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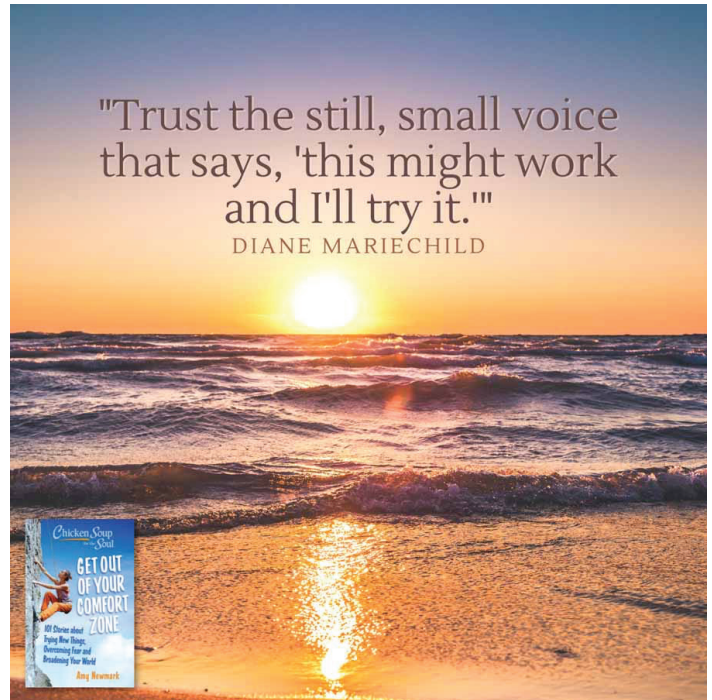
Thursday, May 16

Senior Menu: Chesseburger quinoa casserole, cheesy breadstick, steamed Brussel sprouts, fruit.
Faculty Inservice
Girls Golf at Sisseton, 10 a.m.
Track at Webster, 1 p.m.

Friday, May 17

Senior Menu: Spanish rice with hamburger, green beans, vanilla pudding with mandarin oranges, whole wheat read.
Region Track at Mobridge.

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



"Trust the still, small voice
that says, 'this might work
and I'll try it.'"

DIANE MARIECHILD

Saturday, May 18

Common Cents Community Thrift Store hours 10 a.m. to 1 p.m.

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

Sunday, May 19

High School Region baseball at highest two seeds
Groton CM&A: Sunday School at 9:15 a.m., Worship Service at 10:30 a.m.

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

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

Emmanuel Lutheran: Worship with communion, 9 a.m.

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

United Methodist: Conde worship, 8:30 a.m.; Cof-fee Hour, 9:30 a.m.; Groton worship, 10:30 a.m.

OPEN: Recycling Trailer in Groton

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

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1440

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Debates, calling instead for an expedited debate schedule and stricter rules on interruptions, among other conditions.

More than 107,000 people in the US died of a drug-related overdose last year, according to data released yesterday from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. The preliminary tally represents the first drop in drug-related deaths since 2018 and a 3% drop from 2022. The CDC data did not reveal the cause of the overall decline.

Sports, Entertainment, & Culture

The 2024 NFL schedule to include five international games; see complete schedule release. Netflix to stream two games on Christmas Day.

Magician David Copperfield accused of sexual misconduct by 16 women. Sequel of 1996 film "Happy Gilmore" confirmed at Netflix; Adam Sandler to return.

Sage, a miniature poodle, wins best in show at 2024 Westminster Kennel Club Dog Show. 2024 PGA Championship tees off today from Valhalla Golf Club in Louisville, Kentucky.

Science & Technology

OpenAI cofounder and chief scientist Ilya Sutskever to leave company; Sutskever helped lead a November effort to oust CEO Sam Altman that ultimately failed. Bipartisan Senate group releases AI policy roadmap proposal, seeks \$32B in annual funding.

Engineers demonstrate snake-like fiber optic system that can image the inside of arteries in real time; device may help preventive diagnosis of aneurysms and blood clots.

Experimental antiobesity drug combines GLP-1 blocker found in new drugs like Ozempic with molecule that targets receptors in the brain involved in appetite control.

Business & Markets

US stock markets close higher (S&P 500 +1.2%, Dow +0.9%, and Nasdaq +1.4%); all three indexes notch record highs, fueled by latest inflation data. Core consumer price index—excluding volatile food and energy prices—rose 0.3% month-over-month and 3.6% year-over-year in April; 12-month reading is lowest since April 2021.

Warren Buffett's Berkshire Hathaway reveals \$6.7B stake in property-casualty insurer Chubb; company filing yesterday showed Berkshire had been building the position since second half of 2023.

Billionaire and former Los Angeles Dodgers owner Frank McCourt announces he is putting together a "people's bid" to buy TikTok from its Chinese parent company ByteDance. ByteDance faces a legal deadline from the US government to sell TikTok or withdraw from the US market.

Politics & World Affairs

Supreme Court approves new Louisiana congressional map adding a second majority-Black district. Maryland's former Gov. Larry Hogan (R) and County Executive Angela D. Alsobrooks (D) win respective Senate primaries.

Russian forces continue to advance in northern Kharkiv region as Ukrainian troops retreat, with heaviest fighting in town of Vovchansk, 37 miles northeast of Ukraine's second-largest city of Kharkiv. See updates on war.

Fuel barge hits Pelican Island Bridge in Galveston, Texas, causing partial collapse and oil spill but leaves no one injured or killed after tugboat pushing it loses control. Crew of ship that crashed into Baltimore bridge in March remains on board amid ongoing investigations and visa restrictions.

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—Weber—
Landscaping
Greenhouse

NOW
OPEN!

620 West Third Avenue
Groton
Hours: M-F 10-6
Sat 10-4 ~ Sun 12-4

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Groton Pool opening next week

The Groton Municipal Swimming Pool is nearly ready for business already! The pool is filled and the boiler to the pool should be operational by Thursday, May 16th. Sign-up for swimming lessons and the selling of season passes will be done on Sunday, May 19th from 4:30 p.m. to 7:30 p.m. and on Monday, May 20th, from 7:30 a.m. to 1 p.m. The pool is schedule to be open on Wednesday May 22nd. (Photo by Paul Kosel)



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Primary Election: Vote Now Through June 4th

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May 6-12, 2024

Welcome back to the Weekly Round[s] Up. Our main focus this past week was Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) Reauthorization. We had a deadline of last Friday to pass this legislation before the previous one expired. We met that deadline and passed the FAA Reauthorization Act of 2024 on Thursday evening.

This bill includes several important wins for both South Dakotans and air travelers all across the country. More on that later on. We were also busy attending meetings and introducing legislation. I traveled to Yankton and Sioux Falls for events this past Friday. All this and more in my Weekly Round[s] Up:

South Dakotans I met with: Members of South Dakota Realtors and South Dakota members of the American Land Title Association.

I also visited Yankton and Sioux Falls on Friday. In Yankton, I spoke with students at their high school and spoke at a lunch with service clubs from the area. In Sioux Falls, I attended a groundbreaking for Dakota State University's Applied Research Lab. This facility is an important part of DSU's expansion as they continue to be a leader in the cyber security industry. Having a hub like this in Sioux Falls also makes it easier for the talented graduates that come out of DSU to work right here in South Dakota.

Visited with South Dakotans from: Aberdeen, Belle Fourche, Brookings, Madison, Mitchell, Rapid City, Sioux Falls, Vermillion, Watertown and Yankton.

Other meetings: Ken Fisher, Chairman of Fisher Investments; Lt. Gen. Heath Collins, Director of the Missile Defense Agency; Ben Schwartz, Senior Vice President and Chief Counsel for Intuit's Small Business and Self-Employed Group; Norm Willox, CEO of Bluewater International; members of the General Aviation Manufacturer's Association; Shigeo Yamada, Japan's Ambassador to the United States; the Secretary of the Army's Cyber Strategic Seminar; Carl-Oskar Bohlin, Sweden's Minister for Civil Defense; and Cameron Fowler, CEO of Early Warning Services. I had meetings with several of my colleagues this week on artificial intelligence (AI). I attended our Senate Prayer



Dairy Queen in Groton is hiring! If you're looking for a fun job with lots of variety, look no further! We're looking for energetic, smiling people – we provide free meals, uniforms, competitive wages, fun atmosphere and flexible scheduling. Part-time – day, evening, week-end shifts available. We will work with your schedule. Stop in today and pick up an application.

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Breakfast, where Senator James Lankford of Oklahoma was our speaker.

I was on a panel at the AI Expo for National Competitiveness with my colleagues Senator Martin Heinrich (D-N.M.) and Todd Young (R-Ind.) to talk about the work we're doing in AI in the Senate. While at this event, I was able to visit with DSU President José-Marie Griffiths and Andrea Thompson, CEO of DSU's Applied Research Corporation.

Votes taken: 4 – most notably was our vote to reauthorize FAA for the next five years.

The FAA Reauthorization Act of 2024 passed the Senate by a vote of 88 to 4. I supported this legislation which includes several provisions to benefit South Dakota airports and airline customers. The Airport Improvement Program (AIP) grant limits are increased, from \$20 million to \$30 million, for non-hub and small hub airports like Sioux Falls and Rapid City. This creates additional opportunities for South Dakota airports to expand and accommodate those traveling both to and from our great state. The reauthorization also includes provisions to increase air traffic controller hiring and improve pilot training, which are critical to aviation safety. In addition, it supports airline customers by requiring cash refunds for certain airline delays and cancellations. This legislation makes certain that travelers in South Dakota and across the country will have access to safe, reliable air service.

Shortly after voting on the FAA Reauthorization Act of 2024, we voted on a one-week extension of the previous FAA authorization. The House was already out of session by the time we passed the full bill, but they had voted on this one week extension, which makes certain that FAA authority didn't lapse over the weekend. The House is expected to vote on the full FAA Reauthorization Act of 2024 this week.

Hearings: I attended one hearing this week with the Senate Armed Services Committee's Strategic Forces Subcommittee. We heard from leaders from the Department of Defense about missile defense activities as we prepare to craft the FY2025 National Defense Authorization Act. You can watch a clip of that here.

Legislation introduced: This past week, I introduced legislation that would prohibit the Secretary of Agriculture from mandating the use of electronic identification tags in cattle and bison herds. South Dakota cattle producers don't need DC bureaucrats telling them how to manage and track their livestock. You can read more about this legislation here.

My staff in South Dakota visited: Aberdeen, Britton, De Smet, Sioux Falls, Webster and Yankton.

Steps taken this past week: 60,638 steps or 29.62 miles

GROTON

SUBWAY

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Walk-In Interviews: May 21, 3-5 p.m.

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Sioux Falls native receives prestigious place on Fulbright Summer Institute to the UK

John "Jack" Hinrichs, Sioux Falls native, (grandson of Doug and Crys Hinrichs, Claremont) has received a place on a Fulbright Summer Institute to study at the University of St Andrews, one of the most prestigious and selective summer scholarship programmes operating worldwide. Hinrichs has been selected by the US-UK Fulbright Commission to experience the UK on a three week summer program focusing on the theme of Scotland's History: Kingdom, Nation, and People. Through this course, Hinrichs will gain a deep understanding of the development of the Scottish nation by exploring Scotland's natural and urban environments and by learning from world-class lecturers.

The Summer Institutes form part of the US-UK Fulbright Commission's work to promote leadership, learning and empathy between nations through educational exchange. Commenting on receiving the place, Hinrichs said "I am both

honored and excited to have been offered a place in this year's Fulbright St Andrews Institute. Learning about Scotland's history and the development of the Scottish nation will both enrich my studies as a Politics and Economics major, and assist me in my future goal of creating lasting political change."

Fulbright Summer Institutes cover participants' major costs and provide them with a distinctive support and cultural education programme, including comprehensive predeparture guidance, enrichment opportunities in country and an opportunity to be part of the Fulbright alumni network.

The Commission selects participants through a rigorous application and interview process. In making these awards, the Commission looks not only for academic excellence but a focused application, a range of extracurricular and community activities, demonstrated ambassadorial skills, and a plan to give back to the recipient's home country upon returning.

Maria Balinska, Executive Director of the US-UK Fulbright Commission said "Cultural exchange is a truly transformative experience, and I am excited to see this year's UK Summer Institutes participants embark on this journey of immersing themselves in British academia and culture. I'm confident this experience will leave a lasting impression on both the participants and on those they meet and connect with during their time here."





After Lower Brule vote, eight of nine tribes have endorsed Noem ban

BY: JOHN HULT - MAY 15, 2024 6:01 PM

Eight of nine tribal governments in the state of South Dakota have endorsed the banishment of Gov. Kristi Noem from their lands.

The Lower Brule Sioux Tribe unanimously approved a resolution to bar Noem on Wednesday, according to Tribal Chairman Clyde Estes.

The vote comes one day after a similar resolution from the Crow Creek Sioux Tribal Council. Last week, the Yankton Sioux Tribe's Business and Claims Committee endorsed a ban days after the tribal council of the Sisseton-Wahpeton Oyate voted to ban Noem.

The Rosebud, Oglala, Cheyenne River and Standing Rock Sioux tribes voted to bar the governor earlier this year.

The Flandreau Santee Sioux Tribe is the only one in the state that has not yet cast such a vote.

The bans began shortly after Noem delivered a speech on the U.S.-Mexico border that tied the impact of Mexican drug cartels to reservation communities. Noem would later say that some tribal leaders are "personally benefiting" from cartels.

Tribal leaders have also taken issue with comments delivered during town halls in Mitchell and Winner that suggested Native American children have no hope, and that their parents are not there for them.

Those comments in particular have been a sticking point for Estes, the Lower Brule tribal chairman. He said the tribe sent Noem a letter asking for an apology to children and parents.

"They were very hurtful, disparaging words," Estes said. "We never heard a peep."

Lower Brule voted down an earlier attempt to ban the governor. Estes said some leaders were hopeful that they'd hear an apology, but "a couple months have gone by now" without a response.

Estes said the leadership has also taken issue with the comments on tribal leadership and drug cartels. He said he's never met anyone in a cartel "and I hope that I don't."

"It would be like tribes saying the South Dakota Legislature and executive branch of state government is in bed with the mafia," Estes said. "These are blatant mistruths. Words are very powerful and hurtful. We have to be better than that."

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.

U.S. Senate approves Sioux Falls lawyer for federal judgeship

BY: JOHN HULT - MAY 15, 2024 5:14 PM

The U.S. Senate approved one of two federal judge nominees for South Dakota on Wednesday on a vote of 61-33.

Sioux Falls lawyer Eric Schulte will fill the impending vacancy of U.S. District Judge Karen Schreier, who announced her retirement last year and pledged to continue working until her replacement is appointed.

Schulte, a partner at Davenport Evans and former president of the State Bar of South Dakota, secured the approval of the Senate Judiciary Committee in April alongside another Sioux Falls nominee, state Circuit

Court Judge Camela Theeler.

A Senate floor vote on Theeler could come as soon as Thursday. Theeler would replace Jeffrey Viken in Rapid City, who retired last October. The U.S. District Court of South Dakota has relied heavily on "senior status" judges, retirees Lawrence Piersol and Charles Kornmann, to manage caseloads.

South Dakota Republican Senators Mike Rounds and John Thune each voted to support Schulte. Typically, Democratic presidents rely on either Democratic elected federal office-holders or state Democratic party leaders to field nominees for federal judicial vacancies, but the initial candidates offered up by state Democrats fizzled without a formal nomination.

Former South Dakota Democratic Party Chair Randy Seiler, a longtime federal prosecutor and one-time candidate for state attorney general who died unexpectedly last year, had most recently submitted the name of Veronica Duffy. She was and remains a federal magistrate judge.

Rounds and Thune got involved last year, and the nomination process "went pretty quickly" after that, according to Carl Tobias, a law professor at the University of Richmond School of Law who tracks federal judge nominations.

"Some other nominees have waited a year," Tobias said.

The Judiciary Committee endorsed Theeler 20-1 last month, with the only opposition from Missouri Republican Josh Hawley. Schulte had more resistance, passing through with a 12-9 vote. The only Republican who supported him was Lindsey Graham of South Carolina.

There was a measure of uncertainty about Schulte for that reason, Tobias said, but the Wednesday vote came without controversy. There were two minutes of debate, and "nobody even talked about him."

Tobias expects a smooth ride for Theeler, as "there was nothing controversial about her with a 20-1 vote."

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.

South Dakota joins lawsuit against new federal guidance on sex-based discrimination

BY: SEARCHLIGHT STAFF - MAY 15, 2024 12:04 PM

South Dakota has joined a multi-state lawsuit against new federal workplace harassment guidelines that cover an employee's gender identity.

The federal Equal Opportunity Employment Commission published updated guidance on April 29. It covers over 70 examples of unlawful harassment, including not just sex-based but also harassment based on race, color, religion, national origin, disability, age and genetic information.

"As we commemorate this year's 60th anniversary of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, the guidance will help raise awareness about the serious problem of harassment in employment and the law's protections for those who experience it," said EEOC Chair Charlotte A. Burrows in a news release.

Among other things, the guidelines say that "harassing conduct based on sexual orientation or gender identity includes ... denial of access to a bathroom or other sex-segregated facility consistent with the individual's gender identity."

South Dakota Gov. Kristi Noem criticized the guidance Tuesday in a news release.

"With this Guidance, the Biden administration is failing to protect the privacy, safety, and religious rights of all employees," Noem said.

South Dakota Attorney General Marty Jackley also criticized the guidance.

"The EEOC is unlawfully attempting to burden employers, confuse gender, and limit someone's ability to refuse sharing a restroom with someone of the opposite sex," Jackley said.

The lawsuit is filed in federal court in Tennessee. It asks the court to declare the guidance unlawful.

South Dakota joins 17 other states as plaintiffs: Tennessee, Alabama, Alaska, Arkansas, Georgia, Indiana, Iowa, Kansas, Kentucky, Mississippi, Missouri, Nebraska, Ohio, South Carolina, Utah, Virginia, and West Virginia.

U.S. Senate GOP tries to block states from spending some of their COVID relief cash

South Dakota's Thune and Rounds support failed legislation

BY: JENNIFER SHUTT - MAY 15, 2024 7:35 PM

WASHINGTON — The U.S. Senate on Wednesday rejected efforts to roll back guidance from the Treasury Department regarding how state and local governments can spend funding approved by Congress during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The 46-49 vote on the Congressional Review Act resolution ended an attempt by several GOP senators to block the Biden administration from changing the definition of "obligation" as it relates to State and Local Fiscal Recovery Funds and the timeline for spending some of that money.

Missouri Republican Sen. Eric Schmitt said during floor debate that the Treasury Department's change in guidance, which was released in November, was trying to "pull a fast one" on Congress.

"Treasury's attempted sleight of hand to keep the COVID spending spigot on is an insult to Congress and those who believe in our Constitution, as well as a complete misuse of taxpayer dollars," Schmitt said.

The fund for state and local governments, Schmitt said, was intended to assist with "revenue shortfalls tied to the COVID-19 pandemic" and the law clearly stated that "all costs incurred with money from this fund must be incurred by Dec. 31, 2024."

The interim final rule that the Treasury Department released around Thanksgiving extended that deadline by two years for "administrative and legal costs, such as compliance costs and internal control requirements," he said.

"This rule ensures that funding does not go to bridges or broadband, but to bureaucrats," Schmitt said.

Projects affected in multiple states

Oregon Democratic Sen. Ron Wyden spoke against the CRA resolution during floor debate, saying it could have impacted 17 projects in Georgia, 160 in Michigan, 342 in Ohio, 50 in Arizona, 404 in Montana and 73 in West Virginia.

"Nationwide there could be thousands of projects closed. Tens or even hundreds of jobs lost," Wyden said. "This one is one of the most unusual votes that I've seen recently, a true head scratcher."

Wyden said he didn't "see a good reason for the United States Senate to backtrack on solid, bipartisan progress and have this chamber act in a way that leaves more of our nation's infrastructure in a state of disrepair."

Schmitt said during a press conference before the vote that the claim the CRA resolution would have impacted projects already underway was a lie.

"Essentially the obligations that are committed before the end of 2024, according to existing law, will be honored," Schmitt said. "What this says is that you can't extend that out into '25 and '26. That was never the congressional intent here."

Kansas Republican Sen. Roger Marshall, also speaking at the GOP press conference, said the CRA resolution would claw back about \$13 billion and went as far as calling it "illegal spending."

"The clock is going to run out, but Joe Biden is trying to circumvent the law once again," Marshall said, adding that the COVID-19 pandemic is over and spending from those laws needs to wind down.

Counties, cities opposed

Schmitt introduced the two-page CRA resolution in February along with Marsha Blackburn of Tennessee, Mike Braun of Indiana, Tom Cotton of Arkansas, Joni Ernst of Iowa, Bill Hagerty of Tennessee, Ron Johnson of Wisconsin, Cynthia Lummis of Wyoming, Marshall and Rick Scott of Florida.

The National Association of Counties, the National League of Cities and the Government Finance Officers Association urged lawmakers to vote against the CRA in a written statement released Wednesday before the vote.

"The \$350 billion SLFRF provided \$65.1 billion to every city and county in America, and since 2021, localities have used these crucial resources to meet the unique needs of residents and support long-term economic prosperity," the statement read.

The three organizations wrote that the Treasury Department's interim final rule "recognized the importance of flexibility in facilitating the effective rollout of recovery funds, including our ability to use funds for certain personnel costs and to re-obligate funds where necessary."

The White House released a Statement of Administration Policy on Wednesday, saying that President Joe Biden would veto the CRA had it reached his desk.

The CRA resolution, it said, "could result in projects being canceled midstream, reduced project management and oversight, and higher costs as state and local governments are forced to contract out programs."

"Nearly all SLFRF funds have been committed to projects, including infrastructure and disaster relief projects made eligible by bipartisan legislation," the SAP read. "S.J. Res. 57 would create unnecessary uncertainty for recipients that are executing on projects, jeopardize important work underway, and inappropriately constrain Treasury's ability to address ongoing implementation issues."

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

Five-year FAA bill clears U.S. House, boosting flights into Washington, D.C.

SD Rep. Johnson misses vote but expresses support for legislation

BY: JACOB FISCHLER - MAY 15, 2024 4:15 PM

The U.S. House voted 387-26 Wednesday to clear a bill to reauthorize \$105 billion for the Federal Aviation Administration for the next five years — and to finalize a hotly debated deal adding flights at busy Washington Reagan National Airport.

Advocates for the bill, which won votes from every ideological corner of the often-divided House, touted its aviation safety and consumer provisions. The House vote sends the measure to President Joe Biden's desk ahead of a Friday deadline. The Senate approved the legislation last week.

The only member to speak against the bill during floor debate Tuesday was Virginia's Don Beyer, a Democrat who, like the entire U.S. Senate delegation from Maryland and Virginia, opposed a provision to add five incoming and five outgoing flights at Washington Reagan National Airport across the Potomac River from Washington, D.C.

The bill:

Increases funding for the Airport Improvement Program that funds infrastructure improvements at airports of all sizes across the country;

Requires the agency to hire more air traffic controllers;

Updates the aircraft safety certification process; and

Requires airlines to automatically refund passengers on flights delayed three hours or longer, among many other provisions in its more than 1,000 pages.

SD Rep. Johnson misses vote but expresses support

South Dakota Republican Dusty Johnson was listed as not voting on the roll call for the FAA bill. In an interview with South Dakota Searchlight, Johnson said he was busy talking on the floor and missed the vote.

"I'm about as embarrassed as I can be," he said. "This happens about once a year, but it's always a little embarrassing when it does."

Johnson said he was filing paperwork with the House to show that he would have voted yes. He was supportive of the bill and said it included several of his priorities, including:

Protecting Essential Air Service-designated airports from unnecessary costs, including airports in Wiertown, Pierre and Aberdeen.

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Streamlining National Environmental Policy Act Reviews for FAA projects by encouraging the Department of Transportation to use cloud-based platforms for NEPA reviews to increase efficiency.

Increasing flexibility for the Airport Improvement Program by increasing support for non- or small-hub airports.

Temporarily increasing the federal cost share to 95% for non-hub/non-primary airports, such as Sioux Falls and Rapid City.

Prioritizing replacement of FAA air traffic control towers at small-hub airports that are at least 50 years old, including Sioux Falls.

Forming a working group to evaluate best practices for transporting donated organs in commercial aircrafts.

Missouri congressman 'could not be more proud'

The bill's passage was something of a career capstone for House Transportation and Infrastructure Chairman Sam Graves, a Missouri Republican and one of the few pilots in Congress.

"I've served in this House for more than 23 years and I've been looking forward to passing an FAA bill as chairman of the Transportation and Infrastructure Committee for a long time," he said on the floor Tuesday. "This is the kind of bill that a chairman only gets to do once in their career and I could not be more proud of the final product that we put together."

Graves is in his third term as the top Republican on the committee and, under House GOP rules, cannot seek another, though he can ask party leaders to waive that rule.

He highlighted protections in the bill for general aviation, a term that can apply to all non-commercial and non-military flights.

Rep. Rick Larsen, the ranking Democrat on the Transportation and Infrastructure Committee, applauded several provisions in the bill, including the Airport Improvement Program funding, which he said could be used for alternative-fuel infrastructure and to mitigate noise and other harmful effects of airports in disadvantaged neighborhoods.

The bill also creates a program to help airports replace firefighting foam made with PFAS, or forever chemicals, funds workforce development grants and bans airlines from charging families to sit together, the Washington Democrat said.

The bill "cements a safer, cleaner, greener, more innovative and accessible future for U.S. aviation," Larsen said.

DCA flights

Six no votes in the House came from members from Virginia who opposed a provision adding flights to Washington National, also called DCA.

The state's congressional delegation, along with Maryland's U.S. senators, has said the airport already strains to safely handle the traffic it currently operates. Adding flights will only worsen the safety environment, they said.

"I'm deeply concerned about the provisions that would aggravate dangerous conditions at National Airport," Beyer said Tuesday. "I cannot support a bill that hurts my constituents, disrespects all the elected leaders from Virginia, Maryland and D.C., and directly harms our airport and the passengers who use it."

Members from outside the capital region argued the additional flights would be a positive. Rep. Hank Johnson, a Georgia Democrat, said they would add "connectivity and economic expansion."

Rep. Burgess Owens, a Utah Republican, also applauded the extra flights.

"This legislation (was) designed not for one airport and one airline, but for all of us," he said. "It gives more convenience, more opportunities to families traveling into Washington, D.C."

The five new routes have not been selected but some members, including Sen. Ted Cruz, a Texas Republican who is the ranking member on the Senate committee that oversees aviation, have speculated that San Antonio could be one beneficiary.

Research from Min-Seok Pang, a professor at Temple University's Fox School of Business in Philadelphia,

Russell J. Funk, a professor at the University of Minnesota's Carlson School of Management, and Daniel Hirschman, a sociology professor at Cornell University, found that the U.S. House district represented by the chair of the Transportation and Infrastructure Committee sees more commercial aviation service.

The data show transportation committee chairs saw flights to their districts increase by more than 5% on average from 1990 to 2019. Airlines also increased direct service to Washington from a chair's district, the analysis, which was published last year in the academic journal *Organization Science*, showed. The numbers generally reverted to normal after the chair's term.

The staff of South Dakota Searchlight contributed to this report.

Jacob covers federal policy as a senior reporter for States Newsroom. Based in Oregon, he focuses on Western issues. His coverage areas include climate, energy development, public lands and infrastructure.

CNN sets first Biden-Trump presidential debate for June 27 in Atlanta

BY: ARIANA FIGUEROA - MAY 15, 2024 11:12 AM

WASHINGTON — CNN announced on Wednesday morning that it will host a debate between President Joe Biden and presumptive Republican presidential nominee Donald Trump at the network's Atlanta studios on June 27.

CNN said there would be no audience present for the debate and moderators will be announced later.

A second debate will be hosted by ABC News on Sept. 10 in which both candidates have agreed to partake, according to ABC News.

Biden earlier Wednesday had called for two debates to be held before early voting for the November election begins — and Trump responded that he would do it.

On X, formerly Twitter, Biden wrote that he had accepted an invitation from CNN for a debate on June 27.

"Over to you, Donald," Biden wrote. "As you said: anywhere, any time, any place."

Trump has also accepted to participate in the June debate, according to CNN.

Biden started Wednesday's exchanges over debates when he wrote to the Commission on Presidential Debates saying he would not agree to a three-debate schedule laid out earlier by the nonpartisan organization, which has been organizing presidential debates since the 1980s. The first would have been Sept. 16.

"President Joe Biden believes the interests of the American people are best served by presidential debates that offer timely and relevant information to help inform voters before they make their choices — and that allow a head-to-head comparison of the two candidates with a chance of winning the election," Jen O'Malley Dillon, the chair for the Biden campaign, wrote in a letter to the commission.

Trump then accepted Biden's proposed debates, one in June and another in September, on his social media site, Truth Social. "I am Ready and Willing to Debate Crooked Joe at the two proposed times in June and September," Trump wrote.

"Crooked Joe Biden is the WORST debater I have ever faced — He can't put two sentences together!," he also wrote.

Trump added that he wants to debate with Biden on immigration policy, electric vehicles, inflation, taxes and foreign policy. He also called for more than two debates.

In a response to the Biden campaign, the Trump campaign is also proposing additional debates in June, July, August and September.

"Additional dates will allow voters to have maximum exposure to the records and future visions of each candidate," the Trump campaign wrote.

Breaking with precedent

By notifying the Commission on Presidential Debates that the president would not partake in its debates, the Biden campaign broke precedent and instead said that news organizations should host the debates.

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The Biden campaign proposed that the hosting broadcast news organizations be any that held a Republican primary debate in 2016 that Trump participated in and any news organization that hosted a Democratic primary debate in which Biden participated in 2020.

That is so that "neither campaign can assert that the sponsoring organization is obviously unacceptable," according to the letter.

The campaign proposed that the first debate be held in late June, "after Donald Trump's New York criminal trial is likely to be over and after President Biden returns from meeting with world leaders at the G7 Summit."

The second debate should be at the start of early September, the campaign argued, so that it is "early enough to influence early voting, but not so late as to require the candidates to leave the campaign trail in the critical late September and October period."

The Biden campaign is also proposing that a vice presidential debate be held in late July, after the GOP nominee and running mate are selected at the Republican National Convention in Milwaukee, Wisconsin.

One unknown is whether an independent candidate such as Robert F. Kennedy Jr. might also qualify for debates.

CNN said in a press release that to qualify for participation in its debate, "a candidate's name must appear on a sufficient number of state ballots to reach the 270 electoral vote threshold to win the presidency prior to the eligibility deadline; agree to accept the rules and format of the debate; and receive at least 15% in four separate national polls of registered or likely voters that meet CNN's standards for reporting."

The statement added that acceptable polls will include those sponsored by: CNN, ABC News, CBS News, Fox News, Marquette University Law School, Monmouth University, NBC News, the New York Times/Siena College, NPR/PBS NewsHour/Marist College, Quinnipiac University, the Wall Street Journal and the Washington Post.

"The polling window to determine eligibility for the debate opened March 13, 2024, and closes seven days before the date of the debate," the statement said.

2024 South Dakota voter guide

Primary election

Date: June 4.

Voter registration deadline: May 20.

Early/absentee voting: Underway.

General election

Date: Nov. 5.

Voter registration deadline: Oct. 21.

Early/absentee voting: Begins Sept. 20.

Voter information

Voter registration: <https://sdsos.gov/elections-voting/voting/register-to-vote>.

Vote early or absentee: <https://sdsos.gov/elections-voting/voting/absentee-voting.aspx>.

Find your polling place and sample ballot: <https://vip.sdsos.gov/VIPLogin.aspx>.

Primary candidates: <https://vip.sdsos.gov/candidatelist.aspx?eid=651>.

General election candidates: <https://vip.sdsos.gov/candidatelist.aspx?eid=684>.

Ballot questions: <https://sdsos.gov/elections-voting/upcoming-elections/general-information/2024/2024-ballot-questions.aspx>.

Ariana covers the nation's capital for States Newsroom. Her areas of coverage include politics and policy, lobbying, elections and campaign finance.

Feds incentivize better biosecurity at dairy farms for bird flu

BY: JARED STRONG - MAY 15, 2024 6:00 AM

The U.S. Department of Agriculture recently announced it will pay dairy farms with confirmed avian influenza infections to help contain the virus' spread to people and more cows.

Federal funding is now available to cover the costs of enhanced biosecurity measures, protective equipment for workers, heat treatments for tainted milk, and veterinary and testing fees. The precautions are optional.

The virus was first identified in a Texas farm in March and has since been discovered in 41 others in a total of nine states, according to USDA data.

Wild birds are believed to be the initial source of infection, but there is evidence the virus is transmitting cow-to-cow. A dairy farm worker in Texas who was in close contact with infected cattle was also sickened but recovered.

Highly pathogenic avian influenza spreads quickly in poultry flocks and is often deadly to the birds. Sick cows typically recover over the course of 10 to 14 days, but they shed large amounts of the virus in their milk.

That led the USDA in April to prohibit the transport of most lactating dairy cattle across state lines unless testing shows they are not infected.

The movement of infected cows to other states is believed to be responsible for much of the virus' spread. It has also been found in dairy farms in Colorado, Idaho, Kansas, Michigan, New Mexico, North Carolina, Ohio and South Dakota.

The new federal funding provides:

Up to \$2,000 per month per site for personal protective equipment and uniform laundering for workers.

Up to \$8,000 per producer for heat treatment of milk from sick cows to inactivate the virus before disposal.

Up to \$10,000 per site for veterinary fees and sample collection for testing.

Up to \$1,500 per site to develop biosecurity plans and for training.

The USDA can also compensate dairy farms for their milk losses and states for their efforts to restrict movement of infected cattle locally.

The U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and the Food & Drug Administration are also increasing testing to better understand the virus and the public health risks it poses.

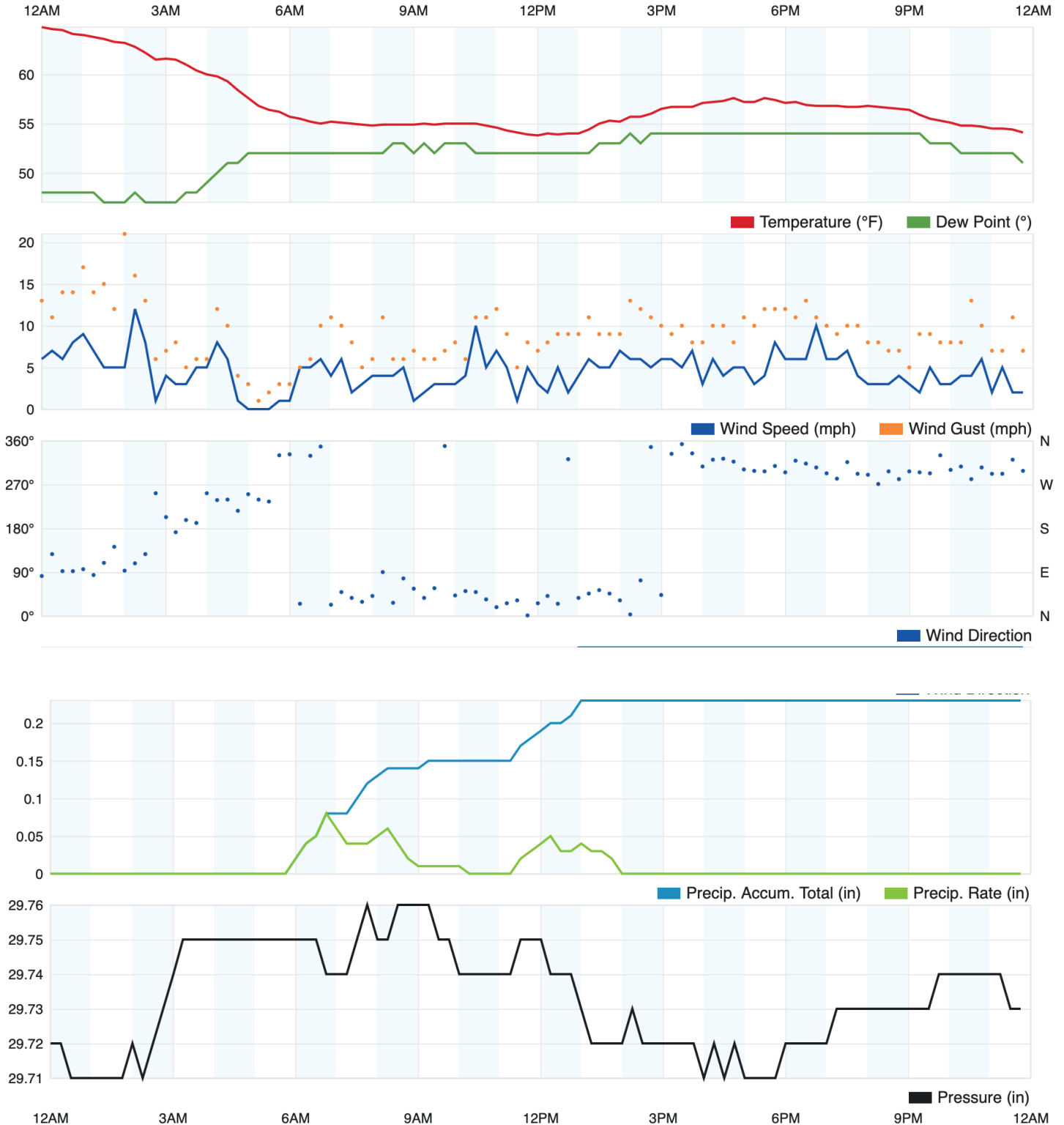
The CDC has said the risk is low to humans. The FDA has found fragments of the virus in the nation's milk supply — despite a requirement to discard milk from sick cows — but the agency has determined that pasteurization neutralizes its threat.

Jared Strong is the senior reporter for the Iowa Capital Dispatch. He has written about Iowans and the important issues that affect them for more than 15 years, previously for the Carroll Times Herald and the Des Moines Register. His investigative work exposing police misconduct has notched several state and national awards. He is a longtime trustee of the Iowa Freedom of Information Council, which fights for open records and open government. He is a lifelong Iowan and has lived mostly in rural western parts of the state.

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Yesterday's Groton Weather Graphs



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Today



High: 76 °F

Sunny

Tonight



Low: 53 °F

Partly Cloudy

Friday



High: 86 °F

Sunny

Friday Night



Low: 55 °F

Chance
T-storms

Saturday



High: 70 °F

Sunny and
Breezy

Forecast into the Weekend

Today



71 to 79°

Friday



82 to 89°

There is a 20-60% chance
for storms late afternoon
and into the overnight
hours.

Saturday



66 to 73°

Westerly winds with
gusts of 35 to 45 mph



NWS Aberdeen, SD
weather.gov/abr

A weak disturbance crossing the area today may bring a few showers along the ND/SD border. Warmer air will move in on Friday before a frontal boundary reaches the area. The front will be the focus for thunderstorms, possibly severe, across parts of central South Dakota late Friday afternoon and evening. Saturday will be dry with westerly winds with 35-45 mph gusts.

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Yesterday's Groton Weather

High Temp: 65 °F at 12:00 AM

Low Temp: 54 °F at 11:48 AM

Wind: 21 mph at 1:54 AM

Precip: : 0.23

Day length: 15 hours, 01 minutes

Today's Info

Record High: 101 in 1934

Record Low: 23 in 2014

Average High: 71

Average Low: 44

Average Precip in May.: 1.77

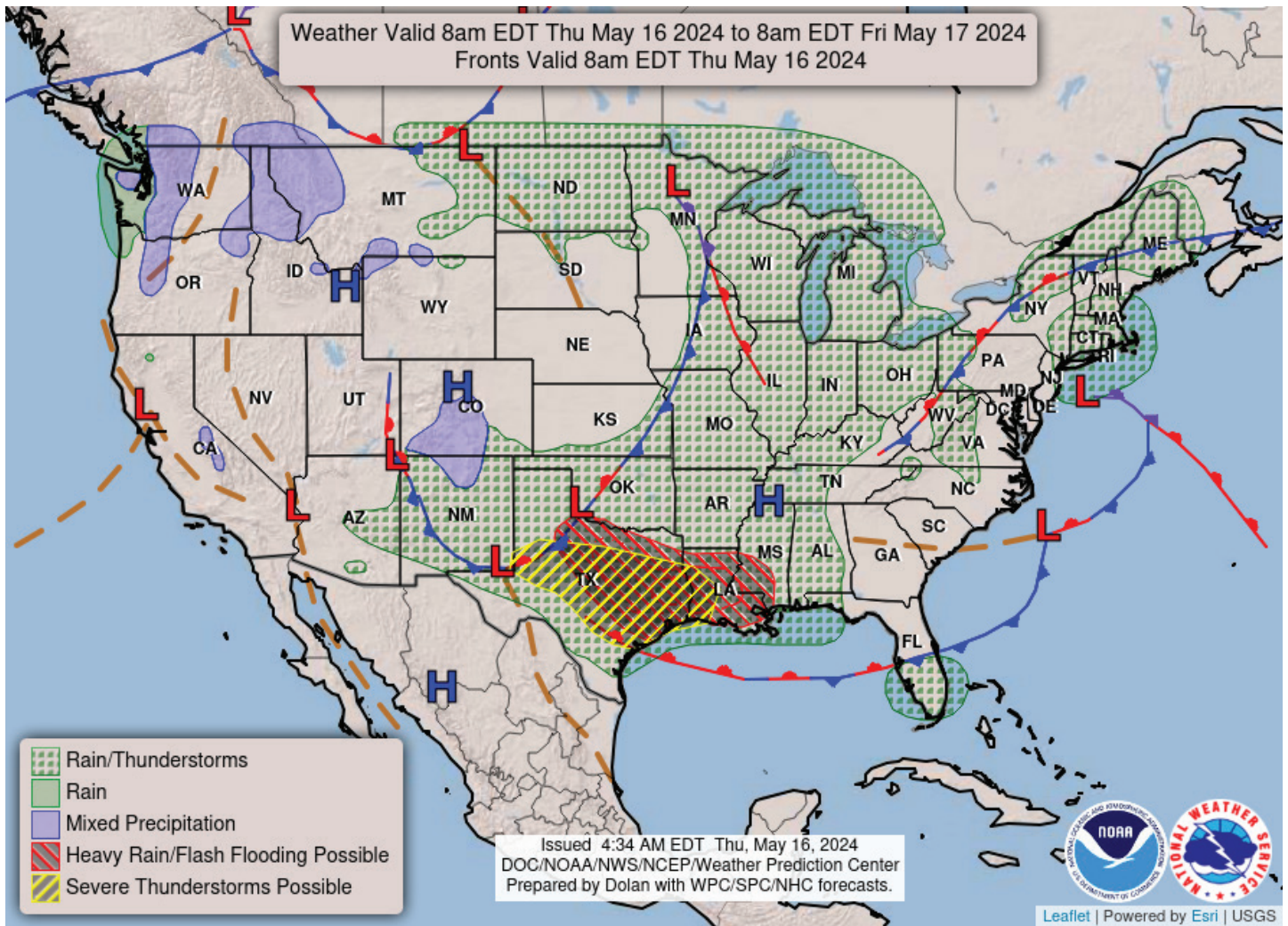
Precip to date in May: 0.91

Average Precip to date: 5.74

Precip Year to Date: 5.44

Sunset Tonight: 8:59:29 pm

Sunrise Tomorrow: 5:57:02 am



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Today in Weather History

May 16, 1883: Benchmark flooding in the Black Hills occurred in 1883, with extremely high flows reported throughout the hills that resulted from heavy rainfall on top of snowmelt. Click [HERE](#) for more images from USGS.

May 16, 1929: On this day, Aberdeen recorded 3.0 inches of snow. This snowfall is the latest measurable snow for the city of Aberdeen on record.

May 16, 1992: It was a wild day across the tri-state region of Nebraska, South Dakota, and Iowa, with tornadoes and destructive straight-line winds. A tornado damaged three-grain bins and two farm wagons in Cedar County of northeast Nebraska before crossing into Dixon County. As it traveled east, it destroyed two barns and a garage and was responsible for killing between 5,000 and 10,000 chickens at a chicken farm. In northwest Iowa, Sioux City reported winds of around 60 miles an hour causing some minor damage. Elsewhere, winds gusted as high as 75 miles an hour in Spencer and 74 miles an hour in Le Mars.

1874: The Mill Creek disaster occurred west of North Hampton, MA. Dam slippage resulted in a flash flood that claimed 143 lives and caused a million dollars property damage. Click [HERE](#) for more information from the New England Historical Society.

1924 - The temperature at Blitzen OR soared to 108 degrees to set a state record for the month of May. The record was later tied at Pelton Dam on the 31st of May in 1986. (The Weather Channel)

1952 - High winds in the Wasatch Canyon of Utah struck Ogden and Brigham City. Winds at Hill Air Force Base gusted to 92 mph. (The Weather Channel)

1983: An unyielding spring storm dumped heavy snow across the Front Range in Colorado. High winds of 20 to 40 mph with gusts to 55 mph produced blizzard conditions at times. The Foothills received 1 to 2 feet of snow with 4 to 12 inches along the Foothills. Blowing snow whipped the snow into drifts several feet deep closing schools and highways. Power outages occurred; with 20 square miles of Denver blacked out. Hundreds of passengers were stranded as only half of the runways were open at Stapleton International Airport. The high temperature at Denver the next day of just 40° set a record low maximum. Much of the snow melted on the 18th as temperatures rebounded into the middle and upper 50s causing widespread street flooding.

1987 - It was a summer-like day as thunderstorms abounded across the nation. Thunderstorms in Texas drenched Guadalupe County with more than three inches of rain resulting in flash flooding. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

1988 - Afternoon and evening thunderstorms developing ahead of a cold front produced severe weather from Florida to New York State. Unseasonably warm weather prevailed in the north central U.S. Havre, MT, reported a record high of 95 degrees. (The National Weather Summary)

1989 - Thunderstorms developing ahead of a cold front produced severe weather in the south central U.S. Thunderstorms spawned twenty tornadoes, and there were 180 reports of large hail and damaging winds. A tornado at Cleburne, TX, caused 30 million dollars damage. A violent (F-4) tornado touched down near Brackettville, TX, and a strong (F-3) tornado killed one person and injured 28 others at Jarrell, TX. Thunderstorms also produced softball size hail at Shamrock, TX. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

1990 - Thunderstorms produced severe weather from eastern Oklahoma and northeastern Texas to the Upper Ohio Valley. Thunderstorms spawned seventeen tornadoes, including a twister which killed one person and injured another north of Corning, AR. There were 128 reports of large hail or damaging winds. Strong thunderstorm winds killed one person and injured six others at Folsomville, IN, and injured another five persons in southeastern Hardin County KY. In Arkansas, baseball size hail was reported near Fouke and near El Dorado. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

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Daily Devotionals

Seeds of Hope

MIND YOUR THOUGHTS!

It was a beautiful day in the mountains. The crisp, clean air and the morning sun combined to create a sense of magic. Gary decided that he would take a long, leisurely drive to the many vistas in the Blue Ridge Mountains.

Shortly after he started his trip, a tire went flat. Easing to the side of the road he parked his car and got out. When he opened up his trunk and looked inside, he discovered that his jack was missing. He went to the middle of the road and looked for any signs of life. Off in the distance he saw a cabin. His heart began to beat with hope thinking there would be someone there to help him.

As he walked along the road he began to think, "What if the person living there does not have a jack?" Then he thought, "What if he has a jack and won't lend it to me? And why should he lend it to me since he doesn't even know me? I doubt if he will even open the door."

He was so agitated that by the time he got to the cabin he was shaking all over. Climbing the steps, he paused and knocked on the door. When the resident opened it, he blurted out, "Keep your jack. I didn't want to use it anyhow," and hit him in the jaw.

Our thoughts shape our attitudes, and our attitudes shape our behavior, and our behavior tells others who we really are.

Prayer: Father, may we, as Your Word advises us, "Fix our hearts on what is good and true and right" and show grace and gratitude to everyone. In Jesus' Name, Amen.

Scripture For Today: And now, dear brothers and sisters, one final thing. Fix your thoughts on what is true, and honorable, and right, and pure, and lovely, and admirable. Think about things that are excellent and worthy of praise. Philippians 4:8



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: 05.14.24

13 19 43 62 64 6

MegaPlier: 3x

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:

\$393,000,000

NEXT DRAW: 1 Days 17 Hrs 30 Mins 35 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

LOTTO AMERICA

WINNING NUMBERS: 05.15.24

17 25 27 47 51 10

All Star Bonus: 3x

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:

\$2,450,000

NEXT DRAW: 2 Days 16 Hrs 45 Mins 35 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

LUCKY FOR LIFE

WINNING NUMBERS: 05.15.24

12 18 24 38 40 5

TOP PRIZE:

\$7,000/week

NEXT DRAW: 17 Hrs 34 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

DAKOTA CASH

WINNING NUMBERS: 05.15.24

6 20 29 33 34

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:

\$101,000

NEXT DRAW: 2 Days 17 Hrs 34 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

POWERBALL

DOUBLE PLAY

WINNING NUMBERS: 05.15.24

8 9 29 57 65 10

TOP PRIZE:

\$10,000,000

NEXT DRAW: 2 Days 17 Hrs 29 Mins 34 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

POWERBALL

WINNING NUMBERS: 05.15.24

19 42 45 55 69 6

Power Play: 2x

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:

\$77,000,000

NEXT DRAW: 2 Days 17 Hrs 29 Mins 34 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

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News from the Associated Press

Editorial Roundup: South Dakota

By The Associated Press undefined

Yankton Press & Dakotan. May 13, 2024.

Editorial: Noem, The Tribes And A No-Win Situation

South Dakota Gov. Kristi Noem has been on a roll of sorts lately, although it's probably been the worst kind of roll possible for a politician.

Details in her new book — such as killing a dog and a goat and questionable facts about meeting foreign leaders — have ignited controversy as she attempts to position herself for the GOP vice-presidential ticket. Her book tour has been a disaster, and she's even gotten into heated exchanges on conservative television networks.

But all these things have taken place on a national stage and, to a degree, have little if anything to do with South Dakota at this moment.

However, back here in her home state, she continues to feud with the state's tribes, some of whom have retaliated in a manner that stirs more embarrassment for Noem.

Last week, two more tribes — including, reportedly, the Yankton Sioux Tribe in Charles Mix County — announced that they are barring the governor from their lands due to comments she made in March concerning the proliferation of drugs on the reservations and the impact these drugs are having on the people. Specifically, Noem stated during a town hall, "We've got some tribal leaders that I believe are personally benefiting from the cartels being there, and that's why they attack me every day. But I'm going to fight for the people who actually live in those situations, who call me and text me every day and say, 'Please, dear governor, please come help us in Pine Ridge. We are scared.'" It echoes comments made to a joint session of the Legislature in January when she said that the cartels have "set up shop" on the reservations.

Tribal leaders angrily condemned Noem's remarks, which she presented without proof. After the comments were made, this newspaper called on the governor to provide evidence of these allegations, which are serious matters if true and potentially slanderous if not.

To date, we know of no evidence produced by her to back the specific allegation of tribal leaders in cahoots with cartels, although she did post a law enforcement video on social media last week about drug problems on the reservations. "Tribal leaders should take action to ban the cartels from their lands and accept my offer to help them restore law and order to their communities while protecting their sovereignty," Noem said.

It's no surprise that the tribal leaders have resorted to issuing these bans on the governor. Because of Noem's profile, it has become national news that the governor of South Dakota is now banned from setting foot in more than 20% of her own state.

Noem's relationships with the tribes have never been smooth. According to The Associated Press, Noem and the tribes clashed over the Dakota Access Pipeline protests at Standing Rock and also during the early days of the COVID-19 pandemic, when some tribes set up checkpoints at the reservation boundaries to keep out unwanted visitors.

The apparent Yankton Sioux decision to ban Noem was an act of solidarity, Council Member Ryan Cournoyer told South Dakota Searchlight. Other tribes that have banned the governor include Oglala, Rosebud, Cheyenne River, Standing Rock and, also last week, Sisseton-Wahpeton Oyate.

There are major drug issues on the reservations, but whether these can be directly attributed to drug cartels and whether tribal officials are somehow in league with the cartels is unknown and/or unproven.

Noem's charge looked mostly like political posturing. Political analyst Cal Jillson, who is based at Southern Methodist University in Dallas, told the AP that Noem is "stoking (the issue) actively, which suggests that she sees a political benefit."

The ban by the tribes, in this current atmosphere, is also a political response, and given Noem's weak-

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ened position and her accumulating problems, it appears to be inflicting some damage on the national stage, which the governor can ill afford.

Either way, it's a bad situation that's getting uglier. It's also needless and avoidable, and no one in South Dakota is winning in this.

END

China and Russia reaffirm ties as Moscow presses offensive in Ukraine

By EMILY WANG FUJIYAMA, CHRISTOPHER BODEEN and HUIZHONG WU Associated Press

BEIJING (AP) — Russian President Vladimir Putin thanked Chinese leader Xi Jinping for efforts to resolve the Ukraine conflict at a Beijing summit Thursday, where the two leaders reaffirmed a “no-limits” partnership that has grown deeper as both countries face deepening tensions with the west.

Putin's two-day state visit to one of his strongest allies comes as his country's forces are pressing an offensive in northeastern Ukraine's Kharkiv region in the most significant border incursion since the full-scale invasion began.

The largely symbolic visit stressed partnership between two countries who face challenges in their relationship with the U.S. and Europe.

“Both sides want to show that despite what is happening globally, despite the pressure that both sides are facing from the U.S., both sides are not about to turn their backs on each other anytime soon,” said Hoo Tiang Boon, a professor who studies Chinese foreign policy at Singapore's Nanyang Technological University.

While both leaders said they were seeking an end to the war in Ukraine, they offered no new specifics in their public remarks Thursday afternoon. China has significant influence as a key supporter of Russia its invasion.

The country claims to take a neutral position in the conflict, but it has backed Moscow's contentions that Russia was provoked into attacking Ukraine by the West, and continues to supply Russia with key components that Moscow needs for its productions of weapons.

China proposed a broadly worded peace plan in 2023, but it was rejected by both Ukraine and the West for failing to call for Russia to leave occupied parts of Ukraine.

“China hopes for the early return of Europe to peace and stability and will continue to play a constructive role toward this,” Xi said, speaking alongside Putin.

His words were an echo of what China said last year when it first offered a broad plan for peace outlining general principles for ending the war in Ukraine.

Putin said he will inform the Chinese leader in detail about “the situation in Ukraine,” and said “we appreciate the initiative of our Chinese colleagues and friends to regulate the situation.” He added that the two planned to engage in further foreign policy discussions at an informal meeting later Thursday.

After Russia's newest offensive in Ukraine last week, the 2-year-old war has entered a critical stage, as Ukraine's depleted military waits for new supplies of anti-aircraft missiles and artillery shells from the United States after months of delay.

Before their remarks, the two leaders signed a joint statement on deepening the comprehensive strategic partnership between their two nations on their 75th anniversary of diplomatic ties, after their initial meeting. Xi said China and Russia will continue to uphold a position of non-alliance and non-confrontation.

Thursday's meeting was yet another affirmation of the friendly “no limits” relationship they signed in 2022, just before Russia launched its full-scale invasion of Ukraine.

Since then, Russia has become increasingly economically dependent on China as Western sanctions cut its access to much of the international trading system. China's increased trade with Russia, totaling \$240 billion last year, has helped the country mitigate some of the worst blowback from sanctions.

Moscow has diverted the bulk of its energy exports to China and relying on Chinese companies for importing high-tech components for Russian military industries to circumvent Western sanctions.

“I and President Putin agree, we should actively look for convergence points of the interests of both

countries, to develop each's advantages, and deepen integration of interests, realizing each others' achievements," Xi said.

In their meeting, Xi congratulated Putin on his election to a fifth term in office and celebrated the 75th anniversary of diplomatic relations forged between the former Soviet Union and the People's Republic of China, which was established following a civil war in 1949. Putin faced no credible opposition in the presidential race, and, like Xi, has not laid out any plans for any potential successors.

On the eve of the visit, Putin said in an interview with Chinese media that the Kremlin is prepared to negotiate over the conflict in Ukraine. "We are open to a dialogue on Ukraine, but such negotiations must take into account the interests of all countries involved in the conflict, including ours," Putin was quoted as saying by the official Xinhua News Agency.

Putin said a Chinese proposal made in 2023, which Ukraine and the West rejected, could "lay the groundwork for a political and diplomatic process that would take into account Russia's security concerns and contribute to achieving a long-term and sustainable peace."

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy has said any negotiations must include a restoration of Ukraine's territorial integrity, the withdrawal of Russian troops, the release of all prisoners, a tribunal for those responsible for the aggression and security guarantees for Ukraine.

Putin has blamed the West for the failure of negotiations in the opening weeks of the war and praised China's peace plan.

Russia-China military ties have also strengthened during the war in Ukraine. They have held a series of joint war games in recent years, including naval drills and patrols by long-range bombers over the Sea of Japan and the East China Sea. Russian and Chinese ground forces also have deployed to the other country's territory for joint drills.

China remains a major market for Russian military, while also massively expanding its domestic defensive industries, including building aircraft carriers and nuclear submarines.

Putin has previously said that Russia has been sharing highly sensitive military technologies with China that helped significantly bolster its defense capability. In October 2019, he mentioned that Russia was helping China to develop an early warning system to spot ballistic missile launches — a system involving ground-based radar and satellites that only Russia and the U.S. possessed.

Slovak leader is in serious but stable condition after assassination attempt, hospital says

By BELA SZANDELSZKY, PETR DAVID JOSEK and PHILIPP JENNE Associated Press

BANSKA BYSTRICA, Slovakia (AP) — Slovak Prime Minister Robert Fico was in serious but stable condition Thursday, a hospital official said, after the populist leader was shot multiple times in an assassination attempt that shook the small country and reverberated across the continent weeks before European elections.

A suspect was in custody, and Interior Minister Matus Sutaj Estok said Wednesday that an initial investigation found "a clear political motivation" behind the attack on Fico while he was attending a government meeting in a former coal mining town.

The minister did not specify what the motivation was. Fico has long been a divisive figure in Slovakia and beyond, and his return to power last year on a pro-Russian, anti-American message led to even greater worries among fellow European Union members that he would abandon his country's pro-Western course.

The attempt on Fico's life Wednesday came at a time of high polarization in Slovakia as thousands of demonstrators have repeatedly rallied in the capital and around the country to protest his policies. It also comes just ahead of June elections for the European Parliament.

Fico's government has already halted arms deliveries to Ukraine, and has plans to amend the penal code to eliminate a special anti-graft prosecutor and to take control of public media. His critics worry that he will lead Slovakia — a nation of 5.4 million that belongs to NATO — down a more autocratic path.

Zuzana Eliasova, a resident of the capital Bratislava, said the attack on Fico was a "shock" to the nation and an attack on democracy at a time when political tensions were already running high.

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"I believe that a lot of people or even the whole society will look into their conscience, because the polarization here has been huge among all different parts of society," she said.

Doctors performed a five-hour operation on Fico, who was initially reported to be in life-threatening condition, according to director of the F.D. Roosevelt Hospital in Banska Bystrica, Miriam Lapunikova. He is being treated in an intensive care unit.

Five shots were fired outside a cultural center in the town of Handlova, nearly 140 kilometers (85 miles) northeast of the capital, government officials said.

Slovakia's Security Council was set to meet in the capital of Bratislava on Thursday to discuss the situation, a government office said, adding that a government meeting would follow.

Fico returned to power in Slovakia last year, having previously served twice as prime minister. He and his Smer party have most often been described as left-populist, though he has also been compared to politicians on the right like the nationalist prime minister of neighboring Hungary, Viktor Orbán.

Fico's comeback caused concern among his critics that he and his party — which had long been tainted by scandal — would lead Slovakia away from the Western mainstream. He promised a tough stance against migration and non-governmental organizations and campaigned against LGBTQ+ rights.

Despite the controversy surrounding Fico's leadership, condemnation of the attack came from both his allies and adversaries. On Wednesday, Russian President Vladimir Putin sent a message to Slovak President Zuzana Caputova, expressing his support and wishing the prime minister a fast and full recovery.

"This atrocious crime cannot be justified," Putin said in the message released by the Kremlin. "I know Robert Fico as a courageous and strong-willed person. I truly hope these personal qualities will help him overcome this harsh situation."

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy also denounced the violence against a neighboring country's head of government.

"Every effort should be made to ensure that violence does not become the norm in any country, form or sphere," he said.

US military says Gaza Strip pier project is completed, aid to soon flow as Israel-Hamas war rages on

By LOLITA C. BALDOR Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — The U.S. military finished installing a floating pier for the Gaza Strip on Thursday, with officials poised to begin ferrying badly needed humanitarian aid into the enclave besieged over seven months of intense fighting in the Israel-Hamas war.

The final, overnight construction sets up a complicated delivery process more than two months after U.S. President Joe Biden ordered it to help Palestinians facing starvation as food and other supplies fail to make it in as Israel recently seized the key Rafah border crossing in its push on that southern city on the Egyptian border.

Fraught with logistical, weather and security challenges, the maritime route is designed to bolster the amount of aid getting into the Gaza Strip, but it is not considered a substitute for far cheaper land-based deliveries that aid agencies say are much more sustainable. The boatloads of aid will be deposited at a port facility built by the Israelis just southwest of Gaza City and then distributed by aid groups.

Heavy fighting between Israeli troops and Palestinian militants on the outskirts of Rafah has displaced some 600,000 people, a quarter of Gaza's population, U.N. officials say. Another 100,000 civilians have fled parts of northern Gaza now that the Israeli military has restarted combat operations there.

Pentagon officials said the fighting in Gaza wasn't threatening the new shoreline aid distribution area, but they have made it clear that security conditions will be monitored closely and could prompt a shutdown of the maritime route, even just temporarily. Already, the site has been targeted by mortar fire during its construction and Hamas has threatened to target any foreign forces who "occupy" the Gaza Strip.

The "protection of U.S. forces participating is a top priority. And as such, in the last several weeks, the United States and Israel have developed an integrated security plan to protect all the personnel," said Navy

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Vice Adm. Brad Cooper, a deputy commander at the U.S. military's Central Command. "We are confident in the ability of this security arrangement to protect those involved."

U.S. troops anchored the pier at 7:40 a.m. local time Thursday, the military's Central Command said, stressing that none of its forces entered the Gaza Strip and would not during the pier's operations.

"Trucks carrying humanitarian assistance are expected to begin moving ashore in the coming days," the command said. "The United Nations will receive the aid and coordinate its distribution into Gaza."

It wasn't immediately clear which U.N. agency would be involved.

Israeli forces will be in charge of security on the shore, but there are also two U.S. Navy warships near the area in the eastern Mediterranean Sea, the USS Arleigh Burke and the USS Paul Ignatius. Both ships are destroyers equipped with a wide range of weapons and capabilities to protect American troops off shore and allies on the beach.

Aid agencies say they are running out of food in southern Gaza and fuel is dwindling, which will force hospitals to shut down critical operations and halt truck deliveries of aid. The U.N. and others have warned for weeks that an Israel assault on Rafah would cripple humanitarian operations and cause a disastrous surge in civilian casualties.

More than 1.4 million Palestinians — half of Gaza's population — have been sheltering in Rafah, most after fleeing Israel's offensives elsewhere.

The first cargo ship loaded with 475 pallets of food left Cyprus last week to rendezvous with a U.S. military ship, the Roy P. Benavidez, which is off the coast of Gaza. The pallets of aid on the MV Sagamore were moved onto the Benavidez. The Pentagon said moving the aid between ships was an effort to be ready so it could flow quickly once the pier and the causeway were installed.

The installation of the pier several miles (kilometers) off the coast and of the causeway, which is now anchored to the beach, was delayed for nearly two weeks because of bad weather. The sea conditions made it too dangerous for U.S. and Israeli troops to secure the causeway to the shore, U.S. officials said.

Military leaders have said the deliveries of aid will begin slowly to ensure the system works. They will start with about 90 truckloads of aid a day through the sea route, and that number will quickly grow to about 150 a day. But aid agencies say that isn't enough to avert impending famine in Gaza and must be just one part of a broader Israeli effort to open land corridors.

Because land crossings could bring in all the needed aid if Israeli officials allowed, the U.S.-built pier-and-sea route "is a solution for a problem that doesn't exist," said Scott Paul, an associate director of the Oxfam humanitarian organization.

Biden used his State of the Union address on March 7 to order the military to set up a temporary pier off the coast of Gaza, establishing a sea route to deliver food and other aid. Food shipments have been backed up at land crossings amid Israeli restrictions and intensifying fighting.

Under the new sea route, humanitarian aid is dropped off in Cyprus where it will undergo inspection and security checks at Larnaca port. It is then loaded onto ships — mainly commercial vessels — and taken about 200 miles (320 kilometers) to the large floating pier built by the U.S. military off the Gaza coast.

There, the pallets are transferred onto trucks, driven onto smaller Army boats and then shuttled several miles (kilometers) to the floating causeway, which has been anchored onto the beach by the Israeli military. The trucks, which are being driven by personnel from another country, will go down the causeway into a secure area on land where they will drop off the aid and immediately turn around and return to the boats.

Aid groups will collect the supplies for distribution on shore, with the U.N. working with the U.S. Agency for International Development to set up the logistics hub on the beach.

Sabrina Singh, Pentagon spokeswoman, told reporters that the project will cost at least \$320 million, including the transportation of the equipment and pier sections from the United States to the coast of Gaza, as well as the construction and aid delivery operations.

The Latest | US military finishes pier for delivering aid into Gaza as Israel presses in Rafah

By The Associated Press undefined

The U.S. military finished installing a floating pier for the Gaza Strip on Thursday for delivering badly needed humanitarian aid into the enclave besieged over seven months of intense fighting in the Israel-Hamas war.

Israel has been pressing its military operations in Rafah, a city along Gaza's southern border with Egypt, and in northern Gaza, where Hamas has regrouped. Around 600,000 Palestinians have been driven out of Rafah since the beginning of last week, the U.N. said. In northern Gaza, Israeli evacuation orders have displaced at least 100,000 people so far.

Some 80% of Gaza's population of 2.3 million Palestinians have fled their homes since the start of the war, with many relocating multiple times.

No food has entered the two main border crossings in southern Gaza for more than a week. Some 1.1 million Palestinians are on the brink of starvation, according to the U.N, while a "full-blown famine" is taking place in the north of the territory.

Israel has portrayed Rafah as the last Hamas stronghold, brushing off warnings from the United States and other allies that any major operation there would be catastrophic for civilians.

Seven months of the war have killed more than 35,000 people in Gaza, most of them women and children, according to local health officials.

The war began Oct. 7 when Hamas attacked southern Israel, killing around 1,200 people there, mostly civilians, and taking about 250 hostage. Israel says militants still hold around 100 hostages and the remains of more than 30 others.

Currently:

- US military says Gaza Strip pier project is completed, aid to soon flow
- The top U.N. court is holding hearings on the Israeli military's incursion into Rafah
- Interior Dept staffer becomes first Jewish Biden appointee to publicly resign over war

Follow AP's coverage of the war in Gaza at <https://apnews.com/hub/israel-hamas-war>

Here's the latest:

GERMANY BANS PRO-PALESTINE GROUP

BERLIN – German authorities say they have banned a group that showed solidarity with "Palestinian resistance in all forms" and raided properties linked to it.

The interior ministry in the western state of North Rhine-Westphalia, Germany's most populous, said it had banned the Palestine Solidarity Duisburg group on Thursday. It accused the group of spreading antisemitic narratives.

The ministry said police searched four properties in the city of Duisburg linked to the group on Thursday.

The region's top security official, state Interior Minister Herbert Reul, said the move "sends the right signal" and added in a statement that "in many cases nothing other than hatred for Jews is hidden behind solidarity with Palestine, as in the case of the organization banned today."

In November, Germany's federal government implemented a formal ban on activity by or in support of Hamas and dissolved Samidoun, a group that was behind a celebration in Berlin of Hamas' attack on Israel.

3 PALESTINIANS KILLED BY ISRAELI FORCES IN WEST BANK

JERUSALEM — The Palestinian Health Ministry said Thursday that Israeli forces killed three Palestinians in the northern West Bank.

The Israeli military did not immediately respond to a request for comment.

The Ramallah-based ministry said that the three men, all younger than 30, were killed by Israeli fire overnight in the flashpoint city of Tulkarem, though the circumstances of the shootings were uncertain.

Since Oct. 7, violence has flared in the occupied territory, with stepped-up Israeli raids into Palestinian cities and towns often turning deadly. The shootings pushed the Palestinian death toll in the territory since the beginning of the war in Gaza to just over 500.

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Also overnight, Israeli police said they shot and killed a man who attempted to stab an officer in east Jerusalem. Police said the officers opened fire as the man charged at them with a knife, killing him. The officers were not wounded and the identity of the attacker was not immediately clear.

Palestinians and rights groups say Israel uses excessive force to subdue suspected attackers. Israel says its forces face complex and often life-threatening situations that demand a response.

In other violence, the Israeli military said Thursday a noncommissioned officer was moderately wounded in a stabbing attack in the West Bank. A manhunt was on for the perpetrator, who fled the scene, the military said.

Attacks by Palestinians have also been on the rise since the war against Hamas broke out on Oct. 7.

U.S. FINISHES PIER TO FERRY HUMANITARIAN AID TO GAZA

WASHINGTON — The U.S. military finished installing a floating pier for the Gaza Strip on Thursday.

Officials said they are poised to begin ferrying badly needed humanitarian aid into the enclave besieged over seven months of intense fighting in the Israel-Hamas war.

The final, overnight construction sets up a complicated delivery process more than two months after President Joe Biden ordered it to help Palestinians facing starvation as food and other supplies fail to make it in.

Israel recently seized the key Rafah border crossing in its push on that southern city on the Egyptian border, complicating those shipments. U.S. troops anchored the pier at 7:40 a.m. local time Thursday. That's according to the military's Central Command, which stressed none of its forces entered the Gaza Strip.

ISRAELI FORCES KILL 3 PALESTINIANS IN WEST BANK

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Attacks by Palestinians have been on the rise since the war against Hamas broke out on Oct. 7.

5 ISRAELI SOLDIERS KILLED IN GAZA, REPORTEDLY BY FRIENDLY FIRE

TEL AVIV, Israel — The Israeli military said Thursday that five soldiers have been killed in northern Gaza, which Israeli media said was the result of a friendly fire incident.

The military released the names of those killed, but did not immediately disclose the circumstances of their deaths.

Israeli Army Radio said a tank fired on a building housing the soldiers, killing five and wounding seven.

There have been multiple friendly-fire incidents throughout the 7-month-long war. At least 27 soldiers have been killed in mistaken fire by Israeli forces, according to military figures.

The incident comes as Israel has reinvaded parts of northern Gaza that it previously said it had asserted control over. Heavy battles have taken place with militants in recent days and rocket fire toward Israel has increased, suggesting Hamas is regrouping in those areas.

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has faced criticism from Israel's top ally, the U.S., as well as at home for not moving toward a postwar vision for Gaza that would replace Hamas with different Palestinian governance.

Along with the fighting in northern Gaza, Israeli troops have also pushed into parts of the southernmost

Gaza city of Rafah.

ISRAELI AIRSTRIKES TARGET HEZBOLLAH STRONGHOLD IN LEBANON

BEIRUT -- Israel's air force conducted airstrikes that targeted mountains in northeast Lebanon close to the border with Syria. There was no word on casualties.

Al-Manar TV of Lebanon's militant Hezbollah group said the airstrikes that occurred around midnight Wednesday struck the hills overlooking the town of Brital. It gave no further details.

The area that was attacked is a Hezbollah stronghold and is a vital route that links the group's positions in eastern Lebanon with Syria's Qalamoun mountains, where Hezbollah also has military presence.

The Israeli military said there were no injuries from the strike.

The Israeli strikes came hours after Hezbollah said it attacked with explosive drones an Israeli military base near the city of Tiberias, their deepest strike in Israel since the two sides began exchanging fire a day after the Israel-Hamas broke out on Oct. 7.

The top UN court is holding hearings on the Israeli military's incursion into Rafah

By MOLLY QUELL Associated Press

THE HAGUE (AP) — The United Nations' top court opens two days of hearings on Thursday into a request from South Africa to press Israel to halt its military operation in the southern Gaza city of Rafah, where more than half of Gaza's population has sought shelter.

It is the fourth time South Africa has asked the International Court of Justice for emergency measures since the nation launched proceedings alleging that Israel's military action in its war with Hamas in Gaza amounts to genocide.

According to the latest request, the previous preliminary orders by The Hague-based court were not sufficient to address "a brutal military attack on the sole remaining refuge for the people of Gaza."

Israel has portrayed Rafah as the last stronghold of the militant group, brushing off warnings from the United States and other allies that any major operation there would be catastrophic for civilians.

South Africa has asked the court to order Israel to withdraw from Rafah; to take measures to ensure unimpeded access for U.N. officials, humanitarian organizations and journalists to the Gaza Strip; and to report back within one week on how it is meeting these demands.

During hearings earlier this year, Israel strongly denied committing genocide in Gaza and said it does all it can to spare civilians and is only targeting Hamas militants. It says Hamas' tactic of embedding in civilian areas makes it difficult to avoid civilian casualties.

In January, judges ordered Israel to do all it can to prevent death, destruction and any acts of genocide in Gaza, but the panel stopped short of ordering an end to the military offensive that has laid waste to the Palestinian enclave.

In a second order in March, the court said Israel must take measures to improve the humanitarian situation in Gaza, including opening more land crossings to allow food, water, fuel and other supplies to enter.

Most of Gaza's population of 2.3 million people have been displaced since fighting began.

The war began with a Hamas attack on southern Israel on Oct. 7 in which Palestinian militants killed around 1,200 people and took about 250 hostages. Gaza's Health Ministry says over 35,000 Palestinians have been killed in the war, without distinguishing between civilians and combatants in its count.

South Africa initiated proceedings in December 2023 and sees the legal campaign as rooted in issues central to its identity. Its governing party, the African National Congress, has long compared Israel's policies in Gaza and the occupied West Bank to its own history under the apartheid regime of white minority rule, which restricted most Blacks to "homelands." Apartheid ended in 1994.

On Sunday, Egypt announced it plans to join the case. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs said Israeli military actions "constitute a flagrant violation of international law, humanitarian law, and the Fourth Geneva Convention of 1949 regarding the protection of civilians during wartime."

Several countries have also indicated they plan to intervene, but so far only Libya, Nicaragua and Colombia have filed formal requests to do so.

A Palestinian converted to Judaism. An Israeli soldier saw him as a threat and opened fire

By JACK JEFFERY Associated Press

JERUSALEM (AP) — At first, it seemed like the kind of shooting that has become all too common in the Israeli-occupied West Bank. A Palestinian aroused suspicions and an Israeli soldier killed him.

But then the deceased was identified as David Ben-Avraham, a Palestinian who had made the almost unheard-of decision to convert from Islam to Judaism years earlier.

His unusual journey had taken him across some of the deepest fault lines in the Middle East and led to some unlikely friendships. Most Palestinians saw him as an eccentric outcast, while many Israelis treated him as an unwelcome convert to a religion that doesn't proselytize.

But in his final moments, he was once again viewed as a Palestinian who was in the wrong place, at a time of widespread anger and suspicion.

A DIVIDED CITY

He was born Sameh Zeitoun in Hebron, home to some 200,000 Palestinians as well as hundreds of Jewish settlers who live in enclaves guarded by Israeli troops. Tensions have run high for decades, often spilling over into violence.

Rights groups have long accused Hebron's settlers of harassing Palestinian residents, and Palestinians have committed a number of stabbing and shooting attacks against Israelis over the years.

At its most extreme, the bitter neighbors live just a few meters apart. In some narrow alleys of Hebron's Old City, metal netting protects Palestinian shoppers from objects thrown by settlers living on the upper floors.

Zeitoun first made contact with Jewish settlers over a decade ago, asking for help converting to Judaism, according to Noam Arnon, a Jewish settler in Hebron who went on to befriend him.

He said Zeitoun was inspired by family stories about his grandfather protecting Jews when riots erupted in 1929, when the Holy Land was under British colonial rule. Palestinians killed dozens of Jewish residents in the city.

"He went further, not only to live as a good neighbor but to join the Jewish community," Arnon recounted.

A RARE CONVERSION

Conversion to other faiths is deeply frowned upon in Islam. In much of the Muslim world, those who do so are cast out of their communities, sometimes violently. Judaism, unlike Islam and Christianity, has no tradition of proselytization.

Such a conversion is even more fraught in Israel and the Palestinian territories, where religion and nationality usually overlap in a decades-old conflict. Judaism is the faith of most of the soldiers who patrol the territory and the settlers whom Palestinians see as hostile colonizers.

Arnon said most of the settlers from Hebron's tight-knit community refused to accept Ben-Avraham. Only Arnon and a few others interacted with him, helping with his conversion application papers.

Religious conversions are rare but legal in areas administered by the semi-autonomous Palestinian Authority. Most are undertaken by Palestinian Christians converting to Islam for marriage.

In Israel, converting to Judaism requires an application to the government-run Conversion Authority. Ben-Avraham submitted two requests in 2018 but did not meet the requirements, according to a government official who was not authorized to speak with media and spoke on condition of anonymity.

With that pathway closed, Ben Avraham turned to Israel's insular ultra-Orthodox community and eventually made his conversion official in 2020, according to documents published online.

AN ARREST

In the year before his conversion, Ben-Avraham was detained by the Palestinian Authority's intelligence unit in Hebron, according to Arnon and a local Palestinian activist, Issa Amro.

The reason for his arrest was never publicly disclosed, but they believe his conversion and open connections with Israelis attracted unwanted attention.

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Palestinians can face arrest or even death if they're seen as collaborating with Israeli authorities. But few would have suspected Ben-Avraham of being an informant because his story was widely known.

Ben-Avraham told the Israeli news site Times of Israel that he was held for two months in solitary confinement and beaten before being released. Around that time, a video emerged showing him holding what appears to be a Quran and pledging his Muslim faith.

Arnon and Amro said his statement was likely made under duress during detention. The PA's prosecution office said it had no information about his case.

After his release, Ben-Avraham moved in with Haim Parag, a Jewish friend who lived in Jerusalem. He returned to Hebron infrequently because of safety concerns and continued his Jewish studies. Parag said the pair regularly prayed together at a nearby synagogue.

"He was like a son to me," he said.

Parag also said he met Ben-Avraham's wife and some of his children, and that several close family members maintained a relationship with him even after his conversion.

The Zeitoun family declined to speak with The Associated Press, fearing reprisal. In the end, Ben-Avraham left little public record of what drove his personal convictions.

A DEADLY SHOOTING

Ben-Avraham was waiting outside a West Bank settlement for an Israeli bus to take him to Parag's apartment March 19 when he got into an argument in Hebrew with an Israeli soldier.

Across the West Bank, Jewish settlers live apart from Palestinians in guarded settlements where they're subject to different laws. Palestinians are generally barred from entering settlements unless they have work permits.

"Are you Jewish?" the soldier shouts in a video that circulated online and appears to have been shot by his body camera.

"Of course," Ben Avraham answers.

"What's your name?" the soldier says.

"David." he replies.

"David?" the soldier says.

"Ben-Avraham, stupid."

The soldier then orders Ben-Avraham to step away from his bag on the ground and raise his hands in the air, before saying sarcastically, "Jewish."

A second video, apparently taken from a nearby security camera, appears to show two soldiers shooting Ben-Avraham from a close distance as he keels over backward onto the sidewalk.

The army said a small knife was found in Ben Avraham's bag after the shooting. Parag said he gave him the knife for self-defense.

The Israeli army said it's investigating the shooting, but rights groups say soldiers are rarely held accountable in such situations.

Israeli forces have been on high alert as the West Bank has seen a surge of violence linked to the war in Gaza. Nearly 500 Palestinians have been killed by Israeli fire since the war's start, according to the Palestinian Health Ministry. Many have been shot dead in armed clashes during military raids, others for throwing stones at troops, and some who were posing no apparent threat.

Palestinians have also carried out several stabbing and other attacks against Israelis.

Arnon said the shooting was a tragic misunderstanding. Parag, Ben-Avraham's friend in Jerusalem, accused the soldiers of racial profiling, saying they saw Ben-Avraham for his background and not his unexpected beliefs.

A FUNERAL

Even in death, Ben-Avraham's identity was contested.

Parag and another Israeli friend asked an Israeli court for the body to be buried at a Jewish cemetery, filing a petition against members of the Zeitoun family who wanted a Muslim funeral. Bezalel Hochman, a lawyer representing the two Israelis, said the Tel Aviv family court ruled in their favor.

After his death caused a public outcry, the Interior Ministry granted him Israeli residency, saying it wanted

"to fulfill the will and desire of the deceased to be part of the nation of Israel."

Ben Avraham was buried in April in a Jewish cemetery on the foothills of Mount Gerizim, near the Palestinian city of Nablus, Parag said. The hilltop is sacred for Samaritans — a small, ancient religious minority that straddles the Palestinian-Israeli divide, just like Ben-Avraham.

No one from the Zeitoun family attended the funeral, said Parag, who's designing his friend's gravestone. He said it will read: "David Ben-Avraham Zeitoun Parag. The Holy Jew."

As countries tighten anti-gay laws, more and more LGBTQ+ migrants seek safety and asylum in Europe

By VERONICA ANDREA SAUCHELLI, MARIA GRAZIA MURRU and GIADA ZAMPANO Associated Press RIETI, Italy (AP) — Ella Anthony knew it was time to leave her native Nigeria when she escaped an abusive, forced marriage only to face angry relatives who threatened to turn her in to police because she was gay.

Since Nigeria criminalizes same-sex relationships, Anthony fled a possible prison term and headed with her partner to Libya in 2014 and then Italy, where they both won asylum. Their claim? That they had a well-founded fear of anti-LGBTQ+ persecution back home.

While many of the hundreds of thousands of migrants who arrive in Italy from Africa and the Mideast are escaping war, conflict and poverty, an increasing number are fleeing possible prison terms and death sentences in their home countries because of their sexual orientation or gender identity, advocates say.

And despite huge obstacles to win asylum on LGBTQ+ grounds, Anthony and her partner, Doris Ezuruike Chinonso, are proof that it can be done, even if the challenges remain significant for so-called "rainbow refugees" like them.

"Certainly life here in Italy isn't 100% what we want. But let's say it's 80% better than in my country," Chinonso, 34, said with Anthony by her side at their home in Rieti, north of Rome. In Nigeria, "if you're lucky you end up in prison. If you're not lucky, they kill you," she said.

"Here you can live as you like," she said.

Most European countries don't keep statistics on the number of migrants who claim anti-LGBTQ+ persecution as a reason for seeking refugee protection under international law. But non-governmental organizations that track the phenomenon say the numbers are rising as countries pass or toughen anti-homosexuality laws — a trend being highlighted on Friday's observance of the International Day Against Homophobia, Biphobia and Transphobia.

To date, more than 60 countries have anti-LGBTQ+ laws on the books, most of them in Africa, the Middle East and parts of Asia.

"The ultimate result is people trying to flee these countries to find safe haven elsewhere," said Kimahli Powell, chief executive of Rainbow Railroad, which provides financial, legal and logistical support to LGBTQ+ people needing asylum assistance.

In an interview, Powell said his organization had received about 15,000 requests for assistance last year, up from some 9,500 the year before. One-tenth of those 2023 requests, or about 1,500, came from Uganda, which passed an anti-homosexuality law that year that allows the death penalty for "aggravated homosexuality," and up to 14 years in prison for "attempted aggravated homosexuality."

Nigeria also criminalizes consensual same-sex relations between adults and the public display of affection between same-sex couples, as well as restricting the work of groups that advocate for gay people and their rights, according to Human Rights Watch. In regions of Nigeria where Sharia law is in force, LGBTQ+ people can face up to 14 years in prison or the death penalty.

Anthony, 37, said it was precisely the threat of prison that compelled her to leave. She said her family had sold her into marriage, but that she left the relationship because her husband repeatedly abused her. When she returned home, her brother and uncles threatened to turn her in to police because she was gay. The fear and alienation drove her first to attempt suicide, and then take up a trafficker's offer to pay for

passage to Europe.

"At a certain point, I couldn't take all these sufferings," Anthony said through tears. "When this man told me that I should abandon the village, I immediately accepted."

After arriving in Libya, Anthony and Chinonso paid traffickers for the risky boat trip across the Mediterranean Sea to Italy, where they both claimed asylum as a member of a group – LGBTQ+ people – who faced persecution in Nigeria. According to refugee norms, applicants for asylum can be granted international protection based on being a "member of a particular social group."

But the process is by no means easy, straightforward or guaranteed. Privacy concerns limit the types of questions about sexual orientation that migrants can be asked during the asylum interview process. Social taboos and a reluctance to openly identify as gay or transgender mean some migrants might not volunteer the information immediately. Ignorance on the part of asylum interviewers about anti-gay laws in countries of origin can result in unsuccessful claims, according to the EU Agency for Asylum, which helps EU countries implement asylum norms.

As a result, no comprehensive data exists about how many migrants seek or win asylum in the EU on LGBTQ+ grounds. Based on estimates reported by NGOs working with would-be refugees, the numbers in individual EU countries ranged from two to three in Poland in 2016 to 500 in Finland from 2015-2017 and 80 in Italy from 2012-2017, according to a 2017 report by the EU Agency for Fundamental Rights.

An EU directive grants special protection for people made vulnerable due to sexual discrimination, prescribing "special procedural guarantees" in countries that receive them. However, it doesn't specify what those guarantees involve and implementation is uneven. As a result, LGBTQ+ asylum seekers don't always find protected environments once in the EU.

"We're talking about people who are unfortunately victims of a double stigma: being a migrant, and being members of the LGBTQIA+ community," said lawyer Marina De Stradis.

Even within Italy, the options vary widely from region to region, with the better-funded north offering more services than the less-developed south. In the capital Rome, there are only 10 beds specifically designated for LGBTQ+ migrants, said Antonella Ugirashebuja, an activist with the Arcigay association.

She said the lack of special protections often impacts female migrants more negatively than male, and can be especially dangerous for lesbians.

"Lesbians leaving Africa often, or more frequently, end up in prostitution and sexual exploitation networks because they lack (economic) support from their families," she said. "The family considers them people to be pushed away, to be rejected ... Especially in countries where this is punishable by law."

Anthony and Chinonso consider themselves lucky: They live in a neat flat in Rieti with their dog Paddy, and dream of starting a family even if Italy doesn't allow gay marriage.

Chinonso, who was studying medicine in Nigeria, is now a social and health worker. Anthony works at the deli counter in a Carrefour supermarket in Rome. She would have liked to have been able to continue working as a film editor, but is happy.

"It gave me the opportunity to grow," she said.

Slovakia's prime minister is expected to survive assassination attempt, deputy says

By BELA SZANDELSZKY and KAREL JANICEK Associated Press

BANSKA BYSTRICA, Slovakia (AP) — Slovakia's populist Prime Minister Robert Fico was shot multiple times and gravely wounded Wednesday, but his deputy prime minister said he believed Fico would survive.

The prime minister had been greeting supporters at an event when the attempted assassination took place, shocking the small country and reverberating across Europe weeks before an election.

"I guess in the end he will survive," Tomas Taraba told the BBC, adding: "He's not in a life threatening situation at this moment."

Doctors fought for Fico's life several hours after the pro-Russian leader, 59, was hit in the abdomen, Defense Minister Robert Kalina told reporters at the hospital where Fico was being treated.

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Five shots were fired outside a cultural center in the town of Handlova, nearly 140 kilometers (85 miles) northeast of the capital, government officials said. Fico was shot while attending a meeting of his government in the town of 16,000 that was once a center of coal mining.

A suspect was in custody, and an initial investigation found "a clear political motivation" behind the assassination attempt, Interior Minister Matus Sutaj Estok said as he briefed reporters alongside the defense minister.

Fico has long been a divisive figure in Slovakia and beyond, but his return to power last year on a pro-Russian, anti-American message led to even greater worries among fellow European Union members that he would lead his country further from the Western mainstream.

Kicking off his fourth term as prime minister, his government halted arms deliveries to Ukraine, and critics worry that he will lead Slovakia — a nation of 5.4 million that belongs to NATO — to abandon its pro-Western course and follow in the footsteps of Hungary under populist Prime Minister Viktor Orbán.

Thousands have repeatedly rallied in the capital and across Slovakia to protest Fico's policies.

A message posted to Fico's Facebook account said he was taken to a hospital in Banská Bystrica, 29 kilometers (17 miles) from Handlova, because it would take too long to get to the capital, Bratislava.

The attack comes as political campaigning heats up three weeks ahead of Europe-wide elections to choose lawmakers for the European Parliament. Concern is mounting that populist and nationalists similar to Fico could make gains in the 27-member bloc.

But politics as usual were put aside as the nation faced the shock of the attempt on Fico's life.

"A physical attack on the prime minister is, first of all, an attack on a person, but it is also an attack on democracy," outgoing President Zuzana Caputova, a political rival of Fico, said in a televised statement. "Any violence is unacceptable. The hateful rhetoric we've been witnessing in society leads to hateful actions. Please, let's stop it."

President-elect Peter Pellegrini, an ally of Fico, called the shooting "an unprecedented threat to Slovak democracy. If we express other political opinions with pistols in squares, and not in polling stations, we are jeopardizing everything that we have built together over 31 years of Slovak sovereignty."

The recent elections that brought Fico and his allies to power have underlined deep social divisions, exacerbated by the war in Ukraine, Slovakia's neighbor to the east.

Gábor Czímer, a political journalist at Slovakian news outlet Ujszo.com, said Fico's return to power had uncovered signs that "Slovak society is strongly split into two camps" — one that is friendly toward Russia and another that pushes for stronger connections with the EU and the West.

"At the same time, I couldn't imagine that it would lead to physical violence," Czímer said.

Estok, the Slovak interior minister, told reporters outside the hospital that the country was "on the edge of a civil war" from the political tension.

"Such hateful comments are being made on social networks today, so please, let's stop this immediately," he said.

U.S. President Joe Biden said he was alarmed by the assassination attempt. "We condemn this horrific act of violence," he said in a statement.

NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg posted on the social media platform X that he was "shocked and appalled" by the attempt on Fico's life. European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen called it a "vile attack."

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy denounced the violence against a neighboring country's head of government.

"Every effort should be made to ensure that violence does not become the norm in any country, form or sphere," he said.

Slovakia's Parliament was adjourned until further notice. The major opposition parties, Progressive Slovakia and Freedom and Solidarity, canceled a planned protest against a controversial government plan to overhaul public broadcasting that they say would give the government full control of public radio and television.

Progressive Slovakia leader Michal Simecka called on all politicians "to refrain from any expressions and steps which could contribute to further increasing the tension."

Czech Prime Minister Petr Fiala wished the premier a swift recovery. "We cannot tolerate violence, there's no place for it in society."

The Czech Republic and Slovakia formed Czechoslovakia until 1992.

PEN America, facing ongoing criticism over its response to the Mideast war, gathers for annual gala

By HILLEL ITALIE AP National Writer

NEW YORK (AP) — With guests including Paul Simon and Seth Meyers, PEN America will gather Thursday night for its annual gala, a dressed-up, high-profile event raised even higher because some wondered if it would be held at all.

The literary and human rights organization has faced ongoing criticism over its response to the Israel-Hamas war, with hundreds of writers alleging that PEN showed limited concern over the suffering of Gaza residents and the deaths of Palestinian writers and journalists. PEN has already canceled its spring awards ceremony after dozens of nominees withdrew and its World Voices festival after hundreds signed an open letter saying they wouldn't participate.

But the gala is the organization's major annual fundraiser, with more than \$2 million already coming in from Thursday's event, and key supporters from previous years are again contributing. All five major New York publishers — Penguin Random House, Simon & Schuster, HarperCollins, Hachette Book Group and Macmillan — are listed as sponsors, along with organizations ranging from Bloomberg and Barnes & Noble to the National Basketball Association and the David Geffen Foundation.

"The test of our partnerships is whether we can find a common cause, not whether we hold every cause in common," PEN America CEO Suzanne Nossel said in a statement.

Hundreds are expected for the dinner benefit at the American Museum of Natural History in Manhattan. Honorees Thursday night include Simon, Wall Street Journal publisher Almar Latour and the Vietnamese dissident Pham Doan Trang. Meyers will serve as emcee.

Authors scheduled to attend include Robert Caro, Candace Bushnell, Jay McInerney and Andrew Solomon, a former PEN president who joined Salman Rushdie, Jennifer Egan and other onetime PEN officials in publishing a letter in April urging "writers to keep faith in the community that we have built together so that PEN America can continue to evolve in ways that serve and elevate the writers as a vital force within society."

Protests against PEN have continued, and writers have publicly clashed. Author-journalist George Packer, a PEN board member, earlier this month condemned what he called the "authoritarian spirit" of PEN critics, alleging in *The Atlantic* they were pressuring others not to back the organization. Novelist Dinaw Mengestu, PEN's vice president, responded on Instagram by alleging that Packer's essay "perverts and distorts the legitimate and necessary criticisms against PEN" and trivializes the Gaza war.

Last week, more than a dozen writers who withdrew from PEN events held a benefit reading at a church in downtown Manhattan, with proceeds going to We Are Not Numbers, a youth-led Palestinian non-profit in Gaza that advocates for human rights. When the opening speaker, Nancy Kricorian, referred to the PEN cancellations, audience members shouted and clapped. Another speaker, writer-translator Esther Allen, criticized PEN for continuing with the fundraising gala while calling off the awards and World Voices.

"The priorities could not be clearer," she said.

California college professor to stand trial in death of pro-Israel protester last year

VENTURA, Calif. (AP) — A judge decided Wednesday that a Southern California college professor will stand trial for involuntary manslaughter and battery in the death of a Jewish counter-protester during demonstrations over the Israel-Hamas war last year.

Superior Court Judge Ryan Wright judge declared after a two-day preliminary hearing that there's enough evidence to try Loay Abdelfattah Alnaji, according to the Ventura County District Attorney's Office.

Alnaji, 51, is accused of striking Paul Kessler with a megaphone in November during a confrontation at an event that started as a pro-Palestinian demonstration in Thousand Oaks, a suburb northwest of Los Angeles.

Kessler, 69, fell backward and struck his head on the pavement. He died the next day at a hospital.

Alnaji was charged with two felonies: involuntary manslaughter and battery causing serious bodily injury, with special allegations of personally inflicting great bodily harm injury on each count, the DA's office said. If found guilty of all charges, he could be sentenced to more than four years in prison.

Alnaji posted \$50,000 bail. An email and phone message for Alnaji's lawyer, Ron Bamieh, weren't immediately returned Wednesday.

Alnaji, a professor of computer science at Moorpark College, had espoused pro-Palestinian views on his Facebook page and other social media accounts, many of which were taken down in the days after Kessler's death, according to the Los Angeles Times.

The Commission on Presidential Debates faces an uncertain future after Biden and Trump bypassed it

By JONATHAN J. COOPER Associated Press

PHOENIX (AP) — The nonpartisan Commission on Presidential Debates, which has planned presidential faceoffs in every election since 1988, has an uncertain future after President Joe Biden and former President Donald Trump struck an agreement to meet on their own.

The Biden and Trump campaigns announced a deal Wednesday to meet for debates in June on CNN and September on ABC. Just a day earlier, Frank Fahrenkopf, chair of the Commission on Presidential Debates, had sounded optimistic that the candidates would eventually come around to accepting the commission's debates.

"There's no way you can force anyone to debate," Fahrenkopf said in a virtual meeting of supporters of No Labels, which has continued as an advocacy group after it abandoned plans for a third-party presidential ticket. But he noted candidates have repeatedly toyed with skipping debates or finding alternatives before eventually showing up, though one was canceled in 2020 when Trump refused to appear virtually after he contracted COVID-19.

In reaching an agreement on their own, Biden and Trump sidelined a commission that aims to set neutral rules and provide a forum that's simultaneously broadcast on all major networks.

The commission suggested in a statement Wednesday that it would not immediately let go of its plans.

The commission was "established in 1987 specifically to ensure that such debates reliably take place and reach the widest television, radio and streaming audience," the statement said. "Our 2024 sites, all locations of higher learning, are prepared to host debates on dates chosen to accommodate early voters. We will continue to be ready to execute this plan."

Representatives for the commission did not respond to requests for further comment.

The Biden and Trump campaigns had both been critical of the commission's plans, including the dates it set in September and October, after voters in many states will have already started casting ballots by mail.

Fahrenkopf on Tuesday said he had not spoken to representatives for either Biden or Trump. All the while, the campaigns had closed in on their own agreements. But he defended the importance of television debates in general.

"You learn a lot about the personality of the candidate," Fahrenkopf said. "Not only where they stand on the issues but how they conduct themselves and how you feel about how they conduct themselves."

Topeka was at the center of Brown v. Board. Decades later, segregation of another sort lingers

By HEATHER HOLLINGSWORTH Associated Press

TOPEKA, Kan. (AP) — The lesson on diversity started slowly in a first-grade classroom in Topeka, where schools were at the center of a case that struck down segregated education.

"I like broccoli. Do you like broccoli?" Marie Carter, a Black school library worker, asked broccoli-hating librarian Amy Gugelman, who is white.

The students were comparing what makes them the same and what makes them different. It's part of their introduction to Brown v. Board of Education, a ruling commemorated at a national historic site in a former all-Black school just down the street. Linda Brown, whose father Oliver Brown was the lead plaintiff in the case, was a student there.

Within a few questions, the first-graders at Williams Science & Fine Arts Magnet school watched the two women hold their arms next to each other. "My skin is brown," Carter observed, "and Mrs. Gugelman's skin is not."

And then Gugelman reached the heart of the lesson. "Can we still be friends?"

The students, themselves a range of ethnicities, screamed out "yes!" oblivious to the messiness of the question, to the history of this place, to the struggles with race and equity that continue even now.

In school lessons, memorials and ceremonies, Topeka is marking its ties to the 1954 ruling that struck down "separate but equal." But just as clear to many is the legacy of discrimination that stands in the way of its promise of equity in Topeka and elsewhere.

The district is now 36% white, down from 72% in 1987. The changes coincide with the nation growing more diverse. Yet none of Topeka's neighboring districts have a white enrollment below 64%; one district has a 94% white enrollment.

This concentration of students of color in districts with higher numbers of poor students partially reflects historic redlining and that poorer families couldn't afford to move to suburban districts with more costly homes, said Frank Henderson, who has served on the state and national school board associations.

Four years ago, the largely white suburban district of Seaman, north of Topeka, where Henderson was the first Black school board member, was forced to confront the darker aspects of its past.

In 2020, student journalists confirmed the district's namesake, Fred Seaman, was a regional leader of the Ku Klux Klan a century ago. The school board ultimately voted unanimously to renounce Seaman and his KKK activities but to keep the name.

"I felt it was probably the best that could be done to be able to address this hot issue," said Henderson, whose 16 1/2-year school board term ended in January.

Madeline Gearhart, who was co-editor-in-chief of the high school newspaper, was disappointed. But now she thinks the student journalists who broke the story laid the groundwork for the issue to be taken up later in a district that is 80% white.

"I just think it's so ironic that in a world where Topeka was a part of Brown v. Board, we still are maintaining the namesake of the district and not trying to disassociate," said Gearhart, who is white and now a junior at the University of Kansas.

Seven years after the historic ruling, Beryl New began attending the all-Black school, Monroe Elementary, where Linda Brown and another plaintiff child were students. It was still largely segregated, not by district policy, but by redlining.

Her family was friends with the president of the Topeka chapter of the NAACP who recruited the 13 families that sued the Topeka district. Their case was eventually joined by school desegregation cases from Virginia, South Carolina and Delaware. On May 17, 1954, the Supreme Court overturned the doctrine of "separate but equal" in the case that bore Oliver Brown's name. A similar case from Washington, D.C.,

was decided at the same time in a separate ruling.

The ruling embarrassed city leaders because they believed they had built equitable schools for white and Black students, said New, who serves on the African Affairs Commission for Kansas and is a former principal and district administrator.

"But of course, there were issues that were deeper than just what a building looks like," she said.

For New, the mission now is to diversify the district's workforce. Nationally, only about 45% of public school students are now white, but around 80% of teachers are, according to the National Center for Education Statistics.

The district is handing out symbolic teaching contracts to high schoolers and vowing to hire them when they graduate from college. And to clear roadblocks for Black aides who want to become full-fledged teachers, it sometimes pays their salaries while they student teach.

That is what allowed teacher Jolene Tyree, who is Black, to finish her degree. The longtime-aide, hopes it makes a difference to her students to have someone who looks like them. Growing up, she recalls having very few Black teachers.

"You just feel somewhat on the outer side," said Tyree, whose mother also attended Monroe and whose first-graders are now learning about the desegregation case.

Back in the library, Tyree's students' lesson was ending. Tiffany Anderson, Topeka's first Black female superintendent, strode to the front of the room, quizzing the children on whether they wanted to be teachers, doctors or even the president of the United States someday.

Hands shot into the air. Anderson said many of the kids wouldn't have done so in the past because they hadn't seen anyone who looked like them in those roles.

"So, boys and girls," Anderson said, "as I'm looking out at the sea of differences that make you all special, ... I just want to remind you, do differences really matter?"

The children shouted "no" before trickling out of the room.

Seven-year-old Jamari Lyons stayed behind.

"It's OK to be white. And it's OK to be Black. You can still be friends. You can still be neighbors. You can still love each other," Jamari said, spreading his arms out wide.

Then he asked: "Right?"

Florida deputy's killing of Black airman renews debate on police killings and race

By TARA COPP and CLAUDIA LAUER Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — In 2020, the top enlisted leader of the Air Force went public with his fear of waking up to the news that a Black airman had been killed by a white police officer.

Then four years later, a Florida deputy shot and killed Senior Airman Roger Fortson in his apartment.

"I doubt if that police officer knew or cared that Roger was an airman. What he saw was a young, Black male," retired Chief Master Sgt. Kaleth O. Wright said in an interview Wednesday with The Associated Press.

After George Floyd was killed by a white Minneapolis police officer in May 2020, Wright, who like Floyd is Black, felt compelled to speak publicly about the fears that he and his younger troops had. It didn't seem to matter how hard he'd worked to serve his country. There were still police who would only see him as a threat.

The national outcry surrounding Floyd's death pushed Wright to lead some initiatives to better address racial issues within the Air Force. But by his own account, they didn't go far enough. Fortson's death has left him wondering if things will ever change.

"Right now, in the midst of what happened to Roger, it's kind of a big deal. People are talking about it, the Air Force is dealing with it. But in a couple of weeks, it will go away, right?" Wright said.

The investigation into Fortson's death is ongoing, and the sheriff's office has not released the name or race of the officer involved.

On Wednesday, Okaloosa County Sheriff Eric Aden went to Hurlburt Field where Fortson served and

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met with Lt. Gen. Tony Bauernfeind, the head of Air Force Special Operations Command, to talk about the next steps.

Sabu Williams, president of the Okaloosa County NAACP branch, was there and said he did not leave with a sense that the sheriff's office thought Fortson's race was a factor in the shooting.

But "bias certainly played a role in this thing," Williams said. "From my perspective, we feel we don't get the benefit of the doubt. It seems to be a 'shoot first, ask questions later' kind of thing."

In a statement posted to his Facebook page late Wednesday, Bauernfeind said the meeting with the sheriff's office was productive and that the command would host a town hall in the coming days to talk further about the shooting and the way forward.

There is no government-managed national data collection system that tracks fatalities caused by law enforcement officers. The FBI has a database, but it's voluntary, and less than two-thirds of local, state, tribal and federal agencies provided data for it last year. In any case, there is no breakdown by race.

Databases kept by private organizations, however, have found that fatal police encounters have risen each year since Floyd was killed and those killings are disproportionately of Black people.

Two databases, one by The Washington Post and another compiled by Campaign Zero, run by academics and activists advocating for police accountability, found that while more white people are killed in police encounters overall, Black people are disproportionately killed by police. Black people make up about 12% of the U.S. population but account for about a quarter of police killings in each of the databases.

In the meeting at Hurlburt, Williams requested that the sheriff's office pursue de-escalation training and unconscious bias training, which he said the sheriff supported.

The sheriff's office said in a statement posted on Facebook that they have received the local NAACP's "list of demands and understand their concerns." In the meeting at the airfield, the sheriff "emphasized his commitment to do what is right," it said.

Michael P. Heiskell, the president of the National Association of Criminal Defense Lawyers, said the deputy's race doesn't matter when determining whether unconscious bias played a role.

"Whatever the race of this deputy, whether he's Black, white, Hispanic, whatever — in this instance where this deputy saw a Black person with a weapon and immediately used deadly force, instead of calmly and reflectively assessing the situation, this is it."

Williams' NAACP chapter is drafting state legislation it wants to name after Fortson. The bill would require police to use de-escalating language before using force if they encounter someone with a gun who is not being held in a threatening position.

Released police body camera footage shows Fortson had his gun in his hand when he opened his front door, but the barrel was pointed to the floor. Within seconds the deputy shot him, only afterward telling him to drop the weapon.

"A little bit of de-escalation or discussion" by the deputy could have given the airman the chance to put down the gun, Williams said. "He wasn't given any time."

MaCharie Dunbar, a board member of the Black Veterans Project, a national organization created to address racial inequality in the experiences of Black service members, said he wonders whether it would have made a difference if Fortson had been in uniform.

"One thing proven true time and again is that if you're Black in America, it doesn't matter what kind of job you have, the clothes you wear, the car you drive, the house you live in," said Dunbar, who is retired from the Air Force and had been stationed at Hurlburt Field. "At the end of the day, you're just Black. And there are some who hold on to this ideology that Black people are dangerous."

Fortson's shooting occurred against a wider backdrop of increased attention by the military to racial issues in its ranks. Over the past few years, internal reviews have found significant disparities in opportunities for promotion and uneven military punishments.

But there has been significant pushback against those efforts, with far-right members of Congress criticizing them as being "woke." Congress this year put caps on what the Pentagon can pay experts in promoting diversity, equity and inclusion.

Wright said that pushback has served to silence much discussion on the issue and, for now, the most

helpful thing commanders can do is listen.

"If you're a white male officer in the United States Air Force, you don't wake up every day thinking about race," Wright said. "We have Black airmen and officers that wake up every day and they go into rooms and they're the only Black person."

He said commanders need to understand the toll this takes.

"It comes with stress and anxiety. It comes with a feeling of not belonging. And, you know, most of us are taught to just assimilate, right? You know, don't complain, don't be the outcast. Don't be the outsider because, you know, sometimes you get labeled as an angry Black man."

If airmen don't feel like they're supported in their own units, it's unlikely they will trust opening up to commanders on an issue as big as Fortson's shooting, he said.

Wright is now thinking about writing another column, and maybe getting involved on the issue again. But he's not sure what needs to be done to prevent a future incident. Bringing the sheriff's deputies on base to help them see Black airmen differently won't fix the problem without a larger, societal change, he said. Asking commanders to have the equivalent of "the talk" with Black airmen that parents have with their Black children about encounters with the police isn't a solution either.

"I don't know that commanders could say anything to airmen that would necessarily be helpful about, 'if the police knock on your door, do this, don't do that,'" Wright said. "Young African American males, they know the drill, right? They already know the story. And, still, it's not enough."

Wright has two sons, ages 22 and 27. His heart has been breaking for Fortson's mother, who buries her 23-year-old son on Friday.

"That could have easily been one of my sons," Wright said.

Topeka was at the center of Brown v. Board. Decades later, segregation of another sort lingers

By HEATHER HOLLINGSWORTH Associated Press

TOPEKA, Kan. (AP) — The lesson on diversity started slowly in a first-grade classroom in Topeka, where schools were at the center of the case that struck down segregated education.

"I like broccoli. Do you like broccoli?" Marie Carter, a Black school library worker, asked broccoli-hating librarian Amy Gugelman, who is white.

The students in the sunny, book-filled room were comparing what makes them the same and what makes them different. It's part of their introduction to Brown v. Board of Education, a ruling commemorated at a national historic site in a former all-Black school just down the street. Linda Brown, whose father Oliver Brown was the lead plaintiff in the case, was a student there after she was denied entry to an all-white school near her home.

Within a few questions, the first-graders at Williams Science & Fine Arts Magnet school watched the two women hold their arms next to each other. "My skin is brown," Carter observed, "and Mrs. Gugelman's skin is not."

And then Gugelman reached the heart of the lesson. "Can we still be friends?"

The students, themselves a range of ethnicities, screamed out "yes!" oblivious to the messiness of the question, to the history of this place, to the struggles with race and equity that continue even now.

Seventy years after the landmark Supreme Court ruling, segregation persists, not as a matter of law but as a reflection of underlying disparities, including in housing. In greater Topeka, as in school systems across America, students of color are concentrated in districts that disproportionately serve low-income families. That racial isolation has lasting consequences as students who attend high-poverty schools have lower graduation rates and less earning potential.

In school lessons, memorials and ceremonies, Topeka is marking its ties to the 1954 ruling that struck down "separate but equal." But just as clear to many is the legacy of discrimination that stands in the way of its promise of equity.

RACIAL DISPARITIES DEEPEN BETWEEN DISTRICTS

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MaKenzie Johnstone, who is white, enrolled two years ago at Williams, one of the magnet schools built to attract white students to historically Black neighborhoods. At her old district, Auburn-Washburn, which is 72% white, the 11-year-old said she rarely came across people of color.

Now her best friend, 10-year-old Malaya Webster, is Black. The fifth-graders spend recess together, chattering incessantly. Sometimes the subject strays to what happened down the street.

"White people," Malaya, explained, "couldn't be next to Black people, which is pretty bad, because we all should be treated the same."

MaKenzie was outraged, saying, "It made no sense at all." She described the desegregation case as a piece of distant history — something that happened "back in time."

To Tiffany Anderson, Topeka's first Black female superintendent, that's not the case.

"Being here in this magnet school environment, you get to see an array of diversity. But if you drive 20 minutes down the road," she said, "you might not see any diversity in the student population or the staff population."

In Topeka, as in much of the rest of the country, court-ordered desegregations have ended but racial imbalances persist. Today, 36% of the Topeka district's students are white, down from 72% in 1987. The changes coincide with the nation growing more diverse. Yet none of Topeka's neighboring districts have a white enrollment below 64%; one district has a 94% white enrollment.

The concentration of students of color in districts with higher numbers of poor students partially reflects historic redlining and that poorer families couldn't afford to move to suburban districts with more costly homes, said Frank Henderson, who has served on the state and national school board associations.

A RECKONING WITH A REMINDER OF RACISM

Four years ago, the largely white suburban district of Seaman, north of Topeka, where Henderson was the first Black school board member, was forced to confront the darker aspects of its past.

In 2020, student journalists confirmed the district's namesake, Fred Seaman, was a regional leader of the Ku Klux Klan a century ago. After student protests, meetings and surveys, the school board voted unanimously to renounce Seaman and his KKK activities but to keep the name.

The vote followed an election in which two pro-name preservation candidates defeated incumbents. Nationally, critical race theory was in the news.

"I felt it was probably the best that could be done to be able to address this hot issue," said Henderson, whose 16 1/2-year school board term ended in January.

Madeline Gearhart, who was co-editor-in-chief of the high school newspaper, was disappointed. But now she thinks the student journalists who broke the story laid the groundwork for the issue to be taken up later in a district that is 80% white.

"I just think it's so ironic that in a world where Topeka was a part of Brown v. Board, we still are maintaining the namesake of the district and not trying to disassociate," said Gearhart, who is white and now a junior at the University of Kansas.

"I would say," she added, "it speaks to the larger effects of how Topeka is divided up."

BUILDING BACK TEACHER DIVERSITY

Seven years after the historic ruling, Beryl New began attending the all-Black school, Monroe Elementary, where Linda Brown and another plaintiff child were students. It was still largely segregated, not by district policy, but by redlining.

Her family was friends with the president of the Topeka chapter of the NAACP who recruited the 13 families that sued the Topeka district. Their case was eventually joined by school desegregation cases from Virginia, South Carolina and Delaware. On May 17, 1954, the Supreme Court overturned the doctrine of "separate but equal" in the case that bore Oliver Brown's name. A similar case from Washington, D.C., was decided at the same time in a separate ruling.

The ruling embarrassed city leaders because they believed they had built equitable schools for white and Black students, said New, who serves on the African Affairs Commission for Kansas and is a former principal and district administrator.

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"But of course, there were issues that were deeper than just what a building looks like," she said.

Vicki Lawton Benson, 78, whose mother, Maude Lawton, was among the Topeka plaintiffs, said she didn't learn about her mother's involvement until she was in high school. Her parents, she said, shielded the family from the ugliness around them.

"I think it's amazing to have the strength of character, to build a legacy and want to be an integral part of changing history for the positive for all mankind," she said.

For New, the mission now is to diversify the district's workforce. In the wake of Brown, tens of thousands of Black teachers lost their jobs in newly integrated classrooms, and the effects of that are evident today.

Nationally, only about 45% of public school students are now white, but around 80% of teachers are, according to the National Center for Education Statistics.

"You hear all of the wonderful things about Brown v. Board," said Anderson, the Topeka schools superintendent. "But the reality, is a lot of African-American teachers lost their jobs."

Her district is handing out symbolic teaching contracts to high schoolers and vowing to hire them when they graduate from college. And to clear roadblocks for Black aides who want to become full-fledged teachers, it sometimes pays their salaries while they student teach.

That is what allowed teacher Jolene Tyree, who is Black, to finish her degree. The longtime-aide hopes it makes a difference to her students to have someone who looks like them. Growing up, she recalls having very few Black teachers herself.

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"It's OK to be white. And it's OK to be Black. You can still be friends. You can still be neighbors. You can still love each other," Jamari said, spreading his arms out wide.

Then he asked: "Right?"

Venezuela's barred opposition candidate is now the fiery surrogate of her lesser-known replacement

By REGINA GARCIA CANO Associated Press

SABANA DE MENDOZA, Venezuela (AP) — At an intersection packed in four directions, rallygoers scream and light up cellphones in the evening as Venezuelan opposition figure María Corina Machado climbs onto a flatbed truck like a presidential candidate.

She has been barred from the July 28 election. Still, she crisscrosses the country, shaking hands, taking selfies, blowing kisses and promising the defeat of President Nicolás Maduro — all as a surrogate for a quiet former diplomat who has not yet begun to campaign.

"María Corina! María Corina!" the people yell, sometimes in unison, in the small Andean foothill town of Sabana de Mendoza. Their cheers are deafening.

Machado's challenge is whether she can translate her fame and charisma into votes for Edmundo González Urrutia, who was chosen by the chief opposition coalition after Machado was unable to overcome a ruling blocking her candidacy.

"I don't remember what his name is," seamstress Danis Cegarra, 48, said of González while she waited with her two children for Machado. "Although we don't know much about him, we are going to support

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him. Well, I am going to support him, because I want a change above all because I have children.”

González is the third candidate that the Unitary Platform opposition coalition has promoted as its own this year.

Machado, a former lawmaker, entered 2024 as the group’s candidate after easily winning an October presidential primary, but a top court loyal to Venezuela’s ruling party affirmed an administrative decision to ban her from office. She appointed a substitute in March, former academic Corina Yoris, who also was barred. Four days later, the coalition picked González.

Machado, a free-market proponent who has been campaigning for more than a year, is now introduced as “opposition leader” instead of candidate at her rallies. González, 74, has yet to step onto a stage with her, or alone.

“He seems to be a very quiet, consensus-based diplomat. María Corina is out there on the stump fire breathing,” said Ryan Berg, director of the Americas Program at the Washington-based Center for Strategic and International Studies. “Her job is to bring out people to vote for Edmundo, but it will be interesting to see what he’s like if he ever goes out there because it’s going to be quite a character mismatch to see him next to her.”

González began his career as an aide to Venezuela’s ambassador in the U.S. in the late 1970s. He had postings in Belgium and El Salvador and served as Caracas’ ambassador to Algeria.

His last post was as ambassador to Argentina during the first years of the presidency of Hugo Chávez, who came to power in 1999 and transformed Venezuela with socialist policies like nationalizing industries and launching welfare programs. Chávez handpicked Maduro to replace him before dying of cancer in 2013.

More recently, González worked as an international relations consultant and wrote a historical work on Venezuela during World War II. He plans to launch his campaign this week. He told The Associated Press last week he expects various opposition leaders to become his surrogates.

In Sabana de Mendoza, about two and half hours after Machado was scheduled to appear on a recent weekday, she delivered a fiery 20-minute, yes-we-can speech from the truck’s roof. She spent one of those minutes talking about González.

“This community is going to elect this person, Edmundo González Urrutia, our candidate for the presidency,” Machado said while holding a banner with González’s headshot. “He is a good man; he is an honest man. I ask all of you, who have accompanied me and have given me your trust and affection, that we vote firmly and safely for a man who will do a great job.”

Machado has not only helped to unify the fractured, personality-driven opposition, her campaigning has drawn the attention — and rivalry — of the ruling party.

At least twice in the past month, the United Socialist Party of Venezuela has held rallies on the same day and the same community where Machado was expected to address supporters.

González’s headshot will appear three times in the July 28 ballot, one for each party he will officially represent. Meanwhile, the headshot of Maduro, who is seeking a third term, will appear 13 times.

Maduro’s 11-year presidency has been marked by a social, political and economic crisis that obliterated the middle class, pushed millions into poverty and turned some government allies into millionaires. Under his watch, more than 7.7 million Venezuelans have abandoned their homeland, settling primarily in Latin America and Caribbean countries.

The effects of the crisis are evident along a country road that leads to Sabana de Mendoza. Abandoned homes and businesses stretch for several hundred meters. Shuttered gas stations are rusting. People fan themselves because there is no electricity for an air cooler.

Hermógenes Alvarado, 56, an unemployed truck driver, said he will vote for “the other” candidate, González, even if he knows next to nothing about him. He said he thinks anyone other than Maduro will bring back jobs to his community.

But next to Alvarado while waiting for a gas station to open, Moises Mendoza, 29, said he is not so certain about Machado’s replacement. The maker of maracas, hammocks and ceramics does not see his vote as automatically transferable. For him, staying home on Election Day is an option.

"I don't know who Edmundo is, and I imagine that people with the opposition are going to support him to be able to remove this government," Mendoza said. "If he doesn't convince me, I won't vote."

Will jurors believe Michael Cohen? Defense keys on witness' credibility at Trump hush money trial

By MICHAEL R. SISAK, JAKE OFFENHARTZ, JENNIFER PELTZ and ALANNA DURKIN RICHER Associated Press

NEW YORK (AP) — With prosecutors' hush money case against Donald Trump barreling toward its end, their star witness will be back in the hot seat Thursday as defense lawyers try to chip away at Michael Cohen's crucial testimony implicating the former president.

The trial, now in its fourth week of testimony, will resume in Manhattan with potentially explosive defense cross-examination of Cohen, whose credibility could determine the presumptive Republican presidential nominee's fate in the case.

Cohen is prosecutors' final witness — at least for now — as they try to prove Trump schemed to suppress a damaging story he feared would torpedo his 2016 presidential campaign, and then falsified business records to cover it up.

With the defense not expected to call many witnesses, Cohen's cross-examination is a pivotal moment for Trump's team, who must convince jurors that his once loyal attorney and fixer can't be believed. The defense has suggested that Cohen is on a mission to take down the former president and will say whatever he needs to put Trump behind bars.

Over two days on the witness stand, Cohen placed Trump directly at the center of the alleged scheme to stifle negative stories to fend off damage to his White House bid. Cohen told jurors that Trump promised to reimburse him for the money he fronted and was constantly updated about efforts to silence women who alleged sexual encounters with him. Trump denies the women's claims.

Cohen also described a meeting in which he says he and Trump discussed with Allen Weisselberg, a former Trump Organization chief financial officer, how the reimbursements for Cohen's \$130,000 hush money payment to porn actor Stormy Daniels would be paid as legal services over monthly installments. That's important because prosecutors say the reimbursements were logged, falsely, as legal expenses to conceal the payments' true purpose.

Trump says the payments to Cohen were properly categorized as legal expenses and the prosecution is an effort to torpedo his campaign to reclaim the White House. His defense has suggested that Trump was trying to protect his family — not his campaign — by squelching what he says were false, scurrilous claims.

Cohen told jurors how his life and relationship with Trump were upended after the FBI raided his office, apartment and hotel room in 2018. Trump initially showered him with affection on social media and predicted that Cohen would not "flip." His tone changed when, months later, Cohen pleaded guilty to federal campaign finance charges and implicated Trump in the hush money scheme. Trump was not charged with a crime related to the federal investigation.

Prosecutors tried to blunt the defense attacks on their star witness by getting him to acknowledge at the outset his past crimes, including lying to Congress about a Moscow real estate project that he had pursued on Trump's behalf during the heat of the 2016 campaign. Cohen admitted on the witness stand to a slew of other lies, including many he says were designed to protect Trump. The defense is expected to seize on his history of falsehoods to cast doubt on his testimony.

Defense attorney Todd Blanche began grilling Cohen on Tuesday with questions not related to the criminal charges but designed to show that Cohen turned on Trump because he wanted fame and revenge. Blanche confronted Cohen with profane social media posts, a podcast and books about the former president, getting Cohen to acknowledge that he has made millions of dollars off his new persona as one of Trump's fiercest critics.

Defense lawyers are expected to question Cohen through the end of the day on Thursday. Manhattan District Attorney Alvin Bragg's office has said it will rest their case once he's done on the stand, though

they could have an opportunity to call rebuttal witnesses if Trump's lawyers put on witnesses of their own. The defense isn't obligated to call any witnesses, and it's unclear whether the attorneys will do so. Blanche told Judge Juan M. Merchan on Tuesday that the defense may call one expert witness, and that there was still no determination on whether Trump himself would take the stand.

In any event, the trial will take Friday off so Trump can attend the high school graduation of his youngest son, Barron.

The first Mexican taco stand to get a Michelin star is a tiny business where the heat makes the meat

By MARK STEVENSON Associated Press

MEXICO CITY (AP) — Newly minted Michelin-starred chef Arturo Rivera Martínez stood over an insanely hot grill Wednesday at the first Mexican taco stand ever to get a coveted star from the French dining guide, and did exactly the same thing he's been doing for 20 years: searing meat.

Though Michelin representatives came by Wednesday to present him with one of the company's heavy, full-sleeved, pristine white chef's jackets, he didn't put it on: In this tiny, 10-foot by 10-foot (3-meter by 3-meter) business, the heat makes the meat. And the heat is intense.

At Mexico City's Tacos El Califa de León, in the scruffy-bohemian San Rafael neighborhood, there are only four things on the menu, all tacos, and all of which came from some area around a cow's rib, loin or fore shank.

"The secret is the simplicity of our taco. It has only a tortilla, red or green sauce, and that's it. That, and the quality of the meat," said Rivera Martínez. He's also probably the only Michelin-starred chef who, when asked what beverage should accompany his food, answers "I like a Coke."

It's actually more complicated than that. El Califa de León is the only taco stand among the 16 Mexican restaurants given one star, as well as two eateries that got two stars. Almost all the rest are pretty darn posh eateries (hint: a lot of expensive seafood served in pretty shells on bespoke plates).

In fact, other than perhaps one street food stand in Bangkok, El Califa de León is probably the smallest restaurant ever to get a Michelin star: Half of the 100 square-foot (9.29 square-meter) space is taken up by a solid steel plate grill that's hotter than the salsa.

The other half is packed with standing customers clutching plastic plates and ladling salsa, and the female assistant who rolls out the rounds of tortilla dough constantly.

In a way, El Califa de León is a tribute to resistance to change. It got there by doing exactly the same four things it has been doing since 1968.

Thousands of times a day, Rivera Martínez grabs a fresh, thinly sliced fillet of beef from a stack and slaps it on the super-hot steel grill; it sizzles violently.

He tosses a pinch of salt over it, squeezes half a lime on top, and grabs a soft round of freshly rolled tortilla dough onto the solid metal slab to puff up.

After less than a minute — he won't say exactly how long because "that's a secret" — he flips the beef over with a spatula, flips the tortilla, and very quickly scoops the cooked, fresh tortilla onto a plastic plate, places the beef on top and calls out the customer's name who ordered it.

Any sauces — fiery red or equally atomic green — are added by the customer. There is no place to sit and at some times of day, no place to stand because the sidewalk in front of the business was taken over by street vendors hawking socks and batteries and cell phone accessories years ago.

Not that you really would want to eat inside the tiny taco restaurant. The heat on a spring day is overwhelming.

The heat is one of the few secrets Rivera Martínez would share. The steel grill has to be heated to an astounding 680 degrees (360 Celsius). Asked how it felt to get a Michelin star, he said in classic Mexico City slang, "está chido ... está padre," or "it's neat, it's cool."

The prices are quite high by Mexican standards. A single, generous but not huge taco costs nearly \$5. But many customers are convinced it's the best, if not the cheapest, in the city.

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"It's the quality of the meat," said Alberto Muñoz, who has been coming here for about eight years. "I have never been disappointed. And now I'll recommend it with even more reason, now that it has a star."

Muñoz's son, Alan, who was waiting for a beef taco alongside his father, noted "this is a historic day for Mexican cuisine, and we're witnesses to it."

It really is about not changing anything — the freshness of the tortillas, the menu, the layout of the restaurant. Owner Mario Hernández Alonso won't even reveal where he buys his meat.

Times have changed, though. The most loyal customer base for El Califa de León originally came from politicians of the old ruling PRI party, whose headquarters is about five blocks away. But the party lost the presidency in 2018 and has gone into a steady decline, and now it's rare to see anyone in a suit here.

And Hernández Alonso noted that his father Juan, who founded the business, never bothered to trademark the Califa name and so a well-funded, sleek taco chain has opened about 15 airy restaurants in upscale neighborhoods under a similar name. Hernández Alonso has been toying with the idea of getting the business on social media, but that's up to his grandkids.

By law, following the coronavirus pandemic, Mexico City restaurants have been allowed to open up street-side canopied seating areas. But El Califa de León doesn't even have a sidewalk for customers to eat on because of all the street vendors, so customers now stand cheek-to-jowl with display stands and plastic mannequins.

Asked if he would like them to make room for a street-side seating area, Hernández Alonso expressed an "if it ain't broke, don't fix it" attitude.

"As the saying goes, why fix or change something that's alright? You shouldn't fix anything," he said, motioning to the street vendors. "It's the way God ordered things, and you have to deal with it."

Driver said he smoked pot oil, took medication before Florida crash that killed 8 Mexican workers

By MIKE SCHNEIDER and TERRY SPENCER Associated Press

OCALA, Fla. (AP) — A man with a long record of dangerous driving told investigators he smoked marijuana oil and took prescription drugs hours before he sideswiped a bus, killing eight Mexican farmworkers and injuring dozens more, according to an arrest report unsealed Wednesday.

Bryan Maclean Howard, 41, pleaded not guilty to driving under the influence-manslaughter and remained jailed without bond for Tuesday's crash. The Florida Highway Patrol says he drove his 2001 Ford pickup into the center line on a two-lane road and struck the bus, causing it to veer off the road, strike a tree and flip over.

The seasonal farmworkers were on their way early in the morning to harvest watermelon at Cannon Farms in Dunnellon, about 80 miles (130 kilometers) northwest of Orlando in north-central Florida's Marion County, a rural area of rolling hills with numerous horse farms and abundant fruit and vegetable fields.

The Mexican consulate in Orlando was working to support the victims, meeting with some at a hotel in Gainesville. Many were taken to AdventHealth Ocala hospital.

Juan Sabines, the Mexican consul in Orlando, told Spanish language news media that seven workers, three of whom were in critical condition, remained hospitalized as of Wednesday afternoon.

Sabines said they had contacted the families of the eight workers who were killed in the crash.

He also said inspectors from the Wage and Hour Division from the U.S. Department of Labor were performing inspections at the work site, and the consul encouraged workers to call the Occupational Safety and Health Administration with anonymous tips if they had anything to report about the employer. The Department of Labor did not respond to a request for comment from The Associated Press.

Sabines said he spoke with the 44-year-old bus driver, also a Mexican man with a visa.

"What he needs the most immediately is help with his mental health," Sabines said.

In the pickup truck driver's arrest report, state troopers say Howard had bloodshot and watery eyes and slurred speech after the crash, which he said he didn't remember.

He told an investigator that he had crashed his mother's car into a tree while avoiding an animal a few

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days earlier, and that on Monday night he had taken two anti-seizure drugs and medication for high blood pressure in addition to smoking marijuana oil. He said he woke up about five hours later and was driving to a methadone clinic where he receives daily medication for a chipped vertebrae, according to the affidavit.

Howard then failed several sobriety tests and was arrested, the Florida Highway Patrol said.

Responding to a judge by teleconference from jail on Wednesday, Howard said he's a self-employed painter and drywall installer with \$700 in the bank, no other assets and no dependents. Howard's head was bandaged and he wore a protective gown typically given to inmates on suicide watch. The judge denied bond, appointed a public defender and set his next court appearance for next month.

Howard's parents did not immediately respond to a Wednesday phone message seeking comment, and the Marion County public defender's office declined comment.

Marion County court records show Howard has had at least three crashes and numerous traffic tickets dating back to 2006, including one citation for crossing the center line. His license has been suspended at least three times, the latest in 2021 for getting too many citations within a year. In 2013, he was convicted of grand theft. A year later, his probation was revoked after he tested positive for cocaine.

Mexican President Andrés Manuel López Obrador said Wednesday morning that 44 Mexican farmworkers were on the bus, hired by a Mexican American farmer to work on the watermelon farm under H-2A visas. Florida farms use about 50,000 H-2A workers each year, more than any other state, according to the Florida Fruit & Vegetable Association.

Six of the dead have been identified: Evarado Ventura Hernández, 30; Cristian Salazar Villeda, 24; Alfredo Tovar Sánchez, 20; Isaías Miranda Pascal, 21; José Heriberto Fraga Acosta, 27; and Manuel Pérez Ríos, 46.

Jose Ventura told Univision that Evarado Ventura Hernandez was his younger brother, and he had helped him come to work in the United States. He said his brother left behind a young daughter.

"We just came for a better future, but now you can see what we found. We found death," he told the Spanish-language broadcaster.

He sobbed as he added, "I was supposed to take care of my brother because he was the youngest."

His sister, Norma Ventura Hernández, said she was angry.

"We are totally destroyed and it's not right," she said. "Let justice be done, and don't allow all these deaths to go unpunished."

More than two dozen people gathered at a memorial service for the victims Wednesday evening outside the Farmworker Association of Florida office, north of Orlando in Apopka, Florida. Some people held white crosses with the names of those killed, some spoke and some sang songs in Spanish.

"Thank you to all who have reached out and offered condolences, help and prayers" for the people hurt in the crash, Cannon Farms said in a Facebook post. It said the bus was operated by Olvera Trucking Harvesting Corp.

No one answered the phone at Olvera Trucking after the crash. The company recently advertised for a temporary driver who would bus workers to watermelon fields and then operate harvesting equipment, at \$14.77 an hour.

A Labor Department document shows Olvera also applied for 43 H-2A workers to harvest watermelons at Cannon Farms this month, again at a base rate of \$14.77 an hour, with promises of housing and transportation to and from the fields.

The H-2A program allows U.S. employers or agents who meet certain regulatory requirements to bring foreign nationals into the country to fill temporary agricultural jobs. Getting to and from the fields can be hazardous: Federal statistics show vehicle crashes were the leading cause of job-related deaths among farmworkers in 2022, the latest year available. They accounted for 81 of 171 fatalities.

Olvera's vehicle, which the highway patrol described as a "retired" school bus, did not have seat belts, Mexican consul Sabines said Wednesday.

The Labor Department announced new seat belt requirements for employer vehicles used for farmworkers on temporary visas, among other worker protections that take effect June 28. Florida law already requires seat belts for farmworker transport using vehicles weighing less than 10,000 pounds. The Florida Fruit & Vegetable Association has called the new federal seat belt requirement "impractical."

Advocacy groups called for stricter laws and enforcement to protect farmworkers, while a GoFundMe campaign organized by the Farmworker Association of Florida to support accident victims and their families had raised nearly \$58,000 by Wednesday evening.

Reported sex assaults in the US military have dropped. That reverses what had been a growing problem

By LOLITA C. BALDOR Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — The number of reported sexual assaults across the military decreased last year, and a confidential survey found a 19% drop in the number of service members who said they had experienced some type of unwanted sexual contact, according to new figures obtained by The Associated Press. Both are dramatic reversals of what has been a growing problem in recent years.

More than 29,000 active-duty service members said in the survey that they had unwanted sexual contact during the previous year, compared with nearly 36,000 in the 2021 survey, according to several defense officials. The decrease is the first in eight years.

At the same time, 8,515 sexual assaults were reported last year involving members of the U.S. military, a decrease from 8,942 in 2022. And officials said the U.S. military academies also saw fewer reported sexual assaults in the school year that ended last spring versus the previous year.

President Joe Biden hailed the improved numbers as he spoke Wednesday to his military commanders, who were gathered at the White House.

"I'm proud that for the first time in nearly a decade, rates of sexual assault and harassment are, within the active-duty forces, are down. They're down. That's because of your leadership," Biden said.

Senior defense officials said the assault numbers are still far too high and there is much more work to do, but they expressed cautious optimism that the military could be turning a corner, with help from an array of new programs and increased personnel. Sexual assault reports in the military have gone up for much of the last decade, except for a tiny decrease in 2020, during the COVID-19 pandemic shutdown.

The officials spoke on condition of anonymity because the report has not been publicly released.

While it's difficult to point to any one reason for the recent decreases, the Defense Department has been making a series of changes over the past year that officials say may be contributing to the shift. The services are using an infusion of more than \$1 billion in the last two budgets to improve programs and hire up to 2,500 personnel as part of a new "prevention workforce" and place them at military installations around the world. So far, more than 1,000 have been hired.

The Pentagon releases a report every year on the number of sexual assaults reported by or about troops. But because sexual assault is a highly underreported crime, the department does a confidential survey every two years to get a clearer picture of the problem. That survey is conducted online.

The data for the fiscal year that ended Sept. 30 also suggests that a greater percentage of service members came forward to report sexual assaults, which has been a key goal for the Defense Department. About 25% of those who said on the survey that they had faced unwanted sexual contact reported it last year, compared with 20% in 2021, according to defense officials and documents reviewed by the AP.

Defense officials have long argued that an increase in reported assaults is a positive trend because so many people are reluctant to report them, both in the military and in society as a whole. Greater reporting, they say, shows there is more confidence in the reporting system and greater comfort with the support for victims, and results in a growing number of offenders being held accountable.

But the Pentagon and the military services also have come under persistent criticism and pressure from members of Congress to reduce sexual assaults and harassment in the military. Service leaders and lawmakers have all argued that the sexual assaults and harassment contribute to the military's struggles to meet recruiting goals.

Alarmed members of Congress have enacted a number of changes, including a new prosecution system that uses independent lawyers. Lawmakers argued that some commanders failed to take victims' complaints seriously or tried to protect those in their units who faced accusations, making victims reluctant

to come forward.

The services have long worked to develop programs to prevent sexual assaults, encourage reporting and bolster confidence in the system. The Army, for example, has a new training program for soldiers when they report to their first duty station that shows service members acting out dangerous situations and teaches troops how to respond.

The number of reported sexual assaults decreased across all the military services, which is a marked improvement over the 2022 fiscal year, when the number of sexual assaults in the Navy, Air Force and Marine Corps all shot up significantly. A 9% drop in Army reports in 2022 offset the increases in the other branches so that there was an uptick of about 1% for the whole military. The Army is the largest military service.

According to officials, the number of sexual assaults reported in the Army decreased from 3,718 in 2022 to 3,507 last year, while the Navy went from 2,052 to 1,942 and the Air Force from 1,928 to 1,838. The Marine Corps had the smallest decline, going from 1,244 to 1,228.

Included in the 8,515 total were 541 service members who reported an assault that occurred before they entered the military and 612 civilians who said they were assaulted by a member of the military.

At the military academies, the number of assaults dipped from 155 in 2022 to 124 in the 2023 school year. Service commanders are still working, however, to address what was a dramatic spike in 2022.

The latest survey also showed that nearly a quarter of all active-duty women said they'd faced sexual harassment, a decrease from the 28.6% in 2021.

One troubling area continues to be female service members' satisfaction with the help they get when they make a complaint and their overall trust in the system and their leaders.

While a large percentage of victims seek out sexual assault response staff, fewer than 70% are happy with the services they get. And that hasn't changed much over the past several years. Roughly the same percentage says they trust the military to respect and protect them and their privacy.

Officials said the hiring of more permanent, full-time workers will help improve that process.

As Zambia schools take on climate change, one teen is spreading the word in sign language

By TSVANGIRAYI MUKWAZHI Associated Press

KASAMA, Zambia (AP) — Every morning, Bridget Chanda places her prosthetic legs beside her bed, pulls on her stockings and pushes the remains of her limbs into the prosthetics as best she can. After six years they no longer fit, and it's painful to stand or walk for too long, but it doesn't faze her much.

"I still manage somehow," she said. "I am a girl on a mission."

Chanda, 18, is intent on helping educate Zambia's deaf community about climate change. As the southern African nation has suffered from more frequent extreme weather, including its current severe drought, it's prompted the Zambian government to include more climate change education in its school curriculum.

But for that to be shared with the deaf community, it's up to people like Chanda to help translate — and it's a task that is more difficult because sign language doesn't include many climate-related terms.

She's a student at Chileshe Chepela Special School in Kasama, in northern Zambia, where many students are deaf or hard of hearing. After Chanda enrolled there in 2022, learning sign language was a way to fit in and bond with those schoolmates, even though she herself is not deaf. Around the same time, climate change was becoming a more topical issue in the country, and Chanda — who finds it puzzling that her hometown in the south near Lusaka has been wracked by drought while Kasama is looking at a bumper harvest — wanted to talk about it.

"Climate change affects our way of life," she said.

The country has been suffering from severe food shortages as water has grown scarce, prompting the president to declare a national emergency in February.

Chanda has served as an interpreter as climate agriculture expert Elizabeth Motale visits communities and schools to educate people on climate change. In one visit to a garden outside Chanda's school, she

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signed as Motale showed students how drip irrigation gets precious water exactly where plants need it. Students smiled and laughed as they perforated a plastic bottle to dribble water onto the plants' roots.

Chanda has even taught Motale some sign language to use when no interpreter is available.

"Bridget has been such a blessing to me," Motale said.

Sign language isn't recognized as an official language in Zambia, but the government has taken steps to ensure its recognition and has made it mandatory for climate change education to also be taught in sign language. But with the language lagging behind, it can be a challenge to teach new concepts.

Chanda recalls struggling to find the words to explain mulching, for example — adding organic material to soil to help trap moisture — or climate adaptation, the ways people can adjust to more extreme weather.

"It's difficult sometimes," said Chanda. "I sometimes have to finger-spell and when I miss a letter or two it makes it difficult for some students who are deaf."

The Campaign for Female Education (CAMFED), a pan-African movement promoting girls' education, launched a new climate education program in schools in March, led by young women graduates. The program, in partnership with education ministries in Zambia and Zimbabwe, aims to help young people — particularly marginalized girls — build climate resilience and explore green careers.

Part of the climate education CAMFED wants to promote is practical. It runs an agriculture guide program that aims to promote climate-smart techniques, like drip irrigation that uses less water, and teaches entrepreneurship skills that may help young women launch farming businesses that use such skills.

Helena Chandwe, an enterprise manager with CAMFED, said it's important to improve how the information is delivered to students with special needs, and that means interpreters who can deliver it correctly and with sufficient context.

Chanda hopes to join the agriculture guides program after finishing her education.

Her lower legs were amputated after she developed gangrene at age 7. Stigmatized and bullied at school in Lusaka, she eventually wound up at Chileshe, where she has found a far more welcoming environment in a place that mixes special-needs students with mainstream students.

Her prosthetic limbs don't keep her from wheeling a friend, Juliet Nankamba, around in Juliet's wheelchair. The two often sit next to each other in class, sharing books and taking part in class discussions and assignments. Asked about her friendship with Bridget, Juliet smiles, laughs and flashes a peace sign.

Chanda struggles to hold back tears as she describes how CAMFED has helped with her tuition and boarding fees. She was appointed head girl at the beginning of the year, and said she dreams of one day becoming an orthopedic surgeon, going far away from Zambia to make her mother proud.

All eyes are on Coppola in Cannes. Sound familiar?

By JAKE COYLE AP Film Writer

CANNES, France (AP) — Francis Ford Coppola on Thursday will premiere at the Cannes Film Festival a film on which he has risked everything, one that's arriving clouded by rumors of production turmoil. Sound familiar?

On Thursday, Coppola's self-financed opus "Megalopolis" will make its much-awaited premiere. Other films are debuting in Cannes with more fanfare and hype, but none has quite the curiosity of "Megalopolis," the first film by the 85-year-old filmmaker in 13 years. Coppola put \$120 million of his own money into it.

Forty-five years ago, something very similar played out when Coppola was toiling over the edit for "Apocalypse Now." The movie's infamous Philippines production, which would be documented by Coppola's late wife, Eleanor, was already legend. The originally planned release in December 1977 had come and gone. Coppola had, himself, poured some \$16 million into the \$31 million budget for his Vietnam-set telling of Joseph Conrad's "Heart of Darkness."

"I was terrified. For one thing, I was on the hook for the whole budget personally — that's why I came to own it," Coppola said in 2019. "In addition, in those days interest was over 25, 27%. So it looked as though, especially given the controversy and all the bogus articles being written about a movie that no one knew anything about but were predicting it was 'the heralded mess' of that year, it looked as though

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I was never going to get out of the jeopardy I was in. I had kids, I was young. I had no family fortune behind me. I was scared stiff."

Gilles Jacob, delegate general of Cannes, traveled to visit Coppola, hoping he could coax him into returning to the festival where the director's "The Conversation" had won the Palme d'Or in 1974. In his book, "Citizen Cannes: The Man Behind the Cannes Film Festival," Jacob recounted finding Coppola in the editing suite "beset by financial woes and struggling with 20 miles of film."

By springtime 1979, Coppola had assembled an edit he screened in Los Angeles — much as he recently did "Megalopolis." When Jacob got wind of the screening, he threw himself into securing it for that year's Cannes.

"Already considered an event even before it had been shown, 'Apocalypse Now' would be the festival's crowning glory," Jacob wrote. He added: "Ultimately I knew it was Cannes' setting — more than a match for his own megalomania — that would convince him to come."

But Coppola wasn't so sure. The film was unfinished, didn't have credits yet and he still was unsure about the ending. But after some back-and-forth and debate about whether "Apocalypse Now" would screen in or out of competition, it was decided: It would screen as a "work in progress" — in competition.

At the premiere in Cannes, Coppola carried his daughter, Sofia, then 8, on his shoulders. The response to the film wasn't immediately overwhelming.

"'Apocalypse Now,' one of the most ballyhooed movies of the decade, got only a polite response at the Cannes Film Festival on Saturday," wrote the Herald Tribune.

At the press conference, Coppola was defensive about the bad press the film received and the attention given to its budget.

"Why is it that I, the first one to make a film about Vietnam, a film about morality, am so criticized when you can spend that much about a gorilla or a little jerk who flies around in the sky?" asked Coppola.

But "Apocalypse Now" would ultimately go down as one of Cannes' most mythologized premieres. The president of the jury that year, French author Françoise Sagan, preferred another entry about war: "The Tin Drum," Volker Schlöndorff's adaptation of the Günter Grass novel. The jury, split between the two, gave the Palme d'Or to both.

"Megalopolis," too, will be premiering in competition on Thursday.

The day after the 1978 Cannes closing ceremony, Jacob recalled running into Coppola at the Carlton Hotel, just as he was leaving.

"A big, black limousine was about to drive off. The back door opened and Francis got out," Jacob wrote. "He came up to me, held out his hand and, as he removed a big cigar from between his teeth, said, 'I only received half a Palme d'Or.'"

Supreme Court orders Louisiana to use congressional map with additional Black district in 2024 vote

By MARK SHERMAN and KEVIN MCGILL Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — The Supreme Court on Wednesday ordered Louisiana to hold congressional elections in 2024 using a House map with a second mostly Black district, despite a lower-court ruling that called the map an illegal racial gerrymander.

The order allows the use of a map that has majority Black populations in two of the state's six congressional districts, potentially boosting Democrats' chances of gaining control of the closely divided House of Representatives in the 2024 elections.

The justices acted on emergency appeals filed by the state's top Republican elected officials and Black voters who said they needed the high court's intervention to avoid confusion as the elections approach. About a third of Louisiana is Black.

The Supreme Court's order does not deal with a lower-court ruling that found the map relied too heavily on race. Instead, it only prevents yet another new map from being drawn for this year's elections.

The Supreme Court could decide at a later date to hear arguments over the decision striking down the

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Louisiana map.

The court's three liberal justices dissented from Wednesday's order. Justice Ketanji Brown Jackson wrote that the judges who struck down the latest map should have had the chance to produce a new map before the high court intervened.

"There is little risk of voter confusion from a new map being imposed this far out from the November election," Jackson wrote.

Liberal justices have dissented from prior Supreme Court orders that put decisions near elections on hold. Those orders invoked the need to give enough time to voters and election officials to ensure orderly balloting. "When an election is close at hand, the rules of the road must be clear and settled," Justice Brett Kavanaugh wrote two years ago in a similar case from Alabama. The court has never set a firm deadline for how close is too close.

Louisiana Attorney General Liz Murrill said she was pleased with the order. "The Secretary of State has consistently stated she needed a map by May 15," Murrill said in an emailed statement. "The plaintiffs did not contest it at trial. We will continue to defend the law and are grateful the Supreme Court granted the stay which will ensure we have a stable election season."

A lawyer for the Black voters praised the court's action. "We are very relieved that SCOTUS agreed with us that it's too close to the election to insert uncertainty. ... We will have a map with 2 majority black districts this fall," Jared Evans, an attorney with the NAACP Legal Defense and Education Fund, wrote in a text using an abbreviation for the Supreme Court.

Edward Greim and Paul Hurd, attorneys for plaintiffs who challenged the new map said Wednesday's order lets the state impose a "brutal racial gerrymander" on 2024 voters who will cast ballots in districts "segregated by race." But they predicted eventual victory in the case.

Louisiana has had two congressional maps blocked by federal courts in the past two years in a swirl of lawsuits that included a previous intervention by the Supreme Court.

The state's Republican-dominated legislature drew a new congressional map in 2022 to account for population shifts reflected in the 2020 Census. But the changes effectively maintained the status quo of five Republican-leaning majority white districts and one Democratic-leaning majority Black district.

Noting the size of the state's Black population, civil rights advocates challenged the map in a Baton Rouge-based federal court and won a ruling from U.S. District Judge Shelly Dick that the districts likely discriminated against Black voters.

The Supreme Court put Dick's ruling on hold while it took up a similar case from Alabama. The justices allowed both states to use the maps in the 2022 elections even though both had been ruled likely discriminatory by federal judges.

The high court eventually affirmed the ruling from Alabama and returned the Louisiana case to federal court, with the expectation that new maps would be in place for the 2024 elections.

The 5th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals gave lawmakers in Louisiana a deadline of early 2024 to draw a new map or face the possibility of a court-imposed map.

New Gov. Jeff Landry, a Republican, had defended Louisiana's congressional map as attorney general. Now, though, he urged lawmakers to pass a new map with another majority Black district at a January special session. He backed a map that created a new majority Black district stretching across the state, linking parts of the Shreveport, Alexandria, Lafayette and Baton Rouge areas.

A different set of plaintiffs, a group of self-described non-African Americans, filed suit in western Louisiana, claiming that the new map was also illegal because it was driven too much by race, in violation of the Constitution. A divided panel of federal judges ruled 2-1 in April in their favor and blocked use of the new map.

Landry and Murrill, a Republican ally, argued that the new map should be used, saying it was adopted with political considerations — not race — as a driving factor. They note that it provides politically safe districts for House Speaker Mike Johnson and Majority Leader Steve Scalise, fellow Republicans. Some lawmakers have also noted that the one Republican whose district is greatly altered in the new map, Rep. Garret Graves, supported a GOP opponent of Landry in last fall's governor's race. The change to Graves'

district bolsters the argument that politics was the driving factor rather than race, lawmakers have said. Voting patterns show a new mostly Black district would give Democrats the chance to capture another House seat and send a second Black representative to Congress from Louisiana. Democratic state Sen. Cleo Fields, a former congressman who is Black, had said he will run for Congress in the new district, if it's in place for the next election.

US border arrests fall in April, bucking usual spring increase as Mexico steps up enforcement

WASHINGTON (AP) — Arrests for illegally crossing the U.S. border from Mexico fell more than 6% in April to the fourth lowest month of the Biden administration, authorities said Wednesday, bucking the usual spring increase.

U.S. officials have largely attributed the decline to more enforcement in Mexico, including in yards where migrants are known to board freight trains. Mexico won't allow more than 4,000 illegal crossings a day to the U.S., Alicia Barcena, Mexico's foreign relations secretary, told reporters Tuesday, down from more than 10,000 Border Patrol arrests on some days in December.

Migrants were arrested 128,884 times in April, down from 137,480 in March and barely half a record-high of 249,737 in December, U.S. Customs and Border Protection said. While still historically high, the sharp decline in arrests since late December is welcome news for President Joe Biden on a key issue that has nagged him in election-year polls.

San Diego became the busiest of the Border Patrol's nine sectors along the Mexican border for the first time since the 1990s with 37,370, replacing Tucson, Arizona.

Troy Miller, Customs and Border Protection's acting commissioner, said more enforcement, including deportations, and cooperation with other countries resulted in lower numbers.

"As a result of this increased enforcement, southwest border encounters have not increased, bucking previous trends. We will remain vigilant to continually shifting migration patterns," he said.

Authorities granted entry to 41,400 people in April at land crossings with Mexico through an online appointment app called CBP One, bringing the total to more than 591,000 since it was introduced in January 2023.

The U.S. also allows up to 30,000 Cubans, Haitians, Nicaraguans and Venezuelans if they apply online with a financial sponsor and arrive on commercial flights. About 435,000 entered the country that way through April, including 91,000 Cubans, 166,700 Haitians, 75,700 Nicaraguans and 101,200 Venezuelans.

Now armed with AI, America's adversaries will try to influence election, security officials warn

By DAVID KLEPPER and ERIC TUCKER Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — America's foreign adversaries will again seek to influence the upcoming U.S. elections, top security officials warned members of the Senate Wednesday, harnessing the latest innovations in artificial intelligence to spread online disinformation, mislead voters and undermine trust in democracy.

But the U.S. has greatly improved its ability to safeguard election security and identify and combat foreign disinformation campaigns since 2016, when Russia sought to influence the election, U.S. Director of National Intelligence Avril Haines testified to the Senate Intelligence Committee.

The latest warning from security officials comes as advances in AI make it easier and cheaper than ever to create lifelike images, video and audio that can fool even the most discerning voter. Other tools of disinformation include state media, online influencers and networks of fake accounts that can quickly amplify false and misleading content.

Russia, China and Iran remain the main actors looking to interfere with the 2024 election, security officials said, but due to advances in technology other nations or even domestic groups could try and mount

their own sophisticated disinformation campaigns.

Russia remains "the most active foreign threat to our elections," Haines said, using its state media and online influencers to erode trust in democratic institutions and U.S. support for Ukraine.

In recent months, Russia has seized on America's debate over immigration, spreading posts that exaggerate the impact of migration in an apparent effort to stoke outrage among American voters.

China did not directly try to influence the outcome of the 2020 presidential election, mostly because of concerns over blowback, Haines said.

China's ties to TikTok were one of the things cited by members of Congress who recently voted to force TikTok's Beijing-based owner to sell the platform.

"Needless to say, we will continue to monitor their activity," Haines said of China.

Iran, meanwhile, has used social media platforms to issue threats and try to confuse voters, Haines said. She cited a 2020 episode in which U.S. officials accused Tehran of distributing false content and being behind a flurry of emails sent to Democratic voters in multiple battleground states that appeared to be aimed at intimidating them into voting for President Donald Trump.

Previous efforts by federal agencies to call out foreign disinformation on platforms like Facebook or X, formerly known as Twitter, have quickly become caught up in debates over government surveillance, First Amendment rights and whether government agencies should be tasked with figuring out what's true.

Republican Sen. Marco Rubio of Florida, the top Republican on the committee, questioned the officials about what they could do and how they would respond to "clearly fake" AI-generated videos about candidates that surface before the election.

"Who would be the person that would stand before the American people and say, 'We're not interfering in the election. We just want you to know the video's not real. Who would be in charge of that?'" Rubio asked.

Haines responded that "I could be the person who goes out and makes that determination" but said there may be certain situations in which it would make more sense for state or local authorities to make that announcement.

Wednesday's hearing on foreign threats to the election also covered the risk that an adversary could hack into state or local election systems, either to change the vote or to create the perception that the outcome can't be trusted.

Jen Easterly, director of the Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency, said the federal government has worked closely with state and local election officials to ensure the 2024 election is the most secure ever.

"Election infrastructure has never been more secure," Easterly said.

Senators urge \$32 billion in emergency spending on AI after finishing yearlong review

By MARY CLARE JALONICK and MATT O'BRIEN Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — A bipartisan group of four senators led by Majority Leader Chuck Schumer is recommending that Congress spend at least \$32 billion over the next three years to develop artificial intelligence and place safeguards around it, writing in a report released Wednesday that the U.S. needs to "harness the opportunities and address the risks" of the quickly developing technology.

The group of two Democrats and two Republicans said in an interview Tuesday that while they sometimes disagreed on the best paths forward, they felt it was imperative to find consensus with the technology taking off and other countries like China investing heavily in its development. They settled on a raft of broad policy recommendations that were included in their 33-page report.

While any legislation related to AI will be difficult to pass, especially in an election year and in a divided Congress, the senators said that regulation and incentives for innovation are urgently needed.

"It's complicated, it's difficult, but we can't afford to put our head in the sand," said Schumer, D-N.Y., who convened the group last year after AI chatbot ChatGPT entered the marketplace and showed that it

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could in many ways mimic human behavior.

The group recommends in the report that Congress draft emergency spending legislation to boost U.S. investments in artificial intelligence, including new research and development and new testing standards to try to understand the potential harms of the technology. The group also recommended new requirements for transparency as artificial intelligence products are rolled out and that studies be conducted into the potential impact of AI on jobs and the U.S. workforce.

Republican Sen. Mike Rounds, a member of the group, said the money would be well spent not only to compete with other countries who are racing into the AI space but also to improve Americans' quality of life — supporting technology that could help cure some cancers or chronic illnesses, he said, or improvements in weapons systems could help the country avoid a war.

"This is a time in which the dollars we put into this particular investment will pay dividends for the taxpayers of this country long term," he said.

The group came together a year ago after Schumer made the issue a priority — an unusual posture for a majority leader — and brought in Democratic Sen. Martin Heinrich of New Mexico, Republican Sen. Todd Young of Indiana and Rounds of South Dakota.

As the four senators began meeting with tech executives and experts, Schumer said in a speech over the summer that the rapid growth of artificial intelligence tools was a "moment of revolution" and that the government must act quickly to regulate companies that are developing it.

Young said the development of ChatGPT, along with other similar models, made them realize that "we're going to have to figure out collectively as an institution" how to deal with the technology.

"In the same breath that people marveled at the possibilities of just that one generative AI platform, they began to hypothesize about future risks that might be associated with future developments of artificial intelligence," Young said.

While passing legislation will be tough, the group's recommendations lay out the first comprehensive road map on an issue that is complex and has little precedent for consideration in Congress. The group spent almost a year compiling the list of policy suggestions after talking privately and publicly to a range of technology companies and other stakeholders, including in eight forums to which the entire Senate was invited.

The first forum in September included X owner and Tesla CEO Elon Musk, Meta's Mark Zuckerberg, former Microsoft CEO Bill Gates and Google CEO Sundar Pichai.

Schumer said after the private meeting that he had asked everyone in the room — including almost two dozen tech executives, advocates and skeptics — whether government should have a role in the oversight of artificial intelligence, and "every single person raised their hand."

Still, there are diverse views in the tech industry about the future of AI. Musk has voiced dire concerns evoking popular science fiction about the possibility of humanity losing control to advanced AI systems if the right safeguards are not in place. Others are more concerned about the details of how proposed regulations could affect their business, from possible government oversight over the most capable AI systems to tracking of highly sought-after AI computer chips for national security.

The four senators are pitching their recommendations to Senate committees, which are then tasked with reviewing them and trying to figure out what is possible. The Senate Rules Committee is already moving forward with legislation, on Wednesday approving three bills that would ban deceptive AI content used to influence federal elections, require AI disclaimers on political ads and create voluntary guidelines for state election offices that oversee candidates.

Schumer, who controls the Senate's schedule, said those election bills were among the chamber's "highest priorities" this year. He also said he planned to sit down with House Speaker Mike Johnson, who has expressed interest in looking at AI policy but has not said how he would do that.

Still, winning enough votes on the legislation may be not be easy. The bills that would ban deceptive AI election content and require AI disclaimers on political ads were approved by the Rules panel on party line votes, with no GOP support. Republicans argued that the legislation would usurp states that are already acting on the issue and potentially violate political candidates' rights to free speech.

Senate Rules Committee Chairwoman Amy Klobuchar, a Democrat from Minnesota, said that the rapid development of AI is a "hair on fire" moment for elections. And while states may be passing similar bills, she said the country is "unguarded on the federal level."

Some experts warn that the U.S. is behind many other countries on the issue, including the EU which took the lead in March when they gave final approval to a sweeping new law governing artificial intelligence in the 27-nation bloc. Europe's AI Act sets tighter rules for the AI products and services deemed to pose the highest risks, such as in medicine, critical infrastructure or policing. But it also includes provisions regulating the new class of generative AI systems like ChatGPT that have rapidly advanced in recent years.

"It's time for Congress to act," said Alexandra Reeve Givens, CEO of the Center for Democracy & Technology. "It's not enough to focus on investment and innovation. We need guardrails to ensure the responsible development of AI."

Others said the senators' road map wasn't tough enough on tech companies. Some groups calling for tighter AI safeguards and civil rights protections said it showed too much deference to industry priorities.

Alix Dunn is a senior adviser at AI Now, a policy research center that pushes for more accountability around AI technology. She criticized the closed door sessions with tech CEOs. "I don't see how it got us even an inch closer to meaningful government action on AI," she said.

The senators emphasized balance between innovation and safeguards, and also the urgency of action.

"We have the lead at this moment in time on this issue, and it will define the relationship between the United States and our allies and other competing powers in the world for a long time to come," Heinrich said.

Netanyahu fends off criticism at home and abroad over his lack of a postwar plan for Gaza

By TIA GOLDENBERG, WAFAA SHURAFU and ABBY SEWELL Associated Press

JERUSALEM (AP) — Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu on Wednesday fended off criticism that he is not planning for a postwar reality in the Gaza Strip, saying it was impossible to prepare for any scenario in the embattled Palestinian enclave until Hamas is defeated.

Netanyahu has faced increasing pressure from critics at home and allies abroad, especially the United States, to present a plan for governance, security and rebuilding of Gaza.

He has indicated Israel seeks to maintain open-ended control over security affairs and rejected a role for the internationally recognized Palestinian Authority. That position stands in contrast to the vision set forth by the Biden administration, which wants Palestinian governance in Gaza and the Israeli-occupied West Bank as a precursor to Palestinian statehood.

The debate over a postwar vision for Gaza comes as fighting has erupted again in places Israel had targeted in the early days of the war and said it had under control, as well as in Gaza's southernmost city of Rafah, which has sent hundreds of thousands fleeing.

For Palestinians, that displacement has renewed painful memories of mass expulsion from what is now Israel in the war surrounding the country's creation in 1948. Palestinians across the Middle East on Wednesday were marking the 76th anniversary of that event.

The latest war began on Oct. 7 with Hamas' rampage across southern Israel, through some of the same areas where Palestinians fled from their villages decades earlier. Palestinian militants killed some 1,200 people that day, mostly civilians, and took another 250 hostage.

Israel's fierce response has obliterated entire neighborhoods in Gaza and forced some 80% of the population to flee their homes. Gaza's Health Ministry says over 35,000 Palestinians have been killed, without distinguishing between civilians and combatants in its count. The U.N. says there is widespread hunger and that northern Gaza is in "full-blown famine."

'THE DAY AFTER'

The renewed fighting in areas where Israel's military had largely asserted control, as well as a recent uptick in rocket fire from Gaza toward Israel, suggests that Hamas is regrouping. That has prompted criti-

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cism in Israel that Netanyahu is squandering military gains in Gaza by not moving toward a postwar vision for the territory.

Netanyahu said Israel has been trying for months to find a solution to "this complex problem," but that a postwar plan could not be promoted so long as Hamas was not defeated. He said Israel had tried to enlist local Palestinians to assist with food distribution but that the effort failed because Hamas threatened them, a claim that could not be verified.

"All the talk about 'the day after,' while Hamas stays intact, will remain mere words devoid of content," Netanyahu said.

Senior members of his Cabinet disagree. In a nationally televised statement Wednesday, Netanyahu's defense minister increased the criticism, saying he had repeatedly pleaded with the Cabinet to make a decision on a postwar vision for Gaza that would see the creation of a new Palestinian civilian leadership. Yoav Gallant, a member of the three-man War Cabinet, said the government has refused to discuss the issue.

Gallant said not doing so would produce a reality where Israel could again exert civilian control over the Gaza Strip, which he said he opposed. Israel withdrew troops and settlers from the territory in 2005 after capturing it in the 1967 Mideast war.

"I call on Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu to make a decision and declare that Israel will not establish civilian control over the Gaza Strip, that Israel will not establish military governance in the Gaza Strip and that a governing alternative to Hamas in the Gaza Strip will be advanced immediately," he said, suggesting Netanyahu's decision-making was based on political considerations.

Hamas' top leader Ismail Haniyeh said Wednesday in response to the debate over Gaza's postwar future that "the Hamas movement is here to stay."

Earlier this week, U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken chided Israel for the lack of a plan in some of his strongest public criticism.

Disagreements over Gaza's future have led to increasingly public friction between Israel and the U.S., its closest ally. The U.S. has also been outspoken against an Israeli incursion into Rafah, which Israel sees as essential to defeating Hamas but where more than half of Gaza's population of 2.3 million have sought shelter.

Israeli troops launched operations in Rafah last week, seizing the nearby crossing into Egypt and moving into eastern districts of the city in battles with Hamas fighters. Though still short of the full-on invasion Israel has threatened, the incursion has already caused chaos.

The United Nations said Wednesday that over the last week, as Israeli forces have moved into parts of Rafah, some 600,000 have fled the city. During that time, another 100,000 have fled parts of northern Gaza that the Israeli military has reinvaded.

SAME SCENES PLAY OUT

The Nakba, Arabic for "catastrophe," refers to the 700,000 Palestinians who fled or were driven out of what today is Israel before and during the 1948 war surrounding its creation, in which five Arab countries attacked the nascent state.

More than twice that number have been displaced within Gaza in the latest war.

The refugees and their descendants number some 6 million and live in built-up refugee camps in Lebanon, Syria, Jordan and the Israeli-occupied West Bank. In Gaza, they are the majority of the population, with most families having been pushed out of what is now central and southern Israel.

Israel rejects what the Palestinians say is their right of return because if it was fully implemented, it would likely result in a Palestinian majority within Israel's borders.

"We lived through the Nakba not just once, but several times," said Umm Shadi Sheikh Khalil, who was displaced from Gaza City and now lives in a tent in the central Gaza town of Deir al-Balah.

At a center for older residents of the Shatila refugee camp in Beirut, Amina Taher recalled the day her family's house in the village of Deir al-Qassi, in today's northern Israel, collapsed over their heads after being shelled by Israeli forces in 1948. The house was next to a school that Palestinian fighters used as a base, she said.

Taher, then 3, was pulled from the rubble unharmed, but her 1-year-old sister was killed. Now she has

seen the same scenes play out in news coverage of Gaza.

"When I would watch the news, I had a mental breakdown because then I remembered when the house fell on me," she said. "What harm did these children do to get killed like this?"

This, too, could pass: Christian group's rule keeping beaches closed on Sunday mornings may end

By WAYNE PARRY Associated Press

OCEAN GROVE, N.J. (AP) — In this seaside community that calls itself "God's Square Mile at the Jersey Shore," all the land is owned by a religious group that has for generations enforced an 11th Commandment: Thou shalt stay off the beach on Sunday morning.

But there are signs that decades-old policy may be coming to an end as a way to resolve a court case brought by the state of New Jersey that could cost the group \$25,000 a day in fines for violating state beach access laws.

The Ocean Grove Camp Meeting Association, which has kept beaches closed until noon on Sundays, has deleted that restriction from its website. Item 4 under "Beach Regulations" used to outline the Sunday morning closure. Now, just the number "4" remains on the site, followed by blank space.

The association and its lawyer did not immediately respond to requests for clarification Wednesday, and the state attorney general's office said it was looking into the matter.

Restricting activity on Sunday morning is central to Ocean Grove's very existence. It was founded in 1869 as a Methodist retreat, centered on an enormous hall called The Great Auditorium, where worship services are held near rows of tent cabins where summer pilgrims come to live in its shadow.

The association, a nonprofit Christian entity that owns the beach and the land under all of Ocean Grove's houses under a charter given to it by the state in 1870, has long kept people off the beach before noon on Sundays.

The state of New Jersey is challenging the rule, threatening fines and taking the association to court.

The dispute involves an issue that has been contested for generations but never quite settled here: Does a religious group have the right to impose its beliefs on everyone in a community, including those of other faiths, or no faith at all?

"We just feel that's wrong, that it's not what America is supposed to be about, and it makes living here very uncomfortable when you're gay, when you're Jewish, an atheist or agnostic," said Paul Martin, who bought a house in Ocean Grove in 2003 with his wife, Aliza Greenblatt.

"We have the right to live here, too," said Greenblatt, who like her husband is Jewish. "We're not anti-Christian. We just want the line between church and state to be respected."

The couple were among those who defied the rules last year and went onto the beach on Sunday mornings. They said association personnel called the police, but officers did not intervene once they arrived.

Harriet Bernstein is part of a lesbian couple from Ocean Grove whose request to use the boardwalk pavilion for their civil union ceremony was rejected in 2007 by the association on religious grounds. After a court ruled in favor of the couple, the association stopped allowing anyone to wed in the pavilion.

"I feel less comfortable because of the imposition of their religion on everybody that lives here," Bernstein said. Referring to images of a cross on the badges people are required to purchase in order to use the beach, she said, "I'm Jewish; I don't wear crosses."

The association did not respond to repeated requests for an interview in recent weeks.

But in court papers it says what the state is trying to do violates U.S. Constitutional amendments concerning freedom of religion, the taking of private property, and due process and equal protection.

Church and state have never been as neatly separated in Ocean Grove as they are in other places.

Although it is a part of Neptune Township, just north of Asbury Park and about 60 miles south of New York City, Ocean Grove once was its own municipality, having been incorporated by the state Legislature in 1920. But a court ruled that act unconstitutional and dissolved the municipality a year later.

The Sunday morning beach closures dismay some but delight others.

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"Ocean Grove is God's place," said Mary Martin, an 87-year-old retired teacher who moved here from northern New Jersey in 1960. "I love it here. I love the Bible hour six days a week, great speakers, great singing, great fellowship, great joy, everyone welcome."

Martin shares a feeling often voiced by association members and their supporters that a cherished way of life is under attack in Ocean Grove.

"It used to be no beach at all on Sunday," she said. "Then we gave in to them and said, 'OK, after noon on Sunday.' Now they want to take that away, too. We should be able to enjoy our Sundays."

Neil Ostrander has a part-time job with the association helping get the auditorium ready for summer. When newcomers arrived, he said, "they knew the deal" about its ownership by a Christian group.

"It's like when someone moves above a bar that's been a bar for 170 years, and then sues it for being a bar," he said.

In court papers, the association writes that "all members of the public are welcome (onto the beach) 365 days a year. Anyone, regardless of race, creed, religion or orientation is welcome onto this private property 99.5% of the year."

Public access is restricted for 45 hours out of the year between Memorial Day and Labor Day, a policy the association called "abundantly reasonable."

"The slight limitation on physical presence on the beachfront on the Lord's Day is consistent with the plaintiff's mission to build and maintain a beautiful seaside community to serve as a place for meditation, reflection and renewal during the summer months," the association wrote. "The ability to reflect upon an empty and quiet beachfront during this limited time is at the core of plaintiff's very creation. Regardless of one's beliefs, spending the morning hours in an unhurried morning stroll on a less crowded boardwalk has emotional, spiritual and bodily health benefits."

While acknowledging the association's beach policy "is steeped in its Christian faith," the group cites several nonreligious reasons for it as well, including allowing lifeguards to have a few hours off at the end of a busy week and advancing "a better quality of life" for residents and visitors, including having more parking available for Sunday morning visits to shops and eateries.

The state takes a contrary view, saying that using chains and locks to keep the public off the sand on Sunday morning violates the association's authority to operate a beach.

A Swiss court sentences a former Gambian interior minister to 20 years for crimes against humanity

By JAMEY KEATEN and ABDOLIE JOHN Associated Press

GENEVA (AP) — Switzerland's top criminal court on Wednesday convicted a former interior minister of Gambia for crimes against humanity and sentenced him to 20 years over his role in murder, torture and other repression committed by the West African country's security forces under its longtime dictator.

Prosecutors had sought a life sentence for Ousman Sonko, Gambia's interior minister from 2006 to 2016 under then-President Yahya Jammeh. But legal rights groups, led by TRIAL International, which helped bring the case, hailed what they called a landmark decision involving a former government official for crimes against humanity, saying it could set a precedent for international justice.

"In its judgement of 15 May 2024, the criminal chamber finds Ousman Sonko guilty of multiple counts of intentional homicide, multiple counts of torture and false imprisonment, each as a crime against humanity," the court in the southern city of Bellinzona said in a statement.

It cited repression of political opponents, journalists and suspected coup plotters under Jammeh's 22-year rule.

Human Rights Watch trumpeted a "monumental" verdict, calling it "a major achievement for Switzerland's efforts to hold accountable those responsible for grave crimes committed abroad."

The Swiss Attorney General's office said it was "satisfied" with the ruling, touting a "milestone in international criminal law" and an important decision for victims in Gambia.

Defense lawyer Philippe Currat said Sonko, 55, planned to appeal the ruling to the criminal chamber's

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appeals court.

In a phone interview, Currat said the alleged wrongdoing didn't rise to the level of crimes against humanity, and that a direct connection to his client and the crimes was not established. He said the court should have provided more English translation for Sonko, who does not speak German — the language of the proceedings — and that failing to do so violated the rules of a fair trial.

"In what I heard today, the court was not able to specify Sonko's individual role in the acts described, that it was a case of collective responsibility: Because he was minister, he was necessarily responsible for everything," Currat said. "That in the end, he gets convicted because somebody has to be convicted, and there's no one else at hand — so he's the one to do the trick."

"That's a real problem," he added.

Currat also argued that Swiss law — which was revised in 2011 when it comes to crimes against humanity — could not fairly be applied to acts before that date.

The two-month trial was welcomed by advocacy groups as a watershed application of the principle of "universal jurisdiction," which allows for the prosecution of serious crimes committed abroad.

However, the court deemed that the crimes committed by Sonko did not rise to "aggravated" cases that could have brought the maximum penalty of life behind bars, according to several lawyers who attended the trial.

Sonko, who was in the courtroom for Wednesday's verdict, offered little reaction when a translation was read out in English, said TRIAL International's legal adviser Benoit Meystre, who also attended the proceedings.

Activists and legal experts say the verdict could send a message to Jammeh, who fled Gambia — an English-speaking West African country surrounded by neighboring Senegal — and remains in exile in Equatorial Guinea.

Sonko — who left Gambia shortly before Jammeh lost power in 2016 — applied for asylum in Switzerland in November that year and was arrested two months later. The indictment filed by the Swiss attorney general's office in April last year covered alleged crimes over the previous 16 years.

Because Sonko has been in custody since January 2017, he would have fewer than 13 years more behind bars if the verdict is upheld.

Among other things, the court found Sonko guilty of the murder of an alleged political opponent in 2000; torture and arbitrary detention in connection with an attempted coup d'état in 2006; the murder of a politician in 2011; illegal detention and torture — including one murder — against peaceful protesters in 2016, according to TRIAL International.

Reed Brody, an American human rights lawyer who attended the trial, said: "The long arm of the law is catching up with Yahya Jammeh's accomplices all around the world, and hopefully will soon catch up with Jammeh himself."

Nyima Sonko, the widow of activist Ebrima Solo Sandeng, who was killed by state security agents, said: "What goes around comes around, he (Sonko) deserved it."

Outside the courtroom, Olimatou Sonko, the defendant's daughter, told Swiss public broadcaster SRF "it isn't fair" that the full proceedings of the trial weren't translated to English from German, which her father doesn't understand.

Philip Grant, executive director at TRIAL International, said Ousman Sonko was the highest-level former official ever to be put on trial in Europe under the principle of universal jurisdiction.

Sonko, who joined the Gambian military in 1988, was appointed commander of the State Guard in 2003, a position in which he was responsible for Jammeh's security, Swiss prosecutors said. He was made inspector general of the Gambian police in 2005.

He was removed as interior minister in September 2016, a few months before the end of Jammeh's government, and left Gambia to seek asylum in Europe.

Ousman Sonko is not to be confused with leading politician Ousmane Sonko in Senegal, who spells his first name slightly differently.

Jammeh seized control in a 1994 coup. He lost Gambia's 2016 presidential election but refused to con-

cede defeat to Adama Barrow, and ultimately fled amid threats of a regional military intervention to force him from power.

Modou Faal, a mechanic living in the Gambian village of Lamin, said the country should move forward after the verdict and said he was concerned that it would hinder the reconciliation process.

"We can forgive but not forget," he said.

Ukrainian troops pull out of some areas and Zelenskyy postpones foreign trips amid Russian offensive

By MATTHEW LEE and ILLIA NOVIKOV Associated Press

KYIV, Ukraine (AP) — Ukrainian forces withdrew from some parts of the country's northeast and battled Russian troops in other areas Wednesday, as President Volodymyr Zelenskyy's decision to postpone all his upcoming foreign trips underscored the seriousness of the threat his soldiers face.

Against that grim backdrop, visiting U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken sought to reassure Ukraine of continuing American support, announcing a \$2 billion arms deal. Most of the money comes from a package approved last month.

The top diplomat's trip comes as Russian troops press a new offensive in Ukraine's Kharkiv region. It began last week, marking the most significant border incursion since the full-scale invasion began in 2022 and forcing thousands to flee their homes. In recent weeks, Moscow's forces have also sought to build on gains in the eastern region of Donetsk. Taken together, the developments mean the war has entered a critical stage for Ukraine's depleted army.

Ukraine's General Staff reported late Tuesday that troops fell back from two areas in Kharkiv — Lukyantsi and Vovchansk — "in order to save the lives of our servicemen and avoid losses." Russia said it had captured Lukyantsi.

It was not possible to independently verify either side's claims.

Vovchansk — just 5 kilometers (3 miles) from the Russian border — has been the focus of much of the recent fighting, and Ukrainian and Russian troops battled in its streets Wednesday. Oleksii Kharkivskiy, head of the city's patrol police, said Russian troops were taking up positions in the city, while the Ukrainian General Staff said its forces were trying to flush them out.

Gunfire could be heard in the background of a video the police official posted on his Instagram page.

The Ukrainian presidential office said additional reinforcements were being deployed in the region, including army reserve units.

At the dangerous juncture, Blinken was in Ukraine to highlight U.S. support, though most of the money he announced Wednesday, about \$1.6 billion, comes from the \$60 billion allotted to Ukraine in the supplemental foreign assistance legislation passed by Congress and signed by President Joe Biden, officials said.

He said the money would be used for three purposes: to provide weapons in the short term, to invest in Ukraine's defense-industrial base and to allow Ukraine to buy military supplies from other countries.

At a news conference with Blinken, Ukrainian Foreign Minister Dmytro Kuleba said of the aid: "This is a very powerful message to both our friends and our enemies."

Blinken said Washington understands the urgency of Ukraine's need for additional air defenses to protect against the Russian onslaught and was prioritizing them in its assistance.

He added that the U.S. has "not encouraged or enabled strikes outside of Ukraine" using American-supplied long-range weapons. That decision is up to Kyiv authorities, he said.

The United Kingdom has said it placed no limits on Ukraine's use of weapons Britain supplies to hit targets on Russian soil, but Germany, another major supporter, has balked at that and ruled it out for fear of escalating the conflict.

Russia is opening new fronts in order to stretch Ukraine's army, which is short of ammunition and manpower, along the about 1,000-kilometer (620-mile) front line, hoping defenses will crumble. Russian artillery and sabotage raids have also been menacing Ukraine's northern Chernihiv and Sumy regions.

The Russian Defense Ministry also claimed that its troops have retaken the village of Robotnye in the

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southern Zaporizhzhia region. Ukrainian forces had gained control of the village last August in what was seen as an important advance in a counteroffensive that eventually petered out.

Elsewhere in Ukraine's southern regions, an aerial attack on the central district of Kherson wounded 17 civilians, the regional prosecutor's office said. And a Russian missile attack injured six people in Mykolaiv, according to Ukraine's rescue service.

Still, the Institute for the Study of War said late Tuesday that the pace of Russia's advance in the Kharkiv border region, where it launched an offensive late last week and has made significant progress, has slowed. The Washington-based think tank said Moscow's main aim there is to create a "buffer zone" that will prevent Ukrainian cross-border strikes on Russia's Belgorod region.

Even so, Zelenskyy's office announced Wednesday he canceled all his upcoming foreign visits and would try to reschedule them.

Zelenskyy had been expected to visit Spain, and perhaps Portugal, later this week. No reason was given for his decision, but the difficulties on the front line hung over it.

On Wednesday evening, Zelenskyy said in his nightly address that the Ukrainian forces have managed to "partially stabilize" fighting in the Kharkiv region, and that "the occupier who entered the Kharkiv region, is being destroyed with all available means." He didn't elaborate.

Meanwhile, Russian air defenses shot down several Ukrainian missiles over the Black Sea and near the Belbek air base, Sevastopol Gov. Mikhail Razvozhayev said. Sevastopol is where the Russian Black Sea Fleet is headquartered.

The fragments of downed missiles fell into residential areas but caused no casualties, Razvozhayev said.

Russian air defenses also shot down nine Ukrainian drones, two Vilha rockets, two anti-radar HARM missiles and two Hammer guided bombs over the Belgorod region early Wednesday, the Defense Ministry said.

Vasily Golubev, the governor of the Rostov region, said two drones attacked a fuel depot. He said there were no casualties or fire.

Ukraine has launched a steady series of drone attacks on oil refineries and fuel depots across Russia over the past months, causing significant damage.

What is the celebrity 'blockout' over the war in Gaza?

By DEEPTI HAJELA Associated Press

NEW YORK (AP) — Some social media users are calling out celebrities for what they say is inaction in the face of a humanitarian crisis in Gaza — and they've taken to a "blockout" to pressure the stars to take a stand.

For the blockout, users put a block on seeing any and all content from the accounts of certain celebrities on social media platforms including X, TikTok and Instagram. Some have posted about the celebrities they've blocked, using a hashtag such as #blockout, #blockout2024, or #celebrityblockout, while others have shared posts from users lambasting attendees of high-glamour events like the Met Gala and contrasting it with the situation in Gaza.

Blockout participants say it's a protest because the celebrities either haven't spoken up or haven't said enough against Israel's actions in Gaza during its war with Hamas. Since the war erupted Oct. 7 with Hamas' deadly attacks, Israel's military has killed more than 35,000 people in Gaza, according to Gaza's Health Ministry, which doesn't distinguish between civilians and combatants.

HOW DOES THE BLOCKOUT WORK?

On social media platforms, users see content from people they follow, as well as from those chosen for them by algorithms. In both instances, users can select options to mute or block a person or account.

Blocking the accounts of celebrities or influencers means not seeing any of the content they produce on social media — no posts, no photos or videos, no collaborations with sponsors. The number of people interacting with content brings in money, so the blocks are meant to affect views, engagement and — ultimately — paychecks.

The blockout also is meant to target celebrities' brands by taking eyeballs and attention away from their content.

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WHO IS BEING BLOCKED?

There is no single organized list of celebrities being blocked. Some users are offering celebrity suggestions, while others are deciding on their own. Celebrities in the U.S. and beyond have been named in the blackout.

Blocking is up to each social media user. And every celebrity, influencer or content creator must be blocked individually on each platform.

HOW DID THE BLOCKOUT START?

Protests around the Israel-Hamas war have grown, with encampments on college campuses around the country. Amid those movements, attention to what celebrities and influencers were, or weren't, saying got a boost after the Met Gala last week.

The annual party draws a host of famous faces from the worlds of fashion, movies, music, sports and more. It's known for its over-the-top arrivals carpet and the elaborate outfits celebrities wear. This year, the gala was circled by protesters for much of the evening.

Social media was flooded with images from the star-studded event. Around the same time, images circulated as Israel launched a military operation in the southern Gaza city of Rafah. That led to some users calling out the contrast between the gala's celebrity opulence and the situation in Gaza — using images from both — and condemning celebrities for not using their platforms to speak up for those who are suffering.

WILL THE BLOCKOUT BE EFFECTIVE?

The effectiveness and staying power of the blackout are yet to be seen, said Beth Fossen, assistant professor of marketing at Indiana University. It might depend on the celebrity and what they're known for — a famous person whose "brand" is tied to humanitarian causes may be more affected than one known primarily for talent, she added.

"If your identity is really tied to promoting something that is key to the boycotting, then this could potentially have really serious consequences for you," Fossen said. "There might be some influencers that gain their fame by sort of promoting peace and then they're being silent on this issue — followers may not forgive them."

IS THERE BLOCKOUT BACKLASH?

There has been criticism of the blackout, with some saying the focus on celebrities takes attention away from what's happening on the ground in Gaza. Others question what the parameters are for judging whether someone should be blocked — and what would constitute a well-known person speaking out or doing enough.

NYC's Rikers Island jail gets a kid-friendly visitation room ahead of Mother's Day

By TED SHAFFREY Associated Press

NEW YORK (AP) — It's probably the last place a mom wants to spend Mother's Day with her kids. But a family visiting space at New York City's notorious Rikers Island jail complex is a little more kid-friendly after a colorful redesign by the Children's Museum of Manhattan.

The jail opened the new preschool play and learning room for the children and grandchildren of female prisoners Tuesday, a few days ahead of the Sunday holiday.

"Mother's Day means everything to me," said Rikers inmate Nadine Leach, 43, as she watched her 3-year-old granddaughter, Queen, excitedly explore the sound machines, coloring books and toys.

One interactive wall display shows a map of the city's five boroughs. Buttons below trigger city sounds, like the screech of a subway.

Leach's daughter, Lashawna Jones, 27, said the play installation is beautiful compared with her last visit. Before, it was a mostly bare room, with a few books. Jones said the design focused her children's attention on imaginative play instead of their grandmother being in jail and awaiting trial on a felony drug charge.

"It makes me sad that she's not actually home with us for Mother's Day because I feel like a little sad coming here to visit her here because I'm used to having her physically home with us. Like, right now,

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"I'm being a big girl; I'm holding my tears back," Jones said.

To get to the facility, families take a bus, go through security and drug screenings, and pass by walls with six layers of razor wire. Outside the new play center, a sign on blue cinder block reads, "Inmates are permitted to hold their children during the visit."

The visitation hub was designed and installed by the Children's Museum of Manhattan and replicates exhibitions at the museum's home on the Upper West Side.

The exhibits teach preschool skills: communication, sharing, literacy and executive function, said Leslie Bushara, the museum's chief program officer.

Lynelle Maginley-Liddie, commissioner of the New York City Department of Correction, cut a giant green ceremonial ribbon to open the room.

"We want mothers to have interactions with their kids," Maginley-Liddie said. "You know, being incarcerated can be very difficult. It can be difficult on the children. It can be difficult on the moms. And it's important for them to have those connections even while they're in our care, so that when they are released, that bond has been sustained during incarceration."

Rikers Island consists mainly of men's jail facilities that house around 6,000 people. Child-friendly exhibits will be added to those facilities over the next year, the museum said in a statement. Funding for the exhibits also will allow approved inmates to travel to the Children's Museum of Manhattan twice per month.

People jailed at Rikers are either charged with crimes being tested in court or are serving short sentences. City officials voted to close the entire complex in 2026 and replace it with smaller neighborhood facilities that would be easier for relatives to visit, but the deadline was pushed back. Poor conditions have raised the prospect of a federal takeover.

The women's jail, called the Rose M. Singer Center, currently holds around 370 people, according to the Department of Correction. State officials moved hundreds of women into state facilities in 2021 in an effort to improve safety.

Fewer US overdose deaths were reported last year, but experts are still cautious

By MIKE STOBBE AP Medical Writer

NEW YORK (AP) — The number of U.S. fatal overdoses fell last year, according to Centers for Disease Control and Prevention data posted Wednesday.

Agency officials noted the data is provisional and could change after more analysis, but that they still expect a drop when the final counts are in. It would be only the second annual decline since the current national drug death epidemic began more than three decades ago.

Experts reacted cautiously. One described the decline as relatively small, and said it should be thought more as part of a leveling off than a decrease. Another noted that the last time a decline occurred — in 2018 — drug deaths shot up in the years that followed.

"Any decline is encouraging," said Brandon Marshall, a Brown University researcher who studies overdose trends. "But I think it's certainly premature to celebrate or to draw any large-scale conclusions about where we may be headed long-term with this crisis."

It's also too soon to know what spurred the decline, Marshall and other experts said. Explanations could include shifts in the drug supply, expansion of overdose prevention and addiction treatment, and the grim possibility that the epidemic has killed so many that now there are basically fewer people to kill.

CDC Chief Medical Officer Dr. Deb Houry called the dip "heartening news" and praised efforts to reduce the tally, but she noted "there are still families and friends losing their loved ones to drug overdoses at staggering numbers."

About 107,500 people died of overdoses in the U.S. last year, including both American citizens and non-citizens who were in the country at the time they died, the CDC estimated. That's down 3% from 2022, when there were an estimated 111,000 such deaths, the agency said.

The drug overdose epidemic, which has killed more than 1 million people since 1999, has had many ripple

effects. For example, a study published last week in JAMA Psychiatry estimated that more than 321,000 U.S. children lost a parent to a fatal drug overdose from 2011 to 2021.

"These children need support," and are at a higher risk of mental health and drug use disorders themselves, said Dr. Nora Volkow, director of the National Institute on Drug Abuse, which helped lead the study. "It's not just a loss of a person. It's also the implications that loss has for the family left behind."

Prescription painkillers once drove the nation's overdose epidemic, but they were supplanted years ago by heroin and more recently by illegal fentanyl. The dangerously powerful opioid was developed to treat intense pain from ailments like cancer but has increasingly been mixed with other drugs in the illicit drug supply.

For years, fentanyl was frequently injected, but increasingly it's being smoked or mixed into counterfeit pills.

A study published last week found that law enforcement seizures of pills containing fentanyl are rising dramatically, jumping from 44 million in 2022 to more than 115 million last year.

It's possible that the seizures indicate that the overall supply of fentanyl-laced pills is growing fast, not necessarily that police are whittling down the illicit drug supply, said one of the paper's authors, Dr. Daniel Ciccarone of the University of California, San Francisco.

He noted that the decline in overdoses was not uniform. All but two of the states in the eastern half of the U.S. saw declines, but most western states saw increases. Alaska, Washington, and Oregon each saw 27% increases.

The reason? Many eastern states have been dealing with fentanyl for about a decade, while it's reached western states more recently, Ciccarone said.

Nevertheless, some researchers say there are reasons to be optimistic. It's possible that smoking fentanyl is not as lethal as injecting it, but scientists are still exploring that question.

Meanwhile, more money is becoming available to treat addiction and prevent overdoses, through government funding and also through legal settlements with drugmakers, wholesalers and pharmacies, Ciccarone noted.

"My hope is 2023 is the beginning of a turning point," he said.

The jurors in Trump's hush money trial are getting a front row seat to history -- most of the time

By COLLEEN LONG Associated Press

A gag order. The House Speaker turning up outside court. Angry denunciations of the judge overseeing the case.

Some of the most explosive moments in Donald Trump's hush money trial have played out for most of the world to see — except for the people who are actually deciding his fate: the jury.

The 12-person panel is shown evidence and witness testimony so they can decide whether the former president is guilty of a scheme to buy up and bury seamy stories in an effort to illegally influence the 2016 presidential election. But it's a highly curated experience; jurors are not getting the full picture seen by those who follow along each day.

They don't even witness Trump enter or exit the courtroom. He's already there by the time they are brought into the room, and he stays until they are dismissed.

This is by design. Laws carefully govern how a criminal case is tried to ensure that a jury's decision on guilt or innocence isn't affected by fights over evidence or other legal sparring. It's routine to hold back a jury while trial lawyers argue with the judge about what can and can't be included for jurors to see during the trial. And attorneys often gather quietly at the judge's bench to talk about sensitive topics, out of their earshot.

Jurors, too, agree to a set of rules when they're chosen for a trial. They can't research the case. They must avoid all news about it. They also agree not to discuss the case outside of court and not talk about it among themselves until deliberations, when all the evidence has been presented and they're deciding

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whether the defendant should be convicted. If they break any of these rules, they could be kicked off the panel and replaced with an alternate juror, or a mistrial could be declared.

So if they're taking their civic duty seriously, the Trump jury has never heard the Republican presidential candidate criticize Judge Juan M. Merchan as "totally conflicted." They don't know that Trump has been threatened with jail time and fined \$10,000 for violating a gag order that bars him from talking about witnesses in the case, including the prosecution's star witness, Michael Cohen. They haven't watched Cohen's TikTok livestreams. They didn't see House Speaker Mike Johnson hold a press conference outside the courthouse this week, using his powerful position to show his party turning against the judicial system by declaring the Manhattan criminal trial illegitimate.

And they're unaware of the hours of legal wrangling over what witnesses can be called to testify, and what they can say when they're called.

Trump has pleaded not guilty to 34 counts of falsifying business records and denies any of the sexual encounters happened. Trump's attorneys, for example, last week asked the judge to declare a mistrial over testimony from a crucial witness, Stormy Daniels, who spoke in discomfiting detail for jurors over the alleged sexual encounter with Trump that prompted the hush money payment just weeks before the presidential election in 2016. Jurors saw Daniels on the witness stand for 7.5 hours over two days.

The panel got sent home early the day Daniels finished testifying. And then Trump's attorneys argued with the judge the case should be thrown out over her testimony. They took issue with Daniels' testimony describing a power dynamic between her and Trump, and the visceral reaction she had when she says she saw Trump sitting on the bed of his hotel suite stripped down to his boxers and T-shirt.

"That is so prejudicial and so incredible for a jury to hear," Trump's attorney Todd Blanche argued. He blamed prosecutors for asking questions that elicited intimate details of the alleged encounter.

Judge Merchan refused to throw out the case.

Trump's attorneys also wanted to modify a gag order that bars him from talking about witnesses in the case. "He needs an opportunity to respond to the American people," Blanche argued.

Judge Merchan denied that request too. And an appeals court on Tuesday upheld the gag order; finding that Trump wasn't claiming the restrictions infringed on his right to a fair trial. He was arguing that being prohibited from talking about the case could adversely impact his 2024 presidential campaign.

But Trump's lawyers have won some, too. Merchan said no to prosecutors' request to play jurors a 1999 CNN interview in which Trump discussed his familiarity with campaign finance laws. And just before court let out last Friday, Merchan told prosecutors they should inform Cohen "that the judge is asking him to refrain from making any more statements" outside court about the case or about Trump.

More routine actions are also decided outside of the watchful eyes of the jury. The judge and attorneys talk about scheduling and days off - including this Friday, when the Republican presidential nominee will be attending his son Barron's high school graduation. And they've talked about potential upcoming witnesses.

Merchan asked Trump's defense lawyer Blanche whether his client would testify. Blanche said: "No."

"No determination yet?" Merchan clarified, according to a transcript. "No," Blanche said.

Even before the jury was seated, Merchan made a litany of rulings on what could be brought into court, including that prosecutors could ask about the infamous "Access Hollywood" tape where Trump bragged about grabbing women's genitals without their permission, but they couldn't play the tape itself. He set strict ground rules for the defense's planned expert testimony on campaign finance law. And he denied three requests by Trump's lawyers to delay the trial.

Once all the evidence is presented and both sides rest, the judge will instruct the jury on how to begin deliberations. Only after the trial formally ends are they released from the rules, meaning they can read, watch or listen to whatever they like. And, for the first time since being sworn in, they can talk about a process no other American has ever experienced -- sitting in judgment on a former president on trial for a crime.

Until then, they will be reminded by Merchan each day: "to please not talk either among yourselves or anyone else about anything related to the case."

And, the judge says: "Please continue to keep an open mind."

2 journalists in detention in Tunisia as authorities launch wave of arrests against critics

By SAM METZ and MASSINISSA BENLAKEHAL Associated Press

TUNIS, Tunisia (AP) — Two journalists were kept under detention in Tunisia on Wednesday, following a raft of arrests targeting government critics including lawyers and the press that has drawn concern from the country's international allies.

Authorities in the north African country this week unleashed a new campaign of repression against perceived opponents of President Kais Saied's government. Migration activist Saadia Mosbah, France 24 cameraman Hamdi Tlili and lawyer Sonia Dahmani were among those detained or arrested in recent days.

Tlili was subsequently released without being charged, according to the North Africa Foreign Correspondents' Club.

On Wednesday, radio journalist Borhen Bsaies and opinion columnist Mourad Zeghidi were kept under pre-trial detention four days after they were apprehended. They were accused of violating a cybercrime law barring fake news and undermining state security.

Bsaies's attorney Nizar Ayed told The Associated Press that his client was questioned for five hours about his Facebook posts and political views but did not offer clear evidence that he had violated the law or made remarks targeting the president.

Criticism of Tunisia's president is often used as a reason for officials to charge people with undermining state security.

Khaled Drareni, Reporters Without Borders' North Africa representative, called the arrests "a frontal attack on press freedom." In a statement he called for "an end to this serious obstruction that signals the tougher line being taken by an increasingly authoritarian government."

Political arrests have grown increasingly common since President Kais Saied took power five years ago but the frequency of developments this week sparked renewed fear in Tunisia and alarmed the country's international allies.

The European Union, Tunisia's top trade partner, on Tuesday issued a rare rebuke of Tunisian authorities, calling the arrests worrisome.

"Freedoms of expression and association, as well as the independence of the judiciary, are guaranteed by the Tunisian Constitution and constitute the basis of our partnership," its spokesperson said in a statement.

State Department spokesperson Vedant Patel told reporters that the U.S. was engaging Tunisia about the arrests, particularly those of attorneys.

"This kind of action is inconsistent with what we think are universal rights that are explicitly guaranteed in the Tunisian constitution, and we've been clear about that at all levels," he said.

Tunisia is a key ally for the U.S. and the EU on issues ranging from security to migration in the Mediterranean.

The arrests were the latest made under a controversial cybercrime law called Decree 54 that authorities have used to pursue prominent political opponents since 2022. A growing chorus of groups, including the country's largest labor union and its affiliate that represents journalists, condemned the law and the arrests.

The General Union of Journalists on Tuesday said the law was being used to stifle freedom of expression and called it "a sword of Damocles hanging over the heads of journalists."

They said that the two journalists were at risk of being fined and facing five years behind bars if found guilty in court next week.

The arrests mark a continuation of Saied's tumultuous first term in office, months ahead of a yet-to-be scheduled presidential election expected this fall. Leading opposition parties are expected to boycott the contest.

Morocco's automotive industry shifts gears to prep for electric vehicle era

By SAM METZ Associated Press

TANGIERS, Morocco (AP) — A train that travels from rural northern Morocco to a port on the Mediterranean Sea carries no passengers. Three times a day, it brings hundreds of cars stacked bumper to bumper from a Renault factory outside Tangiers to vessels that transport them to European dealerships.

Business incentives and investing in infrastructure like the freight railway line have allowed Morocco to grow its automotive industry from virtually non-existent to Africa's largest in less than two decades. The North African kingdom supplies more cars to Europe than China, India or Japan, and has the capacity to produce 700,000 vehicles a year.

Moroccan officials are determined to maintain the country's role as a car-making juggernaut by competing for electric vehicle projects. But whether one of Africa's few industrialization success stories can stay competitive as worldwide auto production transitions to EVs and increasingly relies on automation remains to be seen.

More than 250 companies that manufacture cars or their components currently operate in Morocco, where the auto industry now accounts for 22% of gross domestic product and \$14 billion in exports. French automaker Renault, the country's largest private employer, calls Morocco "Sanderoland" because it produces nearly all of its subcompact Dacia Sanderos there.

Unencumbered by many of democracy's checks and balances, the government tells companies looking to outsource production to cheaper locales they can get approval for new factories and complete construction in as little as five months.

"We didn't export one car 15 years ago. Now it's the first exporting sector in the country," Minister of Industry and Trade Ryad Mezzour said in an interview with The Associated Press.

Mezzour said Morocco has distinguished itself from other outsourcing destinations by expanding its ports, free trade zones and highways. The government offered subsidies of up to 35% for manufacturers to put factories in the rural hinterlands outside of Tangiers, where Renault now produces Clios as well as Dacia Sanderos, Europe's most popular passenger vehicle, and soon plans to start manufacturing hybrid Dacia Joggers.

Chinese, Japanese, American and Korean factories make seats, engines, shock absorbers and wheels at the Tangiers Automotive City, a large campus of car parts manufacturers. Stellantis produces Peugeots, Opels and Fiats at its plant in Kenitra.

Devoting immense resources to developing and maintaining an automotive sector that could employ a young and growing workforce was part of a 2014 industrialization plan. To create jobs, Mezzour said that he and his predecessors have focused on offering more than cheap labor to foreign automakers looking for new places to build cars and produce parts.

Major automakers pay unionized factory workers less in Morocco than they do in Europe. But even with salaries one-fourth the size of France's 1,766.92-euro (\$1911.97) monthly minimum wage, the jobs pay more than the median income in Morocco. The industry employs 220,000 — a small but sizable chunk of the more than 200,000 agricultural jobs the country is losing annually amid a six-year drought.

Like in many African countries, Morocco's domestic market for new cars is small. Less than 162,000 vehicles were sold there last year. The government's success in building an automotive industry nevertheless has made cars the tip of the spear as Morocco works to transform its largely agrarian economy.

"I have one simple priority — not exports or being competitive. My job is to create jobs," Mezzour said.

Abdelmonim Amachraa, a Moroccan supply chain expert, said the spending on infrastructure and training skilled workers puts the industry in a good position to lure investment from automakers looking to build out their electric vehicle supply chains.

Moroccan officials have sought investment from both East and West, trying to lure industry players from China, Europe and the United States as they now race to produce affordable electric vehicles at scale. China's BYD — the world's largest electric vehicle maker — has at least twice announced plans to build

factories in the country that have stalled before starting.

"The important question is what can a small country do in this world," Amachraa said, noting how rapidly global car manufacturing was changing. "We have this ability to coexist with Europe, Africa and the United States when a link can't be found between China and the United States."

As Europe works to phase out combustion engines over the next decade, automakers like Renault are preparing to adapt in Morocco. Mohamed Bachiri, the director of the Renault Group's operations in the country, said the company's record of success in Morocco makes it an attractive destination for others to invest, particularly in EVs.

He said the industry is likely to continue growing because Morocco's "integration rate" — the percentage of parts that carmakers can source domestically — has steadily risen to more than 65%. The country also has a competitive advantage by having the experienced and skilled autoworkers that some other outsourcing destinations lack, Bachiri said.

"We're predisposed to manufacturing cars for customers in our sphere. And the day they decide they need electric vehicles, we will," he said.

The government has bankrolled public-private partnerships like a Renault-managed academy to train technicians and managers. Compared to comparable markets, Morocco's political climate and proximity to Europe made it a safe investment, Bachiri said.

"It's like being on an island next door," he said, noting instability in neighboring countries throughout North and West Africa.

However, as the United States and European countries encourage their automakers to "onshore" electric vehicle production, it's unclear how Morocco will fare. The country has long prided itself on being a free market that eschews tariffs and trade barriers but finds itself squeezed as countries vying for EV production advantages enact policies to protect their domestic automotive industries.

Western governments that have long pushed developing countries to embrace free trade are now enacting policies to boost their own EV production. France and the United States both passed tax credits and incentives last year for consumers who buy electric vehicles manufactured in Europe or North America, respectively.

Though the U.S. incentives can extend to Morocco because the countries share a free trade agreement, Mezzour said they complicated the global supply chain and sometimes made his job more complicated.

"We're living in some kind of new age of protectionism," Mezzour said. "We're living in instability in terms of trade rules that makes it more difficult for countries like Morocco that invested heavily in open, free and fair trade."

'Mad Max' has lived in George Miller's head for 45 years. He's not done dreaming yet

By JAKE COYLE AP Film Writer

CANNES, France (AP) — Only recently has George Miller realized just how influential his medical education was to the world of "Mad Max."

Miller was briefly a doctor before finding filmmaking and his twin brother, whom he attended university with, remained one. As a resident at St. Vincent's Hospital in Sydney, Miller saw people in birth and in death, in moments of, he says, "extremis."

Extremis — a Latin word that literally translates as "at the point of death" — would be a fairly apt way to describe the post-apocalypse wasteland of "Mad Max." It could apply to, well, all of the characters, or to the Earth, itself. The more you think about it, the more Miller's desert dystopia begins looking like a fantastical ER. The human blood bags of "Mad Max: Fury Road." Furiosa's prosthetic arm. Immortan Joe's respirator mask.

"I don't think I'd still be making films if I didn't have that part of myself," Miller said of his medical background in a recent interview.

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"You're looking at a human being from every point of view. As organs. As individuals," Miller says. "Sometimes looking through a microscope and seeing their cells. Or an autopsy. Psychologically. In every way, you're looking at the human being. That's what you do as a storyteller."

Miller's holistic eye could apply to the sprawling saga of "Mad Max," too. It's a world that has lived in his head for nearly half a century. Unlike most other long-running film franchises, it's exclusively Miller's. The 79-year-old filmmaker has written and directed every film, from 1979's "Mad Max" to the new "Furiosa: A Mad Max Saga," which opens in theaters May 24.

Also unlike most franchises, Miller's vision has grown only more kinetic with time. "Fury Road," considered among the greatest action films ever made, moved like Buster Keaton on steroids, with madcap stunts and continual forward movement, all agonizingly spliced together from the briefest of shots amid an infamously troubled production. "Furiosa," a prequel to the events of that film starring Anya Taylor-Joy as a young Furiosa, enlarges the saga, and, particularly in a few breathless sequences, maintains the same headlong momentum.

"I don't do anything with my hands anymore," Miller says. "There's always someone who can type faster than me. There's always someone who can cut faster than me. There's always someone who can operate a camera much better than me. So it's all in the head."

"I can quote some of the lines from the movie but I know virtually every cut of virtually every movie I've made — and in many cases, the cuts of some of my favorite movies," adds Miller. "That's my neurology."

But it took time to restart "Mad Max." As sensational as the response was to "Fury Road," which won six Oscars, its making was marred by production troubles and discord among its cast. Friction continued in the years after, too, as Miller and Warner Bros. sued each other in a pay dispute.

Those issues eventually got ironed out and attention turned to a pair of scripts Miller had ready. While "Fury Road" was stuck in delay, Miller had written treatments for both "Furiosa" and "The Wasteland," a "Mad Max" film taking place a year before "Fury Road." He hopes to make that soon. First came "Furiosa," which Miller first intended to be an anime.

"I had no thoughts of making it into a feature film," he says. "But when 'Fury Road' was delayed yet again by rains, there was no point in making an anime before we made 'Fury Road.' By the time we made 'Fury Road,' all the history of that, we decided to make it as a feature."

Miller reassembled much of the same team from "Fury Road": editor Margaret Sixel (Miller's wife), co-writer Nico Lathouris, producer Doug Mitchell, production designer Colin Gibson, stunt coordinator Guy Norris. But his cast would be largely new. For a younger Furiosa, he turned to Taylor-Joy. As they discussed her casting, Miller asked Taylor-Joy to film herself doing the "Mad as Hell" monologue from "Network."

How was her Peter Finch? "I got the part," Taylor-Joy says, smiling. Then came the hard part: shooting "Furiosa."

"It's what I wanted. I knew I wanted something that was going to test me in every way, shape and form," says Taylor-Joy. "And I got that experience. Anybody that's attracted to making a 'Mad Max' movie, if it's not arduous in some way, I personally would feel cheated. That's not what you go to the wasteland for."

That included only some three dozen lines in the whole movie for Taylor-Joy. On the other hand, a staggering action sequence principally on the War Rig took 78 days to shoot. Taylor-Joy says it was an exercise of piece-by-piece filmmaking.

"I could kind of count myself down," says Taylor-Joy. "I was like, 'OK, I'm below the vehicle. And now I'm on the side of the vehicle. And I've finally made it into the cow catcher. And, oh my God, I'm standing. This is better.'"

Chris Hemsworth, in one of the most colorful and transformative performances of his career, plays the villain Dementus with the flair of a deranged Roman conqueror. A key to unlocking the character, Hemsworth says, was a tip from Miller to try journaling in the voice of Dementus, a maniac with his own painful history who wears his Rosebud — a teddy bear — strapped to his back.

"It was the most satisfying experience that I've had," Hemsworth says of the role. "The script gave me so many more options and directions that I could take a character than I had previously been given. It

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was a big departure from everything else I'd done."

Lengthy as the making of "Furiosa" was, both stars went into the process determined to have a more positive environment than on "Fury Road."

"We all went in to make this — not excusing any kind of behavior — wanting to be extra kind to each other," says Taylor-Joy. "Especially for me, I'm a big George Miller fan. I wanted to make sure he felt respected and heard and cared on set."

"Mad Max" has by now morphed into a kind of archetype — a near-future Western with amped-up modern anxieties. As before in "Mad Max," water is short and natural resources are brutally battled over in "Furiosa."

"You could argue that depending on where you are in history, where you are in time and space, there is always a sense of potential chaos and a fallen world," Miller says. "It's always there in the zeitgeist."

But, Miller points out, these movies are largely shot outdoors, and the conditions he's made them in has markedly changed with time. Miller remembers visiting an area of the Great Barrier Reef in the early '70s. When he returned decades later to the same beach, "the difference was shocking to me."

"All of that stuff is there," Miller says. "And it has to be expressed in any story you tell about the world."

Miller's brother recently retired as a doctor. But for years, they'd speak on the phone about his patients, discussing observations and diagnoses.

"That was a way, I realize, of us both processing the chaos of the world," says Miller. "I like to think that that's what I'm still doing."

70 years ago, school integration was a dream many believed could actually happen. It hasn't

By ANNIE MA AP Education Writer

WASHINGTON (AP) — Seventy years ago this week, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled separating children in schools by race was unconstitutional. On paper, that decision — the fabled Brown v. Board of Education, taught in most every American classroom — still stands.

But for decades, American schools have been re-segregating. The country is more diverse than it ever has been, with students more exposed to classmates from different backgrounds. Still, around 4 out of 10 Black and Hispanic students attend schools where almost every one of their classmates is another student of color.

The intense segregation by race is linked to socioeconomic conditions: Schools where students of color compose more than 90% of the student body are five times more likely to be located in low-income areas. That in turn has resounding academic consequences: Students who attend high-poverty schools, regardless of their family's finances, have worse educational outcomes.

Efforts to slow or reverse the increasing separation of American schools have stalled. Court cases slowly have chipped away at the dream outlined in the case of Brown v. Board, leaving fewer and fewer tools in the hands of districts to integrate schools by the early 2000s.

The arc of the moral universe, in this case, does not seem to be bending toward justice.

"School integration exists as little more than an idea in America right now, a little more than a memory," said Derek Black, a law professor at the University of Southern California. "It's actually an idea that a pretty good majority of Americans think is a good idea. But that's all."

MORE THAN JUST DIVERSE SCHOOLS

The dream of Brown was never as simple as diversity. It was about equality, and the opportunity that came with it.

From the beginning, funding and integration have been inseparable.

"Whiter schools and districts have more resources, and that is wrong," said Ary Amerikaner, a former Obama administration official and the founder of Brown's Promise. "But it is a reality. And that undermines opportunity for students of color, and it undermines our future democracy."

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We remember *Brown v. Board* as the end of segregated schools in the United States. But stating values does not, alone, change reality. Though the case was decided in 1954, it was followed by more than a decade of delay and avoidance before school districts began to meaningfully allow Black students to enter white schools.

It took further court rulings, monitoring and enforcement to bring a short-lived era of integration to hundreds of school districts. For the students who took part in those desegregation programs, their life trajectory changed — the more years spent in integrated schools, the better Black children fared on measures like educational attainment, graduation rates, health, and earning potential, with no adverse effects on white children.

For a brief period, it seemed the country recognized the deeper remedies required. “All things being equal, with no history of discrimination, it might well be desirable to assign pupils to schools nearest their homes,” Chief Justice Warren Burger wrote in *Swann v. Mecklenburg*, a 1971 decision that upheld the use of busing to integrate schools in North Carolina. “But all things are not equal in a system that has been deliberately constructed and maintained to enforce racial segregation.”

But not long after, another series of court decisions would unwind those outcomes. Fifty years ago, in *Milliken v. Bradley*, the court struck down a plan for integrating Detroit public schools across school district lines. The ruling undermined desegregation efforts in the north and Midwest, where small districts allowed white families to escape integration.

Other decisions followed. In *Freeman v. Pitts*, the court ruled resegregation from private choice and demographic shifts could not be monitored by the court. More than 200 districts were released from court-monitored desegregation plans. By 2007, when the court ruled in *Parents Involved v. Seattle Public Schools*, even voluntary integration plans could no longer consider assigning students on the basis of race.

“If you have the tools taken away from you ... by the Supreme Court, then you really don’t have a whole lot of tools,” said Stephan Blanford, a former Seattle Public Schools board member.

ONE DISTRICT AS A MICROCOSM

The arc of history is clear in the city where the landmark *Swann* busing case originated.

At its peak, Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools was considered such a success at integrating classrooms and closing the gap between Black and white students that educators around the country came to tour the district. Today, more than 20 years after a court ruling overturned busing students on the basis of race, CMS is the most segregated district in North Carolina.

While there are no laws that keep kids siloed by race and income, in so many schools that is the reality.

Charlotte’s sprawling, complex busing plan brought Black and white students into the same schools — and by extension, made white children’s resources available to Black students for the first time. The district’s integration program ended when white families sued after their children did not get their top choice of school placement in a lottery that considered race.

Instead, the district created a school assignment process that said diversity “will be based on the family’s decisions.” It left the families of Mecklenburg County, some of whom have always had better choices than others, on their own. In the first year of the district’s choice program, Black families were more likely to try to use the choice plan to pick an alternative school. They were also more likely to get none of the magnet schools they wanted.

In the decades that followed, the district re-segregated. Years of busing had unwound the segregated makeup of the schools, but the underlying disparities and residential segregation had been left untouched.

Charlotte is a place where the divide between affluence and poverty, and the clear racial lines that mirror it, are so stark that people who live there refer to the city in two parts — the well-off “wedge” and the poorer “crescent.” How could anything other than an explicit consideration of those conditions ever hope to ameliorate them?

Solutions to segregated schools exist in this context, often relying on individual families to make choices that are limited by their circumstances. Magnet schools and inter-district transfers — two common policies that may create great individual opportunities — are limited and will always leave some students behind.

Wherever you look, families are divided in how they view integration. For white and affluent families, it can exist as a noble idea, one filled with self-reflection. But for families of color or poor families — those with less of a safety net — the point of integration often is to place their children somewhere better.

Efforts to integrate schools can take two paths, Stefan Lallinger, executive director of Next100, a public policy think tank, says. They either fight around the margins, creating slightly less segregated spaces, or they address the problem head on, which in many parts of the country would mean tackling boundaries deliberately drawn to separate rich from poor.

HOW TO MOVE FORWARD IN A SYSTEM THAT RESISTS?

Amerikaner and Saba Bireda founded Brown's Promise on the idea of bridging the divide between funding and integration, leveraging state courts to obtain the tools the Supreme Court has taken away from districts.

Their strategy has some precedence. In Connecticut, a 1989 lawsuit in state court resulted in the creation of an inter-district transfer program, which allows students in Hartford to transfer into suburban schools and magnet programs, breaking up concentrations of poverty and racially isolated schools.

"This country had to be moved to integration," Bireda said. "And unfortunately, 70 years later, we feel like we still need litigation. We need the push of the courts."

More recent lawsuits have taken place in New Jersey and in Minnesota. In 2015, Alex Cruz-Guzman became a plaintiff in a lawsuit challenging segregation in Minneapolis and St. Paul public schools. Cruz-Guzman immigrated to the United States from Mexico as a teenager. As a parent, he noticed his children's schools consisted almost entirely of other Latino students. When he tried to place them in more integrated schools, the family faced long waitlists.

The case wound its way through court for nearly a decade, almost reaching a settlement in the legislature before that bill failed to pass.

Cruz-Guzman recalls people asking why he would join a case that likely would not resolve in time to benefit his own children, who struggled with learning English for a time in predominantly Latino schools. To him, the arc of the case is about the kids whose lives could change in the future.

"It's not only my kids. My grandkids will benefit from it," he says. "People for generations will benefit."

How far those legal cases can reach remains to be seen. Actual solutions are imperfect. But integration is something this country has tried before, and while it lasted, by many measures, it worked.

Anniversaries are moments to stop and contemplate. Seventy years after Brown, the work towards achieving its vision remains unfinished. Where there are no perfect, easy answers, what other choice is there besides trying imperfect pathways that bring about an increasingly diverse country somewhere closer to the promise of Brown?

"What's the alternative?" Bireda said. "We are headed towards a country that is going to be majority people of color. ... We can be a strong multiracial democracy, but we cannot be that if we continue to allow most children in the United States not to go to school with children who are from different backgrounds."

United Methodists scrap their anti-gay bans. A woman who defied them seeks reinstatement as pastor

By DAVID CRARY, HOLLY MEYER and PETER SMITH Associated Press

Twenty years ago, Beth Stroud was defrocked from her beloved job as a United Methodist pastor in Philadelphia. In a church trial, she was found guilty of violating "Christian teaching" because she had acknowledged living in a committed relationship with another woman.

Earlier this month, delegates at a United Methodist Church conference struck down the UMC's long-standing anti-LGBTQ policies and created a path for clergy ousted because of them to seek reinstatement.

Stroud — even while recalling how her 2004 ouster disrupted her life — is taking that path, though some other past targets of UMC discipline are choosing otherwise. Stroud is optimistic that United Methodist clergy from eastern Pennsylvania will restore her pastoral credentials at a meeting next week.

Ahead of a church service last Sunday, Stroud pondered what reinstatement would mean, and shed a tear. "It's about how compelling that call is — that after 20 years, I still want to come back," she said.

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At 54, she doesn't plan a return to full-time ministry — at least not immediately. Now completing a three-year stint teaching writing at Princeton University, she is excited to be starting a new job this summer as assistant professor of Christian history at the Methodist Theological School in Ohio — one of 13 seminaries run by the UMC.

Yet even with the new teaching job, Stroud wanted to regain the options available to an ordained minister as she looks for a congregation to join near the Delaware, Ohio, campus.

"I think a church will be able to use me in some way where my credentials are important — like being asked to celebrate Communion on a day when the regular pastor is out of town," she said. "Those would be really meaningful opportunities."

When Stroud finally made her decision, she knew it was the right one.

"It felt really good to write that email, to request reinstatement," she said. "I want to continue to be a part of the church and its work in the world."

But the decision did not come easily as she followed the UMC's deliberations on the anti-LGBTQ policies.

"The first thing I felt was just anger — thinking about the life I could have had," she said. "I loved being a pastor. I was good at it. With 20 more years of experience, I could have been very good — helped a lot of people and been very fulfilled."

Instead of pastoring, she spent several years in graduate schools, while earning modest income in temporary, non-tenured academic jobs. There were challenges, including a bout with cancer and divorce from her wife, although they proceeded to co-parent their daughter, who was born in 2005.

Had she not been defrocked, Stroud said, "My whole life would have been different."

The process that led to Stroud's ouster began in April 2003, when she told her congregation, the First United Methodist Church of Germantown, about her same-sex relationship. The church — where Stroud had been a pastor for four years — set up a legal fund to assist with her defense and hired her as a lay minister after she was defrocked.

When she later moved to New Jersey, she sought a new church to join, and settled on Turning Point United Methodist Church, a predominantly Black congregation in Trenton.

On Sunday, as Stroud sat in the pews, she got a shout-out from Turning Point's pastor, Rupert Hall.

"You guys may not realize this, but for the last 15 or so years, we have been blessed to have — as a loving, supportive, active member of Turning Point — a rock star," Hall said.

"The United Methodist Church stripped Beth of her credentials to be a pastor, and her name is known throughout the world as a martyr for those of God's children who call themselves and who are identified in the LGBTQ community."

There were cheers when Hall said Stroud now had a chance for reinstatement.

The UMC says it has no overall figures of how many clergy were defrocked for defying anti-LGBTQ bans or how many reinstatements might occur.

It's an option that won't be exercised by Jimmy Creech, who like Stroud was ousted from the UMC decades ago. Jurors at a church court removed his clergy credentials in 1999 after he presided over a same-sex union ceremony in North Carolina.

Creech is grateful that the General Conference, near the close of its recent proceedings in Charlotte, North Carolina, passed legislation allowing reinstatement of pastors defrocked in cases like his.

"This is an act of reconciliation and restorative justice, a move to heal the broken community of the Church," said Creech, who earlier doubted such a move would ever happen.

However, Creech, 79, said he won't seek reinstatement.

"Simply knowing the Church now provides for it is satisfaction enough for me," he said via email. "Because I am not nor cannot be in pastoral ministry at this time in my life, I do not think reinstating my ordination is appropriate."

Creech was ordained in 1970 and served various parishes in his native North Carolina.

In 1984, the UMC General Conference approved a law forbidding "self-avowed practicing homosexuals" from being in ministry. Creech said that action prompted a member of his church to tearfully confide that he was gay and had decided to leave the UMC.

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Creech began doing biblical studies about sexuality, concluded “the church was wrong” and became an activist on LGBTQ issues in North Carolina. He briefly became a pastor in Nebraska, and soon was put on church trial for presiding over a union ceremony in 1997 for two women. He was acquitted but, after returning to North Carolina, presided over a ceremony for two men. That led to his 1999 defrocking.

Creech said he remained in ministry thereafter, often serving as guest preacher in churches around the country.

“I realized I’m still the same person. I’m still a pastor. The church never took that away from me. What it did was take a title from me.”

Amy DeLong, a lesbian pastor from Wisconsin, fought for LGBTQ inclusion in the UMC for years. She formed an advocacy organization, protested the bans at General Conferences, conducted a same-sex union — and in 2011 underwent a church trial for it. She was suspended from ministry for 20 days and still kept fighting.

In 2019, she watched the bans upheld once more by that year’s UMC General Conference. By 2021, she was done. After nearly a quarter of a century as a UMC minister, DeLong took early retirement.

“I couldn’t stomach the hypocrisy anymore,” said DeLong, who no longer considers herself a Methodist. “The harm they were doing, in my opinion, outweighed whatever good they were doing. They lost the right to shape me and to have any authority over me anymore.”

DeLong welcomes the lifting of the UMC’s bans but says LGBTQ pastors in the church still face inequality.

“It’s good that language is gone. ... It needed to never be a part of who we were,” she said. “But gosh, just all of the senseless brutality weighs so heavily on me.”

The UMC was the last of major mainline Protestant groups to repeal policies that excluded LGBTQ people from marriage and ministry. Religious LGBTQ people were part of the fight for change across denominations, as illustrated by the Shower of Stoles, an exhibit in the care of the National LGBTQ Task Force featuring liturgical vestments of activist clergy and members from the UMC, Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) and other churches.

“You can never underestimate the challenges that queer people have faced in faith communities,” said Cathy Renna, spokesperson for the task force. “And on the flip side of that, the courage of those who stood up and said, ‘No, these are my values. This is my faith.’”

Yemen’s Houthi rebels acknowledge attacking a US destroyer that shot down missile in the Red Sea

By JON GAMBRELL Associated Press

DUBAI, United Arab Emirates (AP) — Yemen’s Houthi rebels on Wednesday claimed targeting a U.S. Navy destroyer and a commercial ship in the Red Sea. However, the attack on the warship apparently happened nearly two days earlier and saw the vessel intercept the missile targeting it.

The latest statement from the Houthis comes as their attacks on shipping, which have disrupted trade through a vital corridor leading onto the Suez Canal and the Mediterranean Sea, have slowed in recent weeks. Though the rebels have not acknowledged the slowdown, the U.S. military has suggested its airstrikes and interceptions of Houthi fire have disrupted their assaults and chewed into their weapon stockpiles.

Recently, the Houthis have been claiming days-old attacks.

Houthi military spokesman Brig. Gen. Yahya Saree said the rebels targeted the USS Mason with missiles and launched an attack on a ship he identified as the Destiny. Multiple vessels have that name in shipping registries.

The Mason, an Arleigh Burke-class guided-missile destroyer, has been in the Red Sea and the wider region as part of a U.S.-led coalition trying to prevent Houthi attacks on shipping. On Monday night, the Mason “successfully engaged and destroyed one inbound anti-ship ballistic missile launched by (the) Iranian-backed Houthis from Yemen over the Red Sea,” the U.S. military’s Central Command said.

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The U.S. Navy's Mideast-based 5th Fleet did not immediately respond to a request for comment regarding the claimed attack on the *Destiny*.

The Houthis say their attacks on shipping in the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden are aimed at pressuring Israel to end its war against Hamas in Gaza, which has killed more than 35,000 Palestinians there, according to local health officials. The war began after Hamas-led militants attacked Israel on Oct. 7, killing 1,200 people and taking some 250 others hostage.

The Houthis have launched more than 50 attacks on shipping, seized one vessel and sunk another since November, according to the U.S. Maritime Administration. Shipping through the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden has declined because of the threat.

India's parliament has fewer Muslims as strength of Modi's party grows

By SHEIKH SAALIQ and KRUTIKA PATHI Associated Press

MALAPPURAM, India (AP) — Preventing Muslim migrants from gaining citizenship. Revoking the semi-autonomy of the country's only Muslim-majority region. Building a Hindu temple where a violent mob razed a mosque.

These were political triumphs for Prime Minister Narendra Modi over the past decade, burnishing his reputation as a leader who prioritizes the interests of India's Hindu majority. For India's 200 million Muslims, they highlight their waning political power in the world's largest democracy.

Tensions between Hindus and Muslims in India are not new, but they have gotten worse under Modi, whose ruling Bharatiya Janata Party touts a Hindu-nationalist ideology. And with Modi seemingly on the cusp of a third five-year term, the outlook for Muslim politicians — and citizens — is bleak. This year's vote will be decided in June.

It's not just that Modi has ramped up anti-Muslim rhetoric in campaign speeches. Ever since the BJP began its rise as a political force in the mid-1980s, the proportion of Muslim lawmakers in parliament and state legislatures has shrunk.

Muslim representation has fallen in the ruling BJP, and in opposition parties, too.

When Modi assumed power in 2014, the outgoing parliament had 30 Muslim lawmakers — and just one was a member of the BJP. Muslims now hold 25 out of 543 seats, and none belong to the BJP.

India has gone from being a country where Muslims were largely marginalized to one where they are "actively excluded," said Ali Khan Mahmudabad, a political scientist and historian at New Delhi's Ashoka University.

"Without representation, you are unable to ask the state for resources and articulate the kind of needs the community has in order to progress, whether its education, jobs, health or basic infrastructure," Mahmudabad said.

In the mid-1980s, Muslims accounted for 11% of India's population, and had 9% of seats in parliament; today they are 14% of the population and have less than 5% of seats in parliament.

Nine out of 10 members in parliament are Hindus, who make up 80 percent of India's population of 1.4 billion.

The political representation of Muslims at the state level is only slightly better. India has more than 4,000 lawmakers in state legislatures across 28 states and Muslim lawmakers hold roughly 6% of these seats.

A government report in 2006 found Muslims lagged Hindus, Christians and people from India's lower castes in literacy, income and access to education. They have made some gains since then but are still at a significant disadvantage, according to multiple independent studies.

Under Modi's decade in power, the BJP has enacted or proposed various laws that Muslim leaders consider discriminatory.

— Some states ruled by the BJP passed laws restricting interfaith marriage as a way to address what they claim is the threat posed by Hindu women marrying Muslim men and then converting.

— One state formerly ruled by the BJP banned girls from wearing hijabs in school. (The law was reversed after the BJP lost political control.)

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— The BJP is advocating a common legal code that would affect some religious practices, by changing some laws in India's constitution that deal with matters ranging from marriage to divorce and inheritance.

Violence against Muslims is commonplace, and Modi has said little to deter it. Muslims have been lynched by Hindu mobs over allegations of eating beef or smuggling cows, an animal considered holy to Hindus. Their homes and businesses have been bulldozed, and their places of worship set on fire.

At recent campaign rallies, Modi has said Muslims are "infiltrators" and that they "have too many children." Without evidence, he has accused the BJP's main rival, the Congress party, of planning to redistribute the wealth of Hindus to Muslims.

Many Muslims believe Modi is stoking divisions as a campaign strategy.

"They're keeping the Hindu-Muslim issue hot... so they remain enemies," said Mehmood Bhai Khatri, a 64-year-old Muslim voter from Modi's home state of Gujarat, a BJP stronghold.

"But who will speak up? If they do, they may be picked up (by police) or a bulldozer will be sent to their homes," said Khatri. "So out of fear, nobody speaks up."

Not one of India's 28 states has a Muslim as chief minister; the BJP and its allies have chief ministers in 19 states.

In Uttar Pradesh, the country's most populous state and where roughly 16% of residents are Muslim, just 7% of state lawmakers are Muslim.

As the BJP becomes ever more powerful, India's opposition parties have become increasingly reluctant to nominate Muslim candidates for fear of alienating Hindu voters, experts say.

While Hindus overwhelmingly rally around the BJP, Muslims have struggled to form a cohesive political agenda, in part because of how diverse their community is across sects, ethnicity, language, customs, and culture.

"There is no way to unite this very heterogeneous group of people, without making Islam the common denominator," said Mahmudabad, the political scientist.

But when political parties don't field enough Muslims, issues important to them — from minority rights to hate speech — hardly ever get debated in the parliament, said Muhammad Saad, a cab driver in New Delhi who is Muslim.

"If there are no Muslims in the parliament, who will raise the voice for us?" Saad questioned.

Analysts say the BJP has made some outreach efforts to Muslims, such as seeking their help as volunteers and at the polls. But the party fielded just 13 Muslim candidates combined in the 2014 and 2019 elections, and none were elected.

The BJP denies discriminating against Muslim people.

The party "permits accommodation of all kinds of people, not just the Hindus," said M Abdul Salam, the only Muslim out of some 430 BJP candidates running for parliament this year. If he wins, he will become the first Muslim member of the BJP since 2014 in India's lower house of the parliament.

Salam, who is from the Muslim-majority southern city of Malappuram, said Muslim politicians from other parties could gain power by joining the BJP's alliance in parliament.

But Muslims from other parties are struggling simply to stay in office.

S T Hasan, a Muslim member of parliament from the northern state of Uttar Pradesh, was not chosen by the Samajwadi Party to seek reelection. He was replaced by a Hindu politician, a decision he believes was made to appeal to Hindu voters, who are the majority in the region he represents.

Hasan said political parties, especially those that consider themselves secular, need to make more room for minority candidates.

"Fair representation of every community is good for a democracy," he said. "But what we are seeing is that one community is being gradually pushed to the corner."

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Today in History: May 16, Nazis crush Warsaw Ghetto Uprising

By The Associated Press undefined

Today in History

Today is Thursday, May 16, the 137th day of 2024. There are 229 days left in the year.

Today's Highlight in History:

On May 16, 1943, the nearly month-long Warsaw Ghetto Uprising came to an end as German forces crushed the Jewish resistance and blew up the Great Synagogue.

On this date:

In 1770, Marie Antoinette, age 14, married the future King Louis XVI of France, who was 15.

In 1866, Congress authorized minting of the first five-cent piece, also known as the "Shield nickel."

In 1929, the first Academy Awards were presented. "Wings" won "best production," while Emil Jannings (YAHN'-ings) and Janet Gaynor were named best actor and best actress.

In 1939, the federal government began its first food stamp program in Rochester, New York.

In 1957, federal agent Eliot Ness, who organized "The Untouchables" team that took on gangster Al Capone, died in Coudersport, Pennsylvania, at age 54.

In 1960, the first working laser was demonstrated at Hughes Research Laboratories in Malibu, California, by physicist Theodore Maiman.

In 1966, China launched the Cultural Revolution, a radical as well as deadly reform movement aimed at purging the country of "counter-revolutionaries."

In 1975, Japanese climber Junko Tabei became the first woman to reach the summit of Mount Everest.

In 1990, death claimed entertainer Sammy Davis Jr. in Los Angeles at age 64 and "Muppets" creator Jim Henson in New York at age 53.

In 1997, President Bill Clinton publicly apologized for the notorious Tuskegee experiment, in which government scientists deliberately allowed Black men to weaken and die of treatable syphilis.

In 2007, anti-war Democrats in the Senate failed in an attempt to cut off funds for the Iraq war.

In 2012, Bosnian Serb Gen. Ratko Mladic (RAHT'-koh MLAH'-dich) went on trial at the Yugoslav war crimes tribunal in the Netherlands, accused of genocide, crimes against humanity and war crimes. (Mladic would be convicted on 10 counts and sentenced to life in prison.)

In 2013, "The Office" aired its final episode after nine seasons on the air on NBC.

In 2016, President Barack Obama called on the nation to support law enforcement officers as he bestowed the Medal of Valor on 13 who risked their lives.

In 2018, officials at Michigan State University said they had agreed to pay \$500 million to settle claims from more than 300 women and girls who said they were assaulted by sports doctor Larry Nassar.

In 2022, the U.S. death toll from COVID-19 hit 1 million.

Today's Birthdays: Former Director of National Intelligence Dan Coats is 81. Jazz musician Billy Cobham is 80. Actor Danny Trejo is 80. Actor Bill Smitrovich is 77. Actor Pierce Brosnan is 71. Actor Debra Winger is 69. Olympic gold medal gymnast Olga Korbut is 68. Olympic gold medal marathon runner Joan Benoit Samuelson is 66. Actor Mare Winningham is 65. Rock musician Boyd Tinsley (The Dave Matthews Band) is 60. Rock musician Krist Novoselic (noh-voh-SEL'-ik) is 59. Singer Janet Jackson is 58. Country singer Scott Reeves (Blue County) is 58. Actor Brian (BREE'-un) F. O'Byrne is 57. R&B singer Ralph Tresvant (New Edition) is 56. Actor David Boreanaz is 55. Political commentator Tucker Carlson is 55. Actor Tracey Gold is 55. International Tennis Hall of Famer Gabriela Sabatini is 54. Country singer Rick Trevino is 53. Musician Simon Katz is 53. TV personality Bill Rancic is 53. Actor Khary Payton is 52. Rapper Special Ed is 52. Actor Tori Spelling is 51. Actor Sean Carrigan is 50. Singer-rapper B. Slade (formerly known as Tonex) is 49. Actor Lynn Collins is 47. Actor Melanie Lynskey is 47. Actor Jim Sturgess is 46. Actor Joseph Morgan is 43. DJ Alex Pall (The Chainsmokers) is 39. Actor Megan Fox is 38. Actor Drew Roy is 38. Actor Jacob Zachar is 38. Actor-comedian Jermaine Fowler is 36. Actor Thomas Brodie-Sangster is 34. Actor Marc John Jefferies is 34. Olympic bronze medal figure skater Ashley Wagner is 33. Actor Miles Heizer is 30.