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LIGHTS ARE strung along the sides of ships to attract squid to the surface of the water, where they can more easily be caught. When the squid are abundant, deckhands have to stay up for three straight days and nights, one post on a Chinese website warned.

Crews on Chinese squid ships face beatings, poor diets, worse

This story was produced by the Outlaw Ocean Project, a nonprofit journalism organization in Washington. This article was reported and written by Ian Urbina, Joe Galvin, Maya Martin, Susan Ryan, Daniel Murphy and Austin Brush, with support from the Pulitzer Center.

ABOARD THE OCEAN WARRIOR ON THE SOUTH ATLANTIC — On the high seas roughly a thousand miles north of the Falkland Islands, an 18-year-old Chinese deckhand working on a Chinese squid ship nervously ducked into a dark hallway to whisper his plea for help.

“Our passports were taken,” he said to the reporters who had just come aboard. “They won’t give them back.”

Fearing he would be overheard,



FABIO NASCIMENTO Outlaw Ocean Project

ABOARD the Victory 205 in 2019, six crew members slept in a small crawl space between the engine room and wheelhouse.

he typed out a message on his cellphone: “Can you take us to the embassy in Argentina?”

Few workplaces are as brutal as distant-water fishing ships from China, and there are a lot of them: The nation today operates the world’s largest fleet, which is more than double the size of its next competitor. It’s rarely easy for crew members to leave these ships, and often it’s forbidden. Workers on China’s vast armada of squid ships, which make up the majority of the vessels in the fleet, typically spend two years almost entirely at sea, most of the time with no internet or phone signal.

China is widely accepted to be the world’s worst purveyor of illegally caught seafood, and its practices have received so much attention that the country has taken steps in the last several years to reduce such violations. But the human rights abuses taking place on its ships — [See Ships, A4]

An unusual tactic against a Mexican Mafia member

An alleged group leader already serving time has been charged in a mundane matter.

By MATTHEW ORMSETH

Gabriel “Sleepy” Huerta has been identified by testifying witnesses and confidential informants as an influential member of the Mexican Mafia, the prison-based organization that controls Latino gangs behind bars and on the streets of Southern California. But in a case brought this month, prosecutors accused Huerta of getting involved in a mundane squabble: a lost gun that led to a beat-down on the streets of his old neighborhood.

Already serving 17 years to life for second-degree murder, Huerta, 64, is now charged with conspiring to commit assault and gang participation. He has yet to enter a plea, and court records indicate he has not retained or been appointed a lawyer.

At a federal racketeering trial last year, a witness testi-

fied that Huerta sat on the Mexican Mafia’s “commission,” a three-man governing body that settles internal disputes. Huerta claims to no longer be affiliated with the Mexican Mafia, but Los Angeles County prosecutors say he still runs rackets from state prison, where he has been held since 1984.

Los Angeles Police Department officers used informants and a wiretap to seize modest amounts of guns, narcotics and money from members of Huerta’s old gang, Eastside Wilmas, according to a 14-page summary of the probe. Police recorded Eastside Wilmas members boasting they’d “stomped” one of their own who lost a rifle in a police raid.

It seemed an unlikely case to ensnare Huerta, who Deputy Dist. Atty. Louis Avila said is considered “a great among equals” in the Mexican Mafia, which has no leader or defined hierarchy.

“It’s absolutely not something that would generally happen,” said Avila, who leads the unit that is prosecuting Huerta. “Most of the time, you wouldn’t charge [See Huerta, A7]



IRFAN KHAN Los Angeles Times

DOCTORS believe more people became infected with respiratory viruses over the Christmas holiday. Above, air travelers at LAX on Dec. 21.

Respiratory illness seems to be everywhere. Here’s why

COVID, flu, RSV are all on the rise or at a high level

By RONG-GONG LIN II

Does it seem like a lot of people you know are sick?

You’re not alone. Respiratory illness season is in full swing in California and across much of the nation.

In Los Angeles County, about 23% of people participating in a weekly text-message-based survey reported having a cough or shortness of breath for the week that ended Dec. 10, higher than the total

reported during a late summer peak in respiratory illnesses, when 21% said they had those symptoms. Early summer brought a lull, with only 10% of survey respondents saying they had a cough or shortness of breath.

Meanwhile, coronavirus levels in wastewater in L.A. County are at their highest since summer.

Statewide, the level of flu-like illness — which includes non-flu viruses such as the coronavirus — is considered high, according to the [See Viruses, A9]

RISK OF BEING EVICTED GROWS IN L.A.

Filings rise, though not as much as feared, as new protections replace moratoriums.

By PALOMA ESQUIVEL

The eviction courtrooms on the sixth floor of the Stanley Mosk Courthouse downtown were bustling this month, as they have been all year.

In one, a woman and her children said they were fighting to hold on to their \$750-per-month rent-stabilized apartment near SoFi Stadium, worried that their housing costs could triple if they had to leave. In another, an elderly woman facing eviction was accompanied by her son-in-law, who was also, separately, being evicted from his home.

Eviction cases across Los Angeles County increased by thousands in 2023 after the expiration of pandemic-era moratoriums early in the year. There were about 43,000 eviction filings through November, putting the county on track to end the year with more than 46,000, according to court data compiled by Kyle Nelson, senior policy and research analyst for the nonprofit advocacy group Strategic Actions for a Just Economy.

That’s at least 10,000 more cases than last year and more than any year since 2016. It’s also far beyond 2020 and 2021, when filings dropped precipitously amid the moratoriums that made it more difficult for landlords to evict tenants.

But this year’s numbers, while high, did not soar as much as some tenant advocates had feared. The exact reasons are unclear, but experts and advocates say that permanent tenant protections adopted as the moratoriums expired — such as a Los Angeles city rule that prohibits landlords from evicting tenants for owing less than one month’s fair market rent — may be stemming the tide.

Even though the numbers are lower than expected, Nelson said, they still represent tens of thou-

[See Tenants, A7]

Obamacare on the ballot again?

Trump is repeating his vow to repeal the healthcare act, which 6.6 million rely on in California. **NATION, A6**

Yamamoto is now a Dodger

The team introduces the Japanese pitcher, whom it signed to a 12-year, \$325-million contract. **SPORTS, B10**

Microsoft and OpenAI sued

The New York Times wants to stop the use of its content to train chatbots. **BUSINESS, A8**

Weather
Dry and partly sunny. L.A. Basin: 66/52. **B6**

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