

# Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, March 21, 2024 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 269 ~ 1 of 87

- [1- Upcoming Events](#)
- [2- 1440 News Headlines](#)
- [3- Three young Groton wrestlers are state champions](#)
- [7- Chamber Ad](#)
- [8- Help Wanted ads](#)
- [9- Tietz selected for First Dakota National Bank](#)
- [3-Class Shootout](#)
- [10- Groton American Legion Auxiliary March Meeting](#)
- [11- Groton Lions Club serve at Table Talks](#)
- [12- SD SearchLight: Alleged assault victim's diary creates Supreme Court test of voter-backed victims' rights law](#)
- [14- SD SearchLight: Watch out for China buying U.S. farmland, Noem tells U.S. House panel](#)
- [16- SD SearchLight: South Dakota no longer only state to saddle counties with all indigent defense costs](#)
- [17- SD SearchLight: Fed declines to cut interest rates, saying it's not clear inflation has slowed enough yet](#)
- [18- SD SearchLight: Congress struggles to finish work on spending bills as another Friday deadline nears](#)
- [20- Weather Pages](#)
- [25- Daily Devotional](#)
- [26- Subscription Form](#)
- [27- Lottery Numbers](#)
- [28- News from the Associated Press](#)

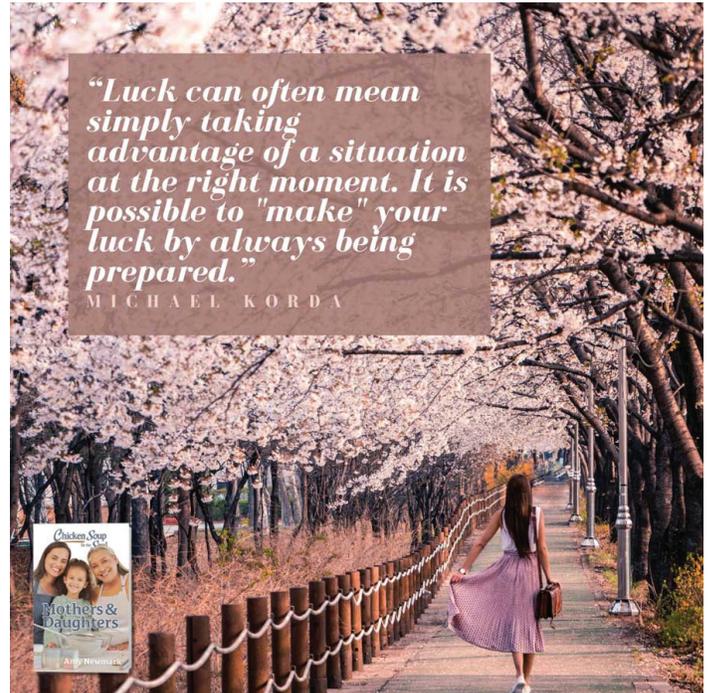
## Thursday, March 21

School Breakfast: Breakfast pizza.  
School Lunch: Chicken strips, fries.  
Senior Menu: Ranch chicken breast, long grain wild rice, vegetable capri blend, acini depepi fruit salad, whole wheat bread.

## Friday, March 22

School Breakfast: Stuffed bagels.  
School Lunch: Cheese sticks, peas.  
Senior Menu: Tuna noodle hot dish with peas, California blend vegetables, Swedish apple square, whole wheat bread.

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



## Saturday, March 23

East River Destination Imagination Tournament at Webster  
Billy Shilhanek benefit at the Groton Legion, 3 p.m.  
Thrift Store open 10 a.m. to 3 p.m.  
Catholic: SEAS Confession, 3:45-4:15 p.m.; SEAS Mass, 4:30 p.m.  
Groton Lions Easter Egg Hunt, 10 a.m., Groton City Park  
Spring Vendor Fair, 10 a.m., GHS Gym  
Men's Bowling Tournament, 1 p.m., Jungle Lanes  
St. John's Lutheran: Questioning confirmands, 5 p.m.

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

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

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# Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, March 21, 2024 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 269 ~ 2 of 87

# 1440

In partnership with **smartasset**<sup>™</sup>

The 5th Circuit Court of Appeals began hearing arguments yesterday over a Texas law allowing state police to arrest and prosecute migrants caught after unlawfully crossing the border. The proceedings come after a Tuesday Supreme Court decision upholding the law, which was then followed by a lower court ruling again suspending the order.

The Environmental Protection Agency yesterday finalized rules that aim to limit tailpipe emissions from passenger cars and light trucks as part of a broader effort to transition the US to electric vehicles.

The medical records of Catherine, Princess of Wales, were allegedly breached at the London Clinic in recent weeks, prompting an investigation by the United Kingdom's independent data privacy watchdog. The report broke amid speculations over Catherine's condition since a mid-January planned abdominal surgery at the prestigious clinic has kept her out of the public eye.

## Sports, Entertainment, & Culture

NCAA men's basketball tournament first round tips off today with the women's first round beginning tomorrow.

Superstar Shohei Ohtani leads his new team, the Los Angeles Dodgers, to victory over the San Diego Padres to open the MLB regular season from Seoul; the season begins in earnest March 28. Dodgers fire Ohtani's interpreter amid allegations he stole millions from Ohtani to cover gambling debt.

"The Crown" and "Black Mirror" lead all nominees for the 2024 BAFTAs, or British Academy Television Awards.

## Science & Technology

Princeton math professor Michel Talagrand wins 2024 Abel Prize, one of the field's most prestigious awards, for his work on analyzing random processes.

Archaeologists discover oldest-known arrowheads, dating to roughly 74,000 years ago in what is now northern Ethiopia; time period coincided with the Toba super-eruption, which spread ash and gas worldwide.

First-ever "quantum tornado" created by scientists in superfluid helium, which experiences near zero friction; phenomenon is meant to mimic and shed light on the dynamics of black holes.

## Business & Markets

US stock markets close at record highs (S&P 500 +0.9%, Dow +1.0%, Nasdaq +1.3%) after Federal Reserve keeps interest rates unchanged, signals three rate cuts this year. Reddit expected to start trading today at \$34 per share.

Chipmaker Intel secures \$19.5B in federal funding (\$8.5B) and loans (\$11B) to build and expand facilities across Arizona, New Mexico, Ohio, and Oregon. Memory chipmaker Micron Technology shares rise over 14% in after-hours trading after it announces better-than-expected quarterly results.

Chipotle Mexican Grill shares briefly surpass \$3,000 for first time after board approves 50-for-1 stock split. Paramount Global shares close up 12% on report of Apollo Global's \$11B offer to buy Paramount's Hollywood studios.

## Politics & World Affairs

Four of six former Mississippi law enforcement officers sentenced for charges related to their roles in the January 2023 beating and torturing of two men during a warrantless home search; sentences so far range from 17.5 years to 40 years in prison, with two remaining officers to be sentenced today.

Former Marine Daniel Penny to stand trial beginning Oct. 8 for charges of second-degree manslaughter and criminally negligent homicide for fatally subduing Jordan Neely on a New York City subway last May.

Vietnam President Vo Van Thuong resigns one year after taking office after reported unspecified violations of the governing Communist Party's rules. Irish Prime Minister Leo Varadkar to step down after successor is chosen, citing personal and political reasons.

# Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, March 21, 2024 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 269 ~ 3 of 87



**Veda Stiegelmeier**  
Girls Tots 67lb State Champ



**Brooks Sombke**  
Tots 43lb State Champ



**Henry Pharis**  
Midget 72lb State Champ

## Three young Groton wrestlers are state champions

Three Groton youth wrestlers became state champions at the South Dakota Wrestling Coaches Association's State Wrestling Tournament held over the weekend at The Monument in Rapid City. It's been a few years since Groton has had a state champion - Liza Krueger was the last girls state champion in 2017. Wyatt Locke was last boys state champion in 2011. Groton had six in the championship match with Veda Stiegelmeier, Henry Pharis and Brooks Sombke all taking first place while Ryker Herron, Rosalyn Block, and Braxten Sombke all taking second. Ben Hoeft and Gavin Englund took second in the high school division. Keenan Moody placed third. Landry Johnson and Kroy Khali both took fifth. Madison Little placed sixth. Those taking seventh were Elsy Hagen, Huntley Overacker and Wyatt Hagen. Placing eighth were Layne Johnson and Christian Ehresmann. Full results are on Page 10. (Courtesy Photos)

# Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, March 21, 2024 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 269 ~ 4 of 87

## 2024 SDWCA State Tournament Results

### 1st: Midgets 72: Henry Pharis.

Champ. Round 1 - Henry Pharis (Groton) won by fall over Ty Roskens (Parkston) (Fall 0:35)

Quarterfinal - Henry Pharis (Groton) won by fall over Kade Reiff (Dell Rapids) (Fall 2:55)

Semifinal - Henry Pharis (Groton) won by fall over Haizen DeBruin (Alcester-Hudson) (Fall 2:09)

1st Place Match - Henry Pharis (Groton) won by major decision over Michael Dylla (DeSmet) (Maj 9-1)

### 1st: Tots 43: Brooks Sombke

Champ. Round 1 - Brooks Sombke (Dakota Boyz Wrestling Club) won by fall over Myles Olson (Belle Fourche) (Fall 2:09)

Quarterfinal - Brooks Sombke (Dakota Boyz Wrestling Club) won by fall over Calvin Blake (Garretson) (Fall 1:29)

Semifinal - Brooks Sombke (Dakota Boyz Wrestling Club) won by fall over Benjamin Rikala (Sturgis) (Fall 1:25)

1st Place Match - Brooks Sombke (Dakota Boyz Wrestling Club) won by fall over Alan Petersen (Howard) (Fall 3:17)

### 1st: Girls Tots 67: Veda Stiegelmeier.

Champ. Round 1 - Veda Stiegelmeier (Groton) received a bye () (Bye)

Quarterfinal - Veda Stiegelmeier (Groton) received a bye () (Bye)

Semifinal - Veda Stiegelmeier (Groton) won by fall over Remington Champagne (Chamberlain) (Fall 0:11)

1st Place Match - Veda Stiegelmeier (Groton) won by major decision over Elsie Lauritsen (Mitchell) (Maj 14-1)

### 2nd: Tots 46: Ryker Herron.

Champ. Round 1 - Ryker Herron (Groton) won by fall over Caleb Sisk (Yankton Jr Bucks) (Fall 2:04)

Quarterfinal - Ryker Herron (Groton) won by fall over Drake Fulkerson (Hill City) (Fall 0:31)

Semifinal - Ryker Herron (Groton) won by fall over Parker Carda (Yankton Jr Bucks) (Fall 0:45)

1st Place Match - Lawson Martens (SF Washington) won by fall over Ryker Herron (Groton) (Fall 2:39)

### 2nd: Girls Midget 96: Rosalyn Block.

Champ. Round 1 - Rosalyn Block (Groton) received a bye () (Bye)

Quarterfinal - Rosalyn Block (Groton) won by fall over Elizabeth Tonsager (Belle Fourche) (Fall 2:25)

Semifinal - Rosalyn Block (Groton) won by fall over Paisley Volker (Sully Buttes) (Fall 3:27)

1st Place Match - Ellie Bult (Bon Homme) won by fall over Rosalyn Block (Groton) (Fall 0:55)

### 2nd: Midgets 77: Braxten Sombke.

Champ. Round 1 - Braxten Sombke (Dakota Boyz Wrestling Club) won by major decision over Keegan Rchetto (Westside Raider Youth Wrestling) (Maj 10-2)

Quarterfinal - Braxten Sombke (Dakota Boyz Wrestling Club) won by fall over Nathaniel Halbur (Tea Area) (Fall 2:39)

Semifinal - Braxten Sombke (Dakota Boyz Wrestling Club) won by decision over Gideon Current03 (Dakota Boyz Wrestling Club) (Dec 12-6)

1st Place Match - Asher Spoehr (Pierre) won by decision over Braxten Sombke (Dakota Boyz Wrestling Club) (Dec 7-6)

# Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, March 21, 2024 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 269 ~ 5 of 87

## **2nd: Junior 175: Ben Hoeft.**

Round 1 - Elliot Bratland (605 Grapplers) won by tech fall over Ben Hoeft (Groton) (TF 10-0)

Round 2 - Elliot Bratland (605 Grapplers) won by tech fall over Ben Hoeft (Groton) (TF 10-0)

## **2nd: Junior 285: Gavin Englund.**

Round 1 - Braden Petersen (SF Lincoln) won by tech fall over Gavin Englund (Groton area tuff tigers) (TF 10-0)

Round 3 - Gavin Englund (Groton area tuff tigers) won by decision over Randall Powers (Bon Homme) (Dec 9-9)

## **3rd: Midgets 113: Keenan Moody.**

Champ. Round 1 - William Selwyn (Bon Homme) won by fall over Keenan Moody (Groton) (Fall 2:07)

Cons. Round 1 - Keenan Moody (Groton) won by forfeit over Forfeit Forfeit (Edgemont) (FF)

Cons. Round 2 - Keenan Moody (Groton) won by fall over Darrian Kills Enemy (Dupree) (Fall 0:12)

Cons. Round 3 - Keenan Moody (Groton) won by fall over Dexton Fuhrmann (Cobbler Kids Wrestling) (Fall 0:14)

Cons. Semi - Keenan Moody (Groton) won by fall over Sullivan Nedved (Dell Rapids) (Fall 0:40)

3rd Place Match - Keenan Moody (Groton) won by fall over Hooper Sazue (Lyman County) (Fall 1:27)

## **5th: Bantam 50: Landry Johnson.**

Champ. Round 1 - Bennett Michael (Platte/Geddes) won by fall over Landry Johnson (Groton) (Fall 1:09)

Cons. Round 1 - Landry Johnson (Groton) won by fall over Cooper Hogg (Parker) (Fall 4:01)

Cons. Round 2 - Landry Johnson (Groton) won by decision over Lucas Kuphal (Alcester/Hudson) (Dec 7-3)

Cons. Round 3 - Landry Johnson (Groton) won by fall over Hudson Gassen (Harrisburg) (Fall 1:07)

Cons. Semi - Tell Johnson (Watertown) won by fall over Landry Johnson (Groton) (Fall 0:37)

5th Place Match - Landry Johnson (Groton) won by fall over Sawyer Bierema (Bon Homme) (Fall 2:01)

## **5th: Bantam 76: Kroy Khali.**

Champ. Round 1 - Kroy Khali (Groton) won by fall over Grayson Schone (Douglas Wrestling Club) (Fall 0:10)

Quarterfinal - Kroy Khali (Groton) won by fall over Grayson Bevers (Watertown) (Fall 3:51)

Semifinal - Iven Meyer (Chamberlain) won by fall over Kroy Khali (Groton) (Fall 0:27)

Cons. Semi - Lucchese Helkenn (Winner) won by decision over Kroy Khali (Groton) (Dec 12-5)

5th Place Match - Kroy Khali (Groton) won by fall over Braysen Uzzle (Redfield) (Fall 2:12)

## **6th: Schoolgirl 112: Madison Little.**

Champ. Round 1 - Madison Little (Groton) won by fall over Layla Crowe (DeSmet) (Fall 1:05)

Quarterfinal - Madison Little (Groton) won in tie breaker - 1 over Kaidynce Hand (Sturgis) (TB-1 3-2)

Semifinal - McKayla Schardin (Madison) won by fall over Madison Little (Groton) (Fall 2:34)

Cons. Semi - Kalley Teason (Miller/Highmore) won by forfeit over Madison Little (Groton) (FF)

5th Place Match - Essah Syverson (Custer) won by decision over Madison Little (Groton) (Dec 2-1)

## **7th: Midgets 89: Huntley Overacker.**

Champ. Round 1 - Huntley Overacker (Groton) won by forfeit over Forfeit Forfeit (Brandon Valley) (FF)

Quarterfinal - Ladd Riopel (Spearfish) won by decision over Huntley Overacker (Groton) (Dec 6-0)

Cons. Round 2 - Huntley Overacker (Groton) won by fall over Kash Pugh (Miller/Highmore) (Fall 1:01)

Cons. Round 3 - Luke Finnicum (SF Roosevelt) won by major decision over Huntley Overacker (Groton) (Maj 10-1)

7th Place Match - Huntley Overacker (Groton) won by fall over Gus Witt (Burke) (Fall 2:48)

# Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, March 21, 2024 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 269 ~ 6 of 87

## **7th: Girls Midget 84: Elsy Hagen.**

Champ. Round 1 - Elsy Hagen (Groton) won by major decision over Amelia Apland (Sturgis) (Maj 13-0)  
Quarterfinal - Ella Haines (Tea Area) won by fall over Elsy Hagen (Groton) (Fall 0:53)  
Cons. Round 2 - Elsy Hagen (Groton) won by fall over Scottie Silver (Westside Raider Youth Wrestling) (Fall 2:06)  
Cons. Round 3 - Mycah Zuhlsdorf (Watertown) won by fall over Elsy Hagen (Groton) (Fall 1:25)  
7th Place Match - Elsy Hagen (Groton) won by major decision over Isabella Dalseide (SF Roosevelt) (Maj 17-4)

## **7th: Schoolboy 110: Wyatt Hagen.**

Champ. Round 1 - Wyatt Hagen (Groton) won by major decision over Tucker Larson (Cobbler Kids Wrestling) (Maj 10-2)  
Quarterfinal - Rayne Wickre (Alcester/Hudson) won in sudden victory - 1 over Wyatt Hagen (Groton) (SV-1 7-5)  
Cons. Round 2 - Wyatt Hagen (Groton) won by decision over Bode Minder (Pierre) (Dec 5-1)  
Cons. Round 3 - Mason Hagen (Sturgis) won by major decision over Wyatt Hagen (Groton) (Maj 10-0)  
7th Place Match - Wyatt Hagen (Groton) won by decision over Shay Weber (Badlands Little Brawlers) (Dec 5-0)

## **8th: Cadet - 16U 175: Layne Johnson.**

Champ. Round 1 - Layne Johnson (Groton) received a bye () (Bye)  
Quarterfinal - Kamden Needham (Yankton Jr Bucks) won by decision over Layne Johnson (Groton) (Dec 6-5)  
Cons. Round 2 - Layne Johnson (Groton) received a bye () (Bye)  
Cons. Round 3 - Tanner Gouldin (Sturgis Youth Wrestling) won by fall over Layne Johnson (Groton) (Fall 1:15)  
7th Place Match - Radley Barrick (Madison) won by fall over Layne Johnson (Groton) (Fall 0:28)

## **8th: Junior 157: Christain Ehresmann.**

Quarterfinal - Ethan Rearick (Wolsey Wessington) won by fall over Christain Ehresmann (Groton area tuff tigers) (Fall 5:01)  
Cons. Round 1 - Tyler Tjeerdsma (Bon Homme) won by decision over Christain Ehresmann (Groton area tuff tigers) (Dec 14-9)  
7th Place Match - Kaleb Johnson (Kingsbury County Knights) won by forfeit over Christain Ehresmann (Groton area tuff tigers) (FF)

## **Tots 67: Kase Ronning.**

Champ. Round 1 - Emmett Schroeder (Winner) won by fall over Kase Ronning (Groton) (Fall 0:44)  
Cons. Round 1 - Kase Ronning (Groton) received a bye () (Bye)  
Cons. Round 2 - Gavin Martinsen (West Central) won by fall over Kase Ronning (Groton) (Fall 0:53)

## **Midgets 53: Bennett Iverson.**

Champ. Round 1 - Kaddilac Coleman (Pony Hills) won by fall over Bennett Iverson (Groton) (Fall 3:33)  
Cons. Round 1 - Bennett Iverson (Groton) won by fall over Pierce Luten (Hill City) (Fall 0:26)  
Cons. Round 2 - Eli Engelhart (Watertown) won by fall over Bennett Iverson (Groton) (Fall 2:11)

## **Novice 77: Bentley Ehresmann.**

Champ. Round 1 - Dylan Ingalls (LOG) won by fall over Bentley Ehresmann (Groton) (Fall 2:13)  
Cons. Round 1 - Rowdy Schrempp (Dupree) won by fall over Bentley Ehresmann (Groton) (Fall 2:52)

# Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, March 21, 2024 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 269 ~ 7 of 87

## Novice 82: Preston Hinkelman.

Champ. Round 1 - Preston Hinkelman (Groton) won by major decision over Tate Krul (Belle Fourche) (Maj 16-2)

Quarterfinal - Axl Jones (LOG) won by major decision over Preston Hinkelman (Groton) (Maj 8-0)

Cons. Round 2 - Kallan Peterson (Miller/Highmore) won by decision over Preston Hinkelman (Groton) (Dec 13-9)

## Novice 93: Parker Zoellner.

Champ. Round 1 - Grayson Licht (Sioux Valley) won by decision over Parker Zoellner (Groton) (Dec 8-1)

Cons. Round 1 - Parker Zoellner (Groton) won by fall over Crawston Craven (Winner) (Fall 2:51)

Cons. Round 2 - Joe Murphy (Pierre) won in sudden victory - 1 over Parker Zoellner (Groton) (SV-1 2-0)

## Cadet - 16U 120: Lincoln Krause.

Champ. Round 1 - Zachary Pederson (Colman) won by fall over Lincoln Krause (Groton) (Fall 2:32)

Cons. Round 1 - Lincoln Krause (Groton) received a bye ( ) (Bye)

Cons. Round 2 - Shea Deering (Sturgis Youth Wrestling) won by fall over Lincoln Krause (Groton) (Fall 2:10)

## So much going on in Groton! Thank you for shopping locally!

### 2024 Groton Spring Vendor Fair

Stop and shop from a variety of Crafters and Vendors! Also enjoy some lunch while you shop! There will also be an Auction table & all proceeds will go to Make - A - Wish Foundation!

Where: Groton High School Gym  
502 N 2nd St. Groton, SD 57445

When: Saturday, March 23<sup>rd</sup> 2024

Time: 10:00am - 3:00pm



March 23, 2024

### Spring Vendor Fair at the GHS Gym



Groton Lions Club Lunch  
starting at 11am

\$10 MEAL DEAL includes BBQ,  
Chips, Bottled Water & Dessert  
Beverages & individual items for sale as well!

GROTON LIONS CLUB ANNUAL

### EASTER EGG HUNT

Saturday, March 23rd @10am sharp!

Groton City Park

3 age groups: 3 and under, 4-6 & 7-10

Your Lions Club Members will be filling &  
hiding nearly 1200 Easter eggs!

Alternate date is March 30th.



MARCH 23RD, 10AM-3PM

### EXTENDED SHOPPING HOURS!

COMMON CENTS  
Community Thrift Store



- Eat
- Shop
- Buy

# GROTON

LOCAL

#57445

Chamber Of Commerce

WWW.GROTONCHAMBER.COM • FACEBOOK @GROTON.CHAMBER

## EMPLOYMENT

**Dairy Queen in Groton is hiring! If you're looking for a fun job with lots of variety, look no further! We're looking for energetic, smiling people – we provide free meals, uniforms, competitive wages, fun atmosphere and flexible scheduling. Part-time – day, evening, week-end shifts available. We will work with your schedule. Stop in today and pick up an application.**

.....

**Position available for full-time Public Works Laborer. Formal training and/or experience preferred. Salary negotiable DOE. Benefits include medical insurance, life insurance, and SD State Retirement. Please send application and resume to the City of Groton, PO Box 587, Groton, SD 57445, or email to [city.doug@nvc.net](mailto:city.doug@nvc.net). Applications will be accepted until 5pm on April 16, 2024. Full job description and application may be found at <https://www.grotonsd.gov/o/grotoncity/page/employment-options>. For more information, please call 605-397-8422. Equal opportunity employer.**

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# Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, March 21, 2024 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 269 ~ 9 of 87

## Tietz selected for First Dakota National Bank 3-Class Shootout

The 36th Annual 3-Class Shootout basketball All-Star game will be held on Saturday, March 30th at the McCook Central Auditorium in Salem. All three classes in both boys and girls will be represented by many of the top seniors in South Dakota.

The games are as followed;

GAME TIMES:           1:00 - "AA" Girls vs "A" Girls  
                              2:30 - "B" Girls vs Winner of 1st Girl's game  
                              4:00 - "AA" Boys vs "A" Boys  
                              DUNK CONTEST after first Boys game  
                              5:30 - "B" Boys vs Winner of 1st Boy's game

### **Class "B" Girls: Coach: Cheylee Nagel, DWU**

Abby Aslesen, Howard; Skylar Volmer, Lyman; Courtney Sees, Avon; Avery Orth, Wessington Springs; Harley Johnson, Arlington; Ashlin Jacobsen, Freeman; Nora Dinger, Wall; Rhea Tucker, Wall; Megan Reiner, Tripp-Delmont/Armour; Claire Verhulst, Harding Co., Jaelyn Wendt, Harding Co

### **Class "A" Girls: Coach: Allan Bertram, Mt. Marty**

Katie Vasecka, Tea; Mara Grant, Tea; Claire Sheppard, Flandreau; Lily Klein, Flandreau; Lizzie Pavlis, Flandreau; Emilee Fox, MVP; Caylin Kelly, Florence/Henry; Carli Kuyper, Lennox; Macy Koupal, Warner; Chandler Cleveland, Vermillion

### **Class "AA" Girls: Coach: Kristen Rotert, Northwestern**

Mahli Abdouch, SF O'Gorman, Lucy Moore, SF O'Gorman; Sawyer Stoebner, Mitchell; Jaidyn Dunn, SF Jefferson; Reese Terwilliger, Pierre; Kennedi Deckert, Brandon Valley; Hamtyn Heinz, Huron; Claire Tereshinski, Yankton; Jaylee Hofer, Harrisburg; Abby Flanagan, Harrisburg

### **Class "B" Boys: Coach: Sam Nicholson, DWU**

Tage Ortman, Canistota; Nic Marshall, White River; Jordan Uhler, White River; George Jensen, DeSmet; Lane Tvedt, Castlewood; Jackson Schauer, Faith; Daniel Mitchell, Gregory; Layne Cotton, Faulkton; Kolt Koepsell, Howard; Aiden Lieber, Mitchell Christian

### **Class "A" Boys: Coach: Matt Wilber, DWU**

Alec Squires, Sioux Valley; Max Engelbretson, Sioux Valley; Jaxson Wingert, Dakota Valley; Tyson Stevenson, Hamlin; Porter Ihnen, Lennox; Jack Erickson, Baltic; Jayce Slaba, Hanson; Matt Anderson, Canton; Lane Tietz, Groton; Jake Kuhl, West Central

### **Class "AA" Boys: Coach: Collin Authier, Mt. Marty**

Gavin Soukup, Mitchell; Braedon VanBockern, Harrisburg; Cam Phipps, Harrisburg; Josh Olthoff, Brandon Valley; Dylon Rawdon, Watertown; CJ Gainey, Huron; Braxton Mohr, SF Lincoln; Naser Ismail, SF Roosevelt; Hayden Goff, SF Roosevelt, Landon Potts, Yankton

# Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, March 21, 2024 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 269 ~ 10 of 87

## Groton American Legion Auxiliary March Meeting

The Groton American Legion Auxiliary Unit 39 met March 4th. Supper was provided by Wendy Cooper. President Samantha Oswald called the meeting to order at 6:38pm with 13 members and 1 guest present. Prayer was said by District 4 President Jan Seibel and the Pledge of Allegiance and the Preamble to the Constitution was led by Samantha.

Minutes from the last meeting were read by Samantha.

Treasurer's Report

Read by Meri Erickson

Unfinished Business

There was a discussion about providing a donation to the Groton food pantry to help provide Easter meals to the veterans who utilize it. Mary motioned to send a donation, Wendy seconded and it passed.

Lori confirmed that we will be sending Gretchen Dinger and Emma Kutter to Girls State.

Jan informed us that this year there is the opportunity to sponsor banquet tables at Girls State for their Friday night formal dinner. Sponsors will be recognized in some way.

A motion was made to sponsor 2 banquet tables this year, it was seconded and passed.

Correspondence

Groton Booster P.A.C. has sent a request for a donation to help pay for this year's Post Prom party that will be held at the Aberdeen YMCA.

Jan motioned to send a donation, Karyn seconded and motion passed.

State Convention

This years State Convention will be held in Pierre July 20th-23rd

Jan Seibel, Karyn Babcock, Tammi Zimney and Sarah Grant will be our unit 39 delegates.

Membership Chairman and Dues forms.

It was decided to keep our dues at the current rate for Auxiliary members as well as for junior members.

Nancy introduced our guest Brenda who is new to our community and became a member tonight.

Legion Birthday

American Legion President Bruce Babcock has invited the Auxiliary to help celebrate the American Legions Birthday at their next meeting on March 11th at 7pm. It was decided that we would provide a cake.

Bruce also mentioned that it might be a good idea if the Auxiliary started serving supper once a month at the Wednesday Bingo Night. Further discussions will be needed.

Patriotism

Tammy spoke to the kindergarten class at Groton Elementary and gave out 51 flags and 48 dictionaries.

Give 10

Sam reminded us to track our Give Ten for schools.

New Business

There was a discussion about finding more ways to support our Veteran Community.

Sarah will reach out to Sioux Falls VA to see if there are needs at the Aberdeen VA that we may be able to help with. Some ideas were Magazine subscription, transportation assistance.

Tammy, Wendy and Lori formed a committee to look into starting a fund to help Veterans in the community that may be struggling financially.

Wendy let us know that The American Legion Post sent us a donation for providing lunch for the district meeting.

Jan sold 11 new grave markers and we are waiting on a check from Mellet. We currently have 2 New Gold Star Mother markers left.

Our next meeting will be April 2nd at 6pm, Charlene and Mary will provide supper.

# Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, March 21, 2024 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 269 ~ 11 of 87

## Groton Lions Club serve at Table Talks

The Groton Lions Club provided lunch and presented to GHS students at Table Talks held March 20th at St. John's Lutheran Church. Over 5 dozen listened to Lion Karyn Babcock as she spoke about how the club serves our Groton SD Community by sponsoring many yearly local activities including the Robotics Pancake Feed, Easter Egg Hunt, Citywide Rummage Sales, Ditch Cleanup, Transit Fundraiser, Summer Fest as well as assisting at the Brown County Fair and serving meals at the Groton Fly-In. Scholarships are also offered to GHS Seniors annually. Applications were handed out to students that were interested in joining the Leo Club Program. The Leo Club is a part of the Lions family and provides young people, ages 12-18, with an opportunity for contribute to our community as well. Individuals interested in either the Lions or Leos Club are encouraged to reach out to a Lion for membership details.



**Scott Hanlon, April Abeln, Topper Tastad, Karyn Babcock, Diane Warrington, and Nancy Larsen (Abeln and Warrington are not Lions members, but helped volunteer for the day).**

(Courtesy Photo from April Abeln)



## SOUTH DAKOTA SEARCHLIGHT

<https://southdakotasearchlight.com>

### **Alleged assault victim's diary creates Supreme Court test of voter-backed victims' rights law**

**BY: JOHN HULT - MARCH 20, 2024 5:00 PM**

A defense attorney request for the diary of an alleged rape victim was the focus on Wednesday in a South Dakota Supreme Court case that tackles the limits of a billionaire-backed, voter-approved victims' rights amendment to the state constitution.

Marsy's Law passed in 2016, enshrining a host of victims' rights into South Dakota's founding document, among them the right to prevent the disclosure of information that "could be used to locate or harass the victim or the victim's family, or which could disclose confidential or privileged information about the victim, and to be notified of any request for such information or records."

The campaign to pass Marsy's Law was bankrolled by California resident Henry Nicholas, the billionaire founder of Broadcom, whose sister was murdered in 1994. He bankrolled several similar amendment campaigns in other states, as well.

In its original form, rights in the amendment were extended to spouses, parents, grandparents and relatives. Voters agreed to adjust the amendment in 2018, limiting that broad definition of "victim" in most cases aside from homicide. The 2018 change also allowed the Legislature to create laws to refine the application of Marsy's Law.

Those voter-backed changes, however, did not undo a victim's right to say "no" to defense lawyers who seek private information.

Wednesday's Supreme Court oral arguments on the campus of Aberdeen's Northern State University became the venue for a case that could refine the limits and application of that right to privacy for victims.

The alleged victim was identified by the initials "E.H." at the hearing and in the associated legal filings. A lower court judge had ordered her to deliver her diary for review based on a defense lawyer request, but she filed an intermediate appeal, a legal maneuver that asks the high court to review a judge's decision before a trial.

The justices pressed attorneys for both sides on several questions, including whether Marsy's Law affords her the right to file such an appeal, whether she'd given the proper notice to file one, and whether her right to privacy is outweighed by the right to confront one's accusers as guaranteed by the Sixth Amendment to the U.S. Constitution.

#### **Lawyers for victim: Privacy rights 'absolute'**

Jeremy Lund, the Aberdeen lawyer representing E.H., led with a nod to factors he and Assistant Attorney General Chelsea Wenzel would home in on throughout the arguments.

"We're here today because the defendants in a child sex abuse case want to read the victim's diaries, after they have already received her medical records, psychological records and one of her diaries, and shared that information with an internationally closed religious society," Lund said, a nod to the alleged perpetrators' membership in a Hutterite Colony.

Lund and Wenzel would both go on to argue that the order for the release of 13 years of diary entries was overly broad and invasive, particularly in light of the information already in the court record and the establishment of Marsy's Law rights by voters.

The Attorney General's Office joined in E.H.'s intermediate appeal just after the filing deadline, Lund conceded. Even so, he said, that issue is minor and ought not dash her hopes of protecting her privacy.

# Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, March 21, 2024 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 269 ~ 13 of 87

But Justice Patricia DeVaney said Marsy's Law doesn't include the word "appeal," nor does it specify the rules for such an appeal. A petition for intermediate appeal must be filed in 10 days, for example, but other areas of the law offer a 30-day notice for appeals.

Lund offered a few options there, but stressed that Marsy's Law is explicit enough in its protections to both require an appeal right and give the state Supreme Court the ability to make the call on its appropriateness.

The lack of a statute tying Marsy's Law to a specific set of procedural rules doesn't change that, he said. "The victim has an absolute privilege to not disclose information or produce discovery pursuant to a defendant's request," Lund said. "There are no exceptions to the right to refuse a discovery request."

Justices DeVaney and Mark Salter pushed both Lund and Wenzel on the issue of absolute rights. "How does that differ fundamentally from, let's say, the Sixth Amendment right of confrontation that says the defendant has a right to have confrontation at trial, and there are no exceptions?" Salter said. "And yet the cases are legion in recognizing that it is not absolute."

Wenzel said the answer is found in comparing South Dakota's version of Marsy's Law with those found in other states. Many states include exceptions for a victim's right not to disclose information. South Dakota does not.

"They provide exceptions or they say, for instance, the section is not intended and may not be interpreted to supersede a defendant's rights," Wenzel said. "We don't have any of that."

## **Defense: Diaries important for defendant rights**

Defense lawyer Tim Whalen argued that the issue is not complicated. The language of Marsy's Law contains no mechanism for a victim to file an intermediate appeal to South Dakota's highest court, he said, nor has the Legislature defined one.

"On the jurisdiction, you either have jurisdiction or you don't," Whalen said. "You cannot create it out of thin air."

Even if he were to concede that the Supreme Court is the proper venue, Whalen said, E.H. failed to follow the state's existing steps for appeals.

"You still have to follow the rules," Whalen said.

Whalen also stressed the importance of the diaries to the defendants' case. When considering a defendant's request for information, courts often use a "Nixon test," which stems from a U.S. Supreme Court decision on when privileged information – presidential records, in former President Richard Nixon's case – can be released.

Under that test, a request for privileged information must be relevant to the case, admissible in court and specific.

Lund and Wenzel pointed out that the judge who ordered the diary entries released did not apply a Nixon test. Had he, Whalen argued, the request for diary entries would've satisfied it.

Mark Waldner, Michael Waldner Jr. and Michael Waldner Sr. say they are "100% innocent," Whalen said, and there is no physical evidence of sexual assault or DNA evidence to prove the crimes.

The victim's mental health records, he said, suggest "she's prone to fantasy, prone to fabrication, she hallucinates, she doesn't have a complete touch of reality."

"That goes directly towards her credibility on whether or not she fantasized the circumstances," of the yearslong pattern of sexual assault alleged in the case, Whalen said.

The Division of Criminal Investigation's report on the case references "purple journals," Whalen said, and includes quotes from specific, dated diary entries.

But, DeVaney asked, "where in the DCI report, or the page of the journal that's in the record, does it support your suggestion that all these other journals or diaries, if they exist, also talk about the allegations in this case?"

Whalen said the DCI report talks about the victim "dealing with" the trauma of the assaults.

In their rebuttal, Lund and Wenzel both said there must be a limit to what defendants can ask for.

"The right to confront and cross examine does not include the right to cross examine in any way, shape or form you want," Lund said.

Wenzel, hearkening back to opening arguments, told the court that the defense's sweeping request for diary entries not only violates the spirit of Marsy's Law, but counts as unnecessary in light of the personal information already offered to defense counsel.

"They have all of her medical records, her counseling records," Wenzel said. "What could be in these journals that's going to tell them about her mental health better than her mental health records and her counseling records?"

## Watch out for China buying U.S. farmland, Noem tells U.S. House panel

BY: ARIANA FIGUEROA - MARCH 20, 2024 4:22 PM

WASHINGTON — South Dakota Gov. Kristi Noem told the U.S. House Agriculture Committee on Wednesday to be vigilant about Chinese ownership of farmland in the U.S.

Noem appeared at the hearing about foreign entities – specifically those from China – buying farmland as concerns have grown in Congress and in dozens of state capitals about China's growing influence and the country's investment in U.S. agricultural land.

"Over the years, I have witnessed this hostile communist country work to systematically take over more of America's vital food supply chain," said Noem, a Republican who has signed into law strict restrictions on select foreign entities buying farmland in her state.

Rep. Dusty Johnson, R-South Dakota, introduced Noem to the committee.

"China is our biggest adversary. Governor Noem has been active in stopping the threat of the Chinese Communist Party in South Dakota," Johnson said later in a news release. "I'm proud to welcome Governor Noem back to the House Ag Committee to share her perspective on how the state and federal government can work together to protect the U.S. from the CCP."

Support for limiting foreign entities' and individuals' access to U.S. agricultural land has grown in Congress in recent years, with a focus on China in the wake last year of a Chinese spy balloon that flew over the U.S.

The issue is part of a larger congressional focus on China. The House voted last week to ban TikTok unless the company splits from its Chinese owner, ByteDance.

"These last few years have seen China steal U.S. intellectual property, hack critical cybersecurity and related infrastructure, weaponize agricultural trade, and acquire American farmland at an alarming rate," committee Chair Glenn "GT" Thompson, Republican of Pennsylvania, said in his opening statement. "Each of these disrupt our national security, our rural communities and our resiliency."

Even though China owns little farmland in the U.S., it's an issue that has raised bipartisan concern. The Senate last year added an amendment in an annual defense measure to curb farmland purchases by China, Iran, North Korea and Russia.

The top Democrat on the committee, Rep. David Scott of Georgia, said Wednesday he was concerned about some of the rhetoric toward China, and urged committee members to focus on policy.

"Some of the rhetoric surrounding this topic may derail us from tackling the real issues at hand and may contribute to violence against Asian Americans," Scott said in his opening statement.

### No endorsement on Trump tariff proposal

Scott also pointed out that China is an important trading partner with the U.S.

Scott asked Noem her opinion on the proposal from former President Donald Trump, the presumptive GOP nominee in the presidential election, to levy a 60% tariff on imports from China. Scott said that farmers would be the ones to "face the potential consequences."

# Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, March 21, 2024 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 269 ~ 15 of 87

Noem did not say whether she agreed with that proposal, but said “that is a proposal that people are still looking at and having conversations about.”

Noem attended a rally with Trump last weekend in Ohio, and is considered a potential running mate for the former president.

Trump floated the 60% tariffs proposal in an interview with Fox News last month.

Scott asked her how much land China has purchased in South Dakota.

Noem said that she is unsure if China owns farmland in her state – in part due to a lack of reporting.

According to federal records, there is no Chinese-owned ag land in South Dakota, but there is a Chinese-owned meatpacking plant in Sioux Falls.

Noem in early March signed into law a bill the South Dakota Legislature passed that bans foreign land ownership for agriculture purposes from China, North Korea, Iran, Cuba, Russia and Venezuela.

U.S. Department of Agriculture data shows about one-third of foreign-controlled agricultural land in South Dakota was acquired by Canada. A majority of the rest of land acquisitions are from the United Kingdom, France, Spain and Germany. The rest, which totals less than 4,000 acres, is held by people or entities from the Bahamas, Mexico and Saudi Arabia.

## Canada largest foreign investor

As of 2022, Chinese entities and individuals owned about 349,000 acres of U.S. agricultural land, which is less than 1% of all U.S. agriculture land held by foreign persons, according to the most recent USDA data.

The states with the largest Chinese holdings are Texas, North Carolina, Missouri, Utah and Virginia, which represent about 85% of all Chinese holdings in the U.S., according to USDA.

“Canadian investors own the largest amount of reported foreign-held agricultural and non-agricultural land, with 32%, or 14.2 million acres,” according to the USDA report.

A recent Government Accountability Office report found that the U.S. government might have difficulties tracking transactions from foreign entities because “the records for these transactions, such as land deeds, are usually kept at county tax and recorder offices across the country and are not maintained in a single database.”

Democratic Rep. Elissa Slotkin of Michigan said that it’s important to make distinctions when it comes to foreign entities making major purchases in the U.S. She said in her state, the biggest foreign land purchasers are Canada and the Netherlands.

“I’m not real stressed about the Canadians buying land in the state of Michigan,” she said.

Slotkin said that Congress should not just think about foreign transactions when it comes to farmland but to other infrastructure sites such as manufacturing.

“If you have a company coming in to do a huge purchase of our infrastructure like hog slaughter, you should be putting that through that same intelligence community process to help us understand if that’s a strategic threat to us,” she said.

There is no federal law that restricts foreign investors from acquiring agricultural land, but dozens of states have laws restricting or prohibiting foreign private investment in agricultural land.

Those states include Alabama, Arkansas, Florida, Idaho, Indiana, Iowa, Kansas, Kentucky, Louisiana, Minnesota, Mississippi, Missouri, Montana, Nebraska, North Dakota, Ohio, Oklahoma, Pennsylvania, South Carolina, South Dakota, Tennessee, Utah, Virginia and Wisconsin.

GOP Rep. Mike Gallagher of Wisconsin, who chairs the Select Committee on the Chinese Communist Party, said that he believes the agriculture sector is China’s next target.

“The CCP’s acquisition of land in the United States, its investments in U.S. agricultural technology, and its collection of U.S. farm data and trade secrets represent offensive maneuvers designed to degrade U.S. preparedness and competitiveness,” he said.

## National security and economic concerns

Republican Rep. Frank Lucas of Oklahoma asked the second panel of witnesses how to balance between

national security concerns and still allowing for international investment in the U.S. economy.

The second panel of witnesses included Josh Gackle, the president of the American Soybean Association, Nova J. Daly, a senior public policy analyst in trade at the law firm Wiley Rein, and Kip Tom, a former ambassador to the Rome-based United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization.

"One of the greatest strengths we have as a country is the investment we get from abroad," Daly said. "The great balance, I think, is to continue with our open investment policy but be incredibly smart in how we apply our national security apparatus."

Gackle, of Kulm, North Dakota, said that foreign ownership of land is also a concern for growers.

"It's not just China, it's other, out-of-state and foreign owners that could potentially drive up the cost of land and the cost of producing for a farmer in North Dakota," he said.

Tom, of Leesburg, Indiana, said based on his travel as an ambassador, he's seen China heavily invest in Africa and Central America.

"I think we have to be extremely careful where they do invest," he said.

The staff of South Dakota Searchlight contributed to this report.

## South Dakota no longer only state to saddle counties with all indigent defense costs

**BY: SEARCHLIGHT STAFF - MARCH 20, 2024 10:14 AM**

Gov. Kristi Noem signed legislation this week to create a state public defender office.

The proposal arose from a task force involving legislative and criminal justice officials. When the group convened, South Dakota was one of two states to saddle counties with the entire financial burden of providing legal representation to criminal defendants who can't afford lawyers. South Dakota had since become the last state in that category.

"A strong criminal justice system supports our American way of life," Noem said in a press release. "It upholds the rights of our people. That includes the Sixth Amendment right to legal counsel."

The new office will take over a limited set of cases: criminal appeals; "habeas corpus" appeals, which are filed to challenge a suspect's detention; and child abuse and neglect appeals. Counties will remain responsible for other cases.

The office is expected to cost the state \$1.4 million annually but save counties \$2.1 million annually. The Legislature additionally included a one-time infusion of \$3 million in the bill to help counties cover current indigent defense costs.

In addition to signing the bill passed by the Legislature to create the office, Noem appointed the first three members of a Commission on Indigent Legal Services to provide oversight of the office. That oversight will include appointing a chief public defender.

Noem's appointees are Larry Long, a former judge and former state attorney general, of Sioux Falls; Heather Lammers Bogard, an attorney at Costello Porter in Rapid City and 2023-2024 South Dakota State Bar president; and Dick Travis, of the May & Johnson law firm in Sioux Falls.

The new law calls for six additional members of the commission to be chosen by the state's chief justice, president pro tempore of the Senate, speaker of the House, and executive director of the South Dakota Association of County Commissioners.

A recommendation from the task force suggested seven full-time equivalent employees for the state public defender office: a chief public defender, four attorney FTEs, and two support staff FTEs.

## Fed declines to cut interest rates, saying it's not clear inflation has slowed enough yet

BY: CASEY QUINLAN - MARCH 20, 2024 4:53 PM

The Federal Reserve declined Wednesday to cut interest rates, saying it remains uncertain inflation is slowing enough, but some economists warned the financial regulators risk waiting too long to make cuts.

Fed Chairman Jerome Powell said the Fed has a lack of sufficient data that inflation is slowing enough to justify taking the pressure off interest rates yet. The Fed started raising the federal funds rate in March 2022 to battle inflation and continued until the latter half of last year, when it decided to pause rates.

The Fed issued a statement that it is waiting until it "has gained greater confidence" that inflation is moving toward its 2% goal to begin cutting rates.

The Fed's preferred inflation indicator, the Personal Consumption Expenditures Price Index or PCE for short, rose 0.3% from December to January compared to 0.1% from November to December, which some economic experts say may be partly behind the decision to hold off on rate cuts. The PCE climbed 2.4% from a year ago compared to 5.4% from January 2022 to January 2023, an indication that inflation has been slowing in the long term.

Powell said, "We believe that our policy rate is likely at its peak for this tightening cycle and that if the economy evolves broadly as expected, it will likely be appropriate to begin dialing back policy restraint at some point this year."

He added that the Fed does not want to ease too much or too soon if that would risk a chance that inflation returns. Powell did not rule out pausing the rate for longer.

Skanda Amarnath, executive director of Employ America, an economic policy research group, and a former analyst at the New York Fed, said the Fed should avoid being too reactive to monthly inflation data, particularly in January and February, which have been hotter months for inflation in the past few years. A lot of businesses revise pricing with the new calendar year, Amarnath added, which can contribute to the rise.

Powell acknowledged on Wednesday that seasonal factors could have affected the data but that they didn't add to the Fed's confidence in slowing inflation either.

"Inflation is a volatile beast. Month to month, it can do weird things. But by and large, we're seeing if you look at the year-over-year change in the [Consumer Price Index] and PCE, you're broadly seeing progress," he said.

The economy has also not shown signs of overheating for some time, Amarnath added.

"From everything we're learning from the past, especially the last three to six months, it is a more normalized pace of job growth, a more normalized pace of wage growth ... It's largely moved in totality towards a still respectable and strong labor market," he said.

Rakeen Mabud, chief economist and managing director of policy and research at the Groundwork Collaborative, an economic think tank, said she is worried that the Fed could wait too long to cut rates and damage the economy.

"All the Fed can do at this point is break this really strong recovery that we've had ... I'm worried now because rate hikes are a really imprecise tool that acts with lags. I don't know exactly when the full impact of these rate hikes are going to play out and neither does Jerome Powell," she said.

Amarnath said that because Fed policy, although it is far from the only factor, has played a role in the past three recessions, the Fed should be careful with how it uses the federal funds rate in its campaign against inflation.

"You may not need to cut at this very meeting. But if you press your luck a little too long in terms of 'OK, the economy is not collapsing right this second,' and if you wait till something breaks, it may prove to be too late," he said.

Americans say their top policy priority this year is strengthening the economy, according to a Pew Research Survey taken in January.

The Fed's interest rate policies also affect housing supply and affordability. Mabud said that the Fed's approach to meeting one of its stated goals — lowering prices — is helping to drive up housing costs, which in turn affects inflation measures. The Consumer Price Index, another inflation measure, shows that in February, shelter and gasoline were responsible for more than 60% of the index's rise.

"Shelter costs continue to be a significant driver of inflation," she said. "We're seeing high mortgage rates which are driving up the cost of buying a house, which then pushes folks back into the potential rental market, which also pushes rents higher. The Fed's high interest rate regime is also making constructing new houses more expensive. We have a shortage of 6.5 million homes, at least, in this country."

The number of people recorded as unhoused on a single night rose to its highest level in January 2023, according to U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development data released in December. The department attributed the rise in the number of unhoused people to the rental market, which has had high rent growth, and the ending of programs implemented early in the pandemic to keep people housed during an economic downturn.

## Congress struggles to finish work on spending bills as another Friday deadline nears

BY: JENNIFER SHUTT - MARCH 20, 2024 11:32 AM

WASHINGTON — Congressional staff were scrambling Wednesday to finalize sweeping legislation that would fund much of the federal government, but time was running short ahead of a Friday midnight deadline.

Leaders of the House and Senate and the Biden administration announced Tuesday they'd reached consensus on the final six government funding bills for the fiscal year that began back on Oct. 1. But neither chamber can vote on the agreement until the text of the package — which includes billions in crucial funding for health, defense, immigration and much more — is finished and released.

Lawmakers may need to pass another short-term stopgap spending bill, sometimes called a continuing resolution, or CR, to avoid a funding lapse when the current funding patch expires just as Saturday begins.

"We don't yet know precisely when the House will act, but as soon as they send us the funding package I will put it on the Senate floor," Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer said Wednesday morning.

"And from there — as we all know — it will take cooperation to get on the bill and consent from every senator to keep this process moving quickly."

The New York Democrat said that even if senators from both political parties move with purpose, "it's going to be a tight squeeze to get this funding package passed before the weekend deadline."

Schumer asked senators "to be flexible, to be prepared to act quickly and to prioritize working together in good faith, so we can finish the appropriations process."

If senators act in the same manner they did earlier this month when the Senate approved the other six spending bills just hours before their deadline, Schumer said, "the odds are good we can get this done without excessive delay or headaches."

House Speaker Mike Johnson said during a press conference Wednesday morning that he expected the text of the legislation to come out later in the day.

The Louisiana Republican said he hoped that chamber would be able to wrap up work before the deadline Friday and predicted Congress wouldn't need to pass another stopgap spending bill to avoid a weekend funding lapse.

"We should have the bill text, hopefully, by this afternoon," Johnson said.

### Deadline after deadline

Congress has been pushing off its deadline to wrap up work on the dozen annual appropriations bills since the start of fiscal year 2024 last autumn, using a series of CRs to keep funding flat with a few exceptions.

Lawmakers were able to reach a bipartisan agreement on six of the spending bills in early March, quickly

# Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, March 21, 2024 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 269 ~ 19 of 87

holding broadly bipartisan votes to approve the package in the House and Senate.

Once lawmakers approve the final six spending bills and President Joe Biden signs the package, both chambers of Congress will likely begin work in earnest on the fiscal 2025 process ahead of their next Oct. 1 deadline.

Biden submitted his budget request earlier this month, which was followed by White House budget director Shalanda Young testifying in front of the Senate Budget Committee on the proposal.

The House Appropriations Committee began hearings this week with Cabinet secretaries and agency heads on their funding requests for the next round of appropriations bills. The Senate panel will likely begin those hearings in the coming weeks.

## Overseas assistance

The House will also turn its attention toward approving emergency assistance to Ukraine, Israel and Taiwan in some form after wrapping up work on the current appropriations process, Johnson said Wednesday during his press conference.

"We had to get the approps done first and having done that now we'll turn our attention to it. And we won't delay on that," he said.

Johnson didn't say exactly what form aid would take or how much funding a House bill would provide, but did say there are a "a number of avenues" that Republicans have been considering.

"We're talking about the whole supplemental and all of these pieces — whether they'd go individually or as a package — all of those things are being debated and discussed," Johnson said.

There are ongoing conversations among House GOP lawmakers about possibly using seized Russian assets and a loan to provide Ukraine with additional assistance, Johnson said.

The Senate in February approved a broadly bipartisan bill to provide Ukraine, Israel and Taiwan with \$96 billion in emergency spending. Much of that money would flow through the U.S. government, including for the departments of Defense and State.

House Republicans, however, are having a debate about the difference between providing military and humanitarian assistance for Ukraine, Johnson said.

"Internally, I think there is a big distinction in the minds of a lot of people between lethal aid for Ukraine and the humanitarian component," he said.

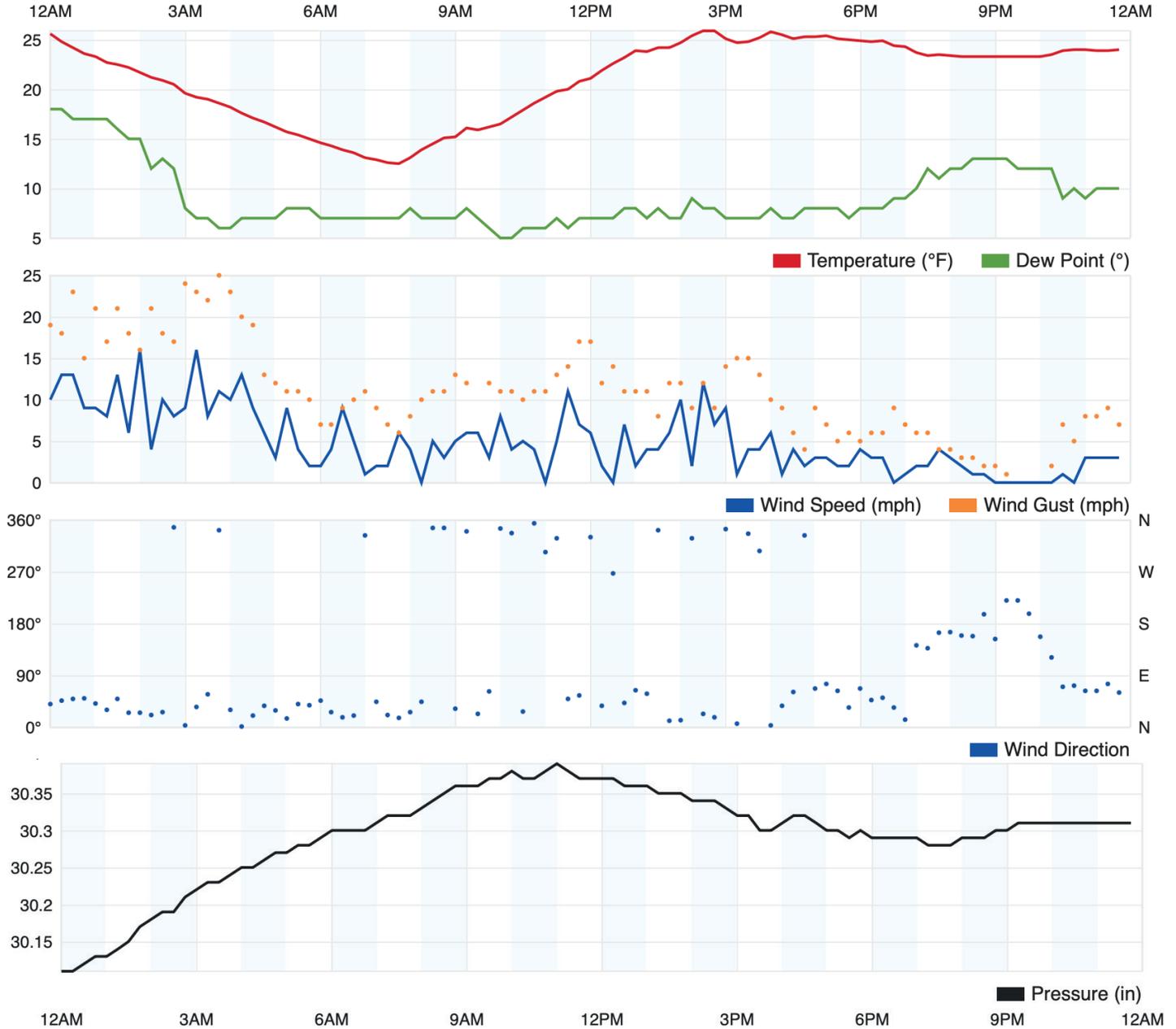
Johnson, who has been noncommittal publicly about whether the House would ever take up assistance to Ukraine, seemed to shift somewhat to supporting the idea of aid, even if he didn't comment specifically on the substance.

"We understand the role that America plays in the world. We understand the importance of sending a strong signal to the world that we stand by our allies," Johnson said. "And we cannot allow terrorists and tyrants to march through the globe."

# Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, March 21, 2024 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 269 ~ 20 of 87

## Yesterday's Groton Weather Graphs



# Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, March 21, 2024 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 269 ~ 21 of 87

Thursday	Thursday Night	Friday	Friday Night	Saturday
				
Chance Snow	Heavy Snow then Chance Snow	Mostly Cloudy	Mostly Cloudy then Slight Chance Snow	Snow Likely
High: 35 °F	Low: 20 °F	High: 30 °F	Low: 12 °F	High: 29 °F



## Accumulation Potential Late Today - Thursday

March 20, 2024  
2:44 PM

### What

An east-west band of moderate to heavy snowfall traveling west to east along the ND/SD state line into western MN

### When

Light snow will develop this evening, but the heaviest snow will fall Thursday afternoon into Thursday evening over southern ND, far northeast SD and into west-central MN

### Uncertainty

Models have trended this band north, however that's not to say that it can't still shift back south. Any slight shift will have significant consequences with regards to "who gets what"

### Impacts

Be prepared to modify travel plans due to hazardous travel conditions expected within the vicinity of this moderate-heavy snow band



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

National Weather Service  
Aberdeen, SD

Light snow will start this evening but heaviest snow will fall Thursday afternoon into the evening hours over far northeast SD into west-central MN. 2 to 5 inches accumulation is possible mainly northeast of a line from Eureka to Milbank with locally higher amounts closer to the ND/SD/MN borders.

# Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, March 21, 2024 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 269 ~ 22 of 87



## Timing Snowfall & Winds

March 20, 2024  
2:57 PM

**Weather Forecast**

	3/20 Wed			3/21 Thu					3/22 Fri						
	3pm	6pm	9pm	12am	3am	6am	9am	12pm	3pm	6pm	9pm	12am	3am	6am	9am
Aberdeen	10%	15%	25%	40%	40%	30%	10%	20%	40%	75%	75%	75%	35%	35%	5%
Britton	5%	15%	25%	40%	55%	45%	20%	25%	50%	90%	90%	90%	60%	60%	15%
Brookings	0%	20%	20%	20%	25%	20%	10%	10%	25%	70%	70%	70%	55%	55%	5%
Chamberlain	5%	5%	0%	0%	5%	5%	0%	5%	5%	40%	40%	40%	5%	5%	0%
Clark	5%	15%	20%	25%	25%	30%	15%	10%	10%	70%	70%	70%	40%	40%	5%
Eagle Butte	10%	10%	5%	0%	5%	5%	10%	20%	25%	25%	25%	25%	5%	5%	0%
Ellendale	10%	15%	25%	50%	70%	40%	15%	25%	55%	85%	85%	85%	40%	40%	10%
Eureka	20%	20%	30%	55%	50%	25%	10%	30%	50%	75%	75%	75%	30%	30%	10%
Gettysburg	15%	20%	15%	15%	15%	10%	10%	20%	25%	50%	50%	50%	15%	15%	5%
Huron	5%	20%	10%	10%	15%	10%	5%	15%	25%	55%	55%	55%	20%	20%	5%
Kennebec	10%	15%	0%	0%	5%	0%	0%	0%	0%	40%	40%	40%	5%	5%	0%
McIntosh	25%	30%	25%	20%	15%	5%	15%	35%	50%	50%	50%	50%	15%	15%	15%
Milbank	0%	10%	20%	25%	30%	40%	20%	15%	10%	85%	85%	85%	70%	70%	15%
Miller	5%	15%	10%	5%	10%	5%	5%	10%	5%	50%	50%	50%	15%	15%	10%
Mobridge	25%	20%	25%	30%	20%	10%	15%	25%	40%	50%	50%	50%	15%	15%	10%
Murdo	5%	0%	0%	0%	0%	5%	0%	0%	0%	35%	35%	35%	5%	5%	0%
Pierre	10%	15%	5%	0%	5%	5%	5%	5%	5%	35%	35%	35%	5%	5%	0%
Redfield	5%	15%	20%	25%	25%	15%	10%	10%	10%	60%	60%	60%	25%	25%	5%
Sisseton	0%	15%	20%	25%	30%	35%	20%	15%	25%	90%	90%	90%	65%	65%	15%
Watertown	0%	15%	20%	25%	30%	40%	20%	10%	10%	75%	75%	75%	50%	50%	5%
Webster	10%	10%	25%	30%	30%	40%	20%	15%	15%	80%	80%	80%	50%	50%	10%
Wheaton	0%	10%	20%	25%	25%	20%	10%	15%	20%	95%	95%	95%	75%	75%	10%

Created: 2 pm CDT Wed 3/20/2024. Shows most impactful weather for the period beginning at the time shown. Weather symbols display where Probability of Precipitation ≥ 0%.

- Rain + - Fz Rain + - Wintry Mix + - Snow +

**Maximum Wind Gust Forecast (mph)**

	3/20 Wed			3/21 Thu					3/22 Fri						
	3pm	6pm	9pm	12am	3am	6am	9am	12pm	3pm	6pm	9pm	12am	3am	6am	9am
Aberdeen	13	9	18	17	20	21	21	20	21	25	26	20	21	24	24
Britton	14	8	10	13	16	20	21	20	23	24	24	21	18	22	22
Brookings	13	9	9	13	14	17	21	23	23	22	22	20	17	21	24
Chamberlain	10	14	21	23	23	25	26	23	22	22	25	23	21	22	21
Clark	18	8	15	20	23	25	26	24	22	24	29	26	21	22	25
Eagle Butte	20	21	28	29	29	26	23	20	20	22	22	18	17	20	21
Ellendale	12	8	18	14	16	20	21	20	21	22	22	21	20	23	23
Eureka	10	12	17	21	25	26	26	25	24	22	23	20	17	17	17
Gettysburg	17	16	25	28	31	33	28	23	22	23	28	22	18	20	21
Huron	9	7	18	20	21	24	25	26	24	23	24	21	22	25	26
Kennebec	16	18	26	29	28	28	26	20	20	22	26	21	20	21	25
McIntosh	17	18	22	23	24	25	23	23	23	22	20	17	17	18	18
Milbank	16	10	8	9	10	14	17	20	21	21	18	18	15	15	21
Miller	18	12	17	21	24	26	25	23	20	20	22	21	20	22	23
Mobridge	14	15	22	22	24	26	25	21	21	24	23	18	17	18	18
Murdo	25	24	33	33	28	23	22	16	20	24	29	21	20	18	22
Pierre	22	21	28	29	29	29	25	18	21	23	26	17	16	16	20
Redfield	14	9	14	21	22	24	24	22	21	22	22	21	20	23	25
Sisseton	17	9	8	9	12	15	17	20	20	21	18	18	15	17	21
Watertown	18	8	18	13	17	20	21	22	23	23	26	23	18	20	23
Webster	14	7	12	15	18	22	24	24	24	29	30	20	21	23	25
Wheaton	17	13	8	8	8	12	14	17	17	17	17	15	14	16	18

Created: 2 pm CDT Wed 3/20/2024 | Values are maximums over the period beginning at the time shown.



National Weather Service  
Aberdeen, SD

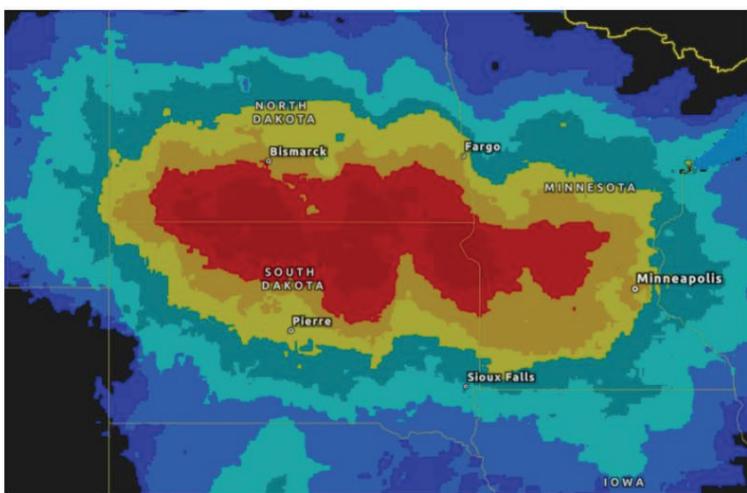


## Winter Storm Sat Night into Early Next Week?

March 20, 2024  
2:59 PM

Likelihood of at least Moderate Impacts from 1am Sunday (3/24) through 1am Monday (3/25)

Moderate Impacts: Expect disruptions to daily life. Hazardous driving conditions. Use extra caution while driving.



### What We Know

A low pressure system is expected to move through the Central Plains Sunday into early next week. As this occurs, snow will spread across the Northern Plains Saturday night through next Monday.

### What We Don't Know

The exact track of the system and thus the location of heaviest snowfall, what the snowfall amounts will be, and specific details on the timing of the snow.

### What You Can Do



Continue to monitor the latest forecast from reliable/reputable sources... especially if you have travel plans!



National Weather Service  
Aberdeen, SD

# Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, March 21, 2024 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 269 ~ 23 of 87

## Yesterday's Groton Weather

High Temp: 26 °F at 2:22 PM

Low Temp: 12 °F at 7:45 AM

Wind: 26 mph at 3:35 AM

Precip: : 0.00

Day length: 12 hours, 17 minutes

## Today's Info

Record High: 76 in 1926

Record Low: -12 in 1965

Average High: 44

Average Low: 22

Average Precip in March.: 0.55

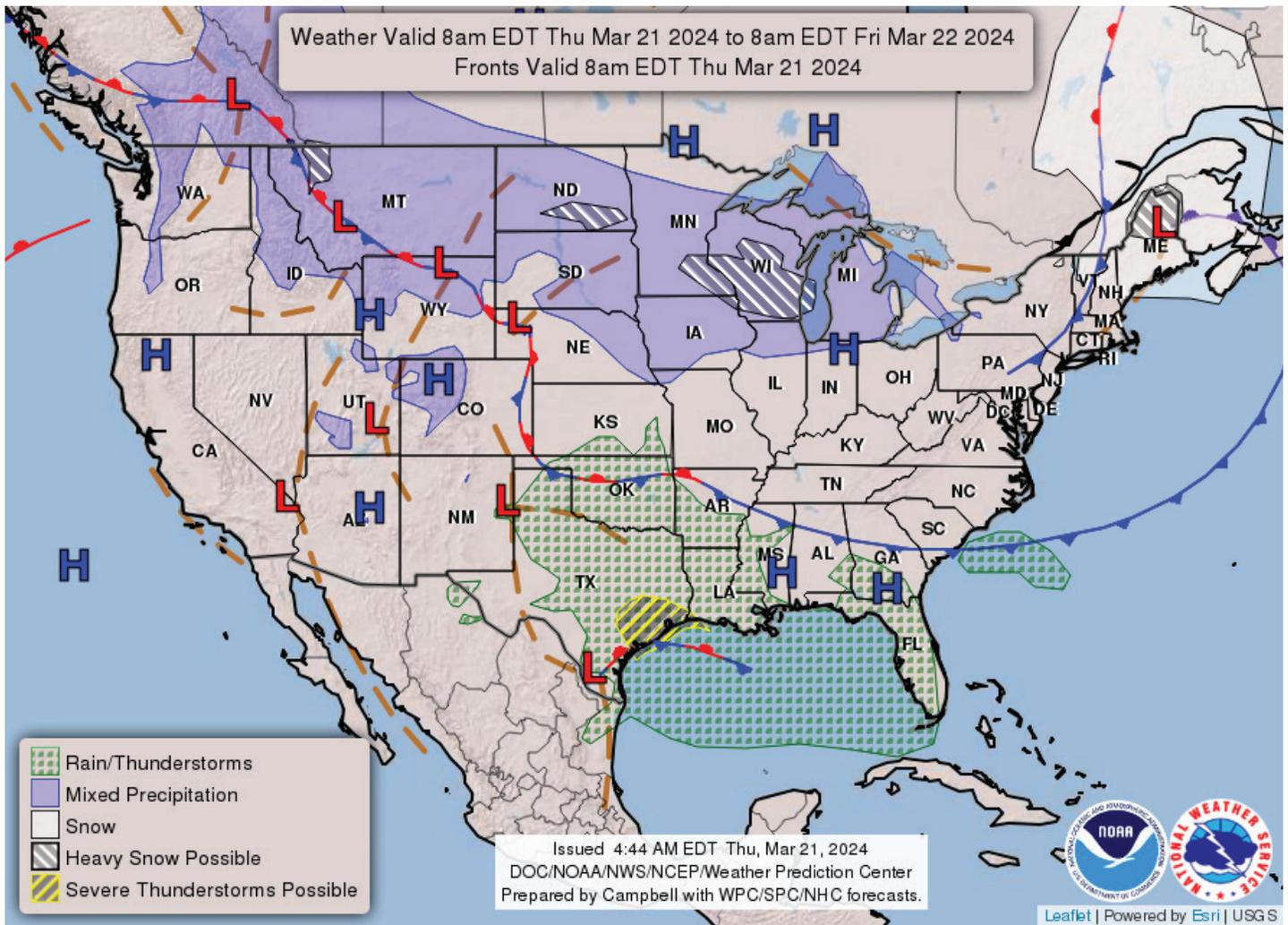
Precip to date in March: 0.00

Average Precip to date: 1.72

Precip Year to Date: 0.07

Sunset Tonight: 7:48:15 pm

Sunrise Tomorrow: 7:28:29 am



# Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, March 21, 2024 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 269 ~ 24 of 87

## Today in Weather History

March 21, 1997: As temperatures began to warm up towards the end of March, the near-record to record winter snowpack over central, north-central, and northeast South Dakota started to melt. The resulting runoff filled up ditches, lakes, creeks, streams, and low-lying areas. The massive amount of water swamped hundreds of sections of county and township roads as well as several state and federal highways. The inundated parts of roads were either broken up or washed out. Tens of culverts were blown out or damaged, and several bridges were either destroyed or washed out by chunks of ice and the high water flow. Road closures were extensive, with rerouting taking place for school buses, mail carriers, farmers, and ranchers. Many spillways and dams received some damage or were washed out. Also, thousands of acres of farmland and pastureland were underwater. Due to the high groundwater, a countless number of homes received water in their basements. A few towns were partially flooded, including Twin Brooks in Grant County, Corona in Roberts County, and Raymond in Clark County. The following week, in the early morning hours of March 27, water flowed into Raymond filling the basements of several homes. In rural areas, several farms were surrounded by water and were inaccessible, leaving some people stranded and livestock marooned. Many other residences and businesses, mainly across northeast South Dakota, received significant damage or were a total loss. As a result, several people had to be evacuated. At the time, many long-term residents said this was the most significant flooding they had seen in their lifetimes. The flooding continued into early to mid-April.

March 21, 2012: Several record high temperatures occurred across the region in March. Click [HERE](#) for a recap.

1801: The Jefferson Flood hit the Connecticut Valley. The flooding was the greatest since 1692. The Federalists named the flood for the new President, who they blamed for the disaster.

1876: More than 40 inches of snow stopped traffic in Montreal, Quebec, Canada. Trains were delayed, and mail carriers resorted to snowshoes.

1932: A tornado swarm occurred in the Deep South. Between late afternoon and early the next morning, severe thunderstorms spawned 31 tornadoes in Alabama, Mississippi, Georgia, and Tennessee. The tornadoes killed 334 persons and injured 1784 others. Northern Alabama was the hardest hit. Tornadoes in Alabama killed 286 persons and caused five million dollars damage.

1951: Antarctica is the windiest place in the world. Port Martin averaged 40 mph winds throughout the year. On this day, the winds averaged 108 mph.

1952 - Severe thunderstorms spawned thirty-one tornadoes across Arkansas, Tennessee, Missouri, Mississippi, Alabama and Kentucky. The tornadoes killed 343 persons and caused 15 million dollars damage. Arkansas and Tennessee each reported thirteen tornadoes. The towns of Judsonia AR and Henderson TN were nearly wiped off the map in what proved to be the worst tornado outbreak of record for Arkansas. A tornado, one and a half miles wide at times, left a church the only undamaged building at Judsonia. (David Ludlum) (The Weather Channel)

1987 - A winter storm in the Northern High Plains Region produced blizzard conditions in western South Dakota. Winds gusted to 70 mph at Rapid City SD, and snowfall totals ranged up to 20 inches at Lead SD. The high winds produced snow drifts six feet high. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

1988 - Bitterly cold weather prevailed across the northeastern U.S. Portland ME reported their coldest spring day of record with a morning low of 5 above, and an afternoon high of just 21 degrees. Marquette MI reported a record low of 15 degrees below zero. (The National Weather Summary) (The Weather Channel)

1989 - Snow blanketed the northeastern U.S. early in the day, with six inches reported at Rutland VT. Morning and afternoon thunderstorms produced large hail and damaging winds from southwestern Mississippi to southwest Georgia. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

1990 - The first full day of spring was a cold one for the eastern U.S. Freezing temperatures damaged 62 percent of the peach crop in upstate South Carolina, and 72 percent of the peach crop in the ridge area of South Carolina. Elkins WV, which a week earlier reported a record high of 82 degrees, was the cold spot in the nation with a morning low of 16 degrees. (Storm Data) (The National Weather Summary)

# Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, March 21, 2024 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 269 ~ 25 of 87

Daily Devotionals

## Seeds of Hope

### FROZEN IN FEAR

A young man from Kansas dreamed of becoming a crew member of a tall ship. Finally, his lifelong ambition was realized when he was offered an opportunity to set sail on one of the few remaining vessels. His enthusiasm was short-lived when, after a few days, the captain ordered him to climb to the "crow's nest" and search the horizon for approaching vessels.

The higher up he climbed on the rope ladder, the more frightened he became, and the slower his progress. Halfway up, he stopped, frozen in his tracks. He was unable to move. No amount of persuasion or encouragement from the sailors below inspired him to go higher. Finally, someone had to climb up behind him and slowly coax him down to safety.

Now and then, we all seem to get "stuck" when we are unable to overcome an old habit, when facing a new challenge or being forced to do something we have never done before. People all around us may provide insight and ideas to solve our problem and challenge us to move on. But nothing seems to make sense, and we "freeze" in our tracks.

However, God, in His Word, promises that "He gives His power to the faint and weary, and might to him who has no strength."

When life's obstacles "freeze" us with fear, we must claim the promises of God and move forward in faith!

Prayer: Lord, increase our faith. May our doubts disappear, and our trust in Your promises give us the confidence and assurance that You will always provide for our safety and security. In Jesus' Name, Amen.

Scripture For Today: He gives power to the weak and strength to the powerless. Isaiah 40:29-31



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

# Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, March 21, 2024 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 269 ~ 26 of 87

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# Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, March 21, 2024 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 269 ~ 27 of 87



## WINNING NUMBERS

### MEGA MILLIONS

WINNING NUMBERS: 03.19.24

24 46 49 62 66 7

MegaPlier: 2x

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:

**\$977,000,000**

NEXT DRAW: 1 Days 17 Hrs 8 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

### LOTTO AMERICA

WINNING NUMBERS:  
03.20.24

3 16 29 44 50 7

All Star Bonus: 3x

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:

**\$2,350,000**

NEXT DRAW: 2 Days 16 Hrs 15 Mins 8 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

### LUCKY FOR LIFE

WINNING NUMBERS:  
03.20.24

23 30 33 37 45 1

TOP PRIZE:

**\$7,000/week**

NEXT DRAW: 16 Hrs 30 Mins 9 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

### DAKOTA CASH

WINNING NUMBERS:  
03.20.24

6 9 10 11 35

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:

**\$28,000**

NEXT DRAW: 2 Days 16 Hrs 30 Mins 9 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

### POWERBALL

DOUBLE PLAY

WINNING NUMBERS:  
03.20.24

7 9 10 26 43 24

TOP PRIZE:

**\$10,000,000**

NEXT DRAW: 2 Days 16 Hrs 59 Mins 8 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

### POWERBALL

WINNING NUMBERS:  
03.20.24

13 22 27 54 66 9

Power Play: 2x

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:

**\$750,000,000**

NEXT DRAW: 2 Days 16 Hrs 59 Mins 8 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

## News from the Associated Press

### Iowa State rides March Madness into game against familiar foe in South Dakota State

By DAVE SKRETTA AP Basketball Writer

OMAHA, Neb. (AP) — T.J. Otzelberger was sitting around CHI Health Center on Wednesday, just before leading Iowa State onto the court for its open practice ahead of the NCAA Tournament, still marveling at the way its fan base showed out last weekend.

Buoyed by Cyclones fans filling to the rafters, they romped past then-No. 1 Houston to win the Big 12 Tournament title.

"That," Otzelberger said, "was something I'll never forget."

Expect the same sort of home-court advantage for the No. 2 seed Cyclones this week. Instead of the 230-mile trek south of the Iowa State campus in Ames to reach Kansas City, those thousands of red- and yellow-clad fans have a mere 170 miles to drive to reach Omaha for their first-round game against No. 15 seed South Dakota State on Thursday.

The winner will play No. 7 seed Washington State or 10th-seeded Drake, which also is located just down I-80 in Des Moines.

"The passion, enthusiasm, investment our fans make every single day — it's inspiring," said Otzelberger, who got his start as a college head coach at South Dakota State, and whose former assistant, Eric Henderson, is now leading the Jackrabbits.

"It really elevates our team to play at higher levels," Otzelberger said. "It allows our guys to accomplish the things they've done."

The top half of the East Region, headlined by overall No. 1 seed and defending national champion UConn, will have to wait until Friday to get their NCAA Tournament underway. But the bottom half, beginning with the matchup between the Cyclones (27-7) and the Jackrabbits (22-12), represents a unique convergence of players, coaches and, yes, fans.

Otzelberger coached under Greg McDermott, whose Creighton teams call CHI Health Center home. One of his recruits while he was with the Jackrabbits, Matt Mims, will be facing him in the starting lineup Thursday, five years after he departed. And there is Henderson, whom the Iowa State coach called "one of my best friends on earth for 20-plus years."

Henderson has the Jackrabbits in the NCAA Tournament for the second time in three years after winning the Summit League.

"Obviously we've talked and texted a few times," Henderson said. "Once you get the emotions out of it, we're both competitive dudes, right? We both want to win. The respect level is high, but yeah."

As for that home-court advantage, Henderson was quick to point out the South Dakota State campus in Brookings is not a whole lot further away than Ames, and that he expects yellow- and blue-clad Jackrabbits fans to be out in force.

"This is what it's all about, right? To be able to share moments like this with our team," Henderson said. "It doesn't get any better than this, to be frank with you. We know what Cyclone Nation does in Kansas City for the Big 12 Tournament. We will be excited for the atmosphere in the building, no doubt."

Sixth-seeded BYU and No. 11 seed Duquesne open the quadruple-header Thursday in Omaha with the winner getting third-seeded Illinois or No. 14 seed Morehead State in the second round.

#### MORE TIES THAT BIND

Drake coach Darian DeVries spent 17 years on McDermott's staff at Creighton, and his son and star player, Tucker DeVries, was born in Omaha. Now, the duo hopes to lead the Bulldogs past the first round of the NCAA tourney for the first time since 1971.

"Being able to create my own memories as a player here would be pretty special," Tucker DeVries said.

#### ANOTHER CHANCE

The Fighting Illini will try to turn around their NCAA Tournament fortunes after a first-round loss to Arkansas last year. They have not made it through the opening weekend since 2005, when Bruce Weber took them to the national title game.

"Last year was kind of embarrassing for me," Illinois forward Coleman Hawkins said. "We just didn't compete hard. It felt like some of the guys gave up. But I feel like we have a really good team this year that's ready to face any challenge."

## WALK-ONS WORK

Duquesne is back in the NCAA Tournament for the first time in 47 years behind a coach, Keith Dambrot, who is retiring after the season and a bunch of players such as Jake DiMichele, who walked on this year and is now one of its key players.

"That's the non-science part of this business," Dambrot said of DiMichele, who hit a big shot in the Atlantic-10 title game. "He's a good student, so that's how we got him. He started as a straight-A student. He's a walk-on for now, but I wouldn't count on for long. That guy's good now. Yeah, like, he looks like a violin player. But he's tough as nails, man. Certainly we have those guys that are stars. But this guy is an undervalued guy. He wins. And we have a lot of guys like that."

## Man pleads guilty in eagle 'killing spree' on reservation to sell feathers on black market

By MATTHEW BROWN and AMY BETH HANSON Associated Press

MISSOULA, Mont. (AP) — A Washington state man accused of helping kill thousands of birds pleaded guilty in federal court on Wednesday to shooting eagles on an American Indian reservation in Montana and selling their feathers and body parts on the black market.

Travis John Branson pleaded guilty to conspiracy, wildlife trafficking and two counts of trafficking federally protected bald and golden eagles, under a plea deal reached last month with government attorneys.

The prosecution over eagles killed on the Flathead Indian Reservation underscores the persistence of a thriving illegal trade in eagle feathers despite a law enforcement crackdown in the 2010s that netted dozens of criminal indictments across the U.S. West and Midwest. Feathers and other parts of eagles are widely used by Native Americans in ceremonies and during powwows.

Court documents quote Branson saying in a January 2021 text that he was going on a "killing spree" to obtain eagle tails. Branson and a second defendant, Simon Paul, killed approximately 3,600 birds, including eagles on the Flathead reservation and elsewhere, according to a December indictment.

Federal authorities have not disclosed how most of those birds were killed, nor where else the killings happened, and the issue was not discussed during Wednesday's hearing.

Branson, of Cusick, Washington, sold an unidentified purchaser two sets of golden eagle tail feathers — highly prized among many Native American tribes — for \$650 in March 2021, according to prosecutors.

Less than two weeks later, law enforcement stopped him on the reservation and found in his vehicle the feet and feathers of a golden eagle he had shot near Polson, Montana, which is on the reservation according to court filings that included a photo of the bird's severed feet with their massive talons. The bird's carcass had been "cleaned" by the second defendant, Paul, and was found in a nearby field, prosecutors wrote.

Multiple phones seized by authorities during the stop yielded photos and text messages that described "the shooting, killing and ultimate selling of bald and golden eagles throughout the United States," prosecutors said.

Branson acknowledged in response to questions from Magistrate Judge Kathleen DeSoto that he "conspired to take and sell migratory birds," which is illegal under federal law. He also said he grew up with his co-defendant and was originally from the Polson area.

DeSoto scheduled sentencing for July 31 before U.S. District Judge Dana Christensen.

Branson was not taken into custody pending his sentencing and he made no public comments after the hearing. His attorney, Assistant Federal Defender Andrew Nelson, declined comment.

The plea deal also calls for Branson to pay restitution for damages. An amount has not been set but

# Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, March 21, 2024 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 269 ~ 30 of 87

tribal officials hope some of that money comes to the Flathead reservation, home to the Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes.

"My hope is that we can see some of those monies because our resources were damaged," said Rich Janssen, Natural Resources Department Head for the tribes. "And frankly, it was our wardens that did a lot of the legwork that brought this case forward to the federal agencies that finally got the prosecution."

Paul, of St. Ignatius, Montana, remains at large. A federal judge issued an arrest warrant for Paul in December when he did not show up for an initial court hearing.

The indictment described Branson and Paul trafficking golden and bald eagles or their parts on at least 11 occasions between December 2020 and the stop of Branson by law enforcement on March 13, 2021.

Court filings suggest the illegal activity went on much longer. They outline a conspiracy that began in 2015 and involved other people who killed eagles on the Flathead Reservation but have not been publicly identified.

In a 2016 text message quoted by prosecutors, Branson appeared to acknowledge that shipping eagles internationally was illegal, adding, "I just get em for 99 cents...price of a bullet."

In another text exchange, Branson was negotiating an eagle feather sale when he allegedly wrote, "I don't get em for free though....out hear (sic) committing felonies," according to the court filings.

He faces up to five years in prison and a \$250,000 fine at sentencing on the most serious charge, conspiracy. Under the plea deal, lawyers for the U.S. Attorney's Office in Montana said they would seek to dismiss additional trafficking charges and would recommend a sentencing guideline reduction that could lessen the severity of Branson's punishment.

The criminal case comes almost a decade after the launch of a multi-state U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service trafficking investigation — dubbed "Operation Dakota Flyer" — that led to charges against 35 defendants and the recovery of more than 150 eagles, 100 hawks and owls and 20 species of other protected birds seized or bought by authorities in undercover purchases, according to federal officials.

Federally recognized tribes can apply for permits with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to take a bald or golden eagle for religious purposes, and enrolled tribal members can apply for feathers and other bird parts from the National Eagle Repository in Colorado and non-government repositories in Oklahoma and Phoenix. There's a yearslong backlog of requests at the National Repository and researchers say the high demand is fueling the black market for eagle parts.

## Editorial Roundup: South Dakota

By The Associated Press undefined

Yankton Press & Dakotan. March 18, 2024.

Editorial: Allegation Against SD Tribes Demands Proof

Last week, Gov. Kristi Noem used a town hall meeting, which was devoted to the signing of recently passed educational bills, to lob a serious accusation at South Dakota tribal leaders regarding the proliferation of drugs on the reservations.

In the process, a frayed relationship that is integral to governance in this state became even more strained, perhaps irreparably so.

While talking about the growing challenges in Native American education, Noem said the reservations "have a tribal council or a president who focuses on a political agenda more than they care about actually helping somebody's life look better."

She then stated, without providing evidence, "We've got some tribal leaders that I believe are personally benefitting from the cartels being here, and that's why they attack me every day," South Dakota Searchlight reported.

This latest flare-up of harsh feelings began to accelerate in January when, in a speech to a joint session of the Legislature, the governor said murders were being committed on the Pine Ridge reservation and in Rapid City by cartel members. She said the drug cartels have been successful in recruiting tribal members, The Daily Beast website reported.

That reference did not sit well with Oglala Sioux Tribe President Frank Star Comes Out, who responded by barring Noem from his reservation.

That was followed by last week's accusation, which is a direct allegation of gross corruption and criminality. Suffice to say, South Dakotans need to see the evidence backing up this charge.

Her allegation has been aggressively challenged by tribal leaders. Rosebud Sioux Tribe President Scott Herman told The Daily Beast, "The Rosebud Sioux Tribe strongly condemns the governor's statements, and we demand an apology from the governor ...

"Her remarks were made from ignorance and with the intention to fuel a racially based and discriminatory narrative towards the Native people of South Dakota."

There's no doubt that reservations face serious challenges in terms of education. Besides a soaring unemployment rate, a third of Native American students in public schools fail to complete high school, while 84% are not considered ready for college once they complete their secondary education and only 7% take ACT tests. Meanwhile, Native American absenteeism has soared to 54% in public schools.

Economic and cultural issues are part of the problem, to be sure. And drugs are almost certainly an issue there, as they are everywhere.

But the step from that to claiming tribal leaders are benefitting from reservation drug issues cannot go unchecked.

If the governor has this evidence, it must be presented not only to the public but also to legal authorities.

If Noem has no evidence, if she was instead stoking racial divisions to deflect criticism, she needs to explain and to apologize. Loudly and clearly.

"If the governor is truthful about wanting to work with tribal nations on issues of education, economic development and law enforcement, she should take the time to contact tribal leaders before making racist, unsubstantiated and discriminatory attacks on tribal people," Herman said.

There is no road in between these two points, and there is no walking away from it. This matter must be addressed.

## Escaped white supremacist inmate and accomplice still at large after Idaho hospital ambush

By GENE JOHNSON and MARK THIESSEN Associated Press

Authorities are searching for a white supremacist Idaho prison inmate and an accomplice who fled after the accomplice shot and wounded corrections officers as they were transporting the inmate from a Boise hospital, according to police.

Police said Nicholas Umphenour is suspected of shooting two corrections officers during Wednesday's ambush in the ambulance bay at Saint Alphonsus Regional Medical Center. A warrant with a \$2 million bond has been issued for his arrest on two charges of aggravated battery against law enforcement and one charge of aiding and abetting an escape, police said.

He and inmate Skylar Meade drove off early Wednesday after the shooting in a gray 2020 Honda Civic with Idaho plates. It's not known where they are or where they are headed, police said Wednesday evening.

Three corrections officers were shot and wounded during the attack — two allegedly by Umphenour and one by responding police.

Officials described Meade, 31, as a white supremacist gang member. Meade was sentenced to 20 years in 2017 for shooting at a sheriff's sergeant during a high-speed chase.

The attack occurred at 2:15 a.m. as Idaho Department of Correction officers prepared to bring Meade back to prison. Department Director Josh Tewalt said during a news conference Wednesday afternoon that Meade was taken to the hospital at 9:35 p.m. Tuesday after he engaged in "self-injurious behavior" and medical staff determined he needed emergency care.

One officer shot by the suspect was in critical but stable condition, police said, while the second wounded officer had serious but non-life-threatening injuries. The third injured corrections officer also sustained non-life-threatening injuries when a responding officer — incorrectly believing the shooter was still in the

emergency room and seeing an armed person near the entrance — opened fire.

“This brazen, violent, and apparently coordinated attack on Idaho Department of Corrections personnel, to facilitate an escape of a dangerous inmate, was carried out right in front of the Emergency Department, where people come for medical help, often in the direst circumstances,” Boise Police Chief Ron Winegar said in a written statement.

Umphenour, 5-foot-11 (180 centimeters) and 160 pounds (72.5 kilograms), has brown hair and hazel eyes, police said. Detectives have confirmed that he is an associate of Meade, police said. Attempts by The Associated Press to reach Umphenour through social media were unsuccessful.

Meade, 5-foot-6 (168 centimeters) and 150 pounds (68 kilograms), has face tattoos with the numbers 1 and 11 — for A and K, the first and 11th letters of the alphabet, representing the Aryan Knights gang he affiliated with, Tewalt said. Photos released by police also showed an A and K tattooed on his abdomen.

The Aryan Knights formed in the mid-1990s in the Idaho prison system to organize criminal activity for a select group of white people in custody, according to the U.S. attorney’s office in the district of Idaho.

Meade had been held in a type of solitary confinement called administrative segregation at Idaho Maximum Security Institution in Kuna, about 12 miles (19 kilometers) south of Boise, because officials deemed him a severe security risk, Tewalt said.

Tewalt said earlier in the day that Meade had been escorted in the ambulance and at the hospital by two uniformed, unarmed officers wearing ballistic vests, tailed by armed staff. Later in the day Correction Department spokesperson Sanda Kuzeta-Cerimagic said in an email that officials had confirmed that one officer had been in the ambulance with Meade and two officers were in an escort vehicle.

“To the best of our knowledge, Meade was in restraints while being escorted in and out of the hospital,” Kuzeta-Cerimagic said. She didn’t specify whether the restraints were handcuffs, shackles or another type of restraint but said transport procedures are dependent on the custody level of the person being transported.

Authorities also did not say if other security measures were in place when Meade was leaving the hospital.

The attack came amid a wave of gun violence at hospitals and medical centers, which have struggled to adapt to the threats.

A Saint Alphonsus spokesperson said the shooting happened in the ambulance bay by its emergency department.

“All patients and staff are safe, the medical center campus is safe and secure, and has resumed normal operations. The Emergency Department itself is currently under temporary lockdown while the Boise Police Department completes the investigation,” Leticia Ramirez said Wednesday morning in a statement.

She said as an added precaution, “we have increased security on campus, all entrances to the hospital will be closed” and monitored by hospital security until further notice.

Ramirez declined to comment when asked about Meade, deferring to the police department.

## **The Latest | Gaps are narrowing in Israel-Hamas cease-fire talks, Blinken says during Mideast visit**

By The Associated Press undefined

United States Secretary of State Antony Blinken says the “gaps are narrowing” in indirect negotiations between Israel and Hamas over another cease-fire and hostage release that the U.S., Egypt and Qatar have spent several weeks trying to broker.

Blinken’s sixth visit to the region since the start of the Israel-Hamas war began in Saudi Arabia before going to Egypt on Thursday with a stop in Israel on Friday. In an interview Wednesday with the Al-Hadath network in Saudi Arabia, Blinken said the mediators worked with Israel to put a “strong proposal” on the table. He said Hamas rejected it, but came back with other demands that the mediators are working on.

“The gaps are narrowing, and I think an agreement is very much possible,” Blinken said.

The Health Ministry in Gaza raised the territory’s death toll Thursday to nearly 32,000 Palestinians. The

# Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, March 21, 2024 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 269 ~ 33 of 87

ministry doesn't differentiate between civilians and combatants in its count but says women and children make up two-thirds of the dead. A United Nations food agency warned that "famine is imminent" in northern Gaza.

Palestinian militants killed some 1,200 people in the surprise Oct. 7 attack out of Gaza that triggered the war, and abducted another 250 people. Hamas is still believed to be holding some 100 people hostage, as well as the remains of 30 others.

Currently:

- Blinken adds a stop in Israel to his latest Mideast tour as tensions rise over fighting in Gaza.
- During the Israel-Hamas war, Jews will soon celebrate Purim, one of their most joyous holidays.
- A firework is lit, a boy is shot. Israel's use of deadly force against Palestinians is scrutinized.
- Find more of AP's coverage at <https://apnews.com/hub/israel-hamas-war>.

Here's the latest:

## HEALTH MINISTRY RAISES DEATH TOLL IN GAZA TO NEARLY 32,000 PALESTINIANS

RAFAH, Gaza Strip — Gaza's Health Ministry says the overall Palestinian death toll from the Israel-Hamas war has climbed to nearly 32,000.

The ministry says 31,988 Palestinians have been killed since Hamas' Oct. 7 attack triggered the war, and another 74,188 Palestinians have been wounded. It says 65 bodies have been brought to hospitals in the past 24 hours, as well as 92 wounded people.

The ministry does not distinguish between fighters and civilians in its figures, but says women and children make up around two-thirds of those killed.

Israel's military says it has killed over 13,000 militants, without providing evidence.

The Gaza Health Ministry, which is part of the Hamas-run government, maintains detailed casualty records. Its figures from previous wars largely matched those of United Nations bodies, independent experts and even the Israeli military's tallies.

Palestinian militants killed some 1,200 people, mostly civilians, and took around 250 hostage after storming across the border into southern Israel on Oct. 7. More than 100 hostages were freed in November in exchange for the release of Palestinians imprisoned by Israel.

## ISRAELI ACTIVISTS LAUNCH CROWDFUNDING CAMPAIGN FOR SANCTIONED SETTLER'S BROTHER

JERUSALEM — Israeli activists have launched an online fundraiser that mentions the family of an extremist settler sanctioned by United States President Joe Biden's administration for alleged attacks on Palestinians and Israeli human rights activists.

The campaign appears to be an effort to skirt U.S. sanctions on violent Israeli settlers and the unauthorized settlement outposts where they live. The sanctions prevent settlers from accessing the American financial system and expose them to an asset freeze.

The fundraiser does not directly mention the sanctioned settler, Moshe Sharvit, nor his outpost, but says it is raising money for "settlement activities" in memory of his brother, who was killed in fighting in Israel's war against Hamas in the Gaza Strip. The page says the funds are to build a synagogue, educational center and facility for Torah study in the Jordan Valley, where Sharvit's sanctioned outpost is located.

Hosted on the Israeli crowdfunding site Givechak, the campaign raised over \$875,000 from more than 10,500 donors as of Wednesday. The site is the latest in a string of online fundraising campaigns that have collected the equivalent of hundreds of thousands of dollars for settlers sanctioned by the U.S. and Britain. At least two crowdfunding pages for sanctioned settlers have now been taken down.

Sharvit and Givechak did not respond to requests for comment.

## ISRAEL SAYS ITS AIRSTRIKE KILLED 2 MILITANTS IN THE WEST BANK

JERUSALEM — The Israeli military says it launched an airstrike that killed two Palestinian militants during a raid in the West Bank.

The military said in a statement early Thursday that the two posed a threat to its forces, which were operating in the built-up Nur Shams refugee camp in the West Bank town of Tulkarem.

The Palestinian Health Ministry and the Palestinian Red Crescent rescue service both said four people were killed in Nur Shams, including the two killed in the airstrike, without saying whether they were civil-

# Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, March 21, 2024 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 269 ~ 34 of 87

ians or combatants.

On Wednesday, a separate Israeli airstrike killed three Palestinian militants traveling in a car in the northern West Bank. The Islamic Jihad group claimed them as members.

Violence across the Israeli-occupied West Bank has surged since the Israel-Hamas war broke out last Oct. 7. Since then, at least 435 Palestinians have been killed in the West Bank by Israeli fire, according to Palestinian health officials.

The Palestinians seek an independent state in the West Bank, Gaza and east Jerusalem, territories Israel captured in the 1967 Mideast war.

**THE GAPS ARE NARROWING IN NEGOTIATIONS FOR A NEW ISRAEL-HAMAS CEASE-FIRE DEAL, BLINKEN SAYS**

JEDDAH, Saudi Arabia — United States Secretary of State Antony Blinken says the “gaps are narrowing” in indirect negotiations between Israel and Hamas over another cease-fire and hostage release.

The United States, Egypt and Qatar have spent several weeks trying to broker an agreement to pause the fighting in Gaza and bring about the release of more of the scores of hostages captured by Hamas in its Oct. 7 attack that started the war.

Blinken’s sixth visit to the region since the start of the war began in Saudi Arabia and will take him to Egypt on Thursday and Israel on Friday. In an interview Wednesday with the Al-Hadath network in Saudi Arabia, Blinken said “the gaps are narrowing, and I think an agreement is very much possible.” He said the mediators worked with Israel to put a “strong proposal” on the table but that Hamas rejected it. But, he said, Hamas came back with other demands that the mediators are working on.

Hamas has demanded guarantees that any cease-fire agreement will lead to an end to the war and the return of Palestinians to northern Gaza, from which hundreds of thousands fled following Israeli evacuation orders in October. Israel has thus far rejected those demands, saying it is determined to renew its offensive after any cease-fire and continue fighting until it destroys Hamas.

Hamas is still believed to be holding around 100 hostages, as well as the remains of around 30 others. It hopes to exchange them for the release of large numbers of Palestinian prisoners, including top militants.

## **Gangs target peaceful communities in new attacks on Haiti’s capital**

By PIERRE-RICHARD LUXAMA Associated Press

PORT-AU-PRINCE, Haiti (AP) — Armed gangs launched new attacks in the suburbs of Port-au-Prince on Wednesday, with heavy gunfire echoing across once-peaceful communities near the Haitian capital.

Associated Press journalists reported seeing at least five bodies in and around the suburbs, and gangs blocked the entrances to some areas.

People in the communities under fire called radio stations pleading for help from Haiti’s national police force, which remains understaffed and outmatched by the gangs. Among the communities targeted in the pre-dawn hours were Pétion-Ville, Meyotte, Diègue and Métivier.

“When I woke up to go to work, I found I could not leave because the neighborhood was in the hand of the bandits,” said Samuel Orelus. “They were about 30 men with heavy weapons. If the neighborhood had mobilized, we could have destroyed them, but they were heavily armed, and there was nothing we could do.”

By Wednesday afternoon, another victim had been reported: a police officer killed in broad daylight in a Port-au-Prince neighborhood known as Delmas 72, according to the SYNAPOHA police union.

As the attacks continued, the U.S. State Department announced Wednesday that it had completed its first evacuation of American citizens from Port-au-Prince. More than 15 Americans were airlifted to neighboring Santo Domingo, the capital of the Dominican Republic.

More than 30 U.S. citizens will be able to leave Port-au-Prince daily aboard the U.S. government-organized helicopter flights, the agency said.

“We will continue to monitor demand from U.S. citizens for assistance in departing Haiti on a real-time

# Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, March 21, 2024 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 269 ~ 35 of 87

basis," the department said.

On Sunday, the agency evacuated more than 30 U.S. citizens from the coastal city of Cap-Haitien in northern Haiti to Miami International Airport.

"We hope that conditions will allow a return of commercial means for people to travel from Haiti soon. We and the international community and the Haitian authorities are working for that to become a reality," the State Department said.

Also on Wednesday, a plane chartered by the Florida Department of Emergency Management evacuated 14 Florida residents, including children, out of Haiti, said Kevin Guthrie, executive director of the state agency, at an airport in Sanford, Florida where the passengers were expected to land.

More than 300 Floridians are in Haiti, and the Florida-sponsored operation was working on getting them out on future flights despite bureaucratic obstacles from the U.S. government and safety threats in Haiti, Guthrie said at a news conference, where he was accompanied by Florida Gov. Ron DeSantis.

"We understand there are people really in danger right now who are fellow Floridians," DeSantis said.

Wednesday's attacks in parts of Port-au-Prince came two days after gangs went on a rampage through the upscale neighborhoods of Laboule and Thomassin in Pétion-Ville, with at least a dozen people killed.

The violence forced the closure of banks, schools and businesses across Pétion-Ville, which until now had been largely spared from the attacks that gangs launched on Feb. 29.

Gunmen have set fire to police stations, forced the closure of Haiti's main international airport and stormed the country's two biggest prisons, releasing more than 4,000 inmates.

Scores of people have been killed and some 17,000 others have been left homeless amid the violence.

Meanwhile, Haitians await the possibility of new leadership as Caribbean officials rush to help form a transitional presidential council that will be responsible for appointing an interim prime minister and a council of ministers.

A top official with regional trade bloc Caricom who was not authorized to speak to the media told The Associated Press late Wednesday that the Pitit Desalin party of Jean-Charles Moïse accepted to be a voting member of the council after initially rejecting a seat. The party was the last remaining holdout, meaning that the nine-member council is now fully formed, although its members have not been disclosed publicly.

Moïse recently formed an alliance with Guy Philippe, a former rebel leader who helped overthrow former President Jean-Bertrand Aristide and who was repatriated to Haiti in November after serving time in a U.S. prison after he pleaded guilty to money laundering.

Prime Minister Ariel Henry, who was locked out of Haiti when the airports closed, has said he will resign once the council is formed.

## **EU leaders gather with Ukraine ammunition production and Gaza aid at the top of their agenda**

BRUSSELS (AP) — European Union leaders gathered Thursday to consider new ways to help boost arms and ammunition production for Ukraine and to discuss the war in Gaza amid deep concern about Israeli plans to launch a ground offensive in the city of Rafah.

Ukraine's munition stocks are desperately low, and Russia has more and better-armed troops. There is also a growing awareness that the EU must provide for its own security, with election campaigning in the U.S. raising questions about Washington's commitment to its allies.

Ahead of the summit in Brussels, EU Council President Charles Michel said the Europeans "face a pivotal moment. Urgency, intensity and unwavering determination are imperative." New plans are on the table, notably to use the profits from frozen Russian assets to buy Ukraine arms and ammunition.

U.N. Secretary-General Antonio Guterres will join the leaders at the start of their two-day meeting, in part to encourage some member countries to resume funding for the U.N. Palestinian relief agency, the main provider of aid in Gaza.

The agency, known as UNRWA, is reeling from allegations that 12 of its 13,000 Gaza staff members participated in the Oct. 7 Hamas attacks in southern Israel. The agency fired the employees, but more

than a dozen countries suspended funding worth about \$450 million, almost half its budget for 2024.

Early this month, the European Commission said it would pay 50 million euros (\$54 million) to the agency after it agreed to allow EU-appointed experts to audit the way it screens staff to identify extremists. Germany, notably, has not resumed funding.

The Israel-Hamas war has driven 80% of Gaza's population of 2.3 million Palestinians from their homes, and U.N. officials say a quarter of the population is starving. The agency is the main supplier of food, water and shelter but is on the brink of financial collapse.

Concern is mounting about an imminent Israeli ground offensive against Hamas in Rafah, Gaza's southernmost city near the border with Egypt. It's a plan that has raised global alarm because of the potential for harm to the hundreds of thousands of civilians sheltering there.

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has said that Israel can't achieve its goal of "total victory" against Hamas without going into Rafah.

In a draft of their summit statement, seen by The Associated Press, the leaders are set to underline that such an operation "would worsen the already catastrophic humanitarian situation and prevent the urgently needed provision of basic services and humanitarian assistance."

The leaders are also expected to give a greenlight to Bosnia to open membership talks once certain conditions are met.

## **Russia fires 31 missiles at Kyiv in the first attack in 44 days, and 13 people are hurt**

By HANNA ARHIROVA Associated Press

KYIV, Ukraine (AP) — Russia fired 31 ballistic and cruise missiles at Kyiv before dawn Thursday in the first attack on the Ukrainian capital in 44 days, officials said. Air defenses shot down all the incoming missiles, though 13 people including a child were injured by falling wreckage, they said.

Residents of Kyiv were woken up by loud explosions around 5 a.m. as the missiles arrived at roughly the same time from different directions, said Serhii Popko, head of the Kyiv City Administration.

Ukraine's air force said Russia launched two ballistic missiles and 29 cruise missiles against the capital.

Kyiv has better air defenses than most regions of the large country. The missile interception rate is frequently high, rendering Russian attacks on the capital significantly less successful than during the early days of the war.

An 11-year-old girl and a 38-year-old man were hospitalized in Kyiv, the city administration said. Eight other people sustained light injuries, according to Mayor Vitali Klitschko.

Ukraine's Emergency Service said around 80 people were evacuated from their homes.

Falling wreckage from the intercepted missiles set fire to at least one apartment building, burned parked cars and left craters in streets and a small park. Some streets were littered with debris, including glass from shattered windows.

The attack came after repeated Ukraine aerial attacks in recent days on Russia's Belgorod region near the border with Ukraine. On Thursday, five people were injured in the latest attack on the Belgorod region, which damaged homes and the city sports stadium, Gov. Vyacheslav Gladkov said. Russia's Ministry of Defense said it stopped 10 rockets over the region.

Russian President Vladimir Putin had threatened Wednesday to "respond in kind" to the attacks.

At an event in the Kremlin, Putin said Russia "can respond in the same way regarding civilian infrastructure and all other objects of this kind that the enemy attacks. We have our own views on this matter and our own plans. We will follow what we have outlined."

Ukraine President Volodymyr Zelenskyy urged the country's Western partners to send more air defense systems so they can be distributed across the country where missile strikes have become more common.

"Every day, every night such ... terror happens," he said on Telegram after Thursday's attack on Kyiv. "World unity is capable to stop it by helping us with more air defense systems."

# Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, March 21, 2024 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 269 ~ 37 of 87

Zelenskyy said Russia doesn't have missiles that can evade U.S.-made Patriots and other advanced air defense weapons.

Russia has largely turned its attention to other Ukrainian cities, targeting them with drones and ballistic missiles.

On Wednesday, Russian ballistic missiles killed five people and injured nine in the eastern Kharkiv region, and strike on southern Odesa last week killed 21.

## Senegal votes Sunday in a presidential election that has fired up political tensions

By JESSICA DONATI Associated Press

DAKAR, Senegal (AP) — Senegal votes Sunday in a tightly contested presidential election that has fired up political tensions and tested one of West Africa's most stable democracies.

The election will take place after much uncertainty following President Macky Sall's unsuccessful effort to delay the vote until the end of the year, sparking violent protests.

In the latest turn of events leading up to Sunday's vote, opposition leader Ousmane Sonko was released from prison last week, triggering jubilant celebrations on the streets of Dakar and renewed excitement about the contest.

Sunday's election is set to be Senegal's fourth democratic transfer of power since it gained independence from France in 1960. The country is viewed as a pillar of stability in a region that has seen dozens of coups and attempted coups in recent years.

Alioune Tine, founder of Afrikajom, a Senegalese think tank, told the Associated Press that Sunday's election had set a grim record in the country's democratic history, with rights groups accusing Sall's government of repressing the media, civil society and the opposition.

"It was the longest and most violent presidential election process, with the most deaths, injuries and political detainees," said Tine.

Human Rights Watch said nearly 1,000 opposition members and activists have been arrested across the country in the last three years. But in a recent interview with the AP, Sall denied that he's trying to hold on to power.

There are 19 candidates in the race, the highest number in Senegal's history. These include a former prime minister, a close ally of Sonko — who was barred from running — and a former mayor of Dakar. A runoff between leading candidates is widely expected.

Despite the violent upheavals in recent months, analysts say unemployment is the chief concern for a majority of young Senegalese. Around half of Senegal's population of 17 million are under 18, according to Afrobarometer, an independent survey research group.

"The big question right now for the Senegalese election is how are we going to break out of poverty," said Marième Wone Ly, a former Senegalese political party leader. "We can't see the end of the tunnel. People don't see it."

About a third of Senegalese live in poverty, World Bank data shows. Thousands have fled towards the West in search of economic opportunity, undertaking risky and often deadly journeys.

Analysts say Amadou Ba, a former prime minister, and Bassirou Diomaye Faye, who is backed by Sonko, are likely to emerge among the front-runners. Faye was also freed from prison last week, in time to spend the final days of the run-up to Sunday's vote on the campaign trail.

Sonko was disqualified from the ballot in January because of a prior conviction for defamation, Senegal's highest election authority said at the time. His supporters maintain his legal troubles are part of a government effort to derail his candidacy.

The popular opposition leader has faced a slew of legal troubles that started when he was accused of rape in 2021. He was acquitted of the charge but was convicted of corrupting youth and sentenced to two years in prison last summer, which ignited deadly protests across Senegal.

Senegal was gripped by deadly unrest last summer when protesters took to the streets over concerns

that Sall would seek a third term in office. Constitutional reforms prohibit a president from serving more than two consecutive terms as decided by a 2016 referendum.

Sall eventually ruled out a third term.

Other contenders for top spots in the race are Idrissa Seck, who has run in previous races and served as prime minister some 20 years ago before being sacked and briefly jailed over corruption allegations, and Khalifa Sall, a former mayor of Dakar and longtime opposition figure. Sall and the president are not related.

Anta Babacar Ngom, the first woman to run for president in years, is the only female presidential candidate in the race, but few expect her to gain a significant share of the vote.

Sall's surprise move to release Sonko and Faye has helped to defuse tensions that had escalated in recent months. Election observers say Sunday's vote is more likely to be peaceful.

"Loosening the knot has tempered things a little, and has brought a bit of calm to the public arena," said Rokhiatou Gassama, a civil society election observer. "According to my analysis, we're going to have a peaceful election."

## Ohtani's interpreter is fired by Dodgers after allegations of 'massive theft' from Japanese star

By STEPHEN WADE, RONALD BLUM AND TONG-HYUNG KIM Associated Press

SEOUL, South Korea. (AP) — Shohei Ohtani's interpreter and close friend has been fired by the Los Angeles Dodgers following allegations of illegal gambling and theft from the Japanese baseball star.

Interpreter Ipppei Mizuhara, 39, was let go from the team Wednesday following reports from the Los Angeles Times and ESPN about his alleged ties to an illegal bookmaker. The team is in Seoul, South Korea, this week as Ohtani makes his Dodgers debut, and Mizuhara was in Los Angeles' dugout during their season-opening win.

Mizuhara was seen regularly chatting with Ohtani, who was the Dodgers' designated hitter, seemingly discussing his at-bats over a tablet computer.

"In the course of responding to recent media inquiries, we discovered that Shohei has been the victim of a massive theft and we are turning the matter over to the authorities," law firm Berk Brettler LLP said in a statement Wednesday.

Sports gambling is illegal in California, even as 38 states and the District of Columbia allow some form of it.

Mizuhara is a familiar face to baseball fans as Ohtani's constant companion, interpreting for him with the media and at other appearances since Ohtani came to the U.S. in 2017. He even served as Ohtani's catcher during the Home Run Derby at the 2021 All-Star Game. When Ohtani left the Los Angeles Angels to sign a \$700 million, 10-year contract with the Dodgers in December, the club also hired Mizuhara.

The Dodgers said in a statement they were "aware of media reports and are gathering information.

"The team can confirm that interpreter Ipppei Mizuhara has been terminated," the statement said. "The team has no further comment at this time."

Dodgers manager Dave Roberts, speaking before Thursday's final game in the series with the San Diego Padres, said there was no plan to have Ohtani sit out.

"That was not considered," Roberts said. "We're here to play baseball. Yesterday we did a good job of focusing on the baseball game and we'll do the same thing today."

Roberts confirmed that Mizuhara had a meeting with the team on Wednesday but declined to elaborate. He said he did not know Mizuhara's whereabouts and said a different interpreter would be used.

"Anything with that meeting, I can't comment," he said, adding that "Shohei's ready. I know that he's preparing."

Security at the Gocheok Sky Dome was stepped up Thursday with police and dogs checking the hallways hours before the game started.

The Ohtani-interpreter news comes a day after a reported bomb threat against Ohtani. Police said they found no explosives.

# Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, March 21, 2024 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 269 ~ 39 of 87

On Tuesday, Mizuhara told ESPN that his bets were on international soccer, the NBA, the NFL and college football. MLB rules prohibit players and team employees from wagering — even legally — on baseball and also ban betting on other sports with illegal or offshore bookmakers.

“I never bet on baseball,” Mizuhara told ESPN. “That’s 100%. I knew that rule ... We have a meeting about that in spring training.”

The Associated Press could not immediately reach Mizuhara for comment Wednesday.

Mizuhara was born in Japan and moved to the Los Angeles area in 1991 so his father could work as a chef. He attended Diamond Bar High School in eastern Los Angeles County and graduated from the University of California, Riverside, in 2007.

After college, Mizuhara was hired by the Boston Red Sox as an interpreter for Japanese pitcher Hideki Okajima. In 2013, he returned to Japan to translate for English-speaking players on the Hokkaido Nippon-Ham Fighters. That’s where he first met Ohtani, who joined the team that same year.

After Ohtani signed with the Angels in 2017, the team hired Mizuhara to work as his personal interpreter. ESPN said Mizuhara told the outlet this week he has been paid between \$300,000 and \$500,000 annually.

ESPN said it spoke to Mizuhara on Tuesday night, at which point the interpreter said Ohtani had paid his gambling debts at Mizuhara’s request. After the statement from Ohtani’s attorneys saying the player was a victim of theft, ESPN says Mizuhara changed his story Wednesday and claimed Ohtani had no knowledge of the gambling debts and had not transferred any money to bookmakers.

Mizuhara said he incurred more than \$1 million in debt by the end of 2022 and his losses increased from there.

“I’m terrible (at gambling). Never going to do it again. Never won any money,” Mizuhara said. “I mean, I dug myself a hole and it kept on getting bigger, and it meant I had to bet bigger to get out of it and just kept on losing. It’s like a snowball effect.”

It would be the biggest gambling scandal for baseball since Pete Rose agreed to a lifetime ban in 1989 after an investigation for MLB by lawyer John Dowd found Rose placed numerous bets on the Cincinnati Reds to win from 1985-87 while playing for and managing the team.

The MLB gambling policy, posted in every locker room, prohibits players and team employees from wagering — even legally — on baseball and also bans betting on other sports with illegal or offshore bookmakers. Betting on baseball is punishable with a one-year ban from the sport. The penalty for betting on other sports illegally is at the commissioner’s discretion.

Ohtani’s stardom has spread worldwide, even as the two-way player has remained largely media-shy. The news of his recent marriage to Mamiko Tanaka shocked fans from Japan to the U.S. While he underwent surgery on his right elbow last September and will not pitch this season, he will be used as a designated hitter and there is a possibility he could play in the field. He went 2 for 5 with an RBI in his first game, the season opener against the San Diego Padres in Seoul.

## Nearly 8 in 10 AAPI adults in US think abortion should be legal, AP-NORC poll finds

By GRAHAM LEE BREWER and AMELIA THOMSON-DEVEAUX Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — With abortion rights poised to be one of the major issues in the 2024 election, a new poll shows that Asian Americans, Native Hawaiians and Pacific Islanders in the United States are highly supportive of legal abortion, even in situations where the pregnant person wants an abortion for any reason.

The poll from AAPI Data and The Associated Press-NORC Center for Public Affairs Research finds that nearly 8 in 10 Asian Americans, Native Hawaiians and Pacific Islanders think abortion should be legal in all or most cases. They’re also supportive of federal government action to preserve abortion rights: Three-quarters of AAPI adults say Congress should pass a law guaranteeing access to legal abortions nationwide.

By comparison, an AP-NORC poll conducted last June found that 64% of U.S. adults think abortion should be legal in all or most cases, and 6 in 10 U.S. adults overall say Congress should pass a law guaranteeing

# Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, March 21, 2024 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 269 ~ 40 of 87

access.

AAPI adults are more likely than Americans overall to identify as Democrats, which may partially explain why their levels of support for legal abortion are higher than among the general population. But even among Democrats, AAPI adults are more supportive of legal abortion later in pregnancy. AAPI Democrats are especially likely to support legal abortion without any limits — more than half of this group say abortion should be legal in all cases, compared to 40% of Democrats overall.

AAPI Republicans are also more likely than Republicans overall to support a law guaranteeing access to legal abortion nationwide. More than half (57%) of AAPI Republicans think abortion should be legal in at least some cases, compared to 38% of Republicans in general. About half (51%) of AAPI Republicans also think Congress should pass a law guaranteeing access to legal abortion nationwide, while only 32% of Republicans overall want this to happen.

Although AAPI voters are a fast-growing demographic with a particularly large presence in states like California, Texas and New York, their attitudes can often not be analyzed in other surveys because of small sample sizes, among other issues. This survey is part of an ongoing project focusing on AAPI Americans' views.

High turnout in areas with large AAPI communities could help Democrats in competitive House districts, and a broader conversation about whether nonwhite voters are shifting to the right may lead to more courting of AAPI voters. The survey's findings suggest that abortion could be a strong issue for Democratic candidates who are looking to reach AAPI communities, and a challenge for Republicans.

"It saddens me how politics got involved in this, and they really shouldn't have," said Debra Nanez, a 72-year-old retired nurse in Tucson, Arizona, and an Independent voter. Nanez identifies as Asian, Native American and Hispanic. "It's a woman's body. How can you tell us what we can do with our bodies, what we can keep and what we cannot keep? It's ridiculous."

While an AP-NORC poll conducted in October 2022 found that more than 4 in 10 Americans overall trust Democrats to do a better job of handling the issue of abortion, while only 2 in 10 have more trust in Republicans, the poll released Thursday shows that the trust gap between the parties is wider for AAPI adults. Fifty-five percent of AAPI adults trust Democrats on abortion policy, while only 12% trust Republicans.

More than half of AAPI adults were born outside the U.S., according to the survey. For many of those immigrants and their first-generation American children, abortion isn't just viewed as health care — it can also be seen as a right that was not afforded to them in their countries of origin, said Varun Nikore, executive director of AAPI Victory Alliance, a progressive political advocacy organization.

"I think it has to do with some sort of home country attitudes that are sort of pervasive, but also the strong feeling we've had rights and we've had access to health care, and now we don't want to lose something that we had. And it could be that we also came to this country to have better access to health care than we did before," Nikore said.

Nearly 6 in 10 AAPI adults don't want Congress to pass a law preserving states' ability to set their own laws allowing or restricting abortion, and only 14% support the passage of a law banning access to abortions nationwide.

Joie Meyer, 24, is a health care consultant in Florida, where abortions are prohibited after 15 weeks of pregnancy. She said that given that other nearby states like Alabama and Georgia have even more restrictive abortion laws, she would have to travel far to receive the procedure.

"I'm 24 and maybe some people my age are having children, but if I were to get in that position to be pregnant, I don't think I would feel ready," she said. "So, that would be something that I would have to think about."

Meyer, who was born in China but has lived in the U.S. since an infant, has made plans with a friend in California in case she does need an abortion. Flying across the country might be more time-consuming than driving to the nearest state that provides abortion, but she said she wants to know that she'll be with someone who can take care of her during the recovery.

"Even if there's a closer state, would I want to do that alone and have to really navigate that physical

and emotional pain alone? Not really," Meyer said.

## Why Israel is so determined to launch an offensive in Rafah

JERUSALEM (AP) — Israel is determined to launch a ground offensive against Hamas in Rafah, Gaza's southernmost city, a plan that has raised global alarm because of the potential for harm to the hundreds of thousands of civilians sheltering there.

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu says Israel can't achieve its goal of "total victory" against Hamas without going into Rafah.

Israel has approved military plans for its offensive. But with 1.4 million Palestinians jammed into the city, Israel's allies, including the U.S., have demanded greater care for civilians in its anticipated incursion.

Most of those Palestinians have been displaced by fighting in other parts of Gaza and are living in densely packed tent camps, overflowing U.N.-run shelters or packed apartments.

Netanyahu is sending a delegation to Washington to present the administration with its plans.

### WHY RAFAH IS SO CRITICAL

Since Israel declared war in response to Hamas' deadly cross-border attack on Oct. 7, Netanyahu has said a central goal is to destroy the Islamic group's military capabilities.

Israel says Rafah is Hamas' last major stronghold in the Gaza Strip, after operations elsewhere dismantled 18 out of the militant group's 24 battalions, according to the military. But even in northern Gaza, the first target of the offensive, Hamas has regrouped in some areas and continued to launch attacks.

Israel says Hamas has four battalions in Rafah and that it must send ground forces to topple them. Some senior militants could also be hiding in the city.

### WHY THERE IS SO MUCH OPPOSITION TO ISRAEL'S PLAN

The U.S. has urged Israel not to carry out the operation without a "credible" plan to evacuate civilians. Egypt, a strategic partner of Israel's, has said that any move to push Palestinians into Egypt would threaten its four-decade-old peace agreement with Israel.

In a phone call with Netanyahu this week, President Joe Biden told the Israeli leader not to carry out a Rafah operation, said the White House's national security adviser, Jake Sullivan. He said the U.S. was seeking "an alternative approach" that did not involve a ground invasion.

Secretary of State Antony Blinken, who is on his sixth visit to the region since the war began, reiterated those concerns in an interview with Al-Hadath TV in Saudi Arabia on Wednesday.

"President Biden has been very clear that we cannot support a major ground operation, military operation in Rafah," Blinken said. He said there is no effective way of moving 1.4 million people to safety and that those who stay behind "would be in terrible jeopardy."

### ISRAEL DOESN'T APPEAR CLOSE TO SENDING IN TROOPS

Netanyahu said he was sending a delegation to Washington "out of respect" for Biden. But in a statement Wednesday, he said he had told Biden that Israel "cannot complete the victory" without entering Rafah.

Despite the tough talk, Israel doesn't appear close to sending troops into Rafah. This may be connected to ongoing attempts to broker a temporary cease-fire. Qatari mediators say those talks would be set back by a Rafah invasion.

There are also logistical concerns.

Israel's military says it plans to direct the civilians to "humanitarian islands" in central Gaza ahead of the planned offensive. Netanyahu said Wednesday evacuation plans had not yet been approved.

## One Tech Tip: How to spot AI-generated deepfake images

By KELVIN CHAN and ALI SWENSON Associated Press

LONDON (AP) — AI fakery is quickly becoming one of the biggest problems confronting us online. Deceptive pictures, videos and audio are proliferating as a result of the rise and misuse of generative artificial intelligence tools.

# Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, March 21, 2024 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 269 ~ 42 of 87

With AI deepfakes cropping up almost every day, depicting everyone from Taylor Swift to Donald Trump, it's getting harder to tell what's real from what's not. Video and image generators like DALL-E, Midjourney and OpenAI's Sora make it easy for people without any technical skills to create deepfakes — just type a request and the system spits it out.

These fake images might seem harmless. But they can be used to carry out scams and identity theft or propaganda and election manipulation.

Here is how to avoid being duped by deepfakes:

## HOW TO SPOT A DEEPPFAKE

In the early days of deepfakes, the technology was far from perfect and often left telltale signs of manipulation. Fact-checkers have pointed out images with obvious errors, like hands with six fingers or eyeglasses that have differently shaped lenses.

But as AI has improved, it has become a lot harder. Some widely shared advice — such as looking for unnatural blinking patterns among people in deepfake videos — no longer holds, said Henry Ajder, founder of consulting firm Latent Space Advisory and a leading expert in generative AI.

Still, there are some things to look for, he said.

A lot of AI deepfake photos, especially of people, have an electronic sheen to them, "an aesthetic sort of smoothing effect" that leaves skin "looking incredibly polished," Ajder said.

He warned, however, that creative prompting can sometimes eliminate this and many other signs of AI manipulation.

Check the consistency of shadows and lighting. Often the subject is in clear focus and appears convincingly lifelike but elements in the backdrop might not be so realistic or polished.

## LOOK AT THE FACES

Face-swapping is one of the most common deepfake methods. Experts advise looking closely at the edges of the face. Does the facial skin tone match the rest of the head or the body? Are the edges of the face sharp or blurry?

If you suspect video of a person speaking has been doctored, look at their mouth. Do their lip movements match the audio perfectly?

Ajder suggests looking at the teeth. Are they clear, or are they blurry and somehow not consistent with how they look in real life?

Cybersecurity company Norton says algorithms might not be sophisticated enough yet to generate individual teeth, so a lack of outlines for individual teeth could be a clue.

## THINK ABOUT THE BIGGER PICTURE

Sometimes the context matters. Take a beat to consider whether what you're seeing is plausible.

The Poynter journalism website advises that if you see a public figure doing something that seems "exaggerated, unrealistic or not in character," it could be a deepfake.

For example, would the pope really be wearing a luxury puffer jacket, as depicted by a notorious fake photo? If he did, wouldn't there be additional photos or videos published by legitimate sources?

## USING AI TO FIND THE FAKES

Another approach is to use AI to fight AI.

Microsoft has developed an authenticator tool that can analyze photos or videos to give a confidence score on whether it's been manipulated. Chipmaker Intel's FakeCatcher uses algorithms to analyze an image's pixels to determine if it's real or fake.

There are tools online that promise to sniff out fakes if you upload a file or paste a link to the suspicious material. But some, like Microsoft's authenticator, are only available to selected partners and not the public. That's because researchers don't want to tip off bad actors and give them a bigger edge in the deepfake arms race.

Open access to detection tools could also give people the impression they are "godlike technologies that can outsource the critical thinking for us" when instead we need to be aware of their limitations, Ajder said.

## THE HURDLES TO FINDING FAKES

All this being said, artificial intelligence has been advancing with breakneck speed and AI models are

being trained on internet data to produce increasingly higher-quality content with fewer flaws.

That means there's no guarantee this advice will still be valid even a year from now.

Experts say it might even be dangerous to put the burden on ordinary people to become digital Sherlock Holmes because it could give them a false sense of confidence as it becomes increasingly difficult, even for trained eyes, to spot deepfakes.

## **A firework is lit, a boy is shot. Israel's use of deadly force against Palestinians is scrutinized**

By JACK JEFFERY Associated Press

JERUSALEM (AP) — A 12-year-old boy in east Jerusalem lights the fuse of a long firework and hoists it in the air. Then, just before it explodes and illuminates the night sky with a burst of red, he is shot in the chest by Israeli police and falls to the ground.

A clip of Rami Halhouli's final moments last week has been circulating on social media for days. Human rights activists say it shines a light on the surge of Palestinians — including dozens of children — who have been killed without justification by Israeli forces since Oct. 7.

Halhouli's family says the boy was struck by a bullet fired from the direction of an Israeli police watchtower looking over the Shuafat refugee camp. Halhouli, his brother and four friends, the family says, were lighting fireworks to celebrate the end of another day of Ramadan, the Muslim holy month marked by dawn-to-dusk fasting.

Israeli police say the officer who fired the shot acted appropriately, citing regulations that permit shooting someone who is aiming a firework at another person in a life-threatening way. The Israeli government says the shooting is under investigation.

Ali Halhouli, the boy's father, was at home when he heard the gunshot — and then his son crying out for his mother. "When I rushed out of here I saw him lying on his face," he said.

Violence across east Jerusalem and the occupied West Bank has spiked since Oct. 7, when Hamas militants staged a surprise attack on southern Israel and sparked a brutal war in the Gaza Strip.

At least 435 Palestinians from east Jerusalem and the West Bank have been killed by Israeli fire since then, according to the Palestinian Health Ministry. Many have been shot dead in armed clashes, others for throwing stones at troops. Some appear to have posed no apparent threat.

Around 100 of these 435 fatalities have been children under 18, according to the Israeli human rights group B'Tselem. In 60 of these cases, the group says there seems to have been no justification for the use of lethal force. These include cases where teens or younger children were hurling rocks or participating in protests.

"It's clear there is a trigger-happy attitude among Israeli soldiers and border-police officers, and it affects Palestinian children too," said Sarit Michaeli, a B'Tselem spokeswoman.

"Regarding the specific case in Shuafat refugee camp," she said, "a young child was not posing any threat to a heavily armed border police officer."

Halhouli, the youngest of seven siblings, was shot at around 8 p.m. last Tuesday outside his home on a garbage-strewn alleyway, his father said. He was roughly 60 meters (200 feet) from the Israeli police watchtower; video of the incident shows Halhouli pointing the firework in the rough direction of the watchtower, but not directly at it.

The police acknowledged the fatal shooting that evening, saying its forces returned fire after fireworks were launched at the watchtower. Throughout the night last Monday and Tuesday, Palestinian protesters from the camp had thrown Molotov cocktails and launched fireworks at Israeli forces, police said.

Standing at the spot where the shooting took place, Ibrahim Halhouli, a 16-year-old relative of the slain boy, said they now all steer clear of the alleyway.

"We are scared," he said, looking up at the watchtower.

Shuafat, home to some 60,000 Palestinians, has long been a flashpoint.

It is a poor, densely packed neighborhood that lacks municipal services despite falling within Jerusalem's

# Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, March 21, 2024 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 269 ~ 44 of 87

city borders. It is the only Palestinian refugee camp in Jerusalem, and a number of militants involved in attacks on Israelis have come from the area. It is segmented from the rest of Jerusalem by a heavily manned checkpoint and Israeli forces regularly raid the camp to arrest suspected militants.

After the shooting, Ali Halhouli said his other sons took the body to a medical center in Shuafat where staff pronounced him dead. In desperation, the family found an ambulance to transport him to Hadassah hospital, one of Israel's largest medical facilities, where doctors said the bullet had struck his heart.

"The boy is dead, you brought him dead," Ali Halhouli said, recounting one of the doctor's words. Soon after, a police officer arrived at the ward and said they needed to transfer the body to an Israeli forensic institute for an autopsy.

Ali Halhouli, 61, said he was left in limbo for days, contacted three times by different police officers, each of whom told him his son's corpse would soon be returned.

On one occasion he was told he must keep the funeral to fewer than 40 people or face a fine. Funerals of slain Palestinians often escalate into violent protests. The body was eventually handed back to the family overnight Sunday and buried the next morning, he said.

Makhash, the Israeli Justice Ministry body that investigates police conduct, told the AP that the investigation into the officer who shot the boy is ongoing.

On-duty police officers and soldiers are rarely prosecuted for killing Palestinians. According to Israeli legal rights group Yesh Din, a police officer was last charged of murder in 2021 after shooting dead an unarmed autistic Palestinian in Jerusalem's Old City. The officer was later acquitted in 2023, it said.

The day after Rami Halhouli died, a provocative, high-ranking Israeli official who oversees the police said the officer who shot him should be commended, not investigated. Itamar Ben Gvir, the ultra-nationalist minister for national security, also called the boy a terrorist, without offering any evidence.

"A 12-year-old boy a terrorist?" Ali Halhouli said, clearly hurt by the remark.

## Tristan da Silva scores 20 points as Colorado outlasts Boise State 60-53 to cap the First Four

By MITCH STACY AP Sports Writer

DAYTON, Ohio (AP) — Tristan da Silva scored 20 points and Colorado won its first NCAA Tournament game in three years, wrapping up the First Four with a sloppy 60-53 win over Boise State on Wednesday night.

A layup by Eddie Lampkin Jr. and a pair of foul shots from J'Vonne Hadley capped an 11-0 run that gave the Buffaloes a 56-49 lead with 24 seconds left in what had been a back-and-forth game. Boise State had to start fouling and Colorado didn't miss from the line — and that sealed it.

Colorado outscored Boise State 15-4 over the last 4 1/2 minutes.

KJ Simpson had 19 points and 11 rebounds for the Buffaloes (25-10), who advanced as a No. 10 seed to face seventh-seeded Florida in Indianapolis on Friday.

"KJ was really positive, which I thought was great because you need that positivity in the NCAA Tournament when you go down four late," Colorado coach Tad Boyle said. "And we got five straight stops in a row. Our defense just kind of cranked up a notch."

Simpson, Colorado's top scorer all season, was 6 for 18 from the floor and made all six of his foul shots.

"Obviously, it wasn't my best night shooting the ball, and I had a lot of kind of bad shots tonight," Simpson said. "So that was kind of frustrating. But I (was) understanding that my team needed me out there to do other things."

Chibuzo Agbo had 17 points for Boise State (23-11), who dropped to 0-10 all-time in the NCAA Tournament.

"The guys battled and battled, even when the shots weren't dropping," Boise State coach Leon Rice said. "We competed on the glass, we guarded really well. And it was two really good defensive teams."

But the start was lethargic for both teams, who had combined for just 25 points at the 10-minute mark of the first half. Boise State went up by six late in the half, but Colorado cut it to 26-24 at the break.

Boise State was 1 for 10 from 3-point range in the first half, while the Buffs were just 1 of 8 from long range.

## COLD SHOOTERS

Colorado shot 44%, but Boise State finished at just 34%. That followed a 29% effort in a 76-66 loss to New Mexico in a Mountain West Tournament quarterfinal on March 14. The Broncos were just 2 for 18 from 3-point range.

"In the first half, we were right there," Boise State guard Max Rice said. "Then we just had so many balls that rattled in and out."

Added Rice: "This is a really, really tough draw and then a tough, tough, tough loss that we'll have trouble with for the rest of our lives. That's the way it is."

## GOOD DAYTON VIBES

The people of the state of Colorado will have reason to remember this year's First Four. Not only did the Buffs win on Wednesday, Colorado State blew out Virginia 67-42 in the late game Tuesday night. Colorado State also moved on as a 10th seed and play No. 7 seed Texas in Charlotte on Thursday.

## UP NEXT

Colorado will board the bus for an easy two-hour ride west on Interstate 70 to Indianapolis, where they'll play Florida at 4:30 p.m. ET.

## Homelessness, affordable-housing shortage spark resurgence of single-room 'micro-apartments'

By HALLIE GOLDEN and CLAIRE RUSH Associated Press

SEATTLE (AP) — Every part of Barbara Peraza-Garcia and her family's single-room apartment in Seattle has a double or even triple purpose.

The 180-square-foot (17-square-meter) room is filled with an air mattress where she, her partner and their children, ages 2 and 4, sleep. It's also where they play or watch TV. At mealtimes, it becomes their dining room.

It's a tight squeeze for the family of asylum seekers from Venezuela. But at \$900 a month — more than \$550 less than the average studio in Seattle — the micro-apartment with a bare-bones bathroom and shared kitchen was just within their budget and gave them a quick exit from their previous arrangement sleeping on the floor of a church.

"It's warm. We can cook ourselves. We have a private bathroom. It's quiet," said Peraza-Garcia, whose family came to the U.S. to escape crime in Venezuela and so she could access vital medication to combat cysts on her kidney. "We can be here as a family now."

Boarding houses that rented single rooms to low-income, blue-collar or temporary workers were prevalent across the U.S. in the early 1900s. Known as single room occupancy units, or SROs, they started to disappear in the postwar years amid urban renewal efforts and a focus on suburban single-family housing.

Now the concept is reappearing — with the trendy name of "micro-apartment" and aimed at a much broader array of residents — as cities buffeted by surging homelessness struggle to make housing more affordable.

"If you're a single person and you want a low-cost place to live, that's as cheap as you're going to get without trying to find a subsidized apartment," said Dan Bertolet, senior director of housing and urbanism for the non-profit research center Sightline Institute.

The Pacific Northwest is a leader in the resurgence of this form of affordable housing. Oregon last year passed a bill opening the door for micro-apartments and Washington state lawmakers this year did the same, starting to clear red tape that for years has limited construction of the tiny units, which are about a third the size of an average studio apartment.

The Washington bill, which was signed this week by Democratic Gov. Jay Inslee after receiving nearly unanimous support in the Legislature, would require most cities to allow micro-apartments in residential buildings with at least six units, according to the Department of Commerce. It takes effect in late 2025.

The legislation is an effort to counteract skyrocketing housing prices and, in the Seattle area, one of the nation's highest rates of homelessness, as well as a critical housing shortage.

# Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, March 21, 2024 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 269 ~ 46 of 87

Extremely low-income renters — those below federal poverty guidelines or earning 30% of the area median income — face a shortage of 7.3 million affordable rental homes, according to a National Low Income Housing Coalition report published last week. Such households account for 11 million — or nearly one-quarter — of renters nationwide, the report said.

Rep. Mia Gregerson, who sponsored Washington's bill, said she predicts the measure will lead to thousands of units being built in her state, providing unsubsidized affordable housing to everyone from young people getting their first apartment and elderly people downsizing to those coming out of physical or mental health treatment.

"Government can't close that gap all by itself, it has to have for-profit, market-rate housing built all at the same time," said Gregerson, a Democrat.

The U.S. lost hundreds of thousands of SROs in the last half of the 20th century as associations with poverty and substandard accommodation sparked restrictive zoning laws. Some cities outlawed their construction altogether — a loss some housing experts say helped contribute to the homelessness crisis.

Facing that crisis and a critical housing shortage, cities and states across the nation are now shifting their stance.

In December, as her state grappled with a massive influx of migrants, New York Gov. Kathy Hochul announced a \$50 million program aimed at repairing and renovating 500 SROs across the state. New York City lost at least 70,000 such units between the early 20th century and 2014, according to a report from New York University's Furman Center.

But there is concern that this type of affordable housing is not an ideal fit for an especially vulnerable group — families.

There are more than 3,800 unhoused families with children in the Seattle area, among the highest in the nation, according to the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development 2023 one-night count.

Cities need to focus on building affordable housing that also includes larger units, such as studios and one-bedroom apartments, said Marisa Zapata, a land-use planning professor at Portland State University.

"My biggest concern is that we will see them as the solution and not do right by our community members by building the housing that people want," she said of micro-apartments.

The bill passed by Oregon lawmakers last year requires local governments to allow single room occupancy units in areas zoned for residential use. The provision took effect Jan. 1.

Central City Concern, a Portland-based homeless services nonprofit, leases more than 1,000 SRO units — both subsidized and not — to people who are considered extremely low income. It helps people struggling to access housing due to things like eviction histories and poor credit scores.

The units have a median rent of \$550 a month, making them a "vital option" for people exiting homelessness or living on fixed incomes, such as those with disabilities, said Sarah Holland, senior director of supportive housing and employment. Over 80% of tenants were formerly homeless, she said, and some have been living in their units for 30 years.

"As costs continue to escalate in Portland, it gives them the chance to stay in their home," she said.

Cheyenne Welbourne moved into one of the nonprofit's micro-apartments in downtown Portland last March after years of living on the streets. The room, which has a curtained-off toilet and sink, is just big enough to fit a single bed, a chair and a TV. But to him, it's a treasured home that he's decorated with colorful lights, potted plants and action figures. He uses the small kitchenette, which features an induction cooktop, for making the tea he loves to drink.

"All I had was just me and my backpack, and that's it," he said. "I was just happy to be in here and that I didn't have to spend another winter out there."

"I just want a home, you know? A nice home, a decent home."

Some experts hope the Pacific Northwest will inspire more states to take similar steps.

"The alternatives are ... people being in shelters, people being on the street, people being doubled, tripled, quadrupled up," said Vicki Been, faculty director at New York University's Furman Center and a law professor.

For Peraza-Garcia's family in Seattle, the tight squeeze is worth it to be in the same complex as their

cousins and walking distance of grocery stores, a park and preschools. They plan to spend the next year in the micro-apartment and then move to a bigger place if they can get good-paying jobs.

"We're happy because we're here in a quiet place where we can be together as a family," she said.

## As election nears, Venezuelan government keeps arresting opponents allegedly tied to criminal plots

By REGINA GARCIA CANO Associated Press

MEXICO CITY (AP) — As Venezuela's government would have it, President Nicolás Maduro and members of his inner circle have been the target of several conspiracies since last year that could have left them injured or worse.

Few details have been released about the alleged plots. But the government has cited them in the arrests of more than 30 people since January including a prominent human rights attorney and staffers of the leading opposition presidential candidate.

Local and international nongovernment groups, the United Nations and foreign governments have described the crackdown as a pretext to stifle political opposition ahead of the July 28 president election in which Maduro, in power since 2013, will seek a new six-year term.

The latest arrests took place Wednesday shortly before the country's top prosecutor announced arrest warrants for nine people working with Machado's campaign whom he accused of participating in one plot.

Oscar Murillo, general coordinator for the Venezuelan human rights group Provea, said officials are coordinating actions of the police, military and civic groups to tamp down on any anti-government activity.

"This has translated into greater political repression and a deepening of the policy of persecution that seeks to break civil society at a time when perhaps the ideal thing would be to be talking about the public policies needed to reverse poverty or inequality in Venezuela," Murillo said.

Attorney General Tarek William Saab has described the plots variously as aimed at attacking military installations, killing Maduro and other officials and de-stabilizing the country. He has publicly presented alleged confessions, planning documents, laptops and other items he has characterized as evidence.

Saab on Wednesday accused the nine members of the opposition, including Machado's campaign manager, of being part of a "destabilizing" plot that included demonstrations, a media campaign and plans to attack military barracks. He said two of the nine people, Dignora Hernández and Henry Alviarez — Machado's political coordinator and national coordinator respectively — had already been arrested.

The arrests of Hernández and Alviarez brings to at least six the number of Machado staffers who are in custody over their alleged participation in the plots the government claims to have foiled.

Allowing free-market proponent Machado to run in the July election would offer Venezuela its best chance of a competitive race because no other candidate has anywhere near the level of support, money or political machinery to challenge Maduro. But the self-described socialist government has barred her from office for 15 years — an administrative order upheld by the country's top court in January.

Other members of Venezuela's opposition have urged Machado to stand aside for another contender, but she has insisted on continuing her candidacy — perhaps hoping that international pressure could force Venezuela's establishment to relent on the ban.

"If the regime believes that with these actions they are going to isolate me, let me be clear: My team is Venezuela," she told reporters Wednesday. She added that her campaign continues organizing across the country and expects "much more than just well wishes" from the international community.

Machado defended her staff, stressing that all allegations against them are false.

The government has not made public any charging documents detailing allegations against the dozens of defendants in the conspiracy cases. Under Venezuelan law, court hearings are open, but in practice people, journalists and sometimes even the defendants' counsels of choice are barred from the courtroom.

Maduro has alleged the U.S. government is behind the plans to assassinate him.

Among the dozens of people taken into custody earlier this year over accusations stemming from the

# Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, March 21, 2024 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 269 ~ 48 of 87

alleged plots is also human rights attorney Rocío San Miguel, whom Saab has identified as a "spy" for one of the conspiracies. Saab has also accused her of having more than a dozen maps that highlighted sensitive military locations that she should not have known about.

"Should the state lower its guard and let these operations go forward, to bathe the country in blood?" Saab said days after San Miguel's Feb. 9 arrest.

San Miguel's attorney, Juan Gonzalez, said he has not been allowed to see her since her arrest but that she denied all allegations during an initial hearing.

Wednesday's detentions came hours after an independent panel of experts investigating human rights violations in Venezuela told the U.N. Human Rights Council in Geneva that Maduro's government had increased repression efforts against real or perceived opponents ahead of this year's presidential election.

"The mission confirms that, as has happened in the past, the authorities invoke real or fictitious conspiracies to intimidate, detain and prosecute people who oppose or criticize the government," panel head Marta Valiñas told the council, which authorized the investigative mission. "At the same time, the Attorney General's Office continues to operate as part of the government's repressive machinery to grant the appearance of legality to the persecution of critical voices."

The panel last year reported that Maduro's government was using defamatory campaigns, detentions, arbitrary criminal proceedings and even torture to curtail democratic freedoms ahead of the election.

"In some cases, the acts of torture or ill-treatment were intended to extract fabricated confessions or false statements," the panel said in its report.

Maduro became interim president in March 2013 after the death of charismatic leader Hugo Chávez's. He narrowly won election weeks later and was re-elected in 2018 in an electoral process widely criticized as fraudulent.

The country has not been without conspiracies against the government in the past.

Less than three months after his re-election, Maduro tied opposition leaders to what the government described as an assassination attempt against the president in which drones with explosives detonated when he was delivering a speech live on television. In 2020, his government foiled an attempted armed invasion to overthrow him, an effort that ended with six insurgents dead and two former Green Berets behind bars.

The latest wave of arrests threatens to unravel a political accord negotiated last year among the U.S. government, the opposition faction it backs and Maduro.

The October agreement focused on conditions for a free and fair election and earned Maduro some relief from U.S. economic sanctions on the country's oil, gas and mining sectors. But hopes for a more level playing field began fading shortly afterward, and the U.S. already reversed the relief on the gold-mining industry due to what it considers Maduro's noncompliance.

The administration of President Joe Biden has given Maduro until late April to comply with the deal or expect an end to the remaining relief, which would hurt the country's oil-dependent economy.

Brian Nichols, a U.S. assistant secretary of state, earlier this month told attendees of a Washington-based think tank panel that the "incentives" the U.S. and other countries have put forth "have not been sufficient to motivate" Maduro to move toward a competitive election. On Wednesday, he called for the immediate release of "all those unjustly detained."

"Maduro's escalating attacks on civil society and political actors are totally inconsistent with Barbados Accord commitments but will not stifle the democratic aspirations of the Venezuelan people," Nichols tweeted.

## **1 of the few remaining survivors of the attack on Pearl Harbor has died at 102**

By AUDREY McAVOY Associated Press  
HONOLULU (AP) — Richard C. "Dick" Higgins, one of the few remaining survivors of the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, has died, a family member said Wednesday. He was 102.

Higgins died at home in Bend, Oregon, on Tuesday of natural causes, granddaughter Angela Norton said.

# Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, March 21, 2024 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 269 ~ 49 of 87

Higgins was a radioman assigned to a patrol squadron of seaplanes based at the Hawaii naval base when Japanese planes began dropping bombs on the morning of Dec. 7, 1941.

He recounted in a 2008 oral history interview how he was in his bunk inside a screened-in lanai, or porch, on the third floor of his barracks when the bombing began.

"I jumped out of my bunk and I ran over to the edge of the lanai and just as I got there, a plane went right over the barracks," he said according to the interview by the National Museum of the Pacific War in Fredericksburg, Texas.

He estimated the plane was about 50 feet (15 meters) to his side and 100 feet (30 meters) above his barracks. He described "big red meatballs" on the plane, in reference to the red circular emblem painted on the wings and fuselages of the Japanese aircraft.

"So, there was no doubt what was happening in my mind, because of the things that had been going on," he said.

Norton called her grandfather a humble and kind man who would frequently visit schools to share stories about Pearl Harbor, World War II and the Great Depression. Norton said he wanted to teach people history so they wouldn't repeat it.

"It was never about him," Norton said. "The heroes were those that didn't come home."

Higgins was born on a farm near Mangum, Oklahoma, on July 24, 1921. He joined the Navy in 1939 and retired 20 years later. He then became an aeronautics engineer for Northrop Corporation, which later became Northrop Grumman, and other defense contractors. He worked on the B-2 Stealth Bomber, Norton said.

His wife, Winnie Ruth, died in 2004 at the age of 82. They had been married for 60 years.

Not long after he went into hospice last Thursday, he told his granddaughter, "I'm ready to go see Winnie Ruth."

"I said, 'It's OK, go home. Be with Jesus and be with Winnie Ruth,'" Norton said. "It's okay to do that. Leave us. You've had it's such a good and full life."

There are now 22 survivors of the attack still living, said Kathleen Farley, the California state chair of the Sons and Daughters of Pearl Harbor Survivors. Farley said other survivors may still be living but not all joined the Pearl Harbor Survivors Association when it was formed in 1958 and so may not be known to her.

About 2,400 servicemen were killed in the bombing, which launched the U.S. into World War II. The USS Arizona battleship alone lost 1,177 sailors and Marines, nearly half the death toll.

About 87,000 military personnel were on Oahu on Dec. 7, according to a rough estimate compiled by military historian J. Michael Wenger.

Higgins is survived by two children, two grandchildren and four great-grandchildren. The family plans to hold a memorial service at a church in Bend on Thursday followed by a ceremony with full military honors. Afterward his body will be flown to California, where he will be buried next to his wife.

## Mississippi ex-deputy gets 40-year sentence as judge decries brutal attack on 2 Black men

By MICHAEL GOLDBERG and EMILY WAGSTER PETTUS Associated Press

JACKSON, Miss. (AP) — Two former Mississippi deputies wept in court Wednesday as a federal judge sentenced them to years in prison and condemned their cruelty for breaking into a home with four other white officers and torturing two Black men.

U.S. District Judge Tom Lee sentenced Christian Dedmon, 29, to 40 years in prison and Daniel Opdyke, 28, to 17.5 years.

Lee said Dedmon carried out the most "shocking, brutal and cruel attacks imaginable" against the two Black men, Michael Corey Jenkins and Eddie Terrell Parker, and against a white man during a traffic stop weeks earlier.

Dedmon did not look at Jenkins and Parker as he apologized Wednesday, saying he'd never forgive himself for the pain he caused.

# Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, March 21, 2024 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 269 ~ 50 of 87

Jenkins, who has trouble speaking after being shot in the mouth during the January 2023 attack, said in a statement read by his lawyer that Dedmon's actions were the most depraved of any of those who attacked him.

"Deputy Dedmon is the worst example of a police officer in the United States," Jenkins' lawyer read. "Deputy Dedmon was the most aggressive, sickest and the most wicked."

On Tuesday, Lee sentenced 31-year-old Hunter Elward, who shot Jenkins, to nearly 20 years in prison and Jeffrey Middleton, 46, to 17.5 years. The judge called their actions "egregious and despicable." They, like Opdyke and Dedmon, worked as Rankin County sheriff's deputies during the attack.

Another former deputy, Brett McAlpin, 53, and a former Richland police officer, Joshua Hartfield, 32, are set for sentencing Thursday.

All six pleaded guilty last August, admitting that they broke into a home without a warrant and tortured Jenkins and Parker after a neighbor complained the men were staying there with a white woman.

Hours before Dedmon's sentencing, Opdyke cried profusely as he turned to look at Jenkins and Parker, saying isolation behind bars had given him time to reflect on "how I transformed into the monster I became that night."

"The weight of my actions and the harm I've caused will haunt me every day," Opdyke said. "I wish I could take away your suffering."

Parker rested his head in his hands and closed his eyes, then stood and left the courtroom before Opdyke finished speaking. Jenkins said he was "broken" and "ashamed" by the cruelty inflicted on him.

Some of the former officers involved in the attack called themselves the "Goon Squad." The judge said Opdyke may not have been fully aware of what being a member of the group entailed when Middleton asked him to join, but Opdyke did know it involved using excessive force.

Last March, months before federal prosecutors announced charges in August, an investigation by The Associated Press linked some of the deputies to at least four violent encounters with Black men since 2019 that left two dead and another with lasting injuries.

The former officers stuck to their cover story for months until finally admitting that they tortured Jenkins and Parker. Elward admitted to shoving a gun into Jenkins' mouth and firing it in a "mock execution" that went awry.

In a statement Tuesday, Attorney General Merrick Garland condemned the "heinous attack on citizens they had sworn an oath to protect."

The terror began Jan. 24, 2023, with a racist call for extrajudicial violence when a white person in Rankin County complained to McAlpin that two Black men were staying with a white woman at a house in Braxton. McAlpin told Dedmon, who texted a group of white deputies asking if they were "available for a mission." "No bad mugshots," he texted — a green light, prosecutors said, to use excessive force on parts of the body that wouldn't appear in a booking photo.

Once inside, they handcuffed Jenkins and his friend Parker and poured milk, alcohol and chocolate syrup over their faces. They forced them to strip naked and shower together to conceal the mess. They mocked the victims with racial slurs and shocked them with stun guns. Dedmon and Opdyke assaulted them with a sex toy.

After Elward shot Jenkins in the mouth, lacerating his tongue and breaking his jaw, they devised a coverup that included planting drugs and a gun. False charges stood against Jenkins and Parker for months.

The majority-white Rankin County is just east of the state capital, Jackson, home to one of the highest percentages of Black residents of any major U.S. city. The officers shouted at Jenkins and Parker to "stay out of Rankin County and go back to Jackson or 'their side' of the Pearl River," according to court documents.

Opdyke was the first to admit what they did, his attorney Jeff Reynolds said Wednesday. On April 12, he showed investigators a WhatsApp text thread where the officers discussed their plan and what happened. Had he thrown his phone in a river, as some of the other officers did, investigators might not have discovered the encrypted messages.

Reynolds also said Opdyke was sexually assaulted as a child and had seen the older deputies as father

figures, making him susceptible to the culture of misconduct within the Rankin County Sheriff's Office.

"When a new officer goes over there, they start indoctrinating people," Reynolds said. "Where is the true leadership? Why aren't they in this court?"

Dedmon, who planted drugs on Jenkins to frame him on false charges, said bad behavior did not get in the way of his promotion to narcotics investigator.

"It's because instead of doing the right thing, I chose to do the wrong thing," Dedmon said.

Dedmon, like Opdyke and Elward, also pleaded guilty to taking part in an assault on a white man during a traffic stop Dec. 4, 2022. Prosecutors revealed the victim's identity Tuesday as Alan Schmidt. Reynolds said Opdyke held Schmidt down until Dedmon arrived but didn't beat him or sexually assault him.

The AP does not typically name people who say they were sexually assaulted unless they consent to being identified or come forward publicly.

According to a statement from Schmidt that prosecutors read in court, Dedmon accused him of possessing stolen property. Schmidt said he was handcuffed, pulled from his vehicle and beaten.

Prosecutors said Elward and Opdyke failed to intervene as Dedmon punched and kicked him, used a Taser on him, fired his gun into the air, then sexually assaulted him.

"What sick individual does this?" Schmidt wrote.

Dedmon admitted to firing a gun into the air to intimidate Schmidt but denied sexually assaulting him. Prosecutors said they read details from the sexual assault into the court record when Dedmon pleaded guilty, and Dedmon said he agreed with the facts presented.

Rankin County Sheriff Bryan Bailey, who took office in 2012, revealed no details about his deputies' actions when he announced they had been fired last June. After they pleaded guilty, Bailey said the officers had gone rogue and promised changes. Jenkins and Parker called for his resignation and filed a \$400 million civil lawsuit against the department.

## **Grambling State rallies to win its first NCAA Tournament game, beating Montana State in OT**

By JACOB BENGE Associated Press

DAYTON, Ohio (AP) — Jimel Cofer scored all 19 of his points in the second half and overtime and Grambling State rallied from a 14-point deficit to beat Montana State 88-81 to earn its first NCAA Tournament win in program history in the First Four on Wednesday night.

The Southwestern Athletic Conference champion Tigers (21-14) advance as the No. 16 seed in the Midwest Region to play No. 1 seed Purdue on Friday night in Indianapolis.

"Incredible. That's what March is made of, baby," Grambling State coach Donte' Jackson said. "You got to find a way to fight, stay in the game, and have that one last run."

Montana State's Robert Ford III made his fifth 3-pointer of the game to tie the game at 78 for the Big Sky Conference tournament champions with 2:02 left in overtime, but Grambling iced the game from the free throw line with eight straight points.

Montana State (17-18) went 1 of 6 in the final 1:27 in failing to win its first NCAA Tournament game in its sixth attempt.

Burnett and Jourdan Smith had 18 points apiece for the Tigers.

Grambling State, which was playing in the NCAA Tournament for the first time despite a 2-10 start to the season, rode a second-half surge going on a 21-6 run erasing its 42-33 halftime deficit. Cofer, who didn't play in the first half, flipped in a layup as part of an individual 6-0 run giving the Tigers their first lead of the second half 60-59 with 5:47 remaining in regulation.

Cofer laid in a game-tying score with 34 seconds left to knot it at 72, and Montana State's Brandon Walker missed a potential go-ahead layup with 9 seconds left to send the game to overtime.

Montana State shot 63% in the first half and held a lead as large as 14 in its third-straight NCAA Tournament appearance.

"There were some definite momentum swings," Montana State coach Matt Logie said.

# Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, March 21, 2024 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 269 ~ 52 of 87

Ford had 26 points to lead Montana State. Brian Goracke added 15 and Brandon Walker had 14. "I would just say I understand how hard it is to get here," said Ford, who hit six 3-pointers. "There's a lot of great players in the league. There's a lot of great teams. The biggest part is understanding what it takes to get here and when you get here, what it feels like."

The First Four went to overtime for the first time since Notre Dame beat Rutgers 89-87 in double overtime in 2022.

## FIRST TIME DANCING

Grambling made the NCAA Tournament for the first time in its 47-year history.

"What this means for our program, it's an understatement, to be totally honest," Jackson said. "Just let these guys know, when they could have went to all these other big schools and things of that nature, that they chose right by coming to Grambling. And just really thankful, just all our guys that's here and just the way they prepared and how they played today."

## CLUTCH COFER

Cofer scored a team-high 13 points in the second half and six in overtime. He didn't spend any time on the floor in the first half and didn't play during the SWAC championship game Saturday.

"I was just trying to stay locked in the whole time," Cofer said. "Even when I'm not playing I'm locked in the game because I know eventually my name is going to be called. Once I'm out there, I've got to do what I have to do."

## HALFTIME ADJUSTMENTS

The Tigers trailed by double figures in both halves and by as many as 14 points in the second.

"At halftime, it was somewhere we'd already been before. We knew what we had to do," Cofer said. "We played a big schedule in the regular season, so it wasn't nothing new."

## DEEP BENCH

Grambling had four players in double figures, with Mika Stevenson adding 10.

"It's one thing to scout and go through the plays," Jackson said. "It's another thing for them to run the plays at the pace that they run them at and shoot the ball at the pace they shoot it at. But at the end of the day, we locked in and those guys found a way to get it done."

## Congressional leaders sell \$1.2 trillion spending package to members before shutdown deadline

By KEVIN FREKING Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Congressional leaders from both parties looked to put a positive light on a \$1.2 trillion spending package that lawmakers are working to approve before funding expires at midnight Friday for a host of key government agencies.

Text of the legislation had not been released as of Wednesday afternoon, but lawmakers and aides were expecting an official unveiling early Thursday. The package, which is expected to pass, will wrap up Congress' work on spending bills for the year — nearly six months after the fiscal year began.

This year's dozen spending bills were packed into two packages. The first one cleared Congress two weeks ago just hours before a shutdown deadline for the agencies funded through the bills.

Now Congress is focused on the second, larger package, which includes about \$886 billion for defense, about a 3% increase from last year's levels. The bill also funds the Departments of Homeland Security, Health and Human Services, Labor and others, with non-defense spending expected to be relatively flat compared to the prior year.

Leaders worked to sell the package to members. In a closed-door meeting with GOP lawmakers in the morning, Speaker Mike Johnson described a few of the policy changes that House Republicans were able to secure in the latest negotiations. Those included a prohibition on funding for a United Nations relief program for Palestinian refugees that extends through March 2025. He also noted the bill funds 8,000 additional detention beds for noncitizens awaiting their immigration proceedings or removal from the country.

"The Homeland (Security) piece was the most difficult to negotiate because the two parties have a wide

# Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, March 21, 2024 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 269 ~ 53 of 87

chasm between them," Johnson said at the GOP leadership's weekly press conference. "I think the final product is something that we were able to achieve a lot of key provisions in, and wins, and it moved in a direction that we want even with our tiny, historically small majority."

The House is expected to vote on the second package on Friday, giving lawmakers more than a day to examine the legislation, but in doing so, leadership is bypassing a House rule that calls for giving lawmakers 72 hours to review major legislation before having to vote on it.

That is riling some House Republicans, but following the rule would surely invite some lapse in federal funding, even if just for a day or so, for several key federal agencies.

Once the bill passes the House, Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer, D-N.Y. said he will put it on the Senate floor.

"Even with bipartisanship, it's going to be a tight squeeze to get this funding package before the week-end deadline," Schumer said.

Democrats celebrated staving off the vast majority of policy mandates Republicans had sought to include in the spending bills, such as restricting access to the abortion pill mifepristone or banning access to gender-affirming health care.

"We're exactly in the position that we knew we were going to end up," said Rep. Pete Aguilar D-Calif. "We knew that House Democrats, Senate Democrats, Senate Republicans and the White House weren't going to tolerate any significant harmful cuts and crazy policy riders."

The spending in the bill largely tracks with an agreement that former Speaker Kevin McCarthy worked out with the White House in May 2023, which restricted spending for two years and suspended the debt ceiling into January 2025 so the federal government could continue paying its bills.

"We have had to stick to some difficult topline and fight off literally hundreds of Republican poison pills, not to mention some really harsh, almost unthinkable, cuts proposed by House Republicans," said Sen. Patty Murray, the Democratic chair of the Senate Appropriations Committee. "But now we have a good, bipartisan bill that protects absolutely essential investments in the American people."

McCarthy was ousted from the speaker's role a few months after securing the debt ceiling deal. Eight Republicans ended up joining with Democrats in removing McCarthy as speaker. And some of those unhappy with that debt ceiling deal also expressed misgivings about the latest package.

Johnson is expected to bring the bill up for a vote through a streamlined process that requires two-thirds support for the bill to pass. The earlier spending package passed by a vote of 339-85 with Republicans providing all but two of the no votes.

"If this bill sits out for two weeks, it will get pilloried like a pinata," said Rep. Chip Roy, R-Texas. "So they want to jam it through over the next 48 hours."

"I hope there will be some modest wins. Unfortunately, I don't expect that we will get much in the way of significant policy wins based on past history and based on our unwillingness to do use any kind of leverage to force policy wins, meaning a willingness to walk away and say no," said Rep. Bob Good, R-Va.

One of the changes Johnson touted for members was prohibiting — through March 2025 — funding for the United Nations Relief and Works Agency, which is the main supplier of food, water and shelter to civilians in Gaza. Republicans are insisting on cutting off funding to the agency after Israel alleged that a dozen employees of the agency were involved in the attack that Hamas conducted in Israel on Oct. 7.

The U.S. is the biggest donor to the agency, providing it with about \$364 million in 2022 and \$371 million in 2023. After Israel made its allegations, the Biden administration paused funding for the agency. Republicans seek a more lasting prohibition.

But the prohibition does concern some lawmakers because many relief agencies say there is no way to replace its ability to deliver the humanitarian assistance that the United States and others are trying to send to Gaza, where a quarter of the 2.3 million residents are starving.

Sen. Chris Van Hollen, D-Md., said in a recent speech on the Senate floor that any individual who participated in the Oct. 7 attack must be held responsible. But not innocent civilians.

"Punish the 14. Don't punish 2 million innocent Gazans," Van Hollen said.

But House Republicans are describing the agency as "part of the problem" that Israel is confronting. About

three dozen wrote Appropriations Committee members saying, "in light of UNRWA's record of troublesome allegations and disturbing revelations since Hamas's October 7 terrorist attack on Israel, we believe that going forward no further U.S. taxpayer funds can be given to the agency."

Johnson also touted to colleagues a 6% cut to foreign aid programs and only allowing the American flag to be flown over U.S. diplomatic facilities as wins, according to a Republican congressional aid not authorized to speak publicly. Under the Biden administration, U.S. embassies have been invited to fly the pride flag or light up with rainbow colors in support of the LGBTQ community.

Johnson said that after the spending package passes, the House would next turn its attention to a bill that focuses on aiding Ukraine and Israel, though lawmakers are scheduled to be away from Washington for the next two weeks. The Senate has already approved a \$95.3 billion aid package for Ukraine, Israel and Taiwan, but Johnson has declined to bring that up for a vote.

## M. Emmet Walsh, unforgettable character actor from 'Blood Simple,' 'Blade Runner,' dies at 88

By ANDREW DALTON AP Entertainment Writer

LOS ANGELES (AP) — M. Emmet Walsh, the character actor who brought his unmistakable face and unsettling presence to films including "Blood Simple" and "Blade Runner," has died at age 88, his manager said Wednesday.

Walsh died from cardiac arrest on Tuesday at a hospital in St. Albans, Vermont, his longtime manager Sandy Joseph said.

The ham-faced, heavysset Walsh often played good old boys with bad intentions, as he did in one of his rare leading roles as a crooked Texas private detective in the Coen brothers' first film, the 1984 neo-noir "Blood Simple."

Joel and Ethan Coen said they wrote the part for Walsh, who would win the first Film Independent Spirit Award for best male lead for the role.

Critics and film geeks relished the moments when he showed up on screen.

Roger Ebert once observed that "no movie featuring either Harry Dean Stanton or M. Emmet Walsh in a supporting role can be altogether bad."

Walsh played a crazed sniper in the 1979 Steve Martin comedy "The Jerk" and a prostate-examining doctor in the 1985 Chevy Chase vehicle "Fletch."

In 1982's gritty, "Blade Runner," a film he said was grueling and difficult to make with perfectionist director Ridley Scott, Walsh plays a hard-nosed police captain who pulls Harrison Ford from retirement to hunt down cyborgs.

Born Michael Emmet Walsh, his characters led people to believe he was from the American South, but he could hardly have been from any further north.

Walsh was raised on Lake Champlain in Swanton, Vermont, just a few miles from the U.S.-Canadian border, where his grandfather, father and brother worked as customs officers.

He went to a tiny local high school with a graduating class of 13, then to Clarkson University in Potsdam, New York, and the American Academy of Dramatic Arts in New York City.

He acted exclusively on the stage, with no intention of doing otherwise, for a decade, working in summer stock and repertory companies.

Walsh slowly started making film appearances in 1969 with a bit role in "Alice's Restaurant," and did not start playing prominent roles until nearly a decade after that when he was in his 40s, getting his breakthrough with 1978's "Straight Time," in which he played Dustin Hoffman's smug, boorish parole officer.

Walsh was shooting "Silkwood" with Meryl Streep in Dallas in the autumn of 1982 when he got the offer for "Blood Simple" from the Coen brothers, then-aspiring filmmakers who had seen and loved him in "Straight Time."

"My agent called with a script written by some kids for a low-budget movie," Walsh told The Guardian in 2017. "It was a Sydney Greenstreet kind of role, with a Panama suit and the hat. I thought it was kinda fun

# Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, March 21, 2024 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 269 ~ 55 of 87

and interesting. They were 100 miles away in Austin, so I went down there early one day before shooting.”

Walsh said the filmmakers didn’t even have enough money left to fly him to New York for the opening, but he would be stunned that first-time filmmakers had produced something so good.

“I saw it three or four days later when it opened in LA, and I was, like: Wow!” he said. “Suddenly my price went up five times. I was the guy everybody wanted.”

In the film he plays Loren Visser, a detective asked to trail a man’s wife, then is paid to kill her and her lover.

Visser also acts as narrator, and the opening monologue, delivered in a Texas drawl, included some of Walsh’s most memorable lines.

“Now, in Russia they got it mapped out so that everyone pulls for everyone else. That’s the theory, anyway,” Visser says. “But what I know about is Texas. And down here, you’re on your own.”

He was still working into his late 80s, making recent appearances on the TV series “The Righteous Gemstones” and “American Gigolo.”

And his more than 100 film credits included director Rian Johnson’s 2019 family murder mystery, “Knives Out” and director Mario Van Peebles’ Western “Outlaw Posse,” released this year.

Johnson was among those paying tribute to Walsh on social media.

“Emmet came to set with 2 things: a copy of his credits, which was a small-type single spaced double column list of modern classics that filled a whole page, & two-dollar bills which he passed out to the entire crew,” Johnson tweeted. “Don’t spend it and you’ll never be broke.’ Absolute legend.”

## Alabama governor signs bill barring diversity, equity and inclusion programs

By KIM CHANDLER Associated Press

MONTGOMERY, Ala. (AP) — Alabama Gov. Kay Ivey on Wednesday signed legislation that would ban diversity, equity and inclusion programs at public schools, universities and state agencies and prohibit the teaching of “divisive concepts” including that someone should feel guilty because of their race or gender.

The measure, which takes effect Oct. 1, is part of a wave of proposals from Republican lawmakers across the country taking aim at diversity, equity and inclusion programs, also known as DEI, on college campuses. Republicans say the programs deepen divisions and promote a particular political viewpoint. But opponents say it is a rollback of hard-won advances and programs that welcome underrepresented student populations.

“My administration has and will continue to value Alabama’s rich diversity, however, I refuse to allow a few bad actors on college campuses – or wherever else for that matter – to go under the acronym of DEI, using taxpayer funds, to push their liberal political movement counter to what the majority of Alabamians believe,” Ivey said in a statement.

Also Wednesday, an Alabama House committee advanced legislation that would ban teacher-led discussions in public schools on sexual orientation and gender identity and prohibit displaying Pride flags in classrooms. The measure, part of a wave of laws across the country that critics have dubbed “Don’t Say Gay,” now moves to the full House.

The DEI measure was sharply criticized by opponents who said it was taking the state backward, instead of forward.

“This regressive measure undermines the strides we’ve made in cultivating an inclusive society in Alabama by stifling essential discussions and programs that are key to improving our state,” Alabama House Minority Leader Anthony Daniels said.

Daniels said it “detrimentally impacts the educational experience of college students by removing programs in which they can receive support, build communities, and learn how to be prosperous and inclusive citizens,”

The Alabama legislation would prohibit universities, K-12 school systems and state agencies from sponsoring DEI programs, defined under the bill as classes, training, programs and events where attendance is based on a person’s race, sex, gender identity, ethnicity, national origin or sexual orientation.

The bill also says schools, universities and state agencies cannot require students, employees and contractors to attend classes and training sessions "that advocates for or requires assent" to what the bill lists as eight "divisive concepts."

The list of banned concepts includes that "any individual should accept, acknowledge, affirm, or assent to a sense of guilt, complicity, or a need to apologize on the basis of his or her race, color, religion, sex, ethnicity, or national origin," or that fault, blame or bias should be assigned to people based on race, religion, gender or national origin.

Auburn University, a public institution, said in a letter to faculty, staff and students that it was evaluating the new law's implications.

The measure will affect "use of state funds to sponsor DEI programs and activities" but does not prohibit instruction associated with accreditation standards and academic support for students of a particular demographic, university leadership wrote.

"We are resolute in our mission to deliver exceptional student experiences and to provide support to all of our students with particular emphasis on providing access and opportunity," the letter said.

The bill also would attempt to prohibit transgender people on college campuses from using multiple occupancy restrooms that correspond with their current gender identity.

The legislation says colleges and universities "shall ensure that every multiple occupancy restroom be designated for use by individuals based" on the sex that a person was assigned at birth. It is unclear how the requirement would be enforced.

## Republicans make last-ditch request for Biden to testify as impeachment inquiry winds down

By LISA MASCARO AP Congressional Correspondent

WASHINGTON (AP) — The House impeachment inquiry into President Joe Biden is all but winding down, lacking the political appetite from within the Republican ranks to go forward with an actual impeachment, but facing political pressure to deliver after months of work.

The chairman of the House Oversight and Accountability Committee, Republican Rep. James Comer, made a last-ditch push at Wednesday's hearing, announcing he will seek testimony from Biden himself, saying the Democratic president was either "complicit or incompetent" in his son Hunter Biden's business dealings. It's highly unlikely Biden would appear before the committee.

"We need to hear from the president himself," Comer said at the close of the nearly eight-hour hearing.

The White House told Republicans to "move on" and focus on "real issues" Americans want addressed.

"This is a sad stunt at the end of a dead impeachment," spokesman Ian Sams said. "Call it a day, pal."

Having produced with no hard evidence of presidential wrongdoing it's clear the lengthy GOP impeachment inquiry is all but coming to a close. Seeking testimony from the president is a possible final act. Rather than drawing up articles of impeachment against Biden, Comer is eyeing potential criminal referrals of the family to the Justice Department, a largely symbolic move.

The committee's top Democrat, Rep. Jamie Raskin of Maryland, said the Republicans have turned the investigation into a "laughing stock" and the "comedy of errors" of the Biden impeachment inquiry is finally "crashing to an end."

Republicans launched their early investigations into the president after taking control of the House last year, eager to hold Biden to the high bar of impeachment. The House, under a Democratic majority, had twice impeached Republican Donald Trump during his presidency.

As Trump and Biden face another likely rematch this November, the probe is grinding on drilling into Hunter Biden's often complicated business dealings and troubled personal life, particularly during the years before Joe Biden became president.

The committee asserts that the Bidens traded on the family name, an alleged influence-peddling scheme in which Republicans are trying to link a handful of phone calls or dinner meetings between Joe Biden, when he was vice president or out of office, and Hunter Biden and his business associates.

# Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, March 21, 2024 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 269 ~ 57 of 87

Hunter Biden, who is facing firearm and tax charges in separate matters, testified behind closed doors last month in a deposition that filled more than 200 pages but left Comer's committee without evidence rising to "high crimes and misdemeanors" that would be expected to impeach a president.

"My father's never been involved with my business," Hunter Biden testified.

It would be rare but not unprecedented for a president to appear before Congress. Abraham Lincoln spoke privately to the House Judiciary Committee about a leaked speech and Gerald Ford appeared about his pardon of former president Richard M. Nixon, among others.

Aboard Air Force One as Biden flew Wednesday from Arizona to Texas, White House press secretary Karine Jean-Pierre said, "Republicans need to drop this stunt and join the president in focusing on real issues that matter to the American people."

Wednesday's testimony came from a cast of unusual witnesses, some with complicated backgrounds.

Jason Galanis is serving a lengthy federal prison sentence in Alabama for fraud schemes and appeared remotely before lawmakers. Tony Bobulinski, a onetime business associate of Hunter Biden, took his claims against the family public during the first Trump-Biden presidential debate in 2020.

The Democrats called Lev Parnas to testify, relying on the convicted businessman who was central to Trump's first impeachment as a Rudy Giuliani associate working to dig up political dirt on Joe Biden before the 2020 election. Parnas has since played a key role in dispelling the House GOP's main claim of bribery against the Bidens.

Testifying via video, Galanis told lawmakers he expected to make "billions" with Hunter Biden and other associates, using the Biden family name in their foreign business dealings.

Galanis described a particular time in May 2014 when Hunter Biden put his father on speakerphone for a brief chat with potential foreign business partners — a Russian oligarch and her husband — during a party at a New York restaurant.

But Hunter Biden directly rebuffed involvement with Galanis in his own deposition, testifying that he met Galanis for about 30 minutes 10 years ago.

In earlier testimony, Galanis, who was sentenced for multiple fraud schemes, acknowledged that he unsuccessfully sought a pardon in the final days of the Trump presidency.

Bobulinski told the committee that he met twice with Joe Biden in 2017 during a conference in Los Angeles, through Hunter Biden, including once for about 45 minutes, when they talked mostly about family and did not talk business.

While Hunter Biden has testified that his father was never involved in his business dealings, Bobulinski declared: "It is clear to me that Joe Biden was the brand."

Parnas told the committee that he has seen "zero evidence" of Biden family corruption in his work overseas.

Before his conviction, Parnas had been a central figure in Trump's first impeachment over withholding aid to Ukraine.

Parnas described helping Giuliani peddle the false claims against Biden to conservative media. Trump's team claimed that Joe Biden, as vice president, had intervened in the firing of a Ukrainian prosecutor to aid Hunter Biden's work on the board of the Ukrainian energy firm Burisma. In fact, Western allies also wanted the prosecutor fired over allegations of corruption.

In launching their Biden impeachment inquiry last year, the House Republicans relied in large part on unverified claims from an FBI informant released by Senate Republicans suggesting Burisma-related payments totaling \$10 million to the Bidens were discussed. The now former FBI informant, Alexander Smirnov, was arrested last month and pleaded not guilty to charges that he fabricated the bribery allegations.

Rep. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, D-N.Y., asked the Republicans why kept pursuing impeachment knowing the \$10 million claim is false and she demanded to know what crime or crimes they allege Biden, as president, has committed to warrant impeachment.

"Impeachment 101," she said. "I'm hearing about Biden's family. I'm hearing about this and that. I am not hearing the specific allegation."

One Democrat, Rep. Jared Moskowitz of Florida, all but dared Republicans to start impeachment proceedings, making the motion himself. It went nowhere.

"They're never going to impeach Joe Biden," Moskowitz declared. "It's all a sham."

With the House's slim GOP majority narrowed further by early retirements, Republicans may not have enough support within their ranks to pursue articles of impeachment against the president, especially because Democrats would likely vote against any such charges.

Instead, Comer has been looking into potential criminal referrals that could open the door to prosecutions in a future administration.

It's unclear who would exactly be charged, and over what offenses. Comer has also discussed drafting ethics-related legislation to tighten influence peddling or foreign lobbying among officials.

The committee will issue a final report with its recommendations once the inquiry has concluded.

## Idaho police search for escaped inmate and accomplice after ambush at Boise hospital

By GENE JOHNSON and MARK THIESSEN Associated Press

A white supremacist Idaho prison gang member and an accomplice remained on the loose Wednesday after the accomplice staged a brazen overnight attack to free the inmate as he was being transported from a Boise hospital, police said.

Police identified the man suspected of shooting two corrections officers during the ambush as Nicholas Umphenour. A warrant with a \$2 million bond has been issued for his arrest on two charges of aggravated battery against law enforcement and one charge of aiding and abetting an escape, police said.

Police said the search continues for Umphenour and escaped inmate Skylar Meade, who fled the hospital early Wednesday in a gray 2020 Honda Civic with Idaho plates. It's not known where they are or where they are headed, police said.

Three corrections officers were shot and wounded — two allegedly by Umphenour and one by responding police — during the attack in the ambulance bay at Saint Alphonsus Regional Medical Center.

Officials described Meade, 31, as a white supremacist gang member. Meade was sentenced to 20 years in 2017 for shooting at a sheriff's sergeant during a high-speed chase.

The attack occurred at 2:15 a.m. as Idaho Department of Correction officers prepared to bring Meade back to prison. Department Director Josh Tewalt said during a news conference Wednesday afternoon that Meade was taken to the hospital at 9:35 p.m. Tuesday after he engaged in "self-injurious behavior" and medical staff determined he needed emergency care.

One officer shot by the suspect was in critical but stable condition, police said, while the second wounded officer had serious but non-life-threatening injuries. The third injured corrections officer also sustained non-life-threatening injuries when a responding officer — incorrectly believing the shooter was still in the emergency room and seeing an armed person near the entrance — opened fire.

"This brazen, violent, and apparently coordinated attack on Idaho Department of Corrections personnel, to facilitate an escape of a dangerous inmate, was carried out right in front of the Emergency Department, where people come for medical help, often in the direst circumstances," Boise Police Chief Ron Winegar said in a written statement.

Umphenour, 5-foot-11 and 160 pounds, has brown hair and hazel eyes, police said. Detectives have confirmed that he is an associate of Meade, police said. Attempts by The Associated Press to reach Umphenour through social media were unsuccessful.

Meade, 5-foot-6 and 150 pounds, has face tattoos with the numbers 1 and 11 — for A and K, the first and 11th letters of the alphabet, representing the Aryan Knights gang he affiliated with, Tewalt said. Photos released by police also showed an A and K tattooed on his abdomen.

The Aryan Knights formed in the mid-1990s in the Idaho prison system to organize criminal activity for a select group of white people in custody, according to the U.S. attorney's office in the district of Idaho.

Meade had been held in a type of solitary confinement called administrative segregation at Idaho Maximum Security Institution in Kuna, about 12 miles (19 kilometers) south of Boise, because officials deemed him a severe security risk, Tewalt said.

Tewalt said earlier in the day that Meade had been escorted in the ambulance and at the hospital by two uniformed, unarmed officers wearing ballistic vests, tailed by armed staff. Later in the day Correction Department spokesperson Sanda Kuzeta-Cerimagic said in an email that officials had confirmed that one officer had been in the ambulance with Meade and two officers were in an escort vehicle.

"To the best of our knowledge, Meade was in restraints while being escorted in and out of the hospital," Kuzeta-Cerimagic said. She didn't specify whether the restraints were handcuffs, shackles or another type of restraint but said transport procedures are dependent on the custody level of the person being transported.

Authorities also did not say if other security measures were in place when Meade was leaving the hospital.

The attack came amid a wave of gun violence at hospitals and medical centers, which have struggled to adapt to the threats.

A Saint Alphonsus spokesperson said the shooting happened in the ambulance bay by its emergency department.

"All patients and staff are safe, the medical center campus is safe and secure, and has resumed normal operations. The Emergency Department itself is currently under temporary lockdown while the Boise Police Department completes the investigation," Leticia Ramirez said Wednesday morning in a statement.

She said as an added precaution, "we have increased security on campus, all entrances to the hospital will be closed" and monitored by hospital security until further notice.

Ramirez declined to comment when asked about Meade, deferring to the police department.

## **Court action on Texas' migrant arrest law leads to confusion at the US-Mexico border**

By VALERIE GONZALEZ and LINDSAY WHITEHURST Associated Press

McALLEN, Texas (AP) — A dizzying volley of courtroom maneuvers over a Texas law that would allow the state to arrest and deport people who enter the U.S. illegally sowed confusion at the nation's border with Mexico on Wednesday as sheriffs, police chiefs and migrants waited for direction.

Texas faced skeptical questioning during a hearing before a three-judge panel of the 5th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals that ended without a ruling, leaving the new law on hold for now. It was part of a flurry of activity that included a decision from the U.S. Supreme Court that allowed the law to take effect for several hours Tuesday. And regardless of how the three-judge panel rules, the legal saga over Texas Republican Gov. Greg Abbott's latest escalation to prevent illegal border crossings won't be over.

Yolanis Campo, 42, who traveled from Colombia and crossed the Rio Grande to enter the U.S. from Mexico with her 16-year-old daughter, recommended other migrants take another route because of the confusion over Texas' law. She was processed by Border Patrol agents who released her with an ankle bracelet to pursue her immigration case.

"It's more complicated because (federal authorities) tell us we can move on, but this new rule, this new law complicates everything because it says we can't move on," said Campo, who was staying at a shelter in McAllen.

During Wednesday's hearing, 5th Circuit Chief Judge Priscilla Richman questioned how the state law would be carried out, including how Texas would respond if federal authorities don't cooperate with a state judge's order to deport someone. No arrests were reported while it was in effect Tuesday.

The U.S. Department of Homeland Security has said it would not have authority to deport under the state law.

"This is uncharted because we don't have any cases on it," said Texas Solicitor General Aaron Nielson.

The Justice Department has argued that Texas' law is a clear violation of federal authority and would create chaos at the border.

The department's lawyers faced a grilling from Judge Andrew Oldham, who was appointed by Republican President Donald Trump. The third judge on the panel, Judge Irma Ramirez, an appointee of Democratic

# Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, March 21, 2024 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 269 ~ 60 of 87

President Joe Biden, previously voted to keep the law on hold.

Richman, who was appointed by Republican President George W. Bush, challenged Texas' assertion that it is exercising a "core police power," getting Nielsen to acknowledge that deporting people has been a federal responsibility. But Nielsen denied that Texas is "trying to take over the field" on border enforcement and said the state wants to cooperate with the federal government to address the issue.

Nielsen also said he did not know how the law would affect someone who entered the country illegally but came to Texas from another state.

Republican legislators wrote the law so that it applies in all of the state's 254 counties, although Steve McCraw, the director of the Texas Department of Public Safety, has said he expects it will mostly be enforced near the U.S.-Mexico border.

Dozens of sheriffs met in Austin on Wednesday to rally support for Abbott, but they offered varied explanations about how they would enforce the law. Those farther from the border said they expected to have little to do with it.

"We're not going to be targeting minorities or anything like that." McLennan County Sheriff Parnell McNamara, whose office is a few hundred miles from the border. "Our good citizens don't need to be worried about the police, especially in McLennan County."

The Supreme Court did not rule on the merits of the law. It instead kicked back to the lower appeals court a challenge led by the Justice Department. The 5th Circuit has been considering the state's appeal of a scathing injunction from a lower-court judge that put the law on hold.

Under the Texas law, once migrants are in custody on illegal entry charges, they can agree to a judge's order to leave the U.S. or face prosecution. However, Mexico has said it would refuse to take back anyone who is ordered to cross the border.

"Of course we're against this draconian law, completely opposed," Mexican President Andrés Manuel López Obrador said Wednesday during his daily press briefing.

Other GOP-led states are already looking to follow Texas' path.

In Iowa, lawmakers on Tuesday approved a bill that would also give its state law enforcement the power to arrest people who are in the U.S. illegally and have previously been denied entry into the country. If Republican Gov. Kim Reynolds signs it, it would take effect in July.

The confusion in Texas resembles other immigration battles during the Trump and Biden administrations, fueled by congressional inaction. In 2020, the 9th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals blocked a Trump policy to make asylum-seekers wait in Mexico for hearings in U.S. immigration court but said its order applied only in California and Arizona and not in New Mexico or Texas because those border states were outside its jurisdiction. The Supreme Court later said the policy should remain in effect across the border.

Arrests for illegal crossings fell by half in January from a record-high of 250,000 in December, with sharp declines in Texas. Tucson, Arizona, has been the busiest corridor in recent months, followed by San Diego in January, but reasons for sudden shifts are often complicated and are dictated by smuggling organizations.

When Biden visited the Rio Grande Valley for his second trip to the border as president last month, administration officials credited Mexico for heightened enforcement on that part of the border. They said conditions were more challenging for Mexican law enforcement in Sonora, the state that lies south of Arizona.

## **A police officer was accused of spying for China. The charges were dropped, but the NYPD fired him**

By DAVE COLLINS Associated Press

Baimadajie Angwang thought he would be reinstated to his dream job as a New York City police officer after federal prosecutors dropped criminal charges alleging he spied for China. Instead, he is fighting the police commissioner's decision to fire him.

In a decision made public recently, Commissioner Edward Caban ordered the immediate firing of Ang-

# Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, March 21, 2024 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 269 ~ 61 of 87

wang on Jan. 29, saying he disobeyed an order to submit to questioning by internal affairs investigators about the spying case.

Angwang, 37, said he declined to appear before the investigators last year on the advice of his lawyers, because the NYPD refused to give them department documents ahead of the questioning that would have allowed them to prepare. Now he is considering taking the commissioner to court over his firing.

"It's extremely disappointing," Angwang told The Associated Press in a phone interview Wednesday. "I have to continue to fight, not just for me, for anyone who were wrongfully accused in the past who's getting the wrongful treatment I just got at this moment, or any potential discrimination victims in the future. ... I will not give up until I find the justice."

Police officials declined to comment and referred the AP to Caban's written decision to fire Angwang.

"The Department is a paramilitary organization, and failure to obey and comply with questioning under an official investigation undermines its ability to carry out its mission," Caban wrote.

Angwang, who was born in Tibet and granted asylum in the U.S. in his teens, was arrested by federal agents in September 2020, charged with feeding information about New York's Tibetan community to the Chinese consulate in New York. He denied the allegations but spent six months in detention before being freed on bail awaiting trial.

In a surprise move in January 2023, federal prosecutors in Brooklyn suddenly dropped the charges and did not fully explain why, saying only that they uncovered new information and were acting "in the interest of justice." Prosecutors still haven't elaborated on their decision.

Angwang, who also served in the U.S. Marines and was deployed to Afghanistan, said he believes he got caught up in the Trump administration's effort to root out Chinese espionage across U.S. institutions, and alleges there were shades of racism targeting people with Chinese links.

In firing Angwang, Caban chose a harsher penalty than what was recommended in November by an NYPD disciplinary judge who held a hearing on the firing and listened to testimony and arguments from both sides. The administrative judge, Vanessa Facio-Lince, found that Angwang violated department rules by disobeying the order to submit to internal affairs questioning.

Facio-Lince said, however, that he should not be terminated, after citing his good record as a police officer and praise by his superiors. Instead, she recommended an alternate manner of Angwang leaving the department that would allow him to negotiate some terms of his departure, including partial retirement benefits.

Angwang's lawyer, Michael Bloch, said even the judge's proposal was out of line with department disciplinary guidelines. Bloch said the maximum penalty Angwang should have faced was a 20-day suspension. Bloch said there have been many other officers who committed more serious misconduct and were allowed to keep their jobs, despite administrative judges recommending their firing.

For Angwang, losing the job has been painful. He said his desire to be a police officer sprouted years ago when an NYPD officer was nice enough to give him directions when he got lost riding the subway. Before his 2020 arrest, he served at a precinct in Queens as a community liaison officer.

"Every time I could help a person, that makes me the happiest person in the world," he said. "And now, with the decision, I cannot continue to serve the community as a police officer."

He said it was ironic that the NYPD was firing an officer who immigrated to the U.S. and was supported by the immigrant community, when the department is struggling to make the force more diverse.

"I just want people to be aware as an immigrant I served in the Marines. I went to combat. I went to Afghanistan," he said. "I was able to become a police officer. I was able to become a community affairs officer. I was able to build a bridge between the underserved community and the NYPD, which never happened in the past. I gained a lot of support. ... And now, unfortunately, NYPD terminated that opportunity between the NYPD and the community."

## **FBI: 'Little rascals' trio, ages 11, 12 and 16, arrested for robbing a Houston bank**

HOUSTON (AP) — Three boys, ages 11, 12 and 16, and dubbed the "Little Rascals," have been arrested for robbing a bank in Houston, authorities confirmed Wednesday.

Harris County Sheriff Ed Gonzalez said the youngsters are in custody and have been charged with robbery by threat. Gonzalez said that because of their ages, no additional information would be released, and the sheriff's office didn't immediately respond to a request for more information.

The FBI's Houston office says they were wanted for robbing a Wells Fargo bank in the Greenspoint area of north Houston on March 14. The FBI posted an image of the trio on X, showing all three of them wearing hoodies inside the bank's lobby. A message left with the FBI seeking additional information wasn't immediately returned.

Houston's ABC 13 reported that the boys passed a threatening note to a teller before fleeing on foot with an undisclosed amount of cash. The station also reported that the parents of two of the boys identified them after their photos were released, while a third boy was recognized by a law enforcement officer following a fight.

## **Reddit poised to make its stock market debut after IPO prices at \$34 per share amid strong demand**

By MICHAEL LIEDTKE AP Technology Writer

SAN FRANCISCO (AP) — Reddit will enter a new era as a publicly traded company with a market value of \$6.4 billion after the social media platform's initial public offering was priced at \$34 per share.

The price announced late Wednesday came in at the top end of the target range set by Reddit's investment bankers as they spent the past few weeks gauging investor demand for the stock. It sets the stage for Reddit's shares to begin trading Thursday on the New York Stock Exchange under the ticker symbol "RDDT" in a debut likely to spur a flurry of commentary on Reddit's own platform, as well as competing social media outlets.

The interest surrounding Reddit stems largely from a large audience that religiously visits the service to discuss a potpourri of subjects that range from silly memes to existential worries, as well as to get recommendations from like-minded people.

By tech industry's standards though, Reddit remains extraordinarily small for a company that has been around since 2005.

Meta Platforms — whose biggest social media service Facebook was started just 18 months earlier than Reddit — boasts a market value of more than \$1.2 trillion. Meta also generates annual revenue of \$135 billion, while Reddit's remains below \$1 billion.

And then there is this problem: Reddit has never profited from its broad reach, while piling up cumulative losses of \$717 million. That number has swollen from cumulative losses of \$467 million in December 2021, when the company first filed papers to go public before aborting that attempt.

In the documents filed for its revived IPO, Reddit attributed the losses to a fairly recent focus on finding new ways to boost revenue.

But Reddit will now have more money in the bank to finance its ambitions to expand its influence and reel in more revenue in the process.

The IPO raised about \$748 million, including about \$228 million for Reddit shareholders who opted to sell some of their stock. Another \$519 million is earmarked for Reddit, but the San Francisco-based company won't receive all that money because it still has to pay commissions and other costs associated with the offering. Bankers still have a 30-day window to sell another 3.3 million shares that would raise an additional \$112 million, before deducting commissions and fees.

Reddit set aside up to 1.76 million of the 15.3 million shares being offered in the IPO for users of its platform. Per the usual IPO custom, the remaining shares were bought primarily by mutual funds and other institutional investors betting Reddit is ready for prime time in finance.

## 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.

# Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, March 21, 2024 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 269 ~ 64 of 87

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 1-2% this year, after lifting prices in 2022.

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.

## **Federal Reserve still foresees 3 interest rate cuts this year despite bump in inflation**

By CHRISTOPHER RUGABER AP Economics Writer

WASHINGTON (AP) — Federal Reserve officials signaled Wednesday that they still expect to cut their key interest rate three times in 2024, fueling a rally on Wall Street, despite signs that inflation remained elevated at the start of the year.

For now, the officials kept their benchmark rate unchanged for a fifth straight time.

Speaking at a news conference, Chair Jerome Powell said the surprising pickup in inflation in January and February hadn't fundamentally changed the Fed's picture of the economy: The central bank still expects inflation to continue to cool, though more gradually than it thought three months ago.

The recent high inflation readings followed six months of steady slowdowns in price increases. Economists and Wall Street investors were looking for some clarification Wednesday about how the latest inflation reports were viewed at the Fed.

The January and February data, Powell said, "haven't really changed the overall story, which is that of inflation moving down gradually on a sometimes bumpy road towards 2%," the Fed's target.

# Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, March 21, 2024 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 269 ~ 65 of 87

In new quarterly projections they issued, the policymakers forecast that stronger growth and inflation above their 2% target level would persist into next year. Overall, the forecasts suggest that the Fed still expects an unusual combination: A healthy job market and economy in tandem with inflation that continues to cool — just more gradually than they had predicted three months ago.

For this year, the Fed projected that the economy will expand 2.1% — a big increase from its December forecast of just 1.4%. Yet at the same time, it still expects inflation to keep declining, though slowly.

Michael Gapen, chief U.S. economist at Bank of America, said the Fed's updated projections suggest that it expects improvements in supply chains and the availability of workers to continue, allowing the economy to grow even as inflation slows to the Fed's target. Rising immigration, for example, has made it easier for businesses to hire without having to rapidly raise pay.

"It looks to me like they're embracing that supply-side story," Gapen said. That means "you can cut while growth is solid, and you can cut while the labor market is strong."

Rate cuts would, over time, lead to lower costs for home and auto loans, credit card borrowing and business loans. They might also aid President Joe Biden's re-election bid, which is facing widespread public unhappiness over higher prices and could benefit from an economic jolt stemming from lower borrowing rates.

The financial markets cheered the message Wednesday from Powell and the Fed, with traders sending the Dow Jones industrial average surging 1%, to another all-time high.

"Inflation has come way down, and that gives us the ability to approach this question carefully and feel more confident that inflation is moving down sustainably," Powell said. "It is still likely ... that we will see that confidence and that there will be rate cuts."

The Fed's policymakers did make some small adjustments in their outlook: Their projections showed that in 2025, they now foresee only three rate cuts, down from the four they envisioned in their December forecasts.

One reason may be that they expect "core" inflation, which excludes volatile food and energy costs, to still be 2.6% by the end of 2024, up from their previous projection of 2.4%. In January, core inflation was 2.8%, according to the Fed's preferred measure.

The Fed's forecasts overall, suggest that

Most economists have pegged the Fed's June meeting as the most likely time for it to announce its first rate cut, which would begin to reverse the 11 hikes it imposed beginning two years ago. The Fed's hikes have helped lower annual inflation from a peak of 9.1% in June 2022 to 3.2%. But they have also made borrowing much costlier for businesses and households.

Though consumer inflation has tumbled since mid-2022, it has remained stuck above 3%. And in the first two months of 2024, the cost of services, like rents, hotels and hospital stays, remained elevated. That suggested that high borrowing rates weren't sufficiently slowing inflation in the economy's vast service sector.

While the Fed's rate hikes typically make borrowing more expensive for homes, cars, appliances and other costly goods, they have much less effect on services spending, which doesn't usually involve loans. With the economy still healthy, there is no compelling reason for the Fed to cut rates until it feels inflation is sustainably under control.

"There's no urgency for them," said Luke Tilley, chief economist at Wilmington Trust, a wealth management company. "They've got a strong economy, strong labor market."

In most respects, the U.S. economy remains healthy. Employers keep hiring, unemployment remains low, and the stock market is hovering at record highs. Yet average consumer prices remain much higher than they were before the pandemic — a source of unhappiness for many Americans for which Republicans have sought to pin blame on Biden.

And there are signs that the economy could weaken in the coming months. Americans slowed their spending at retailers in January and February, for example. The unemployment rate has reached 3.9% — still a healthy level, but up from a half-century low last year of 3.4%. And much of the hiring in recent months has occurred in government, health care and private education, with many other industries barely adding any jobs.

Other major central banks are also keeping rates high to ensure that they have a firm handle on consumer price spikes. In Europe, pressure is building to lower borrowing costs as inflation drops and economic growth stalls. The European Central Bank's leader hinted this month that a possible rate cut could come in June, while the Bank of England isn't expected to open the door to any imminent cut when it meets Thursday.

## As Texas border arrests law teeters in court, other GOP states also push tougher immigration policy

By JONATHAN MATTISE Associated Press

NASHVILLE, Tenn. (AP) — Republican lawmakers across the country were already jockeying to push their states deeper into immigration enforcement when the Supreme Court, if only briefly, let Texas enforce a new law giving police broad powers to arrest migrants suspected of crossing the border illegally.

Within hours Tuesday, another court blocked the Texas law again. The same day, Iowa passed a similar bill.

In New Hampshire, lawmakers are nearing passage of legislation to let police bring trespassing charges against people suspected of illegally entering the U.S. from Canada.

Georgia Republicans have advanced a proposal requiring eligible cities and counties to seek agreements to perform some immigration-related enforcement in jails to help the federal government after police accused a Venezuelan man of beating nursing student Laken Riley to death on the University of Georgia campus. Immigration authorities say the man unlawfully crossed into the U.S. in 2022. It is unclear whether he had applied for asylum.

On Wednesday, the state Senate honored Riley's family. During the ceremony, her father, Jason Riley, blamed immigrant-protecting sanctuary policies in Athens, where University of Georgia is located, for his daughter's death and urged Gov. Brian Kemp to declare an "invasion," Texas' argument to defend a series of escalating measures along the border. Last month, a federal judge in Texas rejected those claims while blocking the state's new arrest law.

"A man with an evil heart stole her life. He was in this country and in this state illegally," Jason Riley said. "My vision for every senator in this chamber is that you protect citizens from this illegal invasion."

Meanwhile, it's yet to be seen what Republican-led states, many of which are pushing different bills and sending their National Guard members to the border, will embrace the Texas-style bill, particularly if another court ruling favors the policy. Oklahoma isn't waiting to test the waters — GOP House and Senate leaders embraced the idea of a Texas-style anti-immigration law, with House Speaker Charles McCall announcing plans Wednesday to immediately introduce a similar measure.

The Biden administration is suing to block the Texas measure, arguing it's a clear violation of federal authority that would cause chaos in immigration law and wreak havoc on international relations.

Tennessee lawmakers are approaching the finish line on a proposal to require law enforcement agencies there to communicate with federal immigration authorities if they discover people are in the country illegally. For the brief time Texas had the all-clear to enforce its law Tuesday, the Tennessee House and Senate speakers expressed openness to considering a similar policy.

"We are monitoring the Texas situation as Gov. Abbott works to protect his state," House Speaker Cameron Sexton said.

Muzaffar Chishti, a senior fellow at the Migration Policy Institute, said these kinds of immigration policies are typically driven by political motivation and come with serious complications for resource-strapped law enforcement agencies that lack immigration expertise.

"To train a bunch of state officers in a field of enforcement in which they have zero background and zero training is an operational headache," Chishti said.

Under Iowa's bill, entering the state after previously being denied entry to the U.S. would become an aggravated misdemeanor, or a felony under some circumstances, including during an arrest for a different felony.

"The federal government has abdicated its responsibilities and states can and must act," Republican Rep. Steven Holt said.

# Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, March 21, 2024 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 269 ~ 67 of 87

Democratic Rep. Sami Scheetz argued immigration was constitutionally reserved for the federal government.

"Illegal immigration is a serious problem that requires action, yet the approach laid out in this bill misses the heart of what it truly means to address this issue with compassion, wisdom and effectiveness," Scheetz said.

The bill awaiting Republican Gov. Kim Reynolds' signature would take effect July 1.

New Hampshire's border bill dealing with Canada, meanwhile, would follow only 21 apprehensions in the state between October 2022 and December 2023, even as the U.S. Customs and Border Protection enforcement area that includes New Hampshire, New York, Vermont and Maine has seen a dramatic increase in illegal border activity since 2021.

The Republican-led New Hampshire Senate passed the trespassing bill last month. Republicans have a slimmer House majority, but the bill's sponsor, Senate President Jeb Bradley, expects it to pass.

Even with the Texas law again on hold, the former U.S. representative said he thinks courts are moving toward giving states more authority, boding well for legislation like his.

"The magnitude of the problem has gotten significantly worse," Bradley said Wednesday. "We can't wait for Congress."

Some Democratic-led states are pursuing expansions of immigrant rights, including Maryland, where lawmakers are closing in on a bill to seek a federal waiver to let people buy health insurance through the state's health care exchange, regardless of immigration status.

In Massachusetts, which has struggled to find shelter for thousands of migrants streaming into the state, a bill is advancing to limit how long homeless people can stay in emergency state shelters to nine months with an additional three months for those employed or enrolled in job training programs.

Earlier this month, Arizona Democratic Gov. Katie Hobbs vetoed a bill modeled on the Texas law. Since then, Republican lawmakers have vowed to pass a similar bill and send it to Hobbs.

Arizona lawmakers are pursuing a measure, which would go to voters for approval and therefore bypass a potential Hobbs veto, that would require local governments that receive state money for welfare programs to use a federal employment verification database to check whether recipients are in the U.S. legally and remove those who aren't from the program.

Opponents consider Texas' law the most dramatic state attempt to police immigration since an Arizona law more than a decade ago, key portions of which were struck down by the Supreme Court. That law would have allowed police to arrest people for federal immigration violations, often referred to by opponents as the "show me your papers" bill.

Among the various legislation proposed in GOP-led states, Georgia has an additional bill that would punish cities and counties that Republicans say are using so-called sanctuary policies to illegally harbor immigrants who are in the country without permission by cutting off most state aid to the local government and removing elected officials from office.

Florida has already passed legislation to increase sentences for immigrants in the country illegally who are convicted of driving without a license or committing felonies.

Tennessee additionally is considering whether to allow judges to sentence someone in the country illegally to life without parole for a violent crime involving a deadly weapon or on school property. Another Tennessee proposal would make it a misdemeanor to knowingly or recklessly transport someone who is in the country illegally into the state.

Immigrants were holding an advocacy day Tuesday at Tennessee's Capitol when the Supreme Court temporary ruling came down, shocking the group. Lisa Sherman Luna, the Tennessee Immigrant & Refugee Rights Coalition's executive director, said the Texas law sets a "horrifying precedent" for communities and the country.

"How 'united' will our states be when they each have different laws on who can call them home?" Luna said.

## Caitlin Clark, freshmen JuJu Watkins and Hannah Hidalgo top AP women's All-America team

By DOUG FEINBERG AP Basketball Writer

Caitlin Clark has been a mainstay on The Associated Press All-America team the past few seasons.

The NCAA's all-time scoring leader from Iowa was honored for the third straight year Wednesday, becoming the 11th player to earn the distinction three times. She was a unanimous choice from the 35-member national media panel that chooses the AP Top 25 each week.

Clark was joined on the first team by Stanford's Cameron Brink, UConn's Paige Bueckers and freshmen JuJu Watkins of USC and Hannah Hidalgo of Notre Dame. They are only the fourth and fifth freshmen to make the AP team since it began in 1994-95, joining Oklahoma's Courtney Paris, UConn's Maya Moore and Bueckers.

"We've had a front row seat to JuJu, but what Hannah's done is unbelievable," USC coach Lindsay Gottlieb said. "Coach Niele (Ivey) has done an incredible job."

Clark joins a select group with her third first-team honor: South Carolina's A'ja Wilson and Aliyah Boston, Baylor's Brittney Griner, Tennessee's Chamique Holdsclaw, Duke's Alana Beard, Paris, Oregon's Sabrina Ionescu, Kentucky's Rhyne Howard and UConn's Breanna Stewart and Moore. Paris and Moore did it four times.

Clark, who earned second-team honors as a freshman, led the nation in scoring averaging 31.9 points per game as well as being tops in assists with 8.9. The Iowa native became the first Division I player to have consecutive 1,000-point seasons and to also top 3,000 points and 1,000 assists for her career.

"That is mind-boggling when you think about it," Iowa coach Lisa Bluder said. "I mean, everybody's defensive plan is to stop her, and nobody's been able to figure out really how to do it. She's faced every kind of defense. She really knows how to pick them apart."

Watkins took the country by storm as a freshman. She has already scored 810 points, which is fourth most for a freshman all-time. She averaged 27 points, which was second behind Clark and added 7.2 rebounds, 3.2 assists, 2.4 steals and 1.5 blocks to help the Trojans win the Pac-12 Tournament for the first time since 2014. She is the first USC player to earn first-team AP honors.

"JuJu came to a program that while there's a proud history, there's been nothing significant done in many, many years," Gottlieb said. "It's very rare for a player of her level to go to a program that's not already at the top. She's answered every bell."

Hidalgo was incredible on both ends of the floor for the Fighting Irish, helping lead them to the ACC Tournament title. She averaged 23.3 points, 6.4 rebounds and 5.5 assists and also led the nation in steals, averaging 4.6 a game.

"She deserves to be listed amongst the best in women's basketball," Ivey said. "Hannah is a fierce competitor and an elite performer who rises to the occasion and has been extremely consistent and dominant this season."

Bueckers finally made it through a season healthy after missing most of the past two years because of injuries. She returned to the form that earned her AP Player of the Year honors as a freshman, averaging 21.3 points, 4.8 rebounds and 3.7 assists for the Huskies.

"She's one of those unique superstars that wants to be that at both ends of the floor," UConn coach Geno Auriemma said. "Not everyone values those same things. She gets a lot of enjoyment out of the rebounding that she can do, the blocked shots, the steals, stealing the inbounds pass on the out-of-bounds play. She just has a great sense of the game and what's happening next. I think that's probably why she's never surprised, because I think she always knows what's happening next."

Brink averaged 17.8 points, 12 rebounds and 3.5 blocks, which led the nation. She became only the second player in the past 24 years to have 100 blocks and 100 assists in the same season, joining Stewart, who did it three times.

"Cam is the best two-way player in the nation and a dominant force at both ends," Stanford coach Tara VanDerveer said. "In addition to all the points, rebounds and blocks, she's a selfless teammate and a willing passer who makes everyone around her better."

Clark, Brink and Bueckers were all on the preseason AP All-America team. They were joined by LSU's Angel Reese, Indiana's Mackenzie Holmes and Virginia Tech's Elizabeth Kitley.

## SECOND TEAM

The AP second team was headlined by Kitley, who was the ACC player of the year for a third straight season. She was joined by Reese, South Carolina's Kamilla Cardoso, Texas' Madison Booker and Ohio State's Jacy Sheldon.

## THIRD TEAM

The AP third team was Utah's Alissa Pili, Holmes, Syracuse's Daisha Fair, Virginia Tech's Georgia Amore and Oregon State's Reagan Beers.

## HONORABLE MENTION

Ayoka Lee of Kansas State, and Aaliyah Edwards of UConn were the leading vote-getters among players who didn't make the three All-America teams. Players earned honorable-mention status if they appeared on one of the ballots.

## The Latest | Airstrike in the West Bank kills at least 3 Palestinian militants, officials say

By The Associated Press undefined

An Israeli airstrike has killed at least three Palestinian militants traveling in a car in the northern West Bank near the town of Jenin, according to Israeli and Palestinian officials. The Islamic Jihad militant group claimed the three dead men as members. The airstrike occurred as raids of the largest hospital in the Gaza Strip raged on for a third day.

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has said he is determined to carry out a Rafah ground offensive, even as tensions between Israel and the United States intensify.

U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken will travel to Israel this week as part of his sixth urgent mission to the Middle East since the Israel-Hamas war began last October.

At least 31,819 Palestinians have been killed, according to Gaza's Health Ministry, which doesn't differentiate between civilians and combatants in its count but says women and children make up two-thirds of the dead. A United Nations food agency warned that "famine is imminent" in northern Gaza.

Palestinian militants killed some 1,200 people in the surprise Oct. 7 attack out of Gaza that triggered the war, and abducted another 250 people. Hamas is still believed to be holding some 100 people hostage, as well as the remains of 30 others.

Currently:

- Blinken adds Israel stop to latest Mideast tour as tensions rise over Gaza war
- During the Israel-Hamas war, Jews will soon celebrate Purim — one of their most joyous holidays
- Heavy fighting rages around Gaza's biggest hospital as Israel raids it for a second day
- Gaza and Haiti are on the brink of famine, experts say
- Find more of AP's coverage at <https://apnews.com/hub/israel-hamas-war>

Here's the latest:

### PALESTINIAN POLL FINDS THAT SUPPORT FOR HAMAS HAS DROPPED

RAMALLAH, West Bank — A poll of Palestinian public opinion shows that support for Hamas has dropped since the last such survey in December, but the militant group remains the preferred political party among Palestinians.

The poll, released Wednesday by the West Bank-based Palestinian Center for Policy and Survey Research, asked Palestinians in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip which political party they favor and 34% said Hamas, 17% preferred Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas' Fatah, 11% favored a third party and 37% said none or that they didn't know.

In the last poll, 43% of Palestinians preferred Hamas compared to 17% for Fatah.

More than five months into the devastating war, more than 70% of Palestinians in Gaza say they support Hamas' decision to attack Israel on Oct. 7, up from 57% in December's poll. In the West Bank, support

# Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, March 21, 2024 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 269 ~ 70 of 87

for the attack dropped from 82% in December to 71%. Nearly two-thirds of Palestinians say they expect Hamas to win the war.

The survey asked Palestinians in Gaza about their food insecurity, and 55% said they do not have enough food to last a day or two.

Those findings were similar to November's results, but due to security concerns the poll did not send data collectors to question Palestinians in northern Gaza, where the humanitarian crisis is at its most acute.

The poll questioned 1,580 adults, 830 in the West Bank and 750 in the Gaza Strip between March 5-10 and had a margin of error of 3 percentage points.

## ISRAELI AIRSTRIKE KILLS AT LEAST 3 PALESTINIAN MILITANTS IN THE WEST BANK

JERUSALEM — An Israeli airstrike has killed at least three Palestinian militants traveling in a car in the northern West Bank, according to Israeli and Palestinian officials.

The Palestinian Red Crescent said three passengers in the car were killed in Wednesday's strike near the town of Jenin, while another was wounded. The Islamic Jihad militant group claimed the three dead men as members.

The Israeli army said that all four occupants of the car were wanted militants.

Over the past few years Jenin has become a major flashpoint in the decades long Israeli-Palestinian violence.

Violence across the occupied West Bank has surged since the Israel-Hamas war broke out last Oct. 7, when Palestinian militants broke into southern Israel, killing 1,200 people and kidnapping 250 others.

The Palestinian Authority, which administers semi-autonomous parts of the West Bank, has a limited foothold in Jenin. At least 435 Palestinians have been killed in the West Bank by Israeli fire since the conflict broke out, according to Palestinian health officials.

## REPORT SAYS UNRWA HAS 'CRITICAL AREAS' THE NEED ADDRESSING TO ENSURE NEUTRALITY

UNITED NATIONS — An interim report by an independent group investigating the beleaguered U.N. agency supporting Palestinian refugees in Gaza has identified "critical areas" that need to be addressed to ensure its neutrality.

The group chaired by former French foreign minister Catherine Colonna presented its interim report to Secretary General Antonio Guterres on Tuesday, U.N. associate spokesperson Florencia Soto Niño-Martinez told reporters Wednesday.

Guterres ordered the independent review of the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees known as UNRWA on Feb. 5 after Israel alleged that 12 members of its 13,000 staff in Gaza participated in Hamas' Oct. 7 attack in southern Israel that sparked the Israel-Hamas war.

The group has found "that UNRWA has in place a significant number of mechanisms and procedures to ensure compliance with the humanitarian principle of neutrality," Soto Niño-Martinez said. "The group has also identified critical areas that still need to be addressed."

She gave no other details but said the review group "will now develop concrete and realistic recommendations on how to address these critical areas to strengthen and improve UNRWA."

Soto Niño-Martinez reaffirmed that the group's final report is due on April 20 and will be made public.

Colonna has been conducting the review with three research organizations: the Raoul Wallenberg Institute in Sweden, the Chr. Michelsen Institute in Norway and the Danish Institute for Human Rights.

A separate review of the Israeli allegations is being conducted by the U.N.'s internal watchdog, the Office of Internal Oversight Services. More than a dozen countries suspended funding for UNRWA following the Israeli allegations.

## ISRAELI MILITARY SAYS IT ARRESTED 350 PALESTINIANS IN RAID AT SHIFA

JERUSALEM — The Israeli military says it has arrested 350 Palestinians in its raid on Gaza's main hospital, now in its third day.

The military said forces were still operating in the area of Shifa Hospital in Gaza City on Wednesday. It says it found rifles, grenades and other weapons inside the hospital.

Israel said it raided the hospital because Hamas fighters had regrouped inside and were directing attacks from the compound.

# Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, March 21, 2024 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 269 ~ 71 of 87

The military says it has killed dozens of militants in the raid, a claim that could not be independently confirmed.

Gaza officials said thousands of Palestinian patients, medical staff and displaced people were trapped inside the sprawling complex during the raid, although the military said it was allowing passage for anyone who wanted to leave.

The Shifa medical complex had only partially resumed operations after a destructive Israeli raid in November.

The surge in fighting in Gaza City has raised questions about Israel's pledge to destroy Hamas' military capabilities. The group's continued presence comes months after Israel claimed it had defeated Hamas' forces there and taken control of the area.

## 22 PALESTINIANS RECEIVING MEDICAL CARE IN ISRAEL ORDERED TO LEAVE

JERUSALEM — Israeli authorities have ordered a group of Palestinian medical patients who received treatment for life-threatening illnesses in Israel to return to the war-torn Gaza Strip, saying they no longer are in need of care.

Physicians for Human Rights-Israel, a local advocacy group, says at least 22 Palestinians are affected by the order. It says they include cancer patients, babies, new mothers and older people.

Before the war erupted last October, Israel allowed Palestinians with serious conditions to enter the country for treatment not available in Gaza. Those services have all but halted since the Oct. 7 cross-border attack by Hamas.

Nearly six months of fighting have displaced over 80% of Gaza's population, destroyed tens of thousands of homes and left the territory's health care system barely functioning. Physicians for Human Rights-Israel said the Israeli evacuation order has endangered the lives of recovering patients.

"Returning residents to Gaza during a military conflict and a humanitarian crisis is against international law and poses a deliberate risk to innocent lives," the group said. "All the more so when it concerns patients who may face a death sentence due to insanitary conditions and hunger, along with the unlikely availability of medical care."

Aseel Abu Raas, a spokeswoman for the group, said COGAT, the Israeli defense agency responsible for Palestinian civilians, had ordered the patients to leave by 3 a.m. Thursday.

In a statement, COGAT said Palestinians who do not need medical treatment will be returned to Gaza while those still needing treatment will stay, but did not elaborate.

Officials at two of the affected hospitals, Augusta Victoria and Makassed, east Jerusalem institutions that serve the Palestinian population, did not immediately return messages seeking comment. Sheba Hospital, a major Israeli institution, declined comment.

Physicians for Human Rights-Israel said late Wednesday that after it asked for an injunction, Israel's Supreme Court froze the order for at least 13 Palestinians.

Israel previously rounded up and deported several thousand Palestinian laborers from Gaza who had been working in Israel before the war.

It remains unclear how many Palestinian medical patients remain in Israel for treatment.

## WORLD BANK REPORT SAYS FAMINE IS IMMINENT IN NORTHERN GAZA STRIP

WASHINGTON — Famine is imminent for Palestinians in the northern Gaza Strip and is projected to affect adults and children between now and May, according to a World Bank food security report released on Wednesday.

"The situation in the Gaza Strip has reached catastrophic levels," the report warned.

Roughly 1.11 million people, or half of the Gaza Strip's population, are in Phase 5 of the IPC Food Insecurity Scale — known as the "Catastrophe Phase" of extreme food shortage and unable to meet basic needs. Virtually all households skip meals daily and a significant portion of children under two are suffering from acute malnutrition, the report states.

The report recommends "restoring humanitarian access, curbing hostilities, and ensuring the safe delivery of aid to the population in need."

Wednesday's report echoes similar findings released Monday in a report from the Integrated Food Se-

curity Phase Classification, an agency that monitors hunger globally.

## IRAN'S TOP LEADER SAYS COUNTRY WILL CONTINUE SUPPORTING FIGHTERS

TEHRAN, Iran — Iran's supreme leader in his Persian New Year speech, said that his country will continue supporting anyone who fights with Israel, state TV reported Wednesday.

In a live broadcast, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei said that a great oppression is being done in the region due to the existence of Israel. "This is a very great oppression that has been going on for 10 years and this oppression must be stopped," he said.

"Whoever enters this great jihad, humanitarian jihad, Islamic jihad, conscientious jihad, we support him and help him, and with the grace of God, we will achieve our goal," Khamenei added.

The Iranian leader also rejected any accusation by the United States against his country about its role in the Israel-Hamas war and called it a U.S. miscalculation.

Khamenei also said that U.S. understanding of regional issues is wrong.

"Anywhere in this region — in Yemen, Syria, Lebanon — any action is taken by the fighting and brave forces of resistance, the Americans attributed it to Iran. This false analogy will definitely bring America to its knees," he said.

## MOURNERS PRAY OVER 28 KILLED IN ISRAELI AIRSTRIKES

DEIR AL-BALAH, Gaza Strip — Mourners held funeral prayers Wednesday morning outside a hospital in central Gaza for 28 people killed in three separate Israeli airstrikes on urban refugee camps.

Associated Press footage showed mourners praying over the bodies, which were wrapped in funeral shrouds, before the bodies were taken away in donkey carts for burial.

Nineteen people, including five women and nine children, were killed when a strike flattened a family home late Tuesday in the urban Nuseirat refugee camp. Another person was killed in a separate strike in the camp. A strike in the nearby Bureij camp killed eight people, including three women.

The dead were brought to the Al-Aqsa Martyrs' Hospital, the main medical facility in central Gaza. An Associated Press reporter saw the bodies and their names in hospital records.

Nuseirat and Bureij are among several dense, built-up refugee camps in Gaza that date back to 1948, when an estimated 700,000 Palestinians fled or were driven from their homes in what is now Israel during the war surrounding its creation. Refugees and their descendants make up a majority of Gaza's population of 2.3 million.

## EPA issues new auto rules aimed at cutting carbon emissions, boosting electric vehicles and hybrids

By MATTHEW DALY and TOM KRISHER Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — The Biden administration announced new automobile emissions standards Wednesday that officials called the most ambitious plan ever to cut planet-warming emissions from passenger vehicles.

The new rules relax initial tailpipe limits proposed last year but eventually get close to the same strict standards set out by the Environmental Protection Agency.

The rules come as sales of electric vehicles, which are needed to meet the standards, have begun to slow. The auto industry cited lower sales growth in objecting to the EPA's preferred standards unveiled last April as part of its ambitious plan to cut planet-warming emissions from passenger vehicles.

The EPA said that under its final rule, the industry could meet the limits if 56% of new vehicle sales are electric by 2032, along with at least 13% plug-in hybrids or other partially electric cars, as well as more efficient gasoline-powered cars that get more miles to the gallon.

That would be a huge increase over current EV sales, which rose to 7.6% of new vehicle sales last year, up from 5.8% in 2022.

The new standards will avoid more than 7 billion tons of planet-warming carbon emissions over the next three decades and provide nearly \$100 billion in annual net benefits, the EPA said, including lower health care

# Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, March 21, 2024 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 269 ~ 73 of 87

costs, fewer deaths and more than \$60 billion in reduced annual costs for fuel, maintenance and repairs.

President Joe Biden, who has made fighting climate change a hallmark of his presidency, cited "historic progress" on his pledge that half of all new cars and trucks sold in the U.S. will be zero-emission by 2030.

"We'll meet my goal for 2030 and race forward in the years ahead," Biden said in a statement Wednesday.

## WHAT IS EPA PROPOSING?

The EPA rule applies to model years 2027 to 2032 and will significantly reduce emissions of planet-warming greenhouse gases, as well as other air pollution such as nitrogen oxides and particulate matter from new passenger cars, light trucks and pickups.

Transportation makes up the largest source of U.S. greenhouse gas emissions, and cars and trucks account for more than half of those emissions. The EPA said the new rule will help "tackle the climate crisis" while accelerating the adoption of cleaner vehicle technologies. The agency is finalizing the rule as sales of clean vehicles, including plug-in hybrid and fully electric vehicles, hit record highs last year.

The new rule slows implementation of stricter pollution standards from 2027 through 2029, after the auto industry called proposed benchmarks unworkable. The rule ramps up to nearly reach the level the EPA preferred by 2032.

"Let me be clear: Our final rule delivers the same, if not more, pollution reduction than we set out in our proposal," EPA Administrator Michael Regan told reporters. In addition to carbon pollution, the final standards also will reduce other serious air pollution that contributes to heart attacks, respiratory illnesses, aggravated asthma and decreased lung function, Regan said.

"Folks, these new standards are so important for public health, for American jobs, for our economy and for our planet," he said.

The standards are designed to be technology-neutral and performance-based, Regan said, giving car and truck manufacturers the flexibility to choose pollution-control technologies that are best suited for their customers while meeting environmental and public health goals.

## WHY DID EPA CHANGE THE PROPOSED RULE?

The changes appear aimed at addressing strong industry and labor opposition to the accelerated ramp-up of EVs, along with public reluctance to fully embrace the new technology. There is also a legitimate threat of legal challenges before conservative courts.

The Supreme Court, with a 6-3 conservative majority, has increasingly reined in the powers of federal agencies, including the EPA, in recent years. The justices have restricted the EPA's authority to fight air and water pollution — including a landmark 2022 ruling that limited the EPA's authority to regulate carbon dioxide emissions from power plants that contribute to global warming.

At the same time, the Democratic president needs cooperation from the auto industry and political support from auto workers, a key political voting bloc.

"U.S. workers will lead the world on autos — making clean cars and trucks, each stamped 'Made in America,'" Biden said Wednesday. "You have my word."

The United Auto Workers union, which has endorsed Biden, said it supports rules that benefit workers and the environment, not just the industry. The new rule protects workers who build combustion engine vehicles "while providing a path forward for automakers to implement the full range of automotive technologies to reduce emissions," the union said.

## HOW ARE THE NEW RULES BEING RECEIVED?

Generally, environmental groups have been optimistic about the new EPA plan, which is aimed at slashing emissions from a source that causes one-fifth of the nation's carbon pollution.

David Cooke, senior vehicles analyst for the Union of Concerned Scientists, said the rule would significantly reduce vehicle pollution from current requirements. But the standards are weaker than those EPA proposed a year ago and make it unlikely that the U.S. will be able to meet its commitments under the 2015 Paris Climate Accord, which aims to keep global warming from increasing more than 2 degrees Celsius (3.6 degrees Fahrenheit) since pre-industrial times, he said.

Still, the new rules over time will prevent more carbon pollution "than the entire U.S. economy coughs

up in a year," said Manish Bapna, president of the Natural Resources Defense Council. In the short term, the rules "will save drivers money at the pump and cut tailpipe pollution that endangers public health," he added.

"In the longer journey to confront the climate crisis, these standards take us in the right direction," he said.

But Dan Becker at the Center for Biological Diversity said he fears loopholes will let the industry continue to sell gas burners. He also is afraid the industry will get away with doing little during the first three years of the standards, which could be undone if former President Donald Trump is reelected.

"The bottom line is that the administration is caving to pressure from big oil, big auto and the dealers to stall progress on EVs and now allow more pollution from cars," Becker said.

#### WHAT DO REPUBLICANS SAY?

Republicans criticized the new standards, saying they essentially decide for the public which vehicles they should buy. "These regulations represent yet another step toward an unrealistic transition to electric vehicles that Americans do not want and cannot afford," said West Virginia Sen. Shelley Moore Capito.

House Speaker Mike Johnson, R-Louisiana, called the rule a "misguided electric vehicle mandate" that will force the U.S. to rely on China and other foes for critical minerals needed for batteries.

Regan said the government isn't requiring people to buy EVs or any other technology, adding that there are "multiple pathways companies can choose to comply" with the rule.

"We are staying well within the confines of the law and our statutory authority by not mandating a specific technology," he said.

The EPA could achieve its carbon pollution goals even if sales of battery electric vehicles are as low as 30% in 2032, as long as other standards are met, he said.

U.S. electric vehicle sales grew 47% last year to a record 1.19 million as EV market share rose to 7.6%. But EV sales growth slowed toward the end of the year. In December, they rose 34%.

#### WHAT DOES THE CAR INDUSTRY THINK?

The Alliance for Auto Innovation, a large industry trade group, praised the EPA's slower implementation of the standards, saying the pace of the EV transition matters as the industry moves to produce more electric vehicles and plug-in hybrids to convert more traveling miles to electricity. The group had complained that the ramp-up to 67% initially proposed by the EPA was too fast for the industry to achieve. The proposal was faster than Biden's goal of ensuring that EVs account for half of new vehicles in the U.S. by 2030.

"Moderating the pace of EV adoption was the right call because it prioritizes more reasonable electrification targets in the next few, very critical years of the transition," said John Bozzella, the Alliance CEO.

The adjusted emissions targets will still be a stretch for the industry to achieve, Bozzella said, but they should give the market and parts supply chains a chance to catch up to higher EV sales. The plan also gives the industry more time to set up public charging stations, and it allows government tax incentives for EV manufacturing and for consumers to buy EVs to take hold, he said.

Toyota, the top seller of hybrid vehicles in the U.S., said it believes the fastest way to reduce carbon emissions quickly is to give consumers choices of battery electric vehicles and hybrids. The new EPA standards allow for more sales of plug-in hybrids and regular gas-electric hybrids to meet emissions limits.

## **Blinken adds Israel stop to latest Mideast tour as tensions rise over Gaza war**

By MATTHEW LEE AP Diplomatic Writer

JEDDAH, Saudi Arabia (AP) — U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken will travel to Israel this week as part of his sixth urgent mission to the Middle East since the Israelis' war with Hamas began in October, as relations between the two countries have soured dramatically in recent weeks.

The visit comes amid a flurry of calls, planned trips by U.S. and Israeli officials and public airings of severe disagreements over the state of the conflict — notably Israeli plans to mount a major military operation in the southern Gaza city of Rafah and what will happen to Gaza after the war ends.

# Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, March 21, 2024 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 269 ~ 75 of 87

The State Department said the Israel stop would cap Blinken's latest Mideast tour that started in Saudi Arabia on Wednesday and will continue in Egypt on Thursday. The top U.S. diplomat will be in Tel Aviv on Friday after talks with Arab leaders and foreign ministers in Jeddah and Cairo focused on the war in Gaza.

"In Israel, Secretary Blinken will discuss with the leadership of the government of Israel the ongoing negotiations to secure the release of all hostages," State Department spokesman Matthew Miller said. "He will discuss the need to ensure the defeat of Hamas, including in Rafah, in a way that protects the civilian population, does not hinder the delivery of humanitarian assistance, and advances Israel's overall security."

Tensions between the U.S. and Israel over the prosecution of the Gaza war have been mounting for months over rising civilian casualties. And they have intensified as Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has repeatedly said he will ignore President Joe Biden's warnings not to start a large-scale ground operation in Rafah without credible plans to protect innocent Palestinians who have sought refuge there.

Biden, facing a tough re-election campaign ahead of November's presidential election, is under growing domestic pressure to rein in Israel's military response to the Oct. 7 Hamas attacks in Israel. Opposition to the war in the United States, Arab nations and much of the rest of the world has shaped the evolution of Blinken's frequent trips to the region since October.

His first two visits were largely focused on re-affirming U.S. support for Israel in the immediate aftermath of the Hamas attacks, but as civilian Palestinian casualties began to multiply and humanitarian conditions in Gaza deteriorated, his emphasis shifted to boosting humanitarian assistance and protecting innocents.

Since late last year, Blinken has also used his visits to stress the importance of Arab support for "day after" plans for Gaza and trying to coax Israeli leaders into accepting a status for the Palestinians that could help ensure Israel's long-term security.

As that shift has taken place, though, the situation in Gaza has gotten worse and relations between the U.S. and Israel have nosedived. Public disagreements between Biden and Netanyahu have become more frequent and more intense.

In a phone call with Biden on Monday, their first in more than a month, Netanyahu agreed to send a high-level delegation to Washington to discuss plans for the proposed Rafah operation, and the Pentagon said Tuesday that Israeli Defense Minister Yoav Gallant would visit the U.S. capital next week.

In his talks in Jeddah, Cairo and Tel Aviv, Blinken is expected to focus on attempts to negotiate a cease-fire and hostage release deal, increase humanitarian aid deliveries to Gaza by land, air and sea and plan for the territory's post-conflict future.

In the Red Sea city of Jeddah, Blinken met with Saudi Arabia's de facto leader, Crown Prince Mohamed bin Salman and Saudi Foreign Minister Prince Faisal bin Farhan. The prospect of normalization of relations between Saudi Arabia and Israel is seen as a potential point of leverage in pushing the Israelis on easing civilian suffering in Gaza.

Blinken and Prince Faisal "discussed the urgent need to protect all civilians in Gaza and immediately increase humanitarian assistance to those in need," the State Department said, adding that "resolving the conflict" and "preparing for the post-conflict phase" remain a top priority.

Blinken also "emphasized the United States' commitment to achieving sustained peace through the establishment of an independent Palestinian state with security guarantees for Israel," the department said in a statement.

But the Saudis have made clear that normalization won't happen unless it is accompanied by a clear commitment from Israel to accept an independent Palestinian state by a date certain. Netanyahu and many members of his far-right government are opposed to a Palestinian state.

In Cairo on Thursday, Blinken will see Egyptian officials as well as meet with a six-member Arab committee that includes foreign ministers of Egypt, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Jordan, Morocco and the Palestinian Authority, according to an Egyptian diplomat.

This group has been charged with exploring ways to revamp, reform and revitalize the Palestinian Authority for a possible governance role in Gaza once the war is over. The West Bank-based Palestinian Authority has committed to reforms and replaced some of its top leadership.

# Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, March 21, 2024 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 269 ~ 76 of 87

Blinken's discussions are also expected to touch on the cease-fire negotiations that have taken on new urgency as the humanitarian situation in Gaza has become increasingly dire.

Qatari officials, whose country is the main interlocutor with Hamas, said this week they were "cautiously optimistic" after talks with Israel's intelligence chief in Doha. But, Qatari Foreign Ministry spokesperson Majed al-Ansari said Tuesday that an Israeli ground operation in Rafah would set back any talks.

At least 31,819 Palestinians have been killed, according to Gaza's Health Ministry, which doesn't differentiate between civilians and combatants in its count but says women and children make up two-thirds of the dead. A United Nations food agency warned that "famine is imminent" in northern Gaza.

Palestinian militants killed some 1,200 people in the surprise Oct. 7 attack out of Gaza that triggered the war, and abducted another 250 people. Hamas is still believed to be holding some 100 people hostage, as well as the remains of 30 others.

## BYU's Aly Khalifa heads into March Madness without food or water while observing Ramadan

By DAVE SKRETTA AP Basketball Writer

OMAHA, Neb. (AP) — Aly Khalifa will set his alarm for 4:30 a.m. Thursday, a witching hour for a college kid if ever there was one, and roll out of bed for the same breakfast as always: scrambled eggs, yogurt, some fruit, all washed down with a whole lot of water.

It will be the last he eats or drinks for nearly 16 hours.

Then he will pray, prostrating in accordance with Ramadan, the holiest month for Muslims, not for leading BYU to victory in its game hours later against Duquesne but out of a profound sense of reverential devotion.

It is a fast Khalifa is embarking on willingly, yet one that carries with it unusual challenges during the NCAA Tournament. The energy the 6-foot-11 forward from Alexandria, Egypt, will expend on the court over 40 minutes cannot be replenished until much later in the day, after the sun mercifully drops over the horizon and darkness finally sets in.

"Not going to lie," Khalifa said in a corner of the Cougars' locker room Wednesday, having just stepped off the bus for practice at about the same time as tipoff will occur the following morning, "I'm real thirsty right now. That's the hardest part."

One of the Five Pillars of Islam is the "sawm," where during the ninth month of the Islamic calendar healthy adults are required to abstain from food and drink during daylight hours. The practice is intended to renew their awareness and gratitude for all that God has bestowed upon them, and to serve as a reminder of their religious obligation to help those less fortunate.

There are exceptions for children and the elderly, women who are pregnant and those who are traveling, and that could have given Khalifa a reprieve. In fact, BYU teammates Fousseyni Traore, a native of Mali, and Atiki Ally Atiki, who was recruited to the predominantly Mormon school from Tanzania, chose to observe Ramadan in other ways, such as extended prayer.

Yet Khalifa wanted to fast in earnest, putting faith in God — and the BYU training staff — he could endure such deprivation.

Cougars coach Mark Pope has provided leadership and guidance. Michael Davie, the school's director of sports science, has been meticulously monitoring his weight and hydration level. Robert Ramos, the director of sports medicine, is providing solidarity — "He's doing it with me," Khalifa said with a smile. "Rob was like, 'I got you.'"

They had a dry run last week during the Big 12 Tournament, where the Cougars won a second-round game against UCF before losing in the quarterfinals to Texas Tech. (Khalifa tweaked his ankle against the Red Raiders but is ready to go this week.)

"We're getting more comfortable with the schedule, more comfortable with the diet, more comfortable with the first thing he eats in the evening and how he rations it out," Pope said. "He's become way more comfortable. He's had a bit more juice (energy) every day. He's adjusted to it. I'm super proud of him. He's

# Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, March 21, 2024 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 269 ~ 77 of 87

an incredible example of faith and devotion.”

Cougars guard Richie Saunders, who has helped to raise money to build basketball courts in West Africa, knew Khalifa’s fast would be a tremendous sacrifice. But he also knew that a close-knit team that had successfully navigated its first season in the Big 12 to return to the NCAA Tournament for the first time in three years would be there to help.

They might need to play more minutes. Adjust their style. Provide emotional support, just as much as the physical kind.

“I knew that sacrifice for him,” Saunders said, “but we’re such a team of faith, all the different nuances or whatever. If that’s his choice, we’re going to be behind him. We’re going to carry him when he needs to be carried.

“It’s a team,” Saunders said. “You know?”

Khalifa isn’t unique in the NCAA Tournament. Samson Johnson and Hassan Diarra of No. 1 overall seed UConn fasted last year, when the Huskies rolled to the national championship, and are planning to do the same as they defend their title.

So far, tipoff times have worked in Khalifa’s favor. Both of the Cougars’ games in the Big 12 Tournament started before noon, and their game against Duquesne on Thursday will begin at 11:40 a.m. That beats a game that would start in the midafternoon, when Khalifa’s hunger pangs and unquenchable thirst would be at their worst.

They won’t know until Thursday night, assuming they win, when they will tip against Illinois or Morehead State on Saturday.

“The built-in part of faith is that you kind of press forward with your acts of devotion,” Pope said, “and it’s inherent in that you have faith that God’s will is going to be done. I don’t think Aly is asking for any handouts. I don’t think our players in their walk of faith are asking for any accommodations or handouts. I think that defies the point of it.

“One of the beautiful things about acts of devotion, which all of our guys on our team are incredibly familiar with, is that you kind of put your offering on the altar, so to speak — the figurative altar — and then you trust that God’s will is going to be done.”

## **In one Ukrainian city, ballet in a bomb shelter is an escape from the horrors of war**

By SAMYA KULLAB Associated Press

KHARKIV, Ukraine (AP) — In a dance studio that doubles as a bomb shelter in northeast Ukraine, the little girls in pink tutus prance in like gusts of air.

Timed to classical music, the 9-year olds jump and glide. Occasionally, they misbehave, prompting a curt rebuke from Marina Altukhova, their instructor.

The Princess Ballet Studio is a spartan, windowless space under an apartment complex, but for an hour, the ballet class offers levity and escape from the daily horrors playing out above ground in the northeastern city of Kharkiv.

Reminders of Russia’s war against Ukraine are inescapable: Buildings lie in piles of rubble, and sirens are constant. Practicing in a bomb shelter means the girls can keep dancing through the almost hourly air raid alerts.

Owner Yulia Voitina has done what she can to lighten the place up: Pink ballet slippers hang from a door knob, a bean bag offers comfortable seating for waiting parents.

Altukhova tells her students to plié, and the little girls bend their knees, staring at their reflection in a large mirror to perfect the stance. As the music swells, she tells them to rise up on the balls of their feet and raise their arms. Some lose their balance.

“Very good,” she says.

The Kharkiv region cuts across the snaking 1,000-kilometer (620-mile) front line, where Ukrainian and

Russian forces have been locked in vicious battles for over two years since Moscow's invasion.

Voitina ran a chain of ballet studios before the war, but she closed them when she left to seek shelter in western Ukraine. When she came home in March 2023, she realized she didn't have the money, or the students to reopen them. But she decided to keep one open for nearly no profit. She had 300 students before the war, but her studio now serves 20.

She felt she had to. "There is nothing for kids in Kharkiv, no school or kindergartens, kids are online all the time," she said. "They need to apply their energy somewhere to feel nice emotions. So ballet, in particular, is like salvation for them."

Across the Kharkiv region, civilians are putting lives back together as best they can.

In nearby Iziium, all but levelled after months of Russian occupation, Hanna Tertyshna is gardening. The front lines are not far, but she has had enough of being displaced after fleeing the Russians once. "It's all unpredictable," she said. "But it's good to be home, the birds are chirping and children are playing."

A short distance away, Evgeny Nepochatov looked at the rubble that used to be his family home. "It's so sad," was all he could say.

Yuri Sevastianov, an 80-year-old former Soviet agricultural director, bicycled by to gather firewood from the remains of Nepochatov's house. "It's the only way we can survive," said Sevastianov, grimly, and sped off.

Back in ballet class, Altukhova has a complicated exercise for the girls that will require them to do a complete turn of the body on one foot — a pirouette. Nine-year-old Myroslava Ponomarenko goes in for the move, her expression fixed in a mask of concentration as though the whole world were at stake.

From the door to the small waiting room, her mother Hanna watches with pride.

"That is her favorite thing to do, she has been attending classes since she was 3," the 32-year old says.

Her husband works for the State Emergency Service, and is rarely at home. Often, he is called to rescue civilians after Russian missile strikes, move rubble and assess the damage.

Like Voitina, Ponomarenko fled the city with her family early in the war, only to return last year. She was among the first to sign up her daughter for ballet classes once the studio reopened.

At first, little Myroslava was not impressed.

"When my daughter came here at first, she said, 'Oh my God, mom, this is a basement, there are no windows'" she said.

She was used to Kharkiv's finest ballet conservatory, where concert pianists played live during lessons, and she could watch professional dancers practice.

But she has come to terms with the new reality. She told her mother, "Well, it is what it is, let it be," Ponomarenko said. "I will agree to anything."

## French bulldogs remain the most popular US breed in new rankings. Many fans aren't happy

By JENNIFER PELTZ Associated Press

NEW YORK (AP) — French bulldogs. U.S. dog owners. C'est l'amour.

Frenchies remained the United States' most commonly registered purebred dogs last year, according to American Kennel Club rankings released Wednesday. The club calls the Frenchie the most popular breed, though other canine constituencies may beg to differ.

Is it a coup to be celebrated? Au contraire, say longtime fans who rue what popularity is doing to the breed. Nevertheless, after lapping Labrador retrievers to take the top spot in 2022, the bat-eared, scaled-down bulldogs held on in the new standings, which reflect puppies and other dogs that were added last year to the United States' oldest dog registry.

Meanwhile, dachshunds are at a nearly two-decade peak, the cane corso is making moves, and there's a new breed in the mix.

Of course, purebreds are only part of the canine population in the U.S., where animal shelters faced an influx of all sorts of dogs last year. Here's a snapshot:

# Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, March 21, 2024 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 269 ~ 79 of 87

## TOP 10

After Frenchies, the most common breeds registered were Labs, golden retrievers, German shepherds and poodles. Then came dachshunds, bulldogs, beagles, Rottweilers and German shorthaired pointers.

All were also in the top 10 in 2022. A decade ago, Yorkshire terriers and boxers were in the group. Go back a half-century, and the third most popular breed was the Irish setter — now 76th.

Pooch preferences shift for reasons ranging from media exposure (social and otherwise) to changing lifestyles as more Americans have moved to cities.

The statistics have limits. Registration is voluntary, the AKC releases few raw numbers, and the popularity rankings measure only the club's roughly 200 recognized breeds. They don't include doodles, other deliberate hybrids or everyday mixed-breed dogs, though those can be registered as "all-American dogs" for such sports as agility and obedience.

## THE FRENCHIE MALAISE

Nearly 98,500 French bulldogs joined the AKC pack last year, after a whopping 108,000 in 2022.

The small, solidly built, push-faced dogs have a penchant for comically pensive expressions and often take city living in stride. "They're interesting little beings," says Naneice Bucci, who has owned and shown them for decades.

The breed also is now a lightning rod for canine controversy and cultural critique.

There are the foreshortened snouts that can result in labored breathing, gagging, difficulty with exercise and other ills — concerns that prompted the Netherlands to ban breeding certain individual dogs with muzzles deemed too short. There are pet-store heists and violent robberies, at least one of them deadly. There's a proliferation of Frenchies with unusual coat colors and textures, which have Frenchie folk squabbling over longtime standards.

And there's concern among long-timers that the hot market for puppies is incentivizing people who are in it for greed, not the breed.

To Bucci, "it's a very scary time."

As a "preservation breeder" who follows AKC standards and conducts a battery of internationally recommended health tests before her dogs reproduce, she dreads that breeders who don't do likewise may lead to crackdowns on everyone. And as a founder of Nevada French Bulldog Rescue, she also sees "all of the underbelly of the people who breed indiscriminately."

"Every time we take in a Frenchie that's in terrible condition, yes, I get angry," says Bucci, who lives near Reno. "But at the same time, I don't want to be punished for trying to do it right."

## DACHSHUND REDUX

Among other breeds, the unmistakable, low-slung dachshund is riding high at No. 6, its highest ranking since 2004. The dogs ranked as high as third at times in the 1950s-70s.

Their combination of sprightly cuteness, small size and determination — they were originally bred to roust badgers — endear them to many. They also have a full-sized bark and a tendency toward stubbornness.

"Even though they're small, people have to remember: They are hounds," says Carole Krivanich of Milton, Delaware, whose nearly 15-year-old dachshund Mo is an agility and show champion. A longtime Rottweiler owner, she's found dachshunds to be "very versatile" and good companions.

## ON A COURSE FOR PUP-ULARITY

The cane corso (pronounced CAH'-neh COOR'-soh) is now 16th in the rankings, remarkable for a breed the AKC first started counting as recently as 2010. (Perhaps it helped that owners have included such figures as NBA great LeBron James and Kansas City Chiefs quarterback Patrick Mahomes.)

The dogs are praised as protective, trainable and attached to their people. But the strong breed is "not for somebody that doesn't know how to control a dog," AKC spokesperson Brandi Hunter Munden says.

## WHO'S NEW?

The bracco Italiano debuts in the standings at 152nd most popular. But the large, long-eared bird-hunters aren't exactly obscure. Country music power couple Tim McGraw and Faith Hill have shared the antics of their bracchi Italiani (that's the proper plural) on social media. A bracco co-owned by McGraw notched a first-round "best of breed" win at the prestigious Westminster Kennel Club dog show last year.

## WHO'S FEW?

The sloughi was rarest among last year's registrations. Sometimes called Arabian greyhounds, the fleet, somewhat shy dogs joined the AKC pack in 2016.

## GIMME SHELTER

While dogs from affenpinschers to Xoloitzcuintlis were bred last year, U.S. animal shelters were already brimming with dogs and cats. Shelters and rescue groups took in about 3.2 million dogs, while 2.2 million dogs were adopted, according to Shelter Animals Count, a nonprofit that gathers shelter data.

There's "a need for a renewed effort to make adoption a priority for the community," says the group's executive director, Stephanie Filer. Shelters have a wide variety of dogs to offer, including specific breeds, she notes.

Hunter Munden, the AKC's spokesperson, has two rescue dogs and a purebred herself.

"Rescue is wonderful," she said. "However, we do understand that people want specific characteristics to fit their lifestyle, when it comes to dog ownership, and that's where purebred dogs come in."

## Judge clears way for Trump to appeal ruling keeping Fani Willis on Georgia 2020 election case

By ALANNA DURKIN RICHER and SUDHIN THANAWALA Associated Press

ATLANTA (AP) — The judge overseeing the Georgia 2020 election interference case cleared the way Wednesday for Donald Trump and other defendants to appeal a ruling allowing Fulton County District Attorney Fani Willis to remain on the prosecution.

Superior Court Judge Scott McAfee's ruling means defense attorneys can ask the Georgia Court of Appeals to review the judge's decision not to disqualify Willis or dismiss the indictment over her romantic relationship with special prosecutor Nathan Wade. It will be up to the appeals court to decide whether to hear the matter.

The judge said he would continue working to get the case ready for trial by addressing other matters in the meantime.

But while Willis had made clear her determination to turn the page from weeks of embarrassing headlines, the judge's decision to green-light the appeal allows defense attorneys to keep at the forefront allegations of impropriety that threaten to damage the public's perception of the prosecution.

McAfee last week said Willis can remain on the most sprawling of four criminal cases against the former president as long as Wade resigns, which Wade did on Friday.

Willis' romantic relationship with Wade has roiled the case for weeks, overshadowing the allegations charging Trump and 18 others with trying to illegally overturn his narrow loss to Democrat Joe Biden in 2020 in Georgia in a desperate bid to remain in power. Among the acts listed in the indictment was a Jan. 2, 2021, phone call in which Trump urged fellow Republican Secretary of State Brad Raffensperger to help him "find" the 11,780 votes needed to beat Biden.

While the judge did not find Willis' relationship with Wade created a conflict of interest that should force her off the case, he said an "appearance of impropriety" infected the prosecution team. The judge rebuked Willis for her "tremendous" lapse in judgment and questioned the truthfulness of Wade's and her testimony about the timing of their relationship.

Attorneys for Trump and the other defendants said in court papers on Monday that Wade's resignation was not enough to correct the appearance of impropriety the judge found. Defense lawyers say a failure to remove Willis could imperil any convictions and force a retrial if an appeals court later finds it was warranted.

Trump attorney Steve Sadow called the judge's decision to allow the appeal "highly significant."

"The defense is optimistic that appellate review will lead to the case being dismissed and the DA being disqualified," Sadow said in an email.

Jeff DiSantis, a spokesman for the district attorney's office, noted in a text message that the case had not been put on hold, adding that prosecutors will "work to move it forward to trial as quickly as possible."

The district attorney's office will only comment on the appeal in court filings, he said.

Trump has pleaded not guilty and has denied doing anything wrong. The presumptive Republican nominee for the 2024 presidential election has characterized all the criminal cases against him as an effort to hurt his bid to reclaim the White House in November.

Defense attorneys alleged that Willis paid Wade large sums for his work and then improperly benefited from the prosecution of the case when Wade used his earnings to pay for vacations for the two of them.

Willis and Wade acknowledged they engaged in a romantic relationship, but they rejected the idea that Willis improperly benefited from it. Willis and Wade insisted they didn't begin dating until after he became special prosecutor and the relationship ended in the summer of 2023. They both said that Willis either paid for things herself or used cash to reimburse Wade for travel expenses.

Wade offered his resignation in a letter to Willis on Friday, saying he was doing so "in the interest of democracy, in dedication to the American public and to move this case forward as quickly as possible."

"I will always remember — and will remind everyone — that you were brave enough to step forward and take on the investigation and prosecution of the allegations that the defendants in this case engaged in a conspiracy to overturn Georgia's 2020 Presidential Election," Willis wrote in a letter accepting his resignation.

The case is separate from the 2020 election interference case brought by special counsel Jack Smith in Washington's federal court. That case is currently on hold while the U.S. Supreme Court weighs Trump's claims of presidential immunity, with oral arguments scheduled for next month.

## Several probes target Brazil's Bolsonaro, but his COVID decisions are catching up to him first

By ELÉONORE HUGHES and MAURICIO SAVARESE Associated Press

RIO DE JANEIRO (AP) — As Brazilian President Jair Bolsonaro's term wound down in the final days of December 2022, he had decided to skip the ritual of handing over the presidential sash to his successor, and instead made plans to travel abroad.

But there was a problem, according to a Federal Police indictment unveiled Tuesday: Bolsonaro didn't have the necessary vaccination certificate required by U.S. authorities.

So Bolsonaro turned to his aide-de-camp, Mauro Cid, and asked him to insert false data into the public health system to make it appear as though he and his 12-year-old daughter had received the COVID-19 vaccine, according to the indictment.

Cid told police he tasked someone with the carrying out the deed, then printed out the certificates inside the presidential palace on Dec. 22 and hand-delivered them to Bolsonaro, according to detective Fábio Alvarez Shor, who signed the indictment.

It is Bolsonaro's first indictment since leaving office, and tampering with public records in Brazil is no trifling matter; should the prosecutor-general's office decide to use the indictment to file charges at the Supreme Court, the 68-year-old politician could spend up to 12 years behind bars or as little as two years, according to legal analyst Zilan Costa. A separate indictment for criminal association carries a maximum jail time of four years, he said.

Bolsonaro, who didn't comment on Tuesday, previously denied any wrongdoing during questioning in May 2023.

In addition to the allegation Bolsonaro falsified records, another ongoing investigation seeks to determine whether he tried to sneak two sets of expensive diamond jewelry into Brazil and prevent them from being incorporated into the presidency's public collection. Police are also probing his alleged involvement in the Jan. 8, 2023 uprising in the capital, soon after Lula took power. It resembled the U.S. Capitol riot in Washington two years prior and sought to restore Bolsonaro to power. Commanders who served under Bolsonaro have told police the former leader presented them with a plan for him to remain in power after he lost his 2022 reelection bid.

But it is his actions during the COVID-19 pandemic — which he called "a measly cold" as he brazenly

flouted health restrictions and encouraged Brazilians to follow his example – that may have caught up with him first. After vaccines became available, he dismissed them as unnecessary, despite Brazil registering one of the highest death tolls in the world, and repeatedly said he would not receive a jab himself.

His administration ignored several offers from pharmaceutical company Pfizer to sell Brazil tens of millions of shots in 2020, and he openly criticized a move by Sao Paulo state's governor to buy vaccines from Chinese company Sinovac when no other doses at hand.

Bolsonaro wasn't the only one indicted on Tuesday: Cid and 15 others were accused of involvement in the scheme to falsify records for themselves and others.

"The former president never ordered or knew that any of his advisors had produced vaccination certificates with ideologically false content," three of Bolsonaro's lawyers said in a statement released late Tuesday. "When he entered the U.S. at the end of December 2022, he was not asked for a vaccination certificate since, as President of the Republic, he was exempt from this requirement."

Shor, the police detective, wrote in his indictment he is awaiting information from the U.S. Justice Department to "clarify whether those under investigation did make use of the false vaccination certificates upon their arrival and stay in American territory." If so, further charges could be leveled against Bolsonaro, Shor wrote without specifying in which country.

His indictment breathed fresh life into a Senate committee inquiry that ended in October 2021 with a recommendation for nine criminal charges against Bolsonaro, alleging that he mismanaged the pandemic. Then prosecutor-general Augusto Aras, who was widely seen as a Bolsonaro ally, declined to move the case forward.

Aras' successor, Paulo Gonet, met committee members Tuesday night. They requested that he reopen investigations stemming from their monthslong work that were shelved, and stressed the importance of carrying forward those already underway, according to a statement from the office of Sen. Omar Aziz, who chaired the committee.

Bolsonaro retains staunch allegiance among his political base, as shown by an outpouring of support last month, when an estimated 185,000 people clogged Sao Paulo's main boulevard to decry what they — and the former president — characterize as political persecution.

The indictment will not turn off his backers and will only confirm his detractors' suspicions, said Carlos Melo, a political science professor at Insper University in Sao Paulo.

"It is definitely worse for him in courts," Melo said. "He could be entering a trend of convictions, and then arrest."

Brazil's top electoral court has already ruled Bolsonaro ineligible to run for office until 2030, on the grounds that he abused his power during the 2022 campaign and cast unfounded doubts on the country's electronic voting system.

After losing the October 2022 election, he never conceded defeat. And with a fresh vaccination certificate in hand, according to the police indictment, he decamped for south Florida.

## **Irish Prime Minister Leo Varadkar says he's quitting for personal and political reasons**

By JILL LAWLESS undefined

LONDON (AP) — Irish Prime Minister Leo Varadkar, who made history as his country's first gay and first biracial leader, announced Wednesday that he is stepping down for reasons that he said were both personal and political.

Varadkar announced Wednesday he is quitting immediately as head of the center-right Fine Gael party, part of Ireland's coalition government. He'll be replaced as prime minister in April after a party leadership contest.

"My reasons for stepping down now are personal and political, but mainly political," Varadkar said, without elaborating. He said he plans to remain in parliament as a backbench lawmaker and has "definite" future

plans.

Varadkar, 45, has had two spells as taoiseach, or prime minister — between 2017 and 2020, and again since December 2022 as part of a job-share with Micheál Martin, head of coalition partner Fianna Fáil.

He was the country's youngest-ever leader when first elected, as well as Ireland's first openly gay prime minister. Varadkar, whose mother is Irish and father is Indian, was also Ireland's first biracial taoiseach.

He played a leading role in campaigns to legalize same-sex marriage, approved in a 2015 referendum, and to repeal a ban on abortion, which passed in a vote in 2018.

"I'm proud that we have made the country a more equal and more modern place," Varadkar said in a resignation statement in Dublin.

Varadkar was first elected to parliament in 2007, and once said he'd quit politics by the age of 50.

He led Ireland during the years after Britain's 2016 decision to leave the European Union. Brexit had huge implications for Ireland, an EU member that shares a border with the U.K.'s Northern Ireland. U.K.-Ireland relations were strained while hardcore Brexit-backer Boris Johnson was U.K. leader, but have steadied since the arrival of Prime Minister Rishi Sunak.

Varadkar recently returned from Washington, where he met President Joe Biden and other political leaders as part of the Irish prime minister's traditional St. Patrick's Day visit to the United States.

Varadkar also has expressed frustration at how polarized politics has become in Ireland, as in other countries.

There have been reports of discontent within Fine Gael, and 10 of the party's lawmakers, almost a third of the total, have announced they will not run for reelection.

Earlier this month, voters rejected the government's position in referendums on two constitutional amendments. Changes backed by Varadkar that would have broadened the definition of family and removed language about a woman's role in the home were resoundingly defeated. The result sparked criticism that the pro-change campaign had been lackluster and confusing.

Even so, his resignation was not widely expected. Martin, the current deputy prime minister, said he'd been "surprised, obviously, when I heard what he was going to do."

"But I want to take the opportunity to thank him sincerely," Martin said. "We got on very well."

Transport Minister Eamon Ryan said he didn't think the referendum results were "the key factor" in Varadkar's decision.

"I think there is a gap before the local and European elections (in June) and that timing probably influenced him more than the referendum," Ryan said.

Martin said Varadkar's resignation should not trigger an early election, and the three-party coalition government that also includes the Green Party would continue.

Varadkar said he knew his departure would "come as a surprise to many people and a disappointment to some."

"I know that others will, how shall I put it, cope with the news just fine — that is the great thing about living in a democracy," he said. "There's never a right time to resign high office. However, this is as good a time as any."

## Historic covered bridges are under threat by truck drivers relying on GPS meant for cars

By LISA RATHKE Associated Press

LYNDON, Vt. (AP) — One of Vermont's historic covered bridges has fallen under threat from modern technology.

Box truck drivers relying on GPS continually crash through Lyndon's 140-year-old Miller's Run bridge despite signs, including a flashing one, to deter vehicles that are too tall or too heavy from crossing. Drivers can face a fine of \$5,000 from the town, plus state penalties.

Still, the bridge keeps getting whacked.

"GPS is the most general excuse that is given by drivers that do hit the bridge," said Justin Smith, Lyndon's municipal administrator. He says the real problem is lack of common sense.

The bridge, built in 1878 and renovated in 1995, lies on a short cut motorists use to avoid downtown Lyndonville. The community, which has five historic covered bridges, including two that are in use, calls itself the "Covered Bridge Capital of the NEK," short for Northeast Kingdom area.

Police chief Jack Harris estimates the Miller's Run bridge has been struck two dozen times, and at least once, two times in one day. The drivers are using GPS programs for cars rather than commercial vehicles, he said. Typically the damage is cosmetic, though on two occasions the bridge had to be closed for several months for repairs, he said.

In 2019, a delivery truck hit the supports and the engineering and repair costs were nearly \$100,000, said Smith. About half the time, the town recoups insurance money from the drivers — if it catches them. Many just drive away.

"They will claim that they didn't know they hit it and yet you'll see the truck stop in the middle of the bridge and they'll look up to see that they're hitting the bridge," Police Chief Harris said. "I can count the number that have stopped and waited on one hand," Harris said.

Many are inexperienced in driving box trucks, such as people who may have just rented one to move, he said.

"Every now and then we'll get a large camper being pulled through and those generally get damaged because the bridge will take air conditioning units right off the top," he said.

A neighbor's security camera trained on the bridge has helped track down some errant drivers.

Lyndon is far from alone, according to Bill Caswell, president of the National Society for the Preservation of Covered Bridges.

"You can visit many covered bridges throughout Vermont and other states and see broken boards on the portals and broken or missing roof braces," he said by email.

Last November, a tractor trailer truck seriously damaged a covered bridge in Princeton, Illinois, and a bridge in Ohio was damaged in a similar way a year earlier, he said. An historic covered bridge in Cobb County, Georgia, was struck numerous times until metal barriers were installed at each end, he said. It also has a warning signs and flashing lights.

"Even with all the warnings, the barriers are still struck," Caswell wrote. "But the bridge is now protected."

A box truck rental company in Lyndonville now warns drivers about covered bridges in the area, and the town is considering installing a steel beam in front of the bridge to force trucks that are too tall to a full stop.

A Google spokesperson said "Google Maps is designed for drivers of standard-sized vehicles. To get the best routes, we encourage drivers of trucks and larger vehicles to use navigation tools designed specifically for those vehicle types."

Apple did not respond to an email seeking comment.

There are mixed views in town about what to do, Smith said.

"Some people obviously want to see something that protects the bridge so we can keep it in place," he said. "Others are like: 'It's time to take it off and set it on the side and put a more standard bridge in.'"

"I swear, we could take that bridge out and not replace it and people would go in the river. It's very frustrating to think that we are that set to what something tells us to do."

## **A wooden boat carrying dozens of Rohingya Muslim refugees capsizes off Indonesia's coast**

By YAYAN ZAMZAMI and EDNA TARIGAN Associated Press

BANDA ACEH, Indonesia (AP) — A wooden boat carrying dozens of Rohingya Muslims capsized off Indonesia's northernmost coast on Wednesday, according to local fishermen who rescued six people. The survivors said more people were still on the boat.

There were no immediate reports of casualties.

The six, four women and two men, were moved to a temporary shelter in the Samatiga sub-district. The fishermen told The Associated Press the refugees' boat capsized about 16 miles (25 Kilometers) from the coastline of Kuala Bubon Beach in Aceh province.

Amiruddin, a tribal fishing community leader in Aceh Barat district, said those rescued indicated that the boat was sailing east when it started leaking and then strong currents pushed it toward the west of Aceh. The six said others were still trying to survive on the capsized craft.

About 740,000 Rohingya were resettled in Bangladesh to escape the brutal counterinsurgency campaign by security forces in their homeland of Myanmar.

Thousands have been trying to flee overcrowded camps in Bangladesh to neighboring countries with Indonesia seeing a spike in refugee numbers since November which prompted it to call on the international community for help. Rohingya arriving in Aceh face some hostility from some fellow Muslims.

Indonesia, like Thailand and Malaysia, is not a signatory to the United Nations' 1951 Refugee Convention outlining their legal protections, and so is not obligated to accept them. However, they have so far provided temporary shelter to refugees in distress.

Last year, nearly 4,500 Rohingya — two-thirds of them women and children — fled their homeland of Myanmar and the refugee camps in neighboring Bangladesh by boat, the United Nations refugee agency reported. Of those, 569 died or went missing while crossing the Bay of Bengal and Andaman Sea, the highest death toll since 2014.

Returning safely to Myanmar is virtually impossible because the military that attacked them overthrew Myanmar's democratically elected government in 2021. No country has offered them any large-scale re-settlement opportunities.

## **Trump suggests he'd support a national ban on abortions around 15 weeks of pregnancy**

By MICHELLE L. PRICE Associated Press

NEW YORK (AP) — Donald Trump suggested Tuesday that he'd support a national ban on abortions around 15 weeks of pregnancy, voicing for the first time support for a specific limit on the procedure.

The Republican former president has taken credit for striking down a federally guaranteed right to abortion by appointing three U.S. Supreme Court justices who voted to overturn *Roe v. Wade*. As he seeks the White House a third time, Trump has refrained from embracing any specific limit on the procedure, warning it could backfire politically and instead suggesting he would "negotiate" a policy on abortion that would include exceptions for cases of rape, incest and to protect the life of the mother.

But in a radio interview Tuesday, Trump criticized Democrats for not endorsing a ban that would limit abortions in states that still allow the procedure.

"We're going to come up with a time — and maybe we could bring the country together on that issue," Trump said while calling into the "Sid & Friends in the Morning" show on WABC.

Trump went on to say: "The number of weeks now, people are agreeing on 15. And I'm thinking in terms of that. And it'll come out to something that's very reasonable. But people are really, even hard-liners are agreeing, seems to be, 15 weeks seems to be a number that people are agreeing at."

At the same time, Trump seemed to suggest reluctance to a federal ban.

"Everybody agrees — you've heard this for years — all the legal scholars on both sides agree: It's a state issue. It shouldn't be a federal issue, it's a state issue," he said.

Last month, Trump's campaign dismissed reports that he privately had expressed for a ban on abortion after 16 weeks of pregnancy, calling the report "fake news." The campaign did not offer details on Trump's plans, only saying he planned to "negotiate a deal" on abortion.

Later Tuesday, after casting his ballot in Florida's Republican presidential primary, Trump was asked by a reporter about a ban on abortions at 16 weeks and said, "We'll be talking about that soon."

Abortion rights have been a galvanizing issue for voters in recent years, and Democrats and President Joe Biden's campaign are preparing to spotlight the issue as a clear split from Trump in the 2024 election.

# Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, March 21, 2024 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 269 ~ 86 of 87

Polling has consistently shown that most Americans believe abortion should be legal through the initial stages of pregnancy. About half of U.S. adults said abortions should be permitted at the 15-week mark, according to an Associated Press-NORC Center for Public Affairs Research poll conducted last June.

## Today in History: March 21

### **Martin Luther King Jr. leads civil rights march from Selma to Montgomery**

By The Associated Press undefined

Today in History

Today is Thursday, March 21, the 81st day of 2024. There are 285 days left in the year.

Today's Highlight in History:

On March 21, 1965, civil rights demonstrators led by the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. began their third, successful march from Selma to Montgomery, Alabama.

On this date:

In 1685, composer Johann Sebastian Bach was born in Eisenach, Germany.

In 1935, Persia officially changed its name to Iran.

In 1945, during World War II, Allied bombers began four days of raids over Germany.

In 1952, the Moondog Coronation Ball, considered the first rock and roll concert, took place at Cleveland Arena.

In 1972, the Supreme Court, in *Dunn v. Blumstein*, ruled that states may not require at least a year's residency for voting eligibility.

In 1990, Namibia became an independent nation as the former colony marked the end of 75 years of South African rule.

In 1997, President Bill Clinton and Russian President Boris Yeltsin wrapped up their summit in Helsinki, Finland, still deadlocked over NATO expansion, but able to agree on slashing nuclear weapons arsenals.

In 2006, the social media website Twitter was established with the sending of the first "tweet" by co-founder Jack Dorsey, who wrote: "just setting up my twttr."

In 2007, former Vice President Al Gore made an emotional return to Congress as he pleaded with House and Senate committees to fight global warming; skeptical Republicans questioned the science behind his climate-change documentary, "An Inconvenient Truth."

In 2012, meting out unprecedented punishment for a bounty system that targeted key opposing players, the NFL suspended New Orleans Saints head coach Sean Payton without pay for the coming season and indefinitely banned the team's former defensive coordinator; Commissioner Roger Goodell fined the Saints \$500,000 and took away two draft picks.

In 2013, in the Middle East, President Barack Obama insisted "peace is possible" as he prodded both Israelis and Palestinians to return to long-stalled negotiations with few, if any, pre-conditions.

In 2016, laying bare a half-century of tensions, President Barack Obama and Cuban President Raul Castro prodded each other over human rights and the longstanding U.S. economic embargo during an unprecedented joint news conference in Havana.

In 2017, at his Senate confirmation hearing, Supreme Court nominee Neil Gorsuch declared he'd made no promises to President Donald Trump or anyone else about how he would vote on abortion or other issues.

In 2019, President Donald Trump abruptly declared that the U.S. would recognize Israel's sovereignty over the disputed Golan Heights, a major shift in American policy.

In 2020 during a White House briefing, President Donald Trump doubled down on his support for the malaria drug hydroxychloroquine as a possible treatment for the coronavirus, while Dr. Anthony Fauci said the evidence was "anecdotal."

In 2022, a China Eastern Boeing 737-800 with 132 people on board crashed in a mountainous area of southern China, setting off a forest fire visible from space in the country's worst air disaster in nearly a decade. (All 123 passengers and nine crew members would later be confirmed dead.)

In 2023, Willis Reed, who dramatically emerged from the locker room minutes before Game 7 of the

# Groton Daily Independent

**Thursday, March 21, 2024 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 269 ~ 87 of 87**

1970 NBA Finals to spark the New York Knicks to their first championship and create one of sports' most enduring examples of playing through pain, died at age 80.

Today's Birthdays: Actor Kathleen Widdoes is 85. Songwriter Chip Taylor ("Wild Thing") is 84. Folk-pop singer-musician Keith Potger (The Seekers) is 83. Actor Marie-Christine Barrault is 80. Singer-musician Rose Stone (Sly and the Family Stone) is 79. Actor Timothy Dalton is 78. Singer Ray Dorset (Mungo Jerry) is 78. Rock singer-musician Roger Hodgson (Supertramp) is 74. Rock musician Conrad Lozano (Los Lobos) is 73. R&B singer Russell Thompkins Jr. is 73. Comedy writer-performer Brad Hall is 66. Actor Sabrina LeBeauf is 66. Actor Gary Oldman is 66. Actor Kassie Depaiva is 63. Actor Matthew Broderick is 62. Comedian-actor Rosie O'Donnell is 62. Actor Cynthia Geary is 59. Hip-hop DJ Premier (Gang Starr) is 58. Rock musician Jonas "Joker" Berggren (Ace of Base) is 57. Rock MC Maxim (Prodigy) is 57. Rock musician Andrew Copeland (Sister Hazel) is 56. Actor Laura Allen is 50. Rapper-TV personality Kevin Federline is 46. Actor Sonequa Martin-Green (TV: "The Walking Dead") is 39. Actor Scott Eastwood is 38. Tennis player Karolina Pliskova is 32. Actor Jasmin Savoy Brown is 30. Actor Forrest Wheeler is 20.