THE CHRISTIAN SCIENCE MONITOR

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

– MARY BAKER EDDY

WEEK OF MAY 11, 2026 | VOLUME 118 – ISSUE 25

CONTENTS

Fighting for a better life: connecting global stories

Last December, I was in Miami reporting on the Cuban diaspora when a source casually mentioned Cuban soldiers being sent to Russia to fight in the war against Ukraine. I made a mental note to follow up with my colleagues reporting regularly from Ukraine, but wondered: How would we tell this story? How – and why – are citizens from halfway around the world ending up on the front lines of a war that has nothing to do with them or their nation?

It turns out, editors across our international desk were hearing similar anecdotes – from Nepal to Botswana to Colombia. Although our team is spread around the globe, our daily meetings where we discuss what we're covering – and what we should be reporting next – keep us closely connected. This is a space to throw out half-baked ideas and question colleagues about news we may not understand from their patch of the globe. And it often serves as an incubator for international spreads like this week's multicontinent feature on how foreign mercenaries have ended up on the front lines of the Russia-Ukraine conflict.

By Whitney Eulich
Latin America bureau chief

The number of foreign fighters-for-hire in Ukraine increased in 2025, according to a recent report by the Ukrainian government's "I Want To Live" project, an initiative that provides avenues for Russian fighters to voluntarily surrender. On average, two-to-three citizens of countries other than Russia are captured in Ukraine per week, the report cites. Nearly 7% of all prisoners of war in Ukraine today hail from more than 40 countries around the globe.

What started as a colleague mentioning a story pitch about a Botswanan who was duped into enlisting in the Russian military to fight in Ukraine – and then escaped – transformed into bigger questions about what this recruitment process looks like, and how it has worked so successfully. Why are certain nationals targeted, like combat-hardened Colombian veterans?

It turns out that even if the recruitment tactics vary, there's one thing these African, Asian, and Latin American recruits fighting for Russia, and in some cases Ukraine, have in common: a desire to improve their quality of life. I'm grateful to be part of a team that can connect the sometimes isolated dots crossing our desks into a global perspective that tells this bigger story. ▪

Israeli justices extend deadline for Oct. 7 investigation

A panel of Israeli Supreme Court justices has given Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's government until July 1 to set up a "suitable" investigative framework to evaluate the events of Oct. 7, 2023.

A Hamas attack on Israel that day killed some 1,200 people, led to 250 others being taken hostage, and precipitated a war that has devastated the Gaza Strip and killed tens of thousands of Palestinians.

The justices had been weighing petitions that the court instruct the government to establish an independent state commission of inquiry, as has been the practice in previous times of national crisis.

"We deemed it appropriate at this stage to allow the government an additional stay of approximately two months, in the hope that it will soon find a suitable framework for investigating the events, which will gain broad public approval," the judges wrote in their decision.

For nearly 2 1/2 years, since the early days of the conflict, Mr. Netanyahu has resisted calls for such a commission – seen by many as the most credible and authoritative path toward determining truth and accountability – until the war was over.

By contrast, amid reports that warnings of an impending attack had not been taken seriously, senior Israeli military and security leaders did take responsibility publicly for what they called their failure to prevent the Hamas incursion.

Public support for an independent commission is strong. In a Hebrew University poll of Israelis published April 26, 72% of respondents said they favor an inquiry into the failures of Oct. 7. Supporters see it as essential for political accountability and public trust, while opponents argue that political bias, institutional distrust, and wartime realities make such an investigation difficult.

Critics say the government's delay tactics reflect a reluctance to confront political responsibility for decisions leading up to the attack and the war that followed. As time passes, meanwhile, concerns are growing that the search for the truth will be hampered by fading memories and eroding evidence.

– Shoshanna Solomon / Contributor

Trump administration to reclassify marijuana

The Trump administration is changing the way marijuana is regulated. In a major policy shift, it is reclassifying some marijuana by removing it from the Schedule I tier occupied by such drugs as heroin and LSD.

A Justice Department order in April launched the shift, with a focus on state-licensed medical use.

The administration is also moving toward an expedited reclassifying of marijuana more broadly. A Drug Enforcement Administration hearing is scheduled for June 29.

Marijuana still isn't legal under federal law, though 40 states and the District of Columbia permit its medicinal or recreational use.

Now, with licensed medical marijuana classified as a Schedule III substance, it will be subject to fewer regulations. And businesses selling the product might be eligible for federal tax breaks.

President Donald Trump has described his marijuana policies as a "common sense" approach to a drug that many Americans rank as less harmful than alcohol.

But some prominent leaders in the president's own party disagree with the reclassification move, and a slim majority of Americans polled by Gallup in 2024 said they think marijuana harms most users and is detrimental to society overall.

Views of the drug became more negative, compared with a poll taken in 2022, even as legal cannabis sales were expanding across the country.

At the same time, other recent polls find that most Americans support some form of legal marijuana use.

– Stephen Humphries / Staff writer

Supreme Court evaluates deportation protections

The Supreme Court will decide whether the government can end temporary protections for hundreds of thousands of Haitian and Syrian immigrants already in the United States.

The Trump administration has already suspended the entrance of Haitians and Syrians into the United States and paused their applications for asylum, citing security risks.

Oral arguments in the case, Mullin v. Doe, took place in late April. The safeguard under scrutiny is called temporary protected status, which can be granted by the Secretary of Homeland Security to citizens of designated countries to which it is considered unsafe to return. TPS offers access to work permits and protection against deportation – available only to immigrants already in the United States. The status doesn't offer a path to a green card or U.S. citizenship, but many recipients have lived here for years because of multiple extensions of their country's protected status.

In the case before the Supreme Court, the Trump administration contends that immigration law plainly says that courts can't second-guess its decisions on TPS. The Department of Homeland Security moved to revoke TPS for Haiti and Syria last year. Immigrant advocates have sued the government over its termination attempts – and the process behind them. On TPS for Haiti specifically, those advocates allege that the administration was motivated, at least partly, by race, which the White House denies.

"The Trump administration is restoring integrity to our immigration system to keep our homeland and its people safe, and we expect a higher court to vindicate us in this," a DHS spokesperson said in an email. "The United States has had a generous asylum program – those who can prove a need for it should apply instead of expecting extensions of their temporary status."

– Sarah Matusek / Staff writer

Man charged with presidential assassination attempt

A California man is accused of seeking to kill President Trump at a gala dinner in a Washington hotel last month. Cole Tomas Allen faces two other criminal charges in connection with the thwarted attack at the annual White House Correspondents' Association dinner.

To Mr. Trump's supporters, the incident is more evidence of a rising tide of left-wing violence. They accuse Democratic leaders and members of the media who rail against the president of creating a permission structure for extremists. Though the link between rhetoric and action isn't straightforward, political violence experts point to a recent uptick in left-wing extremist attacks after years in which far-right extremists posed a greater threat to the public and to government officials.

This uptick includes the fatal shooting of a health insurance chief executive in New York in December 2024 and the killing of Charlie Kirk, a right-wing commentator, on a Utah college campus last September.

Mr. Trump has now been the target of at least three assassination attempts.

Democratic leaders have condemned the attempted shooting. Some Democrats also note that Mr. Trump himself frequently uses inflammatory and even violent political rhetoric.

Categorizing acts of political violence is complex. Individuals might act on motives that don't always map onto ideological or partisan labels and are freighted with personal mythologies, refracted through online conspiracies.

– Simon Montlake, Sophie Hills, Patrik Jonsson, and Cameron Pugh / Staff writers

Trump's $1.5 trillion defense spending ask

The Trump administration is hoping to spend $1.5 trillion on defense next year. That's roughly 42% more than the United States, by far the world's most expensive military, spends now.

That's also getting close to 5% of U.S. gross domestic product. The last time the defense budget was significantly higher as a percentage of GDP was during the Reagan administration's Cold War military buildup in the mid-1980s, when it reached nearly 7%, or during the Vietnam War, when it was more than 9%.

While the huge budget increase plan aims to make good on President Trump's campaign pledge to rebuild America's military, it also represents a big shift in national spending priorities. It's a pace that potentially diverts billions of dollars from education, healthcare, and other initiatives while adding roughly $5.8 trillion to the national debt over the next decade.

In the proposed U.S. military budget for fiscal year 2027, the Army and Navy would each see their budgets grow by a quarter, while the Air Force would get a 34% boost. The Defense Department's newest branch of service, the Space Force, stands to see its budget more than doubled to about $71 billion.

Even think tanks that describe themselves as hawkish, such as the

Foundation for Defense of Democracies, called the administration's proposed U.S. military budget for fiscal year 2027 "extraordinary."

With a bigger budget than the next nine countries combined, the U.S. already has the most expensive armed forces in the world. In terms of sheer active personnel numbers, America ranks third behind China and India, according to the Peterson Foundation.

Worth noting: The cost of the conflict with Iran is not factored into the current defense request. That will take more money – an additional $1 trillion, by some estimates.

But America's current war is clearly influencing both public and private investments, in everything from more drones (and defenses against them) to more missiles and Navy ships. Private investment in the military and defense sectors has surged recently, namely in defense tech and startups. In the first quarter of this year, defense startups backed by venture capital raised $468 million, a 180% increase from the same period in 2025.

The new military budget request will face steep political challenges as it seeks congressional approval. To help offset the increase in military spending, the Trump administration has made deep cuts to nondefense programs across the federal government, including to affordable housing, education and job training, and medical research.

– Anna Mulrine Grobe / Staff writer

Péter Magyar's challenge: Rebuild Hungary's democracy

The question facing Hungary's leader-in-waiting is momentous. How do you rebuild a democracy that has been openly and systematically undermined from within for 16 years?

During his long rule, Prime Minister Viktor Orbán changed the structure of the constitutional court and packed it with loyalists. He dramatically curtailed independent media. And he reshaped the Hungarian economy as an oligarchy, where as much as 30% of the gross domestic product runs through businesses with ties to him.

That's just the top of the list. So where does Péter Magyar, the incoming prime minister, even start?

The question is urgent. The Hungarians who gave Mr. Magyar's Tisza party a decisive two-thirds majority in Parliament are expecting strong action against corruption, which was voters' top issue, according to polls. The European Union, which Mr. Orbán repeatedly ignored and antagonized, has an Aug. 31 deadline for proof of progress.

But Mr. Magyar's next steps also matter more broadly as countries in Europe and beyond wrestle with new strains of populism. His experience will be a crucial test of whether leaders can reestablish democratic processes or if they instead fall into the self-perpetuating cycles of personal power and revenge.

"Can you avoid being trapped in your own power bubble? Can you allow some control on your own power?" asks Stefano Bottoni, senior fellow at the Hungarian Academy of Sciences in Budapest. "This is what paved the way for the gloomy situation we have in Hungary today."

The EU deadline offers Mr. Magyar a focus. The EU is withholding some €18 billion ($21.2 billion) in grants because it determined that Hungary under Mr. Orbán failed to reach 27 specific milestones for rule of law. If these are not met by the end of August, Hungary will lose the money permanently.

The good news for Mr. Magyar is that the EU's milestones generally align with his own priorities domestically. These include steps to root out fraud and to ensure judicial independence. The problem is that such steps might not be easy or quick, even with a two-thirds legislative majority that can rewrite the constitution, if needed.

Mr. Magyar's government won't assume power until May. Until then, he is worried that ministries are even now destroying the documents that could reveal corruption. He has set up an online platform for anonymous whistleblowers, hoping to hold wrongdoers accountable even before he takes office.

Then there is the question of what he finds when he becomes prime minister. Will he have to forcibly remove all the top officials Mr. Orbán put in place? What about his judges?

This is probably Mr. Magyar's top priority. Not only could Mr. Orbán's loyalists be an impediment to his agenda, but they are a symbol of the regime he was elected to replace.

"The corruption was totally systemic," says Dr. Bottoni. "It has to be addressed even if it might cause disruption."

"This is not a change of government," he adds. "It is the start of a change of regime."

And that doesn't even begin to address what he does about the oligarchic economic system Mr. Orbán established, in which certain businesses were openly favored. While there was almost certainly corruption within the system, the system itself is not illegal. That is true of much of what Mr. Orbán established.

"It's more complicated than meets the eye," says Grégoire Roos, director of the Europe and Russia and Eurasia Programs at Chatham House, a think tank in London. "He will not dismantle that web overnight."

With his supermajority, Mr. Magyar has tremendous power to force out those who block his agenda. But if he is forced to rely on constitutional reforms, they would take time.

"It would be a cumbersome, time-consuming process," says Zoltán Ádám, a senior research fellow at the ELTE Centre for Social Sciences in Budapest. "He won't want to wait for a new constitution to be in place, so he would likely use some sort of extraordinary legal measure."

Most experts agree he is justified in taking such extraordinary action to undo the system Mr. Orbán built for his personal advantage. The processes established "in the long run can be separate from the rules for the new appointees," says Mr. Ádám.

But then how does Mr. Magyar avoid simply becoming another Viktor Orbán himself?

One potentially significant sign: Mr. Magyar has agreed to join the European Public Prosecutor's Office, which means EU investigators could be a part of Hungary's anti-corruption efforts. Mr. Orbán rejected the group. Joining the group would mark some check on Mr. Magyar's power, helping him counter any perception that his agenda is mere political revenge.

There is danger ahead for Hungary, but also opportunity. "We have to build a democratic culture that was never there," says Dr. Bottoni. "If he can at least start doing that, we have a historic chance."

– Mark Sappenfield / Staff writer

Atlanta's zoo to receive giant pandas

China has announced that it will send two pandas, Ping Ping and Fu Shuang, to Zoo Atlanta as part of a 10-year conservation partnership.

This new agreement is part of Beijing's long-running "panda diplomacy" with the United States and a continuation of its conservation program. As of March, there were 808 giant pandas in captivity worldwide, including at the San Diego and Washington, D.C., zoos. That's almost double from a decade ago. The number of wild pandas, mainly concentrated in China's national parks, remains steady at 1,900.

"Zoo Atlanta is delighted and honored to yet again be trusted as stewards of this treasured species," said Raymond B. King, the zoo's president and CEO.

– Staff

NUMBERS IN THE NEWS

61

Percentage of U.S. adults who say they are bothered by the feeling that some wealthy people don't pay their fair share of taxes. Sixty percent of U.S. adults say they are bothered by the feeling that some corporations don't pay taxes fairly.

3.3

Percentage by which consumer prices increased in the U.S. over the past year, according to Bureau of Labor Statistics data released in early April. In March alone, prices rose 0.9%, because of U.S. military operations in Iran. This marks the sharpest rise in inflation in nearly four years.

$2.15 MILLION

The median home price in San Francisco, as of March. The median price surged nearly 18% from last year, thanks to an artificial intelligence tech boom and hiring surge in the Bay Area.

$51 BILLION

China's trade surplus in March, a roughly 50% decrease from its surplus of $103 billion a year ago. Trade between the United States and China has been shrinking, and the Iran war has also impacted China's exports to the Middle East and elsewhere.

62

Percentage of U.S. adults who think the benefits of sending people into space are worth the costs, according to an Ipsos poll conducted in early April after NASA's launch of Artemis II. Support for space exploration has grown over time. After Americans first landed on the moon in 1969, 39% of U.S. adults believed the costs were justified.

– Victoria Hoffmann / Staff writer

Sources: Pew Research Center, Bureau of Labor Statistics, Los Angeles Times, The Wall Street Journal, CNN, Ipsos

OUR WORLD

"A political choice masquerading as neutrality."

That's how Ashwini Deshpande, an economist at Ashoka University, described India's outdated census data to Al Jazeera. Delhi kicked off a long-delayed census – originally scheduled for 2021 – in April. It's the first since India eclipsed China as the world's most populous nation, with an estimated 1.4 billion people. Over the next year, millions of officials will collect data – including, controversially, on caste – that will shape political representation, welfare allocation, and other development decisions for the next decade.

– Lindsey McGinnis

Argentina eases protections for glaciers

In 2010, Argentina became the first country in Latin America to pass a law that specifically protects its glaciers, deeming them "vital water resources." But in April, President Javier Milei's government relaxed restrictions, opening up the choice on whether a glacier can be mined to provincial authorities. Argentina has nearly 17,000 glaciers, which provide water to some 40 rivers across 12 provinces. Environmentalists say the legal change will weaken water-protection laws. Mr. Milei says the reform empowers provinces to use resources as they see fit.

– Whitney Eulich

"No economy can afford to leave half its potential untapped."

That's according to the World Bank's Women, Business and the Law 2026 report – an assessment of equality in laws and how well they are enforced. Egypt, in particular, scored 10 points higher than it did in 2024 in the report's legal frameworks index – above the regional average – after removing some restrictions on women working, offering flexible labor arrangements, and expanding paid leave for parents. Jordan, Kyrgyzstan, Madagascar, Oman, and Somalia also took "notable steps toward removing discriminatory laws," the report stated.

– Audrey Thibert

Japan puts the lid back on litter

Japan has long been one of the cleanest places in the world, despite having few public trash bins. "People are taught from a young age to take their trash home," CNN reported. But litter has increased amid a tourism boom, prompting some cities to reinstall bins and introduce fines for littering starting in June. Public trash bins largely disappeared after attacks in 1995 by a doomsday cult carried out in the Tokyo subway.

– Audrey Thibert

CARACAS, VENEZUELA

In Venezuela, political change and food costs don't add up

The country's triple-digit inflation hasn't changed much since the U.S. captured former leader Nicolás Maduro on Jan. 3. What's giving Venezuelans hope?

By Tibisay Zea / Contributor

Alexandra Rodríguez Urbina, a young nurse in Caracas, has not had a day off in nearly two weeks. She moves between clinic and hospital shifts, starting before sunrise and often finishing long after dark. At night, if she's not too exhausted, she bakes cakes and cookies to sell the next day to patients and colleagues.

When she finally gets a day off, she spends it at the supermarket. Before going, she makes a list: vegetables, chicken, eggs, milk, maybe meat or sausages. But the list rarely holds. Prices change quickly, and what she can afford one week can slip out of reach the next.

Ms. Rodríguez no longer shops at her usual supermarket; it became too expensive last year. She now goes to a cheaper Chinese-run store, adjusting as she moves through the aisles. She picks up a package of sausages, checks the price, and puts it back. At the meat counter, she takes a number, hesitates, then leaves. This week, she decides, it will be chicken and legumes. "I don't know if we'll be able to buy red meat ever again," she says.

It wears on her. "The constant recalculating, the feeling that, no matter how much you work, money is never enough," she says. Countries across the globe are grappling with higher food prices in light of the war in Iran. But in Venezuela, consumers have been struggling for decades with one of the highest inflation rates in the world, regularly hitting triple digits – and one that hasn't budged since the United States captured former authoritarian leader Nicolás Maduro on Jan. 3.

In recent months, she's heard officials in Venezuela and the U.S. speak of economic recovery, rising oil production, and investment. But standing in the supermarket aisle, doing the math in her head, those changes don't yet align with her reality.

"Real improvements"

Venezuela holds the world's largest oil reserves, which once powered its status as one of Latin America's strongest economies. But through corruption, mismanagement, and U.S. sanctions, Venezuela fell into one of deepest economic collapses in modern history, starting in 2014.

Today, close to 75% of the population lives in poverty.

For many Venezuelans, the most urgent problem is painfully familiar: Prices continue to rise, wages keep losing value, and no matter how much they work, the money is never enough.

Venezuela's economy is no longer in free fall. It has modestly grown over the past few years, supported by a partial recovery in oil production and a wider circulation of dollars. Since Mr. Maduro's removal, that stabilization has entered a new phase.

Washington has eased sanctions, and under pressure from the Trump administration, acting President Delcy Rodríguez has moved to overhaul oil sector rules. New laws grant private companies greater control over production and sales, ending the state oil company's monopoly and allowing disputes to be settled through independent arbitration.

Oil revenues are now routed into U.S.-controlled bank accounts in a bid to increase transparency and attract foreign investment, though some U.S. lawmakers have called for stricter oversight.

"It's not just perception – there are real improvements," says Venezuelan economist Luis Vicente León. "But it's not yet a recovery that people fully feel in their pockets."

According to the Caracas-based polling firm Datanalisis, positive assessments of the country's general situation rose from 19% in October 2025 to more than 55% in February 2026. And 71% of Venezuelans expect living conditions to improve.

But, "expecting immediate results would be like running a marathon the day after coming out of solitary confinement," says Mr. León. It's not realistic.

For now, structural constraints, including unreliable electricity and labor shortages caused by years of out-migration, continue to limit jobs and income growth. Private investment is expanding beyond oil into sectors such as construction and technology. But projects will take time to materialize. And food prices remain top of mind for society.

An opportunity?

Older adults have become some of the most vulnerable to Venezuela's economic crisis. A study by the nonprofit Convite found that Venezuelan seniors need about $500 a month to cover food and transportation, while their average income is around $50, a gap of more than 90%.

Carlos Irala, a university professor in his 70s, continues teaching finance at the Central University of Venezuela, earning roughly $60 a month. He'd like to retire, he says, but doesn't have the means.

Mr. Irala, an economist trained in the United Kingdom, never imagined his later years would look like this. At the supermarket, he has cut back on buying protein and has reduced his portion sizes as prices go up. A whole chicken now costs around $10, a sizable chunk of his paycheck.

The collapse of Venezuela's pension system has deepened the strain on the elderly. Pensions are tied to the minimum wage of 130 bolívares per month – about $0.28 – unchanged since March 2022. On April 8, acting President Rodríguez announced on state television that she would make a "responsible increase" to workers' wages in May.

Mr. Irala lives alone, like many of his peers. More than 7.9 million Venezuelans – roughly a quarter of the population – have left the country since 2013. Family support systems have weakened, leaving many seniors isolated.

Economist Ricardo Hausmann, a professor at Harvard University and former Venezuelan finance minister, says the influx of cash Venezuela needs is unlikely to materialize without democratic change. For "Venezuela to become investable, you need clear rules and credible institutions," he says.

"We just want to choose our own leaders," Ms. Rodríguez, the nurse, says.

Despite the struggle to make ends meet, more public protests are taking place, and the government released hundreds of political prisoners, including Ms. Rodríguez's own mother, who was let out of prison after a year in detention for protesting Venezuela's 2024 election results. She was one of the hundreds of political prisoners

freed following Mr. Maduro's removal from power.

"It's not that my financial situation has changed, but for the first time I believe it might," Ms. Rodríguez says. She says she always loved the lasagna her mom made, though she didn't make it often because it requires so much time – and so many ingredients.

Lasagna is a dish in Venezuela for good times, "for special occasions like family reunions, when members help out in the kitchen," she says. She and her mom, who is also a nurse, are working multiple jobs, like so many other Venezuelans. And the cheese and meat that are central to the recipe are out of their budget these days.

Still, she looks beyond the grocery store aisle, to a post-Maduro landscape, and feels some hope. "This can be an opportunity for Venezuela to do better," she says. "Maybe the opportunity of a lifetime." ▪

BOSTON

Boston pushes to keep school buses rolling

Polls show nationwide struggles with late school buses. In Boston, parents, local officials, and the school district press for accountability.

By Cameron Pugh / Staff writer

By 7:20 a.m., Andrew Iliff has already run through much of his morning routine. His daughter, Zoe, is ready for school, her tie-dye backpack nearby. Mr. Iliff spreads chili crisp and avocado on toast while Zoe's mom sips from a white mug.

Uncertainty, though, is baked into this early morning ritual. Each day, the family wonders when – and whether – the school bus will arrive to pick up Zoe.

"No bus news," Mr. Iliff says. The family gathers around a kitchen island as he thumbs through Zum, a GPS-enabled app that updates parents with the whereabouts of their child's bus. "No news is good news, right?"

Tardy and unpredictable buses have long dogged families of Boston Public Schools (BPS), a sprawling district that transports some 19,000 students to over 200 schools a day. BPS and Transdev, the district's bus contractor, have for years struggled to run the enormously complex operation in a city well-known for its circuitous streets and gridlocked traffic.

Parents need the bus to be reliable, say Mr. Iliff and his wife Jessica Berwick – as reliable as the morning sun rising over the eaves of the Victorian-style homes in their Jamaica Plain neighborhood. A bus that comes 15 or 30 minutes late can mean canceled appointments, skipped work and lost pay, as well as disrupted learning for children.

"Something has got to give, because right now, this is a systemic failure," says Cheryl Buckman, a South Boston resident. Her son, Landon, takes the bus each day, and she, like parents across the city, says it's frequently late. "You can't let these kids down, because they're not going to be able to learn."

On the whole, on-time arrivals have ticked up in Boston over the years. They recently rose to 94% for morning trips in March – among the highest levels in half a decade. Yet a recent dip in performance, and a sharp increase in routes with either no drive or no bus assigned, have prompted renewed scrutiny from parents and elected officials. And even an on-time rating as high as 93% equates to some 1,330 students arriving late each day, said Boston City Council Member Erin Murphy at a March 31 hearing.

The trouble now facing the district, and parents, is how to fix it. Dan Rosengard, the district's executive director for transportation, recognized families' struggles at the March hearing, while highlighting the progress BPS has made and promising more improvements.

"If you are a student on one of the buses that is consistently arriving late, the system is failing you," Mr. Rosengard said. "While we are proud of the progress we've made in recent years, we will not and cannot rest until every student who relies on the bus can feel confident that it's going to get them to school safely, on time, and ready to learn."

Because not all public school districts publish bus transportation data, it can be difficult to make comparisons across cities. Yet Boston is not alone. School districts nationwide have struggled with bus service in recent years, owing to driver shortages and shrinking budgets.

In an Associated Press-NORC poll last year, 44% of parents across the U.S. said that their children have been late to school because of transportation challenges. And about 30% of school administrators said they worried about whether their district could provide transportation for vulnerable students, such as those with disabilities or experiencing homelessness.

"We have to do this math every morning"

Around 7:30 a.m., about 30 minutes before Zoe's bus is scheduled, Dr. Berwick leans over the kitchen counter and outlines her day. She has a meeting before heading to her job at Massachusetts General Hospital. If the bus doesn't come, taking Zoe to school will fall to Mr. Iliff.

"We have to do this math every morning," she says. "Every morning, it's like we need at least one to two levels of backup plan."

"Because the bus could say, 'We're 20 minutes late,'" Zoe adds.

The couple is able to adjust when the bus goes missing, owing to flexible work schedules and proximity to Zoe's school. Usually, a delayed bus means Zoe and Mr. Iliff swaddle themselves in winter gear and bike to Rafael Hernández School, where Zoe is a third grader. Zoe's brother, a high school junior, is old enough to carpool or take public transit, which means one less schedule to juggle.

Yet families are not the only ones managing complicated schedules. Under Massachusetts law, BPS must provide transportation not only for public schools, but also parochial and charter schools, whose students make up 22% of bus riders. Those schools set their own distinct start times, adding wrinkles to an already complex bus schedule.

Further complicating matters is Boston's notorious traffic – the fifth worst in the country, according to a 2025 report by INRIX, a transportation analytics company.

BPS, for its part, has worked to reform its system, launching the Zum app to provide parents more timely updates and reforming its contract with Transdev. A 2024 memo from the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education noted "some progress" in transportation, including a jump in bus on-time rates from 76.4% in September 2022 to 87.8% in March 2024. Levels have since risen to 91% on average this year. Still, the district has never achieved its benchmark of 95%.

In 2025, the district exited its Systemic Improvement Plan, which it agreed to in 2022 to avoid triggering receivership, a protocol where

the state appoints an official to run the system. That followed a withering state probe that criticized BPS for "deficiencies across a broad range of district functions," including poor bus performance.

Mr. Iliff says he recognizes the work the district has put into improving a transportation system that has long resisted even minor improvements.

"They're working in good faith, they're trying hard, they're putting their best foot forward," he says. "I wouldn't want that job. This is a really tough ship to turn around."

Consequences for parents – and the bus operator

About 25 minutes before Zoe's scheduled bus, Dr. Berwick crosses her arms and shakes her head. Every morning, as she and Mr. Iliff monitor Zum, she wonders how other families with less flexible work schedules manage.

Ms. Buckman, the mother from South Boston, thinks often about the potential consequences of a late bus. Recently, she says, Landon's father was a half hour late for work because he had to wait with their son for a tardy bus.

"We can't keep doing this," Ms. Buckman says. "Sooner or later, a parent's going to lose his job if he walks in the door late because of a late bus."

Being late to school – or late coming home – has rippling impacts on students, too, Ms. Buckman says. She says her son, who has been diagnosed with ADHD and autism, has missed medical appointments because late buses in the afternoon. Arriving late to school can cause him academic and emotional distress.

"If he's late, it sets him up for, I want to say, maybe a 15-minute meltdown that he has in school, just to get all of his frustrations out," she says.

Yet many parents feel that Transdev, the district's contractor since 2013, has, unlike them, avoided consequences for its performance.

Transdev hires and trains drivers, as well as operates and maintains the 750-bus fleet. Under the most recent iteration of its contract, BPS can charge the company $500 for every bus that doesn't show or is more than an hour late. But for most of this school year, the district has not issued those fines – a revelation that incensed some parents and local officials. Mr. Rosengard said at the March hearing that BPS would issue fines going forward. In April, Mr. Rosengard told City Council that the district had fined Transdev $105,000.

BPS told the Monitor that the contract was designed to improve performance through a "combination of incentives and accountability measures."

"When performance declined in December 2025, particularly with increased uncovered trips, BPS took additional steps to hold the vendor accountable," a district spokesperson said in a statement.

The number of uncovered trips, or those with no driver or no bus, leapt from 86 in September to 329 in January, according to a February letter from Mr. Rosengard to the school committee. There were more than 2,000 uncovered trips as of January, the letter said. As of March, Mr. Rosengard said at the hearing, uncovered trips have fallen to slightly below September's levels.

In a statement to the Monitor, Transdev acknowledged that delays can "impact students' readiness for the school day and pose significant challenges for parents." The bus operator said that it was "deeply committed to building on our progress and delivering the reliable service that students and parents deserve."

Rolling forward

"Two stops away," Mr. Iliff says, checking Zum around 7:40 a.m.

The family breathes a sigh of relief this morning, now that the bus is seemingly on its way. Mr. Iliff is walking Zoe to the bus stop today. They hustle into the foyer where Zoe pulls on a pink-and-purple winter coat and shoulders her backpack.

Before she says goodbye, Dr. Berwick underscores how uncertainty adds a layer of stress to their days.

"The problem is not the walk or the drive even," she says. "It's the inconsistency. We could make another plan – we totally could. But I never know which morning we're going to need that plan."

Not this morning.

After a brief, but blustery, walk in the April cold, Mr. Iliff watches as Zoe's bus pulls up, early, at around 7:55 a.m. The driver, Junior, who Mr. Iliff says is "always cheerful," puts on a show, honking and flashing the vehicle's lights.

"Good morning," Mr. Iliff shouts to Junior, as Zoe boards the bus. Today, it seems, she'll arrive at school on time, along with most of her BPS peers. ▪

BOSTON

Where inflation is felt the most: The checkout counter

More than half of Americans say everyday life is less affordable. Most say rising grocery costs are the main culprit.

By Laurent Belsie and Victoria Hoffmann / Staff writers

Not all that long ago, food shopping was one of Joei Chan's mindless chores. She didn't think about which grocery had the best prices on bananas or bread, whether to wait until items on her shopping list were on sale, or whether there might be a coupon for yogurt.

But these days, the Boston resident says, food shopping has become "strategic."

"Now, it's all about: How can I best save my money?" says the recent college grad who now works in hospitality, trying to speak over the amplified announcer and screeching brakes of Boston's T.

Housing and healthcare costs received a lot of the cost-of-living attention in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic. More recently, gas prices have captured headlines. But it's the food costs that people such as Ms. Chan notice every day. As she says, it's "one expense that is a lot for me."

Since 2020, overall grocery prices have jumped about 24%, rising even faster than the cost of living, according to the U.S. Department of Agriculture. In the last year alone, grocery prices were up an average 2.4% from a year earlier.

In March, the U.S. Department of Agriculture said food costs could rise by 3.1% in 2026 compared with last year's grocery bills.

"It wouldn't surprise me to see some further rise," Joseph Glauber, a research fellow emeritus of the International Food Policy Research Institute, said at an April 10 news briefing.

In a CNBC-SurveyMonkey poll released in April, more than half of Americans said everyday life had become less affordable over the past year. Three-quarters of them (76%) pointed to rising grocery

prices as a leading cause, more so than gasoline and transportation (71%), healthcare (37%), housing (32%), or any other category.

It doesn't appear to matter to consumers that food price inflation has slowed significantly since 2022, when "food-at-home" prices, meaning grocery prices, soared 9.9%, the biggest jump since 1979, according to the USDA. Experts cited reasons ranging from a strain of avian influenza that devastated flocks of laying hens that year to the Russia-Ukraine war, which kept Ukrainian grain as well as Russian energy and fertilizer off the market, causing prices to soar and food exports to dwindle.

Despite the slowing inflation, food bills remain a flash point for consumers' larger inflation concerns. Part of this is the nature of food itself.

While people are able to modify daily routines to cope with rising costs (they can carpool, stop buying new clothes, cancel vacations, or cut back on eating out and going to the movies), they don't typically stop buying food. Unless stretched so thin that skipping meals becomes necessary, they also can shop for cheaper groceries, of course. But they still tend to purchase the same amount of food.

These factors keep food demand generally steady, or "inelastic," as economists put it. That inelasticity, in turn, makes food prices especially sensitive to inflationary surges.

Groceries and the gas pump

This is particularly true now, with oil prices rising.

Food prices remain especially susceptible to energy price shocks because energy plays a major role at every step of the supply chain. Diesel fuel powers the tractors that farmers use to plant their crops. The nitrogen fertilizers they spread and the heat they use to dry their crops typically come from natural gas.

Then there's what happens after the farm – the shipping, processing, and packaging – that add the most costs. Each stage involves some form of energy, including the electric power grocery stores use to keep produce crisp and ice cream frozen.

Some food prices rise faster than others. Right now, for example, beef prices are soaring because of drought and higher operating costs, which have driven cattle herd counts to a 75-year low. Fresh tomato prices hit an eight-year high last month because of rising energy costs, tariffs on Mexican tomato imports, and weather problems in Florida, a key growing region. Eggs, on the other hand, are getting cheaper because farmers are rebuilding flocks after the 2022 avian flu outbreak.

Consumers notice

"Food's gone up a lot this year," says Vanessa Salmon, a resident of Benton Harbor, Michigan, who lives on a fixed income. "Fig Newtons that I buy were actually 87 cents at Aldi when I first moved to Michigan in 2018. And now, they're about $2.50. And I'm pretty sure that they're all a little bit smaller, too."

"I don't buy the nicer ingredients anymore," says her son, Leo V. Kaplan, of nearby Kalamazoo. That means regular mushrooms instead of shiitakes. Planning special meals for celebrations can also be daunting, he says. "I spent $70 on cooking a birthday cake."

"I think we haven't seen even maybe the worst of it," adds Ms. Salmon.

Waste not, want not

Hardest hit by rising food prices are young people, families with children, and low-income households. A February survey by LendingTree, an online financial marketplace, found that roughly 20% of people in those groups said affording food had become difficult. By contrast, only 5% of baby boomers report such difficulty.

Whatever the challenge, people are seeking solutions. Nearly 9 in 10 Americans are taking action to reduce costs, with 30% reporting they are paying closer attention to grocery prices, according to LendingTree. One in 4 reported cutting back spending on "splurge" items or replacing brand-name purchases with store or generic brands.

One-quarter of Americans also said they were paying more attention to reducing food waste and eating more leftovers.

Food waste remains a big problem in the United States. Some 70 million tons of food were wasted in 2024, most of it before it reaches consumers, according to an April report by ReFED, a Chicago-based nonprofit working to address the problem. That's about 29% of the U.S. food supply.

Though huge, the number represents a 2.2% decrease from 2023, the first such decline since the pandemic. Households trimmed nearly 950,000 tons from residential food waste in part by increasing donations to food banks.

Much of the progress is linked to focusing on everyday items that are easy to manage, such as milk, according to ReFED. Foods that are more difficult to track, such as fresh fruit, did not show similar reductions. The organization is working to promote ways that make perishables more visible, including refrigerator-monitoring tools and "eat me first" labels.

But to waste less (and thereby save more), consumers can: create weekly meal plans, shop with a list to avoid overbuying, store produce in airtight containers, and keep refrigerators organized. Other strategies include eating leftovers, freezing food before it spoils, monitoring expiration dates, and composting scraps.

"This past year, the often 'invisible' problem of food waste became much more visible," the report said. "With persistent food insecurity, shrinking federal food assistance programs, and significantly elevated grocery prices stressing consumers and challenging food businesses, a wide range of external factors set the stage for food waste action." ▪

DAKAR, SENEGAL

Why the cost of Senegal's national dish just keeps going up

Food prices are rising quickly in Senegal. That's affecting the country's national dish, *thieboudienne.*

By Adrien Marotte / Contributor

The sun slowly begins to set over the island of Ngor, off the northern coast of Senegal's capital, Dakar.

As residents and tourists lounge on the beach, the smell of frying fish wafts from a nearby restaurant, mingling with the salty air. Inside, Aminata Mbengue slices onions with quick, confident movements.

On tonight's menu is *thieboudienne,* Senegal's national dish. It's made from fish, rice, cabbage, carrots, cassava, eggplant, oil, and chile, all of it stewed in a rich, tomato-based broth. Traditionally eaten with one's hands from a communal plate, *thieb* is seen as a culinary reflection of one of Senegal's core cultural values, *teranga,*

or hospitality.

The dish is so iconically Senegalese that, in 2021, UNESCO added it to the list of the world's most important pieces of "intangible cultural heritage." But nearly all of the ingredients Ms. Mbengue adds to her pot tonight are shaped by forces far beyond the country's borders.

Right now, that means one thing: Her costs are rising.

As in other nations around the world, Senegal's government has expressed concerns about cost of living because of the war in Iran. Food inflation here predates that conflict – with local challenges ranging from overfishing to rising imports – but war could exacerbate it further.

"Everything has gone up in Senegal," she says.

Fish and rice

Thieboudienne's name comes from the Wolof words for its two core ingredients, *ceeb* (rice) and *jin* (fish).

Traditionally, the *jin* is a flaky white grouper, a type of fish known locally as *thiof.* But in recent years, overfishing by locals, coupled with added pressure from foreign industrial fleets, have begun to empty Senegalese waters of *thiof.*

El Hadj Moustapha Diop, a fisher since 1977, says he barely ever sees *thiof* in the water anymore. "Ten years ago, in one day, you could catch 15 or 20," he says.

As a result of the shortage, many *thieb* chefs have turned to a fish once associated with poverty, sardinella – or young sardines. But even they are becoming scarce. Mostly foreign-owned fish-meal factories are driving a massive reduction in the population. In the 2010s, between 100,000 and 250,000 tons of sardinella were caught each year, but since 2020, catches have plummeted to approximately 10,000 tons annually. Scientists say the population is now teetering on the brink of "collapse," meaning the fish population could soon be too low to replenish itself.

Then there is *ceeb* – rice. Though it is a Senegalese staple, at least 40% of the country's supply is imported. Between 2020 and 2024, the price shot up nearly 40%, driven by global shocks including the COVID-19 pandemic, rising shipping costs, and export restrictions from major rice-producing countries such as India. The government introduced subsidies to reduce the price in 2024, but the reductions are unevenly applied, so many Senegalese are still paying more for rice than before the crisis.

"Now, I think twice"

At Dakar's neighborhood *thieb* eateries, rising costs are evident.

Five to 10 years ago, *thieb* "was the most affordable meal," says Ibrahima Fall, a mechanic. On a recent afternoon, he was sharing a communal plate of *thieb* with his colleagues at an informal restaurant in the neighborhood of Virage. The chef here raised the price three years ago from 600 CFA francs (about $1) to 1,000 ($1.80). In Ngor at the same moment, Ms. Mbengue began charging 2,500 CFA francs ($4.50) for a plate instead of 1,500 ($2.70).

"Now, I think twice before buying it," says Mr. Fall. "Sometimes, I choose a sandwich instead."

For chefs, however, there is little that can be done.

"People think we raise prices to earn more," says Fatou Sarr, who makes *thieboudienne* in the central Dakar neighborhood of Ouakam. "But ... it's just to survive."

Even the prices of the locally-grown veggies in *thieb* aren't stable. They fluctuate with harvest quality, transport costs, and demand.

Shopping for ingredients on the island of Ngor on a recent morning, Ms. Mbengue picked up a cabbage. Five years ago, one cabbage was 100 CFA francs. Now, it's more than double, at 250 CFA francs. Chiles, tomatoes, peppers – they're all up, too, she says.

Still, she has customers to serve. Back at the restaurant later in the day, she lifts the lid of the pot where her *thieb* is cooking. A thick steam rises, filled with the smells of fish, onions, and chiles. The rice has turned a deep red.

Ms. Mbengue dishes the first plates, as more customers queue up to order. With practiced hands, she lays the fish gently on a bed of rice stained deep red by the tomato sauce, then arranges the vegetables around it – a piece of carrot, a wedge of cabbage, a strip of cassava, softened from hours of simmering. A spoon of sauce follows, soaking into the grains.

The dish might be more expensive than ever, but a good *thieboudienne* is still hard to refuse. ▪

ACCRA, GHANA; NAIROBI, KENYA; AND JOHANNESBURG

A war in Europe drags on, and Africans pay the price

Citizens of Ghana, Kenya, and several other African nations are ending up on the front lines in Ukraine as Russia looks overseas to bolster its armed forces.

By Vincent Owino and Justice Baidoo / Special contributors
and Ryan Lenora Brown / Special correspondent

Last October, Maxwell Aidoo was scrolling TikTok from his home near Ghana's capital, Accra, when a video caught his eye.

A Ghanaian man describing himself as a travel agent explained that he was recruiting for cleaning and construction jobs in Russia. The pay – $4,000 a month – was many multiples of what Mr. Aidoo and his mother earned running their small general store.

So he sent a message. The agent got back to him quickly: Would he be interested in working as a "helper" moving equipment for the Russian military?

That seemed easy enough. "I thought, 'It pays well,'" Mr. Aidoo recalls.

When Russia launched its full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, the Kremlin imagined a quick, decisive victory. Instead, the war has become the deadliest conflict in Europe since World War II, with combined casualties expected to surpass 2 million this year. The grueling war has killed as many as 325,000 Russian soldiers and wounded nearly a million more.

To make up for these staggering losses, the Russian military is recruiting more than 30,000 new soldiers each month. And to find them, Moscow is casting an increasingly wider net.

Since November, the number of foreigners fighting in the Russian military has risen sharply from about 18,000 to nearly 28,000. Among them are citizens of at least 36 African countries.

Many have no idea what they have signed up for.

"They didn't say I was going to war," Mr. Aidoo says.

A once-in-a-lifetime offer

Recruitment efforts like the one that ensnared Mr. Aidoo follow

a remarkably consistent script.

In countries across Africa, headhunters pepper social media with ads for high-paying civilian jobs in Russia, including roles in cooking, housekeeping, and security. Some also advertise military positions.

In December 2025, a friend of Vincent Ndung'u told him about a company recruiting Kenyans to join the Russian army. Mr. Ndung'u had long dreamed of becoming a soldier, and the salary the agent promised – $2,500 per month and a $12,400 signing bonus – stopped him in his tracks.

"I had never been paid that kind of money in my life," says the father of three, who worked piece jobs in construction and catering. "I saw the opportunity to change my life, and my family's fortunes forever."

And so, without telling anyone the specifics, Mr. Ndung'u signed up. From there, he says, things moved "unnaturally" fast. He was sent to the capital, Nairobi, then quickly put on a plane to Moscow.

"All I knew is I was going to join a military," he says. "I had no idea there was a war between Russia and Ukraine."

Mr. Ndung'u is one of about 1,000 Kenyans who have been recruited to fight in Russia since the war began, according to lawmakers there, many under false pretenses.

Mr. Ndung'u's first flicker that something was wrong came soon after he arrived in Russia. He received a panicked WhatsApp message from the friend who had encouraged him to enlist, who was already in Ukraine.

"You should either disappear or wait to die," his friend told him. "Africans are dying."

A "crazy decision"

For recruiters, who pocket bonuses for each soldier they sign up, young African men like Mr. Aidoo and Mr. Ndung'u are an easy mark. One-third of the continent's population lives on less than $2 a day, and fewer than 1 in 5 adults have a salaried job. Those who want to work or study in wealthier countries usually find the doors bolted shut.

In this context, a job in Russia promises the extraordinary: a prosperous life in Europe.

When Mr. Aidoo arrived in Russia last November, he was eager to begin earning and supporting his mother. But he was surprised to find there was no "helper" position waiting for him. Instead, he was given a contract to sign in Russian, which turned out to be for a position as a soldier with the Wagner Group, a state-funded private militia. Then he was sent to the war-battered Ukrainian region of Donetsk.

Still, Mr. Aidoo tried to make the best of the situation. He sent home photos of himself in military camo, posing in the snow with an assault rifle slung over his shoulder. He took shaky phone videos of abandoned tanks and storerooms packed with ammunition. "A [expletive] crazy decision I took," he says in one. "But it's all good."

Behind the facade, however, Mr. Aidoo was terrified. "I saw people die every day," he says.

Nearly 1 in 4 Africans enlisted in the Russian army have been killed, according to a list of African recruits obtained by Inpact, a Swiss investigative research organization. And while compensation to the families of slain Russian soldiers can exceed $180,000, relatives of slain foreign fighters receive nothing.

In December 2025, Mr. Aidoo's battalion was advancing toward a Ukrainian position when something exploded nearby. The next thing he remembers, he was lying in a military hospital in Moscow.

Fearing he would be returned to the front line, he fled with the help of a friend to the Ghanaian Embassy, which arranged a ticket home. On the flight at the end of March, a single thought looped through his mind.

"I would close my eyes and just wish the plane would land so I [could] see my mother again," he says.

Pushing for change

In recent months, as a growing number of stories of young men tricked, trafficked, and killed in Russia have circulated, African governments have begun to sound the alarm.

Kenya's government recently shut down some 600 recruitment agencies and has also started prosecuting suspected traffickers. Meanwhile, in February, Ghanaian Foreign Minister Samuel Okudzeto Ablakwa traveled to Kyiv to personally appeal to Ukrainian authorities to release two Ghanaian prisoners of war.

"This is not our war, and we cannot allow our youth to become human shields for others," he wrote in a post on Facebook at the time.

Russia appears to be doing damage control, too, albeit covertly. Earlier this year, a blacklist began circulating in soldier recruitment networks of 43 countries whose citizens can no longer sign contracts with the Russian military. Among them were more than a dozen African nations, including both Ghana and Kenya.

But the policy is unofficial and unevenly enforced. And the new rules are little comfort for the families of men still in Ukraine.

Mr. Ndung'u, the Kenyan father, heeded his friend's warning from the front line, and managed to escape back to Kenya before being deployed to Ukraine. But after that January message, his friend abruptly stopped responding to texts.

"His family keeps asking me where he is," says Mr. Ndung'u. "I just tell them to be patient, that he'll come back. But deep down, I know he's no more." ▪

BOGOTÁ, COLOMBIA

How Colombia became a top exporter of mercenaries

It's not just Russia seeking fighters abroad – Ukraine's recruitment of Colombian veterans has made them one of the largest foreign contingents in the war.

By Manuel Rueda / Contributor

As a sergeant in Colombia's army, Michael Ramírez fought in repeated battles against the nation's rebel groups. He learned how to fabricate explosives, and was trained as a counterinsurgency specialist in a course that involved 40-mile marches and surviving in the jungle without food.

Mr. Ramírez retired from service in 2015. But he missed military life, so, eight years later, he got on a plane to Europe to join the Ukrainian army.

"He always spoke about how he regretted retiring in his 30s, and wanted to return to that world he knew so well," says his wife Patricia Mendigaño in Bogotá.

Over the past decade, Colombia has become a notorious supplier of mercenaries, with a March report published by a United Nations

working group estimating that at least 10,000 Colombians have been recruited by foreign armies and security contractors around the world. In recent years, hundreds have wound up in Ukraine.

The pull toward the war in Europe varies: Some, like Mr. Ramírez, have struggled to adapt to a "sedentary" life after the armed forces, while others complain about low pensions and few civilian job opportunities. NATO allies are often happy to bolster their forces with fighters from Colombia, where decades of internal conflicts involving guerrilla groups and drug traffickers have given many soldiers direct combat skills. Many veterans have received thorough training, sometimes from U.S. military advisers.

Compared with the deceptive practices Russia employs in countries like Kenya and Nepal, Ukraine's recruitment of Colombian fighters appears to be largely aboveboard. But the risks Colombians face on the front line are the same – as is the difficult search for closure for families of soldiers killed thousands of miles away from home, in wars that have little to do with them.

Colombia's appeal

A U.N. convention against the use of mercenaries, created in 1989, says that hiring "soldiers of fortune" is illegal. It calls on signatories – of which there are fewer than 40 – to prosecute mercenaries in their territory.

Yet the convention allows nations to integrate foreigners into their armies as long as they are treated the same as local fighters, with similar pay and obligations. This is what's happening in Ukraine, and in other countries that have established foreign legions.

Elizabeth Dickinson, a Colombia expert with the International Crisis Group, says the United Arab Emirates has been recruiting Colombian veterans since the early 2010s, when the Gulf nation was looking to bulk up its military with more midlevel officers. They narrowed in on Colombia, as many countries have since, because its officers were comfortable with the weapons and tactics used by NATO partners and other United States allies.

Ms. Dickinson says that, in recent years, a small industry of recruiters has developed within Colombia. Often retired officers themselves, the recruiters connect Colombian veterans with armies and security companies around the world.

"You have very official, above the table, and transparent recruitment," Ms. Dickinson says. "But you also have an increasing number of Colombians who are recruited by deceptive middlemen, and are not told what they are getting themselves into."

Backdoor recruits have fought for irregular forces in Sudan and Mexico. And in 2021, a group of 26 Colombians was contracted by a company in Florida to take out, for the co-owners' financial benefit, Haiti's President Jovenel Moïse. Some have wound up in Russia, too, though it is far less frequent for Colombians to join the Russian army.

Carlos Ramírez, a lawyer with a Colombian nonprofit called The Voices of Those Who Aren't Here (Corporación la Voz de los Que no Estan), says that, over the past two years, his organization has assisted 26 families with relatives who have joined the Russian army, and are now missing or killed in action. During the same time period, his organization has helped more than 300 families whose relatives have gone to Ukraine and experienced a similar fate.

"Russia provides very few details about its fighters," says Mr. Ramírez.

For any group or nation looking for a skilled fighter, Colombia offers a large supply of highly trained and relatively young veterans – for a price.

Early retirement and low pensions

Under Colombian law, most soldiers and noncommissioned officers must retire by the age of 45. But many are let go by their commanders before that, when they have completed 20 years of service and are eligible for a pension. It's a way to keep forces young and physically fit in a country where troops are exposed to repeated combat. Others choose to retire young due to a lack of promotions or low pay.

This means that those who began their military careers right out of high school can receive retirement orders in their late 30s.

"At that age, many people still have to support their children, or help their families," says Raul Musse Pencue, president of ACOSIPAR, an association representing Colombia's retired soldiers.

Veterans get a pension that is equivalent to 70% of what they last earned, Mr. Musse says, which typically comes to around $700 dollars a month. Civilian employment "opportunities are limited for someone who has been a soldier" their entire career, he says.

Those serving on the front lines in Ukraine, on the other hand, are offered around $4,000 a month.

Ms. Mendigaño's husband was doing OK financially in Colombia running a small business that sold car batteries, but with the wages from fighting abroad he could start to pay off a home loan. For five months he contemplated the move – talking to other veterans in Colombia, watching social media accounts of compatriots fighting in Ukraine, discussing the risks with his family – before ultimately buying a plane ticket to Europe.

Once there, he participated in multiple raids on Russian positions in northern Ukraine, which he recorded with a body camera. In September 2024, he got trapped during an operation near the village of Hlyboke, and sought shelter in an abandoned truck.

The Ukrainian army "used a drone for three days to send him food," his wife recalls. "They monitored him with heat cameras for a week, but then they lost track of him."

Mr. Ramírez was reported missing, and his wife fears he could be dead – or taken prisoner by the Russian military.

A surge in inexperienced recruits

Increasingly, Colombians with next to no military experience are enlisting in wars abroad, too. Edgar Eduardo López enlisted in the Ukrainian army in September 2024.

Although Mr. López had completed a year of compulsory military service when he was 19, he hadn't picked up a gun in two decades. He'd spent the past several years working as a truck driver, earning slightly above Colombia's minimum wage of $500 a month.

"He told me he wanted to buy me a nice house," says his mother, Lucia Sáenz, who lives in a hillside slum on the outskirts of Bogotá.

His lack of recent experience didn't stop the Ukrainian army from hiring him. While military experience increases the chances of acceptance, according to the Ukrainian international legion's website, any 18-to-60-year-old in good health and without a criminal record is eligible.

Mr. López was killed in a battle with Russian forces in November 2024, just two months after enlisting. Ms. Sáenz visited Ukraine last year to try to recover her son's remains, but was told his body was in an area now under Russian control and couldn't be reached.

All she wants now is to "give him a proper funeral," Ms. Sáenz says. "He was my son and I raised him on my own."

Colombia's government said it wants to crack down on middlemen trying to recruit mercenaries for foreign conflicts. President

Gustavo Petro recently signed a law that confirms Colombia's accession into the U.N. convention against mercenaries.

But Colombian regulations need to go further, says Mario Urueña, a professor at Bogotá's Rosario University who researches Colombia's mercenary industry. He'd like to see legally binding penalties for recruiters hiring fighters here, as well as training and mental health programs to help veterans transition into civilian life.

"In Colombia we applaud our soldiers, and we call them heroes," says Dr. Urueña. But, he adds, that appreciation needs to extend beyond retirement. ▪

KATHMANDU, NEPAL

What we've learned from POWs in Ukraine

Nepali fighters captured by Ukraine offer intel – for militaries, and for families back home.

By Aakash Hassan / Contributor

When the Monitor first reported on Russia's recruitment of Nepali citizens two years ago, officials and activists in Kathmandu were still trying to grasp the scale of the problem. Authorities moved to curb departures to Russia, while volunteers scrambled to trace missing men.

What once appeared to be isolated cases has since become a pattern. According to Nepal's Ministry of Foreign Affairs, at least 118 Nepali nationals have been killed while serving in the Russian army and 132 remain missing – and about a dozen are now prisoners of war in Ukraine.

Their testimonies – emerging through official interrogations, media releases, and letters – offer a rare window into how foreign nationals are being drawn into the conflict.

In an interrogation video published by The Kyiv Independent, for example, a Nepali prisoner describes how he traveled to Russia in search of work after falling into debt, only to be deployed to the front lines with minimal training. "We came because of money," he tells someone off-screen, adding that he was captured within weeks of his first combat mission.

For Ukrainian authorities, such interrogations serve a dual purpose: gathering intelligence while also documenting what they describe as an expanding overseas recruitment network to fill the gaps in Russia's war effort.

Indeed, Ukraine has sought to actively encourage defections through its "I Want To Live" initiative, which provides Russian soldiers and foreign recruits with guidance on how to surrender safely. Videos of POWs are used to highlight the risks faced by those recruited into the conflict, and to show that surrender is possible. More than 10,000 people have surrendered since 2022, according to the project, and 7% of those detained are foreign nationals.

But these POW accounts matter far beyond the front lines.

In one handwritten letter sent home by a Nepali POW earlier this year, there are no military secrets or battlefield details. Instead, it includes requests for family photographs; promises to send biscuits, tea, "and other small things"; and congratulations on a brother's wedding.

"I am safe and in good condition here," writes the POW, whose family shared the letter with the Monitor on the condition that his name is withheld to protect his safety. "I often think about home."

The letter moves between reassurance and concern. In coiling Devanagari script, the writer asks about his family's financial situation, and discusses arrangements for sending money through intermediaries – underscoring the fragile economic realities that shape many recruits' decision to leave in the first place.

Indeed, Nepal has seen a steady outflow of young men seeking work abroad, often driven by limited opportunities at home. Many are drawn to Russia through misleading promises of noncombat roles, and have little or no military training when they arrive in war-torn Ukraine.

"This Russian war is silently creating crises for thousands of families in Nepal," says Kritu Bhandari, a Kathmandu-based activist who has been helping families track down relatives who joined the Russian army. "These are very unlucky people who ended up in this war because of economic hardships, and now, as prisoners of war, their return to their families has become even more difficult."

Unlike foreign recruits still inside Russia, prisoners of war being held in Ukraine fall under formal exchange processes negotiated between Kyiv and Moscow, leaving little room for third-country intervention. Ukraine and Russia have conducted periodic prisoner swaps, but these are typically reciprocal, state-to-state exchanges that prioritize their own nationals.

"But with the letters coming from [the POWs], at least we know they are alive," Ms. Bhandari says. "There is hope that someday they will reunite with their families."

In his letter, the Nepali POW alludes to that hope in his sign-off.

"I will return and take care of everything," he promises. "Please don't worry too much about me. … That's all for now." ▪

REPORTERS ON THE JOB

MAINE

Sophie Hills

Worried I'd find no one to interview by the time I got to Maine to write about the state's U.S. Senate primary, I emailed 13 Democratic county committees (there are 16, total, in the state). Two or three might respond in time, I thought. By the next day, I had a new problem: an abundance of Democratic committee chairs, representing nine counties, all ready to meet.

Monitor photographer Melanie Stetson Freeman and I did our best, driving through four counties in one day for interviews and campaign events. From Portland to Millinocket, and everywhere along the way, people were eager to talk, which hinted at Mainers' high interest in this primary. ▪

SOCIAL CIRCLE, GEORGIA

Patrik Jonsson

For a story on jails run by Immigration and Customs Enforcement, I contacted the Rev. Dallas Anne Thompson, a chaplain leading ad hoc vigils outside a new ICE detention facility. She sees it as her duty to pray for those in distress. Someone saw the Rev. Thompson praying and complained to her private employer that vigils could be seen as an ICE protest. "I almost lost my job," the Rev. Thompson says.

Exchanges such as this one reveal the tightrope reporters often walk: sharing important stories without exposing vulnerable voices

to harm. In this case, I guaranteed to the Rev. Thompson that I wouldn't name her workplace so she could share insights without fear of reprisal. And she did. It was a reminder that meaningful reporting depends not just on getting sources to talk, but also on earning their trust. ▪

BOSTON

Cameron Pugh

Despite being well out of school-age years, I last caught a school bus just a few weeks ago. On a nippy April morning, I rose at 6 a.m. for a story on Boston's chronically late school buses. One family let me tag along during its morning routine. So, I shouldered a backpack and trudged into the rising sun. If the family's third grader, Zoe, could do it, so could I. My morning weariness dissolved as I chatted with the family. I felt energized not just by Zoe's laugh, but also by what Zoe's father noticed about my job – how I got to be present for even the smallest moments of other people's lives. ▪

WASHINGTON

Linda Feldmann

Reporters are used to covering the story, not being part of it. On April 25, at the White House correspondents' dinner in Washington, gunshots were fired outside the Hilton's main ballroom – and we in the press, including me and Monitor colleague Caitlin Babcock, became witnesses to history.

Our first duty was to stay safe, so we crouched on the floor, as instructed by security personnel. Soon, we were evacuated upstairs, where we exchanged information with fellow journalists. I called and texted more contacts, including other attendees, to see what they knew, as well as people on the outside who could share what they learned from TV coverage. Some early reports were false, but I quickly got the full story. ▪

THE EXPLAINER

What is reconciliation, and why are political parties turning to it more often?

The process was created as a tool to help Congress keep spending in line with revenue. It's become a way for the majority to sidestep political opposition.

By Caitlin Babcock / Staff writer

Budget reconciliation is a complicated procedure that both parties in Congress have increasingly used to skirt impasses caused by partisan divisions and pass budget-related bills.

Congress' willingness to use reconciliation signals a shift away from its regular lawmaking process in a way that some experts say de-emphasizes debate and gives the majority party more control over funding.

"Historically, reconciliation was created as a tool for deficit reduction to bring revenue and spending in line with budget targets," says Dominik Lett, a budget analyst at the libertarian-leaning Cato Institute. "Increasingly, it's being used as a [partisan] tool to … boost spending and increase the deficit."

Republicans used reconciliation to pass their tax-and-spending bill last year. Now they're turning to it again.

The Senate voted recently along party lines to start debate on a budget to spend up to $70 billion to fund two of the agencies that are carrying out President Donald Trump's crackdown on illegal immigration.

Embarking on the lengthy reconciliation process, they hope to finalize funding for Immigration and Customs Enforcement and Customs and Border Protection through the end of Mr. Trump's term – despite Democratic opposition. It's part of Republicans' strategy to end the partial shutdown of the Department of Homeland Security, which began Feb. 14, as Democrats demand changes to immigration law enforcement tactics.

Q: What is reconciliation?

Traditionally, the minority party in the Senate can try to block the majority using a filibuster, a long-standing Senate practice of holding up debate to block a law's passage or prolonging debate before a vote. Reconciliation, however, protects certain budget-related laws from the filibuster. Passing a reconciliation bill comes with a complicated set of procedures, but if successful, it's a way the majority party can pass a budget bill despite opposition from the minority party.

The Budget Act of 1974 created reconciliation. Since then, Congress has passed 24 reconciliation bills, the most recent being Republicans' One Big Beautiful Bill Act in 2025.

Under the rules for reconciliation, debate time is limited in the Senate. That effectively ends the filibuster, in which 60 votes are needed to end debate.

"Majorities of both parties have increasingly relied on the fast-track procedure [of reconciliation] to advance their agendas," says James Wallner, a senior fellow at the Foundation for American Innovation.

Q: Why is reconciliation being used more frequently?

Reconciliation was originally conceived of as a tool to reassert Congress' authority over the budget and to keep the federal deficit under control, says Steven S. Smith, a professor at Arizona State University and co-author of "The American Congress."

Republicans got more creative during George W. Bush's presidency. They had control of the House and Senate, and President Bush was eager to get his tax priorities passed into law. With a 50-50 party-line split in the Senate, Democrats could readily use the filibuster to block Republicans.

So, Republicans used reconciliation to sidestep the filibuster and, no longer needing to reach the 60-vote threshold as they would have with a stand-alone bill, were able to pass Mr. Bush's tax cuts.

"That kind of broke open the thinking ever since about the ways in which the reconciliation bill can be used to avoid a Senate filibuster," says Dr. Smith. Democrats would later use reconciliation to pass key adjustments to the Affordable Care Act in 2010.

More recently, reconciliation has been seen as a potential tool for an entirely new purpose: as a substitute for the regular funding process. Typically, Congress funds much of the government on a one-year basis in a process known as appropriations.

But members of both parties have started using reconciliation to pass multiyear funding for things that would typically receive

money on a yearly basis, which would subject that spending to annual review. In 2022, the Democrats' Inflation Reduction Act allotted $80 billion in mandatory spending to the Internal Revenue Service. In 2025, the Republicans' One Big Beautiful Bill Act provided funds for multiple years for the departments of defense and homeland security.

Q: Why is passing a reconciliation bill so complicated?

The rules for reconciliation mean that it's a drawn-out, multistep process that can take weeks or months.

First, the House and the Senate must each pass a budget resolution that sets levels of spending, revenue, and debt.

Once both chambers have done that, relevant committees typically write specific legislation for how to achieve the goals laid out in the budget resolution. The result is the reconciliation bill. Once developed, it goes back to the House and Senate to be passed in each chamber again.

In the Senate, debate on a reconciliation bill is capped at 20 hours. After debate concludes, senators can continue offering amendments in a marathon session known colloquially on Capitol Hill as a "vote-a-rama." That could go on for hours, often well into the night.

There's another thing senators have to keep in mind: Everything in a reconciliation bill has to be budget related. The bill and each of its amendments must be able to pass a thorough review by the Senate parliamentarian – the chamber's official adviser on all things rules and procedures – to make sure each provision in the bill is relevant to spending, revenue, or debt levels.

Reconciliation bills also pose a unity challenge for party leaders. They tend to involve the majority party working in lockstep to avoid minority-party obstruction – and these large spending bills rarely please everyone.

Q: What do Republicans hope to accomplish with their second reconciliation bill of this Congress?

Republicans' key objective in this use of reconciliation is to fund ICE and CBP. The Department of Homeland Security is partially shut down, and Democrats have been unwilling to fund these agencies without significant reforms of immigration enforcement tactics, including face-mask bans for federal immigration enforcement officers.

The two agencies have enough money from the Republicans' tax-and-spending bill last year to continue operations.

President Trump has given congressional Republicans a June 1 deadline to fund these agencies through reconciliation. Congress would still need to pass a separate bill to fund other agencies in DHS such as the Federal Emergency Management Agency.

Unlike Republicans' last reconciliation bill, which included a broad range of priorities, Republican leadership hopes to keep this one focused on ICE and CBP. Other members of the party have their own priorities.

Senators like Missouri Republican Josh Hawley want to take the opportunity to try to address cost-of-living issues. Others like Republican Ted Cruz hope to tackle defense funding. ▪

KATHMANDU, NEPAL

Font of knowledge: Calligraphy enthusiasts take up their pens

A Nepal-based group, Callijatra, preserves and promotes a once-forgotten language and its writing systems across Kathmandu Valley.

By Zinara Rathnayake / Contributor

As a schoolchild in Kathmandu, Ejen Maharjan watched in awe while his friend glided his pen in perfect curves to create ornate calligraphy in Nepalbhasa, the historical language of their people, the Newars. The friend was drawing Ranjana Lipi, which translates to "delightful script."

"I didn't even know how to write my name in Ranjana Lipi," Mr. Maharjan recalls. "That hit me very hard."

Today, the 23-year-old proudly dips his bamboo pen, called *chosa*, in blue ink to write beautiful, flowing Ranjana Lipi calligraphy, drawing thick strokes and intricate loops on paper. Mr. Maharjan is part of a group of calligraphy enthusiasts who are preserving and promoting Nepalbhasa and its writing systems across Kathmandu Valley, Nepal's capital region in the Himalayan foothills.

Mr. Maharjan hones his skills at Studio Nilo, an art and calligraphy workshop in Patan, an ancient city-state in the valley. Outside, exposed-brick buildings with elaborate wooden windows line the narrow streets that wrap around central courtyards. Residents come there to nap, chat, sip tea, and play ceremonial drums.

Mr. Maharjan learned to write Ranjana Lipi from Callijatra, a Kathmandu-based organization that celebrates once-forgotten writing systems from across Nepal.

Callijatra was founded in 2017 by typeface designer Ananda Maharjan and local politician Sunita Dangol, who both studied at Nepal Lipi Guthi, a decades-old epigraphy institute. The two set up calligraphy workshops to increase awareness of Ranjana Lipi.

"They had realized that it should be promoted not just in a classroom, but all over the country," says Callijatra's vice president, Lalima Shrestha, who was part of the first workshop.

A language pushed to the margins

The Newars are the earliest inhabitants of Kathmandu Valley. Some anthropologists tie the Newars' origins to the Kirat dynasty, which settled here around 7th century B.C. The Newars have used different alphabetic writing systems, including Ranjana Lipi.

While Nepalbhasa was widely adopted in literature and royal courts by the Malla kings from the 13th century, the Gorkha kings who conquered the valley and unified Nepal as one country in 1769 gradually eliminated the language. The Rana family, who ruled Nepal from 1846 to 1951, banned its use, imprisoning and expelling those who wrote and spoke the language.

Later, the state's "one nation, one language" policy from 1961 to 1990 pushed for a national identity through Nepali, an Indo-Aryan language written in a script called Devanagari. Nepali became the dominant language in media, education, and government administration, while Devanagari replaced scripts once used by the Newars.

As Nepalbhasa was pushed to the margins, between 1952 and 1991, the percentage of the language's speakers in the valley fell from 75% to 44%. Today, Newars make up only about 5% of Nepal's population, and UNESCO classifies Nepalbhasa as "definitely endangered," which means that young children no longer learn it as their mother tongue. Some research estimates that Nepalbhasa could be lost in 30 to 40 years.

"It's not just writing"

Ms. Shrestha first came across a photo of Ranjana Lipi when she was age 14, during a social studies class. She asked her father to teach her the script, but he didn't know it. Years later, still determined and enthusiastic to learn more about her heritage, Ms. Shrestha joined Callijatra's workshop and eventually became part of the group. Callijatra's team now volunteers to host workshops most Saturdays across Kathmandu Valley.

As many ancient books and other literary documents are written in Ranjana Lipi, knowing how to read this script is crucial to understanding Nepal's history, religion, and artistic traditions.

Mr. Maharjan, who attended his first calligraphy workshop online during the COVID-19 pandemic, now uses every opportunity to teach others. When he can't find a calligraphy pen, he uses a pencil. "Our generation is now aware of [Ranjana Lipi's] value, and we need to teach it to children, so we can preserve our language," he says.

Since Callijatra's first workshop nine years ago, appreciation has been growing for Nepalbhasa and its scripts.

Young people such as Mr. Maharjan are driving this change, explains computer engineer Suyogya Ratna Tamrakar, one of Callijatra's founding members. "They ask questions and want to learn about our culture," he says.

"Calligraphy is a good medium to let them learn and know about what's theirs," Mr. Tamrakar adds. "Because it's not just writing. It feels like you're meditating. At workshops, schoolkids come and ask, 'Please write my name in this style.'"

Reclaiming their heritage

Bringing back the joy of old scripts through calligraphy has also created opportunities for those working in creative fields. Tattoo artists and jewelers incorporate the scripts in their designs, Ms. Shrestha explains while wearing a gold-plated ring with Ranjana Lipi motifs. Graphic designers in Kathmandu are increasingly using Kutakshar, a monogram of Ranjana Lipi in which several characters are interwoven, making it difficult to read. It was mainly used to write religious texts and mantras.

Those outside the Newar community are also drawn to the calligraphy workshops.

Studio Nilo co-founder Seema Gautam hails from Eastern Rukum, a mountain district 14 hours from Kathmandu, and was born and brought up in neighboring India. "When I do calligraphy in Ranjana, I feel like Devi [a Hindu goddess]," says Ms. Gautam. "They say it's the second-most beautiful script in the world [after Chinese]."

Beyond calligraphy, Mr. Tamrakar and another team member have developed a mobile app. With more than 75,000 downloads, it translates Nepali writing into scripts such as Ranjana Lipi.

Callijatra's efforts are part of a larger movement to reclaim and revive Nepalbhasa. After years of advocacy, the World Newah Organization helped get Nepalbhasa added to Google Translate in 2024. Ms. Shrestha is the general secretary at WNO, a U.S.-registered nonprofit.

Local governments are taking notice, too. In 2021, Kathmandu reintroduced Nepalbhasa as a mandatory subject in schools from first to eighth grades.

Ms. Shrestha looks forward to every Callijatra workshop.

"Our culture is so rich," she says, explaining that she now speaks Nepalbhasa with her grandparents.

"The innovations that are happening in the West now were already there in our civilizations, but if you don't know how to read what our ancestors have given us, how can we understand their knowledge?" ▪

EDITORIALS

How women's digital lives change China

A recent surprise in China was a survey that found professional women have adapted faster to using artificial intelligence than men. They also show less fear of AI. Yet it was the explanation for this AI gender gap that offered a keyhole into how Chinese women are changing themselves – and society – from inside the narrow lanes imposed upon them by the ruling party.

One insight on the survey came from Poh-Yian Koh, president of FedEx China. She said that, in the era of AI, the common female traits of flexibility, resilience, empathy, long-term vision, and bridge-building allow women to serve as "indispensable 'interpreters' who connect technology with humanity."

"Technology can be replicated. Empathy cannot," she said. "In the age of intelligence, trust is the scarcest resource." Technology might determine how fast society moves, but "humanity determines how far we go."

Women in China are still locked out of the country's highest positions of power. Yet, in the digital universe, they are defining a different future.

"Humor, coded language, and private networks became safer ways to share experiences and support one another," Lina Ma, a New York-based researcher who specializes on the topic, wrote in The Diplomat.

"Across platforms such as RedNote, Douyin, and Bilibili, women exchange stories and practical advice about everyday struggles," she wrote. They help each other reinterpret their experiences separate from societal expectations or official controls.

This style of informal connection might foreshadow the future of digital activism everywhere. "The Chinese example shows that repression does not eliminate political consciousness; instead, movements adapt," Ms. Ma wrote.

One woman who has risen in China's limited national politics is Jiang Shengnan, who started her career as an online writer. She achieved some reforms in the country's largely rubber-stamp Parliament. Yet her widest influence has been as a trusted, empathetic voice on the internet.

"Many people support me, saying that I'm a precious female voice," Ms. Jiang told Shanghai magazine Sixth Tone in 2023. "But in fact, I'm just an ordinary female voice. Everyone knows that things are precious because they are scarce. My greatest hope is that I will become less precious as soon as possible." ▪

Asia's expanding circle of security

For the first time since World War II, Japanese combat troops have participated in live-fire, land-and-sea military exercises in an Asian country that was once under harsh rule by imperial Japan.

On April 20, some 1,400 Japanese soldiers joined with the forces of a few other Pacific democracies to practice mock battles for 19 days in the northern Philippines – not far from China and the islands it forcibly claims in the South China Sea.

The multinational war games, which were due to end May 8, included the firing of a Japanese cruise missile to sink a World War II-era minesweeper – the country's first missile use outside Japan since the war.

For Japan, this overseas training under real-world conditions marks a historic turning point for its postwar pacifist tradition and its heavy reliance on the United States for external defense. Yet, on a larger scale, it puts on display a long-term effort by many Asian democracies and their Western partners to define the meaning of shared security, preferably the kind that cannot be seen as ganging up on China.

That task has become more urgent in the face of China's aggression against its neighbors, nuclear threats from North Korea, and recent uncertainty over America's military deterrence in the region.

"In an increasingly severe security environment, no single country can now protect its own peace and security alone," Japanese Prime Minister Takaichi Sanae wrote on the social platform X as the exercises started.

In practice, the joint drills in the Philippines are a way to create "a security environment that tolerates no attempt to unilaterally change the status quo by force," Col. Higuchi Takeshi of Tokyo's joint staff told Japanese media. Yet that goal of defending established borders also reflects a dedication to democratic values, such as respect for the integrity and freedom of individuals to collectively form and keep their country based on equal citizenship. Those transcendent values are what bind many alliances of democracies and compel them to cooperate.

Befitting Japan's wealth, size, and postwar credentials as a peace-loving democracy, it is the third-largest contributor to the 17,000 troops participating in the joint exercises. The Philippines has dubbed the drills with the local idiom *Balikatan*, or "shoulder to shoulder."

That spirit of unity is not only about defending land borders, however. It also relies on shared adherence to democratic ideals. ▪

Scandinavia's U-turn on book reading

Amid a spate of cellphone and social media bans for young people around the world, a parallel, quieter shift is taking place in education – away from ubiquitous digital technology and back to the analog tools of paper, pen, and pencil.

And, in an interesting twist, this change is being led by the Scandinavian nations that pioneered the shift to ed tech learning more than a decade ago. Today, they are grappling to redefine what contributes to meaningful and enduring education.

In 2009, Sweden swapped out printed school textbooks for computers and tablets. In 2023, it announced a €104 million ($122 million) plan to bring back book-based learning, especially in the early grades. Finland began a similar reversal in 2024. And so has Norway, which, starting in 2016, issued an iPad to every 5-year-old starting school. Now, it's going all out to boost reading – through youth-friendly library activities and community reading sessions.

Behind these shifts is public concern over declining literacy and reading comprehension. But the change also points to a broader embrace of screen- and tech-free learning as a means to support less distraction, active engagement, and deeper comprehension.

"Progress sometimes means knowing when you've taken a wrong turn, so you can double back and undo the mistake," observed a Swedish writer on After Babel, a Substack newsletter launched by New York University Professor Jonathan Haidt. Dr. Haidt's extensive research on the effects of online technology and social media on children and teens has sparked intense discussions on how best to use tech in the service of education.

Ed tech, according to Australian education specialist Jared Cooney Horvath, has grown "from a niche supplement into a $400 billion juggernaut woven into nearly every corner of schooling." But scale doesn't necessarily equal impact. Screen reading, by its very nature, Dr. Horvath wrote in The Dispatch last December, favors "shallow skimming – glancing, scrolling, and extracting instead of truly learning." Other researchers point out that screen-based tools substitute passive engagement and novelty for the more challenging and time-consuming consideration of new concepts.

For one longtime high school humanities teacher, the increasing intertwining of technology and artificial intelligence in learning "has done education a favor it didn't ask for" – by spurring a needed and timely reconsideration.

For too long, education has primarily been viewed as a means "to succeed, to be useful, to secure a future," observed Aran Levasseur on April 20 in the online magazine of the University of California, Berkeley-based Greater Good Science Center. The present moment, he indicated, offers an opportunity to "reimagine [education] as the cultivation of judgment, purpose, and the capacity to think and choose well in a world where productivity is no longer the defining measure of human value." ▪

READERS RESPOND

Zooming in on what matters

My new favorite feature in the Weekly is Reporters on the Job. I love reading about the real-life travails your team goes through during reporting. These tiny vignettes are probably the most powerful in the whole magazine.

That's especially true of the March 23 issue, in which Middle East editor Ken Kaplan wrote about letting his mom lurk during one of his work Zoom calls to really "get" his work. I *loved* this.

"Ma, I'm busy" – I heard myself saying that while explaining my work to my mom, just as Mr. Kaplan does.

Keep up the great work with a great magazine.

Mandy Bundock-Simjian
Wallingford, Connecticut

Discovery at the drive-thru

A surprise gesture restores this writer's faith in humanity.

On a bright and dewy spring morning, I was meeting a friend for a walk around nearby Burke Lake Park, and stopped by a McDonald's to pick up a couple of Egg McMuffins for our breakfast.

I pulled into the parking lot from the north and eased toward the drive-thru. I had company. A big tough guy – beard, hunting gear, "Don't Tread on Me type" – in a big tough truck – oversize wheels, mud flaps – approached from the south.

I was clearly the next in line, but the back of his truck was jutting out into a side street, so I motioned for him to go ahead. His engine roared as if he were taking off on a street race; the truck lurched forward 10 feet and then rocked back as he hit the brakes. Glad I let him go, I thought.

He placed his order. I placed mine, and pulled up to the window to pay.

As I presented my credit card, the woman at the register put up a hand. She motioned toward the truck ahead and said with a smile and a shrug, "He paid for you." Surprised, I opened my car door and shouted a quick "Hey, thank you!" The big tough guy flashed a thumbs-up in the side-view mirror and then rumbled off to meet the rest of his day.

It was a really nice moment, but did this brief interaction over Egg McMuffins at a McDonald's drive-thru restore my faith in humanity?

Actually, yeah, it kind of did.

It reminded me that despite what we see on the news and social media, where everyone is a fire-breathing extremist of some sort, most people out there are pretty friendly folk. It reminded me of all the times in my life, in ways big and small, at home and abroad, when I depended on the kindness of strangers and they came through. It reminded me not to judge a book by its cover. If that's an overused phrase, it's probably because we need to be reminded of it all the time.

I met my friend at the lake. We unwrapped our free Egg McMuffins, steam rising into the air, and saw the sun lighting up the new green foliage. It was a beautiful morning.

– Zachary Przystup

Finding our safety and belonging in God

The Bible, as the Word of God, speaks to us with timeless truth. Psalm 91 offers this assurance: "I will say of the Lord, He is my refuge and my fortress: my God; in him will I trust. Surely he shall deliver thee from the snare of the fowler, and from the noisome pestilence" (verses 2, 3). What a powerful idea, that we can find a safe home in God, free from danger, disease, and even the noise of opinions.

Before becoming a follower of Christ, Paul the Apostle was known as Saul, and he rounded up early followers of Jesus and put them in prison. Then the voice of Truth, attributed to Christ Jesus, spoke to Saul on the road to Damascus. Heeding Christ's direction enabled Saul to come home to God, divine Love, with a new name and mission.

Later, Paul was stoned for his own commitment to Christ, and left for dead by an angry crowd. There, in what could have felt like total injury and defeat, Paul, with the help of fellow Christians gathering around him, no doubt in prayer, was able to get up and keep working for God. Paul discovered firsthand that there is nothing that can separate us from God's love, nothing that can interrupt our sense of home.

On a drive to visit family for a special ceremony, I listened to the final chapter of "Science and Health with Key to the Scriptures," written by Christian Science Monitor founder Mary Baker Eddy. This chapter is a collection of healings people had through relying on Christian Science, and I especially perked up when I heard multiple accounts of those who found healing when they put aside their prejudices toward Christian Science.

Though I didn't have any prejudices toward Christian Science, I was wrestling with prejudice about the attitudes and actions of some of those who would be in attendance, and preconceptions that the ceremony would be politically charged and feel unsafe. I prayed during the event to see how the light of Christ was present. It wasn't hard, as I saw people gather peacefully and I witnessed many acts of goodwill. My sense of home and belonging – and everyone's – had not been interrupted, and I knew it never could be, because the true sense of home and belonging comes from and is maintained by God. As we understand that we are at home in the consciousness of God and belong fully to Him, we find evidence of this in our experience.

At the end of the night, I discovered that my jacket and our car key had gone missing. I knew I needed to ask the people I had initially perceived as my nemeses for help. But with the lessons I'd learned that day, I knew they, too, expressed God, so I could expect kindness and helpfulness from them. I was profoundly grateful when the event organizers quickly found and returned my jacket, but even more grateful to drop my mistaken viewpoints.

So, regardless of today's issues that seem to cause division, we can turn to divine Love and find that God is a safe, expansive place we all can call home.

– Ginger Emden

The American frontier story left out key players

Men like Kit Carson captured fame, but the West was also shaped by Black men, Chinese women, and a Cheyenne chief.

By Barbara Spindel / Contributor

In his first inaugural address, in March 1801, President Thomas Jefferson spoke of the United States as "a rising nation, spread over a wide and fruitful land" and "advancing rapidly to destinies beyond the reach of mortal eye." By the end of 1803, the U.S. had indeed advanced considerably: The Louisiana Purchase, through which a huge territory west of the Mississippi River was transferred from French to American hands, nearly doubled the nation's size.

Historian Megan Kate Nelson's splendid new book, "The Westerners," cites Jefferson's vision of national progress as one of the first articulations of the "frontier myth." Historian Frederick Jackson Turner is credited with giving the myth its fullest expression in a renowned 1893 essay, "The Significance of the Frontier in American History."

Turner posited that the conquest of the West was foundational to American identity. American exceptionalism, he argued, stemmed not from the nation's European roots but from the violent clashes between "savagery" and "civilization" that eventually pushed the country's domain to the Pacific Ocean.

Nelson notes that the frontier myth celebrates pioneers implicitly understood to be white and male; men such as Daniel Boone, Davy Crockett, and Kit Carson have loomed large in the popular imagination. "The Westerners" offers a more expansive view of the 19th-century American West, demonstrating that Indigenous, Black, Mexican, and Asian women and men were also vital to the frontier experience. The book serves as a forceful corrective to American history as it has long been told.

The vivid narrative traces the paths of seven fascinating individuals. Nelson begins with Sacajawea. In 1804, the Native American teenager became part of the expedition of Meriwether Lewis and William Clark to explore the Louisiana Territory and the Pacific Northwest. She served as an interpreter and a guide. Her knowledge of the landscape and her skills at foraging provided the explorers not only with additional food sources but with scientific specimens that Jefferson had asked Lewis and Clark to collect on their journey.

Of course, Sacajawea's story is a familiar one, though its details, down to the spelling of her name, have been subject to debate. (The author appears to agree with the historical consensus that Sacajawea died in 1812, but recent scholarship based on Indigenous oral tradition claims that she lived into old age.) Nelson's other subjects are far less well-known today but were prominent in their time. Some, like Sacajawea, were cultural brokers, adept at navigating different worlds during a period of great flux.

María Gertrudis Barceló, for instance, was a successful businesswoman, operating a Santa Fe gambling saloon that thrived for decades and amassing a fortune in the process. Until 1821, when Mexico won independence from Spain, she was a Spanish subject, and Nelson notes that Spanish women had more rights than their American counterparts: They could legally own property and run businesses.

Barceló became a skilled dealer of the Spanish card game monte. With the 1848 signing of the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, which ended the Mexican-American War, her national identity changed once again. Barceló went from being a Mexican Northerner to an American Westerner. Her business survived these shifts because of what Nelson calls "her ability to assess the rapidly changing geopolitics of Nuevo México." During the war, the author writes, "the American occupiers became her friends, lovers, and customers. She passed on information to them, and they, in turn, gambled at her monte tables and protected her interests."

Another intrepid Westerner with keen survival instincts was Jim Beckwourth, the son of an enslaved Black woman and her white enslaver. Beckwourth was born in Virginia around the turn of the 19th century. After being emancipated by his father, he set out for the West, where, in Nelson's account, he appears to be everywhere at once. Before his death in 1866, he worked as a fur trapper, a gold miner, a farmer, a rancher, and a courier for the U.S. Army during the Mexican-American War. He also spent several years living as an adopted member of the Apsáalooke band in the Rocky Mountains.

The restless Beckwourth published a popular autobiography in 1856 detailing his many adventures, which, in Nelson's view, were possible only because the Western territories were so vast and unregulated. As a biracial man, Nelson writes, "he often chose to pass as Indigenous or white as the circumstances demanded in the dynamic communities of the American West."

The book's other characters are equally compelling. They include Little Wolf, a Northern Cheyenne chief who for years resisted the U.S. government's demands to relocate his people to a reservation, and Polly Bemis, a Chinese woman who was trafficked to Idaho and built a life there in the face of federal legislation targeting Chinese immigrants.

"Before the Civil War, the West was chaotic and unstable, a landscape of transformation," Nelson observes. "Because of this, men and women from a variety of racial and ethnic communities were able to claim spaces for themselves there."

After the war, the government increasingly asserted its control over the once wild West. Nelson sees a connection between the fact that the exploits of white settlers were acclaimed while the opportunities for people such as Barceló, Beckwourth, and Bemis contracted.

"Removing people from a central national narrative effectively eliminates them from the body politic, making it easier to take their land and their civil rights away," the author notes. In reminding us of these extraordinary stories, she has crafted a fuller and more accurate picture of the mythic American frontier. ▪

A servant girl's visions nearly brought down a king

Credited with the gift of prophesy, Elizabeth Barton ran afoul of Henry VIII and was silenced. In the present day, a female professor struggles to be heard.

By Elizabeth Toohey / Contributor

In my book group, getting everyone to agree on a novel can be a challenge. If your group, like mine, has competing tastes, "The Lost Book of Elizabeth Barton," by Jennifer N. Brown, might be just the ticket. It is a plot-driven page-turner that weaves historical fiction, academic satire, and detective fiction into a compulsively readable and intellectually rewarding book.

Like A.S. Byatt's 1990 Booker Prize-winning "Possession," which intertwines the lives of Victorian poets with academics who study them, "The Lost Book of Elizabeth Barton" toggles between historical figures and the modern-day scholars hot on their trail. Here, the subject of scholarly scrutiny is Elizabeth Barton, a Roman Catholic mystic who spoke out against King Henry VIII and his plan to break from the pope and establish a new church. Unlike Martin Luther's principled stance – set forth in his 1517 treatise – Henry's motive was personal and political, born of his desire to divorce his wife, Catherine of Aragon, to marry Anne Boleyn. And, as head of the new church, he would wield absolute power.

Enter the prophesying Elizabeth, appearing just as Henry was demanding that Pope Clement VII grant his divorce. To be a female visionary was to have a voice in an era when few women did. It was also to risk manipulation by the male clergy. What began as Elizabeth's visions or dreams were likely manipulated by Edward Bocking, the monk who "recorded" them.

Brown, a debut novelist and medieval scholar, renders Elizabeth's rise from impoverished servant to popular prophetess in admirably human and complex terms. Elizabeth's popularity as one of the most prominent Catholic loyalists made her dangerous to the king. She was tortured into a confession of treason and had the dubious distinction of being the only woman whose head was placed on a spike alongside those of other traitors on the London Bridge.

Her book of visions was ordered burned. That no copies exist makes for a tantalizing prospect for the aptly named (fictional) Dr. Alison Sage, wise in the way of books, if not always people.

Brown draws on her deep knowledge of the epoch for a compelling story full of fascinating period details, such as "priest holes" – human hideaways, key to the intrigue in both stories. Brown is especially attuned to women's prospects; no matter whether they were servants or middle class, their destinies were limited to arranged marriages or joining a convent. It's gratifying, then, when Elizabeth's point of view gives way to the savvy strategizing of Philippa, the prioress, and of Lady Agatha Vale, who supports an underground network of priests while employing stratagems to ensure the financial security of her offspring – especially the girls. (One has to wonder how they would have felt about the new archbishop of Canterbury – the first woman in the nearly 500-year history of the Church of England to hold the position.

The plot involving Alison's residency at an elite scholarly retreat is a bit less compelling. That said, the satire is awfully fun, especially for readers with a taste for skewering professors (guilty!). I had some laugh-aloud moments when Alison is asked repeatedly whether her work involves a Renaissance Fair, and rolled my eyes along with her at a hypermasculine scholar fixated on falconry.

The end of Elizabeth's story – the aftermath, really – is tremendously clever and satisfying. For those considering how resistance looks in the face of tyranny (purely for academic reasons, of course) a tale of women's visions and stratagems might be just the thing. ▪

IN PICTURES

On the trail of primates, past and present

Story by Kang-Chun Cheng / Contributor

CHITENGO, MOZAMBIQUE

Rassina Farassi steps gingerly onto a scrubby, rain-slicked landscape dotted by thorny acacias and fever trees with mustard-yellow trunks. Clutching binoculars in one hand and a GPS device in the other, she scans the horizon for the objects of her attention: 13 chacma baboons (*Papio ursinus*) fitted with radio collars.

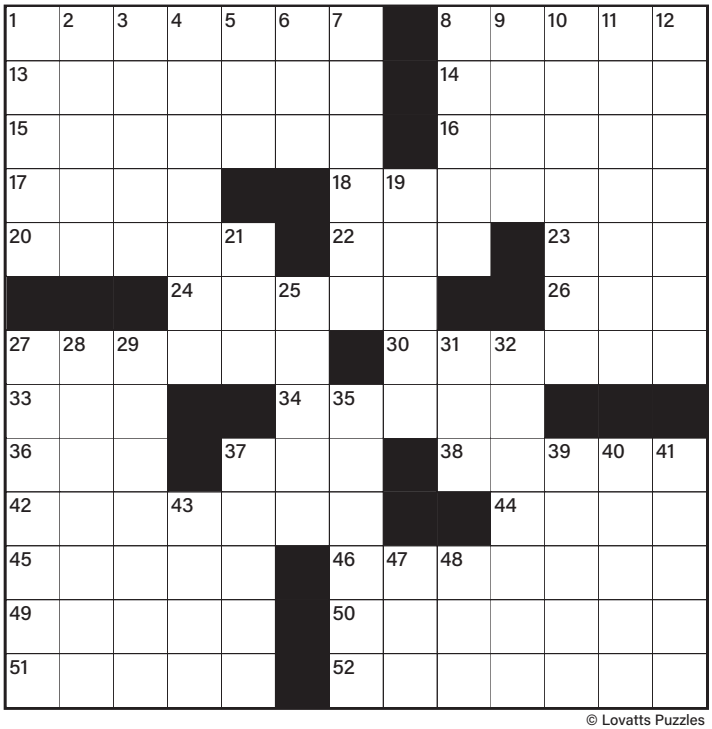
For eight months of the year, Ms. Farassi observes and tracks the baboons' movements in Gorongosa National Park in central Mozambique. The daughter of maize farmers from northern Cabo Delgado province, she is Mozambique's first female primatologist.

As part of her doctoral studies at the University of Coimbra in Portugal, she is conducting fieldwork for the Paleo-Primate Project (PPP), an interdisciplinary partnership between Gorongosa and the University of Oxford that involves fossil digs, primate observation, and cave exploration. This partnership falls under the Gorongosa Restoration Project, which works to advance community-centered development and conservation in Gorongosa. The park aims to increase its biodiversity after a ruinous 15-year civil war that ended in 1992.

Fieldwork here could unlock key information about human existence and adaptation, says primatologist and paleoanthropologist Susana Carvalho, the former director of PPP. Ms. Farassi, for her part, is examining bipedalism among primates. Using baboons as a model for human evolution, she hopes to fill gaps in understanding how modern *Homo sapiens* developed.

She first ventured into Gorongosa in 2017 under Ms. Carvalho's tutelage. "I remember being amazed seeing baboons in the wild, seeing how they interacted," Ms. Farassi recalls. ▪

Crossword



ACROSS

1. Nourishing substance

8. Fours and sixes, but not sevens

13. Penzance characters in an operetta

14. Withdraw from office

15. Divide fairly

16. The supreme Supreme

17. Opposite of stout

18. Turps, for one

20. German industrial city

22. Part of WYSIWYG

23. Urban address abbr.

24. Jeff Gordon, notably

26. It gets under your collar

27. Bacon request

30. Be politically incorrect

33. Fashion's bottom line?

34. Tightly knit group

36. Buddy in Bordeaux

37. The whole shebang

38. Spinnaker site

42. Columbo concerns

44. Baht spender

45. Quake precaution

46. Set in motion

49. ___ gum (paint resin)

50. Driver of UPS or FedEx truck

51. Thatching material

52. Prolongs

DOWN

1. American pie?

2. Old Pisa dough?

3. Alternatives to woods

4. Certain writing implements

5. Pilot's approx.

6. Lepidopterist's aid

7. Crossword fly

8. Comedian Murphy

9. Miner's discovery

10. Manatee with its tail up front

11. Skittle

12. In progress

19. Judean despot

21. Preschooler's downtime

25. Go by bike

27. Combustion ___, explosive engine area

28. Buyer's problem, at times

29. Ape or parrot

31. Shoestring, maybe

32. Full-length movie

35. Rhine region

37. Asserts confidently

39. Ball's partner

40. Unpopular, and then some

41. Wedding cake layers

43. Tea adjective

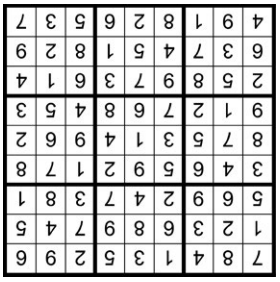
47. Courteney of "Friends"

48. Boy king in 1922 headlines

Sudoku difficulty: ★★★★

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

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.