



Letters urge Biden to empty death row

Trump would not be able to undo commutations of federal sentences

BY MARK BERMAN, ANN E. MARIMOW AND YASMEEN ABUTALEB

A coalition of former prison officials, relatives of homicide victims, civil rights advocates and religious leaders are urging President Joe Biden to empty federal death row before he cedes the White House to President-elect Donald Trump, who staunchly supports capital punishment.

Letters to Biden that are slated to be made public Monday ask him to commute all federal death sentences to life without parole, invoking the president's Catholic faith and public opposition to capital punishment, and criticizing the death penalty as arbitrary, unfair and biased.

"We need clear and lasting steps that will ensure that the next administration will not execute the people currently facing death sentences in the federal system," states one of the letters, signed by a collection of current and former prosecutors, police chiefs and attorneys general.

Forty people are on federal death row, including the gunman who killed nine Black parishioners in Charleston, South Carolina, the surviving Boston Marathon bomber and the attacker who gunned down 11 people at a Pittsburgh synagogue. All three were sentenced to death when Biden served as president or vice president.

Others are far less prominent, including a person convicted of killing a fellow federal inmate and another convicted of robbing a bank with an associate who shot and killed a guard. Their attorneys are telling Biden in some

SEE DEATH ROW ON A4

Musk's Mars dreams have benefited U.S. military

BY EVA DOU AND AARON GREGG

Amused observers have long dismissed Elon Musk's dream to colonize Mars as unserious science fiction. But in his pursuit of the Red Planet, Musk has managed to build a deadly serious business with vast military consequences.

Security experts say SpaceX has leapfrogged so far ahead in several critical technologies that it could deter major rivals like China from engaging in a war with the United States — or tip the balance if one breaks out. Others worry that it could provoke an untimely response.

Musk is in the first camp. In recent days he has remarked on X that his ambition to send crews to Mars as soon as 2028 would result in "alien-level technology that is crushingly better than competitors," along with making an oblique reference to averting a war against China. That prospect may not be imminent, but it has become the focus of U.S. defense preparations as China rises.

Technological prowess is one reason SpaceX's value has jumped to around \$350 billion from \$210 billion earlier this

SEE MUSK ON A14

In Syria, a new era as Assad's regime falls



OMAR SANADIKI/AP

Syrian opposition fighters in Damascus, Syria, on Sunday celebrate the fall of Bashar al-Assad, who was in power for a quarter-century.

Biden says U.S. forces launched airstrikes against Islamic State

BY MICHAEL BIRNBAUM, CAT ZAKRZEWSKI AND MISSY RYAN

The Biden administration raced Sunday to try to help stabilize Syria after the collapse of President Bashar al-Assad's regime, targeting the Islamic State with dozens of airstrikes and monitoring Syrian stockpiles of chemical weapons.

President Joe Biden announced that U.S. forces had hit Islamic State camps and operatives in Syria and said that the United States was working with its partners to address concerns that extremist groups could capitalize on the power vacuum left by Assad's departure to Russia.

"We're clear-eyed about the fact that ISIS will try to take advantage of any vacuum to reestablish its capabilities to create a safe haven," Biden said, speaking from the Roosevelt Room. "We will not let that happen."

The rebel groups that toppled the autocrat had their own "grim record of terrorism," he said. "They're saying the right things now. But as they take on greater responsibility, we will assess not just their words, but their actions."

SEE U.S. ON A11



SALWAN GEORGES/THE WASHINGTON POST

Syrians living in Turkey burn photos of Assad in celebration in the city of Gaziantep on Sunday.

Multiple cracks led to collapse of singular hold on power

BY LIZ SLY

President Bashar al-Assad ruled his country with an iron fist for 24 years, as his father had done for 30 years before him. When he appeared to prevail in Syria's civil war, it was widely assumed he would remain in power until he was ready to hand over to his own son.

Instead, his supposedly indomitable regime turned out to be a hollow shell, crumbling in only 11 days in the face of an advance by lightly armed rebels. As opposition forces converged on Damascus from the north and the south late Saturday night, Assad fled to the airport and boarded a plane, according to Syrians in Damascus. Russian state media reported

Sunday that he had been granted asylum in Moscow.

By the time the end came, Assad was isolated and alone, abandoned by his main international allies, Russia and Iran, by an army that was no longer willing to fight for him, and by his minority Alawite constituents, many of whom chose to defect or

SEE ASSAD ON A10

CELEBRATIONS MARK DICTATOR'S OUSTER

Anxiety over nature of rebel force behind charge

BY KAREEM FAHIM, MOHAMAD EL CHAMAA AND LOVEDAY MORRIS

ISTANBUL — President Bashar al-Assad, Syria's autocratic ruler, was ousted Sunday after a quarter-century in power, toppled after an Islamist rebel offensive that hurtled through Syrian cities and towns, and finally Damascus, the capital and once-feared seat of Assad's power, which fell with little sign of a fight.

The Syrian leader, the scion of a family that ruled Syria for more than half a century, vanished in silence Sunday, abandoned by allies and friends. It fell to Russia, Assad's longtime military benefactor, to announce his resignation and flight from Syria. Assad went to Moscow, Russia's state news agency said.

If Assad's exit was quiet, the gatherings to mark his ouster Sunday were cacophonous, erupting in Damascus and other Syrian towns with celebratory gunfire. Joyous rallies were held by Syrians in exile, in Istanbul and elsewhere. At the border between Lebanon and Syria, people sang, set off fireworks and burned banknotes bearing Assad's face.

"There was a nightmare and it's gone," said Mohammed al-Azzam, 37, from Hama, the second city to fall in the rout by the rebel forces led by Islamist group Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS).

In darker but more poignant rituals, rebel fighters freed thousands of traumatized inmates from Syrian prisons, facilities whose names alone conjured horror, including Sednaya and the Syrian military's Palestine Branch.

On Sunday morning, Syrian state television — which only hours earlier had been broadcasting false reports of army successes and assuring citizens that Assad was safe — abruptly switched to hosting rebels on air. "Syria has regained its freedom," a news anchor said.

One resident of Damascus saw people "celebrating and shooting." The joy, though, seemed tentative. "The streets are empty; no one is even walking," said the resident, who spoke on the condition of anonymity because it was not clear yet whether it was safe to speak to reporters.

SEE SYRIA ON A12

Freed prisoners: Families embark on frantic search for loved ones. **A8**

'Axis of resistance': Another blow to Iran's alliance of proxies. **A9**

Austin Tice: Journalist's family is hopeful he will be brought home. **C1**

Scientists look to past for clues to future quake

Researchers hope to mitigate tsunami risk in the Pacific Northwest

BY CAROLYN Y. JOHNSON

BANDON, ORE. — The warnings of a looming cataclysm are ubiquitous along the Oregon Coast. On blue-and-white signs, a cartoon wave curls out of the sea, capital letters blaring: TSUNAMI HAZARD ZONE. Harbingers of a future disaster are always in the periphery, staked next to highways, on neighborhood streets, between the crab shack and the chowder house.

A massive earthquake will one day rattle the region. Minutes to hours later, a surge of seawater will swallow the land. No one

knows when.

In the late 1980s, scientists began to recognize that one of the biggest hazards on the planet lurks just off the coast of the Pacific Northwest. The Cascadia Subduction Zone, where one plate of the Earth's crust dives beneath another, stretches from Northern California to Canada's Vancouver Island, getting stuck and building up stresses. Until the day they release.

The last time this happened was more than 300 years ago. That means to understand the future risk, scientists must reconstruct the past. This summer, a

team of tsunami detectives, clad in waders and knee-high mud boots, trudged into soggy marshes at the mouth of Oregon's Coquille River — on the hunt for buried catastrophes.

Finding this record intact isn't easy.

On a sunny July day, scientists wove their way through waist-high marsh grasses, stepping over driftwood trip hazards and sneaky, ankle-twisting channels. They were searching for "1700" — a 9-magnitude temblor that year that shook the land, caused large swaths of the coast to sink several

SEE TSUNAMI ON A2

IN THE NEWS

Gavin Newsom As the California governor considers a future White House bid, he is grappling with how combative a posture to take toward Donald Trump. **A3**

Civilian deaths in Israel Asian farmworkers have been risking death by laboring inside high-risk military zones. **A6**

THE NATION **Trump** told NBC News that he would like to see many of those who investigated him jailed. **A3**
As winter nears, much of the United States is unusually parched. **A14**

THE WORLD **Volodymyr Zelensky** said the number of Ukraine's war dead is much smaller than Trump claimed. **A7**
Kyiv is under pressure from the United States to draft younger men. **A7**

THE ECONOMY **Scammers** love the holidays, too. Shira Ovide explains how to protect yourself. **A15**

THE REGION **Virginia Gov.** Glenn Youngkin's telling of an incident at the gate of Marine Corps Base Quantico conflicts with prosecutors' account. **B1**

Ten people up for judgeships on the backlogged local D.C. courts are awaiting confirmation as the Senate prioritizes federal benches. **B1**
George Mason University is facing an outcry after banning two pro-Palestinian student activists from the campus for four years. **B1**

STYLE **Appalled** by the outcome of the White House race, some supporters of Kamala Harris have turned to election denialism. **C1**
The 2024 election may have reshaped the Oscars race, in which feel-good movies seem to be on the rise. **C1**

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The Washington Post
Year 148, No. 54060

