

Groton Daily Independent

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Saturday, Sept. 21

Volleyball at Hamlin Tournament, 9 a.m.
JH FB Jamboree at Webster, 10 a.m.
Boys Soccer hosts Hot Springs, 11 a.m.
Common Cents Community Thrift Store open, 10 a.m. to 1 p.m., 209 N Main
3rd/4th and 5th/6th Football hosts Jamboree

Sunday, Sept. 22

FIRST DAY OF AUTUMN
Emmanuel Lutheran: Worship, 9 a.m.; Sunday School, 10:15 a.m.; Choir, 6 p.m.
St. John's Lutheran: Worship at St. John's, 9 a.m.; at Zion, 11 a.m.; Sunday School, 9:45 a.m.
Catholic: SEAS Confession, 7:45-8:15 a.m.; SEAS Mass, 8:30 a.m.; Turton Confession, 10:30-10:45

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



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.

United Methodist: Conde Worship, 8:30 a.m.;
Groton worship, 10:30 a.m.; Coffee Hour, 9:30 a.m.

Monday, Sept. 23

School Breakfast: Breakfast sliders.
School Lunch: Turkey gravy, mashed potatoes.
Senior Menu: Hot pork sandwich, cucumber salad,
baked beans, sherbert, fruit.
Cross Country at Clear Lake, 4 p.m.
JH Football hosts Oakes, 4:30 p.m., one game
JV Football hosts Oakes, 5:30 p.m.
Emmanuel Lutheran: Bible Study, 6:30 a.m.
Pantry open, 11 a.m. to 3 p.m., community center.
Senior Citizens meet at the community center,
potluck, noon to 3 p.m.

3rd/4th and 5th/6th Football hosts Redfield - 6PM

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1440

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

Hezbollah Commander Killed

Senior Hezbollah commander Ibrahim Akil was reportedly killed yesterday after Israel hit Lebanon's capital, Beirut, in a rare airstrike. At least 14 people were killed and more than 60 others wounded in the attack, which came after Iran-backed Hezbollah militants struck northern Israel with 140 rockets earlier in the day.

Akil was a member of Hezbollah's highest military body called the Jihad Council, and was wanted by the US for his role in the fatal 1983 bombings of the US Embassy in Beirut in April and a Marine Corps barracks in October, which killed a total of 304 people. The US State Department had offered a \$7M reward for information leading to the arrest of Akil, who was designated a global terrorist in 2019.

The latest attacks come amid escalating tensions, particularly after more than 5,000 Hezbollah-owned communications devices exploded across Lebanon and Syria this week, killing at least 37 people and wounding roughly 3,000.

FTC sues drug intermediaries for allegedly inflating insulin prices.

The Federal Trade Commission accuses the three largest pharmacy benefit managers—CVS' Caremark Rx, Cigna's Express Scripts, and UnitedHealth's OptumRx—of illegally overcharging for insulin used by diabetes patients. The three PBMs control 80% of all prescriptions filled in the US, deciding which drugs are covered and often setting patient out-of-pocket costs.

Secret Service identifies failures preceding July Trump shooting.

An agency report released Friday concluded communication failures between local and federal law enforcement contributed to missed opportunities in stopping the attempted assassination of former President Donald Trump in July during a rally outside Pittsburgh. Problems included ineffective radio transmissions between the Secret Service and local police, as well as failure to place a team on the roof where the shooter was perched.

Georgia election board requires November ballots be hand counted.

The state election board ruled 3-2 Friday in requiring local precincts to count ballots by hand and to confirm the figures with the machine counts before certifying the results in the November elections. The new rule could lengthen the time it takes to tally the results in the battleground state. Separately, early in-person voting kicked off Friday in Virginia, Minnesota, and South Dakota.

Researchers reconstruct Earth's climate over 485 million years.

The effort is considered the most rigorous reconstruction of Earth's past climate and offers new insights into the link between carbon dioxide and global temperatures. The findings—based on 150,000 estimates derived from fossil evidence and climate models—show the planet's climate has varied more than previously thought, with the average temperature fluctuating between 52 and 97 degrees Fahrenheit during the Phanerozoic Eon. The Earth's current average temperature is 59 degrees Fahrenheit.

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Sri Lankans to vote today for their next president.

More than 17 million eligible voters in the South Asian island nation are poised to vote for their next president for a five-year term. Nearly 40 candidates are running in the race, with top contenders including Marxist-leaning lawmaker Anura Kumara Dissanayake and current President Ranil Wickremesinghe, who is running as an independent. The election comes after Sri Lanka's economy collapsed in 2022, spurring nationwide unrest and prompting the former president to flee the country.

Humankind(ness)

Today, we're sharing a story from reader Phyllis W. in Kieler, Wisconsin.

"I was at a grocery store that does not provide free bags. You may bring your own, or purchase them. After I had paid, the cashier was bagging my groceries in the bags I had brought, but there were not enough. I needed one more. The woman behind me in line called out, 'Give her a bag, and put it on my bill.' (Their bags were more than \$2.) How generous and unexpected. Thank you, whoever you are."

Groton Area

GT TIGERS

GDILIVE.COM

10th Anniversary of GDILIVE.COM!

Saturday, Sept. 21



**Volleyball at
Hamlin
Tournament
11:30 a.m.**

**Boys Soccer hosts
Hot Springs,
11 a.m.**



\$5 ticket or GDI Subscription required to watch the events.

Career Highs Move the Needle for No. 24 Northern State

Aberdeen, S.D. – The Northern Sun Conference season kicked off for the No. 24 Northern State University volleyball team on Friday with a 3-1 win over Sioux Falls. The Wolves continued their hot start, rattling off their ninth straight win.

THE QUICK DETAILS

Final Score Match: NSU 3, USF 1

Records: NSU 9-0 (1-0 NSIC), USF 5-4 (0-1 NSIC)

Attendance: 1306

HOW IT HAPPENED

The Wolves opened the contest with a 25-21 victory, however Sioux Falls rallied back taking the second 26-24

It was all Northern State in the third set as the Wolves recorded a 25-14 win; defensively they forced 11 hitting errors in the set

NSU closed out the match with a 25-23 win in the fourth, coming back from an 18-10 deficit

Northern tallied a match leading 54 kills, 79 digs, 17 blocks, and seven aces; their 17 blocks were a season high for the squad

Natalia Szybinska knocked down a season high 24 kills, leading the Northern State offense

Szybinska was also efficient with a career best .556 attack percentage

Keri Walker paced the offense with 42 assists and kept USF on the toes, adding six kills offensively, as well as 13 digs and four blocks on defense

Reese Johnson notched the second career high for the Wolves in the win with 21 digs and added a team best two aces

Abby Meister was the final Wolf in double figures with 19 digs, while eight Wolves recorded multiple blocks

Victoria Persha led the team at the net with nine blocks, followed by Abby Brooks with five

NORTHERN STATE STATISTICAL STANDOUTS

Natalia Szybinska: 24 kills, .556 attack%, 6 digs, 3 blocks

Keri Walker: 42 assists, 13 digs, 6 kills, .545 attack%, 4 blocks

Reese Johnson: 21 digs, 2 aces, 1 assist

Victoria Persha: 9 blocks, 5 kills, .357 attack%, 2 aces

UP NEXT

Northern State returns to the court tomorrow afternoon against No. 8 Wayne State. First serve is set for 3 p.m. versus the Wildcats. Saturday is Youth Day with kids receiving free admission when wearing their jersey.

Pennington County Fatal Crash

What: Single vehicle fatal crash
Where: Interstate 90, mile marker 110, Wall, SD
When: 9:43 a.m., Friday, September 20, 2024

Vehicle 1: 1929 Ford Model A
Driver 1: 73-year-old male, fatal injuries
Seatbelt Use: No

Pennington County, S.D.- A 73-year-old man died this morning from injuries sustained in a single vehicle crash in Wall, SD.

The name of the person involved has not been released pending notification of family members.

Preliminary crash information indicates the driver of a 1929 Ford Model A was traveling westbound on Interstate 90 near mile marker 110 when it departed its lane to the left. The driver overcorrected to the right and entered a yaw. The vehicle crossed the shoulder, entered the north ditch, tripped and rolled. The driver was ejected from the vehicle and was declared deceased at the scene.

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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BROWN COUNTY
BROWN COUNTY COMMISSION AGENDA
REGULAR MEETING TUESDAY
September 24, 2024 8:45 A.M.

COMMISSIONER'S CHAMBERS, COURTHOUSE ANNEX - 25 MARKET STREET, ABERDEEN SD

1. Call To Order - Pledge of Allegiance
2. Approval of Agenda
3. Opportunity of Public Comment
4. Adopt Fiscal Year 2025 Budget
5. First Reading of following Ordinances:
 - a. Ord. #276 – Rezone
 - b. Ord. #277 – Rezone
 - c. Ord. #278 - Rezone
6. Mike Scott, Landfill Manager
 - a. Set Solid Waste Fees
 - b. Approve Purchase of Pickup
 - c. Approve & Authorize Chairman to sign Permit Renewal Documents
7. Rachel Kippley
 - a. RFP for Grandstands 2025-2029
8. Justin Scott, Brown County Treatment Court Association
 - a. Request funds from Opioid Settlements
9. Judy Dosch, Building Superintendent
 - a. Change Order for Building Restoration Project
 - b. Quotes for 124 Building – Down Spouts
10. R-O-W's for NVC
11. Approve & Authorize Allison Tunheim, HR Director to sign the documents for Cafeteria Plan
12. Approve using Public Purchase & Public Surplus for Bids – Auction – Etc.
13. Consent Calendar
 - a. Approval of General Meeting Minutes of September 10, 2024
 - b. Claims/Payroll
 - c. HR Report
 - d. Lease Agreement
 - e. Claim Assignments
 - f. Zoning Ordinances – Set Hearing Date/Authorize Advertising
 - g. Plats
 - i. Final Plats
 1. Sombke Second Subdivision
 2. Donald Raba & WW Rentals First Addition
 3. OALC Second Subdivision
 4. Dixon Third Addition
14. Other Business
15. Executive Session (if requested per SDCL 1-25-2)
16. Adjourn

Brown County Commission Meeting

Please join my meeting from your computer, tablet, or smartphone.

<https://meet.goto.com/BrCoCommission>

You can also dial in using your phone. United States: +1 (872) 240-3311

Access Code: 601-168-909 #

Get the app now and be ready when your first meeting starts: <https://meet.goto.com/install>

Public comment provides an opportunity for the public to address the county commission but may not exceed 3 minutes.

Public comment will be limited to 10 minutes (or at the discretion of the board).

Public comment will be accepted virtually when the virtual attendance option is available.

Official Recordings of Commission Meetings along with the Minutes can be found at

<https://www.brown.sd.us/department/commission>

Groton Area wins homecoming game over Deuel

Groton Area won its homecoming football game Friday with a 14-9 win over the Deuel Cardinals.

Each team had the ball once in the first quarter with Groton Area having the first possession, only to have it ended with an interception by Gavin Maaland in the end zone. "They took away our passing game," said Coach Shaun Wanner, "so we ended up running it a lot and we moved the ball pretty good."

The Cardinals had the ball for the remaining half of the first quarter and ended up punting on fourth and 11. There were 19 plays in the first quarter.

Groton Area had the ball to start the second quarter, only to fumble the ball on the first play. "It wasn't the start that we wanted," Wanner said. "But our defense limited them to a field goal. When you have as many upper classmen as we have, they don't let things get to them early in the game."

That set up the Cardinals on the Tiger 15 yard line and they eventually ended up kicking a 29 yard field goal by Sean Kormann.

Both teams ended up punting the next possessions away. With 5:10 left in the half, Groton Area set up shop on the Tiger 36 yard line. After three first downs, Christian Ehresmann would catch the pass from Ryder Johnson to score on a 14 yard pass play. Joao Nunes kicked the PAT and Groton was on top, 7-3. That drive lasted nearly five minutes as the Tigers scored with 28 seconds left in the half. There were a total of four first downs and 11 plays for the 64 yard drive.

The score remained, 7-3, Groton Area, at half time.

Deuel's first drive in the second half was stopped when the Cardinals failed to convert on fourth and three at midfield. Groton Area took over on its own 47 yard line.

After three first downs, Ryder Johnson connected with Christian Ehresmann for a five yard pass play to score. Joao Nunes kicked the PAT and Groton took a 14-3 lead. That drive lasted seven minutes, went 53 yards in 14 plays with four first downs.

The last scoring drive of the game started with 4:04 left by the Deuel Cardinals. Starting at the Cardinal 38 yard line, Deuel would march the distance of the field in 13 plays, 62 yards and five first downs as Troy Jenson would score on a three yard pass from Aiden Sievers. The two point conversion attempt failed and it was 14-9 with 32 seconds left in the game, which stood as the final score.

Groton Area had more first downs, 11-8, more yards rushing, 172-40, but fewer yards passing, 90-62.

In rushing, Groton Area carried the ball 34 times for 172 yards (Korbin Kucker 23-113, Ryder Johnson 5-53, Christian Ehresmann 5-20, Keegen Tracy 1-7). Deuel carried the ball 24 times for 40 yards (Gavin Klaus 11-35, Owen Haas 3-4, Carson Marko 1-2, Aiden Sievers 9-(-1)).

In passing, Ryder Johnson completed eight of 12 passes for 60 yards, two touchdowns and one interception. Korbin Kucker completed one of one pass for two yards. Receivers were Christian Ehresmann 4-23, two touchdowns; Teylor Diegel 3-17, Connor Glines 1-16 and Keegen Tracy 1-6. Deuel's Aiden Sievers completed 11 of 18 passes for 90 yards. Receivers were Gabe Sather 7-76, Nolan Gubrud 1-7, Carson Marko 1-5, Gavin Maaland 1-(-1), Troy Jenson 1-3, 1 touchdown.

Groton Area lost one fumble while Deuel had no fumbles. Groton Area had six penalties for 40 yards and Deuel had seven for 45 yards.

Defensive leaders for Groton Area were Christian Ehresmann with 10 tackles and two sacks, Brevin Flihs had seven tackles and one sack, Tucker Hardy had six tackles and one sack and Korbin Kucker and Caleb Mertz each had five tackles. Deuel was led by Gavin Maaland with nine tackles while Carson Marko and Reed VanWormer each had eight.

"Our seniors are leading our program," Wanner said. "They are a tight knit group and they know they don't have another year to play football. It was like Brevin Flihs said, 'I can golf the rest of my life but when football is over, it's over.' And the seniors know that. It can be over in four weeks, five weeks, six weeks. It's up to them."

Groton Area is now 3-1 on the season and will travel to Clark/Willow Lake on Friday. Deuel falls to 1-3 and will host Sioux Valley. "Clark and Roncalli will be the toughest teams coming up," Wanner said. "Clark

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is a lot like us - they run and pass the ball well. They also have some good sized kids up front. Our juniors have had close games with them the last couple of years and I expect this to be close as well. It's their homecoming game so I know what their kids are going through - we're back to a regular routine and I like that."

The game was broadcast live on GDILIVE.COM, sponsored by Agtegra, Avantara Groton, Bierman Farm Service, BK Custom T's & More, Blocker Construction, Dacotah Bank, Full Circle Ag, Groton Ag Partners, Groton Chamber, Groton Ford, Harry Implement, John Sieh Agency, Jungle Lanes & Lounge, Krueger Brothers, R&M Farms/Rix Farms and The Meathouse in Andover with the team of Justin Olson, Paul Kosel and Jeslyn Kosel. Internet service was provided by JVT.

- Paul Kosel

Boys soccer team beats Custer

The boys soccer team posted a 5-1 win over Custer in action played Friday in Groton.












The Tigers would score first with 34:\$7 left in the half on a Logan Olson kick assisted by Karson Zak. Olson would score again with 24:41 left in the first on on kick and assist by Easton Weber. Goal keeper Gage Sippel had a long kick that bounced over the defenders and Karson Zak scored with 16:33 left in the half. Zak would score again with 13:55 left in the half to make it 4-0. Custer's Koleden Niemann would score with 3:35 left in the half and the half time score was 4-1.

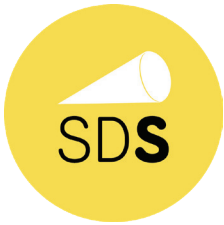
One goal was scored in the second half and that was by Ethan Kroll with 19:19 left in the game.

The game was broadcast live on GDILIVE.COM, sponsored by Agtegra, Avantara Groton, Bierman Farm Service, BK Custom T's & More, Blocker Construction, Dacotah Bank, Full Circle Ag, Groton Ag Partners, Groton Chamber, Groton Ford, Harry Implement, John Sieh Agency, Jungle Lanes & Lounge, Krueger Brothers, R&M Farms/Rix Farms and The Meathouse in Andover with the team of Paul Kosel and Jeslyn Kosel. Internet service was provided by JVT.

Groton Area hosts Hot Springs today in an 11 a.m. game.

- Paul Kosel

#	Name	Season				Seed	Pts
		W	L	T	PCT	Pts	
1	 Vermillion	5	1	1	.786	43.071	
2	 James Valley Christian	6	3	0	.667	42.889	
3	 Rapid City Christian	4	1	1	.750	42.417	
4	 West Central	3	4	2	.444	40.111	
5	 Freeman Academy	5	2	3	.650	39.850	
6	 St. Thomas More	3	6	1	.350	39.150	
7	 Groton Area	2	4	3	.389	38.500	
8	 Belle Fourche	3	5	0	.375	38.250	
9	 Custer	2	6	2	.300	37.600	
10	 Dakota Valley	0	5	0	.000	35.400	
11	 Hot Springs	1	8	0	.111	35.333	



SOUTH DAKOTA SEARCHLIGHT

<https://southdakotasearchlight.com>

Prison families group hopes to push lawmakers, corrections officials to address concerns

More than 100 attend or tune in to group's first meeting at Sioux Falls library

BY: JOHN HULT - SEPTEMBER 20, 2024 6:31 PM

SIoux FALLS — Family members and friends of people in state prison packed a downtown library meeting room Thursday night in Sioux Falls for the first meeting of a group that aims to put pressure on the Department of Corrections (DOC) to address their concerns.

The organizers of South Dakotans Impacted By Incarceration told the 70 in-person attendees and 40 online viewers that their plans include regular meetings, advocacy and outreach to those in power.

A panel of lawmakers, activists and a county sheriff fielded questions and heard concerns for an hour and a half, with many personal stories and calls to action met with raucous applause.

Co-founder Erin Vicars of Sioux Falls told the crowd that she and co-founder Nieema Thasing of Elkton began discussions on creating a group about five months ago, in part as a response to controversies and security issues that have played out over the past eight months.

Outbreaks of violence at two state prisons and multiple lockdowns, including a lockdown currently in place at the penitentiary, have occurred since March. The DOC imposed a temporary shutdown of tablet-based communications and placed call limits on inmates afterward, and the prices of commissary items have also become a point of contention between inmates and the agency.

"I am here because I think we should have a voice," Vicars said. "Your voice matters."

At one point, Vicars asked how many attendees had family members in prison who'd been denied medications prescribed to them by doctors outside the walls. There were 20 hands in the air.

Showing up in public and telling shared stories about those situations, Thasing said, is one way to counter the DOC.

"If 1,000 people show up and talk about what has happened with their loved ones, they can't say that all of us are lying," Thasing said. "That was 20 hands just on one issue."

The DOC did not respond to a South Dakota Searchlight request for comment on the medication allegations, or to questions about volunteer and reentry programs.

Rep. Kady Wittman, D-Sioux Falls, was part of the panel, as were Brookings County Sheriff Marty Stanwick; The Hub South Dakota Director and former state trooper Julian Beaudion; life coach and community activist Terry Liggins; a volunteer prison chaplain named Boots Among Trees; and former state lawmaker Tim Goodwin of Rapid City, who's running for another term this fall.

Also in attendance in the audience were Rep. Tom Pischke, R-Dell Rapids; Sen. Reynold Nesiba, D-Sioux Falls; Rep. Linda Duba, D-Sioux Falls; Sen. Liz Larson, D-Sioux Falls; and former speaker of the South Dakota House Steve Haugaard, R-Sioux Falls.

Panelists: Vote, vote, vote

Early on in the meeting, Thasing asked all current and former lawmakers to stand up and to stay standing. Pischke initially remained seated near the back of the room, but stood when he was called out.

Thasing thanked them for coming, but also said she was disappointed in the state and local officials who didn't come.

The group sent "250 emails," Thasing said as the crowd applauded, "and this is who showed up – and

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showed out.”

She urged attendees to remember which lawmakers were in the room to hear their concerns, so that “when you see them on the street, you can walk up and say ‘did you handle that?’”

Thasing, who is also president of the League of Women Voters in Brookings, told the crowd to “vote, vote, vote” if they want change.

Beaudion, the former state trooper, repeated that line several times during his remarks. He told attendees that he sees criminal justice issues from both sides, as a former trooper whose siblings have been incarcerated.

Prisons are not set up to provide for “basic human needs,” he said, which forces family members on the outside to provide financial and emotional support. Multiple attendees talked about putting money in their family members’ inmate accounts so they can buy food to supplement their meals or avoid the cafeteria meals. Heads nodded as others told stories of “inedible” food and health problems they say are caused by it.

Liggins, who helped organize the Tuesday event, spent time in federal prison and now supports other family members behind bars, he said. He’s been free for eight years. He remembers needing support, and now understands the stress of offering it. The support is critical, he said.

“I know the incarcerated person leans on you, hard, and they ask for things, and they request things, and you do a damned good job providing for them,” Liggins said.

He decried a dearth of mental health options in prison, a lack of reentry support, and a lack of access to post-secondary education.

“I have raised my hand in this community for eight years of my reentry, and I have yet to get a meeting with the Department of Corrections secretary, from anybody on that end,” Liggins said. “I’ve yet to have an opportunity to make a difference in this state.”

Volunteers who work at the DOC are required to pass background checks. At one point, a woman named Sam Dixon stood up, holding a phone, saying she had an inmate on the line who wanted to address the group. The inmate was not identified.

He thanked everyone for coming, then told the group that official DOC programs like parenting classes, relationship classes and classes on restorative justice are “not happening” at the penitentiary.

He urged “anyone who can pass a background check” to consider volunteering, because “we desperately need volunteers.” He said inmates have worked with volunteers to start a Toastmasters club in prison, a yoga group and an alternatives to violence group, among others.

“We cannot sit around and wait for our administration to help us,” he said. “Us prisoners have been networking and finding amazing members of our community to come start programs, and it has been amazingly successful.”

Lawmakers: Issues raise questions about leadership

Troubles with volunteer and reentry programs were also part of discussions from lawmakers.

Goodwin said he volunteers with a group called St. Dysmas. The nonprofit organizes church services at the penitentiary.

Lately, however, there have been scheduling issues. Services were held at 6:30 p.m. on Thursdays. This year, he said, the DOC changed the time, first to 1:30 p.m. Wednesday, which made it harder for volunteers with day jobs. More recently, he said, the time was switched to 8:30 a.m. on Wednesdays.

“For all the churches that sign up to sponsor this, that means you’ve got to be at the pen at 7:30 a.m.,” Goodwin said.

The lockdowns and steady stream of changes to scheduling have left him questioning the agency’s leadership as discussions continue on a new men’s prison in rural Lincoln County.

If it withstands legal challenges and lawmaker skepticism, the prison — for which lawmakers have set aside \$569 million and counting — will be the most expensive capital project in state government’s history.

“If we’re going to put all this money into a new prison, we ought to have confidence in our leadership,”

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Goodwin said. "We shouldn't be digressing and having lockdowns."

Wittman, who represents a district that includes the state penitentiary, said she's volunteered at the prison for more than three years. She's "passionate about reentry programs," she said, in part because of her time as an employee of the Bishop Dudley House shelter in Sioux Falls, where some inmates go when they're released.

"The first place they're walking to is the Bishop Dudley House," Wittman said. "And I can tell you right now, the Bishop Dudley house is not well equipped to handle ..."

At that point, an attendee cut Wittman off from the back of the room by shouting "that's the most dangerous place for them to go to."

Wittman called the shelter "a rough place." But, she said, "that's not on the Bishop Dudley House."

"What I'm telling all of you is that I don't think we have appropriate resources and support systems in place for folks upon release, and we are setting them up to fail," Wittman said.

Haugaard has been a critic of the DOC in recent months. He's testified in legislative committees against the state's plans for a new prison, and appeared at the most recent meeting of the state's Corrections Commission.

That group, he said, ought to have more oversight and authority to push for changes at the DOC.

Haugaard told attendees to address their concerns to the penitentiary and DOC, but also to the Governor's Office and Attorney General's Office, so "everybody's aware that this complaint is floating out there."

He also said it's important to advocate for parole, probation and reentry program dollars in Pierre.

"There's no reason why we should have such a high incarceration rate in the state," Haugaard said. "If we were adequately funding probation and parole, that wouldn't be the situation."

Vicars told South Dakota Searchlight that the group intends to hold an October meeting, but the date hasn't been set.

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

COMMENTARY

Democracy and discomfort: Mount Rushmore's potent mix

Loving the Shrine of Democracy requires listening to those who don't

by KEVIN WOSTER

SEPTEMBER 20, 2024 12:47 PM

Democracy and discomfort go together. Or at least they should.

A democracy without some discomfort in its educational system and public dialogue probably isn't much of a democracy at all.

So I was feeling democratically (small "d") inspired and appropriately uncomfortable as I sat at my table at the August Black Hills Forum and Press Club luncheon here in Rapid City and listened to Indigenous social-justice activist and organizer Nick Tilsen talk about Mount Rushmore.

Nobody can make an old white guy feel uncomfortable quite like Tilsen, especially if that old white guy happens to love Mount Rushmore National Memorial, as I do.

What can I say? I'm a sucker for those massive presidential faces "carved" (as in dynamited and jack-hammered) almost a century ago out of the granite face of a mountain.

Of course, I have reservations about doing such a thing to a mountain, which was more elegantly known as Six Grandfathers by Indigenous people — the "six" representing the sacred directions of east, west, north, south, the sky above and the earth below. White folks renamed the mountain after one of their own, of course. Charles E. Rushmore was a New York City lawyer who spent a little time in the Black Hills in the mid-1880s securing mining options.

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And for that he got his own mountain, in name at least? Go figure.

A big part of me wishes I could have seen Six Grandfathers before workers started blasting away in 1927. But I'm nonetheless inspired whenever I stop at Mount Rushmore, which I've been doing since I first visited the place with my family as a kid. I still feel a bit like a kid when I stand, in childlike wonderment, at one of the viewing areas and gaze up at the mammoth stone faces looming above me.

An amazing piece of art? Absolutely. The Shrine of Democracy? Sure, to many of us, at least.

But it's something else, too, something even Rushmore lovers like me can't deny, if we're being honest: It's a place of stark contradictions and even hypocrisies. In fact, you could make an argument that the Shrine of Democracy is also the Shrine of Hypocrisy.

Which is pretty much what Tilsen, president and CEO of the nonprofit NDN Collective, did as he spoke at the press club.

"That was a sacred site for our people. That was our church where we went to pray, to give back to our creator," Tilsen said. "And then it was blown up, and then the faces of the people who are responsible for violating our rights, murdering our people, stealing our children from our homes — those people who created the policy for that to happen, their faces were put on that mountain. You can imagine that disrespect ... and then on top of it to celebrate it as a form of democracy is to do no justice to us here."

Strong words. Words that could make an old white guy, or anyone without an Indigenous perspective, get a bit defensive. Which would be a mistake. Because there are truths in those words, uncomfortable truths that are nonetheless essential to hear and consider and discuss.

The way we should do things in a democracy.

There's much to admire about the four presidents — Washington, Jefferson, Lincoln and Theodore Roosevelt — depicted on Mount Rushmore. But two were slave owners and all four played a role in the oppression, or worse, of Indigenous people.

Then there's the Land Back movement that NDN Collective promotes. Locally it seeks return of the federal land in the Black Hills taken in violation of treaties.

The U.S. Supreme Court affirmed, in a 1980 ruling following decades of legal wrangling, that the Black Hills were wrongly taken. In the *United States v. Sioux Nation of Indians*, the high court voted 8-1 to affirm a lower court ruling that gave \$17.1 million — the estimated value of Black Hills land when taken by the federal government in 1877 — plus interest over the years of \$88 million.

The Sioux Nation never accepted the \$105 million, which has now grown with interest to about \$2 billion. Instead, Tilsen and many others continue to press for the return of the land, or at least the return of the land owned by the federal government, including Mount Rushmore.

"My opinion is it should be returned to Lakota people," Tilsen said. "And then we should have decision-making power about what we should do with that place."

NDN Collective started an online petition with more than 45,000 signatures calling for the closure of Mount Rushmore as well as the return of federal lands in the Black Hills to "the Oceti Sakowin," or the Great Sioux Nation.

While Tilsen told the press club audience that the land should be returned to Lakota control, he didn't speak of closing Mount Rushmore or destroying the sculpture. He spoke instead of how Indigenous management of the property would lead to a more complete, more honest story being told at the mountain.

"I think there's an opportunity to tell the true history of that place, not under the banner of the Department of the Interior," he said.

The National Park Service, which manages Mount Rushmore National Memorial, is part of the Department of Interior. And especially in recent years, the park service has tried to expand its education-interpretation offerings to better recognize and honor Indigenous people and expand the Rushmore story.

Earl Perez-Foust, program manager of interpretation and education at Mount Rushmore, said in an email that certain areas of the park are made available for tribal cultural and spiritual practices. Lakota artists, historians and performers also share their knowledge and craft regularly with park visitors, he said.

Sometime around the end of the year, a new circular garden will open with native plants and stone spokes

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aligning with cultural sites throughout the Black Hills, Perez-Foust said. He said it is based on Native stone hoop designs found throughout North America. And the park is producing new interpretative films to be released next summer that will include Indigenous perspectives on Mount Rushmore.

Those are valuable steps. But they won't go far enough for Tilsen and others who want the land returned. Protests are part of that effort.

Tilsen and NDN Collective organized a road blockade at Mount Rushmore on July 3, 2020, prior to a fireworks display and program headlined by then-President Donald Trump. After an altercation with law enforcement, Tilsen and some of the other protesters were arrested, although their charges were later dropped in an agreement with the prosecution.

That protest at Mount Rushmore was one of many over the years at the memorial, including occupations there by Indigenous protesters in the early 1970s.

"For generations Indian people have been protesting at Mount Rushmore," Tilsen said.

Those protests will continue, because the issue is far from settled. And Nick Tilsen will continue to speak out in ways that will make old white guys like me uncomfortable.

But if we truly believe in democracy, it's our job to listen.

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.

How to vote early in South Dakota, beginning today

BY: SEARCHLIGHT STAFF - SEPTEMBER 20, 2024 6:00 AM

Early voting for South Dakota's Nov. 5 general election begins today.

Check registration

To cast an early ballot, voters should first make sure they're registered. Voter registration status can be checked in the South Dakota Secretary of State's online voter information portal at vip.sdsos.gov/viplogin.aspx.

The registration deadline for the Nov. 5 election is Oct. 21. Voter registration instructions are available online from the secretary of state at sdsos.gov/elections-voting/voting/register-to-vote/default.aspx.

Vote early in person

To vote early in person, voters may go to their local county auditor's office (contact the office for hours) with acceptable photo identification. Acceptable photo identification cards include a South Dakota driver's license or non-driver ID card, tribal ID, passport, student ID issued by a South Dakota high school or college, or any other photo ID issued by the U.S. government. If a voter does not have a photo ID, the voter must be given the option to sign a personal identification affidavit.

Vote early (absentee) by mail

To vote early by mail (also called absentee voting), voters may request an absentee ballot application from their county auditor or download an application from the South Dakota Secretary of State's website at sdsos.gov/elections-voting/voting/absentee-voting.aspx.

Voters filling out an absentee ballot application form must include a photocopy of an acceptable photo identification card or have the form notarized. Acceptable photo identification cards include a South Dakota driver's license or non-driver ID card, tribal ID, passport, student ID issued by a South Dakota high school or college, or any other photo ID issued by the U.S. government.

Absentee ballot applications should be mailed to the voter's county auditor's office. A list of the offices is available at vip.sdsos.gov/CountyAuditors.aspx.

The auditor will provide a paper absentee ballot to the voter. The voter then completes the ballot and mails it to the auditor.

U.S. House votes to repeal Biden auto emissions rule

SD's Dusty Johnson votes yes with all but one Republican

BY: JACOB FISCHLER - SEPTEMBER 20, 2024 3:15 PM

The U.S. House voted, 215-191, on Friday to roll back an Environmental Protection Agency rule strengthening standards for air pollution from car and truck tailpipes.

Eight Democrats joined all but one Republican present in voting to approve a resolution under the Congressional Review Act, which allows Congress to undo certain executive branch rules, to disapprove of the rule that was announced in March.

The rule would set up a multiyear schedule to lower the limit on greenhouse gas emissions by passenger vehicles by nearly half by 2032.

Democrats Yadira Caraveo of Colorado, Henry Cuellar and Vicente Gonzalez of Texas, Don Davis of North Carolina, Jared Golden of Maine, Marcy Kaptur of Ohio, Mary Peltola of Alaska and Marie Gluesenkamp Perez of Washington voted for the resolution.

Pennsylvania Republican Brian Fitzpatrick was the lone GOP member to vote against the resolution. South Dakota Republican Dusty Johnson voted yes.

President Joe Biden has pledged to veto the resolution if it reaches his desk.

"The rule sets performance-based standards that manufacturers can meet using a wide range of technologies and avoids over seven billion metric tons of carbon emissions while significantly reducing other pollutants," the White House Office of Management and Budget said in a statement of administration policy. "These standards will provide important health benefits to millions across the country."

'Force-fed EVs'

Republicans on the House floor Friday argued the rule was a mandate for U.S. consumers to buy electric vehicles, often called EVs, which they said were still riddled with reliability issues, especially for rural drivers and drivers in colder climates.

"Americans are being force-fed EVs and they're being force-fed a lie saying that driving EVs is going to save the planet," House Natural Resources Chair Bruce Westerman, an Arkansas Republican, said.

Democrats, who largely favor the rule, described the regulation as a common-sense measure to reduce pollutants that cause climate change and health issues such as asthma.

The rule does not mandate electric vehicles, House Energy and Commerce ranking Democrat Frank Pallone of New Jersey said.

"We're not mandating EVs, we're not forcing anybody to use EVs. I'm going to say that over and over again," Pallone said. "What we are doing is trying to reduce air pollution and this resolution is a step backwards in addressing dangerous air pollution."

The resolution's sponsor, Michigan's Rep. John James, was among the Republicans making an economic argument about the EPA rule, saying it would drive costs of vehicles higher than many Americans can afford.

"I think about every hardworking American whom Washington has forgotten when we talk about making vehicles that are affordable and making a nation that is competitive," he said.

Saving money

Colorado Democratic Rep. Diana DeGette countered that argument, saying the standards would "save the average American driver an estimated \$6,000 over the life of a vehicle."

"My colleagues on the other side of the aisle seem to think this is bad for consumers when in fact it's good," she said.

The transportation sector is the single largest contributor to U.S. greenhouse gas emissions, according to the EPA's rule. The sector accounts for 29% of emissions, with the light-duty vehicles covered by the rule comprising 58% of those emissions.

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

Secret Service acknowledges 'failures' in protection of Trump in Pennsylvania shooting

BY: ASHLEY MURRAY - SEPTEMBER 20, 2024 2:38 PM

WASHINGTON — The U.S. Secret Service has taken responsibility for the failures that resulted in the July assassination attempt on former President Donald Trump in Pennsylvania and is asking for more resources going forward, a top official said Friday.

Acting Director Ronald Rowe briefed reporters on the agency's findings following an investigation into how a gunman was able to scale a nearby roof and fire multiple shots at Trump during a July 13 campaign rally in Butler. Trump sustained an injury to his right ear, and one spectator was killed while two others were seriously injured.

"It's important that we hold ourselves accountable for the failures of July 13, and that we use the lessons learned to make sure that we do not have another failure like this again," Rowe said.

The investigation revealed communication "deficiencies" between law enforcement personnel and an "overreliance on mobile devices, resulting in information being siloed," Rowe said, highlighting that vital information about the shooter was transmitted via phone instead of over the Secret Service radio network.

The investigation also uncovered "complacency" among some staff members who visited the site ahead of time but did not escalate to supervisors their concerns over "line of sight issues," Rowe said.

"The findings of the Mission Assurance review have prompted the Secret Service to move into the accountability phase of this process," he said, referring to the agency's title of its investigation.

"What has become clear to me is we need a shift in paradigm in how we conduct our protective operations. As was demonstrated on Sunday in West Palm Beach, the threat level is evolving," Rowe said.

"This increased operational tempo requires additional resources to not only account for costs being incurred today, but ensure that we have the tools, technology and personnel needed to meet these new requirements and execute our mission going forward," he said.

Second attempt to harm Trump

The investigation's conclusions were revealed less than a week after a second attempt on Trump's life. On Sunday the Secret Service thwarted a gunman's attempt to aim a high-powered rifle at the former president while he was playing golf on his West Palm Beach, Florida, property.

The incidents prompted unanimous U.S. House support for a measure to grant presidential and vice presidential candidates the same security level as the officeholders. The proposal sailed through the lower chamber Friday in a 405-0 vote.

On Monday a bipartisan congressional task force investigating the July attempted assassination in Pennsylvania announced an expansion of its purview to also probe Sunday's attempt in Florida. The task force will hold its first hearing Thursday.

Rowe said the agency has been providing the "highest levels" of protections for presidential candidates since the July 13 assassination attempt.

That increased level of protection is working, Rowe told reporters, recounting how an agent swept the area ahead of Trump and "took steps to neutralize that threat."

"No shot was fired at the former president. The former president was not exposed to where he was on the golf course," he said.

Extending that level of protection means the agency is "burning through a lot of assets and resources."

"This isn't pie in the sky, trying to say 'Hey, we want this now.' We are not capitalizing on a crisis," Rowe said.

Rowe would not disclose an additional dollar amount the agency is seeking and said conversations with congressional appropriators are "ongoing."

"The threat is not going to evaporate anytime soon, and so we have to be prepared for this. And that is the argument that we have been making. We have certainly made some inroads, and we're having these

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productive conversations with the Hill," he said.

Rowe was appointed as the agency's acting director after former Director Kimberly Cheatle heeded loud cries for her resignation, stepping down 10 days after the attempt on Trump's life in July.

Rowe would not detail who or how many in the agency will face discipline, citing federal regulations preventing him from discussing it further.

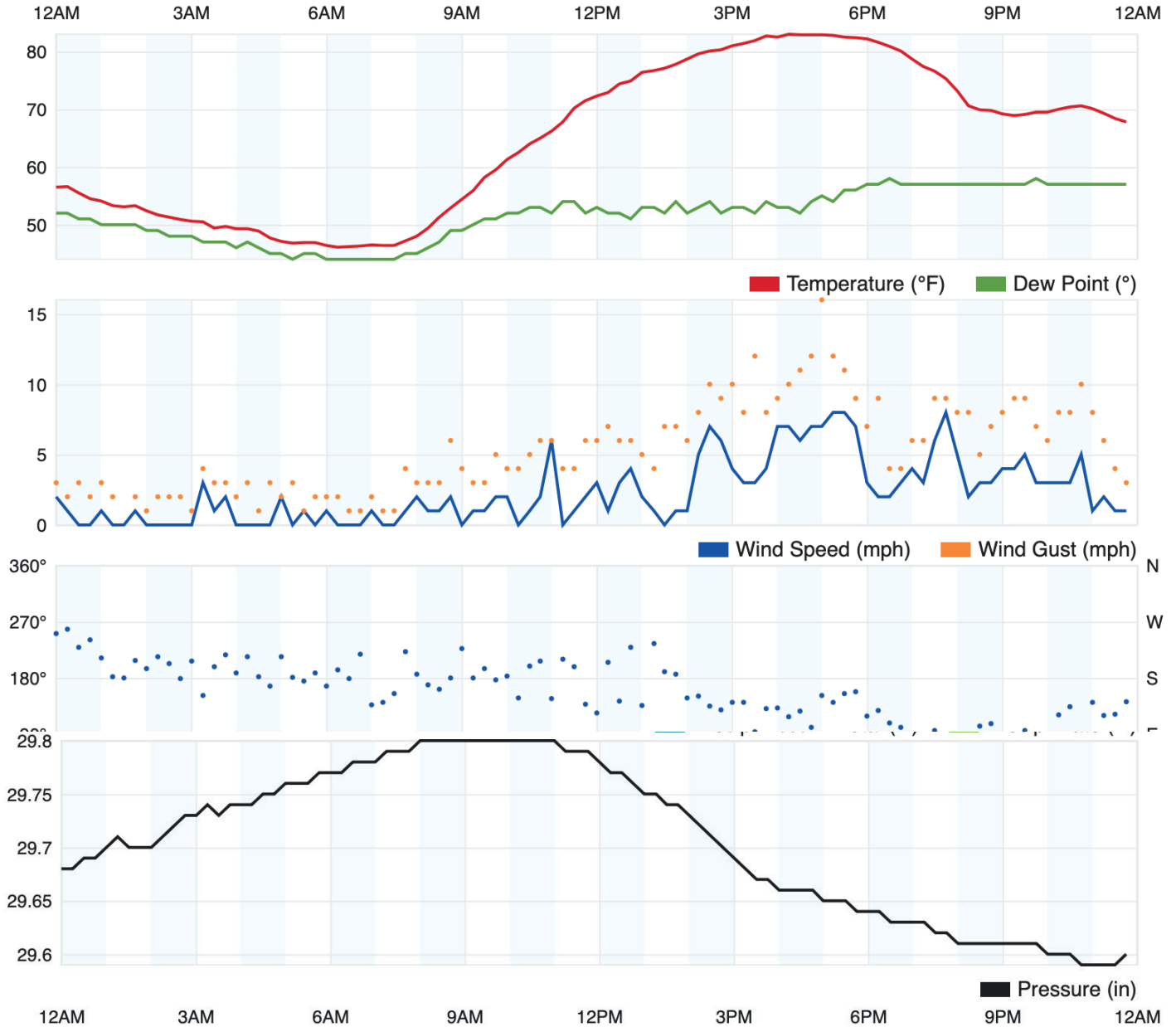
"What I will tell you is that I have not asked for anybody to retire. I know some of that was reported. That is false," Rowe said. Rowe said the agency's offices of Integrity and Professional Responsibility will together decide any discipline in accordance with the agency's "table of penalties."

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

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Yesterday's Groton Weather Graphs



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Today



High: 68 °F

Sunny then
Sunny and
Breezy

Tonight



Low: 41 °F

Mostly Clear

Sunday



High: 67 °F

Sunny

Sunday Night



Low: 40 °F

Mostly Clear

Monday



High: 71 °F

Sunny

Today



Highs: 66-72°F

Lows: 40-45°F

**Wind Gusts: 35-45 mph
James River and west**



Aberdeen, SD

Today is going to be windy. Gusts around the James River valley and areas west will have wind gusts between 35 and 45 mph through the mid afternoon. Also, expect cooler temperatures with highs in the mid 60s to mid 70s.

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Yesterday's Groton Weather

High Temp: 83 °F at 4:27 PM

Low Temp: 46 °F at 6:13 AM

Wind: 16 mph at 4:55 PM

Precip: : 0.00

Day length: 13 hours, 14 minutes

Today's Info

Record High: 99 in 1937

Record Low: 22 in 1893

Average High: 73

Average Low: 45

Average Precip in Sept.: 1.40

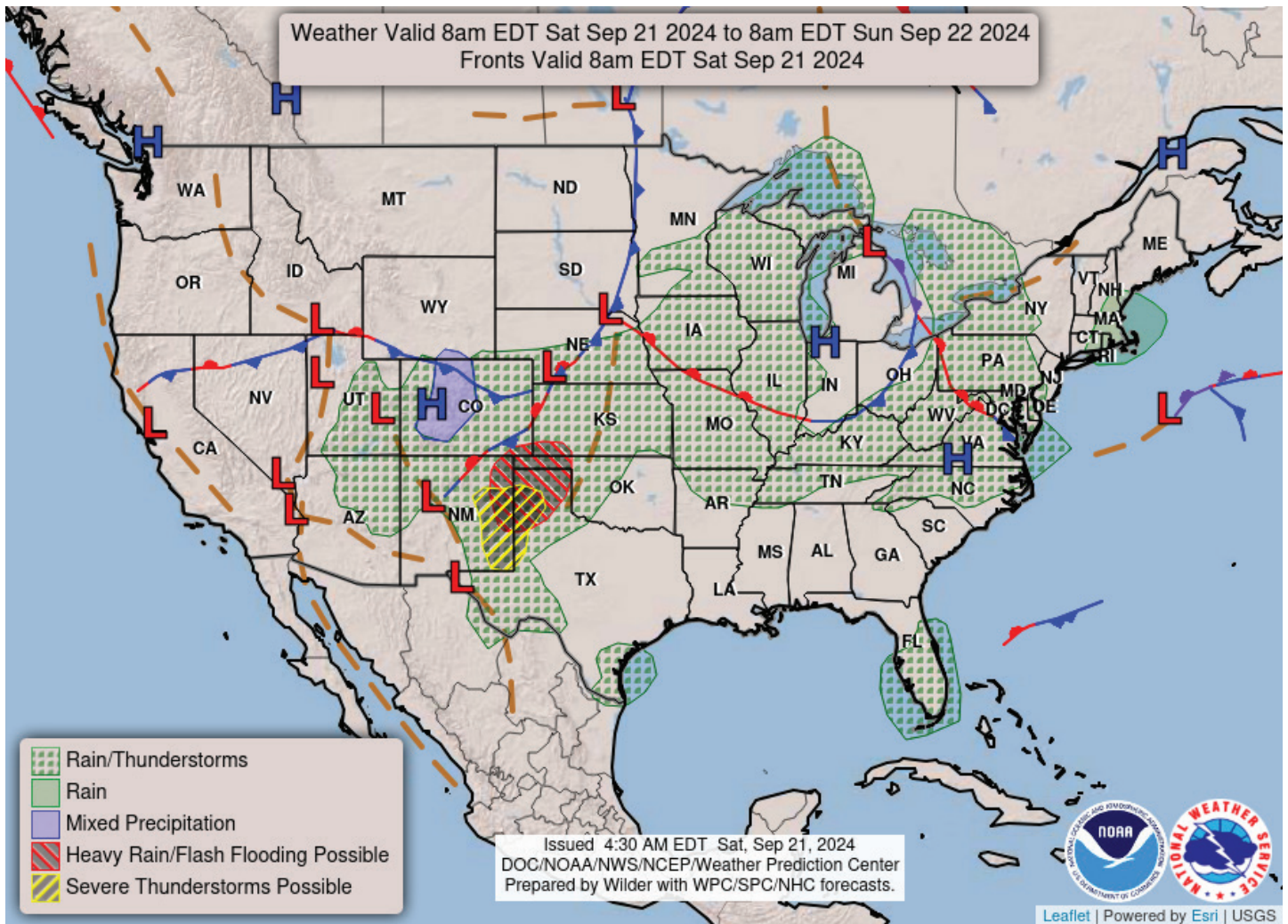
Precip to date in Sept.: 0.24

Average Precip to date: 17.74

Precip Year to Date: 19.66

Sunset Tonight: 7:32:38 pm

Sunrise Tomorrow: 7:18:58 am



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Today in Weather History

September 21, 1960: In the morning hours of September 21st, lightning struck and caused structural damage to a home in Clear Lake, Deuel County. Lightning also hit a home in Clark in Clark County, and two telephone poles near Milbank in Grant County. Power was also interrupted for a short time by lightning near Britton.

1894: A late season severe weather outbreak occurred across northwest Iowa, south central Minnesota and southwestern Wisconsin during the late evening hours. Several communities were impacted by this outbreak with an estimated 55 to 65 deaths, and in additional 300 injuries. The strongest tornado was an estimated F5, which tore through the counties of Kossuth, Hancock, Winnebago in Iowa, and Faribault in Minnesota.

1894 - A heavy chicken house, sixteen by sixteen feet in area, was picked up by a tornado and wedged between two trees. The hens were found the next day sitting on their eggs in the chicken house, with no windows broken, as though nothing had happened. (The Weather Channel)

1924: A couple of tornadoes, one rated F4 and the other F5, tore paths of devastation through Eau Claire, Clark, and Taylor Counties in Wisconsin. The death toll was 18 and 50 people were injured.

1938 - A great hurricane smashed into Long Island and bisected New England causing a massive forest blowdown and widespread flooding. Winds gusted to 186 mph at Blue Hill MA, and a storm surge of nearly thirty feet caused extensive flooding along the coast of Rhode Island. The hurricane killed 600 persons and caused 500 million dollars damage. The hurricane, which lasted twelve days, destroyed 275 million trees. Hardest hit were Massachusetts, Connecticut, Rhode Island and Long Island NY. The "Long Island Express" produced gargantuan waves with its 150 mph winds, waves which smashed against the New England shore with such force that earthquake-recording machines on the Pacific coast clearly showed the shock of each wave. (David Ludlum) (The Weather Channel)

1954 - The temperature at Deeth, NV, soared from a morning low of 12 degrees to a high of 87 degrees, a record daily warm-up for the state. (The Weather Channel)

1987 - Tropical Storm Emily, which formed in the Caribbean the previous afternoon, caused considerable damage to the banana industry of Saint Vincent in the Windward Islands. Unseasonably hot weather continued in Florida and the western U.S. Redding CA and Red Bluff CA, with record highs of 108 degrees, tied for honors as the hot spot in the nation. (The National Weather Summary)

1988 - Thunderstorms produced high winds and locally heavy rain in the southwestern U.S. One thunderstorm in west Texas produced wind gusts to 86 mph at Dell City completely destroying an airport hangar. A Cessna 150 aircraft housed within the hangar was flipped over and snapped in two. Thunderstorms produced large hail in east central Utah, while snow blanketed some of the higher elevations of the state. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

1989 - Hurricane Hugo slammed into the South Carolina coast about 11 PM, making landfall near Sullivan's Island. Hurricane Hugo was directly responsible for thirteen deaths, and indirectly responsible for twenty-two others. A total of 420 persons were injured in the hurricane, and damage was estimated at eight billion dollars, including two billion dollars damage to crops. Sustained winds reached 85 mph at Folly Beach SC, with wind gusts as high as 138 mph. Wind gusts reached 98 mph at Charleston, and 109 mph at Shaw AFB. The biggest storm surge occurred in the McClellanville and Bulls Bay area of Charleston County, with a storm surge of 20.2 feet reported at Seewee Bay. Shrimp boats were found one half mile inland at McClellanville. (National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)



THE TRUE BELIEVER

His license plate proudly proclaimed "SAY NO." But when the "outspoken" advocate for living a drug free life was stopped for speeding, the police officers discovered that he was transporting drugs in his automobile.

While we may shake our heads in disbelief at that man's hypocrisy, he is not that different from many Christians. The Apostle John wrote, "Those who say they live in God should live their lives as Christ did." We might say that this is an "If/Then" statement. John wants us to have no doubt about one important fact: "If we say that we live in God, then others will be able to see Christ in what we do and hear His love in what we say." Rather troubling words, aren't they?

In only a few words John states two ways that will assure us that we belong to Christ: If we do what Christ says and live as Christ wants us to live. A few verses later in his little letter John clearly describes what he means: "Believe in the name of His Son and love one another."

True "lived-out" Christian faith results in "loving behavior." For this reason, John reminds us that what we say and the way we act are proof that we are living in God and belong to Christ. If we are obedient to the teachings of Scripture and show God's love as Jesus did, then we know without a doubt that we "live in God."

Prayer: Father, we truly love You and want to "live in You" as You would have us to live. Make our faith strong, our love deep and our lives worthy of Your grace. In Jesus' Name, Amen.

Scripture For Today: Whoever claims to live in him must live as Jesus did. 1 John 2:6

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:
09.20.24

20 21 40 49 55 11

MegaPlier: 3x

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:
\$62,000,000

NEXT DRAW:

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

LOTTO AMERICA

WINNING NUMBERS:
09.18.24

7 17 29 42 45 5

All Star Bonus: 4x

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:
\$9,310,000

NEXT 13 Hrs 15 Mins
DRAW: 20 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

LUCKY FOR LIFE

WINNING NUMBERS:
09.20.24

2 9 17 18 27 2

TOP PRIZE:
\$7,000/week

NEXT 13 Hrs 30 Mins
DRAW: 20 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

DAKOTA CASH

WINNING NUMBERS:
09.18.24

3 15 23 25 29

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:
\$35,000

NEXT 13 Hrs 30 Mins
DRAW: 19 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

POWERBALL

DOUBLE PLAY

WINNING NUMBERS:
09.18.24

16 23 50 53 66 14

TOP PRIZE:
\$10,000,000

NEXT 13 Hrs 59 Mins
DRAW: 20 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

POWERBALL

WINNING NUMBERS:
09.18.24

1 11 22 47 68 7

Power Play: 4x

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:
\$195,000,000

NEXT 13 Hrs 59 Mins
DRAW: 20 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
- Cancelled:** 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
- 11/16/2024 Groton American Legion "Turkey Raffle" 6:30-11:30pm
- 11/28/2024 Community Thanksgiving at the Community Center 11:30am-1pm
- 12/01/2024 Groton Snow Queen Contest, 4:30 p.m.
- 12/07/2024 Olive Grove 8th Annual Holiday Party & Tour of Homes with Live & Silent Auctions 6pm-close
- 04/12/2025 Lion's Club Easter Egg Hunt at the City Park 10am Sharp
- 05/03/2025 Lion's Club Spring Citywide Rummage Sale 8am-3pm
- 05/26/2025 Memorial Day Services Groton Union Cemetery with lunch at Legion Post #39, 12pm
- 07/04/2025 Firecracker Couples Tourney at Olive Grove Golf Course
- 07/09/2025 Legion Auxiliary Salad Luncheon
- 07/13/2025 Lion's Club Summer Fest/Car Show at the City Park 9am-4pm
- 09/06/2025 Lion's Club Fall Citywide Rummage Sale 8am-3pm
- 10/31/2025 Downtown Trick or Treat 4-6pm
- 11/27/2025 Community Thanksgiving at the Community Center 11:30am-1pm

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News from the **AP** Associated Press

Friday's Scores

The Associated Press

PREP FOOTBALL=

Aberdeen Central High School 14, Spearfish 6

Aberdeen Roncalli 47, Miller 14

Avon 72, Colome 6

Bridgewater-Emery/Ethan 20, Wagner 6

Brookings 13, T F Riggs High School 0

Burke 38, Scotland/Menno 22

Castlewood 52, Wilmot 0

Chester 33, Deubrook 14

Clark-Willow Lake 36, Parker 0

Colman-Egan 60, Sioux Falls Lutheran 6

Dakota Valley 21, Tri-Valley 14

Dell Rapids 42, Milbank 7

Dell Rapids St Mary 46, Centerville 44

Elk Point-Jefferson 46, Baltic 14

Elkton-Lake Benton 61, Great Plains Lutheran 8

Estelline-Hendricks 22, Waverly-South Shore 12

Freeman-Marion-FA 42, Alcester-Hudson 0

Gayville-Volin High School 56, Irene-Wakonda 20

Gregory 44, Stanley County 16

Groton 14, Deuel 9

Hamlin 64, Florence-Henry 8

Harding County 22, Lemmon High School 8

Harrisburg 49, Yankton 14

Hill City 53, Faith 0

Hot Springs 68, Lakota Tech 16

Howard 32, Canistota 0

Huron 28, Sturgis Brown High School 27

Jones County 36, New Underwood 34

Kimball-White Lake 26, Bon Homme 0

Lead-Deadwood 15, Belle Fourche 6

Lennox 40, West Central 28

Leola-Frederick High School 42, Faulkton 20

Lyman 42, Bennett County 0

Madison 28, Vermillion 7

McCook Central-Montrose 20, Flandreau 13

North Central 46, Northwestern 14

Oldham-Ramona-Rutland 30, Arlington 24

Philip 58, Kadoka 20

Rapid City Christian 46, Chamberlain 6

Sioux Falls Christian 49, Canton 7

Sioux Falls Lincoln 28, Sioux Falls Jefferson 16

Sioux Falls O'Gorman 46, Rapid City Central 7

Sioux Falls Washington 35, Rapid City Stevens 7

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Sioux Valley 56, Sisseton 12
Sully Buttes 52, Potter County 0
Sunshine Bible Academy 6, Iroquois-Lake Preston 0
Tea 58, Douglas 3
Timber Lake 38, Herreid-Selby 14
Watertown 47, Mitchell 14
Waubay/Summit 38, Redfield 0
Winnebago, Neb. 45, Mahpiya Lúta Red Cloud 6
Winner 30, WWSSC 18
Wolsey-Wessington 22, Platte-Geddes 6

Some high school football scores provided by Scorestream.com, <https://scorestream.com/>

Friday's Scores

The Associated Press
PREP VOLLEYBALL=
Bison def. Takini, 25-11, 25-9, 25-10
Sioux Falls Jefferson def. Rapid City Central, 25-23, 25-12, 25-15
Sioux Falls Roosevelt def. Rapid City Stevens, 25-14, 25-19, 25-14
Edgemont Triangular=
Edgemont def. Little Wound, 25-4, 25-3, 25-2
Edgemont def. Oelrichs, 25-6, 25-5, 25-7

Some high school volleyball scores provided by Scorestream.com, <https://scorestream.com/>

In-person voting begins for the US presidential contest, kicking off the sprint to Election Day

By STEVE KARNOWSKI Associated Press

MINNEAPOLIS (AP) — In-person voting for this year's presidential election began Friday, a milestone that kicked off a six-week sprint to Election Day after a summer of political turmoil.

Voters lined up to cast their ballots in Minnesota, South Dakota and Virginia, the states with the first early in-person voting opportunities. About a dozen more states will follow by mid-October.

At a polling site in Minneapolis, Jason Miller arrived well before the polls opened at 8 a.m. and was first in line. He was among roughly 75 people who cast ballots in the first hour at the city's early voting center.

"Why not try to be first? That's kind of fun, right?" said the 37-year-old house painter.

He said he voted "against crazy," but didn't want to name his choice for president.

"I don't think I have to. I think that's pretty obvious. I think that's very, very clear," he said.

The beginning of in-person balloting follows a tumultuous summer in American politics that included President Joe Biden dropping out of the race and being replaced by Vice President Kamala Harris as the Democratic nominee, and an assassination attempt against Republican nominee Donald Trump followed by another apparent attempt on his life just nine weeks later.

Across the country, local election directors are beefing up their security to keep their workers and polling places safe while also ensuring that ballots and voting procedures won't be tampered with. Officials and ordinary poll workers have been targets of harassment and even death threats since the 2020 presidential election.

Federal authorities are investigating the origin of suspicious packages that have been sent to or received by elections officials in more than 15 states in recent days, including Virginia.

"If I could wave a magic wand in this room right now, I would wish for two things: Between now and

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November 5th, I want to see high turnout and low drama," Minnesota Secretary of State Steve Simon said during a news conference Thursday that previewed his state's efforts around the election season. Simon also serves as president of the National Association of Secretaries of State.

Some voters suggested that the potential for trouble or chaos on Election Day was one reason not to wait. Chris Burda, 74, said she is encouraging others to get their ballots in early "to avoid potential disruption on Election Day or in-person voting by a certain party who seems to be interested in poll watching to the point of intimidation." She cast her ballot for Harris at a Minneapolis voting center, saying the vice president was "standing up for democracy and the freedom to choose."

As the start of early voting approached, Trump's rhetoric turned more ominous with a pledge to prosecute anyone who "cheats" in the election in the same way he falsely claimed they did in 2020, when he lied about widespread fraud and attacked officials who stood by their accurate vote tallies.

Trump has previously sought to sow doubts about mail voting and encouraged voters to cast ballots in person on Election Day. But this year, Trump and the Republican National Committee, which he now controls, have begun to embrace early and mail voting as a way to lock in GOP votes before Election Day, just as Democrats have done for years.

Eugene Otteson, 71, a Vietnam War veteran and former mill worker, cast his early ballot for the former president in Anoka, Minnesota. He said he believes Trump will keep the country from intervening in foreign conflicts and will manage the economy like a business executive.

"Not that I like him, but he's a business person, and I like someone who can run a business," Otteson said. "With Kamala, you still don't know what she stands for ... I hear her going around say 'joy, joy.' Well, I can say joy to the world, but that don't mean it's going to stop the wars going on."

In Virginia, early in-person voting has long been popular in many parts of the state.

Fairfax County Elections Director Eric Spicer said roughly a third of local voters came to the polls on Election Day during the 2020 presidential election, while the rest voted by mail or early and in-person. Mary Lynn Pinkerman, the elections director for the city of Chesapeake, expects early voting to help ease the crowds on Nov. 5 but also cautioned that with heavy interest in this year's presidential race, "voters could still encounter wait times" on Election Day.

Among Virginians taking advantage of early voting Friday was Rocklyn Faher, a retired U.S. Navy aviation electrician who served in the first Gulf War. He became emotional when talking about casting his ballot in Norfolk for Harris. Fighting back tears, he spoke about preserving the Constitution and the future for his grandchildren.

"I'm obviously very emotionally invested in this election," said Faher, 70. "It is the most important election of the last 100 years."

Faher said he believes in protecting reproductive rights and likes Harris' plan to provide \$25,000 for first-time homebuyers, while criticizing Trump's plan to impose tariffs on products from overseas.

He also said that Harris' overall proposals are "better than herding 10 million naturalized and unnatural immigrants, documented or undocumented, into railroad cars and shipping them across the border into Mexico. That's insane."

Immigration, and in particular the surge at the country's southern border over the past few years, also is animating those casting a ballot for Trump, who has promised mass deportations if he wins the presidency again.

Israel Chavez, 37, came to America from Peru as a 10-year-old with his father and sister. He voted for Trump because he believes the economy was stronger under the former president and he supports a harder line on immigration.

"I know how it is when you have an open border and let anyone in," he said after casting his ballot at a voting center in Anoka, Minnesota. "My dad brought us into the country legally. We had visas. He just did it right."

In Yankton, South Dakota, the county elections office saw a steady stream of people voting early immediately after it opened at 9 a.m., said Kasi Foss, the county's assistant auditor. That's unusual for the

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first day of early voting.

She said that while the office didn't have a line for voting, the office consistently had two or three people wanting to vote at all times.

South Dakota voters are deciding the fate of several ballot initiatives on hot-button issues, including a proposed amendment to the state constitution to protect abortion rights and a measure that would legalize the recreational use of marijuana. But Foss said she believes the presidential race is driving turnout.

"Normally, on the first day, we'll have a couple of stragglers," she said.

Some voters might opt for early in-person balloting instead of using mail ballots to ensure their votes get counted, given the ongoing struggles of the U.S. Postal Service.

State and local election officials from across the country last week warned that problems with mail deliveries threaten to disenfranchise voters, and they told the head of the system that it hasn't fixed persistent deficiencies despite their repeated attempts at outreach.

Postmaster General Louis DeJoy responded in a letter released Monday that he'll work with state election officials to address their concerns, but reiterated that the Postal Service will be ready.

Simon, the Minnesota secretary of state, urged voters to make their voting plans now.

"My hope and expectation is that the USPS will do the things that we have recommended, and do them quickly over the next 47 days because the stakes really are high for individual voters," Simon said.

An Israeli strike on a school kills at least 22 people, Gaza Health Ministry says

DEIR AL-BALAH, Gaza Strip (AP) — An Israeli strike on a school in northern Gaza on Saturday killed at least 22 people, the Gaza Health Ministry said.

Another 30 were wounded in the strike on the school in the Zeitoun area of Gaza City, the ministry said in a statement.

The Israeli army said earlier Saturday it struck a Hamas' "command and control center, which was embedded inside a compound that previously served" as a school. "The Hamas terrorist organization systematically violates international law by operating from inside civilian infrastructure," the army added.

Since the outbreak of the Israel-Hamas war, the Israeli army has struck a number of schools, packed with tens of thousands of Palestinians driven from their homes by Israeli offensives and evacuation orders. The military has continually accused Hamas of operating from within civilian infrastructure in Gaza, including schools and United Nations facilities.

Earlier this month, an Israeli strike hit a school in the Nuseirat refugee camp, killing 14, according to Palestinian medical officials. The Israeli military said it was targeting Hamas militants planning attacks from inside the school.

The war began when Hamas-led fighters killed some 1,200 people, mostly civilians, in an Oct. 7 attack on southern Israel. They abducted another 250 people and are still holding around 100 hostages. Israel's campaign in Gaza has killed at least 41,000 Palestinians, according to the Gaza Health Ministry, which doesn't differentiate between fighters and civilians.

Also Saturday, the Gaza Health Ministry said five of its workers were killed and five others injured by Israeli fire that struck the ministry's warehouses in the southern Musbah area.

Tensions soared in the region on Friday after an Israeli airstrike on a Beirut suburb in Lebanon killed 31 people, including civilians and Ibrahim Akil, who was in charge of Hezbollah's elite Radwan Force. Also killed was Ahmed Wahbi, another senior commander in the group's military wing.

The strike came hours after Hezbollah launched one of its most intense bombardments of northern Israel in nearly a year of fighting. Israel's Iron Dome missile defense system intercepted most of the rockets.

The US is more hands-off than usual in the Middle East. It fears making things worse

By ELLEN KNICKMEYER and MATTHEW LEE Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — The Biden administration is taking a more hands-off approach than usual during a week of dramatic escalation between Israel and Hezbollah militants in Lebanon, with top U.S. officials holding back from full-on crisis diplomacy for fear of making matters worse.

The public restraint follows explosions of the militant group's pagers and walkie-talkies and an Israeli airstrike targeting a senior Hezbollah operative in Beirut, which threaten to spur all-out war between Israel and its enemies in the Middle East and doom already faltering negotiations for a cease-fire in the Hamas conflict in Gaza.

The escalation came even as two Biden administration officials stopped in the region this week to appeal for calm. It heightens the impression that Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's hard-right government is paying ever less attention to the mediation efforts of its key ally, despite depending on the U.S. for weapons and military support.

"The United States looks like a deer in the headlights right now," said Brian Katulis, a senior fellow for U.S. foreign policy at the Middle East Institute think tank in Washington. "In terms of words, deeds and action ... it's not driving events, it's reacting to events."

There has been no publicly acknowledged U.S. contact with Netanyahu since senior White House official Amos Hochstein visited Israel on Monday to warn against escalation. The first wave of device explosions — widely blamed on Israel, which didn't acknowledge responsibility — struck the next day.

And Gaza cease-fire negotiations were at such a delicate point that Secretary of State Antony Blinken visited only Egypt in a trip to the region this week because traveling to Israel in support of a deal might cause Netanyahu to say something that undermines the U.S.-led mediation, U.S. officials said.

Asked if the U.S. still had hope for a deal in Gaza — which the administration calls crucial to calming regional conflict — President Joe Biden said Friday that he did and his team is pressing for it.

"If I ever said it wasn't realistic, we might as well leave," Biden told reporters. "A lot of things don't look realistic until we get them done. We have to keep at it."

In the meantime, the White House and State Department have declined to comment publicly on the Hezbollah devices exploding Tuesday and Wednesday, killing at least 37 people and injuring thousands more, including civilians, in what analysts believe was a highly sophisticated Israeli intelligence operation.

Nor would they offer any assessment of an airstrike Friday in a densely populated part of Beirut — the deadliest such strike on Lebanon's capital in years — which killed a Hezbollah commander. The Israeli military said 15 other operatives also were killed. Lebanon's health ministry said Saturday the strike killed at least 31 people, including seven women and three children.

Netanyahu and Hamas have followed past rounds of direct U.S. diplomatic outreach with fiery rhetoric or surprise attacks that the U.S. sees as setting back the effort for a truce.

Blinken appeared to loop in the pager explosions as the latest example of that.

When mediators seem to make progress in a Gaza deal, often there's an "incident, something that makes the process more difficult, that threatens to slow it, stop it, derail it," Blinken said in Egypt, in response to reporters' questions about the pager attacks.

There may yet be high-level contact with Netanyahu when he travels to New York for next week's U.N. General Assembly gathering of world leaders, said U.S. officials with knowledge of the discussions who spoke anonymously to discuss the administration's strategy. But the officials also acknowledge that the situation has become so precarious that taking a public stance either firmly in support or critical of Israel would probably do more harm than good.

In Washington, State Department spokesman Matthew Miller batted away a question about whether months of Biden administration visits to the Middle East without a cease-fire deal to show for them was making Blinken and other officials look like "furniture" in regional capitals.

"So far, we have been successful of keeping it from turning into an all-out regional war," Miller said. He

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credited U.S. messaging — sometimes through intermediaries, to Iran, its militia allies in the region and to Israel.

The Biden administration pointed out that Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin has been in contact this week with his Israeli counterpart, Yoav Gallant. Gallant's job, however, is said to be in jeopardy.

Critics accuse the administration of pushing a deal on Gaza that's repeatedly failed to win buy-in from the warring sides and has been outpaced by the growth of the conflict. The administration could do more diplomatically, including by working harder to rally Middle Eastern countries to intensify pressure on Israel, Iran and the latter's proxies to stop fighting, said Katulis, the Middle East Institute analyst.

U.S. officials rejected assertions that they have given up on either a Gaza cease-fire or preventing the conflict from spreading to all-out war in Lebanon.

"We'd be the first ones to recognize ... that we are not closer to achieving that than we were even a week or so ago," national security spokesman John Kirby said Friday.

"But ain't nobody giving up," Kirby said, reiterating that the U.S. was working with fellow mediators Qatar and Egypt to put together a final Gaza proposal to present to Israel and Hamas. "We're still going to keep the shoulder to the wheel. We're still going to keep trying on this."

The Midwest could offer fall's most electric foliage but leaf peepers elsewhere won't miss out

By PATRICK WHITTLE Associated Press

PORTLAND, Maine (AP) — Fall is back, and bringing with it jack-o'-lanterns, football, pumpkin spice everything and — in some parts of the country — especially vibrant foliage.

Leaves around the northern U.S. are starting to turn orange, yellow and red, inspiring legions of leaf lovers to hop in their cars and travel to the countryside for the best look at fall's fireworks. Leaf peeping — the act of traveling to witness nature's annual kaleidoscope — contributes billions of dollars to the economy, especially in New England and New York.

But this year, some of the most colorful displays could be in the Midwest. AccuWeather, the commercial forecasting service, said in early September that it expects especially vibrant foliage in states such as Michigan and Illinois.

The service also said powerful, popping colors are expected in upstate New York and parts of Pennsylvania, while New England will follow a more typical color pattern. But that doesn't mean New England travelers will miss out.

Maine, the most forested state in the country, had "an abundance of daily sunshine with just the right amount of rainfall to set the stage for a breathtaking foliage season," said Gale Ross, the state's fall foliage spokesperson. Color change and timing depend on the weather in the fall, but cooler nighttime temperatures and shorter days should enhance the colors, Ross said.

"The growing season of 2024 has been excellent for trees, supporting tree health and resilience that should lead to brilliant fall colors throughout Maine," said Aaron Bergdahl, the state's forest pathologist.

Fall colors peak at different times around the U.S., with the foliage season sometimes starting not long after Labor Day in the far northern reaches of the country and extending into November further to the south. In Maine alone, peak foliage can arrive in the northern part of the state in late September and not arrive in coastal areas until close to Halloween.

Leaf turn happens when summer yields to fall and temperatures drop and the amount of sunlight decreases. Chlorophyll in leaves then breaks down, and that allows their fall colors to shine through before leaf drop.

However, weather conditions associated with climate change have disrupted some recent leaf peeping seasons. A warming planet has brought drought that causes leaves to turn brown and wither before reaching peak colors.

Other enemies of leaf peeping include heat waves that cause leaves to fall before autumn arrives and extreme weather events like hurricanes that strip trees of their leaves. A summer heatwave in the Pacific

Northwest in 2021 caused a condition called "foliage scorch" that prematurely browned leaves.

This year in Maine, leaf turn was still very sparse in most of the state as late September approached, but the state office of tourism was already gearing up for an influx of tourists. Northern Maine was already experiencing moderate color change. And neighboring New Hampshire was expecting about 3.7 million visitors — more than twice the state's population.

"It's no surprise people travel from all over the world to catch the incredible color," said NH Travel and Tourism Director Lori Harnois.

Voting ends in Sri Lanka to choose a president and a way out of years of turmoil

By KRISHAN FRANCIS, SHEIKH SAALIQ and BHARATHA MALLAWARACHI Associated Press

COLOMBO, Sri Lanka (AP) — Voting has ended Saturday in Sri Lanka's presidential election as the country seeks to recover from the worst economic crisis in its history and the resulting political upheaval.

The election, contested by 38 candidates, is largely a three-way race among incumbent liberal President Ranil Wickremesinghe, Marxist-leaning lawmaker Anura Kumara Dissanayake, and opposition leader Sajith Premadasa.

There are 17 million eligible voters, and final results are expected Sunday.

The results will show whether Sri Lankans approve of Wickremesinghe's leadership of a fragile recovery, including restructuring Sri Lanka's debt under an International Monetary Fund program after it defaulted in 2022.

The government announced Thursday that it passed the final hurdle in debt restructuring by reaching an agreement in principle with private bond holders.

At the time of its default, Sri Lanka's local and foreign debt totaled \$83 billion. The government says it has now restructured more than \$17 billion.

Despite a significant improvement in key economic figures, Sri Lankans are struggling with high taxes and living costs.

Both Premadasa and Dissanayake say they will renegotiate the IMF deal to make austerity measures more bearable. Wickremesinghe has warned that any move to alter the basics of the agreement could delay the release of a fourth tranche of nearly \$3 billion that is crucial to maintaining stability.

Voters hope for an end to instability

Most Sri Lankans voted with the economy in mind, hoping a new government will lead the way out of crisis and end entrenched corruption.

"I think corruption is one of the main reasons that led the country to the present pathetic condition. So, the next leader should pay attention to eliminate corruption and start building the country," said Chandrakumar Suriyaarachchi, a driver who voted in Saturday's election. "Our children deserve a better life."

Political experts say widespread disenchantment with the political old guard — widely blamed for Sri Lanka's economic instability — could mean no single candidate is able to secure 50% of votes as a first preference. In that scenario, the top two candidates move to a second round of counting that takes into account second-choice votes.

There are concerns that if a clear winner fails to emerge, the island nation could plunge into more instability.

Voter Visaka Dissanayake said he hopes Sri Lanka votes for a "strong leader, who will set the path for economic recovery."

"We have now come out of a very difficult situation. So, I hope the economic recovery will continue," Dissanayake said.

Rajapaksa political dynasty casts a long shadow

Sri Lanka's economic crisis resulted largely from excessive borrowing on projects that did not generate revenue. The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and the government's insistence on using scarce foreign reserves to prop up the currency, the rupee, contributed to the economy's free fall.

The economic collapse brought a severe shortage of essentials such as medicine, food, cooking gas and fuel, with people spending days waiting in line to obtain them. It led to rioting in which protesters took over key buildings including the president's house, his office and the prime minister's office, forcing then-President Gotabaya Rajapaksa to flee the country and resign.

Wickremesinghe was elected by a parliamentary vote in July 2022 to cover the remainder of Rajapaksa's five-year term. Now, Wickremesinghe is seeking another term to strengthen the gains.

However, many people accuse him of protecting members of the Rajapaksa family, whom they blame for the economic crisis.

Wickremesinghe, who was the only member of his party in Parliament, was elected mainly with the votes of Rajapaksa loyalists. They also supported him as members of his Cabinet and in voting for the reforms he proposed.

Euphoric two years ago, US anti-abortion movement is now divided and worried as election nears

By DAVID CRARY AP National Writer

Just two years ago, leading anti-abortion activists were euphoric as the U.S. Supreme Court overturned the 1973 Roe v. Wade decision, thus ending the nationwide right to abortion.

Now, with a presidential election fast approaching, their movement is disunited and worried. Within their own ranks, there is second-guessing and finger-pointing, plus trepidation that Election Day might provide new proof that their cause is broadly unpopular.

Michael New, an abortion opponent who teaches social research at The Catholic University of America, offered an overview of how the movement had fared since the Roe ruling in June 2022.

"Things have not necessarily unfolded as we would hope," he wrote in an email to The Associated Press. "There is certainly a sense among pro-life leaders that we should have had a stronger post-Roe game plan in place."

"I always remind fellow pro-lifers that we were never promised a smooth glide path to victory," he added. "There will certainly be setbacks and disappointments along the way."

A key reason for the wariness is the anti-abortion movement's recent losing streak on abortion-related ballot measures in seven states, including conservative Kansas and Kentucky. Nine more states will consider constitutional amendments enshrining abortion rights in the Nov. 5 election — Arizona, Colorado, Florida, Maryland, Missouri, Montana, Nebraska, Nevada and South Dakota. In several of them, abortion opponents tried various unsuccessful strategies for blocking the measures.

"Pro-life people don't wear rose-colored glasses; we know we have a huge task ahead of us," Carol Tobias, president of National Right to Life, told the AP. "Because of the massive amounts of money being dumped into the ballot measures from those allied with the abortion industry and the Democratic Party, it's an uphill battle."

"We will continue to educate, to make people aware of the catastrophic result if these measures pass," she added. "I have not seen flagging energy or any loss of determination among pro-life people."

Texas is among the Republican-governed states that have enacted near-total abortion bans. Yet nationally, Texas Right to Life president John Seago said, the anti-abortion movement "is in a critical chapter right now."

"Following a historic legal victory, we have realized that while we had enjoyed massive legislative and legal victories in the last decade, public opinion had not followed the same trajectory," he added.

Troy Newman, who heads the anti-abortion group Operation Rescue, recently published an online opinion piece assailing the movement he's been a part of for 25 years.

"The tide has turned, and the pro-life message is now considered a political liability that could prevent President Trump's victorious return to the White House," Newman wrote.

"After evaluating the terrible mistakes of the pro-life movement over the last several years, I can only conclude that it is our fault," Newman wrote. "We have had over 50 years to change the culture's position

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on abortion only to have failed miserably.”

In an interview with the AP, Newman blamed those in his own ranks for the predicament — saying some anti-abortion leaders should have been more adamant in their positions. “We lose the minute we stop focusing on the babies,” he said.

Kristan Hawkins, leader of Students for Life of America, suggested via email that Newman’s views were ill-suited to the post-Roe era. She said the students in her organization were embracing the challenges of a state-by-state playing field.

But she acknowledged the magnitude of the challenges.

“I actually believe the biggest threat is ourselves — our mindsets — which will lead to decreased recruitment, training, and mobilization of our grassroots army of love,” she wrote recently in the conservative outlet Townhall.

“Look at the struggles we face this fall with several late-term abortion ballot referendums,” she added. “Most will likely be a political loss for our movement because, in most states, a politically sophisticated, organized, and well-funded state-wide movement is not present.”

Hawkins also acknowledged the anger among some anti-abortion activists over the inconsistent rhetoric on abortion coming from the Republican presidential ticket of former President Donald Trump and his running mate, Ohio Sen. JD Vance.

“I’m not here to make apologies for the Campaign and their political miscalculations, which are dividing us and could very well lead to their defeat,” wrote Hawkins.

Trump nominated the Supreme Court members who were crucial to overturning Roe and called it “a beautiful thing to watch” as various states took different directions. He has been evasive on whether he would veto a federal abortion ban if Congress approved one; his “leave it to the states” approach conveys acceptance of the current patchwork map in which abortion is widely available in at least half the states.

Eligible to vote in Florida, Trump has criticized as too restrictive a new state law banning abortion after the first six weeks of pregnancy. But he said he would vote against the ballot measure that would make abortion legal until fetal viability.

Trump’s support for a state-by-state solution was a factor in the decision of Charles Camosy, an anti-abortion Catholic academic, to declare he now feels politically estranged.

“The Republican Party has rejected our point of view. Democrats are running a candidate (Kamala Harris) who has made abortion rights a centerpiece of her campaign,” Camosy, a medical humanities professor at Creighton University School of Medicine, wrote recently in *The Atlantic*.

“Pro-lifers — those who believe that protecting vulnerable and unborn life should be a primary policy priority — now do not fit in either major political party.”

In an interview, Camosy said abortion-rights supporters were better prepared for the post-Roe era than their adversaries

“They were well-funded, they developed key relationships with the media,” Camosy said, while some Republican-controlled legislatures – in his view -- went too far with stringent abortion bans.

“I see this moment as an opportunity,” Camosy wrote in *The Atlantic*. “Pro-life 3.0 must welcome people from multiple political and policy perspectives, working for both prenatal justice and social support for women and families.”

Some other anti-abortion activists have forcefully renounced Trump, including leaders of End Abortion Ohio.

“We call on God-fearing American voters to withhold their votes from Trump until he evidences genuine repentance for his pro-abortion stance,” said the group’s executive director, Nicholas Kallis.

However, Ohio Right to Life president Mike Gonidakis is encouraging support for Trump.

“A vast majority of our statewide membership absolutely support President Trump and believe he would advance the protection of life at the federal level ... more than a Kamala administration would,” he said. “It is not even close.”

Other anti-abortion leaders have made similar calculations.

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One example: Back in April, Marjorie Dannenfelser, president of Susan B. Anthony Pro-Life America, said she was “deeply disappointed” in Trump’s willingness to leave abortion policy to the states.

These days, in a move potentially benefiting Trump, the group plans a \$92 million voter outreach program in battleground states depicting Harris and other Democratic candidates as “extremists” on abortion. “It is imperative that the pro-life movement fully unify and mobilize to defeat this threat,” Dannenfelser said.

Among those embracing Trump is Frank Pavone, who continues to lead Priests for Life despite being defrocked in 2022 after feuding with his bishop over his anti-abortion and partisan political activities.

“Trump has brought in far more people than he has alienated,” Pavone said via email. “His statements have blunted the effectiveness of the dire, scare-mongering Democrat warnings that the Republicans will ban all abortions.”

Heavy rain pounds northcentral Japan leaving 1 person dead and several others missing

By MARI YAMAGUCHI Associated Press

TOKYO (AP) — Heavy rain pounded Japan’s northcentral region of Noto on Saturday which triggered landslides and floods and left one person dead and several missing, officials said.

The deluges caused swollen rivers to overflow, flooding homes and stranding some residents in the region still recovering from the deadly Jan. 1 earthquake.

The Japan Meteorological Agency issued the highest level of heavy rain across several cities in the Ishikawa prefecture, including hard-hit cities Suzu and Wajima on the northern coast of the Noto peninsula.

In Suzu, one person died and another was missing after being swept in floodwaters. One other went missing in the nearby town of Noto, according to the prefecture.

In Wajima, four people were missing following a landslide at a construction site. They were among 60 construction workers repairing a tunnel damaged by January’s quake, NHK said, adding that one other was missing due to floods at a different location in the city.

NHK footage at a coastal area of Wajima showed a wooden house torn and tilted after it was apparently hit by a landslide from a steep hill, with muddy water still flowing down. No injuries were reported from the site.

In Noto town, two people were seriously injured while visiting their quake-damaged home when a landslide struck them.

At least 16 rivers in Ishikawa breached their banks as of Saturday afternoon, according to the Land and Infrastructure Ministry. Residents were urged to use maximum caution against possible mudslides and building damage.

By late afternoon Saturday, about 1,350 residents were taking shelter at designated community centers, school gymnasiums and other town facilities, authorities said.

Up to 20 centimeters (7.8 inches) of rainfall is predicted in the region within the next 24 hours through Sunday noon, due to the rainbands that cause torrential rain above the Hokuriku region, JMA said.

“Heavy rain is hitting the region that had been badly damaged by the Noto earthquake, and I believe many people are feeling very uneasy,” said Chief Cabinet Secretary Yoshimasa Hayashi.

Hayashi said the government “puts people’s lives first” and its priority was search and rescue operations. He also called on the residents to pay close attention to the latest weather and evacuation advisories and take precautions early, adding that the Self Defense Force troops have been dispatched to Ishikawa to join rescue efforts.

A number of roads flooded by muddy water were also blocked. Hokuriku Electric Power Co. said about 6,500 homes were without power. Traffic lights were out in the affected areas. Many homes were also without water supply.

Heavy rain also fell in nearby northern prefectures of Niigata and Yamagata, threatening flooding and other damages, officials said.

A 7.6 magnitude earthquake struck the region on Jan. 1, killing more than 370 people and damaging roads and other key infrastructure. Its aftermath still affects the local industry, economy and daily lives.

A New Zealand pilot is freed after 19 months in rebel captivity in Indonesia's Papua region

By NINIEK KARMINI and CHARLOTTE GRAHAM-McLAY Associated Press

JAKARTA, Indonesia (AP) — A New Zealand pilot held hostage for more than a year in the restive Papua region of Indonesia was freed Saturday by separatist rebels.

Phillip Mark Mehrtens, a 38-year-old pilot from Christchurch, was working for Indonesian aviation company Susi Air when he was abducted by rebels from a remote airport on Feb. 7, 2023.

"Today I finally got out. I am so happy to be back home with my family soon," Mehrtens told reporters in a news conference in the mining town of Timika. "Thank you to everyone who helped me get out safely and healthy."

Television news earlier showed an emaciated, long-haired Mehrtens, wearing a dark-green shirt and black shorts, sitting in a room surrounded by police officers and local officials. He sobbed while talking to his family via video and an officer tried to calm him down by patting his back. He was later flown to Jakarta to be reunited with his family.

Rebels have used violence to try to achieve independence as the security situation deteriorates in Indonesia's easternmost region of Papua, a former Dutch colony in the western part of New Guinea that is ethnically and culturally distinct from much of Indonesia.

Papua was incorporated into Indonesia in 1969 under a United Nations-sponsored ballot that was widely seen as a sham. Since then, a low-level insurgency has simmered. The conflict spiked in the past year, with dozens of rebels, security forces and civilians killed.

Egianus Kogoya, a regional commander in the Free Papua Movement, initially said the rebels would not release Mehrtens unless Indonesia's government allows Papua to become a sovereign country.

Then on Tuesday, leaders of the West Papua Liberation Army, the armed wing of the Free Papua Movement known as TPNPB, issued a proposal for freeing Mehrtens that outlined terms including news media involvement in his release.

A taskforce spokesperson, Bayu Suseno, said that Mehrtens' release was the result of hard work from a small task force team that had been communicating with the separatists led by Kogoya through the local church and community leaders as well as youth figures.

"This is incredibly good news," said Suseno. "Effort to free the pilot by soft approach resulted in a hostage release without any casualties both from security forces, civilians or the pilot himself."

New Zealand Foreign Minister Winston Peters said that a wide range of government agencies had been working with Indonesian authorities and others to secure the release for the past 19 1/2 months. Officials were also supporting Mehrtens' family, Peters said.

Many news outlets showed "cooperation and restraint" in reporting the story, he added. "The case has taken a toll on the Mehrtens family, who have asked for privacy," Peters said.

New Zealand news outlets reported during Mehrtens' captivity that he was one of a number of expatriate pilots employed by Susi Air and in recent years lived in Bali with his family.

Peters had not spoken to Mehrtens since his release. The news was "one of the better stories I've had" in his 45 years as a lawmaker, the three-time foreign minister added.

He declined to give details about how the pilot was freed. It was a "tricky" environment and building trust had been the most difficult aspect, Peters said.

"It was quite nerve-wracking, holding our nerve and not getting too carried away, not doing anything that might imperil the chances," he said. "Because there was always a concern of ours that we might not succeed."

Indonesia President Joko Widodo congratulated the military and police for prioritizing persuasion and

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safety.

"This was through a very long negotiation process and our patience not to do it repressively," Widodo said.

In April 2023, armed separatists attacked Indonesian troops who were deployed to rescue Mehrtens, killing at least six soldiers.

In August, gunmen stormed a helicopter and killed its New Zealand pilot, Glen Malcolm Conning, after it landed in Alama, a remote village in the Mimika district of Central Papua province. No one has claimed responsibility for that attack, and the rebels and Indonesian authorities have blamed each other.

In 1996, the Free Papua Movement abducted 26 members of a World Wildlife Fund research mission in Mampenduma. Two kidnapped Indonesians were killed by their abductors. The remaining hostages were freed within five months.

Phillies clinch 3rd straight playoff berth and close in on NL East title

By MIKE FITZPATRICK AP Baseball Writer

NEW YORK (AP) — After the Philadelphia Phillies clinched a third consecutive playoff appearance Friday night, they shook hands on the field and walked back toward the dugout as though it were any other regular-season victory.

Moments later, manager Rob Thomson gathered his players in the clubhouse and thanked them during a tempered champagne toast acknowledging their significant achievement.

But no wild party, with grown men spraying booze and guzzling beer and soaking each other in glee.

Not just yet, anyway.

"Pretty calm and relaxed from what it usually turns into," All-Star third baseman Alec Bohm said with a chuckle.

Qualifying for the postseason is a long way from winning the World Series. Nobody knows that better than the Phillies these days — and they have much loftier goals than simply taking part.

"You look around and you see all the talent, you see all the guys, you see the front office, the moves they make and things like that, you look at it on paper at the beginning of the year, and this team should be in the playoffs," Bohm said. "So it's good that we've stayed healthy throughout the year and done all the things we need to do to get to this point. Now it's just a matter of, keep going."

Bryce Harper and the Phillies punched their latest playoff ticket — this one long expected — with a 12-2 blowout of the New York Mets.

Assured at least a National League wild card, Philadelphia can secure its first NL East title since 2011 with one more win this weekend against the second-place Mets at Citi Field.

"It's hard to go wire-to-wire, and I think our team's done a great job obviously this whole season," Harper said. "We've got bigger goals and things like that, but this is a great moment."

With the division crown so close, the Phillies kept it mellow Friday night — hoping to let loose soon with a boozy clubhouse bash after locking up first place.

"It'll be a little more rowdy, for sure," said Bohm, who homered and finished with four hits and four RBIs.

Seeking their third World Series championship, the Phillies overtook Atlanta for the division lead on May 3 and haven't trailed since.

Philadelphia (92-62) is tied with the Los Angeles Dodgers for the best record in the majors and on track for a first-round bye in the playoffs. It's the third time the Phillies have reached the postseason three years in a row (1976-78 and 2007-11).

"Not everybody gets the chance to play for the World Series every year, so as much as maybe people in this room feel like this is where we should be, it's still an accomplishment," Bohm said.

Harper, Bohm, Kyle Schwarber, Trea Turner and Nick Castellanos have powered the offense, while Zack Wheeler, Aaron Nola, Ranger Suárez and Cristopher Sánchez have anchored the pitching staff on a team largely unchanged from 2023.

Philadelphia won five straight NL East titles from 2007-11, then went 10 years without making the play-

offs. A wild-card entry each of the past two postseasons, the Phillies put together consecutive October runs that ended in heartbreak.

They reached the 2022 World Series, losing to Houston in six games, and dropped a seven-game NL Championship Series to Arizona last year after leading the underdog Diamondbacks 2-0 and 3-2.

So this time, the Phillies are looking to go all the way and finally finish the job.

Philadelphia's only World Series championships came in 1980 and 2008.

Shocking rape trial highlights the systematic struggles French sexual abuse victims face

By DIANE JEANTET Associated Press

AVIGNON, France (AP) — The trial of dozens of men accused of raping an unconscious woman whose husband repeatedly drugged her over the course of nearly a decade has highlighted the difficulties that sexual violence victims can face in France.

Dominique Pelicot, 71, and his 50 co-defendants face up to 20 years in prison if they're convicted at a trial that has shocked the world and riveted the French public.

Pelicot tearfully acknowledged in court that he's guilty of the allegations against him, and he said all of his co-defendants understood exactly what they were doing when he invited them to his home in Provence between 2011 and 2020 to have sex with his unconscious and unwitting wife, who divorced him after learning what he had done to her.

Despite evidence including meticulously archived photos and videos that Pelicot shot of the alleged rapes, some of the defendants' lawyers have scrutinized Gisèle Pelicot's private life and motives, even questioning whether she was truly unconscious during some of the encounters. Although they must defend their clients to the best of their abilities, the lawyers' tactics have outraged advocates for the sexually abused, who say the attorneys show that victim-blaming is alive and well in France.

"This trial is the trial of our society," 27-year-old Nathan Paris, who works in a youth shelter, said this week outside the Avignon courthouse. Paris, a victim of sexual violence himself, has made the trip from Marseille on several occasions since the trial began.

"The French population has evolved ... and I feel like justice has not evolved over that time," he said, vowing to keep coming back until the trial ends.

The co-defendants range in age from their 20s to their 70s and represent a cross-section of French men: There is a firefighter, a journalist, a nurse, a prison guard and a construction worker. Some are retired, some are unemployed and many have families of their own. One knew he had HIV when he raped Gisèle Pelicot on six occasions and chose not to wear a condom, according to police. She didn't contract HIV, though she was found to have other sexually transmitted diseases, a medical expert testified.

Magali Lafourcade, a judge and general secretary of the National Consultative Commission of Human Rights who is not involved in the trial, said the fight against sexual violence in France has slightly improved since the start of the #MeToo movement, which has brought down some of France's most well-known actors and film directors, among other notables. Women have always talked, but their voices are now being heard more, she said.

"For a very long time, we saw the rape and killing of women by men as something that pertained to the private sphere — we thought we should not interfere with people's private lives," Lafourcade said.

"There has been a clear change, or revolution even, with this perception since #MeToo," she added.

Civic groups have lobbied hard in recent years so that judges, politicians and the media understand that sexual violence is not just a private affair, but also a societal, political and financial one, Lafourcade said.

French President Emmanuel Macron has promised to prioritize gender equality and combat violence against women. But France's public policies are still lagging, and more resources and effort need to be put toward going after sexual offenders, experts told The Associated Press.

Lawyers and analysts agree that in many ways, the Pelicot trial is a slam dunk thanks to its abundance

of highly incriminating evidence and its lead defendant's admission of guilt.

Gisèle Pelicot also defies the widespread stereotype among French society that women who are raped might have provoked their assailants by seeking to attract the male gaze or being imprudent. She is a grandmother in her 70s who was drugged and unconscious whenever she was assaulted, according to police.

"Most victims don't have that," said Celine Piques, a spokesperson of the feminist group Osez le Féminisme!, or Dare Feminism!, stressing that 90% of women who say they were raped don't pursue charges because they don't think they'll stand a chance. "In most cases, the victims' words are called into question and the shame falls on them rather than on the man who committed the rape."

Piques said she has been particularly shocked by the questions about Gisèle Pelicot's sex life, including "whether she was into swinging or threesomes, when this woman was drugged and unconscious."

Gisèle Pelicot has shown remarkable calm and stoicism during the trial, even throughout the most gruesome and explicit descriptions of the abuse she suffered. But she grew exasperated on Wednesday when defense lawyers questioned her about graphic images taken of her that were shown in court for the first time. She had agreed to their display because she said she hoped they would serve as "undeniable evidence."

"I understand why victims of rape don't press charges," Pelicot told the five judges after a lawyer asked if she wasn't hiding any unusual sexual "tendencies."

"I'm not even going to answer this question, which I find insulting," she responded, her voice breaking. She told the court that the first two weeks of the trial had been harrowing, saying, "Since I've arrived in this courtroom, I've felt humiliated. I am treated like an alcoholic, an accomplice. ... I have heard it all."

Pelicot has become a symbol of the fight against sexual violence in France, and she's seen as a hero to many victims for waiving her anonymity, letting the trial be public and appearing openly before the media. She has attended every day of the trial, where she has sat in a room full of men accused of raping her.

But despite the nauseating details that have emerged during the trial, it hasn't stopped some from minimizing the abuse, with the mayor of the small community where the Pelicots lived, Mazan, apologizing Thursday for suggesting in a BBC interview that things could have been worse because "no children were involved" and "nobody died."

Such dismissiveness is pervasive in France's justice system, Lafourcade said.

"We have a real problem with the judiciary's treatment of sexual infractions, which is very painful for the victims and has a chilling effect," she said. "It discourages people from pressing charges."

Given how few cases are reported and how seldom the ones that are end in convictions, only a tiny fraction of assailants actually go to prison, Lafourcade said.

"And to reduce a crime, it is not the severity of the sentence that counts," she added. "It is the fact of being certain of being caught."

Pelicot's supporters believe she is making a difference by courageously facing the men accused of raping her and that broader change is on the horizon.

"Before, we never would have questioned a lawyer and his line of defense," said Paris, the youth shelter worker. "But today society is changing, people monitor what is happening and take into consideration the suffering of others."

Donald Trump returns to North Carolina without Mark Robinson, one of his top in-state supporters

By MEG KINNARD and ERIK VERDUZCO Associated Press

WILMINGTON, N.C. (AP) — Donald Trump returns to North Carolina on Saturday, stumping in the southern battleground state that both Democrats and Republicans are treating as increasingly critical to victory in November.

But Trump will be campaigning in Wilmington, along the state's southern coast, without Lt. Gov. Mark

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Robinson, the GOP gubernatorial nominee and one of the former president's top surrogates in the state, following a CNN report about his alleged posts on a pornography website's message board. Two people familiar with the matter who spoke on condition of anonymity said Friday that Robinson was not scheduled to attend the Wilmington event.

Robinson has denied writing the posts, which include lewd and racist comments, saying Thursday that he wouldn't be forced out of the race by "salacious tabloid lies." Trump's campaign has appeared to distance itself from Robinson in the wake of the CNN reporting, which the AP has not independently verified, saying in statement to the AP that Trump "is focused on winning the White House and saving this country" and calling North Carolina "a vital part of that plan," without mentioning Robinson.

While Robinson won his GOP gubernatorial primary in March, he's been trailing in several recent polls to Democratic nominee Josh Stein, the state's attorney general. State Republican officials have stood by Robinson, whose decision to keep campaigning could threaten GOP prospects in other key races, including Trump's efforts in a battleground state he previously won twice.

Democrats have seized on the opportunity to highlight Trump's ties to Robinson, with billboards showing the two together, as well as a new ad from Vice President Kamala Harris' campaign highlighting the Republican candidates' ties as well as Robinson's support for a statewide abortion ban without exceptions. According to Harris' campaign, it's their first ad effort related to tying Trump to a down-ballot race.

A Republican has carried North Carolina in every general election since 1976 save one, when Barack Obama won the state in 2008. Trump won there in both his previous campaigns but by less than 1.5 percentage points over Democrat Joe Biden in 2020, the closest margin of any state that Trump won. That's part of why Democrats see the state as winnable this fall.

With neither Senate seat up for grabs, the gubernatorial contest has been North Carolina's marquee down-ballot race this year. Robinson has become a natural top surrogate for Trump in the state and a frequent presence at campaign events there, appearing with the nominee as recently as an event last month in Asheboro. Trump has long praised Robinson, who is Black, referring to him as "Martin Luther King on steroids."

Endorsing Robinson ahead of the GOP gubernatorial primary, Trump continued: "I think you're better than Martin Luther King. I think you are Martin Luther King times two."

While more visits have been made by presidential contenders to the Rust Belt battlegrounds of Pennsylvania, Michigan and Wisconsin, both Harris and Trump have made multiple trips to North Carolina, highlighting the state's importance. Following Biden's departure from the race in July, Trump held his first large-scale rally there, turning his full focus toward Harris.

Wilmington is home to New Hanover County, which Biden won in 2020. But his margin over Trump in the county was among his slimmest in the state.

AI is helping shape the 2024 presidential race. But not in the way experts feared

By DAN MERICA, GARANCE BURKE and ALI SWENSON Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — With the 2024 election looming, the first since the mass popularization of generative artificial intelligence, experts feared the worst: social media flooded with AI-generated deepfakes that were so realistic, baffled voters wouldn't know what to believe.

So far, that hasn't happened. Instead, what voters are seeing is far more absurd: A video of former President Donald Trump riding a cat while wielding an assault rifle. A mustachioed Vice President Kamala Harris dressed in communist attire. Trump and Harris sharing a passionate embrace.

AI is playing a major role in the presidential campaign, even if the greatest fears about how it could threaten the U.S. presidential election haven't materialized yet. Fake AI-generated images regularly ricochet around the web, but many of them are so cartoonish and absurd that even the most naïve viewer couldn't take them seriously.

Still, even these memes can be problematic. Eye-catching AI-generated photos and videos, some striving to be funny, have become useful tools for spreading false, sometimes racist messages with a clear political bent — and candidates and their supporters are among those sharing them on social media.

For example, Trump and many of his allies not only repeatedly promoted the unfounded conspiracy

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theory that Haitian migrants are stealing and eating cats and dogs in Springfield, Ohio, they also spread related AI-generated memes. One shared by Trump's Truth Social account showed him on a luxury jet, surrounded by cats and white ducks. Another showed a group of kittens holding a sign that read, "DON'T LET THEM EAT US, Vote for Trump!"

Francesca Tripodi, an expert in online propaganda, said such AI-made images are new, viral vehicles to carry age-old anti-immigration narratives.

"The memes that are amplifying this claim are anything but humorous. When you have elected officials who are utilizing this imagery as a way of perpetuating racism and xenophobia, that's a huge problem," said Tripodi, a sociologist at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

Republicans defend the images as lighthearted jokes — and byproducts of Trump's personality.

"There is a culture of personality surrounding Donald Trump that encourages that sort of over-the-top communication style that turns things into comical memes," said Caleb Smith, a Republican strategist. "The intent is to entertain, not to deceive. That is what it should be."

Not just Trump supporters

Trump and his supporters aren't the only ones creating AI memes, but they appear to be using AI image generators more than their Democratic counterparts. Some left-leaning users have posted AI images making fun of billionaire Elon Musk, the owner of X and an outspoken supporter of Trump's campaign. Democrats also posted AI-generated images of Trump in handcuffs and being chased by police when he was in court in Manhattan last year.

But Kamala Harris' campaign has not leaned into amplifying AI-generated content, sticking instead to TikTok trends and other memes that don't require AI models to create.

"Currently, the only authorized campaign use of generative AI is for productivity tools, such as data analysis and industry-standard coding assistance," said Harris campaign spokesperson Mia Ehrenberg.

Trump campaign spokesman Steven Cheung did not respond to specific questions from The Associated Press but said its strategy had not changed since May, when he provided an emailed statement saying the campaign did not "engage or utilize" tools supplied by any AI company.

Using fake, entertaining, often preposterous images to score political points is hardly new. But unlike cobbled-together Photoshop images or political cartoons, AI-generated images pack a stronger punch with their hyperrealism and can draw new attention to a political message.

While some of the images related to pets in Springfield were cartoonish and silly, many felt they perpetuated a damaging conspiracy theory about a community that has since received bomb threats prompting evacuations of schools and government buildings.

"Mememes that are obviously parody are one thing. It's another where it's obviously intended to deceive," said Rep. Adam Schiff, a California Democrat and vocal Trump critic. "And we already see the Trump campaign really blurring the line."

AI makes it easy

The speed and accessibility of generative AI tools make it easy to create outlandish political content that can drive clicks and likes. With AI image generators accessible to anyone with an internet connection, they are a cheap and convenient way for campaigns to respond to online trends and hammer home a message.

"Campaigns have had to deal with disinformation and misinformation for a very long time. ... It's not a new problem. But obviously what AI allows is for this stuff to do done more rapidly, perhaps more convincingly, and in a more targeted environment," said Teddy Goff, the digital director of Barack Obama's 2012 reelection campaign.

Paul Ingrassia, a New York-based political commentator and lawyer, said he spun up a viral image of Trump emerging from a lion's den in seconds by prompting Grok, then dropped it into his newsletter and sent it to Trump campaign staffers. Trump's Truth Social account posted Ingrassia's newsletter, including the image, that day.

"I got a message from my point of contact with the president and they said: 'The president loved the image, how did you make it? Who created it?' And I said: 'Oh, I did. I made that for the article,'" Ingrassia said. "And he said, 'Keep up the great work, he loves it.'"

The use of AI for political satire and propaganda isn't limited to the U.S. and has been observed in elections from Indonesia to the Netherlands.

More sinister deepfakes also have sought to influence races around the world. In Slovakia last year, AI audio clips impersonated the liberal party chief talking about rigging the vote days before parliamentary elections. In New Hampshire's primary in January, audio deepfakes of President Joe Biden were sent in robocalls to Democratic voters, urging them not to vote. The incident was quickly publicized and resulted in criminal charges.

Trump's embrace of AI-generated images counters some of his past commentary. In an interview on Fox Business this year, Trump called artificial intelligence "very dangerous" and "so scary" because "there's no real solution" to the issues created by the advancing technology.

And some Republicans have fretted about how Trump and the GOP are using AI to create political memes. "I don't engage in memes. I never have. I never will," said Rep. Brian Fitzpatrick, a Pennsylvania Republican in a competitive district outside Philadelphia. "I just don't believe in it."

With immigration and abortion on Arizona's ballot, Republicans are betting on momentum

By GABRIEL SANDOVAL Associated Press/Report for America

PHOENIX (AP) — Voters will decide ballot measures on abortion and immigration in Arizona, a key battleground state where Republicans are looking to capitalize on concerns about illegal border crossings to counter an expected increase in turnout by people determined to restore and protect abortion rights.

And while the abortion initiative is bolstered by a citizen-led campaign flush with cash, the GOP lawmakers who added a measure to empower state law enforcers to crack down on people who are in Arizona illegally say it already has so much momentum that they don't plan to raise money or spend much time selling it.

Abortion has many people fired up since an 1864 law banning nearly all abortions was revived and then quickly repealed this year. But immigration consistently ranks as a top concern in this western swing state, where anti-immigration legislation has long fueled national debates over illegal crossings from Mexico.

"Voters will approve this more to send a message that something, anything, needs to be done," said Barrett Marson, a Phoenix-based Republican strategist. "It lacks financial backing because people know it's going to pass and that it has little impact on curbing illegal immigration into Arizona."

Arizona state House Speaker Ben Toma voted with fellow Republicans in June to put the measure on the ballot. He called it common sense and just a small part of "what actually needs to happen to secure the border."

Frustration over illegal immigration persists despite moves by the Biden-Harris administration this year to shut down what had been an unprecedented surge in new arrivals. Democrats blame former President Donald Trump for making it a top campaign issue by persuading allies in Congress to torpedo bipartisan legislation that could have bolstered the federal response.

Republican lawmakers across the country this year have pushed tougher immigration policies, with their majorities in Texas, Iowa and Oklahoma passing laws to conduct immigration enforcement at the state level. But in each of those states, federal courts blocked their efforts to enforce the laws.

Democratic strategist DJ Quinlan said that despite universal concerns about the border, plenty of voters and stakeholders oppose this particular measure, which would make it a state crime for noncitizens to illegally cross from Mexico into Arizona outside authorized ports of entry. The crime would enable local police to arrest violators and state judges to order deportations, which are roles historically left to the federal government.

"When you talk to a lot of people in law enforcement or in the business community or that deal with these sorts of issues on a day-to-day basis, this referendum is not the answer," Quinlan said.

The measure also would require state agencies that administer federal, state or local benefit programs to use a federal database to verify that no ineligible noncitizens get the benefits. And it would shield law enforcement from civil lawsuits alleging racial profiling of Latinos or other minorities.

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Some of its provisions aren't directly related to illegal immigration, including making selling fentanyl that leads to a person's death a felony punishable by up to 10 years in prison. Latino groups argued this violates a state constitutional requirement that legislative proposals cover a single subject. The Arizona Supreme Court disagreed, clearing to a path for voters to decide.

Kent Jenson, a 68-year-old retiree, said he opposes illegal immigration and detests drug use, so he plans to vote for the immigration measure and against the abortion initiative. "It's terrible what fentanyl has done to families," Jenson said.

Opponents argue the immigration legislation would harm Arizona's reputation and economy even more than a so-called "show me your papers" law approved by lawmakers in 2010 that was partially struck down by the U.S. Supreme Court two years later.

The cost also worries some mayors, county officials and law enforcement leaders who warn that diverting resources to border security could deprive their day-to-day operations and essential public services.

An Associated Press review of state campaign finance records found no contributions specifically supporting Proposition 314, nor any donations explicitly against it.

Toma said Republicans are spending their time, money and energy on competitive races and other state-wide ballot measures, with 13 in all. At stake is not only control of the U.S. Senate and White House, but also the state Legislature. Republicans have a one-seat majority in each chamber and Democrats hope to regain power for the first time in decades.

"People are going to focus, and rightly so, on the issues that actually need help," Toma said.

Citizen-led Proposition 139, which would enshrine abortion access in the state's constitution, has generated millions of dollars in donations and reached the ballot with more than a half-million signatures. Arizona is one of 10 states where voters will consider abortion protections.

"It is a basic human right that all women need to have autonomy over their own bodies," said Erin Dean, 34, a voter who used to be registered as a Republican but now backs Democrats.

The political action committee Arizona for Abortion Access raised nearly \$23 million as of late July, campaign finance records show. A PAC opposing the measure, It Goes Too Far, had raised nearly \$900,000.

Republican and Democratic strategists alike say the abortion measure could draw voters who might not otherwise be interested in casting a ballot.

Marson, the GOP strategist, expects it to boost turnout with young and first-time voters. The same can't be said for the immigration measure, which he predicts will pass anyway.

"Not many teenagers are itching to vote on an illegal immigration issue even if a wide swath of people support the measure," Marson said.

Ballot measures on immigration have been popular in Arizona before.

In 2004, voters made Arizona the only state to require proof of citizenship status to register to vote. A measure banning in-state tuition for noncitizens was passed in 2006, but key parts were overturned in 2022 when Arizonans voted to make students — regardless of immigration status — eligible for state financial aid. ____

Gabriel Sandoval is a corps member for the Associated Press/Report for America Statehouse News Initiative. Report for America is a nonprofit national service program that places journalists in local newsrooms to report on undercovered issues.

'She should be alive today' — Harris spotlights woman's death to blast abortion bans and Trump

By COLLEEN LONG, AMANDA SEITZ and JOSH BOAK Associated Press

ATLANTA (AP) — Kamala Harris blasted Donald Trump as a threat to women's freedoms and their very lives, warning in a speech in the battleground state of Georgia on Friday that Republicans would continue to choke off access to abortion if he returns to the White House.

The Democratic vice president's visit came days after ProPublica reported that two women in the state died after they did not get proper medical treatment for complications from taking abortion pills to end

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their pregnancies.

Such deaths, Harris said, were not only preventable but predictable because of laws that have been implemented since the U.S. Supreme Court overturned Roe v. Wade. Although Georgia's six-week ban allows abortions in early pregnancy to save a mother's life, critics say the law has created dangerous confusion for doctors about when they're allowed to provide care.

"Good policy, logical policy, moral policy, humane policy is about saying a healthcare provider will only start providing that care when you're about to die?" Harris asked.

Harris shared the story of Amber Thurman, a mother who decided to have an abortion when she became pregnant again.

"She had her future all planned out," Harris said. "And it was her plan. What she wanted to do for herself, for her son, for their future."

However, Thurman waited more than 20 hours at the hospital for a routine medical procedure known as a D&C to clear out remaining tissue after taking abortion pills. She developed sepsis and died.

"She was loved," Harris said. "And she should be alive today."

Harris has been outspoken on abortion rights ever since the Supreme Court's decision more than two years ago, but Friday's speech in Atlanta was her first focused squarely on the issue since replacing President Joe Biden at the top of the Democratic ticket.

Harris heard Thursday night from Thurman's mother and sisters.

During a livestreamed campaign event hosted by Oprah Winfrey and attended by Harris, Shanette Williams, Thurman's mother, tearfully told viewers that "people around the world need to know that this was preventable." Williams said she initially did not want to go public about her daughter's 2022 death but ultimately decided it was important for people to understand her daughter "was not a statistic. She was loved."

Harris told the family: "I'm just so sorry. The courage you all have shown is extraordinary."

She spoke about Thurman at a second rally Friday, before a thunderous crowd of thousands in the swing state of Wisconsin. Speaking in the Democratic stronghold and state capital, Madison, she called the bans put in place in more than 20 states "immoral" and warned against another Trump term.

"We are not going back," Harris said.

Trump has repeatedly said he was proud to help overturn Roe v. Wade by appointing conservative justices during his term in office. He's also said he supports exceptions to abortion bans in cases of rape, incest or the life of the mother.

Karoline Leavitt, a spokesperson for Trump's campaign, said that since Georgia has such exceptions in place, "it's unclear why doctors did not swiftly act to protect the lives of mothers."

Anti-abortion advocates and doctors argued Friday that the women's deaths raise questions around the safety of taking abortion pills at home without management by a doctor. Advocates have been pushing for tougher restrictions on the pills for years, most recently at the U.S. Supreme Court in a failed attempt to limit availability.

"Women think that it's completely safe for them to go online and order these drugs," Christina Francis, a Fort Wayne, Indiana, OB-GYN who opposes abortion, told reporters Friday.

Since 2000, the FDA has approved a two-drug regimen of mifepristone and misoprostol as a safe way to end pregnancies through 10 weeks gestation. During the COVID-19 pandemic, the FDA eliminated an in-person visit requirement to get the drugs. Reported complications have been rare and surgical intervention to end the pregnancy is needed in 2.6% of cases.

Dozens of pregnant patients have faced delayed care or been turned away from hospitals amid medical emergencies over the last two years, a violation of federal law, since Roe v. Wade was overturned by the U.S. Supreme Court. Violations occurred in states with and without abortion bans. But an AP analysis earlier this year found an immediate spike in some states with abortion bans, including Texas, following the ruling.

Dr. Nisha Verma, an OB-GYN in Georgia, said the six-week ban has caused a "massive environment of fear and confusion and uncertainty" for the medical community.

She said Republican legislators who are now blaming hospitals and doctors are seeing the ramifications

of the laws playing out in real time.

"The law is preventing us from being able to provide evidence-based care without having to think about the risk of criminal prosecution," she said.

With in-person early voting starting Friday in three states — Virginia, South Dakota and Minnesota — Harris' campaign is hoping that reproductive rights will be a strong motivator for Democrats. The party points to a series of electoral wins when abortion rights have been on the ballot, and advocates believe Harris is a strong messenger.

About half of voters say abortion is one of the most important issues as they consider their votes — but it's more important to women who are registered voters than to male voters, according to a new AP-NORC poll. About 6 in 10 women voters say abortion policy is one of the most important issues to their vote in the upcoming election, compared to about 4 in 10 male voters.

The gender gap doesn't stop there.

About 6 in 10 women voters trust Harris more than Trump to handle abortion, while about 2 in 10 women have more trust in Trump. Half of male voters trust Harris more than Trump on abortion, while about one-third trust Trump more than Harris.

Court rules nearly 98,000 Arizonans whose citizenship hadn't been confirmed can vote the full ballot

By SEJAL GOVINDARAO Associated Press

PHOENIX (AP) — The Arizona Supreme Court unanimously ruled Friday that nearly 98,000 people whose citizenship documents hadn't been confirmed can vote in state and local races, a significant decision that could influence ballot measures and tight legislative races.

The court's decision comes after officials uncovered a database error that for two decades mistakenly designated the voters as having access to the full ballot. The voters already were entitled to cast ballots in federal races, including for president and Congress, regardless of how the court ruled.

Secretary of State Adrian Fontes, a Democrat, and Stephen Richer, the Republican Maricopa County recorder, had disagreed on what status the voters should hold. Richer asked the high court to weigh in, saying Fontes ignored state law by advising county officials to let affected voters cast full ballots.

Fontes said not allowing the voters who believed they had satisfied voting requirements access to the full ballot would raise equal protection and due process concerns.

The high court, which leans Republican, agreed with Fontes. It said county officials lack the authority to change the voters' statuses because those voters registered long ago and had attested under the penalty of law that they are citizens. The justices also said the voters were not at fault for the database error and also mentioned the little time that's left before the Nov. 5 general election.

"We are unwilling on these facts to disenfranchise voters en masse from participating in state contests," Chief Justice Ann Scott Timmer wrote in the ruling.

Of the nearly 98,000 affected voters, most of them reside in Maricopa County, which is home to Phoenix, and are longtime state residents who range in age from 45 to 60. About 37% of them are registered Republicans, about 27% are registered Democrats and the rest are independents or affiliated with minor parties.

Arizona is unique among states in that it requires voters to prove their citizenship to participate in local and state races. Voters can demonstrate citizenship by providing a driver's license or tribal ID number, or they can attach a copy of a birth certificate, passport or naturalization documents.

Arizona considers drivers' licenses issued after October 1996 to be valid proof of citizenship. However, a system coding error marked nearly 98,000 voters who obtained licenses before 1996 — roughly 2.5% of all registered voters — as full-ballot voters, state officials said.

The error between the state's voter registration database and the Motor Vehicle Division has since been resolved.

That number of votes could tip the scales in hotly contested races for the state Legislature, where Republicans hold a slim majority in both chambers.

Voters also are deciding on the constitutional right to abortion and on a state law that would criminalize noncitizens for entering Arizona through Mexico at any location other than a port of entry.

Though Richer and Fontes disagreed over the status of the voters, both celebrated the court's ruling. "Thank God," Richer said on the social platform X. He told The Associated Press on Thursday that maintaining voters' statuses would be administratively easier.

Fontes, in a news release, called the ruling a "significant victory for those whose fundamental right to vote was under scrutiny." Election officials will be contacting voters who need to update their proof of citizenship after the election, he said.

John Groseclose, who was among the voters whose citizenship was in question, said he was relieved he wouldn't have to spend more time running around to resolve the mix-up.

Earlier this week, he said he waited an hour and a half at a motor vehicle office in Tempe only to find that the employee who attended to him was unaware of the issue and did not know how to update his voter registration — despite him providing an official birth certificate and new passport.

"I'm glad that none of us are going to be disenfranchised over an error generated by the MVD 20 some-odd years ago," Groseclose told the AP.

Israel-Hamas war latest: Israel strikes Beirut after Hezbollah rockets land in northern Israel

By The Associated Press undefined

An Israeli airstrike in Beirut killed at least 14 people and wounded dozens more, Lebanese health officials said. It was the first such Israeli attack on Lebanon's capital in months and came shortly after Hezbollah pounded northern Israel with 140 rockets.

In Gaza, Palestinian authorities said 15 people were killed overnight in Israeli attacks.

Gaza's Health Ministry says more than 41,000 Palestinians have been killed in the territory since Hamas' Oct. 7 attack that sparked the Israel-Hamas war. The ministry does not differentiate between fighters and civilians in its count but says a little over half of those killed were women and children.

Israel says it has killed over 17,000 militants, without providing evidence.

Here's the latest:

Weaponizing ordinary devices violates international law, United Nations rights chief says

UNITED NATIONS — Weaponizing ordinary communication devices represents a new development in warfare, and targeting thousands of Lebanese people using pagers, two-way radios and electronic equipment without their knowledge is a violation of international human rights law, the United Nations human rights chief said Friday.

Volker Türk told an emergency meeting of the U.N. Security Council there must be an independent and transparent investigation of the two attacks in Lebanon on Tuesday and Wednesday where these devices exploded, reportedly killing 37 people and injuring more than 3,400 others.

"Those who ordered and carried out these attacks must be held to account," he said.

Lebanon has blamed Israel for the attacks, which appeared to target Hezbollah militants but also saw many civilian casualties, including children. Hezbollah has fought many conflicts with Israel, including a war in 2006, and it has conducted near-daily strikes against Israel to support Hamas militants who attacked Israel on Oct. 7.

When reporters asked Israel's U.N. Ambassador Danny Danon about speculation Israel was behind the two explosions, he said: "We are not commenting."

Lebanon's foreign minister urges United Nations Security Council to condemn deadly explosions

UNITED NATIONS — Lebanon's foreign minister is warning the U.N. Security Council that if it doesn't condemn this week's deadly explosions and name Israel as the perpetrator a "Pandora's Box" will be opened, and governments and extremists will target and kill civilians with similar communications devices.

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Abdallah Bouhabib accused Israel on Friday of terrorizing the entire Lebanese population on streets, in markets and their homes where exploding pagers, two-way radios and other electronic devices reportedly killed 37 people and injured more than 3,400 others.

He held up a photo of a mangled and bloodied hand, telling ambassadors from the 15 council nations: "Look at the ugliness of what has happened in this picture."

Israel's U.N. Ambassador Danny Danon criticized the Lebanese minister for not mentioning Hezbollah, which started launching near daily attacks against Israel from Lebanon the day after Hamas' Oct. 7 attacks in southern Israel. Many victims of the explosions were its supporters.

The Lebanese people are "trapped in the grip of this terrorist organization," Danon said.

Before the council meeting, he was asked by reporters about speculation Israel was behind the explosions. "We are not commenting on the specific attacks you mentioned, but I can tell you that we will do everything we will do everything we can to target those terrorists to minimize casualties for civilians," he replied.

Bouhabib warned that without condemnation of Israel, other countries and extremists will use similar ordinary devices on trains, planes and elsewhere to terrorize civilians.

Hezbollah confirms a top military official was killed in Friday's airstrike

BEIRUT — Hezbollah announced the death of a top military official in an Israeli airstrike in Beirut Friday.

Israeli officials had earlier said the rare strike on Beirut's southern suburbs killed Ibrahim Akil, a commander of the Lebanese militant group's elite Radwan Force. The strike killed at least 14 people and wounded dozens more, according to Lebanon's health ministry.

In a statement, Hezbollah described Akil as "a great jihadist leader" and said he had "joined the procession of his brothers, the great martyr leaders, after a blessed life full of jihad, work, wounds, sacrifices, dangers, challenges, achievements, and victories."

United Nations humanitarian chief calls for investigation into device explosions

UNITED NATIONS — The U.N. humanitarian chief told an emergency meeting of the U.N. Security Council that weaponizing communications devices represents a new development in warfare and said targeting thousands of Lebanese people using them without their knowledge is a violation of international human rights law.

Volker Türk called for an independent investigation of this week's mass explosions of Hezbollah pagers and walkie-talkies that killed at least 37 people and wounding about 3,000 others. The attacks have widely been attributed to Israel.

"Those who ordered and carried out these attacks must be held to account," he told council members Friday.

Türk said the explosions also appear to violate international humanitarian law's key principles of distinction, proportionality and precautions in attack. He said international law also prohibits the use of booby-trapped devices that look harmless.

"It is a war crime to commit violence intended to spread terror among civilians," he added.

Lebanon urges United Nations to condemn attacks that used the synchronized explosion of devices

BEIRUT — Lebanon's mission to the United Nations called attacks this week in which thousands of devices were blown up "an unprecedented method of fighting in its brutality and terrorism."

It said targeting thousands of people of different ages and in heavily populated areas "is an act of terrorism and a violation of international law and human rights and is designated as a war crimes."

The mass explosions of Hezbollah pagers and walkie-talkies on Tuesday and Wednesday killed at least 37 people and wounding about 3,000 others in attacks widely attributed to Israel.

Lebanon said the U.N. should hold an emergency meeting to discuss the situation in the Middle East and should condemn the attacks. It also said the U.N. should stop Israel's attacks to avoid "a destructive regional war."

14 killed in Israeli airstrike on Beirut

BEIRUT — Lebanon's Health Ministry has raised the death toll from Friday's Israeli airstrike on Beirut to

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14. Dozens more were wounded.

The Israeli strike in the southern suburbs of Lebanon's capital flattened two apartment buildings.

The Israeli military said the strike killed Ibrahim Akil, a senior Hezbollah military official. There was no immediate confirmation of his death from Hezbollah.

Biden says he still has hope for a cease-fire and hostage deal between Israel and Hamas

WASHINGTON — U.S. President Joe Biden said Friday that his administration must keep working at trying to win a cease-fire and hostage deal between Israel and Hamas as tensions rise along the Israel-Lebanon border.

The president's comments came hours after Israel carried out what it called targeted strikes near Beirut. The action is raising concerns that the nearly yearlong Gaza war could spread into a larger regional war.

"We are continuing to try to do what we tried in the beginning to make sure that both the people of northern Israel as well as southern Lebanon are able to get back to their homes and go back safely," Biden said in an exchange with reporters at the start of a Cabinet meeting at the White House.

Asked if getting an agreement may be slipping out of reach in the final months of his presidency, Biden said he still had hope and that his national security team continues to work.

"If I ever said it wasn't realistic, we might as well leave," Biden said. "A lot of things don't look realistic until we get them done. We have to keep at it."

Israel says its airstrike killed a senior Hezbollah military official

JERUSALEM — The Israeli military announced that its airstrike Friday on a neighborhood of Beirut killed Ibrahim Akil, a senior Hezbollah military official. There was no immediate confirmation of his death from Hezbollah.

The Israeli strike in the southern suburbs of Lebanon's capital killed at least nine people and wounded nearly 60 others, according to Lebanese health officials, and flattened two apartment buildings. The Israeli military also claimed that its strike killed other "top operatives" of Hezbollah's elite Radwan Force, without elaborating.

A Hezbollah official has confirmed that Akil was supposed to be in the building in the Dahiya district that was hit.

Akil has served on Hezbollah's highest military body, the Jihad Council, and has been sanctioned by the United States for being involved in two terrorist attacks in 1983 that killed more than 300 people at the U.S. Embassy in Beirut and the U.S. Marine Corps barracks.

Netanyahu is shortening a planned United States trip

JERUSALEM — Israel's Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has shortened a planned trip to the U.S. because of rising tensions with Hezbollah, according to an Israeli official.

The official spoke on the condition of anonymity because they were not authorized to brief the media on the matter. Netanyahu is supposed to travel to the U.S. ahead of a planned speech at the U.N. General Assembly on Thursday.

The decision to shorten the trip comes as tensions with Hezbollah threaten to spiral into an all-out war, following an Israeli strike targeting a senior Hezbollah leader in a southern suburb of Beirut.

Associated Press writer Julia Frankel contributed to this report.

Israel carries out an airstrike on Beirut

BEIRUT — An Israeli airstrike hit Beirut on Friday, killing at least eight people and wounding nearly 60 others in the first such Israeli attack on Lebanon's capital in months.

The Israeli strike on Beirut's crowded southern suburbs hit during rush hour, as people headed home from work and children left school. Local networks broadcast footage that showed at least two buildings completely flattened and the main street ravaged in Dahiya, just kilometers from downtown Beirut where Lebanon's Hezbollah militant group holds sway.

The strike came after Hezbollah pounded Israel with 140 rockets earlier Friday and tensions threaten to spill into all-out war.

White House calls allegations against Israeli soldiers in West Bank 'deeply disturbing'

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WASHINGTON — The White House says a video showing Israeli soldiers pushing three apparently lifeless bodies from rooftops during a raid in the northern part of the occupied West Bank “deeply disturbing.”

An AP journalist in the town of Qabatiya witnessed three soldiers push the bodies off the roofs of adjacent multi-story buildings, sending them falling out of view.

White House national security spokesperson John Kirby told reporters Friday that “it clearly would depict abhorrent and egregious behavior by professional soldiers” if the video is found to be authentic.

“We reached out immediately to our Israeli counterparts about it, and we pressed them for more details,” he said. “They have assured us that they’re going to investigate this, and that there will be proper accountability if it’s warranted. And we’re going to be very eager to see what the IDF investigation finds.”

The Israeli military in a statement called it “a serious incident that does not coincide with IDF values and the expectations from IDF soldiers,” using the acronym the military goes by.

The United States says there is still time for a diplomatic solution

WASHINGTON — The Biden administration continues to hold on to hope that surging tensions between Israel and Hezbollah won’t escalate into all-out war following Israel Defense Forces air strike Friday near Beirut.

White House national security spokesperson John Kirby said he was unaware of Israel providing the U.S. any forewarning ahead of the operation.

“We still believe that there is time and space for a diplomatic solution,” Kirby said. “We think that that is the best way forward. War is not inevitable up there at the Blue Line. And we’re going to continue to do everything we can to prevent it.”

The Israeli strikes near Beirut followed two waves of deadly attacks earlier this week of hundreds of hand-held pagers and walkie-talkies used by Hezbollah militants exploding. The sophisticated sabotage operations are widely believed to be carried out by Israel.

The White House has declined to publicly comment on the electronic device attacks beyond saying the U.S. was not involved.

Palestinian authorities say 15 people were killed overnight in Gaza

Palestinian authorities say 15 people were killed overnight in the Gaza Strip in multiple Israeli attacks.

An airstrike early Friday morning in Gaza City hit a family home, killing six people including an unknown number of children, Gaza’s Civil Defense said. Another person was killed in Gaza City when a strike hit a group of people on a street.

In Beit Hanoun, north of Gaza City, another person was killed and several others injured when a vehicle was hit by an Israeli strike, the Civil Defense said.

Late Thursday, six more people were killed in a strike that hit a home in the center of Gaza City, while another was killed in Beit Lahya, north of Gaza City.

Israel maintains it only targets militants and accuses Hamas and other armed groups of endangering civilians by operating in residential areas. The military, which rarely comments on individual strikes, had no immediate comment.

The war has caused vast destruction and displaced about 90% of Gaza’s population of 2.3 million.

Israel challenges international court request for arrest warrants

Israel’s foreign ministry said Friday it submitted two legal briefs in response to the International Criminal Court prosecutor’s request for arrest warrants against the country’s leaders.

The court’s prosecutor is seeking arrest warrants for Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and Defense Minister Yoav Gallant, as well as top Hamas leader Yahya Sinwar and other Hamas leaders. One of them was since assassinated in what was believed to be an Israeli strike.

The foreign ministry said it has submitted two legal briefs challenging the court’s jurisdiction to arrest Israeli leaders and claiming the court did not provide Israel the opportunity to investigate itself before requesting the warrants.

“No other democracy with an independent and respected legal system like that which exists in Israel has been treated in this prejudicial manner by the Prosecutor,” wrote Foreign Ministry spokesperson Oren

Marmorstein on the social media platform X. He said Israel remained “steadfast in its commitment to the rule of law and justice” and would continue to protect its citizens against militancy.

Israel is not a party to the court. Rights groups say the country has struggled to investigate itself in the past. Netanyahu has brushed off calls for a state investigation into the failings that led to the Oct. 7 attack.

Leader of Iraqi militia reportedly killed in Syria

BAGHDAD — A leader of an Iranian-backed Iraqi militia was killed Friday in a strike in Syria, a war monitor and a militia official said.

Iraq’s Kataeb Hezbollah group — which is different from the Lebanese militant group Hezbollah — said in a statement that Abu Haidar al-Khafaji was killed “while performing his duties as a security advisor in Damascus.”

The United Kingdom-based Syrian Observatory for Human Rights had earlier reported that a leader in Iraq’s Kataeb Hezbollah group was killed and another person injured in a drone strike on the car they were traveling in on the road to the Damascus airport.

An official with an Iraqi militia confirmed that a car carrying a group of militia members was struck in Damascus, killing one person and injuring three others. The official spoke on condition of anonymity because he was not authorized to speak to the media.

There was no comment from Israeli officials on the strike. Israel frequently strikes Iranian and Iran-linked groups in Syria but rarely acknowledges the strikes.

Tensions have heightened in the region following a wave of apparently remotely detonated explosions in Lebanon targeting pagers and walkie talkies belonging to the Lebanese Hezbollah. The attacks, widely blamed on Israel, which has not commented on them, killed at least 37 people — including two children — and wounded about 3,000.

Associated Press journalist Qassim Abdul-Zahra contributed to this report.

Israel military says it killed 2 Hezbollah members planting explosives along the border

BEIRUT — Israel’s military killed two Hezbollah members who were planting explosives along the border over the weekend, Israel’s military and an official with a Lebanese group said.

The official with a Lebanese group said the two members of the militant group were killed Sunday and their bodies were taken by Israeli troops because they were too close to the fence along the tense frontier. The official spoke Friday on condition of anonymity because he was not authorized to speak to the media.

On Thursday, Israel’s military released a video it said was taken by one of the fighters showing the militants coming under fire. The military said that the two fighters were killed by Israeli troops as they tried to plant an improvised explosive device near a military post.

In the days following the tense border interaction, thousands of devices exploded in different parts of Lebanon and Syria, killing 37 people and wounding around 3,000 others. The attack was blamed on Israel, and many of those killed or injured were members of Hezbollah.

Rare Israeli airstrike in Beirut kills Hezbollah commander and more than a dozen others

By BASSEM MROUE and JULIA FRANKEL Associated Press

BEIRUT (AP) — Israel launched a rare airstrike that killed a senior Hezbollah military official in a densely populated southern Beirut neighborhood on Friday. It was the deadliest such strike on Lebanon’s capital in decades, with Lebanese authorities reporting at least 14 people killed and dozens more wounded in the attack.

The Israeli military’s chief spokesman, Rear Adm. Daniel Hagari, said the strike on Beirut’s southern Dahiya district killed Ibrahim Akil, a commander of Hezbollah’s elite Radwan Force, as well as 10 other Hezbollah operatives.

“We will continue pursuing our enemies in order to defend our citizens, even in Dahiya, in Beirut,” said Israeli Defense Minister Yoav Gallant, describing the Israeli strike that targeted Akil as part of “a new

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phase of war.”

Several hours later, Hezbollah confirmed Akil’s death. In a statement, the Lebanese militant group described Akil as “a great jihadist leader” and said he had “joined the procession of his brothers, the great martyr leaders, after a blessed life full of jihad, work, wounds, sacrifices, dangers, challenges, achievements, and victories.”

Akil served on Hezbollah’s highest military body, the Jihad Council. He was sanctioned by the United States for his alleged involvement in the 1983 bombing that killed more than 300 people at the U.S. Embassy in Beirut and the U.S. Marine Corps barracks.

Last year, the U.S. State Department posted a \$7 million reward for information leading to his identification, location, arrest or conviction, citing his role in the embassy bombing and in the taking of American and German hostages in Lebanon in the 1980s.

The strike came as a new cycle of escalation between the enemies raised fears of a full-out war erupting in the Middle East.

Hours before the Israeli strike, Hezbollah pounded northern Israel with 140 rockets as the region awaited the revenge promised by Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah over this week’s mass explosions of pagers belonging to members of the Shiite militant group.

The Israeli military did not provide the identities of the other Hezbollah commanders allegedly killed in its strike on the crowded neighborhood just kilometers from downtown Beirut.

Lebanon’s Health Ministry said at least 14 people were killed and 66 others were wounded in the attack, which leveled the apartment building where the Israeli army claimed Akil had been meeting with other militants in the basement. Nine of the wounded were in serious condition, the ministry added.

Local networks in Lebanon broadcast footage showing first responders sifting through the rubble of a collapsed high-rise in the Jamous area in the heart of Dahiya, where Hezbollah conducts many of its political and security operations.

The rescue operation continued into the late hours of Friday, hours after the attack, as first responders wrestled to remove the rubble to reach the basement of the building where apparently many of the bodies were located.

Friday’s airstrike — the deadliest such attack on a neighborhood of Beirut since Israel and Hezbollah fought a bloody, monthlong war in 2006 — hit during rush hour, as people were leaving work and children heading home from school.

At Beirut’s St. Therese Hospital near the scene of the airstrike, crowds flocked to donate blood for those wounded in the attack.

“We are all together in this situation, so it’s my obligation,” said Hussein Harake, who lined up to donate blood.

From Israel, Gallant said he briefed senior military officials on the strike and vowed Israel would press on against Hezbollah “until we achieve our goal, ensuring the safe return of Israel’s northern communities to their homes.”

The strike came after Hezbollah launched one of its most intense bombardments of northern Israel in nearly a year of fighting, largely targeting Israeli military sites. Israel’s Iron Dome missile defense system intercepted most of the Katyusha rockets. The few that got through sparked small fires but caused little damage and no Israeli casualties.

Hezbollah described its latest wave of rocket salvos as a response to past Israeli strikes on southern Lebanon — not as revenge for the mass explosions of Hezbollah pagers and walkie-talkies on Tuesday and Wednesday that killed at least 37 people - including two children - and wounded 2,900 others in attacks widely attributed to Israel.

Israel has neither confirmed nor denied involvement in this week’s sophisticated attacks, which signaled a major escalation in the past 11 months of simmering conflict along the Israel-Lebanon border.

Israel and Hezbollah have traded fire regularly since Hamas’ Oct. 7 assault on southern Israel ignited the Israeli military’s devastating offensive in Gaza. But previous cross-border attacks have largely struck areas in northern Israel that had been evacuated and less-populated parts of southern Lebanon.

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The last time Israel hit Beirut was in a July airstrike that killed senior Hezbollah commander Fouad Shukur. "The attack in Lebanon is to protect Israel," Hagari said at a news conference following Friday's strike, describing both Shukur and Akil as the two military officials closest to Hezbollah leader Nasrallah.

Hagari also accused Akil of plotting a series of attacks against Israeli soldiers and civilians dating back decades, including a never-realized plan to invade northern Israel in a similar way to the Hamas-led Oct. 7 attacks.

After Friday's Israeli airstrike, Hezbollah announced attacks on northern Israel, two of which it said targeted an intelligence base from where it claimed Israel directed assassinations.

Israel remains on edge, with Nasrallah vowing Thursday to keep up strikes on Israel despite the humiliating "blow" he said Hezbollah suffered in the sabotage of its communication devices.

"We are in a tense period," Hagari told reporters Friday. "We are prepared on high alert both offensively and defensively."

In recent days, Israel has sent a powerful fighting force to the northern border, designated as an official war goal the return of tens of thousands of displaced residents to their homes in northern Israel and ordered citizens near Israel's border with Lebanon to stay close to bomb shelters. Hezbollah has maintained that it will only halt its fire when there is a cease-fire in Gaza.

Hamas, which continues to fight Israel in Gaza, condemned the Israeli strike targeting Akil as a "new crime" and "violation of Lebanese sovereignty."

Even as the world's attention turns to the surge in Israel-Hezbollah tensions, Palestinian casualties in the besieged Gaza Strip continued to mount.

Palestinian health authorities early Friday reported that 15 people, including children, were killed in Israeli strikes that targeted a family home and a group of people on the street in Gaza City. Israel's campaign in Gaza has already killed at least 41,000 Palestinians, according to the Gaza-based Health Ministry, which doesn't differentiate between fighters and civilians.

In response to a request for comment on the latest Gaza strikes, the Israeli military insisted on Friday that it took "feasible precautions to mitigate civilian harm" and accused Hamas of endangering civilians by operating in residential areas.

Israel's bombardment and invasion of the Gaza Strip — launched in response to Hamas killing 1,200 people and taking 250 hostage in southern Israel on Oct. 7 — has wreaked vast destruction and displaced about 90% of Gaza's population of 2.3 million.

Thousands of exploding devices in Lebanon trigger a nation that has been on edge for years

By ZEINA KARAM and KAREEM CHEHAYEB Associated Press

BEIRUT (AP) — Chris Knayzeh was in a town overlooking Lebanon's capital when he heard the rumbling aftershock of the 2020 Beirut port blast. Hundreds of tons of haphazardly stored ammonium nitrates had exploded, killing more than 200 people and injuring thousands.

Already struggling with the country's economic collapse, the sight of the gigantic mushroom cloud unleashed by the blast was the last straw. Like many other Lebanese, he quit his job and booked a one-way ticket out of Lebanon.

Knayzeh, now a lecturer at a university in France, was visiting Lebanon when news broke Tuesday of a deadly attack in which thousands of handheld pagers were blowing up in homes, shops, markets and streets across the country. Israel, local news reports said, was targeting the devices of the militant Hezbollah group. Stuck in Beirut traffic, Knayzeh started panicking that drivers around him could potentially be carrying devices that would explode.

Within minutes, hospitals were flooded with bloodied patients, bringing back painful reminders of the port blast four years ago that left enduring mental and psychological scars for those who lived through it.

A day later, a similar attack struck walkie-talkies. In total, the explosions killed at least 37 people and injured more than 3,000, many of them civilians. Israel is widely believed to be behind the blasts, although

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it has neither confirmed nor denied responsibility.

"The country's state is unreal," Knayzeh told The Associated Press.

The port blast was one of the biggest nonnuclear explosions ever recorded, and it came on top of a historic economic meltdown, financial collapse and a feeling of helplessness after nationwide protests against corruption that failed to achieve their goals. It compounded years of crises that have upended the lives of people in this small country.

Four years after the port catastrophe, an investigation has run aground. The ravaged Mediterranean port remains untouched, its towering silos standing broken and shredded as a symbol of a country in ruins. Political divisions and paralysis have left the country without a president or functioning government for more than two years. Poverty is on the rise.

On top of that and in parallel with the war in Gaza, Lebanon has been on the brink of all-out war with Israel for the past year, with Israel and Hezbollah trading fire across the border and Israeli warplanes breaking the sound barrier over Beirut almost daily, terrifying people in their homes and offices.

"I can't believe this is happening again. How many more disasters can we endure?" asked Jocelyn Hallak, a mother of three, two of whom now work abroad and the third headed out after graduation next year. "All this pain, when will it end?"

A full-blown war with Israel could be devastating for Lebanon. The country's crisis-battered health care system had been preparing for the possibility of conflict with Israel even before hospitals became inundated with the wounded from the latest explosions. Most of the injuries received were in the face, eyes and limbs — many of them in critical condition and requiring extended hospital stays.

Still, Knayzeh, 27, can't stay away. He returns regularly to see his girlfriend and family. He flinches whenever he hears construction work and other sudden loud sounds. When in France, surrounded by normalcy, he agonizes over family at home while following the ongoing clashes from afar.

"It's the attachment to our country I guess, or at the very least attachment to our loved ones who couldn't leave with us," he said.

This summer, tens of thousands of Lebanese expatriates came to visit family and friends despite the tensions. Their remittances and money they spend while there help keep the country afloat and in some cases are the main source of income for families. Many, however, cut their vacations short in chaotic airport scenes, fearing major escalation after the assassinations of Hezbollah and Hamas commanders in Beirut and Tehran last month, blamed on Israel.

Even in a country that has vaulted from one crisis to another for decades, the level of confusion, insecurity and anger is reaching new heights. Many thought the port blast was the most surreal and frightening thing they would ever experience — until thousands of pagers exploded in people's hands and pockets across the country this week.

"I saw horrific things that day," said Mohammad al-Mousawi, who was running an errand in Beirut's southern suburb, where Hezbollah has a strong presence, when the pagers began blowing up.

"Suddenly, we started seeing scooters whizzing by carrying defaced men, some without fingers, some with their guts spilling out. Then the ambulances started coming."

It reminded him of the 2020 port blast, he said. "The number of injuries and ambulances was unbelievable."

"One more horror shaping our collective existence," wrote Maha Yahya, the Beirut-based director of the Malcolm H. Kerr Carnegie Middle East Center.

"The shock, the disarray, the trauma is reminiscent of Beirut after the port explosion. Only this time it was not limited to a city but spread across the country," she said in a social media post.

In the aftermath of the exploding pagers, fear and paranoia has taken hold. Parents kept their children away from schools and universities, fearing more exploding devices. Organizations including the Lebanese civil defense advised personnel to switch off their devices and remove all batteries until further notice. One woman said she disconnected her baby monitor and other household appliances.

Lebanon's civil aviation authorities have banned the transporting of pagers and walkie-talkies on all airplanes departing from Beirut's Rafik Hariri International Airport "until further notice." Some residents

were sleeping with their phones in another room.

In the southern city of Tyre, ahead of a speech by Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah, city resident Hassan Hajo acknowledged feeling "a bit depressed" after the pager blasts, a major security breach for a secretive organization like Hezbollah. He was hoping to get a boost from Nasrallah's speech. "We have been through worse before and we got through it," he said.

In his speech, Nasrallah vowed to retaliate against Israel for the attacks on devices, while Israel and Hezbollah traded heavy fire across the border. Israel stepped up warnings of a potential larger military operation targeting the group.

Another resident, Marwan Mahfouz, said Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has been threatening Lebanon with war for the past year and he should just do it.

"If we are going to die, we'll die. We are already dying. We are already dead," he said.

Secret Service report details communication failures preceding July assassination attempt on Trump

By REBECCA SANTANA, ERIC TUCKER and ALANNA DURKIN RICHER Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Communication breakdowns with local law enforcement hampered the Secret Service's performance during a July campaign rally where former President Donald Trump was shot and wounded, according to a report released Friday that lays out a litany of missed opportunities to stop a gunman who opened fire from an unsecured roof.

A five-page document summarizing the key conclusions of a yet-to-be finalized Secret Service report lays bare the cascading and wide-ranging failings that preceded the July 13 shooting at the Butler, Pennsylvania, rally at which Trump was struck in the ear by gunfire.

Those include an absence of clear guidance from the Secret Service to local law enforcement, the failure to fix line-of-sight vulnerabilities at the rally grounds that left Trump open to sniper fire and "complacency" among some agents, said Ronald Rowe Jr., the agency's acting director.

Though the failed response has been well documented through congressional testimony, news media investigations and other public statements, the summary document released Friday marks the Secret Service's most formal attempt to catalog the errors of the day and comes amid fresh scrutiny of the agency following Sunday's arrest of a man who authorities say stalked Trump at a Florida golf course.

"This was a failure on the part of the United States Secret Service. It's important that we hold ourselves to account for the failures of July 13th and that we use the lessons learned to make sure that we do not have another failure like this again," Rowe said at a news conference accompanying the release of the summary.

The report details a series of "communications deficiencies" before the shooting by 20-year-old Thomas Matthew Crooks, who was killed by a Secret Service counter-sniper after firing eight rounds in Trump's direction from the roof of a building less than 150 yards from where Trump was speaking. That building had been identified as a possible hazard before the event, Rowe said, yet officials didn't take appropriate steps to correct the potential problems.

"Line-of-sight issues were acknowledged, but not properly mitigated. Issues were encountered the day of the visit with respect to line-of-sight concerns, but they were not escalated to supervisors," Rowe said. "While some members of the advanced team were very diligent, there was complacency on the part of others that led to a breach of security protocols."

Among the other problems: Some local police at the site were unaware of the existence of two communications centers on the grounds, meaning officers did not know that the Secret Service were not receiving their radio transmissions.

Law enforcement also overly relied on cell phones, instead of Secret Service radio frequencies, to communicate vital information. As officers searched for Crooks before the shooting, details were being transmitted "via mobile/cellular devices in staggered or fragmented fashion" instead of through the Secret Service's own network.

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"The failure of personnel to broadcast via radio the description of the assailant, or vital information received from local law enforcement regarding a suspicious individual on the roof of the AGR complex, to all federal personnel at the Butler site inhibited the collective awareness of all Secret Service personnel," the report said. AGR International Inc. operates a manufacturing plant just north of the Butler Farm Show grounds, where the rally was held.

That breakdown was especially problematic for Trump's protective detail, "who were not apprised of how focused state and local law enforcement were in the minutes leading up to the attack on locating the suspicious subject." Had they known, the report says, they could have made the decision to relocate Trump while the search for the gunman was in progress.

The report raises more serious questions about why no law enforcement were stationed on the roof Crooks climbed onto before opening fire.

A local tactical team was stationed on the second floor of a building in the complex from which Crooks fired. Multiple law enforcement entities questioned the effectiveness of the team's position, "yet there was no follow-up discussion" about changing it, the report says. And there was no discussion with Secret Service about putting a team on the roof, even though snipers from local law enforcement agencies "were apparently not opposed to that location."

The tactical team operating on the second floor of the building had no contact with Secret Service before the rally. That team was brought in by a local police department to help with the event, without Secret Service's knowledge, the report says.

The Secret Service understood in advance that the rally site, selected by Trump's staff because it better accommodated the "large number of desired attendees," was a security challenge because of lines of sight that could be exploited by a would-be attacker. And yet, the report said, no security measures were taken on July 13 to remove those concerns and the Secret Service lacked detailed knowledge about the local law enforcement support that would even be in place.

The report's executive summary does not identify specific individuals who may be to blame nor does it indicate whether any staff members have been disciplined, though The Associated Press has previously reported that at least five Secret Service agents have been placed on modified duty. The director at the time, Kimberly Cheatle, resigned more than a week after the shooting, saying she took full responsibility for the lapse.

The Secret Service's investigation is one of numerous inquiries, including by Congress and by the Department of Homeland Security's inspector general office.

Rowe has said the July shooting and Sunday's episode, in which 58-year-old Ryan Wesley Routh was arrested after Secret Service agents detected a rifle poking through shrubbery lining the West Palm Beach, Florida, golf course where Trump was playing, underscore the need for a paradigm shift in how the agency protects public officials.

Trump, he said, is receiving the "highest levels" of protection and the Secret Service response in Florida was an example of procedures working as they should.

Tiny Kentucky town is rocked as their sheriff is jailed in the killing of a prominent judge

By BRUCE SCHREINER and DYLAN LOVAN Associated Press

WHITESBURG, Ky. (AP) — Residents of a tiny Appalachian town struggled Friday to cope with a shooting involving two of its most prominent citizens: a judge who was gunned down in his courthouse chambers and a local sheriff charged with his murder.

"It's just so sad. I just hate it," said Mike Watts, the Letcher County circuit court clerk. "Both of them are friends of mine. I've worked with both of them for years."

It wasn't clear what led to the shooting. The preliminary investigation indicates Letcher County Sheriff Shawn "Mickey" Stines shot District Judge Kevin Mullins multiple times following an argument inside the courthouse, according to Kentucky State Police.

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Mullins, 54, who held the judgeship for 15 years, died at the scene, and Stines, 43, surrendered without incident. He was charged with one count of first-degree murder.

The fatal shooting stunned the tight-knit town of Whitesburg, the county seat, with a population of about 1,700 people, 145 miles (235 kilometers) southeast of Lexington.

Stines was deposed on Monday in a lawsuit filed by two women, one of whom alleged that a deputy forced her to have sex inside Mullins' chambers for six months in exchange for staying out of jail. The lawsuit accuses the sheriff of "deliberate indifference in failing to adequately train and supervise" the deputy.

The now-former deputy sheriff, Ben Fields, pleaded guilty to raping the female prisoner while she was on home incarceration. Fields was sentenced this year to six months in jail and then six and a half years on probation for rape, sodomy, perjury and tampering with a prisoner monitoring device, The Mountain Eagle reported. Three charges related to a second woman were dismissed because she is now dead.

Stines fired Fields, who succeeded him as Mullins' bailiff, for "conduct unbecoming" after the lawsuit was filed in 2022, The Courier Journal reported at the time.

Those who know both the sheriff and the judge had nothing but praise for them, recalling how Mullins helped people with substance abuse disorder get treatment and how Stines led efforts to combat the opioid crisis. They worked together for years and were friends.

Those who knew Stines also were struggling to understand how someone they described as a family man could kill someone.

Jessica Slone, a distant relative of Stines' and a lifelong resident of Letcher County, said she was shocked when she heard the news. She was at the dollar store with her nephew when he told her Mullins had been shot.

"I was like seriously? Is he okay? And he said 'No, he's dead,'" she said. "But at the time, I didn't know that Mickey had done it. When I found out I was grocery shopping and I got really emotional and started praying."

She said Stines was close with his children and worked hard to get fentanyl and methamphetamine off the streets of the community and help people dealing with substance use disorder get into recovery.

Patty Wood, the widow of District Judge Jim Wood, Mullins' predecessor, said she has been close friends with Stines and his family for years. She said she was shocked by the shooting and the arrest of Stines.

"You couldn't find a better person on the face of the earth than Mickey Stines. I don't know what happened," she said.

"I know Mickey's character. And I know there had to be something that did it," she said. "I just cannot believe that he just went in and shot him for no reason."

Jennifer L. Taylor, a Whitesburg attorney, said Stines has a big heart and was looking forward to retiring from law enforcement, she said. In a recent conversation with her, Stines brought up that he might go to law school. Mullins, she said, "took his time out to listen to people."

"Keep our community in prayers," Taylor said. "It's going to be a rough time."

Several people also reflected on how a relatively quiet day in court quickly turned chaotic.

Watts said he saw Mullins and Stines together shortly before noon Thursday — about three hours before the shooting — when he went into the judge's chambers to ask him to sign some papers. Mullins and Stines were getting ready to go out to lunch together, Watts said.

It seemed like an ordinary interaction, except that Stines seemed quieter than usual. He thought the pair had a good working relationship and knew of nothing that could have prompted the violent encounter.

Watts, who was on another floor in the courthouse, never heard any shots and only learned of the shooting when his son called to tell him there was an "active shooter" in the courthouse.

Taylor said she was at her law office a short distance from the courthouse, when the shooting happened Thursday. "We just saw cars flying by," she said. "I'm still in shock. It's unreal."

Kentucky Attorney General Russell Coleman said his office will collaborate with a regional commonwealth's attorney as special prosecutors in the criminal case, since the lead county prosecutor, Matt Butler, recused himself and his office. Butler said he and the judge married two sisters, and their children act like siblings.

"We will fully investigate and pursue justice," Coleman said on social media.

Kentucky Supreme Court Chief Justice Lurance B. VanMeter was in Whitesburg on Friday and said he was visiting to show his support for the community and "our Kentucky Court of Justice family," he said. "They are obviously in shock and grieving."

VanMeter commented on the swirl of social media speculation about what triggered the shooting.

"I know it's hard to do, but I would hope that people on social media would just respect their privacy and their grief and let them mourn," he said. "It's just a tragic, horrific situation."

Letcher County's judge-executive closed the county courthouse on Friday.

It was unclear whether Stines had an attorney — state police referred inquires to a spokesperson who did not immediately respond by email.

Mullins served as a district judge in Letcher County since he was appointed by former Gov. Steve Beshear in 2009 and elected the following year.

Passenger on a previous Titan sub dive says his mission was aborted due to apparent malfunction

By PATRICK WHITTLE Associated Press

A paid passenger on an expedition to the Titanic with the company that owned the Titan submersible testified before a U.S. Coast Guard investigatory panel Friday that the mission he took part in was aborted due to an apparent mechanical failure.

The Titan submersible imploded last year while on another trip to the Titanic wreckage site. A Coast Guard investigatory panel has listened to four days of testimony that raised questions about the company's operations before the doomed mission.

Fred Hagen was first to testify Friday and was identified as a "mission specialist," which he and other witnesses have characterized as people who paid a fee to play a role in OceanGate's underwater exploration. He said his 2021 mission to the Titanic was aborted underwater when the Titan began malfunctioning and it was clear they were not going to reach the fabled wreck site.

The Titan appeared to be off course on its way to the Titanic, so the crew decided to use thrusters so the submersible could make its way to the wreck, Hagen said. The starboard thruster failed to activate, he said.

"We realized that all it could do was spin around in circles, making right turns," Hagen said. "At this juncture, we obviously weren't going to be able to navigate to the Titanic."

Hagen said the Titan dropped weights, resurfaced and the mission was scrapped. He said he was aware of the potentially unsafe nature of getting in the experimental submersible.

"Anyone that wanted to go was either delusional if they didn't think that it was dangerous, or they were embracing the risk," he said.

OceanGate co-founder and Titan pilot Stockton Rush was among five people who died when the submersible imploded en route to the site of the Titanic wreck in June 2023.

Earlier this month, the Coast Guard opened a public hearing that is part of a high-level investigation into the cause of the implosion. The public hearing began Sept. 16 and some of the testimony has focused on problems the Washington state company had prior to the fatal 2023 dive.

During Thursday's testimony, company scientific director Steven Ross told the investigators the sub experienced a malfunction just days before the Titanic dive. Earlier in the week, former OceanGate operations director David Lochridge said he frequently clashed with Rush and felt the company was committed only to making money.

"The whole idea behind the company was to make money," Lochridge testified. "There was very little in the way of science."

The hearing is expected to resume next week and run through Sept. 27.

Other witnesses Friday included former OceanGate contractor Antonella Wilby, who worked in operations and engineering for the company. Wilby said she was criticized by company officials when she came

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forward about concerns about a banging noise during a 2022 submersible dive.

Hagen said during his own testimony that he feared the hull had cracked when he heard a loud bang during a 2022 dive. Wilby said OceanGate's director of administration told her "you don't seem to have an explorer mindset" after she raised the concern about noise.

She said she also never saw anyone inspect the sub's hull after the banging noise, which she described as similar to an explosion.

"I saw what I would classify as safety theater," Wilby said.

Dave Dyer of the University of Washington Applied Physics Lab also testified Friday to provide details about the lab's relationship with OceanGate while its submersible was in development and said the company and lab disagreed about fundamental aspects of its engineering.

OceanGate felt it was better to terminate the relationship and take over the engineering itself, Dyer said.

"It was the engineering. We were butting heads too much," Dyer said.

Another Friday witness, Triton Submarines chief executive officer Patrick Lahey, recounted meeting OceanGate personnel in 2019 and getting a look at their submersible when it was in development. He said he "wasn't particularly impressed" by what he saw.

Lahey stressed that it's important for submersibles to be accredited to ensure safety.

"I just said it looked to me like a lot of the stuff was not quite ready for primetime. And that there were many things in it that I thought had not been executed as appropriately as they should be," Lahey said.

Lochridge and other witnesses have painted a picture of a company led by people who were impatient to get the unconventionally designed craft into the water. Lochridge said he filed a complaint with the federal Occupational Safety and Health Administration about the company. OSHA "promptly referred his safety allegations regarding the Titan submersible to the Coast Guard," a spokesperson for the agency said Thursday.

The deadly accident set off a worldwide debate about the future of private undersea exploration. Coast Guard officials noted at the start of the hearing that the submersible had not been independently reviewed, as is standard practice. That and Titan's unusual design subjected it to scrutiny in the undersea exploration community.

OceanGate suspended its operations after the implosion. The company has no full-time employees currently, but has been represented by an attorney during the hearing.

During the submersible's final dive on June 18, 2023, the crew lost contact after an exchange of texts about the Titan's depth and weight as it descended. The support ship Polar Prince then sent repeated messages asking if the Titan could still see the ship on its onboard display.

One of the last messages from Titan's crew to Polar Prince before the submersible imploded stated, "all good here," according to a visual recreation presented earlier in the hearing.

When the submersible was reported missing, rescuers rushed ships, planes and other equipment to an area about 435 miles (700 kilometers) south of St. John's, Newfoundland. Four days later, wreckage of the Titan was found on the ocean floor about 330 yards (300 meters) off the bow of the Titanic, Coast Guard officials said. No one on board survived.

OceanGate said it has been fully cooperating with the Coast Guard and NTSB investigations since they began. The Titan had been making voyages to the Titanic wreckage site going back to 2021.

Federal authorities subpoena NYC mayor's director of asylum seeker operations

By JAKE OFFENHARTZ Associated Press

NEW YORK (AP) — Federal prosecutors scrutinizing a web of top officials in New York City Mayor Eric Adams' administration subpoenaed the director of the city's Office of Asylum Seeker Operations to testify before a grand jury.

Molly Schaeffer, who coordinates the city's efforts to get housing and social services for newly arrived

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migrants, received the subpoena at her Brooklyn home Friday, according to a person familiar with the matter. The person spoke to The Associated Press on condition of anonymity because they were not authorized to discuss the subpoena.

The authorities did not seize Schaeffer's electronic devices — as they have done to several other Adams' aides in recent weeks — but served her a subpoena requesting her presence in front of a federal grand jury in Manhattan, the person said.

It was not immediately clear when the testimony would take place or how it could fit within the multiple ongoing federal law enforcement investigations swirling around Adams, a first-term Democrat and former police captain.

Schaeffer directed questions to the deputy mayor for communications, Fabien Levy, who declined to comment on the nature of the investigation.

"We expect all team members to fully comply with any ongoing inquiry," Levy wrote in a text message. "Molly Schaeffer is an integral part of our team and works hard every day to deliver for New Yorkers."

Schaeffer has not been accused of any wrongdoing. Federal prosecutors often use subpoenas to get testimony or records from people with information relevant to an investigation, not necessarily because they believe the person has committed a crime.

A spokesperson for the U.S. attorney's offices in Manhattan declined to comment.

In her current role, Schaeffer works closely with another top mayoral aide, Tim Pearson, a longtime confidante of Adams who oversees contracts for new shelters built by the city to house asylum seekers.

Earlier this month, federal agents seized the phones of Pearson, along with several other top deputies to the mayor, including the New York City police commissioner, the school's chancellor and two deputy mayors. The police commissioner, Edward Caban, resigned last week.

Those seizures are believed to be related to probes overseen by Manhattan federal prosecutors examining, at least in part, whether the relatives of top-ranking Adams' aides used their family connection for financial gain.

In July, Adams received his own subpoena from federal prosecutors seeking information from him, his campaign, and City Hall. That request came eight months after FBI agents seized the mayor's phones and an iPad as he was leaving an event in Manhattan.

Those subpoenas requested information about the mayor's schedule, his overseas travel and potential connections to the Turkish government, according to a person familiar with the matter who spoke on condition of anonymity because they were not authorized to discuss the investigations.

Adams also has not been accused of any wrongdoing.

A separate federal probe led by the U.S. Attorney's Office in Brooklyn is believed to be focused on Adam's director of Asian Affairs, Winnie Greco.

Schaeffer has led the office of asylum seeker operations since its creation last year, overseeing the city's response to the arrival of more than 200,000 migrants and the wide-ranging effort to house and feed the surge of new arrivals.

She previously worked for Adams' predecessor, Mayor Bill de Blasio.

Robinson won't appear at Trump's North Carolina rally after report on online posts, AP sources say

By GARY D. ROBERTSON and MICHELLE L. PRICE Associated Press

RALEIGH, N.C. (AP) — North Carolina Lt. Gov. Mark Robinson will not appear at former President Donald Trump's rally on Saturday in the battleground state following a CNN report about Robinson's alleged disturbing online posts, an absence that illustrates the liability the gubernatorial candidate poses for Trump and downballot GOP candidates.

Robinson is not expected to attend the event in Wilmington, according to a person on the Trump campaign and a second person familiar with the matter who spoke on condition of anonymity to discuss internal planning.

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Robinson has been a frequent presence at Trump's North Carolina campaign stops. The Republican nominee has referred to Robinson, who is Black, as "Martin Luther King on steroids" and long praised him. But in the wake of Thursday's CNN report, the Trump campaign issued a statement that didn't mention Robinson and instead spoke generally about how North Carolina was key to the campaign's efforts.

Robinson's campaign didn't respond to a text Friday seeking confirmation on his Saturday plans. The deadline in state law for Robinson to withdraw as the Republican candidate for governor passed late Thursday. State Republican leaders could have picked a replacement had a withdrawal occurred.

Robinson has denied writing the posts, which include racial and sexual comments. He said he wouldn't be forced out of the race by "salacious tabloid lies." While Robinson won his GOP gubernatorial primary in March, he's been trailing in several recent polls to Democratic nominee Josh Stein, the state's attorney general.

"Let me reassure you the things that you will see in that story — those are not the words of Mark Robinson," he told supporters in a video released Thursday by his campaign. "You know my words. You know my character."

State law says a gubernatorial nominee had until the day before the first absentee ballots requested by military and overseas voters are distributed to withdraw. They were distributed starting Friday.

Robinson has a history of inflammatory comments that Stein has said made him too extreme to lead North Carolina. They already have contributed to the prospect that campaign struggles for Robinson could help Democratic Vice President Kamala Harris win the state's 16 electoral votes.

Democrats jumped on Robinson and other Republicans after the report aired, showing on social media photos of Robinson with Trump or with other GOP candidates, attempting to tarnish them by association. Losing swing district races for a congressional seat and the General Assembly would endanger the GOP's control of the U.S. House and retaining veto-proof majorities at the legislature.

"The fallout is going to be huge," Chris Cooper, a political science professor at Western Carolina University, said Friday. "The Democrats are counting on this ... having a big effect." But Cooper said Republicans could limit problems to the governor's race only if upward ticket-splitting trends among voters continue.

Harris' campaign rolled out a new ad Friday it calls the first to link Trump to a down-ballot candidate. The commercial alternates between Trump's praise for Robinson and the lieutenant governor's comments which his critics have argued show his support for a statewide abortion ban without exceptions. Robinson's campaign have said that's not true.

The Democratic National Committee is also running billboards in three major North Carolina cities showing a photo of Robinson and Trump and comments Trump has said about him. And a fundraising appeal Friday by Jeff Jackson, Democratic attorney general candidate, also includes a past video showing Republican opponent Dan Bishop saying he endorsed Robinson.

"Every North Carolinian when they go to vote ought to look at whether a candidate has done that, because that sends a strong message about who you are as a candidate," Democratic Gov. Roy Cooper, a top Harris surrogate, said at a Friday news conference.

CNN's story, which describes a series of comments that it said Robinson posted on the message board more than a decade ago, sent tremors through the state's political class, particularly Republicans.

While the state Republican Party came to Robinson's defense late Thursday pointing out he's "categorically denied the allegations," party Chairman Jason Simmons put out his own statement Friday calling them "deeply troubling" and that Robinson "needs to explain them to the people of North Carolina."

U.S. Sen. Thom Tillis, R-N.C., who endorsed a Robinson rival in the primary, said on X that Thursday "was a tough day, but we must stay focused on the races we can win." He didn't mention the governor's race.

U.S. Rep. Richard Hudson of North Carolina, chairman of House Republicans' campaign arm, discounted Robinson's impact in North Carolina congressional races.

CNN reported that Robinson, who would be North Carolina's first Black governor, attacked on the message board civil rights leader Martin Luther King Jr. in searing terms and once referred to himself as a "black NAZI." CNN also reported that Robinson wrote of being aroused by a memory of "peeping" women

in gym showers when he was 14 along with an appreciation of transgender pornography. Robinson at one point referred to himself as a "perv," according to CNN.

The Associated Press has not independently confirmed that Robinson wrote and posted the messages. CNN said it matched details of the account on the pornographic website forum to other online accounts held by Robinson by comparing usernames, a known email address and his full name.

CNN reported that details discussed by the account holder matched Robinson's age, length of marriage and other biographical information. It also compared figures of speech that came up frequently in his public Twitter profile that appeared in discussions by the account on the pornographic website.

In-person voting begins for the US presidential contest, kicking off the sprint to Election Day

By STEVE KARNOWSKI Associated Press

MINNEAPOLIS (AP) — In-person voting for this year's presidential election began Friday, a milestone that kicked off a six-week sprint to Election Day after a summer of political turmoil.

Voters lined up to cast their ballots in Minnesota, South Dakota and Virginia, the states with the first early in-person voting opportunities. About a dozen more states will follow by mid-October.

At a polling site in Minneapolis, Jason Miller arrived well before the polls opened at 8 a.m. and was first in line. He was among roughly 75 people who cast ballots in the first hour at the city's early voting center.

"Why not try to be first? That's kind of fun, right?" said the 37-year-old house painter.

He said he voted "against crazy," but didn't want to name his choice for president.

"I don't think I have to. I think that's pretty obvious. I think that's very, very clear," he said.

The beginning of in-person balloting follows a tumultuous summer in American politics that included President Joe Biden dropping out of the race and being replaced by Vice President Kamala Harris as the Democratic nominee, and an assassination attempt against Republican nominee Donald Trump followed by another apparent attempt on his life just nine weeks later.

Across the country, local election directors are beefing up their security to keep their workers and polling places safe while also ensuring that ballots and voting procedures won't be tampered with. Officials and ordinary poll workers have been targets of harassment and even death threats since the 2020 presidential election.

Federal authorities are investigating the origin of suspicious packages that have been sent to or received by elections officials in more than 15 states in recent days, including Virginia.

"If I could wave a magic wand in this room right now, I would wish for two things: Between now and November 5th, I want to see high turnout and low drama," Minnesota Secretary of State Steve Simon said during a news conference Thursday that previewed his state's efforts around the election season. Simon also serves as president of the National Association of Secretaries of State.

Some voters suggested that the potential for trouble or chaos on Election Day was one reason not to wait.

Chris Burda, 74, said she is encouraging others to get their ballots in early "to avoid potential disruption on Election Day or in-person voting by a certain party who seems to be interested in poll watching to the point of intimidation." She cast her ballot for Harris at a Minneapolis voting center, saying the vice president was "standing up for democracy and the freedom to choose."

As the start of early voting approached, Trump's rhetoric turned more ominous with a pledge to prosecute anyone who "cheats" in the election in the same way he falsely claimed they did in 2020, when he lied about widespread fraud and attacked officials who stood by their accurate vote tallies.

Trump has previously sought to sow doubts about mail voting and encouraged voters to cast ballots in person on Election Day. But this year, Trump and the Republican National Committee, which he now controls, have begun to embrace early and mail voting as a way to lock in GOP votes before Election Day, just as Democrats have done for years.

Eugene Otteson, 71, a Vietnam War veteran and former mill worker, cast his early ballot for the former president in Anoka, Minnesota. He said he believes Trump will keep the country from intervening in foreign

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conflicts and will manage the economy like a business executive.

"Not that I like him, but he's a business person, and I like someone who can run a business," Otteson said. "With Kamala, you still don't know what she stands for ... I hear her going around say 'joy, joy.' Well, I can say joy to the world, but that don't mean it's going to stop the wars going on."

In Virginia, early in-person voting has long been popular in many parts of the state.

Fairfax County Elections Director Eric Spicer said roughly a third of local voters came to the polls on Election Day during the 2020 presidential election, while the rest voted by mail or early and in-person. Mary Lynn Pinkerman, the elections director for the city of Chesapeake, expects early voting to help ease the crowds on Nov. 5 but also cautioned that with heavy interest in this year's presidential race, "voters could still encounter wait times" on Election Day.

Among Virginians taking advantage of early voting Friday was Rocklyn Faher, a retired U.S. Navy aviation electrician who served in the first Gulf War. He became emotional when talking about casting his ballot in Norfolk for Harris. Fighting back tears, he spoke about preserving the Constitution and the future for his grandchildren.

"I'm obviously very emotionally invested in this election," said Faher, 70. "It is the most important election of the last 100 years."

Faher said he believes in protecting reproductive rights and likes Harris' plan to provide \$25,000 for first-time homebuyers, while criticizing Trump's plan to impose tariffs on products from overseas.

He also said that Harris' overall proposals are "better than herding 10 million naturalized and unnatural immigrants, documented or undocumented, into railroad cars and shipping them across the border into Mexico. That's insane."

Immigration, and in particular the surge at the country's southern border over the past few years, also is animating those casting a ballot for Trump, who has promised mass deportations if he wins the presidency again.

Israel Chavez, 37, came to America from Peru as a 10-year-old with his father and sister. He voted for Trump because he believes the economy was stronger under the former president and he supports a harder line on immigration.

"I know how it is when you have an open border and let anyone in," he said after casting his ballot at a voting center in Anoka, Minnesota. "My dad brought us into the country legally. We had visas. He just did it right."

In Yankton, South Dakota, the county elections office saw a steady stream of people voting early immediately after it opened at 9 a.m., said Kasi Foss, the county's assistant auditor. That's unusual for the first day of early voting.

She said that while the office didn't have a line for voting, the office consistently had two or three people wanting to vote at all times.

South Dakota voters are deciding the fate of several ballot initiatives on hot-button issues, including a proposed amendment to the state constitution to protect abortion rights and a measure that would legalize the recreational use of marijuana. But Foss said she believes the presidential race is driving turnout.

"Normally, on the first day, we'll have a couple of stragglers," she said.

Some voters might opt for early in-person balloting instead of using mail ballots to ensure their votes get counted, given the ongoing struggles of the U.S. Postal Service.

State and local election officials from across the country last week warned that problems with mail deliveries threaten to disenfranchise voters, and they told the head of the system that it hasn't fixed persistent deficiencies despite their repeated attempts at outreach.

Postmaster General Louis DeJoy responded in a letter released Monday that he'll work with state election officials to address their concerns, but reiterated that the Postal Service will be ready.

Simon, the Minnesota secretary of state, urged voters to make their voting plans now.

"My hope and expectation is that the USPS will do the things that we have recommended, and do them quickly over the next 47 days because the stakes really are high for individual voters," Simon said.

Bureau of Prisons says it's adding staff and making fixes at jail where Sean 'Diddy' Combs is held

By MICHAEL BALSAMO and MICHAEL R. SISAK Associated Press

NEW YORK (AP) — The federal Bureau of Prisons says it has increased staffing in recent months to make up for staggering shortfalls at the troubled New York City jail where Sean "Diddy" Combs is awaiting trial after pleading not guilty Tuesday to sex trafficking charges.

The agency's push to fix the Metropolitan Detention Center in Brooklyn comes as detainees, advocates and judges have continued to raise alarms about "dangerous, barbaric conditions," rampant violence and multiple deaths. Some judges have refused to send people to the jail, the only federal lockup in the nation's biggest city.

Combs' lawyers are pushing to have him moved to a jail in New Jersey, arguing that the Brooklyn jail, known as MDC Brooklyn, is unfit for pretrial detention. Combs, 54, is being kept in the facility's special housing unit, confined to his cell up to 23 hours a day with around-the-clock monitoring. His lawyer, Marc Agnifilo, said that's routine for high-profile new arrivals.

MDC Brooklyn is getting needed attention thanks to a group of senior Bureau of Prisons officials known as the Urgent Action Team, which is focusing on bringing the facility back to adequate staffing levels and ensuring it is in good repair.

The agency said Friday that it has increased staffing at the jail by about 20%, bringing its total number of employees to 469. Even so, there are still 157 vacant positions. The new hires include correctional officers and medical staff. Before the surge, the facility was operating at about 55% of full staffing, according to court filings.

At the same time, the facility's inmate population has dropped from about 1,600 at the start of the year to about 1,200 as of Friday.

A senior Bureau of Prisons official told The Associated Press that members of the Urgent Action Team have made repeated visits to MDC Brooklyn and meet weekly to address issues at the jail. Top agency leaders are giving the jail "sustained attention" and "sustained leadership focus" to mitigate issues at the lockup, the official said.

The official was not authorized to publicly discuss the ongoing review and spoke to the AP on condition of anonymity.

In addition to hiring, the Bureau of Prisons says it has been tackling a substantial maintenance backlog at the Brooklyn jail. Over four weeks in the spring, agency workers completed more than 800 work orders for repair and infrastructure improvements. They included electrical and plumbing upgrades and repairs to food service and heating and air conditioning systems.

MDC Brooklyn has been plagued by problems since it opened in the 1990s. Part of the facility, near the waterfront in the borough's Sunset Park neighborhood, is a century-old former Navy warehouse. The Bureau of Prisons closed its other New York City jail, the Metropolitan Correctional Center, in 2021 after Jeffrey Epstein's suicide there shone a spotlight on lax security, crumbling infrastructure and dangerous, squalid conditions.

MDC Brooklyn detainees have long complained about frequent violence, horrific conditions, severe staffing shortages and the widespread smuggling of drugs and other contraband, some of it facilitated by employees. At the same time, they say they've been subject to frequent lockdowns during which they've been barred from leaving their cells for visits, calls, showers or exercise.

MDC Brooklyn isn't the only federal prison facility beset by staffing and other problems.

The Bureau of Prisons has struggled to retain correctional officers at its prisons and jails across the U.S. — but the problem has been even more pronounced in New York City, in part because of city's high cost of living and starting salaries that are far lower than other law enforcement agencies.

In the last few years, MDC Brooklyn officers have been forced to work repeated overtime shifts because of staffing shortages, raising safety concerns. To stanch the departure of experience staff, the agency has increased retention bonuses to hike salaries for workers at the Brooklyn jail.

Still, problems have persisted. At least six MDC Brooklyn staff members have been charged with crimes in the last five years. Some were accused of accepting bribes or providing contraband to inmates such as drugs, cigarettes, and cellphones, according to an AP analysis of agency-related arrests.

In the last few months, inmates have also claimed that food served at the jail contained maggots. The senior Bureau of Prisons official who spoke to the AP about the Urgent Action Team's work said all food at the jail was evaluated after that claim and no maggots were found. An assistant warden also taste tests meals before they are served, the official said.

The agency's focus on fixing MDC Brooklyn comes amid increase scrutiny from Congress and a new law overhauling oversight of the beleaguered federal prison system. Combs' detention at MDC Brooklyn has only further galvanized public interest.

An ongoing AP investigation has uncovered deep, previously unreported flaws within the Bureau of Prisons, an agency with more than 30,000 employees, 158,000 inmates, 122 facilities and an annual budget of about \$8 billion.

AP reporting has revealed dozens of escapes, chronic violence, deaths and severe staffing shortages that have hampered responses to emergencies, including inmate assaults and suicides.

In April, the Bureau of Prisons said it was closing its women's prison in Dublin, California, known as the "rape club," giving up on attempts to reform the facility after an AP investigation exposed staff-on-inmate sexual abuse.

In July, President Joe Biden signed a law establishing a new oversight paradigm for the Bureau of Prisons, including an independent ombudsman to field and investigate complaints and risk-based inspections by the Justice Department's inspector general of all 122 federal prison facilities.

Georgia State Election Board approves rule requiring hand count of ballots

By KATE BRUMBACK Associated Press

ATLANTA (AP) — Georgia's State Election Board on Friday voted to approve a new rule that requires poll workers to count the number of paper ballots by hand after voting is completed, a change that critics worry could delay the reporting of election night results.

The board's decision went against the advice of the state attorney general's office, the secretary of state's office and an association of county election officials. Three Republican board members who were praised by former President Donald Trump during a rally last month in Atlanta voted to approve the measure, while the lone Democrat on the board and the nonpartisan chair voted to reject it.

The State Election Board has found itself mired in controversy in recent months as it considers new rules, many of them proposed by Trump allies. Democrats, legal experts and democracy advocates have raised concerns that new rules could be used by the former president and his supporters to cause chaos in this crucial swing state and undermine public confidence in results if he loses to Democratic Vice President Kamala Harris in November.

In a memo sent to election board members Thursday, the office of state Attorney General Chris Carr said no provision in state law allows hand counting of ballots at precincts. The memo says the rule is "not tethered to any statute" and is "likely the precise kind of impermissible legislation that agencies cannot do." It warns that any rule that oversteps the board's authority is unlikely to survive a legal challenge.

Already, two rules the board passed last month having to do with certifying vote counts have been challenged in two separate lawsuits, one filed by Democrats and the other filed by a conservative group. A judge has set an Oct. 1 trial on the Democrats' lawsuit.

Secretary of State Brad Raffensperger last month called the hand counting rule "misguided," saying it would delay the reporting of election results and introduce risks to chain of custody procedures.

The new rule requires that the number of ballots — not the number of votes — be counted at each polling place by three separate poll workers until all three counts are the same. If a scanner has more than 750 ballots inside at the end of voting, the poll manager can decide to begin the count the following day.

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Georgia voters make selections on a touchscreen voting machine that prints out a paper ballot that includes a human-readable list of the voter's choices as well as a QR code that is read by a scanner to tally the votes.

Proponents say the rule is needed to make sure the number of paper ballots matches the electronic tallies on scanners, check-in computers and voting machines. The three workers will have to count the ballots in piles of 50, and the poll manager needs to explain and fix, if possible, any discrepancies, as well as document them.

Results could be delayed if polling places decide to wait until the to hand tally is finished before they send the memory cards that record the votes in machines to the central tabulation location.

Several county election officials who spoke out against the rule during a public comment period preceding the vote warned that a hand count could delay the reporting of election night results. They also worried about putting an additional burden on poll workers who have already worked a long day.

Leaders of the Georgia Association of Voter Registration and Election Officials raised concerns similar to Raffensperger's in a letter to the State Election Board last month, warning the rule would ultimately undermine confidence in the process. The nonprofit association's members include over 500 election officials and workers statewide, according to the organization.

Janelle King, a board member who worked with the author of the rule on the wording, said she wasn't concerned if election night reporting is slowed a bit in favor of making sure that the number of ballots is accurate.

"What I don't want to do is set a precedent that we're OK with speed over accuracy," she said as the board was discussing the rule proposal, adding that she'd rather wait an extra hour or so for results than hear about lawsuits over inaccurate counts later.

Board chairman John Fervier cautioned that the board was going against the advice of its lawyers and could be exceeding its authority.

"This board is an administrative body. It's not a legislative body," he said. "If the legislature had wanted this, they would have put it in statute."

Some other states already count ballots by hand at the end of voting. Illinois has done so for decades "without complaints of delays or any potential impact on ballot security," Matt Dietrich, a spokesperson for the Illinois State Board of Elections said in a statement. "It's designed to ensure integrity and voter trust and by all accounts has worked."

Guidelines from the U.S. Election Assistance Commission say "the total number of ballots cast should balance with the number of total voters processed at each polling place," but they do not call for a hand count of ballots from a tabulator.

The board also tabled until 2025 a proposal for a similar count at early in-person voting locations. The board considered 11 new rules Friday, adopting a few others that mostly make minor changes and tabling some more complicated ones.

The election officials association had urged the State Election Board in a letter Tuesday not to consider any new rules when Election Day is less than 50 days away, ballots are already going out and poll worker training is well underway.

"We do not oppose rules because we are lazy or because a political operative or organization wants us to," the letter says. "We oppose rules because they are poorly written, inefficient, would not accomplish their stated goals, or go directly against state law."

Sean 'Diddy' Combs joins list of Hollywood stars charged with sex crimes

By MICHAEL CASEY Associated Press

Since the #MeToo movement took off, a multitude of male celebrities have been accused of sexual misconduct, but only a handful of those in the music and film industries who have actually faced criminal charges.

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Sean "Diddy" Combs has now joined that short list of prosecuted stars.

Here is a list of some of the most prominent men to face criminal charges in recent years and the outcome of those cases:

Harvey Weinstein

The ex-movie mogul was prosecuted in both New York and California after dozens of women came forward to publicly accuse him of sexual assault.

In the Los Angeles case, a jury convicted Weinstein in 2022 of raping and sexually assaulting one of four women he was charged with abusing. The three guilty counts involved an Italian actor and model who said Weinstein appeared at her hotel room, uninvited, during a Los Angeles film festival in 2013.

Weinstein, 72, was later acquitted of a sexual battery allegation made by a massage therapist who treated him at a hotel in 2010. The jury was unable to reach a decision on counts involving two other accusers. A mistrial was declared on those counts.

In the New York case, Weinstein was initially convicted in 2020 of raping one woman and sexually assaulting another, followed weeks of harrowing and graphic testimony from a string of accusers. But his 23-year prison sentence and conviction was overturned earlier this year, with New York's highest court saying the trial judge unfairly allowed testimony based on allegations that were not part of the case.

A retrial has been scheduled and Manhattan prosecutors this week brought a new indictment with additional allegations from another woman. The trial had been scheduled to start in November but is now unlikely to begin until 2025.

Weinstein, who also faces several civil lawsuits brought by women accusing him of sexual misconduct, denies sexually assaulting anyone and is appealing his California conviction.

Bill Cosby

The former "Cosby Show" star was the first celebrity to go on trial in the #MeToo era.

He was arrested in 2015 when a district attorney armed with newly unsealed evidence — Cosby's damaging deposition in a lawsuit brought by Temple University sports administrator Andrea Constand — filed charges against him just days before the 12-year statute of limitations was about to run out. Constand accused Cosby of drugging and sexually assaulting her.

The AP does not typically identify sexual assault victims without their permission, which Constand has granted.

Jurors couldn't reach a unanimous verdict when Cosby was put on trial in 2017. At a second trial in 2018, he was convicted and sentenced to up to a decade in prison. But the Pennsylvania Supreme Court in 2021 said the district attorney who made the decision to arrest Cosby was obligated to stand by a predecessor's promise not to charge Cosby, though there was no evidence that agreement was ever put in writing.

Cosby, now 87, has been accused of rape, sexual assault and sexual harassment by more than 60 women. He has denied all allegations involving sex crimes.

R. Kelly

Federal juries in Chicago and New York convicted Kelly of crimes that include producing child sexual abuse materials and federal sex trafficking charges.

Born Robert Sylvester Kelly, he was sentenced to 30 years in the New York case last year and a mostly concurrent 20-year sentence in February in the Chicago case.

The 57-year-old was accused of using his fame to sexually abuse young fans, including some who were just children, in a systematic scheme that went on for decades.

The Grammy-winning, multiplatinum-selling songwriter also was accused of using his entourage of managers and aides to meet girls and keep them from speaking out, an operation that prosecutors said amounted to a criminal enterprise.

Attorneys for R. Kelly are appealing his convictions.

Sean "Diddy" Combs

The hip-hop mogul was arrested in New York on Sept. 16 and was accused in an indictment of using his "power and prestige" to induce female victims and male sex workers into drug-fueled sexual performances dubbed "Freak Offs."

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Prosecutors said he used violence and threats of blackmail to keep people from speaking out. Combs, 54, faces federal racketeering conspiracy and sex trafficking charges that could put him in prison for at least 15 years if he is convicted on all counts.

A judge Wednesday rejected the hip-hop mogul's proposal that he await his sex trafficking trial in the luxury of his Florida mansion instead of a federal jail in Brooklyn.

Kevin Spacey

Last year, a London jury acquitted the Oscar-winning actor of sexual assault charges stemming from allegations by four men dating back 20 years.

Three men accused Spacey of aggressively grabbing their crotches, describing him as "vile" and a "slippery, snaky" predator. Spacey said he was a "big flirt" who had consensual flings with men and whose only misstep was touching a man's groin while making a "clumsy pass."

The court victory in England came after Spacey also successfully defended himself against a civil lawsuit in New York in 2022 brought by "Star Trek: Discovery" actor Anthony Rapp.

Cuba Gooding Jr.

The Oscar-winning "Jerry Maguire" star pleaded guilty in 2022 to forcibly kissing a worker at a New York nightclub in 2018 — and in return prosecutors dropped charges involving two other women that could have led to a possible jail term if the case had gone to trial and resulted in a conviction.

Gooding also publicly apologized for the first time to two other women who accused him of similar behavior in separate encounters, calling himself a "celebrity figure" who meant no harm. His admissions were part of a plea deal that came nearly three years after Gooding was arrested.

Gooding told the judge he "kissed the waitress on her lips" without consent.

Danny Masterson

"That '70s Show" star is serving a sentence of 30 years to life in prison for raping two women.

After an initial jury failed to reach verdicts on three counts of rape in December 2022 and a mistrial was declared, prosecutors retried Masterson on all three counts.

At his second trial, a jury found Masterson guilty of two of three rape counts on May 31. Both attacks took place in Masterson's Hollywood-area home in 2003, when he was at the height of his fame.

They could not reach a verdict on the third count, an allegation that Masterson also raped a longtime girlfriend.

Prosecutors alleged that Masterson used his prominence in the Church of Scientology — where all three women were also members at the time — to avoid consequences for decades after the attacks, and the women blamed the church for their hesitancy in going to police about Masterson.

Did Middle East device attack violate international law? Advocates want an investigation

By JAMEY KEATEN and KAREEM CHEHAYEB Associated Press

GENEVA (AP) — Human rights advocates are calling for an independent investigation into the deadly explosions of pagers and walkie-talkies in Lebanon and Syria, suggesting the blasts may have violated international law if the devices were fashioned as booby traps.

The explosions that have been widely blamed on Israel killed at least 37 people and wounded more than 3,000, including many members of the Iranian-backed militant group Hezbollah. Israel has not confirmed or denied involvement.

The United Nations human rights office and some advocacy groups have cried foul, arguing that the strikes were "indiscriminate" because it's nearly impossible to know who was holding the devices, or where they were, when they went off. But some academics insist the explosions were precisely focused because the devices had been distributed to Hezbollah members.

The International Committee of the Red Cross, which aims to help protect civilians and other noncombatants in conflict and aims to stay neutral, said: "This was a unique operation, and it will take time to have all the facts to establish a legal opinion."

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The committee declined to comment publicly about whether the operation violated international humanitarian law, which is difficult to enforce and sometimes flouted by countries.

International law has never addressed the targeting of communication devices that people carry on their bodies. The Geneva Conventions, which provide a rule book for the protection of civilians during conflict, were adopted 75 years ago, long before pagers, mobile phones and walkie-talkies were in widespread public use. The legal situation is further complicated by the fact that Hezbollah is an armed nonstate group acting inside Lebanon, a sovereign member of the U.N.

"There must be an independent, thorough and transparent investigation as to the circumstances of these mass explosions, and those who ordered and carried out such an attack must be held to account," the U.N. human rights chief, Volker Türk, said in a statement.

Did devices amount to booby traps?

The question of how to apply international rules to the attack seems to center mostly on whether a secret explosive embedded in a personal electronic device might be considered a booby trap. Israel has been blamed for targeted strikes and assassinations in the past, but a large strike using mobile communication devices is virtually unheard of.

A booby trap is defined as "any device designed or adapted to kill or injure, and which functions unexpectedly when a person disturbs or approaches an apparently harmless object," according to Article 7 of a 1996 adaptation of the Convention on Certain Conventional Weapons, which Israel has adopted.

The protocol prohibits booby traps "or other devices in the form of apparently harmless portable objects which are specifically designed and constructed to contain explosive material."

Lama Fakhri, Middle East and North Africa director at Human Rights Watch, said the rules were designed to protect civilians and avoid "the devastating scenes that continue to unfold across Lebanon today." She too called for an impartial investigation.

The convention also sets rules for the use of land mines, remnants of cluster bombs and other explosives. It bars use of other "manually emplaced munitions," such as improvised explosive devices that "are designed to kill or injure, and which are actuated manually, by remote control or automatically after a lapse of time."

The pagers were used by members of Hezbollah, but there was no guarantee that the members would be holding the devices when they went off. Many of the casualties were among members of Hezbollah's extensive civilian operations mainly serving Lebanon's Shiite community.

Laurie Blank, a professor at Emory Law School in Atlanta who specializes in international humanitarian law and the law of armed conflict, said the law of war doesn't prohibit use of booby traps outright, but places limits on them. She said she believed the attack was "most likely lawful under international law."

She said booby traps can be used to target enemy forces in or near a military objective, including the communication systems used by Hezbollah fighters.

"That said, it's not clear that this is a booby-trap scenario. For example, if the attack is attacking the pagers themselves, then it's not an issue of booby-trapping," Blank wrote in an email.

Did 'indiscriminate' nature of attack make it illegal?

Experts said the pager explosions suggested a long-planned and carefully crafted operation, possibly carried out by infiltrating the supply chain and rigging the devices with explosives before they were delivered to Lebanon.

"There is no world in which the explosion of hundreds, if not thousands, of pagers is not an indiscriminate attack prohibited by international law," Mai El-Sadany, who heads the Tahrir Institute for Middle East Policy, a Washington-based think tank, wrote on X.

"The pager holders were scattered across civilian areas, from shopping malls to crowded streets and apartment buildings to hospitals, surrounded by women, children and men," she told The Associated Press. "An attack like this cannot anticipate what innocent passerby is in the impact area or what carefree child picks up the pager when it beeps."

British lawyer Geoffrey Nice, who prosecuted former Yugoslav and Serbian President Slobodan Milosevic, said in an interview: "It's pretty obvious here it's a war crime. And we should call it out for what it is."

But he noted criminal conduct on both sides of the Israel-Hamas conflict, alluding to rocket strikes by Hamas militants on Israel and casualties caused by Israel's military operation in Gaza, where the Health Ministry says at least 41,000 people have been killed since the Oct. 7 Hamas attack on southern Israel that triggered the latest war.

Rules require countries to 'minimize' harm

Amos Guiora, a professor at the S.J. Quinney College of Law at the University of Utah, said the strikes were "justified in the context of self-defense," but he acknowledged the risks of collateral damage against civilians.

"International law does not articulate a number as to what is legitimate or illegitimate collateral damage, it's just to 'minimize.' The tragic reality of collateral damage is that innocent people will be harmed and killed," he said. "I do have a sense on this one that there was a conscious effort to minimize it — with the understanding it will be never perfect."

"This particular attack strikes me — whoever did it — is as pinpointed as pinpointed can be," said Guiora, who spent 20 years in the Israeli military and advised its commanders in Gaza in the 1990s.

Israel has already faced heavy international criticism over its military response in Gaza and, more recently, in the West Bank since the Oct. 7 attacks by Hamas.

Back in May, the top prosecutor at the International Criminal Court issued arrest warrants for top Israeli officials, including Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, as well as Hamas leaders behind the attacks, over their actions in the war.

Israel ignored an order from the U.N.'s top court to halt its military offensive in southern Gaza after South Africa accused Israel of genocide. Russia, too, has ignored the court's call for it to end its invasion of Ukraine.

Hamas has also been investigated. Human Rights Watch released a report in July that concluded Hamas-led armed groups committed numerous war crimes during the attacks in Israel.

Hezbollah has been linked to numerous indiscriminate attacks on civilians over the years, including in Argentina, Bulgaria and, of course, Israel.

New York magazine says its star political reporter is on leave after a relationship was disclosed

By DAVID BAUDER AP Media Writer

New York magazine says that its highly regarded Washington correspondent, Olivia Nuzzi, is on leave after disclosing that she violated the publication's standards by having a personal relationship with a former reporting subject.

The newsletter Status, which broke the story, and The New York Times both cite unnamed sources in identifying Robert F. Kennedy Jr. as the other person involved with Nuzzi. She has not confirmed Kennedy's involvement, and Kennedy said in a statement that he had only met her once.

David Haskell, New York magazine editor in chief, said in a note to staff members on Friday that Nuzzi told them the relationship began last December, "after we had published her November profile." Her only published profile that month was of Kennedy. The relationship reportedly ended in August, he wrote.

It's an explosive development for the magazine and Nuzzi, whose piece featuring an interview with Donald Trump, "Peering into Donald Trump's Ear, and Soul," was featured on its most recent cover. Haskell said online versions of the Trump story and one Nuzzi wrote about Biden this summer will direct readers to a note explaining the situation.

Posted late Thursday, New York said in the note that if it had been aware of the relationship, Nuzzi would not have been permitted to cover the presidential campaign.

New York said an internal review of her work has found no inaccuracies or evidence of bias, but that Nuzzi is on leave while a more thorough third-party review is undertaken.

"We regret this violation of our readers' trust," the magazine said, and a spokeswoman had no further comment. A spokesperson for Kennedy, who is married to the actress Cheryl Hines, did not immediately

return a message from The Associated Press.

Nuzzi said in a statement to Status that in early 2024, the nature of some communication between herself and a former reporting subject turned personal.

"During that time, I did not directly report on the subject nor use them as a source," she said. "The relationship was never physical but should have been disclosed to prevent the appearance of a conflict. I deeply regret not doing so immediately and apologize to those I've disappointed, especially my colleagues at New York."

Haskell said that New York editors "learned about the personal nature of Olivia's relationship a few days ago." He said he was told the relationship ended in August.

In her story about Kennedy's campaign that was published last November, "The Mind-Bending Politics of RFK Jr.'s Spoiler Campaign," Nuzzi described a harrowing car ride and brief hike with Kennedy and his dogs while interviewing him.

His name came up in a March 2024 piece in The New York Times where Nuzzi, Frank Bruni and Joe Klein discussed the state of the campaign at the time. "We're forgetting or purposefully ignoring something rather important about this election: It's not a two-man race. It's a three-man race," Nuzzi said, noting that at the time Kennedy was "polling competitively."

Status quoted a representative for Kennedy saying, "Mr. Kennedy only met Olivia Nuzzi once in her life for an interview she requested, which yielded a hit piece."

In Politico's Playbook newsletter Friday afternoon, that publication's Ryan Lizza — who is Nuzzi's ex-fiance — wrote that "because of my connection to this story ... my editors and I have agreed that I won't be involved in any coverage of Kennedy in Playbook or elsewhere at Politico."

Shohei Ohtani surpasses 50-50 milestone in spectacular fashion with a 3-homer, 2-steal game

By ALANIS THAMES AP Sports Writer

MIAMI (AP) — Shohei Ohtani looked up at the boisterous crowd that turned out to cheer him and the Los Angeles Dodgers — and entertained each and every spectator with one of the greatest individual performances, and seasons, in major league history.

Fans lifted their phones to capture the moment and chanted "M-V-P!" as Ohtani rounded the bases after he cleared the fence for the 50th time, becoming the first major league player with at least 50 home runs and 50 stolen bases in a season.

The most amazing thing about it? Ohtani's day wasn't even finished.

Ohtani raced past the 50-50 milestone in the most spectacular game of his history-making career, becoming the first big league player to hit three homers and steal two bases in a game during a 20-4 rout of the Miami Marlins on Thursday that also secured a playoff spot for the Dodgers.

"I almost cried, to be honest," Dodgers shortstop Miguel Rojas said. "It was a lot of emotions because of everything that happens behind the scenes that we got to witness every single day."

Los Angeles' \$700 million Japanese superstar hit his 49th homer in the sixth inning, his 50th in the seventh and his 51st in the ninth. He finished 6 for 6 with 10 RBIs.

"It was something I wanted to get over as quickly as possible. And, you know, it's something that I'm going to cherish for a very long time," Ohtani said through an interpreter in a televised interview.

Ohtani reached the second deck in right-center on two of his three homers at LoanDepot Park. In the sixth inning, he launched a 1-1 slider from George Soriano 438 feet for his 49th.

Ohtani hit his 50th homer in the seventh, an opposite-field, two-run shot to left against Marlins reliever Mike Baumann. Then, in the ninth, his 51st traveled 440 feet to right-center, a three-run shot against Marlins second baseman Vidal Brujan, who came in to pitch with the game out of hand.

"To be honest, I'm the one probably most surprised," Ohtani said. "I have no idea where this came from, but I'm glad that it was going well today."

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Ohtani came into the game with 48 homers and 49 steals. He took care of the stolen bases early, swiping his 50th in the first and his 51st in the second. He has been successful on his last 28 stolen base attempts.

He broke the Dodgers' franchise record of 49 homers set by Shawn Green in 2001. And he became the third player in major league history with at least six hits, three homers and 10 RBIs in a game, joining Cincinnati's Walker Cooper in 1949 and Washington's Anthony Rendon in 2017.

"THIS GUY IS UNREAL!!!" LeBron James posted on X.

Ohtani has 120 RBIs, trailing only Aaron Judge of the New York Yankees (53 homers, 136 RBIs) in both categories.

Ohtani reached the 50-50 milestone in his 150th game. He was already the sixth player in major league history and the fastest ever to reach 40 home runs and 40 stolen bases in a season, needing just 126 games.

His previous career high in homers was 46 for the Los Angeles Angels in 2021, when he also made 23 starts on the mound and won his first of two American League MVP awards.

It was another memorable night for Ohtani at LoanDepot Park, where he struck out then-Angels teammate Mike Trout of the United States for the final out of the 2023 World Baseball Classic championship while playing for Japan.

"I've had perhaps the most memorable moments here in my career," Ohtani said, "and this stadium has become one of my favorite stadiums."

Already the consensus best player in baseball whose accomplishments as a pitcher and batter outpaced even Babe Ruth, Ohtani reached new heights as an offensive player while taking the year off from pitching.

Ohtani signed his \$700 million, 10-year deal with the Dodgers last December. The two-way star, who previously spent six years with the Los Angeles Angels, has played exclusively at designated hitter this season as he rehabilitates after surgery a year ago for an injured elbow ligament.

He finished a triple shy of the cycle on Thursday, adding a run-scoring single and two doubles. He was thrown out at third base while trying to stretch his second double into a triple.

"There's nothing you really can say because there's nothing anybody can do about it," teammate and former MVP Mookie Betts said. "He's just too good."

First base was open when Ohtani came up to bat in the seventh, but Marlins manager Skip Schumaker decided against intentionally walking him with the Marlins trailing 11-3.

"If it was a tight game, one-run lead or we're down one, I probably put him on," Schumaker said. "Down that many runs, that's a bad move baseball-wise, karma-wise, baseball god-wise. ... I think out of respect for the game, we were going to go after him. He hit the home run. That's just part of the deal. He's hit (51) of them. He's the most talented player I've ever seen."

Preparation was a key to Ohtani becoming the first member of the 50-50 club. He regularly huddled with the team's hitting coaches and studied video of opposing pitchers to understand their tendencies with hitters and baserunners.

"I see all the work he puts in," catcher Will Smith said recently. "It's not like he goes out there and it's too easy for him. He works harder than anybody. He scouts really hard. He's playing a different game so it's fun to see."

Ohtani appeared to make the 50-50 mark his mission. He increased the frequency of his base-stealing attempts, and in turn his success rate went up.

But that may not be the case next year when he returns to the mound.

"He's not pitching this year so I think he is emptying the tank offensively," manager Dave Roberts said. "I do think the power, the on-base (percentage), the average, I think he can do that as a pitcher. He's done something pretty similar like that with his OPS. But as far as the stolen bases go, I'm not sure about that."

Ohtani's teammates have enjoyed watching him crush home runs and scamper around the bases.

"I'm honestly kind of trying to learn from him just seeing the way he goes about his day-to-day business. He's very consistent, the same demeanor throughout," outfielder Tommy Edman said recently. "I think that's why he's such a good player."

Third baseman Max Muncy added, "Every night I feel like he does something that we haven't seen." What's next for Ohtani?

The Dodgers are headed to the postseason in October, which will be another first for Ohtani. He never made it there with the Angels, who never had a winning record during his tenure in Anaheim.

Another potential first could be earning National League MVP honors as a designated hitter. No player who got most of his playing time as a DH — without pitching — has ever won MVP, although Don Baylor, Edgar Martinez and David Ortiz placed high in the vote.

It would be Ohtani's third career MVP award.

House unanimously votes to boost Trump security as Congress scrambles to ensure candidate safety

By MARY CLARE JALONICK and FARNOUSH AMIRI Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Lawmakers are scrambling to ensure that the U.S. Secret Service has enough money and resources to keep the nation's presidential candidates safe amid repeated threats of violence. It's unclear, though, how much they can do with only weeks before the election, or if additional dollars would make an immediate difference.

Days after a gunman was arrested on former President Donald Trump's golf course, the House on Friday overwhelmingly passed bipartisan legislation 405-0 to require the agency use the same standards when assigning agents to major presidential candidates as they do presidents and vice presidents. The agency has told Congress that it has already boosted Trump's security, but House lawmakers want it put into law.

The efforts come after an assassination attempt on former President Donald Trump at a rally in July, and after Secret Service agents arrested a man with a rifle hiding on the golf course at Trump's Florida club over the weekend. The suspect in Florida apparently also sought to assassinate the GOP presidential nominee.

"In America, elections are determined at the ballot box, not by an assassin's bullet," Rep. Mike Lawler, R-N.Y., a chief sponsor of the bill, said in floor debate ahead of the vote. "That these incidents were allowed to occur is a stain on our country."

With the election rapidly approaching and Congress headed out of town before October, lawmakers are rushing to figure out exactly what might help, hoping to assess the agency's most pressing needs while ensuring that they are doing everything they can in an era where political violence has become more commonplace and every politician is a target.

"We have a responsibility here in Congress to get down to the bottom of this to figure out why these things are happening and what we can do about it," House Speaker Mike Johnson, R-La., said Tuesday. "This is not a partisan issue. We have both parties working on it."

House Democratic Leader Hakeem Jeffries said Thursday that "we've got to get the Secret Service into a position where its protectees are shielded in the most maximum way possible."

Democrats and Republicans have been in talks with the agency this week to find out whether additional resources are needed. Connecticut Sen. Chris Murphy, the Democratic chairman of the spending subcommittee that oversees the Secret Service, said Congress wants to make sure that if it is spending new dollars, "it's going to help the situation between now and the inauguration."

Murphy said new money could go toward technology like drones, partnerships with other agencies that could provide immediate assistance and overtime pay for agents. It would likely be added to a stopgap spending bill that Congress will consider next week to keep the government running, either in the form of allowing the Secret Service to spend money more quickly or providing them with emergency dollars.

"I'm confident we are going to take care of this one way or the other," Murphy said.

After the July shooting, House Republicans created a bipartisan task force focused on investigating the security failures of that day, and the panel will hold its first hearing next week. The House voted Friday to expand the committee's mandate to include what happened in Florida, even though the Secret Service successfully apprehended the suspect before anyone was hurt.

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In a letter earlier this month, the Secret Service told lawmakers that a funding shortfall was not the reason for lapses in Trump's security when a gunman climbed onto an unsecured roof on July 13 at a rally in Butler, Pennsylvania, and opened fire. But Acting Secret Service Director Ronald Rowe Jr. said this week that the agency had "immediate needs" and that he's talking to Congress.

Secret Service officials also told lawmakers behind closed doors that they have already increased Trump's security to the same level as Vice President Kamala Harris and President Joe Biden.

"There are a handful of specialized assets only the commander in chief gets, but the rest of his protection is at the same level," Spencer Love, a Democratic spokesperson for the House task force, said after the agency briefed members on Wednesday.

In the Senate, Florida Sen. Rick Scott has also introduced a bill mandating similar protection for presidential candidates. Both bills would also require regular reports to Congress on the status of the candidates' protection. Senate leaders have not yet said whether they will consider the legislation.

In a joint statement after the bill's passage, Lawler and his co-sponsor, Democratic Rep. Ritchie Torres of New York, urged the Senate to take up the bill and President Joe Biden to sign it. They thanked Biden for expanding Trump's security but said that "without the passage and implementation of this legislation, this enhanced protection will not be codified into law and is subject to change with time."

Republicans have argued that an overhaul of the agency, and potentially reallocating agents, should be a higher priority than funding.

House Majority Leader Steve Scalise, a Louisiana Republican who was himself shot at a baseball practice in 2017, noted this week that the Secret Service has received regular budget increases in recent years.

"It's not about the money," Scalise said, but "what they're doing with the money."

Rep. Mike Waltz, a Republican on the task force, said he pushed Secret Service officials Wednesday on what new resources they needed and they said they were still evaluating.

"I think it's irresponsible to just throw money at it when they're not even sure what exactly they need and how quickly they can get it," the Florida lawmaker said, adding that he hopes the agency shifts to a more threat-focused approach to protecting officials and candidates.

It's unclear, though, if Republicans would fight a funding boost.

"It's been made implicitly clear that they're stretched pretty thin," said Democratic Rep. Glenn Ivey, a member of the task force. "I know that there's some folks who see a \$3 billion budget and think that should be enough. But when you look at where all of the bodies have to go, that's a problem."

Takeaways from AP's report on churches starting schools in voucher states

By HOLLY MEYER Associated Press

Some churches are launching new Christian schools on their campuses, seeking to give parents more education options that align with religious values.

State school voucher programs are not the driving reason, but they are making the start-up process easier, pastors and Christian education experts say. In Florida, Ohio and other states, there is now a greater availability of taxpayer funding to pay for K-12 private school tuition.

The demand for church-affiliated schools, they say, rose out of pandemic-era scrutiny over what children were being taught in public schools about gender, sexuality and other contentious issues.

Here are some of the key points arising from this development:

A fast-moving, multistate trend

Advocates for taxpayer-funded religious schools say their aim is not to hurt public schools. Rather, they say, it's about giving parents more schooling options that align with their Christian values.

In Christian classrooms, pastors say religious beliefs can inform lessons on morals and character building, teachers are free to incorporate the Bible across subjects, and the immersive environment may give students a better chance of staying believers as adults.

Ohio passed so-called universal school choice — taxpayer dollars available for private school tuition without income limits — in 2023.

Troy McIntosh, executive director of the Ohio Christian Education Network, says he wants all Ohio families to have access to a Christian education.

“We didn’t need five Christian schools in the state — we needed 50,” he said.

There has been a wave of school voucher laws passed nationwide — including in Arizona, Florida and West Virginia — following key Supreme Court rulings in recent years. This year, universal school choice became an official national Republican Party policy, including equal treatment for homeschooling.

Says pastor Jimmy Scroggins, whose Family Church in South Florida is hoping to launch three classical Christian schools over the next year, “We’re not trying to burn anything down. We’re trying to build something constructive.”

Opponents worry about church-state issues and harm to public schools

In addition to discrimination concerns and church-state issues, opponents worry school vouchers take money from public schools, which serve most U.S. students, and benefit higher-income families who already use private schools.

“The problem isn’t churches starting schools. The problem is taxpayer funding for these schools, or any private schools,” said Rachel Laser, president of Americans United for Separation of Church and State. School vouchers, she said, “force taxpayers to fund religious education — a clear violation of religious freedom.”

Melissa Erickson, director and co-founder of Alliance for Public Schools in Florida, said she has fought vouchers for years along with other policies that hurt a public school system continually villainized as the problem, even as it serves most children in the state.

“They want the benefits of the public funding without the requirements that public schools have to go through. It’s very concerning that there’s no accountability,” said Erickson, who is seeing “homeschool collectives or small individual churches that never thought of going into the education business, now going into it because there’s this unregulated stream of money.”

A look at the numbers

Most U.S. private schools are religious, though not all are sponsored by a specific house of worship.

Conservative Christian schools accounted for nearly 12% (3,549) of the country’s private options during the 2021-22 academic year, according to the latest data from the National Center for Education Statistics’ Private School Universe Survey. While they’re not the largest group, enrollment is growing at conservative Christian schools. Total enrollment jumped about 15% (785,440) in 2021, compared to 2019.

The Association of Christian Schools International, an accreditation group, represents about 2,200 U.S. schools. This summer, the association said it had 17 churches in its emerging schools program.

“We are calling upon pastors to envision a generation of ambassadors for Jesus Christ, molded through Christian education,” association president Larry Taylor said in a news release.

Vouchers ease start-up stress for churches seeing demand for more Christian schools

By HOLLY MEYER Associated Press

Florida pastor Melvin Adams knows a few hours of church programming every week is no match for the more than 30 hours children spend at secular schools, absorbing lessons that he says run counter to their family’s Christian beliefs.

Like other theologically conservative pastors in Florida and beyond, he decided his Nazarene church in the Orlando suburbs could do something about it. Now the inaugural semester of Winter Garden Christian Academy is underway at Faith Family Community Church, educating K-4th grade students within the church’s biblical worldview.

“We’re making disciples and we’re doing it not just on Sundays, but we’re doing it all week long,” said Adams. “I feel like we do have a leg up here in Florida.”

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The state has an expansive voucher program in which taxpayers help to pay tuition for all families who want to send their kids to private schools. While that's not the primary reason Faith Family Community and other churches are launching Christian schools on their campus, the vouchers have made it easier.

It's not about hurting public schools, said pastor Jimmy Scroggins, whose Family Church in South Florida is hoping to launch three classical Christian schools over the next year. Rather, he said it's about giving parents more schooling options that align with their Christian values.

Family Church is responding to an ongoing demand that rose out of heightened, pandemic-era scrutiny of what children were being taught in public schools about gender, sexuality and other contentious issues, he said. In Christian classrooms, pastors say religious beliefs can inform lessons on morals and character building, teachers are free to incorporate the Bible across subjects, and the immersive environment may give students a better chance of staying believers as adults.

A push for a Christian education reformation

"Our hope is to help accelerate this movement of Christian education. ... That every Christian church with a building will consider starting or hosting a neighborhood school," said Scroggins. "We're not trying to burn anything down. We're trying to build something constructive."

Scroggins makes his case in "The Education Reformation: Why Your Church Should Start a Christian School," a new book he co-wrote with Trevin Wax of the Southern Baptist Convention's North American Mission Board. Scroggins' large, multisite church also is Southern Baptist.

They have company in their cause from school voucher advocates.

On the national level, for example, Family Research Council senior fellow Joseph Backholm made a similar argument in his 2020 report, "Why Every Church Should Start a Christian School," while pushing for more public funding for private education. At the state level, the Ohio Christian Education Network launched a school planting initiative for churches in 2021.

"We believe the church has a responsibility to rise up and meet what we see as an educational crisis in the United States," said Troy McIntosh, the network's executive director. So far, they've helped start two schools and hope to add more, likely beginning as small learning environments known as microschools, he said.

Ohio passed so-called universal school choice — taxpayer money available for private school tuition without income limits — in 2023. They were part of a wave of pro-school voucher laws passed in Arizona, Florida, West Virginia and other states following key Supreme Court rulings in recent years. This year, universal school choice became an official national Republican Party policy, including equal treatment for homeschooling.

School voucher trend divides stakeholders

In addition to discrimination concerns and church-state issues, opponents worry school vouchers take money from public schools, which serve most U.S. students, and help higher-income families already in private schools.

"The problem isn't churches starting schools. The problem is taxpayer funding for these schools, or any private schools," said Rachel Laser, president of Americans United for Separation of Church and State, in a statement. School vouchers, she said, "force taxpayers to fund religious education — a clear violation of religious freedom."

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through. It's very concerning that there's no accountability," said Erickson, who is seeing "homeschool collectives or small individual churches that never thought of going into the education business, now going into it because there's this unregulated stream of money."

Churches sharing their space with school start-ups

In Ohio, McIntosh's group wants all Ohio families to have access to a Christian education, and it backed the state's expansive school voucher program.

"We didn't need five Christian schools in the state — we needed 50," said McIntosh, noting that getting a building can be a challenge for school start-ups. "We tried to take that hurdle away by sourcing church facilities that are largely unused during the week."

Northland Church, a nondenominational congregation in the Orlando suburbs, had that unused space and decided to host a school, according to senior pastor Josh Laxton, who said in an email that he sees Christian education as a counterweight to declining church attendance and biblical literacy trends. The church invited The Ecclesial School Initiative to start a school on its grounds last year.

The Northland school is the second campus the initiative launched since its start in 2020, said Kevin Clark, founder and president. The group is creating a network of classical schools hosted by churches, expanding access to Christian education in Florida — and transforming lives.

"I thought this can't just be a one-off solution. It needs a systematic approach to engage more families ... and serve families that hadn't really had this kind of access," said Clark, noting Christian education is often a value-add option for more well-to-do families.

The Ecclesial School Initiative gets a shoutout in Scroggins' book, which is being offered for free through the SBC's domestic evangelism arm and the Association of Christian Schools International. The accreditation group represents about 2,200 U.S. schools; this summer the association said it had 17 churches in its emerging schools program.

"We are calling upon pastors to envision a generation of ambassadors for Jesus Christ, molded through Christian education," association president Larry Taylor said in a news release announcing the Southern Baptist collaboration. He wants students to be "capable not only of engaging with the culture but also of navigating and thriving amidst secular ideologies."

Public school vs. Sunday school

The public school-Sunday school clash has flared up before with disagreements about human origins to prayer in class, said Jeff Walton, executive director of the American Association of Christian Schools. Today, the accreditation group is seeing school growth, especially from Southern Baptist churches, and enrollment increasing among its more than 700 member schools, he said.

"It's not an opposition to public education in principle. It's an opposition to where public schools have gone ideologically in a lot of communities, and that frustrates Christian parents," said Walton, noting the conflicting messages are hard on children.

The first semester is underway at one Southern Baptist church in West Virginia. South Berkley Baptist's Christian academy, which accepts the state's Hope Scholarship voucher, is starting off with less than 10 students and individualized learning, said pastor Patrick McCoy, who is pursuing school accreditation.

The school came about after McCoy started substitute teaching at area public schools a couple years ago. He said there he found good people, and little being taught on hot-button ideologies, but a clear need for strong Christian education.

"They're failing in preparing them for adulthood," said McCoy, who is worried for the future of public-school funding since he expects more parents will use vouchers for private education.

"We've got to attack this problem head-on," he said. "Since they're not doing it, somebody needs to do it."

Many players who made their MLB debuts in 2020 felt like they were 'missing out'

By STEPHEN HAWKINS AP Baseball Writer

Garrett Crochet, Tanner Houck and Tarik Skubal made their big league debuts pitching in empty ballparks. No family members were there to share the moment when Ryan Mountcastle and Brent Rooker got their first hits.

They were among 212 players who made their MLB debuts during the 2020 season that was delayed and shortened to 60 games because of the COVID-19 pandemic. When the games finally began late that July, no fans were allowed and the only crowd noise was artificial through stadium speakers.

"All the buildup and all the hard work and everything, it was like I expected a little more. ... I just felt like I was missing out," said Crochet, a Chicago White Sox left-hander.

"You dream of playing on the big stage, but you don't really understand what it entails. So debuting in the COVID year, to be honest, wasn't the best," said Skubal, a 17-game winner this season for Detroit.

Four summers later, Skubal, Crochet and Boston starter Houck were first-time All-Stars this year with fellow pandemic debuts Philadelphia third baseman Alec Bohm, Washington reliever Kyle Finnegan and Cubs infielder Isaac Paredes. Eleven others have made All-Star teams, including two-time picks San Diego infielder Jake Cronenworth, Milwaukee catcher William Contreras and Tampa Bay pitcher Shane Bieber.

Contreras, who was with the Atlanta Braves in 2021, is one of 10 players who made their 2020 debuts and have won World Series championship rings. The Brewers catcher and about two dozen other players are on teams contending for playoff spots this season — with plenty of fans cheering them in the stadium.

"Once it was full capacity, it's definitely, definitely a lot better," said Mountcastle, the Baltimore Orioles first baseman.

"The fans bring a different aspect to the game," added New York Mets left-hander David Peterson, who was 6-2 in 10 games as a rookie in 2020. "There's nothing like a packed stadium going wild."

About 100 of those 212 first-timers in 2020 are still playing or have played in MLB games this year, according to data reviewed through Baseball Reference.

But there are also 24 players like Brandon Bailey, who after making it to the majors never got back after that season. Family and friends never got to be in the stands to watch them play in a big league game.

Bailey, who turns 30 in October, retired after a second Tommy John surgery months after his 2020 debut with the Astros.

"That hit me the hardest, that my family would never get that opportunity," said Bailey, who is now a pitching coach in the Orioles organization.

Rooker, now with Oakland, recalls the uniqueness of his debut with the Minnesota Twins, getting called up from the alternate training site instead of an affiliate and then his first at-bats that season coming against big league pitchers. The outfielder hit .316 with a homer and reached base in all seven games he played. Traded twice in 2022 and then released by Kansas City, he was claimed by the Athletics and was an All-Star in 2023 during a 30-homer season.

"We got two different debuts. We got the 2020 debut and then you got the debut the next year, obviously with fans and with the actual normal ballpark procedures," Rooker said. "The 2020 games are still intense obviously because they're Major League Baseball games, but there's no fans there, so they feel like kind of weird scrimmages in a way. And the next year, you kind of got that real-game feel."

Mountcastle believes he had the same nerves, excitement and emotions for his debut that he would have had in a full stadium. He hit .333 with five home runs and 23 RBIs after the Orioles brought him up for the final 35 games of 2020, a debut he was able to share with his family through a team-produced video.

"We all remember it was definitely a crazy time for everybody, but it was a short season, too," Mountcastle said. "I'm just happy we got somewhat of a season in."

Houck won all three of his starts for Boston at the end of the 2020 season, with a 0.53 ERA over 17 innings. The right-hander felt the absence of fans was an advantage in allowing him to remain calm and collected when pitching in MLB games for the first time. It really felt like being in the majors when his wife

and family were able to be there to watch him in 2021.

"I feel blessed that I was fortunate enough to be a part of the group that got to continue playing after such a weird year," Houck said. "I don't think it took anything away from me. I think that becoming a big leaguer was everything I've wanted since I was 4 years old."

Voters split on whether Harris or Trump would do a better job on the economy: AP-NORC poll

By JOSH BOAK and LINLEY SANDERS Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Going into November's election, neither Kamala Harris nor Donald Trump has a decisive edge with the public on the economy, turning an issue that was once a clear strength for Trump into the equivalent of a political jump ball.

About 4 in 10 registered voters say Republican Trump would do a better job handling the economy, while a similar number say that about the Democratic vice president, according to a new poll by The Associated Press-NORC Center for Public Affairs Research. About 1 in 10 voters don't trust either candidate, and a similar share has equal faith in them.

The finding is a warning sign for Trump, who has tried to link Harris to President Joe Biden's economic track record. The new poll suggests that Harris may be escaping some of the president's baggage on the issue, undercutting what was previously one of Trump's major advantages.

The economy has long been a weak issue for Biden: A separate AP-NORC poll conducted in late June, before Biden's disastrous debate with Trump, found that about 6 in 10 Americans disapproved of his handling of the economy. Earlier this year, Americans were much more likely to say that Trump's presidency helped the country on cost of living and job creation, compared to Biden's.

The new poll found that the economy is one of the most important issues for about 8 in 10 voters as they consider which candidate to support, dwarfing other top issues like health care and crime.

The aftermath of inflation's spike in 2022 to a four-decade high has pervaded this year's presidential contest. Shoppers are upset over their grocery bills. Higher interest rates are financially squeezing the buyers of homes and motor vehicles. All that has appeared to matter more to the public than the low 4.2% unemployment rate and stock market gains.

According to the AP-NORC poll, only about one-third of voters say the state of the national economy is somewhat or very good, although they're more optimistic about their own situation, with about 6 in 10 voters saying their household's finances are somewhat or very good. Both of those numbers have remained steady over the course of the year, despite falling inflation.

The candidates have clashing ideas about how best to straighten out the economy, giving voters a stark choice that might hint at how partisan identity increasingly informs views of the economy and policy. But neither campaign has fully explained how its plans would be implemented. Harris insists her plans would be fully funded and not add to the deficit, while Trump's team assumes — in defiance of most economic models — that growth will be high enough to offset the cost.

Mark Carlough, 33, who works on medical records in Philadelphia, plans to vote for Harris and says he believes that the taxes on imports proposed by Trump would hurt most consumers.

"The tariffs would be horrible for the economy," he said.

Richard Tunnell, 32, of Huntsville, Texas, plans to vote for Trump, just as he did in 2020. He's not sure if the Republican has an advantage over Harris on the economy, but he noted that Trump has been a great businessman who remains one of the "richest men on the planet" even after filing for bankruptcy multiple times.

"I believe this country needs someone to reach their hand in it and work it like a game of Monopoly and that person is Donald Trump," said Tunnell, a military veteran on disability.

Chantelle Breaux, 38, a stay-at-home parent from Lafayette, Louisiana, feels neither candidate has much to offer on the economy. She doesn't plan to vote — unless a candidate more to her liking enters the race.

"Kamala wants to put a Band-Aid where major surgery needs to be done on this economy," said Breaux.

"Trump wants to run the country as if it's a business, but it isn't a business that is going to support all of the people."

Former President Trump suggests growth would come from tax cuts for corporations and the wealthy leading to more investment, while a universal tariff of as much as 20% would direct that investment to building U.S. factories.

Harris has campaigned on more benefits for the middle class to be funded by higher taxes on corporations and the wealthy, saying that would help to contain costs and deliver growth. Her team has warned that Trump's tariffs would lead to higher prices and worsen underlying inflation challenges.

The economy is one of many issues shaping public sentiment as the campaigns seek to turn out their voters. More than half of voters said health care was a top concern, while roughly half said that about crime, immigration, abortion policy and gun policy. Only about one-third called climate change one of the most important issues for their vote, and about one-quarter said that about the war between Israel and Hamas.

Trump and Harris are evenly matched in the poll on who would better handle crime and the war in Gaza. But the issues soon splinter in ways that reflect the distinct priorities of Republicans and Democrats.

Trump has an advantage over Harris on whom voters trust to better handle immigration. This issue was a problem for Biden, as well: Illegal immigration and crossings at the U.S. border with Mexico have been a challenge during much of his administration. Republicans are more likely to care about immigration, the issue where Trump has a clear upper hand.

Harris fares better than Trump when it comes to issues that Democrats care more about, including gun policy, health care, abortion policy and climate change.

Rosamaria Nunez, a 68-year-old retiree in San Antonio, Texas, identified gun violence as the most important issue facing the country, saying it became personal when her grandson called her last year to be picked up because of a school lockdown.

Nunez said she plans to vote for Harris, saying: "First of all, she's a gun owner, so she can relate to the safety issue. She seems like she's more in tune with a real person than Trump is."

Overall, voters see high stakes for the presidential election's impact on the country's future, the economy, and the future of democracy in the U.S., but they're less likely to think the election will have an impact on them personally. About 8 in 10 voters say the election will have "a great deal" or "quite a bit" of impact on the country's future. About three-quarters say the election will have a similar impact on the nation's economy and the future of democracy in the U.S.

By contrast, half of voters say the election will have at least "quite a bit" of impact on them personally.

Brazil drought punishes coffee farms and threatens to push prices even higher

By GABRIELA SÁ PESSOA and DEE-ANN DURBIN Associated Press

CACONDE, Brazil (AP) — Silvio Almeida's coffee plantation sits at an ideal altitude on a Brazilian hillside, whose clay-rich soil does well at retaining moisture from rainfall and a nearby reservoir.

Lately, though, water is scarce on Almeida's modest farm in Caconde, a town in one of Sao Paulo state's key growing regions. He can't get his coffee to grow the way it should.

In Brazil, the world's largest coffee producer, Almeida and other farmers have started grappling with the nation's worst drought in more than seven decades and above-average temperatures. Almeida expected to harvest 120 sacks of coffee beans this harvest season, but instead managed just 100.

"Given the conditions here, the 2025 crop is already affected," he told The Associated Press, pointing to a part of his plantation where flower buds died before blooming. "I won't say it's doomed, because with God anything is possible. But based on the situation, it's already compromised."

Brazil's harvest season that ends this month was virtually flat from last year, and exports surged, but the ongoing drought is already complicating the start of the 2025/2026 season, according to a report Monday by

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the Center for Advanced Studies on Applied Economics at the University of Sao Paulo's agribusiness school.

At the same time, Vietnam, the world's second-biggest coffee producer, is experiencing heat and drought, affecting its crops. Potential supply shortages in both countries have started driving up global coffee prices, according to the report.

The market is closely monitoring how Brazilian coffee plants endure these adverse climate conditions, which can cause flowers to stop blooming, fail to turn into cherries or produce lower-quality beans, said Felipe Serigati, who coordinates the master's program in agribusiness at the Getulio Vargas Foundation, a university in Sao Paulo.

"It could result in a smaller coffee harvest," Serigati said. "Since the market tends to anticipate these movements, we've already seen the price of arabica coffee in New York and robusta (coffee) in Europe trading at higher levels."

Coffee prices haven't reached the record highs the world saw in the late 1970s, after a severe frost wiped out 70% of Brazil's coffee plants. But they have been soaring in recent years, and adjusted for inflation are at a 13-year high, according to the International Coffee Organization.

In August, the organization's Composite Indicator Price – which combines the price of several types of green coffee beans – averaged \$2.38 per pound, up nearly 55% from the same month a year ago.

In part, prices are rising because of higher demand, particularly in Asia. But weather is also driving increases. Drought, frost and fire have damaged as much as one-fifth of arabica coffee producers' growing areas in Brazil, said Billy Roberts, a senior economist for food and beverage at Colorado-based CoBank.

"It's not looking like it will get that much better in the near term. They will need consistent rainfall to recover," he said.

Uncontrolled, manmade wildfires across Brazil have lately been ravaging protected areas and farms. One of them ripped through Caconde last week.

Almeida, who is also a math teacher at a local public school, helped calculate the damage for a regional association. So far, he estimates the blazes affected 519 hectares (1,282 acres). Half was native Atlantic Forest, 30% pasture and 15% coffee plantations.

On Almeida's own land, 2,000 of his 15,000 plants were torched. His neighbor, João Rodrigues Martins, lost everything.

Martins, 71, had 2,500 coffee plants on a small plot, now completely blackened by soot. The coffee he sells to a local cooperative is his livelihood and also pays for his son's medical treatment.

For smallholders, seeing years of cultivation reduced to ash is tough to reckon with. Last week, Martins ran through fire to save his bee boxes. Today, he is finding the strength to continue forward.

"Faith is a boat that helps us navigate life," he said.

US will let more people take methadone at home

By CARLA K. JOHNSON AP Medical Writer

The first big update to U.S. methadone regulations in 20 years is poised to expand access to the life-saving drug starting next month, but experts say the addiction treatment changes could fall flat if state governments and methadone clinics fail to act.

For decades, strict rules required most methadone patients to line up at special clinics every morning to sip their daily dose of the liquid medicine while being watched. The rules, built on distrust of people in the grip of opioid addiction, were meant to prevent overdoses and diversion — the illicit selling or sharing of methadone.

The COVID-19 pandemic changed the risk calculation. To prevent the spread of the coronavirus at crowded clinics, emergency rules allowed patients to take methadone unsupervised at home.

Research showed the looser practice was safe. Overdose deaths and drug diversion didn't increase. And people stayed in treatment longer.

With evidence mounting, the U.S. government made the changes permanent early this year. Oct. 2 is the date when clinics must comply with the new rules — unless they're in a state with more restrictive

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regulations.

Alabama — where about 7,000 people take methadone for opioid use disorder — plans to align with the new flexible rules, said Nicole Walden, a state official overseeing substance use services.

"This is a step toward the country — and everybody — saying this is not a bad thing," Walden said. "People don't have to show up every day to get a medication that can help save their lives."

Is methadone an opioid?

Methadone, an opioid itself, can be dangerous in large amounts. When taken correctly, it can stop drug cravings without causing a high. Numerous studies have shown it reduces the risk of overdose and the spread of hepatitis C and HIV. But it cannot be prescribed for opioid addiction outside of the nation's 2,100 methadone clinics, which on a given day treat nearly 500,000 U.S. patients with the drug.

The new federal rules allow stable patients to take home 28 days' worth of methadone. Colorado, New York and Massachusetts are among states taking steps to update their rules to align with the new flexibility. Some others have not, including West Virginia and Tennessee — the states with the nation's highest drug overdose death rates.

"Where you live matters," said University of Arizona researcher Beth Meyerson, who studies methadone policy.

Phoenix resident Irene Garnett, 44, would welcome more take-home methadone doses. Her clinic now requires her to come in twice a week, even though she's been a patient there more than 10 years, "which is just bonkers," she said.

Garnett, who works as a grant manager for a harm reduction agency, lives 25 minutes away from the clinic. She said 28 days of take-home methadone, the maximum allowed under the new federal rules, would give her more freedom to travel and a "more normal quality of life."

"This is the only medication where you have to disrupt your life by going someplace every day," she said.

Under the new rules, which Arizona plans to embrace, clinics will have broad discretion about which people qualify for take-home doses. Ideally, such decisions will be made jointly between doctors and patients. But money will play a role too, experts said.

Frances McGaffey, who researches substance use treatments for the nonprofit Pew Charitable Trusts, said payments to clinics are sometimes tied to in-person dosing, which can discourage take-home treatment.

"States should be looking at their payment policy and see what kind of care they're incentivizing," she said.

In Arizona, clinics now get \$15 per in-person dose from the state's Medicaid program vs. about \$4 per take-home dose. The state is considering options including making those amounts equal or adopting what's called "bundled payment," a model that reflects the overall cost of treatment.

New York's Medicaid program uses a bundled payment model so there's no financial incentive for in-person dosing.

Longtime methadone patient David Frank, a 52-year-old New York University sociologist, gets four weeks of take-home methadone in wafer form from his clinic.

"I never in a million years could have gone back to school, got my Ph.D., done research or taught — any of that stuff — if I had to go to a clinic every day," Frank said. "It's night and day in terms of your ability to live a stable, happy, quality life."

A movement to 'liberate methadone'

The methadone clinic system dates to 1974, when the U.S. saw fewer than 7,000 overdose deaths a year. Some longtime patients — including Garnett and Frank — are organizing a movement to "liberate methadone" as annual overdose deaths now top 107,000. They support legislation to allow addiction specialist physicians to prescribe methadone and pharmacies to fill those prescriptions.

The new federal rules don't go that far, but they include other changes, such as:

— In states that adopt the rules, methadone treatment can start faster. People will no longer need to demonstrate a one-year history of opioid addiction.

— Counseling can be optional instead of mandatory.

— Telehealth can be used to assess patients, improving access for rural residents.

— Nurse practitioners and physician assistants — not just doctors — can start people on methadone. “It really is up to states to adopt these changes in order to increase access to care,” said Mark Parrino, president of the American Association for the Treatment of Opioid Dependence.

Tennessee officials have drafted new rules that are stricter than the federal government’s. The state’s proposal would increase random urine drug screening, make counseling mandatory for many patients and obligate clinics to hire pharmacists if they want to dispense take-home doses.

The state’s proposed rules “are duplicative, contradictory, prescriptive, rigid, and written in a way that seeks to punish versus heal people living with an opioid use disorder,” wrote Zac Talbott, who operates four methadone clinics in Tennessee, Georgia and North Carolina.

In states that do adopt the federal rules, the changes will be a heavy lift for some clinics, experts said. Some clinic leaders may disagree with the patient-centered philosophy behind the changes. Some may balk at the legal liability that goes with judgment calls about which people can safely take methadone at home.

“Not all opioid treatment programs are created equal,” said Linda Hurley, CEO of Rhode Island’s oldest methadone program, CODAC Behavioral Healthcare.

Clinics are used to operating within a highly restrictive environment, said Meyerson, the University of Arizona researcher.

“We have regulated them into a corner for years,” Meyerson said. The new rules allow the clinics to put the well-being of patients at the center of care.

“The question is,” she said, “can they do it?”

EU pledges to loan Ukraine up to \$39 billion to help rebuild its economy and power grid

By LORNE COOK Associated Press

KYIV, Ukraine (AP) — The European Union pledged on Friday to lend Ukraine up to 35 billion euros (\$39 billion) as part of a loan package organized by the Group of Seven major industrial nations, as it seeks to help the country rebuild its economy and its war-shattered power grid.

G7 leaders agreed in June to engineer a \$50 billion loan to help Ukraine in its fight for survival. Interest earned on profits from Russia’s frozen central bank assets would be used as collateral, but progress in distributing the loans has been slow.

“We should make Russia pay for the destruction it caused,” European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen told reporters at a news conference in Kyiv with President Volodymyr Zelenskyy in Kyiv.

Von der Leyen said that the EU has already provided Ukraine with more than 118 billion euros (\$132 billion) in military and economic assistance since the war began in February 2022, “but Russia’s relentless attacks mean further support is necessary.”

“Crucially, this loan will flow straight into your national budget. This will improve Ukraine’s macro-financial stability and it will provide you with significant and much-needed fiscal space. You will decide how best to use the funds, giving you maximum flexibility to meet your needs,” she said.

The loans would be underwritten by the windfall profits earned on almost \$300 billion in Russian assets, which have been frozen over its full-scale invasion of Ukraine. The vast majority of that money is held in EU nations, notably Belgium.

Von der Leyen said that the EU is “confident that we can deliver this loan to Ukraine very quickly.” The 27-nation bloc hopes that other G7 countries will follow its lead and start providing loans too.

Zelenskyy said that his priorities are to rebuild Ukraine’s energy network, erect more bomb shelters, improve schools and buy more weapons and ammunition.

Von der Leyen arrived in Ukraine on Friday focused on helping the country to restore and reconnect its electricity grid and boost its heating capacity as winter approaches.

Around half of Ukraine’s energy infrastructure has been destroyed during the war with Russia, and rolling electricity blackouts leave parts of the east in darkness for four hours at a time. Von der Leyen said it

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was the equivalent of all of Latvia, Lithuania and Estonia losing electricity.

Meanwhile, winter is approaching.

"Heating season starts in two weeks and Russia's relentless attacks on Ukraine's civilian energy infrastructure aims to inflict maximum damage," von der Leyen said. "We will help Ukraine in its brave efforts to overcome this."

The main aim is to help Ukraine decentralize its power grid, and to become less reliant on the big power stations that make easier targets for Russian forces. Around 260 missiles rained down in a major attack on energy infrastructure late last month.

The Europeans have already sent more 10,000 generators and transformers, and they're supplying small and more mobile gas turbines too. These types of electricity-providing equipment are harder to hit and easier to repair.

Ukraine's winter runs from late October through March, with January and February the toughest months. The Europeans hope to help supply around 25% of the 17 gigawatts of power that the country is likely to need this winter.

One aim of the EU assistance is to provide an incentive for people to stay in Ukraine. About 4 million people have fled since the war began on Feb. 24, 2022, often to Poland and other neighboring countries.

The EU is providing assistance, such as short-term help to find a place to stay, jobs or education. But recently the number of people leaving has climbed. The European Commission, the EU's powerful executive branch, estimates that 10,000 more people are applying for help each week.

Should the influx continue it could undermine European support for Ukraine.

On Thursday, the commission announced that it would provide an extra 160 million euros (\$180 million) to help fortify Ukraine's energy network. Of that, 100 million euros (\$112 million) come from the windfall profits earned from the frozen Russian assets.

Denmark is also leading the charge on using this money to place orders for weapons and military equipment directly with Ukraine's defense industry.

Today in History: September 21, Nairobi shopping mall attack

By The Associated Press undefined

Today is Saturday, Sept. 21, the 265th day of 2024. There are 101 days left in the year.

Today in history:

On Sept. 21, 2013, an attack by armed militants in the Westgate shopping mall in Nairobi, Kenya left 67 people dead and hundreds injured.

Also on this date:

In 1792, the National Convention of France issued a proclamation announcing the abolition of the French monarchy.

In 1898, in response to a letter from 8-year-old Virginia O'Hanlon, the New York Sun newspaper wrote an editorial containing the famous line "Yes, Virginia, there is a Santa Claus."

In 1915, Cecil Chubb purchased Stonehenge for £6,600; the last private owner of the site, Chubb donated it to the British people three years later.

In 1922, President Warren Harding signed the Lodge-Fish Resolution, a Congressional resolution endorsing the creation of a Jewish state in Palestine.

In 1937, "The Hobbit," by J.R.R. Tolkien, was first published by George Allen & Unwin Ltd. of London.

In 1938, a hurricane struck parts of New York and New England, causing widespread damage and claiming some 700 lives.

In 1939, Romanian Prime Minister Armand Călinescu was assassinated by members of the fascist Iron Guard movement.

In 1955, at Yankee Stadium in New York, boxer Rocky Marciano completed his undefeated professional career by knocking out Archie Moore in the ninth round of their title fight.

In 1970, Monday Night Football made its debut on ABC, with the Cleveland Browns defeating the New

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York Jets 31-21.

In 1981, the Senate unanimously confirmed the nomination of Sandra Day O'Connor to become the first female justice on the Supreme Court.

In 1989, Hurricane Hugo crashed into South Carolina; the storm was blamed for 56 deaths in the Caribbean and 29 in the United States.

In 2022, Russia's Vladimir Putin ordered a mobilization of reservists for the first time since World War II, nearly seven months after invading Ukraine.

Today's Birthdays: Producer Jerry Bruckheimer is 81. Musician Don Felder is 77. Author Stephen King is 77. Basketball Hall of Famer Artis Gilmore is 75. Actor-comedian Bill Murray is 74. Race car driver Arie Luyendyk is 71. Filmmaker Ethan Coen is 67. Basketball Hall of Famer Sidney Moncrief is 67. Actor-comedian Dave Coulier is 65. Actor David James Elliott is 64. Actor Nancy Travis is 63. Actor Rob Morrow is 62. Actor Angus Macfadyen is 61. Actor Cheryl Hines is 59. Country singer Faith Hill is 57. Actor-talk show host Ricki Lake is 56. Actor Billy Porter is 55. Actor Alfonso Ribeiro (rih-BEHR'-oh) is 53. Actor Luke Wilson is 53. Musician Liam Gallagher (Oasis) is 52. TV personality Nicole Richie is 43. Actor Maggie Grace is 41. Actor Joseph Mazzello is 41. Rapper Wale (WAH'-lay) is 40. Singer Jason Derulo is 35. Cyclist Tadej Pogačar is 26.