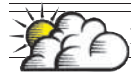


The Washington Post

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Partly sunny 44/31 • Tomorrow: Mostly sunny 42/34 B6

Democracy Dies in Darkness

FRIDAY, DECEMBER 13, 2024 • \$3

Assad's fall deals blow to Putin's global aims

Russia tries to save face as it works to preserve its military bases in Syria

BY ROBYN DIXON, MARY ILYUSHINA AND CATHERINE BELTON

Russia is scrambling to save face after its humiliating loss of its client, dictator Bashar al-Assad, and the Kremlin has conceded that preserving its crucial Syrian military bases will take time and delicate negotiations with groups it was calling "terrorists" just days ago.

In 2015, Russian President Vladimir Putin made saving the Assad regime his personal project, intervening with a massive show of airpower to prevent its defeat by insurgents. Assad's fall nine years later was a stunning blow to the main goal in Putin's long rule — forging Russia into a great world power competing globally with the United States.

"The entire system of Russian presence in the Middle East, which was built over the past 10 years and in which very significant resources were invested, has in an instant turned into something from a political era that has faded into oblivion," mourned Mikhail Rostovsky, writing in the pro-Kremlin newspaper *Moskovsky Komsomolets*. "This is a hurtful, unfortunate, even painful fact that cannot be denied or understated."

The regime's swift collapse this week stunned the Kremlin, starkly demonstrating the limits of Russian global power, even as Putin is waging what he calls an

SEE RUSSIA ON A8

Electric truck plan hasn't yet delivered

Problems delay program that would make Postal Service's fleet greener

BY JACOB BOGAGE

A multibillion-dollar program to buy electric vehicles for the U.S. Postal Service is far behind its original schedule, plagued by manufacturing mishaps and supplier infighting that threaten a cornerstone of outgoing President Joe Biden's fight against climate change.

The Postal Service is slated to purchase 60,000 "Next Generation Delivery Vehicles," or NGDVs — mostly electric — from defense contractor Oshkosh, which has a long history of producing military and heavy industrial vehicles, but not postal trucks. Congress provided \$3 billion for the nearly \$10 billion project in the 2022 Inflation Reduction Act, one of Biden's chief legislative accomplishments.

But as of November, the Postal Service had received only 93 of the Oshkosh trucks, the agency told *The Washington Post* — far fewer than the 3,000 expected by now. Significant manufacturing difficulties that were not disclosed to the Postal Service for

SEE MAIL TRUCKS ON A14

Trump takes a victory lap in New York



SPENCER PLATT/GETTY IMAGES

Traders jockey for position to see President-elect Donald Trump at the New York Stock Exchange, where he rang the opening bell Thursday after being named *Time* magazine's person of the year. It was a triumphant return to a city that has long held great importance for Trump — but that hasn't always returned the affection. **Story, A2**

In Syria, a race to find missing chemical weapons

BY JOBY WARRICK

In 53 years of Assad family rule, Syria's government made chemical weapons by the ton, from giant vats of World War I-era mustard gas to nerve agents so deadly that just a few drops could kill. But by far the most worrisome Syrian weapons of mass destruction are the ones that simply disappeared.

The list of the missing is long. It includes, according to an audit by international weapons inspectors, more than 360 tons of mustard gas that Syria admitted making but has never been fully accounted for. Then there's the five tons of missing precursors for the nerve agent sarin — enough poison to fill a small swimming pool. When pressed,

Inspectors worry that deadly agents could end up in the wrong hands

Syrian officials offered an excuse that seemed laughably absurd.

"Lost during transportation, due to traffic accidents," the Syrians said, according to notes from a confidential 2016 investigation obtained by *The Washington Post*.

What happened to those chemicals — at least some of which are suspected to have been hidden away for future use — is a suddenly urgent question in the wake of last week's takeover by Syrian rebels. In a country with no

governing authority, and with terrorist groups such as the Islamic State roaming its lawless eastern deserts, securing whatever chemicals remain has become a top priority not only for Syria's neighbors but also for countries around the world.

Even a small amount of sarin — one of the most lethal man-made substances ever produced — in the hands of terrorists would carry the potential for hundreds or even thousands of casualties. Experts say the existence of such weapons in Syria could turn out to be among the darker legacies of President Bashar al-Assad's rule, one that could pose a threat long after the autocrat's downfall.

"Although Assad is gone, the specter of chemical weapons still

hangs over Syria," said Gregory Koblentz, a nonproliferation expert and director of biodefense studies at George Mason University's Schar School of Policy and Government. While the threat of a large-scale chemical attack appears to be diminished, he said, there is a "growing risk that chemical weapons may be looted by profiteers, competing rebel groups or terrorists."

That risk was underscored this

SEE SYRIA ON A8

Israeli strikes: Plans were in place for years before Assad's fall. **A6**

Austin Tice: Rebels offer to help U.S. search for journalist. **A9**

Out of jail: An American says he spent 7 months in Syrian prison. **A9**

He fled China's clutches only to be forced back

Secret repatriation of Uyghur man shows how Beijing exerts its will extrajudicially across borders

BY SHIBANI MAHTANI
IN THMA DA, CAMBODIA

The arrival of Cambodian police officers should have come as a relief for Abdureqip Rahman. The young Uyghur man had been trapped inside a high-walled, barbed-wire compound for 10 weeks, working alongside others trafficked here and forced, often through beatings, to run online scams.

But Rahman had become increasingly nervous at the prospect of rescue, wary of the Cambodian authorities. He had heard that the officers were there to take him to the capital, Phnom Penh, and then to immigration authorities who would send him home — to China, where the consequences would be "unimaginable," he said.

Rahman tried to stay calm. He reminded himself of assurances from U.N. officials that he would be protected. He was hoping ultimately to secure asylum in the United States.

"Everything is okay," a U.N. official had told him in a series of Signal messages he secretly exchanged while he was still in the scam compound. "The U.N. and other partners are involved and requesting international protection for your case."

SEE UYGHURS ON A10

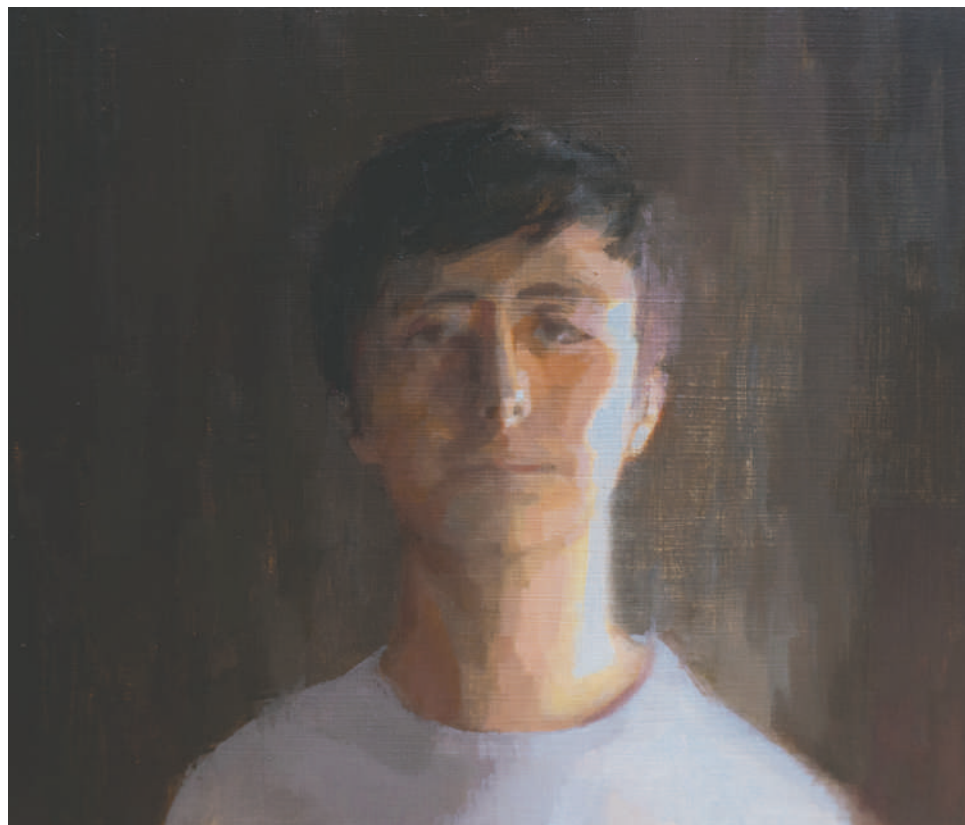


ILLUSTRATION BY JAMES LEE CHIAHAN FOR THE WASHINGTON POST

Biden begins series of pardons

REDUCED SENTENCES FOR 1,500 OTHERS

Sweeping move is one Trump cannot reverse

BY LEO SANDS, MERYL KORNFIELD AND CLEVE R. WOOTSON JR.

President Joe Biden is commuting the sentences of nearly 1,500 people and pardoning 39 more convicted of nonviolent crimes, the White House announced on Thursday, describing it as "the largest single-day grant of clemency in modern history."

The people whose sentences will be commuted were placed on home confinement during the coronavirus pandemic and have "successfully reintegrated" with their families and communities, the White House said in a statement.

Biden is still reviewing clemency petitions and more announcements are to come, White House officials said, although they did not provide details about which additional petitions Biden is weighing. Pressure has grown on the outgoing president to exercise his powers to protect people who might be targeted by the Justice Department under President-elect Donald Trump, and opponents of capital punishment have called for Biden to empty federal death row by commuting the inmates' sentences to life in prison. Trump staunchly supports capital punishment.

SEE PARDONS ON A4

DOJ moves to protect students from abuse

New guidelines follow Post investigation on predatory school police

BY JENN ABELSON AND JESSICA CONTRERA

The Justice Department issued new guidelines Thursday on preventing school police from sexually abusing students, a first-of-its-kind effort to create safeguards around officers with immense access to children.

The directives urge law enforcement agencies to train school police on appropriate boundaries with children, ensure there are "multiple ways" for students to report troubling behavior and fully investigate complaints of sexual assault and misconduct by officers.

In unveiling the new standards for the nation's roughly 20,000 school police officers, the Justice Department called on officials to set up robust policies for "preventing officer-perpetrated sexual assault and holding officers who commit these offenses accountable."

The agency began drafting the

SEE OFFICERS ON A18

Louisville: Justice Dept. and city agree to a police reform plan. **A18**

IN THE NEWS

Jan. 6 report The FBI did not have any undercover agents at the riot or instruct any of its informants there to breach the Capitol, a Justice Department investigation found. **A5**

Youngkin eyes 'sanctuary cities' A budget proposal from Virginia's governor would aim to stamp out havens for immigrants. **B1**

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A spending bill provision could block trans health care available to military families. **A3**
Kari Lake, a prominent election denier, is Trump's choice to lead Voice of America. **A4**

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A rugby team from Papua New Guinea is part of Australia's plan to counter China. **A9**

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The White House is rushing to finalize new rules even as Republicans threaten to repeal them next year. **A12**
Regulators sued the nation's largest alcohol distributor, Southern Glazer's Wine and Spirits, over its pricing and sales strategies. **A13**

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An independent report has found "substantial evidence" that Trayon White Sr. violated D.C. Council rules. **B1**
A hospital set to open in Southeast D.C. next spring has not yet finalized an agreement with the physicians group that is set to staff it. **B1**

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With Pete Hegseth, Trump's pick for defense secretary, Fox News faces the uncomfortable challenge of covering a hometown figure. **C1**
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