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T-storms 94/60 • Tomorrow: Showers 64/55 B18

Democracy Dies in Darkness

WEDNESDAY, MAY 20, 2026 • \$4

A hail of bullets for ship risking run in strait

Seafarers just trying to do their jobs are caught up in conflict, at grave peril

BY SAMMY WESTFALL

Before chancing the treacherous waters of the Strait of Hormuz, the all-Filipino crew of 23 had been stranded at anchor for more than a month in the Persian Gulf as the U.S. and Israel waged war against Iran.

The crew members had huddled on the cargo ship's bridge to cast a final vote: Should they risk the perilous six-hour journey, made treacherous by mines and Iranian attacks? Although the path was closed to most international traffic, there was no way out but through.

Their worst fears came to pass: As the vessel navigated the Strait of Hormuz, it met with a hail of bullets that shattered windows and pockmarked it with dents. The crew scattered for cover, caught up in the ripple effects of a conflict in which they had no part. The gunfire appeared to come from small Iranian boats.

Before each of the five votes the sailors wound up holding ahead of their passage, the captain printed and handed out copies of letters from the Greek shipping company managing the vessel, urging them in increasingly strident terms to go for it, and expressing what sailors, some paid as little as a few hundred dollars a month, described as

SEE STRAIT ON A13

Iran hearing: Lawmaker's remark "inappropriate," admiral says. A8

Distrust simmers as Putin visits Xi in China

Moscow's dependency on Beijing increases as Ukraine war takes toll

BY CATHERINE BELTON AND RUDY LU

In the hours before Russian President Vladimir Putin arrived in China on Tuesday, he beamed out a video message proclaiming "an unprecedented level" of relations between Moscow and Beijing and cooperation on an "equal basis."

But as Putin visits — days after President Donald Trump's summit with Xi Jinping — there is growing imbalance between Russia and China, which are longtime allies against the United States, but also uneasy neighbors.

China's economic and political might on the world stage continues to grow, while Putin appears to be in one of the weakest positions since he ordered the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, Western officials and analysts said.

The Russian economy is faltering, and punitive sanctions are increasing Moscow's dependency on Beijing. Meanwhile, there is distrust beneath the surface, with at least one possible espionage case simmering in Russia.

SEE PUTIN ON A11

Inside the perimeter of the former East Wing



ALEX BRANDON/AP



JACQUELYN MARTIN/AP



SAMUEL CORUM/SIPA USA

FROM TOP: Work continues on the construction of the ballroom at the White House on Tuesday. President Donald Trump offers the closest look yet at the construction project amid new questions over its funding. A detailed view of the site. **Story, B13**

Trump deal with IRS 'forever' bars past tax inquiries

LAWMAKERS CRITICIZE \$1.8B SETTLEMENT

President and family cannot tap compensation fund

BY JEREMY ROEBUCK

Trump administration officials confronted bipartisan skepticism Tuesday of their deal to resolve President Donald Trump's legal claims against the government, as lawmakers panned its \$1.8 billion fund to compensate targets of "weaponized" justice and questioned a newly revealed provision that could carry significant financial benefits to the president and his family.

A one-page addendum to the deal posted Tuesday to the Justice Department's website said the IRS would be "forever barred and precluded" from pursuing unpaid tax claims against Trump, members of his family or his businesses that arose before the settlement being reached.

It was not immediately clear whether the IRS had any open tax audits of the president or his relatives, and the Treasury Department did not respond to requests for comment on that question, but Trump has often complained that he has been the subject of punishing, yearslong tax inquiries before his years in the White House.

While administration officials

have said Trump and his family are barred from receiving direct payments from the \$1.8 billion compensation fund, ending any pending tax investigations could benefit them personally.

The new provision to the settlement — which resolved a lawsuit Trump, his two eldest sons and his family business filed against the agency in January over the leak by a contractor of their confidential tax returns — was dated Tuesday and signed by acting attorney general Todd Blanche.

A spokesperson for the Justice Department described the new element as a "customary" part of most legal settlements releasing both parties from any claims they might have against each other. She stressed that it did not prevent the IRS from auditing or pursuing unpaid tax claims against the Trumps for future tax years.

Typically, though, such releases are limited to claims arising from matters central to the litigation being settled and do not restrict the parties from pursuing potentially unrelated claims, in this case audits of the Trumps' past returns.

SEE IRS ON A2

Mosque killings follow rise in anti-Islam voices

San Diego police say the two teenage shooters were radicalized online

BY MICHELLE BOORSTEIN AND N. KIRKPATRICK

Religious leaders from across the country are warning that a deadly shooting at a San Diego Islamic center — the latest in a string of attacks against houses of worship — reflects the escalating rhetoric against Muslims and other religious groups.

"This tragedy is a painful reminder that Islamophobia and religious bigotry continue to endanger lives and undermine the safety and rights of minority communities," said a statement from the Indian American Muslim Council. "We urge political leaders, law enforcement, and civil society to confront anti-Muslim hatred with the seriousness it demands and to ensure that all communities are able to worship in

peace and security."

Monday's fatal shooting of three men at the Islamic Center of San Diego also brought a spotlight to the issue of public funding for security at religious institutions. Hundreds of clergy were on Capitol Hill Tuesday as a bill was filed in the Senate to provide \$1 billion in additional funding for such security.

San Diego police said the two teenage suspects in Monday's attack were radicalized online. In one of their vehicles, the FBI found "writings and various ideologies outlining religious and racial beliefs of how the world they envisioned should look." The two were found dead nearby shortly after the attack.

"When elected officials, when the media try to dehumanize a community, this is the result," Imam Taha Hassane, the center's director, said in an interview with The Washington Post. "When we don't watch what we say about

SEE SHOOTING ON A6

'Sacrificed his life': Guard at mosque engaged the killers. A6

Fast-moving Ebola outbreak may prove difficult to contain

BY LENA H. SUN AND LAUREN WEBER

Public health authorities and experts warn that the world is confronting a dangerous convergence of factors that could make the latest Ebola outbreak extraordinarily difficult to contain: a fast-moving epidemic in a conflict-ridden region, involving a strain with no approved vaccine, at a moment when the global health infrastructure built after past Ebola crises has been weakened by funding cuts and political upheaval.

The concern comes as the United

States on Monday tightened entry rules for some travelers and disclosed that an American infected with the deadly disease was flown to Germany for treatment.

The outbreak is suspected to be linked to 130 deaths and more than 500 infections in Democratic Republic of Congo as of Tuesday, with two confirmed cases in Uganda. The World Health Organization declared an international public health emergency in

SEE EBOLA ON A12

Doctor: U.S. surgeon working in Congo tests positive for Ebola. A12

Millions are expected to lose ACA coverage

BY CHRISTOPHER ROWLAND

The affordability crisis for many people who have health insurance under the Affordable Care Act came into sharper focus Tuesday, with a new analysis projecting that higher premiums will cause millions more people to lose insurance this year.

Another sign of economic distress: Average deductibles for policyholders are now the highest ever, a result of people switching to the exchange's cheapest "bronze plans" in response to premium hikes, according to the report released Tuesday by KFF, a health policy research organization.

With greater migration to

Higher premiums will cause the change, a new analysis projects

bronze plans, the average deductible for ACA recipients rose more than \$1,000 a year, to \$3,786, the KFF analysis found.

There are two ways that people are losing coverage. First, premium increases prevented some from signing up during last year's open enrollment period. Now, millions who did sign up can no longer afford the premiums and will lose coverage for failing to pay.

The impacts are a result of a deadlock in Congress last year over covid-era ACA subsidies set to expire starting this year. Republicans, who hold majorities in the House and the Senate, refused to extend the subsidies for 2026 despite months of wrangling and a 43-day government shutdown.

With premiums rising as much as 100 percent for some, about 1 million people opted out of coverage for 2026 during last year's open enrollment period. The KFF analysis says attrition for failing to pay could grow throughout the year by up to 4 million more.

In all, active enrollment could

SEE INSURANCE ON A18

IN THE NEWS

Trump picks Paxton In Texas, the president has endorsed MAGA favorite Ken Paxton over Sen. John Cornyn, a decision that defied Senate Republican leaders. A2

Climate optimism A United Nations panel now calls its worst-case projection for global warming "implausible." A7

THE NATION House Republicans are seeking to end daylight saving time, a move favored by Trump. A4
Suicidal ideation could be treated by a surprising new combination of drugs. A9

THE WORLD Move over, Moo Deng. A baby hippo named Bumpy was rescued from beside his mother's body in Kenya. He's now thriving — and breaking the internet with his extreme cuteness. A10

THE ECONOMY An 83-year-old widow was a model of good financial stewardship. So why can't she get a credit card? A14
Federal student loan limits could exacerbate the national shortage of nurses and other health care workers, a coalition of 25 states says. A18

STYLE Country stars Kacey Musgraves and Miranda Lambert recently settled their years-long tension with a duet. B1

SPORTS The Spurs grabbed the double-overtime thriller in Game 1, and now the onus is on the Thunder to answer. B7

THE REGION After a brawl in D.C., U.S. Attorney Jeanine Pirro renewed her threat to prosecute parents of lawbreaking teens. B13

FOOD What's the best lime seltzer? Our blind taste test deduced which flavored fizzes bubbled up to the top.

BUSINESS NEWS.....A14
COMICS.....B4
OBITUARIES.....B17
OPINION PAGES.....A15
TELEVISION.....B6
WORLD NEWS.....A10

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