



Partly sunny 46/36 • Tomorrow: Rain, snow 48/34 B6

Democracy Dies in Darkness

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LUIS ANTONIO ROJAS FOR THE WASHINGTON POST

Plants needed to make world's best mezcal are slowly disappearing

Demand is draining Mexico of its wild agave

BY KEVIN SIEFF, LUIS ANTONIO ROJAS AND TUCKER HARRIS

The hunt for one of the world's most precious plants begins at the base of a mountain covered in dense brush, concealing the treasure that — with any luck — lies somewhere up the slope.

Today, it's Pablo Santiago Martínez, armed with his machete, preparing to whack his way through the vegetation of central Oaxaca. He's 50, his back bent by years of hard physical labor.

Santiago has been cutting down wild agave since he was 7, when the succulents grew like weeds across the Oaxacan countryside. Then the outside world discovered mezcal, the spirit distilled from agave that has been produced here for at least 400 years.

On this particular day, like so many others, Santiago led a horse up the side of the mountain, swung his blade and loaded the animal with the

SEE MEZCAL ON A10



ILLUSTRATION BY TUCKER HARRIS/THE WASHINGTON POST

Pablo Santiago Martínez, whose family makes Mezcal Los Ocotales, holds the core of a wild tepeztate agave in Oaxaca.

Drone in deadly attack on soldiers was misidentified

POSSIBLY MISTAKEN FOR U.S. AIRCRAFT

Three dead were members of Ga. Army Reserve unit

BY ALEX HORTON, MISSY RYAN, JOBY WARRICK AND DAN LAMOTHE

American air defenses failed to intercept an attack drone that killed three U.S. troops and wounded dozens in Jordan amid confusion about the identity of approaching aircraft, officials said Monday as more details emerged about the incident and the Biden administration deliberated about how to respond.

While the Pentagon scrambled to identify what went wrong at the isolated facility with the goal of preventing more bloodshed from ongoing attacks by Iranian proxy forces, President Biden's vow to retaliate raised questions about whether the United States could tip the region into the full-scale conflict that Washington has sought to avoid. The incident also prompted concern about whether U.S. personnel are adequately pre-

pared to defend against the proliferation of attack drones.

The dead were identified as Sgt. William Jerome Rivers, 46; Spec. Kennedy Ladon Sanders, 24; and Spec. Breonna Alexsondria Moffett, 23. They were members of an Army Reserve unit, the 718th Engineer Company, from Fort Moore in Georgia and the first American troops killed by hostile fire since the war in Gaza triggered a steep rise in violence across the Middle East.

Two officials said an initial assessment suggested that the weaponized drone may have been mistaken for an American aircraft returning to Tower 22, a base in northeastern Jordan close to where the country's border con-

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Mideast unease: U.S. response comes with many risks. A13

Inquiry: U.N. workers played role in October strikes, files allege. A14

Biden faces treacherous choices in responding

White House fears wider conflict as Republicans call for decisive action

BY TYLER PAGER, YASMEEN ABUTALEB AND ABIGAIL HAUSLOHNER

President Biden met with top aides Monday to review potential American responses to a drone attack that killed three U.S. service members, as Republicans called for hard-hitting retaliation while the White House worried about getting dragged into a widening conflict in the Middle East.

The United States believes Iranian-backed militants were behind the drone strike, and Biden is ramping up a reelection campaign against a leading Republican opponent who boasts of

his toughness against Iran, making any option politically perilous as well as militarily fraught.

Biden has promised to "hold all those responsible to account," but exactly how he plans to do that remains unclear. The drone attack, which marked the first known time U.S. soldiers have been killed in the fallout from the Israel-Gaza war, killed three Army Reserve members from Fort Moore in Georgia who were stationed at a facility in Jordan and injured dozens more.

U.S. officials said they were part of a mission working with partners to counter the Islamic State in the region, and that their presence was unrelated to American support for Israel.

"We do not seek another war. We do not seek to escalate," John Kirby, a spokesman for the White House National Security Council, told reporters Monday. "But we will absolutely do what is re-

SEE BIDEN ON A12

Maximum sentence for high-profile tax 'heist'

Trump's returns were among thousands leaked by ex-IRS contractor

BY SALVADOR RIZZO

A former government contractor who leaked a slew of confidential tax records filed by the wealthiest Americans, including those of President Donald Trump, was sentenced Monday to the maximum of five years in prison in what a federal judge called "the biggest heist in IRS history."

Charles Littlejohn pleaded guilty last year to one count of unauthorized disclosure of income tax returns. Littlejohn, 38, admitted that he leaked Trump's confidential tax information to the New York Times in 2019 and then replicated his work the next year, filtering the tax returns and

financial data of thousands of wealthy Americans to ProPublica. The news organizations published reports showing how Trump and the richest Americans for years paid little or no federal taxes.

U.S. District Judge Ana C. Reyes said Littlejohn deserved the maximum sentence she could impose, because he had targeted a sitting president and thousands of others. Prosecutors said Littlejohn had disclosed the tax returns of about 7,600 individuals and 600 entities.

After comparing Littlejohn to the rioters who stormed the Capitol on Jan. 6, 2021, Reyes said judges had to send a message that "open season on our elected officials" would not be tolerated and that "an independent and steadfast judiciary stands ready to punish anyone who holds his personal political beliefs above the law."

SEE LITTLEJOHN ON A4

Hope for Alzheimer's patients, in unequal doses

Promising new drugs haven't been widely tested in minorities, leaving doubts about efficacy, risk

BY LAURIE MCGINLEY



HANNAH YOON FOR THE WASHINGTON POST

Retired social worker Robert Williford, 67, waits as nurse Christine Besso sets up his first treatment of Leqembi at a clinic in Abington, Pa. At right is his wife, Cynthia Byron-Williford.

ABINGTON, PA. — Wrapped in a purple blanket, Robert Williford settles into a quiet corner of a bustling neurology clinic, an IV line delivering a colorless liquid into his left arm.

The 67-year-old, who has early Alzheimer's disease, is getting his initial dose of Leqembi. The drug is the first to clearly slow the fatal neurodegenerative ailment that afflicts 6.7 million older Americans, though the benefits may be modest. The retired social worker, one of the first African Americans to receive the treatment, hopes it will ease his forgetfulness so "I drive my wife less crazy."

But as Williford and his doctors embark on this treatment, they are doing so with scant scientific data about how the medication might work in people of color. In the pivotal clinical trial for the drug, Black patients

SEE ALZHEIMER'S ON A6

IN THE NEWS

Baby shark? Drone-shot images that might show a newborn great white off the coast of California are stirring up both excitement and skepticism. A7

Maryland rampage A woman accused of wounding several people in Prince George's County was ordered held without bond. B1

THE NATION **Two families** waited years for kidneys, then found each other. A2 **Legal experts** explain how Donald Trump would probably pay \$83.3 million in damages. A5

THE WORLD **French farmers** and their tractors blocked major roads in protest of new regulations. A8 **China Evergrande** Group, a heavily indebted property giant, was ordered to liquidate. A9

THE ECONOMY **As Trump's** rivals in the Republican presidential primary collapse, Wall Street is warming to his candidacy. A15 **The Biden** administration finalized a scaled-back plan to make new stoves less energy-intensive. A ban on gas burners isn't in the works. A16

THE REGION **After an initial win**, student activists will now face the D.C. Council in their push for greener schools. B1 **Former D.C. Council** member Jack Evans is back on the civic stage with an official title, four years after he resigned amid scandal. B1

STYLE **Night after night**, Baltimore's Future Islands left it all onstage. Now, they're learning to take it easy, too. C1

HEALTH & SCIENCE **A writer's father** was ill. Could he survive the maddening world of the prison health-care system? E1

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