

Groton Daily Independent

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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.

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



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.

Dueling Duo at the Legion 6 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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students in Finland's fourth-largest city, Vantaa.

The Walt Disney Co.'s monthslong battle with billionaire investor Nelson Peltz and his firm, Trian Fund Management, will come to a close today, as shareholders vote to determine the company's future board. Shareholders will decide between Disney's incumbent slate of 12 members and Trian's two candidates, Peltz and former Disney CFO Jay Rasulo, who aim to replace two current members. Investor Blackwells Capital has also nominated three candidates. The board sets the strategy and oversees the management of the entertainment giant.

The Tropicana closed its doors yesterday, marking an end to the third-oldest hotel-casino in Las Vegas, with ties to the Mafia and celebrities.

In The Know

Billie Eilish, Pearl Jam, and Nicki Minaj among group of 200 artists who penned an open letter to tech and digital music companies, expressing their concerns over the use of AI in music.

Joe Flaherty, prolific actor and comedian, dies at age 82. Larry Lucchino, former president and CEO of the Boston Red Sox, dies at age 78.

Chicago Symphony Orchestra taps Klaus Mäkelä, 28, as its next music director; will be youngest in the orchestra's 133-year history. SiriusXM to launch Taylor Swift channel April 7 ahead of the release of her new album.

Science & Technology

Amazon to phase out its "Just Walk Out" technology at Amazon Fresh stores; approach, which scanned and billed customers via cameras and sensors, to be replaced with carts that let users scan items while they shop.

Left-handedness linked to specific genetic variation that controls the production of tiny structures known as microtubules; feature was found at almost three times the rate in lefties, who make up about 10% of the population.

Prototype smart contacts for health monitoring and drug delivery demonstrated; devices are powered by light and electrolytes contained in tears.

Business & Markets

US stock markets close lower (S&P 500 -0.7%, Dow -1.0%, Nasdaq -1.0%) as US 10-year Treasury yield rises to highest level since November. US crude oil prices surpass \$85 per barrel, highest since October.

Tesla shares close down 5% after Q1 electric vehicle deliveries drop 8.5% year-over-year, the first quarterly decline since 2020. General Electric completes split into three public companies as aerospace and energy businesses begin trading on New York Stock Exchange; healthcare business split off in January 2023.

Bernard Arnault and his family (\$233B), Elon Musk (\$195B), and Jeff Bezos (\$194B) top Forbes annual list of the world's billionaires, which features 2,781 people, up from last year; Taylor Swift and Earvin "Magic" Johnson among first-timers on list.

Politics & World Affairs

World Central Kitchen suspends Gaza aid deliveries after an Israeli airstrike kills seven aid workers; Israel claims responsibility for the strike, says the incident was unintentional.

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Fire in Istanbul nightclub kills at least 29 people; police say fire—which took place during daytime hours—may have been caused by renovation work and have detained at least eight people.

Oregon Gov. Tina Kotek (D) signs bill recriminalizing hard drug possession. Wisconsin Gov. Tony Evers (D) vetoes bill barring transgender student-athletes from teams aligned with gender identity.

30th Anniversary!



Congratulations Dale and Joyce Grenz on 30 years of owning and operating the Groton Dairy Queen. You have served the greater community with generous hearts and humble leadership - all while offering Hot Eats and Cool Treats with excellence. Today we celebrate and honor you for 30 years of service!



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15 N Main St. - Ste. 101
Downtown Groton

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



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

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!!

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. 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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Spring in the air with public works discussion

Garbage pickup may soon move back to streets throughout town.

At Tuesday's City Council meeting, Mayor Scott Hanlon asked Public Works Coordinator Terry Herron if there was a timeframe to end the spring thaw garbage route.

Currently, residents need to bring their garbage to Railroad Avenue, Main Street, Sixth Street and Highway 37 for the Tuesday weekly pickup. Some areas of streets in town develop soft spots when the ground thaws in the spring.

There are some soft spots on Seventh Avenue near the Krause's development, Herron said.

That development includes houses on Seventh Avenue just east of Fourth Street.

Moving back to the normal garbage route is dependent on what the weather does, Herron said.

Hanlon said he would want to keep the spring thaw routes as long as possible to preserve the streets.

"All and all, everything is looking good," he said. "I guess thank goodness. I've talked to a lot of people, and everything is looking good."

Other signs that point to spring include discussion about upcoming public works projects, sump pumps running outside instead of into the sanitary sewer and street sweeping.

Wastewater Superintendent Dwight Zerr discussed a sewer replacement project at Fourth Street and Second Avenue. The old lines have cracks and odd angles, and those lines need to be replaced.

"Those are the ones we've had trouble with before," he said.

The city will have to dig up portions of the street to replace the lines, but the project should be able to stay within the public works budget, he said.

City staff are also looking to clear a line near the ice skating rink that has landscape-type rocks causing issues in it. In addition, street sweeping has started in other cities.

"When it quits snowing, I'll start sweeping," Zerr said.

- Three more summer employees were hired at Tuesday's council meeting.
 - o Claire Zbylut was hired as day baseball/softball coach at \$2,500 yearly plus \$50 for each year of service. Zbylut has one year of experience.
 - o Dillon Abeln was hired as groundskeeper at \$11.20 per hour with an additional 25 cents for each year of service. Abeln has one year of experience.
 - o Sydney Locke was hired as gatekeeper at \$11.20 per hour with an additional 25 cents for each year of service. This is Locke's first year.
- Groton code enforcer Dennis "Mike" Olson met with the City Council during executive session at Tuesday's meeting. No action was reported.
- The council approved a special event alcoholic beverage license for an event later this month. The Groton Area Fire Protection District requested the special event license for the Fireman's Fun Night, taking place April 20 at the Groton Fire Hall. While introducing the item to the council, Mayor Scott Hanlon said he doesn't think the city has ever had any problem from having alcohol at the event. The license was approved with a unanimous vote. "Thank you firemen for doing this," Hanlon said. "It's a fun event, and it's going to raise some money for the fire hall."
- Writing a bad check to the city will soon cost more. Senate Bill 38, approved in the state legislature in January, updates the fee businesses can charge people for a bad check from \$40 to \$60. Groton Finance Officer Douglas Heinrich asked the council if the city could increase the returned check fee to \$60, effective July 1. It doesn't happen very often, Heinrich said, but it's just another deterrent.

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Traphagen, Gerlach selected as Assistant Coaches of the Year

Groton Areas Kyle Gerlach and Trent Traphagen were chosen as Assistant Coaches of the Year by the South Dakota Basketball Coaches Association. Gerlach is the assistant boys coach and Traphagen is the assistant girls coach.

Region 1 Girls' Basketball Coach of the Year

Head Girls: Derek Larson Aberdeen Roncalli High School

Assistant Girls: Trent Traphagen Groton Area High School

Region 2 Girls' Basketball Coach of the Year

Head Girls: Tara King- Arlington High School

Assistant Girls: Brian Relf Flandreau High School

Region 3 Girls' Basketball Coach of the Year

Head Girls: Krista Robinson James Valley Christian HS

Assistant Girls: Eric Hasart James Valley Christian HS

Region 4 Girls' Basketball Coach of the Year

Head Girls: Dakota Johnson Spearfish High School

Tie Assistant Girls: Jaime Bentley Spearfish High School

Tie Assistant Girls: Josie Dirksen Sturgis Brown HS

Girls Region 1-4 Lower Level Coach of the Year

(Three way tie)

LeAnn Bartholow: James Valley Christian

Wade Stobbs: Huron

Cooper Heiser: Arlington

Region 5 Girls' Basketball Coach of the Year

Head Girls: Jim Bridge Hanson High School

Assistant Girls: Barry Matthies Bishop O'Gorman HS

Region 6 Girls' Basketball Coach of the Year

Head Girls: Jon Brooks Vermillion High School

Assistant Girls: Dana Bigge Harrisburg High School

Region 7 Girls' Basketball Coach of the Year

Head Girls: Preston Kristensen Mt Vernon-Plankinton HS

Assistant Girls: Becky Haenfler Avon High School

Region 8 Girls' Basketball Coach of the Year

Head Girls: Matt Rama Mahpiya Luta High School

Assistant Girls: Amanda Carlow Mahpiya Luta High School

Girls Lower Level Region 5-8 Coach of the Year

Tera Koupal- Wagner

Region 1 Boys' Basketball Coach of the Year

Head Boys: Brock Pashen Leola/Frederick High School

Assistant Boys: Kyle Gerlach Groton Area High School

Region 2 Boys' Basketball Coach of the Year

Head Boys: Todd Neuendorf Hamlin High School

Assistant Boys: Travis Wadsworth Hamlin High School

Region 3 Boys' Basketball Coach of the Year

Head Boys: Tim Buddenhagen Huron High School

Assistant Boys: Ryan Spader Howard High School

Region 4 Boys' Basketball Coach of the Year

Head Boys: Travis Grueb Faith High School

Assistant Boys: Adam Courtney Rapid City Christian

Boys Coach Region 1-4 Lower Level Coach of the Year

Bill Clemens Northwestern

Region 5 Boys' Basketball Coach of the Year

Head Boys: Nick Koepsell Howard High School

Assistant Boys: David Carmon Sioux Valley High School

Region 6 Boys' Basketball Coach of the Year

Head Boys: Scott Langerock Harrisburg High School

Tie Assistant Boys: Dave Nour Harrisburg High School

Tie Assistant Boys: Jacob Hinker Lennox High School

Region 7 Boys Basketball Coach of the Year

Head Boys: Jeff Determan Gregory High School

Assistant Girls: Becky Haenfler Avon High School

Region 8 Boys' Basketball Coach of the Year

Head Boys: Casey Means Pine Ridge High School

Assistant Boys: Ben Connot Winner High School

Boys Lower Level Region 5-8 Coach of the Year

Kenedy Koepsell, Howard



SOUTH DAKOTA SEARCHLIGHT

<https://southdakotasearchlight.com>

80% of tested surface water in South Dakota fails to meet state standards

BY: JOSHUA HAIAR - APRIL 2, 2024 6:27 PM

About 80% of the rivers, streams and lakes tested in South Dakota are too polluted for at least one of their intended uses.

The state Department of Agriculture and Natural Resources recently released the final draft of its 2024 report on surface water quality.

The state has criteria to ensure a body of water is safe for its assigned uses. That means a lake where people swim and fish may have a stricter standard than a creek that's rarely used for recreation.

The percentage of sites not supporting all of their intended uses is about the same as the last report in 2022.

The report is required as part of the federal Clean Water Act and is reviewed by the Environmental Protection Agency.

South Dakota's rivers and streams span 11,929 miles, with an additional 135,128 miles of streams that are dry at least part of the year. Of these, 6,148 stream miles were evaluated over the last five years, and 22% were clean enough to support all of their assigned beneficial uses. Those could include fishing, swimming, irrigation or supplying domestic water, among other uses.

Causes of river and stream pollution include runoff bringing too much soil and other solids into the water, and E. coli contamination from livestock and wildlife waste.

The report also covers the state's 577 lakes and reservoirs, of which 180 have been assessed. Eighty percent of tested lakes were too polluted to support all of their assigned beneficial uses, and the report primarily blames mercury detected in fish.

Mercury levels in freshwater fish across the U.S. are rising due to more mercury in the atmosphere as a result of coal combustion and other human activities.

Agriculture also contributes to lake pollution, according to the report: "These lakes have sizeable watersheds of nutrient-rich glacial soils that are extensively developed for agriculture. Runoff carrying sediment and nutrients from agricultural land is the most significant source of nonpoint pollution." Nonpoint pollution comes from many sources via runoff, as opposed to a single point source like a factory.

The report includes public comments that were submitted about the draft report. Two groups, including the Environmental Protection Agency, shared their thoughts. The EPA praised the state for finishing the report but suggested making the data easier to understand.

Jay Gilbertson, speaking for the East Dakota Water Development District, raised some questions. He noted a portion of the report that says South Dakota "primarily" uses volunteer efforts to prevent pollution from runoff, like when rain washes waste from livestock feedlots into waterways.

Gilbertson said the word "primarily" made it sound like regulatory enforcement is also used, but he doesn't know of any examples of that happening. He suggested the report should either drop the word "primarily" or change it to "exclusively."

The state changed the report to say it "encourages volunteer efforts."

Among other comments and questions, Gilbertson also said the report indicates the state didn't get any information from the Department of Game, Fish and Parks or any group that monitors beaches in the state. He found it worrisome that one state department wouldn't share needed data with another, especially

since it could affect public safety.

The state's response to that was a single word: "Noted."

Gilbertson told South Dakota Searchlight that the state's binary "pass-fail" approach to the water quality report masks some progress. He said along the Big Sioux River, for example, the state financially incentivizes better livestock waste management and the planting of grass buffers to filter out waste before it reaches the water.

Joshua Haiar is a reporter based in Sioux Falls. Born and raised in Mitchell, he joined the Navy as a public affairs specialist after high school and then earned a degree from the University of South Dakota. Prior to joining South Dakota Searchlight, Joshua worked for five years as a multimedia specialist and journalist with South Dakota Public Broadcasting.

Thune says immigration, debt, Ukraine war funding challenge US leadership

BY: BRAD JOHNSON - APRIL 2, 2024 4:30 PM

WATERTOWN — About 1.8 million of the estimated 9 million encounters at the southern U.S. border in the past three years are "people they call got-aways," U.S. Sen. John Thune, R-South Dakota, told a gathering of Rotarians recently.

"In other words," he said, "they didn't catch them."

But officials did apprehend 169 people who were on the terror watch list, he added.

Immigration was the first of several topics Thune addressed with the Rotary Club on March 28 in Watertown. Others included inflation, federal spending, political and societal polarization, green energy, war funding for Ukraine and his relationship with Donald Trump.

He said immigration is dominating political discourse.

"It's a huge problem on the minds of people all across the country and all across South Dakota," Thune said, noting how most Americans trace their ancestry to legal immigration.

"It is a reminder that inasmuch as we are a nation of immigrants, we are first and foremost a nation of laws, and we need to enforce our laws," he said. "They are not being enforced today."

Inflation

Inflation is another major issue as the country moves into the presidential election season.

"Since President Biden took office," Thune said, "the cumulative inflation has gone up 18.6%. That means about a thousand bucks a month to the average family of four."

He said wages and income growth have not kept pace, while at the same time "this White House has great ideas on how to spend your money."

Trump, leadership race

How the U.S. Senate deals with spending will change, Thune said, if he becomes the next majority leader should Republicans gain control and tap him for the job. He is competing against Sen. John Cornyn, of Texas, to replace Sen. Mitch McConnell, of Kentucky, who recently announced he will step down as the Republican Senate leader in November. Thune presently is Senate minority whip, his party's number two position in the Senate.

It is unclear how that will square with the presumptive Republican presidential nominee, Donald Trump, who has criticized both Thune and Cornyn in the past.

Thune said he recently spoke with Trump, and the two had a good conversation. "I don't know if in the end he gets involved in the leadership race or not," Thune said. "But I think we have an understanding and a relationship that, if nothing else, is at least professional."

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Ukraine

Thune noted that Congress recently passed a package of legislation that “funded the government for last year.” Included in that package is \$500 million for the Israeli Cooperative Missile Defense Program and \$300 million for the Ukraine Security Assistance Initiative.

Left unfinished was another bill with billions more to help Ukraine repel Russia’s invasion, as well as additional aid for Israel and Taiwan.

The Senate has approved \$95 billion in aid (including \$60 billion for Ukraine), but it’s stalled in the House, where it’s expected to be addressed this month.

Thune noted that \$38 billion of that aid would help the U.S. rebuild its military with new weapons while older weapons are sent to Ukraine.

“America needs to provide leadership,” Thune said. “The world is a dangerous place. Right now, our choice with Ukraine is to send them weapons and let them fight their battles, which they are happy to do, and they’ve proven they have an enormous determination to win.”

The alternative, he said, is to “send them American sons and daughters, which is what will happen if Russia succeeds in Ukraine and goes next against a NATO ally such as one of the Baltics – Estonia, Lithuania, or Latvia or Poland,” triggering U.S. involvement.

“Then our men and women are in that fight,” he said.

Thune noted that the House is considering a version of military aid that would be more of a lend-lease program similar to World War II aid. That would provide cover for a Congress increasingly concerned about the national debt.

National debt

Thune said the U.S. government must face the burgeoning national debt in the near future.

“It is a time bomb,” he said. “It’s ticking and at some point, it is going to go off.”

Addressing runaway spending will require presidential leadership, and both President Joe Biden and Trump are avoiding the issue, Thune said.

“Members of Congress, especially House members who run every two years, are not going to walk out on that limb and have somebody saw it off behind them. So, you are never going to get members of Congress willing to make hard votes to deal with the debt absent a president who is willing to give them political cover.”

Other issues

Among other issues, Thune addressed:

The farm bill. The last farm bill expired at the end of September and Congress extended it for a year. “There are big differences of opinions between Republicans and Democrats about what the priorities ought to be in terms of funding allocations in the farm bill,” Thune said, adding there is a slim possibility it will be addressed sometime this summer, “but I’m not holding my breath on that.” Most likely, it will come up after the November election.

Electric cars and green energy. Thune said the Biden administration is trying to force people to change driving habits. “The idea that you are going to have two-thirds of America driving electric vehicles in eight years is unrealistic,” he said, noting it is impractical in weather- and distance-challenged states like South Dakota. This state is a leader in alternative energy with its hydroelectric power and renewable fuels, he said. “But the heavy hand of government — the mandates and everything that comes with it — has a very crushing effect on people.”

Political and social polarization. “The country is very divided right now and our politics reflects it,” Thune said. He noted that the Citizens United U.S. Supreme Court ruling that allows unlimited independent expenditures on political campaigns has changed the political scene. Spending surpassed \$100 million in five U.S. Senate races in 2022. “That has changed politics in a way that sometimes I think is hard to wrap your head around.” A major obstacle in all of the issues, he concluded, is that social media is driving people

into their own information bubbles and “nobody is hearing what the other side is saying anymore.”

Brad Johnson is a Watertown real estate appraiser, former newspaper reporter and editor, and longtime opinion columnist. He is president of the South Dakota Lakes and Streams Association, vice president of the South Dakota Wildlife Federation and served 16 years on the South Dakota Board of Water and Natural Resources.

Law school dean, public defender, judge appointed to state public defense commission

BY: JOHN HULT - APRIL 2, 2024 11:34 AM

The chief justice of the South Dakota Supreme Court has appointed a law school dean, a deputy public defender and a Winner-based circuit judge to a commission that will monitor and guide the work of the new state public defender office, leaving only one commission seat left to fill.

The commission will oversee the Office of Indigent Legal Services. It was borne of legislation that changed South Dakota’s status as the only state in the nation to saddle counties with the entire financial burden of delivering constitutionally required legal representation to those who cannot afford it.

The office will be led by a yet-unhired chief defender, who will handle criminal and child abuse and neglect appeals, as well as challenges to detention from incarcerated people. Counties will continue to fund representation in other cases.

In addition to oversight of the state-level office’s work, the commission is meant to “oversee indigent representation services to ensure the effective assistance of counsel in South Dakota’s court system,” according to a Tuesday news release from the state Unified Judicial System.

The office will cost \$1.4 million annually, but is expected to save counties \$2.1 million each year.

The commission consists of three members appointed by the governor, three by the chief justice, and one each from the state Senate president pro tempore, speaker of the state House of Representatives and the executive director of the South Dakota Association of County Commissioners.

State Supreme Court Chief Justice Steven Jensen announced his three in the Tuesday news release. They are:

Neil Fulton, dean of the University of South Dakota Knudson School of Law, appointed to a four-year term.

Betsy Doyle, deputy public defender for Minnehaha County, appointed to a three-year term.

Bobbi Rank, circuit judge for the Sixth Judicial Circuit, appointed to a one-year term.

Jensen, who lobbied for the creation of the indigent defense office, said the commission will help protect a critical right for South Dakota citizens.

“Ensuring the right to counsel for every person accused of a crime is fundamental to upholding the right of due process — that is the right to be heard and present a defense to a charge by the government,” Jensen said in the release.

Gov. Kristi Noem was the first to name members to the commission. On March 18, the day she signed the bill creating the office and the commission, she announced the appointment of former judge and former attorney general Larry Long, State Bar President Heather Lammers Bogard and private attorney Dick Travis.

Senate President Pro Tempore Lee Schoenbeck, R-Watertown, who works as a private attorney and is not seeking reelection this year, appointed himself to the commission on Veto Day, the last official day of the 2024 legislative session. House Speaker Hugh Bartels, R-Watertown, appointed Rep. David Kull, a Brandon Republican and former Brandon police chief.

The South Dakota Association of County Commissioners has submitted a name, Executive Director Kris Jacobsen said, but the appointment is not yet official.

John is the senior reporter for South Dakota Searchlight. He has more than 15 years experience covering criminal justice, the environment and public affairs in South Dakota, including more than a decade at the Sioux Falls Argus Leader.

As drag shows go 'mainstream,' some red states look to restrict them

Most Americans oppose bans, polls show, but conservatives keep filing bills

BY: AMANDA HERNÁNDEZ - APRIL 2, 2024 7:00 AM

Drag performances used to be found mostly in the confines of nightlife venues such as clubs and bars. But drag has stepped into the daylight, with elaborately costumed and made-up performers appearing at library readings and kid-friendly brunches, and a newfound visibility for gender-bending entertainment and self-expression.

"Drag now versus 15 years ago is like night and day," said Dr. Lady J, a Cleveland-area performer with a doctoral dissertation in drag history. "Drag is so mainstream now. ... I grew up in a world where drag queens were this mysterious thing that maybe existed in New York or San Francisco."

The growing visibility has made drag performances a target for conservative legislators. Although polls show most Americans don't support laws to restrict drag performances, lawmakers in states including Kentucky, Missouri, Nebraska, South Dakota and West Virginia have considered or enacted legislation this session that would prohibit businesses from allowing minors to attend drag shows. Several would impose stricter business regulations on establishments that host drag shows or would ban "obscene live conduct" at state universities.

Supporters of these bills say they are designed to protect children from entertainment that is not appropriate for them, not to target the transgender community. But critics warn that such laws could be used to file criminal charges or discriminate against people who identify as transgender outside of drag performances. This year, 21 drag-related bills have been considered in 12 states, according to the ACLU's LGBTQ+ bill tracking database. (Some were carried over from last year's legislative sessions.)

Most of them failed. Of 15 drag bills considered last year, only three were carried over to this year's legislative sessions, according to the ACLU's database. Those that become law often face significant legal challenges.

In Montana, where a law explicitly restricting drag performances was enacted last year, federal court orders have rendered it unenforceable.

Courts also have deemed the laws in Florida, Tennessee and Texas — all of which use similar language about "adult cabaret entertainment" or "sexually oriented businesses" — unenforceable. A federal court ruled that the Texas law was unconstitutional and violated the First Amendment.

Legislation restricting gender-affirming care, transgender girls' participation in school sports and restroom access is also on the table in many states.

Dr. Lady J says drag-related bills deflect attention from deeper issues facing the LGBTQ+ community.

"[These drag-related bills are] distracting people from the actual anti-trans laws that are being passed," she said. "It's flashier to talk about drag than it is to talk about what it means to tell a 12-year-old, 14-year-old trans kid they can have hormones one day and the next day to tell them that thing that you thought was going to save your life ... the government decided yesterday you don't get it anymore. Good luck surviving, kid."

Largely backed by GOP lawmakers, bills affecting drag performances have often surfaced during election cycles, experts pointed out, deployed to mobilize conservative voter bases.

"[Drag] is the latest in a series of LGBTQ-related issues that [some Republicans] have found compelling as a way of firing up their base and getting folks either to contribute money or to come out and vote for them," said Melissa Michelson, a political scientist and LGBTQ+ politics expert at Menlo College in California.

The focus on drag-related legislation is likely to wane as election season fades, Michelson added. "It's all about riling up the public. There's no actual threat. It's very much an electoral politics phenomenon."

Dr. Lady J said these efforts aren't about protecting children but rather about erasing LGBTQ+ visibility from public spaces. When she performs at kid-friendly events, she is deliberate about selecting music and attire that are both appropriate for and captivating to younger audiences, such as a headdress adorned with pony figurines inspired by the popular toy and show "My Little Pony," Dr. Lady J told Stateline.

"The reality is that a lot of these people just don't want queer people anywhere near their kids," she said.

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"They don't want their kids to see that you are allowed to grow up and be happy and be a queer person."

Many who are backing the bills disagree, saying they're worried about how adult content is seeping into everyday life.

"We've really come to a place where things that were always considered adult-oriented have moved into the public sector and have been marketed and advertised at family-friendly events, when truly they were very sexual in nature," Kentucky Republican state Sen. Lindsey Tichenor said in an interview.

State legislative efforts

Tichenor has sponsored a bill targeting performances "with explicitly sexual conduct" in "adult-oriented businesses" near places children might be.

Her bill would restrict these businesses from operating within roughly a city block's distance — about 933 feet — of other establishments serving children, such as schools, playgrounds or day care facilities. Violators risk losing business or liquor licenses and may face cease-and-desist orders. Local governments also would have the power to impose stricter rules.

"A lot of the opposition really isn't informed [about] exactly what is in the legislation. And it's really, very simply, putting adult-oriented businesses in the proper place where minors can't have access to it," said Tichenor.

When initially introduced, the bill contained language that redefined as adult-oriented businesses establishments that "host sexually explicit drag performances." Tichenor said she made several adjustments to the bill after meeting with performers who were concerned with the proposed revised definition. The current version of the legislation no longer references all drag, but describes adult cabaret that contains "explicitly sexual conduct."

"I thought it was very important that we had that definition specific to drag performances that are of a sexual nature and where those can be and where they cannot be," she said.

This legislative session, only one related measure has been signed into law, in South Dakota. Approved in early March, the law prohibits the state Board of Regents and the public universities it oversees from using state funds or property for "obscene live conduct."

While the law does not explicitly ban drag shows, some opponents believe it's a veiled attempt to target them because two bills with similar language, with one explicitly banning drag, died earlier this year.

"It's kind of impeaching on First Amendment rights — free expression, freedom of speech," said Everett Moran, a legislative intern with the Transformation Project Advocacy Network, a South Dakota-based trans advocacy group.

The bills come after controversy erupted in 2022 over a drag show held at South Dakota State University in Brookings that was advertised as kid-friendly. There was backlash, and the Board of Regents set a policy that prohibits programs on campus where minors are present from including specific sexual activities, obscene live conduct or any material meeting the definition of "harmful to minors."

Proponents of the law said it reflects that policy.

"This [bill] complements [the board's policy] and says, you know what, this is more than just a policy. This is a law. You broke a law," Republican Rep. Chris Karr, the bill's lead sponsor, told colleagues ahead of the bill's vote in the House in early February. Karr could not be reached for comment for this story.

No one from the Board of Regents testified in favor of or against the bill, but when asked about how the new law would be enforced, the board said in a statement that it "does not currently authorize or expend public funds to support obscene live conduct, as defined in codified law 22-24-27, on any South Dakota public university campus."

South Dakota state Rep. Linda Duba, a Democrat who voted against the measure, said the law will not affect the transgender community. Still, she said, the law is unnecessary and "purely political."

"It's an election year, and the [Republican] supermajority decided this would be something they thought we should do even though we have policies in place that make this bill unnecessary," Duba said in an interview. "We've already defined in current statute what obscenity is, and we have a policy in place by

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the Board of Regents, and the bill doesn't do anything different."

A different time

In West Virginia, a bill introduced in January would have amended the state's indecent exposure law to criminalize engaging in "obscene matter." The bill's definition of "obscene matter" includes "any transvestite and/or transgender exposure, performances, or display to any minor."

The bill's lead sponsor, Republican Sen. Mike Azinger, could not be reached for comment, and co-sponsor, Republican Sen. Robert Karnes, declined Stateline's interview request. Before the state's legislative session ended, the bill was sent to the Judiciary Committee.

In Missouri, a Senate and House bill would each add performances featuring male or female impersonations to the definition of sexually oriented businesses. Both bills are in committee. Under the bills, performers could potentially face felony charges for performing in public spaces where the show could be viewed by a child.

And in Nebraska, legislation that would restrict minors — defined by state law as anyone under 19 — from attending drag shows, appeared to die after the legislature's Judiciary Committee voted against advancing it. The proposed legislation would have imposed misdemeanor charges, carrying a maximum penalty of up to a \$1,000 fine and one year in jail, against anyone — including parents — who brings a child to a drag event.

Fifty-eight percent of Americans oppose laws that would impose restrictions on drag shows or performances in their state, while 39% support such legislation, according to a 2023 NPR-PBS NewsHour-Marist poll.

Despite the varied opinions among Americans, these drag-related bills have emerged at a time when drag has become a form of mainstream entertainment and widely popular, said Michelson, the political scientist and LGBTQ+ politics expert. This differs from previous attacks on members of the LGBTQ+ community throughout history, who were targeted during a time when stigma was rampant, Michelson added.

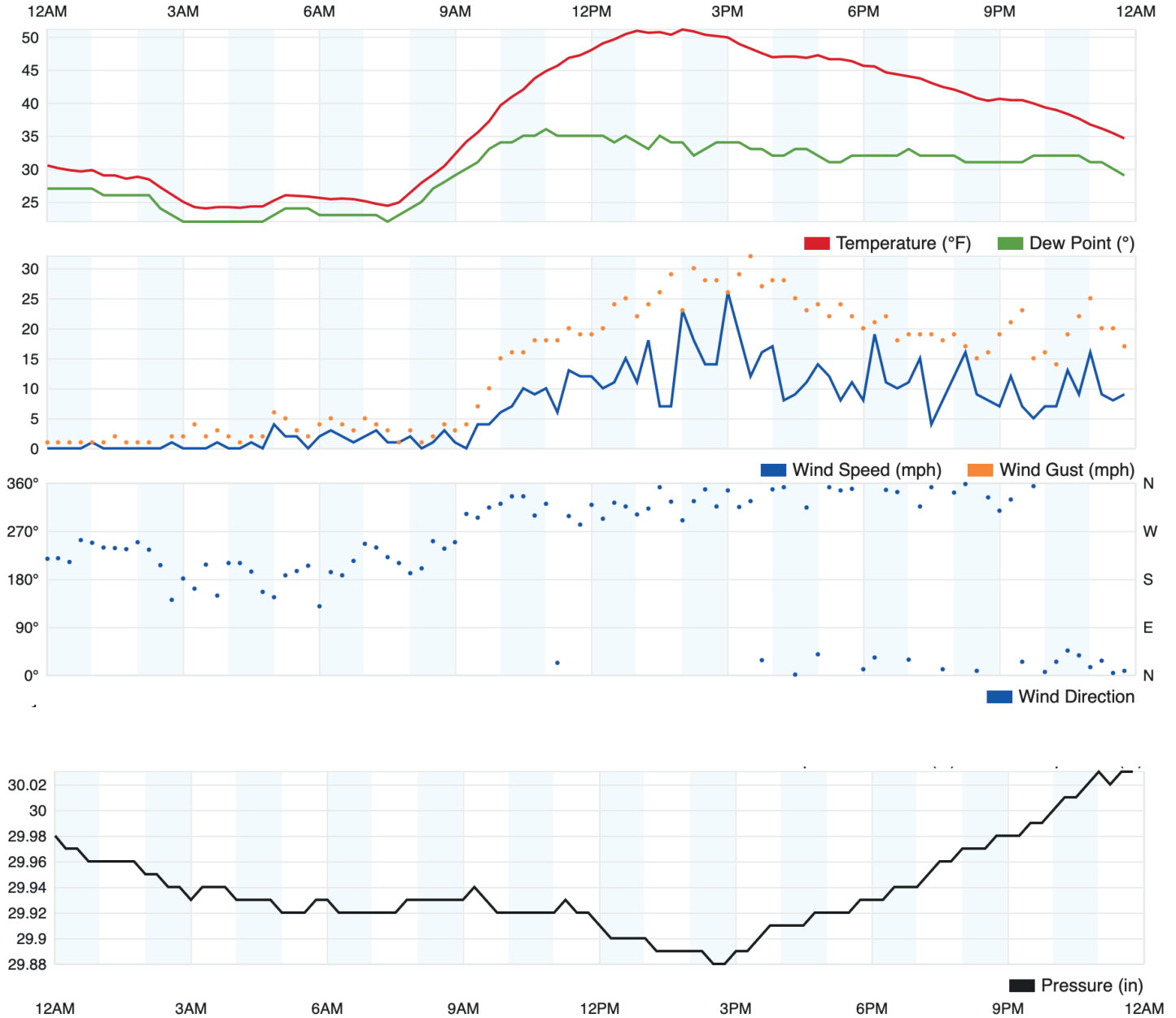
"These bans aren't going to be particularly successful or popular in the way that folks are maybe hoping they will be. It's kind of too late," Michelson said. "If they had gone [after] drag performers a decade ago, 15 years ago, it probably would have hit more successfully."

Amanda Hernández covers criminal justice for Stateline. She has reported for both national and local outlets, including ABC News, USA Today and NBC4 Washington.

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Yesterday's Groton Weather Graphs



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Today

Tonight

Thursday

Thursday
Night

Friday



Becoming
Sunny

High: 52 °F



Clear

Low: 23 °F



Sunny

High: 56 °F



Mostly Clear

Low: 25 °F



Sunny

High: 59 °F



Sunny - Breezy Northeast

April 3, 2024
3:38 AM

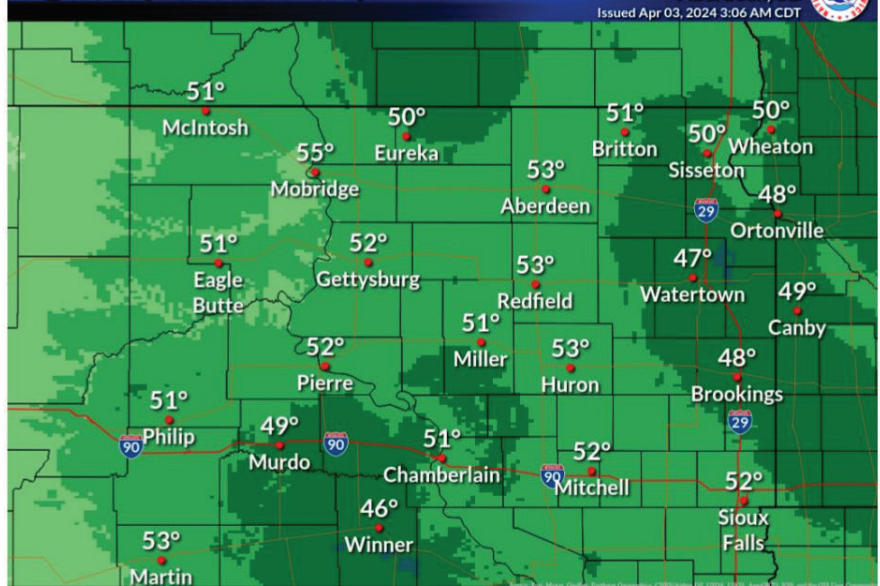
North winds 20 - 30 mph along & east of the James Valley

Key Messages...

- Sunny skies today through Friday
- Steady increase in Temperatures next few days:
Thursday (50s)
Friday (near 60)
Saturday (near 60)

High Temperatures Today

Weather Forecast Office
Aberdeen, SD
Issued Apr 03, 2024 3:06 AM CDT



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

National Weather Service
Aberdeen, SD

Winds will remain breezy out of the north today in eastern SD/western MN. Over the next few days expect steadily warmer temperatures. Rain chances will be on the increase for the weekend/early next week.

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Yesterday's Groton Weather

High Temp: 51 °F at 12:59 PM

Low Temp: 24 °F at 3:25 AM

Wind: 32 mph at 2:35 PM

Precip: : 0.00

Day length: 12 hours, 59 minutes

Today's Info

Record High: 83 in 1921

Record Low: -2 in 2018

Average High: 52

Average Low: 27

Average Precip in April.: 0.12

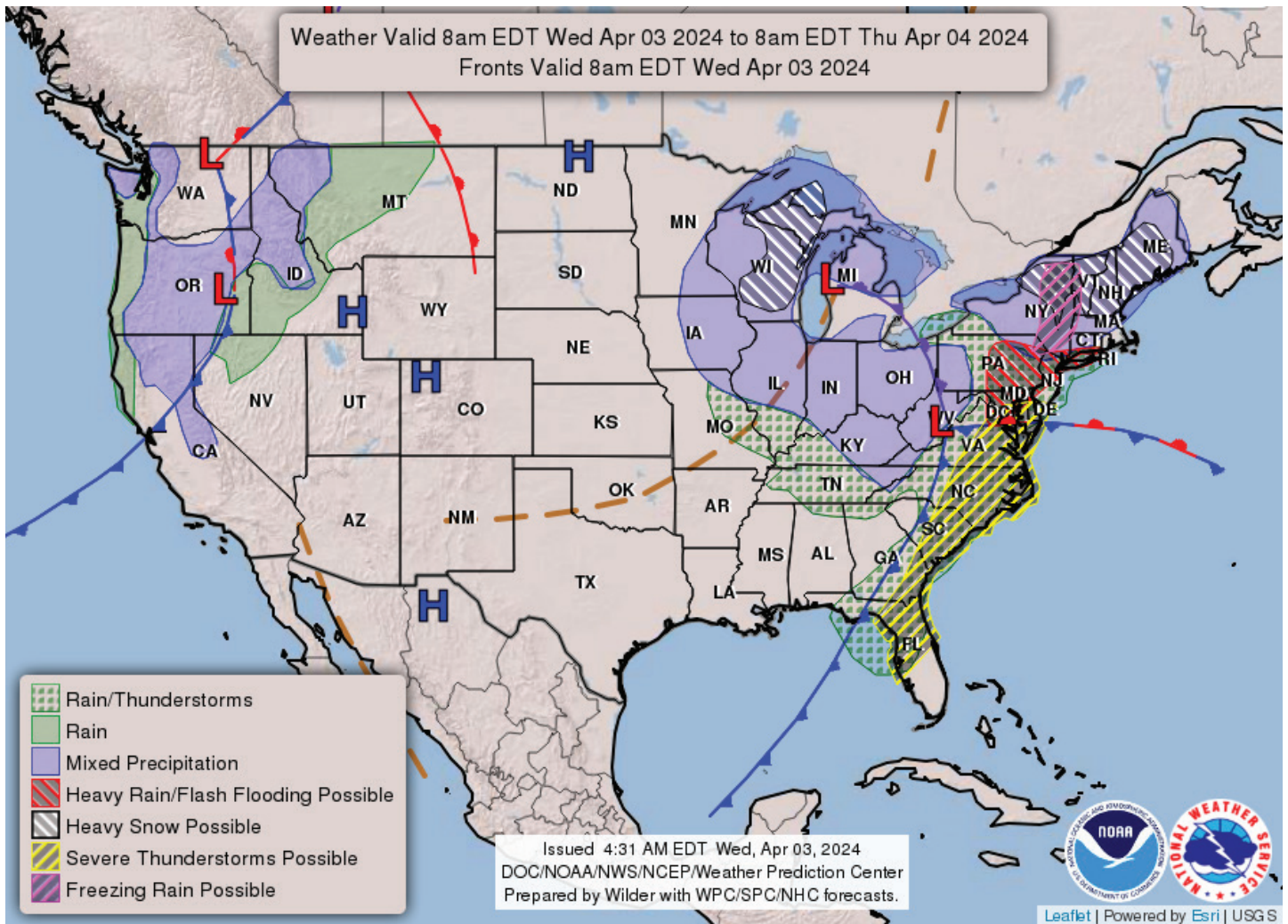
Precip to date in April: 0.00

Average Precip to date: 2.18

Precip Year to Date: 0.85

Sunset Tonight: 8:05:07 pm

Sunrise Tomorrow: 7:03:53 am



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Today in Weather History

April 3, 1968: Heavy snowfall, up to ten inches, was accompanied by winds of over 60 mph in parts of South Dakota. Snowdrifts of up to 4 feet were reported, and many roads were closed. Aberdeen was one of the hardest hit areas with 10.5 inches of snow and wind gusts of 62 mph. The strong winds and localized areas of icing caused considerable damage to utility lines.

April 3, 2003: Dry vegetation, along with windy conditions, caused a grassland burn northeast of Bath, near the James River in South Dakota, to get out of control during the early afternoon hours. Strong north to northeast winds of 20 to 35 mph caused the fire to spread quickly south along the James River. The fire became one and a half miles wide and burned six miles to the south before it was brought under control. A total of 4,000 acres were consumed. The smoke from the fire could be seen from miles around and lowered visibilities enough to close State Highway 12 two different times. At one point, traffic had to be diverted on Highway 12 for six hours due to the low visibility in smoke. Also, the Burlington Northern/Santa Fe Railroad was delayed in Bristol and Andover on April 3rd because of the smoke. Twenty-one fire departments with around 250 people worked to bring the fire under control.

April 3, 2007: A sharp frontal boundary along with an upper-level disturbance brought an unusual band of heavy snow across northern South Dakota. Snowfall amounts of 6 to 12 inches occurred from Eureka to Summit. Roads became snow covered or slushy making travel difficult. Due to the poor road conditions, several vehicles ended up in the ditch. Several schools and events were either postponed or canceled. Snowfall amounts included, 6 inches at Eureka and Milbank, 7 inches at Conde, 8 inches at Hosmer, Columbia, Summit, and Britton, 10 inches at Webster, and 12 inches at Waubay.

April 3, 2009: An area of low pressure moved across the Central Plains producing widespread snow over central and north central South Dakota. Along with the snow came strong north winds of 15 to 30 mph causing areas of blowing snow and reduced visibilities. The snow and reduced visibility caused some travel problems. Snowfall amounts ranged from a few inches to almost a foot of snow. Some of the snowfall amounts included; 6 inches near Presho and Okaton, Fort Thompson, and Timber Lake; 7 inches in Murdo and 16 S Ree Heights; 8 inches 14 NNE Isabel and 11 inches 3 NW Parade and 6 E Hayes.

1898: An avalanche near Chilkoot Pass, Alaska in the Yukon during the Gold Rush buried 142 people and killed 43 others.

1964: KAUZ in Wichita Falls, Texas broadcast the first live television pictures of an F5 tornado moving through the city. Seven people were killed, 111 injured and 225 homes were destroyed during the twisters 5 to a 6-mile path. Extensive damage was done at Sheppard Air Force Base where three tanker planes, a hanger, the power plant, and the chapel were all destroyed. Damage estimates exceeded \$15 million.

1974: A "Super-Outbreak" of tornadoes ravaged the Midwest and the eastern U.S. Severe weather erupted early in the afternoon and continued through the next day. Severe thunderstorms spawned 148 tornadoes from Alabama to Michigan, most of which occurred between 1 PM (CST) on the 3rd and 1 AM on the 4th. The tornadoes killed 315 persons, injured 5300 others, and caused 600 million dollars damage. Alabama, Kentucky, and Ohio were especially hard hit in the tornado outbreak. One tornado destroyed half of the town of Xenia, Ohio killing 34 persons. Another tornado, near the city of Stamping Ground, Kentucky produced a path of destruction a record five miles in width. A tornado raced through Guin, Alabama at a speed of 75 mph. Two powerful tornadoes roared across northern Alabama during the early evening hours, killing fifty persons and injuring 500 others. Some rescue vehicles responding to the first tornado were struck by the second.

1987: An extensive, slow-moving low-pressure system produced very heavy snows over the Appalachian Region lasting through April 5th. 60 inches fell at Newfound Gap in western North Carolina, the most substantial single storm snowfall in the state's history. Up to 36 inches was reported in southeastern Kentucky. The total of 25 inches at Charleston, WV easily surpassed its previous record for the entire month of April of 5.9 inches. The 20.6 inch total at Akron, OH established an all-time record for that location. Snow closed interstate 40 for the first time since it was opened in 1967. Lightning and thunder accompanied the snow in some areas while a trace fell as far south as Mobile. The snow was the first snow ever reported in April in Mobile since records began in 1872. The storm became known unofficially as the "Dogwood Snowstorm" as many trees had fully bloomed.

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Daily Devotionals

Seeds of Hope

ASHAMED AT HIS COMING

A young child lay dying. When asked if there was anything special he wanted he replied, "I would like to meet the president." The word was relayed to the White House by a special friend of the president.

The next day, and without warning, President Eisenhower went to the child's home and knocked on the door. The father, not knowing who was there, opened the door. To his surprise, it was the president.

The child was elated – his wish had come true. But not so the father. He was embarrassed and horrified. There he stood, unshaven and in a torn undershirt. With head bowed and tears streaming down his cheeks, he muttered repeatedly, "If only I had known, if only I had known..."

Our Lord may return at any moment. Perhaps sooner rather than later. Jesus said, "Of that day and hour, no man knows." Although we may not know when, we can certainly be prepared. The visible proof of our being prepared for His return is to be clothed in His righteousness and doing His work in His world.

Speaking of His return Jesus used the word "Watch!" If we are truly watching for His return, we will be abiding in Him "that we will not be ashamed..."

Prayer: Father, may we not only look for and long for Your return, but be found fully prepared and unashamed because we are ready to meet You. In Jesus' Name, Amen.

Scripture For Today: And now, my children, live by the help of Him. Then when He comes again, we will be glad to see Him and not be ashamed. 1 John 2:28



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:
04.02.24

10 50 56 60 66 19

MegaPlier: 3x

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:
\$67,000,000

NEXT 2 Days 15 Hrs 48
DRAW: Mins 10 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

LOTTO AMERICA

WINNING NUMBERS: 04.01.24

6 16 32 41 44 3

All Star Bonus: 2x

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:
\$2,600,000

NEXT 15 Hrs 3 Mins 10
DRAW: Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

LUCKY FOR LIFE

WINNING NUMBERS:
04.02.24

6 8 17 22 31 13

TOP PRIZE:

\$7,000/week

NEXT 15 Hrs 18 Mins 9
DRAW: Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

DAKOTA CASH

WINNING NUMBERS:
03.30.24

1 15 19 30 34

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:
\$40,000

NEXT 15 Hrs 18 Mins 9
DRAW: Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

POWERBALL

DOUBLE PLAY

WINNING NUMBERS: 04.01.24

12 15 28 30 39 12

TOP PRIZE:
\$10,000,000

NEXT 15 Hrs 47 Mins 10
DRAW: Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

POWERBALL

WINNING NUMBERS: 04.01.24

19 24 40 42 56 23

Power Play: 2x

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:
\$1,090,000,000

NEXT 15 Hrs 47 Mins 10
DRAW: Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

News from the Associated Press

Tribes blast South Dakota governor's claim that leaders are benefitting from drug cartels

By JACK DURA Associated Press

Relations between South Dakota tribes and Republican Gov. Kristi Noem have long been strained, but they have become even more contentious recently as Noem has pointedly criticized tribal leaders, accusing some of profiting from drug dealing and questioning their commitments to children on reservations.

In speeches at community forums, Noem has slammed leaders of the tribes in the state as being more interested in hurting her politically and profiting from drug cartels than improving the lives of children and others amid persistent poverty on reservations.

"We've got some tribal leaders that I believe are personally benefitting from the cartels being there and that's why they attack me every day," Noem said at a forum last month in Winner. "But I'm going to fight for the people who actually live in those situations, who call me and text me every day and say, 'Please, dear governor, please come help us in Pine Ridge. We are scared.'"

Even for tribal leaders accustomed to rocky relations with the governor, the accusations left them stunned.

"How dare the Governor allege that Sioux Tribal Councils do not care about their communities or their children, and, worse, that they are involved in nefarious activities?" said Oglala Sioux Tribe President Frank Star Comes Out, whose tribe earlier this year banished Noem from the Pine Ridge Reservation and is suing the federal government for more law enforcement resources to tackle crime on the reservation.

Or as Standing Rock Sioux Tribal Chairwoman Janet Alkire put it in a statement, "Governor Kristi Noem's wild and irresponsible attempt to connect tribal leaders and parents with Mexican drug cartels is a sad reflection of her fear-based politics that do nothing to bring people together to solve problems."

In making her comments, Noem expressed frustration at persistent problems on reservations and desperation to help, but others question why the governor seems to be picking a fight now with tribes. They note members of the tribes typically favor Democratic candidates in the otherwise conservative state and speculate Noem's tough stand is intended to impress presumptive Republican presidential nominee Donald Trump, who has named Noem as a potential vice presidential running mate.

Michael Card, an emeritus political science professor at the University of South Dakota, speculated that Noem's comments might go back to her view about security on the southern border and support for Trump.

Noem has risen fast in her political career, having won every race she has run, said Card, who drew a "linkage" from Noem to Trump in that "we like strong people, and this is a strong woman."

Some tribal leaders also point to Noem's support of Trump.

"She's trying to out-Trump Trump by saying something crazy about Native Americans because she knows we've had a long history of fighting with the state, and she figures by saying something that might go national, maybe Trump will elevate her a little higher and pick her to be on his team, which is sad," said Democratic state Sen. Shawn Bordeaux, a former Rosebud Sioux tribal council member.

No one denies drug and alcohol abuse are an endemic problem on some reservations, but Noem hasn't provided evidence linking drug cartels to tribal leaders. Her spokesman, Ian Fury, said in an email that "drug cartel presence on Native American reservations" has been documented by the news media for years but didn't respond to inquiries for more specifics.

In response to questions about drug cartels, the South Dakota U.S. Attorney's Office said in a statement that it works with tribal, local and state officials but didn't specify whether cartels were active on reservations. The U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration and FBI either referred questions to the U.S. Attorney's Office or declined to comment.

In a letter to the U.S. Interior Department and other federal officials last week, Noem called for audits of federal funds given to the nine tribes in South Dakota to understand how the money had been spent. The Interior Department declined to comment.

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Also last week, Noem requested a meeting with the Oglala Sioux tribal officials, offering to help address problems facing their reservation. She made a similar request in February. Fury did not respond to an email asking whether the tribe has responded.

The governor also has tried to reach leaders of the Rosebud Sioux Tribe and Crow Creek Sioux Tribe without success, Fury said.

"She continues to have no response from any of those tribes. But she is loving all the conversations that she's having with their community members – she has appreciated their encouragement and support," Fury said.

The dispute continues a long history of contentious relations between the tribes in South Dakota and the government dating to the 1800s. The deadliest was in 1890 at the Wounded Knee massacre, where federal troops shot and killed hundreds of Lakota men, women and children during a campaign to stop a religious practice known as the Ghost Dance.

More recently, efforts in the 1950s to "terminate" or withdraw federal responsibility and administration of tribes led to tension, though ultimately no tribe in South Dakota was terminated, said Sean Flynn, professor and chair of history at Dakota Wesleyan University, and an enrolled member of the Rosebud Sioux Tribe.

Flynn said he thinks Noem could use her voice and position to help the tribes obtain more federal support to tackle problems on reservations, instead of "scolding" tribal leaders and parents.

"It doesn't seem like a formula for addressing the issue of drug use on reservations," he said.

Strongest earthquake in 25 years rocks Taiwan, killing 9 people

By JOHNSON LAI and CHRISTOPHER BODEEN Associated Press

HUALIEN, Taiwan (AP) — The strongest earthquake in a quarter-century rocked Taiwan during the morning rush hour Wednesday, killing nine people, sending others scrambling out the windows of damaged buildings and halting train service throughout the island. A tsunami warning was triggered but later lifted.

The quake, which also injured hundreds, was centered off the coast of rural, mountainous Hualien County, where some buildings leaned at 45-degree angles, their ground floors crushed. Just over 150 kilometers (93 miles) away in the capital of Taipei, tiles fell from older buildings, and schools evacuated their students to sports fields, equipping them with yellow safety helmets. Some children covered themselves with textbooks to guard against falling objects as aftershocks continued.

Television images showed neighbors and rescue workers lifting residents, including a toddler, through windows and onto the street, after doors fused shut in the shaking. All appeared mobile, in shock but without serious injuries.

Taiwan is regularly jolted by quakes and its population is among the best prepared for them, but authorities said they had expected a relatively mild earthquake and accordingly did not send out alerts. The eventual temblor was strong enough to scare even people who are used to such shaking.

"I've grown accustomed to (earthquakes). But today was the first time I was scared to tears by an earthquake," said Hsien-hsuen Keng, a resident who lives in a fifth-floor apartment in Taipei. "I was awakened by the earthquake. I had never felt such intense shaking before."

Nine people died in the quake, which struck just before 8 a.m., according to Taiwan's national fire agency. The local United Daily News reported that three were hikers killed in rockslides in Taroko National Park, which is in Hualien, and that a van driver died in the same area when boulders hit the vehicle.

Another 934 people were injured. Meanwhile, authorities said they had lost contact with 50 people in minibuses in the national park after the quake downed phone networks. Another six people were trapped in a coal mine, where a rescue was underway.

The quake and aftershocks also caused 24 landslides and damage to 35 roads, bridges and tunnels.

Taiwan's earthquake monitoring agency said the quake was 7.2 magnitude while the U.S. Geological Survey put it at 7.4. It struck about 18 kilometers (11 miles) off of Hualien, on Taiwan's east coast, and was about 35 kilometers (21 miles) deep. Multiple aftershocks followed.

The national legislature, a converted school built before World War II, and sections of the main airport

in Taoyuan, just south of Taipei, also saw minor damage.

Traffic along the east coast was at a virtual standstill after the earthquake, with landslides and falling debris hitting tunnels and highways. Train service was suspended across the island of 23 million people, with some tracks twisted by the stress of the quake, as was subway service in Taipei, where sections of a newly constructed elevated line split apart but did not collapse.

The initial panic after the earthquake quickly faded on the island, which prepares for such events with drills at schools and notices issued via public media and mobile phone. Stephen Gao, a seismologist and professor at Missouri University of Science and Technology, said Taiwan's readiness is among the most advanced in the world, also featuring strict building codes and a world-class seismological network.

By noon, the metro station in the busy northern Taipei suburb of Beitou was again buzzing with people commuting to jobs and people arriving to visit the hot springs or travel the mountain paths at the base of an extinct volcano.

The earthquake was felt in Shanghai and several provinces along China's southeastern coast, according to Chinese media. China and Taiwan are about 160 kilometers (100 miles) apart.

The Japan Meteorological Agency said a tsunami of 30 centimeters (about 1 foot) was detected on the coast of Yonaguni island about 15 minutes after the quake struck. Smaller waves were measured in Ishigaki and Miyako islands. All alerts in the region had been lifted by Wednesday afternoon.

Taiwan lies along the Pacific "Ring of Fire," the line of seismic faults encircling the Pacific Ocean where most of the world's earthquakes occur.

Hualien was last struck by a deadly quake in 2018 that killed 17 people and brought down a historic hotel. Taiwan's worst quake in recent years struck on Sept. 21, 1999, with a magnitude of 7.7, causing 2,400 deaths, injuring around 100,000 and destroying thousands of buildings.

The economic fallout from the quake has yet to be calculated, but Taiwan is the leading manufacturer of the world's most sophisticated computer chips and other high-technology items that are highly sensitive to seismic events. Parts of the electricity grid were shut down, possibly leading to disruptions in the supply chain and financial losses.

Taiwanese chipmaker TSMC, which supplies semiconductors to companies such as Apple, said it evacuated employees from some of its factories in Hsinchu, southwest of Taipei. Hsinchu authorities said water and electricity supplies for all the factories in the city's science park were functioning as normal.

The Taiwan stock exchange opened as usual on Wednesday, with the index wavering between losses and gains.

The Latest | Israeli airstrike that killed aid workers in Gaza threatens much-needed food deliveries

By The Associated Press undefined

Israeli airstrikes on aid workers delivering food in Gaza killed at least seven people — including a U.S.-Canada dual citizen and citizens of Australia, Poland and the United Kingdom. It's the latest Israeli military action to hit humanitarian efforts in the besieged Palestinian territory.

World Central Kitchen, the charity founded by celebrity chef José Andrés, said early Tuesday it was immediately pausing operations in the region, delivering a blow to the recently opened sea route for food aid. Ships carrying food sailed away from Gaza after arriving just a day earlier.

Israel says the strikes were an accident and that officials are investigating. The U.N. says at least 180 humanitarian workers have been killed in the war so far.

The U.S., which has provided key military and diplomatic support for Israel's war against Hamas in Gaza, had hoped the sea route would allow more food to enter the territory. In northern Gaza, the United Nations says much of the population is on the brink of starvation. South Africa has accused Israel of acts of genocide in its war in Gaza and filed a case at the United Nations' highest court — charges Israel strongly denies.

After nearly six months, Israel's war in Gaza has killed nearly 33,000 Palestinians, the territory's Health

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Ministry says. The ministry doesn't differentiate between civilians and combatants in its tally, but says women and children make up two-thirds of the dead. The war began on Oct. 7, when Hamas-led militants stormed into southern Israel, killing some 1,200 people, mostly civilians, and taking around 250 people hostage.

Currently:

- Family and friends recall 'brave' and 'selfless' aid workers killed in Israeli airstrikes
- Tehran vows response after strike blamed on Israel destroyed Iran's Consulate in Syria and killed 12
- Palestinians seek full UN membership again, but US is almost certain to block it for a second time
- Forced from their Gaza home by Israeli troops, a family makes a terrifying escape through a war zone.
- World Central Kitchen is saving lives with food but paying a price in blood
- Find more AP coverage at <https://apnews.com/hub/israel-hamas-war>

Here's the latest:

IRAN WARNS ISRAEL OVER THE SYRIA STRIKE

TEHRAN, Iran — Iran's paramilitary Revolutionary Guard has warned Israel over an airstrike that destroyed Iran's consulate in Damascus and killed 12 people, including two Iranian generals.

Gen. Ramazan Sharif, a spokesman for the guard, said Wednesday that "soon we will see deadlier blows to the Zionist regime and the Resistance Front will carry out its duties in this regard."

He appeared to be referring to Iran and its allies across the region, including the Lebanese Hezbollah and armed groups in Syria, Iraq and Yemen. They have repeatedly traded fire with Israel and the U.S. since the start of the war in Gaza, raising fears of a wider conflict.

Monday's airstrike on the Syrian capital was widely blamed on Israel, which has not said whether it was involved.

Sharif accused Israel of trying to avenge Hamas' Oct. 7 attack that triggered the war in Gaza, saying it "will get nowhere, and the motivation of our soldiers will be multiplied."

He also accused Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu of using such strikes to divert public attention from "the racist nature of this regime."

GERMANY IS CONCERNED ABOUT ISRAEL'S MOVE TO EXPEL AL-JAZEERA TV

BERLIN — Germany is expressing concern about new legislation that clears the way for the closure of Al Jazeera's operations in Israel.

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu vowed to push ahead with the removal of what he called a "terror channel" from the country on Monday after parliament passed the law.

The foreign ministry in Germany, a staunch ally of Israel, said Wednesday that it views the legislation "with concern." Spokesperson Sebastian Fischer said a free and diverse media landscape is a central tenet of liberal democracy, "and Israel understands itself as a liberal democracy."

Asked by an Al Jazeera reporter whether Germany agrees with Netanyahu's assessment of Qatari-based TV network, Fischer replied: "We have regularly given interviews on Al Jazeera, and wouldn't do that if it Al Jazeera were a terror channel from our point of view."

ISRAELI POLICE SAY ARAB RESIDENT CARRIES OUT CAR-RAMMING ATTACK

TEL AVIV — Israel police said an Arab resident from northern Israel carried out a car-ramming attack, wounding four police officers and attempting to stab security forces at a checkpoint before he was killed by police.

The attack, carried out by a 26-year-old Palestinian citizen of Israel from the Arab town of Tira, occurred around 2 a.m. Wednesday.

The police were lightly wounded and evacuated for medical treatment.

Palestinian citizens make up around 20% of Israel's population. They have citizenship, including the right to vote, but face widespread discrimination. They have close family ties to Palestinians in the occupied West Bank and Gaza and largely support the Palestinian cause, leading some Israelis to view them with suspicion.

The attacks came amid heightened Israeli-Palestinian tensions during the Muslim holy month of Rama-

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dan. The Hamas militant group has called on Palestinians to attack Israelis during the month-long holiday. There have been several stabbing and ramming attacks at checkpoints during Ramadan and since the start of the war.

Violence has surged in the occupied West Bank since Hamas' Oct. 7 attack triggered the war in Gaza.

ISRAEL SAYS 'MISIDENTIFICATION' LED TO GAZA STRIKES THAT KILLED AID WORKERS

JERUSALEM — Israel's military chief says a deadly Israeli strike that killed seven aid workers in the Gaza Strip was the result of a "misidentification" in complex conditions.

Announcing the results of a preliminary investigation early Wednesday, Lt. Gen. Herzi Halevi expressed remorse over the killings and called the event a "grave mistake."

"It was a mistake that followed a misidentification – at night during a war in very complex conditions. It shouldn't have happened," he said. He gave no further details.

He said an independent body would conduct a "thorough investigation" that would be completed in the coming days, and said the army appreciates the "important work" of the World Central Kitchen.

He said the conclusions of the independent investigation would be implemented immediately and shared with World Central Kitchen and other "relevant" international organizations.

"We see great importance in the continued delivery of humanitarian aid, and we will keep working to facilitate this vital effort," he said.

World Central Kitchen said it had coordinated with the Israeli military over the movement of its cars. Three vehicles that were moving at large distances apart were hit in succession. They were left incinerated and mangled, indicating multiple targeted strikes.

At least one of the vehicles had the charity's logo printed across its roof to make it identifiable from the air, and the ordnance punched a large hole through the roof.

The strikes on the charity's convoy highlighted what critics say is Israel's indiscriminate bombing and lack of regard for civilian casualties in Gaza. Israeli authorities blame Hamas militants for civilian deaths because the fighters operate in populated areas.

AUSTRALIAN LEADER SAYS ISRAEL PROMISES 'FULL TRANSPARENCY' INTO AID WORKERS' KILLING

MELBOURNE, Australia — Australian Prime Minister Anthony Albanese says his Israeli counterpart Benjamin Netanyahu has provided an undertaking for "full transparency" in an investigation of how seven aid workers including an Australian woman who were killed by airstrikes in Gaza.

Albanese said he had "expressed Australia's anger and concern" over Zomi Frankcom's death in a phone call with Netanyahu on Wednesday.

"I emphasized the importance of full accountability and transparency and Prime Minister Netanyahu has committed to full transparency about how this tragedy could possibly have occurred," Albanese told reporters.

"There is a need for a thorough investigation into what happened here and Prime Minister Netanyahu committed to that," Albanese added.

Israel had accepted responsibility for the attack on a World Central Kitchen aid convoy and the consequent investigation must be "very fast, immediate, clear and transparent," Albanese said.

"I conveyed to Prime Minister Netanyahu in very clear terms that Australians were outraged by this death, by this tragedy, of this fine Australian," Albanese said.

"This is an Australian who we can all be proud of, someone who not only was in Gaza assisting people in need, but had in the past provided support for people in Bangladesh, in Pakistan, here in Australia after the bushfires. This was someone who was clearly committed to benefit her fellow humanity, and someone ... whose loss is very deeply felt by her family, but I think felt by Australians as well," Albanese added.

CANADA AND OTHER COUNTRIES WILL SEND ISRAEL A DIPLOMATIC REBUKE FOR KILLING GAZA AID WORKERS, OFFICIAL SAYS

TORONTO — Canada and other nations' embassies will present a joint formal diplomatic rebuke to the Israeli Foreign Ministry over the country's killing of seven aid workers in Gaza, a senior Canadian government official said.

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A top official with Canada's Global Affairs department has also made a formal representation to Israel ambassador to Canada on Tuesday, the official said, speaking on condition of anonymity as they were not authorized to publicly discuss the matter.

The Canadian official did not elaborate on which nations would take part in the formal rebuke, known as a demarche. But the dead from Monday night's strikes included a Canadian-American dual national, a Palestinian, three British citizens, and Polish and Australia nationals. Those Western countries have been key backers of Israel's nearly 6-month-old offensive in Gaza, and several of them sharply condemned the killings.

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu acknowledged that the military had carried out the "unintended strike ... on innocent people." He said officials were investigating and would work to ensure it did not happen again.

U.N. SAYS ISRAEL'S KILLING OF AID WORKERS IS 'INEVITABLE' RESULT OF HOW IT'S CONDUCTING THE WAR IN GAZA

UNITED NATIONS – The United Nations says Israel's "heartbreaking" killing of seven aid workers in airstrikes "is the inevitable result of the way this war is currently being conducted," pointing to the killing of more than 180 humanitarian workers so far.

The World Central Kitchen staff's recent deaths show "a disregard for international humanitarian law and a disregard for the protection of humanitarian workers" that the law requires, U.N. spokesman Stephane Dujarric told reporters Tuesday.

At least one of the vehicles had the charity's logo printed across its roof to make it identifiable from the air, and the ordnance punched a large hole through the roof. Three vehicles moving at large distances apart were hit in succession. They were left incinerated and mangled, indicating multiple targeted strikes.

Dujarric said Sigrid Kaag, the senior U.N. humanitarian and reconstruction coordinator for Gaza, met with the World Central Kitchen team Monday in Gaza's southern city of Rafah — just hours before they were killed. Kaag is "appalled" at the attack, Dujarric said.

World Central Kitchen, which is a partner of the U.N. World Food Program, has suspended operations in the region along with other aid organizations, dealing a blow to the delivery of desperately needed aid to Gaza's 2.3 million hungry people, including hundreds of thousands of people who are near starvation.

Israel has called the airstrikes an accident and says it's investigating.

Dujarric was asked what his message is to Israel. "The message is let humanitarian workers do their job. They need to be able to do it in safety."

U.S. MILITARY BELIEVES ISRAEL CARRIED OUT DEADLY STRIKE ON IRAN'S CONSULATE IN SYRIA

WASHINGTON — The United States military believes Israel carried out the recent airstrike on Iran's Consulate in Syria and that several senior leaders of the Revolutionary Guard were present.

Pentagon spokeswoman Sabrina Singh said Tuesday that it is the U.S. assessment that Israel conducted the strike on the Iranian Consulate in Damascus and that "there were a handful IRGC top leaders there."

Israel, which has repeatedly targeted Iranian officers in Syria and in Lebanon, did not comment on Monday's attack.

Iran has vowed to respond to the attack that killed 12 people including two Iranian generals and a member of the Lebanese militant Hezbollah group, which is backed by Iran.

Israel, increasingly impatient with months of cross-border fighting with Hezbollah, has warned of the possibility of a full-fledged war.

The U.S. National Security Council said the United States played no role in the strike in Damascus and did not know of it ahead of time.

Ukraine lowers its conscription age to 25 to plug a shortfall in troop numbers fighting Russia

By HANNA ARHIROVA and SAMYA KULLAB Associated Press

KYIV, Ukraine (AP) — Ukraine on Wednesday lowered the military conscription age from 27 to 25 in an effort to replenish its depleted ranks after more than two years of war following Russia's full-scale invasion. The new mobilization law came into force a day after Ukraine President Volodymyr Zelenskyy signed it. Ukraine's parliament, the Verkhovna Rada, passed it last year.

It was not immediately clear why Zelenskyy took so long to sign the measure into law. He didn't make any public comment about it, and officials did not say how many new soldiers the country expected to gain or for which units.

Conscription has been a sensitive matter in Ukraine for many months amid a growing shortage of infantry on top of a severe ammunition shortfall that has handed Russia the battlefield initiative. Russia's own problems with manpower and planning have so far prevented it from taking full advantage of its edge.

The law Zelenskyy signed to lower the conscription age, known as 9281, is distinct from a more controversial and expansive draft mobilization law which is still being considered in parliament. That bill, known as 10449, would not only lower the conscription age, but also spell out who has the right to exemptions, among many other issues. This legislation, expected to be deeply unpopular, has proven harder to pass in parliament, with over 1,000 amendments submitted by lawmakers.

Zelenskyy also signed two other laws pertaining to mobilization, including one that creates an online registry for recruits.

"These laws introduce changes only to some aspects of the mobilization process. But still there are many other issues that have to be resolved," said Oksana Zabolotna, an analyst with the Center for United Actions, a government watchdog in Kyiv.

Lowering the conscription age likely will not meet the military's goal of 500,000 new recruits, she said.

"There are about half a million men aged 25-27. Some of them are unfit for service, some have left, some are (in the) reserve or have the right to deferment," she said. She estimated the new law may achieve about 10% of the goal.

That is still a step forward. The average age of Ukrainian soldiers, like those on the Russian side, is around 40, military analysts say. Some Ukrainians worry that taking young adults out of the workforce will backfire by further harming the war-ravaged economy, but the problem reportedly has become acute as Kyiv girds for an expected summer offensive by the Kremlin's forces.

The initial enthusiasm for going out to fight against the Kremlin's forces has waned, though public support for the war remains high.

Ukraine currently forbids men younger than 60 from traveling abroad. Many Ukrainian men are evading the draft by hiding at home or trying to bribe their way out of the battle. Commanders say they don't have enough soldiers to launch offensives, and barely enough to hold positions during intensifying Russian assaults.

Russia's population is more than three times as large as Ukraine's, and President Vladimir Putin has shown a willingness to force men to the front if not enough volunteer.

Zelenskyy has rarely mentioned the mobilization issue. Last December, he said Ukraine's military wanted to mobilize up to 500,000 more troops. But he said he had asked the top brass to spell out the details on what is "a very sensitive matter" before deciding whether to grant their wish.

Such a major mobilization would cost Ukraine the equivalent of \$13.4 billion, Zelenskyy said at the time. Other aspects to be considered include whether troops currently on the front would be rotated or allowed home leave, he said.

The need for a broad mobilization to beef up the number of Ukrainian troops reportedly was one of the areas of disagreement between Zelenskyy and Gen. Valerii Zaluzhnyi, the popular commander in chief of Ukraine's armed forces whom the president replaced in February.

Ukrainian Defense Ministry statistics say the Ukrainian military had nearly 800,000 troops in October.

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That doesn't include National Guard or other units. In total, 1 million Ukrainians are in uniform.

Meanwhile, Ukraine's air force said it shot down four drones that Russia launched overnight over central provinces.

An 11-year-old boy died in a hospital from injuries sustained during Russia's attack in the Kupiansk area on Tuesday, according to Kharkiv regional Gov. Oleh Syniehubov. His 58-year-old father was killed in the attack.

Russian attacks all across the country are "wreaking havoc," Zelenskyy wrote on X, formerly Twitter, in an appeal for Ukraine's Western partners to supply more air defense systems.

In March alone, the Kremlin's forces launched more than 400 missiles of various types, 600 Iranian-designed Shahed drones, and more than 3,000 guided aerial bombs against Ukraine, he said.

Yes, we're divided. But new AP-NORC poll shows Americans still agree on most core American values

By GARY FIELDS and AMELIA THOMSON DEVEAUX Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Despite the country's deep political polarization, most Americans share many core beliefs about what it means to be an American, according to a new poll.

The poll from The Associated Press-NORC Center for Public Affairs Research found that about 9 in 10 U.S. adults say the right to vote, the right to equal protection under the law and the right to privacy are extremely important or very important to the United States' identity as a nation. The survey also found that 84% feel the same way about the freedom of religion.

The results, which included perspectives on a number of different freedoms and rights, have only small variances between Republicans and Democrats except on the right to bear arms, which Republicans are more likely to see as core to the nation's identity. The overall findings are striking because they come at a time of extreme partisanship when political agreements seem rare and concerns are heightened over the potential for violence during a volatile presidential election year.

"If you get a bunch of normal people at random and put them in a room together and chat about issues, there's a lot more convergence than you might imagine," said Michael Albertus, a political science professor at the University of Chicago.

A more pessimistic assessment of the country was reflected in another finding — that only about 3 in 10 Americans believe the nation's democracy is functioning well. About half say the U.S. is a poorly functioning democracy, while 14% say the U.S. is not a democracy.

The tension between the broad consensus on the country's fundamental values and discontent with how well its form of government is working is not a surprise, experts say.

"Part of it is really our leaders are not reflecting the electorate, and they behave in a way that's much more polarized than what the electorate is," said Lilliana Mason, a political scientist at Johns Hopkins University.

Most Americans, she said, "are pretty moderate, but they've been riled up to hate people of the other party for being different from them culturally, racially and religiously."

The AP-NORC poll also found broad agreement on the importance of some key values for the U.S.'s identity as a country. About three-quarters of U.S. adults agree that a democratically elected government is extremely or very important, and about 8 in 10 think the same about the ability of people living in the U.S. to get good jobs and achieve the American dream.

But what achieving that dream means — and which values are most fundamental to American culture — isn't something all Americans agree on.

Democrats are more likely than Republicans — 71% to 38% — to believe that the ability to come to the U.S. from elsewhere in the world to escape violence or find economic opportunities is core to the country's identity. A majority of Republicans, 58%, think a culture grounded in Christian values and beliefs is an essential characteristic, compared to only 18% of Democrats.

Juan Sierra, 51, a naturalized citizen whose family immigrated from the Dominican Republic after a hurricane destroyed his father's cement business, said it is very important to him that the U.S. be seen as a

place of opportunity.

The industrial technician in Port St. Lucie, Florida, said he believes democracy is working and will continue to do so "as long as there are good people in government."

Sierra also said it was extremely important that people have freedom of religion, although he had concerns over the nation's identity being tied to Christianity.

"We're seeing what happens right now when laws are passed and decisions are made based on someone's religion," he said, citing the Alabama Supreme Court ruling in February that frozen embryos can be considered children and be afforded legal protections, a decision that temporarily halted IVF procedures in the state.

Susan Johnson, a 76-year-old Republican living in the Dallas suburbs, said the nation's standing as a beacon to others who need refuge is very important, but said that could not override concerns about border security.

"We need people working," she said. "We just need them to come the right way."

Johnson also said she believes it's extremely important that the nation's identity be grounded in spirituality.

"Whether or not you're Mormon or a Muslim or a Christian, they just have to have some higher power to reach up to," she said. "The country is going to fall apart if we don't believe in God."

The poll found few divisions on democracy as a system in theory, but it identified one notable gap: younger Americans between the ages of 18 to 29 were less likely than those 60 and older to say the U.S. is a well-functioning democracy. They're also less likely than older Americans to believe that some characteristics are essential to the U.S.'s character as a nation, including having a democratically elected government. About 6 in 10 younger adults see this as important, compared to about 9 in 10 older adults.

Palakjot Singh, a 21-year-old college student in Fresno, California, identified himself as a Republican and said he had a better quality of life when Donald Trump was president. He said the U.S. is not a well-functioning democracy in part because people are not open to debating different points of view compared to previous generations.

"There is not good communication," he said. "Nobody is sitting together trying to get to one point."

Howard Lavine, a political science professor at the University of Minnesota, said the generational split is understandable. Many younger people don't remember a time when those with opposing views and from different political backgrounds could get together and "come over to your house." Their frame of reference is the hyper partisanship of the Trump years, he said.

Joe Lagle, 55, a retired Air Force veteran in Colorado Springs who said he has not voted for either President Joe Biden or Trump, said the nation's various rights are "all important" but believes they are being eroded by intolerance and well-meaning but shortsighted people.

Mike Maloy, 41, an engineer in Greensboro, North Carolina, said having those rights and freedoms "doesn't necessarily mean the U.S. is a functioning democracy."

"Everything is run by a handful of people and their corporations," he said. "That's not a democracy."

A Democrat, Maloy cited as an example this year's presidential primary in North Carolina, when Biden was the lone candidate on the ballot. He called that "frustrating" and said the result was that voters "had no choice."

As international travel grows, so does US use of technology.

A look at how it's used at airports

By REBECCA SANTANA Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — The Belgian family of four was on their fourth trip to the United States. They had been dreading the long line at passport control when they entered the country but had heard about a new app they could use to ease their way and decided to give it a shot. Within minutes, they had bypassed the long line at Washington Dulles International Airport and were waiting for their luggage.

"It was always a long row," said Piet De Staercke of the line to go through passport screening. He, his

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wife and two sons were visiting Washington and Chicago. "We were a bit scared. But now with the app, it's amazing."

As travel continues to boom following coronavirus pandemic-related slumps, U.S. Customs and Border Protection is expanding the use of technology like the Mobile Passport Control app the De Staercke family used in an effort to process the ever-growing number of passengers traveling internationally. And with events like a rare solar eclipse, the Olympics in Paris, and summer holidays still driving international travel, those numbers don't look set to drop anytime soon.

Customs and Border Protection officials gave The Associated Press a behind-the-scenes look at some of the technologies they've been using and what to expect in the months and years ahead.

THE NUMBERS

During fiscal year 2023, the agency processed over 394 million travelers at the ports of entry. That's a 24% increase over the previous year. When looking at the country's top 20 airports by passenger volume, officers processed 31% more travelers while average wait times increased 11%. And at some of the busiest airports, the wait times have had negligible increases or even decreased. At JFK Airport in New York, for example, wait times went down — by 0.4 of a second on average — while CBP officers processed 33% more travelers.

Increasingly, people are traveling internationally with their families rather than going abroad alone for business.

MORE APPS

Officials are moving more toward app-based technologies to speed passengers' movement through the airport. The Mobile Passport Control app used by the Belgian family is one example. It's available to U.S. citizens, but also to lawful permanent residents, certain Canadians and travelers from countries who are part of the Visa Waiver Program who've already been to the U.S. at least once.

Passengers upload their photos and information to the app. When they enter the screening area, they get routed to a separate line. The officer then just needs to take a photo of one member of the family and it pulls up the entire group's photos and their information.

CBP launched the app in 2021 but is now trying to get more people to use it, including by working with airlines to allow the app to be downloaded while the plane is in flight and putting up signs at airports to let travelers know about it. Last year, a record 4.1 million people came into the country using the app.

"Any second that we can save through the process, it saves time because it adds up eventually," said Marc Calixte, the top CBP official at Dulles.

Last September, the agency also created an app specifically for passengers who use Global Entry. That's one of the "Trusted Traveler" programs CBP runs that allows certain low-risk passengers who make an appointment for an interview and submit to a background check to travel through customs and passport control more quickly when they arrive in the U.S.

IMPROVEMENTS TO GLOBAL ENTRY

Last year saw a record 3.2 million people apply to the Global Entry program, and this year the agency is on track to field about 4 million applications, said Brendan Blackmer, CBP branch chief for the Trusted Traveler Programs. But passengers have complained about how long it can take to get applications processed and their struggles to get appointments. On its website, CBP says it averages four to six months to process applications. In February, 17 members of Congress wrote to CBP demanding information, saying they were fielding complaints from constituents over the wait times.

Blackmer said the agency has pushed to improve the process, including by allowing nearly 100% of people renewing their status to do so without having to come into an enrollment center. That frees up appointments for first-time applicants. And it's pushing for more people to be able to complete the process while they're in the airport, either leaving or returning from a trip.

There are also more appointments available, Blackmer said, although some cities like San Francisco are still seeing so much demand that appointments can take more than 90 days to get.

"We've done a lot of work the past year and a half, and the agency's in a better position now and able to meet the demand for the program. And we're going to continue to work," Blackmer said.

FEE INCREASES

Come Oct. 1, people using some of the Trusted Traveler Programs will see increases to the fees they pay. The cost of NEXUS, a U.S.-Canadian program designed to ease travel between the two countries for pre-approved travelers, will go from \$50 to \$120. Global Entry will go from \$100 to \$120. SENTRI, for pre-approved travelers on the southern border with Mexico, will go down, from \$122.50 to \$120.

But the fees will now cover all kids under 18 regardless of which program you're in.

What's unchanged is that approval for the programs will still be good for five years.

WHAT'S NEXT?

Calixte said possibly by the end of summer the airport will be opening so-called E-Gates where passengers using Global Entry can use the app, bypass an officer at a booth, and instead go to a gate where their photo is taken and matched to their passport, and, assuming no red flags arise, the gates open and they pass out of the customs and passport control area and are on their way.

Further on the horizon, Blackmer said the agency is exploring a concept called smart queuing, where the app assigns passengers to certain lines depending on information they have entered into the app, such as whether they have goods to declare.

The women's NCAA Tournament is having a big moment that has also been marred by missteps

By ANNE M. PETERSON AP Sports Writer

PORTLAND, Ore. (AP) — A huge disparity between the men's and women's weight rooms drew attention to the women's NCAA Tournament for all the wrong reasons in 2022, starting a conversation about equity that has carried over into today. Then this season brought the mismatched 3-point lines in Portland, Oregon.

The incorrectly drawn lines were among a series of miscues that have been a backdrop to what's otherwise been a big moment for women's basketball.

The issues have had little to do with the players on the court or the fans in the stands. There have been record-setting crowds and historic TV ratings, headline-grabbing moments from Caitlin Clark and JuJu Watkins, and the epic Elite Eight duels between Iowa and LSU, and UConn and USC.

It was only two seasons ago that the tournament's field grew to 68 teams just like the men's side, and the women were finally able to use the March Madness and Final Four branding that had previously been exclusive to the men.

The exponential growth means that mistakes are possible along the way, UConn coach Geno Auriemma said.

"The attention generated now on the sport is such that things like this are blown up. Maybe this was happening 10 years ago and nobody paid any attention to it. Maybe nobody was even smart enough to notice or pay attention," Auriemma said about the court issue. "It certainly doesn't take away from the performance of these kids and what they did. Sometimes things grow so fast and they explode so quickly that we hurry up and we miss a step."

The missteps began with Utah's experience in Idaho, where the team was housed in a hotel some 35 miles from the Utes' opening-round games in Spokane, Washington. While in Coeur d'Alene, the team said it was the target of racist slurs that were shouted at players as they walked to and from a team dinner.

The players were ultimately moved closer to Spokane, but there were questions about logistics, like why both men's and women's games were scheduled in a smaller city like Spokane with fewer hotels that meet the NCAA's standards for accommodations — while there was also a girls' volleyball tournament for 800 teams in the city.

Part of the answer lies in how the women's tournament is set up. The first two rounds are hosted by high-seeded schools, and the sites are announced in the week before the games begin. The cities hosting opening rounds for the men are determined years in advance.

Lynn Holzman, NCAA vice president for women's basketball, told the AP that the selection committee

was set to review the format in 2025, but possibly sooner. That was no consolation for Utah.

"For our players and staff to not feel safe in an NCAA Tournament environment, it's messed up," Utah coach Lynne Roberts said.

There were other, less serious embarrassments. In a first-round game between Chattanooga and N.C. State in Raleigh, a referee was pulled at halftime after it was revealed she had an apparent conflict — a master's degree from Chattanooga.

Notre Dame's Hannah Hidalgo was forced during a Sweet 16 game against Oregon State to remove her nose piercing that she had played with all season. It was unclear why she wasn't informed about a rule banning the piercing before the game.

"It's tough because you know I was on a roll and having to sit out for five minutes because of a nose ring is BS," she said.

The biggest lapse was the two different 3-point lines on the floor in Portland. One side's arc was about 9 inches short of regulation at its apex, a mistake by the contractor that makes the courts used throughout March Madness.

"For an error of that magnitude to overshadow what has been an incredible two weekends of basketball featuring sensational teams and incredible individual performances is unacceptable and extremely upsetting," Stanford coach Tara VanDerveer said.

Back in 2022, Oregon's Sedona Price caused a stir when she posted a video that went viral on social media showing the inequity between the men's and women's weight rooms for the NCAA Tournament. The men's gym was fully equipped. The women's had a small set of barbells.

The weight rooms were equalized by the NCAA. The 3-point line was also quickly addressed once it was discovered — but not until after five tournament games had been played on the court.

NCAA spokeswoman Meghan Durham Wright said in a statement that the organization "acted immediately to address isolated incidents that in no way affected the amazing accomplishments of the women competing in this tournament."

It's likely the NCAA will continue to face such issues as the women's game continues to grow. Clark and Iowa played the most-watched women's college basketball game on record. Iowa's 94-87 victory over LSU on Monday night averaged 12.3 million viewers on ESPN, according to Nielsen. More viewing records will likely fall with the Final Four this weekend including a matchup between Clark and Paige Bueckers.

And indeed there are concerns about the super regional format. While the men's tournament is divided into four regional locations, the women's teams are lumped into two on opposite sides of the country.

With so many teams at one location, scheduling for practices and locker rooms becomes a challenge. Some teams, like UCLA and Oregon State, landed in Albany, while UConn was in Portland, making it more difficult for fans to attend.

Auriemma was blunt.

"With eight teams," he said, "it's kind of a mess."

Workers had little warning as Maryland bridge collapsed, raising concerns over safety, communication

By JAKE OFFENHARTZ and CLAUDIA LAUER Associated Press

In the moments before the cargo ship Dali rammed into the Francis Scott Key Bridge and sent it crumbling into the water, a flurry of urgent warnings crackled over radios and enabled police to block traffic from getting on the span, likely saving lives.

But those warnings seemingly didn't reach the six construction workers who were killed in last week's collapse of the Baltimore bridge. Their deaths have raised questions about whether the construction company took proper precautions, including keeping a safety boat nearby that might have been able to warn them at least a few seconds before impact.

Federal regulations require construction companies to keep such boats, commonly known as skiffs, on hand whenever crews are working over waterways, safety experts told The Associated Press. There is no

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indication that the construction company, Brawner Builders, had a rescue boat on the water or ready to be launched as the bridge fell.

"If you're working over a bridge like that, the standard interpretation doesn't give you an option," said Janine McCartney, a safety engineer for HHC Safety Engineering Services Inc. "The skiff is required, period."

Coast Guard representatives and other officials said they were unaware of any Brawner boat in the water at the time of the March 26 collapse. And satellite images from around the time of the collapse appeared to show no skiff in the river near the bridge.

Even if the workers had been warned that the giant ship was about to hit, it's unclear if they would have had enough time to scramble to safety.

The archived recordings of the bridge's maintenance radio channel from early that morning include only one minor exchange between two maintenance workers about the approaching ship, though it's unclear if either was on or near the span at the time. In the exchange, a man with a muffled voice seemed to ask what was going on, and the other replied, "They're just holding traffic because a ship lost its steering, that's all." The bridge collapsed less than 30 seconds later.

But if a safety boat were present, experts said, it might have been able to use a marine radio and required walkie-talkies to warn the construction workers about the Dali's distress calls, possibly giving them a chance to act. Authorities say a construction inspector was able to run to a section of the bridge that didn't collapse, though it's unknown what warning, if any, he received.

A Brawner representative declined to comment for this story, saying the company is focused on taking care of the families of the workers, who were filling potholes on the bridge when it collapsed. Brawner has used safety skiffs for work on bridges in the past, according to a deposition of a company executive that was part of a 2011 lawsuit.

Occupational Safety and Health Administration regulations say construction companies performing work over waterways must have at least one safety boat available. OSHA officials have said in rule interpretations over the years that the required boat can "ensure prompt rescue of employees that fall into the water, regardless of other precautions taken to prevent this from occurring."

An OSHA spokesperson didn't respond to repeated requests for clarification on that regulation.

Some states have rules clarifying that the boats aren't required under certain conditions, such as when the work being done is contained within the guardrails of a bridge. But Maryland isn't among them and does require that a safety skiff be present when workers are over or near water. A spokesperson for the Maryland Occupational Safety and Health, which oversees compliance with federal labor regulations, declined to comment on the Key Bridge collapse or Brawner's safety record, citing the open investigation into the tragedy.

Dennis O'Bryan, a maritime lawyer, said he believes the skiff requirement remains in effect even when there is little risk of drowning unless the company secures an exemption from the state.

"If there was a skiff there, it would have heard the mayday call and radioed the workers to get off the bridge," O'Bryan said. "There needs to be an investigation into whether the skiff was there and, if not, why it wasn't."

O'Bryan isn't representing any of the families of the workers who were on the Key Bridge when it collapsed. But in 2011, he represented a Brawner employee who was injured while operating a safety boat meant to monitor workers on a bridge. The lawsuit accused the company of not properly staffing the boat. It was settled for an undisclosed sum.

The AP requested a copy of the safety plan that Brawner submitted for the Key Bridge project, which was among more than 25 contracts worth a total of over \$120 million that the state awarded the company in the past five years. The request was still being processed as of Tuesday.

Brawner has been cited three times for seven safety violations since 2018, including four citations for failing to provide proper fall protections, OSHA's online enforcement records show. The company was fined close to \$11,000 in informal OSHA settlements.

Several project foremen interviewed by the AP said that despite OSHA's strict interpretations, it is not

uncommon for construction companies to forgo the use of a safety skiff on jobs that don't pose an imminent risk of drowning, and it's unclear when the regulation is enforced. In the past decade, there has been just one violation issued in Maryland during a bridge construction project for failure to provide a life-saving skiff, according to a review of available online OSHA records.

Some construction experts said a boat wouldn't have made a difference because of the steep drop, the little time the crew had to react, and the tons of steel and debris that made it incredibly difficult for even trained rescuers to locate and reach the missing workers' bodies.

"You can have the most perfect safety plan and safety measures in place, and unless you have time to implement them, then who knows," said Julio Palomo, president of Laborers International Union of North America Local 11, which represents Maryland and other parts of the Washington, D.C., area. "Would it just have put more people in danger having that boat in the water? We just don't know."

Others, though, said a safety boat might have had a better chance to issue a warning over a direct radio line to the crew, something companies could consider when writing future safety plans in light of the Key Bridge collapse.

Ryan Papariello, a safety and health specialist with the Laborers' Health and Safety Fund of North America, said that in safety plans for work on bridges, companies should think about including flotation devices and clear communication with the Coast Guard or anyone that's patrolling the water. He also said future plans might include the use of specific loud noises that signal workers to evacuate.

"Obviously this wasn't a foreseeable incident," Papariello said. "A lot of the contractors that we see — and I'm not blaming the contractor — they just don't have a valid rescue plan in place."

Deadly severe weather roars through several states, spawning potential tornadoes

By BRUCE SHIPKOWSKI Associated Press

Thousands of homes and businesses were without power Tuesday as severe weather roared through several states, causing at least one death and spawning possible tornadoes.

Parts of Ohio, Pennsylvania, Kentucky, Mississippi, Alabama, Tennessee, West Virginia, Virginia and Georgia were under tornado watches into Tuesday night, while Wisconsin was experiencing a spring snowstorm.

Storms in Northeastern Oklahoma unleashed three suspected tornadoes and dumped heavy rain that was blamed for the death of a 46-year-old homeless woman in Tulsa who was sheltering inside a drainage pipe.

The woman's boyfriend told authorities the two had gone to sleep at the entrance of the drainage pipe and were awakened by floodwaters, Tulsa Fire Department spokesperson Andy Little said. Up to 1.5 inches (3.8 centimeters) of rain fell in Tulsa in about an hour, National Weather Service meteorologist Robert Darby said.

"It wasn't a whole lot. But when it came down, it was pretty rapid," Darby said.

In West Virginia, about 140,000 customers were without electricity Tuesday afternoon, or about 14% of all customers tracked in the state by poweroutage.us. A storm blew off part of a vacant building's roof in Charleston, littering the street with bricks and closing the roadway to traffic. Trees were uprooted and lay in roads, lawns and in some cases, on top of cars.

Gov. Jim Justice declared a state of emergency for several counties and urged people to "exercise extreme caution."

In Ohio, firefighters rescued two people who were trapped under a bridge Tuesday morning when a river began rising. The two were sleeping when the Scioto River started to rise, preventing them from returning to shore, the Columbus Fire Department reported. A fire department boat was sent to rescue them. No injuries were reported.

Mindy Broughton rushed into her mobile home Tuesday morning as hail began and winds picked up at the RV Park where she lives near Hanging Rock, Ohio.

Broughton and her fiance hunkered down as the mobile home quickly began rocking. Broughton said

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her fiance used his body to shield her as the winds raged outside.

"I said I think we may die today," she said.

In a matter of seconds, the winds died down. When Broughton opened her mobile home door, she saw the RV Park littered with debris and overturned RVs. Luckily, Broughton said there was no one inside the overturned mobile homes.

Northeast of Cincinnati, part of Interstate 75 was blocked Tuesday afternoon when about a half-dozen power poles toppled in high winds near Wetherington, WLWT-TV reported.

In Wisconsin, forecasters warned more than a foot (30 centimeters) of heavy snow could fall in eastern parts of the state, including the Green Bay area. The state's top election official, Meagan Wolfe, urged residents planning to vote in Tuesday's presidential primaries to consider voting earlier in the day to avoid travel woes.

The National Weather Service said snowfall totals could range from 4 to 8 inches (10 to 20 centimeters) over central Wisconsin and 8 to 14 inches (20 to 35 centimeters) over eastern Wisconsin, while wind gusts of 30 mph to 50 mph (48 kph to 80 kph) will create very limited visibility and make travel difficult.

"Just three weeks ago, we were in the 70s. So that kind of got people thinking spring is right around the corner — and here we're in April and we're getting a major snowstorm," meteorologist Scott Cultice with the weather service's Green Bay office said. "As people say, 'That's springtime in Wisconsin.'"

More than 70,000 homes and businesses in Wisconsin had lost power Tuesday night, according to poweroutage.us.

Kentucky Gov. Andy Beshear declared a state of emergency after severe storms swept through his state Tuesday morning.

"We have reports of substantial damage to a number of structures — and thankfully, as of right now we are not aware of any fatalities," Beshear said in a statement.

Another round of storms Tuesday afternoon led to multiple tornado warnings in Kentucky, Tennessee and Ohio.

One person was hurt and taken to a hospital after a tree came down on their house in Lexington, Kentucky, Mayor Linda Gorton told WLEX-TV. Homes were damaged and a tree crushed a University of Kentucky student's car.

"I looked out my blinds and I see the wind just start roaring," Reese Sherrard told the news outlet. "I see one big tree just fall right on top of my car. No trees fell on our house, so it seems like we got pretty lucky."

In Louisville on Tuesday night, Mayor Craig Greenberg reported "serious" storm damage in the nearby city of Prospect and throughout the county, but said no injuries had been reported. He said fire crews were checking on people street by street in the most impacted areas and that he had declared a county-wide state of emergency.

The National Weather Service confirmed a tornado in northeast Tennessee on Tuesday. A funeral home and a house were damaged in the town of Sunbright, a town of about 500 people, said Matthew Brown, Morgan County's 911 director. Power lines and trees were down, and some roads were closed, he said.

The utility company in Memphis, Tennessee, reported that about 40,000 homes and businesses lost power temporarily Tuesday morning after an electric substation was struck by lightning, which then affected two other substations.

Storms also swept through far southwestern Indiana on Tuesday morning, toppling trees and causing power outages, leading several local school districts to cancel classes. More than 18,000 homes and businesses were without power shortly before noon Tuesday, including in Vanderburgh County, home to Evansville, Indiana's third-largest city.

Severe weather was expected to move into New England on Wednesday night into Thursday, with forecasts of 12 to 18 inches (30 to 46 centimeters) of snow in parts of New Hampshire and Maine and lesser amounts in other areas, the National Weather Service said. Wind gusts could reach 50 mph (80 kph) in some places, bringing the possibility of power outages.

Family and friends recall dedication of World Central Kitchen aid workers killed in Gaza

By The Associated Press undefined

Israeli airstrikes that killed seven aid workers in Gaza reverberated around the world Tuesday, as friends and relatives mourned the losses of those who were delivering food to besieged Palestinians with the charity World Central Kitchen.

Killed were three British nationals, an Australian, a Polish national, an American-Canadian dual citizen and a Palestinian. Some had traveled the world, participating in aid efforts in the aftermath of wars, earthquakes and wildfires.

Here's some information on those who have been identified.

SAIF ISSAM ABU TAHA

Saif Issam Abu Taha, 27, had worked for World Central Kitchen as a driver and translator since the beginning of the year, relatives said.

His brothers described him as a dedicated young man eager to help fellow Palestinians.

He'd also been a successful businessman who conducted trade with Ukraine, Egypt, China and others, brother Abdul Razzaq Abu Taha said. His work made him known on the Israeli side, his brother added, which helped in coordination and approval to assist the World Central Kitchen team in unloading the ship.

Saif had hoped to get married. "My mother was looking for a wife for him," Abdul Razzaq Abu Taha said. "He was supposed to get married if the war didn't happen."

Saif and other workers were excited about unloading the food aid, desperately needed in Gaza. The last time Saif and his brother spoke, he said, they'd finished the job and he was heading home.

After hearing about the airstrikes, Abdul Razzaq Abu Taha said he tried to call to see whether Saif was OK.

After many attempts, he said, a stranger answered and told him, "I found this phone about 200 meters away from the car. All of the people inside are killed."

LALZAWMI 'ZOMI' FRANKCOM

Friends and family remembered Lalzawmi "Zomi" Frankcom, 43, as a brave, selfless woman whose care for others drew her across the globe. For the last five years, she'd worked for Washington-based World Central Kitchen, taking her to the U.S., Thailand and her native Australia.

"We mourn this fine Australian who has a record of helping out her fellow citizens, whether it be internationally or whether it be through the support that she gave during the bushfires that occurred during that Black Summer," Prime Minister Anthony Albanese told Australian Broadcasting Corp. "She is someone who clearly was concerned about her fellow humanity."

In a statement, relatives described Frankcom as an "outstanding human being" who was "killed doing the work she loves delivering food to the people of Gaza."

She was born in Melbourne and earned a bachelor's from the Swinburne University of Technology. For eight years, she worked for the Commonwealth Bank of Australia, the nation's largest bank.

Frankcom's social media highlighted visits to help those in need in Pakistan, Bangladesh, Romania and Haiti.

World Central Kitchen colleague Dora Weekley, who met Frankcom responding to Hurricane Dorian in the Bahamas in 2019, described Frankcom as "larger than life."

She recalled when Frankcom was invited to walk a Hollywood red carpet, for a documentary about World Central Kitchen that was nominated for an Emmy.

"I remember getting a picture of her in a dress, saying, 'Hold onto this forever,'" Weekley told ABC. "Because usually I'm in sweats and runners, and I'm in Pakistan or Afghanistan or, you know, she could be anywhere, and never with her hair done or makeup done."

"She worked all hours, she gave everything, and she believed in helping people who were less fortunate."

DAMIAN SOBÓL

Damian Soból, 36, was known as a cheerful, friendly and resourceful manager who quickly rose in World Central Kitchen's ranks.

Hailing from the southeastern Polish city of Przemyśl and studying hospitality there, Soból had been on aid missions in Ukraine, Morocco, Turkey and, for the past six months, Gaza.

"He was a really extraordinary guy," said Marta Wilczynska, of the Free Place Foundation, which cooperates with World Central Kitchen. "We were very proud of him."

Wilczynska met Soból on the Polish side of the border with Ukraine, a few days after Russia's February 2022 invasion. He spoke English well and was a translator, and as a skilled manager, he could organize work in any condition, she said.

"Always smiling, always so helpful, he loved this job. I felt I had a brother in him," Wilczynska said.

Free Place Foundation President Mikolaj Rykowski said Soból was "the man for every task — he could overcome every difficulty."

Posting on Facebook, Przemyśl Mayor Wojciech Bakun said of Soból's death that there are "no words to describe how people who knew this fantastic young man feel now."

JOHN CHAPMAN, JAMES HENDERSON AND JAMES KIRBY

The three British victims were military veterans providing security for the World Central Kitchen aid mission.

British media reported that Chapman, 57, and Kirby, 47, were former Royal Marines, while 33-year-old Henderson, known as Jim, was a British Army veteran.

Haiti's surge in gang violence has led more than 53,000 to flee the capital in less than three weeks

By EVENS SANON Associated Press

PORT-AU-PRINCE, Haiti (AP) — More than 53,000 people have fled Haiti's capital in less than three weeks, the vast majority to escape unrelenting gang violence, according to a United Nations report released Tuesday.

More than 60% are headed to Haiti's rural southern region, which worries U.N. officials.

"Our humanitarian colleagues emphasized that these departments do not have sufficient infrastructure, and host communities do not have sufficient resources, to cope with the large number of people fleeing Port-au-Prince," said U.N. spokesman Stephane Dujarric.

The southern region already hosts more than 116,000 Haitians who previously left Port-au-Prince, according to the report by the U.N.'s International Organization for Migration.

The exodus from the capital of some 3 million people began shortly after powerful gangs launched a series of attacks on government institutions at the end of February. Gunmen have burned police stations, opened fire on the main international airport that remains closed and stormed Haiti's two biggest prisons, releasing more than 4,000 inmates.

More than 1,500 people have been reported killed up to March 22, and another 17,000 have been left homeless, according to the U.N.

Among the rare travelers trying to head north instead of south from the capital were Marjorie Michelle-Jean, a 42-year-old street vendor, and her two children, ages 4 and 7.

"I want to see them alive," she said, explaining that stray bullets keep hitting the tin roof of their home. Last week, they tried twice to travel to her hometown of Mirebalais in central Haiti but were forced to turn back because of roadblocks.

"I will definitely try again," she said. "It's absolutely not safe in Port-au-Prince."

Of the 53,125 people who fled Port-au-Prince from March 8-27, nearly 70% already had been forced to abandon their homes and were living with relatives or in crowded and unsanitary makeshift shelters across the capital, the U.N. found.

More than 90% of Haitians leaving the capital have been crowding into buses, risking travel through gang-controlled territory where gang rapes have been reported and gunmen have been known to open fire on public transport.

The violence forced Prime Minister Ariel Henry to announce last month that he would resign once a transitional presidential council is created. Henry was in Kenya to push for the U.N.-backed deployment of

a police force from the East African country when the attacks began, and he remains locked out of Haiti. The transitional council, which will be responsible for choosing a new prime minister and council of ministers, has yet to be formally established.

Meanwhile, the mass migration from Port-au-Prince is expected to continue.

But Gary Dorval, 29, who was among a handful of people joining a demonstration on Tuesday, said he wants to stay until a new government is installed: "I want to be part of the change."

AP Exclusive: EPA didn't declare a public health emergency after fiery Ohio derailment

By JOSH FUNK Associated Press

The aftermath of last year's fiery train derailment in eastern Ohio doesn't qualify as a public health emergency because widespread health problems and ongoing chemical exposures haven't been documented, federal officials said.

The Environmental Protection Agency never approved that designation after the February 2023 Norfolk Southern derailment even though the disaster forced the evacuation of half the town of East Palestine and generated many fears about potential long-term health consequences of the chemicals that spilled and burned. The contamination concerns were exacerbated by the decision to blow open five tank cars filled with vinyl chloride and burn that toxic chemical three days after the derailment.

The topic of a public health emergency came up in emails obtained by the Government Accountability Project watchdog group through a public records request. But EPA Response Coordinator Mark Durno said the label, which the agency has only used once before in Libby, Montana — where hundreds of people died and thousands were sickened from widespread asbestos exposure — doesn't fit East Palestine even though some residents still complain about respiratory problems and unexplained rashes. Officials also believed the agency had enough authority to respond to the derailment without declaring an emergency.

Durno said the reason a public health emergency isn't being considered is that "we have not had any environmental data" about ongoing chemical exposures in the extensive air, water and soil testing program.

The EPA said in a statement that the order it did issue telling Norfolk Southern it was responsible for the damage declared that "the conditions at the derailment site 'may constitute an imminent and substantial endangerment to the public health or welfare or the environment.'" So the agency said it didn't see a need for a public health emergency because it had the legal authority it needed to respond.

But area residents like Jami Wallace see plenty of evidence that their hometown has become a disaster every time they open Facebook and see posts about their friends' kids covered with rashes or struggling with chronic nosebleeds. Other posts talk about the smell of chemicals returning after heavy rains.

"They keep saying it's a coincidence, but if this was your family, wouldn't you get tired of it being a coincidence?" Wallace said.

Lesley Pacey, who is an environmental investigator with the watchdog group, said she wants to make sure that East Palestine residents get the help that they need to recover from the derailment.

"I talk to residents all the time and they're having new seizures pop up, cancers. I mean, a lot of the damage has already been done to these people," Pacey said.

Federal and state officials continue monitoring for additional problems in the small community near the Pennsylvania border, according to Durno. The EPA also keeps testing the air and water in the area as it oversees the railroad's work to clean up the mess.

He reiterated that none of the agency's more than 100 million tests of air, water and soil ever showed concerning levels of chemicals apart from the soil immediately around the derailment that was dug up and disposed of last year.

In the recently disclosed emails, an EPA lawyer tells one of its PR people it was "best not to get into this" when he was asked whether a document explaining the agency's order telling Norfolk Southern to clean up the contamination from the derailment should include anything about medical benefits. That kind of aid, which could include Medicare coverage, is only available if EPA declares a public health emergency.

"But again there was no data suggesting that that was necessary. And to this date, there is no data that suggests that that's necessary," Durno said

The railroad has already spent more than \$1.1 billion on its response to the derailment, including more than \$104 million in direct aid to East Palestine and its residents. Partly because Norfolk Southern is paying for the cleanup, President Joe Biden has never declared a disaster in East Palestine, which is a sore point for many residents. The railroad has promised to create a fund to help pay for the long-term health needs of the community, but that hasn't happened yet.

The emails also provide a reminder that the EPA was aware of the potential dangers of releasing and burning the vinyl chloride. But that was already made clear when the EPA advised officials on scene that phosgene — which was used as a chemical weapon in World War I — and hydrogen chloride would likely be created when vinyl chloride is burned and warned the public about that possibility.

The officials who made the decision to release the vinyl chloride — Ohio's governor and the local fire chief leading the response — decided that releasing and burning it was safer than risking a tank car or more exploding.

Ultimately, Durno said the EPA found only low levels of hydrogen chloride in the plume of thick black smoke and no phosgene. And he said the agency took extensive samples throughout the area to monitor for those chemicals during the burn and evacuation even though weather conditions kept its specialized plane with additional testing equipment grounded on the day of the burn.

The head of the National Transportation Safety Board said recently that her agency's investigation showed that the vent and burn of the vinyl chloride was unnecessary because the company that produced that chemical was sure no dangerous chemical reaction was happening inside the tank cars. But the officials who made the decision have said they were never told that.

The NTSB's full investigation into the cause of the derailment won't be complete until June, though that agency has said that an overheating wheel bearing on one of the railcars that wasn't detected in time by a trackside sensor likely caused the crash.

The EPA has said the cleanup in East Palestine is expected to be complete sometime later this year.

Rick Tsai, a chiropractor who ran in the March primary for the U.S. congressional seat on the derailment, sees a dismal future for the small township the longer that it goes without the resources it needs to make it safe again — resources the public health emergency designation could help provide.

"People are just about to give up," he lamented. "I don't think people have much hope anymore."

With famine looming, aid group halts food delivery in Gaza after Israeli strike kills 7 workers

By WAFAA SHURAFI and SAMY MAGDY Associated Press

DEIR AL-BALAH, Gaza Strip (AP) — Some of Israel's closest allies, including the United States, on Tuesday condemned the deaths of seven aid workers who were killed by airstrikes in Gaza — a loss that prompted multiple charities to suspend food deliveries to Palestinians on the brink of starvation.

The deaths of the World Central Kitchen workers threatened to set back efforts by the U.S. and other countries to open a maritime corridor for aid from Cyprus to help ease the desperate conditions in northern Gaza.

President Joe Biden issued an unusually blunt criticism of Israel by its closest ally, suggesting that the incident demonstrated that Israel was not doing enough to protect civilians.

"Israel has not done enough to protect aid workers trying to deliver desperately needed help to civilians," he said, adding he was "outraged and heartbroken" by their killings.

"Incidents like yesterday's simply should not happen," he added. "The United States has repeatedly urged Israel to deconflict their military operations against Hamas with humanitarian operations, in order to avoid civilian casualties."

Ships still laden with some 240 tons of aid from the charitable group turned back from Gaza just a day after arriving, according to Cyprus. Other humanitarian aid organizations also suspended operations in

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Gaza, saying it was too dangerous to offer help. Israel has allowed only a trickle of food and supplies into Gaza's devastated north, where experts say famine is imminent.

The dead from Monday night's strikes included three British citizens, Polish and Australia nationals, a Canadian-American dual national and a Palestinian. Those countries have been key backers of Israel's nearly 6-month-old offensive in Gaza, and several of them denounced the killings.

Israel already faces growing isolation as international criticism of the Gaza assault has mounted. On the same day as the deadly airstrikes, Israel stirred more fears by apparently striking Iran's consulate in Damascus and killing two Iranian generals. The government also moved to shut down a foreign media outlet — Qatari-owned Al Jazeera television.

The hit on the charity's convoy also highlighted what critics have called Israel's indiscriminate bombing and lack of regard for civilian casualties in Gaza.

Israel's military chief, Lt. Gen. Herzl Halevi, announced the results of a preliminary investigation early Wednesday.

"It was a mistake that followed a misidentification — at night during a war in very complex conditions. It shouldn't have happened," he said. He gave no further details. He said an independent body would conduct a "thorough investigation" that would be completed in the coming days.

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu had earlier acknowledged the "unintended strike ... on innocent people" and said officials would work to ensure it does not happen again.

World Central Kitchen said it had coordinated with the Israeli military over the movement of its cars. Three vehicles moving at large distances apart were hit in succession. They were left incinerated and mangled, indicating multiple targeted strikes.

At least one of the vehicles had the charity's logo printed across its roof to make it identifiable from the air, and the ordnance punched a large hole through the roof. Footage showed the bodies at a hospital in the central Gaza town of Deir al-Balah, several of them wearing protective gear with the charity's logo.

Israeli TV said the initial military investigation found that the army identified the cars carrying World Central Kitchen's workers arriving at its warehouse in Deir al-Balah and observed suspected militants nearby. Half an hour later, the vehicles were struck by the air force as they headed south. The reports said it was not clear who ordered the strikes or why.

Throughout the war, Israel has said it seeks to avoid civilian casualties and uses sophisticated intelligence to target Hamas and other militants. Israeli authorities blame them for civilian deaths because they operate in populated areas.

At the same time, Israel has also insisted that no target is off-limits. Israeli forces have repeatedly struck ambulances and vehicles carrying aid, as well as relief organization offices and U.N. shelters, claiming that armed fighters were in them.

Israeli forces have also shown a readiness to inflict widespread destruction on suspicion of a militant presence or out of tactical need. Homes with Palestinian families sheltering inside are leveled by strikes almost daily with no explanation of the intended target. Videos of strikes released by the military often show them hitting individuals without visible weapons, while identifying them as militants.

More than 32,900 Palestinians have been killed in the war, around two-thirds of them women and children, according to Gaza's Health Ministry, which does not distinguish between civilians and combatants in its count.

Celebrity chef José Andrés, who founded the World Central Kitchen charity, said he was "heartbroken" by the deaths of the staffers.

"The Israeli government needs to stop this indiscriminate killing. It needs to stop restricting humanitarian aid, stop killing civilians and aid workers, and stop using food as a weapon," he wrote on X, formerly Twitter.

The U.S., Britain, Poland, Australia and Canada all called on Israel to give answers on the deaths. Israeli Defense Minister Yoav Gallant launched an investigation and ordered the opening of a joint situation room enabling coordination between the military and aid groups.

But anger among its allies could put new pressure on Israel.

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The British government summoned Israel's ambassador for a rebuke and called for an immediate humanitarian pause to allow more aid in and the release of hostages.

British Prime Minister Rishi Sunak told Netanyahu that he was "appalled" by the workers' deaths and described the situation in Gaza as "increasingly intolerable."

A senior Canadian government official said there will be a joint formal diplomatic rebuke at the foreign ministry in Israel on Wednesday. The official also said a top official with Canada's Global Affairs department made a formal representation to Israel ambassador's to Canada on Tuesday. The official spoke on condition of anonymity as they were not authorized to speak publicly on the matter.

The deaths sent a further chill through U.N. agencies and other aid groups that have said for months that sending truck convoys around Gaza — particularly in the north — has been extremely difficult because of the military's failure to either grant permission or ensure safe passage. Israel has barred UNRWA, the main U.N. agency in Gaza, from making deliveries to the north.

The U.S. and other countries have been working to set up the sea passage from Cyprus to get around the difficulties.

World Central Kitchen was key to the new route. It and the United Arab Emirates sent a pilot shipment last month. Their second delivery of around 400 tons of food and supplies arrived in three ships to Gaza hours before the strikes on the convoy.

Around 100 tons were unloaded before the charity suspended operations, and the rest was being taken back to Cyprus, Cypriot Foreign Ministry spokesman Theodoros Gotsis said.

Still, Cypriot President Nikos Christodoulides said Tuesday that ship deliveries would continue.

Anera, a Washington-based aid group that has been operating in the Palestinian territories for decades, said that in the wake of the strikes it was taking the "unprecedented" step of pausing its own operations in Gaza, where it had been helping to provide around 150,000 meals daily.

"The escalating risks associated with aid delivery leave us with no choice," it said in a statement.

Jamie McGoldrick, the United Nations humanitarian coordinator for the Palestinian territories, said the strikes were "not an isolated incident." The U.N. says more than 180 humanitarian workers have been killed in the war.

"This is nearly three times the death toll recorded in any single conflict in a year," he said.

The war began when Hamas-led militants stormed into southern Israel in a surprise attack on Oct. 7, killing some 1,200 people and taking around 250 hostage. Israel responded with one of the deadliest and most destructive offensives in recent history.

Two other Israeli strikes late Monday killed at least 16 Palestinians, including eight children, in Rafah, where Israel has vowed to expand its ground operation. The city on the Egyptian border is now home to some 1.4 million Palestinians, most of whom have sought refuge from fighting elsewhere.

One strike hit a family home, killing 10 people, including five children, according to hospital records. Another hit a gathering near a mosque, killing at least six people, including three children.

South Koreans bid emotional farewell to beloved panda leaving for China

By HYUNG-JIN KIM Associated Press

SEOUL, South Korea (AP) — A crowd of people, some weeping, gathered at a rain-soaked amusement park in South Korea to bid farewell to a beloved giant panda before her departure to China on Wednesday.

Fu Bao has been a major attraction at the Everland theme park near Seoul since she was born there in 2020 to pandas Ai Bao and Le Bao, who came from China in 2016 on a 15-year lease program.

China sends pandas abroad as a sign of goodwill but maintains ownership over the animals and their cubs. Decades of conservation efforts in the wild and study in captivity saved the species from extinction, increasing its population from fewer than 1,000 at one time to more than 1,800 in the wild and in captivity.

On Wednesday, many panda fans in South Korea braved rain to attend a farewell ceremony at the Everland park for Fu Bao, who was to be flown to China later in the day.

As a truck carrying Fu Bao slowly moved to a plaza in the rain, many visitors wearing raincoats or holding

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umbrellas waved flags, shouted their parting messages and took photos with their mobile phones. Some loudly cried or wiped away tears.

The truck was decorated with a huge picture of Fu Bao and the message "It was a miracle that we met you. Thank you, Fu Bao."

But she wasn't shown to the public on Wednesday. The park last showed her to the public on March 3. "You are our baby panda forever even if 10 years pass or 100 years pass," zookeeper Kang Cheol-won said in a speech during the ceremony. "Dear all, Fu Bao is now leaving. Please, remember Fu Bao for a long, long time ... and please don't cry much!"

Fu Bao's mother, Ai Bao, gave birth last year to female twin cubs, the first panda twins born in South Korea.

Biden and Trump win Rhode Island, Connecticut, New York and Wisconsin primaries

By JONATHAN J. COOPER and TERESA CRAWFORD Associated Press

KENOSHA, Wis. (AP) — Voters in four states weighed in Tuesday on their parties' presidential nominees, a largely symbolic vote now that both President Joe Biden and former President Donald Trump have locked up the Democratic and Republican nominations.

Biden and Trump easily won primaries in Rhode Island, Connecticut, New York and Wisconsin, adding to their delegate hauls for their party conventions this summer.

Their victories, while hardly surprising, nevertheless offer clues about enthusiasm among base voters for the upcoming 2020 rematch that has left a majority of Americans underwhelmed. Biden has faced opposition from activists encouraging Democrats to vote against him to send a message of disapproval for his handling of the war between Israel and Hamas, and some Republican Trump critics are still voting for rivals who have dropped out.

"Uncommitted" in Rhode Island and Connecticut was getting a similar share of the Democratic vote as protest campaigns in Minnesota and Michigan, which got 19% and 13% respectively. In Wisconsin, "un-instructed delegation" was getting a smaller share.

In particular, the tallies in Wisconsin, a pivotal November battleground, will give hints about the share of Republicans who still aren't on board with Trump and how many Democrats are disillusioned with Biden. Trump campaigned Tuesday in Wisconsin and Michigan, two Midwest battlegrounds.

"Donald Trump is the first person I can remember who actually tried to keep all of the promises that he made during the campaign," said Scott Lindemann, a 62-year-old contractor in Kenosha, Wisconsin, who voted for the former president in the GOP primary. "I was very impressed with that."

In New York, 70-year-old Steve Wheatley, a registered Republican, said he wishes there were more candidates to choose from. He said he voted for Nikki Haley even though "she has no shot" because of the lack of options.

"We need younger candidates with fresh ideas to run for president," said Wheatley, a resident of Athens, a small town in the Hudson Valley. "I prefer a Democrat but our choices are thin. Look at what Biden has done so far with the economy."

Theresa Laabs, a 55-year-old cashier in Kenosha, said her family is feeling the squeeze from higher food and gasoline prices, but she voted for Biden in the Democratic primary because she feels like he's working to alleviate inflation.

"I understand it's the economy now, and I'm hoping that Joe will keep working even harder in the next four years to try and bring these things down and make it easier for the working family," Laabs said.

Trump and Biden turned their attention to the general election weeks ago after Haley dropped out of the GOP contest. Biden visited all the top battlegrounds last month after his State of the Union speech.

Biden and the Democratic National Committee have outpaced Trump and the Republicans in fundraising. Biden claimed the largest single-event fundraising record last week when he took in \$26 million at a star-studded New York event last week with big names from the entertainment world teamed up with the

president and his Democratic predecessors, Barack Obama and Bill Clinton.

Trump is looking to one-up his rival with a fundraiser in Palm Beach, Florida, this weekend that he hopes will bring in \$33 million.

With the presidential candidates locking up their parties' nominations, turnout was slow in Rhode Island, where only 4% of eligible voters had cast ballots by 5 p.m., a figure that included Tuesday's in-person votes as well as mail-in and early votes.

It was slow across the border in Connecticut as well, where early voting was held for the first time in state history. Secretary of the State Stephanie Thomas said turnout was only 1% to 2% in some communities by 11 a.m., while it was 4% in Stamford, one of the state's larger cities. "What we have been hearing on the ground from people over the last few weeks is that this isn't a competitive primary," she said about the low numbers.

Trump accuses Biden of causing a border 'bloodbath' as he escalates his immigration rhetoric

By JOEY CAPPELLETTI, ADRIANA GOMEZ LICON and JILL COLVIN Associated Press

GRAND RAPIDS, Mich. (AP) — Donald Trump accused President Joe Biden of unleashing a "bloodbath" at the U.S.-Mexico border Tuesday, escalating his inflammatory rhetoric as he campaigned in two Midwestern swing states likely to be critical to the outcome of the 2024 election.

Trump, who has accused migrants of "poisoning the blood of the country" and vowed to launch the largest domestic deportation operation in the nation's history if he wins a second term, said Biden was allowing a "bloodbath" that was "destroying the country." In Michigan, he referred to people in the U.S. illegally who are suspected of committing crimes as "animals," using dehumanizing language that those who study extremism have warned increases the risk of violence.

"Under Crooked Joe Biden, every state is now a border state. Every town is now a border town because Joe Biden has brought the carnage and chaos and killing from all over world and dumped it straight into our backyards," Trump said in Grand Rapids, where he stood flanked by law enforcement officers in uniform before a line of flags.

While violent crime is down, Trump and other Republicans have attacked Biden by seizing on several high-profile crimes alleged to have been committed by immigrants in the U.S. illegally as border crossings have hit record highs. Polls suggest Trump has an advantage over Biden on the issue as many prospective voters say they're concerned about the impact of the crossings.

Trump continued to hammer the theme at a rally in Green Bay, Wisconsin, Tuesday evening as the state was holding its presidential primaries. Trump accused rogue nations of "pumping migrants across our wide open border" and "sending prisoners, murders, drug dealers, mental patients, terrorists" — though there is no evidence any country is engaged in that kind of coordinated effort.

He also claimed that migrants would cost the country trillions of dollars in public benefits and cause Social Security and Medicare to "buckle and collapse."

"If you want to help Joe Biden wheel granny off the cliff to fund government benefits for illegals, then vote for Crooked Joe Biden," he said. "But when I am president, instead of throwing granny overboard, I will send Joe Biden's illegal aliens back home."

Biden's campaign said Trump is the one who threatens the programs. "Donald Trump is trying to hide his unpopular record with erratic lies and desperate denials," said Brianna Johnson, the campaign's Wisconsin communications director.

The White House emphasized the positive impact that immigration has on the U.S. economy. They argued that recent gains in immigration have helped to boost employment and sustained growth as the Federal Reserve hiked interest rates to bring down inflation.

"We know immigrants strengthen our country and also strengthen our economy," White House press secretary Karine Jean-Pierre said at Tuesday's briefing, noting that immigrants were the ones doing the "critical work" on the Francis Scott Key Bridge in Baltimore when it collapsed after being struck by a ship.

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Trump invoked the killing of Ruby Garcia, a Michigan woman who was found dead on the side of a Grand Rapids highway on March 22. Police say she was in a romantic relationship with the suspect, Brandon Ortiz-Vite. He told police he shot her multiple times during an argument before dropping her body on the side of the road and driving off in her red Mazda.

Trump incorrectly referred to the 25-year-old Garcia as a 17-year-old.

Authorities say Ortiz-Vite is a citizen of Mexico and had previously been deported following a drunken driving arrest. He does not have an attorney listed in court records.

Trump in his remarks said that he had spoken to some of her family. Garcia's sister, Mavi, however, disputed his account, telling Fox17 that they had not. "No, he did not speak with us," the outlet said she told them in a text message, declining to comment further.

She also pleaded on Facebook last week for reporters to stop politicizing her sister's story, and on Tuesday asked for privacy, saying she only wanted "justice to be served" and to "be left alone."

Trump also again mentioned the killing of Laken Riley, a nursing student in Georgia. A Venezuelan man who officials say entered the U.S. illegally has been charged. Riley's family attended Trump's rally in Georgia last month and met with him backstage.

Trump referred to the suspect in Riley's death as an "illegal alien animal."

"The Democrats say: 'Please don't call them animals. They're humans.' I said, 'No, they're not humans, they're not humans, they're animals,'" he said.

FBI statistics show overall violent crime dropped again in the U.S. last year, continuing a downward trend after a pandemic-era spike. In Michigan, violent crime hit a three-year low in 2022, according to the most recent available data. Crime in Michigan's largest city, Detroit, is also down, with the fewest homicides last year since 1966.

Michigan and Wisconsin are seen as critical battleground states in this year's election. Trump won both in 2016, toppling the Democrats' so-called "blue wall," but lost them to Biden in 2020. His campaign is hoping to win them back with a particular focus on blue-collar workers and union members.

In Green Bay, some supporters braved snowfall for three hours outside to enter the venue. In Grand Rapids, over 100 supporters stood in the cold rain to line the street where Trump's motorcade was expected to pass.

At a nearby park, a small group advocating for immigration reform gathered to hold a moment of silence for Garcia while holding signs that read "No human being is illegal" and "Michigan welcomes immigrants."

Biden's campaign has tried to counter Trump's attacks by hammering the former president for his role in killing a bipartisan border deal that would have added more than 1,500 new Customs and Border Protection personnel, in addition to other restrictions.

"There was a solution on the table. It was actually the former president that encouraged Republicans to walk away from getting it done," Michigan Gov. Gretchen Whitmer, a Democrat, said Monday. "I don't have a lot of tolerance for political points when it continues to endanger our economy and, to some extent, our people as we saw play out in Grand Rapids recently."

Trump has been leaning into inflammatory rhetoric about the surge of migrants at the southern border since he became his party's presumptive nominee. He has portrayed migrants as "poisoning the blood of the country," questioned whether some should even be considered people, and claimed, without evidence, that countries have been emptying their prisons and mental asylums into the U.S.

In Green Bay, Trump spoke beside an empty podium that read, "Anytime. Anywhere. Anyplace." Trump said it was meant for Biden, whose campaign has not committed to participating in debates.

Palestinians seek full UN membership again, but US is almost certain to block it for a second time

By EDITH M. LEDERER Associated Press

UNITED NATIONS (AP) — Supporters of the Palestinians' request for full membership in the United Nations asked the U.N. Security Council on Tuesday to revive their application for admission submitted in

2011. But the United States is again almost certain to block it.

The supporters' letter to the council president included the names of 140 countries that have recognized a Palestinian state, including members of the 22-nation Arab Group at the United Nations, the 57-nation Organization of Islamic Cooperation, and the 120-member Nonaligned Movement.

The Palestinians are making a fresh bid for U.N. membership as the war between Israel and Hamas that began on Oct. 7 nears its sixth month, and the unresolved decades-old Palestinian-Israeli conflict remains in the spotlight after years on the back burner.

Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas delivered the Palestinian Authority's application to become the 194th member of the United Nations to then Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon on Sept. 23, 2011, before addressing world leaders at the General Assembly.

That bid failed because the Palestinians failed to get the required support of nine of the Security Council's 15 members. Even if they did, the United States, Israel's closest ally, had promised to veto any council resolution endorsing Palestinian membership.

The United States has repeatedly said full U.N. membership should follow a negotiated peace agreement between Israel and the Palestinians.

"Our position has not changed," U.S. deputy ambassador Robert Wood told several reporters Tuesday, reiterating that the issue of full Palestinian membership in the U.N. is one of the final status issues to be decided in bilateral talks between the Palestinians and Israel on a peace agreement.

After the Palestinians' initial bid for full U.N. membership was rejected, they went to the 193-member General Assembly, where there are no vetoes, and by more than a two-thirds majority succeeded in having their status raised from a U.N. observer to a non-member observer state in November 2012.

That change opened the door for the Palestinian territories to join U.N. and other international organizations, including the International Criminal Court.

Malta's U.N. Ambassador Vanessa Frazier, the current Security Council president, told reporters Monday that the council's standing committee for new members, which includes all 15 council nations, is expected to meet behind closed doors to consider the application.

The committee would then decide whether to recommend membership to the General Assembly.

Wood's comments Tuesday on the unchanged U.S. position appear to doom Palestine's full U.N. membership again.

Malta has invited ministers to the monthly Security Council meeting on April 18 where the ongoing Israeli-Hamas war in Gaza and the council's call for a cease-fire during the Muslim holy month of Ramadan, which ends April 9 and was rejected by both parties, is expected to take center stage.

But the issue of Palestine's full membership in the United Nations is certain to be raised as well.

The largest fresh egg producer in the US has found bird flu in chickens at a Texas plant

By KEN MILLER Associated Press

The largest producer of fresh eggs in the U.S. said Tuesday it had temporarily halted production at a Texas plant after bird flu was found in chickens, and officials said the virus had also been detected at a poultry facility in Michigan.

Ridgeland, Mississippi-based Cal-Maine Foods, Inc. said in a statement that approximately 1.6 million laying hens and 337,000 pullets, about 3.6% of its total flock, were destroyed after the infection, avian influenza, was found at a facility in Parmer County, Texas.

The plant is on the Texas-New Mexico border in the Texas Panhandle about 85 miles (137 kilometers) southwest of Amarillo and about 370 miles (595 kilometers) northwest of Dallas. Cal-Maine said it sells most of its eggs in the Southwestern, Southeastern, Midwestern and mid-Atlantic regions of the United States.

"The Company continues to work closely with federal, state and local government officials and focused industry groups to mitigate the risk of future outbreaks and effectively manage the response," the statement said.

"Cal-Maine Foods is working to secure production from other facilities to minimize disruption to its customers," the statement said.

The company said there is no known bird flu risk associated with eggs that are currently in the market and no eggs have been recalled.

Eggs that are properly handled and cooked are safe to eat, according to the U.S. Department of Agriculture. The announcement by Cal-Maine comes a day after state health officials said a person had been diagnosed with bird flu after being in contact with cows presumed to be infected, and that the risk to the public remains low. The human case in Texas marks the first known instance globally of a person catching this version of bird flu from a mammal, federal health officials said.

In Michigan, Michigan State University's Veterinary Diagnostic Laboratory has detected bird flu in a commercial poultry facility in Ionia County, according to the Michigan's Department of Agriculture and Rural Development.

The county is about 100 miles (161 kilometers) northwest of Detroit.

The department said it received confirmation of the disease Monday from the lab and that it is the fourth time since 2022 that the disease was detected at a commercial facility in Michigan.

Department spokesperson Jennifer Holton said Tuesday that state law prohibits the department from disclosing the type of poultry at the facility. The facility has been placed under quarantine and the department does not anticipate any disruptions to supply chains across the state, Holton said.

Dairy cows in Texas and Kansas were reported to be infected with bird flu last week — and federal agriculture officials later confirmed infections in a Michigan dairy herd that had recently received cows from Texas. A dairy herd in Idaho has been added to the list after federal agriculture officials confirmed the detection of bird flu in them, according to a Tuesday press release from the USDA.

12.3 million: Iowa's victory over LSU is the most-watched women's college basketball game on record

By JOE REEDY AP Sports Writer

Caitlin Clark can claim another record — the most-watched women's college basketball game in history. Iowa's 94-87 victory over LSU in the Elite Eight of the women's NCAA Tournament on Monday night averaged 12.3 million viewers on ESPN, according to Nielsen. That makes it one of the most-viewed games in any sport other than NFL football over the past year.

Iowa-LSU outdrew all but one of the five games in last year's NBA Finals, along with the clinching game of last year's World Series (11.48 million).

Clark scored 41 points as the Hawkeyes avenged last year's loss to the Tigers in the national championship game.

The viewership surpassed the 11.84 million who watched the 1983 NCAA championship game between Southern California and Louisiana Tech. LSU coach Kim Mulkey played for Louisiana Tech and was matched up against USC great Cheryl Miller in that game, which the Trojans won 64-58.

It was also the most-watched men's or women's college basketball game ever on ESPN, more than doubling the prior largest audience.

According to ESPN, the 2002 women's national championship game between UConn and Oklahoma had the old mark at 5.68 million. ESPN's most-watched men's game was the 2008 regular-season matchup between Duke and North Carolina, which drew 5.61 million.

Only one men's NCAA Tournament game this year had bigger viewership: North Carolina State's win over Duke on Sunday in the men's Elite Eight on CBS averaged 15.1 million.

According to Sports Media Watch, it was the most-viewed basketball game on ESPN since Game 7 of the 2018 Eastern Conference finals, when the Cleveland Cavaliers' victory over the Boston Celtics averaged 13.6 million.

UConn's 80-73 win over Southern California, which was on after the Iowa game, was the second-most watched college game in ESPN history at 6.7 million. ABC had both regional finals on Sunday, with South

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Carolina averaging 3.1 million in its win over Oregon State and North Carolina State drawing 2.5 million against Texas.

Clark's four March Madness games on ESPN and ABC have averaged 6.83 million. Iowa will face UConn in Friday's second national semifinal on ESPN. The winner will face either South Carolina or North Carolina State on ABC on Sunday.

The Hawkeyes' 89-68 win over Colorado in Saturday's regional semifinal averaged 6.9 million viewers on ABC.

Iowa's last five televised games have surpassed 3 million viewers, including the last three that have drawn at least 4.9 million.

The 60 women's tournament games are averaging 1.5 million, a 127% increase over last year.

LSU's victory over UCLA on Saturday, which preceded the Iowa game, averaged 3.8 million, the second most-watched Sweet 16 game on record.

World Central Kitchen is saving lives with food but paying a price in blood

By ASHRAF KHALIL Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — The deaths of seven World Central Kitchen workers in an Israeli airstrike in Gaza was a tragic turn for an American homegrown charity that, in less than 15 years, has mushroomed from the grassroots brainchild of a celebrity chef into one of the world's most recognized food relief organizations.

The killings also interrupted a crucial flow of desperately needed food into the besieged coastal strip, as international organizations and charities warn of a looming famine. World Central Kitchen, in partnership with the United Arab Emirates, had just delivered a cargo ship with 400 tons of canned goods from Cyprus to Gaza. Around 100 tons were unloaded before the charity suspended operations, in the wake of the attack; the rest was being taken back to Cyprus, Cypriot Foreign Ministry spokesman Theodoros Gotsis said.

It's an unprecedented crisis for José Andrés, the restaurateur who founded the charity to provide immediate food relief to disaster-stricken areas and has grown it into a global operation working in multiple war zones. Founded in 2010, the organization achieved international prominence for its work in Puerto Rico in 2017 feeding victims of Hurricane Maria. It also operates in Ukraine, providing more than 100 million meals to refugees, according to the group's website, and earning Andrés a medal from Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy.

World Central Kitchen has quickly become a mainstay of American philanthropy, with contributions on par with much older organizations. The charity in 2022 reported \$518 million in total contributions and Andrés himself received \$100 million from Amazon founder Jeff Bezos in 2021.

Andrés rose to prominence with a string of successful restaurants in Washington, D.C., just as the celebrity chef phenomenon was taking off. He developed close ties with former President Barack Obama at a time when current President Joe Biden served as vice president. Andrés prepared meals at the White House, and Obama and former first lady Michelle Obama were frequent guests at his restaurants. The Spanish-born Andrés became a naturalized citizen during the Obama administration in a ceremony at the White House.

He remains connected to the Biden administration, serving as co-chair of the President's Council on Sports, Fitness & Nutrition. In February, he spoke at a conference on hunger hosted by second gentleman Doug Emhoff.

Andrés publicly feuded with former President Donald Trump over a planned restaurant in what was then the Trump International Hotel in Washington. The chef tried to pull out of a contract in protest over Trump's incendiary comments about Mexican and Latin American immigrants crossing the U.S. border. The pair sued each other and then settled out of court. When the hotel was sold and reopened as a Waldorf-Astoria; Andrés almost immediately announced new plans to launch a restaurant there.

In a statement Tuesday night, Biden said he had spoken with Andrés "to convey my deepest condolences for the deaths of these courageous aid workers and to express my continued support for his and his team's relentless and heroic efforts to get food to hungry people around the globe."

Biden said bluntly that Israel was not doing enough to protect aid workers. "This conflict has been one

of the worst in recent memory in terms of how many aid workers have been killed," he said.

When fighters from Hamas — the militant group that controls Gaza — breached the border on Oct. 7, killing some 1,200 Israelis and taking hundreds of hostages, Andrés quickly moved to organize support for Gazan civilians sure to be caught up in the Israeli military response. With funding from the Emirati government, his group organized an initial food shipment from Cyprus and set up more than 60 kitchens in Gaza producing thousands of meals a day. The latest food shipment was meant to expand upon that model.

In a March telephone interview with The Associated Press shortly before the most recent shipment launched from Cyprus, Andrés credited his campaign with sparking governments into action and helping inspire the U.S. government plan to build a temporary port in Gaza to receive aid shipments.

"We have awakened the international community to do more for the people of Gaza," he told the AP. "Everybody should have food and water, it's a universal right."

The loss of World Central Kitchen's efforts will be a serious blow to overall humanitarian efforts in Gaza.

"WCK is a key player in efforts to address food insecurity in Gaza and has provided essential food aid to thousands of families, contributing significantly to combating the catastrophic hunger there," said a statement from the U.N.'s World Food Program.

The killings may also represent a turning point in Andrés' public perspective on the Israeli government. The chef was a vocal critic of Hamas in the immediate aftermath of the Oct. 7 attacks. He spoke on the X social media platform of Israel's right to defend its citizens and called for the ouster of a Spanish government minister who accused Israel of committing war crimes in Gaza.

But on Tuesday, Andrés harshly criticized the Israeli military.

"The Israeli government needs to stop this indiscriminate killing. It needs to stop restricting humanitarian aid, stop killing civilians and aid workers, and stop using food as a weapon," he wrote on X. "No more innocent lives lost."

His organization laid the blame squarely on the Israel Defense Forces, saying the IDF had coordinated over the movement of the cars carrying the workers as they left northern Gaza late Monday.

Lt. Gen. Herzi Halevi, Israel's military chief, said Tuesday that the strike was "a mistake that followed a misidentification — at night during a war in very complex conditions. It shouldn't have happened."

Footage of the aftermath showed a vehicle with the charity's logo printed across its roof to make it identifiable from the air. A projectile had blasted a large hole through the roof. Two other vehicles in the convoy were incinerated and mangled, indicating multiple hits.

Other footage showed the bodies, several wearing protective gear with the charity's logo, at a hospital in the central Gaza town of Deir al-Balah. Those killed included three British nationals, an Australian, a Polish national, an American-Canadian dual citizen and a Palestinian, according to hospital records.

Houston police chief won't say if thousands of dropped cases reveals bigger problems within agency

By JUAN A. LOZANO Associated Press

HOUSTON (AP) — Houston's police chief on Tuesday declined to say whether recent revelations that more than 264,000 cases filed with Houston police in the past eight years were dropped speak to broader problems within his agency that need to be fixed.

During a nearly two-hour meeting at police headquarters in downtown Houston with reporters and local community leaders, Chief Troy Finner acknowledged his department has lost some trust with the public because of the ongoing scandal. In February, Finner announced that hundreds of thousands of incident reports, including for sexual assaults and property crimes, were never submitted for investigation as officers assigned them an internal code that cited a lack of available personnel.

But Finner said he wasn't ready to declare that the mishandling of these incident reports was an example of bigger cultural problems within the police department and how officers perform their duties. After a deadly drug raid in 2019, an audit found multiple problems with the Houston police narcotics unit behind the raid, including a lack of supervision and officers making hundreds of errors in cases.

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"It's ugly. It don't feel good. It's a part of that process that we brought upon ourselves," Finner said during the meeting, which reporters were not allowed to record.

Finner said there would be accountability but declined to provide more details on this, citing an internal affairs investigation set to be completed by the end of April.

Last month, Mayor John Whitmire announced the creation of an independent panel to review police handling of the dropped cases.

Two assistant chiefs have already been demoted over their roles in the matter.

The police department has so far reviewed 67,533 of the 264,000 incident reports, Finner said Tuesday.

The department's top priority has been reaching out to people who filed more than 4,000 sexual assault reports that were suspended, with 3,883 having been reviewed as of Tuesday, Finner said.

The internal code, part of the department's record management system, was created in 2016, years before Finner became chief in April 2021.

Finner said he first found out officers were using the code during a meeting on Nov. 4, 2021, and gave an order for it to stop. But then he learned on Feb. 7 of this year that it was still being used to dismiss a significant number of adult sexual assault cases.

Finner suggested he and others in his department might have failed to follow up on whether the internal code was no longer being used because they were dealing with various issues, including a dramatic spike in crime during the pandemic, a shortage of officers and the deaths of 10 people at the Astroworld music festival, which happened a day after the meeting where he told his staff to stop using the code.

"I don't make any excuses. When you are the chief, you are responsible," Finner said.

One of the community activists who attended Tuesday's meeting, Cesar Espinosa, executive director of FIEL, a Houston-based civil rights group, said there needs to be full transparency with the ongoing investigation and with any punishment so that people don't think "this is business as usual."

"We just want to know the facts about what happened and how we're going to keep it from happening again," Espinosa said.

The Tropicana Las Vegas, a mob-era casino and Sin City landmark, closes after 67 years

By RIO YAMAT Associated Press

LAS VEGAS (AP) — In the 1971 film "Diamonds are Forever," James Bond stays in a swanky suite at the Tropicana Las Vegas.

"I hear that the Hotel Tropicana is quite comfortable," Agent 007 says.

It was the Tropicana's heyday, a frequent haunt of the legendary Rat Pack, while its past under the mob cemented its place in Vegas lore.

But after welcoming guests for 67 years, the Las Vegas Strip's third-oldest casino shut its doors for good on Tuesday. Employees crowded the main entrance, cheering and crying, while tourists and locals watched the historic moment from behind a yellow gate. A tissue box made its way through the crowd.

Then, just before 1 p.m., security guards began locking up the Tropicana. The thick chains clinked as they were wrapped around the casino's gold door handles.

Demolition is slated for October to make room for a \$1.5 billion Major League Baseball stadium — part of the city's latest rebrand as a hub for sports entertainment.

Charlie Granado, a bartender at the Tropicana, said it's a bittersweet ending for the place he has called a second home for 38 years.

"It's time. It's ran its course," Granado said. "It makes me sad. But on the other hand, it's a happy ending."

The population of Clark County had just surpassed 100,000 when the Tropicana opened on a Strip surrounded by vast, open desert. It cost \$15 million to build three stories with 300 rooms split into two wings.

Its manicured lawns and flashy showroom earned it the nickname "Tiffany of the Strip." There was a towering tulip-shaped fountain near the entrance, mosaic tiles and mahogany-paneled walls throughout.

Black and white photographs from that time give a view into what it was like inside the walls of the

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Tropicana at its height, playing host to A-list stars — from Elizabeth Taylor and Debbie Reynolds to Frank Sinatra and Sammy Davis Jr. Mel Tormé and Eddie Fisher performed at the Tropicana.

Decades later, New Jersey resident Joe Zappulla was among the final hotel guests to check out at the Tropicana before the locks went on the doors. He spent \$600 for a room and fulfilled a Vegas fantasy: lying on top of a craps table on a casino floor.

"When else can I do this in Vegas?" he said.

Zappulla grew up hearing glamorous tales from his parents, who honeymooned in Las Vegas in 1961 and visited often, about their run-ins with the Rat Pack during the Tropicana's heyday. It's a version of Sin City that his parents loved.

"Old Vegas, it's going," Zappulla said with tears sliding down his cheeks. "So I'm really clinging to a little piece of that."

In a city known for reinvention, the Tropicana itself underwent major changes as Las Vegas evolved. Two hotel towers were added in later years. In 1979, the casino's now-beloved \$1 million green-and-amber stained glass ceiling was installed above the casino floor.

Barbara Boggess was 26 when she started working at the Tropicana in the late 1970s as a linen room attendant.

Now 72, Boggess has seen the Tropicana through its many iterations. There was the 1980s rebrand as "the Island of Las Vegas," with a swim-up blackjack table at the pool, and the South Beach-themed renovation completed in 2011.

Today, only the low-rise hotel room wings remain of the original Tropicana structure. Yet the casino still conjures up vintage Vegas nostalgia.

"When you first walk in, you see the stained glass and the low ceilings," JT Seumala, a Las Vegas resident staying at the casino in March, said. "It does feel like you step back in time for a moment."

Seumala and his husband roamed the sprawling property during their visit, turning down random hallways and taking pictures of the purple-and-orange carpet, the wallpaper and the ceiling. They tried their luck at blackjack and roulette and made conversation with a cocktail server who had worked there for 25 years. They saved a few red \$5 poker chips to remember the mob-era casino.

Behind the scenes of the casino's opening decades ago, the Tropicana had ties to organized crime, largely through reputed mobster Frank Costello.

Costello was shot in the head in New York weeks after the Tropicana's debut. He survived, but the investigation led police to a piece of paper in his coat pocket with the Tropicana's exact earnings figure and mention of "money to be skimmed" for Costello's associates, according to The Mob Museum.

By the 1970s, federal authorities investigating mobsters in Kansas City charged more than a dozen operatives with conspiring to skim \$2 million in gambling revenue from Las Vegas casinos, including the Tropicana. Charges connected to the Tropicana alone resulted in five convictions.

But there were many years of mob-free success at the Tropicana. It was home to the city's longest running show, "Folies Bergere." The topless revue, imported from Paris, had a nearly 50-year run and helped make the feathered showgirl one of the most recognizable Las Vegas icons.

Today, the casino once surrounded by wide-open desert intersects with a major street named for it at the south end of the Strip, dwarfed by towering megaresorts that Las Vegas is now known for. Nearby are the homes of the NFL's Las Vegas Raiders, who left Oakland, California, in 2020, and the city's first major league professional team, the NHL's Vegas Golden Knights.

The ballpark planned for the land beneath the Tropicana is expected to open in 2028.

"There's a lot of controversy as far as if it should stay or should it go," Seumala said. "But the thing that I do love about Vegas is that it's always reinventing itself."

Second channel opened allowing some vessels to bypass wreckage at the Baltimore bridge collapse site

By LEA SKENE Associated Press

BALTIMORE (AP) — Crews opened a second temporary channel on Tuesday allowing a limited amount of marine traffic to bypass the mangled wreckage of Baltimore's collapsed Francis Scott Key Bridge, which had blocked the vital port's main shipping channel since its destruction one week ago.

Work is ongoing to open a third channel that will allow larger vessels to pass through the bottleneck and restore more commercial activity, officials announced at a news conference Tuesday afternoon. The channels are open primarily to vessels involved in the cleanup effort, along with some barges and tugs that have been stuck in the Port of Baltimore.

A tugboat pushing a fuel barge was the first vessel to use an alternate channel late Monday. It was supplying jet fuel to Delaware's Dover Air Force Base.

Gov. Wes Moore said rough weather over the past two days has made the challenging salvage effort even more daunting. Conditions have been unsafe for divers trying to recover the bodies of the four construction workers believed trapped underwater in the wreckage.

"We promised these families that we would do everything in our power to bring them closure, but also my directive is to complete this mission with no injuries and no casualties," Moore said.

Earlier Tuesday, Moore visited one of two centers the Small Business Administration opened to help companies get loans to assist them with losses caused by the disruption caused by the collapse.

U.S. Sen. Ben Cardin, a Democrat who accompanied Moore in meetings with potential loan applicants, said he spoke with truck drivers who relied on the port to supply their cargo. While they are already feeling the immediate economic effects of the collapse, he said, the ripple effects will be widespread — especially for small businesses, which he called "the growth engine of our nation."

For Alex Del Sordo, who owns a marina and waterside restaurant near the collapse site, the future economic landscape is largely a mystery. So far, his businesses have been busy servicing boats involved in the recovery and salvage operation and offering discounted meals for first responders. He said he and his partner are considering applying for a low-interest loan.

He anticipates a decrease in pleasure boating because vessels moored in Baltimore's harbor are temporarily trapped there. But he said rebuilding the Key Bridge will likely bring a large influx of labor and maritime traffic into the area and help keep some local businesses afloat.

"I think small businesses will have to be creative in what they offer," he said.

In Annapolis, lawmakers held a hearing Tuesday afternoon for a bill authorizing use of the state's rainy day fund to help port employees who are out of work and aren't covered under unemployment insurance while the port is closed or partially closed. The bill also would let the governor use state reserves to help some small businesses avoid laying people off and to encourage companies that relocate to other ports to return to Baltimore when it reopens.

Lawmakers are working to pass the bill quickly in the last week of their legislative session, which ends Monday. The Maryland Senate Finance Committee voted 11-0 in favor Tuesday; it could be on the Senate floor as soon as Wednesday.

Meanwhile, crews are undertaking the complicated work of removing steel and concrete at the site of the collapse after a container ship lost power and crashed into one of the bridge's supporting columns. Crews have described the mangled steel girders as "chaotic wreckage."

U.S. Army Corps of Engineers Col. Estee Pinchasin said the underwater conditions are "extremely unforgiving" for divers.

"The magnitude of this is enormous," she said.

To open the second channel, crews used a large crane to lift wreckage out of the way.

Authorities believe six members of a road construction crew plunged to their deaths in the collapse, including two whose bodies were recovered last week. Two other workers survived.

Other vessels are also stuck in Baltimore's harbor until shipping traffic can resume through the port,

which is one of the largest on the East Coast and a symbol of the city's maritime culture. It handles more cars and farm equipment than any other U.S. port.

Jim Roof, a longtime tugboat captain, said he's waiting for a deeper channel to open before he can leave the harbor. He shook his head, thinking about the thousands of ships that have passed under the Key Bridge during his career.

"The system we have is pretty good," he said, noting that in this case, the absolute worst possible timing caused a large-scale disaster.

The local nonprofit Baltimore International Seafarers' Center has been in contact with the crews of some stationary ships, offering them support and transportation for shopping trips and other excursions.

Volunteer Rich Roca said seafaring is a tough job even in the best of times. Crew members often leave their homes and families for months on end. Some of those stuck in Baltimore are halfway around the world with no return in sight.

President Joe Biden, who has pledged significant federal resources to the recovery effort, is expected to visit the collapse site Friday.

The bridge fell after being struck by the cargo ship Dali, which lost power in the early hours of March 26, shortly after leaving Baltimore on its way to Sri Lanka. The ship issued a mayday alert, which allowed just enough time for police to stop traffic, but not enough to save a roadwork crew filling potholes on the bridge. The ship remains stationary, and its 21 crew members remain on board.

The Dali is managed by Synergy Marine Group and owned by Grace Ocean Private Ltd., both of Singapore. Danish shipping giant Maersk chartered the Dali.

Synergy and Grace Ocean filed a court petition Monday seeking to limit their legal liability, a routine but important procedure for cases litigated under U.S. maritime law. A federal court in Maryland will ultimately decide who is responsible and how much they owe.

Company helping immigrants in detention ordered to pay \$811M+ in lawsuit alleging deceptive tactics

By PHILIP MARCELO Associated Press

NEW YORK (AP) — A company that provides services for immigrants in federal detention was ordered Tuesday to pay more than \$811 million in restitution and penalties in a lawsuit alleging it used deceptive and abusive tactics.

Nexus Services must pay roughly \$231 million in restitution as well as penalties of \$13.8 million to New York, \$7.1 million to Virginia and \$3.4 million to Massachusetts, according to a judgement filed in federal court for the Western District of Virginia in Harrisonburg. The Virginia-based company, its subsidiary Libre by Nexus and its three executives must also each pay more than \$111 million in civil penalties.

"This judgment is a victory for thousands of immigrant families who lost their life savings and were targeted and preyed on by Libre," New York Attorney General Letitia James said in a statement. "Libre exploited vulnerable immigrants and their families to pad its pockets, and that is illegal and unconscionable."

James joined state attorneys general in Virginia and Massachusetts and the federal Consumer Financial Protection Bureau in a 2021 lawsuit that accused the company of violating state and federal consumer protection laws.

The officials said the company promised to secure immigrants' release on bond while their immigration claims were being processed but concealed and misrepresented the true nature and costs of its services. They said the company collected thousands of dollars in fees above the face value of the bonds and forced immigrants to wear painful ankle monitors.

U.S. District Judge Elizabeth Dillon noted in her decision that the company isn't a licensed bail bond agent or a surety company certified by the U.S. Treasury but a "service provider that acts as an intermediary between immigration detainees and sureties and their bond agents."

The company said in a statement that it intends to appeal the judgement, calling it a "shocking departure

from normal American jurisprudence” as it was decided “without evidence, without a trial and without a damages hearing.”

“We continue to remain committed to serving our clients - people who suffer and sacrifice for a better life, and who do not deserve to be political pawns in an American legislature or an American courtroom,” the company added.

The women’s NCAA Tournament had center stage. The stars, and the games, delivered in a big way

By TIM REYNOLDS AP Basketball Writer

There were plenty of people at a movie theater in central Iowa on Monday night, though very few of them were watching an actual movie.

They were there to see Caitlin Clark.

And they weren’t alone. Not even close. Millions of people — 12.3 million, the most to ever watch a women’s basketball game, according to ESPN — tuned in across America to watch the opener of an NCAA Tournament doubleheader that captivated fans like never before. Clark and Iowa, in a national-title-game rematch against Angel Reese and LSU in one game; Paige Bueckers and perennial power UConn against freshman sensation JuJu Watkins and Southern California in the other.

The winners on the scoreboard: Iowa and UConn, which are heading to the Final Four in Cleveland this weekend. Perhaps the biggest winner: the women’s game, which had the March Madness stage all to itself on Monday night with massive star power delivering two games worthy of the over-the-top billing, and maybe, just maybe, adding a few new fans along the way.

“It’s a perfect opportunity to make the moment a movement,” said former Division I guard Isis Young, now a broadcaster and analyst. “Right now, women’s basketball is a movement ... and the movement is really riding on the back of these players that we’re watching.”

And make no mistake: People were watching. Last year’s LSU-Iowa national championship game, on ABC, drew 9.9 million viewers. Monday’s LSU-Iowa rematch, on cable, crushed that number.

Baseball had a no-hitter on Monday night; Ronel Blanco’s gem for Houston against Toronto didn’t seem to capture attention the way Iowa-LSU and UConn-USC did. Phoenix’s Devin Booker scored 52 points, his league-high-tying third game of 50 or more this season; it happened while fellow NBA guards Damian Lillard and Patrick Beverley were tweeting about Watkins and Clark.

“Caitlin Clark the truth,” offered New York Knicks forward Josh Hart.

In homes, in sports bars from Seattle to Miami, even in NBA locker rooms, the women’s games Monday night had people staring at televisions. At a sports bar in Indianapolis, where the NBA’s Pacers were simultaneously playing maybe a block or so away, most TVs were on Iowa-LSU. Indiana’s WNBA team has the No. 1 pick in the draft this year. There’s no mystery about who it will select; the city knows Clark will soon be calling Indianapolis home.

“Not only did we have all the TVs on the game, we had them with the sound on, too,” said Clara Huson, a longtime basketball referee in New England. She missed her morning flight from Indianapolis to Boston after a weekend wedding and was given two options for a rescheduling opportunity — Monday night or Tuesday morning.

She chose Tuesday. Easy call. “I wasn’t missing these games,” she said.

This was not just another night for women’s basketball. The buzz built throughout the day. Rapper Travis Scott told his nearly 12 million followers on X, the site formerly known as Twitter, that Monday “might be one for the illest days in women’s sports historyyyyyyy.” And Hall of Famer Magic Johnson let his 5.2 million followers know he considered Monday’s two-game slate “one of the best in history.”

The games didn’t disappoint. Bettors took notice, too — even a 4:15 p.m. start time in Las Vegas didn’t keep LSU-Iowa from setting records, a surefire gauge of whether people had interest.

“It is the biggest handle we’ve seen for a women’s game,” Jay Kornegay, executive vice president of

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race and sports operations at Westgate Las Vegas, said shortly before tipoff. "It's already surpassed last year's final with these two teams."

Had the game been later in the day, Kornegay said, the numbers would have been even bigger.

South Carolina and North Carolina State reached the Final Four with wins on Sunday, a day when the women's game was going head to head with men's tournament games. Monday's slate from an NCAA tourney perspective was all women, two games both featuring star players, not to mention a rematch of last year's Iowa-LSU championship game.

It was a perfect storm. Even in defeat, Reese understood the magnitude of the moment.

"I think it's just great for the sport, just being able to be a part of history," Reese said Monday night. "Like I said, no matter which way it went tonight, I know this was going to be a night for the ages. And just being able to be a part of history is great."

Clark is the biggest name in the college game; she set the NCAA all-time scoring record earlier this season and has become a full-fledged celebrity, starring in national commercials and commanding media attention like no one else. After the Boston Celtics beat the Charlotte Hornets on Monday, they tuned in for the end of the Iowa-LSU game.

"Caitlin Clark is stealing the show of basketball," Celtics forward Sam Hauser said.

To Zoe Pawloski, Clark was just someone to share the weight room with. Pawloski used to swim for Iowa and her team would lift at the same time Clark's team would work out.

"I never sat down and watched March Madness on TV until Caitlin Clark," said Pawloski, who watched the game with a few dozen other Iowa fans in a bar in Council Bluffs, Iowa. "It's really cool how much she's grown basketball, and people knowing Iowa the school makes me really happy. Iowa is on the map."

Not a lot of people were at the movies in Waukeez, Iowa, on Monday night. There probably won't be a lot of moviegoers there on Friday, either — that's when the women's Final Four starts.

At The Palms Theater in Waukeez, about 200 people showed up to watch Clark play on a 75-foot screen. It was a private party put together by Dowling Catholic High School, her alma mater. And let's just say the game was far more popular than the movies on other screens.

"Not even close," said Alison Meyer, the theater's general manager. "Nope, nope, nope. It's pretty big-time when you have an Iowa team playing, let alone somebody from our hometown."

The games didn't disappoint. The stars didn't disappoint, either. Clark had 41 points and 12 assists, plus she tied a tournament record with nine 3-pointers. Reese had 17 points and 20 rebounds. Bueckers had 28 points and 10 rebounds. Watkins had 29 points and 10 rebounds.

"It's been a great ride," Watkins said.

And for the game, it was a great night.

Going from assistant to top job remains a tough climb for Black coaches in major men's conferences

By AARON BEARD AP Basketball Writer

Bruiser Flint remembers being a Massachusetts assistant coach building a resume that would one day have him running his own program. He had twice interviewed elsewhere before his moment arrived with mentor John Calipari bolting for the NBA, vacating the big chair for the Minutemen.

The breakthrough had come for Flint, who was 30 at the time: He had joined the limited ranks of Black men in charge of a top-level college basketball team.

"I was unbelievably grateful," Flint recalled. "It was my first job ... and I think at the time, I might have been the youngest head coach in the country. That was one of my goals, that's what you work for."

Nearly three decades later, Flint has led two programs and again works with Calipari, now at Kentucky. And while numbers have improved, Black coaches remain in an unbalanced equation: They fill a majority of assistant coaching roles at the top level of men's college basketball yet hold fewer than 1 of 3 of head coaching jobs.

"I think that there are more guys, I believe, that have come through the ranks as assistants that are

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prepared and just waiting on an opportunity," said longtime Florida State head coach Leonard Hamilton, who is Black. "I think you're going to see some more mobility in the future than it has been in the past because now there's so many young, up-and-coming, prepared coaches that there's always some qualified people available that are just waiting on the opportunity."

An analysis by The Associated Press found Black coaches holding 59.4% of assistant roles in the top six basketball leagues — the Atlantic Coast, Big 12, Big East, Big Ten, Pac-12 and Southeastern conferences — for the 2022-23 season. Yet the rate for Black coaches holding the top jobs was 29.9% compared with white coaches (64.9%).

Part of the issue is simple math. The sport has long had Black players account for more than half of Division I rosters, and those who transition into coaching have multiple avenues as assistants or in staff-support roles. That's particularly true now with this season's addition of two coaches for men's and women's basketball.

So there's a natural bottleneck since head-coaching jobs (80 in the top six conferences) don't change hands as often.

Yet that doesn't explain the disproportionately low percentage of Black head coaches.

"I don't know whether it's a Black-white thing or it's just trying to find the best candidate," said Miami assistant Bill Courtney, Cornell's head coach from 2010-16. "The more that we can have success as Black head coaches, I think the more that people will get an opportunity."

Richard Lapchick understands the disparity. He's founder and former director of The Institute for Diversity and Ethics in Sport (TIDES) at Central Florida, which has long published annual report cards examining diversity-hiring results for professional and college sports.

The numbers for the top six basketball conferences are ahead of a larger trend across Division I. For example, a recent TIDES study reported Black coaches made up around 33% of men's assistant jobs in Division I for the 1999-2000 season but that had increased to more than 46% by 2021-22. The rate of Black DI head coaches has remained largely stagnant — between 20% and 25% — going back to the turn of the millennium.

"There's just an overall assessment that it's disappointing we really haven't changed the possibilities for Black head coaches, no matter how many Black assistant coaches who are successful," Lapchick said. "While the numbers are still nowhere near where they should be, the fact that the most dominant basketball schools are hiring more Black coaches is a sign of potential progress for the future."

Lapchick points to at least one contributing factor: the underrepresentation of women and people of color in Division I leadership roles, outlined in previous TIDES reports.

"I think a large part of it is due to the relationships and network," said Georgia Tech assistant Karl Hobbs, a former head coach at George Washington. "I think a lot of athletic directors and presidents just aren't familiar with some of the African-American coaches. And I think overall there has to be a little bit better job in schools, athletic directors, search firms and so forth ... in getting to know who these coaches are."

Pittsburgh head coach Jeff Capel III sees another factor.

"It used to be for the longest time that the Black coaches were just the recruiters," Capel said. "You were charged to go recruit Black players, to go into neighborhoods, to go into places that maybe white coaches felt like they couldn't get into or didn't feel comfortable going into."

"I think we've certainly made so much progress since then with the opportunities and Black coaches being seen in a different light. Being seen for their mind, their X and Os, their strategy, not just being able to recruit or being able to connect with a certain demographic."

To Capel's point, North Carolina State head coach Kevin Keatts "kind of hated" the recruiter label that followed many Black assistants while rising in the coaching ranks. That made it, in his estimation, important to work for someone who trusts assistants with more than recruiting.

"You just need opportunities," said Keatts, who has led this year's Wolfpack to the program's first Final Four since 1983. "I was a Black assistant coach, and I got opportunities. I worked for Rick Pitino (at Louisville), but he also helped prepare me. One of his things when he hired me is: 'I don't hire assistant

coaches, I hire future head coaches.' And I think whether you're a Black or a white assistant coach, the guy that you work for needs to give you an opportunity to coach to help you."

Back at Kentucky, Flint sees some positive changes, such as more assistants having agents to promote them. Yet the hiring process has changed dramatically and created different challenges. Advocates among Black head coaches nationally often lack the stature of vocal heavyweights like Georgetown's John Thompson, Arkansas' Nolan Richardson or Temple's John Chaney.

"I still think we need to get in a better position," Flint said. "The hiring process is a lot different than when I got into the business a long time ago. It used to be a situation where an AD would have some names just in case he needs a coach. Or the coach can call an AD and (say), 'Check out my plan.' Now, with the whole search-firm thing, it becomes a little bit different."

In the meantime, Flint keeps an open door to Black coaches trying to learn from his experience and position themselves as head-coaching candidates. He views that as a responsibility and roots for success stories that open doors for the next generation.

It's about doing everything possible to help others prepare for takeoff, knowing those opportunities don't come around every day.

"You've got to prepare yourself for it," Flint said. "It's just not going to happen for you. You've got to have a game plan and then in a lot of ways, like I said, when it comes, you've got to be ready."

Aid organizations suspend operations in Gaza after World Central Kitchen workers' deaths

By GLENN GAMBOA and SARAH EL DEEB Associated Press

NEW YORK (AP) — Several humanitarian aid organizations suspended operations in Gaza on Tuesday after Israeli airstrikes killed seven World Central Kitchen workers.

The nonprofits, including World Central Kitchen, said they now need to determine whether their workers can safely provide aid in the region. According to the United Nations, more than 180 humanitarian aid workers have died since the war began in October.

"We are horrified and heartbroken by the tragic killing of seven innocent humanitarians in Gaza," said Chris Skopec, executive vice president of global health at Project HOPE, which operates health clinics in Rafah and Deir al-Balah and provides medical supplies and other aid to area hospitals.

The three World Central Kitchen vehicles, hit after loading up with food from a nearby warehouse, were clearly marked and their movements were known to the Israeli military, according to the organization.

Those steps are what humanitarian workers use to try to ensure their safety in the dangerous region, Skopec said. For the World Central Kitchen convoy to still be hit with military fire increased apprehension among aid workers in the region, he said.

"There needs to be accountability," Skopec said. "The government of Israel needs to be able to give assurances that they consider aid workers legitimate actors in Gaza and that international law will be respected. We need to be able to do this critical, life-saving work safely."

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu acknowledged that the country's forces had carried out the "unintended strike ... on innocent people." He said officials were looking into the strike and would work to ensure it did not happen again.

In a briefing Tuesday, White House national security spokesman John Kirby said the United States is concerned the incident could have a chilling effect on other groups carrying out aid operations in the territory.

Anera, a partner of World Central Kitchen and Project HOPE that provides humanitarian aid in the Middle East, also announced Tuesday it would take the "unprecedented step" of pausing its humanitarian operations in Gaza. Since the war began, Anera's team has provided an average of 150,000 meals daily in Gaza.

"The blatant nature of the attack on WCK's convoy has proven that aid workers are currently under attack," said Anera media relations officer Steve Fake. "Our decision to resume aid relies on the safety of our staff."

The International Medical Corps, which has one of the largest field hospitals in Rafah with 140 beds said

it is "rethinking our process," including its plans to set up another field hospital in Deir al-Balah.

"It is devastating," said Dr. Zavar Ali, who has been running the Rafah field hospital and is working to set up the new hospital. "It really is an immense blow to morale. It puts us (in) a very uncertain position in terms of our coordination with the different actors for security."

Lawsuit seeks to force ban on menthol cigarettes after months of delays by Biden administration

By MATTHEW PERRONE AP Health Writer

WASHINGTON (AP) — Anti-smoking groups sued the U.S. government Tuesday over a long-awaited ban on menthol cigarettes, which has been idling at the White House for months.

The lawsuit is the latest effort to force the government to ban menthols, which are disproportionately used by Black smokers and young people. It comes amid growing concerns from advocates that the federal plan could be derailed by election-year politics.

Health officials under President Joe Biden initially targeted last August to publish the rule eliminating the minty flavor. Late last year, White House officials said they would take until March to review the rule. Three nonprofit groups, including Action on Smoking and Health, filed their lawsuit in a federal court in California after the March deadline passed.

"Because of defendants' inaction, tobacco companies have continued to use menthol cigarettes to target youth, women, and the Black community — all to the detriment of public health," the groups state in their complaint.

A spokesperson for the White House declined to comment on the lawsuit Tuesday.

The Food and Drug Administration has spent years developing the plan to eliminate menthol, estimating it could prevent 300,000 to 650,000 smoking deaths over several decades. Most of those preventable deaths would be among Black Americans.

Like all major federal regulations, the plan must get final approval from the White House.

Previous FDA efforts on menthol have been scuttled by tobacco industry pushback or competing political priorities across several administrations. The latest delay comes as Democrats voice worries about Biden's prospects in a rematch against former President Donald Trump.

White House officials have held dozens of meetings with groups opposing the menthol ban, including civil rights advocates, business owners and law enforcement officials. Some suggested a rule targeting menthols could suppress Biden's turnout among Black voters. In almost all cases, groups opposing the ban receive financial support from tobacco companies.

In recent months, supporters of the plan have tried to assure the White House that banning menthol will not hurt Biden's re-election chances.

"If Black lives truly matter, then we must end the sale of menthol cigarettes and do it now," said Dr. Carol McGruder, of the African American Tobacco Control Leadership, in a statement. McGruder's group is among those suing the FDA and its parent agency, the Department of Health and Human Services.

A lawyer who helped file the lawsuit said the government will have about two months to respond.

A 2020 lawsuit by the same groups jump-started FDA's work on menthol, alleging that the agency had "unreasonably delayed" action against the flavor.

Menthol is the only cigarette flavor that was not banned under the 2009 law that gave the FDA authority over tobacco products, an exemption negotiated by industry lobbyists. The act did, though, instruct the agency to continue to weigh whether to ban menthol.

The flavor's persistence has infuriated anti-smoking advocates, who point to research that menthol's numbing effect masks the harshness of smoking, making it easier to start and harder to quit.

More than 11% of U.S. adults smoke, with rates roughly even between white and Black populations. About 80% of Black smokers — and most teenagers who smoke — use menthol.

College will cost up to \$95,000 this fall. Schools say it's OK, financial aid can numb sticker shock

By NICK PERRY Associated Press

MEREDITH, N.H. (AP) — As more than 2 million graduating high school students from across the United States finalize their decisions on what college to attend this fall, many are facing jaw-dropping costs — in some cases, as much as \$95,000.

A number of private colleges — some considered elite and others middle-of-the-pack — have exceeded the \$90,000 threshold for the first time this year as they set their annual costs for tuition, board, meals and other expenses. That means a wealthy family with three children could expect to shell out more than \$1 million by the time their youngest child completes a four-year degree.

But the sticker price tells only part of the story. Many colleges with large endowments have become more focused in recent years on making college affordable for students who aren't wealthy. Lower-income families may be required to pay just 10% of the advertised rate and, for some, attending a selective private college can turn out to be cheaper than a state institution.

"Ninety thousand dollars clearly is a lot of money, and it catches people's attention, for sure," said Philip Levine, a professor of economics at Wellesley College near Boston. "But for most people, that is not how much they're going to pay. The existence of a very generous financial aid system lowers that cost substantially."

Wellesley is among the colleges where the costs for wealthy students will exceed \$90,000 for the first time this fall, with an estimated price tag of \$92,000. But the institution points out that nearly 60% of its students will receive financial aid, and the average amount of that aid is more than \$62,000, reducing their costs by two-thirds.

But many prospective students this year are facing significant delays and anxiety in finding out how much aid they will be offered by colleges due to major problems with the rollout of a new U.S. Department of Education online form that was supposed to make applying for federal aid easier. Many colleges rely on information from the form for determining their own aid offers to students.

"The rollout has been pure chaos and an absolute disaster," said Mark Kantrowitz, a financial aid expert.

As well as repeated delays and glitches, he said, there have been other problems with the new system including more stringent requirements for proof of identity from parents, which is deterring thousands of eligible but undocumented parents from applying — even though their children are U.S. citizens and entitled to aid.

Kantrowitz said that if the significant drop in people applying for aid under the new system persists, it could result in lower enrollments and even force some institutions to close.

Levine said his research has shown that the amount lower-income students are paying at elite institutions has actually been declining over the past six years. But he worries that sticker shock will put off some students from even applying to institutions like Wellesley.

"People should be making educational decisions based on the actual cost they have to pay, not their perceived cost," Levine said. "The problem is that the sticker price is the easiest number to know. It gets the most attention."

Aside from Wellesley, some of the other colleges with sticker prices of more than \$90,000 this year include the University of Southern California at \$95,000, Harvey Mudd College in California at \$93,000, the University of Pennsylvania at \$92,000, Brown University in Rhode Island at \$92,000, Dartmouth College in New Hampshire at \$91,000, and Boston University at \$90,000.

Harvard University in Cambridge, Massachusetts, puts its cost of attendance this fall at up to \$91,000, but makes the point that the average parent contribution is just \$13,000, and almost a quarter of families pay nothing at all. Harvard can afford a particularly generous student aid program because it has an endowment worth more than \$50 billion, the largest of any university.

The sticker prices don't always provide apples-to-apples comparisons because some colleges include costs like health insurance and travel expenses, while others don't. And some colleges that last year had

sticker prices of close to \$90,000, including Columbia University in New York and the University of Chicago, have yet to reveal this year's expected costs.

In its most recent analysis, the College Board estimated the average advertised costs for private nonprofit colleges last year were \$60,000, compared to about \$29,000 for students at public in-state institutions and \$47,000 at public out-of-state institutions.

Kantrowitz said the average unmet need for students at four-year colleges is about \$10,000 per year.

"So families are forced to borrow that money or come up with that money from some other source, and that's on top of their share of college costs," he said.

So is college a good investment?

Kantrowitz believes the answer is yes, so long as students borrow in moderation and complete their studies.

"If you graduate and you don't take on a ridiculous amount of debt, you should be able to repay that debt in a reasonable amount of time," Kantrowitz said. "But if you drop out, you have the debt, but not the degree that can help you repay the debt."

Biden and Xi discuss Taiwan, AI and fentanyl in a push to return to regular leader talks

By ZEKE MILLER, DIDI TANG and FATIMA HUSSEIN Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — President Joe Biden and Chinese President Xi Jinping discussed Taiwan, artificial intelligence and security issues Tuesday in a call meant to demonstrate a return to regular leader-to-leader dialogue between the two powers.

The call, described by the White House as "candid and constructive," was the leaders' first conversation since their November summit in California produced renewed ties between the two nations' militaries and a promise of enhanced cooperation on stemming the flow of deadly fentanyl and its precursors from China.

Xi told Biden that the two countries should adhere to the bottom line of "no clash, no confrontation" as one of the principles for this year.

"We should prioritize stability, not provoke troubles, not cross lines but maintain the overall stability of China-U.S. relations," Xi said, according to China Central Television, the state broadcaster.

The roughly 105 minute call kicks off several weeks of high-level engagements between the two countries, with Treasury Secretary Janet Yellen set to travel to China on Thursday and Secretary of State Antony Blinken to follow in the weeks ahead.

Biden has pressed for sustained interactions at all levels of government, believing it is key to keeping competition between the two massive economies and nuclear-armed powers from escalating to direct conflict. While in-person summits take place perhaps once a year, officials said, both Washington and Beijing recognize the value of more frequent engagements between the leaders.

The two leaders discussed Taiwan ahead of next month's inauguration of Lai Ching-te, the island's president-elect, who has vowed to safeguard its de-facto independence from China and further align it with other democracies. Biden reaffirmed the United States' longstanding "One China" policy and reiterated that the U.S. opposes any coercive means to bring Taiwan under Beijing's control. China considers Taiwan a domestic matter and has vigorously protested U.S. support for the island.

Taiwan remains the "first red line not to be crossed," Xi told Biden, and emphasized that Beijing will not tolerate separatist activities by Taiwan's independence forces as well as "exterior indulgence and support," which alluded to Washington's support for the island.

Biden also raised concerns about China's operations in the South China Sea, including efforts last month to impede the Philippines, which the U.S. is treaty-obligated to defend, from resupplying its forces on the disputed Second Thomas Shoal.

Next week, Biden will host Philippines President Ferdinand Marcos Jr. and Japanese Prime Minister Fumio Kishida at the White House for a joint summit where China's influence in the region was set to be top of the agenda.

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Biden, in the call with Xi, pressed China to do more to meet its commitments to halt the flow of illegal narcotics and to schedule additional precursor chemicals to prevent their export. The pledge was made at the leaders' summit held in Woodside, California, last year on the margins of the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation meeting.

At the November summit, Biden and Xi also agreed that their governments would hold formal talks on the promises and risks of advanced artificial intelligence, which are set to take place in the coming weeks. The pair touched on the issue on Tuesday just two weeks after China and the U.S. joined more than 120 other nations in backing a resolution at the United Nations calling for global safeguards around the emerging technology.

Biden, in the call, reinforced warnings to Xi against interfering in the 2024 elections in the U.S. as well as against continued malicious cyberattacks against critical American infrastructure.

He also raised concerns about human rights in China, including Hong Kong's new restrictive national security law and its treatment of minority groups, and he raised the plight of Americans detained in or barred from leaving China.

The Democratic president also pressed China over its defense relationship with Russia, which is seeking to rebuild its industrial base as it presses forward with its invasion of Ukraine. And he called on Beijing to wield its influence over North Korea to rein in the isolated and erratic nuclear power.

As the leaders of the world's two largest economies, Biden also raised concerns with Xi over China's "unfair economic practices," National Security Council spokesman John Kirby said, and reasserted that the U.S. would take steps to preserve its security and economic interests, including by continuing to limit the transfer of some advanced technology to China.

Xi complained that the U.S. has taken more measures to suppress China's economy, trade and technology in the past several months and that the list of sanctioned Chinese companies has become ever longer, which is "not de-risking but creating risks," according to the broadcaster.

Yun Sun, director of the China program at Stimson Center, said the call "does reflect the mutual desire to keep the relationship stable" while the men reiterated their longstanding positions on issues of concern.

The call came ahead of Yellen's visit to Guangzhou and Beijing for a week of bilateral meetings on the subject with finance leaders from the world's second largest economy — including Vice Premier He Lifeng, Chinese Central Bank Gov. Pan Gongsheng, former Vice Premier Liu He, American businesses and local leaders.

An advisory for the upcoming trip states that Yellen "will advocate for American workers and businesses to ensure they are treated fairly, including by pressing Chinese counterparts on unfair trade practices."

It follows Xi's meeting in Beijing with U.S. business leaders last week, when he emphasized the mutually beneficial economic ties between the two countries and urged people-to-people exchange to maintain the relationship.

Xi told the Americans that the two countries have stayed communicative and "made progress" on issues such as trade, anti-narcotics and climate change since he met with Biden in November. Last week's high-profile meeting was seen as Beijing's effort to stabilize bilateral relations.

Ahead of her trip to China, Yellen last week said that Beijing is flooding the market with green energy that "distorts global prices." She said she intends to share her beliefs with her counterparts that Beijing's increased production of solar energy, electric vehicles and lithium-ion batteries poses risks to productivity and growth to the global economy.

U.S. lawmakers' renewed angst over Chinese ownership of the popular social media app TikTok has generated new legislation that would ban TikTok if its China-based owner ByteDance doesn't sell its stakes in the platform within six months of the bill's enactment. Kirby said Biden "reiterated our concerns about the ownership of TikTok" to Xi during their call.

As chair of the Committee on Foreign Investment in the U.S., which reviews foreign ownership of firms in the U.S., Yellen has ample leeway to determine how the company could remain operating in the U.S.

Meanwhile, China's leaders have set a goal of 5% economic growth this year despite a slowdown exacerbated by troubles in the property sector and the lingering effects of strict anti-virus measures during

the COVID-19 pandemic that disrupted travel, logistics, manufacturing and other industries.

China is the dominant player in batteries for electric vehicles and has a rapidly expanding auto industry that could challenge the world's established carmakers as it goes global.

The U.S. last year outlined plans to limit EV buyers from claiming tax credits if they purchase cars containing battery materials from China and other countries that are considered hostile to the United States. Separately, the Department of Commerce launched an investigation into the potential national security risks posed by Chinese car exports to the U.S.

Black coaches were 'low-hanging fruit' in FBI college hoops case that wrecked careers, then fizzled

By EDDIE PELLIS AP National Writer

NEW YORK (AP) — Book Richardson doesn't sleep much past 5:30 a.m. anymore.

That was around the time seven years ago that FBI agents pounded on his door, barged in, handcuffed him and dragged him away while his 16-year-old son, E.J., looked on helplessly.

"Ever since then, everyone looks at me differently," the former University of Arizona assistant coach told The Associated Press about his arrest, part of a sting designed to clean up college basketball. "And I don't fall back to sleep when I see that time come up on the clock."

He is one of four assistant coaches — along with a group of six agents, their financial backers and shoe company representatives — who were arrested in the 2017 federal probe aimed at rooting out an entrenched system of off-the-books payments to players and their families that, at the time, was against NCAA rules.

All four assistants — Richardson, Lamont Evans, Tony Bland and Chuck Person — are Black. Of the 10 men arrested, only one was white.

"Low-hanging fruit," the 51-year-old Richardson said when asked why Black men took the brunt of the punishment. "Who do you see all the time that's out there? Black assistants. Who is forging the relationships? Black assistants."

Several coaches and other insiders told the AP it shouldn't come as a surprise that Black men ended up as the fall guys, given the racial lines along which careers often play out in the sport.

An AP analysis of schools in the six biggest basketball conferences found the ranks of Black assistant coaches have risen from 51% to 59% between 2014 and 2023. But Black men command only about 30% of head-coaching positions.

Heading into this week's Final Four, all the arrested assistants are banned by the NCAA, while the agents and shoe reps saw their connections in the college world vanish.

"Some people in the college space I very rarely talk to because, to them, I'm toxic," said Merl Code, a Black former rep for Nike and Adidas who served 5½ months in jail for convictions in the case.

Meanwhile, most of the head coaches Richardson and the others worked with are white and still have jobs in college basketball.

CONVICTED FELON

Richardson served 90 days in jail and says he wears the "scarlet letter F" — for felon — now. The NCAA booted him out of college hoops for 10 years. Evans got a three-month jail sentence and a 10-year ban; the other two arrested assistants weren't jailed but were banned by the NCAA.

Some see promise in the fact that Black men fill more assistant coaching positions now than in 2014. Others believe that while opportunities have expanded for African-Americans, they are still the lower-paid, higher-risk jobs in the "talent-acquisition" part of the game that's rife with turnover and shadowy dealmaking — and landed Richardson and others in jail.

"Obviously if we knew exactly how to fix it, maybe we would already have done it," said Florida State's longtime head coach, Leonard Hamilton, who is Black. "It's been something they were discussing when I got into coaching in 1971."

Code, who lives in Greenville, South Carolina, and is still piecing his life back together, said conditions that exist in college basketball mirror America. In his recently published book, "Black Market," he notes

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that his alma mater, sports powerhouse Clemson, was similar to many large Southern state universities built on former plantation land cultivated for decades by slaves.

"It's not a difficult scenario to see," Code said. "It's just society in America as we see it. And we, people of color, are going to see it very differently than someone who is white."

SHAPING LIVES

These days, Richardson runs the boys' basketball program for the New York Gauchos, a venerated hoops proving ground based in a gym near the 149th St-Grand Concourse subway stop in the Bronx.

Whereas he says he made "2-3 hundred thousand dollars a year" at Arizona, he now clears around three grand a month. He is shaping lives with the Gauchos in much the same way he did as a college assistant — doling out everything from advice to tough love to recommendations about high school and college. Most of the players he works with are Black. One recently committed to play at Georgia Tech — a match made possible in part by Richardson's connections.

Monique Hibbert, whose son is among the eighth graders Richardson coaches, said the coach brought the parents together to tell them about why he ended up in jail. "He said 'take it or leave it,' and I said, 'I'll take it. Every day,'" Hibbert said.

In many ways, Richardson's job — building relationships — hasn't changed much from seven years ago, when he was a top assistant for coach Sean Miller at the highly rated Arizona program. (Miller, who is white, got fired in the wake of the scandal but now has the head-coaching job at Xavier.)

For decades, college recruiting has involved relationships, starting with shoe-company reps, who identify talented players as early as junior high. They connect with college assistant coaches, who stay close in hopes of signing the players the shoe guys know. Then, there are the agents, who try to gain influence with all parties in the hopes of landing a piece of the action if a player turns pro.

Underpinning it all is the quiet and, prosecutors said, illegal movement of money to the players and their families, who often come from poor backgrounds.

"Some of these guys have parents on disability. Some have ailing grandmothers who can't afford their medicine," said Code, who remains unapologetic about using shoe-company money to help families. "These are young men and women who have actual, real-life situations they're dealing with at a really young age and they're using their athletic ability to assist their families through their struggle."

PLAYBOOK UNRAVELED

When the charges against Richardson, Code and the rest were announced, an FBI assistant director boldly proclaimed, "We have your playbook." The arrests came after an undercover operation that lured the accused into meetings in hotel suites and, in one case, a yacht where they picked up envelopes of cash.

One defendant, Christian Dawkins, who is Black, was sentenced to 18 months in jail. In a documentary about the case, "The Scheme," Dawkins, who worked as an agent, is heard on a wiretap spelling out the risks assistant coaches take in their recruiting efforts.

"These guys have worked their whole lives to get to this point," Dawkins tells an undercover FBI agent. "And if one thing goes wrong, and not to make this a race thing, but especially a guy that's a Black assistant coach, if you have one (expletive) thing happen to you, you'll never coach again, and that's the bottom line."

That's what happened to Richardson, who was jailed and banned by the NCAA after pleading guilty to bribery for accepting \$20,000 from Dawkins and an associate in exchange for steering Arizona players their way.

Richardson admits to using some of the money for a trip to Spain with his now ex-wife, Erin. But most of it, he said, was to pay for a high school recruit and his family to travel to Tucson to watch "Midnight Madness," the celebration that marks opening night of practice in college basketball. The player had already committed to Arizona.

"It wasn't like I was buying a player," Richardson said. "My whole point was, when you made me out to be a monster, hell, I'm trying to get him back on campus. So, all I'm saying is, 'Let's use some common sense. I know everything I do might not be traditional, but c'mon.'"

Code ended up in jail because his boss at Adidas directed him to funnel \$25,000 to the family of a Black

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player who would go on to sign with Louisville, which has an endorsement deal with the shoe company. The payment made the player ineligible under NCAA rules. Code's crime was that he defrauded Louisville of the scholarship it wasted on the player by providing the money that made him ineligible.

"Let's talk about the truth and what really happened," Code said. "Who authorized this? How can I defraud a university that has a \$160 million relationship with a company I work for?"

Louisville ended up firing head coach Rick Pitino. Unlike Code, Pitino, who is white, was never charged and the NCAA cleared him of wrongdoing. He now coaches at St. John's.

"You've got people mugging people and injuring people and they're in and out of jail the next day," Pitino said. "And then, you took some assistant coaches and you're locking up an Adidas guy and putting them in jail for that? It's maybe the most hypocritical thing I've ever seen."

WHAT REALLY CHANGED?

Richardson now lives on the outskirts of an industry that has, in fact, undergone a seismic change, though not in the way the FBI thought it would.

New state laws and court rulings over the past three years have brought about the so-called "NIL" era in college sports — for name, image and likeness compensation deals for athletes. Players can now profit through sponsorship deals that begin as early as high school.

Richardson says NIL should stand for "Now It's Legal" — a nod to the harsh reality that most of those under-the-table payments for which he was jailed can be made legitimately now.

The coach still has dreams of returning to college hoops someday, though he's well aware that by the time his ban is over, "I'll be 60, no one's hiring me."

HARSH REALITIES

Among the questions Richardson ponders when he bolts awake before sunrise: If he and the rest broke NCAA rules, does that mean they also broke the law? Also, what really changed because of those arrests?

Both the U.S. attorney's office that prosecuted the case and the NCAA declined comment to the AP on these or any other questions about the case.

"I was able to recover," said Will Wade, a white head coach who lost his job at LSU in the wake of the case but was hired at McNeese State in Louisiana, and led the school to the NCAA Tournament this year. "There were a lot of people that were not able to recover. I think it ruined a lot of people's lives for very little reason."

Even coaches who weren't caught up in the scandal recognized the elements at play.

"We aren't color blind," said Marquette coach Shaka Smart, who is Black. "I was friends with some of those guys."

Miami assistant Bill Courtney, who is Black, conceded there could have been reasons beyond race that led to the arrests.

"But as a Black assistant coach at the time, seeing that happen was very difficult," he said.

Richardson, from the vantage point of his windowless office in the Bronx, reaches his own conclusions.

"Truth be told, out of 10 people who got arrested, nine of those guys were some kind of shade of me," he said. "And now, none of us are coaching, which we were pretty good at. And we weren't good because we were cheating. We were good at what we did."

US job openings rise modestly to 8.8 million in February in strong labor market

By PAUL WISEMAN AP Economics Writer

WASHINGTON (AP) — U.S. job openings barely changed in February, staying at historically high levels in a sign that the American job market remains strong.

The Labor Department reported Tuesday that employers posted 8.76 million job vacancies in February, up modestly from 8.75 million in January and about what economists had forecast.

But the Job Openings and Labor Turnover Survey, or JOLTS, showed that layoffs ticked up to 1.7 million in February from 1.6 million in January, highest since March 2023. The number of Americans quitting their

jobs – a sign of confidence they can find better pay or working conditions elsewhere – rose modestly to 3.5 million.

Monthly job openings are down from a peak of 12.2 million in March 2022 but are still at a high level. Before 2021, they'd never topped 8 million.

The high level of vacancies is a sign of the job market's strength and endurance. When the Federal Reserve began raising its benchmark interest rates two years ago to combat inflation, most economists expected the higher borrowing costs to send the United States into recession.

Instead, the economy has continued to grow and employers have been seeking new workers and holding on to the ones they already have. Although the unemployment rate rose to 3.9% in February, it's come in below 4% for 25 straight months, longest such streak since the 1960s.

At the same time, the higher rates have brought inflation down. In February, consumer prices were up 3.2% from a year earlier — down from a four-decade high year-over-year peak of 9.1% in June 2022.

The combination of easing inflation and sturdy job growth has raised hopes the Fed is managing to pull off a "soft landing" — taming inflation without triggering a recession. The Fed stopped raising rates last July and has signaled that it plans to reverse course and cut rates three times in 2024. But it appears to be in no hurry to start, given the economy's strength and with inflation still above the central bank's 2% target.

"Job openings are still elevated relative to pre-pandemic readings, signaling still-strong demand for workers," said Rubeela Farooqi, chief U.S. economist at High Frequency Economics. "A strong labor market backdrop coupled with inflation receding but remaining above target supports the (Fed's) current patient stance on future policy decisions."

Compared to layoffs, the steady drop in job openings is a painless way to cool a labor market that has been red hot, easing upward pressure on wages that can lead to higher prices.

Hiring likely remained healthy last month. Economists expect the March jobs report, out Friday, to show that employers added nearly 193,000 jobs and that the unemployment dipped to 3.8%, according to a survey of forecasters by the data firm FactSet.

A 12-year-old student opens fire at a school in Finland, killing 1 and wounding 2 others

By JARI TANNER Associated Press

HELSINKI (AP) — A 12-year-old student opened fire at a secondary school in southern Finland on Tuesday morning, killing one and seriously wounding two other students, police said. The suspect was later apprehended.

Heavily armed police cordoned off the Viertola school — a large educational institution including lower and upper secondary schools with a total of about 800 students — in the city of Vantaa, just outside the capital, Helsinki, after receiving a call about a shooting incident at 09:08 a.m.

Police said both the suspect and the victims were 12 years old.

One of the students had died instantly after being shot, Chief of Police Ilkka Koskimäki from the Eastern Uusimaa Police Department told a news conference. The other two were seriously wounded, he said.

The weapon used in the shooting was a registered handgun that was licensed to the suspect's relative, Detective Inspector Kimmo Hyvärinen said.

The suspect was detained in the Helsinki area less than one hour after the shooting with a handgun in his possession, police said. He admitted to the shooting in an initial police hearing but there is no immediate word of the motive, police said, adding that the case is being investigated as a murder and two attempted murders.

Finnish President Alexander Stubb and Prime Minister Petteri Orpo offered condolences to the families of the victims in postings on X with both saying they were shocked over the shooting.

"What makes it particularly shocking is the age of the victim and the suspect," Orpo said during a news conference later Tuesday. "I can assure you that this (shooting) will be carefully reviewed and conclusions will be drawn that this will not happen again."

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The minimum age of criminal liability in Finland is 15 years, which means the suspect cannot be formally arrested. A suspect younger than 15 can only be heard by the police after which they will be handed over to Finland's child welfare authorities.

In the past decades, Finland has witnessed two major deadly school shootings.

In November 2007, a 18-year-old student armed with a semi-automatic pistol opened fire at the premises of the Jokela high school in Tuusula, southern Finland, killing nine people. He was found dead with self-inflicted wounds.

Less than a year later, in September 2008, a 22-year-old student shot and killed 10 people with a semi-automatic pistol at a vocational college in Kauhajoki, southwestern Finland, before fatally shooting himself.

In the Nordic nation of 5.6 million, there are more than 1.5 million licensed firearms and about 430,000 license holders, according to the Finnish Interior Ministry. Hunting and gun-ownership have long traditions in the sparsely-populated northern European country.

Responsibility for granting permits for ordinary firearms rests with local police departments.

Following the school shootings in 2007 and 2008, Finland tightened its gun laws by raising the minimum age for firearms ownership and giving police greater powers to make background checks on individuals applying for a gun license.

The Interior Ministry said Finland will pay respects to the victims of the school shooting on Wednesday when all state agencies and institutions will lower the national flag to half staff. Private households are encouraged to join in the commemoration, the ministry said.

What is World Central Kitchen and how has it helped people in Gaza?

By TIA GOLDENBERG Associated Press

JERUSALEM (AP) — World Central Kitchen, the food charity founded by celebrity chef José Andrés, called a halt to its work in the Gaza Strip after an Israeli strike killed seven of its workers, mostly foreigners.

The group, which said it will make decisions about longer-term plans in the region soon, has been bringing desperately needed food to Gazans facing widespread hunger and pioneered the recently launched effort to deliver aid by sea from Cyprus. Its absence, even if temporary, is likely to deepen the war-torn territory's misery as the United Nations warns that famine is imminent.

Here's a look at the charity's work in Gaza and what its absence could mean:

WHAT IS WORLD CENTRAL KITCHEN?

Founded in 2010, World Central Kitchen delivers freshly prepared meals to people in need following natural disasters, like hurricanes or earthquakes, or to those enduring conflict. The group has also provided meals to migrants arriving at the southern U.S. border, as well as to hospital staff who worked relentlessly during the coronavirus pandemic.

The aid group sends in teams who can cook meals that appeal to the local palate on a large scale and fast.

"When you talk about food and water, people don't want a solution one week from now, one month from now. The solution has to be now," Andrés is quoted as saying on the group's website.

World Central Kitchen has worked in dozens of affected areas and currently has teams in Haiti, addressing the needs of Ukrainians displaced by Russia's invasion, as well as providing meals to people affected by the war in Gaza.

WHAT HAS IT DONE DURING THE WAR IN GAZA?

Teams from the charity have fanned out across the region since Hamas-led militants attacked southern Israel on Oct. 7 and throughout the war that it sparked. It has fed Israelis displaced by the attack as well as former hostages, according to its website, and people in Lebanon displaced by fighting with Israel. But its work in Gaza has been the most demanding.

In Gaza, the group says it has provided more than 43 million meals to Palestinians.

The group has set up two main kitchens, in the southern city of Rafah and the central town of Deir al-Balah. It lends support to 68 community kitchens throughout the territory, serving more than 170,000 hot meals a day. The group ramped up its work during Ramadan, the holy month when Muslims traditionally

fast from sunrise to sundown and then eat a lavish meal, distributing 92,000 food boxes or about 4.7 million meals.

The group has also provided meals through airdrops and has led two shipments by sea carrying hundreds of tons of food for northern Gaza, where the food emergency is most acute.

In an interview with The Associated Press last month, Andrés credited the charity's sea deliveries with prompting the U.S. to declare that it would build a floating pier for aid delivered to Gaza by sea.

"I think this has been our achievement," he said.

WHAT WILL THE CHARITY'S ABSENCE MEAN FOR PEOPLE IN GAZA?

With World Central Kitchen immediately suspending its work, tens of thousands of meals a day won't be handed out.

Following the deadly strike, Cyprus' foreign ministry spokesperson said aid ships that arrived in Gaza this week will return to the Mediterranean island nation with some 240 tons of undelivered aid. Roughly 100 tons have already been offloaded, the spokesperson said.

Other aid organizations are still on the ground providing assistance to Palestinians, including the U.N. But aid groups say supplies are not coming in quickly enough and once they have entered Gaza, delivery is hobbled by logistical problems as well as the constant fighting. Israel denies there is a food shortage in Gaza and blames the U.N. and other aid groups for failing to scale up deliveries inside the territory.

World Central Kitchen was at the vanguard of the two sea shipments that have arrived in Gaza so far. It was not clear in what capacity the sea corridor would continue without the group, but the president of Cyprus said Tuesday that more aid could be shipped to Gaza from Cyprus "before the end of the month," as the U.S. completes construction of a floating pier off the Palestinian territory's coastline.

President Nikos Christodoulides said the Cyprus-Gaza aid shipments "will continue as humanitarian needs are there."

Pope exposes confidential details of past conclaves and settles scores with Pope Benedict XVI's aide

By NICOLE WINFIELD Associated Press

VATICAN CITY (AP) — Pope Francis has exposed the political "maneuvers" used to sway votes during the two most recent elections of popes, while denying he is planning to reform the process for future conclaves, in a book-length interview published Tuesday.

The confidential revelations are contained in "The Successor: My Memories of Benedict XVI," in which the Argentine pope reflects on his relationship with the late German pope and settles some scores with Benedict's longtime aide.

The book, written as a conversation with the correspondent for Spain's ABC daily, Javier Martínez-Brocal, comes at a delicate time for the 87-year-old Francis. His frail health has raised questions about how much longer he will remain pope, whether he might follow in Benedict's footsteps and resign, and who might eventually replace him.

In the book, Francis revealed previously confidential details about the 2005 conclave that elected Benedict pope and the 2013 ballot in which he himself was elected, saying he was allowed to deviate from the cardinals' oath of secrecy because he is pope.

In 2005, Francis said, he was "used" by cardinals who wanted to block the election of Benedict — then Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger — and that they managed to sway 40 out of 115 votes his way. The idea wasn't to elect the Argentine but rather to force a compromise candidate after knocking Ratzinger out of the running, he said.

"They told me afterward that they didn't want a 'foreign' pope," — in other words, a non-Italian one — Francis said, making clear that the process wasn't so much about the Holy Spirit inspiring cardinals as it was a cold, hard political calculus.

Francis said he put an end to the maneuvering by announcing that he wouldn't accept being pope, after

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which Ratzinger was elected.

"He was the only one who could be pope in that moment," Francis said, adding that he, too, voted for Ratzinger.

In 2013, after Benedict's resignation, there was also political maneuvering involved. Francis — who at the time was Cardinal Jorge Mario Bergoglio — said he only realized after the fact that cardinals were coalescing behind him, pestering him with questions about the church in Latin America and dropping hints that he was gaining support.

He said it finally dawned on him that he might be pope when Spanish Cardinal Santos Abril y Castelló came running after him after lunch on March 13, just before what would become the final ballot.

The Spanish cardinal had what was clearly a health-related question about Bergoglio's ability to take on the physical rigors of the papacy, after opponents apparently had raised his health as a possible impediment to his election.

"Eminence, is it true you're missing a lung?" Francis recounted Abril as saying, to which he replied that he had part of one lung removed after a respiratory infection. After he assured the cardinal that the operation had taken place more than 50 years earlier, he remembered Abril muttering: "Oh these last-minute maneuvers..."

Francis in the interview denied rumors he is planning any reform of the conclave rules for a future papal election.

Conservative media have speculated, without any attribution, that Francis was tinkering with the protocols to limit pre-conclave discussions about the needs of the church to cardinals aged under 80. Only those cardinals — most of whom were appointed by Francis — are able to vote for the next pope, but older colleagues are currently allowed to take part in the earlier discussions.

While Francis denied any such reform, he revealed he was revising the protocol for papal funerals. Francis said Benedict's would be "the last wake in which the body of a pope is exposed in an open coffin, on a bier."

He said he wanted to ensure popes "are buried like any son of the church," in a dignified, but not excessive manner.

In the book, Francis also settles some scores with Benedict's longtime secretary, Archbishop Georg Gaenswein, whom he initially fired and then exiled from the Vatican after what he described as a series of imprudent decisions that "made life difficult for me."

Gaenswein is widely believed to have helped fuel the anti-Francis opposition during Benedict's decade-long retirement, allowing Benedict to be used by conservatives nostalgic for his doctrinaire papacy. He was behind some of the biggest hiccups in the unusual cohabitation of two popes.

Francis reveals details about one well-known incident in 2020, in which Cardinal Robert Sarah, the conservative former Vatican liturgy chief, co-authored a book with Benedict reasserting the need for a celibate priesthood.

The book was published at the precise moment Francis was considering calls to relax celibacy requirements and allow married priests in order to address a shortage of clergy in the Amazon. It caused a stir because Benedict's participation in the book raised the prospect of the former pope trying to influence the decision-making of a current one.

Francis squarely blames Gaenswein for the affair, insisting that Sarah was a "good man" who perhaps was "manipulated by separatist groups." Francis said he felt compelled to sideline Gaenswein after the ruckus.

"I was obliged to ask Benedict's secretary to take a voluntary leave, but keeping the title of prefect of the papal household and the salary," Francis said.

Gaenswein later sealed his fate with Francis when he published a tell-all memoir, "Nothing But the Truth," in the days after Benedict's Dec. 31, 2022, death that was highly critical of Francis.

"It pained me that they used Benedict. The book was published on the day of his burial, and I felt it was a lack of nobility and humanity," Francis said.

Francis insisted that Benedict always deferred to him, defended him and supported him and was not behind any of the conservative attacks or maneuvers to undermine his authority.

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He denied that his dry homily during Benedict's funeral, criticized by conservatives as lacking praise, was a sign of anything other than liturgical protocol.

"You don't deliver eulogies in homilies," he said.

Today in History: April 3, Martin Luther King Jr. makes final speech

By The Associated Press undefined

Today in History

Today is Wednesday, April 3, the 94th day of 2024. There are 272 days left in the year.

Today's Highlight in History:

On April 3, 1968, civil rights leader Martin Luther King Jr. delivered what turned out to be his final speech, telling a rally of striking sanitation workers in Memphis, Tennessee, that "I've been to the mountaintop" and "seen the Promised Land. I may not get there with you. But I want you to know tonight that we, as a people, will get to the Promised Land!" (About 20 hours later, King was felled by an assassin's bullet at the Lorraine Motel.)

On this date:

In 1865, Union forces occupied the Confederate capital of Richmond, Virginia.

In 1882, outlaw Jesse James was shot to death in St. Joseph, Missouri, by Robert Ford, a member of James' gang.

In 1936, Bruno Hauptmann was electrocuted in Trenton, New Jersey, for the kidnap-murder of 20-month-old Charles Lindbergh Jr.

In 1942, during World War II, Japanese forces began their final assault on Bataan against American and Filipino troops who surrendered six days later; the capitulation was followed by the notorious Bataan Death March.

In 1944, the U.S. Supreme Court, in *Smith v. Allwright*, struck down a Democratic Party of Texas rule that allowed only white voters to participate in Democratic primaries.

In 1948, President Harry S. Truman signed the Marshall Plan, designed to help European allies rebuild after World War II and resist communism.

In 1973, the first handheld portable telephone was demonstrated for reporters on a New York City street corner as Motorola executive Martin Cooper called Joel S. Engel of Bell Labs.

In 1974, deadly tornadoes began hitting wide parts of the South and Midwest before jumping across the border into Canada; more than 300 fatalities resulted from what became known as the Super Outbreak.

In 1978, at the Academy Awards, Woody Allen's "Annie Hall" was named best picture of 1977; its co-star, Diane Keaton, won best actress while Richard Dreyfuss was honored as best actor for "The Goodbye Girl."

In 1996, Unabomber Theodore Kaczynski (kah-ZIHN'-skee) was arrested at his remote Montana cabin.

In 2012, Mitt Romney tightened his grip on the Republican presidential nomination, sweeping primaries in Wisconsin, Maryland and Washington, D.C.

In 2013, Oscar-winning screenwriter and award-winning novelist Ruth Prawer Jhabvala, 85, died in New York.

In 2014, David Letterman announced during a taping of the "Late Show" on CBS that he would retire as host in 2015. (Stephen Colbert (kohl-BEHR') was named as his replacement a week later.)

In 2017, a divided Senate Judiciary Committee panel voted 11-9 along party lines to favorably recommend Supreme Court nominee Neil Gorsuch to the full Senate.

In 2020, President Donald Trump announced new federal guidelines recommending that Americans wear face coverings when in public to help fight the spread of the coronavirus, but Trump immediately said he had no intention of following that advice himself; he said he could not envision himself covering his face while sitting in the Oval Office greeting world leaders.

In 2022, Ukrainian authorities found bodies with bound hands, close-range gunshot wounds and signs of torture scattered in a city on the outskirts of Kyiv after the withdrawal of Russian troops.

Today's Birthdays: Conservationist Jane Goodall is 90. Actor William Gaunt is 87. Songwriter Jeff Barry is

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86. Actor Eric Braeden is 83. Actor Marsha Mason is 82. Singer Wayne Newton is 82. Singer Tony Orlando is 80. Comedy writer Pat Proft is 77. Folk-rock singer Richard Thompson is 75. Country musician Curtis Stone (Highway 101) is 74. Blues singer-guitarist John Mooney is 69. Rock musician Mick Mars (Motley Crue) is 68. Actor Alec Baldwin is 66. Actor David Hyde Pierce is 65. Rock singer John Thomas Griffith (Cowboy Mouth) is 64. Comedian-actor Eddie Murphy is 63. Rock singer-musician Mike Ness (Social Distortion) is 62. Rock singer Sebastian Bach is 56. Rock musician James MacDonough (Megadeth) is 54. Olympic gold medal ski racer Picabo Street is 53. Actor Jennie Garth is 52. Actor Jamie Bamber is 51. Actor Adam Scott is 51. Christian rock musician Drew Shirley (Switchfoot) is 50. Comedian Aries Spears is 49. Actor Matthew Goode is 46. Actor Cobie Smulders is 42. Rock-pop singer Leona Lewis is 39. Former actor Amanda Bynes is 38. Actor-comedian Rachel Bloom is 37. Actor Hayley Kiyoko is 33. Rock musician Sam Kiszka (Greta Van Fleet) is 25.