THE CHRISTIAN SCIENCE MONITOR

"The object of the Monitor is to injure no man, but to bless all mankind."

– MARY BAKER EDDY

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A global lens on kitchen table bills

During an editorial meeting earlier this year, International Editor Sara Miller Llana and I started talking about a topic that seemed to be everywhere: affordability.

In the United States, voters regularly cite cost of living as their top concern, and political analysts say it will likely be a central topic in this year's midterm elections.

But affordability isn't just an American issue, Sara pointed out. People around the world, from Nigeria to the Netherlands, had been protesting cost-of-living stressors for months. And, at the time, massive protests around affordability in Iran were prompting a brutal government crackdown.

By Stephanie Hanes
Print Editor

At the Monitor, one of our goals is to bring a global lens to topics like this one.

That sort of perspective can help readers see in a more complete way the situations they face in their own homes, towns, and countries. And when stories shine light on that picture more broadly, it can open hearts to neighbors both near and far, illuminate something bigger than oneself, and, often, point toward solutions.

So, over the past few months, Sara, National Editor Mark Trumbull, and I have been working with Monitor reporters to come up with a group of stories that could bring this more expansive perspective to the issue of affordability.

Our first story is this week. We start in India, where Aakash Hassan and Lindsey McGinnis write about the squeezing of the middle class in a country where this demographic is expanding rapidly. The story they tell, I believe, will resonate for anyone sifting through bills at their kitchen table. As one expert they interviewed explains, the "middle class" is that demographic with enough money to have choices about what to do with it, even when those choices feel tough.

The fact that Lindsey and Aakash's main characters live in New Delhi rather than in New York shows not only the expanse of this topic, but also the connections people share across ethnicity and nationality.

Over the next few weeks, we will share stories about housing, food, transportation, and energy – often cited as key affordability markers – from multiple continents and multiple perspectives. We hope you find these pieces illuminating, as well as connecting. ▪

After dozens ran for president, Peru's voters head to runoff

With no clear front-runner in Peru's crowded presidential elections, voters in the South American nation will likely need to return to the polls for a June 7 runoff.

Some 35 candidates had vied for the first election, held in early April. The most likely scenario for June is a face-off between two right-wing options. Former presidential candidate and congressional leader Keiko Fujimori has risen to the top spot – albeit with support at about 14%, according to polls released in early April. Former Lima mayor Rafael López Aliaga – known across Peru as "Porky" for his resemblance to the cartoon character – has fallen from his onetime lead to second or even third, behind conservative former comedian Carlos Álvarez.

Voters, like many across Latin America, are focused on crime and restoring order, analysts say. And many Peruvians say the proposals made by presidential candidates are unbelievable at best.

"The candidates come out with proposals that seem designed to make them look tougher than the rest, but I'm not hearing anything I'm confident will change the very bad situation we are living and working in," says José Quispe, a bus depot and route manager for Santa Catalina Transportation, a Lima-based private transit company that runs 220 buses with 300 drivers.

For more than a year, Mr. Quispe's company has come under relentless extortion pressures from gangs.

"Their message is 'You pay or you die,' and we have learned they are not kidding around," says Mr. Quispe, as he shifts the fingers of one hand from making the sign for money to forming a pistol that he points at his head.

Still, some officials and law enforcement experts point out that statistically Peru is not the crime-ridden danger that newscasts present.

There's been a surge in certain kinds of violent crime, in particular extortion, which is carried out largely in working-class neighborhoods. There were an estimated 30% more cases of extortion reported in the first eight months of 2025 compared with the same period in 2024. But Peru's crime rates pale in comparison to some regional neighbors.

– Howard LaFranchi / Staff writer

Anthropic's new Mythos AI tool signals a new era

The AI company Anthropic shared in April that its most advanced model to date, Claude Mythos Preview, not only had found thousands of severe vulnerabilities in common operating systems that humans had missed, but also had devised sophisticated ways to exploit those gaps.

The software was so powerful, the San Francisco-based company said, that it would not release it publicly, but rather, for the moment, would make it available to a newly formed consortium of some 40 key tech companies that could fix the vulnerabilities Mythos found.

If what Anthropic has claimed about Mythos is true, it reflects an intense new phase of the long-standing arms race between hackers and cybersecurity firms.

"This is kind of the beginning of the full-scale reckoning of the cyber risk posed by AIs," says Mantas Mazeika, research scientist at the Center for AI Safety, a nonprofit that advocates for standards to manage risks like misinformation, weaponization, and existential threats.

The twist is that this time, it's the cybersecurity community that might have gained a step on the hackers.

"I view this as an opportunity to get ahead of the bad guys," says V.S. Subrahmanian, a computer scientist at Northwestern University. "We have this capability now to identify the vulnerabilities that might exist in a system."

Anthropic built Mythos as a cutting-edge, general-purpose AI model. But what Anthropic found was that it had made a big leap in its ability to detect software bugs and, more importantly, how to use those bugs, sometimes in tandem, to attack systems. The company claims it found severe vulnerabilities in every major operating system and web browser, some of which had gone undetected for years.

"AI models have reached a level of coding capability where they can surpass all but the most skilled humans at finding and exploiting software vulnerabilities," the company warned.

Part of Mythos' advantage over humans is the speed with which it can operate.

To find software bugs, most major technology companies follow a cycle. They hire professionals who find a vulnerability in the system and figure out how to exploit it. Then, those professionals alert the company, which figures out how to "patch" it. Typically, that process takes months.

"What we're basically seeing these AI systems do now – if everything that they are saying in this announcement is accurate – is that time is compressed significantly," says Allie Mellen, an AI security operations analyst in Boston. "The time between anyone – not just a white-hat hacker, but also a black-hat hacker, or a nation-state or a cyber criminal gang – being able to identify and exploit those vulnerabilities is incredibly small."

Anthropic says it will not widely release this version to the public, in an effort to keep it out of the hands of hackers. Dr. Mellen calls Anthropic's approach a "very positive step," and exactly what's needed in the short term.

Down the road, though, "it's a different conversation," she says. "We need to rethink the way that we are approaching the patching process and system."

– Laurent Belsie and Caitlin Babcock Staff writers

Massachusetts forwards social media ban

Massachusetts advanced a bill on April 8 aimed at restricting social media for teens. The legislation, which passed in the Commonwealth's House of Representatives 129-25, would be one of the strictest social media bans in the United States.

The proposed law bans cellphones in schools, prohibits children younger than age 14 from using social media, and requires parental consent for 14- and 15-year-olds seeking to open accounts. It still needs approval from the Massachusetts Senate and governor.

Similar laws in Florida and Ohio have faced First Amendment challenges in court. Lawmakers in California have mulled a stricter ban for children under age 16.

Internationally, countries including Australia, Greece, France, and the United Kingdom have enacted or proposed legislation limiting minors' access to social media. In the U.S., states such as Massachusetts are pushing for strict guidelines following major lawsuits against Meta and YouTube. A Los Angeles jury found that the online platforms were, in fact, liable for their addictive design that has been marketed to minors.

– Staff

With right-wing loss, Hungarian election reverberates globally

Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán, who ruled his country for 16 years, often with what critics felt was the clenched fist of autocracy, lost his election April 12 in a political rout that is reverberating across the globe.

His opponent's party, formed only two years ago, was on course for a two-thirds majority – strong enough even to amend the constitution.

Mr. Orbán was an admitted hero and trailblazer for resurgent right-wing politicians from Finland to Germany.

He was held up by U.S. President Donald Trump's administration as a model of what Europe could (and should) be.

And he was obstructor in chief for the European Union: Russia's most loyal friend, a vetoer of all things pro-Ukrainian, and a standard-bearer for those who feel the EU is perpetually undermining the sovereignty of its member nations.

Now, he has been ousted in a defeat far more comprehensive than the polls or pundits imagined possible. The opposition Tisza party of Péter Magyar was headed for 138 seats in Parliament. Mr. Orbán's Fidesz party was on track for 55, and the far-right Our Homeland party set for six.

The election brought out a record number of voters, with Hungary's youth appearing to play a pivotal role. High inflation and a stagnant economy have forced many to look abroad for jobs.

But 16 years of what Mr. Orbán himself said was an increasingly "illiberal democracy" also appeared to have taken a toll. Some revelers on election night couldn't quite grasp that they were now able to express themselves openly.

Chants of "Europe" and "Russians, go home!" could be heard among the crowds, from squares to teeming metro stations. In his victory speech, Mr. Magyar declared that Hungarians had said "yes to Europe."

Certainly, András Szenes did.

The mathematician and university professor said the result was not just "an amazing evening for all Hungarians ... but also a new day for Europe."

"It will mean a shift in the Russian influence in European politics," he said from an election watch party. "It's a shift in power, and a shift in the direction of unity of the European Union."

Numerous European leaders agreed, with British Prime Minister Keir Starmer calling it "an historic moment ... for European democracy."

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy similarly hailed Mr.

Magyar's win in a post on the social platform X, calling it a victory for a "constructive approach."

Mr. Orbán had made Ukraine a centerpiece of his campaign, arguing that the war was not in Hungary's interests. In the EU, Mr. Orbán has repeatedly stalled or blocked efforts to help Ukraine.

For Mr. Orbán's supporters, the results suggest that perhaps Hungary was not the bulwark of far-right politics that they had hoped it was.

Speaking at an election-night rally for Fidesz, a man who shared only his first name, Bálint, said, "I am disappointed because I thought we were doing better."

To him, Hungary was a beacon for a Europe that has lost its way. Fidesz was "against the migrants. They were against 'woke' and the liberal nonsense."

"We are the last bastion of this Christian-democratic thinking in Europe, and we thought that the future of Europe is not based on Brussels, the EU thinking," he added. "We thought that Europe is based on the strong nations."

Mr. Orbán accepted the result early, calling Mr. Magyar to concede by 9:30 p.m. local time.

He called the result of the election "clear and painful" but vowed to fight on. "We never give up. This is one thing people know about us: We never give up."

– Mark Sappenfield / Staff writer

Maine set to pause building data centers

Maine lawmakers passed a bill that temporarily halts the construction of data centers until November 2027, though it still needs Gov. Janet Mills' approval. At least 11 states have introduced similar proposals.

Debates about data centers are flaring across the country, from Oklahoma to Indiana to Pennsylvania. Power-hungry data centers are regularly blamed for rising electricity prices. That issue was central to November's gubernatorial elections in New Jersey and Virginia, the latter of which has the largest concentration of data centers in the country.

An October analysis by the Bank of America Institute found that rising demand for power for data centers and manufacturing facilities is already leading to higher utility bills for residential customers, and it predicts the trend will continue as more data centers come online. Low-income households are disproportionately affected by higher utility rates, the analysis noted.

Maine would be the first to enact a measure to pause data center construction. Supporters say it would allow time to study how data centers affect electricity costs. Maine has one of the highest electricity rates in the U.S. Opponents argue the state already has strict rules in place and that new projects could help lower costs.

– Staff

Woman to coach German soccer club

For the first time in any of Europe's top soccer leagues, a woman will coach a men's team. Marie-Louise Eta is taking the reins of Union Berlin on an interim basis until the end of the season after the club fired its previous coach early in April.

Ms. Eta already made history for Union in 2023, when she became the first female assistant for a men's team in any of Europe's top leagues.

She is set to become the head coach of Union's women's team next season, but there is speculation that good results during the next month could put her in the frame for the permanent job.

– Staff

With Artemis II back on Earth, NASA looks forward

The crew of the Artemis II Orion spacecraft set a record for the farthest distance traveled from Earth (252,756 miles), and they viewed areas of the moon never seen by human eyes.

Now, NASA turns its attention to future moon missions, with the ultimate goal of building a moon base in the 2030s and launching crewed missions to Mars in the 2040s.

Artemis II was the "opening act in America's return to the moon," said NASA Administrator Jared Isaacman. "Artemis III will start being assembled, and the next crew will begin playing their part as we return to the lunar surface, we build the base, and we never give up the moon again."

Commander Reid Wiseman, pilot Victor Glover, and mission specialists Christina Koch and Jeremy Hansen plunged back down through the Earth's atmosphere April 10 at more than 25,000 miles per hour – reaching temperatures of over 4,000 degrees Fahrenheit – and splashed down safely in the Pacific Ocean.

Here are four takeaways from their mission:

Orion works (mostly)

The teardrop-shaped spacecraft had already flown around the moon and back in the Artemis I mission in 2022, but that mission was uncrewed. Artemis II was the vital test of the capsule's "human systems," including life support and temperature control.

One human system that had almost immediate problems was the toilet. Just hours into the mission, the crew reported that the specially designed microgravity commode had jammed. Despite days of troubleshooting, the crew and NASA engineers on the ground were unable to diagnose and fix the problem. They hope to find a solution once Orion returns to the Kennedy Space Center in the coming weeks.

Another, more serious, issue appears to have been resolved. The heat shield on the Artemis I Orion capsule suffered cracking and abrasion during reentry. NASA reported that it had identified the cause and had adjusted the reentry angle for Artemis II to reduce stress on the heat shield.

Artemis II yielded new science

The crew returned from their seven-hour journey around the

far side of the moon with dozens of spectacular images of the lunar surface and of Earth. NASA expects to process hundreds more in the weeks ahead.

These will help guide NASA's future exploration and scientific research of the lunar surface, including the selection of landing sites and the location of a moon base.

Artemis II also represented the first time a science team was integrated into Mission Control itself. The lunar science team had a physical desk in the mission control room, and during the flyby, a lunar scientist communicated with the crew directly through CAPCOM, the designated communication channel to Orion.

Artemis II also featured the first major test of the NASA Deep Space Network, a global array of large radio antennas that allows Mission Control to maintain communication with spacecraft on interplanetary missions. Mid-mission, flight director Rick Henfling said the network was performing "exceptionally."

Steps for future missions are underway

Preparations for Artemis III have already begun. That mission aims to practice, in low-Earth orbit, docking the Orion capsule with lunar landing spacecraft designed by private companies. NASA has contracted with private space companies SpaceX and Blue Origin to build the landing spacecraft.

A moon base beckons

NASA's next goal, particularly in the context of a new space race with China, is to establish a permanent human presence on the lunar surface in the 2030s.

It's an ambitious task, and a lot has to go right, experts say, starting with successful Artemis III and Artemis IV missions. These missions would ideally see a human walk on the moon in 2028 for the first time since Eugene Cernan stepped off the lunar surface during the Apollo 17 mission in December 1972.

Such an expedited timeline carries risks, but experts say that NASA's recent safety record is encouraging.

Other technical challenges lie ahead, but the biggest obstacle to achieving the moon base goal is likely to be the same challenge NASA always faces: government funding.

– Henry Gass / Staff writer

OUR WORLD

"We turned every bank manager … into an inspector of illegal deforestation."

That's how André Lima of Brazil's Environment Ministry described its new anti-deforestation efforts to Reuters. Officials have long struggled to identify those who engage in illegal deforestation threatening the Amazon, the world's largest rainforest. Now, banks will be required to cross-check rural loan applications with a government registry of satellite data documenting illegal deforestation since July 2019. Brazil's agribusiness lobby says the measure doesn't distinguish between legal and illegal deforestation, and will slow down loan processes.

– Whitney Eulich

China embroiled in pension debate

As the share of rural Chinese over age 60 rapidly grows, the government is under pressure to raise rural retirement pensions. Averaging about 246 yuan ($36) a month, the current pension fails to cover living expenses, and a meager 20-yuan increase proposed in March at the meeting of the National People's Congress has unleashed a rare debate in a highly censored society. "It makes no sense to argue that a country that can build a space station, expand high-speed rail to county capitals, and host the Olympics cannot afford to support tens of millions of elderly rural residents," a Chinese internet user wrote, according to China Digital Times.

– Ann Scott Tyson

Adieu to a consequential mayor

More green space, fewer cars, and lots of bicycles – that's the legacy of Anne Hidalgo, who served as mayor of Paris from 2014 through the end of March. Ms. Hidalgo, who was born in Spain, made the French capital more accessible to pedestrian and bike traffic by pushing for key amenities and services across all neighborhoods. The changes brought plenty of criticism alongside support, but her fellow Socialist Party member Emmanuel Grégoire won the recent election to succeed her.

– Matthew Bell

"A region rich in culture, creativity and talent"

That's how Eurovision director Martin Green describes Asia, which is getting its own version of the annual international music competition. Come November, singers and musicians from at least 10 Asian countries will gather in Bangkok for the first Asian edition of the global spectacle. So far, that includes South Korea, Thailand, Philippines, Vietnam, Malaysia, Cambodia, Laos, Bangladesh, Nepal, and Bhutan. Eurovision, which marks its 70th anniversary this year, drew 166 million viewers in 2025. The Asian version of the contest is about "building something that reflects the voices, identities and ambitions of the region," Mr. Green said in a statement.

– Audrey Thibert

TEL AVIV, ISRAEL

In Lebanon, history gnaws at Israelis: Has military force alone brought security?

The battle to disarm Hezbollah has revived an old debate in Israel about whether force without a political strategy risks open-ended conflict.

By Shoshanna Solomon / Contributor

Avi Ashkenazi was a deputy battalion commander in Israel's 1982 war in Lebanon, fighting with his tank unit. When his commander was killed in action, Mr. Ashkenazi took over.

That was when Israel, to push the Palestine Liberation Organization away from its northern border and halt years of PLO attacks on its northern residents, sent its forces all the way to Beirut.

The war against Syrian army forces then occupying Lebanon and Palestinian guerrilla fighters enjoying Syria's protection lasted just three months, ending with the evacuation of the PLO leadership from Lebanon, at the cost to Israel of some 370 soldiers' lives.

But Israel stayed for another 18 years, pulling back initially in 1985 to a security zone it established in the south. During that time, the Shiite Lebanese militia Hezbollah emerged, and another 700 Israeli soldiers were killed. Under intense domestic pressure over the mounting casualties, Israel finally withdrew in 2000.

Now, as Israel once again sends forces into Lebanon to battle Iran-allied Hezbollah – and politicians discuss establishing a new security zone – Mr. Ashkenazi has a sense of déjà vu.

His nephew is fighting in Lebanon, and when they met briefly recently during a short visit home, they compared experiences.

"He told me they were in Yohmor," a village some 5 kilometers (about 3 miles) from the Israeli border near the Litani River, Mr. Ashkenazi says by phone. "What is sad is that 44 years ago, I was in the same village."

The limits of force

Even as Iranian missiles fell on Israel before the U.S.-Iran ceasefire, the renewed battle against Hezbollah was shaping up to be a main focus of Israelis and was generating debate: Can military force in Lebanon deliver Israelis lasting security, or, as past experience suggests, does the absence of a clear political strategy risk drawing Israel back into a costly and open-ended conflict, in what many call the "Lebanese quagmire"?

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu said that while he supported U.S. President Donald Trump's decision to suspend strikes against Iran to allow for negotiations, the "two-weeks ceasefire does not include Lebanon." The army then carried out the largest offensive against Hezbollah infrastructure of the war, targeting command centers and military sites in Beirut, the Beqaa Valley, and the south. Lebanon said more than 250 people were killed.

"The lessons we learned then have not been implemented," Mr. Ashkenazi says of the 1982 war and its aftermath. "We think that if we use force and more force, we will succeed, but in fact, force has not solved us any problems anywhere. What is needed is ... an agreement."

In late 2024, after a punishing Israeli offensive capped more than a year of intensifying fighting with Hezbollah, Israel and Lebanon reached a ceasefire agreement, under which the Beirut government pledged to disarm Hezbollah. Since then, Israel has continued near-daily strikes on Hezbollah targets.

In March, after a weakened but defiant Hezbollah fired missiles and drones at Israel following the killing of Iran's supreme leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, Israel responded with waves of airstrikes, followed by a ground incursion into southern Lebanon. The stated aim: to remove the threat to northern communities in Israel, where tens of thousands of residents had only recently returned home after evacuation during the war in Gaza, which Hezbollah joined in solidarity with Hamas.

The army "is completing the ground maneuver ... in order to protect and prevent a direct threat to Israeli border communities," Defense Minister Israel Katz said in early April, adding that disarming Hezbollah remains a "top objective."

Homes in Lebanese border villages used as Hezbollah outposts would be destroyed, he said, and Israel would maintain security control south of the Litani River. He also said the 600,000 Lebanese residents displaced from the south would not be allowed to return until northern Israeli communities were secure.

Yet the same day, a senior Israeli military official said fully disarming Hezbollah would be unrealistic without occupying all of Lebanon – something not under consideration.

Need for diplomacy

"The battle against Hezbollah has been going on for decades, and we're in a better position today because they were greatly weakened a year and a half ago," says Chuck Freilich, a former deputy national security adviser and a professor of political science at Tel Aviv University and Columbia University.

Israel's strategy, he says, is to push Hezbollah roughly 10 kilometers from the border, beyond the range of anti-tank missiles.

The next step, he argues, should be diplomatic: working with Lebanon's government and international forces to disarm Hezbollah. These steps would require Israeli concessions, including a withdrawal of Israeli troops from southern Lebanon.

This, he says, is "a more winning strategy, instead of just trying to endlessly hit targets that they rebuild afterwards."

Indeed, Israeli and Lebanese envoys held U.S.-mediated talks in Washington April 14 to discuss a resumption of their ceasefire deal. The meeting was hailed as an important, if symbolic, first step.

Maintaining a permanent security zone on Lebanese soil, as some political leaders have been calling for, Mr. Freilich warns, risks repeating past mistakes. Instead, Israel should operate from its own territory, carrying out targeted incursions when necessary.

Meanwhile, the cost of the new incursion is rising. Thirteen Israeli soldiers had been killed as of mid-April, as troops moved from village to village dismantling Hezbollah infrastructure. A major battle was being waged around a Hezbollah stronghold in the village of Bint Jbeil.

Some soldiers are also entering combat with reduced training. Ayelet Hashahar Saydoff, founder of the movement Mothers at the Front, says training has been shortened by several months.

"Our husbands and our fathers also were in Lebanon," she says. "Two years ago, our children were already in Lebanon, and we paid a price. It does not make sense that this has not brought us quiet.

... This means that those who are managing this war are managing it badly."

At this point, she says, there is "zero, zero" tolerance for the loss of Israeli soldiers' lives, especially as there is no faith in the government or Prime Minister Netanyahu, who in 2024 said Hezbollah had been set back "decades."

Low trust in government

A recent poll by the Institute of National Security Studies shows trust in the government remains low. Of those polled, 68% reported low confidence in the government, 46% said they believe Hezbollah can be disarmed, and 43% said they do not.

After four soldiers from a reconnaissance unit were killed at the end of March, parents sent a letter to Mr. Netanyahu criticizing the "extremely unreasonable" conditions they were operating in.

"Exploiting the dedication of our children, young people who have already been fighting for three years (!!) in a tremendous war on all fronts, is a serious act of injustice that is unacceptable," they wrote.

Gary Cohen, a writer and filmmaker who immigrated from Scotland and served as a paratrooper in the 1982 war, recalls landing deep inside Lebanon and fighting to Beirut. Friends were later killed during Israel's years in the security zone.

"We paid a heavy price," he says.

Lebanon, he says, is one of the most beautiful places he's ever been to. "I thought that one day, I would bring my children on holiday and show them where we fought," he says. "That was obviously a pipe dream, and it looks like my grandchildren will also fight in Lebanon."

"I would be a lot happier with what we're doing if I trusted the government," he adds. "This government is very good at starting wars. It's got no idea, or maybe no inclination, to finish."

Demand to "finish the job"

At the same time, many residents of Israel's north are demanding decisive action to "finish the job" in Lebanon.

"We were told that Hezbollah was weakened in a very significant way, and we're going to have at least a few years of quiet," says Liat Cohen Rabib, who has lived on the border in Metula for 30 years. "And that backfired on everyone."

She recalls sitting in shelters as a child during the 1982 war. Today, her husband and two daughters are serving on reserve duty, while her son and nephew are fighting in Lebanon.

Repeated cycles of conflict, she says, are not sustainable. Hezbollah's long-range missiles now threaten all of Israel, not just the north, and everyone in Israel "has an interest to solve this once and for all."

Yet a solution should begin with policy – working with Lebanon's government, setting clear goals and timelines – before relying on force, Ms. Rabib says. A renewed security zone, she warns, would turn Israeli soldiers into "a living fence."

Ofer Shelah, a former member of Parliament from a centrist party, and now director of a national security program at the Institute of National Security Studies, says a security zone would again create favorable conditions for guerrilla warfare and would not stop rocket fire.

But an election year, he notes, creates its own logic.

"Look at the political interests, both of the government and the military," he says. "That will dictate a lot of what's going to happen, much more than ... very sound reasoning." ▪

RWENZORI MOUNTAINS, UGANDA

The twilight of Uganda's tropical glaciers

Glaciers in the tropics are rare and melting quickly, reshaping the lives of the people who depend on them.

By Simon Vera / Contributor

Mountain tour guide Enock Bwambale points at three sheets of ice lying between the ragged peaks of Mount Stanley, on the border of Uganda and Congo. A towering glacier once stood here, he explains, but today "this is all that's left."

A constant splashing accompanies Mr. Bwambale's explanation, as a nearby waterfall drains glacier meltwater at high speed. During the dry season, some 5 million people in the foothills below depend on this water. But it is in increasingly short supply.

Since the first measurements were taken in 1906, the Rwenzori Mountains – whose name means "the place of snow" in the local Lhukonzo language – have lost more than 90% of their ice. Within a decade, experts predict it will be gone entirely.

Rwenzori's glaciers are far from the only ones under pressure.

The world's glaciers are melting faster than ever before recorded. But the tropical glaciers that hug the equator in the Andes, Southeast Asia, and Africa are especially vulnerable. South America's glaciers are shrinking 35% faster than the global average, and a recent study of Indonesia's Eternity Glaciers predicted they will be gone in five years. Meanwhile, the United Nations says that "according to available data," East Africa's glaciers will "very likely be gone by 2050."

For communities below these towering rivers of ice, their retreat is already reshaping life in ways both mundane and sublime.

The taps guiding water to their communities from creeks have started to run dry part of the year, turning water collection into an hourslong journey.

The Rwenzori's glaciers are also believed to be the home of Kithasamba, a powerful deity responsible for the fertility of both the local Bakonzo people and their land.

According to legend, when the snow and ice disappears, their god disappears, too.

"Even if individual glaciers have little effect [on sea level rise], they are immensely important for local communities," says glaciologist Lander Van Tricht.

Glaciers in the tropics

The glaciers on Mount Stanley form part of the Afro-alpine zone, an unusual ecosystem found at high altitudes in the African tropics. Here, giant groundsel plants rise out of the ground like 20-foot-tall candelabras. They grow alongside tubular giant lobelias whose drooping leaves provide shelter for the iridescent sunbirds that pollinate them. Plants and animals alike have adapted to the extremes of a climate often described as "summer every day and winter every night."

The glaciers that flow from the Afro-alpine zone act as natural reservoirs for the communities below, storing water during wet, cold periods and releasing it in warm, dry ones. In those periods, people living downstream from the meltwater of Rwenzori's glaciers depend on it to bathe, drink, and take care of their livestock.

Yosia Kibaya is a farmer in his mid-60s whose family has lived in the Rwenzori foothills for centuries. He grew up in a wide valley beside the Nyamwamba River, about a 45-minute drive from the regional capital Kasese.

In the dry season, the Nyamwamba is fed by glacier meltwater, and in Mr. Kibaya's memory, the river flowed year-round – wild and roaring. Now it is a meager trickle seeping between rocks in the dry season. "We didn't even know those rocks were under the water back then," he says.

Meanwhile, in the mountains surrounding his valley, "there was snow ... every winter," he recalls. But he hasn't seen white caps for years.

Nyesi Masike, who lives on the banks of the same river, rattles off a list of the foods she once grew year-round: sweet potatoes, pumpkins, tomatoes, yams. "Now I can only give my children plantains and beans for most of the year," she says.

Ms. Masike has 12 children, which is not uncommon here. In the last 50 years, the local constituency's population has grown almost eightfold, according to local officials, accentuating the impact of the dwindling water supply.

A landscape drying out

Most people in these foothills have never seen the glaciers their livelihoods depend on. Between their villages and Mount Stanley's peaks lies a vast mountain range of deep valleys and steep rock faces. Moss paints the rocks yellow, red, and green. Tough grasses grow from the mud, and towering lobelia flowers sway in the wind.

For the untrained eye, this is an awe-inspiring landscape. But after 20 years guiding tourists in these mountains, Mr. Bwambale notices something else. Dry clumps of moss crumble at the touch. Trees are dying of thirst, leaving behind leafless trunks. "Every year I discover new creeks which have completely run dry," he says walking through a waterless riverbed.

The tourists he leads come here to climb the snow-covered peaks of the UNESCO world heritage-listed Rwenzori Mountains. But those mountains are now facing a wide variety of challenges, including droughts, deforestation, and landslides. All of these environmental problems are amplified by the growing population.

Meanwhile, residents and activists say they need help blunting the effects of the water loss. Some communities have begun planting trees to help the soil better hold moisture. Despite major international pledges in recent years to channel money to developing countries to mitigate the effects of climate change, people here say they have been left on their own.

That leaves people like Edrine Bagambe, who is in her mid-20s, wondering what the future holds.

"When food runs out, and the river dries out, I want to leave," she says. "But where can I go? I don't have money to buy new land somewhere else."

As Mr. Bwambale descends from Mount Stanley, he speaks wistfully about the place he slowly sees disappearing. "I no longer recognize the Rwenzori," he says. "It hurts to know the next generation will never see the beauty I enjoyed for so long."

The changing climate has far-reaching consequences for the Bakonzo. "If the water shortage keeps increasing, we will have to leave," Mr. Bwambale concludes as he descends through the tropical forest in the foothills.

▪ *This article was published with the support of the Pascal Decroos Fund for Exceptional Journalism.*

DELHI, INDIA & BOSTON

In India, joining the middle class isn't what it used to be

Around the globe, citizens are getting richer but feel they can't afford the things their parents once could, whether that's in New Delhi or the Netherlands.

By Aakash Hassan / Contributor
and Lindsey McGinnis / Staff writer

Surender Singh Negi moved from a remote Himalayan town to Delhi in 1987 – young, energetic, and by his own admission, "somewhat clueless." He was drawn to the big city – but also to a bigger paycheck. He landed a job as an accountant at a pharmaceutical firm, placing himself firmly inside a burgeoning middle class.

Mr. Negi, who didn't attend college, was able to purchase a three-bedroom apartment in East Delhi. There, he and his wife raised three children and put each of them through college.

One of them, Akhil Negi, lives in that same family home. He works as a software engineer for an IT company, earning around 160,000 rupees ($1,700) a month – compared to the 7,000 monthly rupees his father made at the same age. In fact, his salary is almost double what his father earned before he retired after nearly 35 years working.

Yet buying a decent home in the Indian capital today feels like a distant dream for the younger Mr. Negi, who is getting married later this year. He and his wife plan to move into a rented apartment instead. "Apparently, I earn a huge salary compared to what my dad was earning at my age, but it's simply not enough," says Mr. Negi at the family home, a third-floor walk-up. "It will take me years to save for a down payment, and then I'll be tied to a loan for decades."

It's a conundrum felt by members of the middle class around the world: From Nigeria to Venezuela, families feel they are struggling – not just to get ahead, but to simply make ends meet. Plenty of people in the United States, where rents and housing prices have climbed faster than median incomes, can relate. Lack of job opportunities drove recent youth-led protests that toppled governments in Nepal and Bangladesh. Now, the Iran war is driving up gas prices and transit fares in countries across the globe, exacerbating the affordability issue for millions.

In February, a first-of-its kind survey of 107 countries' national priorities by the global polling firm Gallup found that a median of 26% of adults cited economic issues as their top concern. If you include respondents who said they are most worried about employment, the total rises to 36%. Economic worries outweighed political, security, social, and environmental issues combined.

But there's a disconnect between these concerns over cost of living, and what economists are observing globally.

"In most of the world, the middle class is actually getting richer and can actually afford more things," says Homi Kharas, senior fellow at The Brookings Institution and author of "The Rise of the Global Middle Class: How the Search for the Good Life Can Change the World."

Global inflation has declined since its 2022 peak, and the global middle class is growing – with India and China leading the pack. By 2030, India is set to have up to 700 million people in its middle

class, making the country a huge force driving the world economy.

Yet in India, where middle class incomes have risen sharply, financial security still feels increasingly elusive to many. A lot of Indians say they feel poorer than members of their parents' generation, despite earning more.

"What the squeeze is showing is that the middle class is also increasingly worried about volatility and shocks. ... They're concerned about whether they'll be able in the future to sustain the same kind of standard of living," explains Dr. Kharas. "It's [about] expectations, it's stability, and it's security."

What does it mean to be middle class?

The definition of "middle class" changes depending on who you ask.

Gallup allows people to self-identify their social class. The Pew Research Center defines the middle class in relative terms, as households whose annual income is two-thirds to double the national median. Dr. Kharas – who co-founded the World Data Lab, which forecasts detailed consumer and demographic trends – looks at spending rather than income.

"I actually think it's easier to define what's not in the middle class ... because it's such a heterogeneous group," he says.

The rich have so much expendable income that they don't really need to think about how they spend it. The poor simply don't have the luxury, with most of their money going toward baseline necessities. "And the middle class are actually the people who are making what I would call 'economic choices,'" he explains. "They have a certain budget constraint, they have some discretionary spending, and they basically are making constant choices about what to do with that discretionary money."

More than half the world's population, the global middle class makes choices that shape regional and global economies.

Yet it is a relatively new demographic. In his book, Dr. Kharas traces the global middle-class roots back to Victorian England, when the Industrial Revolution transformed the economy and created a need for middle-tier workers – such as factory managers, accountants, or engineers – that were neither laborers nor aristocracy. Post-World War II economic growth expanded the middle class in Europe and the United States, with many economists and historians describing the 1940s-70s period as the "golden age" of America's middle class. But from a global standpoint, this was just the beginning.

Over the next few decades, the rise of the digital economy, urbanization, the globalization of trade, and economic liberalization propelled the middle class forward across the Global South – especially in Asia.

By 2030, two out of every three members of the global middle class will reside in Asia.

All are searching for what Dr. Kharas describes as "the good life." And a fundamental part of that, valued across cultures and throughout time, is stable housing. But it's getting harder to come by.

"Global housing mismatch"

In the Netherlands, Portugal, and other European countries, surging home prices have been linked to the rise of far-right populism. A lack of affordable housing in Seoul has been blamed in part for South Korea's declining birth rates. Meanwhile, in the U.S., demand for housing is outpacing supply, pushing up costs and deferring home ownership. Last year, the median age of first-time homebuyers reached a record high of 40, according to the National Association of Realtors.

This is all part of what the World Economic Forum calls the "global housing mismatch." And it's apparent in cities such as Delhi and Mumbai, which rank among the least affordable housing markets in India. Home prices there cost an estimated 10 to 14 times average annual household incomes, according to a 2024 analysis by the Indian real estate platform Magicbricks. Their analysts say that's more than double the globally accepted benchmark for affordable housing. Monthly mortgage payments can consume up to 40%-50% of household income.

"In India, housing is increasingly built with a speculative intent – it's produced to sell, not necessarily to live in," says Mukta Naik, a fellow at Sustainable Futures Collaborative, a research organization based in Delhi. Uneven urbanization and artificial land scarcities continue to push prices upward, she explains, pointing to large tracts held by public agencies and limited release for development.

Meanwhile, India faces an urban housing shortage of roughly 10 million units, which could reach 30 million by 2030, while new supply is increasingly skewed toward premium housing. Rents are also rising, adding to the pressure. Residential rents in major Indian cities have increased by about 7% to 9% in 2025, following even steeper annual hikes of 12% to 24% between 2021 and 2024.

Nowadays, people move to cities for better jobs, only to find that the cost of housing erodes much of their income gains. The system forces families into trade-offs between the costs of rent, commuting, and quality of life.

"It's a nightmare," says Mr. Negi's father. "Had I known there would be such bad crises in future, I would have bought a bigger house, and I could have afforded it."

Cost of living grows

Housing is just one pressure the middle class faces. In their recently released book "Breakpoint: The Crisis of the Middle Class and the Future of Work," Saurabh Mukherjea and Nandita Rajhansa argue that the cost of living for India's middle class is effectively doubling every eight years – far outpacing income growth for many households.

"When I look at my monthly expenses, I'm surprised," says Mr. Negi, who is still paying off a Japanese SUV he bought two years ago. "Everything is costly."

This is backed up by data. A home-cooked vegetarian meal now costs about 11% more year on year, according to a recent analysis by The Hindu. Medical inflation, at around 14% annually, is among the highest in Asia. Schooling has become yet another major expense as families seek better opportunities for their children in an increasingly competitive economy. Private school fees have risen by roughly 60% in just three years.

At the same time, household debt is rising. More than half of Indian families have taken personal loans, and a growing share of borrowers are under age 30. For many, debt servicing takes up a significant portion of income, leaving less room for savings or asset building.

These numbers haven't significantly affected political polling. India's Prime Minister Narendra Modi, in power for nearly 12 years, draws a significant share of his support from India's middle class, which continues to express a degree of optimism about the economy. Many supporters attribute their financial strains to the legacy of previous governments or to global disruptions, rather than to current policy. But the pressures are reshaping how middle-class families allocate income.

"Earlier, housing was the one big investment households made," says Dr. Naik. "Now it has to compete with spending on education and other aspirations."

Adeeb Anwar, who is in his early 30s and lives with his wife and parents in a congested neighborhood in south Delhi, says even small apartments have become too expensive.

"My father managed to raise children and buy a house. For me, just having children and sending them to school will make things harder," says the University of Delhi graduate, who works as a cinematographer.

After researching the market, Mr. Anwar estimates it would take him at least five years to save for a down payment at his current income level. Adding a mortgage on to that feels daunting to him. "It's scary to think about the kind of stress that would bring," he says.

Economic perceptions

Gallup found that positive, national growth statistics do little to assuage such fears – people in countries that were experiencing massive GDP growth were just as likely to name economic issues as their country's biggest problem.

"This disconnect between macroeconomic indicators and public perception," the report says, "suggests that people judge national economic progress based on whether they feel secure and able to live well on their household income."

Within India, one of the world's most rapidly growing economies, the data paints a complicated picture. A 2023 Gallup poll showed Indians were more optimistic about their economic future than people surveyed in comparable economies, like the U.S., Germany, and Japan. Recent consumer spending data backs that up.

But the 2026 Ipsos Happiness Report tells a different story. India dropped 16 percentage points from last year's report, with financial insecurity being the top reason driving unhappiness.

A growing mismatch between education and jobs is adding to this insecurity. Nearly 40% of young graduates in India are unemployed, and fewer than 1 in 10 secure a stable salaried job soon after graduation, according to the State of Working India 2026 report by Azim Premji University. And the threat of artificial intelligence looms large.

"People are terrified by AI and what AI is going to do to the middle class," says Dr. Kharas. "Historically, technological change has replaced what people have crudely called 'brawn,'" or physical labor. Now, it's coming after "brain," too.

That's rattled India's IT sector, an engine of India's middle class growth and the industry in which Mr. Negi, the son, works. It also has people questioning the value of education, which was once seen as a basic ladder to middle-class life, but is becoming increasingly expensive.

In many countries, students are asking: "'Is this a good investment or not?' And the answer to that, which 10 years ago was a no-brainer, is no longer a no-brainer," says Dr. Kharas.

This uncertainty complicates long-term financial decisions. For an earlier generation, the senior Mr. Negi argues that the pathway to middle-class stability was relatively clear and easy: Secure a stable job, buy a home, educate children, and build modest savings.

For many younger Indians, including his son, the aspiration remains the same, but the economics behind it have fundamentally shifted. It has Mr. Negi thinking about his father's hometown of Chinyalisaur, a quiet hamlet along the banks of the Bhagirathi river, en route to several Hindu pilgrimage sites. Most residents rely on farming, growing rice, wheat, and millets on terraced fields carved into the hillsides.

"With each passing day, it feels increasingly difficult for me to have my own house," he says with a sigh. "Maybe I will keep a savings till I retire and then buy one affordable in some remote part [of India] and live there. Maybe in the town where my father came from." ▪

WASHINGTON

Mass departures from Congress show gridlock frustration

Legislators say fundraising and attention-getting are eroding norms of policymaking and consensus as the institution cedes its constitutional role.

By Caitlin Babcock / Staff writer

Voters routinely give Congress rock-bottom approval ratings, saying the institution is unaccountable and ineffective.

Some members of Congress would appear to agree. A near-record number of 68 lawmakers have said they will not run for reelection this cycle. Some are eyeing higher office, while others are leaving public service entirely.

"They're looking for a better life," quips Democratic Sen. Peter Welch of Vermont.

Lawmakers and voters alike have long complained that Congress has become an environment where legislating takes a back seat to fundraising, media appearances, and partisan battles. But experts say those trends are increasing so much that the institution is repelling policy-minded candidates who actually want to pass laws.

"It may not be the case that you're getting ordinary Americans shuffling through Congress, but you're instead getting a very small minority of people" who may not be the ones willing to take on that wonky but important legislative work, says Ruth Bloch Rubin, an expert in American politics at the University of Chicago.

Whether they're staying or going, many veteran lawmakers agree, as Democratic Sen. Elizabeth Warren of Massachusetts puts it, that Congress is "absolutely not" the same as when she started serving in 2013. (Senator Warren is running for reelection.)

The Monitor interviewed five retiring lawmakers, and several others who have served for over a decade. Most say their work has been fulfilling, but they see increasing drawbacks. The constant pressure to fundraise is growing. They fear more than ever for their safety. And working across the aisle has become nearly impossible.

A chorus of lawmakers also says Congress has ceded more and more of its power to the executive branch, a concern particularly of the party that is not in power.

"The institution's not doing the job that it's assigned to do," says Senator Welch. "We all know it."

Republicans echo that sentiment, with Nebraska Rep. Don Bacon calling the political parties in Congress "dysfunctional."

Maryland Democrat Steny Hoyer, who's retiring after 45 years in the House, including over two decades in leadership, laments the loss of bipartisanship and says he's "deeply concerned" that the body is not fulfilling its duties under the Constitution.

Public opinion polls show that most people think Congress might work better with term limits on members. But some experts say the

fact that so many are leaving early highlights how the challenges in Congress – the difficulty of passing policy, and the institution's deference to the president – means members who came to get things done are increasingly turning away frustrated.

For some who are staying – and for some would-be members running – legislating might not even be the priority.

Congress is increasingly for those "who are more interested in scoring political points on social media or on cable news than it is for people who want to try to make bipartisan deals," says David Barker, a professor of government at American University. "It's just not built for that anymore."

"There doesn't seem to be a 'middle'"

Retiring Democratic Rep. Julia Brownley first got into politics when she ran for her local California school board to advocate for students like her daughter, who has dyslexia. After arriving on Capitol Hill in 2013, she used her position on the Veterans' Affairs Committee to help pass bills, like one expanding travel reimbursement for veterans seeking medical care, with Republican support. She's still on that committee, but collaboration has waned.

"There doesn't seem to be a 'middle' to work with," she says on a video call from her district office in Southern California.

Since the 1970s, studies show Democrats in Congress have steadily grown more liberal, and Republicans have grown even more conservative. A realignment took place over decades as many conservative Southern Democrats became Republicans and liberal Northeastern Republicans left the GOP. Partisan gerrymandering – when districts are redrawn to benefit a certain party or candidate – has further hollowed out the center.

Republican Rep. Michael McCaul of Texas, chairman emeritus of the House Foreign Affairs Committee, says he joined a "more respectful and collegial" House 22 years ago. Back then, the retiring congressman says, "working across the aisle was not a bad thing."

The lack of bipartisanship has an effect: The 118th Congress, spanning 2023-2025, passed the fewest bills since the Civil War.

President Trump's influence has sped up the exodus of moderate Republican members. Several, like North Carolina Sen. Thom Tillis, belong to a tiny group of Republicans who have publicly criticized the president and his administration. Of 10 GOP House members who voted to impeach Mr. Trump in 2021, most are gone. Only one, California Rep. David Valadao, is running for reelection; the other, Washington Rep. Dan Newhouse, is retiring.

The House and Senate leadership have deferred to the president, says Dr. Barker. "So if you're a member who really just wants to make policy and wants to try to get stuff done, then you don't really get a lot of chances to do that."

Not the "Schoolhouse Rock!" process

Former Chairman McCaul has spent over two decades in the House after working in counterterrorism for the Texas state attorney's office. Reflecting on his time as a congressman during a phone call between votes and meetings, he said a major point of frustration has been working hard to get things passed in the House only to see them go nowhere in the Senate.

He's learned "if you want to get something passed, you've got to attach it to a must-pass bill" like appropriations, he says.

A 2024 study conducted by researchers at Pennsylvania State and Colorado State universities found that as polarization rises in Congress, fewer bills get passed – but those that do tend to be more sweeping. Partisanship, and slim majorities in the House and Senate, mean it's often more effective for leadership to put their priorities into special bills that need fewer votes to pass, or into must-pass bills like yearly funding packages.

"Congress has moved further and further away from following regular order in lawmaking," says Kevin Kosar, a senior fellow at the right-leaning American Enterprise Institute.

He cites, for example, the recent recurrence of government shutdowns when lawmakers can't agree on annual funding.

Dr. Kosar says the commonly understood "Schoolhouse Rock!" process, where a member introduces a stand-alone bill that makes its way through a committee and is voted on, is becoming more rare. Lawmakers must stay on leadership's good side, he says, hoping they can add their priorities into a massive spending package.

"It's very disempowering," says Dr. Kosar. A lot of members are "just kind of shocked at how impotent they feel."

This year, 12 members of Congress, 11 of whom are Republicans, are leaving to run for governor in their home states – an executive office that allows for much more action and immediate results.

Rep. Ralph Norman, a Republican member of the conservative House Freedom Caucus, is running for South Carolina governor. He joined Congress in 2017, after working for his father's construction business and then serving in state government. During an interview at his office overlooking the Capitol, he says he regrets that he wasn't able to do more to reduce government spending.

In his tall-backed chair, he leans away from his desk. "As governor," he says, "I can cut the budget. I'll have direct control."

"It shouldn't be that way"

One challenge in particular has become far more acute in recent years: Members of Congress, and prominent politicians across the country, are facing a surge in threats. In 2025 Capitol Police investigated 14,938 cases of "concerning statements, behaviors, and communications" against members and their families. That's nearly a 60% increase from 2024.

Events like last year's arson attack at Pennsylvania Gov. Josh Shapiro's home and the deadly shooting of Turning Point USA co-founder Charlie Kirk highlight a growing culture of political violence that's causing some members like Maine's Democratic Rep. Jared Golden, who is leaving office in a swing district, to question whether the cost of their work is growing too high. "As a father, I have to consider whether the good I can achieve outweighs everything my family endures as a result," he wrote.

In the wake of Mr. Kirk's assassination, Congress voted to allot each member $10,000 per month to cover personal security costs, up from $5,000 previously. Representative Norman says he now has a security guard who accompanies him to town halls.

"It shouldn't be that way, but it is what it is," he says. "You saw what happened to Charlie Kirk. … That's just part of it now."

Sound bites and cameras

Jonathan Lewallen, a professor at the University of Tampa who has written about the decline of legislating in Congress, says a shift in the media environment has changed the way members think about their jobs. His research shows coverage of Congress has shifted more toward TV and radio and away from print as many newspapers have closed. At the same time, social media has expanded and popularized quick sound bites. Dr. Lewallen says this shapes the day-to-day business of Congress, as lawmakers focus more on issues they think the media will cover.

Several members who have built a strong online presence during

their time in Congress, like Democratic Rep. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez and former GOP Rep. Marjorie Taylor Greene, were never the primary sponsors of any bill that passed into law.

"And if that's the case, what's the point of being in Congress?" asks Dr. Lewallen. "If you're just issuing press releases and giving speeches anyway, why not just have a podcast?"

In a changed Congress, who fits in?

This year's turnover, which is tilted more toward Republicans, could help Democrats take control of the House, and possibly the Senate. But it could also reshape Congress in other ways, bringing in a wave of different types of Republicans and Democrats.

The ability to attract attention through social media tends to reward candidates who lean into controversy and conflict more than those who want to work across divisions on policy. Still, Dr. Kosar says a new class of members could make things better, by refusing to treat having a majority as a "winner-takes-all" situation.

"You sometimes get these influxes of members who have broadly shared ideas about what's wrong with the way Congress is working, and they want to work to change things," he says. Given how "miserable" many now appear to be, he doesn't think it would take too many new voices to spur change.

Democratic Sen. Mark Warner, who is running again, says he values bipartisan wins he had earlier in his Senate career, which began in 2009. That spirit of bipartisanship "feels gone," the Virginian says, "but I think it's got to come back." ▪

NUMBERS IN THE NEWS

31

Percentage of Americans who were part of the upper middle class in 2024, up from 10% in 1979, according to a recent American Enterprise Institute report. The research classifies a family of three earning between $133,000 and $400,000 today as upper middle class. The findings show that the U.S. upper middle class is growing while the lower middle class has shrunk over the past 50 years.

$258,030

The gap between the median net worth of white households ($276,900) and Black households ($18,870) in New York state, according to a new racial equity plan released by New York City Mayor Zohran Mamdani's office. Mayor Mamdani is attempting to expand his affordability agenda to include racial equality.

$5.01

The highest national average unleaded gas price, recorded in the U.S. in June 2022. The Iran war has driven up prices again, with the national average recently climbing above $4 per gallon, up 21% from early March.

$854,000

The average home sale price in Hawaii in the fourth quarter of 2025, according to the federal House Price Index. It is the highest in the United States. The national average is $486,000. West Virginia has the lowest average home sale price in the U.S., at $269,000.

20

Percentage by which electricity prices are up in Maine this year, due to new state supply rates set in 2026. Maine Governor Janet Mills signed a law requiring the Maine Public Utilities Commission to develop an affordability metric and consider the impact of electricity prices on residential customers in its pricing.

– Audrey Thibert / Staff writer

Sources: The Wall Street Journal, The New York Times, AAA, Urban Institute, Maine Wire, WMTW-TV

THE EXPLAINER

Musk, OpenAI head to court in 'test case' for AI ethics

The trial, stemming from a fallout between Elon Musk and a firm he co-founded, is likely to highlight a company's role in responsible AI development.

By Caitlin Babcock / Staff writer

A dispute between ChatGPT's parent company, OpenAI, and one of the company's founders – billionaire and tech entrepreneur Elon Musk – will play out in a federal court in Oakland, California, beginning April 27.

Mr. Musk, who left the company in 2018, is suing OpenAI, claiming its leaders manipulated him into thinking he was contributing money to a nonprofit. He wants the company returned to its nonprofit status and seeks monetary compensation.

OpenAI says Mr. Musk, who has since raised billions through the launch of his own for-profit company xAI, is misrepresenting facts to gain a competitive edge.

At the heart of the case is a dispute about the direction of artificial intelligence and how much responsibility technology companies bear for the public good.

David Tuffley, lecturer at Griffith University's School of Information and Communication Technology in Australia, calls the trial a "test case" for AI ethics.

"I think this current lawsuit is going to be a very interesting step in the direction of clarifying just how responsible a corporation is," Mr. Tuffley says.

Q: What are the roots of Mr. Musk's dispute with OpenAI?

Mr. Musk says now-CEO Sam Altman approached him in 2015 and asked him to help start a nonprofit AI company that would be "for the benefit of humanity." Mr. Musk says he believed, for example, that the company would distribute its research openly and focus on safety, not just profits. He says he contributed the majority of the company's funding in its early years.

Now, OpenAI has expanded to become one of the world's most prominent AI companies. Its signature product, ChatGPT, has more than 700 million weekly users, according to the company.

In 2025, OpenAI finalized its transition to a for-profit model.

After leaving OpenAI, Mr. Musk started xAI. In 2024, he sued OpenAI, Mr. Altman, and OpenAI's president, Greg Brockman,

for up to $134 billion in damages. He says he would donate any compensation he wins to OpenAI's nonprofit arm. Mr. Musk is also seeking to have Mr. Altman and Mr. Brockman removed as officers in the company, and has asked the court to revert OpenAI to a nonprofit.

In court filings, the company claims Mr. Musk was aware of and open to the company's plans to switch to a for-profit entity, saying he left when the company refused to give him full control.

"This case has always been about Elon generating more power and more money for what he wants," the company said in a social media post April 7.

Q: What's at stake?

Mr. Musk says his lawsuit's purpose is to compel OpenAI to return to its founding principles, which he says it has violated by prioritizing profit over safety.

"OpenAI's conduct could have seismic implications for Silicon Valley and, if allowed to stand, could represent a paradigm shift for technology start-ups," wrote Mr. Musk in court filings.

He has come under scrutiny for his own AI product, Grok, a chatbot on the social media platform X that users have accused of generating harmful sexualized images and videos.

Anton Leicht, a visiting scholar at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace who researches the political economy of AI, says it's true that OpenAI has moved away from parts of its founding mission.

However, he thinks the way the company has narrowed its scope is realistic given the way AI investment has taken off since OpenAI's founding.

"I think [the trial] reveals the tension between trying to push AI capabilities and doing all these other things," including altruism, he says.

Jeffrey Saviano, an AI ethicist who advises corporate boards and government officials, worries that the debate around OpenAI's for-profit versus nonprofit status is missing the point. He hopes the trial raises bigger questions about AI and responsibility: Why have so few companies articulated the boundaries of what they will tolerate from their AI systems? How should AI deployers, and not just developers, be held accountable?

"This is the leadership moment of our time," he says. "It's hard to imagine being an effective leader – for-profit or nonprofit – today unless you have an appreciation and you understand what responsible AI development and deployment looks like."

Q: How has OpenAI come under scrutiny recently?

Mr. Musk isn't the first to claim that OpenAI is shirking its ethical responsibilities. The company faces multiple other lawsuits – The New York Times accuses it of illegally using the newspaper's articles to train ChatGPT, for example, and multiple lawsuits allege that ChatGPT gave harmful advice to people in mental health crises, including some that resulted in a person dying by suicide.

On April 9, Florida Attorney General James Uthmeier launched an investigation into OpenAI, saying, among other things, that ChatGPT may have been used to assist a gunman who fatally shot two people at Florida State University last year.

OpenAI says it is "dedicated to the safe and beneficial development of artificial general intelligence." Last year, it made updates to ChatGPT it said aimed to address the platform's interactions with people experiencing a mental health crisis.

In February, many members of the public, as well as industry insiders, sided with OpenAI competitor Anthropic when it refused to sign a contract with the Pentagon that it feared could open the door for unethical use of its AI technology. OpenAI stepped in to fill Anthropic's place, though it had similar – but less binding – restrictions.

The Department of Defense then blacklisted Anthropic, though the company is challenging that in court.

Whereas OpenAI has moved away from policy advocacy that doesn't directly affect its business interests, "Anthropic is kind of still trying to do it all," says Mr. Leicht. That "comes with real costs."

But OpenAI's approach has come with its own costs. Its Pentagon contract ignited a massive backlash, with uninstalls of the ChatGPT app jumping 295% the day after the contract was announced. Mr. Altman also came under scrutiny in April when a New Yorker magazine investigation quoted multiple people questioning whether he could be trusted to lead development of this powerful technology.

Mr. Altman did not respond directly to the New Yorker article. But shortly after it ran, Mr. Altman published a sweeping blueprint for how policymakers could mitigate AI's harms by establishing a social contract. The plan calls for, among other things, taxing businesses that replace human employees with robots, and creating a public investment fund to distribute the returns from AI profits to the public. ▪

REPORTERS ON THE JOB

HOPKINTON, MASSACHUSETTS

Kendra Nordin Beato

Sometimes, Monitor reporters take their own photos. Recently, I attended a ribbon-cutting ceremony of a statue honoring Roberta "Bobbi" Gibb, the first woman to complete the Boston Marathon. Trying to capture Ms. Gibb and the statue towering over her in a compelling way was tricky, and I had just a few moments to capture the scene. So, I texted a photo to staff photographer Melanie Stetson Freeman, who recently celebrated 40 years of shooting award-winning photos for the Monitor, and asked for pointers. "Have your subject stand to the left of the frame," she told me. I tried again and sent a few more shots. Mel called back, even though she was on deadline. "Not quite, she's too far away. Have her take two steps toward you." A few quick notes from a pro, and the picture finally came into focus. ▪

HOUSTON

Henry Gass

I wear multiple hats for the Monitor – Texas correspondent and U.S. Supreme Court correspondent – and I do my best to avoid wearing them at the same time. April 1, however, was a two-hat day. Artemis II was launching at 5:30 p.m. local time, and the Supreme Court was hearing the contentious birthright citizenship case that morning. I hit the road just after 5 a.m. to reach NASA's Lyndon B. Johnson Space Center in time for both the launch and the court hearing. Three hours later, sitting between an astronaut sculpture and a live news feed from the International Space Station, I began listening to Chief Justice John Roberts opine on domicile theory. From gravitas to gravity, just another two-hat day. ▪

Taylor Luck

JUBBAH, SAUDI ARABIA

I was prepared for Iranian drones and missiles on my reporting trip. I did not expect snow in Saudi Arabia. When rare lightning storms brought hail and flurries to Jubbah, an oasis village and UNESCO World Heritage site that is surrounded by the Nefud Desert, my host Rami grabbed my arm and said, "Come, finish your coffee. The world is white!"

We drove seven minutes off-road into the desert, where the red sands were capped with white. Hundreds of Saudis were playing in the hail, pelting each other with slushy balls, setting up campfires, and driving donuts in their 4x4s, etching figure eights into the white-red sands. Amid the cold, geopolitical tensions and Iran war fears melted away, if only for a few hours. ▪

Simon Montlake

BISHRAMPUR, BANGLADESH

In rural Bangladesh, guesthouses run by nonprofits are often the only places to stay. My fixer and I stayed at the guesthouse of a social development nonprofit, ESDO, while reporting on election campaigning in northwest Bangladesh earlier this year. It was unexpectedly fortuitous. While I was there, I was also writing another piece on traditional weavers. Among other things, ESDO trains and equips villagers to weave floor mats through its livelihoods program. We got to meet women at their homes, see how they operate their handlooms, and understand what it means for them to earn money. One woman told me that she now earns more than her husband, a truck driver, and she has even invested in livestock. ▪

EDITORIALS

Where wit and wisdom disarm disinformation

Even as the European Union works to bolster support for Ukraine, the continent confronts growing Russian aggression on a different battlefield: the online frontier. The Kremlin is intensifying disinformation campaigns in an attempt to weaken Europe's democratic pillars of truth and civic trust.

As a main target of the attacks, France is leading the charge to debunk these claims. "The more outspoken France has become about Russia, the more it is targeted," The Economist reported on April 8. In multiple cases, false claims on social media were launched right after French President Emmanuel Macron voiced support for Ukraine or European rearmament.

Working with the EU's new digital "democracy shield," France is pursuing transparency with cutting-edge technology – and a touch of Gallic flair.

In 2021, France set up Viginum, a special office to combat foreign digital interference. Six months ago, it launched French Response, an English-language social media account on X to "better defend the country in a multifront meme war," The Wall Street Journal reported.

Sharing news and views "with a frank posture, tinged with humor ... sometimes self-deprecation," Foreign Minister Jean-Noël Barrot told fellow diplomats in January, "increases the impact of our message."

Beyond online virality, this approach recognizes the need to cultivate civic trust alongside modern media literacy.

"The European fight against Russian interference has undergone a strategic shift," Le Monde wrote in March. "Both Brussels and Paris now advocate a society-wide approach ... to involve citizens in the solution." A February conference on combating disinformation noted the importance of equipping civil society with strong associations, fact-checking skills, and media literacy education.

A special commission offered an even broader view. "The bond of trust between citizens and the media and institutions ... needs to be reforged" – as do the skills of discernment and critical thinking, the group concluded in 2022.

It defined critical thinking as "the ability to trust intelligently, after considering the quality of the information, opinions and knowledge." And, the report added confidently, "Human beings are predisposed to possess this ability." ▪

Hungary's moving message to populists

Populist politicians in Europe, whether left or right, who use tactics of demonization and division to amass power have been put on notice. In a much-watched election on April 12, voters in Hungary ousted Prime Minister Viktor Orbán, who epitomized the continent's identity politics of fear and hate over the past 16 years. In record turnout, they soundly opted for Péter Magyar, an astute coalition-builder who overcame a smear campaign thrown at him by offering a "message of love" to all Hungarians.

In a speech after his Tisza party won a supermajority in parliament, Mr. Magyar touched on the election's meaning: "It is a sin to divide the nation." He attacked a system of lies and corruption, not individuals. He called on supporters to reconcile with members of Mr. Orbán's party, Fidesz, despite that party's "us versus them" tactics.

In a phone call with the outgoing prime minister, Mr. Magyar told Mr. Orbán that reunifying Hungary, a Central European country of 9.6 million people, was now their shared responsibility.

And in a challenge to populism's tendency to create enemies that don't exist, he told supporters, "As the winner of the election, we will have to extend a hand to our fellow countrymen."

Mr. Magyar's party is very diverse on policy issues. Yet all Hungarians long for "moving away from constant hysteria and toward a governmental focus on everyday issues," Gabor Gyori, a political analyst with the Policy Solutions research organization in Budapest, told The New York Times.

Indeed, Tisza's victory was driven in part by its appeals for clean governance, better health care, and improved relations with the European Union – including its unifying democratic values.

"Europe's heart is beating stronger in Hungary tonight," European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen said in a post on the social platform X.

During the campaign, Mr. Orbán might have realized that the lies thrown at his opponent were not working with voters. He wisely conceded the election quickly as the ballot results rolled in. Hungary's political order will not be instantly transformed under Tisza. Yet, among a majority of voters, a spell of deceit and vilifica-

tion has now been broken.

During a campaign that took him to some 700 towns, Mr. Magyar simply told the truth about the country's state of democracy. He largely avoided personal attacks against Mr. Orbán and instead offered reconciliation. His main slogan was "Do not be afraid."

That was enough to burst the bubble of one of Europe's most famed populists. ▪

Welding the skilled trades to career dignity

The rapid adoption of artificial intelligence in workplaces across the United States is automating a wide range of administrative, managerial, and even specialized high-tech tasks. Employers and employees are understandably concerned.

Yet, the same AI boom is also driving demand for workers in professions long seen as declining in prestige and pay: the skilled trades or blue-collar jobs that built America's middle class.

As the cost of college increases, and as young people seek less debt, enrollment in public and private vocational programs has increased by about 6% annually in recent years. Still, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, more than 400,000 skilled-trade jobs remained unfilled in 2025.

Paradoxically, these economic and social pressure points highlight new possibilities for expanding pathways to prosperity. Private industry is stepping up its efforts – and, in the process, also offering Americans an opportunity to reassess how they view work, wealth, and individual worth. (According to a March 2025 Pew Research Center survey, only 30% of blue-collar workers felt Americans respect their work.)

Last month, the founder of BlackRock, the world's largest investment firm, announced a $100 million philanthropic initiative to build up the U.S. skilled-trades workforce. This month, Fortune magazine reported that home-improvement retailer Lowe's will invest $250 million in skilling workers in fields such as carpentry, electrical work, and plumbing.

Speaking to the BBC, BlackRock chief Larry Fink voiced a need to "rebalance" views of these professions. And Lowe's CEO Marvin Ellison emphasized that skilled trades are "a way to create meaningful wealth [and] earn a very dignified living."

Such views help reframe the conversation, according to GroundBreak Carolinas, an industry trade group.

"Capital and technology alone do not build progress. People do," GroundBreak notes on its website. "The trades offer something increasingly rare: tangible skills, visible impact ... and long-term stability."

This observation ties in to a broader civic need to uphold the dignity of manual or trades work and "combat condescension and credentialist prejudice," Harvard University professor and philosopher Michael Sandel noted in 2020.

"The most important role we play in the economy," he wrote in The Atlantic, is not in consuming but in producing the "goods and services that fulfill the needs of our fellow citizens."

Greek philosopher Aristotle, Dr. Sandel pointed out, "argued that human flourishing depends on ... cultivation and exercise of our abilities." And the "American republican tradition" also taught that such endeavors "nurture the virtues that equip citizens for self-rule."

For today's young people, the opportunity to become skilled producers and productive citizens could be a double bonus. ▪

READERS RESPOND

Where the old ways still pull weight

There are some farmers in my state, Kansas, who do not use gas-powered tractors, trucks, or cars, but still have horse-drawn equipment and carriages to get around town. One can see buggies with horses tied to hitching posts next to buildings or in the fields. These farmers are Mennonites and still live as their ancestors did in the 1800s.

"A breeding program for the ages," the In Pictures photo-essay about the Rare Breeds program at Colonial Williamsburg in the April 6 Monitor Weekly, was a reminder of how much I enjoy getting to see the Mennonite farmers. I was fascinated by the way the farm animals at Colonial Williamsburg are being revitalized and taken care of with so much love. It was a wonderful article by staff writer Scott Baldauf, and I really enjoyed staff photographer Melanie Stetson Freeman's photos.

Sue Carol Helten
Douglass, Kansas

A photographer for the ages

Thank you for the brilliance of the In Pictures photo-essay "A breeding program for the ages." I really hope that, one day, there will be a complete collection of Melanie Stetson Freeman's nature and people photographs from the Monitor – online or in print.

Carolyn Nagusky
Salida, Colorado

THE HOME FORUM

The wind chime

An unexpected visit from a reclusive neighbor compels this writer to see the fellow in a new light.

Two years. That's how long I had lived next door to my neighbor without ever speaking to him.

It's not that I didn't try. I would call out to him whenever I saw him working in his front yard. He would briefly look up from his gardening, and then turn away.

I tried every greeting I could think of. "Good morning, neighbor! Looks like a warm one! Have a great day!"

When that didn't work, I tried a foreign accent. "G'day, mate! Top of the morning, neighbor!"

Nothing.

We are different. He seems much older and lives alone. I am married and have an exuberant 8-year-old granddaughter who spends weekends with my wife and me. He has a "no trespassing" flag in his front yard. We have seasonal greeting signs ("Hello, fall!"). He has a "beware of dog" sign and doesn't own a dog. We have a retriever that licks everyone who passes by.

Like I said, we're different.

Which is why I was surprised when I heard a quiet, apologetic

knock on my front door and opened it to find my neighbor.

"Hello," he muttered, "I wonder if I might have a moment of your time."

Taken aback, I couldn't think of an appropriate response.

"It's important," he added, as if to justify his presence.

The man's discomfort touched something in me, something I did not know could be there for this man, my neighbor, who had shown such disdain for me.

"Please," I offered, surprising myself, "come in."

He moved slowly as he entered, breathing heavily.

We sat in the living room, opposite each other, and when my neighbor began to speak, his voice sounded wounded and tired. "I know you must think it strange, my being here. We've never really spoken."

"Yes, I know."

"It's important." And then, as if reconsidering, he added, "Well, it's important to me."

At this, my granddaughter bounded into the room, unaware of what was happening. When she saw our neighbor, the man she knew had rebuffed my attempts to be friendly, she paused, and then boldly stepped forward.

"Hello, pleased to meet you. My name is Lilith. But you can call me Lily since you're our neighbor," and she stuck out her hand.

For the first time, he looked up, first at me and then at my granddaughter. He reached out his hand to shake hers.

"Nice to meet you, young lady. I'm Mr. Richards. Gene Richards from next door."

"I'm not a young lady yet," Lily corrected, hopping up on the couch next to me. "I'm a little girl. I'm 8." And then, as an afterthought she added, "But a lot of people think I'm older."

"Lily," I interjected, "our neighbor Mr. Richards is here to talk to me about something. You should excuse yourself."

"No, no, that's fine," Mr. Richards offered. "It's nothing like that. It's actually kind of silly, I suppose. You see, earlier today I thought I heard something familiar. From your backyard."

"And what was that?"

"A wind chime."

Lily and I looked at each other.

"It sounded like the one I used to have, hanging from a eucalyptus tree in my backyard. At least, it was hanging there until that big storm we had last summer."

"What did it look like?" I asked.

"It was quite delicate, only about 8 inches tall. A metal moon with a smiling face – a man in the moon, I guess you'd call it, with four crystal cylinders hanging from it." Mr. Richards paused and then, in a faltering voice, added, "It was a gift from my wife."

There was a long moment of silence before Lily, in a quiet, clear voice, said, "I think we found it yesterday."

Mr. Richards sat up straight, his eyes wide.

"My granddaughter and I were planting flowers," I explained, "by the fence. I was about to throw it away but Lily ..."

"Rescued it!" she cheerfully interjected, and with that, she slid off the couch and disappeared.

An awkward minute passed, and Lily reappeared in the doorway and softly padded her way across the room to Mr. Richards. She was holding the wind chime we had found.

"Is this the one?" she quietly asked.

At first, he couldn't respond, as his eyes teared and his lips trembled. He finally managed a quiet, "Yes."

Lily gently handed him the wind chime, spreading it out on his receiving hands as if it were a rare artifact.

"Before she passed, my wife said to remember her every time it chimed," Mr. Richards shared. "She said it would be like her, speaking to me with the wind."

"I had to replace the clapper with a nail," Lily explained in a serious tone. "That's what they call the metal piece that makes it chime."

Mr. Richards nodded. "It's perfect. Thank you."

Slowly, cradling the wind chime in both hands, Mr. Richards rose. "I should be going. There's still enough light that I can hang it up."

Lily and I followed Mr. Richards to the door. When he was about halfway down the walk, he turned. "Mr.," and he stopped, realizing he didn't know my name.

"It's Bachmann," I quickly offered. "But you can call me Dave. We are, after all, neighbors."

"Yes, I'll do that. I was just thinking of something. Ever hear of a fella named Robert Frost?"

I smiled. "He's one of my favorite poets."

"I was just remembering a poem of his we read in school. Something about fences and a wall."

"'Mending Wall.'"

"That's it. There were two neighbors rebuilding the wall, and the one neighbor kept saying, 'Good fences make good neighbors.'"

"Yes, that's right."

Mr. Richards paused, as if carefully considering what he was about to say. "I think he might have been wrong about that."

I nodded in agreement.

"See ya around, Dave."

"See ya around, Gene."

Lily leaned up against me, took my hand, and squeezed it. "Hey, Gramps?"

"Yes, Lily."

"I think you just got a new neighbor."

– Dave Bachmann

THE HOME FORUM: KIDS SPACE

A PBS preschool special celebrates the feeling of awe

The Home Forum has previewed an educational, 22-minute special by The Jim Henson Co. "Wowsabout," filmed in Sequoia National Park, stars new puppet characters. The special was created, written, and executive produced by Halle Stanford and principal puppeteer Dorien Davies. In "Wowsabout," a friendship grows between Roxy, a hedgehog, and Ronald, a pig, as they're inspired by one of America's extraordinary natural wonders.

"Awe can be such a uniting force, and it's something we need a lot more of today," says Ms. Davies, who plays Roxy.

"Wowsabout" will premiere May 1 and will be available for streaming. It will kick off the PBS Kids Across America initiative, running May through July. The initiative will showcase "amazing places and real kids," as well as historic figures throughout the 50 states and U.S. territories.

Finding happiness

I was in a meeting with a journalist who corresponds with people in regions where journalists cannot enter because of intense troubles there. She was animated as she explained how she helps locals get their stories out. Asked how she stays happy dealing with such serious situations, she said, "I think people have generally found fulfillment doing what needs to be done."

In a similar way, I find that happiness keeps bubbling up as we understand our place as the needed expressions of God's good nature and qualities and live according to that understanding.

I've known empty-feeling times when human pleasures proved unfulfilling. But through my study and practice of Christian Science, steady joy has come in understanding that our fulfillment comes from divine Spirit, God. And joy keeps coming as we find purpose by expressing spiritual qualities, including intelligence and love. The more we pray to bring out God-reflecting qualities in our thinking, the more good things happen. This has been my story.

Christian Science presents the nature of God to us through Bible-based words such as infinite, Love, and Mind. There's great fulfillment in living the different good qualities that express God. Finding happiness by expressing such qualities may be similar to what the journalist found. Her happiness came from giving a voice to those who felt they couldn't be heard and so empowering them.

Ultimately, we find steady joy is in bearing witness to the love and goodness of the divine Spirit, and finding within ourselves our all-good, spiritual nature. This blesses others, too. God loves us constantly just as the sun keeps shining, whether it's a cloudy day on Earth or not. And just as the sun evaporates clouds, as we express God's love it brightens up the room for others, too.

Society might suggest happiness depends upon what we're able to own or consume, or who we get to spend time with. Monitor founder Mary Baker Eddy wrote, "Happiness consists in being and in doing good; only what God gives, and what we give ourselves and others through His tenure, confers happiness: conscious worth satisfies the hungry heart, and nothing else can" ("Message to The Mother Church for 1902," p. 17).

We feel this "conscious worth" as we welcome the larger scope of satisfaction. In nurturing our expression as the image of Spirit, we find joy in contributing at work, home, or in the community. As we hunger to magnify God for everyone's benefit, we make real traction.

Jesus reassured us: "If ye keep my commandments, ye shall abide in my love; even as I have kept my Father's commandments, and abide in his love. These things have I spoken unto you, that my joy might remain in you, and that your joy might be full" (John 15:10, 11). As needed expressions of infinite intelligence and Love, we are animated by God's good and helpful qualities, and these qualities are manifested in healthier bodies, lives, and communities.

– Curtis Wahlberg

Malian photographer ushered in a 'visual revolution'

Self-taught portraitist Seydou Keïta introduced "the African gaze" during a time of transition for the continent. A catalog celebrates his artistry.

By Carol Strickland

The late Malian photographer Seydou Keïta has been likened to a griot, a storyteller who preserves the oral history of his ancestors. But he was also a master of the moment, capturing the epoch in which Africans shed colonial rule and glimpsed their future.

With his emphasis on depicting Africans the way they wished to be seen, Keïta showed a society emerging from European control. And when his portraits from the 1940s to the '60s eventually made their way to the West, they also challenged the stereotyped images of Africans found in magazines such as National Geographic.

"For the first time, [Western] audiences could experience what I'll call the African gaze, and it amounted to a visual revolution," writes Howard French, an essayist in "Seydou Keïta: A Tactile Lens," a catalog that accompanies an exhibition of the same name at the Brooklyn Museum in New York.

Keïta was "thoroughly imbued with the spirit of his time," French adds. He portrayed Africans at a turning point between their colonial past and their independent future.

His work is considered on a par with that of famous Western studio portraitists such as Richard Avedon and Irving Penn. While they had access to the latest technology in the boom years after World War II, Keïta had none of those things. While Americans were buying Polaroid Land Cameras, people in colonial French West Africa did not typically see or own permanent images of themselves, let alone have the tools to take them.

Enter Seydou Keïta. He was born in Bamako, Mali, in 1921, and, as the eldest son, became the chief breadwinner, working in his father's trade of carpentry to support an extended family of 100 members. When Keïta was age 14, his uncle gave him a Kodak Brownie Flash camera. Making pictures became his passion.

In 1948, Keïta opened a portrait studio in the courtyard of his family compound. For the next 15 years, customers flocked to have their pictures taken. They wished to ensure their image for posterity, primping for the camera in their own finery or with props he provided such as watches, pens, radios, Western suits and ties, even a Vespa scooter.

Keïta was famous for his skill with such portraits. "The self-image fixed on paper – it started with Seydou," as Kader Keïta, a family member, told exhibition curator Catherine E. McKinley. Customers came from all over West Africa, queuing up in Keïta's courtyard to choose their poses and costumes from his samples. Keïta's family members served them tea and bantered with them. It was a celebratory outing, often memorializing a wedding, engagement, or birth.

Keïta photographed all day and spent time at night in a darkroom making 5-by-7 prints that the sitters collected the next day.

What's remarkable about these portraits is that Keïta, who was

self-taught but a wizard when it came to lighting his subjects and arranging their poses, only clicked the shutter once – for reasons of economy. The portraits – shot outdoors in natural light since electricity was a luxury – are luminous. Skin glistens, fingernails shine.

The images were a collaboration between sitter and photographer, with Keïta fluffing garments and directing poses to maximize a commanding sculptural presence. Through their bold gazes, the subjects appear to leap out at the viewer, dignified, powerful, and alive.

Handwoven textiles used as backdrops are Keïta's signature and recall African visual culture. (Keïta's younger brothers were in charge of holding up the fabrics, including Keïta's own fringed bedspread.) The patterned textiles add dynamism, density, and detail. (The use of patterned backdrops reappears in contemporary art, such as in Mickalene Thomas' paintings and Kehinde Wiley's portrait of President Barack Obama.)

A print of a woman in recumbent pose shows how Keïta actively staged his images to create an elegant aura. The woman reclines on a checkerboard fabric wearing a flowered gown and polka-dotted headscarf. Arabesques of a fabric backdrop surround her.

Despite Keïta's status as a celebrated 20th-century African master, his discovery by the Western art world was almost by happenstance. Two of his portraits (attributed anonymously) caused a sensation in a 1991 group show of African art in New York. Collector Jean Pigozzi tracked down their Malian creator, who was then working as an auto mechanic.

Malian government officials forced Keïta to close his studio in 1963 and work for the state until he quit in 1977. After his "rediscovery," collectors and museums printed his negatives using the latest technology. Seeing his negatives transformed into large formats and framed for the first time, he was thrilled. "I knew then that my work was really, really good," he said shortly before his death in 2001. "The people in my photos looked so alive, almost as if they were standing right in front of me."

Keïta's images reflect both his clients' aspirations toward a modern, urban identity and their reverence for still-potent cultural traditions. This extensive catalog shows, through the eyes of a premiere portrait photographer, a society in transition.

▪ *The exhibition "Seydou Keïta: A Tactile Lens" is on display at the Brooklyn Museum until May 17. Nine photographs by Keïta are also on view at New York's Museum of Modern Art in a group show, "Ideas of Africa: Portraiture and Political Imagination," through July 25.*

BEST BOOKS OF APRIL

What Monitor reviewers like best this month.

Inheritance
by Jane Park
In Jane Park's poignant debut novel, Anne Kim, a successful Korean Canadian lawyer in New York, returns home to the Alberta prairie following the death of her father. Memories, frustrations, and surprises await. In flashbacks to the 1980s and '90s, Anne's childhood struggles and sacrifices become clear – from living in the shadow of her spoiled older brother to navigating school as one of the lone Asian students. It's an affecting story of honor, tradition, and expectations sometimes buoying – but nearly burying – one immigrant family.

Transcription
by Ben Lerner
When a magazine writer inadvertently destroys his smartphone on his way to interview his former mentor, he's left with nothing to record their vital conversation. In this succinct 144-page novel, Ben Lerner explores the impact that our ubiquitous devices have on our ability to connect with one another. Are they a barrier or do they help bridge our shortcomings? Do they shape our memories or demand authenticity?

The Keeper
by Tana French
Tana French has described her Ardnakelty trilogy as "mystery software running on western hardware." That's a perfect description of "The Keeper," the final outing starring retired Chicago police officer Cal Hooper, his wary fiancée Lena Dunne, and their adopted teen Trey Reddy. Cal moved to the Irish village looking for peace. Instead, he discovered a peat bog's worth of secrets – dark, dank, and potentially deadly. A young woman is found dead in a river. Was it suicide? French, one of the greatest mystery writing talents, ratchets up both the menace and the stakes as Cal and Lena break Ardnakelty's prime directive: Talk plenty ... but say nothing.

The Lost Book of Elizabeth Barton
by Jennifer N. Brown
A page-turner interweaving historical and detective fiction, "The Lost Book of Elizabeth Barton" toggles between the Reformation, when Elizabeth lived, and the present day when scholars are hot on her trail. Through Elizabeth's rise from servant to visionary who resisted Henry VIII's break with the Roman Catholic Church to gain a divorce, Brown explores historical women's stratagems for self-determination. These themes are mirrored by the brilliant but hapless professor Alison Sage, and scholars around her, who may be more interested in uncovering material – rather than intellectual – treasures.

Ms. Mebel Goes Back to the Chopping Block
by Jesse Q. Sutanto
Self-described trophy wife Mebel lives the high life in Jakarta – that is, until her longtime husband decamps into the waiting arms and apron strings of their 20-something chef. Miserable Mebel, determined to win him back, enrolls ASAP in a fancy European cooking school. The only problem: The Paris program is full, so Mebel gets shunted to the satellite campus in an English backwater. Bestselling author Jesse Q. Sutanto serves up a snappy fish-out-of-bouillabaisse tale that will leave readers grinning.

Dreamt I Found You
by Jimin Han
Cousins Dahee and Channing – Korean American young women born hours apart – are lifelong besties, but near opposites. Cautious Dahee works as a teacher in New York; impulsive Channing has a summer babysitting gig in her coastal New England hometown. After Channing complains about a creepy local politician, Dahee decides to visit with their beloved grandfather, Harabeoji. Mirroring a famous Korean love story, Jimin Han's immersive, winning story grapples with community loyalty, courage, and devotion.

Mrs. Benedict Arnold
by Emma Parry
Emma Parry's fresh rendition of the country's most notorious act of treason involves patriot Gen. Benedict Arnold and his loyalist wife, Peggy Shippen. Told in Peggy's enthusiastic voice, the novel details family life, friendships, politics, parties, and war. Come for the banter, stay for the intrigue, and enjoy this fascinating tale of the American Revolution.

The Ending Writes Itself
by Evelyn Clarke
If a reclusive author invites you to his private island, send regrets. In "The Ending Writes Itself," Evelyn Clarke, the pseudonym for authors V.E. Schwab and Cat Clarke, strands a half-dozen writers on a Scottish island. Their task: Finish bestselling author Arthur Fletch's final mystery and score a $1 million publishing contract. They are firmly midlist writers, or, as the horror author puts it, "disposable." How disposable becomes apparent over the weekend. The novel is a darkly comic satire of the publishing industry and an elegy for formerly idealistic storytellers who are "unable to break out, only to break even."

The Last Woman of Warsaw
by Judy Batalion
In 1930s Warsaw, two young Jewish women from different backgrounds must work together to solve a disappearance. Fanny, daughter of an elite family, dreams of life as a photographer. After Zosia escapes violence in her village, she works with a youth movement protesting for social equity. When a Jewish professor vanishes, Fanny and Zosia defy danger to search for her.

Dog Person
by Camille Pagán
Floundering Michigan bookstore owner Miguel is stuck, grieving the death of the love of his life, novelist Amelia May, and worrying about the potential closure of their beloved bookstore. Harold, their devoted mutt, doggedly narrates his mission: help Miguel heal and fetch him a second love. Camille Pagán's novel uplifts with enormous canine charm, a twisty plot, and an endearing cast.

Small Town Girls
by Jayne Anne Phillips
Jayne Anne Phillips' memoir in 22 linked essays makes clear how her family's deep roots in the Allegheny Mountains in West Virginia shaped her as a writer. Phillips left her hometown after college, but its stories and local history have continued to fuel her fiction, including her powerful Pulitzer Prize-winning novel, "Night Watch," set in the aftermath of the Civil War. (Her town sided with the Union.) "Small Town Girls" encompasses a detailed recap of the infamous Hatfield-McCoy feud, and a lament for the environmental devastation wrought by mining and fracking. Phillips' tributes to her hardworking mother – a grade school teacher who made sure all her students were fed and warmly clothed – and to West Virginia writers Stephen Crane and Breece D'J Pancake are particularly moving.

This Vast Enterprise
by Craig Fehrman
Historian Craig Fehrman offers a revelatory take on Lewis and Clark's Corps of Discovery expedition. The chapters alternate among characters, presenting the arduous journey from different perspectives. In addition to Meriwether Lewis and William Clark, Fehrman highlights Sacajawea, the Native American teenager who joined the corps as interpreter and guide, and York, the Black man enslaved by Clark who was compelled to join the trek. The deeply researched account also foregrounds lesser-known figures, including soldier John Ordway and Lakota leader Black Buffalo.

Law on Trial
by Shaun Ossei-Owusu
The words "Equal Justice Under Law" are engraved on the front of the United States Supreme Court. But according to law professor Shaun Ossei-Owusu, the legal system is far more likely to deliver inequality and unfairness than justice, especially among the nation's most vulnerable populations. He argues that at every level – from law school to the highest court in the land – the legal system favors the rich and powerful. Aimed at average readers as well as lawyers, the book is evenhanded, eye-opening, and authoritative.

Seydou Keïta: A Tactile Lens
Exhibition catalog edited by Catherine E. McKinley
The master portraitist of Mali, Seydou Keïta, gained Western fame for his midcentury photographs – on a par with Richard Avedon – in the 1990s. His images of Africans as they wished to be seen, referencing their own personalities and tastes, reflect both his clients' aspirations toward a modern, urban identity and their reverence for African traditions. This extensive catalog shows, through the eyes of a premier portrait photographer, a society in transition.

IN PICTURES

Mayan women batting away barriers

Story by Laura Fornell / Contributor

HONDZONOT, MEXICO

Every Tuesday and Thursday afternoon, 18 women and girls from this remote jungle community meet to train on the village ball field – a place where they were once unwelcome. The players spend their two hours of softball practice in constant laughter as they take a break from their traditional Mayan roles as housewives, mothers, and daughters and do something just for themselves.

One of the team's veterans, Gloria Carolina Be Segura, runs a small grocery store. On training days, she wakes up extra early to get her housework done. "My husband or my son takes care of the store so that I can go play," she explains, satisfied with her small personal victory. "It's my time, when I de-stress and have fun with my friends."

The women have been playing since 2018, when Fabiola May Chulim and a few neighbors began meeting near their homes to practice something similar to baseball, using sticks, tennis balls, and their own rules. The game aroused unease in their village, Hondzonot.

"Women could not be distracted with other things; they had to stay at home," Ms. May Chulim says. "Our husbands and fathers ... told us that we were wasting our time."

Without neglecting their duties at home, they continued meeting. The women brought their children and would take turns looking after them. Gradually, other women joined in the game, and their team, Las Diablillas (The Little Devils), was born. After a tournament organized by the municipality of Tulum, they learned the rules of softball and traded sticks for bats. But they decided to practice their own way: barefoot and dressed in huipil, the white tunic with embroidered floral motifs that most Mayan women wear.

Little by little, other women's softball teams have formed in surrounding villages.

"There are more and more teams and more fans," says Ms. May Chulim. "Many people tell us that we are an inspiration."

The team's fame has brought invitations for the women to play matches on other softball diamonds outside their community. The women of Hondzonot, who would probably never have left their village if not for softball, have traveled across much of the Yucatán Peninsula, sharing their experiences with other athletes and proudly representing their Mayan culture.

"We never imagined we would get this far," Ms. May Chulim says, enthusiastically remembering the team's hard beginnings. "Now the question is not who will give us permission, but who will be able to stop us." ▪

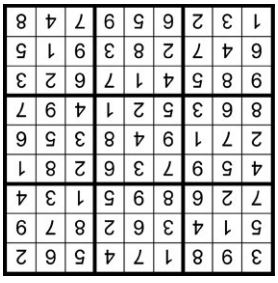
Sudoku difficulty: ★★★☆

3					4	5	6	2
	1		3					
7				9				4
4							8	1
				2			9	7
	8	5	4		7	6		
		2	6	5		7		

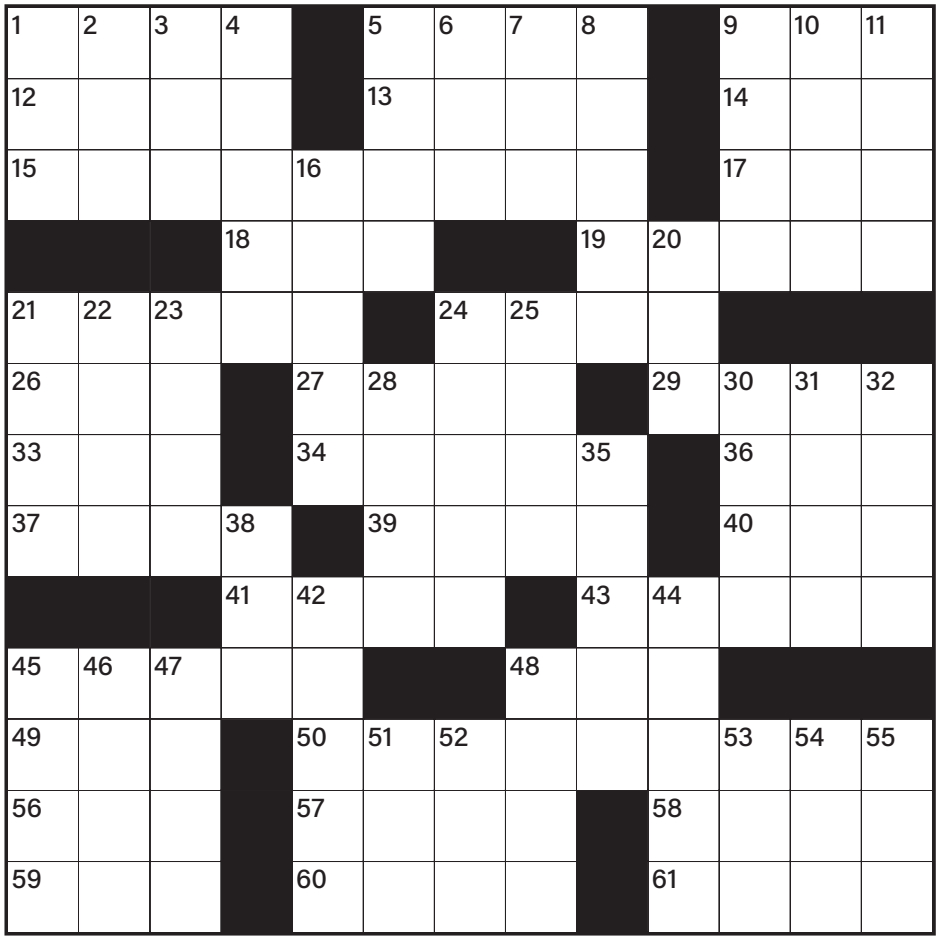
How to do Sudoku

Fill in the grid so the numbers 1 through 9 appear just once ineach column, row, and three-by-three block.

Crossword and Sudoku solutions



Crossword



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ACROSS

1. Barber's obstacles
5. Wolf's wail
9. Mailman's bane
12. "Remember the neediest," e.g.
13. It's among the reeds
14. Blarney stone loc.
15. Grasp mentally
17. Boston ___ Party
18. Shakespearean commotion
19. Twinkle
21. Sheepish, so to speak
24. Best possible price
26. Geldof's Live ___
27. Buck or stag
29. To ___ his own
33. Consultation cost
34. Nautical direction
36. Status chaser?
37. Cotton-tipped cleaner
39. Knight's wife
40. DHL competitor
41. Gadgeteers' concerns
43. Butcher shop choice
45. Levi's spec
48. Ruffle feathers
49. "Ands" or "buts" alternatives
50. Places for theorizers?
56. Pen follower
57. ___ and shine!
58. Cellist ___ Ma
59. "Before" of yore
60. Humpty Dumpty et al.
61. Wooed

DOWN

1. Auto-testing grp.
2. Edelweiss locale
3. Weightlifter's unit
4. Big name in wraps
5. Guffaw
6. Honor bestowed by HRH
7. Achieved victory
8. Rocky outcrop
9. Allude to
10. Ammonia compound
11. Foolscap quantity
16. Botanical swelling
20. Confederate commander
21. Stumbling sorts
22. Apartment consideration
23. Cartoon light bulb indication
24. Circus performers?
25. Get between the covers?
28. Skilled, as a seaman
30. Caribbean color
31. Dixie and Davis
32. Emcee
35. Offering to Jesus
38. "Speed" speeder
42. Fixed expression
44. Gives the go-ahead to
45. Surfaris hit, "___ Out"
46. Off yonder
47. Archipelago piece
48. Decorates with frosting
51. Eighteen-wheeler
52. Flavor intensifier, familiarly
53. Initial promise?
54. Cereal grain
55. Nursery bed?