

Groton Daily Independent

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Friday, July 5

Senior Menu: Chicken strips, tri-tators, carrots, fruit, whole wheat bread.

Saturday, July 6

Common Cents Community Thrift Store is closed.
Catholic: SEAS Confession, 3:45-4:15 p.m.; SEAS Mass, 4:30 p.m.



Sunday, July 7

Special Needs Swim, 4 p.m. to 6 p.m.
Emmanuel Lutheran: Worship with communion, 9 a.m.
St. John's Lutheran: Worship with communion: St. John's at 9 a.m.; Zion at 11 a.m.
United Methodist: Worship with communion: Conde at 8:30 a.m.; Groton at 10:30 a.m.; Coffee hour, 9:30 a.m.
Catholic: SEAS Confession, 7:45-8:15 a.m.; SEAS Mass, 8:30 a.m.; Turton Confession, 10:30-10:45 a.m.; Turton Mass, 11 a.m.
First Presbyterian Church: Bible Study, 9:30 a.m.; Worship, 11 a.m.
Groton CM&A: Sunday School, 9:15 a.m.; worship, 10:30 a.m.

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

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1440

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Brits Oust Tories

British Prime Minister Rishi Sunak was ousted from office yesterday after the center-left Labour Party won a parliamentary majority in the United Kingdom's first national elections in nearly five years. Sir Keir Starmer, Labour's leader, is expected to become the country's next prime minister.

Sunak, who heads the center-right Conservative Party, called for the early elections in May in a last-ditch effort to sway public support despite significantly trailing in opinion polls. Voters expressed dissatisfaction with a range of issues, including stagnant household income, the highest tax rates since the 1940s, and record immigration levels.

With 326 seats needed for a parliamentary majority, early results point to Labour winning 410 seats, Conservatives with 131, Liberal Democrats with 61, and the remainder split among a variety of parties.

It would mark the lowest share of seats for the Conservatives—colloquially known as Tories—in the party's 200-year history and ends a 14-year run by the party.

California Fires

Almost 30,000 people were ordered to evacuate their Northern California homes in recent days as wildfires continued to spread near the city of Oroville. As of this writing, the Thompson Fire had consumed around 3,500 acres, having tripled in size during the day Wednesday. Officials say the blaze is 7% contained; no deaths have been reported, though at least seven firefighters were treated for injuries.

The fire comes as Northern California and the interior western US prepare for a heat wave expected to bring triple-digit temperatures in many spots. Oroville is slated to pass 110 degrees this weekend, along with much of the inland parts of the state, while Las Vegas to the southeast may reach 120 degrees (the all-time high is 117 degrees).

Meanwhile, forecasts suggest Death Valley may hit 130 degrees early next week—a mark that would be the hottest temperature ever reliably measured on the planet.

A New Top Dog

A new face hoisted the Mustard Belt at Nathan's Famous Fourth of July hot dog eating contest yesterday after 39-year-old Patrick Bertoletti downed 58 hot dogs in 10 minutes. Florida's Miki Sudo chomped through 51 franks, setting a women's world record en route to her 10th title.

For Bertoletti, the win comes in the absence of all-time great Joey Chestnut who was banned from the contest after signing an endorsement deal with Impossible Foods, a maker of plant-based meats. Chestnut had won 16 of 17 previous contests and tossed back 62 hot dogs last year. The excommunicated champ instead held a charity event in El Paso, Texas, facing off against active-duty service members.

While the Coney Island event has been held since 1972, the history of the humble hot dog dates back much further. German immigrants began selling the food, which evolved from traditional sausages, from New York City pushcarts in the 1860s.

Sports, Entertainment, & Culture

LeBron James signs two-year, \$104M deal to remain with Los Angeles Lakers; James' son Bronny was selected by the Lakers at last week's NBA Draft.

Robert Towne, Oscar-winning screenwriter best known for "Chinatown" and "Mission: Impossible," dies at 89.

Shohei Ohtani, Aaron Judge, and Bryce Harper headline list of starters for 2024 MLB All-Star Game (July 16).

British cyclist Mark Cavendish breaks Tour de France record with 35 career stage wins.

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Science & Technology

Three new species of plants related to cacao trees discovered in South American rainforests; scientists say finding sheds light on the species' biodiversity, may lead to climate-resilient chocolate.

Mysterious Denisovan population—ancient human relatives whose remains have only been found in a few locations—subsisted by hunting animals on the Tibetan plateau.

Researchers create most detailed map to date of the brain cells associated with language processing, identifying neurons that encode the meaning of individual words.

Business & Markets

US markets end Wednesday mixed (S&P 500 +0.5%, Dow -0.1%, Nasdaq +0.9%), with the S&P 500 and Nasdaq hitting new highs.

Monthly jobs report to be released today; 200,000 jobs expected to have been added in June.

Saks Fifth Avenue parent company to acquire luxury retailer Neiman Marcus in nearly \$2.7B deal.

European Union raises tariffs on Chinese-made electric vehicles, citing unfair subsidies by China; additional duties range from around 18% to almost 38% depending on manufacturer.

Politics & World Affairs

Israel reportedly approves largest land expansion in the West Bank in three decades; move opens roughly 5 square miles for Israeli settlements in the territory.

Hurricane Beryl to pass over Mexico's Yucatan Peninsula today, on track to reach southern Texas early next week; hurricane left at least two people dead in Jamaica.

Runoff elections in Iran to be held today to replace former President Ebrahim Raisi, who died in a May helicopter crash; reformist Dr. Masoud Pezeshkian faces hard-liner Saeed Jalili.

*Actual retail prices are set by dealer and may vary. Taxes are additional and vary by location. Freight and PDI charges may be additional and vary by dealer. Models subject to limited availability. Images may not reflect dealer inventory and/or unit specifications. † As rated by Kohler, all power levels are stated in gross horsepower at 3600 RPM per SAE J1940 as rated by engine manufacturer. †† As required by Kawasaki, horsepower tested in accordance with SAE J1995 and rated in accordance with SAE J2723 and certified by SAE International. **See operator's manual for warranty details and information. Certain restrictions apply. Kohler® is a registered trademark of Kohler Co. Kawasaki® is a registered trademark of KAWASAKI JUKOKYO KABUSHIKI KAISHA.
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PLEASE JOIN US IN
CELEBRATING

DROP & GO GIFT CARD
BRIDAL SHOWER FOR

*Julianna Kosel
& Isaac Mell*

Julianna is the daughter of Tina & the one & only "Paper Paul" Kosel
The wedding will take place in Florida on July 30th.

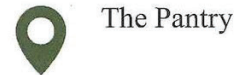
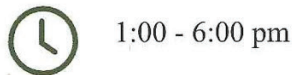
GROTON SWIMMING POOL
DROP OFF TIMES ARE: 1-8:30 M-TH
1-8 FRI-SUN

FROM: JUNE 27TH TO JULY 14TH

*The couple is also registered on Amazon if you prefer to send them a gift.

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FREE SNAP APPLICATION ASSISTANCE AVAILABLE



WITH SNAP:



You will stretch your food dollars.



Your students qualify for free school meals.

Information needed to receive help filling out SNAP Application:

- Social Security Numbers of all household members.
- Gross monthly earned and unearned income.
- Out-of-pocket medical expenses totaling over \$35/month (**Only for those age 60+ and disabled households**).
- Amount of childcare Expenses.

Household Size	Max Gross Monthly Income
1	\$1580
2	\$2137
3	\$2694
4	\$3250
5	\$3807
6	\$4364
EACH ADDITIONAL MEMBER +\$557	



*This institution is an equal opportunity provider.

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Terry Herron and Dwight Zerr make adjustments to a float in an emergency backup manhole on Thursday. "We need a new lift station," was Waste Water Superintendent's Dwight Zerr's words. The area received 1.72 inches of rain. Even though the city has been aggressively relining the sewer mains, rain and ground water is still getting into the system and the main lift station, Aspen Lift Station, cannot keep up during rain events. The lift station has been operating at least 20 hours per day this past spring. The city is working on a study for a new lift station and to add an additional cell at the lagoon. (Photo by Paul Kosel)

Meade County Fatal Crash

What: Two vehicle fatal crash
Where: SD Highway 34, mile marker 38, two miles east of Sturgis, SD
When: 10:10a.m., Monday, July 1, 2024

Vehicle 1: 2017 Chevrolet Silverado
Driver 1: Male, 82, fatal injuries
Seatbelt Use: No

Vehicle 2: 2005 Dodge Ram 2500
Driver 2: Male, 72, serious, non-life-threatening injuries
Seatbelt Use: Yes
Passenger 1: Female, 72, serious, non-life-threatening injuries
Seatbelt Use: No

Meade County, S.D.- An 82 year-old man died today from injuries sustained in a two vehicle crash July 1 near Sturgis, SD.

The names of the persons involved have not been released pending notification of family members.

Preliminary crash information indicates the driver of a 2017 Chevrolet Silverado was traveling eastbound on SD Highway 34 near mile marker 38. At the same time, the driver of a 2005 Dodge Ram 2500 was traveling westbound on SD Highway 34. While initiating a left-hand turn into a gas station, the driver of the Silverado turned in front of the Dodge Ram and the vehicles collided head-on. The driver and passenger of the Dodge Ram were transported to a nearby hospital with serious, non-life-threatening injuries. The driver of the Silverado was life-flighted to a Rapid City hospital, where he passed away today from his injuries.

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

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

Custer County Fatal Crash

What: Two vehicle fatal crash

Where: Intersection of SD Highway 89 and US 385, in Pringle, SD city limits

When: 11:521a.m., Thursday, June 27, 2024

Vehicle 1: 2006 Chevrolet Impala

Driver 1: Female, 46, no injuries

Seatbelt Use: Yes

Passenger 1: Male, 21, no injuries

Seatbelt Use: Yes

Vehicle 2: Bicycle

Driver 2: Male, 82, fatal injuries

Helmet Use: Yes

Custer County, S.D.- An 82-year-old man died yesterday from injuries received in a June 27 crash in Pringle, SD.

Preliminary crash information indicates the driver of a 2006 Chevrolet Impala was traveling southbound on US 385, approaching the intersection at SD Highway 89. At the same time, a bicyclist was traveling northbound on SD Highway 89 and failed to stop at the stop sign at the intersection and the two vehicles collided. The driver and passenger in the Impala were not injured. The bicyclist was lifeflighted to a nearby hospital and passed away on July 3 from his injuries.

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

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

Codington County Fatal Crash

What: Two vehicle fatal crash
Where: 455th Ave and 156th Street, 16 miles north of Watertown, SD
When: 9:59 a.m., Thursday, June 27, 2024

Vehicle 1: 2019 Chevrolet Equinox
Driver 1: Female, 87, no injuries
Seatbelt Use: Yes
Passenger 1: Male, 88, fatal injuries
Seatbelt Use: Yes

Vehicle 2: 2022 AGCO 8300C Terragator (Crop Sprayer)
Driver 2: Male, 21, no injuries
Seatbelt Use: Yes

Codington County, S.D.- One person died yesterday from injuries received in a June 27 crash north of Watertown, SD.

Preliminary crash information indicates the driver of a 2022 AGCO Terragator crop sprayer was making a left turn from 455th Avenue into a field approach when the driver of a 2019 Chevrolet Equinox attempted to pass and collided with the tractor. Both drivers were not injured. A male passenger in the Equinox suffered serious, life-threatening injuries and was transported by ambulance to a local hospital. He passed away on July 3 from his injuries.

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

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

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Volleyball

Thurs., Aug. 15 First Day of Practice
Thurs., Aug. 29 at Hamlin
(8th at 4:00, 7th/C at 5:00, JV at 6:00, Varsity to follow)
Thurs., Aug. 31 C Tournament at Matchbox, Abd.
Tues., Sept. 3 Ipswich
(7th/C at 5:00, 8th/JV at 6:00, Varsity to follow)
Thurs., Sept. 5 at Sisseton
(7th at 4:00, 8th/C at 5:00, JV at 6:00, Varsity to follow)
Sat., Sept. 7 C Tournament at Matchbox, Abd.
Tues., Sept. 10 Webster Area
(7th/C at 5:00, 8th/JV at 6:00, Varsity to follow)
Thurs., Sept. 12 Aberdeen Roncalli
(7th/C at 5:00, 8th/JV at 6:00, Varsity to follow)
Sat., Sept. 14 JH Tournament at Matchbox, Abd.
Thurs., Sept. 19 Clark/Willow Lake
(7th/C at 5:00, 8th/JV at 6:00, Varsity to follow)
Sat., Sept. 21 at Hamlin Tournament
Tues., Sept. 21 Warner
(7th/C at 5:00, 8th/JV at 6:00, Varsity to follow)
Tues., Sept. 26 Tiospa Zina
(7th/C at 5:00, 8th/JV at 6:00, Varsity to follow)
Sat., Sept. 28 at Miller Tournament
Sat., Sept. 28 JH at Hamlin Tournament
Mon., Sept. 30 Florence/Henry
(7th/C at 5:00, 8th/JV at 6:00, Varsity to follow)
Tues., Oct. 1 at Great Plains Lutheran
(C at 5:00, JV at 6:15, Varsity to follow)
Tues., Oct. 7 at Mobridge-Pollock
(7th/C at 4:00, 8th/JV at 5:00, Varsity to follow)
Thurs., Oct. 10 at Milbank
(7th at 4:00 (elementary),
8th at 4:00, C at 5:15, JV at 6:00, Varsity to follow)
Mon., Oct. 14 at Britton-Hecla
(7th at 4:00, 8th at 5:00 in Auxiliary Gym)
(C at 5:00, JV at 6:00, Varsity to follow)
Thurs., Oct. 17 at Deuel
(C at 5:00, JV at 6:00, Varsity to follow)
Thurs., Oct. 21 Langford Area
(7th at 4:00, 8th at 5:00, JV at 6:00, Varsity to follow)
Tues., Oct. 22 at Northwestern Area
(7th/C at 5:00, 8th/JV at 6:00, Varsity to follow)
Fri., Oct. 25 Redfield
(7th/C at 5:00, 8th/JV at 6:00, Varsity to follow)
Mon., Oct. 28 at Faulkton
(JV at 6:30, Varsity to follow)
Tues., Nov. 5 Region 1A
Thurs., Nov. 7 Region 1A
Tues., Nov. 12 SoDak 16
Nov. 21-23 State at Sioux Falls

Football

Thurs., Aug. 8 First Day of Practice
Fri., Aug. 30 Mobridge-Pollock
Fri., Sept. 6 at Webster Area
Fri. Sept. 13 at Milbank
Fri., Sept. 20 Deuel (Homecoming)
Fri., Sept. 27 at Clark/Willow Lake
Fri., Oct. 4 Aberdeen Roncalli
Fri., Oct. 11 at Sisseton
Fri., Oct. 18 Baltic
Thurs., Oct. 24 Playoffs
Thurs., Oct. 21 Playoffs
Fri., Nov. 8 Playoffs
Fri. Nov. 15 State at Dakota Dome

Cross Country

Thurs., Aug. 15 First Day of Practice
Thurs., Sept. 5 Redfield, 10:00
Tues., Sept. 10 Britton, 4:00
Mon., Sept. 16 Webster, 2:00
Thurs., Sept. 19 Lee Park, 4:00
Mon., Sept. 23 Clear Lake, 4:00
Mon., Sept. 30 Groton, 4:00
Thurs., Oct. 3 Sisseton, 4:00
Thurs., Oct. 10 NEC at Webster, 1:00
Thurs., Oct. 17 Region 1A at Webster, 3:30
Sat., Oct. 26 State at Rapid City

Boys Golf

Mon., Aug. 19 Sioux Valley, 10:00
Thurs., Aug. 22 Milbank, 10:00
Tues., Aug. 27 NEC at Hankinson, ND 10:00
Tues., Sept. 3 Lee Park, Aberdeen, 10:00
Thurs. Sept. 12 Groton, 10:00
Tues., Sept. 17 Redfield, 10:00
Thurs. Sept. 19 Hankinson, ND, 10:00
Thurs., Sept. 26 Sisseton, 10:00
Mon., Sept. 30 Region 1A at Milbank, 10:00
Oct. 7-8 State at Hartford

America's 250th South Dakota Commission launches walking challenge

PIERRE, S.D. – The America's 250th South Dakota Commission has announced the launch of "Walk 250 Miles by 2026." It's the first of many events in South Dakota meant to celebrate the anniversary of the nation's founding in 2026.

"The ultimate goal is to complete 250 miles of outdoor exercise while visiting historic locations throughout the state," said Dr. Ben Jones, director of the South Dakota State Historical Society. "Participants will have from July 4, 2024, to July 4, 2026, to complete the challenge."

The walking challenge encourages individuals to get outside, exercise, and enjoy the historical significance of their surroundings. Participants track their own miles and submit them through an online form. Participants can earn prizes based on miles completed and locations visited.

"We have numerous trails across the state, and this gives individuals the opportunity to explore our outdoor resources and take in the history as well," said Nick Harrington, South Dakota Game, Fish & Parks communications manager. "We're excited for individuals to learn about our history and make their own memories in the outdoors."

The commission has partnered with the City of Deadwood, Department of Game, Fish & Parks, the Battleship South Dakota Memorial, and the South Dakota State Fair to create miles-based challenges for additional prizes. Candidates will also be able to work towards smaller milestones such as walking or 80 miles in honor of 80 years since the launch of Operation OVERLORD during World War II or walking 150 miles to celebrate Deadwood's anniversary. As the program begins, additional challenges will be announced.

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GROTON AREA SCHOOL DISTRICT #06-6

School Board Meeting

July 8, 2024 – 7:00 PM – GHS Conference Room

AGENDA:

1. Call to Order with members present. Approve agenda as proposed or amended.

POTENTIAL CONFLICTS DISCLOSURE PURSUANT SDCL 23-3

CONSENT AGENDA:

1. Approval of minutes of June 10 school board meeting as drafted.
2. Approval of year ending (FY2024) district bills.

OLD/CONTINUING BUSINESS:

1. Open Forum for Public Participation...in accordance with Board Policy & Guidelines.
2. Approve off-staff coaching agreement for Seth Erickson, Assistant Football Coach, for the 2024 season.
3. Approval of June 2024 Financial Report, Custodial Accounts, and Investments.
4. Approve Supplemental Budget FY24-03.
5. Approval of June 2024 School Lunch Report.
6. Approval of June 2024 School Transportation Report.
7. Administrative Reports: (a) Superintendent's Report; (b) Principal's Reports; (c) Business Manager Report

ADJOURN

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ANNUAL REORGANIZATION BUSINESS:

1. Call to Order with members present.
2. Installation of incumbent board member Marty Weismantel and new board member Nick Strom followed by election of president and vice president as well as appointments to the various "ad hoc" committees.
3. Approve agenda as proposed or amended.

POTENTIAL CONFLICTS DISCLOSURE PURSUANT SDCL 23-3

7:30 PM – DISTRICT BUDGET HEARING

CONSENT AGENDA:

1. Approve June 2024 District bills for payment.
2. Designate legal counsel/school attorney...Rodney Freeman of Churchill, Manolis, and Freeman of Huron.
3. Designate Business Manager as custodian of all district accounts.
4. Authorize Business Manager to continue existing funds and establish new accounts and to invest and reinvest funds in local institutions which serve the greatest advantage to the District and set business manager bond.
5. Authorize Business Manager to publish staff salaries.
6. Designate official bank depository... Dacotah Bank.
7. Adopt Groton Area School District Policy Manual with such revisions as previously approved.
8. Adopt Special Education Comprehensive Plan.
9. Authorize office personnel to administer Custodial Funds & NSLP (school lunch) funds, with oversight by business office management.
10. Authorize superintendent to administer or direct federal programs, with Consolidated Application (Title programs) and related ESSA compliance issues assigned to building principals.

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11. Appoint superintendent to act as Asbestos Compliance Officer.
12. Authorize superintendent or designee to close school in emergency situations or inclement weather.
13. Authorize superintendent or designee to institute NSLP & School Breakfast Agreement.
14. Adopt Food Safety Plan, HACCP-Based Standard Operating Procedures.
15. Authorize superintendent or designee to institute ASBSD school bus mutual assistance pact.
16. Authorize business manager to transfer petty cash and incident payment funds (SDCL 13-18-16/17).
17. Approve peripheral sports and other volunteer school workers such as chain gang, line judges, Booster Club/PAC workers, assistant coaches, volunteer coaches, volunteer drivers, school board members etc. to be included in the school's worker's compensation insurance coverage.

NEW BUSINESS:

1. Adopt FY2025 District Budget and authorize Business Manager to file tax request with county auditors.
2. Approve FY2023 Single Audit Federal Awards report from Eide Bailly.
3. Open and approve diesel/gas quotes.
4. Open and approve newspaper quotes and designate official newspaper for FY2025.
5. Cast ballot for SDHSAA Board of Directors West River At-Large Representative.
6. Appoint board member to serve as voting member of the North Central Special Education Cooperative Governing Board for 2024-2025 school year.
7. Set dates and time for regular school board meetings.
8. Set salaries for board members...**presently at \$50/meeting; \$75/meeting for chairman; mileage as applicable.**
9. Set rate for substitute teachers for 2024-2025 school year...recommend \$135/day [Currently \$130/day].
10. Set rate for substitute bus drivers for 2024-2025 school year...recommend \$100/day [Currently \$90/day].
11. Establish activity admission & school lunch prices for 2024-2025.

		<u>Recommendations</u>
Admission:	Adult - \$5; Doubleheader - \$6	No Change
	Adult 10-punch ticket - \$45	No Change
	Adult All-Activities Pass - \$75	No Change
	1 st -12 th grade - \$4	No Change
	1 st -5 th grade activity ticket - \$25	No Change
	6 th -12 th grade activity ticket - \$30	No Change
Breakfast	K-5 - \$2.50; 6-12 - \$3.00; Adult - \$3.25	K-5 - \$2.60; 6-12 - \$3.10; Adult \$3.50
Lunch	K-5 - \$3.25; 6-12 - \$3.75; Adult \$4.50	K-5 - \$3.35; 6-12; \$3.85; Adult \$4.75
Seconds Lunch	K-12	\$2.00
Second Milk	\$0.50	No Change

12. Set rate for OST services for 2024-2025 school year.
13. Approve hiring Matt Baumgartner as Head Girls Soccer Coach for the 2024 season.
14. Approve Kelsie Roberts, Volunteer Assistant Boys Soccer Coach, for the 2024 season.
15. Approve Sam Crank and Wyatt Wambach as part-time student OST workers.

ADJOURN

A Walk of Faith

"For we walk by faith, not by sight"

II Corinthians 5:7



Ladies' Luncheon

Bethesda Lutheran Church, Bristol

Wednesday, July 10, 2024

By Bethesda Women of the ELCA

Silent Auction opens at 10:30

Speaker: Jeff Peterson, author of "It's Just Walking"
and a graduate of Bristol High School

Luncheon at Noon—Door Prizes

\$15.00 advance tickets please, call:

Kay Espeland 605-492-3507

Jane Goehring 605-290-1420

Or contact any WELCA member





SOUTH DAKOTA SEARCHLIGHT

<https://southdakotasearchlight.com>

COMMENTARY

Shedding tears as we shed our common sense on guns

Concealed carry in schools, a church raffle, and what they say about South Dakota

by KEVIN WOSTER

It's enough to make a grown man cry.

And one of my friends did just that during a recent school board meeting here in Rapid City as he was trying to offer public comment about a pending board decision on guns in schools.

Yes, guns in schools. How's that for dissonance?

Remember those "What doesn't belong?" elementary school exercises where you look for things in a picture that don't belong there? How about guns in schools?

They don't belong there.

Kids belong in schools. Books and teachers belong. PE and reading and math and, well, you know, all the things that fit in the school picture.

But guns? In schools? Who thinks that's a good idea, unless you're talking about a very limited number of guns in the hands of trained law-enforcement officers?

Well, the 2024 South Dakota Legislature seemed to think more guns in schools was a very good idea. By wide vote margins — 31-3 in the Senate and 62-8 in the House — lawmakers passed a bill with a title that read: "An act to expand certain privileges for individuals who hold an unrestricted enhanced concealed carry permit."

And the expansion of certain privileges? That's where the guns come in. The guns in schools.

Prior to approval of Senate Bill 203, which was signed by the governor, only trained law-enforcement officers and designated school "sentinels" were authorized to carry firearms in public schools. And the sentinels have only been authorized in law since the state Legislature acted in 2013.

Now by expanding "certain privileges," the new law allows the holder of an unrestricted enhanced concealed carry permit to enter a public school while carrying a firearm if he or she has "written permission from the principal of the school or other person who has general control and supervision of the building or grounds."

Obviously, local school boards have a lot of control and supervision of buildings and grounds within their school districts. And the Rapid City Area Schools Board of Education ultimately exercised its authority on this issue by deciding not to implement the provisions of SB 203.

So my friend got the vote outcome he wanted. But why had he choked up even before the vote? It was the statistics that were presented to the board moments earlier by a representative of Moms Demand Action for Gun Sense in America.

Statistics like this from Everytown for Gun Safety, a sister organization of Moms Demand Action:

From 2013 through 2022, Everytown identified 720 incidents of gunfire on the grounds of a preschool or K-12 school across the nation, including gun homicides and assaults, suicides and suicide attempts, unintentional shootings and mass shootings.

So far nationally in 2024, there have been at least 107 incidents of gunfire on school grounds, resulting in 29 deaths and 61 injuries.

It's clear that we need to make our schools more secure. But is putting more armed civilians in our schools the way to do it? Our school board decided — wisely, I think — that it isn't.

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After the school board meeting, my friend explained his flood of emotions: "I started thinking about my grandkids and your grandkids. It could be anybody's grandkids. The shootings. And all the guns we have, and talking about allowing them in schools. And I just lost it. I mean, what are we doing?"

What are we doing, indeed? We are a nation of so many inspirational advancements, yet we are failing miserably in addressing a gun-violence problem that U.S. Surgeon General Vivek Murthy recently labeled a public health crisis.

Supporters of SB 203 argue that more "good guys with guns" in schools or accessible to schools makes them available to stop bad guys with guns, making schools safer. Moms Demand Action argues that more guns in the hands of civilians in schools are not likely to safely neutralize a threat but in fact could become threats in themselves.

Even trained law-enforcement officers can get rattled in stressful situations. And what's more stressful than responding to an active shooter in a school?

We have a gun culture in this nation unknown in most advanced countries. For some Second Amendment advocates, all gun restrictions are bad and virtually all laws that open more areas to people — good guys, presumably — with guns are good.

Here in South Dakota, we haven't just lost nuance when it comes to guns. We seem to have lost all common sense and sometimes any sense of propriety.

I was referred to a disheartening example of that recently on the website of one of the Catholic parishes here in Rapid City.

The home page for Blessed Sacrament Catholic Church proclaims that it is "Continuing the Work of Jesus," shows a picture of the attractive church and its fetching backdrop of cliff and pines, and asks: "Are you curious about spirituality?"

Scrolling down from there, I saw a pitch for the parish "Fourth of July Gun Raffle." It included four guns, the first of which was a CMMG MK4 semi-automatic rifle.

Many people would call the MK4 an assault rifle. I'll call it an assault-style rifle or military style rifle, similar in appearance to the better-known AR-15. Whatever you call it, it's fashioned after weapons of war and is a jarring sight on a church website, especially in these times.

And as a Catholic who belongs to another parish but attends Blessed Sacrament from time to time, I had to ask: "What were they thinking?"

Well, they were thinking they wanted to raise money for youth programs in the parish. That's good. And when I last checked online, they'd raised more than \$5,000. But in a time when mass shootings — many involving military style firearms — are a regular occurrence, couldn't they raffle something else? Mountain bikes? E-bikes? Tents? Canoes? Fly rods?

Why raise money to fund "the work of Jesus" with guns? And why lead the raffle with a military style rifle, or include it at all? It seems tone-deaf, at best.

I'm sure those tickets sell. Guns carry an iconic status to many South Dakotans, some of whom are in positions of authority in our churches and in the state Legislature.

I guess that's how we get military style rifles on church websites. And I guess it's how we got yet another law aimed at putting more guns in places they really don't belong, like schools.

Meanwhile, the gun-related carnage across this nation continues unabated, at a level that our surgeon general considers to be a public-health crisis.

If that isn't worth crying over, I don't know what is.

Kevin Woster grew up on a farm near Reliance and worked for decades as a journalist, including stops at the Brookings Register, Sioux Falls Argus Leader, Rapid City Journal, KELO-TV and South Dakota Public Broadcasting, plus freelance assignments for outdoors and agricultural magazines. He lives in Rapid City.

'Frustrating' partisan stalemate: the new normal for farm bills?

BY: ALLISON WINTER - JULY 5, 2024 5:00 AM

WASHINGTON — The stalemate over the current farm bill may be solidifying a new era in farm politics as it joins the last three farm bills in a trend of delays and partisan division — a contrast from the legislation's history of bipartisanship.

Every five years, Congress is tasked with drafting a new federal farm bill. The omnibus law that began 90 years ago as various kinds of payments to support farmers now has an impact far beyond the farm, with programs to create wildlife habitat, address climate change and provide the nation's largest federal nutrition program.

The current farm bill process, already nearly a year behind schedule, is at an impasse as Democrats and Republicans clash over how to pay for the bill and whether to place limits on nutrition and climate programs. The previous farm bill expired in September 2023 and has been extended through the end of this September.

Historically, farm bills were completed within a few months of their expiration date. Ten of the 13 farm bills since 1965 were enacted by December 31 in the year of their expirations. But three of the four farm bills since 2008 went beyond that date.

The last three bills — including the 2018 bill, which is the one recent version that passed on time — each had partisan disagreements about spending.

The trend represents a change in how the once-bipartisan legislation is viewed.

"The last two farm bills were the anomaly," said Jonathan Coppess, a professor of Agricultural Law and Policy at the University of Illinois who has written a history of the farm bill. "Now that it has been three in a row, I'm not sure that holds."

A recent report from the nonpartisan Congressional Research Service notes that starting in 2008, farm bills have been subject to delays, vetoes and insufficient votes to pass on the floor.

The report concluded: "Over time, farm bills have tended to become more complicated and politically sensitive. As a result, the timeline for reauthorization has become less certain."

Spending debate

That uncertainty is true of the current farm bill, as Republicans in the House and Senate push for spending limits that Democrats say are non-starters.

"I don't think we're close to getting a farm bill done until the folks who are negotiating the farm bill are realistic about what's doable within a constrained resource environment," Agriculture Secretary Tom Vilsack said in an interview on the radio program AgriTalk June 21.

The Republican-led House Agriculture Committee approved its farm bill proposal largely on party lines at the end of May, after hours of debate and complaints from Democrats that the process had not been as bipartisan as in years past.

Four Democrats voted for the bill in committee, but they joined 20 other Democrats on the committee in a "dissenting views" letter expressing "genuine concern over the trajectory of the Majority's partisan farm bill" — which they predicted would be stuck in delay and dysfunction without significant changes.

The Senate Agriculture Committee has yet to vote. The Republican and Democratic leaders of the committee have each put forward contrasting bills and expressed their frustration.

'The most frustrating time'

Senate Agriculture Committee Chairwoman Debbie Stabenow, a Michigan Democrat who is retiring after this term, has called the process the "most frustrating" of her career and said she would not let the Republican approach for the farm bill be her legacy.

"I've actually been involved in six farm bills and led on three of them, and this has been the most frustrating time," said Stabenow in an interview with Michigan Advance at the end of June. "Because it's so much more partisan than usual and particularly around food assistance."

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Partisan division is not uncommon in today's Congress but is notable on the farm bill, which had historically brought together lawmakers from both sides of the aisle. Bipartisan support can be necessary for final passage because the size of the \$1.5 trillion farm bill means it inevitably loses some votes from fiscal conservatives and others.

"If you don't have a bipartisan bill, this is not going to happen, and that is no matter who's in charge. The margins are too close to be able to get this done without bipartisan support," said Collin Peterson, a former Democratic House member from Minnesota and Agriculture Committee Chairman.

The key dispute for Democrats this year is a funding calculation that would place limits on the "Thrifty Food Plan" formula that calculates benefits for the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, SNAP.

Republicans are using the limits to offset other spending in the bill on crop subsidies. The top Republican on the Senate Agriculture Committee, Arkansas Sen. John Boozman, said he wants to put "more farm in the farm bill."

Peterson, who is now the head of an eponymous consulting firm, said in an interview with States Newsroom that Republicans would likely have to make changes to the nutrition title to get a bill to final passage.

"It is unrealistic to think they are going to get this done without significant changes in that part of the bill," he said.

'An uneasy alliance' from the start

The nutrition program that is at the center of the impasse was added to the legislation 50 years ago to help build a coalition of wide-ranging bipartisan support.

Lawmakers added the nutrition title to the farm bill in 1973, a move that widened the vested interest in the bill in the House. Lawmakers who wanted to increase payments for cotton and wheat farmers in their districts were able to bring in support from representatives from districts whose citizens could benefit from food aid.

"That was the first coalition building between the two interests," Coppess said. "But it was pretty intense. And it was an uneasy alliance from the start."

Since then, the farm bill in many ways has become a food bill. Three-quarters of the mandatory spending in the bill falls under the nutrition title, which includes SNAP, the largest U.S. program that addresses hunger.

The program, formerly called food stamps, supplements food budgets for low-income households. Anti-hunger groups have joined the outside interests pushing for the bill every five years.

But with such a large funding line, the nutrition program has become a target for Republicans who want to cut it to offset other spending in the bill.

"The dispute is all the pay-fors," Peterson said. "And that has been the issue for the last three farm bills and issue on this one as well."

Peterson, who was chairman of the House Agriculture Committee for the 2008 farm bill and was the top Democrat on the committee for the 2013 and 2018 bills, said partisan division on the committee is not unfamiliar at this phase of the process.

The farm bills he worked on also had partisan votes in the House but eventually found support from both sides after conferencing with the Senate.

"At the end of the day, every one of those bills was partisan, until we got through the conference committee, and then at that point it was bipartisan, because the Senate brought some of that to the table," Peterson said. "So, kind of, what's going on here went on the last three farm bills."

The most recent farm bill in 2018 was marked by contentious partisan debate centered on SNAP's work requirements and other eligibility rules.

The House Agriculture Committee's bill that year initially failed on the House floor and later squeaked through on a 213-211 vote. Twenty Republicans joined all House Democrats in voting against that bill.

After reconciling with the Senate bill and the removal of some of the contentious changes to SNAP, most Democrats flipped their votes in support and the House agreed to the final conference report in a bipartisan

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vote of 369-47. The dissenting votes included 44 Republicans and three Democrats.

A trend toward fracture

The partisan division over the nutrition title creates new fault lines for the farm bill.

Historically, farm bill alliances were more regional than partisan. They were built on a common ground of support for shared crops or producers: cotton in the South, corn in the Midwest and wheat in the Western Plains.

"What was our biggest issue back in the four farm bills that I wrote was not Republican versus Democrat. It was usually Midwest against the Southeast or the Northeast or the Southwest from a crop standpoint," former Senator Saxby Chambliss said in an interview.

Chambliss, a Republican from Georgia, was on the House Agriculture Committee from 1995 to 2002 and the Senate Agriculture Committee 2005 to 2011, which included a stint as chairman and ranking member.

"There's a different political dynamic that exists in the Senate today that did not exist when I was there," Chambliss said. "How much of that bleeds into the farm bill? I don't know the answer to that, but obviously it's a little more acrimonious than what I ever experienced."

As partisan politics have become more entrenched in regions of the country, with the South becoming more closely aligned with the Republican Party, it has played out in farm-bill politics.

"You see a staunch realignment around where the regional and the partisan are now very similar," said Coppess.

Allison Winter is a Washington D.C. correspondent for States Newsroom, a network of state-based nonprofit news outlets that includes South Dakota Searchlight.

COMMENTARY

Fireworks sales have fallen back to Earth after years of explosive growth — here's why

JAY ZAGORSKY

It's the Fourth of July — a day of parades, barbecue and, of course, fireworks. But while parades and barbecues are still very popular, shockingly, this year fireworks are less so.

Imports of fireworks reached a peak in 2022 of almost US\$600 million, according to the U.S. International Trade Commission. But today, just two years later, my estimate is that fireworks imports will only reach about \$350 million in 2024. What happened to one of U.S.'s favorite Fourth of July activities?

The answer, I believe, lies in the COVID-19 pandemic, which transformed the economy as billions of people around the world were stuck at home. E-commerce boomed, as did sales of alcohol, indoor exercise equipment and cleaning products. However, this boom was followed by a bust for many products, as people switched back to pre-pandemic buying habits.

This appears to be what happened with fireworks.

The explosive business of pyrotechnics

I am a business school professor who has followed the fireworks industry for years. In the U.S., fireworks are a multibillion-dollar industry. They're primarily lit off around Independence Day and New Year's Eve. To handle these two holidays, American businesses import large amounts of fireworks well in advance of these dates to ensure enough supply.

Fireworks were invented in China over 2,000 years ago, and most of the world's fireworks are still made there today. Since 2010, China has exported almost 90% of the world's fireworks, United Nations data shows. Much of these are low-priced mass-market products. More expensive fireworks are exported from countries like the Netherlands, Germany, Spain, Poland and the U.S.

While Americans light off millions of pounds of pyrotechnics each year, only a small amount of professional

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fireworks are manufactured here. Because so few fireworks are produced in the U.S., by using import and population figures, it's easy to calculate how much explosives are blown up per person each year.

Back in 2010, about two-thirds of a pound of fireworks were lit off per person. In 2019, the year before the pandemic, the figure was three-quarters of a pound per person.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, when people were stuck in their homes and social distancing was common, fireworks use shot up. This makes sense: Setting off pyrotechnics is an outdoor activity where the product instructions explicitly state people igniting them should stand far away from others. In 2021 and 2022, fireworks usage almost doubled to 1.35 pounds per American.

While 2024 isn't over yet, most of what will be blown up this Fourth of July has already been imported. Extrapolating from the amount imported so far, 2024 fireworks consumption looks set to end up back at 2010 levels of about two-thirds of a pound per person.

Why the big drop?

I believe there are three reasons for the big decline. First, as already mentioned, there was the COVID-19 spike as bored people stuck at home looked for something exciting to do outside.

Second, relatedly, during the pandemic many people lit fireworks because public displays were canceled. The amount of display fireworks, which are shot off only by professionals, plummeted. Today, all of the public displays are back, which reduces demand from more casual consumers. Why worry about lighting dangerous explosives when a professional can take care of it?

The last reason is that, like so much else, fireworks are more expensive these days. Inflation in the U.S. has soared recently, with the prices of all kinds of goods and services rising. Fireworks are no different.

In 2021, the average import price for fireworks was \$1.13 per pound, figures from the U.S. International Trade Commission show. That cheap price wasn't available to the typical buyer – it's the wholesale price paid for an entire tractor-trailer container, just off the ship.

During the first four months of 2024, the bulk price jumped up to \$1.61 per pound. This 42% price increase is more than twice the overall increase in the U.S. inflation rate.

Add in rising labor costs at fireworks stands, and these three explanations make it clear why fireworks use is down since the pandemic's peak.

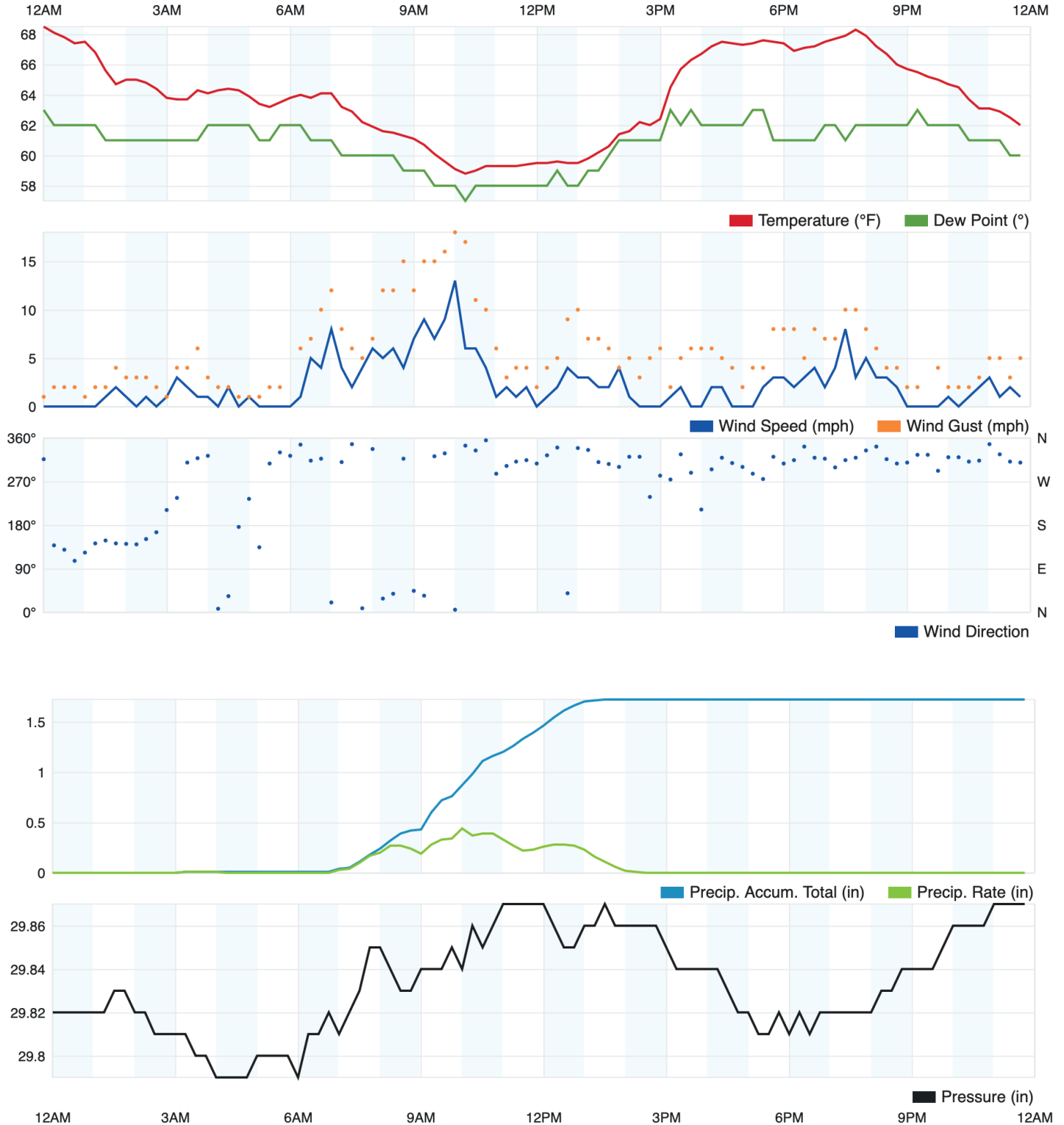
Fireworks are a key part of the Fourth of July holiday, and they are often magnificent spectacles. However, if you're shooting them off, use some common sense, especially if children are around. Each year, thousands of people in the U.S. are injured and a small number die due to fireworks. So be careful.

And whether you're lighting fireworks, watching them or just hiding from the noise, I wish you all a happy Independence Day.

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Yesterday's Groton Weather Graphs



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Today

Tonight

Saturday

Saturday Night

Sunday



40 %

High: 78 °F

Partly Sunny
then Chance
T-storms



30%

Low: 58 °F

Chance
T-storms



40 % 60 %

High: 78 °F

Chance
T-storms then
Showers
Likely



30%

Low: 56 °F

Chance
T-storms



10 % → 40 %

High: 79 °F

Slight Chance
T-storms then
Chance
T-storms

Unsettled Next Several Days (Low Risk For Severe Weather)

Friday



Highs:
74-79°F

Chance Precipitation:
20-40%

Saturday



Highs:
74-80°F

Chance Precipitation:
30-80%

Sunday



Highs:
75-81°F

Chance Precipitation:
30-50%

Monday



Highs:
77-83°F

Chance Precipitation:
5-30%



Overall we will be under a slowly evolving pattern, so while eventually we will see drier conditions and more heat, over the next few days it will remain unsettled with daily chances for moisture and near normal temperatures.

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Yesterday's Groton Weather

High Temp: 69 °F at 12:00 AM

Low Temp: 59 °F at 10:25 AM

Wind: 20 mph at 9:52 AM

Precip: : 1.72

Day length: 15 hours, 35 minutes

Today's Info

Record High: 108 in 1936

Record Low: 35 in 1915

Average High: 84

Average Low: 59

Average Precip in July.: 0.59

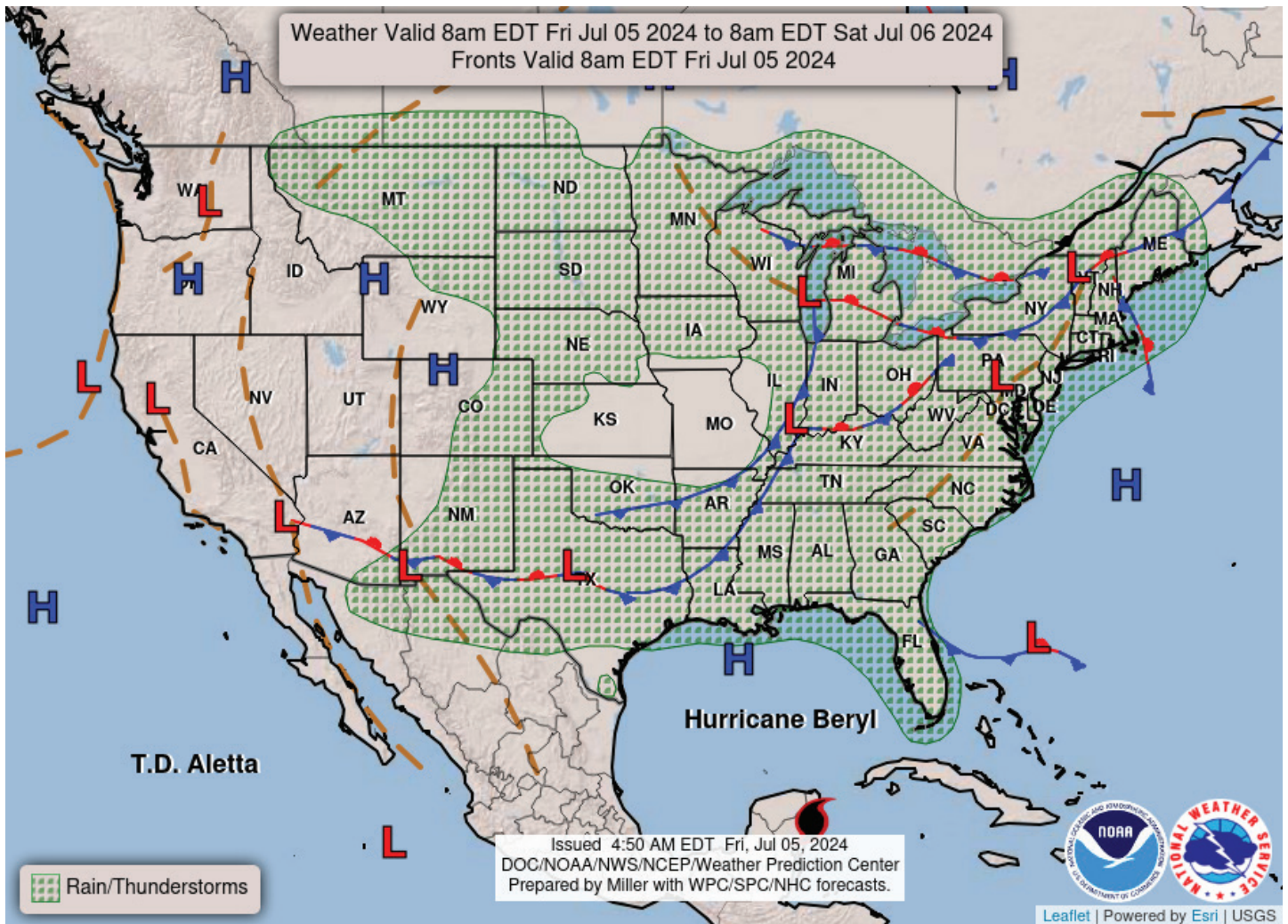
Precip to date in July: 2.55

Average Precip to date: 11.60

Precip Year to Date: 13.60

Sunset Tonight: 9:25:08 pm

Sunrise Tomorrow: 5:49:53 am



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Today in Weather History

July 5, 1936: Three record high temperatures were set on this day. Near Gann Valley, the temperature reached 120 degrees, setting the state record. The state record was tied on July 15, 2006, at 17 miles WSW of Fort Pierre. Other record highs on this date include 119 degrees in Kennebec and 116 degrees in Murdo. The record highs near Gann Valley, Kennebec, and Murdo are all-time highs for each location.

July 5, 1996: A powerful thunderstorm packing over 100 mph winds and grapefruit-sized hail tracked from Belle Fourche Reservoir to Wall. The storm caused an estimated \$4.5 million in crop damage, killed numerous livestock, and stripped vegetation bare.

1891 - Sixteen horses were killed by hail, and many more have to be put to death due to injuries from a hailstorm at Rapid City, SD. (The Weather Channel)

1900 - A spectacular three day fire began when a bolt of lightning struck a refinery in Bayonne NJ. (David Ludlum)

1916 - A hurricane produced 82 mph winds, an 11.6 foot tide, and a barometric pressure of 28.92 inches at Mobile, AL. (David Ludlum)

1925: A large hailstone weighing a half pound fell at Plumstead, just outside of London, England. This hailstone was the heaviest hailstone ever recorded in the United Kingdom.

1937 - The temperature at Medicine Lake, MT, soared to 117 degrees to establish a state record. (Sandra and TI Richard Sanders - 1987)

1937 - Midale and Yellow Grass in Saskatchewan hit 113 degrees to establish an all-time record high for Canada that same day. (The Weather Channel)

1970 - The morning low at Death Valley CA was 103 degrees, and the high that afternoon was 120 degrees. (The Weather Channel)

1980: The "More Trees Down" started in western Iowa and tracked eastward affecting several states along its path before dissipating in eastern Virginia.

1987 - Severe thunderstorms raked south central Kansas for the second morning in a row. Thunderstorm winds again gusted to 80 mph at Clearwater, and in the Wichita area reached 100 mph. Twenty-five persons were injured at a trailer park at El Dorado Lake. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

1988 - Afternoon and evening thunderstorms spawned eleven tornadoes in Montana and three in North Dakota. Baseball size hail was reported at Shonkin, MT, and wind gusts to 85 mph were reported south of Fordville, ND. Twenty cities in the north central U.S. reported record high temperatures for the date, including Fargo ND with a reading of 106 degrees. Muskegon, MI, equalled their July record with a high of 95 degrees. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

1989 - Moisture from what once was Tropical Storm Allison triggered thunderstorms over the Middle Atlantic Coast Region, which deluged Wilmington, DE, with a record 6.83 inches of rain in 24 hours, including 6.37 inches in just six hours. Up to ten inches of rain was reported at Claymont, northeast of Wilmington. July 1989 was thus the wettest month in seventy years for Wilmington, with a total of 12.63 inches of rain. Alamosa CO reported an all-time record high of 94 degrees, and Pierre, SD, hit 113 degrees. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

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Daily Devotionals

Seeds of Hope

CAREFUL: GOD AT WORK

One morning a man, seeking direction in his life, was going through his mail. He had prayed earnestly for direction from God, but it never seemed to come. On this day, however, things changed.

Tucked away in the pile of mail he was sorting through was a magazine that was addressed to his neighbor. He looked at the cover and saw an article entitled, "The Needs of the Congo." His curiosity got the best of him so he opened the magazine and read the article. It touched his heart deeply.

For days he prayed about its contents and the opportunities and challenges it represented. Finally, one day he declared, "My search is over." He went to the Congo, lost himself in his work and became a great medical missionary and author. Ultimately he received the Nobel Peace Prize for his work.

Albert Schweitzer was a theologian, philosopher, organist, and physician. But one day he became a medical missionary where he lost himself in God's will doing God's work among the lost and dying.

Was it an accident that the mailman put the magazine in the wrong mailbox? Of course not. He too was doing God's work. Although some may consider it an "accident" it was actually "an act of God" to get his attention.

Prayer: How marvelous are the different ways, Lord, You use to get our attention to do Your will. Help us to be alert to see and hear what You have for us to do. In Jesus' Name, Amen.

Scripture For Today: And we know that God causes everything to work together for the good of those who love God and are called according to his purpose for them. Romans 8:28



We all need the encouragement, comfort, and peace that comes through God's grace. Our daily devotionals, known as Seeds of Hope, have been a means through which thousands of people have experienced this grace. Each devotional comes from God's Word and we pray this good "seed" finds good soil in your heart. Our aim is that the Seeds of Hope will be a great source of daily encouragement to you and that God will use them to draw you near to Him

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WINNING NUMBERS

MEGA MILLIONS

WINNING NUMBERS:
07.02.24

4 8 19 31 45 11

MegaPlier: 4x

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:
\$162,000,000

NEXT DRAW: 15 Hrs 30 Mins 53 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

LOTTO AMERICA

WINNING NUMBERS:
07.03.24

6 7 37 46 49 10

All Star Bonus: 5x

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:
\$4,440,000

NEXT DRAW: 1 Days 14 Hrs 45 Mins 53 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

LUCKY FOR LIFE

WINNING NUMBERS:
07.04.24

3 4 22 33 48 4

TOP PRIZE:
\$7,000/week

NEXT DRAW: 15 Hrs 52 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

DAKOTA CASH

WINNING NUMBERS:
07.03.24

4 7 14 25 34

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:
\$26,000

NEXT DRAW: 1 Days 15 Hrs 52 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

POWERBALL

DOUBLE PLAY

WINNING NUMBERS:
07.03.24

19 22 38 55 61 23

TOP PRIZE:
\$10,000,000

NEXT DRAW: 1 Days 15 Hrs 29 Mins 53 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

POWERBALL

WINNING NUMBERS:
07.03.24

2 26 33 55 57 22

Power Play: 2x

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:
\$20,000,000

NEXT DRAW: 1 Days 15 Hrs 29 Mins 53 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

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Upcoming Groton Events

- 07/04/2024 Firecracker Couples Tourney at Olive Grove Golf Course
- 07/09/2024 FREE SNAP Application Assistance 1-6pm at the Community Center
- 07/14/2024 Lion's Club Summer Fest/Car Show at the City Park 9am-4pm
- 07/17/2024 Legion Auxiliary #39 Salad Buffet & Dessert Bar at the Groton Legion 11am-1pm
- 07/17/2024 Pro Am Tourney at Olive Grove Golf Course
- 07/25/2024 Dairy Queen Miracle Treat Day
- 07/25/2024 Summer Downtown Sip & Shop 5-8pm
- 07/25/2024 Treasures Amidst The Trials 6pm at Emmanuel Lutheran Church
- 07/26/2024 Ferney Open Tourney at Olive Grove Golf Course 9am Start
- 07/27/2024 1st Annual Celebration in the Park 1-9:30pm
- 08/05/2024 School Supply Drive 4-7pm at the Community Center
- 08/02/2024 Wine on 9 at Olive Grove Golf Course 6pm
- 08/08/2024 Family Fun Fest 5:30-7:30pm
- 08/9-11/2024 Jr. Legion State Baseball Tournament
- 08/12/2024 Vitalant Blood Drive at the Community Center 1:15-7pm
- 09/07/2024 Lion's Club Fall Citywide Rummage Sale 8am-3pm
- 09/07-08/2024 Groton Airport Fly-In/Drive-In, Groton Municipal Airport
- 09/08/2024 Sunflower Couples Tourney at Olive Grove Golf Course 10am
- 10/05/2024 Pumpkin Fest at the City Park 10am-3pm
- 10/11/2024 Lake Region Marching Band Festival 10am
- 10/31/2024 Downtown Trick or Treat 4-6pm
- 10/31/2024 United Methodist Church Trunk or Treat 5:30-7pm
- 11/28/2024 Community Thanksgiving at the Community Center 11:30am-1pm
- 12/07/2024 Olive Grove 8th Annual Holiday Party & Tour of Homes with Live & Silent Auctions 6pm-close

News from the Associated Press

The Latest | Keir Starmer is officially the new UK prime minister

By The Associated Press undefined

Labour leader Keir Starmer officially became prime minister of the United Kingdom on Friday.

Starmer received the blessing of King Charles III to form a government in a ceremony known as the "kissing of hands." A photo of the occasion served as the official announcement of Starmer's new title.

Earlier on Friday, Rishi Sunak offered his resignation as prime minister to the king.

Voters in the U.K. cast their ballots Thursday in a national election to choose the 650 lawmakers who will sit in Parliament for the next five years.

After more than a decade in power under five different prime ministers, Sunak's Conservatives suffered a major defeat.

Here's the latest:

Keir Starmer is officially the new UK prime minister

Labour leader Keir Starmer has officially become prime minister of the United Kingdom.

Starmer received the blessing of King Charles III to form a government in a ceremony known as the "kissing of hands."

A photo of the occasion served as the official announcement of Starmer's new title.

Starmer is now headed from Buckingham Palace to take up residence in No. 10 Downing Street, where he is expected to speak.

Starmer arrives at Buckingham Palace for meeting with the king

Labour leader Keir Starmer has arrived at Buckingham Palace to accept the request of King Charles III to form a government after his party's landslide victory.

In a ceremony known as the "kissing of hands," Starmer will officially become U.K. prime minister. He will then head to his official residence at 10 Downing Street.

Starmer's arrival at the palace is part of the choreography of changing governments that harkens back to a time when the king exercised supreme power and chose his preeminent minister – the prime minister – to run his government.

The modern-day constitutional monarchy echoes that tradition, with the king officially offering the post to the party that holds a majority in the House of Commons.

Earlier in the day, outgoing Prime Minister Rishi Sunak offered his resignation to the king.

Sunak resigns

Rishi Sunak has departed from Buckingham Palace following his resignation as prime minister, after the Conservative Party suffered staggering losses in the general election.

Sunak officially left the post after tendering his resignation to King Charles III in his final audience with the monarch. Sunak was driven to the palace in a chauffeur-driven ministerial car, and left in a private vehicle.

Sunak leaves 10 Downing street after final speech as prime minister

Rishi Sunak has left the prime minister's residence and headed to Buckingham Palace to offer his resignation to King Charles III.

"This is a difficult day, but I leave this job honored to have been prime minister of the best country in the world," Sunak said in his final speech outside 10 Downing Street.

Sunak wished his victorious rival, Labour leader Keir Starmer, all the best: "Whatever our differences in this campaign, he is a decent, public-spirited man who I respect."

Sunak said he had given the job his all.

Sunak conceded defeat earlier in the morning as vote counts confirmed exit polls that had projected a landslide defeat for his Conservatives to the Labour Party.

After Sunak resigns, Starmer will go to the palace to seek the king's blessing to form a government. After performing the "kissing of hands," the new prime minister will head to his official residence, where

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he is expected to speak.

China says it hopes to work with the UK 'on the basis of mutual respect'

"Developing a stable and mutually beneficial China-UK relationship is in line with the fundamental interests of the two peoples, and is conducive to both sides responding to global challenges together and promoting world peace and development," Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesperson Mao Ning said Friday.

"We hope to work with the UK to move China-UK relations forward on the right track on the basis of mutual respect and win-win cooperation," Mao said at a daily press briefing.

China-UK relations have been roiled in the last few years by blocks on Chinese investment in Britain over national security concerns, tensions in the South China Sea and China's crackdown on democracy and free speech in the former British colony of Hong Kong in violation of its pledge to keep such institutions intact until 2047.

Left-wing disruptor George Galloway loses his seat after only a few months in Parliament

One of the casualties of the Labour Party's landslide win was a former member.

George Galloway, the leader of the Workers Party of Britain, lost the seat he won only months ago in a special election where he mobilized support against the Labour Party's stance on Gaza.

Galloway, who did not stay to listen to the result, lost his Rochdale seat to Labour's Paul Waugh, a former journalist.

Rochdale, like many other northern towns, has a sizable Muslim population.

Labour leader Keir Starmer has faced criticism within Muslim circles over his strong backing for Israel in the wake of the Hamas attacks on Oct. 7. He has subsequently shifted his position to call for a ceasefire.

Galloway, a left-wing disruptor, was expelled by Labour in 2003.

Former Prime Minister Liz Truss loses her seat

Liz Truss, the former prime minister whose premiership lasted just 49 days, has lost her lawmaker's seat in the election.

Truss lost her Norfolk South West seat to Labour by just several hundred votes. Truss quit as prime minister in 2022 after a tumultuous and historically brief term marred by economic policies that roiled financial markets.

Several other high-profile and senior Conservative lawmakers also lost their seats, including House of Commons leader Penny Mordaunt, education secretary Gillian Keegan and former business secretary Jacob Rees-Mogg.

Australia, New Zealand leaders congratulate Starmer

The leaders of Australia and New Zealand have sent their congratulations to Labour Party leader Keir Starmer on his election victory.

Australia's Prime Minister Anthony Albanese said in a social media post on X that he looked forward "to working constructively" with the new British government.

New Zealand's Prime Minister Christopher Luxon also took to X to congratulate Starmer, writing: "New Zealand and the UK are great friends and can do so much more together."

Luxon added his thanks to Prime Minister Rishi Sunak "for your service to your nation and friendship to New Zealand."

Larry the cat seen waiting patiently outside Downing Street

As the U.K. awaits a new prime minister, one feline was also patiently waiting to be let into No. 10 Downing Street.

Larry, Britain's mouse-catcher in chief and long time resident at the leader's official residence, was pictured waiting outside the famous black door early Friday.

The tabby cat was not bothered by the large crowd of press photographers waiting outside ahead of the change of power expected later Friday. Prime Minister Rishi Sunak is expected to go to King Charles III to tender his resignation, and soon after Labour leader Keir Starmer will meet the monarch to be officially appointed.

Larry was recruited by former Prime Minister David Cameron to tackle rats seen scuttling close to the British leader's official residence, and entered Downing Street in February 2011.

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Starmer: We will put the country first, party second

Labour leader Keir Starmer, who is set to become the first Labour prime minister in 14 years, says his government will always put "country first, party second."

He said a "mandate like this comes with great responsibility," and added that his government will be focused on "national renewal."

"We have to return politics to public service," he said.

With more than half of all 650 seats counted, Labour looks set to secure one of its biggest ever majorities in the House of Commons.

Starmer is expected to pay a visit to King Charles III later Friday to get the monarch's permission to form a new government.

Labour wins at least 326 seats, enough to have a majority

Official results show Britain's Labour Party has won enough seats to have a majority in the UK Parliament and will form the next government.

The party had won 326 of the 650 seats by 5 a.m. Friday as counting continued.

That means leader Keir Starmer will become prime minister and can form a majority government.

"We did it," he said at a victory party in London. "Change begins now."

Hope is "shining once again on a country with the opportunity after 14 years to get its future back," Starmer said.

Prime Minister Sunak concedes that Labour has won

British Prime Minister Rishi Sunak says the British people have "delivered a sobering verdict," and the Labour Party has won the election.

Sunak, who held onto his lawmaker's seat in North Yorkshire, told those gathered: "The Labour party has won this general election."

He said he took "responsibility" for his party's loss, and that he had called Labour leader Keir Starmer to congratulate him on his victory.

He added that he will head to London in the coming hours, and promised that the transition to Labour will be orderly.

Sunak is expected to go to see King Charles III at Buckingham Palace on Friday to officially resign. After that, Starmer is expected to be driven to the palace to get the king's permission to form a government.

Labour is way ahead with more than half of all seats counted

With more than half of the 650 seats declared so far, Labour is emerging way ahead of other parties with at least 250 seats.

The governing Conservatives have 44 seats, while the left-of-center Liberal Democrats have won 32 seats.

The hard-right, anti-immigration Reform UK has won 4 seats so far.

The Scottish National Party has four seats, while the Green Party has 1 seat.

Labour suffers in some areas over its Gaza stance

While the Labour Party appears headed for a landslide U.K. election victory, it seems clear that it has suffered in areas with big Muslim communities over its stance on the conflict in Gaza.

A prominent Labour member, Jonathan Ashworth, lost his Leicester South seat in central England to an independent candidate who had Gaza at the heart of his campaign.

Ashworth, who was expected to be appointed to the Cabinet, lost around 20,000 votes when compared to the election of 2019.

Even Labour leader Keir Starmer saw his majority in his Holborn and St. Pancras seat in north London reduced, with more than 7,000 votes going to a pro-Gaza candidate.

After the Oct. 7 attacks on Israel by Hamas militants, Starmer took a strongly pro-Israel stance and maintained it even as the death toll in Gaza swelled. Many Muslims who had been traditional Labour voters were aghast and have clearly turned to other candidates.

Anti-immigration Reform UK leader Nigel Farage wins a seat in Parliament

Nigel Farage, the leader of the hard-right Reform UK party, has been elected to Parliament.

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Farage won the contest in the seaside town of Clacton-on-Sea, becoming a lawmaker at his eighth try after seven failed election attempts.

Partial results show the anti-immigration Reform, successor to the Brexit Party, has taken votes from both the Conservatives and Labour.

Farage said the party was "going to come second in hundreds of constituencies." It is not yet clear how many seats Reform will win.

He said there is a "massive gap" in the right of British politics, and it was his job to fill it.

"My plan is to build a mass national movement over the course of the next few years," he said.

Former Labour leader Corbyn holds onto his London seat

Jeremy Corbyn, who led the Labour Party into the general elections of 2017 and 2019, has held onto his seat in north London — but this time as an independent.

Corbyn, who had been suspended from the party following a row over antisemitism, decided to stand as an independent candidate in the Islington North constituency he has represented since 1983.

Corbyn won the seat by nearly 7,000 votes over his Labour opponent. Corbyn had won the seat by more than 26,000 votes at the last election.

Defense Secretary Grant Shapps loses his seat

U.K. Defense Secretary Grant Shapps, long a key figure in the Conservative Party, has lost his seat in the general election.

Shapps lost his contest for Welwyn Hatfield, a seat north of London, by nearly 4,000 votes, or by 8 percentage points to his Labour Party opponent Andrew Lewin.

Shapps, 55, is the most senior Cabinet minister to lose their seat so far. He was widely considered to be the government's most trusted media performers over many years and had been tipped as a potential Conservative leadership candidate to replace Prime Minister Rishi Sunak.

Labour leader Starmer says voters are ready for change

Labour leader Keir Starmer says "voters have spoken and they are ready for change" as an exit poll points to a landslide win for his party.

Starmer spoke as he won his seat in north London but on a much-reduced majority.

Addressing the audience, he spoke of the need to return politics to "public service" and the need for "change."

He thanked voters for electing him to serve "my home, where my kids have grown up, where my wife was born."

"It all starts with you. Change begins in this community," he said. "You have voted, it is now time for us to deliver."

Anti-immigration party Reform UK wins its first seat in the election

Reform U.K., the recently formed anti-immigration party, has won its first seat in the general election.

Lee Anderson, the former Conservative deputy chairman who defected to Reform a few months ago, held onto his seat in Ashfield in central England with 43% of the vote.

Reform has posed a serious headache to the governing Conservatives, luring many previously staunch Tory voters with its promises to cut immigration.

The exit poll suggested that the party, which is led by divisive right-wing politician Nigel Farage, could win up to 13 seats in the 650-seat House of Commons.

Count Binface makes an appearance at vote counting center

Count Binface, the comedy independent candidate hoping to unseat Prime Minister Rishi Sunak in his seat of Richmond and North Allerton, has appeared at a vote counting center.

The self-described intergalactic space warrior is a satirical character created by comedian David Harvey. He has said his ambition was to conquer "the entire omniverse." He also said he hoped that his campaign will raise a smile and show that "democracy is alive".

"There's something wonderful that in the year of 2024 when so many countries are going to the polls and democracy is under threat like never before, it's still possible to do what I do," he said in a recent interview.

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Labour's economic spokeswoman warns of scale of coming challenge

Labour's Rachel Reeves, who is set to become the first female Treasury chief if her party wins the U.K. election, said she is "under no illusions" about the scale of the challenge she will face.

"The severity of the inheritance from the Conservatives is truly awful," she told Sky News.

Reeves noted that the U.K.'s debt burden is running at 100% of the country's national income and the tax burden at a seven-decade high.

She said she "can't promise to turn everything around straight away."

Reeves said the driving mission of an incoming Labour government is to kickstart economic growth.

Conservatives lose the first seat they were defending

Britain's governing Conservative Party has lost its first seat it was defending in the country's general election.

Robert Buckland, a former justice minister, lost his Swindon South seat in central England after his vote slumped by 25% compared with the last election 2019. Labour's Heidi Alexander won the seat, returning to Parliament after she resigned in 2018 to take up a position with the mayor of London.

According to the exit poll, the Conservatives are set to lose more than 200 seats and suffer its worst result since 1906.

What to expect in coming hours as ballots get counted by hand

Voting in the U.K. is done the old-school way — no voting machines are used. Instead, voters put a pencil to paper, and all ballot papers are counted manually.

After ballot boxes are opened, the ballot papers in the box are mixed with postal vote ballot papers and the counting begins at counting centers across the U.K.

Several dozen seats are expected to be declared from now until around 0100GMT to 0200GMT — including Labour leader Keir Starmer's London seat, Holborn and St. Pancras.

From 0200GMT onwards will be the busiest part of the night, with more than 200 seats expected to be declared.

By around 0300GMT, enough results should be known to suggest which party is on course to win.

The first of 650 House of Commons seats is declared

A Labour Party candidate has won the first U.K. seat to report its result in the general election.

Bridget Phillipson, who is Labour's education spokesperson, won with a majority of 7,169 in the Houghton and Sunderland South seat in the northeast of England from the second-placed candidate.

That's more than double the majority she won last time the seat was contested in 2019.

The candidate from the recently formed anti-immigration Reform U.K. came second, pushing the candidate from the governing Conservative Party into third.

Phillipson said the result represented a vote for "hope and unity, not decline and division."

Leading Conservative, Labour members react to exit poll results

Leading members of Britain's main political parties are reacting to the exit poll suggesting the opposition Labour Party winning a landslide victory and returning to power for the first time since 2010.

Labour's deputy leader Angela Rayner told Sky News that the Conservatives are getting punished by voters for "14 years of the chaos and the scandals and the decline."

Labour's national campaign chief, Pat McFadden, said the transformation of his party since its poor showing in the 2019 election has been "remarkable."

"We have campaigned as a changed Labour Party, ready to change Britain," he said.

Meanwhile, Ruth Davidson, the former leader of the Scottish Conservatives, said the exit poll pointed to a "massacre" for the party.

The projection suggests that the Conservatives will end up with its lowest number of seats in the House of Commons since 1906.

Exit poll: Conservatives set to face historic defeat; anti-immigration Reform UK gains big

Results from Britain's exit poll suggest that the governing Conservatives are set to have their seats in the 650-seat House of Commons cut down to 131 — the Tories' worst result in the party's two-century

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history and one that would leave the party in disarray.

The exit poll also forecasts the left-of-center Liberal Democrats will take 61 seats, and Nigel Farage's right-wing, anti-immigration Reform UK, which currently does not have any seats, is set to take 13 seats. The Green Party is expected to take 2.

The Scottish National Party, SNP, are expected to secure 10 seats.

Exit poll suggests Labour is heading for a landslide victory

As polls close across the U.K., an exit poll suggests the Labour Party is headed for a huge majority in Britain's election.

The poll, released moments after polls closed on Thursday, indicates that Labour leader Keir Starmer will be the country's next prime minister.

Britain's exit poll is conducted by pollster Ipsos and asks people at scores of polling stations to fill out a replica ballot showing how they have voted. It usually provides a reliable though not exact projection of the final result.

The exit poll suggested that Labour will win 410 of the House of Commons' 650 seats, with the Conservatives taking 131 seats.

A key unknown: How will turnout influence the outcome of the UK election?

One of the significant unknowns in Thursday's U.K election is how turnout will influence the outcome. The number of people who voted won't be known until after polls close.

The U.K. has 67 million residents and 46 million were registered to vote in the last general election in 2019. Turnout at that time was 67%.

In local elections in May when Conservatives suffered heavy losses in council seats and mayoral offices, turnout averaged 30%, the Institute for Government, an independent think tank, reported.

Conservatives expressed optimism that reports of high turnout Thursday could help them overcome polls that have suggested a widespread Labour victory.

With a double-digit lead in the polls, Labour fears supporters will be complacent and won't vote. They've urged their supporters to go to the polls.

Until polls close in the UK, humans' canine friends are the winners

If you were watching the news coverage of the U.K. election, you would be forgiven for thinking it has gone to the dogs.

Seemingly every news site had a gallery of images with dogs outside polling stations, patiently waiting for their owners to do their civic duty while the news business fulfilled an obligation of its own to protect the sanctity of elections.

The U.K. has restrictions on what can be reported on election days before the polls close to avoid influencing voters. Unlike the United States, where there is wall-to-wall coverage and analysis, there is no such reporting in Britain.

There are just reports that people are going to the polls, along with photos and footage of the lead candidates entering polling stations — but there is no discussion of their campaign platforms.

Thus, the puppy love.

There was Alfie, a blonde shaggy dog in Chiswick, Arnie a cockapoo wearing a rainbow color bowtie in Liverpool and Tobie, a rare otterhound, in Norfolk. Those were on Sky News.

On the BBC, there was Lucien, a Bernese mountain dog, lying outside Antrobus Village Hall in Cheshire, Pippin, a fox red Labrador, in the Edgware part of London, and Maui, an Old English sheepdog in Wokingham.

Journalists went the extra mile to show that it wasn't just pooches at polls — they found at least two horses, a cat, a chicken and a giant snake named Neptune.

A north London borough and Labour stronghold excited about the possibility of change

Voters in the north London borough of Islington started to gather even before the polling station opened as the historically Labour Party stronghold tantalizingly considers the possibility of a change in government after 14 years of Conservative rule.

James Erskine, who works in advertising, said he was unable to forgive Conservative austerity policies that he believes have decimated public services, such as the National Health Service. Even so, he wanted

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to vote for something rather than against something.

"I think nothing has gone well in the last 14 years, and I think it's really important that the right result happens," he told The Associated Press. "I was even excited that we might get a different opposition to the big two parties. I don't actually think that will happen, but that would be amazing. I just see this as the potential for a seismic shift, and that's what I'm hoping for."

Erskine did not disclose who he voted for

England's team base at Euro 2024 is a 'politics-free zone'

England's team base at the European Championship soccer tournament in Germany is a "politics-free zone" on election day, defender John Stones says.

Stones said he had no clue about his teammates' voting intentions.

"I couldn't tell you about the other lads. I'm sure it'll be something that'll get brought up tonight, later on, but I couldn't tell you who they vote for. They keep it close to their chests," he said.

That's a stark contrast to France's players, who have been vocal about a hard-fought parliamentary election campaign at home.

England is preparing for its Euro 2024 quarterfinal match against Switzerland on Saturday

Staunchly conservative voters in Clacton weigh a switch to the Reform Party

LONDON — Britain is going to the polls Thursday at a time when public dissatisfaction is running high over a host of issues.

From the high cost of living and a stagnating economy to a dysfunctional state health care system and crumbling infrastructure, some disillusioned voters have turned to the populist Reform Party.

Its divisive leader Nigel Farage, who championed Brexit, is drawing growing numbers of Conservative voters with his pledge to "take our country back."

Opponents have long accused Farage of fanning racist attitudes toward migrants and condemned what they call his scapegoat rhetoric. They say that underfunding of schools, hospitals and housing under governments on the right and left is the problem, not migrants.

Polls show Farage has a comfortable lead in Clacton-on-Sea — a town on England's southeast coast where many older, white voters used to staunchly support the governing Conservatives.

It's unclear how much impact his party will have in capturing seats and Parliament, though it could be a spoiler by siphoning votes from Conservative candidates.

Farage, who has lost seven campaigns for Parliament, was the rare party leader who didn't go to the polls Thursday. He voted in advance by mail.

All voters must bring ID for the first time in a general election

All voters in the U.K. were required to bring identification with them Thursday for the first time in a general election.

A change in the law has required voters in England, Scotland and Wales to prove their identity since 2023 by showing a passport, drivers' license and more than a dozen other acceptable forms of ID.

Voters in Northern Ireland have had to show identification since 1985, and photo ID since 2003.

The Elections Act introduced by former British Prime Minister Boris Johnson in 2022 was enforced, ironically, earlier this year when Johnson tried to vote without ID in a local election in South Oxfordshire.

He was turned away, but returned later with his identification and cast his vote.

Lib Dem leader Ed Davey, who urged voters to take 'a leap of faith,' votes in his suburban London district

Liberal Democrat leader Ed Davey voted Thursday in an election that could see his left-of-center party gain a larger share of seats in Parliament.

Davey's Lib Dems have been trying to make inroads in areas of southern England where Conservatives are vulnerable as their party has plunged in popularity after 14 years in power.

Davey's stunt-filled campaign has been a publicity bonanza. He has tumbled off a paddleboard into a lake, braved roller coaster rides and bungee jumped, urging voters to take "a leap of faith."

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The party had 15 of the 650 seats in the House of Commons when Parliament was dissolved in May.

The party has vowed to improve Britain's ailing health and social care systems, including introducing free nursing care at home. It wants to lower voting age to 16 and rejoin the European Union's single market.

UK communities locked in tight contests as traditional party loyalties come second

Communities all over the United Kingdom such as Henley-on-Thames are locked in tight contests in which traditional party loyalties come second to more immediate concerns about the economy, crumbling infrastructure and the National Health Service.

Though it has traditionally been a Conservative Party stronghold, the area known for its famous regatta may change its stripes. The Conservatives, which took power during the depths of the global financial crisis, have been beset by sluggish growth, declining public services and a series of scandals, making them easy targets for critics on the left and right.

"This is a blue (Conservative) town, always has been," said Sam Wilkinson, a restaurant manager. "My generation won't necessarily vote blue, not necessarily, but at the same time who else do you vote for? It's really tricky. I'm just kind of looking out for my kids really, hopefully more money into education and the arts."

Residents steadily streamed to the polling station, including Patricia Mulcahy, who is retired.

"The younger generation are far more interested in change," she said. "So, I think whatever happens in Henley, in the country, there will be a big shift. But whoever gets in, they've got a heck of a job ahead of them. It's not going to be easy."

Labour's ex-leader Corbyn casts vote as an independent candidate

Former Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn, who is running for reelection as an independent, posted a photo of himself voting Thursday in his North London district.

Corbyn, a socialist who has won his seat for Labour at every general election since 1983, was suspended from the party and barred from running by Labour after his leadership faced antisemitism allegations.

He became deeply unpopular after Labour in 2019 suffered its worst defeat since 1935.

Keir Starmer was chosen as leader to replace Corbyn and he has rebuilt it and moved it closer to the center. Pollsters and politicians expect Labour to win the largest number of seats.

Labour's Keir Starmer, favored to win power, votes in London

Labour Party leader Keir Starmer voted Thursday in an election that is widely expected to return his party to power for the first time in 14 years and make him prime minister.

Starmer, who has warned his supporters not to take the election for granted despite polls and politicians predicting a landslide, voted in his London neighborhood.

Pollsters have given Labour a double-digit lead since before the campaign began six weeks ago.

Starmer has spent his time criss-crossing Britain and urging voters to vote for change.

He has pledged to revive a sluggish economy, invest in the nation's crumbling infrastructure and repair the broken National Health Service, which his center-left party founded in 1945.

Scottish National Party leader, fighting Labour wave, casts his vote

Scottish National Party leader John Swinney has voted as his party fights to hold off a wave of support from the rival Labour Party.

Swinney, who became the SNP's third leader in just over a year in May, has tried to bring stability to a party in turmoil.

Scotland's long-serving First Minister Nicola Sturgeon abruptly stepped down last year during a campaign finance investigation that eventually led to criminal charges against her husband, who was the party's chief executive.

Swinney joined the party at 15 years old, and previously led the party from 2000 to 2004.

Swinney has said that if his party wins a majority of seats in Scotland he will try to open Scottish independence negotiations with the London-based U.K. government. He wants to rejoin the European Union and the European single market.

Sunak votes in his Northern constituency

Prime Minister Rishi Sunak cast his ballot Thursday in a national election that will determine if he remains

in office.

Sunak, who tried to bring stability to a Conservative Party in chaos when he was picked as leader in October 2022, spent the past six weeks trying to persuade voters across the U.K. to give his party another term after 14 years in power.

Pollsters and politicians widely expect the Labour Party to win for the first time since 2005.

Sunak's campaign got off to a soggy start when he called the snap election in a downpour outside 10 Downing Street in May.

He had been expected to wait until the fall, when expected improvements in the economy would give him a better chance.

Sunak voted shortly after polls opened in his constituency in Yorkshire in northern England.

Polls open in vote that could end Tories' 14 years in power

British voters are picking a new government on Thursday after polls opened at 7 a.m. for a parliamentary election that is widely expected to bring the opposition Labour Party to power.

Against a backdrop of economic malaise, mounting distrust of government institutions and a fraying social fabric, a fractious electorate is delivering its verdict on Prime Minister Rishi Sunak's Conservative Party, which has been in power since 2010.

The center-left Labour Party, led by Keir Starmer, has had a steady and significant lead in opinion polls for months, but Labour leaders have warned against taking the election result for granted, worried their supporters will stay home.

Sunak, for his part, has tried to rally his supporters, saying on Sunday that he still thought the Conservatives could win and defending his record on the economy.

Starmer takes power as prime minister as UK Labour Party sweeps to power in historic election win

By BRIAN MELLEY and JILL LAWLESS Associated Press

LONDON (AP) — Labour leader Keir Starmer has officially become prime minister of the United Kingdom. Starmer received the blessing of King Charles III to form a government in a ceremony known as the "kissing of hands."

A photo of the occasion served as the official announcement of Starmer's new title.

Starmer is now headed from Buckingham Palace to take up residence in No. 10 Downing Street, where he is expected to speak.

He replaces Conservative Prime Minister Rishi Sunak, who offered his resignation to Charles after his party that ruled for 14 years was swept from power in a Labour landslide.

Sunak in his farewell remarks said he had heard the anger and disappointment of voters and took responsibility for his party's loss.

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

LONDON (AP) — Britain's Labour Party swept to power Friday after more than a decade in opposition, as a jaded electorate handed the party a landslide victory — but also a mammoth task of reinvigorating a stagnant economy and dispirited nation.

Labour leader Keir Starmer will officially become prime minister later in the day, leading his party back to government less than five years after it suffered its worst defeat in almost a century.

In the merciless choreography of British politics, he will take charge in 10 Downing St. shortly after Conservative leader Rishi Sunak and his family left the official residence and King Charles III accepted his resignation at Buckingham Palace.

"This is a difficult day, but I leave this job honored to have been prime minister of the best country in the world," Sunak said in his farewell address.

Sunak had conceded defeat earlier in the morning, saying the voters had delivered a "sobering verdict."

In a reflective farewell speech in the same place where he had called for the snap election six weeks

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earlier, Sunak wished Starmer all the best but also acknowledged his missteps.

"I have heard your anger, your disappointment, and I take responsibility for this loss," Sunak said. "To all the Conservative candidates and campaigners who worked tirelessly but without success, I'm sorry that we could not deliver what your efforts deserved."

Labour's triumph and challenges

With almost all the results in, Labour had won 410 seats in the 650-seat House of Commons and the Conservatives 118.

"A mandate like this comes with a great responsibility," Starmer acknowledged in a speech to supporters, saying the fight to regain people's trust after years of disillusionment "is the battle that defines our age."

Speaking as dawn broke in London, he said Labour would offer "the sunlight of hope, pale at first but getting stronger through the day."

For Starmer, it's a massive triumph that will bring huge challenges, as he faces a weary electorate impatient for change against a gloomy backdrop of economic malaise, mounting distrust in institutions and a fraying social fabric.

"Nothing has gone well in the last 14 years," said London voter James Erskine, who was optimistic for change in the hours before polls closed. "I just see this as the potential for a seismic shift, and that's what I'm hoping for."

And that's what Starmer promised, saying "change begins now."

Anand Menon, professor of European Politics and Foreign Affairs at King's College London, said British voters were about to see a marked change in political atmosphere from the tumultuous "politics as pantomime" of the last few years.

"I think we're going to have to get used again to relatively stable government, with ministers staying in power for quite a long time, and with government being able to think beyond the very short term to medium-term objectives," he said.

Britain has experienced a run of turbulent years — some of it of the Conservatives' own making and some of it not — that has left many voters pessimistic about their country's future. The U.K. divorce from the European Union followed by the COVID-19 pandemic and Russia's invasion of Ukraine battered the economy, while lockdown-breaching parties held by then-Prime Minister Boris Johnson and his staff caused widespread anger.

Rising poverty, crumbling infrastructure and overstretched National Health Service have led to gripes about "Broken Britain."

Johnson's successor, Liz Truss, rocked the economy further with a package of drastic tax cuts and lasted just 49 days in office. Truss, who lost her seat to Labour, was one of a slew of senior Tories kicked out in a stark electoral reckoning.

While the result appears to buck recent rightward electoral shifts in Europe, including in France and Italy, many of those same populist undercurrents flow in Britain. Reform UK leader Nigel Farage roiled the race with his party's anti-immigrant "take our country back" sentiment and undercut support for the Conservatives and even grabbed some voters from Labour.

Conservative vote collapses as smaller parties surge

The result is a catastrophe for the Conservatives as voters punished them for 14 years of presiding over austerity, Brexit, a pandemic, political scandals and internecine conflict.

The historic defeat — the smallest number of seats in the party's two-century history — leaves it depleted and in disarray and will spark an immediate contest to replace Sunak, who said he would step down as leader.

In a sign of the volatile public mood and anger at the system, the incoming Parliament will be more fractured and ideologically diverse than any for years. Smaller parties picked up millions of votes, including the centrist Liberal Democrats and Farage's Reform UK. It won four seats, including one for Farage in the seaside town of Clacton-on-Sea, securing a place in Parliament on his eighth attempt.

The Liberal Democrats won about 70 seats, on a slightly lower share of the vote than Reform because its votes were more efficiently distributed. In Britain's first-past-the-post system, the candidate with the

most votes in each constituency wins.

The Green Party won four seats, up from just one before the election.

One of the biggest losers was the Scottish National Party, which held most of Scotland's 57 seats before the election but looked set to lose all but handful, mostly to Labour.

Labour was cautious but reliable

Labour did not set pulses racing with its pledges to get the sluggish economy growing, invest in infrastructure and make Britain a "clean energy superpower."

But the party's cautious, safety-first campaign delivered the desired result. The party won the support of large chunks of the business community and endorsements from traditionally conservative newspapers, including the Rupert Murdoch-owned Sun tabloid, which praised Starmer for "dragging his party back to the center ground of British politics."

Conservative missteps

The Conservative campaign, meanwhile, was plagued by gaffes. The campaign got off to an inauspicious start when rain drenched Sunak as he made the announcement outside 10 Downing St. Then, Sunak went home early from commemorations in France marking the 80th anniversary of the D-Day invasion.

Several Conservatives close to Sunak are being investigated over suspicions they used inside information to place bets on the date of the election before it was announced.

In Henley-on-Thames, about 40 miles (65 kilometers) west of London, voters like Patricia Mulcahy, who is retired, sensed the nation was looking for something different. The community, which has long voted Conservative, flipped to the Liberal Democrats this time.

"The younger generation are far more interested in change," Mulcahy said ahead of the results. "But whoever gets in, they've got a heck of a job ahead of them. It's not going to be easy."

Associated Press journalists Danica Kirka, Pan Pylas, Poppy Askham, Bela Szandelszky in London and Tian Macleod Ji in Henley-on-Thames contributed.

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Rishi Sunak's campaign to stay British PM showed his lack of political touch

By PAN PYLAS Associated Press

LONDON (AP) — Rishi Sunak's campaign to remain Britain's prime minister showed a lack of political touch.

The Conservative Party's problems were grave before Friday's resounding election defeat but missteps by Britain's richest prime minister contributed to its defeat.

Predecessors such as Tony Blair and Boris Johnson were more politically astute and able to connect with voters. As for Sunak, he didn't have to call the election until Jan. 2025. He defied political advice by doing so in May — with Conservative support dwindling steadily amid an economic slump, ethics scandals and a revolving door of leaders over the last two years — and announced the July 4 date in the pouring rain.

What's more, the Conservative Party didn't appear ready for the campaign compared with Labour, and voters haven't really felt the improvement in Britain's economy yet.

"I have heard your anger, your disappointment, and I take responsibility for this loss," Sunak said in his final speech as prime minister outside the residence at 10 Downing St.

Arguably, Sunak's biggest blunder — one that prompted him to apologize and which many analysts think was the final death knell of the Conservative Party's campaign — was his decision to leave early from the 80-year D-day commemorations in northern France on June 6.

Critics said the decision to skip the international event that closed the commemorations showed disrespect to the veterans and diminished the U.K.'s international standing. Other world leaders including President Joe Biden, French President Emmanuel Macron, German Chancellor Olaf Scholz and Ukrainian

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leader Volodymyr Zelenskyy all were present. As was Keir Starmer, the U.K.'s new prime minister.

Born in 1980 in Southampton on England's south coast to parents of Indian descent, Sunak became Britain's first leader of color and the first Hindu to become prime minister. At 42, he was Britain's youngest leader for more than 200 years.

A former hedge fund manager at Goldman Sachs who married into a billionaire Indian family, Sunak rose rapidly within Conservative ranks. Now 44, he became Treasury chief on the eve of the coronavirus pandemic. Within weeks, he had to unveil the biggest economic support package of any Chancellor of the Exchequer outside wartime, a package that many saw as saving millions of jobs.

Long a low-tax, small-state politician despite the high-spending nature of that package, Sunak had a record of idolizing former Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher. Smooth, confident and at ease with the march of modern technology, Sunak was dubbed "Dishty Rishi" and quickly became one of the most trusted and popular faces within Johnson's administration during the rigors of the pandemic.

Johnson was forced to quit in the summer of 2022 after being adjudged to have lied to Parliament over breaches of coronavirus lockdowns at his offices in Downing Street. As if that wasn't bad enough, trust in the Conservatives tanked further when his successor Liz Truss backed a package of unfunded tax cuts that roiled financial markets and sent borrowing costs surging, particularly for homeowners already struggling with the most acute of cost of living crisis in decades. Her premiership was the shortest in the history of the U.K.

When Sunak replaced Truss, he pitched himself as a stable pair of hands. He constantly reminded voters that he had warned Conservative Party members about the recklessness of Truss's economic plan when he challenged her to succeed Johnson. The day he replaced Truss after her traumatic 49-day premiership in Oct. 2022, the Conservatives were trailing Labour by around 30 percentage points.

As Treasury chief, Sunak was lauded for rolling out his COVID-19 job retention package that arguably saved millions of jobs. But that came at a cost, bringing the country's tax burden to its highest level since the 1940s.

In his 21 months as prime minister, Sunak struggled to keep a lid on bitter divisions within his Conservative Party. One side wanted him to be much tougher on immigration and bolder in cutting taxes, while another urged him to move more to the center of politics, the space where, historically, British elections are won.

In his concession speech, Sunak said he would serve a full term in parliament until 2029, and that he would stay on as leader until the Conservative Party has elected a successor.

"It is important that, after 14 years in government, the Conservative Party rebuilds, but also that it takes up its crucial role in opposition professionally and effectively," he said,

Many think he may be tempted to return to the U.S. in the years to come, perhaps to pursue his interest in artificial technology.

After his school years at Winchester College, one of Britain's most expensive boarding schools, Sunak went to Oxford University to study politics, philosophy and economics — the degree of choice for future prime ministers. He then got an MBA at Stanford University, which proved to be a launchpad for his subsequent career as a hedge fund manager at Goldman Sachs in the U.S.

There, he met his wife, Akshata Murty, the daughter of the billionaire founder of Indian tech giant Infosys. They have two daughters. The couple are the wealthiest inhabitants yet of No. 10 Downing Street, according to the Sunday Times' 2024 Rich List, with an estimated fortune of 651 million pounds (\$815 million). They're even richer than King Charles III, a level of wealth that many said left him out of touch with the daily problems of most people.

With his fortune secure, Sunak was elected to Parliament for the safe Tory seat of Richmond in Yorkshire in 2015. In Britain's 2016 Brexit referendum, he supported leaving the European Union, a "leave" that came unexpectedly and that many Britons today regret.

Hurricane Beryl takes aim at the Mexican resort of Tulum as a Category 2 storm

By MARTÍN SILVA and JOHN MYERS JR. Associated Press

TULUM, Mexico (AP) — Hurricane Beryl weakened slightly to a Category 2 storm as it headed for what could be a direct hit on Mexico's Caribbean coast resort of Tulum early Friday, where authorities urged tourists to leave white sand beaches.

Beryl was the earliest Category 5 hurricane in the Atlantic before weakening to a Category 2 storm with windspeeds of 110 mph (175 kph) as it neared landfall on Mexico's Yucatan Peninsula, according to the U.S. National Hurricane Center.

President Andrés Manuel López Obrador issued a statement late Thursday saying Beryl may make a direct hit on Tulum, which, while smaller than Cancun, still has thousands of tourists and residents.

"It is recommendable that people get to higher ground, shelters or the homes of friends or family elsewhere," López Obrador wrote. "Don't hesitate, material possessions can be replaced."

Once a sleepy, laid-back village, in recent years Tulum has boomed with unrestrained development and now has about 50,000 permanent inhabitants and at least as many tourists on an average day. The resort now has its own international airport, but it is largely low-lying, just a few yards (meters) above sea level.

Early Friday, the storm's center was about 40 miles (65 kilometers) east of Tulum and was moving west-northwest at 15 mph (about 24 kph), the hurricane center said.

On Friday, Beryl was expected to weaken as it crossed over the Yucatan peninsula and re-emerge in the Gulf of Mexico, where the surprisingly resilient storm could once again become a hurricane and make a second landfall around Mexico's border with Texas next week.

As the wind began gusting over Tulum's beaches, four-wheelers with megaphones rolled along the sand telling people to leave. Tourists snapped photos of the growing surf, but military personnel urged them to leave.

Authorities around the Yucatan peninsula have prepared shelters, evacuated some small outlying coastal communities and even moved sea turtle eggs off beaches threatened by storm surge. In Tulum, authorities shut things down and evacuated beachside hotels.

Francisco Bencomo, general manager of Hotel Umi in Tulum, said all of their guests had left.

"With these conditions, we'll be completely locked down," he said, adding there were no plans to have guests return before July 10th.

"We've cut the gas and electricity. We also have an emergency floor where two maintenance employees will be locking down," he said from the hotel. "We have them staying in the room farthest from the beach and windows."

"I hope we have the least impact possible on the hotel, that the hurricane moves quickly through Tulum, and that it's nothing serious," he said.

Tourists were also taking precautions. Lara Marsters, 54, a therapist visiting Tulum from Boise, Idaho, said "this morning we woke up and just filled all of our empty water bottles with water from the tap and put it in the freezer ... so we will have water to flush the toilet."

"We expect that the power will go out," Marsters said. "We're going to hunker down and stay safe."

But once Beryl re-emerges into the Gulf of Mexico a day later, forecasters say it is again expected to build to hurricane strength and could hit right around the Mexico-U.S. border, at Matamoros. That area was already soaked in June by Tropical Storm Alberto.

Velázquez said temporary storm shelters were in place at schools and hotels but efforts to evacuate a few highly exposed villages — like Punta Allen, which sits on a narrow spit of land south of Tulum — and Mahahual, further south — had been only partially successful.

Earlier, Beryl wreaked havoc in the Caribbean. The hurricane damaged or destroyed 95% of homes on a pair of islands in St. Vincent and the Grenadines, jumbled fishing boats in Barbados and ripped off roofs and knocked out electricity in Jamaica.

On Union Island, part of St. Vincent and the Grenadines, a man who identified himself as Captain Baga

described the storm's impact, including how he had filled two 2,000-gallon rubber water tanks in preparation.

"I strapped them down securely on six sides; and I watched the wind lift those tanks and take them away -- filled with water," he said Thursday. "I'm a sailor and I never believed wind could do what I saw it do, if anyone (had) ever told me wind could do that, I would have told them they lie!"

The island was littered with debris from homes that looked like they had exploded.

Girlyn Williams and Jeremiah Forde were trying to recover what they could Thursday around their home, where only a concrete foundation remained standing.

They had run from room to room during the storm as different sections of their house were being destroyed. Eventually, they hid in a small space created by a rubber water tank that got wedged between the house and a concrete tank. Williams cut her leg in the scramble and needed six stitches.

Three people were reported killed in Grenada and Carriacou and another in St. Vincent and the Grenadines, officials said. Three other deaths were reported in northern Venezuela, where four people were missing, officials said.

In the Pacific, Tropical Depression Aletta was located about 300 miles (485 kilometers) south-southeast of the southern tip of Baja California with maximum sustained winds of 35 mph (55 kph), and was forecast to head away from land and dissipate by the weekend.

Myers reported from Kingston, Jamaica. Associated Press writers Renloy Trail in Kingston, Jamaica; Mark Stevenson, María Verza and Mariana Martínez Barba in Mexico City; Coral Murphy Marcos in San Juan, Puerto Rico, and Lucanus Ollivierre on Union Island, St. Vincent and Grenadines, contributed to this report.

Hungary's Orbán arrives in Moscow for talks with Putin, a rare visit from a European leader

By JUSTIN SPIKE and DASHA LITVINOVA Associated Press

BUDAPEST, Hungary (AP) — Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán has arrived in Moscow for talks with Russian President Vladimir Putin, Orbán's press chief said Friday, a rare visit to Russia by a European leader since it invaded Ukraine more than two years ago.

Orbán's visit comes only days after he made a similar unannounced trip to Ukraine, where he met with President Volodymyr Zelenskyy and proposed that Ukraine consider agreeing to an immediate cease-fire with Russia.

The Hungarian prime minister, widely seen as having the warmest relations with Vladimir Putin among all European Union leaders, has routinely blocked, delayed or watered down EU efforts to assist Ukraine and impose sanctions on Moscow for its war. He has long argued for a cessation of hostilities in Ukraine but without outlining what that might mean for the country's territorial integrity or future security.

That posture has frustrated Hungary's EU and NATO allies, which have broadly considered Russia's invasion as a breach of international law and a threat to the security of countries in Eastern Europe.

In an email on Friday, Orbán's press chief, Bertalan Havasi, said the Hungarian leader's trip comes "as part of his peace mission" — reflecting the image of a peacemaker that the populist leader has cultivated since Russia began its full-scale invasion in February 2022. Hungarian Foreign Minister Péter Szijjártó also joined the trip to Moscow, according to a post on his Facebook page.

Hungary at the beginning of the month took over the six-month rotating presidency of the EU Council, a largely formal role that can be used to shape the bloc's policy agenda. Orbán has said he wants to use the presidency to advocate for an end to the fighting in Ukraine.

Kremlin spokesperson Dmitry Peskov confirmed to a Russian state TV reporter on Friday that Ukraine will be among the topics on the agenda when Orbán and Putin meet.

EU officials have come down hard on Orbán for his visit with Putin, something only one other European leader has done since the start of the invasion.

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Austrian Chancellor Karl Nehammer visited Moscow in April 2022, weeks after the invasion, and said he raised the issue of war crimes allegedly committed in Ukraine by Russian forces.

The EU's foreign policy chief, Josep Borrell, said in a statement that Orbán's visit to Moscow "takes place, exclusively, in the framework of the bilateral relations between Hungary and Russia."

"Prime Minister Orbán has not received any mandate from the EU Council to visit Moscow. The EU position on Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine is reflected in many European Council conclusions. That position excludes official contacts between the EU and President Putin. The Hungarian Prime Minister is thus not representing the EU in any form," Borrell said.

He added that Putin has been indicted by the International Criminal Court and an arrest warrant released for his role in relation to the forced deportation of children from Ukraine to Russia.

Speaking to Hungarian state radio before departing Friday morning, Orbán said he was aware that his country's presidency of the EU "does not entitle us to negotiate on behalf of anyone."

Without mentioning reports of his planned trip to Moscow, he said his trip earlier this week to Kyiv did not "need a mandate, because I do not represent anything. The only thing I do is go to those places where there is a war or the threat of war that has negative consequences for Europe and Hungary as well."

Other EU officials have expressed dismay that Orbán undertook the trip unilaterally and without the approval of the bloc's member states.

Estonian Foreign Minister Margus Tsahkna said in a statement that "there is no justification" for the visit, and the Hungarian leader "is not representing the European Union and he does not have the approval of EU member states, including Estonia."

European Council President Charles Michel on Thursday said on the social media platform X that "the EU rotating presidency has no mandate to engage with Russia on behalf of the EU."

"The European Council is clear: Russia is the aggressor, Ukraine is the victim. No discussions about Ukraine can take place without Ukraine," Michel wrote.

Litvinova reported from Tallinn, Estonia.

US jobs report for June is likely to point to slower but still-solid hiring

By PAUL WISEMAN AP Economics Writer

WASHINGTON (AP) — The American job market likely cooled last month while still remaining fundamentally healthy, which would be welcome news for the Federal Reserve in its drive to fully tame inflation.

When the Labor Department issues the latest jobs report Friday, it's expected to show that employers added 190,000 jobs in June — a solid gain, though down from a surprisingly robust 272,000 increase in May. The unemployment rate likely remained at a low 4%, according to forecasters surveyed by the data firm FactSet.

From the Fed's perspective, a deceleration in hiring to a still-decent pace would be just about ideal. It would suggest that the job market is slowing enough to ease pressure on employers to sharply raise pay, which could feed inflation, yet not so much as to cause waves of layoffs.

That said, economists been repeatedly predicting that the job market would lose momentum in the face of high interest rates engineered by the Fed, only to see the hiring gains show unexpected strength. The economy has added a healthy average of 248,000 jobs a month so far in 2024. That's close to the 2023 average of 251,000, though down from the sizzling gains of 2022 (an average of 377,000 added jobs each month) and 2021 (a record 604,000) as the economy roared back from COVID-19 recession.

"The labor market has really proven the doubters wrong," said Andrew Flowers, chief economist at Apicast, which uses technology to help companies recruit workers.

Still, Flowers suggested, the much higher borrowing costs caused by the Fed's rate hikes will eventually weaken the job market.

"Eventually," he said, "it's going to bend, but not break. The slow bite of high interest rates is going to

moderate job growth.”

Already, there are signs of an economic slowdown. The U.S. gross domestic product — the total output of goods and services — grew at a lethargic annual pace of 1.4% from January through March, the slowest quarterly pace in nearly two years.

Consumer spending, which accounts for about 70% of all U.S. economic activity and which has powered the expansion the past three years, rose at just a 1.5% pace last quarter after growing more than 3% in each of the previous two quarters. In addition, the number of advertised job openings has declined steadily since peaking at a record 12.2 million in March 2022.

Still, while employers might not be hiring so aggressively after having struggled to fill jobs the past two years, they aren't cutting many, either. Most workers are enjoying an unusual level of job security.

“Businesses are hiring less amid cooler demand conditions,” said Bill Adams, chief economist at Comerica Bank. “But they are also laying off fewer workers than before the pandemic. The job market is tight, so businesses don't want to cut headcount today only to realize they need more workers tomorrow and then struggle to find them.”

During 2022 and 2023, the Fed raised its benchmark interest rate 11 times to try to conquer the worst streak of inflation in four decades, lifting its key rate to its highest point in 23 years. The punishingly higher borrowing rates that resulted, for consumers and businesses, were widely expected to trigger a recession. They didn't. The economy and the job market instead have shown surprising resilience.

Meanwhile, inflation has steadily declined from a 9.1% peak in 2022 to 3.3%. In remarks this week at a conference in Portugal, Fed Chair Jerome Powell noted that price increases in the United States were slowing again after higher readings earlier this year. But, he cautioned, further evidence that inflation is moving toward the Fed's 2% target level would be needed before the policymakers would cut rates.

Fed officials are sure to be watching Friday's jobs report for signs that wage pressures are easing. According to FactSet, forecasters believe that average hourly earnings rose 3.9% last month from a year earlier. That would be the smallest such gain since June 2021. But it would still exceed the 3.5% average annual wage growth that many economists consider consistent with 2% inflation.

The jobs report comes as Americans are weighing the health of the economy in advance of the November presidential election. Many blame President Joe Biden for high prices that continue to squeeze their household budgets.

Some Americans are also feeling the effects of a weakening labor market. One of them, Caleb Hennington, of Little Rock, Arkansas, was laid off from his marketing job in March.

“Since then, it's been a real struggle to find a new opportunity,” said Hennington, 32, who said he has applied for more than 250 positions.

“Most places completely ghost me after saying they'll get back to me quickly with a follow-up,” he said. “It's been exhausting mentally, and even though I have 10 years in the marketing field, I'm struggling to find a new role. I've had to resort to picking up freelance gigs and part-time jobs just to have some income coming in.”

Fireworks light up the skies across the US as Americans endure searing heat to celebrate July Fourth

By DAVID SHARP Associated Press

Millions of people in the U.S. celebrated and suffered under heat warnings Thursday as they flocked to beaches and traveled in droves to toast their nation's birth with July Fourth parades, cookouts and the always anticipated fiery splashes of color in the evening sky.

In Washington, neon bursts of light illuminated the night above the National Mall. The Boston Pops performed a musical fireworks spectacular at that city's Hatch Memorial Shell. And at parades all across the country, from Brattleboro, Vermont, to Waco, Texas, to Alameda, California, revelers dressed up in red, white and blue and waved the Stars and Stripes in commemoration of Independence Day.

Travel records were projected to fall with people jamming airports and crowding highways to reach

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Fourth of July celebrations that will stretch into a long weekend for many.

On the East Coast, some would-be beachgoers in Connecticut were turned away as parking at state parks filled to capacity, including a 2-mile (3 kilometer) stretch at Hammonasset Beach State Park, the state's largest shoreline beach.

Across the West, meanwhile, residents dealt with stifling heat as the National Weather Service warned of a "significant and extremely dangerous" heat wave across much of the region. Some spots in the desert Southwest were expecting temperatures topping 120 degrees Fahrenheit (49 degrees Celsius), and hot, muggy conditions also permeated the Deep South and Middle Atlantic.

A heat advisory in Philadelphia that came with temperatures tipping into the 90s didn't stop crowds from gathering at historic sites in the city where the Declaration of Independence was adopted on July 4, 1776.

Outside the National Constitution Center, volunteer actors dressed in Revolutionary War-era costume made of heavy wool, despite the heat. Participants said it was worth it.

"It keeps you connected to your neighborhood and where you live," said Adrian Mercado, who donned a 6th Pennsylvania Regiment uniform.

Evening fireworks were scheduled over the Benjamin Franklin Parkway, after a concert by Ne-Yo and Kesha.

In New York City, Macy's annual fireworks show fired off thousands of projectiles from the Hudson River, lighting up the skylines of Manhattan, Hoboken, and Jersey City.

From Queens, bright golden and orange exploding orbs could be seen silhouetting the Empire State Building, itself lit up in red, white and blue. Mild weather brought residents to their rooftops, where many lit their own fireworks.

"This is how we celebrate. It's the bombs bursting in air. It's the rockets' red glare. That's how people show their pride and patriotism," said Julie Heckman of the American Pyrotechnics Association.

All signs pointed to big celebrations: The Transportation Security Administration reported that a record of nearly 3 million people traveled through airports in a single day last week, a figure expected to be broken this week. AAA projected that 60.6 million people will travel by car during the holiday period. Part of the boost was attributed to easing inflation, though many Americans remain concerned about the economy.

In suburban Chicago, Highland Park resumed its annual parade on the second anniversary of a mass shooting that took seven lives and injured dozens at the 2022 event. Residents gathered at a middle school for a remembrance before the parade, which followed a different route than in the past.

"July Fourth is always going to be a day of mixed emotion," Mayor Nancy Rotering said. "We come forth today hoping we as a community can remember and honor the lives lost."

The holiday celebrating the establishment of a new country free from British rule is traditionally marked by barbecue, cold drinks and the Stars and Stripes on flagpoles and on clothing, in addition to the parades. But some were also celebrating in other ways unique to their communities.

Of course there was the annual hot dog eating contest on New York's Coney Island, where a new champion chomper emerged: Patrick Bertoletti of Chicago gobbled down 58 hot dogs to win his first men's title. In the women's competition, Miki Sudo of Florida downed 51 links to notch her 10th title and set a new record.

In Alaska, the city of Seward got a head start with a fireworks display at midnight, as thousands of people gathered on a rocky beach during the brief window when the sky dims this time of year in the land of the midnight sun. The shells burst over Resurrection Bay as people watched in silence. "It was absolutely magical," resident Iris Woolfolk said.

The Northern California city of Oroville's annual fireworks were canceled due to a wildfire, although most of the 17,000 people under evacuation orders or warnings were able to go home as hundreds of firefighters toiled under extreme heat.

The July Fourth holiday generally unites Americans in their shared love of country, but the 2024 version comes against a backdrop of deep political polarization and a divisive presidential race.

In Boston, where tens of thousands were expected to enjoy the Boston Pops Fireworks Spectacular,

conductor Keith Lockhart said it's inspiring to see people of different political stripes gather on Charles River Esplanade.

But, he noted, "one would have to have one's head pretty deeply stuck in the sand to not notice the deep divisions in our country."

Associated Press writers John O'Connor in Springfield, Illinois; Isabella O'Malley in Philadelphia; Susan Haigh in Hartford, Connecticut; and Morgan Lee in Santa Fe, New Mexico, contributed to this report.

Germany fears a victory for the far-right National Rally could harm its close relations with France

By KIRSTEN GRIESHABER Associated Press

BERLIN (AP) — German Chancellor Olaf Scholz is worried about the outcome of the runoff elections in France.

Scholz, who is normally tightlipped when asked about domestic politics in other European countries, has in recent weeks more than once expressed concern that the far-right, nationalist National Rally may win a parliamentary majority in the second round of elections in neighboring France on Sunday, allowing the party to form a new government.

Earlier this week, the decidedly pro-European Scholz even revealed that he and beleaguered French President Emmanuel Macron are texting on a daily basis as the election draws closer.

"We are discussing the situation, which is really depressing," Scholz said at a summer gathering of his Social Democratic Party in Berlin on Tuesday, according to German news agency dpa.

"In any case, I am keeping my fingers crossed that the French, whom I love and appreciate so much, the country that means so much to me, will succeed in preventing a government led by a right-wing populist party," Scholz added in an unusually emotional way.

Germany worries about French election outcome

The German chancellor's concerns may be well-founded. If the French give the far-right nationalist party a majority on Sunday, German-French ties are likely to deteriorate, with effects felt across the European Union, experts say.

The specter of a far-right government in France comes after the European Parliament elections last month strengthened hard-right parties overall, though their performance varied from country to country. In Germany, the far-right Alternative for Germany also surged.

Several countries in the EU such as Italy, the Netherlands or Sweden have veered to the right in national elections as voters cast their ballots for euroskeptic parties promising nationalist solutions for European issues such as inflation, migration, and Russia's brutal war on Ukraine that has brought in millions of refugees looking for shelter.

Why would a victory for the National Rally hurt German-French relations?

Germany and France, the EU's two biggest economies, have long been viewed as the engine of European integration. The two countries in the heart of Europe have overcome hundreds of years of wars and animosity and, after the end of World War II, built a close relationship.

Both countries are founding members of the European Union, which was created in large part to prevent a new war between Germany and France given their bellicose history.

Generations of high school students have participated in exchange programs, there are city partnerships, regular bilateral government consultations, joint arms projects, and, countless binational German-French families living in both countries.

However, the National Rally has pursued a "France First" policy. It wants to move away from the close partnership of France and Germany, experts say, which would be a turnaround from decades of close and celebrated friendship.

Even though the leaders of the two countries have had political differences in the past over topics such as how strongly to support Ukraine in defending itself against Russia, they have — until now — always

tried to coordinate their positions on the EU and their foreign policy.

"German-French relations are actually unique in international politics in terms of their cooperation and intensity," says Ronja Kempin, an analyst of Franco-German relations at the German Institute for International and Security Affairs.

It comes therefore as no surprise that "in Berlin, people are now particularly nervous about the fact that the National Rally in France could represent a party with a large majority in parliament that is very critical of Germany, perhaps even hostile to Germany," she added.

Even though National Rally party leader Jordan Bardella said last month that if he becomes France's prime minister, he hopes "to have the occasion and the opportunity to talk with the German chancellor," he has also stressed that he would defend his country's interests and sees Scholz as a political rival.

If the Franco-German relationship sours, all of the EU is affected

Germany, which is the EU's most populous country and has the continent's biggest economy, is often perceived by its European neighbors as overpowering and dominant in the 27-country bloc. Populist parties in particular have been using this sentiment to rile up voters.

If a future far-right French government were to join that choir of nationalists, it would have repercussions for all of the EU, says Jacob Ross, an expert on Franco-German relations at the German Council on Foreign Relations.

"Many EU projects could potentially be blocked," he said adding that future cooperation on European financial and banking policies, European armaments projects, and everyday collaboration on the EU's administrative level could suffer.

The further expansion of the EU, which Scholz has been advocating, could also be in question, Ross said.

"The National Rally is certainly not a supporter of rapid EU expansion into the Western Balkans, and certainly not into Ukraine or Georgia," he added.

Too close to fail?

Despite the potentially grim outlook, some European political veterans think that German-French relations are too strong to fail.

While being potentially forced to work with a far-right prime minister, French President Emmanuel Macron would still hold some powers over foreign policy, European affairs and defense, in line with the Constitution. He has a presidential mandate until 2027, has said he won't step down before the end of his term.

Martin Schulz, the former president of the European parliament and a member of Scholz's Social Democrats, says that the relationship is close that even a populist government cannot derail it.

"No French president can do without Germany and, conversely, no German chancellor can do without France," Schulz told the weekly publication Der Spiegel on Thursday. "The two countries are too intertwined for that — economically, in terms of monetary policy, socially and culturally."

"After all these decades of cooperation, no one can flip the switch from one day to the next and unwind this connection. The majority of people in France are also interested in a close relationship with Germany," he added. "So: Franco-German relations will continue — the question is in what form."

Sylvie Corbet contributed reporting from Paris.

Iran holds runoff presidential vote pitting hard-line former negotiator against reformist lawmaker

By JON GAMBRELL and NASSER KARIMI Associated Press

DUBAI, United Arab Emirates (AP) — Iranians voted Friday in a runoff presidential election between a hard-line former nuclear negotiator and a reformist lawmaker, with both men trying to convince a skeptical public to cast ballots after years of economic woes and mass protests roiling the Islamic Republic.

The race between hard-liner Saeed Jalili and Masoud Pezeshkian, a heart surgeon and longtime member of parliament, comes after a first round of voting saw the lowest turnout ever for an Iranian election, leaving turnout Friday a major question.

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Meanwhile, wider tensions have gripped the Middle East over the Israel-Hamas war in the Gaza Strip. In April, Iran launched its first-ever direct attack on Israel over the war in Gaza, while militia groups that Tehran arms in the region — such as the Lebanese Hezbollah and Yemen's Houthi rebels — are engaged in the fighting and have escalated their attacks.

Iran also continues to enrich uranium at near weapons-grade levels and maintains a stockpile large enough to build several nuclear weapons, should it choose to do so. And while Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei remains the final decision-maker on matters of state, whichever man ends up winning the presidency could bend the country's foreign policy toward either confrontation or collaboration with the West.

A heavy security presence could be seen on the streets of Tehran on Friday, as crowds appeared light at dozens of polling places. State television broadcast scenes of modest lines at polling centers around the country.

Both Jalili and Pezeshkian voted in southern Tehran, home to many poor neighborhoods, in a bid to boost turnout. Though Pezeshkian came out on top in the first round of voting on June 28, Jalili has been trying to secure the votes of people who supported hard-line parliament speaker Mohammad Bagher Qalibaf, who came in third and later endorsed the former negotiator.

One voter, 27-year-old Yaghoub Mohammadi, said he voted for Jalili in both rounds.

"He is clean, without depending on powerful people in the establishment," Mohammadi said. "He represents those who have no access to power."

Voter Samira Sharafi, the 34-year-old mother of a toddler, said she voted for reformist Pezeshkian, despite having voted for Qalibaf in the first round. She described him as "more experienced" than Jalili.

There have been calls for a boycott, including from imprisoned Nobel Peace Prize laureate Narges Mohammadi, though potential voters in Iran appear to have made the decision not to participate last week on their own as there's no widely accepted opposition movement operating within or outside of the country.

State television broadcast images of modest lines at select polling places around the country as polls opened Friday.

As has been the case since the 1979 Islamic Revolution, women and those calling for radical change have been barred from the ballot while the vote itself will have no oversight from internationally recognized monitors.

Interior Minister Ahmad Vahidi, who is in charge of overseeing the election, announced all the polls had opened at 8 a.m. local time.

Khamenei cast one of the election's first votes from his residence, television cameras and photographers capturing him dropping the ballot into the box.

"I have heard that people's enthusiasm is more than before," Khamenei said. "God willing, people vote and choose the best" candidate.

However, Khamenei on Wednesday said that those who didn't vote last week weren't against the country's Shiite theocracy.

"There are reasons behind this matter which should be examined by sociologists and those involved in politics," he said.

More than 61 million Iranians over the age of 18 are eligible to vote, with about 18 million of them between 18 to 30. Elections are scheduled to end at 6 p.m. local, but traditionally get extended until midnight to boost participation.

Friday's election marks only Iran's second presidential runoff since 1979. The first came in 2005, when hard-liner Mahmoud Ahmadinejad bested former President Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani. Under Ahmadinejad, Iran faced international sanctions over its advancing nuclear program, as well as the 2009 Green Movement protests and the crackdown that smashed them.

Pezeshkian's supporters have been warning Jalili will bring a "Taliban"-style government into Tehran, while Jalili has criticized Pezeshkian for running a campaign of fear-mongering.

The election comes after the 63-year-old late President Ebrahim Raisi died in a May 19 helicopter crash

that also killed the country's foreign minister and others. He was seen as a protege of Khamenei and a potential successor as supreme leader. Still, many knew him for his involvement in the mass executions that Iran conducted in 1988, and for his role in the bloody crackdowns on dissent that followed protests over the 2022 death of Mahsa Amini, a young woman detained by police over allegedly improperly wearing the mandatory headscarf, or hijab.

Karimi reported from Tehran, Iran.

Israel conducts military operation in the area of the West Bank city of Jenin; 5 Palestinians killed

JERUSALEM (AP) — The Israeli military said Friday it was conducting counterterrorism activity that included an airstrike in the area of the West Bank city of Jenin. Palestinian authorities said five people were killed.

The military said Israeli soldiers had "encircled a building where terrorists have barricaded themselves in" and the soldiers were exchanging fire, while an airstrike had "struck several armed terrorists" in the area.

The Palestinian Health Ministry said five people died but did not provide any information on their identities. No further details were immediately available from either side.

The clashes in Jenin, a known militant stronghold where the army frequently operates, came a day after an Israeli anti-settlement monitoring group said the government plans to build nearly 5,300 new homes in settlements in the occupied West Bank.

The construction plans revealed by the Peace Now group are part of the hard-line government's efforts to beef up settlements as part of a strategy of cementing Israel's control over the West Bank to prevent a future Palestinian state. The Palestinians seek the West Bank, east Jerusalem and Gaza — areas captured by Israel in the 1967 Mideast war — for an independent state.

Violence has spiraled in the West Bank since the start of Israel's war in Gaza, sparked by the Oct. 7 raid into southern Israel by Hamas militants who killed around 1,200 people, mostly civilians, and took more than 200 others as hostages. The war has so far killed more than 38,000 Palestinians, Gaza's Health Ministry says. The ministry does not differentiate between combatants and civilians in its count, but it includes thousands of women and children.

Cease-fire talks appeared to be reviving after stalling for weeks. Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's office said Thursday he was sending negotiators to resume the talks, a day after Hamas handed mediators its latest response to a U.S.-backed proposal for a deal.

The revival of negotiations appeared to mark another attempt by U.S., Qatari and Egyptian mediators to overcome the gap that has repeatedly thwarted a deal over the past months. Hamas wants an agreement that ensures Israeli troops fully leave Gaza and the war ends, while Netanyahu says the war cannot end before Hamas is eliminated.

Israeli negotiators are expected to arrive in Doha, Qatar's capital, for the talks as early as Friday, with American, Egyptian and Qatari officials present.

US jobs report for June is likely to point to slower but still-solid hiring

By PAUL WISEMAN AP Economics Writer

WASHINGTON (AP) — The American job market likely cooled last month while still remaining fundamentally healthy, which would be welcome news for the Federal Reserve in its drive to fully tame inflation.

When the Labor Department issues the latest jobs report Friday, it's expected to show that employers added 190,000 jobs in June — a solid gain, though down from a surprisingly robust 272,000 increase in May. The unemployment rate likely remained at a low 4%, according to forecasters surveyed by the data firm FactSet.

From the Fed's perspective, a deceleration in hiring to a still-decent pace would be just about ideal. It

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would suggest that the job market is slowing enough to ease pressure on employers to sharply raise pay, which could feed inflation, yet not so much as to cause waves of layoffs.

That said, economists been repeatedly predicting that the job market would lose momentum in the face of high interest rates engineered by the Fed, only to see the hiring gains show unexpected strength. The economy has added a healthy average of 248,000 jobs a month so far in 2024. That's close to the 2023 average of 251,000, though down from the sizzling gains of 2022 (an average of 377,000 added jobs each month) and 2021 (a record 604,000) as the economy roared back from COVID-19 recession.

"The labor market has really proven the doubters wrong," said Andrew Flowers, chief economist at Apicast, which uses technology to help companies recruit workers.

Still, Flowers suggested, the much higher borrowing costs caused by the Fed's rate hikes will eventually weaken the job market.

"Eventually," he said, "it's going to bend, but not break. The slow bite of high interest rates is going to moderate job growth."

Already, there are signs of an economic slowdown. The U.S. gross domestic product — the total output of goods and services — grew at a lethargic annual pace of 1.4% from January through March, the slowest quarterly pace in nearly two years.

Consumer spending, which accounts for about 70% of all U.S. economic activity and which has powered the expansion the past three years, rose at just a 1.5% pace last quarter after growing more than 3% in each of the previous two quarters. In addition, the number of advertised job openings has declined steadily since peaking at a record 12.2 million in March 2022.

Still, while employers might not be hiring so aggressively after having struggled to fill jobs the past two years, they aren't cutting many, either. Most workers are enjoying an unusual level of job security.

"Businesses are hiring less amid cooler demand conditions," said Bill Adams, chief economist at Comerica Bank. "But they are also laying off fewer workers than before the pandemic. The job market is tight, so businesses don't want to cut headcount today only to realize they need more workers tomorrow and then struggle to find them."

During 2022 and 2023, the Fed raised its benchmark interest rate 11 times to try to conquer the worst streak of inflation in four decades, lifting its key rate to its highest point in 23 years. The punishingly higher borrowing rates that resulted, for consumers and businesses, were widely expected to trigger a recession. They didn't. The economy and the job market instead have shown surprising resilience.

Meanwhile, inflation has steadily declined from a 9.1% peak in 2022 to 3.3%. In remarks this week at a conference in Portugal, Fed Chair Jerome Powell noted that price increases in the United States were slowing again after higher readings earlier this year. But, he cautioned, further evidence that inflation is moving toward the Fed's 2% target level would be needed before the policymakers would cut rates.

Fed officials are sure to be watching Friday's jobs report for signs that wage pressures are easing. According to FactSet, forecasters believe that average hourly earnings rose 3.9% last month from a year earlier. That would be the smallest such gain since June 2021. But it would still exceed the 3.5% average annual wage growth that many economists consider consistent with 2% inflation.

The jobs report comes as Americans are weighing the health of the economy in advance of the November presidential election. Many blame President Joe Biden for high prices that continue to squeeze their household budgets.

Some Americans are also feeling the effects of a weakening labor market. One of them, Caleb Hennington, of Little Rock, Arkansas, was laid off from his marketing job in March.

"Since then, it's been a real struggle to find a new opportunity," said Hennington, 32, who said he has applied for more than 250 positions.

"Most places completely ghost me after saying they'll get back to me quickly with a follow-up," he said. "It's been exhausting mentally, and even though I have 10 years in the marketing field, I'm struggling to find a new role. I've had to resort to picking up freelance gigs and part-time jobs just to have some income coming in."

'We have to be wacky.' With suggestive poses and pets, election campaigning tests Tokyo's patience

By MARI YAMAGUCHI Associated Press

TOKYO (AP) — Tokyo elects a new governor this weekend, but residents say personal publicity stunts have overtaken serious campaigning to a degree never seen before, with nearly nude women in suggestive poses, pets, an AI character and a man practicing his golf swing.

It's impossible to ignore. With internet campaigning still relatively new, candidates traditionally use designated election billboards — more than 14,000 of them — to promote themselves. The makeshift billboards are set up only during the short campaign season and are valuable space for exposure in a city already crammed with advertising.

But this year's wackiness — notably from non-candidates renting the billboard space — is proving exceptional, and residents have flooded election offices with angry calls and messages.

"They are distasteful. As a Japanese citizen I feel embarrassed, as I see many foreign visitors pass by those billboards and they must wonder what's going on," said Mayumi Noda, an office worker. "As a voter, I think it's outrageous and disrespectful to the other candidates who are seriously competing."

A record 56 candidates, including incumbent Gov. Yuriko Koike, who seeks her third four-year term, are running in Sunday's election. Many of the candidates are fringe figures or influencers seeking even more exposure.

Tokyo, a city of 13.5 million, has outsized political and cultural power in Japan. Its budget equals that of some nations, and its policies impact the national government.

Hours after official campaigning began on June 20, residents faced a stunning array of posters. For some, it's not even clear whether the person behind it is a candidate or simply seeks exposure.

One billboard featured racy posters for an adult entertainment shop. Another had an almost naked female model in a suggestive pose with a message that said "Stop restricting free speech." Others showed photos of a pet dog or a female kickboxer. One candidate called AI Mayor used an image of a metallic humanoid.

Campaign video clips have also drawn criticism. One shows female candidate Airi Uchino saying, "I'm so cute; please watch my campaign broadcast," and repeating her name in a high-pitched, anime-style voice while asking voters to be friends on social media. She then strips down to a beige-colored tube top.

In another video, a male candidate who represents what he calls a "golf party" talks about his policies while occasionally practicing his golf swing.

Under a 1950 public office election law, candidates in Japan are free to say anything as long as they do not support another candidate or carry obviously false or libelous content.

This year's escalation is partly linked to an emerging conservative political party that has fielded 24 candidates for governor. Since each of the election billboards across Tokyo has 48 squares for candidates to paste their posters, the party is renting out half the slots to anyone who pays, including non-candidates.

That kind of unexpected approach isn't regulated.

The rental cost starts at 25,000 yen (about \$155) per location per day, said party leader Takashi Tachibana.

"We have to be wacky or we don't get media attention," Tachibana said in a YouTube comment posted on the party website.

"The point is to make immoral and outrageous actions ... to get attention," said Ryosuke Nishida, a Nihon University professor and expert in politics and media. "The reason why some people find these performances amusing is because they think their objections are not taken into consideration by politicians and existing parties or reflected in their politics."

At a park near Tokyo's busy Shimbashi train station, passersby glanced at a campaign billboard with half of its slots filled with dog posters.

"I don't decide who to vote for by looking at the faces on their posters," said Kunihiko Imada, a plumber. "But I still think these billboards are being misused."

A bench and a grandmother's ear: Zimbabwe's novel mental health therapy spreads overseas

By FARAI MUTSAKA Associated Press

HARARE, Zimbabwe (AP) — After her son, the family's shining light and only breadwinner, was arrested last year, Tambudzai Tembo went into meltdown. In Zimbabwe, where clinical mental health services are scarce, her chances of getting professional help were next to zero. She contemplated suicide.

"I didn't want to live anymore. People who saw me would think everything was okay. But inside, my head was spinning," the 57-year-old said. "I was on my own."

A wooden bench and an empathetic grandmother saved her.

Older people are at the center of a homegrown form of mental health therapy in Zimbabwe that is now being adopted in places like the United States.

The approach involves setting up benches in quiet, discreet corners of community clinics and in some churches, poor neighborhoods and at a university. An older woman with basic training in problem-solving therapy patiently sits there, ready to listen and engage in a one-on-one conversation.

The therapy is inspired by traditional practice in Zimbabwe in which grandmothers were the go-to people for wisdom in rough times. It had been abandoned with urbanization, the breakdown of tight-knit extended families and modern technology. Now it is proving useful again as mental health needs grow.

"Grandmothers are the custodians of local culture and wisdom. They are rooted in their communities," said Dixon Chibanda, a psychiatry professor and founder of the initiative. "They don't leave, and in addition, they have an amazing ability to use what we call 'expressed empathy'... to make people feel respected and understood."

Last year, Chibanda was named the winner of a \$150,000 prize by the U.S.-based McNulty Foundation for revolutionizing mental healthcare. Chibanda said the concept has taken root in parts of Vietnam, Botswana, Malawi, Kenya, and Tanzania and is in "preliminary formative work" in London.

In New York, the city's new mental health plan launched last year says it is "drawing inspiration" from what it calls the Friendship Bench to help address risk factors such as social isolation. The orange benches are now in areas including Harlem, Brooklyn and the Bronx.

In Washington, the organization HelpAge USA is piloting the concept under the DC Grandparents for Mental Health initiative, which started in 2022 as a COVID-19 support group of people 60 and above.

So far, 20 grandmothers determined to "stop the stigma around mental health and make it okay to talk about feelings" have been trained by a team from Friendship Bench Zimbabwe to listen, empathize and empower others to solve their problems, said Cindy Cox-Roman, the president and chief executive of HelpAge USA.

Benches will be set up at places of worship, schools and wellness centers in Washington's low-income communities with people who "have been historically marginalized and more likely to experience mental health problems," she said.

Cox-Roman cited fear and distrust in the medical system, lack of social support and stigma as some of the factors limiting access to treatment.

"People are hurting, and a grandmother can always make you feel better," she said.

"We have so much wisdom in our older population and arms that can open. I reject ageism. Sometimes age brings wisdom that you don't learn until you get old," one of the grandmothers, 81-year-old Barbara Allen, said in a promotional video.

More than one in five U.S. adults live with a mental illness, according to the National Institute of Mental Health.

"The mental health crisis is real. Where it's a real crisis after the pandemic is that many clinicians have dropped out of the workforce," said Dr. Jehan El-Mayoumi, who works as an expert with HelpAge USA and is a founding director of the health equity Rodham Institute at Georgetown University. She has struggled to get psychiatrists for acutely suicidal patients.

El-Mayoumi said the Zimbabwean concept provides people with "someone you can trust, open up your

heart to, that you can tell your deepest secrets (and) that requires trust, so that's what's so wonderful about the Friendship Bench."

The idea was born out of tragedy. Chibanda was a young psychiatrist, and one of just over 10 in Zimbabwe in 2005. One of his patients desperately wanted to see him, but she could not afford the \$15 bus fare. Chibanda later learned that she had killed herself.

"I realized that I needed to have a stronger presence in the community," Chibanda said. "I realized that actually one of the most valuable resources are these grandmothers, the custodians of local culture."

He recruited 14 grandmothers in the neighborhood near the hospital where he worked in the capital, Harare, and trained them. In Zimbabwe, they get \$25 a month to help with transport and phone bills.

The network, which now partners with the health ministry and the World Health Organization, has grown to over 2,000 grandmothers across the country. Over 200,000 Zimbabweans sat on a bench to get therapy from a trained grandmother in 2023, according to the network.

Siridzayi Dzukwa, the grandmother who talked Tembo out of suicide, made a home follow-up visit on a recent day. Using a written questionnaire, she checked on Tembo's progress. She listened as Tembo talked about how she has found a new lease on life and now sells vegetables to make ends meet.

Dzukwa has become a recognizable figure in the area. People stop to greet and thank her for helping them. Some ask for a home visit or take down her number.

"People are no longer ashamed or afraid of openly stopping us on the streets and ask us to talk," she said. "Mental health is no longer something to be ashamed of."

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He's derided as dull, but Keir Starmer becomes UK prime minister with a sensational victory

By JILL LAWLESS Associated Press

LONDON (AP) — For someone often derided as dull, Keir Starmer has delivered a sensational election result.

Starmer has led Britain's Labour Party to a landslide election victory, and on Friday will become prime minister — the first leader from the center-left party to win a U.K. national election since Tony Blair, who won three in a row starting in 1997.

It's the latest reinvention for a man who went from human rights attorney to hard-nosed prosecutor and from young radical to middle-aged pragmatist.

Like Blair, who refashioned the party as "New Labour" in the 1990s, 61-year-old Starmer led Labour to victory over Rishi Sunak's Conservative Party in Thursday's election after dragging the party towards the political middle ground.

He won by promising voters change, but also calm, vowing to restore stability to public life and give Britain "the sunlight of hope" after 14 years of turmoil under the Conservatives.

"People look at Starmer and they see this guy who is very solid, clearly very able in his professional life," said Douglas Beattie, author of "How Labour Wins (and Why it Loses)."

"I think people want that caution, they want that stability."

A former chief prosecutor for England and Wales, Starmer has often been caricatured by Conservative opponents as a "lefty London lawyer." He was knighted for his role leading the Crown Prosecution Service, and opponents like to use his title, Sir Keir Starmer, to paint him as elite and out of touch.

Starmer prefers to stress his humble roots and everyman tastes. He loves soccer — still plays the sport on weekends — and enjoys nothing more than watching Premier League team Arsenal over a beer in

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his local pub. He and his wife Victoria, who works in occupational health, have two teenage children they strive to keep out of the public eye.

During the campaign he was stubbornly resistant to revealing flashes of personality, telling a Guardian interviewer that he couldn't remember any of his dreams, did not have a favorite novel and had no childhood fears.

When he did get personal, telling a journalist that he hopes to carve out Friday evenings to spend with his family — his wife is Jewish, and Friday night Shabbat dinners are a family tradition — the Conservatives used it against him, claiming Starmer planned to be a part-time prime minister.

Born in 1963, Starmer is the son of a toolmaker and a nurse who named him after Keir Hardie, the Labour Party's first leader. One of four children, he was raised in a cash-strapped household in a small town outside London.

"There were hard times," he said in a speech launching his election campaign. "I know what out-of-control inflation feels like, how the rising cost of living can make you scared of the postman coming down the path: 'Will he bring another bill we can't afford?'"

Starmer's mother suffered from a chronic illness, Still's disease, that left her in pain, and Starmer has said that visiting her in the hospital and helping to care for her helped form his strong support for the state-funded National Health Service.

He was the first member of his family to go to college, studying law at Leeds University and Oxford. As a lawyer, he took civil liberties cases including that of the "McLibel Two," green activists sued by McDonald's for handing out leaflets saying the restaurant chain sold unhealthy food.

The cases often put him at odds with both Conservative and Labour governments, so his switch to become head of the Crown Prosecution Service in 2008 surprised some colleagues. But during five years in the job he gained a reputation as a tough and hard-working director of public prosecutions.

Starmer entered politics relatively late, in his 50s, and was elected to Parliament in 2015. He often disagreed with party leader Jeremy Corbyn, a staunch socialist, at one point quitting the party's top team over disagreements, but agreed to serve as Labour's Brexit spokesman under Corbyn.

Starmer has faced repeated questions about that decision, and about urging voters to support Corbyn, a divisive figure under whose leadership the party was hammered in the 2019 election.

He said he wanted to stay and fight to change Labour, arguing that "leaders are temporary, but political parties are permanent."

After Corbyn led Labour to election defeats in 2017 and 2019 — the latter the party's worst result since 1935 — Labour picked Starmer to lead efforts to rebuild.

His leadership has coincided with a turbulent period that saw Britain suffer through the COVID-19 pandemic, leave the EU, absorb the economic shock of Russia's invasion of Ukraine and endure economic turmoil from Liz Truss' turbulent 49-day term as prime minister in 2022.

Voters are weary from a cost-of-living crisis, a wave of public sector strikes and political turmoil that saw the Conservative Party dispatch two prime ministers within weeks in 2022 — Boris Johnson and Truss — before installing Sunak to try to steady the ship.

Starmer imposed discipline on a party with a well-earned reputation for internal division, ditched some of Corbyn's socialist policies and apologized for antisemitism that an internal investigation concluded had been allowed to spread under Corbyn.

Starmer promised "a culture change in the Labour Party." His mantra is now "country before party."

Starmer has promised voters that a Labour government can ease Britain's chronic housing crisis and repair its fraying public services, especially the creaking health service — but without imposing tax increases or deepening the public debt.

"While I don't think anyone is particularly excited about Keir Starmer, I think he has done a good job of situating himself as the kind of competent grown up in the room who is going to be able to bring government back to where it belongs," said Lise Butler, senior lecturer in modern history at City University of London.

Starmer will face pressure to deliver quickly. He has already dismayed some supporters by watering down a pledge to spend billions investing in green technology, saying a Labour government would not borrow

more to fund public spending.

Starmer was a strong opponent of Britain's decision to leave the European Union, but now says a Labour government won't seek to reverse Brexit, another disappointment to many in the party.

"A lot of people on the left will accuse him of letting them down, betraying socialist principles. And a lot of people on the right accuse him of flip-flopping," said Tim Bale, professor of politics at Queen Mary University of London.

"But, hey, if that's what it takes to win, then I think that tells you something about Starmer's character. He will do whatever it takes — and has done whatever it takes — to get into government."

Associated Press writer Danica Kirka contributed to this story.

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What to know about Venezuela's election as Maduro faces the toughest race of his decade in power

By REGINA GARCIA CANO Associated Press

CARACAS, Venezuela (AP) — Venezuela's self-described socialist government is facing a serious electoral challenge in a presidential election for the first time in decades.

President Nicolás Maduro, now in his 11th year in office, is being challenged by former diplomat Edmundo González Urrutia at the head of a resurgent opposition, as well as a field of eight other candidates. The official campaign period for the July 28 election kicked off Thursday.

Maduro, who has presided over an economic collapse that has seen millions of people emigrate, and his United Socialist Party of Venezuela have fended off challenges by barring rivals from elections and painting them as out-of-touch elitists in league with foreign powers.

This time, he promised to let the Unitary Platform opposition coalition participate in the election in a deal that brought his government some relief from crippling economic sanctions imposed by the United States. That respite, however, was short-lived as the U.S. reimposed sanctions amid mounting government actions against the opposition, including blocking the candidacy of opposition powerhouse María Corina Machado.

Here's what to know about Venezuela's upcoming presidential election.

Who is the opposition candidate?

The most talked-about name in the race is not on the ballot: María Corina Machado, a former lawmaker, emerged as an opposition star in 2023, filling the void left when a previous generation of opposition leaders went into exile. Her principled attacks on government corruption and mismanagement rallied millions of Venezuelans to vote for her in the opposition's October primary.

But Maduro's government declared the primary was against the law and opened criminal investigations against some of its organizers. Since then, it has issued warrants for a number of Machado's supporters and arrested some members of her staff, and the country's top court affirmed a decision to keep her off the ballot.

Yet, she kept on campaigning, holding rallies across the country and turning the ban on her candidacy into a symbol of the loss of rights and humiliations that many voters have felt for over a decade.

She has thrown her support behind Edmundo González Urrutia, a former ambassador who's never held public office, helping a fractious opposition unify behind him.

They are campaigning together promising an economy that will lure back the millions of Venezuelans who have migrated since Maduro became president in 2013.

On Thursday, the bus that was set to move Machado and González throughout a section of Caracas was temporarily stopped by law enforcement with both standing on a platform affixed to the vehicle. The officers argued the stop was a routine procedure to verify the validity of the driver's documents.

People gathered at the opposition's march marking the official start to the campaign chanted "Freedom! Freedom! Freedom!" and "And it will fall, and it will fall, this government is going to fall." They waved Ven-

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zuelan flags as they awaited the duo's arrival while motorists joined them honking their horns.

González began his diplomatic 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 Hugo Chávez's presidency, which began in 1999.

More recently, González worked as an international relations consultant and wrote a historical work on Venezuela during World War II.

Why is the current president having trouble?

President Nicolás Maduro's popularity has dwindled due to an economic crisis that resulted from a drop in oil prices, corruption and government mismanagement.

Maduro can still bank on a cadre of die-hard believers, known as Chavistas, including millions of public employees and others whose businesses or employment depend on the state. But the ability of his United Socialist Party of Venezuela to use access to social programs to get people to the polls has diminished as the country's economy has frayed.

He is the heir to Hugo Chávez, a popular socialist who expanded Venezuela's welfare state while locking horns with the United States.

Sick with cancer, Chávez handpicked Maduro to act as interim president upon his death. He took on the role in March 2013, and the following month, he narrowly won the presidential election triggered by his mentor's death.

Maduro was re-elected in 2018 in a contest that is widely considered a sham. His government banned Venezuela's most popular opposition parties and politicians from participating, and in turn, the opposition urged voters to boycott the election.

That authoritarian tilt was part of the rationale the U.S. used to impose economic sanctions that crippled the country's crucial oil industry.

Maduro held two events Thursday, including a march in Caracas, marking the official start of his campaign.

Who will vote?

More than 21 million Venezuelans are registered to vote, but the exodus of over 7.7 million people due to the prolonged crisis — including about 4 million voters — is expected to reduce the number of potential voters to about 17 million.

Voting is not mandatory and is done on electronic machines.

Venezuelan law allows people to vote abroad, but only about 69,000 met the criteria to cast ballots at embassies or consulates during this election. Costly and time-consuming government prerequisites to register, lack of information and a mandatory proof of legal residency in a host country kept many migrants from registering to vote.

Venezuelans in the U.S. face an insurmountable obstacle: Consulates, where citizens abroad would typically cast their ballots, are closed because Caracas and Washington severed diplomatic relations after Maduro's 2018 re-election.

Under what conditions is the election taking place?

A more free and fair presidential election seemed like a possibility last year, when Maduro's government agreed to work with the U.S.-backed Unitary Platform coalition to improve electoral conditions in October 2023. An accord on election conditions earned Maduro's government broad relief from U.S. economic sanctions on its state-run oil, gas and mining sectors.

But hopes for a more level playing field began fading days later, when authorities said the opposition's primary was against the law and later began issuing warrants and arresting human rights defenders, journalists and opposition members.

A U.N.-backed panel investigating human rights violations in Venezuela has reported that the government has increased repression of critics and opponents ahead of the election, subjecting targets to detention, surveillance, threats, defamatory campaigns and arbitrary criminal proceedings.

The government has also used its control of media outlets, the country's fuel supply, electric network and other infrastructure to limit the reach of the Machado-González campaign.

The mounting actions taken against the opposition prompted the Biden administration earlier this year

to end the sanctions relief it granted in October. _____

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Afghanistan has been through everything. Now it wants to dust off its postal service and modernize

By RIAZAT BUTT Associated Press

KABUL, Afghanistan (AP) — In parts of Afghanistan where there are no street names or house numbers, utility companies and their customers have adopted a creative approach for connecting. They use mosques as drop points for bills and cash, a "pay and pray" system.

Now the national postal service wants to phase this out by putting mailboxes on every street across the country, part of a plan to modernize a service long challenged by bureaucracy and war.

The lofty aspirations include introducing access to shopping via e-commerce sites and issuing debit cards for online purchases. It will be a leap in a country where most of the population is unbanked, air cargo is in its infancy and international courier companies don't deliver even to the capital, Kabul.

The changes mean Afghans will pay higher service fees, a challenge as more than half the population already relies on humanitarian aid to survive.

The Afghan Post, like much of the country, still does everything on paper. "Nobody uses email," said its business development director, Zabihullah Omar. "Afghanistan is a member of the Universal Postal Union, but when we compare ourselves to other countries it is at a low level and in the early stages."

The postal service has 400 to 500 branches across the country and is key for completing administrative tasks like obtaining a passport or driver's licence. It distributes up to 15,000 passports daily.

Another popular service is the certification of documents for admission to higher education or overseas institutions. The main Kabul branch has dedicated counters for it along with VIP lanes and a women-only area.

Post offices in Afghanistan are vital for women wanting to access services or products they would otherwise be denied, since they are often barred from entering ministries or other official premises.

But the spectre of the Taliban's edicts targeting women and girls also looms at the Afghan Post.

At the entrance to the main Kabul branch, a sign tells women to correctly wear hijab, or the Islamic headscarf. One picture shows a woman with a red cross over her visible face. The other has a green check mark over the face because only her eyes are seen.

One woman visiting the branch was a 29-year-old medical graduate from western Farah province, who gave her name as Arzo. The Education Ministry wouldn't let her in and dispatched her to the post office instead to get paperwork done.

She wanted to get her documents certified, a practical measure amid the country's precarious economic situation and the sweeping restrictions on women and girls.

"Anything can happen at any time," she said. "There are no jobs. There are many problems."

It was her first time using a post office. She paid 640 afghanis, or \$9, for each document and called the fees too high.

A more satisfied customer was 22-year-old Alam Noori from eastern Paktika province who came to collect his passport. "Piece of cake," he said in English. In the past, he also used a post office to collect his driver's license.

"I came to know about the post office through social media," he said. "People in the city use it a lot because they are aware of it, but those in villages and districts aren't."

The Afghan Post's business development director, Omar, wants services to be easier for people but conceded that it will take time.

"In most government agencies, people are wandering from public service to public service, so I want to serve people here, and that makes me very happy," he said. "There is a need for a post office wherever there is a population."

That's where the plan to have a mailbox on every street comes in. They will be for paying bills, sending

mail and submitting documents for processing.

But handwritten letters are disappearing, as they are in many parts of the world.

Hamid Khan Hussain Khel is one of the country's 400 postmen, zipping around the capital on a motorcycle bearing Afghan Post's jaunty blue and yellow. But he has yet to deliver a personal letter, despite serving the city's population of five million for two years. He cited the popularity of smartphones and messaging apps.

He enjoys the work, which is less dangerous than it was during the decades-long conflict.

"When we meet people, their satisfaction makes us happy," he said. "I haven't seen a person not smile when they get their documents."

Brazil's Bolsonaro indicted for alleged money laundering for undeclared diamonds from Saudi Arabia

By GABRIELA SÁ PESSOA and MAURICIO SAVARESE Associated Press

SAO PAULO (AP) — The indictment of former Brazilian President Jair Bolsonaro for money laundering and criminal association in connection with undeclared diamonds from Saudi Arabia marked the far-right leader's second formal accusation with more potentially in store.

Two sources with knowledge of the case confirmed Thursday's indictment by Federal Police, which followed another formal accusation in May against Bolsonaro for allegedly falsifying his COVID-19 vaccination certificate. Both officials spoke on condition of anonymity because they weren't authorized to speak publicly.

Brazil's Supreme Court has yet to receive the police report with the latest indictment. Once it does, the country's prosecutor-general, Paulo Gonet, will analyze the document and decide whether to file charges and force Bolsonaro to stand trial.

The indictment dramatically raises the legal threats facing the divisive ex-leader that are applauded by his opponents but denounced as political persecution by his supporters.

Bolsonaro did not immediately comment, but he and his lawyers have previously denied any wrongdoing in both those cases, as well as other investigations into the former president. One is probing his possible involvement in inciting an uprising in capital Brasilia on Jan. 8, 2023 that sought to oust his successor from power.

Last year, Federal Police accused Bolsonaro of attempting to sneak in diamond jewelry reportedly worth \$3 million and selling two luxury watches.

Police said in August that Bolsonaro received cash from the nearly \$70,000 sale of two luxury watches he received as gifts from Saudi Arabia. Brazil requires its citizens arriving by plane from abroad to declare goods worth more than \$1,000 and, for any amount above that exemption, pay a tax equal to 50% of their value.

The jewelry would have been exempt from tax had it been a gift from Saudi Arabia to Brazil, but not Bolsonaro's to keep for himself. Rather, it would have been added to the presidential collection.

The investigation showed that Mauro Cid, Bolsonaro's former aide-de-camp who allegedly falsified his COVID-19 records, in June 2022 sold a Rolex watch and a Patek Philippe watch to a store in the U.S for a total \$68,000. They were gifted by Saudi Arabia's government in 2019. Cid later signed a plea bargain with authorities and confirmed it all.

Flávio Bolsonaro, the former president's eldest son and a sitting senator, said on X after Thursday's indictment that persecution against his father was "blatant and shameless."

In addition to Bolsonaro, police indicted 10 others, including Cid and two of his lawyers, Frederick Wassef and Fábio Wajngarten, according to one of the sources. Wassef said in a statement that he didn't have access to the final report of the investigation, and decried selective leaks to the press of an investigation that is supposed to be proceeding under seal.

"I am going through all of this solely for practicing law in defense of Jair Bolsonaro," he wrote.

On X, Wajngarten said police have found no evidence implicating him. "The Federal Police knows I did nothing related to what they are investigating, but they still want to punish me because I provide unwavering and permanent defense for former President Bolsonaro," he said.

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Bolsonaro retains staunch allegiance among his political base, as shown by an outpouring of support in February, when an estimated 185,000 people clogged Sao Paulo's main boulevard to protest what the former president calls political persecution.

His critics, particularly members of his rival President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva's political party, have cheered every advance of investigations and repeatedly called for his arrest.

The 69-year-old former army captain started his political career as a staunch advocate of Brazil's military dictatorship, and was a lawmaker for nearly three decades. When he bid for the presidency for the first time, in 2018, he was widely dismissed as an outsider and too radically conservative. But he surprised analysts with a decisive victory, in no small part due to his self-portrayal as an upstanding citizen in the years following a sprawling corruption probe that ensnared hundreds of politicians and executives.

Bolsonaro insulted adversaries since his earliest days in office while garnering critics with his divisive policies, attacks on the Supreme Court and efforts to undermine health restrictions during the pandemic. He lost his reelection bid in the closest finish since Brazil's return to democracy in 1985.

Carlos Melo, a political science professor at the Insper University in Sao Paulo, believes Brazil's Supreme Court and the justice overseeing several investigations targeting Bolsonaro, Alexandre de Moraes, will not risk sending the former president to prison or imposing other harsh measures with any haste. The objective, he said, is to avoid instigating supporters of the far-right leader and so make cases against him more politically sensitive to prosecute.

"This is a year of mayoral elections. Moraes and his fellow justices know that prosecuting a former president who remains a popular man would be even tougher in a year like this," Melo said. "This indictment is another piece of the puzzle. It gives one more problem to Bolsonaro. There will be more."

Last year, Brazil's top electoral court ruled that Bolsonaro abused his presidential powers during his 2022 reelection bid, which rendered him ineligible for any elections until 2030. The case focused on a meeting during which Bolsonaro used government staffers, the state television channel and the presidential palace in Brasilia to tell foreign ambassadors that the country's electronic voting system was rigged.

FACT FOCUS: Trump's misleading claims about the Jan. 6, 2021, attack on the Capitol

By MARY CLARE JALONICK Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Former President Donald Trump said during his debate with President Joe Biden last week that the Jan. 6, 2021, attack on the Capitol involved a "relatively small" group of people who were "in many cases ushered in by the police."

But that's not what happened. Thousands of his supporters were outside the Capitol that day and hundreds broke in, many of them beating and injuring law enforcement officers in brutal hand-to-hand combat as the officers tried to stop them from storming through windows and doors. There is ample video evidence of the violence, and more than 1,400 people have been charged with federal crimes related to the riot.

Many of those who broke into the Capitol were echoing Trump's false claims of election fraud, and some menacingly called out the names of lawmakers — particularly then-House Speaker Nancy Pelosi and then-Vice President Mike Pence, who refused to try to object to Biden's legitimate win. The rioters interrupted the certification of Biden's victory, but lawmakers who had evacuated both chambers returned that night to finish.

Trump, now the presumptive GOP nominee to challenge Biden, has not only continued to mislead voters about what happened that day but has also heaped praise on the rioters, calling them "hostages" and promising to pardon them if he is elected. A look at some of his false claims:

'PEACEFULLY AND PATRIOTICALLY'

CLAIM: At the debate, Trump was asked by CNN's Jake Tapper what he would say to any voters "who believe that you have violated your constitutional oath through your actions, inaction on January 6, 2021, and worry that you'll do it again?" Trump simply replied: "Well, I didn't say that to anybody. I said peacefully and patriotically."

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THE FACTS: In a speech on the White House Ellipse the morning of Jan. 6 to thousands of supporters, Trump did tell the crowd to march "peacefully and patriotically" to the Capitol. But he also used far more incendiary language when speaking off the cuff in other parts of the speech, such as telling the crowd: "We fight like hell. And if you don't fight like hell, you're not going to have a country anymore."

Trump did not address Tapper's question about his inaction as his supporters broke into the building and injured police. More than three hours elapsed between the time his supporters violently breached the Capitol perimeter and Trump's first effort to get the rioters to disperse. He released a video message at 4:17 p.m. that day in which he asked his supporters to go home but reassured them, "We love you, you're very special."

Some rioters facing criminal charges have said in court they believed they had been following Trump's instructions on Jan. 6. And evidence shown during trials illustrates that far-right extremists were galvanized by a Trump tweet inviting his supporters to a "wild" protest on Jan. 6. "He called us all to the Capitol and wants us to make it wild!!!" wrote one Oath Keepers member who was convicted of seditious conspiracy.

POLICE 'LET THEM IN'

CLAIM: Trump said at the debate: "They talk about a relatively small number of people that went to the Capitol. And in many cases were ushered in by the police." The next day, Trump said at a rally: "So many of these people were told to go in, right? The police: 'Go in, go in, go in.'"

THE FACTS: More than 100 Capitol Police and Metropolitan Police officers were injured, some severely, as they tried to keep the rioters from breaking into the Capitol. In some cases police retreated or stepped aside as they were overwhelmed by the violent, advancing mob, but there is no evidence that any rioter was "ushered" into the building.

In an internal memo last year, U.S. Capitol Police Chief J. Thomas Manger said that the allegation that "our officers helped the rioters and acted as 'tour guides'" is "outrageous and false." Manger said police were completely overwhelmed and outnumbered, and in many cases resorted to de-escalation tactics to try to persuade rioters to leave the building.

The Capitol Police said in a statement this week that "under extreme circumstances, our officers performed their duties to the best of their ability to protect the members of Congress. With the assistance of multiple law enforcement agencies and the National Guard, which more than doubled the number of officers on site, it took several hours to secure the U.S. Capitol. At the end of the day, because of our officers' dedication, nobody who they were charged with protecting was hurt and the legislative process continued."

NATIONAL GUARD RESPONSE

CLAIM: Trump said he offered 10,000 National Guard troops to Pelosi and "she now admits that she turned it down." Referring to a video Pelosi's daughter took that day, Trump claimed that Pelosi said, "I take full responsibility for January 6."

THE FACTS: Trump has repeatedly and falsely claimed that he offered National Guard troops to the Capitol and that his offer was rejected. He has previously said he signed an order for 20,000 troops to go to the Capitol.

While Trump was involved in discussions in the days prior to Jan. 6 about whether the National Guard would be called ahead of the joint session, he issued no such order or formal request before or during the rioting, and the guard's arrival was delayed for hours as Pentagon officials deliberated over how to proceed.

In a 2022 interview with the Democratic-led House committee that investigated the attack, Christopher Miller, the acting Defense secretary at that time, confirmed that there was no order from the president.

The Capitol Police Board makes the decision on whether to call National Guard troops to the Capitol, and two members of that board — the House Sergeant at Arms and the Senate Sergeant at Arms — decided through informal discussions not to call the guard ahead of the joint session that was eventually interrupted by Trump's supporters, despite a request from the Capitol Police. The House Sergeant at Arms reports to the Speaker of the House, who was then Pelosi, and the Senate Sergeant at Arms reported to then-Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell, R-Ky. But Pelosi's office has said she was never informed of the request.

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The board eventually requested the guard's assistance after the rioting was underway, and Pelosi and McConnell called the Pentagon and begged for military assistance. Pence, who was in a secure location inside the building, also called the Pentagon to demand reinforcements.

In a video recently released by House Republicans, Pelosi is seen in the back of a car on Jan. 6 and talking to an aide. In the raw video recorded by her daughter, Pelosi is angrily asking her aide why the National Guard wasn't at the Capitol when the rioting started. "Why weren't the National Guard there to begin with?" she asks.

"We did not have any accountability for what was going on there and we should have, this is ridiculous," Pelosi says, while her aide responds that security officials thought they had sufficient resources. "They clearly didn't know and I take responsibility for not having them just prepare for more," Pelosi says in the video.

There is no mention of a request from Trump, and Pelosi never said that she took "full responsibility for Jan. 6."

In a statement, Pelosi spokesman Ian Krager said Trump's repeated comments about Pelosi are revisionist history.

"Numerous independent fact-checkers have confirmed again and again that Speaker Pelosi did not plan her own assassination on January 6th," Krager said. "The Speaker of the House is not in charge of the security of the Capitol Complex — on January 6th or any other day of the week."

'INNOCENT' RIOTERS

CLAIM: Trump said to Biden during the debate, "What they've done to some people that are so innocent, you ought to be ashamed of yourself, what you have done, how you've destroyed the lives of so many people."

THE FACTS: Echoing Trump's false claims of a stolen election, rioters at the Capitol engaged in hand-to-hand combat with police and a slew of rioters were carrying weapons, including firearms, knives, brass knuckle gloves, a pitchfork, a hatchet, a sledgehammer and a bow. They also used makeshift weapons, including flagpoles, a table leg, hockey stick and crutch, to attack officers. Police officers were bruised and bloodied, some dragged into the crowd and beaten. One officer was crushed in a doorframe and another suffered a heart attack after a rioter pressed a stun gun against his neck and repeatedly shocked him. One rioter has been charged with climbing scaffolding and firing a gun in the air during the melee.

The rioters broke through windows and doors, ransacking the Capitol and briefly occupying the Senate chamber. Senators had evacuated minutes earlier. They also tried to break into the House chamber, breaking glass windows and beating on the doors. But police held them off with guns drawn.

About 900 of the rioters have been sentenced, with roughly two-thirds of them receiving a term of imprisonment ranging from a few days to 22 years. Hundreds of people who went into the Capitol but did not attack police or damage the building were charged only with misdemeanors.

Associated Press writers Barbara Whitaker, Alanna Durkin Richer, Melissa Goldin and Jill Colvin contributed to this report.

Find AP Fact Checks here: <https://apnews.com/APFactCheck>

Britain's Labour Party has won enough seats to have a majority in the UK Parliament

By BRIAN MELLEY and JILL LAWLESS Associated Press

LONDON (AP) — Britain's Labour Party headed for a landslide victory Friday in a parliamentary election, an exit poll and partial returns indicated, as voters punished the governing Conservatives after 14 years of economic and political upheaval.

As the sun rose, official results showed Labour had 326 of the 650 seats, as vote counting continued.

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British Prime Minister Rishi Sunak had already acknowledged the defeat and said he called center-left Labour's leader Keir Starmer to congratulate him on becoming the country's next prime minister.

Starmer will face a jaded electorate impatient for change against a gloomy backdrop of economic malaise, mounting distrust in institutions and a fraying social fabric.

"Tonight people here and around the country have spoken, and they're ready for change," Starmer told supporters in his constituency in north London, as the official count showed he'd won his seat. "You have voted. It is now time for us to deliver."

As thousands of electoral staff tallied millions of ballot papers at counting centers across the country, the Conservatives absorbed the shock of a historic defeat that would leave the depleted party in disarray and likely spark a contest to replace Sunak as leader.

"Nothing has gone well in the last 14 years," said London voter James Erskine, who was optimistic for change in the hours before polls closed. "I just see this as the potential for a seismic shift, and that's what I'm hoping for."

While the result tallied so far suggest Britain will buck recent rightward electoral shifts in Europe, including in France and Italy, many of those same populist undercurrents flow in the country. Reform UK leader Nigel Farage has roiled the race with his party's anti-immigrant "take our country back" sentiment and undercut support for the Conservatives, who already faced dismal prospects.

The exit poll suggested it was on course to win about 410 seats in the 650-seat House of Commons and the Conservatives 131.

With more than half of the official results in, the broad picture of a Labour landslide was borne out, though estimates of the final tally varied. The BBC projected that Labour would end up with 410 seats and the Conservatives with 144. Even that higher tally for the Tories would leave the party with its fewest seats in its nearly two-century history and cause disarray.

"It's clear tonight that Britain will have a new government in the morning," said soon-to-be former Defense Secretary Grant Shapps after losing his seat — one of a clutch of Conservative Cabinet ministers who went down to defeat.

In a sign of the volatile public mood and anger at the system, some smaller parties appeared to have done well, including the centrist Liberal Democrats and Reform UK. Farage won his race in the seaside town of Clacton-on-Sea, securing a seat in Parliament on his eighth attempt.

A key unknown remained whether Farage's hard-right party could convert its success in grabbing attention into more than a handful of seats in Parliament.

Britons vote on paper ballots, marking their choice in pencil, that are then counted by hand. Final results are expected later Friday morning.

Britain has experienced a run of turbulent years — some of it of the Conservatives' own making and some of it not — that has left many voters pessimistic about their country's future. The U.K.'s exit from the European Union followed by the COVID-19 pandemic and Russia's invasion of Ukraine battered the economy, while lockdown-breaching parties held by then-Prime Minister Boris Johnson and his staff caused widespread anger.

Johnson's successor, Liz Truss, rocked the economy further with a package of drastic tax cuts and lasted just 49 days in office. Rising poverty and cuts to state services have led to gripes about "Broken Britain."

Hundreds of communities were locked in tight contests in which traditional party loyalties come second to more immediate concerns about the economy, crumbling infrastructure and the National Health Service.

In Henley-on-Thames, about 40 miles (65 kilometers) west of London, voters like Patricia Mulcahy, who is retired, sensed the nation was looking for something different. The community, which normally votes Conservative, may change its stripes this time.

"The younger generation are far more interested in change," Mulcahy said. "So, I think whatever happens in Henley, in the country, there will be a big shift. But whoever gets in, they've got a heck of a job ahead of them. It's not going to be easy."

Anand Menon, professor of European Politics and Foreign Affairs at King's College London, said British voters were about to see a marked change in political atmosphere from the tumultuous "politics as pan-

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tomime" of the last few years.

"I think we're going to have to get used again to relatively stable government, with ministers staying in power for quite a long time, and with government being able to think beyond the very short term to medium-term objectives," he said.

Labour has not set pulses racing with its pledges to get the sluggish economy growing, invest in infrastructure and make Britain a "clean energy superpower."

But nothing really went wrong in its campaign, either. The party has won the support of large chunks of the business community and endorsements from traditionally conservative newspapers, including the Rupert Murdoch-owned Sun tabloid, which praised Starmer for "dragging his party back to the center ground of British politics."

The Conservatives, meanwhile, have been plagued by gaffes. The campaign got off to an inauspicious start when rain drenched Sunak as he made the announcement outside 10 Downing St. Then, Sunak went home early from commemorations in France marking the 80th anniversary of the D-Day invasion.

Several Conservatives close to Sunak are being investigated over suspicions they used inside information to place bets on the date of the election before it was announced.

Sunak has struggled to shake off the taint of political chaos and mismanagement that's gathered around the Conservatives.

But for many voters, the lack of trust applies not just to the governing party, but to politicians in general.

"I don't know who's for me as a working person," said Michelle Bird, a port worker in Southampton on England's south coast who was undecided about whether to vote Labour or Conservative in the days before the elections. "I don't know whether it's the devil you know or the devil you don't."

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Hurricane Beryl strengthens back into a Category 3 storm as it nears Mexico's Yucatan Peninsula

By MARTÍN SILVA and JOHN MYERS JR. Associated Press

TULUM, Mexico (AP) — After leaving a trail of destruction across the eastern Caribbean and at least nine people dead, Hurricane Beryl strengthened back into a Category 3 storm late Thursday as it chugged over open water toward Mexico's resort-studded Yucatan Peninsula.

The U.S. National Hurricane Center said Beryl, which was the earliest Category 5 hurricane in the Atlantic, now had winds of 115 mph (185 kph) after weakening earlier Thursday.

President Andrés Manuel López Obrador issued a statement saying Beryl may make a direct hit on Tulum, which, while smaller than Cancun, still holds thousands of tourists and residents.

"It is recommendable that people get to higher ground, shelters or the homes of friends or family elsewhere," López Obrador wrote. "Don't hesitate, material possessions can be replaced."

Jack Beven, senior hurricane specialist at the U.S. Hurricane Center, said "the biggest immediate threat now that the storm is moving away from the Cayman Islands is landfall in the Yucatan Peninsula."

The storm's center was about 135 miles (220 kilometers) east-southeast of Tulum, Mexico, and was moving west-northwest at 16 mph (about 26 kph), the hurricane center said.

Beryl was expected to bring heavy rain and winds to Mexico's Caribbean coast, before crossing the Yucatan peninsula and restrengthening in the Gulf of Mexico to make a second strike on northeast Mexico.

As the wind began gusting over Tulum's white sand beaches on Thursday afternoon, four-wheelers with megaphones rolled along the sand telling people to leave. Tourists snapped photos of the growing surf, but military personnel urged them to leave as Beryl headed to an expected landfall around Tulum early Friday.

Over the past days, Beryl has damaged or destroyed 95% of homes on a pair of islands in St. Vincent and the Grenadines, jumbled fishing boats in Barbados and ripped off roofs in Jamaica before rumbling past the Cayman Islands early Thursday.

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Mexico's popular Caribbean coast prepared shelters, evacuated some small outlying coastal communities and even moved sea turtle eggs off beaches threatened by storm surge.

In Playa del Carmen, most businesses were closed Thursday and some were boarding up windows as tourists jogged by and some locals walked their dogs under sunny skies. In Tulum, authorities shut things down and evacuated beachside hotels.

Francisco Bencomo, General manager of Hotel Umi in Tulum said all of their guests had left. "With these conditions, we'll be completely locked down," he said, adding there were no plans to have guests return before July 10th.

"We've cut the gas and electricity. We also have an emergency floor where two maintenance employees will be locking down," he said from the hotel. "We have them staying in the room farthest from the beach and windows."

"I hope we have the least impact possible on the hotel, that the hurricane moves quickly through Tulum, and that it's nothing serious," he said.

Tourists were also taking precautions. Lara Marsters, 54, a therapist visiting Tulum from Boise, Idaho, said "this morning we woke up and just filled all of our empty water bottles with water from the tap and put it in the freezer ... so we will have water to flush the toilet."

"We expect that the power will go out," Marsters said. "We're going to hunker down and stay safe."

Myriam Setra, a 34-year-old tourist from Dallas, Texas was having a sandwich on the beach earlier Thursday, saying "figured we'd get the last of the sun in today, too. And then it's just going to be hunker down and just stay indoors until hopefully it passes."

But once Beryl re-emerges into the Gulf of Mexico a day later, forecasters say it is again expected to build to hurricane strength and could hit right around the Mexico-U.S. border, at Matamoros. That area was already soaked in June by Tropical Storm Alberto.

Velázquez said temporary storm shelters were in place at schools and hotels but efforts to evacuate a few highly exposed villages — like Punta Allen, which sits on a narrow spit of land south of Tulum — and Mahahual, further south — had been only partially successful.

Beryl's worst damage appeared to be behind it. Its eye wall brushed by Jamaica's southern coast on Wednesday afternoon while on Thursday morning, telephone poles and trees were blocking the roadways in Kingston.

Authorities confirmed a young man died on Wednesday after he was swept into a storm water drain while trying to retrieve a ball. A woman also died after a house collapsed on her.

Residents took advantage of a break in the rain to begin clearing debris.

Sixty percent of the island remained without electricity, along with a lack of water and limited telecommunications. Government officials were assessing the damage, but it was hampered by the lack of communication, mainly in southern parishes that suffered the most damage.

Some 1,432 people remained in shelters in Jamaica, like Desrine Campbell, a resident of the low-lying community of Old Harbour Bay, who wailed, "My house is almost flooded!"

Nearby, Carlton Golding said ruefully, "I lost everything this time." Golding's house was totally destroyed by the hurricane, the second time that he has suffered damage from storms.

In the south-central parish of Clarendon, residents attempted to mend damaged roofs and clear downed trees. Many roadways in the area remained partially blocked from downed electricity and telecommunication poles.

The premier of the Cayman Islands, Juliana O'Connor, thanked residents and visitors Thursday for contributing to the "collective calm" ahead of Beryl by following storm protocols.

Michelle Forbes, the St. Vincent and Grenadines director of the National Emergency Management Organization, said that about 95% of homes in Mayreau and Union Island have been damaged by Hurricane Beryl.

Three people were reported killed in Grenada and Carriacou and another in St. Vincent and the Grenadines, officials said. Three other deaths were reported in northern Venezuela, where four people were missing, officials said.

One fatality in Grenada occurred after a tree fell on a house, Kerryne James, the environment minister,

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told The Associated Press.

Separately, the U.S. National Hurricane Center said on Thursday that Tropical Storm Aletta had formed in the Pacific Ocean off Mexico's coast. Aletta, which was located about 190 miles (310 kilometers) from Manzanillo and had maximum sustained winds of 40 mph (65 kph), was forecast to head away from land and dissipate by the weekend.

Myers reported from Kingston, Jamaica. Associated Press writers Renloy Trail in Kingston, Jamaica; Mark Stevenson, María Verza and Mariana Martínez Barba in Mexico City; Coral Murphy Marcos in San Juan, Puerto Rico, and Lucanus Ollivierre in Kingstown, St. Vincent and Grenadines, contributed to this report.

Bertoletti, Sudo win top dog honors at Nathan's Famous power-eating contest, absent longtime champ

By SUSAN HAIGH and CEDAR ATTANASIO Associated Press

NEW YORK (AP) — Patrick Bertoletti gobbled up 58 hot dogs to win his first men's title Thursday at the annual Nathan's Famous Fourth of July hot dog eating contest, taking advantage of the absence of the event's biggest star. In the women's competition, defending champion Miki Sudo won her 10th title and set a new world record by downing 51 links.

Joey "Jaws" Chestnut, the reigning men's champion and winner of 16 out of 17 previous competitions, didn't attend this year over a sponsorship tiff. Instead he competed later in the day against four soldiers at a U.S. Army base in El Paso, Texas, where he wolfed down 57 hot dogs in five minutes.

Bertoletti, 39, of Chicago, won in a tight, 10-minute race where the leader bounced back and forth, defeating 13 competitors from around the world. He said he lost weight and practiced for three months with "an urgency" to prepare for the event, thinking he had a good chance of winning.

"With Joey not here, I knew I had a shot," Bertoletti said. "I was able to unlock something that I don't know where it came from."

Bertoletti bested his prior record of 55 hot dogs at the event, which is held every Independence Day on New York's Coney Island, a beachfront destination with amusement parks and a carnivalesque summer culture.

Earlier, in the women's competition, Sudo, a 38-year-old dental hygiene student from Florida, once again carried the day and set the new record a year after forcing down 39 1/2 hot dogs in 2023.

"I'm just happy to call this mine for another year," Sudo said after winning the pink belt.

Sudo defeated 13 competitors, including 28-year-old rival Mayoi Ebihara of Japan, who came in second after eating 37 hot dogs. She was also the runner-up in 2023.

Sudo also outdid her partner, former Florida bodybuilder Nicholas Wehry, who ate 46 hot dogs in the men's competition.

Bertoletti's victory marks the first time the famed mustard belt has gone to someone besides Chestnut since 2015.

Thousands of fans, some wearing foam hot dog hats, flock each year to the event held outside the original Nathan's location in Coney Island. Rich Shea, CEO of event organizer Major League Eating, noted how people still came out in droves even though Chestnut was not there.

"Just a great competitor, a great guy, a grown man, and a man who's made a choice not to be here today," he said of the popular eating champ on ESPN. "But fortunately for us, tens of thousands of people are crowding around Nathan's Famous. It's a pilgrimage every year. This is not a paid Hollywood crowd."

Competitors came from over a dozen states and five continents, with prospects from Brazil, Japan, the United Kingdom, South Korea, Australia and the Czech Republic vying for the coveted title and \$10,000 prize money.

Last year Chestnut, of Indiana, chewed his way to the title by downing 62 dogs and buns in 10 minutes. The record, which he set in 2021, is 76.

Chestnut was initially disinvited from the event over a sponsorship deal with Impossible Foods, which

specializes in plant-based meat substitutes and which advertised on ESPN throughout the event Thursday.

Major League Eating has since said it walked back the ban, but Chestnut decided to spend the holiday with the troops anyway. Chestnut said he wouldn't return to the Coney Island contest without an apology.

The event in El Paso was held on an Army base that's not easily accessed by the public. Still, a few hundred fans showed up to support Chestnut, some wearing hot dog costumes and another wearing a T-shirt that read, "Let Joey eat." Chestnut's tally of 57 bested the four Fort Bliss soldiers, who ate a combined 49.

Ahead of the event, Chestnut expressed fear that he might not perform well without the support of the large and raucous Coney Island crowd. But afterward he said he had hit a "record-setting pace."

"I love you guys," Chestnut told the fans at Fort Bliss after acknowledging the military service of his father, grandfather, and brother. "You guys pushed me so hard, thank you so much."

The event was sponsored by Impossible Foods, though its vegan products were not used in the competition. Company CEO Peter McGuinness appeared on stage with Chestnut and representatives of Operation Homefront, a charity that supports military families. He presented the organization with a \$106,000 donation check; \$1,000 for each hot dog eaten.

Chestnut will next compete with pro rival Takeru Kobayashi on Sept. 2 in a head-to-head Netflix special.

Haigh reported from Norwich, Connecticut.

Biden heads into a make-or-break stretch for his imperiled presidential campaign

By COLLEEN LONG, ZEKE MILLER and SEUNG MIN KIM Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — President Joe Biden on Thursday opened a critical stretch in his effort to salvage his imperiled reelection campaign, facing a growing sense that he may have just days to make a persuasive case that he is fit for office before Democratic support for him completely evaporates.

In the aftermath of Biden's disastrous debate performance last week against Republican Donald Trump, some financial backers were holding off or canceling upcoming fundraisers, according to a person familiar with the plans who spoke to The Associated Press on condition of anonymity to talk about private discussions.

"I'm not going anywhere," Biden told a crowd gathered for a July Fourth barbecue on the White House South Lawn.

Later, during evening fireworks, he stood on the balcony with his family and Vice President Kamala Harris and her husband, Doug Emhoff, in a clear show of support. Harris at one point grabbed Biden's hand and held it high in the air, and later the two hugged.

In a Wednesday night meeting with Democratic governors, Biden acknowledged that he needs to get more sleep and limit evening events so he can turn in earlier to be rested for the job, according to three people familiar with the meeting, who also spoke on condition of anonymity. One person said the president joked that his health was fine, it was his brain that had challenges.

California Gov. Gavin Newsom, who was in the meeting, was asked Thursday about the idea that Biden wants to limit events after 8 p.m. and responded: "He did that with a smile on his face. It was more of a rhetorical framework of just being fit and rested."

Newsom, who was campaigning for Biden in western Michigan, added, "I like when a president acknowledges they're human."

Biden argued that much more than his own political future was in jeopardy. In an interview with a Wisconsin radio station that aired Thursday he said: "The stakes are really high. I know you know this. For democracy, for freedom ... our economy, they're all on the line."

The interview on the Earl Ingram Show on the Civic Media Radio Network, taped Wednesday, was the part of a media and public events blitz that the Democratic president and his staff have acknowledged as a make-or-break moment.

At the July Fourth barbecue, Biden welcomed military families formally from a lectern. He then went

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over to personally greet the crowd for a few moments. He suddenly grabbed a microphone and stood in the center of the grass, explaining that there were thousands of people waiting to come into the party and he needed to duck back inside because the grounds were locked down as long as he was out there.

"Keep up the fight!" one supporter yelled.

"You got me, man," Biden replied.

He also made a halting reference to Trump, who in 2018 skipped a trip to a World War I cemetery in France that Biden visited recently.

The president is scheduled to campaign in Wisconsin on Friday and sit for an interview with ABC's George Stephanopoulos that will air as a prime-time special that night.

He plans to be in Philadelphia on Sunday and hold a full news conference during the NATO summit in Washington next week.

It is not a given that his campaign will survive even that long if he does not deliver a strong showing on ABC. Discussions that were once a whisper around who should step into his place should he bow out are growing louder.

For now, Biden is not ready to walk away and he has communicated that in conversations with Democratic governors, close allies and staffers from his campaign.

But time is short for a possible change. The Democratic National Committee announced weeks ago that it would hold a virtual roll call for a formal nomination before the party's national convention, which begins Aug. 19.

"I'm proud to be running for reelection as a president who's made his promises and I've kept them," Biden said in the radio interview.

"I had a bad night. A bad night. I screwed up," he said of the debate, where he gave halting and convoluted answers.

"But 90 minutes on stage does not erase what I've done for 3 1/2 years," he said in a different interview, with Philadelphia-area WURD Radio.

In his private conversations, Biden has focused on how to reverse the trajectory from his rocky debate and has emphasized the critical nature of this year's presidential election.

During one call, when asked what would happen if his efforts to course correct do not work, Biden stressed that he understood how important the race is and that he would put the country first, according to a person who spoke directly with the president. The person was granted anonymity to discuss private conversations.

Biden's meeting Wednesday with the Democratic governors lasted for more than an hour and drew more than 20 of them, some in person and some participating virtually. Afterward they described the conversation as "candid" and said they were standing behind Biden despite being concerned about a Trump victory in November. Details about Biden's comments on getting more sleep were first reported by The New York Times.

During that meeting, Biden told leaders he had been checked out by his doctor following his debate performance, according to two people familiar with the talks who spoke on condition of anonymity because they were not authorized to discuss the private conversation. A few hours earlier, White House press secretary Karine Jean-Pierre had said Biden had not been examined by the doctor.

The White House has blamed Biden's debate performance, where he appeared pale and his raspy voice trailed off at times, on a cold. Biden also said he had jet lag following back-to-back foreign trips that ended 12 days earlier.

Biden's staff has resisted repeated calls to release more robust medical records for the 81-year-old president. After his last full physical in February, his doctor declared him fit for duty.

Two Democratic lawmakers have publicly called for Biden to drop out of the race. Most Democratic lawmakers, though, are taking a wait-and-see approach, holding out for a better idea of how the situation plays out through new polling and the TV interview. That's according to Democratic lawmakers who requested anonymity to speak bluntly about the president.

Some have suggested Harris is emerging as the favorite to replace Biden if he were to withdraw. Those

involved in private discussions acknowledge that California's Newsom and Gov. Gretchen Whitmer of Michigan remain viable alternatives. But for some insiders, Harris is viewed as the best prospect to quickly unify the party and avoid a messy and divisive convention fight.

Newsom was asked directly whether, if Biden dropped out, he would he support Harris. He said, "I don't even like playing in the hypotheticals."

Trump was seen on video declaring that Harris would be his new rival, saying, "she's so pathetic." It was unclear when he made the comments, which were posted on his social media account.

Later Thursday, Trump called for a second debate, "but this time, no holds barred ... with just the two of us on stage."

Even as other Democratic allies have remained quiet since the debate, there is a growing private frustration about the Biden campaign's response at a crucial moment in the campaign — particularly in Biden waiting several days to do direct damage control with senior members of his own party.

Associated Press writers Joey Cappelletti in South Haven, Michigan, and Lisa Mascaro and Mary Clare Jalonick contributed to this report.

Brazilian police indict ex-President Bolsonaro in undeclared diamonds case, sources say

By GABRIELA SÁ PESSOA and MAURICIO SAVARESE Associated Press

SAO PAULO (AP) — Brazil's Federal Police have indicted former President Jair Bolsonaro for money laundering and criminal association in connection with undeclared diamonds the far-right leader received from Saudi Arabia during his time in office, according to a source with knowledge of the accusations.

A second source confirmed the indictment, although not for which specific crimes. Both officials spoke on condition of anonymity because they weren't authorized to speak publicly.

Brazil's Supreme Court has yet to receive the police report with the indictment. Once it does, the country's prosecutor-general, Paulo Gonet, will analyze the document and decide whether to file charges and force Bolsonaro to stand trial.

This is Bolsonaro's second indictment since leaving office, following another in May for allegedly falsifying his COVID-19 vaccination certificate. But this indictment dramatically raises the legal threats facing the divisive ex-leader that are applauded by his opponents but denounced as political persecution by his supporters.

Bolsonaro did not immediately comment, but he and his lawyers have previously denied any wrongdoing in both those cases, as well as other investigations into the former president. One is probing his possible involvement in inciting an uprising in capital Brasilia on Jan. 8, 2023 that sought to oust his successor from power.

Last year, Federal Police accused Bolsonaro of attempting to sneak in diamond jewelry reportedly worth \$3 million and selling two luxury watches.

Police said in August that Bolsonaro received cash from the nearly \$70,000 sale of two luxury watches he received as gifts from Saudi Arabia. Brazil requires its citizens arriving by plane from abroad to declare goods worth more than \$1,000 and, for any amount above that exemption, pay a tax equal to 50% of their value.

The jewelry would have been exempt from tax had it been a gift from Saudi Arabia to Brazil, but not Bolsonaro's to keep for himself. Rather, it would have been added to the presidential collection.

The investigation showed that Mauro Cid, Bolsonaro's former aide-de-camp who allegedly falsified his COVID-19 records, in June 2022 sold a Rolex watch and a Patek Philippe watch to a store in the U.S for a total \$68,000. They were gifted by Saudi Arabia's government in 2019. Cid later signed a plea bargain with authorities and confirmed it all.

Flávio Bolsonaro, the former president's eldest son and a sitting senator, said on X after Thursday's indictment that persecution against his father was "blatant and shameless."

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In addition to Bolsonaro, police indicted 10 others, including Cid and two of his lawyers, Frederick Wassef and Fábio Wajngarten, according to one of the sources. Wassef said in a statement that he didn't have access to the final report of the investigation, and decried selective leaks to the press of an investigation that is supposed to be proceeding under seal.

"I am going through all of this solely for practicing law in defense of Jair Bolsonaro," he wrote.

On X, Wajngarten said police have found no evidence implicating him. "The Federal Police knows I did nothing related to what they are investigating, but they still want to punish me because I provide unwavering and permanent defense for former President Bolsonaro," he said.

Bolsonaro retains staunch allegiance among his political base, as shown by an outpouring of support in February, when an estimated 185,000 people clogged Sao Paulo's main boulevard to protest what the former president calls political persecution.

His critics, particularly members of his rival President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva's political party, have cheered every advance of investigations and repeatedly called for his arrest.

Psychologist Deborah Santos watched news of Bolsonaro's indictment in a bakery in Sao Paulo's up-market Vila Madalena neighborhood.

"This is great, because it breaks a pattern. Bolsonaro supporters love to say how honest he is; everyone else is dishonest, but them," said Santos, 52. "There you have it: the police think he steals diamonds. That should end any politician's career."

The 69-year-old former army captain started his political career as a staunch advocate of Brazil's military dictatorship, and was a lawmaker for nearly three decades. When he bid for the presidency for the first time, in 2018, he was widely dismissed as an outsider and too radically conservative. But he surprised analysts with a decisive victory, in no small part due to his self-portrayal as an upstanding citizen in the years following a sprawling corruption probe that ensnared hundreds of politicians and executives.

Bolsonaro insulted adversaries since his earliest days in office while garnering critics with his divisive policies, attacks on the Supreme Court and efforts to undermine health restrictions during the pandemic. He lost his reelection bid in the closest finish since Brazil's return to democracy in 1985.

Carlos Melo, a political science professor at the Insper University in Sao Paulo, believes Brazil's Supreme Court and the justice overseeing several investigations targeting Bolsonaro, Alexandre de Moraes, will not risk sending the former president to prison or imposing other harsh measures with any haste. The objective, he said, is to avoid instigating supporters of the far-right leader and so make cases against him more politically sensitive to prosecute.

"This is a year of mayoral elections. Moraes and his fellow justices know that prosecuting a former president who remains a popular man would be even tougher in a year like this," Melo said. "This indictment is another piece of the puzzle. It gives one more problem to Bolsonaro. There will be more."

Last year, Brazil's top electoral court ruled that Bolsonaro abused his presidential powers during his 2022 reelection bid, which rendered him ineligible for any elections until 2030. The case focused on a meeting during which Bolsonaro used government staffers, the state television channel and the presidential palace in Brasilia to tell foreign ambassadors that the country's electronic voting system was rigged.

Bolsonaro is expected to meet Argentinian President Javier Milei this weekend at a conservative conference in Balneario Camboriu, in Brazil's south.

Israel approves plans for nearly 5,300 new homes in West Bank settlements

By JOSEF FEDERMAN, TIA GOLDENBERG and KAREEM CHEHAYEB Associated Press

JERUSALEM (AP) — The Israeli government has approved plans to build nearly 5,300 new homes in settlements in the occupied West Bank, a monitoring group said Thursday, the latest in a campaign to accelerate settlement expansion, aimed at cementing Israeli control over the territory and preventing the establishment of a future Palestinian state.

Word of the decision emerged as diplomatic efforts aimed at ending the nine-month war in Gaza ap-

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peared to be stirring back to life after a weekslong hiatus. Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's office said he had decided to send negotiators to resume negotiations. A day earlier, the militant Hamas group handed mediators its latest response to a U.S.-backed proposal for a deal.

Fighting intensified between Israel and Lebanon's Hezbollah, with the militant group saying Thursday it fired more than 200 rockets and exploding drones into northern Israel to avenge the killing of a senior commander in an Israeli airstrike the day before.

Months of exchanges have literally set the Israeli-Lebanese border ablaze and raised fears of a potentially even more devastating war in the Middle East. Hezbollah has said it will halt its attacks if there is a cease-fire between Hamas — a fellow Iran-backed ally — and Israel.

Israel's turbocharged settlement drive threatens to further stoke tensions in the West Bank, which has seen a surge in violence since the war in Gaza began on Oct. 7.

The Israeli anti-settlement monitoring Peace Now said the government's Higher Planning Council had approved or advanced plans for 5,295 homes in dozens of settlements across the West Bank. It also "legalized" three informal outposts as new neighborhoods of existing settlements in the Jordan Valley and near the city of Hebron.

On Wednesday, Peace Now said Israel approved the largest seizure of land in the West Bank in over three decades. COGAT, the Israeli defense body that oversees the planning council, referred questions to Netanyahu's office, which did not immediately respond to a request for comment.

Netanyahu's government is dominated by settlers and their supporters. The hard-line nationalist finance minister, Bazalel Smotrich, himself a settler, has been put in charge of settlement policy and has said his rapid expansion drive is in part intended to ensure a Palestinian state cannot be created. In an escalation over past months, settlers have carried out more than 1,000 attacks on Palestinians, causing deaths, damaging property and in some cases prompting Palestinians to flee villages.

The Palestinians seek the West Bank, east Jerusalem and Gaza — areas captured by Israel in the 1967 Mideast war — for an independent state.

The new housing approvals could also rankle Israel's ally, the United States, which speaks out against settlements, though it has done little to pressure Israel on the issue.

Gaza's Health Ministry said Thursday that the number of Palestinians killed by Israel's campaign in Gaza had climbed past 38,000. The ministry does not differentiate between combatants and civilians in its count. The war began when Hamas-led militants launched a surprise attack on Oct. 7 into southern Israel, killing around 1,200 people and abducting another 250 people.

The revival of cease-fire talks appeared to mark another attempt by U.S., Qatari and Egyptian mediators to overcome the gap that has repeatedly thwarted a deal over the past months. Hamas wants a deal that ensures Israeli troops fully leave Gaza and the war ends; Netanyahu says the war cannot end before Hamas is eliminated.

Israeli negotiators are expected to arrive in Doha, Qatar's capital, for the talks as early as Friday, with American, Egyptian and Qatari officials present.

A senior Biden administration official said the White House viewed the resumption of negotiations as a "breakthrough" that "moves the process forward" while cautioning that there is still much work to do.

Netanyahu spoke earlier on Thursday with President Joe Biden. Netanyahu's office said he told Biden that Israel is committed "to finish the war only after achieving all of its objectives" — a reference to the twin war goals of rescuing hostages and destroying Hamas.

Biden made clear to Netanyahu that "it's time to bring the deal to closure," said the administration official, who spoke on condition of anonymity to discuss the 30-minute call.

The U.S. has rallied world support behind a plan for a phased cease-fire in Gaza that calls for the release of all hostages still held by Hamas in return for a lasting truce and the withdrawal of Israeli forces from Gaza.

So far, neither side appears to have fully embraced it.

Last month, Hamas suggested "amendments" to the proposal, some of which the U.S. said were unworkable. Talks ground to a halt. After the U.S. put forward a new version, Hamas said Wednesday it sent a

new response to Egypt and Qatar. Hamas political official Bassem Naim said the group “responded with some ideas to bridge the gap” between the two sides, without elaborating.

For his part, Netanyahu has given conflicting stances — he has said Israel is committed to the proposal outlined by Biden in a May 31 speech. But in a TV interview last month, he said he was only prepared to make a “partial deal,” and would continue the war “after a pause.”

At its core, the U.S. proposal calls for a three-phase process.

The first phase would bring a cease-fire, a pullback of Israeli forces from all densely populated areas of Gaza and the release of a number of hostages, including women, older people and the wounded, in exchange for the release of hundreds of Palestinian prisoners. After some hostages were released during a November cease-fire, militants still hold around 80 hostages and the remains of 40 others.

During the 42 days of phase one, the parties would negotiate the terms of phase two.

The negotiations are meant to lead to a “sustainable calm” and the withdrawal of all Israeli troops from Gaza — with the release by Hamas of all remaining male hostages in return for an Israeli release of Palestinian prisoners. The third phase would see the return of the remains of hostages.

The transition from the first to the second phase has appeared to be the main sticking point.

Hamas is concerned that Israel will restart the war after the first phase, perhaps after making unrealistic demands in the talks. Israeli officials have said they want the negotiations to lead to Hamas’ removal from power in Gaza — a provision not spelled out in the proposal. They have also pushed for a time limit on negotiations to keep pressure on Hamas and prevent it from drawing out talks and the initial cease-fire.

The U.S. administration official indicated that Hamas has moved from its position demanding guarantees of a permanent cease-fire to begin the three-phase deal. Hamas’ response indicates that there is a “decent understanding of what would have to happen” to move from phase one to phase two, the official said.

Cherayeb reported from Beirut. Associated Press writers Abby Sewell in Beirut and Aamer Madhani in Washington contributed to this report.

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

Novak Djokovic’s knee is pain-free at Wimbledon but his movement is not quite where he wants it

By HOWARD FENDRICH AP Tennis Writer

LONDON (AP) — The good news, Novak Djokovic said, was that his surgically repaired right knee was pain-free at Wimbledon on Thursday.

The bad news, he knows, is that his movement, such a big part of his success, was not yet back to normal during a 6-3, 6-4, 5-7, 7-5 victory in the second round over Jacob Fearnley, a 22-year-old from Scotland who played college tennis in the United States — and that’ll need to improve if Djokovic is going to contend for the title, the only reason he is back competing so soon after tearing his meniscus.

“The more matches I have, the better the chance I’ll have to feel more comfortable moving around and gain that speed, agility, change of direction — that freedom that I’m looking for, really. I had it in certain moments today, certain moments in the first match, but then it’s still not there,” said Djokovic, who has won seven of his 24 Grand Slam trophies at the All England Club. “In a way, it’s expected and normal when you come back from surgery. The body’s trying to understand what’s going on.”

When Fearnley, a wild-card entry ranked just 277th and participating in his first major tournament, grabbed the third set, a roar arose at Centre Court.

“I noticed they were probably more towards me in the crowd,” Fearnley said. “That was pretty obvious.”

Similar sounds came when he went ahead 5-4 in the fourth, particularly from a cheering section that included four teammates from his days at TCU in Fort Worth, Texas.

“It was really emotional,” said Tomas Jirousek, who played with Fearnley on the Horned Frogs tennis team and was wearing a school sweatshirt.

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Might this really turn into a tight contest? Might Djokovic, who hasn't reached a final of any tournament this season, really be forced to a fifth set? Of course not. Djokovic is too savvy, too superb at the biggest moments, and grabbed 12 of the last 17 points to reel off the final three games.

Still, the 37-year-old from Serbia, who has been wearing a gray sleeve on his knee, plans to watch some video of this match, the way he usually does, to get a sense of where he can get better for his next match, which will be against Alexei Popyrin on Saturday for a spot in the fourth round.

"I do watch specific moments where I thought I've done well or moments where I haven't done so well, and just try to analyze that myself. Then, of course, with my team members," Djokovic said. "Draw some conclusions, take it to the practice court and work on it."

Fearnley, meanwhile, smiled while discussing the way his follower count on Instagram doubled to about 5,000. But he also vowed that whatever surge in popularity this performance on a much grander stage than he's used to, and against a much greater opponent than he's used to, is not "going to really affect me."

It was a big day for the locals, all-in-all, with several attention-grabbing matchups involving British players at the All England Club and national election going on around the U.K.

"A great day for British tennis," Fearnley said, "and there's no better place to do it than at home, at Wimbledon."

That included Andy Murray, a two-time singles champion at Wimbledon, teaming with his brother, Jamie, during a loss in men's doubles that began a farewell tour of sorts.

Murray, 37, has said he plans to head into retirement after playing at the All England Club — in men's and mixed doubles, but not singles, on account of recent back surgery — and the Paris Olympics.

In one all-British matchup won by the unseeded player, Harriet Dart came back to eliminate No. 32 Katie Boulter 4-6, 6-1, 7-6 (10-8). In another, Cam Norrie defeated No. 28 Jack Draper 7-6 (3), 6-4, 7-6 (6).

"He sort of knew all my patterns of play. I felt like his backhand was incredible today. Just wasn't allowing me to do the things that I wanted to do," said Draper, who recently overtook Norrie as their country's highest-ranked man. "I felt like I wasn't able to be brave enough."

No. 5 Jessica Pegula became the highest-seeded woman to lose so far, dismissed by Wang Xinyu 6-4, 6-7 (7), 6-1, and No. 7 Hubert Hurkacz exited the men's bracket when he needed to stop playing after injuring his right knee while diving to hit a shot late in the fourth set against Arthur Fils. Play was delayed for several minutes while a trainer examined then taped up Hurkacz's knee; when action resumed, Hurkacz immediately tried to dive for another volley, then couldn't continue.

Seeded winners included No. 1 Iga Swiatek — whose current unbeaten streak reached 21 — No. 4 Elena Rybakina, No. 10 Ons Jabeur, No. 11 Danielle Collins, No. 13 Jelena Ostapenko, No. 9 Alex de Minaur, No. 10 Grigor Dimitrov, No. 13 Taylor Fritz and No. 14 Ben Shelton, who won his second consecutive five-setter.

AP tennis: <https://apnews.com/hub/tennis>

US citizen Woodland convicted of drug-related charges by Moscow court. He's sentenced to 12.5 years

MOSCOW (AP) — Robert Woodland, a Russia-born U.S. citizen, was convicted of drug-related charges by a Moscow court and sentenced to 12 1/2 years in prison on Thursday, court officials and his lawyers said.

He was found guilty of attempted trafficking of large amounts of illegal drugs as part of an organized group, according to an online statement released by court officials, and sentenced to 12 1/2 years in a maxim security penal colony. His lawyers told reporters after the verdict was delivered Thursday that they will appeal the ruling because Woodland's guilt hasn't been proven.

Lawyer Stanislav Kshevitsky also said that Woodland has been suffering from unspecified mental health issues. He didn't provide any details, but said that the court didn't take those issues into account.

Russian media reported that his name matches a U.S. citizen interviewed in 2020 who said he was born in the Perm region in 1991 and adopted by an American couple at age 2. He was arrested in January.

He said he traveled to Russia to find his mother and eventually met her on a TV show before deciding

to move to Russia. Russian news agency Interfax has cited court officials as saying that Woodland also holds Russian citizenship.

Arrests of Americans in Russia have become increasingly common as relations between Moscow and Washington sink to Cold War lows. Washington accuses Moscow of targeting its citizens and using them as political bargaining chips, but Russian officials insist they all broke the law.

Some have been exchanged for Russians held in the U.S., while for others, the prospects of being released in a swap are less clear.

The U.S. State Department said Thursday it was aware that a U.S. citizen was sentenced by a Russian court and that the embassy in Moscow was closely monitoring the case. The department, citing privacy issues, said it would have no further comment.

Millions swelter under dangerous Fourth of July heat wave

By MELINA WALLING Associated Press

Around 134 million people in the U.S. are under alerts as an "extremely dangerous and record-breaking" heat wave broils much of the country, according to the National Weather Service.

Regions that may see temperatures above 90 degrees Fahrenheit (32 degrees Celsius) or much higher into the triple digits (well above 37 degrees Celsius) include nearly all of the West Coast, the southern Plains, most of the lower Mississippi Valley into the Ohio Valley and parts of Florida, said Bob Oravec, a lead forecaster with the National Weather Service.

The Pacific Northwest will see the mercury rising later in the weekend. Arizona will continue to sizzle as firefighters battle a wildfire near Phoenix, where some contend with burns from blazing hot asphalt, concrete or other surfaces. And more humid regions will see a muggy weekend.

"If it's both humid and hot, you can't really rely on sweat to cool you down to a safe level," said Daniel Swain, a climate scientist with the University of California, Los Angeles.

It's a dangerous weather pattern hitting as fires burn in northern California, and just in time for a holiday weekend. When people are celebrating, "it's very easy to get sidetracked," staying out for longer and forgetting to stay hydrated, said Chris Stachelski, a meteorologist with the National Weather Service. "And then all of a sudden you're putting yourself more at risk."

Human-caused climate change is making heat waves longer and more intense. More research will be needed to link an individual event like this one directly to climate change, but given the overall trajectory, Swain wasn't surprised by the forecast this weekend. Even so, "the pace of record breaking heat extremes and precipitation extremes is becoming a little bit overwhelming," he said.

This heat wave's expected duration, breadth and high overnight temperatures compound the risks to people's health. "I think this heat wave may end up being more consequential, more dangerous, and more record breaking in many cases than the heat waves that produce those slightly higher temperatures," Swain said.

Stachelski added that even after the highest temperatures have passed, heat can still be dangerous, especially to the most vulnerable — the young, old and those without access to air conditioning.

Experts urge people to drink plenty of water and find air conditioning. Big Sur State Parks used Sabrina Carpenter lyrics to urge hikers to "please, please, please" avoid caffeine and alcohol, wear sun protection and know trails ahead of time.

The extended high temperatures that cook the West Coast will also dry out vegetation and set the stage to make the remaining months of the fire season more severe, Swain said.

"Heat is an underrated killer," Swain said, referring both in the short term to heat waves like this one and to the broader trends of global warming. "It's one we've long underestimated. And I think we continue to do so at our peril."

The Associated Press' climate and environmental coverage receives financial support from multiple private foundations. AP is solely responsible for all content. Find AP's standards for working with philanthropies,

a list of supporters and funded coverage areas at AP.org.

Fires have become the most visible sign of the conflict heating up on the Lebanon-Israel border

By ABBY SEWELL and MELANIE LIDMAN Associated Press

CHEBAA, Lebanon (AP) — With cease-fire talks faltering in Gaza and no clear offramp for the conflict on the Lebanon-Israel border, the daily exchanges of strikes between Hezbollah and Israeli forces have sparked fires that are tearing through forests and farmland on both sides of the frontline.

The blazes — exacerbated by supply shortages and security concerns — have consumed thousands of hectares of land in southern Lebanon and northern Israel, becoming one of the most visible signs of the escalating conflict.

There is an increasingly real possibility of a full-scale war — one that would have catastrophic consequences for people on both sides of the border. Some fear the fires sparked by a larger conflict would also cause irreversible damage to the land.

Charred remains in Lebanon

In Israel, images of fires sparked by Hezbollah's rockets have driven public outrage and spurred Israel's far-right national security minister, Itamar Ben-Gvir, to declare last month that it is "time for all of Lebanon to burn."

Much of it was already burning.

Fires in Lebanon began in late April — earlier than the usual fire season — and have torn through the largely rural areas along the border.

The Sunni town of Chebaa, tucked in the mountains on Lebanon's southeastern edge, has little Hezbollah presence, and the town hasn't been targeted as frequently as other border villages. But the sounds of shelling still boom regularly, and in the mountains above it, formerly oak-lined ridges are charred and bare.

In a cherry orchard on the outskirts of town, clumps of fruit hung among browned leaves after a fire sparked by an Israeli strike tore through. Firefighters and local men — some using their shirts to beat out flames — stopped the blaze from reaching houses and U.N. peacekeeper center nearby.

"Grass will come back next year, but the trees are gone," said Moussa Saab, whose family owns the orchard. "We'll have to get saplings and plant them, and you need five or seven years before you can start harvesting."

Saab refuses to leave with his wife and 8-year-old daughter. They can't afford to live elsewhere, and they fear not being able to return, as happened to his parents when they left the disputed Chebaa Farms area — captured from Syria by Israel in 1967 and claimed by Lebanon.

Burn scars in Israel

The slopes of Mount Meron, Israel's second-highest mountain and home to an air base, were long covered in native oak trees, a dense grove providing shelter to wild pigs, gazelles, and rare species of flowers and fauna.

Now the green slopes are interrupted by three new burn scars — the largest a few hundred square meters — remnants of a Hezbollah explosive drone shot down a few weeks ago. Park rangers worry that devastation has just begun.

"The damage this year is worse a dozen times over this year," said Shai Koren, of the northern district for Israel's Nature and Parks Authority.

Looking over the slopes of Meron, Koren said he doesn't expect this forest to survive the summer: "You can take a before and after picture."

Numbers and weapons

Since the war began, the Israeli military has tracked 5,450 launches toward northern Israel. According to Israeli think tank the Alma Research and Education Center, most early launches were short-range anti-tank missiles, but Hezbollah's drone usage has increased.

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In Lebanon, officials and human rights groups accuse Israel of firing white phosphorus incendiary shells at residential areas, in addition to regular artillery shelling and airstrikes.

The Israeli military says it uses white phosphorus only as a smokescreen, not to target populated areas. But even in open areas, the shells can spark fast-spreading fires.

The border clashes began Oct. 8, a day after the Hamas-led incursion into southern Israel that killed around 1,200 people and sparked the war in Gaza. There, more than 37,000 have been killed, according to Gaza's Health Ministry.

Hezbollah began launching rockets into northern Israel to open what it calls a "support front" for Hamas, to pull Israeli forces away from Gaza.

Israel responded, and attacks spread across the border region. In northern Israel, 16 soldiers and 11 civilians have been killed. In Lebanon, more than 450 people — mostly fighters, but also 80-plus civilians and noncombatants — have been killed.

Exchanges have intensified since early May, when Israel launched its incursion into the southern Gaza city of Rafah. That coincided with the beginning of the hot, dry wildfire season.

Since May, Hezbollah strikes have resulted in 8,700 hectares (about 21,500 acres) burned in northern Israel, according to Israel's Nature and Parks Authority.

Eli Mor, of Israel's Fire and Rescue, said drones, which are much more accurate than rockets, often "come one after another, the first one with a camera and the second one will shoot."

"Every launch is a real threat," Mor added.

In southern Lebanon, about 4,000 hectares (10,000 acres) have burned due to Israeli strikes, said George Mitri, of the Land and Natural Resources program at the University of Balamand. In the two years before, he said, Lebanon's total area burned annually was 500 to 600 hectares (1,200 to 1,500 acres).

Fire response

Security concerns hamper the response to a fire's first crucial hours. Firefighting planes are largely grounded over fears they'll be shot down. On the ground, firefighters often can't move without army escorts.

"If we lose half an hour or an hour, it might take us an extra day or two days to get the fire under control," said Mohammad Saadeh, head of the Chebaa civil defense station. The station responded to 27 fires in three weeks last month — nearly as many as in a normal year.

On the border's other side, Moran Arinovsky used to be a chef and is now deputy commander of the emergency squad at Kibbutz Manara. With about 10 others, he's fought more than 20 fires in the past two months.

Mor, of Israel's Fire and Rescue, said firefighters often must triage.

"Sometimes we have to give up on open areas that are not endangering people or towns," Mor said.

The border areas are largely depopulated. Israel's government evacuated a 4-kilometer strip early in the war, leaving only soldiers and emergency personnel. In Lebanon, there's no formal evacuation order, but large swathes have become virtually uninhabitable.

Some 95,000 people in Lebanon and 60,000 people in Israel have been displaced for nine months.

Kibbutz Sde Nehemia didn't evacuate, and Efrat Eldan Schechter said some days she watches helplessly as plumes of smoke grow closer to home.

"There's a psychological impact, the knowledge and feeling that we're alone," she said, because firefighters can't access certain areas.

Israel's cowboys, who graze beef cattle in the Golan Heights, often band together to fight blazes when firefighters cannot arrive quickly.

Schechter noted that news footage of flames tearing across hillsides has focused more attention on the conflict in her backyard, instead of solely on the Gaza war. "Only when the fires started, only then we are in the headlines in Israel," she said.

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has said that as fighting in Gaza winds down, Israel will send more troops to its northern border. That could open a new front and raise the risk of more destructive fires.

On Thursday, Israel's Fire and Rescue Service said it was tackling fires in 10 separate areas sparked by

barrages of missiles fired by Hezbollah in retaliation for an Israeli strike that killed one of its top commanders the day before. Meanwhile, in Chebaa, another Israeli strike sparked a new fire in Saab's cherry orchard.

Koren says natural wildfires are a normal part of the forest's lifecycle and can promote ecodiversity, but not the fires from the conflict. "The moment the fires happen over and over, that's what creates the damage," he said.

Lidman reported from northern Israel.

The questions about Biden's age and fitness are reminiscent of another campaign: Reagan's in 1984

By LAURIE KELLMAN Associated Press

The age question for presidential candidates is more than four decades old. President Ronald Reagan answered it with a pledge to resign if he became impaired, and later with a clever joke that reset his campaign from a stumbling debate performance to a 49-state landslide and a second term.

"I will not make age an issue of this campaign," Reagan said to the question he knew was coming in perhaps the most famous mic-drop moment in campaign history. "I am not going to exploit for political purposes my opponent's youth and inexperience."

The audience roared, even Democratic Vice President Walter Mondale laughed — and Reagan's reelection was back on track.

Today, Democratic President Joe Biden, 81, is struggling for such a redemptive moment after a disastrous debate performance against Republican former president Donald Trump, 78. Those 90 minutes last week set off alarms among Democrats hoping Biden would keep Trump from returning to the White House — and heightened concern among voters long skeptical of how either elderly man would govern a complex nation of more than 330 million people for four more years.

More than two dozen people who have spent time with the president privately described him as often sharp and focused. But he also has moments, particularly later in the evening, when his thoughts seem jumbled and he trails off mid-sentence or seems confused, they said. Sometimes he doesn't grasp the finer points of policy details. He occasionally forgets people's names, stares blankly and moves slowly around the room, they said.

Biden has vowed to stay in the race, despite signs of eroding support on Capitol Hill.

"I am running ... no one's pushing me out," Biden said on a call Wednesday with staffers from his reelection campaign. "I'm not leaving. I'm in this race to the end and we're going to win."

But the question facing him is far more intimate, according to one expert who covered Reagan's health during his presidency.

"The most important debate of the campaign is the one taking place right now in Joe Biden's head between the part of mind telling him he's the chosen one, and the more self-aware part," said Rich Jaroslavsky of the University of California Berkeley, formerly of the Wall Street Journal.

A nation ever more accustomed to dealing with aging

At its heart, the question — how old is too old to be president? — is about competence. And Americans have never had wider personal experience with the effects of aging than they do today.

A surge of retiring baby boomers means that millions more Americans know when they see someone declining. For many, this widespread experience made Biden's halting performance during Thursday's debate a familiar reality check.

Trump seemed more vigorous, even though he lied about or misstated a long list of facts. When he challenged Biden to a cognitive test, Trump flubbed the name of the doctor who had administered his. For now, he's ceding the spotlight.

"Is this an episode, or is this a condition?" Rep. Nancy Pelosi, D-Calif., 84, wondered on MSNBC, reflecting the question dominating Democratic circles this week. "It's legitimate — of both candidates."

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Reagan faced the same questions even before he was elected as the oldest president to that point. In 1980, at 69, he pledged to resign if he sensed serious cognitive decline while in office.

"If I were president and had any feeling at all that my capabilities had been reduced before a second term came, I would walk away," he told the New York Times on June 10, 1980. "By the same token, I would step down also."

That didn't happen. Reagan served two full terms, leaving office in 1989. He announced in 1994 that he had been diagnosed with Alzheimer's disease. He died in 2004.

Neither Trump nor Biden has made a similar pledge, and their campaigns did not respond to requests for comment Wednesday.

For Reagan, the age issue faded in his first term as any health questions focused on his recovery from a nearly fatal assassination attempt in 1981. He seemed headed for an easy reelection. And debates seemed natural settings for the smooth-talking former Hollywood actor. But his performance in the first showdown with Mondale in the 1984 campaign brought the age issue roaring back.

The president, then 73, rambled and hesitated. He seemed to lose his train of thought at one point, and appeared tired at others. No one had seen him perform publicly in such a way, recalled Jaroslovsky, who co-authored a story headlined: "New Question in Race: Is Oldest U.S. President Now Showing His Age?"

Important differences between 1984 and 2024

Reagan's age — really, his fitness for a second term — was now indelibly part of the 1984 race, a striking parallel to what is happening in 2024 in the aftermath of Biden's shaky debate performance. But there are key differences.

Reagan was leading going into the first debate, while Biden and Trump were virtually tied. Onstage, "Biden was terrible out of the gate," said Jaroslovsky, the founder of the Online News Association.

Then, as now, Jaroslovsky said, the embattled president's supporters provided vigorous spin.

Reagan's operation said he had been tired. There was sniping about the staff overpreparing him, Jaroslovsky said. Biden's team cited fatigue from two overseas trips that had exhausted even younger staffers. It was a bad night, they said. Blame flew at the president's aides. Democrats on Capitol Hill griped that Biden's performance had damaged their chances at the polls. And press critics asserted that reporters had failed to hold the president and his staff to account.

By Tuesday, pressure was building on Biden to withdraw from the race and open a difficult process for Democrats to nominate someone else. The crisis rippled across the Democratic Party just over six weeks before its convention in Chicago. It's not clear that Biden and Trump will debate a second time.

Reagan's moment in 1984 came during the second debate at the 33 minute-mark, when The (Baltimore) Sun's Henry Trehwitt said: "You already are the oldest president in history, and some of your staff say you were tired after your most recent encounter with Mr. Mondale." Here, Reagan squared his feet and suppressed a smile. He was ready.

Trehwitt noted that President John F. Kennedy (the youngest American elected president) got hardly any sleep during the Cuban Missile Crisis: "Is there any doubt in your mind that you would be able to function in such circumstances?"

"Not at all, Mr. Trehwitt," Reagan said. Later, he declared, "I am in charge."

This story corrects Trump's age to 78 throughout.

Indian mother delivers baby on boat as her river island is inundated by floodwaters

By ANUPAM NATH Associated Press

MORIGAON, India (AP) — A blue tarp covered a mother and her newborn daughter from the incessant rain on their boat journey. Jahanara Khatoon, 25, had just given birth on the boat on their way to a healthcare center, surrounded by the raging floodwaters of the Brahmaputra River.

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"I am very happy," said her husband, Kamaluddin, who was also on the boat. "My wife wanted a boy, but Allah has given me a girl and I'm very satisfied. I don't want to have any more children."

The couple had left their home on Phuliamari Char, one of the islands in the river, after it was inundated by floodwaters, taking shelter on a nearby island known as Chars.

Increased rainfall in the region blamed on climate change has made the Brahmaputra River — already known for its powerful, unpredictable flow — even more dangerous for those who live near it or on the more than 2,000 islands in it.

India, and Assam state in particular, is seen as one of the world's most vulnerable regions to climate change because of increasingly intense rain and floods, according to a 2021 report by the Council on Energy, Environment and Water, a New Delhi-based climate think tank.

Khatoon and Kamaluddin earn their living as farmers on their island in Assam state's Morigaon district. A medical team was visiting flooded Chars to aid those who needed medical help, especially pregnant women. The team convinced Khatoon to travel with them to the nearest medical facility across the river.

The baby couldn't wait for Khatoon to get to the healthcare center. As her labor progressed, the team on the boat quickly got to work, holding up a tarp to protect from the rain as they helped with the delivery.

Within 10 minutes the baby emerged to shouts of celebration.

Diluwara Begum, an auxiliary nurse and midwife, lifted the newborn and whispered prayers into her ears. "This was my first time helping deliver a baby on a boat. It was a very different feeling. It feels good." she said.

The family has named the baby Karima, which means "Giving."

Today in History: July 5

Dolly the sheep marks cloning breakthrough

By The Associated Press undefined

Today in History

Today is Friday, July 5, the 187th day of 2024. There are 179 days left in the year.

Today's Highlight in History:

On July 5, 1996, Dolly the sheep, the first mammal cloned from an adult somatic cell by scientists at the Roslin Institute at the University of Edinburgh, was born.

Also on this date:

In 1687, Isaac Newton first published his Principia Mathematica, a three-volume work setting out his mathematical principles of natural philosophy.

In 1811, Venezuela became the first South American country to declare independence from Spain.

In 1852, Frederick Douglass delivered his speech "What to the Slave is the Fourth of July?" at Corinthian Hall in Rochester, New York.

In 1865, the Secret Service Division of the U.S. Treasury Department was founded in Washington, D.C., with the mission of suppressing counterfeit currency.

In 1935, President Franklin D. Roosevelt signed the National Labor Relations Act.

In 1937, Hormel introduced a canned meat product called Spam; more than 9 billion cans have been sold since.

In 1940, during World War II, Britain and the Vichy government in France broke off diplomatic relations.

In 1943, the Battle of Kursk began during World War II; in the weeks that followed, the Soviets were able to repeatedly repel the Germans, who eventually withdrew in defeat.

In 1946, the modern bikini, designed by Frenchman Louis Reard, was first modeled in Paris.

In 1947, Larry Doby made his debut with the Cleveland Indians, becoming the first Black player in the American League three months after Jackie Robinson broke the color barrier in the National League.

In 1954, Elvis Presley recorded his first single, "That's All Right," at Sun Studio in Memphis, Tennessee.

In 1971, President Richard Nixon certified the 26th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution, which lowered

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the minimum voting age from 21 to 18.

In 1975, Arthur Ashe became the first Black man to win a Wimbledon singles title, defeating Jimmy Connors.

In 1977, Pakistan's army, led by General Mohammad Zia ul-Haq, seized power from President Zulfikar Ali Bhutto (ZUL'-fih-kahr ah-LEE' BOO'-toh).

In 1980, Bjorn Borg became the first male player to win five consecutive Wimbledon singles titles.

In 1994, Amazon was founded by Jeff Bezos as an online marketplace for books.

In 2011, a jury in Orlando, Florida, found Casey Anthony, 25, not guilty of murder, manslaughter and child abuse in the 2008 disappearance and death of her 2-year-old daughter, Caylee.

In 2013, Pope Francis cleared two of the 20th Century's most influential popes to become saints in the Roman Catholic church, approving a miracle needed to canonize Pope John Paul II and waiving Vatican rules to honor Pope John XXIII.

Today's Birthdays: Julie Nixon Eisenhower is 76. Rock star Huey Lewis is 74. Baseball Hall of Fame pitcher Rich "Goose" Gossage is 73. NFL Hall of Fame receiver James Lofton is 68. Cartoonist Bill Watterson (Calvin and Hobbes) is 66. Singer-songwriter Marc Cohn is 65. Actor Edie Falco is 61. Actor Jillian Armenante is 60. Actor Kathryn Erbe (er-BEE') is 59. Actor Michael Stuhlbarg (STOOL'-bahrg) is 56. Rapper RZA (RIH'-zuh) is 55. Author Gary Shteyngart is 52. R&B singer Joe is 51. Rapper Royce da 5'9" is 47. International Tennis Hall of Famer Amelie Mauresmo is 45. Actor Ryan Hansen is 43. Country musician Dave Haywood (Lady A) is 42. Actor Danay Garcia is 40. Soccer player Megan Rapinoe is 39. Actor Jason Dolley is 33. Los Angeles Dodgers pitcher and designated hitter Shohei Ohtani is 30.