

# Groton Daily Independent

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## 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.

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



## Friday, March 29

No school - Easter Break  
Emmanuel Luther: If no community service, worship at Emmanuel at 7 p.m.  
St. John's Lutheran: Good Friday service, 7 p.m.

## Saturday, March 30

Thrift Store open 10 a.m. to 1 p.m.  
Catholic: SEAS Confession, 3:45-4:15 p.m.; SEAS Mass, 4:30 p.m.

**OPEN: Recycling Trailer in Groton**  
The recycling trailer is located west of the city shop. It takes cardboard, papers and aluminum cans.  
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# 1440

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Divers recovered the bodies of two migrant workers who were filling in potholes on Baltimore's Key Bridge Tuesday when it collapsed, with four others still missing. The two were found inside a truck 25 feet beneath the water's surface. The discovery came as federal investigators began piecing together a more detailed timeline of the incident after retrieving the Dali container ship's data recorder.

Yesterday, Amazon added \$2.75B to its investment in Anthropic, bringing its total investment in the artificial intelligence startup to \$4B. The news marks the biggest investment Amazon has made in another company since its founding and represents its latest effort to compete with Microsoft and Google on AI. The 2024 Major League Baseball season gets underway today, with a number of marquee matchups highlighted by the defending champion Texas Rangers hosting the Chicago Cubs (7:35 ET, ESPN).

## Sports, Entertainment, & Culture

Beyoncé reveals track list for "Cowboy Carter," her new album launching at midnight; includes a cover of Dolly Parton's "Jolene" and possible collab with Willie Nelson.

Daniel Kahneman, Nobel Prize-winning economist and psychologist, dies at 90. Richard Serra, sculptor known for large-scale outdoor artwork, dies at 85.

NCAA men's basketball tournament continues today with the Sweet 16; see full schedule and predictions for each matchup. Women's Sweet 16 tips off tomorrow.

## Science & Technology

Astronomers observe strong and organized magnetic fields around Sagittarius A\*, the supermassive black hole at the center of the Milky Way; findings suggest many black holes may share common magnetic field patterns.

New study finds removing certain types of blood stem cells from old mice rejuvenates the immune system, making them more effective at fighting viruses and diseases.

Scientists reconstruct the past 5-million-year history of the Southern Ocean supercurrent's speed; analysis suggests retreating glacial ice accelerates the current, intensifying warming cycles in the Antarctic.

## Business & Markets

US stock markets close higher (S&P 500 +0.9%, Dow +1.2%, Nasdaq +0.5%); S&P 500 notches fresh record close.

Video-sharing app TikTok reportedly under investigation by the US Federal Trade Commission over its data and security practices that allegedly violate federal law.

Electric vehicle startup Fisker cuts base price of Ocean SUV to \$24K as part of efforts to avoid bankruptcy; move comes after its stock was delisted this week from the New York Stock Exchange.

## Politics & World Affairs

Former US Sen. Joe Lieberman, who was Al Gore's running mate in the 2000 presidential elections, dies at age 82 due to complications from a fall; Lieberman, a Democrat-turned-independent, was a four-term US senator from Connecticut.

The Walt Disney Co. settles two-year lawsuit with board appointed by Florida Gov. Ron DeSantis (R) over special tax district where Disney is located and the future development of its parks. Federal appeals court extends hold on Texas law allowing state police to arrest and prosecute migrants.

At least four killed, five others injured after man goes on a stabbing spree in Rockford, Illinois, and surrounding area; suspect alive and in custody, victims range from 15 to 63 years old.

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1503 N Broadway, Groton, 605/397-8145

## Groton April Calendar of Events

### Monday, April 1

NO SCHOOL - Easter Break  
Pantry Open 11 a.m. to 3 p.m.  
Senior Menu: Sloppy Joe on bun, oven roasted potatoes, broccoli, ice cream sundae, fruit.  
Emmanuel Lutheran: Bible Study 6:30 a.m.

### Tuesday, April 2

Senior Menu: Baked pork chops, au gratin potatoes, vegetable capri blend, honey fruit salad, whole wheat bread.  
School Breakfast: Cereal.  
School Lunch: Chicken strips, fries.  
Thrift Store open 3 p.m. to 6 p.m.  
Food Pantry open 4 p.m. to 8 p.m.  
Wage Memorial Library Board meeting, 2 p.m. at the Library  
City Council Meeting, 7 p.m.  
St. John's Lutheran: Ladies Aid / LWML, 1 p.m.  
United Methodist: Bible Study meeting, 11 a.m., Groton Dairy Queen

### Wednesday, April 3

Senior Menu: Swiss steak, mashed potatoes and gravy, peas and carrots, apricots, whole wheat bread.  
School Breakfast: French toast.  
School Lunch: Chef salad.  
Groton CM&A: Kids' Club, Youth Group and Adult Bible Study begins at 7 pm  
Groton Chamber Meeting, Noon at City Hall  
Emmanuel Lutheran: Sarah Circle, 5 p.m. ; Confirmation 6 p.m.; League, 6:30 p.m.  
United Methodist: Coffee Hour, 9:30 a.m.

### Thursday, April 4

Senior Menu: Cheeseburger quinoa casserole, cheesy breadstick steamed Brussel sprouts, fruit.  
School Breakfast: Muffins.  
School Lunch: Pasta with meat sauce.  
Track at Mobridge 11 a.m.

### Friday, April 5

Senior Menu: Spanish rice with hamburger, green beans, vanilla pudding with mandarin oranges, whole wheat bread.  
School Breakfast: Bagel bites.  
School Lunch: Hamburgers, fries.

### Saturday, April 6

Thrift Store open 10 a.m. to 1 p.m.  
Catholic: SEAS Confession, 3:45-4:15 p.m.; SEAS Mass, 4:30 p.m.  
Duelling Duo at the Legion 6 p.m.

### Sunday, April 7

POPS Concert 2 p.m. and 5 p.m.  
Groton CM&A: Sunday School at 9:15 a.m., Worship Service at 10:30 a.m.  
Catholic: SEAS Confession, 7:45-8:15 a.m., SEAS Mass, 8:30 a.m.; Turton Confession, 10:30-10:45 a.m.; Turton Mass, 11 a.m.  
First Presbyterian Church: Bible Study, 9:30 a.m.; Worship, 11 a.m.  
Emmanuel Lutheran: Worship with communion, 9 a.m.; Sunday School, 10:15 a.m.; Choir, 6 p.m.  
St. John's Lutheran: Worship with communion at St. John's at 9 a.m. and Zion at 11 a.m.; Sunday School, 9:45 a.m.  
NSU Soccer Camp at the Groton soccer field, 2-5 p.m.

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**Aberdeen**

225-6772

1-800-843-1865



**Redfield**

1-800-247-4650

**Webster**

1-800-658-2252



**JOHN DEERE**

## Monday, April 8

Senior Menu: Ranch chicken breast, sweet potatoes mixed Monterey blend, applesauce bars, whole wheat bread.

School Breakfast: Pancake on stick.

School Lunch: French bread pizza, cooked carrots.

State Smarter Balanced Testing (EIA/Math: April 8-12, Science (Grade 11) Week of April 15-19 (day TBD)

School Board meeting, 7 p.m.

Pantry Open 11 a.m. to 3 p.m.

Senior Citizen meet at the Groton Community Center, 1 p.m.

Emmanuel Lutheran: Bible Study 6:30 a.m.

High School Baseball: Varsity at Dell Rapids 5 p.m., second game at 7 p.m.

Soccer uniform pickup, 5-8 p.m., Groton Community Center

## Tuesday, April 9

ELECTION DAY!

Groton Area Opt-Out Election. Polls open 7 a.m. to 7 p.m.

Senior Menu: Lemon baked fish, baked potato with sour cream, California blend vegetables, peach crisp, whole wheat bread.

School Breakfast: Scones.

School Lunch: Chicken patty, fries.

Track at Ipswich, 2:30 p.m.

JH Track at Milbank 4 p.m.

Thrift Store open 3 p.m. to 6 p.m.

Food Pantry open 4 p.m. to 8 p.m.

United Methodist: Bible Study, 10 a.m.

## Wednesday, April 10

Senior Menu: Hamburger on bun, lettuce/tomato/onion, potato salad, fruit, cookie.

School Breakfast: Cereal

School Lunch: Chicken quesadilla, peas.

Groton CM&A: Kids' Club, Youth Group and Adult

Bible Study begins at 7 pm

Emmanuel Lutheran: Confirmation, 6 p.m.

United Methodist: Coffee Hour, 9:30 a.m.

## Thursday, April 11

Senior Menu: Cheese tortellini Alfredo with diced chicken, green beans, Mandarin oranges, whole wheat bread.

School Breakfast: Breakfast pizza.

School Lunch: BBQ rib sandwich, tater tots.

Girls Golf at Mobridge.

Track at Milbank, 3:30 p.m.

Groton Lions Club meeting, 6 p.m., 104 N Main St.

## Friday, April 12

Senior Menu: Bratwurst on bun, mashed potatoes, sauerkraut, 3 bean salad, chocolate pudding with banana.

School Breakfast: Biscuits.

School Lunch: Grilled cheese, corn.

All-School Play 7 p.m .

## Saturday, April 13

ACT Testing at Groton Area

Track at Mobridge 10 a.m.

All School Play 5 p.m.

Thrift Store open 10 a.m. to 1 p.m.

Catholic: SEAS Confession, 3:45-4:15 p.m.; SEAS Mass, 4:30 p.m.

Emmanuel Lutheran: WELCA Spring Gathering, Our Savior's Lutheran in Redfield 9 a.m.

## Sunday, April 14

Groton CM&A: Sunday School at 9:15 a.m., Worship Service at 10:30 a.m.

Catholic: SEAS Confession, 7:45-8:15 a.m., SEAS Mass, 8:30 a.m.; Turton Confession, 10:30-10:45 a.m.; Turton Mass, 11 a.m.

First Presbyterian Church: Bible Study, 9:30 a.m.; Worship, 11 a.m.

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 <p><b>BLOCKER</b> CONSTRUCTION</p>	<p>New Construction Remodeling Hoop Barns Shops</p> <p>Perry Blocker</p>	<p>13379 Sperry Ln, Bath 605/216-2677 prblocker@hotmail.com</p>
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Emmanuel Lutheran: Worship with Milestones (4 yr olds and juniors), 9 a.m.; Sunday School, 10:15 a.m.; Choir 6 p.m.

St. John's Lutheran: Worship at St. John's at 9 a.m. and Zion at 11 a.m.; Sunday School, 9:45 a.m.

High School Baseball in Groton: Varsity: Elkton/Lake Benton at Noon, W-I-N at 4 p.m

## Monday, April 15

Senior Menu: Beef tips on rice, mixed vegetables, fruit cocktail, cookie, whole wheat bread.

School Breakfast: Stuffed bagels.

School Lunch: Chicken nuggets, diced potatoes.

JH Track at Ipswich 2 p.m.

Pantry Open 11 a.m. to 3 p.m.

Senior Citizen meet at the Groton Community Center, 1 p.m.

Emmanuel Lutheran: Bible Study 6:30 a.m.

St. John's Lutheran: Christian Literature Circle, 7:30 p.m.

Groton Area Winter Sports Awards Night, 7 p.m., GHS Arena

State Smarter Balanced Testing: Grade 3-5, Science (Grade 5): Week of April 15-19 (Day TBD), ELA/Math: April 22-26

## Tuesday, April 16

Senior Menu: Baked turkey crunch with dressing, Italian blend vegetables, carrot bars, corn muffin.

School Breakfast: Waffles.

School Lunch: Pizza burgers, cooked broccoli.

Track at Britton, 2 p.m.

Thrift Store open 3 p.m. to 6 p.m.

Food Pantry open 4 p.m. to 8 p.m.

City Council meeting, 7 p.m.

St. John's Lutheran: Quilting, 9 a.m.

United Methodist: Bible Study, 10 a.m.

## Wednesday, April 17

Senior Menu: Chicken fried steak, mashed pota-

toes and gravy, Oriental blend vegetables, cinnamon apple sauce, whole wheat bread.

School Breakfast: Egg bake.

School Lunch: tacos.

FCCLA Banquet at GHS Arena Lobby 6 p.m.

Groton CM&A: Kids' Club, Youth Group and Adult Bible Study begins at 7 pm

Emmanuel Lutheran: Pastor at Rosewood Court; Confirmation. 6 p.m.; League, 6:30 p.m.

United Methodist: Coffee Hour, 9:30 a.m.; Groton Ad Council, 7 p.m.

## Thursday, April 18

Senior Menu: Spaghetti with meat sauce, corn, garlic toast, fudge cake squares, fruit.

School Breakfast: pop tarts.

School Lunch: Corndogs, baked beans.

Girls Golf at Milbank, 10 a.m.

## Friday, April 19

Senior Menu: Breaded chicken on bun, oven roasted potatoes, peas and cheese salad, honey fruit salad.

School Breakfast: Egg wraps.

School Lunch: pizza, green beans.

JH Track at Groton Area, 2 p.m.

## Saturday, April 20

PROM, 8 p.m.

Thrift Store open 10 a.m. to 1 p.m.

Catholic: SEAS Confession, 3:45-4:15 p.m.; SEAS Mass, 4:30 p.m.

Firemen Spring Social, 7 p.m.

## Sunday, April 21

Groton CM&A: Sunday School at 9:15 a.m., Worship Service at 10:30 a.m.

Catholic: SEAS Confession, 7:45-8:15 a.m., SEAS Mass, 8:30 a.m.; Turton Confession, 10:30-10:45 a.m.; Turton Mass, 11 a.m.

First Presbyterian Church: Bible Study, 9:30 a.m.;

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Worship, 11 a.m.

Princess Prom, 4:30 p.m., GHS Gym  
Emmanuel Lutheran: Worship with communion, 9 a.m.; Sunday School 10:15 a.m.; Choir 6 p.m.

St. John's Lutheran: Worship with communion at St. John's at 9 a.m. and Zion at 11 a.m.; Sunday School, 9:45 a.m.

## Monday, April 22

Senior Menu: Meatballs, mashed potatoes and gravy, Harvard beets, pineapple tidbits, whole wheat bread.

School Breakfast: Oatmeal.

School Lunch: meatballs, mashed potatoes.

School Board meeting 7 p.m.

JH Track at Britton, 3:30 p.m.

Pantry Open 11 a.m. to 3 p.m.

Senior Citizen meet at the Groton Community Center with noon potluck

Emmanuel Lutheran: Bible Study 6:30 a.m.

High School Baseball: JV vs. W-I-N at Northville, doubleheader, 5:30 p.m.

## Tuesday, April 23

Senior Menu: Pork roast, mashed potatoes and gravy, broccoli and carrots peaches whole wheat bread.

School Breakfast: Breakfast sandwich.

School Lunch: Hamburgers, tri taters.

Track at Groton Area, 11 a.m.

Thrift Store open 3 p.m. to 6 p.m.

Food Pantry open 4 p.m. to 8 p.m.

United Methodist: Bible Study, 10 a.m.

## Wednesday, April 24

Senior Menu: Turkey sub sandwich, lettuce and tomato macaroni salad, tropical fruit.

School Breakfast: French toast.

School Lunch: Pizza crunchers, corn.

Groton CM&A: Kids' Club, Youth Group and Adult Bible Study begins at 7 pm

Emmanuel Lutheran: Confirmation, 6 p.m.

United Methodist: Coffee Hour, 9:30 a.m.

High School Baseball: Varsity vs. Madison at 7 p.m. in Groton.

## Thursday, April 25

Senior Menu: Ham, sweet potatoes, vegetable blend Provence, baked apples dinner roll.

School Breakfast: Muffins.

School Lunch: Chicken strips, waffle fries.

Girls Golf at Redfield 10 a.m.

Middle School Spring Concert 7 p.m.

## Friday, April 26

Senior Menu: Taco salad, Mexican rice with beans, breadstick, cherry fluff.

School Breakfast: Bagel bits.

School Lunch: Lasagna, corn, tea buns.

Track at Webster, 1 p.m.

## Saturday April 27

Thrift Store open 10 a.m. to 1 p.m.

Catholic: SEAS Confession, 3:45-4:15 p.m.; SEAS Mass, 4:30 p.m.

High School Baseball: Varsity vs. Howard at 2 p.m. in Groton.

## Sunday, April 28

Groton CM&A: Sunday School at 9:15 a.m., Worship Service at 10:30 a.m.

Catholic: SEAS Confession, 7:45-8:15 a.m., SEAS Mass, 8:30 a.m.; Turton Confession, 10:30-10:45 a.m.; Turton Mass, 11 a.m.

First Presbyterian Church: Bible Study, 9:30 a.m.; Worship, 11 a.m.

Emmanuel Lutheran: Worship, 9 a.m.; Sunday School, 10:15 a.m.; Piano Recital, noon; choir, 6 p.m.

St. John's Lutheran: Worship at St. John's at 9 a.m. and Zion at 11 a.m.; Sunday School, 9:45 a.m.

High School Baseball at Volga. Varsity at 2 p.m., Junior Varsity at 4 p.m.

## Monday, April 29

Senior Menu: Baked cod, macaroni and cheese, spinach salad with tomatoes fruit cocktail, whole wheat bread.

School Breakfast: Pancake on stick.

School Lunch: Garlic cheese bread, cooked carrots.

FFA Banquet, GHS Gym, 6 p.m.

Pantry Open 11 a.m. to 3 p.m.

Emmanuel Lutheran: Bible Study 6:30 a.m.

## Tuesday, April 30

Senior Menu: Teriyaki chicken, rice pilaf, cauliflower and broccoli, pineapple strawberry ambrosia whole wheat bread.

School Breakfast: Scones.

School Lunch: Hot dogs, baked beans.

Track at Milbank, 1:30 p.m.

Elementary Spring Concert, 7 p.m.

Thrift Store open 3 p.m. to 6 p.m.

Food Pantry open 4 p.m. to 8 p.m.

United Methodist: Bible Study, 10 a.m.

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Members of the St. Elizabeth Ann Seton Catholic Church youth group performed The Living Stations Wednesday night at the SEAS Church. A huge crowd was on hand for the viewing of the event. Back Row left to right: Jackson Garstecki, Bryson Wambach, Walker Zoellner, Charlie Frost, Nicholas Groeblichhoff, Carter Simon, Logan Warrington, Easton Ekern, Corbin Weismantel, Blake Lord, Brody Lord and Brevin Flihs and Front row left to right: Addison Hoffman, Keira Weismantel, Taryn Traphagen, Teagan Hanten, Ashlynn Warrington, Ashley Johnson, Faith Traphagen and Anna Fjeldheim. (Courtesy Photo Robyn Warrington)



Jackson Garsetecki and Anna Fjeldheim gave the welcome in front of a full church for the Living Stations. (Photo lifted from GDILIVE.COM video)

## 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.**

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

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## GF&P Draft Management Plans Available for Public Comment

PIERRE, S.D. – South Dakota Game, Fish and Parks (GFP) currently has three management plans available for public comment.

### Deer Action Plan

The South Dakota White-Tailed and Mule Deer Action plan, 2024-2028, is a document that will be utilized to guide deer management in South Dakota. The plan outlines harvest strategies to ensure sustainability of each deer species and its habitat while maintaining populations at levels compatible with human activity and land use.

### Bobcat Action Plan

The South Dakota Bobcat Action plan will provide strategic guidance for GFP and objectives related to bobcat management. The plan will describe information used to monitor bobcat populations and emphasize working cooperatively with interested publics in both the planning process and the regular program activities related to bobcat management.

### Ring-necked Pheasant Action Plan

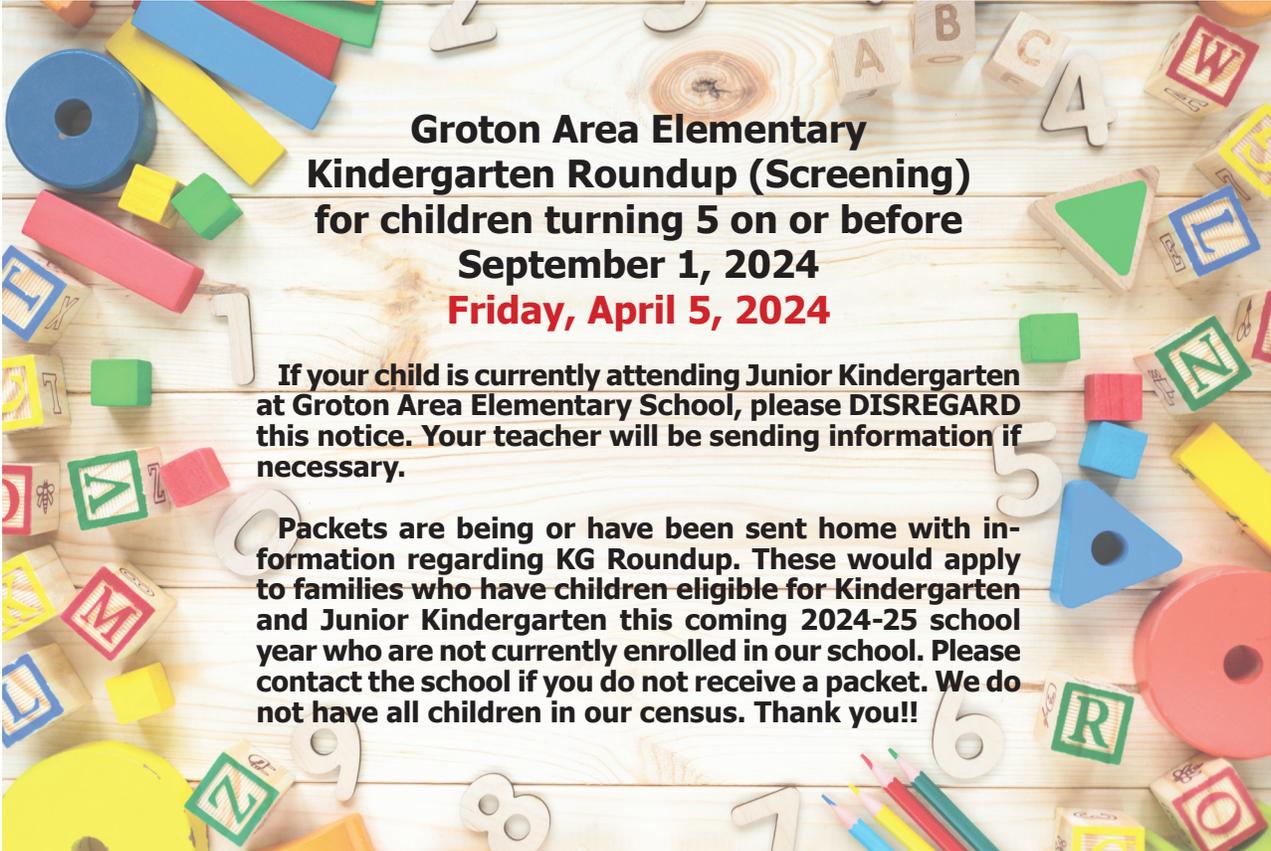
The Ring-necked Pheasant Action plan, 2024-2028, is a document that will be used by GFP to guide ring-necked pheasant management in South Dakota through identified management objectives and measurable strategies to meet these management objectives.

### Public Comments Currently Being Accepted

All individuals interested in deer, bobcat, and/or ring-necked pheasant management in South Dakota may provide suggestions and comments on the draft action plans until April 19.

The draft action plans can be found online at [gfp.sd.gov/management-plans](http://gfp.sd.gov/management-plans).

Written comments on the plan can be sent to 523 E. Capitol Ave., Pierre, S.D. 57501, or emailed to [WildInfo@state.sd.us](mailto:WildInfo@state.sd.us). Comments must be received by the deadline and include your full name and city of residence.



## 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!!**

## Milbrandt set to retire after teaching 18 years in Groton



**Julie Milbrandt**

After devoting twenty years of her life to the education of young children, Julie Milbrandt is retiring at the end of the current school year.

Many factors were in the "pot" that had to be considered before she made this decision.

"I've missed several of those typical '1-800-Grandma calls' that someone else had to answer for me," Milbrandt admitted. "I also will be available to help out at home more too."

"I started my career teaching second grade in Bowdle," she stated. "After marrying Greg and moving into the Groton School District, I was a Special Education paraprofessional for four years."

"I spent the next 14 years as a classroom teacher, four in junior kindergarten/ kindergarten and that last ten in first grade," Milbrandt listed.

"I've enjoyed teaching and love being around the kids," she said, "but it's time for me to change. One thing I know for sure is that I'll be spending more time with my work and involvement in Plexus."

"In addition to teaching first grade, Joni Greblinghoff and I are in charge of the DI program here in Groton," Milbrandt explained. "Last weekend we attended the Regional DI tournament which was held in Webster this year."

"We have two levels of competitors in Groton Elementary," she said. "Students in kindergarten through grade 5 participated in a variety of events; some were competitive, but some were not."

"Some kindergarten through grade two students presented a skit they had prepared ahead of time by researching underwater creatures," Milbrandt explained. "Other Groton students in grades two through five participated in the Improvisational challenge."

"This year I have twenty students in my half of first grade," Milbrandt stated. "Caitlyn Fischbach, the other first grade teacher, also has twenty students in her class."

"I originally became a teacher because I love kids, I love books, and I love school!" she admitted. "That's what is all about: helping these children to become what they want to be when they grow up!"

"The only downside of teaching that I can think of is the continual change in what is required in education, the expectations to do the impossible, and the reality that I can't do it all!" Milbrandt shook her head sadly.

"Greg and I have two sons, Eric and his family in Madison, and Jacob and his family in Tyndall," she smiled. "We are also blessed to have five grandchildren living here with us on earth and one who is living in heaven."

## 'What do we want our schools to be?' Discussion of opt-out for Groton Area School District continues

A crowd of Groton Area school staff, parents and community members filled a portion of the Old Gymnasium on Tuesday evening in the final meeting to discuss increasing taxes to fund the schools.

Voters will decide on April 9 if they want to allow the district to opt-out of tax levy limitations. The district is requesting a maximum of \$1.25 million per year for the general fund.

Through the last several years, especially since the state rewrote the funding formula for schools, Groton Area has had to transfer capital outlay funds to the general fund to shore up that account. More than 40 school districts in the state utilize this allowable capital outlay flexibility to support their general funds.

However, using those funds to supplement the general fund has made it difficult to maintain district facilities and make necessary improvements, said Superintendent Joe Schwan.

### State legislature responsible for Groton's situation

The district was hit hard with the elimination of the Pension Fund levy in 2016 that would help to cover retirement expenses that are now part of the general fund, he said. Additionally, other revenues, like wind farm taxes and utility taxes, have been equalized across the state, reducing the amount of state aid that Groton Area is allocated.

The opt-out would allow the district to preserve programming and remain competitive in the teacher job market, Schwan said.

"We are a locally funded entity, and that's how it's going to be," he said. "Whatever we do or don't do in our district is going to be because of what we (the community) choose to do or not do."

Groton resident Justin Hanson asked if it would be fair to say the district has missed out on \$4 million in capital projects because it has had to transfer that money to the general fund, to which Superintendent Schwan responded "that's a fair statement."

Based on the proposed opt-out of \$1.25 million, the levy impact would vary based on what type of property it is.

- Agriculture land would have a 57 cent levy impact per \$1,000 of taxable valuation
- Owner-occupied property would have a \$1.277 levy impact per \$1,000 of taxable valuation
- Other property such as commercial would have a \$2.642 levy impact per \$1,000 of taxable valuation

The district would not have to request the full \$1.25 million each year, but that would be the cap amount on the additional tax levy.

Nobody on the school board wants to raise taxes, but if the opt-out fails, the district will have to make adjustments to the general fund, of which 80 to 85 percent of the fund is made up by salary and benefits.

"As passionate as people are about this, I think they're just as passionate about giving the best education to our kids," he said. "...It goes back to the issue – we're locally funded. So what do we want our school to be? That's where we're at."

Some in the crowd were concerned with why the opt-out hadn't been brought to a vote sooner. Others, like Groton farmer Doug Sombke, questioned why the state money wasn't being allocated to schools.

Sombke said there is a lot of money available if state legislators want to tap into it. The state education department returned millions to the state's general fund in 2023, and more than \$100 million from the video lottery went back to the state's general fund. There are also a number of businesses that don't pay sales tax or excise tax, which could bring millions to the state.

"You need to talk to your legislators, folks," he told the crowd. "We should have been talking to them right after 2016, and we could have avoided this."

"...I'm not saying that we don't want to fund our schools. No one is saying that," he said. "But this state has so much money, so much of your tax dollars, that they're putting away."

Sombke brought up the more than \$226 million set aside this past legislative session for the construction of a future men's prison in rural Lincoln County and a future women's prison in Rapid City.

"Now, imagine we use that same money, that same bag of money, and they have it, to do it for education," he said. "We might not need a prison."

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Voting on the opt-out issue can be done from 8 a.m. to 4 p.m. on days the district office is open or at the polls from 7 a.m. to 7 p.m. on April 9. Precincts will be located in Andover, Bristol, Columbia and Groton.

- Elizabeth Varin

## Two teachers leaving, one changing grade, two being hired

The board approved a slate of employment changes, including two new hires, two resignations and a change of assignment.

Two more teachers will be leaving the district at the end of the 2023-2024 school year. The board approved the resignation of fifth grade teacher Shelby Hendrickson and middle school reading and social studies teacher Rachael Pederson.

Other teachers who submitted their resignations earlier this school year include:

- Elementary special education teacher Sadie Hanna
- Ag instructor Anna Fuhrman
- K-12 vocal music teacher Tanner Pietz
- First grade teacher Julie Milbrandt

The teacher resignations are effective at the end of the 2023-2024 school year.

Some of those positions have already been filled for the upcoming school year. Carrie Cole, hired as first grade teacher at the board's March 11 meeting, will move to the fifth grade teaching position.

On Tuesday, the board approved hiring McKayla Johnston as first grade teacher for the 2024-2025 school year. Johnston, who did her student teaching in one of the third grade classes at Groton Area Elementary School, is currently finishing her degree at Northern State University with a double major in elementary and special education.

The board also approved hiring Landon Brown as K-12 vocal music teacher for the 2024-2025 school year. Brown is currently finishing his music education degree at South Dakota State University.

Others hired earlier this year for the 2024-2025 school year include:

- Megan Serr as elementary special education teacher
- Lindsey Vander Wal as ag education teacher and FFA adviser

Yet-to-be-filled positions for the upcoming school year include:

- Middle school reading/social studies teacher
- Sign language interpreter
- Part-time food service team member
- Debate adviser
- Oral interpretation adviser
- FBLA adviser

## Football cooperative discussion nearing completion

Officials from Groton and Langford schools are finalizing discussion about a football cooperative.

Superintendent Joe Schwan said while administrators are not quite ready to bring an agreement to the board, they're close. Another conference call is scheduled for this week to discuss academic eligibility requirements and make sure both schools are utilizing the same rules for their football players.

Another issue that seems to be a sticking point is name recognition. Some Langford representatives want "Langford" to be included in the name of the cooperative. However, Schwan said, Groton didn't change its name when it had a cooperative with Bristol in the 1990s, and it may alienate part of the current Groton Area community to change the name now.

Additional discussion took place about splitting up costs for coaches and other resources.

A conference call is schedule for Thursday morning between the two districts, and a cooperative agreement may be on the agenda for both boards' April meetings.

In other discussion:

- Kindergarten roundup will take place April 5 at the elementary school for children turning five years

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old on or before Sept. 1, 2024. Teachers will screen incoming students to assess whether they should go into kindergarten or junior kindergarten.

- Sixth graders will be able to try track and field a year early. The board approved allowing sixth grade participation in track and field, specifically at the junior high level, on a trial basis for the 2024 season. Athletes will have to have a physical and fill out paperwork.

- The board approved having Carla Tracy and Bruce Babcock as volunteer assistant track coaches for the 2024 season.

- First grade teacher Julie Milbrandt and Caitlyn Fischbach presented an overview of the first grade classes. Each first grade class is made up of 20 students. Positive points were made about the math and science curriculums, but changes are coming for science and social studies. The science curriculum the classes currently use is no longer available, so that will be something the district will need to evaluate, Milbrandt said. The social studies curriculum is also very dated, especially compared to new rigorous standards. Elementary Principal Brett Schwan told the school board that the district will have to look at a new science curriculum for next year and social studies for the year after as resources for new social studies standards are not currently available.

- Kindergarten teachers Ann Gibbs and Lindsey DeHoet discussed progress being made in their classes. Strengths for Gibbs class include building up to reading and using centers to allow students to think they're playing while they are really learning so many different things, Gibbs said. One of the favorite things in her class is Dr. Science, where students pick a science experiment, practice it and present it to their classmates. DeHoet added that with so many students – 25 in DeHoet's class and 25 in Gibb's class – it takes a bit longer to do things, but the students this year are eager learners. There are five sets in twins in kindergarten this year. Both Gibbs and DeHoet praised their paraprofessional aides Elizabeth Bahr and Joni Groeblichhoff respectively.

- Junior kindergarten teacher Ashley Brudvid reviewed the junior kindergarten program. Essentially it is a kindergarten preparation program that allows students to have an extra year to build the foundational skills needed for school, she said. Main goals include introducing students to the classroom environment and master early learning skills.

- Elizabeth Varin

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## Easter Baskets by Tina ~ 605-397-7285



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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

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### 'Order restored' at penitentiary following 'disturbance' At least one correctional officer assaulted in incident, during which inmates cried 'we want phones'

BY: JOHN HULT AND MAKENZIE HUBER - MARCH 27, 2024 9:48 PM

SIOUX FALLS — Order was restored late Wednesday after a "disturbance" at the East Hall of the South Dakota State Penitentiary, Corrections Secretary Kellie Wasko said.

The statement came more than four hours after initial reports of the incident, and did not address the extent of any staff injuries, though it acknowledged that a staff assault had taken place.

"Order has been restored at the South Dakota State Penitentiary," Wasko said. "After a disturbance, which included a staff assault, the response followed established protocol and was conducted professionally, swiftly, and thoroughly. Thank you to our corrections officers for doing an outstanding job to safely resolve the situation."

A call reporting "suspicious activity" on the stretch of North Drive that runs past the penitentiary was logged at 4:03 p.m. by the Sioux Falls Police Department.

Two entryways to the parking lot in front of the penitentiary were temporarily blocked off with road cones. Loud banging, whistling, yelling and occasional chants of "we want phones" echoed into the evening from within East Hall, one of the two main cell blocks in the 143-year-old facility. By around 8 p.m., the lights were on in the cell block, and the loudest shouting had largely ceased.

The incident comes less than 20 days after the DOC shut down tablet-based phone calls, photo and text messaging and email services, a move that frustrated prisoners and family members. Inmates still had the tablets, which are also used for ebooks, music, a law library and coursework.

The March 8 shutdown was tied to an "investigation pending resolution," according to a DOC statement posted to the agency's website on March 20.

One woman on the scene Wednesday evening told South Dakota Searchlight that she drove to the penitentiary when she saw reports of the incident on social media.

She said her significant other is incarcerated and scheduled to be released within days. He called her as she was en route from one of the prison's wall phones, which are still accessible for inmates. He told her DOC staff were using tear gas to pacify inmates before he abruptly ended the call. He told her the incident began as correctional officers attempted to take away tablets, and at least one inmate refused. South Dakota Searchlight was not able to independently verify the account of the situation.

The most notable modern "riot" on the penitentiary grounds took place in 1993.



A vehicle guards an entryway to the parking lot of the South Dakota State Penitentiary on March 27, 2024. (John Hult/South Dakota Searchlight).

According to reporting from the Argus Leader, Rapid City Journal and Associated Press, the 12-hour riot of May 5-6, 1993, started after guards placed an inmate who was intoxicated by inmate-brewed alcohol in his cell. More than 200 inmates were caught up in the prison yard riot, causing \$2.4 million in damage to the penitentiary before surrendering the next morning. Two guards were injured, and the riot led to a major overhaul of the prison.

Three inmates were found guilty for their part in the riot, while 32 other inmates involved were disciplined by prison officials in the months following the event. Then-Attorney General Mark Barnett said it would be "impractical" to prosecute all 223 inmates because "it would gum up the court system." The state penitentiary warden lost his job due to the riot, and Lynne DeLano, South Dakota's first corrections secretary when the department was created in 1989, was replaced. Penitentiary guards received 5% raises after the riot.

## Sicangu Oyate development group has big plans for tribal prosperity on Rosebud

BY: JOSHUA HAIAR - MARCH 27, 2024 5:28 PM



**At the biggest bison herd run by Native Americans in the U.S., TJ Heinert, who looks after the herd, discusses managing the livestock for the Rosebud Tribal Reservation.** (Joshua Haiar/South Dakota

Searchlight)

The U.S. government has tried to alleviate tribal poverty in South Dakota for decades.

It has not worked.

On the Rosebud Sioux Tribal Reservation in Todd County, for example, the per capita annual income is \$12,562, only 45% of the adult population participates in the workforce, and 39% of its 9,199 residents live below the poverty line.

Today, tribal development groups can often be found taking on the responsibility of creating a robust economy on reservations. Rather than relying on federal programs administered by federal employees or tribal governments alone, they leverage federal funding sources to make long-term investments. The aim is to launch projects that will best serve the tribes and, in some cases, be sustainable without assistance.

The movement is especially

visible in the work of Sicangu Co on Rosebud.

Michael LaPointe, the organization's top economic development official, said the goal is to enhance living standards on the reservation, a task he believes state and federal governments have failed at.

"They haven't solved poverty here, ever," he said.

LaPointe said that despite the presence of federal and state economic development programs, tribal

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governments don't have the resources to address various day-to-day crises and also apply for grants and loans designed to help improve economic conditions.

"It's a lot of work, and it takes a lot of staff time," LaPointe said, underscoring the significance of the development group's work. Sičanġu Co's initiatives, he said, have directly led to the creation of 180 new jobs over the past three years.

Founded in 2019, Sičanġu Co oversees a range of economic and social development projects for the Tribe. Although some projects were delayed or had to adapt during the COVID-19 pandemic, the organization is now operating at full capacity.

Officials with the USDA Office of Rural Development recently toured the area to get a look at what's been done with funding its offered, and where the office might be able to offer more.

## Community building

Sičanġu Co is working on a housing and business project called Keya Wakpala Woicageyapi, which translates to Turtle Creek Regenerative Development. This 600-acre area will have up to 600 affordable homes, a tribal grocery store, shops, and a Sičanġu Co-run space to help people start businesses.

Michael Prate, who oversees the project, said there's a need for quality homes. He believes Sičanġu can build affordable homes with help from various subsidies and grants.

"With that, the cost is similar to those trailers you see around town," Prate said.

In 2023, the USDA Rural Development team put about \$4.5 million into tribal lands in South Dakota. This included money for homes, water infrastructure, and various business investments. It's part of the larger \$683 million the USDA rural development division spent last year in South Dakota, with most of it going to improve internet and electricity.

Nikki Gronli, the state's USDA rural development team leader, said the USDA could offer home loans with little or no down payment, a low-interest rate and a 40-year mortgage.

"Owning a home helps people build wealth," Gronli said. "You need good homes to attract doctors, police and teachers to the area."

The project works to create jobs in construction, Prate said, and offers job training opportunities for tribal members.

"This is about more than just building homes," he said.

A company that makes prefabricated parts for the homes recently announced plans to open a factory nearby, bringing even more jobs.

Prate also pointed to a nearby community greenhouse and garden, managed by Sičanġu Co, saying one of residents' top demands for their community is locally produced food, according to a survey the group conducted.

## Land use changes

In 2020, Sičanġu Co started the Wolakota Buffalo Range, consisting of 28,000 acres. That year, 100 wild bison came from two national parks. Since then, more bison have been added from other herds and herd growth. Now, there are 1,012.

It's the biggest bison herd run by Native Americans in the U.S. Before this, non-tribal ranchers leased the land for cattle grazing.

Now, the herd doesn't need any new bison from outside. It can sustain and grow on its own. TJ Heinert, who looks after the herd, spent time developing his sharpshooter skills to ensure a clean kill. The Tribe uses every part of these bison for a food-security program and ceremonies, he said.

LaPointe, the development official, said Sičanġu Co has big plans for the bison. He wants the Tribe to become home to 6,000 bison and sell sustainable and ethically harvested bison products across the U.S. Additionally, he said there are plans to build a processing facility and an environment to attract tourists.

However, Heinert and LaPointe said making money is not the main goal.

"We're here to reconnect our people with the buffalo," Heinert said.

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Farming is another focus for the future. Right now, non-tribal farmers lease a significant amount of land on the reservation, according to LaPointe. Sičanġu Co's Rosebud Farm Co is teaching people to farm and manages 1,800 acres of organic farms.

"We want to create jobs," said Bud Colombe, who helps run that program. "A lot of our farm jobs are not with us."

Colombe wants to see grain dryers and places to store crops on the reservation. This would help the tribe keep more control of its supply chain.

"We don't have any of those things," he said.

Gronli, with the USDA, said they can help with loans for these projects.

Sičanġu Co is working on other value-added agriculture projects, as well. Koby Jeschkeit-Hagen, the group's food systems coordinator, said they plan to make and sell products like organic baby food. These would be cheaply sold within the Tribe's borders but sold for more elsewhere.

Additionally, LaPointe said Sičanġu Co is investing in wind energy on the Tribe's lands, and a wind turbine technician program at the Tribe's already existing Sinte Gleska University.

## Tribal education

Bison and locally grown produce are already on the lunch menu at the Sičanġu Co's Lakota immersion school.

Chronic absenteeism among South Dakota's Native American students in public schools increased from 31% to 54% from 2018 to 2023 – the highest among all South Dakota student demographics. A third of Native American public school students don't complete high school, 84% are not considered college and career-ready, and only 7% take the ACT, according to the latest data from the state Department of Education.

The school, Wakanyeja ki Tokeyahci, opened in 2020 and today offers a pre-K to 2nd-grade education focused on the Lakota language and core educational concepts contextualized in that culture. The school began only teaching kindergarten but has since, and continues to expand.

Sage Fast Dog Sr. is the head of the school, which currently has a waitlist. He said the approach makes tribal students excited to learn because they and their culture are at the center of the material taught.

"Our vision is that our children will stand with everything Lakota," he said.

Gronli said that across South Dakota's nine reservations, similar stories driven by various tribal development corporations are unfolding.

These organizations, including the Oglala Sioux Tribe's Thunder Valley development group, and the Cheyenne River Sioux Tribe's Four Bands Community Fund, focus on a range of initiatives from housing development and financial education to education and business support.

"What I see here is, in South Dakota, so many of those things we know are an issue for all of us: housing, childcare, health; I see all these groups within tribal areas, and they're taking it on," she said.

## Avera plans \$245 million expansion in Sioux Falls for delivery care, digestive health

Health system hails projects as 'largest expansion of hospital patient care space' in Sioux Falls history

BY: MAKENZIE HUBER - MARCH 27, 2024 12:18 PM

Avera Health plans to expand two of its Sioux Falls campuses at a cost about \$245 million.

It'll be the largest expansion of hospital patient care space in Sioux Falls history at 350,000 square feet, according to the health care system.

The planned six-story and three-story buildings are meant to expand capacity and access for two specialties in South Dakota: digestive health services and pregnancy and labor services.

Avera spokesman Cale Feller told South Dakota Searchlight that the health care system “often has very full facilities.” The system serves about 42,000 inpatients each year, with another 1.1 million served outside of its hospital settings. The Avera McKennan hospital in Sioux Falls serves patients within a 300-mile radius of the city.

The building projects will ease strain and demand on the Avera system, which includes 300 locations throughout South Dakota, Minnesota, Iowa, Nebraska and North Dakota, Avera President and CEO Jim Dover said in a press release.

The projects, he said, are “foundational to the quality of care we’re able to deliver as an interconnected system.”

“Years of planning and research have gone into evidence-based care for the population we serve, and I’m confident this project will benefit patients for generations to come,” he said.



**Rendering of the women’s and children’s building planned for Avera McKennan in Sioux Falls.** (Courtesy of Avera Health)

## Women and children’s services

South Dakota’s preterm birth rate has risen in the past decade, from 7.9% of live births in 2011 to 9.4% in 2020. According to the South Dakota Department of Health Pregnancy Risk Assessment Monitoring System 2021 report — the latest available — 10.1% of mothers surveyed had a preterm birth, which increases the risk of sudden infant death syndrome and long-term health issues.

Over 25% of infants had to stay at the hospital for more than two days, according to the survey. And the percentage of women reporting gestational diabetes during pregnancy was 14.9%.

The six-story building will add 158 beds for women’s and children’s hospital services at Avera’s McKennan Hospital campus in Sioux Falls, create a new front entrance for the hospital and expand some existing facilities, according to the news release. The tower will be dedicated to labor and delivery, postpartum care, newborn nursery, neonatal intensive care unit, pediatric hospital care and pediatric intensive care.

Many counties – especially in western South Dakota – are considered maternal health care deserts, meaning there isn’t a hospital or birth center offering obstetric care in the county. Native American South Dakotans are most likely to live in such areas. According to South Dakota Public Broadcasting, Avera researchers are looking to understand barriers to Native American maternal health.

The Avera Research Institute was awarded federal grant funding of up to \$58 million over seven years to conduct such research.

From 2012 to 2021, American Indians made up 20% of all live births, but 44% of all pregnancy-associated deaths.

“It’s crisis levels,” Amy Elliot, chief research officer at Avera McKennan, told SDPB. “With the lack of obstetrics providers especially on the western side of the state. How do we find solutions, not just for recruiting more people, but also do we have to think a little bit different about how we deliver care?”

Feller said the health care system has multiple initiatives to support rural health care, including telemedicine neonatal intensive care; obstetricians and gynecologists placed in regional centers such as Mitchell, Aberdeen and Pierre to reduce travel time for births; and remote monitoring and training for rural center sonographers to reduce travel for high-risk pregnancy patients.

## Digestive health services

Digestive health services, or gastroenterology, covers everything involving the digestive tract, including gallbladder disease and pancreatic and colon cancer.

Pancreatic cancer diagnoses are on the rise in South Dakota — increasing from 2.2 cases per 100,000 people in 2002 to 13.2 in 2020, according to the National Cancer Institute — along with liver cancer (3.5 to 7.2 for the same timeframe). Stomach and colon cancers diagnoses are trending downward.

But with the 2021 federal recommendation to start colon cancer screenings five years sooner to age 45, the specialty has become “busy,” Feller said.

“Colonoscopy is a crucial preventive measure against colorectal cancer, which is the third most common cancer diagnosed in both men and women in the United States and the second leading cause of cancer-related deaths in both women and men,” Feller added.

The three-story building project will expand digestive health services on the Louise Health Campus, where there is a growing need for capacity and access.

Gastroenterology services are currently located in the Avera Specialty Hospital and its attached medical building. The space vacated within the Avera Specialty Hospital by digestive health services will be used for orthopedic services.

The projects are expected to break ground this summer and be completed in 2026 for the Louise project and 2027 for the main hospital campus project.

The health care system also plans to renovate other Sioux Falls locations. The South Dakota Health and Educational Facilities Authority will consider a plan to finance up to \$465 million in bonds to Avera Health for the projects and refinance projects at its meeting on Thursday.

Avera plans to move its hospital oncology unit to the fifth floor of the Prairie Center on the main campus. The move is a “domino effect” of the two major projects, Feller said.

Avera will also build out its clinic space at the southeastern Sioux Falls Dawley Farm location to accommodate specialty providers at the clinic, and it plans to create a new 18-bed unit for patients at Avera St. Luke’s Hospital in Aberdeen.

## Federal rebuild of Baltimore bridge ‘will not be quick or easy or cheap,’ Buttigieg says

BY: JACOB FISCHLER - MARCH 27, 2024 9:35 PM

U.S. Transportation Secretary Pete Buttigieg outlined Wednesday the immediate and longer-term priorities the Biden administration is pursuing in the aftermath of the Francis Scott Key Bridge collapse in Baltimore that left six presumed dead.

While many questions remained roughly 36 hours after a massive cargo ship struck the bridge and caused the deadly collapse, Buttigieg at a White House press briefing reiterated President Joe Biden’s pledge a day earlier for the federal government to fund the full cost of rebuilding the bridge.

The U.S. Coast Guard is also leading efforts to clear debris from the site to reopen operations at the busy Port of Baltimore, Vice Admiral Peter Gautier, the deputy commandant for operations for the Coast Guard, said at the briefing.

“It’s just too soon to say” exactly how much money or time will be needed to rebuild the bridge or open the port, Buttigieg told reporters.

“Rebuilding will not be quick or easy or cheap,” Buttigieg said. “But we will get it done.”

The U.S. Transportation Department received a preliminary estimate from the Maryland Department of Transportation around the time Buttigieg addressed reporters at the Wednesday afternoon briefing, he said.

He did not share the sum requested, but said the state’s official request would allow federal money to flow even before a full cost is known.

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**Workers continue to investigate and search for victims after the cargo ship Dali collided with the Francis Scott Key Bridge causing it to collapse yesterday, on March 27, 2024 in Baltimore, Maryland. Two survivors were pulled from the Patapsco River and six missing people are presumed dead after the Coast Guard called off rescue efforts. A work crew was fixing potholes on the bridge, which is used by roughly 30,000 people each day, when the ship struck at around 1:30am on Tuesday morning. The accident has temporarily closed the Port of Baltimore, one of the largest and busiest on the East Coast of the U.S.** (Photo by

Scott Olson/Getty Images)

to pay for reconstruction, Buttigieg said the government would pursue accountability for "any private party found to be responsible," but that Biden didn't want to wait for that process to play out before sending funds to Maryland.

For the second day in a row, Biden spoke with Maryland Gov. Wes Moore, members of the state's congressional delegation and local leaders and reiterated his administration's support "every step of the way," according to a White House pool report.

The administration could ease regulatory requirements to speed bridge construction, Buttigieg said, though he noted it was too early to know what regulations would be at play.

"We have a clear direction from the president to tear down any barriers, bureaucratic as well as financial, that could affect the timeline of this project," he said.

## Port reopening

Buttigieg did not have an estimate for how long it would take to rebuild the bridge or to reopen the port. The initial construction of the Key Bridge took five years in the 1970s, he said.

"That does not necessarily mean it will take five years to replace, but that tells you what went into that original structure," he said. "So it is going to be some time."

The port could be reopened before a new bridge is built, he said.

Debris from the collapsed bridge is blocking the shipping channel connecting the port to the Chesapeake

## Congressional action likely needed

The bipartisan infrastructure law enacted in 2021 authorized funding for the Transportation Department's emergency relief program, which would likely be a mechanism for federal funding, Buttigieg said, though he added it's likely Congress will have to approve more emergency appropriations.

"It is certainly possible – I would go so far as to say likely – that we may be turning to Congress in order to help top-up those funds," Buttigieg said. "But that shouldn't be a barrier to the immediate next few days starting to get the ball rolling."

The emergency relief account has about \$950 million, Buttigieg said, "but also a long line of needs and projects behind that."

The Federal Highway Administration's emergency fund allocated about \$560 million in fiscal 2024.

Asked if the companies that own and operate the ship involved, the Dali, would be made

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Bay and the Atlantic Ocean. The remains of the bridge must be cleared before the port can restart operations.

Reopening the port is among the administration's top priorities in the aftermath of the collapse.

The port is a major economic hub, directly supporting 8,000 jobs and about \$2 million in wages daily, Buttigieg said.

The port also usually handles between \$100 million and \$200 million in cargo daily. But the disruption to shipping traffic is slightly less urgent, Buttigieg said.

Ships often visit the port as part of a run along the Eastern Seaboard, including the Port of New York and New Jersey and Virginia ports, he said. Cargo is already being diverted to other East Coast ports, he said.

"That said, the Port of Baltimore is an important port," he said. "So for our supply chains, and for all the workers who depend on it for their income, we're going to help to get it open as soon as safely possible."

## Investigation ongoing

Buttigieg declined to comment in detail on the investigation into the crash, which is being conducted by the National Transportation Safety Board, an independent agency.

The bridge, which opened in 1977, was not built to withstand the force of a 200-million-pound vessel crashing into a key structural feature, he said, casting doubt on whether any engineering feature could have helped.

"Part of what's being debated is whether any design feature now known would have made a difference in this case," Buttigieg said.

But, he said, if the NTSB determines anything that should be considered in regulations, inspections, designs or funding for bridges, the administration would "be ready to apply those findings."

## Jackley among attorneys general to call on Congress to restrict 'diet weed' in next farm bill

BY: JOHN HULT - MARCH 27, 2024 9:05 AM

South Dakota Attorney General Marty Jackley is among 21 top state prosecutors who've signed a letter urging Congress to close the loophole that created the diet weed industry as they craft the next farm bill.

Hemp-derived cannabis equivalents became legal with the passage of the 2018 farm bill, which legalized the cultivation of hemp as long as the plants contain less than .3 % THC. That chemical compound creates the "high" experienced by marijuana users, and is typically present only in lower levels in hemp.



**Jeff Garland (right) gives Indiana NRCS district conservationist Lee Schnell a tour of Papa G's Organic Hemp Farm in Crawford County, Indiana June 23, 2022.** (NRCS photo, Brandon O'Connor)

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Entrepreneurs, however, quickly began to concentrate and even synthesize the chemical cousins of THC found in the hemp plant. The resulting products, sold under names like Delta-8 or Delta-10, are widely available across the U.S. in smoke shops and convenience stores, though some states have banned them.

South Dakota lawmakers passed a bill barring their sale – but not their possession or use – during the 2024 legislative session. The bill becomes law on July 1.

The letter from the bipartisan group of attorneys general, addressed to the heads of the Senate and House of Representatives' agriculture committees, argues that Congress ought to fix the problem it unwittingly created. The next farm bill, they said, should clarify that legalized hemp does not legalize hemp-derived intoxicants.

"Regardless of your Committees' intentions, the reality is that (the 2018 farm bill) has unleashed on our states a flood of products that are nothing less than a more potent form of cannabis," the letter says.

A press release from Jackley's office notes that mislabeled products have led to emergency room visits in other states. Many of the products appeal to those younger than 21, he said, such as gummy candies or chocolates that ape the marketing of established consumer brands.

"Illicit suppliers are stealing legitimate brand names and packaging harmful and dangerous products as candy, snacks, and cereal," Jackley said in the news release. "These copycat hemp products put people, especially children, at risk. They also jeopardize lawful hemp production for agricultural purposes here in South Dakota."

In an interview with South Dakota Searchlight, Jackley said a federal solution is necessary to offer confidence and certainty to hemp growers and retailers of non-intoxicating CBD health products while protecting the public from unregulated sellers of cannabis-like products.

South Dakota leads the nation in hemp production.

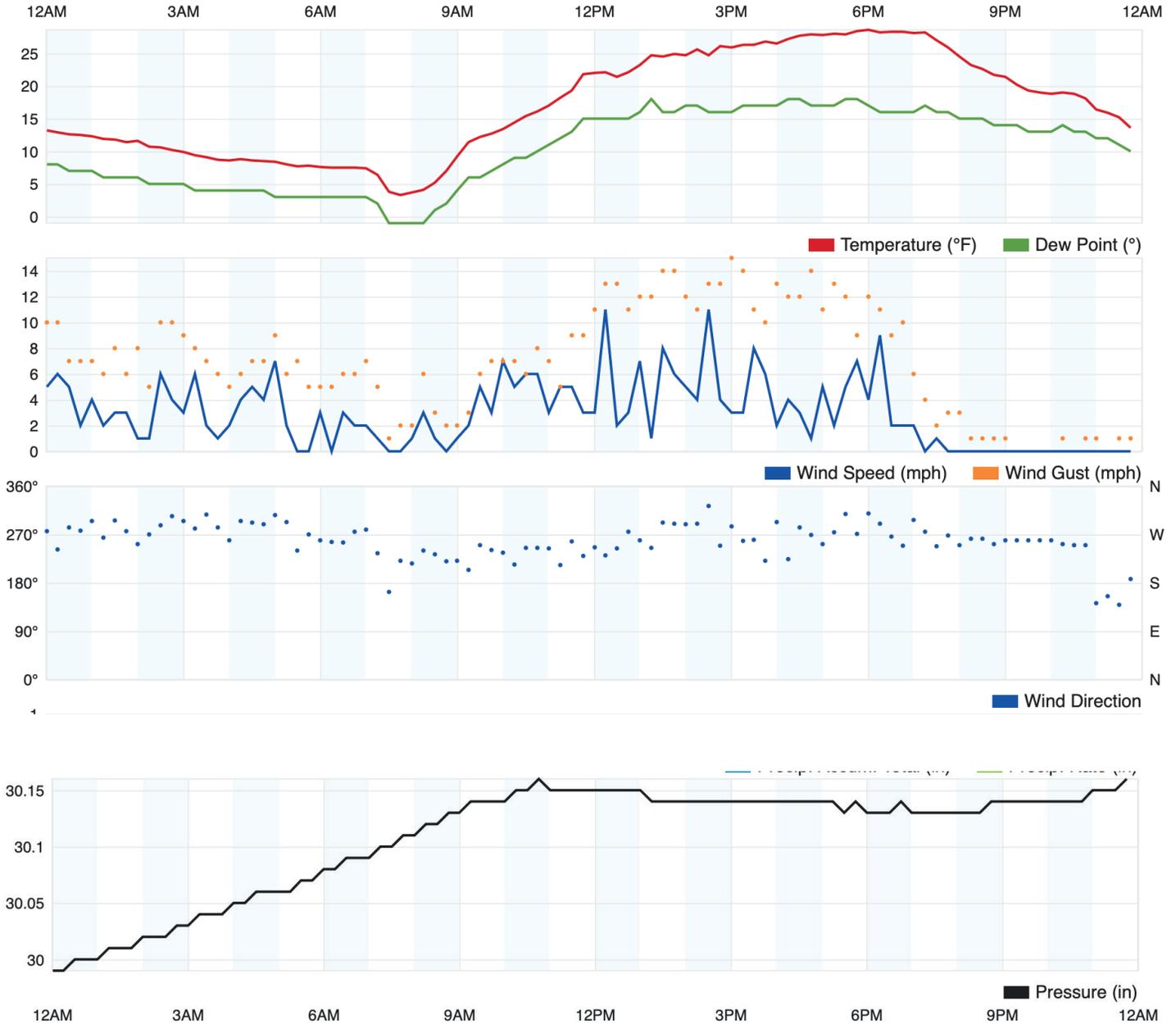
"If South Dakota has different rules from North Dakota, that's a problem for hemp growers," Jackley said.

The other state attorneys general who signed the letter are from Arkansas, California, Colorado, Connecticut, District of Columbia, Georgia, Hawaii, Indiana, Iowa, Kansas, Maryland, Minnesota, Missouri, North Carolina, North Dakota, Oregon, Pennsylvania, Tennessee, Virginia, and Washington.

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## Yesterday's Groton Weather Graphs



# Broton Daily Independent

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Today



Sunny

High: 37 °F

Tonight



Partly Cloudy then Chance Freezing Rain

Low: 23 °F

Friday



Chance Rain/Freezing Rain then Chance Rain

High: 38 °F

Friday Night



Partly Cloudy

Low: 20 °F

Saturday



Partly Sunny

High: 38 °F



## Potential for Light Icing Overnight

March 28, 2024  
5:39 AM

Weak system moves through the region tonight

- ❖ Weak system moving through the area tonight may bring patches of **light freezing rain** across northern SD.
- ❖ Ice accumulations are forecast to be less than one tenth of an inch.
- ❖ Best chances for icing between 10pm Thursday to 7am Friday, mainly north of Hwy 212.



Powered by  
Global Systems Laboratory  
National Oceanic and  
Atmospheric Administration  
U.S. Department of Commerce

National Weather Service  
Aberdeen, SD

A weak disturbance will move northeast across the Dakotas overnight into Friday morning. There's potential we'll see patches of light freezing rain, mainly across northern South Dakota. Amounts are forecast to be light, less than one-tenth of an inch, so any impacts are expected to be minor and not too widespread. The forecast radar image on the left is just one model's interpretation of where possible areas of freezing rain will be at midnight. Main takeaway here is that the patches of freezing rain will likely not be too widespread.

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## Yesterday's Groton Weather

High Temp: 29 °F at 5:56 PM

Low Temp: 3 °F at 7:49 AM

Wind: 16 mph at 1:33 PM

Precip: : 0.00

Day length: 12 hours, 40 minutes

## Today's Info

Record High: 82 in 1946

Record Low: -10 in 1913

Average High: 48

Average Low: 25

Average Precip in March.: 0.77

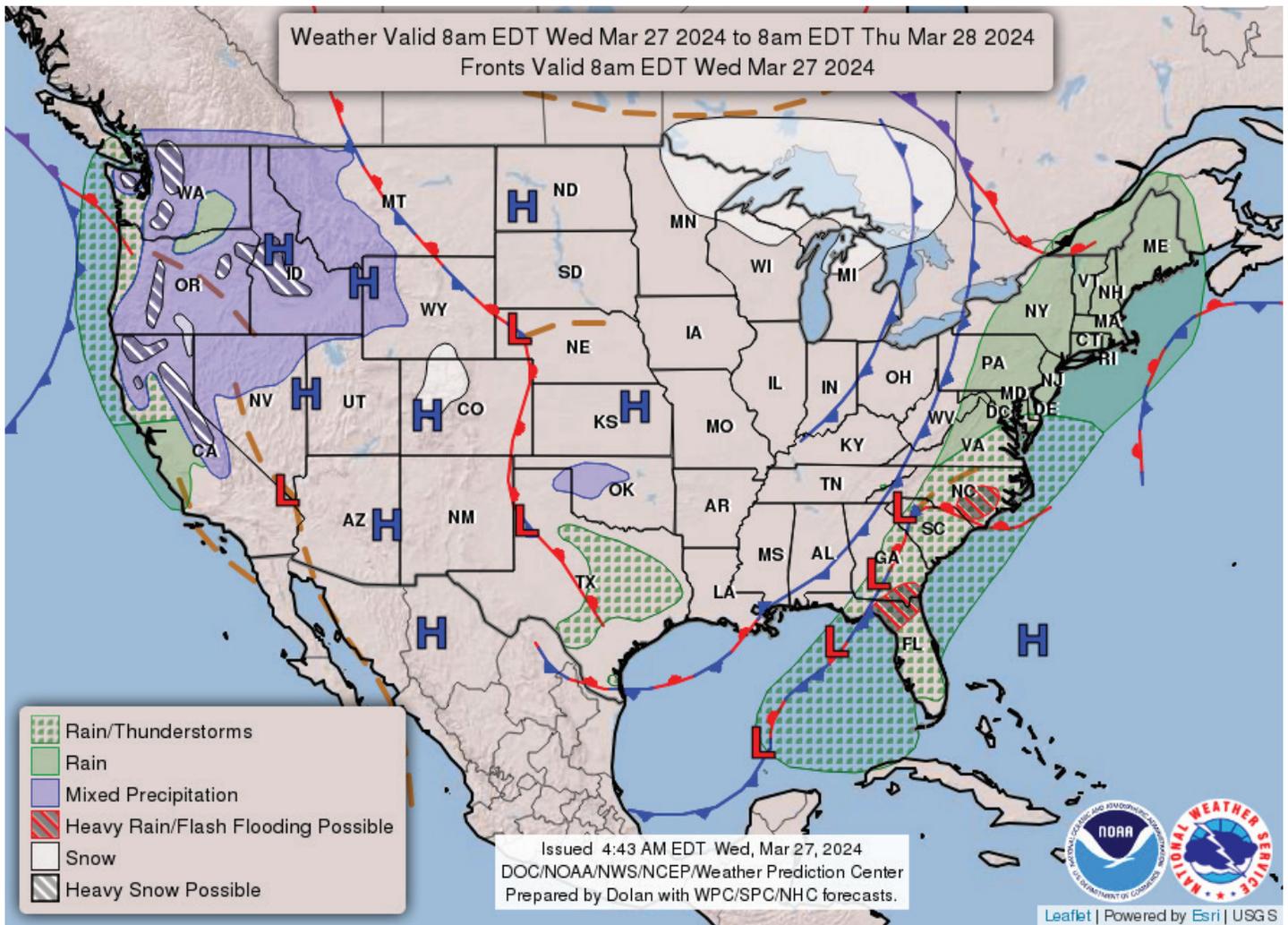
Precip to date in March: 0.78

Average Precip to date: 1.94

Precip Year to Date: 0.85

Sunset Tonight: 7:57:21 pm

Sunrise Tomorrow: 7:15:11 am



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## Today in Weather History

March 28, 1977: A slow-moving storm system affected South Dakota from March 28th through March 30th, 1977. The storm produced heavy snow in the west and thunderstorms in the east. Northerly winds gusting to 50 miles an hour in the West created blizzard conditions as the snow totals mounted. Some areas in western Butte, Pennington, northern Shannon, and Lawrence counties received over 20 inches of snow. With drifts exceeding 6 to 8 feet many people in western South Dakota thought it was the worst blizzard in a quarter century. A few locations in the northern Black Hills received over 4 feet of snow. Because of blocked roads, westbound traffic was halted on I-90, and many schools and businesses were forced to close for several days. Across the eastern portion of the state rains of over 1" fell in many areas. Milbank even reported walnut size hail.

1917 - Thane Creek, AK, reported a snow cover of 190 inches. (The Weather Channel)

1920: The worst tornado disaster of record occurred in Chicago, IL as a tornado killed 28 persons and caused three million dollars damage. This tornado was part of an outbreak which saw 38 tornadoes hit the Midwest and the Deep South states. Over 380 people died, and at least, 1,215 were injured during the Palm Sunday outbreak.

1935: On this date through March 31st, a great dust storm descended on Amarillo, Texas reducing visibility to zero for a six-hour period.

1963: A decision was handed down in the case of Whitney Bartie vs. the United States of America. Bartie sued the U.S. Weather Bureau for negligence in failing to provide a warning about Hurricane Audrey in 1957. Bartie's wife and five children were killed after the 12-foot storm surge struck Cameron Parish, LA on the morning of June 27, 1957. It was ruled that the evidence presented did not establish negligence on the part of the Weather Bureau.

1984 - A violent outbreak of tornadoes hit the Carolinas. Thunderstorms spawned 22 tornadoes during the late afternoon and evening hours which killed 57 persons and injured 1248 others. Nearly half the deaths occurred in mobile homes. A tornado from near Tatum SC to southern Cumberland County NC was 2.5 miles in width at times. (The Weather Channel)

1987 - A blizzard raged from southern Nebraska to central Iowa. Snowfall totals ranged up to 17 inches at Blue Hill NE. Winds gusted to 68 mph at Carroll IA. High winds produced snow drifts twenty feet high in western Iowa, and produced wind chill readings as cold as 30 degrees below zero in Nebraska. The snowfall total of 9.4 inches at Omaha NE was a record for the date. (Storm Data) (The National Weather Summary)

1988 - Severe thunderstorms in central Oklahoma produced hail up to four inches in diameter causing 35 million dollars in southern Oklahoma County. Baseball size hail and seven inches of rain caused another eighteen million dollars damage in Stephens County. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

1989 - Unseasonably warm weather prevailed from the Southern and Central Plains to the Atlantic coast. Eighteen cities reported new record high temperatures for the date. The afternoon high of 81 degrees at Beckley WV was a record for March, and the high of 90 degrees in downtown Baltimore MD tied their March record. (The National Weather Summary)

1990 - A storm system brought heavy snow to the west central and southern mountains of Wyoming, and high winds to the Wasatch Mountains of northern Utah. Snowfall totals in Wyoming ranged up to ten inches at the Snowy Ski Range Area, and the storm pushed the snowfall total for the month at Cheyenne above 37 inches, surpassing their previous record for March of 35 inches. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

Daily Devotionals

## Seeds of Hope

### HIDING "WHAT IS"

In ancient Greece, the theaters had no scenery, and the actors wore no costumes. To portray a character, however, they carried hand-held masks that they would place in front of their faces. They were designed to represent the character of the person in the role they were playing. They would walk onto the stage, and when speaking, hold the mask before their face.

The word hypocrisy, as we know it today, had its roots in the Greek word hupokrisis. It meant "acting a part in a play or feigning to be what one is not." Our word, hypocrite, had its origins in the Greek work hypocrisies - one who wears a "mask" to hide their real identity.

John addressed hypocrisy when he wrote, "If someone says I belong to God, but doesn't obey God's commandments, that person is a liar and does not live in the truth." Strong words that leave no "wigggle room."

True Christian faith results in consistent Christian living. John is confronting all of us because Christian faith results in Christian living, Christian conduct, and Christian service.

If we profess to be "Christian" but do not demonstrate Christlike behavior in "word and deed," we are wearing a mask to present ourselves as someone other than who we are. We are attempting to represent ourselves as someone we are not.

John is encouraging us to look at our behavior in the light of God's Word. He says, candidly, that "if we live like Christ, we belong to Christ!" In other words, "walk our talk."

Prayer: Father, we are all capable of hiding who we are from others. But we cannot hide from You. May we come out of hiding and be Christ-like Christians. In Jesus' Name, Amen.

Scripture For Today: If someone claims, "I know God," but doesn't obey God's commandments, that person is a liar and is not living in the truth. 1 John 2:4



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 DRAW: 1 Days 16 Hrs 13  
Mins 25 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

### LOTTO AMERICA

WINNING NUMBERS: 03.27.24

9 22 30 31 34 5

All Star Bonus: 2x

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:  
**\$2,500,000**

NEXT DRAW: 2 Days 15 Hrs 28  
Mins 26 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

### LUCKY FOR LIFE

WINNING NUMBERS: 03.27.24

3 10 16 37 44 4

TOP PRIZE:

**\$7,000/week**

NEXT DRAW: 15 Hrs 43 Mins 26  
Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

### DAKOTA CASH

WINNING NUMBERS: 03.27.24

3 4 11 34 35

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:  
**\$36,000**

NEXT DRAW: 2 Days 15 Hrs 43  
Mins 25 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

### POWERBALL

DOUBLE PLAY

WINNING NUMBERS: 03.27.24

31 47 52 53 57 23

TOP PRIZE:

**\$10,000,000**

NEXT DRAW: 2 Days 16 Hrs 12  
Mins 25 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

### POWERBALL

WINNING NUMBERS: 03.27.24

37 46 57 60 66 8

Power Play: 2x

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:  
**\$935,000,000**

NEXT DRAW: 2 Days 16 Hrs 12  
Mins 26 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

## News from the Associated Press

### Editorial Roundup: South Dakota

By The Associated Press undefined

Yankton Press & Dakotan. March 25, 2024.

Editorial: SD Public Defender Bill Is A Step Forward

Better late than never, South Dakota stepped into a new legal era last week when Gov. Kristi Noem signed House Bill 1057, which establishes a state public defender office, into law.

This legislation will help counties deal with providing legal representation for certain individuals in the court system.

Prior to this, counties were responsible for picking up the entire cost of such legal representation.

Under HB1057, the new state office will take over certain types of indigent cases that the counties would otherwise have to cover, South Dakota Searchlight reported. These will include criminal appeals, habeas corpus appeals and child abuse and neglect appeals.

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

It's a welcome change for South Dakota, particularly for the counties that are dealing with that legal burden. This was the last state in the union that did not have a public defender office to handle such cases.

HB1057 came about from recommendations made by a task force set up last summer to study the costs of public defenders in the state. It was created because some counties were facing dire financial issues dealing with these cases.

"We don't have two to three years to get this fixed," Hughes County Commissioner Randy Brown, a member of the task force, said last July. "We're going to need some sort of financial assistance starting next year."

Added Sen. Jim Mehlhaff, R-Pierre, "It would be nice to see some sort of funding component and relief to the counties that are really squeezed by this in the initial court-appointed attorney appointments."

The new office is forecast to cost the state \$1.4 million annually but save the counties \$2.1 million a year. According to Searchlight, lawmakers have added a one-time influx of \$3 million to help counties with current indigent cases.

This new office should provide a real service to counties facing strained budgets and states attorneys with limited staffs trying to deal with growing workloads.

However, the office is not the end of the issue. In other states, public defenders often report being underpaid and overworked for their services — an indication that this measure in South Dakota may merely transfer some of those headaches from one entity to another. We'll see how it transpires.

But this new office is a start and quite definitely a step in a better direction for all involved.

END

### Dethroned crypto king Sam Bankman-Fried to be sentenced for defrauding FTX investors

By KEN SWEET and LARRY NEUMEISTER Associated Press

NEW YORK (AP) — Former crypto mogul Sam Bankman-Fried faces the potential of decades in prison when he is sentenced Thursday for his role in the 2022 collapse of FTX, once one of the world's most popular platforms for trading digital currency.

Bankman-Fried, 32, was convicted in November of fraud and conspiracy — a dramatic fall from a year earlier when he and his companies seemed to be riding a crest of success that resulted in a Super Bowl advertisement and celebrity endorsements from stars like quarterback Tom Brady and comedian Larry David.

A jury found that Bankman-Fried illegally used money from FTX depositors to cover his expenses, which

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included purchasing luxury properties in the Caribbean, alleged bribes to Chinese officials and private planes. Prosecutors recommended a prison sentence of 40 to 50 years.

"The defendant victimized tens of thousands of people and companies, across several continents, over a period of multiple years. He stole money from customers who entrusted it to him; he lied to investors; he sent fabricated documents to lenders; he pumped millions of dollars in illegal donations into our political system; and he bribed foreign officials. Each of these crimes is worthy of a lengthy sentence," prosecutors told Judge Lewis A. Kaplan in a court filing.

Bankman-Fried's attorneys, friends and family have urged leniency, saying he is unlikely to reoffend again. They also say FTX's investors have largely recovered their funds — a claim disputed by bankruptcy lawyers, FTX and its creditors.

"Mr. Bankman-Fried continues to live a life of delusion," wrote John Ray, the CEO of FTX who has been cleaning up the bankrupt company. "The 'business' he left on November 11, 2022 was neither solvent nor safe."

Two weeks ago, Bankman-Fried attorney Marc Mukasey attacked a probation office recommendation of 100 years in prison, saying a sentence of that length would be "grotesque" and "barbaric."

He urged the judge to sentence Bankman-Fried to a term of five to 6 1/2 years in prison.

"Sam is not the 'evil genius' depicted in the media or the greedy villain described at trial," Mukasey said, calling his client a "first-time, non-violent offender."

Bankman-Fried was worth billions of dollars on paper as the co-founder and CEO of FTX, which was the second-largest cryptocurrency exchange in the world at one time.

FTX allowed investors to buy dozens of virtual currencies, from Bitcoin to more obscure ones like Shiba Inu Coin. Flush with billions of dollars of investors' cash, Bankman-Fried took out a Super Bowl advertisement to promote his business and bought the naming rights to an arena in Miami.

But the collapse of cryptocurrency prices in 2022 took its toll on FTX, and ultimately led to its downfall. FTX's hedge fund affiliate, known as Alameda Research, had bought billions of dollars of various crypto investments that lost considerable amounts of value in 2022. Bankman-Fried tried to plug the holes in Alameda's balance sheet with FTX customer funds.

Three other people from Bankman-Fried's inner circle pleaded guilty to related crimes and testified at his trial.

The biggest name among the three was Caroline Ellison, once the girlfriend of Bankman-Fried. Ellison described Bankman-Fried as a calculating individual who knew that he was likely committing crimes when he directed the use of customer funds. Two other onetime friends of Bankman-Fried, Gary Wang and Nishad Singh, also testified they felt they were directed by Bankman-Fried to commit fraud.

## Doctors visiting a Gaza hospital are stunned by the war's toll on Palestinian children

By WAFAA SHURAFU and KAREEM CHEHAYEB Associated Press

DEIR AL-BALAH, Gaza (AP) — An international team of doctors visiting a hospital in central Gaza was prepared for the worst. But the gruesome impact Israel's war against Hamas is having on Palestinian children still left them stunned.

One toddler died from a brain injury caused by an Israeli strike that fractured his skull. His cousin, an infant, is still fighting for her life with part of her face blown off by the same strike.

An unrelated 10-year-old boy screamed out in pain for his parents, not knowing that they were killed in the strike. Beside him was his sister, but he didn't recognize her because burns covered almost her entire body.

These gut-wrenching casualties were described to The Associated Press by Tanya Haj-Hassan, a pediatric intensive-care doctor from Jordan, following a 10-hour overnight shift at Al-Aqsa Martyrs Hospital in the town of Deir al-Balah.

Haj-Hassan, who has extensive experience in Gaza and regularly speaks out about the war's devastating

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effects, was part of a team that recently finished a two-week stint there.

After nearly six months of war, Gaza's health sector has been decimated. Roughly a dozen of Gaza's 36 hospitals are only partially functioning. The rest have either shut down or are barely functioning after they ran out of fuel and medicine, were surrounded and raided by Israeli troops, or were damaged in fighting.

That leaves hospitals such as Al-Aqsa Martyrs caring for an overwhelming number of patients with limited supplies and staff. The majority of its intensive care unit beds are occupied by children, including infants wrapped in bandages and wearing oxygen masks.

"I spend most of my time here resuscitating children," Haj-Hassan said after a recent shift. "What does that tell you about every other hospital in the Gaza Strip?"

A different team of international doctors working at Al-Aqsa Martyrs in January stayed at a nearby guesthouse. But because of a recent surge of Israeli strikes nearby, Haj-Hassan and her co-workers stayed in the hospital itself.

That gave them a painfully vivid look at the strain the hospital has come under as the number of patients keeps rising, said Arvind Das, the team leader in Gaza for the International Rescue Committee. His organization and Medical Aid for Palestinians organized the visit by Haj-Hassan and others.

Mustafa Abu Qassim, a nurse from Jordan who was part of the visiting team, said he was shocked by the overcrowding.

"When we look for patients, there are no rooms," he said. "They are in the corridors on a bed, a mattress, or on a blanket on the floor."

Before the war, the hospital had a capacity of around 160 beds, according to the World Health Organization. Now there are some 800 patients, yet many of the hospital's 120 staff members are no longer able to come to work.

Health care workers face the same daily struggle as others in Gaza in finding food for their families and trying to ensure some safety for them. Many bring their children with them to the hospital to keep them close, Abu Qassim said.

"It's just miserable," he said.

Thousands of people driven from their homes by the war are also living in the hospital grounds, hoping it will be safe. Hospitals have special protections under international law, though those protections can be removed if combatants use them for military purposes.

Israel has alleged that hospitals serve as command centers, weapons storage facilities and hideouts for Hamas, but has presented little visual evidence. Hamas has denied the allegations. Israel has been carrying out a large-scale operation in Gaza's largest hospital, Shifa, for the past week.

Israeli troops have not raided or besieged Al-Aqsa Martyrs but have attacked surrounding areas, sometimes striking close to the hospital. In January, many doctors, patients, and displaced Palestinians fled the hospital after a flurry of strikes.

Israel's bombardment and offensive in Gaza have killed more than 32,000 Palestinians and wounded nearly 75,000 more in the territory of 2.3 million people, according to Gaza's Health Ministry. The count does not differentiate between combatants and civilians, but the ministry says about two-thirds of those killed have been women and children.

Roughly half of Gaza's 2.3 million people are 17 or younger, the U.N.'s agency for children estimates.

Israel holds Hamas responsible for non-combatants' deaths and injuries because the militants in Gaza operate from within civilian areas. It says over one-third of the dead are Hamas militants, though it has not backed up the claim with evidence.

The war was triggered on Oct. 7 by Hamas and other militants who attacked southern Israel, killing around 1,200 people and taking some 250 hostages. The Israeli government believes around 100 hostages being held in Gaza are still alive.

In the early stages of the war, Israel severely limited the entry of food, fuel and medical supplies into Gaza. While the flow of aid has increased — and Israel says there are no longer any limits — the international community has called on Israel to let in more.

Aid groups say complicated inspection procedures at the border, continued fighting, and a breakdown in public order have caused massive slowdowns in convoys. Israel accuses the U.N. of disorganization.

The result has been catastrophic, with hospital staff struggling to cope with a shortage of spare parts to maintain medical equipment. Al-Aqsa Martyrs has also been short on anesthetics, meaning surgeries and other procedures are frequently performed without painkillers.

Haj-Hassan says there is only one way to end Gaza's health care crisis.

"They need the war to stop," she said.

## **Why did more than 1,000 people die after police subdued them with force that isn't meant to kill?**

By REESE DUNKLIN, RYAN J. FOLEY, JEFF MARTIN, JENNIFER McDERMOTT, HOLBROOK MOHR and JOHN SEEWER Associated Press

Carl Grant, a Vietnam veteran with dementia, wandered out of a hospital room to charge a cellphone he imagined he had. When he wouldn't sit still, the police officer escorting Grant body-slammed him, ricocheting the patient's head off the floor.

Taylor Ware, a former Marine and aspiring college student, walked the grassy grounds of an interstate rest stop trying to shake the voices in his head. After Ware ran from an officer, he was attacked by a police dog, jolted by a stun gun, pinned on the ground and injected with a sedative.

And Donald Ivy Jr., a former three-sport athlete, left an ATM alone one night when officers sized him up as suspicious and tried to detain him. Ivy took off, and police tackled and shocked him with a stun gun, belted him with batons and held him facedown.

Each man was unarmed. Each was not a threat to public safety. And despite that, each died after police used a kind of force that is not supposed to be deadly — and can be much easier to hide than the blast of an officer's gun.

Every day, police rely on common tactics that, unlike guns, are meant to stop people without killing them, such as physical holds, Tasers and body blows. But when misused, these tactics can still end in death — as happened with George Floyd in 2020, sparking a national reckoning over policing. And while that encounter was caught on video, capturing Floyd's last words of "I can't breathe," many others throughout the United States have escaped notice.

Over a decade, more than 1,000 people died after police subdued them through means not intended to be lethal, an investigation led by The Associated Press found. In hundreds of cases, officers weren't taught or didn't follow best safety practices for physical force and weapons, creating a recipe for death.

These sorts of deadly encounters happened just about everywhere, according to an analysis of a database AP created. Big cities, suburbs and rural America. Red states and blue states. Restaurants, assisted-living centers and, most commonly, in or near the homes of those who died. The deceased came from all walks of life — a poet, a nurse, a saxophone player in a mariachi band, a truck driver, a sales director, a rodeo clown and even a few off-duty law enforcement officers.

The toll, however, disproportionately fell on Black Americans like Grant and Ivy. Black people made up a third of those who died despite representing only 12% of the U.S. population. Others feeling the brunt were impaired by a medical, mental health or drug emergency, a group particularly susceptible to force even when lightly applied.

"We were robbed," said Carl Grant's sister, Kathy Jenkins, whose anger has not subsided four years later. "It's like somebody went in your house and just took something, and you were violated."

AP's three-year investigation was done in collaboration with the Howard Center for Investigative Journalism programs at the University of Maryland and Arizona State University, and FRONTLINE (PBS). The AP and its partners focused on local police, sheriff's deputies and other officers patrolling the streets or responding to dispatch calls. Reporters filed nearly 7,000 requests for government documents and body-camera footage, receiving more than 700 autopsy reports or death certificates, and uncovering video in at least four dozen cases that has never been published or widely distributed.

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Medical officials cited law enforcement as causing or contributing to about half of the deaths. In many others, significant police force went unmentioned and drugs or preexisting health conditions were blamed instead.

Video in a few dozen cases showed some officers mocked people as they died, laughing or making comments such as "sweaty little hog," "screaming like a little girl" and "lazy f---." In other cases, officers expressed clear concern for the people they were subduing.

The federal government has struggled for years to count deaths following what police call "less-lethal force," and the little information it collects is often kept from the public and highly incomplete at best. No more than a third of the cases the AP identified are listed in federal mortality data as involving law enforcement at all.

When force came, it could be sudden and extreme, the AP investigation found. Other times, the force was minimal, and yet the people nevertheless died, sometimes from a drug overdose or a combination of factors.

In about 30% of the cases, police were intervening to stop people who were injuring others or who posed a threat of danger. But roughly 25% of those who died were not harming anyone or, at most, were committing low-level infractions or causing minor disturbances, AP's review of cases shows. The rest involved other nonviolent situations with people who, police said, were trying to resist arrest or flee.

A Texas man loitering outside a convenience store who resisted going to jail was shocked up to 11 times with a Taser and restrained facedown for nearly 22 minutes — more than twice as long as George Floyd, previously unreported video shows. After a California man turned silent during questioning, he was grabbed, dogpiled by seven officers, shocked five times with a Taser, wrapped in a restraint contraption and injected with a sedative by a medic despite complaining "I can't breathe." And a Michigan teen was speeding an all-terrain vehicle down a city street when a state trooper sent volts of excruciating electricity from a Taser through him, and he crashed.

In hundreds of cases, officers repeated errors that experts and trainers have spent years trying to eliminate — perhaps none more prevalent than how they held someone facedown in what is known as prone restraint.

Many policing experts agree that someone can stop breathing if pinned on their chest for too long or with too much weight, and the Department of Justice has issued warnings to that effect since 1995. But with no standard national rules, what police are taught is often left to the states and individual departments. In dozens of cases, officers disregarded people who told them they were struggling for air or even about to die, often uttering the words, "I can't breathe."

What followed deadly encounters revealed how the broader justice system frequently works to shield police from scrutiny, often leaving families to grieve without knowing what really happened.

Officers were usually cleared by their departments in internal investigations. Some had a history of violence and a few were involved in multiple restraint deaths. Local and state authorities that investigate deaths also withheld information and in some cases omitted potentially damaging details from reports.

One of the last hopes for accountability from inside the system — what are known as death opinions — also often exonerated officers. The medical examiners and coroners who decide on these did not link hundreds of the deaths to force, but instead to accidents, drug use or preexisting health problems, sometimes relying on debunked science or incomplete studies from sources tied to law enforcement.

Even when these deaths receive the homicide label that fatal police shootings often get, prosecutors rarely pursue officers. Charging police is politically sensitive and can be legally fraught, and the AP investigation identified just 28 deaths that led to such charges. Finding accountability through civil courts was also tough for families, but at least 168 cases ended in settlements or jury verdicts totaling about \$374 million.

The known fatalities still averaged just two a week — a tiny fraction of the total contacts police have with the population. Police leaders, officers and experts say law enforcement shouldn't bear all the blame. As the social safety net frays, people under mental distress or who use stimulant drugs like cocaine or methamphetamine are increasingly on the streets. Officers sent to handle these emergencies are often

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poorly trained by their departments.

If incidents turn chaotic and officers make split-second decisions to use force, "people do die," said Peter Moskos, a professor at John Jay College of Criminal Justice and former Baltimore police officer.

"The only way to get down to zero is to get rid of policing," Moskos said, "and that's not going to save lives either."

But because the United States has no clear idea how many people die like this and why, holding police accountable and making meaningful reforms will remain difficult, said Dr. Roger Mitchell Jr., a leader in the push to improve tracking and one of the nation's few Black chief medical examiners when he held the office in Washington, D.C., from 2014 to 2021.

"Any time anyone dies before their day in court, or dies in an environment where the federal government or the local government's job is to take care of you," he said, "it needs transparency. It cannot be in the dark of night."

"This," he added, "is an American problem we need to solve."

Those who died

Carl Grant didn't care much for football. So on Super Bowl Sunday in 2020, family members said, he eased into his black Kia Optima, intending to shop for groceries near his suburban Atlanta home. The 68-year-old wound up 2½ hours away, where he came face to face with police in an encounter that underscores several findings central to AP's investigation: He was Black, he was not threatening physical harm, and a seemingly routine matter rapidly escalated.

The former Marine and trucking business owner had dementia and qualified as a disabled veteran. As he drove that evening, he became disoriented and took an interstate west to Birmingham, Alabama. There, Grant twice tried to go inside houses he thought were his.

Both times, residents phoned 911. And both times, responding officers opted to use force.

At the first house, Grant was taken to the ground and cuffed after an officer said he'd stepped toward a partner. Even though one officer sensed he was impaired, police released Grant without asking medics to examine him — a decision a superior later faulted.

At a second house about a half-mile away, police found him sitting in a porch chair. When he didn't follow an order to get off the porch, a different officer pushed him down the stairs, according to previously unreleased body-camera video. Grant gashed his forehead in the fall.

Officer Vincent Larry, who pushed Grant, went with him to the hospital. When Grant wouldn't return to his exam room, Larry used an unapproved "hip toss" to lift and slam him, hospital surveillance video showed. The back of Grant's head bounced four inches off the floor, a nurse estimated, wrecking his spinal cord in his neck.

After Grant awoke from emergency surgery, he thought his paralysis was a combat injury from the Vietnam War. "I'm so sorry this happened," he told family, his sister recalled. He died almost six months later from the injury.

An internal investigation concluded Larry's force at the hospital was excessive, and in a departure from many other cases AP found, his department acted: he received a 15-day suspension. He is no longer a city employee, a Birmingham spokesperson told AP. Neither Larry nor the department would comment. A judge recently cited a procedural error in dismissing a lawsuit filed by Grant's estate, which is appealing the ruling.

"He's almost 70 and confused," Grant's partner, Ronda Hernandez, said. "That's what I don't get. You just don't do that to old people."

Grant was one of 1,036 deaths from 2012 through 2021 that AP logged. That is certainly an undercount, because many departments blocked access to information. Files that others released were blacked out and video blurred, while officers routinely used vague language in their reports that glossed over force.

All but 3% of the dead were men. They tended to be in their 30s and 40s, when police might consider them more of a physical threat. The youngest was just 15, the oldest 95.

In sheer numbers, white people of non-Hispanic descent were the largest group, making up more than 40% of cases. Hispanics were just under 20% of those killed. But Black Americans were hit especially hard.

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The disproportionate representation of Black people tracks research findings that they face higher rates and severity of force, and even deaths. The Department of Justice has found after multiple investigations that Black people accounted for more unjustified stops for minor offenses, illegal searches that produced no contraband, unnecessary force, or arrests without probable cause.

Researchers caution that proving — or disproving — discrimination can be hard because of a lack of information. But in some cases AP identified, officers were accused of profiling and stopping Black people based on suspicions, as happened to Donald “Dontay” Ivy Jr.

Ivy was a 39-year-old resident of Albany, New York, who excelled in basketball during high school, served in the U.S. Navy and graduated college with a business degree. On a freezing night in 2015, he went to an ATM to check whether a delayed disability deposit had posted. Officers thought he seemed suspicious because he was walking with a lean and only one hand in the pocket of his “puffer” coat — indications, they thought, he might have a gun or drugs.

Ivy was cooperative when they stopped him, but, they said, he wouldn’t answer how much money he had withdrawn and denied a prior arrest. Police interpreted Ivy’s behavior as deceptive without grasping that Ivy suffered from paranoid schizophrenia. A witness recounted that Ivy seemed “slow” when he spoke.

When an officer touched Ivy to detain him — a known trigger for some with severe mental illness — police say Ivy began to resist. An officer fired a Taser, then Ivy fled. Officers caught up and beat him with batons, shocked him several more times with a Taser, put him facedown and got on top of him. By the time they rolled Ivy over, he’d stopped breathing.

The department quickly ruled that the officers acted appropriately and blamed a “medical crisis” for his death, even though it was classified a homicide. A grand jury declined to indict. However, the local prosecutor urged police to review policies for Tasers, batons and dealing with people with mental illness.

The local chapter of the New York Civil Liberties Union continued to question the stop, saying there was “strong reason to suspect” Ivy was racially profiled. After years in court, the city paid \$625,000 to settle with Ivy’s estate. His cousin and close friend Chamberlain Guthrie said the way Ivy’s life ended was one of the most painful things his family had endured.

“It’d be one thing if Dontay was out here being a ruffian and he was a thug,” Guthrie said. “But he was none of that.”

When force goes wrong

When people died after police subdued them, it was often because officers went too fast, too hard or for too long — many times, all of the above.

The United States has no national rules for how exactly to apply force. Instead, Supreme Court decisions set broad guard rails that weigh force as either “objectively reasonable” or “excessive,” based in part on the severity of the situation, any immediate safety threat and active resistance.

That frequently leaves states and local law enforcement to sort out the particulars in training and policies. Best practices from the government and private law enforcement organizations have tried to fill gaps, but aren’t mandatory and sometimes go ignored, as happened in hundreds of cases reviewed by AP and its partners.

In 2019, the mother of Taylor Ware, the former Marine with college plans, called 911 when he wouldn’t get back in their SUV during a manic episode caused by bipolar disorder. She told the dispatcher Ware would need space and urged police to wait for backup because he was a former wrestler and might be a handful — advice that tracked best practices, yet wasn’t followed.

The first officer to encounter Ware at a highway rest stop in Indiana saw the 24-year-old extending him a hand in greeting. Ware then calmly walked through a grassy field and sat down with folded legs.

The officer, an unpaid reserve marshal, assured Ware’s mother he’d had calls like this before. As she and a family friend watched, he stopped about 10 feet in front of Ware, according to video filmed by the friend and obtained by AP. His police dog barked and lunged several times — a provocation officers are told to avoid with the emotionally distressed. Ware remained seated.

After a few minutes, Ware walked toward the parking lot. There, the officer said, Ware pushed him away,

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a split-second act disputed by the friend. Her video shows Ware running and the officer commanding the dog to attack, setting off a cascade of force that ended with Ware in a coma. He died three days later.

A police news release said Ware had a "medical event," an explanation that echoes how police first described George Floyd's death. The prosecutor in Indiana declined to bring charges and praised officers for "incredible patience and restraint." His office's letter brushed past or left out key details: multiple dog bites, multiple stun-gun shocks, prone restraint and an injection of the powerful sedative ketamine.

In dozens of other cases identified by AP, people who died were given sedatives without consent, sometimes after officers urged paramedics to use them — a recommendation law enforcement is unqualified to make.

A coroner ruled Ware's death was due to natural causes, specifically "excited delirium" — a term for a condition that police say causes potentially life-threatening agitation, rapid heart rate and other symptoms. Major medical groups oppose it as a diagnosis, however, and say it is frequently an attempt to justify excessive force.

"It was like that was his body's own fault, that it wasn't the police's fault," Ware's sister, Briana Garton, said of the autopsy ruling.

Two experts who reviewed the case for the AP said police actions — such as the order for the dog to attack, the use of a Taser in the sternum and restraint facedown with handcuffs and back pressure — contributed to Ware's death.

"This was not proper service," said police practices expert Stan Kephart, himself a former chief. "This person should be alive today."

As with Ware, officers resorted to force in roughly 25% of the cases even though the circumstances weren't imminently dangerous. Many began as routine calls that other officers have, time and again, resolved safely. Those included medical emergencies phoned in by families, friends or the person who died.

By launching prematurely into force, police introduced violence and volatility, and in turn needed to use more weapons, holds or restraints to regain control — a phenomenon known as "officer-created jeopardy." Sometimes it starts when police misread as defiance someone's confusion, intoxication or inability to communicate due to a medical issue.

What led up to the force was sometimes unclear. In more than 100 cases, police either withheld key details or witnesses disputed the officer's account — and body-camera footage didn't exist to add clarity. But in about 45% of cases, officers became physical after they said someone tried to evade them or resist arrest for nonviolent circumstances. Some sprinted away with drugs, for example, or simply flailed their arms to resist handcuffs or wiggled around while held down.

Many times the way officers subdued people broke policing best practices, especially when using the go-to tools of restraining people facedown and shocking them with Tasers.

When done properly, placing someone on their stomach or shocking them is not inherently life-threatening. But there are risks: Prone restraint can compress the lungs and put stress on the heart, and Taser's maker has issued warnings against repeated shocks or targeting the body near the heart. These risks intensify when safety protocols aren't followed or when people with mental illness, the elderly or those on stimulant drugs are involved.

Some officers involved in fatalities testified they had been assured that prone position was never deadly, AP found, while many others were trained to roll people onto their sides to aid breathing and simply failed to do so.

"If you're talking, you're breathing, bro," an officer, repeating a common myth about prone restraint, told a Florida man following 12 shocks from stun guns.

"Stomach is (an) ideal place for them to be. It's harder for them to punch me," testified an officer in the death of a Minnesota man found sleeping at a grocery store and restrained for more than 30 minutes.

In dozens of police or witness videos, those who died began to fade on screen, their breathing becoming shallow, as happened in suburban San Diego to 56-year-old Oral Nunis.

Nunis was having a mental break at his daughter's apartment in 2020. He had calmed down, but then the first arriving officer grabbed his arm, a mere four seconds after making eye contact. Nunis begged to

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go without being handcuffed. The officer persisted. Nunis became agitated and ran outside.

At 5 feet, 5 inches tall and 146 pounds, Nunis quickly found himself pinned by several officers — each at least 80 pounds heavier than him. Although his body turned still, they kept pressing, wrapped him in a full-body restraint device and put a spit mask on him. From just 10 feet away, his daughter tried to console him in his final minutes: “Daddy, just breathe.”

The district attorney’s office later cleared the police, calling their force reasonable because Nunis had posed “unnaturally strong resistance” for his size.

As part of the family’s lawsuit, two pathologists concluded that the restraint officers used led to his death. One officer was asked under oath if pressure on someone’s back could impair breathing. “I have had several bodies on top of me during different training scenarios,” the 6-foot, 265-pound officer said, “and I never had difficulty breathing.”

The use of Tasers can be similarly misinformed. An officer shocked Stanley Downen, 77, a former iron-worker with Alzheimer’s disease who served during the Korean War, as he wandered the grounds of his veterans’ home in Columbia Falls, Montana. The electricity locked up his body and made him fall without control of his limbs. He hit his head on the pavement and later died.

The officer said under oath that he hadn’t read any warnings, including those from Taser manufacturer Axon Enterprise Inc., about the risks of shocking the elderly or people who could be injured if they fell. He testified that Downen was “armed with rocks,” but a witness told police Downen never raised his hands to throw them. The police chief cleared the officer, though a police expert hired by the family found he failed to follow accepted practices.

In about 30% of deaths that AP logged, civilians and officers faced potential or clear danger, extenuating circumstances that meant police didn’t always follow best practices. In about 170 of those cases, officers said a person charged, swung or lunged at them, or police arrived to find people holding someone down after a fight. In the other roughly 110 cases, police were trying to stop violent attacks against others, including officers.

There was a Kansas man who used his elderly mother as a shield when deputies arrived. And there was a 41-year-old concrete mason in Minnesota who choked and punched his adult daughter before grabbing an officer by the throat and pushing her into a window.

In one of the most violent encounters, three officers in Cohasset, Massachusetts, confronted Erich Stelzer, a 6-foot-6-inch bodybuilder who was stabbing his date so viciously that the walls were red with her blood.

Rather than fire their pistols that night in 2018, two of the officers used their Tasers and managed to handcuff Stelzer, 25, as he thrashed on the floor. Stelzer stopped breathing, and the officers could not revive him. The local prosecutor determined they had handled the situation appropriately and would have been justified in shooting Stelzer because he presented a lethal threat.

While the officers were relieved to have saved the woman’s life, they also wrestled with killing a man despite doing their best to avoid it.

“As the time went by after the incident, you know, it wasn’t lost on me that he was someone’s son, someone’s brother,” Detective Lt. Gregory Lennon said. “And I’m sorry that he died. You know, it wasn’t our intention.”

## Lack of accountability

Understanding how and why people die after force can be difficult. Information is often scarce or government at all levels won’t share what it has.

In 2000, Congress started trying to get the Justice Department to track deaths involving law enforcement. The department has acknowledged its data is incomplete, blames spotty reporting from police departments, and does not make whatever information exists publicly available.

Mortality data maintained by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention also has gaps. The AP found that when a death certificate does not list words like “police” and “law enforcement,” the CDC’s language-reading software doesn’t label the death as involving “legal intervention.” This means the death data flagged police involvement in, at most, 34% of the more than 1,000 deaths the investigation identified.

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Among the mislabeled deaths is that of Daniel Prude, a 41-year-old Black man. He died in 2020 while restrained and covered with a spit hood in Rochester, New York. The high-profile incident was caught on video, but while his death certificate noted "physical restraint," it made no direct mention of police.

The CDC recognizes the data undercounts police-involved deaths, but says it wasn't primarily intended to flag them. Staff lack the time or resources to corroborate death certificate details, officials said.

In 2017, leading pathologists recommended adding a checkbox to the U.S. standard death certificate to identify deaths involving law enforcement — as is already done with tobacco use and pregnancy. They argued better data could help inform better practices and prevent deaths. However, the proposal hasn't gained traction.

"This is a long-standing, not-very-secret secret about the problem here: We know very little," said Georgetown University law professor Christy Lopez, who until 2017 led the Justice Department office that investigates law enforcement agencies over excessive force.

Meanwhile, laws in states like Pennsylvania, Alabama and Delaware block the release of most, if not all, information. And in other places, such as Iowa, departments can choose what they wish to release, even to family members like Sandra Jones.

Jones' husband, Brian Hays, 56, had battled an addiction to painkillers since injuring his shoulder at a factory job. She last saw him alive one September night in 2015 after he called 911 because his mental health and methamphetamine use was making him delusional. Officers who arrived at their home in Muscatine, Iowa, ordered her to leave.

The next morning, a hospital contacted Jones to say Hays was there. As Hays was on life support, doctors told her that he had several Taser marks on his body and scrapes on his face and knees, she recalled. Neighbors also said they had seen Hays run out of the house, clad only in boxer shorts, and make it around the corner before officers caught him.

When Jones set out to unravel what happened, she said, police wouldn't hand over their reports. A detective later told her officers had shocked Hays and tied his feet before he went into cardiac arrest. She couldn't glean why that much force was necessary.

In time, Jones managed to get the autopsy report from the medical examiner's office, confirming the force and a struggle. But an attorney told her winning a lawsuit to pry out more information was unlikely. Hays' death didn't even make the local news.

"All I know is, something terrible happened that night," she said. "I have pictured him laying on that cement road more times than I can tell you. I picture him there, struggling to breathe."

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This story is part of an ongoing investigation led by The Associated Press in collaboration with the Howard Center for Investigative Journalism programs and FRONTLINE (PBS). The investigation includes the Lethal Restraint interactive story, database and the documentary, "Documenting Police Use Of Force," premiering April 30 on PBS.

## **VP Harris says US agencies must show their AI tools aren't harming people's safety or rights**

By MATT O'BRIEN AP Technology Writer

U.S. federal agencies must show that their artificial intelligence tools aren't harming the public, or stop using them, under new rules unveiled by the White House on Thursday.

"When government agencies use AI tools, we will now require them to verify that those tools do not endanger the rights and safety of the American people," Vice President Kamala Harris told reporters ahead of the announcement.

Each agency by December must have a set of concrete safeguards that guide everything from facial recognition screenings at airports to AI tools that help control the electric grid or determine mortgages and home insurance.

The new policy directive being issued to agency heads Thursday by the White House's Office of Manage-

ment and Budget is part of the more sweeping AI executive order signed by President Joe Biden in October.

While Biden's broader order also attempts to safeguard the more advanced commercial AI systems made by leading technology companies, such as those powering generative AI chatbots, Thursday's directive targets AI tools that government agencies have been using for years to help with decisions about immigration, housing, child welfare and a range of other services.

As an example, Harris said, "If the Veterans Administration wants to use AI in VA hospitals to help doctors diagnose patients, they would first have to demonstrate that AI does not produce racially biased diagnoses."

Agencies that can't apply the safeguards "must cease using the AI system, unless agency leadership justifies why doing so would increase risks to safety or rights overall or would create an unacceptable impediment to critical agency operations," according to a White House announcement.

The new policy also calls for two other "binding requirements," Harris said. One is that federal agencies must hire a chief AI officer with the "experience, expertise and authority" to oversee all of the AI technologies used by that agency, she said. The other is that each year, agencies must make public an inventory of their AI systems that includes an assessment of the risks they might pose.

Some rules exempt intelligence agencies and the Department of Defense, which is having a separate debate about the use of autonomous weapons.

Shalanda Young, the director of the Office of Management and Budget, said the new requirements are also meant to strengthen positive uses of AI by the U.S. government.

"When used and overseen responsibly, AI can help agencies to reduce wait times for critical government services, improve accuracy and expand access to essential public services," Young said.

## **Biden fundraiser in NYC with Obama, Clinton nets a whopping \$25M, campaign says. It's a new record**

By CHRIS MEGERIAN and COLLEEN LONG Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — A fundraiser for President Joe Biden on Thursday in New York City that also stars Barack Obama and Bill Clinton is raising a whopping \$25 million — setting a new record for the most-ever haul for a single political event, his campaign said.

The eye-popping amount was a major show of Democratic support for Biden at a time of persistently low poll numbers. The president will test the power of the campaign cash as he faces off with presumptive Republican presidential nominee Donald Trump, who has already proven with his 2016 win over Democrat Hillary Clinton that he didn't need to raise the most money to seize the presidency.

The Radio City Music Hall event will be a gilded exclamation mark on a recent burst of presidential campaign travel. Biden has visited several political battlegrounds in the three weeks since his State of the Union address served as a rallying cry for his reelection bid. The event also brings together more than three decades of Democratic leadership.

The hourslong event has different tiers of access depending on donors' generosity. The centerpiece is an onstage conversation with the three presidents, moderated by late-night talk show host Stephen Colbert. There's also a lineup of musical performers — Queen Latifah, Lizzo, Ben Platt, Cynthia Erivo and Lea Michele — that will be hosted by actress Mindy Kaling. Thousands are expected, and tickets are as low as \$225.

More money gets donors more intimate time with the presidents. A photo with all three is \$100,000. A donation of \$250,000 earns donors access to one reception, and \$500,000 gets them into an even more exclusive gathering.

"But the party doesn't stop there," according to the campaign. First lady Jill Biden and DJ D-Nice are hosting an after-party at Radio City Music Hall with 500 guests.

Obama and Clinton are helping Biden expand his already significant cash advantage over Trump. Biden had \$155 million in cash on hand through the end of February, compared to \$37 million for Trump and his Save America political action committee.

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The \$25 million tally for the New York City event Thursday includes money from supporters who handed over cash in the weeks ahead of the fundraiser for a chance to attend. It's raising \$5 million more than Trump raised during the entire month of February.

"This historic raise is a show of strong enthusiasm for President Biden and Vice President Harris and a testament to the unprecedented fundraising machine we've built," said campaign co-chair Jeffrey Katzenberg. "Unlike our opponent, every dollar we're raising is going to reach the voters who will decide this election — communicating the president's historic record, his vision for the future and laying plain the stakes of this election."

Trump has kept a low profile in recent weeks, partially because of courtroom appearances for various legal cases, the bills for which he's paying with funds from donors. He is also expected to be in the area on Thursday, attending the Long Island wake of a New York City police officer who was shot and killed during a traffic stop in Queens.

His next political rally is scheduled for Tuesday in Green Bay, Wisconsin. Some Republican leaders have become concerned that his campaign doesn't have the infrastructure ready for a general election battle with Biden.

Steven Cheung, a Trump campaign spokesperson, dismissed the import of Biden's Thursday fundraiser. "Crooked Joe is so mentally deficient that he needs to trot out some retreads like Clinton and Obama," he said.

Leon Panetta, who served in top positions under Clinton and Obama, described the fundraiser as an important moment for Biden's campaign.

"What it does, first and foremost, is to broaden and reinforce the support of all Democrats," he said.

Panetta said Clinton and Obama, both known as effective political communicators, could help Biden develop a better pitch for his reelection.

"I can't think of two people who would be better at putting together that kind of message," he said.

Obama's attendance on Thursday is a reminder of his role in boosting Biden's reelection. A joint fundraiser with Biden and Obama raised nearly \$3 million in December. And people who served in the former president's administration are also raising money for Biden, scheduling their own event on April 11.

"Consider what you'll donate this cycle and do it now," said an email that went out to a network of people. "Early money is far more valuable to the campaign."

## The Latest | Death toll climbs after airstrikes and rocket fire on Lebanon-Israel border

By The Associated Press undefined

The death toll from Israeli airstrikes across southern Lebanon has climbed to 16, including several militants and members of paramedic groups, according to Lebanese state media and the militant organizations.

And in northern Israel, one man was killed by a barrage of at least 30 rockets fired by Lebanese militant group Hezbollah, which said it was responding to a deadly airstrike targeting a paramedic center linked to a Sunni Muslim group.

International mediators have been scrambling to prevent an all-out war between Israel and Hezbollah amid near-daily violence, mostly confined to the area along the Lebanon-Israel border.

Hezbollah has been launching rockets toward Israel since Oct. 8, the day after Hamas-led militants stormed into southern Israel, triggering the war in Gaza. Some 1,200 people were killed in Israel and another 250 people abducted.

More than 32,000 people have been killed in Gaza and 74,000 wounded, according to the 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.

Currently:

- Israeli strikes in Lebanon kill 16, militant rockets kill 1 Israeli as cross-border violence soars
- Talks resume on bringing Israeli officials to the US to discuss Gaza operation, the White House says

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- Doctors visiting a Gaza hospital are stunned by the war's toll on Palestinian children
- US sanctions online media site Gaza Now and its founder for allegedly supporting Hamas
- As those who fled Israel's border villages weigh whether to return, what hangs in the balance?
- Find more AP coverage at <https://apnews.com/hub/israel-hamas-war>.

Here's the latest:

## ATTACKER WOUNDS 3 AFTER OPENING FIRE IN WEST BANK

TEL AVIV, Israel — Israeli authorities say an attacker wounded three people after opening fire at several vehicles on a main route in the occupied West Bank.

The Israeli military says the attacker fled the scene following Thursday's shooting and that forces were conducting searches. Magen David Adom of the Israeli rescue service said the injuries were moderate or light and that a 13-year-old was among the wounded.

Tensions in the West Bank have surged since the start of the war in Gaza and Israeli forces have engaged in near-nightly raids in the territory to clamp down on militancy. There has been a spike in shooting attacks by Palestinians during that time.

Since the start of the war, Israel has arrested roughly 3,600 Palestinians in the West Bank, the military says.

The Palestinian Health Ministry says at least 454 Palestinians have been killed and about 4,700 wounded in the West Bank and east Jerusalem since Oct. 7.

## U.N. SAYS A HOSPITAL IN SOUTHERN GAZA HAS CLOSED, LEAVING ONLY 12 LEFT

UNITED NATIONS — Two-thirds of Gaza's 36 hospitals aren't functioning after Al Amal Hospital in the south of the territory ceased operation amid intense military activity, U.N. humanitarian officials report.

According to the U.N. World Health Organization, Gaza now has just 12 operating hospitals – two that are "minimally functional" and 10 that are partially functional, four in the north and six in the south, U.N. spokesman Stephane Dujarric told reporters Wednesday.

More than two dozen staff, six patients and a companion and the bodies of two people killed inside Al Amal were moved Monday by the U.N. humanitarian office, the Palestine Red Crescent Society and the International Committee for the Red Cross before the hospital was closed Tuesday, Dujarric said.

Andrea De Domenico, the head of U.N. humanitarian operations in the Palestinian territories, visited the partially functioning Kamal Adwan hospital in the north last week and reported that it is receiving "about 15 malnourished children a day and is struggling to maintain services," Dujarric said.

"The hospital's only generator has been heavily damaged, and health workers and patients desperately need food, water and sanitation assistance," the U.N. spokesman said.

According to the U.N. World Food Program, Dujarric said, roughly 70% of northern Gaza's population "is facing catastrophic hunger" but efforts to deliver life-saving aid have been impeded by fighting and "access constraints" in getting food to those in need.

This month, WFP was only able to send 11 convoys to the north with food for some 74,000 people, far below the colossal needs of the population, Dujarric said.

## ISRAELI AIRSTRIKES IN LEBANON KILL 9 PEOPLE INCLUDING PARAMEDICS, STATE NEWS AGENCY SAYS

BEIRUT — Israeli airstrikes killed nine people in southern Lebanon late Wednesday, including paramedics who were preparing to respond to the first strike, the state-run National News Agency said.

That raises the number of people killed by Israeli strikes Wednesday to 16, after an earlier attack hit a different paramedic center linked to a Lebanese Sunni Muslim group, killing seven of the group's members.

And earlier Wednesday, the Shiite militant group Hezbollah claimed responsibility for firing a barrage of rockets into the northern Israeli city of Kiryat Shmona and a military base, which killed one person. It said the rockets were in response to the deadly strike on the paramedics center.

The Lebanese news agency said Israel bombed the village of Teir Harfa after sunset, killing five, and a second strike killed four people as paramedics gathered near a cafe in the coastal town of Naqoura.

Hezbollah's Islamic Health Society said two of its paramedics were killed in Teir Harfa while the Islamic Risala Scout Association, also a paramedic group, said one of its members was killed in the strike on

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Naqoura. Hezbollah said two of its fighters were killed, without saying where.

The Amal movement, a Shiite political and paramilitary organization, said the strike on Naqoura killed one of its local commanders, identified as Ali Mahdi.

Israel's military said it had struck a Hezbollah military compound in Teir Harfa and a "terrorist cell" in Naqoura.

Israel said the earlier strike in Hebbariye killed a member of the Sunni al-Jamaa al-Islamiya, or the Islamic Group, and several other militants. It said the man was involved in attacks against Israel.

Hezbollah has been firing rockets into northern Israel since the day after Hamas-led militants stormed into southern Israel on Oct. 7. The near-daily violence has mostly been confined to the area along the Lebanon-Israel border.

Nearly 240 Hezbollah fighters and about 40 civilians have died in Lebanon. The fighting has killed nine civilians and 11 soldiers in Israel.

**IN RARE SPEECH, HEAD OF HAMAS FIGHTERS IN GAZA CALLS ON MUSLIMS TO LIBERATE JERUSALEM MOSQUE**

GAZA CITY, Gaza Strip — Hamas has released a rare recording of what it says is the shadowy head of its military wing calling on Muslims around the world to liberate Jerusalem's Al-Aqsa Mosque.

Wednesday's recording was a reminder of the difficulty Israel has faced in realizing its stated goal of destroying Hamas' military capabilities.

Mohammed Deif delivered the message in a voice recording posted Wednesday on the militant group's channel in the messaging app Telegram.

"Start marching today, now, not tomorrow, toward Palestine," Deif says in a message aimed at Muslims globally, calling them to join "the honor of jihad and participation in the liberation of Al-Aqsa Mosque."

Al-Aqsa is the third-holiest site in Islam, and sits on a disputed hilltop revered by Jews and Muslims in Jerusalem's Old City.

No image of Deif appears in the recording, and it was not possible to authenticate it. It was not clear when the recording was made.

The leader of Hamas' Qassam Brigades has not been seen in public in decades, and the last time Hamas published a voice recording of him was the day of the Oct. 7. attack that triggered the war.

Israel says Deif is one of the masterminds of the attack, and he tops Israel's most-wanted list alongside Yehya Sinwar, the overall leader of Hamas in Gaza.

Deif is thought to be paralyzed after surviving multiple assassination attempts. Israel has released a small number of photos of what it says are Deif.

**NETANYAHU SAYS CIVILIANS IN RAFAH CAN 'JUST MOVE' AWAY FROM AN ISRAELI GROUND INVASION**

TEL AVIV, Israel — Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu of Israel has downplayed U.S. fears of a humanitarian catastrophe if Israel launches a planned ground invasion into Gaza's southernmost city, saying civilians would be able to flee the fighting into other parts of the war-torn territory.

Speaking Wednesday to a bipartisan U.S. Congressional delegation visiting Israel, Netanyahu said people sheltering in Rafah — now more than half of Gaza's 2.3 million population — will be able to move away from the fighting.

"People just move, they move with their tents," Netanyahu said. "People moved down (to Rafah). They can move back up."

Israel says a ground offensive is needed to destroy thousands of Hamas fighters in Rafah. The planned incursion has raised global alarm because the city on the Gaza-Egypt border is jammed with 1.4 million Palestinians in sprawling tent camps and U.N. shelters, most of whom have fled fighting elsewhere.

The United States, Israel's top ally, has urged Israel not to carry out the operation without a "credible" plan to evacuate civilians. Rafah is also the main entry point for desperately needed aid into Gaza, where the U.N. says 100% of the population is at severe levels of food insecurity.

Netanyahu suggested that the dispute over Rafah was just another in a series of disagreements between the allies and that he "appreciates" President Joe Biden's support, but that Israel will act alone "if

we have to.”

Israel’s military has said it plans to direct the civilians to “humanitarian islands” in central Gaza ahead of the planned offensive.

## **It’s a bittersweet Easter for chocolate lovers and African cocoa farmers but big brands see profits**

By FRANCIS KOKUTSE and JESSICA DONATI Associated Press

ACCRA, Ghana (AP) — Shoppers may get a bitter surprise in their Easter baskets this year. Chocolate eggs and bunnies are more expensive than ever as changing climate patterns eat into global cocoa supplies and the earnings of farmers in West Africa.

About three-quarters of the world’s cocoa — the main ingredient in chocolate — are produced on cacao trees in Ghana, Ivory Coast, Nigeria and Cameroon. But dusty seasonal winds from the Sahara were severe in recent months, blocking out the sunlight needed for bean pods to grow. The season prior, heavy rainfall spread a rotting disease.

With exports from the Ivory Coast, the world’s top producer, down by a third in recent months, the global price of cocoa has risen sharply. Cocoa futures have already doubled this year, trading at a record high of more than \$10,000 per metric ton in New York on Tuesday after rising more than 60% the previous year. Farmers who harvest cacao beans say the increases aren’t enough to cover their lower yields and higher production costs.

Yet the high Easter demand for chocolate carries a potential treat for big confectionery companies. Major global makers in Europe and the United States have more than passed on the rise in cocoa prices to consumers. Net profit margins at The Hershey Company increased to 16.7% in 2023 from 15.8% in 2022. Mondelez International, which owns the Toblerone and Cadbury brands, reported a jump to 13.8% in 2023 from 8.6% the year before.

“It is likely consumers will see a price spike on chocolate candy this Easter,” Wells Fargo said in a report this month.

Mondelez said it raised chocolate prices up to 15% last year and would consider additional price hikes to help meet 2024 revenue growth forecasts. “Pricing is clearly a key component of this plan,” Chief Financial Officer Luca Zaramella said in January. “Its contribution will be a little bit less than we have seen in 2023, but it is higher than an average year.”

Hershey’s also raised prices on its products last year and has not ruled out making further increases. “Given where cocoa prices are, we will be using every tool in our toolbox, including pricing, as a way to manage the business,” Hershey Chairman, President and CEO Michele Buck said during a conference call with investors last month.

Consumer groups are keeping track. In the United Kingdom, British consumer research and services company Which? found that chocolate Easter eggs and bunnies from popular brands like Lindt and Toblerone cost about 50% more this year. It said some candy eggs were smaller, too.

Cocoa is traded on a regulated, global market. Farmers sell to local dealers or processing plants, who then sell cocoa products to global chocolate companies. Prices are set up to a year in advance. Many farmers blame climate change for their poor crops. Cacao trees only grow close to the equator and are especially sensitive to changes in weather.

“The harmattan was severe at the time the pods were supposed to develop,” Fiifi Bofo, a spokesperson at the Ghana Cocoa Board, said, referring to the cool trade winds that carry enough dust to block out the sunlight needed for the trees to flower and produce beans.

Months of rain also are being blamed for black pod disease, a fungal infection that thrives in cooler, wet and cloudy weather, and causes pods to rot and harden.

“While we have a good price today, that’s not it. The cacao hasn’t even produced any (fruit),” Eloi Gnakomene, a cacao farmer in Ivory Coast, said last month. “People say that we’ve had a bit, but those living over that way, they’ve had nothing.”

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Opanin Kofi Tutu, a cocoa farmer in the eastern Ghana town of Suhum, said the shortfall in production coupled with higher fertilizer costs are making it difficult to survive. "The exchange rate to the dollar is killing us," he said.

Chocolate isn't even one of the traditions Tutu associates with Easter. "I am looking forward to my wife's kotomir and plantain, not chocolates," he said, referring to a local sauce prepared with cocoyam leaves.

To help increase production, authorities are promoting education on farming methods that might mitigate the effects of climate change, such as the use of irrigation systems. The president of Ghana also has promised to step in to help farmers get a better deal.

"With the current trend of the world cocoa price, cocoa farmers can be sure that I will do right by them in the next cocoa season," President Nana Addo Dankwa Akufo-Addo said last month.

The National Retail Federation, an American trade association, expects spending this Easter to remain high by historical standards despite rising candy prices. Its latest survey showed that consumers were expected to spend \$3.1 billion on chocolate eggs and bunnies and other sweets this Easter, down from \$3.3 billion a year ago.

In Switzerland, home to the world's biggest consumers of chocolate per capita, domestic consumption melted slightly last year, falling by 1% to 10.9kg per person, according to industry association Chocosuisse. It linked the dip to the rise in retail chocolate prices.

The nation's signature chocolate maker, Lindt & Sprüngli, reported increased profitability, with margins rising to 15.6% from 15% a year earlier.

"Lindt & Sprüngli Group's business model once again proved to be very successful in the financial year 2023," it said in a statement this month, noting that prices increases accounted for most of the growth.

Yet some smaller businesses that sell chocolate are finding it hard to keep up with the spike in cocoa prices while their sales decline.

Sandrine Chocolates, a shop in London that sells handmade Belgian chocolates, is struggling to survive after decades in business. The owner, Niaz Mardan, said the U.K.'s cost-of-living crisis and weak economy leave people worrying more about food than luxury chocolate, especially when cheaper alternatives were available at big grocery stores.

She has let go of her two employees and relies on sales at Easter and Christmas to stay afloat. "Many, many times, I thought to close the shop, but because I love the shop, I don't want to close it," Mardan, 57, said. "But there is no profit at all."

## Talks resume on bringing Israeli officials to the US to discuss Gaza operation, the White House says

By COLLEEN LONG and SEUNG MIN KIM Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Talks have restarted aimed at bringing top Israeli officials to Washington to discuss potential military operations in Gaza, after Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu canceled a planned visit this week because he was angry about the U.S. vote on a U.N. cease-fire resolution, the White House said Wednesday.

"So we're now working with them to find a convenient date that's obviously going to work for both sides," said press secretary Karine Jean-Pierre.

No date has been finalized yet. One U.S. official said strategic affairs minister Ron Dermer and national security adviser Tzachi Hanegbi would be among the delegation to come to Washington. The official were not authorized to speak publicly about the sensitive discussions and spoke to The Associated Press on condition of anonymity.

An Israeli official said the White House had reached out with the goal of setting a new meeting. The official was not authorized to talk to the media and spoke on condition of anonymity. Netanyahu's office said the prime minister "did not authorize the departure of the delegation to Washington."

The prime minister canceled the trip this week after the U.N. vote to demand a cease-fire in Hamas-run Gaza; the U.S. abstained from the vote but did not veto it. Netanyahu accused the United States of "re-

treating" from a "principled position" by allowing the resolution to pass without conditioning the cease-fire on the release of hostages held by Hamas.

The delegation to the U.S. was meant to discuss a promised ground invasion of the southern Gaza city of Rafah, which is overflowing with displaced civilians. Israel has so far rejected American appeals to call off the planned operation.

Israeli Defense Minister Yoav Gallant was already in Washington by the time Netanyahu canceled the trip by other officials. Gallant met with Biden's national security adviser, Jake Sullivan, Secretary of State Antony Blinken and Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin. The Gaza operation was one of many topics they discussed.

Netanyahu on Wednesday said his decision to cancel was meant to deliver a message to Hamas that international pressure against Israel will not prompt it to end the war without concessions from the militant group, an apparent attempt to smooth over the clash between the allies.

Speaking to visiting Sen. Rick Scott, R-Fla., Netanyahu said the canceled visit "was a message first and foremost to Hamas: Don't bet on this pressure, it's not going to work."

Netanyahu said the U.S. abstention on the U.N. vote was "very, very bad," and that it "encouraged Hamas to take a hard line and to believe that international pressure will prevent Israel" from achieving its war aims. Israel wants to destroy Hamas' military and governing capabilities and free the hostages taken by the militant group during its Oct. 7 attack against Israel.

The U.S. abstention and Netanyahu's subsequent decision to cancel the delegation represented the strongest public dispute between the two allies since the war in Gaza began.

## **US journalist marks a year in a Russian prison as courts keep extending his time behind bars**

By EMMA BURROWS Associated Press

For Evan Gershkovich, the dozen appearances in Moscow's courts over the past year have fallen into a pattern.

Guards take the American journalist from the notorious Lefortovo Prison in a van for the short drive to the courthouse. He's led in handcuffs to a defendants' cage in front of a judge for yet another hearing about his pretrial detention on espionage charges.

The proceedings are always closed. His appeals are always rejected, and his time behind bars is always extended. Then it's back to Lefortovo.

Gershkovich was arrested a year ago Friday while on a reporting trip for The Wall Street Journal to the Ural Mountains city of Yekaterinburg. The Federal Security Service, or FSB, alleges he was acting on U.S. orders to collect state secrets but provided no evidence to support the accusation, which he, the Journal and the U.S. government deny. Washington designated him as wrongfully detained.

The periodic court hearings give Gershkovich's family, friends and U.S. officials a glimpse of him, and for the 32-year-old journalist, it's a break from his otherwise largely monotonous prison routine.

"It's always a mixed feeling. I'm happy to see him and that he's doing well, but it's a reminder that he is not with us. We want him at home," Gershkovich's mother, Ella Milman, told The Associated Press.

Although Gershkovich is often seen smiling in the brief appearances in open court, friends and family say he finds it hard to face a wall of cameras pointing at him as if he were an animal in a zoo.

Ahead of the most recent one on Tuesday, Milman was particularly interested to see him. She was waiting, she said, for "a big reveal" — Gershkovich's cellmate had given him a haircut.

But the hearing itself offered no new revelations on his case: He was ordered to remain behind bars pending trial at least until June 30 — the fifth extension of his detention.

When Gershkovich was arrested a year ago — the first U.S. journalist taken into custody on espionage charges since Nicholas Daniloff in 1986 at the height of the Cold War — it came as a shock, even though Russia had enacted increasingly repressive laws on freedom of speech after the invasion of Ukraine.

"He was accredited by the Russian Foreign Ministry. There was nothing to suggest that this was going to happen," said Emma Tucker, the Journal's editor-in-chief.

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The son of Soviet emigres who settled in New Jersey, Gershkovich moved to Russia in 2017 to work for The Moscow Times newspaper before being hired by the Journal in 2022.

"He absolutely loved it," Milman said of her son's life in Moscow.

He threw himself into work and became close friends with other reporters. They spent evenings, weekends and holidays together — at traditional Russian saunas, cycling around Moscow or having barbecues in the countryside.

Those friends are now among the most vocal advocates for his release.

"For us, it's got to the level where if we can see Evan smiling in the courtroom — that stuff that brings us a lot of happiness. It's reassuring that he's still not been broken by it," said Washington Post correspondent Francesca Ebel.

His supporters say that is remarkable, given that Gershkovich is being held in Lefortovo, a notorious czarist-era prison used during Josef Stalin's purges, when executions were carried out in its basement.

Gershkovich is not allowed phone calls and wakes up "every morning to the same gray prison wall. ... To think that he's been doing that every day for the past year is just horrible," said his friend, Polina Ivanova of the Financial Times.

He's allowed out of his cell for a hour a day to exercise. He spends the rest of his time largely reading books in English and Russian and writing letters to friends and family who try to make sure he stays up to date with current affairs and gossip.

That includes following his favorite English soccer team, Arsenal, which is having one of its best seasons, even though scores usually get to him about two weeks late. Gershkovich can see only limited highlights on Russian TV but is kept up to date by his friend, Pjotr Sauer of the British newspaper, the Guardian.

"He is very happy about how Arsenal is playing but obviously upset he can't see it for himself," Sauer said.

Mikhail Gershkovich writes his son about chess strategy because his cellmate doesn't like the game. They also discuss artificial intelligence because "he wants to be current when he comes back," his father said.

No one knows when that might be.

The Biden administration is seeking the release of Gershkovich, who faces 20 years in prison. Russia's Foreign Ministry has said it would consider a prisoner swap — but only after a verdict in his trial, which has not yet begun.

U.S. Ambassador Lynne Tracy, who was in court again Tuesday for his latest hearing, said the charges against Gershkovich "are fiction" and that Russia is "using American citizens as pawns to achieve political ends."

Since invading Ukraine, Russian authorities have detained several U.S. nationals and other Westerners, seemingly bolstering that idea.

President Vladimir Putin has said he believed a deal can be reached to free Gershkovich, hinting he would be open to swapping him for a Russian national in Germany who fits the description of Vadim Krasikov. He is serving a life sentence for the 2019 killing in Berlin of a Georgian citizen of Chechen descent.

U.S. officials made an offer to swap Gershkovich last year that was rejected by Russia, and the Biden administration has not made public any possible deals since then.

Shortly after Russia invaded Ukraine, Gershkovich wrote on X, formerly Twitter, that "reporting on Russia is now also a regular practice of watching people you know get locked away for years."

Fluent in Russian, Gershkovich knew the risks and, after his arrest, knew "right from the very start that this was going to take a long time," Ebel said.

The Journal's Tucker said she is "optimistic that 2024 will be the year Evan is freed but I'm also realistic," noting that any negotiations for a swap are taking place against a "very febrile" backdrop.

That includes tensions with the West over the war in Ukraine, the recent attack on a Moscow concert hall and the U.S. presidential election.

Friends and family say Gershkovich is relying on his sense of humor to get through the days. Tracy said outside court Tuesday that he has displayed "remarkable resilience and strength in the face of this grim situation."

From behind bars, he has organized presents for friends on their birthdays as well as sending flowers

to important women in his life for International Women's Day earlier this month.

"He is telling people not to freak out," said Milman, noting that her son is a source of great pride for the family.

But as he enters his second year of detention, the strain on them is showing.

Every day, Milman said, "I wake up and look at the clock."

"I think about if his lunchtime has passed, and his bedtime," she said. "It's very hard. It's taking a toll."

## **Cargo ship had engine maintenance in port before it collided with Baltimore bridge, officials say**

By LEA SKENE and BRIAN WITTE Associated Press

BALTIMORE (AP) — The cargo ship that lost power and crashed into a bridge in Baltimore underwent "routine engine maintenance" in port beforehand, the U.S. Coast Guard said Wednesday, as divers recovered the bodies of two of six workers who plunged into the water when it collapsed. The others were presumed dead, and officials said search efforts had been exhausted.

Investigators began collecting evidence from the vessel a day after it struck the Francis Scott Key Bridge. The bodies of the two men were located in the morning inside a red pickup submerged in about 25 feet (7.6 meters) of water near the bridge's middle span, Col. Roland L. Butler Jr., superintendent of Maryland State Police, announced at an evening news conference.

He identified the men as Alejandro Hernandez Fuentes, 35, who was from Mexico and living in Baltimore, and Dorlian Ronial Castillo Cabrera, 26, who was from Guatemala and living in Dundalk, Maryland.

The victims, who were part of a construction crew fixing potholes on the bridge, were from Mexico, Guatemala, Honduras and El Salvador, Butler said.

Maryland Gov. Wes Moore addressed their families in Spanish during the news conference, saying, "Estamos contigo, ahora y siempre," which means, "we are with you, now and always."

All search efforts have been exhausted, and based on sonar scans, authorities "firmly" believe the other vehicles with victims are encased in material from the collapsed bridge, Butler said. Divers are to resume searching once the debris is cleared.

Coast Guard Rear Admiral Shannon Gilreath said at the news conference that authorities were informed that the ship was going to undergo the maintenance.

"As far as the engine goes, we were not informed of any problems with the vessel," he said.

The Baltimore region has reeled from the sudden loss of a major transportation link that's part of the highway loop around the city. The disaster also closed the port, which is vital to the city's shipping industry.

National Transportation Safety Board officials boarded the ship to recover information from its electronics and paperwork and to interview the captain and other crew members, NTSB Chair Jennifer Homendy said during a separate news conference. Twenty-three people, including two pilots, were on the ship when it crashed, she said.

The vessel was also carrying 56 containers of hazardous materials including corrosives, flammables and lithium ion batteries, Homendy said. She added that some containers were breached, and that a sheen on the water from those materials would be handled by authorities.

Marcel Muise, NTSB investigator in charge, laid out a preliminary timeline assembled from the voyage data recorder comprising audio from the bridge and VHF radio ahead of the crash, which federal and state officials have said appeared to be an accident.

The vessel, the Dali, left port at 12:39 a.m. Tuesday and, after it entered the channel, signs of trouble came at about 1:25 a.m. when numerous alarms sounded, according to the NTSB. About a minute later, steering commands and rudder orders were issued, and at 1:26 a.m. and 39 seconds, a pilot made a general radio call for nearby tug boats.

Maryland Transportation Authority data from about the same time shows the pilot association dispatcher called the transportation authority's officer on duty about the blackout, the NTSB said.

Just after 1:27 a.m., the pilot commanded the ship to drop an anchor on the left side of the ship and

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issued added steering commands. About 20 seconds later, the pilot issued a radio call reporting that the Dali had lost all power approaching the bridge.

At about that time, the state transportation officer on duty radioed two of its units already stationed at each end of the bridge saying to close the bridge to vehicle traffic. They were already there because of the construction.

Around 1:29 a.m., when the ship was traveling at about 8 mph (13 kph), recordings for about 30 seconds picked up sounds consistent with it colliding with the bridge, the NTSB said. A Transportation Authority dash camera also shows lights on the bridge going out.

At 1:29 a.m. and 39 seconds, the pilot reported to the Coast Guard that the bridge was down.

Muise said experts will review the entire voyage data recording and develop a detailed transcript.

At least eight people initially went into the water when the ship struck the bridge column, and two of them were rescued Tuesday, officials said.

Traffic was still crossing the span as the ship approached, and some vehicles appeared to escape with only seconds to spare. The crash caused the bridge to break and fall into the water within seconds.

Authorities had just enough time to stop vehicle traffic. One officer parked sideways across the lanes and planned to drive onto the bridge to alert the construction crew once another officer arrived, but he did not get a chance.

The debris complicated the search for the workers, according to a Homeland Security memo described to The Associated Press by a law enforcement official who was not authorized to discuss details of the document or the investigation and spoke on condition of anonymity.

Gov. Moore said the divers faced dangerous conditions, among the mangled metal and low visibility.

"They are down there in darkness where they can literally see about a foot in front of them," Moore said.

The Dali, which is managed by Synergy Marine Group, was headed from Baltimore to Sri Lanka. It is owned by Grace Ocean Private Ltd., and Danish shipping giant Maersk said it had chartered it.

The vessel passed foreign port state inspections in June and September 2023. In the June inspection, a faulty monitor gauge for fuel pressure was rectified before departure, Singapore's port authority said.

The ship was traveling under a Singapore flag, and officials there said they will conduct their own investigation in addition to supporting U.S. authorities.

The sudden loss of a highway that carries 30,000 vehicles a day and the port disruption will affect not only thousands of dockworkers and commuters but also U.S. consumers who are likely to feel the impact of shipping delays.

"A lot of people don't realize how important the port is just to everything," said Cat Watson, who used the bridge to get to work every day and lives close enough that she was awakened by the collision. "We're going to be feeling it for a very long time."

Baltimore is a busy entry point for vehicles made in Germany, Mexico, Japan and the United Kingdom, along with coal and farm equipment.

Ship traffic has been suspended indefinitely. Windward Maritime, a maritime risk-management company, said its data shows a large increase in ships that are waiting for a port to go to, with some anchored outside Baltimore or nearby Annapolis.

At the White House, Transportation Secretary Pete Buttigieg said the Biden administration was focused on reopening the port and rebuilding the bridge, which was completed in 1977. He did not put a timeline on those efforts, while noting that the original bridge took five years to construct.

Buttigieg also planned to meet Thursday with supply chain officials.

Barges, including some with cranes, were on their way to help remove the wreckage, Gilreath said.

Homendy said the NTSB investigation could take 12 to 24 months but the agency may issue urgent safety recommendations sooner. A preliminary report should come in two to four weeks.

"It's a massive undertaking for an investigation," Homendy said.

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.

## **An airstrip is being built on a Yemeni island during the ongoing war, with 'I LOVE UAE' next to it**

By JON GAMBRELL Associated Press

SEOUL, South Korea (AP) — As Yemen's Houthi rebels continue to target ships in a Mideast waterway, satellite pictures analyzed by The Associated Press show what appears to be a new airstrip being built at an entrance to that crucial maritime route.

No country has publicly claimed the construction taking place on Abd al-Kuri Island, a stretch of land rising out of the Indian Ocean near the mouth of the Gulf of Aden. However, satellite images shot for the AP appear to show workers have spelled out "I LOVE UAE" with piles of dirt next to the runway, using an abbreviation for the United Arab Emirates.

Both the Gulf of Aden and the Red Sea to which it leads have become a battleground between the Houthis and U.S.-led forces in the region as Israel's war on Hamas in the Gaza Strip rages — potentially allowing a nation to project its power into the area.

The construction comes as the presence of troops from the Emirates in the Socotra island chain to which Abd al-Kuri belongs — and that of the separatist force it backs in southern Yemen — have sparked clashes in the past.

In response to questions from the AP, the United Arab Emirates said Thursday that "any presence of the UAE on Socotra island is based on humanitarian grounds that is carried out in cooperation with the Yemeni government and local authorities."

"The UAE remains steadfast in its commitment to all international endeavors aimed at facilitating the resumption of the Yemeni political process, thereby advancing the security, stability, and prosperity sought by the Yemeni populace," it added, without elaborating.

The Yemeni Embassy in Washington and Saudi Arabia, which leads a coalition fighting the Houthis, did not respond to questions.

Abd al-Kuri is about 35 kilometers (21.75 miles) in length and about 5 kilometers (3.11 miles) at its widest point. It sits closer to the Horn of Africa than it does to Yemen, the Arab world's poorest nation, which has been at war for years.

Along that widest point sits the airstrip construction. Satellite photos from Planet Labs PBC analyzed by the AP showed trucks and other vehicles grading the runway on March 11, turning part of its sandy features a dark brown. Planet Labs images of the site shot for the AP on Monday, Tuesday and Wednesday showed vehicles in different positions and active work being done there, possibly including paving the site.

The runway, running north to south, measures some 3 kilometers (1.86 miles). A runway of that length can accommodate attack, surveillance and transport aircraft, even some of the heaviest bombers.

Construction initially could be seen in the area in January 2022, with a diagonal, shorter runway being carved out of the sand, according to Planet Labs imagery. The first signs of construction of the longer north-south runway were in July 2022, but work later halted.

This month, there's been increased activity on Abd al-Kuri, including construction at the northern edge of the runway, close to the water, and the movement of heavy vehicles.

That works corresponds with a report last week by Abu Dhabi's state-linked broadcaster Sky News Arabia, which claimed to quote an anonymous U.S. defense official as saying America had "strengthened our missile defenses on Socotra Island" in anticipation of the rebels attacking U.S. bases. Socotra is the main island of the Socotra chain, about 130 kilometers (80 miles) from Abd al-Kuri.

The U.S. military told the AP it is not involved in the construction on Abd al-Kuri, nor is there any American "military presence" elsewhere in Yemen. U.S. special forces have launched raids in the past in Yemen, while a two-decade American drone strike campaign has targeted the country's local al-Qaida affiliate.

There also weren't any air defense batteries immediately discernible around the Abd al-Kuri Island site in satellite imagery. However, what appear to be piles of dirt at the site had been arranged to spell "I LOVE UAE" just east of the runway.

The island of Socotra, a UNESCO World Heritage site home to the rare Dragon Blood tree, has long been

a strategic port given its location on a key East-West trade route for cargo and energy shipments coming from Asia and the Middle East onward to Europe. The Soviet Union once used Socotra as an anchorage for both its surface fleet and submarines when South Yemen, a Communist nation based in Aden, ruled the island from 1967 until 1990.

The island since has felt far removed from the chaos that has gripped Yemen in the decades since, from unification, to civil war, to the Iranian-backed Houthi rebels' sweeping entrance into the capital in 2014. A Saudi-led coalition that includes the UAE entered the Yemen war in 2015 on behalf of the country's exiled government and has been caught in a grinding, nearly decadelong conflict since.

In 2018, the UAE deployed troops to Socotra Island, sparking a dispute with Yemen's exiled government. Two years later, clashes broke out between Yemeni separatists backed by the UAE and other forces there.

Meanwhile, Iranian-linked media and the Houthis have alleged without providing evidence that the Emiratis allowed Israel to operate from Socotra as well. Israel has not acknowledged any presence there, and the Israeli prime minister's office declined to comment.

Since November, the Houthis have attacked ships, saying they want to force Israel to end its offensive in the Gaza Strip against Hamas. The ships targeted by the rebels, however, largely have had little or no connection to Israel, the U.S. or other nations involved in the war. The rebels also have fired missiles toward Israel, though they have largely fallen short or been intercepted.

While President Joe Biden entered office in 2021, he pulled support from the Saudi-led coalition, declaring: "This war has to end." But in January, the U.S. began launching airstrikes targeting the Houthis over their attacks on shipping, a near-daily campaign of attacks that continues today.

The airfield on Abd el-Kuri isn't the first mysterious airstrip to begin construction amid Yemen's war. In 2021, the AP reported that an airfield was being built on Mayun Island, also known as Perim Island, which sits in the narrow Bab el-Mandeb Strait linking the Gulf of Aden to the Red Sea.

Then, military officials with Yemen's internationally recognized government, which the Saudi-led coalition has backed since 2015, said the UAE was building the runway. The Saudi-led coalition battling the Houthis later acknowledged having "equipment" on the island, while a militia leader and nephew of Yemen's late strongman president Ali Abdullah Saleh acknowledged that his Emirati-backed troops were stationed there.

## **A fight to protect the dignity of Michelangelo's David raises questions about freedom of expression**

By COLLEEN BARRY Associated Press

FLORENCE, Italy (AP) — Michelangelo's David has been a towering figure in Italian culture since its completion in 1504. But in the current era of the quick buck, curators worry the marble statue's religious and political significance is being diminished by the thousands of refrigerator magnets and other souvenirs sold around Florence focusing on David's genitalia.

The Galleria dell'Accademia's director, Cecilie Hollberg, has positioned herself as David's defender since her arrival at the museum in 2015, taking swift aim at those profiteering from his image, often in ways she finds "debasing."

In that way, she is a bit of a David herself against the Goliath of unfettered capitalism with its army of street vendors and souvenir shop operators hawking aprons of the statue's nude figure, T-shirts of it engaged in obscene gestures, and ubiquitous figurines, often in Pop Art neon.

At Hollberg's behest, the state's attorney office in Florence has launched a series of court cases invoking Italy's landmark cultural heritage code, which protects artistic treasures from disparaging and unauthorized commercial use. The Accademia has won hundreds of thousands of euros (dollars) in damages since 2017, Hollberg said.

"There was great joy throughout all the world for this truly unique victory that we managed to achieve, and questions and queries from all over about how we did it, to ask advice on how to move," she told The Associated Press.

Legal action has followed to protect masterpieces at other museums, not without debate, including

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Leonardo's "Vitruvian Man," Donatello's David and Botticelli's "Birth of Venus."

The decisions challenge a widely held practice that intellectual property rights are protected for a specified period before entering the public domain — the artist's lifetime plus 70 years, according to the Berne Convention signed by more than 180 countries including Italy.

More broadly, the decisions raise the question of whether institutions should be the arbiters of taste, and to what extent freedom of expression is being limited.

"It raises not just legal issues, but also philosophical issues. What does cultural patrimony mean? How much of a stranglehold do you want to give institutions over ideas and images that are in the public domain?" said Thomas C. Danziger, an art market lawyer based in New York.

He pointed to Andy Warhol's famous series inspired by Leonardo's "Last Supper." "Are you going to prevent artists like Warhol from creating what is a derivative work?" Danziger asked. "Many people would view this as a land grab by the Italian courts to control and monetize artworks in the public domain that were never intended to be charged for."

Italy's cultural code is unusual in its scope, essentially extending in perpetuity the author's copyright to the museum or institution that owns it. The Vatican has similar legislative protections on its masterpieces, and seeks remedies through its court system for any unauthorized reproduction, including for commercial use and for damaging the dignity of the work, a spokesman said.

Elsewhere in Europe, Greece has a similar law, adopted in 2020, which requires a permit to use images of historic sites or artifacts for commercial use, and forbids the use of images that "alter" or "offend" the monuments in any way.

France's Louvre museum, home to some oft-replicated masterpieces like the "Mona Lisa" and Venus de Milo, notes that its collection mostly dates from before 1848, which puts them in the public domain under French law.

Court cases have debated whether Italy's law violates a 2019 European Union directive stating that any artwork no longer protected by copyright falls into the public domain, meaning that "everybody should be free to make, use and share copies of that work."

The EU Commission has not addressed the issue, but a spokesman told the AP that it is currently checking "conformity of the national laws implementing the copyright directive" and would look at whether Italy's cultural heritage code interferes with its application.

Hollberg won her first case against ticket scalpers using David's image to sell marked-up entrance packages outside the Accademia's doors. She also has targeted GQ Italia for imposing a model's face on David's body, and luxury fashion brand Longchamp's cheeky Florence edition of its trademark "Le Pliage" bag featuring David's more intimate details.

Longchamp noted the depiction was "not without irony" and said the bag was "an opportunity to express with amused lightness the creative force that has always animated this wonderful city."

No matter how many lawsuits Hollberg has initiated — she won't say how many — the proliferation of David likenesses continues.

"I am sorry that there is so much ignorance and so little respect in the use of a work that for centuries has been praised for its beauty, for its purity, for its meanings, its symbols, to make products in bad taste, out of plastic," Hollberg said.

Based on Hollberg's success and fortified by improved search engine technology, the private entity that is custodian of Florence's landmark Cathedral has started going after commercial enterprises using the famed dome for unauthorized, and sometimes denigrating, purposes — including men's and women's underwear.

So far, cease-and-desist letters have been enough to win compliance without turning to the courts, adding an extra half a million euros (\$541,600) a year to revenues topping 30 million euros (\$32 million), Luca Bagnoli, president of the Opera di Santa Maria del Fiore, told the AP.

"We are generally in favor of the freedom of artistic expression," Bagnoli said. "When it comes to re-interpreted copies, it becomes a little more difficult to understand where artistic freedom ends and our image rights begin."

Italy's cultural heritage code in its current form has been on the books since 2004, and while Hollberg's

cases were not the first, they have represented an acceleration, experts said.

The jurisprudence is still being tested. A court in Venice ordered Germany's Ravensburger jigsaw puzzle maker to stop using the image of "Vitruvian Man" in the first case to involve a company outside Italy. The ruling implicitly rejected Ravensburger's argument that the law was incompatible with the EU directive on copyright, lawyers said.

Experts say the aggressive stance could backfire, discouraging the licensing of Italy's artworks, a source of revenue, while also limiting the reproduction of masterpieces that serve as cultural ambassadors.

"There is a risk for Italy, because you can select a work of art that is not covered by this legislation," said Vittorio Cerulli Irelli, an intellectual property lawyer at Trevisan & Cuonzo in Rome. "In many instances, it is the same for you to use Leonardo's painting which is in the U.K. or Leonardo's painting which is in Italy. You just go for the easiest choice."

## Venezuelans are increasingly stuck in Mexico, explaining drop in illegal crossings to US

By CHRISTOPHER SHERMAN, ELLIOT SPAGAT and VALERIE GONZALEZ Associated Press

MEXICO CITY (AP) — Venezuelan migrants often have a quick answer when asked to name the most difficult stretch of their eight-country journey to the U.S. border, and it's not the dayslong jungle trek through Colombia and Panama with its venomous vipers, giant spiders and scorpions. It's Mexico.

"In the jungle, you have to prepare for animals. In Mexico, you have to prepare for humans," Daniel Ventura, 37, said after three days walking through the Darien Gap and four months waiting in Mexico to enter the U.S. legally using the government's online appointment system, called CBP One. He and his family of six were headed to Fort Atkinson, Wisconsin, where he has a relative.

Mexico's crackdown on immigration in recent months — at the urging of the Biden administration — has hit Venezuelans especially hard. The development highlights how much the U.S. depends on Mexico to control migration, which has reached unprecedented levels and is a top issue for voters as President Joe Biden seeks reelection.

Arrests of migrants for illegally crossing the U.S.-Mexico border have dropped so this year after a record high in December. The biggest decline was among Venezuelans, whose arrests plummeted to 3,184 in February and 4,422 in January from 49,717 in December.

While two months do not make a trend and illegal crossings remain high by historical standards, Mexico's strategy to keep migrants closer to its border with Guatemala than the U.S. is at least temporary relief for the Biden administration.

Large numbers of Venezuelans began reaching the U.S. in 2021, first by flying to Mexico and then on foot and by bus after Mexico imposed visa restrictions. In September, Venezuelans briefly replaced Mexicans as the largest nationality crossing the border.

Mexico's efforts have included forcing migrants from trains, flying and busing them to the southern part of the country, and flying some home to Venezuela.

Last week, Mexico said it would give about \$110 a month for six months to each Venezuelan it deports, hoping they won't come back. Mexican President Andres Manuel López Obrador extended the offer Tuesday to Ecuadorians and Colombians.

"If you support people in their places of origin, the migratory flow reduces considerably, but that requires resources and that is what the United States government has not wanted to do," said López Obrador, who is barred by term limits from running in June elections.

Migrants say they must pay corrupt officials at Mexico's frequent government checkpoints to avoid being sent back to southern cities. Each setback is costly and frustrating.

"In the end, it is a business because wherever you get to, they want to take the last of what you have," said Yessica Gutierrez, 30, who left Venezuela in January in a group of 15 family members that includes young children. They avoided some checkpoints by hiking through brush.

The group is now waiting in Mexico City to get an appointment so they can legally cross the U.S.-Mexico

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border. To use the CBP One app, applicants must be in central or northern Mexico. So Gutierrez's group sleeps in two donated tents across the street from a migrant shelter and check the app daily.

More than 500,000 migrants have used the app to enter the U.S. at land crossings with Mexico since its introduction in January 2023. They can stay in the U.S. for two years under a presidential authority called parole, which entitles them to work.

"I would rather cross the jungle 10 times than pass through Mexico once," said Jose Alberto Uzcategui, who left a construction job in the Venezuelan city of Trujillo with his wife and sons, ages 5 and 7, in a family group of 11. They are biding time in Mexico City until they have enough money for a phone so they can use CBP One.

Venezuelans account for the vast majority of 73,166 migrants who crossed the Darien Gap in January and February, which is on pace to pass last year's record of more than 500,000, according to the Panamanian government, suggesting Venezuelans are still fleeing a country that has lost more than 7 million people amid political turmoil and economic decline. Mexican authorities stopped Venezuelan migrants more than 56,000 times in February, about twice as much as the previous two months, according to government figures.

"The underlying question here is: Where are the Venezuelans? They're in Mexico, but where are they?" said Stephanie Brewer, who covers Mexico for the Washington Office on Latin America, a group that monitors human rights abuses.

Mexico deported only about 429 Venezuelans during the first two months of 2024, meaning nearly all are waiting in Mexico.

Many fear that venturing north of Mexico City will get them fleeced or returned to southern Mexico. The U.S. admits 1,450 people a day through CBP One with appointments that are granted two weeks out.

Even if they evade Mexican authorities, migrants feel threatened by gangs who kidnap, extort and commit other violent crimes.

"You have to go town by town because the cartels need to put food on their plates," said Maria Victoria Colmenares, 27, who waited seven months in Mexico City for a CBP One appointment, supporting her family by working as a waitress while her husband worked at a car wash.

"It's worth the wait because it brings a reward," said Colmenares, who took a taxi from the Tijuana airport to the border crossing with San Diego, hours before her Tuesday appointment.

Texas Republican Gov. Greg Abbott has touted his own efforts to explain the recent reduction in illegal crossings in his state, where at least 95% of Border Patrol arrests of Venezuelans occur. Those have included installing razor wire, putting a floating barrier in the Rio Grande and making plans to build a new base for members of the National Guard.

U.S. Homeland Security Secretary Alejandro Mayorkas has mostly credited Mexico for the drop in border arrests.

Some Venezuelans still come north despite the perils.

Marbelis Torrealba, 35, arrived in Matamoros, across the border from Brownsville, Texas, with her sister and niece this week, carrying ashes of her daughter who drowned in a boat that capsized in Nicaragua. She said they were robbed by Mexican officials and gangs and returned several times to southern Mexico.

A shelter arranged for them to enter the U.S. legally on emergency humanitarian grounds, but she was prepared to cross illegally.

"I already experienced the worst: Seeing your child die in front of you and not being able to do anything."

## Schools in the path of April's total solar eclipse prepare for a natural teaching moment

By CAROLYN THOMPSON Associated Press

CLEVELAND (AP) — Seventh-grade student Henry Cohen bounced side to side in time to the Beatles' "Here Comes the Sun" playing in teacher Nancy Morris' classroom, swinging his arms open and closed across the planets pictured on his T-shirt.

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Henry and other classmates at Cleveland's Riverside School were on their feet, dancing during a session of activities tied to April's total solar eclipse. Second-graders invited in for the lessons sat cross-legged on the floor, laughing as they modeled newly decorated eclipse viewing glasses. Dioramas with softball-sized model earths and moons and flashlight "suns" occupied desks and shelves around the room.

Henry said his shirt reflected his love of space, which he called "a cool mystery." The eclipse, he said, "is a one in a million chance and I'm glad I get to be here for it."

For schools in or near the path of totality of the April 8 eclipse, the event has inspired lessons in science, literacy and culture. Some schools also are organizing group viewings for students to experience the awe of daytime darkness and learn about the astronomy behind it together.

A hair out of the path of totality, the school system in Portville, New York, near the Pennsylvania line, plans to load its 500 seventh- through 12th-grade students onto buses and drive about 15 minutes into the path, to an old horse barn overlooking a valley. There, they will be able to trace the shadow of the eclipse as it arrives around 3:20 p.m. EST.

It required rearranging the hours of the school day to remain in session, but Superintendent Thomas Simon said staff did not want to miss out on the learning opportunity, especially at a time when students experience so much of life through screens.

"We want them to leave here that day feeling they're a very small part of a pretty magnificent planet that we live on, and world that we live in, and that there's some real amazing things that we can experience in the natural world," Simon said.

Schools in Cleveland and some other cities in the eclipse's path will be closed that day so that students aren't stuck on buses or in crowds of people expected to converge. At Riverside, Morris came up with a mix of crafts, games and models to educate and engage her students ahead of time.

"They really were not realizing what a big deal this was until we really started talking about it," Morris said.

Learning about phases of the moon and eclipses is built into every state's science standards, said Dennis Schatz, past president of the National Science Teaching Association. Some school systems have their own planetariums — relics of the 1960s space race — where students can take in educational shows about astronomy.

But there is no better lesson than the real thing, said Schatz, who encourages educators to use the eclipse as "a teachable moment."

Dallas science teachers Anita Orozco and Katherine Roberts plan to do just that at the Lamplighter School, arranging for the entire pre-K- through fourth-grade student body to watch it together outdoors. The teachers spent a Saturday in March at a teaching workshop at the University of Texas at Dallas where they were told it would be "almost criminal" to keep students inside.

"We want our students to love science as much as we do," Roberts said, "and we just want them understanding and also having the awe of how crazy this event is."

Wrangling young children may be a challenge, Orozco said, but "we want it to be an event."

In training future science teachers, University at Buffalo professor Noemi Waight has encouraged her student teachers to incorporate how culture shapes the way people experience an eclipse. Native Americans, for example, may view the total eclipse as something sacred, she said.

"This is important for our teachers to understand," she said, "so when they're teaching, they can address all of these elements."

The STEM Friends Club from the State University of New York Brockport planned eclipse-related activities with fourth-grade students at teacher Christopher Albrecht's class, hoping to pass along their passion for science, technology, engineering and math to younger students.

"I want to show students what is possible," said Allison Blum, 20, a physics major focused on astrophysics. "You know those big mainstream jobs, like astronaut, but you don't really know what's possible with the different fields."

Albrecht sees his fourth-grade students' interest in the eclipse as a chance to incorporate literacy into lessons, too — maybe even spark a love of reading.

"This is is a great opportunity to read a lot with them," Albrecht said. He has picked "What Is a Solar

Eclipse?" by Dana Meachen Rau and "A Few Beautiful Minutes" by Kate Allen Fox for his class at Hill Elementary School in Brockport, New York.

"It's capturing their interest," he said, "and at the same time, their imagination, too."

## Judge forges ahead with pretrial motions in Georgia election interference case

By KATE BRUMBACK Associated Press

ATLANTA (AP) — The charges against former President Donald Trump in the Georgia election interference case seek to criminalize political speech and advocacy conduct that the First Amendment protects, his lawyers argued in a court filing challenging the indictment.

Fulton County Superior Court Judge Scott McAfee plans to hear arguments on that filing and on two pretrial motions filed by former Georgia Republican Party chair David Shafer during a hearing set for Thursday. Lawyers for Shafer argue that he acted legally when he and other state Republicans signed a certificate asserting that Trump won the 2020 presidential election in Georgia and declaring themselves the state's "duly elected and qualified" electors.

McAfee is forging ahead with the case even as Trump and other defendants have said they plan to seek a ruling from the Georgia Court of Appeals to disqualify District Attorney Fani Willis. The judge earlier this month rejected defense efforts to remove Willis and her office over her romantic relationship with special prosecutor Nathan Wade, but he did give the defendants permission to seek a review of his decision from the appeals court.

Willis in August obtained an indictment against Trump and 18 others, accusing them of participating in a wide-ranging scheme to try to illegally overturn the 2020 presidential election in Georgia, which the Republican incumbent narrowly lost to Democrat Joe Biden. All of the defendants were charged with violating Georgia's expansive anti-racketeering law, along with other alleged crimes.

Four people have pleaded guilty after reaching deals with prosecutors. Trump and the others have pleaded not guilty. No trial date has been set, though Willis has asked that it begin in August.

Trump's lawyers wrote in their filing that the crimes their client is charged with fall into five separate areas: Republican elector certificates submitted by Georgia Republicans; a request to the Georgia House speaker to call a special legislative session; a filing in a lawsuit challenging the 2020 presidential election; a January 2021 phone call between Trump and Georgia Secretary of State Brad Raffensperger; and a letter sent to Raffensperger in September 2021.

"The First Amendment, in affording the broadest protection to political speech and discussion regarding governmental affairs, not only embraces but encourages exactly the kind of behavior under attack in this Indictment," Trump's lawyers wrote.

Prosecutors argued in response that the indictment "is based on criminal acts, not speech." Wherever speech is involved, they wrote, it is "speech integral to criminal conduct, fraud, perjury, threats, criminal solicitation, or lies that threaten to deceive and harm the government."

Most of the charges against Shafer have to do with his involvement in helping to organize a group of Georgia Republicans to cast Electoral College votes for Trump even though the state's election had been certified in favor of Biden. The charges against him include impersonating a public officer, forgery, false statements and writings, and attempting to file false documents.

His lawyers wrote in a filing that prosecutors are seeking "to punish as criminal conduct by Mr. Shafer which was lawful at the time." They argued that Shafer "was attempting to comply with the advice of legal counsel" and the requirements of the Electoral Count Act.

Shafer's lawyers also ask that three phrases be struck from the indictment: "duly elected and qualified presidential electors," "false Electoral College votes" and "lawful electoral votes." They argue that those phrases are used to assert that the Democratic slate of electors was valid and the Republican slate of electors in which Shafer participated was not. They argue that those are "prejudicial legal conclusions" about issues that should be decided by the judge or by the jury at trial.

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Prosecutors argue that Shafer is using "incorrect, extrinsic facts and legal conclusions ... to somehow suggest that he was or may have been a lawful presidential elector at the time of the charged conduct." They agreed that the indictment includes "disputed" and "unproven" allegations but said "that is not and never has been grounds for the dismissal of an indictment."

Willis and her team experienced several setbacks in March. Although McAfee did not grant defense requests to remove her from the case, he was sharply critical of her actions and said Wade, her hand-picked lead prosecutor on the case, must step aside for Willis to continue the prosecution. Just days earlier, the judge dismissed six of the 41 counts in the indictment, including three against Trump, finding that prosecutors failed to provide enough detail about the alleged crimes.

## Former Sen. Joe Lieberman, Democrats' VP pick in 2000, dead at 82

By SUSAN HAIGH Associated Press

HARTFORD, Conn. (AP) — Former U.S. Sen. Joe Lieberman of Connecticut, who nearly won the vice presidency on the Democratic ticket with Al Gore in the disputed 2000 election and who almost became Republican John McCain's running mate eight years later, has died, according to a statement issued by his family.

Lieberman died in New York City on Wednesday due to complications from a fall, the statement said. He was 82.

The Democrat-turned-independent was never shy about veering from the party line.

Lieberman's independent streak and especially his needling of Democratic presidential nominee Barack Obama during the 2008 presidential contest rankled many Democrats, the party he aligned with in the Senate. Yet his support for gay rights, civil rights, abortion rights and environmental causes at times won him the praise of many liberals over the years.

"In an era of political carbon copies, Joe Lieberman was a singularity. One of one," said Connecticut Sen. Chris Murphy, a Democrat. "He fought and won for what he believed was right and for the state he adored."

Over the last decade, Lieberman helped lead No Labels, a centrist third-party movement that has said it will offer as-yet-unnamed candidates for president and vice president this year. Some groups aligned with Democrats oppose the effort, fearing it will help presumptive Republican nominee Donald Trump win the White House.

The group on Wednesday called Lieberman's unexpected death a "profound loss," describing him as "a singular figure in American political life who always put his country before party."

Lieberman came tantalizingly close to winning the vice presidency in the contentious 2000 presidential contest that was decided by a 537-vote margin victory for George W. Bush in Florida after a drawn-out recount, legal challenges and a Supreme Court decision. He was the first Jewish candidate on a major party's presidential ticket and would have been the first Jewish vice president.

Gore said in a statement Wednesday night that he was profoundly saddened by the death of his one-time running mate. He called Lieberman "a truly gifted leader, whose affable personality and strong will made him a force to be reckoned with" and said his dedication to equality and fairness started at a young age, noting Lieberman traveled to the South to join the civil rights movement in the 1960s.

"It was an honor to stand side-by-side with him on the campaign trail," Gore said.

Lieberman sought the Democratic presidential nomination in 2004 but dropped out after a weak showing in the early primaries. Four years later, he was an independent who was nearly chosen to be McCain's running mate. He and McCain were close pals who shared hawkish views on military and national security matters.

McCain was leaning strongly toward choosing Lieberman for the ticket as the 2008 GOP convention neared, but he chose Sarah Palin at the last minute after "ferocious" blowback from conservatives over Lieberman's liberal record, according to Steve Schmidt, who managed McCain's campaign.

Lieberman generated controversy in 1998 when he scolded President Bill Clinton, his friend of many years, for "disgraceful behavior" in an explosive speech on the Senate floor during the height of the scandal

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over his relationship with Monica Lewinsky. Yet Lieberman later voted against the impeachment of Clinton.

While he had a tortured relationship with Democrats, Lieberman defended his partisan switches as a matter of conscience, saying he always had the best interests of Connecticut voters at heart. Critics accused him of pursuing narrow self-interest and political expediency.

In announcing his retirement from the Senate in 2013, Lieberman acknowledged that he did "not always fit comfortably into conventional political boxes" and felt his first responsibility was to serve his constituents, state and country, not his political party.

During his final Senate speech, Lieberman urged Congress to look beyond party lines and partisan rancor to break Washington gridlock.

"It requires reaching across the aisle and finding partners from the opposite party," said Lieberman. "That is what is desperately needed in Washington now."

Nevada Sen. Harry Reid, who served as Senate Democratic leader, once said that while he didn't always agree with the independent-minded Lieberman, he respected him.

"Regardless of our differences, I have never doubted Joe Lieberman's principles or his patriotism," Reid said. "And I respect his independent streak, as it stems from strong convictions."

Privately, some Democrats were often less charitable about Lieberman's forays across party lines, which they saw as disloyal. He bolted his party and turned independent after a 2006 Senate primary loss in Connecticut.

Lieberman's strong support of the Iraq War had hurt his statewide popularity. Democrats rejected Lieberman and handed the 2006 primary to a political newcomer and an antiwar candidate, Ned Lamont, who is now serving a second term as Connecticut governor. Citing his Senate experience, congressional clout and support for the state's defense industry, Lieberman went on to win reelection to a fourth term as an independent.

Many of his Democratic allies and longtime friends, including former Sen. Chris Dodd, had supported Lamont in that election. Lieberman was candid about what he considered a betrayal by old pals such as Dodd, but the two men later reconciled.

In a statement issued Wednesday expressing condolences, Lamont said he and Lieberman eventually became friends after their grueling and contentious race.

"While the senator and I had our political differences, he was a man of integrity and conviction, so our debate about the Iraq War was serious," Lamont said in a statement. "I believe we agreed to disagree from a position of principle."

"When the race was over, we stayed in touch as friends in the best traditions of American democracy. He will be missed," he added.

After his rebound reelection in 2006, Lieberman decided to caucus with Democrats in the Senate, who let him head a committee in return because they needed his vote to help keep control of the closely divided chamber. But it wasn't long until Lieberman was showing his independent streak and ruffling his Democratic caucus colleagues.

He was an enthusiastic backer of McCain in the 2008 presidential contest, and his speech at the 2008 GOP presidential nominating convention criticizing Obama, the Democratic presidential nominee, struck a deep nerve.

Lieberman cast Obama as a political show horse, a lightweight with a thin record of accomplishment in the Senate despite his soaring eloquence as a speaker.

"In the Senate, during the 3 1/2 years that Sen. Obama has been a member, he has not reached across party lines to ... accomplish anything significant, nor has he been willing to take on powerful interest groups in the Democratic Party to get something done," Lieberman said at the convention.

"Eloquence is no substitute for a record," he said.

Lieberman campaigned heartily across the country for McCain. Many Democrats considered it a betrayal of Obama and his former party colleagues.

"Joe Lieberman has said things that are totally irresponsible when it comes to Barack Obama," House

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Democratic leader Nancy Pelosi of California said in a radio interview during the 2008 race. In a message posted Wednesday on X, Pelosi called Lieberman a "leader of integrity and patriotism" while acknowledging they often disagreed on politics.

Sen. Lindsey Graham, R-S.C., said Lieberman's death was "devastatingly sad" and speculated that McCain, who died in 2018, was "giving him an earful about how screwed up things are."

After the election, there was speculation Senate Democrats might strip Lieberman of his chairmanship of the Senate Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs Committee as payback. Sen. Patrick Leahy, D-Vt., chair of the Judiciary Committee, was among those who said Lieberman should lose his chairmanship. Leahy branded Lieberman's attacks on Obama as "beyond the pale."

But at Obama's urging, Senate Democrats decided not to punish Lieberman for supporting McCain and the GOP ticket. Obama was eager to strike a bipartisan tone for his presidency and giving Lieberman a pass helped reinforce that message. On Wednesday, Obama acknowledged they "didn't always see eye-to-eye," but noted Lieberman had an "extraordinary career in public service."

Vermont Sen. Bernie Sanders, an independent and staunch liberal, called Lieberman's convention comments a "slap in the face" for millions of Americans who backed Obama.

Connecticut Democrats considered censuring Lieberman. Longtime friend Nick Balleto, former chairman of the state party, acknowledged many were unhappy with Lieberman and noted that the discontent overshadowed everything he had done for the state. Before the U.S. Senate, Lieberman served in the state Senate and as Connecticut Attorney General.

"He was the most genuine, honest, straightforward politician you'd probably ever meet. What you saw is what you got," said Balleto. "His issues were the issues of the people. ... He didn't move because it was where the wind wanted to be today. He stayed strong in what he believed in his heart and his mind."

Lieberman was known in the Senate for his hawkish foreign policy views, his pro-defense bent and his strong support for environmental causes.

Five weeks after the Sept. 11, 2001, attacks, he became one of the first politicians to call for the ouster of Iraqi leader Saddam Hussein and later voted in favor of the military invasion of Iraq. His vocal support for the war would later help doom his candidacy in the 2006 Connecticut Democratic primary.

Lieberman tended to vote with Democrats on most issues and was a longtime supporter of abortion rights, a stance that would have proved problematic with conservatives had McCain chosen him as his running mate in 2008.

He played a key role in the legislation that created the Department of Homeland Security.

Lieberman grew up in Stamford, Connecticut, where his father ran a liquor store. Lieberman graduated from Yale University and Yale Law School in New Haven. As Connecticut's attorney general from 1983 to 1988, he was a strong consumer and environmental advocate. Lieberman vaulted into the Senate by defeating moderate Republican incumbent Lowell Weicker in 1988.

After leaving the Senate in 2013, Lieberman joined a New York City law firm. His funeral will be held Friday at Congregation Agudath Sholom in his hometown of Stamford. An additional memorial service will be announced at a later date.

Lieberman and his wife, Hadassah, have four children.

## **4 people killed and 7 wounded in stabbings in northern Illinois, with a suspect in custody**

ROCKFORD, Ill. (AP) — Four people were killed and seven were hurt when a man went on a stabbing rampage Wednesday across multiple locations in a northern Illinois community, authorities said.

A 22-year-old man is in police custody and was being questioned, according to Rockford Police Chief Carla Redd. She said one of the people who was wounded remained in critical condition.

"My heart goes out to the families right now that are suffering a loss," Redd told reporters.

She said the Rockford Police received a medical call at 1:14 p.m. followed by additional calls for police and paramedics.

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"We don't believe there's any other suspects that are on the run or at large at this particular time," Redd said. "Right now, we don't have a clear motive as to what caused this individual to commit such a heinous crime."

Not all of the victims found at multiple addresses in the city had stab wounds and none were shot, according to Redd.

Rockford Police initially said five people had been injured. Cori Hilliard, a public information officer with the Winnebago County Sheriff's Office, told The Associated Press Wednesday evening that two more victims were among those hurt.

Three people died at the scenes. The fourth died at a hospital.

Police later identified those victims as a 15-year-old girl, a 63-year-old woman, a 49-year-old man and a 22-year-old man. Their names were not released.

Redd said residents in the area were being asked to review their home surveillance camera footage for anything related to the attacks.

Rockford's population is about 150,000 and it's 90 miles (145 kilometers) miles northwest of Chicago. The violence Wednesday came days after a teenage employee of a Walmart in Rockford was stabbed and killed inside the store.

"Today, we are shocked by another horrific act of violence against innocent members of our community," Rockford Mayor Tom McNamara said. Now that the suspect is in custody, he continued, "Our primary concern is ensuring that our community members directly impacted by this violence are supported throughout their healing and recovery."

The mayor wrote on the city's Facebook page that "multiple jurisdictions" are "working on multiple crime scenes to develop an understanding of what transpired in an effort to prevent this from happening again."

The suspect was arrested by a Winnebago County sheriff's deputy after they were called to a reported home invasion, Sheriff Gary Caruana said.

"The young lady ran from him," Caruana said of one of the survivors. "She got some stab wounds in her hands and her face. She is in serious condition. One of the good Samaritans stopped to help her out. He did get some stab wounds. He is being checked out."

Resident Eric Patterson said he was struggling to make sense of the violence on his street.

"You can't rationalize this," Patterson told the Rockford Register Star. "It's almost like playing a video game, but it's reality. It makes no sense. It's like Grand Theft Auto. 'I'm going to run over the mailman here. I'm going to stab a couple people there. I am going to go in this house over here.'"

Another resident, Vanessa Hy, told WREX-TV in Rockford that the experience of witnessing the arrest was unreal, "like a movie."

"All of the sudden, we heard police run up on both sides of the house screaming 'Stop! Get down!'" Hy told the station. "Then they ran into the backyard and after a few minutes we saw them bringing the suspect down the driveway in handcuffs and he was very bloody."

Cassandra Hernandez, another neighbor, told the Rockford paper that she is friends with one of the victims.

"You never expect this here," Hernandez said. "We have such great neighbors."

## Ex-Trump lawyer Eastman should lose state law license for efforts to overturn election, judge says

By STEFANIE DAZIO and CHRISTOPHER WEBER Associated Press

LOS ANGELES (AP) — A judge has recommended that conservative attorney John Eastman lose his California law license over his efforts to keep former President Donald Trump in power after the 2020 election.

Eastman, a former law school dean, faced 11 disciplinary charges in the state bar court stemming from his development of a legal strategy to have then-Vice President Mike Pence interfere with the certification of President Joe Biden's victory.

State Bar Court of California Judge Yvette Roland's recommendation, issued Wednesday, now goes to

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the California Supreme Court for a final ruling on whether he should be disbarred. Eastman can appeal the top court's decision.

"Dr. Eastman maintains that his handling of the legal issues he was asked to assess after the November 2020 election was based on reliable legal precedent, prior presidential elections, research of constitutional text, and extensive scholarly material," Eastman's attorney, Randall Miller, said in a statement after the ruling. "The process undertaken by Dr. Eastman in 2020 is the same process taken by lawyers every day and everywhere – indeed, that is the essence of what lawyers do."

The judge found Eastman liable for 10 of the 11 charges, including misleading courts, moral turpitude, making false statements and plotting with Trump to hinder the transfer of power.

"Eastman conspired with President Trump to obstruct a lawful function of the government of the United States; specifically, by conspiring to disrupt the electoral count on January 6, 2021," Roland wrote in her 128-page decision.

The California State Bar is a regulatory agency and the only court system in the U.S. that is dedicated to attorney discipline.

Eastman separately faces criminal charges in Georgia in the case accusing Trump and 18 allies of conspiring to overturn the Republican's loss in the state. Eastman, who has pleaded not guilty, has argued he was merely doing his job as Trump's attorney when he challenged the results of the 2020 election. He has denounced the case as targeting attorneys "for their zealous advocacy on behalf of their clients."

He's also one of the unnamed co-conspirators in the separate 2020 election interference case brought by special counsel Jack Smith, but Eastman is not charged in the federal case.

The State Bar of California alleged that Eastman violated the state's business and professions code by making false and misleading statements that constitute acts of "moral turpitude, dishonesty, and corruption." In doing so, the agency says he "violated this duty in furtherance of an attempt to usurp the will of the American people and overturn election results for the highest office in the land — an egregious and unprecedented attack on our democracy."

In her decision, Roland wrote: "In view of the circumstances surrounding Eastman's misconduct and balancing the aggravation and mitigation, the court recommends that Eastman be disbarred."

Eastman was a close adviser to Trump in the run-up to the Jan. 6, 2021, attack on the U.S. Capitol. He wrote a memo laying out a plan for Pence to reject legitimate electoral votes for Biden while presiding over the joint session of Congress on Jan. 6 in order to keep Trump in the White House.

Prosecutors seeking to strip Eastman of his law license depicted him as a Trump enabler who fabricated a baseless theory and made false claims of fraud in hopes of overturning the results of the election.

Eastman's attorney countered that his client never intended to steal the election but was considering ways to delay electoral vote counting so states could investigate allegations of voting improprieties. Trump's claims of fraud were roundly rejected by courts, including by judges Trump appointed.

The judge wasn't persuaded by Eastman's claim that his actions amounted to no more than a dedicated representation of Trump.

"It is true that an attorney has a duty to engage in zealous advocacy on behalf of a client," Roland wrote. "However, Eastman's inaccurate assertions were lies that cannot be justified as zealous advocacy. Eastman failed to uphold his primary duty of honesty and breached his ethical obligations by presenting falsehoods to bolster his legal arguments. Finally, the court notes that acts of moral turpitude are a departure from professional norms and are unequivocally outside the realm of protection afforded by the First Amendment and the obligation of vigorous advocacy."

Roland did agree with Eastman's attorney on one of the 11 counts. The judge found Eastman's remarks to a rally in Washington on Jan. 6 did not contribute to the subsequent assault on the Capitol.

Eastman will be placed on involuntary inactive status within three days of the judge's order, which means he cannot practice law in California while the Supreme Court considers the case, the state bar said.

The States United Democracy Center, which filed an early ethics complaint against Eastman, cheered the judge's decision.

"This is a crucial victory in the effort to hold accountable those who tried to overturn the 2020 election. After hearing from almost two dozen witnesses over a 35-day trial, the court found that John Eastman violated his ethical duties to uphold the constitution," said Christine P. Sun, a senior vice president for the nonprofit. "This decision sends an unmistakable message: No one is above the law — not presidents, and not their lawyers."

Eastman has been a member of the California Bar since 1997, according to its website. He was a law clerk for U.S. Supreme Court Justice Clarence Thomas and a founding director of the Center for Constitutional Jurisprudence, a law firm affiliated with the Claremont Institute. He ran for California attorney general in 2010, finishing second in the Republican primary.

Eastman was dean of Chapman University law school in Southern California from 2007 to 2010 and was a professor at the school when he retired in 2021 after more than 160 faculty members signed a letter calling for the university to take action against him.

## Security in Congo's mineral-rich east is deteriorating with rebel group expanding territory, UN says

By EDITH M. LEDERER Associated Press

UNITED NATIONS (AP) — Security in Congo's mineral-rich east has deteriorated since recent elections, with a rebel group allegedly linked to neighboring Rwanda making "significant advances and expanding its territory," the U.N. special envoy for the conflict-racked African nation said Wednesday.

Bintou Keita told the U.N. Security Council this has created "an even more disastrous humanitarian situation, with internal displacement reaching unparalleled numbers."

Last month, the United States told Rwanda and Congo that they "must walk back from the brink of war," the sharpest warning yet of a looming conflict.

U.S. deputy ambassador Robert Wood again condemned "the aggressive military incursion" into eastern Congo by the M23 rebel group and the Rwandan Defense Force and attacks including on U.N. peacekeepers.

He called on the leaders of Rwanda and Congo "to make the decision to pursue peace — for the sake of their people, the region and the world."

Wood described M23 as "a group which has perpetrated appalling human rights abuses against civilians, including sexual and gender-based violence."

He called the international community's failure to condemn the actions of Rwanda, which is a major troop contributor to U.N. peacekeeping forces, "dismaying" and said "the U.N. should reevaluate Rwanda's credibility as a constructive partner in peacekeeping."

The U.S. State Department last month called for the withdrawal of Rwanda's troops and surface-to-air missile systems from eastern Congo and criticized M23, calling it a "Rwanda-backed" armed group.

The Rwandan Foreign Ministry said last month that the country's troops are defending Rwandan territory as Congo carries out a "dramatic military build-up" near the border.

The ministry's statement said Rwanda's national security is threatened by the presence in Congo of an armed group whose members include alleged perpetrators of the 1994 genocide in Rwanda during which more than 800,000 Tutsi and moderate Hutus who tried to protect them were killed.

The rebel group, known by its initials FDLR, "is fully integrated into" the Congolese army, the statement said. Although Rwanda has long cited a threat posed by FLDR, authorities there had never admitted to a military presence in eastern Congo.

Wood said the U.S. recognizes the FDLR "is a continuing threat to the Congolese people and a security threat to Rwanda that must be addressed."

At Wednesday's council meeting the Congolese and Rwandan ambassadors again went after each other. Congolese Ambassador Zenon Ngay Mukongo called the M23 and Rwandan forces a "coalition of the axis of evil."

He said a meeting of heads of state is planned for April and Congo is seeking lasting peace throughout

the country and that it "will not accept window-dressing arrangements aimed at perpetuating insecurity and confusion" which encourages the M23 and Rwanda's "shameless exploitation of strategic minerals" in eastern Congo.

Rwandan Ambassador Ernest Rwamucyo reiterated his government's serious concerns about the FDLR and called for Congo to resolve the security issues involving many rebel groups themselves.

"We should also raise awareness about the dangers of genocide, the ideology, which has spilled over into the DRC," the initials of Congo's official name, the Democratic Republic of Congo, he said.

Keita, the U.N. envoy, told the council that mediation by Angola between the countries has resumed.

In response to a question afterward by reporters about Wednesday's confrontation between the ambassadors, she said, she strongly believes this mediation and other efforts to reduce tensions should be supported "in spite of the displeasure that we saw" in the council.

## Hunter Biden's lawyers push California judge to toss out tax charges

By STEFANIE DAZIO and LINDSAY WHITEHURST Associated Press

LOS ANGELES (AP) — Attorneys for Hunter Biden asked a judge Wednesday to toss out the tax case accusing him of a four-year scheme to avoid paying \$1.4 million in taxes while living an extravagant lifestyle.

President Joe Biden's son has pleaded not guilty to the nine felony and misdemeanor tax offenses. His attorneys argued the prosecution is politically motivated, was tainted by leaks from IRS agents who claimed publicly the case was mishandled and includes some allegations from before he moved to California.

Prosecutors framed the claims as far-fetched during the three-hour hearing. Prosecutor Leo Wise scoffed at the idea that the case was tainted by the IRS agents "who I couldn't have picked out of a lineup."

Defense attorney Abbe Lowell, on the other hand, maintained the case was hopelessly contaminated by partisan politics, calling it "the least ordinary prosecution a person could imagine."

U.S. District Judge Mark C. Scarsi appeared to be skeptical, telling Lowell the hard evidence for some of his claims was lacking. "You cite to a lot of things on the internet," he said.

Scarsi said he would likely rule on motions to dismiss by April 17.

Hunter Biden has also been charged in Delaware with lying on a federal form to buy a gun in 2018 by saying he wasn't using or addicted to illegal drugs, even though he has acknowledged being addicted to crack cocaine at the time. He has pleaded not guilty in that case, which also accuses him of possessing the gun illegally.

Both cases are overseen by special counsel David Weiss and now have tentative trials scheduled for June, though defense attorneys are also trying to get the Delaware gun charges tossed out.

The two sets of charges come from a yearslong federal investigation that had been expected to wrap up over the summer with a plea deal in which Hunter Biden would have gotten two years of probation after pleading guilty to misdemeanor tax charges. The president's son, who has since repaid the back taxes with a loan, also would have avoided prosecution on the gun charge if he stayed out of trouble.

Defense attorneys argue that immunity provisions in the deal were signed by a prosecutor and are still in effect, though prosecutors disagree.

But the deal that could have spared Hunter Biden the spectacle of a criminal trial during the 2024 presidential campaign unraveled after a federal judge in Delaware began to question it. Now, the tax and gun cases are moving ahead as part of an unprecedented confluence of political and legal drama: As the November election draws closer, the Justice Department is actively prosecuting both the Democratic president's son and the presumptive Republican nominee, Donald Trump.

Hunter Biden's original proposed plea deal with prosecutors had been pilloried as a "sweetheart deal" by Republicans, including Trump. The former president is facing his own criminal problems — 91 charges across four cases, including that he plotted to overturn the results of the 2020 election, which he lost to Joe Biden.

Hunter Biden's criminal proceedings are also happening in parallel to so-far unsuccessful efforts by congressional Republicans to link his business dealings to his father. Republicans are pursuing an impeach-

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ment inquiry into President Biden, claiming he was engaged in an influence-peddling scheme with his son. No evidence has emerged to prove that Joe Biden, as president or previously as vice president, abused his role or accepted bribes, though questions have arisen about the ethics surrounding the Biden family's international business dealings.

In launching their Biden impeachment inquiry last year, the House Republicans relied in large part on unverified claims from an FBI informant released by Senate Republicans suggesting that payments totaling \$10 million from Ukrainian energy company Burisma to the Bidens were discussed. The now-former FBI informant, Alexander Smirnov, was arrested last month in a case also overseen by Weiss. He has pleaded not guilty to charges that he fabricated the bribery allegations. His attorney attended Wednesday's hearing, though he did not speak in the courtroom.

If convicted of the tax charges, Hunter Biden, 53, could receive a maximum of 17 years in prison.

## Top-seeded North Carolina and Clemson looking to move ACC beyond Sweet 16 vs Alabama and Arizona

By BETH HARRIS AP Sports Writer

LOS ANGELES (AP) — Armando Bacot and his North Carolina teammates heard the bashing about the ACC's quality this season and they've added it as a chip on their broad shoulders.

Ever since Zion Williamson left Duke for the NBA in 2019 after one season, "I feel like the respect for the ACC just in general kind of went down," Bacot said.

Yet, the league is having the last laugh in the NCAA Tournament so far.

Besides the top-seeded Tar Heels and sixth-seeded Clemson in the West Regional, No. 4 seed Duke and No. 11 seed North Carolina State remain in the South bracket. It's the 13th time the league has had at least four teams in the Sweet 16.

"Most ACC programs are playing a high-level non-conference schedule, too, so I think that really plays a factor," Bacot said. "I feel like other conferences might not be as strong or they're kind of manipulating it in a way. Hopefully everyone sees after this year how competitive ACC basketball is and how good the teams are."

The Tar Heels (29-7), who missed the tournament last year, will try to prove it against fourth-seeded Alabama (23-11) on Thursday in the Sweet 16.

ACC teams went 8-1 during the first week of the NCAA Tournament, the most of any league, with the victories coming by an average of 18.4 points per game. The league received five bids, with only Virginia losing in the First Four to Colorado State.

Coach Hubert Davis is taking a page from his predecessors Dean Smith and Roy Williams in breaking the NCAA Tournament into mini-tourneys. The Tar Heels won two games in the Charlotte tourney to advance to what Davis calls the "Los Angeles Invitational."

"They're always ready for the moment. At Carolina, there's very few programs that are at our level, and the spotlight is bright playing at North Carolina," said Davis, who has spent 12 years coaching at the school where he starred from 1988-92. "This is something that our guys not only are used to or accustomed to, but it's a position that they want to be in."

The ACC has continued to outperform other leagues in recent NCAA Tournaments. Miami reached the Final Four last year, Duke and North Carolina were there in 2022, Virginia won the title in 2019 and the Tar Heels were champions in 2017.

"I just think that there's great parity in our league," Clemson coach Brad Brownell said. "I think because we have a lot of different styles of play in our league that, when we get to the NCAA Tournament, we've kind of seen everything. Our teams adjust and we seem to play very well this time of year."

Thursday's first game pits second-seeded Arizona (27-8) against No. 6 seed Clemson (23-11) at Crypto.com Arena.

Clemson played Sunday night in Memphis, Tennessee, and got back to campus at 3:30 a.m. Monday

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before starting its journey to the West Coast about 12 hours later.

"Yesterday was a little challenging. We practiced, but it wasn't easy," Brownell said. "Just trying to get our legs back, just get used to the time change and all of that. It's been a quick turnaround, that's for sure."

The Wildcats played their first two games in Salt Lake City and then made the short trip from Tucson to Los Angeles, where they are 6-3 all-time in tournament games. They could be playing on the same Thursday-Saturday schedule they're used to during Pac-12 play.

"But just because you had an extra day or a few extra hours doesn't mean you have a significant advantage this time of year because the other team's really good," Wildcats coach Tommy Lloyd said. "They're playing for something as well."

Keshad Johnson and Caleb Love are looking to take the Wildcats to where each of them has been before. Johnson played for San Diego State in last year's championship game loss to UConn. In 2022, Love led North Carolina to the title game. Both players used their fifth year of eligibility to transfer.

"What I learned the most is just do whatever it takes. Make your sacrifice. Try to make the game easier on your teammates," Johnson said. "Don't really worry about the number of stats. That's me problems. It's bigger than me when it comes to March."

Clemson guard Joseph Girard III is another fifth-year senior who left Syracuse to spend his final season with the Tigers.

"I had one shot at it, to get back to a moment like this, to get back to a Sweet 16 like I did my sophomore year," he said. "I felt these guys gave me the best chance."

## Donald Trump assails judge and his daughter after gag order in New York hush-money criminal case

By MICHAEL R. SISAK Associated Press

NEW YORK (AP) — Donald Trump lashed out Wednesday at the New York judge who put him under a gag order ahead of his April 15 hush-money criminal trial, making a fallacious claim about his daughter and urging him to step aside from the case.

In a social media post, the former president suggested without evidence that Judge Juan M. Merchan was kowtowing to his daughter's interests as a Democratic political consultant. He also made a claim — later repudiated by court officials — that she had posted a social media photo showing Trump behind bars.

Trump, the presumptive Republican nominee, complained on his Truth Social platform that the gag order issued Tuesday was "illegal, un-American, unConstitutional." He said that Merchan, a veteran Manhattan jurist, was "wrongfully attempting to deprive me of my First Amendment Right to speak out against the Weaponization of Law Enforcement" by Democratic rivals.

Trump claimed that Merchan's daughter, Loren Merchan, whose firm has worked on campaigns for President Joe Biden and other Democrats, had recently posted a photo on social media depicting her "obvious goal" of seeing him jailed.

In a statement, a spokesperson for New York's state court system said that claim was false and that the social media account Trump was referencing no longer belongs to Loren Merchan. It appears to have been taken over by someone else after she deleted it about a year ago, court spokesperson Al Baker said.

The account on X, formerly known as Twitter, "is not linked to her email address, nor has she posted under that screenname since she deleted the account. Rather, it represents the reconstitution, last April, and manipulation of an account she long ago abandoned," Baker said.

Messages seeking comment were left for Loren Merchan and Trump's campaign.

Trump did not link to the purported photo, but an X account under the name "LM" showed a photo illustration of an imprisoned Trump as its profile picture Wednesday morning. It was later changed to an image of Vice President Kamala Harris as a child.

Loren Merchan's consulting firm had linked to that account in its social media posts in past years, but it is now private with no posts displayed and states that it joined the platform in April 2023, after Baker said she deleted it. Usernames on X can be taken over by other users after they're deleted.

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The gag order, which prosecutors had requested, bars Trump from either making or directing other people to make public statements on his behalf about jurors and potential witnesses in the hush-money trial, such as his lawyer turned nemesis Michael Cohen and porn star Stormy Daniels. 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 or his family, nor does it prohibit criticism of Manhattan District Attorney Alvin Bragg, the elected Democrat whose office is prosecuting Trump.

Trump's post insinuating that Loren Merchan had posted the photo came after conservative commentator Laura Loomer posted a story online Tuesday claiming to have unearthed her X account.

"So, let me get this straight," Trump wrote on Truth Social, "the Judge's daughter is allowed to post pictures of her 'dream' of putting me in jail ... but I am not allowed to talk about the attacks against me, and the Lunatics trying to destroy my life and prevent me from winning the 2024 Presidential Election, which I am dominating?"

Bragg's office declined to comment.

Trump's three-part Truth Social post was his first reaction to the gag order. His focus on Merchan's daughter echoed his lawyers' arguments last year when they urged the judge to exit the case. The judge had also made several small donations totaling \$35 to Democratic causes during the 2020 campaign, including \$15 to Biden.

Merchan said then that a state court ethics panel found that Loren Merchan's work had no bearing on his impartiality. The judge said in a ruling last September that he was certain of his "ability to be fair and impartial" and that Trump's lawyers had "failed to demonstrate that there exists concrete, or even realistic reasons for recusal to be appropriate, much less required on these grounds."

In a recent interview, Merchan told The Associated Press that he and his staff were working diligently to prepare for the historic first trial of a former president.

"There's no agenda here," Merchan said. "We want to follow the law. We want justice to be done."

Trump's hush-money case, set to be the first of his four criminal cases to go to trial, centers on allegations that he falsely logged payments to Cohen as legal fees in his company's books when they were for Cohen's work during the 2016 campaign covering up negative stories about Trump. That included \$130,000 Cohen 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.

In issuing the gag order, Merchan cited Trump's history of "threatening, inflammatory, denigrating" remarks about people involved in his legal cases. A violation could result in Trump being held in contempt of court, fined or even jailed.

Though not covered by the restrictions, Merchan referenced Trump's various comments about him as an example of his rhetoric. The gag order mirrors one imposed and largely upheld by a federal appeals court panel in Trump's Washington, D.C., election interference criminal case.

Trump's lawyers fought a gag order, warning it would amount to unconstitutional and unlawful prior restraint on his free speech rights.

Merchan had long resisted imposing one, recognizing Trump's "special" status as a former president and current candidate and not wanting to trample his ability to defend himself publicly.

But, he said, as the trial nears, he found that his obligation to ensuring the integrity of the case outweighs First Amendment concerns. He said Trump's statements have induced fear and necessitated added security measures to protect his targets and investigate threats.

## Debate emerges over whether modern protections could have saved Baltimore bridge

By BEN FINLEY Associated Press

When a 900-foot container ship struck the San Francisco–Oakland Bay Bridge in 2007, the span stood firm and no one died, either on the ship or the highway above.

The bridge's supports were protected by a fendering system of concrete and other materials that was installed to absorb such strikes. And it's now prompting the question: Could such a system — or others like it — have saved Baltimore's Francis Scott Key Bridge?

Some experts are saying yes.

Sherif El-Tawil, a University of Michigan engineering professor, said there are several safety measures that "would have made a huge difference" had they been in place Tuesday morning when a cargo ship plowed into the bridge and caused its collapse.

El-Tawil said a fendering system may have softened the 985-foot-long ship's blow. Pilings anchored to the river bottom, known as dolphins, are another measure that could have helped to deflect the container ship Dali. And yet another potential protection would have been islands of rocks or concrete around the bridge's supports.

"It may seem like a very large force," El-Tawil said of the massive cargo ship. "But I think you can design around it, either through a protective system or by designing the bridge itself to have massive towers."

Such protections have become a focal point in the wake of the tragedy, which claimed the lives of six construction workers. Experts say the 47-year-old Key Bridge did not appear to have the protections that are common among newer spans.

The incident is raising questions about how much money American taxpayers are willing to spend to protect against these rare but deadly catastrophes. And not everyone agrees the Key Bridge could have been saved.

"There's a lot of debate taking place among the engineering community about whether any of those features could have had any role in a situation like this," U.S. Transportation Secretary Pete Buttigieg said Wednesday at a White House briefing.

"It's difficult to overstate the impact of this collision we're talking about," Buttigieg said. "It's not just as big as a building, it's really as big as a block — 100,000 tons all going into this pier all at once."

Buttigieg did not directly answer a question about whether steps should be taken to protect the nation's bridges. But the secretary noted that many bridges have been designed to better protect against collisions since a freighter struck Florida's Sunshine Skyway Bridge in 1980, killing 35 people.

Baltimore's Key Bridge opened three years before that disaster in 1977, a time when cargo ships were much smaller in size. In recent years, vessels have grown to carry more containers to save on shipping costs. Ports in Georgia and South Carolina have dredged deeper channels to accommodate them, while part of a bridge was elevated to allow bigger ships to reach New York City-area ports.

The Skyway Bridge disaster in Tampa prompted a paradigm shift in design in the early 1980s, said Mark Luther, a University of South Florida oceanography professor and director of the USF Center for Maritime and Port Studies.

The new Skyway Bridge was built with rock islands around its main supports and large cylindrical piers on either side of those islands to make it "very difficult for a vessel to strike any part of the bridge and knock it down," Luther said.

"To go back and retrofit a bridge like the Key Bridge with these features would be extremely expensive," Luther said. "And to my knowledge nobody's done it. (They've) just had to accept what risk there is with the construction that was state-of-the art in the '70s."

Roberto Leon, a Virginia Tech engineering professor, said the technology exists to protect a bridge against a collision with a massive cargo ship like the Dali.

But he cautioned that governments will always be weighing the costs and the risks. And the protections put in place don't always match up to the size of the disaster, even if the Key bridge was retrofitted with

modern safety measures.

"This was an enormous load," he said of the ship that struck the Key Bridge. "If the protection system had been designed for that load. I think it would have protected the bridge. But a big question is: Would you design it for such an enormous load? Because as the load increases, it becomes much more expensive."

## **Texas' migrant arrest law will remain on hold under new court ruling**

By KEVIN MCGILL Associated Press

NEW ORLEANS (AP) — Texas' plans to arrest migrants suspected of illegally entering the U.S. will remain on hold under a federal appeals court order that likely prevents enforcement of Republican Gov. Greg Abbott's new immigration law until a broader decision on whether it is legal.

The 2-1 ruling late Tuesday is the second time a three-judge panel of the 5th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals has put a temporary hold on the the Texas law. It follows a confusing few hours last week the Supreme Court allowed the law to take effect, setting off anger and anticipation along the U.S.-Mexico border.

The same panel of appeals judges will hear arguments on the law next week.

"I think what we can draw from this, from the chaos that this has been are several conclusions," said Lisa Graybill, vice president of law and policy at the National Immigration Law Center. "One is that this is clearly a controversial law. Two is that the politics of the justices on the bench are very clearly playing out in their rulings."

Texas authorities announced no arrests made under the law during that short window on March 19 before the appellate panel stepped in and blocked it.

In Tuesday's order, Chief Judge Priscilla Richman cited a 2012 Supreme Court decision that struck down portions of a strict Arizona immigration law, including arrest power. The Texas law is considered by opponents to be the most dramatic attempt by a state to police immigration since that Arizona law.

"For nearly 150 years, the Supreme Court has held that the power to control immigration — the entry, admission, and removal of noncitizens — is exclusively a federal power," wrote Richman, an appointee of Republican President George W. Bush.

The Justice Department has argued that Texas' law is a clear violation of federal authority and would create chaos at the border. Texas has argued that President Joe Biden's administration isn't doing enough to control the border and that the state has a right to take action.

The Texas law, Richman wrote, "creates separate, distinct state criminal offenses and related procedures regarding unauthorized entry of noncitizens into Texas from outside the country and their removal."

She was joined in the opinion by Judge Irma Carrillo Ramirez, a Biden appointee.

Judge Andrew Oldham, an appointee of former President Donald Trump and a former aide to Abbott, dissented from the majority decision.

Oldham wrote that the Biden administration faced a high bar to take sovereign power that Texas has to enforce a law its people and leaders want.

"In our federal system, the State of Texas is supposed to retain at least some of its sovereignty," Oldham wrote. "Its people are supposed to be able to use that sovereignty to elect representatives and send them to Austin to debate and enact laws that respond to the exigencies that Texans experience and that Texans want addressed."

The law was in effect for several hours on March 19 after the U.S. Supreme Court cleared the way. But the high court didn't rule on the merits of the case. It instead sent the case back to the 5th Circuit, which suspended enforcement while it considered the latest appeal.

The latest ruling keeps the block in place.

Phone messages were left Wednesday seeking comment from spokespersons for Abbott and state Attorney General Ken Paxton.

The law signed by Abbott allows any Texas law enforcement officer to arrest people suspected of entering the country illegally. Once in custody, migrants could either agree to a Texas judge's order to leave the U.S. or be prosecuted on misdemeanor charges of illegal entry. Migrants who don't leave could face arrest again under more serious felony charges.

Authorities have offered various explanations for how they might enforce the law. Mexico has said it would refuse to take back anyone who is ordered by Texas to cross the border.

The brief window while the law was in effect revealed that many sheriffs were unprepared, unable or uninterested in enforcing it.

Sheriff Thaddeus Cleveland of Terrell County, which touches more than 50 miles (80 kilometers) of border, told The Associated Press last week said there's no practical way for him to enforce the law. Cleveland said he has no way to transport people, the county jail has space for just seven people and the closest port of entry is a drive of more than 2 1/2 hours away.

Smith County Sheriff Larry Smith, president of the Texas Sheriff's Association, said the law will have little effect in his jurisdiction in East Texas, which is closer to Louisiana and Oklahoma than Mexico which is nearly 400 miles (644 kilometers) away.

Critics have said the Texas law could lead to civil rights violations and racial profiling.

Supporters have rejected those concerns, saying arresting officers must have probable cause, which could include witnessing the illegal entry or seeing it on video. They also say that they expect the law would be used mostly in border counties, though it would apply statewide.

## The Latest | Airstrikes and rocket fire on Lebanon-Israel border as death toll climbs

By The Associated Press undefined

The death toll from Israeli airstrikes across southern Lebanon has climbed to 16, including several militants and members of paramedic groups, according to Lebanese state media and the militant organizations.

And in northern Israel, one man was killed by a barrage of at least 30 rockets fired by Lebanese militant group Hezbollah, which said it was responding to a deadly airstrike targeting a paramedic center linked to a Sunni Muslim group.

International mediators have been scrambling to prevent an all-out war between Israel and Hezbollah amid near-daily violence, mostly confined to the area along the Lebanon-Israel border.

Hezbollah has been launching rockets toward Israel since Oct. 8, the day after Hamas-led militants stormed into southern Israel, triggering the war in Gaza. Some 1,200 people were killed in Israel and another 250 people abducted.

More than 32,000 people have been killed in Gaza and 74,000 wounded, according to the 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.

Currently:

- Israel and Hamas dig in as pressure builds for a cease-fire in Gaza.
- With its soldiers mired in Gaza, Israel is also fighting over drafting the ultra-Orthodox.
- They fled kibbutzim after Hamas attacked. Now, many Israelis must decide whether to go back.
- Seven Lebanese and an Israeli are killed in an exchange of fire along the Lebanon-Israel border.
- Find more AP coverage at <https://apnews.com/hub/israel-hamas-war>.

Here's the latest:

U.N. SAYS A HOSPITAL IN SOUTHERN GAZA HAS CLOSED, LEAVING ONLY 12 LEFT

UNITED NATIONS — Two-thirds of Gaza's 36 hospitals aren't functioning after Al Amal Hospital in the south of the territory ceased operation amid intense military activity, U.N. humanitarian officials report.

According to the U.N. World Health Organization, Gaza now has just 12 operating hospitals – two that are "minimally functional" and 10 that are partially functional, four in the north and six in the south, U.N. spokesman Stephane Dujarric told reporters Wednesday.

More than two dozen staff, six patients and a companion and the bodies of two people killed inside Al Amal were moved Monday by the U.N. humanitarian office, the Palestine Red Crescent Society and the International Committee for the Red Cross before the hospital was closed Tuesday, Dujarric said.

Andrea De Domenico, the head of U.N. humanitarian operations in the Palestinian territories, visited the

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partially functioning Kamal Adwan hospital in the north last week and reported that it is receiving "about 15 malnourished children a day and is struggling to maintain services," Dujarric said.

"The hospital's only generator has been heavily damaged, and health workers and patients desperately need food, water and sanitation assistance," the U.N. spokesman said.

According to the U.N. World Food Program, Dujarric said, roughly 70% of northern Gaza's population "is facing catastrophic hunger" but efforts to deliver life-saving aid have been impeded by fighting and "access constraints" in getting food to those in need.

This month, WFP was only able to send 11 convoys to the north with food for some 74,000 people, far below the colossal needs of the population, Dujarric said.

**ISRAELI AIRSTRIKES IN LEBANON KILL 9 PEOPLE INCLUDING PARAMEDICS, STATE NEWS AGENCY SAYS BEIRUT** — Israeli airstrikes killed nine people in southern Lebanon late Wednesday, including paramedics who were preparing to respond to the first strike, the state-run National News Agency said.

That raises the number of people killed by Israeli strikes Wednesday to 16, after an earlier attack hit a different paramedic center linked to a Lebanese Sunni Muslim group, killing seven of the group's members.

And earlier Wednesday, the Shiite militant group Hezbollah claimed responsibility for firing a barrage of rockets into the northern Israeli city of Kiryat Shmona and a military base, which killed one person. It said the rockets were in response to the deadly strike on the paramedics center.

The Lebanese news agency said Israel bombed the village of Teir Harfa after sunset, killing five, and a second strike killed four people as paramedics gathered near a cafe in the coastal town of Naqoura.

Hezbollah's Islamic Health Society said two of its paramedics were killed in Teir Harfa while the Islamic Risala Scout Association, also a paramedic group, said one of its members was killed in the strike on Naqoura. Hezbollah said two of its fighters were killed, without saying where.

The Amal movement, a Shiite political and paramilitary organization, said the strike on Naqoura killed one of its local commanders, identified as Ali Mahdi.

Israel's military said it had struck a Hezbollah military compound in Teir Harfa and a "terrorist cell" in Naqoura.

Israel said the earlier strike in Hebbariye killed a member of the Sunni al-Jamaa al-Islamiya, or the Islamic Group, and several other militants. It said the man was involved in attacks against Israel.

Hezbollah has been firing rockets into northern Israel since the day after Hamas-led militants stormed into southern Israel on Oct. 7. The near-daily violence has mostly been confined to the area along the Lebanon-Israel border.

Nearly 240 Hezbollah fighters and about 40 civilians have died in Lebanon. The fighting has killed nine civilians and 11 soldiers in Israel.

**IN RARE SPEECH, HEAD OF HAMAS FIGHTERS IN GAZA CALLS ON MUSLIMS TO LIBERATE JERUSALEM MOSQUE**

**GAZA CITY, Gaza Strip** — Hamas has released a rare recording of what it says is the shadowy head of its military wing calling on Muslims around the world to liberate Jerusalem's Al-Aqsa Mosque.

Wednesday's recording was a reminder of the difficulty Israel has faced in realizing its stated goal of destroying Hamas' military capabilities.

Mohammed Deif delivered the message in a voice recording posted Wednesday on the militant group's channel in the messaging app Telegram.

"Start marching today, now, not tomorrow, toward Palestine," Deif says in a message aimed at Muslims globally, calling them to join "the honor of jihad and participation in the liberation of Al-Aqsa Mosque."

Al-Aqsa is the third-holiest site in Islam, and sits on a disputed hilltop revered by Jews and Muslims in Jerusalem's Old City.

No image of Deif appears in the recording, and it was not possible to authenticate it. It was not clear when the recording was made.

The leader of Hamas' Qassam Brigades has not been seen in public in decades, and the last time Hamas published a voice recording of him was the day of the Oct. 7. attack that triggered the war.

Israel says Deif is one of the masterminds of the attack, and he tops Israel's most-wanted list alongside

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Yehya Sinwar, the overall leader of Hamas in Gaza.

Deif is thought to be paralyzed after surviving multiple assassination attempts. Israel has released a small number of photos of what it says are Deif.

**NETANYAHU SAYS CIVILIANS IN RAFAH CAN 'JUST MOVE' AWAY FROM AN ISRAELI GROUND INVASION**  
TEL AVIV, Israel — Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu of Israel has downplayed U.S. fears of a humanitarian catastrophe if Israel launches a planned ground invasion into Gaza's southernmost city, saying civilians would be able to flee the fighting into other parts of the war-torn territory.

Speaking Wednesday to a bipartisan U.S. Congressional delegation visiting Israel, Netanyahu said people sheltering in Rafah — now more than half of Gaza's 2.3 million population — will be able to move away from the fighting.

"People just move, they move with their tents," Netanyahu said. "People moved down (to Rafah). They can move back up."

Israel says a ground offensive is needed to destroy thousands of Hamas fighters in Rafah. The planned incursion has raised global alarm because the city on the Gaza-Egypt border is jammed with 1.4 million Palestinians in sprawling tent camps and U.N. shelters, most of whom have fled fighting elsewhere.

The United States, Israel's top ally, has urged Israel not to carry out the operation without a "credible" plan to evacuate civilians. Rafah is also the main entry point for desperately needed aid into Gaza, where the U.N. says 100% of the population is at severe levels of food insecurity.

Netanyahu suggested that the dispute over Rafah was just another in a series of disagreements between the allies and that he "appreciates" President Joe Biden's support, but that Israel will act alone "if we have to."

Israel's military has said it plans to direct the civilians to "humanitarian islands" in central Gaza ahead of the planned offensive.

**REPUBLICAN U.S. SEN. GRAHAM, ON A VISIT TO ISRAEL, CALLS FOR BIDEN TO LET ISRAEL DESTROY HAMAS IN SOUTHERN GAZA CITY OF RAFAH**

TEL AVIV, Israel — Republican U.S. Sen. Lindsey Graham wants the Biden administration and Congress to allow Israel to militarily defeat all remaining Hamas fighters in the southern Gaza city of Rafah — which is overflowing with more than a million displaced civilians. Israel says there are thousands of Hamas militants in that area.

Defeating Hamas in Rafah is "non-negotiable," Graham told reporters in Jerusalem on Wednesday. "I urge the Biden administration, the Congress to make sure that Israel has the time and space to achieve victory over Hamas militarily."

The U.S. Department of Defense wants Israel to protect civilians and secure the delivery of aid into Gaza during any military operation into Rafah, where over half of Gaza's 2.3 million people have fled to escape fighting in other areas and are packed into rudimentary tent camps and U.N.-run shelters.

Israel was meant to send a delegation to Washington to discuss plans for defeating Hamas in Rafah. However, Israel cancelled the visit after the U.S. allowed the U.N. Security Council to pass a resolution calling for an immediate cease-fire in Gaza and the release of Israeli hostages held by Hamas, without linking the two.

The cancelled meeting was the strongest public clash between Israel and the U.S. since the war began.

Graham said he understood Israel's opposition to the U.N. resolution, saying the wording created doubt. But he hoped for a "breakthrough" that would bring Israel and the U.S. "back together talking about the way forward."

**NETANYAHU SAYS U.S. VISIT WAS CANCELED AS A MESSAGE TO HAMAS**

TEL AVIV, Israel — Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu says his decision not to send a delegation to Washington for talks with the Biden administration was meant to deliver a message to Hamas that international pressure against Israel will not prompt it to end the war without concessions from the militant group.

Netanyahu's remarks appeared to be an attempt to smooth over a clash between Israel and Washington this week following the U.S. decision not to veto a U.N. Security Council resolution this week demanding an

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immediate cease-fire. Netanyahu decided in response to cancel a delegation's visit to Washington meant to discuss Israel's plans for an offensive in Gaza's southernmost town of Rafah.

Speaking to visiting Republican Sen. Rick Scott of Florida on Wednesday, Netanyahu said the cancelled visit "was a message first and foremost to Hamas: don't bet on this pressure, it's not going to work."

Netanyahu said the U.S. abstention was "very, very bad," and that it "encouraged Hamas to take a hard line and to believe that international pressure will prevent Israel" from achieving its war aims. Israel wants to destroy Hamas' military and governing capabilities and free the hostages taken by the militant group during its Oct. 7 attack.

The U.S. abstention and Netanyahu's decision to cancel the delegation was the strongest public dispute between the two allies since the war in Gaza began.

## RAFAH AIRSTRIKE KILLS AT LEAST 4, WITH 10 MORE FEARED BURIED UNDER RUBBLE

RAFAH, Gaza Strip — Palestinian health officials say an airstrike on an apartment building in the southernmost Gaza city of Rafah has killed at least four people.

An Associated Press reporter saw the bodies arrive at a local hospital. Relatives say another 10 people were still buried under the rubble.

Palestinians could be seen digging through the remains of a pancaked building early Wednesday. Mohammed Dheir, a neighbor, says there were "limbs all over the ground."

Israel has threatened to expand its ground operation to Rafah, where some 1.4 million people – over half of Gaza's population – have sought refuge. The military has regularly carried out airstrikes on Rafah since the start of the war.

The war began when Hamas-led militants stormed across the border on Oct. 7 and attacked several Israeli communities and army bases, killing some 1,200 people, mostly civilians. They abducted another 250 and dragged them back to Gaza.

In response, Israel launched one of the deadliest and most destructive military campaigns in recent history.

Gaza's Health Ministry said Wednesday that at least 32,490 Palestinians have been killed since the start of the war. It does not differentiate between fighters and civilians but says women and children make up around two-third of those killed.

The Israeli military says it has killed over 13,000 fighters. It blames civilian deaths on Hamas because the militants fight in dense, residential areas, but the military rarely comments on individual strikes.

## 18 PEOPLE HAVE NOW DIED TRYING TO RECOVER AIRDROPPED AID, GAZA OFFICIALS SAY

RAFAH, Gaza Strip — Palestinian officials say at least six people drowned earlier this week while trying to recover airdropped food aid in northern Gaza.

Mahmoud Bassel, a spokesman for Gaza's Civil Defense rescue service, says a large group of men swam out into the Mediterranean Sea on Monday to try to recover aid parcels. Six bodies were later recovered and transferred to a nearby hospital.

He said Wednesday that a total of 18 people have died while trying to recover airdropped aid in scenes of chaos and desperation.

"Sometimes it falls into the sea, sometimes on civilians, sometimes on houses, sometimes on Israeli territory beyond the border fence," he said.

The Hamas-run government media office has also reported 18 deaths related to the aid drops. The United States and other nations have carried out several airdrops in recent weeks to try and get food to Palestinians in northern Gaza, where experts say famine is imminent.

Aid groups say the airdrops are no substitute for bringing aid in overland and have called on Israel to streamline its inspection procedures and open more crossings.

Israel's offensive, launched in response to Hamas' Oct. 7 attack, has caused widespread devastation in northern Gaza and Israeli forces have largely sealed the north off since October. Aid groups say requests to deliver aid to the north are often denied by the military or are too dangerous because of the breakdown in security across Gaza.

## ISRAELI MILITARY KILLS 3 PALESTINIANS DURING AN OVERNIGHT RAID IN THE WEST BANK

JERUSALEM — The Israeli military says its forces killed three Palestinian militants during an overnight

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raid in the West Bank.

The military said it opened fire on militants who hurled explosive devices, killing one of them. It said an airstrike killed two other militants, and that its forces destroyed a vehicle containing explosive devices after arresting two people who were inside it.

The Palestinian Health Ministry said two of those killed were 19 years old. It says another four Palestinians were wounded in the raid, which occurred overnight into Wednesday. It did not say whether any of those killed or wounded were militants or civilians.

Violence across the West Bank has spiked since the war in Gaza broke out on Oct. 7, when Palestinian militants launched an incursion on southern Israel, killing some 1,200 people and kidnapping around 250 others.

The raid was carried out in the Jenin refugee camp, which has seen regular clashes between Israeli forces and Palestinian militants in recent years. The dense, urban camp was built to house Palestinian refugees from what is now Israel who fled or were driven out during the 1948 war surrounding Israel's creation.

The Palestinian Authority, which administers parts of the Israeli-occupied West Bank, has little control over Jenin.

At least 450 Palestinians have been killed in the West Bank by Israeli fire since the conflict broke out, according to Palestinian health officials.

## HEZBOLLAH CLAIMS ROCKET ATTACK THAT KILLED 1 IN NORTHERN ISRAEL

TEL AVIV, Israel — Israel Rescue Services said that one person was killed and two others lightly injured in a Hezbollah rocket attack on northern Israel. The man, 25, was killed from a fire that broke out at a factory in an industrial park in the northern city of Kiryat Shmona as a result of a direct hit.

Around 30 rockets were launched from Lebanon toward northern Israel on Wednesday morning, according to the Israeli military. Hezbollah took responsibility for the launches and said they were in response to an Israeli airstrike that killed seven members of a militant group in southern Lebanon.

Lebanon's Hezbollah militant group began launching rockets toward Israel one day after Hamas-led militants stormed into southern Israel on Oct. 7. There has been near-daily violence, mostly confined to the area along the Lebanon-Israel border, and international mediators are scrambling to prevent an all-out war between Hezbollah and Israel.

The fighting has killed nine civilians and 11 soldiers in Israel. More than 200 Hezbollah fighters and about 40 civilians have died in Lebanon.

## ISRAELI AIRSTRIKE KILLS 7 IN LEBANON

BEIRUT — An Israeli airstrike on a paramedic center linked to a Lebanese Sunni Muslim group in south Lebanon killed seven of its members early Wednesday.

The airstrike on the village of Hebbariye hit an office of the Islamic Emergency and Relief Corps overnight, according to the Lebanese Ambulance Association. The strike was one of the deadliest single attacks since violence erupted along the Lebanon-Israel border more than five months ago.

"This condemned crime forms a flagrant violation against humanitarian work," the association said in a statement. It listed the names of the seven volunteers who were killed in the strike.

The militant Hezbollah group vowed to avenge the attack, saying it "will not pass without punishment."

The Israeli military said it struck "a military building" in Hebbariye and killed a member of Lebanon's Sunni Muslim al-Jamaa al-Islamiya, or the Islamic Group. It said the man was involved in carrying out attacks against Israel and several other militants were killed with him as well.

Since the Israel-Hamas began on Oct. 7, Hezbollah has been carrying attacks against Israel's military posts along the border. Israel has since carried out scores of airstrikes, mostly along the border, but since late February they have started attacking northeast Lebanon.

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## UConn, San Diego State set for title game rematch in Sweet 16; Iowa State, Illinois target Elite 8

By KYLE HIGHTOWER AP Sports Writer

BOSTON (AP) — Connecticut coach Dan Hurley won't shy away from the notion that his team has consistently been the best in college basketball this season.

The Huskies' 33-3 record and the dominant manner in which they've won along the way have proven that. He also knows that means next to nothing as they return to the Sweet 16 still four victories away from becoming the first team since Florida in 2007 to repeat as NCAA Tournament champions.

"We're not going to be able to trade that in for anything tomorrow night versus the team we faced last year in the finals," Hurley said Wednesday as his team prepares for its East Regional semifinal matchup against a fifth-seeded San Diego State team it beat in the NCAA title game last April. "But we bring the confidence. We believe. We think we're supposed to win these games."

The Huskies have reason to feel that way, having won each of their first two tournament games by an average of 28 points.

For San Diego State coach Brian Dutcher it will be a chance to get past a UConn program that beat the Aztecs (26-10) and Kawhi Leonard in the 2011 Sweet 16 when the Huskies were led by Kemba Walker. In last year's championship game, UConn jumped out to a 16-point lead and never let San Diego State get within fewer than five points in the second half.

This time UConn will also be playing at the Boston Celtics' TD Garden, just 85 miles from their campus. "It's like a repeat. I mean, we've got to do what they did to us," Dutcher said. "We're in their backyard now, and hopefully we'll have an opportunity to beat them close to their home."

Aztecs senior Lamont Butler is embracing getting another shot at the Huskies.

"They took us down last year, so we definitely want some revenge back a little bit," he said.

The other half of the bracket features a matchup between second-seeded Iowa State (29-7), which has the best defensive rating of remaining teams, against No. 3 seed Illinois (28-8), which boasts the top offensive rating, according to Ken Pomeroy's efficiency ratings.

Both are also among six remaining Sweet 16 teams with Final Four appearances, but no titles.

Iowa State's only Final Four berth was 80 years ago.

Coach T.J. Otzelberger said the Cyclones' old school, 57-53 victory in January over Houston was emblematic of the type of defense-first mentality that has served them best this season.

"You feel so great in the locker room after all those sacrifices, all that hard work, all that unity, all that time you beat the No. 2 ranked team in the country," Otzelberger said. "I truly believe that gave our guys a greater sense of purpose and confidence."

Illinois hasn't been to a Final Four since 2005 and has been relying on its unorthodox "booty ball" offensive actions, aimed at getting different post-ups and matchups.

It also revolves around the comradery of a group that wasn't above embracing luck as it entered a venue adorned with shamrocks.

When senior forward Coleman Hawkins walked into the news conference along with teammates Marcus Domask and Quincy Guerrier, he noticed their name placards were in an order different than where they'd sat in their previous media sessions. He quickly changed them.

"Superstitious?" the moderator asked.

"Little bit," Hawkins replied.

But perhaps the biggest reason for the Illini's success on offense has been senior guard Terrence Shannon Jr., who is averaging a team-high 23.3 points per game and scored 56 points in the Illini's first two NCAA Tournament wins over Morehead State and Duquesne.

He's done it playing most of the season under a cloud after being charged with rape in September.

Shannon played in Illinois' first 11 games before the university suspended him from team activities when the criminal charge was filed against him. He returned after six games when a federal judge intervened, ruling that his civil rights were violated by a lack of due process.

He hasn't spoken to the media since then and was again unavailable for interviews on Wednesday. Coach Brad Underwood said his team has done its best to adjust. "I've said all along I was going to coach the guys I had in the locker room," Underwood said. "I was going to be the best supporter of those guys that I coach every day. We had to find a way to flourish through those tough times. Then when he came back and joined us, he was a part of our team again. He has always been a great teammate. We got him back, and here we sit today."

## **NCAA President Charlie Baker urges states with legal wagering to ban prop bets on college athletes**

By RALPH D. RUSSO AP College Sports Writer

In the midst of March Madness, the NCAA is pushing for states with legal wagering on sporting events to ban prop bets on college athletes.

"Sports betting issues are on the rise across the country with prop bets continuing to threaten the integrity of competition and leading to student-athletes getting harassed," NCAA President Charlie Baker said Wednesday in statement posted on social media. "The NCAA has been working with states to deal with these threats and many are responding by banning college prop bets."

Prop bets — short for proposition bets — allow gamblers to wager on statistics a player will accumulate during a game rather than the final score.

Baker's statement came two days after the NBA confirmed it opened an investigation into unusual betting patterns surrounding props involving Toronto Raptors forward Jontay Porter. The Raptors said Porter would miss his third consecutive game Wednesday for personal reasons.

Some NBA players and coaches have been outspoken recently about prop bets and how gamblers react when numbers fail to hit. Indiana Pacers guard Tyrese Haliburton said his social media is filled with complaints and Cleveland Cavaliers coach J.B. Bickerstaff revealed he received threats from gamblers last season and reported it to the NBA.

Earlier this month, U.S. Integrity, a company used by many professional sports leagues and college conferences to monitor betting activity, flagged a Temple regular-season men's basketball game for wagering irregularities.

The NCAA men's and women's basketball tournaments are a huge draw for gamblers. The American Gaming Association estimates \$2.7 billion will be bet this year on March Madness through legal sportsbooks.

Several states including Colorado, Arizona, Massachusetts, New York, Pennsylvania and Oregon have rules prohibiting prop betting on college athletes that predate the NCAA's recent push. Others such as Illinois, Connecticut and Iowa do not allow college athlete prop bets involving in-state teams.

Kansas, Michigan, Louisiana and Wyoming allow bettors to place prop bets on college athletes regardless of where they play.

The NCAA already has made some progress this year toward eliminating prop bets on college athletes. Gambling regulators in Ohio, Vermont and Maryland have removed prop betting on college athletes online and in sportsbooks. Baker and his staff are reaching out to regulators in other states to encourage similar bans.

The Ohio Casino Control Commission said last month in granting the NCAA's request that prop bets last year on NCAA athletes with sports gaming operators in the state brought in approximately \$104.6 million, which accounted for 1.35% of the total amount wagered. Prop bets on college athletes accounted for about 2.2% of wagers.

Chris Cylke, senior vice president for government relations for the American Gaming Association, said banning legal wagering on college player propositions would drive more bettors to illegal and offshore sportsbooks.

"While it is unclear how this advances our shared goal of reducing athlete harassment, we do know that driving customers to illegal channels will ultimately hinder the ability to monitor for and detect potential

suspicious betting behavior," Cylke said in a statement provided to The Associated Press.

The number of states that now allow some form of sports betting has grown to 38, plus the District of Columbia. Thirty states and the nation's capital allow online wagering.

Companies that monitor sports betting for irregularities have warned college sports administrators that prop betting on unpaid athletes elevates the potential risk for a scandal because players can more easily influence their own performance than the overall outcome of a game.

The NCAA conducted a survey after last year's basketball tournaments that found 58% of 18- to 22-year-olds are gambling.

Baker has said the proliferation of legal sports gambling has increased stress on college athletes.

"All that chatter about who's playing, who's not playing. Who's sore, who's not sore. What's going on with the team you're playing? What do you think your chances are? Which is just classic chatter, where — in a world where people are betting — takes on a whole new consequence," Baker said in January before his address to membership at the NCAA convention.

The NCAA has partnered with a data science company called Signify, which also works with the NBA Players Association and WNBA, to identify online threats made to athletes during championship events that are linked to wagering.

"Basically tracks ugly, nasty stuff that's being directed at people who are participating in their tournaments and we'd use it the same way," Baker said in January. "And it can shut it down or basically block it. And in some cases even track back to where it came from."

In October, the NCAA announced it would be advocating for state legislators to update laws to crack down on harassment of athletes, coaches and game officials and bolster integrity protections.

In West Virginia, NCAA officials worked with lawmakers to pass a bill that would allow betting regulators to ban people from wagering in the state online or at sportsbooks who have been found to have harassed players, coaches, or officials online or in person. The bill is awaiting a signature from Gov. Jim Justice.

San Diego State men's basketball coach Brian Dutcher said he is concerned about how all the negative feedback impacts athletes' mental health.

"People complaining about how they're playing, missing shots, and they just get beat up constantly," said Dutcher, whose team is playing in Boston in the Sweet 16 this week.

Illinois guard Dra Gibbs-Lawhorn said he encourages his teammates to ignore the criticism.

"I never really am on social media but in person someone would be like, 'I'm going to bet the under on you.' In that moment you can't say anything," Gibbs-Lawhorn said. "So I'm just like, 'OK, good job.' Like, I don't know what you want me to say."

## **Baltimore bridge collapse: Ships carrying cars and heavy equipment need to find a new harbor**

By TOM KRISHER AP Business Writer

Manufacturers and shippers are scrambling to figure out where they can load or unload cargo while the main operations of the Port of Baltimore remain shut down due to Tuesday's deadly collapse of the Francis Scott Key Bridge.

Supply chain experts say other ports up and down the East Coast are likely to absorb much of Baltimore's traffic, avoiding a crisis. But not without some longer shipping times and upheaval.

"Ultimately, most trade through Baltimore will find a new home port," Moody's Analytics economist Harry Murphy Cruise wrote in a blog post.

U.S. Transportation Secretary Pete Buttigieg reiterated Wednesday that it was too soon to estimate how long it would take to clear the bridge structure from the 50-foot-deep (15 meters) Patapsco River channel, which leads to the port's main terminal.

The port's location makes it a key destination for freight. The Maryland Port Administration says the facility is an overnight drive from two-thirds of the U.S. population, and it's closer to the Midwest than

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any other East Coast port.

Here's a look at the goods that go through the Port of Baltimore and the potential impact of a prolonged port shutdown:

## WHAT GOODS ARE SHIPPED TO AND FROM BALTIMORE?

Baltimore is the ninth-busiest port in the nation for international cargo, but it leads U.S. ports in "roll on, roll off" cargo. That means goods with wheels, composed largely of automobiles but including construction and agricultural equipment.

The state of Maryland says the port moved 847,158 automobiles last year. About 70% of the wheeled cargo was imported.

The port also handles a large amount of wood, steel, aluminum, home appliances, furniture, sugar and liquefied natural gas. About 20% of U.S. coal exports pass through Baltimore, second only to the port in Norfolk, Virginia.

Shippers also use the port for containers, although other ports handle more of them. About 1 million containers went through Baltimore in the past year, about 2.8% of the container volume shipped through East Coast ports, according to S&P Global.

In all, the port handled a record 11.7 million tons of cargo last year, the state said.

"For everybody who is buying cars, for everybody who is (buying) farm equipment, we're the largest port in the country that does that," Maryland Gov. Wes Moore said. "So this is not just impacting Maryland."

## HOW MANY SHIPS STOP AT THE PORT?

More than 50 ocean shipping and cruise ship companies do business with the port, the state says, and their vessels visit the port about 1,800 times per year.

Last year, more than 444,000 passengers boarded cruise ships at the port from Royal Caribbean, Carnival, Norwegian and other cruise lines.

## WHAT ARE BALTIMORE-BOUND SHIPS DOING NOW?

Many are waiting to get booked at other ports, pushing back their arrival dates for several weeks.

Windward Maritime said that from Monday to Tuesday, estimated time of arrival for Baltimore bound vessels doubled. The maritime risk management company predicted that ships scheduled to go to Baltimore would be delayed by at least 24 days.

The company also said its data shows a large increase in ships that are basically drifting in the North Atlantic, likely meaning they are waiting to see which port they will go to.

Some are anchored near Baltimore or nearby Annapolis, where a dozen vessels were waiting. Ships also are gathered near Norfolk.

## WHERE ELSE WILL THE SHIPS GO?

Supply chain experts say it will take some time, and there will be disruption, but automakers and shipping companies will divert their cargo to ports up and down the East Coast.

Ports in Philadelphia, Wilmington, Delaware; Newark, New Jersey; Norfolk; Charleston, South Carolina; Jacksonville, Florida; and in Georgia also could see additional cargo.

The Georgia Ports Authority, which owns ports in Savannah and Brunswick, said it has capacity to take on more cargo. But it can't make up for Baltimore by itself.

Baltimore still can handle some autos. Part of its operations are east of where the bridge collapsed and are still operational, the port said. BMW and Volkswagen said they would still be able to use Baltimore.

## WILL THE INCREASED SHIPPING TIMES RAISE PRICES OF GOODS?

Perhaps, although Moody's said finding substitute ports should minimize price adjustments for coal and vehicles. "That said, the reshuffle will squeeze other ports, potentially adding a smidge to shipping costs as delays spill to other goods," analyst Murphy Cruise wrote.

## HAVE OTHER PORTS HAD TO CLOSE AND WHAT HAPPENED THEN?

In September 2019, the South Korean freighter Golden Ray overturned shortly after leaving the Port of Brunswick in Georgia.

The crew was rescued, including four men trapped below its decks. But hauling away the shipwreck,

including the cargo of 4,200 automobiles, turned out to be a slow and messy demolition effort that took over two years.

The port was closed for four days, reopening only after the U.S. Coast Guard determined it was safe for vessels to slowly sail on the shipping channel leading to the port.

The circumstances were much different from the bridge collapse in Baltimore, where sections of the structure lie across the river. Clearing a channel for ships likely will take far longer than four days.

During a briefing at the bridge collapse scene, U.S. Rep. David Trone said state and federal officials estimated the port's closure would cost the economy at least \$15 million per day.

The Port of Baltimore directly employs over 15,000 workers and indirectly supports nearly 140,000 jobs via other port activities, many of whom will either be temporarily out of work or work limited hours, according to Trone.

## Settlement reached in lawsuit between Disney and Florida Gov. Ron DeSantis' allies

By MIKE SCHNEIDER Associated Press

ORLANDO, Fla. (AP) — Allies of Gov. Ron DeSantis and Disney reached a settlement agreement Wednesday in a state court fight over how Walt Disney World is developed in the future following the takeover of the theme park resort's government by the Florida governor.

In a meeting, the DeSantis-appointed members of the board of the Central Florida Tourism Oversight District approved the settlement agreement, ending almost two years of litigation that was sparked by DeSantis' takeover of the district from Disney supporters following the company's opposition to Florida's so-called "Don't Say Gay" law.

The 2022 law bans classroom lessons on sexual orientation and gender identity in early grades and was championed by the Republican governor, who used Disney as a punching bag in speeches until he suspended his presidential campaign this year.

The district provides municipal services such as firefighting, planning and mosquito control, among other things, and was controlled by Disney supporters for most of its five decades.

The agreement came a day after the appointment of a new board member, replacing a DeSantis-appointed board chairman who was a Disney critic. Under the deal, covenants and a development agreement Disney supporters on the board made with the company just before the state takeover would be dropped and the new board agreed to operate under an earlier plan.

Jeff Vahle, president of Walt Disney World Resort, said in a statement Wednesday that the company was pleased a settlement had been reached.

"This agreement opens a new chapter of constructive engagement with the new leadership of the district and serves the interests of all parties by enabling significant continued investment and the creation of thousands of direct and indirect jobs and economic opportunity in the state," Vahle said.

DeSantis, who was in Orlando on Wednesday, said at a news conference that "we have been vindicated on all those actions."

"I'm glad that they were able to do that settlement," DeSantis said. "Those 11th hour covenants and restrictions were never going to be valid. We knew that."

As punishment for Disney's opposition to the controversial law, DeSantis took over the governing district through legislation passed by the Republican-controlled Florida Legislature and appointed a new board of supervisors. Disney sued DeSantis and his appointees, claiming the company's free speech rights were violated for speaking out against the legislation. A federal judge dismissed that lawsuit in January, but Disney appealed.

Before control of the district changed hands from Disney allies to DeSantis appointees early last year, the Disney supporters on its board signed agreements with Disney shifting control over design and construction at Disney World to the company. The new DeSantis appointees claimed the "eleventh-hour deals" neutered

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their powers and the district sued the company in state court in Orlando to have the contracts voided.

Disney filed counterclaims that included asking the state court to declare the agreements valid and enforceable.

Under the terms of Wednesday's settlement agreement, Disney lets stand a determination by the board of DeSantis appointees that the comprehensive plan approved by the Disney supporters before the takeover is null and void. Disney also agrees that a development agreement and restrictive covenants passed before the takeover are also not valid, according to the settlement terms.

Instead, a comprehensive plan from 2020 will be used with the new board able to make changes to it, and the agreement suggests Disney and the new board will negotiate a new development agreement in the near future.

Disney also agreed to put on hold the appeal of the federal lawsuit pending the negotiations on the development agreement and other matters, and it will drop its two state lawsuits against the district, one of which was a public records complaint.

"It looks to me like both sides called 'uncle,'" said Richard Foglesong, a Rollins College professor emeritus who wrote a definitive account of Disney World's governance in his book, "Married to the Mouse: Walt Disney World and Orlando."

"Disney has an interest in ending this and so does the oversight board," he added. "So, they both win."

Since the takeover last year, the district has faced an exodus of experienced staffers, with many in exit surveys complaining that the governing body has been politicized since the changeover. Just this month, the district's administrator, Glen Gilzean, left to become a county elections supervisor at half the \$400,000 salary he was earning at the district, and the district's DeSantis-appointed board chairman, Martin Garcia, departed the following week.

In their place, DeSantis on Tuesday appointed Orlando businessman Craig Mateer to the board and board members on Wednesday approved former DeSantis advisor Stephanie Kopelousos to be the district's new administrator.

Mateer, a donor to DeSantis campaigns, previously had been appointed by the governor to the Greater Orlando Aviation Authority and the Board of Governors, which oversees the state university system. Kopelousos was director of legislative affairs for DeSantis. She also had served as secretary of the Florida Department of Transportation under then-Florida Gov. Charlie Crist and was a former county manager in northeast Florida.

Garcia was a vocal critic of Disney and his replacement by Mateer, who is well-known in Orlando tourism and business circles, may have made Disney comfortable enough with the board to reach an agreement, Foglesong said.

Board member Charbel Barakat said the board was looking forward to taking a more cooperative approach with the entertainment giant.

"We are eager to work with Disney," Barakat said after the settlement deal was approved.

## **Biden leans on his Democratic predecessors as Trump remains isolated from other Republican leaders**

By CHRIS MEGERIAN Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — When President Joe Biden needs advice, there are two people he can turn to who know what it's like to sit in his chair. Sometimes he will invite Barack Obama over to the White House for a meal or he will get on the phone with Bill Clinton.

The three men share decades of history at the pinnacle of American and Democratic leadership, making them an unusual trio in presidential history. Although there has sometimes been friction as their ambitions and agendas have diverged, they have spent years building toward a similar vision for the country.

On Thursday, their partnership will be on display in what has been described as a one-of-a-kind fundraising extravaganza in New York City to help Biden build on his already significant cash advantage in this

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year's presidential election. It's a dramatic show of force intended to rally the Democratic Party faithful to secure a second term for Biden despite his stubbornly low poll numbers and doubts due to his age (81).

"There is everything to be gained by Joe Biden standing next to Bill Clinton and Barack Obama," said Leon Panetta, who worked in the administrations of both former presidents. "That picture is worth a hell of a lot in politics today."

The display of solidarity is a sharp contrast to Donald Trump's isolation from other Republican leaders.

Although Trump has solidified his grip on his party on the way to becoming the presumptive nominee, not even his own former vice president, Mike Pence, is willing to endorse Trump's bid for another White House term. The only other living Republican president, George W. Bush, is not a supporter, either.

It's a far different situation with Biden, Obama and Clinton. When they haven't been campaigning against each other, they've been working together.

At one point, all three of them were on a collision course during the Democratic presidential primary in 2008. Biden and Obama sought the nomination, as did Clinton's wife, Hillary. Obama came out on top, and chose Biden as his vice president and Hillary Clinton as his secretary of state.

As Obama's two terms were ending and the 2016 election was approaching, he nudged Hillary Clinton to the forefront as his preferred successor and dissuaded Biden from running after Biden's elder son died of cancer. Clinton lost to Trump, who lost to Biden in 2020. Obama privately helped clear a path for Biden to the Democratic nomination that year.

There have been notable splits between the presidents on key issues. Biden was unsuccessful in persuading Obama not to send more troops to Afghanistan in 2009. U.S. forces remained in the country until 2021, when Biden withdrew them during his first year in office.

The three presidents have often focused on the same goals in a sort of legislative relay race. Clinton failed to significantly expand health care access during his presidency, which ran from 1993 to 2001. Obama picked up the baton when he took office in 2009 and signed the Affordable Care Act into law in 2010.

Biden called the law a "big ... deal" — inserting an infamous expletive in the middle of that thought — and built on it when he began his own term in 2021. He signed legislation that included financial incentives for states to expand Medicaid, prompting North Carolina to take the belated step last year, more than a decade after the Affordable Care Act made it possible.

Between Clinton, Obama and Biden, "they've seen the sweep of Democratic history together in ways that not everybody has," said Gene Sperling, a longtime economic adviser.

Sperling is among the administration officials who have served all three presidents. Another member of those ranks is John Podesta, currently a global climate envoy for Biden who was Clinton's chief of staff and an environmental adviser to Obama.

Podesta said all three have tried to improve the lives of working Americans.

"Each one of them, when they close the door on the Oval Office, that's what mattered to them the most," he said.

But their styles aren't the same. While Obama was more reserved, Biden and Clinton draw energy from chatting up people on rope lines and forging deep personal relationships.

"Their relaxation is politics," Podesta said.

Panetta suggested that Biden, broadly unpopular in public polling, should try to pick up a few tips from his Democratic predecessors, both of whom served two terms.

"The fundamental reason they got reelected is that they were able to connect with the American people," he said. "Joe Biden clearly needs to do that."

The only living Democratic president who will not be in New York for the fundraiser is 99-year-old Jimmy Carter. A spokeswoman for Carter confirmed that he remains in home hospice care and is not making any public statements.

Carter's relationship with Biden goes back several decades. When Carter was running for president in 1976 as a little-known former governor of Georgia, Biden took a political risk by becoming the first sitting senator to endorse him.

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Fundraisers, even with presidents, are usually small affairs. Dozens or sometimes hundreds of people gather in a wealthy person's living room or backyard to hear a speech from the candidate and maybe ask a few questions.

This one is in a different league. Thousands of people are expected at Radio City Music Hall to watch Stephen Colbert, the late-night talk show host, moderate a conversation with the three presidents. Celebrity guests — Cynthia Erivo, Mindy Kaling, Queen Latifah, Lizzo, Lea Michele and Ben Platt — will provide more star power.

The cheapest tickets are \$225, making it more accessible than most fundraisers. But that's only the starting point. A photo with all three presidents is \$100,000. Access to more intimate receptions will cost \$250,000 or \$500,000.

Campaign officials have not said how much they expect the event to raise. But they said a fundraiser featuring Biden and Obama in December raised nearly \$3 million.

Trump, meanwhile, is also expected to be in the area Thursday, attending the Long Island wake of a New York City police officer who was shot and killed during a traffic stop in Queens.

The Trump campaign, which has struggled to keep pace with Biden's fundraising, scoffed at Thursday's event, dismissing it as a sign the president needs to "trot out some retreads like Clinton and Obama," in the words of spokesman Steven Cheung.

Eric Schultz, a senior adviser to Obama, said the former president "will do all he can" to support Biden and "he looks forward to helping Democrats up and down the ballot make the case to voters this fall."

"Our strategy will be based on driving impact, especially where and when his voice can help move the needle," Schultz said.

The relationship between Obama and Biden has been personal as well as political. Obama offered to help Biden pay the family's medical bills when Biden's son Beau was struggling with cancer. After Beau's death in 2015, Obama gave a eulogy at the funeral, where he described his vice president as "my brother."

"They're like family to each other," White House press secretary Karine Jean-Pierre said recently.

## People form a human chain around Slovakia's public broadcaster that government wants to take over

BRATISLAVA, Slovakia (AP) — Protesters in Slovakia formed a human chain around the country's public television and radio building Wednesday in anger over a takeover plan by the government whose populist, pro-Russia prime minister recently labeled several private media outlets his enemies.

The takeover plan was drafted by Culture Minister Martina Šimkovičová, who represents an ultra-nationalist member party of the coalition government and has worked for an internet television outlet known for spreading disinformation.

The plan has been condemned by President Zuzana Čaputová, opposition parties, local journalists, international media organizations, the European Commission and others who warn that the government would be taking full control of public broadcasting. Slovak journalists have called the plan an attack on all free media.

Wednesday's was the latest protest against the policies of Prime Minister Robert Fico, known for his tirades against journalists. His critics worry Slovakia under him will abandon its pro-Western course and follow the direction of Hungary under Prime Minister Viktor Orbán.

Šimkovičová has said taking over public media is needed because she believes the current broadcaster is biased, giving space only to mainstream views and censoring the rest. The broadcaster has denied that.

According to her plan, the current public radio and television known as RTVS would be replaced by a new organization. A new seven-member council with members nominated by the government and parliament would select the broadcaster's director and have the right to fire the director without giving cause.

The current broadcaster's director was elected by parliament, and his term in office will end in 2027.

The hundreds of protesters unveiled a banner reading "HANDS OFF RTVS!" and chanted to local journalists, "We're by your side." Thousands of people rallied in a similar protest earlier this month.

Fico returned to power for the fourth time last year after his leftist party Smer (Direction) won the parliamentary election on a pro-Russian, anti-American platform.

## 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.

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.

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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.

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.

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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!"

## **House Speaker Mike Johnson is committed to advancing Ukraine aid. But it will be a difficult task**

By STEPHEN GROVES Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — For over a month, House Speaker Mike Johnson has sat on a funding package that would send desperately needed ammunition and weaponry to Ukraine, mulling how best to gain a grasp of what is expected to be a difficult lift in the House.

The Republican speaker has indicated he will attempt to push for approval of tens of billions in wartime funding for Ukraine, as well as Israel, once the House returns in April. Yet it will be perhaps his most difficult task since he took the speaker's gavel late last year.

"We'll turn our attention to it and we won't delay on that," the Louisiana representative said of the Ukraine package at a news conference last week.

Still, Johnson has waited to act at a time when Russia is renewing its missile attacks on Kyiv. In Ukraine's eastern regions, soldiers are running low on ammunition as they attempt to hold off a surge of Russian soldiers to the frontlines. European leaders and analysts are warning that the conflict could grow into a much larger clash that involves NATO allies and direct American military involvement if Russia prevails in Ukraine.

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Johnson is facing dilemmas himself in Congress. Should funding for Ukraine's government be loans or a typical grant? Should the \$95 billion package that the Senate approved for Ukraine, Israel and other allies be handled as one or broken into pieces? And how decisively should he push for the House to act when his own leadership position is being threatened?

Rep. Gregory Meeks, the top Democrat on the House Foreign Affairs Committee, called it "devastating" that the House has departed for a two-week break with the aid package left unresolved. He, along with many Democrats, called on Johnson to allow a vote on a Senate-approved bill.

"If you're serious about helping Ukraine, you just put the bill on the floor and let's vote -- let the House have its will," he said.

But hardline conservatives in the House, adamantly opposed to aid for Ukraine, are already frustrated with Johnson's willingness to work with Democrats to pass legislation — so much so that it could cost him his job. Rep. Marjorie Taylor Greene, a far-right Republican from Georgia, has filed a motion to vacate Johnson as speaker and warned him not to put Ukraine funding on the House floor.

"He should not bring funding for Ukraine," Greene told reporters on the Capitol steps just after she filed the motion to vacate.

Meanwhile, an old guard of Republican defense hawks has put increasing pressure on Johnson to advance an aid package in some form. Most Democrats have indicated support for the Senate-passed legislation. However, a growing number of Democrats have raised concerns about Israel's deadly campaign in Gaza, and a significant number of them are expected to oppose any funding for offensive weaponry for Israel.

The dynamic leaves Johnson with a shifting and unpredictable House at a time when he will need to win broad, bipartisan support. Before becoming speaker, Johnson was deeply skeptical of approving funding for Ukraine and voted repeatedly against it. But now, occupying one of the most powerful positions in Washington, Johnson is poised to become a crucial ally for Kyiv at a time when America's commitments abroad are in doubt.

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

Fond of quoting former President Ronald Reagan, Johnson has repeatedly cited "peace through strength" as one of his guiding principles. In private, he has indicated he will work towards a vote on Ukraine aid once the House returns in April, according to two people who discussed the private conversations on the condition of anonymity. But he has revealed little about how he intends to do it.

One idea Johnson has raised is splitting the funding for Ukraine and Israel into separate votes, which could allow him to navigate the fractures in support for the two countries between Republicans and Democrats.

Senior Republicans are also working on a package that would loan Ukraine money to keep its government operating. Most of the money in the package would be allocated for purchasing weaponry from U.S. defense manufacturers, then sending them to Ukraine. The group of GOP defense hawks has also advanced legislation called the Rebuilding Economic Prosperity and Opportunity for Ukrainians, or REPO Act, which would allow the U.S. to tap frozen Russian central bank assets to compensate Ukraine for damages from the invasion.

"I would like to be doing it as soon as possible. I think the situation in Ukraine is dire," said Rep. Michael McCaul, who is leading the push as the Republican chair of the House Foreign Relations Committee, in an interview on CBS' "Face the Nation."

But McCaul added that Johnson is in "a very difficult spot" as Greene's ouster threat hangs over his head.

For now, Greene has not asked that the motion immediately be brought up for a vote, meaning that it could remain little more than a threat. Also, other conservatives have suggested they do not want to force an ouster of Johnson, even as they express displeasure about how he had led the House. Democrats too have suggested they could protect Johnson from being ousted as speaker, especially if he is being punished for bringing the funding for Kyiv to the floor.

Still, some Republicans have quietly worried that Johnson will not be able to muster the support for

Ukraine, especially if he has to gain the two-thirds support to bring the bill under a streamlined process. A small group of Republicans has worked to gain support for a "discharge petition" — a seldom-successful procedural tool that can circumvent the speaker's control over which bills come up for a vote by gaining 218 member signatures, representing a majority of the House.

"This is the only way you're going to get a bill passed and you can do it with 218 votes," said Rep. Don Bacon, a centrist Republican who has advanced the discharge petition drive.

Democrats have tried the discharge petition approach as well, but that effort was intended more to put pressure on the speaker.

Meanwhile, the mood in Kyiv has grown tense as the city withstands missile attacks and officials await word from Washington on approval of the aid, said Shelby Magid, deputy director of the Eurasia Center at the Atlantic Council, which advocates for American cooperation with Europe.

"So many Ukrainians know the names of members of Congress and the different procedures now," she said during a trip to Kyiv last week. "Their lives depend on it."

## **TikTok is under investigation by the FTC over data practices and could face a lawsuit**

By HALELUYA HADERO AP Business Writer

NEW YORK (AP) — The Federal Trade Commission is investigating TikTok over its data and security practices, a probe that could lead to a settlement or a lawsuit against the company, according to a person familiar with the matter.

The investigation is the latest battle in Washington for the social media company, which is already fighting against a federal bill that could ban the platform in the U.S. if it doesn't break ties with its Beijing-based parent company, ByteDance.

In its investigation, the FTC has been looking into whether TikTok violated a portion of federal law that prohibits "unfair and deceptive" business practices by denying that individuals in China had access to U.S. user data, said the person, who is not authorized to discuss the investigation.

The agency also is scrutinizing the company over potential violations of the Children's Online Privacy Protection Act, which requires kid-oriented apps and websites to get parents' consent before collecting personal information of children under 13.

FTC spokesperson Nicole Drayton and TikTok declined to comment on the investigation, which was first reported by Politico.

The agency is nearing the conclusion of its investigation and could settle with TikTok in the coming weeks. But there's not a deadline for an agreement, the person said.

If the FTC moves forward with a lawsuit instead, it would have to refer the case to the Justice Department, which would have 45 days to decide whether it wants to file a case on the FTC's behalf, make changes or send it back to the agency to pursue on its own.

The news comes nearly two years after Senate Intelligence Committee Chairman Mark Warner and Marco Rubio, the top Republican on the committee, urged FTC chair Lina Khan to investigate TikTok, citing a report from BuzzFeed News that said ByteDance employees in China have repeatedly accessed data on U.S. TikTok users.

In late 2022, ByteDance said it fired four employees who accessed data on journalists from BuzzFeed News and The Financial Times while attempting to track down leaks of confidential materials about the company.

Legislation that could determine TikTok's fate in the U.S. was approved in the House this month. But the bill has already run into roadblocks in the Senate, where there is little unanimity on how to best approach concerns over the social platform.

Lawmakers and intelligence officials have said they worry the platform could be used by the Chinese government to access U.S. user data or influence Americans through its popular algorithm. To date, the U.S. government hasn't provided public evidence that this has happened.

## **783 million people face chronic hunger. Yet the world wastes 19% of its food, UN says**

By CARLOS MUREITHI Associated Press

NAIROBI, Kenya (AP) — The world wasted an estimated 19% of the food produced globally in 2022, or about 1.05 billion metric tons, according to a new United Nations report.

The U.N. Environment Programme's Food Waste Index Report, published Wednesday, tracks the progress of countries to halve food waste by 2030.

The U.N. said the number of countries reporting for the index nearly doubled from the first report in 2021. The 2021 report estimated that 17% of the food produced globally in 2019, or 931 million metric tons (1.03 billion tons), was wasted, but authors warned against direct comparisons because of the lack of sufficient data from many countries.

The report is co-authored by UNEP and Waste and Resources Action Programme (WRAP), an international charity.

Researchers analyzed country data on households, food service and retailers. They found that each person wastes about 79 kilograms (about 174 pounds) of food annually, equal to at least 1 billion meals wasted worldwide daily.

Most of the waste — 60% — came in households. About 28% came from food service, or restaurants, with about 12% from retailers.

"It is a travesty," said co-author Clementine O'Connor, the focal point for food waste at UNEP. "It doesn't make any sense, and it is a complicated problem, but through collaboration and systemic action, it is one that can be tackled."

The report comes at a time when 783 million people around the world face chronic hunger and many places facing deepening food crises. The Israel-Hamas war and violence in Haiti have worsened the crisis, with experts saying that famine is imminent in northern Gaza and approaching in Haiti.

Food waste is also a global concern because of the environmental toll of production, including the land and water required to raise crops and animals and the greenhouse gas emissions it produces, including methane, a powerful gas that has accounted for about 30 percent of global warming since pre-industrial times.

Food loss and waste generates 8 to 10 percent of global greenhouse gas emissions. If it were a country, it would rank third after China and the U.S.

Fadila Jumare, a Nigeria-based project associate at Busara Center for Behavioral Economics who has studied prevention of food waste in Kenya and Nigeria, said the problem further disadvantages many people who are already food insecure and cannot afford healthy diets.

"For humanity, food waste means that less food is available to the poorest population," said Jumare, who wasn't involved in the report.

Brian Roe, a food waste researcher at Ohio State University who wasn't involved with the report, said the index is important to tackling food waste.

"The key takeaway is that reducing the amount of food that is wasted is an avenue that can lead to many desirable outcomes — resource conservation, fewer environmental damages, greater food security, and more land for uses other than as landfills and food production," said Roe, who wasn't involved in the report.

The report showed notable growth in coverage of food waste in low- and middle-income countries, the authors said. But it may fall to wealthier nations to lead in international cooperation and policy development to reduce food waste, they said.

The report said many governments, regional and industry groups are using public-private partnerships to reduce food waste and its contributions to climate and water stress. Governments and municipalities collaborate with businesses in the food supply chain, whereby businesses commit to measure food waste.

The report said food redistribution — including donating surplus food to food banks and charities — is significant in tackling food waste among retailers.

One group doing that is Food Banking Kenya, a nonprofit that gets surplus food from farms, markets,

supermarkets and packing houses and redistributes it to schoolchildren and vulnerable populations. Food waste is an increasing concern in Kenya, where an estimated 4.45 million metric tons (about 4.9 million tons) of food is wasted every year.

"We positively impact the society by providing nutritious food and also positively impact the environment by reducing the emission of harmful gases," said John Gathungu, the group's co-founder and executive director.

The report's authors said they found that the differences in per capita household food waste between high-income and lower-income countries were surprisingly small.

Richard Swannel, a co-author and director of Impact Growth at WRAP, said that shows food waste "is not a rich world problem. It's a global problem."

"The data is really clear on this point: that here is a problem right around the world and one that we could all tackle tomorrow to save ourselves money and reduce environmental impact," he said.

## Looking at a solar eclipse can be dangerous without eclipse glasses. Here's what to know

By ADITHI RAMAKRISHNAN AP Science Writer

DALLAS (AP) — Millions of people along a narrow band in North America will look up when the sky darkens during a total solar eclipse on April 8. When they do, safety is key.

Staring directly at the sun during a solar eclipse or at any other time can lead to permanent eye damage. The eclipse is only safe to witness with the naked eye during totality, or the period of total darkness when the moon completely covers the sun.

Those eager to experience the eclipse should buy eclipse glasses from a reputable vendor. Sunglasses are not protective enough, and binoculars and telescopes without a proper solar filter can magnify light from the sun, making them unsafe.

"Please, please put those glasses on," NASA Administrator Bill Nelson said.

### Where to find eclipse glasses

Since counterfeit glasses abound, consider purchasing glasses from a local science museum or order online from a seller cleared on the American Astronomical Society's website.

Eclipse safety experts say legitimate eclipse glasses should block out ultraviolet light from the sun and nearly all visible light. When worn indoors, only very bright lights should be faintly visible – not household furniture or wallpaper.

Old eclipse glasses from the 2017 total solar eclipse or October's "ring of fire" annular eclipse are safe to reuse, as long as they aren't warped and don't have scratches or holes.

Glasses should say they comply with ISO 12312-2 standards, though fake suppliers can also print this language on their products. NASA does not approve or certify eclipse glasses.

### How to view the eclipse without glasses

If you don't have eclipse glasses, you can still enjoy the spectacle through indirect ways such as making a pinhole projector using household materials.

Poke a hole through a piece of cardstock or cardboard, hold it up during the eclipse and look down to see a partial crescent projected below. Holding up a colander or a cracker will produce a similar effect.

Another trick: Peering at the ground under a shady tree can yield crescent shadows as the sunlight filters through branches and leaves.

Eye experts warn against viewing the eclipse through a phone camera. The sun's bright rays can also damage a phone's digital components.

### Why looking at a solar eclipse is dangerous

Eye damage can occur without proper protection. The sun's bright rays can burn cells in the retina at the back of the eye. The retina doesn't have pain receptors, so there's no way to feel the damage as it happens. Once the cells die, they don't come back.

Symptoms of solar eye damage, called solar retinopathy, include blurred vision and color distortion.

In a rare case of eclipse eye damage, a woman who viewed the 2017 eclipse without adequate protection came to Mount Sinai's New York Eye and Ear Infirmary, complaining of a black spot in her vision. Doctors discovered retinal damage that corresponded to the eclipse's shape.

"The dark spot she was describing was in the shape of a crescent," said Dr. Avnish Deobhakta, a Mount Sinai ophthalmologist.

There's no set rule for how long of a glance can lead to permanent damage. Severity varies based on cloudiness, air pollution and a person's vantage point.

But doctors say looking at a solar eclipse for even a few seconds unprotected isn't worth the risk. There are reports of solar retinopathy after every solar eclipse, and U.S. eye doctors saw dozens of extra visits after the one in 2017.

Spectators who plan ahead can secure a stress-free eclipse viewing experience.

"It can be dangerous if we aren't careful, but it's also very safe if we take the basic precautions," said Dr. Geoffrey Emerson, a board member of the American Society of Retina Specialists.

## A faster spinning Earth may cause timekeepers to subtract a second from world clocks

By SETH BORENSTEIN AP Science Writer

Earth's changing spin is threatening to toy with our sense of time, clocks and computerized society in an unprecedented way — but only for a second.

For the first time in history, world timekeepers may have to consider subtracting a second from our clocks in a few years because the planet is rotating a tad faster than it used to. Clocks may have to skip a second — called a "negative leap second" — around 2029, a study in the journal *Nature* said Wednesday.

"This is an unprecedented situation and a big deal," said study lead author Duncan Agnew, a geophysicist at the Scripps Institution of Oceanography at the University of California, San Diego. "It's not a huge change in the Earth's rotation that's going to lead to some catastrophe or anything, but it is something notable. It's yet another indication that we're in a very unusual time."

Ice melting at both of Earth's poles has been counteracting the planet's burst of speed and is likely to have delayed this global second of reckoning by about three years, Agnew said.

"We are headed toward a negative leap second," said Dennis McCarthy, retired director of time for the U.S. Naval Observatory who wasn't part of the study. "It's a matter of when."

It's a complicated situation that involves, physics, global power politics, climate change, technology and two types of time.

Earth takes about 24 hours to rotate, but the key word is about.

For thousands of years, the Earth has been generally slowing down, with the rate varying from time to time, said Agnew and Judah Levine, a physicist for the time and frequency division of the National Institute of Standards and Technology.

The slowing is mostly caused by the effect of tides, which are caused by the pull of the moon, McCarthy said.

This didn't matter until atomic clocks were adopted as the official time standard more than 55 years ago. Those didn't slow.

That established two versions of time — astronomical and atomic — and they didn't match. Astronomical time fell behind atomic time by 2.5 milliseconds every day. That meant the atomic clock would say it's midnight and to Earth it was midnight a fraction of a second later, Agnew said.

Those daily fractions of seconds added up to whole seconds every few years. Starting in 1972, international timekeepers decided to add a "leap second" in June or December for astronomical time to catch up to the atomic time, called Coordinated Universal Time or UTC. Instead of 11:59 and 59 seconds turning to midnight, there would be another second at 11:59 and 60 seconds. A negative leap second would go from 11:59 and 58 seconds directly to midnight, skipping 11:59:59.

Between 1972 and 2016, 27 separate leap seconds were added as Earth slowed. But the rate of slowing

was tapering off.

"In 2016 or 2017 or maybe 2018, the slowdown rate had slowed down to the point that the Earth was actually speeding up," Levine said.

Earth's speeding up because its hot liquid core — "a large ball of molten fluid" — acts in unpredictable ways, with eddies and flows that vary, Agnew said.

Agnew said the core has been triggering a speedup for about 50 years, but rapid melting of ice at the poles since 1990 masked that effect. Melting ice shifts Earth's mass from the poles to the bulging center, which slows the rotation much like a spinning ice skater slows when extending their arms out to their sides, he said.

Without the effect of melting ice, Earth would need that negative leap second in 2026 instead of 2029, Agnew calculated.

For decades, astronomers had been keeping universal and astronomical time together with those handy little leap seconds. But computer system operators said those additions aren't easy for all the precise technology the world now relies on. In 2012, some computer systems mishandled the leap second, causing problems for Reddit, Linux, Qantas Airlines and others, experts said.

"What is the need for this adjustment in time when it causes so many problems?" McCarthy said.

But Russia's satellite system relies on astronomical time, so eliminating leap seconds would cause them problems, Agnew and McCarthy said. Astronomers and others wanted to keep the system that would add a leap second whenever the difference between atomic and astronomical time neared a second.

In 2022, the world's timekeepers decided that starting in the 2030s they'd change the standards for inserting or deleting a leap second, making it much less likely.

Tech companies such as Google and Amazon unilaterally instituted their own solutions to the leap second issue by gradually adding fractions of a second over a full day, Levine said.

"The fights are so serious because the stakes are so small," Levine said.

Then add in the "weird" effect of subtracting, not adding a leap second, Agnew said. It's likely to be tougher to skip a second because software programs are designed to add, not subtract time, McCarthy said.

McCarthy said the trend toward needing a negative leap second is clear, but he thinks it's more to do with the Earth becoming more round from geologic shifts from the end of the last ice age.

Three other outside scientists said Agnew's study makes sense, calling his evidence compelling.

But Levine doesn't think a negative leap second will really be needed. He said the overall slowing trend from tides has been around for centuries and continues, but the shorter trends in Earth's core come and go.

"This is not a process where the past is a good prediction of the future," Levine said. "Anyone who makes a long-term prediction on the future is on very, very shaky ground."

## How events in Moldova's breakaway Transnistria region raised fears of Russian interference

By STEPHEN McGRATH Associated Press

Since Russia invaded Ukraine two years ago, fears have risen in neighboring Moldova that it could also be in Moscow's crosshairs.

Like Ukraine, Moldova is a former Soviet republic that has aligned itself with the West and aspires to join the European Union. And both countries hope to eventually reintegrate Russian-speaking breakaway territories that view Moscow as their protector.

After a short war in the early 1990s, Transnistria declared independence from Moldova, where today's pro-Western government has firmly opposed Russian President Vladimir Putin's war with Ukraine.

Although Transnistria's independence isn't recognized by any U.N. member countries, including Russia, the Kremlin-friendly territory has become a source of tension during the war, especially since it is wedged between Moldova and Ukraine and is home to a military base with 1,500 Russian troops.

WHY HAS TRANSNISTRIA CAUSED ALARM?

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A large majority of Transnistria's 470,000 people speak Russian as a first language and some 200,000 are Russian citizens who feel a close connection to Russia, though most are also Moldovan citizens. In 2006, more than 95% of voters in a Transnistria referendum said they wanted to join Russia, but the ballot wasn't internationally recognized.

Since the war in Ukraine started, several developments in Transnistria have led some to draw parallels to the separatist movement by pro-Moscow factions in eastern Ukraine that paved the way for Russia's full-scale assault.

Just weeks after the invasion, a series of explosions rocked Transnistria. Last year, an opposition leader there who campaigned for human rights was shot to death. And this month, an empty helicopter at a military installation was destroyed in what Transnistria officials blamed on a Ukrainian drone strike but what Moldovan authorities allege was a staged explosion meant to inflame tensions.

"More such actions are planned by the Russian Federation" in Transnistria, Moldova's Bureau for Reintegration Policies said in a statement Monday. The bureau, which works to reintegrate Transnistria into Moldova, added that with Russia unable to attack Moldova militarily, "such actions are aimed at increasing panic, inducing mistrust in society and weakening the economy."

The separatist region also made headlines last month when authorities used a rare meeting of Transnistria's congress to appeal to Moscow for "protection" due to what they said was increased pressure from Moldova. The appeal stopped short of asking Russia to annex the territory, allaying fears in Moldova, which dismissed the event as propaganda.

The Kremlin routinely denies that it is trying to destabilize Moldova, but last week, Moldova expelled a Russian diplomat after Moscow opened six polling stations for its presidential election in Transnistria.

## DOES RUSSIA HAVE AMBITIONS IN TRANSNISTRIA?

Russian forces have made territorial gains in Ukraine in recent months after Kyiv's counteroffensive failed to yield significant battlefield gains. But to reach Transnistria from Ukraine, Russian forces would need to capture Ukraine's Black Sea coast, including the major port city of Odesa, to create a land corridor to the region.

In an interview with The Associated Press, Moldova's foreign minister, Mihai Popsoi, didn't play down the threat that Russia poses to Moldova.

"It's not whether the Russians would want to come ... and violate our sovereignty — it's a matter of whether they could," Popsoi said. "As long as Ukraine is resolute in its resistance and defending its territory, and as long as the West is willing to provide enough support for Ukraine, ... then we remain safe."

Moldova has faced a litany of crises amid the war next door. These include errant missiles landing on its territory, a severe energy crisis after Moscow dramatically reduced gas supplies, rampant inflation and recurring anti-government protests by pro-Russia parties.

Military aggression may not be in Russia's interest since it is already "pretty effectively" destabilizing Moldova "without attacking Moldova," said Alexandra Vacroux, executive director of the Davis Center for Russian and Eurasian Studies at Harvard University. "I don't see it," she added.

## WHAT COULD PUTIN ACTUALLY DO IN THE BREAKAWAY REGION?

Moldova's government asserts that Moscow is conducting a broad "hybrid war" against their country by funding anti-government protests, meddling in local elections, and running vast disinformation campaigns to try to topple the government and derail Moldova's EU aspirations.

Earlier this month, Moldova's national intelligence agency said it had gathered data indicating "unprecedented" plans by Moscow to launch a fresh and sprawling destabilization campaign as Moldova gears up for an EU membership referendum and a presidential election.

"We're counting on our society and our partners to help us continue to build resilience ... so that we can be more effective in preventing and combatting all these hybrid threats," Popsoi said.

## IS THE HELICOPTER INCIDENT CAUSE FOR CONCERN?

After Transnistrian authorities blamed the helicopter incident on Ukraine, Moldova quickly denied that any attack occurred and called it "an attempt to cause fear and panic in the region."

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The reintegration bureau said that after analyzing footage of the parked helicopter bursting into flame, there were indications that the fire was "caused by factors other than the drone," but it didn't specify what caused the blaze.

Popsoi, 37, said the incident — which occurred on the final day of Russia's highly-orchestrated presidential election — "looked as staged as they come," but that the "hysteria and panic is understandable" given the proximity of Russia's war.

Moldova said the helicopter had been decommissioned for several years. "It seems like they added fuel to that helicopter ... just to have a nicer explosion for cinematographic effect," Popsoi said.

WILL THE OLD "FROZEN CONFLICT" THAW ANYTIME SOON?

Ion Marandici, a scholar who studies conflict resolution and Eastern Europe, said he's skeptical that Transnistria could be reintegrated into Moldova by 2030, when Moldova hopes to become a full EU member.

"The conflict can be managed successfully, but it cannot be resolved at this time due to the deep-seated distrust and the sacrifices that neither side is willing to make," he said. "Reintegration would mean a weakening of (Moldova's) pro-EU parties and a consolidation of their political opponents."

Popsoi said the EU has assured Moldova that the Transnistria issue will not prevent the country from joining the EU "per se" and that the process could instead make reintegration with Moldova more attractive for the breakaway region, since 70% of Transnistria's exports end up in the EU.

"We are committed to a peaceful settlement," he said. "There is this constant struggle there between more reasonable economy-driven folks, and there is the more security establishment, pro-Russian hawks there that are looking for escalation, looking to cause trouble."

## **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.

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

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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 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.

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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.

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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 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

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neighborhoods.

In a video livestreamed on a phone snatched from one resident, they marched 15-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 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.

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"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."

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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

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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."

## 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.

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 de-

fensive 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.

"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.

## Here are some numbers that will help you get your March Madness fix for the Sweet 16

By STEVE MEGARGEE AP Sports Writer

Sixteen may be sweet, but it isn't the only relevant number as the NCAA Tournament heads into the regional semifinals.

Here are some other numbers worth knowing for each team. These statistics will help you learn more about each of the remaining teams and could explain how some of them got this far.

### EAST REGION

UCONN: In UConn's second-round victory over Northwestern, Donovan Clingan became just the third player in tournament history to get 14 points, 14 rebounds and eight blocks in a game. The others to do it were Hakeem Olajuwon for Houston in 1983 and David Robinson for Navy in 1986. The blocks also were the most ever by a UConn player in a tournament game.

SAN DIEGO STATE: The Aztecs' Sweet 16 matchup with defending national champion UConn will mark the fourth time that two teams have faced each other in the tournament a year after meeting in the final. The losing team from the championship won the rematch in one of the three previous instances, when Duke beat UNLV in a 1991 semifinal. Cincinnati won two straight championship games over Ohio State in 1961-62. Florida beat UCLA in the 2006 championship game and in a 2007 semifinal.

ILLINOIS: Illinois has won six in a row, and Terrence Shannon Jr. has scored at least 25 points in each

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of those games. The 6-foot-6 guard has averaged 30.5 points and has shot 52.8% (56 of 106) from the floor during that stretch. He also shown an uncanny knack for drawing fouls during the streak. Over his last five games, Shannon has gone 51 of 58 on free-throw attempts.

**IOWA STATE:** Iowa State is allowing just 61.2 points per game to rank fourth among all Division I teams in scoring defense. Since falling 73-65 to Houston on Feb. 19, the Cyclones haven't allowed any of their last 10 opponents to exceed 65 points. The Cyclones next face Illinois, which ranks ninth in points per game (84.6) and has averaged 91.3 points over its last four contests.

## WEST REGION

**ALABAMA:** Mark Sears and Aaron Estrada were the first set of Division I teammates since 1996-97 to both have at least 410 points, 125 assists, 120 rebounds, 50 3-point baskets and 40 steals during the regular season. Sears is averaging 21.5 points, 4.2 rebounds, 4.2 assists and 1.7 steals. Estrada has 13.3 points, 5.4 rebounds, 4.7 assists and 1.7 steals per game.

**NORTH CAROLINA:** Armando Bacot had seven straight tournament double-doubles and six consecutive tourney games with at least 15 rebounds before he ended up with 18 points and seven boards in a second-round victory over Michigan State. His seven straight NCAA double-doubles matched Tim Duncan and Olajuwon for the NCAA record.

**ARIZONA:** Arizona's first-round triumph over Long Beach State marked the 19th time this season the Wildcats had five different players score in double figures. No other Division I team had that many games this season in which five different players had at least 10 points.

**CLEMSON:** Each of Clemson's first two tournament opponents has shot below 40% against the Tigers. Clemson won its first-round game by limiting New Mexico to 29.7% shooting, the lowest percentage the Tigers had ever allowed in an NCAA tourney game. Clemson now faces Arizona, which shot 52.8% in its second-round victory over Dayton.

## MIDWEST REGION

**CREIGHTON:** Baylor Scheierman is the first Division I men's player in history to have at least 2,000 career points, 1,000 rebounds, 500 assists and 300 3-point baskets. Scheierman, who is in his second season at Creighton after playing three seasons at South Dakota State, has 2,208 points, 1,250 rebounds, 578 assists and 352 3-pointers.

**TENNESSEE:** Tennessee is making its 10th Sweet 16 appearance – including its seventh in the last 18 years – but the Volunteers have never reached the Final Four and earned their lone regional final berth in 2010.

**GONZAGA:** Gonzaga is in the Sweet 16 for the ninth straight time, the longest active streak of any Division I team. Going back to 1975 – the first year that all teams had to win at least one game to reach the Sweet 16 – the record for consecutive Sweet 16 appearances is owned by North Carolina with 13 straight from 1981-93.

**PURDUE:** Zach Edey is the first player since Kareem Abdul-Jabbar (then known as Lew Alcindor) in 1968 to have at least 50 points and 35 rebounds while shooting 65% from the field in his first two games of an NCAA Tournament. Edey has shot 67.9% (19 of 28) and has totaled 53 points and 35 rebounds in victories over Grambling State and Utah State.

## SOUTH REGION

**DUKE:** Jared McCain has gone 10 of 17 from 3-point range through the first two rounds. In the Blue Devils' second-round blowout of James Madison, McCain became the first freshman to score at least 30 points without committing a turnover in an NCAA Tournament game since the event expanded to 64 teams in 1985.

**HOUSTON:** The Cougars showcased their depth by surviving a second-round matchup with Texas A&M in overtime even after four of their five starters fouled out. They became the first team to win an NCAA game while having at least four players foul out since 1987, when UTEP overcame foul trouble to beat Arizona.

**MARQUETTE:** Marquette owns a 75-29 record under coach Shaka Smart despite posting a negative rebound margin in each of his three seasons. The Golden Eagles have been outrebounded in each of their

last eight games but have gone 5-3. They're getting outrebounded by 3 boards per game this season. The only other Sweet 16 team with a negative rebound margin is North Carolina State (minus-0.8), which faces Marquette on Friday.

NORTH CAROLINA STATE: Mohamed Diarra has 6.4 points and 7.7 rebounds per game this season, but he's averaged 11.7 points and 13.5 rebounds over his last six. Michael O'Connell scored in double digits three times and totaled 14 3-point baskets in 31 regular-season games. He's reached double figures in six of seven postseason games and has gone 12 of 22 from 3-point range during that stretch.

## 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.

## 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.

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"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."

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 Steel, 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.

## **Trump evokes more anger and fear from Democrats than Biden does from Republicans, AP-NORC poll shows**

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

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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.

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.

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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."

## Today in History: March 28, Three Mile Island has partial nuclear meltdown

By The Associated Press undefined

Today in History

Today is Thursday, March 28, the 88th day of 2024. There are 278 days left in the year.

Today's Highlight in History:

On March 28, 1979, America's worst commercial nuclear accident occurred with a partial meltdown inside the Unit 2 reactor at the Three Mile Island plant near Middletown, Pennsylvania.

On this date:

In 1797, Nathaniel Briggs of New Hampshire received a patent for a washing machine.

In 1854, during the Crimean War, Britain and France declared war on Russia.

In 1898, the U.S. Supreme Court, in *United States v. Wong Kim Ark*, ruled 6-2 that Wong, who was born in the United States to Chinese immigrants, was an American citizen.

In 1935, the notorious Nazi propaganda film "Triumph des Willens" (Triumph of the Will), directed by Leni Riefenstahl, premiered in Berlin with Adolf Hitler present.

In 1939, the Spanish Civil War neared its end as Madrid fell to the forces of Francisco Franco.

In 1941, novelist and critic Virginia Woolf, 59, drowned herself near her home in Lewes, East Sussex, England.

In 1942, during World War II, British naval forces staged a successful raid on the Nazi-occupied French port of St. Nazaire in Operation Chariot, destroying the only dry dock on the Atlantic coast capable of repairing the German battleship *Tirpitz*.

In 1969, the 34th president of the United States, Dwight D. Eisenhower, died in Washington, D.C., at age 78.

In 1977, "Rocky" won best picture at the 49th Academy Awards; Peter Finch was honored posthumously as best actor for "Network" while his co-star, Faye Dunaway, was recognized as best actress.

In 1987, Maria von Trapp, whose life story inspired the Rodgers and Hammerstein musical "The Sound of Music," died in Morrisville, Vermont, at age 82.

In 1999, NATO broadened its attacks on Yugoslavia to target Serb military forces in Kosovo in the fifth straight night of airstrikes; thousands of refugees flooded into Albania and Macedonia from Kosovo.

In 2000, in a unanimous ruling, the Supreme Court, in *Florida v. J.L.*, sharply curtailed police power in relying on anonymous tips to stop and search people.

In 2012, bluegrass legend and banjo pioneer Earl Scruggs died in Nashville, Tennessee at 88.

In 2022, the Academy of Motion Pictures Arts and Sciences condemned the actions of Will Smith during the previous night's Oscars and launched an inquiry into his slapping of Chris Rock. (Smith was later expelled from the movie academy received a 10-year ban from the Oscars.)

Today's Birthdays: Author Mario Vargas Llosa is 88. Country musician Charlie McCoy is 83. Movie director Mike Newell is 82. Philippines President Rodrigo Duterte is 79. Actor Dianne Wiest is 78. Country singer Reba McEntire is 69. Olympic gold medal gymnast Bart Conner is 66. Actor Alexandra Billings (TV: "Transparent") is 62. Rapper Salt (Salt-N-Pepa) is 58. Actor Tracey Needham is 57. Actor Max Perlich is 56. Movie director Brett Ratner is 55. Country singer Rodney Atkins is 55. Actor Vince Vaughn is 54. Rapper Mr. Cheeks (Lost Boyz) is 53. Singer-songwriter Matt Nathanson is 51. Rock musician Dave Keuning (The Killers) is 48. Actor Julia Stiles is 43. Singer Lady Gaga is 38. Electronic musician Clayton Knight (Odesza) is 36.