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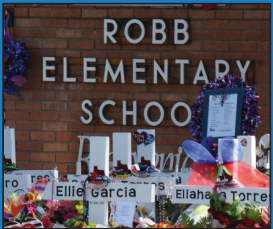
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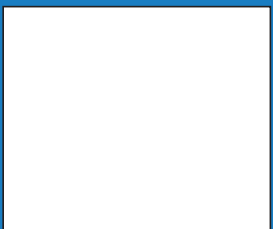
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U.S. designates Houthis as terrorist organization amid Red Sea attacks



By Clyde Hughes
UPI

The United States on Wednesday designated Houthi rebels in Yemen as a terrorist organization for their ongoing targeting of shipping vessels in the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden.

U.S. national security adviser Jake Sullivan announced that the designation against the Houthis, also known as Ansarallah, saying it would make it

harder for the organization to access financial markets and fund their operations.

“Over the past months, Yemen-based Houthi militants have engaged in unprecedented attacks against the United States military forces and international maritime vessels operating in the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden,” Sullivan said in a White House statement. “These attacks fit the textbook definition of terrorism.

“They have endangered U.S. personnel, civilian mariners, and our partners, jeopardizing global trade, and threatened freedom of navigation. The United States and the international community have been united in our response and in condemning these attacks in the strongest terms.”

Sullivan noted that the designation will not take effect for 30 days to allow

See **HOUTHIS**, page 6

737 Max 9 jetliners still grounded as FAA’s Boeing probe continues

By Doug Cunningham
UPI

The Federal Aviation Administration on Wednesday detailed its expanded probe into Boeing’s 737 Max 9 jets, keeping the planes with door plugs grounded until data from its investigation is thoroughly reviewed.

“All 737-9 MAX aircraft with door plugs will remain grounded pending the FAA’s review and final approval of an inspection and maintenance process that satisfies all FAA safety requirements,” the FAA said in a statement. “Once the FAA approves an inspection and maintenance process, it will be required on every grounded 737-9 MAX prior to future operation. The safety of the flying public, not speed, will determine the timeline for returning these aircraft to service.”

The FAA said it’s investigating manufacturing methods and production lines both at Boeing and subcontractor Spirit AeroSystems, as well as bolstering its oversight of Boeing while examining potential system change.

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OPINION

The Unforgivable Sin: On the Exploitation of Innocence

Children are not property to be exploited; they are gifts from God -- and what do you do with a gift? You cherish it, grow it, and protect it. Yet, in a world marred by moral decay and power imbalances, the most vulnerable among us, children, often fall prey to the darkest desires of influential figures.

The Jeffrey Epstein case, among others, lays bare a troubling pattern: a fascination among certain powerful individuals for underage boys and girls. This is not a new phenomenon; history is replete with instances where those in positions of power, be they priests or potentates, have succumbed to this heinous proclivity.

But why? The answer perhaps lies in the corrupting nature of power itself. As Lord Acton famously said, "Power tends to corrupt, and absolute power corrupts absolutely." In the case of the exploitation of children, power becomes a vehicle not just for corruption but for the perversion of the most sacred trust.

Let us consider priests, traditionally seen as moral guides and protectors of the flock. When they succumb to such vile desires, it is not only a betrayal of their sacred duty but an affront to the very tenets of faith and morality they are meant to uphold. Similarly, when influential figures

like Epstein and his band of unknown powerful figures, most of whom are men, engage in such acts, it reflects a gross abuse of power and privilege, a twisted assertion of dominance over the most defenseless.

This reprehensible behavior is not just a violation of law but a moral abomination that should be met with the severest of punishments. In this context, the call for the death penalty for child predators might seem a fitting retribution. The argument is straightforward: Such an act is so fundamentally against the natural order, so damaging to the very fabric of society, and so irreparably harmful to the victims that only the most extreme form of punishment would suffice.

As we grapple with these dark realities, we must remember that the true measure of a society is found in how it treats its most vulnerable. In safeguarding our children, nurturing their growth and fiercely defending their innocence, we uphold not just a legal duty but a moral imperative. For, in the words of Charles Dickens, "In the little world in which children have their existence, there is nothing so finely perceived and so finely felt as injustice."

Children, the purest embodiment of innocence, should be the cherished treasures of our society, protected from the snares of

those who would do them harm. However, as cases like Epstein's tragically illustrate, often the mighty have the most depraved of desires, exploiting the defenseless and leaving an indelible scar on the tapestry of humanity.

Why do such abominations occur, especially among the powerful? The intoxicating nature of power distorts the moral compass, leading some to exploit the innocent in a perverse display of control. This is a breach of legal boundaries and, more critically, a profound moral failure. As Edmund Burke wisely noted, "The only thing necessary for the triumph of evil is for good men to do nothing." Thus, it becomes imperative for society to act decisively.

The psychological and societal impact of these crimes is catastrophic. The betrayal of a child's trust can fracture the foundation of their world, often leaving lifelong emotional and mental scars. Beyond the individual tragedy, such violations erode public trust in institutions and figures of authority, undermining the social fabric that binds communities.

In facing this grim reality, our justice system must be unyielding in its pursuit of those who prey on children. While some advocate for the ultimate punishment, the death penalty, we must tread cautiously. The pursuit of justice must be balanced

with the principles of fairness and the potential for rehabilitation. As Alexander Pope eloquently put it, "To err is human, to forgive divine." Our approach must reflect a balance between the gravity of the crime and the principles of a just and humane society.

The solution lies not only in punishment but in prevention and education. It requires creating environments where children are informed, empowered, and encouraged to speak out. We must cultivate a culture that prioritizes the welfare and protection of children above all else.

The exploitation of children by the powerful is a stark reminder of the moral and ethical failings that can permeate any society. Our response must be resolute in punishing the guilty and safeguarding the innocence of the young. Through vigilant protection, education, and moral guidance, we can strive to build a world where the innocence of childhood is not just a fleeting moment but a lasting legacy treasured and protected by all.

Armstrong Williams is the manager/sole owner of Howard Stirk Holdings I & II Broadcast Television Stations and the 2016 Multicultural Media Broadcast Owner of the Year. To find out more about him and read features by other Creators Syndicate writers and cartoonists, visit the Creators Syndicate website at www.creators.com.



ARMSTRONG WILLIAMS

Church without God: Secular congregations fill a need for the nonreligious

By Jacqui Frost
Purdue University

Shared testimonies, collective singing, silent meditation and baptism rituals -- these are all activities you might find at a Christian church service on a Sunday morning in the United States. But what would it look like if atheists were gathering to do these rituals instead?

Today, almost 30% of adults in the United States say they have no religious affiliation, and only half attend worship services regularly. But not all forms of church are on the decline -- including "secular congregations," or what many call "atheist churches."

As a sociologist of religion who has spent the past 10 years studying nonreligious communities, I have found that atheist churches serve many of the same purposes as religious churches. Their growth is evidence that religious decline does not necessarily mean a decline in community, ritual or people's well-being.

What's an atheist church?

Secular congregations often mimic religious organizations by using the language and structure of a "church," such as meeting on Sundays or hearing a member's "testimony," or by adapting religious language or practices in other ways.

For example, there are a growing number of psychedelic churches, which cater to people looking to experience spirituality and ritual through drug use.

There are also secular organizations that promote the idea that people can live forever, such as the Church of Perpetual Life. Members believe they can achieve immortality on Earth through radical life-extension technologies such as gene editing or cryonic preservation -- freezing bodies after death in hopes that they can someday be resuscitated.

These secular congregations often appeal to atheists and other secular people, but their main purpose is not promoting atheism.

However, "atheist church" or-

ganizations like the Sunday Assembly and the Oasis explicitly celebrate atheists' identities and beliefs, even though not everyone who attends identifies as an atheist. Testimonies and activities extol values like rational thinking and materialist philosophies, which promote the idea that only physical matter exists.

There are also longstanding humanist and ethical communities that promote secular worldviews and provide secular ceremonies for major life transitions, like births, funerals and weddings. The American Humanist Association, for example, describes its values as "Good without a God." And for decades, Unitarian Universalist congregations, which grew out of Christian movements, have drawn on teachings from both religious and nonreligious traditions, without imposing specific creeds of their own.

But there has been a recent rise in secular congregations that explicitly mimic religious organizations and rituals to celebrate atheistic worldviews. Many have just one

or two chapters, such as the Seattle Atheist Church and the North Texas Church of Freethought.

However, Sunday Assembly and the Oasis have networks with dozens of chapters, and Sunday Assembly has been dubbed the "first atheist mega-church." Many chapters of Sunday Assembly see hundreds of attendees at their services.

Nothing supernatural

Many features of atheist churches in the United States are directly borrowed from religious organizations. At Sunday Assembly, where I spent three years doing research, services include collective singing, reading inspirational texts, silent reflection and collecting donations. They center around a central lecture given by a member of the congregation or a member of the larger local community.

I attended one service where an astronomer gave a talk about the New Horizons spacecraft's mission to Pluto. At another service,

a member of a local community garden organization talked about building community through her community garden program.

Atheist church organizers I met told me that they intentionally borrow the structure of a church because they see it as a good model for building effective rituals and communities. More generally, the structure of a "congregation" is popular and familiar to most attendees.

However, there are key differences. Sunday Assembly has no hierarchical structure, and there is no pastor or minister, meaning that decisions are made by the community. Attendees share duties for running the services and finding speakers and readings.

The other key difference is the complete lack of reference to the supernatural. Lectures and rituals I have encountered at atheist church services are centered around affirming atheistic beliefs, celebrating science, cultivating experiences of awe and wonder for nature and creating communities of support.

Mike Morgan v. Mark Robinson: What would that governor's race look like?

By Karl Cameron

The New Year is here, and the political races are on. North Carolina Prima-

ries on March 15th will be here before you know it, but just how well have voters thought out the possibilities that the primaries could present?

One such possibility we'll focus on here. North Carolina could have its first All-African American Governor's Race. Let's

look at just what that race would look like.

At this writing the Morgan Campaign priorities are: Education, Healthcare, Gun Violence and Criminal Justice Refocus,

while the Robinson campaign's focus is on Abortion, the 2nd Amendment, parents rights, Veterans Benefits, and Election Reform.

Now where do Mike and Mark stand on six of these issues?

Mike supports universal basic education with qualified teachers, stating, "Public schools should teach the

true and accurate history of our state, while Mark says kindergarten through fifth grade should focus on reading, writing, and math, not social studies, science or equity and social justice. Mark is Pro-voucher and Pro-private schools, and expanding access to trade schools.

Regarding Healthcare, Mike is a proponent of the recent NC healthcare expansion and lower prescription drug prices, while Mark is against healthcare expansion in NC, wants to repeal ACA, and wants a state-produced rather than federally-produced healthcare system.

When we look at where they stand on Gun Violence, Mark vows to protect gun rights, against universal background checks, while Mike is in favor of "common sense

gun laws."

Mark's view on the economy embraces Anti-tax incentives for businesses, and wants to provide apprenticeships and

training to enhance workforce development, while Mike wants to encourage investments and entrepreneurs, raise the minimum wage, and urge a "bottom-up economy."

When we turn to Climate Change, Mark calls it "Junk Science", and wants to increase fossil fuels, while Mike sees Climate Change as an "Undeniable threat", and would urge decreasing fossil fuel dependence, and desires sustainability.

On the issue of Abortion, Mike is Pro-Choice and believes that women should have "the ability to decide if and when to become pregnant" and access to abortion services,

while Mark is Pro-Life, against abortion for any reason, and says that the 12-

week band did not go far enough.

This is what we've found regarding where Mike and Mark stand. There's no telling how many times this will change after

this writing, however, we've attempted to give North Carolina Voters a good look at what a Mike Morgan v. Mark Robinson Governor's Race would look like.

The bottom line for our state is to elect the best person to the governorship. We've shown you where they stand should

this race materialize. Do your own analysis, and whether you're a Democrat or Republican, vote in the primaries. They are North Carolina's first step toward who will be our next governor.



Daily Drum Media Group
PO Box 965
Greenville, NC 27835
www.dailydrummedia.com
tdd@dailydrummediagroup.com

Roger Johnson.....Publisher
Ben Johnson.....CFO
Alishia Albrooks.....Sales Consultant
George Ayino.....Sales Consultant
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Townebank Celebrates opening of new Financial Center in Greenville

Greenville, NC – TowneBank and Towne Insurance announced today that they have officially opened the doors to the new Greenville Financial Center. Located at the intersection of Red Banks Road and Arlington Boulevard, the 30,000-square-foot, two-story building houses banking and mortgage on the first floor and Towne Insurance and Towne Benefits on the second floor.

The highly anticipated opening comes after the Greenville community watched the site transform over a nearly two-year period. The completed project is the work of Hudson Brothers Construction as the general contractor, E.R. Lewis Construction as the site work contractor, and HBA Architects. PC&A Business Environments put the Towne finishing touch on the beautiful interiors.

The full-service office features a remote drive-through with a Towne24 ATM lane and a meeting room available to community groups. Visitors will notice that the front entrance fountain includes a sculpture of two herons in flight, created by renowned sculptor David Turner of Virginia's Eastern Shore. Work by North



Carolina artist Richard Fennell procured through City Art Gallery is featured inside. A TowneBank clock welcomes everyone from the street corner.

TowneBank Greenville president Greg Steele shared his enthusiasm that the Towne family in Greenville has finally moved into its permanent professional home. "We've had such a warm welcome since TowneBank opened in Greenville in 2019. We look forward to welcoming all of our Greenville community through the doors of the new TowneBank Greenville Financial Center,

where you will find the friendly faces of your local bankers, insurance advisors, benefits consultants, and mortgage loan officers waiting for you."

Jim Clement, president of Towne Insurance for the Carolinas, said of the move, "Since we brought Towne Insurance to Greenville in 2013, we have nurtured our expertise in this market and enjoyed welcoming our mortgage, bank, and wealth management partners. We continue to provide a broad scope of insurance products and services including commercial property and

casualty, personal lines, contract and surety bonding, group and individual health and employee benefits, and various life insurance products. I am most heartened by our community partnerships with local service organizations and as the official bank of ECU Athletics."

The Greenville Financial Center is open from 9:00 AM – 5:00 PM Monday through Thursday and 9:00 AM – 6:00 PM on Friday, with the drive-thru open from 8:30 AM – 6:00 PM daily. We invite our neighbors to come in to say hello. As a warm welcome, we are offering exciting personal and business specials for a limited time. Visit TowneBank.com/GreenvilleSpecials for more details.

Founded in 1999, TowneBank is a company built on relationships, offering a full range of banking and other financial services, with a focus on serving others and enriching lives. Dedicated to a culture of caring, Towne values all employees and members by embracing their diverse talents, perspectives, and experiences.

Now celebrating 25 years, TowneBank operates 50 banking offices throughout Hampton Roads and Central Virginia, as

well as Northeastern and Central North Carolina – serving as a local leader in promoting the social, cultural, and economic growth in each community. Towne offers a competitive array of business and personal banking solutions, delivered with only the highest ethical standards. Experienced local bankers providing a higher level of expertise and personal attention with local decision-making are key to the TowneBank strategy. Towne has grown its capabilities beyond banking to provide expertise through its affiliated companies that include Towne Wealth Management, Towne Insurance Agency, Towne Benefits, TowneBank Mortgage, TowneBank Commercial Mortgage, Berkshire Hathaway HomeServices RW Towne Realty, Towne 1031 Exchange, and Towne Vacations. With total assets of \$16.67 billion as of September 30, 2023, TowneBank is one of the largest banks headquartered in Virginia.

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Treasury Department sanctions ex-Guatemalan energy minister

By Clyde Hughes
UPI

The Treasury Department on Wednesday announced sanctions against former Guatemalan energy minister Alberto Pimentel Mata for alleged widespread bribery in connection with government contracts, along with his exploitation of the country's mining industry.

The Treasury Department accuses Pimentel of conducting various corruption schemes while serving as the country's

minister of energy and mining from 2022 to 2023. Officials said he illegally took large monthly payments in exchange for permits and licenses for a private company working in Guatemala's energy and mining sector.

He also was accused of rigging the bidding process in favor of a company and taking more than \$1 million in bribes to guarantee mining licenses to paying companies.

"The United States remains committed to holding accountable those who abuse their positions in pursuit of personal

benefits, weakening the public's faith in government institutions," Treasury Under Secretary Brian E. Nelson said in a statement.

"We stand in solidarity with the Guatemalan people as they strive to foster greater transparency, accountability, and government integrity within their system," Nelson said.

The State Department said that they will restrict Pimentel's visa access, as well.

"Pimentel used his official position to exploit the Guatemala mining sector through bribery schemes, including schemes related to government contracts and mining licens-

es," State Department spokesman Matthew Miller said in a statement.

"The United States remains committed to taking action against illicit activities carried out by officials who abuse their positions of power to seek personal benefits at the expense of the Guatemalan people."

The Treasury Department's actions follow a State Department designation last October that cited Pimentel, Gendri Rocael Reyes Mazariegos and Oscar Rafael Perez Ramirez, the vice minister of sustainable development, for their alleged involvement in corruption. That action barred them from entering the United States.

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E. Jean Carroll tells damages hearing that Donald Trump assaulted her, lied about it

By Doug Cunningham
UPI

E. Jean Carroll took the stand Wednesday in the

second day of a trial to determine how much damages former President Donald Trump owes for making defamatory statements against her.

Carroll told the courtroom, with Trump present, that the former president repeatedly spread lies about her since she came forward in 2019, accusing him of sexually assaulting her in 1996.

"I'm here because I was assaulted by Donald Trump and when I wrote about it, he said it never happened. He lied. And he shattered my reputation," Carroll said from the witness stand Wednesday.

Carroll said she expected Trump to claim the encounter was consensual but her attorney Shawn Crowley, noted that "he went much, much further," denying that he ever met her at all and lodging further allegations against her.

"He said I made up an accusation to sell a book, that is a lie. He said I made an accusation for publicity, that is a lie. He said my false accusation damaged the real victims of sexual assault, that is a lie," Carroll said.

She noted that Trump's statements were particularly impactful because they were made while he was president.

"The thing that really got See CARROLL, page 5

me about this is from the White House, he asked if anyone has any information about me, and if they did, to please come forward as soon as possible, because he wanted the world to know what's really going on and that people like me should pay dearly," Carroll said.

When asked by Crowley if she had paid dearly, Carroll responded that she has "paid as dearly as possible" noting that Trump's comments "instantaneously" led her to face harassment from his supporters and "ended the world I had been living in."

"I receive them all the time, sometimes hundreds a day," she said.

"I just want my reputation back."

Crowley told the court Wednesday that Trump's comments about Carroll have not stopped, even while he was present in the courtroom.

"He sat in this courthouse this morning. And while he was sitting there, he posted more defamatory statements, more lies about Ms. Carroll and this case," Crowley said. "By our count, by our last count, 22 posts just today. Think about that. Think about that when you consider how much money will it take to get him to stop."

Grounded

continued from page 1

"The first 40 inspections that are part of that process are now complete, and the FAA will thoroughly review the data from them," the FAA said.

On Jan. 11, when the FAA began expanding its oversight of Boeing, administrator Mike Whitaker said in a statement, "It is time to re-examine the delegation of authority and assess any associated safety risks."

The FAA said the safety of the flying public, not the speed of review, will determine the timeline for getting Boeing 737 Max 9 aircraft back in the air again.

When the FAA's investigation is over and it approves an inspection and maintenance process, that process will be required on every grounded Boeing 737 Max 9 prior to future operation.

The investigation was triggered by the in-flight loss of a door plug from a 737 Max 9 on Jan. 5.

The door plug was found Jan. 7 in a Portland, Ore., resident's backyard.

No one was seriously injured in the incident.

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Biden administration proposes new rule to limit bank overdraft fees

By A.L. Lee
UPI

The Biden administration Wednesday proposed a new rule aimed at cutting the average overdraft fees imposed by the nation's largest banks by more than half.

The move by the Consumer Financial Protection Bureau aims to eliminate a longstanding legal loophole that exempts overdraft lending services from provisions of the Truth in Lending Act, which required clear disclosure of credit costs but exempted some overdrafts when honoring checks for account holders who overdrew on their available money.

"Decades ago, overdraft loans got special treatment to make it easier for banks to cover paper checks that were often sent through the mail," CFPB Director Rohit Chopra said. "Today, we are proposing rules to close a longstanding loophole that allowed many large banks to transform overdraft into a massive junk fee harvesting machine."



The proposal allows large banks to continue offering overdraft loans, provided they follow existing lending laws, disclose interest rates, and charge a fee -- either a set benchmark between \$3 and \$14, or a calculated cost, with transparency around the calculation methods.

It applies to banks with assets exceeding \$10 billion, including about 175 of the largest lenders in the country many of which

charge \$35 for overdraft loans, despite most debit card overdrafts being under \$26 and repaid within three days.

The proposed rule is part of a broader effort to lower consumer costs while the measure is expected to save 23 million families about \$3.5 billion in fees each year, translating to an annual savings of \$150 per household, President Joe Biden said.

"Banks call it a service -- I call

it exploitation," Biden wrote in a statement. "We're going to continue doing everything in our power to bring down costs and grow our economy ... while standing up to extreme Republican attempts to provide more giveaways to the wealthy and big corporations and undermine competition."

Congress passed the Truth in Lending Act in 1968 but overdraft fees did not become a major profit source until the 1990s, when debit cards became popular, and banks raised the fees, leading to an estimated \$12.6 billion in overdraft revenue in 2019.

Wells Fargo and JPMorgan Chase led with one-third of the revenue in 2022, according to the CFPB.

Recent federal actions prompted changes at the banks that have reduced overdraft revenue to about \$9 billion annually by addressing illegal practices like charging fees even when customers have enough available funds.

Since taking office in 2021, Biden has called for increased

limits on bank fees for bounced checks and account overdrafts.

The latest move comes after the CFPB issued new guidance to the nation's big banks in October, advising they were still subject to the 2010 Consumer Financial Protection Act, which prohibits large financial institutions and credit unions from charging junk fees for basic customer service.

Late last year, Biden proposed new federal rules aimed at eliminating junk fees associated with retirement investment advice and promoting increased competition for post-employment savings plans.

The Federal Trade Commission also proposed similar rules that would prohibit junk fees and deceptive charges for airline tickets, hotel and resort bookings, live events, apartment rentals, and utility bill payments.

Hidden fees significantly reduce monthly income and make it challenging for families to meet financial needs, while disproportionately affecting vulnerable populations, the White House said.

Taiwan elects Lai Ching-te as president, sending a defiant message of democracy to China

By Thomas Maresca
UPI

Taiwan's Lai Ching-te, the presidential candidate from the incumbent Democratic Progressive Party, won a landslide victory on Saturday as the island of 23 million sent a powerful message to China in a high-stakes election with global consequences.

"We are telling the international community that between democracy and authoritarianism, we will stand on the side of democracy," Lai said at a press conference for international media after results were announced on Saturday evening.

With the full count completed just hours after polls closed, Lai won 40.1% of the vote, while his main opponent, Hou You-ih of the traditionally Beijing-friendly Kuomintang party, had 33.5%. Third-party candidate Ko Wen-je of the upstart Taiwan People's Party surged to a strong showing of 26.5%.

Lai's victory marked the first time in Taiwan's brief democratic history that an incumbent party won a third consecutive term in office. The 64-year-old former doctor currently serves as vice president under outgoing President Tsai Ing-

wen, and vowed to maintain the strong stance she has taken against Beijing.

Lai said Saturday he would pursue exchanges and cooperation with China, but only "under the principles of dignity and parity."

"At the same time, we are also determined to safeguard Taiwan from continuing threats and intimidation from China," he added.

Jubilant crowds of supporters thronged the streets outside the headquarters of the DPP as election results came in, many of them chanting Lai's name and waving pink and green flags, the colors identified with the party.

"I always believed [the DPP candidates] were going to win the election, because I know that they're doing the right thing for Taiwan," Roderick Tseng, a 34-year-old baker, said. "They're trying to push Taiwan more toward international recognition, and not just starting a conflict with China."

Supporter Chang Chihning, 52, said she was worried because of the three-way race and late polls that indicated challenger Hou was closing the gap with Lai.

"I was nervous and very tense with the three different candidates, so I got up early in the morning to cast my ballot for Mr. Lai," said



Chang, who was joined at the rally by her daughter, a first-time voter clad all in green.

She said she was less concerned about how Beijing, which has repeatedly vowed to seize control of Taiwan, would react to the victory.

"China has been making similar threats [for a long time] and never followed through on them," Chang said. "So I'm not particularly worried."

Beijing criticized Lai as a dangerous "separatist" in the lead-up to the election and on Friday its Defense Ministry warned that it would "pulverize" any attempts at an independence movement in Taiwan.

Lai has said there is no

need to pursue formal independence, claiming that Taiwan is already a "sovereign, independent country."

At a polling station on a narrow road of street smalls near Longshan Temple in Taipei, 70-year-old DPP voter Lin Wei-chieh praised Lai's stance.

"The correct position is that we are two separate countries," Lin said. "We're already independent. Naturally, there are things that [the DPP] could have done better, but the foundation starts with casting out the pro-China forces."

Lai's main opponent, Hou You-ih of the Kuomintang party, or KMT, has argued that better relations with China would benefit

Taiwan's economy.

His campaign warned that a DPP victory would heighten the risk of war with its giant neighbor, a message that Beijing itself has echoed. His supporters also expressed that concern on Saturday.

"The DPP is making it more dangerous," Chuang Hsuan-gung, 68, said. "I am hoping there will be more communication with China."

Beijing has kept up a steady stream of incursions by fighter jets, naval ships and, more recently, large balloons in what Taipei calls "gray zone" warfare meant to strain the island's defense capabilities and wear down its morale.

The DPP and independent research groups have also accused China of meddling in Taiwan's elections by financing and coordinating online disinformation campaigns and amplifying divisive voices on social media platforms.

One goal of China's efforts is to increase polarization in Taiwan, Tim Niven, lead researcher at Taipei-based disinformation researcher Doublethink Lab, said.

"The goal is to degrade the enemy -- the DPP -- and devalue democracy," Niven told UPI. "If Taiwan is polarized, people can't talk to each other and make compromises."

While Lai won the presidency, his DPP did not secure a majority in the parliament thanks in large part to the presence of the upstart Taiwan People's Party.

Younger voters in particular were energized by the presidential campaign of former Taipei mayor Ko Wen-je.

"I hope there will be a change in Taiwan's future," Chiu Yi-han, 38, said. "Taiwan has been governed by the same two parties for too long. The situation with China has been the same for a long time. I am looking for a breath of fresh air in the economy, in education."

Carroll

continued from page 4

Crowley also said that Trump on Wednesday could be heard "loudly saying things" about Carroll's testimony, including claiming it was false and saying "she's gotten her memory back," noting that the jury may have been able to hear it.

The New York federal court jury is deciding how much more money in damages Trump will have to pay for further defaming her following a \$5 million defamation verdict against him in an earlier case she brought.

A federal judge ruled in June 2023 that Carroll could file an amendment to her complaint and request an award of an additional \$10 million.



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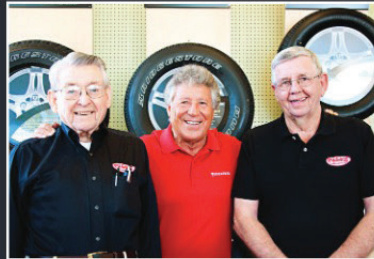
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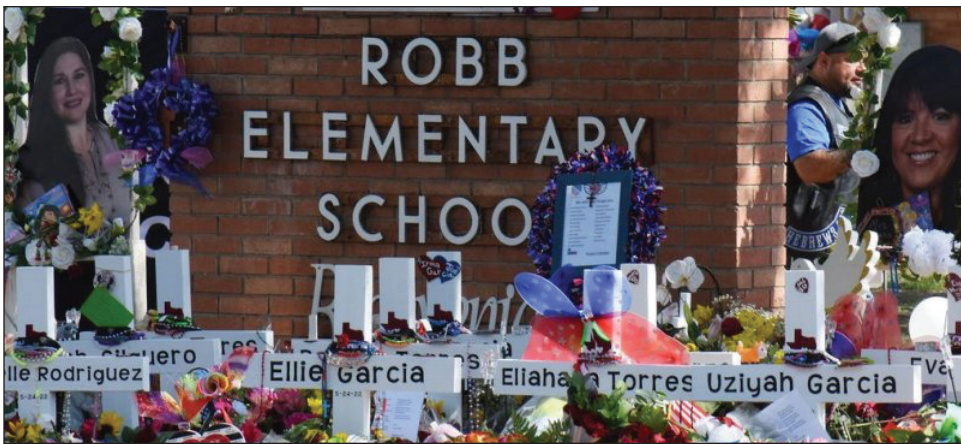


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Justice Dept. to release report on law enforcement response to Uvalde school shooting



By Sheri Walsh
UPI

The U.S. Justice Department will release its report Thursday evaluating how law enforcement responded to the Uvalde school shooting that killed 19 children and two teachers.

Uvalde school district Superintendent Ashley Chohlis announced the report's impending release on

Monday, the Austin American-Statesman reported.

The Department of Justice's critical incident review will provide a comprehensive account of how more than 370 officers from local, state and federal law enforcement agencies responded to Robb Elementary School on May 24, 2022, during the second deadliest school shooting in U.S. history, and what they did or failed to do to protect students and staff.

Uvalde families and Texas state officials have blasted police for taking 77 minutes to confront the killer. A SWAT team from the U.S. Border Patrol eventually shot and killed the lone gunman, identified as former student Salvador Ramos.

According to police, Ramos, 18, shot his grandmother and stole her truck before driving it into a ditch near Robb Elementary, where he jumped a perimeter fence and entered the school through an unlocked side door. Armed with an AR-15-style rifle, he shot teachers and students inside a fourth-grade classroom.

In a 77-page report two months after the shooting, a Texas House committee called the law enforcement response "chaotic" and "uncoordinated."

"The group was devoid of clear leadership, basic communications and sufficient urgency to take down the gunman," the committee report said.

Five months after the shooting, the Uvalde school

district suspended its police force and requested more Texas Department of Public Safety troopers be stationed on school grounds.

At least five officers have lost their jobs over the response, including two Texas Department of Public Safety officers and Uvalde's school police chief.

The Justice Department report to be released Thursday was produced by the Department of Justice's Office of Community Oriented Policing Services -- or COPS -- which is made up of former local, state and federal law enforcement officials.

"The goal of the review is to provide an independent account of law enforcement actions and responses; identify lessons learned and best practices to help first responders prepare for and respond to active shooter events; and provide a roadmap for community safety and engagement before, during and after such incidents," the Justice Department said in a 2022 news release.

"Nothing can undo the pain that has been inflicted on the loved ones of the victims, the survivors and the entire community of Uvalde," Attorney General Merrick Garland said when the critical incident review was announced nearly two years ago.

"But the Justice Department can and will use its expertise and independence to assess what happened and to provide guidance moving forward."

Ramos, 18, shot his grandmother and stole her truck before driving it into a ditch near Robb Elementary, where he jumped a perimeter fence and entered the school through an unlocked side door. Armed with an AR-15-style rifle, he shot teachers and students inside a fourth-grade classroom.



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Houthis

continued from page 1

for "humanitarian carve outs" to reduce the impact on civilians in Yemen.

"The people of Yemen should not pay the price for the actions of the Houthis," Sullivan said. "We are sending a clear message: Commercial shipments into Yemeni ports on which Yemeni people rely for food, medicine and fuel should continue and are not covered by our sanctions."

He added that if the Houthis cease their attacks in the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden, the United States "will immediately re-evaluate this designation."

The move comes a day after the United States mil-



itary completed its third round of airstrikes against Houthi positions in Yemen in response to their attacks in the Red Sea since the start of the Israel-Hamas war on Oct. 7. U.S. officials said its strikes targeted a building that contained ballistic missiles that posed a threat to U.S. forces and merchant ships.

The Houthis had previously been designated a foreign terrorist organization by former President Donald Trump's administration shortly before he left office on Jan. 10, 2021, saying that the group receives drones, missiles and training from Iran's Revolutionary Guards.

However, President Joe Biden's administration removed the designation within a month of taking office.

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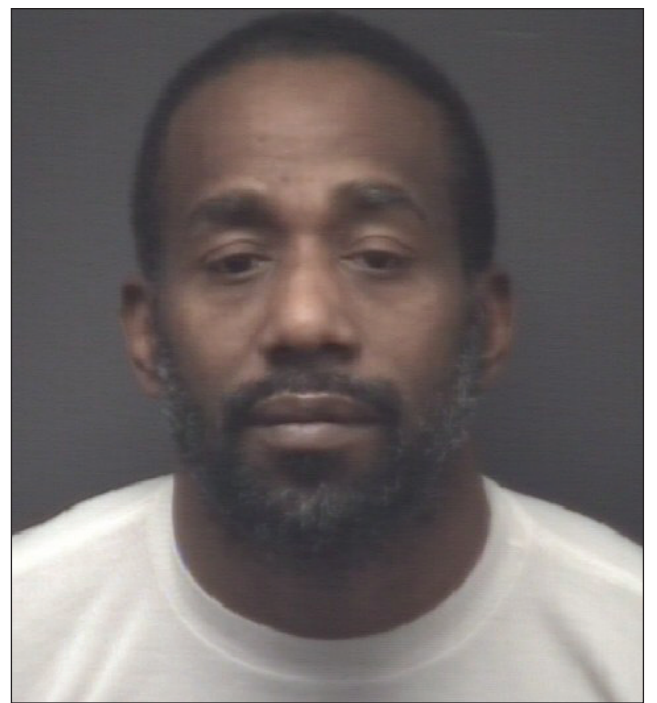
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NFL PLAYOFFS

Ravens, Texans to start divisional round

By Alex Butler
UPI

NFL MVP favorite Lamar Jackson and the top-seeded Baltimore Ravens will host the emerging Houston Texans on Saturday in Baltimore, starting the divisional round of the 2024 NFL postseason.

Eight playoff teams remain, with four from the league's AFC and NFC vying for spots in conference title games. The Texans and Ravens will kick off that attempt at 4:30 p.m. EST from M&T Bank Stadium. The game will air on ABC and ESPN.

"Just to have another week to go out with my brothers is a blessing," Texans quarterback C.J. Stroud told reporters Saturday after the Texans beat the Cleveland Browns in the wild-card round. "I'm super excited for this team and the city of Houston."

Jackson's Ravens are 9.5-point favorites. Odds makers give the Ravens-Texans game the lowest point total (45.5) of the divisional round.

The Ravens have both the No. 6 offense and defense in the league in terms of yards gained and allowed. They allowed the fewest points during the regular season. The Ravens boast the top running game in the league. They also forced the most turnovers.

The Texans, the AFC's No. 4 seed, are led by Stroud, a front-runner for Offensive Rookie of the Year honors. They surrendered the fewest turnovers in the NFL, while ranking No. 12 on offense and No. 14 on defense. They have the No. 6 rush defense and allowed the fewest passing touchdowns. The Ravens beat the Texans 25-9 in Week 1.

"Obviously they are very well coached and have really good young and veteran players," Ra-



vens coach John Harbaugh said at his weekly news conference. "They have continued to improve throughout [the season]."

The top-seeded San Francisco 49ers will host the No. 7 Green Bay Packers in the first NFC divisional-round game. That matchup will kick off at 8:15 p.m. Saturday in Santa Clara, Calif., and will air on Fox.

The 49ers rank third in points scored and allowed. They totaled the second-most yards on offense and allowed the eighth-fewest defensively. The 49ers have the No. 4 passing offense, but use their running game and defense to dominate foes. They ranked third in rushing yards gained and allowed during the regular season.

The Packers, who upset the No. 2 Dallas Cowboys in the first round, were 2-5 through eight weeks this season. They then ignited to win seven of their last nine games, including the 48-32 win over the Cowboys.

The Packers have the No. 11 offense and No. 17 defense in the league. They totaled the 12th-most passing yards and allowed the ninth-fewest during the regular season.

Packers quarterback Jordan Love, who is in his first full season as a starter, threw 14 touchdown passes and logged 10 turnovers through his first nine games. He then totaled 21 touchdown passes and just one interception over his last nine appearances, including the playoffs.

The 49ers are 9.5-point favorites and the game has the highest expected point total of the weekend (50.5).

The No. 3 Detroit Lions will host the No. 4 Tampa Bay Buccaneers in Sunday's opener at Raymond James Stadium in Tampa, Fla. That NFC matchup will kick off at 3 p.m. and air on NBC.

The Lions, who won their first playoff game 32 years last weekend, are 6.5-point favorites. They

were among the most-balanced offenses in the NFL during the regular season, with the No. 2 passing game and No. 5 rushing attack. They were led defensively by the No. 2 unit against the run.

The Buccaneers were one of the hottest teams in the NFL over the last two months, winning six of their last seven games. They have the No. 5 rush defense in the league and just held the Philadelphia Eagles' No. 8-ranked unit to 42 yards on the ground in the wild-card round. They also allowed the seventh-fewest points in the NFL.

The Lions beat the Buccaneers 20-6 in Week 6.

The reigning champion Kansas City Chiefs, the AFC's No. 3 seed, will face the No. 2 Buffalo Bills in the final game of the weekend at Highmark Stadium in Orchard Park, N.Y. That game will kick off at 6:30 p.m. on CBS.

Quarterback Patrick Mahomes leads a Chiefs offense, which

ranked ninth in yardage during the regular season. The Chiefs also have the No. 2 defense in the league. They were strongest against the pass, allowing the fourth-fewest yards through the air.

Quarterback Josh Allen will lead the Bills' offense, which ranked fourth during the regular season. The Bills totaled the eighth-most passing yards and seventh-most rushing yards. Their defense allowed the ninth-fewest yards, led by a seventh-ranked pass defense.

The Bills, who beat the Chiefs 20-17 in Week 14, are 2.5-point favorites.

"I think we are playing at a comfortable level because of the uncomfortable situations we've been in over the last six or seven weeks," Allen said. "It's almost a breath of fresh air knowing everybody is in the same situation: win or go home."

The AFC Championship game will air at 3 p.m. Jan. 28 on CBS. The NFC Championship game will air at 6:30 p.m. that same night on Fox. Super Bowl LVIII will air at 6:30 p.m. Feb. 11 on CBS.

The Bills-Chiefs game is expected to be the coldest of the weekend, with temperatures dipping below 20 degrees and a slight chance of snow in the forecast.

Divisional-round schedule
All times EST
Saturday
Texans at Ravens at 4:30 p.m. on ESPN, ABC
Packers at 49ers at 8:15 p.m. on Fox

Sunday
Buccaneers at Lions at 3 p.m. on NBC
Chiefs at Bills at 6:30 p.m. on CBS

Eagles All-Pro center Jason Kelce to retire after 13 seasons

By Alex Butler
UPI

Philadelphia Eagles center Jason Kelce informed his teammates he will retire after 13 seasons.

Sources told ESPN, NFL Network and Sports Illustrated Tuesday about the decision. Kelce, 36, did not meet with the media after the Eagles' 32-9 loss to the Tampa Bay Buccaneers in the wild-card round Monday in Tampa, Fla.

The veteran offensive lineman could be seen holding back tears and hugging coaches before heading into the locker room.

Kelce joined the Eagles as a sixth-round pick in the 2011 NFL Draft. He started every game in 12 of his 13 seasons with the NFC East franchise. Kelce was a seven-time Pro Bowl selection and a six-time All-Pro.

"If it was his last game, he's one of the best teammates I ever had, a guy whose passion was unmatched," Eagles tackle



Lane Johnson told reporters Monday at Raymond James Stadium.

Eagles coach Nick Sirianni also said he "loved" Kelce, when asked about what he means to the team.

"We're not there at that position yet -- ready to talk about that, but he's special and I love him," Sirianni said. "He's one of the most special guys I've been around."

Kelce signed a one-year contract with the Eagles in March and was set to become a free agent this

off-season. The decorated offensive lineman, and likely Hall of Famer, went to the playoffs seven times with the Eagles. He won a Super Bowl with the Eagles in 2018.

Kelce went to the Super Bowl for a second time in 2023, with his Eagles losing to the Kansas City Chiefs. Kelce's brother, Chiefs tight end Travis Kelce, won his second Super Bowl title in that game. Travis Kelsey, 34, has spent his entire 11-year NFL career with the Chiefs.



Caitlin Clark leads Iowa past Wisconsin, passes Brittney Griner in scoring

By Alex Butler
UPI

Caitlin Clark netted a game-high 32 points to lead Iowa to a victory over Wisconsin and passed former Baylor star Brittney Griner for fourth place on the women's college basketball scoring list.

The All-American guard made 8 of 18 shots and six 3-pointers in the 96-50 blow-

out victory Tuesday in Iowa City. She also logged seven rebounds, five assists and four steals for the No. 2 Hawkeyes (18-1).

"It's hard for me to keep my head around," Clark told reporters, when asked about passing Griner. "I'm just trying to stay in the moment and enjoy every single second of it."

See **SCORING**, page 9

Bill Belichick, Jim Harbaugh interview for new jobs as NFL coaching rumors swirl

By Alex Butler
UPI

Bill Belichick and Jim Harbaugh were among the latest prominent candidates to be interviewed for NFL head coaching vacancies. Rumors continue to swirl about other potential openings as the playoffs progress.

The Falcons announced Monday night that they completed interviewing Belichick, who parted ways Thursday with the New England Patriots.

NFL teams can only conduct interviews virtually with employees of other teams before the end of the divisional round of the playoffs.

Teams can conduct in-person interviews starting Monday with candidates employed by other teams whose seasons ended. They can't interview candidates who are employed by teams in conference title games until the end of those teams' seasons.

The Falcons, who fired coach Arthur Smith on Jan. 8, completed interviews with offensive coordinator Brian Callahan (Cincinnati Bengals), assistant coach Anthony Weaver (Baltimore Ravens) and defensive coordinators Mike Macdonald (Ravens), Steve Wilks (San Francisco 49ers) and Ejiro Evero (Carolina Panthers).

The Chargers announced that they interviewed Harbaugh on Monday. The University of Michigan coach, who led the Wolverines to a national title Jan. 8, declined to say if he would go to the NFL when asked throughout the College Football Playoff.

Wolverines athletic director Warde Manuel said last week at a celebration ceremony in



Ann Arbor, Mich., that he was working to give Harbaugh a new contract.

The Chargers said they also interviewed Macdonald and Wilks.

They conducted additional interviews with former Buffalo Bills offensive coordinator Leslie Frazier, offensive coordinator Todd Monken (Ravens), defensive coordinator Patrick Graham (Las Vegas Raiders), offensive coordinator Kellen Moore (Chargers) and outside linebackers coach Giff Smith (Chargers).

The Patriots hired former linebackers coach Jerod Mayo on Friday, filling one of the NFL's eight head coach job openings. The Seattle Seahawks, Washington Commanders, Las Vegas Raiders, Tennessee Titans and Carolina Panthers join the Falcons and Chargers as the other teams

looking for head coaches.

The Panthers announced last week that they completed interviews with Macdonald, Monken and Evero.

They previously interviewed interim coach Chris Tabor and Eagles offensive coordinator Brian Johnson.

The Panthers also requested permission to interview Callahan, Detroit Lions offensive coordinator Ben Johnson, Houston Texans offensive coordinator Bobby Slowik, Dallas Cowboys defensive coordinator Dan Quinn, Miami Dolphins offensive coordinator Frank Smith, Los Angeles Rams defensive coordinator Raheem Morris and Tampa Bay Buccaneers offensive coordinator Dave Canales.

The Titans conducted interviews with Callahan, Macdonald, Raiders interim coach Antonio Pierce and New York

Giants offensive coordinator Mike Kafka. They requested interviews with Brian Johnson, Ben Johnson, Quinn, Slowik, Panthers offensive coordinator Thomas Brown and Lions defensive coordinator Aaron Glenn.

The Commanders requested interviews with Glenn, Ben Johnson, Macdonald, Morris, Quinn and Weaver. The Seahawks requested interviews with Frank Smith, Quinn, Morris, Evero and Graham.

The Raiders requested an interview with Frazier.

The Ravens will host the Houston Texans in the first game of the divisional round at 4:30 p.m. EST Saturday in Baltimore. The Green Bay Packers, 49ers, Buccaneers, Lions, Bills and Kansas City Chiefs will be the other teams fighting for spots in conference titles games.

Scoring

continued from page 8

Former Washington guard Kelsey Plum leads the women's all-time scoring list, with 3,527 career points. Former guards Kelsey Mitchell (3,402) of Ohio State and Jackie Stiles (3,393) of Southwest Missouri sit in second and third, respectively.

Clark (3,306) passed Griner (3,283) with a free throw about three minutes into the second quarter of Tuesday's win.

The Hawkeyes, who are on a 15-game winning streak, made 47.5% of their shots, including 40.5% of their 3-point attempts. They totaled 25 assists, 17 steals and missed just three of 26 free throw attempts against the Badgers.

Clark scored seven points in the first quarter, helping the Hawkeyes take a 19-15 lead into the second. She poured in a dozen over the next 10 minutes. The Hawkeyes, who outscored the Badgers 27-15 in the second quarter, led 46-30 at halftime.

They continued their dominance over the next 10 minutes, outscoring the Badgers 30-14 in the third. Clark scored another 13 points in the frame. She did not score in the fourth, when the Hawkeyes outscored the Badgers 20-6.

Katie Martin totaled 16 points, five rebounds, four assists and three steals in the victory. Fellow Hawkeyes guard Sydney Affolter totaled 12 points, six rebounds, four assists and three steals off the bench.

Badgers forward Serah Williams totaled 19 points and 14 rebounds in the loss.

Clark, who is averaging a national-best 31 points per game, needs 222 to pass Plum for the women's points record. She needs 362 points to pass former LSU guard Pete Maravich for the overall points record in men's or women's college basketball.

Clark needs 97 to pass Mitchell and 88 to pass Stiles.

The Hawkeyes have 11 regular-season games remaining. They will then play the Big Ten tournament and the Division I women's basketball tournament. Clark could pass Maravich in 14 games if she stays at her current points average.

The Hawkeyes will face No. 18 Ohio State (14-3) at noon EST Sunday in Columbus, Ohio. The Badgers (8-10) will host Minnesota (14-3) at 9 p.m. Tuesday in Madison, Wis.



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La Voz Latina

Soccer: AS Roma fires manager Jose Mourinho



By Alex Butler
UPI

Jose Mourinho is out as manager of AS Roma, the Italian Serie A club announced Tuesday morning.

"We would like to thank Jose on behalf of all of us at AS Roma for his passion and efforts since his arrival at the club," AS Roma owners Dan and Ryan Friedkin said in a news release.

"We will always have great memories of his tenure at Roma, but we believe that an immediate change is in the best interests of the club. We wish Jose and his assistants all the best in their future endeavors."

Mourinho, 60, started his Roma tenure in 2021. He led the squad to an 18-11-9 record and sixth place finish in Serie A in his first season.

Roma went 18-11-9 and finished sixth again in 2022. They started their 2023-24 campaign 8-7-5 through their first 20 games and currently sit in ninth.

Roma finished in the Top 3 for five-consecutive seasons from 2013 through 2017, while coached by Rudi Garcia, Luciano Spalletti and Eusebio Di Francesco.

Mourinho previously managed at Tottenham Hotspur, Manchester United, Chelsea, Real Madrid, Inter Milan, Porto, Uniao de Leiria and Benfica.

The two-time Champions League winner led clubs to eight league titles in four different leagues. His contract with Roma was set to expire at the end of the season.

Roma will host Verona in another Serie A match at noon EST Saturday at Stadio Olimpico in Rome.

Ariana Grande to release 'Eternal Sunshine' album in March

By Annie Martin
UPI

Ariana Grande will release a new album in March.

The 30-year-old singer and actress announced her seventh studio album, Eternal Sunshine, on Wednesday.

Eternal Sunshine is scheduled for release March 8. The album will have four exclusive covers, one of which shows Grande wearing red lipstick and sheer gloves.

Grande's mom, Joan Grande, celebrated in the comments on Instagram, writing, "you're incredible... the album is perfection!!! so proud xxxooxxx."



Grande confirmed in December that she will release a new album in 2024.

The singer shared a single and music video for "Yes, And?," a first song from the album, last week. In the lyrics, Grande appears to address scrutiny of her relationship with Ethan Slater.

Eternal Sunshine will mark Grande's first album since Positions, released in October 2020.

In addition to her new music, Grande will star with Slater in the upcoming film adaptation of Wicked.

Grande and Slater were first linked in July following news of Grande's split from her husband Dalton Gomez. Slater subsequently filed for divorce from his wife Lilly Jay, with whom he shares a 1-year-old son.



Tennis writer Mike Dickson, 59, dies at Australian Open

By Alex Butler
UPI

Tennis writer Mike Dickson died while reporting on the Australian Open, his family announced Wednesday. The British journalist was 59.

"We are devastated to announce that our wonderful husband and dad, Mike, has collapsed and died while in Melbourne for the Australian Open," Dickson's wife, Lucy, in a statement posted to his X account.

"For 38 years, he lived his dream covering sport all over the world. He was a truly great man and we will miss him terribly."

No cause of death was provided for Dickson, who lived in Wimbledon with his family.

Organizers from major tennis tournaments and hundreds of others, including journalists, athletes and readers, wrote condolences to Dickson's family on social media upon learning of his death.

"We are shocked and saddened to hear of the sudden passing of Mike, our long-standing colleague and friend," the Australian Open wrote on X. "Our thoughts and condolences go out to his family."

Dickson held a job at the Daily Mail since 1990. The British outlet said he covered 30 different sports across nearly 50 countries during his career.

His final two articles were published Wednesday morning.

"Dicko was everything you want a correspondent to be -- a brilliant news hound, a terrific writer and a friend to so many in his sport," Daily Mail publisher Lee Clayton said. "The world of tennis will join us in mourning."

"He was a giant of a journalist. It will be an impossibly difficult time for us all as we digest this huge loss."

China's population falls for second year

By Darryl Coote
UPI

China's population declined for a second consecutive year, according to statistics released Wednesday.

The data from Beijing's National Bureau of Statistics states the population was 1.409 billion as of the end of 2023, marking a decline of 2.08 million from a year prior, which was the first decline the Asian nation experienced in six decades.

The decrease is due to a dropping birth rate, which hit a record low of 6.39 births per 1,000 people, a decrease from 6.77 births in 2022. The number of deaths for

the year was 11.1 million.

The announcement comes after the United Nations earlier this year said India had surpassed China as the world's most populated nation with some 1.428 billion people.

"It's not a surprise," Prof. Stuart Gietl-Basten, an expert in population policy at Hong Kong University of Science and Technology, told the BBC.

China is undergoing a deindustrialization. Other Asian nations, such as South Korea and Japan, which have undergone the same transition, are experiencing a similar population trend.

China is "kind of locked in now," he

said. "This is just the next year in this new era of population stagnation or decline for China."

The dropping birth rate comes despite national efforts to bolster the number of babies being born as there are fears that a decrease in the number of working-age people will sap the economy.

President Xi Jinping has called for women in China to return to more traditional homemaker roles, and in November at the opening of the National Women's Congress called for the fostering of "a new type of marriage and childbearing culture." The New York Times reported.

