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Wednesday, April 10

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

School Breakfast: Cereal

School Lunch: Chicken quesadilla, peas.

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

Emmanuel Lutheran: Confirmation, 6 p.m.

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

SD District Municipal League meeting at the Legion
No Bingo at the Legion



Thursday, April 11

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

School Breakfast: Breakfast pizza.

School Lunch: BBQ rib sandwich, tater tots.

Girls Golf at Moberge.

Track at Milbank, 3:30 p.m.

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

Friday, April 12

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

School Breakfast: Biscuits.

School Lunch: Grilled cheese, corn.

All-School Play 7 p.m .

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

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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The parents of the convicted Oxford High School shooter were both sentenced yesterday to 10 to 15 years in state prison for their roles in failing to prevent their son from opening fire at his Michigan school in November 2021, killing four and wounding seven others. It is the first such conviction of parents of a child who committed a mass shooting in the US.

Nobel Prize-winning physicist Peter Higgs has died at age 94 following a short illness, the University of Edinburgh announced yesterday. Higgs, who was an emeritus professor at Edinburgh, is known for discovering the Higgs boson, a subatomic particle known colloquially as the "God particle."

The European Court of Human Rights ruled yesterday that countries have an obligation to reduce greenhouse gas emissions to protect people from the effects of climate change, marking the first successful international court ruling on climate change. The decision sets a legal precedent for climate litigation within the Council of Europe's 46 member states, including the 27 EU nations (see the difference).

Sports, Entertainment, & Culture

First leg of the UEFA Champions League quarterfinals kick off, with more matches today; see full schedule and results.

NCAA men's basketball championship game brings in nearly 15 million viewers, a 4% increase from last year but behind the nearly 19 million who viewed Sunday's women's championship game.

YouTube stars Dude Perfect, known for their trick shot videos, get \$100M investment from Highmount Capital to expand outside traditional video content.

Science & Technology

Google Cloud announces new custom-built processor as part of effort to meet rising AI demand, says chip is 30% more efficient than comparable products from Amazon Web Services and Microsoft.

New platform allows study of factors influencing dendritic translation, a key process involved in the formation of new memories.

Scientists discover bristle worm species with eyesight on par with mice, which may be able to detect ultraviolet light; complex vision comes despite the animals having rudimentary nervous systems.

Business & Markets

US stock markets close mixed (S&P 500 +0.1%, Dow -0.0%, Nasdaq +0.3%) ahead of today's March inflation data; economists predict consumer price index report to show growth of 0.3% month-over-month and 3.4% year-over-year.

Gold prices hit record, surpassing \$2,300 per ounce. Costco selling as much as \$200M in gold bars per month, Wells Fargo estimates; Costco began selling gold bars in August, reporting \$100M in sales in its first quarter.

Boeing reports Q1 passenger plane deliveries fell to 83—the lowest level since mid-2021—amid scrutiny following door plug blowout in January. Federal Aviation Administration investigating whistleblower complaint over safety and quality concerns at Boeing.

Politics & World Affairs

Arizona's Supreme Court rules 1864 near-total abortion ban is enforceable, superseding 15-week abortion ban passed in 2022, effective in two weeks; signatures being gathered for potential ballot measure allowing abortions up to 24th week of pregnancy.

US House members to deliver articles of impeachment against Homeland Security Secretary Alejandro Mayorkas to the Senate next week; Democrats expected to vote to dismiss charges.

The Environmental Protection Agency issues ruling requiring over 200 chemical plants to reduce toxic emissions, claims cancer cases near plants expected to fall by 60%. Norfolk Southern agrees to pay \$600M to settle class-action suit over 2023 train derailment in eastern Ohio that released toxic chemicals.

Why 1440? The printing press was invented around the year 1440, spreading knowledge to the masses and changing the course of history. More facts: In every day, there are 1,440 minutes. We're here to make each one count.



Girl Scouts donate to The Pantry

Groton Girl Scout Troop #40249 along with several area businesses donated over 100 boxes of Girl Scout cookies to The Pantry on Tuesday. Pictured here are some of the troop members along with Enrich Groton SoDak Inc. volunteers. Cookies were also donated to troops overseas.

From left to right: Isabella Daly, Hallie Perkins, April Abeln, Topper Tastad, Nancy Larsen, Diane Warrington, Pat Miller and Rosalyn Block. (Courtesy Photo April Abeln)

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Groton Area opt-out passes with 67%

Patrons of the Groton Area School District voted overwhelming in favor of the opt-out which will help keep programs at the school stable. The measure passed, 567-275 with a 67 percent favorable vote. It passed at the Andover precinct 35-24, the Groton precinct 424-128 and the Columbia precinct 53-20. The Bristol precinct had more no votes, 103-55.

Thirty-three percent of the total patrons showed up at the polls on Tuesday.

The vote will allow the school board to ask for up to \$1.25 million extra in each of the next 10 years.



Jerry Peltier made sure the ballots were stamped before they went into the ballot box.

(Photo by Paul Kosel)



Kathy Harry and Meri Erickson man the election table at the Groton Community Center. (Photo by Paul Kosel)

	"YES"	"NO"	POLL BOOK COUNT
ANDOVER	35	24	59
BRISTOL	55	103	158
GROTON	424	128	552
COLUMBIA	53	20	73
TOTALS	567	275	842

PERCENTAGE 67% 33% ISSUE "PASS"

Percentage of district ballots cast – 33 %

(Eligible voters – 2,572)

Ballots spoiled, rejected, or uncounted – 2

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School Play this weekend

The All School Play is set for this weekend in Groton. The play, "Peter Pan & Wendy" will be performed Friday at 7 p.m. and Saturday at 5 p.m. with a free will offering at the door.

Front Row L-R: Libby Johnson, Gracie Borg, TJ Feist, Kylie Borg, Josie Lord, Callie Herrick, Ayce Warrington, Kendyll Kroll, Tori Schuster, (Not pictured Feddy Cole, Ivy Cole, Kaelynn Furman

Middle Row L-R: Aspen Beto, Novalea Warrington, Madison Herrick, Wesley Borg, Kyleigh Kroll, Tenley Frost, Libby Cole, Layne Johnson, T.C. Schuster, John Bisbee, Kinzleigh Furman

Back Row L-R: Abby Yeadon, Gentry Pigors, Divya Pelmelay, Natalia Warrington, Anna Bisbee, Camryn Kurtz, Gavin Kroll, Mya Feser, Addison Hoeft, Blake Lord, Brody Lord, Emily Clark, Axel Warrington. (Courtesy Photo Amanda Bisbee)

Sirens to sound today

South Dakota Severe Weather Awareness week is scheduled for April 8-12, 2024.

During the week Brown County will be testing our entire network of outdoor warning sirens through the county. This will happen on today with the outdoor warning sirens being activated at 10:30 a.m.

Please remember these are outdoor warning sirens and are only designed to alert those who are outside that something dangerous is happening in your area. Once you hear the siren activated you should go inside and turn to local media or NOAA weather radio to get more information.

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Schwan is triple winner at Milbank Junior High Meet

The junior high track meet was held Tuesday in Milbank with Jordan Schwan being a triple winner on the day. Schwan won the 100m dash, the 400m dash and was on the winning 400m Relay team with teammates Owen Sperry, Ryder Schelle and Jace Johnson. Anthony Gilmore won the 200m dash.

In the girl's division, MaKenna Krause took first in the 100m dash and Ryelle Gilbert won the 400m dash.

Boys Results

100 Meters 8th Grade - Finals

5. Owen Sperry, 13.10

100 Meters 7th Grade - Finals

1. Jordan Schwan, 12.71

2. Anthony Gilmore, 13.25

10. Ryder Schwan, 13.89

40. Eli Heilmann, 16.43

200 Meters 8th Grade - Finals

5. Owen Sperry, 27.59

200 Meters 7th Grade - Finals

1. Anthony Gilmore, 27.20

2. Ryder Schwan, 28.44

8. Kyson Kucker, 29.45

12. Keegan Kucker, 31.28

32. Eli Heilmann, 37.41

400 Meters 7th Grade - Finals

1. Jordan Schwan, 1:04.17

3. Keegan Kucker, 1:07.00

6. Kyson Kucker, 1:08.16

800 Meters 8th Grade - Finals

5. Kason Oswald, 2:48.75

1600 Meters 8th Grade - Finals

4. Jace Johnson, 5:59.34

9. Kason Oswald, 6:49.38

4x100 Relay 8th Grade - Finals

1. Owen Sperry, Ryder Schelle, Jace Johnson, Jordan Schwan, 51.30

Shot Put - 8lb 8th Grade - Finals

9. Lane Johnson, 26' 4

Discus - 1kg 8th Grade - Finals

9. Lane Johnson, 68' 6.5

Girls Results

100 Meters 8th Grade - Finals

1. MaKenna Krause, 14.37

8. Kinsley Rowen, 15.30

17. Gracie Pearson, 16.38

18. Ella Kettner, 16.41 (0.0)SR

19. Audrey Davis, 16.48

100 Meters 7th Grade - Finals

3. Madison Little, 14.75

17. Aurora Washenberger, 16.09

23. Rowan Patterson, 16.71

33. Andi Gauer, 18.14

34. Illyanna Dallaire, 18.68

200 Meters 7th Grade - Finals

7. Madison Little, 31.04

19. Aurora Washenberger, 34.28

27. Rowan Patterson, 35.41

31. Andi Gauer, 38.64

34. Illyanna Dallaire, 44.24

400 Meters 8th Grade - Finals

1. Ryelle Gilbert, 1:11.71

5. Rylie Rose, 1:22.00

800 Meters 7th Grade - Finals

4. Sydney Holmes, 3:21.33

1600 Meters 8th Grade - Finals

2. Ryelle Gilbert, 6:01.53

1600 Meters 7th Grade - Finals

5. Sydney Holmes, 7:22.40

100m Hurdles - 30" 8th Grade - Finals

6. Ella Kettner, 21.38

100m Hurdles - 30" 7th Grade - Finals

4. Tevan Hanson, 20.86

4x100 Relay 8th Grade - Finals

5. Kinsley Rowen, Tevan Hanson, Ella Kettner, Abby Fjeldheim, 1:02.31

Shot Put - 6lb 8th Grade - Finals

11. Libby Cole, 25' 7

16. Audrey Davis, 22' 5.5

19. Kyleigh Kroll, 20' 3

Shot Put - 6lb 7th Grade - Finals

2. Abby Fjeldheim, 25' 6

15. Adeline Kotzer, 17' 10

Discus 8th Grade - Finals

12. Libby Cole, 57' 7.5

18. Kyleigh Kroll, 45' 4

Discus 7th Grade - Finals

12. Adeline Kotzer, 28' 2.5

High Jump 8th Grade - Finals

5. Addison Hoeft, 3' 6

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15 N Main St. - Ste. 101
Downtown Groton

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Name Released in Codington County Fatal Crash

What: Single vehicle fatal crash
Where: 45050 164th St., 7 miles NW of Watertown, SD
When: 8:15 p.m., Saturday, April 6, 2024

Driver 1: Jacob Hans Obermeier, 53-year-old male from Sioux Falls, fatal injuries
Vehicle 1: 2016 Chrysler 300S
Seatbelt Use: Yes

Codington County, S.D.- A 53-year-old male suffered fatal injuries in a single vehicle crash Saturday evening near Watertown, SD.

Preliminary crash information indicates Jacob H. Obermeier, the driver a 2016 Chrysler 300S, was traveling westbound on 164th Street near 450th Avenue and failed to navigate the curve. The vehicle entered the north ditch and rolled. Obermeier died as a result of his injuries. There were no passengers in the vehicle.

The South Dakota Highway Patrol is investigating the crash. All information released so far is only preliminary.

The Highway Patrol is an agency of the South Dakota Department of Public Safety.



SOUTH DAKOTA SEARCHLIGHT

<https://southdakotasearchlight.com>

Price goes up for Governor's House program, but less than recent years

Pace of construction for inmate-built homes set to pick up

BY: JOHN HULT - APRIL 9, 2024 5:02 PM

The homes built by inmates and sold to income-eligible South Dakotans will cost more come Friday, but the price hike is lower than it has been for the last three years.

The South Dakota Housing Development Authority Board voted Tuesday to increase the prices for Governor's Houses, which are constructed at Mike Durfee State Prison in Springfield and shipped across the state to eligible buyers.

There are two- and three-bedroom homes, as well as "DakotaPlex" options for more than one family in towns with 5,000 people or fewer, and day care models.

Homebuyers can get a Governor's House if they have an income of \$64,820 or less for a one- or two-person household, or \$74,080 for households of three or more. Developers can buy and place the homes, as well, provided they're later sold to people who fall within the income guidelines.

Buyers are responsible for finding a lot, getting a building permit, buying appliances, laying flooring and hooking up utilities.

Prices have crept up significantly since 2020, when a buyer could get a two-bedroom Governor's House for \$50,200.

On July 1, the start of the 2025 fiscal year, the homes will be priced as follows:

Two bedroom: \$75,900, up from \$71,400.

Three bedroom: \$89,900, up from \$85,400.

Dakotaplex two bedroom: \$89,900, up from \$85,900.

Dakotaplex three bedroom: \$99,900, up from \$95,900.

Day care: \$89,900, up from \$85,900.

From 2022 to 2023, the price hikes were about twice as high.

As in previous years, the increases are tied to higher build prices. The cost of building materials like wood and siding has been the culprit in recent years. A different pressure point emerged when bids for materials began to arrive at South Dakota Housing for the coming construction season.

"Most of the price increase was not so much based on commodity items, but more production items like furnaces and anything with an electric circuit board," said Mike Harsma, who heads the Governor's House program for South Dakota Housing.

Harsma told the board that the authority aims to build 120 homes in fiscal year 2025, a higher number than recent years. So far in fiscal year 2024, which began last July, the authority sold 42 Governor's Houses, most of which were three-bedroom models. Forty-three were completed in that time frame, and 55 were delivered.

Harsma told the board that the slight slowdown in sales over the past year was tied to longer lead times for materials. Since 2022, the wait time for a Governor's House has been three years from order to delivery.

Production is ramping back up as the construction season gets underway, he said, in part because inmates have begun to get lunch at the building site. That's cut out the time it's typically taken to cart them

from the site to the prison for meals.

"We're looking at probably lowering lead times over the next few weeks," Harsma said.

The board voted unanimously to pass the price increases, which take effect Friday.

The board also heard an update on the Housing Infrastructure Financing Program, created in 2023 by the Legislature with an infusion of \$200 million in funding to help developers pay for things like lighting, water and sewer lines and streets.

Chas Olson, director of the housing authority, told the board that \$113 million has been committed thus far and that several of the awarded projects are or will soon be building. Two other projects could be ready to apply for funds next month.

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.

Cost of workforce ads starring Noem rises to \$9 million

Most of the money comes from employer tax fund controlled by governor

BY: JOSHUA HAIAR - APRIL 9, 2024 3:39 PM

Governor Kristi Noem's administration has signed a contract amendment raising the maximum spending on workforce recruitment ads starring the governor to \$9 million.

The contract is publicly viewable in the state's online portal for financial documents, Open.SD.gov, which also shows the state has paid \$8.5 million to the firm managing the campaign so far. The original contract from last year, prior to amendments, was for \$5 million.

The Freedom Works Here campaign showcases Noem stepping into various high-demand jobs and inviting applicants to fill openings in the state.

Launched last summer, the campaign entered its third round Monday with a new video ad featuring Noem as a homebuilder. The national campaign has further elevated the profile of Noem, who is under consideration as a running mate for presumptive Republican presidential nominee Donald Trump.

Some lawmakers have criticized a lack of clear data demonstrating the workforce campaign's effectiveness or lack thereof.

The governor's Monday press release about the newest ad said, "Thousands and thousands of families have already moved to South Dakota, and thousands more are in the process of coming here."

In response to questions Tuesday from South Dakota Searchlight about the ads' effectiveness, the Governor's Office of Economic Development responded by email. The office said the number of job openings in the state has dropped by 4,000 since the campaign began. The office also said 9,400 people who "worked directly through the Freedom Works Here process" have shown interest in moving to South Dakota, and another 2,400 have received individual assistance to begin the process of moving to the state.

"Anecdotally, we are hearing from even more folks who did not utilize the formal process but were spurred to move here by the ads," the office said.

The Governor's Office of Economic Development contracts with an Ohio firm, Strategic Media Placement, doing business as Go West Media, to run the campaign. Both entities are subsidiaries of The Strategy Group, whose CEO Ben Yoho managed Vivek Ramaswamy's unsuccessful campaign for the Republican presidential nomination.

During a legislative hearing in January, a former Noem administration official testified that the Ohio firm seemed predestined for selection to carry out the campaign. State Sen. Lee Schoenbeck, R-Watertown, said during the hearing that the Ohio firm's idea for the campaign was "clearly stolen" from a similar proposal submitted by Lawrence & Schiller, of Sioux Falls.

Most of the money for the workforce campaign comes from state government's Future Fund, which is controlled by the governor.

South Dakota employers pay into the Future Fund when they submit payroll taxes for unemployment

benefits. The Future Fund receives a fraction of an additional percent — which the state describes as an “investment fee” — on top of those payroll taxes.

According to the most recent data available from the state Department of Labor and Regulation, 28,261 employers paid \$23 million into the Future Fund in 2022, which equated to an average of \$814 per employer.

State law says the Future Fund must be used “for purposes related to research and economic development for the state.” Unlike other funds administered by the Governor’s Office of Economic Development, Future Fund expenses don’t go through a board of citizen appointees for vetting or approval.

Responding to recent controversies about the fund, lawmakers passed and the governor signed a bill in March requiring biannual reporting to legislators about the governor’s use of the fund.

Rep. Scott Odenbach, R-Spearfish was one of the bill’s sponsors.

“Many people wonder if this is a proper use of tax money,” Odenbach said Tuesday. “As the spending on this program grows so does the need for more vigorous oversight. I am hopeful that this session’s bill is just the beginning of reforms to Future Fund spending.”

Of the \$8.5 million paid to Strategic Media Placement so far, \$7.5 million has come from the Future Fund, and the rest has come from other state funds, according to Open.SD.gov.

The Governor’s Office of Economic Development spent an additional \$130,000 from its marketing funds last year to wrap a NASCAR vehicle with a Freedom Works Here-themed design for two races.

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.

Wind Cave tours suspended again, but officials hope to solve elevator problems for good this time

Park will focus on surface programming in the meantime

BY: MARCUS HEERDT - APRIL 9, 2024 6:30 AM

HOT SPRINGS — Long-lingering elevator problems at Wind Cave National Park will prevent cave tours this summer at the southwest South Dakota attraction, but park officials hope a replacement elevator system will be a permanent solution.

The park recently announced that cave tours will be suspended beginning May 1 to accommodate the work.

The elevator system, which provides access to the cave for approximately 130,000 visitors annually, has been problematic for several years due to its aging components.

According to Tom Farrell, chief of interpretation at Wind Cave, many repairs have taken place over the years, and the existing system includes parts dating back to the 1930s. This will be the first complete rebuild, and the work is expected to continue into the fall.

Consistent elevator issues

Over the past five years, Wind Cave tours have been canceled on several occasions due to the park’s faulty elevator system.

On June 29, 2019, Wind Cave’s elevators became nonoperational. At the time, funding was not available for complete replacement, so the park made repairs.

After the first company hired could not complete the work, the park hired a consultant team and the project went out for bids a second time. Elevator Repair Service Inc., of Houston, Texas, secured the bid, began work in June 2020, and completed the repair work that November.

Park officials considered conducting cave tours through an alternate walk-in entrance, but ultimately decided against it, because the route includes a descent of 155 stairs.

“In the middle of the summer, we just didn’t think we could do something like that in terms of the amount of visitation that would be coming in,” Farrell told the Rapid City Journal at the time. “And if we had a

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medical emergency down there, we'd have to haul people up 155 stairs."

Even after the elevator repairs, the park was unable to offer cave tours due to the coronavirus pandemic. The visitor center remained closed.

After an 11-month closure, Wind Cave reopened its visitor center to the public in February 2021, and cave tours resumed that March.

Since the 2021 reopening, the elevator system has operated sporadically due to consistent maintenance problems.

Once funding was secured for a complete overhaul of the elevator system, PKD Incorporated of Texas was hired for the work. The cost is just under \$2 million with funding coming from a national account funded by fees collected at parks across the country.

"We're excited to finally be able to completely rebuild the old elevators, including replacement of the cabs, motors, cables and electrical equipment," said Wind Cave National Park Superintendent Leigh Welling.

Shift to surface programs

During the cave's closure, park rangers will focus on aboveground programming.

"We appreciate everyone's patience while we improve access to the cave and remind the public that there are still many things to do at the park," Welling said.

Those include ranger-led talks and hikes, and new exhibits being installed in the visitor center this spring that include several interactive stations, a walk-through cave and a prairie diorama.

Rangers will also offer virtual tours of the cave in the visitor center auditorium. The program will use LI-DAR technology to give a tour of the Natural Entrance tour route. LIDAR (Light Detection and Ranging) is a remote sensing method that uses light in the form of a pulsed laser to create a 3D scan or map of a place.

The staff at Wind Cave stress that the park is more than just a cave and has many other surface activities such as hiking and wildlife viewing.

"We are two parks in one," said Farrell.

The park covers 53 square miles, has more than 30 miles of hiking trails and is home to bison, elk, deer, pronghorn, coyotes, prairie dogs and other wildlife.

The Black Hills Parks and Forests Association is the official nonprofit partner of Wind Cave whose retail store and main offices are located inside the visitor center.

Executive Director Patty Ressler said the organization has been preparing for the cave closure.

"We will have cool new products available at the park store and will be planning additional educational programming to help supplement what the park will already be doing," Ressler said. "Visitors should still plan to visit Wind Cave and have a great park experience."

Financial impact

The suspension of cave tours means a loss of tour fees for the park. During the 2018 summer season, before the current run of elevator problems began, the park took in nearly \$700,000 in tour fees.

Local economies are also impacted. A 2023 National Park Service report showed that 607,418 visitors to Wind Cave National Park in 2022 spent \$52.7 million in communities near the park. That spending supported 741 jobs in the local area and had a cumulative benefit to the local economy of \$75 million.

Hot Springs is about 10 miles from the park's visitor center. The Hot Springs Area Chamber of Commerce is bracing for impacts from the cave closure.

"There was a significant impact on area visitation the last time the elevators went down," said Hot Springs Area Chamber of Commerce Executive Director Olivia Mears. "Although we appreciate that this time there will be new, modernized elevators installed, it is still very disappointing that cave tours will not be available.

Mears said the chamber plans to promote other things the park has to offer, but anticipates a detrimental impact on visitation.

South Dakota's Secretary of Tourism Jim Hagen is aware of the park's prolonged elevator saga and is looking forward to a future when it no longer causes disruptions.

"Even though there will be no underground cave tours this summer, we will take this short-term pain for much-needed, longer-term gain," Hagen said.

Marcus Heerdt is an award-winning reporter for the Fall River County Herald-Star newspaper in Hot Springs. A lover of being outside as well as history, he is the author of five books about South Dakota: three hiking guidebooks and two local history books.

U.S. Sen. Josh Hawley proposes adding radiation exposure bill to stalled tax package

Radiation fund includes eligibility for South Dakota workers

BY: ASHLEY MURRAY - APRIL 9, 2024 5:36 PM

WASHINGTON — Republican Sen. Josh Hawley of Missouri thinks he's found a path for stalled tax legislation that would temporarily expand the child tax credit and restore business tax breaks that are expired or have sunset under the 2017 tax law.

Hawley's idea is to attach the Radiation Exposure Compensation Act to the tax bill to entice his party colleagues to pass it through the upper chamber — including top tax writer and radiation compensation champion Sen. Mike Crapo of Idaho. The House already has passed the tax package with overwhelming bipartisan support.

"I think if they want to move the tax bill, I would say put RECA onto the tax bill and move them together. I think you can get 60 (votes) for that. I would go for it. I think other people would vote for it. It's hard to see a path if that doesn't happen, to be honest with you," Hawley told States Newsroom and a small group of reporters Tuesday.

Hawley's RECA proposal would expand the expiring compensation fund for victims of past government radiation and atomic bomb testing in the St. Louis area and the western and southwestern U.S. The existing fund, which would be extended for six years, includes eligibility for people who worked in uranium mining, milling and transport decades ago in South Dakota.

Senators voted in favor of the bill in March, 69-30.

When asked by States Newsroom if the proposal — first reported by Punchbowl News — had gained traction, Hawley said he's "talked to multiple senators about this and where my position is."

"Listen, I don't control the floor. So it's not my decision. But I'm just saying that if they want to move that bill ... I can only control my own vote, but I'd vote for it," he said.

Senate GOP opposition to tax bill

Some Senate Republicans refuse to support the tax bill over a Democratic proposal to allow taxpayers to receive the child tax credit even if they had no annual income the prior year — a "look-back" provision that they liken to expanding welfare.

Several also oppose a provision that would phase-in the credit at a faster rate, therefore increasing the amount parents could receive as a refund.

Crapo, ranking member of the Senate Committee on Finance and lead Senate Republican negotiator on the tax bill, has championed compensation for victims of government radiation exposure.

The Idaho Republican's invited guest to President Joe Biden's State of the Union address in March was Tona Henderson, head of the Idaho Downwinders in Emmett, Idaho, a group that advocates for compensation for Idahoans affected by government nuclear weapons testing in the 1950s and 1960s.

A Senate Finance Committee spokesperson said Crapo does not have any comment about Hawley's idea.

A staunch opponent of the tax legislation, GOP Sen. Thom Tillis of North Carolina, said Hawley's proposal does nothing to move his position.

"You're talking about the tax legislation I oppose?" he said when asked by States Newsroom Tuesday if attaching RECA would change his mind. "No."

Sen. Ron Wyden, who chairs the Senate Finance Committee and originally sponsored the tax bill, said

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he hasn't yet been briefed on the proposal, which also would have to make it through the Republican-controlled House.

"But, you know, when I hear United States senators, particularly Republicans, say that they're interested in families and small businesses, and getting a roof over people's heads, I think that's a good thing," the Oregon Democrat said.

Wyden said he's interested in "approaches that add votes, don't subtract votes."

What Republicans want to do — strip the bill of several provisions to expand the child tax credit — would alienate Democratic supporters of the bill, Wyden said.

"What has been offered thus far by the Senate Republicans would not get a single Democratic vote, and the sponsors of it know that."

Worsening the national debt?

The Committee for a Responsible Federal Budget, a nonpartisan budget watchdog organization, panned Hawley's proposal Tuesday afternoon, saying it has potential to turn the tax legislation "into a fiscally reckless bill by adding a layer of unpaid-for spending."

"Despite its flaws, the House went through the important exercise of holding down their bill's costs and ensuring it was fully offset. Throwing \$50 billion of borrowing on top of it would unravel all of the progress made in that effort," Maya MacGuineas, CRFB's president, said in a statement.

The \$78 billion bill negotiated by Wyden and Republican Rep. Jason Smith of Missouri, the lead tax writer in the House, offsets the cost by ending a pandemic-era tax break for businesses that has been riddled with fraud.

"Of course we need to make sure victims of radiation exposure are appropriately compensated. But their grandchildren shouldn't be the ones paying the bill," MacGuineas said later in the statement.

"We are nearing an inflection point in our nation's history where the national debt will exceed its record as a share of the economy, interest payments on that debt will be higher than what we spend on national defense or Medicare, and a host of important priorities will test our ability to continue borrowing."

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

Republicans return to D.C. amid dwindling majority, suspense over House speaker post

BY: ASHLEY MURRAY - APRIL 9, 2024 9:11 AM

WASHINGTON — U.S. House Republicans are returning from a two-week recess Tuesday with an even slimmer majority and the potential looming chaos of a second speaker fight in less than a year.

Hours before recess began on March 22, Rep. Marjorie Taylor Greene of Georgia filed a motion to vacate the U.S. House speaker's office, threatening to boot Mike Johnson of Louisiana from the role he's held for just over five months.

The potential leadership crisis looms over a serious to-do list that includes renewing the Foreign Surveillance Intelligence Act and pressure to finally approve a long-stalled foreign aid request for conflicts in Ukraine, Israel and the Indo-Pacific.

Adding to the risk of chaos for the GOP: Two House Republicans abruptly announced resignations days before lawmakers headed home for the Easter holiday break, narrowing the House GOP's majority to 217-213 once both are finished and prior to a series of special elections later this spring.

Colorado's Ken Buck resigned on March 22, quickly followed by the abrupt resignation of Mike Gallagher of Wisconsin, whose last day is slated for April 19.

And as the 2024 election cycle accelerates, political observers will be watching for whether House GOP lawmakers will balance day-to-day business while appeasing the political base for presumed Republican

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presidential candidate former President Donald Trump.

House Republicans have struggled to unify during the 118th Congress, which started with the party slog-ging through more than a dozen ballots to seat Kevin McCarthy at the helm, said Matt Dallek, a political historian at George Washington University.

McCarthy, of California, was ousted in the fall, and the former leader left Congress in December, chip-ping away at the majority's margin.

"This is a continuation of the tumult that really began when the Republicans took power," Dallek said.

Ukraine aid

With a two-week work period ahead, House GOP lawmakers face another chance to prove whether they can coalesce around billions in aid to U.S. allies. House Republicans also face big questions about federal funds to help rebuild the collapsed Francis Scott Key Bridge in Baltimore and the renewal of a surveillance law that expires April 19, a self-imposed deadline after lawmakers extended it in December.

Johnson has vowed to prioritize Ukraine aid when House lawmakers return Tuesday, despite the prospect of continued opposition from the party's far-right faction.

The U.S. Senate passed a \$95.3 billion foreign aid package in February that would cover assistance to Ukraine, Israel and Taiwan, but the House has yet to advance it.

The standalone foreign aid package received support after Senate Republicans, heeding to Trump's opposition, blocked a deal to alter U.S. immigration laws in exchange for Ukraine aid after months of bipartisan negotiations.

Johnson has said the House will be considering Ukraine aid again. "We've been talking to all the members especially now over the district work period. When we return after this period, we'll be moving a product but it's going to, I think, have some important innovations," the Louisiana Republican said March 31 on Fox News' "Sunday Night in America," hosted by former GOP South Carolina Congressman Trey Gowdy.

Johnson said he wants to see the REPO Act as part of the deal. The legislation, introduced last year, would build a fund for Ukraine using the profits from the sale of seized Russian assets, which Johnson said would be "pure poetry."

Johnson also said he expects conference members to rally in support if the bill restructured Ukraine aid in the form of loans and if it included a measure that would "unleash" American natural gas exports as a way to "help unfund Vladimir Putin's war effort."

The speaker faces an uphill battle in unifying House Republicans on the issue.

Georgia's Rep. Andrew Clyde, a member of the far-right House Freedom Caucus, wrote on X April 3 that "(b)orrowing billions of dollars to protect Ukraine's borders while OUR southern border is being invaded is a slap in the face to the American people."

Some of Johnson's conservative colleagues think amending the foreign aid bill could be a winning strategy.

Rep. French Hill of Arkansas said adding the REPO Act "would go a long way to filling the Ukrainian budget gap and be a good down payment for reconstruction, to make Putin pay the ultimate cost of his illegal invasion of Ukraine."

"It would be, in my judgment, a way to get more support for the total package for Ukraine, seizing these Russian assets," Hill told CBS "Face the Nation" host Margaret Brennan on Sunday.

When Brennan pressed him on the skepticism from his colleagues on the far right, including Greene, Hill responded: "I think overwhelmingly Americans and Republican primary voters believe that Putin should be defeated in Ukraine. As I've said before, we should draw the line on authoritarian dictators, particularly permanent members of the (United Nations) Security Council invading neighboring countries."

Working with the Democrats?

If Johnson can't unify the House GOP conference, votes from across the aisle may be the only path to passing an aid package, particularly if Johnson bypasses the House Committee on Rules. That fast-track to the floor requires a two-thirds majority for passage, which will inevitably mean Democrats' support will

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matter.

However, striking a government funding deal with President Joe Biden last year was a flash point that led to the far-right House Republicans' ouster of McCarthy.

Business in the lower chamber ground to a halt for weeks in October after seven House Republicans joined Florida's Matt Gaetz in taking the gavel from McCarthy. All Democrats joined in voting for his removal.

Greene's motion in late March to sack Johnson followed a fast-tracked bipartisan House vote that resulted in the passage of the last round of overdue spending bills.

Greene did not force a vote on removing Johnson, but rather said it was a "warning" to him that the conference would begin looking for a new speaker who "will stand with Republicans and our Republican majority instead of standing with Democrats," she told reporters after filing the motion.

Dallek said that Johnson putting a Ukraine deal on the floor "may be the final straw for the Marjorie Taylor Greenes of the world, and they might move to get rid of him."

"There's talk that Democrats would save (Johnson) in agreement for putting Ukraine funding on the floor. You know, retaining your speakership because you're saved by the opposition party is not exactly a great place to be, right?" Dallek said.

Johnson said he believes his Republican colleagues view Greene's effort as "a distraction from our mission."

"Again, the mission is to save the republic," he told Fox News's Gowdy on Easter. "And the only way we can do that is if we grow the House majority, win the Senate and win the White House.

"So we don't need any dissension right now. Look, Marjorie Taylor Greene filed the motion, it's not a privileged motion so it doesn't move automatically. It's just hanging there. And she's frustrated. She and I exchanged text messages. Even today. We're going to talk early next week," Johnson said.

GOP Rep. Don Bacon of Nebraska said he's "optimistic" the House can pass the Ukraine aid bill during this work period.

"But it is very likely that after this Ukraine bill, we may have a standoff with the speaker. I hope the speaker prevails. He's doing the right thing. It's in our national security interest that Ukraine remain independent," Bacon told NBC's "Meet the Press" on March 31.

On Monday, Greene wrote on X that she remains opposed to Johnson bypassing the Rules Committee and calling a floor vote.

"Our Republican Speaker of the House is upsetting many of our members by relying on Democrats to pass major bills and working with Dems by giving them everything they want," Greene wrote.

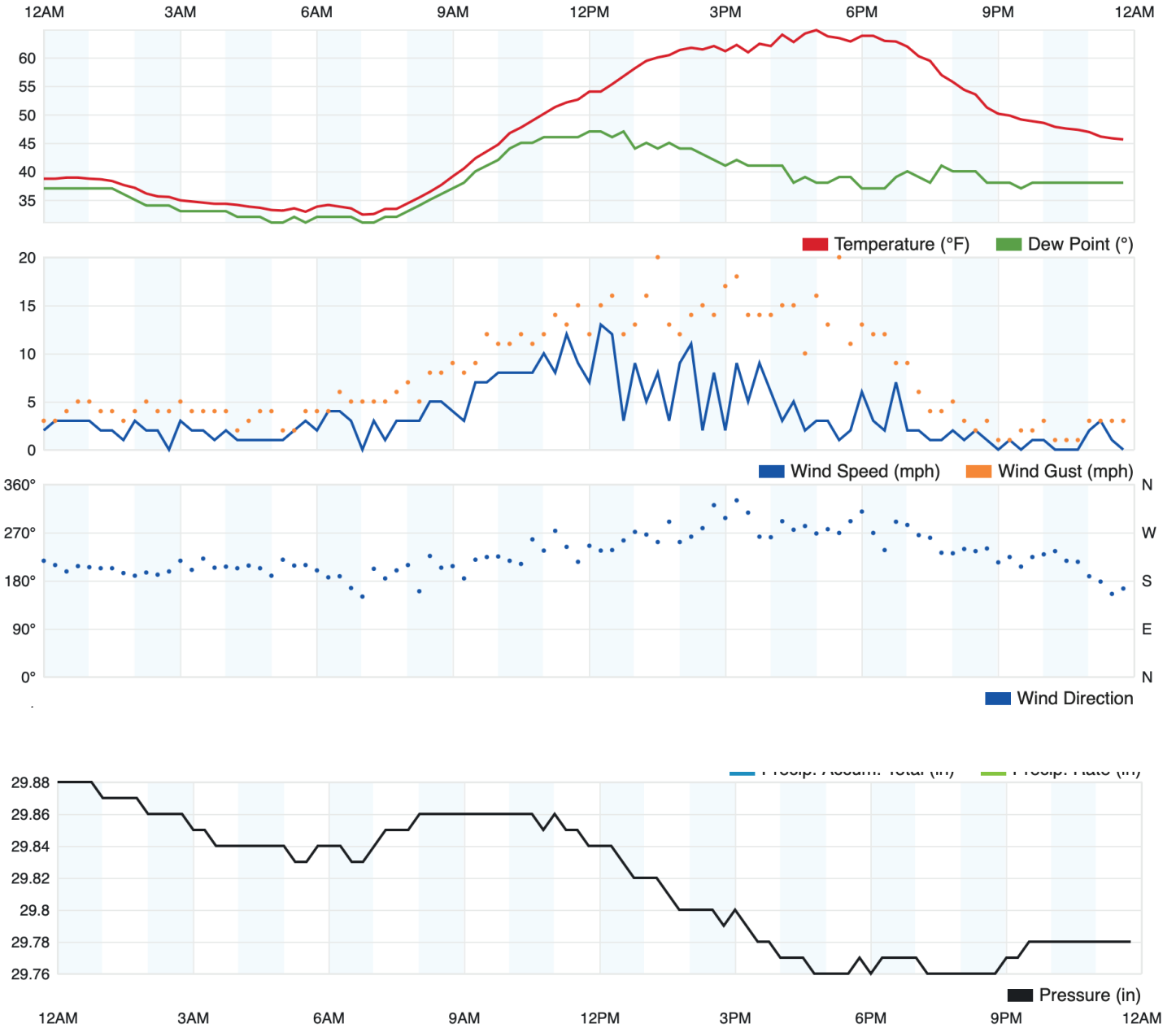
"That makes him the Democrat Speaker of the House not our Republican Speaker of the House."

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

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Yesterday's Groton Weather Graphs



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Today



Sunny then
Slight Chance
Rain

High: 66 °F

Tonight



Breezy.
Chance Rain
then Mostly
Cloudy

Low: 38 °F

Thursday



Breezy.
Mostly Sunny
then Slight
Chance Rain

High: 57 °F

Thursday
Night



Mostly Clear

Low: 31 °F

Friday



Sunny

High: 64 °F

Today



Highs: 58-67°F
Lows: 32-41°F

Scattered showers afternoon

Windy

Thursday



Highs: 55-59°F
Lows: 29-35°F

Elevated Fire Danger

Windy

Maximum Wind Gust Forecast (mph)

	4/10 Wed						4/11 Thu							
	6am	9am	12pm	3pm	6pm	9pm	12am	3am	6am	9am	12pm	3pm	6pm	9pm
Aberdeen	20	23	25	28	28	28	29	29	31	35	36	35	29	20
Britton	14	20	23	25	26	23	25	25	30	32	33	33	30	22
Brookings	13	15	22	22	21	18	23	24	28	29	36	37	32	22
Chamberlain	14	21	28	33	32	32	35	32	30	32	36	35	29	15
Clark	13	21	24	25	25	25	29	28	32	33	37	37	31	23
Eagle Butte	30	36	39	41	41	36	32	30	26	31	35	33	28	18
Ellendale	20	24	25	28	29	29	30	29	35	36	36	33	29	20
Eureka	18	25	29	31	31	30	28	28	30	32	36	35	28	18
Gettysburg	21	29	31	35	35	33	29	29	28	35	36	36	30	20
Huron	16	18	25	29	29	26	29	29	29	33	38	38	32	21
Kennebec	20	28	33	38	36	33	30	30	30	35	40	39	32	17
McIntosh	31	37	40	44	44	36	33	32	30	36	39	38	30	18
Milbank	17	21	22	21	22	22	25	26	28	28	33	33	29	24
Miller	21	25	28	30	31	30	29	29	31	36	37	36	30	20
Mobridge	24	29	32	35	35	32	26	26	24	30	36	35	29	18
Murdo	24	33	38	41	40	36	30	29	28	31	36	35	30	16
Pierre	20	29	33	37	37	31	28	28	23	30	35	35	30	15
Redfield	18	23	25	28	29	30	29	29	32	37	37	36	31	18
Sisseton	18	21	23	22	24	24	29	29	30	30	33	33	31	24
Watertown	14	20	23	24	24	23	25	26	31	30	35	36	31	24
Webster	16	21	24	26	25	25	29	30	35	35	38	38	33	25
Wheaton	13	16	20	21	21	20	23	25	24	24	30	31	28	22



Created: 3 am CDT Wed 4/10/2024 | Values are maximums over the period beginning at the time shown.

Today will feature highs in the upper 50s to upper 60s with wind gusts between 30 and 45 mph. Some scattered showers/not severe storms are possible this afternoon. Thursday, winds will continue to gust and fire weather concerns become elevated for areas around and west of the Missouri River.



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Yesterday's Groton Weather

High Temp: 65 °F at 5:07 PM

Low Temp: 32 °F at 7:06 AM

Wind: 20 mph at 1:26 PM

Precip: : 0.00

Day length: 13 hours, 18 minutes

Today's Info

Record High: 88 in 1977

Record Low: 16 in 1997

Average High: 55

Average Low: 29

Average Precip in April: 0.46

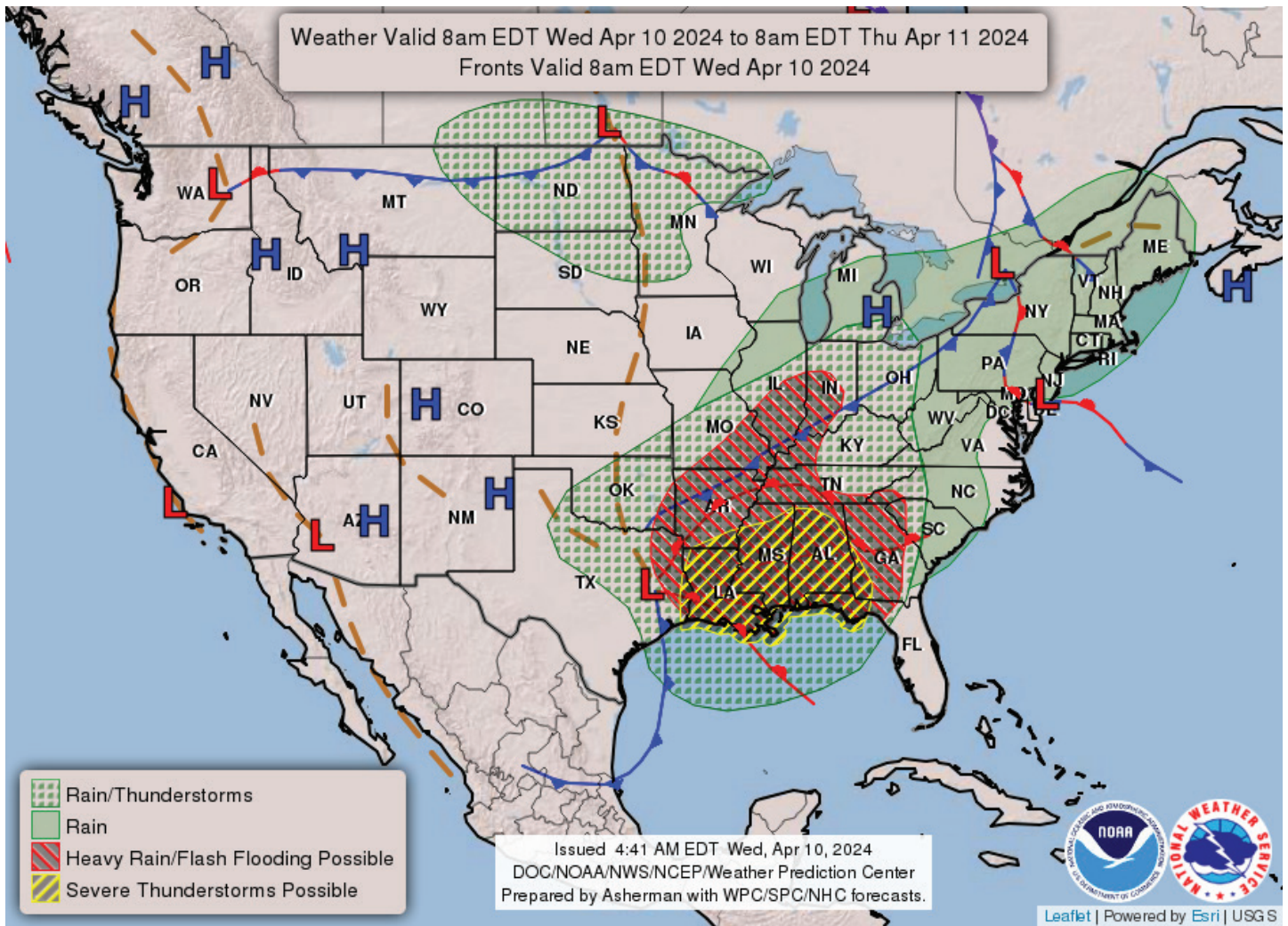
Precip to date in April: 0.58

Average Precip to date: 2.52

Precip Year to Date: 1.43

Sunset Tonight: 8:12:52 pm

Sunrise Tomorrow: 6:52:50 am



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Today in Weather History

April 10, 1965: Severe Thunderstorms in the afternoon and early evening resulted in severe hail reports throughout much of Clark County. Hail up to 2.00 inches in diameter was recorded 30 miles northeast of Huron around 2:40 PM. About 6:30 PM, hail 0.75 inches in diameter fell near Garden City on a flock of wild geese in flight, killing 25 of them.

April 10, 1969: The Elm River in Westport was the highest of all time at 22.11 feet, which is 8.11 feet above flood stage.

April 10, 2005: Thunderstorm winds caused widespread damage in Menno, in Hutchinson County. Numerous trees including several large trees were uprooted. Numerous homes were damaged, some directly by the wind and others by trees and other debris. Garages were especially hard hit, including at least one garage which was destroyed. A grain elevator was damaged, with a catwalk and conveyor being blown over. A historical post office addition to a log building was destroyed, doors and part of the roof of a flour mill were blown down, and doors were blown off several other buildings. Many homes and other buildings had windows broken and siding damaged. A few small storage buildings were destroyed, and others were damaged or blown over. Several farms were heavily damaged, with machine sheds, at least, one hog barn, and several other small structures destroyed. Several vehicles were damaged, including one pickup which was pushed partly onto the porch of a house. Power lines and poles were blown down, resulting in a power outage in Menno.

April 10, 2013: A large slow-moving upper-level low-pressure area moving across the region brought several rounds of heavy snow to much of central and northeast South Dakota. Snowfall amounts from 6 to as much as 22 inches occurred over the several day periods. Travel became difficult if not impossible with some roads closed for a time. Interstate-90 closed on the evening of the 9th. Many schools were also closed across the region. Additionally, a 66-year-old suffered a heart attack and passed away while shoveling the snow in front of his house in Aberdeen.

1935: Severe dust storms across Iowa and Kansas closed schools and highways. Dodge City, Kansas experienced its worst dust storm of record, with dense dust reported from the morning of the 9th until after sunset on the 11th. The sky was almost as dark as night at times during the daylight hours. The thick dust suspended traffic on highways and railroads and also suspended most business in town.

1979: This day was known as "Terrible Tuesday" to the residents of Wichita Falls, Texas as a tornado rated F4 on the Fujita scale ripped through the city. A massive F4 tornado smashed into Wichita Falls killing 43 persons and causing 300 million dollars in damage. Another tornado struck Vernon, Texas killing eleven persons.

1894 - A heavy late season snow blanketed parts of the northeastern U.S. Heavier snowfall totals included 31.5 inches at Salem Corners PA, 30 inches at LeRoy NY, 26 inches at York PA, 14 inches at Waterbury CT, and 9 inches at Providence RI. (The Weather Channel)

1979 - A massive tornado smashed into Wichita Falls, TX, killing 43 persons and causing 300 million dollars damage. Another tornado struck Vernon TX killing eleven persons. (David Ludlum) (Storm Data)

1987 - Blustery northwest winds prevailed across the Northern Plains Region. Winds in Wyoming gusted to 65 mph. Temperatures in North Dakota were only in the 20s and 30s, following afternoon highs in the 70s the previous day. (The National Weather Summary)

1988 - Unseasonably warm weather prevailed in the western U.S. Eleven cities reported new record high temperatures for the date, including Bakersfield CA with a reading of 95 degrees, their warmest for so early in the season. Pocatello ID warmed from a record low of 19 above to an afternoon high of 63 degrees. (The National Weather Summary)

1989 - Strong northerly winds, gusting to 53 mph at Albuquerque, NM, ushered cold arctic air into the south central U.S. The temperature at Albuquerque plunged from 82 degrees to 29 degrees overnight. Thirty-three cities in the central U.S. reported record low temperatures for the date, including Goodland KS with a reading of 4 degrees above zero. (The National Weather Summary)

2005 - Heavy snow affected the Colorado Rockies during April 10-11, as up to 30 inches of snow affected the mountains around Denver. In the Denver metro area, 10-15 inches of snow accumulated.

Daily Devotionals

Seeds of Hope

I KNEW I WOULD BE ASKED

A nervous witness sat before the judge and jury. Everyone could see his fear. He could not hide it. The attorney turned to him and asked, "Tell me, did you see the accident?"

"Yes sir, I did," he answered.

"How far away were you?" asked the lawyer.

"Twenty-two feet and two inches," he replied.

"How can you be so specific?" came the next question.

"I knew some lawyer would ask me," he said, "so I measured it."

The motto of the Coast Guard is "Semper Paratus" – which means "Always Prepared."

Writing in his first letter, the Apostle Peter said, "If someone asks about your Christian hope, always be ready to explain it."

Some Christians believe that faith is such a personal matter that it should never be discussed publicly. However, when the opportunity arises, we must always be prepared to speak for our Lord. We need not be offensive or obnoxious, but gentle, sincere and able to share our message of salvation and hope.

Prayer: Help us, Lord, to realize that, ready or not, we are Your witnesses in the world. May we prepare today to speak Your truth tomorrow. In Jesus' Name, Amen.

Scripture For Today Instead, you must worship Christ as Lord of your life. And if someone asks about your hope as a believer, always be ready to explain it. 1 Peter 3:15



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:

04.09.24

34 43 51 52 69 25

MegaPlier: 4x

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:

\$120,000,000

NEXT DRAW: 2 Days 17 Hrs 27 Mins 45 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

LOTTO AMERICA

WINNING NUMBERS:

04.08.24

24 28 29 32 38 8

All Star Bonus: 3x

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:

\$2,750,000

NEXT DRAW: 16 Hrs 42 Mins 45 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

LUCKY FOR LIFE

WINNING NUMBERS:

04.09.24

1 11 12 19 45 3

TOP PRIZE:

\$7,000/week

NEXT DRAW: 16 Hrs 57 Mins 45 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

DAKOTA CASH

WINNING NUMBERS:

04.06.24

3 4 28 32 33

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:

\$50,000

NEXT DRAW: 16 Hrs 57 Mins 45 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

POWERBALL

DOUBLE PLAY

WINNING NUMBERS:

04.08.24

7 40 45 58 61 14

TOP PRIZE:

\$10,000,000

NEXT DRAW: 17 Hrs 26 Mins 45 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

POWERBALL

WINNING NUMBERS:

04.08.24

6 21 23 39 54 23

Power Play: 2x

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:

\$31,000,000

NEXT DRAW: 17 Hrs 26 Mins 45 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

News from the Associated Press

Two tribal nations sue social media companies over Native youth suicides

By GRAHAM LEE BREWER, HALELUYA HADERO and SHAWN CHEN Associated Press

Two tribal nations are accusing social media companies of contributing to the disproportionately high rates of suicide among Native American youth.

Their lawsuit filed Tuesday in Los Angeles county court names Facebook and Instagram's parent company Meta Platforms; Snapchat's Snap Inc.; TikTok parent company ByteDance; and Alphabet, which owns YouTube and Google, as defendants.

Virtually all U.S. teenagers use social media, and roughly one in six describe their use as "almost constant," according to the Pew Research Center.

But Native youth are particularly vulnerable to these companies' addictive "profit-driven design choices," given historic teen suicide rates and mental health issues across Indian Country, chairperson Lonna Jackson-Street of the Spirit Lake Tribe in North Dakota said in a press release.

"Enough is enough. Endless scrolling is rewiring our teenagers' brains," added Gena Kakkak, chairwoman of the Menominee Indian Tribe of Wisconsin. "We are demanding these social media corporations take responsibility for intentionally creating dangerous features that ramp up the compulsive use of social media by the youth on our Reservation."

Social media companies accused of 'deliberate misconduct'

Their lawsuit describes "a sophisticated and intentional effort that has caused a continuing, substantial, and longterm burden to the Tribe and its members," leaving scarce resources for education, cultural preservation and other social programs.

A growing number of similar lawsuits are being pursued by US school districts, states, cities and other entities, claiming that TikTok, Snapchat, Instagram and YouTube exploit children and adolescents with features that keep them constantly scrolling and checking their accounts.

New York City, its schools and public hospital system accuse the platforms of fueling a childhood mental health crisis that's disrupting learning and draining resources. School boards in Ontario, Canada, claim teachers are struggling because platforms designed for compulsive use "have rewired the way children think, behave, and learn."

The Associated Press reached out to the companies for comment. Google said "the allegations in these complaints are simply not true."

"Providing young people with a safer, healthier experience has always been core to our work," Google spokesperson José Castañeda said in a statement. "In collaboration with youth, mental health and parenting experts, we built services and policies to provide young people with age-appropriate experiences, and parents with robust controls."

Snap Inc. said it provides an alternative to a feed of online content. "We will always have more work to do, and will continue to work to make Snapchat a platform that helps close friends feel connected, happy and prepared as they face the many challenges of adolescence," the company's statement said.

Native children are uniquely stressed out

Native Americans experience higher rates of suicide than any other racial demographic in the U.S., according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, jumping nearly 20% from 2015 to 2020 compared with a less-than 1% increase among the overall U.S. population.

Mental health care is already difficult to access from remote locations, and generations of colonization and social stigma create more barriers, particularly when the care isn't culturally appropriate, advocates say.

About 87% of people who identify as Native American don't live on an Indian reservation, according to the 2020 U.S. Census, and social media can help them connect with tradition, culture and other tribal

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communities.

But “they also might experience discrimination online. And social media companies don’t always have great, helpful policies for managing that,” said Andrea Wiglesworth, an enrolled member of the Seneca-Cayuga Nation and Shawnee Tribe who researches stress in Native populations at the University of Minnesota.

Native American identity is a complex mix of political and cultural experiences that varies from tribe to tribe and within Indigenous communities, adding a unique layer of stress onto other social pressures, Wiglesworth said.

“I won’t speak for all Native people, but from my lived experience there is this sense of shared responsibility for the well-being of our community and community members,” she added. She said Indigenous people need to think about how they carry that commitment into the digital world.

The teenage brain is wired for compulsive responses

The science is still emerging about how social media affects teenagers’ mental health. Psychologists and neuroscientists note the potential for both positive and negative side effects, and researchers have yet to draw a direct link between screen time alone and poor mental health outcomes, according to Mitch Prinstein, chief science officer at the American Psychological Association.

What researchers do know is that as an adolescent’s brain develops, it builds and strengthens the connections that guide responses for a variety of human interactions while it creates more receptors for oxytocin and dopamine. This is the brain’s reward system, Prinstein said, and it manifests in adolescents a need for both positive feedback and concern about social punishments.

“In the 1980s that meant that we were suddenly talking about who’s in which clique and who sits at which lunch table and are you wearing the right clothes to get positive feedback when you go to school. In 2024, we’re now making it possible to kind of feed that with 24/7, 365 button-pressing for feedback and input from peers,” he said.

Prinstein called for new legislation in Senate testimony last year, saying federal regulators should have more power to prohibit exploitative business practices and require social media companies to protect the well-being of children on their platforms.

Regulatory efforts focus on TikTok

A nationwide investigation by a bipartisan coalition of attorneys general is focusing on whether TikTok is harming the mental health of children and young adults by promoting content and boosting engagement. Meanwhile, some Republican-led states have pursued their own lawsuits.

Utah accused TikTok in October of baiting children into excessive social media use. Indiana’s lawsuit accusing TikTok of deceiving users about inappropriate content and insecure personal information was dismissed in November. Arkansas has two lawsuits pending, against TikTok and ByteDance.

And in Congress, a bipartisan group of senators is supporting the Kids Online Safety Act, which in part would require platform design changes to prevent harm. Tech industry groups have opposed the bill, and the American Civil Liberties Union has raised censorship concerns.

Crews encircle wildfire on Pine Ridge Reservation in South Dakota

WOUNDED KNEE, S.D. (AP) — A wildfire has burned about 750 acres (304 hectares) of the Pine Ridge Indian Reservation in South Dakota, but crews have encircled much of the fire and it no longer is growing, officials said Tuesday.

The fire was reported Friday evening on the west side of the reservation, located in southwest South Dakota, as it tore through trees and heavy vegetation.

Jon Siedschlaw, deputy director of Oglala Sioux Tribe Emergency Management, said the fire was still burning inside a line dug with heavy equipment. No homes or other structures have burned, he said.

The cause of the fire is under investigation.

The Bureau of Indian Affairs’ Pine Ridge Agency, which is leading the firefighting effort, didn’t respond to inquiries from The Associated Press about the blaze, but in a Facebook post the agency said Monday evening that the fire was 80% contained.

"Fire is holding inside the heavy equipment line. Even with the rain some areas inside the perimeter have started to smoke again. Smoke will be visible for the following weeks," the post said. The agency said in other social media posts that crews will continue responding to the fire this week.

The fire was spotted Friday between Manderson and Wounded Knee. It spread with the help of wind gusts of 45 mph (72 kph), the agency said in a post.

Pine Ridge is the largest Native American reservation in South Dakota and one of the largest in the U.S. It comprises about 2.1 million acres (850,000 hectares), according to the Pine Ridge Agency's website.

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, who alleged her left forearm was injured by an "explosive munition" fired at her by law enforcement officers during a clash between protesters and officers at a blocked highway bridge in November 2016.

The judge ruled that "the facts as alleged" by Wilansky don't meet legal standards for excessive force or for overcoming the officers' qualified immunity, in part because they were reasonably trying to disperse protesters, not arrest them. The lawsuit named Morton County, its sheriff and two officers, who denied firing any explosive devices at Wilansky.

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.

Exit polls suggest a big win by South Korea's liberal opposition parties in parliamentary election

By HYUNG-JIN KIM Associated Press

SEOUL, South Korea (AP) — Initial exit polls suggested South Korea's liberal opposition parties are expected to win a landslide victory in Wednesday's parliamentary election.

The joint exit polls by South Korea's three major TV stations – KBS, MBC and SBS – show the main opposition Democratic Party and its satellite party were forecast to win combined 183-197 seats in the 300-member National Assembly.

The polls suggested the ruling People Power Party and its satellite party were projected to win 85-100 seats.

The predictions, if confirmed, would deal a massive blow to conservative President Yoon Suk Yeol and make him a lame duck for his remaining three years in office.

THIS IS A BREAKING NEWS UPDATE. AP's earlier story is below:

SEOUL, South Korea (AP) — South Korean President Yoon Suk Yeol faces a crucial test Wednesday, as voters go to the polls for a parliamentary election that could determine whether he becomes a lame duck for his remaining three years in office.

In the months ahead of the election, the conservatives supporting Yoon and their liberal rivals exchanged toxic rhetoric and mudslinging. Regardless of the results, Yoon will stay in power, but if his People Power Party fails to regain a parliamentary majority it could set back Yoon's agenda and further intensify conservative-liberal fighting.

Since taking office in 2022 for a single five-year term, Yoon, a former top prosecutor, has been grappling with low approval ratings and a liberal opposition-controlled parliament that has limited his major policy platforms.

Pre-election surveys indicate that the liberal opposition parties are well placed to maintain or boost their control of the single-chamber, 300-member National Assembly. But observers said that there's room for an upset as many districts were being closely fought and many moderate voters would make last-minute choices.

"What would matter to the People Power Party is whether it can become the biggest party or the second biggest party," said Choi Jin, director of the Seoul-based Institute of Presidential Leadership. "If his party loses the election, Yoon will find it difficult to move forward even a single step on state affairs."

Of the 300 seats, 254 will be elected through direct votes in local districts, and the other 46 to the parties according to their proportion of the vote. Election observers say candidates in about 50 to 55 local districts are in neck-and-neck races.

Polling stations opened at 6 a.m. and will close at 6 p.m. As of 2 p.m. (0500 GMT), about 25 million people, or 56% of South Korea's 44 million eligible voters, had cast ballots, according to the National Election Commission. That figure includes about 14 million people who cast ballots during two days of early voting last week, the highest turnout of its kind in the history of South Korean parliamentary elections.

South Korea's conservative-liberal division deepened during the 2022 presidential election, during which Yoon and his main rival Lee Jae-myung spent months demonizing each other. Yoon eventually beat Lee by the narrowest margin ever for a Korean presidential candidate.

Lee, now the chairman of the opposition Democratic Party, is a harsh critic of Yoon's policies and is eyeing another presidential bid. He faces an array of corruption investigations that he argues are politically motivated and pushed by Yoon's government.

There was a brief soul-searching about South Korea's divisive politics after Lee was stabbed in the neck in January by a man who, according to police, tried to kill Lee to prevent him from becoming president. But as the parliamentary election approached, the rival parties began churning out abusive rhetoric and crude insults against each other.

Ruling party leader Han Dong-hoon called Lee "a criminal" and labeled his past comments as "trash." Lee's party spokesperson described Han's mouth as a "trash bin." Han accused Lee of using a sexist re-

mark against a female ruling party candidate.

During one of his final campaign events on Tuesday, Han argued that giving too many seats to Lee's Democratic Party will throw South Korea into political turmoil. "Tomorrow's 12 hours will determine whether the Republic of Korea will plunge into shocking chaos and despair or overcome a crisis," Han said, using South Korea's official name.

Speaking ahead of his corruption trial at a Seoul court, Lee urged voters to punish the Yoon government, which he said has used prosecutors to suppress opponents. "I earnestly ask you to hand out your judgement on a government that betrays and goes against the people," Lee said.

Chung Jin-young, a former dean of the Graduate School of Pan-Pacific International Studies at Kyung Hee University, predicted that the opposition parties could win a combined 150-180 seats.

"That would cause a political deadlock for the Republic of Korea for the next three years, as both the ruling and opposition parties can't pursue things unilaterally and won't likely make terms with each other," Chung said.

Earlier this year, Yoon saw rising approval ratings over his strong push to drastically increase the number of medical students despite vehement protests by incumbent doctors. Yoon has said he aims to create more doctors to brace for the country's rapidly aging population, but thousands of young doctors have gone on strike, saying that schools can't handle an abrupt increase in students.

The doctors' walkouts eventually left Yoon facing growing calls to find a compromise, with patients and others experiencing delays of surgeries and other inconveniences. Yoon's ruling party is also struggling with rising prices of agricultural products and other goods and criticism of Yoon's personnel management style.

"President Yoon has said a priority would be given to stabilizing prices and livelihoods, but they weren't stabilized, so I think that will be a big negative for the Yoon government during the election," Kim Daye, a 32-year-old Seoul resident, said.

Muslims worldwide celebrate Eid al-Fitr, but the festivities are marred by the Gaza war

By NINIEK KARMINI Associated Press

JAKARTA, Indonesia (AP) — Muslims around the world celebrated the Eid al-Fitr holiday Wednesday, marking the end of the Islamic holy month with family reunions, new clothes and sweet treats.

But the celebrations were overshadowed by the worsening humanitarian crisis in the Gaza Strip and Israel's expected offensive in the city of Rafah despite efforts from its Western allies to halt the fighting after six months of war.

In Istanbul, thousands of worshippers gathered at the Aya Sofya Mosque for morning Eid prayers, some carrying Palestinian flags and chanting slogans in support of people in Gaza.

Many laid their prayer rugs in the square in front of the former Byzantine cathedral, which was re-converted to a mosque four years ago, as space inside quickly filled.

In a holiday message, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan sent support to Gaza, which he called a "bleeding wound on the conscience of humanity."

"I hope that the Eid will lead to peace, tranquillity and wellbeing for our country, our nation, the Islamic world and all humanity," he added.

In Indonesia, the world's most populous Muslim nation, nearly three-quarters of the population were traveling for the annual homecoming known locally as "mudik" that is always welcomed with excitement.

"Mudik is not just an annual ritual or tradition for us," said civil servant Ridho Alfian, who lives in the Jakarta area and was traveling to Lampung province at the southern tip of Sumatra island. "This is a right moment to reconnect, like recharging energy that has been drained almost a year away from home."

Before the Eid al-Fitr holiday, markets teemed with shoppers buying clothes, shoes, cookies and sweets. People poured out of major cities to return to villages to celebrate the holiday with their loved ones. Flights were overbooked and anxious relatives weighed down with boxes of gifts formed long lines at bus and

train stations for the journey.

For Arini Dewi, Eid al-Fitr is a day of victory from economic difficulties during Ramadan. "I'm happy in celebrating Eid holiday despite the surge of food prices," said the mother of two.

Former Vice President Jusuf Kalla was among Jakarta residents offering prayers at the Al Azhar mosque yard. "Let's celebrate Eid al-Fitr as a day of victory from many difficulties... of course there are many social problems during fasting month of Ramadan, but we can overcome it with faith and piety," Kalla said.

On the eve of Eid al-Fitr, Jakarta residents set off firecrackers on streets that were mostly empty after city residents traveled home.

On Wednesday morning, Muslims joined communal prayers shoulder-to-shoulder on the streets and inside mosques. Jakarta's Istiqlal Grand Mosque, the largest in Southeast Asia, was flooded with devotees offering morning prayers.

Preachers in their sermons called on people to pray for Muslims in Gaza who were suffering after six months of war.

"This is the time for Muslims and non-Muslims to show humanitarian solidarity, because the conflict in Gaza is not a religious war, but a humanitarian problem," said Jimly Asshiddiqie, who chairs the advisory board of the Indonesian Mosque Council.

In Pakistan, authorities deployed more than 100,000 police and paramilitary forces to maintain security at mosques and marketplaces. People were shopping as usual Tuesday, with women buying bangles, jewelry and clothes for themselves and their children.

In Malaysia, ethnic Malay Muslims performed morning prayers at mosques nationwide just weeks after socks printed with the word "Allah" at a convenience store chain sparked a furor. Many found it offensive to associate the word with feet or for it to be used inappropriately.

Malaysia's Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim called for unity and reconciliation in his message on the eve of Eid, saying no groups should be sidelined based on religion or any other reason.

"We must be firm, resolute and unwavering in our commitment to foster values and build a dignified nation," he said. "However, let us not take this as a license or opportunity to insult, undermine, or damage the cultural practices and way of life of others."

The owners of the KK Mart chain and representatives from one of its suppliers were charged with offending the religious feelings of Muslims. KK Mart Group said the supplier sent items the company had not agreed to stock. The supply company founder apologized for being careless in the inspection of the imported items.

Track and field introducing prize money at Olympics with Paris gold medalists to get \$50,000

MONACO (AP) — Track and field is set to become the first sport to introduce prize money at the Olympics, with World Athletics saying Wednesday it would pay \$50,000 to gold medalists in Paris.

The governing body of athletics said it was setting aside \$2.4 million to pay the gold medalists across the 48 events on the track and field program for this year's Paris Olympics. Relay teams will split the \$50,000 between their members. Payments for silver and bronze medalists are planned to start from the 2028 Olympics in Los Angeles.

"While it is impossible to put a marketable value on winning an Olympic medal, or on the commitment and focus it takes to even represent your country at an Olympic Games, I think it is important we start somewhere and make sure some of the revenues generated by our athletes at the Olympic Games are directly returned to those who make the Games the global spectacle that it is," World Athletics President Sebastian Coe said in a statement.

The prize money will come out of the share of Olympic revenue that the IOC distributes to World Athletics and other governing bodies of individual sports.

Athletes will have to pass "the usual anti-doping procedures" at the event before they receive the money, World Athletics added.

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The modern Olympics originated as an amateur sports event and the International Olympic Committee does not award prize money. However, many medalists receive payments from their countries' governments, national sports bodies or from sponsors.

The United States Olympic and Paralympic Committee awarded \$37,500 to gold medalists at the last Summer Games in Tokyo in 2021. Singapore's National Olympic Council promises \$1 million for Olympic gold, a feat only achieved once so far by a Singaporean competitor.

The move by World Athletics could be seen as an indicator of Coe's intentions for the Olympics as a whole if he makes a run for the IOC presidency.

"I haven't ruled it in, and I certainly haven't ruled it out," Coe said last year when asked whether he would consider running for the IOC's top post when Thomas Bach's term ends in 2025. The IOC typically disapproves of any public campaigning for the presidency.

Biden to honor PM Kishida, reflect on Japan's growing clout on international stage

By AAMER MADHANI and ZEKE MILLER Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — President Joe Biden is set to host Japanese Prime Minister Fumio Kishida on Wednesday for talks on the delicate security situation in the Pacific and a glitzy state dinner, honoring a leader who has proven to be one of Biden's strongest allies in the face of a string of international crises.

Kishida's official visit completes the administration's feting of the leaders of the Quad, the informal partnership between the U.S., Japan, Australia and India that the White House has focused on elevating since Biden took office. As Biden administration officials put it, they saved the most pivotal relationship for last.

The visit will mark the realization of Japan's transformation from regional player to that of global influencer — with senior Biden administration officials noting appreciatively there is little the U.S. does across the globe that Tokyo doesn't support. They pointed to Japan's eagerness to take a leading role in trying to bolster Ukraine against Russia's invasion or the flow of humanitarian aid into Gaza.

Biden and Kishida are also kindred spirits as politicians, both confronting difficult political headwinds on the home front while trying to navigate increasingly complicated problems on the global stage. Like Biden, Kishida has been dogged by low approval ratings for much of his tenure.

Biden's reelection effort has been shadowed by an American electorate anxious about inflation, unease among some Democrats over his handling of the Israel-Hamas war, and concerns about whether at 81 he's too old to serve another four years.

Kishida, meanwhile, is dealing with a Japanese economy that slipped to the world's fourth-largest after it contracted in the last quarter of 2023 and fell behind Germany. Polls in Japan show that support for Kishida, who was elected in 2021, has plunged as he deals with a political funds corruption scandal within his ruling Liberal Democratic Party.

"For President Biden, this is, of course, a chance to highlight and cement progress in the relationship, the most important bilateral alliance in the Indo-Pacific. It's a chance to sustain urgency and momentum in this relationship," said Christopher Johnstone, a former national security official in the Biden administration who is now the Japan Chair at the Center for Strategic and International Studies. "For Kishida, it's a chance to showcase his ties to the U.S., to prop up support at home."

There are differences between the leaders. The visit comes after Biden announced last month that he opposes the planned sale of Pittsburgh-based U.S. Steel to Nippon Steel of Japan, exposing a marked rift in the partnership at the very moment the two leaders aim to reinforce it. Biden argued in announcing his opposition that the U.S. needs to "maintain strong American steel companies powered by American steelworkers."

Biden will welcome Kishida on Wednesday morning with a pomp-filled arrival ceremony on the White House South Lawn. The leaders will hold Oval Office talks and a joint press conference before the formal dinner, which will include a post-meal performance by singer-songwriter Paul Simon, a favorite of both Kishida and first lady Jill Biden.

The Bidens hosted Kishida and his wife for dinner Tuesday evening, taking the couple for a dinner at BlackSalt, a seafood restaurant in a tony neighborhood in the nation's capital.

The couples also exchanged gifts. The Bidens presented Kishida with a three-legged table handmade by a Japanese American-owned company in Pennsylvania. The president also gave Kishida a custom-framed lithograph and a two-volume LP set autographed by Billy Joel. Jill Biden gave Yuko Kishida a soccer ball signed by the U.S. women's national team and the Japanese women's national team.

White House national security adviser Jake Sullivan said the leaders will announce plans to upgrade U.S.-Japan military relations, with both sides looking to tighten cooperation amid concerns about North Korea's nuclear program and China's increasing military assertiveness in the Pacific.

Kishida and Biden are also expected to confirm Japan's participation in NASA's Artemis moon program as well as its contribution of a moon rover developed by Toyota Motor Corp. and the inclusion of a Japanese astronaut in the mission. The rover, which comes at a roughly \$2 billion cost, would be the most expensive contribution to the mission by a non-U.S. partner to date.

The leaders are also expected to announce cyber initiatives and new educational partnerships, and Kishida is expected to take part in planting a cherry blossom tree on the National Mall, an administration official said.

Biden has heaped praise on Japan for its significant increase in defense spending and has tightened cooperation on economic and security matters throughout Kishida's tenure.

Japan was quick to step up in the aftermath of Russia's invasion of Ukraine, join the U.S. and other Western allies in mounting aggressive sanctions on Moscow, and Japanese automakers Mazda, Toyota and Nissan announced their withdrawal from Russia.

Tokyo has been one of the largest donors to Kyiv since Russia's invasion, and Japan has surged its defense spending amid concern about China's military assertiveness.

As part of its increased defense, Japan agreed to acquire U.S.-made Tomahawks and other long-range cruise missiles that can hit targets in China or North Korea under a more offensive security strategy. Japan, Britain and Italy also began a collaboration on a next-generation jet fighter project.

The stepping up of Japan on the global stage is viewed within the administration as a "fundamental validation of President Biden's Indo-Pacific strategy," according to a senior administration official who previewed the visit for reporters.

The official, who spoke on the condition of anonymity under ground rules set by the White House, added that the visit will help the White House demonstrate that Japan, long seen as an important regional alliance, has morphed into "if not our most important global alliance, then among the most important."

Biden administration imposes first-ever national drinking water limits on toxic PFAS

By MICHAEL PHILLIS Associated Press

The Biden administration on Wednesday finalized strict limits on certain so-called "forever chemicals" in drinking water that will require utilities to reduce them to the lowest level they can be reliably measured. Officials say this will reduce exposure for 100 million people and help prevent thousands of illnesses, including cancers.

The rule is the first national drinking water limit on toxic PFAS, or perfluoroalkyl and polyfluoroalkyl substances, which are widespread and long lasting in the environment.

Health advocates praised the Environmental Protection Agency for not backing away from tough limits the agency proposed last year. But water utilities took issue with the rule, saying treatment systems are expensive to install and that customers will end up paying more for water.

Water providers are entering a new era with significant additional health standards that the EPA says will make tap water safer for millions of consumers — a Biden administration priority. The agency has also proposed forcing utilities to remove dangerous lead pipes.

Utility groups warn the rules will cost tens of billions of dollars each and fall hardest on small communi-

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ties with fewer resources. Legal challenges are sure to follow.

EPA Administrator Michael Regan says the rule is the most important action the EPA has ever taken on PFAS.

"The result is a comprehensive and life changing rule, one that will improve the health and vitality of so many communities across our country," said Regan.

PFAS chemicals are hazardous because they don't degrade in the environment and are linked to health issues such as low birth weight and kidney cancer. They've been used in everyday products including nonstick pans, firefighting foam and waterproof clothing. Although some of the most common types are phased out in the U.S., others remain. Water providers will now be forced to remove contamination put in the environment by other industries.

"It's that accumulation that's the problem," said Scott Belcher, a North Carolina State University professor who researches PFAS toxicity. "Even tiny, tiny, tiny amounts each time you take a drink of water over your lifetime is going to keep adding up, leading to the health effects."

PFAS is a broad family of chemical substances, and the new rule sets strict limits on two common types — called PFOA and PFOS — at 4 parts per trillion. Three other types that include GenEx Chemicals that are a major problem in North Carolina are limited to 10 parts per trillion. Water providers will have to test for these PFAS chemicals and tell the public when levels are too high. Combinations of some PFAS types will be limited, too.

Regan will announce the rule in Fayetteville, North Carolina, on Wednesday.

Environmental and health advocates praised the rule, but said PFAS manufacturers knew decades ago the substances were dangerous yet hid or downplayed the evidence. Limits should have come sooner, they argue.

"Reducing PFAS in our drinking water is the most cost effective way to reduce our exposure," said Scott Faber, a food and water expert at Environmental Working Group. "It's much more challenging to reduce other exposures such as PFAS in food or clothing or carpets."

Over the last year, EPA has periodically released batches of utility test results for PFAS in drinking water. Roughly 16% of utilities found at least one of the two strictly limited PFAS chemicals at or above the new limits. These utilities serve tens of millions of people. The Biden administration, however, expects about 6-10% of water systems to exceed the new limits.

Water providers will generally have three years to do testing. If those test exceed the limits, they'll have two more years to install treatment systems, according to EPA officials.

Some funds are available to help utilities. Manufacturer 3M recently agreed to pay more than \$10 billion to drinking water providers to settle PFAS litigation. And the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law includes billions to combat the substance. But utilities say more will be needed.

For some communities, tests results were a surprise. Last June, a utility outside Philadelphia that serves nearly 9,000 people learned that one of its wells had a PFOA level of 235 parts per trillion, among the highest results in the country at the time.

"I mean, obviously, it was a shock," said Joseph Hastings, director of the joint public works department for the Colledgeville and Trappe boroughs, whose job includes solving problems presented by new regulations.

The well was quickly yanked offline, but Hastings still doesn't know the contamination source. Several other wells were above the EPA's new limits, but lower than those the state of Pennsylvania set earlier. Now, Hastings says installing treatment systems could be a multi-million dollar endeavor, a major expense for a small customer base.

The new regulation is "going to throw public confidence in drinking water into chaos," said Mike McGill, president of WaterPIO, a water industry communications firm.

The American Water Works Association, an industry group, says it supports the development of PFAS limits in drinking water, but argues the EPA's rule has big problems.

The agency underestimated its high cost, which can't be justified for communities with low levels of PFAS, and it'll raise customer water bills, the association said. Plus, there aren't enough experts and work-

ers — and supplies of filtration material are limited.

Work in some places has started. The company Veolia operates utilities serving about 2.3 million people across six eastern states and manages water systems for millions more. Veolia built PFAS treatment for small water systems that serve about 150,000 people. The company expects, however, that roughly 50 more sites will need treatment — and it's working to scale up efforts to reduce PFAS in larger communities it serves.

Such efforts followed dramatic shifts in EPA's health guidance for PFAS in recent years as more research into its health harms emerged. Less than a decade ago, EPA issued a health advisory that PFOA and PFOS levels combined shouldn't exceed 70 parts per trillion. Now, the agency says no amount is safe.

Public alarm has increased, too. In Minnesota, for example, Amara's Law aims to stop avoidable PFAS use. It's been nearly a year since the law's namesake, Amara Strande, died from a rare cancer her family blames on PFAS contamination by 3M near her high school in Oakdale, although a connection between PFAS and her cancer can't be proven. Biden administration officials say communities shouldn't suffer like Oakdale. 3M says it extends its deepest condolences to Amara's friends and family.

Losing Amara pushed the family towards activism. They've testified multiple times in favor of PFAS restrictions.

"Four parts per trillion, we couldn't ask for a better standard," Amara's sister Nora said. "It's a very ambitious goal, but anything higher than that is endangering lives."

Biden says Netanyahu's approach to the war is a mistake, deepening a rift between the two allies

By TIA GOLDENBERG and WAFAA SHURAFU Associated Press

TEL AVIV, Israel (AP) — U.S. President Joe Biden called Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's handling of the war in Gaza a mistake and called for his government to flood Gaza with aid, ramping up pressure on Israel to reach a cease-fire and widening a rift between the two staunch allies that has worsened as the war has dragged on.

Biden has been an outspoken supporter of Israel's war against Hamas since the militant group launched a deadly assault on Oct. 7. But in recent weeks his patience with Netanyahu has appeared to be waning and his administration has taken a more stern line with Israel, rattling the countries' decades-old alliance and deepening Israel's international isolation over the war.

The most serious disagreement has been over Israel's plans for an offensive in the southernmost Gaza city of Rafah and the rift has spiraled since, worsened by an Israeli airstrike last week on an aid convoy, which killed seven workers with the food charity World Central Kitchen, most of them foreigners. Israel said the deaths were unintentional but Biden was outraged.

Biden's comments, made in an interview that aired late Tuesday after being recorded two days after the WCK strike, highlight the differences between Israel and the U.S. over humanitarian aid to people in Gaza, where a months-long war has led to warnings of imminent famine.

"What he's doing is a mistake. I don't agree with his approach," Biden told Spanish-language broadcaster Univision.

He was responding to being asked if Netanyahu is prioritizing his political survival over the national interest.

Biden said Israel should agree to a cease-fire, flood beleaguered Gaza with aid for the next six to eight weeks and allow other countries in the region to help distribute the aid. "It should be done now," he said.

Hunger in Gaza is overshadowing the Muslim holiday of Eid al-Fitr, a typically joyous festival during which families celebrate the end of the holy month of Ramadan.

Israel halted aid deliveries to Gaza in the early days of the war, but under U.S. pressure has slowly increased trucks allowed to enter the territory. Still, aid groups have complained that supplies are not reaching desperate people quickly enough, blaming Israeli restrictions, and countries have attempted other ways to deliver them including air drops and by sea.

Israel says it has steadily ramped up aid throughout the war, opening up more entry points for trucks

to enter and to reach especially hard-hit areas like northern Gaza, an early target of Israel's in the war.

Israel blames aid groups for being too slow to deliver aid once it's inside Gaza. Those groups say logistical issues and the precarious security situation — underscored by the WCK strike — complicate aid deliveries.

Israel and Hamas are currently engaged in talks meant to bring about a cease-fire in exchange for the release of hostages captured by Hamas and others who stormed across the border on Oct. 7. But the sides remain far apart on key issues, including the return of Palestinians to hard-hit northern Gaza. Netanyahu's Security Cabinet met late Tuesday to discuss the hostage negotiations, but did not appear to make any decisions.

Netanyahu has vowed to achieve "total victory" in the war, pledging to destroy Hamas' military and governing capabilities to prevent a repeat of the Oct. 7 attacks and to return the hostages. He says that victory must include an offensive in Rafah, which Israel says is Hamas' last major stronghold, but more than half of Gaza's 2.3 million people are currently seeking shelter there.

Six months into the war, Israel is growing ever more isolated, with even its closest partner increasingly vocal about its discontent in the war's direction and longtime trading partners like Turkey taking potentially painful economic steps to express dismay.

Netanyahu, who is on trial for alleged corruption, is under pressure to decide on a postwar vision for Gaza. But critics say he is delaying because he doesn't want to anger his ultranationalist governing partners, who support resettling the Gaza Strip, which Israel withdrew from in 2005 and an idea Netanyahu has ruled out.

Netanyahu's governing partners also oppose making significant concessions to Hamas in the ongoing negotiations. They have threatened to exit the government -- a step that would cause the ruling coalition to collapse and trigger new elections.

"If the prime minister thinks that there's going to be a reckless deal here, it isn't going to pass," Limor Sonn Har Melech, a lawmaker in the hard-line Jewish Power party, said in an interview to an Israeli radio station. "If we realize that the meaning of stopping this war is capitulation to Hamas, we won't be there."

Israel launched the war in response to Hamas' cross-border assault, where militants killed 1,200 people, mostly civilians, and took roughly 250 people hostage, according to Israeli authorities.

More than 33,200 Palestinians have been killed in the relentless fighting, according to Gaza's Health Ministry which doesn't differentiate between civilians and combatants in its count but says most of the dead are women and children. Israel says it has killed some 12,000 militants, without providing evidence.

The war has ignited a humanitarian catastrophe. Most of the territory's population has been displaced and with vast swaths of Gaza's urban landscape levelled in the fighting, many areas are uninhabitable.

Italy opens new slander trial against Amanda Knox. She was exonerated 8 years ago in friend's murder

By COLLEEN BARRY Associated Press

FLORENCE, Italy (AP) — A Florence appeals court on Wednesday opened a new slander trial against Amanda Knox based on a 2016 European Court of Human Rights decision that her rights were violated during a long night of questioning into the murder of her British roommate without a lawyer and official translator.

Italy's highest Cassation Court in November threw out the slander conviction, the only remaining guilty verdict against Knox after the same court definitively threw out convictions for 21-year-old Meredith Kercher's 2007 murder against Knox and her former Italian boyfriend, Raffaele Sollecito, eight years ago.

The slander charge stems from Knox's accusation against the Congolese owner of a bar where she worked part-time during an overnight interrogation in the Perugia police station. The accusation appeared in statements typed by police that Knox signed, but which have been ruled inadmissible in this trial by the high court.

Knox, who was a 20-year-old student with rudimentary Italian-language ability who had recently arrived

in Perugia, recanted the accusation in a four-page handwritten note in English penned the following afternoon, which is the only evidence that the court can rule on in the new trial, her lawyer said.

Despite Knox's attempts at walking back the accusation, bar owner Patrick Lumumba was picked up for questioning and held for nearly two weeks. Lumumba, who has since left Italy, is joining the prosecution as a civil participant, as allowed by Italian law.

The slander conviction carried a three-year sentence, which Knox served during nearly four years of detention until being released after a Perugia appeals court found her and Sollecito not guilty. The Cassation Court later threw out that decision, and the defendants were convicted again by a Florence appeals court before the highest court in 2015 exonerated both Knox and Sollecito, stating they did not commit the murder.

Knox, now 36, remains in the United States, where she campaigns for judicial reform and has a variety of media projects including a podcast and a limited series on her case in development with Hulu. She was not expected at Wednesday's hearing and judges declared she will be tried in absentia

Kercher's throat and been slit when her semi-nude body was found Nov. 2, 2007 beneath a blanket in her locked bedroom in an apartment she shared with Knox and two Italian roommates.

Rudy Guede, whose DNA and footprints were found at the scene, was convicted of the murder in a fast-track trial and sentenced to 16 years in prison. He was released after serving 13 years, and is currently being investigated for allegedly physically and sexually assaulting a former girlfriend since being freed.

Israel threatens to strike Iran directly if Iran launches attack from its territory

By JACK JEFFERY The Associated Press

JERUSALEM (AP) — Israel's foreign minister threatened Wednesday that its country's forces would strike Iran directly if the Islamic Republic launched an attack from its territory against Israel, as tensions between the rival powers flare following the killings of Iranian generals in a blast at the Iranian consulate in Syria.

"If Iran attacks from its territory, Israel will respond and attack in Iran," Israel Katz said in a post on X in both Farsi and Hebrew.

The remarks came after Iran's Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei reiterated early Wednesday a promise to retaliate against Israel over the attack on its consulate in Damascus earlier this month.

Tehran holds Israel responsible for the strike that leveled the building, killing 12 people. Israel has not acknowledged its involvement, though it has been bracing for an Iranian response to the attack, a significant escalation in their long-running shadow war.

Khamenei spoke at a prayer ceremony celebrating the end of the Muslim holy month of Ramadan, saying the airstrike was "wrongdoing" and akin to an attack on Iranian territory.

"When they attacked our consulate area, it was like they attacked our territory," Khamenei said, in remarks broadcast by Iranian state TV. "The evil regime must be punished, and it will be punished."

Neither Katz nor the Ayatollah elaborated on the way they would retaliate.

Among 12 killed in the blast on Apr. 1 were seven Iranian Revolutionary Guard members, four Syrians and a Hezbollah militia member.

Khamenei also criticized the West, particularly the U.S. and Britain, for supporting Israel in its war against Hamas in Gaza.

"It was expected they (would) prevent (Israel) in this disaster. They did not. They did not fulfil their duties, the Western governments," he said.

Iran supports anti-Israeli militant groups like Palestinian Hamas and Lebanese Hezbollah. It does not recognize Israel.

The Latest | Biden calls Netanyahu's approach to war against Hamas a 'mistake'

By The Associated Press undefined

U.S. President Joe Biden says Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's approach to the war against Hamas is mistaken.

Biden's remarks in a television interview that aired late Tuesday deepen an already growing rift between the two staunch allies over the war, now in its seventh month. Those disagreements have compounded over the worsening humanitarian crisis in the Gaza Strip, Israel's expected offensive in the city of Rafah and Israel's recent strike on a humanitarian convoy, which killed seven aid workers, most of them foreigners.

"What he's doing is a mistake. I don't agree with his approach," Biden told U.S. Spanish-language broadcaster Univision in an interview conducted on April 3, two days after the strike on the World Central Kitchen aid convoy. He was responding to a question about whether Netanyahu was letting political considerations steer his decision-making in the war.

Biden said Israel should agree to a cease-fire, flood beleaguered Gaza with aid for the next six to eight weeks and allow regional countries to help distribute the aid. "It should be done now," he said.

International efforts to broker a cease-fire between Israel and Hamas are taking place in Cairo this week.

Israel's bombardment and ground offensives in Gaza over the past six months have killed at least 33,360 Palestinians and wounded 74,993, Gaza's Health Ministry said Tuesday. The ministry doesn't differentiate between civilians and combatants in its tally, but says women and children make up two-thirds of the dead.

The war began Oct. 7 when Hamas-led militants stormed into southern Israel, killing some 1,200 people, mostly civilians, and taking around 250 people hostage.

Currently:

- Austin tells Congress Israel is taking steps to boost aid to Gaza as lawmakers question US support
- Turkey and Israel announce trade barriers on each other as relations deteriorate over Gaza
- At U.N. court, Germany rejects allegations that it's facilitating acts of genocide in Gaza
- A Moroccan activist was sentenced to 5 years for criticizing the country's ties to Israel
- Find more AP coverage at <https://apnews.com/hub/israel-hamas-war>

Here's the latest:

IRAN'S SUPREME LEADER AGAIN PLEDGES RETALIATION AGAINST ISRAEL OVER KILLINGS OF IRANIAN GENERALS

JERUSALEM — Iran's Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei again promised to retaliate against Israel over the killings of Iranian generals in a strike on its consulate in Syria.

Khamenei spoke Wednesday at a prayer ceremony in Tehran celebrating the first day of the Eid al-Fitr holiday and the end of the Muslim holy fasting month of Ramadan. He said last week's attack on Iran's consulate in Damascus, widely blamed on Israel, was akin to an attack on Iranian territory. "The evil regime must be punished, and it will be punished," he added.

Israeli Foreign Minister Israel Katz appeared to respond, posting on social platform X in both Farsi and Hebrew: "If Iran attacks from its territory, Israel will respond and attack in Iran."

The strike on April 1 killed 12 people, including seven Iranian Revolutionary Guard members, four Syrians and a Hezbollah militia member. Israel has not acknowledged its involvement, though it has been bracing for an Iranian response to the attack, which marked a significant escalation in their long-running shadow war.

Iran supports anti-Israeli militant groups like Hamas, who are battling Israeli forces in the Gaza Strip, as well as the Lebanese Hezbollah.

BIDEN CALLS NETANYAHU'S APPROACH TO WAR AGAINST HAMAS A 'MISTAKE'

TEL AVIV, Israel — U.S. President Joe Biden says Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's approach to the war against Hamas is mistaken.

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Biden said Israel should agree to a cease-fire, flood beleaguered Gaza with aid for the next six to eight weeks and allow regional countries to help distribute the aid. "It should be done now," he said.

The Biden administration was outspoken in its support for Israel following the Oct. 7 Hamas attack, but in recent weeks has stepped up criticism of Israel's approach to the war.

Israel and Hamas are holding talks meant to bring about a cease-fire in exchange for the release of hostages, although the sides still disagree on key terms of a deal.

AUSTRALIAN FOREIGN MINISTER CRITICIZED FOR SUGGESTING POSSIBLE RECOGNITION OF A PALESTINIAN STATE

MELBOURNE, Australia — Australian Foreign Minister Penny Wong is facing criticism after she raised the prospect of Australia recognizing a Palestinian state.

Wong said in a speech late Tuesday that recognizing Palestinian statehood could be the only way to end the cycle of violence in the Middle East and build momentum toward a two-state solution amid ongoing conflict between Palestinians and Israel. She said Wednesday she wasn't changing Australia's position, but was starting a conversation.

"We've made no such decision. The discussion I want to have is to look at what is happening in the international community where there is the very important debate about how it is we secure long-lasting peace in a region which has known so much conflict," Wong told Australian Broadcasting Corp.

Wong said Hamas must free hostages and that the militant group would have no place in a Palestinian state. She also said there needed to be an immediate humanitarian cease-fire so that aid could be delivered to Gaza. And she urged Israel not to invade the southern Gaza city of Rafah because of the risk to civilians.

Both Australia's center-left Labor Party government and the conservative opposition parties support a two-party solution in the Middle East.

But opposition spokesperson on foreign affairs Simon Birmingham called it "downright dangerous to reward (Hamas for its Oct. 7 attack on Israel) with a fast track to recognition of statehood."

ISRAELI AIRSTRIKE ON HOME IN CENTRAL GAZA KILLS 11 PEOPLE

DEIR AL-BALAH, Gaza Strip — An Israeli airstrike hit a home in central Gaza on Tuesday evening, killing at least 11 people, including seven women and children, hospital officials said.

After the strike hit in the town of Zawaida, Associated Press footage showed one man carrying the limp body of a little girl and laying her with the bodies of other dead children on the floor at the main hospital in nearby Deir al-Balah. Hospital officials said the dead included five children and two women.

The strike came as the Israeli military withdrew its forces from the southern city of Khan Younis this week, ending a monthslong ground assault that left large parts of the city in ruins. Still, airstrikes have continued in the past days, including in Gaza's southernmost city of Rafah, where Israel says it plans to launch its next ground assault.

FAMILIES OF HOSTAGES HELD IN GAZA MEET WITH U.S. VICE PRESIDENT

WASHINGTON — Several family members of hostages held by Hamas met with U.S. Vice President Kamala Harris at the White House on Tuesday and urged for a deal that would release their loved ones and implement a temporary cease-fire in Gaza.

"The only hope for peace is through the release of all the hostages now," said Jonathan Dekel-Chen, the father of American hostage Sagui Dekel-Chen. On a potential hostage agreement, Dekel-Chen stressed that the world is waiting for "Hamas to get to yes."

Rachel Goldberg, the mother of American hostage Hersh Goldberg-Polin, called the meeting with Harris "very productive." She expressed gratitude to the White House and lawmakers for their support, but

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added: "We need results. We need our people home."

"You can believe as we do that it is horrible that innocent civilians in Gaza are suffering," Goldberg said. "And at the same time, you can also know that it is horrible and against international law for hostages to be held against their will."

During the meeting, Harris emphasized that she and President Joe Biden "have no higher priority than reuniting the hostages with their loved ones," according to a White House readout, as she gave an update on the administration's efforts on a hostage deal.

U.S. DEFENSE SECRETARY TELLS CONGRESS THAT ISRAEL IS TAKING STEPS TO BOOST AID TO GAZA
WASHINGTON — U.S. Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin told Congress Tuesday that pressure on Israel to improve humanitarian aid to Gaza appears to be working, but he said more must be done and it remains to be seen if the improvement will continue.

"It clearly had an effect. We have seen changes in behavior, and we have seen more humanitarian assistance being pushed into Gaza," Austin said in a Senate Armed Services Committee hearing. "Hopefully that trend will continue."

Austin's comments came during a session that was interrupted several times by protesters shouting at him to stop sending weapons to Israel. "Stop the genocide," they said, as they lifted their hands, stained in red, in the air. A number of senators also decried the civilian casualties, saying the administration needs to do more to press Israel to protect the population in Gaza.

In response, Austin said he spoke with his Israeli counterpart, Defense Minister Yoav Gallant, on Monday and that he repeated U.S. insistence that Israel must move civilians out of the battlespace in Gaza and properly care for them.

Austin and Joint Chiefs Chairman Gen. CQ Brown Jr. were testifying on Capitol Hill about the Pentagon's \$850 billion budget for 2025.

BLINKEN SAYS ISRAEL HASN'T TOLD U.S. ABOUT ANY SPECIFIC DATE TO LAUNCH RAFAH INVASION
WASHINGTON — U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken on Tuesday said Israel has not apprised the U.S. of any specific date for the start of a major offensive into the southern Gaza city of Rafah, but added that American and Israeli officials remained in contact to try to ensure that "any kind of major military operation doesn't do real harm to civilians."

Blinken spoke a day after Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu vowed that a date has been set to invade Rafah. The city is filled with around 1.4 million Palestinians, most of whom are displaced from other parts of the Gaza Strip. The United States, Israel's closest ally, has said a ground operation into Rafah would be a mistake and has demanded to see a credible plan to protect civilians.

Washington has also been applying pressure on Israel to improve humanitarian aid to Gaza, where half the population is starving and on the brink of famine due to Israel's tight restrictions on allowing aid trucks through.

"We're looking at a number of critical things that need to happen in the coming days," Blinken said, referring to recent Israeli announcements on the opening of new aid routes into Gaza and more active efforts to avoid casualties to both civilians and humanitarian relief workers. "But what matters is results and sustained results and this is what we will be looking at very carefully in the days ahead."

That includes getting assistance in and distributed to all of the territory "not just in the south, or in central Gaza. It has to get to the north as well," he said.

FRANCE USING 'ALL INFLUENCE' TO PERSUADE ISRAEL TO OPEN GAZA CROSSINGS TO AID CONVOYS
PARIS — France's foreign minister says his country is using "all levels of influence," including threats of sanctions, to force Israel to open crossings with Gaza for vital humanitarian aid to reach Palestinians.

France was the first country to propose European Union sanctions against violent Israeli settlers in the occupied West Bank, Foreign Minister Stéphane Séjourné said in an interview Tuesday with French broadcasters RFI and FRANCE 24.

He added: "We have multiple ways to utilize our influence, obviously, we can provide more sanctions ... to let humanitarian aid convoys cross checkpoints" and reach people in Gaza.

Séjourné did not elaborate on what kind of sanctions he was referring to. It is highly unlikely that France

would impose any eventual sanctions without broader EU support, and the EU has been divided over policy toward Israel.

ISRAEL SHOOTS DOWN A DRONE OVER THE RED SEA

JERUSALEM — Israel shot down a drone over the Red Sea overnight in what the military described as the first deployment of its naval Iron Dome missile defense system.

The military said that a Corvette warship shot down the drone as it flew east over waters near the southern Israeli city of Eilat. The military released grainy aerial footage of the missile making contact with an aircraft.

It was not immediately clear who was directing the drone. Yemen's Houthi rebels have been conducting near daily attacks on commercial and military ships in the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden, launching drones and missiles from rebel-held areas of Yemen.

The Israeli defense system, called the "C-Dome," is a naval version of the Iron Dome, which has been used to shoot down rockets fired from the Gaza Strip for the past decade.

TURKEY AND ISRAEL PUTTING UP TRADE BARRIERS AS RELATIONS DETERIORATE

JERUSALEM — Foreign Minister Israel Katz says Israel is preparing a ban on products from Turkey after Ankara announced it was restricting exports to Israel.

Turkey said earlier Tuesday it is restricting exports of dozens of products to Israel, including aluminum, steel, construction products and chemical fertilizers. It said it would continue the measures until Israel declares a cease-fire and allows the uninterrupted flow of aid to Gaza.

Katz said in a post on X, formerly Twitter, that Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan is sacrificing the economic interests of his citizens "for his support of Hamas."

Relations between Turkey and Israel have been frosty for years, although trade ties between the two countries are strong.

NATO-member Turkey is among the strongest critics of Israel's military actions in Gaza.

Erdogan has repeatedly called for an immediate cease-fire and accused Israel of committing genocide in its military campaign in Gaza. The Israeli Foreign Ministry had no additional comment.

In some classrooms in Senegal, deaf and hard-of-hearing students now study alongside everyone else

By ANDREI POPOVICIU Associated Press

PIKINE, Senegal (AP) — Mouhamed Sall stepped to the chalkboard with a glance and quick question in sign language to an assistant. Then he solved the exercise to the silent approval of his classmates, who waved their hands in a display of appreciation.

Sall and three other students are part of a new approach in a small number of schools in Senegal that seat those who are deaf and hard of hearing with the rest of the class.

Some classmates at the sun-washed Apex Guinaw Rails Sud school in a suburb of the capital, Dakar, have embraced the chance to learn sign language in the months since Sall arrived. The class is lively and cheeky: "No teachers allowed in this room," graffiti scrawled above the chalkboard says.

"I have no problem communicating with some colleagues I went to primary school with," Sall said as his mother spoke. "The new colleagues don't know sign language but we still play together."

"We've been friends, so it was easy to learn sign language," said classmate Salane Senghor, who also knew Sall in primary school. New classmates were curious, looking to the assistant to find out what he was saying.

The United Nations children's agency says about 60% of children with disabilities in Senegal are not going to school. But the government lacks comprehensive data on the issue and counts only children who are formally registered as having a disability.

"We're looking for progress from the government to ensure every child, regardless of ability, has the opportunity to learn," said Sara Poehlman with UNICEF Senegal.

Senegal lacks a national strategy for inclusive education, but it is developing one. Recent political insta-

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bility in the West African nation has hindered progress.

The challenges are compounded by a stigma that some in Senegal associate with disabilities. Some parents hide their children and prevent them from participating in society.

But attitudes are changing. In 2021, Senegal's football team for deaf and hard of hearing players won the first African football championship for such teams and played in the world championship, to the congratulations of Senegal's president. During the recent election, the National Association for the Promotion of the Deaf in Senegal and the International Foundation for Electoral Systems organized a workshop to teach hard-of-hearing voters over 100 election-related terms in sign language.

Now there's more visibility in classrooms.

The organization Humanity and Inclusion last year began partnering with Senegal's education ministry for mixed classes in four public secondary schools with inclusive education practices. Apix is one of them. Humanity and Inclusion funds the hiring of assistants who can communicate in sign language.

"We see that all children are on an equal footing, and that's why we make an inclusive class or school by harmonizing with the hearing pupils," said Papa Amadou, one assistant.

Sall is receiving education free of charge, a big advantage in a part of the world where school fees can be a constant source of stress for parents.

Until now, Senegal has had mostly specialized schools for children with disabilities, but they are often private and expensive.

Sall's mother, Khadija Koundio, at first paid about \$17 every month for him to attend an activity center for children with learning challenges in their neighborhood. Then he was able to enter primary school with the support of a similar Humanity and Inclusion program created several years ago in a small number of schools for younger students.

Omar Diop, head supervisor at Apix, praised the new secondary school program but said challenges continue.

"It's their first year for the teachers, so that poses a problem because the children come with a much higher level of sign language," Diop said.

Mamadou Konte, the Apix school director, emphasized the need for more teacher training. "We've seen success at our school, but this model needs to be replicated nationwide," Konte added.

Challenges remain for students and families, too. Koundio, president of the parents' association for the school's deaf and hard-of-hearing students, said some of her son's classmates live farther away and struggle with the cost of commuting.

Poehlman with UNICEF highlighted government initiatives like the Carte de l'Égalité, which provides financial assistance to families so children can access specialized schools, but she stressed the importance of programs implemented in public schools.

Jandira Monteiro with Humanity and Inclusion urged collaboration between Senegal's ministries of health and education to ensure holistic support for children with disabilities.

Sall said he feels accepted by his peers. The teachers at Apix commend him on his intelligence and his artistic talents in crafting bright models of houses and traditional boats called pirogues.

His mother wants him to pursue his passions, including art.

"One day, when I'm gone, he'll have enough to support himself," she said.

Biden meets Japan's PM Kishida over shared concerns about China and differences on US Steel deal

By AAMER MADHANI Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Japanese Prime Minister Fumio Kishida began a much-anticipated visit to Washington on Tuesday that spotlights shared concerns about provocative Chinese military action in the Pacific and at a rare moment of public difference between the two nations over a Japanese company's plan to buy an iconic U.S. company.

Kishida and his wife stopped by the White House Tuesday evening ahead of Wednesday's official visit

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and formal state dinner as President Joe Biden looks to celebrate a decades-long ally he sees as the cornerstone of his Indo-Pacific policy. Kishida will be the fifth world leader honored by Biden with a state dinner since he took office in 2021.

The two shook hands and first lady Jill Biden embraced Kishida's wife, Yuko. The foursome posed for a photo and briefly toured the grounds before heading to an upscale seafood restaurant, BlackSalt, for dinner.

The Bidens were presenting the prime minister with a three-legged table handmade by a Japanese American-owned company in Pennsylvania. The president was also gifting Kishida a custom-framed lithograph and a two-volume LP set autographed by Billy Joel. Jill Biden was giving Yuko Kishida a soccer ball signed by the U.S. women's national team and the Japanese women's national team.

Ahead of the White House visit, Kishida laid a wreath at Arlington National Cemetery on Tuesday and stopped by the U.S. Chamber of Commerce and met with Microsoft's vice chairman and president Brad Smith. Biden and Kishida on Wednesday will hold talks and take part in a joint news conference before Biden fetes the Japanese leader with the state dinner in the East Room.

The prime minister has also been invited to address a joint meeting of Congress on Thursday. He will be just the second Japanese leader to address the body; Shinzo Abe gave a speech to Congress in 2015.

The visit comes after Biden announced last month that he opposes the planned sale of Pittsburgh-based U.S. Steel to Nippon Steel of Japan, exposing a marked rift in the partnership at the very moment the two leaders aim to reinforce it. Biden argued in announcing his opposition that the U.S. needs to "maintain strong American steel companies powered by American steelworkers."

Ambassador Rahm Emanuel, Biden's envoy to Tokyo, sought Monday to downplay the impact of Biden's opposition to the U.S. Steel acquisition to the relationship. Emanuel noted that in February the Biden administration approved a plan that would drive billions of dollars in revenue to a U.S.-based subsidiary of the Japanese company Mitsui for crane production in the United States.

"The United States relationship with Japan is a lot deeper and stronger and more significant than a single commercial deal," said Emanuel, the former mayor of Chicago, in a joint appearance at Washington's Center for Strategic and International Studies with Japan's chief envoy to Washington. "As we would say in Chicago, you got to chill."

Nippon Steel announced in December that it planned to buy U.S. Steel for \$14.1 billion in cash, raising concerns about what the transaction could mean for unionized workers, supply chains and U.S. national security. Shigeo Yamada, Japan's ambassador to Washington, declined to comment on whether Kishida would raise the Nippon-U.S. Steel deal with Biden.

Kishida at the U.S. Chamber said that American investments in Japan and vice versa would make the "economies more deeply tied and inseparable." Smith, the Microsoft vice chairman, announced that the tech company was investing \$2.9 billion in Japan over the next two years to expand its cloud computing and artificial intelligence operations there. Microsoft will be working with the Japanese government to improve its cybersecurity capabilities.

"We see this as a critical investment in every Japanese company that we support and the Japanese government as well," Smith said.

Biden has sought to place greater foreign policy focus on the Pacific even while grappling with the fallout of the Russian invasion of Ukraine and the grinding Israel-Hamas war. Last year, Biden brought together Kishida and South Korean President Yoon Suk Yeol at the presidential retreat at Camp David, Maryland, a historic summit between leaders of two countries that have a difficult shared history.

Biden has honored Yoon with a state visit and picked Kishida's predecessor, Prime Minister Yoshihide Suga, as the first face-to-face foreign leader visit of his presidency.

The administration has been pleased by Japan's strong support for Ukraine. Tokyo has been one of the largest donors to Kyiv since Russia's February 2022 invasion, and Japan has surged its defense spending amid concern about China's military assertiveness.

Yamada suggested that Kishida would underscore Japan's support for Ukraine during his appearance before Congress, and lay out why the conflict in Eastern Europe matters to his country. Biden is struggling to get House Republicans to back his call to send an additional \$60 billion to Kyiv as it tries to fend off Russia.

Kishida has warned that the war in Europe could lead to conflict in East Asia, suggesting that a lax attitude to Russia emboldens China.

"The prime minister's conviction is today's Ukraine could be tomorrow's East Asia," Yamada said.

The Pentagon announced on Monday that the U.S., United Kingdom, and Australia were considering including Japan in the AUKUS partnership, a grouping launched in 2021 that aims to equip Australia with nuclear-powered and conventionally-armed submarines.

Beijing has condemned the AUKUS pact, which it says promotes division and could lead to military confrontation in the region. China's foreign ministry on Tuesday raised objection to Japan's prospective new role.

Kishida will stick around Washington on Thursday to take part in a meeting with Biden and Philippine President Ferdinand Marcos Jr. Philippine-Chinese relations have been repeatedly tested by skirmishes between the two nations' coast guard vessels in the disputed South China Sea.

Chinese coast guard ships also regularly approach disputed Japanese-controlled East China Sea islands near Taiwan. Beijing says Taiwan is part of its territory and will be brought under control by force if necessary.

"Cooperation among our three countries is extremely important in maintaining peace and stability in the Indo-Pacific and in defending a free and open international order based on the rules of law," Kishida said Monday before leaving for Washington.

The leaders are expected to discuss plans to upgrade the U.S. military command structure in Japan. There are about 54,000 U.S. troops stationed in Japan.

White House national security adviser Jake Sullivan the leaders' announcements on defense will enable "greater coordination in the integration of our forces and ensure that they are optimally postured and linked to other like-minded partners."

Kishida and Biden are also expected to confirm Japan's participation in NASA's Artemis moon program as well as its contribution of a moon rover developed by Toyota Motor Corp. and the inclusion of a Japanese astronaut in the mission. The rover, which comes at a roughly \$2 billion cost, would be the most expensive contribution to the mission by a non-U.S. partner to date.

6 former Mississippi law officers to be sentenced in state court for torture of 2 Black men

By MICHAEL GOLDBERG Associated Press/Report for America

JACKSON, Miss (AP) — Six former Mississippi law enforcement officers who pleaded guilty to a long list of state and federal charges for torturing two Black men will be sentenced Wednesday in state court.

The six white former Mississippi law enforcement officers who attacked Michael Corey Jenkins and Eddie Terrell Parker in January 2023 have already been sentenced to federal prison terms ranging from about 10 to 40 years. In March, U.S. District Judge Tom Lee called their actions "egregious and despicable" as he gave sentences near the top of the federal guidelines to five of the six men.

Rankin County Circuit Judge Steve Ratcliff will sentence all six defendants on state charges Wednesday. They agreed to sentences recommended by state prosecutors ranging from five to 30 years. Time served for the state convictions will run at the same time as the federal sentences, and the men will serve their time in federal penitentiaries.

The case drew outrage from top law enforcement officials in the country, including Attorney General Merrick Garland, who said the officers committed a "heinous attack on citizens they had sworn an oath to protect." In the episode's grisly details, local residents saw echoes of Mississippi's history of racist atrocities by people in authority.

Malik Shabazz, an attorney representing Jenkins and Parker, said the state sentencing hearing would be a "test" for Ratcliff and state prosecutors.

"The state criminal sentencing is important because historically, the state of Mississippi has lagged behind or ignored racial crimes and police brutality against Blacks, and the Department of Justice has had

to lead the way," Shabazz said.

The defendants include five former Rankin County sheriff's deputies — Brett McAlpin, 53, Hunter Elward, 31, Christian Dedmon, 29, Jeffrey Middleton, 46, and Daniel Opdyke, 28 — and a former police officer from the city of Richland, Joshua Hartfield, 32, who was off duty during the assault.

All six of the former officers pleaded guilty to state charges of obstruction of justice and conspiracy to hinder prosecution. Dedmon and Elward, who kicked in a door, also admitted to home invasion.

The charges followed an Associated Press investigation in March that linked some of the officers to at least four violent encounters since 2019 that left two Black men dead.

The former lawmen admitted to breaking into a home without a warrant and torturing Jenkins and Parker in an hourslong attack that included beatings, repeated uses of stun guns and assaults with a sex toy before one of the victims was shot in the mouth.

The terror began on Jan. 24, 2023, with a racist call for extrajudicial violence, according to federal prosecutors.

A white person phoned Rankin County Deputy Brett McAlpin and complained that two Black men were staying with a white woman at a house in Braxton, Mississippi. McAlpin told Christian Dedmon, who texted a group of white deputies so willing to use excessive force they called themselves "The Goon Squad."

Once inside, they handcuffed Jenkins and his friend Parker and poured milk, alcohol and chocolate syrup over their faces while mocking them with racial slurs. They forced them to strip naked and shower together to conceal the mess. They mocked the victims with racial slurs and assaulted them with sex objects.

In a mock execution gone awry, Elward shot Jenkins in the mouth, lacerating his tongue and breaking his jaw. The officers devised a coverup and agreed to plant drugs on Jenkins and Parker. False charges stood against the men for months.

McAlpin and Middleton, the oldest in the group, threatened to kill other officers if they spoke up, prosecutors said. Opdyke was the first to admit what they did, according to Jeff Reynolds, his attorney. Opdyke showed investigators a WhatsApp text thread where the officers discussed their plan, Reynolds said.

The only defendant who didn't receive a federal prison term at the top of the sentencing guidelines was Hartfield, who did not work in a sheriff's department with the others and was not a member of the "Goon Squad."

In federal court, the deputies expressed remorse for their behavior and apologized to Jenkins and Parker. Several of their attorneys said their clients became ensnared in a culture of corruption that was encouraged by leaders in the sheriff's office.

Rankin County Sheriff Bryan Bailey revealed no details about his deputies' actions when he announced they had been fired last June. After they pleaded guilty in August, Bailey said the officers had gone rogue and promised changes. Jenkins and Parker have called for his resignation and filed a \$400 million civil lawsuit against the department.

Key question before US reveals latest consumer prices: Is inflation cooling enough for the Fed?

By CHRISTOPHER RUGABER AP Economics Writer

WASHINGTON (AP) — An eagerly awaited report Wednesday on consumer prices will show whether inflation is still easing, a trend the Federal Reserve will weigh in deciding when and by how much — or even whether — to cut interest rates this year.

The March inflation figures are expected to show an ever-so-slight cooling of inflation, which might keep the Fed on track to cut its benchmark rate three times this year, starting as early as June. But with inflation data having come in higher than expected in January and February, a third elevated reading could scramble the Fed's plans and forestall some or all of those rate reductions.

The government's inflation reports have assumed an unusually high profile this year in both the financial markets and the presidential election. Chair Jerome Powell has made clear that the Fed needs "greater

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confidence" that inflation is steadily falling back to the central bank's 2% target before it can begin reducing borrowing costs.

Republican critics of President Joe Biden have sought to pin the blame for high prices on the president and use it as a cudgel to derail his re-election bid. Despite a healthy job market, a near-record-high stock market and a significant drop in inflation from its peak of 9.1%, many Americans blame Biden for the surge in consumer prices that began in 2021. Average prices are still far above where they stood before the pandemic.

Early this year, Wall Street traders had projected that the Fed would cut its key rate up to six or seven times in 2024. In March, Fed officials penciled in three cuts. But persistently high inflation readings in January and February — along with signs that economic growth remains healthy — have led several Fed officials to suggest that fewer rate cuts may occur this year.

Economists have forecast that Wednesday's report will show that prices rose at a seasonally adjusted 0.3% from February to March, slightly below the previous month's 0.4% increase, according to a survey of economists by FactSet. That would leave consumer costs 3.4% higher than they were a year ago.

Financial markets and economists will keep a particularly close eye on the March "core" inflation figures, which exclude volatile food and energy costs. Core prices typically provide a better sense of where inflation is headed. Economists have predicted that core prices also slowed to a 0.3% increase from February to March, down from 0.4% from January to February.

A rise in gas prices was a likely key source of last month's inflation. The average national price of a gallon of gas rose about 5% to \$3.50. Prices for services — everything from car insurance and hotel rooms to restaurant meals and entertainment — are also believed to have risen.

Rents and the cost of home ownership have also both surged since the pandemic. The cost to rent a new apartment has actually declined in most big cities — a result, in part, of a wave of new apartment buildings being completed. But the government tracks both new and existing rents, and the decline in newer rents is only slowly feeding into the government's data.

Rents rose 5.8% in February from a year earlier, well above the 3% to 4% pace that was typical before the pandemic but far below a peak of 8.8% a year ago.

The costs of new and used vehicles, though, are believed to have dropped in March and are expected to hold down inflation in the months ahead. Cars and SUVs still cost much more than they did before the pandemic. But as automakers increase production and replenish dealer inventories, buyers are able to get some deals again.

Laura Rosner-Warburton, an economist at MacroPolicy Perspectives, said that only about 16% of new cars are now sold above the manufacturer's recommended price, down from nearly half in July 2022.

"The conditions have really shifted in the new-vehicle market," she said. "The supply has improved. I think that's an area where we just haven't seen much deflation at all, and we will."

The costs of groceries, having skyrocketed in 2022 and early 2023, are rising much more slowly now. Food prices were up just 1% in February from a year earlier. Egg prices, though, may jump, with avian flu having re-emerged and forced egg producers to reduce the size of their flocks.

Hiring ramped up last month and the unemployment rate fell to a low 3.8% from 3.9%. A report on manufacturing also showed that factory output expanded after more than a year of contraction.

Such signs of economic vigor have also complicated the prospect of Fed rate cuts, which typically occur when the economy stumbles. With growth healthy, some economists have asked, why cut rates at all? A strong economy also means that the Fed's policymakers can take their time to consider when and by how much to reduce borrowing costs for consumers and businesses.

At a news conference last month, Powell said that robust hiring, on its own, wouldn't require the Fed to delay rate cuts. He noted that even though job gains were strong last year, inflation still tumbled thanks in large part to a surge of available workers, mostly from increased immigration.

"In and of itself, strong job growth is not a reason for us to be concerned about inflation," the Fed chair said.

Some other policymakers, though, said that recent data had given them pause. "It's much too soon to think about cutting interest rates," Lorie Logan, president of the Federal Reserve Bank of Dallas, said last week.

What to know about the Arizona Supreme Court ruling that reinstates an 1864 near-total abortion ban

By JACQUES BILLEAUD and MORGAN LEE Associated Press

PHOENIX (AP) — The Arizona Supreme Court has delivered a landmark decision in giving the go-ahead to enforce a long-dormant law that bans nearly all abortions, drastically altering the legal landscape within the state around terminating pregnancies.

The law predating Arizona's statehood provides no exceptions for rape or incest and allows abortions only if the mother's life is in jeopardy. Arizona's highest court suggested doctors can be prosecuted under the 1864 law, though the opinion written by the court's majority didn't explicitly say that.

The Tuesday decision threw out an earlier lower-court decision that concluded doctors couldn't be charged for performing abortions in the first 15 weeks of pregnancy.

HOW WE GOT HERE

The law was enacted decades before Arizona became a state on Feb. 14, 1912. A court in Tucson had blocked its enforcement shortly after the U.S. Supreme Court issued its 1973 *Roe v. Wade* decision guaranteeing the constitutional right to an abortion.

After the U.S. Supreme Court overturned the landmark *Roe* decision in June 2022, then-Arizona Attorney General Mark Brnovich, a Republican, successfully requested that a state judge lift an injunction that blocked enforcement of the 1864 ban.

The state Court of Appeals suspended the law as Brnovich's Democratic successor, Attorney General Kris Mayes, urged the state's high court to uphold the appellate court's decision.

WHO CAN BE PROSECUTED UNDER THE 1864 LAW?

The law orders prosecution for "a person who provides, supplies or administers to a pregnant woman, or procures such woman to take any medicine, drugs or substance, or uses or employs any instrument or other means whatever, with intent thereby to procure the miscarriage of such woman, unless it is necessary to save her life."

The Arizona Supreme Court suggested in its ruling Tuesday that physicians can be prosecuted, though justices didn't say that outright.

"In light of this Opinion, physicians are now on notice that all abortions, except those necessary to save a woman's life, are illegal" the ruling said. The justices noted additional criminal and regulatory sanctions may apply to abortions performed after 15 weeks of pregnancy.

The law carries a sentence of two to five years in prison upon conviction. Lawyers for Planned Parenthood Arizona said they believe criminal penalties will apply only to doctors.

The high court said enforcement won't begin for at least two weeks. However, plaintiffs say it could be up to two months, based on an agreement in a related case to delay enforcement if the justices upheld the pre-statehood ban.

POLITICS OF THE PRESIDENTIAL RACE

The ruling puts the issue of abortion access front and center in a battleground state for the 2024 presidential election and partisan control of the U.S. Senate.

Democrats immediately pounced on the ruling, blaming former President Donald Trump for the loss of abortion access after the U.S. Supreme Court ended the national right to abortion.

President Joe Biden and his allies are emphasizing efforts to restore abortion rights, while Trump has avoided endorsing a national abortion ban and warned that the issue could lead to Republican losses. The decision will give Arizona the strictest abortion law of the top-tier battleground states.

Staunch Trump ally and abortion opponent Kari Lake is challenging Democratic U.S. Rep. Ruben Gallego in an Arizona race for the U.S. Senate seat now held by Kyrsten Sinema, who isn't seeking a second term.

WHAT'S NEXT?

Under a near-total ban, the number of abortions in Arizona is expected to drop drastically from about 1,100 monthly, as estimated by a survey for the Society of Family Planning.

This past summer, abortion rights advocates began a push to ask Arizona voters to create a constitutional right to abortion. If proponents collect enough signatures, Arizona would become the latest state to put the question of reproductive rights directly before voters.

The proposed constitutional amendment would guarantee abortion rights until a fetus could survive outside the womb, typically around 24 weeks. It also would allow later abortions to save the mother's life, or to protect her physical or mental health.

Judge in Trump's classified files case agrees to redact witness names, granting prosecution request

By ERIC TUCKER Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — The federal judge presiding over the classified documents case against former President Donald Trump granted a request by prosecutors on Tuesday aimed at protecting the identities of potential government witnesses.

But U.S. District Judge Aileen Cannon refused to categorically block witness statements from being disclosed, saying there was no basis for such a "sweeping" and "blanket" restriction on their inclusion in pretrial motions.

The 24-page order centers on a dispute between special counsel Jack Smith's team and lawyers for Trump over how much information about witnesses and their statements could be made public ahead of trial. The disagreement, which had been pending for weeks, was one of many that had piled up before Cannon and had slowed the pace of the case against Trump — one of four prosecutions he is confronting.

The case remains without a firm trial date, though both sides have said they could be ready this summer. Cannon, who earlier faced blistering criticism over her decision to grant Trump's request for an independent arbiter to review documents obtained during an FBI search of Mar-a-Lago, made clear her continued skepticism of the government's theory of prosecution, saying Tuesday that the case raised "still-developing and somewhat muddled questions."

In reconsidering an earlier order and siding with prosecutors on the protection of witness identities, Cannon likely averted a dramatic exacerbation of tensions with Smith's team, which last week called a separate order from the judge "fundamentally flawed."

The issue surfaced in January when defense lawyers filed in partially redacted form a motion that sought to require prosecutors to turn over a trove of documents that they said would bolster their claim that the Biden administration had sought to "weaponize" the government in charging Trump.

Defense lawyers asked permission to file the motion, which included as attachments information that they had obtained from prosecutors, in mostly unredacted form. But prosecutors objected to unsealing the motion to the extent that it would reveal the identity of any potential government witness.

Cannon then granted the defense request for the motion and its exhibits to be filed in unredacted form as long as the personal identifying information of witnesses remained sealed. Smith's team asked her to reconsider, saying that witnesses could be exposed to threats and harassments if publicly identified.

In agreeing Tuesday for the witness names to remain redacted, she wrote, "Although the record is clear that the Special Counsel could have, and should have, raised its current arguments previously, the Court elects, upon a full review of those newly raised arguments, to reconsider its prior Order."

Still, the order was not a complete win for prosecutors.

Cannon rejected a request by Smith's team to seal from pretrial motions the substance of all witness statements, with the exception of information that could be used to identify witnesses.

"As for legal authority, the cases cited in the Special Counsel's papers do not lend support to this sweeping request; nor do they appear to have been offered as such," Cannon wrote. "And based on the Court's independent research, granting this request would be unprecedented: the Court cannot locate any case

— high-profile or otherwise — in which a court has authorized anything remotely similar to the sweeping relief sought here.”

Turkey and Israel announce trade barriers on each other as relations deteriorate over Gaza

By SUZAN FRASER Associated Press

ANKARA, Turkey (AP) — Turkey and Israel announced trade barriers on each other Tuesday as relations deteriorated further amid the war in Gaza.

Turkey, a staunch critic of Israel’s military actions in the territory, announced that it was restricting exports of 54 types of products to Israel with immediate effect. They include aluminum, steel, construction products, jet fuel and chemical fertilizers. In response, Israel said it was preparing a ban on products from Turkey.

The announcements came a day after Turkish Foreign Minister Hakan Fidan said Israel had barred Turkish military cargo planes from joining an operation to airdrop humanitarian aid to Gaza and vowed to respond with a series of measures against Israel until it declares a cease-fire and allows aid to flow in without interruptions.

“There is no excuse for Israel to block our attempt to deliver aid by air to starving people of Gaza,” Fidan said.

Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan’s government, which suffered major setbacks in local elections last month, is faced with intense pressure at home to halt trade with Israel. Critics accuse the government of engaging in double standards by leveling strong accusations against Israel while continuing lucrative commercial relations.

Erdogan, whose ruling party has roots in Turkey’s Islamic movement, has been an outspoken critic of Israel’s treatment of the Palestinians since taking office in 2003.

The Turkish leader stepped up his criticism of Israel following its military offensive in Gaza, describing Israel’s actions as war crimes verging on “genocide” and asserting that the Hamas militant group, considered a terrorist organization by Israel, the United States and European Union, is fighting for the liberation of its lands and people.

In a post on X, Israeli Foreign Minister Israel Katz said Erdogan was “once again sacrificing the economic interests of the people of Turkey for his support of the Hamas murderers in Gaza.”

In the same post, he said he had contacted organizations in the U.S. and asked them to stop investing in Turkey and refrain from importing Turkish goods.

Hamish Kinnear, senior Middle East and North Africa analyst at Britain-based risk intelligence company Verisk Maplecroft, said domestic considerations were behind Turkey’s decision to slap trade restrictions on Israel, saying Erdogan’s ruling party was trying to “rally its base in the wake of defeat in local elections.”

“Reduced bilateral trade will be the result, especially if Israel retaliates with trade restrictions of its own,” Kinnear said. “Turkey’s government has likely made the calculation that damaged trade ties are worth it for the potential gain in domestic political support.”

Turkish exports to Israel amounted to \$5.4 billion in 2023, according to the Turkish Statistical Institute.

Turkey and Israel had normalized ties by appointing ambassadors to their respective countries in 2022, following years of tensions.

Since January, Turkish authorities have detained dozens of people, including private detectives, on suspicion of spying for Israel, mostly on Palestinians living in Turkey.

Two days after \$1.3 billion Powerball drawing, the winning Oregon ticket holder remains unknown

By CLAIRE RUSH and MEAD GRUVER Associated Press

PORTLAND, Ore. (AP) — The winner of the eighth-biggest lottery prize in U.S. history won't be announced for at least a couple more weeks until their ticket is verified and arrangements for the massive payment are made, Oregon lottery officials said Tuesday.

A person with a ticket matching all six Powerball numbers in Saturday's \$1.3 billion jackpot came forward Monday to claim the prize from last weekend's drawing. They bought the ticket at a convenience store in northeastern Portland.

For selling the winning ticket, managers of the Plaid Pantry location plan to share their \$100,000 bonus. The store's other employees typically get a cut of lottery prize bonus payments too, said Jonathan Polonsky, CEO and president of Plaid Pantry.

Lottery officials said they were taking precautions to verify the win and in order to send the winner the sum, they will need to coordinate with the Multi-State Lottery Association, which oversees the Powerball and Mega Millions lotteries. That will take time.

"We've never had a jackpot this large in Oregon won here. There's a lot of moving pieces," Oregon Lottery spokesperson Melanie Mesaros said.

Oregon has had five previous Powerball jackpot winners, including two families who shared a \$340 million prize in 2005.

The jackpot has a cash value of \$621 million if the winner chooses to take a lump sum rather than an annuity paid over 30 years, with an immediate payout followed by 29 annual installments.

In Oregon, the prize is subject to federal and state taxes that whittle down the haul by a couple hundred million.

The prize was the fourth largest Powerball jackpot in history and the eighth largest among U.S. jackpot games, according to the Oregon Lottery.

The largest U.S. lottery jackpot won was \$2.04 billion in California in 2022.

New York City to wind down deal with embattled medical company tasked with housing migrants

By ANTHONY IZAGUIRRE Associated Press

ALBANY, N.Y. (AP) — New York City will move to end its contract with a medical services company hired to house and care for a recent influx of international migrants, following scrutiny over the firm's costly deal with the city and the quality of its humanitarian services.

Mayor Eric Adams' office on Tuesday said the city would not renew its contract with DocGo before it expires on May 5 and will instead search for a new housing provider for migrants.

DocGo, which previously worked with the city to provide COVID-19 testing, was awarded a \$432 million no-bid emergency contract last year to help the city manage a massive new population of migrants.

The arrangement drew questions from city Comptroller Brad Lander, who in reviewing the contract determined there wasn't enough detail to justify the cost and that it wasn't clear how the company had the expertise to transport, house and feed thousands of migrants.

News reports from the New York Times and Albany Times Union also detailed alleged mistreatment of migrants under the company's care, including issues with health care and food waste, among other things. Its chief executive officer resigned after he admitted to lying about his educational record.

DocGo currently provides care for 3,600 migrants in New York, half in the metro area and half upstate, officials said.

The company will continue to provide services for migrants who were relocated upstate until a new vendor is picked, with the city aiming to have a new contractor by the end of the year. In New York City, officials will temporarily use an existing contract with the company Garner Environmental Services to care

for migrants.

"This will ultimately allow the city to save more money and will allow others, including non-profits and internationally-recognized resettlement providers, to apply to do this critical work, and ensures we are using city funds efficiently and effectively," Camille Joseph Varlack, chief of staff for the mayor, said in a statement.

The city has other ongoing contracts with DocGo and will continue to work with the company in those deals.

In a statement, a DocGo spokesperson said the company is "immensely proud of the exceptional work that our team has accomplished and continues to perform in aiding the City's response to this unprecedented crisis."

New York has struggled to handle an influx of international migrants who have arrived in the city since 2022, with more than 187,000 people coming through its intake system seeking shelter.

Politico first reported the news of the city declining to renew its contract with DocGo.

GOP's Marjorie Taylor Greene delivers fresh threats of ousting Speaker Johnson in scathing rebuke

By LISA MASCARO AP Congressional Correspondent

WASHINGTON (AP) — Hard-right Rep. Marjorie Taylor Greene escalated her criticism Tuesday of House Speaker Mike Johnson, blistering his leadership in a lengthy letter to colleagues and renewing threats of a snap vote that could remove him from office.

As lawmakers returned to work from a two-week spring recess, the fresh onslaught from the Georgia congresswoman dragged the still-new speaker back into the Republican chaos that has defined GOP House control and threatens to grind work to a halt. Johnson may very well be unable to execute the basics of his job.

"Today, I sent a letter to my colleagues explaining exactly why I filed a motion to vacate against Speaker Johnson," Greene said on social media about the procedural tool that could force the quick vote.

Greene in stark terms warned Johnson not to reach across the aisle to Democrats for votes he would need to pass pending legislation that hard-right Republicans oppose, particularly aid to Ukraine. That aid package as well as other agenda items are in grave doubt.

"I will not tolerate this type of Republican leadership," wrote Greene, a top ally of presumptive presidential nominee Donald Trump, in the five-page letter first reported by The New York Times.

The standoff threatens to mire the House in another standstill, saddling the Republican majority with a do-nothing label after months of turmoil that has sent some seasoned lawmakers heading for the exits.

It comes during what is typically a springtime legislative push in Congress to notch a few priorities before lawmakers turn their attention toward the November election campaigns.

For Johnson, who took the helm just six months ago after the House ousted Kevin McCarthy from the speaker's post, it is political payback for his efforts to keep government running by compromising with Democrats on must-past legislation to fund federal operations and prevent a shutdown.

Partnership with Democrats is about the only way Johnson can pass any bills in the face of a thin majority and staunch resistance from his right flank. He can lose barely more than a single Republican from his ranks on most votes.

Greene, who had filed the motion to vacate the speaker before lawmakers left for spring break in March, has stopped short of saying she would call it up for the vote, letting the threat of removal hang over the speaker.

"I don't have a red line or a trigger or a date or a deadline," Greene said later Tuesday evening as lawmakers returned to the Capitol.

"This is a process," she said. "I don't want it to be horribly painful or like it was the last time. And I want us to do the right thing and actually elect a Republican speaker that's ready to be speaker."

Other Republicans, even some of the eight who voted to oust McCarthy, the California Republican who

has since retired from Congress, have cooled on Greene's effort, trying to prevent another spectacle. McCarthy's ouster left the House essentially shuttered for almost a month last fall as Republicans argued over a new leader.

And Democrats led by Rep. Hakeem Jeffries of New York have signaled they may lend their votes to Johnson, a courtesy they did not extend to McCarthy, which could save the Louisiana Republican's job in a bipartisan effort to keep the House open and functioning.

A leader of the effort to oust McCarthy, Rep. Matt Gaetz, R-Fla., said while he is frustrated by Johnson's leadership, "I still don't want to hand the House of Representatives over to Hakeem Jeffries."

Rep. Matt Rosendale, R-Mont., who also voted against McCarthy, said he doesn't want to go through that process again. "I just don't see what we could gain," he said.

But Greene, during a rousing town hall late Monday in her home district in Georgia and in the scathing letter delivered Tuesday as lawmakers returned to work, left clear the threat that persists if Johnson seeks any partnership with Democrats.

In the letter, she outlined the promises she said Johnson made to Republicans during the fight to become speaker, and listed ways she said he had broken them — for example, by passing the spending bills needed to fund the government with existing policies many Republicans oppose, or by failing to include legislation with Republican proposals for securing the U.S.-Mexico border.

"This has been a complete and total surrender to, if not complete and total lockstep with, the Democrats' agenda that has angered our Republican base so much and given them very little reason to vote for a Republican House majority," she wrote.

At the Capitol, she said it is Johnson who has thrown the House into "chaos" by partnering with Democrats.

Arizona can enforce an 1864 law criminalizing nearly all abortions, court says

By JACQUES BILLEAUD and ANITA SNOW Associated Press

PHOENIX (AP) — Arizona will soon join 14 other states that have banned abortion at all stages of pregnancy after a state Supreme Court ruling Tuesday found that officials may enforce an 1864 law criminalizing all abortions except when a woman's life is at stake.

The court said enforcement won't begin for at least two weeks. However, it could be up to two months, based on an agreement reached in a related case in Arizona, according to state Attorney General Kris Mayes and Planned Parenthood, the plaintiffs in the current case.

The law provides no exceptions for rape or incest.

Under a near-total ban, the number of abortions in the state is expected to drop from about 1,100 monthly — as estimated by a survey for the Society of Family Planning — to almost zero. The forecast is based on what has happened in other states that ban abortion at all stages of pregnancy.

Arizona Sen. Eva Burch, who has had an abortion since announcing on the Senate floor last month that she was seeking one because her pregnancy wasn't viable, criticized GOP lawmakers who back the ban.

"The fight for reproductive rights is not over in Arizona," she said, referring to a statewide petition campaign to put the issue on the ballot this fall. "This moment must not slow us down."

According to AP VoteCast, 6 out of 10 Arizona voters in the 2022 midterm elections said they would favor guaranteeing access to legal abortion nationwide.

Planned Parenthood officials vowed to continue providing abortions for the short time they are still legal and said they will reinforce networks that help women travel out of state to places like New Mexico and California to access abortion.

"Even with today's ruling, Planned Parenthood Arizona will continue to provide abortion through 15 weeks for a very short period of time," said Angela Florez, president of the organization's Arizona chapter.

Arizona State University student Katarina White welcomed the ruling.

"I was overcome by joy and happy to know that all these babies that could potentially be aborted aren't going to be aborted," the Tempe resident said. "It just made me really proud to be an Arizonan."

Brittany Crawford, a mother of three who owns a hair salon in Phoenix, said the high court's ruling could have far-reaching consequences.

"You are going to have a lot of desperate girls doing whatever they can to get rid of their babies," Crawford said. "Some could end up dead."

She herself had an abortion at 18, right out of high school, and said she suffered extreme emotional trauma.

"I still think I should have the right to decide whether I do have a child, or whether I don't have a child," she said.

The Center for Arizona Policy, a longtime backer of anti-abortion proposals before the Legislature, said the state's highest court reached the appropriate conclusion.

"Today's outcome acknowledges the sanctity of all human life and spares women the physical and emotional harms of abortion," the group said in a statement.

Nearly every state ban on abortions has been challenged with a lawsuit. Courts have blocked enforcing some restrictions, including prohibitions throughout pregnancy in Utah and Wyoming.

The Arizona ruling suggests doctors can be prosecuted for performing the procedure, and the 1864 law carries a sentence of two to five years in prison for doctors or anyone else who assists in an abortion.

"In light of this Opinion, physicians are now on notice that all abortions, except those necessary to save a woman's life, are illegal," the Arizona Supreme Court said in its decision, adding that additional criminal and regulatory sanctions may apply to abortions performed after 15 weeks.

Jill Gibson, chief medical officer at Planned Parenthood Arizona, said that means legal considerations are now likely to weigh heavily on any decision about abortion.

"It just creates this environment that makes it really impossible for a physician to understand her risk in taking care of her patients," Gibson said. "Rather than, you know, making clinical decisions based on what my patients are telling me, I will be phoning my lawyers for guidance on what I can do."

Planned Parenthood said it will continue to offer abortion services up to 15 weeks for at least two more months, in line with an agreement in the related case not to immediately enforce a near-total ban if upheld by the Arizona Supreme Court.

Since the U.S. Supreme Court overturned *Roe v. Wade* in 2022, most Republican-controlled states have started enforcing new bans or restrictions, and most Democratic-dominated ones have sought to protect abortion access.

Arizona Attorney General Mark Brnovich, a Republican, persuaded a state judge in Tucson to lift a restriction on enforcing the state's 1864 law. Mayes, Brnovich's Democratic successor, had urged the state's high court to hold the line against it.

"Today's decision to reimpose a law from a time when Arizona wasn't a state, the Civil War was raging, and women couldn't even vote will go down in history as a stain on our state," Mayes said Tuesday.

Former Arizona Gov. Doug Ducey, a Republican who signed the state's current law restricting abortion after 15 weeks, posted on the social platform X saying that the state Supreme Court's ruling was not the outcome he would have wanted.

"I signed the 15-week law as governor because it is thoughtful policy, and an approach to this very sensitive issue that Arizonans can actually agree on," he said.

John Calipari departs Kentucky after 15 years, saying the program 'needs to hear another voice'

By GARY B. GRAVES AP Sports Writer

LEXINGTON, Ky. (AP) — There were too many people for John Calipari to thank by name, and too many moments to single out from one of the most fulfilling chapters of his career.

He used this moment to say goodbye.

Calipari stepped down as Kentucky's men's basketball coach after 15 years on Tuesday, saying that the "program probably needs to hear another voice" amid reports that he's closing in on a deal with Arkansas

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to take over that Southeastern Conference program.

Calipari posted a video on X, formerly known as Twitter, in which he said that after talking with his wife, Ellen, he decided a change was needed. He added, "We've loved it here, but we think it's time for us to step away and step away completely from the program."

Calipari leaves a Wildcats program he guided to the 2012 NCAA championship among four Final Four appearances. He went 410-123 in 15 seasons. The past few seasons have been disappointing by Kentucky standards, with a 1-3 mark in its last three NCAA Tournament trips, including first-round losses to No. 14 seed Oakland last month and No. 15 seed Saint Peter's two years ago.

The Wildcats' most recent loss set off immediate calls to fire Calipari before athletic director Mitch Barnhart said days later that Calipari would return next season. Firing Calipari would've triggered a buyout of more than \$33 million under the terms of a 10-year, so-called lifetime contract signed in 2019.

Barnhart said in a statement that Kentucky would work diligently to hire "a proven, highly dedicated coach who embraces the importance of this program to our fans and the state of Kentucky."

The AD added: "We're appreciative of John Calipari leading our program for the last 15 years, adding to the legacy of championship success at Kentucky. We're grateful to John for his many contributions to the university, and our state, both on and off the court."

The list of possible candidates includes Baylor's Scott Drew, who guided the Bears to a national title in the 2020-21 COVID-19 season. UConn's Dan Hurley, who guided the Huskies to their second consecutive NCAA championship, also been mentioned along with Chicago Bulls coach Billy Donovan, a former Kentucky assistant whose Florida squads were the NCAA's last back-to-back champs before UConn.

Donovan said before Chicago hosted the New York Knicks on Tuesday night that he has not been contacted by Kentucky, and he reiterated his commitment to the Bulls and their quest for a playoff berth.

"A lot of this stuff I think sometimes turns out to be speculation," he said. "But I have not had any contact with anybody and my commitment's here."

Calipari didn't specifically mention the Arkansas opening he has been linked to since multiple reports surfaced Sunday night about negotiations with the school. The Hall of Famer simply said, "There have been opportunities that have been presented to us, so we're discussing them as a family."

However, Calipari's announcement certainly clears the way for him to go to the SEC rival he got very familiar with while coaching the Wildcats. The 65-year-old would replace Eric Musselman, who left after four seasons to become the coach at Southern California.

The Board of Trustees of the University of Arkansas has scheduled a special meeting Wednesday morning to consider "a salary in excess of line item maximum" for its Fayetteville campus.

Calipari established a legacy in Lexington upon arriving in 2009 with an impressive annual influx of stellar freshmen who came to be known as "one-and-dones" for playing one season before entering the NBA draft.

One of his top scorers from this year's 23-10 squad, dynamic guard Rob Dillingham, announced on ESPN Tuesday that he would enter the NBA draft and forgo his remaining college eligibility. He is projected as a top-five selection on several draft sites.

Kentucky thrived with Calipari's approach in the first half of his tenure as the Wildcats regained their blueblood status and he developed the newcomers into draft picks. The first-round total is 35 alone among 47 overall selections, with No. 1 overall choices in John Wall (2010), Anthony Davis (2012) and Karl-Anthony Towns (2015). Opening-day NBA rosters featured 26 Kentucky players, including two-way and inactive.

Pro teams' interest in Kentucky players spawned preseason combines — sometimes televised — featuring scouts from all 32 NBA clubs. While the youth movement helped Kentucky win games and fill 20,500-seat Rupp Arena, some fans and media argued that Calipari became too focused on sending players to the next level instead of winning championships.

Meanwhile, the youngsters' inexperience began to show in losses to more seasoned opponents, some stocked with veterans through the transfer portal. Calipari himself used the portal to fill roster voids — including 2022 consensus national player of the year Oscar Tshiebwe — and continued winning. But not enough to please a demanding fan base that expects nothing less than a deep tournament run toward a

ninth national championship.

The advent of name, image and likeness (NIL) endorsement opportunities for college athletes has added another challenge, which Calipari addressed with last month's launch of the La Familia fundraising collective focused solely on basketball. It has raised just over \$50,000 with a goal of \$1 million.

Sitting on a couch in his Lexington home, Calipari thanked players and their families in his video for the privilege of coaching them. He also thanked staff, supporters and others for everything achieved and for "lifelong" friendships built during his tenure.

"Hopefully, it was an experience with your kids that you can look at and say, 'Man, this is something that we'll remember the rest of our lives together,'" Calipari said. "Those memories and what we were able to do together is what this is all about.

"Again, it's been a dream, what we've been able to do for 15 years. Time for another voice. And you know I'm always going to be a fan. Thank you."

Appeals court rejects Donald Trump's latest attempt to delay April 15 hush money criminal trial

By JENNIFER PELTZ and MICHAEL R. SISAK Associated Press

NEW YORK (AP) — A New York appeals court judge Tuesday rejected Donald Trump's latest attempt to delay his hush money criminal trial, taking just 12 minutes to swat aside an argument that it should be postponed while the former president fights a gag order.

Justice Cynthia Kern's ruling was the second time in as many days that the state's mid-level appeals court refused to postpone the trial, set to begin next week, further narrowing any plausible path to the delay that Trump's legal team has repeatedly sought.

Trump's lawyers wanted the trial delayed until a full panel of appellate court judges could hear arguments on lifting or modifying a gag order that bans him from making public statements about jurors, witnesses and others connected to the hush-money case.

They argue the gag order is an unconstitutional curb on the presumptive Republican nominee's free speech rights while he's campaigning for president and fighting criminal charges.

"The First Amendment harms arising from this gag order right now are irreparable," Trump lawyer Emil Bove said at an emergency hearing Tuesday in the state's mid-level appeals court.

Bove argued that Trump shouldn't be muzzled while critics, including his former lawyer and fixer Michael Cohen and porn actor Stormy Daniels, routinely assail him. Both are key prosecution witnesses.

Bove also argued that the order unconstitutionally restricts Trump's critiques of the case — and, with them, his ability to speak to the voting public and its right to hear from him.

Steven Wu, the appellate chief for the Manhattan district attorney's office, countered that there is a "public interest in protecting the integrity of the trial."

"What we are talking about here is the defendant's uncontested history of making inflammatory, denigrating" comments about people involved in the case, Wu said. "This is not political debate. These are insults."

Wu said prosecutors already have had trouble getting some witnesses to testify "because they know what their names in the press may lead to." Wu didn't identify the witnesses but noted they included people who would testify about record-keeping practices.

The gag order still affords Trump "free rein to talk about a host of issues," noting that he can comment on Judge Juan M. Merchan and District Attorney Alvin Bragg and "raise political arguments as he sees fit." Trump has repeatedly lambasted Bragg, a Democrat, and the judge.

Barring further court action, jury selection will begin on April 15.

Merchan issued the gag order last month at prosecutors' urging, then expanded it last week to prohibit comments about his own family after Trump lashed out on social media at the judge's daughter, a Democratic political consultant, and made what the court system said were false claims about her.

Tuesday was the second of back-to-back days for Trump's lawyers in the appeals court. Associate Justice Lizbeth González on Monday rejected their request to delay the trial while Trump seeks to move his case

out of heavily Democratic Manhattan.

Trump's lawyers framed their gag order appeal as a lawsuit against Merchan. In New York, judges can be sued to challenge some decisions under a state law known as Article 78.

Trump has used the tactic before, including against the judge in his recent New York civil fraud trial in an unsuccessful last-minute bid to delay that case last fall and again when that judge imposed a gag order barring trial participants from commenting publicly on court staffers. That order came after Trump smeared the judge's principal law clerk in a social media post.

A sole appeals judge lifted the civil trial gag order, but an appellate panel restored it two weeks later.

Trump's hush-money criminal case involves allegations that he falsified his company's records to hide the nature of payments to Cohen, who helped him bury negative stories during his 2016 campaign. Cohen's activities included paying 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 has made numerous attempts to get the trial postponed.

Last week, as Merchan swatted away various requests to delay the trial, Trump renewed his request for the judge to step aside from the case. The judge rejected a similar request last August.

Trump's lawyers allege the judge is biased against him and has a conflict of interest because of his daughter Loren's work as president of Authentic Campaigns, a firm with clients that have included President Joe Biden and other Democrats. Trump's attorneys complained the expanded gag order was shielding the Merchans "from legitimate public criticism."

Merchan had long resisted imposing a gag order. At Trump's arraignment in April 2023, he admonished Trump not to make statements that could incite violence or jeopardize safety, but stopped short of muzzling him. At a subsequent hearing, Merchan noted Trump's "special" status as a former president and current candidate and said he was "bending over backwards" to ensure Trump has every opportunity "to speak in furtherance of his candidacy."

Merchan became increasingly wary of Trump's rhetoric disrupting the historic trial as it grew near. In issuing the gag order, he said his obligation to ensuring the integrity of the proceedings outweighed First Amendment concerns.

Trump reacted on social media that the gag order was "illegal, un-American, unConstitutional" and said Merchan was "wrongfully attempting to deprive me of my First Amendment Right to speak out against the Weaponization of Law Enforcement" by Democratic rivals.

Trump suggested without evidence that Merchan's decision-making was influenced by his daughter's professional interests and made a claim, later repudiated by court officials, that Loren Merchan had posted a social media photo showing Trump behind bars.

After the outburst, Merchan expanded the gag order April 1 to prohibit Trump from making statements about the judge's family or Bragg's family.

"They can talk about me but I can't talk about them???" Trump reacted on his Truth Social platform.

Idaho man faces federal terrorism charge. Prosecutors say he planned a church attack to support IS

By REBECCA BOONE and MEAD GRUVER Associated Press

BOISE, Idaho (AP) — An 18-year-old man planned to attack churches in a northern Idaho city using a metal pipe, butane fuel, a machete and, if he could get them, his father's guns, according to federal prosecutors who charged him with attempting to provide material support to the Islamic State group.

Authorities said Alexander Scott Mercurio adopted the Muslim faith against his Christian parents' wishes and was in contact with FBI informants posing as Islamic State group supporters.

Mercurio was arrested Saturday, the day before investigators believe he planned to carry out the at-

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tack. Phone messages left for a relative and for his defense attorneys at the Federal Defenders of Eastern Washington & Idaho were not immediately returned Tuesday. Mercurio did not immediately respond to an email through a jail inmate email system.

Mercurio told one informant he intended to incapacitate his father with the pipe, handcuff him and steal his guns and a car to carry out the attack in Coeur d'Alene, according to an FBI agent's sworn statement in the case unsealed Monday in U.S. District Court.

The guns included rifles, handguns and ammunition his father kept in a locked closet, but Mercurio still planned to attack with the pipe, fire and knives if he couldn't get the firearms, alleged the sworn statement by FBI task force officer John Taylor II.

If he could get the key and access the closet, Mercurio said in an audio recording he gave the informant, "everything will be so much easier and better and I will achieve better things," according to the statement.

The recording was to accompany a photo the informant took of Mercurio in front of the IS flag holding up a knife and his index finger in a gesture commonly used by the group, the statement alleged.

After attacking the church, Mercurio told the informant he planned to attack others in town — as many as 21 — before being killed in an act of martyrdom, according to the statement.

Mercurio talked with confidential informants over a two-year span and at one point tried to build an explosive vest to wear during the attacks, the statement alleged.

Mercurio told a confidential informant that he first connected with IS during the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, when schools were closed, Taylor said, and investigators later found several files on his school-issued laptop detailing IS's extremist ideology. Mercurio's parents disapproved of his beliefs, he allegedly told a confidential informant posing as an IS supporter, and Mercurio eventually began to worry that he was a hypocrite for not yet carrying out an attack, according to the statement.

"I've stopped asking and praying for martyrdom because I don't feel like I want to fight and die for the sake of Allah, I just want to die and have all my problems go away," he wrote in a message to the informant, according to the statement.

On March 21, Mercurio sent a direct message to the informant again, saying he was restless, frustrated and wondered how long he could keep living "in such a humiliated and shameful state," the statement alleged.

"I have motivation for nothing but fighting ... like some time of insatiable bloodlust for the life juice of these idolators; a craving for mayhem and murder to terrorize those around me. I need some better weapons than knives," the direct message said, according to the statement.

Law enforcement moved to arrest Mercurio after he sent an audio file pledging his allegiance to the IS, the statement alleged.

"Thanks to the investigative efforts of the FBI, the defendant was taken into custody before he could act, and he is now charged with attempting to support ISIS's mission of terror and violence," Attorney General Merrick Garland wrote in a press release. "The Justice Department will continue to relentlessly pursue, disrupt, and hold accountable those who would commit acts of terrorism against the people and interests of the United States."

If convicted, Mercurio could be sentenced to up to 20 years in prison. Mercurio has not yet had an opportunity to enter a plea. He is being held in a northern Idaho jail while he awaits his first court appearance, scheduled for late Wednesday morning.

The Islamic State group took control of a large swath of territory in Syria and Iraq in 2014 and had been largely defeated on the battlefield by 2018. However, it maintains desert hideouts in both countries and its regional affiliates operate in Afghanistan, West Africa and the Far East. IS claimed responsibility for last month's Moscow concert hall attack that killed 145 people, the most deadly attack in Russia in years.

Michigan school shooter's parents sentenced to 10 years in prison for not stopping a 'runaway train'

By ED WHITE Associated Press

PONTIAC, Mich. (AP) — The first parents convicted in a U.S. mass school shooting were sentenced to at least 10 years in prison Tuesday as a Michigan judge lamented missed opportunities that could have prevented their teenage son from possessing a gun and killing four students in 2021.

"These convictions are not about poor parenting," Oakland County Judge Cheryl Matthews said. "These convictions confirm repeated acts, or lack of acts, that could have halted an oncoming runaway train."

The hearing in a crowded, tense courtroom was the climax of an extraordinary effort to make others besides the 15-year-old attacker criminally responsible for a school shooting.

Jennifer and James Crumbley did not know Ethan Crumbley had a handgun — he called it his "beauty" — in a backpack when he was dropped off at Oxford High School. But prosecutors convinced jurors the parents still played a disastrous role in the violence.

The Crumbleys were accused of not securing the newly purchased gun at home and acting indifferently to signs of their son's deteriorating mental health, especially when confronted with a chilling classroom drawing earlier that same day.

The Crumbleys earlier this year were convicted of involuntary manslaughter.

"The blood of our children is on your hands, too," Craig Shilling told the couple, wearing a hoodie with the image of son Justin Shilling on his chest.

Nicole Beausoleil, the mother of shooting victim Madisyn Baldwin, said the Crumbleys had failed at parenting.

"While you were purchasing a gun for your son and leaving it unlocked," Beausoleil said, "I was helping her finish her college essays."

Prosecutor Karen McDonald asked the judge to stretch beyond the sentencing guidelines and order a minimum 10-year prison sentence.

Defense attorneys sought to keep the Crumbleys out of prison, noting they have already spent nearly 2 1/2 years in jail, unable to afford a \$500,000 bond after their arrest.

They will get credit for that jail time and become eligible for parole after serving 10 years in custody. If release from prison is denied, they could be held for up to 15 years.

Five deputies in the suburban Detroit courtroom stood closely over the couple, and more lined the walls. James Crumbley, 47, had been recorded in jail making threats toward McDonald.

Before being sentenced, he stood and insisted he did not know his son was deeply troubled.

"My heart is really broken for everybody involved. ... I have cried for you and the loss of your children more times than I can count," he said.

The couple had separate trials in Oakland County court, 40 miles (64 kilometers) north of Detroit. Jurors saw the teen's violent drawing on his school assignment and heard testimony about the crucial hours before the attack.

Ethan Crumbley sketched images of a gun, a bullet and a wounded man on a math paper, accompanied by despondent phrases: "The thoughts won't stop. Help me. Blood everywhere. My life is useless."

Ethan Crumbley had told a counselor he was sad — a grandmother had died and his only friend suddenly had moved away — but said the drawing only reflected his interest in creating video games.

His parents were called to a hasty meeting at school that lasted less than 15 minutes. They did not mention that the gun resembled one James Crumbley had purchased just four days earlier, a Sig Sauer 9 mm.

Mother and son had fired 50 rounds at a shooting range and took 50 more home. Jennifer Crumbley described the gun on social media as an early Christmas gift.

School staff did not demand that the teen go home during the meeting but were surprised when the Crumbleys did not volunteer it. Instead, they left with a list of mental health providers and said they were returning to work.

Later that day, on Nov. 30, 2021, their son pulled a handgun from his backpack and began shooting,

killing Shilling, Baldwin, Tate Myre and Hana St. Juliana, and wounding seven other people. No one had checked the bag.

Ethan Crumbley, now 17, is serving a life sentence for murder and other crimes.

The parents ignored "things that would make a reasonable person feel the hair on the back of their neck stand up," the judge said. "Opportunity knocked over and over again — louder and louder — and was ignored. No one answered."

Jennifer Crumbley, 46, began her remarks by expressing "deepest sorrow" about the shooting. She also said her comment at her trial about looking back and not doing anything differently was "completely misunderstood."

"My son did seem so normal. I didn't have a reason to do anything different," Jennifer Crumbley said.

She blamed the school for not giving her the "bigger picture" about Ethan Crumbley: sleeping in class, watching a video of a mass shooting, writing negative thoughts about his family.

"The prosecution has tried to mold us into the type of parents society wants to believe are so horrible only a school or mass shooter could be bred from," Jennifer Crumbley said. "We were good parents. We were the average family."

During the trials, there was no testimony from specialists about Ethan Crumbley's mental health. But the judge, over defense objections, allowed the jury to see excerpts from his journal.

"I have zero help for my mental problems and it's causing me to shoot up the ... school," he wrote. "I want help but my parents don't listen to me so I can't get any help."

Relatives of the victims were not impressed by the Crumbleys' courtroom comments. Beausoleil said they were portraying themselves as victims.

"The remorse that they were showing has nothing to do with taking accountability for their actions," Steve St. Juliana, the father of Hana, said outside court. "I'm sure they were sad people lost their lives. I'm sure they're sad their son is in jail, sad they're in jail. ... What's important is for them to recognize that they made mistakes."

The judge will decide later whether the Crumbleys will be allowed to have contact with their son while the three are in separate state prisons, though McDonald, the prosecutor, said the Corrections Department typically prohibits communication between co-defendants.

Defense lawyers said the Crumbleys have a constitutional right to be a family. But McDonald wondered about the parents of the victims.

"The parents in that courtroom have been deprived of their constitutional right to be parents, and that matters," she told reporters.

Women's NCAA title game outdraws the men's championship with an average of 18.9 million viewers

By JOE REEDY AP Sports Writer

The women's NCAA championship game drew a bigger television audience than the men's title game for the first time, with an average of 18.9 million viewers watching undefeated South Carolina beat Iowa and superstar Caitlin Clark, according to ratings released Tuesday.

The Sunday afternoon game on ABC and ESPN outdrew Monday's men's final between UConn and Purdue by four million. The Huskies' 75-60 victory averaged 14.82 million on TBS and TNT.

The audience for the women's game — in which the Gamecocks won their fourth national title and denied Clark's Hawkeyes their first — peaked at 24.1 million during the final 15 minutes.

"You're seeing the growth in many places: attendance records, viewership and social media engagement surrounding March Madness," UCLA coach Cori Close said. "I don't think you can attribute it just to Iowa, though. A rising tide does lift all boats. But I think all those boats have been on many different waterways. The product is really good, and the increase of exposure is getting rewarded."

It was the second most-watched non-Olympic women's sporting event on U.S. television, trailing only the 2015 Women's World Cup final between the United States and Japan, which averaged 25.4 million on

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Fox. That also was on a Sunday and took place in prime time on the East Coast.

The record for the most-watched women's basketball game still belongs to the gold medal game of the 1996 Atlanta Olympics between the United States and Brazil, which averaged 19.5 million. South Carolina coach Dawn Staley played for that U.S. team.

Nielsen's numbers include an estimate of the number of people who watched outside their homes, which wasn't measured before 2020. Due to cord-cutting, the in-home audience has steadily declined annually.

The audience for the national title game was up 90% over last year when Clark and Iowa fell to LSU. That also was the first time since 1995 that the championship was on network television.

The audience was 289% bigger than the viewership for the Gamecocks' title two years ago, when they beat UConn on ESPN.

"I had not seen it much (women's basketball) before this year. I didn't make it appointment television. This year, it was appointment television," said former CBS Sports president Neal Pilson, who now runs a sports television consulting company. "That's what happened when you see those numbers. There were a lot of people making notes to sit down and watch the games."

During the Final Four, Clark said the audience growth was benefiting all of women's sports, not just basketball.

"I think you see it across the board, whether it's softball, whether it's gymnastics, volleyball. People want to watch. It's just when they're given the opportunity, the research and the facts show that people love it," she said.

Clark and Iowa have the three biggest audiences for women's college basketball. The Hawkeyes' victory over UConn on Friday night averaged 14.2 million, and their April 1 victory over LSU in the Elite Eight drew 12.3 million.

Iowa's six NCAA Tournament games on ESPN and ABC averaged 10.07 million.

However, as Clark heads to the WNBA, many wonder if the college game can continue to attract large audiences.

Clark was the marquee player of March Madness, but there was an impressive group of freshmen, headlined by Southern California's JuJu Watkins, Notre Dame's Hannah Hidalgo and Texas' Madison Booker. Watkins set the NCAA record for points by a freshman with 920.

"There are also some great freshmen coming into the game next year who I think are going to make a tremendous impact. As long as we keep telling the story, there's still room to grow the game," Close said.

It also helped that the women's game got increased exposure during the regular season on network television.

Fox carried 14 women's games this season, including three in prime time, NBC two, and CBS had the Big Ten Tournament championship. ABC had five regular-season games and nine during the NCAA Tournament.

Fox has announced the Women's Champions Classic for next season on Dec. 7. The prime-time double-header will feature UConn, Iowa, Louisville and Tennessee.

Pilson thinks this year's tournament has paved the way for further growth. Just maybe not at the level seen with Clark's following.

"I wouldn't call it a blip because I think the women's game is going to definitely improve from ratings and exposure here on out," he said. "The broadcast and top cable sports channels can still deliver an audience. Midseason coverage tends to focus on the teams and personalities to make the public aware of the athletes. But the game has improved over the last five years. It has become faster and more competitive. I also think they have learned from the NBA and NFL on how to promote its stars."

Most audiences during March Madness also tuned in before and after Iowa's games.

UConn's 80-73 win over Southern California in the Elite Eight on April 1, which tipped off after the Iowa game, averaged 6.7 million. During the Sweet 16 on March 30, LSU's victory over UCLA, which preceded the Iowa game, averaged 3.8 million.

"The great thing about what's happened the last two years is there are people who only watch out for Caitlin Clark, but there are also people who watch for Caitlin Clark and became interested in the other

games," said Jon Lewis, who runs the Sports Media Watch site. "It's not like the Caitlin Clark games did amazingly well and every other game was at the same level that it was two years ago. They were also tuning in on days when Caitlin Clark didn't play, which is really notable. Now, none of those numbers are at the level of what we saw for the Iowa games, but they are a lot better than what the tournament was getting before."

The championship game's return to network television has also benefited the women's game. UConn's victory over Tennessee in 1995 averaged 7.44 million on CBS. Despite ESPN's work raising the profile of the tournament since it acquired the rights in 1996, the closest the network got to that number for the final was in 2002, when 5.68 million watched UConn beat Oklahoma.

"I think our game has been good for a long time and I think people have just missed the boat. Now we've finally had the exposure, and people have understood, 'Wow, I haven't watched women's basketball for a long time, I've missed something.' I don't think they're going to want to miss anymore," Iowa coach Lisa Bluder said during the Final Four. "Caitlin has certainly been a tremendous star for our game, but there are so many stars in our game. So we're just going to latch onto that next one next year."

Former assistant principal charged with child neglect in case of 6-year-old boy who shot teacher

By BEN FINLEY and DENISE LAVOIE Associated Press

NEWPORT NEWS, Va. (AP) — A former assistant principal at a Virginia elementary school has been charged with felony child neglect more than a year after a 6-year-old boy brought a gun to class and shot his first-grade teacher.

A special grand jury in Newport News found that Ebony Parker showed a reckless disregard for the lives of Richneck Elementary School students on Jan. 6, 2023, according to indictments unsealed Tuesday.

Parker and other school officials already face a \$40 million negligence lawsuit from the teacher who was shot, Abby Zwerner. She accuses Parker and others of ignoring multiple warnings the boy had a gun and was in a "violent mood" the day of the shooting.

Criminal charges against school officials following a school shootings are quite rare, experts say. Parker, 39, faces eight felony counts, each of which is punishable by up to five years in prison.

The Associated Press left a message seeking comment Tuesday with Parker's attorney, Curtis Rogers.

Court documents filed Tuesday reveal little about the criminal case against Parker, listing only the counts and a description of the felony charge. It alleges that Parker "did commit a willful act or omission in the care of such students, in a manner so gross, wanton and culpable as to show a reckless disregard for human life."

Newport News police have said the student who shot Zwerner retrieved his mother's handgun from atop a dresser at home and brought the weapon to school concealed in a backpack.

Zwerner's lawsuit describes a series of warnings that school employees gave administrators before the shooting. The lawsuit said those warnings began with Zwerner telling Parker that the boy "was in a violent mood," had threatened to beat up a kindergartener and stared down a security officer in the lunchroom.

The lawsuit alleges that Parker "had no response, refusing even to look up" when Zwerner expressed her concerns.

When concerns were raised that the child may have transferred the gun from his backpack to his pocket, Parker said his "pockets were too small to hold a handgun and did nothing," the lawsuit states.

A guidance counselor also asked Parker for permission to search the boy, but Parker forbade him, "and stated that John Doe's mother would be arriving soon to pick him up," the lawsuit stated.

Zwerner was sitting at a reading table in front of the class when the boy fired the gun, police said. The bullet struck Zwerner's hand and then her chest, collapsing one of her lungs. She spent nearly two weeks in the hospital and has endured multiple surgeries as well as ongoing emotional trauma, according to her lawsuit.

Parker and the lawsuit's other defendants, which include a former superintendent and the Newport News

school board, have tried to block Zwerner's lawsuit.

They've argued that Zwerner's injuries fall under Virginia's workers' compensation law. Their arguments have been unsuccessful so far in blocking the litigation. A trial date for Zwerner's lawsuit is slated for January.

Prosecutors had said a year ago that they were investigating whether the "actions or omissions" of any school employees could lead to criminal charges.

Howard Gwynn, the commonwealth's attorney in Newport News, said in April 2023 that he had petitioned a special grand jury to probe if any "security failures" contributed to the shooting. Gwynn wrote that an investigation could also lead to recommendations "in the hopes that such a situation never occurs again."

It is not the first school shooting to spark a criminal investigation into school officials. For instance, a former school resource officer was acquitted of all charges last year after he was accused of hiding during the Parkland school massacre in 2018.

Chuck Vergon, a professor of educational law and policy at the University of Michigan-Flint, told The AP last year that it is rare for a teacher or school official to be charged in a school shooting because allegations of criminal negligence can be difficult to prove.

More often, he said, those impacted by school shootings seek to hold school officials liable in civil court.

House to delay sending Mayorkas impeachment articles to Senate

By STEPHEN GROVES and LISA MASCARO Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Speaker Mike Johnson will delay sending the House's articles of impeachment against Homeland Security Secretary Alejandro Mayorkas to the Senate this week as previously planned after Republican senators requested more time Tuesday to build support for holding a full trial.

The sudden change of plans cast fresh doubts on the proceedings, the historic first impeachment of a Cabinet secretary in roughly 150 years. Seeking to rebuke the Biden administration's handling of the southern border, House Republicans impeached Mayorkas in February but delayed sending the articles while they finished work on government funding legislation.

Johnson had planned to send the impeachment charges to the Senate on Wednesday evening. But as it became clear that Democrats, who hold majority control of the chamber, had the votes to quickly dismiss them, Senate Republicans requested that Johnson delay until next week. They hoped the tactic would prolong the process.

While Republicans argued Tuesday that forgoing a full Senate trial would break precedent, most Senate Republicans voted to do just that when Donald Trump, the former president, was impeached a second time on charges he incited an insurrection in the Jan. 6, 2021 attack on the Capitol. Their effort to halt the proceedings failed. Trump was ultimately acquitted in the Senate trial.

"Our members want to have an opportunity not only to debate but also to have some votes on issues they want to raise," said South Dakota Sen. John Thune, the second-ranking Republican Senate leader. Under procedural rules, senators are required to convene as jurors the day after the articles of impeachment are transmitted for a trial.

"There is no reason whatsoever for the Senate to abdicate its responsibility to hold an impeachment trial," Johnson's spokesman, Taylor Haulsee, said in a statement announcing the delay.

Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer, D-N.Y., who has decried the impeachment push as a "sham," suggested Democrats still plan to deal with the charges quickly.

"We're ready to go whenever they are. We are sticking with our plan. We're going to move this as expeditiously as possible," Schumer said.

"Impeachment should never be used to settle policy disagreements," he told reporters earlier Tuesday.

House Republicans charged in two articles of impeachment that Mayorkas has not only refused to enforce existing law but also breached the public trust by lying to Congress and saying the border was secure.

Democrats — and a few Republicans — say the charges amount to a policy dispute, not the Constitution's bar of high crimes and misdemeanors.

"Ultimately, I think it's virtually certain that there will not be the conviction of someone when the con-

stitutional test has not been met," said Sen. Mitt Romney, R-Utah.

Romney said he was not sure how he would vote on the Senate's process but wanted to at least express his view that "Mayorkas has done a terrible job, but he's following the direction of the president and has not met the constitutional test of a high crime or misdemeanor."

Still, with elections approaching, Republicans want to force Congress to grapple with the Biden administration's handling of the southern border as long as possible.

"I think there are a lot of Democrats who really want to avoid the vote. I don't blame them. I mean, this is the number one issue on the minds of Americans," Thune said.

Sen. Sherrod Brown, a Democrat who is facing a tough reelection bid in Ohio, called the impeachment trial a "distraction" and pointed to Republican senators rejecting a bipartisan deal aimed at tamping down the number of illegal border crossings from Mexico.

"Instead of doing this impeachment — the first one in 100 years — why are we not doing a bipartisan border deal?" Brown said.

Prior to Mayorkas, only one U.S. cabinet official had ever been impeached. Secretary of War William Belknap in 1876. A House investigation found evidence that he had received kickback payments while administering government contracts.

Belknap resigned, but the Senate still held a trial. The votes on all five impeachment charges against Belknap fell short of the two-thirds majority needed for a conviction.

New EPA rule says 218 US chemical plants must reduce toxic emissions that are likely to cause cancer

By MATTHEW DALY Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — More than 200 chemical plants nationwide will be required to reduce toxic emissions that are likely to cause cancer under a new rule issued Tuesday by the Environmental Protection Agency. The rule advances President Joe Biden's commitment to environmental justice by delivering critical health protections for communities burdened by industrial pollution from ethylene oxide, chloroprene and other dangerous chemicals, officials said.

Areas that will benefit from the new rule include majority-Black neighborhoods outside New Orleans that EPA Administrator Michael Regan visited as part of his 2021 Journey to Justice tour. The rule will significantly reduce emissions of chloroprene and other harmful pollutants at the Denka Performance Elastomer facility in LaPlace, Louisiana, the largest source of chloroprene emissions in the country, Regan said.

"Every community in this country deserves to breathe clean air. That's why I took the Journey to Justice tour to communities like St. John the Baptist Parish, where residents have borne the brunt of toxic air for far too long," Regan said. "We promised to listen to folks that are suffering from pollution and act to protect them. Today we deliver on that promise with strong final standards to slash pollution, reduce cancer risk and ensure cleaner air for nearby communities."

When combined with a rule issued last month cracking down on ethylene oxide emissions from commercial sterilizers used to clean medical equipment, the new rule will reduce ethylene oxide and chloroprene emissions by nearly 80%, officials said.

The rule will apply to 218 facilities spread across the United States — more than half in Texas or Louisiana. Plants also are located in two dozen other states, including Ohio and other Midwest states, West Virginia, Pennsylvania, New York and throughout the South, the EPA said. The action updates several regulations on chemical plant emissions that have not been tightened in nearly two decades.

Democratic Rep. Troy Carter, whose Louisiana district includes the Denka plant, called the new rule "a monumental step" to safeguard public health and the environment.

"Communities deserve to be safe. I've said this all along," Carter told reporters at a briefing Monday. "It must begin with proper regulation. It must begin with listening to the people who are impacted in the neighborhoods, who undoubtedly have suffered the cost of being in close proximity of chemical plants — but not just chemical plants, chemical plants that don't follow the rules."

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Carter said it was "critically important that measures like this are demonstrated to keep the confidence of the American people."

The American Chemistry Council, which represents chemical manufacturers, said it was reviewing the rule but criticized EPA's use of what it called "a deeply flawed" method to determine the toxicity of ethylene oxide.

"We also remain concerned with the recent onslaught of chemical regulations being put forth by this administration," the group said in a statement. Without a different approach, "the availability of critical chemistries will dwindle" in the U.S., harming the country's supply chain, the ACC said.

The new rule will slash more than 6,200 tons (5,624 metric tonnes) of toxic air pollutants annually and implement fenceline monitoring, the EPA said, addressing health risks in surrounding communities and promoting environmental justice in Louisiana and other states.

The Justice Department sued Denka last year, saying it had been releasing unsafe concentrations of chloroprene near homes and schools. Federal regulators had determined in 2016 that chloroprene emissions from the Denka plant were contributing to the highest cancer risk of any place in the United States.

Denka, a Japanese company that bought the former DuPont rubber-making plant in 2015, said it "vehemently opposes" the EPA's latest action.

"EPA's rulemaking is yet another attempt to drive a policy agenda that is unsupported by the law or the science," Denka said in a statement, adding that the agency has alleged its facility "represents a danger to its community, despite the facility's compliance with its federal and state air permitting requirements."

The Denka plant, which makes synthetic rubber, has been at the center of protests over pollution in majority-Black communities and EPA efforts to curb chloroprene emissions, particularly in the Mississippi River Chemical Corridor, an 85-mile (137-kilometer) industrial region known informally as Cancer Alley. Denka said it already has invested more than \$35 million to reduce chloroprene emissions.

The EPA, under pressure from local activists, agreed to open a civil rights investigation of the plant to determine if state officials were putting Black residents at increased cancer risk. The agency initially found evidence of discrimination, but in June it dropped its investigation without releasing any official findings and without any commitments from the state to change its practices.

Regan said the rule issued Tuesday was separate from the civil rights investigation. He called the rule "very ambitious," adding that officials took care to ensure "that we protect all of these communities, not just those in Cancer Alley, but communities in Texas and Puerto Rico and other areas that are threatened by these hazardous air toxic pollutants."

While it focuses on toxic emissions, "by its very nature, this rule is providing protection to environmental justice communities — Black and brown communities, low-income communities — that have suffered for far too long," Regan said.

Patrice Simms, vice president of the environmental law firm Earthjustice, called the rule "a victory in our pursuit for environmental justice."

Fenceline monitoring for six toxic air pollutants — ethylene oxide, chloroprene, vinyl chloride, benzene, 1,3-butadiene and ethylene dichloride — will be crucial to ensure accountability and transparency, Simms and other advocates said. The new rule marks just the second time that EPA has mandated fenceline monitoring in air toxics standards under the Clean Air Act.

"For years, we've watched our families and neighbors suffer from disease, like cancer, due to underregulated emissions," said Robert Taylor, founder of Concerned Citizens of St. John, a local advocacy group.

After the EPA closed its civil rights complaint, "we felt little hope that any government could protect us from industry," Taylor said. The new rule is "renewing our hope," he said.

Content creation holds appeal for laid-off workers seeking flexibility

By BROOKE SCHULTZ undefined

With a compact mirror in one hand and an eyelash curler in the other, Grace Xu told her roughly 300,000 TikTok followers she was likely about to be laid off.

She was right, she tells them in a subsequent clip. But she was planning to pursue a different career anyway: as a content creator.

"I guess the decision has been made on my behalf," she tells viewers in the video posted earlier this year. "The universe has spoken."

By all accounts, the U.S. job market is holding strong, with employers adding 303,000 workers to their payrolls in March. The jobless rate has now remained below 4% for 26 straight months, the longest such streak since the 1960s.

But that's of little comfort to the thousands of people who have nonetheless found themselves out of work. Hiring has largely been concentrated to a few industries, while tech and finance have only added a small number of jobs in the last 12 months.

Rather than trying to return to traditional employment, however, people like 26-year-old Xu are carving a new path for themselves through online content creation, where they can make money from brand deals and advertising by producing social media videos ranging from educational to entertaining.

"I think most employees look at employers now and no longer think that they are going to find security — permanent security — in a job," said Sarah Damaske, who studies labor and employment relations, and sociology at Penn State. "I think it makes it less risky to do something like go and be a content creator because employment with a traditional employer is so much riskier."

In an estimated \$250 billion industry, 4% of global content creators pull in more than \$100,000 annually, according to Goldman Sachs Research. YouTube — considered by creators to be one of the more lucrative platforms — has more than 3 million channels in its YouTube Partner Program, which is how creators earn money. A spokesperson said the platform paid out more than \$70 billion in the last three years.

Meanwhile, TikTok — which faces the threat of a national ban that could cost many creators an income stream — has seen a 15% growth in user monetization, according to a company spokesperson.

Many people turn to full-time content creation only after they've seen a payoff from putting in the work, said Brooke Erin Duffy, a professor of communication at Cornell University. Or they are forced into it, as an avenue back to employment.

The pandemic also reshaped how employees consider work, with many preferring to have more control over their schedules and the ability to do their jobs from home. In February, nearly 440,000 people applied to start their own businesses — up nearly 50% from a monthly pace of 300,000 just before the pandemic, according to the U.S. Census Bureau.

Among them are content creators, although they likely make up only a small portion.

For Xu, the pandemic allowed her to rediscover her hobbies. She started making content at that time as @amazingishgrace on TikTok. Her thrift flips — all sewn by hand — went viral and steadily built up a following. Even when she left her banking job to move into the tech sector for a better work-life balance, she kept on making content.

When a round of layoffs happened last summer, Xu wondered if she should go to content creation full time, despite a deep fear of ruining things she loved by turning them into work. Her own layoff sped up her timeline.

"You just have to have this belief that, like, once your life is wide open for something, it will come," she said, "otherwise you'll drive yourself crazy thinking about it."

Another content creator, who goes by Pot Roast's Mom on TikTok, described staying in her engineering job for so long because she was afraid of not having health insurance while also having to pay off her student loan. But when her eponymous cat, Pot Roast, died two years ago, she turned to content creation full time.

"Her death just like revealed, or I guess opened my eyes, to that I liked nothing in my life besides her," said Pot Roast's Mom, who goes by her username to protect her privacy. "And when she died, I was like,

OK, it's time to make some changes."

A community of women in the industry helped her shift from traditional employment to full-time content creation by demystifying brand deal pricing, and setting up payment tiers on platforms like Patreon, a subscriber service for content creators.

She has accrued 1.2 million followers on TikTok and a majority of her income came from Patreon last year — about \$30,000 — with a small portion coming from brand deals, around another \$10,000.

Pot Roast's Mom saw a video recently where a woman said making cat content earned her \$200,000 in a year. More than likely, she said, that was a one-off.

"I think if you do something like this, you have to be ready to fail, ready to not make a lot of money," she said. "You have to be realistic."

Indeed, it takes time, energy and resources to turn content creation into a successful career, Duffy said. Creators have to negotiate multivideo brand deals or sponsorships to have a semblance of steady income, but those can have monthslong payout dates. Some rely on savings from their traditional careers to plug the gaps while they wait.

"The level of unpredictability when you're dependent on a platform is quite profound," she said. "Your success is dependent upon an algorithm or updated community guidelines or an audience that may or may not like you on any given day."

Cynthia Huang Wang tried her hand in full-time content creation after she was laid off from her brand marketing job in February 2023. In January, she posted a TikTok about returning to the workforce, taking her 164,000 TikTok followers along as she updated her resume.

With the job market improving, Wang said she sees the appeal of returning to a stable income. Maternity leave at a corporate job also has pull as she and her husband consider starting a family.

There are limitations, though, to what she's willing to return for, including pay, title and work she's interested in doing.

"Going back to the office every day would be a nonstarter for me," she said. "I think maybe like two, or max three, days because I still want to be able to create content. And I think going into the office every single day would really impact that."

Clark Effect: Ratings and attendance boost could be on way for WNBA

By DOUG FEINBERG AP Basketball Writer

NEW YORK (AP) — The basketball world can't get enough of Caitlin Clark and now that the college season is over, next up is the WNBA draft. While there is no drama about whether the Iowa guard will be the top pick, there is excitement about her arrival.

With record ratings for the NCAA championship game and nearly every other game she played this season, Clark is joining the WNBA at the right time. The league has its TV deal expiring at the end of next year and that could lead to a massive new contract for the WNBA.

The WNBA just had its most-watched season in 21 years, averaging 462,000 viewers per game across ABC, ESPN and CBS. The league also had its most-watched Finals in 20 years that featured Las Vegas and New York. It was up 36% from the previous season. The league's attendance rose 16% — it's highest figure since 2018. Throw Clark into the mix and that number could grow exponentially.

"When you're given an opportunity, women's sports just kind of thrives," Clark said. "I think that's been the coolest thing for me on this journey. We started our season playing in front of 55,000 people in Kin-nick Stadium, and now we're ending it playing in front of probably 15 million people or more on TV. It just continues to get better and better and better. That's never going to stop."

Clark has inspired countless young boys and girls to want to watch and attend college basketball games. The WNBA hopes that carries on to her career in Indiana, where she is the expected No. 1 pick in the draft Monday night. There's no reason to think it won't as fans traveled across the country to see her play in college as nearly every road game Iowa played was sold out the past two seasons. Two WNBA teams

have already moved their games against Indiana to bigger arenas.

"I know her shoulders are heavy because of what she has to give to women's basketball. I just want to say we're thankful. We're thankful that she chose to play basketball," South Carolina coach Dawn Staley said. "We're thankful for the way she's handled all of it. Her next step is the WNBA — I do think she can be that person that elevates us."

She certainly will be an attendance boost for the Fever, who were second-to-last in home attendance averaging just over 4,000 fans. The Fever play in Gainbridge Fieldhouse, which could hold 20,000 spectators. The team has not released how many tickets they've sold since they won the draft lottery to get the No. 1 pick.

If Monday night's draft is any indication of excitement, the league sold out of its approximately 1,000 tickets within 15 minutes. The cheapest available ticket on one secondary market topped \$165 this week.

Austin tells Congress Israel is taking steps to boost aid to Gaza as lawmakers question US support

By TARA COPP and LOLITA C. BALDOR Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin told Congress Tuesday that pressure on Israel to improve humanitarian aid to Gaza appears to be working, but he said more must be done, and it remains to be seen if the improvement will continue.

"It clearly had an effect. We have seen changes in behavior, and we have seen more humanitarian assistance being pushed into Gaza," Austin said in a Senate Armed Services Committee hearing. "Hopefully that trend will continue."

Austin's comments came during a session that was interrupted several times by protesters shouting at him to stop sending weapons to Israel. "Stop the genocide," they said, as they lifted their hands, stained in red, in the air. A number of senators also decried the civilian casualties, saying the administration needs to do more to press Israel to protect the population in Gaza.

In response, Austin said he spoke with his Israeli counterpart, Defense Minister Yoav Gallant, on Monday and that he repeated U.S. insistence that Israel must move civilians out of the battlespace in Gaza and properly care for them.

Austin and Joint Chiefs Chairman Gen. CQ Brown Jr. were testifying on Capitol Hill about the Pentagon's \$850 billion budget for 2025. But the hearing offered the first chance for lawmakers on both sides to question the Pentagon's top civilian and military leadership on the administration's Israel strategy following Tel Aviv's deadly strike on World Central Kitchen humanitarian aid workers in Gaza.

That strike led to a shift in tone from President Joe Biden on how Israel must protect civilian life in Gaza and drove dozens of House Democrats, including former House Speaker Nancy Pelosi, to call on Biden to halt weapons transfers to Israel. Half the population of Gaza is starving and on the brink of famine due to Israel's tight restrictions on allowing aid trucks through.

Israel in recent days took initial steps to increase the flow of humanitarian aid into Gaza. In a call Friday, Biden told Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu that future U.S. support for the war in Gaza depends on Israel taking more action to protect civilians and aid workers.

At the hearing, Austin also said that the military is moving ahead with plans to build a pier off the Gaza coast to increase the delivery of humanitarian aid, and initial operations will probably be ready to start by the third week of this month. He said that details are still being worked out but that aid organizations will help do that.

Six U.S. military ships with personnel and components to build a humanitarian aid pier are enroute to Gaza, with several in the Mediterranean Sea, heading toward Cyprus.

The war, now in its seventh month, has killed more than 33,000 Palestinians, mostly women and children, according to local health authorities. Israeli authorities say 1,200 people, mostly civilians, were killed and roughly 250 people taken hostage in Hamas' Oct. 7 attack.

In their opening statements, both Austin and Brown emphasized that their 2025 budget is still shaped

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with the military's long-term strategic goal in mind — to ready forces and weapons for a potential future conflict with China. About \$100 billion of this year's request is set aside for new space, nuclear weapons and cyber warfare systems the military says it must invest in now before Beijing's capabilities surpass it.

But the conflicts in Ukraine and Israel are challenging a deeply-divided Congress and have resulted in months of delays in getting last year's defense budget through, which was only passed by lawmakers a few weeks ago.

Ukraine's president Volodymyr Zelenskyy has issued desperate pleas that if the U.S. does not help soon, Kyiv will lose the war to Russia.

The Pentagon scraped together about \$300 million in ammunition to send to Kyiv in March but cannot send more without Congress' support, and a separate \$60 billion supplemental bill that would fund those efforts has been stalled for months.

"The price of U.S. leadership is real. But it is far lower than the price of U.S. abdication," Austin told the senators.

If Kyiv falls, it could imperil Ukraine's Baltic NATO member neighbors and potentially drag U.S. troops into a prolonged European war. If millions die in Gaza due to starvation, it could enrage Israel's Arab neighbors and lead to a much wider, deadlier Middle East conflict — one that could also bring harm to U.S. troops and to U.S. relations in the region for decades.

Israel's actions in Gaza have been used as a rallying cry by factions of Iranian-backed militant groups, including the Houthis in Yemen and Islamic Resistance groups across Iraq and Syria, to strike at U.S. interests. Three U.S. service members have already been killed as drone and missile attacks increased against U.S. bases in the region.

Lawmakers are also seeing demands at home. For months, a handful of its far-right members have kept Congress from approving additional money or weapons for Ukraine until domestic needs like curbing the crush of migrants at the southern U.S. border are addressed. Republican House Speaker Mike Johnson is already facing a call to oust him as speaker by Georgia Republican Rep. Marjorie Taylor Greene because Johnson is trying to work out a compromise that would move the Ukraine aid forward.

Beyoncé becomes first Black woman to hit No. 1 on Billboard country albums chart

By MARIA SHERMAN AP Music Writer

NEW YORK (AP) — Beyoncé has made history once again. Her latest album, the epic "Act II: Cowboy Carter", hit No. 1 on the Billboard country albums chart, making her the first Black woman to top the chart since its 1964 inception.

The album also topped the all-genres Billboard 200, marking her eighth No. 1 album. According to Luminate, the industry data and analytics company, "Cowboy Carter" totaled 407,000 equivalent album units, a combination of pure album sales and on-demand streams, earned in the U.S. in its first week.

As a Black woman reclaiming country music, Beyoncé stands in opposition to stereotypical associations of the genre with whiteness. Conversation surrounding Beyoncé's country music explorations began when she arrived at the 2024 Grammy Awards in full cowboy regalia — making a statement without saying a word. Then, during the Super Bowl, she dropped two hybrid country songs: "Texas Hold 'Em" and "16 Carriages," eventually leading to the release of "Cowboy Carter."

In February, "Texas Hold 'Em" reached No. 1 on the country airplay chart, making her the first Black woman to top that chart as well.

New WIC rules include more money for fruits and veggies. They also expand food choices

By JONEL ALECCIA AP Health Writer

The federal program that helps pay for groceries for millions of low-income mothers, babies and young kids will soon emphasize more fruits, vegetables and whole grains, as well as provide a wider choice of foods from different cultures.

The final rule changes for the program known as WIC were announced Tuesday by the Food and Nutrition Service, and will take effect within two years with some exceptions.

Last updated a decade ago, the new WIC rules make permanent a bump in monthly cash vouchers for fruits and vegetables — something first enacted during the COVID-19 pandemic. Shoppers can also add canned fish, fresh herbs and lactose-free milk to their carts, among other changes. The voucher piece will take effect by June, officials said.

“It places a heavy emphasis on fruits and vegetables, which we think is an important component of a healthy diet,” Agriculture Secretary Tom Vilsack said in an interview. “It’s designed to fill the nutrition gaps that are often in the diets of many of us.”

The WIC program served an average of about 6.6 million low-income Americans a month in 2023 at a cost of a little more than \$7 billion. It’s designed to supplement the food budgets for pregnant, nursing and postpartum women, as well as to feed babies and young kids up to age 5. That’s done by providing vouchers to mothers and children who qualify and specifically listing the amount and types of food they can buy.

But officials have said only about half of those eligible are enrolled in the Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants and Children.

Under the new rules, fruits and vegetable vouchers in 2024 will provide \$26 per month for kids ages 1 through 4; \$47 per month for pregnant and postpartum women; and \$52 for breastfeeding women. The changes also expand access to whole grains like quinoa, wild rice and millet and to foods such as teff and whole wheat naan. They also remove or reduce monthly allowances for juice and cut back on allowances for milk.

Food plans in the program are based on recommendations from the National Academies of Science, Engineering and Medicine and the federal 2020-2025 Dietary Guidelines for Americans.

The plan failed to include a change requested by top allergists in the U.S. that would have added peanut products to foods allowed for babies ages 6 months to 11 months to help prevent peanut allergies.

Research published in 2015 showed early introduction to peanut foods can reduce the chance of allergy development in kids who are at high risk, and several U.S. guidelines suggest exposing high-risk children to peanuts as early as 4 months.

Adding peanut to the WIC guidelines may have prevented more than 34,000 infants from developing a peanut allergy, said Dr. Gideon Lack of King’s College London, who led the study. But federal nutrition officials concluded that the change was “outside the scope” of the final rule.

Dr. Ruchi Gupta, a pediatrics professor and child allergy expert at Northwestern University, called the omission “disappointing.” She noted that WIC enrollees often include children of color who are at higher risk of developing dangerous peanut allergies.

The decision “can only increase disparities we are already seeing in food allergy prevalence,” she said.

Librarians fear new penalties, even prison, as activists challenge books

By HILLEL ITALIE and KIMBERLEE KRUESI Associated Press

When an illustrated edition of Margaret Atwood’s “The Handmaid’s Tale” was released in 2019, educators in Clayton, Missouri needed little debate before deciding to keep copies in high school libraries. The book is widely regarded as a classic work of dystopian literature about the oppression of women, and a

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graphic novel would help it reach teens who struggle with words alone.

But after Missouri legislators passed a law in 2022 subjecting librarians to fines and possible imprisonment for allowing sexually explicit materials on bookshelves, the suburban St. Louis district reconsidered the new Atwood edition, and withdrew it.

"There's a depiction of a rape scene, a handmaid being forced into a sexual act," says Tom Bober, Clayton district's library coordinator and president of the Missouri Association of School Librarians. "It's literally one panel of the graphic novel, but we felt it was in violation of the law in Missouri."

Across the country, book challenges and bans have soared to the highest levels in decades. Public and school-based libraries have been inundated with complaints from community members and conservative organizations such as as Moms for Liberty. Increasingly, lawmakers are considering new punishments — crippling lawsuits, hefty fines, and even imprisonment — for distributing books some regard as inappropriate.

The trend comes as officials seek to define terms such as "obscene" and "harmful." Many of the conflicts involve materials featuring racial and/or LGBTQ+ themes, such as Toni Morrison's novel, "The Bluest Eye," and Maia Kobabe's memoir, "Gender Queer." And while no librarian or educator has been jailed, the threat alone has led to more self-censorship.

Already this year, lawmakers in more than 15 states have introduced bills to impose harsh penalties on libraries or librarians.

Utah enacted legislation in March that empowers the state's Attorney General to enforce a new system of challenging and removing "sensitive" books from school settings. The law also creates a panel to monitor compliance and violations.

Awaiting Idaho Gov. Brad Little's signature is a bill that empowers local prosecutors to bring charges against public and school libraries if they don't move "harmful" materials away from children.

"The laws are designed to limit or remove legal protections that libraries have had for decades," says Deborah Caldwell-Stone, director of the American Library Association's Office for Intellectual Freedom.

Since the early 1960s, institutions including schools, libraries and museums — as well as educators, librarians and other staffers who distribute materials to children — have largely been exempt from expensive lawsuits or potential criminal charges.

These protections began showing up in states as America grappled with standards surrounding obscenity, which was defined by the Supreme Court in 1973.

Ruling 5-4 in *Miller v. California*, the justices said obscene materials are not automatically protected by the First Amendment, and offered three criteria that must be met for being labeled obscene: whether the work, taken as a whole, appeals to "prurient interest," whether "the work depicts or describes, in a patently offensive way, sexual conduct specifically defined by the applicable state law," and whether the work lacks "serious literary, artistic, political, or scientific value."

Eventually, almost every state adopted protections for educators, librarians and museum officials, among others who provide information to minors.

"Until recently, police and prosecutors were unable to pursue charges against public libraries over materials that make certain individuals uncomfortable. These exemptions have prevented spurious prosecutions of teachers over health and sexuality curriculum, art, theater, and difficult subjects in English classes," stated a 2023 report from EveryLibrary, a national political action committee that opposes censorship.

Arkansas and Indiana targeted educators and librarians with criminalization laws last year. Tennessee criminalized publishers that provide "obscene" materials to public schools.

Some Republicans are seeking penalties and restrictions that would apply nationwide. Referring to "pornography" in the foreword to Project 2025, the Heritage Foundation's blueprint for a possible second Donald Trump administration, the right-wing group's president, Kevin Roberts, wrote that the "people who produce and distribute it should be imprisoned. Educators and public librarians who purvey it should be classed as registered sex offenders."

Arkansas' version was temporarily blocked by a federal judge after a coalition of librarians and publishers challenged the legality of subjecting librarians and booksellers to criminal charges if they provide "harmful"

materials to minors.

Indiana lawmakers stripped away "educational purposes" as a defense for school librarians and educators charged with giving minors "obscene" or "harmful" material — felonies punishable by up to 2½ years in jail and \$10,000 in fines. The law also requires public catalogs of what's in each school library and systems for responding to complaints.

Indiana's law took effect January 1. It's likely a matter of when — not if — a lawsuit is filed, and the anxiety has created a chilling effect.

"It's putting fear into some people. It's very scary," said Diane Rogers, a school librarian who serves as president of the Indiana Library Federation. "If you're a licensed teacher just being charged with a felony potentially gets rid of your license even if you're found innocent. That's a very serious thing."

Rogers said she's confident Indiana's school libraries don't offer obscene materials, but she's seen reports that some districts have moved certain titles to higher age groups or required parental approval to check them out.

A PEN America list shows 300 titles were removed from school libraries across 11 Missouri districts after lawmakers in 2022 banned "sexually explicit" material, punishable by up to a year in jail or a \$2,000 fine. The American Civil Liberties Union of Missouri and library groups challenged the law last year, but it remains in effect pending a motion for the state to intervene.

"Gender Queer" is another title no longer available to high schoolers in Clayton, where district officials recently turned their attention to Mike Curato's graphic novel, "Flamer," about a teenager who struggles with his sexual identity and how to fit in at Boy Scout camp. The American Library Association included "Flamer" on its list of 2023's most challenged and/or banned books.

"We had a lot of conversations about how to interpret the law and not be in violation," Bober said. "But we also didn't want to overreach and overcensor our collections. With 'Flamer,' we did not feel we were in violation of the law."

UConn concludes a dominant run to its 2nd straight NCAA title, beating Zach Edey and Purdue 75-60

By EDDIE PELLIS AP National Writer

GLENDALE, Ariz. (AP) — A basketball beatdown. A coaching clinic. A double-digit domination.

Take one guess who finished off a romp through college basketball again. You bet, it's UConn — a team built to win now, and often, and by a lot every time it takes the court.

Coach Dan Hurley's Huskies delivered the latest of their suffocating hoops performances Monday night, smothering Purdue for a 75-60 victory to become the first team since 2007 to capture back-to-back national championships.

Tristen Newton scored 20 points for the Huskies, who won their 12th straight March Madness game — not a single one of them decided by fewer than 13 points.

UConn was efficient on offense but won this with defense. The Huskies (37-3) limited the country's second-best 3-point shooting team to a mere seven shots behind the arc and only a single make, while happily allowing 7-foot-4 AP Player of the Year Zach Edey to go for 37 points on 25 shot attempts.

UConn won its sixth overall title and joined the 2006-07 Florida Gators and the 1991-92 Duke Blue Devils as just the third team to repeat since John Wooden's UCLA dynasty of the 1960s and '70s.

"I just think it's the best two-year run in a very, very long time, just because of everything we lost from last year's team," said Hurley, whose top two scorers from last year now play in the NBA. "To lose that much and do it again, it's got to be as impressive a two-year run since at least prior to Duke."

The 2024 Huskies are the sixth team to win all six tournament games by double-digit margins. They won those games by a grand total of 140 points, blowing past the 1996 Kentucky team, which won its six by 129.

In a matchup of two top seeds, they wore down the Boilermakers (34-5), who made it this far a year after becoming just the second No. 1 in the history of March Madness to fall in the first round. But Purdue

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left the same way it came — still looking for the program's first NCAA title.

So much for the free-for-all this new age of the transfer portal and name, image and likeness deals was supposed to become. UConn has figured out how to dominate and replenish its roster with players who understand their roles.

Cam Spencer, a transfer from Rutgers, Stephon Castle, a blue-chip freshman, and Alex Karaban, a sophomore from last year's team, spent the night guarding the 3-point line and making life miserable for Purdue's guards.

"They just made a decision — we can defend the perimeter, and we can take this away from you, you're going to get the ball to your best player, he'll be 1-on-1, and that's that," Purdue coach Matt Painter said.

This was only the second time this season Purdue didn't put up 10 3-point attempts, and how 'bout this final score: Edey 37, the rest of the Boilermakers 23.

How serious was Hurley about defending the perimeter? When Braden Smith wiggled loose for a semi-open look to make Purdue's first 3 of the game with 2:17 left in the first half, the coach bolted onto the floor and called timeout.

And that was that from behind the arc.

"Coaches made a point that we'd be really locked in if we controlled their 3-point attempts," Spencer said. "Holding them to seven shows we were locked in on making sure their guards didn't get involved in the game."

With his Xs-and-Os masterpiece, Hurley joins former Florida coach Billy Donovan in the back-to-back club, and is in company with Bill Self and Rick Pitino as only the third active coach with two championships. News broke over the weekend that it appears there's a job opening at Kentucky, and the UConn coach's name has come up there.

"I don't think that's a concern," Hurley said. "My wife, you should have her answer that."

No way the Huskies would want to lose him.

Hurley earned every penny in this one. In the first half, he begged with, swore at and generally berated the refs about over-the-backs, elbows and hip checks that weren't called.

Once, when that didn't work after Edey set a hard (and probably legal) pick against Castle, Hurley started in on Edey himself as the center walked toward the Purdue bench for a timeout.

But the coach's best work came in whatever hotel room he used to draw up the game plan.

"The whole game plan was no Smith, no Loyer, no Jones, no Gillis," Hurley said, as he ticked off the last names of the Purdue guards. "We knew if we keep them below 18, 20 points as a group, and they had no chance to win, no matter how well Zach played."

It's no slight on Edey, who battled gamely, finishing with 10 rebounds to record his 30th double-double of the season. But this game proved the number crunchers and analytics experts right. UConn let Edey back in and back down all night on 7-2 Donovan Clingan, giving up difficult 2s in the post in exchange for any 3s.

"They only doubled late in the second half, but by that point we had dug ourselves too deep of a hole," Fletcher Loyer said.

The defensive dominance put the finishing touch on a tournament in which UConn's average margin of victory was 23.3 points. Sure, Hurley might have to replace two or three of these players, but the coach said he'll worry about that in a week or two.

"Obviously, what can you say?" he said. "We won — by a lot — again."

Who's really left-handed? In baseball, it can be hard to tell

By KRISTIE RIEKEN AP Sports Writer

HOUSTON (AP) — Houston's Jordan Alvarez might be the top left-handed hitter in Major League Baseball. Teammate Framber Valdez ranks among the best left-handed pitchers, too.

Other than that, those guys are all right.

Literally — neither player considers himself left-handed at all.

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MLB and its history are dotted with men who played out of their natural handedness, a phenomenon that is seen occasionally in other sports but is a regular occurrence on the diamond. Thumb through a pack of baseball cards from just about any era and you're likely to see players who bat one way and throw the other. Ask them to sign that card and there's no telling which hand would hold the pen.

Valdez writes, eats and even hits (before the introduction of the universal designated hitter) with his right hand. His left arm has helped him make two All-Star teams and throw a no-hitter. What else does he use it for?

"Nothing, nothing, nothing," he said with a laugh.

Valdez simply decided at a young age that he wanted to be a left-handed pitcher.

"I used to throw lefty every single day, like day by day by day," he said in Spanish through a translator. "When I was 11, I felt very comfortable throwing lefty, even though I did everything else righty."

Lefties accounted for around 26% of innings pitched in the majors last year, even though only 10-12% of the general population is estimated to be left-handed. Demand for good lefty pitchers is high, and Valdez recalls having an affinity for all of them.

"When I was growing up, I was always told that it is very important to have a lefty pitcher, that all the best pitchers were lefties as well," he said. "So, I told myself: 'Hey, I want to be a lefty.'"

Alvarez throws, writes and eats with his right hand — that sweet, powerful swing is his only left-handed activity. Like many young players, he aspired to be a switch-hitter. Oddly, he ended up more comfortable on his non-dominant side.

"But I just got accustomed to hitting left-handed," he said via translator. "And it was very interesting because my dad is the same thing. He hits left-handed, but he does everything else right-handed."

Players like Alvarez are common across the majors, with 95 position players currently on active rosters listed as batting left and throwing right, including superstar two-way player Shohei Ohtani.

Houston has the only two position players in the league who throw left and bat right in outfielders Chas McCormick and Jake Meyers.

"My dad throws left and hits right so that's what I do, too," Meyers said. "I picked up a baseball with my left hand and started throwing it and picked up a bat and wanted to swing right-handed and that's kind of what he believed and now I'm here. Chas McCormick is the only other guy I've played with that does that."

Toronto outfielder George Springer, a righty hitter and thrower, startled teammate Justin Turner this spring by writing with his left hand.

"It's really weird," Turner said. "I saw him sign an autograph the other day and I was like, 'What the hell are you doing?'"

Springer, the 2017 World Series MVP, calls himself left-handed and says the only things he does righty are play baseball and golf. His parents tell him he started grabbing the ball with his right hand at a young age and stuck with it.

"That's just who I am," Springer said. "I've never really thought anything of it. I guess it is cool that I can do things with each side of my body and I'm not so one-way dominant."

Dr. Stephen D. Christman, a professor in the psychology department at the University of Toledo and an expert in handedness, said cases like Springer's aren't that surprising.

"It's easier for a lefty to learn to use their right hand than for a righty to learn to use their left hand because most left-handers lean more towards being ambidextrous," said Christman, who has studied handedness for more than two decades.

Christman said studies have found only 1-2% of people are uniformly left-handed across the 10 activities used to measure handedness, including writing, drawing, throwing, brushing teeth and hair, opening a box and using a spoon. Because lefties are forced to adapt — like when only righty scissors are available — they're more likely to learn to use both hands.

Though it's rare in other sports for guys to play out of their natural handedness, there is a huge exception in the NBA. Superstar LeBron James is like Springer in that he's naturally left-handed but plays right-handed. James, who turns 40 in December, joked about his handedness late last year.

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"I'm gonna play until I'm 40. Then, after 40, I'm gonna go all left-hand until I'm 45," he joked to reporters. "I'm gonna score 5,000 points with my left hand. Then I'll be done."

Valdez, Alvarez and Springer follow in a line of great MLB players who played out of their natural handedness. The list even includes Babe Ruth, who batted and threw left-handed but can be seen in photos using his right hand to sign autographs. John Thorn, MLB's official historian, says Ruth was naturally left-handed, but teachers at the time routinely discouraged children from writing with their left hand because lefties were "thought to represent the dark side."

Though not for the same reasons, Houston first baseman Jon Singleton ended up doing the same thing as Ruth. He both bats and throws left-handed but writes with his right hand.

"My mom's a school teacher, and she taught me how to write with my right hand when I was young, and I think that translated to me eating with my right hand so on and so forth," he said. "But for the most part, I think I'm left-handed."

Though things might come easier for elite athletes, Christman said anyone can learn to do things with their non-dominant hand.

"I think practice can overcome any innate handedness difference just about," he said.

Today in History: April 10

The Titanic sets sail from England, bound for New York

By The Associated Press undefined

Today in History

Today is Wednesday, April 10, the 101st day of 2024. There are 265 days left in the year.

Today's Highlight in History:

On April 10, 1912, the British liner RMS Titanic set sail from Southampton, England, bound for New York on its ill-fated maiden voyage.

On this date:

In 1866, the American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals was incorporated.

In 1932, German President Paul Von Hindenburg was reelected in a runoff, with Adolf Hitler coming in second.

In 1947, Team President Branch Rickey called Jackie Robinson up to the Brooklyn Dodgers from their minor league affiliate the Montreal Royals. (Less than a week later, Robinson would become the first Black player in Major League Baseball when he took the field for the Dodgers.)

In 1963, the fast-attack nuclear submarine USS Thresher (SSN-593) sank during deep-diving tests east of Cape Cod, Massachusetts, in a disaster that claimed 129 lives.

In 1971, a table tennis team from the United States arrived in China at the invitation of the communist government for a goodwill visit that came to be known as "ping-pong diplomacy."

In 1972, the United States and the Soviet Union joined some 70 nations in signing an agreement banning biological warfare.

In 1974, Golda Meir announced her resignation as prime minister of Israel.

In 1998, the Northern Ireland peace talks concluded as negotiators reached a landmark settlement to end 30 years of bitter rivalries and bloody attacks.

In 2005, Tiger Woods won his fourth Masters with a spectacular finish of birdies and bogeys.

In 2010, Polish President Lech Kaczynski (lehk kah-CHIN'-skee), 60, was killed in a plane crash in western Russia that also claimed the lives of his wife and top Polish political, military and church officials.

In 2012, Rick Santorum quit the presidential race, clearing the way for Mitt Romney to claim the Republican nomination.

In 2017, Justice Neil Gorsuch took his place as the newest addition on the bench of the Supreme Court, restoring a narrow conservative majority.

In 2018, during five hours of questioning from a U.S. Senate panel, Facebook CEO Mark Zuckerberg

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batted away accusations that he had failed to protect the personal information of millions of Americans from Russians intent on upsetting the U.S. election, though he conceded that Facebook needed to work harder to make sure the tools it creates are used in "good and healthy" ways.

In 2019, scientists released the first image ever made of a black hole, revealing a fiery, doughnut-shaped object in a galaxy 53 million light-years from earth.

In 2021, speaking to Republican donors at his new home inside his Mar-a-Lago resort, former President Donald Trump slammed Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell as a "stone-cold loser" and mocked McConnell's wife, Elaine Chao, who had been Trump's transportation secretary.

In 2023, a Louisville bank employee shot and killed five co-workers, including a close friend of the governor, and wounded eight others in a livestreamed workplace shooting at a bank branch; the shooter, 25-year-old Connor Sturgeon, was fatally shot by police.

Today's Birthdays: Actor Steven Seagal is 72. Folk-pop singer Terre Roche (The Roches) is 71. Actor Peter MacNicol is 70. Actor Olivia Brown is 67. Singer-producer Kenneth "Babyface" Edmonds is 66. Rock singer-musician Brian Setzer is 65. Rock singer Katrina Leskanich (les-KAH'-nich) is 64. Olympic gold medal speedskater Cathy Turner is 62. Rock musician Tim "Herb" Alexander is 59. R&B singer Kenny Lattimore is 57. Actor-comedian Orlando Jones is 56. Rock musician Mike Mushok (Staind) is 55. Rapper Q-Tip (AKA Kamaal) is 54. Actor David Harbour is 49. Blues singer Shemekia Copeland is 45. Actor Laura Bell Bundy is 43. Actor Harry Hadden-Paton is 43. Actor Chyler Leigh is 42. Pop musician Andrew Dost (fun.) is 41. Actor Ryan Merriman is 41. Singer Mandy Moore is 40. Actor Barkhad Abdi (BAHRK'-hahd AHB'-dee) is 39. Actor Shay Mitchell is 37. Actor Haley Joel Osment is 36. Actor Molly Bernard (TV: "Younger") is 36. Country singer Maren Morris is 34. Actor Alex Pettyfer is 34. Actor-singer AJ (AKA Amanda) Michalka (mish-AL'-kah) is 33. Actor Daisy Ridley is 32. Singer-actor Sofia Carson is 31. Actor Audrey Whitby is 28. Actor Ruby Jerins is 26.