

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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Reporting on what was gained – and lost

I will never forget Nazeka.

What is burned in my memory from my trip to Afghanistan in 2007 is her smile. Not because it was radiant, though it was. She was like a chirping mother bird among the brood of kids who seemed drawn to her.

Instead, I remember the smile because of the story. An orphan living with her grandparents, she narrated with poise the time her grandfather's mutilated body was delivered to her front door in a bag. He had offended the Taliban, and their vengeance was simply one more tale among a barbarous litany.

That regime has returned. Afghanistan's women are today treated like property at best, and criminals at worst. Nazeka said then that she hoped to one day be president. Today, such dreams might put a woman in jail or expose her to the casual brutality of the Taliban's paternal order.



By Mark
Sappenfield
Senior Global
Correspondent

In this week's issue, we look at the fortunes of Afghan women from two vantage points. From inside Afghanistan, we speak with two women who expose the cruelty of the new Taliban regime. Amid the everyday threats to women in Afghanistan, few such stories make it out of the country. The report is a reminder of what was gained during the U.S. occupation of Afghanistan and then lost.

From Europe, we look at the Afghan women who got out and how the freedom to dream fuels them. Many take any opportunity to learn whenever, wherever, and however they can. And whatever knowledge they gain – even if it is limited – becomes an opportunity to help others.

These stories are universal in many ways: the struggle against great odds, the resilience to persevere, the hope of better to come. Yet they ring a uniquely Afghan note.

Pakistani Nobel Peace Prize laureate Malala Yousafzai was named after Malala of Maiwand, the folk hero famous for rallying Afghan forces against the British during the Second Afghan War. At age 15, Ms. Yousafzai was shot in the head at point-blank range by a Pakistani Taliban gunman who boarded a school bus to kill her. He intended to silence her call for girls' right to an education.

In the moments after the attack, as she was being rushed away in critical condition, she told her father, "Don't worry, Baba. I am going to be fine and victory will be ours."

I saw that same defiance in Nazeka's smile.

Tempered by generations of poverty, war, and rank prejudice, so many Afghan women refuse to be bowed or broken. Their determination goes beyond willpower and touches the fringes of deeper grace. Their stories are not chronicles of any time, place, or personality, but testimonies to the human spirit. ■

Despite job loss in July, unemployment did not rise

In July, the economy lost jobs, but unemployment numbers actually improved.

The workforce isn't growing by much. It might even be shrinking, partly because of a plunge in immigration. That means that the United States could create only a few jobs or even lose jobs in any given month and the unemployment rate would remain stable.

"Net migration is very likely to be negative again for 2026," says Tara Watson, a senior fellow at the Brookings Institution and co-author of a January study that estimated that more migrants left the U.S. last year than came in.

The U.S. lost 23,000 jobs in July, the Bureau of Labor Statistics reported in early August. Economists had anticipated a gain of some 80,000 jobs, according to a Bloomberg survey. In fact, July set a dubious record: For 21 months in a row, the American labor force has been stuck at the 158-million mark (the longest streak at any one number in BLS records going back to 1939). A labor force that's not expanding could slow potential future economic growth.

Many economists expect the job market to continue to grow, albeit at a slower pace. "I'm not terribly concerned" about July's job losses, says Dean Baker, co-founder of the Center for Economic and Policy Research. Most of them were concentrated among public school teachers who were ending the academic year.

Joblessness actually improved. That's because at the same time jobs were disappearing, the labor force itself was shrinking by 264,000. That allowed the unemployment rate to fall to 4.1% in July, down from 4.2% in June.

There is some concern that a big fall in prime-age employment for men in June was barely reversed in July, Mr. Baker says. The reason is unknown. But analysts have long known that growth in the workforce would slow as a big cohort of boomers retires.

What's changed is immigration. These analysts had anticipated that growth in the number of migrants would offset that decline among the native-born. Now, however, the dramatic plunge in immigration under the Trump administration is changing the equation.

A January Brookings study estimated that somewhere between 10,000 and 295,000 more migrants left the U.S. last year than came in. If true, this net negative migration would be a first in the U.S. for at least half a century, the study said.

Admittedly, the numbers are patchy. Unauthorized immigrants don't typically report when they come in or leave. The Trump administration has not published key data. Still, the evidence points to a dramatic slowdown, not only in the labor force but also, quite possibly, in overall economic growth.

With downward revisions to both May and June estimates, the BLS says the economy has been adding only 34,000 jobs each month over the past year.

– Laurent Belsie / Staff writer

EU border debate shifts after migrant surge in Spain

The surge of migrants into Ceuta, an autonomous 7-square-mile Spanish territory perched on the tip of North Africa, subsided as quickly as it swelled. But it has forced Europe into a debate over how countries can manage migration humanely while maintaining control of their borders.

Many of the 50,000 who flooded the enclave between July 30 and July 31 – nearly doubling Ceuta’s population – have since returned to Morocco. The following weekend, Spain installed a 500-meter floating barrier along the patch of Mediterranean coastline shared by the two countries.

But the political response remains turbulent. Italy reacted by temporarily suspending Spain’s membership in Europe’s Schengen Agreement, which allows borderless travel between members, with Finland and Denmark backing the move. Twenty-two member states issued a joint letter calling for tighter coordination and control of Europe’s borders. Spain said some countries’ reactions to the incident were “selfish, polarizing, and unlawful.”

“The political landscape in Europe is so polarized,” says Riccardo Fabiani, the North Africa Project Director for the International Crisis Group. “If one country tries to take a third-way approach to migration, they will be exposed to criticism from both the right and the left, everywhere across Europe.”

The exact reason for the surge, in which at least 67 migrants died trying to cross to Ceuta, remains unclear. But one answer might lie with a recent decision by Spain’s Supreme Court. On July 8, it ruled that those who crossed into Spain by sea or land – without passing a physical barrier – could not immediately be sent back to their home country. That has been interpreted by some as a green light for migrants to try to make it to Spanish territory.

Spanish Prime Minister Pedro Sánchez said during a visit to Ceuta on July 31 that criminal trafficking gangs had exploited the Supreme Court ruling to encourage Moroccans via social media to take their chances there.

“The weaponization of migration is not new,” says María Belén Zanzuchi, a policy analyst at the Migration Policy Institute Europe.

Spain’s government, though, has taken steps over the past few months to be more welcoming toward migrants. It announced that it would offer residency permits to 500,000 undocumented people already in the country – one of the biggest migration decisions in Spanish history – stoking criticism from conservative politicians.

The surge at Ceuta has reignited that criticism. “We cannot allow uncontrolled mass crossings ... or other hybrid threats to create the perception that illegal entry into the European Union is possible,” EU leaders wrote in a letter to European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen, European Council President António Costa, and Irish Prime Minister Micheál Martin. Ireland currently holds the presidency of the EU Council.

EU ministers will discuss such measures as reintroducing internal border checks across Europe and a bolstered role for EU border agency Frontex.

European countries have struggled to find common ground on migration since 2015, when more than 1 million people, mostly refugees and asylum seekers from the Middle East, arrived on the continent following a decision to welcome them by the then-German Chancellor Angela Merkel. It led to a backlash against her,

similar to the reaction the Spanish prime minister is now facing.
– Colette Davidson / Staff writer

New executive orders revisit birthright citizenship

President Donald Trump is making a fresh attempt to limit birthright citizenship after losing on the issue at the U.S. Supreme Court in June.

A pair of executive orders signed on Aug. 7 aims for specific groups of foreign parents. One tries to narrow automatic citizenship for children of parents with certain ties to foreign governments. The other directs a crackdown on what the administration defines as “birth tourism,” the practice of coming to the United States for the purpose of giving birth.

Legal experts question the legality of the president’s latest action in light of the Supreme Court’s rebuke, on constitutional grounds, of one of his past orders. They also expect more litigation against the White House, with a possible return to the nation’s top court.

The order trying to narrow birthright citizenship “is very unlikely to succeed,” says Nicole Hallett, director of the Immigrants’ Rights Clinic at the University of Chicago Law School. “The Supreme Court made it very clear that [Mr. Trump] did not have that power.”

Still, his executive action appears to signal that “the right is not going to give up this issue,” she says. “They view this as a generational fight.”

Virtually everyone born in the United States is a U.S. citizen. Children of foreign diplomats are an exception.

On his first day back in office in January 2025, Mr. Trump signed an order that claimed automatic American citizenship didn’t extend to children born to parents in the U.S. unlawfully or temporarily, such as on a visa. He directed federal agencies to withhold documents recognizing U.S. citizenship from people born under those circumstances.

In June, the Supreme Court struck down that order, holding that the Constitution grants birthright citizenship to people born in the U.S. regardless of immigration status.

“We had a very unfortunate decision in the Supreme Court concerning birthright. ... So, we’re making adjustments,” Mr. Trump said at the White House on Aug. 6.

His latest order repackages his first, but this time targets children of immigrants deemed alien enemies, foreign government employees, and those who try to buy citizenship for their child, as well as children of noncitizens born in U.S. territories. The order claims to affect children not covered under the Supreme Court’s June decision.

The other order signed directs the Departments of State and Homeland Security to crack down on people or organizations suspected of enabling birth tourism. Mr. Trump defines that term as visa-holders entering the U.S. for the purpose of giving birth, or noncitizens assisting their entry.

It’s not illegal for foreigners to give birth in the United States. But lying in the visa application process about intentions for travel – such as if the goal is to give birth in the U.S. – is considered fraud.

Estimates of its prevalence vary.

As of 2024, the U.S. government reports around 3.6 million births a year, including some 9,600 births (less than 1%) to foreign residents

in the U.S. and its territories. The Center for Immigration Studies, a think tank that favors restricted immigration, has estimated some 20,000 or more annual “birth tourists.”

– Sarah Matusek and Henry Gass
Staff writers

NUMBERS IN THE NEWS

6 in 10

The share of Americans who believe President Donald Trump’s economic policies have made the U.S. economy worse, according to a recent Pew Research Center survey. This number is up from 52% in January. The findings come as concerns over the affordability of housing, food, healthcare, and gas remain widespread.

9,000

The number of jobs Porsche plans to eliminate by 2035. The German luxury carmaker is cutting 1 in 5 jobs due to a reduction in sales, stiff competition from the Chinese car industry, tariffs, and a scaled-back EV strategy.

4 MILLION

The estimated number of people who lost access to the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program between July 2025 and April 2026, according to preliminary data from the U.S. Agriculture Department. The decline followed the passage of the One Big Beautiful Bill Act, which made sweeping changes to eligibility for the federal food assistance program.

17

The number of black rhinos that were reintroduced to Matusadona National Park in Zimbabwe after being critically endangered for 30 years. Black rhinos were once common in this area, but widespread poaching in the 1980s and 1990s killed more than 90% of the species. Support from local communities as well as global conservation partners led to the comeback of the iconic African animals.

26 MILLION

The number of elementary and secondary school students across the U.S. who ride school buses to and from school each day. School buses travel approximately 4.4 billion miles each school year and are estimated to be nine times safer than other vehicles.

– Emily Staunton / Staff writer

Sources: Pew Research Center, Reuters, WBUR, U.S. Department of Agriculture, National Geographic, School Transportation News

OUR WORLD

“These orphaned children have lost so much.”

That’s how Warda Hijazi, a mother of three whose husband was killed during the Israel-Hamas war in the Gaza Strip, described the difficulty experienced by children who lost one or both parents in the conflict. Ms. Hijazi, speaking to Al Jazeera, was on the sidelines as 100 children participated in a 500-meter race through Khan Yunis in southern Gaza that was designed to raise awareness and support for orphaned Palestinian kids. According to UNICEF, more than 58,000 children in Gaza have lost one or both parents since the war began in October 2023.

– Kelenna Onukwugha

“It gave me hope, but I remain cautious.”

That’s what Kim Aris, son of ousted Myanmar leader Aung San Suu Kyi, said to NPR about rare new photos of his mother meeting with a Red Cross official Aug. 3. The Nobel Peace Prize winner’s whereabouts have been hard to ascertain since a 2021 military coup overthrew her government, and the newly released images come after years of democracy activists demanding proof of her well-being. Pressure is also mounting on the military junta, including from members of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations, to restore democratic norms.

– Lindsey McGinnis

Argentina will import high-denomination money

Argentina’s Central Bank announced in July that it will import hundreds of millions of its 20,000 Argentine-peso bank notes from China in 2027. Libertarian President Javier Milei came into office making widespread austerity cuts and has argued that producing paper currency domestically no longer makes sense, given the outdated machinery at the country’s mint and the high operating costs. The move also comes as inflation has increased demand for higher-denomination bills. Some of Argentina’s paper money has been imported from Brazil, Spain, France, Malta, and China in the past. But, in something of a twist of globalization, local media reported this summer that Argentina’s mint will start printing currency for Nigeria.

– Whitney Eulich

Africa’s internet relies on a single cable-repair vessel

One ship. That’s what the entire African continent has to repair its vast network of undersea internet cables. Orange Marine’s vessel Léon Thévenin, based in Cape Town, South Africa, needs 10 days just to reach faults in the northern part of the continent, according to a recent report by the International Advisory Body for Submarine Cable Resilience. Broken cables – usually caused by fishing gear or ship anchors – can severely throttle or

even cut off internet access. In 2024, four severed cables off the West African coast cost Nigeria's economy an estimated \$590 million. Africa, the South Atlantic, and the Pacific islands together host just 13% of the world's operational cable-repair ships, compared with 40% each for the Asia-Pacific countries and the region that includes North America and Europe.

— Ryan Lenora Brown

NEWS: GLOBAL CURRENTS

AARAU, SWITZERLAND

Afghan women in Europe aim to bring change home

Displaced Afghans from the world's "worst women's rights crisis" leverage education in Europe.

By Dominique Soguel / Special correspondent

On August 15, 2021, the future that Maryam had been building for herself as a student at Kabul University collapsed. News the Taliban had seized the Afghan capital spread fast, through text messages urging students to flee the campus.

"It was a big shock. Everyone went home or to the airport," says Maryam, who's in her mid-20s, sipping an iced matcha outside a library in the Swiss city of Aarau.

The library offers both an escape from the single room she shares at an asylum center here and the quiet she needs to study German.

Maryam is one of three Afghan women, now resettled in Europe, the Monitor spoke with for this story. Each started from scratch here in the West. And each of them has never stopped hoping for change back home. Two are being identified with pseudonyms out of concern for the safety of relatives in Afghanistan.

The Taliban takeover of Afghanistan five years ago ushered in an era of dehumanizing restrictions for women and girls. Simply being a woman from that country is enough to be granted asylum in some European countries, including Denmark and the Netherlands. Most of the world's 2.6 million registered Afghan refugees are in Iran and Pakistan. In 2021, following the Taliban's rise to power, Afghans submitted 102,000 asylum applications in the European Union, more than double the previous year. In 2025, they lodged nearly 64,000 first-time asylum applications and another 6,207 in Switzerland.

"The Taliban have stripped women and girls of their rights and dignity," says Shaharзад Akbar, executive director of Rawadari, an Afghan human rights organization. "This situation has led to mass exodus of educated and professional women from Afghanistan."

Leaving Afghanistan is not easy, particularly for single women. And Europe has become less welcoming to Afghan refugees in recent years. But the continent has offered the kind of education that was taken from women at home — and that many see as a tool of both resistance and preparation for a future they still want to help shape in their home country.

Starting over

German is not the first foreign language that Maryam has tackled

in pursuit of a better future. By the time Kabul fell to the Taliban, she had completed six semesters of Chinese alongside a cohort of about 30 university students who believed their best prospects for jobs and scholarships would come from the East.

"Before the Taliban came to power, there were many opportunities for girls," recalls Maryam, who belongs to the Farsi-speaking Hazara minority of Afghanistan.

That soon changed. Female students were first required to wear hijabs, with colorful headscarves tolerated for a while. Then only black was allowed, and full-face coverings became mandatory. By December 2022, women were banned from campus altogether. As of June 2026, the Taliban has issued 166 decrees specifically targeting the rights of women and girls, according to the Georgetown Institute for Women, Peace and Security.

"Afghanistan is the worst women's rights crisis in the world," says Fereshta Abbasi, a researcher in the Asia division of Human Rights Watch, pointing out that Afghanistan is the only nation in the world where women and girls are barred from secondary and higher education.

Today Maryam hopes studying German will pave the way for a bachelor's degree. She carries the pain of separation from her husband and parents, who are still in Kabul. Her sisters contact her from there constantly.

Freedom for Maryam takes shape in simple pleasures. At the top of the list is taking the train to discover different parts of Switzerland, and learning to ride a scooter. Back in Kabul, she would be confined to her family's home or the city's sole park designated only for single women.

"The best part is I have my freedom here and I have my hope," she says. "I hope I can find something that can help not just my sisters but all the girls in Afghanistan. They, too, have their hopes."

Fighting for a chance to learn

Sitara grew up in Afghanistan's cultural capital of Herat, where her mother, who married at age 13 and never attended school, was her constant champion. Though illiterate, she sat by Sitara as her child learned the alphabet, and stayed up late to cook and keep her company when she finally reached university.

"I wish I had had this opportunity," she often told Sitara, who went on to become a teacher.

Violence drove Sitara from Afghanistan. Taliban fighters gunned down one of her brothers in the street in retaliation for a rejected marriage proposal.

She flew to the country of Georgia with her sister and continued to Greece. Finding little support there, Sitara sought better conditions in Switzerland, only to be moved through seven "prison-like" camps and deported back to Greece under EU asylum rules.

Over the past five years, Europe's political debate has shifted away from resettlement and toward returns. Brussels recently hosted a Taliban delegation in June for migration talks, and Germany has sent four deportation flights to Afghanistan, deporting 154 Afghans between August 2024 and April 2026.

Now more settled in Athens, Sitara paints landscapes in her free time. Through church, she gained the freedom to openly practice the Christianity that she first encountered in Afghanistan. She also studies economy and management on a scholarship and helps guide migrants through the asylum process.

"I have deep empathy because I went through many of these challenges," says Sitara, who wants to create an organization that helps refugees rebuild their lives. She urges others to see displaced

Afghans, particularly Afghan women, as more than victims or burdens to society.

"They are qualified to work, learn languages, become part of communities and contribute," she says. "Hope has gone from my country. Darkness has taken over Afghanistan. This country has become a prison for every Afghan girl."

Taking it back home

UNICEF estimates that more than 3 million Afghan girls were shut out of secondary education in 2021. "Close to half are unlikely to return should school reopen today," the agency concluded in a report published after the first year of Taliban rule.

For Mursal, an Afghan student at the University of Edinburgh in Scotland, getting an education is a responsibility toward those who were denied the same chance. "I'm going to open a path for my siblings, for my cousins, for my community," she says.

"My grandma was always encouraging me to focus on my education, stand on my own feet, don't be dependent on anyone else, especially men," she recalls. "If you don't rely on yourself as a woman, anyone who provides for you will also control all aspects of your life."

Gender-based restrictions appeared in her life at age 9. They included abandoning outside playtime with friends in favor of household chores. She says her grandfather was loving enough to walk her to private school in Kabul. "I think that was the only privilege that I had in Afghanistan," she says.

Mursal was a teenager when she arrived in Glasgow in August 2021. A series of violent attacks persuaded her father that Afghanistan was not safe for his daughters. He left first to begin a new life for the family in the United Kingdom.

In Scotland, it was back to square one. Her Afghan high school qualifications were not recognized.

"I struggled a lot," she says, to adjust to the Scottish accent and make her way to university, where she now goes to class with native English speakers. "But when you are so determined to achieve something, you will do it, no matter what."

Afghanistan is never far from her mind. One day, scrolling through social media, she saw the devastating images of an attack at her old school. "I realized that I recognized my seat," she says. "I couldn't do anything except cry."

Mursal says life in exile has made her conscious of which Afghan values she wants to preserve. Hospitality and respect for elders are obvious keepers. Religious and cultural restrictions for girls are not. She says she is grateful her parents embraced her independence, including by allowing her to live in another city.

When it comes to the future of Afghan girls, she says what worries her is that the Taliban mindset will outlast its control over the government.

"It takes lots of time and effort to change," that thinking, she says. "We can achieve it by people who have the opportunity to leave the country, be in a safe place, educate themselves, and then maybe hopefully we can do something for Afghanistan." ■

BERLIN

A rare inside look at the reality faced by Afghan women under the Taliban

When the Taliban took over Afghanistan in August 2021, restrictions on women began immediately – and have since escalated systematically.

By Mark Sappenfield / Staff writer

When heavily armed Taliban militiamen swept into the Afghan capital on a Sunday afternoon five years ago, a lot of people were concerned about what was coming next. The small gains made by Afghan women during the United States' 20-year occupation were about to end.

The Taliban said this new government would be different from the brutal regime that ruled over Afghanistan before the U.S. invasion in 2001. One official told The Associated Press there would be an "open, inclusive Islamic government."

But the years since have largely been years of silence. Human rights groups speak of the total collapse of women's rights, yet detailed accounts about the lives of women living in Afghanistan are exceedingly rare.

The Monitor has obtained the stories of Ayesha and Zahra to offer a glimpse of what life is like for women in the country today. Their names have been changed and locations withheld to protect them from retaliation by Taliban authorities. Their experiences offer a stark look at the ways Afghan women are treated and their lack of even the most basic individual freedoms under Taliban rule. These two individuals have been intimidated, beaten, and imprisoned – in one case for daring to challenge the authorities, and in the other for allegedly violating harsh dress codes. Both women live in fear that the state can do whatever it chooses to them without recourse.

The restrictions began immediately after the Taliban returned to power but have since escalated systematically, says Laila Basim, leader of the Afghanistan Women's Spontaneous Movement, which advocates for Afghan women's rights. She has lived in the U.S. since 2023, though she maintains close contact with women inside Afghanistan.

The Taliban's first decree banned women from working. Further measures followed, such as mandatory dress requirements, restrictions that require many women to be accompanied by a male guardian when leaving home, the closure of secondary schools for girls, and barring women from attending universities. By 2023, the Taliban had already issued dozens of decrees and directives specifically targeting Afghan women, Ms. Basim says.

It is a "systematic exclusion" of women from society, she argues.

Ayesha

Ayesha was bold enough to protest. She holds a bachelor's degree in business administration but was forced to abandon her medical studies before graduating when the Taliban banned women from attending university. She instead completed a midwifery program, opening an examination room while working at a local hospital.

She remembers a different life before the Taliban takeover – a

job, her studies, and the freedom to choose her own attire. “I could wear anything,” she says “Jeans, sandals, jacket, whatever I love.”

Traditional Afghan attire always included the hijab, which Ayesha says helps to maintain modesty. But she sees the new mandates as an excuse to erase women from society.

Even routine tasks under the Taliban are often impossible without a *mahram* (male guardian).

During recent protests, she and other women dressed carefully to give the Taliban no pretext to object. Their slogans, she says, were strictly about basic rights. But Taliban security forces responded by opening fire on protesters.

“Fear spreads everywhere,” she says. Amid the chaos, she heard a girl cry out, “Oh God, we are killed!” Ayesha says she was knocked to the ground, severely injuring her knee, before two Taliban members seized her and forced her into a car. The verbal abuse they unleashed against her during the ride, she says, was unspeakable.

At the prison, Ayesha says she was thrown into a filthy, pitch-black cell that was so small she struggled to breathe. Guards stared at her, she says, “like I’m a murderer,” and she feared she would be sexually assaulted. During interrogations, the guards beat and kicked her, Ayesha says, “like I’m not human.”

She says she went days without food or water, enduring relentless lashings. The hunger was secondary to her desperate prayers for the whipping to stop. After four days, Ayesha says her family secured her release with the help of community elders, paying a ransom, and providing a formal guarantee of her future conduct.

When she learned she was being released, the relief eclipsed everything, she says. “The beating, the lash, and all the mistreatment” were briefly forgotten in that moment of happiness. As she left, however, she recalls that a Taliban guard was laughing and remarking that she wouldn’t dare to take part in a protest ever again.

Following the protests, Ayesha says the surrounding areas were turned into a closed military zone by the Taliban. The Monitor is not naming the specific part of the country, because she fears possible retribution. In recent weeks, women have become afraid even to speak to neighbors, wary that they might be informants. Since her release, she says, not a single person has dared to visit her.

Ayesha says she wants people outside Afghanistan to understand that she does not feel safe, has no basic rights, and that she is consumed by uncertainty about her children’s future.

Yet she also described what hope for the future of Afghanistan looks like to her: girls allowed to attend school and university, women able to support their families, and a return to a democratic political system with “happiness and prosperity.”

She declares that the Taliban haven’t succeeded in silencing every voice, including those of Afghanistan’s bravest women.

Zahra

Zahra graduated from high school during the U.S. occupation of Afghanistan. She studied English with the hope of pursuing higher education abroad. Her dreams were big. With hard work, she might even be able to attend Oxford or Harvard.

Her life has long since withdrawn into unfulfilling days at home. An educational course, she says, would feel like “a sanctuary.”

But she never expected what happened the day she went to the market to buy medicine and other supplies for her family. She was not involved in protests, but the Taliban’s “morality police” detained her during a sweep of the area. “I remember thinking, ‘Oh God, they are here again,’” she says.

Zahra says she was accused of being improperly covered, despite

wearing what she described as a proper hijab. When she objected, she says she was insulted and ordered into a vehicle. She says she tried to run but was grabbed and dragged through the crowd, struck in the shoulder with the butt of a rifle, and then forced into a vehicle along with other women.

“They treated me like an animal,” she says.

Zahra says she was held in detention for four days, where she was interrogated and beaten. Her family tried repeatedly to visit her but were turned away. On one occasion, her brother was beaten by the authorities in front of her parents.

Her family, like Ayesha’s, ultimately secured her release through a guarantor and a hefty payment.

Since her release, Zahra says she has lived with intense fear. A knock at the door can trigger panic that she might be detained again. She now avoids the bazaar and limits her movement outside the home as much as possible. “You cannot trust a single soul,” she says.

She recalls how ordinary life once felt in Afghanistan – children walking to school with backpacks, laughing and talking about their lessons in a city that still felt open and functional. On the day of her arrest, she says, the bazaar had a similar atmosphere – with families shopping and women moving freely through the market. But things feel different to her now.

The memories of her life during the pre-Taliban era – meeting friends, attending classes, going out and about as she wished – are the embers of a time that Zahra prays might one day return to her country.

■ *This story was reported and co-written by Mark Sappenfield and an Afghan journalist who will remain anonymous, because of the fear of retribution by Taliban authorities.*

GUATEMALA CITY

Prosecutor promises a new chapter for Guatemala

After years of corruption, Guatemala has a new attorney general. Now, Gabriel García Luna must rebuild public trust in the justice system – and his country.

By Yuliana Ramazzini / Contributor

When Gabriel García Luna took office as Guatemala’s attorney general in May, it was a pivot away from years of internationally condemned corruption in the Public Prosecutor’s Office, and signaled an opportunity to rebuild.

Three months in, Mr. García Luna has already started to clean house. But just how radically he can walk back the corruption that permeated this office over the past eight years – and its meddling in the stewardship of Guatemala’s president – will continue to be tested.

Guatemala’s former chief prosecutor, María Consuelo Porras, was accused of gutting the Public Prosecutor’s Office of career lawyers, undermining anti-corruption efforts, and chipping away at democracy and the rule of law. She took steps to keep anti-corruption

President Bernardo Arévalo out of office, and many point to her role in complicating his political projects. She was sanctioned for corruption by more than 40 countries, including the United States.

Mr. García Luna has ousted Ms. Porras' key allies, and he has launched a committee to review cases of those criminalized under her administration. His office is working closely with the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights, which scheduled an early August hearing to review cases of individuals who denounced political persecution under Ms. Porras.

It's giving some, such as Juan Francisco Sandoval, a former head of Guatemala's Special Prosecutor's Office Against Impunity (FECI), and who was pushed into exile by Ms. Porras' office, cautious hope that the public could one day regain confidence in the justice system here.

"This closes a phase marked by the deterioration and manipulation of the justice system," Mr. Sandoval says. "Credibility has to be restored. There was a time when the Public Prosecutor's Office was an institution that inspired the most public trust. ... We all have high expectations" for Mr. García Luna.

Strides and setbacks in justice

Guatemala was once seen as a regional model for tackling corruption through its International Commission Against Impunity in Guatemala, or CICIG, which countries such as El Salvador and Honduras tried to emulate. The commission, which operated from 2007 to 2019, was backed by the United Nations and worked alongside Guatemalan prosecutors to investigate organized crime, corruption, and illicit networks.

As it investigated increasingly powerful businesspeople and politicians, including a sitting president and vice president, some critics said it was overstepping its mandate, becoming too influential in domestic politics.

When Ms. Porras took over as attorney general in 2018, she didn't have a close relationship with CICIG leadership. A year later, its charter was not renewed by the Guatemalan government.

Ms. Porras conducted investigations aimed at criminalizing judges, prosecutors, journalists, and human rights defenders – at least 79 of whom were living in exile by 2023 due to fears of unjust imprisonment. That same year, she launched what the Organization of American States described as an "attempted coup" against Mr. Arévalo to keep him from taking office. He ran on a pro-democracy platform, blaming the country's widespread corruption for hollowing out the state's ability to deliver security, justice, education, and economic opportunities.

Ms. Porras tried to hold on to a position of power before her second consecutive term as attorney general expired this year, unsuccessfully running for a seat on the Constitutional Court as well as a third term as attorney general. On May 15, Mr. García Luna was sworn in as Guatemala's new top prosecutor.

Reforming an "institution of repression"

Mr. García Luna took office with the eyes of the entire country upon him.

A career judge, he previously served as a criminal-law adviser to the Office of the Solicitor General, and president of the nation's Judicial Disciplinary Board.

"Everyone has a concept of a Public Prosecutor's Office that can be used in a certain way, and we can no longer have that," he told The Associated Press in July. "It is not a political entity, nor a political weapon for anyone, and I do not intend to repeat the

actions taken in previous administrations."

Though Mr. García Luna's appointment feels like the end of a difficult period for Guatemala's democracy, his most revolutionary work might be the baseline task of getting the nation back on track to follow – and trust – the rule of law, experts say.

Mr. García Luna is now "at the helm of the most important institution of repression," says Edgar Ortiz Romero, an expert in constitutional law, referring to the Public Prosecutor's Office. "He has the task of dismantling that mechanism of repression and reorienting it toward what it should be about: justice and public safety."

Already, Mr. García Luna has closed FECI, the special office on impunity, which had become politicized under Ms. Porras' leadership. He also dismissed at least eight high-profile prosecutors closely aligned with the former attorney general.

Mr. Sandoval warns that there are no quick fixes to the challenges of the Public Prosecutor's Office. "Many prosecutors and specialized investigators left [their jobs under Ms. Porras], and the office has been weakened," he says.

Claudia Paz y Paz, who served as attorney general from 2010 to 2014 and went into exile in 2024 "for fear of being criminalized by the Public Prosecutor's Office," says a four-year term as attorney general might not be enough time to fix all of its challenges. But, she says, "it's enough time to make progress on the things that are most important."

For the nearly three years that Mr. Arévalo has been in office, his efforts to create change in the country, such as filing corruption complaints or trying to replace Ms. Porras, were repeatedly spoiled by intervention or investigations by the Public Prosecutor's Office.

Many, including members of Guatemala's more than 22 Maya Indigenous groups that were key in bringing Mr. Arévalo to the presidency, are hopeful Mr. García Luna's appointment could spell broader change in the country.

But it wasn't just Ms. Porras getting in the president's way, observers say. Mr. Arévalo has no formal governing coalition in the legislature: His Movimiento Semilla party lost its legal registration as a political party this year and is barred from participating in 2027 general elections. He was able to pass some reforms, including anti-money-laundering legislation and ethics reforms within the executive branch, but a lot of his energy was focused on preserving democratic institutions under repeated legal challenges from Ms. Porras' team.

Public opinion for the president is low, with some 52% of Guatemalans qualifying his work thus far as bad or very bad, according to a May poll by CID Gallup.

In that sense, Mr. García Luna's appointment might be "too little, too late" to clear governing hurdles for the president, says Mr. Ortiz, the constitutional law expert. "Obviously, I think the way [Mr. Arévalo] can govern will change because there will be less repression," he says. But the "chances of making major changes were in the first year – not the third." ■

Women's pro baseball swings for the fences

As interest and investment in women's sports surges, a new "league of their own" steps up to the plate.

By Kendra Nordin Beato / Staff writer

When Maybelle Blair, seated like a queen in a wheelchair, threw a ceremonial opening pitch on a misty August night, there might have been some crying in baseball.

Ms. Blair, with her mane of white hair and fashionable wrap-around sunglasses, is a sports icon. Turning 100 this year, she starred in the All-American Girls Professional Baseball League of the 1950s that inspired the hit 1992 movie "A League of Their Own." She was a guest of honor at the inaugural weekend of the new Women's Pro Baseball League earlier this month in Springfield, Illinois.

"I want you to know that this is the happiest moment of my life," she told the cheering crowd at Robin Roberts Stadium. "Nothing would stop me from being here if I had to crawl. I've watched so many of them, as little girls, grow up, and all they wanted to do was play baseball. And guess what? They are playing it."

The Women's Professional Baseball League (WPBL) is the fifth iteration of women's pro baseball in the United States, the last being the short-lived Ladies Professional Baseball League, which folded in 1998. The WPBL is made up of four teams: the Boston Hunters, New York Heights, San Francisco Firebells, and Los Angeles Queens. Their season runs for eight weeks, and all games are played in Springfield and broadcast on ESPN Select. The league's launch comes at a moment when interest in and investment across women's professional sports in the U.S. are surging. Yet amid the celebration, pressures remain to prove that, this time, a women's pro baseball league – without the extensive youth, collegiate, and professional development system that supports many other women's sports – can succeed.

The WPBL didn't come out of left field. Baseball for All, the nation's largest girls' baseball organization, estimates that more than 100,000 girls play youth baseball in the U.S. In Canada, the second-most represented country in WPBL, there are 30,000 girls and women registered with Baseball Canada. Japan ran its own professional league for a decade before folding in 2019, and today more than 23,000 women play baseball there on 102 teams, according to MLB.com.

If one thing was clear in the messages from the coaching staff in the days leading up to the opening pitch in Springfield, their rosters are stacked with elite athletes.

While some in the WPBL played softball in high school and college, others have been dedicated baseball players, securing spots on high school and collegiate rosters. For many players, it is their first time competing on a professional team made up entirely of women.

Five WPBL players already play professional baseball with men in the Banana Ball Championship League, made famous by the Savannah Bananas. Ayami Sato of Japan, considered the best female player in the world with pitching speeds nearing 80 mph, plays for the Toronto Maple Leafs in the Canadian Baseball League. With seven countries represented on the final WPBL rosters, dozens of players have competed in the biennial Women's Baseball World Cup.

"It's really mind-blowing the talent that they have," said Keith Foulke, a former relief pitcher with the Red Sox and, for their first three games, the manager of the Boston Hunters. "When I saw them play [during spring training] down in Fort Myers, it was like, 'Wow. These aren't women playing baseball; these are athletes playing baseball.... They play the game at a very high level, and they play it the correct way.'"

Fans line up

Despite a drenching rain, spirits were high at Robin Roberts Stadium. Fans queued up with umbrellas and ponchos several hours before the gate opened at the sold-out debut game on Aug. 1 to ensure they got a bobblehead giveaway of Mo'ne Davis, the first girl to pitch a shutout in Little League World Series history in 2014. She now plays center field for the Los Angeles Queens.

An arc of colorful balloons framed the front gate, and the air was heavy with the smell of freshly potted flowers. Merchandise supplies – caps, sweatshirts, T-shirts, and canvas bags – quickly dwindled.

"We were No. 9 and 10 in line at 12:30 p.m. to make sure we got our bobblehead," said Brenda Highley, a retired Navy veteran and softball player, who drove 3 1/2 hours from Lakewood, Illinois. "It's all coming around finally, and I want to be part of it."

The rain pushed back the original 5 p.m. start time, and spectators crowded beneath the stadium steps to stay dry. Every now and then, a cheer rippled through as players entered the stands to greet fans and sign autographs.

Liz Gilder, a left-handed pitcher from Canada for the San Francisco Firebells, folded down her 5-foot-10-inch frame to eye level with a 5-year-old in a pink sweatshirt decorated with butterflies, clutching a pen and a baseball, muted by shyness. "She just started T-ball. She's got a good arm," says her mother.

Let's play ball

After the opening ceremonies, athleticism took center stage as the Los Angeles Queens and the New York Heights squared off.

The Queens rallied from a 7-2 deficit in the second inning to beat the Heights 10-8. Maggie Foxx of the Queens secured the league's first RBI on a two-run single in the first inning. Denae Benites of the Heights lifted the crowd to its feet in the fourth inning with a slug that disappeared into the rain and darkness over the head of Ms. Davis in center field for WPBL's first-ever home run.

"I never thought this [league] would happen. I'm 20 years old, and I thought this might happen when I was 50 and done playing," said Ms. Foxx at the postgame press conference. "When I walked on the field, I started crying because of how much this moment meant to everyone."

Hurdles to overcome

It remains to be seen if this fifth iteration of women's pro baseball will finally take hold.

"I think the time is right. There is a wave of women's pro sports, and we're certainly riding that wave," says Commissioner Justine Siegal, founder of Baseball for All and co-founder of the WPBL with Keith Stein, the co-owner of the Toronto Maple Leafs. She cites as momentum the league's Instagram following, which reached 175,000 followers before the first game. It has since jumped to more than 240,000 followers.

Part of that success depends on getting the word out. Many local spectators only heard about the league the week before. Becky Brouse Davis and her husband, Brad Davis, drove two days from

West Virginia to catch the first week of games. The sports information director for West Virginia University Institute of Technology was so frustrated with the lack of details about the league and players that she started an independent website, thisiswomensbaseball.com.

Even though the first game sold out on a rainy night, on the second night, a clear summer evening with cicadas chirping beneath a starry sky, the stadium was only two-thirds full.

Longtime baseball fans and retirees Carl Bollinger and Mike Powers drove an hour down from Peoria, Illinois, after hearing about the league on talk radio. Even though the San Francisco Firebells, with No. 1 draft pick Kelsie Whitmore on the mound, defeated the Boston Hunters 11-3 with little drama, Mr. Powers says he's glad they came.

"The word 'inaugural' adds something to it. Anytime you see someone chase their dreams," he says, pausing with a catch in his throat, "that's worth something." ■

REPORTERS ON THE JOB

BOSTON



Cameron Pugh

Reporting requires persistence. Reporters have to ask for information and access repeatedly, without coming off as pushy. I had to strike that balance during a recent story about the end of Temporary Protected Status for Haitian and Syrian immigrants. As I searched for a TPS holder, my first call was to a nonprofit leader I had interviewed before. He agreed to ask around. After a string of rejections, I started to doubt anyone would come through (though every interview, even without a TPS lead, strengthened my story). Eventually, my persistence paid off: In the end, it was the first call I made that connected me to a TPS holder kind enough to share their story. ■

SALT LAKE CITY



Melanie Stetson Freeman

I was heading to Salt Lake City to join staff writer Story Hinkle when I got a text. Her flight was canceled and she wouldn't make it until the next day. This meant I had to pick up the vehicle she had rented. When I got to the rental garage, a black Ford F-150 four-door truck was parked up front. "Is that for me?!" I asked. It was enormous. Massive. It was TOO BIG! Story had rented it so we could drive on an unpaved road in a national monument. But first, I had to drive it into the city and park ... in a parking garage. I almost cried. The upshot? It stuck out so far from the parking spot, it was a cinch to find anywhere we went. ■

LAMPEDUSA, ITALY



Mark Sappenfield

When Pope Leo XIV traveled to the Italian island of Lampedusa in July to deliver a message about compassion, Senior Global Correspondent Mark Sappenfield wanted to be there. It's where many African migrants trying to reach Europe first land. Mark could have written about the immigration debate from anywhere — Rome or his home base, Berlin. But that story can start to feel redundant.

By going to this "rock in the middle of nowhere," Mark found a fresh perspective for his story. He saw little bitterness; rather, an acceptance of geographic reality. "I saw such a good spirit about migration," he says. "And I realized without that spirit, it's just not going to work because it rips societies apart. It became clear to me that that's the best story to tell." ■

— Sara Miller Llana / International editor

WATAMU, KENYA



Sophie Neiman

Sometimes, a story requires you to dive deep.

Literally. That's how I found myself swimming in the Indian Ocean as staff from Local Ocean Conservation harvested seagrass to feed an injured turtle in their care. I came to profile Fikiri Kiponda, who rescues sea turtles caught in fishing nets. (My article appears in this issue's new Endeavors section.) I'd expected to spend most of my time chatting with locals about how they'd gone from eating turtles to saving them. Instead, I visited a sea turtle clinic, and watched as the reptiles were released back into the ocean. Now, in the waters off Watamu, I admired iridescent blue parrotfish darting along the coral reef, along with yellow and white fish zipping by too quickly for me to identify. Beneath the water's surface, I saw the world these conservationists were working to protect. ■

THE EXPLAINER

Revamped rules for endangered species

The Trump administration says changes to Endangered Species Act rules balance costs and benefits. Conservationists see risks for habitats.

By Medara Udoekong / Staff writer

The Trump administration has changed the protections given to vulnerable plant and animal species and their habitats under the Endangered Species Act, and has altered how the safeguards for these species are prioritized.

From mighty Rice's whales to the humble rusty patched bumblebee, the 1973 act protects more than 1,600 listed endangered and threatened species and their habitats. When the law passed on a sweeping bipartisan vote, species such as American alligators, gray wolves, and even the United States' national symbol, the bald eagle, were on the brink of extinction. These populations, along with 54 other species, have recovered to the point where they are no longer considered endangered or threatened.

Without the law, hundreds of species in the U.S. would now be extinct, according to a study by the Center for Biological Diversity.

Despite its successes and high support from the public, the Endangered Species Act has been the subject of divisive political debate. The recent modifications have put it back in the spotlight.

Q: What changes did the Trump administration make?

In July, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and the National Marine Fisheries Service rescinded the regulatory definition of "harm" under the Endangered Species Act (ESA), even though the word remains in the law. The administration argues that both agencies improperly expanded the definition of harm to include habitat modification, exceeding the law's original intent and creating unnecessary land-use restrictions for businesses and landowners.

The administration also changed how the two agencies decide to exempt a particular area from being designated as a critical habitat. Critical habitats are those deemed important for endangered or threatened species' survival and recovery, and once designated, it

becomes more complicated to carry out projects there.

Critical habitats often overlap with places of economic, infrastructure, and national security importance. For example, the Gulf of Mexico, where the Trump administration has said it plans to expand oil production, is home to endangered sea turtle species.

To manage trade-offs between competing development priorities and habitat protection, the ESA has long allowed agencies to grant exemptions if an area's economic or national security potential outweighs the value of protecting it, and if it would not drive the species to extinction.

Lastly, the Trump administration ended the Fish and Wildlife Service's long-standing practice of automatically awarding newly listed threatened species the stronger protections given to endangered species. Endangered species are those currently at risk of extinction, while threatened species are those likely to become endangered in the foreseeable future.

The Fish and Wildlife Service now must develop individual protections for newly listed threatened species, a lengthier process.

Q: Why is the administration making the changes?

Officials say that federal agencies had, over time, interpreted the Endangered Species Act more broadly than Congress intended when it passed the law.

"We're returning the ESA to its foundational purpose to ensure legitimate conservation goals are met without sacrificing economic growth and American prosperity," Commerce Secretary Howard Lutnick said in a statement announcing the changes.

Ryan Shannon, a senior attorney at Defenders of Wildlife, a conservation nonprofit, disagrees. "Every single action they're taking is to weaken protections for endangered species," he says. "None of these are aimed at furthering the purpose of the Endangered Species Act."

The administration also says that previous ESA regulations created unnecessary costs, as well as uncertainty for landowners, businesses, and infrastructure projects, impacting economic activity.

"For years, federal agencies abused the ESA to obstruct lawful land use and burden American families and businesses," Interior Secretary Doug Burgum said in July. He added that this "approach turned routine activity into a 'regulatory trap.'"

Some conservationists support the move. "If we ignore costs [to landowners], we harm species in the process because we create perverse incentives, and species do worse," says Jonathan Wood, vice president of law and policy at the Property and Environment Research Center, which promotes market-based conservation policies.

Finally, the Trump administration says previous regulations were not effective in recovering listed species. It notes that only 3% of species populations have recovered from being threatened or endangered since 1973.

"Success should be measured by species recovery and delisting, not by adding more species to the list," according to a news release by the Interior Department announcing two of the changes to ESA regulations.

Mr. Shannon disagrees, noting that the law has prevented the extinction of 99% of the species it protects.

He says the administration overlooks the complexity of bringing back endangered species, adding that species are listed only after decades of decline and "face significant systemic threats to their existence." The 50-plus years since the act is very little time on an ecological scale, so it is unrealistic to expect many species to have fully recovered already, he adds.

Q: What effect could the changes have?

Conservation groups worry that the changes could accelerate habitat loss, which is widely considered to be the leading cause of species extinction. They argue that the changes significantly weaken the Endangered Species Act.

"Globally, there's just simply no way to save species from extinction without protecting the places that they live," says Noah Greenwald, co-director for endangered species at the Center for Biological Diversity.

Agriculture, urban development, dam construction and water diversion, pollution, and climate change are the biggest causes of habitat loss, according to the National Wildlife Federation.

The lack of a regulatory definition of harm creates ambiguity over when habitat destruction would qualify as illegally harming a protected species, Mr. Shannon says. A coalition of environmental groups and Native American tribes has sued to reverse it.

He also worries that the revised rules on critical habitat will make it easier to exempt important habitats from protection, in favor of commercial development and other land use.

Proponents say the changes will require regulators to better assess the economic costs and benefits of protecting particular areas. Mr. Wood, at the Property and Environment Research Center, says this could encourage voluntary conservation. Landowners would not feel incentivized to destroy habitats to keep protected species from settling on their property, he says.

Administration officials say that by not automatically applying protections for endangered species to threatened species, the Fish and Wildlife Service will tailor protection measures to individual species rather than relying on a one-size-fits-all approach, resulting in more effective conservation. But Mr. Greenwald says the changes will delay protecting species.

Species already face yearslong delays in getting protection. The Fish and Wildlife Service, which conservation groups say has been chronically underfunded, lost about 1,800 staff members as the Trump administration downsized the federal workforce. It also faces a potential budget cut next year. Requiring individual protections for each species will worsen the backlog, Mr. Greenwald says. ■

WATAMU, KENYA

For this turtle rescuer, fishing communities make the best allies

By Sophie Neiman / Contributor

On a humid June morning, two turtle hatchlings flail nervously inside a red cooler faded from Watamu's sweltering sun. A Kenyan fisher, Angore Kahindi, had found them tangled in his net and stored them in the only container he had. Then he called Fikiri Kiponda, who gives out his cellphone number to fishers in the community for just such an emergency.

Mouth set in a determined line, Mr. Kiponda arrives quickly and snaps on a pair of white gloves. He gently plucks the turtles from the cooler and records their sizes in a spiral-bound book to help him track turtle populations. Hatchlings can't survive too long out of the water, so there is little time to waste.

Mr. Kiponda speeds away from the fisher's house in his pickup truck toward Watamu's beach. He carefully lowers the turtles to the white sand at the water's edge and watches them scuttle away until they are imperceptible against the vast ocean. "They're very vulnerable," Mr. Kiponda says simply.

Such mornings are standard for Mr. Kiponda. A fisher notifies him about a turtle in distress. He hurries to compensate the caller for their time and the damage to their net, and then returns the turtle to the sea.

That means working closely with local communities, which once saw turtles as a valuable source of food and income. "We used to kill turtles," says Mr. Kahindi. Now, he explains, "we've become conservationists."

Mr. Kiponda has been doing this for nearly two decades as head of the bycatch release program at Local Ocean Conservation (LOC), a small nonprofit based on Kenya's southeastern coast.

Roughly 1 in every 1,000 hatchlings are expected to make it to adulthood. Even if they survive targeting by crabs and seabirds, turtles swimming along the coast must contend with fishing nets, high-rise hotels encroaching on their nesting grounds, and pollution in warming seas.

Hawksbill turtles are critically endangered, while olive ridley, loggerhead, and leatherback turtles are all classified as vulnerable. Green sea turtles were only removed from the International Union for Conservation of Nature's endangered species list last year.

Sea turtles are "a keystone species and key indicators of ocean health," says LOC founding director Nicky Parazzi. They play a particularly important role in the well-being of coral reefs, helping to control fish populations and seagrass growth.

Changing dreams

Mr. Kiponda grew up on the coast, spending his days on the Indian Ocean while his father worked as a chef for wealthy beachgoers. But at the time, he had little interest in what lay beneath the water's surface.

Mr. Kiponda excelled in mathematics and enrolled in accounting school in 2000. Upon graduation, he landed a job in one of Watamu's many posh hotels. It should have been a dream opportunity, but "it wasn't really fulfilling," he says.

In 2005, during a moonlit stroll on the beach, he stumbled on turtles hatching. He was not sure what to make of the strange creatures cracking through eggshells and shuffling into the surf. But he was mesmerized and had to learn more.

Mr. Kiponda quit his job and began volunteering with LOC to monitor turtle nests. He walked miles along the beach, ensuring hatchlings and nesting mothers made it safely to the sea. When offered the opportunity to work for LOC's bycatch release program four years after he started volunteering, Mr. Kiponda jumped on it.

"I'm part of them"

When Mr. Kiponda rushes off to help a turtle, he often does not even bother to turn on his truck radio. "You don't have music in an ambulance," he says. "You go out for a mission."

Mr. Kiponda spends most of his time in the fishing villages bordering Mida Creek, a breeding ground for juvenile turtles that empties into the ocean. He calls out *jambo* – Swahili for hello – and greets vendors by name. Community relationships are at the heart of his process. He builds close contacts with the fishers who call him about ensnared turtles; supports trash pickup and tree plantings; and hosts "mzee (old man) days" to learn from local elders.

Protecting the environment today "will benefit even the coming generation," says Khamis Omar, a community liaison volunteer who often aids Mr. Kiponda in releasing turtles. Mr. Omar's father, Omar Said, nods eagerly while repotting mangroves to restore the forest in Mida Creek. "I want to be an example to the rest," adds Mr. Said with a smile.

"It's a holistic approach," Mr. Kiponda says of his community engagement. "I'm part of them."

LOC's network now comprises more than 100 fishers, according to marine biologist Joey Ngunu, who synthesizes the data that Mr. Kiponda collects. This is a result of deep trust, explains Mr. Ngunu. Turtle poachers can be punished with life imprisonment in Kenya, so fishers are often afraid to acknowledge they caught one.

When a turtle can't be released right away, Mr. Kiponda brings the animal to LOC's rehabilitation center, where Lameck Maitha looks after it. To Mr. Kiponda, returning a turtle to the sea is the most rewarding part of the job, no matter how many times it happens. Not long after a Monitor contributor departed, LOC released its 25,000th turtle. "The best feeling ever is seeing them go," Mr. Kiponda says. "It never gets old ... Today, I've done this. I wish tomorrow I could save even more." ■

FIKIRI KIPONDA

- Finished accounting school but found the work "wasn't very fulfilling"
- Now oversees the bycatch release program at the Local Ocean Conservation nonprofit
- Helped build a network of more than 100 fishers protecting sea turtles
- Has rescued up to 16 turtles a day

Iran's other war - on its homefront

Ask an Iranian these days how the war is going and you might hear, Which war? The on-again, off-again war on Iran by U.S. President Donald Trump? Or the war inside Iran by a regime whose new fear campaign against its people appears to be backfiring?

Since January, when Iran saw its largest unrest since the 1979 Islamic Revolution, executions of political dissenters have surged. In late July, the regime escalated its intimidation tactics by holding the first public executions since 2022 – but not before a large crowd tried to stop the construction of gallows in a public square.

Social media videos show security forces in the city of Isfahan chasing protesters before two young men were hanged. “The protests on [July 28] clearly demonstrate that the relative calm on Iran’s streets ... amid the war, should not be mistaken for reconciliation with the government,” Bahar Ghandehari, from the Center for Human Rights in Iran, told *The New Arab*.

Those acts of defiance, as well as frequent protests by retirees against worsening livelihoods, help shatter the narrative that Iranians are united behind their country’s war against the United States and Israel.

While a nationwide uprising is unlikely, “the biggest threat to the Islamic Republic is not the US and Israeli military operations,” former United Nations prosecutor Payam Akhavan told *Iran International*. “It is the Iranian people first and foremost.”

An opinion survey in June showed at least one-quarter of Iranians participated in January’s protests. Dissatisfaction with the regime is running at 71%, according the Netherlands-based Group for Analyzing and Measuring Attitudes in Iran.

Perhaps more important, 59% oppose Iran acquiring nuclear weapons. If the U.S. is playing the long game to prevent a nuclear Iran, it might count less on U.S. bombs than on the Iranian people.

“Absent a dramatic change of conditions in the country – much improved economy, fewer social restrictions, stabilised security situation – a new window for large-scale popular unrest will eventually open,” Farzan Sabet, an Iran expert in Geneva, told *The New Arab*.

Or as three political prisoners wrote in a statement released last month: No government can achieve legitimacy or security by “the accumulation of corpses and a fear production line.” ■

AI's boost to enterprise, innovation, and jobs

Small-business expansion and innovation in the United States are near all-time highs. And artificial intelligence – despite concerns over AI shrinking the workforce – is driving this resurgence.

Recent data showed an average of 466,000 new business applications filed in the U.S. each month since the beginning of 2024. Some 60% of new business owners used AI to help launch their enterprise in 2025 – 75% of them to develop business ideas; about half for legal and setup tasks.

For Americans short on finance but brimming with business

ideas, AI is changing the calculus for the better. “A lot of the big-picture thinking about AI and productivity has focused on ... large companies,” Nasdaq economist and senior director Michael Normyle said in an interview on the stock exchange’s news site in July. The thousands of startups begun with AI, he indicated, “are being underappreciated.”

“These companies start out as one-person operations, but there’s no rule saying they stay that way,” Mr. Normyle pointed out. “More businesses mean more potential sources of job creation.”

Such insights and data help pierce the gloom that AI is destined to cause large-scale job losses and devalue human skills. Instead, the trend highlights how latent creativity and innovation are often reignited by tectonic shifts in technology.

How AI can democratize opportunity

“A more hopeful possibility,” as *The Economist* observed, “is that the technology democratizes the ability to put ideas into practice and become a successful business owner.” It pointed to recent bank statistics that “a rising share of new entrepreneurs are low-income” – a finding on expanded opportunity confirmed by the 2025 Global Entrepreneurship Monitor.

“A broad cross-section of Americans [is] starting businesses, including veterans and active-duty military, immigrants and Americans born abroad, and also demonstrating gender and racial/ethnic diversity,” the GEM report noted. “Collectively, these entrepreneurs contribute to job creation, innovation and global competitiveness for the United States.”

“Technology can just as readily create opportunities for high-quality work as it can automate it,” according to Massachusetts Institute of Technology economist David Autor. “Around 60% of all jobs ... in the US today didn’t exist in 1940,” but were sparked by technological and social innovations, he said in a 2023 talk.

At a time of rapid and uncertain change, humanity’s innate capacities to tap fresh opportunities and to innovate still challenge outgrown ideas of what’s possible for progress and prosperity. ■

Africa is plowing a different growth path

Perhaps more so than in other parts of the world, Africa has been jolted by recent global trade shocks, epidemics, and climate uncertainties – even as foreign aid has slowed to a trickle. But a bright spot has been agriculture, which is evolving from subsistence farming into sustainable livelihoods.

Investors from the Middle East, Asia, and Europe are seeding the ability of African farmers to intensify and diversify crops and livestock. These investments signal a shift from resource exploitation by outside interests to an approach that recognizes African countries as reliable producers and trade partners.

“African agriculture is rapidly becoming a proving ground for global investment,” according to Bloomberg News. Recent investment deals “blend commercial interests with social development projects such as building infrastructure, creating permanent jobs and sharing technological knowhow.” This framework, Bloomberg observed last October, can improve productivity “for the benefit of the host country and its overseas backers.”

Last year, the European Investment Bank deployed one-third of

its portfolio in Africa, or €3.1 billion (about \$3.57 billion), with an emphasis on improving agriculture value chains. This year, China eliminated tariffs on goods from 53 of 54 African nations, after OK'ing a range of new agricultural imports.

Qatar has put in \$1.5 billion to improve irrigation in Ghana, creating an estimated 2,500 jobs. And Angola has signed co-production deals for local farmers with Brazil and the United Arab Emirates that will retain 40% of output within the country.

"Agripreneurs" boost employment and trade

These investments are spawning "agripreneurs," who are turning to digital communication and data platforms to enhance productivity and marketing. Analyst Landry Signé of the Washington-based Brookings Institution argues that Africa is well positioned to harness the latest technologies to "leapfrog to new food production methods."

Tech-savvy farmers are boosting employment, trade, and new agriculture-related companies. This mix, *The Economist* wrote earlier this month, "could be a boon for Africa – and force a rethink of what is meant by farming and manufacturing."

In 2024, the African Development Bank Group estimated the continent's food and agribusiness industry would surge almost fourfold by 2030, reaching \$1 trillion.

With a total population greater than that of India or China, Africa has an estimated 60% of the world's remaining uncultivated yet arable land. Instead of seeking to follow the industrialization paths pursued by Asia and Latin America in recent decades, the continent has an opportunity for a different growth model, one suited to its priorities and potential. ■

READERS RESPOND

Threading history's strands together

Kendra Nordin Beato's article "A tale of two Revolutionary tailors" in the June 29 Weekly was an outstanding look at the artistry, craftsmanship, research, and historical detail that go into creating authentic period garments.

The story brought back memories of my experience during the American bicentennial in 1976. As a teenager working at Thorny Hills Farm in Pennsylvania, I was a stable hand, and repaired and restored carriage wheels during the colder months. I also participated in a weeklong reenactment of the Revolutionary-era journey that moved the Liberty Bell and other bells from Philadelphia toward Allentown for safekeeping. We traveled in period clothing, stopped in towns along the route, and sought to interpret history as accurately as it was then understood.

My love of history began with an inspiring history teacher and has continued throughout my life. I have maintained a close connection with Colonial Williamsburg, regularly visit historic locations, and produced a children's TV program about time-traveling young people experiencing American history. My acting career has also allowed me to portray historical figures. Those experiences have given me a deep appreciation for the extraordinary detail that reenactors, actors, researchers, costumers, and craftspeople bring to historical interpretation. Their work is far more than dressing in old clothing. It is a disciplined effort to understand the people, materials, skills, and realities of another age.

John M. "JD" Demers
Raleigh, North Carolina

THE HOME FORUM

Gators invade the suburbs

A new family in the neighborhood finds a surprise hiding in the garden.

I was on a morning stroll in my northern Virginia suburb, when I turned the corner and happened upon a most unexpected scene.

A squadron of police officers was conferring with animal control in the middle of the road. Seeking to avoid an encounter with a rabid raccoon or a foaming pit bull, I spotted a neighbor standing in his driveway and asked if he knew what was going on.

"There's a gator in my yard," he replied.

While picking tomatoes in the vegetable garden, his 2-year-old declared that he'd found a frog. Upon further inspection, it seemed to be some kind of large lizard, and then, holy smokes, a gator! At which point he rushed everyone back into the house. It turned out he had just moved in over the weekend – what a nice housewarming gift. We shook hands. Nice to meet you.

As the animal control team and police walked up the driveway, I followed behind. The tension built as we closed in on the vegetable patch. Through a series of whispers and hand signals, the gator's location was confirmed. I had to see it to believe it, but there it was, plain as day: a genuine alligator, probably 3 feet long, nestled in between tomato plants, the sun shining off its scales, head hidden, perfectly camouflaged. Clever girl.

Just moments earlier, I'd been yawning, rubbing sleep from my eyes, plodding down the pavement. Now, I found myself a bit player in a cops-meet-crocodile-hunter show. Life comes at you fast.

Like ballplayers just before the pitch, animal control crouched into position, with thick metal grabbers, nooses, and nets at the ready. "On three," the lead whispered, "One, two, *three!*" He lunged forward, making a decisive stab with the metal alligator tongs. The reptile was secured!

As he raised the mighty dinosaur in the air, I expected writhing and wrangling, a fight for survival. But the gator was still. The gator was dead. The gator was a toy. A very realistic toy, but a toy nonetheless.

I relayed the story to my family over text. My dad reported, "No gators yet in our tomato plants, but will continue to monitor."

My fellow Washingtonians: a reminder that we live in The Swamp, so keep your heads on a swivel. There're gators out there. I've seen 'em with my own eyes.

– Zach Przystup

SUMMER STORM PALISADES PARKWAY

Rain-splatter on glass
skirmishing with wiper blades:
framed Performance Art.

– Judith Saunders

A CHRISTIAN SCIENCE PERSPECTIVE

The miracle of grace

A psalmist once wrote, “The Lord will command his lovingkindness in the daytime, and in the night his song shall be with me” (Psalms 42:8). Confidence in God as ever-present Love sings through the ages in this hymn. It speaks to everyone.

But sometimes God can feel far off or uninterested in mankind. In the book of Jeremiah God responds to this question by asking rhetorically, “Am I a God at hand, saith the Lord, and not a God afar off? Can any hide himself in secret places that I shall not see him?” (Jeremiah 23:23, 24).

The Bible describes God as Love. In a passage from “Science and Health with Key to the Scriptures” by Mary Baker Eddy, we read: “It is not well to imagine that Jesus demonstrated the divine power to heal only for a select number or for a limited period of time, since to all mankind and in every hour, divine Love supplies all good” (p. 494).

The story of Hagar illustrates the limitlessness of God’s love. She had borne Abram (later renamed Abraham) his first son at the urging of his wife, Sarai (later renamed Sarah), because Sarai had been barren. Later when Sarah did give birth to a son, there was tension between the women. Sarah urged Abraham to send Hagar and her son away, and he did – into the wilderness. Their water was soon gone, and it must certainly have felt to Hagar that they were hidden in a place where God could not find them. But God had assured Abraham that his first son would be the father of a nation. Was Hagar included in the spirit of that promise? She was.

What happened for Hagar is reflected in something Mrs. Eddy states in Science and Health: “In divine Science, where prayers are mental, *all* may avail themselves of God as ‘a very present help in trouble’” (pp. 12-13). Through her tears, Hagar heard the angel of God telling her, “Fear not.” As she let go of the fear that she and her son were separated from God, she could see what God had already supplied for them – a whole well of water (see Genesis 21:9-20).

I had an experience as a young mother when it felt as if I might be far from God. I had just moved with my husband and 1-year-old daughter to a country halfway around the world. Alone at home, I began to miscarry our second child. I had miscarried before and understood what was going on. There were no Christian Science churches or Christian Science practitioners in this country, I couldn’t make an overseas call as they were very costly, and the internet was not yet available. But I knew God

was there with me. What I did have was that week’s Christian Science Bible lesson, which I began to study deeply.

I came to a verse from Isaiah: “So shall my word be that goeth forth out of my mouth: it shall not return unto me void, but it shall accomplish that which I please, and it shall prosper in the thing whereto I sent it” (Isaiah 55:11). My understanding in that moment was that this child was an expression of God’s word. As Science and Health states, “Man is the expression of God’s being” (p. 470). The miscarriage stopped, and my child was brought to full term.

Mrs. Eddy writes, “The relations of God and man, divine Principle and idea, are indestructible in Science” (Science and Health, pp. 470–471). This proved true for Hagar and her son, and later it proved true for me and my son. It is true for “all mankind and in every hour,” since “the miracle of grace is no miracle to Love” (Science and Health, p. 494).

– Kit Cornell Kurtz

BOOKS

The audacious plot to blow up the Nord Stream pipelines

Shadowy figures, deep-sea sabotage, and geopolitical skulduggery come together in a fascinating exposé by a Wall Street Journal reporter.

By Malcolm Forbes / Contributor

In September 2022, seven months after Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine, a series of explosions in the Baltic Sea alarmed seismologists across Europe. The blasts destroyed Nord Stream 1 and 2, the world’s largest offshore pipeline system, which transported gas from Russia to Germany. Great geysers almost a kilometer (0.6 miles) in diameter erupted, unleashing methane. The cost of the leaked gas amounted to almost \$2 billion dollars. Experts determined that the damage was not caused by an underwater earthquake. NATO then declared that the pipelines had been deliberately targeted.

So began a blame game, with Russian leader Vladimir Putin accusing the CIA of terrorism and Western intelligence officials branding Russia the culprit. Who was responsible for one of the biggest and most audacious acts of sabotage in modern history?

Bojan Pancevski, the chief European political correspondent of The Wall Street Journal, embarked on a mission to unravel the mystery. His book, “The Nord Stream Conspiracy,” is a compelling account of his detective work. Drawing on years of interviews with a range of individuals, Pancevski tells an in-depth, multistranded story about a daring operation that rocked lives, destabilized economies, and shook the world order.

The book opens with the German response to the pipeline attack. Aware that this could be the biggest case of his career, Dieter Romann, head of the Germany’s Federal Police, puts his best man on the job. An officer referred to only as The Chief Investigator assembles a team. Two theories emerge: First, that the pipelines

were destroyed by a minisubmarine or drone; the second, more fanciful, hypothesis was that a small team of professional divers was involved. As the investigators probe further, they discover that some countries – supposedly Germany’s allies – are proving secretive and obstructive.

From here, Pancevski turns his focus on Ukraine and introduces a different set of protagonists. We meet a man called The Colonel, whose career as a law enforcement, intelligence, and military officer has involved everything from fighting corruption and organized crime to battling pro-Russian warlords. We also encounter his compatriot and brother-in-arms, The General, “another mastermind of crazy clandestine operations,” including a notorious plot that infiltrated Russia’s security apparatus. Shortly before Russia invaded Ukraine in 2022, the two men formed an elite combat group they named The Startup. “You could say we became a tiny little deep state,” The General tells Pancevski.

When Russian forces finally invaded in 2022, The Startup offered effective resistance. But trading blow for blow wasn’t enough: To protect their homeland, the men knew they needed to hit the aggressor where it hurt the most, and that meant attacking the economy. A plan was devised and a target decided upon. “Nord Stream was Putin’s perfidious tentacle,” The Colonel says, “and it was wrapped around Europe’s neck.” Destroying the pipeline network would force the extrication of Europe from Putin’s stranglehold and, in the process, eliminate a critical source of Russia’s revenue. But Operation Diameter, as it was called, would be dangerous. It would involve a team of divers working with explosives under time constraints and high stress, in total darkness and freezing temperatures. Fulfilling their objective was one thing; doing so without getting caught or killed was another.

It has become something of a cliché to say that a gripping work of nonfiction reads like a fictional thriller. However, that is indeed the case with “The Nord Stream Conspiracy.” Pancevski keeps us hooked. His depiction of both the preparation of the mission and its execution is wholly absorbing. We learn how eight civilian divers were selected, including one woman who, though less experienced, showed remarkable courage.

After undergoing rigorous training, they endured first a delay to obtain fake IDs and then a fraught wait in a safe house. A day before departure, one diver tested positive for COVID-19. While at sea, storms created 7-foot waves, and their boat was tossed around “like a walnut shell.” It was no safer overboard: Diving to the seabed was like descending into a sandstorm.

The book is just as riveting when Pancevski traces geopolitical tension and skulduggery. It continues to enthrall as the cast of shadowy operatives expands. As with *The General* and *The Colonel*, Pancevski has withheld the names of key figures, “for revealing their identities could put their lives at risk.” Joining *The Captain*, *The Soldier*, and *The Skipper* are more intriguingly named characters: *The Iceman*, *The Smiley*, and *The Walking Lawsuit*.

Pancevski ensures his narrative loses none of its momentum in his last section devoted to the German investigation. Here, as the detectives home in on their quarry, we find out mistakes the conspirators made, from minor organizational errors to strategic blunders. It should be said that Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy continues to deny official Ukrainian involvement in the Nord Stream explosion.

Some parts of the book could have been dropped, such as pages on the history of Nord Stream and the perils of deep-sea diving. Otherwise, it is hard to fault this immersive and propulsive study,

a fascinating exposé that illuminates murky, treacherous deeds not only at the bottom of the sea but also on dry land. ■

Raising horses lifts a Black family across generations

On a South Carolina farm, a withdrawn girl finds her place as an equestrian in DéLana R.A. Dameron’s last novel, “Fairfield County.”

By Deborah Johnson / Contributor

In her deeply moving new novel, “Fairfield County,” celebrated poet and author DéLana R.A. Dameron weaves an unexpected story involving the South (in this case, rural South Carolina), horses, and cowboys – specifically, Black cowboys. In her deft narrative, she completely overturns popular, even mythic, notions of all three.

The Bolton family has lived on the same plot of land for generations – first as enslaved people and then as sharecroppers. But the end of World War I provided space for change “long enough for folks like Moses Bolton to see a few feet into tomorrow’s horizon and think there might still be a future for Fairfield County.”

Moses, the patriarch of the Bolton clan, is able to secure a home- stead cheaply because, in 1937, the land was thought to be used up – overworked from growing cotton. The white owners sold it for pennies on the acre, determining that more money could be made in developing nearby granite quarries. Black people like Moses were offered the opportunity to buy this “useless, terrorized, plundered” land. And they took it.

With ownership came other opportunities. Moses always had a way with horses. He had been a handler and a wrangler. Sometimes, even a trainer. But now, in possession of his own land, he found that he could use his talent to further his own interests and those of his family. He could start breeding horses.

Moses liked to say he had been born just a “few steps outside of a life of bondage.” This explains his determination to create a “self-governed life” in which he would “marry publicly, and in a church. Have children and get to keep them. Buy a house ... – things his grandfather could only imagine.”

Moses’ ability to bond with and understand horses makes him a legend in Fairfield County and beyond. And he is able to pass this skill to his descendants. Each has a horse story to tell: Moses has Pal O Mine. His son, Lloyd, nurtures Reddmare, and Lloyd’s son, Dwayne, rides Reddmare’s colt, O’Boy. Eventually, Moses’ great-granddaughter, Nikki, will choose Easy, Pal O Mine’s direct descendant, as her legacy mount.

In many ways, Nikki Bolton is the beating heart of the novel, and she appears to be a stand-in for Dameron, who did not start riding until midlife.

Nikki’s relationship with her mother is fraught, and when Nikki is physically attacked in school by a police officer, she turns into a shy, withdrawn girl. That is, until she visits Fairfield County to see her father and his buddy from the Iraq War, “Uncle” Sonny. The two men introduce her to horses and the equestrian life, and she thrives.

But this is no up-by-their-bootstraps story. The South itself is too

nuanced and multilayered for that. There are tragedies, including a neighbor lynched because he would not give up the rights to his land. Fires engulf characters we have come to love. Beloved animals must be put down. This is rural life as it's lived. One of the beauties of this novel is how these experiences are used as framework, never distracting from the portrait of the Boltons that emerges.

The story itself is beautifully elliptical. It reminded me of Edward P. Jones' "The Known World." We are given a glimpse of events and then drawn into a deeper understanding of them as the story progresses.

The only minor nit I would pick with this lovely novel is the fact that Nikki, even though she spent time with her father in Fairfield County, had never heard about her family's connection to horses.

I live in the South and know it to be a very chatty place. Folks down here know not only their family history but they know that of their neighbors as well. And they are quite willing, even eager, to share their information. As the school bus driver, Mrs. Esther, says, "We take care of we." But this is only the smallest of quibbles.

Sadly, "Fairfield County" is Dameron's final novel, as she died last year. But with this book, she has left behind a rich legacy – her own love of horses and the Black horsewomen and men in a place that she came to call home.

I loved the time I spent there – and with them. ■

Daniel Mason burrows into rural lore in 'Country People'

The novel charmingly sends up the urban-rural divide as a pair of West Coast academics move to a quirky Vermont town. Rabbit holes and diversions ensue.

By **Heller McAlpin** / Contributor

"Country People," Daniel Mason's first novel set in contemporary times, will come as something of a surprise for fans of his historical fiction – including, most recently, his masterful "North Woods."

But achievements like "North Woods" – which offered a fresh view of American history reflected in the lives of the successive inhabitants of a house in the Massachusetts woods over the past four centuries – do not come along every day. With "Country People," Mason has opted for something lighter, a romp that unfolds over a single academic year and playfully explores the power of storytelling, family, and community.

"Country People" involves a couple of urban academics who move from northern California to rural Vermont with their two school-age children and Italian-bred, truffle-hunting dog after the wife accepts a prestigious one-year visiting professorship in the English department of a local college. Kate Petrosian fervently believes that liberal arts in general and John Milton and William Blake in particular have much wisdom to offer students – even in an era when the university "had abandoned itself so completely to the promises of technology that her students studying biology (and not, say, bioengineering) were considered crazy, wasteful hippies." Kate's hope is that, away from his obligations as a teaching assistant, her husband, Miles Krzelewski, will finally finish his dissertation

on Russian folklore, which is 14 years overdue because he keeps changing topics.

But Greensbury, Vermont, is a lushly forested "childcare desert" rich in diversions. Instead of working on his doctorate, the eminently distractible Miles becomes the primary caregiver for his children and enthusiastically embraces the local culture. Despite his lack of experience, he volunteers as a parent coach in the Greensbury Valley children's cross-country ski league, taught by a Norwegian Olympic medalist who flaunts his muscles in red spandex. Miles also signs up to assist in the annual elementary school production of "A Midsummer Night's Dream." The show's flirtatious young director, fresh from a stint as summer musical director at Camp Samuel Beckett, channels "a medieval tavern wench at an Aerosmith concert" in her orange velvet breeches, fishnet stockings, and Red Sox bomber jacket.

Miles eventually gets pulled into the local chapter of the Jeremiah Wylkes Society, whose mission is to investigate its 19th-century namesake's contention that there is a hidden entrance to a spectacular underworld nearby. (Passages from Wylkes' invented "Colloquies" are sprinkled throughout the novel.) The Society members' earnest reports on the unverifiable provenance of this document bring to mind the hilarious amateur historical society in "North Woods."

Miles, who notes that Russian folktales frequently feature underground kingdoms, feels in his element, "however nonsensical, illogical, indeed structurally impossible a hollow Earth was." He is self-aware enough to recognize that, when it comes to going down rabbit holes, he's an expert.

The Wylkes Society's members include many of the amiable oddballs Miles has met around town. These include the ski instructor, the celebrity-obsessed leader of seasonal nature rambles, his daughter's third grade teacher, and a friendly man whose conversation helps pass the time during a very long wait at the local urgent care center after a skiing injury. (The man describes his great project, dubbed the "Encyclopedia of Foolish Errors, Registry of Unsubstantiated Nonsense, and Inventory of Wrong Ideas.") Also in attendance at the meetings is Andrei Abramov, a biochemist postdoc who, like Miles, followed his wife to the college and has become a "marooned academic." Andrei has taken up farming, and Miles eagerly joins him, hoping that the backbreaking work of scything will enhance his understanding of the Russian peasants he's supposed to be writing about.

"Country People" is framed as a sort of fairytale – Miles' non-dissertation – about a floundering man who eventually finds his way out of the woods. Its unnamed narrator periodically interjects wry commentary into his account of Miles' misadventures in the land of snow and sap: "Reader, how I want to tell you that Cave A-76 turned out to be the long-fabled entrance to the underworld," he remarks at one point.

Mason enjoys riffing on the absurdities of academic culture and flagging the divides that separate what are often called coastal elites. The Krzelewski-Petrosians are a family whose daughter's stuffies are named Freudenschade and Hegemony. They speak in literary references, feast on local produce, and are astonished by the alien foodstuffs they encounter at the local convenience store, such as hazelnut cranberry-flavored Coffee Drink. A recurring gag about an absurd radio call-in show is a rare misfire for Mason. Far more amusing are his jabs at a prolific sociologist's propensity for turning every aspect of Greensbury life into a published paper.

Mason is a psychiatrist and associate professor in Stanford University's Department of Psychiatry as well as a writer. His interest

in the interplay among literature, history, and medical practice informs his fiction. In “Country People,” he highlights – with levity and humor – how erroneous ideas, gullibility, and blinders can lead even people who should know better down rabbit holes, and what it takes to tunnel one’s way out. ■

Q&A with Rye Barcott, author of ‘Courage Can Save US’

Rye Barcott served as a U.S. Marine and is the co-founder and CEO of With Honor, a nonprofit that addresses governmental polarization through empowering veterans to run for office. His latest book, “Courage Can Save US: Ten Extraordinary Americans and the Fight for Our Future,” profiles 10 government officials (nine of whom are veterans) who have taken strides to overcome partisanship. In an interview, he discussed his book and what it takes to stand for “copartisanship.” Mr. Barcott spoke recently with staff writer Emily Staunton. The interview has been condensed and edited for clarity.

Q: What was your criteria for selecting the 10 public servants you wrote about?

I was looking for individuals who would be comfortable with me telling their story in a way that was not just telling a hero’s journey, but trying to give a full picture. These are 10 individuals who are currently in the public arena and not historical figures. That results in a level of immediacy but also recognizes that there are things that we won’t know until history plays out.

Q: Why did you feel strongly about starting With Honor and how does it support veterans as they move into public office?

What has occurred in the United States is very difficult for collaboration across party lines, because our congressional districts have become gerrymandered into safe partisan districts. And that results in more partisan behavior.

Our organization recognizes that reality. We spend a lot of time focused on primary elections, where we try to identify the individuals who are really governance-minded, truly committed to serving with integrity and civility and courage. We’re really looking for a track record of being able to work across party lines and do what you say you’re going to do.

We then support them so that they can win the primary elections. We’ll help educate and recruit candidates and then be there for them.

Q: The book profiles government officials who cooperated across party lines. What is the most instructive lesson for those searching to build copartisanship?

One of the main themes that emerged was the resilience of each of these individuals. All 10 had striking examples where they faced hardship. But they were able to rebound and keep going. The way they rebounded was having a service mentality – that your life is here for a greater purpose.

I find that there are three underlying values behind courage: integrity, humility, and commitment. Commitment speaks to the resilience point. Integrity is at the root of moral courage; it is doing the right thing as you assess it. Humility is realizing that we are one of many and it’s not all about you.

Q: What is it about veterans that enables them to work across the aisle?

Service in uniform forces you to be with other Americans from all different walks of life on a common mission. For most of the Marines that I served with, I had no idea what their ideological or their political beliefs were. We saw each other as human beings and comrades first. You take an oath that, if called, you will give up your life for this mission.

That experience of not only working with others who are different from you, but also working in service to something larger than yourself – that has a humbling and leveling effect.

Q: What are the largest barriers government leaders face to displaying the courage exemplified in the book?

I think almost all the incentives now run against the courage to be governance-minded. The incentives in politics are so tied to money. Often, the way that you raise money is by fear-mongering and going the way of the algorithms. It is counter-cultural to suggest not to do that.

We can do something about that by recognizing folks who rise above it and have found ways to communicate upbeat messages that are factually accurate. Americans are hungry for that. Let’s focus on where we can go in the future. Let’s be clear-eyed about what our challenges are, but let’s stay positive.

Q: What are the characteristics of a good fighter? Reflecting on the 250th anniversary of the U.S., what would help the country’s future?

Roughly two-thirds of all of our presidents have served in uniform. George Washington set the stage by voluntarily stepping down from power. I conclude the prologue with his farewell address. The No. 1 issue that he warns us about are factions. The greatest threat is from within. How do we propel the country, not just beyond 250, but to really be thriving in the next 250 years?

It is widely accepted across party lines that more voluntary national service is something that can not only help heal wounds within the country, but also help young Americans.

Q: Is there anything else you would like to share?

My hope is that the book can help individuals reflect on moments of courage that they have witnessed. On our website, we added a courage platform where you can share your moment of courage. I do believe that courage, as a form of service, can really be a source of salvation for our country as well as for us as individuals. ■

Migration is reshaping life for married women in Senegal

STORY BY ADRIEN MAROTTE / CONTRIBUTOR

LÉONA, SENEGAL

A plastic chair, a floor mat, a washbasin. In a sandy courtyard in this rural community in northwestern Senegal, that is all it takes to conjure an imaginary house as part of a women's program performed for a community radio station.

"Focus ... action," calls out Seydina Alioune Gueye, the program's director. The few spectators who have gathered at the scene fall silent, and the actresses take their places. One actress mimics exhaustion as she folds invisible laundry. Nearby, another actress prepares a meal. At the center of the courtyard, Mr. Gueye portrays a domineering husband. He looks for a pair of trousers, raises his voice, accuses. Slowly, the plot unfolds: He stirs conflict between the two women to justify taking a third wife – a woman who is already pregnant. The scene feels familiar to the actresses and the audience.

"We act what we see," actress Khadi Dièye says after the performance. "We talk about forced marriages, violence, irregular migration. These are our realities."

Beside her, actress Mame Bintou, nods. "We want to denounce," she says, "but also make people think."

The weekly radio program is a space for women to discuss the men who have left and the challenges of living without them. Taking up to four wives is legal in Senegal, though the practice is a common source of tension discussed on the women's program.

Many men here go abroad to work and send money home. Nearly 60% of those men migrate to Europe; most of the rest go elsewhere in Africa, according to data from the Reception, Orientation, and Monitoring Office (BAOS), a Senegalese government entity supporting migrants and their families. Often, the men marry just before departing and do not return for years. The women are typically sent to live with in-laws.

In Léona, as in much of the surrounding Louga region, migration structures lives, expectations, and imaginations. It also sustains a local economy heavily dependent on remittances – income that supports many rural households, especially women.

Some describe a life close to confinement. There is fear of gossip, fear of judgment.

"You have to be careful about everything," Mariama Achemya Aïdara whispers, saying she felt constantly watched by her in-laws. Going out, working, moving around. Every gesture can be commented on.

So they gather.

At the center of Léona, a mud house topped by a tall antenna hosts the radio station. "Here, women can talk about what they really live through," says Matel Ba, the station's director since 2018.

In a community scattered across more than 100 hamlets, the station connects people and fosters dialogue. On the Saturday morning women's program, the stories are often the same: absent husbands, unreliable remittances, disagreements with in-laws, and, for some, domestic violence. "Some women live alone for 20 years," Ms. Ba says. "How do you build a life under those conditions?"

Sometimes, the radio acts as a mediator. Ms. Ba has even gone to meet husbands to hear their side when they return home. But she

also promotes employment training programs, economic projects, and paths toward independence for the women.

A few streets away from the radio station, about 30 women gather for a tontine, a rotating savings group common across West Africa. Sitting in a circle, they each place a small amount of cash into a metal box. "It helps us not depend only on men," explains Ms. Aïdara. The fund finances small businesses and community projects.

Without the men, caring for everything – the fields, the houses, the children – falls to the women. In the Niayes, fertile coastal lowlands between sand dunes and the Atlantic Ocean, two women rake the soil side by side amid a light breeze off the water. Moisture trapped in the ground allows finicky crops such as onions and peanuts to grow. Goats wander past, and children run nearby.

The women live together in a large house built with money sent from Europe. Around them, other buildings rise from the sand, some still unfinished. Salimata Boye occupies one of these homes. Her husband has been in Spain since 2006, and returns only once every two years. In the meantime, she works in the fields, under the watchful eyes of her brother-in-law. Even going out requires permission.

Beside her, her sister-in-law Yama Soul raises her three children alone. Her husband also left by boat years ago. "I would prefer him to be here," she says quietly.

Despite the difficulties of long-distance marriage, a husband abroad is still widely seen as a marker of success and social mobility. Among the new generation, though, attitudes are gradually changing.

At dusk, 19-year-old Seynabou Tabane prepares chicken *yassa* with her mother and sister. She says a long-distance marriage is not for her. "I don't like it," she says. She wants something different: "Someone who supports me, trusts me, and helps me with my projects." She adds that she dreams of becoming a veterinarian.

Her mother, Maimouna Sougou, listens quietly. She knows the subject well, having herself endured a long-distance marriage. She discusses these very issues every week on the radio, where she is one of the hosts. The younger women continue those conversations on social media, with friends, at the gym, or by the sea.

In Léona, women are carving out new spaces to talk. And little by little, they are finding their voice and their place. ■

Crossword

ACROSS

1. Country's output fig.
4. Month after Feb.
7. Came upon
10. Wobble
11. Excavation find
12. Pass over
14. Division word
15. Family adoptee
16. Former Italian currency
17. Ants, at picnics
19. Bubbly
21. President pro ____
23. Neither here ____ there
24. Preview
28. Dusting item
31. Fridge invasion?
32. Pond critter
33. Mama's partner
34. Earth, for one

35. Fixed up

37. Base VIPs

38. Old chestnut?

39. Inhale

43. Hardly "fresh"

47. Hound sound

48. Little rascal

50. Like some essentials

51. Comfortable state

52. Pine tree

53. Bakery appliance

54. A pop

55. Tackle

56. Evergreen shrub

.....

DOWN

1. Autry of Westerns

2. Trawling equipment

3. Charted a course

4. Clean the linoleum

5. Geometric calculation

6. Capacity to remember

7. Large tooth

8. Emanate

9. Tucker out

10. Clothing mishap

13. Smidgeon

18. "Ready, ____, go!"

20. Caviar source

22. Temporary

24. This way, or that

25. Dinghy accessory

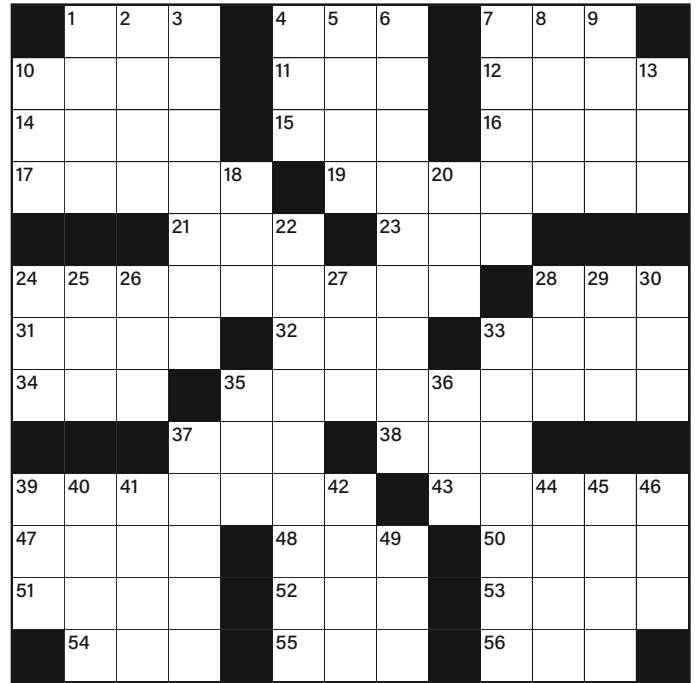
26. Barbecue tidbit

27. Boy child

28. Cheese eater

29. Big zoo attraction

30. Rove around



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33. Shoulder-length hairdo

35. Become yucky, perhaps

36. Cargo vehicle

37. Adventure

39. Brief adieu

40. Harvest grain

41. Alternative choice

42. Bedouin royalty

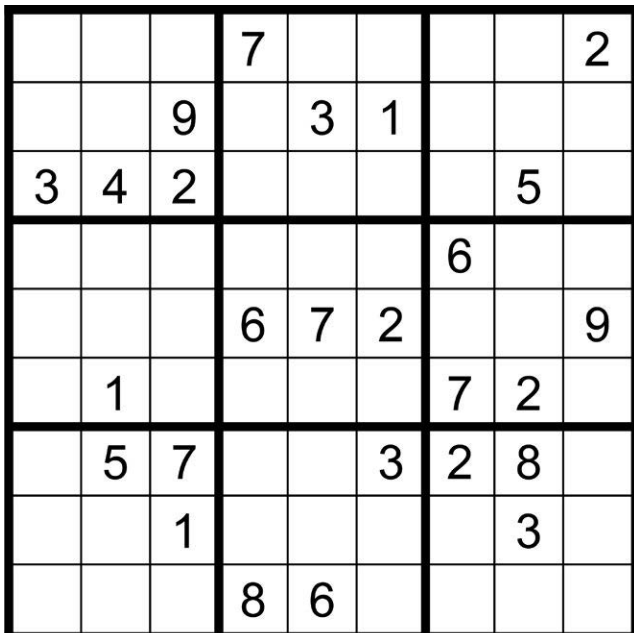
44. Fantastic review

45. Sketched

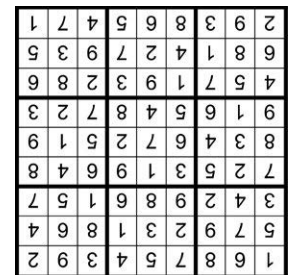
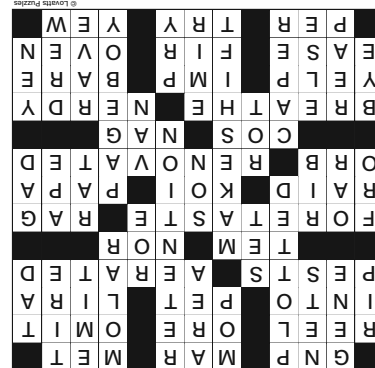
46. Long

49. Lever

Sudoku difficulty: ★★☆☆



Crossword and Sudoku solutions



How to do Sudoku

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