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## Saturday, April 6

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

## Sunday, April 7

POPS Concert 2 p.m. and 5 p.m.  
Groton CM&A: Sunday School at 9:15 a.m., Worship Service at 10:30 a.m.  
Catholic: SEAS Confession, 7:45-8:15 a.m., SEAS Mass, 8:30 a.m.; Turton Confession, 10:30-10:45 a.m.; Turton Mass, 11 a.m.  
First Presbyterian Church: Bible Study, 9:30 a.m.; Worship, 11 a.m.

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



Emmanuel Lutheran: Worship with communion, 9 a.m.; Sunday School, 10:15 a.m.; Choir, 6 p.m.  
St. John's Lutheran: Worship with communion at St. John's at 9 a.m. and Zion at 11 a.m.; Sunday School, 9:45 a.m.  
NSU Soccer Camp at the Groton soccer field, 2-5 p.m.

## Monday, April 8

Senior Menu: Ranch chicken breast, sweet potatoes mixed Monterey blend, applesauce bars, whole wheat bread.  
School Breakfast: Pancake on stick.  
School Lunch: French bread pizza, cooked carrots.  
State Smarter Balanced Testing (EIA/Math: April 8-12, Science (Grade 11) Week of April 15-19 (day TBD)  
School Board meeting, 7 p.m.  
Pantry Open 11 a.m. to 3 p.m.  
Senior Citizen meet at the Groton Community Center, 1 p.m.  
Emmanuel Lutheran: Bible Study 6:30 a.m.  
High School Baseball: Varsity at Dell Rapids 5 p.m., second game at 7 p.m.  
Soccer uniform pickup, 5-8 p.m., Groton Community Center

**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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## Aid Attack Fallout

The Israeli military has dismissed two senior officers and reprimanded three others after concluding an investigation into an airstrike in Gaza earlier this week that killed seven volunteers with the World Central Kitchen. The probe found the drone team that mistook the volunteers for Hamas militants didn't have enough evidence to order the strikes and deviated from standard operating procedures.

The nonprofit, led by celebrity chef José Andrés, had been delivering aid to the enclave before the group suspended operations due to the attack. The World Central Kitchen volunteers were traveling in three vehicles marked with the group's name and emblem when the strikes happened. The Israeli military said the drone team had spotted what they assumed was a weapon over the shoulder of one of the workers. The World Central Kitchen said it had coordinated its movements with the military to avoid such incidents and that its workers were not armed. Nearly 200 humanitarian aid workers have been killed during the Israel-Hamas war, per the UN.

Separately, McDonald's announced it will buy all 225 of its restaurants from a franchisee in Israel following boycotts related to the war.

## Earthquake of 4.8 magnitude shakes New Jersey, New York City area.

The earthquake's epicenter hit near Whitehouse Station, New Jersey, Friday morning, about 45 miles away from New York City (see map). Tremors were felt across the East Coast, including in Baltimore, Boston, and Philadelphia. There have been no reports of significant damage or life-threatening casualties as of this writing.

## South Carolina Gamecocks, Iowa Hawkeyes reach NCAA title game.

No. 1 South Carolina and No. 1 Iowa will face off in the NCAA women's championship game tomorrow (3 pm ET, ABC) after defeating No. 3 NC State and No. 3 Connecticut, respectively, last night. On the men's side, No. 1 Purdue takes on No. 11 NC State tonight (6 pm ET, TBS), followed by a face-off between No. 1 Connecticut and No. 4 Alabama (8:50 pm ET, TBS).

## US employers add 303,000 jobs in March, exceeding expectations.

The nonfarm payroll growth is up from February's downwardly revised growth of 270,000 jobs and beats economists' estimates of 200,000. The unemployment rate fell to 3.8% as expected, down from 3.9% in February. Average hourly earnings rose 0.3% month-over-month and 4.1% year-over-year. See all data here.

## USC's Bronny James, son of LeBron James, declares for NBA draft.

The 19-year-old freshman basketball star also announced Friday he plans to retain his college eligibility and will enter the NCAA transfer portal. His announcement comes after playing one season for the University of Southern California, during which he suffered a cardiac arrest in July. The 6-foot-4 guard was found to have a congenital heart defect and was cleared to return in November.

## New York to pay \$17.5M for forced removal of hijabs for mug shots.

New York City agreed to settle a class-action lawsuit filed in 2018 by two Muslim American women who said their rights were violated after police forced them to remove their hijabs, or head coverings, before taking their arrest photos. The police department changed its policy in 2020 to allow people to wear head coverings for religious reasons as long as their faces were clearly visible.

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## **Criminal networks are infiltrating legal businesses, EU says in report.**

The European Union's law enforcement agency, Europol, released a first-of-its-kind report, identifying 821 criminal networks and detailing how they are organized, how they operate, and what kinds of activities they engage in. According to the report (see here), 86% of the identified criminal networks rely on the legal economy to conceal their activities and launder their profits.

## **Apple to lay off 614 workers after nixing self-driving car project.**

The job cuts affect employees from Apple's offices in California and mark the first major round of layoffs for the tech giant postpandemic. It is unclear what projects the employees were working on. The news comes after Apple canceled a decadelong initiative in February to develop autonomous electric vehicles, seeking to instead pivot to working on artificial intelligence.

## **Humankind(ness)**

Today, we're sharing a story from reader Bill M. in Colorado.

"I am a guide for blind and visually impaired skiers. Recently my skier and I took a break and she wanted a chocolate chip cookie. They were located at the cashier counter, so I picked one up and went to the cashier. I was still wearing the bright orange 'bib' that announced I was a blind skier guide. I told him the cookie was for my skier....the cashier said well she deserves a discount and charged me half the price of the cookie. As I turned to walk away, the cashier said, 'take another one, just for you and what you do....my treat.'"

## **EMPLOYMENT**

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

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15 N Main St. - Ste. 101  
Downtown Groton

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



**Living Heart Fitness Center**  
Exercise helps ease arthritis  
pain and stiffness. - Mayo Clinic

## GFP Holds April Commission Meeting

The South Dakota Game, Fish and Park (GFP) Commission held their April meeting in Pierre, April 4-5 at the Matthews Training Center in Pierre.

### Wildlife Proposals

#### East River Firearm, Archery, and Muzzleloader Deer

Harvest data and observation reports from GFP staff, landowners, and hunters all suggest deer numbers are low in southeastern South Dakota following die-offs because of the severe 2022-2023 winter and hemorrhagic disease in 2023. In response, the Commission proposed changes to the numbers and types of East River Deer Hunting Season licenses.

The proposal would result in a reduction of 860 firearm deer licenses (38% reduction) or 985 tags (650 fewer any deer tags and 335 fewer antlerless whitetail tags) among seven counties including: Bon Homme, Clay, Hutchinson, Lincoln, Turner, Union, and Yankton.

In addition, archery and muzzleloader hunters in Clay, Lincoln, and Union Counties would no longer be allowed to harvest antlerless deer using their antlerless whitetail deer license (LM1 type). However, they would still be allowed to harvest a deer using their archery or muzzleloader any deer license type (01 type).

#### Landowner Own Land Prairie Antlerless Elk Hunting Season

During the 2024 South Dakota Legislative session, Senate Bill 173 enrolled an act to provide a landowner own land elk license for antlerless elk in the prairie elk season.

The Commission proposed such a season with the following qualifications:

An applicant must own/lease a minimum of 240 acres within an elk unit;

Members of the qualifying landowner-operators family including grandparents, parents, spouse, children, children's spouse, or grandchildren who live on the ranch or in the closest community and have an active role in the ranch operation also qualify;

Only one qualifying applicant per ranch unit per year may purchase a landowner own land license;

A qualifying applicant for a ranch unit may not purchase a landowner own land elk license if any qualifying member of the ranch unit holds an elk license in that unit;

A ranch unit is described as all private property owned and leased for agricultural purposes by written agreement by and individual qualifying landowner in the state; and,

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A ranch unit may not be subdivided for the purposes of qualifying for more than one landowner own land elk license.

## **Raccoon Hunting Season**

The Commission proposed to allow nonresidents to use dogs, statewide, as an aid in the taking of a raccoon within the specified nonresident raccoon season structure.

## **Custer State Park Coyote Hunting Season**

The Commission continued discussions on extending the Custer State Park Coyote Hunting Season to start November 1 and continue through April 30.

The Commission discussed their previous proposal to remove closure of season from one-half hour after sunset to one-half hour before sunrise and allow coyote hunting throughout the day and night.

## **Small Game Hunting Seasons**

The Commission continued their discussion on lengthening the quail, partridge, and grouse seasons to Jan 31, aligning these seasons closing date with the close of the pheasant season.

The Commission continued their discussion to remove the word "common" in the snipe season hunting rules, allowing for the take of all species of snipe.

The Commission proposed to extend the tree squirrel and cottontail rabbit hunting seasons to run from Sept. 1 - March 31 on publicly accessible land.

## **Custer State Park Bison Hunting Seasons**

The Commission continued their discussions to allow the use of archery equipment during the Custer State Park trophy and non-trophy bison harvest season.

The Commission also discussed the March proposal to decrease the allowable hunting days for trophy bison from three to two. Hunters typically fill their tags within two days, and this change will allow increased opportunity for scheduling hunts.

The Commission also continued discussions to increase the number of trophy bison licenses available from eight license to 10 and non-trophy bison licenses from 15 to 20. This would result in a total of 11 trophy bison licenses, including the one license available through the Hunt for Habitat raffle.

## **Wildlife Finalizations**

### **Elk Hunting Seasons**

The Commission chose the following license allocations for the 2024 elk hunting seasons:

Custer State Park: 15 resident "Any Elk" licenses, including 1 raffle "Any Elk" license, and 0 "Antlerless Elk" licenses;

Custer State Park Early Archery: 5 resident "Any Elk" licenses;

Black Hills Archery: 192 resident "Any Elk" licenses and 90 resident "Antlerless Elk" licenses;

Black Hills Firearm: 570 resident "Any Elk" licenses and 730 "Antlerless Elk" licenses; and,

Prairie Elk: 126 resident "Any Elk" licenses and 210 "Antlerless Elk" licenses.

The commission also proposed to include the month of November for prairie units 15A, 35A, and 35B. The resulting season dates would be Sept. 1 - Dec. 31 for Unit 15A and Sept. 15 - Dec. 31 for units 35A and 35B.

## **Bighorn Sheep Hunting Season**

The Commission also reviewed recommendations to add one bighorn sheep license to the Custer State Park Unit, and reduced by two licenses to the Hell Canyon Unit for the 2024 and 2025 bighorn sheep hunting seasons.

The Commission amended the Bighorn Sheep hunting season to remove hunting unit BHS-BH1, which includes those portions beginning at Highway 385 and the Pennington County line, then south of Highway 385 to Sheridan Lake Road, then east on Sheridan Lake Road to Highway 79 in Rapid City, then north on Highway 79 to the Pennington County line. This proposal would then expand the unit boundary for BHS-BH4 to include the former boundaries of BHS-BH1 and those portions of Pennington County west of Interstate 90, Elk Vale Road. and US Highway 79.

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The recommendations would allow for the following license allocations:

Custer State Park: 4

BH2: 3

BH3: 0

BH4: 2

This recommendation would also allow for one bighorn auction license, for a total of 10 licenses available for the 2024 and 2025 hunting seasons.

## **Tree Stands and Trail Cameras**

The Commission voted to expand requirements on tree stand placement and construction on Walk-In-Areas and all private lands leased by the Department for public hunting access.

This will allow a user to label these with either their name and address or their GFP customer identification number. Individuals would need to obtain permission to use trail cameras on private land leased for hunting access by GFP.

## **Time Restrictions for Use of State Park Systems and Public Lands**

The Commission voted to clarify that Oahe Downstream Recreation Area and West Shore Lakeside Use Area, and other areas north of Fort Pierre, observe the Central Time zone. This clarifies that while these areas are technically located within the Mountain Time zone, they operate on the Central Time zone as that is what the communities in which they are associated with operate.

## **August Management Take**

The Commission voted to remove Aurora, Beadle, Bon Homme, Brookings, Clay, Davison, Hanson, Hutchinson, Jerauld, Kingsbury, Lake, Lincoln, McCook, Miner, Minnehaha, Moody, Sanborn, Turner, Union, and Yankton counties from the August Management Take Hunting season unit. Those counties will not have an August Management Take season for Canada geese in 2024.

## **Nonresident Waterfowl**

The Commission voted to add additional licenses to the Nonresident Waterfowl hunting seasons. The additions include:

Adding 50 licenses to the 3-day NRW-00V area; and,

Adding 55 licenses to the 3-day NRW-00Z area.

The Commission did not increase licenses to the 10-day statewide, NRW-00B area, which would remain at 3,925 licenses available. The Commission did not increase these licenses, to alleviate concerns regarding additional licenses available on public land in northeast South Dakota.

These 105 license additions fall within the 5% yearly increases allowed in statute.

## **Public Comment Opportunity and Upcoming Meeting**

To hear the discussion on any of the topics on the agenda, audio from the meeting is available through South Dakota Public Broadcasting and will soon be available on the GFP website as part of the meeting archive.

To see these documents in their entirety, visit [gfp.sd.gov/commission/information](http://gfp.sd.gov/commission/information).

To be included in the public record and to be considered by the Commission, public comments must include a full name and city of residence and be submitted by 11:59 p.m. CT, April 28.

The next GFP Commission meeting will be held in the Custer State Park Event Barn on May 2-3.

## Memorials, South Dakota's Connection from Past to Present

As the cabinet secretary for the South Dakota Department of Veterans Affairs, I travel across this great state and visit with veterans in every county. These trips also afford me the opportunity to stop and view all the veteran's memorials in South Dakota.

Memorials are not about war – they are about people. They are about paying tribute to all the military service personnel who honorably served their country. Their bravery, their resourcefulness, and their patriotism mark them as America's finest citizens. These proud Americans stepped out of the crowd and swore an oath to support and defend the constitution of the United States of America against all enemies.

Veterans' memorials provide a connection from the past to the present. They encourage people to remember and honor those who have served our great country. They also teach younger generations about the sacrifices made by our nation's heroes.

There are over 200 veteran's memorials in South Dakota, and this is a testament to their significance. Veterans service organizations, community leaders, and civic organizations have designed these historical touchstones. Each of them has a specific message and includes symbolisms such as peaceful waters, raging waters, crosses, dog tags, eagles, soldiers, pillars, eternal lights, and flags.

Whether you are traveling through Geddes, Armour, Viborg, Tyndall, Kennebec, Pine Ridge, Sisseton, Gettysburg, Wall, Belle Fourche, or any other community in this state, I encourage you to take the time to find these memorials. We even have a resource tool that will help you – <https://vetaffairs.sd.gov/resources/Veterans%20Memorials.pdf>

These memorials play a vital role in ensuring the sacrifices made by so many for freedom are remembered.

Greg Whitlock, Secretary  
South Dakota Department of Veterans Affairs



**Greg Whitlock,**  
**Secretary**  
**South Dakota**  
**Department of**  
**Veterans Affairs**

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## *Groton Area March Students of the Month*



**Lydia Meier**  
Senior



**Brooklyn Hansen**  
Junior



**Jerica Locke**  
Sophomore



**Kella Tracy**  
Freshman



**Ryder Schelle**  
Eighth Grade



**Kolton Antonsen**  
Seventh Grade



**Ryder Schwan**  
Sixth Grade

Groton Area School works to ensure that all levels of academic instruction also include the necessary life skills teaching, practicing, and modeling that encourages essential personal life habits that are universally understood to facilitate helping our students become good human beings and citizens.

It is learning with our heads, hearts, and hands to be caring and civil, to make healthy decisions, to effectively problem solve, to be respectful and responsible, to be good citizens, and to be empathetic and ethical individuals.

Students are selected based on individual student growth in the areas of: positive behavior, citizenship, good attendance, a thirst for knowledge, and high academic standards.



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## RED FLAG WARNING

Begins: 1:00 PM Sat, Apr 6, 2024

Expires: 7:00 PM Sat, Apr 6, 2024

...RED FLAG WARNING IN EFFECT FROM 1 PM THIS AFTERNOON TO 7 PM CDT THIS EVENING FOR WIND AND LOW RELATIVE HUMIDITY FOR NORTHEAST SOUTH DAKOTA AND WEST CENTRAL MINNESOTA...

The National Weather Service in Aberdeen has issued a Red Flag Warning for wind and low relative humidity, which is in effect from 1 PM this afternoon to 7 PM CDT this evening. The Fire Weather Watch is no longer in effect.

\* AFFECTED AREA...In Minnesota, Traverse and Big Stone. In South Dakota, Brown, Marshall, Roberts, Day, Spink, Clark, Codington, Grant, Hamlin and Deuel.

\* WINDS...Southeast 30 to 35 mph with gusts up to 50 mph.

\* RELATIVE HUMIDITY...As low as 30 percent.

\* IMPACTS...Critical fire weather conditions are a concern on Saturday due to the combination of strong winds and dry fuels.

A Red Flag Warning means that critical fire weather conditions are either occurring now, or will shortly. A combination of strong winds, low relative humidity, and warm temperatures can contribute to extreme fire behavior.

## WIND ADVISORY

Begins: 7:00 AM Sat, Apr 6, 2024

Expires: 11:00 PM Sat, Apr 6, 2024

...WIND ADVISORY REMAINS IN EFFECT UNTIL 11 PM CDT /10 PM MDT/ THIS EVENING...

\* WHAT...Southeast winds 25 to 35 mph with gusts up to 50 mph expected.

\* WHERE...Portions of west central Minnesota and central, north central, and northeast South Dakota.

\* WHEN...Until 11 PM CDT /10 PM MDT/ this evening.

\* IMPACTS...Gusty winds will blow around unsecured objects. Tree limbs could be blown down and a few power outages may result.

Winds this strong can make driving difficult, especially for high profile vehicles. Use extra caution.

Secure outdoor objects.

## HAZARDOUS WEATHER OUTLOOK

Begins: 4:12 AM Sat, Apr 6, 2024

Expires: 4:15 AM Sun, Apr 7, 2024

This Hazardous Weather Outlook is for west central Minnesota and northeast South Dakota.

.DAY ONE...Today and tonight.

Strong southeasterly winds are expected today, with gusts in excess of 40 mph at times. Elevated fire danger is also a concern due to the strong winds and low relative humidity. A Wind Advisory is in effect through this evening. A Red Flag Warning is in effect this afternoon and evening.

.DAYS TWO THROUGH SEVEN...Sunday through Friday.

Hazardous weather is not expected at this time.



## SOUTH DAKOTA SEARCHLIGHT

<https://southdakotasearchlight.com>

### From fringe to foreground: 'Loose cannon' lawmaker departs as leading legislative voice

**Schoenbeck known for quips, sharp elbows and political prowess**



**Sen. Lee Schoenbeck, R-Watertown, walks back to his Senate office in the state Capitol during the 2024 legislative session.** (Joshua Haiar/South Dakota Searchlight)

BY: JOSHUA HAIAR - APRIL 5, 2024 3:28 PM

South Dakota lawmakers had a historic opportunity to boost the state's lowest-in-the-nation teacher pay in 2016, but the votes weren't there.

The legislation failed by one vote on a Thursday at the Capitol in Pierre.

Lee Schoenbeck was a member of the state House at the time and a supporter of the bill. During a floor debate, he described some opponents' arguments as "garbage." He went on social media after the House vote and called some fellow Republicans "chicken" for their opposition.

That weekend during a public forum, Schoenbeck accused his own Republican House majority leader, Brian Gosch, of trying to intimidate a legislator out of supporting the bill with a threat of an ethical investigation. Schoenbeck called Gosch "pond scum" (although Schoenbeck says he accidentally said "scum pond").

The following Monday, back at the Capitol, some Republicans who were upset about Schoenbeck's verbal attacks blocked him from entering a caucus meeting.

But then something happened: Lawmakers started talking to him about the bill. His outbursts against Republican leaders had emboldened some rank-and-file members.

"Piles of them started coming to my desk," where they strategized on how to move the bill forward, Schoenbeck said.

The House reconsidered the legislation that week, and it passed.

The episode was an example of Schoenbeck's unique brand of lawmaking, combining blunt public rhetoric with private maneuvering to get results.

His perfection of those tactics made him perhaps the most powerful member of the Legislature during the last several legislative sessions while he served as president pro tempore of the Senate.

Schoenbeck said there's a simple reason he's been willing to speak his mind when others were afraid: "I don't care if I lose an election."

"That's the difference," he said. "That's it."

But after 14 years as a legislator spread across four non-consecutive stints, much of it in leadership, Schoenbeck, 65, is not seeking reelection this year. His time as a lawmaker will end in January, leaving fellow legislators, lobbyists and others in Pierre to wonder if anybody will fill the void left by the departure of Schoenbeck's guiding hand and mouth.

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## Political junkie from Webster

Schoenbeck's introduction to politics came in his hometown of Webster, where he grew up in a house full of Catholic, blue-collar Democrats. His dad was a mechanic and his mom was a seamstress. They had eight kids.

Schoenbeck worked as an assistant janitor at the local courthouse in high school. There, he spent time talking politics with Republican former Gov. Sigurd Anderson, who served as a judge at the time.

"I'd be sweeping and he'd stop me and start telling me stories about politics and political philosophy," he said. "Then I started spending Saturdays at his house."

Schoenbeck got involved with the College Republicans while studying at Augustana University in Sioux Falls, and he served as an intern and legislative aide at the Capitol in Pierre.

His next opportunity was working for Republican South Dakota Congressman Jim Abdnor. Schoenbeck said the time he spent driving across South Dakota during Abdnor's successful 1980 U.S. Senate campaign was "the most impactful political experience in my life."

While earning a law degree from the University of South Dakota, Schoenbeck wrote a letter to the editor defending then-Gov. Bill Janklow.

"How can the chairman of the South Dakota Democratic Party criticize Governor Janklow's budget proposals when her organization is still struggling to balance its books from the 1978 election?" he wrote. "I'm sure glad I didn't loan them any money."

Janklow took notice and hired Schoenbeck to work on the governor's 1982 reelection campaign.

A few years later, Schoenbeck threw his hat in the race for Day County state's attorney before even knowing he'd passed the bar exam.

"I drove farmhouse to farmhouse to farmhouse," Schoenbeck said. He won and served from 1985 to 1988.

While working as a state's attorney, he also started his own law firm. He's since become a successful litigator, with cases including a \$2.4 million bad faith and breach of contract verdict against Nationwide Insurance.

Through it all, Schoenbeck stayed closely tied to politics. He claims to have the largest collection of South Dakota political buttons in the state.

"There's nobody close," he said.

## Becoming a lawmaker

In the 1990s, Webster and much of northeastern South Dakota still favored Democrats. Small family farms were plentiful, the Democratic-leaning South Dakota Farmers Union was influential, and Democrat Tom Daschle had recently become one of the state's U.S. senators.

Regardless, Schoenbeck thought he saw weakness and felt he had the right stuff to beat then-Democratic state Sen. Paul Symens in 1992.

"Nobody thought I could win," Schoenbeck recalled.

They were right.

"We get about 30 days out from that election and I think, 'You know what, I've campaigned enough, it's time for some pheasant hunting,'" Schoenbeck said. "That was a terrible mistake. That's the only time people care."

He ran again in 1994 and won by 12 votes.

He headed to Pierre as a firebrand conservative, saying "there will be enough budget cuts to choke a horse next year."

The relationships Schoenbeck had built over the years paid off. He was already close with Janklow, who by then was beginning his second eight-year stint as governor. Their relationship gave the freshman lawmaker a larger-than-typical profile.

Schoenbeck said he met regularly with Janklow and a group of other power brokers.

"Every night when we were done, we would just hang out in his office every night — every single night," Schoenbeck said.

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Schoenbeck and Janklow may have seen a kindred, fiery spirit in each other. Schoenbeck recalled that after he helped defeat a bill Janklow favored, Janklow pulled a gun out of his desk, "and he swings it from the left and points it to my head with the hammer cocked."

Schoenbeck said he talked him down, telling him, "You can't shoot a state senator in the Capitol."

"He goes, 'Damn it, you're right!' And slams the gun back in his drawer."

His relationship with Janklow didn't save Schoenbeck in the next election cycle, when Symens reclaimed the Senate seat.

"I lost Webster," Schoenbeck said. "I lost my hometown, where I didn't go campaign."

Symens said Schoenbeck "was an opportunist" who leaned into popular positions he did not actually believe in. While he ran on cutting taxes, Symens said, "Lee Schoenbeck has never seen a sales tax he didn't like."

Schoenbeck moved to Watertown and won election to the state Senate again, serving from 2003 to 2006. From 2005 to 2006, he was elected to serve as Senate president pro tempore.

Rob Skjonsberg served as then-Gov. Mike Rounds' chief of staff. Skjonsberg now works as a lobbyist in Pierre. He said Schoenbeck has always been a firebrand conservative, and it could be frustrating to deal with his "sharp elbows."

"He can be a great champion when he is in your corner, and sometimes you wish he'd stay retired," he said. Skjonsberg called that the "sign of a great legislator."

After that, Schoenbeck took a break from Pierre. But once his youngest child graduated from high school, he was elected to the House, serving from 2015 to 2016, where he'd go from grilling Democrats to fighting with a new right-wing contingent he no longer identified with.

"What's hilarious is that, 20 years ago, Lee was in the same spot as a bunch of these new-to-the-party people driving him nuts today," Skjonsberg said. "It's all kind of come full circle for Lee."

Schoenbeck hung up his legislative hat in 2016 after the teacher pay debate. But then he was elected in 2018 to the Senate, where he'll remain until his current term ends in January.

## A changing GOP

Schoenbeck does not consider himself a moderate.

"I was a right-wing nut," in the eyes of some, he said, recalling his earlier years in politics. "The problem is, they moved the wing on me."

Schoenbeck said that when he first ran to become a lawmaker, "Joel Rosenthal was like, 'this guy is nuts.'"

Rosenthal served as chairman of the South Dakota Republican Party from 1985 to 1989 and 1994 to 2003.

"Schoenbeck was a loose cannon," Rosenthal said recently, but at a time when "right-wing" meant being a more vehement adherent to the same ideology as others in the party.

Rosenthal said the new right-wing is diverging from traditional Republican views on some issues, displaying a strong preference for nationalism and protectionism, often coupled with skepticism toward immigrants, free trade and international alliances. Additionally, he said, they endorse "more government" to fight "culture wars."

"We now have two Republican parties," Rosenthal said, referencing the split.

Most alarmingly, Rosenthal said, today's right-wingers often hold destructive views of democratic institutions. And while Schoenbeck's approach to politics can be brazen, "The key difference is Lee Schoenbeck wants to govern. He believes in the institutions."

## Boxing out the 'wackadoodles'

Schoenbeck railed against his 2022 Republican primary opponent during a public debate. He also used his time at the mic to explain his rationale for attacking the contemporary right-wing of the party.

"My opponent and I have one big difference, and it's that the people on his Facebook page that are encouraging him and stuff, are the legislators that we would describe as the 'wackadoodles,'" he said, mentioning two by name: Republican Senators Julie Frye-Mueller of Rapid City and Tom Pischke of Dell

Rapids.

"And if leaders do not speak out, the public doesn't know," Schoenbeck continued. "I'm not going to shy away from that fight."

The following legislative session in Pierre, Schoenbeck played a leading role in the Senate's censure of Frye-Mueller. She had allegedly harassed a Legislative Research Council staffer, including criticism of the staffer's decision to have her baby vaccinated.

At the end of this year's legislative session, Frye-Mueller gave a floor speech criticizing Schoenbeck for allegedly undermining the rules to silence her and some other Republicans. Frye-Mueller alleged her freedom of speech was being restrained, while Schoenbeck was free to call other Republicans "pond scum" and other names.

Schoenbeck's activism against the politicians he dislikes could continue after he leaves the Legislature, in part through his candidate recruitment and mentorship efforts.

In 2022, Schoenbeck's campaign committee raised \$131,241. Ahead of that year's primary election, the committee spent \$63,313 to support various candidates, including 17 state senators and 15 representatives that are now holding office.

He also founded a political action committee in 2021, South Dakota Strong. In 2022, the group spent \$145,090 supporting various candidates.

Sen. Helene Duhamel, R-Rapid City, is one of the lawmakers Schoenbeck has helped. The former television news reporter and anchor said she was approached by Schoenbeck and encouraged to seek office.

Duhamel said that through his South Dakota Strong PAC, Schoenbeck will continue to be a player in politics. But she is still "worried about the loss" of her mentor and the loss of a lawmaker who's uniquely willing to speak his mind.

"Schoenbeck is not afraid, and many of us are fearful," Duhamel said.

For Schoenbeck, politics is "like a chess game," Duhamel said, pointing to the Senate's seating arrangement, where Schoenbeck has placed newer senators around him and senators he's called "wackadoodles" near each other to minimize their influence.

Democratic former state Sen. Troy Heinert spent time as Schoenbeck's sparring partner in Pierre. The two became friends "because I was playing chess, too, not playing checkers."

"He likes the game," Heinert said. "He's savvy."

Heinert said what he likes about Schoenbeck is his authenticity.

"He will tell you what he thinks," Heinert said. "I often disagree with him, but he says what he thinks."

*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.*

## South Dakota Investment Council takes cautious approach to artificial intelligence stocks

**Staff 'constantly evaluating' tech companies in state's larger investment portfolio**

BY: JOHN HULT - APRIL 5, 2024 8:00 PM

The overseers of South Dakota's investments have put some money into companies that aim to cash in on artificial intelligence, but the explosion in public interest hasn't changed the state's money management strategy.

Leadership with the South Dakota Investment Council offered insights on the AI boom after prompting from its advisory board, which met in Sioux Falls on Thursday.

Matt Clark, the state's chief investment officer, compared the current plenitude of cash-burning AI operations to companies wrapped up in the dot-com bust of 2000. That year's crash of tech stocks left scores of companies that had hoped to find a toehold in the then-nascent world of online commerce in

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history's dustbin.

As with the internet of 2000, Clark said, there's little doubt that investments in AI will pay off for some companies. The question – one being asked and reevaluated constantly by the investment council during booms in one sector or the other, Clark said – is which ones.

"A lot of those companies that were around in 1999 did prosper, but over half of them disappeared, went bankrupt," Clark told the council's advisory board this week. "You can't have 10 companies all get 30% market share. There's going to be some disappointment."

## About the council

The council manages the assets of the South Dakota Retirement System, the Education Enhancement Trust, and the School and Public Lands Trust, among others.

The returns from investments and interest in the funds are used for a variety of purposes, such as boosting the state's general fund and paying for scholarships. Unlike most states, the retirement system in South Dakota is fully funded for its participants, which include public employees ranging from teachers to correctional officers, state troopers and employees of the Department of Transportation.

On Thursday, council staff told board members that \$13 million from the School and Public Lands Trust was transferred to schools in the month of February.

The South Dakota Retirement System returned 5.8% for the fourth quarter, underperforming compared to its benchmark. Staff told the board that quarterly underperformance was tied to a more conservative investment mix than its benchmark funds, which are more heavily influenced by the stock market.

Over the long-term, the state's investments have grown considerably.

Today, at the 50-year mark in its history, the retirement fund is worth \$14.5 billion and covers more than 33,000 recipients. When it began, there were 2,900 recipients and \$50 million in the fund.

"The return over the full period has exceeded other state retirement systems across the nation," according to the council's 2023 annual report.

There's a similar long-term growth trajectory for the managed assets as a whole. Day to day, week to week, and month to month, however, the funds may lose money or underperform.

## Managing investments amid AI scramble

Board member questions on which sectors might be the best bets in the stock market followed a rundown of the state's equity portfolio performance for the months of February and March. The council's Jan Zeeck told the board that the equity portfolio moved into negative territory in February briefly before bouncing back to neutral last month, in line with a global rebound in durable goods orders.

Market volatility was an issue in the early months of 2024, Zeeck said, and the state has moved to a "defensive position" in response. The health care and pharmaceutical sectors have "taken a hit," Zeeck said, as did consumer staples.

That comment prompted a board question on where the value might be in the market right now. Zeeck framed her response in part around the interest in AI. Pharmaceuticals and other staples, she said, are "just not exciting compared to all the talk of technology and AI."

There are some significant differences between the 1999-2000 bubble and today, Zeeck said. The "Magnificent Seven" of the tech world – Microsoft, Alphabet (Google), Meta (Facebook), Apple, Tesla, Amazon and NVIDIA – are "bringing in a lot of cash flow, and it's real."

But that doesn't mean investments in AI at companies like those will pay off in the long term, Zeeck said. NVIDIA stock has been on a roller coaster this year as the chip maker manages AI-related demand for its products.

"We don't know what the returns will be on a lot of that," she said. "Nobody really knows that yet."

The state does have investments in tech firms, and Zeeck said they are "constantly evaluating" its position in those areas. In the full scope of the state's managed assets, though, the technology sector and AI

are minor factors.

"We really don't have a big bet on tech stocks," Clark told South Dakota Searchlight after the meeting.

*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.*

## **COMMENTARY**

### **Historic high-speed internet opportunity hinges on affordability and digital skills**

ERIK GAIKOWSKI

South Dakota has a historic opportunity to expand access to affordable, reliable, high-speed internet to everyone in the state, no matter where they live or their circumstances.

Access, however, depends on more than wires, poles and other pieces of infrastructure. It also depends on making sure that internet service is affordable, and that all South Dakotans have the tools and the skills to use it.

That is why we're proud to see that South Dakota is one of the first states in the country to have its digital opportunity plan approved by the National Telecommunications and Information Administration. The approval is the first step in unlocking federal funding that can help underserved communities — including older South Dakotans, veterans, low-income families, tribal communities, people living in rural areas and others — to connect to the internet.

In developing the plan after intense collaboration with stakeholders, partner organizations and public participation, the South Dakota Governor's Office of Economic Development and Department of Labor and Regulation discovered that while the state has made significant strides to close digital gaps, we continue to face numerous challenges, especially in rural areas. They heard the cost of high-speed internet as the most frequently mentioned barrier to universal access, and they found South Dakotans need better access to digital skill development and devices.

AARP South Dakota, on behalf of our more than 100,000 members in the state, applauds the approval of our state's plan to expand high-speed internet. High-speed internet is not a luxury. It is a necessity for older South Dakotans. In short, it will improve the quality of life and help adults 50-plus safely age in place.

This plan is South Dakota's blueprint to tear down the digital divide in our state. There are several key strategies that have been identified to reduce barriers to internet access. Through implementation, South Dakota will pursue efforts to improve overall broadband access, affordability, digital skills and access to devices, as well as sustain these efforts over time. This is no small task.

While putting this comprehensive plan together is a commendable start, there is still much work ahead of us. AARP South Dakota looks forward to working with the Governor's Office of Economic Development, the Department of Labor and Regulation, and other key stakeholders toward successful implementation of this plan. Like other traditionally underserved groups, too many older adults have been left behind for too long.

We must also maintain our focus on ensuring that internet is affordable. As South Dakota's plan demonstrates, wires alone can't solve the problem of connectivity, which is why AARP remains committed to the continuation of the federal Affordable Connectivity Program, which provides direct support to South Dakotans to help them afford internet service.

Without access to affordable, reliable high-speed internet — and the digital skills needed to use it — too many older South Dakotans are not able to fully participate in today's economy. They risk missing out on opportunities like online learning, finding and maintaining employment, accessing important services and keeping social connections crucial to their well-being. They can't shop online for essentials like groceries and may not be able to virtually see their doctors or health care specialists, who may be located miles away.

Eligible households can receive a benefit that provides a \$30-\$75 per month discount on the cost of high-speed internet. For many families, that can cover the entire cost of their service. There are over

21,000 South Dakota households on the Affordable Connectivity Program and more than 42% of these are headed by a resident 50 or older.

Right now, the program is at risk of running out of money in May. As South Dakota — working in collaboration with regional and local partners — works to close the digital divide, it's our hope that Congress considers maintaining this critical program.

*Erik Gaikowski of Sioux Falls is the state director for AARP South Dakota. AARP is the nation's largest nonprofit, nonpartisan organization dedicated to empowering people to choose how they live as they age. In South Dakota, AARP strengthens communities and advocates for what matters most to people 50-plus and their families: health security, financial stability and personal fulfillment.*

## In Maryland appearance, Biden pledges federal support to rebuild collapsed bridge

BY: JENNIFER SHUTT - APRIL 5, 2024 6:08 PM

DUNDALK, Maryland — President Joe Biden traveled to Maryland on Friday to tour the collapsed Francis Scott Key Bridge by helicopter before meeting with the families of the construction workers who are presumed or confirmed dead after the collapse last week.

Biden said he understood the families' pain of losing their loved ones, and pledged that the federal government would do everything in its power to quickly open the shipping lanes into the city's port and rebuild the bridge.

"To all the families and loved ones who are grieving, I've come here to grieve with you," Biden said during a press conference on the banks of the Patapsco River with the collapsed bridge in the background.

"It's not the same, but I know a little bit about what it's like to lose a piece of your soul — to get that phone call in the middle of night to say family members are gone," Biden added. "I've been there. It's a feeling like having a black hole in your chest, like you're getting sucked in and unable to breathe. The anger, the pain, the depth of a loss that's so profound."

Six deaths have been confirmed or are presumed after the collapse. Two construction workers' bodies have been recovered while four more remain missing.

The federal government, Biden said, would support Baltimore with the cleanup and rebuilding of the bridge as well as the workers who have had their jobs and livelihoods impacted by the bridge collapse.

"Folks, 20,000 jobs depend on this port," Biden said. "Twenty thousand families depend on this port to buy groceries, to make rent, to pay their bills."

The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers expects it will be able to open a "third channel for some commercial traffic, including car carriers" by the end of this month and open the full channel by the end of May, Biden said.

"We're going to move heaven and earth to rebuild this bridge as rapidly as humanly possible," Biden said. "And we're going to do so with union labor and American steel."

Maryland Gov. Wes Moore said the six victims of the collapse and their families are in people's hearts, thoughts and prayers.

"Ten days ago, a piece of the Baltimore skyline and a piece of the Baltimore spirit plunged into the river," Moore said. "But the people of Maryland, we rallied."

### Relief for workers

Moore said he signed an executive order Friday morning approving \$60 million "in financial relief for workers and businesses that have been impacted by the Key Bridge collapse."

The governor also announced the launch of a partnership between the public and private sectors, he called the "Maryland Tough, Baltimore Strong Alliance."

"The Alliance is made up of leaders who are doubling down on their commitment to the city and their commitment to this state," Moore said. "Many have agreed to not lay off employees. Many have agreed to return to Baltimore even if they need to move somewhere else temporarily. And all have agreed to



help us build a better future.”

The group includes more than 50 members, including foundations, businesses and sports teams, who Moore said have committed more than \$15 million “to support our workers and our neighbors in this moment.”

“Now I know our state’s largest city is being tested right now,” Moore said. “But Baltimore has been tested before. We get knocked down, we stand back up and we dust ourselves off and we move forward. That is what we do.”

The Maryland congressional delegation announced in a written statement released Friday afternoon that the U.S. Department of Labor had issued a \$3.5 million grant through its emergency National Dislocated Worker Grant program “to create temporary clean up and recovery jobs for workers impacted by the tragic collapse of Baltimore’s Francis Scott Key Bridge.”

“We will never forget the six Marylanders we lost in this tragedy, and we’re holding their memories and their families close to our hearts throughout each step of this process,” the lawmakers wrote in the statement. “The collapse also caused serious consequences for our state’s economy, but the reality is that the whole country depends on the Port of Baltimore so the impact is felt far and wide.”

“This tragedy took reliable revenue and income from small businesses and hundreds of thousands of workers,” they added. “With this funding, we hope to relieve some of the economic burden and provide stability in a time of uncertainty and grief as teams work to restore the Port as swiftly and safely as possible.”

White House budget director Shalanda Young on Friday ahead of the visit wrote to Congress to urge lawmakers to authorize a “a 100 percent Federal cost share for rebuilding the bridge.”

“This authorization would be consistent with past catastrophic bridge collapses, including in 2007, when the Congress acted in a bipartisan manner within days of the I-35W bridge collapse in Minnesota,” Young wrote.

U.S. Sens. Ben Cardin and Chris Van Hollen as well as U.S. Rep. Kweisi Mfume, all Democrats, were at the Friday event with Biden and pledged to help move any legislation needed through Congress.

*Jennifer covers the nation’s capital as a senior reporter for States Newsroom. Her coverage areas include congressional policy, politics and legal challenges with a focus on health care, unemployment, housing and aid to families.*

## **The IRS is testing a free method to directly file taxes. But not everyone is thrilled.**

South Dakota included in initial rollout, but state treasurer signs letter criticizing program

BY: ASHLEY MURRAY - APRIL 5, 2024 1:42 PM

WASHINGTON — Many U.S. taxpayers in a dozen states for the first time can electronically file their federal returns directly to the Internal Revenue Service for free — but critics insist the new federal benefit is not needed and will even harm both users and states.

More than 50,000 taxpayers in Arizona, California, Florida, Massachusetts, Nevada, New Hampshire, New York, South Dakota, Tennessee, Texas, Washington and Wyoming have so far used the new online IRS Direct File program this tax season, according to the agency.

The free alternative to potentially costly private tax filing software rolled out in mid-March for the 2023 filing season. It is only available for those with W-2 income or simple credits and deductions, like the child tax credit or student loan interest.

The IRS estimates that 19 million taxpayers are eligible to use the new program in advance of the April 15 tax filing deadline.

But opponents argue the government Direct File program is a waste of resources and will snag business from professional tax preparers. They say it will confuse taxpayers who are accustomed to automatically filing their federal and state returns together through private software.

Some states also claim it will cost them revenue and increase what they have to spend on collections

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from taxpayers who owe money to their states.

The IRS program is purposefully small for now. The agency said in a launch-day release that it's following "best practices for launching a new technology platform by starting small, making sure it works and then building from there."

The pilot program "is almost tailor-made for students and young people with simple tax situations," IRS Commissioner Danny Werfel said in late March, encouraging people to visit the new [directfile.irs.gov](https://directfile.irs.gov).

The White House is celebrating the launch as a win for President Joe Biden, who in 2022 along with a Democratic-led Congress authorized its funding to jumpstart the program as part of the Inflation Reduction Act.

The progressive Economic Security Project estimates that if the program scales up, it could eventually save the average taxpayer up to \$160 annually in tax prep costs. Assuming broad public adoption, that could add up to Americans saving \$11 billion a year in filing fees and time.

The organization also estimates low-income households could gain up to \$12 billion in unclaimed federal tax credits, and that the IRS would see a return on investment of more than \$100 per federal dollar spent on the program due to less paperwork and fewer errors.

Roxy Caines, director of the Get It Back campaign, said Direct File could increase tax participation, particularly for low-income households.

"Having an accessible way to file taxes is really important because of the high cost of tax preparation as well as the arduous process. It's often viewed as intimidating," said Caines, who runs the financial literacy and tax credit advocacy campaign by the left-leaning Center on Budget and Policy Priorities.

## 'Unnecessary and unconstitutional'

But not everyone is on board.

When Werfel appeared in February before the U.S. House Committee on Ways and Means, Republican Chair Jason Smith of Missouri described the program as a "scheme the American people didn't ask for."

In January, 13 Republican attorneys general sent a letter to Treasury Secretary Janet Yellen opposing "the unnecessary and unconstitutional efforts to empower the Internal Revenue Service with the expansive authority to prepare and file tax returns for all taxpayers."

"American taxpayers do not want to invite the proverbial fox into the hen house," wrote the officials, led by Montana Attorney General Austin Knudsen.

Attorneys general from Georgia, Idaho, Iowa, Louisiana, Missouri, Nebraska, South Carolina, Tennessee, Texas, Utah, Virginia and West Virginia co-signed it.

The officials wrote that a program for taxpayers to directly file with the IRS at no cost "needlessly threatens" the livelihoods of tax preparers.

"Every year, tens of millions of taxpayers file their taxes for free with help from existing programs or online software. Additionally, millions of Americans work with small businesses in our states to file their taxes at an affordable cost, including both independent tax preparation services and local accountants. They choose to do so because they want an advocate in their corner who will represent their interests against the IRS bureaucracy," they wrote.

The IRS did not respond to a request for comment about the criticism.

Pete Sepp, president of the National Taxpayers Union, a fiscally conservative organization that advocates for simplifying the tax code, told States Newsroom the project has been "dramatically oversold" and is being piloted in "some very easy places," including states that don't collect their own income tax.

Money for the IRS would be better spent on improving customer service, he argues.

"Every single penny they can scrounge up from other places needs to be poured into that effort, right? Now, in our opinion, designing a portal for direct file that is underpowered and is competing with other services is just not a priority," he said, referring to the 22-year "Free File" arrangement the IRS has had with select private companies.

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## So what about Free File?

Today, the vast majority of taxpayers file electronically, according to IRS data. Of the 160 million individual federal tax returns that the IRS processed in 2022, 150.6 million, or 94%, were e-filed. Of those, just under 3.3 million used what's been criticized as an opaque and complicated electronic Free File program.

Free File dates back to the early 2000s, when the idea of e-filing was just budding, and the government had no such program in place.

President George W. Bush's administration was exploring the possibility of a free direct file portal through the IRS website.

At the time the agency was struggling after failed modernization efforts, and a public-private partnership with the burgeoning tax preparation software companies became an appealing option.

"The tax companies just said, 'Well, we got a deal for you,'" recalls Nina Olson, who served as the National Taxpayer Advocate for the IRS from 2001 to 2019.

"And at that time, I was very suspect of the deal. I said at the time that they're going to find themselves in 20 years, that you know, tax companies would pull out and you would have a patchwork of services available to people," Olson, who now runs the nonprofit Center for Taxpayer Rights, said in an interview with States Newsroom.

What began in 2002 was an agreement between the IRS and a group of private tax prep software companies, under the name Free File Alliance, to offer free federal tax returns to those under a certain income threshold. In 2023, that annual earnings threshold was \$79,000 or less.

Taxpayers who earn above that income threshold have the option to complete their federal returns for free, unguided, using fillable PDF tax forms.

The just over two-decade-old program has been scrutinized for not reaching the taxpayers who most need a free filing option and for not providing a better user experience.

A 2019 Treasury Inspector General for Tax Administration report described the program as "fraught with complexity and confusion."

The inspector general found that in 2018 only 2.5 million of the 104 million taxpayers eligible for Free File actually used it.

About 34.5 million of those Free File-eligible taxpayers used one of the alliance companies' commercial software options, and a likely 14 million of them paid to e-file their federal returns, the report found.

The low number of Free File users likely was because an estimated 9 million eligible taxpayers were unaware that they had to access the Free File software options via the IRS website.

Those who, for example, searched the web and found one of the IRS partner companies' websites were "not guaranteed a free return filing," and subsequently susceptible to advertising for potentially costly add-ons like "audit defense," the report found.

Investigative reporting in 2019 by ProPublica revealed deliberate tactics to cloud the Free File program by Intuit, maker of TurboTax, one of the Free File Alliance's largest partners.

Terms between the IRS and Free File Alliance initially included a commitment from the agency to not develop its own free online filing program. In exchange, the partner companies agreed to limit advertising and add-on solicitation on their free file web pages.

In 2019 the IRS dropped the prohibition on developing its own program. Limits on company marketing and solicitation for add-on products continued as part of the agreement — though Intuit would eventually have to pay for breaking its commitment.

H&R Block and Intuit respectively left the Free File Alliance in 2020 and 2021. Together they served about 70% of eligible Free File taxpayers in 2019, according to a 2022 Government Accountability Office report that recommended the IRS develop additional options for taxpayers to file for free.

Acknowledging the opposing viewpoints on whether the IRS should create, or could handle, its own program, the report concluded the agency "should work to manage the risk of taxpayers having fewer options to electronically file their federal taxes for free."

In 2022, Intuit settled with attorneys general from across the U.S., agreeing to pay \$141 million to Intuit

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TurboTax customers who ended up buying services that should have been free to them.

Today there are eight companies in the Free File Alliance, with differing income and tax situation criteria. All are listed on the IRS website.

Olson said she doesn't view the IRS Direct File pilot as a competitor to the already existing Free File partnership. Rather, it's "one more component of a robust tax online taxpayer account," she said.

"This is what countries do around the world. We're so far behind," Olson said. "There's a response to folks who say 'The government doesn't need to do this' or 'There's no interest in this product.' Regardless of whether there's interest in the product, it's a government obligation."

## Congressional mandate

Among the tens of billions of dollars Congress authorized for the IRS in the Inflation Reduction Act, \$15 million was earmarked for exploring the possibility of an IRS-run direct federal tax filing system.

Specifically Congress mandated the agency to use the money to survey taxpayers' wants and needs, obtain a third-party opinion, and report back to lawmakers on the costs to create and run such a program.

In its third-party review, the left-leaning think tank New America assessed that a successful IRS-run Direct File program "depends critically" on whether the agency prioritizes the project and begins with limited testing before building up.

The organization estimated that development, staffing, infrastructure and customer service for a scaled-up platform would cost the IRS annually anywhere from \$22 million to \$47 million if 1 million taxpayers use a Direct File program, and up to \$126 million to \$213 million in the event that 25 million taxpayers jump on board.

New America also recommended the IRS consider the importance of customer service, data privacy and taxpayers' habits of filing federal and state returns all on one platform — one of the main concerns from critics.

Ayushi Roy, deputy director of New America's New Practice Lab, which led the review, told States Newsroom she's been talking to taxpayers using the Direct File pilot and "broadly speaking, we're finding that filers are really landing on either 'Wow,' or 'it didn't include me for now.'"

The group will conduct its own analysis of the IRS trial run, particularly focusing on the experience for Spanish-speaking filers.

As for taxpayer interest, the IRS found that 72% of survey respondents said they were "very interested" or "somewhat interested" in a free IRS-provided tool to prepare and file federal taxes.

The survey conducted in 2022 by MITRE, a nonprofit that runs federally funded research and development centers, also found that a top reason cited by 46% of those interested is that they would rather give their financial data to the IRS than to a third party.

An October 2023 report from the Treasury Inspector General for Tax Administration took issue with the design of the survey, warning that the interest level may be "overstated" because the survey did not include a "neutral" option for respondents to choose.

However, the largely Democrat- and progressive-aligned international polling firm GQR found in late January through early February that between 92% and 95% of taxpayers across political ideologies and income levels in Arizona, Florida, Georgia, New York and Texas support a free online IRS filing service.

Several state governments already offer free public electronic filing for state income tax returns, including Alabama, Kansas, Kentucky and Pennsylvania, which offer the service regardless of income level. Some states, like California and Iowa, have income thresholds for free filing.

## States bite back

Despite the adoption of free public filing in some states, 21 state auditors, comptrollers and treasurers from 18 states sent a letter on March 25 to Yellen and Werfel expressing concern about the "serious harm" the IRS Direct File program will cause and urging them to "shut down" the service.

"Taxpayers are not the only parties who will suffer from Direct File. States will suffer too. States will lose

out on payments from Direct File taxpayers who owe state taxes but incorrectly assume that Direct File covers federal and state filings.

"States will then have to increase resources dedicated to collection efforts," wrote the officials from Alaska, Florida, Idaho, Indiana, Iowa, Kansas, Kentucky, Louisiana, Mississippi, Nebraska, North Carolina, Ohio, Oklahoma, South Carolina, South Dakota, Utah, West Virginia and Wyoming. South Dakota's signer is State Treasurer Josh Haeder.

According to the Treasury Department, taxpayers using the IRS Direct File pilot in Arizona, California, Massachusetts or New York are automatically directed to their state-supported tax filing websites. Those in Washington are sent to that state's page to claim the Working Families Tax Credit.

The IRS could not provide a more specific figure of how many taxpayers have so far used Direct File, and its latest estimate stands at 50,000. Advocates say they expect to learn updated numbers as soon as a week after federal taxes are due on April 15.

*Ashley Murray covers the nation's capital as a senior reporter for States Newsroom. Her coverage areas include domestic policy and appropriations.*

## Health and Human Services increases loan forgiveness for OBs, midwives who practice in rural areas

Policy change comes amid increase in 'maternal care deserts'

BY: KELCIE MOSELEY-MORRIS - APRIL 5, 2024 6:00 AM

The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services announced Thursday a \$25,000 increase in loan forgiveness available to primary care providers in designated underserved areas. That means qualifying individuals are eligible for up to \$75,000 in forgiveness if they commit to two full-time years of service.

The amount is available to medical and osteopathic doctors, including OB-GYNs, pediatricians, nurse practitioners and midwives, and physician assistants who practice in areas with shortages of primary care providers. The move is meant to help rural and historically underserved communities provide primary care services.

It could also help areas that have been deemed "maternal care deserts" after clinics closed because adequate staffing levels could not be maintained, leaving care limited or completely absent and forcing people to travel long distances for standard appointments. This has especially been a problem in states with abortion bans since 2022, including Idaho, Mississippi and South Dakota.

Idaho has lost 22% of its practicing OB-GYNs since a near-total abortion ban went into effect in late 2022, along with half of the state's maternal-fetal medicine specialists, and three clinics across the state closed their labor and delivery units in the same time frame. Doctors have said it has been difficult to recruit new physicians to fill those positions — one doctor said Wednesday that out-of-state applications for openings have dropped significantly.

According to March of Dimes, nearly 7 million people of reproductive age live in a county that is considered a maternity care desert as of 2022, or about 35%. That number has reportedly grown in the past two years. About 2.2 million of those people live in an area with no hospital providing obstetric care, no birth center and no obstetrics providers. The 2022 report showed more than 97,000 Ohioans were affected by reductions in access to maternity care, the highest of any state.

Another 11.4%, according to the report, live in an area considered to have low access to maternity care, meaning fewer than two hospitals or birth centers providing maternity services and fewer than 60 OB-GYN providers. Research also notes challenges finding care in rural and medically underserved communities disproportionately affect people of color, particularly Black patients.

Medical school costs have grown, and associated debt has increased four-fold over the past 30 years, according to HHS, but the maximum loan forgiveness had remained at \$50,000 until now. The Health Resources and Services Administration division of HHS is responsible for the program.

An additional maximum of \$5,000 in loan repayment will be available for those who pass an oral exam

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showing they are fluent in Spanish and practice in high need areas with patients who have limited proficiency in English. Research from the American Medical Association has shown those patients have worse health outcomes and provider experiences.

HHS is also working to create new primary care residency programs in rural communities, which would provide 540 openings for physicians in specialty care, once operational, according to the release. It is also conducting more than 25,000 training sessions for practicing primary care providers, including OB-GYNs, nurse midwives and other maternal care providers to diagnose and treat mental health conditions among pregnant patients, new moms, children and adolescents.

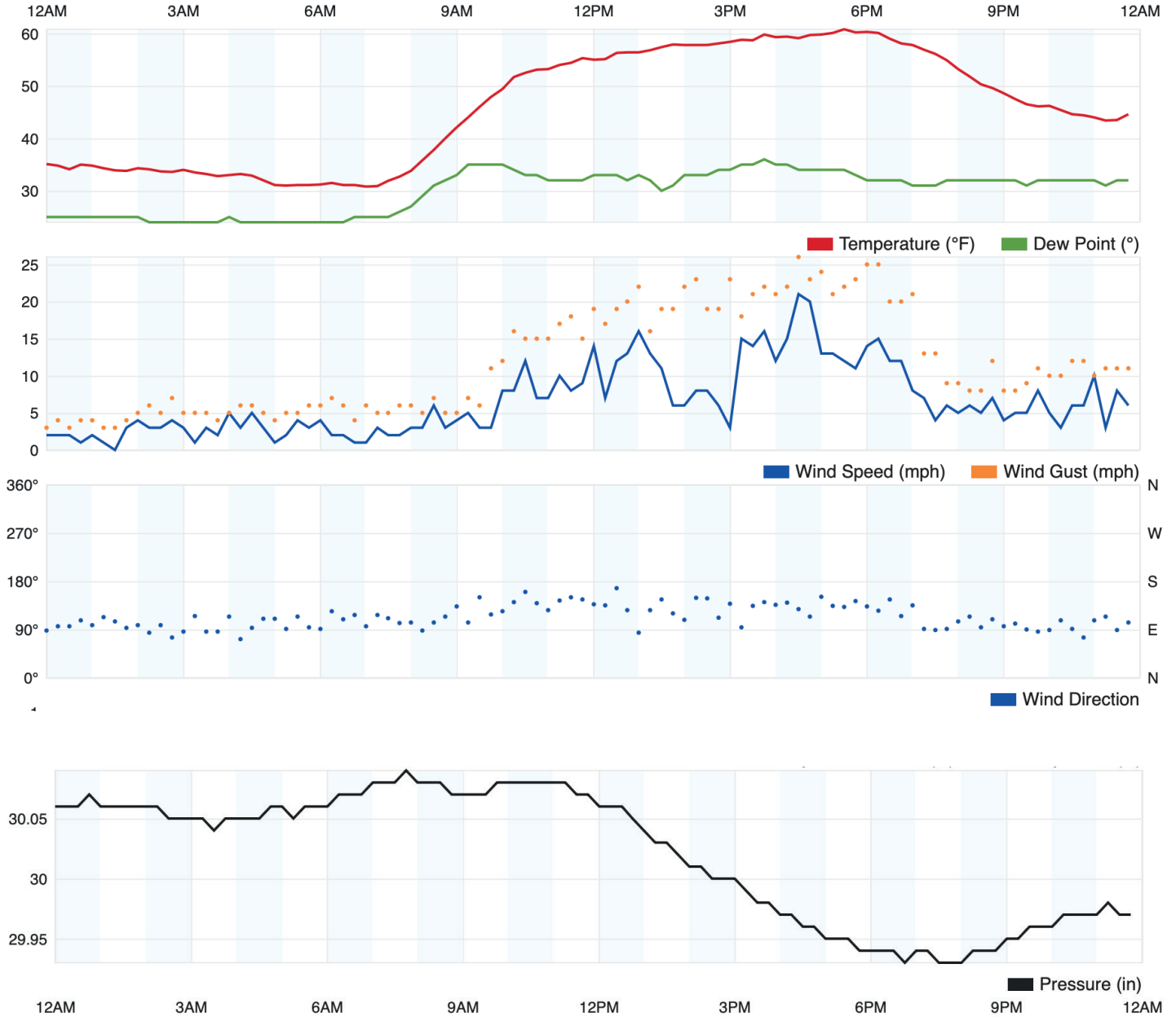
The National Health Service Corps Loan Repayment Program is accepting applications until May 9.

*Kelcie Moseley-Morris is an award-winning journalist who has covered many topics across Idaho since 2011. She has a bachelor's degree in journalism from the University of Idaho and a master's degree in public administration from Boise State University. Moseley-Morris started her journalism career at the Moscow-Pullman Daily News, followed by the Lewiston Tribune and the Idaho Press.*

# Groton Daily Independent

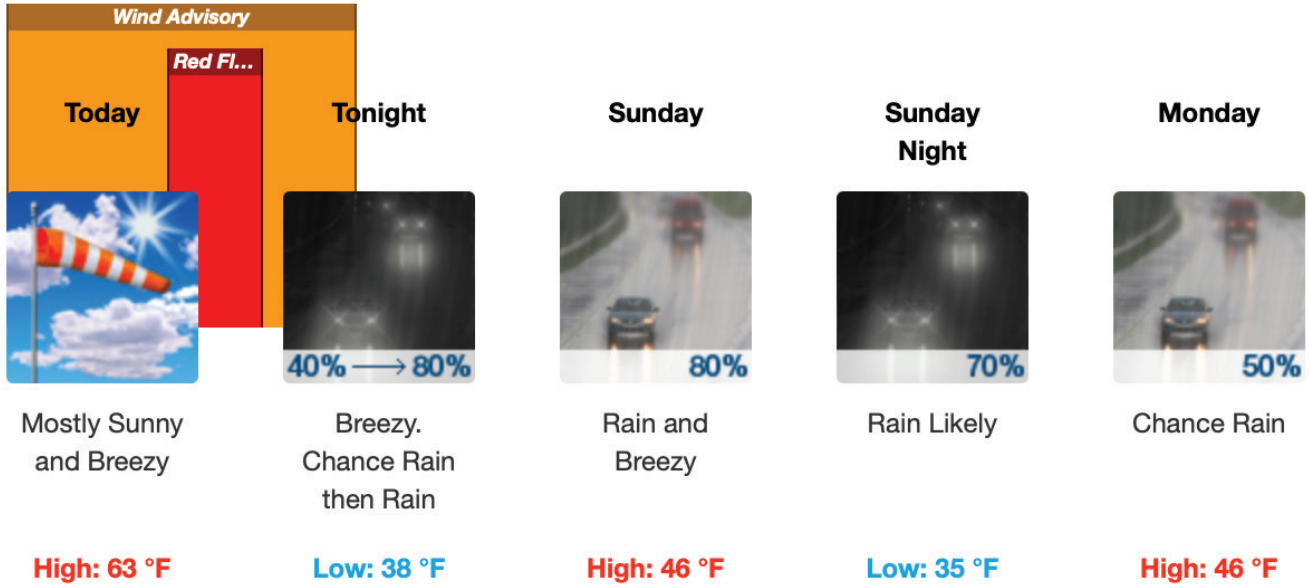
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## Yesterday's Groton Weather Graphs



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## Mild, Windy Today, Turning Cooler, More Damp on Sunday

### Today

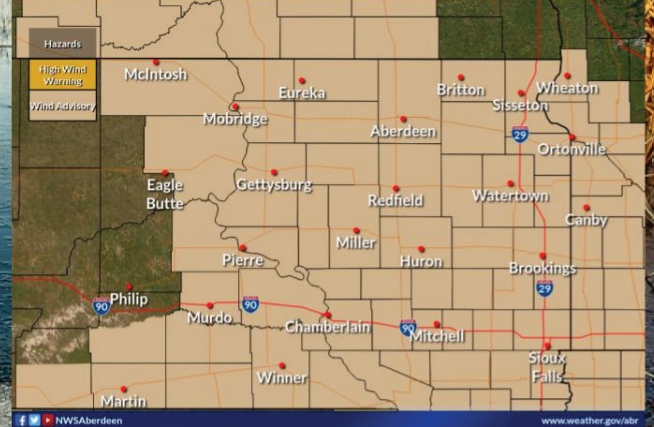
- Partly Sunny, Windy & Mild. Highs 56-65°
- SE Winds 25-35 mph with Gusts 40-50 mph
- Afternoon Very High-Extreme Fire Danger
- Increasing Rain Chances tonight

### Sunday

- Cloudy & Windy with a 60-90% chance for rain
- Cooler with highs 42-52°
- E/NE Winds 20-30 mph with Gusts 30-40 mph

### Strong Winds Today

Gusts of 40 to 50 mph possible



National Weather Service  
Aberdeen, SD

Temperatures will be mild today, but southeasterly winds will gust in excess of 40 mph at times. A Wind Advisory is in effect through this evening.



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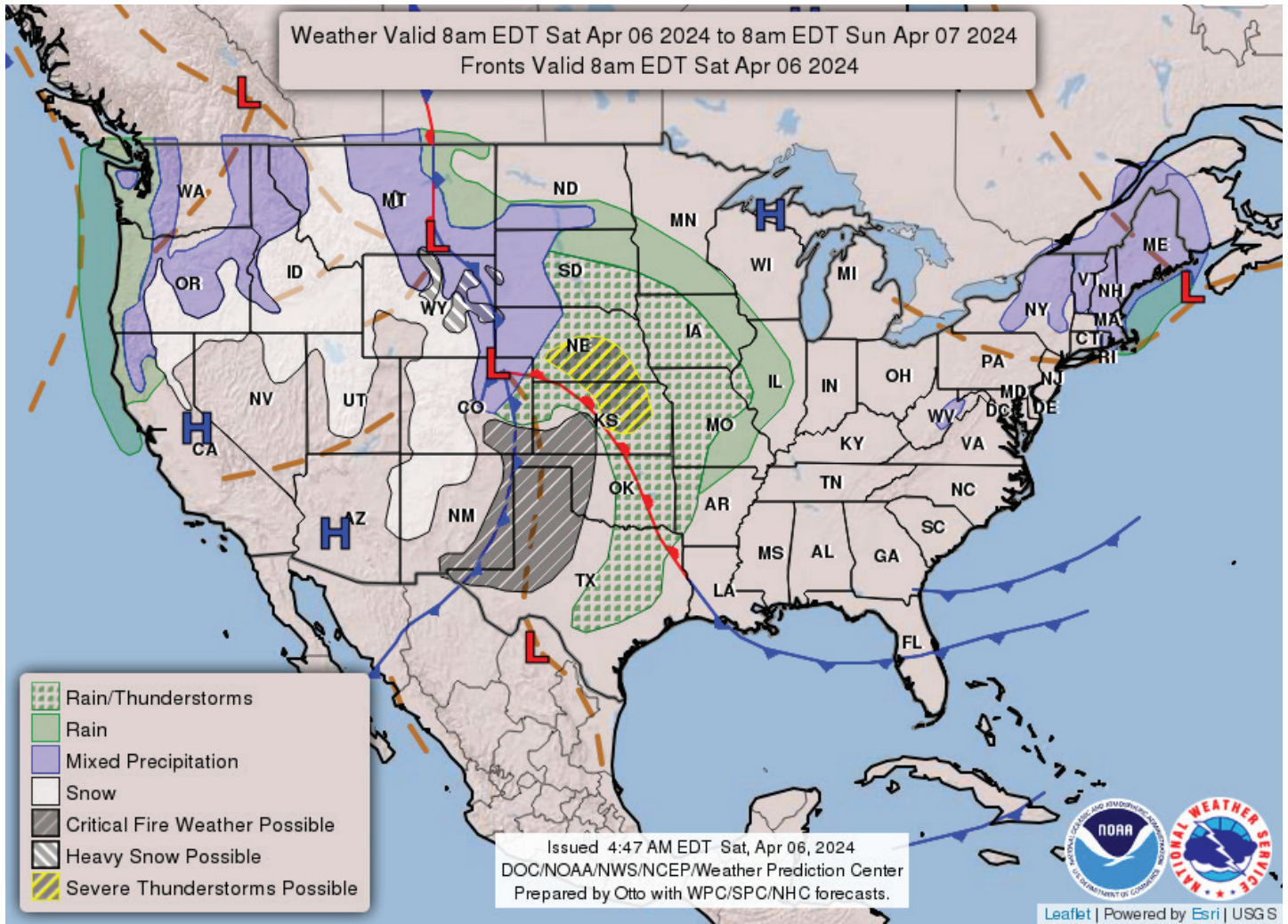
## Yesterday's Groton Weather

**High Temp: 61 °F at 5:31 PM**  
**Low Temp: 30 °F at 7:07 AM**  
**Wind: 30 mph at 5:20 PM**  
**Precip: : 0.00**

Day length: 13 hours, 08 minutes

## Today's Info

Record High: 85 in 1991  
Record Low: 0 in 2023  
Average High: 53  
Average Low: 28  
Average Precip in April.: 0.26  
Precip to date in April: 0.00  
Average Precip to date: 2.32  
Precip Year to Date: 0.85  
Sunset Tonight: 8:08:59 pm  
Sunrise Tomorrow: 6:58:19 am



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## Today in Weather History

April 6, 1959: Dust storms impacted much of the state of South Dakota beginning on the 6th and on into the 7th. The preceding drought period had left a little moisture in the soil, so the fall-plowed fields in exposed locations eroded severely. Strong winds on the 6th and 7th lifted the loose soil, creating areas of blowing dust. In the localities, visibility was less than a quarter mile for short periods. Some observers stated that it was the worst dust event since the 1930s.

April 6, 2006: Severe thunderstorms the morning of the 6th produced large hail up to 1.75 inches in diameter near Miller in Hand County. Later on, heavy rains of 3 to 6 inches fell causing flash flooding across parts of Spink, Clark, and Day counties. Many county and township roads were flooded with several of the roads damaged or thoroughly washed out. Areas around Frankfort, Doland, Turton, Conde, Crandall, Raymond, Butler and Bristol were most affected. Many roads were closed. Also, several basements were flooded, and sewers were backed up.

April 6, 2008: An area of low pressure moving across South Dakota spread heavy snow of 6 to 15 inches across much of central, north central, and northeast South Dakota. Also, strong winds gusting to 25 to 40 mph caused some blowing and drifting snow. Many activities were canceled and roads became treacherous. Many vehicles went into the ditch, and several accidents also occurred. Snowfall amounts included, 6 inches at Mission Ridge, Isabel, Mellette, and Britton, 7 inches at Faulkton, Andover, Columbia, Timber Lake, and Eureka, 8 inches at Bath, Selby, Mobridge, and Leola, 9 inches at Hosmer, 10 inches at Ipswich, 11 inches at Mound City, and 6 miles east of Hayes. Locations with a foot or more of snow included 12 inches at Roscoe and Elm Lake, 13 inches at Eagle Butte, Onaka, and 23 miles north of Highmore, and 15 inches at Bowdle.

1909: American explorer Robert Peary and five others reached what they determined to be the North Pole on this day. Historical analysis suggests he fell a few miles short of achieving his goal.

1936 - A tornado outbreak in the Deep South resulted in a total of 446 deaths and eighteen million dollars damage. It was a "Tale of Two Cities". During the evening of the 5th a tornado hit Tupelo MS killing 216 persons, injuring 700 others, and causing three million dollars damage. The next morning the paths of two tornadoes met about 8:30 AM and cut a swath four blocks wide through Gainesville GA killing 203 persons, injuring 934, and causing thirteen million dollars damage. Eight to ten feet of debris filled the streets following the storm. At least 70 persons died in the Cooper Pants Factory, the greatest tornado toll of record for a single building. (David Ludlum) (The Weather Channel)

1973: On this date through the 8th, a major spring snowstorm dumped 11.6 inches of snow across Denver, Colorado. Most of the heavy wet snow of 10.1 inches fell on the 7th when temperatures remained in the 20s. The low temperature of 5 degrees on the 8th was a new record low for the date and the lowest for so late in the season.

1983 - The temperature at Denver, CO, dipped to a record cold seven degrees above zero. (The Weather Channel)

1987 - Rain and melting snow caused flooding from New England to Ohio. Flooding in the Merrimack Valley of Massachusetts was the worst in fifty years, causing forty-two million dollars damage. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

1988 - A powerful storm produced wind gusts to 75 mph around Chicago, IL, and wind gusts to 92 mph at Goshen IN. The high winds created twenty-five foot waves on Lake Michigan. (Storm Data) (The National Weather Summary)

1989 - Unseasonably hot weather prevailed in California. Afternoon highs of 91 degrees in Downtown San Francisco, 93 degrees at San Jose, 98 degrees at San Diego, 103 degrees at Santa Maria, 104 degrees at Riverside, and 106 degrees in Downtown Los Angeles established records for the month of April. (The National Weather Summary)

1990 - Snow developed in the northeastern U.S. for the second time in the month. In Virginia, a heavy wet snow blanketed northern and central sections of the Shenandoah Valley, and eastern foothills, with up to 12 inches reported around Harrisonburg. Heavy snow also blanketed the high elevations of West Virginia, with 10 inches reported at Snowshoe. An inch of snow at Syracuse NY raised their total for the winter season to a record-tying 161.3 inches. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

2005 - Thunderstorms erupted and produced severe weather including 32 reports of tornadoes, most of which touched down in Mississippi and Louisiana. Between 20 and 25 homes were destroyed and 7 people were injured. Mississippi governor Haley Barbour declared a state of emergency (CNN).

2007: In Cleveland, Ohio on the 6th to the 9th: The opening-season series between the Indians and Minnesota Twins is wiped out by a snowstorm and a cold snap. The Indians led 4-0 when their home opener Friday on the 6th was called off by umpires because of heavy snow. The grounds crew who tried to make the field playable with backpack blowers and brooms spent more time on the field than the players during nearly three hours of stoppages. About a foot of snow remained on the ground Monday afternoon the 9th.

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Daily Devotionals

## Seeds of Hope

### CHOOSING SIDES

A minister had been invited to have dinner with President Abraham Lincoln shortly after his inauguration. Shortly after they gave thanks for the food, the minister said, "I hope the Lord's on our side. We are facing some difficult times!"

"I don't agree with you," said the president.

"What?" gasped the minister. "You don't agree that we need the Lord on our side?"

"No," replied Lincoln. "It is my prayer that I and this nation should be on the Lord's side."

When we ask God to be on the side of the choices we make or the paths we choose to follow, they may or may not be those that would honor God. The assumption is that God will be with us and bless us no matter what.

But when we choose to be on God's side, everything is different. We look to Him for guidance and instruction and do those things that are pleasing in His sight. Often individuals think that if we are a nation of slogans and signs that refer to God we will be honored and blessed by Him. Not so!

The Bible clearly and consistently reminds us that: Blessed is the nation whose God is the LORD!

Prayer: We acknowledge, Lord, that we cannot expect You to guide and guard us unless we willingly honor, worship and praise You. In Jesus' Name, Amen.

Scripture For Today: All of you who are on the Lord's side, come here and join me. Exodus 32:26



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:  
04.05.24

20 30 54 63 65 14

MegaPlier: 3x

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:  
**\$97,000,000**

NEXT DRAW:

PREVIOUS RESULTS

### LOTTO AMERICA

WINNING NUMBERS:  
04.03.24

11 16 20 27 47 4

All Star Bonus: 2x

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:  
**\$2,650,000**

NEXT DRAW: 13 Hrs 48 Mins 37 Secs

PREVIOUS RESULTS

### LUCKY FOR LIFE

WINNING NUMBERS:  
04.05.24

3 7 17 30 47 15

TOP PRIZE:

**\$7,000/week**

NEXT DRAW: 14 Hrs 3 Mins 37 Secs

PREVIOUS RESULTS

### DAKOTA CASH

WINNING NUMBERS:  
04.03.24

1 12 13 16 34

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:  
**\$45,000**

NEXT DRAW: 14 Hrs 3 Mins 37 Secs

PREVIOUS RESULTS

### POWERBALL

DOUBLE PLAY

WINNING NUMBERS:  
04.03.24

10 44 53 60 63 13

TOP PRIZE:  
**\$10,000,000**

NEXT DRAW: 14 Hrs 32 Mins 37 Secs

PREVIOUS RESULTS

### POWERBALL

WINNING NUMBERS:  
04.03.24

11 38 41 62 65 15

Power Play: 3x

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:  
**\$1,300,000,000**

NEXT DRAW: 14 Hrs 32 Mins 37 Secs

PREVIOUS RESULTS

## News from the Associated Press

### **Judge dismisses lawsuit of injured Dakota Access pipeline protester**

By JACK DURA Associated Press

BISMARCK, N.D. (AP) — A federal judge in North Dakota has dismissed the excessive-force lawsuit of a New York woman who was injured in an explosion during the protests of the Dakota Access oil pipeline.

In orders on Wednesday and Friday, U.S. District Court Judge Daniel Traynor granted motions to dismiss the 2018 lawsuit by Sophia Wilansky, whose left forearm was injured in the blast from an “explosive munition” or a flashbang during a clash between protesters and law enforcement officers at a blocked highway bridge in November 2016. The lawsuit named Morton County, its sheriff and two officers.

The judge said Wilansky’s 2023 amended complaint “plainly shows the officers use of the munitions and grenades were set in place to disperse Wilansky from the area, not to stop her in her tracks. In addition, the Amended Complaint fails to allege the officers were attempting to arrest her under the circumstances. Such an omission is independently fatal.”

Thousands of people camped and demonstrated for months from 2016 to 2017 near the pipeline’s controversial Missouri River crossing upstream of the Standing Rock Sioux Tribe’s reservation. The tribe has long opposed the pipeline for the potential risk of an oil spill contaminating its water supply. A court-ordered environmental review of the pipeline crossing is ongoing, with draft options of removing, abandoning or rerouting the crossing, increasing the line’s safety features, or no changes. A final decision is expected later this year.

Wilansky alleged the officers “attacked her with less-lethal and explosive munitions” and nearly severed her hand. She sought “millions of dollars” in damages.

An attorney for Wilansky replied to an email from The Associated Press, but did not immediately comment. Wilansky’s father did not return a phone message. Attorneys for the defendants did not respond to a phone message. Morton County Sheriff Kyle Kirchmeier declined to comment, citing a possible appeal.

The judge also noted Wilansky’s “horrific injuries to her forearm” and her allegations that the officers laughed at her and congratulated one on his “marksmanship.”

“While the Court appreciates the need for officer safety, it can be easy to devalue the human life officers are sworn to protect — in this instance, the protestors. The allegation of laughing and congratulating, if true, is appalling,” Traynor wrote in a footnote.

Also on Wednesday, he dismissed a similar, related lawsuit Wilansky filed against officers last year.

Other similar lawsuits connected to the protests continue to play out in court.

Last month, Traynor dismissed a 2022 lawsuit filed by an Oregon photojournalist who alleged officers used excessive force and violated her constitutional rights while she covered a 2017 demonstration.

The pipeline has been transporting oil since 2017.

### **Former tribal leader in South Dakota convicted of defrauding tribe**

RAPID CITY, S.D. (AP) — A jury on Thursday convicted a former tribal leader in South Dakota of defrauding his tribe out of thousands of dollars.

After a three-day trial, the jury convicted former Oglala Sioux Tribal President Julian Bear Runner, 38, of Pine Ridge, of six counts of wire fraud as well as larceny and embezzlement charges.

A 2022 federal indictment alleged Bear Runner submitted vouchers while he was president in 2019 and 2020 for work-related travel he didn’t go on, and received about \$80,000 in checks, which authorities said he took for his personal use, including gambling and hotel stays.

“When government leaders abuse positions of power for personal financial gain, it’s the public that pays the price,” South Dakota U.S. Attorney Alison Ramsdell said in a statement. “In this case, Julian Bear Runner stole more than \$80,000 from the Oglala Sioux Tribe, embezzling money that could have otherwise been used to improve life for those living throughout the Pine Ridge Reservation.”

The charges' maximum penalty includes 20 years in prison and/or a \$250,000 fine and three years of supervised release, according to Ramsdell's office. Bear Runner's sentencing date is yet to be set.

His public defender did not immediately return a phone message for comment.

Oglala Sioux Tribal President Frank Star Comes Out did not immediately respond to a text message for comment.

## For families of hostages, it's a race against time as Israel's war reaches six-month mark

By SAM MEDNICK Associated Press

JERUSALEM (AP) — It's the last wish of a dying mother, to be with her daughter once more. But six months into Israel's war against Hamas, time is running out for Liora Argamani, who hopes to stay alive long enough to see her kidnapped daughter come home.

"I want to see her one more time. Talk to her one more time," said Argamani, 61, who has stage four brain cancer. "I don't have a lot of time left in this world."

Noa Argamani was abducted from a music festival Oct. 7 when Hamas-led militants stormed into southern Israel, killing some 1,200 people and taking around 250 hostage. The video of her abduction was among the first to surface, images of her horrified face widely shared — Noa detained between two men on a motorcycle, one arm outstretched and the other held down as she screams "Don't kill me!"

There's been little news about Noa, 26. But in mid-January, Hamas released a video of her in captivity. She appears gaunt and under duress, speaking about other hostages killed in airstrikes and frantically calling on Israel to bring her and others home.

Half a year into Israel's war, agonized families such as the Argamanis are in a race against time. In November, a weeklong cease-fire deal saw the release of more than 100 hostages. But the war is dragging on, with no end in sight and no serious hostage deal on the table. Israel says more than 130 hostages remain, with about a quarter of those believed dead, and divisions are deepening in the country over the best way to bring them home.

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has vowed to both eliminate Hamas and bring all the hostages back, but he's made little progress. He faces pressure to resign, and the U.S. has threatened to scale back its support over the humanitarian situation in Gaza.

Israelis are divided into two main camps: those who want the government to put the war on hold and free the hostages, and others who think the hostages are an unfortunate price to pay for eradicating Hamas.

"They have these two goals and the assessment of the type of risk they're willing to take to get the hostages back — this is where you see divisions," said Shmuel Rosner, a senior fellow at the Jewish People Policy Institute and analyst for Israeli public television station Kan News.

On-and-off negotiations mediated by Qatar, the United States and Egypt have yielded little. If a viable deal emerges, decisions will become harder and the divisions sharper, Rosner said.

But for most families and friends whose loved ones are in captivity, there is no choice but to bring them home. Many are concerned in particular about the women held in Gaza and say, based on testimonies from freed hostages, they fear those remaining could be suffering from sexual abuse.

Before a recent parliamentary committee meeting, attendees held posters showing the hostages. Yarden Gonen, whose 23-year-old sister, Romi, also was taken from the Oct. 7 music festival, criticized what she said was the government's inaction.

"What are we fighting for?" she said. "What is more important than this?"

Outside an art installation mimicking the Gaza tunnels where some hostages are believed to be held, Romi's mother said she can't believe it's been half a year, with much of the world wanting to forget or ignore such a horrible situation.

"We are doing everything we can so the world will not forget," Merav Leshem Gonen said. "Every day we wake up and take a big breath, deep breath, and continue walking, continue doing the things that will bring her back."

When Yonatan Levi saw the video of his friend Noa Argamani in captivity, he said he could barely recognize the smart, free spirit of the woman who loved parties and traveling and was studying computer science. "When I saw that video, I thought maybe she's living physically but has died inside," said Levi, who met Argamani during a diving course in the southern Israeli city of Eilat.

A few months before her abduction, Argamani asked Levi to help navigate insurance issues for her mom, he said. As an only child, she was a big part of her mother's life and care, and she seemed hopeful she would be OK, Levi said.

But Liora Argamani's cancer has worsened, according to a video released by the Hostages and Missing Families Forum.

In it, Liora and her husband tearfully thumb through childhood photos of Noa. From her wheelchair, Liora addresses the camera — and U.S. President Joe Biden directly. Behind her rests an enlarged photo of Noa's pained face as she's dragged into Gaza, on a posterboard with her words overtop: "DON'T KILL ME!"

"My heart really hurts," Liora, a Chinese immigrant, says slowly in accented Hebrew. "I am asking you, President Joe Biden. ... I am really begging you."

The stress of missing a loved one like Noa is hard on the healthiest of people, and it will only exacerbate a condition like cancer, said Ofrit Shapira Berman, a psychoanalyst who heads a group of health professionals treating freed hostages, families and survivors.

"The fact that so much of her psychic energy is invested in her daughter's trauma leaves her lesser chance to survive," Berman said.

In the video, Noa's father, Yaakov Argamami, strokes the family photo albums and chokes back tears.

"I miss everything about her," he says. "Her hug. The hug I wanted to ..."

Unable to finish, he simply nods and the camera cuts away.

## **Mexico is breaking diplomatic ties with Ecuador after police stormed the embassy in Quito**

QUITO, Ecuador (AP) — The Mexican president has quickly moved to break off diplomatic ties with Ecuador after police broke into the Mexican Embassy to arrest a former Ecuadorian vice president who had sought political asylum there after being indicted on corruption charges.

Andrés Manuel López Obrador made the announcement Friday evening after Ecuadorian police forced their way into the embassy in the capital, Quito, to arrest Jorge Glas who has been residing there since December. Glas, arguably the most wanted man in Ecuador, has been convicted on bribery and corruption charges and Ecuadorian authorities are still investigating more allegations against him.

Police broke through the external doors of the Mexican diplomatic headquarters in the Ecuadorian capital and entered the main patio to get Glas.

"This is not possible. It cannot be. This is crazy," Roberto Canseco, head of the Mexican consular section in Quito, told local press while standing outside the embassy. "I am very worried because they could kill him. There is no basis to do this. This is totally outside the norm."

Defending its decision, Ecuador's presidency said in a statement: "Ecuador is a sovereign nation and we are not going to allow any criminal to stay free."

López Obrador fired back, calling Glas' detention an "authoritarian act" and "a flagrant violation of international law and the sovereignty of Mexico."

Alicia Bárcena, Mexico's secretary of foreign relations, posted on the social platform X that a number of diplomats suffered injuries during the break-in, adding that it violated the Vienna Convention on Diplomatic Relations.

Diplomatic premises are considered "inviolable" under the Vienna treaties and local law enforcement agencies are not allowed to enter without the permission of the ambassador. WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange lived inside the Ecuadorian Embassy in London for seven years because British police could not enter to arrest him.

Bárcena said that Mexico would take the case to the International Court of Justice "to denounce Ecu-



dor's responsibility for violations of international law." She also said Mexican diplomats were only waiting for the Ecuadorian government to offer the necessary guarantees for their return home.

Ecuador's Foreign Ministry and Ecuador's Ministry of the Interior did not immediately respond to a request for comment.

The Mexican Embassy in Quito remained under heavy police guard late Friday.

A day earlier, tensions between the two countries escalated after Mexico's president made statements that Ecuador considered "very unfortunate" about last year's election, won by Ecuadorian President Daniel Noboa.

In reaction, the Ecuadorian government declared the Mexican ambassador persona non grata.

## **Israel says its strike that killed aid workers was a mistake. Rights groups say it was no anomaly**

By LEE KEATH Associated Press

CAIRO (AP) — Two basic mistakes, according to the Israeli military. First, officers overlooked a message detailing the vehicles in the convoy. Second, a spotter saw someone boarding one car, carrying something — possibly a bag — that he thought was a weapon. Officials say the result was the series of Israeli drone strikes that killed seven aid workers on a dark Gaza road.

The Israeli military has described the deadly strike on the World Central Kitchen convoy as a tragic error. Its explanation raises the question: If that's the case, how often has Israel made such mistakes in its 6-month-old offensive in Gaza?

Rights groups and aid workers say Monday night's mistake was hardly an anomaly. They say the wider problem is not violations of the military's rules of engagement but the rules themselves.

In Israel's drive to destroy Hamas after its Oct. 7 attacks, the rights groups and aid workers say, the military seems to have given itself wide leeway to determine what is a target and how many civilian deaths it allows as "collateral damage."

More than 33,000 Palestinians have been killed in Israel's offensive, around two-thirds of them women and children, according to Gaza's Health Ministry. Its count doesn't distinguish between civilians and combatants.

Israel says it is targeting Hamas fighters and infrastructure and that it tries to minimize civilian deaths. It blames the large number of civilian casualties on militants and says it's because they operate among the population. Israel says each strike goes through an assessment by legal experts, but it has not made its rules of engagement public.

### **OTHER STRIKES**

In the thousands of strikes Israel has carried out, as well as shelling and shootings in ground operations, it's impossible to know how many times a target has been wrongly identified. Nearly every day, strikes level buildings with Palestinian families inside, killing men, women and children, with no explanation of the target or independent accountability over the proportionality of the strike.

Sarit Michaeli, spokeswoman for the Israeli human rights group B'Tselem, said the World Central Kitchen strike drew world attention only because foreigners were killed.

"The thought that this is a unique case, that it's a rare example — it's an insult to the intelligence of anyone who has been following the situation," she said.

She said a broader investigation is needed into the rules of engagement: "The relevant questions aren't asked because the investigations only deal with specific cases, rather than the broader policy."

Israel's chief military spokesman, Daniel Hagari, acknowledged, "Mistakes were conducted in the last six months."

"We do everything we can not to harm innocent civilians," he told reporters. "It is hard because Hamas is going with civilian clothes ... Is it a problem, is it complexity for us? Yes. Does that matter? No. We need to do more and more and more to distinguish."

But the military hasn't specified how it will achieve this.

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Brig. Gen. Benny Gal, who was part of the investigation into the World Central Kitchen strikes, was asked whether more questions should be asked before a strike is authorized.

"This was not our standards," he said. "The standard is more questions, more details, more crossing sources. And this was not the case."

## WHITE FLAGS

Palestinian witnesses have repeatedly reported people, including women and children, being shot and killed or wounded by Israeli troops while carrying white flags. Several videos have surfaced showing Palestinians being fired at or killed while seeming to pose little threat to Israeli forces nearby.

In March, the military acknowledged it shot dead two Palestinians and wounded a third while walking on a Gaza beach. It said troops opened fire after the men allegedly ignored warning shots. It reacted after the news channel Al Jazeera showed footage of one of the men falling to the ground while walking in an open area and then a bulldozer pushing two bodies into the garbage-strewn sand. It said at least two of the three men were waving white flags.

Aid groups have also reported strikes on their personnel.

Medical Aid for Palestine said its residential compound in the southern area of Muwasi – which the military had defined as a safe zone – was hit in January by what the U.N. determined was a 1,000-pound bomb. Several team members were injured and the building damaged, the group said.

The group said the Israeli military gave it multiple explanations – denying involvement, saying it was trying to hit a target nearby and blaming a missile that went astray. "The variety of responses highlights a continued lack of transparency," the group said.

The medical charity Doctors Without Borders said a tank shelled a house sheltering its staff and their families in Muwasi in February, killing one staffer's wife and daughter-in-law.

Both groups said they had informed the military repeatedly of their locations and clearly marked the buildings.

Israeli admissions of mistakes are rare.

In December, after a strike killed at least 106 people in the Maghazi camp, the military said buildings near the target were also hit, likely causing "unintended harm to additional uninvolved civilians." It also admitted soldiers mistakenly shot to death three Israeli hostages who were waving white flags after getting out of Hamas captivity in Gaza City.

## 'THE PATTERN'

In Israel's ground assaults, troops are operating in urban environments, searching for Hamas fighters while surrounded by a population hunkering in their homes and in motion, trying to flee or find food and medical care.

Some Israeli politicians and news outlets regularly proclaim there are no innocents in Gaza. And in some videos circulated online, soldiers talk of getting vengeance for the Oct. 7 Hamas attacks that sparked the war.

In that atmosphere, Palestinians and other critics say, soldiers on the ground appear to have wide liberty in deciding whether to target someone as suspicious. Residents and medical staff in Gaza say they see the result.

Dr. Tanya Haj-Hassan, a doctor with Medical Aid for Palestinians who just returned from two weeks at a Gaza hospital, said staff regularly treated children and elderly shot by snipers.

"It's not an anomaly. It's actually the pattern," she told journalists in a briefing this week. "I don't think it's that children in particular are singled out as targets. The understanding and kind of the conclusion you reach ... is that everybody's a target."

Chris Cobb-Smith, a former British army and weapons expert who's done research and security missions in Gaza, said that if there was a breakdown in communication in the case of the World Central Kitchen strike, "for a professional army, this is inexcusable."

"There seems to be a consistent pattern of utterly reckless behavior," said Cobb-Smith, who helped investigate the Doctors Without Borders shelling.

Chris Lincoln-Jones, a former British intelligence staff officer who has worked in the defense industry including alongside an Israeli drone manufacturer, said the investigation showed unprofessional actions and poor command and control: "They don't operate proper battle space management."

Even if a gunman had been in the car with aid personnel, he said, it wouldn't justify a strike "unless the gunman was actually shooting at someone from the car."

"No way that a NATO drone pilot would do that. I would expect to be prosecuted for doing that. I would expect to face the possibility of prison."

## US and China plan talks on economics, including manufacturing 'overcapacity' issue, Yellen says

By FATIMA HUSSEIN and KEN MORITSUGU Associated Press

GUANGZHOU, China (AP) — The U.S. and China agreed to hold talks that will address a key American complaint about China's economic model, Treasury Secretary Janet Yellen said Saturday on the second day of an official visit to China.

The two sides will hold "intensive exchanges" on more balanced economic growth, according to a U.S. statement issued after Yellen and Chinese Vice Premier He Lifeng held extended meetings over two days in the southern city of Guangzhou.

They also agreed to start exchanges on combating money laundering, the U.S. statement said.

Yellen, who headed to Beijing after starting her five-day visit in one of China's major industrial and export hubs, said the exchange on balanced growth would create a structure to hear each other's views and try to address American concerns about manufacturing overcapacity in China.

"I think the Chinese realize how concerned we are about the implications of their industrial strategy for the United States, for the potential to flood our markets with exports that make it difficult for American firms to compete," Yellen told reporters after the announcement.

"It's not going to be solved in an afternoon or a month, but I think they have heard that this is an important issue to us."

China's official Xinhua News Agency said that the two sides had agreed to discuss a range of issues including balanced growth of the United States, China and the global economy as well as financial stability, sustainable finance and cooperation in countering money-laundering.

It added in an initial dispatch that China had responded fully on the issue of production capacity, but did not provide details. China also expressed grave concern over American trade and economic measures that restrict China, Xinhua said.

Chinese government subsidies and other policy support have encouraged solar panel and EV makers in China to invest in factories, building far more production capacity than the domestic market can absorb.

The massive scale of production has driven down costs and ignited price wars for green technologies, a boon for consumers and efforts to reduce global dependence on fossil fuels. But Western governments fear that that capacity will flood their markets with low-priced exports, threatening American and European jobs.

"It's going to be critical to our bilateral relationship going forward and to China's relationship with other countries that are important, and this provides a structured way in which we can continue to listen to one another and see if we can find a way forward that will avoid conflict," Yellen told reporters.

The exchanges on balanced growth and money laundering will be held under the framework of existing economic and financial working groups that were set up after Yellen met He in July.

Yellen struck a positive note on joint efforts to address U.S. concerns about Chinese companies selling goods to Russia following its invasion of Ukraine.

"We think there's more to do, but I do see it as an area where we've agreed to cooperate and we've already seen some meaningful progress," she said.

Earlier state media coverage of her trip had characterized U.S. concerns about overcapacity as a possible pretext for tariffs. In a commentary published Friday night, Xinhua wrote that while Yellen's trip is a good sign that the world's two largest economies are maintaining communication, "talking up 'Chinese

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overcapacity' in the clean energy sector also smacks of creating a pretext for rolling out more protectionist policies to shield U.S. companies."

Yellen told reporters during an Alaska refueling stop en route to China that the U.S. "won't rule out" tariffs to respond to China's heavily subsidized manufacturing of green energy products.

The U.S. has made efforts through legislation and executive orders to wean itself off certain Chinese technologies in order to build out its domestic manufacturing capabilities. Many members of the White House and Congress view the actions as important to maintaining national security.

The \$280 billion CHIPS and Science Act passed in 2022 aims to boost the semiconductor industry and scientific research in a bid to create more high-tech jobs in the United States and help it better compete with China. Additionally, last August, U.S. President Joe Biden signed an executive order to block and regulate high-tech U.S.-based investments going toward China.

Yellen will hold meetings in Beijing with more senior officials and economists on Sunday and Monday.

## When will Fed cut rates?

### As US economy flexes its muscles, maybe later or not at all

By CHRISTOPHER RUGABER AP Economics Writer

WASHINGTON (AP) — Ever since the Federal Reserve signaled last fall that it was likely done raising interest rates, Wall Street traders, economists, car buyers, would-be homeowners — pretty much everyone — began obsessing over a single question: When will the Fed start cutting rates?

But now, with the U.S. economy showing surprising vigor, a different question has arisen: Will the central bank really cut rates three times this year, as the Fed itself has predicted — or even cut at all? The Fed typically cuts only when the economy appears to be weakening and needs help.

Lower interest rates would reduce borrowing costs for homes, cars and other major purchases and probably fuel higher stock prices, all of which could help accelerate growth. An even more robust economy might also benefit President Joe Biden's re-election campaign.

Friday's blockbuster jobs report for March reinforced the notion that the economy is managing quite nicely on its own. The government said employers added a huge burst of jobs last month — more than 300,000 — and the unemployment rate dipped to a low 3.8% from 3.9%.

Some analysts responded by arguing that it's clear the last thing the economy needs now is more stimulus from lower rates.

"If the data is too strong, then why are we cutting?" asked Torsten Slok, chief economist at Apollo Global Management, a wealth management firm. "I think the Fed will not cut rates this year. Higher (rates) for longer is the answer."

In March, the central bank's policymakers — as a group — had penciled in three rate cuts for 2024, just as they had in December. Some economists still expect the Fed to carry out its first rate reduction in June or July. But even at last month's Fed meeting, some cracks had emerged: Nine of the 19 policymakers forecast just two rate cuts or fewer for 2024.

Since then, Friday's jobs data, combined with an unexpectedly buoyant report showing that factory output is expanding again after months of contracting, suggested that the economy is extending an unexpected run of healthy growth. Despite the Fed's aggressive streak of rate hikes in 2022 and 2023, which sent mortgage rates and other borrowing costs surging, the economy is defying long-standing expectations that it would weaken.

Such trends have made some Fed officials nervous. Though inflation is down sharply from its peak, it remains stubbornly above the Fed's 2% target. Rapid economic growth could reignite inflation pressures, undoing the progress that has been made.

In a slew of speeches this past week, several Fed officials stressed that there was little need to cut rates anytime soon. Instead, they said, they need more information about where exactly the economy is headed.

"It's much too soon to think about cutting interest rates," Lorie Logan, president of the Federal Reserve Bank of Dallas, said in a speech. "I will need to see more of the uncertainty resolved about which eco-

conomic path we're on."

Raphael Bostic, head of the Atlanta Fed, said he favored just one rate cut this year — and not until the final three months. And Neel Kashkari, president of the Minneapolis Fed, sent stock prices falling Thursday afternoon after raising the possibility that the Fed might not cut at all this year.

"If we continue to see strong job growth," Kashkari said, "if we continue to see strong consumer spending and strong GDP growth, then that raises the question in my mind, well, why would we cut rates?"

Still, a strong economy and hiring, by themselves, might not necessarily preclude rate reductions. Chair Jerome Powell and other officials, such as Loretta Mester, president of the Cleveland Fed, have underscored that the main factor in the Fed's rate-cutting decision is when — or whether — inflation will resume its fall back to the central bank's 2% target. They note that the economy managed to grow briskly in the second half of 2023 even while inflation fell steadily. Inflation is just 2.5% now, according to the Fed's preferred measure, down from a peak of 7.1%.

Still, in January and February, "core" prices — which exclude volatile food and energy costs — rose faster than is consistent with the Fed's target, raising concerns that inflation hasn't been fully tamed.

As a result, the government's upcoming reports on inflation will be scrutinized for any signs that inflation is easing further. Wednesday's report on the consumer price index is expected to show that core prices rose 0.3% from February to March, which generally is too fast for the Fed's liking.

One reason why Powell suspects the economy can keep growing even as inflation cools is that the supply of workers has soared in the past two years. This trend makes it easier for the economy to produce more and avoid shortages even when demand stays strong. It also helps keep wage and price growth in check.

A surge in immigration in the past two years, most of it unauthorized, has dramatically increased the number of workers willing to fill jobs. Their entry into the job market has mostly ended the labor shortages that bedeviled the economy after the pandemic and caused wages to spike for workers in retail, restaurants, and hotels.

"There are significantly more people working," Powell said in a discussion at Stanford University this week. "It's a bigger economy, rather than a tighter one."

Whether that trend of a rising labor supply can continue this year will help determine the Fed's next steps.

Still, speaking at a conference at the San Francisco Fed last month, even Powell acknowledged that the healthy economy reduces the urgency of rate cuts: "This economy doesn't feel like it's suffering from the current level of rates."

Indeed, Slok and some Fed officials think borrowing costs aren't restraining the economy as much as they would have in the past. That's because in today's economy, several trends could keep growth, inflation and interest rates higher than in the past two decades. These include a more productive economy, larger government budget deficits and the return of some manufacturing to the United States, where it is more expensive, from overseas.

"It is extremely difficult to make the case that the Fed should be cutting rates at all — and arguably, the debate about raising rates again should be more lively than it is currently," said Thomas Simons, an economist at Jeffries, a brokerage.

## **Christiania, Copenhagen's hippie oasis, wants to rebuild without its illegal hashish market**

By JAN M. OLSEN Associated Press

COPENHAGEN, Denmark (AP) — The now-aging hippies who took over a derelict naval base in Copenhagen more than 50 years ago and turned it into a freewheeling community known as Christiania want to boot out criminals who control the community's lucrative market for hashish by ripping up the cobblestoned street where it openly changes hands.

Over the years, there have been many attempts to halt the illegal hashish sales which have often ended in violent clashes between criminal gangs and police, with trading then quickly resuming. On Saturday, residents started digging up Pusher Street, after which they can receive government money earmarked

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for the area's renovation.

Just after 10 a.m., two children living in Christiania, Emilia and Sally, lifted the first cobblestone from the infamous street in a symbolic move. A large crowd gathered at the scene erupted in applause as the heavy stone was showed around.

Danish Justice Minister Peter Hummelgaard, who was present at the ceremony, said he believes that the excavation of Pusher Street and the individual cobblestones has high symbolic value.

"For more than 40 years, Christiania and the illegal sale of drugs out here has been a huge thorn in the side of the established society," Hummelgaard told Danish broadcaster TV2. "But now we have reached the point where the Christianians have also had enough of the (criminal) gangs."

The plan is to create "a new Christiania without the criminal hashish market," said Mette Prag, coordinator of a new public housing project in the enclave. Prag, who has lived in Christiania for 37 years, likened it to "a village."

"We don't want the gangsters anymore," said Hulda Mader, who has lived in Christiania for 40 years. Once the illegal trade is gone, "there might be some people selling hashish afterward, but it's not going to be in the open."

After the cobblestones are removed, new water pipes and a new pavement will be laid on Pusher Street and nearby buildings will be renovated. That is the first step in an overall plan to turn the hippie oasis into an integrated part of the Danish capital area, although "the free state" spirit of creativity and community life is to be maintained.

For years, Danish authorities have been breathing down the necks of the downtown community.

In 1971, squatters took over the abandoned military facility and set up a neighborhood dedicated to the flower-power ideals popular at the time of free cannabis, limited government influence, no cars and no police. Since then, successive Danish governments have wanted to close Christiania because of the open sale of hashish, among other things, often leading to tense relations.

To begin with, the residents, called Christianites, disregarded laws by building houses without permits and often ignoring utility bills. Outsiders could only move into the community if they were related to someone already living there.

The residents eventually were given the right to use the land, but not to own it. After more than four decades of locking horns with authorities, they were given control over their homes in 2011, when the state sold the 84-acre (24-hectare) enclave for 125.4 million kroner (\$18.2 million) to a foundation owned by its inhabitants. Currently, nearly 800 adults and about 200 children live there, according to Prag, with up to 25% of the residents above the age of 60.

The following year, it was decided to erect public housing for up to 300 people. Construction is expected to start in 2027.

Prag said they want "younger people, more families" to move in who are willing to participate in community activities to keep the spirit of Christiania alive, complete with buildings painted in psychedelic colors and stray dogs.

Over the years, Christiania has become one of Copenhagen's biggest tourist attractions, a magnet for Danes as well as foreigners. Some come to be offended by the open sale of hashish — authorities for years tolerated the hashish trade on Pusher Street — and others to buy weed. Christiania banned hard drugs in 1980.

In 2004, police began cracking down on drug-related activities — worth millions according to police — controlled by the Hells Angels and the outlawed Loyal to Family. Even when police arrested dealers and fined customers, the illegal sales resumed soon afterward.

In August of last year, drug-related tensions escalated when when a turf war apparently led to a shooting in which one man died and several people were wounded.

Residents also have tried to stop the sales on Pusher Street themselves by tearing down the dealers' booths, but they mushroomed back. Residents blocked access to the street with huge shipping containers, but masked men removed them.

Fed up with criminals, residents decided in August that something had to be done, knowing that the government had said that getting rid of the organized hashish sales was "an important prerequisite" before Christiania could get 14.3 million kroner (\$2.1 million) earmarked for the renovation work.

Now, Christiania hopes that, by inviting ordinary people to come and help dig up Pusher Street, the sales will stop once and for all, and the community can remain an alternative yet legal part of Copenhagen without criminals.

"You can come and have a cobblestone" as a souvenir, Mader said with a smile.

## Earthquake aftershocks halt the demolition of a leaning building in Taiwan. Death toll rises to 13

TAIPEI, Taiwan (AP) — The demolition of a building that is leaning precariously after an earthquake in Taiwan was halted on Saturday because of aftershocks that made it lean even more, media reports said.

The red building, about 10 stories tall and inclined over a street in the city of Hualien, has become an iconic image from the magnitude 7.4 earthquake that also buried people under boulders at nearby Taroko National Park, a popular hiking destination about 25 kilometers (15 miles) northwest of Hualien.

The death toll rose to 13 after a third victim was found on the park's Shakadang Trail. Six other people are still missing, including three on the same trail. More than 400 people remained stranded three days after the quake in locations cut off by damage. Most are at a hotel in Taroko park.

Hundreds of aftershocks have struck the area since the Wednesday morning quake off Taiwan's east coast, including a magnitude-5.2 earthquake shortly before noon on Saturday.

Survivors have told harrowing tales of rocks tumbling onto roadways, trapping them in tunnels until rescuers arrived to free them.

The relatively low number of deaths from the powerful quake has been attributed to strict construction standards and widespread public education campaigns on the earthquake-prone island. The quake was the strongest to hit Taiwan since a magnitude 7.7 earthquake in 1999 that killed 2,400 people.

Rescuers were planning to bring in heavy equipment to try to recover two bodies pinned under boulders on the Shakadang Trail. The three dead and three missing on the trail include a family of five. Search and recovery work had been called off Friday afternoon because of aftershocks.

In Hualien, a city official said that experts would discuss how to proceed with the demolition of the leaning building. Offerings were made at a ceremony before the demolition began the previous day.

## Though Rwanda has come a long way since the 1994 genocide, scars of the past still haunt the nation

By RODNEY MUHUMUZA and IGNATIUS SSUUNA Associated Press

KIGALI, Rwanda (AP) — Rwanda is preparing to mark the 30th anniversary of the East African nation's most horrific period in history — the genocide against its minority Tutsi. To this day, new mass graves are still being discovered across the country of 14 million people, a grim reminder of the scale of the killings.

Delegations from around the world will gather on Sunday in the capital of Kigali as Rwanda holds somber commemorations of the 1994 massacres. High-profile visitors are expected to include Bill Clinton, the U.S. president at the time of the genocide, and Israeli President Isaac Herzog.

In a pre-recorded video ahead of the ceremonies, French President Emmanuel Macron said on Thursday that France and its allies could have stopped the genocide but lacked the will to do so. Macron's declaration came three years after he acknowledged the "overwhelming responsibility" of France — Rwanda's closest European ally in 1994 — for failing to stop the country's slide into the slaughter.

Here's a look at the past and how Rwanda has changed under President Paul Kagame, praised by many for bringing relative peace and stability but also vilified by others for his intolerance of dissent.

WHAT HAPPENED IN 1994?

An estimated 800,000 Tutsi were killed by extremist Hutu in massacres that lasted over 100 days. Some

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moderate Hutu who tried to protect members of the Tutsi minority were also targeted.

The killings were ignited when a plane carrying then-President Juvénal Habyarimana, a member of the majority Hutu, was shot down on April 6, 1994, over Kigali. The Tutsi were blamed for downing the plane and killing the president. Enraged, gangs of Hutu extremists began killing Tutsi, backed by the army and police.

Many victims — including children — were hacked to death with machetes. Kagame's rebel group, the Tutsi-led Rwandan Patriotic Front, managed to stop the killings, seized power and has since, as a political party, ruled Rwanda.

Kagame's government and genocide survivor organizations have often accused France of training and arming militias and troops that led the rampage, sometimes saying they expect a formal apology.

A report commissioned by Macron in 2019 and published in 2021 concluded that French authorities failed to see where Habyarimana's regime, which France supported, was headed and were subsequently too slow to acknowledge the extent of the killings. However, the report cleared France of any complicity in the massacres.

## WHAT CAME AFTER THE GENOCIDE?

After Kagame seized power, many Hutu officials fled into exile or were arrested and imprisoned for their alleged roles in the genocide. Some escaped to neighboring Congo, where their presence has provoked armed conflict. In the late 1990s, Rwanda twice sent its forces deep into Congo, in part to hunt down Hutu rebels.

Some rights groups accused Rwanda's new authorities of revenge attacks, but the government has slammed the allegations, saying they disrespect the memory of the genocide victims.

Kagame, who grew up as a refugee in neighboring Uganda, has been Rwanda's de facto ruler, first as vice president from 1994 to 2000, then as acting president. He was voted into office in 2003 and has since been reelected multiple times.

## WHAT'S THE POLITICAL LANDSCAPE LIKE?

Rwanda's ruling party is firmly in charge, with no opposition, while Kagame's strongest critics now live in exile. Kagame won the last presidential election, in 2017, with nearly 99% of the vote after a campaign that Amnesty International described as marked by suppression and a "climate of fear."

Critics have accused the government of forcing opponents to flee, jailing or making them disappear while some are killed under mysterious circumstances. Rights groups cite serious restrictions on the internet, as well as on freedom of assembly and expression.

Some claim Kagame has exploited alleged Western feelings of guilt over the genocide to entrench his grip on Rwanda.

Now a candidate in the upcoming July presidential election, Kagame has cast himself in the role of a leader of a growing economy marked by technological innovation, with his supporters often touting Rwanda as an emerging business hub in Africa.

## WHAT ABOUT RECONCILIATION?

Rwandan authorities have heavily promoted national unity among the majority Hutu and the minority Tutsi and Twa, with a separate government ministry dedicated to reconciliation efforts.

The government imposed a tough penal code to punish genocide and outlaw the ideology behind it, and Rwandan ID cards no longer identify a person by ethnicity. Lessons about the genocide are part of the curriculum in schools.

However, a leading survivors' group points out that more needs to be done to eradicate what authorities describe as "genocide ideology" among some Rwandans.

## WHAT DOES RWANDA LOOK LIKE TODAY?

The streets of Kigali are clean and free of potholes. Littering is banned. Tech entrepreneurs flock here from far and wide. Stylish new buildings give the city a modern look and an innovation center aims at nurturing local talent in the digital culture.

But poverty is rampant outside Kigali, with most people still surviving on subsistence farming. Tin-roofed



shacks that dotted the countryside in 1994 remain ubiquitous across Rwanda.

The nation is young, however, with every other citizen under the age of 30, giving hope to aspirations for a post-genocide society in which ethnic or tribal membership doesn't come first.

Corruption among officials is not as widespread as among other governments in this part of Africa, thanks in part to a policy of zero-tolerance for graft.

ARE THERE TROUBLES ON THE HORIZON?

Though mostly peaceful, Rwanda has had troubled relations with its neighbors. Recently, tensions have flared with Congo, with the two countries' leaders accusing one another of supporting various armed groups.

Congo claims Rwanda is backing M23 rebels, who are mostly Tutsi fighters based in a remote area of eastern Congo. The M23 rebellion has displaced hundreds of thousands in Congo's North Kivu's province in recent years. Rwanda says Congo's military is recruiting Hutu men who took part in the 1994 massacres.

U.N. experts have cited "solid evidence" that members of Rwanda's armed forces were conducting operations in eastern Congo in support of M23, and in February, amid a dramatic military build-up along the border, Washington urged Rwandan authorities to withdraw troops and missile systems from Congo.

In January, Burundi, whose troops are fighting alongside the Congolese military in eastern Congo, closed its border with Rwanda and started deporting Rwandans. This happened not long after Burundian President Evariste Ndayishimiye accused Rwanda of backing Congo-based rebels opposed to his government. Rwanda denies the allegation.

Rwanda has also been in the news recently over a deal with Britain that would see migrants who cross the English Channel in small boats sent to Rwanda, where they would remain permanently. The plan has stalled amid legal challenges. In November, the U.K. Supreme Court ruled the plan was illegal, saying Rwanda is not a safe destination for asylum-seekers.

## **Caitlin Clark leads Iowa rally for 71-69 win over UConn in women's Final Four. South Carolina awaits**

By DOUG FEINBERG AP Basketball Writer

CLEVELAND (AP) — Caitlin Clark eventually found a way.

Completely shut down in the first half, the most exciting player in women's college basketball now has one game left in her storied career at Iowa. She'll try to cap it off by bringing the Hawkeyes their first national championship.

Clark scored 21 points and made three momentum-turning 3-pointers in the second half to rally Iowa past Paige Bueckers and UConn 71-69 in the women's Final Four on Friday night.

Next up for the Hawkeyes (34-4) is a rematch with unbeaten South Carolina, which also had a perfect record last year before losing to Iowa in the national semifinals. The Hawkeyes then fell to LSU in the title game.

"South Carolina has been the top of the top. They're in a different league. We're going to do everything we can to try to be right there with them," Clark said. "But, yeah, I think the biggest thing is enjoy this tonight and we'll go over the scout early in the morning."

After a rough opening 30 minutes because of a swarming UConn defense, the NCAA Division I career scoring leader scorer finally got going in the fourth quarter.

With the game tied at 51, Clark scored seven points in the first 2 1/2 minutes of the period — including one of her signature step-back 3s — to give Iowa a small cushion. UConn (33-6) cut it to 60-57 before the Hawkeyes scored six straight to take a 66-57 advantage.

Iowa led 70-66 before Nika Muhl hit a 3-pointer after a steal with 39.3 seconds left to get the Huskies within one.

Iowa's Hannah Stuelke turned it over with 10 seconds left. UConn had a chance to take the lead, but Aaliyah Edwards was called for an offensive foul while setting a screen with 3.9 seconds left.

Clark made one free throw but missed the second. Teammate Sydney Affolter got the rebound after Stuelke tipped it and UConn tied her up, forcing a jump ball. The possession arrow kept the ball with the

Hawkeyes, who sealed the win by throwing the ball in the air to run out the final seconds.

Stuelke scored 23 points to lead Iowa. Clark finished with nine rebounds and seven assists.

"I thought we started off the fourth quarter really good," Clark said. "Came up with some big baskets. Hannah came up with some baskets. Kate (Martin) was tremendous. Just resilient."

Bueckers and Edwards each scored 17 points for the Huskies, who were back in the Final Four after a one-year hiatus that ended their run of 14 straight seasons in the national semifinals.

This might have been one of the best coaching jobs by Geno Auriemma. UConn had hopes of winning the 12th title in school history coming into the season, but those were quickly dashed by a series of injuries that sidelined nearly half of its roster.

But Bueckers, the national player of the year as a freshman in 2021 who returned to that form after missing an entire season and part of another with injuries, carried the Huskies back into title contention.

"We put ourselves in position to win a game that we probably had no business being in given the circumstances we worked with," Auriemma said. "In the moment, when you're trying to win the game and don't win the game, you don't think you're lucky to be here, you just think about we had an opportunity to win this game and we didn't."

UConn got going early behind Bueckers and stellar defense by Muhl and her teammates, who swarmed Clark every time she touched the ball. The Huskies led by 12 points in the second quarter.

"That's what you're going to see at this point. They're gonna really sell out on me," Clark said. "I thought my teammates stepped up did a really good job, made some big baskets when we needed it. I couldn't be more proud of them. It takes all five of us."

Iowa trailed by six at the half before getting going in the third quarter behind their star. She made her first 3-pointer of the game 2 minutes into the period, and then her four-point play got Iowa within one. The Hawkeyes then took their first lead later in the period right before Martin got hit in the face by Edwards, resulting in a bloody nose. She ran off the court, leaving a trail of blood behind her.

Martin was back on the Iowa bench before they had finished cleaning the court. She then hit three big baskets down the stretch and finished with 11 points.

"Couldn't be happier with our performance tonight in the second half," Iowa coach Lisa Bluder said. "First half was a little rough for us. We really kept believing."

Clark had a tough first half, scoring six points while missing all six of her 3-point attempts. She barely got any open shots and at times looked frustrated. Iowa's coaches kept shouting words of encouragement to their generational player.

Even though she wasn't scoring, Clark kept the Hawkeyes in the game with six rebounds and four assists as the Hawkeyes trailed 32-26 at the break.

"We got some good looks. They just didn't go in. And sometimes that's just what happens," Clark said. "We missed some easy bunnies around the rim. But I think the best thing about our group is we went into the locker room at halftime and it wasn't, like, oh, come on, you've got to make shots. It was, no, stop turning the ball over and you're going to be perfectly fine."

## **Donald Trump is demanding a new judge just days before the start of his hush-money criminal trial**

By MICHAEL R. SISAK Associated Press

NEW YORK (AP) — Former President Donald Trump is demanding a new judge just days before his hush-money criminal trial is set to begin, rehashing longstanding grievances with the current judge in a long-shot, eleventh-hour bid to disrupt and delay the case.

Trump's lawyers — echoing his recent social media complaints — urged Manhattan Judge Juan M. Merchan to step aside from the case, alleging bias and a conflict of interest because his daughter is a Democratic political consultant. The judge rejected a similar request last August.

In court papers made public Friday, Trump's lawyers said it is improper for Merchan "to preside over

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these proceedings while Ms. Merchan benefits, financially and reputationally, from the manner in which this case is interfering" with Trump's campaign as the presumptive Republican presidential nominee.

The trial is scheduled to begin April 15. It is the first of Trump's four criminal cases scheduled to go to trial and would be the first-ever criminal trial of a former president.

Merchan didn't immediately rule. The decision is entirely up to him. If he were to exit, it would throw the trial schedule into disarray, giving Trump a long-sought postponement while a new judge gets up to speed.

Messages seeking comment were left for a court spokesperson and for Merchan's daughter, Loren Merchan. The Manhattan district attorney's office said it sees no reason for Merchan to step aside.

The defense's claims that Loren Merchan is profiting from her father's decisions require "multiple attenuated factual leaps here that undercut any direct connection" between her firm and this case, prosecutor Matthew Colangelo wrote in a letter to the judge.

"This daisy chain of innuendos is a far cry from evidence" that Judge Merchan has a direct, personal or financial interest in reaching a particular conclusion, Colangelo wrote.

Loren Merchan is president of Authentic Campaigns, which has collected at least \$70 million in payments from Democratic candidates and causes since she helped found the company in 2018, records show.

The firm's past clients include President Joe Biden, Vice President Kamala Harris and Senate Majority PAC, a big-spending political committee affiliated with Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer. Senate Majority PAC has paid Authentic Campaigns \$15.2 million, according to campaign finance disclosures.

In a separate development Friday, Merchan blocked Trump's lawyers from forcing NBC to provide them with materials related to its recent documentary about porn actor Stormy Daniels, a key prosecution witness. He ruled that the defense's subpoena was "the very definition of a fishing expedition" and didn't meet a legal burden for requiring a news organization to provide access to its notes and documents.

On Wednesday, Merchan rejected the presumptive Republican nominee's request to delay the trial until the Supreme Court rules on presidential immunity claims he raised in another of his criminal cases. The judge has yet to rule on another defense delay request — this one alleging he won't get a fair trial because of "prejudicial media coverage."

The hush money case centers on allegations that Trump falsified his company's records to hide the nature of payments to his former lawyer Michael Cohen, who helped Trump bury negative stories during his 2016 campaign. Among other things, Cohen paid Daniels \$130,000 to suppress her claims of an extramarital sexual encounter with Trump years earlier.

Trump pleaded not guilty last year to 34 felony counts of falsifying business records. He has denied having a sexual encounter with Daniels. His lawyers argue the payments to Cohen were legitimate legal expenses.

Trump foreshadowed his lawyers' renewed push to have Merchan exit the case with posts assailing the judge and his daughter last week on his Truth Social platform.

Trump suggested, without evidence, that Merchan's rulings — including his decision to impose a gag order on Trump — were swayed by his daughter's consulting interests. He wrongly claimed that she had posted a social media photo showing him behind bars. Trump's attacks on Loren Merchan led the judge to expand the gag order to prohibit him from making public statements about his family.

"The Judge has to recuse himself immediately, and right the wrong committed by not doing so last year," Trump wrote on March 27. "If the Biased and Conflicted Judge is allowed to stay on this Sham 'Case,' it will be another sad example of our Country becoming a Banana Republic, not the America we used to know and love."

Trump similarly pressed the judge in his Washington, D.C., election interference case to recuse herself, claiming her past comments about him called into question her ability to be fair. But U.S. District Judge Tanya Chutkan said there was no reason for her to step aside.

Merchan's daughter featured prominently in the defense's calls for his recusal last year. They also seized on several small donations the judge made totaling to Democratic causes during the 2020 campaign. They totaled \$35, including \$15 to Biden.

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Merchan rejected that request, writing last August that a state court ethics panel had found that Loren Merchan's work had no bearing on his impartiality. The judge said he was certain of his "ability to be fair and impartial" and said Trump's lawyers had "failed to demonstrate that there exists concrete, or even realistic reasons for recusal to be appropriate, much less required on these grounds."

Trump's lawyers contend circumstances have now changed, with Trump locked in a rematch against President Joe Biden, and Democrats — including clients of Loren Merchan's firm — seeking to capitalize on Trump's legal troubles with fundraising emails framed around developments in the hush-money case.

"It would be completely unacceptable to most New Yorkers if the judge presiding over these proceedings had an adult child who worked at WinRed or MAGA Inc.," Blanche and Necheles wrote, referring to a Republican fundraising platform and a pro-Trump fundraising committee.

In seeking Merchan's recusal, Trump's lawyers also took issue with his decision to give an interview to The Associated Press last month, suggesting he may have violated judicial conduct rules, and they questioned his use of a court spokesperson last week to deny Trump's claims that she had posted the image of Trump in jail.

In the interview, Merchan told the AP that he and his staff were working diligently to prepare for the historic first trial of a former president, saying: "There's no agenda here. We want to follow the law. We want justice to be done."

## What is Eid al-Fitr and how do Muslims celebrate the Islamic holiday?

By MARIAM FAM Associated Press

CAIRO (AP) — Muslims around the world will soon bid farewell to the Islamic holy month of Ramadan and start celebrating the holiday of Eid al-Fitr. Eid is marked with congregational prayers and festivities that typically include family visits, gatherings and new clothes.

This year, Eid will come just after the Israel-Hamas war crosses the somber milestone of having stretched on for half a year. During Ramadan, as Muslims around the world savored the traditions of their diverse communities, advocacy, prayers and charity for Palestinians in Gaza were high on the minds of many.

What's Eid al-Fitr?

It's an Islamic holiday marking the end of Ramadan, the month when devout Muslims fast daily from dawn to sunset. Ramadan is a time of increased worship, charity, and good deeds.

Eid al-Fitr means the feast, or festival, of breaking the fast.

When is Eid al-Fitr?

Islam follows a lunar calendar and so Ramadan and Eid cycle through the seasons. This year, the first day of Eid al-Fitr is expected to be on or around April 10; the exact date may vary among countries and Muslim communities.

What are some common Eid greetings?

Eid Mubarak, or Blessed Eid, and Happy Eid.

What are some of the traditions and customs associated with Eid al-Fitr?

In Indonesia, the world's most populous Muslim-majority country, many people embark on an exodus to their hometowns to celebrate the holiday with loved ones. This year, an estimated 193.6 million travelers are expected to crisscross the vast archipelago for Eid in a homecoming tradition known locally as "mudik."

In the past two years of Eid celebrations, Indonesians crammed into trains, ferries, buses and onto motorcycles as they poured out of major cities amid severe traffic congestion to return to their villages to celebrate the holiday with families. Flights were overbooked and anxious relatives, weighed down with boxes of gifts, formed long lines at bus and train stations for the journeys.

Before the holiday, popular markets teem with shoppers buying clothes, shoes, cookies and sweets.

In Malaysia, Muslims also have a homecoming tradition for Eid. The first day usually begins with a morning prayer in the mosque, seeking forgiveness from family and friends, and visiting loved ones' graves.

There's an "open house" spirit that sees friends and families trading visits to celebrate Eid and enjoy traditional delicacies such as ketupat, rice cooked in a palm leaf pouch, and rendang, a meat dish stewed in spices and braised in coconut milk.

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Older Muslims give money in green packets to children and guests who visit their homes.

In Egypt, families partake in Eid prayers amid a festive atmosphere. Many visit relatives, friends or neighbors and some travel to vacation spots. Children, usually wearing new Eid outfits, receive traditional cash gifts known as "eidiya."

Making or buying Eid cookies dusted with powdered sugar is another fixture of marking the holiday in the country.

In the United States, where Muslims make up an ethnically and racially diverse minority, many come together for Eid prayers and for festivals featuring fun activities for children and families. These often include such things as face painting and balloon twisting.

## **Some states are seeking to restrict TikTok. That doesn't mean their governors aren't using it**

By BROOKE SCHULTZ Associated Press/Report for America

HARRISBURG, Pa. (AP) — POV: You're on TikTok, and so is your governor — even as your Legislature considers banning the app from state-owned devices and networks.

Efforts to ban TikTok over security concerns about China's influence through the platform have picked up steam in the past year in state legislatures, with an expansive ban even proposed by Congress. In Pennsylvania, forward movement on a bill that first unanimously passed the state Senate last year could send legislation to the Democratic governor's desk imminently.

But even as the app faces scrutiny and bans, governors and state agencies — and even President Joe Biden — are still using the app to promote their initiatives and expand their voting pool. Their target is the youth vote, or the people who largely make up the app's U.S. user base of 170 million.

Pennsylvania Gov. Josh Shapiro, a Democrat, is a prolific poster, with his efforts beginning on the campaign trail through a personal account. The first-termer is a rising star in the Democratic Party and is among governors building national profiles and possibly positioning themselves for a 2028 run for the White House.

His careful messaging extends to his official governor account on TikTok. All colored with his priorities and stances, videos have him participating in viral trends, breaking down aspects of his budget proposal, and even taking a dig at Texas via a Beyoncé song.

Other governors use TikTok accounts — among verified accounts, only Democrats — even in states that have banned the app from state devices and networks.

It isn't surprising that politicians do use TikTok so much, said Anupam Chander, visiting scholar at the Institute for Rebooting Social Media at Harvard University. It's more surprising that they don't.

Such outreach draws its lineage to President Franklin Roosevelt's fireside chats, when Depression-era Americans would gather around the radio to hear his voice. More recently, social media has been galvanized in elections, like former President Barack Obama on Facebook in 2008, or former President Donald Trump on Twitter, now X, in 2016.

"This is an app that can be very personal. You can share your walk to the Senate chambers or your exhilaration as a vote is passed. Or your disappointment when a vote fails," he said. "This is a way to reach people in a very personal way."

Former GOP presidential candidate Vivek Ramaswamy made early and, well, liberal use of TikTok during his campaign, with one young Republican saying his social media presence "made him popular."

"A lot of younger voters seem receptive to candidates such as Ramaswamy, due to his young age and new-generation agenda," Victoria Carlson, a spokesperson for the George Washington University College Republicans, told CBS News in September.

In Michigan, the app was banned in March 2023 from government devices — with certain exceptions, like Democratic Gov. Gretchen Whitmer's promotional account, which has brought cute dog videos, her March Madness bracket and news about her initiatives to her roughly 245,000 followers.

In New Jersey, a government-affiliated app posts jokes and memes. An exemption in New Jersey's law banning TikTok from government devices allows for posts from non-state networks, with permission.

Other government accounts across the country have touted their state parks to drive tourism, events and small businesses.

In Pennsylvania, you have Shapiro and his steaming 'Get S—t Done' mug of tea — a nod to his edgy tagline — or slightly shaky footage as he records himself thanking teachers as his kids head back to school. As a play on the popular "point of view" videos where creators set up a scenario, Shapiro makes a concerned face with the overlaid text "POV: When extremists try to stop legal votes from counting."

"The governor believes, and this administration believes, that there should be no wrong door to accessing government," said Manuel Bonder, Shapiro's spokesperson.

TikTok is part of that landscape, he said. The administration has a phone dedicated only to making TikToks, off of state Wi-Fi, with no other apps on it, Bonder said.

A TikTok spokesperson wouldn't be quoted by name about legislation banning the app.

In 2022, researchers found more than 100 accounts for those running for Congress. A majority were Democrats, said Maggie Macdonald, assistant professor of political science at the University of Kentucky.

"It seems to be, Democrats are exclusively having this debate, in terms of having an account and talking of banning it," she said.

## State Republicans killed an Indiana city's lawsuit to stop illegal gun sales. Why?

By ISABELLA VOLMERT Associated Press

INDIANAPOLIS (AP) — Almost 25 years after suing the firearms industry for failing to prevent illegal gun sales, the northwestern Indiana city of Gary won a critical victory last fall when a judge ordered gun manufacturers to hand years of production and sales records.

But in March, Gov. Eric Holcomb signed a new law retroactively banning cities from bringing such lawsuits, effectively halting the case. Republicans said the gun industry is not responsible for illegal sales. Critics say the legislation shows lawmakers don't consider ending gun crime a priority and reflects their apathy for Gary's majority Black residents.

"There's gun violence everywhere you turn in America," longtime Gary resident Rev. Dena Holland-Neal said. "And someone has to be accountable."

Gary is more racially diverse than the rest of Indiana and, sitting just east of Chicago, is one of its few Democratic strongholds. Most of its estimated 67,970 population is Black in contrast to 10% of people statewide, according to the U.S. Census Bureau.

Hospital chaplain Carmen McKee, who counsels victims of gun violence and their families, said racism underscores the actions of policymakers who dismiss Gary's needs as, "It's just Gary" or "It's just another area of people of color."

"But yet they would not allow it to happen in their area," McKee said.

Gary was among dozens of U.S. cities to sue major gun-makers and sellers in reaction to the out-of-control homicide rates and violent crime of the 1990s. But the other cities' cases fell by the wayside, leaving Gary's as the last suit standing when, in November, a Lake County judge ordered manufacturers to produce decades of business records.

"This case has persevered because it's a valid claim," said Rodney Pol, an attorney on the case and a Democratic state senator representing Gary.

Indiana's Republican-dominated Legislature moved quickly to approve the new law this year, stipulating that only the state's attorney general can bring civil action against a firearm or ammunition manufacturer, and made it retroactive to Aug. 27, 1999, three days before Gary filed its lawsuit.

Rep. Chris Jeter, who wrote the legislation, told the House Committee on Judiciary that the judge's order would result in excessive costs for firearms manufacturers, which he said should not be held liable for illegal sales.

"I just think that there's an effort to try to end this use of the court system as a weapon against gun manufacturers," Jeter said.

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He made no attempt to hide that Gary was his intended target.

"This bill is an effort to take one last shot to try to eliminate this last pending case," he said.

Jeter did not respond to an Associated Press interview request.

The vocal minority Democratic caucus in the Indiana Legislature decried the new law for favoring firearms companies. State Rep. Ragen Hatcher, a former prosecutor who represents Gary, called it a "slap in the face" for attorneys and judges.

"That is something for the court to decide," Hatcher said.

Days after the governor signed the law, gun manufacturers asked the court to end Gary's suit. The judge stayed the discovery Tuesday until the conflict with the new law is resolved. A status conference is scheduled for May 8.

Attorneys for the defendants either did not respond to messages from the AP or declined to comment on the case.

Several of the gun manufacturers and retailers named in the lawsuit are on the board of the National Shooting Sports Foundation, which lobbies for the firearms and ammunition industries in Indiana and statehouses nationwide.

Lobbying records first reported by ProPublica and The Indianapolis Star show NSSF spent tens of thousands of dollars more on lobbying in Indiana last year than in the previous three years. Reports for this session haven't yet been filed.

"This case is, and always was, frivolous, an abuse of the legal system," Lawrence G. Keane, the senior vice president and general counsel for the group, said in a recent statement.

The Brady Center, a national organization supporting gun-control policy, represents Gary in the lawsuit. Philip Bangle, senior litigation counsel, said Brady plans to challenge the new state law.

For Gary residents and officials, the looming end of the lawsuit is a reminder of how the firearms industry has changed and the continued devastating impact of gun violence.

Technology and other changes over the past 20 years have made it easier to modify and re-sell illegal guns, Gary Deputy Police Chief Brian Evans said.

Violent crime offenders have trended younger during his three decades on the force, and often they are using guns acquired through illegal means, Evans said.

The case has been around for so long that Holland-Neal doubts it's even a topic of conversation among younger residents or recent arrivals. But she worries about the prevalence of firearms in her city and the rising tide of gun violence nationwide.

"There's such a need for this country to figure out some way to put some laws together that address gun violence, that make a difference," she said. "How that's going to happen? I'm honest with you, I have no idea."

## Democrats lean into border security as it shapes contest for control of Congress

By STEPHEN GROVES Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — With immigration shaping the elections that will decide control of Congress, Democrats are trying to outflank Republicans and convince voters they can address problems at the U.S. border with Mexico, embracing an issue that has traditionally been used against them.

The shift in strategy, especially from Democrats running in battleground states, comes as the Biden administration has struggled to manage an unprecedented influx of migrants at the Southwest border. Donald Trump, the presumptive Republican presidential nominee, has led his party in vilifying immigrants as "poisoning the blood" of the country and called for mass deportations of migrants. And as the GOP looks to flip control of the Senate, they are tying Democrats to President Joe Biden's handling of immigration.

The tactic has already figured large in elections like Arizona's Senate race, a seat Democrats almost certainly need to win to save their majority. Republican Kari Lake has repeatedly linked Rep. Ruben Gallego, the likely Democratic nominee, to Biden, telling the crowd at a March event that "there's really not

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a difference between the two.”

Democrats are no longer shrugging off such attacks: They believe they can tout their own proposals for fixing the border, especially after Trump and Republican lawmakers rejected a bipartisan proposal on border security earlier this year.

“It gives some Democrats an opportunity to say, ‘Look, I’m here for solutions,’” Gallego said. “Clearly, the Republicans are here to play games. And so whether it’s Kari Lake or Donald Trump, they’re not interested in border security. They’re interested in the politics of border security. And, we’re here to actually do something about it.”

During most of his five House terms, Gallego had been a member of the Congressional Progressive Caucus, but as he prepared for a Senate run, he quietly left the group. Now he’s emphasizing his work on bolstering the ranks of U.S. Customs and Border Protection and securing funding for communities impacted by recent spikes in immigration, which he calls a “crisis.”

Standing in front of the Santa Cruz County Sheriff’s Office in Arizona last month, Gallego slammed the GOP for blocking the bipartisan border bill.

“Every minute we wait means more fentanyl deaths, more strain on our first responders, and the looming possibility of street releases — something that no small community wants,” he said.

Just two states over, Democrats are hoping to bolster their chances of holding the Senate by pulling off a difficult feat — turning Texas blue, at least in one race. Some see a chance to flip a long-held GOP seat by fielding Rep. Colin Allred, D-Texas, against Sen. Ted Cruz.

Allred has emphasized his connection to border communities on the campaign trail and recounted how he had made childhood visits to Brownsville, Texas, where his grandfather worked as a customs officer.

“Our border communities are not just political backdrops, not just places you go to point out problems,” he said at a news conference last month. “They’re places where real people live, where they’re trying to raise their families.”

Both Allred and Gallego have joined a House task force focused on border security. Some Senate Democrats have also recently leaned into legislation focused on immigration enforcement. The Democratic Senatorial Campaign Committee has launched ads criticizing GOP senators for opposing the bipartisan Senate deal.

It is all a part of a strategy to neutralize the GOP’s advantage on the issue by convincing swing voters that Democrats are serious about border policy.

“Democrats aren’t going to win on immigration this year, but they have to get closer to a draw on the issue to get to a place where people take them seriously,” said Lanae Erickson, a senior vice president at Third Way, a centrist Democrat think tank. “Be palatable enough on that issue that people are then willing to consider other priorities.”

Still, Democrats face a difficult task when it comes to the politics of border security. A new poll from The Associated Press-NORC Center for Public Affairs Research has found that almost half of adults blame Biden and congressional Democrats for the current situation at the U.S.-Mexico border, while 41% blame Republicans in Congress.

Republicans are also using practically every tool in Congress to denounce Biden’s handling of the southern border. They are forcing Democrats to take tough votes on border security measures and demanding policy changes in return for aiding Ukraine. And the House in February impeached Homeland Security Secretary Alejandro Mayorkas for his handling of the southern border.

“The reason you’re seeing the Democrats talk about the border is because they have a political crisis, not because they’re trying to solve the border crisis,” said Sen. Steve Daines, the chair of the National Republican Senatorial Committee. “If they truly want to solve the border crisis, President Biden can go back to the Oval Office with a stroke of a pen and can make significant inroads in solving this problem. But he chooses not to.”

Daines visited Arizona this week as part of an effort to boost Lake, a fervent Trump supporter who has insisted that she lost a 2022 race for governor because of fraud. Republicans lost several Senate elections in 2022, including in Arizona, Pennsylvania and Nevada, after Trump-backed candidates struggled to raise



money and connect with a broader, more moderate range of voters during the general election.

This year, as Republicans look to win Senate seats in West Virginia, Montana, Ohio, Pennsylvania and Maryland, they are uniting around border policy changes. They are also bringing up past comments and votes from Gallego and Allred as well as vulnerable senators.

In Texas, one political action committee aligned with Cruz has launched an ad attacking Allred for calling the border wall "racist" in 2018. And according to an analysis by media tracking firm AdImpact, over \$26 million was spent in February on TV ads about the border and immigration in federal and down-ballot races in Texas, Arizona, Florida, Michigan, North Carolina, Wisconsin and Ohio by candidates, political groups and other groups.

Still, Democrats on Capitol Hill have all opposed Republican legislation that would bring back many of the Trump administration's border policies, including restarting construction of border walls.

"You're going to be painted as an open border Democrat no matter what, so talk about solutions," said Maria Cardona, a Democratic strategist.

She is urging candidates to lean into the immigration debate by discussing plans for border security and policies to help immigrants who have set up lives in the country. It's an approach that worked under former Presidents Bill Clinton and Barack Obama, she said.

Still, the shift in the way Democrats talk about the border could shape the future of immigration policy. The hardline immigration measures pursued by the Trump administration spurred a reaction by Democrats to oppose tough immigration enforcement measures. Now, some Democrats argue that the party should move away from a stance that border security and reforms for legal immigration should not be inextricably tied together. But that approach could also disenchant progressive and Latino voters.

"As we look towards the future, I would hope that Democrats see that despite all the noise we see about the border, people also really care about pathways to citizenship for immigrants who have been here for many years," said Beatriz Lopez, the deputy director of The Immigration Hub.

Most Democrats, including Gallego and Allred, still express support for that kind of immigration reform. But what's different is that Democrats also see the necessity of talking about their border policy proposals, said Rep. Henry Cuellar, a Texas Democrat.

"For so long, the Republicans have had a narrative about the border being a dangerous place and out of control," said Cuellar, who is leading the House Democrats for Border Security group. "I think it's important that Democrats also have a narrative about border security. We care about border security."

## **Brazil's Krenak Indigenous group gets literary esteem and an apology for dictatorship-era crimes**

By ELÉONORE HUGHES and MAURICIO SAVARESE Associated Press

RIO DE JANEIRO (AP) — It was a historic week for Brazil's Krenak people, getting both literary esteem and an apology for dictatorship-era crimes — both firsts for the Indigenous people of the country.

On Tuesday, the indigenous group received a formal apology for human rights abuses they suffered during the military dictatorship (1964-1985) — a first in Brazil. Then on Friday one of their leaders, renowned writer and environmentalist Ailton Krenak, earned a seat at the Brazilian Academy of Letters, the country's most exclusive literature body.

During Friday's ceremony, Krenak received a sword, a necklace and a diploma from his peers. Wearing an Indigenous headband and the academy's traditional green vest adorned with golden embroidery, he said he had come "to bring more languages" to the room.

"My relatives have come from different parts of Brazil to be here. I can't mention every ethnicity here, there are many," Krenak said in his speech. "I am here. I am Guarani, I am Kayapo, I am Xavante, I am them all."

Earlier, Krenak told the academy he wants to create a platform to make the institution's documents and books available in Indigenous languages, many of which are on the verge of disappearing.

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"We could do this for every native tongue. It is completely up to the Brazilian Academy of Letters to include another 170 languages beyond Portuguese," Krenak said.

"The idea is to prioritize spoken language, and not text. What threatens these (Indigenous) languages is the lack of speakers," he added. Among notable members of the Brazilian academy are Grammy-award winner Gilberto Gil and actress Fernanda Montenegro, who was nominated for best actress in the 1999 Academy Awards.

Tuesday's apology was also a ceremonious event. On a stage featuring Brazilian states' flags and in a crowded room packed with Indigenous people, some of whom were wearing traditional headdresses and black body paint, law professor Eneá de Stutz e Almeida knelt before Indigenous leader Djanira Krenak.

"In the name of the Brazilian State, I want to ask forgiveness for all the suffering your people have gone through," said de Stutz e Almeida, the president of the amnesty commission attached to the human rights ministry responsible for investigating the dictatorship's crimes.

Those crimes included forcing the Krenak off their land in southeastern Minas Gerais, where a so-called reformatory site was built. There, Indigenous peoples were tortured, beaten and forbidden to speak their languages.

The military also created a rural guard made up of Indigenous people, who were taught torture techniques. The commission also extended an apology to the Guarani Kaiowá Indigenous people, who were also chased off their land in Mato Grosso do Sul state to make way for farms run by non-Indigenous Brazilians.

Ailton Krenak fled his home territory when he was about 11 years old, only to return as an adult. The military thought "that Brazil could deal with native peoples in a paternalistic way and could prepare them for civilization," Krenak told The Associated Press in an interview following Tuesday's apology.

The cases about the Krenak and the Guarani Kaiowá Indigenous groups were first rejected by the amnesty commission in 2022, when members appointed by former President Jair Bolsonaro's government were in place. Prosecutors appealed both decisions.

The Bolsonaro presidency (2019-2022) facilitated mining, logging and large-scale agriculture in Indigenous territories.

President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva has long advocated for Indigenous peoples' rights and created eight new Indigenous-only territories since taking office for a third, non-consecutive term in 2023. He climbed the presidential ramp alongside Indigenous chief Raoni.

In Lula's first year, the amnesty commission changed its rules to allow for apologies to be issued not only to individuals but entire groups, paving the way for Tuesday's ceremony — and potentially many more.

The state's first-ever apology regarding the persecution of Indigenous peoples during the dictatorship echoes the request for forgiveness by Bank of Brazil for its role in the capture and enslavement of millions of Africans.

"All of the more than 300 Indigenous groups that exist in Brazil have a story to tell about the military period and, unfortunately, from my understanding, it's not a good one," said Rubens Valente, author of "The Rifles and the Arrows," a seminal book about the military regime's impact on Indigenous communities.

Indigenous peoples in contemporary Brazil continue to face threats to their livelihoods. A right-leaning Congress is seeking to pass legislation that does away with protections of Indigenous peoples' land rights. The country's top court is set to rule on the matter.

Ailton Krenak also said that an apology doesn't change the deep-seated social and economic problems faced by Indigenous peoples.

"I keep thinking about the situation of the Guarani Kaiowá who continue to be decimated by agribusiness. Will an apology stop the violence against them?" he said.

Indigenous peoples' memory, rites, culture and tradition have already suffered irreparable damage, Krenak said.

"If the old die, how will the young invent culture? This is the subject of my work. That's why I write," he added. \_\_\_\_

A previous version of this story misidentified Indigenous rights activist Shirley Djukurnã Krenak as Ailton Krenak's daughter. She is not.

## **Biden tours collapsed Baltimore bridge as clearing proceeds and declares 'your nation has your back'**

By WILL WEISSERT Associated Press

DUNDALK, Md. (AP) — President Joe Biden got a firsthand look Friday at efforts to clear away the “mangled mess” of remains of the collapsed Francis Scott Key Bridge in Baltimore, as cranes, ships and diving crews work to reopen one of the nation’s main shipping lanes.

Aboard Marine One, circling the warped metal remains and the mass of construction and salvage equipment trying to clear the wreckage of last week’s collapse, which killed six workers, Biden got an up close view of the devastation.

On the ground later, he received a briefing from local officials, the U.S. Coast Guard and Army Corps of Engineers on the situation in the water and its impacts on the region. The president also greeted police officers who helped block traffic to the bridge in the moments before it was hit by a ship — which helped avert an even larger loss of life.

“I’m here to say your nation has your back and I mean it,” Biden said from the shoreline overlooking the collapsed bridge in Dundalk, just outside Baltimore. “Your nation has your back.”

Eight workers — immigrants from Mexico, Guatemala, Honduras and El Salvador — were filling potholes on the bridge when it was hit by a huge cargo ship and collapsed in the middle of the night of March 26. Two men were rescued and the bodies of two others were recovered in subsequent days.

Authorities announced Friday evening that salvage divers had recovered, in the hours before Biden arrived, a third body from the water, that of Maynor Yasir Suazo-Sandoval, 38, one of the missing workers. They said the search for the other victims will continue.

The president also met for more than an hour with the families of those killed.

“The damage is devastating and our hearts are still breaking,” Biden said.

Officials have established a temporary, alternate channel for vessels involved in clearing debris. The Army Corps of Engineers hopes to open a limited-access channel for barge container ships and some vessels moving cars and farm equipment by the end of this month, and to restore normal capacity to Baltimore’s port by May 31, the White House says.

That’s important since longer delays in reopening shipping lanes could send shockwaves through the economy. As much as \$200 million in cargo normally moves through Baltimore’s port per day, and it is the leading hub for importing and exporting vehicles.

More than 50 salvage divers and 12 cranes are on site to help cut out sections of the bridge and remove them from the key waterway. Officials told Biden they had all the resources they need to meet the targets for opening the channel into the Baltimore port.

The president announced that some of the largest employers affected by the collapse, including Amazon, Home Depot and Domino Sugar, have committed to keeping their employees on payroll until the port is reopened. That followed days of outreach by state and federal officials to try to mitigate the economic impact.

“From the air I saw the bridge that has been ripped apart,” Biden said, “but here on the ground I see a community that’s pulled together.”

It is still unclear, though, how the costs of cleanup and building a new bridge will be covered.

The Federal Highway Administration has provided \$60 million in “quick release” emergency relief funds to get started. Exactly how much the collapse will ultimately cost is unclear, though some experts estimate recovery will take at least \$400 million and 18 months.

Biden said within hours of the collapse that “the federal government will pay for the entire cost of reconstructing that bridge, and I expect the Congress to support my effort.”

Senate Republican Leader Mitch McConnell likened the bridge collapse to assistance that flows after natural disasters and saying “the federal government will step up and do the lion’s share” of funding. But authorization could cause some squabbles in Congress.

The White House is asking lawmakers to authorize the federal government to cover 100% of the collapsed

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bridge cleanup and reconstruction costs, rather than seeking funding through a separate, emergency supplemental funding request.

In a letter to congressional leaders, Office of Management and Budget Director Shalanda Young noted similar techniques were used for recovery and rebuilding efforts that received bipartisan congressional support in 2007, when a highway bridge in downtown Minneapolis collapsed during evening rush hour, killing 13 people.

But some hard-line congressional Republicans are already lining up to demand politically controversial offsets for the funding. The conservative House Freedom Caucus issued a statement saying, "If it proves necessary to appropriate taxpayer money to get one of America's busiest ports back online, Congress should ensure it is fully offset and that burdensome regulations" are waved. It was referring to potential federal spending cuts elsewhere and to regulations like the Endangered Species Act.

The caucus's letter also suggested that approval for bridge recovery funds be tied to the Biden administration agreeing to lift a pause it has imposed on exportation of liquefied natural gas.

The funding questions only serve to heighten the collapse's political implications as Biden squares off with former President Donald Trump in November's election.

It's the second major disaster along the country's busy northeastern hub in as many years. Last summer, an overpass along Interstate 95 in Philadelphia caught fire and collapsed after a tanker truck slammed into it. Federal and state officials moved quickly on temporary repairs and ultimately reopened that section of the highway faster than expected.

But the cleanup and repairs in Baltimore will take far longer and be far more costly, making the chances it is a net political positive for Biden — especially in time for Election Day — far murkier. That hasn't stopped the Biden administration from championing anew a \$1 trillion-plus public works package that cleared Congress in 2021.

The bridge collapse also has thrust into the national spotlight Maryland's Democratic Gov. Wes Moore, 45, a leading voice in Biden's reelection campaign's effort to energize young voters on the 81-year-old president's behalf. The governor accompanied Biden on the helicopter tour and during his briefings.

Biden has traveled the country showcasing construction projects on highways, bridges and tunnels. In 2022, he arrived for an event in Pittsburgh just hours after a bridge nearby collapsed. Promoting the public works package also has allowed the president to lean into his love of train travel and many years commuting to and from Washington on Amtrak as a Delaware senator.

Biden said Friday that he'd been over the bridge "about a thousand times" commuting from Washington to his home in Delaware, prompting the state Department of Transportation chief to quip, "thank you for the tolls, sir."

## Former Trump officials are among the most vocal opponents of returning him to the White House

By MICHELLE L. PRICE Associated Press

NEW YORK (AP) — Former Defense Secretary Mark Esper has called him a "threat to democracy." Former national security adviser John Bolton has declared him "unfit to be president." And former Vice President Mike Pence has declined to endorse him, citing "profound differences."

As Donald Trump seeks the presidency for a third time, he is being vigorously opposed by a vocal contingent of former officials who are stridently warning against his return to power and offering dire predictions for the country and the rule of law if his campaign succeeds.

It's a striking chorus of detractors, one without precedent in the modern era, coming from those who witnessed first-hand his conduct in office and the turmoil that followed.

Sarah Matthews, a former Trump aide who testified before the House Jan. 6 committee and is among those warning about the threat he poses, said it's "mind-boggling" how many members of his senior staff have denounced him.

"These are folks who saw him up close and personal and saw his leadership style," Matthews said.

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"The American people should listen to what these folks are saying because it should be alarming that the people that Trump hired to work for him a first term are saying that he's unfit to serve for a second term."

Yet the critics remain a distinct minority. Republican lawmakers and officials across the party have endorsed Trump's bid — some begrudgingly, others with fervor and enthusiasm. Many aides and Cabinet officials who served under Trump are onboard for another term, something Trump's campaign is quick to highlight.

"The majority of the people who served in President Trump's cabinet and in his administration, like the majority of Americans, have overwhelmingly endorsed his candidacy to beat Crooked Joe Biden and take back the White House," said Trump campaign spokesman Steven Cheung.

Still, the Biden campaign has trumpeted the criticism of former Trump officials in statements and social media posts, hoping to convince at least some Republican voters — including those who backed other candidates during the GOP primary — that they cannot support his candidacy.

"Those who worked with Donald Trump at the most senior levels of his administration believe he is too dangerous, too selfish and too extreme to ever lead our country again — we agree," said Biden campaign spokesman Ammar Moussa.

In many ways, the schism among former Trump officials is an extension of his time in the White House. Friction was constant as Trump's demands ran into resistance from some officials and aides who refused requests that they found misguided, unrealistic and, at times, flatly illegal. Firings were frequent. Many quit.

Staff upheaval was particularly intense in the chaotic weeks after the 2020 election as Trump worked to overturn his election loss to Biden. Trump summoned supporters to Washington on Jan. 6, 2021, as his falsehoods about a stolen election became the rallying cry for supporters who violently breached the U.S. Capitol. Many people serving in the administration quit in protest, including Matthews.

Trump's attempt to remain in office included a bitter pressure campaign against Pence, who as vice president was tasked with presiding over the count of the Electoral College ballots on Jan. 6. Trump was adamant that Pence should prevent Biden from becoming president, something he had no power to do. Pence had to flee the Senate chamber on Jan. 6 as rioters stormed the building to chants of "Hang Mike Pence!"

Pence recently said he "cannot in good conscience" endorse Trump because of Jan. 6 and other issues, despite being proud of what they achieved together.

And Pence is not alone.

Esper, who was fired by Trump days after the 2020 election, clashed with the then-president over several issues, including Trump's push to deploy military troops to respond to civil unrest after the killing of George Floyd by police in 2020.

In a recent interview with HBO's "Real Time With Bill Maher," Esper repeated a warning that Trump is "a threat to democracy" and added, "I think there's a lot to be concerned about."

"There's no way I'll vote for Trump, but every day that Trump does something crazy, the door to voting for Biden opens a little bit more, and that's where I'm at," Esper said.

Among Trump's most vocal critics are former aides who worked closely with him in the White House, particularly a trio who gained prominence testifying about the Jan. 6 attack and Trump's push to overturn the election.

The group includes Matthews, former Trump White House communications director Alyssa Farah Griffin and Cassidy Hutchinson, a former top aide to Trump chief of staff Mark Meadows. They have given a series of interviews in recent months opposing their former boss.

"Fundamentally, a second Trump term could mean the end of American democracy as we know it, and I don't say that lightly," Griffin told ABC in December.

John Kelly, Trump's former chief of staff, had his own long falling-out with Trump. Kelly, in a lengthy October statement to CNN, described Trump as "a person who admires autocrats and murderous dictators" and "has nothing but contempt for our democratic institutions, our Constitution, and the rule of law."

Olivia Troye, a former Pence adviser who left the White House in 2020, and former press secretary

Stephanie Grisham, who resigned Jan. 6, are both outspoken critics who said they didn't vote for Trump in 2020.

Even Bill Barr, Trump's former attorney general who has not ruled out voting for him again, has referred to Trump as "a consummate narcissist" who "constantly engages in reckless conduct that puts his political followers at risk and the conservative and Republican agenda at risk."

Still, the ranks of former Trump officials opposing his bid are greatly outnumbered by those who are supportive.

Linda McMahon, who headed the Small Business Administration under Trump, is co-chairing a major fundraiser for the former president on Saturday in Florida, along with former Trump Commerce Secretary Wilbur Ross.

McMahon is also chair of the board of The America First Policy Institute, which is packed with supportive former Trump officials and has been described as an "administration in waiting" for a second Trump term.

The institute is headed by Brooke Rollins, Trump's former domestic policy chief, and counts Pence's national security adviser and retired Lt. Gen. Keith Kellogg among its chairs, along with former Energy Secretary Rick Perry, Trump's U.S. trade representative Robert Lighthizer, and former National Economic Council director Larry Kudlow.

Former acting Attorney General Matthew Whitaker has campaigned for Trump, as has former Housing Secretary Ben Carson, who called him "a friend of America."

Trump's also got the backing of former acting Director of National Intelligence Richard Grenell, former Interior Secretary and Montana Rep. Ryan Zinke, and Russell Vought, who ran Trump's Office of Management and Budget.

Vought said in a post on X that Trump is "the only person I trust to take a wrecking ball to the Deep State."

Trump supporters are also quick to dismiss critics in the party.

Carmen McVane, who attended Trump's rally Tuesday in Green Bay, Wisconsin, said those who speak negatively against Trump or refuse to endorse are RINOs, or Republicans In Name Only, and will only help Biden and Democrats.

"There's a lot of RINOs who don't do what they're supposed to do," McVane said. "It's time for everyone to back who we have and go full force ahead."

## **Condemned inmate could face 'surgery without anesthesia' if good vein is elusive, lawyers say**

By JIM SALTER Associated Press

ST. LOUIS (AP) — Missouri's execution protocol allows for "surgery without anesthesia" if the typical process of finding a suitable vein to inject the lethal drug doesn't work, lawyers for a death row inmate say in an appeal aimed at sparing his life.

Brian Dorsey, 52, is scheduled for execution Tuesday for killing his cousin and her husband at their central Missouri home in 2006. His attorneys are seeking clemency from Gov. Mike Parson and have several appeals pending.

A federal court appeal focuses on how Missouri injects the fatal dose of pentobarbital. The written protocol calls for insertion of primary and secondary intravenous lines. But it offers no guidance on how far the execution team can go to find a suitable vein, leaving open the possibility of an invasive "cutdown procedure," Dorsey's attorneys say.

The procedure involves an incision that could be several inches wide and several inches deep. Forceps are used to tear tissue away from a vein that becomes the injection point.

"It's surgery," said Arin Brenner, a federal public defender and one of the attorneys representing Dorsey. "It would be surgery without anesthesia."

Brenner said Dorsey faces a higher-than-normal risk of needing a cutdown because he is obese. His veins also might be compromised because he is diabetic and a former IV drug user.

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A spokesperson for Attorney General Andrew Bailey didn't comment but referred to the state's response to the appeal.

"Cut-down procedures are rarely, if ever, used under Missouri's execution protocol," the response stated. "And in the event that a cut-down procedure were necessary, medical personnel have access to pain relieving medications."

Medication would be inadequate and if the procedure is necessary, Dorsey should receive a local anesthetic, said Megan Crane, another attorney for him.

"It is extremely painful," Crane said. "Even if given an oral pain relief or an opioid, that will not relieve the pain."

Lawyers for Dorsey say use of the surgical procedure would violate his constitutional guarantee against cruel and unusual punishment and also his right to religious freedom, because it would prevent him from having meaningful interaction with his spiritual adviser, including the administration of last rites.

The issue isn't theoretical. In Idaho, the scheduled execution of serial killer Thomas Eugene Creech in February was halted after a medical team unsuccessfully tried eight times establish an IV. It is unclear whether, when or how the state might try again to execute him.

Missouri's execution process is shrouded in secrecy, so it's impossible to know if, or how often, cutdown procedures have been required. No independent observer sees the IV line inserted. The spiritual adviser doesn't enter the room until the preparation is complete. Witnesses sit in dark rooms with curtains drawn until corrections officers open them seconds before the drug is injected.

Attorneys for Dorsey wonder if a cutdown procedure was used in January 2023 when Amber McLaughlin was executed. It was believed to be the first execution of an openly transgender person in the U.S.

The Rev. Lauren Bennett of St. Louis served as McLaughlin's spiritual adviser. She recalled McLaughlin saying, "Ouch, ouch, ouch. It hurts," but said McLaughlin was unable to explain the cause of her pain before her death.

Issues with the IV have been problematic in executions elsewhere.

In 2014, Oklahoma inmate Clayton Lockett was declared dead 43 minutes after his execution began, at times writhing in pain and clenching his teeth through the process. A state investigation showed that the execution team repeatedly failed to insert an IV line in his arms, jugular vein, foot and subclavian vein in the upper torso, before eventually running a line through a vein in Lockett's groin.

The review found that Lockett died after the line came loose, and that the deadly chemicals were pumped into the tissue surrounding the injection site instead of directly into his bloodstream. There is no indication in the report that Lockett was ever given an anesthetic.

In 2022, it took more than three hours to execute Joe Nathan James Jr. in Alabama. The state said the process was delayed because of difficulties establishing an IV line. Dr. Joel Zivot, a professor of anesthesiology at Emory University and an expert on lethal injection who witnessed the private autopsy, said he saw "multiple puncture sites on both arms" and two incisions in the middle of the arm, which he said were indications of efforts to perform a cutdown. It's unclear if he received anesthesia.

Messages were left Friday with corrections officials in Oklahoma and Alabama.

Dorsey, formerly of Jefferson City, was convicted of killing his cousin, Sarah Bonnie, and her husband, Ben, on Dec. 23, 2006, at their home near New Bloomfield. Prosecutors said that earlier that day, Dorsey called Sarah Bonnie seeking to borrow money to pay two drug dealers who were at his apartment.

Dorsey went to the Bonnies' home that night. After they went to bed, Dorsey took a shotgun from the garage and killed both of them before sexually assaulting Sarah Bonnie's body, prosecutors said.

Sarah Bonnie's parents found the bodies the next day. The couple's 4-year-old daughter was unhurt.

In the clemency petition, 72 current and former state correctional officers asked Parson, a Republican and a former county sheriff, to commute Dorsey's sentence to life in prison, citing his virtually spotless record of good behavior while in prison.

"The Brian I have known for years could not hurt anyone," one officer wrote. "The Brian I know does not deserve to be executed."

A spokesperson said Parson is still reviewing the clemency request.

An appeal to the U.S. Supreme Court centers on the \$12,000 flat fee for Dorsey's court-appointed trial attorneys. The appeal argues that with the flat fee, his lawyers had a financial incentive to resolve the case quickly. They encouraged Dorsey to plead guilty, but with no demand that prosecutors agree to life in prison instead of the death penalty.

Dorsey's attorneys also had asked the Missouri Supreme Court to stay the execution on the grounds that the Department of Corrections' acting director, Trevor Foley, has not been confirmed by the state Senate and is therefore unqualified to oversee an execution. The court denied that request Friday.

## **Sen. Bernie Sanders's office in Vermont caught fire. Arson is suspected, but the motive is unclear**

BURLINGTON, Vt. (AP) — Police in Vermont are seeking a suspect who allegedly started a fire Friday outside the office of U.S. Sen. Bernie Sanders. The small blaze caused minor damages but no injuries.

Authorities say an unknown male suspect sprayed what they described as a possible accelerant on the office door, set it on fire and fled. They said the suspect remained at large and no motive had been established.

"A significant fire engulfed the door and part of the vestibule, impeding the egress of staff members who were working in the office and endangering their lives," Burlington police said in a statement. "The sprinkler system then engaged and largely extinguished the fire."

Earlier in the day, the Burlington Fire Department said it responded to a call Friday morning and found a fire between the vestibule, the elevator and the entrance door of Sanders' third-floor office in Burlington. The office door suffered moderate fire damage and much of the third floor sustained significant water damage. The offices of Sanders and those nearby were evacuated.

A spokesperson for Sanders did not immediately respond to a request for comment. Sanders was not at the office.

## **Biden urges Egypt, Qatar leaders to press Hamas to come to agreement for Israeli hostages in Gaza**

By AAMER MADHANI Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — President Joe Biden on Friday wrote to the leaders of Egypt and Qatar, calling on them to press Hamas for a hostage deal with Israel, according to a senior administration official, one day after Biden called on Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu to redouble efforts to reach a cease-fire in the six-month-old war in Gaza.

The official, who spoke on the condition of anonymity to discuss the private letters, said Biden's national security adviser, Jake Sullivan, will meet Monday with family members of some of the estimated 100 hostages who are believed to still be in Gaza.

The letters to Egyptian President Abdel Fattah el-Sissi and Qatar's ruling emir, Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad Al Thani, come as Biden has deployed CIA Director William Burns to Cairo for talks this weekend about the hostage crisis.

David Barnea, the head of Mossad, Israel's spy agency, and negotiators from Egypt and Qatar are expected to attend. The Hamas side of the talks is indirect, with proposals relayed through third parties to Hamas leaders sheltering in tunnels beneath Gaza.

White House officials say negotiating a pause in fighting between Israel and Hamas to facilitate the exchange of hostages held in Gaza for Palestinian prisoners held in Israel is the only way to put a temporary cease-fire into effect and boost the flow of badly humanitarian aid into the territory.

Biden, in his conversation with Netanyahu, "made clear that everything must be done to secure the release of hostages, including American citizens," and discussed "the importance of fully empowering Israeli negotiators to reach a deal," according to the official. The first phase of the proposed deal would secure the release of women and elderly, sick and wounded hostages.



White House national security spokesman John Kirby said earlier Friday that Biden underscored the need to get a hostage deal done during the Thursday conversation with Netanyahu that largely focused on Israeli airstrikes that killed seven aid workers with World Central Kitchen.

"We are coming up on six months — six months that these people have been held hostage. And what we have to consider is just the abhorrent conditions" the hostages are being held in, Kirby said. "They need to be home with their families."

Biden had expressed optimism for a temporary cease-fire and a hostage deal during the runup to the Muslim holy month of Ramadan, but an agreement never materialized.

The White House said in a statement Thursday following Biden's call with Netanyahu that the U.S. president said reaching an "immediate cease-fire" in exchange for hostages was "essential" and urged Israel to reach such an accord "without delay."

White House officials acknowledge that Biden has become increasingly frustrated with Israel's prosecution of a grinding war that has killed more than 33,000 Palestinians.

The war in Gaza began when Hamas-led militants stormed into southern Israel, killing some 1,200 people, mostly civilians, and taking around 250 people hostage.

The Israeli military campaign in Gaza, experts say, is among the deadliest and most destructive in recent history. Within two months, researchers say, the offensive already has wreaked more destruction than the razing of Syria's Aleppo between 2012 and 2016, Ukraine's Mariupol or, proportionally, the Allied bombing of Germany in World War II. It has killed more civilians than the U.S.-led coalition did in its three-year campaign against the Islamic State group.

The White House has maintained its support for Israel amid growing domestic and international wariness with Israel's prosecution of the war, and repeatedly said that a temporary cease-fire could have already come had Hamas agreed to release the sick, the wounded, the elderly, and young women.

But the pressure on Biden has only mounted since this week's airstrikes that killed the World Central Kitchen workers.

The Israeli government acknowledged "mistakes" and announced some disciplinary measures against officers involved in ordering the strikes. Israel also approved a series of steps aimed at increasing the flow of humanitarian aid into Gaza, including the reopening of a key crossing that was destroyed in the Oct. 7 Hamas attack.

U.N. Secretary-General Antonio Guterres said Friday that the World Central Kitchen incident is part of a broader problem with how the Israeli military is carrying out the war. Nearly 200 humanitarian aid workers have killed since start of the conflict.

"But the essential problem is not who made the mistakes, it is the military strategy and procedures in place that allow for those mistakes to multiply time and time again," he said. "Fixing those failures requires independent investigations and meaningful and measurable change on the ground."

## Israel dismisses 2 officers over deadly drone strikes on aid workers in Gaza

By JULIA FRANKEL Associated Press

JERUSALEM (AP) — The Israeli military said Friday that it dismissed two officers and reprimanded three others for their roles in drone strikes in Gaza that killed seven aid workers on a food-delivery mission, saying the officers had mishandled critical information and violated the army's rules of engagement.

The findings of a retired general's investigation into the Monday killings marked an embarrassing admission by Israel, which faces growing accusations from key allies, including the United States, of not doing enough to protect Gaza's civilians from its war with the militant Hamas group.

The findings are likely to bolster widespread skepticism over the Israeli military's decision-making. Palestinians, aid groups and human rights organizations have repeatedly accused Israeli forces of firing recklessly at civilians throughout the conflict — a charge Israel denies.

"It's a tragedy," military spokesman Rear Adm. Daniel Hagari told reporters. "It's a serious event that we

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are responsible for, and it shouldn't have happened. And we will make sure that it won't happen again." With pressure mounting on Israel, Hagari and other officials shared the results of the investigation with reporters late Thursday.

The speed of the probe and the swift punishment of five senior officers were unusual. Such investigations are often slow and in most cases end without charges being filed. Human rights activists have long complained that Israeli forces operate in a climate of impunity, an allegation the military rejects.

Still, the punishments and the apology seemed unlikely to calm the rising international outcry over the deaths of the World Central Kitchen workers, or to reassure international aid groups that it is safe to resume operations in Gaza, where nearly a third of the population is on the brink of starvation.

The army declined to answer questions about whether similar violations of rules of engagement have taken place during the war. In addition to many civilian deaths, more than 220 humanitarian workers have been killed in the conflict, according to the United Nations, including at least 30 killed in the line of duty.

World Central Kitchen called the investigation and disciplinary actions "important steps forward" — but said more needed to be done.

"Without systemic change, there will be more military failures, more apologies and more grieving families," the statement read, repeating a call for an independent investigation.

U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken said it was important that Israel was taking responsibility, and that the U.S. would review the findings "to see not just what steps are being taken but the results."

Military spokespeople said that under the Israeli army's rules of engagement, officers must have more than one reason for identifying someone as a target before they can be hit. But the investigation determined that a colonel had authorized the series of deadly drone strikes on the convoy based on one major's observation — from grainy drone-camera footage — that someone in the convoy was armed.

That observation turned out to be untrue, military officials said.

The army said the colonel and the major were dismissed, while three other officers were reprimanded, the most senior of whom was the head of the Southern Command. The results of the investigation were turned over to the military's advocate general, who will decide whether the officers or anyone else involved in the killings should receive further punishment or be prosecuted.

The killings were condemned by Israel's closest allies. They heightened criticism of Israel's conduct in the nearly 6-month-old war with Hamas — and put renewed focus on the dire situation in Gaza. The humanitarian group Oxfam says people in the enclave's north have been surviving on an average of 245 calories a day since January — less than the amount found in a can of fava beans and less than 12% of the recommended daily intake.

Israel has promised to open more border crossings into Gaza and increase the flow of aid into the territory. But Blinken said Friday that those measures may not be enough to meet the Biden administration's demands for dramatic improvements in humanitarian conditions.

If fully implemented, the measures could increase assistance to Palestinians. But the U.S. also wants to see tangible steps to better protect civilians and aid workers, he said.

It was not immediately clear when the Erez crossing — which borders hard-hit northern Gaza — would open or how much additional cargo it could handle. The crossing, built to handle passenger traffic, was badly damaged in the Oct. 7 Hamas attack on Israel that ignited the war.

In New York, U.N. Secretary-General Antonio Guterres noted Israel's acknowledgment of mistakes and punishment of the officers.

"But the essential problem is not who made the mistakes, it is the military strategy and procedures in place that allow for those mistakes to multiply time and time again," he said. "Fixing those failures requires independent investigations and meaningful and measurable change on the ground."

He called for an immediate cease-fire, the release of all Israeli hostages held by Hamas and a "quantum leap" in the delivery of humanitarian aid.

Those killed Monday were three British citizens, a Polish citizen, an Australian, a Canadian American dual citizen and a Palestinian, all of whom worked for World Central Kitchen, the international charity founded

by celebrity chef José Andrés.

The investigation, headed by Yoav Har-Even, a retired general, found two major areas of wrongdoing. It faulted officers for failing to read messages alerting troops that cars, not aid trucks, would carry workers from the charity away from the warehouse where aid was distributed. As a result, the cars that were targeted were misidentified as transporting militants.

The army also faulted a major who identified the strike target and a colonel who approved the strike for acting with insufficient information.

The army said the order was given after one of the passengers inside a car was identified as a gunman. It said troops became suspicious because a gunman had been seen on the roof of one of the delivery trucks on the way to the warehouse.

The army showed reporters footage of the gunman firing his weapon while riding atop one of the trucks — video that The Associated Press could not independently verify.

After the aid was dropped off at a warehouse, an officer believed he had spotted a gunman getting into one of the cars. The passenger, it turned out, was not carrying a weapon. The military said it's possible he was just carrying a bag.

The army said it then struck one car. As people scrambled away into a second car, it hit that vehicle as well. It did the same thing when survivors fled into a third car.

World Central Kitchen and the military said they coordinated the convoy's movements, and that the vehicles were marked with the organization's logo. But army officials claimed that drone operators could not see the words because it was nighttime.

The army could not say exactly where the communication about the convoy's plans had broken down. "Let's be very clear. This is tragic, but it is not an anomaly," Scott Paul, of Oxfam, said Thursday in a briefing with other relief organizations before the results of Israel's investigation were released. "The killing of aid workers in Gaza has been systemic."

## **Voting company makes 'coercive' demand of Texas counties: Pay up or lose service before election**

By NICHOLAS RICCARDI Associated Press

A voting company owner on Friday acknowledged making a "coercive" demand of 32 Texas counties: Pay an additional surcharge for the software that runs their voting registration system, or lose it just before November's elections.

John Medcalf of San Diego-based VOTEC said he had to request the counties pay a 35% surcharge because several agencies in multiple states, including some of the Texas counties, have been late to pay in the past and his company had trouble meeting payroll.

He characterized the charges as a cry for help to get enough money to avoid losing key employees just before November.

"It is coercive, and I regret that," Medcalf said. "We've been able to get by 44 of 45 years without doing that."

The surcharges have sent Texas' largest counties scrambling to approve payments or look at other ways they can avoid losing the software at a critical time.

Medcalf said that VOTEC would continue to honor counties' contracts for the remainder of their terms, which run past Texas' May primary runoffs, but that most expire shortly before November.

"It's either pay now and dislike it or pay with election difficulty," Medcalf said, adding that he didn't expect any contracts to actually be canceled.

The bills are for 35% of two major line items in the existing contracts, Medcalf said.

Texas' Secretary of State's office said Thursday that it was consulting with counties about their options.

The biggest county in Texas, Harris, has already said it will pay its surcharge of about \$120,000 because the system is so crucial.

## President Joe Biden will unveil his new plan to give student loan relief to many new borrowers

By SEUNG MIN KIM and COLLIN BINKLEY Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — President Joe Biden will announce his latest effort to broaden student loan relief next week for new categories of borrowers, according to three people familiar with the plans, nearly a year after the Supreme Court foiled his administration's first attempt to cancel debt for millions who attended college.

Biden will detail the plan Monday in Madison, Wisconsin, where the flagship campus of the University of Wisconsin is located. The actual federal regulations — outlining who would qualify to get their student loan debt reduced or eliminated — are not expected to be released then, said the people, who were granted anonymity to detail a proposal not yet made public.

Much of the specifics that Biden will discuss Monday have long been telegraphed through a negotiated rulemaking process at the Department of Education, which has worked for months to hash out the new categories of borrowers. The president announced immediately after the Supreme Court decision that Education Secretary Miguel Cardona would undertake the process because he would have the power under the Higher Education Act to waive or compromise student loan debt in specific cases.

Still, the effort seeks to make good on Biden's promise after the Supreme Court struck down his initial plan in June, a \$400 billion proposal to cancel or reduce federal student loan debt that a majority of justices said required congressional approval. Biden called that decision a "mistake" and "wrong."

And the fresh announcement on student loan relief, a vital issue for younger voters, could help energize parts of Biden's political coalition who have become disillusioned over his job performance — people whose support the president will need to defeat presumptive Republican presidential candidate Donald Trump this year.

The plan that Biden will detail is set to expand federal student loan relief to new yet-targeted categories of borrowers through the Higher Education Act, which administration officials believe puts it on a stronger legal footing than the sweeping proposal that was killed by a 6-3 court majority last year. The planned announcement from Biden was first reported by the Wall Street Journal.

"This new path is legally sound," Biden said in June. "It's going to take longer, but, in my view, it's the best path that remains to providing for as many borrowers as possible with debt relief."

Biden's latest attempt at cancellation is expected to be smaller and more targeted than his original plan, which would have canceled up to \$20,000 in loans for more than 40 million borrowers. Details of the new plan have come into focus in recent months as the Education Department brought its ideas to a panel of outside negotiators with an interest in higher education, ranging from students to loan servicers.

"President Biden's expected additional executive action will greatly reduce the burden of student loans for millions of Americans," Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer, D-N.Y., said Friday. "There is always more work to be done to alleviate the burden of student loan debt. And we will not stop until crippling student loan debt is a thing of the past."

Through that process, the agency laid out five categories of borrowers who would be eligible to get some or all of their federal loans canceled. The plan is focused on helping those with the greatest need for relief, including many who might otherwise never repay their loans.

Among those targeted for help are individuals whose unpaid interest has snowballed beyond the size of the original loan. The proposal would reset their balances back to the initial balance by erasing up to \$10,000 or \$20,000 in interest, depending on a borrower's income.

Borrowers paying down their student loans for decades would get all remaining debt erased under the department's plan. Loans used for a borrower's undergraduate education would be canceled if they had been in repayment for at least 20 years. For other types of federal loans, it's 25 years.

The plan would automatically cancel loans for those who went to for-profit college programs deemed "low-value." Borrowers would be eligible for cancellation if, while they attended the program, the average federal student loan payment among graduates was too high compared to their average salary.

Those who are eligible for other types of cancellation but haven't applied would automatically get relief. It would apply to Public Service Loan Forgiveness and Borrower Defense to Repayment, programs that have been around for years but require infamously difficult paperwork.

Under pressure from advocates, the department also added a category for those facing "hardship." It would offer cancellation to borrowers considered highly likely to be in default within two years. Additional borrowers would be eligible for relief under a wide-ranging definition of financial hardship.

A series of hearings to craft the rule wrapped up in February, and the draft is now under review. Before it can be finalized, the Education Department will need to issue a formal proposal and open it to a public comment period.

The latest attempt at cancellation joins other targeted initiatives, including those aimed at public service workers and low-income borrowers. Through those efforts, the Biden administration says it has canceled \$144 billion in student loans for almost 4 million Americans.

## East Coast earthquakes aren't common, but they are felt by millions. Here's what to know

By ADITHI RAMAKRISHNAN AP Science Writer

DALLAS (AP) — East Coast residents were jolted Friday by a 4.8-magnitude earthquake centered near Lebanon, New Jersey, with weak rumblings felt as far away as Baltimore and the Massachusetts-New Hampshire border. No life-threatening injuries or major damage have been reported.

Here's what to know about earthquakes on the East Coast.

How often do New York City and the East Coast get earthquakes?

Earthquakes large enough to be felt by a lot of people are relatively uncommon on the East Coast. Since 1950 there have been about 20 quakes with a magnitude above 4.5, according to the United States Geological Survey. That's compared with over 1,000 on the West Coast.

That said, East Coast quakes like the one experienced Friday do happen.

"There's a history of similar-sized earthquakes in the New York region over the last few hundred years," said Jessica Thompson Jobe from the USGS' Earthquake Hazards Program.

When was the last big East Coast quake?

In 2011, a 5.8 magnitude earthquake near Mineral, Virginia, shook East Coast residents over a wide swath from Georgia to Maine and even southeastern Canada. The USGS called it one of the most widely felt quakes in North American history.

The quake cost \$200 to \$300 million in property damages, including to the Washington Monument in Washington, D.C.

What's the difference between East and West Coast quakes?

The West Coast lies on a boundary where sections of Earth's crust rub together, causing stress and slippage along fault lines that generate earthquakes relatively often.

East Coast quakes like Friday's are caused by compression over time of hard, brittle rock deep underground, according to Robert Thorson, an earth sciences professor at the University of Connecticut. "It's like having a big block of ice in a vise and you are just slowly cranking up the vise," he said. "Eventually, you're going to get some crackling on it."

These East Coast quakes can be harder to pinpoint. And they tend to affect a broader area. That's because colder, harder East Coast rocks are better at spreading the rattling energy from an earthquake.

The distribution of cities across the East Coast also means that more people are around to experience the effects of a quake.

"We also have population centers over a large part of the northeast," said Leslie Sonder, a geophysicist at Dartmouth College, "So a lot of people around here feel the earthquake."

How do you stay safe during a quake?

USGS experts say there is a risk of aftershocks for weeks to months, which are expected after any

earthquake. They recommend paying attention to emergency messaging from local officials.

To keep safe from shakes while sleeping, remove any furniture or objects that could fall and injure you or others.

If you feel shaking, drop where you are. Cover your head and neck with one arm, crawl under a table for shelter and hold on. If there's no shelter nearby, grasp your head and neck with both hands until the shaking stops.

## **Cleanup begins as spring nor'easter moves on. But hundreds of thousands still lack power**

By NICK PERRY and LISA RATHKE Associated Press

GILFORD, N.H. (AP) — Snow showers lingered Friday as the cleanup began following a major spring storm that brought heavy snow, rain and high winds to the Northeast, left hundreds of thousands of homes and businesses without power, and contributed to at least two deaths.

Well over a foot (30 centimeters) of snow was reported in many parts of northern New England by Thursday evening. Some areas got closer to 2 feet (61 centimeters).

"We don't have any internet so we're kind of closed off from the world," said Betty Tidd, 78, of Gilford, New Hampshire. She and her husband lost power early Thursday, but they've been staying comfortable, thanks to their backup battery system and propane stove.

Tidd said they've been keeping busy by bird watching, reading, and playing games, but she hasn't been able to send out the daily poem she's been sharing with family and friends as part of National Poetry Month.

Stowe, Vermont, reported 20 inches (50.8 centimeters) of snow, the National Weather Service office in Burlington reported. The agency's office in Gray, Maine, said it had 17.4 inches (44.2 centimeters). The Concord Municipal Airport in New Hampshire was on the lower end, at 7.4 inches (18.7 centimeters).

"It's heavy, it's heavy," Jay Carr, 49, a photographer, in Marshfield, Vermont, said the shoveling. "I try to shift from left to right so I don't damage one side worse than the other."

Low pressure meandering through the Gulf of Maine will mean continued snow showers over northern New York, New England, and the spine of the Appalachians in West Virginia from Friday into Saturday, the weather service said.

A landslide following thunderstorms at the Wheeling Mt. Zion cemetery in West Virginia toppled trees and gravestones. Volunteers who care for the cemetery said the caskets were not damaged.

Avalanches are possible in parts of the Green Mountains in Vermont and the Adirondacks in New York, the weather service said.

"Outdoor enthusiasts heading into the back country on Friday to snowshoe or ski, need to be aware of the avalanche danger, the risks involved and take the appropriate precautions," the service said in a statement.

That point was repeated at a Concord, New Hampshire, news conference on preparations for the solar eclipse on Monday. A group of towns in the northern part of the state will be in the perfect position to see a total eclipse, and they're anticipating many visitors.

They were digging out from the storm, including Colebrook, which is about 10 miles (16 kilometers) from the Canada border.

"We did have about a foot of snow dumped out there over the last day and a half," Town Manager Tim Stevens said at the news conference. "But even with that, we're still not canceling the eclipse," he added, to a round of laughter.

In West Virginia, flooding was expected to continue along the Ohio River into the weekend. The weather service warned motorists to be careful, since backwater flooding can occur even miles from the Ohio.

In New England, utility crews worked overnight to restore power and assess damage, including downed poles and wires and blocked roads. Nearly 700,000 customers, most of them in Maine and New Hampshire, were without electricity at one point.

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By late Friday morning, Central Maine Power said it had restored power to more than 120,000 customers. It had called total restoration a multi-day effort.

Some customers were affected for the second time in less than a week after losing power during an ice storm last weekend.

The weather service said it was the biggest April nor'easter — a type of storm with winds blowing from the northeast that either exits or moves north along the East Coast — to hit the region since 2020.

A tree fell on a vehicle Wednesday and killed a woman in Armonk in New York's Westchester County, police said. In Derry, New Hampshire, officials said a woman died and another was hospitalized after a house fire Thursday sparked by an explosion. A tree had fallen on the house near propane tanks.

Despite the dangers, some hardy New Englanders took the weather in stride.

"It's special to get snow in April and to be able to get out and enjoy it," said Jane Phillips, cross-country skiing in her neighborhood in Portland, Maine. "It's fun being a Mainer."

## **New mass graves in Rwanda reveal cracks in reconciliation efforts, 30 years after the genocide**

By RODNEY MUHUMUZA and IGNATIUS SSUUNA Associated Press

HUYE, Rwanda (AP) — The diggers' hoes scrape the brown soil, looking for — and often finding — human bone fragments. The women then wipe the bone pieces with their hands as others watch in solemn silence.

The digging goes on, a scene that's become all too familiar in a verdant area of rural southern Rwanda, where the discovery in October of human remains at the site of a house under construction triggered another search for new mass graves believed to hold victims of the 1994 genocide against Rwanda's Tutsi.

In the months since, Rwandan authorities say the remains of at least 1,000 people have been found in this farming community in the district of Huye, a surprisingly high number after three decades of government efforts to give genocide victims dignified burials.

As Rwanda prepares to commemorate the 30th anniversary of the genocide next week, continuing discoveries of mass graves are a stark reminder not only of the country's determination to reconcile with its grim past but also of the challenges it faces in aiming for lasting peace.

Speaking to The Associated Press, the head of a prominent genocide survivors' group and several other Rwandans said the discoveries underscore that more needs to be done for true reconciliation.

Rwanda has made it a criminal offense to withhold information about a previously unknown mass grave. For years perpetrators of the 1994 genocide, including those who served prison terms and were later released, have been urged to speak up and say what they know.

Yet the mass graves are still mostly found by accident, leading to new arrests and traumatizing survivors all over again.

The October discovery led to the arrest of Jean Baptiste Hishamunda, 87, and four of his relatives.

After the remains of six people were discovered under his home, diggers started going through his entire property, finding dozens and then hundreds more remains as their search extended to other sites in Huye.

An estimated 800,000 Tutsi were killed by extremist Hutu in massacres that lasted over 100 days in 1994. Some moderate Hutu who tried to protect members of the Tutsi minority also were targeted.

The genocide was ignited on April 6 when a plane carrying President Juvénal Habyarimana, a member of the majority Hutu, was shot down in the capital Kigali. The Tutsi were blamed for downing the plane and killing the president. Enraged, gangs of Hutu extremists began killing Tutsi, backed by the army and police.

The government of President Paul Kagame, whose rebel group stopped the genocide and whose party has ruled the East African country since 1994, has tried to bridge ethnic divisions using legal means and other measures. Although critics accuse the authoritarian Kagame of crushing all dissent, he is also praised by many for presiding over relative peace and stability.

The government imposed a tough penal code to punish genocide and outlaw the ideology behind it, and Kagame has fostered a culture of obedience among the country's 14 million people. Rwandan ID cards no

longer identify a person by ethnicity and lessons about the genocide are part of the curriculum in schools. Hundreds of community projects, backed by the government or civic groups, focus on uniting Rwandans and, every April, the nation joins hands in somber commemorations of the genocide anniversary.

Today, serious crimes fueled by ethnic hatred are rare in this small country where Hutu, Tutsi and Twa live side by side — but signs persist of what authorities say is a genocidal ideology, citing concealing information about undiscovered mass graves as an example.

Then there are incidents of villagers asking mass-grave investigators if they are searching for valuable minerals or dumping dog carcasses at memorial sites, according to Naphtal Ahishakiye, executive secretary of Ibuka, the genocide survivors' group based in Kigali.

"It's like saying, 'What we lost during the genocide are dogs,'" Ahishakiye said.

There are still those who resist coming forward to say what they witnessed, he said. "We still need to improve, to teach, to approach people, up to (when) they become able to tell us what happened."

As more mass graves are discovered, Tutsi survivors "start to doubt" the good intentions of their Hutu neighbors, he said. Their pleas for information about relatives lost in the killings go unanswered.

In the village of Ngoma, where shacks roofed with corrugated sheets dot lush farmland, diggers come across decaying shoes and pieces of torn clothing among skulls and bones. The survivors are traumatized all over again.

"I have tried very hard to forget," said Beata Mujawayezu, her voice catching as she recalled the killing of her 12-year-old sister at a roadblock on April 25, 1994.

The girl pleaded for her life with militiamen, going down on her knees in front of a gang leader whom she addressed as "my father." She was hacked with a machete.

"She was a lovely girl," Mujawayezu said of her sister as she watched the digging at a mass grave site on a recent afternoon in her Tutsi-dominated neighborhood. "One day, hopefully, we will get to know where she was buried."

Augustine Nsengiyumva, another survivor in Ngoma, said the new mass grave discoveries have left him disappointed in his Hutu neighbors, whom he had grown to trust.

"Imagine sleeping on top of genocide victims," he said, referring to cases where human remains are found under people's homes. "These are things I really don't understand."

Young people are less troubled by the past. Some Rwandans see this as a chance for reconciliation in a country where every other citizen is under the age of 30.

In the semi-rural area of Gahanga, just outside of Kigali, farmer Patrick Hakizimana says he sees a ray of hope in his children that someday Rwanda will have ethnic harmony.

A Hutu and an army corporal during the genocide, Hakizimana was imprisoned from 1996 to 2007 for his alleged role in the killings. He said he has learnt his lesson and is now trying to win the respect of others in his neighborhood.

"There are people who still have hatred against Tutsi," he said. "The genocide was prepared for a long time."

It will take a long time for people to leave that hatred behind, he said.

## **USC's Bronny James declares for NBA draft and enters transfer portal after 1 season**

By BETH HARRIS AP Sports Writer

LOS ANGELES (AP) — Bronny James will enter the NBA draft after one season at Southern California that was shortened by his recovery from cardiac arrest.

The 19-year-old son of LeBron James announced Friday on his Instagram account that he also plans to retain his college eligibility and will enter the transfer portal.

"I've had a year with some ups and downs but all added to growth for me as a man, student and athlete," James wrote.



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James posted his decision hours before USC introduced Eric Musselman as its new coach. He comes from Arkansas and replaces Andy Enfield, who left on Monday to become coach at SMU.

Musselman is scrambling to assemble a coaching staff and assess a roster that has also lost junior Kobe Johnson, who said Thursday that he's committed to crosstown rival UCLA. USC star freshman Isaiah Collier attended Musselman's news conference.

"I need to try to get a hold of Bronny. I've texted him," Musselman said after his campus news conference. "Certainly he's got a lot of options and we respect those options. We just want him to know that, hey, this opportunity here, if you want to play at USC, we'd love to have him. Such a talented young man."

James averaged 4.8 points and 2.8 rebounds while starting six of 25 games for the Trojans. He shot 37% from the field, 27% from 3-point range and 68% from the free throw line.

The elder James, his wife and their 9-year-old daughter were frequent courtside spectators at the Galen Center this season.

"Bronny is his own man," the elder James said this week. "He has some tough decisions to make. When he's ready to make those decisions, he'll let us all know. But as his family, we're going to support whatever he does."

The 39-year-old James has been vocal about wanting to play with his son in the NBA.

Klutch Sports CEO Rich Paul, who represents father and son, said recently that he doesn't "value a young player getting into the lottery as much as I do getting him on the right team in the right developmental situation."

James, a 6-foot-4 combo guard, didn't make his college debut until Dec. 10. Afterward, James appeared in front of the media for less than a minute to thank the doctors, athletic trainers and support system that helped him return to play.

Despite numerous requests, James never spoke to reporters during the season.

He suffered cardiac arrest on July 20 during a workout at the Galen Center. He was found to have a congenital heart defect that was treatable.

## Right to children or children's rights? Surrogacy debate comes to a head in Rome

By NICOLE WINFIELD Associated Press

ROME (AP) — An international campaign to ban surrogacy received a strong endorsement Friday from the Vatican, with a top official calling for a broad-based alliance to stop the "commercialization of life."

A Vatican-affiliated university hosted a two-day conference promoting an international treaty to outlaw surrogacy, be it commercial arrangements or so-called altruistic ones. It's based on the campaigners' argument that the practice violates U.N. conventions protecting the rights of the child and surrogate mother.

At issue is whether there is a fundamental right to have a child, or whether the rights of children trump the desires of potential parents.

The conference, which also drew U.N. human rights representatives and experts, marked an acceleration of a campaign that has found some support in parts of the developing world and western Europe. At the same time, Canada and the United States are known for highly regulated arrangements that draw heterosexual and homosexual couples alike from around the world, while other countries allow surrogacy with fewer rules.

Pope Francis in January called for an outright global ban on the practice, calling it a despicable violation of human dignity that exploits the surrogate mother's financial need. On Thursday, Francis met privately with one of the proponents calling for a universal ban, Olivia Maurel, a 33-year-old mother of three.

Maurel was born in the U.S. in 1991 via surrogacy and attributes a lifetime of mental health issues to the "trauma of abandonment" she says she experienced at birth. She says she was separated from her biological mother and given to parents who had contracted with an agency in Kentucky after experiencing infertility problems when they tried to have children in their late 40s.

Maurel says she doesn't blame her parents and she acknowledges there are "many happy stories" of

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families who use surrogate mothers. But she says that doesn't make the practice ethical or right, even with regulations, since she said she was made to sacrifice "for the desire of adults to have a child."

"There is no right to have a child," Maurel told the conference at the LUMSA university. "But children do have rights, and we can say surrogacy violates many of these rights."

She and proponents of a ban argue that surrogacy is fundamentally different from adoption, since it involves creating a child for the specific purpose of separating him or her from the birth mother for others to raise as their own.

Monsignor Miloslaw Wachowski, undersecretary for relations with states in the Vatican secretariat of state, concurred, saying the practice reduces human procreation to a concept of "individual will" and desire, where the powerful and wealthy prevail.

"Parents find themselves in the role of being providers of genetic material, while the embryo appears more and more like an object: something to produce — not someone, but something," he said.

He called for the campaign to ban the practice not to remain in the sphere of the Catholic Church or even faith-based groups, but to transcend traditional ideological and political boundaries.

"We shouldn't close ourselves among those who think exactly the same way," he said. "Rather, we should open up to pragmatic alliances to realize a common goal."

The Vatican's overall position, which is expected to be crystalized in a position paper Monday on human dignity, stems from its belief that human life begins at conception and must be given the consequent respect and dignity from that moment on. The Vatican also holds that human life should be created through intercourse between husband and wife, not in a petri dish, and that surrogacy takes in vitro fertilization a step further by "commercializing" the resulting embryo.

As the conference was getting underway, Italy's main gay family advocacy group, Rainbow Families, sponsored a pro-surrogacy counter-rally nearby. The aim was to also voice opposition to proposals by Italy's hard-right-led government to make it a crime for Italians to use surrogates abroad, even in countries where the practice is legal.

"We are families, not crimes," said banners held by some of the 200 or so participants, many of them gay couples who traveled abroad to have children via surrogate.

A 2004 law already banned surrogacy in Italy. The proposed law would make it illegal in Italy for citizens to engage a surrogate mother in another country, with prison terms of up to three years and fines of up to 1 million euros (\$1.15 million) for convictions.

Participants at the rally complained that the law would stigmatize their children and they denied anyone's rights or dignity was violated in the surrogacy process, which they noted was legal and regulated.

"All parties involved are consenting, aware," said Cristiano Giraldi, who with his partner Giorgio Duca used a surrogate in the U.S. to have their 10-year-old twins. "We have a stable relationship with our carrier, our children know her. So actually there is no exploitation, there is none of the things that they want the public to believe."

In the U.S., Resolve, the National Infertility Association, which advocates for people experiencing infertility problems, has criticized any calls for a universal ban on surrogacy as harmful and hurtful to the many people experiencing the "disease of infertility."

"Resolve believes that everyone deserves the right to build a family and should have access to all family building options," Betsy Campbell, Resolve's chief engagement officer, said in a telephone interview. "Surrogacy, and specifically gestational carrier surrogacy, is an option."

She said the U.S. regulations, which include separate legal representation for the surrogate and the intended parents, and mental health and other evaluations, safeguard all parties in the process and that regardless less than 2% of pregnancies in the U.S. using assisted reproductive technology involves surrogacy.

"Most people do not expect to have infertility or to need medical assistance to build their families," she said. "So when non-medical people speak about IVF and surrogacy in a negative way, it can be very discouraging and make an already challenging journey all the more challenging."

Velina Todorova, a Bulgarian member of the U.N. Committee on the Rights of the Child, told the Rome

conference that the U.N. committee hasn't taken a definitive position on surrogacy, but that its concern was the rights of children born via the practice.

It was a reference to legislation to prevent parents from being able to register the births of children born through surrogacy in their home countries.

## Another month of robust US job growth points to continued economic strength

By PAUL WISEMAN AP Economics Writer

WASHINGTON (AP) — America's employers delivered another outpouring of jobs in March, adding a sizzling 303,000 workers to their payrolls and bolstering hopes that the economy can vanquish inflation without succumbing to a recession in the face of high interest rates.

Last month's job growth was up from a revised 270,000 in February and was far above the 200,000 jobs that economists had forecast. By any measure, it amounted to a major burst of hiring, and it reflected the economy's ability to withstand the pressure of high borrowing costs resulting from the Federal Reserve's interest rate hikes. With the nation's consumers continuing to spend, many employers have kept hiring to meet steady customer demand.

Friday's report from the Labor Department also showed that the unemployment rate dipped from 3.9% to 3.8%. The jobless rate has now remained below 4% for 26 straight months, the longest such streak since the 1960s. The government also revised up its estimate of job growth in January and February by a combined 22,000.

Normally, a blockbuster bounty of new jobs would raise concerns that a vibrant labor market would force companies to sharply raise pay to attract and keep workers, thereby fanning inflation pressures. But the March jobs report showed that wage growth was mild last month, which might allay any such fears. Average hourly wages were up 4.1% from a year earlier, the smallest year-over-year increase since mid-2021. From February to March, though, hourly pay did rise 0.3% after increasing 0.2% the month before.

The economy is sure to weigh on Americans' minds as the November presidential vote nears and they assess President Joe Biden's re-election bid. Many people still feel squeezed by the inflation surge that erupted in the spring of 2021. Eleven rate hikes by the Fed have helped send inflation tumbling from its peak. But average prices are still about 18% higher than they were in February 2021 — a fact for which Biden might pay a political price.

In a statement Friday, though, Biden argued that the economy's strong performance means that his policies are paying off.

"My plan is growing the economy from the middle out and the bottom up, investing in all Americans and giving the middle class a fair shot," he said. "Inflation has come down significantly. We've come a long way, but I won't stop fighting for hard-working families."

The 303,000 jobs that the economy added in March were the largest gain since last May. And they boosted average monthly job growth so far this year to a vigorous 276,000, an improvement even on 2023's robust average of 251,000.

The unemployment rate fell last month even though a sizable 469,000 people entered the labor force looking for work. That influx increased the proportion of Americans who either have a job or are looking for one from 62.5% in February to 62.7%. A bigger labor force tends to ease pressure on companies to significantly raise wages, thereby slowing inflation pressures.

Though most industries added jobs last month, hiring was mainly concentrated in three categories: Healthcare and private education, leisure and hospitality and government accounted for nearly 69% of the hiring. In addition, construction companies added a solid 39,000 jobs.

Four years after the pandemic curbed travel and forced shutdowns of restaurants, bars and entertainment venues, those industries have finally regained their pre-pandemic employment level, with a category that includes such businesses adding 49,000 jobs in March.

The Fed's policymakers are tracking the state of the economy, the job market and inflation to determine

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when to begin cutting interest rates from their multi-decade highs. Rate cuts by the Fed would likely lead, over time, to lower borrowing rates across the economy.

The central bank's policymakers started raising rates two years ago to try to tame inflation, which by mid-2022 was running at a four-decade high. Those rate hikes — 11 of them from March 2022 through July 2023 — helped drastically slow inflation. Consumer prices were up 3.2% in February from a year earlier, far below a peak of 9.1% in June 2022.

The much higher borrowing costs for individuals and companies that resulted from the Fed's rate hikes were widely expected to trigger a recession, with waves of layoffs and a painful rise in unemployment. Yet to the surprise of just about everyone, the economy has kept growing steadily and employers have kept hiring at a healthy pace.

Some economists believe that a rise in productivity — the amount of output that workers produce per hour — made it easier for companies to hire, raise pay and post bigger profits without having to raise prices. In addition, an influx of immigrants into the job market is believed to have addressed labor shortages and slowed upward pressure on wage growth. This helped cool inflation even as the economy kept growing.

"This report is like the macroeconomist's Holy Grail," said Julia Pollak, chief economist at the online job marketplace ZipRecruiter. "It's pointing toward noninflationary growth."

Noting the strong job growth, influx of new workers, declining unemployment and slowing wage growth, Pollak said, "It suggests that the Fed can walk and chew gum at the same time, bringing down inflation without crippling the labor market."

In the meantime, the Fed has signaled that it expects to cut rates three times this year. But it is awaiting more inflation data to gain further confidence that annual price increases are heading toward its 2% target. Some economists have begun to question whether the Fed will need to cut rates anytime soon in light of the consistently durable U.S. economy.

The still-strong demand for labor has meant that some employers are still struggling to fill vacancies. One of them is John Zmuda, president of Moseys Production Machinists in Anaheim, California, who said it's still "extremely hard" to find workers.

Though he receives plenty of resumes, Zmuda said "it seems like most people are just wage-hunting" rather than seeking a long-term career.

Moseys, a family-owned company that supplies the defense, aerospace, healthcare industries, wants to add three or four workers to a staff of 27. Zmuda said he has raised wages 10% over the past year or so. But California's high cost of living, especially for housing, puts off some potential recruits.

Like many manufacturers, Moseys depends heavily on robots. But for an employer, automation goes only so far.

"People bring to the table their minds and eyes," Zmuda said. "Robots do not. People will think before they do something."

Likewise, in Duncan, Oklahoma, Southern Machine Works, which also supplies the aerospace and defense industries, needs four or five machinists.

"It's really been a struggle to find anyone," said Frank Burch, CEO of the third-generation family firm.

Attracting recruits to a rural town of 23,000 is difficult, especially when the oil-field-services giant Halliburton is nearby and seeking workers, too.

"We're just hiring individuals that seem to have the mental capacity to learn the business, and then we're teaching them through our in-house training program," Burch said.

Employers, he suggested, will probably have to get used to tighter labor markets:

"When you look at the demographics of the country — the baby boom's gone, the current generation just isn't having children. I just don't really see it changing in my lifetime."

## Purdue's Zach Edey is the overwhelming choice for 2nd straight AP Player of the Year award

By MICHAEL MAROT AP Sports Writer

WEST LAFAYETTE, Ind. (AP) — The child who wanted Zach Edey's autograph during his Purdue recruiting trip apparently saw something others missed.

Big Maple was destined to be a basketball star.

While many college coaches passed on the unpolished Canadian prospect as the basketball world became enamored with perimeter play and 3-point shooting, Purdue coach Matt Painter took a swing on his third center in the recruiting class and found a gem who led the Boilermakers to their first Final Four since 1980.

On Friday, Edey collected his second Associated Press Player of the Year award, becoming the first back-to-back winner since Ralph Sampson won three in a row at Virginia from 1981-83. Edey received 57 of 62 votes from journalists who vote in the weekly AP Top 25. Tennessee's Dalton Knecht received three votes and Houston's Jamal Shead got two.

Edey is the fifth player to win the award in consecutive seasons though Lew Alcindor also won the award twice in non-consecutive seasons.

"I get to pay him (coach Matt Painter) back. There were so many coaches that looked over me, like you could -- name a program -- I could name a coach that looked over me," Edey said. "Tennessee, Rick Barnes is a great coach, but he was at our practice, looked over me. It's kind of been the story of my life. People have doubted me. People looked past me. Can't do that anymore."

A dedicated work ethic and a fiery, steely-eyed determination has turned the 7-foot-4, 300-pound Edey from intriguing prospect into college basketball's biggest star.

The truth is Painter, who routinely builds his team around big men, almost missed, too. His first two choices in that recruiting class were Hunter Dickinson, who chose Michigan, and Ryan Kalkbrenner, who wound up at Creighton. Dickinson became an All-American with the Wolverines and again at Kansas while Kalkbrenner was a two-time all-Big East selection.

Edey outplayed them all, becoming the first national scoring leader to take his team to the Final Four since Oscar Robertson in 1960.

He heads into Saturday's matchup against North Carolina State averaging 25.0 points and 12.2 rebounds for a second straight double-double. He also had 2.2 blocks while shooting 62.2% from the field this season, virtually willing the Boilermakers past Tennessee 72-66 in the regional final with a career-high 40 points and 16 rebounds after last March's shocking first-round loss to 16th-seeded Fairleigh Dickinson.

Edey grew up in Toronto playing hockey and baseball until the strike zone became too large. Eventually, he landed at IMG Academy in Florida where he played only one season on the school's top basketball team. Still, Painter took a chance.

"We were fortunate, right? I didn't know he was going to turn into a two-time national player of the year," Painter said. "I did think he would be good, I just didn't know when he would be good. But he had good hands, he had good feet, he just needed repetition and work so right away, I was like 'We're going to throw him the ball when he's open.' He's always open."

Edey wasn't sure if Purdue was the right fit, either.

But his mother, Julia, remembers how that youngster at the Boilermakers' scrimmage game made them feel welcomed. Edey explained he wasn't even on the team, but the kid didn't care. He just wanted the autograph.

"Zach and I were standing in the tunnel and we said, 'That kid just got a signature from a nobody,'" Julia Edey recounted, drawing laughter from Edey, his parents and Purdue's sellout crowd on Senior Day.

Now Edey will leave Purdue as perhaps the greatest player in school history.

He broke Rick Mount's 54-year-old school scoring record and now has surpassed 2,400 points. He broke Joe Barry Carroll's 44-year-old career rebounding mark. His jersey number, 15, hangs in the rafters alongside other All-Americans such as John Wooden and Glenn "Big Dog" Robinson, even one of Edey's former teammates, Jaden Ivey.

Edey and his teammates are two wins away from Purdue's first national title since Wooden led the Boilermakers to the 1932 championship.

And he did it with an unforgettably powerful, selfless style that endeared him to fans and teammates without shedding the same humility he treated the young autograph seeker all those years ago.

"You can tell he loves the game, you can tell he respects the game and not every No. 1 person is like that," fifth-year forward Mason Gillis said of his teammate. "I think a lot of people don't respect the game, don't respect people around him. He does. He looks out for everybody, he's a good guy, he stays in the gym and I don't think we could ask for a better national player of the year. He does it the right way."

## Americans think a president's power should be checked, AP-NORC poll finds — unless their side wins

By NICHOLAS RICCARDI and LINLEY SANDERS Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Like many Americans, Richard Bidon says he'd like to see the U.S. government "go back to its original design" — a system of checks and balances developed nearly 240 years ago to prevent any branch, especially the presidency, from becoming too powerful.

But that's mainly when Republicans are in power.

Bidon, an 84-year-old Democrat who lives near Los Angeles, said if President Joe Biden is reelected, he doesn't want him to have to get the approval of a possibly Republican-controlled Congress to enact policies to slow climate change. He wants presidents to have the power to change policy unilaterally — as long as they're from the right party.

"When a Democrat's in, I support" a strong presidency, Bidon said. "When Republicans are in, I don't support it that much. It's sort of a wishy-washy thing."

A new poll from The Associated Press-NORC Center for Public Opinion Research finds that Bidon's view is common. Though Americans say don't want a president to have too much power, that view shifts if the candidate of their party wins the presidency. It's a view held by members of both parties, though it's especially common among Republicans.

Overall, only about 2 in 10 Americans say it would be "a good thing" for the next president to be able to change policy without waiting on Congress or the courts. But nearly 6 in 10 Republicans say it would be good for a future President Donald Trump to take unilateral action, while about 4 in 10 Democrats say the same if Biden is reelected.

The sentiment comes amid escalating polarization and is a sign of the public's willingness to push the boundaries of the political framework that has kept the U.S. a stable democracy for more than two centuries. In the poll, only 9% of Americans say the nation's system of checks and balances is working extremely or very well. It also follows promises by Trump to "act as a dictator" on day one of a new administration to secure the border and expand oil and gas drilling.

Bob Connor, a former carpenter now on disability in Versailles, Missouri, wants that type of decisive action on the border. He's given up hope on Congress taking action.

"From what I've seen, the Republicans are trying to get some stuff done, the Democrats are trying to get some other stuff done — they're not mixing in the middle," said Connor, 56. "We're not getting anywhere."

He blames the influx of migrants on Biden unilaterally revoking some of Trump's own unilateral border security policies when he took office.

"I'm not a Trump fanatic, but what he's saying has to get done is right," Connor said.

Joe Titus, a 69-year-old Democrat from Austin, Texas, believes Republicans have destroyed Congress' ability to act in its traditional legislative role and says Biden will have to step into the gap.

"There's this so-called 'majority' in Congress, and they're a bunch of whack-jobs," Titus, a retired Air Force mechanic, said of the GOP-controlled House of Representatives. "It's not the way this thing was set up."

The current Congress is setting dubious records as the least productive one in the country's history, with fewer than three dozen bills sent to Biden's desk last year. At Trump's urging, House Republicans have stalled aid to Ukraine and a bipartisan immigration bill.

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Titus said that in general he opposes expanded presidential power but would support Biden funding more immigration judges and sending additional aid to Ukraine on his own.

"There's certain things that it seems to me the public wants and the other party is blocking," Titus said.

The presidency has steadily gained power in recent years as congressional deadlocks have become more common. Increasingly, the nation's chief executive is moving to resolve issues through administrative policy or executive orders. The U.S. Supreme Court is poised to rule later this year on a case that could significantly weaken the ability of federal agencies — and thus a presidential administration — to issue regulations.

Meanwhile, conservatives are planning a takeover of the federal bureaucracy should they win the White House in November, a move that could increase the administration's ability to make sweeping policy changes on its own.

The AP-NORC poll found that voters' views of which institutions have too much power were colored by their own partisanship. Only 16% of Democrats, whose party currently controls the White House, say the presidency has too much power while nearly half of Republicans believe it does. In contrast, about 6 in 10 Democrats say the U.S. Supreme Court, with its 6-3 conservative majority, has too much power.

With Congress evenly divided between the two parties — the GOP has a narrow House majority, Democrats a narrow Senate one — Americans have similar views on its power regardless of party. About 4 in 10 from both major parties say it has too much power.

"I think Congress had too much power when the presidency and Congress were both ruled by Democrats, but now that Republicans are in the majority there's an equal balance," said John V. Mohr, a 62-year-old housecleaner in Wilmington, North Carolina.

In contrast, he complained that Biden is "sitting there writing executive orders left and right," including his proclamation marking Transgender Day of Visibility, which fell on Easter Sunday this year.

The abstract idea of a president with nearly unchecked power remains unpopular.

Steven Otney, a retired trucker in Rock Hill, South Carolina, said major policies should be approved by Congress and gain approval from the courts. But he also said it depends on the topic. He wants to see prompt action on certain issues by the next president if he's Trump.

"Some things need to be done immediately, like that border wall being finished," said Otney, a Republican.

He said it's just common sense.

"If Trump got in there and said 'I want to bomb Iran,' no, that's crazy," Otney said. "Within reason, not stupid stuff either way. Something to help the American people, not hurt us."

## Iran vows to 'punish Zionist regime' over deadly strike on Iranian consulate attributed to Israel

By AMIR VAHDAT Associated Press

TEHRAN, Iran (AP) — The commander of Iran's powerful Revolutionary Guard warned Friday that "our brave men will punish the Zionist regime," escalating threats against Israel for an airstrike that killed seven of the group's members, including two Iranian generals, earlier this week.

The strike, widely attributed to Israel, destroyed the consular section at the Iranian embassy in Syria. The attack on an Iranian diplomatic compound was a significant escalation in what has been a long-running shadow war between the two archenemies, and Israel has been bracing for an Iranian response.

The tensions flared against the backdrop of the six-month-old Israel-Hamas war in Gaza, and raised renewed fears of a widening regional conflict. The Islamic militant group Hamas, which has ruled Gaza for 17 years, is one of Iran's proxies, along with Lebanon's Hezbollah militia and Yemen's Houthi rebels.

Both Hezbollah and the Houthis have carried out attacks along the fringes of the Gaza war, with Hezbollah engaging in daily cross-border exchanges with Israel and the Houthis frequently targeting Red Sea shipping.

On Friday, thousands joined a funeral procession in Tehran for the seven slain Guard members, chanting "death to Israel" and "death to America." Marchers held up banners with the photos of those killed in the attack. Other banners read: "We will make the wicked Zionist regime regret this crime, with the

power of God.”

The protesters then headed to Tehran University where the head of the Revolutionary Guard, Gen. Hossein Salami gave his speech before the weekly Friday prayers.

“Our brave men will punish the Zionist regime,” he said, adding that “no enemy act against our holy system will go unanswered.”

“The collapse of (the Zionist regime) is very possible and close with God’s grace,” Salami said, adding that the U.S. has become “wildly hated by the world, especially in Muslim-dominated countries” for supporting Israel.

It was not clear if Iran would respond directly or continue to activate its proxies, as it has done throughout the Gaza war.

In all, 12 people were killed in Monday’s strike on the Iranian diplomatic compound — the seven Guard members, four Syrians and a Hezbollah member.

Friday’s public funeral fell on Quds Day, or Jerusalem Day, a traditional Iranian show of support for the Palestinians that has been held on the last Friday of the holy month of Ramadan since the 1979 Islamic Revolution.

## **Blinken says Israeli offers to increase flow of aid to Gaza are welcome but may not be sufficient**

By MATTHEW LEE Associated Press

LEUVEN, Belgium (AP) — U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken said Friday that the measures the Israeli government has announced to expand the flow of aid into Gaza are welcome but may not be enough to meet the Biden administration’s demands for dramatic improvements in humanitarian conditions in the territory.

Blinken said that opening more border crossings, if fully implemented, has the potential to surge assistance to Palestinians caught in the fighting between Israel and Hamas. However, the U.S. also wants to see tangible steps to bolster the protection of civilians and aid workers, he said.

In addition, he called for an “independent, thorough and fully publicized investigation” into the recent killings of aid workers. Seven employees of the charity World Central Kitchen, including six international volunteers, were killed in multiple Israeli airstrikes on their three-car convoy in Gaza late Monday.

The military announced Friday that it dismissed two officers and reprimanded three others for their role in the strikes on the convoy, saying they had mishandled critical information and violated the army’s rules of engagement.

The attack on the convoy was a “grave mistake,” the military said. The speed of the investigation and swift punishment of senior officers was highly unusual for the military, where charges against troops for alleged wrongdoing are rare.

The findings are likely to renew skepticism over the Israeli military’s decision-making. Palestinians, aid groups and human rights organizations have repeatedly accused Israeli forces of firing recklessly at civilians throughout the conflict — a charge Israel denies.

The incident sparked international outrage and put Israel on the defensive about its conduct in its six-month-old war against Hamas.

“We welcome that steps that have been announced by Israel,” Blinken said. “These are positive developments but the real test is results and that’s what we’re looking to see in the coming days and the coming weeks.”

At the same time, he said the U.S. wanted to see a “better system for de-confliction and coordination” so that aid can be safely delivered and distributed inside Gaza.

“All of these things are critical and that really needs to be measured by results,” Blinken told reporters in the town of Leuven, outside Brussels, where he was meeting with U.S. and European trade and commerce officials.

Israel’s military has promised to conduct a speedy investigation into the killing of the aid workers. In



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initial comments, the Israeli army chief said earlier this week that the strikes were a result of misidentification, but did not elaborate.

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's office announced early Friday that Israel would act to improve conditions, including reopening a key border crossing into northern Gaza, just hours after President Joe Biden told him in a Thursday phone call that future U.S. support for the war in Gaza depends on Israel taking more action to protect civilians and aid workers.

Netanyahu's office said the Erez crossing between Israel and Gaza, which was partially destroyed in Hamas' Oct. 7 attack on southern Israel, would temporarily reopen. It also said Israel would allow its Ashdod port, 22 miles (37 kilometers) north of Gaza, to be used to process aid shipments bound for the territory and allow increased Jordanian aid shipments through another land crossing. The announcement did not elaborate on quantities or types of items to be let in.

Biden also told Netanyahu that reaching an "immediate cease-fire" in exchange for the estimated 100 hostages that are still being held in Gaza was "essential" and urged Israel to reach such an accord "without delay," the White House said.

Israel declared war on Hamas in response to the Oct. 7 attack, in which the militants killed about 1,200 people in Israel and took about 250 hostages.

Israel's blistering air and ground offensive has killed more than 33,000 Palestinians in Gaza, about two-thirds of them women and children, according to the Health Ministry in Gaza, an enclave that in parts remains under Hamas control.

The offensive has displaced more than 80% of Gaza's population of 2.3 million people and pushed hundreds of thousands to the brink of starvation.

## Today in History: April 6, first modern Olympics begin

By The Associated Press undefined

Today in History

Today is Saturday, April 6, the 97th day of 2024. There are 269 days left in the year.

Today's Highlight in History:

On April 6, 1896, the first modern Olympic games formally opened in Athens, Greece.

On this date:

In 1862, the Civil War Battle of Shiloh began in Tennessee as Confederate forces launched a surprise attack against Union troops, who beat back the Confederates the next day.

In 1864, Louisiana opened a convention in New Orleans to draft a new state constitution, one that called for the abolition of slavery.

In 1909, American explorers Robert E. Peary and Matthew A. Henson and four Inuits became the first men to reach the North Pole.

In 1917, the United States entered World War I as the House joined the Senate in approving a declaration of war against Germany that was then signed by President Woodrow Wilson.

In 1943, "Le Petit Prince" (The Little Prince) by Antoine de Saint-Exupery was first published by Reynal & Hitchcock of New York.

In 1945, during World War II, the Japanese warship Yamato and nine other vessels sailed on a suicide mission to attack the U.S. fleet off Okinawa; the fleet was intercepted the next day.

In 1954, Sen. Joseph R. McCarthy, R-Wis., responding to CBS newsman Edward R. Murrow's broadside against him on "See It Now," said in remarks filmed for the program that Murrow had, in the past, "engaged in propaganda for Communist causes."

In 1968, 41 people were killed by two consecutive natural gas explosions at a sporting goods store in downtown Richmond, Indiana.

In 1974, Swedish pop group ABBA won the Eurovision Song Contest held in Brighton, England, with a performance of the song "Waterloo."

In 2008, Democratic presidential candidate Barack Obama, speaking at a private fundraiser in San

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Francisco, spoke of voters in Pennsylvania's Rust Belt communities who "cling to guns or religion" because of bitterness about their economic lot; Democratic rival Hillary Rodham Clinton seized on the comment, calling it "elitist."

In 2012, five Black people were shot, three fatally, in Tulsa, Oklahoma; Jake England and Alvin Watts, who admitted targeting the victims because of race, pleaded guilty to murder, and were sentenced to life in prison without parole.

In 2014, legendary Hollywood actor Mickey Rooney, 93, died in North Hollywood.

In 2017, comedian Don Rickles, known for his biting insults, died in Beverly Hills, California at age 90.

In 2020, British Prime Minister Boris Johnson was transferred to the intensive care unit of a London hospital where he was being treated for COVID-19, after his condition deteriorated.

In 2021, Major League Baseball announced that the All-Star Game would be played at Coors Field in Denver; the game had been pulled from Atlanta because of objections to changes in Georgia's voting laws.

In 2022, the mayor of the besieged Ukrainian port city of Mariupol said more than 5,000 civilians had been killed during the invasion by Russian troops. In response, the U.S. and its Western allies moved to impose new sanctions against the Kremlin over what they branded war crimes.

Today's Birthdays: Nobel Prize-winning scientist James D. Watson is 96. Actor Billy Dee Williams is 87. Actor Roy Thinnes is 86. Movie director Barry Levinson is 82. Actor John Ratzenberger is 77. Actor Patrika Darbo is 76. Baseball Hall of Famer Bert Blyleven is 73. Actor Marilu Henner is 72. Olympic bronze medal figure skater Janet Lynn is 71. Actor Michael Rooker is 69. Former U.S. Rep. Michele Bachmann, R-Minn., is 68. Rock musician Warren Haynes is 64. Rock singer-musician Black Francis (The Pixies) is 59. Actor Ari Meyers is 55. Actor Paul Rudd is 55. Actor-producer Jason Hervey is 52. Actor Zach Braff is 49. Actor Joel Garland is 49. Actor Candace Cameron Bure (buhr-RAY') is 48. Actor Teddy Sears is 47. Jazz and R&B musician Robert Glasper is 46. Actor Eliza Coupe is 43. Singer and guitarist Kenneth Pattengale (Milk Carton Kids) is 42. Actor Bret Harrison is 42. Actor Charlie McDermott is 34.