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"All the News That's Fit to Print"

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THE WEATHER
Today, partly sunny sky, quite chilly, high 38. **Tonight,** turning mostly clear, cold, low 30. **Tomorrow,** brisk, remaining chilly, mostly sunny, high 41. Weather map is on Page 22.

MERIDITH KOHUT FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

A 19-year-old sophomore chemistry major, who was recruited to work for the Sinaloa drug cartel to cook fentanyl, at a stash house.

Recruiters on Mexican College Campuses: The Cartels

They Offer Chemistry Students Big Pay to Make Fentanyl

By NATALIE KITROEFF and PAULINA VILLEGAS

CULIACÁN, Mexico — The cartel recruiter slipped onto campus disguised as a janitor and then zeroed in on his target: a sophomore chemistry student.

The recruiter explained that the cartel was staffing up for a project, and that he'd heard good things about the young man.

"'You're good at what you do,'" the student recalled the recruiter saying. "'You decide if you're interested.'"

In their quest to build fentanyl empires, Mexican criminal groups are turning to an unusual talent pool: not hit men or corrupt police officers, but chemistry students studying at Mexican universities.

People who make fentanyl in cartel labs, who are called cooks, told The New York Times that they needed workers with advanced knowledge of chemistry to help make the drug stronger and "get more people hooked," as one cook put it.

The cartels also have a more ambitious goal: to synthesize the chemical compounds, known as precursors, that are essential to making fentanyl, freeing them from having to import those raw materials from China.

If they succeed, U.S. officials say, it would mark a terrifying new phase in the fentanyl crisis, in which Mexican cartels have more control than ever over one of the deadliest drugs in recent history.

"It would make us the kings of Mexico," said one chemistry student who has been cooking fentanyl for six months.

The Times interviewed seven fentanyl cooks, three chemistry students, two high-ranking operatives and a high-level recruiter. All of them work for the Sinaloa cartel, which the U.S. government says is largely responsible for the fentanyl pouring over the southern border.

Those affiliated with the cartel put themselves in danger just by talking to The Times, and spoke on the condition of anonymity for fear of retaliation. Their accounts matched those of American Embassy officials who track cartel activities, including the role students are playing in cartel operations and how they are producing fentanyl. Times reporters spoke to a chemistry professor, who said the recruitment of his students was common.

The students said they had different jobs within the criminal group. Sometimes, they said, they

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Trump Intends To Make Patel Head of F.B.I.

Pressing Wray to Quit Before He Is Fired

By DEVLIN BARRETT and MAGGIE HABERMAN

WASHINGTON — President-elect Donald J. Trump said on Saturday that he wants to replace Christopher A. Wray, the F.B.I. director, with Kash Patel, a hard-line critic of the bureau who has called for shutting down the agency's Washington headquarters, firing its leadership and bringing the country's law enforcement agencies "to heel."

Mr. Trump's planned nomination of Mr. Patel has echoes of his failed attempt to place another partisan firebrand, Matt Gaetz, atop the Justice Department as attorney general. It could run into hurdles in the Senate, which will be called on to confirm him, and is sure to send shock waves through the F.B.I., which Mr. Trump and his allies have come to view as part of a "deep state" conspiracy against him.

Mr. Patel has been closely aligned with Mr. Trump's belief that much of the nation's law enforcement and national security establishment needs to be purged of bias and held accountable for what they see as unjustified investigations and prosecutions of Mr. Trump and his allies.

Mr. Patel "played a pivotal role in uncovering the Russia, Russia, Russia Hoax, standing as an advocate for truth, accountability and the Constitution," Mr. Trump said in announcing his choice in a social media post.

He called Mr. Patel "a brilliant lawyer, investigator and 'America First' fighter who has spent his career exposing corruption, defending Justice, and protecting the American people."

Mr. Patel, a favorite of Mr. Trump's political base, has worked as a federal prosecutor and a public defender, but has little of the law enforcement and management experience typical of F.B.I. directors.

He served in a series of administration positions at the tail end of Mr. Trump's first term, including posts on the National Security Council and in the Pentagon. Before leaving office in early 2021, Mr. Trump floated the idea of mak-

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REBELS IN SYRIA TAKE OVER MOST OF LARGEST CITY

A SURPRISE OFFENSIVE

Challenge to al-Assad in a Civil War That Was Slow for Years

By MUHAMMAD HAJ KADOUR and RAJA ABDULRAHIM

ALEPPO, Syria — Rebels had seized most of Syria's largest city, Aleppo, as of Saturday, according to a war monitoring group and to fighters who were combing the streets in search of any remaining pockets of government forces.

The antigovernment rebels said they had faced little resistance on the ground in Aleppo. But Syrian government warplanes responded with airstrikes on the city for the first time since 2016, according to the war monitoring group, the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights.

Aleppo came to a near standstill on Saturday, with many residents staying indoors for fear of what the sudden flip in control might mean, witnesses said. Others did venture out into the streets, welcoming the fighters and hugging them. Some rebels tried to reassure city residents and sent out at least one van to distribute bread.

The rapid advance on Aleppo came just days into a surprise rebel offensive launched on Wednesday against the autocratic regime of President Bashar al-Assad. The developments are both the most serious challenge to Mr. al-Assad's rule and the most intense escalation in years in a civil war that had been mostly dormant.

The timing of the assault suggested that the rebels could be exploiting weaknesses across an alliance linking Iran to the militant group Hezbollah in Lebanon as well as the Assad regime in Syria and others.

In Aleppo on Saturday, well-armed rebel fighters dressed in camouflage patrolled streets still lined with the ubiquitous posters of Mr. al-Assad. The opposition forces said that although they were in control of nearly the entire city, they had not yet solidified

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In India, Exams Crucial Enough To Stage a Heist

By MUJIB MASHAL and HARI KUMAR

MEERUT, India — The call arrived — it was go time. The medical doctor rushed to the airport, bound for a midnight operation hundreds of miles away in western India.

But this mission was not about saving lives. The doctor carried a screwdriver, a pair of pliers, a blade and a cellphone — tools for a heist. His target was something worth more than gold in India's cutthroat competition for government jobs and university placements: the question sheets for a police constable exam.

After landing in the city of Ahmedabad, the doctor, Shubham Mandal, was hurried to a freight warehouse on its outskirts, according to police documents and interviews with the lead investigator by The New York Times. To avoid surveillance cameras, Dr. Mandal climbed through a back window into a room stacked with boxes. There, the police say, he pried open one marked "confidential" and took out an envelope.

He used his phone's camera to photograph each page inside before resealing the envelope and locking the box. He would repeat the exercise at least once in the nights that followed, as new sheets arrived at the warehouse from the printing house, in between staying at a one-star hotel nearby. Waiting in a car each time were three men, including, the police say, the burglary's mastermind, Ravi Atri.

Mr. Atri saw himself as part criminal, part Robin Hood. He took the national medical school entrance exam five times and ultimately passed, but never became a doctor. Instead, he turned to stealing tests to help others.

No job was too small for him and his gang. He had previously had a hand in leaking questions on exams for nursing jobs, banking jobs, teaching jobs and slots at vocational institutes, the police say, and had been jailed at least twice.

The constable exam, his latest quarry, would be taken in February of this year by nearly five million people vying for 60,000 vacancies in the northern state of Uttar Pradesh, Mr. Atri's home base. A new constable is paid about $400 a month. But even the low-

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ATUL LOKE FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

Officers in Meerut kept an eye on those taking a competitive entrance exam for a police job.

Draft-Dodging Playboy's Heirs Claim Wrights' Plane Is Theirs

By GRAHAM BOWLEY

The Franklin Institute, a Philadelphia museum dedicated to the study of science, has long said one of its most impressive holdings — a plane built in 1911 by the Wright brothers — was a gift from a man named Grover C. Bergdoll.

The Wright Model B, a two-seater that Bergdoll bought from the brothers, remains one of the best preserved icons of early aviation. The museum's website details the plane's rich history and how it was built with inventive flaps and cables.

But it says nothing about the man the museum says was the plane's donor, a wealthy bon vivant who was utterly despised after dodging the draft for World War I. The scion of a Philadelphia brewing fortune, Bergdoll drove cars and flew planes before the war with an abandon that earned him the nickname "Playboy of the Eastern Seaboard."

For nearly a century, that plane has been exhibited at the Franklin Institute. But more recently, the circumstances of how it got there have become a point of contention.

The Franklin Institute acquired the plane in 1933, when Bergdoll was living as a fugitive in Germany, to which he had fled after his conviction for desertion. By this time, all of his possessions had been declared the property of the U.S. government.

Grover C. Bergdoll

The museum has said in several settings that Bergdoll transferred title by letter while he hid from U.S. authorities overseas.

But recently the museum acknowledged, to the author of a book on Bergdoll and Bergdoll's family, that it has no letter. In-

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METROPOLITAN
A One-Man Crime Wave
David Andino shoplifted extensively to fuel his drug addiction. That caused trouble for businesses, and brought anguish to his mother, a cop. PAGE 1

SUNDAY STYLES
Glamour at a Discount
Artists, celebrities and influencers are flocking to an office building in New York's financial district for parties and below-market-rate leases. PAGE 8

SUNDAY BUSINESS
This Era's Mister Rogers
Rachel Accurso, a.k.a. Ms. Rachel, makes educational musical videos for toddlers. Now, a toy version of herself has set off a holiday frenzy. PAGE 6

ARTS & LEISURE
Angelina Jolie Finds Her Voice
The actress, who plays the soprano Maria Callas in a new movie, spent months learning to sing. We joined her at the Metropolitan Opera. PAGE 10

SUNDAY OPINION
Sarah Wildman PAGE 6

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