

A brutal struggle for queer Russians

Adult LGBTQ children are held against their will at ‘conversion’ sites

BY ROBYN DIXON

MOSCOW — In Russia, where the entire LGBTQ+ community has been banned as “extremist,” some parents are paying thugs to abduct their queer sons and daughters, forcing them into secure private centers to “cure” them with so-called conversion therapy.

Some of these young people are fleeing the country, looking for safety in the West.

Former residents say conditions behind high concrete walls are like small unregulated prisons, designed for alcoholics, drug addicts, or people whose families see them as problems.

Many were tricked or abducted, then held for months. They recounted being beaten, humiliated or forced to read out confessions that they were destructive and selfish because of their “addiction” to their sexual or gender identity — mimicking rigid programs designed to combat drug and alcohol addiction.

Many of them emerged “somehow mentally broken,” believing there was something wrong with them, said Vladimir Komov, who formerly served as a rights lawyer at a prominent LGBTQ+ legal advocacy group DELO LGBT+, which shut its operations last week because of the ban.

A 2020 report by an independent United Nations expert found that conversion therapy was “deeply harmful ... inflicting severe pain and suffering and resulting in long-lasting psychological and physical damage.” The report called for a global ban.

In President Vladimir Putin’s move to cement his rule and build a repressive, deeply conservative nation, he has singled out LGBTQ+ people as scapegoats alongside antiwar activists.

But the rhetoric is also part of Putin’s bid to enlist socially conservative nations in Africa and the Middle East to back Russia in

SEE RUSSIA ON A7



SARAH L. VOISIN/THE WASHINGTON POST

On the hunt for climate disease

As outbreaks brew, can scientists stay a step ahead?

BY ANA CAMPOY AND NIKO KOMMENDA IN CAHUIDE, PERU

Aedes, a grayish four-propeller drone, whirred off the dirt soccer field in this Amazon village to help do what doctors cannot as climate change threatens this nation with a new era of disease.

Named after the mosquito that transmits dengue fever, it quickly rose above the excited gaggle of flip-flopped children gathered to see it off and past their homes’ corroded metal roofs. Soon, it was nearly 400 feet high, scanning roads cutting into the jungle for new signs of disease-spreading mosquitoes.

“We can’t keep fighting dengue, malaria, all diseases with the tools we’ve had for 40 or 50 years,” said Gabriel Carrasco, the 32-year-old epidemiologist who deployed the drone. “We’re at the gateway of the consequences of climate change.”

This year, Peru suffered its worst outbreak of dengue in recorded history — a plague that some researchers say could be

linked to record-breaking temperatures and precipitation driven by climate change. More than 250,000 people got infected and at least 430 died of the illness, which attacks the joints.

Dengue is one of several diseases appearing in more places and in higher numbers, overwhelming the country’s ability to predict outbreaks and contain transmission. Cases of leptospirosis — a bacterial disease spread by the infected urine of rats and other animals — also have risen in parts of Peru.

Carrasco and other researchers are among the scientists who warn that this new age of climate-fueled disease requires a far more sophisticated response, as medical authorities rely on incomplete and outdated case records to try to prepare for and react to outbreaks.

Besides Aedes, Carrasco has hauled dozens of pieces of high-tech gear hundreds of miles from his lab in Peru’s capital, Lima, to communities that have sprouted along a highway running along the Amazon River. Harnessing these drones and sensors, he aims to produce highly detailed maps of where disease is moving as new weather patterns emerge, and then feed that information into an artificial-intelligence program that could better predict when and where outbreaks will erupt among threadbare communities that have little capacity to protect themselves.

Scientists can now easily trace how

SEE DISEASE ON A10

Epidemiologist Gabriel Carrasco, right, and research assistant Samuel Charpentier collect data from sensors in the town of El Varillal, in Peru’s Amazon jungle. Carrasco and his team are building a system that they hope to use to predict disease outbreaks.

THE SCHOOL BOOK WARS

An ideological challenge reverberates in Florida

How the book battles in one school district upended lives, careers

BY RESHMA KIRPALANI AND HANNAH NATANSON

PENSACOLA, FLA. — A teacher unable to read books to her fourth-grade students without seeking permission. A pastor worried children will encounter graphic sexual material in the titles waiting on classroom shelves. A superintendent fired in part, he said, for refusing to yank books out of the schools.

The battle over what children should be allowed to read in school has riven Florida’s Escambia County School District. It’s part of a national battle, as school book objections surge to historic highs across the country.

In Escambia County, the controversy kicked off in 2022, when a high school language arts teacher, Vicki Baggett, challenged more than 100 books for what she called inappropriate content. The challenges would spur the removal or restriction of scores of titles, contribute to the superintendent’s termination and draw an ongoing federal lawsuit that seeks to restore the books and alleges district officials have violated students’ and teachers’ constitutional rights.

Over the course of a year, The Washington Post interviewed people on all sides of the debate in Escambia County schools to understand how the spike in book challenges affected how they live, learn and read. (Baggett, the prolific challenger, denied several interview requests.) These are their stories — shared in their own words. Interviews have been lightly edited for clarity.

SEE BOOKS ON A4



WOJCIECH GRZEDZINSKI FOR THE WASHINGTON POST

Another Christmas at war

Ukrainian soldiers eat a Christmas Eve meal Sunday in the Donetsk region of Ukraine. The military unit, stationed in a blasted-out village, sang around a table filled with 12 traditional dishes, even as they missed their families and victory against Russia felt elusive. **Story, A6**

Vaccine foes are gaining power

CANDIDATES WIN STATE OFFICE

Louisiana results hint at broad transformation

BY LAUREN WEBER

BATON ROUGE — People who oppose vaccine requirements are winning elections for state legislatures amid a national drop in childhood vaccination rates and a resurfacing of preventable deadly diseases.

The victories come as part of a political backlash to pandemic restrictions and the proliferation of misinformation about the safety of vaccines introduced to fight the coronavirus.

In Louisiana, 29 candidates endorsed by Stand for Health Freedom, a national group that works to defeat mandatory vaccinations, won in the state’s off-year elections this fall.

Fred Mills, the retiring Republican chairman of the Louisiana Senate’s health and welfare committee, said he fears that once-fringe anti-vaccine policies that endanger lives will have a greater chance of passing come January when newly elected lawmakers are sworn in and more than a dozen Republican moderates like himself leave office.

Louisiana’s shift is a sign of the growing clout of the anti-vaccine movement in the nation’s statehouses as bills that once died in committee make it to the legislative floor for a vote.

Since spring, Tennessee lawmakers dropped all vaccine requirements for home-schooled children. Iowa Republicans passed a bill eliminating the requirement that schools educate students about the HPV vaccine. And the Florida legislature passed a law preemptively barring school districts from requiring coronavirus vaccines, a move health advocates fear opens the door to further vaccine limitations.

SEE VACCINE ON A16

For some in Brazil, credit card rates as high as 455%

BY ELIZABETH DWOSKIN AND GABRIELA SA PESSOA

PORTO ALEGRE, BRAZIL — Ady Chaves opened her bank statement reluctantly.

In the fine print of the lengthy credit card contract was the figure the 26-year-old preschool teacher had dreaded to learn: 455 percent. The annual percentage rate on her card from Nubank, one of many branchless “digital banks” springing up in Brazil.

That rate is the reason that the debt Chaves took on in summer 2022 to purchase classroom materials has ballooned to an amount she says her salary will never cover. It’s why she resorted to buying beans and rice on an installment plan. Why her credit is bad. Why she lost more than 10 pounds.

Brazil has long suffered exorbitant interest rates. The average

SEE CREDIT ON A8

IN THE NEWS

Trump’s trials What to know about the former president’s legal battles, including an anticipated appeal to the Supreme Court. **A5**

Football’s shifting landscape Even Texas has not escaped the slow decline in participation that has taken hold at the sport’s grass-roots levels amid a brain-injury crisis. **D1**

THE NATION **The lack** of regulations on ketamine faces fresh scrutiny after Matthew Perry’s death. **A2** **A woman** in Ohio was charged with abuse of a corpse after miscarrying in her bathroom. **A3**

THE WORLD **Russian dissident** Alexei Navalny has been found in a remote penal colony, his team said. **A7** **Britain’s King Charles III** shared an eco-friendly Christmas message. **A9**

THE ECONOMY **Two U.S. companies** are launching spacecraft to the moon within weeks of each other early next year. **A12** **Spirit Airlines** apologized for placing an unaccompanied 6-year-old on the wrong plane and said it was investigating the incident. **A12**

THE REGION **A proposed bill** would increase the speeding fine on a Maryland road some have dubbed the “Highway of Death.” **B1** **A Maryland state lab** is looking to identify and return human remains it has held for years, starting with 15 African Americans. **B1**

STYLE **Having fun** has become exhausting, forced and performative. **C1** **Dakota Johnson** is making it part of her life’s work to promote sexual wellness — the documentary “The Disappearance of Shere Hite” is in line with that. **C1**

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