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In Tehran on Tuesday, Iranians hold images of Hassan Nasrallah, the slain Hezbollah leader, during a demonstration in support of Hezbollah and Palestinians. High-level diplomacy intensified Wednesday amid rising concern that tensions between Israel and Iran could escalate.

# Amid crisis, Biden and Netanyahu talk for 1st time in months

BY DAVID E. SANGER AND ERIC SCHMITT  
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## WASHINGTON

For the first time in two months, President Joe Biden and Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu spoke on Wednesday in a phone conversation that focused on Israel's plans to retaliate against Iran for a missile attack.

When the meeting ended, U.S. officials said nothing about Israel's plans, or whether Netanyahu indicated he would heed Biden's warnings not to hit nuclear or energy sites, which the White House fears could lead to an escalating cycle of Iranian missile strikes and Israeli responses.

Instead, a terse account of the conversation issued by the White House hours later said Biden "condemned unequivocally Iran's ballistic missile attack against Israel on Oct. 1," but made no reference to discussions on how to respond — which was the purpose of the call.

Looming over the conversation was the reality that, for all the declarations of unified purpose, the past few months have been burdened by the weight of the worst relationship between the United States and Israel in years.

The conversation on a secure line, which also included Vice President

Kamala Harris, began shortly after 10:30 a.m., the Israeli news media reported.

The call came at a moment when U.S. national security officials believe the Middle East is on a knife's edge. They have told Biden that after the missile attack by Iran on Oct. 1, which did relatively little damage in Israel, Iran's supreme leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, is not looking to enter a broader war.

But U.S. officials believe that if Israel reacts to the strikes by going after Iran's most sensitive sites, the result could be an uncontrolled escalation. Israel's defense minister, Yoav Gallant, posted a video Wednesday around the time of the call. "Our attack will be deadly, precise and above all surprising," he said, which seemed to suggest that some kind of covert action in Iran might be the central element. "They will not understand what happened, and how it happened," he added. "They will see the results."

U.S. and Israeli officials have hinted that Israel might take its time in responding, adding to Iran's anxieties about what could come next. There have been, in the past, local attacks on nuclear facilities and assassinations of Iranian scientists, but they have not stopped Iran's slow but steady progress to the

threshold of building a bomb.

U.S. officials do not dispute that Israel needs to react to maintain deterrence. But at this point, administration officials would settle for acts of sabotage, as long as the situation does not escalate what has already turned into a regional conflict. Yet time after time in the past year, Netanyahu has largely ignored Biden, betting that the president did not have the political latitude to cut off arms or aid to Jerusalem.

White House officials, worried after they were blindsided by a series of Israeli attacks on Hezbollah in Lebanon, demanded the conversation Wednesday and insisted that it take place before Israel conducted a counterattack.

Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin was reported to be "angry beyond words," one administration official said, because the absence of clear advance notice about the attacks in Lebanon put the lives of Americans in the Middle East at risk.

Top U.S. officials said they were mostly concerned about making sure that Iran and Israel did not get into an uncontrolled escalation of their long-running shadow war. In the past six months, that conflict has expanded to include three rounds of direct missile attacks from one country against the

other. This was the first year direct attacks took place since the Iranian revolution in 1979.

For his part, Netanyahu believes that Biden's constant efforts to reach a cease-fire in the Gaza Strip, and more recently in Lebanon, would have squandered Israel's best chance in decades to deal major blows to Hamas and Hezbollah, according to U.S. officials familiar with their conversations.

In the American account of the conversation, the White House said that "the leaders discussed the urgent need to renew diplomacy to release the hostages held by Hamas." It made no reference to the view of U.S. negotiators that Netanyahu often proved an obstacle to reaching that accord, as did the leader of Hamas, Yahya Sinwar.

In the prime minister's view, Israel has scored major tactical victories over both Hamas and Hezbollah by destroying much of their leadership ranks. In Hezbollah's case, U.S. and Israeli intelligence officials believe that half or more of its arsenal of missiles, all designed to strike Israeli targets, has been destroyed.

U.S. officials have argued that it is time for Israel to cement its tactical gains over Hamas and Hezbollah into a broader strategic victory, including some political agreements on cease-fires and, ultimately, toward a two-state solution that would give Palestinians a homeland. But they fear that Netanyahu is not interested and is trying to revive his reputation after being taken by surprise by the terrorist attack on Oct. 7, 2023, that killed more than 1,200 Israelis.

# South Korean author of 'The Vegetarian' wins Nobel prize

BY ALEX MARSHALL  
NYT News Service/Syndicate Stories

Han Kang, the South Korean author best known for "The Vegetarian," was awarded the Nobel Prize in literature Thursday — the first writer from her country to receive the major award.

Mats Malm, the permanent secretary of the Swedish Academy, which organizes the prize, said at a news conference in Stockholm that she was receiving the honor "for her intense poetic prose that confronts historical traumas and exposes the fragility of human life."

Han's best-known book, "The Vegetarian," published in South Korea in 2007, won the 2016 International Booker Prize after it was translated into English. In the surreal novel, a depressed housewife shocks her family when she stops eating meat; later, she starves herself, thinking that she can feed off sunlight.

Porochista Khakpour, in a review of "The Vegetarian" for The New York Times, said that Han "has been rightfully celebrated as a visionary in South Korea."

Han's other novels include "The White Book," which was also nominated

for the International Booker Prize, and "Greek Lessons," published in English in 2023. In "Greek Lessons," a woman loses her ability to speak and tries to restore it by learning ancient Greek. Idra Novey, in a review for the Times, called the novel "a celebration of the ineffable trust to be found in sharing language."

Anders Olsson, the chair of the Nobel committee, said in a statement Thursday that Han, in her writing, "has a unique awareness of the connections between body and soul, the living and the dead, and in her poetic and experimental style has become an innovator in contemporary prose."

Han's award was a surprise. Before the announcement, the bookmakers' favorite for this year's award was Can Xue, an avant-garde Chinese writer of category-defying novels.

The Nobel Prize is literature's preeminent award, and winning it is a capstone to a writer, poet or

playwright's career. Past recipients have included Toni Morrison, Harold Pinter and, in 2016, Bob Dylan. Along with the prestige and a huge boost in sales, the new laureate receives 11 million Swedish krona (about \$1 million).

In recent years, the academy has tried to increase the diversity of authors considered for the literature prize, after facing criticism over the low number of laureates who were female or came from outside Europe and North America.

Since 2020, the academy has awarded the prize to one person of color — Abdulrazak Gurnah, a Tanzanian writer whose novels dissect the legacy of colonialism — as well as two women: Louise Glück, the American poet, and Annie Ernaux, the French writer of autobiographical works.

Last year's recipient was Jon Fosse, a Norwegian author and playwright whose novels, told in lengthy sentences, often contain religious undertones.

# Why a Union County school bus driver crashed, according to the sheriff's office

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Three students and a school bus driver had minor injuries after a bus ran off of Mill Grove Road and crashed in Union County on Wednesday morning, the sheriff's office said.

Lt. James Maye said the portion of the road where the crash occurred is curvy, and when the bus began to run off the road, the driver tried to stabilize it. But she overcorrected, he said.

A photo on the sheriff's

office Facebook page showed the bus crashed in a wooded area. There were 33 students inside at the time of the crash.

Maye said there was nothing to indicate any "extreme wrongdoing" by the driver. She wasn't intoxicated or having a medical emergency, and wasn't speeding, he said.

The injured students and driver received treatment at the scene, or were referred for additional treatment, the sheriff's office said.

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# Did NC's Ted Budd and Dan Bishop vote against disaster relief? We explain.

BY DANIELLE BATTAGLIA  
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Sen. Ted Budd and Rep. Dan Bishop have been criticized for voting against funding the Federal Emergency Management Agency ahead of Hurricane Helene.

The storm made landfall on Sept. 26 as a Category 4 hurricane and tore up the East Coast, leaving a path of devastation behind.

Helene killed more than 230 people, decimated communities across Western North Carolina as well as other states, and will cost well into the \$100 billion range in relief aid.

And just days before the storm hit, Congress went home while ignoring requests for billions of dollars of additional disaster relief funding.

But that's not what Budd and Bishop are being criticized for. The two Republicans are under fire for voting against a continuing resolution to keep the government funded at its current levels through Dec. 20. The CR refilled FEMA's \$20 billion budget.

Eighteen senators and 82 House members voted against the package.

Vice President Kamala Harris' campaign and others have used the vote to criticize Budd, Bishop and the other 98 lawmakers for voting against disaster relief funding.

But is that a fair assessment?

## VOTING AGAINST APPROPRIATIONS

"Appropriations bills are large, unwieldy pieces of legislation by design," said Chris Cooper, a political science professor from Western Carolina University. "While it is true that the bill they voted against would have included FEMA funding, it also would have included a host of other provisions that have absolutely nothing to do with emergency management or disaster relief."

After the bill passed the House, 341-82, Bishop quickly took to social media to explain his vote. Bishop said he won't vote to spend billions on things the country doesn't need when he has concerns about the election and "our debt is sky-rocketing."

"Today's vote sets up another monstrous December omnibus and worsens the swamp spending addiction," Bishop wrote.

Bishop is running for attorney general against fellow Rep. Jeff Jackson.

## BUDGET NEGOTIATIONS

This session of Congress will go down in history as one of the least productive on record. The first year was mired by Republican infighting, and that largely stemmed from negotiations over 12 appropriation bills.

The infighting got so severe that it cost House Speaker Kevin McCarthy his leadership role, caused him to resign from Congress, led to Rep. Patrick McHenry, a Republican from North Carolina, becoming an interim speaker for the first time in the nation's history, and then set up three weeks of Republicans trying to elect a new speaker.

Most of those events happened in October 2023, but it wasn't until March that Congress passed those 12 appropriation bills that make up the government's budget.

And now they have to do it again.

## BUDD'S VOTE

As for Budd, he didn't put out a public statement following the vote, but his staff provided an explanation in an email to McClatchy Tuesday.

"Senator Budd wanted to see reform to the broken budget process instead of setting in motion a process that will lead to a massive take-it-or-leave-it spending bill before Christmas," said Curtis Kalin, Budd's spokesman. "... when the government overspends on things it shouldn't, it crowds out the real responsibilities it has, like disaster relief."

## DISASTER RELIEF

Since Helene hit Western North Carolina, Budd has been one of the lawmakers who immediately called for relief to those affected.

He and Sen. Thom Tillis wrote a joint letter asking for congressional leadership to consider bringing members of Congress back during their October recess to pass disaster relief aid.

FEMA officials stated that the agency has the money for an immediate response and recovery to Helene.

But long-term, both Republicans and Democrats, including President Joe Biden, have called on Congress to do more.

And overnight, Hurricane Milton made landfall in Florida, causing widespread damage and flooding in its path.

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