement have long viewed him as an imperfect messenger.

Biden initially opposed the 1973 Roe v. Wade decision, saying it went too far. He also opposed federal funding for abortions and supported restrictions on abortions later in pregnancy.

The Biden campaign's strategy is to let the president be who he is — an 81-year-old Catholic man whose views on the issue have evolved and who still doesn't use the word abortion much. His aides also want to highlight his evolution on the issue and how he still grapples with what can be an uncomfortable topic but believes firmly in the freedom of choice.

"Donald Trump on the other hand has repeatedly used disgusting and derogatory language when referring to women, and he will institute a national abortion ban," said Lauren Hitt, spokesperson for the Biden campaign. "The choice in this election is incredibly clear."

Trump has taken credit for appointing three Supreme Court justices who made overturning Roe v. Wade possible.

Biden's aides believe they can reach a broader swath of voters by framing the issue around reproductive freedom, as the fallout from the Supreme Court's decision to overturn Roe v. Wade has moved beyond access to abortion and into areas such as IVF and birth control.

The strategy might appeal to some voters but alienate others, said Sophia Jordán Wallace, a political science professor at the University of Washington.

"The question is if people sincerely believe that this framing is because he's thinking about abortion plus other issues or whether he's using that framing to avoid saying the word 'abortion' due to discomfort," she said. She added that Biden could be more explicit about how his perspective on abortion has changed, something many voters may be able to relate to.

"That's a story they can tell," she said.

Polling has found that Americans broadly support abortion rights, and voters in seven states have either affirmed the right or defeated attempts to weaken it since the Supreme Court ruling. An Associated Press-NORC Center for Public Affairs Research poll conducted in June 2023 found that about two-thirds (64%) of U.S. adults think abortion should be legal in at least some circumstances. Another survey conducted later that year also found that 60% of U.S. adults think the outcome of the 2024 election will be very important for abortion policy.



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Many advocates say they want to see Biden offer more full-throated support for abortion rights in particular and have said they sense discomfort in his approach to speaking on the topic.

"Abortion could very well be the issue that the election hinges on," Nourbese Flint, president of the national abortion justice group All(asterisk) Above All Action Fund. "If President Biden wants to speak to the American electorate, whatever their faith, he should use his bully pulpit to be bold on abortion access."

The State of the Union address was the latest showcase of Biden's complicated relationship with the topic.

He told The New Yorker last week: "I've never been supportive of, you know, 'It's my body, I can do what I want with it.'"

Last month in New York, Biden referred to himself as a "practicing Catholic" before saying, "I don't want abortion on demand, but I thought Roe v. Wade had it right." He used similar words on the 51st anniversary of that court decision.

And during a Maryland fundraiser last year for his reelection campaign, he said: "I'm a practicing Catholic. I'm not big on abortion. But guess what? Roe v. Wade got it right."

Advocates also have criticized Biden's use of the phrase "abortion on demand," which they say was once an abortion rights rallying cry that was co-opted by the anti-abortion movement.

"Those comments around 'abortion on demand' are tied to stigma around abortion," said Dr. Jamila Peritt, president and CEO of Physicians for Reproductive Health.

Still, she said, "We need to make clear that we are much better off under that leadership than under those who want to ban abortion outright."

Biden has repeatedly called on Congress to restore Roe v. Wade protections, and his administration has made several moves to improve reproductive health care access. That includes defending the FDA's approval of the abortion drug mifepristone and supporting the agency in allowing pharmacies to get certified to dispense the drug.

Federal agencies under his administration also have improved abortion access for veterans and service members, issued guidance reminding abortion providers of their federal protections when performing abortions during medical emergencies, and filed lawsuits to defend the right to travel to another state for abortion care.

Biden has been endorsed by major abortion rights organizations, including Planned Parenthood and Reproductive Freedom for All, whose CEO, Mini Timmaraju, praised Biden for speaking "powerfully about the harms of abortion bans and attacks on IVF" in his State of the Union remarks.

Biden used part of his address to thank Vice President Kamala Harris, who has embarked on a multistate reproductive freedom tour.

Jennifer Driver, senior director of reproductive rights at State Innovation Exchange, called Harris a "champion for abortion rights," but said, "We also need the president to be vocal on this issue."

## What to know about the SAVE plan, the income-driven plan to repay student loans

By ADRIANA MORGA AND COLLIN BINKLEY Associated Press

NEW YORK (AP) — More than 75 million student loan borrowers have enrolled in the U.S. government's newest repayment plan since it launched in August.

President Joe Biden recently announced that he was canceling federal student loans for nearly 153,000 borrowers enrolled in the plan, known as the SAVE plan. Forgiveness was granted to borrowers who had made payments for at least 10 years and originally borrowed \$12,000 or less.

The SAVE plan was created last year to replace other existing income-based repayment plans offered by the federal government. More borrowers are now eligible to have their monthly payments reduced to \$0, and many will qualify for lower payments compared to other repayment plans.

For Lauran Michael and her husband, the SAVE plan has reduced student loan payments by half.

Since getting married, they've both been paying off her husband's student loans, which would have

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amounted to about \$1,000 a month when payments resumed after a pause during the pandemic. Under the SAVE plan, their payments are now \$530 a month.

"We don't want our loans dictating our life choices, and us not being able to do other things because we're paying so much money. The SAVE plan is definitely a game changer for us," said Michael, a 34-year-old interior designer in Raleigh, North Carolina.

Michael's family is paying for daycare for their two children using the money they saved from not making payments during the pandemic and the reduced payments under the SAVE plan.

If you are interested in applying for the SAVE plan, here's what you need to know:

## WHAT IS AN INCOME-DRIVEN REPAYMENT PLAN?

The U.S. Education Department offers several plans for repaying federal student loans. Under the standard plan, borrowers are charged a fixed monthly amount that ensures all their debt will be repaid after 10 years. But if borrowers have difficulty paying that amount, they can enroll in one of several plans that offer lower monthly payments based on income and family size. Those are known as income-driven repayment plans.

Income-driven options have been offered for years and generally cap monthly payments at 10% of a borrower's discretionary income. If a borrower's earnings are low enough, their bill is reduced to \$0. And after 20 or 25 years, any remaining debt gets erased.

## HOW IS THE SAVE PLAN DIFFERENT?

More borrowers in the SAVE plan are eligible for \$0 payments. This plan won't require borrowers to make payments if they earn less than 225% of the federal poverty line — \$32,800 a year for a single person. The cutoff for other plans, by contrast, is 150% of the poverty line, or \$22,000 a year for a single person.

Also, the SAVE plan prevents interest from piling up. As long as borrowers make their monthly payments, their overall balance won't increase. Once they cover their adjusted monthly payment — even if it's \$0 — any remaining interest is waived.

Other major changes will take effect in July 2024. Payments on undergraduate loans will be capped at 5% of discretionary income, down from 10% now. Those with graduate and undergraduate loans will pay between 5% and 10%, depending on their original loan balance.

The maximum repayment period is capped at 20 years for those with only undergraduate loans and 25 years for those with any graduate school loans.

## WHO QUALIFIES FOR THE SAVE PLAN?

The SAVE plan is available to all student loan borrowers in the Direct Loan Program who are in good standing on their loans.

Read more about the SAVE plan [here](#).

## HOW DO I APPLY FOR THE SAVE PLAN?

Borrowers can apply to the SAVE plan using the Income-Driven Repayment Plan request through the Education Department's website.

## HOW WILL I KNOW THAT MY DEBT HAS BEEN CANCELED?

If you are one of the borrowers who is benefitting from forgiveness under the SAVE plan, you will receive an email from the Education Department.

## WHAT ARE OTHER PROGRAMS THAT CAN HELP WITH STUDENT LOAN DEBT?

If you've worked for a government agency or a nonprofit, the Public Service Loan Forgiveness program offers cancellation after 10 years of regular payments, and some income-driven repayment plans cancel the remainder of a borrower's debt after 20 to 25 years.

Borrowers should make sure they're signed up for the best possible income-driven repayment plan to qualify for these programs.

Borrowers who have been defrauded by for-profit colleges may also apply for relief through a program known as Borrower Defense.

If you'd like to repay your federal student loans under an income-driven plan, the first step is to fill out an application through the Federal Student Aid website.

## WILL THERE BE FUTURE FORGIVENESS?

Several categories of borrowers would be eligible for relief under Biden's second try at widespread can-

cellation after the Supreme Court rejected his first plan last year.

The proposed plan includes relief for borrowers who have been paying their loans for at least 20 or 25 years, automatic forgiveness for borrowers who are eligible for income-driven repayment plans but are not enrolled, and loan cancellation for borrowers who attended a for-profit college that left them unable to pay their student loans, among others.

Whether any of the relief will materialize is a looming question as conservatives vow to challenge any attempt at mass student loan cancellation. The new proposal is narrower, focusing on several categories of borrowers who could get some or all of their loans canceled, but legal challenge is almost certain.

Currently, borrowers who are eligible for forgiveness under the SAVE program will get their loans discharged on a rolling basis, according to the Education Department.

## **The diaries of presidents offer history in the raw — even the naked — and may have secrets to tell**

By CALVIN WOODWARD Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Just before dawn one summer day in Washington, the president of the United States stripped naked on a rock by the river, plunged in and saw a dead man float to the surface.

We know this about John Quincy Adams because he kept a diary for the ages. So have many presidents, from George Washington to Joe Biden. In these journals — a collection of notebooks in Biden's case — they confide to themselves, express raw opinions, trace even the humdrum habits of their day and offer seat-of-the-pants insight on monumental decisions of their time.

Here, also, they may possess and spill secrets they shouldn't. That's part of why Biden is facing more congressional scrutiny this week for his sloppy handling of classified documents after his vice presidency. Meantime Donald Trump became the first person in history to be charged with a crime for making off with sensitive government records as president — and then, unlike Biden, resisting demands to return them.

Adams called his diary his "second conscience" — not to mention a place to record his frequent skinny-dipping in the Potomac — and presidents since have vouched for the value of scribbling down the day's observations or dictating them to a recorder to help them think things through and preserve them in memory, if not memoirs.

"The process of converting a jumble of thoughts into coherent sentences makes you ask tougher questions," Barack Obama said of his journaling.

Jimmy Carter, who came away from the White House with more than 5,000 pages of transcribed entries, allowed, "I seldom exercised any restraint on what I dictated."

Dwight Eisenhower wrote in a diary entry not only about infighting on a scientific advisory panel, but its highly secret (if questionable) analysis that Soviet atomic bombs could be rendered 99% ineffective by surrounding them with a type of radioactivity to which they were uniquely vulnerable.

Trump's diary was named Twitter.

Now Robert Hur, the special counsel who probed Biden's treatment of classified material but declined to recommend charges, is to appear before a House committee Tuesday to explain findings that left both parties ambivalent, for opposite reasons.

Democrats are relieved Biden won't be charged but upset that Hur cited old-age memory fog as one reason the president should get a pass. Republicans wanted Biden prosecuted yet were delighted to see Hur fuel the public's sense that Biden is too old for the job.

The hearing is bound to touch on the ample history of presidents who left office with documents containing state secrets, even after the 1978 Presidential Records Act mandated that the government has "complete ownership, possession, and control" of all presidential and vice presidential records. The act was just one part of a reformist clean-up of government from Richard Nixon's corrupt presidency.

A president's diary is exempt from that act, at least when its content does not relate to the conduct of official business, but classified information is not supposed to be there.

According to Hur's report, Biden's diaries contained highly classified reflections on foreign adversaries,

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homeland threats and notes from the President's Daily Brief, including some determined to be "top secret" with markings signifying they came from human intelligence sources — among the most closely controlled secrets in the U.S. government.

He appeared to keep multiple sets of notes, one organized for his daily reflections and another devoted to foreign policy. The papers gather information explaining why he disapproved of President Obama's plan for a U.S. troop surge in Afghanistan.

"There is evidence that, after his vice presidency, Mr. Biden willfully retained marked classified documents about Afghanistan and unmarked classified handwritten notes in his notebooks, both of which he stored in unsecured places in his home," Hur wrote.

"He had no legal authority to do so," Hur went on, and the president's actions "risked serious damage to America's national security." But he said the evidence falls far short of proving that Mr. Biden retained and disclosed these classified materials willfully.

The special counsel investigation drew a sharp contrast between Biden and Trump, crediting the Democrat with fully cooperating in the return of documents he shouldn't have had, consenting to searches in several places and submitting to an interview that lasted more than five hours.

"After being given multiple chances to return classified documents and avoid prosecution, Mr. Trump allegedly did the opposite," Hur said. "According to the indictment, he not only refused to return the documents for many months, but he also obstructed justice by enlisting others to destroy evidence and then to lie about it."

Presidents who have been less conspicuous in disdaining the rules have not faced such trouble.

Ronald Reagan, Hur noted in his report, left the White House in 1989 with eight years of handwritten diaries, "which he appears to have kept at his California home even though they contained Top Secret information." The Justice Department took no known steps to retrieve or secure the diaries.

Carter dictated entries to his diary and had them typed by a secretary. Returning to Plains, Georgia, after his presidency, Carter realized he had 21 large volumes of double-spaced text, excerpts of which became a book.

Hur said there is "some reason to think" Carter and another enthusiastic diarist, George H.W. Bush, both had classified information in their diaries. But that was hardly shocking.

"Historically, after leaving office, many former presidents and vice presidents have knowingly taken home sensitive materials related to national security from their administrations without being charged with crimes," Hur wrote.

Students of history have always placed great stock in the unguarded musings of high officials, whether in a diary, a leaked conversation or one of the thousands of White House recordings that six presidents secretly taped from the Franklin Roosevelt administration to the downfall of Nixon.

Those episodes are rarer in the scripted, polished and controlled enterprise of the modern American presidency, under any recent president not named Trump.

They "provide unique windows into the presidency, helping us better understand how policy is made and power is used," said Marc Selverstone, director of Presidential Studies and co-chair of the Presidential Recordings Program at the University of Virginia's Miller Center. "You get it, as LBJ would have said, with the bark off."

To be sure, there wasn't much guarded about John Quincy Adams, judging by the 15,000 pages of diary entries he wrote over more than 68 years, four of them in the White House. His diaries "comprise the longest continuous record of any American of the time," says the Massachusetts Historical Society, which publishes them online.

On May 26, 1828, Adams closed a long, detailed post about his "harassing day (of) crowded and multifarious business" with happy news from his garden. "I perceived a tamarind heaving up the earth," he wrote, and he planted Hautboy Strawberries.

Another day, he enjoyed "sitting naked, basking on the bank at the margin of the river" after a swim. No secrets there.

On July 22, 1825, his early morning routine of walking and swimming took a dark twist.



"I walked as usual to my ordinary bathing place, and came to the rock where I leave my clothes a few minutes before sunrise — I found several persons there, besides three or four who were bathing; and at the shore under the tree a boat with four men in it, and a drag net ... in search of a dead body."

"I stripped and went in to the river; I had been not more than ten minutes swimming when the drag boat started, and they were not five minutes from the shore when the body floated immediately opposite the rock; less than one hundred yards from the shore."

Thus the diary of the sixth president notes the death of Mr. Shoemaker, a post office clerk seen swimming about in the water until he was gone.

## **Gunmen kidnap nearly 300 students in northwest Nigeria. 2 days later, some lose hope of finding them**

By CHINEDU ASADU Associated Press

KURIGA, Nigeria (AP) — Rashidat Hamza is in despair. All but one of her six children are among the nearly 300 students abducted from their school in Nigeria's northwest, riddled with Islamic extremists and armed gangs.

It has been more than two days after her children — ages 7 to 18 — went to school in the remote town of Kuriga in Kaduna state only to be kidnapped by gunmen. She was still in shock Saturday.

Authorities said at least 100 children aged 12 or younger were among the abductees in the state known for violent killings lawlessness and dangerous roads where people get regularly snatched.

"We don't know what to do, but we believe in God," Hamza told The Associated Press during a visit to the town.

The mass kidnapping in Kuriga was the third in northern Nigeria since last week; a group of gunmen abducted 15 children from a school in another northwestern state, Sokoto, before dawn Saturday, and a few days earlier 200 people, mostly women and children displaced by conflict, were kidnapped in north-eastern Borno State.

The kidnappings are a stark reminder of the security crisis plaguing Africa's most populous country.

No group claimed responsibility for any of the recent abductions. But Islamic extremists waging an insurgency in the northeast are suspected of carrying out the kidnapping in Borno. Locals blame the school abductions on herders who are in conflict with the settled communities.

It's not the first time for a student kidnapping in Nigeria to shock the world. In 2014, Islamic extremists abducted more than 200 schoolgirls from Borno's Chibok, sparking the global #BringBackOurGirls social media campaign. A decade later, at least 1,400 Nigerian students have so far been abducted from their schools in similar circumstances. Some are still held captive, including nearly 100 of the Chibok girls.

Recalling Thursday's kidnapping, Nura Ahmad, a teacher, told the AP that students were just settling into their classrooms at the government primary and secondary school when gunmen "came in dozens, riding on bikes and shooting sporadically."

The LEA Primary and Secondary School, one of the few educational facilities in this area, sits by the road just at the entrance of the town, tucked in the middle of forests and savannah. Even with its decaying roof and wrecked walls, it gave parents hope for a better future for their children.

"They surrounded the school and blocked all passages ... and roads" to prevent help from coming before kidnapping the children in less than five minutes, Ahmad said.

Fourteen-year-old Abdullahi Usman braved gunshots to escape the captors.

"Those who refused to move fast were either forced on the motorcycles or threatened by gunshots fired into the air," Abdullahi said. "The bandits were shouting: Go! Go! Go!" he said.

Nigerian police and soldiers headed into the forests Friday to search for the missing children, but combing the wooded expanses of northwestern Nigeria could take weeks, observers said.

"Since this happened, my brain has been muddled," said Shehu Lawal, the father of a 13-year-old boy who is among those abducted.

"My child didn't even eat breakfast before leaving. His mother fainted (upon hearing the news)," he said.

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Some villagers like Lawan Yaro, whose five grandchildren are among the abducted, say their hopes are already fading.

People are used to the region's insecurity, "but it has never been in this manner," he said.

"We are crying, looking for help from the government and God, but it is the gunmen that will decide to bring the children back," Yaro said. "God will help us."

But schools are not the only targets.

More than 3,500 people have been abducted across Nigeria in the last year, according to the Armed Conflict Location and Event Data Project. Some were even kidnapped from their homes in the capital of Abuja. Last year, President Bola Tinubu took office after he successfully campaigned on the promise to tighten security and stop the kidnappings.

Experts say it is easy to smuggle in arms, used in kidnappings, over Nigeria's poorly policed borders. More than half of its 1,500-kilometer (932-mile) border with Niger, for instance, stretches across the northwest. Though mostly covered in woodland savannah, the region also has vast ungoverned and unoccupied forests where organized gangs hide and keep their kidnap victims.

In 2022, lawmakers passed a bill to penalize ransom payments, but Nigerian kidnapers are known for their brutality, forcing many families to succumb to their demands.

Nigeria's military continues to conduct air raids and special military operations in the region as well as respond to pockets of crisis across the country but is fatigued by the 14-year Islamist insurgency in the northeast. Armed gangs also keep on multiplying in the region where many are poor and often work with extremists, seeking to expand their operations.

The military previously said that sometimes kidnap victims were used as "human shields" to prevent aerial bombardments of the forests where their captors hide.

The gangs are "adapting their strategies and further entrenching themselves in the northwest through extortion," said James Barnett, a researcher specializing in West Africa at the U.S.-based Hudson Institute.

"Their mentality is that they should be allowed free rein to do what they please in the northwest and that if the state challenges them, directly or indirectly, they will have to respond and show their strength," Barnett said.

More than a dozen checkpoints and military trucks now dot the dangerous 55-mile (89 kilometers) road running from Kuriga town to the city of Kaduna. But the soldiers are likely to be redeployed elsewhere soon, depending on security needs.

People in Kuriga can only hope their children are returned unharmed and the safety they now feel with the presence of military personnel endures.

Hamza, the mother whose five children were kidnapped, hopes the government will arrest the kidnapers and return the students. "The gunmen don't allow us to have peace."

## **Katie Porter's star dims in failed US Senate bid, leaving the Californian facing an uncertain future**

By MICHAEL R. BLOOD AP Political Writer

LOS ANGELES (AP) — U.S. Rep. Katie Porter became a social media celebrity by brandishing a white board at congressional hearings to dissect CEOs and break down complex figures into assaults on corporate greed, a signature image that propelled the Democrat's U.S. Senate candidacy in California.

This time, her numbers didn't add up.

The progressive favorite known for spotlighting her soccer mom, minivan-driving home life was trounced in Tuesday's primary election to fill the seat once held by the late Democratic Sen. Dianne Feinstein, finishing far behind Republican Steve Garvey and fellow Democratic Rep. Adam Schiff.

Another established Democrat, Rep. Barbara Lee, finished even farther behind and will abandon her House seat at the end of the term. But it's Porter's departure from an up-for-grabs swing district in Southern California that could cost the party dearly in the fierce fight for control of the U.S. House.

Porter didn't go down quietly. She immediately pointed a finger at "billionaires spending millions to rig

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this election." That claim resulted in a brutal social media backlash from many who were happy to depict the congresswoman as a graceless loser.

"Can we stop trying to excuse every loss with the term 'rig' or 'rigged'?" veteran Florida Democratic operative Steve Schale wrote on X, formerly known as Twitter.

Some likened her bitter words to former President Donald Trump's baseless claims of election fraud in 2020 — not a kind comparison to make in Democratic circles.

The episode represented a messy coda to what once was seen as a top-shelf campaign likely headed for the November ballot. Instead, she is now dealing with stinging fallout from the loss and her reaction to it, and facing an uncertain future after her House term expires in early January.

Perhaps chastened by the criticism, Porter later clarified her initial statement to say she didn't believe the California vote count or election process had been compromised, but she didn't recant her earlier remarks. Rigged, she said in a follow-up, "means manipulated by dishonest means."

Porter, known as a small-dollar fundraiser and a self-styled guardian of the middle class, was the first major candidate to enter the race in January 2023. At the time, she promised to be a "warrior" in Washington who would take on big banks, Wall Street and the pharmaceutical industry.

As for her future, political watchers in California say Porter could end up somewhere in the Biden administration, on Democratic Gov. Gavin Newsom's staff or perhaps be a candidate for another statewide office in 2026 — the race for governor is wide open. She was a consumer protection attorney before her election to the House, and her knack for wringing common-sense answers from questions that become clouded by political haze remains a marketable skill.

In what might not be a coincidence, Porter's campaign began raising money for President Joe Biden on Friday, urging her supporters in an email to "donate, knock (on) doors, make calls" to get the president reelected.

"I do think it will blow over," said veteran Democratic consultant Roger Salazar. He called her rigged-election claims a "heat-of-the-moment" reaction to the millions of dollars spent against her by super political action committees.

That's pretty much the line Porter has taken. She faults outside spending for costing her a chance at the seat, hinting that she became a target after taking on powerful forces.

"As we've seen in this campaign, they spend millions to defeat someone who will dilute their influence and disrupt the status quo," she wrote on X.

But Democratic strategists believe she made strategic mistakes that contributed to her downfall.

Democratic consultant Andrew Acosta said Porter's steady attacks on Schiff probably alienated Democratic base voters who admire the congressman, who had been a leading voice in two Trump impeachments.

"Being the angry outsider is the role Republicans usually play," Acosta said. "It doesn't play with Democratic base voters."

Porter said Schiff's ads spotlighting Garvey's conservative credentials by directing criticism mainly at him — in a kind of a carom shot that boosted his visibility among Republican and right-leaning voters — were a "brazenly cynical" attempt to box out female candidates. In other words, her and Lee.

Paul Mitchell of Political Data Inc., a research firm that closely tracks voting trends and works with Democrats, independent candidates and academics, said Porter was simply outmaneuvered. With a large fundraising advantage, he said, Schiff was able to define the race as a contest between him and the Republican Garvey.

To the average voter "a two-person race makes a lot more sense," Mitchell said. "It strengthened both of their brands." A one-on-one contest is "the most easily digestible narrative in American politics."

On X, Porter wrote that "we had the establishment running scared — withstanding 3-to-1 in TV spending and an onslaught of billionaires spending millions to rig this election."

"Special interests like politics as it is today because they control the politicians," she wrote.

But Acosta and others said practices bemoaned by Porter — a candidate trying to elevate a presumably weaker opponent, or political groups with little accountability spending millions — are commonplace.

It's "indicative of the world we live in today," Acosta said, adding that the days of polite concession

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speeches are over.

"Now, they throw a fit and blame the system," he said.

Meanwhile, Porter left some Democrats rankled about the House seat she had to agree to vacate to run for the Senate. It's in danger of being seized by Republicans in November, with control of the closely divided chamber on the line.

Democratic state Sen. Dave Min will face Republican Scott Baugh in the competitive 47th District in Orange County, which both parties see as crucial to their chances of winning a majority.

When an incumbent steps out of a competitive district "it goes from relatively safe to up in the air," noted Salazar. "The House is so tight ... you don't want to lose an opportunity."

The prospect of losing a key House seat led to plenty of angsty comments on X, many framed in the kind of blunt terms Porter has long been known for.

"Katie," one commenter wrote, "you threw away your seat."

## Trump blasts Biden over Laken Riley's death after Biden says he regrets using term 'illegal'

By JOSH BOAK, MICHELLE PRICE and JILL COLVIN Associated Press

ATLANTA (AP) — President Joe Biden said Saturday that he regretted using the term "illegal" during his State of the Union address to describe the suspected killer of Laken Riley, as his all-but-certain 2024 GOP rival, Donald Trump, blasted the Democrat's immigration policies and blamed them for her death at a rally attended by the Georgia nursing student's family and friends.

Biden expressed remorse after facing frustration from some in his party for the use of the term to describe people who arrived or are living in the U.S. illegally.

"I shouldn't have used illegal, it's undocumented," he said in an interview with MSNBC's Jonathan Capehart taped in Atlanta, where the president was meeting with small business owners and holding a campaign rally.

Trump, campaigning in Rome, Georgia, at the same time, assailed Biden for the comments.

"Joe Biden went on television and apologized for calling Laken's murderer an illegal," he said to loud jeers and boos. "Biden should be apologizing for apologizing to this killer."

The back-and-forth underscored how Riley's murder has become a flashpoint in the 2024 campaign and a rallying cry for Republicans who have seized on frustrations over the Biden administration's handling of the U.S.-Mexico border during a record surge of migrants entering the country. An immigrant from Venezuela who entered the U.S. illegally has been arrested and charged with her murder.

Trump was joined at his rally by Riley's parents, her sister and friends and met with them before he took the stage. They were welcomed with a standing ovation and large signs handed out by the campaign that featured Riley's photograph and the words "SAY HER NAME!" "REMEMBER OUR ANGELS," they read on the back.

"We share your grief," Trump told them in his remarks.

Trump, in a speech that lasted nearly two hours, hammered Biden on the border and for mispronouncing Riley's name during his State of the Union address this past week.

"What Joe Biden has done on our border is a crime against humanity and the people of this nation for which he will never be forgiven," Trump charged, alleging that Riley "would be alive today if Joe Biden had not willfully and maliciously eviscerated the borders of the United States and set loose thousands and thousands of dangerous criminals into our country."

Trump, who had made immigration a centerpiece of his campaign, has repeatedly vowed to mount the largest deportation in the nation's history if he wins.

He contrasted his rhetoric with Biden's — "I say he was an illegal alien. He was an illegal immigrant. He was an illegal migrant" — and accused Biden, who has long been seen as an empathetic leader, of having "no remorse. He's got no regret, he's got no empathy, no compassion, and worst of all, he has no intention of stopping the deadly invasion that stole precious Laken's beautiful American life," Trump said.

Biden earlier this year bucked activists within his party by agreeing to make changes to U.S. immigration



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law that would have limited some migration. The deal that emerged would have overhauled the asylum system to provide faster and tougher enforcement, as well as given presidents new powers to immediately expel migrants if authorities become overwhelmed. It also would have added \$20 billion in funding, a huge influx of cash.

The changes became part of a short-lived bipartisan compromise that was quickly killed by Republican lawmakers after Trump made his opposition known.

After the deal's collapse, Biden has been considering taking executive action to try to curtail migration, but he's expressed frustration that his lawyers have yet to devise options that they believe can pass muster with federal courts. Biden, instead, has insisted that Congress take up the measure again, trying to flip the script on Republicans and arguing they are more interested in being able to talk about the issue in an election year than taking action to fix it.

Among those who attended the rally was Republican Rep. Marjorie Taylor Greene, who represents Rome in Congress and yelled at Biden during Thursday's State of the Union to "Say her name!"

The phrase was popularized by civil rights activist Kimberlé Crenshaw in 2015 following the death of Sandra Bland, a 28-year-old Black woman who was found dead in a Texas jail cell a few days after she was arrested during a traffic stop.

Crenshaw and others began using the phrase to draw attention to cases in which Black women are subject to police brutality. In 2020, the hashtag #SayHerName helped put more public scrutiny on the shooting death of Breonna Taylor, a 26-year-old Black woman in Louisville, Kentucky, who was shot and killed in her home during a botched police raid.

The term "illegal" was once common but is far less so today, particularly among Democrats who more fully embraced immigrant rights issues during Trump's presidency.

Biden used the term Thursday night during an exchange in which the president pressed Republicans in his address to pass the bipartisan border security deal. Greene, a stalwart Trump ally, then shouted at the president to say Riley's name, adding she was killed "by an illegal."

"By an illegal, that's right," Biden responded immediately, before appearing to ask how many people are being killed by "legals."

He added, "To her parents, I say: My heart goes out to you. Having lost children myself, I understand."

Speaking to Capehart, Biden said, "Look, when I spoke about the difference between Trump and me, one of the things I talked about in the border was his, the way he talks about vermin, the way he talks about these people polluting the blood. I talked about what I'm not going to do. What I won't do. I'm not going to treat any, any, any of these people with disrespect. Look, they built the country."

Trump campaign senior adviser Chris LaCivita slammed Biden for apologizing for his phrasing and not to Riley's family.

"He should be apologizing to the family as opposed to apologizing for the word that he used which is an accurate description," he told reporters before Trump took the stage, blasting the response as "tone deaf" and highlighting the candidates' "two very distinct differences in approach on the border invasion."

Biden's expression of regret was a shift from a day earlier, when Biden had hesitated when asked by reporters if he regretted using the term, saying, "well I probably," before pausing and saying "I don't" and appearing to start saying "regret."

## Moldova faces multiple threats from Russia as it turns toward EU membership, foreign minister says

By STEPHEN McGRATH and AUREL OBREJA Associated Press

CHISINAU, Moldova (AP) — The past two years have been the hardest and most tumultuous for European Union candidate Moldova in more than three decades as it faces threats from Russia in multiple spheres of public life, the country's foreign minister says.

Since Russia invaded Ukraine in 2022, its neighbor Moldova has faced a litany of crises that have at times raised fears the country is also in Russia's crosshairs. These included errant missiles landing on its

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territory; a severe energy crisis after Moscow dramatically reduced gas supplies; rampant inflation; and protests by pro-Russia parties against the pro-Western government. Moldova has also taken in the highest number of Ukrainian refugees per capita of any country.

"This past two years without exaggeration have been by far the most difficult in the past 30 years," Mihai Popsoi, appointed foreign minister in late January, told The Associated Press in an interview.

Moldova gained independence from the Soviet Union in 1991, but Russia continues to see the country — sandwiched between Ukraine and EU member Romania — as within its sphere of influence.

Moldovan officials have repeatedly accused Russia of conducting a "hybrid war" against the country — funding anti-government protests, meddling in local elections and running vast disinformation campaigns to try to topple the government and derail Moldova from its path toward full EU membership. Russia has denied the accusations.

Last week, Moldova's national Intelligence and Security Services agency said it has gathered data indicating "unprecedented" plans by Moscow to launch a fresh and sprawling destabilization campaign as Moldova gears up for a referendum on EU membership and a presidential election later in the year.

"We know that the Kremlin is going to invest a lot of energy and financial resources through their proxies to try to get their way," said Popsoi, a lawmaker from the governing Party of Action and Solidarity who also serves as deputy prime minister.

"They're trying to bribe voters and use citizens to bribe them," he added. "The Russians are learning and adapting, and they're trying to use the democratic process against us ... to topple a democratic government in Moldova."

Tensions have also periodically soared in Moldova's Russia-backed breakaway region of Transnistria — a thin strip of land bordering Ukraine that isn't recognized by any U.N. member countries but where Russia maintains about 1,500 troops as so-called peacekeepers, guarding huge Soviet-era weapons and ammunition stockpiles.

Shortly after the war started, a string of explosions struck the region; an opposition leader was found fatally shot in his home last July; and anxieties soared last month when some feared the region would ask to be annexed by Russia. Instead, the region appealed to Russia for diplomatic "protection" amid what it said was increasing pressure from Chisinau.

Popsoi acknowledged that the situation with Transnistria is tense, and he worries that the speculation could adversely impact investment. "The situation will remain tense as long as the front line is 200 miles away," he said.

The 37-year-old minister noted the testing period Moldova has been through has nevertheless also been transformative for his country, which has a population of about 2.5 million people.

"When we look at the energy security of Moldova, two years ago there was very little," he said. "Now Moldova is quite independent or has alternatives and can choose where to buy gas and electricity."

The same can be said, he added, for his country's defense capabilities, the resilience of key institutions such as intelligence, police force, and justice reform. "Moldova is moving in the right direction despite enormous challenges."

Cristian Cantir, a Moldovan associate professor of international relations at Oakland University, says Moldova has faced a "constant onslaught" of Russian tests to probe weaknesses that might undermine its EU trajectory.

"It feels like a geopolitical race in which Russia is trying to stop Moldova from moving toward the EU, while Moldova tries to fend off Russian influence until it joins the EU," he said, adding that the authorities "have been much more open about acknowledging the danger Russia presents to the country's democracy."

In the wake of Russia's invasion of Ukraine, Moldova applied to join the EU and was granted candidate status in June 2022. In December, Brussels said it would open accession negotiations for both Moldova and Ukraine.

Although militarily neutral, non-NATO Moldova has boosted defense spending over the past year and recently approved a new national security strategy that identified Russia as a main threat and aims to raise defense spending to 1% of GDP.

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"A significant number of Moldovans still live under the spell of Russian propoganda which has made a boogeyman out of NATO," Popsoi said. "But that doesn't stop us from cooperating with our NATO partners and building resilience in our armed forces."

Since the war started, Moldova has received critical financial and diplomatic support from its Western partners but needs long-term investments, Popsoi said. The referendum later this year on EU membership aims to gauge where Moldovans see their future. Officials have an ambitious target of gaining full accession by 2030.

"We will do our utmost to make sure we get this message across that there is a better tomorrow and that is within the European Union," Popsoi added. "No matter how hard Russian propoganda tries to convince our citizens of the opposite."

## Today in History: March 11

### Massive earthquake and tsunami in Japan kill nearly 20,000

By The Associated Press undefined

Today in History

Today is Monday, March 11, the 71st day of 2024. There are 295 days left in the year.

Today's highlight in history:

On March 11, 2011, a magnitude-9.0 earthquake and resulting tsunami struck Japan's northeastern coast, killing nearly 20,000 people and severely damaging the Fukushima Dai-ichi nuclear power station.

On this date:

In 1862, during the Civil War, President Abraham Lincoln removed Gen. George B. McClellan as general-in-chief of the Union armies, leaving him in command of the Army of the Potomac, a post McClellan also ended up losing.

In 1918, what were believed to be the first confirmed U.S. cases of a deadly global flu pandemic were reported among U.S. Army soldiers stationed at Fort Riley, Kansas; 46 soldiers would die. (The worldwide outbreak of influenza claimed an estimated 20 to 40 million lives.)

In 1941, President Franklin D. Roosevelt signed the Lend-Lease Bill, providing war supplies to countries fighting the Axis.

In 1942, as Japanese forces continued to advance in the Pacific during World War II, U.S. Army Gen. Douglas MacArthur left the Philippines for Australia, where he vowed on March 20, "I shall return" — a promise he kept more than 2 1/2 years later.

In 1954, the U.S. Army charged that Sen. Joseph R. McCarthy, R-Wis., and his subcommittee's chief counsel, Roy Cohn, had exerted pressure to obtain favored treatment for Pvt. G. David Schine, a former consultant to the subcommittee. (The confrontation culminated in the famous Senate Army-McCarthy hearings.)

In 1985, Mikhail S. Gorbachev was chosen to succeed the late Konstantin U. Chernenko as general secretary of the Soviet Communist Party.

In 1997, Paul McCartney was knighted by Queen Elizabeth II.

In 2002, two columns of light soared skyward from Ground Zero in New York as a temporary memorial to the victims of the Sept. 11 attacks six months earlier.

In 2004, ten bombs exploded in quick succession across the commuter rail network in Madrid, Spain, killing 191 people in an attack linked to al-Qaida-inspired militants.

In 2006, former Serb leader Slobodan Milosevic (sloh-BOH'-dahn mee-LOH'-shuh-vich) was found dead of a heart attack in his prison cell in the Netherlands, abruptly ending his four-year U.N. war crimes trial; he was 64.

In 2010, a federal appeals court in San Francisco upheld the use of the words "under God" in the Pledge of Allegiance and "In God We Trust" on U.S. currency.

In 2012, U.S. Army Staff Sgt. Robert Bales shot and killed 16 Afghan villagers — mostly women and

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children — as they slept; Bales later pleaded guilty and was sentenced to life in prison without parole.

In 2013, former Detroit Mayor Kwame Kilpatrick (D) was convicted of a raft of crimes, including racketeering conspiracy (he was later sentenced to 28 years in prison).

In 2018, lawmakers in China abolished presidential term limits that had been in place for more than 35 years, opening up the possibility of Xi Jinping (shee jihn-peeng) holding power for life.

In 2020, the World Health Organization declared the coronavirus outbreak a pandemic. Former Hollywood producer Harvey Weinstein was sentenced in New York to 23 years in prison for rape and sexual abuse.

In 2021, President Joe Biden signed into law a \$1.9 trillion COVID relief package that he said would help defeat the virus and nurse the economy back to health; Americans would receive up to \$1,400 in direct payments, along with extended unemployment benefits.

In 2022, Russia widened its offensive in Ukraine, striking airfields in the west and a major industrial city in the east, while the huge armored column that had been stalled for over a week outside Kyiv went on the move again.

Today's birthdays: Media mogul Rupert Murdoch is 93. Former ABC News correspondent Sam Donaldson is 90. Musician Flaco Jimenez (FLAH'-koh hee-MEH'-nez) is 85. Actor Tricia O'Neil is 79. Actor Mark Metcalf is 78. Rock singer-musician Mark Stein (Vanilla Fudge) is 77. Singer Bobby McFerrin is 74. Movie director Jerry Zucker is 74. Singer Cheryl Lynn is 73. Actor Susan Richardson is 72. Recording executive Jimmy Iovine (eye-VEEN') is 71. Singer Nina Hagen is 69. Country singer Jimmy Fortune (The Statler Brothers) is 69. Actor Elias Koteas (ee-LY'-uhs koh-TAY'-uhs) is 63. Actor-director Peter Berg is 62. Singer Mary Gauthier (GOH'-shay) is 62. Actor Jeffrey Nordling is 62. Actor Alex Kingston is 61. Actor Wallace Langham is 59. Former U.S. Rep. Jesse Jackson Jr., D-Ill., is 59. Actor John Barrowman is 57. Singer Lisa Loeb is 56. Neo-soul musician Al Gamble (St. Paul & the Broken Bones) is 55. Singer Pete Drobe is 55. Actor Terrence Howard is 55. Rock musician Rami Jaffee is 55. Actor Johnny Knoxville is 53. Rock singer-musicians Benji and Joel Madden (Good Charlotte; The Madden Brothers) are 45. Actor David Anders is 43. Singer LeToya Luckett is 43. Actor Thora Birch is 42. TV personality Melissa Rycroft is 41. Actor Rob Brown is 40. Actor Jodie Comer is 31.