

“All the News
That’s Fit to Print”

The New York Times

THE WEATHER
Today, plenty of sunshine, warmer, high 54. **Tonight**, becoming cloudy, low 39. **Tomorrow**, clouds and some breaks of sunshine, lighter winds, high 51. Weather map, Page D8.

VOL. CLXXIII . . . No. 60,104 © 2024 The New York Times Company MONDAY, MARCH 25, 2024 Prices in Canada may be higher \$4.00



DAY OF MOURNING Russians laid flowers outside Crocus City Hall, where at least 137 people died in a terror attack on Friday. Page A8.

Covid Malaise Is Killing Trust In U.S. Politics

This article is by **Lisa Lerer, Jenni-fer Medina and Reid J. Epstein.**

In March 2020, when Joseph R. Biden Jr. and Donald J. Trump competed for the White House for the first time, American life became almost unrecognizable. A deadly virus and a public health lockdown remade daily routines with startling speed, leaving little time for the country to prepare.

Four years later, the coronavirus pandemic has largely receded from public attention and receives little discussion on the campaign trail. And yet, as the same two men run once again, Covid-19 quietly endures as a social and political force. Though diminished, the pandemic has become the background music of the presidential campaign trail, shaping how voters feel about the nation, the government and their politics.

Public confidence in institutions — the presidency, public schools, the criminal justice system, the news media, Congress — slumped in surveys in the aftermath of the pandemic and has yet to recover. The pandemic hardened voter distrust in government, a sentiment Mr. Trump and his allies are using to their advantage. Fears of political violence, even civil war, are at record highs, and rankings of the nation's happiness at record lows. And views of the nation's economy and confidence in the future remain bleak, even as the country has defied expectations of a recession.

“The pandemic pulled the rug from people — you were never quite as secure as you were,” Gov. Kathy Hochul of New York, a Democrat, said in an interview. “We’re starting to get our grounding back. But I think it’s just hard for people to feel good again.”

High rates of office vacancies

Continued on Page A16

Mass Evacuations on Israel’s Other Front Line

By ISABEL KERSHNER

KFAR YUVAL, Israel — More than 60,000 Israelis who live far from Gaza but close to the front line of another spiraling conflict have in recent months been ordered from their homes along Israel’s northern border with Lebanon — the first mass evacuation of the area in Israeli history.

In one Israeli border town, anti-tank missiles fired from Lebanon have damaged scores of homes. In another village, holdouts who refuse to evacuate said they avoided turning lights on at night to keep from becoming visible targets. And in a sign of the proximity of the fighters across the border and how personal the simmering hostilities have become, a farmer said he had received a text mes-

Conflict Growing With Hezbollah on Border With Lebanon

sage claiming to be from Hezbollah and threatening him with death.

The evacuations and an effort in Lebanon to move thousands of civilians away from the border are the result of an intensifying conflict between Israel and Hezbollah, the Lebanese militia and political organization.

The skirmish along Israel’s northern border is being fought in parallel with the more intense war in Gaza, which Israel launched after Hamas’s Oct. 7 attack. Now also in its sixth month, the battle

with Hezbollah has implications both for the prospects of a wider regional conflict and for the thousands of civilians who live along the frontier.

Israel has responded forcefully to Hezbollah’s attacks: Above the hills and valleys of Israel’s border with Lebanon, Israeli warplanes rumble overhead. In the recent fighting, at least eight civilians in Israel and 51 in Lebanon have been killed, according to the Israeli and Lebanese authorities, as have combatants on both sides.

A recent two-day trip through the Galilee Panhandle — a finger

Continued on Page A10

HOSPITAL CHAOS Accounts from witnesses paint a bleak picture at Al-Shifa complex. PAGE A11



Senegal Goes to the Polls

Sunday’s presidential vote was seen by some young people as a chance for an overhaul. Page A13.

As Deadline Arrives, Seizing Trump’s Properties Is Not That Easy

By RUKMINI CALLIMACHI

Rejected by more than two dozen bond companies, Donald J. Trump has so far been unable to come up with the nearly half-a-billion dollar penalty owed by Monday in his civil fraud trial.

Just days before the deadline, the former president’s social media company completed a merger — a move that is poised to pump

an estimated \$3 billion into Mr. Trump’s coffers. That is more than enough to cover the \$454 million penalty that he owes to the state of New York, but the merger restricts him from selling his shares for six months, or using them as a collateral against a loan.

Unless those rules are waived to allow him to tap the infusion of cash, Mr. Trump faces the possibility that the state’s attorney gen-

A Tangle of Ownership and Existing Debts

eral will move to freeze some of his bank accounts and attempt to seize his properties in the city where he made his name as a real estate developer.

The buildings at the heart of the

lawsuit — several that dot the Manhattan skyline and a 212-acre property north of the city in Westchester County — sit like the smallest figurine inside a Russian nesting doll, protected by layer upon layer of legal entities. Lawyers specializing in bankruptcies, foreclosures and corporate insolvency warn that getting control over, and trying to liquidate, any

Continued on Page A15

Shrieks and Blank Stares: Scenes of Terror in Russia

Moscow’s Fight With Extremists Seethed for Many Years

By NEIL MacFARQUHAR

In the past few months, deep in the forbidding deserts of central Syria, Russian forces have quietly joined the Syrian military in intensifying attacks against Islamic State strongholds, including bombing what local news reports called the dens and caves where the extremist fighters hide.

While the world was focused on the conflicts in Ukraine and Gaza, this type of skirmishing has been simmering for years in Syria, and the Islamic State has long threatened to strike Russia directly for shoring up the regime of its sworn enemy, President Bashar al-Assad of Syria.

That moment appeared to have come on Friday night with the bloody assault on a Moscow concert hall that left more than 130 people dead. “The fiercest in years,” said a statement of responsibility issued on Saturday by the Islamic State via its news agency, referring to the long history of brutal terrorist attacks pitting jihadist forces against Moscow.

“They have framed this attack as coming in the context of the normal, ongoing war between ISIS and the anti-Islamic countries,” said Hanna Notte, a Berlin-based expert on Russian foreign and security policy at the James Martin Center for Nonproliferation Studies. “This seems to be within the overarching theme of Russia in Afghanistan, Russia in Chechnya, Russia in Syria.”

In his brief remarks on Saturday, President Vladimir V. Putin of Russia did not mention the claim from the Islamic State, but he did threaten to punish those responsible. “All perpetrators, organizers and commissioners of this crime will receive a just and inevitable punishment,” Mr. Putin said.

The Russian president spoke with Mr. al-Assad about counterterrorism cooperation, among other issues, in a phone call on Saturday, the Kremlin said.

Russian state television, dismissing responsibility claims by ISIS, instead suggested that it was a “false flag” operation by Ukraine, possibly with Western backing. The White House issued a statement on Saturday repeating the U.S. assertion that ISIS

Continued on Page A9

Survivors of Shooting at Concert Recount Chaos and Shock

By VALERIE HOPKINS and ALINA LOBZINA

Once they heard the shots ring out on Friday night at Crocus City Hall, Efim Fidrya and his wife ran down to the building’s basement and hid with three others in a bathroom.

They listened as the gunfire began and thousands of people who had come to a sold-out rock concert on Moscow’s outskirts began screaming and trying to flee.

Horried and scared, Mr. Fidrya did the only thing he could think to do: He held on tight to the bathroom door, which didn’t lock, trying to protect the group in case the assailants came to find them.

“While we could hear shooting and screaming, I stood the whole time holding the bathroom door shut,” Mr. Fidrya, an academic, said in a phone interview from Moscow. “The others were standing in the corner so that if someone started shooting through the door, they wouldn’t be in the line of fire.”

They didn’t know it then, but they were sheltering from what became Russia’s deadliest terror attack in two decades, after four gunmen had entered the popular concert venue and began shooting rapid-fire weapons.

Their story is one of many harrowing accounts that have emerged in the days since the attack, which killed at least 137 people. More than 100 injured people are hospitalized, some in critical condition, health officials said.

Mr. Fidrya’s small group waited and waited, but the attackers had started a fire in the complex and it was spreading. Mr. Fidrya’s wife, Olga, showed everyone how to wet their T-shirts and hold them to their faces so they could breathe without inhaling toxic smoke.

And then a second round of shots rang out.

After about half an hour, it was so smoky that Mr. Fidrya, 42, thought even the assailants must have left. As he ventured out, he saw the body of a dead woman lying by the escalator. Later he saw the body of another woman who had been killed in the carnage, her distraught husband standing over her.

His group went down into the parking garage and eventually

Continued on Page A8

GROWING TERROR THREAT ISIS-K, which began as a nemesis against the Taliban, is beginning to learn from its mistakes. PAGE A9

Private Lawyers Assist States, Earning Millions in Case Fees

By SHALINA CHATLANI

In 2018, when Mike DeWine was Ohio’s attorney general, he began investigating an obscure corner of the health care industry. He believed that insurers were inflating prescription drug prices through management companies that operated as middlemen in the drug supply chain. There were concerns that these companies, known as pharmacy benefit managers, or P.B.M.s, were fleecing agencies like Medicaid, the government-run health insurance program for the poor.

Three years later, after Mr. DeWine became governor of Ohio, the state announced an \$88 million settlement with one of the nation’s largest insurance companies, Centene.

The case led to a nationwide reckoning for the company, as attorneys general in one state after another followed Ohio’s lead, announcing multimillion-dollar set-

tlements and claiming credit for forcing Centene to reform its billing practices.

On the surface, it appeared that these settlements, which now total nearly \$1 billion, were driven by state governments cracking down on a company that had ripped off taxpayers.

But a New York Times investigation, drawing on thousands of pages of court documents, emails and public records in multiple states, reveals that the case against Centene was conceived and executed by a group of powerful private lawyers who used political connections to go after millions in contingency fees.

The lawyers were first hired in Ohio, without competitive bidding. Then, they gathered evidence against Centene of questionable billing practices across the country.

Continued on Page A18



Francis Quiet on Palm Sunday
The pope’s choice to skip the speech at the outset of Easter week raised concerns about his health. PAGE A12

Fueling China-Taiwan Tensions
Beijing is using a fatal episode off Kinmen, a Taiwanese-controlled island, to warn Taiwan’s president-elect. PAGE A4

Lessons From a TikTok Ban
The U.S. is agonizing over the possibility, but in India, users adjusted quickly, turning to Instagram and YouTube to build big audiences. PAGE B1

Outlook for Housing Market
The Fed expects to cut rates this year, and a change in selling practices may affect home buying. PAGE B1

The Guardian of Babar
Laurent de Brunhoff carried on his father’s series about a beloved elephant for seven decades. He was 98. PAGE A20



Signs of Spring, or Not
A writer wonders whether the wild things around her are out of sync with the season. PAGE A14

Dark Day Comes for Buffalo
A total eclipse will pass directly over the city next month, and a million visitors are expected. PAGE A19

Proud to Represent
The Utah star Alissa Pili stands out in the N.C.A.A. tournament not just because of her basketball abilities, but because she is from two underrepresented minority communities. PAGE D1

His Moment of Fame
Do you know who Josh Sborz is? Meet the player who threw the last pitch of the 2023 World Series, and who also was named the top player at the 2015 College World Series. PAGE D2

David Brooks PAGE A22



Unifying Principles
Now in two series, “The Regime” and “Alice & Jack,” Andrea Riseborough has played many characters. What connects them? Not even she knows. PAGE C1

