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BREAKING NEWS AT CHICAGOTRIBUNE.COM

Assad likely fled to Russia

Crowds in Syria celebrate end of dictator's rule; rebels urge calm, institute curfew in Damascus

By Abdulrahman Shaheen and Abby Sewell
Associated Press

DAMASCUS, Syria — Ousted Syrian President Bashar Assad fled to Moscow on Sunday, Russian media reported, hours after a stunning rebel advance took over the capital and ended the Assad family's 50 years of iron rule.

The Russian agencies, Tass and RIA, cited an unidentified Kremlin source on Assad and his family

being given asylum in Moscow, his longtime ally and protector. The Associated Press was not immediately able to verify the reports but contacted the Kremlin for comment.

RIA also said Moscow had received guarantees from insurgents of the security of Russian military bases and diplomatic posts in Syria.

Assad reportedly left Syria early Sunday, and Syrians have been pouring into the streets after a

stunning rebel advance reached Damascus, ending the Assad family's 50 years of domination.

The swiftly moving events have raised questions about the future of the country and the wider region. Russia has requested an emergency session of the U.N. Security Council discuss the situation in Syria, Russia's first deputy permanent representative to the U.N., Dmitry Polyansky, posted on Telegram.

Joyful crowds gathered in squares in Damascus, waving the Syrian revolutionary flag in scenes

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Opposition fighters celebrate the takeover of the city by insurgents in Damascus, Syria, on Sunday. HUSSEIN MALLA/AP



A person walks Thursday through Evans Field in River Grove, part of the Forest Preserves of Cook County's Des Plaines River Trail System. Scientists say wetlands absorb water from storms and flooding, reducing the destructive effects. CHRIS SWEDA/CHICAGO TRIBUNE

Study: Imperiled wetlands saving Midwest billions

Natural 'sponges' that help prevent flooding threatened by agriculture, law, policy

By Adriana Pérez
Chicago Tribune

Thirty million acres of unprotected wetlands across the Upper Midwest, including 1 million acres in Illinois, are at risk of being destroyed largely by industrial agriculture — wetlands that provide nearly \$23 billion in annual flood mitigation benefits, according to new research. In the

long term, these wetlands could prevent hundreds of billions of dollars of flood damage in the region.

"Wetlands can help mitigate flooding and save our homes. They can help clean our water. They can capture and store carbon. They support hunting and recreation, and they support the commercial fishing industry by providing habitats for the majority of

commercially harvested fish and shellfish," said study author Stacy Woods, research director for the Food and Environment program at the Union of Concerned Scientists, a nationwide nonprofit science advocacy organization.

Last year, the U.S. Supreme Court stripped protections from freshwater and inland wetlands in its Sackett v. EPA ruling, allowing private property development

in wetland areas that don't have a "continuous surface connection" to permanent bodies of water.

But environmentalists say wetlands are rarely truly "isolated" from a watershed, no matter how inland they may be. Some experts worry that after President-elect Donald Trump takes office, he might roll back

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Superfan lives his 'Vacation' fantasy

McHenry resident channels Griswold for the holidays

By Peter Breen
Chicago Tribune

For many, "National Lampoon's Christmas Vacation" is a must-watch seasonal classic.

For Ted Ray, the 1989 comedy about an extended family's disastrous attempt to celebrate the holiday, is an all-consuming passion, if not a downright obsession.

His homage to Clark Griswold, the movie's hapless hero, starts with more than 5,000 white lights Ray drapes over his far northwest suburban McHenry home. In that effort, Ray is no stranger to Griswoldian mishaps.

"I was using so much power that I lit my garage on fire the first year I did it," said Ray, an HVAC technician, who at 33 is two years younger than the movie.

But his enthusiasm for "Christmas Vacation" goes much further. In the driveway of Ray's home is a 1990 Ford Taurus wagon with a rear-facing row of seats that he bought for \$300 through Facebook Marketplace prior to last year's Christmas season. He figured it was a reasonable facsimile of the Griswold family vehicle but knew it needed an added touch.

In the movie, Clark Griswold drives his family out to the country in a similar wagon to find a Christmas tree. Chevy Chase's character settles on a massive tree but, having forgot-

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JOHN J. KIM/CHICAGO TRIBUNE

Bears dominated by 49ers

Ten days after team leaders fired coach Matt Eberflus, the state of the Bears looked even worse Sunday in a 38-13 loss to the 49ers at Levi's Stadium in Santa Clara, California. **Chicago Sports**

Joffrey Ballet's 'Nutcracker' sparkles

It's been eight years since the company unveiled a new "Nutcracker," but the Chicago-themed production at the Lyric Opera House sparkles like it's still fresh out of the box. **Arts & Living**

Woman remembered as 'shining star'

Tracey found dead in South Loop stairwell in October at age 36

By Sylvan Lebrun
Chicago Tribune

Looking to escape city life in Chicago during the pandemic, Caitlin Tracey moved to a charming lakeside town in her home state of Michigan, where she rode an electric scooter to the grocery store and loved to paddleboard in the lake.

Her new neighbor in New Buffalo, Joyce Lantz, said she immediately admired Tracey, who she saw as "such a shining star." She was smart, successful and fashionable, with an "intelligence that's (also) a humor," Lantz said.

Her friends and family recall Tracey — nicknamed "CT" — as someone who loved travel, dancing, fine wine, fashion and hosting guests for meals. Her house, located just a few minutes' walk



Caitlin Tracey's father, Andrew Tracey, left, and mother, Monica Tracey, center, embrace the priest following Caitlin Tracey's funeral on Nov. 23 at Old St. Patrick's Church in Chicago. TESS CROWLEY/CHICAGO TRIBUNE

from the lake, was "like something that you'd see in a design magazine," Lantz said.

"As another woman, you just want to cheer her on, because she's on her own, and built this amazing life," Lantz said. "It's just

amazing to me how one person can come into your life and change the trajectory in such a major way. It's deeply sad, right? That she's not with us anymore."

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