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Democracy Dies in Darkness

SUNDAY, FEBRUARY 15, 2026 • \$6



Scenes from a Youth Day march, which demands political prisoners be freed
In Venezuela, first big protests since Maduro's exit

BY ANDREA HERNÁNDEZ BRICEÑO AND ANA VANESSA HERRERO
IN CARACAS, VENEZUELA

Hundreds of protesters took to the streets in Venezuela's capital and across the country last week for Youth Day, asserting their right to demonstrate and calling for acting president Delcy Rodriguez to release political prisoners.

Thursday's rallies, which proceeded peacefully, were seen as a test for the new government — the first major show of opposition in the streets since the U.S. capture Jan. 3 of President Nicolás Maduro, and since security forces made thousands of arrests in a large-scale crackdown on dissent in 2024, after Maduro claimed victory in an election that evidence shows he lost.

"We are not afraid anymore," Zahid Reyes, 19, a student leader at the Central University of Venezuela in Caracas, said as he was getting ready to join a campus rally. "Venezuela has changed."

"Amnesty now," read banners at campus entrances.

An air of excitement prevailed, among the hundreds of students looking to give new voice to an opposition that faced increasingly harsh repression in recent years. Police and security forces cordoned off the area.

SEE VENEZUELA ON A10



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT:
Samuel Baluce, Minnesota Sipala,
Miguel Angel Suarez and Areyeliz
Villegas before the march.

PHOTOS BY ANDREA HERNÁNDEZ BRICEÑO/FOR THE WASHINGTON POST

Lemon bigger than ever after his arrest and Trump attacks

BY DREW HARWELL

The White House took a victory lap late last month when federal authorities arrested journalist Don Lemon after he covered an immigration protest in a Minnesota church, tweeting his photo and the caption, "When life gives you lemons," along with the emoji for chains.

But in the nearly two weeks since he was taken into custody, Lemon has enjoyed a triumph of his own. A new audience galvanized by the arrest has flooded his online-media empire, earning him more than 300,000 new followers on Instagram and 140,000 new subscribers on YouTube.

His Substack business has soared 73 percent to more than 140,000 subscribers, many of whom pay \$8 a month to be a part of "Lemon Nation." His online store has even started offering a new line of merchandise: tees, stickers and \$5 sweatshirts labeled "We Will Not Be Silenced."

"I think they did not expect public sentiment to go the way it's going," Lemon told The Washington Post in an interview. "They elevated me when they tried to demean me and demote me."

Lemon's arrest cast a spotlight on the increasingly aggressive ways the Trump administration

SEE LEMON ON A9



A federal grant aimed at helping underserved children funded a dance class in Connecticut.

Community schools hit hard by cuts

Trump policy cancels grant, threatens programs in 11 states and D.C.

BY LAUREN LUMPKIN

NEW HAVEN, CONN. — When more than 400 children returned from winter break last month, their New Haven public school had changed.

The care coordinator who helped families in crisis was gone. A class for parents who were getting certified to work in child care centers had been

scrapped. A dance club, where 13-year-old Miguel Gonzalez practices the moves that will hopefully help him get into a performing arts high school next year, was in its final weeks.

These programs at Family Academy of Multilingual Exploration (FAME) were funded by the Full-Service Community Schools grant, a federal program that prioritized helping

students found to be the most underserved. The Education Department abruptly canceled the grant in mid-December, affecting programs in 11 states and D.C., because the grantees had mentioned diversity, equity and inclusion in their applications. The programs do not align with the Trump administration's priorities, according to

SEE SCHOOLS ON A15



ARTS & STYLE
Kyle Smith, NFL fashion editor, melds the worlds of sports and style.

SPORTS
Two golds, two records, and speedskater Jordan Stoltz isn't done yet. B1



TRAVEL
Five tips for finding a cheap spring break trip. You need one this year.

BUSINESS
Trump set off a surge of AI in government. The results are unfolding. B8

The Book World section has been sunset. We appreciate your loyal readership and look forward to continuing to deliver the latest arts, entertainment and culture coverage.

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A secret test for 'Havana' weapon

SCIENTIST TURNED PULSES ON HIMSELF

He suffered symptoms similar to mystery illness

BY WARREN P. STROBEL AND ELLEN NAKASHIMA

Working in strict secrecy, a government scientist in Norway built a machine capable of emitting powerful pulses of microwave energy and, in an effort to prove such devices are harmless to humans, in 2024 tested it on himself. He suffered neurological symptoms similar to those of "Havana syndrome," the unexplained malady that has struck hundreds of U.S. spies and diplomats around the world.

The bizarre story, described by four people familiar with the events, is the latest wrinkle in the decade-long quest to find the causes of Havana syndrome, whose sufferers experience long-lasting effects including cognitive challenges, dizziness and nausea. The U.S. government calls the events Anomalous Health Incidents (AHIs).

The secret test in Norway has not been previously reported. The Norwegian government told the CIA about the results, two of the people said, prompting at least two visits in 2024 to Norway by Pentagon and White House officials.

Those aware of the test say it does not prove AHIs are the work of a foreign adversary wielding a secret weapon similar to the prototype tested in Norway. One of them noted that the effects suffered by the Norwegian researcher, whose identity was not disclosed by the people familiar, were

SEE RESEARCHER ON A7

Rubio hails 'deepest bonds' in appeal to unify the West

BY JOHN HUDSON AND ELLEN FRANCIS

MUNICH — Secretary of State Marco Rubio declared that the United States and Europe "belong together" in a speech Saturday seeking to unify the Western alliance, while condemning hallmarks of globalization, open borders, unfettered free trade, "deindustrialization" and mass migration.

Rubio's message, in a keynote address at the annual Munich Security Conference, received applause from an audience of

European leaders distressed about divisions with the United States stoked by President Donald Trump's punitive tariffs, territorial ambitions for Greenland and disagreements over how to end Russia's war in Ukraine.

"We are bound to one another by the deepest bonds that nations could share, forged by centuries of shared history, Christian faith, culture, heritage, language, ancestry and the sacrifices our forefathers made together," Rubio said.

But even as he appealed to

SEE RUBIO ON A13

Navalny probably killed by a rare poison, Europeans say

BY VICTORIA CRAW

It is "highly likely" that Russian opposition leader Alexei Navalny was killed by a rare toxin found in poison dart frogs, five European nations said in a statement Saturday, adding that Russia had the "means, motive and opportunity" to administer the deadly dose when Navalny died in an Arctic prison two years ago.

The statement, by the United Kingdom, Sweden, France, the Netherlands and Germany, provided official Western govern-

ment validation of the belief — widely held by Navalny's family and thousands of his supporters — that he was murdered by Russian authorities, perhaps on a direct order from the Kremlin.

The statement said that the five nations, all NATO allies, were "confident that Alexei Navalny was poisoned with a lethal toxin" following analysis of samples from him that confirmed the presence of epibatidine, a substance found in poison dart frogs in South America.

The substance is not found

SEE NAVALNY ON A13