

Groton Daily Independent

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Today on GDILIVE.COM
Stations of the Cross
7 p.m.
SEAS Church

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



*"Courage is like
a muscle.
We strengthen
it by use."*
-Ruth Gordon

Wednesday, March 27

School Breakfast: Egg bake.
School Lunch: Cheese nachos.
Senior Menu: Beef stew, buttermilk biscuit, Waldorf salad, sherbet.
United Methodist: Communion coffee hour, 9:30 a.m.; Confirmation, 6 p.m.; Lent Bible Study, 7 p.m.
Groton CM&A: Easter Cantata performed at Aberdeen Alliance, 7 p.m.
Stations of the Cross, 7 p.m., St. Elizabeth Ann Seton Catholic Church (will be livestreamed)

Thursday, March 28

School Breakfast: Pop tarts.
School Lunch: Sloppy joes, baby bakers.
Senior Menu: Chicken cacciatore, rice pilaf, Italian blend vegetables, apple sauce bars, whole wheat bread.
Emmanuel Lutheran: Worship with communion, 7 p.m.
St. John's Lutheran: Maundy Thursday service with communion, 7 p.m.
Easter Cantata at the Groton C&MA Church, 6:30 p.m. with refreshments following.

OPEN: Recycling Trailer in Groton

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

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1440

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A major bridge spanning Baltimore's harbor collapsed early Tuesday after a large shipping container lost power and struck one of its support pillars. Two people were rescued from the water, while six are presumed dead. All eight people were part of a construction crew working on the bridge at the time of the incident.

Shares of Trump Media and Technology Group, the owner of former President Donald Trump's Truth Social platform, climbed as much as 59% after the opening bell yesterday in its first day on the Nasdaq Composite Index. Trump Media's stock—trading under the ticker DJT for Trump's initials—rose as high as \$77 per share before settling and closing up 16% at around \$58 per share, valuing the company at nearly \$8B.

Texas Attorney General Ken Paxton (R) reached a deal yesterday with prosecutors to resolve criminal securities fraud charges, ending a yearslong saga weeks before his trial was set to begin. Paxton maintains his innocence.

Sports, Entertainment, & Culture

"The Bachelor" contestant Jenn Tran tapped to become first Asian American "Bachelorette". "Wonka" and "Dune" star Timothée Chalamet signs multiyear deal to both act in and produce upcoming Warner Bros. films.

NFL owners approve major overhaul to kickoff rules for 2024 season intended to increase number of returned kickoffs. NFL sets two Christmas Day games in 2024, despite the holiday falling on a Wednesday.

US music revenue hit \$17.1B in 2023, an 8% rise from 2022 and the eighth consecutive year of revenue growth.

Science & Technology

OpenAI releases set of seven videos created by professional filmmakers using its new Sora text-to-video generator. Tool made waves last month, producing lifelike clips made by AI; see overview.

Researchers discover protein that stimulates regrowth of optical nerve fibers; may help lead to treatments for retinal damage, including glaucoma, which affects more than 3 million Americans yearly.

First known symbolic gesture observed in birds; scientists recorded the Japanese tit using repetitive wing movements to signal "after you" to others.

Business & Markets

US stock markets close lower (S&P 500 -0.3%, Dow -0.1%, Nasdaq -0.4%); S&P 500 falls for third consecutive session.

Visa, MasterCard agree to cut and cap credit card processing fees charged to merchants (and often passed down to consumers) as part of settlement in long-running suit; US businesses expected to save at least \$30B in five-year deal.

Outerwear maker Canada Goose to lay off roughly 17% of its corporate staff as part of cost-cutting measures.

Politics & World Affairs

Robert Kennedy Jr. announces San Francisco attorney and Democratic donor Nicole Shanahan as his vice president pick in his third-party bid for the presidency.

US Supreme Court questions whether groups seeking to restrict access to abortion pill mifepristone have standing to sue the FDA; decision expected in June.

UK court delays WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange's extradition; US has three weeks to provide guarantees about his First Amendment rights and protection from death penalty.

Millions in Child Care Grants Awarded Across South Dakota

SIOUX FALLS, SD – Today, the Governor’s Office of Economic Development (GOED) announced multiple awardees of Governor Kristi Noem’s Investment Plan for Child Care.

“We are creating more child care options and openings across our state because of this funding,” said Governor Kristi Noem. “I am proud that we have been able to make these grants a reality and help child care professionals in South Dakota.”

Over 40 different entities across the state applied for this latest round of implementation grant funding with 13 awardees named, totaling over \$3.7 million.

There are several types of projects that were awarded funding to expand the number of slots available in communities. These include projects aimed at improving the child care workforce, strengthening coalitions and partnerships to create after-school programs, and creating a business accelerator for potential owners.

These plans, along with the work of these communities, will retain over 595 current slots and will allow for over 2,460 new child care slots.

Recipients awarded:

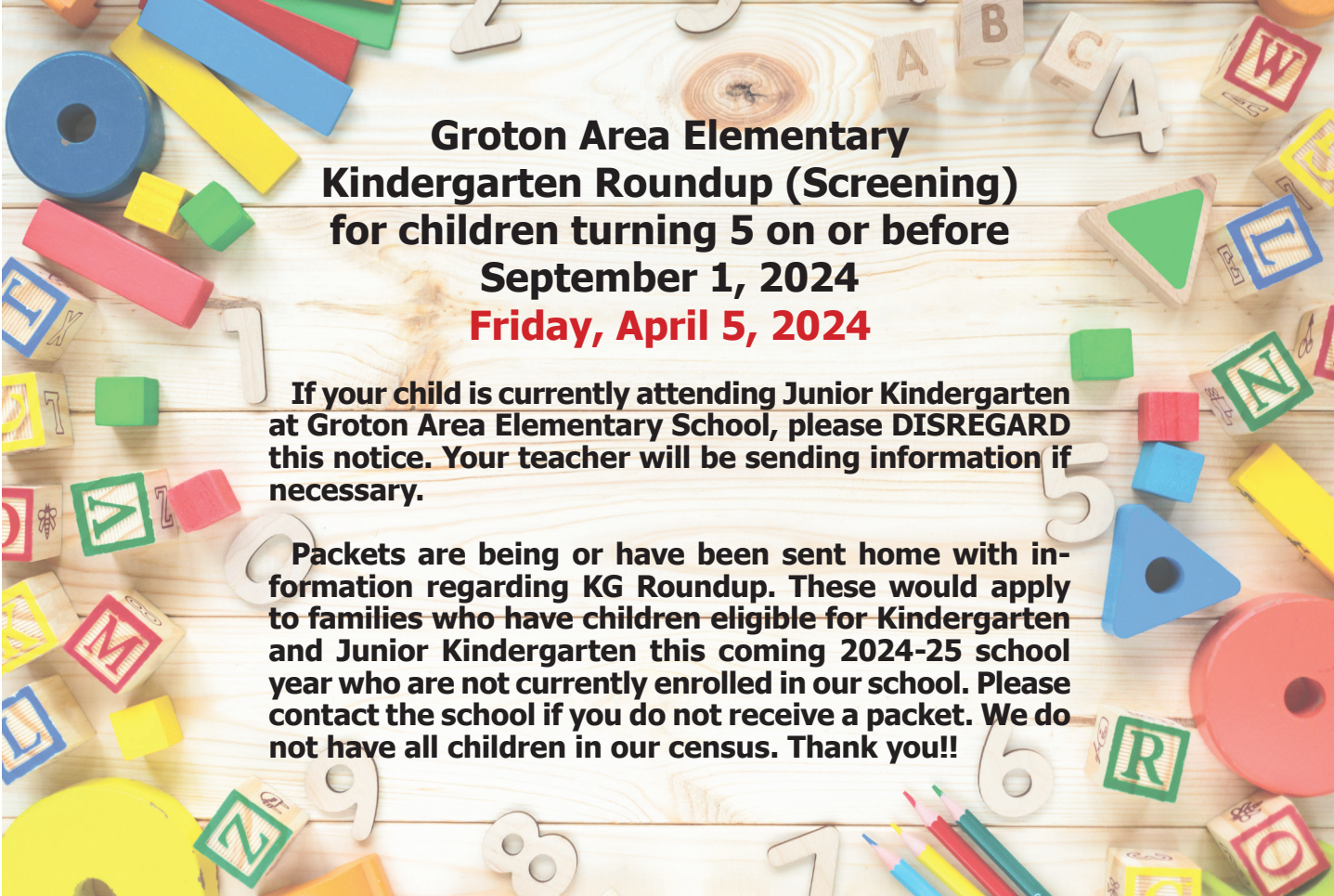
Boys & Girls Club of Brookings
Burke Business Promotion Council
City of Highmore
Elevate Rapid City
Grow Spink, Inc., Redfield
Lake Area Improvement Corporation, Madison
McIntosh Community Daycare
Mobridge Economic Development Corporation
Murdo Development Corporation
Pierre Economic Development Corporation
Platte Development Corporation
Sioux Falls Development Corporation
Vermillion Area Chamber and Development Company

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A good sized crowd shows up at the Groton Area opt-out meeting held in the GHS Gym on Tuesday. (Photo by Paul Kosel)



Groton Area Elementary Kindergarten Roundup (Screening) for children turning 5 on or before September 1, 2024 **Friday, April 5, 2024**

If your child is currently attending Junior Kindergarten at Groton Area Elementary School, please DISREGARD this notice. Your teacher will be sending information if necessary.

Packets are being or have been sent home with information regarding KG Roundup. These would apply to families who have children eligible for Kindergarten and Junior Kindergarten this coming 2024-25 school year who are not currently enrolled in our school. Please contact the school if you do not receive a packet. We do not have all children in our census. Thank you!!

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We had another whirlwind week in the United States Senate. The Senate managed to pass our final appropriations package funding the final six areas of the federal government for FY2024. We were in the Capitol late into the night on Friday, passing the final package just after 2 AM on Saturday morning. Our government funding work is finally over for this fiscal year, and we turn

toward appropriations for FY2025, which are due on September 30 of this year. We also had many South Dakotans in our office this past week, along with hearings, classified briefings and votes. All that and more in this week's Weekly Round[s] Up:

South Dakotans I met with: Students from Mobridge Pollock High School, Bowdle High School and Lemmon High School; members of the South Dakota Bankers Association; and Bryce Dibbern with the South Dakota Livestock Marketing Association.

I went to Hot Springs last Monday to present Vietnam Veteran Lapel Pins to 36 veterans living at the Veterans Home. I also spoke at the National Honor Society induction ceremony at T.F. Riggs High School in Pierre.

Visited with South Dakotans from: Aberdeen, Bowdle, Brookings, Burke, Hot Springs, Interior, Lemmon, Mobridge, Pierre, Redfield, Sioux Falls, Spearfish, Troy and Yankton.

Other meetings: Tim Buckley, CEO of Vanguard. We had our Senate Bible Study, where Senator Marsha Blackburn of Tennessee was our speaker. I attended an artificial intelligence policy event where I and several other legislators spoke with members of the European Union parliament and leaders from across the AI field about opportunities and innovation in AI.

Votes taken: 21 – many of these were on amendments to the minibus appropriations bill. The rest were on nominations to judicial positions in Texas, California, Maryland and New Jersey, and one executive position at the Department of Labor.

On Thursday, we also voted on a Congressional Review Act (CRA) that I led with Senator Jon Tester (D-Mont.) to overturn a Biden administration decision to allow for beef imports from Paraguay. As you may recall, last November, the U.S. Department of Agriculture announced that they were lifting a ban on beef imports from Paraguay, who have historically struggled to contain outbreaks of foot and mouth disease. In February, Senator Tester and I filed this CRA to overturn this decision. I am happy to report that our CRA passed the Senate 70-25, the highest number of affirmative votes on a CRA on record. You can read more about this vote here. The CRA must now pass the House, so stay tuned for more updates.

Legislation introduced: This past week, I introduced legislation with Senator Amy Klobuchar (D-Minn.) to require the Farm Service Agency to make quarterly updates to Livestock Indemnity Program (LIP) payment rates that reflect livestock market prices. You can read more about this legislation here.

Hearings: I attended two hearings this past week. One was in the Select Committee on Intelligence, which was closed as usual. The other was in the Senate Armed Services Committee, where we heard from Admiral John Aquilino, Commander of U.S. Indo-Pacific Command, and General Paul LaCamera, Commander

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of United States Forces Korea.

Classified briefings: I attended two classified briefings this week. One was part of my work on the Senate Armed Services Committee's Strategic Forces Subcommittee. The other was an all-Senators briefing with my colleagues on TikTok.

As many of you may know, one of our hot topics these past couple of weeks on Capitol Hill has been TikTok, specifically the House's bill to 'ban' the app from the United States. TikTok is owned by a Chinese company called ByteDance. TikTok collects information on its users, including not only personal information like name and zip code, but algorithmic information like how Americans talk, act and think. Under Chinese law, any information and data that ByteDance has on its users must be made available to the Chinese government. I don't think I need to tell you why this is bad news for our national security. The bill passed in the House of Representatives requires TikTok to divest from ByteDance in order to continue operating in the United States. All this to say, if you, your kids or your grandkids currently have TikTok, I suggest being very careful with the information you share on the app.

I talked more about TikTok on CNN This Morning this past Thursday. You can watch a clip of that here.

My staff in South Dakota visited: Aberdeen, Brookings, Burke, Dupree, Eagle Butte, Gregory, Madison, McIntosh, Oacoma, Timber Lake, Sturgis, Wall and Wessington Springs.

Steps taken this past week: 53,826 steps or 26.71 miles

15 N Main St. - Ste. 101
Downtown Groton

Call/Text Paul: 605-397-7460
Call/Text Tina: 605-397-7285



Exercise reduces joint pain and helps
fight tiredness. - Mayo Clinic

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Individuals in the group picture include April Abeln, Topper Tastad, Nancy Larsen, Karla Davidson, Jonna Waage, Brittany Eddy, Heidi Locke, Victoria Jorgenson, Pat Miller, Bo Fries, and Diane Warrington. Behind the camera was David Miller.

Easter Food Items Delivered in Groton

Enrich Groton SoDak Inc. volunteers worked alongside Dacotah Bank employees Tuesday morning sorting Easter food items for 52 families in the Groton SD Community. Food will be delivered by the Groton Police Department with all items being purchased by monetary donations as well as Thrivent Action Teams. Each family will receive their food in a reusable bag that can be filled with items from Common Cents for a 10% discount. Reusable bags will also be for sale for \$5 at Common Cents Community Thrift Store starting this Saturday.



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. 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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Langford Area – Groton Area Athletics Cooperative Meeting
March 20, 2024

1. Name recognition ... would Groton be willing to include our name in the football coop?

Groton Area's board is of the position that "Groton Area" appropriately recognizes all the communities that participate here.

2. Color/nickname ... would Groton be willing to change uniform colors or team name?

No.

3. Would it be possible for Langford to host a game for Homecoming?

Groton Area's board is not willing to concede a varsity home game. We are, however, willing to work with Langford Area administrators to play one or more junior high and/or junior varsity game(s) in Langford.

4. Thoughts on practice times and site?

We would like to keep our practice times and site the same. We dismiss school at 3:30 PM and usually practice begins between 3:45 and 4:00, closer to 4:00.

We need further discussion and clarification regarding Wednesday (i.e. Church Night) scheduling for HS athletes.

5. Cheerleading, would there be an opportunity for Langford kids to try out for football cheerleading?

Yes. We would suggest a cheer team of six to eight girls selected at tryouts with a third-party evaluator.

6. Would it be possible for Langford to have a coach on the HS and also the JH staff?

Groton Area will continue to hire and pay the Head Football Coach and two Assistant Football Coaches according to the terms of the GTA (Groton Teacher's Association) negotiated agreement. Groton Area's two Junior High Coaches will remain employed as Junior High Coaches according to the terms of the GTA negotiated agreement.

Langford will hire and pay an Assistant (HS) Football Coach according to the terms of the Langford School District's negotiated agreement. Langford may also choose to hire and pay a JH Football coach according to the terms of the Langford School District's negotiated agreement.

7. Although we are only talking football and possibly wrestling at this time, what are Groton's thoughts on co-oping in other sports in the future?

We continue to be open for discussion. Initially the sports/activities that would come to mind include wrestling, cross country, soccer, golf, track and field, theatre, and show choir.

We specifically discussed the possibility of having the two schools pep bands playing together at home game(s).

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8. Football is an expensive sport; how would the financial cost of the sport be divided up?

Groton Area will pay its coaches' salaries and benefits, Langford will pay its coach(es) salaries and benefits, and all the associated expenses (liability insurance, coaches' education, background checks, etc.).

Groton Area will be responsible for paying game personnel (announcer, clock, chains, etc) and officials and will keep the gate receipts and concessions revenues for those events.

Each district remains financially responsible for the care and upkeep of its own facilities.

Transportation to practices would be the financial and logistical responsibility of the school traveling (Langford). For away games where Groton Area is the closer school to the game site, Langford will transport their athletes to Groton. If Langford is the closer site and en route to the away game, Groton Area would pick up Langford's athletes in Langford. It may make logistical sense for the two schools to choose to travel separately and meet at the away game site.

Groton Area would purchase and supply enough game uniforms for all team members.

Both schools currently own enough equipment for their athletes which could continue to be used.

For future necessary equipment purchases agreed upon by each school, the expenses will be divided proportionally based on the number of rostered athletes from each school.

9. Athletic trainers

Groton Area will continue to have an athletic trainer at home events and will work with the Langford School District and its athletic trainer so those athletes can continue to receive services as they are now.

10. Participation forms

Each School District will be responsible to ensure its coaches and athletes have met the SDHSAA participation and eligibility requirements [e.g. physicals (Langford currently requires physicals every two years and is discussing requiring every year; Groton Area currently only requires one every three years.), HIPPA, Consent to Participate, Concussions, Coaches Education, etc.].

Other Considerations:

1. We would want to work out details around academic eligibility and training rules for student-athletes. – Zoom meeting scheduled for Thursday, March 28 at 9:30 AM with administrators of each school to review and discuss policies.

School Board Meeting Principal Report

MS/HS- Shelby Edwards

03/26/2024

Class Counts-

6th- 40

7th- 44

8th- 43

9th- 40

10th- 45

11th- 45

12th- 39

Total- 296 Students

Smarter Balance Testing

April 8th-17th

Grades 6,7,8,11

Continuing work on 24-25 Schedule

Continuing 24/25 Handbook Changes

Participated in the 2024 Spread the Word Campaign for Special Olympics on March 6th

National Honors Society Induction on Monday March 18th

We had 7 new members inducted

Class registrations are finished and we will start putting schedules together this week

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Elementary Principal Report

3/26/2024

Brett Schwan

1. Enrollment:

- a. EC-13
- b. PS-6
- c. JK-19
- d. KG-52
- e. 1st-40
- f. 2nd-46
- g. 3rd-43
- h. 4th-50
- i. 5th-54

2. KG Roundup: (Currently have 23 new students signed up...this does not include our 19 JK students)

2024 Groton Area Elementary

Kindergarten Roundup (Screening) for children turning 5 on or before September 1, 2024

Friday, April 5, 2024

If your child is currently attending Junior Kindergarten at Groton Area Elementary school, please DISREGARD this notice. Your teacher will be sending information if necessary.

Packets are being sent home this week with information regarding KG Roundup. These would apply to families who have children eligible for KG and JK this coming 2024-2025 school year who are not currently enrolled in our school. Please contact the school if you do not receive a packet. We do not have all children in our census. Thank you!!!

3. CNA in Watertown: We finished our 5th session of our CNA process. Action Plan: **If we intentionally create a professional development plan that addresses district goals THEN teachers will implement meaningful learning experiences using common instructional strategies AND student achievement and attendance will improve.**

4. State Testing Schedule:

- a. 5th Grade Science: April 15 – April 19
- b. 3rd – 5th ELA/Math: April 22 – 26
- c. Make up testing: April 29 – May 3

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Easter Baskets by Tina ~ 605-397-7285



Fire truck Easter basket with a light up cup three mystery eggs, a light up football, a space game, blue peeps bubbles and a blue fan



It has a blue speaker , pink bubbles a blue fan, and stress carrot a stuffed bunny with three clear Easter bunnies with jelly beans in side them



The stuff inside it a cup that lights up, a stuffed cow, a bow with a arrow toy, a shooter game, a blue peeps bubble and a green bubble fan



The stuff that's in this basket yellow peeps bubbles a duck puzzle, a stuffed bunny, four mystery colored Easter eggs with prize inside a jump rope, a cup that lights up on top and a pink fan with bubbles in it



SOUTH DAKOTA SEARCHLIGHT

<https://southdakotasearchlight.com>

Minnehaha County collects \$640,000 to help house ex-prisoners, families

BY: JOHN HULT - MARCH 26, 2024 5:03 PM

STIOUX FALLS – South Dakota’s largest county by population will spend another \$640,000 to address housing challenges for people who’ve spent time behind bars.

The Minnehaha County Commission cast a unanimous vote Tuesday to allow its Human Services Department to accept and spend the grant funds from the MacArthur Foundation. The foundation supports a range of criminal justice reform-related activities across the U.S. In South Dakota, MacArthur money has been used to help pay for juvenile and adult diversion programs and reduce jail populations in both Minnehaha and Pennington counties.

Minnehaha County’s Human Services Department is spearheading the housing work, called “Just Home,” which is one of five such MacArthur-funded projects in the U.S. The others are in Tulsa, Oklahoma, San Francisco and Charleston, South Carolina.

The goal is to “address the housing challenges we have for individuals and their families who’ve been involved in the criminal justice system,” Minnehaha County Supportive Services Manager Brett Johnson told commissioners on Tuesday.

People with a criminal record are more likely to be passed over for jobs and housing, and sometimes face restrictions on community services. But a lack of employment, housing and services are factors that can increase a person’s chances of reoffending.

About two years ago, the county collected \$90,200 in grant funding to begin studying how it would administer the Just Home program.

“These are all grant monies,” Johnson told commissioners. “There is no obligation from the county to provide any match funds or any funds out of our general fund budget to provide any of this additional funding related to this project.”

The Just Home project has already secured other funding, including \$4 million in low-interest loans to help build 51 additional apartment units for the Glory House, a halfway house for those recently released from incarceration.

The new grant funding will be spread across multiple areas, and is largely related to case management.

Partners also include the St. Francis House, which will purchase 10 apartment units in central Sioux Falls, South Dakota Urban Indian Health, which will offer culturally appropriate courses and case management for Native Americans, and the Helpline Center, which offers referrals to community services. Augustana University and the University of South Dakota will work to structure and implement the project and study outcomes.

Commissioner Jean Bender wanted to know if the purchase of apartments for Just Home would displace people currently living in Copper Arms, the 10-unit property targeted for purchase by the St. Francis House.

“They have some vacant units already in the building, but through the process of them purchasing that, we’re not going to displace anybody that’s already there,” Johnson said.

Johnson told Commissioner Joe Kippley that the universities’ research will help the county understand the impact of the funding on ex-inmate employment, repeat offenses and the disproportionate representation of Native Americans in the justice system.

“Certainly the biggest ones, we want to see a reduction in homelessness and incarceration as well as connection to other services that currently exist,” Johnson said.

In addition to the subcontracts with nonprofits, the funding will be used to offer incentives to landlords who might otherwise reject felons who apply for housing, as well as for the future Just Home participants who'd be their tenants.

Johnson told South Dakota Searchlight that those incentives could take the form of payments for renter's insurance, for example, or an agreement to cover post move-out damages if necessary.

"We want to be good stewards of their units," Johnson said.

Legislature will study property taxes, Ellsworth's growth, regulating the web over summer

BY: JOSHUA HAIAR - MARCH 26, 2024 4:09 PM

Lawmakers will study topics ranging from property taxes to the regulation of minors' access to inappropriate web content this summer.

The legislature's Executive Board defined the summer studies state lawmakers will take on in Pierre on Tuesday, the last day of the 2024 legislative session. The last day is typically used to consider vetoes, but Gov. Noem did not veto any legislation this year.

The Executive Board is the committee responsible for overseeing the administrative functions of the legislature, which include managing the interim activities and study committees between sessions.

A summer study involves a research project or series of meetings, conducted by a group of lawmakers who gather for discussions between legislative sessions. The studies are meant to delve deeply into specific issues, gather information, and develop recommendations or draft legislation to be considered.

One of this year's studies will explore the state's potential role in regulating artificial intelligence, and in managing access to inappropriate online content by minors. Both topics saw failed attempts at regulation during the 2024 session, with some opponents calling for summer studies before formal legislative action. The board approved the dual-purpose study on the topics on a 13-2 vote.

"When it comes to regulation of technologies like this, it's important that we not shoot and miss; that we not be hasty," Rep. Will Mortenson, R-Fort Pierre, said Tuesday.

Another summer study will focus on property tax assessments and valuations, following some lawmakers' concerns about the significant increase in property assessments because of COVID-19, an influx of new residents, and changing interest rates. The study will explore ways to lessen the burden of property taxes.

The property tax study passed on a 10-5 vote.

The expansion of Ellsworth Air Force Base will also be analyzed. The study will examine the need for additional infrastructure, growth in the area school populations and other ways the state might manage the impact of the expansion.

"With the B-21 bomber program, the Ellsworth Air Force Base is estimated to increase by more than 4,000 new military personnel, families, and civilians over the next twenty years, bringing the total base population to nearly 12,000 people," wrote Sen. Helene Duhamel, R-Rapid City, in her request that the board approve studying the topic.

Additionally, the legislative budget committee will meet during the summer to oversee the design and planning for a new men's prison in Lincoln County, south of Sioux Falls. Some lawmakers called for a comprehensive review to prevent future expenditure overruns after concerns about overspending were aired during the legislative session.

The Executive Board will next meet on April 23.

Civic engagement center moves forward for Black Hills State Legislature, Regents plan to fund center despite vote against it during 2024 session

BY: MAKENZIE HUBER - MARCH 26, 2024 2:19 PM

Black Hills State University will begin work on a center for civic engagement this year, even after a bill to create the center failed twice in the Legislature.

The Legislature's Joint Appropriations Committee approved a letter Tuesday outlining how nearly \$1 million it budgeted for Black Hills State earlier this month should be spent. The letter says that the school will use a portion of that money to create the center.

According to the letter, the center's purpose will be to prepare undergraduate students in South Dakota for active and informed participation in political and civic life.

"The center must provide this foundation by incorporating, in the education of the students, a broad range of subjects, including communications, economics, history, philosophy, political science, and sociology, and enhancing the students' understanding of civic affairs and discourse," the letter reads.

The center would be tasked with helping the Board of Regents and other public universities develop civic programming, develop and provide curriculum, and host civic-focused events.

Gov. Kristi Noem and the South Dakota Board of Regents, which oversees the state's public universities, identified a civic engagement center as a priority ahead of the 2024 legislative session, but a bill to create the "Dr. Nicholas W. Drummond Center for Civic Engagement" failed by one vote in the Senate.

Sioux Falls Republican Rep. Tony Venhuizen, who serves on Joint Appropriations, told South Dakota Searchlight after the Tuesday meeting that legislation wasn't necessary, since the South Dakota Board of Regents has the authority to create the center so "on their own terms."

Writing the center's name into state statute sparked opposition to the bill, he said. The Board of Regents testified against the bill because there wasn't a new funding source to help Black Hills State pay for the center.

To get around such concerns, appropriators sent an additional \$926,406 in general funds to Black Hills State University at the end of session. The Legislature approved the increase when it signed off on the state budget bill.

Board of Regents Executive Director Nathan Lukkes told appropriators on Tuesday the center would cost about \$200,000 in its first year of implementation "as the minimum to do the initiative justice."

Spearfish Republican Rep. Scott Odenbach, who introduced the civics bills, said he's pleased with the decision to move forward on the "groundbreaking" initiative. He hopes Drummond can still be honored somehow through the center.

"Whatever your major is, you need better exposure to the civic life of our country," Odenbach said. "For too long, that got pigeon-holed for political science or government majors. But if you're going to school for education or biology, every student still needs to understand that in South Dakota 'Under God the People Rule.' We all have to step up as leaders of our country. That's the hope of where this will go."

The rest of the money would be added to Black Hills State's regular budget. A 2022 study found that the university had a "significant shortfall in funding" compared to similar institutions in other states. The Legislature approved about half a million additional dollars last year for Black Hills State.

Northern State University in Aberdeen has its own Center for Public History and Civic Engagement, which prior legislation indicated the two centers could work together on the initiatives.

BHSU will present the center's progress to the Legislature during the 2025 session, which begins in mid-January.

The letter was one of eight approved by the committee on Tuesday, all concerning how appropriators expect state money to be spent, and what they expect those awarded funding to report back to the Legislature in the coming years.

The committee considered letters of intent for:

Center for quantum computing: Of the \$3 million approved for this project, \$1.2 million will go to Dakota State University, \$1.2 million to South Dakota School of Mines and Technology, and \$590,000 for the

Regents to distribute as needed.

Local government cybersecurity initiative: The \$7 million appropriated by the Legislature will be used primarily to create a secure email server for South Dakota counties and municipalities, as well as for grants to implement Project Boundary Fence cybersecurity recommendations.

Technology grants for long term care facilities: The \$2 million in grants passed by the Legislature "may only be used" for technological equipment to improve the care of elderly patients or improve the productivity of workers. Those improvements can include remote sensing, monitoring devices and other equipment.

Telemedicine grants for long term care facilities: The \$5 million in federal funding will be used for telemedicine technology grants at assisted living centers and nursing centers in remote and underserved parts of the state. Facilities are expected to cover ongoing costs of the technology after the grants are spent.

Tuition and fees freeze: Tuition and fees for students attending South Dakota public universities and technical colleges won't increase for the 2024-2025 school year because of this \$7 million in appropriation.

Updating the USD chemistry and biology lab: \$8 million of the \$16.8 million in appropriations for this project will be set aside for maintenance and repair of the Churchill-Haines Lab, used for chemistry and biology, at the University of South Dakota.

Support to South Dakotans who are disabled: The letter of intent from the Department of Human Services failed to pass the committee. Instead, the committee plans to ask the Government Operations and Audit Committee to address the recommendations from a Family Support 360 and Shared Living Program Assessment, monitor compliance, and report back to the Legislature before the 2025 session.

U.S. Supreme Court justices seem skeptical of limits on access to abortion medication

BY: JENNIFER SHUTT - MARCH 26, 2024 5:49 PM

WASHINGTON — The future of medication abortion access in the United States went in front of the U.S. Supreme Court justices on Tuesday, where several justices appeared somewhat skeptical as anti-abortion organizations argued use of the pharmaceutical should be moved back to what was in place before 2016.

Solicitor General Elizabeth Prelogar, speaking on behalf of the federal government, told the conservative-dominated court that those restrictions would be unnecessary due to the numerous reputable studies that have shown mifepristone to be safe and effective.

Prelogar also argued that conscience protections already in place at the federal level protect doctors and other health care providers who don't want to participate in elective abortion or in treating complications that can sometimes arise from medication abortion.

"Only an exceptionally small number of women suffer the kinds of serious complications that could trigger any need for emergency treatment," Prelogar said. "It's speculative that any of those women would seek care from the two specific doctors who asserted conscience injuries. And even if that happened, federal conscience protections would guard against the injury the doctors face."

Prelogar said there was no way to trace those two anti-abortion doctors' concerns — cited in the case argued by Alliance Defending Freedom — about treating patients with complications from medication abortion to the changes the Food and Drug Administration approved in 2016 and 2021, which were at the center of the case before the Supreme Court.

Prelogar also said the anti-abortion legal organization that filed the original lawsuit hadn't identified a situation where a doctor or health care provider opposed to abortion raised a conscience protection and then had that violated.

Medication abortion includes mifepristone as the first pharmaceutical and misoprostol as the second. The two-drug regimen accounted for about 63% of abortions within the United States in 2023, according to a report from the Guttmacher Institute.

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Questions about broad changes in access

Justices Amy Coney Barrett and Neil Gorsuch — appointed to the court by former President Donald Trump — and Ketanji Brown Jackson, appointed by President Joe Biden — were among the members of the court who specifically asked about why conscience protections would or would not be an appropriate remedy to the anti-abortion doctors' concerns about medication abortion.

"I'm worried that there is a significant mismatch in this case between the claimed injury and the remedy that's being sought," Jackson said. "The obvious, common-sense remedy would be to provide them with an exemption that they don't have to participate in this procedure."

But, Jackson noted, the anti-abortion doctors were seeking changes in access to mifepristone for everyone in the United States.

"And I guess I'm just trying to understand how they could possibly be entitled to that, given the injury that they have alleged," Jackson said.

Gorsuch appeared to express some criticism of the anti-abortion case as well, saying, "We have before us a handful of individuals who have asserted a conscience objection."

"Normally, we would allow equitable relief to address them," Gorsuch said. "Recently — and I think what Justice Jackson is alluding to — we've had, what one might call, a rash of universal injunctions or vacatures."

"And this case seems like a prime example of turning what could be a small lawsuit into a nationwide legislative assembly on an FDA rule, or any other federal government action," Gorsuch said.

Prelogar agreed there was a "profound mismatch," though Erin Morrow Hawley argued on behalf of Alliance Defending Freedom and the anti-abortion doctors that conscience protections don't go far enough.

"These are emergency situations," Hawley said. "Respondent doctors don't necessarily know until they scrub into that operating room whether this may or may not be abortion drug harm — it could be a miscarriage, it could be an ectopic pregnancy, or it could be an elective abortion."

Doctors, Hawley said, "can't waste precious moments" in those circumstances.

Ruling coming later this year

The Supreme Court's opinion on the case, Food and Drug Administration v. Alliance for Hippocratic Medicine, will likely arrive sometime early this summer in the middle of a bitter campaign for control of the White House and Congress in which the issue of reproductive rights is being stressed by Democrats.

The ruling will come about two years after the Supreme Court overturned the constitutional right to an abortion that it first recognized in the 1973 Roe v. Wade ruling and reasserted in the 1992 Casey v. Planned Parenthood decision.

Reverting use of mifepristone, one of two pharmaceuticals used in medication abortions, back to what was in place before the FDA began making changes in 2016 would lead to significant changes for doctors and patients:

Mifepristone would be approved for up to seven weeks gestation, down from the current 10-week ceiling for use.

Patients would go back to attending three, in-person doctor's office appointments to complete the medication abortion process.

The pharmaceutical could no longer be sent to patients through the mail.

Only doctors would be able to prescribe mifepristone, removing the option for qualified healthcare providers like physician's assistants and nurse practitioners to prescribe it.

The FDA originally approved mifepristone in 2000, later updating prescribing guidelines in 2016 and again during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Several major medical organizations — including the American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists, the American Medical Association and the Society for Maternal-Fetal Medicine — wrote in a brief to the Supreme Court ahead of oral arguments that "(f)ocus on the use of mifepristone for induced abortion disregards how similarly essential it is to the safe and effective treatment of miscarriage or early pregnancy loss."

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"Miscarriage is common," the medical organizations wrote. "Of the roughly 5.5 million pregnancies estimated to occur in the United States each year, between 10% and 26% end in miscarriage. For the million or more patients who experience early pregnancy loss annually, mifepristone is often a critical component of care."

Thomas, Alito ask about Comstock Act

Associate Justices Clarence Thomas and Samuel Alito appeared to be more skeptical than some of their colleagues that mifepristone access should remain as it is now, including mailing it to some patients.

Both asked questions about the Comstock Act, a law from 1873 that sought to regulate obscenity, but also banned mailing "books on anatomy, works by British author D. H. Lawrence, information about contraception, and photographs of boxing matches," according to a post from the National Archives.

Alliance Defending Freedom has argued throughout the case that the Comstock Act bars the mailing of mifepristone.

Hawley said that remains its position, disagreeing with the stance of the federal government and the legal counsel for a manufacturer of mifepristone.

"The Comstock Act says that drugs should not be mailed either through the mail or through common carriers, so we think that the plain text of that is pretty clear," Hawley said.

Nothing the Supreme Court has ruled in its history "empowers FDA to ignore other federal laws," Hawley said.

Prelogar said she didn't believe that law fell within "FDA's lane," since under the Food, Drug and Cosmetic Act, that agency can only maintain enhanced requirements for pharmaceuticals like mifepristone if "necessary to ensure safe use."

"I don't think it would have even been permissible for FDA to consider maintaining this restriction because of Comstock," Prelogar said. "It's very clear that the only thing FDA can take into account for restrictions are safety and efficacy concerns in deciding whether to maintain a (Risk Evaluation and Mitigation Strategies) program."

Jessica Ellsworth, legal counsel for Danco Laboratories LLC, which produces the brand-name version of mifepristone called Mifeprex, said she agreed with the assertion that FDA is only responsible to consider safety and efficacy.

The FDA, Ellsworth said, regularly approves pharmaceuticals "whose manufacture and distribution is restricted by other laws, like the Controlled Substances Act, environmental laws, customs laws."

"I think this court should think hard about the mischief it would invite if it allowed agencies to start taking action based on statutory responsibilities that Congress has assigned to other agencies," Ellsworth said.

Thomas said his "problem" with mailing mifepristone is that Danco is a private entity and that unlike the federal government, it "doesn't have the sort of safe harbor that" she suggested.

Danco "disagreed" with that interpretation of the Comstock Act, Ellsworth said.

"This statute has not been enforced for nearly 100 years," Ellsworth said. "And I don't believe that this case presents an opportunity for this court to opine on the reach of the statute."

Drug complications

Nearly all the justices asked questions of the three lawyers presenting the case Tuesday about the safety and efficacy of mifepristone.

One recurring question sought to determine when complications from using a pharmaceutical like mifepristone rise to the level where the FDA should pull it from the market.

Associate Justice Sonia Sotomayor noted "the problem with all drugs is there are complications in virtually all of them."

"The reality is, even if there is some increase in emergency room visits, the question of when that rises to a sufficient safety risk is up to the FDA, correct?" Sotomayor asked.

Alito raised concerns about who would be in a position to rein in the FDA in the event it "flagrantly vio-

lated the law, didn't do what it should have done, endangered the health of women."

Prelogar said the FDA "takes very seriously its responsibility to ensure the safety of drugs" and noted there are other legal avenues besides the Supreme Court.

"We have a tort system in this country, and that can help ensure that if there are safety problems that come to pass, the sponsors will take action in reaction to that," Prelogar said. "So if the premise here is that unsafe drugs could somehow remain on the market, I think that that's incorrect."

Alito appeared frustrated with some of the arguments in the case. He asked the legal counsel for Danco if the FDA was "infallible," asked for information about times the FDA has had to pull approved medications from the market and asked why the FDA didn't continue to require reporting of non-fatal adverse events after making changes to its prescribing guidelines in 2016.

Ellsworth said "the FDA decided not to continue that reporting requirement in 2016 based on more than 15 years of a well-established safety profile when that reporting was required."

"There is no drug on the market today under any REMS that requires the kind of reporting that the plaintiffs are saying should be reimposed here," Ellsworth said.

Justice Jackson later inquired about the "flip side" of Alito's question on whether the FDA is infallible, asking "if courts have specialized scientific knowledge with respect to pharmaceuticals" and whether there should be concerns about judges "parsing medical and scientific studies."

Ellsworth responded that pharmaceutical companies have laid out significant concerns in briefs about courts second-guessing or overturning the FDA's scientific judgment.

"There are two amicus briefs from the pharmaceutical industry that expand on why exactly that's so concerning for pharmaceutical companies who do depend on FDA's gold standard review process to approve their drugs and then to be able to sell their products in line with that considered judgment," Ellsworth said.

Among those concerns, she said, is that the U.S. District Court for the Northern District of Texas' ruling in this case in 2023, which called for the complete removal of mifepristone from the market, used flawed reasoning.

"You have a district court that, among other things, relied on one study that was an analysis of anonymous blog posts," Ellsworth said. "You have another set of studies that he relied on that were not in the administrative record and would never be because they post-date the FDA decisions here. They have since been retracted for lack of scientific rigor and for misleading presentations of data."

That is one of the many reasons, she said, the FDA has "hundreds of pages of analysis in the record of what the scientific data showed. And courts are just not in a position to parse through and second guess that."

Biden pledges federal dollars for "entire cost" to rebuild collapsed Baltimore bridge

BY: JACOB FISCHLER - MARCH 26, 2024 5:42 PM

President Joe Biden called Tuesday for the federal government to foot the bill to rebuild the Francis Scott Key Bridge in Baltimore following its collapse earlier in the day.

The ongoing search-and-rescue operation led by the U.S. Coast Guard is the top priority for now, Biden said in brief remarks from the White House on Tuesday afternoon.

The bridge collapsed around 1:30 a.m. Tuesday after a container ship struck it.

Biden said the federal government should fund all reconstruction costs. Congress would have to approve any federal funding.

"It's my intention that the federal government will pay for the entire cost of reconstructing the bridge," Biden said. "And I expect the Congress to support my effort. It's going to take some time. The people of Baltimore can count on us, though, to stick with them every step of the way."

Asked if the shipping company should be held responsible for the costs of reconstruction, Biden said the

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federal government should act before a determination of fault is made.

"That might be, but we're not going to wait for that to happen," he said. "We're going to pay for it to get the bridge rebuilt and open."

Biden's public remarks came shortly after meeting with Maryland Gov. Wes Moore, Baltimore Mayor Brandon Scott, Baltimore County Executive John A. Olszewski Jr. and the Maryland congressional delegation, during which the president said he promised federal resources to rebuild the bridge and reopen the Port of Baltimore, which closed shortly after the bridge collapse.

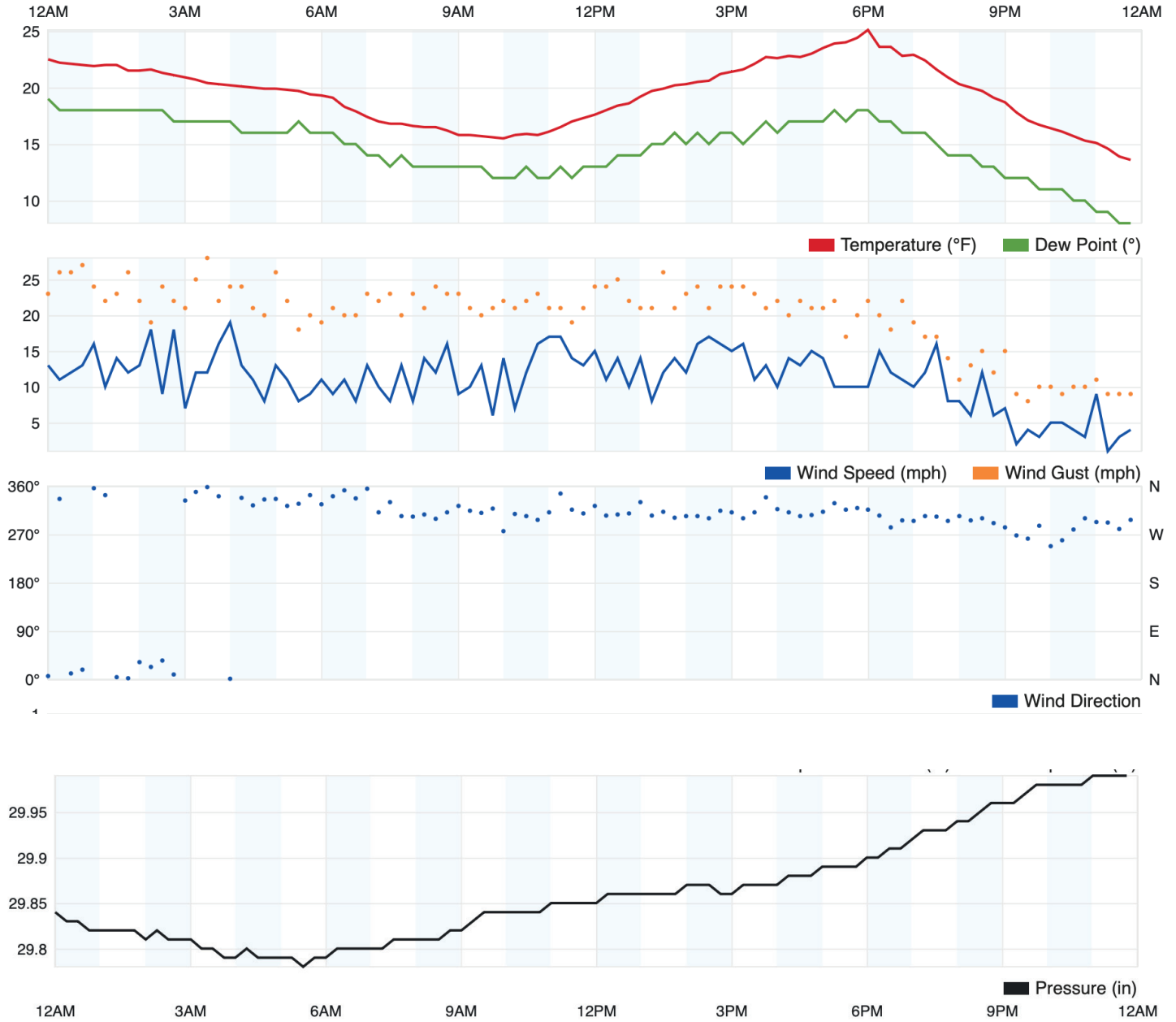
"I told them we're going to send all the federal resources they need as they respond to this emergency," he said. "I mean all the federal resources. And we're going to rebuild that bridge together."

Biden said he would visit Baltimore "as quickly as I can."

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Yesterday's Groton Weather Graphs



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Today



Sunny

High: 25 °F

Tonight



Mostly Clear

Low: 5 °F

Thursday



Mostly Sunny

High: 36 °F

Thursday
Night



Mostly Cloudy
then Chance
Wintry Mix

Low: 23 °F

Friday



Chance
Rain/Freezing
Rain then
Chance Rain

High: 40 °F



Diminishing Winds Tonight

	Wind Gust Forecast (mph)														Maximum
	3/26 Tue		3/27 Wed						3/28 Thu						
	6pm	9pm	12am	3am	6am	9am	12pm	3pm	6pm	9pm	12am	3am	6am	9am	
Aberdeen	26	22	20	17	14	16	17	17	14	7	6	6	6	7	26
Britton	30	25	22	17	14	15	20	22	17	12	9	7	6	6	30
Brookings	30	22	17	14	12	12	16	18	14	8	6	6	6	8	30
Chamberlain	24	14	9	7	6	6	7	9	9	10	9	9	10	10	24
Clark	30	24	22	17	15	17	21	21	16	10	9	8	9	13	30
Eagle Butte	22	15	12	12	10	7	9	12	9	10	13	12	10	15	22
Ellendale	30	24	22	18	17	18	18	20	15	9	8	6	6	6	30
Eureka	26	22	17	14	13	14	16	17	14	7	8	8	8	14	26
Gettysburg	26	21	16	15	13	13	15	15	13	10	12	13	13	17	26
Huron	26	20	18	15	13	12	12	13	10	9	10	9	9	12	26
Kennebec	24	15	12	9	7	6	8	12	12	12	10	9	9	13	24
McIntosh	26	17	14	13	12	10	12	14	12	10	13	12	10	13	26
Milbank	30	25	22	20	17	16	20	21	15	10	10	8	6	6	30
Miller	24	18	17	14	13	12	13	12	9	8	9	9	10	12	24
Mobridge	26	20	14	12	9	10	12	13	12	10	10	9	9	12	26
Murdo	22	14	9	7	6	6	7	13	13	13	14	12	10	12	22
Pierre	23	13	8	7	5	5	8	10	10	10	9	8	8	10	23
Redfield	26	21	20	16	14	15	16	14	10	8	8	7	8	10	26
Sisseton	32	30	25	22	20	20	22	24	21	15	12	9	7	6	32
Watertown	31	25	21	18	15	16	20	22	17	12	9	7	6	7	31
Webster	35	30	25	21	17	18	22	23	20	12	9	8	7	8	35
Wheaton	30	24	22	20	18	17	18	21	18	13	10	8	6	6	30

Tonight

- Flurries early-east of James River
- Lows: 0 to 9°

Wednesday

- Clouds and sun
- Highs: 22-38°

Thursday

- Sun and clouds then increasing clouds late
- Highs: 31 to 48°

Thurs Night/Friday

- 20-50% chance of rain/snow
- Potential for freezing rain (15%) mixed in

Winds will be diminishing tonight through the overnight with overall dry conditions Wednesday through Thursday. A quick system will bring a 20-50% chance of light rain/snow with the possibility (15%) of freezing rain late Thursday into Friday.

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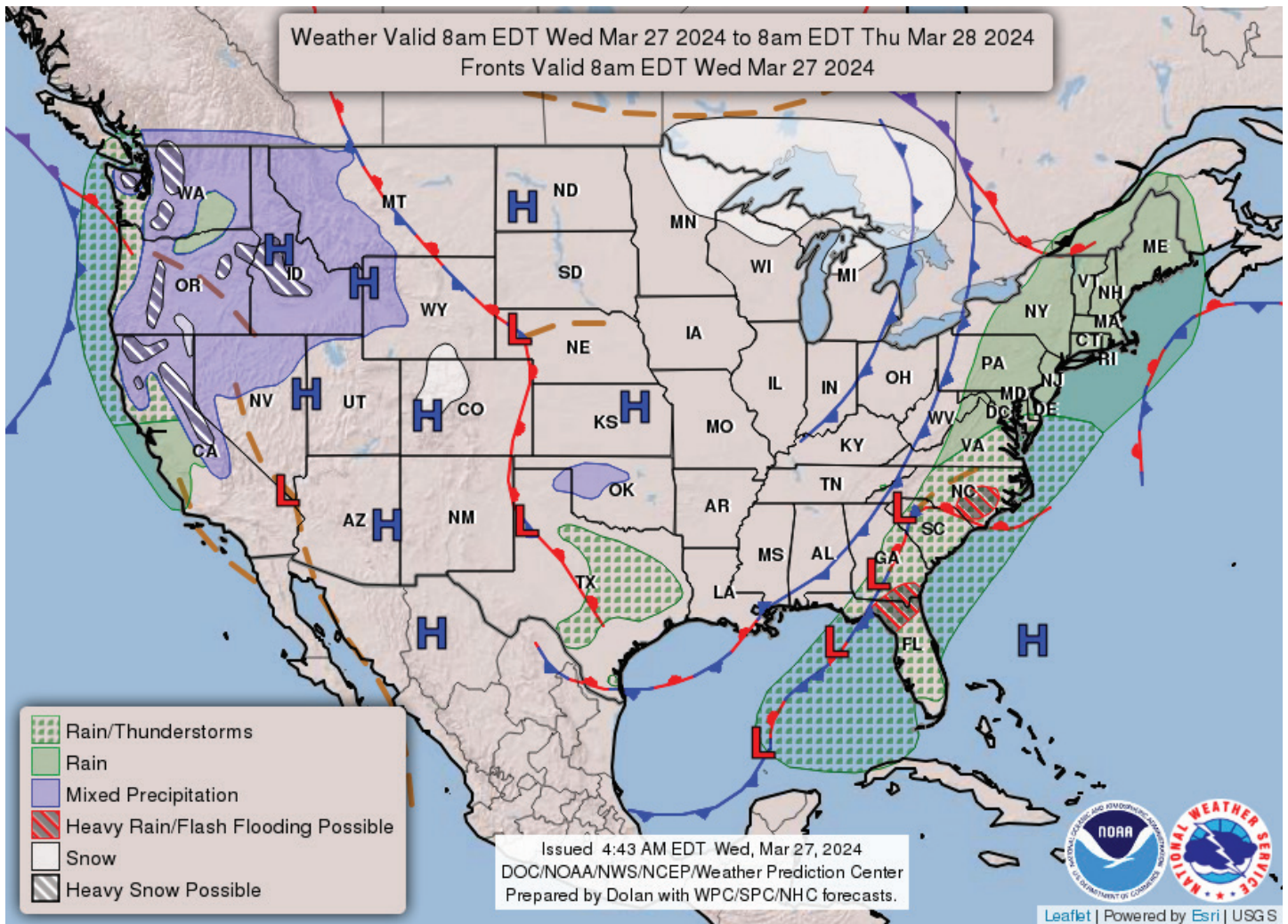
Yesterday's Groton Weather

High Temp: 25 °F at 6:00 PM
Low Temp: 14 °F at 11:30 PM
Wind: 28 mph at 12:02 AM
Precip: : 0.00

Day length: 12 hours, 37 minutes

Today's Info

Record High: 83 in 1946
Record Low: -12 in 1913
Average High: 48
Average Low: 24
Average Precip in March.: 0.74
Precip to date in March: 0.78
Average Precip to date: 1.91
Precip Year to Date: 0.85
Sunset Tonight: 7:56:03 pm
Sunrise Tomorrow: 7:17:04 am



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Today in Weather History

March 27, 1993: Rain and rapid snowmelt caused the Big Sioux and Vermillion Rivers to rise to 1 to 8 feet above flood stage March 26th through March 31st, 1993. The worst of the flooding occurred in far southeast South Dakota where large areas of farmland were under water. The floodwaters closed at least four state highways in southeast South Dakota and blocked dozens of smaller roads in the east. Large chunks of ice on the Big Sioux led to many temporary ice jams. The ice jams took out fences and washed out roads. In some areas, the ice had to be pushed off of the streets with tractors.

1890: The middle Mississippi Valley saw a significant tornado outbreak on this day with 24, estimated F2 or stronger tornadoes impacting the area. Tornadoes killed at least 146 people. The most notable of the tornadoes was an estimated F4 that carved a path from the Parkland neighborhood to Crescent Hill in Louisville, Kentucky. This tornado destroyed 766 buildings and killed an estimated 76 to 120 people. Most of the deaths occurred when the Falls City Hall collapsed. C

1931: A blizzard struck western Kansas and adjoining states was called the "worst since January 1888". Twenty children, ages seven to fourteen, were stranded in a makeshift school bus for 33 hours during this blizzard.

1946: Winnipeg, Manitoba Canada thawed out as the mercury soared to 74 degrees, their warmest March temperature on record.

1950 - A three day snowstorm in the High Plains Region finally came to an end. The storm produced 34 inches of snow in 24 hours at Dumont, located in the Black Hills of South Dakota, and a total of 50 inches. (David Ludlum)

1964: Great Alaskan earthquake left at least 100 dead in Anchorage, Alaska. The magnitude 9.2 quake is the largest in US history and the second strongest worldwide. Waves reached 103 feet above the low - tide mark.

1984 - The temperature at Brownsville, TX, soared to 106 degrees, and Cotulla, TX, reached 108 degrees, equalling the March record for the U.S. (The Weather Channel)

1987 - The second blizzard in less than a week hit eastern Colorado and western Kansas. Snowfall totals ranged up to 24 inches at San Isabel CO. Winds gusted to 50 mph at Goodland KS. The high winds piled snow into massive drifts, closing roads for days and killing thousands of cattle. Snow drifts thirty feet high were reported in northwest Kansas. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

1988 - Temperatures rose quickly, then dropped just as rapidly, in the central U.S. Eight cities reported record high temperatures for the date as readings soared into the 80s. In southeastern Colorado, the temperature at Lamar CO reached 91 degrees. Strong southerly winds gusted to 63 mph at Gage OK. Strong northwesterly winds, gusting to 61 mph at Goodland KS, then proceeded to usher much colder air into the area. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

1989 - Afternoon and evening thunderstorms produced severe weather in the south central U.S. Two tornadoes were reported, and there were 77 other reports of large hail and damaging winds. Baseball size hail was reported at Willow OK and Bartlesville OK. Twenty-six cities in the central and eastern U.S. reported new record high temperatures for the date, including Yankton SD with a reading of 84 degrees. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

1994: The Southeastern Palm Sunday Tornado Outbreak occurred on this date. What began as a peaceful Palm Sunday quickly changed to a historic day in weather history when a powerful tornado ripped through southern Alabama and Georgia. By the time the storm was over, 22 people were dead, and 92 were injured. The F4 tornado cut a 50-mile path from Ragland in St. Clair, County Alabama to the Georgia line. The storm touched down near Ragland at 10:51 am. The storm struck Ohatchee than roared across northeastern Calhoun County, passing near Piedmont and hitting Goshen in Cherokee County. The most disastrous damage occurred at Goshen, where the twister struck the Goshen United Methodist Church at 11:37 am. 20 people were killed at the church, which did not hear the tornado warning issued 10 minutes earlier by the National Weather Service in Birmingham. A tornado watch had been released at 9:30 am. Following the tornadoes, Vice President Al Gore pledged to extend NOAA Weatheradio coverage into the areas affected by the twisters, which had previously been unable to receive the alarm signals.

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Daily Devotionals

Seeds of Hope

FROZEN ASSETS

Years ago a fire destroyed a large warehouse that contained many tons of ice. Although the firemen had tens of thousands of gallons of water available to extinguish the fire, they could not be used. The ice was in "cold storage" and beyond reach. The building burned to the ground even though it was full of "frozen water."

God has given each one of us unique gifts and talents, skills and abilities, to do His work. We all are as different as our fingerprints and designed to do things that honor Him. Too often we imagine that what He wants us to do is beyond our capabilities.

We tend to see problems and issues that would require massive amounts of money or large numbers of people to bring change. We look beyond the immediate to the distant, even unimaginable, and find excuses not to do what God places before us.

If you recall the beginning of the earthly ministry of Jesus, He invited ordinary men to join Him in His extra-ordinary work. They had no special training but they did have a special commitment. We know that they were committed because we read that "they spent time with Jesus." These "ordinary men" put aside their personal interests and began to see life through His eyes. He taught them to see the spiritual needs of others and how to meet those needs.

If we are willing to "spend time with Jesus," follow Him closely, listen to Him carefully, and pray to Him sincerely, we will be able to do the same.

Prayer: Heavenly Father, help us to always be alert for opportunities to tell others of Your love, salvation, and hope. If we love You, we will follow You and serve You. In Jesus' Name, Amen.

Scripture For Today: Jesus called out to them, "Come, follow me, and I will show you how to fish for people!" Matthew 4:19



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

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WINNING NUMBERS

MEGA MILLIONS

WINNING NUMBERS:
03.26.24

7 11 22 29 38 4

MegaPlier: 2x

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:
\$20,000,000

NEXT 2 Days 17 Hrs 25
DRAW: Mins 16 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

LOTTO AMERICA

WINNING NUMBERS:
03.25.24

19 32 35 40 43 4

All Star Bonus: 2x

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:
\$2,450,000

NEXT 16 Hrs 40 Mins 17
DRAW: Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

LUCKY FOR LIFE

WINNING NUMBERS:
03.26.24

18 25 34 39 48 12

TOP PRIZE:
\$7,000/week

NEXT 16 Hrs 55 Mins 17
DRAW: Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

DAKOTA CASH

WINNING NUMBERS:
03.23.24

6 11 16 25 29

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:
\$33,000

NEXT 16 Hrs 55 Mins 17
DRAW: Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

POWERBALL

DOUBLE PLAY

WINNING NUMBERS:
03.25.24

2 14 20 28 64 4

TOP PRIZE:
\$10,000,000

NEXT 17 Hrs 24 Mins 16
DRAW: Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

POWERBALL

WINNING NUMBERS:
03.25.24

7 11 19 53 68 23

Power Play: 2x

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:
\$865,000,000

NEXT 17 Hrs 24 Mins 17
DRAW: Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

News from the Associated Press

Lawmakers in Thailand overwhelmingly approve a bill to legalize same-sex marriage

BANGKOK (AP) — Lawmakers in Thailand's lower house of Parliament overwhelmingly approved a marriage equality bill on Wednesday that would make the country the first in Southeast Asia to legalize equal rights for marriage partners of any gender.

The bill passed its final reading with the approval of 400 of the 415 members of the House of Representatives who were in attendance, with 10 voting against it, two abstaining and three not voting.

The bill amends the Civil and Commercial Code to change the words "men and women" and "husband and wife" to "individuals" and "marriage partners." It would open up access to full legal, financial and medical rights for LGBTQ+ couples.

The bill now goes to the Senate, which rarely rejects any legislation that passes the lower house, and then to the king for royal endorsement. This would make Thailand the first country or region in Southeast Asia to pass such a law and the third in Asia, after Taiwan and Nepal.

Danuphorn Punnakanta, a spokesperson of the governing Pheu Thai party and president of a committee overseeing the marriage equality bill, said in Parliament that the amendment is for "everyone in Thailand" regardless of their gender, and would not deprive heterosexual couples of any rights.

"For this law, we would like to return rights to the (LGBTQ+ group). We are not giving them rights. These are the fundamental rights that this group of people ... has lost," he said.

Lawmakers, however, did not approve inclusion of the word "parent" in addition to "father and mother" in the law, which activists said would limit the rights of some LGBTQ+ couples to form a family and raise children.

Thailand has a reputation for acceptance and inclusivity but has struggled for decades to pass a marriage equality law.

The new government led by Pheu Thai, which took office last year, has made marriage equality one of its main goals.

'Heroes' scrambled to stop traffic before Baltimore bridge collapsed; construction crew feared dead

By LEA SKENE Associated Press

BALTIMORE (AP) — It was the middle of the night when a dispatcher's 12-second warning crackled over the radio: A massive cargo ship had lost its steering capabilities and was heading toward the Francis Scott Key Bridge.

Within about 90 seconds, police officers responded that they had managed to stop vehicle traffic over the Baltimore bridge in both directions. One said he was about to drive onto the bridge to alert a construction crew.

But it was too late. Powerless and laden with huge containers, the vessel smashed into a support pillar.

"The whole bridge just fell down," a frantic officer said. "Start, start whoever, everybody ... the whole bridge just collapsed."

When the shipping vessel Dali slammed into the pillar around 1:30 a.m. Tuesday, it caused a long span of the bridge, a major link in the region's transport networks, to crumple into the Patapsco River. The loss of the bridge is expected to snarl commuter traffic and disrupt a vital shipping port.

At least eight people went into the water. Two survived but the other six, part of a construction crew that had been filling potholes on the bridge, were missing and presumed dead. A search for their bodies was to resume Wednesday morning.

Among the missing were people from Guatemala, Honduras and Mexico, according to diplomats from

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those countries. The Honduran man was identified as Maynor Yassir Suazo Sandova.

Federal and state officials said the crash appeared to be an accident. The National Transportation Safety Board is investigating, and ship traffic entering and leaving the Port of Baltimore was suspended indefinitely.

Capt. Michael Burns Jr. of the Maritime Center for Responsible Energy said bringing a ship into or out of ports in restricted waters with limited room to maneuver is "one of the most technically challenging and demanding things that we do."

"So there really is few things that are scarier than a loss of power in restricted waters," he said. And when a ship loses propulsion and steering, "then it's really at the mercy of the wind and the current."

Video showed the ship moving at what Maryland Gov. Wes Moore said was about 9 mph (15 kph) toward the 1.6-mile (2.6-kilometer) bridge. Traffic was still moving across the span, and some vehicles appeared to escape with only seconds to spare. The crash caused the span to break and fall into the water within seconds, and jagged remnants were left jutting up from the water in daylight.

Police said there is no evidence anyone went into the water other than the workers, though they had not discounted the possibility.

A senior executive at the company that employed the crew, Brawner Builders, said they were working in the middle of the bridge when it fell.

"This was so completely unforeseen," said Jeffrey Pritzker, the company's executive vice president. "We don't know what else to say. We take such great pride in safety, and we have cones and signs and lights and barriers and flaggers."

Jesus Campos, who has worked on the bridge for Brawner Builders and knows members of the crew, said he was told they were on a break and some were sitting in their trucks.

"I know that a month ago, I was there, and I know what it feels like when the trailers pass," Campos said. "Imagine knowing that is falling. It is so hard. One would not know what to do."

Father Ako Walker, a Catholic priest at Sacred Heart of Jesus, said outside a vigil that he spent time with the families of the missing workers as they waited for news of their loved ones.

"You can see the pain etched on their faces," Walker said.

Rescuers pulled two people out of the water. One person was treated at a hospital and discharged hours later.

The crash happened long before the busy morning commute on the bridge, which was used by 12 million vehicles last year.

From 1960 to 2015, there were 35 major bridge collapses worldwide due to ship or barge collisions, according to the World Association for Waterborne Transport Infrastructure.

Tuesday's collapse is sure to create a logistical headache along the East Coast for months, if not longer, shutting down shipping traffic at the Port of Baltimore, a major hub.

Paul Wiedefeld, the state's transportation secretary, said vessel traffic in and out of the port would be suspended until further notice, though the facility was still open to trucks.

"Losing this bridge will devastate the entire area, as well as the entire East Coast," state Sen. Johnny Ray Salling said.

U.S. Transportation Secretary Pete Buttigieg said it was too soon to give a time frame for clearing the channel, which is about 50 feet (15 meters) deep, while President Joe Biden said he planned to travel to Baltimore soon and expects the federal government to pay the entire cost of rebuilding.

Synergy Marine Group, which manages the ship, said the impact happened while it was under the control of one or more pilots, who are local specialists who help guide vessels safely in and out of ports. Synergy said in a statement Wednesday that one crew member was treated at a hospital for a minor injury.

The ship is owned by Grace Ocean Private Ltd., and Danish shipping giant Maersk said it had chartered the vessel.

The 985-foot-long (300-meter-long) Dali was headed from Baltimore to Colombo, Sri Lanka, and flying under a Singapore flag, according to data from Marine Traffic.

The vessel also passed foreign port state inspections in June and September 2023. In the June 2023 inspection, a faulty monitor gauge for fuel pressure was rectified before the vessel departed the port,

Singapore's port authority said in a statement Wednesday.

Donald Heinbuch, a retired chief with Baltimore's fire department, said he was startled awake by a deep rumbling that shook his house for several seconds and "felt like an earthquake."

He drove to the river and couldn't believe what he saw: "The ship was there, and the bridge was in the water, like it was blown up."

Baltimore Mayor Brandon Scott called the incident "an unthinkable tragedy." Gov. Moore said that "all of our hearts are broken for the victims and their families," and he also hailed first responders for their quick response.

"Literally by being able to stop cars from coming over the bridge, these people are heroes," Moore said. "They saved lives last night."

50 years after the former Yugoslavia protected abortion rights, that legacy is under threat

By DARKO BANDIC and JOVANA GEC Associated Press

ZAGREB, Croatia (AP) — With vigils outside clinics, marches drawing thousands and groups of men kneeling to pray in public squares, religious and neo-conservative groups have been ramping up pressure to ban abortions in staunchly Catholic Croatia.

The fierce debate has fueled divisions in the European Union nation of about 3.9 million people where abortion remains legal but access to the procedure is often denied, sending many women to neighboring Slovenia to end a pregnancy.

The movement is in stark contrast to Croatia's recent past, when it was part of the former Yugoslavia, a Communist-run country that protected abortion rights in its constitution 50 years ago.

"I find it incredible that we are even discussing this in the year 2024," said Ana Sunic, a mother of two from Zagreb, Croatia's capital. "It is every person's basic right to decide what they will do with their body."

The issue was back in focus this month after France inscribed the right to abortion in its constitution and activists in the Balkans recalled that the former Yugoslavia had done so back in 1974.

Tanja Ignjatovic from the Belgrade-based Autonomous Women's Center in Serbia, another country that was once part of Yugoslavia, noted that women felt abortion rights "belonged to us and could not be brought into question." But, she added, "we have seen that regression is possible, too."

After Yugoslavia disintegrated in a series of wars in the 1990s, the new countries that emerged kept the old laws in place. However, the post-Communist revival of nationalist, religious and conservative sentiments have threatened that legacy.

Yugoslavia's abortion laws stayed intact after Croatia split from the country in 1991, but doctors were granted the right to refuse to perform them in 2003. As a result, many women have traveled to neighboring Slovenia for an abortion over the years.

"The gap between laws and practice is huge," feminist activist Sanja Sarnavka said. "Due to the immense influence by conservative groups and the Catholic church it (abortion) is de facto impossible in many places, or severely restricted."

A current campaign by a Za Zivot — "for life" — movement in Croatia includes prayers, vigils and lectures "for the salvation of the unborn and a stop to abortions in our nation."

A men's organization dubbed Muzevni Budite, or "be masculine," is behind the prayers in city squares, where they preach the revival of male dominance and traditional gender roles along with a campaign against abortions.

In 2022, the weeklong ordeal of a woman who had been denied an abortion even though her child had serious health problems caused an uproar and triggered protests in Croatia's liberal community.

Mirela Cavajda was 20 weeks pregnant when doctors informed her that her fetus had a brain tumor and no chance of a normal life. Though the abortion was eventually permitted in Croatia, Cavajde had it performed in Slovenia.

As many as 207 Croatian women traveled to a single border hospital in Slovenia that same year for the

procedure, a study by Croatian obstetrician Jasenka Grujić showed.

The percentage of doctors who refuse to perform abortions as conscientious objectors reaches 100% in some Croatian hospitals, the study found. The objectors include not only obstetricians but also anaesthesiologists and other doctors needed for the procedure, Grujic said.

"Croatia's medical community is deeply divided," Grujic wrote in the analysis she made available to The Associated Press. "I hope this trend of actual unavailability of abortion will be reversed. That is so dangerous for women's health and lives."

Yugoslav physicians first considered legalizing abortion back in 1935, and that became a reality in the 1950s. Pushed forward by a women's organization born out of World War II, the right to abortion was later included in Yugoslavia's constitution.

Stating that "it is the right of a human being to freely decide on the birth of children," Yugoslavia's constitution did not explicitly guarantee abortion, as France's does. But it nonetheless gave Yugoslav women easy access to terminate pregnancies in clinics throughout the former six-member federation.

"France's decision reminded us that we had that right in the 1974 constitution, which means exactly 50 years before France," Ignjatovic said.

Elsewhere in the former Yugoslavia, Serbia and Slovenia have included the freedom to choose whether to have children in their constitutions. Bosnia's women can legally obtain abortion during the first 10 weeks of pregnancy, though economic impediments exist in the impoverished, post-war country.

After a county restricted transgender women in sports, a roller derby league said, 'No way'

By PHILIP MARCELO Associated Press

SEAFORD, N.Y. (AP) — They zip around the rink, armed with helmets, pads and mouthguards. They push, bump and occasionally crash out as they jostle for position on the hardwood floor.

But for the women of the Long Island Roller Rebels, their biggest battle is taking place outside the suburban strip-mall roller rink where they're girding for the upcoming roller derby season.

The nearly 20-year-old amateur league is suing a county leader over an executive order meant to prevent women's and girl's leagues and teams with transgender players from using county-run parks and fields. The league's legal effort, backed by the New York Civil Liberties Union, has thrust it into the national discussion over the rights of transgender athletes.

Amanda Urena, the league's vice president, said there was never any question the group would take a stand.

"The whole point of derby has been to be this thing where people feel welcome," said the 32-year-old Long Island native, who competes as "Curly Fry" and identifies as queer, at a recent practice at United Skates of America in Seaford. "We want trans women to know that we want you to come play with us, and we'll do our very best to keep fighting and making sure that this is a safe space for you to play."

The February edict from Nassau County Executive Bruce Blakeman affects more than 100 public facilities in the county of nearly 1.4 million just east of Queens.

Sports leagues and teams seeking permits to play or practice in county-run parks must disclose whether they have or allow transgender women or girls. Any organization that allows them to play will be denied a permit, though men's leagues and teams aren't affected.

Bills restricting trans youths' ability to participate in sports have already passed in some 24 states as part of an explosion of anti-trans legislation on many subjects in recent years. The largest school district in Manhattan is among localities also weighing a ban, following a school board vote last week.

The Roller Rebels sought a county permit this month in hopes of hosting practices and games in county-owned rinks in the upcoming season, as they have in prior years. But they expect to be denied, since the organization is open to anyone who identifies as a woman and has one transgender player already on the roster.

The ban will also make it hard for the league, which has two teams and about 25 players, to recruit and

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will hurt its ability to host competitions with other leagues, Urena said.

State Attorney General Letitia James has demanded the county rescind the ban, saying it violates state anti-discrimination laws, while Blakeman has asked a federal judge to uphold it.

That a roller derby league has become the face of opposition isn't surprising: the sport has long been a haven for queer and transgender women, said Margot Atwell, who played in a women's league in New York City and wrote "Derby Life," a book about roller derby.

The sport, which dates at least to the 1930s and enjoyed its heyday in the 1970s, involves two teams racing around a track as their designated "jammer" attempts to score points by lapping the other skaters, who are allowed to use their hips, chests and shoulders to slow them down.

The latest revival started in the early 2000s and has been sustained by LGBTQ+ people, with leagues frequently taking part in Pride parades and holding fundraising matches, Atwell said.

"You come in here and you say, 'I'm a trans woman. I'm a nonbinary person. I'm genderqueer.' OK? We accept you," said Caitlin Carroll, a Roller Rebel who competes as "Catastrophic Danger." "The world is scary enough. You should have a safe place to be."

Blakeman has said he wants to ensure female athletes can compete safely and fairly. He held a news conference last week with Caitlyn Jenner, who won Olympic gold in the men's decathlon in 1976 and later underwent a gender transition. Jenner, a Republican who's frequently at political odds with the greater transgender community, has endorsed the ban.

Blakeman, a Republican who was elected in 2021, has said constituents asked his office to act. But many critics dismiss the ban as political posturing, noting he has acknowledged there have been no local complaints involving transgender players on women's teams.

"This is a solution in search of a problem," said Emily Santosus, a 48-year old transgender woman on Long Island who hopes to join a women's softball team. "We're not bullies. We're the ones that get bullied."

The ones who will suffer most aren't elite athletes, but children still trying to navigate their gender identities, added Grace McKenzie, a transgender woman who plays for the New York Rugby Club's women's team.

"Cruel is the only word that I can use to describe it," the 30-year-old Brooklyn resident said. "Kids are using sports at that age to build relationships, make friendships, develop teamwork skills, leadership skills and, frankly, just help shield them from all the hate they face as transgender kids already."

In the larger discussion about trans women in sports, each side points to limited research to support their opinion. And bans often do not distinguish between girls and women who took puberty blockers as part of their transition — stunting the development of a male-typical physique — and those who didn't, something one New York advocate pointed out.

The order in Nassau County puts some younger trans girls at greater risk by potentially pitting them against boys instead, said Juli Grey-Owens, leader of Gender Equality New York.

"They are not hitting puberty, so they're not growing, they're not getting that body strength, the endurance, the agility, the big feet, the large legs," Grey-Owens said.

The ban could even lead to cisgender female athletes who are strong and muscular being falsely labeled transgender and disqualified, as has happened elsewhere, said Shane Diamond, a transgender man who plays recreational LGBTQ+ ice hockey in New York City.

"It creates a system where any young woman who doesn't fit the stereotypical idea of femininity and womanhood is at risk of having her gender questioned or gender policed," Diamond said.

A 2022 Washington Post-University of Maryland Poll found that 55% of Americans were opposed to allowing trans women and girls to compete with other women and girls in high school sports, and 58% opposed it for college and pro sports.

Two cisgender female athletes said after listening to Jenner that men are stronger than women, so it will never be fair if transgender women and girls are allowed to compete.

"There is a chance I would get hurt in those situations," said Trinity Reed, 21, who plays lacrosse at Nassau County's Hofstra University.

Mia Babino, 18, plays field hockey at the State University of New York at Cortland and plans to transfer

to Nassau County's Molloy University.

"We've worked very hard to get to where we are and to play at a college level," she said.

But that attitude runs against everything athletic competition stands for, and it sells women and their potential short, countered Urena, of the Roller Rebels.

"If people gave up playing sports because they thought they were going to lose, we wouldn't have a sports industry," they said. "I love playing against people that are faster and stronger because that's how I get better."

'Women farmers are invisible': A West African project helps them claim their rights — and land

By JACK THOMPSON Associated Press

ZIGUINCHOR, Senegal (AP) — Mariama Sonko's voice resounded through the circle of 40 women farmers sitting in the shade of a cashew tree. They scribbled notes, brows furrowed in concentration as her lecture was punctuated by the thud of falling fruit.

This quiet village in Senegal is the headquarters of a 115,000-strong rural women's rights movement in West Africa, We Are the Solution. Sonko, its president, is training female farmers from cultures where women are often excluded from ownership of the land they work so closely.

Across Senegal, women farmers make up 70% of the agricultural workforce and produce 80% of the crops but have little access to land, education and finance compared to men, the United Nations says.

"We work from dawn until dusk, but with all that we do, what do we get out of it?" Sonko asked.

She believes that when rural women are given land, responsibilities and resources, it has a ripple effect through communities. Her movement is training women farmers who traditionally have no access to education, explaining their rights and financing women-led agricultural projects.

Across West Africa, women usually don't own land because it is expected that when they marry, they leave the community. But when they move to their husbands' homes, they are not given land because they are not related by blood.

Sonko grew up watching her mother struggle after her father died, with young children to support.

"If she had land, she could have supported us," she recalled, her normally booming voice now tender. Instead, Sonko had to marry young, abandon her studies and leave her ancestral home.

After moving to her husband's town at age 19, Sonko and several other women convinced a landowner to rent to them a small plot of land in return for part of their harvest. They planted fruit trees and started a market garden. Five years later, when the trees were full of papayas and grapefruit, the owner kicked them off.

The experience marked Sonko.

"This made me fight so that women can have the space to thrive and manage their rights," she said. When she later got a job with a women's charity funded by Catholic Relief Services, coordinating micro-loans for rural women, that work began.

"Women farmers are invisible," said Laure Tall, research director at Agricultural and Rural Prospect Initiative, a Senegalese rural think tank. That's even though women work on farms two to four hours longer than men on an average day.

But when women earn money, they reinvest it in their community, health and children's education, Tall said. Men spend some on household expenses but can choose to spend the rest how they please. Sonko listed common examples like finding a new wife, drinking and buying fertilizer and pesticides for crops that make money instead of providing food.

With encouragement from her husband, who died in 1997, Sonko chose to invest in other women. Her training center now employs over 20 people, with support from small philanthropic organizations such as Agroecology Fund and CLIMA Fund.

In a recent week, Sonko and her team trained over 100 women from three countries, Senegal, Guinea-Bissau and Gambia, in agroforestry — growing trees and crops together as a measure of protection from

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extreme weather – and micro gardening, growing food in tiny spaces when there is little access to land. One trainee, Binta Diatta, said We Are the Solution bought irrigation equipment, seeds, and fencing — an investment of \$4,000 — and helped the women of her town access land for a market garden, one of more than 50 financed by the organization.

When Diatta started to earn money, she said, she spent it on food, clothes and her children's schooling. Her efforts were noticed.

"Next season, all the men accompanied us to the market garden because they saw it as valuable," she said, recalling how they came simply to witness it.

Now another challenge has emerged affecting women and men alike: climate change.

In Senegal and the surrounding region, temperatures are rising 50% more than the global average, according to the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, and the UN Environment Program says rainfall could drop by 38% in the coming decades.

Where Sonko lives, the rainy season has become shorter and less predictable. Saltwater is invading her rice paddies bordering the tidal estuary and mangroves, caused by rising sea levels. In some cases, yield losses are so acute that farmers abandon their rice fields.

But adapting to a heating planet has proven to be a strength for women since they adopt climate innovations much faster than men, said Ena Derenoncourt, an investment specialist for women-led farming projects at agricultural research agency AICCRA.

"They have no choice because they are the most vulnerable and affected by climate change," Derenoncourt said. "They are the most motivated to find solutions."

On a recent day, Sonko gathered 30 prominent women rice growers to document hundreds of local rice varieties. She bellowed out the names of rice – some hundreds of years old, named after prominent women farmers, passed from generation to generation – and the women echoed with what they call it in their villages.

This preservation of indigenous rice varieties is not only key to adapting to climate change but also about emphasizing the status of women as the traditional guardians of seeds.

"Seeds are wholly feminine and give value to women in their communities," Sonko said. "That's why we're working on them, to give them more confidence and responsibility in agriculture."

The knowledge of hundreds of seeds and how they respond to different growing conditions has been vital in giving women a more influential role in communities.

Sonko claimed to have a seed for every condition including too rainy, too dry and even those more resistant to salt for the mangroves.

Last year, she produced 2 tons of rice on her half-hectare plot with none of the synthetic pesticides or fertilizer that are heavily subsidized in Senegal. The yield was more than double that of plots with full use of chemical products in a 2017 U.N. Food and Agriculture Organization project in the same region.

"Our seeds are resilient," Sonko said, sifting through rice-filled clay pots designed to preserve seeds for decades. "Conventional seeds do not resist climate change and are very demanding. They need fertilizer and pesticides."

The cultural intimacy between female farmers, their seeds and the land means they are more likely to shun chemicals harming the soil, said Charles Katy, an expert on indigenous wisdom in Senegal who is helping to document Sonko's rice varieties.

He noted the organic fertilizer that Sonko made from manure, and the biopesticides made from ginger, garlic and chilli.

One of Sonko's trainees, Sounkarou Kébé, recounted her experiments against parasites in her tomato plot. Instead of using manufactured insecticides, she tried using a tree bark traditionally used in Senegal's Casamance region to treat intestinal problems in humans caused by parasites.

A week later, all the disease was gone, Kébé said.

As dusk approached at the training center, insects hummed in the background and Sonko prepared for another training session. "There's too much demand," she said. She is now trying to set up seven other

farming centers across southern Senegal.

Glancing back at the circle of women studying in the fading light, she said: "My great fight in the movement is to make humanity understand the importance of women."

The winless lottery streak is over. Someone has won the \$1.12 billion Mega Millions jackpot

DES MOINES, Iowa (AP) — Someone in New Jersey overcame the odds Tuesday night and won the \$1.12 billion Mega Millions jackpot, breaking a winless streak that dated to last December.

The numbers drawn were: 7, 11, 22, 29, 38 and 4. The winning ticket was sold in New Jersey, according to the Mega Millions website.

Until the latest drawing, no one had matched all six numbers and won the Mega Millions jackpot since Dec. 8. That amounted to 30 straight drawings without a big winner.

It's tough to win the Mega Millions jackpot because the odds are so long, at 1 in 302.6 million.

The prize is the 8th largest in U.S. lottery history.

The \$1.12 billion jackpot is for a winner who is paid through an annuity, with an initial payment and then 29 annual payments. Most winners choose a cash payout, which would be \$537.5 million.

The next big U.S. lottery drawing will be Wednesday night for an estimated \$865 million Powerball jackpot. No one has won that prize since New Year's Day, making for 36 drawings without a winner.

Mega Millions is played in 45 states plus Washington, D.C., and the U.S. Virgin Islands. Powerball also is played in those states as well as Washington, D.C., the U.S. Virgin Islands and Puerto Rico.

Should college essays touch on race? Some feel the affirmative action ruling leaves them no choice

By COLLIN BINKLEY, ANNIE MA and NOREEN NASIR Associated Press

CHICAGO (AP) — When she started writing her college essay, Hillary Amofa told the story she thought admissions offices wanted to hear. About being the daughter of immigrants from Ghana and growing up in a small apartment in Chicago. About hardship and struggle.

Then she deleted it all.

"I would just find myself kind of trauma-dumping," said the 18-year-old senior at Lincoln Park High School in Chicago. "And I'm just like, this doesn't really say anything about me as a person."

When the Supreme Court ended affirmative action in higher education, it left the college essay as one of few places where race can play a role in admissions decisions. For many students of color, instantly more was riding on the already high-stakes writing assignment. Some say they felt pressure to exploit their hardships as they competed for a spot on campus.

Amofa was just starting to think about her essay when the court issued its decision, and it left her with a wave of questions. Could she still write about her race? Could she be penalized for it? She wanted to tell colleges about her heritage but she didn't want to be defined by it.

In English class, Amofa and her classmates read sample essays that all seemed to focus on some trauma or hardship. It left her with the impression she had to write about her life's hardest moments to show how far she'd come. But she and some of her classmates wondered if their lives had been hard enough to catch the attention of admissions offices.

"For a lot of students, there's a feeling of, like, having to go through something so horrible to feel worthy of going to school, which is kind of sad," said Amofa, the daughter of a hospital technician and an Uber driver.

This year's senior class is the first in decades to navigate college admissions without affirmative action. The Supreme Court upheld the practice in decisions going back to the 1970s, but this court's conservative supermajority found it is unconstitutional for colleges to give students extra weight because of their race alone.

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Still, the decision left room for race to play an indirect role: Chief Justice John Roberts wrote universities can still consider how an applicant's life was shaped by their race, "so long as that discussion is concretely tied to a quality of character or unique ability."

"A benefit to a student who overcame racial discrimination, for example, must be tied to that student's courage and determination," he wrote.

Scores of colleges responded with new essay prompts asking about students' backgrounds. Brown University asked applicants how "an aspect of your growing up has inspired or challenged you." Rice University asked students how their perspectives were shaped by their "background, experiences, upbringing, and/or racial identity."

WONDERING IF SCHOOLS 'EXPECT A SOB STORY'

When Darrian Merritt started writing his essay, he knew the stakes were higher than ever because of the court's decision. His first instinct was to write about events that led to him going to live with his grandmother as a child.

Those were painful memories, but he thought they might play well at schools like Yale, Stanford and Vanderbilt.

"I feel like the admissions committee might expect a sob story or a tragic story," said Merritt, a senior in Cleveland. "And if you don't provide that, then maybe they're not going to feel like you went through enough to deserve having a spot at the university. I wrestled with that a lot."

He wrote drafts focusing on his childhood, but it never amounted to more than a collection of memories. Eventually he abandoned the idea and aimed for an essay that would stand out for its positivity.

Merritt wrote about a summer camp where he started to feel more comfortable in his own skin. He described embracing his personality and defying his tendency to please others. The essay had humor — it centered on a water gun fight where he had victory in sight but, in a comedic twist, slipped and fell. But the essay also reflects on his feelings of not being "Black enough" and getting made fun of for listening to "white people music."

"I was like, 'OK, I'm going to write this for me, and we're just going to see how it goes,'" he said. "It just felt real, and it felt like an honest story."

The essay describes a breakthrough as he learned "to take ownership of myself and my future by sharing my true personality with the people I encounter. ... I realized that the first chapter of my own story had just been written."

A RULING PROMPTS PIVOTS ON ESSAY TOPICS

Like many students, Max Decker of Portland, Oregon, had drafted a college essay on one topic, only to change direction after the Supreme Court ruling in June.

Decker initially wrote about his love for video games. In a childhood surrounded by constant change, navigating his parents' divorce, the games he took from place to place on his Nintendo DS were a source of comfort.

But the essay he submitted to colleges focused on the community he found through Word is Bond, a leadership group for young Black men in Portland.

As the only biracial, Jewish kid with divorced parents in a predominantly white, Christian community, Decker wrote he constantly felt like the odd one out. On a trip with Word is Bond to Capitol Hill, he and friends who looked just like him shook hands with lawmakers. The experience, he wrote, changed how he saw himself.

"It's because I'm different that I provide something precious to the world, not the other way around," he wrote.

As a first-generation college student, Decker thought about the subtle ways his peers seemed to know more about navigating the admissions process. They made sure to get into advanced classes at the start of high school, and they knew how to secure glowing letters of recommendation.

If writing about race would give him a slight edge and show admissions officers a fuller picture of his achievements, he wanted to take that small advantage.

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His first memory about race, Decker said, was when he went to get a haircut in elementary school and the barber made rude comments about his curly hair. Until recently, the insecurity that moment created led him to keep his hair buzzed short.

Through Word is Bond, Decker said he found a space to explore his identity as a Black man. It was one of the first times he was surrounded by Black peers and saw Black role models. It filled him with a sense of pride in his identity. No more buzzcut.

The pressure to write about race involved a tradeoff with other important things in his life, Decker said. That included his passion for journalism, like the piece he wrote on efforts to revive a once-thriving Black neighborhood in Portland. In the end, he squeezed in 100 characters about his journalism under the application's activities section.

"My final essay, it felt true to myself. But the difference between that and my other essay was the fact that it wasn't the truth that I necessarily wanted to share," said Decker, whose top college choice is Tulane, in New Orleans, because of the region's diversity. "It felt like I just had to limit the truth I was sharing to what I feel like the world is expecting of me."

SPELLING OUT THE IMPACT OF RACE

Before the Supreme Court ruling, it seemed a given to Imani Laird that colleges would consider the ways that race had touched her life. But now, she felt like she had to spell it out.

As she started her essay, she reflected on how she had faced bias or felt overlooked as a Black student in predominantly white spaces.

There was the year in math class when the teacher kept calling her by the name of another Black student. There were the comments that she'd have an easier time getting into college because she was Black.

"I didn't have it easier because of my race," said Laird, a senior at Newton South High School in the Boston suburbs who was accepted at Wellesley and Howard University, and is waiting to hear from several Ivy League colleges. "I had stuff I had to overcome."

In her final essays, she wrote about her grandfather, who served in the military but was denied access to GI Bill benefits because of his race.

She described how discrimination fueled her ambition to excel and pursue a career in public policy.

"So, I never settled for mediocrity," she wrote. "Regardless of the subject, my goal in class was not just to participate but to excel. Beyond academics, I wanted to excel while remembering what started this motivation in the first place."

WILL SCHOOLS LOSE RACIAL DIVERSITY?

Amofa used to think affirmative action was only a factor at schools like Harvard and Yale. After the court's ruling, she was surprised to find that race was taken into account even at some public universities she was applying to.

Now, without affirmative action, she wondered if mostly white schools will become even whiter.

It's been on her mind as she chooses between Indiana University and the University of Dayton, both of which have relatively few Black students. When she was one of the only Black students in her grade school, she could fall back on her family and Ghanaian friends at church. At college, she worries about loneliness.

"That's what I'm nervous about," she said. "Going and just feeling so isolated, even though I'm constantly around people."

The first drafts of her essay focused on growing up in a low-income family, sharing a bedroom with her brother and grandmother. But it didn't tell colleges about who she is now, she said.

Her final essay tells how she came to embrace her natural hair. She wrote about going to a mostly white grade school where classmates made jokes about her afro. When her grandmother sent her back with braids or cornrows, they made fun of those too.

Over time, she ignored their insults and found beauty in the styles worn by women in her life. She now runs a business doing braids and other hairstyles in her neighborhood.

"I stopped seeing myself through the lens of the European traditional beauty standards and started seeing myself through the lens that I created," Amofa wrote.

"Criticism will persist, but it loses its power when you know there's a crown on your head!"

As those who fled Israel's border villages weigh whether to return, what hangs in the balance?

By ADAM GELLER Associated Press

KIBBUTZ NAHAL OZ, Israel (AP) — Months after Hamas killed 1,200 people in an early-morning assault, Israeli communities ravaged in the attack remain mostly empty. Now the residents who fled these “kibbutzim” along the border with Gaza are wrestling with whether, how and when to return -- choices that have implications not just for their families, but also for the country. Here are the key takeaways:

Before Oct. 7, communities shaped by contradiction

Kibbutzim, which for decades have exemplified Israeli resilience, have long been a paradox. Many of those along the border with Gaza were built on or near the sites of former Palestinian villages. Over the years, residents tried to maintain economic relationships with people living in Gaza, the majority of whom are either refugees or their descendants. The residents of kibbutzim cherished life in the communities as almost idyllic. Yet, long before October 7, many were targets of frequent rocket attacks.

Trauma lingers as war stretches on

More than five months after last October's attack, the trauma inflicted by the killing and kidnapping of family and friends remains raw for residents of the kibbutzim. Israel's massive invasion of Gaza, which has killed more than 30,000 people in Gaza, has likely curtailed the threat that such a large-scale assault could be repeated. But frequent artillery fire and the roar of fighter jets are a reminder that the empty border kibbutzim are extensions of the war zone.

Many people long for their homes

Residents have begun weighing whether, when and how to go back. In the hours after the attack, hundreds of kibbutzim residents were evacuated to hotels, dormitories and other locations, some hours away from their schools, jobs and homes. Many pine for the lives they left behind.

Consensus is elusive amid great uncertainty

But they are split on how to proceed, with some determined to go back and others deeply reluctant. With so much uncertainty about future security conditions along the border, many say that for now, it is impossible to make long-term decisions.

Family decisions, but with potential consequences for the country

The choices kibbutz residents make about whether to return are foremost about what is best for their families and close-knit communities. But the outcome is also important for Israel, whose leaders relied on border kibbutz as a way to solidify control of land after the 1948 war against Palestinian fighters and the armies of neighboring Arab countries.

“If the kibbutzim ... will not come back, no one will come,” says Shlomo Getz, a researcher who studies the communities. “That means we are losing our country.”

They fled kibbutzim after Hamas attacked. Now, many Israelis must decide whether to go back.

By ADAM GELLER Associated Press

KIBBUTZ NAHAL OZ, Israel (AP) — For a few minutes on a recent afternoon, the sun-bathed silence that fills Nadav Tzabari's neighborhood could almost be mistaken for peace.

Then shelling from Israeli tanks dug in across the fence line in Gaza erupts again, sending shudders through the vacated homes and overgrown gardens of this long-resilient farming community, emptied for months of nearly all its people.

“This is my house,” says Tzabari, a 35-year-old teacher, arriving at a small stucco building with a red tile roof near the center of Nahal Oz. It is so close to the bombed-out buildings on Gaza City's eastern fringe that before Hamas swept in last October, residents could see their Palestinian counterparts driving through the streets.

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Next door, Tzabari recalls, the attackers shot dead his 75-year-old neighbor and wounded her husband as the couple clung to the door of their safe room. Beyond an orange tree in his own yard, a tarp stretches across a gaping hole punched through the roof by one of thousands of rockets fired from Gaza in the months since. Inside, the blast layered every surface in dust and grit.

Yet as soon as Tzabari reenters its cracked facade, he is confronted with vivid memories of Nahal Oz as it was -- and vexing questions about what it might yet be.

"I don't know what I'm going to do. It changes every day," says Tzabari, who fulfilled a dream with his husband when they bought a home in the kibbutz, but are deeply conflicted about returning. "It doesn't matter how you twist it or what angle you look at it. This is going to be a really, really long, hard and complicated journey."

Five months after Hamas slaughtered 1,200 people in an early-morning assault, triggering a massive invasion by Israel that has killed more than 30,000 people in Gaza, those who fled ravaged border communities are wrestling with whether, how and when to go back.

The choices are fraught and deeply personal. The trauma of seeing family members and friends killed and others taken hostage remains raw. The attack, which trapped many residents in the dark for 17 or 18 hours, left homes in some communities beyond repair. Artillery fire and the roar of fighter jets make clear that Nahal Oz and nearby towns, built decades ago on or near the sites of former Palestinian villages, are extensions of the war zone.

Many older people, including Nahal Oz's founders, pledge to return and a small number of residents have gone back to some communities. But the future of the cooperatives, known as kibbutzim, depends on younger families.

"One day you say, 'No, no, no, I don't want to go back.' The next day you wake up and you say, 'I want to go home,'" says Raymond Reijnen, standing outside the dairy barn where a handful of residents have come back to work a few days each week. The other days, he and his wife deliberate whether Nahal Oz, where their children ran barefoot for hours, can ever again be home.

"It's a really difficult question," he says, as two Israeli soldiers just beyond the cattle shed point machine guns toward Gaza. "Is the kibbutz going to be the same place with the same people? Nobody knows."

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Most of the communities near the Gaza border were home to just a few hundred people. But in a country whose short existence has been defined by war, kibbutzim played an outsized role in staking Israel's territory. Mass evacuations following the October attack have, for now, sharply reduced its inhabitable footprint.

"It's a practical problem," says Shlomo Getz, who leads a center for kibbutz research at the University of Haifa, noting that the communities accounted for most of the population on Israel's side of the border.

"If the kibbutzim ... will not come back, no one will come," he says. "That means we are losing our country."

The story of Nahal Oz is central to understanding that connection.

In 1951, a newly independent Israel was two years removed from a fierce war with Palestinian fighters and neighboring Arab countries. Palestinians had constituted a large majority of the pre-war population. But by the time fighting ended, about 700,000 had fled or been expelled.

Many, pushed from Arab villages just across the armistice line, ended up in Gaza, where today three-fourths of all residents are refugees or their descendants. Israeli leaders moved to solidify control by establishing communities along the border with the narrow strip, then occupied by Egypt.

To Prime Minister David Ben-Gurion, the moment called for soldiers trained to farm as well as fight. The new corps was dubbed Nahal, a Hebrew acronym for "Fighting Pioneer Youth," and planted its first outpost on land sloping gently toward the border. Two years later, a second group turned it into a kibbutz, Nahal Oz.

"We lived, more or less, half as military and half as citizens," says Yankale Cohen, who was 19 when he and few others founded the kibbutz. "But in the meantime, we developed a community."

A month after the kibbutz was launched, Egyptian soldiers killed a resident. Three years later, Roi Rotberg, a soldier in charge of security, was patrolling on horseback when he was ambushed. His death at 21 drew wide attention.

"Have we forgotten that this small group of young people dwelling at Nahal Oz is carrying the heavy

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gates of Gaza on its shoulders?" Israeli military chief Moshe Dayan said in a eulogy at Rotberg's funeral. His words alluded to the Old Testament's story of Samson, who pulled down the gates of Gaza and carried them to a hill some believe is the one overlooking present-day Nahal Oz. But it was more than a metaphor for Dayan, who noted that Palestinians had watched as Israelis transformed "the lands and villages where they and their fathers dwelt."

Nahal Oz was built closer to the border than nearby kibbutzim, less than a mile from Gaza's Shejaiya neighborhood, a Hamas stronghold on Samson's hill. Kibbutz farmers seed crops to the fence line.

Residents gradually built a tidy village of single-story homes, shadowed by a grain silo and surrounded by cultivated fields. They turned the kibbutz's first building into a pub, where younger residents gathered for beer and music. Whimsical statues of eggplants and peppers sprouted outside a visitor center that bustled each spring, when Israelis flock to see wildflowers carpeting the fields.

Over time, people in the kibbutzim and in Gaza – captured by Israel during the 1967 war – settled into a sort of tacit acceptance.

Thousands of Palestinians crossed daily to work on Israeli farms. Cohen, who earned the nickname "Mr. Potato" for crop expertise developed over decades, advised Gaza farmers on planting and processing. Many older Israelis recall regular drives to Gaza for shopping and medical care.

That changed after the first Palestinian intifada erupted in 1987, a divide cemented when Israel withdrew from Gaza in 2005 and Hamas seized control two years later.

Tensions in Gaza simmered as recurrent wars and a longstanding blockade, meant to keep Hamas from stockpiling weapons, left the economy in shambles. Many Israelis paid little heed to conditions in Gaza and were largely unaware that border kibbutzim were built on the sites of former Palestinian villages. But rocket attacks were a constant reminder of that dynamic in Nahal Oz and neighboring communities.

During a 2014 war, Palestinian fighters emerged from a tunnel near the kibbutz to kill five Israeli soldiers. Weeks later a mortar shell exploded in Nahal Oz, killing a 4-year-old boy.

Afterward, 17 families abandoned Nahal Oz, dropping the population to about 250. With its future threatened, the kibbutz began housing teens preparing for military service and college students.

Leaders also invited families, attracted to an oasis where neighbors gathered on porches for evening chats, homes were far more affordable than in Israeli cities, and – the threat of rockets notwithstanding – most nights were so peaceful, Cohen says, that you could practically smell the quiet.

Soon Reijnen and his wife, Mirjam, who had left careers as firefighters in their native Netherlands, arrived with their three children.

Tzabari, a former soldier battling post-traumatic stress disorder from the 2014 Gaza war, recalled the beauty of the kibbutz he'd visited during forays across the border and came to stay.

Matan Weitz, boarding in a courtyard filled with fellow students, felt so welcomed by kibbutz elders he decided to build a life there after graduation. Often, he'd walk to an old guard tower to gaze over the countryside.

"It's a beautiful place to sit alone and when friends came by to see the kibbutz...we'd climb up and see the sunset over Gaza," he says. "I was never afraid when I was there."

By last fall, Nahal Oz's population had topped 450. The kibbutz was 95% heaven, residents told one another, even if the threat of rockets made it 5% hell.

The tradeoff seemed worth it, until Oct. 7.

On the first Friday last October, kibbutz residents stayed up late, stringing lights around the pool and arranging chairs on the grass. The following day was a Jewish holiday. In Nahal Oz, though, it was planned as much more – the 70th anniversary of its founding.

Nahal Oz's location means that alerts warning of possible rocket attacks give residents just a few seconds to hide and a few more to wait before it is considered safe. The first alert that morning came around 6:30. But the barrage that followed felt endless.

It sounded like "the loudest thunders, multiplied by a thousand," says Naomi Adler, a nurse who hunkered

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down with her husband and three sons in the reinforced saferoom built into each house, and routinely used as bedrooms or home offices.

When it ended roughly 10 minutes later, the couple decided it was OK to emerge for water. The gunfire began as their phones started buzzing.

Lock your homes and stay in your safe rooms, warned a message from the kibbutz security director, Ilan Fiorentino. Hamas is at your back door, warned another from the Adlers' neighbor.

Crouched in the saferoom with his husband and their dog, Tzabari heard shouting in Arabic and the staccato of rifles. When it quieted briefly, he dashed to the shed, grabbing gardening tools that might serve as weapons.

Inside the Reijnsens', Raymond tied bedsheets from the window to the door of the saferoom that, like others, did not lock because they'd been designed to protect against rockets, not invasion. With an Army base next to the kibbutz, help was minutes away, the couple told each other. Later they learned that Hamas had overrun the installation, killing dozens of soldiers.

The initial barrage had been a distraction. After plowing through fortifications Israeli officials had billed as virtually impenetrable, dozens of attackers breached the fence around the kibbutz before assaulting neighborhoods.

In a video livestreamed on a phone snatched from one resident, they marched 17-year-old Tomer Arava from his home at gunpoint, forced him to coax neighbors from hiding, then opened fire.

Arava, his mother, and her boyfriend were killed. The boyfriend's daughters were taken hostage, released 51 days later.

Next door to Tzabari, gunmen burst into the home of Yonatan and Shoshana Brosh, who had taken to mothering the new arrivals. She was killed by shots fired through the saferoom door.

Ariel Zohar, a 12-year-old resident out for a run when the assault began, was rescued by Fiorentino, the security director. Later, Zohar's sisters, mother and father – a former AP video journalist -- were found dead in a bedroom, their arms wrapped around one another. Fiorentino was also killed later, trying to fend off the assault.

In all, 15 people from Nahal Oz were killed, including a Tanzanian intern just arrived to study farming. Two of the seven taken hostage are still being held.

The toll extended to the fields, where attackers destroyed computers regulating the irrigation system and broke the pipes. They shot up the kibbutz's new \$1.4 million dairy barn, killing cattle, and stole nine tractors.

"They came to kill us, to burn us alive, to take all the agriculture down and to make us not want to come back," says Moran Freibach, 53, who was raised in Nahal Oz and oversees farming operations.

When Israeli forces finally reached homes that afternoon, they ordered residents to continue hiding. It was well after dark before soldiers returned, giving residents minutes to pack.

In her kitchen, Tami Halevi, 86, had a fleeting thought: How long would it be before they could return? She rushed to divvy a pot of stew prepared for the anniversary celebration, shoving containers into the freezer.

Nearby, Tzabari and husband Rotem Katz hurried for the door with their dog, Tom, leaving behind all the trappings of home – a hammock in the backyard, the fish tank in the hall.

Outside the Reijnen house, Mirjam and her children clambered into the bed of a military vehicle packed with neighbors and belongings. But what had become of her husband?

Then Raymond appeared with a basket filled with his daughter's stuffed animals and climbed aboard. As the vehicle sped down a road littered with bodies and burned-out cars, the kibbutz where his family had made a new life grew fainter and fainter.

Then, the Nahal Oz of memory vanished in the darkness.

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Weeks after the attack, inside an assisted living complex near Tel Aviv, Tami Halevi gratefully appraised the bare walls and basic furniture she'd been offered. There was no way of knowing how long it would

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take before she and 16 other elders who'd arrived together might get back to Nahal Oz.

"One of my friends here told me: 'I'm bringing nothing. I don't want to feel at home,'" says Halevi, a grandmother of 14, welcoming a visitor. The embroidered armchair one of her grandsons retrieved from the kibbutz beckons from the center of the small living room. Framed drawings by a friend decorate a spot over the sofa.

"I'm living here. I don't know for how long. And I want a few pieces of my life," she says.

Halevi, a retired college administrator, laughs when some of the others teasingly call her "the child," because she did not start her life in Nahal Oz until two years after its founding. But it is a reminder of the very deep roots the seniors have in the kibbutz.

Many memories are sweet ones, of the early years when all kibbutz children were raised together in a single building; of drives into Gaza to seek out the most delicious hummus. But the lessons of that experience are complicated.

After the 1967 war, Halevi and her husband, an agronomist, hosted a farmer from Gaza in their living room at the request of Israeli officials, eager to encourage economic ties. In 2000, after the first rocket fell on Nahal Oz, her husband planted a tree in the crater. The kibbutz continued its dependence on Palestinian workers.

"We have been, in a way, kind of naïve," says Cohen, now 89.

Still, the kibbutz always sustained itself. Past crises, though, were mere shadows of this one.

"The young families that recently built new homes in Nahal Oz, I'm sure there are part of them who will never go back," Halevi says. Her own daughter, who was evacuated from her home in a nearby kibbutz, is uncertain about returning.

She and other elders have come to a few decisions of their own. They will stay together. They will offer counsel, while acknowledging that the future belongs to the next generation. And they will return to Nahal Oz. It is not so much a plan, Cohen says, as a belief.

"It is our home," he says. "We built it. And we're going to die there."

A month after fleeing Nahal Oz, Amir Adler decided to go back.

Together with wife, Naomi, and their three sons, they'd found safety in one of the dormitory rooms assigned to families at a sister kibbutz in northern Israel, Mishmar HaEmek.

But the assault had destroyed pipes irrigating the avocado plantation he supervised, and Palestinian workers he'd employed had been ordered back to Gaza. Without its crops, Nahal Oz's odds of survival would be much lower.

Before he could re-enter the grove, soldiers combed it for enemy fighters and explosives. Once at work, he kept thinking about his responsibilities as a husband and father, says Adler, walking through the dorm where families have propped laundry racks in the halls.

Just before he left for Nahal Oz, residents had held a ceremony marking a month since the attack. For the first time, the Adlers' 6-year-old realized how many neighbors had been killed and took his father's departure hard.

"I said 'let's call him ... See, he's picking up his phone,'" recalls Naomi, who asked her son's teachers to do the same. "He needs to know that, yes, just going to Nahal Oz doesn't mean you die."

Neither of the Adlers grew up in Nahal Oz. When they first visited seven years ago, they noted how people knew their neighbors and children played without supervision, so different from Jerusalem, where Naomi grew up. On the day before last fall's attack, they bought eight fruit trees to plant in the yard, imagining it as the place they'd welcome grandchildren someday.

Naomi has worked since the attack as the kibbutz event planner, trying to maintain a sense of togetherness. One recent afternoon, she coordinated a picnic daytrip to mark a holiday. On another, she organized a workshop in a tent outside the dorms, helping children plant terrariums.

But the Adlers say it is all but impossible for now to think about returning.

"Do we want to stay part of this community? Hell, yes. Can we? We don't know," she says. "We have to be OK with not knowing, because trying to control that will drive you crazy."

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After Nahal Oz was evacuated, most residents landed at the same kibbutz in northern Israel that had provided refuge during the 2014 war.

"They were traumatized. ... You could see it in their eyes," says Lee Falcon, a resident of Mishmar HaEmek. "We just wanted to give them the place to, just, be."

The single-story dorms made for tight quarters, with families of four or five in a single room. Still, the refuge 2 ½ hours from Nahal Oz, kept the community largely intact.

"I knew for sure that I wanted to be here," says Weitz, the college student, who was away on the day of the attack and quickly decided to join other residents. "It's the closest thing to home that I have right now."

Months later, relocated residents continue to meet with counselors. Some of the greatest comfort, though, has come from one another.

A few of the younger men began spending hours together in a basement pottery studio, gatherings that turned into a form of group therapy.

One sculpted a figure of himself, lying on the ground and covered with brush, just as he'd done to hide from attackers. Another shaped a tsunami out of clay, poised to swallow up one of the red wildflowers that are symbols of the border kibbutzim.

Tzabari's husband, Katz, spent hours in the studio, making ceramic houses to substitute for the shattered one he'd left behind.

Kibbutz leaders, meanwhile, began wrestling with plans for the future. When the community meets, they link up online with the elders at the assisted living facility and another group of residents who have settled close to jobs in southern Israel. Some of those conversations have been trying.

"There is much disagreement. Look, you have to take so many things into consideration," says Yael Lachyani, a native of Nahal Oz who is part of the team working to chart its recovery.

Some residents say they won't go back. Others insist they will, as soon as it's safe. Still others say they need to see what will change before deciding. Opinions shift constantly, depending on developments in the war, Lachyani says.

In January, workers leveled an almond grove at Mishmar HaEmek to make way for prefabricated homes that will provide larger quarters for families until the school year ends. Leaders also polled all residents 18 and older about what should come after.

Based on the results, they set a goal of moving the community to an interim site in southern Israel in August, pending a government decision on the location. That would allow children, who have been attending school in Mishmar HaEmek, to return to their regular classrooms, while putting residents closer to jobs and Nahal Oz.

But the question of return remains unresolved. The kibbutz has fielded calls from Israelis inquiring about moving to the community. Israeli officials recently declared a few kibbutzim to be safe, though Nahal Oz is not among them.

In January, Tzabari began traveling to the kibbutz a few days each week, clearing trees and planting flowers in preparation for its next chapter.

Returning to Mishmar HaEmek, often he'd find Katz in the pottery studio, shaping houses from clay.

When it's safe, Tzabari told him, he hopes they can return to life at Nahal Oz. Katz, who's taken over security planning for the kibbutz, says he cannot imagine going back permanently. But he is reassured by a promise from Tzabari that, if he continues to feel that way, their priority will be on staying together. "Home is somewhere out there," Katz says. "But it's not in Nahal Oz."

Days after the Reijnens arrived at Nahal Oz in 2018, incendiary balloons launched from Gaza set the fields of southern Israel on fire.

It was fortuitous timing – the couple, who'd come to Israel seeking distance from antisemitism in Europe, are former firefighters and felt welcomed by a community anxious for their expertise.

By last fall, the Reijnens, who'd been alarmed when they first found Nahal Oz on a map, had bought a house there. Mirjam had become a tour guide. Raymond was a dairy supervisor. Their Dutch-born kids,

fluent in Hebrew, had become Israelis.

For weeks after the attack, both vowed they'd never return. When Raymond began going back to care for the cows, Mirjam supported him, but disagreed. She avoided a bedroom in their rented apartment, plagued by a nightmare of "terrorists ... entering in through the window."

"My heart says go back, it's your home. And I can be really sad if I think about not going home ever again," she says. "But I have no idea how to do it."

In Nahal Oz, meanwhile, Raymond sleeps in their old house. Even when bombing shakes the foundation, he sits in front of the television with the family cat and feels a measure of peace. Still, there's no clear path to whatever will be.

On one of the evenings the family is together, Mirjam and daughter Arielle light candles in a holder shaped like Dutch canal houses, while Raymond finishes cooking. Nearby, a stenciled Bible verse Mirjam chose for their home before Oct. 7, fills a wall of their temporary one.

"Be strong and courageous," it counsels. "Do not be afraid or discouraged. For the Lord your God will be with you ... Wherever you go."

Trump slow to invest in states that could decide election as some in GOP fear 'skeleton' campaign

By STEVE PEOPLES AP National Political Writer

NEW YORK (AP) — In his bid to retake the White House, few states hold as much promise for Donald Trump as Michigan.

The former president has already won the state once and President Joe Biden, who reclaimed it for Democrats in 2020, is confronting vulnerabilities there as he seeks reelection. Trump's campaign promises an aggressive play for Michigan as part of a robust swing-state strategy.

But, at least for now, those promises appear to be mostly talk. The Trump campaign and its partners at the Republican National Committee haven't yet made significant general election investments in the state, according to Michigan Republican Party Chairman Pete Hoekstra. The national committee, he said, hasn't transferred any money to the state party to help bolster its operations heading into the general election. There are no specific programs in place to court voters of color. And there's no general election field staff in place.

"We've got the skeleton right now," Hoekstra said. "We're going to have to put more meat on it."

It's much the same in presidential battleground states across the country, according to Republican operatives and party officials involved in campaign planning elsewhere.

Widely praised for its professionalism and effectiveness throughout the primary phase of the 2024 election, Trump's political operation has been slow to pivot toward the general election in the weeks after executing a hostile takeover of the Republican Party's national political machinery. In fact, the former president's team has rolled back plans under previous leaders to add hundreds of staff and dozens of new minority-outreach centers in key states without offering a clear alternative.

Indeed, just six months before the first early votes are cast in the general election between Trump and Biden, Trump's Republican Party has little general election infrastructure to speak of.

Officials on the ground in top swing states are not panicking, but the disparity with the Biden campaign is stark.

This month alone, Biden opened 100 new offices and added more than 350 new staffers in swing states from Arizona to Georgia to Pennsylvania, according to campaign spokesman Ammar Moussa. That's in addition to the Democratic president's existing battleground-state staff of 100 that was already in place.

Trump campaign senior adviser Chris LaCivita, who is now also running operations at the RNC, declined to detail any of the Republican campaign's plans.

"By combining forces, the Trump campaign and the RNC are deploying operations fueled by passionate volunteers who care about saving America and firing Joe Biden," he said. "We do not feel obligated, however, to discuss the specifics of our strategy, timing, or tactics with members of the news media."

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Trump may be discussing strategy with some state Republican officials behind closed doors.

Hoekstra was among a handful of Michigan Republican leaders who trekked to Florida last week to meet privately with Trump and members of his senior campaign team about plans for the general election. The conversation, Hoekstra said, left him optimistic about the former president's commitment to his state.

"I feel good about where we are," he said. "The Trump team is engaged."

Earlier this month, Trump replaced Republican National Committee Chair Ronna McDaniel with his new hand-picked leadership team, including daughter-in-law Lara Trump, who is now RNC co-chair. LaCivita, who took over as the committee's chief of staff, promised sweeping changes in the GOP's political infrastructure across the country.

In the days since, more than 60 Republican staffers across the country were issued layoff notices. They included virtually all the people who staffed the RNC's minority outreach community centers and others inside the committee's department of State Parties Strategies.

"There was never a fully cohesive bond between the Trump campaign and the RNC in the past, and we are now operating as one entity," Lara Trump said Tuesday on David Webb's SiriusXM Patriot channel program. "We have cut a lot of fat."

Facing internal pushback on some of the cuts, Lara Trump has vowed that the committee's half-dozen existing community centers would remain open. But it's unclear whether Trump's team will follow through on McDaniel's plans to open an additional 40 community centers in the coming months.

The centers were seen as a critical resource in boosting the Republican Party's relationships with minority groups who have traditionally voted Democratic, but may be open to the GOP's populist message. Advocates suggest that such investments have made a significant impact in recent years, especially in competitive House districts where several thousand votes can make a difference.

"It seems that there's a consensus that community centers are vital for the Republican Party in general," said Shawn Steel, a RNC member from California who credits a community center in Orange County's Little Saigon with helping his wife, Rep. Michelle Steele, R-Calif., win her seat.

Democrats, Steel said, have been effectively engaging in minority communities since New York City's Tammany Hall more than two centuries ago. "We're trying to catch up," Steel said. "I'm optimistic."

Amid such optimism, however, there is also a deep sense of uncertainty as Trump's team rewrites the party's 2024 battleground-state strategy after burning the previous playbook.

Trump's lieutenants have already postponed plans in place before McDaniel's ouster that would have begun adding hundreds of Republican staffers in presidential battleground states beginning this month, according to people with direct knowledge of the plans who spoke on the condition of anonymity to disclose private conversations.

It's unclear if or when the field staff will eventually be in place. Recently laid-off staffers have recently begun interviewing for new positions, although some have been told they must relocate to Florida or new states.

Georgia GOP Chair Joshua McKoon said he has had several meetings with RNC leadership about "the deployment of additional resources" to his state, although there is no set timeline.

"What wins elections is having the staff necessary to carry out your get-out-the-vote plan, so that's what I'm most interested in," McKoon said. "I certainly expect to have further discussions in the very near future about the timeline and having some more specifics."

He added, "I feel like we're going to have what we need."

Aware of a building sense of urgency, newly elected RNC Chair Michael Whatley issued a memo to party officials over the weekend promising that the committee is "building on our existing programs and expanding our outreach at the RNC."

He vowed to "re-engage America's working voters," continue to engage rural voters, and grow Trump's support "with demographics who have not traditionally voted for our candidates..."

Whatley did not offer any specifics, however, aside from mentioning a new battleground-state program that would direct officials within the committee's State Parties Strategies department to work with "auxiliary Republican groups and other grassroots organizations" in addition to state parties.

Trump's team did not clarify, when asked, which grassroots organizations Whatley meant, although the chairman before his recent election had aggressively courted leaders at Turning Point USA, a leading group in Trump's "Make America Great Again" movement that had been a driving force in McDaniel's ouster.

On Tuesday, Lara Trump wrote "Awesome!" in sharing a social media post from Turning Point founder and CEO Charlie Kirk that highlighted the group's efforts to organize "full-time ballot chasers" in Arizona and other states.

Meanwhile, Biden's campaign earlier in the month launched a \$30 million six-week advertising blitz targeting swing-state voters with a particular focus on Black and Hispanic-owned outlets and "culture and sports programming such as Comedy Central and ESPN."

Biden is also hitting the campaign trail with more intensity.

He has campaigned in Pennsylvania, Georgia, New Hampshire, Wisconsin and Michigan in recent days. He was in North Carolina on Tuesday, signaling the president's ambition in a state that Trump narrowly won in 2020.

Trump, by contrast, has been hardly seen in public this month aside from his court appearances.

Moussa, Biden's spokesman, slapped Trump for embracing a general election strategy focused on "apparently hiding at his country club."

"Meanwhile, the RNC fires staffers, shuts community centers and shuts down their minority outreach programs. Not exactly how to win the hearts and minds of the American people — or get to 270 electoral votes," Moussa said.

Ahmaud Arbery's killers ask a US appeals court to overturn their hate crime convictions

By KATE BRUMBACK and RUSS BYNUM Associated Press

ATLANTA (AP) — Attorneys are asking a U.S. appeals court to throw out the hate crime convictions of three white men who used pickup trucks to chase Ahmaud Arbery through the streets of a Georgia subdivision before one of them killed the running Black man with a shotgun.

A panel of judges from the 11th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals in Atlanta was scheduled to hear oral arguments Wednesday in a case that followed a national outcry over Arbery's death. The white men's lawyers argue that evidence of past racist comments they made didn't prove a racist intent to harm.

On Feb. 23, 2020, father and son Greg and Travis McMichael armed themselves with guns and drove in pursuit of Arbery after spotting the 25-year-old man running in their neighborhood outside the port city of Brunswick. A neighbor, William "Roddie" Bryan, joined the chase in his own truck and recorded cellphone video of Travis McMichael shooting Arbery in the street.

More than two months passed without arrests, until Bryan's graphic video of the killing leaked online and the Georgia Bureau of Investigation took over the case from local police. Charges soon followed.

All three men were convicted of murder in a Georgia state court in late 2021. After a second trial in early 2022 in federal court, a jury found the trio guilty of hate crimes and attempted kidnapping, concluding the men targeted Arbery because he was Black.

In legal briefs filed ahead of their appeals court arguments, lawyers for Greg McMichael and Bryan cited prosecutors' use of more than two dozen social media posts and text messages, as well as witness testimony, that showed all three men using racist slurs or otherwise disparaging Black people.

Bryan's attorney, Pete Theodocion, said Bryan's past racist statements inflamed the trial jury while failing to prove that Arbery was pursued because of his race. Instead, Arbery was chased because the three men mistakenly suspected he was a fleeing criminal, according to A.J. Balbo, Greg McMichael's lawyer.

Greg McMichael initiated the chase when Arbery ran past his home, saying he recognized the young Black man from security camera videos that in prior months showed him entering a neighboring home under construction. None of the videos showed him stealing, and Arbery was unarmed and had no stolen property when he was killed.

Prosecutors said in written briefs that the trial evidence showed "longstanding hate and prejudice toward

Black people" influenced the defendants' assumptions that Arbery was committing crimes.

In Travis McMichael's appeal, attorney Amy Lee Copeland didn't dispute the jury's finding that he was motivated by racism. The social media evidence included a 2018 Facebook comment Travis McMichael made on a video of Black man playing a prank on a white person. He used an expletive and a racial slur after he wrote wrote: "I'd kill that"

Instead, Copeland based her appeal on legal technicalities. She said that prosecutors failed to prove the streets of the Satilla Shores subdivision where Arbery was killed were public roads, as stated in the indictment used to charge the men.

Copeland cited records of a 1958 meeting of Glynn County commissioners in which they rejected taking ownership of the streets from the subdivision's developer. At the trial, prosecutors relied on service request records and testimony from a county official to show the streets have been maintained by the county government.

Attorneys for the trio also made technical arguments for overturning their attempted kidnapping convictions. Prosecutors said the charge fit because the men used pickup trucks to cut off Arbery's escape from the neighborhood.

Defense attorneys said the charge was improper because their clients weren't trying to capture Arbery for ransom or some other benefit, and the trucks weren't used as an "instrumentality of interstate commerce." Both are required elements for attempted kidnapping to be a federal crime.

Prosecutors said other federal appellate circuits have ruled that any automobile used in a kidnapping qualifies as an instrument of interstate commerce. And they said the benefit the men sought was "to fulfill their personal desires to carry out vigilante justice."

The trial judge sentenced both McMichaels to life in prison for their hate crime convictions, plus additional time — 10 years for Travis McMichael and seven years for his father — for brandishing guns while committing violent crimes. Bryan received a lighter hate crime sentence of 35 years in prison, in part because he wasn't armed and preserved the cellphone video that became crucial evidence.

All three also got 20 years in prison for attempted kidnapping, but the judge ordered that time to overlap with their hate crime sentences.

If the U.S. appeals court overturns any of their federal convictions, both McMichaels and Bryan would remain in prison. All three are serving life sentences in Georgia state prisons for murder, and have motions for new state trials pending before a judge.

Hurry up and wait: Trump's classified documents case is mired in delays that may run past election

By ERIC TUCKER Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — The case against Donald Trump seemed relatively straightforward in August 2022 when FBI agents searched his Mar-a-Lago estate, with authorities citing evidence that the former president hoarded enough classified documents to fill dozens of boxes and obstructed the government's efforts to retrieve them.

But nine months after he was indicted, there are mounting doubts that the case can reach trial this year.

The Trump-appointed judge in the case has yet to set a firm trial date despite holding two hours-long hearings with lawyers this month. Multiple motions to dismiss the case are still pending, disputes over classified evidence have spanned months and a bitterly contested defense request to disclose the names of government witnesses remains unresolved. Complicating matters further is a recent order suggesting that the judge, Aileen Cannon, is still entertaining a Trump team claim about his rightful possession of the documents that she had appeared openly skeptical of days earlier.

"This does seem to be moving more slowly and less sequentially than other cases that I have seen" concerning classified information, said David Aaron, a former Justice Department national security prosecutor.

To a certain extent, the delays are the product of a broader Trump team strategy to postpone the four

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criminal cases confronting the presumptive Republican nominee in this year's presidential race. But the case in Florida is unique because of the startlingly few substantive decisions that have been made to move closer to a trial. That raises the prospect that a resolution in the case may be unlikely before this year's presidential election. If he were to win the White House, Trump could appoint an attorney general who would dismiss the federal charges against him in Florida and other jurisdictions.

Prosecutors on special counsel Jack Smith's team have strenuously fought to press the case forward. Though they've taken care not to mention the upcoming election, they've repeatedly cited a public interest in getting the case resolved quickly and have pointed to what they say is overwhelming evidence — including surveillance video, a defense lawyer's notes and testimony from close associates — establishing Trump's guilt beyond a reasonable doubt.

"This case should be over already," said Jeffrey Swartz, a professor at Cooley Law School and former judge in Florida. "There was nothing in this case that complex."

That's what distinguishes the classified documents case from the other — more legally intricate — criminal cases against Trump, which revolve around everything from allegations of hush money paid to a porn actress to complex racketeering charges and his role in seeking to overturn the 2020 election.

But defense lawyers see it differently, and Cannon — a former federal prosecutor who was appointed to the bench in 2020 and has limited trial experience as a judge — has proved receptive to some of their arguments since even before the case was filed last June.

The judge first made headlines weeks after the FBI search of Mar-a-Lago when, responding to a Trump lawsuit seeking to recover the seized documents from the federal government, she appointed an independent arbiter to sift through all the records. That appointment was overturned by a unanimous federal appeals panel, which said Cannon had overstepped her bounds.

"My sense of it is, when she did get reversed by the 11th Circuit that made her gun-shy, so she's gone at a very slow pace" and issued "very few public, written decisions about important issues," said John Fishwick, Jr., a former U.S. attorney for the Western District of Virginia.

Soon after Trump was charged, Cannon set the case for trial on May 20, 2024. But last fall she signaled she would reconsider that date during a March 1 hearing. The hearing took place as scheduled — but no replacement date was picked, even though both sides operating on the assumption that the May 20 date is moot have suggested the trial could begin this summer.

That's not the only unresolved question. Defense lawyers have filed about a half-dozen motions to dismiss the case, including on grounds that the prosecution is vindictive and that Smith's appointment as special counsel was illegal.

Cannon this month heard hours of arguments on two of the dismissal motions — whether Trump was entitled under a statute known as the Presidential Records Act to retain the classified documents after he left office and whether the Espionage Act law at the heart of the case was so vague as to be unconstitutional.

Cannon appeared skeptical of the defense assertions and, after the hearing, issued a terse two-page order rejecting the vagueness argument while permitting Trump to raise it again later.

She has not yet acted on the Presidential Records Act motion, but legal experts noted her direction last week to lawyers for both sides to weigh in on proposed jury instructions that appeared to tilt in Trump's favor. She asked them to respond to a premise that said in part: "A president has sole authority under the PRA to categorize records as personal or presidential during his/her presidency. Neither a court nor a jury is permitted to make or review such a categorization decision."

That wording was notable because it echoes arguments Trump's lawyers have been making for months. They insist that law allowed him to designate the records he was charged with retaining as his own personal files. Smith's team, by contrast, says the law has no relevance in a case concerning illegal possession of top-secret information, including nuclear secrets.

"It seems a little early in the game to be talking about jury instructions when there are substantial questions of law that have been raised that need to be resolved," said Aaron, though he said the jury instructions order could be a way to tee up those resolved questions.

Besides the pending motions to dismiss, Cannon has yet to rule on a defense motion seeking to compel prosecutors to turn over a raft of information they insist would show that President Joe Biden's administration had "weaponized" the criminal justice system in bringing the Trump case.

That assertion is in keeping with campaign-trail claims by Trump and his allies that he's a victim of political persecution by the Biden Justice Department. He's complained that he was charged when Biden, who was also investigated for retaining classified information, was not — prompting Smith's team to lay out the abundant differences in the investigations.

An even more contentious dispute centers around a defense request to file on the public docket a motion that would identify potential prosecution witnesses. Cannon initially consented to the filing but paused her order after prosecutors argued that such a disclosure could jeopardize the safety of the witnesses.

"It may be that the judge is just afraid of making a mistake, but delaying it just puts it off," said Kevin McMunigal, a Case Western Reserve University law professor. "Eventually she's going to have to make a decision about these."

AP-NORC Poll: Trump evokes more anger and fear from Democrats than Biden does from Republicans

By BILL BARROW and LINLEY SANDERS Associated Press

ATLANTA (AP) — Many Americans are unenthusiastic about a November rematch of the 2020 presidential election. But presumptive GOP nominee Donald Trump appears to stoke more anger and fear among Americans from his opposing party than President Joe Biden does from his.

A new poll from The Associated Press-NORC Center for Public Affairs Research finds that Democrats are more likely to report feeling "fearful" or "angry" about the prospects of another Trump term than Republicans are about the idea of Biden remaining in the White House.

The emotional reaction Trump inspires may work in his favor too, though, since the poll also found that Republicans are more excited about the prospect of a Trump win than Democrats are about a Biden victory.

Seven in 10 Democrats say the words "angry" or "fearful" would describe their emotions "extremely well" or "very well" upon a Trump victory. A smaller majority of Republicans — 56% — say the same about a Biden triumph. About 6 in 10 Democrats cite both emotions when contemplating a Trump victory. Again, that exceeds the roughly 4 out of 10 Republicans who said they would feel both angry and scared about Biden prevailing.

The findings are notable in an unusual campaign pitting an incumbent president against his predecessor, with both men facing doubters within their own parties and among independents. Consolidating support from Republicans who backed Nikki Haley in the GOP primary could be a challenge for Trump. Biden faces disenchanted progressives to his left and concerns over whether his age, 81, is a liability in the job.

Excitement about the two candidates will be an important factor in a race where turnout from each side's base will be key. But dislike can motivate voters as much as enthusiasm.

"If there was a third-party candidate who had a chance in hell I would vote for them," said Austin Healey, a 26-year-old Democrat. Healey, who describes himself as "very liberal," said his mixed reviews of Biden take a back seat to his concerns that Trump's comeback bid "looks like a clear ploy for trying to abolish democracy."

Though he is "not excited about it," Healey said, that means a vote for Biden.

Derrick Johnson, a Michigan voter who identifies as a liberal independent, offered plenty of critiques against Biden, as well. But the 46-year-old caregiver and food service worker made his bottom line clear: "Donald Trump is a madman. I'm afraid he'll have us in World War III. My message is anybody but Trump."

Democrats' intense feelings about Trump account for the overall differences in how Americans view the two rivals. Altogether, about 4 in 10 U.S. adults say "fearful" would describe their emotions "extremely" or "very" well if Trump is elected again, while roughly 3 in 10 would fear a second Biden term. About 4 in 10 U.S. adults said they would be angered by Trump winning in November while 28% said the same about Biden.

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The poll's findings on negative emotions could be especially important for Biden given his other weak spots, including that Republicans remain more excited about electing Trump again than Democrats are about reelecting Biden. Slightly more than half of Republicans, 54%, said "excited" describes their feelings about another Trump term "extremely well" or "very well." For Biden, that number was just 4 in 10 among Democrats.

"We know what we're getting with Trump," said Republican John Novak, a 54-year-old maintenance worker who lives in swing-state Wisconsin and counted himself among those GOP loyalists who would be excited by another Trump term.

"I knew who he was when he came down that escalator in 2015, and we were never getting Boy Scout material," Novak said. "But he put conservatives on the Supreme Court, he was firm on immigration ... and he's a conservative who handled the economy."

The latest AP-NORC poll showed Biden with an overall approval rating of 38%. U.S. adults also expressed discontent about his handling of the economy and immigration – and not all of the disapproval is driven by partisan loyalties. About 4 in 10 U.S. adults approve of Biden's stewardship of the economy, roughly equal to his overall job approval rating.

On specific issues, about 3 in 10 Democrats disapprove of Biden's handling of the economy; about 4 in 10 disapprove of his approach to immigration or border security.

"The situation at the border really bothers me," said Johnson, the Michigan liberal. "The border crossings are just getting out of control."

The president and his campaign advisers tout the Biden administration's legislative record, especially on infrastructure, an improving economy and new spending intended to combat climate change. But the president and his allies are also unsparing in lambasting Trump as interested only in "revenge and retribution" for his defeat in 2020 and the pending criminal prosecutions and other legal troubles that have followed.

They have seized on Trump's praise of authoritarians like Russia's Vladimir Putin and Hungary's Victor Orban and recirculated the former president's statement that he would be willing to act like a dictator for a day to close the border and expand drilling for fossil fuel.

Trump has countered with searing attacks on Biden's mental acuity and physical fitness for the presidency and even mocked Biden's stutter. But the latest poll results suggest Trump has not yet maximized the potential benefits of those attacks — or perhaps that they simply have a lower yield for him.

Biden sometimes turns his version of the argument into a humorous quip he used often in 2020, when he was vying to unseat Trump: "Don't compare me to the Almighty, compare me to the alternative."

Indeed, that is what resonates with reluctant Democrats and some independents.

"I voted for Trump (in 2016) because I wanted somebody to shake up Washington," said Neil Murray, a 67-year-old retiree in Jonesboro, Arkansas, who identifies as an independent. "He certainly did that, but he couldn't do anything productive with it."

Frustrated with Trump's negative qualities that he overlooked in 2016, Murray voted for Biden in 2020 — but not enthusiastically. He called Biden "disingenuous on some things" and too close to his left flank on economic policy.

But in November, Murray said, he will have no reservations when casting a second vote for the Democrat, because, "Donald Trump is a screaming lunatic."

The British royal family learns that if you don't fill an information vacuum, someone else will

By DAVID BAUDER AP Media Writer

NEW YORK (AP) — A media frenzy was born on Feb. 27, when the hashtag #WhereIsKate exploded online with speculation about the whereabouts of Britain's Princess of Wales. It opened a rabbit hole of amateur detective work, memes, bizarre theories and jokes — mixed with genuine concern about Kate's health — into which thousands of people descended until her announcement last week that she was recovering from cancer.

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The episode offered the royal family — and everyone else — a lesson in the modern world of online media: If your silence leaves an information vacuum, others will rush to fill it. And the results may be messy.

"The royal family's mantra is never complain, never explain," said Ellie Hall, a journalist who specializes in covering Britain's king and his court. "That really doesn't work in a digital age. It doesn't take much to get the crazy things going."

It was, in part, entertainment for some people with too much time on their hands. Except it involved real people with real lives — and, it turns out, real medical challenges.

Anatomy of an information vacuum

On Jan. 17, Kensington Palace announced that Kate was in the hospital recovering from a planned abdominal surgery and would not be doing any public events until after Easter. There was relatively little online chatter, or official updates, until it was announced on Feb. 27 that her husband, Prince William, would not be attending his godfather's memorial service due to a "personal matter."

That's when the theorizing really began, noted Ryan Broderick, who writes the Garbage Day newsletter about the online environment.

Where was Kate? Was she seriously ill — in a coma, perhaps? Did she travel abroad to undergo plastic surgery? Had she been replaced by a body double? Was there trouble in her marriage? Did she leave William? Had she been abused? Unsubstantiated rumors made it all the way to American talk show host Stephen Colbert. Memes appeared that included putting Kate's picture on the face of an actress in "Gone Girl," a 2014 film about a missing wife.

After two decades in which people have uploaded their lives to a system of platforms run by algorithms that make money off our worst impulses, "we have wondered what the world might look like when we crossed the threshold into a fully online world," Broderick wrote on Garbage Day. "Well, we did. We crossed it."

"Conspiracy is the Internet's favorite sport," Sarah Frier, author of "No Filter: The Inside Story of Instagram," posted on X, formerly Twitter. "It starts here and becomes mainstream. At one point last week, MOST of the content on my (X) feed was about her. None of it was right. This is just what people do for fun and followers now."

Then came the grand, unforced error — the palace releasing a photo on March 10 of Kate and her children that it later admitted had been digitally manipulated, without leaving clear exactly what was done.

Even before that, a ham-fisted public relations strategy by the royal family's handlers had lost control of the narrative, said Peter Mancusi, a journalism professor at Northeastern University and a lawyer with his own business in crisis counseling.

Providing some proof of life, some morsels of information — even a staged shot of Kate waving from a balcony — would have filled the vacuum, he said. Mancusi contrasted the strategy with that surrounding King Charles, where it was quickly announced around the same time that he was fighting cancer. It has never been made clear exactly what kind of cancer the king has, but people are inclined to grant some degree of privacy with that diagnosis, Mancusi said.

Mancusi frequently deals with clients who resist releasing damaging or uncomfortable information that usually winds up getting out anyway. Best to be pro-active or, as Hall said, "feed the beast."

"It's just human nature, and it's the nature of a lot of companies when bad news hits, to go into a defensive crouch," Mancusi said. "But hope isn't a strategy anymore."

Clear and verifiable information can help matters

Despite the temptation to ignore rumors and conspiracy theories, it's best to respond quickly with clear and verifiable information, said Daniel Allington, a social scientist at King's College in London who studies disinformation. "Once people start speculating that you are lying to them," Allington said, "it's very hard to get them back on board."

In an article published on vulture.com 12 days before Kate announced she had cancer, author Kathryn VanArendonk seemed to anticipate that truth in a discussion about how the monarchy is not built for the modern information era.

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"Catherine may be going through some private experiences she does not want to share widely," she wrote, "and the internet has broken everyone's ability to assess what's a supervillain-level coverup and what's more likely to be something sad and mundane."

Cancer is something too many people can relate to. They understand how hard it is to speak those words to loved ones, much less the entire world. Kate's video was a candid, emotional and effective way of sharing very personal information, said Matthew Hitzik, a veteran in crisis communications from New York.

It didn't end wild online speculation, though. Almost immediately, suggestions popped up that the speech was generated by artificial intelligence or, in an unholy alliance of conspiracy theories, that her cancer was caused by the COVID-19 vaccine.

But that was nonsense, and felt churlish. A corner had been turned. The Sun in London now runs daily stories with "Brave Kate" in the headline. Trolls "should hang their heads in shame," the newspaper editorialized. The Atlantic magazine headlined: "I Hope You All Feel Terrible Now."

What shouldn't be lost, however, is how preventable it all was.

"You cannot blame British newspapers for the miseries heaped on the Prince and Princess of Wales," columnist Hugo Rifkind wrote in The Times of London. "Certainly we didn't help, if only because a princess releasing doctored photographs to the public, for reasons at that point unclear, is an objectively grabby and fascinating story. But the conspiracy theories? The juggernauts of dirty speculation? You could argue, I suppose, that papers should have simply pretended none of this was happening.

"But it was, and it wasn't driven by us," he wrote. "It was driven by you."

#WhereIsKate? Now we know.

The presidents of France and Brazil meet and announce a \$1.1 billion investment plan for the Amazon

By MAURICIO SAVARESE and SYLVIE CORBET Associated Press

SAO PAULO (AP) — The Brazilian and the French presidents on Tuesday announced a plan to invest 1 billion euros (\$1.1 billion) in the Amazon, including parts of the rainforest in neighboring French Guiana.

The two countries' governments said in a joint statement the money will be spread over the next four years to protect the rainforest. It will be a collaboration of state-run Brazilian banks and France's investment agency. Private resources will also be welcomed, Brazil and France said.

French President Emmanuel Macron and his Brazilian counterpart Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva are meeting this week to revive the relationship between the countries after years of frictions with former President Jair Bolsonaro, deepen cooperation to protect the rainforest and boost trade.

Macron started his three-day visit to Brazil in the Amazon city of Belem, where he met his long-time ally Lula. The French president then took a boat to the Combu island to meet with Indigenous leaders.

Both Macron and Lula saw a protest by Greenpeace Brazil with banners that read "No oil in the Amazon." Brazil's government has contemplated allowing the tapping of oil in a region close to the Para state, where Belem lies.

Lula said during a speech that Macron's visit is part of a global effort to beef up rainforest protections.

"We want to convince those who have already deforested that they need to contribute in an important way to countries that still have their forests to keep them standing," Lula said in a speech next to the French president.

Macron's office prior said to the trip that a potential European trade deal with the South American bloc Mercosur won't be on the agenda. The French president is an opponent of such an agreement as long as South American producers don't respect the same environment and health standards as Europeans, after farmers raised concerns during protests across France and Europe.

The French president decorated Indigenous leader Raoni Metuktire with the prestigious Legion of Honor medal for efforts at conserving the rainforest.

"You were in Europe and I promised to come here to your forest and be with your people in this forest that is coveted," Macron told the Indigenous leader, according to French radio RFI. "President Lula and I

have a common cause for one of our friends in this land that belongs to you.”

Lula and Macron will seek to “set a common course” to fight both climate change and poverty, Macron’s office said, as Brazil is to host the summit of the Group of 20 leading economies in Rio de Janeiro in November and UN climate talks in Belem next year.

On Wednesday, Macron and Lula will launch a diesel-powered submarine built in Brazil with French technology at the Itaguai shipyard outside Rio de Janeiro. The French president will then head to metropolis Sao Paulo to meet with Brazilian investors. On Thursday, the French president will head to Brasilia to again meet with Lula.

Baltimore bridge collapses after powerless cargo ship rams into support column; 6 presumed dead

By LEA SKENE Associated Press

BALTIMORE (AP) — A cargo ship lost power and rammed into a major bridge in Baltimore early Tuesday, destroying the span in a matter of seconds and plunging it into the river in a terrifying collapse that could disrupt a vital shipping port for months. Six people were missing and presumed dead, and the search for them was suspended until Wednesday morning.

The ship’s crew issued a mayday call moments before the crash took down the Francis Scott Key Bridge, enabling authorities to limit vehicle traffic on the span, Maryland’s governor said.

As the vessel neared the bridge, puffs of black smoke could be seen as the lights flickered on and off. It struck one of the bridge’s supports, causing the structure to collapse like a toy, and a section of the span came to rest on the bow.

With the ship barreling toward the bridge at “a very, very rapid speed,” authorities had just enough time to stop cars from coming over the bridge, Maryland Gov. Wes Moore said.

“These people are heroes,” Moore said. “They saved lives last night.”

In the evening, Col. Roland L. Butler Jr., superintendent for Maryland State Police, announced that the search and rescue mission was transitioning to one of search and recovery. He also said the search was being put on pause and divers would return to the site at 6 a.m. Wednesday, when challenging overnight conditions were expected to improve. No bodies have been recovered, Butler said.

The crash happened in the middle of the night, long before the busy morning commute on the bridge that stretches 1.6 miles (2.6 kilometers) and was used by 12 million vehicles last year.

The six missing people were part of a construction crew filling potholes on the bridge, said Paul Wiefeld, the state’s transportation secretary.

Guatemala’s consulate in Maryland said in a statement that two of the missing were citizens of the Central American nation. It did not provide their names but said consular officials were in contact with authorities and assisting the families.

Honduras’ Deputy Foreign Affairs Minister Antonio García told The Associated Press that a Honduran citizen, Maynor Yassir Suazo Sandoval, was missing. He said he had been in contact with Suazo’s family.

And the Washington Consulate of Mexico said via the social media platform X that citizens of that nation were also among the missing. It did not say how many.

A senior executive at the company that employed the workers also said, in the afternoon, that the workers were presumed dead given the water’s depth and how much time had passed.

Jeffrey Pritzker, executive vice president of Brawner Builders, said the crew was working in the middle of the bridge when it came down.

“This was so completely unforeseen,” Pritzker said. “We don’t know what else to say. We take such great pride in safety, and we have cones and signs and lights and barriers and flaggers.”

Jesus Campos, who has worked on the bridge for Brawner Builders and knows members of the crew, said he was told they were on a break and some were sitting in their trucks.

“I know that a month ago, I was there, and I know what it feels like when the trailers pass,” Campos said. “Imagine knowing that is falling. It is so hard. One would not know what to do.”

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Father Ako Walker, a Roman Catholic priest at Sacred Heart of Jesus, said he spent time with the families of the missing workers as they waited for news of their loved ones.

"You can see the pain etched on their faces," Walker said.

Rescuers pulled two people out of the water, one of whom was treated at a hospital and discharged hours later. Multiple vehicles also went into the river, although authorities did not believe anyone was inside.

"It looked like something out of an action movie," Baltimore Mayor Brandon Scott said, calling it "an unthinkable tragedy."

A police dispatcher put out a call just before the collapse saying a ship had lost its steering and asked officers to stop all traffic on the bridge, according to Maryland Transportation Authority first responder radio traffic obtained from the Broadcastify.com archive.

One officer who stopped traffic radioed that he was going to drive onto the bridge to alert the construction crew. But seconds later, a frantic officer said: "The whole bridge just fell down. Start, start whoever, everybody ... the whole bridge just collapsed."

On a separate radio channel for maintenance and construction workers, someone said officers were stopping traffic because a ship had lost steering. There was no follow-up order to evacuate, and 30 seconds later the bridge fell and the channel went silent.

From 1960 to 2015, there were 35 major bridge collapses worldwide due to ship or barge collisions, according to the World Association for Waterborne Transport Infrastructure.

Tuesday's collapse is sure to create a logistical nightmare along the East Coast for months, if not years, shutting down ship traffic at the Port of Baltimore, a major hub. The loss of the bridge will also snarl cargo and commuter traffic.

"Losing this bridge will devastate the entire area, as well as the entire East Coast," state Sen. Johnny Ray Salling said.

Transportation Secretary Pete Buttigieg said at a news conference that it was too soon to estimate how long it will take to clear the channel, which is about 50 feet (15 meters) deep.

"I do not know of a bridge that has been constructed to withstand a direct impact from a vessel of this size," he said.

The Dali, which was headed from Baltimore to Colombo, Sri Lanka and flying under a Singapore flag, is about 985 feet (300 meters) long and about 157 feet (48 meters) wide, according to data from Marine Traffic.

Synergy Marine Group, which manages the ship, confirmed that it hit a pillar of the bridge at about 1:30 a.m. while in control of one or more pilots, who are local specialists who help guide vessels safely into and out of ports. The ship is owned by Grace Ocean Private Ltd.

Synergy said all crew members and the two pilots on board were accounted for, and there were no reports of any injuries.

The ship was moving at 8 knots, roughly 9 mph (14.8 kph), the governor said.

Inspectors found a problem with the Dali's machinery in June, but a more recent examination did not identify any deficiencies, according to the shipping information system Equasis.

Danish shipping giant Maersk said it had chartered the vessel.

Jagged remnants of the bridge could be seen jutting up from the water in the aftermath of the collapse. The on-ramp ended abruptly where the span once began.

Donald Heinbuch, a retired chief with Baltimore's fire department, said he was startled awake by a deep rumbling that shook his house for several seconds and "felt like an earthquake." He drove to the river's edge and couldn't believe what he saw.

"The ship was there, and the bridge was in the water, like it was blown up," he said.

The bridge spans the Patapsco River at the entrance to the busy harbor, which leads to the Chesapeake Bay and Atlantic Ocean. Opened in 1977, the bridge is named for the writer of "The Star-Spangled Banner."

Wiedefeld said all vessel traffic into and out of the port would be suspended until further notice, though the facility was still open to trucks.

President Joe Biden said he planned to travel to Baltimore and intends for the federal government to pick up the entire cost of rebuilding.

"This is going to take some time," Biden said.

Last year the Port of Baltimore handled a record 52.3 million tons of foreign cargo worth \$80 billion, according to the state.

The head of a supply chain management company said Americans should expect shortages of goods from the collapse's effect on ocean container shipping and East Coast trucking.

"It's not just the port of Baltimore that's going to be impacted," said Ryan Petersen, CEO of Flexport.

The collapse, though, is not likely to hurt worldwide trade because Baltimore is not a major port for container vessels. Its facilities are more important when it comes to goods such as farm equipment and autos, said Judah Levine, head of research for global freight booking platform Freightos.

Children's author Kouri Richins hit with new charges alleging earlier attempt to kill her husband

By HANNAH SCHOENBAUM Associated Press

SALT LAKE CITY (AP) — A Utah woman who authorities say fatally poisoned her husband in 2022, then published a children's book about grief, now faces another attempted murder charge for allegedly drugging him weeks earlier on Valentine's Day.

Kouri Richins, 33, is accused of killing her husband with a lethal dose of fentanyl at their home in a small mountain town near Park City in March 2022. New charging documents filed Monday by Summit County prosecutors allege that was not her first attempt on his life.

They detail the perilous months preceding Eric Richins' death, painting a picture of a paranoid man walking on eggshells around his wife as she made secret financial arrangements and bought illicit drugs that were later found in his system.

Prosecutors have said previously that Kouri Richins, who is being held without bail, may have tried to poison her husband the month before his death, but they did not file the additional charges until this week.

The chilling case of a once-beloved author accused of profiting off her own violent crime has captivated true-crime enthusiasts in the year since she was arrested for her husband's murder. She had self-published "Are You With Me?" — an illustrated storybook about a father with angel wings watching over his young son after passing away.

Once lauded as a heartwarming must-read for any child who has lost a loved one, the book has since become a powerful tool for prosecutors arguing that Kouri Richins carried out a calculated murder plot and attempted cover-up.

The mother of three repeatedly called her husband's death unexpected while promoting her book and was commended by many for helping her sons and other young children process the death of a parent.

Her attorney, Skye Lazaro, did not immediately respond to a request for comment on the new charges. Lazaro has argued in early hearings that the evidence against her client was dubious and circumstantial.

One bite of his favorite sandwich — left with a note in the front seat of his truck on Valentine's Day — made Eric Richins, 39, break out in hives and black out, prosecutors allege in the new documents.

His wife had bought the sandwich from a local diner in the city of Kamas the same week she also purchased several dozen fentanyl pills, according to witness statements and deleted text messages that were recovered by police.

The state's star witness, a housekeeper who claims to have sold her the drugs, told law enforcement that she gave Kouri Richins the pills a couple days before Valentine's Day. Later that month, Richins allegedly told the housekeeper that the pills she provided were not strong enough and asked her to procure stronger fentanyl, according to the new charging documents.

In witness testimony, two friends of Eric Richins recount phone conversations from the day prosecutors are now saying he was first poisoned by his wife of nine years. After injecting himself with his son's EpiPen and chugging a bottle of Benadryl, he woke from deep sleep and told a friend, "I think my

wife tried to poison me.”

His friends say they noticed fear in his voice as Richins, who had no known allergies, told them that he felt like he was going to die and that his wife might be to blame. Opioids, including fentanyl, can cause severe allergic reactions, including hives.

A month later, Kouri Richins called 911 in the middle of the night to report that she had found her husband “cold to the touch” at the foot of their bed, according to the police report. He was pronounced dead, and a medical examiner later found five times the lethal dosage of fentanyl in his system.

“One or two pills might be accidental. Twenty — or five times the lethal dose — is not accidental. That is someone who wants Eric dead,” Summit County Chief Prosecutor Patricia Cassell said.

She alleges that Richins slipped the synthetic opioid into a Moscow mule cocktail she made for her husband amid marital disputes and fights over a multimillion-dollar mansion she purchased as an investment.

Years before her husband’s death, Kouri Richins opened numerous life insurance policies on Eric Richins without his knowledge, with benefits totaling nearly \$2 million, prosecutors allege.

Kouri Richins was also charged Monday with mortgage fraud and insurance fraud for allegedly forging loan applications and fraudulently claiming insurance benefits after his death.

Prosecutors argue she was in financial distress when her husband died and say she mistakenly believed she would inherit his estate under terms of their prenuptial agreement. Newly released documents indicated she had a negative bank account balance, owed lenders more than \$1.8 million and was being sued by a creditor.

Charging documents indicate Eric Richins met with a divorce attorney and an estate planner in October 2020, a month after he discovered that his wife made some major financial decisions without his knowledge. The couple’s prenuptial agreement only allowed Kouri Richins to profit off her husband’s successful stone masonry business if he died while they were still married.

Utah law prohibits anyone convicted of murder from profiting financially off their crime.

The Latest | Israel won’t accept Hamas demands after militant group rejects cease-fire plan

By The Associated Press undefined

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu said Tuesday that his government will not accept Hamas’ “delusional” conditions for a cease-fire in Gaza. The militant group rejected the latest truce proposal because it says Israel is ignoring the group’s core demands.

Hamas wants an end to the war and Israel’s full withdrawal from the Gaza Strip. Israel seeks to destroy Hamas and to recover all of the approximately 100 Israeli hostages still in Gaza, as well as the remains of some 30 others.

Netanyahu also rebuked Monday’s U.N. Security Council resolution calling for a cease-fire. The council’s legally binding demand for a pause in the war comes as much of the Gaza Strip is in ruins, most of its 2.3 million residents are displaced, and a third of the besieged population is on the brink of famine.

More than 32,000 people have been killed in Gaza and more than 74,000 wounded, according to Gaza’s Health Ministry, which doesn’t differentiate between civilians and combatants in its tally. The ministry says women and children make up two-thirds of the dead.

Some 1,200 people were killed in Israel and another 250 people abducted when militants launched a surprise attack out of Gaza on Oct. 7, triggering the war.

Currently:

- Israel and Hamas dig in as pressure builds for a cease-fire in Gaza
- With its soldiers mired in Gaza, Israel also fighting over drafting the ultra-Orthodox
- Lebanese Sunni militant group head says coordination with Shiite Hezbollah is vital to fight Israel
- Pentagon urges Israel to protect civilians in Gaza as military chiefs meet
- Colombia threatens to break ties with Israel if it doesn’t comply with UN cease-fire resolution
- Find more AP coverage at <https://apnews.com/hub/israel-hamas-war>

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Here's the latest:

RUSSIA PUSHES BACK AGAINST U.S. CLAIMS THAT U.N. CEASE-FIRE RESOLUTION IS NOT BINDING UNITED NATIONS – Russia's ambassador to the United Nations ambassador strongly criticized the claim by United States officials that Monday's U.N. Security Council resolution demanding a cease-fire in Gaza is not legally binding.

Vassily Nebenzia got support from the U.N. deputy spokesman, Farhan Haq, and both pointed to Article 25 of the United Nations Charter, its founding document, which says all members of the 193-nation organization "agree to accept and carry out the decisions of the Security Council."

Nebenzia quoted U.S. Ambassador Linda Thomas-Greenfield, who said, "We fully support some of the objectives in this nonbinding resolution." Her comments to the council came shortly after the cease-fire resolution was adopted 14-0, with the United States abstaining.

Nebenzia also cited U.S. National Security Council spokesman John Kirby who said: "It's a nonbinding resolution. So, there's no impact at all on Israel and Israel's ability to continue to go after Hamas."

The Russian ambassador told the council's monthly Mideast meeting that the U.S. — one of the five veto-wielding permanent members of the Security Council — "has essentially openly stated that it does not accept the Charter of our organization, disavowing the hard won fruits of discussions in the council, and including the hard won and historic resolution on a cease-fire in Gaza."

Israel now has "complete carte blanche and is not planning to stop until it razes Gaza to the ground" with Washington's blessing and despite a demand from the Security Council, Nebenzia said.

Haq, the deputy U.N. spokesman, told reporters Monday that, "All Security Council resolutions are international law." On Tuesday, he held up the U.N. Charter saying the U.N. stands by Article 25.

As for implementation of the resolution, which also demanded the release of all Israeli hostages seized during Hamas' Oct. 7 attack in southern Israel, Haq said implementing resolutions "takes time."

"The enforcement of resolutions is something that is ultimately up to the international community as a whole," Haq said.

ISRAELI MAN HELD HOSTAGE IN GAZA IS DECLARED DEAD, ADVOCACY GROUP SAYS

JERUSALEM — One of the Israeli hostages being held in Gaza has been confirmed killed, an advocacy group representing the hostages' families said Tuesday.

It was not clear how Israeli authorities determined Uriel Baruch, 35, had been killed. Baruch was kidnapped from the Nova music festival during the Hamas-led attack on Oct. 7.

Baruch is the latest hostage to be declared dead by Israeli authorities. Israel says 35 of the hostages remaining in the Gaza Strip are dead, either killed during Hamas' initial attack or while in captivity.

Baruch, a techno music fan, leaves behind a wife and two children ages 8 and 5, according to the Hostages Families Forum.

As negotiations remain stalled on a deal to release the hostages and halt the war in Gaza, furious and desperate family members of hostages protested alongside supporters Tuesday evening, blocking the road outside of the military's Tel Aviv headquarters by climbing inside large cages.

About 120 hostages were released during a temporary cease-fire in late November. Hamas-led militants took roughly 250 people into Gaza — among them men, women, children and older adults. About 100 people are believed to still be alive.

ISRAEL CONFIRMS AIRSTRIKE KILLED HAMAS NO. 3 COMMANDER IN GAZA

JERUSALEM — Israel's military says it has confirmed that an airstrike earlier this month killed Marwan Issa, the deputy leader of Hamas' armed wing in Gaza who helped plan the Oct. 7 attack.

Issa is the highest-ranking Hamas leader to have been killed in Gaza since the start of the war. Israel has killed several top Hamas leaders over the years, only to see them quickly replaced with little apparent impact on the group's operations.

Rear Adm. Daniel Hagari said Tuesday that intelligence verified Issa was killed when fighter jets struck an underground compound in central Gaza between March 9 and 10 where Issa and another Hamas commander, Aziz Abu Tamaa, were believed to be located.

Hamas official Izzat al-Risheq said the Israeli announcement was intended to distract from the military's

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failure to achieve its war goals in Gaza. In a statement released online, he said Israel's narrative about the killing was not trustworthy.

"The final say is the responsibility of the Qassam Brigade leadership," he said, referring to Hamas' armed wing.

Issa, born in 1965, was the deputy to Mohammed Deif, the shadowy longtime leader of Hamas' military wing who is said to have survived several previous Israeli attempts on his life.

Yehya Sinwar is Hamas' top leader in Gaza and the alleged mastermind of the Oct. 7 attack that triggered the war. He spent over two decades in Israeli prisons before being released along with more than 1,000 Palestinian prisoners in exchange for a captive Israeli soldier in 2011. Both Deif and Sinwar are believed to be alive in Gaza.

Israel says it has killed over 13,000 Hamas fighters since the start of the war, without providing evidence, and claims to have largely dismantled the group in northern Gaza. But Hamas has continued to carry out attacks on Israeli troops in all parts of the territory.

NETANYAHU SAYS ISRAEL WILL NOT ACCEPT HAMAS' DEMANDS

JERUSALEM — Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu says Israel will not accept Hamas' demands for a cease-fire after the militant group rejected the latest proposal for a truce.

In a statement from his office Tuesday, Netanyahu accused Hamas of being uninterested in proceeding with negotiations toward a deal. He said Hamas' rejection "served as unfortunate testimony to the damage of the Security Council decision," which on Monday approved a resolution calling for an immediate cease-fire and the release of all hostages captured by Hamas, without linking the two.

In a statement late Monday, Hamas said it had informed mediators that it was sticking to its original position, which includes an end to the war and a full Israeli withdrawal from Gaza.

Netanyahu said Israel would not give in to Hamas' "delusional" demands and continue to work to destroy the militant group's military and governing capabilities, as well as seek the release of the remaining hostages.

U.N. RESOLUTION EMBOLDENED HAMAS TO REJECT CEASE-FIRE, ISRAELI F.M. SAYS

JERUSALEM — The United Nations Security Council's approval of a resolution calling for an immediate end to hostilities emboldened Hamas to reject the latest cease-fire proposal, Israel Foreign Minister Israel Katz said Tuesday.

Israel and Hamas are negotiating a cease-fire deal in exchange for the release of dozens of hostages still held by the militant group in Gaza. Hamas said late Monday that it was rejecting the latest proposal and sticking to its core demands, which include an end to the war and a full withdrawal from Gaza.

Katz told Israeli Army Radio that the U.N. resolution indicated to Hamas that international pressure was closing in on Israel and that it need only wait for the war to end through that pressure rather than agreeing to make any concessions.

"The message delivered to Hamas yesterday ... is that you don't have to hurry," Katz said. He also criticized the United States, Israel's top ally, for not vetoing the resolution over its lack of a condemnation of Hamas and its Oct. 7 attack.

HAMAS REJECTS THE LATEST CEASE-FIRE PROPOSAL, SAYING ISRAEL IS IGNORING KEY DEMANDS

RAFAH, Gaza Strip — Hamas has rejected the latest cease-fire proposal, accusing Israel of ignoring its core demands, which include an end to the war and a full withdrawal from Gaza.

In a statement late Monday, the militant group said it had informed mediators that it was sticking to its original position, conveyed earlier in March. It said Israel had not responded to its core demands of a "comprehensive cease-fire, an (Israeli) withdrawal from the Strip, the return of displaced people and a real prisoner exchange."

The statement came shortly after the United Nations Security Council approved a resolution calling for an immediate cease-fire and the release of all hostages held in Gaza.

Hamas is still believed to be holding some 100 hostages, as well as the remains of around 30 others. More than 100 hostages were freed during a weeklong cease-fire in November in exchange for the release of 240 Palestinian prisoners.

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has rejected Hamas' demands, calling them "delusional." He has vowed to resume Israel's offensive after any hostage release and keep fighting until Hamas is destroyed.

UK court says Assange can't be extradited on espionage charges until US rules out death penalty

By SYLVIA HUI and JILL LAWLESS Associated Press

LONDON (AP) — A British court ruled Tuesday that Julian Assange can't be extradited to the United States on espionage charges unless U.S. authorities guarantee he won't get the death penalty, giving the WikiLeaks founder a partial victory in his long legal battle over the site's publication of classified American documents.

Two High Court judges said they would grant Assange a new appeal unless U.S. authorities give further assurances within three weeks about what will happen to him. The ruling means the legal saga, which has dragged on for more than a decade, will continue — and Assange will remain inside London's high-security Belmarsh Prison, where he has spent the last five years.

Judges Victoria Sharp and Jeremy Johnson said the U.S. must guarantee that Assange, who is Australian, "is afforded the same First Amendment protections as a United States citizen, and that the death penalty is not imposed."

The judges said that if the U.S. files new assurances, "we will give the parties an opportunity to make further submissions before we make a final decision on the application for leave to appeal." The judges said a hearing will be held May 20 if the U.S. makes those submissions.

The U.S. Justice Department declined to comment Tuesday.

Assange's supporters say he is a journalist protected by the First Amendment who exposed U.S. military wrongdoing in Iraq and Afghanistan that was in the public interest.

Assange's wife Stella Assange said the WikiLeaks founder "is being persecuted because he exposed the true cost of war in human lives."

"The Biden administration should not issue assurances. They should drop this shameful case, which should never have been brought," she said outside the High Court in London.

The ruling follows a two-day hearing in the High Court in February, where Assange's lawyer Edward Fitzgerald said American authorities were seeking to punish him for WikiLeaks' "exposure of criminality on the part of the U.S. government on an unprecedented scale," including torture and killings.

The U.S. government said Assange's actions went beyond journalism by soliciting, stealing and indiscriminately publishing classified government documents that endangered many people, including Iraqis and Afghans who had helped U.S. forces.

The judges rejected six of Assange's nine grounds of appeal, including the allegation that his prosecution is political. They said that while Assange "acted out of political conviction ... it does not follow however that the request for his extradition is made on account of his political views."

The judges also said Assange could not appeal based on allegations, made by his lawyers, that the CIA developed plans to kidnap or kill Assange during the years he spent holed up in the Ecuadorian Embassy in London, to prevent him from trying to flee.

The judges said "plainly, these are allegations of the utmost seriousness," but concluded they had no bearing on the extradition request.

"Extradition would result in him being lawfully in the custody of the United States authorities, and the reasons (if they can be called that) for rendition or kidnap or assassination then fall away," the ruling said.

They accepted three grounds of appeal: the threat to Assange's freedom of speech, Assange's claim that he faces disadvantage because he is not a U.S. citizen, and the risk he could receive the death penalty.

U.S. authorities have promised Assange would not receive capital punishment, but the judges said that "nothing in the existing assurance explicitly prevents the imposition of the death penalty."

Jennifer Robinson, one of Assange's lawyers, said that "even if we receive the assurances, we're not

confident we can rely on them.”

Assange, 52, a computer expert, has been indicted in the U.S. on charges over Wikileaks’ publication in 2010 of hundreds of thousands of classified documents.

U.S. prosecutors say he conspired with U.S. army intelligence analyst Chelsea Manning to hack into a Pentagon computer and release secret diplomatic cables and military files on the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Assange faces 17 counts under the Espionage Act and one charge of computer misuse. If convicted, his lawyers say he could receive a prison term of up to 175 years, though American authorities have said any sentence is likely to be much lower.

Assange’s wife and supporters say his physical and mental health have suffered during more than a decade of legal battles and confinement.

“My concerns about the precarious mental health of Julian Assange and his unfitness to be extradited, as well as the potential for him to receive a wholly disproportionate sentence in the United States, have not been assuaged by the court,” said Alice Jill Edwards, the United Nations’ special rapporteur on torture, an independent expert for the world body.

Assange’s legal troubles began in 2010, when he was arrested in London at the request of Sweden, which wanted to question him about allegations of rape and sexual assault made by two women. In 2012, Assange jumped bail and sought refuge inside the Ecuadorian Embassy.

The relationship between Assange and his hosts eventually soured, and he was evicted from the embassy in April 2019. British police immediately arrested and imprisoned him for breaching bail in 2012. Sweden dropped the sex crimes investigations in November 2019 because so much time had elapsed.

A U.K. district court judge rejected the U.S. extradition request in 2021 on the grounds that Assange was likely to kill himself if held under harsh U.S. prison conditions. Higher courts overturned that decision after getting assurances from the U.S. about his treatment. The British government signed an extradition order in June 2022.

Associated Press writers Brian Melley in London and Eric Tucker in Washington contributed to this report.

Sean ‘Diddy’ Combs’ lawyer says raids of the rapper’s homes were ‘excessive’ use of military force

By JONATHAN LANDRUM Jr. AP Entertainment Writer

LOS ANGELES (AP) — Sean “Diddy” Combs’ lawyer said Tuesday that the searches of the rapper’s Los Angeles and Miami properties by federal authorities in a sex trafficking investigation were “a gross use of military-level force” and that Combs is “innocent and will continue to fight” to clear his name.

It’s the first public statement from the music mogul’s team since Monday’s raids of his homes by Homeland Security Investigations agents.

“Yesterday, there was a gross overuse of military-level force as search warrants were executed at Mr. Combs’ residences,” said the statement from attorney Aaron Dyer. “There is no excuse for the excessive show of force and hostility exhibited by authorities or the way his children and employees were treated.”

The searches were part of an ongoing sex trafficking investigation by federal authorities in New York, two law enforcement officials told The Associated Press. The officials were not authorized to publicly discuss details of the investigation and spoke to the AP on condition of anonymity.

Combs was not detained and spoke to authorities, and neither he nor any family members were arrested, nor has their travel been restricted, according to Dyer’s statement.

Dyer said the “unprecedented ambush” has led to a “premature rush to judgment of Mr. Combs and is nothing more than a witch hunt based on meritless accusations made in civil lawsuits.”

“There has been no finding of criminal or civil liability with any of these allegations,” Dyer said. “Mr. Combs is innocent and will continue to fight every single day to clear his name.”

Combs’ sons, Justin and Christian “King” Combs, were handcuffed during the raid at their father’s resi-

dence in Los Angeles. King, 25, is a music artist whose song "Can't Stop Won't Stop" with Kodak Black topped Billboard's Mainstream R&B Hip-Hop charts in 2022.

Law enforcement conducted the raid Monday at Combs' multimillion-dollar mansion in the affluent Holmby Hills neighborhood in Los Angeles and his Miami waterfront home. Along with a heavy presence of officers, command trucks were parked outside both properties.

The criminal investigation is a major escalation in the scrutiny of Combs, who has been the defendant in several sexual abuse lawsuits in recent months.

In a lawsuit Combs settled the day after it was filed in November, his former protege and girlfriend, the R&B singer Cassie, sued him alleging years of sexual abuse, including rape. The lawsuit said he forced her to have sex with male prostitutes while he filmed them.

In February, a music producer filed a lawsuit alleging Combs coerced him to solicit prostitutes and pressured him to have sex with them.

Another of Combs' accusers was a woman who said the rap producer raped her two decades ago when she was 17.

Combs and his attorneys have denied all of the lawsuits' allegations.

The AP does not typically name people who say they have been sexually abused unless they come forward publicly as Cassie did.

Combs is among the most influential hip-hop producers and executives of the past three decades. Formerly known as Puff Daddy, he built one of hip-hop's biggest empires, blazing a trail with several entities attached to his famous name. He is the founder of Bad Boy Records and a three-time Grammy winner who has worked with a slew of top-tier artists including Notorious B.I.G., Mary J. Blige, Usher, Lil Kim, Faith Evans and 112.

Combs' network of non-music business ventures, including lucrative private-label spirits, sportswear fashion and a TV network, has been falling apart since the abuse lawsuits began surfacing.

His vodka and tequila deal with Diageo, a major producer of distilled spirits, formally disintegrated in January when the two parties settled mutual lawsuits, leaving the brands in Diageo's hands.

His fashion line, Sean John, has disappeared from Macy's, one of the line's primary partners; Sean John items remain for sale at Walmart's online store, although many items are heavily marked down or available only in off-sizes.

And last November, Combs resigned as chairman of Revolt TV, which focuses on music and social justice issues for African Americans.

Authorities searched Diddy's properties as part of a sex trafficking probe. Here's what to know

By JONATHAN LANDRUM Jr. AP Entertainment Writer

LOS ANGELES (AP) — In the first nine months of 2023, Sean "Diddy" Combs triumphantly performed at the MTV VMAs, released an R&B album that received a Grammy nomination and was a suitor to buy the BET network.

But several lawsuits filed late last year raised allegations of sexual assault and rape against Combs — one of hip-hop's most recognizable names as a performer and producer.

The music mogul's homes in Los Angeles and Miami were searched Monday by federal agents with Homeland Security Investigators and other law enforcement. Officials said the searches were connected to an investigation by federal authorities in New York.

The officials spoke to The Associated Press on conditions of anonymity because they were not authorized to publicly discuss details of the investigation. Combs' whereabouts are unknown but his attorney said Tuesday that the mogul is "innocent and will continue to fight" to clear his name.

"Yesterday, there was a gross overuse of military-level force as search warrants were executed at Mr. Combs' residences," said the statement from attorney Aaron Dyer. "There is no excuse for the excessive show of force and hostility exhibited by authorities or the way his children and employees were treated."

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Although Diddy was embroiled in one high-profile business dispute for part of 2023, it was a case filed by his former girlfriend and R&B singer Cassie that opened the door to other claims of sexual violence. Combs has vehemently denied the lawsuits' allegations.

It is not clear whether the search is related to any of the allegations raised in the lawsuits, which include one from a woman who claims Combs raped her when she was 17.

Here are some things to know about Combs and the investigation.

WHO IS DIDDY?

Combs is among the most influential hip-hop producers and executives of the past three decades. He built one of music's biggest empires, blazing a trail with several entities attached to his famous name. He is the founder of Bad Boy Records and a three-time Grammy winner who has worked with a slew of top-tier artists including Notorious B.I.G., Mary J. Blige, Usher, Lil Kim, Faith Evans and 112.

The music mogul created the fashion clothing line called Sean John, was associated with a well-known vodka brand and launched the Revolt TV network, which focuses on music and social justice issues targeting African Americans. He also produced the reality show "Making the Band" for MTV.

In 2022, BET honored Combs with the Lifetime Achievement Award for his ability to shape culture through his career.

Combs won Grammys for his platinum-selling 1997 album "No Way Out" and the single "I'll Be Missing You," a song dedicated to the late Notorious B.I.G. who was killed earlier that year. He won another Grammy for "Shake Ya Tailfeather" with Nelly and Murphy Lee.

Last year, Combs released his fifth studio album "The Love Album: Off the Grid," which was nominated for best progressive R&B album at February's Grammy Awards, which he did not attend. The album was his first solo project since his 2006 chart-topping "Press Play," which had two top 10 hit singles: "Last Night" with Keyshia Cole and "Come to Me" featuring Nicole Scherzinger.

In 2004, Combs played Walter Lee Younger in the Broadway revival of "A Raisin in the Sun," which aired as a television adaptation four years later. He's also appeared in films including "Get Him to the Greek" and "Monster's Ball."

WHAT SPARKED THE LAWSUITS?

In November, Combs' protege and singer Cassie sued him for alleging years of sexual abuse including rape. The lawsuit alleged he forced her to have sex with male prostitutes while he filmed them.

Combs and Cassie Ventura began dating in 2007 and had an on-and-off relationship for more than a decade.

The suit was settled the day after it was filed, but the lawsuits against Combs kept coming.

Combs had said in a December statement, "I did not do any of the awful things being alleged."

In February, a music producer filed a lawsuit alleging Combs coerced him to solicit prostitutes and pressured him to have sex with them. Combs' attorney Shawn Holley has said of those allegations that "we have overwhelming, indisputable proof that his claims are complete lies."

Another of Combs' accusers was a woman who said the rap producer raped her two decades ago when she was 17.

The filings detail acts of sexual assault, beatings and forced drugging allegedly committed in the early 1990s by Combs, then a talent director, party promoter and rising figure in New York City's hip-hop community.

ANY REPERCUSSIONS FROM THE LAWSUITS?

Last year, Combs stepped down as chairman of his cable television network Revolt amid the sexual abuse allegations against him.

Revolt announced Combs' decision via social media. It's not clear if he will ever return to the media company — which said Combs previously had "no operational or day-to-day role" at the network.

"This decision helps to ensure that Revolt remains steadfastly focused on our mission to create meaningful content for the culture and amplify the voices of all Black people throughout this country and African diaspora," the network said.

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The network had been preparing to celebrate its 10th anniversary.

Combs also created an online marketplace called Empower Global that featured Black-owned brands. The website for the curated marketplace is still active, but shows no products being sold.

WHAT HAPPENED WITH DIAGEO?

Earlier this year, Combs withdrew the lawsuit filed last year against Diageo as part of a settlement with the London-based spirits giant.

Combs said the company didn't make promised investments in Ciroc vodka and DeLeon tequila — two brands Combs promoted in the past — and treated them as inferior "urban" products. He also accused Diageo of racism.

In court filings, Combs said Diageo leadership told him race was one of the reasons it limited distribution to "urban" neighborhoods. Combs said he was also told some Diageo leaders resented him for making too much money.

In legal filings, Diageo accused Combs of resorting to "false and reckless" allegations "in an effort to extract additional billions" from the company.

Combs' reputation took a serious hit after the lawsuit was filed. Diageo became the sole owner of Ciroc and DeLeon after the lawsuit was withdrawn.

Robert F. Kennedy Jr. picks Nicole Shanahan as his running mate for his independent White House bid

By JONATHAN J. COOPER and MEG KINNARD Associated Press

OAKLAND, Calif. (AP) — Robert F. Kennedy Jr. chose Nicole Shanahan on Tuesday to be his vice presidential pick, adding a wealthy but nationally unknown figure to his independent White House bid that's trying to appeal to voters disaffected by a rematch of the 2020 election.

Shanahan, 38, is a California lawyer and philanthropist who's never held elected office. She leads Bia-Echo Foundation, an organization she founded to direct money toward issues including women's reproductive science, criminal justice reform and environmental causes.

Kennedy, a former Democrat, made the announcement in Oakland, California, where Shanahan was raised in an impoverished family.

"Nicole and I both left the Democratic Party," he said. "Our values didn't change. The Democratic Party did."

Kennedy's campaign has spooked Democrats, who are fighting third-party options that could draw support from President Joe Biden and help former President Donald Trump. But allies for both Biden and Trump attacked Kennedy and Shanahan on Tuesday, reflecting the uncertainty about how Americans might respond to an independent ticket that has little chance of winning Electoral College votes but could draw votes across the spectrum.

Without the backing of a party, Kennedy faces an arduous task to get on the ballot, with varying rules across the 50 states. He's picking a running mate now because about half of the states require him to designate one before he can apply for ballot access.

Kennedy has secured access to the ballot in Utah. He and an allied super PAC, American Values 2024, say they've collected enough signatures to qualify in several other states, including swing states Arizona, Nevada and Georgia, but election officials there have not yet signed off.

In Nevada, Democratic Secretary of State Francisco Aguilar said in a March 7 letter to independent candidates that they must nominate a vice presidential candidate before collecting signatures. The letter came days after Kennedy's campaign announced he'd collected enough signatures in the state.

Kennedy acknowledged the hurdles he faces and urged Americans to "take a risk" and vote for him, saying the biggest obstacle to his campaign is the belief that he can't win.

"If Nicole and I can get Americans to refuse to vote from fear, we're going to be in the White House in November," he said.

In a nearly 30-minute speech introducing herself to Kennedy supporters, Shanahan echoed the critique

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at the heart of Kennedy's campaign — that both major parties, the media and the U.S. government are beholden to greedy profiteers. She also embraced his discredited anti-vaccine message.

"It wasn't until I met Bobby and people supporting him that I felt any hope in the outcome of this election," Shanahan said.

Formerly married to Google co-founder Sergey Brin, Shanahan is deeply enmeshed in the Silicon Valley technology culture that Kennedy frequently critiques.

But he said her connections would help her confront the tech industry's power and influence, and her knowledge of artificial intelligence could steer the government to nurture transformative technologies.

Outside the performing arts venue where Kennedy announced his pick, broken-down cars, discarded bicycles, tents and all manner of household goods took up the sidewalk and a park, a visual reminder of the housing crisis that has plagued California.

Dawn Mitchell, a 52-year-old retired Army reservist and U.S. Postal Service worker from Chesapeake, Virginia, said she was vacationing in Los Angeles when she heard Kennedy would be appearing in Oakland and decided to make the six-hour drive to hear him and Shanahan.

"I didn't really know her before, but just listening to her and listening to her passion about helping children and the chronic disease epidemic and regenerative farming, I'm pretty impressed by her," she said.

Speakers who entertained the crowd before Kennedy took the stage included Angela Stanton-King, a woman pardoned by then-President Donald Trump for her role in a car theft ring that led to a 2004 federal conspiracy conviction and two years in prison; Metta World Peace, the NBA all-star player formerly known as Ron Artest; and Dr. Jay Bhattacharya, a Stanford Medical School professor who questioned the efficacy of lockdowns during the COVID-19 pandemic and was part of Republican Florida Gov. Ron DeSantis' presidential launch event last year.

The Democratic National Committee is gearing up to take on Kennedy and other third-party options, including No Labels, a well-funded group working to recruit a centrist ticket. The effort is overseen by veteran strategist Mary Beth Cahill, whose resume includes chief of staff to the late Sen. Edward M. Kennedy of Massachusetts, another of RFK Jr.'s uncles.

Some members of his family have publicly criticized his views. Dozens of Kennedy family members sent a message when they posed with Biden at a St. Patrick's Day reception at the White House in a photo his sister Kerry Kennedy posted to social media.

"He's a spoiler. He's tried to coast on his family legacy and the goodwill they have in the African American community," Pennsylvania Lt. Gov. Austin Davis said of Kennedy on a conference call with reporters organized by the DNC. "But the Kennedy family has denounced this lame attempt and they've quite frankly stood with President Biden."

Republicans, likewise, worry Kennedy's anti-establishment bent and skepticism about the response to COVID-19 could entice voters who might otherwise vote for Trump.

"Robert F. Kennedy Jr. is a far-left radical that supports reparations, backs the Green New Deal, and wants to ban fracking," said Alex Pfeiffer, a spokesperson for the pro-Trump super PAC Make America Great Again Inc. "It's no surprise he would pick a Biden donor leftist as his running mate."

Kennedy is a descendant of a storied Democratic family that includes his father, Robert F. Kennedy, who was a U.S. senator, attorney general and presidential candidate, and his uncle former President John F. Kennedy.

Kennedy was a teenager when his father, known as RFK, was assassinated during his own presidential campaign in 1968. RFK Jr. built a reputation of his own as an activist, author and lawyer who fought for environmental causes such as clean water.

Along the way, his activism has veered into conspiracies and contradicted scientific consensus, most infamously on vaccines.

An anti-vaccine group Kennedy led has a lawsuit pending against a number of news organizations, among them The Associated Press, accusing them of violating antitrust laws by taking action to identify misinformation, including about COVID-19 and COVID-19 vaccines. Kennedy took leave from the group when he announced his run for president but is listed as one of its attorneys in the lawsuit.

Who is Nicole Shanahan, the philanthropist picked by Robert F. Kennedy Jr. as his running mate?

By MEG KINNARD Associated Press

COLUMBIA, S.C. (AP) — Nicole Shanahan, Robert F. Kennedy Jr.'s pick to be his running mate in his independent bid for president, brings youth and considerable wealth to Kennedy's long-shot campaign but is little known outside Silicon Valley.

Shanahan, 38, is a California lawyer and philanthropist. Shanahan leads the Bia-Echo Foundation, an organization she founded to direct money toward issues including women's reproductive science, criminal justice reform and environmental causes. She also is a Stanford University fellow and was the founder and chief executive of ClearAccessIP, a patent management firm that was sold in 2020.

On Tuesday, Shanahan talked about her hardscrabble upbringing in Oakland, the daughter of a mother who immigrated from China and an Irish and German-American father "plagued by substance abuse" who "struggled to keep a job." Touching on her family's reliance on government assistance, Shanahan said that, although she had become "very wealthy later on in life," she felt she could relate to Americans being "just one misfortune away from disaster."

"The purpose of wealth is to help those in need. That's what it's for," Shanahan said. "And I want to bring that back to politics, too. That is the purpose of privilege."

She also referenced discredited theories about vaccines as Kennedy and his allies have been accused of doing.

The attorney talked about her overall passion to help fight "chronic disease," referencing her own struggles with fertility and her five-year-old daughter, who she said has autism. Shanahan cited "toxic substances in our environment," "electromagnetic pollution" from devices like cellphones and — drawing her largest applause of the day — the lack of research surrounding long-term effects of childhood vaccinations.

"Our children are not well, our people are not well, and our country will not be well for very much longer, if we don't heed this desperate call for attention," she said.

Any link between vaccines and autism has long been debunked, and repeated scientific studies in the U.S. and abroad have found no evidence that vaccines can cause autism. Research has also discredited concerns that children get too many vaccines at once.

Vaccines have been proven to be safe and effective in laboratory testing and in real world use in hundreds of millions of people over decades. The World Health Organization credits childhood vaccines with preventing as many as 5 million deaths a year.

While no medical intervention is risk-free, doctors and researchers have proven that risks from disease are generally far greater than the risks from vaccines.

Shanahan was married to Google co-founder Sergey Brin from 2018 to 2023, and they have a young daughter. She was raised in the San Francisco Bay Area, where Kennedy made his announcement.

Before the announcement, Kennedy's campaign manager and daughter-in-law, Amaryllis Fox Kennedy, praised Shanahan's work on behalf of "honest governance, racial equity, regenerative agriculture and children's and maternal health." She said the work "reflects many of our country's most urgent needs."

Kennedy, who said in an interview Monday with "The State of California" on KCBS radio that his VP search placed a priority on "somebody who could represent young people," said Tuesday that Shanahan — who he said, like him, has "left the Democratic Party" — also shares his concerns about government overreach and his distrust in major political parties' abilities to make lasting change.

"She'll tell you that she now understands at the defense agencies work for the military industrial complex, that health agencies work for big pharma and the USDA works for big ag and the processed food cartels," Kennedy said at his Oakland rally. "The EPA is in cahoots with the polluters, that the scientists can be mercenaries, that government officials sometimes act as censors, and that the Fed works for Wall Street and allows millionaire bankers to prey upon on Main Street and the American worker."

Kennedy also said that, in part, Shanahan's heritage played at least some role in his selection of her.

"I wanted someone who would honor the traditions our nation, as a nation of immigrants, but who also understands that to be a nation, we need to secure borders," he said.

Kennedy had previously signaled interest in picking a celebrity or a household name such as NFL quarterback Aaron Rodgers, "Dirty Jobs" star Mike Rowe or former Minnesota Gov. Jesse Ventura, who was a wrestler and actor.

According to campaign finance records, Shanahan has long donated to Democratic candidates, including giving the maximum amount allowed to Kennedy when he was still pursuing that party's nomination before switching to an independent bid in October.

It was unclear if Shanahan would use her own money on the campaign, but she has already opened her wallet to back Kennedy.

She was a driving force and the primary donor behind a Super Bowl ad produced by a pro-Kennedy super PAC, American Values 2024, for which she contributed \$4 million. In response to criticism following the ad's release, the super PAC said its "idea, funding, and execution came primarily" from Shanahan.

The super PAC can accept unlimited funds but is legally barred from coordinating with Kennedy's team.

But as a candidate for vice president, Shanahan can give unlimited sums to the campaign directly. That's potentially a huge boost for Kennedy's expensive push to get on the ballot in all 50 states, an endeavor he has said will cost \$15 million and require collecting more than 1 million signatures.

Texas AG Ken Paxton reaches deal to end securities fraud charges after 9 years

By JUAN A. LOZANO Associated Press

HOUSTON (AP) — Texas Attorney General Ken Paxton on Tuesday agreed to pay nearly \$300,000 in restitution under a deal to end criminal securities fraud charges that have shadowed the Republican for nearly a decade.

The announcement by special prosecutors in a Houston courtroom came less than three weeks before Paxton was set to stand trial on felony charges that could have led to a prison sentence. It was the closest Paxton — who was indicted in 2015 — has ever come to trial over accusations that he duped investors in a tech startup near Dallas.

Under the 18-month agreement, the special prosecutors would drop three felony counts against Paxton as long as he pays full restitution to his victims, and completes 100 hours of community service and 15 hours of legal ethics education. A former special prosecutor said the chance of a conviction was going to be "50-50."

Paxton said little during the hearing, and he avoided reporters by leaving the court through a back door.

But in a statement released later Tuesday, Paxton — one of the nation's most prominent state attorney generals, who just six months earlier was acquitted of corruption charges in an impeachment trial in the Texas Senate — remained defiant.

"There will never be a conviction in this case nor am I guilty," said Paxton, while thanking his family and supporters "for sticking by my side." The agreement lets Paxton remain in his elected position and doesn't affect his law license.

Dan Cogdell, a Paxton's attorney, said prosecutors would never have been able to prove their case at trial, but he conceded that it was cheaper for Paxton to accept the agreement.

"Number one, the economics are actually in his favor for not going to trial. And number two, it's a guaranteed dismissal at the end of the day," Cogdell told reporters.

Houston attorney Brian Wice, who was one of the special prosecutors, described the deal as a victory that requires Paxton to repay investors, including Byron Cook, a former GOP lawmaker who served with Paxton in the Texas Legislature, and the estate of Joel Hochberg, a South Florida businessman who died last year.

Wice, who previously indicated that he would consider a pre-trial deal a "slap on the wrist," said he and fellow prosecutor Jed Silverman reevaluated their chance of success based on evidence and witnesses.

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"Our primary duty is to do justice, not to convict. So, the question isn't whether or not who won, but was justice served? And I think the answer to that is unmistakably yes," Wice said.

Kent Schaffer, who worked as a special prosecutor on the case until February and had tried to broker a similar settlement, said insufficient resources and antagonistic witnesses could have hindered the prosecutors' case.

"I didn't think we had a bad case, but it's 50-50. It could go either way," said Schaffer, a Houston-based criminal defense attorney.

The Cook and Hochberg families said in a statement they are "grateful that they will receive restitution in full."

Wice acknowledged the long arc of the case that shuffled between four different judges over the years, ping-ponged between courtrooms in Dallas and Houston, and was slowed by the aftermath of Hurricane Harvey in 2017.

The resolution of the securities fraud case furthers a dramatic reversal of political fortune for Paxton, who just a year ago appeared imperiled by the criminal case and the threat of being removed from office after his top aides reported him to the FBI.

But Paxton has emerged emboldened. He waged war against dozens of GOP lawmakers who were part of the 2023 effort to impeach him, with his biggest target being state House Speaker Dade Phelan, who was forced into a May 28 runoff. He has also not ruled out a primary challenge to Republican Sen. John Cornyn in 2026.

Paxton still faces legal troubles, however. A federal investigation has been probing some of the same charges presented in his impeachment and former aides who reported Paxton to the FBI are trying to make him testify in a whistleblower civil lawsuit.

The securities fraud case has hung over Paxton nearly his entire time in statewide office. Yet the 61-year-old has shown political resilience time and again, winning over conservative activists, and importantly within the GOP, former President Donald Trump.

Paxton had been accused of defrauding investors in a Dallas-area tech company called Servery by not disclosing that he was being paid by the company to recruit them. He was charged with two counts of securities fraud and one count of not being registered as an investment adviser.

James Spindler, a professor of business and law at the University of Texas at Austin, said it was surprising that Paxton even faced a felony prosecution. He described one of the charges — failing to register as an investment adviser — as a technical violation and said most similar cases are settled as civil lawsuits.

Legal experts have said over the years that the longer the case drags on, the harder it would be for both sides.

Paxton was also charged in a federal civil complaint filed by the U.S. Securities and Exchange Commission over his work with Servery. But a federal judge in March 2017 dismissed the complaint against Paxton. The person who recruited Paxton to work with Servery, ex-company CEO William Mapp, was found liable by a jury for misleading investors and ordered to pay a civil penalty of \$22,500. Mapp lost his job with Servery and later had to work as an Uber driver to make ends meet, according to court documents.

The fraud allegations were among the original 20 articles of impeachment but were set aside during the impeachment trial in the Texas Senate last year.

Paxton's political opponents, most notably Republicans, had used the fraud charges against him in elections. But Paxton has twice been reelected as attorney general since his indictment, most recently in 2022.

Judge issues gag order barring Donald Trump from commenting on witnesses, others in hush money case

By MICHAEL R. SISAK Associated Press

NEW YORK (AP) — A New York judge Tuesday issued a gag order barring Donald Trump from commenting publicly about witnesses, prosecutors, court staff and jurors in his upcoming hush-money criminal trial, citing the former president's history of "threatening, inflammatory, denigrating" remarks about people

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involved in his legal cases.

Judge Juan M. Merchan's decision, echoing a gag order in Trump's Washington, D.C., election interference criminal case, came a day after he rejected the defense's push to delay the Manhattan trial until summer and ordered it to begin April 15. If the date holds, it will be the first criminal trial of a former president.

"Given that the eve of trial is upon us, it is without question that the imminency of the risk of harm is now paramount," Merchan wrote in a four-page decision granting the prosecution's request for what it deemed a "narrowly tailored" gag order.

The judge said the presumptive Republican presidential nominee's statements have induced fear and necessitated added security measures to protect his targets and investigate threats.

Trump's lawyers fought a gag order, warning it would amount to unconstitutional and unlawful prior restraint on his free speech rights. Merchan, who had long resisted imposing a gag order, said his obligation to ensuring the integrity of the trial outweighed First Amendment concerns.

"President Trump's political opponents have, and will continue to, attack him based on this case," Trump lawyers Todd Blanche and Susan Necheles said in a recent court filing. "The voters have the right to listen to President Trump's unfettered responses to those attacks — not just one side of that debate."

The gag order bars Trump from either making or directing other people to make public statements on his behalf about potential witnesses and jurors in the hush-money trial. It also prohibits any statements meant to interfere with or harass the court's staff, prosecution team or their families.

It does not bar comments about Merchan, whom Trump has referred to after his arraignment last year as "a Trump-hating judge" with a family full of "Trump haters," or Manhattan District Attorney Alvin Bragg, an elected Democrat. But it puts Trump on notice that attacks on key figures in the case, like his former lawyer-turned-nemesis Michael Cohen or porn star Stormy Daniels, won't be tolerated.

A violation could result in Trump being held in contempt of court, fined or even jailed.

"I want to thank Judge Merchan for imposing the gag order as I have been under relentless assault from Donald's MAGA supporters," said Cohen, a key prosecution witness against Trump. "Nevertheless, knowing Donald as well as I do, he will seek to defy the gag order by employing others within his circle to do his bidding, regardless of consequence."

Blanche declined to comment. Bragg's office also declined to comment. A message seeking comment was left for Trump's presidential campaign.

The gag order adds to existing restrictions that prohibit Trump from using evidence in the case to attack witnesses.

Trump's hush-money case centers on allegations that he falsely logged payments to Cohen, then his personal lawyer, as legal fees in his company's books when they were for his work during the 2016 campaign covering up negative stories about Trump. That included \$130,000 he had paid Daniels on Trump's behalf so she wouldn't publicize her claim of a sexual encounter with him years earlier.

Trump pleaded not guilty last April to 34 counts of falsifying business records, a felony punishable by up to four years in prison, though there is no guarantee that a conviction would result in jail time. He denies having sex with Daniels and his lawyers have said that the payments to Cohen were legitimate legal expenses, not part of any coverup.

At his arraignment, Merchan admonished Trump not to make statements that could incite violence or jeopardize safety, but stopped short of muzzling him. At a subsequent hearing, Merchan noted Trump's "special" status as a former president and current candidate and said, "I'm bending over backwards and straining to make sure that he is given every opportunity possible to advance his candidacy and to be able to speak in furtherance of his candidacy."

As jury selection nears, Merchan has been increasingly wary of Trump's rhetoric disrupting the historic trial. Earlier this month, Merchan ruled to keep the names of jurors from the public. Trump will have access to them, but he risks forfeiting access if he discloses the names publicly or engages in harassing or disruptive conduct that threatens the safety or integrity of jurors, the judge said.

Now, with the gag order, Merchan is declaring scores of people involved in the case off-limits for Trump's social media venom, courthouse diatribes and campaign rallies. Trump's grousing to TV cameras as he

entered and exited the courtroom became ritual during his New York civil fraud trial last year.

After leaving Monday's hearing where Merchan set the trial date, Trump tore into prosecutor Matthew Colangelo at a press conference, referring to the ex-Justice Department official as a "radical left from DOJ" sent to run the Trump case "by Biden and his thugs." The judge cited those remarks in his ruling.

Trump has repeatedly lashed out about the hush-money case. He warned on social media of "potential death & destruction" before his indictment last year and posting a photo on social media of himself holding a baseball bat next to a picture of Bragg. He has referred to Cohen as a "convicted felon, disbarred lawyer, with zero credibility" and has used a mocking nickname to describe Daniels.

Merchan is just the latest judge to put guardrails around Trump.

A federal appeals court panel in December largely upheld Trump's gag order in his Washington, D.C., election interference case but narrowed it by freeing him to criticize special counsel Jack Smith, who brought the case. The New York gag order echoed that ruling by excluding Bragg.

At the fraud trial, Trump was fined \$15,000 for twice violating a gag order imposed after he made a disparaging social media post about the judge's chief law clerk.

In January, a federal judge threatened Trump with expulsion from court in a civil trial on writer E. Jean Carroll's defamation claims against him after he was heard saying "it is a witch hunt" and "it really is a con job."

Russia persists in blaming Ukraine for concert attack despite its denial and Islamic State's claim

MOSCOW (AP) — Russian officials persisted Tuesday in saying Ukraine and the West had a role in last week's deadly Moscow concert hall attack despite vehement denials of involvement by Kyiv and a claim of responsibility by an affiliate of the Islamic State group.

Without offering any evidence, Alexander Bortnikov, head of the Federal Security Service, or FSB, followed similar allegations by President Vladimir Putin, who linked the attack to Ukraine even as he acknowledged that the suspects who were arrested were "radical Islamists."

The IS affiliate claimed it carried out the attack, and U.S. intelligence said it had information confirming the group was responsible. French President Emmanuel Macron said France also has intelligence pointing to "an IS entity" as responsible for the attack.

But despite the signs pointing to IS, Putin insisted on alleged Ukrainian involvement — something that President Volodymyr Zelenskyy rejected, accusing the Kremlin leader of trying to drum up fervor as his forces fight in Ukraine.

Bortnikov alleged that Western spy agencies also could have been involved in the deadliest terror attack on Russian soil in two decades, even as he acknowledged receiving a U.S. tip about the attack.

"We believe that radical Islamists prepared the action, while Western special services have assisted it and Ukrainian special services had a direct part in it," Bortnikov said without giving details.

He repeated Putin's claim that the four gunmen were trying to escape to Ukraine when they were arrested, casting it as a proof of alleged involvement by Kyiv.

But that assertion was undercut slightly by Belarus' authoritarian President Alexander Lukashenko, who said Tuesday the suspects were headed for Ukraine because they feared tight controls on the Belarus border.

Russia is still reeling from the attack Friday in which gunmen killed 139 people in the Crocus City Hall, a concert venue on the outskirts of Moscow. Health officials said about 90 people remain hospitalized, with 22 of them, including two children, in grave condition.

The four men accused of carrying out the attack appeared in a Moscow court on Sunday on terrorism charges and showed signs of severe beatings. One appeared to be barely conscious during the hearing.

The men are citizens of Tajikistan, authorities said, and were identified as Dalerdzhon Mirzoyev, 32; Saidakrami Rachabalizoda, 30; Shamsidin Fariduni, 25; and Mukhammadsobir Faizov, 19. They were charged with committing a terrorist attack resulting in death, which carries a maximum sentence of life imprisonment.

A senior Turkish security official confirmed Tuesday that two of them spent a "short amount of time" in Turkey before traveling together to Russia on March 2.

One of the suspects, Fariduni, entered Turkey on Feb. 20, checked into a hotel in Istanbul's Fatih district the next day, and checked out Feb. 27, the official said. The other, Rachabalizoda, checked into a hotel in the same district on Jan. 5, checking out on Jan. 21.

The official said Turkish authorities believe the two "became radicalized in Russia" because they were not in Turkey for long. There was no warrant for their arrest so they were allowed to travel freely between Russia and Turkey, the official said, speaking on condition of anonymity because he was not authorized to make public statements.

The Islamic State group, which lost much of its ground after Russia's military action in Syria, has long targeted Russia. In October 2015, a bomb planted by IS downed a Russian jetliner over the Sinai desert, killing all 224 people aboard, most of them Russian vacationers returning from Egypt.

The group, which operates mainly in Syria and Iraq but also in Afghanistan and Africa, also has claimed several attacks in Russia's volatile Caucasus and other regions in the past years. It recruited fighters from Russia and other parts of the former Soviet Union.

On Monday, Putin warned that more attacks could follow, alleging possible Western involvement. He didn't mention the warning about a possible imminent terrorist attack that the U.S. shared confidentially with Moscow two weeks before the raid.

Three days before the attack, Putin denounced the U.S. Embassy's March 7 notice urging Americans to avoid crowds in Moscow, including concerts, calling it an attempt to frighten Russians and "blackmail" the Kremlin ahead of the presidential election.

Bortnikov said Russia was thankful for the warning but described it as very general.

"The information about preparations for terror attacks in large gatherings of people was of a general nature," he said. "Of course, we reacted to that information and took corresponding measures to prevent such incidents."

He added that the FSB acted on the tip, targeting a group of suspects he didn't identify but which eventually proved false.

"We are thankful, of course, but we would like to see more specifics," Bortnikov said.

5 takeaways from the abortion pill case before the U.S. Supreme Court

By MATTHEW PERRONE, AMANDA SEITZ and CHRISTINE FERNANDO Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — U.S. Supreme Court justices on Tuesday did not appear ready to limit access to the abortion pill mifepristone, in a case that could have far-reaching implications for millions of American women and for scores of drugs regulated by the Food and Drug Administration.

It's the first abortion-related case the court has taken since a majority of the current justices struck down the constitutional right to abortion in 2022.

A group of anti-abortion doctors had asked the court to restrict access to mifepristone and to limit when in a pregnancy it could be used.

Key moments from the arguments:

ABORTION PILL SAFETY UNDER MICROSCOPE

The FDA approved mifepristone in 2000 as a safe and effective way to end early pregnancies. Last year the pill was used in more than six in 10 of the abortions in the U.S.

The central argument of the conservative group challenging mifepristone is that the Food and Drug Administration overlooked serious problems with the drug when it eased restrictions on the drug, including making it available via mail in 2021.

Erin Hawley, who represented the doctors suing the agency, argued the FDA "failed to consider or explain ... its wholesale removal of safeguards" on the pill.

But the FDA has long argued its decision to drop in-person appointments to get mifepristone, among

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other requirements, came after 20 years of monitoring its safety. In that period the agency reviewed dozens of studies in thousands of women in which serious problems — including hospitalization — occurred less than 0.3% of the time.

Hawley pointed out that FDA's own prescribing label mentions that 2.9% to 4.6% of women taking the drug go to the emergency room. But Solicitor General Elizabeth Prelogar pointed to studies showing that half of women who go to the emergency room don't get any treatment at all.

"Many women might go because they're experiencing heavy bleeding, which mimics a miscarriage, and they might just need to know whether or not they're having a complication," Prelogar said.

Because of the highly technical nature of reviewing drug data and research, courts have long deferred to FDA's scientific judgements on safety and effectiveness.

Justice Ketanji Brown Jackson pressed Hawley on the legal basis for second-guessing the agency's regulators.

"So what deference do we owe them at all with respect to their assessment that these studies establish what it is that they say they do about safety and efficacy?"

HOW FAR TO GO

Hawley ran into questions as she argued that a nationwide rule curtailing mifepristone use was needed.

She was repeatedly interrupted by Justice Neil Gorsuch, who voiced objections to such sweeping injunctions.

The case "seems like a prime example of turning what could be a small lawsuit into a nationwide legislative assembly on an FDA rule or any other federal government action," said Gorsuch.

Normally when a court issues an injunction about a government policy it only applies to the individuals or groups in the case. But in recent years a growing number of justices on lower courts have issued "universal injunctions," blocking federal regulations nationwide.

Gorsuch noted that there have been roughly 60 such rulings in the last four years.

Chief Justice John Roberts also seemed skeptical that a ruling reversing the FDA's scientific judgments was necessary.

"Why can't the court specify that this relief runs to precisely the parties before the court as opposed to looking to the agency in general and saying, 'Agency, you can't do this anywhere?'"

RIGHT TO SUE

The Biden administration argued that the plaintiffs — a group called the Alliance for Hippocratic Medicine — didn't have the right to challenge the FDA's actions on mifepristone.

The doctors who brought the suit argued that they might have to treat emergency room patients who experience serious complications after taking the drug.

But Prelogar told the court that the doctors don't have to prescribe mifepristone and they can abstain from treating patients who have taken the pill if they oppose abortion.

"They don't prescribe mifepristone," Prelogar said. "They don't take mifepristone, obviously. The FDA is not requiring them to do or refrain from doing anything. They aren't required to treat women who take mifepristone."

Justice Samuel Alito, however, repeatedly pressed the government on who did have the right to sue over FDA's decisions.

"Is there anybody who can sue and get a judicial ruling on whether what FDA did was lawful?" Alito, who wrote the 2022 ruling that overturned *Roe v. Wade*, asked.

REAL-LIFE EXAMPLES, PLEASE

Several justices pressed Hawley to provide real-life examples of doctors who oppose abortion being forced to treat patients who had suffered from abortion pill complications.

They also took issue with how many hypothetical problems Hawley raised in her argument against the FDA's loosening of abortion pill restrictions.

"I don't want to hypothesize," Jackson said to Hawley, asking her to provide an example of a doctor who was unable to object to providing an abortion.

At one point, Justice Amy Coney Barrett also questioned an example one of the doctors provided of a

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colleague who had to perform a "dilation and curettage" procedure on a patient with complications. Barrett pointed out that those procedures are not just performed in cases of abortions but for miscarriages as well.

Some of the justices also pointed out that doctors are already protected from performing abortions when they don't want to by voicing conscience objection.

Justice Brett Kavanaugh raised that point early on: "Under federal law, no doctors can be forced against their consciences to perform or assist in an abortion, correct?"

MORE DRUGS AT RISK

For more than a century, the FDA has had sole authority over assessing the safety of drugs and approving their sale in the U.S.

The agency first approved mifepristone in 2000 following a four-year review, including detailed safety studies submitted by the French manufacturer. In 2016, FDA loosened restrictions on the drug to allow it to be prescribed up to 10 weeks of pregnancy and allowed nurses and other medical professionals to prescribe it. In 2021, the agency said the drug could be sent through the mail, doing away with a long-standing requirement that women to pick the drug up in person.

Jessica Ellsworth, an attorney representing the New York-based Danco Laboratories, which makes mifepristone, asked the justices to consider how the case could upend the FDA's decades-old system for regulating drugs, vaccines and other life-saving medicines.

"I think this court should think hard about the mischief it would invite if it allowed agencies to start taking action based on statutory responsibilities that Congress has assigned to other agencies," she said.

U.S. District Judge Matthew Kacsmaryk's decision last year marked the first time a court had issued a decision to revoke approval of a drug FDA had deemed safe. An open letter signed by nearly 300 biotech and pharmaceutical company leaders last year slammed the ruling as undermining Congress' delegated authority to the FDA to approve and regulate drugs. If justices can unilaterally overturn drug approvals, they said "any medicine is at risk."

Trump's social media company gains in its first day of trading on Nasdaq

NEW YORK (AP) — Shares of Donald Trump's social media company rose about 16% in the first day of trading on the Nasdaq, boosting the value of Trump's large stake in the company as well as the smaller holdings of fans who purchased shares as a show of support for the former president.

Trump Media & Technology Group Corp. merged Monday with a blank-check company called Digital World Acquisition Corp. Trump Media, which runs the social media platform Truth Social, has now taken Digital World's place on the Nasdaq stock exchange.

Shares closed at \$57.99, up 16.1%, giving the company a market value of \$7.85 billion. At one point the stock was up about 59%. Trump holds a nearly 60% ownership stake in the company, now worth about \$4.6 billion.

Many of those investing in Trump Media are small-time investors either trying to support Trump or aiming to cash in on the mania, instead of big institutional and professional investors. Those shareholders helped the stock of Digital World more than double this year in anticipation of the merger going through.

Truth Social launched in February 2022, one year after Trump was banned from major social platforms including Facebook and X, formerly Twitter, following the Jan. 6 insurrection at the U.S. Capitol. He's since been reinstated to both but has stuck with Truth Social.

On Truth Social Tuesday, users were posting about being shareholders or seeking tips on how to buy shares.

One user urged conservatives to "get behind the DJT stock and sent it over \$100 per share" to "drive the liberals insane!" Another declared: "Get yourself a piece of #DJT stock if your a true MAGA supporter."

A day earlier, Trump Media CEO Devin Nunes, a former House Republican, said, "As a public company, we will passionately pursue our vision to build a movement to reclaim the Internet from Big Tech censors."

Despite the enthusiasm, investors could experience a bumpy ride. For one, they're betting on a company with uncertain prospects of turning a profit. Trump Media lost \$49 million in the first nine months of last

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year, when it brought in just \$3.4 million in revenue and had to pay \$37.7 million in interest expenses.

In a recent regulatory filing, the company cited the high rate of failure for new social media platforms, as well as its expectation that its operations will lose “for the foreseeable future” as risks for investors.

Research firm Similarweb estimates that Truth Social had roughly 5 million active mobile and web users in February. That’s far below TikTok’s more than 2 billion and Facebook’s 3 billion — but still higher than other “alt-tech” rivals like Parler.

However, Trump Media has said it doesn’t keep track of some numbers that rivals use as key measures of their performance, such as average revenue per user or active user accounts. It says it wants to focus on the long-term instead of “short-term decision-making.”

For that long term, though, skeptics see struggles ahead for a company that’s estimated to have far fewer users than rivals in a business where gaining a critical mass is key.

“I think there is a possibility of, sooner or later, the stock price falling by 95%,” said Jay Ritter, a professor and expert on initial public offerings of stock at the University of Florida’s Warrington College of Business.

Brian Dunn, director of the Institute for Compensation Studies at Cornell University, compared the fervor for Trump Media shares to the meme stock craze that boosted shares of companies such as GameStop and AMC Entertainment to exorbitant heights in 2021.

“Like any meme stock or fad, as long as there’s a greater fool to buy you out for what you paid for it, than you can continue to prosper,” Dunn said, warning that small investors “could end up holding the bag when the music stops.”

On Monday, Trump told reporters that “Truth Social is doing very well. It’s hot as a pistol and doing great.” On Tuesday, he posted “I LOVE TRUTH SOCIAL, I LOVE THE TRUTH!” on the platform.

The company, which is based in Florida, said in a recent regulatory filing that it “is highly dependent on the popularity and presence of President Trump.” Trump Media has acknowledged that there are risks associated with Trump’s outsized influence.

If the former president were to limit or discontinue his relationship with the company for any reason, including due to his campaign to regain the presidency, the company “would be significantly disadvantaged,” it said in a filing ahead of the merger with Digital World.

Acknowledging Trump’s involvement in numerous legal proceedings, the company noted that “an adverse outcome in one or more” of the cases could negatively affect Trump Media and Truth Social.

Another risk, the company said, was that as a controlling stockholder, Trump would be entitled to vote his shares in his own interest, which may not always be in the interests of all the shareholders generally.

NFL owners approve a radical overhaul to kickoff rules, adopting setup used in XFL

By ROB MAADDI AP Pro Football Writer

ORLANDO, Fla. (AP) — Kickoff returns are returning to the NFL.

Team owners on Tuesday approved a new rule that will take what essentially had become “a dead play” and make it an integral part of the game again.

“We feel this is a great day for the NFL,” said Saints special teams coordinator Darren Rizzi, who was heavily involved in creating the framework for the new hybrid kickoff.

The major overhaul to special teams — which has been in the works for years — takes elements of the kickoff rules used in the XFL and tweaks them for use in the NFL beginning in 2024. The rule will be in play for one season on a trial basis and then be subject to renewal in 2025.

NFL Competition Committee chairman Rich McKay said the new rule passed by a 29-3 to vote.

“There was a little fear of the unknown,” McKay said. “I think the optics are definitely the most drastic (rule change) we’ve seen. The thing that gives us all the comfort is we have the tape, we’ve seen it. We can show you the plays and you can see how this can play out.”

McKay said there was urgency to vote on this rule before the draft because it could impact the way

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teams structure rosters. There were 1,970 touchbacks on kickoffs last season that now could be returns. There were 92 fair catches last season that are no longer allowed. Any ball caught in the field of play must be returned.

"The kickoff returners' value is gonna skyrocket," Cowboys special teams coach John Fassel said.

NFL Commissioner Roger Goodell said he anticipates the league may have to tinker with the rule in the future but considers this "a big improvement."

"I think it will bring the play back into a relevant play, an important play, an exciting play and I think we can do it where the injury rate will drop," Goodell said.

For a standard kickoff, the ball would be kicked from the 35-yard line with the 10 kick coverage players lined up at the opposing 40, with five on each side of the field.

The return team would have at least nine blockers lined up in the "set up zone" between the 30- and 35-yard line, with at least seven of those players touching the 35. There would be up to two returners allowed inside the 20.

Only the kicker and two returners would be allowed to move until the ball hits the ground or was touched by a returner inside the 20.

Any kick that reaches the end zone in the air can be returned, or the receiving team can opt for a touchback and possession at the 30. Any kick that reaches the end zone in the air and goes out of bounds or out of the end zone also would result in a touchback at the 30.

If a ball hits a returner or the ground before the end zone and goes into the end zone, a touchback would be at the 20 or the play could be returned.

"It's a drastic kind of move that's going to be way different," said Ravens coach John Harbaugh, a former special teams coordinator. "Is that the right move at this time? I don't know. I think that's to be determined."

Under current rules, any touchback — or if a returner calls for a fair catch in the field of play — results in the receiving team getting the ball at its 25.

The proposal needed 24 of 32 votes to pass.

"I'm all for it," Chiefs coach Andy Reid said. "You have 2,000 dead plays. Nobody wants to see that. It'll add excitement and newness."

In other rule changes, the owners voted to make two tweaks to instant replay. Replay can now be used to review whether the game clock expired before the snap and also can correct an obvious error when a passer was ruled down by contact or out of bounds before throwing the ball.

Previously, those plays had been ruled dead at the spot but now can be changed with clear evidence. If the pass is caught or intercepted, it would be down at that spot with no advancement. If the pass was incomplete, that would stand.

There were several other changes, including allowing teams in the playoffs to have unlimited returns from injured reserve if they have missed four games. Teams also can place up to two players on IR, the physically unable to perform list or non-football injury list before cutting the roster to 53 players and have them still be eligible to return.

Owners also voted to move the trade deadline back one week to the Tuesday following the end of Week 9 and will allow a team to elevate a "bona fide" quarterback from the practice squad an unlimited amount of times to be the emergency third quarterback.

SILVER AND BRADY

Tom Brady's bid to purchase a share of the Las Vegas Raiders remains on hold.

Owners didn't take a vote on whether to approve Brady's potential ownership stake during this week's league meetings. There's been concern that Raiders owner Mark Davis is discounting the price for Brady.

"I wouldn't say it's a delay," Goodell said. "We go through a thorough process. ... I think it's making progress."

With its soldiers mired in Gaza, Israel fights a battle at home over drafting the ultra-Orthodox

By MELANIE LIDMAN Associated Press

JERUSALEM (AP) — As Israel battles a prolonged war in Gaza, broad exemptions from mandatory military service for ultra-Orthodox men have reopened a deep divide in the country and rattled the government coalition, with Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's fellow War Cabinet members staunchly opposed to his proposed new conscription law.

By the end of the month, Israel's government must present legislation aimed at increasing recruitment among the religious community. As the deadline approaches, public discourse has grown increasingly toxic — a departure from demonstrations of unity early in the war.

Netanyahu's government so far has survived the public angst sparked by Hamas' Oct. 7 attack that ignited the war, but the draft issue has put him in a bind. The collapse of the three-member War Cabinet would undermine the country's stability at a sensitive time in the fighting. But a loss of the ultra-Orthodox parties would bring down his broader governing coalition and plunge the country into new elections as he and his Likud party are badly trailing in opinion polls.

"Politically, this is one of the most concrete threats to the government," said Gilad Malach, an expert on the ultra-Orthodox at the Israel Democracy Institute, a Jerusalem think tank.

Most Jewish men are required to serve nearly three years followed by years of reserve duty. Jewish women serve two mandatory years. But the politically powerful ultra-Orthodox, who make up roughly 13% of Israeli society, have traditionally received exemptions if they are studying full-time in religious seminaries. The exemptions — and the government stipends many seminary students receive through age 26 — have infuriated the wider general public.

The Supreme Court has ruled the current system discriminatory and given the government until April 1 to present a bill and until June 30 to pass it.

Yoav Gallant and Benny Gantz — who with Netanyahu comprise the War Cabinet — say the prime minister's proposed law doesn't go far enough toward increasing the number of ultra-Orthodox who will join the army. Critics say some aspects, such as raising the age for exemption, could even depress the numbers.

Gantz, Netanyahu's top political rival, said he'd leave the Cabinet if the enlistment law is weakened or fails to pass by the deadline. Defense Minister Gallant said he'd support a new law only with the support of Gantz and more centrist members of the country's emergency wartime government.

The government is composed of ultra-Orthodox and religious ultranationalist parties who were joined in the early days of the war by a faction led by former military generals, including Gantz. The union was meant as a show of unity in the aftermath of Oct. 7, but the parties differ widely on the issue of conscription.

After Hamas' attack, Israel activated 360,000 reservists, its largest mobilization since the 1973 Mideast war. Many have since been released but will be expected to return to active duty in coming months. The increased reserve duty and talk of lengthening mandatory service have deepened public anger.

Among Israel's Jewish majority, mandatory military service is largely seen as a melting pot and rite of passage. The ultra-Orthodox say that integrating into the army will threaten their generations-old way of life and that their devout lifestyle and dedication to upholding the Jewish commandments protect Israel as much as a strong army.

"We prefer dying to serving in the Israeli army," said Yona Kruskal, 42, a father of 11 and full-time seminary student, as he blocked traffic in Jerusalem with about 200 others last week in one of the frequent protests against the conscription law. "There's no way you can force us to go to the army, because we are hell-bent that the army and religion contradict one another."

As the ultra-Orthodox scuffled with police at the protest, other Israelis berated them, chanting "Shame! Shame!"

"My friends are sitting in Gaza while you're here, sitting on the ground," one man yelled. A woman screamed at the protesters that her son was serving in Gaza to protect them.

Oren Shvill, a founder of Brothers in Arms, a protest group representing reserve soldiers who oppose

Netanyahu, said the ultra-Orthodox are benefitting from the army's protection without participating. "There's one law for everyone, and it should be enforced equally," he said.

Economists say the system is unsustainable. With its high birthrate, the ultra-Orthodox community is the fastest-growing segment of the population, at about 4% annually. Each year, roughly 13,000 ultra-Orthodox males reach the conscription age of 18, but less than 10% enlist, according to the Israeli parliament's State Control Committee, which recently held a hearing on the matter.

"One of the things that in the past was debatable and now is much more clear is that we need more soldiers," said Yoaz Hendel, a former Netanyahu aide and Cabinet minister who just finished four months of reserve duty as commander of a special forces unit. He said the burden of service should be shared equally among all sectors of the population.

The shock of the Oct. 7 attack appeared to ignite some enthusiasm among the ultra-Orthodox to serve, but no large enlistment materialized, according to Israeli media. The army declined to comment on the ultra-Orthodox enlistment rate.

The debate has long divided Israel, and a string of court decisions have repeatedly found the system unjust. But Israeli leaders, under pressure from ultra-Orthodox parties, have repeatedly stalled. It remains unclear whether Netanyahu will be able to do so again.

The rift over exemptions was exacerbated last year when Netanyahu's government pressed ahead with an overhaul of the legal system supported by ultra-Orthodox governing partners who sought to override court decisions on conscription. The government froze the overhaul after the war broke out.

The army has attempted to accommodate the ultra-Orthodox by creating separate units that allow them to maintain religious practices, including minimizing interaction with women.

Ephraim Luff, 65, a full-time seminary student in the ultra-Orthodox city of Bnei Brak, dismissed such efforts, saying the men who enlist in these units are not "real Haredim," as the ultra-Orthodox are known in Hebrew.

"The army is the final stage of Israeli education to make people into secular Israelis and to disconnect them from their Jewish heritage," said Luff, who described how one of his eight children "strayed from the path" of full-time learning and served in the army as a truck driver for a year and a half.

One of the country's two chief rabbis, Yitzhak Yosef, said this month that the ultra-Orthodox "will all move abroad" if forced to enlist. The comment drew both condemnation, for encouraging Israelis to leave during a national crisis, and ridicule, because many secular Israelis would have no problem with the ultra-Orthodox leaving en masse, said the Israel Democracy Institute's Malach.

On the contrary, the ultra-Orthodox leadership's unwillingness to compromise even as other parts of Israeli society make significant sacrifices has alienated more of the public, Malach said.

"In this government, I don't see a real opportunity for change," he said. "But if there are elections and there is a coalition without haredim or with weakened haredim, there could be a change."

Black coaches are rare in soccer. Is this because of a lack of diversity in the boardroom?

By JAMES ROBSON AP Soccer Writer

MANCHESTER, England (AP) — Ricky Hill packed his bags and prepared to uproot his life again. Next stop: Chicago. The former England international soccer player is accustomed to making sacrifices and traveling far to build his coaching career, an effort he says has been stymied because he is Black.

"It is something that I hate to do because home is where the heart is," Hill said of leaving behind his wife of 38 years and his 99-year-old mother to chase a rare management opportunity.

Racism has long permeated the world's most popular sport, with players subjected to racist chants and taunts online. While soccer governing bodies such as FIFA and UEFA have taken steps to combat the abuse of players, the lack of diversity in the upper ranks at major clubs remains an unsolved problem.

"It's two fights for equality," Hill told The Associated Press.

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Hill — who as a teenager in the 1970s was among the first generation of Black players in England — says he routinely faced racist abuse from fans when he played for Luton Town.

“You would hear songs about you, see people spitting, that kind of vitriolic behavior.”

That racism, he says, has continued to hold him back in the pursuit of his top-flight coaching dream.

“The difficulty we’ve had as racially diverse individuals and Black individuals, specifically, is there is no way of showing your worth as a coach or manager without actually having the opportunity to do so,” he said.

The issue needs to be considered “through a Black lens,” Delroy Corinaldi, co-founder of the British-based advocacy group Black Footballers Partnership, told The AP.

A BFP report in 2022 found that while some 43% of players in England’s Premier League are Black, only 4% land coaching jobs in English professional soccer. There are currently only two Black managers in the Premier League.

WIDER PROBLEM

Under-representation is not just an English problem. There are only two Black head coaches in France’s Ligue 1, one in Italy’s Serie A, and none in the top divisions of Spain and Germany.

Wilfried Nancy, who is French, built his coaching career with Montreal in Canada and he now leads Ohio’s championship-winning Columbus Crew. He is the only Black head coach in MLS.

Nancy is puzzled by the lack of diversity in soccer coaching in Europe and the U.S.

“A lot of people like me, we have a lot of competency, but they don’t have the opportunity for the moment to do it,” he said.

Hill is standing up to racism in the sport. In 2022, he sued MLS and the USL Championship claiming discrimination after repeatedly being overlooked for jobs despite his decorated coaching career with Tampa Bay Rowdies and in Trinidad and Tobago.

WHY IS THIS HAPPENING?

A lack of diversity in boardrooms may be the root of the problem.

The Football Association in England launched a leadership diversity code in 2020, setting hiring targets to address inequality. Yet its most recent report in November said workforce representation still does not reflect the diversity of players. Of last season’s hires, the report said, 9% of senior leaders, 11% of team operations, 16% of coaches and 9% of senior coaches were Black, Asian or of mixed heritage.

FA chief executive Mark Bullingham admits there is “still a huge amount of work to be done.”

Burnley coach Vincent Kompany, who is Black, said this must be addressed to effect real change.

“If you have a boardroom that’s diverse, you can’t brush things under the carpet,” Kompany said.

The Premier League’s Coach Inclusion and Diversity Scheme aims to increase minority representation in coaching. The initiative provides coaches with a bursary and work placements.

Yet the BFP’s latest report found that non-Black former players are 50% more likely than their Black counterparts to progress into management in England, and Black managers or assistants are 41% more likely to be fired.

“They are less likely to get in. Once they get in they are less likely to get promoted. And once they do get promoted they are more likely to get fired,” one of the report’s authors, Stefan Szymanski, a professor of sport management at the University of Michigan, told AP. “I’d like to hear what an explanation of this is, other than racism.”

TOP JOBS

Two of the biggest coaching jobs in soccer will become available at the end of the season. And while it is not yet clear who will fill the positions at Liverpool and Bayern Munich, it’s highly unlikely the successful candidates will be Black.

The standout favorite is Xabi Alonso, who is less than two years into his first job as head coach with Bayer Leverkusen. Alonso, who is white, had a distinguished playing career with Liverpool, Real Madrid and Bayern, and Bayer is on course to win the German title this season.

“You have to be fair. Who’s qualified to do that job?” former Premier League player Troy Deeney told AP. “Part of the argument isn’t to just say, ‘Give Black people, women, whoever you think is marginalized, just

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give them the job.' Who's the Black manager that's doing really well at the moment that deserves that job?"

Ruud Gullit, then one of the most celebrated players in the world, became the Premier League's first Black manager when he was appointed by Chelsea in 1996. Multiple Champions League-winner Clarence Seedorf was hired by Italian giant AC Milan in 2014. He lasted only four months.

But high-profile Black players are more commonly hired as coaches to low-level teams.

Former England internationals Paul Ince and Sol Campbell began their managerial careers with then-fourth division team Macclesfield. Ince's only top-flight job was with Blackburn in 2008. He was fired after less than six months and has not been hired by a Premier League club since.

Meanwhile, Campbell's ex-England teammate, Frank Lampard, who is white, has held three Premier League coaching positions on the back of his one year at second division Derby.

Deeney was hired as head coach of fourth-tier Forest Green Rovers in December, but was fired less than a month later. He remains determined.

"If the reports coming out are suggesting the scale is tipped not in my favor, it doesn't mean I don't play the game. It just means I've got to play the game harder than everybody else," he said.

Hill had a four-month spell as manager of Luton, then in the third tier of English soccer, and has struggled to find work in England ever since. He has just taken a position as executive director of Evolution Soccer in suburban Chicago.

"The industry is such that everyone wants to stay in it and only a certain number of people can," he said. "But, disproportionately, Black people do not manage to stay within the game at a far greater rate than anyone else."

A POSSIBLE SOLUTION

Inspiration could be drawn from the U.S., where the formerly white-dominated NFL implemented rules to try to level the playing field for people of color seeking positions as head coaches, general managers and executives.

The Rooney Rule requires teams to interview at least one person of color for a head coach position, and if any team loses a minority coach or executive to another team, it is awarded compensatory picks in upcoming drafts.

The system has paid off.

In the NFL, four minority head coaches have been hired this year and there's a record nine coaches of color entering the 2024 season.

A similar scheme was adopted by England soccer's lower divisions in 2019, but statistics show diversity remains an issue.

Last week, the government introduced legislation to create an independent regulator in English soccer. Szymanski said this could push clubs to commit to diversity where FA and Premier League incentives have failed.

"I would say voluntary arrangements have shown themselves not to be satisfactory," he said. "You need some kind of regulation to push the clubs to embrace change."

President Joe Biden wins Missouri Democratic primary

COLUMBIA, Mo. (AP) — President Joe Biden has won Missouri's primary, the state Democratic Party announced.

Biden's win was not in doubt; he has already beaten his major competitors. But the primary races are still closely watched by insiders for turnout and signs of protest voters.

Saturday's primary was the Missouri Democratic Party's first party-run presidential contest since a new law took effect in August 2022.

The party says about 20,000 voters participated.

Missouri Republicans opted to hold a caucus this year, which former President Donald Trump won.

Lawmakers have failed to reinstate the state-run primary despite calls to do so by both state Republican and Democratic party leaders.

The irony of Steve Martin's life isn't lost on him

By JAKE COYLE AP Film Writer

NEW YORK (AP) — Steve Martin has long marveled at the many phases of his life. There's his youth as a Disneyland performer, surrounded by vaudeville performers and magicians. A decade as a stand-up before the sudden onset of stadium-sized popularity. An abrupt shift to movies. Later, a new chapter as a banjo player, a father and, a comedy act, once again, with Martin Short.

It's such a confounding string of chapters that Martin has typically only approached his life piecemeal or schizophrenically. He titled an audiobook "So Many Steves." His memoir, "Born Standing Up," covered only his stand-up years. In it, he wrote that it was really a biography "because I am writing about someone I used to know."

"My life has many octopus arms," Martin says, speaking from his New York apartment.

People participate in documentaries for all kinds of reasons. But Martin may be unique in making a film about his life with the instruction of: "See if you can make sense of all THAT." Morgan Neville, the documentary filmmaker of the Fred Rogers film "Won't You Be My Neighbor" and the posthumous Anthony Bourdain portrait "Roadrunner," took up the challenge.

Yet Neville, too, was hesitant about any holistic view of Martin. The resulting film is really two. "STEVE! (martin) a documentary in 2 pieces," premiering Friday on Apple TV+, splits Martin's story in two halves. One depicts Martin's stand-up as it unfolded, with copious contributions from journal entries and old photographs. The other captures Martin's life as it is today — riding electric bikes with Short, practicing the banjo — with reflections on the career that followed.

It's an attempt to synthesize all the Steve Martins, or at least line them up next to each other. The "King Tut" guy with the arrow through his head. The "wild and crazy guy." The "Jerk." The Grammy-winner. The novel writer. And the self-lacerating comic who says in the film: "I guarantee I had no talent. None."

"I'm going to say something very immodest: I have a modesty about my career," Martin says, chuckling. "Just because you do a lot of things doesn't mean they're good. I know that time evaluates things. So there's nothing for me to stand on to evaluate my efforts. But an outsider can make sense of it."

Neville, who joined the video call from his home in Pasadena, California, didn't set out to make two films about Martin. But six months into the process, it crystalized for him as the right structure. Through lines emerged.

"When I look at the things Steve's done in his life — playing banjo, magic, stand-up — these are things that take great effort to master," Neville says. "But in a way, it's the constant working at it. Even seeing Steve pick up a banjo, it's never, 'I nailed it.' It's always: 'I could do that a little better.'"

Looking back hasn't come naturally to Martin. He's long resisted the kind of life-story treatment of a film like "STEVE!" But Martin, 78, grants he's now at that time of life where you can't help it. Even if reliving some things smarts.

"The first part, that's what I really have a hard time watching," Martin says. "When I'm on black-and-white homemade video being so not funny."

Martin grew up in Orange County in awe of Jerry Lewis, Laurel and Hardy and Nichols and May. His first job, as an 11-year-old, was selling guide books at Disneyland. He drifted toward the Main Street Magic Shop. Stage performers like Wally Boag became his idols.

When Martin, after studying philosophy in college and writing for "The Smothers Brothers Comedy Hour," began stand-up, he drew copiously from Boag and others, filtering the showmanship of vaudeville into an avantgarde act, just with balloon animals and an arrow through his head. Donning the persona of, as he says in the film, "a comedian who thinks he's funny but isn't," his routine moved away from punchlines and toward an absurd irony with "free-form laughter."

Martin's act was groundbreaking and, in the 1970s, when most comics were doing political material, it became wildly popular. "He's up there with the most idolized comedians ever," Jerry Seinfeld says in the film. Now, Martin doesn't see much from those years that makes him laugh.

"Then there are these moments that I think of as performance glory, but they last a minute or two min-

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utes. It was all so new. It was exciting because it was new to the audience and to me.”

Martin tends to be hard on himself. In one late scene in “STEVE!” he and Short are going over possible jokes, but most don’t make the cut for Martin.

It’s tempting to assign some of this nature to Martin’s famously critical father, Glenn, a real-estate salesman who had his own unrealized ambitions in show business. At dinner after the premiere of “The Jerk,” he pronounced his son “no Charlie Chaplin.” But Martin disagrees.

“I don’t think so,” says Martin. “It’s good to be hard on yourself. It’s just the way I do it. I just want to go over it and go over it. I realize it’s all in the details. It’s all in the timing.”

That makes Martin think of a joke that he and Short have considered for their act but thus far deemed too esoteric.

“I say, ‘You know, Marty, some comedians say funny things. And some comedians say things funny. And you just say ... things,’” says Martin, laughing. “But there’s a truth in saying funny things and saying things funny. You walk the line. Our lives now are saying funny things and it used to be saying things funny.”

It’s a line, typically exact in its wording, that perfectly represents the irony of Martin’s own life. In 1981, Martin quit stand-up, he thought for good. The act had run its course and he was happy to transition to movies. It wasn’t until decades later, when Martin prepared to tour as a banjo player, that a friend convinced him audiences were going to want a little banter in between songs.

“So I had this terror and I started working on material,” Martin says. “Eventually I became what I grew up with, which is a folk music act with a funny monologist, making funny intros to songs.”

That’s bled into Martin’s unexpected return to stand-up. Martin and Short, friends since the 1986 comedy “Three Amigos!” have become the premier double act of today, starring on the acclaimed Hulu series “Only Murders in the Building” and performing on the road. They cuttily but affectionately volley quip after quip with the finesse of Grand Slam champions.

The irony isn’t lost on Martin. The no-punchline comedian has become a lover of punchlines.

“I’ve morphed into a person who really appreciates the joy of telling jokes,” shrugs Martin. “Marty and I in our show is joke after joke after joke.”

It’s not the only reversal Martin never expected. After spending most of his life not wanting children, Martin and his wife of 17 years, Anne Stringfield, have an 11-year-old daughter. She’s seen only as a cartoon in “STEVE!” to protect her privacy.

Even more confounding for Martin: After a life riddled by anxiety he’s strangely content. Maybe even happy. “Yes, I hate to say it,” Martin says shaking his head.

Martin likes to say he has a “relaxed mind” now. He’s peeled away a lot — competitiveness, people or situations who brought him grief — and has narrowed his life down to things that matter most to him.

“I have this thing that I’ve noticed,” Martin says. “As we age, we either become our best selves or our worst selves. I’ve seen people become their worst selves and I’ve seen people who were tough, difficult people early on become better selves.”

In the film, Martin puts it: “I look back and go, ‘What an odd life.’ My whole life was backwards.”

Ukrainian navy says a third of Russian warships in the Black Sea have been destroyed or disabled

KYIV, Ukraine (AP) — Ukraine has sunk or disabled a third of all Russian warships in the Black Sea in just over two years of war, the navy spokesman said Tuesday, a heavy blow to Moscow’s military capability.

Ukraine’s Navy spokesman Dmytro Pletenchuk told The Associated Press that the latest strike on Saturday night hit the Russian amphibious landing ship Kostiantyn Olshansky that was resting in dock in Sevastopol in Russia-occupied Crimea. The ship was part of the Ukrainian navy before Russia captured it while annexing the Black Sea peninsula in 2014.

Pletenchuk has previously announced that two other landing ships of the same type, Azov and Yamal, also were damaged in Saturday’s strike along with the Ivan Khurs intelligence ship.

He told the AP that the weekend attack, which was launched with Ukraine-built Neptune missiles, also

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hit Sevastopol port facilities and an oil depot.

Russian authorities reported a massive Ukrainian attack on Sevastopol over the weekend but didn't acknowledge any damage to the fleet.

Pletenchuk said that with the latest attack, a third of all warships that Russian had in the Black Sea before the war have been destroyed or disabled. At the same time, he acknowledged that just two of about a dozen of Russian missile carrying warships have been sunk and pledged that Ukraine will continue the strikes.

"Our ultimate goal is complete absence of military ships of the so-called Russian Federation in the Azov and Black Sea regions," Pletenchuk told the AP.

Successful Ukrainian drone and missile strikes have provided a major morale boost for Kyiv at a time when its undermanned and under-gunned forces are facing Russian attacks along the more than 1,000-kilometer (600-mile) front line.

Challenging Russia's naval superiority also has helped create more favorable conditions for Ukrainian grain exports and other shipments from the country's Black Sea ports.

Moscow officials have kept mum on most of Ukrainian claims, but previous navy losses have been confirmed by Russian military bloggers and media who have harshly criticized the military brass for its slow and sloppy response to the threat.

Earlier this month, Russian media reported that the navy chief, Adm. Nikolai Yevmenov, had been fired and replaced with Adm. Alexander Moiseyev, the commander of Russia's Northern Fleet. The Kremlin hasn't yet announced the reshuffle, but last week Moiseyev was presented as the new acting navy chief during a ceremony at a Russian naval base.

A list of major US bridge collapses caused by ships and barges

By The Associated Press undefined

A container ship struck a major bridge in Baltimore early Tuesday, causing it to plunge into the river below. From 1960 to 2015, there were 35 major bridge collapses worldwide due to ship or barge collision, with a total of 342 people killed, according to a 2018 report from the World Association for Waterborne Transport Infrastructure. Eighteen of those collapses happened in the United States.

A list of notable disasters involving ships or barges hitting bridges in the U.S.:

POPP'S FERRY BRIDGE

March 20, 2009: A vessel pushing eight barges rammed into the Popp's Ferry Bridge in Biloxi, Mississippi, resulting in a 150-foot section of the bridge collapsing into the bay.

INTERSTATE 40 BRIDGE: 14 DEAD

May 26, 2002: A barge hit the Interstate 40 bridge over the Arkansas River at Webbers Falls, Oklahoma, collapsing a 500-foot section of road and plunging vehicles into the water. Fourteen people died and 11 were injured.

QUEEN ISABELLA CAUSEWAY: 8 DEAD

Sept. 15, 2001: A tugboat and barge struck the Queen Isabella Causeway in Port Isabel, Texas, causing a midsection of the bridge to tumble 80 feet into the bay below. Eight people died after motorists drove into the hole.

EADS BRIDGE: 50 INJURED

April 14, 1998: The Anne Holly tow traveling through the St. Louis Harbor rammed into the center span of the Eads Bridge. Eight barges broke away. Three of them hit a permanently moored gambling vessel below the bridge. Fifty people suffered minor injuries.

BIG BAYOU CANOT: 47 DEAD

Sept. 22, 1993: Barges being pushed by a towboat in dense fog hit and displaced the Big Bayou Canot railroad bridge near Mobile, Alabama. Minutes later, an Amtrak train with 220 people aboard reached the displaced bridge and derailed, killing 47 people and injuring 103 people.

SEEBER BRIDGE: 1 DEAD

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May 28, 1993: The towboat Chris, pushing the empty hopper barge DM3021, hit a support tier of the Judge William Seeber Bridge in New Orleans. Two spans and the two-column bent collapsed onto the barge. Two cars carrying three people fell with the four-lane bridge deck into a canal. One person died and two people were seriously injured.

SUNSHINE SKYWAY BRIDGE: 35 DEAD

May 9, 1980: The 609-foot freighter Summit Venture was navigating through the narrow, winding shipping channel of Florida's Tampa Bay when a sudden, blinding squall knocked out the ship's radar. The ship sheared off a support of the Sunshine Skyway Bridge, dropping a 1,400-foot section of concrete roadway during the morning rush hour. Seven vehicles, including a bus with 26 aboard, fell 150 feet into the water. Thirty-five people died.

Today in History: March 27

'The 'Godfather' wins best picture, Brando refuses to accept best actor

By The Associated Press undefined

Today in History

Today is Wednesday, March 27, the 87th day of 2024. There are 279 days left in the year.

Today's Highlight in History:

On March 27, 1973, "The Godfather" won the Academy Award for best picture of 1972, but its star, Marlon Brando, refused to accept his Oscar for best actor, and in what would become one of the Oscars' most famous moments sent in his place actor and activist Sacheen Littlefeather, who spoke out about the depiction of Native Americans in Hollywood. (In 2022, months before her death, the Academy would apologize for the "abuse" Littlefeather received at the time.)

On this date:

In 1513, Spanish explorer Juan Ponce de Leon sighted present-day Florida.

In 1625, Charles I acceded to the English throne upon the death of James I.

In 1794, Congress approved "An Act to provide a Naval Armament" of six armed ships.

In 1912, first lady Helen Herron Taft and the wife of Japan's ambassador to the United States, Viscountess Chinda, planted the first two of 3,000 cherry trees given to the U.S. as a gift by the mayor of Tokyo.

In 1945, during World War II, General Dwight D. Eisenhower told reporters in Paris that German defenses on the Western Front had been broken.

In 1964, Alaska was hit by a magnitude 9.2 earthquake (the strongest on record in North America) and tsunamis that together claimed about 130 lives.

In 1968, Soviet cosmonaut Yuri Gagarin (gah-GAH'-rihn), the first man to orbit the Earth in 1961, died when his MiG-15 jet crashed during a routine training flight near Moscow; he was 34.

In 1975, construction began on the Trans-Alaska Pipeline, which was completed two years later.

In 1977, in aviation's worst disaster, 583 people were killed when a KLM Boeing 747, attempting to take off in heavy fog, crashed into a Pan Am 747 on an airport runway on the Canary Island of Tenerife (ten-uh-REEF').

In 1980, 123 workers died when a North Sea floating oil field platform, the Alexander Kielland, capsized during a storm.

In 2012, award-winning poet Adrienne Rich, died in Santa Cruz, California at age 82, while art critic Hilton Kramer, died in Harpswell, Maine at 83.

In 2018, retired Supreme Court Justice John Paul Stevens, in an essay on The New York Times website, called for the repeal of the Second Amendment to allow for significant gun control legislation.

In 2019, Facebook said it was extending its ban on hate speech to prohibit the promotion and support of white nationalism and white separatism.

In 2022, Will Smith slapped Chris Rock on stage at the Oscar and won best actor just minutes later. (Smith was later expelled from the movie academy and received a 10-year ban from the Oscars.)

Today's Birthdays: Actor Julian Glover is 89. Actor Jerry Lacy is 88. Actor-director Austin Pendleton is 84.

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Actor Michael York is 82. Rock musician Tony Banks (Genesis) is 74. Rock musician Andrew Farriss (INXS) is 65. Jazz musician Dave Koz (kahz) is 61. Movie director Quentin Tarantino is 61. Rock musician Derrick McKenzie (Jamiroquai) is 60. Rock musician Johnny April (Staind) is 59. Actor Talisa Soto is 57. Actor Ben Koldyke is 56. Actor Pauley Perrette is 55. Singer Mariah Carey is 54. Rock musician Brendan Hill (Blues Traveler) is 54. Actor Elizabeth Mitchell is 54. Actor Nathan Fillion is 53. Hip-hop singer Fergie is 49. Jazz musician Tia Fuller is 48. Actor Emily Ann Lloyd is 40. MLB catcher Buster Posey is 37. Actor Brenda Song is 36. Pop singer-songwriter Kimbra is 34. Actor Taylor Atelian is 29. Actor/R&B singer Halle Bailey is 24. Classical crossover singer Amira Willighagen (TV: "Holland's Got Talent") is 20.