



December 16, 2024

Headlining This Week's Brief

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Top Stories

Minimal U.S. Weather Threats This Week, but Elevated Fire Danger Returns to Southern California

Starting in the Northwest, [winter storm alerts](#) are most abundant across the Washington-Oregon Cascade Ranges and Northern Rockies. Through Tuesday, Cascade snow totals as high as 20-30 inches are forecast at elevations above 4,000 feet, complicating ground travel at [Oregon mountain snow passes](#). Larger cities, including Seattle and Portland, will escape the snow, but as much as two inches of rain is expected through Wednesday, resulting in nuisance-level travel inconvenience.

In Southern California, the [Franklin Fire](#) is 54% contained after burning 4,037 acres as of this morning. Malibu schools [reopened](#) earlier today. At least 28 structures were damaged, and another 20 were destroyed by fire early last week. Looking ahead, [Fire Weather Watches](#) have been issued for Ventura and Los Angeles counties ahead of a second, weaker 'Santa Ana' wind event anticipated between Tuesday night and Thursday. Northeast wind gusts as high as 50-55mph are forecast within high elevations and wind-prone areas. [Southern California Edison](#) is considering Public Safety Power Shutoffs (PSPS) for 80,000 customers.

The central and eastern U.S. will experience periods of nuisance-level rain and snow, but there is no strong supporting signal for widespread significant weather impacts heading into the weekend. A notable surge of cold air will hit the Great Lakes, Midwest, and much of the East between Friday and Sunday. Low temperatures into the mid-20s will penetrate the Deep South, while negative wind chill readings will extend across the Dakotas, Minnesota, upper Wisconsin and Michigan, and parts of New England. This downturn in temperatures will be short-lived, with extended-range models signaling a rapid rebound.

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Well-above-normal temperatures are forecast to dominate the eastern two-thirds of the U.S. and Canada between Christmas and New Year's Day.

South Korean President Impeached, Setting Stage for an Uncertain Future

South Korea's National Assembly [voted to impeach](#) President Yoon Suk-yeol on Saturday following his controversial and short-lived declaration of martial law on December 3. Yoon's presidential powers are now suspended while the Constitutional Court determines whether to remove him from office officially. The court has 180 days to make its decision, during which [Prime Minister Han Duck-soo](#) will serve as acting president. If Yoon is removed, a national election must be held within 60 days to determine his successor. Opposition leader Lee Jae-Myung says that he and the [Democratic Party](#) will work with Han to ensure stability while the court considers the case. Han is also under investigation for his role in the martial law decision, although Lee has said that he does not plan to attempt to [impeach](#) him. The court's [first public hearing](#) will be held on December 27. Despite Yoon's impeachment, demonstration activity and possible strike action are expected to continue until his full removal from office. If he is forced to resign, further instability and protests are likely, given the [deeply divided](#) nature of the South Korean electorate.

For further information on the situation in South Korea, review AlertMedia's [situation report](#).

Eastern European Countries Face Turbulent Week of Protests Amid Political Unrest

On Saturday, former soccer player and anti-Western candidate Mikheil Kavelashvili was elected President of Georgia, though opposition parties currently boycotting parliamentary sessions have called the election "[illegitimate](#)." The election followed over two weeks of protests against the ruling Georgian Dream party after it halted accession talks with the European Union (EU) last month. Demonstrations in Georgia continued unabated over the weekend despite the government's swift [passage](#) of a controversial law that bans certain protest activities.

Across the Black Sea, Romania's pro-European parties [agreed](#) to form a majority government to shut out far-right nationalists who scored significant gains during the December 1 parliamentary elections. The unlikely alliance of pro-Europe groups spans the ideological spectrum. Its formation comes after Romania's Constitutional Court annulled the results of the first round of the presidential election and canceled the December 8 runoff over allegations of Russian interference, with a date for a fresh vote yet to be determined.

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In neighboring Moldova, the parliament voted last Friday to [impose](#) a State of Emergency (SOE) in the country's energy sector amid fears of looming gas supply disruptions. The SOE, which will be in effect for 60 days, will allow the government to "respond rapidly and curb energy exports." Moldova decided not to extend its contract with Russian gas supplier Gazprom, which is set to expire on December 31.

Meanwhile, in Serbia, protests against the government have [persisted](#), with demonstrators blocking roads and suspending classes across the country. The demonstrations, which began in November following a roof canopy collapse incident that killed 15 people in Novi Sad, have evolved to encompass a broad range of grievances against the government. In a separate development, the U.S. [reportedly](#) plans to impose sanctions against Serbia's main gas supplier starting January 1.

Climate and Natural Hazards

- **Hundreds Feared Dead in Mayotte Following Tropical Cyclone Chido:** Chido made landfall over the French Territory of Mayotte on Saturday as a Category 4 hurricane equivalent, the strongest to impact the islands in at least 90 years. Communication with the island has been limited, though officials fear that "[several hundred](#)" to even several thousand people may have been killed. Approximately [100 medical professionals](#) are being sent to the island, and a field hospital is being deployed after severe degradation of the healthcare system. The storm is also responsible for at least four deaths in [Mozambique](#) and two in [Malawi](#).
- **Two Additional Tropical Storm Threats:** The [Joint Typhoon Warning Center](#) has issued a Tropical Cyclone Formation Alert near the southern Philippines. The Philippines weather authority, [PAGASA](#), has issued multiple heavy rainfall-flood alerts over the southern two-thirds of the country, poised to endure above-normal daily rain totals through the end of the week. Rapid intensification into a significant typhoon is unlikely, making flooding and landslides the primary hazards. Elsewhere, the [India Meteorological Department](#) is monitoring an area of disturbed weather east of Sri Lanka. Forecast models suggest limited strengthening, if any, as the main center moves north-northwest through mid-week. Nevertheless, excessive rainfall could reach [Tamil Nadu, Puducherry, and surrounding areas](#) Tuesday into Wednesday.

Worldwide

- **Fall of Assad Brings New Reality for Syria:** In the week since Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) ousted Syrian leader Bashar al-Assad, the country has been [bombed](#) by three foreign powers: the U.S., which has attacked ISIS remnants in the east; Türkiye targeting Kurdish forces on its border; and Israel, which has moved to seize additional territory in the Golan Heights and has engaged in a

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[comprehensive campaign](#) to destroy the state's remaining military capabilities. While Israel has insisted that its actions are primarily defensive and HTS has said it is [not seeking conflict](#) with Israel, Netanyahu has announced plans to [double](#) the settler population in the occupied Golan Heights, framing it as necessary to ensure the country's safety. In a separate development, Russian forces [reportedly](#) do not intend to withdraw from Syria fully, and Russia is allegedly [in talks](#) with Syria's interim government to keep its two main bases in the country.

- **No-Confidence Vote Passes in Germany, Elections Expected in February:** German Chancellor Olaf Scholz [lost](#) a no-confidence vote today, triggering early elections on February 23. His three-party coalition collapsed after he fired the finance minister, prompting the pro-business FDP to leave and leaving his government without a majority. President Frank-Walter Steinmeier now has 21 days to dissolve parliament. Campaigning for February's early election is already underway. Polls show Scholz's Social Democrats trailing Friedrich Merz's center-right Union bloc, while the Greens and far-right Alternative for Germany trail further behind.
- **China Deploys Nearly 100 Vessels During Drills Around Taiwan:** Last week, China held drills ranging from southern Japan to the South China Sea, deploying what Taiwan [described](#) as Beijing's largest deployment of naval force in nearly 30 years. The [unannounced exercises](#), following Taiwanese President Lai Ching-te's recent [Pacific tour](#), reportedly included simulated attacks on foreign ships. The exercises prompted protests from Taipei but did not stop the Taipei-Shanghai City Forum from moving forward today. The government did, however, [block](#) some individuals in the Chinese delegation from attending the annual event, which features meetings between the mayors and officials of Taipei and Shanghai and serves as a platform for dialogue and cooperation between the two cities.
- **Notable Criminal Incidents Reported Across Caribbean:** In recent days, significant crime-related news has come out of the Caribbean. Most striking was [another deadly event](#) in violence-prone Haiti, but other, more tourist-friendly destinations have reported notable incidents as well. Turks and Caicos is reportedly facing a [wave](#) of "brazen robberies," while Jamaica [recorded](#) 25 murders just within the first week of December. In the Bahamas, the U.S. [indicted](#) local police officers for drug trafficking. It issued a [security alert](#) over recent crimes reported in Nassau, including an armed home invasion in the city's Love Beach area. The U.S. Embassy in the country also issued a [warning](#) for a potential rise in crime and violence during the holiday season.
- **Organized Crime Continues to Drive Violence Across Mexico:** In relatively quiet Querétaro, 10 people were [gunned down](#) at a bar in the city's downtown area in early December. The mass shooting comes a month after Mexico's President Claudia Sheinbaum [announced](#) a new security strategy to reduce violent crime. Analysts [warn](#) that the incident is a result of the expansion of

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the Jalisco New Generation Cartel across Mexico in the past decade. Elsewhere, police in Chihuahua [said](#) that they have “restored order” following days of deadly clashes in various parts of the state. Violence [continues](#) to plague Sinaloa following the arrest of a cartel leader on U.S. soil; 500 are dead, as well as a reported \$1 billion in losses. Meanwhile, political violence has not ceased since the country’s recent elections. A congressman was [shot dead](#) in Veracruz last week, and just days later, a state judge was [killed](#) outside of a court building in the resort city of Acapulco.

- **Mysteries Remain Around U.S. East Coast Drone Sightings:** Mysterious drone sightings across the northeast region of the U.S. have [raised public concern](#), with federal and state officials struggling to identify their origins. U.S. Homeland Security Secretary Alejandro Mayorkas emphasized the need for expanded drone-countering legislation as current authorities limit investigation capabilities. Recent drone activity [resulted](#) in arrests near Boston’s Logan International Airport and forced New York’s Stewart Airfield to halt flights for around an hour. Officials, including Senator Chuck Schumer, are [advocating](#) for advanced detection systems and broader authority for state and local enforcement. While there is no evidence of foreign involvement or malicious intent, and most of the drone sightings are [actually just manned aircraft](#), the FBI has launched an investigation, deploying observation teams in New Jersey to track the activity.

Cyber and Regulatory

- **Ransomware Group Targets Rhode Islander’s PII and Other Notable Hacks:** Rhode Island’s online portal for obtaining social services, RIBridges, was [breached](#) in early December, leading to the theft of resident’s private data over the past eight years. Officials say that the hackers are part of an international ransomware group and that the data stolen likely includes social security numbers and bank information for hundreds of thousands of state residents since 2016. Meanwhile, a new group named “Termite” [claimed](#) responsibility for a hack against Blue Yonder and threatened to release nearly 700 GB of data, including sensitive documents, unless a ransom was paid. Krispy Kreme was also targeted in an attack that [impacted](#) its online systems in late November and prevented online orders from being processed.
- **Australia Proposes Taxing Digital Platforms for News Media:** The Australian government is [looking](#) to implement a tax targeting digital platforms and search engines unless they share revenue with news media organizations in the country. The proposed tax would [apply](#) to companies that make more than

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\$250 million AUS annually and aims to make revenue sharing the cheaper option. The move was prompted by Meta's announcement that it would not renew contracts, **implemented** by the News Media Bargaining Code in 2021, to pay Australian news publishers for their content. Google stated it would renew its three-year agreements and continue to assess the proposal.

- **Meta Services Restored Following Technical Issue:** Meta's suite of applications, including Facebook, WhatsApp, and Instagram, **suffered** outages on December 11 that impacted more than 200,000 people around the world. Over half of the **impacted** users reported issues with Facebook, while another 70,000 reported issues accessing Instagram. Facebook Messenger, Threads, and WhatsApp also suffered from the issue but on a much smaller scale. Most of the outages were **resolved** approximately five hours after the incident began.
- **California Regulators Extend Emission's Reporting Grace Period, OSHA Extends Comment Period on Heat Rules:** The California Air Resources Board (CARB) released a **statement** saying that it will extend the grace period for companies that fall under the Climate Corporate Data Accountability Act. In the release, CARB stated that enforcement will be **delayed** until 2026 for companies that show they're putting in a "good faith effort" to collect and record emissions data. Senator Scott Wiener called the delay unacceptable, though Governor Gavin Newsom had noted that the implementation period was too aggressive upon signing the bill. Additionally, OSHA has **extended** the comment period for a proposal to effectively protect both indoor and outdoor workers from heat. The extension aims to allow for additional responses and comments past the holiday season.
- **Overdraft Fees Limited by U.S. Federal Ruling:** The Consumer Financial Protection Bureau (CFPB) **finalized** a rule to limit how much banks can charge customers who overdraw their accounts. The ruling, set to take effect in October 2025, would apply to banks and credit unions with more than \$10 billion in assets. Officials are offering large banks multiple options to comply, including a fee capped at \$5 for each instance, another fee to cover costs and losses, or treating the overdraft as a line of credit. Supporters of the ruling state that it will help save Americans billions of dollars per year. However, multiple banking groups have **filed** a lawsuit against the CFPB, saying that the bureau has exceeded its regulatory authority with the ruling.

Infrastructure and Supply Chain

- **China, U.S. Exchange Further Tit for Tat Measures Over Tech:** In the latest example of escalating trade tensions between China and the U.S., China opened an [investigation](#) into U.S. chipmaker Nvidia, believing that it may have run afoul of anti-monopoly laws during a 2020 deal. Not long after that investigation was announced, the Biden administration announced that they were introducing Section 301 [tariffs](#) of 50% on solar wafers and polysilicon and 25% on certain tungsten products from China. The tariffs are due to go into effect on January 1, 2025, and are part of an effort to shield the U.S. solar industry from cheaper Chinese suppliers.
- **Rescue Operations Underway After Two Russian Oil Tankers Damaged in Kerch Strait:** At least one person is dead after two Russian oil tankers [sustained damage](#) during a storm in the Black Sea on Sunday. One of the tankers, Volgoneft-212, [split](#) in half, and video footage shows streaks of oil visible in the water around its broken bow. Both tankers were carrying over 4000 tonnes of oil products. Poor weather conditions have complicated rescue operations, and Russian officials have yet to fully assess the [extent](#) of the oil spill. A second tanker, the Volgoneft-239, ran aground near the Russian port of Taman. The Kerch Strait separates the occupied Crimean Peninsula from Russia and is a key route for Russian exports.
- **Romania, Bulgaria Join Schengen:** As of January 1, 2025, Bulgaria and Romania will officially [join](#) the Schengen Zone, removing borders between the two countries and much of Europe and hopefully providing a boom to their respective economies. While Sofia and Bucharest joined the European Union in 2007, they had been [denied](#) permission to join the visa-free zone over objections primarily from Austria. Romania and Bulgaria's admission into Schengen comes as more countries reintroduce border controls amid rising concerns across the continent around migration and security.
- **Prices of Grocery Staples Rising Again:** Egg prices in the U.S. are up by the largest amount in nearly two years, [jumping](#) 35% since June, with the possibility that they could push higher in the coming months. A [resurgence](#) of bird flu combined with higher demand due to the holidays has pushed the prices up. Ground beef prices have also increased, hitting record highs in September. Overall, [wholesale food costs](#) in the U.S. were up 3.1% from October, underscoring the difficulty of reining in inflation.
- **Update on Cargo Theft in Mexico:** During the third quarter of 2024, 83% of cargo theft events in Mexico involved violence, according to supply chain risk management firm [Overhaul](#). Puebla, the State of Mexico, and Guanajuato saw comparatively higher violent theft rates than other states. Overhaul also noted a 5% increase in thefts from units in unsecured parking, although the main tactic remains the interception of trucks while in transit. The Mexican Association of Insurance

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Institutions (AMIS) has [reported](#) a 1% year-over-year increase in cargo theft events between January and October. Recent efforts by the government to address cargo theft may be bearing fruit. An [update](#) from earlier this month on the National Guard's [BALAM strategy](#) said that crime on federal highways had decreased by 8.84%.

Health

- **African Health Authorities Concerned Over Spread of Congo Mystery Illness:** A mysterious disease outbreak in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) continues to grow, with African authorities [reporting](#) this past week that total cases had eclipsed 500 and deaths reached at least 32. The illness is [primarily impacting](#) children and is centered in a rural area of Kwango Province. The remote nature of the outbreak and recent adverse weather have made investigating its underlying cause challenging for authorities. Testing suggests that malaria may be at least partially at fault, but [officials said](#) it's possible more than one disease is involved. Africa's CDC chief [called](#) the illness' spread a "major public health concern" for the DRC.
- **Louisiana Latest U.S. State to Report Human Bird Flu Case:** On Friday, the Louisiana Department of Health [reported](#) that it had identified a presumptive positive human case of bird flu (H5N1). The first case for Louisiana brings the total number of [recorded](#) cases across the U.S. to 60. It came as two more bird flu infections in farmworkers were [reported](#) in California. Despite the slowly rising human case count, continuing infections in American [livestock herds](#) and [bird flocks](#), and [more detections](#) in wastewater samples, the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) [still maintains](#) that the overall risk to the general public remains low.
- **Dengue Cases in Americas Reach Historic Levels, Oropouche Continues Spread:** According to an [update last week](#) from the Pan American Health Organization (PAHO), cases of dengue in the Americas region this year have reached levels not seen since recording began in 1980. Over 12.6 million infections have been reported in 2024, almost three times more than in 2023, with Argentina, Brazil, Colombia, and Mexico accounting for most cases. In addition to dengue, Oropouche remains a problem as it expands to new areas and expands in others. Just this month, officials in Barbados [reported](#) new cases, and the CDC [increased](#) its travel advisory for Brazil's Espírito Santo state due to an ongoing outbreak.
- **Viral Activity Rises in U.S., U.K. Officials Warn of Flu Wave:** In its [latest update](#) on respiratory illness spread in the U.S., the CDC reported that COVID-19, flu, and RSV activity was increasing. Emergency department visits in connection with the viral infections were also rising, with RSV visit levels reported at "moderate," though flu and COVID-related hospitalizations remained low. Health authorities across the Atlantic in the U.K. [say](#) they are dealing with a "tidal wave" of seasonal viruses affecting hospitals. Flu cases and hospitalizations are increasing, and officials

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are [urging](#) citizens to book vaccination appointments as the national booking system for shots closes on Thursday.

- **Other Health Stories the Global Intelligence Team Is Watching:** Last week, officials in Perth, Australia, issued an [alert](#) over reported measles cases, the second notice for the city in [just a few days](#). The latest EU One Health Zoonoses Report [showed](#) a rise in zoonotic diseases in Europe in 2023, with listeriosis cases hitting their highest since 2007. Meanwhile, U.S. officials [recently reported](#) on slowly rising cases of [C. auris](#), an “emerging fungus that can cause severe, often multidrug-resistant, infections.”

Demonstrations and Industrial Action

- **Demonstrations Continue in South Korea After Impeachment Vote:** Tens of thousands of people in Seoul took to the streets on Saturday as lawmakers [voted](#) to impeach President Yoon Suk Yeol. Opposition groups, including the Democratic Party (DP) and civil society organizations, have vowed to sustain pressure on the government until Yoon is permanently removed from office. The group Emergency Action for Yoon Seok-yeol’s Immediate Resignation and Social Reform [intends](#) to hold daily vigils at the Gwanghwamun gate of Gyeongbok Palace and is calling for a “large-scale candlelight vigil” and march on Saturday, December 21. Though smaller in scale, Pro-Yoon rallies have also drawn large crowds in Seoul.
- **Demonstrations Related to Middle East Conflict to Persist Through Holidays:** Demonstrations related to Israel’s military operations in Gaza are expected to continue through the holiday season and into next year. Much of U.S. activists’ energy has been focused on demonstrations against President-elect Donald Trump’s inauguration, which will take place on January 20. Ahead of that date, activists in Massachusetts are calling for a demonstration this Thursday morning in Cambridge against a partnership program between the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and Elbit Systems. Pro-Palestine groups in British Columbia are organizing a demonstration at Vancouver’s Robson Square on December 31. More than 45,000 people have been killed in Gaza since October 7, 2023, according to Gaza’s health ministry, and as of October this year, more than 1.9 million people were displaced.
- **VW Workers Threaten Further Strikes While Canada Post Employees Return to Job:** Last week, workers at Volkswagen went [on strike](#) for a second time this month and have threatened to escalate their campaign if a deal with management isn’t reached by December that would [avert](#) plant closures at the Germany industrial powerhouse. As the country’s largest private employer and Europe’s biggest automaker, the situation at VW has [significant implications](#) for the wider German economy, with prolonged unrest there likely to affect the hundreds of companies that form the auto supply chain. Meanwhile, in Canada, the Federal Labor Relations

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Board **ordered** postal workers to return to work starting tomorrow, saying that negotiations had reached an impasse. More than 55,000 members of the Canadian Union of Postal Workers have been on strike since November 15.

- **Approval of Mozambique’s Presidential Election Results Likely to Prompt Further Protests:** Demonstrations in Mozambique, called by opposition presidential candidate Venâncio Mondlane, have **resulted** in more than 100 fatalities over seven weeks of post-election unrest. Mozambique’s Constitutional Council is expected to approve the presidential election results around December 23, and the U.K. is **recommending** that people “prepare for significant disruption and unrest” before and after the council’s announcement. The Lebombo border crossing with South Africa **reopened** this weekend after protest activity **surged**, though authorities in South Africa are **recommending** that travelers avoid the crossing for the holiday season. Demonstrations have also **affected** the country’s power supplies and those of neighboring Zambia. Mondlane, who disputes the results of the vote, **announced** he intends to be sworn in as president on January 15.
- **Cuban President Calls for Demonstration Against United States Amid Economic Crisis:** Cuba’s President Miguel Díaz-Canel has **called** for supporters to take part in a march later this week against U.S. policies related to Cuba, particularly the ongoing **economic embargo**. The march, planned for Friday, December 20, will conclude in front of the U.S. Embassy in Havana. Demonstrations broke out in Cuba earlier this year over power outages and food shortages, with Cuba’s government **accusing** the U.S. of promoting unrest within the country. Cuba-U.S. relations are expected to remain strained under a second Donald Trump presidency.

Upcoming Events

- December 16: Victory Day (Bangladesh)
- December 16: Day of Reconciliation (South Africa)
- December 16: National Day (Bahrain)
- December 24: Christmas Eve (Global)
- December 25: Christmas (Global)
- December 26: Boxing Day (Global)
- December 29: Parliamentary Elections (Chad)
- December 29: Presidential Election (Croatia)
- December 31: New Year’s Eve (Global)
- January 1: New Year’s Day (Global)
- January 6: Counting and Certification of Electoral Votes (United States)

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- January 7: Orthodox Christmas (Global)
- January 9: Martyr's Day (Panama)
- January 20: Martin Luther King Jr Day (United States)
- January 20: Presidential Inauguration (United States)
- January 20-24: World Economic Forum (Davos Switzerland)