

Groton Daily Independent

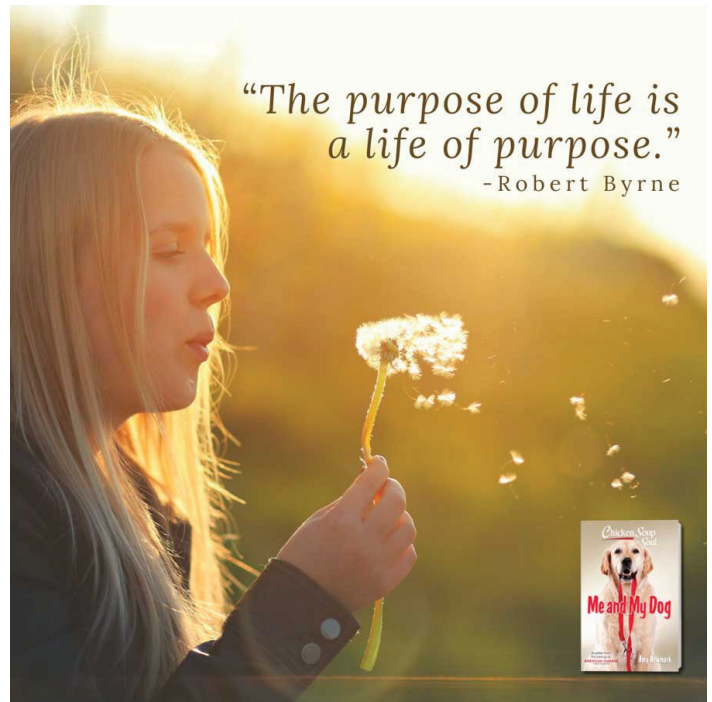
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Tuesday, March 12

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 N. Main, 6 p.m.
Senior Menu: Spaghetti with meat sauce, corn, garlic toast, chocolate cake, fruit.

CLOSED: Recycling Trailer in Groton

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

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1440

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The Biden administration yesterday proposed a \$7.3T budget for fiscal year 2025, a roughly \$300B increase over the current fiscal year's estimated expenses. The president's annual budget proposal is not binding, and Congress rarely enacts it as received but may use it as a starting point for negotiations if lawmakers so choose.

Reddit yesterday revealed plans to raise up to \$748M in next week's planned initial public offering at a valuation of close to \$6.5B. The IPO will mark the first US social media offering since Pinterest's \$10B

debut in 2019.

Catherine, Princess of Wales, issued an apology yesterday following backlash from an edited photo released on social media to celebrate Mother's Day in the UK. Several major news outlets raised concerns about the image's authenticity, prompting a "kill notice" or a retraction. While minor editing, like cropping, is allowed, photo agencies have strict guidelines on edits that substantially change an image.

Sports, Entertainment, & Culture

The 96th Academy Awards pull in 19.5 million TV viewers, the most since 2020 and a 4% increase over last year.

Sports blog Deadspin's entire editorial staff laid off after sale to European startup Lineup Publishing.

QB Kirk Cousins signs four-year, \$180M deal with the Atlanta Falcons after six years with the Minnesota Vikings. Nine-time Pro Bowl QB Russell Wilson to sign with the Pittsburgh Steelers.

Science & Technology

Elon Musk says his artificial intelligence startup, xAI, will make its chatbot Grok open-source beginning this week; move would make all or part of the source code available to the public.

New drugs used for weight loss, including Ozempic and Wegovy, show success in treating side-effects of HIV drugs, including fatty liver buildup.

Unusual study reveals cicadas urinate in streams similar to mammals; findings disprove prevailing theory on how sap-eating insects excrete, may inform design of fluid channels in robotics applications.

Business & Markets

US stock markets close mixed (S&P 500 -0.1%, Dow +0.1%, Nasdaq -0.4%) ahead of today's inflation data. Consumer price index report expected to show monthly gains of 0.4% in February and up 3.1% year-over-year.

Bitcoin price passes \$72K, breaking record. UK regulators accept applications for crypto-backed exchange-traded notes for Q2 of 2024, following US launch in January of crypto-backed exchange-traded funds.

Japan avoids technical recession as adjusted Q4 GDP data indicate 0.4% annualized growth (revised from -0.4%); announcement raises expectations Bank of Japan could normalize interest rates in next week's meeting.

Politics & World Affairs

Special Counsel Robert Hur to testify before Congress today on investigation of President Joe Biden's handling of classified documents; comes after Hur declined to press charges last month, in part citing memory lapses by Biden during interviews. Housing and Urban Development Secretary Marcia Fudge to resign.

Sen. Bob Menendez (D-NJ) pleads not guilty to new obstruction, bribery charges in superseding indictment. Former President Donald Trump adviser Peter Navarro ordered to report to Miami prison March 19 to serve four-month sentence on contempt charges.

Settlement between state of Florida, plaintiffs clarifies students and teachers allowed to discuss sexual orientation and gender identity in classrooms, provided it is not part of formal instruction; 2022 state law limited such discussions in elementary schools.



Columbia area residents attended the first meeting at the Columbia American Legion Monday to hear about the Groton Area's opt out. (Photo by Paul Kosel)

Concerns about fiscal situation, football take stage at school district meeting

Finances, faculty and football failed to fill the room at the Columbia American Legion building. However, more than a dozen members of the Groton Area School District community attended the first of three public meetings to discuss the proposed opt-out of tax levy limitations.

The school board voted in January to impose the excess tax – a maximum of 1.25 million per year starting with calendar year 2024 taxes payable in calendar year 2025. The issue was referred to a vote, set to take place April 9.

The district scheduled three informational meetings, the first that took place Monday evening.

For about an hour, district officials discussed the need for more general fund revenue.

"I do wish we were able to talk about things we could add," said Superintendent Joe Schwan. "We're having a discussion about 'how do we maintain and keep what we have going on.'"

"...An opt-out is nothing short of a tax increase," he added. "That's what it is. It's opting out of the imposed tax levy limitation."

The opt-out would allow more funding to come in to the general fund, the account that includes the day-to-day operation of the schools. About 80 to 85 percent of the general fund goes toward personnel salary and benefits, said Becky Hubsch, business manager.

The capital outlay is for expenses like text books, technology equipment and facilities maintenance.

In 2016, the state's funding formula for schools was rewritten, which continues impacting the Groton district negatively.

The Groton district used to benefit from telecommunication and windmill taxes, which was given to the districts on top of state funding. In 2016, that was equalized for the state.

At that time, the pension fund levy was eliminated, Schwan said. The district had been able to pay its share of retirement costs, but that went away.

The pension fund levy brought in about \$100,000 per year, and other revenues like the wind farm and utility taxes brought in more than \$800,000.

Those in the crowd asked why an opt-out wasn't proposed in 2016.

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The district has been routing some money from the capital outlay fund to the general fund, and officials had hoped to stay out of a position to need an opt-out. However, "the wells running dry," Schwan said.

If the opt-out is not approved at the polls, there would be an immediate impact which would include reduction in non-core educational programs.

"An opt-out is one solution to our issue," Schwan said. "If there's not support for the opt-out, then the conversation has to be had, 'what do we want to have?'"

"As a district, what do we want to do," he continued. "What programs do we have to offer our kids and how are we going to do that."

Others asked what is currently in the capital outlay fund (about \$771,000 as of the end of February), whether the funds Groton lost since 2016 has gone to someone else (yes) and whether putting more money into the capital outlay fund would keep up with inflation (likely no).

There are other districts in the region facing the same issues, said Board Vice President Marty Weismantel. "They're all in the same boat," he said.

Two more community meetings are scheduled for 6 p.m. March 19 at the Bristol Community Center and 6 p.m. March 25 at the Groton Community Center.

The election is scheduled for April 9, and absentee early voting is available now at the Groton Area School District. The office is open 8 a.m. to 4 p.m. Monday through Friday (not including days when the school is closed).

Football cooperative moves closer to reality

Groton Area School District is one step closer to a football cooperative with the Langford School District. Board members indicated they want to move forward with discussions with Langford after reviewing a recent survey of football parents.

Nearly 75 percent of those who responded said the district should continue discussion with Langford. More than 84 percent of respondents said "no" to moving one of Groton's home games to Langford, while about half were interested in playing junior high and junior varsity games at Langford.

One primary concern of those who don't want to continue discussion with Langford is that the Langford players may take opportunities to play away from kids in Groton, Superintendent Joe Schwan said.

While the cooperative agreement proposed is only for two years, high school athletic officials said six-man football is not likely in the next four years, so the cooperative may end up lasting longer.

Vice President of the Board Marty Weismantel added after a recent discussion with a Langford board member, the projected number of players in Langford likely won't be enough for a full nine-man team, so this may be a more long-term commitment.

"I would say this is a long term deal, and they (the Langford district officials) are anxiously awaiting a 'Yes' from us," he said.

Board member TJ Harder said, "if you have a chance to make your team better," why not. This would allow Groton to have players that don't have to play both offense and defense.

Other board members, like President Deb Gengerke, were excited about other future opportunities to work with Langford in both athletics and other extracurricular activities.

"But first things first," she said as the board moved forward with the football cooperative discussion.

New teachers, new staff member, new resignation

The board also approved four hires and two resignations.

Three teaching positions were filled for the 2024-2025 school year.

Megan Serr has been hired as an elementary special education teacher. The Northern State University grad will come to Groton from a special education cooperative serving the school in Selby.

Lindsey Vander Wal has been hired as agriculture education teacher and FFA adviser. Vander Wal will graduate in May from South Dakota State University with an agriculture education degree and comes from a farm family background.

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Carrie Cole has been hired as first grade teacher. Cole is a non-traditional teacher, having worked in journalism before going back to school for an elementary education teaching degree.

Ryan Scepaniak was listed as both a resignation and hire at Monday's meeting. Scepaniak resigned as assistant wrestling coach to take the maintenance director position at the district. He took the position March 7, and Superintendent Joe Schwan said he brings not only a great work ethic, but he is also a certified plumber.

One more resignation was added to the agenda Monday evening. District vocal music teacher Tanner Pietz, who began working for the district in December after graduating from Northern State University, submitted his resignation, to take effect at the end of the school year.

- The board also voted to increase the driver's education class rate from \$270 to \$290 for the summer. Driver's education instructor agreements were also approved.
- The boys' basketball team will travel to Rapid City for the State A state championship this week. Superintendent Joe Schwan clarified that the district is paying what it would cost to send a regular school bus with the team to the tournament. Upgrades, like taking a charter bus instead, is being covered through private donations.

- Elizabeth Varin

158 +/- ACRE LAND AUCTION

WEST HANSON TWP., BROWN CO., SD

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

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

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

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

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

For additional information, terms, drone video, aerial, soil & plat maps and FSA-156EZ, please visit www.burlagepeterson.com, or contact Auctioneers.

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

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

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

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Aberdeen Farmer Elected Second Term as NFU Vice President

By Lura Roti for South Dakota Farmers Union

Family farmers and ranchers from across the nation elected Aberdeen farmer, Jeff Kippley to serve a second term as the National Farmers Union Vice President today, March 11, during the organization's national convention held in Scottsdale, Arizona.

"There is more work to do, and I am eager to continue to work hard for you," Kippley said.

President of South Dakota Farmers Union Doug Sombke agreed.

"Jeff Kippley has been such a great addition to National Farmers Union," said Sombke, who also serves as Treasurer of National Farmers Union. "His background as a farmer and an accountant is valuable in the national boardroom and in the offices of D.C. policymakers."

Sombke added that he appreciates serving with Kippley on the state and national level because Kippley is serving for the right reasons.

"Like all of us serving in Farmers Union leadership, Jeff is a family farmer who wants a better future on the farm for his kids," said Sombke, who farms with his three grown sons. "Policy changes need to be made to ensure fair prices for crops and livestock so the next generation can earn an income farming and ranching."

Jeff Kippley and his wife, Rachel, have four children: Noah, 17; Titus, 15; Aaron, 11; and Moriah, 9.

Advocating for policy to support fair prices for farmers & ranchers

Kippley raises crops and cattle together with his dad, John, wife, Rachel, and their four children near Aberdeen. But like so many family farmers and ranchers across the nation, the Kippley farm income is not enough to support their family. So, together with family, the Kippleys own a tax preparation service. Rachel also works off the farm as the Fair and Park Manager for Brown County.

"As tax advisers, we see the numbers behind many family farms and ranches. And it's not just our family farm that needs off-farm income to stay afloat financially – it is the majority of family agriculture producers," Kippley said.

As National Farmers Union Vice President, Kippley will continue to advocate for:

- Price Transparency
- MCOOL (mandatory country-of-origin labeling)
- Landowner Rights
- Higher ethanol blends like E30

"Policy changes need to take place soon, so our children can earn a fair living on the family farm or ranch," Kippley said.

A farmer fighting for farmers

As National Farmers Union Vice President Kippley will travel the nation to meet with Farmers Union members. During his first term he worked to grow membership and guarantee the voice of farmers and ranchers is heard by policymakers in D.C. In his second term, he plans to continue this work.

"Although family farming and ranching operations in other parts of the U.S. may not look like they do in South Dakota – regardless of commodities raised or size, the challenges we as family farmers and ranchers face do look much the same," Kippley said. "When I meet with policymakers, I make sure they understand that they are talking to a family farmer about real issues impacting family farmers and ranchers. It is important the policies put in place for agriculture producers actually work for us."



Family farmers and ranchers from across the nation elected Aberdeen farmer, Jeff Kippley (on right) to serve a second term as the National Farmers Union Vice President today, March 11, during the organization's national convention held in Scottsdale, Arizona.

(Photo SDFU)

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Democratic Leadership Column:

End of the 2024 Session

by Minority Leader Sen. Reynold Nesiba (District 15)

This session we, again, made historic investments in infrastructure for clean drinking water, airports, and telemedicine that would not have happened without the leadership of President Joe Biden. South Dakota's own members of Congress voted against these crucial funds.

During the final week, five House Democrats made the deciding 39-31 vote to move our ethanol industry forward while also protecting the rights of landowners. South Dakota really has the potential to be a world leader in low carbon fuels for automobiles and aviation. And we did it with greatly enhanced landowners' rights that would not have happened without Rep. Oren Lesmeister.

Because of Medicaid expansion, we are now providing healthcare to about 20,000 low-income South Dakotans. This is thanks to the voters who overcame years of foot-dragging by the Legislature. Yet, Republicans continue to think their constituents got it wrong. They are now working on a purely partisan measure to undermine the decision of South Dakotans to expand Medicaid. Voters will be asked a vague and misleading question on the ballot this November of whether we should create more bureaucracy and require South Dakotans to routinely submit more paperwork to remain eligible for healthcare access. And only if it passes will they tell us what exemptions will be included. Will there be a waiver for a spouse caring for a child or a spouse that has healthcare challenges? No one can say.

Let's judge this legislative session by the outcomes of our decisions, not how fast we got to go home. We bought a \$4 million sheep shed instead of feeding hungry kids for a fraction of that price. We made hot pink a legal hunting apparel color, but couldn't keep guns out of small children's reach through safer storage laws. We couldn't even end child marriage.

The tax on baby formula and peanut butter persists to help set aside a half billion dollars for new prisons, including a women's prison with a mommy and baby unit where 98% of those in custody have a substance use disorder. We must do better at helping our fellow South Dakotans overcome addiction and we can't simply arrest and incarcerate our way out of this crisis.

We also didn't see anything substantive to address our childcare crisis or provide the funding necessary to substantially increase average teacher pay. We remain ahead of only West Virginia and Mississippi.

Lastly, our state motto is "Under God the People Rule." The leader of the Republican Party said on the Senate floor that "direct democracy doesn't work." What I think he meant is that the people of South Dakota don't often agree with the decisions he and his Republican colleagues make at the Capitol. The initiated measure process is the reason we have our state's minimum wage, Medicaid expansion, and an end to predatory lending. Republicans not only want to dismiss the will of the voters, they want to strip away the entire idea of direct democracy. We were the first state to embrace voter-initiated measures. Now Republicans want a deeply flawed process to remove people's names from a signature petition.

A number of measures will be on the ballot this fall. This includes restoring abortion rights, ending the sales tax on food, and legalizing recreational marijuana. Many of the ballot questions were created because the legislature failed to address these issues that matter to many South Dakotans.

This is my last year in the legislature. I will miss serving my constituents and working alongside some amazing lawmakers. Thank you to the Capitol press corps for your accurate reporting that is vital for our government. I also want to thank our interns, who work hard every day to make sure we stay on top of all of the bills and help us with legislation. Finally, a thank you to my wife, Erika Nesiba, without whom I couldn't do this work. I look forward to spending more time with you.

South Dakota Supreme Court traveling session coming to Aberdeen, S.D.

ABERDEEN, S.D. - Northern State University will host the South Dakota Supreme Court next week for its March 2024 Term of Court.

"The South Dakota Supreme Court each spring and fall holds a term of court outside of our courtroom at the State Capitol in Pierre," Chief Justice Jensen said. "These special sessions give South Dakotans an up-close look at how the judicial system works and how the courts resolve disputes."

The public is invited to attend the Supreme Court's March 2024 Term of Court on March 19-20 at Northern State University.

The Supreme Court will hear oral arguments in three cases on the morning of Tuesday, March 19, and four cases on the morning of Wednesday, March 20, 2024. The sessions will be held at the Johnson Fine Arts Center at 1200 S. Jay St. in Aberdeen. The arguments will begin at 9 a.m. CDT and end at noon each day.

Prior to court on both days, Supreme Court staff will provide a brief history of the South Dakota Supreme Court, what attendees will see that day in the court process, who is involved in the cases, and what happens after oral arguments are heard. The primer will begin at 8:30 a.m. on both days.

"Northern State University is proud to host the South Dakota Supreme Court and Justices," said President Neal Schnoor. "We are pleased that hundreds of university and high students and community members will have this unique opportunity to experience the court in session firsthand."

Booklets containing a schedule of the cases to be heard, a short synopsis of each case, biographical information on the Supreme Court justices and a short summary of appellate procedure can be found on the Unified Judicial System website at <https://uj.s.sd.gov/uploads/sc/March2024TermOfCourtBooklet.pdf>.

Learn more about the Supreme Court's March term of court at https://uj.s.sd.gov/Supreme_Court/CurrentTerm.aspx

Today on

GDILIVE.COM

Pep Rally for boys basketball team going to the State A: 2:45 p.m.

City Council Meeting, 7 p.m.

Middle School Talent Show, 7 p.m.

Archived:

School Board Meeting from last night

Opt-Out Discussion in Columbia from last night

Johnson to TikTok: Cut Ties with the CCP or Lose Access to American Markets

Washington, D.C. – U.S. Representative Dusty Johnson (R-S.D.) co-sponsored bipartisan legislation to take further steps to prohibit the Chinese Communist Party's (CCP) access to Americans' private data through apps like TikTok. The Protecting Americans from Foreign Adversary Controlled Applications Act would remove CCP-backed ByteDance apps, including TikTok, from American app stores and web hosting services unless the application severs ties to entities like ByteDance that are subject to control of a foreign adversary.

"TikTok is Chinese Communist Party malware, promoting their propaganda and stealing Americans' private data," said Johnson. "This bill gives TikTok the choice—continue operating its high-user platform in America or cut ties with the Chinese Communist Party. We need to keep our country safe from the malign influence of CCP."

Johnson has long been a critic of TikTok and ByteDance. In 2022, he introduced the Block the Tok Act to remove TikTok from federal government devices. Later that year, he voted to ban it on federal government devices.

What the Protecting Americans from Foreign Adversary Controlled Applications Act Does:

Incentivize Divestment of TikTok: Unless TikTok is fully divested such that it is no longer controlled by a PRC-based entity, the application will face a prohibition in the U.S. from app store availability and web hosting services until such time as a divestment occurs.

Address the National Security Risks Posed by Other Applications Controlled by Foreign Adversary Companies: Establishes a process for the President to designate other foreign adversary controlled social media applications—as defined by statute—that shall face a prohibition on app store availability and access to web hosting services in the United States unless they sever ties to the foreign adversary-controlled company. The President may exercise this authority if an application presents a national security threat, has over one million annual active users, and is under the control of a foreign adversary entity, as defined by statute.

Empower Users to Switch Platforms: Designated applications must provide users with a copy of their data in a format that can be imported into an alternative social media application. All users would be able to download their data and content and transition to another platform.

What the Protecting Americans from Foreign Adversary Controlled Applications Act Does Not Do:

Punish Individual Social Media Users: No enforcement action can be taken against individual users of an impacted app.

Censor Speech: This legislation does not regulate speech. It is focused entirely on foreign adversary control—not the content of speech being shared. This bill only applies to specifically defined social media apps subject to the control of foreign adversaries, as defined by Congress.

Impact Apps That Sever Ties to Foreign Adversary-Controlled Entities: An app, including TikTok, that severs ties with entities subject to the control of a foreign adversary is not impacted by any other provision of the bill.

[View full bill text here.](#)

The Protecting Americans from Foreign Adversary Controlled Applications Act is led by the Select Committee on the Chinese Communist Party Chairman Mike Gallagher (R-WI) and Ranking Member Raja Krishnamoorthi (D-IL).

Communication: It's Not Always Easy



By: Keah Munsen,
Instructor
Mitchell Technical College

Transitioning farm ownership is never an easy task. Now more than ever, the importance of protecting yourself and additional owners is vital. If your family operation is deciding what to do with estate planning, it is very crucial that you talk to an estate planner as soon as possible. Communication between parents and possible heirs to the business isn't always something that is easy to discuss during lunch or at family gatherings. Working with an estate planner is essential to be sure all owners are aware of what is to happen during a transition and ease the stress and pain of how to divide the assets.

How the older generation thinks does not mean the next generation is thinking in the same way. Sometimes in operations, we assume that the next person understands exactly what we are talking about. When was the last time you had a meeting to discuss possible expansion or changes in your programs? In many cases, the primary managers of an operation have been in agriculture all of their lives and may not consider the importance of involving the next generation, who will one day be the managers, in the decision-making process. Communication

early on about operational decisions can help the farm or ranch carry on from one generation to the next, as the younger operators will feel empowered to make decisions on their own because they have a full understanding of how and why things were done in the past.

It can help to have a third party involved who rides the fence and helps get the communication started and helps control some of the emotions. A person would think that with email, Facebook, Snapchat, cell-phones – and who knows what is next to come – that communication wouldn't be an issue. The problem could be that we do communicate, but only on the issues that are easy to discuss.

Start out the upcoming quarter with these suggestions: Set a date for a planning meeting and let everyone know in advance. At the first meeting, come up with a list of areas of concern and their priority on the list. During this time, let everyone add to the list. By doing this, you are letting everyone communicate. Bring up topics that are positive and areas that need improvement. We want everyone to end the meeting feeling like they have contributed.

We would be happy to discuss the process with you, as well as get you in touch with a legal professional in your area, if needed. Feel free to contact the South Dakota Center for Farm and Ranch Management at sdcfm@mitchelltech.edu or 605-995-7193. Or you can also visit us online at sdcfm.com.

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Groton City Council Meeting Agenda

March 12, 2024 – 7:00pm
City Hall – 120 N Main Street

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

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

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BROWN COUNTY
BROWN COUNTY COMMISSION AGENDA
REGULAR MEETING TUESDAY

March 12, 2024 8:45 A.M.

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

1. Call To Order - Pledge of Allegiance
2. Approval of Agenda
3. Opportunity of Public Comment
4. Authorize Chairman to sign the Fair Entertainment Contracts
5. Approve and Authorize Chairman to sign the Change Order for Holum Expo Roof
6. Kristi Lindell – Presentation on Community Outreach & Development Programs CPR3 and Smart Cities Program
7. Dave Lunzman, Sheriff – Discuss Jail Nurse Hires
8. Consent Calendar
 - a. Approval of General Meeting Minutes of March 5, 2024
 - b. Claims/Payroll
 - c. HR Report
 - d. Authorize Advertising for Tax Deed Sale
 - e. Claim Assignment
 - f. Leases
 - g. Lottery Permits for SPURS
 - h. Approve & Authorize Chairman to sign Temporary Alcoholic Beverage Permit
 - i. Abatement
9. Other Business
10. Executive Session (if requested per SDCL 1-25-2)
11. Adjourn

Brown County Commission Meeting

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

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

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

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

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

That's Life by Tony Bender

Fast food in fast decline

I live about 100 miles from any major city so over the years we've had a house rule. If you get to Bismarck, Jamestown, or Aberdeen, bring home some fast food. What's mundane to urban dwellers is a treat to those of us who live in rural areas.

Plus, since we have to spend much of the day on the road, fast food becomes a logical culinary solution. Sometimes your schedule is tight and you just need to eat.

Several weeks ago, I complained on social media about getting two dry Quarter Pounders back to back. I was immediately taken to task by my woke friends who told me:

- I shouldn't be eating fast food in the first place; I should cook a nutritious meal when I get home (in two hours). Gee, thanks. Never thought of that option. You should be my life coach. Not to get religious on y'all but to everything there is a season. Maybe I haven't eaten in 15 hours. Maybe this is a matter of life and death. There's a reason we have convenience stores. Hint: Because they're convenient. Same deal with fast food. Maybe I don't have time to get together with Ward, June, Wally, and The Beav. I am single-handedly responsible for the decline of the American family.

- Did you know that (insert fast-food restaurant here) supports this (non-woke) political cause? No. But I'm dying here. If Stalin himself offered me water in a scorching desert, I think I'd swig now and ask questions later. Heck, I can't fight the Commies if I'm dead. Sure, I think Chick-fil-A is wound a bit tight and their sandwiches are overrated, but if a buddy brings me a chicken sandwich, I'm eating it. That's what happened last spring in Chicago, and when I posted a photo of my meal, as required by law these days, I got chewed out for eating a politically incorrect sandwich. I guess I should have kicked my buddy's butt.

Anyway, the bad Quarter Pounders, from different restaurants, were a surprise. One of the attributes of fast food restaurants is consistency. So, getting two dry quarter pounders in a row—which you don't discover until you're 20 miles down the road—got me wondering if it was economics. Inflation. The high cost of doing business. Some fast food just isn't a bargain, anymore.

In one instance, I'd ordered a Quarter Pounder meal with a separate fish sandwich and the price was more than \$19. Fast food is not only supposed to be fast, it's supposed to be affordable. Comparatively, every Monday, my local bar and restaurant, the Stein Haus, offers ground ribeye burgers for about the same price as a Quarter Pounder. They're fantastic.

Last week, I swung into a longtime favorite taco place for instant gratification and some extra tacos for the weekend. Gus the Wonder Pug was my copilot, so I made sure to get his favorite, Potato Ole's. As we headed toward Interstate, I offered him one; he sniffed and turned away. The entire container was filled with hard, under-seasoned Ole's.

I am not a difficult customer. In my entire life, I've never sent a meal back. However, I have gotten a meal I couldn't eat. Which is as unprecedented as Gus turning down anything edible.

I wheeled around. I received an apology and a fresh batch of Ole's. They were still under-seasoned and somewhat overcooked, but it was, well, progress. Anyone can have a bad day. It may have been inexperienced employees. Anyway, Gus found them palatable enough.

In decades of drive through purchases I don't recall getting bad food. A forgotten burger or two, sure—again, discovered when you're 20 miles down the road—but bad food? No. Heck, I still buy SPAM and Slim Jims, so I don't think my palate has gotten more refined.

I suppose having three negative experiences in short order could be a coincidence, but when you see an increasing number of closed fast food restaurants, it's easy to speculate that food that otherwise might be tossed is staying on the warmer longer. But charging more for less quality is not a good business model.

South Dakota Department of Health Launches Nexus SD: Connecting South Dakotans to Community Services

PIERRE, SD - The SD Department of Health has created Nexus SD, a technology platform and referral system connecting individuals and families to health care, human, and social service providers across the state, with just one call or contact from the recipient.

"The goal of this platform is to help provide better access to services, not just within healthcare, but to help those who face other barriers like the need for transportation, food insecurities, education, and more," said Department of Health Secretary, Melissa Magstadt.

Often South Dakota residents struggle with not only finding the resources they need but facing the daunting task of reaching out to multiple service providers, completing abundant paperwork, and navigating the system. These challenges are often barriers to receiving the help and services they are seeking.

Nexus SD streamlines the connection between all the multi-sector providers to quickly address the needs and drive positive outcomes for higher risk populations and those who are underserved.

Nexus SD provides numerous benefits to the individual in need, plus to the providers and the community:

Individual benefits include:

- Quick connection to appropriate services;
- Telling their story only once;
- Screening identifies additional needs; and
- Elevated level of care and satisfaction.

Provider benefits include:

- Access to comprehensive resource database;
- Streamlined referrals and communication between providers;
- Shared client story to promote rapid identification of social needs;
- Organizations can more effectively serve community members; and
- Access to outcome data for measuring impact.

Community benefits include:

- Community data to inform policy, planning, and investment;
- Identification of unmet needs and barriers to access services; and
- Infrastructure to more effectively serve community members.

Training for early adopters within Rapid City and Mitchell begins March 11, 2024, with a pilot project to begin after training. Pilot users will have the opportunity to provide feedback to make any necessary improvements to the system prior to statewide rollout beginning in spring/summer 2024.

For more program information or to submit your interest in becoming a member, visit Nexus.SD.gov or email NexusSD@helplinecenter.org to connect directly with the Nexus SD team.

Thank you to our partners Findhelp, Helpline Center, and South Dakota Health Link for making this community resource available to those who need help in our state.

At the heart of the Department of Health's mission is a simple yet profound goal: to protect and improve the health of all South Dakotans. The department is entrusted with the vital task of promoting wellness, preventing disease, and ensuring access to quality healthcare for all South Dakotans across our great state.



SOUTH DAKOTA SEARCHLIGHT

<https://southdakotasearchlight.com>

Long-term care committee's work translates into legislative success

Policy changes and millions in grants are approved, but consolidation push fails

BY: MAKENZIE HUBER - MARCH 11, 2024 6:00 PM

Out of the 12 recommendations made by an interim legislative committee studying the sustainability of long-term care in South Dakota, most passed the legislative process or were implemented outside of the Legislature.

That's a clear success, said committee co-chair Sen. Jean Hunhoff, R-Yankton. Legislators were challenged last year to produce recommendations that would pass through the process, something that summer studies have struggled with in years past. This year's legislative session ended last week, except for a day on March 25 to consider vetoes.

Concerns surrounding South Dakota's long term care industry came to a head when several nursing homes closed after the COVID-19 pandemic. More than 15 South Dakota nursing homes have closed since 2017. The facilities cited short staff, rising costs and years of insufficient Medicaid reimbursement.

The problem could worsen as South Dakota's population ages. As baby boomers near the end of their lives over the next 20 years, an increased demand for long-term care services could strain the industry.

State funding for nursing homes increased by an average of 25% statewide after the Legislature and Gov. Kristi Noem approved more money for them during the 2023 legislative session, which alleviated some short-term funding concerns.

Summer study committees allow legislators to understand a problem and study its challenges and potential solutions. They provide for more informed, effective legislation over time, said Sioux Falls Republican Rep. Taylor Rehfeldt, who co-chaired the committee with Hunhoff.

Priorities outlined by the interim committee ranged from telemedicine grants to making it easier for some out-of-state health care professionals to work in South Dakota.

Hunhoff's top priority was investing in regionalized nursing homes. The effort, which would have incentivized nursing homes to consolidate, failed.

"I'm not tied to it, but I still believe we have to do something, because we have to have access to those services and we cannot continue to support all the entities that we have out there," Hunhoff said. "My thought would be that if I get reelected, then we regroup with stakeholders and see if we can find something more acceptable."

The long-term care sustainability discussion must continue, Rehfeldt said. The committee found there was more demand and need for state investment in facilities and technology than the Legislature appropriated.

The discussion is especially important for facilities that are closely located and fighting for the same workers.

"No one wants to hear that, I don't want to hear that, communities don't want to hear that — but those are the facts," Rehfeldt said. "We just don't have enough workforce available to take care of our aging individuals."

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Noem schedules town hall meetings in Mitchell and Winner

BY: SEARCHLIGHT STAFF - MARCH 11, 2024 3:40 PM

Gov. Kristi Noem will participate in town hall meetings this week in Mitchell and Winner, her office announced.

The Mitchell town hall will be at 11:15 a.m. Central time on Wednesday at the Mitchell High School Library, which the public may enter through the Mitchell High School main entrance. The event will also be livestreamed at Facebook.com/govnoem.

At 11 a.m. at the same location, Noem will sign two bills.

Senate Bill 127 establishes a statewide minimum teacher salary of \$45,000 and requires school districts to raise average teacher compensation — including pay and benefits — by at least 97% of the annual rate of increases in state education funding.

House Bill 1022 provides \$6 million to the state Department of Education — which is led by former Mitchell superintendent Joe Graves — to train teachers in phonics-based reading instruction.

The Winner town hall will be at 2 p.m. Central time Wednesday at the Winner Country Club, and also will be streamed on the governor's Facebook page.

COMMENTARY

After sunny start, Noem turns mostly cloudy on open government

DANA HESS

MARCH 11, 2024 6:00 AM

On a warm, mid-August afternoon in 2018, a group of newspaper publishers and editors gathered at the meeting room of the South Dakota Newspaper Association in Brookings. They were there to question U.S. Rep. Kristi Noem, the Republican candidate for governor, about her thoughts on First Amendment and open government issues.

The journalists in the room came from two groups. There were members of the SDNA board of directors, newspaper publishers on the board for their acumen in the business of journalism. The other group was members of SDNA's First Amendment Committee, charged, among other things, with tracking legislation that has implications for the public's right to know.

Meetings like this, known as editorial boards, were common at some newspapers. The publication's leadership would meet with a candidate to ask questions about statewide issues and those of local concern. The questions from the SDNA group would take a narrower focus, seeking Noem's opinions about the state's spineless open meetings law, the lengthy list of records not open to public review, the prospect of opening state emails as public records and opening access to body cam video and crime reports.

There were no rookies in the journalism group. They came from all over the state but their common denominator was experience dealing with candidates, elected officials and major advertisers. They thought they had heard it all. Then Noem surprised them.

Early in the conversation that day, Noem announced that one of the first bills she would sponsor was a reporter shield law. Reporter shield laws allow that journalists don't have to reveal their sources, turn over their notes or be compelled to testify.

Noem said the law was needed to ensure that investigative reporters can "do their jobs without fear of consequences or legal action." Such a law would add accountability to state government, she said, and allow "that you all are able to do your jobs to the best of your ability."

It's not too great a stretch to say that the journalists in the room were stunned by Noem's statement. They welcomed the news, but the prospect of getting a reporter shield law in South Dakota wasn't even on their list of questions that day. They would rather that the candidate promise to convene a task force to study open records or the open meetings law.

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The reporter shield law was part of what Noem called her "Sunshine Initiative" for government openness. As luck would have it, March 10 through March 16 is Sunshine Week, a time set aside in this country each year to look at the importance of shining a light on the workings of government.

Noem is in her second term. After a fast start with the reporter shield law, which she signed into law in 2019, her Sunshine Initiative has faded. When it comes to government openness her administration has been, at best, mostly cloudy.

This space has been used at length and often to chronicle how the Noem administration has been less than open, less than willing to let the sun shine in:

As per Noem's directive, reporters aren't allowed to talk directly to government sources but must instead submit questions to the department's public information officer who may, or may not, decide to provide answers.

The governor has largely given up on the weekly news conferences traditionally held during the legislative session.

During her one, hastily called, legislative press conference this year, she admitted that the cost of deploying National Guard troops to monitor the Texas border was being paid for by South Dakota taxpayers.

The Freedom Works Here workforce development commercials starring Noem came under legislative fire for the way that the winning bidder was selected and how that bidder came into possession of ideas submitted in Lawrence and Schiller's bid.

"Security" has been invoked as the reason for not divulging how much it costs to protect the much-traveled governor.

She refused to release transcripts of the calls to the "whistleblower hotline" set up to collect complaints about the state's institutions of higher learning.

Government openness is dependent on our leaders recognizing its importance and acting in a way that sheds light on the bureaucracy. Despite running for office with a "Sunshine Initiative," Noem has worked tirelessly to ensure that the workings of her administration be encased in darkness.

Public invited to government transparency Zoom event

Open government laws in South Dakota and nationwide will be the topic of a Zoom presentation at 10 a.m. Central time on Thursday, March 14. The presentation is open to the public and sponsored by the South Dakota NewsMedia Association, which represents newspapers and online newsrooms.

David Cuillier, director of the Joseph L. Brechner Freedom of Information Project and co-director of the Brechner Center for Advancement of the First Amendment at the University of Florida, will make the presentation.

Cuillier previously served as national president of the Society of Professional Journalists and as president of the National Freedom of Information Coalition.

He currently serves on the Federal FOIA Advisory Committee under the National Archives and Records Administration and has testified before Congress three times about the Freedom of Information Act.

Preregister for the Zoom event at sdna.com.

Biden calls for expanded child tax credit, taxes on wealthy in \$7.3 trillion budget plan

BY: JENNIFER SHUTT - MARCH 11, 2024 11:59 AM

WASHINGTON — President Joe Biden released his budget request for the upcoming fiscal year Monday, calling on Congress to stick to the spending agreement brokered last year and to revamp tax laws so that the "wealthy pay their fair share."

The \$7.266 trillion budget request doesn't actually spend any money since Congress controls the power of the purse. But it contains details about what the president believes the federal government should

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change and how it should direct taxpayer dollars.

The fiscal 2025 budget request, which totals 188 pages, comes at an especially crucial time for Biden as he increasingly turns his attention toward winning reelection this fall, and follows by days his State of the Union speech. It reflects a budget year that would begin on Oct. 1.

"The story of America is one of progress and resilience, of always moving forward and never giving up. It is a story unique among nations," Biden wrote in a message released alongside his latest budget request. "We are the only nation that has emerged from every crisis we have entered stronger than we went in."

"While my Administration has seen great progress since day one, there is still work to do," Biden added. "My Budget will help make that promise real."

That total spending level would go toward numerous budget categories, including \$900 billion on defense discretionary and \$1.029 trillion on domestic discretionary spending.

Mandatory programs, which are mostly funded outside the annual budget and appropriations process in line with the laws that created them, would take up the rest of the government spending, with Social Security accounting for \$1.543 trillion, Medicare spending \$936 billion and Medicaid requiring \$589 billion.

Another \$965 billion in government spending would go toward interest payments on the country's debt.

The budget request proposes a \$1.781 trillion deficit during fiscal 2025, which would decrease during the following four fiscal years before increasing again toward the end of the 10-year budget window.

The deficit would never drop below the \$1 trillion mark.

Child tax credit, Medicare, Social Security

The budget calls on Congress to expand the child tax credit to the levels that were in place during the COVID-19 pandemic, "which helped cut child poverty nearly in half in 2021 to its lowest level in history," the proposal says.

"The Budget would expand the credit from \$2,000 per child to \$3,000 per child for children six years old and above, and to \$3,600 per child for children under six," the request says.

The budget calls on U.S. lawmakers to bolster Medicare by "modestly increasing the Medicare tax rate on incomes above \$400,000" and by "closing loopholes in existing Medicare taxes."

The budget request says Biden "remains committed to working with the Congress to protect Medicare and Social Security for this and future generations," but it doesn't include any concrete proposals for avoiding a nearly 25% drop off in Social Security benefits in a decade when the trust fund becomes insolvent.

Ukraine, Israel funding

Office of Management and Budget Director Shalanda Young said on a call with reporters Monday morning the budget request calls on Congress to approve emergency spending for war efforts led by Ukraine and Israel.

"It is very frustrating," Young said of the stalemate from House GOP leaders. "We have been asking for support for Ukraine since September. If you can remember, after October 7, we asked for support for Israel."

The Senate voted 70-29 in February to send the House a \$95 billion assistance package for Ukraine, Israel and Taiwan, though House Speaker Mike Johnson, a Louisiana Republican, has so far refused to put the bill on the floor in that chamber for an up or down vote.

Biden also asked Congress, for the fourth time, to bolster spending on U.S. border security, she said.

Young is scheduled to testify before the Democratic-controlled Senate Budget Committee on Tuesday about the budget request.

She will testify in front of the House Budget Committee, which is controlled by Republicans on March 21, according to committee staff.

Those two hearings kick off the annual budget and appropriations process on Capitol Hill, though House GOP leaders upended the order of things last week when they debated and approved their budget resolution in committee.

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Contrasts in Biden, GOP budget proposals

Chair of the Council of Economic Advisers Jared Bernstein said during the call with reporters Monday the difference between House GOP's budget resolution and the White House budget request is "reality."

"We think we have a realistic growth forecast. We defended it extensively in the budget. We explain how we got to where we are," Bernstein said, calling into question House Republicans optimistic prediction of 3% economic growth in order to balance their budget resolution.

"So you can write down whatever you want to get whatever result you want, but if it doesn't match good, hard economic reality, it's not useful," Bernstein said.

Young doubled down on criticism of House Republicans' budget resolution, saying it doesn't "tell you what they cut, who they harm."

"Everything is detailed in the discretionary budget, mandatory proposals, tax proposals," Young said of the president's budget request.

"Congressional Republicans give us their top lines, which have rosy economic projections that don't fit reality," Young said. "They also don't tell you they're going to cut the National Institutes of Health. They're going to cut border security. They're going to cut child care. They're going to cut Head Start. That's the only way you can do it."

Last year's work still undone

Congress' budget resolution is a tax and spending blueprint that lays out the party's vision for the 10-year budget window, but it doesn't actually spend any money. That is reserved for the dozen annual government spending bills.

The House and Senate took overwhelmingly bipartisan votes last week to approve six of those bills for the fiscal year that began back on Oct. 1. But they have yet to release or approve the other half of their work, which is due before March 22, under the latest stopgap spending law.

Biden's budget request for fiscal year 2025 should allow the House and Senate spending panels to move directly into next year's process, drafting the 12 appropriations bills all over again sometime this spring.

But Congress will need to complete work on last year's process, which is running more than five months behind schedule, before it can do that.

Republican reaction

Johnson, House Majority Leader Steve Scalise of Louisiana, Majority Whip Tom Emmer of Minnesota and Republican Conference Chair Elise Stefanik of New York said in a joint statement released Monday that Biden's budget request "doesn't just miss the mark — it is a roadmap to accelerate America's decline."

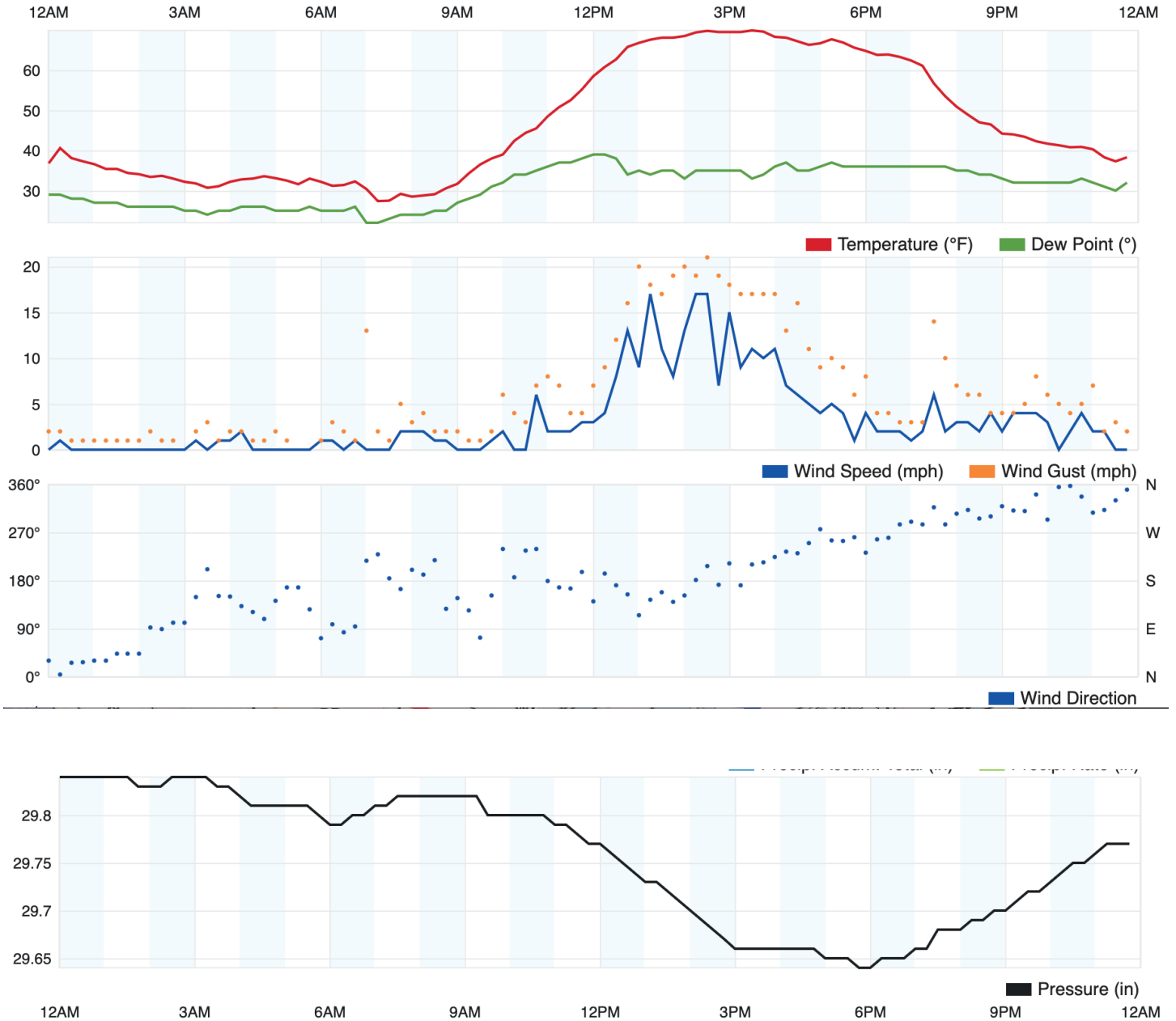
"House Republicans reject Biden's misguided budget proposal and have taken action to steer our nation back to a path of fiscal sanity," Johnson said. "Our efforts to rein in the runaway spending spree from last year's budget have already yielded results, lowering projected deficits by \$2.6 trillion over the next decade."

"The House's budget plan for the next fiscal year, preceding the President's proposal, reflects the values of hardworking Americans who know that in tough economic times, fiscal discipline is non-negotiable," Johnson added. "House Republicans understand the American people expect and deserve nothing less from their government."

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Yesterday's Groton Weather Graphs



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Today



Mostly Sunny

High: 62 °F

Tonight



Mostly Cloudy

Low: 32 °F

Wednesday



Mostly Cloudy
then Slight
Chance Rain

High: 58 °F

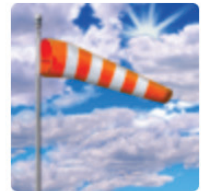
Wednesday
Night



Slight Chance
Rain and
Breezy

Low: 33 °F

Thursday



Mostly Cloudy
and Breezy

High: 46 °F

Next Few Days

Today



Highs: 59 - 65°F
Lows: 31 - 38°F

Wednesday



Highs: 53 - 61°F
Lows: 29 - 36°F

Thursday



Highs: 43 - 48°F
Lows: 23 - 28°F

March 12, 2024 3:18 AM

National Weather Service
Aberdeen, SD

Today will be a little cooler with highs in the 60s. Expect increasing clouds through the afternoon. Wednesday, we will have a chance for some rain (20% in the north, 50% across central SD). Up to a quarter of an inch of precipitation is possible. Rain will come to an end Thursday morning.

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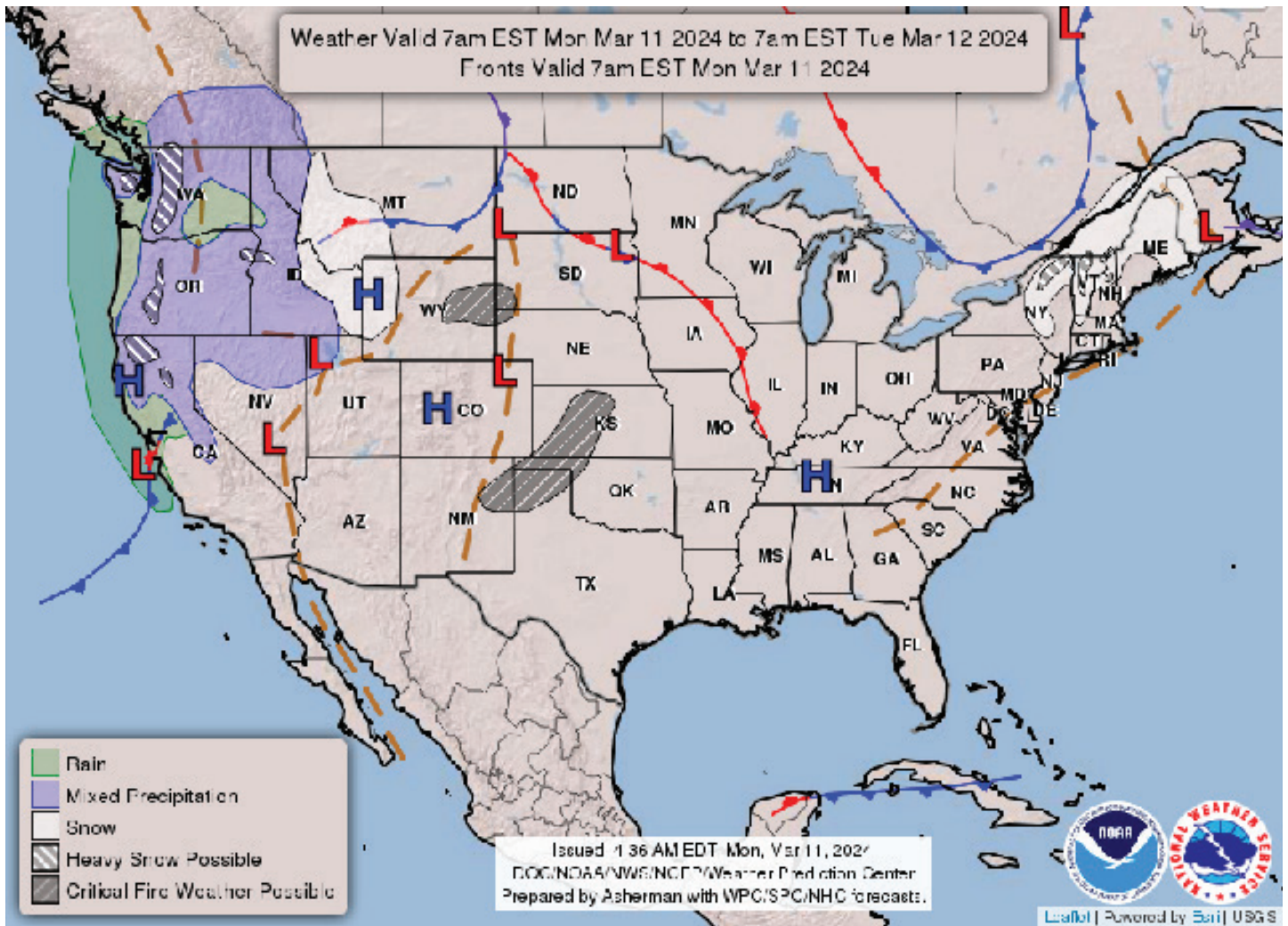
Yesterday's Groton Weather

High Temp: 70 °F at 3:25 PM
(1 degree short of tying the 2016 record)
Low Temp: 26 °F at 7:24 AM
Wind: 22 mph at 2:05 PM
Precip: : 0.00

Day length: 11 hours, 48 minutes

Today's Info

Record High: 72 in 2016
Record Low: -20 in 1897
Average High: 39
Average Low: 18
Average Precip in March.: 0.29
Precip to date in March: 0.00
Average Precip to date: 1.46
Precip Year to Date: 0.07
Sunset Tonight: 7:36:23 pm
Sunrise Tomorrow: 7:45:33 am



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Today in Weather History

March 12, 1995: Rapid snowmelt, due to warm temperatures, caused widespread flooding of streams, low areas, and farmland. Many roads were covered with water, and some were washed out. Some utility poles and lines were damaged. High water levels destroyed some schools, houses, and other buildings. Day County was especially stricken, with damage to roads alone estimated at \$75,000. Ice jams exacerbated the flooding on some culverts and streams.

1888 - A blizzard paralyzed southeastern New York State and western New England. The storm produced 58 inches of snow at Saratoga NY, and 50 inches at Middletown CT. The blizzard was followed by record cold temperatures, and the cold and snow claimed 400 lives. New York City received 20.9 inches of snow, Albany NY reported 46.7 inches. (David Ludlum) (The Weather Channel)

1928: The St. Frances dam near Santa Paula, California, burst before midnight, sending 138,000 acres of water rushing down the San Francisquito Canyon, killing 450 people. The dam was designed and built between 1924 and 1926 by the Los Angeles Department of Water and Power, then named the Bureau of Water Works and Supply.

1954 - A blizzard raged from eastern Wyoming into the Black Hills of western South Dakota, while a severe ice storm was in progress from northeastern Nebraska to central Iowa. The ice storm isolated 153 towns in Iowa. Dust from the Great Plains caused brown snow, and hail and muddy rain over parts of Wisconsin and Michigan. (11th-13th) (The Weather Channel)

1967 - A tremendous four day storm raged across California. Winds of 90 mph closed mountain passes, heavy rains flooded the lowlands, and in sixty hours Squaw Valley CA was buried under 96 inches (eight feet) of snow. (David Ludlum)

1976: A massive tornado outbreak spawned tornadoes in the Great Lakes and Midwest, including 9 in northern Indiana and extreme southern Michigan. A tornado missed President Ford's motorcade by a quarter-mile near O'Hare. The next morning, he got out of his vehicle to view the damage.

1987 - Unseasonably cold weather prevailed in the southeastern U.S., with gale force winds along the Middle Atlantic Coast. A storm in the Pacific Northwest produced rain and gale force winds. Crescent City CA received 2.27 inches of rain in 24 hours. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

1993: An incredible blizzard known as "The Superstorm" struck the eastern United States on this date through the 15th. The storm was described as the most costly non-tropical storm ever to hit the U.S., doing an estimated \$6 billion in damage. The storm was as strong as a hurricane regarding winds and low pressure. The pressure dropped to an incredible 28.35 inches of mercury or 960 millibars when then the storm was located over the Chesapeake Bay. Boston, Massachusetts, recorded a wind gust to 81 mph, the most substantial wind they had recorded since Hurricane Edna in 1954. Also, as the storm was intensifying over the Gulf of Mexico, a wind gust to 99 mph was recorded by an offshore oil rig. It dumped incredible amounts of snow from Alabama to New England. The snow amounts were significant everywhere, but for places like Birmingham, Alabama, the 17 inches recorded brought the city to a standstill for three days. Mount Leconte, North Carolina, recorded 60 inches of snow. Practically every weather station in West Virginia established a new 24-hour snowfall record during the event. Syracuse, New York was buried under 43 inches of snow. The storm killed 220 people, and another 48 lost at sea. The storm also brought a 12-foot storm surge and 15 tornadoes to Florida, where 51 people were killed. Air travel was brought to a halt as every major airport from Atlanta north was closed during the height of the storm. During the late evening into the early morning hours of the 13th, a vicious squall line swept through Florida and spawned 11 tornadoes resulting in five fatalities. Thunderstorm winds gusted to 110 mph at Alligator Point and 109 mph at Dry Tortugas. Exceptionally high tides occurred along the western Florida coast. A 13-foot storm surge occurred in Taylor County, Florida, resulting in 10 deaths with 57 residences destroyed. A 5 to 8-foot storm surge moved ashore in Dixie County. Over 500 homes were destroyed, with major damage to another 700 structures.

2006 - High school senior Matt Suter survives being blown 1,307 feet by a tornado. (The exact distance is determined by NWS GPS.) The twister rips open his grandmother's mobile home and tosses Suter into the night, launching him over a barbed wire fence and eventually depositing him on the soft grass in an open field

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Daily Devotionals

Seeds of Hope

THE NEED TO BE KIND

Miss Wilson went to the post office nearly every day to buy a stamp or two. Often the line was long, and it appeared that she had difficulty standing quietly, waiting for her turn at the counter.

A stranger who had seen her on many occasions asked, "Why don't you just use the stamp machine? It would be so much easier and quicker, and you wouldn't have to stand so long."

"Oh my," she said, "the clerks are so kind to me. They always smile at me and ask me how I am doing and how I feel. The machines don't do that."

Kindness does two things at the same time: It makes us feel good, and others feel good. And, it rarely costs us anything even though it usually makes others feel important.

Kindness, like love, has its source in God. We read in Titus that "When the kindness and love of God our Savior appeared in us, we know that He saved us, not because of the righteous things we had done, but because of His mercy."

When we begin to understand the fullness of God's kindness to us personally, we will no doubt see others in a different light. We certainly do not deserve God's compassion and kindness - yet He has been more than kind to us. He held nothing back in giving His Son to be our Savior. Showing kindness to others demonstrates His love.

Prayer: Acts of kindness, Father, present endless opportunities for us to show others that we care for them just as You do. Help us to represent You always in all ways. In Jesus' Name, Amen.

Scripture For Today: When God our Savior revealed his kindness and love, he saved us, not because of the righteous things we had done, but because of his mercy. He washed away our sins, giving us a new birth and new life through the Holy Spirit. Titus 3:4-5



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 DRAW: 17 Hrs 18 Mins 14 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

LOTTO AMERICA

WINNING NUMBERS: 03.11.24

12 15 16 32 46 1

All Star Bonus: 2x

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:
\$2,150,000

NEXT DRAW: 1 Days 16 Hrs 33 Mins 15 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

LUCKY FOR LIFE

WINNING NUMBERS: 03.11.24

24 26 31 38 42 17

TOP PRIZE:

\$7,000/week

NEXT DRAW: 16 Hrs 48 Mins 15 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

DAKOTA CASH

WINNING NUMBERS:
03.09.24

11 13 15 19 24

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:
\$20,000

NEXT DRAW: 1 Days 16 Hrs 48 Mins 15 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

POWERBALL

DOUBLE PLAY

WINNING NUMBERS: 03.11.24

15 25 35 41 62 12

TOP PRIZE:
\$10,000,000

NEXT DRAW: 1 Days 17 Hrs 17 Mins 15 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

POWERBALL

WINNING NUMBERS: 03.11.24

1 3 7 16 66 5

Power Play: 5x

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:
\$559,000,000

NEXT DRAW: 1 Days 17 Hrs 17 Mins 14 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

News from the Associated Press

The IRS launches Direct File, a pilot program for free online tax filing available in 12 states

By ADRIANA MORGA and FATIMA HUSSEIN Associated Press

NEW YORK (AP) — After weeks of testing, an electronic system for filing returns directly to the IRS is now available for taxpayers from 12 selected states.

The new system, called Direct File, is a free online tool. Taxpayers in the selected states who have very simple W-2s and claim a standard deduction may be eligible to use it this tax season to file their federal income taxes. The program will also offer a Spanish version, which will be available starting at 1 p.m. Eastern Time on Tuesday.

The Treasury Department estimates that one-third of all federal income tax returns filed could be prepared using Direct File and that 19 million taxpayers may be eligible to use the tool this tax season.

“Direct File will offer millions of Americans a free and simple way to file their taxes, with no expensive and unnecessary filing fees and no upselling, putting hundreds of dollars back in the pocket of working families each year, consistent with President Biden’s pledge to lower costs,” said National Economic Advisor Lael Brainard.

Certain taxpayers in Florida, New Hampshire, Nevada, South Dakota, Tennessee, Texas, Washington, Wyoming, Arizona, Massachusetts, California and New York can participate. Direct File can only be used to file federal income taxes, taxpayers from states that require filing state taxes will need to do so separately.

The Direct File pilot is part of the agency’s effort to build out a new government service that could replace some taxpayers’ use of commercial tax preparation software, such as TurboTax. It’s meant to be simple and provides a step-by-step walkthrough of easy-to-answer questions.

Denver fends off Omaha 66-63 in Summit League Tournament semifinal

By The Associated Press undefined

SIOUX FALLS, S.D. (AP) — Tommy Bruner had 23 points and Denver held off Omaha 66-63 on Monday night in the semifinals of the Summit League Tournament.

Denver advances to play South Dakota State in Tuesday’s championship game with an automatic berth to the NCAA Tournament on the line.

Bruner shot 7 of 15 from the field, including 5 for 11 from 3-point range, and went 4 for 7 from the line for the Pioneers (17-16). DeAndre Craig added 15 points and five assists. Isaiah Carr shot 4 of 8 from the field to finish with nine points.

Frankie Fidler led the way for the Mavericks (15-18) with 27 points, eight rebounds and two steals. Omaha also got 12 points from Tony Osburn. Marquel Sutton had 10 points and nine rebounds.

Bruner scored 14 points in the first half and Denver went into halftime trailing 34-32. Denver pulled off the victory after a 9-0 second-half run erased a seven-point deficit and gave them the lead at 46-44 with 12:36 remaining in the half. Craig scored 10 second-half points.

Easley scores 13 as South Dakota State takes down St. Thomas 59-49 in Summit League Tournament

By The Associated Press undefined

SIOUX FALLS, S.D. (AP) — Charlie Easley had 13 points and top-seeded South Dakota State beat No. 4 seed St. Thomas 59-49 on Monday night in the semifinals of the Summit League Tournament.

Easley also added eight rebounds for the Jackrabbits (21-12). Zeke Mayo added 11 points while going 3 of 10 from the floor, including 2 for 5 from 3-point range, and 3 for 5 from the line while he also had five

rebounds. Luke Appel went 4 of 9 from the field to finish with 10 points, while adding six rebounds and six assists.

Kendall Blue led the way for the Tommies (20-13) with 13 points and six rebounds. Brooks Allen added 11 points for St. Thomas. Parker Bjorklund finished with nine points.

South Dakota State took the lead with 12:05 to go in the first half and did not give it up. The score was 28-25 at halftime, with Kalen Garry racking up six points. Easley scored 10 second-half points.

Asked to clear up abortion bans, GOP leaders blame doctors and misinformation for the confusion

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.”

Aid ship sets sail to Gaza where hundreds of thousands face starvation 5 months into war

By WAFAA SHURAF, SAMY MAGDY and MENELAOS HADJICOSTIS Associated Press

RAFAH, Gaza Strip (AP) — An aid ship loaded with some 200 tons of food set sail for Gaza on Tuesday in a pilot program for the opening of a sea corridor to the territory, where the five-month-old Israel-Hamas war has driven hundreds of thousands of Palestinians to the brink of starvation.

The food was gathered by World Food Kitchen, the charity founded by celebrity chef José Andrés, and is being carried on a barge attached to a ship belonging to the Spanish aid group Open Arms. It is expected to arrive at an undisclosed location on the Gaza coastline in two to three days. Andrés and the Open Arms boat captain, Oscar Camps, confirmed the food was destined for northern Gaza.

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The United States has separately announced plans to construct a sea bridge near Gaza in order to deliver aid, but it will likely be several weeks before it is operational. President Joe Biden's administration has provided crucial military aid for Israel while urging it to facilitate more humanitarian access.

The war, triggered by Hamas' Oct. 7 attack on Israel, has killed over 30,000 Palestinians and driven most of Gaza's 2.3 million people from their homes. A quarter of Gaza's population is starving, according to the United Nations, because they cannot find enough food or afford it at vastly inflated prices.

The United States, Qatar and Egypt had tried to broker a cease-fire and hostage release ahead of the Muslim holy month of Ramadan, which began on Sunday. But the talks stalled last week as Hamas demanded that any temporary pause in the fighting come with guarantees for ending the war.

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has vowed to expand the offensive into the southern city of Rafah, where half of Gaza's population has sought refuge, and to keep fighting until Hamas has been completely dismantled and all the captives it is holding have been returned.

Aid groups say it is nearly impossible to deliver aid in much of the territory because of Israeli restrictions, ongoing hostilities and the breakdown of law and order after the Hamas-run police force largely vanished from the streets.

Conditions are especially dire in northern Gaza, which has suffered widespread devastation and been largely cut off by Israeli forces since October. Up to 300,000 Palestinians are believed to have remained there despite Israeli evacuation orders, with many reduced to eating animal feed in recent weeks.

On Monday, the first day of the normally festive month of Ramadan, children with pots lined up at a charity kitchen in the urban Jabaliya refugee camp. Each was given a small portion of cooked carrots and sweet potatoes to break the dawn-to-dusk fast.

"Our children can't find anything to eat," said Bassam al-Haw, a volunteer. "No food, no water, no flour."

The planned sea route has the support of the European Union, the United States, the United Arab Emirates and other countries. The U.S. and other countries have also launched airdrops of aid in recent days, but such efforts are costly and unlikely to meet the mounting needs.

Once the Open Arms ship nears Gaza, two smaller vessels will tow the barge to a jetty that World Central Kitchen is building. World Central Kitchen then plans to distribute the food in northern Gaza.

Organizers said the jetty will be outside of northern Gaza but declined to provide further details. Andrés told The Associated Press in a brief interview Saturday evening that they want to keep the location secret to prevent large crowds from disrupting the delivery.

Scores of Palestinians were killed last month during a chaotic aid delivery in the north organized by Israeli troops, who fired on the crowd. Israel said most of those killed were trampled to death, while Palestinian officials said most had been shot.

Israel, which controls Gaza's coastline and all but one of its land crossings, says it supports efforts to deliver aid by sea and will inspect all cargo before it sets sail for Gaza.

European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen thanked Cyprus for setting up the corridor from the island nation in the eastern Mediterranean, calling the ship's departure "a sign of hope," in a posting on X. "We will work hard together for many ships to follow," she added.

Cyprus' President Nikos Christodoulides said the inaugural voyage is "one of hope and humanity" and would provide a "lifeline to civilians."

The war began when Hamas-led militants stormed into Israel in a surprise attack on Oct. 7, killing some 1,200 people, mostly civilians, and taking around 250 hostage. Hamas is still believed to be holding around 100 hostages, and the remains of 30 others, after freeing most of the rest last year in exchange for the release of Palestinians imprisoned by Israel.

Gaza's Health Ministry says the Israeli offensive launched in response to the attack has killed at least 31,112 Palestinians. The ministry doesn't differentiate between civilians and combatants in its count, but it has said women and children make up around 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 has said

it has killed 13,000 Hamas fighters, without providing evidence.

Yemen Houthi rebels target a Liberian-flagged ship in Red Sea with missiles; no damage reported

By JON GAMBRELL Associated Press

DUBAI, United Arab Emirates (AP) — Yemen's Houthi rebels have targeted a Liberian-flagged container ship in the Red Sea with missiles, producing an explosion near the vessel but causing no damage, authorities said.

The master of the vessel reported the explosion Monday and said no one was hurt, the British military's United Kingdom Maritime Trade Operations center said. The UKMTO later identified the vessel as the Pinocchio, managed by a Singaporean firm.

The Houthis used two anti-ship ballistic missiles in the attack, the U.S. military's Central Command said.

Houthi military spokesman Brig. Gen. Yahya Saree claimed the attack early Tuesday in a prerecorded statement, claiming the Pinocchio was an American ship without offering evidence to support the assertion.

He said the Houthis would continue their attacks, aimed at pressuring an end to the Israel-Hamas war in the Gaza Strip. However, the Houthi attacks targeting vessel since November have increasingly had little or no connection to Israel, the United States or other nations involved in the war.

Monday's attack comes after a Houthi missile struck a commercial ship in the Gulf of Aden last week, killing three of its crew members and forcing survivors to abandon the vessel.

It was the first fatal strike in a campaign of assaults by the Iranian-backed group over Israel's war on Hamas in the Gaza Strip. The Houthis say the attacks are intended to pressure Israel into stopping the war, but their targets increasingly have little or nothing to do with the conflict.

Other recent Houthi actions include an attack last month on a cargo ship carrying fertilizer, the Ruby-mar, which later sank after drifting for several days, and the downing of an American drone worth tens of millions of dollars.

The U.S. has led a series of airstrikes targeting the Houthis since January, but they have yet to stop the rebels' attacks on shipping, which have disrupted trade through the Red Sea, a crucial waterway for energy and cargo shipments between Asia, the Middle East and Europe.

On Monday, U.S. forces carried out six strikes destroying an underwater Houthi drone and 18 anti-ship missiles, Central Command said. The Houthi's Al-Masirah satellite news channel reported U.S. strikes in Yemen's Houthi-held Hodeidah and Saada provinces.

Ariel Henry bows to pressure, saying he'll resign once a council is formed to lead crisis-hit Haiti

By DÁNICA COTO and EVENS SANON Associated Press

PORT-AU-PRINCE, Haiti (AP) — Haitian Prime Minister Ariel Henry announced early Tuesday that he would resign once a transitional presidential council is created, bowing to international pressure to save the country overwhelmed by violent gangs that some experts say have unleashed a low-scale civil war.

Henry made the announcement hours after officials including Caribbean leaders and U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken met in Jamaica to urgently discuss a solution to halt Haiti's spiraling crisis and agreed to a joint proposal to establish a transitional council.

"The government that I'm running cannot remain insensitive in front of this situation. There is no sacrifice that is too big for our country," Henry said in a videotaped statement. "The government I'm running will remove itself immediately after the installation of the council."

Henry has been unable to enter Haiti because the violence closed its main international airports. He had arrived in Puerto Rico a week ago, after being barred from landing in the Dominican Republic, where officials said that he lacked a required flight plan. Dominican officials also closed the airspace to flights to and from Haiti.

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It wasn't immediately clear who would be chosen to lead Haiti out of the crisis in which heavily armed gangs have burned police stations, attacked the main airport and raided two of the country's biggest prisons. The raids resulted in the release of more than 4,000 inmates.

Scores of people have been killed, and more than 15,000 are homeless after fleeing neighborhoods raided by gangs. Food and water are dwindling as stands and stores selling to impoverished Haitians run out of goods. The main port in Port-au-Prince remains closed, stranding dozens of containers with critical supplies.

The urgent meeting in Jamaica was organized by Caricom, a regional trade bloc that has pressed for months for a transitional government in Haiti while violent protests in the country demanded Henry's resignation.

Guyana President Irfaan Ali said that the transitional council would have seven voting members and two nonvoting ones.

Those with votes include the Pitit Desalin party, run by former senator and presidential candidate Moïse Jean-Charles, who is now an ally of Guy Philippe, a former rebel leader who led a successful 2004 coup and was recently released from a United States prison after pleading guilty to money laundering. Also with a vote is the EDE party of former prime minister Charles Joseph; the Fanmi Lavalas party; the December 21 coalition led by Henry; the Montana Accord group; and members of the private sector.

Before sharing details of the proposed transitional council, Ali said, "I want to pause and thank Prime Minister Henry for his service to Haiti," as Caribbean leaders and others clapped.

Henry served the longest single term as prime minister since Haiti's 1987 constitution was approved, a surprising feat for a politically unstable country with a constant turnover of premiers. He was sworn in as prime minister nearly two weeks after the July 7, 2021, assassination of President Jovenel Moïse.

Critics of Henry note he was never elected by the people, much less Parliament, since it remains non-existent after the terms of the last remaining senators expired in January 2023, leaving Haiti without a single elected official.

As Haiti prepares for new leadership, some experts question the role that heavily armed gangs who control 80% of Port-au-Prince will play.

"Even if you have a different kind of government, the reality is that you need to talk to the gangs," said Robert Fatton, a Haitian politics expert at the University of Virginia. "You can't suppress them."

He said officials will still have to deal with them and try to convince them to give up their weapons, "but what would be their concessions?"

Fatton noted that gangs have supremacy in terms of controlling the capital. "If they have that supremacy, and there is no countervailing force, it's no longer a question if you want them at the table, they may just take the table."

Earlier on Monday, Blinken announced an additional \$100 million to finance the deployment of a multinational force to Haiti. Blinken also announced another \$33 million in humanitarian aid and the creation of a joint proposal agreed on by Caribbean leaders and "all of the Haitian stakeholders to expedite a political transition" and create a "presidential college."

He said the college would take "concrete steps" he did not identify to meet the needs of Haitian people and enable the pending deployment of the multinational force to be led by Kenya. Blinken also noted that the United States Department of Defense doubled its support for the mission, having previously set aside \$100 million.

While leaders met behind closed doors, Jimmy Chérizier, considered Haiti's most powerful gang leader, told reporters that if the international community continues down the current road, "it will plunge Haiti into further chaos."

"We Haitians have to decide who is going to be the head of the country and what model of government we want," said Chérizier, a former elite police officer known as Barbecue, who leads the gang federation G9 Family and Allies. "We are also going to figure out how to get Haiti out of the misery it's in now."

Powerful gangs have been attacking key government targets across Haiti's capital of Port-au-Prince since Feb. 29. When the attacks began, Henry was in Kenya pushing for the United Nations-backed deployment of a police force from the East African country after it was delayed by a court ruling.

Late Monday, the Haitian government announced it was extending a nighttime curfew until March 14 in an attempt to prevent further attacks.

The Latest | Israeli military says about 100 projectiles fired into the country from Lebanon

By The Associated Press undefined

The Israeli military said about 100 projectiles were launched from Lebanon into Israel on Tuesday, a day after Palestinians in Gaza began fasting for the holy month of Ramadan.

The launches were some of the heaviest fire emanating from Israel's northern neighbor since the start of the war in Gaza. There were no immediate reports of injuries or damage following the strikes, which appeared to be in response to Israeli airstrikes deep inside Lebanon on Monday.

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 Israeli hostages and Palestinian prisoners, and the entry of much more humanitarian aid. But the cease-fire talks stalled last week. Hunger is worsening across Gaza and pressure is rising on Israel over the growing humanitarian crisis.

Gaza's Health Ministry said Monday the bodies of 67 people killed by Israeli strikes were brought to hospitals over the past 24 hours, bringing the Palestinian death toll to more than 31,112 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 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 still be holding around 100 captives and the remains of others.

Five months of war have forced around 80% of Gaza's 2.3 million people from their homes and pushed hundreds of thousands to the brink of famine.

Currently:

- UN envoy: Finding that some hostages were victims of sexual violence doesn't justify Israeli attacks
- A Gaza family uprooted by war and grieving their losses shares a somber Ramadan meal in a tent
- Ramadan begins in Gaza with hunger worsening and no end to the war in sight
- Muslims welcome Ramadan with a mix of joy and deep concern
- Houthi attack causes a blast near a container ship in the Red Sea
- Find more of AP's coverage at <https://apnews.com/hub/israel-hamas-war>

Here's the latest:

AID SHIP SETS SAIL FROM CYPRUS TO GAZA

An aid ship loaded with some 200 tons of food set sail Tuesday from Cyprus to Gaza, the international charity behind the effort said.

The shipment is a test for the opening of a sea corridor to supply aid to the territory, where starvation is spreading five months into the Israel-Hamas war.

World Food Kitchen, the charity founded by celebrity chef José Andrés, posted on the X social media platform that a ship set sail on Tuesday. Associated Press live footage showed it being towed out of a harbor in the port city of Larnaca.

The United States has separately announced plans to construct a sea bridge near Gaza in order to deliver aid, but it will likely be several weeks before it is operational.

HEZBOLLAH LEADER MEETS WITH TOP HAMAS OFFICIAL

BEIRUT — The leader of Hezbollah met with a top Hamas official involved in negotiations for a cease-fire in Gaza, the Lebanese group said in a statement Tuesday.

Hassan Nasrallah's meeting with Khalil Hayeh in Beirut came at the start Ramadan after Qatar- and Egyptian-mediated negotiations for a truce before the holy month broke down.

Israel's military and Hezbollah militants continue to clash along the Lebanon-Israel border, while other governments scramble to prevent all-out war in the tiny Mediterranean country.

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Amos Hochstein, a senior advisor to U.S. President Joe Biden, has urged both parties to seek a lasting cease-fire in the tense border area. Hezbollah's leadership has said that a cease-fire in Gaza would be the only way to restore calm along the Lebanon-Israel border, but Israeli officials say that wouldn't be the case.

Israeli strikes late Monday deep into Lebanon killed one person and wounded six others near the country's northeastern city of Baalbek.

The Israeli military's Arabic spokesperson Avichay Adraee said Israeli jets bombed two Hezbollah compounds in northeastern Lebanon in retaliation for Hezbollah launching attacks on the Israeli-occupied Syrian Golan Heights.

Since the Israel-Hamas war began, more than 220 Hezbollah fighters and nearly 40 civilians were killed on the Lebanese side while in Israel, nine soldiers and 10 civilians were left dead in the attacks.

ISRAELI MILITARY SAYS ABOUT 100 PROJECTILES FIRED FROM LEBANON INTO ISRAEL

TEL AVIV, Israel — The Israeli military says about 100 projectiles have been launched from Lebanon into Israel, in some of the heaviest fire emanating from Israel's northern neighbor since the start of the war in Gaza.

There were no immediate reports of injuries or damage following Tuesday's strikes, which appeared to be in response to Israeli airstrikes deep inside Lebanon a day before. The military said early Tuesday it struck sites belonging to the Lebanese Hezbollah's aerial forces in retaliation for previous Hezbollah attacks.

There was no immediate claim of responsibility for the launches from Lebanon.

Israel's military and fighters from the Lebanese Hezbollah have been trading fire since the Israel-Hamas war began on Oct. 7. More than 220 Hezbollah fighters and nearly 40 civilians have been killed on the Lebanese side, while in Israel, nine soldiers and 10 civilians have been killed in the attacks.

Tens of thousands of people have been displaced on both sides of the border because of the fighting.

U.N. ENVOY SAYS ABUSE OF HOSTAGES DOESN'T LEGITIMIZE FURTHER HOSTILITIES

UNITED NATIONS — A U.N. envoy warned Israel that her finding of "clear and convincing information" that some hostages taken by Hamas during its Oct. 7 attack were subjected to sexual violence "does not in any way legitimize further hostilities."

"In fact, it creates a moral imperative for a humanitarian cease-fire to end the unspeakable suffering imposed on Palestinian civilians in Gaza and bring about the immediate and unconditional release of all hostages," Pramila Patten told the U.N. Security Council on Monday where Israel's foreign minister sat listening.

"Continuation of hostilities can, in no way, protect them," she said of the hostages. "It can only expose them to further risk of violence, including sexual violence."

Patten, the U.N. envoy focusing on sexual violence in conflict, spoke at a council meeting sought by Israel and called by the United States, United Kingdom and France to focus on her recent report.

Israel's Foreign Minister Israel Katz said he came to the council "to protest as loud as I can against the crimes against humanity" committed by Hamas in order to deter and scare Israeli society.

He strongly criticized the Security Council's failure in over 40 meetings since Oct. 7 to condemn Hamas' actions, saying the U.N.'s most powerful body should declare the extremist group a terrorist organization and pressure it to immediately release the hostages.

ISRAEL AIRSTRIKES HIT DEEP INSIDE LEBANON, WOUNDING 6, HEZBOLLAH SAYS

BEIRUT — Israeli airstrikes late Monday near Lebanon's northeastern city of Baalbek wounded at least six people, a Hezbollah official said.

The official, speaking on condition of anonymity in line with regulations, said the locations of the airstrikes, the deepest in Lebanon since Feb. 26, have not yet been specified.

In late February, Israeli airstrikes near the historic city of Baalbek killed two Hezbollah members.

State-run National News Agency said one of the strikes hit a building in the village of Ansar just south of Baalbek. It gave no word on casualties.

Hezbollah's Al-Manar TV reported at least two airstrikes one striking a building on the outskirts of the village of Taraya and another near Baalbek on the outskirts of Ansar.

Israel's military and Hezbollah fighters have been trading fire since the Israel-Hamas war began on Oct.

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7. More than 220 Hezbollah fighters and nearly 40 civilians were killed on the Lebanese side, while in Israel, nine soldiers and 10 civilians were left dead in the attacks.

Tens of thousands of people have been displaced on both sides of the border.

Associated Press writer Bassem Mroue contributed.

ISRAEL SETS AGE LIMITS FOR THOSE WHO WANT TO PRAY AT AL-AQSA MOSQUE

JERUSALEM — The Israeli government said Monday that younger children and older adults will be the only West Bank Palestinians permitted to enter a major Jerusalem holy site for the important first Friday prayers of the Muslim holy month of Ramadan this week.

Militant groups have called on Palestinians to come to Al-Aqsa Mosque, which has often been a flashpoint of Israeli-Palestinian violence, to confront Israel over the war in Gaza.

When Ramadan began Sunday night, COGAT, the Israeli defense body in charge of civilian affairs in the West Bank, had yet to announce restrictions on prayers at Al Aqsa.

The rules announced Monday would limit West Bank Palestinians' access to the compound for Friday's prayers to men over 55, women over 50 and children under 10, COGAT chief Ghassan Elian said in a post on Facebook. All Palestinians from the West Bank will also need a permit, he added, without elaborating.

Palestinians from the Israeli-occupied West Bank have been unable to visit Jerusalem under Israeli government restrictions put in place immediately after the Oct. 7 Hamas attack.

Last Ramadan, there was no age restriction on women from the territory entering Jerusalem.

The Al-Aqsa Mosque is the third holiest site in Islam. Jews consider the compound the most sacred site in Judaism, the Biblical Temple Mount.

GERMAN LEADER CALLS FOR LONGER CEASE-FIRE AND MORE AID FOR GAZA

BERLIN – German Chancellor Olaf Scholz is calling for a new and longer humanitarian cease-fire and says that more humanitarian aid must reach Gaza.

Germany is a staunch ally of Israel and has repeatedly expressed its solidarity with the country in its war against Hamas. But it has pressed for better aid supplies and for an eventual two-state solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

"More humanitarian aid must reach Gaza and that is our clear call to Israel, which has every right to defend itself against Hamas," Scholz said Monday at a news conference with Malaysia's prime minister.

He added that "we don't think a ground offensive on Rafah is right."

The German leader said that "an important step now would be a cease-fire that lasts longer, ideally during Ramadan already."

The United States, Qatar and Egypt had hoped to broker a cease-fire ahead of Ramadan 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 have stalled.

U.N. CHIEF CALLS ON ISRAEL AND HAMAS TO 'SILENCE THE GUNS'

UNITED NATIONS – The United Nations chief is urging Israel and Hamas to honor the spirit of the Muslim holy month of Ramadan by "silencing the guns" and to show compassion by releasing all hostages seized by the militant group during its attack in southern Israel on Oct. 7.

Secretary-General Antonio Guterres told reporters that Monday marks the start of Ramadan when "Muslims around the world celebrate and spread the values of peace, reconciliation and solidarity."

Yet, in Gaza, "the killing, bombing and bloodshed continue," he said, with civilian killings and destruction in the territory "at a level that is unprecedented" in his more than seven years as secretary-general.

He warned that Israel's threatened assault on the southern city of Rafah where over a million Palestinians have sought safety "could plummet the people of Gaza into an even deeper circle of hell."

Guterres said life-saving humanitarian assistance is only entering Gaza "in trickles," and in the Ramadan spirit he also called for the removal of all obstacles so food and other aid can be delivered with speed and on a massive scale.

"The eyes of the world are watching. The eyes of history are watching. We cannot look away," said the

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U.N. chief, who has been calling for a humanitarian cease-fire for months. "We must act to avoid more preventable deaths. ... Desperate civilians need action – immediate action."

Top Polish leaders to visit White House, hoping to spur US to help Ukraine more

By VANESSA GERA and AAMER MADHANI Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — President Joe Biden is hosting Poland's president and prime minister for White House talks on Tuesday with the Polish leaders looking to press Washington to break its impasse over replenishing funds for Ukraine at a critical moment in the war in Europe.

Ahead of the visit, President Andrzej Duda called on other members of the NATO alliance to raise their spending on defense to 3% of their GDP as Russia puts its own economy on a war footing and pushes forward with its plans to conquer Ukraine. Poland already spends 4% of its own economic output on defense, double the current target of 2% in NATO.

"The war in Ukraine has clearly shown that the United States is and should remain the leader in security issues in Europe and the world," Duda said in an address to Poland on Monday. "However, other NATO countries must also take greater responsibility for the security of the entire alliance and intensively modernize and strengthen their troops."

In a Washington Post opinion piece to spotlight his call for greater NATO spending, Duda argued that Russia was switching its economy to "war mode," allocating close to 30% of its annual budget to arm itself.

"This figure and other data coming out of Russia are alarming," Duda wrote. "Vladimir Putin's regime poses the biggest threat to global peace since the end of the Cold War."

The Biden administration suggested Duda's call to raise the defense spending target for NATO countries may be, at least for the time being, overly ambitious.

"I think the first step is to get every country meeting the 2% threshold, and we've seen improvement of that," State Department spokesman Matthew Miller said. "But I think that's the first step before we start talking about an additional proposal."

Biden invited Duda and Polish Prime Minister Donald Tusk for meetings to mark the 25th anniversary of Poland's accession to NATO, a historic step Poland took into the West after breaking free from Moscow's sphere of influence after decades of communist rule.

The visit also comes amid a standoff in Washington between Biden, a Democrat, and House Republicans on Ukraine funding. House Republicans have blocked a \$118 billion bipartisan package that includes \$60 billion in Ukraine funding, as well as funds for Israel, Taiwan and U.S. border security.

Speaking to reporters before boarding his plane in Warsaw, Duda said while the talks in Washington would celebrate an anniversary, they would above all focus on European security going forward and "about Russian imperial policy, which has returned."

The visit also gives Biden another opportunity to showcase how his view of NATO, a 32-member transatlantic military alliance, contrasts with that of the likely 2024 Republican presidential nominee, Donald Trump.

Trump has said that when he was president, he warned NATO allies that he "would encourage" Russia "to do whatever the hell they want" to countries that are "delinquent" in meeting the alliance's defense spending target. White House press secretary Karine Jean-Pierre said the visit by the Polish leaders was an opportunity to reflect on the countries' shared "ironclad commitment to the NATO alliance, which makes us all safer."

Fear is deepening across Europe about Ukraine's fate as its ammunition stocks run low and as Russia makes gains on the battlefield in Ukraine, reversing its weak military performance at the start of a war launched in February 2022.

Duda and Tusk, who are also scheduled to meet with U.S. lawmakers while in Washington, are expected to add their voices to calls for House Speaker Mike Johnson, R-La., to advance a Senate-passed aid package. German Chancellor Olaf Scholz and Italian Premier Giorgia Meloni have also visited Washington in recent weeks to emphasize the impact the country's impasse on Ukraine funding is having on Europe.

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"The situation is really dire on the frontline," said Michal Baranowski, managing director of Warsaw-based GMF East, part of the German Marshall Fund think tank. "We are not talking about something that can be fixed by June or July but needs to be fixed in March or April."

During his State of the Union address last week, Biden said, "If anybody in this room thinks Putin will stop at Ukraine, I assure you: He will not."

It is the first time in a quarter-century for a Polish president and prime minister to be in Washington at the same time and the first for both leaders to be welcomed at the White House at the same time, according to Polish media. The gesture is widely seen as an acknowledgment of the seriousness of this historical moment, with Russian strength growing as that of Ukraine wanes.

An expanding NATO uses its diversity as strength. Member troops know Russia is watching

By JOHN LEICESTER Associated Press

ABOARD THE FRENCH FRIGATE NORMANDIE (AP) — The French navy frigate, bristling with weaponry and powering through frigid Norwegian seas not so far from Russia, awoke at 7:30 a.m. sharp to what, in the circumstances, was a surreal sound.

The 1967 "Summer of Love" hippie anthem "San Francisco (Be Sure to Wear Flowers in Your Hair)" was playing over the warship's public address system. Singer Scott McKenzie's voice reverberated through the passageways starting to bustle with sailors clutching coffee mugs: "All across the nation, such a strange vibration, people in motion."

It was a slice of Americana rousing one of France's most modern fighting vessels, beginning another day under Italian command, in war games involving 13 nations.

And that, in a nutshell, is NATO: a multinational alliance built around the idea that its 32 countries spread across three continents could turn their diversity into strength and fight as one if the need arose.

The Nordic Response 2024 exercises — bringing together more than 20,000 soldiers with different languages, equipment, habits and histories — are intended to foster the teamwork necessary for the alliance to function.

They are training with the knowledge that Russia and other potential adversaries are watching for any weaknesses in NATO defenses and unity.

Among the nations drilling is Sweden, NATO's 32nd and newest member. Its induction last week and the addition of Finland last year dramatically illustrated how Russia's invasion of Ukraine, now in its third year, shifted Europe's post-Cold War security landscape.

From shunning military alliances, the two Nordic nations reached for NATO's security umbrella and its guarantee that an attack on any one member would be considered as an attack on them all.

In the frozen extremes of northern Finland, Norway and Sweden, the NATO drills are a test for troops and their fighting machines. Participating nations are Belgium, Britain, Canada, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands, Norway, Spain, Sweden and the United States.

The nearly two weeks of drills conclude this week. They are part of a months-long program of NATO maneuvers dubbed Steadfast Defender 24 that are its biggest since the Cold War, with 90,000 troops. The alliance says the intention is "to demonstrate NATO's ability to defend every inch of its territory" — an unmistakable signal to Russia.

Certainly, participating troops suspect that Russia is watching.

Aboard the French frigate Normandie, the crew of 146 scrambled to battle stations when an unknown aircraft that came from the direction of Russia strayed too close for comfort last week, in international airspace north of the warship's Nordic Response patrol zone in Arctic waters.

The Normandie's commanding officer, Capt. Thomas Vuong, told Associated Press journalists aboard that the flight appeared to have been a Russian test of NATO readiness. Norway scrambled F-35 fighters to intercept the aircraft, which headed back in Russia's direction, he said.

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NATO regularly scrambles jets to scope Russian flights, taking to the skies for more than 500 interceptions in 2022. The number dropped but was still more than 300 encounters in 2023, the Brussels-headquartered alliance says.

"These are maneuvers that are fairly standard, maneuvers where the Russians test the procedures," Vuong said, speaking exclusively to AP. Russia has "resources in the skies, at sea that are employed and which enable them to test the alliance's defenses."

Listening to the NATO drills' radio traffic gives a flavor of the melting pot of nations and cultures in the transatlantic organization. Communications are in English but accents betray the array of nationalities: French, Italian, German, British, American and more.

"We have a technical vocabulary and everyone uses it," said Lt. Olivier, pilot of the Normandie's submarine-hunting NH90 helicopter. The French military withheld his family name for security reasons.

"As you can hear, it's not perfect English," he said. "But since it's always the same technical words, everyone is able to understand the picture, the situation, and to react if necessary."

In the decades since its founding by 12 countries in 1949, NATO has worked to standardize procedures and equipment to enable troops to work and, if necessary, fight together more readily. The flight deck of the Normandie, for example, is equipped to receive other countries' helicopters.

The alliance "functions because there are military headquarters developing interoperability within NATO, which means we ensure that we have systems that function together, that communicate together," Vuong said. "This gives us the capability to operate together when we meet at sea."

Vuong added that he senses "a real willingness" from alliance sailors "to make sure we raise our standard within NATO as high as possible."

Lt. Sebastian, a German navy officer who hitched a ride aboard the Normandie to make a port call during the exercises, said working with and learning from other NATO nations helps alliance troops improve. He wouldn't give his family name.

"Of course you can do your job on your own, going to sea with just one ship," he said. But "NATO means a whole group of abilities and that is what we train here, to use all the abilities combined together."

As Putin orchestrates his reelection, a resilient Russian economy is a key selling point

By DAVID McHUGH and VLADIMIR ISACHENKOV Associated Press

MOSCOW (AP) — Russians are finding a few imported staples, like fruit, coffee and olive oil, have shot way up in price. Most global brands have disappeared — or been reincarnated as Russian equivalents under new, Kremlin-friendly ownership. A lot more Chinese cars are zipping around the streets. Those who want a particular luxury cosmetic may be out of luck.

Other than that, not much has changed economically for most people in President Vladimir Putin's Russia, more than two years after he sent troops into Ukraine.

That's despite the sweeping sanctions that have cut off much of Russia's trade with Europe, the U.S. and their allies.

That sense of stability is a key asset for Putin as he orchestrates his foreordained victory in the March 15-17 presidential election for a fifth, six-year term.

Inflation is higher than most people would like, at over 7% — above the central bank's goal of 4%. But unemployment is low, and the economy is expected to grow 2.6% this year, according to the International Monetary Fund, double the previous forecast. That's far above the 0.9% expansion predicted for Europe.

"There are difficulties, of course — they're connected with the general situation in the world," said Andrei Fedotov, 55, who was walking down the Tverskaya Street central shopping avenue a few blocks from the Kremlin. "We know this very well, but I believe we'll overcome them."

Higher prices "bother me, of course — like any consumer, I see them going up," said Fedotov, who works in education. "It's connected to the times that we're in, and which will pass."

Brand manager Irina Novikova, 39, was upbeat despite higher prices in stores: "More domestic products

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have appeared, more agricultural products. Yes, we all see that some goods have disappeared.”

“Prices have gone up — if I used to buy three items for a certain price, now I buy one,” she said, but added, “Go look for Russian products, the shops with Russian goods.”

“Industry may have suffered, we know there have been some setbacks in that regard, but again, we’re adjusting and we’re reorienting our thinking, and we’re starting to look to our Chinese friends,” Novikova said.

Massive Russian spending for military equipment and hefty payments to volunteer soldiers are giving a strong boost to the economy. Government-subsidized mortgages are supporting apartment buyers in a powerful kick to the booming construction sector, as evidenced by several mammoth high-rise developments going up on the banks of the Moscow River.

Inflation rankles, but it’s also nothing new. Russia became more self-sufficient in producing its own food after 2014, when it took over Ukraine’s Crimea Peninsula and the resulting Western sanctions led the government to ban a broad range of food imports from Europe.

Planned government spending this year is roughly twice what it was in 2018. Yet the deficit remains manageable as taxes and oil revenue keep flowing in.

So-called parallel imports via third countries such as Georgia, Kazakhstan or Uzbekistan have allowed Russians with money to keep buying Western products — from sneakers to mobile phones and cars — from companies that no longer do business in Russia, usually for a significant markup.

A BMW SUV is still easily available, though at twice the price in Germany. IKEA shut its 17 Russian stores, but its furniture and home goods can be bought online — for a price.

Apple left, but an iPhone 15 Pro Max with 512 gigabytes sells for the ruble equivalent of \$1,950 on Russia’s Wildberries retail site, about what the phone sells for in Germany.

Not that there aren’t strains on the economy. Companies face labor shortages after hundreds of thousands of men left the country after the start of the fighting in Ukraine to avoid mobilization, and hundreds of thousands of others signed military contracts.

Meanwhile, Russia’s oil exports shifted from Europe to China and India due to boycotts by Ukraine’s allies. To avoid sanctions and a price cap on oil shipments, Russia had to shell out billions to buy a shadow fleet of aging tankers that don’t use Western insurers who have to honor the price ceiling. Russia also lost its lucrative natural gas market in Europe after cutting off most of its pipeline supply.

The auto industry was decimated after foreign owners like Renault, Volkswagen and Mercedes pulled out. China replaced the European Union as Russia’s main trade partner, and Chinese vehicles swiftly took over half the car market last year, according to Ward’s Intelligence.

Many foreign companies also have left or sold their businesses to local partners at knockdown prices. Others, including Danish brewer Carlsberg and French food company Danone, have seen their Russian businesses seized by the government.

“The economy plays a very important role in all of Putin’s elections,” said Janis Kluge, an expert on the Russian economy at the German Institute for International and Security Affairs. “For most Russians, who choose to ignore the war, the economy is really the biggest issue.”

Economic stability “is a signal that Putin can use vis-a-vis the other elites that he is still able to mobilize the masses. And for that, it has to be genuine and not just a manipulated number,” Kluge said.

“So it is still important that there is this genuine support, even though there is no chance at all for the voters to change who is in office,” he said.

Gross domestic product, the economy’s total output of goods and services, remains “an abstract number” to ordinary people, and the ruble’s exchange rate is less of a symbol than it used to be because most people can’t travel and there are fewer imported goods to buy, Kluge said.

“What matters is inflation,” he said. “And this is an issue where the regime actually did some preparation.”

The central bank has been fighting price spikes by raising interest rates to 16%. The government has supported the Russian currency by requiring exporters to change foreign earnings from things like oil into rubles, holding down prices for remaining imports.

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And a 6-month ban on gasoline exports from March 1 will help keep fuel prices down in Russia.

The government also has been offering apartment mortgages at drastically subsidized interest rates — a step that increases people's sense of personal prosperity but that eventually will hit the government with a large bill.

Kluge said the key factor was Russia's ability to keep exporting oil and natural gas to new customers in Asia. As long as the price of oil holds up, Russia can keep up its high level of spending on the military and social programs "indefinitely," Kluge said.

Russia earned some \$15.6 billion in oil export revenue in January, according to the Kyiv School of Economics' Russian oil tracker. That's about \$500 million a day.

Longer term, the economy's prospects are less certain. A lack of foreign investment will limit new technology and productivity. Government largesse may one day exceed the central bank's ability to manage inflation. To what extent generous policies will continue after the election is up to Putin.

The chief risk to today's stability is a sharp drop in the price of oil, now trading around \$70 a barrel for Russia's Urals blend. Thanks in part to sanctions and boycotts, that's a discount from around \$83 for international benchmark Brent crude.

But for now, state finances are more solid than many had expected.

"I have no good news" for people waiting for Russia's economy to collapse "tomorrow" due to sanctions, former Russian central bank official Alexandra Prokopenko wrote on X, formerly Twitter. "It's a big and resilient animal."

UN envoy: Finding that some hostages were victims of sexual violence doesn't justify Israeli attacks

By EDITH M. LEDERER Associated Press

UNITED NATIONS (AP) — The U.N. envoy focusing on sexual violence in conflict warned Israel on Monday that the finding of "clear and convincing information" that some hostages taken by Hamas during its Oct. 7 attack in southern Israel were subjected to sexual violence "does not in any way legitimize further hostilities."

"In fact, it creates a moral imperative for a humanitarian cease-fire to end the unspeakable suffering imposed on Palestinian civilians in Gaza and bring about the immediate and unconditional release of all hostages," Pramila Patten told the U.N. Security Council where Israel's foreign minister was also sitting and listening.

"Continuation of hostilities can, in no way, protect them," she said. "It can only expose them to further risk of violence, including sexual violence."

Patten was speaking at a council meeting sought by Israel and called by the United States, United Kingdom and France to focus on her recent report, which also found "reasonable grounds" to believe Hamas committed rape, sexualized torture, and other cruel and inhumane acts against women during the Oct. 7 attack that killed about 1,200 people and led to 250 others being taken hostage.

She told the council that the 134 hostages still in captivity and the more than 2 million civilians in Gaza "share a common fate. For their common sake, there must be a humanitarian cease-fire now." Israel's ongoing offensive against Hamas has killed over 30,000 people, two-thirds of them women and children, according to the Gaza Health Ministry.

Israel's Foreign Minister Israel Katz said he came to the council "to protest as loud as I can against the crimes against humanity" committed by Hamas in order to deter and scare Israeli society.

He strongly criticized the Security Council's failure in over 40 meetings since Oct. 7 to condemn Hamas' actions, saying the U.N.'s most powerful body should declare the extremist group a terrorist organization and pressure it to immediately release the hostages.

In a statement that surprised some diplomats, Katz noted that Monday was the start of the Muslim holy month of Ramadan and said: "Let me take this opportunity to bless our Muslim brothers: Ramadan

Kareem." That means have a blessed or generous Ramadan.

" Hamas is not speaking on behalf of the Muslim world," Katz said, "and we are asking you to condemn the sexual violence crimes that these barbarians committed in the name of the Muslim religion."

Riyad Mansour, the Palestinian U.N. ambassador, told the council that Muslims around the world are celebrating Ramadan but "in Gaza, death and suffering can be found everywhere. Food and hope can be found nowhere."

He told the council that Israel's Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu doesn't want a cease-fire because his "political survival requires for the onslaught to continue."

Israel's objective, Mansour said, "remains the forcible displacement of our people by making Gaza unlivable."

He expressed hope that the Security Council, which showed an "unprecedented" reaction to Patten's report by convening a meeting within a week, would respond equally to reports of sexual assault against Palestinian women and girls, men and boys.

Patten's key recommendation is to encourage Israel to grant access to the U.N. human rights chief and the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Palestinian territories and Israel "to carry out full-fledged investigations into the alleged violations" by Hamas.

Mansour said the Palestinians would welcome these investigations and challenged Israel "to make a similar declaration of welcome." He also invited Patten to visit Gaza and see for herself the plight of Palestinians.

Patten told the council that when she visited the West Bank she didn't receive any reports of rape, but instances of sexual violence during the detention of both Palestinian men and women were raised.

These included invasive body searches, unwanted touching of intimate areas, beatings in the genital areas, threats to men of rape against their women family members, "and inappropriate strip searches and prolonged forced nudity of detainees," she said.

Patten said she raised these reports with Israeli authorities, who provided her with information on their protocols to prevent such acts and "indicated willingness to investigate any alleged breaches."

She expressed disappointment "that the immediate reaction to my report by some political actors was not to open inquiries into those alleged incidents, but rather to reject them outright via social media." She did not name any of these "political actors."

Purple Ohio? Parties in the former bellwether state take lessons from 2023 abortion, marijuana votes

By JULIE CARR SMYTH and SAMANTHA HENDRICKSON The Associated Press/Report for America
COLUMBUS, Ohio (AP) — For more than half a century, Ohio was one of the most important states to watch during presidential election years, a place where both parties competed vigorously for support from voters who were often genuinely undecided.

Then came Donald Trump.

Beginning in 2016, Ohio became reliably Republican as more and more voters embraced the New York businessman's brash brand of politics. When Trump won the state in 2020 without clinching the White House, he became the first to win Ohio but lose the presidency since the state sided with Richard Nixon over John F. Kennedy in 1960. With that, the Buckeye State's bellwether status was officially unrung.

Now there are hints that the dynamic may be shifting again after the U.S. Supreme Court overturned federal constitutional protections for abortion. Ohio voters responded last year to the 2022 ruling by overwhelmingly approving an amendment enshrining abortion rights in the state constitution. They did so after swarming polls to defeat a Republican effort that would have made doing so more difficult. The state also legalized recreational marijuana.

There's a risk of overinterpreting the results from 2023, but the victories have encouraged Democrats defending a pivotal U.S. Senate seat this year.

Last August's GOP-backed effort to make amending Ohio's constitution harder showed Ohioans that "Republican politicians were not on their side," said Ohio Democratic Party Chair Elizabeth Walters.

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"The Democratic Party isn't getting ahead of themselves after just one election, but it does provide some hope that steadily, and with a lot of work, Ohioans could drift more to the left than to the right in upcoming elections," she said.

Democrats' most immediate concern is re-electing three-term U.S. Sen. Sherrod Brown. He's unopposed in the March 19 primary as Republicans hash out who will run against him, but Brown is viewed as among the nation's most vulnerable Democrats in November's general election, when voters also will cast ballots for president and Congress.

Delaware County voter Janelle Tucker, 53, said as she perused the floral section of a Kroger on Tuesday that she can't predict how Ohio will vote this fall. She's a Democrat and a "big fan" of Brown but said she just doesn't know what will happen.

"Ohio used to be sort of the pulse of the voter, and it's not anymore," she said. "It's fascinating because it seems like the voter strongly approved women's rights, but the representatives don't support the voters."

Since Trump, Tucker said, "I feel like I don't know my community anymore."

Brown stands as a rare Democrat to be elected statewide in Ohio. Republicans control every statewide non-judicial office, both chambers of the state Legislature with supermajorities and the Ohio Supreme Court — and they have for years.

Mark Weaver, a long-time Ohio-based Republican consultant, said, "Anyone who suggests that Ohio has become purple again is going to have to offer up evidence other than 2023."

He chalked up the resounding success of November's Issue 1, which guaranteed an individual's right "to make and carry out one's own reproductive decisions," to abortion rights groups out-raising and out-spending their anti-abortion opponents, therefore driving more left-leaning voters to the polls.

Unless those same groups put similar millions into Brown's race, Ohio will "return to its reliable red state results," Weaver said.

That's what happened in 2022, when then-Democratic U.S. Rep. Tim Ryan ran what was widely considered a textbook campaign for the Senate seat vacated by Republican Rob Portman, only to lose by more than 6 points to Republican venture capitalist and "Hillbilly Elegy" author JD Vance. Vance had been backed by Trump.

But Ryan failed to garner the financial support from national Democrats that Brown is receiving. The Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee has committed at least \$10 million to re-elect him and Montana Democratic Sen. Jon Tester.

David Niven, an associate professor of political science at the University of Cincinnati, said Brown has a shot at keeping his seat if he focuses on abortion in a way that connects with voters.

Brown, acutely aware of the issue's potential to help him, has wasted no time contrasting his stance on abortion with those of his Republican opponents: Cleveland businessman Bernie Moreno, Secretary of State Frank LaRose and state Sen. Matt Dolan.

"I have always been clear about where I stand: I support abortion access for all women," he wrote in a text to voters the week after the November referendum. "I know where my opponents stand, too: All three would overturn the will of Ohioans by voting for a national abortion ban."

Moreno, LaRose and Dolan each celebrated the overturning of Roe v. Wade, which returned abortion policy to the states, but now support a 15-week federal abortion limit that's been cast as a compromise by influential anti-abortion groups. The Ohio Republicans' stances vary on imposing limits even earlier and on allowing exceptions later in pregnancy.

Abortion is also a hot topic in three closely watched Ohio Supreme Court races, where Democrats are defending two sitting justices and dreaming of flipping a third open seat to take control of the seven-member court. The future of Ohio abortion law could be forged there, and on other states' high courts, as the legal questions surrounding abortion rights are hashed out.

Niven's takeaway from 2023? "If the Democrats could make elections strictly about issues, they would win," he said.

Supporting evidence for that theory can be found in Ohio's suburbs, which may prove pivotal again.

In 2018, Brown lost three suburban counties — Butler, outside Cincinnati; and Delaware and Licking,

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outside Columbus — where the abortion rights issue went on to win last November. In two others where Issue 1 lost narrowly — the Cincinnati area's Clermont and Warren counties — the abortion question outperformed Brown's 2018 percentage by double digits.

All five of those counties voted for Trump in 2020.

At the Keystone Pub & Patio in Delaware County, Ken Wentworth, 53, said he isn't sure what the future holds. He feels conflicted himself. A moderate Republican, he said he voted for marijuana legalization last year and "chickened out" and abstained on the abortion issue.

"My friends that are Democrats, they aren't like kinda Democrats, they're Democrats with all capital bold letters," he said. "And, on the Republican side, they are right-wing times a hundred."

He said he remains undecided in the Senate race and doesn't like his choices for president, either, though he would support Trump over Biden if no other alternative emerges.

Independent voter Michelle Neeld, a 43-year-old factory worker from rural Morrow County, voted yes on both abortion rights and marijuana legalization last year. She doesn't want to see Trump back in the White House but says she wouldn't vote for Biden.

She does feel Ohio is moving to the left. "I think it's getting there," she said.

Christopher McKnight Nichols, an Ohio State University professor of history, said the roughly 57% support received by both Ohio ballot issues in November "shows just how weak many of those conservative issues are with actual Republican voters." He said it will likely prompt a "reconfiguration" within the state GOP.

Ohio Republican Party Chair Alex Triantafilou said that, given the GOP's longstanding success in the state, he believes some within the party are overconfident — "and I've shared that privately and publicly with our party faithful."

"I think anybody who ignores the results of 2023 does so at their own peril," he said. "So, I'm not an overconfident Republican. I do think we're going to do well. I do believe (if he's the nominee) President Trump will do well in Ohio. But I think we have our work cut out for us."

Kirk Cousins chooses Atlanta, Saquon Barkley goes to Philly on a busy first day of NFL free agency

By ROB MAADDI AP Pro Football Writer

Kirk Cousins is heading to the Falcons. Saquon Barkley is joining the Eagles. Brian Burns is going to the Giants.

The first day of the NFL's legal tampering period was a free-for-all frenzy with teams making one big move after another, highlighted by Cousins' decision to leave Minnesota for Atlanta.

The four-time Pro Bowl quarterback and the Falcons agreed on a \$180 million, four-year deal with \$100 million guaranteed and a \$50 million signing bonus, according to a person with knowledge of the terms who spoke to The Associated Press on condition of anonymity because the deal can't be signed until the new league year begins on Wednesday.

Barkley bolted New York for NFC East rival Philadelphia, agreeing on a three-year, \$37.75 million deal with \$26 million guaranteed, a person familiar with the contract told the AP.

Hours after losing Barkley, the Giants made a splash on the defensive side. They're sending a 2024 second-round pick and a 2025 fifth-rounder to Carolina for Burns, who is getting a five-year contract worth up to \$150 million with \$87.5 million in guarantees, according to a person with knowledge of the terms.

Barkley, a two-time Pro Bowl running back, joins an all-star offensive cast in Philly and replaces D'Andre Swift, who is heading to the Chicago Bears.

It was a busy day for running backs, who have been undervalued by NFL teams in recent years.

Josh Jacobs, a 2022 All-Pro, is leaving Las Vegas for Green Bay. Tony Pollard is going from Dallas to Tennessee, Austin Ekeler from the Los Angeles Chargers to Washington, Devin Singletary from Houston to the Giants, Gus Edwards from Baltimore to the Chargers, Antonio Gibson from the Commanders to New England and Zack Moss from Indianapolis to Cincinnati.

Like the Giants, the Raiders made a major splash on defense after losing their starting running back.

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Las Vegas and defensive tackle Christian Wilkins agreed to a four-year, \$110 contract with \$84.75 million guaranteed, agent David Mulugheta said.

The Raiders also are bringing in quarterback Gardner Minshew, who went 7-6 filling in for Anthony Richardson in Indianapolis last season.

Detroit is getting edge rusher Marcus Davenport and acquiring cornerback Carlton Davis from Tampa Bay in a trade. The Lions also are re-signing guard Graham Glasgow.

The Vikings are adding edge rushers Jonathan Greenard and Andrew Van Ginkel and inside linebacker Blake Cashman.

In addition to Pollard, the Titans are getting cornerback Chidobe Awuzie and center Lloyd Cushenberry.

The Packers bolstered their defense by agreeing on a deal with safety Xavier McKinney. Green Bay released Aaron Jones to make way for Jacobs.

Jacksonville, which is acquiring quarterback Mac Jones to back up Trevor Lawrence, is adding wide receiver Gabe Davis, safety Darnell Savage, kick returner Devin Duvernay and cornerback Ronald Darby.

The Commanders, who have the most salary cap space in the league, raided division rival Dallas for defensive end Dorance Armstrong and center Tyler Biadasz. Washington also is bringing in linebacker Frankie Luvu and kicker Brandon McManus.

The Texans are snatching punter Tommy Townsend, a 2022 All-Pro, away from two-time defending Super Bowl champion Kansas City.

Several teams kept some of their top players.

The Browns have agreed to re-sign defensive end Za'Darius Smith and defensive tackle Maurice Hurst. The Eagles extended Pro Bowl guard Landon Dickerson's contract and are signing edge rusher Bryce Huff away from the Jets.

The Seahawks are bringing back tight end Noah Fant and defense tackle Leonard Williams. The Jets are re-signing kicker Greg Zuerlein and announced they signed cornerback Isaiah Oliver, who was released by San Francisco last month.

The Patriots are re-signing receiver Kendrick Bourne while bringing quarterback Jacoby Brissett back to the team that drafted him to play behind Tom Brady several years ago. The Bengals are adding safety Geno Stone and they announced they're re-signing tight end Drew Sample and running back Trayveon Williams.

The Bills are bringing back left tackle Dion Dawkins, edge rusher A.J. Epenesa and defensive back Cam Lewis.

The Colts are giving wide receiver Michael Pittman Jr. a new deal and re-signing defensive tackle Grover Stewart and linebacker Zaire Franklin.

Special counsel Hur is set to testify before a House committee over handling of Biden documents case

By ZEKE MILLER, COLLEEN LONG and FARNOUSH AMIRI Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — The special counsel who impugned the president's age and competence in his report on how Joe Biden handled classified documents after his years as vice president is set to be questioned himself on Tuesday, as House Republicans seek to keep a spotlight on the unflattering assessment of the president.

Robert Hur will appear before the Judiciary Committee to take hours of questions from Republicans and Democrats on his 345-page report, made public last month, in which he concluded that Biden should not face criminal charges for his handling of sensitive government information when he was vice president.

Hur's report did cite evidence that Biden willfully held on to highly classified information and shared it with a ghostwriter. But the special counsel devoted much of his report to explaining why he did not believe the evidence met the standard for criminal charges, partly based on five hours of interviews with the president.

Hur said it could be difficult to prove beyond a reasonable doubt that Biden intended to keep the documents, which is the standard for conviction in a criminal case. In part, he argued, jurors could be swayed that Biden's age made him seem forgetful, and there was the possibility for "innocent explanations" for

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the mishandling of any records.

"Mr. Biden would likely present himself to a jury, as he did during our interview of him, as a sympathetic, well-meaning, elderly man with a poor memory," Hur wrote in his report.

Lawmakers on both sides will try to turn the hearing to their political advantage: Hur will be the rare witness likely to be vilified all around, by Republicans angry over his decision not to charge the president, and by Democrats for his commentary about Biden.

Republicans will work to dig further into Hur's unflattering assessment of the president's age and memory — a major attack line as they seek to unseat Biden. Democrats will try to paint Hur, a Trump-appointed former U.S. attorney, as a political partisan out to help his party win a presidential election.

Democrats on the committee have been preparing for the hearing for weeks, with staff bringing in constitutional lawyer Norm Eisen, who served as former President Barack Obama's ethics czar, to help strategize the best line of questioning, according to a congressional aide.

The aide, who spoke on the condition of anonymity to discuss the private meetings, said members of the president's party plan to be aggressive with their interrogation. They hope to highlight the fact that despite what they see as inappropriate commentary from Hur about Biden's age and memories, the special counsel ultimately exonerated him of any criminal wrongdoing.

Republicans, who have been eagerly investigating the president, including a floundering effort to impeach him, will press Hur on Biden's mental acuity. They also hope to highlight what they say is unfair treatment by Attorney General Merrick Garland of Donald Trump, who has been charged with willfully retaining classified documents. FBI agents searched Trump's Florida estate in 2022 and removed boxes of documents after he refused requests from the National Archives to return them.

House committees have also subpoenaed the Justice Department for records into the Biden investigation, including transcripts, notes, video, and audio files.

"Special Counsel Robert Hur's investigation into President Biden's mishandling of classified documents made two things clear: there's a double standard of justice in this country, and Joe Biden isn't fit for office," Judiciary Chairman Jim Jordan, R-Ohio, said recently.

The report's release triggered instant comparisons to the history-shaping events of 2016, when FBI Director James Comey castigated Democratic nominee Hillary Clinton over her email practices but did not recommend pressing charges. In both the Biden and Clinton cases, the language used to characterize the subjects has been as closely scrutinized — and criticized — as the decision not to prosecute. Comey, too, went before a congressional committee, where he offered an impassioned public defense of how he had handled the issue.

And despite the anticipation of political fireworks, Hur — if he's anything like special counsels before him — won't stray beyond the report's findings.

He comes into the hearing with a wealth of experience with politically charged investigations, both as a top Justice Department official during the Trump administration and as Maryland's chief federal law enforcement officer. As the top aide to the Justice Department's deputy attorney general in 2017 and early 2018, Hur helped monitor special counsel Robert Mueller's investigation into Russian interference in the 2016 presidential election. And he prosecuted a number of political figures — including former Baltimore mayor Catherine Pugh — as U.S. attorney for Maryland from 2018 to 2021.

After stepping down as U.S. attorney, Hur joined the Gibson, Dunn & Crutcher law firm. Among his clients was Facebook in a case brought by D.C.'s attorney general that sought to punish the social networking company for allowing data-mining firm Cambridge Analytica to improperly access data from as many as 87 million users. Hur succeeded in getting that case dismissed last year, though D.C. has appealed.

Biden and Trump could clinch nominations in Tuesday's contests, ushering in general election

By STEVE PEOPLES AP National Political Writer

NEW YORK (AP) — Joe Biden and Donald Trump hope to clinch their parties' presidential nominations with dominant victories in a slate of state primaries on Tuesday as the 2024 fight for the White House moves into a new phase.

Neither Biden, a Democrat, nor Trump, a Republican, faces significant opposition in primary contests across Georgia, Washington state, Mississippi and Hawaii. The only question is whether they will earn the necessary delegates in each state to hit the 50% national threshold to become their parties' presumptive nominees.

Whether it happens Tuesday night or in the coming days, the 2024 presidential contest is on the verge of a crystallizing moment that will solidify a general election rematch between Biden and Trump. And that rematch — the first featuring two U.S. presidents since 1956 — will almost certainly deepen the nation's searing political and cultural divides in the eight-month grind that lies ahead.

On the eve of Tuesday's primaries, Trump acknowledged that Biden would be the Democratic nominee, even as he unleashed a new attack on the president's age.

"I assume he's going to be the candidate," Trump said of Biden on CNBC. "I'm his only opponent other than life, life itself."

Biden, too, directed much of his attention toward Trump, whom the Democratic president described as a serious threat to democracy during a campaign stop Monday night in New Hampshire. He also signaled a more robust presence on the campaign trail.

"I'm looking forward to doing more and more of these events," Biden said. Later, he joked about his age. "I know I don't look it, but I've been around a while."

Georgia leads the slate of four states holding primary contests on Tuesday.

The state was a pivotal battleground in the last presidential election — so close that Trump finds himself indicted there for his push to "find 11,780 votes" and overturn Biden's victory.

But as both candidates seek to project strength in the key swing state, Biden and Trump are grappling with glaring flaws.

Trump is facing 91 felony counts in four criminal cases involving his handling of classified documents and his attempt to overturn the 2020 election, among other alleged crimes. He's also facing increasingly pointed questions about his policy plans and relationships with some of the world's most dangerous dictators. Trump met privately on Friday with Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán, who has rolled back democracy in his country.

The 81-year-old Biden is working to assure a skeptical electorate that he's still physically and mentally able to thrive in the world's most important job.

He's also dealing with dissension within his party's progressive base, which is furious that he hasn't done more to stop Israel's war against Hamas in Gaza. Last month in Michigan, a related protest "uncommitted" vote attracted more than 100,000 votes and actually secured two Democratic delegates.

Ahead of Tuesday's vote, a scattering of lawn signs across Seattle urged primary participants to vote "uncommitted" as well, with some signs reading, "Over 30,000 dead. Vote Ceasefire by Tuesday 3/12."

It's much the same in Georgia, where local politicians and faith leaders are pushing Biden to call for a cease-fire in Gaza.

"The most precious tool that we have to hold this president accountable for his harmful policies is our vote," Rami Al-Kabra, who is Palestinian Muslim American and deputy mayor of Bothell, a city about 13 miles northeast of Seattle, said ahead of Tuesday's vote.

Biden enters Tuesday 102 delegates short of the 1,968 needed to formally become the presumptive Democratic nominee. There are 254 Democratic delegates at stake Tuesday in Georgia, Mississippi and Washington state, in addition to party-run contests for the Northern Mariana Islands and Democrats Abroad that conclude that day.

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With no major opponents, Biden is on pace to reach that mark.

Trump, meanwhile, is on pace to reach his magic number as well.

As of Sunday, Trump was 137 delegates short of the 1,215 needed to win the Republican nomination at the party's national convention this summer. There are 161 Republican delegates at stake on Tuesday in Georgia, Mississippi, Washington state and Hawaii.

With a strong showing on Tuesday, Trump can sweep all the delegates in Georgia, Mississippi and Washington state. Hawaii allocates delegates proportionally so other candidates could win a few, even with a small share of the vote.

Not certain he will hit the mark, Trump's campaign has not planned a big victory party like it did last week when hundreds packed his Mar-a-Lago club for a Super Tuesday celebration with drinks and passed hors d'oeuvres.

Protests drove Nepal's king off the throne 16 years ago. Now, protests are trying to bring him back

By BINAJ GURUBACHARYA Associated Press

KATHMANDU, Nepal (AP) — Sixteen years ago, mass protests in Nepal forced then-King Gyanendra Shah to give up the throne and clear the way for a republic. Now, a new wave of protest is trying to bring him back.

The capital of the Himalayan country is again teeming with demonstrators, this time demanding that Shah be reinstated as king and Hinduism brought back as a state religion. Royalist groups accuse the country's major political parties of corruption and failed governance and say people are frustrated with politicians.

"Come back king, save the country. Long live our beloved king. We want a monarchy," the crowd chanted at a rally last month in Kathmandu.

Growing frustration with the present system has led to calls for radical change. Pro-monarchy rallies have been growing larger, and an increasing number of homes and businesses are displaying portraits of the ex-king and his ancestors.

Gyanendra was a constitutional head of state without executive or political powers until 2005, when he seized absolute power. He disbanded the government and parliament, jailed politicians and journalists and cut off communications, declaring a state of emergency and using the army to rule the country.

Protests that drew hundreds of thousands of people forced him to give up power to the parliament in 2006, and two years later parliament voted to abolish the monarchy and Gyanendra left the Royal Palace to live the life of a commoner.

But many Nepalis have grown frustrated with the republic, saying it has failed to bring about political stability and blaming it for a struggling economy and widespread corruption. Nepal has had 13 governments since the monarchy was abolished in 2008.

Many Nepalis believe elected politicians are more interested in power and patronage than addressing their problems, said Dhruva Hari Adhikary, an independent analyst based in Kathmandu. "That's why some people started to think that, well, it was far better under the monarchy," he said.

In November, tens of thousands rallied in support of the king in Kathmandu, where riot police officers used batons and tear gas to halt them from marching to the center of the capital.

Kings were long considered reincarnations of the god Vishnu in the majority-Hindu nation.

"The king is the umbrella that is really needed to block and protect (the country) from all the pressure and influence that is being put on Nepal by countries like India, China or America," said Rudra Raj Pandey, who was among the protesters at last month's rally.

"Our country will retain its values and identity only if it is turned back to a monarchy and the king is reinstated to the throne," he said.

But the movement is too small to prevail any time soon, Adhikary said.

With polls and surveys rarely conducted in Nepal, it's not clear how many people support the monarchy. Gyanendra was an unpopular king, but the monarchy remained broadly popular before he seized absolute

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power.

The country's major political parties have rejected the possibility of the king returning to power.

"Nepal is a republic and the monarchy will never be reinstated," said Narayan Prakash Saud of Nepali Congress, which led the revolt against the king in 2006 and is currently the largest party in parliament. "The only way it would be possible would be through changing the constitution, but there is no possibility of that happening at all."

The most powerful group supporting restoration of the monarchy is the Rastriya Prajatantra Party, or national democratic party, which was founded in the 1990s by allies of the monarchy. It has 14 seats in parliament — around 5% — but wields outsized influence as a representative of the protest movement.

Party leaders met with the prime minister in February and presented their demands.

"I think it is very possible and the environment throughout the country has never been so congenial for this agenda," said Rabintra Mishra, deputy chairman of the party.

"If we can't restore the institution of the monarchy in this country, there is no future for the youth in this country and the existence of this country itself could be at risk," he said.

Gyanendra himself hasn't commented on the movement. He has stayed out of open involvement in politics since his abdication, and only rarely makes public appearances.

Other groups supporting the king have sprung up.

"We need a monarchy. Without a king, we have no identity as Nepalese and all of us might as well just declare ourselves as refugees," said Pasupathi Khadga, who leads a youth organization that supports the reinstatement of the monarchy.

Nepal's monarchy did not allow political parties to form until 1990, when a pro-democracy movement brought in elections and reduced the monarchy to a ceremonial role. Gyanendra became king after his elder brother, then-King Birendra, and his family were killed in a massacre at the royal palace in 2001.

US inflation likely stayed elevated last month as Federal Reserve looks toward eventual rate cuts

By CHRISTOPHER RUGABER AP Economics Writer

WASHINGTON (AP) — Consumer prices likely rose last month at a pace that would exceed the Federal Reserve's inflation target, underscoring why the Fed is being cautious as it considers when to cut interest rates and suggesting that inflation will remain a potent issue in this year's presidential election.

Yet Tuesday's report from the Labor Department may also show that underlying price pressures continue to ease, which would be an encouraging sign that inflation is gradually coming under control.

Economists have estimated that prices rose at a brisk 0.4% annual pace from January to February, up from a 0.3% rise the previous month, according to estimates compiled by FactSet. Compared with a year earlier, inflation is expected to have remained 3.1% in February, unchanged from January.

Higher gas costs likely drove much of last month's overall inflation. The average national pump price climbed from \$2.94 a gallon in mid-January to \$3.08 in mid-February, according to the Energy Department. Grocery prices are thought to have ticked up, too. And because of higher food and labor costs, restaurant prices are expected to have risen more than they did before the pandemic.

Excluding volatile food and energy costs, economists think "core" prices increased 0.3% from January to February, down from a hot 0.4% in the previous month. Compared with 12 months earlier, core prices are projected to have risen 3.7% in February, according to FactSet, down from 3.9% in January, and the smallest rise in nearly three years. Core inflation is watched especially closely because it typically provides a better read of where inflation is likely headed.

Overall inflation has plummeted from a peak of 9.1% in June 2022, though it's now easing more slowly than it did last spring and summer. The prices of many goods, from appliances to furniture to used cars, are actually falling after clogged supply chains during the pandemic had sent prices soaring higher. There are more new cars on dealer lots and electronics on store shelves.

By contrast, prices for restaurant meals, car repairs, hospital care and other services are still rising faster

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than they did before the pandemic. Car insurance has shot up nearly 21%, reflecting rising costs for auto repair and replacement. And after having sharply raised pay for nurses and other in-demand staff, hospitals are passing their higher wage costs on to patients in the form of higher prices.

Voter perceptions of inflation are sure to occupy a central place in this year's presidential election. Despite a healthy job market and a record-high stock market, polls show that many Americans blame President Joe Biden for the surge in consumer prices that began in 2021. Though inflationary pressures have significantly eased, average prices remain about 17% above where they stood three years ago.

In his State of the Union speech last week, Biden highlighted steps he has taken to reduce costs, like capping the price of insulin for Medicare patients. The president also criticized many large companies for engaging in "price gouging" and so-called "shrinkflation," in which a company shrinks the amount of product inside a package rather than raising the price.

"Too many corporations raise prices to pad their profits, charging more and more for less and less," Biden said.

Fed Chair Jerome Powell signaled in congressional testimony last week that the central bank is getting closer to cutting rates. After meeting in January, Fed officials said in a statement that they needed "greater confidence" that inflation was steadily falling to their 2% target level. Since then, several of the Fed's policymakers have said they believe prices will keep declining. One reason, they suggested, is that consumers are increasingly pushing back against higher prices by seeking out cheaper alternatives.

"When we do get that confidence, and we're not far from it, it'll be appropriate to begin" reducing the Fed's benchmark rate, Powell told Congress last week.

Most economists expect the Fed's first rate cut to occur in June, though May is also possible. When the Fed cuts its benchmark rate, over time it reduces borrowing costs for mortgages, car loans, credit cards and business loans.

One factor that could keep inflation elevated is the still-healthy economy. Though most economists had expected a recession to occur last year, hiring and growth were strong and remain healthy. The economy expanded 2.5% last year and could grow at about the same pace in the first three months of this year, according to the Federal Reserve's Atlanta branch.

Last week, the Labor Department said employers added a robust 275,000 jobs in February, the latest in a streak of solid hiring gains, and the unemployment rate stayed below 4% for the 25th straight month. That is the longest such streak since the 1960s.

Still, the unemployment rate rose from 3.7% to 3.9%, and wage growth slowed. Both trends could make the Fed feel more confident that the economy is cooling, which could help keep inflation falling and lead the central bank to begin cutting rates.

The Latest | Israeli strikes kill at least 67 Palestinians in Gaza as Ramadan begins

By The Associated Press undefined

With no end to the war sight, Palestinians in Gaza began fasting Monday for the holy month of Ramadan as hunger worsens across the strip and pressure is raised on Israel over the growing humanitarian crisis.

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 Israeli hostages and Palestinian prisoners, and the entry of much more humanitarian aid. But the cease-fire talks stalled last week.

Gaza's Health Ministry said the bodies of 67 people killed by Israeli strikes were brought to hospitals over the past 24 hours, bringing the Palestinian death toll to more than 31,112 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 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 still be holding around 100 captives and the remains of others.

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Five months of war have forced around 80% of Gaza's 2.3 million people from their homes and pushed hundreds of thousands to the brink of famine.

Currently:

- Ramadan begins in Gaza with hunger worsening and no end to the war in sight
- Muslims welcome Ramadan with a mix of joy and deep concern
- Houthi attack causes a blast near a container ship in the Red Sea
- 'The Zone of Interest' director condemns war in Gaza as he accepts Oscar
- Find more of AP's coverage at <https://apnews.com/hub/israel-hamas-war>

Here's the latest:

U.N. ENVOY SAYS ABUSE OF HOSTAGES DOESN'T LEGITIMIZE FURTHER HOSTILITIES

UNITED NATIONS — A U.N. envoy warned Israel that her finding of "clear and convincing information" that some hostages taken by Hamas during its Oct. 7 attack were subjected to sexual violence "does not in any way legitimize further hostilities."

"In fact, it creates a moral imperative for a humanitarian cease-fire to end the unspeakable suffering imposed on Palestinian civilians in Gaza and bring about the immediate and unconditional release of all hostages," Pramila Patten told the U.N. Security Council on Monday where Israel's foreign minister sat listening.

"Continuation of hostilities can, in no way, protect them," she said of the hostages. "It can only expose them to further risk of violence, including sexual violence."

Patten, the U.N. envoy focusing on sexual violence in conflict, spoke at a council meeting sought by Israel and called by the United States, United Kingdom and France to focus on her recent report.

Israel's Foreign Minister Israel Katz said he came to the council "to protest as loud as I can against the crimes against humanity" committed by Hamas in order to deter and scare Israeli society.

He strongly criticized the Security Council's failure in over 40 meetings since Oct. 7 to condemn Hamas' actions, saying the U.N.'s most powerful body should declare the extremist group a terrorist organization and pressure it to immediately release the hostages.

ISRAEL AIRSTRIKES HIT DEEP INSIDE LEBANON, WOUNDING 6, HEZBOLLAH SAYS

BEIRUT — Israeli airstrikes late Monday near Lebanon's northeastern city of Baalbek wounded at least six people, a Hezbollah official said.

The official, speaking on condition of anonymity in line with regulations, said the locations of the airstrikes, the deepest in Lebanon since Feb. 26, have not yet been specified.

In late February, Israeli airstrikes near the historic city of Baalbek killed two Hezbollah members.

State-run National News Agency said one of the strikes hit a building in the village of Ansar just south of Baalbek. It gave no word on casualties.

Hezbollah's Al-Manar TV reported at least two airstrikes one striking a building on the outskirts of the village of Taraya and another near Baalbek on the outskirts of Ansar.

Israel's military and Hezbollah fighters have been trading fire since the Israel-Hamas war began on Oct. 7. More than 220 Hezbollah fighters and nearly 40 civilians were killed on the Lebanese side, while in Israel, nine soldiers and 10 civilians were left dead in the attacks.

Tens of thousands of people have been displaced on both sides of the border.

Associated Press writer Bassem Mroue contributed.

ISRAEL SETS AGE LIMITS FOR THOSE WHO WANT TO PRAY AT AL-AQSA MOSQUE

JERUSALEM — The Israeli government said Monday that younger children and older adults will be the only West Bank Palestinians permitted to enter a major Jerusalem holy site for the important first Friday prayers of the Muslim holy month of Ramadan this week.

Militant groups have called on Palestinians to come to Al-Aqsa Mosque, which has often been a flashpoint of Israeli-Palestinian violence, to confront Israel over the war in Gaza.

When Ramadan began Sunday night, COGAT, the Israeli defense body in charge of civilian affairs in the

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West Bank, had yet to announce restrictions on prayers at Al Aqsa.

The rules announced Monday would limit West Bank Palestinians' access to the compound for Friday's prayers to men over 55, women over 50 and children under 10, COGAT chief Ghassan Elian said in a post on Facebook. All Palestinians from the West Bank will also need a permit, he added, without elaborating.

Palestinians from the Israeli-occupied West Bank have been unable to visit Jerusalem under Israeli government restrictions put in place immediately after the Oct. 7 Hamas attack.

Last Ramadan, there was no age restriction on women from the territory entering Jerusalem.

The Al-Aqsa Mosque is the third holiest site in Islam. Jews consider the compound the most sacred site in Judaism, the Biblical Temple Mount.

GERMAN LEADER CALLS FOR LONGER CEASE-FIRE AND MORE AID FOR GAZA

BERLIN – German Chancellor Olaf Scholz is calling for a new and longer humanitarian cease-fire and says that more humanitarian aid must reach Gaza.

Germany is a staunch ally of Israel and has repeatedly expressed its solidarity with the country in its war against Hamas. But it has pressed for better aid supplies and for an eventual two-state solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

"More humanitarian aid must reach Gaza and that is our clear call to Israel, which has every right to defend itself against Hamas," Scholz said Monday at a news conference with Malaysia's prime minister.

He added that "we don't think a ground offensive on Rafah is right."

The German leader said that "an important step now would be a cease-fire that lasts longer, ideally during Ramadan already."

The United States, Qatar and Egypt had hoped to broker a cease-fire ahead of Ramadan 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 have stalled.

U.N. CHIEF CALLS ON ISRAEL AND HAMAS TO 'SILENCE THE GUNS'

UNITED NATIONS – The United Nations chief is urging Israel and Hamas to honor the spirit of the Muslim holy month of Ramadan by "silencing the guns" and to show compassion by releasing all hostages seized by the militant group during its attack in southern Israel on Oct. 7.

Secretary-General Antonio Guterres told reporters that Monday marks the start of Ramadan when "Muslims around the world celebrate and spread the values of peace, reconciliation and solidarity."

Yet, in Gaza, "the killing, bombing and bloodshed continue," he said, with civilian killings and destruction in the territory "at a level that is unprecedented" in his more than seven years as secretary-general.

He warned that Israel's threatened assault on the southern city of Rafah where over a million Palestinians have sought safety "could plummet the people of Gaza into an even deeper circle of hell."

Guterres said life-saving humanitarian assistance is only entering Gaza "in trickles," and in the Ramadan spirit he also called for the removal of all obstacles so food and other aid can be delivered with speed and on a massive scale.

"The eyes of the world are watching. The eyes of history are watching. We cannot look away," said the U.N. chief, who has been calling for a humanitarian cease-fire for months. "We must act to avoid more preventable deaths. ... Desperate civilians need action – immediate action."

HUNDREDS ATTEND RAMADAN PRAYERS AT AL-AQSA MOSQUE

JERUSALEM — Hundreds of Palestinians attended prayers at a major Jerusalem holy site on the first day of the Muslim fasting month of Ramadan.

The congregation at the Al-Aqsa mosque compound on midday Monday was far smaller than in previous years. At some entrances, Israeli forces could be seen turning some worshippers away, citing unspecified security concerns. At one entrance, however, worshippers could be seen filing through without being stopped.

The compound is the third holiest site in Islam. It is built on a hilltop that is the holiest site for Jews, who refer to it as the Temple Mount because it was the location of the two Jewish temples in antiquity.

The site has long been a major flashpoint in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Tensions have soared in

recent years as Israel has allowed increasing numbers of Jews to visit the compound. That has stoked Palestinian fears that Israel intends to take over or partition it.

Israel's government, which includes prominent religious ultranationalists, denies having any such plans. Israeli authorities have said they will allow normal access to Muslim worshippers this year, even as war raging in Gaza threatens to spill over across the region.

Hamas has called on Palestinians to confront Israeli forces during Ramadan, the holy month of dawn-to-dusk fasting.

ISRAELI ARMY CENSURES A TOP COMMANDER FOR GAZA BOMBING

TEL AVIV, Israel — The Israeli military says it has censured a top commander over the bombing of a university in Gaza.

The military says Brig. Gen. Barak Hiram, the commander of the 99th Division, was rebuked for the January blast, which according to Al-Israa University destroyed buildings for graduate studies and bachelor's colleges at its main campus outside Gaza City.

The military said Monday that an inquiry showed Hamas was using the buildings and their surroundings for military purposes but that Hiram did not receive proper approval to carry out the blast.

The university said at the time of the demolition that Israeli forces had occupied the campus for over two months and had used it as a base of operations.

Hiram's censure, which amounts to a notch in his personal file in the military, is a rare case of Israel reprimanding its forces for their conduct during the war in Gaza.

Hiram was also criticized when he ordered a tank to fire at a house where militants were holding hostages during Hamas' Oct. 7 attack on southern Israel. The fire may have killed some of the hostages, according to their families. The military said commanders had to make difficult decisions in a complex battlefield that day, and that it would investigate the incident.

Trump's team is slashing Republican National Committee staff amid takeover, AP sources say

By STEVE PEOPLES AP National Political Writer

WASHINGTON (AP) — Just days after installing his new leadership team at the Republican National Committee, Donald Trump's lieutenants are cutting dozens of staff across key departments in an aggressive move that further cements the former president's takeover of the GOP's political and fundraising machinery.

More than 60 people were fired in all, including senior staff in the political, data and communications departments inside the committee's Washington headquarters. The cuts also included staff that ran the committee's celebrated community centers, which were focused on building relationships with minority groups in some Democratic-leaning states.

The sweeping overhaul was confirmed by multiple people with direct knowledge of the cuts who spoke on the condition of anonymity because they were not authorized to discuss the moves publicly.

Rep. Marjorie Taylor Greene, R-Ga., celebrated news of the staffing cuts, suggesting they send a clear message about the direction of the GOP.

"MAGA is now in control of the Republican Party!!" Greene wrote on X, referencing Trump's "Make America Great Again" movement. "We will continue to need everyone's help all the way across the finish line! Do not grow weary."

Trump's lieutenants telegraphed major changes late last week as Republican National Committee members gathered in Houston to approve his hand-picked leadership team, which includes his daughter-in-law Lara Trump as the committee co-chair. Michael Whatley, a former North Carolina GOP chairman, replaced Ronna McDaniel as the chair.

The cuts are designed to eliminate duplication as the Trump campaign and the RNC work to become essentially one organization, said Chris LaCivita, a Trump campaign senior adviser who took over as the RNC chief of staff after Friday's vote.

"This is Republicans streamlining," LaCivita said Monday night.

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Staffers were notified of the cuts in an email Monday afternoon from the committee's new chief operating officer, Sean Cairncross, who offered people an opportunity to reapply for their jobs.

The email, obtained by The Associated Press, indicated that those who choose not to reapply for their jobs would need to leave by the end of March. Some staffers were told to leave their positions immediately on Monday afternoon, however.

"Chairman Whatley is in the process of evaluating the organization and staff to ensure the building is aligned with his vision of how to win in November," Cairncross wrote in the email.

News of the shakeup was first reported by Politico.

The Trump campaign and the RNC have worked closely in past elections, but the new overhaul marks an unprecedented level of integration between the former president's campaign and the GOP's formal political and fundraising apparatus, which is tasked with helping Republicans win elections up and down the ballot. The size and scope of the new changes within the GOP's formal political and fundraising apparatus may take several weeks to become clear.

Aware of internal concerns about the level of the committee's commitment to Trump, LaCivita said last week that "not a penny of the RNC's money" would go to pay Trump's mounting legal fees.

In her farewell address Friday, McDaniel insisted that the Republican Party must come together in order to defeat President Joe Biden this fall. She said she worries most about "internal cohesion" heading into the election.

"We have to stop the attacking other Republicans," she said. "If we spend our time attacking each other, we guarantee the Democrats are going to win."

Kate, Princess of Wales, apologizes for altering family photo that fueled rumors about her health

By BRIAN MELLEY and JILL LAWLESS Associated Press

LONDON (AP) — Kate, Princess of Wales, apologized Monday for "confusion" caused by her altering of a family photo released by the palace — an image of Kate and her children that was intended to calm concern and speculation about the British royal's health, but had the opposite effect.

Several news agencies that initially published the photo, including The Associated Press, withdrew the image over concerns about digital manipulation. Issued by the couple's Kensington Palace office on Sunday to mark Mother's Day in Britain, it was the first official photo of 42-year-old Kate since she had abdominal surgery nearly two months ago.

The retractions sent the online rumor mill, already rampant with speculation over Kate's operation and recuperation, into overdrive. The PR disaster is more evidence that the royal family's long-held mantra — "never complain, never explain" — is impossible in a social media-saturated era.

In a post on social media, Kate said that "like many amateur photographers, I do occasionally experiment with editing."

"I wanted to express my apologies for any confusion the family photograph we shared yesterday caused," the post said.

In the past, the palace has issued several of Kate's family snapshots featuring her and heir to the throne, Prince William, with their children Prince George, 10, Princess Charlotte, 8, and Prince Louis, 5.

The latest photo was taken by William, Kensington Palace said. In an accompanying social media message, Kate said: "Thank you for your kind wishes and continued support over the last two months. Wishing everyone a Happy Mother's Day."

While there was no suggestion the photo was fake, AP retracted it because closer inspection revealed the source had manipulated the image in a way that did not meet AP's photo standards. For instance, it contained an inconsistency in the alignment of Princess Charlotte's left hand with the sleeve of her sweater.

Other major news agencies, including Getty, Reuters, AFP and the U.K. national agency, PA, also withdrew the photo.

Kensington Palace said it would not release the original unedited photograph. And while Kate's statement

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provided a measure of clarification, it looked unlikely to stop the swirl of rumor that has accelerated during her absence from public duties.

Former BBC royal correspondent Peter Hunt said the mishandled photo release "is damaging for the royals."

"They knew there would be intense interest in any picture they released of Kate," he wrote on X, formerly known as Twitter. "Their challenge is that people will now question whether they can be trusted and believed when they next issue a health update."

The royal family is under particular scrutiny because King Charles III has also had to cancel public duties while he undergoes treatment for an unspecified form of cancer. The monarch has canceled all his public engagements, though he has been photographed walking to church and meeting privately with government officials and dignitaries.

Charles' relative openness about his diagnosis was a departure for the generally secretive royal family. But it has been eclipsed in popular interest by curiosity over Kate's condition. In the absence of firm information, conspiracy theories have rushed to fill the vacuum.

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.

Kate underwent surgery Jan. 16 and her condition and the reason for the operation have not been revealed, though Kensington Palace said it was not cancer-related.

Although the palace initially said that it would only provide significant updates and that she would not return to royal duties before Easter — March 31 this year — it followed up with a statement last month saying she was doing well.

At the time, royal aides told The Sun newspaper: "We've seen the madness of social media and that is not going to change our strategy. There has been much on social media but the princess has a right to privacy and asks the public to respect that."

Further questions were raised last week when the British military seemed to jump the gun in announcing Kate would attend a Trooping the Color ceremony in June, apparently without consulting palace officials.

It's up to palace officials, not government departments, to announce the royals' attendance at events. Kensington Palace didn't confirm any scheduled public events for Kate, and the army later removed reference to her attendance.

William, Queen Camilla and other senior royals attended a Commonwealth Day service at Westminster Abbey on Monday. Neither Kate nor the king was due to be at the event, which drew a crowd of several dozen anti-monarchist protesters holding signs reading "Down with the Crown."

William was also due to speak at an event for the Earthshot Prize, an environmental competition that he founded.

Veteran public relations consultant Mark Borkowski said the photo gaffe exposed a wider PR problem for the monarchy.

"There doesn't seem to be that much joined-up strategic thinking at the heart of the royal family at the moment, which leads to these problems where it's a very difficult organization to manage in terms of PR," he said.

"I find they have risen to the challenge, provided the statement as an explanation," he said of Kate's apology Monday. "The question is, with all the conspiracy theories running around, is whether people believe it. And I'm not sure that they will."

Biden's budget proposal for a second term offers tax breaks for families and lower health care costs

By JOSH BOAK and FATIMA HUSSEIN Associated Press

MANCHESTER, N.H. (AP) — President Joe Biden on Monday released a budget proposal aimed at getting voters' attention: It would offer tax breaks for families, lower health care costs, smaller deficits and

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higher taxes on the wealthy and corporations.

Unlikely to pass the House and Senate to become law, the proposal for fiscal 2025 is an election year blueprint about what the future could hold if Biden and enough of his fellow Democrats win in November. The president and his aides previewed parts of his budget going into last week's State of the Union address, and they provided the fine print on Monday.

If the Biden budget became law, deficits could be pruned \$3 trillion over a decade. It would raise tax revenues by a total of \$4.9 trillion over that period and use roughly \$1.9 trillion to fund various programs, with the rest going to deficit reduction.

The president traveled Monday to Manchester, New Hampshire, where he called on Congress to apply his \$2,000 cap on drug costs and \$35 insulin to everyone, not just people who have Medicare. He also advocated for making permanent some protections in the Affordable Care Act that are set to expire next year.

"I'm here in New Hampshire to talk about the budget I released today that would, I think, help in a big way," Biden said.

Biden aides said their budget was realistic and detailed while rival measures from Republicans were not financially viable.

"Congressional Republicans don't tell you what they cut, who they harm," White House budget director Shalanda Young said. "The president is transparent."

House Speaker Mike Johnson, R-La., issued a joint statement with other GOP leaders calling the Biden proposal a "glaring reminder of this Administration's insatiable appetite for reckless spending."

"Biden's budget doesn't just miss the mark — it is a roadmap to accelerate America's decline," the House Republican leaders said.

Under the proposal, the government would spend \$7.3 trillion next fiscal year and borrow \$1.8 trillion to cover the shortfall from tax receipts. Biden's 188-page plan covers a decade's worth of spending, taxes and debt.

Parents could get an increased child tax credit in 2025, as payments would return briefly to the 2021 level funded by Biden's coronavirus pandemic relief package. Homebuyers could get a tax credit worth up to \$10,000 and the plan includes \$10 billion in down payment aid for first-generation buyers. Corporate taxes would jump upward, while billionaires would be charged a minimum tax of 25%.

Biden said in his State of the Union that Medicare should have the ability to negotiate prices on 500 prescription drugs, which could save \$200 billion over 10 years. Aides said his budget does not specify how many drug prices would be subject to negotiations.

Biden's plan would permanently keep Medicare solvent, according to aides, but as noted by Maya MacGuineas, president of the fiscal group Committee for a Responsible Federal Budget, it does not appear to fix Social Security, which projections say will be unable to pay full benefits starting in 2033.

The proposal would provide about \$900 billion for defense in fiscal 2025, about \$16 billion more than the baseline.

The Biden administration is still seeking money to help Ukraine defend itself against Russia and aid for Israel. His budget plan reiterates the supplemental funding request made last October for Ukraine, Israel and humanitarian relief for Palestinians.

It's also requesting funding to expand personnel and resources at the U.S. southern border. Still, military spending over 10 years would decline \$146 billion to \$9.57 trillion.

One key theme in the budget plan is an effort to help families afford their basic needs, as the impact of inflation hitting a four-decade high in 2022 continues to leave many voters feeling as though they're worse off under Biden.

The budget proposal includes \$258 billion to help build or preserve 2 million homes, helping to address a national shortage that has kept housing prices high. Parents making under \$200,000 annually would have access to child care, with most eligible families paying no more than \$10 a day.

It would eliminate origination fees on government student loans, possibly saving borrowers \$1,000 over the life of the debt. It also includes \$12 billion to help universities develop strategies for reducing their costs.

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All of this is a chance for Biden to try to define the race on his preferred terms, just as the all-but-certain Republican nominee, Donald Trump, wants to rally voters around his agenda.

Trump, for his part, would like to increase tariffs and pump out gushers of oil. He called for a "second phase" of tax cuts as parts of his 2017 overhaul of the income tax code would expire after 2025. The Republican has also said he would slash government regulations. He has also pledged to pay down the national debt, though it's unclear how without him detailing severe spending cuts.

In a Monday interview with CNBC, Trump indicated that he would be willing to reduce spending for Social Security, Medicare and Medicaid, though he did not offer a full policy.

"There is a lot you can do in terms of entitlements, in terms of cutting," Trump said.

The interview drew Biden's attention, prompting him to tell the audience in New Hampshire that cuts were off the table: "The bottom line is he's still at it. I'm never going to allow that to happen."

House Republicans on Thursday voted their own budget resolution for the next fiscal year out of committee, saying it would trim deficits by \$14 trillion over 10 years. But their measure would depend on rosy economic forecasts and sharp spending cuts, reducing \$8.7 trillion in Medicare and Medicaid expenditures. Biden has pledged to stop any cuts to Medicare.

Meanwhile, Congress is still working on a budget for the current fiscal year. On Saturday, Biden signed into law a \$460 billion package to avoid a shutdown of several federal agencies, but lawmakers are only about halfway through addressing spending for this fiscal year.

Ramadan begins in Gaza with hunger worsening and no end to the war in sight

By WAFAA SHURAFI and SAMY MAGDY Associated Press

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

Prayers were held outside amid the rubble of demolished buildings. Fairy lights and decorations were hung in packed tent camps, and a video from a U.N.-school-turned-shelter showed children dancing and spraying foam in celebration 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 sunrise-to-sundown 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 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 holiday 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 have stalled.

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

Netanyahu said Monday that Israel had killed "Hamas' number four" leader and added that more targeted killings were to come.

"Three, two, and one are on the way. They are all dead men. We will reach them all," he said.

Netanyahu was likely referencing the assassination of Saleh Arouri, the deputy political head of Hamas and a founder of the group's military wing, who was killed in a blast in Beirut in January. Israel was widely believed to be behind the blast, although it did not take responsibility.

U.N. Secretary-General Antonio Guterres urged Israel and Hamas to honor the spirit of Ramadan by "silencing the guns" and releasing all the hostages.

"The eyes of the world are watching. The eyes of history are watching. We cannot look away," he said. "We must act to avoid more preventable deaths. ... Desperate civilians need action — immediate action."

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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 25 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 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, 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 was expected to make a pilot voyage to Gaza from nearby Cyprus, though it was not clear when it would depart.

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.

Gaza's Health Ministry said Monday that at least 31,112 Palestinians have been killed since the war began, including 67 bodies brought to hospitals in the past 24 hours. The ministry doesn't differentiate between civilians and combatants in its count, but it has said 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 has said 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."

NAACP urges student-athletes to reconsider Florida colleges after state eliminates DEI programs

By MARK LONG AP Sports Writer

GAINESVILLE, Fla. (AP) — Black student-athletes should reconsider attending public colleges and universities in Florida, the NAACP said in a letter to NCAA President Charlie Baker on Monday.

The letter was in response to the University of Florida and other state schools that have eliminated their diversity, equity and inclusion programs. It was also addressed to current and prospective student-athletes.

"This is not about politics," the letter read. "It's about the protection of our community, the progression of our culture, and most of all, it's about your education and your future."

The letter was signed by NAACP National Board of Directors Chairman Leon W. Russell and NAACP President and CEO Derrick Johnson.

Last year, Republican Florida Gov. Ron DeSantis signed a bill prohibiting the use of state funds for any DEI programs. The University of Florida responded in March by closing the Office of the Chief Diversity Officer, eliminating 13 full-time DEI positions and 15 administrative appointments, and ending DEI-focused contracts with outside vendors.

Other state schools like North Florida and Florida International also have shut down DEI programs.

"While it is our duty to spread awareness and encourage action around these egregious assaults, we also recognize that protest can come at a price," the letter read. "The sad reality is, for many Black student-athletes, collegiate sports may be their sole opportunity at achieving the upward mobility necessary to propel them into their rightful places in society."

It's unclear how awareness of the debate over DEI might affect current or prospective student-athletes who are considering powerhouses like Florida and Florida State — especially at a time when name, image and likeness deals have become so integral to building rosters — but a growing campaign could hinder those schools' recruiting efforts.

NFL Hall of Famer and Florida legend Emmitt Smith asked minority athletes at his alma mater to "be aware and vocal" about the decision.

Johnson took it a step further Monday.

"Florida's rampant anti-Black policies are a direct threat to the advancement of our young people and their ability to compete in a global economy," Johnson said in a statement. "Diversity, equity, and inclusion are paramount (to) ensuring equitable and effective educational outcomes.

"The value Black and other college athletes bring to large universities is unmatched. If these institutions are unable to completely invest in those athletes, it's time they take their talents elsewhere."

Donald Trump wants New York hush money trial delayed until Supreme Court rules on immunity claims

By MICHAEL R. SISAK Associated Press

NEW YORK (AP) — Donald Trump is seeking to delay his March 25 hush money trial until the Supreme Court rules on the presidential immunity claims he raised in another of his criminal cases.

The Republican former president's lawyers on Monday asked Manhattan Judge Juan Manuel Merchan to adjourn the New York criminal trial indefinitely until Trump's immunity claim in his Washington, D.C., election interference case is resolved.

Merchan did not immediately rule. In an order late Monday, he chided Trump's lawyers for missing a filing deadline, waiting until 2½ weeks before jury selection to raise the immunity issue and failing to "explain the reason for the late filing." Going forward, the judge said, Trump's lawyers and prosecutors must get his permission before making any other pretrial motions.

Trump contends he is immune from prosecution for conduct alleged to involve official acts during his tenure in office. His lawyers argue some of the evidence and alleged acts in the hush money case overlap with his time in the White House and constitute official acts.

The Supreme Court is scheduled to hear arguments April 25, a month after the scheduled start of jury selection in Trump's hush money case. It is the first of his four criminal cases slated to go to trial as he closes in on the Republican presidential nomination in his quest to retake the White House.

The Manhattan district attorney's office declined to comment. Prosecutors are expected to respond to Trump's delay request in court papers later this week.

Trump first raised the immunity issue in his Washington, D.C., criminal case, which involves allegations that he worked to overturn the results of the 2020 election in the run-up to the violent riot by his supporters at the U.S. Capitol on Jan. 6, 2021.

The hush money case centers on allegations that Trump falsified his company's internal records to hide the true nature of payments to his former lawyer Michael Cohen, who helped Trump bury negative stories during his 2016 presidential campaign. Among other things, Cohen paid porn actor Stormy Daniels \$130,000 to suppress her claims of an extramarital sexual encounter with Trump years earlier.

Trump's lawyers argue that some evidence Manhattan prosecutors plan to introduce at the hush money trial, including messages he posted on social media in 2018 about money paid to Cohen, were from his time as president and constituted official acts.

Trump pleaded not guilty last year to 34 felony counts of falsifying business records. He has denied having a sexual encounter with Daniels, and his lawyers argue the payments to Cohen were legitimate legal expenses and not part of any cover-up.

A federal judge last year rejected Trump's claim that allegations in the hush money indictment involved official duties, nixing his bid to move the case from state court to federal court. Had the case been moved to federal court, Trump's lawyers could've tried to get the charges dismissed on the grounds that federal officials have immunity from prosecution over actions taken as part of their official duties.

"The evidence overwhelmingly suggests that the matter was a purely a personal item of the President — a cover-up of an embarrassing event," U.S. District Judge Alvin Hellerstein wrote last July. "Hush money paid to an adult film star is not related to a President's official acts. It does not reflect in any way the color of the President's official duties."

Trump's lawyers appealed Hellerstein's ruling, but dropped the appeal in November. They said they were doing so with prejudice, meaning they couldn't change their minds.

The question of whether a former president is immune from federal prosecution for official acts taken in office is legally untested.

Prosecutors in the Washington, D.C., case have said no such immunity exists and that, in any event, none of the actions Trump is alleged to have taken in the indictment charging him with plotting to overturn the 2020 presidential election after he lost to Democrat Joe Biden count as official acts.

The trial judge in Washington and a federal appeals court have both ruled against Trump, but the high court agreed last month to give the matter fresh consideration — a decision that delays the federal case in Washington and injects fresh uncertainty as to when it might reach trial.

Warden ousted as FBI again searches California federal women's prison plagued by sexual abuse

By MICHAEL R. SISAK and MICHAEL BALSAMO Associated Press

The warden of a troubled federal women's prison in California has been ousted months into his tenure as FBI agents on Monday hauled boxes of evidence from the facility in an apparent escalation of a yearslong investigation that put a former warden and other employees behind bars for sexually abusing inmates.

Government lawyers said in court papers Monday that Art Dulgov was removed as warden of FCI Dublin in the wake of allegations that his staff had retaliated against an inmate who testified in January in a lawsuit against the prison. The inmate was transferred to a different prison despite the judge's order not to transfer any witnesses without court approval, filings in the case show.

The federal Bureau of Prisons confirmed the leadership shakeup, saying in a statement that "recent developments have necessitated new executive employees be installed" at the low-security Bay Area facility. The agency did not specify what the developments were and declined to comment on the FBI search.

Deputy Regional Director N.T. McKinney will replace Dulgov on an interim basis effective immediately, Bureau of Prisons spokesperson Randilee Giamusso said. McKinney is at least the fourth person to be put in charge of FCI Dublin since former warden Ray Garcia was placed on administrative leave after the FBI raided his office and vehicle in July 2021.

An associate warden and prison captain working under Dulgov were also removed from their positions, along with an executive assistant who oversaw the prison's minimum-security satellite camp, government lawyers said.

A message seeking comment was left with Dulgov.

More than a dozen FBI agents searched FCI Dublin on Monday, seizing computers, documents and other evidence and seeking to interview employees, a person familiar with the matter told the Associated Press. The person was not authorized to speak publicly and did so on the condition of anonymity.

FBI spokesperson Cameron Polan confirmed that agents were there conducting "court-authorized law enforcement activity," but declined to give details.

Monday's search came days after a new wave of civil lawsuits alleging abuse at FCI Dublin and as a

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federal judge weighs appointing a special master to oversee the prison's operations. The prison, about 21 miles (34 kilometers) east of Oakland, has been known as the "rape club" because of years of rampant staff-on-inmate sexual abuse.

An AP investigation in 2021 found a culture of abuse and cover-ups that had persisted for years at the prison, which currently has more than 650 inmates. That reporting led to increased scrutiny from Congress and pledges from the Bureau of Prisons that it would fix problems and change the culture at the prison.

Last August, eight FCI Dublin inmates sued the Bureau of Prisons, alleging the agency had failed to root out sexual abuse. Amaris Montes, a lawyer for the plaintiffs, said inmates continued to face retaliation for reporting abuse, including being put in solitary confinement and having belongings confiscated.

Since 2021, at least eight FCI Dublin employees have been charged with sexually abusing inmates. Five have pleaded guilty. Two were convicted at trial. Another case is pending.

All sexual activity between a prison worker and an inmate is illegal. Correctional employees enjoy substantial power over inmates, controlling every aspect of their lives from mealtime to lights out, and there is no scenario in which an inmate can give consent.

The sexual abuse scandal has been one of many troubles plaguing the federal Bureau of Prisons, which is also beset by rampant staffing shortages, suicides and security breaches.

Dulgov was put in charge of FCI Dublin after the former warden, Thahesha Jusino, retired late last year. Jusino had vowed to rebuild broken trust when she took over in March 2022. Before that, then-deputy regional director T. Ray Hinkle was interim warden. He had pledged to staff that he would help Dublin "regain its reputation," but his tenure was marred by allegations that he targeted staff whistleblowers and clashed with a visiting congresswoman.

Dulgov's personal website lists several accolades for his corrections work, including the Bureau of Prisons' Golden Apple Award and an award from California federal prosecutors in 2019 for helping implement the Trump administration's "zero tolerance" immigration policy. He has also been a federal prison warden in Arizona.

The website also notes that Dulgov, who taught middle school before entering the corrections industry, has served as an Equal Employment Opportunity counselor and has regularly trained his staff in equal employment policies and procedures, civil rights and federal regulations.

McKinney, FCI Dublin's new interim warden, "has been charged with developing a plan for the future of the facility," Giamusso said. She said the change was made "consistent with unprecedented and ongoing actions" by Bureau of Prisons' leadership "to create a positive change in the culture at FCI Dublin."

Garcia was convicted in 2022 of molesting inmates and forcing them to pose naked in their cells. Prosecutors said he tried to keep his victims quiet with promises that he'd help them get early release and told one victim he was close friends with a prison official responsible for investigating staff misconduct and couldn't be fired.

The FBI arrested Garcia in September 2021, months after questioning him at the prison and searching his office and vehicle. He is serving a six-year prison sentence.

Testifying on his own behalf, Garcia conceded that he had made mistakes but claimed that some of his alleged wrongdoing — like taking pictures of naked inmates — was done as part of his official duties to document violations of prison policy.

Prosecutors countered by calling a prison lieutenant who said he's never seen a case where it was appropriate for an employee to take photos of a nude inmate.

Among the other employees accused of sexual abuse were former chaplain James Theodore Highhouse, who was sentenced to seven years in prison after pleading guilty to abusing an inmate in his chapel office and lying to authorities, and ex-safety administrator John Russell Bellhouse, who was convicted last June of sexually abusing two inmates.

Prosecutors said Bellhouse "began to express an interest in a particular female inmate and started calling the inmate his 'girlfriend'" in 2020. They said he inappropriately touched the woman and that she performed oral sex on Bellhouse twice in the prison's safety office. He was sentenced to more than five years in prison.

House Republicans move ahead with TikTok vote even as Trump voices opposition to possible ban

By JILL COLVIN and KEVIN FREKING Associated Press

NEW YORK (AP) — House Republicans are moving ahead with a bill that would require Chinese company ByteDance to sell TikTok or face a ban in the United States even as former President Donald Trump is voicing opposition to the effort.

House leadership has scheduled a vote on the measure for Wednesday. A Republican congressional aide not authorized to speak publicly said that's still the plan and there has not been significant pushback to the bill from lawmakers.

A vote for the bill would represent an unusual break with the former president by House Republicans, but Speaker Mike Johnson and others have already forcefully come out in favor of the bill, and dropping it now would represent a significant reversal. "It's an important bipartisan measure to take on China, our largest geopolitical foe, which is actively undermining our economy and security," Johnson declared last week.

Trump said Monday that he still believes TikTok poses a national security risk but is opposed to banning the hugely popular app because doing so would help its rival, Facebook, which he continues to lambast over his 2020 election loss.

"Frankly, there are a lot of people on TikTok that love it. There are a lot of young kids on TikTok who will go crazy without it," Trump said in a call-in interview with CNBC's "Squawk Box." "There's a lot of good and there's a lot of bad with TikTok. But the thing I don't like is that without TikTok you're going to make Facebook bigger, and I consider Facebook to be an enemy of the people, along with a lot of the media."

"When I look at it, I'm not looking to make Facebook double the size," he added. "I think Facebook has been very bad for our country, especially when it comes to elections."

Trump has repeatedly complained about Facebook's role during the 2020 election, which he still refuses to concede he lost to President Joe Biden. That includes at least \$400 million that its founder, Mark Zuckerberg, and his wife donated to two nonprofit organizations that distributed grants to state and local governments to help them conduct the 2020 election at the height of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The donations — which were fully permitted under campaign finance law — went to pay for things like equipment to process mail ballots and drive-thru voting locations.

TikTok, a video-sharing app, has emerged as a major issue in the 2024 presidential campaign. The platform has about 170 million users in the U.S., most of whom skew younger — a demographic that both parties are desperately trying to court ahead of November's general election. Younger voters have become especially hard for campaigns to reach as they gravitate away from traditional platforms like cable television.

Biden's 2024 campaign officially joined TikTok last month, even though he has expressed his own national security concerns over the platform, banned it on federal devices and on Friday endorsed the legislation that could lead to its ban.

The bill being considered by the House would require the Chinese firm ByteDance to divest TikTok and other applications it owns within six months of the bill's enactment in order to avoid a nationwide ban. The legislation also creates a process that lets the executive branch prohibit access to other apps that pose a threat to national security.

"This legislation will trample the First Amendment rights of 170 million Americans and deprive 5 million small businesses of a platform they rely on to grow and create jobs," TikTok said last week as a House committee took up the bill, passing it on a 50-0 vote.

Some advocacy groups and members that often align with Trump said Monday they disagreed with him on the TikTok bill.

"He's wrong," said Rep. Chip Roy, R-Texas, on Trump. "And by the way, he had his own executive orders and actions he was doing. Now he's suddenly flipped around on that."

Heritage Action, a conservative advocacy group, said it would include the vote in its scorecard grading members.

"The legislation establishes an important national security standard for social media companies: Don't

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be controlled by a foreign adversary," the group said.

And, showing the issue sparks strong opinions across party lines, Democratic Rep. Maxwell Frost of Florida said he opposed this "masked effort that will most likely result in TikTok being banned."

"I think it's going to have drastic impacts for businesses, content creators and a lot of folks in our country," Frost said.

Rep. Michael McCaul, the Republican chairman of the House Committee on Foreign Affairs, said he's still confident about the bill's prospects in the House.

"It's going to sail, and then it will be up to the Senate," McCaul said. "And the White House has already acknowledged that they're going to sign it into law. So I think this is a real positive step."

The bill will likely need support from at least 60 senators to make it across the finish line and be signed into law. Sen. Josh Hawley, R-Mo., said he would encourage colleagues to vote for it. Also, Sen. Eric Schmitt, a Missouri Republican who is often aligned with Trump, said of TikTok that "the amount of data and information they have on Americans is very concerning" and could get in the wrong hands.

As president, Trump attempted to ban TikTok through an executive order that called "the spread in the United States of mobile applications developed and owned by companies in the People's Republic of China (China)" a threat to "the national security, foreign policy and economy of the United States." The courts, however, blocked the action after TikTok sued, arguing such actions would violate free speech and due process rights.

Biden in 2022 banned the use of TikTok by the federal government's nearly 4 million employees on devices owned by its agencies, with limited exceptions for law enforcement, national security and security research purposes.

Both the FBI and the Federal Communications Commission have warned that TikTok owner ByteDance could share user data — such as browsing history, location and biometric identifiers — with China's authoritarian government. TikTok said it has never done that and wouldn't do so if asked. The U.S. government also hasn't provided evidence of that happening.

House lawmakers are expected to receive a briefing Tuesday on TikTok from the FBI, Justice Department and intelligence officials, according to a congressional aide, who was granted anonymity to disclose details of the briefing that has not yet been made public.

Trump, in the interview, said he had not discussed the company with Jeff Yass, a TikTok investor and a major GOP donor. Trump said the two had recently met "very briefly" but that Yass "never mentioned TikTok."

Trump also confirmed he met last week with Elon Musk, the billionaire CEO of Tesla and SpaceX who has increasingly aligned himself with conservative politics. Trump said he didn't know whether Musk would end up supporting his campaign, noting they "obviously have opposing views on a minor subject called electric cars," which Trump has railed against.

US pledges an additional \$100M for a multinational force awaiting deployment to violence-hit Haiti

By DÁNICA COTO Associated Press

U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken on Monday announced an additional \$100 million to finance the deployment of a multinational force to Haiti following a meeting with Caribbean leaders in Jamaica to halt the country's violent crisis.

Blinken also announced another \$33 million in humanitarian aid and the creation of a joint proposal agreed on by Caribbean leaders and "all of the Haitian stakeholders to expedite a political transition" and create a "presidential college."

He said the college would take "concrete steps" he did not identify to meet the needs of Haitian people and enable the pending deployment of the multinational force to be led by Kenya. Blinken also noted that the U.S. Department of Defense doubled its support for the mission, having previously set aside \$100 million.

The joint proposal has the backing of Caricom, a regional trade bloc that held Monday's urgent meeting.

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"I think we can all agree: Haiti is on the brink of disaster," said Guyanese President Irfaan Ali. "We must take quick and decisive action."

Ali said he is "very confident that we have found commonality" to support what he described as a Haitian-led and -owned solution.

Meanwhile, Jamaican Prime Minister Andrew Holness said the meeting was a work in progress.

"It is clear that Haiti is now at a tipping point," he said. "We are deeply distressed that it is already too late for too many who have lost far too much at the hands of criminal gangs."

Embattled Prime Minister Ariel Henry, who faces calls to resign or agree to a transitional council, did not attend the meeting. He has been locked out of his own country while traveling abroad, due to surging unrest and violence by criminal gangs who have overrun much of Haiti's capital and closed down its main international airports.

Henry remained in Puerto Rico and was taking steps to return to Haiti once feasible, according to a brief statement from the U.S. territory's Department of State.

While leaders met behind closed doors, Jimmy Chérizier, considered Haiti's most powerful gang leader, told reporters that if the international community continues down the current road, "it will plunge Haiti into further chaos."

"We Haitians have to decide who is going to be the head of the country and what model of government we want," said Chérizier, a former elite police officer known as Barbecue who leads a gang federation known as G9 Family and Allies. "We are also going to figure out how to get Haiti out of the misery it's in now."

The meeting in Jamaica was organized by members of a regional trade bloc known as Caricom, which for months has pressed for a transitional government in Haiti while protests in the country have demanded Henry's resignation.

"The international community must work together with Haitians towards a peaceful political transition," U.S. Assistant Secretary for Western Hemisphere Affairs Brian Nichols wrote on X, formerly Twitter. Nichols will attend the meeting.

Concerns remain that a long-sought solution will remain elusive. Caricom said in a statement on Friday announcing the urgent meeting in Jamaica that while "we are making considerable progress, the stakeholders are not yet where they need to be."

Mia Mottley, Barbados' prime minister, said that up to 90% of proposals that Haitian stakeholders have put on the table are similar. These include an "urgent need" to create a presidential council to help identify a new prime minister to establish a government.

Her comments were briefly streamed by Caricom, in what appeared to have been a mistake, and then were abruptly cut off.

The meeting was held as powerful gangs continued to attack key government targets across Haiti's capital of Port-au-Prince. Since Feb. 29, gunmen have burned police stations, closed the main international airports and raided the country's two biggest prisons, releasing more than 4,000 inmates.

Scores of people have been killed, and more than 15,000 are homeless after fleeing neighborhoods raided by gangs. Food and water are dwindling as stands and stores selling to impoverished Haitians run out of goods. The main port in Port-au-Prince remains closed, stranding dozens of containers with critical supplies.

Late Monday, the Haitian government announced it was extending a nighttime curfew until March 14 in an attempt to prevent further attacks.

Henry could not be immediately reached for comment after Monday's meeting. He landed in Puerto Rico last week after being denied entry into the Dominican Republic, which shares the island of Hispaniola with Haiti.

When the attacks began, Henry was in Kenya pushing for the U.N.-backed deployment of a police force from the East African country that has been delayed by a court ruling.

A growing number of people are demanding Henry's resignation. He has not made any public comment since the attacks began.

The U.N. Security Council on Monday urged Haiti's gangs "to immediately cease their destabilizing ac-

tions," including sexual violence and the recruitment of children, and said it expects that a multinational force will deploy as soon as possible to help end the violence.

Council members expressed concern at the limited political progress and urged all political actors to allow free and fair legislative and presidential elections.

U.N. Secretary-General António Guterres is calling for the urgent deployment of the multinational force and that the mission be adequately funded, said his spokesman Stephane Dujarric.

Currently, funding is at only \$10.8 million, with officials in Kenya demanding more than \$230 million.

Florida teachers can discuss sexual orientation and gender ID under 'Don't Say Gay' bill settlement

By MIKE SCHNEIDER Associated Press

ORLANDO, Fla. (AP) — Students and teachers can discuss sexual orientation and gender identity in Florida classrooms, provided it's not part of instruction, under a settlement reached Monday between Florida education officials and civil rights attorneys who had challenged a state law which critics dubbed "Don't Say Gay."

The settlement clarifies what is allowed in Florida classrooms following passage two years ago of the law prohibiting instruction on sexual orientation and gender identity in early grades. Opponents said the law had created confusion about whether teachers could identify themselves as LGBTQ+ or if they even could have rainbow stickers in classrooms.

Other states used the Florida law as a template to pass prohibitions on classroom instruction on gender identity or sexual orientation. Alabama, Arkansas, Indiana, Iowa, Kentucky and North Carolina are among the states with versions of the law.

Under the terms of the settlement, the Florida Board of Education will send instructions to every school district saying the Florida law doesn't prohibit discussing LGBTQ+ people, nor prevent anti-bullying rules on the basis of sexual orientation and gender identity or disallow Gay-Straight Alliance groups. The settlement also spells out that the law is neutral — meaning what applies to LGBTQ+ people also applies to heterosexual people — and that it doesn't apply to library books not being used for instruction in the classroom.

The law also doesn't apply to books with incidental references to LGBTQ+ characters or same-sex couples, "as they are not instruction on sexual orientation or gender identity any more than a math problem asking students to add bushels of apples is instruction on apple farming," according to the settlement.

"What this settlement does, is, it re-establishes the fundamental principal, that I hope all Americans agree with, which is every kid in this country is entitled to an education at a public school where they feel safe, their dignity is respected and where their families and parents are welcomed," Roberta Kaplan, the lead attorney for the plaintiffs, said in an interview. "This shouldn't be a controversial thing."

In a statement, Florida Gov. Ron DeSantis's office described the deal as a "major win" with the law formally known as the Parental Rights in Education Act remaining intact.

"We fought hard to ensure this law couldn't be maligned in court, as it was in the public arena by the media and large corporate actors," said Ryan Newman, an attorney for the state of Florida. "We are victorious, and Florida's classrooms will remain a safe place under the Parental Rights in Education Act."

The law has been championed by the Republican governor since before its passage in 2022 by the GOP-controlled Florida Legislature. It barred instruction on sexual orientation and gender identity in kindergarten through the third grade, and it was expanded to all grades last year.

Republican lawmakers had argued that parents should broach these subjects with children and that the law protected children from being taught about inappropriate material.

But opponents of the law said it created a chilling effect in classrooms. Some teachers said they were unsure if they could mention or display a photo of their same-sex partner in the classroom. In some cases, books dealing with LGBTQ+ topics were removed from classrooms and lines mentioning sexual orientation were excised from school musicals. The Miami-Dade County School Board in 2022 decided not to adopt a resolution recognizing LGBTQ History Month, even though it had done so a year earlier.

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The law also triggered the ongoing legal battles between DeSantis and Disney over control of the governing district for Walt Disney World in central Florida after DeSantis took control of the government in what the company described as retaliation for its opposition to the legislation. DeSantis touted the fight with Disney during his run for the 2024 GOP presidential nomination, which he ended earlier this year.

The civil rights attorneys sued Florida education officials on behalf of teachers, students and parents, claiming the law was unconstitutional, but the case was dismissed last year by a federal judge in Tallahassee who said they lacked standing to sue. The case was appealed to the Eleventh Circuit Court of Appeals.

Kaplan said they believed the appellate court would have reversed the lower court's decision, but continuing the lawsuit would have delayed any resolution for several more years.

"The last thing we wanted for the kids in Florida was more delay," Kaplan said.

Cousins leaves Vikings for big new contract with Falcons in QB's latest well-timed trip to market

By DAVE CAMPBELL AP Pro Football Writer

Kirk Cousins is leaving Minnesota for Atlanta, landing another big contract with a well-timed foray into free agency.

Cousins agreed Monday to a four-year, \$180 million deal with \$100 million guaranteed with the Falcons, according to a person with knowledge of the terms, speaking on condition of anonymity to The Associated Press because the deal can't be signed until Wednesday when the new league year begins.

Cousins gets a \$50 million signing bonus and his salaries for 2024 and 2025 are fully guaranteed, the person said. The annual average value of \$45 million would reach the top 10 for quarterbacks in the NFL.

Atlanta had a glaring need at quarterback after cycling through Desmond Ridder and Tyler Heinicke last season, and Cousins' wife, Julie, grew up in Alpharetta, a suburb of Atlanta. The fit was obvious, even if that meant the 35-year-old had to leave a comfortable situation in Minnesota.

And guess what? The Falcons are scheduled to play a road game against the Vikings in the 2024 season.

"After significant and positive dialogue with Kirk and his representatives, we were unable to reach agreement on a contract that fits the short and long-term visions for both Kirk and the Minnesota Vikings," general manager Kwesi Adofo-Mensah said in a statement distributed by the team. "Kirk holds a special place in Vikings history, and we appreciate his leadership and contributions to the team and the Minneapolis-St. Paul community over the past six seasons. We wish him, his wife, Julie, and their children all the best."

After moving on from their franchise player Matt Ryan in 2022, the Falcons drafted Ridder in the third round after signing Marcus Mariota. Neither move panned out, and the Falcons have failed to win more than seven games for six straight seasons.

The NFC South is wide open, though, and Cousins in Atlanta will have some promising young talent around him with running back Bijan Robinson, wide receiver Drake London, tight end Kyle Pitts, their first-round draft picks from each of the past three years.

New coach Raheem Morris and offensive coordinator Zac Robinson both came from the Los Angeles Rams just as Vikings coach Kevin O'Connell did, so the offense Cousins will run with the Falcons will be familiar.

Working his way back from a torn Achilles tendon in his right foot that sidelined him because of an injury for the first time in his career, Cousins had a 103.8 passer rating in eight games for the Vikings last season that was still the third best in the league despite the lost time.

The epitome of a late bloomer, Cousins enjoyed largely the most effective performances of his career since the Vikings hired O'Connell in 2022.

They were going to need a succession plan regardless of how this negotiation played out, though, considering Cousins' age and their commitment to a "competitive rebuild," as Adofo-Mensah has termed it several times — and as his statement Monday reiterated.

"Our approach heading into free agency always included layers of contingencies regarding the quarterback position," Adofo-Mensah said. "We are moving forward with plans that allow us to continue building a roster that can compete for a championship."

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Joshua Dobbs, Jaren Hall and Nick Mullens all took turns subbing for Cousins down the stretch, with mixed success at best as the Vikings stumbled to a 7-10 finish.

The Vikings were serious in their desire to continue with Cousins, but given their cap situation and the recent improvement and outlook around them by their NFC North foes they had to have a limit about how much — and for how long — they could guarantee. With the 11th pick in the draft next month, they'll likely be too low to get one of the top quarterback prospects, but it's a deep class and they're almost certain to take one on the first or second day.

Cousins, for as much as he wanted to finish his career with Minnesota, he also made clear he wanted to be valued with a commitment beyond a token year.

"It's not about the dollars, but what the dollars represent," was how Cousins put it in an interview with reporters on Jan. 8.

Cousins has not only been the consummate overachiever on the field, from afterthought college recruit to fourth-round draft pick to currently 24th place on the NFL's all-time list in career passing yards (39,471), but he has mastered the business side of the game with the guidance of his agent Mike McCartney.

After playing on consecutive franchise tags for Washington in 2016 and 2017, Cousins cashed in as the rare starting quarterback to hit free agency in 2018 when the Vikings had salary cap space and a pressing need at the position after an NFC championship game appearance. He got the first fully guaranteed, multi-year contract in league history for a quarterback when he signed for \$84 million.

Just over the past eight seasons, Cousins has earned more than \$228 million. He has won only one playoff game, after the 2019 season.

The Vikings restructured Cousins' deal a year ago without giving him any new money, adding four voidable years to flatten his salary cap hit. That move will stick with the Vikings with a \$28.5 million salary cap hit in 2024, for the remaining signing bonus proration from his last extension in 2022.

Poland's president calls on NATO allies to raise spending on defense to 3% of GDP

By VANESSA GERA Associated Press

WARSAW, Poland (AP) — Poland's president on Monday called on other members of the NATO alliance to raise their spending on defense to 3% of their gross domestic product as Russia puts its economy on a war footing and pushes forward with its invasion of Ukraine.

President Andrzej Duda made his call in remarks directed at home and abroad. His appeal came on the eve of a visit to the White House, where U.S. President Joe Biden will receive both Duda and Polish Prime Minister Donald Tusk on Tuesday.

"In the face of the war in Ukraine and Russia's growing imperial aspirations, the countries making up NATO must act boldly and uncompromisingly," Duda said in a Monday evening address to his nation.

His appeal comes at Poland marks the 25th anniversary of its accession to NATO, along with the Czech Republic and Hungary, on March 12, 1999.

"Poland is proud to have been a part of it for 25 years," he said. "There has been and there is no better guarantor of security than the North Atlantic Alliance."

"The war in Ukraine has clearly shown that the United States is and should remain the leader in security issues in Europe and the world," Duda said in his speech to his nation. "However, other NATO countries must also take greater responsibility for the security of the entire alliance and intensively modernize and strengthen their troops."

Duda's remarks came on the same day that Sweden's flag was raised at NATO headquarters in Brussels to cement its place as the 32nd member of the trans-Atlantic alliance. Finland joined NATO last year.

"Today, NATO is sending a clear and strong signal by welcoming Finland and Sweden into its ranks," he said. "This is a historic event. Countries that have so far maintained a neutral status for years are joining the alliance. NATO is therefore significantly strengthened. However, further bold decisions are needed."

NATO members agreed in 2014 to boost their defense spending to 2% of GDP after Russia annexed

Ukraine's Crimean Peninsula that year, but most members, including Germany, still fall short of that benchmark.

Poland, however, now spends 4% of its GDP on defense, making it the member to spend the most in percentage terms as it modernizes its military, while the U.S. is well above 3%.

"Russia's imperialistic ambitions and aggressive revisionism are pushing Moscow toward a direct confrontation with NATO, with the West and, ultimately, with the whole free world," Duda said in an op-ed published in The Washington Post.

Duda said that puts the United States and Poland in a position to "lead by example and provide an inspiration for others."

"The Russian Federation has switched its economy to war mode. It is allocating close to 30 percent of its annual budget to arm itself," Duda argued in the newspaper op-ed. "This figure and other data coming out of Russia are alarming. Vladimir Putin's regime poses the biggest threat to global peace since the end of the Cold War."

The Biden administration suggested Duda's call to raise the defense spending target for NATO countries may be, at least for now, overly ambitious.

"I think the first step is to get every country meeting the 2% threshold, and we've seen improvement of that," U.S. State Department spokesman Matthew Miller said. "But I think that's the first step before we start talking about an additional proposal."

Duda will visit Brussels for a meeting with NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg after his visit to the U.S.

Counselor recalls morning of Michigan school attack when parents declined to take shooter home

By ED WHITE Associated Press

PONTIAC, Mich. (AP) — The parents of a Michigan school shooter declined to take their son home hours before the attack, leaving instead with a list of mental health providers after being presented with his violent drawing and disturbing messages, a counselor testified Monday.

A security camera image of James Crumbley with papers in his hand at Oxford High School was displayed for the jury.

"My hope was that they were going to take him," Shawn Hopkins testified, "either take him to get help or even just, 'Let's have a good day. Let's have a day where we just spend time with you.'"

"I didn't want him left alone," the counselor added.

James Crumbley, 47, is on trial for involuntary manslaughter. He is accused of failing to secure a gun at home and ignoring signs of Ethan Crumbley's mental distress.

No one opened the 15-year-old's backpack, and he later pulled out the handgun and shot up the school, killing four students and wounding more on Nov. 30, 2021.

On the trial's third day, prosecutors focused on the morning of the shooting before shifting to the teen's proficiency with a firearm.

The Crumbleys had met with school staff who gave them a drawing on Ethan's math assignment showing a gun, blood, and a wounded person, along with anguished phrases: "The thoughts won't stop. Help me. My life is useless."

Hopkins said he arranged for the Crumbleys to come to the school and met with Ethan before they arrived, trying to understand his mindset. The boy told him: "I can see why this looks bad. I'm not going to do" anything.

"I wanted him to get help as soon as possible, today if possible," Hopkins said. "I was told it wasn't possible."

Hopkins testified that he told the parents that he "wanted movement within 48 hours," and thought to himself that he would call Michigan's child welfare agency if they didn't take action.

Just a day earlier, Jennifer Crumbley had been called when a teacher saw Ethan looking up bullets on

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his phone, the counselor said.

Hopkins said Ethan wanted to stay in school. The counselor believed it was a better place for him, especially if he might be alone even if the Crumbleys took him home but left for work.

"I made the decision I made based on the information I had. I had 90 minutes of information," Hopkins said.

Hopkins said James Crumbley never objected when his wife said they couldn't take Ethan home. And he said no one disclosed that a new gun had been purchased just four days earlier — one described by Ethan on social media as "my beauty."

Hopkins said the father seemed interested in his son's welfare when they discussed the drawing.

"He was talking to his son and mentioned, 'You have people you can talk to. You can talk to your counselor, you have your journal. We talk,'" Hopkins recalled. "It felt appropriate at that time, but my concern at that point was there wasn't any action."

Jurors heard how, in hindsight, a simple step could have prevented the shooting. Nick Ejak, who was in charge of student discipline, said he joked to a teacher about the heavy weight of the shooter's backpack when he retrieved it from a classroom. If he had opened the bag, he would have discovered the gun and ammunition.

Ejak said Ethan's mental health was a concern — not discipline issues — and he believed he had no grounds to unzip the bag.

"That's a fair statement," Ejak replied when defense attorney Mariell Lehman asked if he believed the boy was not a threat to others.

Ethan had made multiple visits to shooting ranges with a parent in 2021, including one just three days before the school massacre. A security camera at the range recorded him instructing his mother when she appeared to struggle with the newly purchased Sig Sauer 9 mm, according to video played for the jury.

"His new Xmas present," she wrote on social media.

Federal agent Brett Brandon said a cable to lock the Sig Sauer gun case was unused and still sealed in plastic when authorities searched the Crumbley home.

When the boy surrendered at school, "he took the magazine out of the firearm and placed it on top of a trash bin, which I found unique," Brandon testified. "Not something someone would do if they committed a mass shooting."

The Crumbleys are the first U.S. parents to be charged with having criminal responsibility for a mass school shooting committed by a child. Jennifer Crumbley was found guilty of the same involuntary manslaughter charges last month.

Ethan, now 17, is serving a life prison sentence for murder and terrorism.

Emma Stone won, but Lily Gladstone didn't lose

By JAKE COYLE AP Film Writer

LOS ANGELES (AP) — The Academy Awards were full of sure-things, long-awaited anointments and easy predictions. The "Oppenheimer" romp. Ryan Gosling's Ken stealing the show. That put even more focus on the category that was hardest to call: best actress.

When Emma Stone was announced as the winner, a ceremony light on surprise got a genuine shock, perfectly illustrated by Stone's stunned expression. Stone's win, for her sensational performance in "Poor Things," was hard not to cast as a defeat for Lily Gladstone. The "Killers of the Flower Moon" actress had been picked by most prognosticators and — as everyone knew — history hung in the balance. Her win would have been the first for a Native American in the nearly century-long history of the Oscars.

It was a difficult to define result. It wasn't quite an upset — Stone's performance, equally favored, was too good to call it that. But it still stung, particularly for Native Americans watching across the country — a community that has watched Hollywood for most of its existence overlook its stories and performers.

One thing you couldn't call it, though, was a loss for Gladstone.

"Lily Gladstone has undeniably left an indelible mark, breaking barriers and inspiring countless individuals

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with her remarkable presence and commitment to storytelling," cheered Blackfoot Confederacy, a Tribal Council for the Blackfoot Confederacy Nations of Kainai-Blood Tribe, Siksika, Peigan-Piikani and Aamskapi Pikuni.

"Her representation is a source of pride for the Blackfoot Confederacy, The Osage Nation, and all indigenous communities, resonating far beyond the confines of a single ceremony."

Throughout awards season, Gladstone has been a figure of rare grace, speaking eloquently on behalf of her tribe, the Osage, Native American representation and Hollywood history. More than any other nominated performer on Sunday night, she carried the hopes and dreams of a people.

"This is for every little rez kid," Gladstone said accepting her Golden Globe award in January. "Every little urban kid, every little Native kid out there who has a dream, who is seeing themselves represented and our stories told by ourselves in our own words, with tremendous allies and tremendous trust with and from each other."

Gladstone, born in Montana and raised in the Blackfeet Nation, was the first Indigenous performer to win that award, for best actress in a drama – just one of the many "firsts" that she achieved leading up to the Oscars. She likewise made history at the Screen Actors Guild Awards, where she won best female actor in a leading role. Those wins — along with the devastating empathy and poise of her performance in "Killers of the Flower Moon" — were more than enough to leave many cheering Gladstone's milestone accomplishments.

"Lily Gladstone, you already won," Peggy Flanagan, Minnesota's Lieutenant Governor and a member of the White Earth Band of Ojibwe, wrote on X. "You bring all of us into every room you enter. We see ourselves in you every day – thank you for taking us along on this journey with you. We can dream bigger than we ever thought because of you."

Gladstone's SAG award was a big reason some expected her to win at the Oscars. It's the most predictive awards for acting prizes. All of the other SAG winners — Cillian Murphy, Da'Vine Joy Randolph, Robert Downey Jr. — won Sunday. In the two previous years, the SAG winners have exactly matched those at the Academy Awards.

But Stone also won at the BAFTAs and at the Globes, where "Poor Things" was slotted into the comedy or musical categories. At the Oscars, it was clear academy voters were more passionate about "Poor Things" than "Killers of the Flower Moon." "Poor Things" took home four awards, second most to "Oppenheimer," while "Killers of the Flower Moon" was shut out.

Martin Scorsese could be seen consoling Gladstone after the ceremony ended. The 81-year-old director knows something about Oscar disappointment. Scorsese, remarkably, has won only one Academy Awards (for directing "The Departed"), and he's sat through numerous ceremonies only to see his much-nominated films – including "Taxi Driver," "Gangs of New York," "The Wolf of Wall Street" and "The Irishman" – leave with nothing. His last two features have gone 0-for-20 at the Academy Awards, easily a record.

Working against Gladstone's favor may have been that she's on screen for closer to a third of the film's lengthy running time. Some felt she should have competed in best supporting actress. Meanwhile, Stone's performance was a more traditional leading one. With two Oscars in five nominations, the 35-year-old Stone is among the most universally beloved actors working today.

"I think I blacked out," Stone said in the press room backstage. "Yes, I was very shocked. I still feel like I'm spinning a little bit. So yes, it's a huge honor and I'm very surprised."

Awards season context, though, means only so much to a Native American community that, after decades almost totally absent of the Academy Awards, had prepared for a historical moment.

Dallas Goldtooth, a Sioux actor and regular on "Reservation Dogs," wrote on X: "How do you say 'robbed' in Blackfoot?"

"Asking for a friend," added Goldtooth. "Just kidding, I'm asking for myself."

Lucas Brown Eyes, an Oglala Lakota TV writer, was frustrated not just by Gladstone not winning but by this being the only real chance Native Americans have had.

"It took 95 YEARS for a Native (Blackfeet) woman to get a nomination like this," wrote Brown Eyes. "The 'make up' Oscar doesn't work for Natives when this industry gives Natives opportunities once in a century."

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One actor, even one as good as Gladstone, isn't enough to turn a tide that Native Americans have been beating back for as long as they've been in movies. The celebratory moment for Native people, in the end, came earlier in the Oscar ceremony, in a performance of collective power. Scott George, the first Native American nominated for best song, performed "Wahzhazhe (A Song for My People)" with the Osage Tribal Singers. More than a dozen singers and dancers surrounded a close-knit drum circle of nine tribal musicians.

At an awards ceremony that so often isolates artists, it was a rousing display of communal connection, sounded through ancient rhythms. And it recalled what Wes Studi said while receiving an honorary Oscar in 2019. Studi, the great Cherokee actor whose breakout character in "Dances With Wolves" was listed nameless only as "Toughest Pawnee," is still the only Native American with an Academy Award.

"I won't say how long it's taken me to do this," said Studi then. "I can only say that the journey has been peopled by many."

Why AP isn't using 'presumptive nominee' to describe Trump or Biden

By ROBERT YOON Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Republican Donald Trump and Democrat Joe Biden are the last remaining major candidates for their parties' 2024 presidential nominations.

But they're not the "presumptive nominees" just yet.

The Associated Press only uses the designation once a candidate has captured the number of delegates needed to win a majority vote at the national party conventions this summer. The earliest point that could happen for either candidate is Tuesday, when contests are held in Georgia, Mississippi, Washington and Hawaii.

A presidential candidate doesn't officially become the Republican or Democratic nominee until winning the vote on the convention floor. It hasn't always been this way. Decades ago, presidential candidates might have run in primaries and caucuses, but the contests were mostly ornamental in nature, and the eventual nominees weren't known until delegates and party bosses hashed things out themselves at the conventions.

Today, the tables have turned. Now, it's the conventions that are largely ornamental, and it's the votes cast in primaries and caucuses that decide the nominees. Because of this role reversal, for the last half-century or so, the eventual nominees were known before the conventions, sometimes long before the conventions or even long before they'd won enough delegates to unofficially clinch the nomination.

Nonetheless, the AP won't call anyone the "presumptive nominee" until a candidate has reached the so-called magic number of delegates needed for a majority at the convention. That's true even if the candidate is the only major competitor still in the race.

For Republicans, that magic number is 1,215; for Democrats, it's more of a moving target but currently stands at 1,968.

Most teens report feeling happy or peaceful when they go without smartphones, Pew survey finds

By BARBARA ORTUTAY AP Technology Writer

Nearly three-quarters of U.S. teens say they feel happy or peaceful when they don't have their phones with them, according to a new report from the Pew Research Center.

In a survey published Monday, Pew also found that despite the positive associations with going phone-free, most teens have not limited their phone or social media use.

The survey comes as policymakers and children's advocates are growing increasingly concerned with teens' relationships with their phones and social media. Last fall, dozens of states, including California and New York, sued Instagram and Facebook owner Meta Platforms Inc. for harming young people and contributing to the youth mental health crisis by knowingly and deliberately designing features that addict children. In January, the CEOs of Meta, TikTok, X and other social media companies went before the Senate Judiciary Committee to testify about their platforms' harms to young people.

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Despite the increasing concerns, most teens say smartphones make it easier be creative and pursue hobbies, while 45% said it helps them do well in school. Most teens said the benefits of having a smartphone outweigh the harms for people their age. Nearly all U.S. teens (95%) have access to a smartphone, according to Pew.

Majorities of teens say smartphones make it a little or a lot easier for people their age to pursue hobbies and interests (69%) and be creative (65%). Close to half (45%) say these devices have made it easier for youth to do well in school.

The poll was conducted from Sept. 26-Oct. 23, 2023, among a sample of 1,453 pairs of teens with one parent and has a margin of error of plus or minus 3.2 percentage points.

Here are some of the survey's other findings:

— About half of parents (47%) say they limit the amount of time their teen can be on their phone, while a similar share (48%) don't do this.

— Roughly 4 in 10 parents and teens (38% each) say they at least sometimes argue with each other about how much time their teen spends on the phone. Ten percent in each group said this happens often, with Hispanic Americans the most likely to say they often argue about phone use.

— Nearly two-thirds (64%) of parents of 13- to 14-year-olds say they look through their teen's smartphone, compared with 41% among parents of 15- to 17-year-olds.

— Forty-two percent of teens say smartphones make learning good social skills harder, while 30% said it makes it easier.

— About half of the parents said they spend too much time on their phone. Higher-income parents were more likely to say this than those in lower income buckets, and white parents were more likely to report spending too much time on their phone than Hispanic or Black parents.

Where to watch this year's Oscar-winning films online

By LEANNE ITALIE AP Entertainment Writer

The Oscars are over and the winners are now on the books, but you're still behind on watching?

No worries. Here's a guide on where to watch Sunday's triumphant, though nominees that missed out on a statuette are worthy, too. Think "Killers of the Flower Moon," "Maestro," "Rustin," "Past Lives," "Nyad" and more.

Also look for some of the short films that took home statuettes, including Wes Anderson's "The Wonderful Story of Henry Sugar." It streams on Netflix and is widely available for digital purchase or rental. The documentary short winner, "The Last Repair Shop" streams on Disney+.

"OPPENHEIMER"

13 nominations, 7 wins. Streams on Peacock.

Christopher Nolan's atomic opus "Oppenheimer" received widespread critical acclaim and broke box office records. It's half the Barbenheimer phenom with "Barbie" from last July. The three-hour film, which is semi-trippy and flashback heavy, chronicles the trials and tribulations of the secret Manhattan Project's J. Robert Oppenheimer (Cillian Murphy). Available for pay at YouTube, Apple TV, Prime Video, Vudu, iTunes, Google Play and elsewhere.

"POOR THINGS"

11 nominations, 4 wins. Streams on Hulu.

Think Frankenstein story, and his bride. Director Yorgos Lanthimos owes a debt to Emma Stone, his child-like and highly randy Bella, in "Poor Things." The comedy is dark and the vibe Victorian fantasy. And did we mention the sex? How Bella handles that activity has been the talk of film circles. No spoilers here but rest assured her consciousness is raised. Also stars Willem Dafoe and Mark Ruffalo. Available for purchase only on Prime Video, Apple TV, Google Play, Vudu and elsewhere.

"BARBIE"

8 nominations, 1 win. Streams on Max.

Greta Gerwig's "Barbie," in the billion-dollar club at the box office, is a live-action musical comedy focused

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on the 64-year-old plastic doll in a range of iterations. It also took the globe by storm, culturally speaking. The film stars Margot Robbie and Ryan Gosling (as Just Ken). Robbie plays Stereotypical Barbie, who experiences an existential crisis but lands on the road to self-discovery. Available for pay at iTunes, Apple TV, Google Play, YouTube, Vudu and elsewhere.

"AMERICAN FICTION"

5 nominations, 1 win. Streams on MGM+

Cord Jefferson's directorial debut "American Fiction" is what satire should be: funny while succinctly pointing at truths. Jeffrey Wright plays a frustrated academic up against the wall of what Black books must be to sell. He takes action. The film is also about families and the weight of their struggles. Wright is joined by a great supporting cast in Leslie Uggams, Erika Alexander, Issa Rae, Sterling K. Brown and Tracee Ellis Ross. Available for pay at Prime Video, Apple TV+, Google Play, YouTube, Vudu and elsewhere.

"ANATOMY OF A FALL"

5 nominations, 1 win. Digital purchase or rental.

Justine Triet's "Anatomy of a Fall" took the Palme d'Or at the 76th Cannes Film Festival. It stars Sandra Hüller as a writer, Sandra, trying to prove her innocence in court in her husband's death at their chalet in the French Alps. The verdict? We won't tell. Did she or didn't she? Triet wrote the film with her husband, Arthur Harari, and they shared in the film's adapted screenplay win Sunday. Available for pay at iTunes, Prime Video, Google Play, Vudu, YouTube and elsewhere.

"THE HOLDOVERS"

5 nominations, 1 win. Streams on Peacock.

The Alexander Payne offering "The Holdovers" is set at Christmastime, but its themes of loneliness and belonging resonate well beyond the holiday, wrapped in a comedic package. Set in 1970 over the holiday break at a boarding school, there's plenty of nostalgia in the details. It stars Paul Giamatti in curmudgeonly glory as the teacher stuck minding Angus (Dominic Sessa) and other students with no place to go. Da'Vine Joy Randolph delivers a standout — and Oscar-winning — performance as a grieving school worker who spends the holidays at the school. Available for pay at iTunes, Prime Video, Google Play, Vudu and elsewhere.

"THE ZONE OF INTEREST"

5 nominations, 2 wins. In theaters. Digital purchase.

There's another meaty role for Hüller in the Holocaust story "The Zone of Interest," directed by Jonathan Glazer. She plays Hedwig, the wife of Rudolf Höss (Christian Friedel), the real-life, bloodthirsty commandant of Auschwitz. The action largely has Rudolf and Hedwig living their everyday family lives just a few steps from the ovens and trains that were instruments in the slaughter of millions of Jews. A story worth telling, considering their status as monsters? You decide. Available for pay on Prime Video, Apple TV, Google Play, Vudu and elsewhere.

"20 DAYS IN MARIUPOL"

1 nomination, 1 win. Digital purchase or rental. In North America it's streamable on the Frontline page at pbs.org, the PBS app and at Frontline on YouTube.

A joint production by The Associated Press and PBS "Frontline," the documentary "20 Days in Mariupol" has been met with critical acclaim and an audience award at the Sundance Film Festival. AP journalist Mstyslav Chernov directed the movie from 30 hours of footage shot in Mariupol in the opening days of the Ukraine war. Chernov and AP colleagues Evgeniy Maloletka, a photographer, and producer Vasilisa Stepanenko were the last international journalists in the city before escaping. Available for pay at Prime Video, Google Play, Vudu and elsewhere.

"THE BOY AND THE HERON"

1 nomination. 1 win. Digital purchase or rental.

Dreamy and enthralling, director Hayao Miyazaki and Studio Ghibli do it again. Well. The beautifully animated Japanese fantasy "The Boy and the Heron" has young Mahito late in World War II mourning the death of his mother and encountering a talking and ornery gray heron he can't get rid of. And there's a very important tower. Available for pay on Apple TV.

Asked to clear up abortion bans, GOP leaders blame doctors and misinformation for the confusion

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.

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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."

Number of Black major leaguers remains historically low, but improvement may be on the way

By ALANIS THAMES AP Sports Writer

For much of Lee Allen Jr.'s childhood, baseball seemed quite far from him.

Major League Baseball's Royals played in his hometown Kansas City, Missouri, but Allen — who is Black and lived in the inner city — didn't come across many baseball opportunities until late in his high school years.

In January 2020, a 17-year-old Allen was invited to one of MLB's development programs, the DREAM Series, where for the first time he was put in front of scouts and coaches to display his skills in a competitive environment.

Four years later, Allen stood on the field at the Jackie Robinson Training Complex in Vero Beach, Florida, wearing a purple, white and gold baseball uniform representing the historically Black college Prairie View A&M University, his eyes set on a pro career.

More than 200 HBCU standouts were there for MLB's Andre Dawson Classic, a collegiate tournament for players hoping to one day crack the major leagues — and perhaps help usher in a new generation of African American stars.

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"Being able to be out here and showcase my talents in front of these scouts and other guys who's looking at us at the next level," said Allen, now a junior infielder for the Panthers, "it feels great for me because I know that those are goals that I can reach, and they're there."

That's MLB's aim as it faces historically low numbers of Black players in the majors. A study done by The Institute for Diversity and Ethics in Sport at Central Florida found African American players represented just 6.2% of players on MLB opening day rosters in 2023, down from 7.2% in 2022. Both figures were the lowest since the study began in 1991, when 18% of MLB players were Black.

That's also the lowest percentage of African American participation among four of the five major professional sports — NBA, NFL, MLB, MLS — outside of the National Hockey League, where more than 90% of its players are white. MLB has tried to address that with a series of grassroots diversity initiatives.

"We are really doubling down on what we've done," said Del Matthews, MLB's vice president of baseball development, "because we are producing kids that are going to college, that are getting internships within the sport. We see more kids playing at the Division I college baseball ranks, and we see more kids being drafted into the minor leagues. And so we're just flooding that through the various programs that we've had."

There are signs of progress at the pro level. Between 2012 and 2021, 17.4% of first-round picks were African American players. That number spiked to 30% in 2022, when four of the first five selections were Black players for the first time ever — and all four were alumni of at least one MLB diversity initiative. In 2023, Black players made up 10 of the first 50 draft selections, or 20%.

Those gains haven't bolstered MLB numbers yet, and even in the minors, Black participation has been slow to rise. When MLB recently announced rosters for its Spring Breakout exhibitions showcasing top minor league prospects, 9.5% of the players were Black — including 31 alums of MLB's diversity programs.

MLB's pipeline begins with an annual tour of pro-style camps in various cities across the country to identify baseball potential among inner city kids. The tour has grown each year — from 12 stops when it launched in 2018 to 18 cities now — and targets kids around 13-14 years old, just before they enter high school.

The goal is to eventually send those players to more advanced development programs, where they can get significant reps playing competitive baseball — mostly cost-free — and create relationships with pro scouts and former major leaguers that can help them down the line.

"The sport has gotten so expensive that it has eliminated a lot of our kids," said Jerry Manuel, a former manager for the White Sox and Mets. "So we've got to do everything we can to get them back in the pipeline."

The programs are mostly funded through USA Baseball, the sport's governing body in the United States, which pays for equipment, meals and potential travel for showcases that Matthews estimated could otherwise cost upward of \$700 per event. Anywhere from 1,200 to 1,500 kids are selected each year to participate in MLB's diversity-focused programming, including the DREAM Series, Breakthrough Series, the Hank Aaron Invitational and girls baseball/softball events. Some players attend several events per year — an opportunity that otherwise wouldn't be feasible for many kids from lower-income families.

That's why Sheila Moreno was grateful that her son Jadin's introduction to baseball was through the Houston Astros' free youth baseball league, one of more than 180 organizations affiliated with MLB's Reviving Baseball in Inner Cities (RBI) outreach program that targets kids in underserved communities.

Jadin wants to play professional baseball overseas, Moreno said, but knowing how expensive the sport can be, she worried that expenses would hinder him before he even got his start. When Moreno came across the RBI Houston program, that gave Jadin the connections he needed to earn invites to other development showcases. He's now a junior infielder at Prairie View.

"He didn't have to pay anything," Moreno said at the Andre Dawson Classic last month, "so it was very helpful. All he wanted to do was play ball. He was just looking for someone to help him with the basic skills and to put effort into him."

The league said nearly 700 alumni of its development programs have gone on to play college baseball, with around 90% of those players being Black.

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In Division I, 752 men's baseball players — about 6% — are Black, according to the NCAA's demographics database. That's the highest that number has been in the last 10 years and reflects small but steady growth that MLB Chief Baseball Development Officer Tony Reagins said shows improvement in the pipeline.

Reagins added that the advocacy of former Black major leaguers like Manuel has been especially helpful in showing aspiring pros what is possible.

One of those MLB hopefuls is Termarr Johnson, who chose baseball over basketball and football — sports he said were more popular growing up in Atlanta. He participated in almost every diversity initiative MLB offered and was connected with mentors like Manuel, Ken Griffey Jr., Dave Winfield and Marquis Grissom — some of whom he can call on a whim for advice.

Johnson was the fourth overall pick in the 2022 draft. Standing in the Pittsburgh Pirates' clubhouse before a recent big league spring training game, Johnson credited those programs for developing him on and off the field.

"The biggest thing that was helpful was them tackling the mental piece of what it takes to be a big leaguer, a great big leaguer," Johnson said. "Them telling me little things like, 'Tuck in your shirt when you're out on the field. Make sure you run off the field.' A scout sees that, people see that."

Johnson has impressed so far as the Pirates' No. 2 overall prospect, and he's started his own kids camp, hoping it inspires more Black kids to play the game and stick with it, like MLB's programs were for him.

"I don't know if I'd be here right now if it wasn't for that," Johnson said.

Who is Robert Hur? A look at the special counsel due to testify on Biden classified documents case

By ALANNA DURKIN RICHER and COLLEEN LONG Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — The special counsel who impugned the president's age and competence in his report on how Joe Biden handled classified documents will himself be up for questioning this week.

Robert Hur is scheduled to testify before a congressional committee on Tuesday as House Republicans try to keep the spotlight on unflattering assessments of Biden.

Some Biden aides and allies have suggested that Hur, a Republican appointed to his role as U.S. attorney by Donald Trump, is a political partisan. Hur's defenders say he has shown throughout his career that his work is guided by only facts and the law — not politics.

A review of Hur's professional life shows he's no stranger to politically charged investigations. He prosecuted former elected officials as Maryland's chief federal law enforcement officer. And as a Justice Department official, he helped monitor special counsel Robert Mueller's investigation into Russian interference in the 2016 presidential election.

A look at Hur's career and why he's in the spotlight now:

SPECIAL COUNSEL

Hur determined in a report made public last month that no criminal charges were warranted in the president's handling of classified documents after he left the vice presidency.

But in explaining how he had arrived at his decision, Hur wrote that Biden would likely present himself to a jury "as a sympathetic, well-meaning, elderly man with a poor memory." He suggested Biden could not even remember during questioning when his adult son Beau had died.

Democrats have lashed out at Hur over the remarks about Biden's age and mental acuity. They argue the digs were unnecessary and could help Republicans trying to unseat Biden in 2024.

Some also suggested Hur was quick to accept the invitation to speak before the House Judiciary Committee. The panel, led by Trump loyalist Rep. Jim Jordan of Ohio, has spearheaded many of the congressional investigations into the president, including the floundering effort to impeach him.

But Hur's report also carefully explained how the criminal case accusing Trump of hoarding classified documents at his Mar-a-Lago resort presents far more serious allegations. Hur noted that Biden cooperated with investigators and agreed to searches of his homes. Trump, on the other hand, is accused of not

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only holding onto sensitive documents, but obstructing justice "by enlisting others to destroy evidence and then to lie about it," Hur wrote.

Hur was handpicked to lead the Biden investigation by Attorney General Merrick Garland, who was aware of both Hur's career history and his political affiliations. Garland has been determined to preside over an apolitical Justice Department as the agency probes not just Biden and Trump, but also Biden's son Hunter.

"I think Merrick Garland probably recognized that Rob was someone who was a Republican but had a track record of making nonpartisan law enforcement decisions and was respected by people on both sides of the aisle," said former Deputy Attorney General Rod Rosenstein, who was once Hur's boss.

THE JUSTICE DEPARTMENT

Hur held one of the most powerful jobs in the Justice Department during a tumultuous time in the Trump administration, serving as the top aide to Rosenstein, the department's second-in-command.

As the principal associate deputy attorney general, Hur helped run day-to-day operations of the department in 2017 and early 2018. He also helped Rosenstein stay on top of Mueller's progress in the Russia investigation. Hur held bi-weekly meetings with the special counsel's team and reported back to Rosenstein, the former deputy attorney general said in an interview.

Rosenstein said he hired Hur because he knew he would maintain a calm and steady demeanor and "approach cases in a nonpartisan way."

In 2017, Hur joined then-Acting U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement Director Thomas Homan at a White House press conference about the violent MS-13 street gang, an appearance that some criticized as violating ethics norms.

Some former Justice Department officials at the time said it was unwise for Hur to discuss law enforcement matters from the briefing room in the White House, saying it could call into question the independence of the department.

MARYLAND U.S. ATTORNEY

Trump nominated Hur in 2017 to take Rosenstein's old job as Maryland's U.S. attorney, and Hur was unanimously approved by the Senate the next year.

Hur's office prosecuted a number of political figures during his tenure, including former Baltimore Mayor Catherine Pugh, a Democrat. She pleaded guilty to conspiracy and tax evasion charges for selling a self-published children's books to nonprofit organizations to promote her political career.

In another case, Hur's office prosecuted a Coast Guard lieutenant who was accused of stockpiling weapons and plotting politically motivated killings inspired by a far-right mass murderer. Christopher Hasson was accused of having what appeared to be a hit list naming Democrats, including then-House Speaker Nancy Pelosi.

According to a book published by Manhattan's former top federal prosecutor, Hur declined to bring a case against former Democratic Secretary of State John Kerry. Former U.S. Attorney Geoffrey Berman wrote in his book "Holding the Line" that Justice Department officials had referred to his office an investigation of Kerry in 2018 after Trump withdrew the U.S. from a nuclear accord with Iran. Kerry helped negotiate the deal during the Obama administration.

After Berman declined to pursue a case, Berman said, the investigation was reassigned to Hur's office. Berman said he told Hur his reason for declining criminal charges and urged Hur to do the same.

"Hur would come to the same conclusion we did, and the Kerry investigation just quietly died — as it should have," Berman wrote.

PRIVATE PRACTICE

After leaving the U.S. attorney's office in 2021, Hur joined the Washington office of the Gibson, Dunn & Crutcher law firm.

Shortly before Garland named him special counsel in January 2023, Hur had been hired to defend the NFL and Commissioner Roger Goodell in a lawsuit brought by the District of Columbia. The football league and Washington Commanders team were accused of colluding to deceive fans by lying about an inquiry into sexual misconduct and a hostile work environment within the team.

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Hur was also on the legal team for Facebook in a case brought by D.C.'s attorney general. The case sought to punish the social networking company for allowing data-mining firm Cambridge Analytica to improperly access data from as many as 87 million users. The firm, which supported Trump's 2016 campaign, managed to grab potentially valuable information about U.S. voters off of Facebook profiles.

Hur was the lead author on the brief for Facebook that resulted in the judge dismissing the case last year. The D.C attorney general has appealed that ruling.

Hur was also listed as one of many attorneys for former FirstEnergy CEO Chuck Jones in several lawsuits stemming from a \$60 million bribery scheme that centered on securing a legislative bailout for two Ohio nuclear power plants with the help of the then-Ohio House speaker.

Florida rivals ask courts to stop online sports gambling off tribal lands

By MIKE SCHNEIDER Associated Press

ORLANDO, Fla. (AP) — The state of Florida and the Seminole Tribe of Florida will be raking in hundreds of millions of dollars from online sports betting this decade, thanks to a compact between the tribe and Gov. Ron DeSantis that gave the tribe exclusive rights to run sports wagers as well as casino gambling on its reservations.

But are these online wagers on the outcome of sporting events legally on tribal land, when really only the computer servers are located there, accepting bets made using mobile phones and computers from anywhere in Florida?

That's a question two of the tribe's gaming competitors are hoping the U.S. Supreme Court will take up soon and answer with a definitive "no."

A decision by the nation's highest court would be of "massive importance" for the future of online gaming across the U.S., since leaving in place an appellate ruling in the tribe's favor would set a precedent for other end-runs around state prohibitions against gaming off tribal lands, said the firms, West Flagler Associates and Bonita-Fort Myers Corporation, which operate racetracks and poker rooms in Florida.

The companies sued Deb Haaland, secretary of the U.S. Department of Interior, which oversees tribal gambling.

The U.S. Supreme Court accepts a tiny percentage of such petitions each year.

The two pari-mutuel firms say the compact signed by the governor and the tribe in 2021 gives the tribe a sports gambling monopoly and creates a "backdoor" way out of the state's requirement, passed by voters in 2018 as an amendment to the Florida Constitution, that a citizens initiative is needed to expand casino gambling outside tribal land.

"Through this artifice, the Compact transparently attempts to get around the Florida Constitution," the firms' attorneys said. "The whole point of the Compact is to provide a hook for dodging Florida's constitutional requirement of a popular referendum to approve off-reservation sports betting."

A lot of money is at stake. The tribe launched its online sports betting operation late last year, and Florida's share of 2024 revenues is already more than \$120 million. State economic forecasters predict the revenue sharing from tribal gaming could total \$4.4 billion through the end of this decade.

The pari-mutuel firms also sued DeSantis and leaders of the Florida Legislature, which authorized the compact, in a case pending before the Florida Supreme Court. The tribe argued the legislature has the authority to decide where online gambling is initiated and the amendment doesn't change that.

"The 2021 Compact is an historic agreement between the Tribe and State that settled years of disputes," the Seminole Tribe said in a court filing.

The tribe now counts about 5,000 members, descended from the Native Americans who survived in the Florida Everglades, resisting federal efforts to remove them in the 19th century. The sovereign tribe operates seven casinos across Florida and owns the Hard Rock Hotel & Casinos business, with locations in 76 countries.

Attorneys for DeSantis and the legislative leaders argue sports betting is different from casino gambling and therefore isn't prohibited by the amendment. They also note that rivals can get in on the action —

and get paid a revenue share — by allowing their customers to make online bets from their properties to the tribe's servers.

"As an important source of revenue for both the Seminole Tribe and the State — and even the Tribe's competitors — the 2021 compact serves the public interest and has been upheld in federal court," attorneys for DeSantis and the legislative leaders told the state justices.

The pari-mutuel firms' latest petition before the U.S. Supreme Court was filed Feb. 8, after an appellate panel reversed a federal district court decision in their favor. If the justices don't weigh in, Florida's example could inspire other states to allow tribes to expand online gaming, Daniel Wallach, a South Florida attorney and sports betting law expert said in a high court brief.

Miami resident Jason Molina started sports betting recently after he learned about it from a friend. He says he loves it and has placed bets on everything from Russian slap fighting to Korean ping pong matches.

"It's something new to my world," Molina said. "It's just a way to have more on the game and be more enthusiastic about it."

Victims of Catholic nuns rely on each other after being overlooked in the clergy sex abuse crisis

By TIFFANY STANLEY Associated Press

On Wednesdays, the support group meets over Zoom. The members talk about their lives, their religious families and their old parochial schools. But mostly, they are there to talk about the sexual abuse they suffered at the hands of Catholic nuns.

The topic deserves more attention, they say. The sexual abuse of children by Catholic sisters and nuns has been overshadowed by far more common reports of male clergy abuse. Women in religious orders have also been abuse victims — but they have been perpetrators too.

"We've heard so much about priests who abuse and so little about nuns who abuse that it's time to restore the balance," said the group's founder, Mary Dispenza, herself a former nun, in a speech to abuse survivors last year.

Dispenza, who endured abuse from both a childhood priest and a nun in her former order, started the online support group five years ago with the Survivors Network of those Abused by Priests, or SNAP. More victims had been contacting her in the wake of #MeToo, as they reassessed past sexual abuse. She has since seen a growing awareness of abusive nuns at former Catholic orphanages and Native American boarding schools.

"The general public would rather not consider the fact that religious women rape, molest and torture children," Dispenza told The Associated Press. Women are seen as nurturers and caregivers, an assumption only heightened with the "spiritual halo" of religious women.

"It's something most of us don't want to entertain or really believe," she said.

NEW LAW OFFERS CHANCE FOR JUSTICE

Before she found the support group and its 10 or so members, Gabrielle Longhi had spent years looking for someone with a story like hers, once posting in the comments of SNAP's website: "I never hear about abuse by nuns."

Now 66 and living in Los Angeles, Longhi was a sophomore at Stone Ridge School of the Sacred Heart in Bethesda, Maryland, when she alleges a teacher, who was then a Catholic sister with the Society of the Sacred Heart, sexually abused her in an office.

Unlike most child sexual abuse victims, she spoke up right away. She told other teachers, her sister and friends that Sister Margaret Daley had tried to sexually force herself on Longhi. Neither her parents nor the police were notified.

"She also kind of retreated after that. She became more closed down," said her sister, Carol O'Leary, who was then a student at Stone Ridge's middle school. The sisters say they were soon asked to leave Stone Ridge.

Longhi always wondered if there were other victims. Daley, her alleged abuser, left the order in 1980

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and died in 2015.

Last year, Longhi learned from another support group member that Maryland was removing its civil statute of limitations for child sex abuse victims. After the new law went into effect, Longhi sued her former school and the religious order.

Stone Ridge, which has educated Kennedys and the daughters of other Washington luminaries, sent a letter to its community about the allegations last fall. The school declined to comment further on active litigation.

The Society of the Sacred Heart declined to discuss the allegations, but issued a statement saying the order and its schools have implemented robust child protection policies. "We are deeply saddened," the statement read. "Our prayers go out to all involved in this matter, and to all survivors of sexual abuse."

An anticipated constitutional challenge to Maryland's law is pending, but the policy change "makes all the difference in the world," Longhi said. "Before you have no case and now you do."

'IT WAS ABUSE. I INTERPRETED IT AS LOVE.'

Paige Eppenstein Anderson is still hoping for her day in court. Like many group members, it took her decades to see that what happened to her was abuse, and once she did in 2020 at age 40, the statute of limitations had run out on her claim in her home state of Pennsylvania.

"It was abuse. I interpreted it as love," she said of the sexual relationship she had as a student with a Catholic school teacher, who later joined a religious order.

As a teenager, she spent much of her free time with her teacher. Their bond was so noticeable that a yearbook entry from a friend called her the woman's "companion."

"It was very confusing to me," Eppenstein Anderson said.

Anne Gleeson was also nearly 40 and in therapy before she understood that she was sexually abused for years, starting at age 13, by a nun who was 24 years her senior. She received a settlement from the Sisters of St. Joseph of Carondelet in 2004.

"The nun brainwashed me into thinking we were head over heels in love," she said. "God's love, that's why no one else could know about it — it was so special."

A longtime SNAP activist in St. Louis, Gleeson had felt that the advocacy group's name — which only mentioned those abused by priests — neglected victims like her.

The nun abuse group brought "a great sense of relief," she said.

LITTLE TRACKING OF ABUSIVE NUNS

Few dioceses or religious orders publicly list abusive nuns — a fact group members want to change. The advocacy group Bishop Accountability lists 172 Catholic sisters who have been accused of sex abuse.

"I feel that it's vastly underreported," said Marya Dantzer, a group member who settled her nun abuse case in Michigan in 1996.

Dantzer noted that nuns, especially as teachers, arguably spend more time with young people than priests.

For years, Dispenza and others have been asking without success for the Leadership Conference of Women Religious — which represents two-thirds of U.S. Catholic sisters — to allow nun abuse survivors to speak at their annual meeting.

"We agree with SNAP that women religious need to keep working for the healing of victims and the prevention of further abuse and that hearing directly from survivors is essential," said Sister Annmarie Sanders, LCWR spokesperson, in an email.

Sanders said the LCWR meeting was not "the proper venue for discussion on this issue." Victims should instead contact their abuser's religious order.

Each of the more than 400 U.S. religious institutes for women is relatively autonomous.

In a 2019 speech about Catholic sex abuse, LCWR's then-president Sharlet Wagner acknowledged "that in some instances, our own sisters have been perpetrators of the abuse."

That speech followed an apology for abuse from an international organization of Catholic sisters, as well as Pope Francis' creation of an abuse reporting system, which includes nuns.

The support group members would like the church to accept more responsibility, and for all religious

orders to expel known abusers from their ranks.

In the meantime, the support group continues to welcome new members, even as others move on. It remains mostly women, many over age 60.

Dispenza recently stepped back from facilitating the group, with Dantzer taking over as leader.

After seeing a growing need, Dispenza opened a second group in 2022 that includes international victims of nun abuse, and she will focus her efforts there.

Members of the international cohort are contemplating the launch of nun abuse support groups in Peru and the Balkans. They have put their contact information on the SNAP website, there for anyone looking for stories like their own.

13 years after Fukushima nuclear disaster, Japan remembers the dead and vows to keep rebuilding

By MARI YAMAGUCHI Associated Press

TOKYO (AP) — Japan marked the 13th anniversary of the massive earthquake and tsunami that triggered a nuclear meltdown and left large parts of Fukushima prefecture uninhabitable on Monday with a minute of silence and memorial events, where officials pledged continued support for rebuilding.

The 9.0 magnitude quake and tsunami that ravaged parts of Japan's northeastern coast on March 11, 2011 killed about 20,000 people and drove thousands from their homes in the prefectures of Miyagi, Iwate and Fukushima.

At 2:46 p.m. — the time when the earthquake struck — people across Japan stopped to observe a minute of silence. In Tokyo's central Ginza shopping district, people stopped to pray on the sidewalk as a bell rang out, marking the moment.

In the town of Minamisanriku in Miyagi prefecture, a team of 10 uniformed police officers sifted through gravel and sand on the beach in an annual search for the remains of people who are still missing. Survivors prayed by the bare girders that used to be the town's disaster prevention center, where dozens died. In the town of Natori, about 400 people prayed and released balloons carrying messages of grief.

In Ishinomaki City in Iwate prefecture, residents gathered in a hilltop park where many of them took shelter 13 years ago, mourning as they stood facing the sea. In Rikuzentakata, about 100 people prayed atop a massive concrete seawall.

And at a ceremony in Fukushima prefecture, where some 20,000 people still cannot return to their homes because of radiation, Gov. Masao Uchibori vowed that rebuilding will continue as the decades-long work of cleaning up the nuclear site continues.

"We will not give up," he said. "I pledge in front of the quake and tsunami victims that we will accomplish recovery at any cost."

A wall of water over 15 meters (50 feet) tall slammed into the coastal Fukushima Daiichi nuclear power plant, destroying its power supply and cooling systems, triggering meltdowns in three of its six reactors, and spewing radiation across the surrounding areas.

The disaster initially forced more than 160,000 people to leave their homes. Work to remove highly radioactive melted fuel debris has still not begun at the plant, and the overall decommissioning project is expected to last decades.

At the ceremony in Fukushima, Prime Minister Fumio Kishida renewed a pledge that the government will help secure jobs, livelihoods and the safe decommissioning of the plant so the former residents can return home.

"We will continue to do utmost for the full-fledged recovery and rebirth, as well as the recovery of the northeastern region," he said.

Most deaths from the tsunami and earthquake took place in Miyagi and Iwate prefectures, north of Fukushima, but they have been able to recover faster because they were not exposed to nuclear waste. The reconstruction of roads, seawalls and other infrastructure has been largely completed in Iwate and Miyagi

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prefectures, but many former residents have not returned due to the loss of communities.

This year's memorial events also remembered victims of the devastating quake that struck Japan's north central region of Noto on Jan. 1, which triggered renewed calls for a review of evacuation plans nationwide, including around nuclear plants.

Kishida later told reporters the government would work to ensure the ruined Fukushima Daiichi plant is decommissioned safely and transparently, citing recent mishaps including a contaminated water leak within the plant complex.

In a step the government and TEPCO say is crucial for decommissioning, the plant started releasing treated radioactive wastewater into the sea last August. The controversial discharges have faced protests by local fishers and neighboring countries — especially China, which has banned Japanese seafood imports.

National memorial services have not been held in Tokyo since the 10th anniversary, and municipalities in the disaster-hit areas now host local services each year.

Today in History: March 12, Jazz legend Charlie 'Bird' Parker dies at 34

By The Associated Press undefined

Today in History

Today is Tuesday, March 12, the 72nd day of 2024. There are 294 days left in the year.

Today's highlight in history:

On March 12, 1955, legendary jazz saxophonist Charlie "Bird" Parker died in New York at age 34.

On this date:

In 1864, Lt. Gen. Ulysses S. Grant assumed command as General-in-Chief of the Union armies in the Civil War.

In 1912, the Girl Scouts of the USA had its beginnings as Juliette Gordon Low of Savannah, Georgia, founded the first American troop of the Girl Guides.

In 1925, Chinese revolutionary leader Sun Yat-sen died in Beijing.

In 1947, President Harry S. Truman announced what became known as the "Truman Doctrine" to help Greece and Turkey resist Communism.

In 1971, Hafez Assad was confirmed as president of Syria in a referendum.

In 1980, a Chicago jury found John Wayne Gacy Jr. guilty of the murders of 33 men and boys. (The next day, Gacy was sentenced to death; he was executed in May 1994.)

In 1987, the musical play "Les Miserables" opened on Broadway.

In 1994, the Church of England ordained its first women priests.

In 2003, Elizabeth Smart, the 15-year-old girl who vanished from her bedroom nine months earlier, was found alive in a Salt Lake City suburb with two drifters, Brian David Mitchell and Wanda Barzee. (Mitchell is serving a life sentence; Barzee was released from prison in September 2018.)

In 2009, disgraced financier Bernard Madoff pleaded guilty in New York to pulling off perhaps the biggest swindle in Wall Street history; he would be sentenced to 150 years behind bars. (Madoff died in prison in April 2021.)

In 2011, fifteen passengers were killed when a tour bus returning from a Connecticut casino scraped along a guard rail on the outskirts of New York City, tipped on its side and slammed into a pole that sheared it nearly end to end.

In 2012, Greece implemented the biggest debt write-down in history, swapping the bulk of its privately held bonds with new ones worth less than half their original value.

In 2017, a bus plowed into people taking part in an early morning street festival in Haiti, killing at least 34 of them.

In 2013, black smoke poured from the Sistine Chapel chimney, signaling that cardinals had failed on their first vote of the papal conclave to choose a new leader of the Catholic Church to succeed Benedict XVI.

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In 2018, Republicans on the House Intelligence Committee said they'd completed a draft report concluding that there was no collusion or coordination between Donald Trump's presidential campaign and Russia.

In 2021, the city of Minneapolis agreed to pay \$27 million to settle a civil lawsuit from George Floyd's family over the Black man's death in police custody.

In 2020, as the coronavirus crisis deepened in the U.S., the stock market had its biggest drop since the Black Monday crash of 1987, the NCAA canceled its basketball tournaments after earlier planning to play in empty arenas and the NHL joined the NBA in suspending play.

In 2022, Russian forces pounding the Ukrainian port city of Mariupol shelled a mosque that was sheltering more than 80 people, including children.

In 2023, "Everything, Everywhere All at Once" won seven Oscars, including best picture and three of the four acting awards.

Today's Birthdays: Politician, diplomat and civil rights activist Andrew Young is 92. Actor Barbara Feldon is 91. Actor-singer Liza Minnelli is 78. Sen. Mitt Romney, R-Utah, is 77. Singer-songwriter James Taylor is 76. Former Sen. Kent Conrad, D-N.D., is 76. Rock singer-musician Bill Payne (Little Feat) is 75. Actor Jon Provost (TV: "Lassie") is 74. Author Carl Hiaasen is 71. Rock musician Steve Harris (Iron Maiden) is 68. Actor Lesley Manville is 68. Actor Jerry Levine is 67. Singer Marlon Jackson (The Jackson Five) is 67. Actor Jason Beghe is 64. Actor Courtney B. Vance is 64. Actor Titus Welliver is 62. Former MLB All-Star Darryl Strawberry is 62. Actor Julia Campbell is 61. Actor Jake Weber is 61. Sen. Tammy Duckworth, D-Ill., is 56. Actor Aaron Eckhart is 56. CNN reporter Jake Tapper is 55. Rock musician Graham Coxon is 55. Actor Rhys Coiro is 45. Country singer Holly Williams is 43. Actor Samm (cq) Levine is 41. Actor Jaimie Alexander is 40. Actor Tyler Patrick Jones is 30.