

Groton Daily Independent

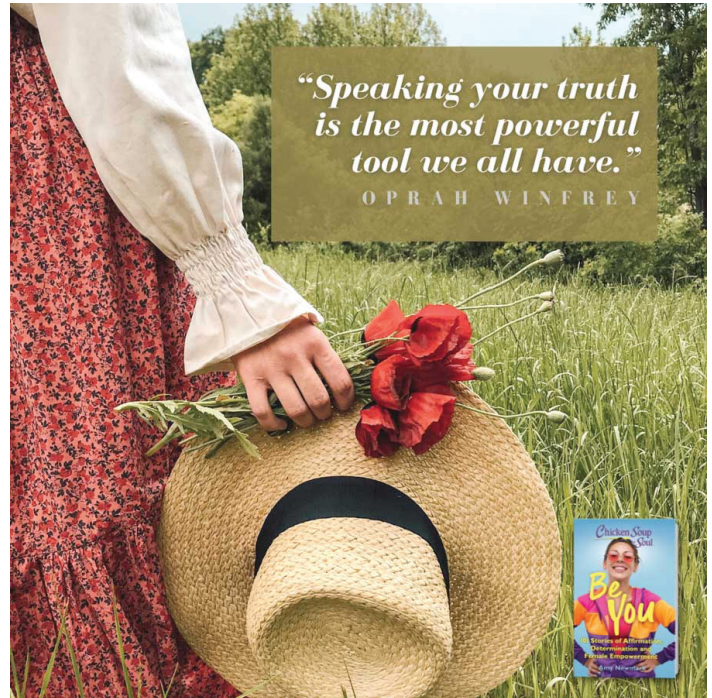
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Wednesday, March 13

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

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



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.

Friday, March 15

No School - Spring Break
State BBB Tournament at Rapid City
Senior Menu: Chicken cordon bleu hot dish, vegetable Catalina blend, pears, tapioca pudding, whole wheat bread.

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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House Judiciary Committee members yesterday interrogated Robert Hur, the special counsel who investigated President Joe Biden's handling of classified materials found in Biden's home and office from his time as vice president.

Haitian Prime Minister Ariel Henry announced his resignation yesterday amid the country's escalating gang violence, vowing to dissolve his government once a transitional council is established. The timing of an interim government remains unclear.

Fires erupted and partially halted production at a major oil refinery in western Russia yesterday after Ukraine reportedly launched at least two dozen drones against the country's energy infrastructure, one of its largest such cross-border attacks of the war. The plant is responsible for 6% of Russian crude oil production. The assault came as the US announced \$300M in weapons support to Ukraine, the first American aid package since December.

Sports, Entertainment, & Culture

"Dear England" and "Sunset Boulevard" lead for most nominations for 2024's Olivier Awards, the British equivalent to Broadway's Tony Awards.

Eric Carmen, singer known for "All by Myself" and "Hungry Eyes," dies at 74. David Mixner, longtime LGBTQ activist, dies at 77.

Social media influencer Andrew Tate briefly detained in Romania, due to be extradited to the UK over allegations of sexual aggression.

Science & Technology

Google restricts its Gemini chatbot from answering a range of questions about global elections.

Farmers reduce pesticide use by more than half in field tests using new spray nozzle designs; technology may help cut agricultural costs while lowering impact of pesticide runoff.

Researchers discover key single protein allowing mammals to sense cold temperatures; study reveals how body takes in certain sensory data, helping yield treatments for people with temperature hypersensitivity.

Business & Markets

US stock markets close higher (S&P 500 +1.1%, Dow +0.6%, Nasdaq +1.5%); S&P 500 notches record close. Consumer price index rose 0.4% month-over-month and 3.2% year-over-year in February.

Oracle shares close up 12%, reaching record high a day after posting better-than-expected quarterly results and teasing announcement with chip giant Nvidia.

Boeing delivery delays impacting growth plans for Southwest, Alaska, and United. Boeing 737 Max production line failed 33 of 89 product audits, per Federal Aviation Administration findings. Chilean authorities lead probe into sudden midair dive of LATAM Airlines Boeing 787 plane that injured 50 people.

Politics & World Affairs

House to vote today on bill banning TikTok (170 million US users) unless Chinese-based owner ByteDance divests within 165 days. Rep. Ken Buck (R, CO-4) to resign next week, narrowing Republican majority to 218-213.

President Joe Biden and former President Donald Trump win enough delegates to secure their respective parties' presidential nominations. Republican National Committee to lay off over 60 people and move most operations to Florida.

Gaza aid ship leaves Cyprus carrying 200 tons of food in first shipment by sea as the US and its allies work to open a maritime humanitarian corridor. India's government to implement 2019 law expediting citizenship to religious minorities from three countries, excluding Muslims.

Childcare, Groton Tigers Week, city alerts take stage at City Council meeting

Conversations continued Tuesday evening about how to provide childcare in Groton.

The city needs a solution, said Councilwoman Karyn Babcock during the City Council meeting.

"We have a lot of daycares in town that are at-home daycares," she said. "If we're going to invest in a daycare, I would like us to look into daycares that provide a learning environment for kids."

Moving forward, she said she would like to see plans for a daycare that includes a learning structure environment and curriculum for the kids. She wants the city to have a daycare with a director, employees, insurance and more, but, she added, she is not sure if it will be an individual investor or the city that needs to make it happen.

Daycare is one of the discussion points for the currently-forming Groton Economic Development Corp., which will focus on growing the community, she said.

"My goal for this development group is to get a for-real daycare," she said. "It needs to be a for-real daycare."

Councilman Kevin Nehls said he would like to see some sort of business plan for a new daycare. It would be hard to judge if a business like this would be a long-term project "without seeing if there's going to be a breakeven."

Babcock agreed, saying she'd like to see proposals including how many employees would be needed and how many kids could attend. It would help clear up if it would have to be a city project or private business project.

The city currently doesn't make a profit from the swimming pool, skating rink or baseball complex, but still provides those opportunities because they are needed in Groton, she said.

"The families need daycare, even if it runs at a loss," she added.

If the daycare is owned by an individual, it could close if the owners moves, Babcock said. If a corporation or the city owns it, it would be less likely to close for personal reasons.

"If our community is going to grow, we can't invite new young people to move here without a place," she said. "It's not a very good opportunity to bring their families here."

"We can't just ignore the fact that we need childcare," she said.

The formation of the economic development corp. is building toward something like this, said Mayor Scott Hanlon.

"The building blocks are trying to be put in place and moving on it," he said. "I think we're moving in a positive way."

City honors boys' basketball team

It's Groton Tiger Week!

The City of Groton proclaimed March 11 through 17 as "Groton Tiger Week" to honor the Groton Area High School Boys' Basketball team, and its "fine performance in the SoDak 16 as well as the regular playing season.

"...Groton Area School system has set a fine example in its role as an educational institution," the proclamation reads. "Groton City and the surrounding area are known for their support for the many athletic and academic programs of the Groton Area Schools."

Alerts by call, text or email?

The city will have a new way to alert citizens.

The City Council approved a more-than-two year contract with Thrillshare, parent company of city website provider Apptegy. The contract includes \$1,666 pro-rated for the first year, plus \$2,000 per year for two years.

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The contract, for unlimited calls, text and email alerts, would replace OneCall, the program that allows the city to send automated calls to citizens

Currently, the city has to be cautious on using OneCall as it has to pay for each completed call. The new system, said Finance Officer Douglas Heinrich, would be unlimited.

"The benefit would be its unlimited," he said. "We can do text, calls or emails."

Councilman Brian Bahr said it seems like a good deal, as long as the city doesn't end up overusing it and frustrating residents.

- Applications for a full-time public works laborer will be accepted starting Wednesday through April 16. The job includes performing tasks related to installing, maintaining and repairing city equipment and facilities, according to the job description approved Tuesday.

- Summer salaries for 2024 have been finalized. The City Council held its second reading of Ordinance No. 775, setting summer salaries for temporary employees, including baseball and softball coaches, lifeguards and public works laborers.

- o \$16 per hour with an additional 25 cents for each year of service for the public works laborer, cemetery caretaker and swimming pool manager positions.

- o \$14 per hour with an additional 25 cents for each year of service for the assistant part time swimming pool manager position.

- o \$11.20 per hour with an additional 25 cents for each year of service for the swimming pool lifeguard, baseball groundskeeper and baseball gatekeeper positions.

- o Regular salary plus \$1 hourly for WSI lifeguards during swimming lessons with a \$25 bonus per private lesson.

- o Regular salary plus 50 cents for WSI assistant lifeguard during swimming lessons.

- o \$50 daily plus 50 percent of net profits for the concession manager position.

- o \$4,000 yearly plus \$77.32 for each year of service for the baseball coordinator position.

- o \$1,500 yearly plus \$25.77 for each year of service for the softball coordinator position.

- o \$4,000 yearly for the legion baseball coach.

- o \$3,000 yearly plus \$51.55 for each year of service for the junior legion baseball coach.

- o \$2,000 yearly plus \$51.55 for each year of service for the junior teenager baseball coach position (if there is only one hired).

- o \$1,500 yearly plus \$38.66 for each year of service for the junior teenager baseball coach position (if two are hired).

- o \$2,500 yearly plus \$50 for each year of service for the day baseball/softball coach.

- o \$1,000 yearly plus \$20.62 for each year of service for the girls softball coach (U8, U10, U12, U14) position.

- Five bids were received for 2024 street surfacing improvements. The council awarded the project to Topkote out of Yankton with a bid of \$2.568 per square yard for a total project cost of \$95,016. Other bids received included \$3.05 per square yard from The Road Guy Construction Company in Yankton, \$3.10 per square yard from Jensen Rock and Sand in Aberdeen, \$3.15 per square yard from Pave LLC in Omaha, Neb., and \$3.75 per square yard from Bituminous Paving Inc. in Big Stone City, Minn. Topkote has won the city's bids for the last few years.

- The City Council awarded its 2024 gravel contract to Krueger Brothers Gravel & Dirt in Groton. The quote opened Tuesday was for \$19.85 per yard of gravel, the same as last year's bid.

- The city will hold its annual equalization meeting March 19.

- City offices will be closed March 29 and April 1 for Good Friday and Easter Monday.

- Elizabeth Varin

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March 4-10, 2024

It was a busy week out in Washington! Spring fly-in season is in full swing, which means that many of you are coming out to DC with different organizations to visit with us on Capitol Hill. I met with several South Dakotans from all across our great state this week. I'm looking forward to seeing even more of

you this spring. Beyond meetings with South Dakotans, we were also busy with hearings and classified briefings as well as several votes on the Senate floor. One of these votes was on a bill to fund six areas of the federal government for the remainder of the fiscal year. You can read all about that and more in my Weekly Round[s] Up:

South Dakotans I met with: Dr. Jim Rankin, President of the South Dakota School of Mines & Technology; members of the South Dakota Broadcasters Association; South Dakota Veterans of Foreign Wars; the Dakota Credit Union Association; Linn Evans, CEO of Black Hills Energy; Leila Balsiger and Katie Schulte, South Dakota's delegates to the United States Senate Youth Program; and Disabled American Veterans Department of South Dakota.

Visited with South Dakotans from: Aberdeen, Beresford, Brandt, Brookings, Canton, Dell Rapids, Newell, Parkston, Plankinton, Rapid City, Sioux Falls, Spearfish, Winner and Yankton.

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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Other meetings: General Michael Langley, Commander of U.S. Africa Command; General Gregory Guillot, Commander of U.S. Northern Command and North American Aerospace Defense Command; Dr. Vineeta Agarwala; and Wayne Peacock, CEO of United Services Automobile Association (USAA). I also spoke at the National Council of State Housing Agencies Legislative Conference about my work on the Senate Committee on Banking, Housing, and Urban Affairs.

Votes taken: 17 – most notably was our vote on the Consolidated Appropriations Act. Remember the homework assignment we discussed last week? We got half of it done last Friday! I voted yes on this appropriations package which includes funding for the following areas: Military Construction-Veterans Affairs; Agriculture; Commerce; Energy-Water Development; Transportation, Housing and Urban Development; and Interior. Funding for the other six appropriations bills expires on March 22.

I was able to secure nearly \$150 million in funding that will directly support South Dakota projects. After hearing from South Dakotans, we provided input and requests to make certain that this federal funding goes to projects that have the support of local stakeholders, not just Washington bureaucrats. These projects, which include housing, transportation and water services, will benefit South Dakota for years to come. You can read more about the Consolidated Appropriations Act and see a full list of South Dakota funding projects here.

Hearings: I attended five hearings this week. One was in the Select Committee on Intelligence. Two were in the Senate Armed Services Committee. I also attended a hearing for the Senate Banking Committee where we heard from Jerome Powell, Chairman of the Federal Reserve. I had the opportunity to ask him about the Fed's Basel III Endgame proposal as well as the high inflation rates. You can watch my full line of questions here.

I also attended a hearing this week for a committee on which I do not serve – the Senate Judiciary Committee. Eric Schulte and Camela Theeler were both nominated to serve on the U.S. District Court for the District of South Dakota. I am proud to support both of these nominees. I was honored to introduce them at their nomination hearing alongside my South Dakota colleague Senator John Thune. You can watch my full introduction here.

Classified briefings: I had one classified briefing with the Senate Armed Services Committee's Strategic Forces Subcommittee.

My staff in South Dakota visited: Aberdeen and Brookings

Steps taken this past week: 42,311 steps or 21.07 miles



Brown County Burn Ban in effect

The Brown County Commission has enacted a fire danger emergency and is prohibiting open burning. This will go into effect immediately on March 12, 2024 and will be in place until further notice.

The ban is imposed to prohibit or restrict open burning with the exception of barbeque grills.

This ban is put in place in order to protect the public health and safety.

Questions can be directed to the Brown County Emergency Management Office at 605-626-7122.

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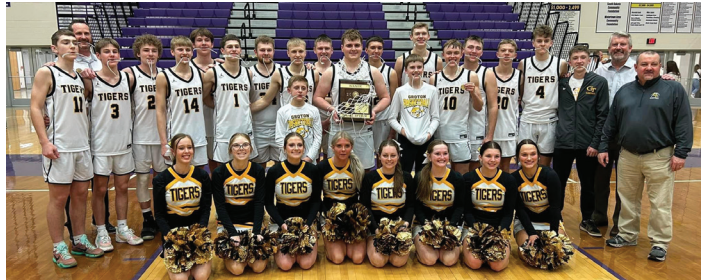
at the State A Boys Basketball Tournament!

Themes for state basketball are
Thursday: Hawaiian/I hate winter
Friday: USA
Saturday: State Shirts/Extreme Black and Gold

State A's Boys Basketball Community Hospitality Room
 Thursday March 14th - Doors open following the 6 p.m. game. *The basketball team will be making their appearance here after they watch part of the 7:45 game. There will be free snacks, appetizers, and drinks to share with all. (No alcohol or smoking)
 Friday March 15th - Doors will open depending on our Tiger's game time.

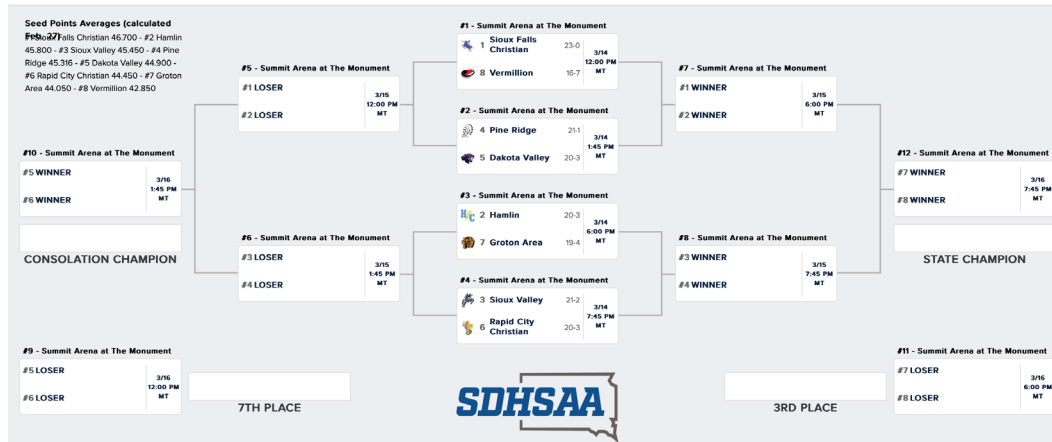
Win - We play at 7:45 p.m. MT - Doors will open at 2:30 p.m. Boys will be coming to eat pregame meal at that time before their game.
 Lose - We play at 1:45 p.m. MT - Doors will open at 11 a.m. Then doors will be open again after our game. *There will be free snacks, appetizers, and drinks to share with all. (No alcohol or smoking)

Minneluzahan Senior Center - Rapid City, SD 315 N 4' St. (This is just outside the Monument across the parking lot of E1 & E2) EVERYONE IS WELCOME...GO TIGERS!!!



Pictured in back, left to right, are Kassen Keough, Assistant Coach Kyle Gerlach, Blake Pauli, Teylor Diegel, Karson Zak, Turner Thompson, Keegen Tracy, Holden Sippel, Jacob Zak, Logan Warrington, Jayden Schwan, Gage Sippel, Lane Tietz, Colby Dunker, Easton Weber, Ryder Johnson, Braxton Imrie, Head Coach Brian Dolan, Assistant Coach Matt Locke; in the middle row are Trey Tietz, Logan Ringgenberg and Major Dolan; cheerleaders in front are Anna Bisbee, Emma Schinkel, Hannah Monson, Abby Jensen, Shea Jandel, Cadence Feist, Breslyn Jeschke and Paisley Mitchell. (Photo from Robyn Warrington's facebook page)

Class A - State



Good Luck Tigers from . . .
 Allied Climate Professionals
 Avantara
 Bary Keith at Harr Motors
 Basekamp Lodge
 BK Custom Ts & More
 Blocker Construction
 Dacotah Bank
 Farmers Union Coop
 Fliehs Sales & Service
 Full Circle Ag
 Greg Johnson Construction
 Groton Ag Partners
 Groton American Legion
 Groton Chamber

Groton Chiropractic Clinic
 Groton Dairy Queen
 Hanlon Brothers
 Heartland Energy
 James Valley
 Telecommunications
 John Sieh Agency
 Jungle Lanes & Lounge
 Ken's Food Fair
 KR Body Shop
 Krueger Brothers
 Lavish Luxury Salon Suite
 Lori's Pharmacy
 Merry Lone Real Estate
 MJ's Sinclair
 Northeast Chiropractic Clinic

Paetznick-Garness Funeral Chapel
 Poet
 Rix Farms/R&M Farms
 S & S Lumber
 Spanier Harvesting & Trucking
 Sun & Sea Travel Co. by Becah Fliehs
 The Groton Independent
 The Meat House of Andover
 Weber Landscaping
 Weismantel Insurance Agency
 Witte Exteriors LLC

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The Groton Area Boys Basketball Team got a send-off by the Groton Fire Department, Groton Police and the elementary children as they head off to the State A Tournament. The team practiced at the Aberdeen Civic Arena and stayed the night in Pierre before heading to Rapid City this morning. (Photo by Paul Kosel)

PROUD TO SUPPORT NATIONAL AG DAY

MARCH 19 / #AGDAY24



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Agriculture Works Here. > [FCSAmerica.com](https://www.FCSAmerica.com)

Second Arts Journal showcases creative variety

By Jim Speirs, Executive Director, Arts South Dakota

The 2024 issue of South Dakota Arts Journal just came out this month, mailed to thousands of South Dakotans who are members of Arts South Dakota or subscribers to South Dakota Magazine—and the enthusiasm for this annual arts publication continues to grow. Our first issue sold out in months, and the second issue, available at newsstands and bookstores right now, showcases the incredible variety of arts in our state.

One of the stories in the exciting second issue of South Dakota Arts Journal spotlights new ideas in western art, with a colorful array of work by state artists. Another reminds us of the local pride and summer fun of community bands and their legacy in Dakota towns. Young composers whose voices speak through their music are highlighted, as is the power of creativity to boost our well being. So many great stories, each giving us a slice of the unique cultural wellspring that is South Dakota.

South Dakota Arts Journal is sharing our arts stories with an incredibly large and diverse audience. About 160,000 people across the nation—a larger number than for any previous state arts publication—will read the issue. As a large, colorful magazine, Arts Journal gives us the chance to tell stories in depth and explore more topics of interest in each year's issue of the magazine.

This vital source of arts information in South Dakota would not be possible without the support and participation of individuals, organizations and businesses throughout our state. The South Dakota Arts Journal is a collaboration between Arts South Dakota, South Dakota Magazine and the South Dakota Arts Council, along with sponsors and readers like you. You can find the publication for sale across South Dakota or directly from South Dakota Magazine. Please pick up a copy, or if you already have one, we hope you'll share it with others—or get extra copies for your friends and relatives in other states.

South Dakota Arts Journal gives us the opportunity to celebrate the passion of South Dakota artists and arts advocates and share the pride we all feel in our creative state. Please visit www.ArtsSouthDakota.org for more about South Dakota Arts Journal and ways to get your copy today!



Esports: What to know about South Dakota's newest prep sport

By Lynn Taylor Rick
SDN Communications

A new activity is set to join football, volleyball as well as track and field as a sanctioned high school sport in South Dakota.

Esports has been surging in popularity over the past decade — the streaming audience is expected to hit 1.4 billion in 2025, and several South Dakota colleges have established esports programs.

Twenty South Dakota high schools started esports programs for the 2023-24 pilot season in preparation for the first sanctioned season by the South Dakota High School Activities Association this coming fall.

Approximately 170 colleges nationwide offer scholarships to esports players. Supporters say esports prepares students for tech careers and teaches sportsmanship and team-building in the same vein as other sports.

For Dan Swartos, executive director of the SDHSAA, making esports a sanctioned activity fits perfectly with the association's mission to engage all students.

"It's a way to get kids involved who might not otherwise be involved with their schools," he said.

The state's best esports teams will converge at South Dakota State University on March 22-23 for the first high school state tournament. SDN Communications, a business internet provider in South Dakota and southwestern Minnesota, is the platinum sponsor of the event.

Here are four things you need to know about the pilot season of esports in South Dakota.

Why did the SDHSAA decide to sanction esports?

The activities association began exploring the addition of esports about four years ago because of popular demand, Swartos said. Nationally, more states have sanctioned the sport. Colleges also offer esports scholarships and have their own competitive teams. It has become a multibillion-dollar business with an estimated 3.26 billion people worldwide playing video games.

The popularity of gaming continues to grow, and the SDHSAA saw an opportunity to engage more students in school activities.

"If you've got kids, your kids are either playing or watching others playing games," Swartos said. "Our job is to provide opportunities for kids and meet them where they're at."

Swartos said esports not only gives students a chance to compete but also teaches life skills and leadership. Just like football or debate, esports offers important lessons for participating students, he said. Players must strategize and create game plans to defeat their opponents. They learn to work with other players and enjoy competing for their schools.

"They work together as a team," Swartos said. "They share the experience and have that camaraderie. And that's important."

What has the first year of esports at the high school level looked like?

For the 2023-24 year, esports is being piloted in 20 schools. Next year, esports will be rolled out to all interested schools and become fully sanctioned.

"We are doing a practice year to get everything set up and work through the bugs," Swartos said.

Schools piloting esports this year include Aberdeen, Baltic, Beresford, Canistota, Dakota Valley, Deuel, Douglas, Flandreau Public, Hot Springs, Lakota Tech, Leola, Madison, Mobridge-Pollock, Northwestern Area, Platte-Geddes, Rapid City Central, Sioux Falls, Tea Area, Warner and Woonsocket.

The Sioux Falls School District has a combined program from all the city's public schools, but the goal is to have a team at each high school.

Teams play against each other virtually together in school computer labs in matches coordinated by North Dakota-based Fenworks. After completing the match, both coaches take a picture of the final score and send it to Fenworks for tracking and standings.

Which titles, or games, are teams piloting?

The esports pilot started with four competitive titles: Rocket League, Super Smash Bros., League of

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Legends and chess. Rocket League is a soccer-type game with cars rather than people playing the sport. Super Smash Bros. uses characters from Nintendo games who fight to knock each other out of the arena. In League of Legends, two teams of five players battle to destroy the opposing team's base. Besides Super Smash Bros., all the other games are played on PCs.

There are five players on a League of Legends team and up to three on a Rocket League team. Super Smash Bros. and chess are both individual titles. Schools can have multiple teams for each title, and teams have backup players as well.

What does a high school esports season look like?

South Dakota high schools compete in an eight-week esports season. It's considered a winter sport, kicking off in November. Each game title has one competition a week against another school along with weekly team practices and professional coaching available. The weekly contests are virtual.

Schools collaborate with Fenworks to coordinate licensing requirements, programming and scheduling of competitions. The eight-week competitive season's results determine which teams advance to the in-person state tournament.

This year's state esports tournament will be held in person March 22-23 at South Dakota State University in Brookings. The event is free and open to the public. Fenworks chief sales officer Gannon Karsky said there are also additional opportunities for vendors and colleges to sponsor the season and tournament to support the players and offer in-person recruitment.



SOUTH DAKOTA SEARCHLIGHT

<https://southdakotasearchlight.com>

Housing board 'in the final stretch' of \$200 million worth of infrastructure awards

BY: MAKENZIE HUBER - MARCH 12, 2024 6:00 PM

The South Dakota Housing Development Authority Board has awarded about \$113 million in taxpayer funding to help pay for infrastructure at 73 housing projects across the state in the last six months.

The board did not award any new grants or loans from the state's Housing Infrastructure Financing Program at its March meeting, marking its first since September without a list of infrastructure applications to consider.

"We're in the final stretch of getting that out and getting deals closed," said Scott Erickson, board chairman, during the group's Tuesday meeting.

The program is a \$200 million pool of state and federal money designed to ease the burden of high inflation for homebuilders in a state with a high need for workforce housing. Lawmakers created the program in 2023, after legal wrangling held up the funds the previous year. It covers up to one-third of the cost of a development's roads, sewer lines, street lights and other costs associated with building new neighborhoods.

The board has received 97 applications worth about \$143 million so far. Director of South Dakota Housing Chas Olson said the organization is working with three current applications, with two on the waiting list for funds "in the event that any grant funding is returned or underspent."

Several other projects are close to submitting applications for the infrastructure program, Olson said.

"We anticipate several closings to occur between now and the April board meeting," Olson said. "So, we should really start so see some of the funding getting disbursed to some of these projects here in the near future."

Aside from the program update, the Housing Development Authority approved housing tax credit waiver requests for Hidden Valley Stables in Sioux Falls and Americana Apartments in Pierre, and it committed to additional funds for Hi Mountain Estates in Box Elder.

The most recent grants and loans from the infrastructure program were awarded at the board's meeting in February.

Housing infrastructure awards, February 2024

Chestnut Ridge Development, 48 single family homes, 42 multifamily townhomes, Brandon: \$1.3 million
East Side Sewer Main Project, sewer service for Chestnut Ridge, Brandon: \$1.2 million
Jolley School Site, 13 single-family lots, Vermillion: \$325,000
Sedivy Lane Sanitary Sewer Improvements, sewer service for 44 additional single-family lots in the short term, potential for hundreds more, Rapid City: \$1.09 million
Soncy Addition, 18 single-family lots for ownership, 92 for rental homes, Spearfish: \$1.4 million
Spilde Subdivision, 111 single family units, Aurora, \$1.03 million

South Dakota ranchers, politicians applaud new 'Product of USA' labeling rule

BY: JOSHUA HAIAR - MARCH 12, 2024 4:00 PM

South Dakota politicians and representatives of the cattle industry are applauding a new U.S. Department of Agriculture rule aimed at ensuring the voluntary "Product of USA" label means what it says.

The rule mandates that only meat, poultry and egg products derived from animals born, raised, slaughtered and processed in the United States can bear the "Product of USA" or "Made in the USA" labels.

USDA Secretary Tom Vilsack said the rule will protect consumers and foster a fair marketplace.

"This final rule will ensure that when consumers see 'Product of USA' they can trust the authenticity of that label and know that every step involved, from birth to processing, was done here in America," he said Monday in a press release.

Warren Symens, president of the South Dakota Cattlemen's Association, said the prior rule allowed the voluntary label to be used on beef that was repackaged in the U.S., no matter where it originated.

"We have long held the position that this was a violation of the consumer's trust, and that the 'Product of the USA' label needs to have the truth and integrity behind it that consumers expect from our nation's beef producers," Symens said in a news release.

The labeling update is different from mandatory Country of Origin Labeling, which was enacted and later revoked in 2015 after threats of tariffs from the World Trade Organization. Bipartisan efforts exist to reinstate the rule for beef.

Republican U.S. Sen. Mike Rounds, of South Dakota, applauded the USDA's new rule on voluntary labels. He previously introduced legislation, sent a letter to the USDA, met with Vilsack, hosted a roundtable discussion and took other actions to push for the rule.

"Integrity has been restored to the 'Product of the USA' label," Rounds said in a news release.

He also called for further actions to restore Country of Origin Labeling and address the anti-competitive effects of consolidation in the meatpacking industry.

Sen. John Thune and Rep. Dusty Johnson, both South Dakota Republicans, took to social media to celebrate the rule change.

"Glad to see that [the USDA] finalized a rule to address the Product of the USA labeling loophole," Thune wrote. "An important step to ensure only products from animals that are born, raised, & harvested in the U.S. can have this label — creating transparency that benefits both producers & consumers."

Johnson wrote, "'Product of the USA' should mean it's American beef from ranch to table. I'm glad USDA's rule closes a loophole and meets producer and consumer expectations."

The South Dakota Farmers Union, the United States Cattlemen's Association, R-CALF USA, the South Dakota Stockgrowers Association, and the South Dakota Cattlemen's Association all contributed statements to Rounds' news release supporting the rule change.

Regulators approve early start for largest solar farm in state

BY: JOSHUA HAIAR - MARCH 12, 2024 2:55 PM

Utility regulators took actions Tuesday that will allow a solar energy project to start producing electricity ahead of schedule at the largest solar farm in the state.

Wild Springs Solar's \$190 million project sprawls across areas totaling 1,499 acres — about 2 square miles — of rangeland in Pennington County, just south of New Underwood. The project was built by National Grid Renewables, of Bloomington, Minnesota.

The project's construction phase may conclude ahead of schedule. So, the company requested a change to its permit conditions that will allow it to start operations as soon as this Friday rather than the previ-

ously anticipated date of May 1.

The state Public Utilities Commission required the solar farm to post a surety bond to make sure there is enough money to safely remove the solar panels and clean up the site when the solar farm is no longer used. The initial bond amounts were \$2.5 million and then \$3 million. The new surety bond amount is \$4.14 million.

The changes in the bond amount reflect changing estimates of the future decommissioning costs. The changing cost estimates are due to the fluctuating value of scrap steel. If the solar farm is shut down, some of the steel could be sold for scrap to offset the cost of decommissioning the project.

"The price of HMS (scrap steel) in August 2022 was \$505 whereas it is now \$325 in January 2024," the company wrote. An attorney for the company, Mollie Smith, said that was partly due to high demand as supply chain problems arose during the COVID-19 pandemic.

"Things were in high demand and it was difficult to get them," Smith told the commission.

Basin Electric Power Cooperative, which is headquartered in Bismarck, North Dakota, and serves numerous rural electric cooperatives across the region, will purchase the solar farm's electricity. The project can produce up to 128 megawatts of electricity. According to the Solar Energy Industries Association, South Dakota had only 102 megawatts of capacity from other solar projects at the end of last year, ranking 47th in the nation. Those 102 megawatts were enough to power about 12,000 homes.

Between projects like Wild Springs and the 80-megawatt Fall River Solar project, solar electricity generation in South Dakota is expected to rise by 328 megawatts in the next five years. Fall River Solar is a 500-acre solar farm in Fall River County near Oelrichs.

AI disinformation, threats to poll workers top U.S. Senate panel list of election worries

BY: ARIANA FIGUEROA - MARCH 12, 2024 8:02 PM

WASHINGTON — Senators on the U.S. Senate Rules Committee expressed concerns Tuesday that poll workers may need protection and that artificial intelligence could interfere in the fall elections.

Leading members of the committee said AI has already been used to promote disinformation that has interfered with elections, while elections workers have for years experienced intimidation. Both issues seriously threaten election integrity, the senators said.

"We are very concerned about what we have seen in just snippets of ads and videos that have gone out that attack candidates on both sides of the aisle, but they are complete deep fakes and not the actual candidate and you can't even tell it's not the candidate," Rules Committee Chair Amy Klobuchar said.

Klobuchar, a Minnesota Democrat, said AI is already being used to interfere with elections, noting voters in New Hampshire received a robocall in the voice of President Joe Biden telling them not to vote in the state's presidential primary.

Sen. Mark Warner, a Virginia Democrat who also chairs the Senate Intelligence Committee, said he is concerned that intelligence agencies have indicated that "we are potentially less protected as we go into 2024 in terms of the security of our elections than we were during 2020."

"That's a pretty stunning fact," Warner said.

Colorado Democratic Sen. Michael Bennet expressed similar concerns and said he's not surprised by the threat to democracy that AI can pose, especially on social media platforms.

"Every single one of these platforms, I think, virtually, has been used to spread ... disinformation," he said.

Jocelyn Benson, Michigan's secretary of state, said Michigan is focused on two things for the upcoming election: "fighting deception and misinformation about our elections and protecting the people who protect democracy."

Benson expressed concern about how AI could be used to spread disinformation.

"I am also worried AI will make it easier to create and distribute hyperlocal disinformation that misleads voters about the voting process or conditions at their specific polling site," she said.

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The top Republican on the committee, Sen. Deb Fischer of Nebraska, asked Brian Kruse, the election commissioner of Douglas County, Nebraska, what unique challenges he faces in preparing for elections.

Kruse echoed concerns about disinformation, saying AI could be used to impersonate him or generate an incorrect polling location.

He said having trust in the community and with voters is important so that "when issues do occur, you can contact them and get the correct information out."

Worker safety

State and local elections officials also told the committee they struggled with threats to election workers. Benson advocated for Congress to make it a federal crime to harm an election worker. She argued that many jurisdictions can't afford private security to protect election workers who are threatened.

"They are regular people, our neighbors and community members, civil servants who drive themselves to town hall meetings, who go back and forth to their offices and homes, often dropping off or picking up children and groceries along the way," she said.

Democratic Sen. Jon Ossoff of Georgia asked Benson how threats to election workers impact their work.

"Not only does it cause us to fear going to work... it takes us away from the actual work of administering elections every time we need to issue protections or think about our own safety," Benson said.

Democratic Sen. Jeff Merkley of Oregon said he's been hearing from officials in his state about the difficulty to recruit election officials. He asked Benson if she was seeing that in Michigan.

"Yes, and it has (been difficult) since the 2020 election cycle," Benson said.

Isaac Cramer, the executive director of the Charleston County Board Of Voter Registration and Elections in South Carolina, said that more than 70% of the state's election directors have left their posts since 2020.

Cramer said that as Charleston County prepares for the 2024 election, his office's main concerns are protecting election workers, the security of polling places and the assurance of reliable federal funding.

He said that during the June 2022 primaries, "our polling places became battlegrounds for disruptive elements seeking to undermine the electoral process."

He said one local group traveled to the various polling locations on Election Day and harassed pool managers and "called law enforcement to come to polling places and demanded they arrest our poll managers."

Paper ballots

Several witnesses from GOP-led states touted their states' use of paper ballots and voter identification laws.

Wes Allen, Alabama's secretary of state, advocated for senators to change federal law to require voter ID. He also approvingly noted Alabama passed a law to use paper ballots and ban voting machines that connect to the internet.

Kruse also said Nebraska uses paper ballots so voting machines are not connected to the internet.

"There is a paper trail," he said.

Kruse, of Nebraska, added that his state has increased the number of poll workers by creating a system to draft workers from a pool in a process similar to jury duty.

"Some advantages to drafting poll workers are increased community awareness of the election process, less difficulty in securing election workers, and a younger workforce with an average age in the mid-50s while the majority of poll workers nationwide are over 60," he said.

Voting rights debate

Earlier Tuesday, the Senate Judiciary Committee held a separate hearing about protecting voting rights in the U.S. The first panel of witnesses included GOP Rep. Wesley Hunt of Texas and Democratic Sen. Raphael Warnock of Georgia.

The chair of the committee, Sen. Dick Durbin, Democrat of Illinois, said the hearing needed to be held because of the "ongoing assault of voting rights," and he advocated for the passage of a bill named for

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late U.S. Rep. John R. Lewis, which would establish a new formula to require all states to get permission from the Department of Justice before making changes to voting laws or putting in place new voting requirements.

Lewis, who died in 2020, was a champion of voting rights and known for his advocacy during the civil rights era. He nearly died on "Bloody Sunday," marching with other advocates from Selma, Alabama, to the state capitol in Montgomery in 1965.

With Republicans in control of the House, the bill is unlikely to receive a vote in that chamber, even if the Senate manages to garner the 60 votes needed.

The bill, which would restore a requirement of the Voting Rights Act that certain states receive preclearance from the federal government before changing voting laws, has failed to pass several times.

The Supreme Court stripped the preclearance requirement in a 2013 decision.

Republicans, then-Democratic Sen. Kyrsten Sinema of Arizona and West Virginia Democratic Sen. Joe Manchin III blocked an attempt in 2022 to change Senate rules to allow the bill to pass with a simple majority vote.

There are currently no Senate Republican co-sponsors of the bill.

"Across the country the right to vote is under assault," Warnock said.

He pointed to his own state of Georgia, which overhauled its voting laws after the 2020 election that sent two Democratic senators – Warnock, the state's first Black senator, and Ossoff, its first Jewish senator – to Congress and the state's electoral votes for President Joe Biden.

The top Republican on the committee, South Carolina Sen. Lindsey Graham, pushed back, arguing that states should be allowed to pass their own voting laws.

He added that while Republicans "admire the name John Lewis and his heroic efforts during the 60s," GOP lawmakers view that bill as an attempt to rewrite the Supreme Court decision in 2013 – a ruling that gutted Section 5 of the Voting Rights Act.

"You won't find much support on this side of the aisle," Graham said of the John Lewis bill.

The Brennan Center for Justice, a left-leaning think tank, published a report in 2022 on how strict voter ID laws disproportionately impact voters of color.

Hunt, who is also Black, disagreed with Democrats and argued that voter identification laws don't disenfranchise Black voters. He pointed out that he has several forms of government IDs.

"We don't need a new solution to a problem that doesn't exist," Hunt said.

GOP U.S. Sen. Lankford of Oklahoma blocks bill expanding IVF for vets, service members

BY: JENNIFER SHUTT - MARCH 12, 2024 5:45 PM

WASHINGTON — Washington state Democratic Sen. Patty Murray tried to pass a bill Tuesday that would expand access to in vitro fertilization for military service members and veterans, but Oklahoma Republican Sen. James Lankford raised an objection and prevented the legislation from moving forward.

"The recent chaos in Alabama caused by far-right ideology put a national spotlight on just how crucial IVF is to so many women and families who are desperately hoping and trying to have children," Murray said.

Lankford cited procedural concerns with the bill, including that it hasn't been debated and reported out by the Senate Veterans Affairs Committee during this Congress and that it didn't have a price tag from the nonpartisan Congressional Budget Office.

The Alabama state Supreme Court's ruling last month that frozen embryos are regarded as children under state laws inserted considerable uncertainty into IVF there.

State lawmakers have since approved a bill to provide protections for IVF doctors and clinics in the state, though there are still numerous unanswered questions.

The Alabama state Supreme Court's actions led to a nationwide debate among Republicans about whether they should support IVF throughout the country.

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"If Republicans really do now want to support IVF, if they really do want to help people trying to grow their family — why not start with our veterans and our service members?" Murray said.

"These are the men and women who fought to protect our families," she added. "Why don't we make sure they have the support they need to grow theirs?"

Lankford questions definition of infertility

Lankford rejected the idea that Republicans don't support IVF.

"I understand it's become vogue in this current season right now to be able to say Republicans are somehow opposed to life because they're opposed to IVF," Lankford said. "I just don't find that."

Lankford questioned definitions in the bill, including that the definition of infertility "includes inability to reproduce or safely carry a pregnancy to term."

That was "very broad" and Lankford said he was trying to "figure out what that means."

One senator can block a bill

Murray tried to pass the bill through unanimous consent, a process that allows any senator to object to approving it.

While unanimous consent is the fastest way to approve bills in the Senate, it's also the easiest way to block them if any one senator doesn't like the policy.

The unanimous consent process lets lawmakers avoid having to hold numerous procedural votes to advance a bill, which require the support of at least 60 lawmakers, followed by the simply-majority passage vote. That process can take weeks in the Senate.

Murray's attempt to pass her IVF for veterans bill through the Senate came one day after the Department of Veterans Affairs announced it would expand access to the procedure for eligible unmarried veterans and those in same-sex relationships.

In order to qualify, veterans must be able to connect their difficulty having children or infertility to a military connected health issue. The new VA policy also allows the use of donor eggs, sperm and embryos.

Duckworth attempt on IVF also stymied

Lankford's objection to Murray's IVF for veterans bill happened less than two weeks after another Republican senator, Cindy Hyde-Smith of Mississippi, blocked Illinois Democratic Sen. Tammy Duckworth from passing a bill through unanimous consent to protect access to IVF nationwide.

Murray's bill, titled Veteran Families Health Services Act, would allow all veterans to access IVF treatments as well as other fertility treatments at VA facilities.

The legislation would allow military members to freeze their eggs or sperm before shipping out to a combat zone or a hazardous duty assignment. It would broaden access to VA's adoption services as well.

Resolve, the national infertility association, supports the bill, saying it would "expand DoD and VA health care to include comprehensive family-building assistance for servicemembers and veterans — allowing servicemembers to freeze their eggs prior to deployment, providing adoption assistance, and expanding access to IVF."

Murray, speaking from the Senate floor Tuesday, said the bill was the type of "straightforward legislation" that lawmakers should approve through unanimous consent.

The bill, she said, "should not be controversial, especially if Republicans are serious, even in the slightest, about supporting IVF."

But Murray noted that fetal personhood laws, backed by many conservative Republicans and anti-abortion groups, would throw IVF access into question.

"When Republicans support legislation that says a fertilized egg has the same rights and protections as a living, breathing human person, that is fundamentally incompatible with supporting IVF," Murray said.

Native activist says treaty rights forgotten in DAPL trial

Iron Eyes says Army Corps had little impact on protester behavior

BY: MARY STEURER - MARCH 12, 2024 10:30 AM

An attorney and Indigenous rights advocate involved in the Dakota Access Pipeline protests said the American justice system simply isn't equipped to uphold treaty law.

That's partially why the demonstrations were so important, he said.

"We don't like our chances in court," said Chase Iron Eyes, director and lead counsel for the Lakota People's Law Project.

Iron Eyes was called as a witness for the United States in a lawsuit over the federal government's response to protests against the pipeline, commonly referred to as DAPL.

Protesters gathered in south central North Dakota in 2016 and 2017 to support the Standing Rock Sioux Tribe, which was opposed to the pipeline out of concerns it infringed on tribal sovereignty and would pollute the tribe's water supply.

North Dakota argues that actions taken by federal agencies during the demonstrations exacerbated and prolonged the protests, causing the state to incur at least \$38 million in expenses. Attorneys for the United States have countered that North Dakota is overstating both the costs of the demonstrations and the federal government's influence over the course of the protests.

The bench trial, conducted by U.S. District Court Judge Dan Traynor, began in February. It's on track to finish at the end of this week.

Testifying was a frustrating experience, Iron Eyes said after a hearing Monday afternoon.

While the lawsuit is between North Dakota and the federal government, tribal sovereignty is central to the case, he said.

"We were there on a completely different basis of law," Iron Eyes said.

One of the main arguments put forward by North Dakota is that the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers was complicit in protesters' occupation of federal and private land north of the Cannonball River. But an 1851 treaty between the Sioux Nation and the United States government suggests that area is tribal land, Iron Eyes said.

"We signed a treaty with the Americans and we didn't forget," he testified. "Some people act like it's ancient history, but we didn't forget."

Iron Eyes was raised on the Standing Rock Indian Reservation and was an enrolled member of the tribe until 2019. He now lives on the Pine Ridge Reservation in South Dakota and is an enrolled member of the Oglala Sioux Tribe.

Though he said he was not a lead organizer of DAPL protests, he got involved early on. In 2016, Iron Eyes was also running as a Democrat to represent North Dakota in the U.S. House of Representatives.

Iron Eyes said that given the tribes' history with the U.S. government, many people came into the protests already highly distrustful of the Army Corps of Engineers and other agencies.

From what he could tell, any actions by the Corps to manage the demonstrations largely went ignored.

"The Army Corps wasn't really relevant to what we were doing," Iron Eyes testified, noting that Standing Rock leadership may have felt differently.

He pointed to a September 2016 incident where a private security company contracted by Energy Transfer Partners used police dogs on protesters as a major inflection point in the protests.

Interest in the demonstrations grew significantly after that incident, he said.

Iron Eyes was arrested during the protests and charged with felony inciting a riot. He later pleaded guilty to a reduced charge of misdemeanor disorderly conduct, The Bismarck Tribune reported at the time. During Monday's hearing, Iron Eyes said his actions were mischaracterized by law enforcement and he felt he was targeted.

Iron Eyes said Energy Transfer Partners should be asked to pay \$38 million, not the federal government.

Winona LaDuke — former executive director of Honor the Earth, an environmental group involved in protesting the pipeline — is expected to appear as a witness Tuesday morning.

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Facing public backlash, some health care companies are abandoning hospital deals

Some states are questioning whether proposed mergers best serve patients

BY: ANNA CLAIRE VOLLERS - MARCH 12, 2024 6:00 AM

Worried about hospitals closing and higher costs for patients, state lawmakers are increasingly tangling with hospitals over potential health care mergers, in some cases derailing deals they think don't serve the public interest.

Financially strapped hospitals often look to merge with or be acquired by other systems. After a pandemic-era slowdown, health care mergers and acquisitions have risen steadily over the past two years. But some proposed hospital deals in Connecticut, Louisiana, Minnesota and elsewhere have fizzled amid heavy pushback from lawmakers, organized labor and grassroots organizations.

At least 10 health care "megadeals" were called off or unwound just last year, due in part to increased oversight, reported Becker's Hospital Review, an industry publication.

"We have seen situations nationally in certain health care transactions where a lot of promises were made, but when you look into it, clinics are closing, prices are going up, access is down," Minnesota Attorney General Keith Ellison, a Democrat, told Stateline.

Ellison was in the middle of campaigning for reelection in late 2022 when he learned that Minnesota-based Fairview Health Services intended to merge with Sanford Health, a larger South Dakota-based health care system.

The proposed deal drew intense criticism from Minnesota's Democratic legislators, from nurses unions, University of Minnesota leaders and community groups. Fairview owns the University of Minnesota Medical Center, which is funded by state taxpayers. If the systems merged, Minnesota tax dollars might be spent across state lines. Some legislators also argued the resulting system would create a local health care monopoly that could lead to fewer services and higher costs for patients.

As the Fairview-Sanford deal chugged along, Ellison's office held public listening sessions across the state. And while Fairview and Sanford officials said the merger would allow the systems to expand care and some residents expressed support for the deal, the overall sentiment from stakeholders was negative, Ellison recalled.

Meanwhile, Democratic lawmakers passed a bill in May 2023 that bans anti-competitive health care mergers and strengthens state oversight of potential deals. It was signed into law that month.

Two months later, Sanford Health called off the merger due to lack of support from "certain Minnesota stakeholders."

Financially struggling hospitals

In March 2023, Massachusetts-based Covenant Health called off its plan to purchase a smaller, struggling health care system in the rural northeast corner of Connecticut. More than a quarter of announced health care deals in the United States last year involved a financially distressed partner, according to consultancy KaufmanHall.

Community groups rallied against the deal, concerned that Covenant's takeover would lead to cuts in reproductive care and other services. Covenant is a Catholic system and follows a set of rules called the Ethical and Religious Directives for Catholic Health Care Services, which forbids the system from providing some types of health care. Those include emergency contraception, fertility services, gender-affirming care, abortion and some end-of-life care.

"My concerns were really rooted in the fact that it was a Catholic-affiliated health care institution that follows Catholic directives," Connecticut state Rep. Jillian Gilcrest, a Democrat, told Stateline. "That region of the state already has limited health care options, and one of the Planned Parenthood clinics in that area had recently closed.

"There was a concern that women in the northeast corner of Connecticut wouldn't have access to reproductive health care."

Some area residents worried they'd lose their hospital without Covenant's takeover, but others formed

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a coalition that called on the state to deny the proposed acquisition. Gilcrest joined 15 other Democratic state legislators in signing a letter opposing the deal.

It fell through a few months later.

Covenant President/CEO Steve Grubbs said in a statement announcing the deal's cancellation that "the affiliation was no longer financially viable."

Day Kimball Healthcare CEO R. Kyle Kramer said the system's leadership was "disappointed" by Covenant's decision not to acquire it, in a statement he released shortly after it was announced.

"We are immediately pursuing the best path forward for Day Kimball and look forward to working with local and state officials as well as exploring discussions with other potential future partners to preserve essential hospital services in the northeastern Connecticut community," Kramer's statement read.

Gilcrest said she hopes Connecticut lawmakers will do more to protect services being eliminated following some hospital mergers, particularly women's health services.

"Unfortunately, I feel like we have not been able to go far enough yet," she told Stateline. "As a result of many of these mergers, when it comes to women's reproductive health care, we continue to see the closure of services like labor and delivery units across Connecticut."

More pushback

This year in Louisiana, pushback from state lawmakers and community groups paused a proposed \$2.5 billion sale of the nonprofit Blue Cross and Blue Shield of Louisiana to for-profit insurance giant Elevance Health. Blue Cross had defended the proposed sale by saying it would help the nonprofit insurer slow rising health care costs and better compete with its national rivals.

Last month, Louisiana state senators sent a report to the state insurance commissioner outlining dozens of concerns over the fairness of the deal, alleged attempts by Blue Cross to influence policyholders' votes, and Elevance's "troubled" history of fines, penalties, lawsuits and premium increases. The Louisiana Hospital Association, other medical groups and the state treasurer also opposed the deal.

Louisiana state Sen. Jeremy Stine, a Republican, said he plans to introduce a bill this legislative session that would prevent deals like the proposed Blue Cross sale from taking effect without meeting certain consumer protection standards.

"The proposed Blue Cross Blue Shield sale to Elevance Health has raised concerns about the potential consequences for Louisiana's healthcare landscape," Stine said in a statement sent to Stateline.

"By implementing these safeguards, we aim to prevent any undue influence, personal gain, or hasty decision-making that may compromise the health and well-being of our community."

Back in Minnesota, the attorney general's office has reviewed nearly a dozen proposed health care transactions since the new law passed less than a year ago.

"Before this law was passed, we did not get advance notice [of a merger or other transaction] unless the parties told us," said Elizabeth Odette, manager of the antitrust division at the Minnesota AG's office.

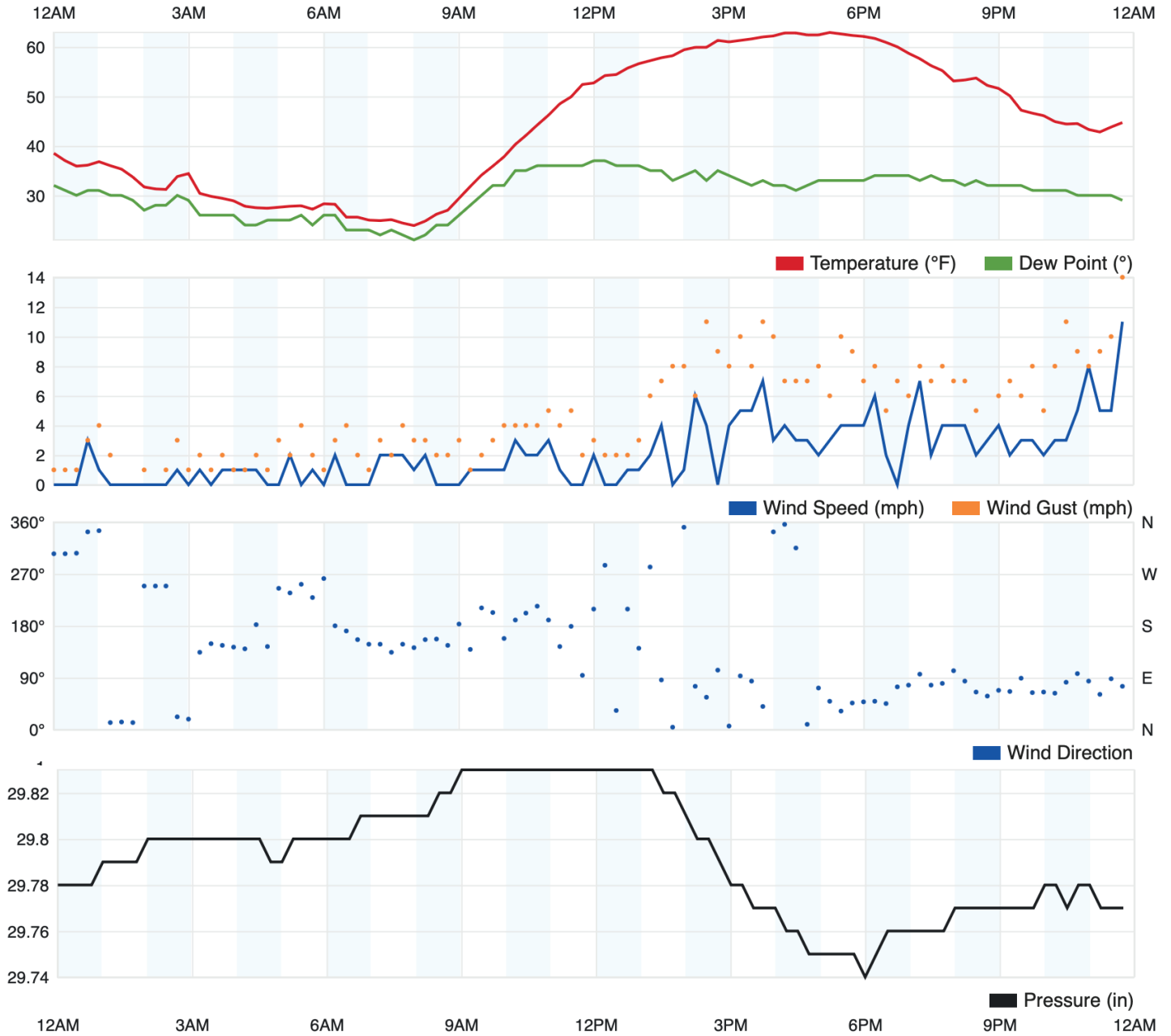
"Sometimes that meant there was not a whole lot we could do, meaningfully, before the parties completed the transaction."

But the stronger law has allowed "not only our office but the public and the [involved] parties to take a little more time to consider the implications of a proposed large merger," she said.

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Yesterday's Groton Weather Graphs



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Today



Slight Chance
Sprinkles/Flurries
then Mostly
Cloudy

High: 61 °F

Tonight



Slight Chance
Sprinkles

Low: 33 °F

Thursday



Partly Sunny
and Breezy

High: 49 °F

Thursday
Night



Mostly Cloudy

Low: 26 °F

Friday



Sunny then
Sunny and
Breezy

High: 53 °F



Above Average
Temperatures



Today

20% chance rain in
northeast SD today,
15 to 30% chance rain
south of US 212 tonight.

Highs: 56 - 61°F

Thursday

Cloudy and cooler.

Highs: 43 - 51°F

Friday

Clearing skies and windy.

Highs: 48 - 56°F

Diminished
precipitation chances



March 13, 2024 3:47 AM

Today, areas of northeast SD have a slight (20%) chance for some rain with highs in the upper 50s to around 60. Tonight, rain chances (15 to 30%) will shift south of US 212. Expect cloudy skies to continue through the day Thursday with a slight decrease to temperatures. Highs Friday will be back up into the 50s with clearing skies.

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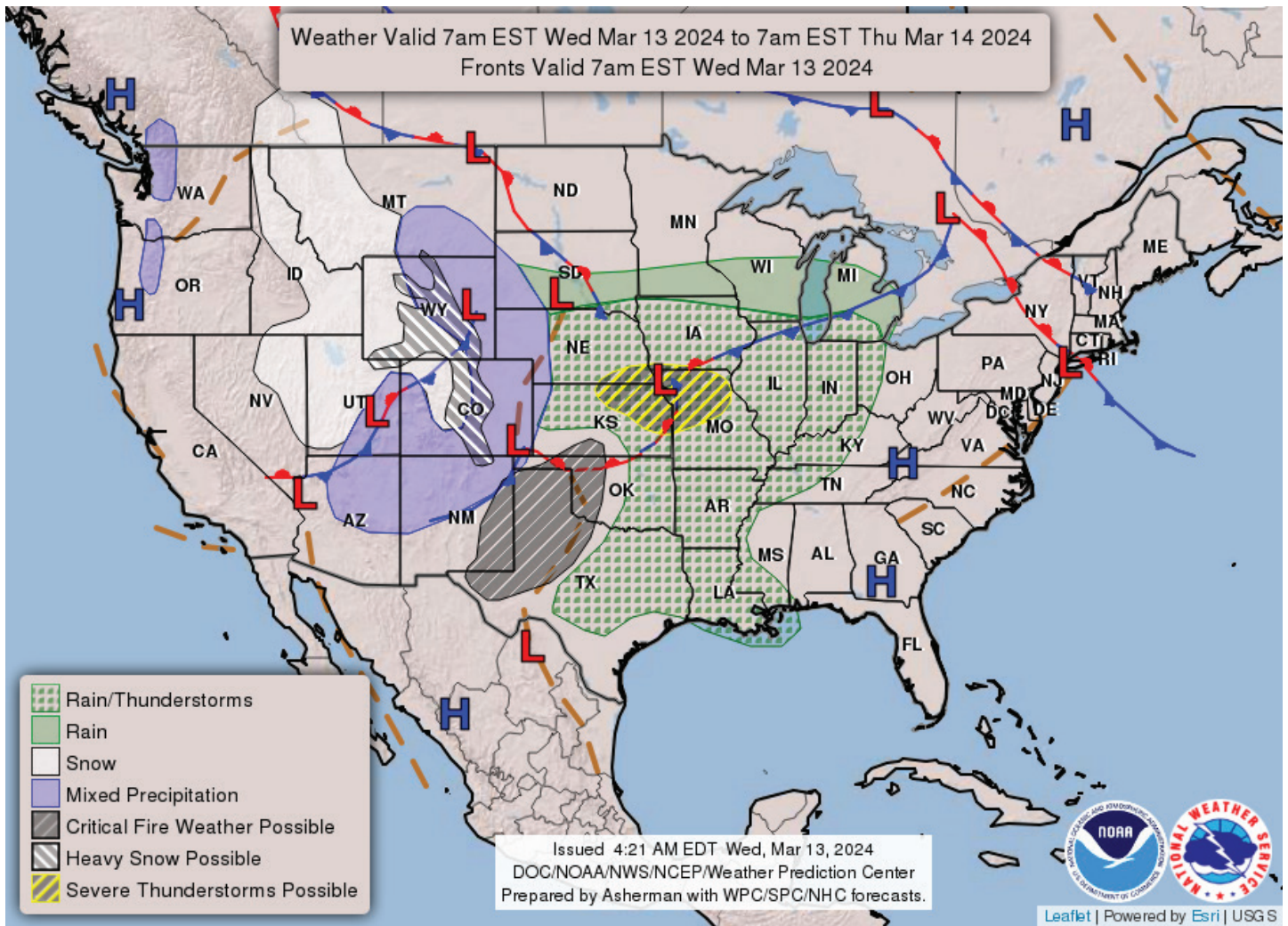
Yesterday's Groton Weather

High Temp: 63 °F at 5:18 PM
Low Temp: 24 °F at 7:55 AM
Wind: 11 mph at 2:23 PM
Precip: : 0.00

Day length: 11 hours, 52 minutes

Today's Info

Record High: 71 in 2012
Record Low: -28 in 1896
Average High: 40
Average Low: 18
Average Precip in March.: 0.32
Precip to date in March: 0.00
Average Precip to date: 1.49
Precip Year to Date: 0.07
Sunset Tonight: 7:37:43 pm
Sunrise Tomorrow: 7:43:40 am



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Today in Weather History

March 13, 1971: During an evening thunderstorm in Moody County, South Dakota, lightning destroyed a transformer plant in Coleman. Damages were estimated at \$250,000.

March 13, 1997: A winter storm began with widespread freezing drizzle, creating icy roadways and walkways, before changing over to snow. Before the snow was over, 2 to 8 inches had fallen on an already expansive and deep snowpack. The winds accelerated to 20 to 40 mph, resulting in widespread blowing and drifting snow. Visibilities were reduced to near zero at times, making travel treacherous. Many roads again became blocked by snowdrifts, and several were closed. Many area schools were still closed, adding to an already substantial total of days missed for the winter season. Some people were stranded and had to wait out the storm. Some airport flights were canceled. The icy roads and low visibilities resulted in several vehicle mishaps as well. There was a rollover accident west of Mobridge and an overturned van 7 miles west of Webster. On Interstate-29, there were several rollover accidents, including vehicles sliding off of the road. Some snowfall amounts included, 4 inches at Timber Lake, Mobridge, Eureka, Leola, Britton, and Clark, 5 inches at Leola, 6 inches at Waubay and Summit, and 8 inches at Pollock.

1907 - A storm produced a record 5.22 inches of rain in 24 hours at Cincinnati, OH. (12th-13th) (The Weather Channel)

1951 - The state of Iowa experienced a record snowstorm. The storm buried Iowa City under 27 inches of snow. (David Ludlum)

1953: An F4 tornado cut an 18-mile path through Haskell and Knox counties in Texas. 17 people were killed, and an eight-block area of Knox City was leveled.

1977 - Baltimore, MD, received an inch of rain in eight minutes. (Sandra and TI Richard Sanders - 1987)

1989 - Residents of the southern U.S. viewed a once in a life-time display of the Northern Lights. Unseasonably warm weather continued in the southwestern U.S. The record high of 88 degrees at Tucson AZ was their seventh in a row. In southwest Texas, the temperature at Sanderson soared from 46 degrees at 8 AM to 90 degrees at 11 AM. (The National Weather Summary)

1987 - A winter storm produced heavy snow in the Sierra Nevada Range of California, and the Lake Tahoe area of Nevada. Mount Rose NV received 18 inches of new snow. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

1988 - Unseasonably cold weather prevailed from the Plateau Region to the Appalachians. Chadron NE, recently buried 33 inches of snow, was the cold spot in the nation with a low of 19 degrees below zero. (The National Weather Summary)

1990: Thunderstorms produced severe weather from northwest Texas to Wisconsin, Iowa, and Nebraska during the day and into the night. Severe thunderstorms spawned 59 tornadoes, including twenty-six strong or violent tornadoes, and there were about two hundred reports of large hail or damaging winds. There were forty-eight tornadoes in Kansas, Nebraska, and Iowa, and some of the tornadoes in those three states were the strongest of record for so early in the season, and for so far northwest in the United States. The most powerful tornado of the day was one that tore through the central Kansas community of Hesston. The F5 tornado killed two persons, injured sixty others, and caused 22 million dollars damage along its 67-mile path. The tornado had a lifespan of two hours. Another tornado tracked 124 miles across southeastern Nebraska, injuring eight persons and causing more than five million dollars damage during its three-hour lifespan.

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Daily Devotionals

Seeds of Hope

THE SOURCE

Niccolo Paganini began his musical career later than most musicians. However, he developed his talents so rapidly, and was so gifted, that his skills exceeded most of his instructors in a short amount of time. He was the most celebrated violinist of his day and is recognized as one of the greatest virtuosos who ever lived.

One evening as he walked on the stage for a concert, he felt that something was wrong. He looked around and could see nothing unusual that would cause this feeling. Then he looked at his instrument and realized that he was handed the wrong violin as he walked on stage. As the orchestra conductor lifted his baton to begin the concert, he realized that it was too late to exchange violins.

Later that evening, those who heard him play his violin said that it was his greatest performance. When asked about the violin, he said, "Today I learned the most important lesson of my career. I thought the music was in the instrument. Today I learned it is in me."

Jesus said that if we remain in Him, as a branch remains in a tree, we will have life. Once a branch is no longer connected to the tree, it withers and dies. If we desire to live like Christ we must remain in Christ. We must stay connected to Him by staying in His Word, by spending time with Him in prayer, and by being obedient to Him in keeping His commands.

Prayer: We ask, Heavenly Father, that our love for You will be so intense that we will live a life that is centered in Your Word, in prayer, and in obedience to You. In Jesus' Name, Amen.

Scripture For Today: Yes, I am the vine; you are the branches. Those who remain in me, and I in them, will produce much fruit. For apart from me you can do nothing. John 15:5



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: 03.12.24

2 16 31 57 64 24

MegaPlier: 3x

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:

\$792,000,000

NEXT DRAW: 2 Days 17 Hrs 20 Mins 34 Secs

PREVIOUS RESULTS

LOTTO AMERICA



LUCKY FOR LIFE

WINNING NUMBERS: 03.12.24

3 13 24 36 44 11

TOP PRIZE:

\$7,000/week

NEXT DRAW: 16 Hrs 50 Mins 34 Secs

PREVIOUS RESULTS

DAKOTA CASH

WINNING NUMBERS:
03.09.24

11 13 15 19 24

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:

\$20,000

NEXT DRAW: 16 Hrs 50 Mins 34 Secs

PREVIOUS RESULTS

POWERBALL

DOUBLE PLAY

WINNING NUMBERS: 03.11.24

15 25 35 41 62 12

TOP PRIZE:

\$10,000,000

NEXT DRAW: 17 Hrs 19 Mins 34 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: 17 Hrs 19 Mins 33 Secs

PREVIOUS RESULTS

News from the Associated Press

Appel, Mayo lead South Dakota State past Denver 76-68 in Summit League title game

SIOUX FALLS, S.D. (AP) — Luke Appel and Zeke Mayo each scored 16 points and South Dakota State defeated Denver 76-68 on Tuesday night to win the Summit League Tournament and advance to the NCAA Tournament for the seventh time.

The Jackrabbits built a 22-5 lead within the first 10 minutes. South Dakota State led 37-23 at halftime and pushed it to 23 with eight minutes left in regulation. Jaxon Brenchley and Pedro Lopez Sanvicente then hit 3-pointers for Denver and the Pioneers went on a 15-2 run to make it 65-53 with 3 1/2 minutes left.

Brenchley hit a 3-pointer, added one free throw on the next possession, then hit another 3 to get Denver within 67-62 with a minute left. The Jackrabbits made 7 of 8 free throws to win it.

William Kyle III had 15 points and 11 rebounds for the Jackrabbits (22-12) and Matt Mims and Kalen Garry each scored 11.

Brenchley finished with 20 points and Tommy Bruner, the nation's leading scorer at 24.2 points per game, had 17 for Denver (17-17). Bruner made only 1 of 9 3-pointers and was 7 for 21 overall. DeAndre Craig scored 12.

The Jackrabbits were 11 of 17 to start the game. Mayo made half the Jackrabbits' six 3s and scored 10 before the break. South Dakota State finished 9 of 23 from 3-point distance and Denver made 11 of 36.

South Dakota State won the Summit League championship for the seventh time in eight title-game appearances since 2012.

Denver has never played in the NCAA Tournament and was playing in a conference tournament championship game for just the second time.

South Dakota gov. promotes work on her teeth by Texas dentist in infomercial-style social media post

PIERRE, S.D. (AP) — South Dakota Gov. Kristi Noem posted an infomercial-style video on X Monday night lavishing praise on a team of cosmetic dentists outside her state for giving her a smile she said she can be proud of.

Noem, who has showcased herself as a potential vice presidential pick for former President Donald Trump, posted the nearly 5-minute video on her personal X account, writing, "I love my new family at Smile Texas!"

Noem at the start of the video identifies herself as the governor of South Dakota as a clip is shown of her speaking at a state Republican party event with Trump signs in the background.

She needed to have what she called an adjustment to her teeth because she knocked out her front teeth years ago in a biking accident, she says in the video.

Noem's two spokespersons did not immediately respond to emails asking what prompted Noem to make the video, whether the dental work was free in exchange for making the video and why she went to Texas when other providers in South Dakota appear available.

Smile Texas also didn't immediately respond to a request for comment.

"The team here was remarkable and finally gave me a smile that I can be proud of and confident in, and that really is a gift that I think is going to be incredibly special to have," Noem said.

She mentions two dentists by name and says she chose Smile Texas, for among other things "because they're the best," adding that she researched other cosmetic dental work they had done.

Jessica Levinson, a professor at Loyola Law School, on Tuesday called the video a shameless plug for a private business.

"I'm honestly kind of baffled by it but one could say everything she's doing at the moment is an audition to be Trump's VP candidate," Levinson said.

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Noem as governor will be term-limited in 2026 and, after declining to run for president this year, is considering her options to maintain prominence in the GOP. Those who are keen to be considered as Trump's running mate have been openly jockeying for the position.

A former member of Congress, Noem rose to national prominence with a mostly hands-off approach to the COVID-19 pandemic. She endorsed Trump at a Republican party fundraiser in South Dakota last September.

Asked around that time whether she would consider joining a potential Trump ticket if invited, Noem told Newsmax she "would in a heartbeat."

South Dakota State secures another Summit title, NCAA berth with 67-54 win over North Dakota State

SIOUX FALLS, S.D. (AP) — Paige Meyer had 18 points, Tori Nelson scored seven of her nine during a 14-0 fourth-quarter run and South Dakota State earned its 12th trip to the NCAA Tournament with a 67-54 win over North Dakota State in the Summit League Tournament championship on Tuesday.

The Jackrabbits (27-5) defended their title when they forced the second-seeded Bison (21-11) into six-straight misses while they turned a one-point lead with six minutes to go into a 61-46 lead with 1:43 left.

Meyer start the run with a layup, Mesa Byom had a three-point play and then Nelson scored seven straight, sandwiching a 3-pointer around two layups. Meyer capped it with two free throws.

"We made some shots," long-time South Dakota State coach Aaron Johnson said. "How about Tori Nelson, senior? My heart goes out to her, she didn't finish (sprained ankle), hopefully we get some good news there. But a big 3, a couple big drives to the basket. She really played like you want to see a senior play."

The Jackrabbits have won 20 straight since back-to-back losses to ranked Gonzaga and Creighton.

Brooklyn Meyer had 15 points and three blocks for South Dakota State, which made its first NCAA berth in 2008-09, its first season of eligibility. Madison Mathiowetz added 12 points and Byom had 11 with nine rebounds.

Heaven Hamling had 16 points for North Dakota State, in its first-ever title game. and Elle Evans had 11.

South Dakota State outscored North Dakota State by one point in each of the first three quarters to lead 42-39 entering the fourth quarter. The Jackrabbits never led by more than five until Brooklyn Meyer's three-point play made it 47-41. But Hamling made two free throws and her 3 with 6:30 to go cut the deficit to 47-46.

US-mandated religious freedom group ends Saudi trip early after rabbi ordered to remove his kippah

By JON GAMBRELL Associated Press

DUBAI, United Arab Emirates (AP) — A U.S. Congress-mandated group cut short a fact-finding mission to Saudi Arabia after officials in the kingdom ordered a Jewish rabbi to remove his kippah in public, highlighting the religious tensions still present in the wider Middle East.

Speaking to The Associated Press, Rabbi Abraham Cooper of the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom sought to distance the order over his skullcap from what he described as progress made in the kingdom under Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman on quietly allowing different faiths to worship privately.

He also said Saudi Arabia may release four Uyghur Muslims held prisoner in the kingdom for asylum in the U.S. over possible persecution they could face if they return to China.

However, displaying any religious symbols other than Islamic ones remains criminalized, the kingdom two years ago carried out its largest mass execution ever that included minority Shiites, and authorities continue a harsh crackdown on any perceived dissent against Prince Mohammed.

"The situation in Saudi Arabia is very complex," said the Rev. Frederick Davie of New York City, the commission's vice chair. "And not everybody's on board, and this may be an example of that."

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Officials in Saudi Arabia, as well as at the Saudi Embassy in Washington, did not respond to questions from the AP over the kippah incident. A message from the embassy released online called it "unfortunate" and "a misunderstanding of internal protocols," without elaborating.

The commission, accompanied by members of the U.S. Embassy in Riyadh, had been attending meetings for about two days when they made a visit on March 5 to Diriyah, a mud-walled village that is a UNESCO World Heritage Site in the Saudi capital.

About a third of the way through the village, a Saudi official handed a phone to Cooper, on which an official told him to remove his kippah, a skullcap worn by some Jews also known in Yiddish as a yarmulke.

"It's a pretty stunning request, considering we're there as a vanguard for international religious freedom and we're preparing a report on Saudi Arabia," said Cooper, who lives in Los Angeles.

"It's like asking somebody in Saudi Arabia to remove her hijab. I didn't take off my kippah 50 years ago in the Soviet Union — I was there for a month — I'm surely not taking off my kippah for you."

Cooper refused and the rest of the group agreed to cut their visit short over the demand. However, Davie noted that Cooper's kippah hadn't been an issue in government meetings or while eating in public earlier on the trip. Some Jewish online influencers have made trips into the kingdom, publicizing their visits.

The current Saudi sensitivity may come in part because of Israel's grinding war targeting Hamas in the Gaza Strip after the Oct. 7 militant attack that killed 1,200 people and took 250 others hostage. In the months since, Israel's war in the Gaza Strip has killed over 31,000 Palestinians there and left the seaside enclave on the brink of famine, particularly enraging Muslims across the Mideast as they mark the holy fasting month of Ramadan.

Saudi Arabia's Al Saud royal family, which bases part of its legitimacy on protecting the holiest sites in Islam in the kingdom, particularly feels that pressure. Just before the war, it had been negotiating a U.S.-mediated deal to potentially diplomatically recognize Israel in exchange for a series of concessions.

That deal now appears largely abandoned. A chance meeting last month between Israeli Economy Minister Nir Barkat and Saudi Arabian Commerce Minister Majid bin Abdullah al-Qasab at a summit of the World Trade Organization in Abu Dhabi drew an angry retort from Riyadh, which referred to Barkat as an "Israeli occupation official."

"We're not naive. We live in the real world. I have eight grandchildren in Jerusalem, so I have literally skin in the game," Cooper said. "Of course, we would prefer if people weren't dying right now in the Holy Land. ... I think they would have canceled our meeting if they decided that they want to send a message to Washington and Jerusalem."

Responding to questions from the AP, the State Department said it had "raised our concerns with Saudi government authorities" over the order given to Cooper to remove his kippah.

"The United States fully supports freedom of religion or belief, including the right to express beliefs through religious attire," the State Department said. "The United States continues to work with our Saudi counterparts on religious freedom issues and we hope the net effect of this incident will push Saudi Arabia to make further strides on these issues."

The Gulf Arab states, particularly the United Arab Emirates, have grown more religiously accommodating. Both Bahrain and the UAE reached a diplomatic recognition deal with Israel in 2020. A prominent synagogue now sits in Abu Dhabi's capital, and a new Hindu temple just opened as well.

But things have moved slower in Saudi Arabia, once dominated by ultraconservative Wahhabi religious leaders before the rise of Prince Mohammed. A U.S. religious freedom report has noted there recently have been "large Christian worship services discreetly and regularly without substantial interference" in the kingdom.

Sunni-ruled Saudi Arabia and its main rival, Shiite-power Iran, reached a détente last year as well, easing tensions between the denominations. Davie said there was "cautious optimism" those relations were improving in the kingdom with its own minority Shiite population.

Meanwhile, Cooper also said the U.S. government is prepared to take four Uyghur Muslims imprisoned in Saudi Arabia and "get them refugee status immediately in the United States."

The State Department also acknowledged the case and said it has "engaged with Saudi officials" over it, without discussing the rabbi's claim they could be released. It warned that Uyghur Muslims and other minority groups face possible "detention and torture" if they are returned to China.

"We also continue to urge the PRC to cease its genocide and crimes against humanity in Xinjiang," the State Department said, using the abbreviation for the People's Republic of China, the country's formal name.

China's embassies in Riyadh and Washington did not respond to requests for comment over the Uyghur prisoners.

Putin says Russia is ready to use nuclear weapons if its sovereignty or independence is threatened

By The Associated Press undefined

President Vladimir Putin said that Russia is ready to use nuclear weapons if there is a threat to its statehood, sovereignty or independence, voicing hope that the U.S. would refrain from actions that could trigger a nuclear conflict.

Putin's statement was another blunt warning to the West ahead of a presidential vote this week in which he's all but certain to win another six-year term.

In an interview with Russian state television released early Wednesday, Putin described U.S. President Joe Biden as a veteran politician who fully understands possible dangers of escalation, and said that he doesn't think that the world is heading to a nuclear war.

At the same time, he emphasized that Russia's nuclear forces are in full readiness and "from the military-technical viewpoint, we're prepared."

Putin said that in line with the country's security doctrine, Moscow is ready to use nuclear weapons in case of a threat to "the existence of the Russian state, our sovereignty and independence."

The Russian leader has repeatedly talked about his readiness to use nuclear weapons since launching the invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. The most recent such threat came in his state-of-the-nation address last month, when he warned the West that deepening its involvement in the fighting in Ukraine would risk a nuclear war.

Asked in the interview if he has ever considered using battlefield nuclear weapons in Ukraine, Putin responded that there has been no need for that.

He also voiced confidence that Moscow will achieve its goals in Ukraine and issued a blunt warning to Western allies, declaring that "the nations that say they have no red lines regarding Russia should realize that Russia won't have any red lines regarding them either."

He held the door open for talks, but emphasized that Russia will hold onto its gains and would seek firm guarantees from the West.

"It shouldn't be a break for the enemy to rearm but a serious talk involving the guarantees of security for the Russian Federation," he said.

Putin said that a recent spike in Ukrainian drone attacks deep inside Russia is part of efforts to derail the country's three-day presidential election, which starts Friday and which he is set to win by a landslide, relying on the tight control over Russia's political scene he has established during his 24-year rule.

Russian authorities reported another major attack by Ukrainian drones early Wednesday. The Defense Ministry said air defenses downed 58 drones over six regions. One of the drones hit an oil refinery in the Ryazan region, injuring at least two people and sparking a fire. Another drone was downed as it was approaching a refinery near St. Petersburg.

Ukraine, meanwhile, reported more Russian attacks early Wednesday.

A Russian strike killed two people and injured another five in the town of Myrnohrad in the eastern region of Donetsk, about 30 kilometers (about 20 miles) from the front line, according to Gov. Vadym Filashkin. Local rescuers managed to pull a 13-year-old girl out of the rubble of an apartment building that was hit by a Russian missile.

A five-story building in the northern city of Sumy was struck by a drone launched from Russia overnight

and 10 people were rescued from the rubble, including eight who sustained injuries, according to the regional administration.

In President Volodymyr Zelenskyy's hometown in the central Dnipropetrovsk region, the death toll from a Russian missile attack the previous night rose to four, said Gov. Serhii Lysak. He said that 43 people were wounded in of Kryvyi Rih, including 12 children, the youngest of them two and eleven-month-old.

"Every day our cities and villages suffer similar attacks. Every day Ukraine loses people because of Russian evil," Zelenskyy said.

Biden and Trump clinch nominations, setting the stage for a grueling general election rematch

By STEVE PEOPLES AP National Political Writer

WASHINGTON (AP) — President Joe Biden and former President Donald Trump clinched their parties' presidential nominations Tuesday with decisive victories in a slate of low-profile primaries, setting up a general election rematch that many voters do not want.

The outcome of contests across Georgia, Mississippi and Washington state was never in doubt. Neither Biden, a Democrat, nor Trump, a Republican, faced major opposition. But the magnitude of their wins gave each man the delegate majority he needed to claim his party's nomination at the summertime national conventions.

Not even halfway through the presidential primary calendar, Tuesday marked a crystalizing moment for a nation uneasy with its choices in 2024.

There is no longer any doubt that the fall election will feature a rematch between two flawed and unpopular presidents. At 81, Biden is already the oldest president in U.S. history, while the 77-year-old Trump is facing decades in prison as a defendant in four criminal cases. Their rematch — the first featuring two U.S. presidents since 1912 — will almost certainly deepen the nation's searing political and cultural divides over the eight-month grind that lies ahead.

In a statement, Biden celebrated the nomination while casting Trump as a serious threat to democracy.

Trump, Biden said, "is running a campaign of resentment, revenge, and retribution that threatens the very idea of America."

He continued, "I am honored that the broad coalition of voters representing the rich diversity of the Democratic Party across the country have put their faith in me once again to lead our party — and our country — in a moment when the threat Trump poses is greater than ever."

Trump, in a video posted on social media, celebrated what he called "a great day of victory."

"But now we have to get back to work because we have the worst president in the history of our country," Trump said of Biden. "So, we're not going to take time to celebrate. We'll celebrate in eight months when the election is over."

Both candidates dominated Tuesday's primaries in swing-state Georgia, deep-red Mississippi and Democratic-leaning Washington. Trump also won Hawaii's Republican caucus.

Despite their tough talk, the road ahead will not be easy for either presumptive nominee.

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.

Biden, who would be 86 years old at the end of his next term, is working to assure a skeptical electorate that he's still physically and mentally able to thrive in the world's most important job. Voters in both parties are unhappy with his handling of immigration and inflation.

And he's dealing with additional dissension within his party's progressive base, furious that he hasn't done more to stop Israel's war against Hamas in Gaza. Activists and religious leaders in Washington encouraged

Democrats to vote “uncommitted” to signal their outrage.

In Seattle, 26-year-old voter Bella Rivera said they hoped their “uncommitted” vote would serve as a wakeup call for the Democratic party.

“If you really want our votes, if you want to win this election, you’re going to have to show a little bit more either support of Palestinian liberation — that’s something that’s very important to us — and ceasing funds to Israel,” said Rivera, a preschool teacher who uses they/them pronouns.

Almost 3,000 miles away in Georgia, retiree Donna Graham said she would have preferred another Republican nominee over Trump, but she said there’s no way she’d ever vote for Biden in the general election.

“He wasn’t my first choice, but he’s the next best thing,” Graham said of Trump. “It’s sad that it’s the same old matchup as four years ago.”

IAEA chief reassures residents that treated wastewater discharge at Fukushima nuclear plant is safe

By MARI YAMAGUCHI Associated Press

TOMIOKA, Japan (AP) — The head of the U.N. atomic agency told local Japanese representatives at a meeting in Fukushima on Wednesday that the ongoing discharge of treated radioactive wastewater at the ruined nuclear power plant has met safety standards and that any restrictions on products from the region are “not scientific.”

International Atomic Energy Agency Director-General Rafael Grossi joined local officials and representatives from fishing and business groups and reassured them that the discharges are being carried out “with no impact to the environment, water, fish and sediment.”

Grossi, who arrived in Japan on Tuesday, visited Fukushima for the first time since the release of the treated water began in August.

Grossi examined the discharge and sampling facility on Wednesday, escorted by Tomoaki Kobayakawa, president of the plant’s operator, Tokyo Electric Power Company Holdings. He last visited the plant in July after issuing an IAEA review predicting only negligible impact from the discharges. An IAEA comprehensive report later concluded that the discharges meet international safety standards.

The 2011 disaster damaged the Fukushima plant’s power supply and reactor cooling functions, triggering meltdowns of three reactors and causing large amounts of radioactive wastewater to accumulate. After more than a decade of cleanup work, the plant began discharging the water after treating it and diluting it with large amounts of seawater on Aug. 24, starting a process that’s expected to take decades.

The discharges have been opposed by fishing groups and neighboring countries including China, which banned all imports of Japanese seafood immediately after the release began.

“There is no scientific reason to impose any restriction on products coming from us,” Grossi said at the meeting in Iwaki, south of the Fukushima Daiichi plant.

“This is very important in particular to be said in this forum here in Fukushima,” he said. He noted a “political dimension to this activity since ... some neighboring countries are also manifesting concerns.”

Despite earlier fears that the water discharge would further hurt Fukushima’s hard-hit fishing industry, it has not damaged its reputation domestically. China’s ban on Japanese seafood mostly hit scallop exporters in Hokkaido. Tokyo has earmarked a fund of more than 100 billion yen (\$680 million) that includes compensation and other support, including measures to help find other export destinations.

The discharges are at the beginning of a long process, Grossi said, stressing the importance of “transparency, technical accuracy and wide open, honest dialogue and consultation.” He stressed that the IAEA has its own office and lab at the Fukushima plant to independently monitor the process.

Grossi said he met with residents not only to highlight the main points about the discharges but “to learn from you.” He said he would keep coming back to Fukushima and that he is open to hearing residents’ concerns and needs.

Prime Minister Fumio Kishida’s government has reversed earlier plans for a nuclear phaseout and is accelerating the use of nuclear power in response to rising fuel costs related to Russia’s full-scale invasion

of Ukraine and pressure to meet decarbonization goals.

On Tuesday, Grossi expressed support for increasing Japan's nuclear capacity as the country looks to it as a stable, clean source of power.

Grossi, at a meeting with Economy and Industry Minister Ken Saito, offered Japan technical assistance to improve the idled Kashiwazaki-Kariwa nuclear power plant in Japan's northcentral region of Niigata, run by the Fukushima Daiichi operator, to address concerns about its past problems with safeguarding measures. It and the government are keen to restart it soon.

IAEA is sending a team of experts to the plant later this month to assist Tokyo Electric Power Company Holdings' effort to gain public trust.

The restart remains uncertain because it is subject to the host community's consent. The Jan. 1 earthquake in the nearby Noto region rekindled safety concerns.

The Latest | Stabbing near Jerusalem after deadly violence erupts in the occupied West Bank

By The Associated Press undefined

Violent clashes overnight have left multiple Palestinians dead in the West Bank, and Israeli police say a Palestinian stabbed and wounded two people at a checkpoint near Jerusalem before being shot Wednesday.

Violence has surged in the occupied West Bank since Hamas' Oct. 7 attack triggered the Israel-Hamas war in Gaza. At least 427 Palestinians have been killed there, mostly during confrontations with Israeli forces, according to the Palestinian Health Ministry. Israeli-Palestinian tensions often soar during the Muslim holy month of Ramadan, which began Sunday, over access to a major holy site in Jerusalem.

Meanwhile, the Israeli military said six aid trucks entered Gaza through the north late Tuesday as international pressure mounts for more humanitarian aid to Gaza.

Some 1,200 people, mostly civilians, were killed during the Hamas-led incursion into southern Israel on Oct. 7, and around 250 people were abducted. Hamas is believed to still be holding around 100 hostages.

Gaza's Health Ministry says that over 31,000 Palestinians have been killed and most of Gaza's 2.3 million people forced from their homes. 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. A quarter of Gaza's population is starving, according to the United Nations.

Currently:

- An aid ship is sailing to Gaza, where hundreds of thousands face starvation 5 months into war.
- A United Nations envoy says the finding that some hostages were victims of sexual violence doesn't justify Israeli attacks.
- Evangelical Christians are fierce Israel supporters. Now they are visiting as war-time volunteers.
- A Gaza family uprooted by war and grieving their losses shares a somber Ramadan meal in a tent.
- Find more of AP's coverage at <https://apnews.com/hub/israel-hamas-war>

Here's the latest:

PALESTINIAN STABS 2 AT A CHECKPOINT NEAR JERUSALEM

JERUSALEM — Israeli police say a Palestinian stabbed and wounded two people at a checkpoint near Jerusalem before being shot Wednesday.

Israel's Magen David Adom rescue service said the two people who were stabbed were in "mild to moderate condition." Israeli police said the two people who were stabbed were members of the security forces, without elaborating. An Associated Press reporter saw the body of the attacker.

Violence has surged in the occupied West Bank since Hamas' Oct. 7 attack triggered the war in Gaza. At least 427 Palestinians have been killed there, mostly during confrontations with Israeli forces, according to the Palestinian Health Ministry. Israeli-Palestinian tensions often soar during the Muslim holy month of Ramadan, which began Sunday, over access to a major holy site in Jerusalem.

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

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OVERNIGHT CLASHES WITH ISRAELI FORCES LEAVE AT LEAST 3 PALESTINIANS DEAD

JERUSALEM — Israeli forces killed at least three Palestinians in two separate clashes overnight, including 13-year-old Rami Hamdan al-Halhuli, who had hurled fireworks at the paramilitary Border Police during a violent protest. The Palestinian Authority said he was shot dead late Tuesday in the Shuafat refugee camp, a poor neighborhood on the outskirts of Jerusalem.

Israeli police say a member of the paramilitary Border Police fired “a single shot” toward a suspect who aimed fireworks in their direction during confrontations in Shuafat. It says the suspect was “apprehended, arrested and transferred for medical treatment.”

The Border Police also said they opened fire at five Palestinians who were hurling firebombs at vehicles on a highway near Jerusalem late Tuesday. It says they were arrested and transferred for medical treatment.

The Palestinian Health Ministry says Israeli forces killed two Palestinians, ages 16 and 23, and wounded three in the village of al-Jib, near Jerusalem. It says they were brought to a hospital in the nearby city of Ramallah, where the Palestinian Authority is headquartered.

The two sides appeared to be describing the same incident. Police could not immediately be reached for comment.

At least 427 Palestinians have been killed in the West Bank since the start of the war, according to the Palestinian Health Ministry, mainly during confrontations with Israeli forces.

6 TRUCKS CARRY AID INTO GAZA FROM THE NORTH FOR THE FIRST TIME SINCE WAR ERUPTED, ISRAELI MILITARY SAYS

JERUSALEM — The Israeli military said an aid convoy has for the first time entered the Gaza Strip through a crossing in the war-ravaged northern half of the territory.

Six trucks entered Gaza late Tuesday through a gate in the border fence, carrying goods from the World Food Program, the military said. It described the delivery as a test run and said the Israeli government would review the results.

Israel alleges that Hamas is commandeering aid. At the same time, Israel is under growing international pressure to ease restrictions on aid entering Gaza, particularly the northern half of the territory. Up to now, aid convoys entered Gaza from its southern end and had to make their way through areas of fighting and large, desperate crowds of Palestinians.

On Tuesday, the European Union’s foreign policy chief said Israel is using starvation as a weapon of war and accused it of blocking overland routes that are the best way to get food to hundreds of thousands of Palestinians facing famine.

The United States and other countries have resorted to workarounds, such as air drops and setting up a sea route, but aid officials say land deliveries remain the most efficient.

Europe’s world-first AI rules are set for final approval. Here’s what happens next

By KELVIN CHAN AP Business Writer

LONDON (AP) — European Union lawmakers are set to give final approval to the 27-nation bloc’s artificial intelligence law Wednesday, putting the world-leading rules on track to take effect later this year.

Lawmakers in the European Parliament are poised to vote in favor of the Artificial Intelligence Act five years after they were first proposed. The AI Act is expected to act as a global signpost for other governments grappling with how to regulate the fast-developing technology.

“The AI Act has nudged the future of AI in a human-centric direction, in a direction where humans are in control of the technology and where it — the technology — helps us leverage new discoveries, economic growth, societal progress and unlock human potential,” said Dragos Tudorache, a Romanian lawmaker who was a co-leader of the Parliament negotiations on the draft law.

Big tech companies generally have supported the need to regulate AI while lobbying to ensure any rules work in their favor. OpenAI CEO Sam Altman caused a minor stir last year when he suggested the ChatGPT maker could pull out of Europe if it can’t comply with the AI Act — before backtracking to say

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there were no plans to leave.

Here's a look at the world's first comprehensive set of AI rules:

HOW DOES THE AI ACT WORK?

Like many EU regulations, the AI Act was initially intended to act as consumer safety legislation, taking a "risk-based approach" to products or services that use artificial intelligence.

The riskier an AI application, the more scrutiny it faces. Low-risk systems, such as content recommendation systems or spam filters, will only face light rules such as revealing that they are powered by AI. The EU expects most AI systems to fall into this category.

High-risk uses of AI, such as in medical devices or critical infrastructure like water or electrical networks, face tougher requirements like using high-quality data and providing clear information to users.

Some AI uses are banned because they're deemed to pose an unacceptable risk, like social scoring systems that govern how people behave, some types of predictive policing and emotion recognition systems in school and workplaces.

Other banned uses include police scanning faces in public using AI-powered remote "biometric identification" systems, except for serious crimes like kidnapping or terrorism.

WHAT ABOUT GENERATIVE AI?

The law's early drafts focused on AI systems carrying out narrowly limited tasks, like scanning resumes and job applications. The astonishing rise of general purpose AI models, exemplified by OpenAI's ChatGPT, sent EU policymakers scrambling to keep up.

They added provisions for so-called generative AI models, the technology underpinning AI chatbot systems that can produce unique and seemingly lifelike responses, images and more.

Developers of general purpose AI models — from European startups to OpenAI and Google — will have to provide a detailed summary of the text, pictures, video and other data on the internet that is used to train the systems as well as follow EU copyright law.

AI-generated deepfake pictures, video or audio of existing people, places or events must be labeled as artificially manipulated.

There's extra scrutiny for the biggest and most powerful AI models that pose "systemic risks," which include OpenAI's GPT4 — its most advanced system — and Google's Gemini.

The EU says it's worried that these powerful AI systems could "cause serious accidents or be misused for far-reaching cyberattacks." They also fear generative AI could spread "harmful biases" across many applications, affecting many people.

Companies that provide these systems will have to assess and mitigate the risks; report any serious incidents, such as malfunctions that cause someone's death or serious harm to health or property; put cybersecurity measures in place; and disclose how much energy their models use.

DO EUROPE'S RULES INFLUENCE THE REST OF THE WORLD?

Brussels first suggested AI regulations in 2019, taking a familiar global role in ratcheting up scrutiny of emerging industries, while other governments scramble to keep up.

In the U.S., President Joe Biden signed a sweeping executive order on AI in October that's expected to be backed up by legislation and global agreements. In the meantime, lawmakers in at least seven U.S. states are working on their own AI legislation.

Chinese President Xi Jinping has proposed his Global AI Governance Initiative, and authorities have issued "interim measures" for managing generative AI, which applies to text, pictures, audio, video and other content generated for people inside China.

Other countries, from Brazil to Japan, as well as global groupings like the United Nations and Group of Seven industrialized nations, are moving to draw up AI guardrails.

WHAT HAPPENS NEXT?

The AI Act is expected to officially become law by May or June, after a few final formalities, including a blessing from EU member countries. Provisions will start taking effect in stages, with countries required to ban prohibited AI systems six months after the rules enter the lawbooks.

Rules for general purpose AI systems like chatbots will start applying a year after the law takes effect. By mid-2026, the complete set of regulations, including requirements for high-risk systems, will be in force.

When it comes to enforcement, each EU country will set up their own AI watchdog, where citizens can file a complaint if they think they've been the victim of a violation of the rules. Meanwhile, Brussels will create an AI Office tasked with enforcing and supervising the law for general purpose AI systems.

Violations of the AI Act could draw fines of up to 35 million euros (\$38 million), or 7% of a company's global revenue.

How key issues in Russia will be affected by the election set to give Putin 6 more years in power

By The Associated Press undefined

Vladimir Putin is poised to sweep to another six-year term in this week's presidential election, even though Russians are dying in Ukraine in a war grinding through its third year and his country is more isolated than ever from the rest of the world.

The all-but-certain outcome comes through his rigid control of Russia established during his 24 years in power — the longest Kremlin tenure since Soviet leader Josef Stalin.

Putin, 71, has silenced virtually all dissent through harsh new laws that impose heavy fines or prison on independent voices. Critics have succumbed to unexplained deaths or fled abroad. The ballot features three other token candidates who publicly support his policies.

How is the war affecting the election?

Putin has focused his campaign on a pledge to fulfill his goals in Ukraine, describing the conflict as a battle against the West for the very survival of Russia and its 146 million people.

In a state-of-the-nation address last month, he charged that the U.S. and its NATO allies "need a dependent, waning, dying space in the place of Russia so that they can do whatever they want."

Putin has repeatedly argued that he sent in the troops in February 2022 to protect Russian speakers in eastern Ukraine and prevent Kyiv from posing a major security threat to Moscow by joining NATO. Ukraine and its allies describe the Russian invasion — the largest conflict in Europe since World War II — as an unprovoked act of aggression by the major nuclear power.

He says Russian forces have the upper hand after the failure of Ukraine's counteroffensive last year, arguing that Ukraine and the West will "sooner or later" have to accept a settlement on Moscow's terms. Putin praised his troops fighting in Ukraine and promised to make them Russia's new elite.

Ordinary Russians know little of their military's many setbacks in the war, with casualties out of view and state-run media carrying accounts only of Moscow's successes.

How is the economy affecting the election?

The economy's resilience in the face of bruising Western sanctions is a big factor behind Putin's grip on power in Russia, a major player in the global energy sector. The economy is expected to grow 2.6% this year, according to the International Monetary Fund, compared with the 0.9% expansion predicted in Europe. Inflation is forecast at more than 7% but unemployment remains low.

Military industries have become a key growth engine, with defense plants churning out missiles, tanks and ammunition. Hefty payments to hundreds of thousands of men who signed contracts with the military have helped boost consumer demand, contributing to economic growth.

In his campaign, Putin has promised to extend cheap mortgages subsidized by the government to help young families, particularly those with children, boosting his popularity and energizing the booming construction sector.

He also pledged to pour more government funds into health care, education, science, culture and sports, while continuing efforts to eradicate poverty.

What impact is the crackdown having?

Putin has methodically tightened control on Russian politics since becoming president in 2000, pushing through constitutional changes that can keep him in power until 2036.

The Kremlin's crackdown on dissent reached unprecedented heights after the invasion of Ukraine, leaving a scorched-earth political landscape ahead of the vote.

A repressive new law approved days after the invasion criminalized any public criticism of the war, and protests have become effectively impossible with police swiftly dispersing unauthorized gatherings. The number of arrests, criminal cases and trials has soared, and long prison terms are more common.

Putin has denigrated opposition activists and war critics as spoiled Western stooges, once describing them as "foam washed away" by his "special military operation."

His biggest critic, Alexei Navalny, was serving a 19-year sentence on extremism charges when he died at age 47 in an Arctic penal colony. Other leading opposition figures also got long prison terms comparable to those given to "enemies of the people" during Stalinist repressions. Prominent Kremlin foe, Vladimir Kara-Murza got the harshest sentence of 25 years on treason charges over an anti-war speech.

But even minor critics were muzzled. A St. Petersburg artist got seven years for replacing supermarket price tags with anti-war slogans, while a Moscow poet was sentenced to seven years for reciting verses against the war in public.

Most independent news outlets were shut and many moved their operations abroad, while the state-controlled media relentlessly hammered home the Kremlin's narratives.

How will Russia's policies be affected?

Putin will likely use his predictable victory as proof of overwhelming public support for the war.

Many observers expect him to toughen his course and escalate the war. Some say the Kremlin could launch another round of mobilizing reservists to swell the military's ranks and try to extend its gains in a big, new offensive.

The Kremlin is set to ramp up its war rhetoric, casting the country as a besieged fortress facing Western aggression. Repression against opposition activists and war critics is likely to expand, with authorities abandoning any semblance of decorum in their ruthless efforts to eradicate signs of dissent.

Moscow's foreign policy is likely to become even more aggressive, and Russian authorities may increasingly try to deepen divides in the West with disinformation and propaganda, as well as appealing to conservative circles in the West by promoting the image of Russia as a bulwark of traditional values.

In Moscow's relations with China, India and countries of the Global South, Putin's election victory will help cement existing alliances by reinforcing the message of his firm control over Russian politics.

Evangelical Christians are fierce Israel supporters. Now they are visiting as war-time volunteers

By MELANIE LIDMAN Associated Press

TEL AVIV, Israel (AP) — When Shawn Landis, an evangelical Christian from Pennsylvania, heard about the Oct. 7 Hamas attack on southern Israel, he knew he would come to Israel to volunteer as soon as it was safe.

Five months later, he was chopping vegetables in a Tel Aviv kitchen, preparing meals for Israeli soldiers.

Evangelicals have been among Israel's fiercest foreign supporters for years, particularly in the United States, where their significant political influence has helped shape the Israel policy of recent Republican administrations.

They believe Israel is key to an end-times prophecy that will bring about the return of the Christian Messiah. Many of these Christians support Israel due to Old Testament writings that Jews are God's chosen people and that Israel is their rightful homeland.

"In the Scripture it instructs us to support Israel, and sometimes the best time to support someone is when they're grieving," said Landis, who has been on four previous faith-based trips to Israel. "Friendship is not just about being there for the good times, it's also about the rough times."

Landis is part of a wave of religious "voluntourism" to Israel, organized trips that include some kind of volunteering aspect connected to the war in Gaza.

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Israel's Tourism Ministry estimates around one-third to half of the approximately 3,000 daily visitors expected to arrive in March are part of faith-based volunteer trips. Before the fighting, around 15,000 visitors arrived in Israel per day, about half of whom were Christian, according to Tourism Ministry statistics. In 2019, the latest tourism statistics available that were not impacted by COVID-19, about 25% of visitors arrived on organized trips, according to the Tourism Ministry.

A study by the Hebrew University of Jerusalem found that almost half of Israelis volunteered in some capacity during the early weeks of the war. But many Israeli volunteers have returned to work and school, and now international visitors are filling the gaps.

In the U.S., support for Israel has become a top priority for evangelical Christians during a presidential election year. They are among the most outspoken backers of Israel's handling of the conflict, and Republicans have faced pressure to hew not just to traditional Republican support for Israel but to beliefs rooted in the Bible.

The war began with Hamas' attack in southern Israel in which militants killed around 1,200 people and took 250 others hostage. Israel responded with an invasion of the Gaza Strip that so far has killed more than 30,000 Palestinians.

On Oct. 11, dozens of leading evangelicals signed a statement of support for Israel organized by the public policy wing of the Southern Baptist Convention, the largest evangelical faith group in the U.S.

One of the key pro-Israel groups in the U.S. is Christians United for Israel, founded and led by evangelical pastor John Hagee. CUFU says it has raised and dispersed more than \$3 million to support Israeli first responders, health care workers, and survivors of the Oct. 7 attack.

Landis was part of a two-week volunteer trip organized by the International Christian Embassy Jerusalem. The evangelical group has put together five volunteer trips since January and expects to bring half a dozen more in the coming month. Normally, ICEJ brings about 6,000 Christian visitors to Israel annually.

Like Landis, Claudio Pichardo, a 37-year-old from Colombia studying business in Holland, was inspired by Scripture to join the ICEJ trip. "This is the best way I can help, because posting on Facebook doesn't help," he said.

When the war started, many international airlines suspended flights and tourism stopped, aside from a handful of Jewish and Christian solidarity missions. Some major airlines resumed flights to Israel in recent weeks, and others plan to soon.

Peleg Lewi, the foreign affairs adviser to the Tourism Ministry, said the faith-based solidarity missions boost morale. They can also kick-start overall tourism to Israel after a cycle of war or violence, he said.

With the war in its sixth month, Israel is under growing international pressure to do more to end the suffering of civilians in Gaza, including allowing in more aid. Aid groups say the fighting has displaced most of the territory's population and pushed a quarter of the population to the brink of famine. Hospitals have reported that some children have died of hunger.

Many Israelis fear the world is forgetting about Oct. 7.

Elizabeth Ødegaard, a trip participant from Norway, said she was surprised by how emotional Israelis get when they meet international visitors who have come to support them.

"Many people tell us, 'The whole world hates us. Everyone is against us,' so I want to say to them, 'You're not alone,'" she said. "I know the people of Israel are important to God. These are my brothers and sisters, and when they attack Israel, they attack me too."

ICEJ trip participants visited hard-hit communities in southern Israel, including the site where the shells of hundreds of burned-out cars are being stored, many from the Tribe of Nova music festival, where 364 people were killed.

"It was humbling and sobering to be there, to know what happened a few months ago and to see Israeli resilience," said Landis.

During such trips, visitors join volunteer initiatives that sprang up in Israel over the past five months, providing extra hands for farmers struggling to harvest crops, cooking meals for families who have a parent serving in the reserves or sorting donations for evacuees still living in hotels.

One initiative is Citrus & Salt, which previously hosted cooking classes and tours of Tel Aviv's markets

for tourists. When the war started, it pivoted to making more than 35,000 donated meals.

"It really helps boost morale for people to come from abroad to Israel in a time of conflict, to physically say, 'I'm here to help. What do you need?'" said Aliya Fastman, a native of Berkeley, California, who has lived in Israel for over a decade and runs Citrus & Salt with her sister. "Chopping onions is no small thing when you fly across the world to do it."

The Latest | Ship with food aid leaves for war-torn Gaza; Israel says 100 rockets fired from Lebanon

By The Associated Press undefined

A ship carrying 200 tons of food was on its way Tuesday to the war-devastated Gaza Strip from the island of Cyprus to test-run opening a sea corridor to the besieged Palestinian territory, where hundreds of thousands of people are on the brink of starvation.

The Israeli military said six aid trucks entered Gaza through the north late Tuesday as the international push for more humanitarian aid to Gaza grew.

Israel's war in Gaza threatens to spill across the Middle East as militant groups allied with Hamas and backed by Iran trade fire with U.S. and Israeli forces. The Israeli military struck two targets in Syria it said were used by Lebanese militant group Hezbollah, after around 100 projectiles were launched into Israel from Lebanon on Tuesday morning in one of the biggest barrages since the war began.

Efforts by the United States, Egypt and Qatar to broker a cease-fire between Israel and Hamas stalled last week.

The war began when Hamas-led militants stormed into southern Israel on Oct. 7, killing some 1,200 people, mostly civilians, and abducting around 250 people. Hamas is still believed to still be holding around 100 hostages and the remains of others.

Gaza's Health Ministry said that over 31,000 Palestinians have been killed and most of Gaza's 2.3 million people forced from their homes. 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. A quarter of Gaza's population is starving, according to the United Nations.

Currently:

- An aid ship is sailing to Gaza, where hundreds of thousands face starvation 5 months into war.
- A United Nations envoy says the finding that some hostages were victims of sexual violence doesn't justify Israeli attacks.
- Officials say a pair of Israeli airstrikes deep into northeastern Lebanon kills at least two people.
- A Gaza family uprooted by war and grieving their losses shares a somber Ramadan meal in a tent.
- Find more of AP's coverage at <https://apnews.com/hub/israel-hamas-war>

Here's the latest:

6 TRUCKS CARRY AID INTO GAZA FROM THE NORTH FOR THE FIRST TIME SINCE WAR ERUPTED, ISRAELI MILITARY SAYS

JERUSALEM — The Israeli military said an aid convoy has for the first time entered the Gaza Strip through a crossing in the war-ravaged northern half of the territory.

Six trucks entered Gaza late Tuesday through a gate in the border fence, carrying goods from the World Food Program, the military said. It described the delivery as a test run and said the Israeli government would review the results.

Israel alleges that Hamas is commandeering aid. At the same time, Israel is under growing international pressure to ease restrictions on aid entering Gaza, particularly the northern half of the territory. Up to now, aid convoys entered Gaza from its southern end and had to make their way through areas of fighting and large, desperate crowds of Palestinians.

On Tuesday, the European Union's foreign policy chief said Israel is using starvation as a weapon of war and accused it of blocking overland routes that are the best way to get food to hundreds of thousands

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of Palestinians facing famine.

The United States and other countries have resorted to workarounds, such as air drops and setting up a sea route, but aid officials say land deliveries remain the most efficient.

ISRAEL IS USING STARVATION AS A WEAPON OF WAR IN GAZA, EU OFFICIAL TELLS U.N. SECURITY COUNCIL

UNITED NATIONS – The European Union’s foreign policy chief says Israel is using starvation as a weapon of war and accused it of blocking overland routes that are the best way to get food to hundreds of thousands of Palestinians facing famine in the Gaza Strip.

Josep Borrell told the U.N. Security Council on Tuesday that humanitarian assistance must get into Gaza where there is no natural disaster, flood or earthquake.

“This is a man-made crisis,” Borrell said. “And when we look for alternative ways of providing support by sea or by air, we have to remind that we have to do it because the natural way of providing support to roads is being closed -- artificially closed -- and starvation is being used as a war arm.”

He said that this practice is being condemned in Ukraine, and the same words have to be used in Gaza.

The World Food Program delivered food into northern Gaza on Tuesday for the first time since Feb. 20, according to the United Nations. After being checked at Israel’s Kerem Shalom crossing, the military said six humanitarian aid trucks brought WFP aid into Gaza at the 96th gate crossing, close to Kibbutz Be’eri.

Aid groups have been struggling to get aid to the isolated area for months, although some private convoys have managed to deliver food.

Borrell said the EU is waiting for the results of three investigations into Israeli allegations that 12 staff members from the U.N. agency for Palestinian refugees, UNRWA, participated in Hamas’ Oct. 7 attacks in southern Israel. But he stressed that UNRWA only exists because there are Palestinian refugees.

And if UNRWA disappears, the refugees will still be there, he said. “In fact, there is only one way to make UNRWA disappear – making those refugees citizens of a Palestinian state that co-exists with an Israeli state.”

To make this a reality, Borrell said the first step should be for the U.N. Security Council to unanimously adopt a resolution endorsing a two-state solution and “defining the general principles which might lead to this result.”

Stressing the very wide support for a two-state solution, he said that would be “a wonderful opportunity to show that our principles are not empty words.”

ISRAEL SAYS IT STRUCK SITES IN SYRIA USED BY HEZBOLLAH

JERUSALEM — The Israeli military bombed two sites in Syria that it said were used by Lebanon’s Hezbollah militant group.

Tuesday’s strikes came amid intensified fighting along the nearby Israel-Lebanon border, where Israel and militant groups have exchanged fire almost daily since the war in Gaza erupted five months ago. The Syrian government did not immediately issue any public comment.

Hezbollah had launched more than 100 rockets towards Israel earlier Tuesday — one of the heaviest barrages of the current conflict — hours after two Israeli airstrikes in northeastern Lebanon destroyed a warehouse and killed at least one person and wounded eight.

Israel’s military says it has carried out 4,500 strikes against Hezbollah targets over the past five months. The vast majority of the strikes were in Lebanon, while a few were in Syria.

The Israeli military statement said it holds the Syrian government “accountable for all activities which take place within its territory and will not allow for any attempted actions which could lead to the entrenchment of Hezbollah on the Syrian front.”

In February, two people were killed in a strike in the Syrian capital of Damascus, although Israel did not confirm the attack.

In recent years, Israel has carried out hundreds of strikes on targets inside government-controlled parts of war-torn Syria. It doesn’t usually acknowledge its airstrikes on Syria. But when it does, Israel says it’s targeting Iran-backed groups there.

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DUTCH LEADER TO VISIT ISRAEL AND EGYPT

THE HAGUE, Netherlands — Dutch caretaker Prime Minister Mark Rutte is visiting Israel and Egypt on Wednesday to discuss the crisis in the Middle East.

Rutte will meet Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu in Jerusalem before traveling to Cairo for talks with Egyptian President Abdel Fattah el-Sissi.

The Dutch government information service says that the “humanitarian situation in Gaza and the importance of an immediate pause in fighting and the release of all hostages will be discussed.”

Rutte also will discuss the “need to prevent regional escalation and find a lasting solution to the conflict.”

68 PALESTINIAN ORPHANS ARE EVACUATED FROM GAZA TO THE WEST BANK, GERMANY SAYS

JERUSALEM — Dozens of Palestinian orphans have been evacuated from Gaza to the occupied West Bank, said the German Foreign Ministry, which had pressed for the transfer.

The evacuation Monday from the orphanage run by SOS Children’s Village, an Austrian-based non-governmental organization, appeared to be one of the largest evacuations from Gaza since the war broke out on Oct. 7.

In a statement Tuesday, the ministry said 68 orphans and 11 staff members were transferred from the southern Gaza city of Rafah to the West Bank city of Bethlehem.

“We are relieved that our intensive efforts finally led to success yesterday and thank all involved,” the ministry said in an email, without elaborating Germany’s role in the operation.

SOS Children’s Village confirmed to The Associated Press that the orphans were currently in Bethlehem, but did not provide any further details. The group has facilities in both Gaza and the West Bank.

In December, 28 premature babies were evacuated from Gaza to Egypt.

News of the evacuated orphans sparked backlash from far-right ministers in Israel’s government.

Bezalel Smotrich, the ultranationalist finance minister, demanded Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu provide “clarifications about who gave the immoral order” to transfer children from Gaza while Israelis are still held in Hamas captivity.

The Israeli military did not immediately reply to a request for comment.

AMERICAN-ISRAELI SOLDIER BELIEVED TAKEN HOSTAGE HAD DIED ON OCT. 7, ISRAEL’S MILITARY SAYS

JERUSALEM — The Israeli military says it has determined that an American-Israeli soldier who was believed taken into Gaza as a hostage was actually killed during the Hamas-led attack on Oct. 7.

It was not clear how the military determined Itay Chen, 19, had been killed. Chen on active duty on the day of the attack.

Chen’s family has been prominent in the struggle by relatives of hostages to have their loved ones released. Chen’s father, Ruby, is American and had made repeated appearances in the media and met top U.S. officials.

U.S. President Joe Biden said Tuesday he was “devastated” to learn of Chen’s death, after meeting Chen’s father and brother at the White House in December.

“No one should have to endure even one day of what they have gone through,” said Biden, adding that the U.S. would keep working to secure the remaining hostages’ release.

In a statement, Chen’s parents thanked the Biden administration and the American people for their support. They said they expect Israel and America’s leadership to do everything to bring back all the hostages still in Gaza, including their son’s remains.

Chen is the latest hostage to be declared dead by Israeli authorities. Israel says 34 of the hostages remaining in the Gaza Strip are dead, either killed during Hamas’ attack or while in captivity.

Hamas-led militants took roughly 250 people captive into Gaza, among them men, women, children and older adults. Dozens were released during a temporary cease-fire in late November and about 100 people remain in captivity who are believed to be alive.

11 KILLED IN AN ISRAELI STRIKE ON A HOME IN CENTRAL GAZA

RAFAH, Gaza Strip — Palestinian officials say an Israeli strike on a home in central Gaza has killed 11 people, mainly women and children.

The strike occurred early Tuesday in the central city of Deir al-Balah. An Associated Press reporter saw

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the bodies arrive at a hospital.

Hospital records show that of the 11 killed, four were women and five were children. All were from the same family.

Israel says it tries to avoid harming civilians and accuses Hamas of using them as human shields because the militants fight in dense, residential neighborhoods. The military rarely comments on individual strikes, which often kill women and children.

Gaza's Health Ministry says at least 31,112 Palestinians have been killed in the war. 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.

The war began when Hamas launched a surprise attack into Israel on Oct. 7, killing some 1,200 people, mainly civilians, and taking around 250 hostage.

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.

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 was begun 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.

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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.

Haiti’s future is being planned on two tracks: traditional political power and gang power

By The Associated Press undefined

Haiti’s future is being planned on two tracks — one involving traditional political power, the other focused on the power of gangs.

After an intense session of international diplomacy in Jamaica, a group of Caribbean nations and the United States announced Tuesday that Haiti’s best hope for calming violence rests with a council of influential figures who would elect an interim leader and could steer the country toward fresh presidential elections.

As they spoke to the media, a heavily armed gang leader held an impromptu news conference in Port-au-Prince and rejected any solution led and supported by the international community.

“Haitian people will choose who will govern them,” Jimmy “Barbecue” Chérizier said Monday.

Haitian politics have lived in these two worlds for decades, experts told The Associated Press this week. Politicians and business interests have maintained on-the-books legal interests while employing gangs to enforce their will on the chaotic streets.

WHO DECIDES HAITI’S FUTURE?

Prime Minister Ariel Henry announced Tuesday that he would resign once the transitional presidential council was created. Guyana President Irfaan Ali said the transitional council would have seven voting members and two nonvoting ones.

The seven voting members include three traditional political parties, a civil-society group known as the Montana Accord and members of the country’s powerful private sector.

The transitional council includes a role for civil society alongside the Montana one, but some observers say that is far from enough.

“The fact that Haiti’s civil society and religious sector will only have ‘observer status’ on a transitional council dominated by members of the country’s disgraced political class and its allies should tell you a lot,” said Michael Deibert, author of “Notes From the Last Testament: The Struggle for Haiti” and “Haiti Will Not Perish: A Recent History.”

WHO ARE THE MEMBERS OF THE COUNCIL DECIDING THE FUTURE OF HAITIAN POLITICS?

One of the parties is the Pitit Desalin party, which is run by former senator and presidential candidate Moïse Jean-Charles. He 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.

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Philippe was a charismatic leader who was instrumental in the 2004 rebellion against former President Jean-Bertrand Aristide and had powerful ties to police, politicians and the business elite.

Former Prime Minister Charles Joseph has a party called EDE/RDE, which also has a vote.

Also on the council is the Fanmi Lavalas party backed by Aristide and another coalition led by Henry.

Robert Fatton, a Haitian politics expert at the University of Virginia, said that membership in the group announced Monday appeared to overlap with at least one other group that was founded in recent weeks to calm Haitian civil unrest in the same general way.

WHAT ARE THE BIGGEST OBSTACLES TO SUCCESS?

Solutions to past crises have overly emphasized foreign nations' ability to resolve problems in Haiti, said Francois Pierre-Louis, a professor of political science at Queens College at the City University of New York.

"The U.S. government and the international community have not allowed Haitians to decide on their own what needs to be done, and that is done two ways," Pierre-Louis said.

Specifically, outside actors have undermined civil society and failed to punish bad elements, he said, making the work of constructing a functional society infinitely more difficult.

But Haiti's domestic instability may have gone so far that only an armed force from overseas can impose order, said Eric Farnsworth, vice president of the Council of the Americas and the Americas Society.

People must be ready to welcome that force. "It's a no-win situation," he said.

Savannah plans a supersized 200th anniversary celebration of its beloved St. Patrick's Day parade

By RUSS BYNUM Associated Press

SAVANNAH, Ga. (AP) — There was no green beer, no pickup trucks towing parade floats or throngs of tourists in gaudy green outfits. Instead, just a few dozen of Savannah's early Irish immigrants marched a half-mile from a hotel near the riverfront to attend a special service at what then was the city's only Roman Catholic church.

That modest procession on March 17, 1824, launched one of the most beloved — and profitable — traditions in Savannah. On Saturday, Georgia's oldest city will celebrate the 200th anniversary of its St. Patrick's Day parade, which has grown over time into one of America's largest. Thousands of revelers are expected to cram sidewalks and squares along the parade route through Savannah's downtown historic district.

More than 18,000 hotel rooms in Savannah and surrounding Chatham County are nearly sold out for the weekend. The parade lineup is bursting with at least 230 pipe-and-drum bands, chauffeur-driven dignitaries, marching military units and shamrock-decorated floats. Downtown bars have stocked up on extra kegs of beer, and the city has rented more than 320 portable toilets for those imbibing.

"We're expecting historic crowds from visitors and residents alike," said Savannah City Manager Jay Melder.

Over the past two centuries, St. Patrick's Day in Savannah has morphed into perhaps the South's biggest street party between Mardi Gras in New Orleans and Florida's raucous spring break.

It's a far cry from how Savannah's celebration began.

Founded as a nondenominational charity to assist poor Irish immigrants, the Hibernian Society of Savannah had an important day planned on March 17, 1824. The group invited Bishop John England, an Irish native appointed to lead the newly formed Diocese of Charleston, South Carolina, to come to Savannah and speak at the city's Roman Catholic church.

The Hibernians hosted England on St. Patrick's Day during their morning meeting at the City Hotel near the bluff overlooking the Savannah River. Then they marched in procession, accompanied by a band and a flag-bearer whose banner was decorated with a symbolic Irish harp and shamrocks, to hear the bishop speak at noon at St. John the Baptist Church.

"May the example of Savannah be widely influential," the bishop told an audience of both Catholics and Protestants inside the packed church while a crowd of onlookers stood outside in the rain, the Savannah Republican newspaper reported. "Here men who differ in religion may meet as friends and brethren."

Afterward, the Irish society marched back to the hotel, where the bishop joined about 80 members for

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an evening banquet marked by a steady stream of toasts, said Howard Keeley, director of the Center for Irish Research and Teaching at Georgia Southern University.

"They partied the night away, apparently," said Keeley, who studies the history of Irish immigrants in Georgia. "It was a big celebration. The Hibernians had always had these celebrations since their founding in 1812. This one was just kind of amped up by the presence of the bishop."

Like even older St. Patrick's Day parades in New York and Boston, Savannah's parade is likely rooted in military units celebrating the holiday during the American Revolution, Keeley said. He noted there are accounts of Irish-born soldiers marching on St. Patrick's Day while serving under George Washington.

Savannah's celebration grew along with its Irish population. Laborers from Ireland settled in the Southern port city in the 1830s to help build railroads and canals. In the 1840s, the potato famine in Ireland drove as many as 2 million immigrants to U.S. shores, causing Savannah's Irish-born population to double, Keeley said.

In the decades following the Civil War, Savannah's holiday started showing glimmers of the more commercially driven celebrations to come.

Local clothing stores stocked green neckties and gloves by 1875, according to "The Days We've Celebrated," a history of St. Patrick's Day festivities in Savannah by the late William L. Fogarty, who served as the parade's 1986 grand marshal.

And following the 1888 celebration, a newspaper reported that Savannah officials had ordered businesses to close for a day because "the city is agitated by Sunday cocktails."

Even by the 1960s, Savannah's parade had yet to become a full-blown tourism dynamo.

Tim Mahoney, chairman of the parade's organizing committee, recalled that when his father held the same post in 1969, the parade got planned "on somebody's dining room table" and was pulled together from high school bands, locally based military units and Savannah's Irish families.

"They had no money; they had no resources," Mahoney said. "But in true Irish leadership fashion they just rolled up their sleeves and said, 'Heck, we're going to make this parade happen.'"

Though some may refer to this year's celebration as Savannah's 200th parade, that's incorrect. The coronavirus pandemic caused City Hall to cancel St. Patrick's Day parades in 2020 and 2021, and there were several prior years in which Savannah went without a parade — including during the Civil War, World War I and the Irish Revolution in 1921.

The 200th anniversary parade is being held a day early, on Saturday, in keeping with another longstanding Savannah tradition. Whenever the March 17 holiday falls on a Sunday, organizers move the parade to Saturday to avoid disrupting church services.

Officials expect visitors to arrive even sooner and start celebrating in earnest Thursday. They'll find park fountains gushing with green-dyed water. Several downtown buildings including City Hall and the Cathedral of St. John the Baptist are temporarily glowing green at night thanks to special lighting.

What would the forefathers of Savannah's celebration think?

"They would be blown away," Mahoney said.

House GOP launch new probe of Jan. 6 and try shifting blame for the Capitol attack away from Trump

By LISA MASCARO AP Congressional Correspondent

WASHINGTON (AP) — House Republicans are launching a vast re-investigation of the Jan. 6, 2021 attack on the Capitol, seeking to push the blame away from Donald Trump who has been indicted over his actions or his supporters in the mob siege trying to overturn the 2020 election.

As Trump campaigns to return to the White House, the House Administration subcommittee on Oversight held the first of what is expected to be regular public hearings revisiting the official account, which had aired in great detail in 2022 by the House's Select Committee on Jan. 6.

Chairman Barry Loudermilk, R-Ga., called Jan. 6 a "dark day" in U.S. history as he opened Tuesday's hearing to delve into the investigation of pipe bombs that were left outside Republican and Democratic

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party headquarters that day.

But he said, "we still have many unanswered questions."

The panel's work comes as Trump and President Joe Biden are galloping toward a rematch this fall, and Republicans, some once skeptical of Trump's return to the White House, have quickly been falling in line to support the former president. The House GOP's high-profile impeachment inquiry into Biden has stalled without a clear path forward.

Speaker Mike Johnson said House Republicans intend to release a final report on Jan. 6 "to correct the incomplete narrative" advanced by the previous work of the Select Committee on the Jan. 6 attack.

With newly released testimony and an 80-plus page report of initial findings, the House Administration subcommittee has outlined a roadmap ahead for its probe — including revisiting key testimony from White House aide Cassidy Hutchinson, who delivered a bombshell account of Trump's actions that day.

The panel's report draws on many of the conspiracy theories circulating about Jan. 6 — from the formation of the Select Committee by then-Speaker Nancy Pelosi to newer questions about the unidentified people who erected the hangman's scaffolding outside the U.S. Capitol.

"Democrats wasted no time before pointing fingers at President Trump for the events of January 6, 2021," the initial findings of the report said.

At the first hearing, Republicans grilled the U.S. Capitol Police about why a bomb-sniffing K9 unit did not initially detect the pipe bombs found outside party headquarters and why police didn't respond faster to seal off the area.

U.S. Capitol Police Assistant Chief Sean Gallagher told the panel it was "chaotic" that day as the mob descended on the Capitol.

"I want to be upfront and honest, U.S. Capitol Police haven't shied away from the failures of that day," Gallagher said about the well-documented leadership problems spelled out in their own report.

He described the fighting on the West and East fronts of the Capitol as police tried to hold back the mob — "our officers were suffering injuries" — and calls coming in, including a pick-up truck loaded with Molotov cocktails, machetes, rifles, handguns and ammunition parked nearby.

Five people died in the riot and its immediate aftermath, including a police officer, and other officers died later by suicide. More than 1,200 people have been charged in the riot, and hundreds convicted.

"For context, I would gladly give up a perimeter not being perfect to be able to get officers responding to help their brothers and sisters who were calling for help at the U.S. Capitol," Gallagher testified.

Rep. Norma Torres of California, the panel's ranking Democrat and a former 911 dispatcher, questioned the whole premise of the hearing, particularly as federal investigations are underway: "What exactly is it that we're doing here?"

"Maybe it is to peddle crazy right-wing conspiracy theories about the Jan. 6 pipe bombs spreading in the dark corners of the Internet?" she asked.

"Or maybe we are here so this subcommittee can once again try to muddle our history, villainize law enforcement and undo the efforts of the bipartisan Jan. 6 Select Committee," she said, "all to distract from the simple fact that the former president and Republican nominee for president orchestrated a corrupt scheme to overturn the results of a free and fair election."

Trump has been indicted on federal charges of conspiracy to defraud Americans and obstruction of an official proceeding over Jan. 6. The Supreme Court is considering his claim of immunity.

House Republicans criticize the Select Committee and they claim it didn't turn over all aspects of its work.

On Tuesday, a previously undisclosed transcript of the Select Committee's interview with an unnamed Secret Service officer who drove the presidential SUV on Jan. 6 provided new information about Trump's actions that day. It was obtained by The Associated Press.

That transcript of the presidential limo driver contradicted some of Hutchinson's testimony but corroborated other aspects of her account, including Trump's attempt to join the mob scene at the Capitol.

Trump had told his supporters during the Jan. 6 "Stop the Steal" rally at the Ellipse near the White House to walk down Pennsylvania Avenue to the Capitol, and said he would be right there with them, as Congress

was certifying the 2020 election and Biden's victory.

But his security detail refused to take him there, and instead took Trump back to the White House.

Hutchinson, who at the time was an aide to Mark Meadows, then the White House chief of staff, had testified in June 2022 that she was told by another official that Trump fought for control of the presidential SUV and demanded to be taken to the Capitol as the insurrection began.

Hutchinson testified that she was told that Bobby Engel, the head of security in the car with him, had grabbed Trump's arm to prevent him from gaining control of the armored vehicle, and Trump then used his free hand to lunge at Engel. She worked inside the White House, and said that when she was told of the altercation immediately afterward, Engel was in the room and didn't dispute the account at the time.

In the newly obtained transcript, the driver confirms: "The President was insistent on going to the Capitol."

The driver explained that Trump and Engel got in the car after the rally, and Trump started asking Engel about going to the Capitol. When Engel suggested they couldn't do that, Trump kept pushing.

"Certainly his voice was raised," the driver testified, "but it did not seem to me like he was irate, certainly not — certainly didn't seem as irritated or as agitated as he had on the way to the Ellipse."

The driver said, "The thing that sticks out most was he kept asking why we couldn't go?"

But the driver said he did not see the altercation that Hutchinson described.

"He never grabbed the steering wheel. I didn't see him, you know, lunge to try to get into the front seat at all," the driver testified.

"You know, what stood out was the irritation in his voice more than — more than his physical presence, which would have been pretty obvious if he was trying to insert himself between the two front seats," the driver said.

The driver said he told other colleagues at the White House what had happened as he waited outside with the vehicles.

House poised to pass bill that could ban TikTok but it faces uncertain path in the Senate

By KEVIN FREKING Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — A bill that could lead to a ban of the popular video app TikTok in the United States is expected to pass the House on Wednesday as lawmakers act on concerns that the company's ownership structure is a threat to national security.

The bill would require the Chinese firm ByteDance to divest TikTok and other applications it owns within six months of the bill's enactment or those apps would be prohibited. The lawmakers contend that ByteDance is beholden to the Chinese government, which could demand access to the data of TikTok's consumers in the U.S. any time it wants. The worry stems from a set of Chinese national security laws that compel organizations to assist with intelligence gathering.

House passage of the bill would only be the first step. The Senate would also need to pass the measure for it to become law, and lawmakers in that chamber indicated it would undergo a thorough review. Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer, D-N.Y., said he'll have to consult with relevant committee chairs to determine the bill's path.

President Joe Biden has said if Congress passes the measure, he will sign it.

The House vote is poised to open a new front in the long-running feud between lawmakers and the tech industry. Members of Congress have long been critical of tech platforms and their expansive influence, often clashing with executives over industry practices. But by targeting TikTok, lawmakers are singling out a platform popular with millions of people, many of whom skew younger, just months before an election.

Ahead of the House vote, a top national security official in the Biden administration held a closed-door briefing Tuesday with lawmakers to discuss TikTok and the national security implications. Lawmakers are balancing those security concerns against a desire not to limit free speech online.

"What we've tried to do here is be very thoughtful and deliberate about the need to force a divestiture of TikTok without granting any authority to the executive branch to regulate content or go after any American

company," said Rep. Mike Gallagher, the bill's author, as he emerged from the briefing.

TikTok has long denied that it could be used as a tool of the Chinese government. The company has said it has never shared U.S. user data with Chinese authorities and won't do so if it is asked. To date, the U.S. government also has not provided any evidence that shows TikTok shared such information with Chinese authorities. The platform has about 170 million users in the U.S.

The security briefing seemed to change few minds, instead solidifying the views of both sides.

"We have a national security obligation to prevent America's most strategic adversary from being so involved in our lives," said Rep. Nick LaLota, R-N.Y.

But Rep. Robert Garcia, D-Calif., said no information has been shared with him that convinces him TikTok is a national security threat. "My opinion, leaving that briefing, has not changed at all," he said.

"This idea that we're going to ban, essentially, entrepreneurs, small business owners, the main way how young people actually communicate with each other is to me insane," Garcia said.

"Not a single thing that we heard in today's classified briefing was unique to TikTok. It was things that happen on every single social media platform," said Rep. Sara Jacobs, D-Calif.

Republican leaders have moved quickly to bring up the bill after its introduction last week. A House committee approved the legislation unanimously, on a 50-vote, even after their offices were inundated with calls from TikTok users demanding they drop the effort. Some offices even shut off their phones because of the onslaught.

Lawmakers in both parties are anxious to confront China on a range of issues. The House formed a special committee to focus on China-related issues. And Schumer directed committee chairs to begin working with Republicans on a bipartisan China competition bill.

Senators are expressing an openness to the bill, but suggested they don't want to rush ahead.

"It is not for me a redeeming quality that you're moving very fast in technology because the history shows you make a lot of mistakes," said Sen. Ron Wyden, D-Ore.

In pushing ahead with the legislation, House Republicans are also creating rare daylight between themselves and former President Donald Trump as he seeks another term in the White House.

Trump has voiced opposition to the effort. He 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.

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.

Trump wins delegates needed to become GOP's presumptive nominee for third straight election

By JILL COLVIN Associated Press

WEST PALM BEACH, Fla. (AP) — Donald Trump, whose single turbulent term in the White House transformed the Republican Party, tested the resilience of democratic institutions in the U.S. and threatened alliances abroad, will lead the GOP in a third consecutive presidential election after clinching the nomination Tuesday.

With wins in Georgia, Mississippi and Washington state, Trump surpassed the 1,215-delegate threshold needed to become the presumptive Republican nominee. He'll formally accept the nomination at the Republican National Convention in July, by which point he could be in the remarkable position of being both a presidential candidate and convicted felon. Trump has been indicted in four separate criminal investigations and his first trial, which centers on payments made to a porn actress, is set to begin March 25 in New York City.

Trump's victory in the GOP primary ushers in what will almost certainly be an extraordinarily negative

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general election campaign that will tug at the nation's already searing political and cultural divides. He'll face President Joe Biden in the fall, pitting two deeply unpopular figures against each other in a rematch of the 2020 campaign that few voters say they want to experience again.

Trump, in a video to supporters Tuesday night, called it a "really great day of victory."

Looking forward to November, he said, "We now have to go on to victory because our country's in serious trouble," complaining about the border and the economy and claiming the U.S. has "no respect on the world stage."

He added: "For this evening and for last week and for all the weeks before, for the tremendous success we've had in this primary, I want to thank everybody. But much more importantly, we have to get to work to beat Joe Biden, the worst administration, the worst president in the history of our country."

Thirty-eight percent of Americans viewed Trump very or somewhat favorably in a February poll conducted by the AP-NORC Center for Public Affairs, compared to 41% for Biden.

Trump is attempting to return to the White House after threatening democratic norms in the U.S. He refused to accept his loss to Biden in 2020, spending months grasping at baseless conspiracy theories of election fraud that were roundly rejected by the courts and his own attorney general. His rage during a rally on Jan. 6, 2021, helped rile up a mob of supporters who later violently attacked the U.S. Capitol in an effort to disrupt the congressional certification of Biden's win.

Only in the wake of the insurrection, with storefronts in the nation's capital boarded up and military vehicles parked on streets to prevent further violence, did Trump accept the reality that Biden would become president. He has since called Jan. 6 "a beautiful day" and aligned himself with those who have been imprisoned for their actions — many for assaulting police officers — labeling them "hostages" and demanding their release.

Trump has been ambivalent about other basic democratic ideals during his 2024 campaign. He has not committed to accepting the results of this year's election and, during a December interview on Fox News, suggested he would be a dictator for the first day of a new administration. He has aligned himself with autocratic leaders of other countries, most notably Russia's Vladimir Putin and Hungary's Viktor Orbán.

Such alliances are a departure from the longstanding posture of the U.S., which has focused on strengthening democracies abroad. But a Trump election could upend U.S. support for Ukraine after its invasion by Russia. And it could have dramatic implications for NATO.

During his years in the White House, Trump often derided the transatlantic alliance as antiquated and lamented that some countries weren't spending enough on their own defense. He has maintained that critique this year, causing a stir on both sides of the Atlantic in February when he told a rally crowd that he once warned members that he would not only refuse to defend countries that were "delinquent," but that he "would encourage" Russia "to do whatever the hell they want" to them.

Legal trouble

Trump becomes the GOP's standard-bearer at a time of profound legal trouble, raising the personal stakes of an election that could determine whether he faces the prospect of time behind bars. He faces 91 felony charges in cases that span from the New York hush money case to his efforts to overturn the election and his hoarding of classified documents.

While the New York case is moving forward this month, there's significant uncertainty about the trajectory of the other, more serious cases, raising the prospect that they may not be decided until after the election.

The Republican Party's rules for its convention do not address what might happen if the presumptive nominee is convicted of a crime. A conviction wouldn't bar Trump from continuing to run, though a felon has never been a major party nominee or won the White House.

If he were to win in November, Trump could appoint an attorney general who would dismiss the federal charges he faces, a remarkable possibility that would undermine the Justice Department's traditional independence from the White House.

In addition to the criminal cases, Trump owes in excess of \$500 million in fines and interest after a judge in New York ruled he had engaged in a scheme to inflate his net worth to obtain favorable financing. He was ordered to pay \$355 million, plus interest, in that case — adding to the \$88.3 million he already owed

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writer E. Jean Carroll after he was found liable of defamation and sexual abuse.

Trump, so far, has deftly used the legal cases as a rallying cry, portraying them as a plot hatched by Democrats to keep him out of power. That argument proved powerful among GOP primary voters, with whom Trump remains a deeply popular figure.

He now enters the general election phase of the campaign in a competitive position, with voters frustrated by the current state of the economy after years of sharp inflation, despite robust growth and low unemployment, as well as growing concern about the influx of migrants across the southern border. As he did with success in 2016, Trump is seizing on immigration this year, deploying increasingly heated and inflammatory rhetoric in ways that often animate his supporters.

The 77-year-old Trump is aided by Biden's perceived weaknesses. The 81-year-old president is broadly unpopular, with deep reservations among voters in both parties about his age and ability to assume the presidency for another four years, though he is not much older than Trump.

Biden is also struggling to replicate the coalition that ushered him into the presidency four years ago as some in his party, particularly younger voters and those on the left, have condemned his handling of Israel's war against Hamas.

Trump's headwinds

While those dynamics may play in Trump's favor, he faces stiff headwinds in winning support beyond his base. A notable chunk of GOP primary voters backed his rivals, including Nikki Haley, who ended her campaign after the Super Tuesday races but has not endorsed Trump. Many of those voters have expressed ambivalence about backing him. He'll have to change that if he wants to win the states that will likely decide the election, such as Arizona, Nevada, Georgia, Pennsylvania, Michigan and Wisconsin — each of which he lost in 2020.

It remains unclear how Trump's legal cases will resonate in the general election, particularly among suburban voters, women and independents. Trump's role in appointing the justices who overturned the constitutional right to an abortion could prove a liability in swing states, where women and independent voters are especially influential. He's also made a string of racist comments, including an assertion that his criminal indictments boosted his support among Black Americans, that aren't likely to win over more moderate voters.

Still, Trump's speedy path to the nomination reflects more than a year of quiet work by his team to encourage states to adopt favorable delegate-selection rules, including pushing for winner-take-all contests that prevent second-place finishers from amassing delegates.

That helped Trump become the presumptive nominee much earlier than in recent presidential elections. Biden didn't win enough delegates to formally become his party's leader until June 2020. During his 2016 bid, Trump won the needed delegates by May.

This year, Trump handily dispatched his Republican primary rivals, sweeping the early voting states that typically set the tone for the campaign. The field included a range of prominent Republicans such as Florida Gov. Ron DeSantis, Haley, his former U.N. ambassador, South Carolina Sen. Tim Scott, former New Jersey Gov. Chris Christie and Mike Pence, who was Trump's vice president.

At one point, DeSantis was ahead of Trump in early state polls. But he wilted in the national spotlight, failing to live up to sky-high expectations, despite \$168 million in campaign and outside spending. DeSantis dropped out of the race after losing Iowa — a state he had staked his campaign on — and endorsed Trump.

In the end, Haley was Trump's last challenger. She only won the District of Columbia and Vermont before ending her campaign.

Hur transcript reveals Biden presidency's profound and mundane moments

By COLLEEN LONG and ZEKE MILLER Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Special counsel Robert Hur was thanking the president for his time. He understood, Hur said, that there were a lot of things going on that demanded Joe Biden's attention.

"We may be interrupted by one," Biden said, explaining that he'd just gotten off the phone with Israeli

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Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu. It was Oct. 8, 2023, the day after the attack on Israel by Hamas, and the president was navigating a major multi-task, trying to prevent a wider Mideast conflict while looking out for his own interests at a time of potential legal jeopardy.

Still, Biden told prosecutors he hoped they could get through the interview. And Hur let the president know they appreciated it.

Their exchange was in a transcript released Tuesday of five hours of Biden interviews with federal prosecutors who investigated his handling of classified documents and concluded there was not enough evidence to charge him with any crimes.

While the release of the transcript may not have altered preconceived notions about Biden, it did offer a rare window into the profound and mundane realities of day-to-day life for the president.

In his conversations with investigators, Biden makes offhand remarks about working in his pajamas as vice president, laments over his oh-so messy garage at his house in Delaware and talks of juggling international crises while other matters intrude.

Taken together, they illustrate the idiosyncrasies of a presidency and showcase a hallmark of Biden's political career: storytelling.

A question about whether he brought classified information as vice president to his home in Wilmington, Delaware, turned into a 25-paragraph stream of consciousness answer about where he kept photos from his vice presidential days. That in turn morphed into a well-worn tale of that one time he "embarrassed the hell" out of the leader of Mongolia, apparently by exceeding expectations with a bow and arrow.

"And so we're out in the middle of nowhere and they're looking up on the hill and we see this tiny line. You know, it's a 20-mile horse race with all these kids under the age of 16 on bareback racing to come down. And you know, there are sumo wrestlers doin' everything they do."

And then, he says, they walk over and hand him a bow and arrow — there are targets on bales of hay. "I don't know if it was to embarrass me or to make a point, but I get handed the bow and arrow. I'm not a bad archer. ... So I — and pure luck, I hit the goddamn target."

To try to explain how he organizes his papers after meetings, Biden used the example of the just-concluded call with Netanyahu and his subsequent talk with "Jake and Tony" — Sullivan and Blinken, that is, his national security adviser and secretary of state.

"I said, guys, we got to follow up on boom, boom, boom, what's going to happen here. And then I took my papers, looked at what I need, put them in a pile, and they're sitting in the middle of my desk."

Biden ventured into how working odd hours as vice president influenced his decorating choices at the Naval Observatory, the Victorian mansion that serves as the vice president's official residence.

"I put a small desk in there so I could (redacted) when I wanted to work in my pajamas," Biden said of his eight years living there. "My wife did not like it."

Biden, by his own admission, is something of a hoarder. Think souvenirs, jumbo photos, genealogy records, binders of speeches given over the course of more than 50 years in public life.

"I just warn you all, never make one great eulogy, because you get asked to do everybody's eulogy," he quipped to Hur's team.

His wife Jill, he said, wanted nothing to do with his filing system, which he said often meant taking unsorted piles from a desk or table and putting them in a cabinet.

When reviewing pictures of his cluttered desk, he pointed to a fundraising item from his 2020 campaign and gave the special counsel investigating him some free advice: "That is something, if you ever run for office, you've got to keep."

Hur quickly replied: "That will never happen, sir."

The photos of his garage show a cluttered mess of boxes, home furnishings and exercise equipment alongside his treasured Corvette, including the crumpled box where investigators found some of the classified documents.

"I don't remember how a beat-up box got in the garage," Biden said. He later speculated that his staff collected some of the last items from his vice presidential office and the box eventually got deposited

among the other storage boxes strewn across the space.

As the first day of questioning wrapped, Hur asked his team if they had "any other questions on the garage before we leave that subject? No?"

Biden jumped in with a joke: "Yeah. When am I going to get the rest of it cleared out?"

Why AP is calling Trump and Biden 'presumptive nominees' for president

By ROBERT YOON Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — It's official: Both President Joe Biden and former President Donald Trump have won enough delegates to be called presumptive presidential nominees.

While Biden and Trump were the last remaining major candidates for their parties' 2024 presidential nominations, The Associated Press only uses the designation "presumptive nominee" once a candidate has captured the number of delegates needed to win a majority vote at the national party conventions this summer.

Biden reached that point Tuesday after he won Georgia's primary and enough of the state's delegates to put him above the 1,968 needed to lock up the nomination.

Trump clinched later Tuesday, winning enough delegates to exceed the 1,215 he needed to claim the Republican nomination. Trump won in Georgia and Mississippi before a victory in Washington put him over the top.

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 doesn'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.

In Vietnam's Mekong Delta, the lure of moving to the city grows even stronger amid climate shocks

By ANIRUDDHA GHOSAL Associated Press

CAN THO, Vietnam (AP) — Dao Bao Tran and her brother Do Hoang Trung, 11-year-old twins growing up on a rickety houseboat in the Mekong Delta, have dreams. Tran loves K-pop, watches videos at night to learn Korean and would love to visit Seoul. Trung wants to be a singer.

But their hopes are "unrealistic," said Trung: "I know I'll end up going to the city to try and make a living."

Such dreams have a way of dissipating in southern Vietnam's Mekong, one of the most climate-vulnerable regions in the world.

For the poor, the future is especially uncertain. A U.N. climate change report in 2022 warned there will be more floods in the wet season and drought in the dry season. Unsustainable extraction of groundwater and sand for construction have made matters worse. And with rising seas gnawing away at its southern edge and dams hemming the Mekong River upstream, farming in the fertile delta is getting harder. Its contribution to Vietnam's GDP has dropped from 27% in 1990 to less than 18% in 2019, according to a 2020 report by the Vietnam Chamber of Commerce and Industry.

The call of the city, where factory jobs promise better salaries, is often too hard to resist for the region's 17 million inhabitants.

The twins' single mother, Do Thi Son Ca, left to seek work in Ho Chi Minh City soon after her children

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were born. She left them with her mother, 59-year-old Nguyen Thi Thuy. Unable to afford rent on land, the small family has lived on a small houseboat ever since.

Thuy rents a smaller boat to sell meat and bean buns at the Cai Rang floating market, the largest of its kind in the Mekong Delta. She rises well before dawn to steam the buns in a metal urn over glowing coals nestled in the middle of the boat, standing in the bow to pull a massive pair of oars to make her way to the market.

On good days she makes about \$4 — hardly enough to put food on the table. The twins have already missed two years of school when their grandmother couldn't pay the fees and their mother, struggling in the city, couldn't help either. Now their houseboat on the Hau River, their only refuge, is in urgent need of expensive repairs and Thuy is wondering how she'll find \$170 before the rainy season.

"The storms are becoming more violent," said Thuy. In the rainy season, heavy rains can mean pumping water furiously so her houseboat doesn't sink. Flooding forces Thuy to move the boat to a bigger canal to avoid a battering if she were to remain anchored at shore, but the larger canal comes with its own risks in the form of bigger waves.

Moving away from the Mekong to bigger cities or even abroad for better prospects isn't new. But the net outmigration — the difference between people moving out of the delta and those moving in — more than tripled after 1999. Experts caution that the reasons people move are complex, and it's difficult to know how great a role climate change plays.

"Climate change is both a catalyst and accelerant for migration," said Mimi Vu, a trafficking and migration specialist based in Ho Chi Minh City. It has hurt livelihoods and worsens inequities in a region that is still less developed than other parts of Vietnam, she said. The region lacks solid development foundations such as high rates of students finishing high school, consistent access to clean water and adequate health care.

"Every generation still struggles," she said.

And moving to the city doesn't guarantee anything.

The twins' mother had a new beginning when she moved to Ho Chi Minh City, finding a job in a clothing factory, marrying and having a baby. But both she and her husband were eventually laid off — among the thousands of workers in Vietnam to lose their jobs because of low overseas orders. They have since moved back to his home village. Ca, 34, never finished school and she is looking for work but does not know what they'll do next.

"My family is poor. So I don't think too far ahead. I just hope my children can receive a full education," she said.

For now she won't be able to help her family with the school fees or boat repairs and also didn't see the kids for Tet, the lunar new year festival in Vietnam.

Vu, the migration specialist, said older workers who return to their villages after layoffs often don't want to go back to a city where they "had their rose-colored glasses pulled off" by the daily struggle.

That includes Pham Van Sang, 50, who left his native Bac Lieu province for Ho Chi Minh City in his 20s after unpredictable weather made growing rice and shrimp no longer viable.

Today, he and his wife, Luong Thi Ut, 51, live in a room that's about 100 square feet (9.2 meters), crammed with what they need to operate a food stall for factory workers in the city. Their main offering is a Mekong-style intense fish noodle dish that, he says, brings homesick factory workers "comfort" with a taste of their old lives.

Sang said he's haunted by memories of home, being young in the countryside, of raising shrimp with his family. "I'm sad for the generation of children and grandchildren who have no future," he said.

Vietnam's government has approved a plan to strengthen the Mekong region's agricultural economy, which produces about half the country's rice and is critical to feed other countries, like Indonesia and Philippines, too. The plan includes trying new technologies to reduce emissions from rice while increasing yields and profits, creating more fisheries and fruit orchards, and building airports and highways to lure foreign investment.

But the allure of Ho Chi Minh City — a bustling metropolis of 9.3 million people, Vietnam's financial en-

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gine — is hard to resist for many, especially the young. Even those in the countryside see moving to the city, or better yet moving abroad, as the fastest way out of poverty, said Trung Hieu, 23.

Hieu lives in a dormitory that he shares with another young man from the delta. He works two jobs — a 12-hour shift in a factory that makes pharmaceutical parts followed by hours spent riding his motorcycle for a Vietnamese ride-hailing company. He enjoyed school and wanted to be a literature teacher, but his family's farm income in Dong Thap province in the Mekong had been decimated over the years. When he finished school, his family had to choose whether to send him to college or allow his younger sister to finish school.

He chose to move to the city so that he could send money back home. "My sister is doing well in school, I'm very happy," he said.

Hieu initially found the city bewildering and felt homesick, but slowly the city grew on him. "You gradually adapt, you survive," he said. He is learning how to thrive in the city: hard work, but also networking and communicating.

Still, he hopes to someday go to college and fulfill his dream of becoming a teacher, and work in a school in the delta like the ones he and his sister studied in. He said it would make him feel closer to home.

"Everyone wants to go back to where they were born and raised," he said.

An aid ship is sailing 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 5-month Israel-Hamas war has driven hundreds of thousands of Palestinians to the brink of starvation.

The push to get food in by sea — along with a recent campaign of airdrops into isolated northern Gaza — highlighted the international community's frustration with the growing humanitarian crisis and its inability to get aid in by road.

The food on the aid ship was collected by World Central Kitchen, the charity founded by celebrity chef José Andrés, and is being transported by the Spanish aid group Open Arms. The ship departed from the eastern Mediterranean island nation of Cyprus and is expected to arrive in Gaza in two to three days.

The United States separately 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.

WAR RAGES WITH NO END IN SIGHT

The war, triggered by Hamas' Oct. 7 attack on Israel, has killed over 31,000 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.

Efforts by U.S., Qatar and Egypt to broker a cease-fire and hostage release before the Muslim holy month of Ramadan stalled 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 strip's southern city of Rafah, where half of Gaza's population has sought refuge, and to keep fighting until Hamas has been dismantled and all the captives it is holding have been returned.

The war threatens to spill across the Middle East as Iran-backed groups allied with Hamas trade fire with U.S. and Israeli forces. The Israeli military said around 100 projectiles were launched into Israel from Lebanon early on Tuesday, one of the biggest barrages since the war began. It appeared to be in response to Israeli airstrikes deep inside Lebanon the day before.

A pair of Israeli airstrikes Tuesday in northeastern Lebanon killed at least two people and wounded 20. Israel and Lebanon's Hezbollah militant group have traded fire nearly every day since the war began.

The Israeli military said it also hit two targets in Syria used by Hezbollah.

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'OUR CHILDREN CAN'T FIND ANYTHING TO EAT'

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

Conditions are especially dire in northern Gaza, which has widespread devastation and has 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."

Six humanitarian aid trucks brought aid directly into northern Gaza on Tuesday evening, coordinated by the Israeli military, which called it a pilot program to determine if additional food can be brought overland into the north. The military said the aid was checked at Israel's Kerem Shalom crossing near Egypt and brought into Gaza at the 96th gate crossing, which is close to Kibbutz Be'eri.

The World Food Program delivered food into northern Gaza on Tuesday for the first time since Feb. 20, according to the United Nations. After being checked at Israel's Kerem Shalom crossing, the military said six humanitarian aid trucks brought WFP aid into Gaza at the 96th gate crossing, close to Kibbutz Be'eri.

Aid groups have been struggling to get aid to the isolated area for months, although some private convoys have managed to deliver food. The World Health Organization and others delivered food, fuel and medical supplies Monday to two hospitals in the north, the U.N. said.

SEA ROUTE BRINGS PROMISE AND POTENTIAL PERIL

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

The United Nations welcomed the inauguration of the sea route, but reiterated that transporting aid by land is the best way to get the most aid into Gaza.

The Open Arms ship is towing a barge loaded with food. Once it nears Gaza, two smaller vessels will tow the barge to a jetty being built by World Central Kitchen, which operates 65 kitchens across the territory, the group said. It plans to distribute the food in the north.

"The best security is to have enough food in Gaza," Andres said. "We want to make sure nothing happens to anybody."

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 shipments.

European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen said it was the first time a ship had been authorized to deliver aid directly to Gaza since 2005 and that the EU would work with "smaller ships" until the U.S. completes work on its floating port.

Cypriot Foreign Minister Constantinos Kombos said during a visit to Beirut that there is a "mechanism" in place for larger shipments, with the goal of "a more systematic exercise with increased volumes."

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.

Gaza's Health Ministry says the Israeli offensive launched in response has killed at least 31,185 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. The military has said it has killed 13,000 Hamas fighters, without providing evidence.

A strike on a home in the central city of Deir al-Balah early on Tuesday killed 11 people from the same

family, including four women and five children, according to hospital records and an Associated Press reporter who saw the bodies brought in.

Staff at a Virginia wildlife center pretend to be red foxes as they care for an orphaned kit

By DENISE LAVOIE and LEA SKENE Associated Press

RICHMOND, Va. (AP) — Employees of the Richmond Wildlife Center in Virginia are doing their best to act like mother foxes as they feed and care for an orphaned kit that found her way into their care.

In a video posted to the center's Facebook page Tuesday, Executive Director Melissa Stanley is shown wearing a red fox mask and rubber gloves while feeding the tiny kit from a syringe. The kit sits on top of a large stuffed animal fox that is supposed to look like her mother, Stanley said.

The same Facebook post explained why staff are wearing the mask to feed her, minimizing human sounds, creating visual barriers and taking other precautions. "It's important to make sure that the orphans that are raised in captivity do not become imprinted upon or habituated to humans," the post said.

All those measures make it more likely the kit could be reintroduced into the wild someday.

Stanley said in an interview Tuesday that the kit was admitted to the center on Feb. 29 after a man walking his dog found her in an alley in Richmond. Thinking she was a kitten, he turned her over to the Richmond Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals. She was less than 24 hours old and her umbilical stump was still attached.

Wildlife center staff initially tried to locate the kit's mother and her den site so they could reunite them. They found the den site, but were told by the grounds superintendent that the foxes had been trapped and removed. Stanley said she suspects the fox kit either fell out of a trap or off the back of the trapper's truck.

Staff at the wildlife center have been taking turns feeding the kit every two to four hours, all while wearing the fox mask. In addition to the large stuffed animal meant to mimic the kit's mother, staff also put a smaller stuffed red fox in her enclosure. She cuddles up to the smaller stuffed animal at the end of the video.

"The goal is to release animals back into the wild, not only to give them a greater chance of survival, but to recognize their own species and to reproduce to carry on their wildlife population," Stanley said.

To that end, the center immediately began looking for other red fox kits of the same age and weight within the rehabilitation community. Staff located three other kits in a rehabilitation setting in northern Virginia. The fox kit will be transferred to the Animal Education and Rescue Organization, which plans to eventually release the kits back into the wild together.

President Joe Biden has won enough delegates to clinch the 2024 Democratic nomination

By ZEKE MILLER AP White House Correspondent

WASHINGTON (AP) — President Joe Biden, who took office aiming to steady a nation convulsed by the coronavirus pandemic and the Jan. 6 insurrection, clinched a second straight Democratic nomination Tuesday and set up an all-but-certain rematch with the predecessor he blames for destabilizing the country.

Biden became his party's presumptive nominee when he won enough delegates in Georgia. That pushed Biden's count past 1,968 for a majority of delegates to the Democratic National Convention in Chicago this August, where his nomination will be made official. Former President Donald Trump is expected to clinch the Republican nomination shortly.

Biden, who mounted his first bid for president 37 years ago, did not face any serious Democratic challengers to his run for reelection at age 81. That's despite facing low approval ratings and a lack of voter enthusiasm for his presidency — driven in part by his age.

Just 38% of U.S. adults approve of how Biden is handling his job as president while 61% disapprove, according to a recent survey by The Associated Press-NORC Center for Public Affairs Research.

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Biden and his allies are betting that over a bruising seven-and-a-half-month general election, his Democratic base and independent voters fearful of a second Trump presidency will stand with him despite their misgivings. Their strategy to constantly highlight Trump's perceived shortcomings — combined with Trump's plan to attack Biden in brutally personal terms — sets up an spiritless campaign that many Americans said they didn't want but will have to decide in November anyway.

Biden has tried to frame the race as a battle for freedom, both at home and abroad. He contrasts his support for Ukraine and work to expand NATO with Trump's praise for Russian President Vladimir Putin and his suggestion that he would tell Russia to attack NATO allies he considers delinquent.

"We face a sobering reality," Biden said in a statement Tuesday upon clinching the nomination. "Freedom and democracy are at risk here at home in a way they have not been since the Civil War. Donald Trump is running a campaign of resentment, revenge, and retribution that threatens the very idea of America."

He added, "I believe that the American people will choose to keep us moving into the future."

Biden is pushing back on GOP-led efforts to restrict abortion rights that have also jeopardized in vitro fertilization procedures. Democrats credit the backlash to the Supreme Court overturning a federal right to abortion for electoral victories over the last two years. Trump appointed three of the justices who voted to strike down *Roe v. Wade* and had taken credit for the decision.

But despite major accomplishments and what his allies see as advantages on key issues, Biden enters a rematch with Trump with vulnerabilities he can't easily fix.

The legislator in chief

In his first two years in office, Biden signed into law long-term investments in roads, bridges and other infrastructure as well as spending to boost America's semiconductor industry. The Senate confirmed Biden's nominee to the Supreme Court and made Ketanji Brown Jackson the first Black woman to become a justice.

The U.S. emerged from the COVID-19 pandemic in an economic boom with low unemployment. After Trump fought his 2020 election loss on the basis of debunked theories about fraud, Biden signed an overhaul of the Electoral Count Act intended to make it harder for presidential losers to overturn election results in Congress.

And as Russia began massing troops on Ukraine's borders, Biden administration officials warned Putin not to invade, then declassified intelligence to build international support for Kyiv. Backed by weapons and intelligence from the U.S. and Western Europe, Ukraine resisted Russian plans to replace President Volodymyr Zelenskyy with a puppet government and has kept most of its territory against its much larger foe.

But the botched U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan left indelible images of desperate people trying to flee a country that American troops fought to secure for two decades and lost in a matter of months to the Taliban. Thirteen U.S. troops died in a suicide bombing outside the Kabul airport during the evacuation of American citizens and allies.

With the economic growth came surging inflation that raised basic prices for Americans and ate into the income gains many people made. Inflation has slowed from its highs two years ago, but just 34% of U.S. adults say they agree with how Biden has handled the economy, according to an AP-NORC survey.

And after campaigning to reverse Trump's immigration crackdown, Biden's White House struggled to process record numbers of people crossing the U.S.-Mexico border without authorization — sometimes thousands of people a day. Republican states sent migrants on buses to Democratic-led cities that struggled to shelter them.

A question of age

Biden's campaign has argued the White House has tamped down inflation and proposed border legislation that would give agents new powers to stop migrants that Republicans helped negotiate, only to reject.

But the president can't alter one of voters' deepest concerns with his candidacy — his age.

Already the oldest-ever American president, Biden would be 86 if he served out the entirety of a second term. Regardless of the November outcome, he or Trump would be the oldest leader ever sworn in on Inauguration Day 2025.

Just hours before clinching the nomination, Biden was the subject of hours of testimony from a special counsel who investigated his mishandling of classified documents and determined that he couldn't prosecute

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the president in part because he was too forgetful. The prosecutor, Robert Hur, characterized Biden in his report as someone who presented as "a sympathetic, well-meaning, elderly man with a poor memory."

The president's age has become a key vulnerability on the campaign trail, though many voters share the same concerns about Trump, who is 77. The latest AP-NORC survey found that 63% say they're not very or not at all confident in Biden's mental capability to serve effectively as president. And 57% said the same of Trump.

In both his State of the Union speech and a new campaign ad, Biden emphasized the value of experience and mixed in a dose of humor.

As he told Congress last week: "I know I may not look like it, but I've been around a while. When you get to be my age, certain things become clearer than ever."

An angry electorate

Biden argues he's proven to be a more effective leader than Trump. He and the Democrats also hold a significant cash advantage over Trump and the Republicans going into November, with the president raising \$10 million in the 24 hours after the speech.

There's evidence his campaign's focus on Trump is already working. Every major Democrat took a pass on challenging Biden in the primary and no Democrat has agreed to join a well-funded effort by the group No Labels to put together a so-called "unity ticket."

One of the few Democrats who did run before dropping out was Rep. Dean Phillips of Minnesota. Before Minnesota's Super Tuesday primary last week, many people angry with Biden said they weren't aware of Phillips' challenge or considered it a distraction from beating Trump.

Said one voter, Aishah Al-Sehaim of St. Louis Park, Minnesota, "It's not even about hope to affect change in the coming years, but simply that things don't get more screwed up nationally and internationally."

Biden's allies are optimistic that a protest vote campaign over Israel's war with Hamas will subside by November when liberals and people of color angry about the more than 30,000 people killed in Israel's offensive after the Oct. 7 attacks will be forced to choose between him and Trump.

In 2012, then-President Barack Obama also saw a number of "uncommitted" delegates emerge from uncontested primaries, particularly in conservative states.

"In terms of where he is now, he's been in tougher spots and I know he feels confident," said longtime Biden confidant and former Delaware Sen. Ted Kaufman. "I sure feel confident."

Biden first ran for the Democratic nomination ahead of the 1988 presidential election, but flamed out when it emerged he had plagiarized speeches. His 2008 campaign ended after a poor showing in the Iowa caucuses and his 2020 effort was on life support before he turned it around with a win in the South Carolina primary, ultimately consolidating the support of the party.

"Sure beats the hell out of the alternative," quipped Kaufman of the easier path to the nomination this time around. "That doesn't mean it's not tough, it doesn't mean it doesn't take character."

Delete a background? Easy. Smooth out a face? Seamless. Digital photo manipulation is now mainstream

By DEEPTI HAJELA Associated Press

NEW YORK (AP) — It's been a common refrain when seeking proof that someone's story or some event actually took place: "Pics, or it didn't happen."

But in a world where the spread of technology makes photo manipulation as easy as a tap on your phone, the idea that a visual image is an absolute truth is as outdated as the daguerreotype. And a photo can sometimes raise as many questions as it was meant to answer.

That was seen in recent days when controversy descended upon an image of Kate, Princess of Wales, and her three children. News agencies including The Associated Press published, then retracted, the image given out by Kensington Palace over concerns it had been manipulated, leading to Kate saying on social media that she occasionally "experimented" with photo editing.

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In that, she's hardly alone.

From something that was time-consuming and required a great deal of technical expertise in the days of actual film and darkrooms, digital editing has become something practically anyone can do, from adding filters to cropping images and much more. Apps abound, offering the easiest of experiences in creating and retouching photos and videos which can then be easily transmitted online and through social media.

"Cover blemishes and let the real you shine through," says an ad for the smartphone app Facetune. "Remove and change backgrounds instantly," the Fotor app's website enthuses. "Our AI object remover is ready to assist you in getting rid of unwanted objects."

This Wild West of image-altering abilities is opening new frontiers for everyday people — and creating headaches for those who expect photos to be a documentary representation of reality.

THE MAINSTREAMING OF MANIPULATION

Photojournalists and major news organizations follow standards and ethics codes around photos. These organizations typically place an absolute premium on image authenticity and reject photographs that have been altered in any way. But efforts to identify altered imagery can be impeded by the increasingly easy-to-use apps for phones and computers that allow anyone to chip away, piece by piece, at what a camera actually recorded.

The mainstreaming of manipulation, placing such abilities at people's fingertips, has made for some interesting and viral moments — like the one in March 2023 when an artificially generated image of Pope Francis wearing a puffy white coat took in many people who thought it was real.

But there are risks and dangers to a world where just because you see something doesn't mean you can absolutely believe it, said Ken Light, a photojournalism professor at the University of California Berkeley's Graduate School of Journalism.

"The role of photography has been to witness and to record for the moment, but also for history. And I don't think any of us know where it's going," he said. The rise of visual manipulation that casts doubt on whether something is real or not "frays the fabric of the culture tremendously in the moment but also for the future."

Fred Ritchin, dean emeritus of the school at the International Center of Photography and a former picture editor at The New York Times Magazine, agreed. "'The camera never lies' is a 20th-century idea. It's not a 21st-century idea," he said. "These are all mythologies that we're still hiding behind and we have not really confronted."

People have long known that some images are manipulated, like cover models on magazines, and some have raised concerns about that impact that artificial and manipulated standards of beauty can have on girls and women.

But they haven't really come to terms with how widespread digital manipulation is in other areas like social media, done by a wide variety of everyday people, said Lexie Kite, who with her sister Lindsay has done research into body image and media and wrote "More Than A Body: Your Body Is an Instrument, Not an Ornament."

"It is important for all of us to anchor ourselves in the truth that digital manipulation is our reality," she said.

HOW CAN FAKERY BE IDENTIFIED?

People can take steps to deal with the creeping effects of photo manipulation, said Hany Farid, a professor at UC Berkeley whose research examines digital forensics and image analysis.

Viewers need "to just slow down a little bit, be a little bit more careful, be a little more thoughtful" about what they're looking at instead of just assuming any image they see is fact, he said.

On the technology side, he said there are ways being developed to track visual images and to make it clear if they've been altered after the photos were taken.

But while such steps may mitigate some of the issues, he said, it won't eliminate the problem or take us back to where we could have abiding faith in an image, as previous generations did with photos we now consider unforgettable.

"Almost every major incident in our history, wars, conflicts, disasters, there's this iconic photo," he said.

"They're so powerful because they capture this incredibly complex set of facts and emotions and history in one photo. And I don't know that we can have that anymore. It's a very different world going forward now."

Or, if the adage was modified: "Pics, and maybe it still didn't quite happen." _____

This story has been corrected to show that the image of the Princess of Wales and her children was given out by Kensington Palace, not Buckingham Palace.

Russia says it killed 234 fighters while thwarting an incursion from Ukraine

By JIM HEINTZ and HANNA ARHIROVA Associated Press

Ukrainian long-range drones smashed into two oil facilities deep inside Russia on Tuesday, officials said, while an armed incursion claimed by Ukraine-based Russian opponents of the Kremlin unnerved a border region just days before Russia's presidential election.

The attack by waves of drones across eight regions of Russia displayed Kyiv's expanding technological capacity as the war extends into its third year. The cross-border ground assault also weakened President Vladimir Putin's argument that life in Russia has been unaffected by the war, though he remains all but certain to win another six-year term after eliminating all opposition.

The Russian Defense Ministry said that Moscow's military and security forces killed 234 fighters while thwarting the incursion. In a statement, the ministry blamed the attack on the "Kyiv regime" and "Ukraine's terrorist formations," insisting that the Russian military and border forces were able to stop the attackers and avert a cross-border raid. It also said the attackers lost seven tanks and five armored vehicles.

The reports of border fighting earlier on Tuesday were murky, and it was impossible to ascertain with any certainty what was unfolding in Russia's Kursk and Belgorod regions. Cross-border attacks in the area have occurred sporadically since the war began and have been the subject of claims and counterclaims, as well as disinformation and propaganda.

Soldiers who Kyiv officials say are Russian volunteers fighting for Ukraine claimed to have crossed the border. The Freedom of Russia Legion, the Russian Volunteer Corps and the Siberian Battalion released statements and videos on social media claiming to show them on Russian territory. They said they wanted "a Russia liberated from Putin's dictatorship."

The authenticity of the videos couldn't be independently verified.

Fighters coming out of Ukraine attempted to reach the town of Tetkino, which lies close to the border, according to the governor of Russia's Kursk region, Roman Starovoit. He said Tetkino was being shelled.

"There was an attempt by a sabotage and reconnaissance group to break through. There was a shooting battle, but there was no breakthrough," he said in a video message on Telegram.

The Russian Defense Ministry said the Tetkino attacks were driven back, but provided no further details.

It also said Ukrainian fighters made at least four attempts to cross into the Belgorod region but all attacks were repelled by warplanes, artillery and missiles.

The representative of Ukraine's intelligence agency, Andrii Yusov, told Ukrainska Pravda that the military groups are made up of Russian citizens.

"On the territory of the Russian Federation, they operate completely autonomously and independently," he said.

In May, Russia alleged that dozens of Ukrainian militants crossed into one of its border towns in the Belgorod region, striking targets and forcing an evacuation, before more than 70 of the attackers were killed or pushed back by what the authorities termed a counterterrorism operation. Ukrainian officials have denied any link with the group.

Meanwhile, one Ukrainian drone struck and set ablaze an oil refinery in the Nizhny Novgorod region, according to regional governor Gleb Nikitin. That region is located some about 775 kilometers (480 miles) from the Ukraine border.

In another deep strike, a drone was shot down in the Moscow region, Moscow mayor Sergei Sobyanin said. Though it was brought down well south of the city center, the drone was close to Zhukovsky Airport,

one of Moscow's four international airports.

Another drone hit an oil depot in Oryol, 116 kilometers (95 miles) from Ukraine.

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy said last year that his country had developed a weapon that hit a target 700 kilometers (400 miles) away, in an apparent reference to drones.

The Russian Defense Ministry said Ukrainian drones were also intercepted Tuesday over the Belgorod, Bryansk, Kursk, Leningrad and Tula regions of Russia.

Kyiv has staged increasingly bold attacks behind the 1,500-kilometer (930-mile) front line running through eastern and southern Ukraine. It has also increasingly deployed sea drones in the Black Sea, where it claims to have sunk Russian warships.

Kyiv's forces are hoping for more military supplies from Ukraine's Western partners, but in the meantime are struggling against a bigger and better-provisioned Russian army that is pressing hard at certain front-line points inside Ukraine.

Zelenskyy said that recent Russian advances have been halted and that the battlefield situation is now significantly better than in the past three months.

"We had some difficulties due to the lack of artillery shells, long-range weapons, sky blocking and the high density of Russian drones," Zelenskyy said in an interview with France's BFM TV and Le Monde published late Monday on the Ukrainian presidential website.

Also on Tuesday, an Il-76 heavy-lift transport plane of the Russian air force with 15 people on board crashed while taking off from an air base in the Ivanovo region in western Russia, the Defense Ministry said. Its statement didn't specify whether there were any survivors. The ministry said that an engine fire during takeoff was the likely cause of the crash.

In Ukraine, three people were killed and 44 more were wounded on Tuesday evening as the result of a Russian missile strike on the city of Kryvyi Rih, Zelenskyy's hometown, Ukrainian officials said. Serhii Lysak, governor of the Dnipropetrovsk region where the city is located, said two residential buildings were damaged.

Director Roman Polanski is sued over more allegations of sexual assault of a minor

By ANDREW DALTON AP Entertainment Writer

LOS ANGELES (AP) — A woman has sued director Roman Polanski, alleging he raped her in his home when she was a minor in 1973.

The woman aired the allegations, which the 90-year-old Polanski has denied, in a news conference with her attorney, Gloria Allred, on Tuesday.

The account is similar to the still-unresolved Los Angeles criminal sexual assault case that prompted Polanski in 1978 to flee to Europe, where he has remained since.

The woman who filed the civil lawsuit said she went to dinner with Polanski, who knew she was under 18, in 1973, months after she had met him at a party. She said Polanski gave her tequila shots at his home beforehand and at the restaurant.

She said she became groggy, and Polanski drove her home. She next remembers lying next to him in his bed.

"He told her that he wanted to have sex with her," the lawsuit says. "Plaintiff, though groggy, told Defendant 'No.' She told him, 'Please don't do this.' He ignored her pleas. Defendant Polanski removed Plaintiff's clothes and he proceeded to rape her causing her tremendous physical and emotional pain and suffering."

Defense attorney Alexander Rufus-Isaacs said in an email Tuesday that Polanski "strenuously denies the allegations made against him in the lawsuit and believes that the proper place to try this case is in the courts."

The lawsuit was filed in Los Angeles Superior Court in June under a California law that temporarily allowed people to file claims of childhood sexual abuse after the statute of limitations had expired. Under

the law, Polanski also could not be named initially, so the lawsuit was not reported on by media outlets. It seeks damages to be determined at trial.

A judge has since given the plaintiff approval to use his name in the case. The judge on Friday set a 2025 trial date.

In his legal response to the lawsuit, Polanski's attorney denies all of its allegations and asserts that the lawsuit is unconstitutional because it relies on a law not passed until 1990.

The woman first came forward with her story in 2017, after the woman in Polanski's criminal case asked a judge to dismiss the charges, which he declined to do.

At the time, the woman who has now filed the civil lawsuit gave her first name and middle initial and said she was 16 at the time of the assault.

In the lawsuit and at Tuesday's news conference, she did not give her name and said only that she was a minor at the time. She spoke only briefly.

"It took me a really long time to decide to file this suit against Mr. Polanski, but I finally did make that decision," she said. "I want to file it to obtain justice and accountability."

The Associated Press does not typically name people who say they have been sexually abused.

At least three other women have come forward with stories of Polanski sexually abusing them.

A major figure in the New Hollywood film renaissance of the 1960s and 1970s, Polanski directed movies including "Rosemary's Baby" and "Chinatown."

In 1977, he was charged with drugging and raping a 13-year-old girl. He reached an agreement with prosecutors that he would plead guilty to a lesser charge of unlawful sexual intercourse and would not have to go to prison beyond the jail time he had already served.

But Polanski feared that the judge was going to renege on the agreement before it was finalized and in 1978 fled to Europe. According to transcripts unsealed in 2022, a prosecutor testified that the judge had in fact planned to reject the deal.

Polanski's lawyers have been fighting for years to end the case and lift an international arrest warrant that confined him to his native France, Switzerland and Poland, where authorities have rejected U.S. requests for his extradition.

He continued making films and won an Oscar for best director for "The Pianist" in 2003. But the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences expelled him in 2018 after the #MeToo movement gained momentum.

Scott Peterson appears virtually in California court as LA Innocence Project takes up murder case

By CHRISTOPHER WEBER Associated Press

LOS ANGELES (AP) — Scott Peterson appeared virtually in court on Tuesday, nearly 20 years after he was convicted of killing his pregnant wife, as his lawyers with the Los Angeles Innocence Project asked a judge to order new DNA tests and allow their investigators to access evidence connected with a burglary across the street from the couple's California home.

Peterson was sentenced to death after a jury found him guilty of murder in the deaths of Laci and the unborn child they planned to name Conner. Prosecutors said he killed Laci and dumped her body in San Francisco Bay on Christmas Eve 2002. The death sentence was later overturned, and he was sentenced to life without the possibility of parole.

The LA Innocence Project has now taken up Peterson's case. The group suggests in court documents that Laci Peterson may have witnessed a Christmas Eve break-in across the street from the couple's home in Modesto and been kidnapped and then killed by the burglars.

The filings in San Mateo County Superior Court represent a longshot bid to exonerate the 51-year-old Peterson, two decades after his arrest captivated the nation.

In January, the LA Innocence Project filed motions on his behalf "to order further discovery of evidence and allow new DNA testing to support our investigation into Mr. Peterson's claim of actual innocence," the group's director, Paula Mitchell, said in a statement Tuesday.

The project is seeking DNA tests on materials connected to the burglary, and on tarps and a large plastic bag found at the waterfront near where the bodies washed up separately.

In addition, the group's attorneys are asking for police reports and audio and video recordings from interviews of suspects and witnesses connected to the burglary. The court filings claim the Modesto Police Department improperly withheld materials and was too hasty in declaring that the burglars had no connection to the killings.

Stanislaus County prosecutor David Harris told Superior Court Judge Elizabeth Hill it will take time to go through old materials, much of which he believes was already litigated at trial and again during Peterson's appeal.

"There's a lot of back and forth from the record and there is going to be a large amount of reading from both sides," Harris said.

One of the burglary suspects, named in court filings as D.M., denied that he had anything to do with the break-in but suggested to police that maybe the burglars were confronted by Laci Peterson and they "did something stupid."

"D.M. further claimed to have knowledge that someone other than Mr. Peterson killed Laci Peterson because he stated that he knows Mr. Peterson is innocent," the filings say.

In court, Mitchell said her group's requests are "not a fishing expedition. They're very precise. They're very specific."

In the original trial, prosecutors presented mostly circumstantial evidence while arguing that Peterson was having an affair with a Fresno massage therapist when he killed Laci, took her body out in a fishing boat and dumped her in the bay.

Peterson appeared in court via Zoom for Tuesday's status conference. The judge set the next two hearings for April 16 and May 29. Peterson will also attend those hearings remotely from Mule Creek State Prison, southeast of Sacramento.

"Today's hearing was just the first step in a long process. We have not commented on our motions, and we will continue to present our case in court — where it should be adjudicated," Mitchell said in the statement.

The national Innocence Project has distanced itself from the Los Angeles group, saying in a press release issued after the court filings that the Southern California nonprofit was "wholly independent of the Innocence Project."

US Army boats head out on a mission to build a floating pier off Gaza's shore for food deliveries

By LOLITA C. BALDOR Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Four U.S. Army boats, loaded with tons of equipment and steel pier segments, left Virginia on Tuesday, heading to Gaza as part of the U.S. effort to expand the delivery of food and other supplies to starving Palestinians as Israel's war against Hamas drags on.

The ships pulled out of docks at Joint Base Langley-Eustis and headed down the James River toward the Atlantic Ocean for what could be a month-long voyage to the Mediterranean Sea. There, at a yet-to-be-announced location along the Gaza shore, they will build and begin to operate a floating dock to receive the aid.

Since Hamas militants attacked Israel on Oct. 7, Israel's military has battered the territory, killing more than 30,000 Palestinians, according to the Gaza Health Ministry, and creating a humanitarian catastrophe. The U.N. says virtually all of Gaza's 2.3 million people are struggling to find food. But getting humanitarian aid to the area has been difficult, due to the ongoing hostilities and struggles to coordinate with the Israeli military, which has blocked routes and slowed deliveries due to inspections.

The latest Pentagon plan calls for the U.S. military to build what is called a modular causeway system. Off shore, the Army will build a large floating platform where ships can unload large containers of aid. Then the aid will be transferred by the Army to a motorized string of steel causeway sections that have

been pushed to the shore.

That pier is expected to be as much as 1,800 feet (550 meters) long, with two lanes, and the Pentagon has said it could accommodate the delivery of more than 2 million meals a day for Gaza residents. Officials have not said who will be unloading the containers and taking the aid ashore. President Joe Biden has said there will be no U.S. troops on the ground in Gaza.

On Tuesday, as family members and senior Army commanders watched, about 70 soldiers with the 7th Transportation Brigade (Expeditionary) pulled away from the docks in four U.S. Army vessels: the USAV Wilson Wharf, USAV Matamoros and USAV Monterrey, all Army landing crafts, and the larger USAV SP4 James A. Loux, a logistics support watercraft.

The brigade's commander, Army Col. Sam Miller, said about 500 of his soldiers will participate in the mission. All together, Pentagon officials have said about 1,000 U.S. troops will be involved.

Calling it a complicated mission, Miller said the transit will take about a month, but it will depend on weather and any possible high seas. The actual construction, he said, will take about a week, but that also could be hampered by weather. Then it will take additional time to get the delivery process coordinated with those providing the aid and the system up and running. Defense officials have said it will take about two months to get the deliveries started.

The Army's vessels and maritime capabilities are unique and not as well known as the Navy's. The last time the 7th Transportation Brigade did a similar mission to construct a large pier was in Haiti in 2010. But it has participated in a number of major military exercises.

"The soldiers here are energized, they're motivated, they're excited," Miller said, adding that the new humanitarian mission "gives them purpose and meaning" and highlights the Army's watercraft. He noted that just 36 hours after Biden ordered the operation, the first Army vessel — the USAV General Frank S. Besson logistics ship — left Joint Base Langley-Eustis on Saturday.

Miller said a larger Maritime Sealift Command ship will also be leaving Virginia in the coming days, and will be carrying some of the bigger equipment and more of the steel pier segments.

Standout moments from the hearing on the Biden classified documents probe by special counsel Hur

By ERIC TUCKER, ALANNA DURKIN RICHER and CHRIS MEGERIAN Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — It's a now-familiar ritual in Washington: a federal prosecutor being summoned to Capitol Hill to discuss the findings of a politically explosive investigation.

Tuesday's hearing with special counsel Robert Hur, who investigated President Joe Biden's handling of classified information, broke little new legal or political ground. But it delivered plenty of talk about the president's memory — faulty, in Hur's assessment — about the laws surrounding classified material and, of course, lots of discussion about Donald Trump.

Here are a half dozen notable moments from Hur's testimony, the questioning surrounding it and the newly released transcript of Biden's fall interview with the investigator:

DEMOCRATS ON THE ATTACK

Democrats sought to use Hur's Republican bona fides to paint him as a political partisan who set out to smear Biden to hurt the president's reelection campaign.

Though Hur concluded Biden should not face criminal charges, the special counsel also impugned Biden's age and competence, saying in his report that the president would probably come across to jurors as a "sympathetic, well-meaning, elderly man with a poor memory."

In one of the most contentious exchanges of the hearing, Rep. Hank Johnson, a Democrat from Georgia, walked through Hur's career, including his time as a law clerk for conservative Supreme Court Chief Justice William Rehnquist and his service as a top official in the Trump Justice Department.

Johnson accused Hur of slamming Biden to try to boost Trump's campaign, saying Hur knew his characterization of the president's age and memory "would play into the Republicans' narrative that the president

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is unfit for office because he's senile."

Hur acknowledged that he is a registered Republican, leading to a smattering of clapping in the crowd. But Hur insisted that politics had nothing to do with his investigation. And he rejected Johnson's suggestion that he was trying to get Trump elected because he wants to become a federal judge or return to the Justice Department.

"I can tell you that partisan politics had no place whatsoever in my work," Hur said. "It had no place in the investigative steps that I took, it had no place in the decision that I made. And it had no place in a single word of my report."

TRUMP ON TRIAL

Trump, the former president and Biden's expected opponent in this year's election, was nowhere in the committee room and the prosecutor who investigated him, Jack Smith, wasn't on the committee witness list.

But that didn't stop Trump from being a central character in Tuesday's hearing. Democrats time and again invoked the criminal case charging the ex-president with illegally hoarding classified documents and refusing to give them back as a way to distinguish his behavior from that of Biden.

Democratic Rep. Jerrold Nadler of New York asked rhetorically why Trump was charged but Biden was not.

"Not because of some vast conspiracy, not because the so-called 'deep state' was out to get him, but because former President Trump was fundamentally incapable of taking advantage of even one of the many, many chances he was given to avoid those charges," Nadler said.

Indeed, both Hur and Smith have taken great pains to illuminate the factual and legal differences between the two investigations.

Biden's team returned the documents after they were discovered, and the president cooperated with the investigation by voluntarily sitting for an interview and consenting to searches of his homes.

Trump, by contrast, is accused of knowingly storing classified documents at his Mar-a-Lago estate, obstructing FBI efforts to get them back, soliciting the help of aides to conceal the documents from the government and seeking to have incriminating evidence destroyed.

ELEMENTS OF A CRIME

The hearing, just like the report, featured substantial discussion of the ins and outs of the criminal statutes governing the mishandling of classified information.

Republican lawmakers appeared repeatedly aghast that Hur could have recommended against prosecution, particularly given the storage of classified documents in a garage as well as a recorded conversation in which Biden can be heard telling his ghostwriter that he had "just found all the classified stuff downstairs."

But Hur repeatedly reminded committee members that the most relevant statute at issue in the investigation requires that the unlawful retention of national defense information be willful — in other words, that it's done with criminal intent. It's a high standard that investigators in some other prominent probes have not met, such as in the Hillary Clinton email inquiry.

Hur did say in his report that he had uncovered evidence to support the idea of willful retention, but repeatedly noted he had not found enough to establish proof beyond a reasonable doubt.

Rep. Matt Gaetz, a Florida Republican, asserted that Hur had found the elements of a criminal violation but had given the president a pass because Biden was "senile." Hur objected to that characterization.

"I need to disagree with at least one thing that you said, which is that I found that all of the elements were met," Hur replied. "One of the elements of the relevant mishandling statute is the intent element. And what my report reflects is my judgment that based on the evidence, I would not be able to prove beyond a reasonable doubt to a jury that that intent element had been met."

ALL THE PRESIDENT'S MEMORY

The release of the transcript of Biden's interview with Hur and the special counsel's testimony were unlikely to change anyone's preconceived notions on the 81-year-old president's mental stamina and fitness for office.

Biden repeatedly demonstrated a fuzzy recollection of some dates in his interviews with Hur, including the year of his son's death and the years of his service as vice president. Yet he also demonstrated his ability to provide detailed accounts of both significant and mundane parts of his life.

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Biden gave Hur a "photographic" overview of his home, long discourses on his political life and humorous asides about his sports car.

The interview transcript showed that Hur never asked Biden about the timing of his son Beau's death, as the president had angrily accused him of doing. But it also suggests Hur's exchange with Biden about his son was less revealing about the president's memory than the special counsel had indicated when he cited the episode as an example of the president's confusion.

Already the country's oldest president, Biden is seeking another term that if served out would have him at age 86 when he left office.

SAME OLD STORY

Biden has a stable of well-worn stories from his life and career that he uses when he speaks publicly. Turns out, he uses them when he's talking privately, too.

The transcript of his interviews with the special counsel shows how Biden revisited some of his most oft-told tales with the investigators who questioned him.

There's the one about how he decided to run for president following the violence at the "Unite the Right" rally in Charlottesville, Virginia, in August 2017. "And then a young woman got killed, and I spoke to her mom," Biden said. "And that's when I decided that I've got to run. I've got to be involved, because I thought, presumptuous of me, that I was the antithesis of everything that this guy stood for, and I could beat him."

Later, he told investigators the story of his trip to Mongolia when he was vice president, where he got handed a bow and arrow during a demonstration of an invasion of yore. "Pure luck, I hit the goddam target."

And there was the story of his son Beau's death, which helped propel Biden back into public life and inspired the title of his memoir, "Promise Me, Dad." As Beau Biden was dying of brain cancer, he asked for a minute of his father's time, Biden recalled.

And that's when Beau said, according to the president: "Promise me, dad. You have to stay engaged, promise me."

PRESIDENTIAL POLITICS

Anyone expecting a sober discussion of the finer points of classified document handling would have been disappointed. Instead, Democrats and Republicans used the hearing as a vehicle to attack the other party's presidential candidate.

The strategy was clear from the opening moments. Rep. Jim Jordan, an Ohio Republican, played a lengthy clip of a Biden press conference where he responded to Hur's report but accidentally referred to Egypt's leader as "the president of Mexico."

Nadler responded with a sizzle reel of Trump struggling to remember things or messing up names.

Other Democrats also saw an opportunity to bring up Trump's legal troubles beyond those involving classified documents. Rep. Ted Lieu, a California Democrat, asked Hur whether he uncovered evidence that Biden paid hush money to a porn actress or former Playboy model. ("No," Hur replied.)

It's unlikely that either side landed a knockout blow, even after hours of testimony. Voters' views of Trump and Biden are deeply entrenched after years in the public eye.

US lawmakers say TikTok won't be banned if it finds a new owner. But that's easier said than done

By MATT O'BRIEN AP Technology Writer

U.S. lawmakers are threatening to ban TikTok but also say they are giving its Chinese parent company a chance to keep it running.

The premise of a bipartisan bill headed for a vote in the U.S. House of Representatives is that TikTok fans in the U.S. can keep scrolling through their favorite social media app so long as Beijing-based ByteDance gives up on owning it.

"It doesn't have to be this painful for ByteDance," U.S. Rep. Raja Krishnamoorthi, an Illinois Democrat and bill co-sponsor, recently posted on X. "They could make it a lot easier on themselves by simply divest-

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ing @tiktok_us. It's their choice."

But it's not going to be as simple as lawmakers are making it sound, according to experts.

WHO WOULD BUY TIKTOK?

While some people have voiced an interest in buying TikTok's U.S. business — among them "Shark Tank" star Kevin O'Leary — there are a number of challenges including a 6-month deadline to get it done.

"Somebody would have to actually be ready to shell out the large amount of money that this product and system is worth," said Stanford University researcher Graham Webster, who studies Chinese technology policy and U.S.-China relations. "But even if somebody has deep enough pockets and is ready to go into negotiating to purchase, this sort of matchmaking on acquisitions is not quick."

Big tech companies could afford it but would likely face intense scrutiny from antitrust regulators in both the U.S. and China. Then again, if the bill actually becomes law and survives First Amendment court challenges, it could make TikTok cheaper to buy.

"One of the main effects of the legislation would be to decrease the sale price," said Matt Perault, director of the University of North Carolina's Center on Technology Policy, which gets funding from TikTok and other tech companies. "As you approach that 180-day clock, the pressure on the company to sell or risk being banned entirely would be high, which would mean probably the acquirers could get it at a lower price."

HOW WOULD IT WORK?

The bill calls for prohibiting TikTok in the U.S. but makes an exception if there's a "qualified divestiture."

That could only happen if the U.S. president determines "through an interagency process" that TikTok is "no longer being controlled by a foreign adversary," according to the bill. Not only that, but the new U.S.-based TikTok would have to completely cut ties with ByteDance. That includes no more "cooperation with respect to the operation of a content recommendation algorithm or an agreement with respect to data sharing."

It reflects longstanding concerns that Chinese authorities could force ByteDance to hand over data on the 170 million Americans who use TikTok. The worry stems from a set of Chinese national security laws that compel organizations to assist with intelligence gathering.

It's an unusual bill in the way that it targets a single company. Typically, a government group led by the Treasury secretary called the Committee on Foreign Investment in the United States, or CFIUS, will review whether such a sale would pose any national security threats.

HASN'T THIS HAPPENED BEFORE?

Yes. The Trump administration brokered a deal in 2020 that would have had U.S. corporations Oracle and Walmart take a large stake in TikTok on national security grounds.

The deal would have also made Oracle responsible for hosting all TikTok's U.S. user data and securing computer systems to ensure national security requirements are satisfied. Microsoft also made a failed bid for TikTok that its CEO Satya Nadella later described as the "strangest thing I've ever worked on."

Instead of congressional action, the 2020 arrangement was in response to then-President Donald Trump's series of executive actions targeting TikTok.

But the sale never went through for a number of reasons. Trump's executive orders got held up in court as the 2020 presidential election loomed. China also had imposed stricter export controls on its technology providers.

Incoming President Joe Biden in 2021 reversed course and dropped the legal proceedings. Now Biden says he's in favor a bill that would ban TikTok if ByteDance won't divest, and Trump is not.

As TikTok bill steams forward, online influencers put on their lobbying hats to visit Washington

By HALELUYA HADERO AP Business Writer

WASHINGTON (AP) — Lawmakers, meet your latest lobbyists: online influencers from TikTok.

The platform is once again bringing influencers to Washington, this time to lobby members of Congress to reject a fast-moving bill that would force TikTok's Beijing-based parent company to sell or be banned in

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the United States. On Tuesday, some influencers began a two-day advocacy event in support of TikTok, which arranged their trip ahead of a House floor vote on the legislation on Wednesday.

But unlike a similar lobbying event the company put together last March when talks of a TikTok ban reached a fever pitch, this year's effort appeared more rushed as the company scrambles to counter the legislation, which advanced rapidly on Capitol Hill.

"If they ban it, I don't know what it will do" to the business, Summer Lucille, a TikTok content creator with 1.4 million followers who is visiting Washington this week, said in an interview arranged by the platform. "It will be devastating."

The legislation is drawing unusual support in Congress

In an unusual showing of bipartisanship, a House panel unanimously approved the measure last week. President Joe Biden has said he will sign the legislation if lawmakers pass it. But it's unclear what will happen in the Senate, where several bills aimed at banning TikTok have stalled.

The legislation faces other roadblocks. Former president and current presidential candidate Donald Trump, who holds sway over both House and Senate Republicans, has voiced opposition to the bill, saying it would empower Meta-owned Facebook, which he continues to lambast over his 2020 election loss. The bill also faces pushback from some progressive lawmakers in the House as well as civil liberties groups who argue it infringes on the First Amendment.

TikTok could be banned if ByteDance, the parent company, doesn't sell its stakes in the platform and other applications it owns within six months of the bill's enactment.

The fight over the platform takes place as U.S.-China relations have shifted to that of strategic rivalry, especially in areas such as advanced technologies and data security, seen as essential to each country's economic prowess and national security. The shift, which started during the Trump years and has continued under Biden, has placed restrictions on export of advanced technologies and outflow of U.S. monies to China, as well as access to the U.S. market by certain Chinese businesses.

The Biden administration also has cited human rights concerns in blacklisting a number of Chinese companies accused of assisting the state surveillance campaign against ethnic minorities.

TikTok isn't short on lobbyists. Its Beijing-based parent company ByteDance has a strong lobbying apparatus in Washington that includes dozens of lobbyists from well-known consulting and legal firms as well as influential insiders, such as former members of Congress and ex-aides to powerful lawmakers, according to the Foundation for Defense of Democracies.

TikTok CEO Shou Zi Chew will also be in Washington this week and plans to meet with lawmakers, according to a company spokesperson who said Chew's visit was previously scheduled.

Influencers descend on Washington

But influencers, who have big followings on social media and can share personal stories of how the platform boosted their businesses — or simply gave them a voice — are still perhaps one of the most powerful tools the company has in its arsenal.

A TikTok spokesperson said dozens of influencers will attend the two-day event, including some who came last year. The spokesperson did not immediately respond to questions about how many new people would be attending this year's lobbying blitz. The company is briefing them ahead of meetings with their representatives and media interviews.

Lucille runs a plus-sized boutique in Charlotte, North Carolina, that she says has seen a substantial surge in revenue because of her TikTok page. The 34-year-old began making TikTok content focusing on plus-sized fashion in March 2022, more than a decade after she started her business. She quickly amassed thousands of followers after posting a nine-second video about her boutique.

Because of her popularity on the platform, her business has more online exposure and customers, some of whom have visited from as far as Europe. She says she also routinely hears from followers who are finding support through her content about fashion and confidence.

JT Laybourne, an influencer who also came to Washington, said he joined TikTok in early 2019 after getting some negative comments on videos he posted on Instagram while singing in the car with his children.

Laybourne, who lives in Salt Lake City, Utah, said he was attracted to the short-form video platform

because it was easy to create videos that contained music. Like Lucille, he quickly gained traction on the app. He says he also received more support from TikTok users, who reacted positively to content he produced on love and positivity.

Laybourne says the community he built on the platform rallied around his family when he had to undergo heart surgery in 2020. Following the surgery, he said he used the platform to help raise \$1 million for the American Heart Association in less than two years. His family now run an apparel company that gets most of its traffic from TikTok.

"I will fight tooth-and-nail for this app," he said.

But whether the opposition the company is mounting through lobbyists or influencers will be enough to derail the bill is yet to be seen. On Tuesday, House lawmakers received a briefing on national security concerns regarding TikTok from the FBI, Justice Department and intelligence officials.

Hur said Biden couldn't recall when his son died. The interview transcript is more complicated

By CHRIS MEGERIAN Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — The White House knew it had a political problem on its hands when a special counsel report questioned President Joe Biden's memory last month, but Biden saw a much more personal affront as well.

Robert Hur, who had been appointed to investigate whether Biden mishandled classified documents, wrote that the president couldn't recall in an interview with prosecutors the date when his adult son, Beau, died of cancer. It was a shocking contention about a keystone event in Biden's life, and it fed into questions about whether the 81-year-old president is fit to serve another term.

"How in the hell dare he raise that?" Biden angrily declared during a hastily arranged press conference after the report was released. "Frankly, when I was asked the question, I thought to myself it wasn't any of their damn business."

The reality of the situation, however, isn't as clear as either Biden or Hur portrayed, according to a transcript of the interview released on Tuesday before the former special counsel testified on Capitol Hill.

Hur didn't ask the president about his son's death; Biden brought it up himself during a discussion about how he stored documents at a rental home in Virginia after leaving the vice president's office in 2017.

And Biden recalled the specific date that Beau died, although he briefly wondered aloud about the year as the conversation toggled between various events.

"What month did Beau die?" Biden mused. "Oh, God, May 30th."

A White House lawyer interjected by saying, "2015."

"Was it 2015 he had died?" Biden asked. When someone responded affirmatively, the president added, "It was 2015."

Biden aides defended the president's inaccurate characterization of the interview during his press conference last month, describing his response as visceral and emotional. And they said his exchange with Hur showed how Biden believed it was important to reflect on how his son's death had affected his decision making over subsequent years.

Hur, in his testimony before the House Judiciary Committee, said his report's discussion of Biden's memory was "necessary and accurate and fair" because his state of mind was an important part of evaluating whether he committed a crime.

"I did not sanitize my explanation nor did I disparage the president unfairly," he said.

Asked why Biden angrily accused Hur of raising his son's death when the transcript shows otherwise, White House spokesman Ian Sams responded that the president was being asked about Beau generally, including the book that the president wrote about his death and his cancer initiative that Beau inspired.

"He thought it was outrageous and inappropriate for that report to include such an inappropriate and extraneous comment like that, especially when it's clear that he says the day his son died," Sams said. "So I think that you saw the anger and emotional reaction of a father who still experiences the pain of

that loss every single day.”

The transcript released on Tuesday sheds new light on one of the most politically and personally sensitive episodes in Biden’s term. Although the special counsel’s investigation found no basis to bring criminal charges against Biden — unlike Donald Trump, who was indicted for refusing to return classified records to the federal government — the references to his memory threatened the president’s ability to assure voters that he can keep doing his job until he turns 86.

Beau was Delaware’s attorney general and widely viewed as his father’s political heir when he was diagnosed with a brain tumor. The cancer, which Biden connects to his son’s National Guard service near toxic burn pits on military bases in Iraq, was devastating for a family that had already suffered tragedy decades earlier. Shortly after Biden was elected to the Senate in 1972, his first wife and baby daughter were killed in a car crash that also badly injured Beau and his younger brother Hunter.

Beau died while Biden was serving as vice president, and his deep sorrow helped deter him from running for president in 2016, when Trump ultimately defeated Hillary Clinton.

Biden mentioned the death during an interview that Hur conducted on Oct. 8. They were discussing where Biden kept documents that he was “actively working on” at his Virginia home.

The president responded by skipping back a few years to talk about how “in this timeframe, my son is — either been deployed or is dying.”

After the brief exchange about the specific date, Biden began to talk about writing his book, “Promise Me, Dad,” which was released in 2017.

“This is personal,” he said as he talked about how “Beau was like my right arm and Hunt was my left.”

Hur offered Biden a break at this point, but the president insisted on continuing with a lengthy story about his family. Biden said how Beau, after he was diagnosed with cancer, made him promise not to step away from public life.

Biden decided “I couldn’t handle” another run for president but he would “stay involved.” However, in a story that Biden has frequently told at fundraisers, he changed course after the white supremacist rally in Charlottesville, Virginia, in 2017 and Trump’s response that there were “very fine people on both sides.”

Biden said that he is “the antithesis” of everything that “this guy stood for” and “I could beat him.”

As he wrapped up the story, Biden wondered aloud whether Hur needed such a lengthy answer.

“Sorry for the detail,” Biden said.

“No apology necessary,” Hur replied.

Pentagon to give Ukraine \$300 million in weapons even as it lacks funds to replenish US stockpile

By TARA COPP and LOLITA C. BALDOR Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — The Pentagon will rush about \$300 million in weapons to Ukraine after finding some cost savings in its contracts, even though the military remains deeply overdrawn and needs at least \$10 billion to replenish all the weapons it has pulled from its stocks to help Kyiv in its desperate fight against Russia, the White House announced Tuesday.

It’s the Pentagon’s first announced security package for Ukraine since December, when it acknowledged it was out of replenishment funds. It wasn’t until recent days that officials publicly acknowledged they weren’t just out of money to buy replacement weapons, they are \$10 billion overdrawn.

The announcement comes as Ukraine is running dangerously low on munitions and efforts to get fresh funds for weapons have stalled in the House because of Republican opposition. U.S. officials have insisted for months that the United States wouldn’t be able to resume weapons deliveries until Congress provided the additional replenishment funds, which are part of the stalled supplemental spending bill.

The replenishment funds have allowed the Pentagon to pull existing munitions, air defense systems and other weapons from its reserve inventories under presidential drawdown authority, or PDA, to send to Ukraine and then sign contracts to order replacements, which are needed to maintain U.S. military readiness.

“When Russian troops advance and its guns fire, Ukraine does not have enough ammunition to fire back,”

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said national security adviser Jake Sullivan in announcing the \$300 million in additional aid.

The Pentagon also has had a separate Ukraine Security Assistance Initiative, or USAI, which has allowed it to fund longer-term contracts with industry to produce new weapons for Ukraine.

Senior defense officials who briefed reporters said the Pentagon was able to get cost savings in some of those longer-term contracts of roughly \$300 million and, given the battlefield situation, decided to use those savings to send more weapons. The officials said the cost savings basically offset the new package and keep the replenishment spending underwater at \$10 billion.

One of the officials said the package represented a "one time shot" — unless Congress passes the supplemental spending bill, which includes roughly \$60 billion in military aid for Ukraine, or more cost savings are found. It is expected to include anti-aircraft missiles, artillery rounds and armor systems, the official said.

"This is not a sustainable way to support Ukraine," said Maj. Gen. Pat Ryder, Pentagon press secretary, calling it a "one time good deal" that officials can't plan on occurring again.

The aid announcement came as Polish leaders were in Washington to press the U.S. to break its impasse over funds for Ukraine at a critical moment in the war. Polish President Andrzej Duda met Tuesday with President Joe Biden after meeting with Democratic and Republican leaders in the House and Senate earlier in the day.

House Speaker Mike Johnson has so far refused to bring the \$95 billion package, which includes aid for Ukraine, Israel and Taiwan, to the floor. Seeking to put pressure on the Republican speaker, House Democrats have launched a long-shot effort to force a vote through a discharge petition. The seldom-successful procedure would require support from a majority of lawmakers, or 218 members, to move the aid package to a vote.

Ukraine's situation has become more dire, with units on the front line rationing munitions as they face a vastly better supplied Russian force. Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy has repeatedly implored Congress for help, but House Republican leadership has not been willing to bring the Ukraine aid to the floor for a vote, saying any aid must first address border security needs.

Pentagon officials said Monday during budget briefings that they were counting on the supplemental to cover the \$10 billion replenishment hole.

"If we don't get the \$10 billion we would have to find other means," Deputy Defense Secretary Kathleen Hicks said. "Right now we're very much focused on the need for that supplemental."

This is the second time in less than nine months that the Pentagon has "found" money to use for additional weapons shipments to Ukraine. Last June, defense officials said they had overestimated the value of the weapons the U.S. had sent to Ukraine by \$6.2 billion over the past two years.

At the time, Pentagon officials said a review found that the military services used replacement costs rather than the book value of equipment that was pulled from Pentagon stocks and sent to Ukraine. The discovery resulted in a surplus that the department used for presidential drawdown packages until the end of December.

The United States has committed more than \$44.9 billion in security assistance to Ukraine since the beginning of the Biden administration, including more than \$44.2 billion since the beginning of Russia's invasion on Feb. 24, 2022.

The Pentagon is \$10 billion overdrawn in the replenishment account in part due to inflationary pressures, and in part because the new systems the Pentagon is seeking to replace the old systems with cost more, such as the upcoming Precision Strike Missile, or PrSM, which the Army is buying to replace the long-range Army Tactical Missile System, or ATACMS.

The vast majority of those munitions have come from Army stockpiles due to the nature of the conventional land war in Ukraine.

The months without further shipments of U.S. support have hurt operations, and Ukrainian troops withdrew from the eastern city of Avdiivka last month, where outnumbered defenders had withheld a Russian assault for four months.

CIA Director William Burns told Congress that entire Ukrainian units have told him in recent days of being

down to their last few dozen artillery shells and other ammunition. Burns called the retreat from Avdiivka a failure of ammunition resupply, not a failure of Ukrainian will.

What to know about a settlement that clarifies what's legal under Florida's 'Don't Say Gay' law

By JEFF McMILLAN, ANDREW DeMILLO and GEOFF MULVIHILL Associated Press

The Florida law labeled by critics as "Don't Say Gay" is remaining in place under a settlement reached this week between the state and parents, students, teachers and advocacy groups who challenged it in court.

But the fallout that gave it that nickname is nixed under the deal.

Florida's 2022 law was created to push back against what conservatives characterize as efforts to indoctrinate kids to a liberal ideology.

It is one of the highest-profile among dozens of measures adopted in Republican-controlled states to try to rein in what can be taught about LGBTQ+ issues — and the rights of LGBTQ+ people — in a movement championed by Florida governor and former presidential candidate Ron DeSantis, among others.

Here are things to know about the fallout from Florida's settlement.

WHAT DOES THE SETTLEMENT CHANGE?

The main thing the settlement does is clarify a law that was purposely vague so it could be used as a weapon to discriminate, said Joe Saunders, senior political director at Equality Florida and a former state lawmaker.

A key point of clarity is how the law applies to "classroom instruction," as opposed to mere discussion or mention of a topic anywhere on school grounds.

He listed some things that will change now:

— Books featuring LGBTQ+ characters were removed from school libraries in one county. Those books must now be returned. But depending on the content of the book, a teacher might not be able to, say, read it aloud to a class.

— Anti-bullying programs that had been ditched because they addressed anti-LGBTQ+ bullying can resume.

— Teachers in a county that once allowed them to designate their classrooms as LGBTQ+ safe spaces with a sticker on the door were required to peel them off. Now, the stickers can return.

— One valedictorian was forced to censor a commencement speech in which he mentioned he was gay. That kind of censorship would no longer be allowed.

— Lawyers advised teachers in one county that they shouldn't talk with students about LGBTQ+ issues or, if they were in a same-sex relationship, even put family photos on their desks. Those photos can now come out of the closet.

— Some after-school gay-straight alliances canceled meetings or went underground because most are advised by teachers, some of whom worried about being punished. Those are now clearly allowed.

"What the settlement now makes clear is that students can say 'gay' in Florida schools, that students can say 'trans' in schools ... and not have to deal with censorship from the weaponized vagueness of the law," Saunders said in an interview Tuesday.

WHAT'S NEXT IN FLORIDA?

The agreement took effect immediately when it was signed by a lawyer for the state government on Monday.

Under the agreement, the state government is to share the settlement — and guidance on how to implement it — with the state's 67 county school districts.

The agreement does not lay out a timeline for that.

Katie Blankenship, director of PEN America Florida, said her group will watch closely to see what happens to classroom books that had been removed or covered up with paper because of Florida's law.

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"I want to know that teachers are being assured they can still share their classroom libraries," Blankenship said.

WHICH OTHER STATES HAVE SIMILAR LAWS?

Since 2022, at least six other states have adopted laws similar to Florida's.

A court has put on hold enforcement of Iowa's law from last year.

Laws are in effect in Alabama, Arkansas, Indiana, Kentucky and North Carolina. A federal challenge over Indiana's is pending before the 7th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals.

It's not immediately clear whether the Florida settlement could sway what happens in the other states.

Some of the measures apply the instruction bans only to younger grades — as Florida's did when it was initially adopted. Others apply it to all public school students. Florida's was expanded through a state Board of Education policy last year.

WHAT DOES THIS MEAN POLITICALLY?

Both in Florida and nationally, DeSantis has built his brand as a conservative willing to go to battle, and the curriculum law he signed in 2022 was a prime example.

The approach did not help him make much of a dent in this year's GOP presidential primary. He dropped out of the race after a blowout loss in the Iowa caucuses in January and endorsed former President Donald Trump.

Both DeSantis and the plaintiffs in the challenge to the law emerged from the settlement claiming victory.

In a statement, his office called the deal "a major win against the activists who sought to stop Florida's efforts to keep radical gender and sexual ideology out of the classrooms."

Those who challenged it said the settlement provides clarity and "effectively nullifies the most dangerous and discriminatory impacts" of the law.

Jamie Miller, executive director of the Florida GOP, said that by leaving the law in place, it does give each side room to say they prevailed. "Democrats can say they had a political victory," Miller said. And DeSantis emerged with the law he championed intact: "His goal was to protect children from classroom instruction that was in conflict with our state culture," Miller said. "He accomplished that."

Miller said he doesn't expect the settlement will impact DeSantis' political future.

Ravens agree to 2-year deal with free agent RB Derrick Henry, AP source says

By NOAH TRISTER AP Sports Writer

The Baltimore Ravens agreed to a two-year contract with free agent running back Derrick Henry on Tuesday, according to a person with knowledge of the deal.

The person spoke to The Associated Press on condition of anonymity because the move can't become official until the new league year begins Wednesday. The deal is worth up to \$20 million and includes \$9 million guaranteed.

The two-time NFL rushing champ joins a Baltimore team that annually produces one of the league's leading ground games. The running back room was a major offseason concern for the Ravens, because Gus Edwards and J.K. Dobbins became free agents. Edwards has agreed to a deal with the Los Angeles Chargers.

Henry's eight-year NFL career — all with the Tennessee Titans to this point — includes a 2020 season when he rushed for 2,027 yards, becoming the eighth player to surpass 2,000.

Henry turned 30 in January. The four-time Pro Bowler led the NFL in 2023 with 280 rushing attempts and ranked second to Christian McCaffrey with 1,167 yards rushing. His 12 rushing TDs were fourth in the AFC, one behind Edwards. Henry also had the first season of his career without a fumble.

Henry leaves Tennessee ranked second in franchise history with 9,502 rushing yards, trailing only Eddie George (10,009).

The 45th pick overall in 2016 leads the NFL with 9,502 yards rushing and 90 rushing TDs in that span.

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The 6-foot-3, 247-pound Henry has finished in the NFL's top 10 in rushing each of the six past seasons. Henry also has four career TD passes, which trails only Hall of Famer LaDainian Tomlinson (seven) among running backs since 2000.

The Ravens finished with the NFL's best regular-season record in 2023 before losing to Kansas City in the AFC championship game. Now they add another proven offensive playmaker to work alongside quarterback Lamar Jackson, who is coming off his second MVP season.

Baltimore was also able to reach a long-term deal with defensive tackle Justin Madubuike after putting the franchise tag on him, but the Ravens could end up losing several other key players to free agency. Linebacker Patrick Queen, edge rushers Jadeveon Clowney and Kyle Van Noy and wide receiver Odell Beckham Jr. are among those who can test the open market.

Running backs have struggled to earn big money in recent years — to the point where Henry organized a group chat among top players at the position last summer. This year's free agent class included Henry, Saquon Barkley, Josh Jacobs and Tony Pollard, all of whom have found new homes.

The Ravens had a news conference Monday about Madubuike's deal, but general manager Eric DeCosta wasn't about to tip his hand when asked about the running back market.

"I understand the question, but talking about a market on the eve of free agency doesn't seem like a smart thing, so I'd probably pass on that question," DeCosta said.

Henry now offers Baltimore a powerful running back the Ravens can pair with Keaton Mitchell, a speedy rookie who was making a significant contribution when he went down with a season-ending knee injury in December. That's if they don't make any more major additions at the position.

"We think Keaton Mitchell's going to come back from his knee injury. Justice (Hill) is a player last year (that was) probably one of the unsung heroes of our whole team, I would say," DeCosta said recently at the NFL's scouting combine. "We've looked at the draft class. Probably not as deep as some other positions that we'll see in this year's draft class."

Kate's photo scandal shows how hard it is for the UK monarchy to control its narrative

By JILL LAWLESS Associated Press
LONDON (AP) —

The scandal over Kate, Princess of Wales' family snapshot is a new chapter in the thorny relationship between the media and Britain's royal family.

It's also a sign of how hard it is for the monarchy to control its own narrative in the social-media era.

"Social media has empowered the royals to curate their public image in new ways," royal historian Ed Owens said Tuesday.

"But they have also given over significant power to the end user. And that end user ... desires greater insight, greater intimate detail about what exactly has been going on behind closed doors."

The palace issued the image of Kate and her children — Prince George, Princess Charlotte and Prince Louis — on Sunday to mark Mother's Day in Britain. A family snapshot taken, the palace said, by Prince William, it was intended to calm speculation about Kate's health, almost two months after she had abdominal surgery for an unspecified condition.

But within hours, The Associated Press withdrew the photo over concerns it had been digitally manipulated 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 agencies including Getty, Reuters, AFP and Britain's PA also retracted it.

Kate said sorry on Monday, saying that "like many amateur photographers, I do occasionally experiment with editing." In a statement on social media, she expressed "apologies for any confusion the family photograph" had caused.

The royal family is under particular scrutiny because King Charles III has also had to cancel public du-

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ties while he undergoes treatment for an unspecified form of cancer. Charles' relative openness about his diagnosis was a departure for the generally secretive royal family.

Both online conversation and traditional media in the U.K. were dominated Tuesday by what the Daily Mirror called the "Picture of Chaos" and the Daily Mail labeled a "PR disaster" for the royals.

The tabloid Sun leapt to the princess' defense with a front page that thundered: "Lay off Kate." The tabloid said "social media trolls, idiotic conspiracy theorists and sniping media critics" were bullying the future queen.

The royals have long had an awkward relationship with the media in Britain, where they are an uneasy hybrid of celebrities and taxpayer-funded public property.

Decades ago, it was possible for the royal family to assert control. In the 1930s, the romance between King Edward VIII and twice-divorced American Wallis Simpson was headline news in the U.S., but was barely mentioned in Britain until the king abdicated to marry the woman he loved.

But the era of deference gave way to the age of celebrity, and with it pressure on the royals to be open and likeable, glamorous but relatable — all while maintaining the dignity of a 1,000-year-old institution.

At times, the royal-press relationship is openly hostile. William and his brother Prince Harry accuse the media of hounding their mother, Princess Diana, and blame paparazzi for her death. Diana was killed in a car crash in Paris in 1997 while she was being pursued by photographers.

Harry, who moved to California with his wife Meghan in 2020, has made taming Britain's tabloid press a personal mission. He has launched lawsuits against several newspaper publishers over alleged phone hacking and other unlawful intrusion.

Harry has attacked the media directly in television interviews, a Netflix documentary series, and in his memoir, "Spare," accusing the press of racist attitudes towards Meghan, who is biracial. He said he feared Meghan would suffer the same "feeding frenzy" as Diana had faced.

Harry isn't the first royal to try to speak directly to the world through TV interviews. During the breakdown of her marriage to the then-Prince Charles in the 1990s, Diana gave a BBC interview in which she said, "There were three of us in that marriage," referring to Charles' relationship with Camilla Parker-Bowles, who is now Queen Camilla.

Prince Andrew tried the same tactic, disastrously, with a 2019 BBC interview to address his friendship with convicted pedophile Jeffrey Epstein and allegations of sexual abuse. Andrew appeared uncomfortable and evasive, and announced after the interview that he was "stepping back" from public duties. He has not returned.

Diana's death shocked the palace and the press into an uneasy truce. The British media left young William and Harry alone in exchange for carefully staged interviews and photo opportunities as they grew up. That practice has continued with William and Kate's children.

British media also became more reluctant to use paparazzi photos. A picture of Kate and her mother in a car was published last week in the United States but not in British publications.

That rule is flexible, though, if an image is judged sufficiently newsworthy. Several U.K. outlets used a grainy photo of Kate in a car with William taken near the couple's Windsor home on Monday.

The age of social media, with its democratic but chaotic flow of information, made the palace's decision to say little about Kate's condition risky.

Royalty has always attracted gossip, rumor and conspiracy theories — look at the evergreen theory that Princess Diana was murdered.

Stephanie Baker, senior lecturer in sociology at City University of London, said social media amplifies that chatter and allows the creation of "crowd sourced conspiracy theories" that can spread around the globe.

"The most serious issue for the Princess of Wales and the monarchy in light of the photoshopped image is the erosion of trust and credibility" she said.

Despite pressure from the media, however, the palace has said it will not release the original, unedited photo.

Owens, author of "After Elizabeth: Can the Monarchy Save Itself?" said William and Kate "have been the

great beneficiaries of social media up to now.”

But from now on, “they are going to have to be more honest in terms of their communications strategy,” he said.

US inflation up again in February in latest sign that price pressures remain elevated

By CHRISTOPHER RUGABER AP Economics Writer

WASHINGTON (AP) — Consumer prices in the United States picked up last month, a sign that inflation remains a persistent challenge for the Federal Reserve and for President Joe Biden’s re-election campaign, both of which are counting on a steady easing of price pressures this year.

Prices rose 0.4% from January to February, higher than the previous month’s figure of 0.3%, the Labor Department said Tuesday. Compared with a year earlier, consumer prices rose 3.2% last month, above January’s 3.1% annual pace.

Excluding volatile food and energy prices, so-called “core” prices also climbed 0.4% from January to February, matching the previous month’s rise and a faster pace than is consistent with the Fed’s 2% inflation target. Core inflation is watched especially closely because it typically provides a better read of where inflation is likely headed.

“It’s a disappointment, but not a disaster,” said Eric Winograd, U.S. economist at asset manager AB. “The underlying details are more encouraging than the top-line number, which was boosted by a few volatile categories — the type of prices that tend not to repeat month-to-month.”

Those volatile items include gas prices, which jumped 3.8% just from January to February but are still below their level of a year ago. Air fares surged 3.6% after two months of much smaller increases. Clothing prices rose 0.6% after three months of declines but are unchanged compared with a year earlier.

Housing and rental costs, though, which tend to change more gradually, cooled in February: They rose 0.4% from January, slower than the 0.6% increase the previous month. Measures of new apartment leases, which have cooled, are expected to feed into the government’s inflation data in the coming months.

New car prices ticked down 0.1% in February. Though these prices remain much higher than they were before the pandemic, they’re expected to decline further as more vehicles show up on dealer lots. Grocery prices were unchanged last month and are up just 1% from a year earlier.

Despite February’s elevated figures, most economists expect inflation to continue slowly declining this year. At the same time, the uptick last month may underscore the Fed’s cautious approach toward interest rate cuts.

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 Biden for the surge in consumer prices that began in 2021. Though inflationary pressures have significantly eased, average prices remain about far 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.

Rob Considine, who lives near Minneapolis, said he has noticed shrinkflation in consumer products like deodorant, shampoo, and soap.

Considine, 38, said he doubts, though, that Biden’s criticism of shrinkflation, or proposals in Congress to restrict the practice, will have much effect. If companies can’t make bars of soap smaller while charging the same price, Considine suggested, they will simply reduce the quality to maintain their profits.

“I don’t know how the government can set a price for a commodity like that without affecting it in the

long run," he said.

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 some 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 dental care, car repairs, and other services are still rising faster than they did before the pandemic. Car insurance has shot higher, reflecting rising costs for repairs 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.

Still, 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.

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

Brad Wills, a senior executive at Schneider Electric, a global electronics component manufacturer, said the pressure his company has felt to boost prices is levelling off because supply chains have healed from the disruptions of the pandemic. Schneider manufactures circuit breakers and other electrical supplies, mostly for homes and apartments.

Still, the disruptions of the pandemic have left the company with a higher cost structure than in the past. It brought some manufacturing back to the United States, where it is more expensive, after some of its plants in Mexico shut down during the pandemic. Schneider also now carries more parts after having dropped a "just in time" approach to inventory that it and many other manufacturers had followed before the pandemic.

"There are still some pressures, but it's plateauing," Wills said about inflation and pricing.

Schneider didn't raise prices at all last year and has said it will raise them just 3% this year, after having boosted prices multiples times in 2022, sometimes by double-digit percentages.

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.

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

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House, he became the first losing presidential candidate Ohio had supported since it sided with Richard Nixon over John F. Kennedy in 1960. With that, the Buckeye State's bellwether status was officially unrun.

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.

"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 recently 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 outspending 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 Senatorial 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, 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."

Samantha Hendrickson is a corps member for the Associated Press/Report for America Statehouse News Initiative. Report for America is a nonprofit national service program that places journalists in local newsrooms to report on undercovered issues.

Girls are falling in love with wrestling, the nation's fastest-growing high school sport

By MARC LEVY Associated Press

MECHANICSBURG, Pa. (AP) — Jody Mikhail was a sophomore at Pennsylvania's Cumberland Valley High School when a poster for a new girls' wrestling club caught her eye. So Mikhail, a senior now, tried the sport.

"I fell in love with it the first time," she said.

Unlike previous generations, she's hardly alone.

Girls' wrestling has become the fastest-growing high school sport in the country, sanctioned by a surging number of states and bolstered by a movement of medal-winning female wrestlers, parents and the

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male-dominated ranks of coaches and administrators who saw it as a necessity and a matter of equality.

Where once girls wrestled on boys teams and against boys, increasingly they are wrestling on girls teams and against girls. And now that they are wrestling in sanctioned and official tournaments against girls, their names are going onto plaques on their high schools' walls and into state record books.

This year, Kentucky, Rhode Island and Pennsylvania held their first state-sanctioned girls' wrestling championships, while Louisiana became the 45th state to sanction the sport. At the collegiate level, women's wrestling is designated as an "emerging" sport and is on track to become a championship-level sport in 2026, the NCAA said.

A rapidly growing sport

In Pennsylvania — where the Penn State men are ranked No. 1 and the state's male and female wrestlers dominated last year's 16-and-under national team championships — the number of girl wrestlers in high schools nearly doubled this year as the state rocketed to more than 180 high school teams from none in 2020.

Hundreds of girls competed in Pennsylvania's first sanctioned state tournament, including Mikhail, after years of girls having no choice but to wrestle boys or, if they did wrestle girls, seeing the same handful of faces, year after year, in tournaments organized by local wrestling organizations.

Even for girls who compete nationally or hope to wrestle in college, wrestling in state-sanctioned tournaments brings status.

"It really does bring this level of, I think, having these girls feel seen," said Brooke Zumas, a former wrestling coach who was active in the movement to get the sport sanctioned in Pennsylvania.

Girls who have competed for years are seeing new faces and big crowds in this year's state-sanctioned championship tournaments.

"There were never tournaments like this," said Savannah Witt, a state champion wrestler from Pennsylvania's Palisades High School who has wrestled for 10 years. "It's awesome to see. I've been used to running into the same, like, three faces at tournaments. Now you come here, I'm like, 'I don't know half these girls.'"

Over the past decade, the number of high school girls' teams quadrupled nationally and the number of girls wrestling in high school quintupled to over 50,000 through last year, according to figures from the National Federation of State High School Associations.

Last year alone, it shot up nearly 60%, the biggest increase for the sport in decades.

Still, the number of girls wrestling in high school was one-fifth of the number of boys last year and the 14th biggest by participation, trailing the stalwarts of American girls' athletics — track and field, volleyball, soccer, basketball and softball — but also tennis, swimming, golf, lacrosse, cross country and cheerleading.

Another leap will likely vault girls' wrestling past field hockey.

'The world is changing'

Wrestling is something of a niche sport: it has arcane rules and lacks a mass media presence that helps stoke interest. For many, it takes a family tradition, a brother or a proselytizing coach. And wrestlers and coaches describe it as a sport daunting for its extreme physicality — but a sport that is unmatched in teaching inner strength and discipline.

Some see the rise of girls' wrestling as part of a larger arc in women's sports: the U.S. women's national soccer team has captured the nation's attention and the Big Ten's women's basketball tournament sold out after Caitlin Clark smashed the women's NCAA scoring record.

"When women first had a chance to participate in sports in an organized fashion, it was in sports that were considered feminine," said Jackie Paquette, who two years ago became the first female executive at the National Wrestling Coaches Association. "It was tennis, it was golf, it was swimming. It was considered graceful. Wrestling is the opposite of that in a sense, so it has been hard for some to accept women in that form. But we are finding out now that the world is changing."

Still, boosters say wrestling is accessible: there's a weight class for every body type, there are fewer competing winter sports and all a wrestler needs is a pair of wrestling shoes.

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In 1990, barely over 100 girls were on high school rosters in the entire country, and before 2018 just six states had sanctioned it.

In 2016, national champion wrestler Sally Roberts founded the advocacy organization Wrestle Like a Girl and began talking to USA Wrestling, the National Wrestling Coaches Association and the National Wrestling Hall of Fame — male-dominated organizations that nevertheless got on board for girls' wrestling.

Something else happened that year: American wrestler Helen Maroulis scored a shocking victory at the Rio De Janeiro Olympics to win a gold medal — the first ever for an American in women's wrestling.

"Other girls said, 'I want to be her,'" Roberts said.

Changing minds and stereotypes

Parents and coaches lobbied school boards and athletic directors and recruited girls in their schools. James Stettler, a teacher and a wrestling coach in Pennsylvania's Central Dauphin district, recalled going to back-to-school nights to hand out fliers to parents.

"Whenever I try to sell them I'm like, 'Oh, you look like a family that has a future wrestler in your family.' And they'll go, 'Oh, no, I have a daughter.' And I go, 'Well, that's great, we have a girls program,'" said Stettler, a former high school wrestler whose 13-year-old daughter, Abby, and two sons wrestle.

The minds of some parents took changing. Some parents didn't want their daughters wrestling boys. Some didn't want their girls wrestling, period.

Leah Wright, of Mechanicsburg, Pennsylvania, recalled how her daughter asked to start wrestling after seeing her older brother wrestle. Wright's husband, who wrestled growing up, said no — but it began a conversation in the household that changed his mind.

"That has definitely shifted, where fathers who wrestled are introducing their daughters to this sport and having this connection through the sport," Wright said.

Some who watched Ultimate Fighting Championship bouts saw Sara McMann and Tatiana Suarez — collegiate wrestlers who won medals in international competition, including McMann's silver medal at the 2004 Olympics.

"And they'd look at their daughters and say, 'Oh, do you want to wrestle?'" Roberts said.

Some never thought it would be sanctioned.

That includes Serge Bouyssou, who recalled the vile things that coaches and parents said to his daughter when she wrestled in high school before graduating more than a decade ago.

"You thought people are never going to give in to the fact that girls are more than capable of participating in this sport," said Bouyssou, who last month coached girl wrestlers from Scituate High School in Rhode Island's first sanctioned state tournament.

Gary Abbott, of USA Wrestling, said wrestling is growing quickly at the youth level, too, and the organization is encouraged by its highest Olympic medal count ever for women — four — in 2021. USA Wrestling hopes to see a day when as many girls are wrestling as there are boys, Abbott said.

In perhaps a decade or two, a new generation of mothers who wrestled on girls teams in sanctioned tournaments may teach their daughters to wrestle.

"It's really good for girls, especially that are new to the sport, to see like that's how it should be," said Aubre Krazer, a state champion and senior at Pennsylvania's Easton Area High School. "It's very organized. ... It's nice to see that, especially for the upcoming generations, it's going to be better for them than it was for us. And that's what I would want for them."

Why is Haiti so chaotic? Leaders used street gangs to gain power. Then the gangs got stronger

By MICHAEL WEISSENSTEIN Associated Press

Haiti's prime minister has said he will resign, bowing to international pressure to save his homeland gripped by violence and controlled by heavily armed gangsters.

Ariel Henry made the announcement hours after officials, including Caribbean leaders and U.S. Secretary

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of State Antony Blinken, met in Jamaica to discuss a solution to halt Haiti's spiraling crisis and agreed to a joint proposal to establish a transitional council.

What is going on in Haiti?

It's easy to blame this latest spasm of violence in the West's first free Black republic on longstanding poverty, the legacy of colonialism, widespread deforestation, and European and U.S. interference.

However, a series of experts told The Associated Press that the most important immediate cause is more recent: Haitian rulers' increasing dependence on street gangs.

Haiti hasn't had a standing army or a well-funded and robust national police force for decades.

United Nations and American interventions have come and gone. Without a solid tradition of honest political institutions, Haitian leaders have been using armed civilians as tools for exercising power.

Now, the state has grown fatally weak and gangs are stepping in to take its place.

Gang leaders, surreally, hold news conferences. And many see them as future stakeholders in negotiations over the country's future.

How did Haiti get here?

A 1990s embargo was imposed after the military overthrew President Jean-Bertrand Aristide. The embargo and the international isolation devastated the country's small middle class, said Michael Deibert, author of "Notes From the Last Testament: The Struggle for Haiti," and "Haiti Will Not Perish: A Recent History."

After a U.S.-backed U.N. force pushed out the coup's leaders in 1994, a World Bank-sponsored structural adjustment led to the importation of rice from the U.S. and devastated rural agricultural society, Deibert said.

Boys without work flooded into Port-au-Prince and joined gangs. Politicians started using them as a cheap armed wing. Aristide, a priest-turned-politician, gained notoriety for using gangsters.

In December 2001, police official Guy Philippe attacked the National Palace in an attempted coup and Aristide called on the gangsters to rise from the slums, Deibert said.

"It wasn't the police defending their government's Palais National," remembered Deibert, who was there. "It was thousands of armed civilians."

"Now, you have these different politicians that have been collaborating with these gangs for years, and ... it blew up in their face," he said.

How did weak foreign intervention hurt Haiti?

Many of the gangs retreated in the face of MINUSTAH, a U.N. force established in 2004.

Rene Preval, the only democratically elected president to win and complete two terms in a country notorious for political upheaval, took a hard line on the gangs, giving them the choice to "disarm or be killed," said Robert Fatton, professor of government and foreign affairs at the University of Virginia.

After his presidency, subsequent leaders were at best easy on the gangs and at worst tied to them, he said.

Fatton said every key actor in Haitian society had their gangs, noting that the current situation isn't unique, but that it has deteriorated at a faster pace.

"For the last the three years, the gangs started to gain autonomy. And now they are a power unto themselves," he said, likening them to a "mini-Mafia state."

"The autonomy of the gangs has reached a critical point. It is why they are capable now of imposing certain conditions on the government itself," Fatton said.

"Those who created the gangs created a monster. And now the monster may not be totally in charge, but it has the capacity to block any kind of solution."

How does gang money hurt Haiti?

The gangs, along with many Haitian politicians and business people, earn money from an illicit brew of "taxes" gleaned through extortion, kidnappings, and drugs and weapons smuggling, Fatton said.

"There are all kinds criminal networks in the area," he said.

After Preval, gangs, politicians and business people extracted every dollar they could, said Francois Pierre-Louis, a professor of political science at Queens College at The City University of New York.

"It was open house for gangs, drugs, the country, basically ... became a narco-trafficking state," he

said. "Basically, the gangs got empowered, and not only they got empowered, they had state protection, politicians protecting them."

Four astronauts from four countries return to Earth after six months in orbit

By MARCIA DUNN AP Aerospace Writer

CAPE CANAVERAL, Fla. (AP) — Four astronauts from four countries caught a lift back to Earth with SpaceX on Tuesday to end a half-year mission at the International Space Station.

Their capsule streaked across the U.S. in the predawn darkness and splashed into the Gulf of Mexico near the Florida Panhandle.

NASA's Jasmin Moghbeli, a Marine helicopter pilot, led the returning crew of Denmark's Andreas Mogensen, Japan's Satoshi Furukawa and Russia's Konstantin Borisov.

They moved into the space station last August. Their replacements arrived last week in their own SpaceX capsule.

"We left you some peanut butter and tortillas," Moghbeli radioed after departing the orbiting complex on Monday. Replied NASA's Loral O'Hara: "I miss you guys already and thanks for that very generous gift."

O'Hara has another few weeks at the space station before leaving aboard a Russian Soyuz capsule.

Before leaving the space station, Mogensen said via X, formerly known as Twitter, that he couldn't wait to hear "birds singing in the trees" and also craved crunchy food.

NASA prefers multiple travel options in case of rocket trouble. Boeing should start providing astronaut taxi service with a two-pilot test flight in early May.

Today in History: March 13

Jorge Bergoglio of Argentina becomes Pope Francis

By The Associated Press undefined

Today in History

Today is Wednesday, March 13, the 74th day of 2024. There are 293 days left in the year.

Today's highlight in history:

On March 13, 2013, Jorge Bergoglio of Argentina was elected pope, choosing the name Francis. he was the first pontiff from the Americas and the first from outside Europe in more than a millennium.

On this date:

In 1781, the seventh planet of the solar system, Uranus, was discovered by Sir William Herschel.

In 1862, President Abraham Lincoln signed a measure prohibiting Union military officers from returning fugitive slaves to their owners.

In 1925, the Tennessee General Assembly approved a bill prohibiting the teaching of the theory of evolution. (Gov. Austin Peay signed the measure on March 21; Tennessee repealed the law in 1967.

In 1933, banks in the U.S. began to reopen after a "holiday" declared by President Franklin D. Roosevelt.

In 1938, famed attorney Clarence S. Darrow died in Chicago.

In 1943, financier and philanthropist J.P. Morgan Jr., 75, died in Boca Grande, Florida.

In 1946, U.S. Army Pfc. Sadao Munemori was posthumously awarded the Medal of Honor for sacrificing himself to save fellow soldiers from a grenade explosion in Seravezza, Italy; he was the only Japanese-American service member so recognized in the immediate aftermath of World War II.

In 1954, the Battle of Dien Bien Phu began during the First Indochina War as Viet Minh forces attacked French troops, who were defeated nearly two months later.

In 1995, two Americans working for U.S. defense contractors in Kuwait, David Daliberti and William Barloon, were seized by Iraq after they strayed across the border; sentenced to eight years in prison, both were freed later the same year.

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In 1996, a gunman burst into an elementary school in Dunblane, Scotland, and opened fire, killing 16 children and one teacher before killing himself.

In 2011, the estimated death toll from Japan's earthquake and tsunami climbed past 10,000 as authorities raced to combat the threat of multiple nuclear reactor meltdowns while hundreds of thousands of people struggled to find food and water.

In 2012, a ferry carrying more than 200 people collided with a cargo boat and sank just short of Dhaka, Bangladesh; most on board died.

In 2017, Ilich Ramirez Sanchez, once the world's most-wanted fugitive known as "Carlos the Jackal," appeared in a French court for a deadly 1974 attack on a Paris shopping arcade that killed two people. (He was convicted and sentenced to life in prison for the third time.)

In 2018, President Donald Trump abruptly dumped Secretary of State Rex Tillerson — via Twitter — and moved CIA Director Mike Pompeo from the role of America's spy chief to its top diplomat.

In 2020, Breonna Taylor, a 26-year-old Black woman, was fatally shot in her apartment in Louisville, Kentucky, during a botched raid by plainclothes narcotics detectives; no drugs were found, and the "no-knock" warrant used to enter by force was later found to be flawed.

In 2021, Marvelous Marvin Hagler, the middleweight boxing great whose title reign and career ended with a split-decision loss to "Sugar" Ray Leonard in 1987, died at age 66 at his New Hampshire home.

Today's Birthdays: Jazz musician Roy Haynes is 99. Songwriter Mike Stoller is 91. Singer-songwriter Neil Sedaka is 85. R&B/gospel singer Candi Staton is 84. Opera singer Julia Migenes is 75. Actor William H. Macy is 74. Comedian Robin Duke is 70. Actor Dana Delany is 68. Sen. John Hoeven, R-N.D., is 67. Rock musician Adam Clayton (U2) is 64. Jazz musician Terence Blanchard is 62. Actor Christopher Collet is 56. Rock musician Matt McDonough (Mudvayne) is 55. Actor Annabeth Gish is 53. Actor Tracy Wells is 53. Rapper-actor Common is 52. Rapper Khujo (Goodie Mob, The Lumberjacks) is 52. Singer Glenn Lewis is 49. Actor Noel Fisher is 40. Singers Natalie and Nicole Albino (Nina Sky) are 40. Actor Emile Hirsch is 39. U.S. Olympic gold medal skier Mikaela Shiffrin is 29. Tennis star Coco Gauff is 20.