

A grim search after Assad's ouster

Syrians scour morgues and prisons for the estimated 150,000 people who went missing in custody.

BY NABIH BULOS

DAMASCUS, Syria — Corpse No. 11 was relatively pristine, with few signs of abuse save for a rictus of pained surprise. No. 26 was in worse condition, the decomposition further along but still not enough to obscure the scarlet bruising on the shriveling skin of his forehead. The face of No. 18 was also bruised but surprisingly intact otherwise; the mouth was open, as if he were in midsentence.

Pacing the pastel-green basement morgue of Damascus' Mujtahed Hospital was Sabri Riyabi, a 32-year-old man from the suburb of Jobar, looking among the unidentified dead for Mohammad, the brother he last saw in 2011.

He lifted the collar of his sweatshirt to cover his nose, then lingered over each of the six corpses with his phone flashlight.

None were Mohammad. He asked a staff member whether those were all the bodies in the hospital that day.

"Don't bother going to the other room — everyone there has been claimed," the attendant said.

Riyabi sighed. "It's my second day searching. I've gone to all the hospitals here in Damascus. So far nothing," he said. "My parents don't dare to come. They don't want to go through this."

Wars are often reduced to statistics: of people killed or wounded, of areas destroyed, of the cost to rebuild. Yet perhaps the most lingering expression of the

[See Syria, A4]



AYMAN OGHANNA For The Times

A MAN searches for a relative at the Mujtahed Hospital morgue in Damascus, Syria's capital. "It's my second day searching. I've gone to all the hospitals here," said another man, looking for a brother he last saw in 2011.

The fire season that keeps on giving shows no sign of easing

Bone-dry vegetation and recurring Santa Anas could keep the risk elevated into the new year in Southern California

BY GRACE TOOHEY

By this time of year, Southern California has usually recorded some measurable rainfall. Santa Ana winds, meanwhile, are typically dying down.

But this December, neither is the case.

Precipitation remains well below average, which has kept vegetation bone-dry, and forecasters say powerful offshore winds could pick back up in the next few days.

It's a recipe that's likely to keep the threat of wildfires elevated even into January if conditions don't change.

"The way this winter has started, how dry it is, it could extend our fire season to next year," said Joe Sirard, a National Weather Service meteorologist in Oxnard. If the rains don't come and the winds do, he said, "that will keep us in high fire season."

[See Fire threat, A9]



WALLY SKALIJ Los Angeles Times

FIREFIGHTERS in the Malibu area battle the Franklin fire, which has so far burned at least seven homes and more than 4,000 acres.

He flipped a deep-blue Assembly district. How?

Jeff Gonzalez, a Latino Republican in Imperial County, says he downplayed party politics.

BY ANABEL SOSA AND HAILEY BRANSON-POTTS

BRAWLEY, Calif. — While Assemblyman Jeff Gonzalez, a newly elected Republican, was taking the oath of office in Sacramento last week, the phones of two supporters in Imperial County pinged with ecstatic updates from his staff about his first day at the Capitol.

There were photos of Gonzalez's nameplate outside his new office and of his freshly printed business cards. There was even one showing a piece of paper



RICH PEDRONCELLI Associated Press

"I DON'T COME HERE as a Republican," says newly elected Assemblyman Jeff Gonzalez, 50, of Indio. "Yes, that's my party, but ... I don't put that title on me."

bearing his new letterhead.

The supporters receiving the pictures? Tony Gallegos and his fiancée, Olga Moreno, from El Centro. They are Democrats.

"We ate a little bit of crow in the beginning because here I am, a big Democrat, and [people think] all of a sudden I've changed," said Gallegos, a former chair of the Imperial County Democratic Central Committee. "Well, we didn't change. We just supported the better candidate."

By winning his race to represent California Assembly District 36, which borders Mexico and includes a wide swath of the Imperial and Coachella valleys, Gonzalez flipped a rural, mostly Latino district where Democrats hold a nearly 14-point voter registration advantage.

[See Gonzalez, A9]

Newsom wish list comes with a price tag

Governor's proposals and other programs could erase the state's recent gains toward balancing the budget.

BY TARYN LUNA

An extra \$420-million tax break for Hollywood film studios. Twenty-five million dollars to wage legal battles against President-elect Donald Trump. Unanticipated costs for providing healthcare to seniors and undocumented immigrants.

As analysts warn about the need for California to restrain spending, Gov. Gavin Newsom's wish list and other new costs are threatening to unwind progress toward balancing the state budget.

To solve a \$78.5-billion deficit over the last two years, the Democratic governor and lawmakers took savings from the state's rainy day fund, delayed programs, cut spending and relied on the occasional accounting gimmick. Those moves, combined with higher-than-expected tax revenues in recent months, suggest the state could face a relatively mild \$2-billion shortfall in the coming year.

But the deficit could grow with the proposals Newsom unveiled in recent months, cost overruns on existing programs and the potential loss of billions in federal funding as analysts predict more significant budget problems in the years ahead.

"There are many different reasons for us to be cautious," said a state budget analyst. [See Budget, A6]

President commutes sentences of 1,500

In largest single-day act of clemency, Biden also pardons 39 for nonviolent crimes.

BY COLLEEN LONG

WASHINGTON — President Biden is commuting the sentences of roughly 1,500 people who were released from prison and placed in home confinement during the COVID-19 lockdown and is pardoning 39 Americans convicted of nonviolent crimes. It's the largest single-day act of clemency in modern history.

The commutations announced Thursday are for people who have served out home confinement sentences for at least one year after they were released. Prisons were uniquely bad for spreading the coronavirus, and some inmates were released in part to stop the spread. At one point, 1 in 5 prisoners had COVID-19, according to a tally kept by the Associated Press.

Biden said he would be taking more steps in the weeks ahead and would continue to review clemency requests. [See Clemency, A6]

Questioned in pot bribery scheme

Feds have said state senator is not a target of their probe, her camp says. CALIFORNIA, B1

Historic papers in fraud scheme

Jackie Robinson's contracts to play baseball used to dupe investors. SPORTS, B10

\$30 minimum wage plan backed

L.A. City Council wants series of raises for hotel and LAX workers by July 2028. BUSINESS, A8

Weather

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