

# Behind the use of child labor in chicken

Feds say poultry firm committed wage theft, retaliated against Indigenous workers.

By KIERA FELDMAN

When the investigators came, operators of a Southern California poultry processor allegedly hid child workers in bathrooms and closets and hurried them out the back door, according to a U.S. Department of Labor lawsuit.

In two poultry plants in La Puente and City of Industry owned by Tony Bran, federal authorities alleged, kids as young as 14 were illegally working dangerous jobs, deboning chicken and operating heavy machinery. Eventually, the chicken ended up at major supermarkets and distributors such as Ralphs, Aldi, Grocery Outlet and Sysco, officials said.

The workers came primarily from Indigenous communities in Guatemala and spoke Q'eqchi', K'iche' and Mam. Instead of going to school, the child laborers worked so many hours they were owed overtime pay. Children worked long hours alongside adults, and Bran was allegedly cheating them all out of wages, the federal lawsuit said.

After the investigators left Bran's Los Angeles-area plants, the workers told authorities, he corralled them.

"[He] told us that he doesn't care about us, we mean nothing to him and that we should leave if we do not like how he is paying us or treating us," one worker said in a translated court filing related to the Department of Labor lawsuit.

Last month, Bran settled with the federal government and agreed to pay nearly [See Chicken, A10]



JOSE LUIS MAGANA AP

**Giuliani ordered to pay millions**  
Trump campaign lawyer is instructed to pay \$148 million to two former Georgia election workers. **NATION, A5**

**Perry's death tied to ketamine**  
"Friends" star recently reduced intake of drug, which is sometimes used to treat depression. **CALIFORNIA, B1**

**Chargers fire Staley, Telesco**  
Hours after the team's historic blowout loss to the Raiders, the coach and general manager are let go. **SPORTS, B12**

**Weather**  
Sunny and warm.  
L.A. Basin: 79/54. **B8**



**SANTA CLAUS**, a.k.a. Albert Sanchez, heads to the break room during a shift at the Puente Hills Mall in City of Industry. The mall draws movie buffs fascinated by its ties to the film "Back to the Future."

COLUMN ONE

## Better not pout, he's telling you why

Christmas was coming, and Santa Claus was trying to pump some life into a dying American mall.

Most of the stores — big chains such as Sears, H&M and Forever 21, as well as little toy shops and boutique clothiers — were empty, dark and drafty, their metal gates permanently down.

An acrid smell, like that of a long-extinguished gas stove, hung in the air outside a closed seafood buffet. A thick coat of dust covered faux leather chairs in a shuttered hair salon.

People slept — older folks in pay-by-the-minute massage chairs, a homeless man on a vinyl bench — while instrumental Christmas music played over-

At a fading mall, known for scenes in 1985's 'Back to the Future,' a rookie Santa brings 'a little bit of light'

By Hailey Branson-Potts

head.

The scene at Puente Hills Mall in City of Industry, best known as the Twin Pines Mall from the 1985 movie "Back to the Future," was not exactly merry.

But even here, the Christmas spirit refused to disappear thanks to Santa — also known as Albert Sanchez.

"Making people smile, that brings joy to me," he said on a Tuesday a few weeks before Christmas.

It's his first year in the red suit, and this 40-year-old rookie Santa lacks the paunch and natural white beard of older, more experienced Kris Kringles.

But his laugh, which comes easily, is punctuated by a natural "ho, ho, ho!" He is soft-spoken [See Mall Santa, A12]

# The fall of Sean 'Diddy' Combs

Mogul denies abusing women as associates allege decades-long pattern

By AUGUST BROWN, STACY PERMAN, CRAIG MARKS AND KENAN DRAUGHORNE

On a late afternoon in April, about two dozen music-industry tastemakers gathered at the 17,000-square-foot Holmby Hills mansion of Sean "Diddy" Combs for a preview of his first studio album in nearly two decades.

In one of his living rooms, attendees sipped cocktails as they admired a striking painting by Kerry James Marshall titled "Past Times," which Combs pur-



CHRIS PIZZELLO Invision/AP

**SEAN "DIDDY" COMBS**, pictured in 2013, has temporarily stepped down as chairman of Revolt TV.

chased in 2018 at auction for \$21.1 million. Combs amassed his fortune first through music, as a hip-hop producer, artist and founder of Bad Boy Entertainment, the label that launched the career of the Notorious B.I.G., among others. He'd later added lucrative fashion and liquor companies to his ventures, most notably Sean John and Ciroc vodka.

Combs, who turned 54 in November, had convened this crowd to hype his new R&B label, Love Records, and to play tracks from his own "The Love Album: Off the Grid," featuring dozens [See Combs, A6]

# Simmering fear along Israel-Lebanon border

As Hezbollah threat rises, an ancient Christian minority looks warily to north.

By MELANIE LIDMAN

**JISH**, Israel — Birds swoop across a valley separating Lebanon and Israel as olive and pomegranate trees rustle in the wind.

The flash of light from an opposing hillside looks small from a distance — until a boom cracks across the landscape, announcing another Hezbollah rocket launched toward Israel. Minutes later, more explosions peel through the air, as the Israeli military responds to the source of the fire.

Since the start of the Israel-Hamas war in the Gaza Strip, hostilities have spread north to these hills, where Lebanon-based Hezbollah fighters have launched hundreds of missiles toward Israeli border communities, and Israeli forces have shelled targets to the north.

"This is happening every day," said Shadi Khaloul, a Christian Aramaean activist, standing in a pastoral orchard in the northern Israeli town of Jish.

Aramaicans are a community of native Christians who trace their lineage to the time of Jesus. Khaloul has been instrumental in reviving spoken Aramaic, believed to be the language of Jesus and one used in [See Hezbollah, A4]



MARCUS YAM Los Angeles Times

**GEORGETTE SLIMAN**, 75, attends a prayer session in Jish in northern Israel. Residents worry that Israel is ignoring the threat from Hezbollah in Lebanon.

# COVID and flu cases on the rise in state

Holiday surge isn't as bad as last year's, but it sparks new warnings from health officials.

By RONG-GONG LIN II

COVID-19 and flu are rising across California, sparking new warnings from health officials to take precautions as the wider winter holiday season looms.

The uptick is modest and not wholly unexpected — wintertime surges have been an annual occurrence since the coronavirus first emerged. But experts say lagging uptake of the latest reformulated vaccines has left some populations particularly vulnerable to severe health outcomes that are largely preventable at this point.

Over the week that ended Dec. 9, 2,449 Californians were newly admitted to hospitals with a coronavirus infection, up 40% over the last month, according to federal data.

California was considered to have "high" viral illness activity level as of Dec. 9, among the worst designations in the country, the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention said.

"Respiratory illness activity is rapidly increasing across the United States," the CDC said in a bulletin Thursday afternoon. "Millions of people may get sick in the next month or two, and low vaccination rates mean more people will get more severe disease. Getting vaccinated now can help prevent hospitalizations and save lives."

A rise in viral illness is expected this time of year, but the prevalence of COVID-19 adds a considerable health burden that didn't exist before the pandemic. COVID-19 remains the primary cause of new respiratory hospitalizations and deaths nationally, causing 1,000 fatalities a week.

"COVID is still causing the most number of cases, the most number of hospitalizations and the most, unfortunately, number of deaths that we're seeing week over week," Dr. Mandy [See COVID-19, A8]



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