

## Bianco shelves election fraud probe

Reversal by Riverside County sheriff follows legal challenges over his seizure of ballots.

BY GRACE TOOHEY

Riverside County Sheriff Chad Bianco, a leading Republican candidate for governor, said Monday that he had paused his controversial investigation into unsubstantiated claims of election fraud, a probe that was facing mounting legal challenges and ethical concerns.

In a statement Monday, Bianco said the probe was “on hold” because of “politically motivated lawsuits and court filings.”

It was a major reversal for the outspoken Trump supporter, who had defended the investigation — and broadened its scope — just last week. Bianco’s employees have seized more than 650,000 ballots cast in Riverside County during November’s election.

Bianco didn’t provide comment beyond the media statement or say when the probe might be restarted.

Since it kicked off, Bianco’s investigation has drawn widespread concern from election watchdogs and state law enforcement officials, including California Atty. Gen. Rob Bonta. The state’s top attorney directed the sheriff to halt his investigation and has since filed a series of legal challenges asking for judicial intervention to ensure that Bianco does so.

In a state Supreme Court petition filed Friday, Bonta called the case an “unprecedented constitutional emergency” and called on the court to order an immediate stay on Bianco’s investigation.

A spokesperson for the attorney general’s office on Monday acknowledged that Bianco said he would stop [See Bianco, A6]



FATEMEH BAHRAMI Anadolu



ARIEL SCHALIT Associated Press

IRANIANS in Tehran, top, protest the Israeli and U.S. attacks on their country. Above, a fire is extinguished after an Iranian missile strike in Haifa, Israel.

## Between threats, Trump says Iran talks are ‘serious’

He posts about U.S. targeting energy sites as Tehran reasserts it isn’t negotiating.

BY ANA CEBALLOS, NABIH BULOS AND GAVIN J. QUINTON

WASHINGTON — President Trump threatened Monday to destroy vital Iranian energy and water infrastructure if a peace deal is not reached, as Tehran continued to deny negotiations were taking place and said it was preparing for a ground invasion after the arrival of thousands of American troops in the region.

If a ceasefire agreement is not reached quickly, the president said in a social media post, “we will conclude our lovely ‘stay’ in Iran by blowing up and completely obliterating all of their Electric Generating Plants, Oil Wells and Kharg Island (and possibly all desalination plants!).”

The threats came within hours of the president insisting on Sunday night that diplomatic efforts would “probably” lead to a deal soon, and that Iran had allowed 20 more oil cargo ships to pass through the Strait of Hormuz as a “sign of respect.”

Trump said the United States is in “serious discussions with A NEW, AND MORE REASONABLE,

REGIME in Iran” but offered no details.

Iran, however, continued to throw cold water on the negotiations Monday when Esmail Baghaei, the Foreign Ministry spokesperson, dismissed the Trump administration’s terms as “unrealistic, unreasonable and excessive.”

“I do not know how many people in the United States take American diplomacy claims seriously. Our mission is clear, unlike the other side, which constantly changes its position,” he said in comments carried by the semiofficial Iranian agency Tasnim News.

Baghaei said there have been no direct negotiations but only messages through intermediaries stating that the U.S. wants to confer.

White House Press Secretary Karoline Leavitt said at a news briefing on Monday that the “American people are smart enough” to not take Iranian officials’ “at their word” when they say there are no negotiations happening with the United States.

Leavitt said the Trump administration is negotiating with Iranian leaders who are “appearing more reasonable behind the scenes” than the government’s previous leaders, who were killed by strikes launched by the United States and Israel.

“This is another historic opportunity for Iran to do the right thing to rid them- [See Iran, A3]

## A TERRIFYING HIDDEN LAB

The case of a lifetime started with a putrid smell and a green garden hose sticking out of the side of a supposedly vacant warehouse in California farm country.

Inside the sprawling building on I Street in Reedley, code enforcement officer Jesalyn Harper found vials filled with liquid — some marked in English or Chinese, others with just a code — that bore frightening labels such as “Malaria,” “COVID-19” and “HIV.” Refrigerators, lined up in columns along a wall, had labels that read “blood” and “Ebola.”

As she walked deeper into the ware-

Discovery of biohazards in a farm town blows open an elaborate criminal case

BY HANNAH FRY

house, passing lab workers filling pregnancy test kits, she located the source of the smell that had brought her there — droppings from 1,000 lab-tested mice, she told The Times during a recent interview. The workers were nice enough, she said, but when she started asking questions she could feel the mood change.

“I realized I’m in trouble, and I need to get out of this building without tipping them off that I’m scared,” Harper said.

Her discovery blew open an elaborate criminal case with ties to Califor- [See Lab, A7]

## 4th man held by ICE dies at SoCal facility

Mexico says it will take legal action. The Adelanto center also faces a federal lawsuit.

BY BRITTNY MEJIA AND RUBEN VIVES

A Southern California immigration detention center faces renewed scrutiny after federal officials confirmed the death of a detainee last week, marking the fourth fatality since September and contributing to what is becoming one of the deadliest years on record for people in U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement custody.

Jose Guadalupe Ramos-Solano, 52, who was being held at the Adelanto ICE Processing Center, died Wednesday. He and the other three people who died were Mexican nationals, prompting the Mexican government to demand an immediate review of the facility, pointing to “serious omissions and evident deficiencies” in medical care.

Mexican officials said during a news conference Monday afternoon that they plan to take legal action and expressed unfettered support for the families of the Mexican citizens who have died in ICE custody.

Sitting in front of news cameras and reporters, Ramos-Solano’s wife, son and daughter sat quietly, occasionally wiping at their eyes or reaching for one another as Mexican officials offered their condolences.

Antonia Tovar said her husband had emigrated from Guanajuato to the U.S. more than 28 years ago and worked at an industrial laundromat.

“My husband was a good person, dedicated to his kids and to his wife,” she said. “I [See ICE, A5]



GARY CORONADO For The Times

CHANCE WILCOX of the National Parks Conservation Assn. stands near a mining claim stake.

## Firm wants to mine near Joshua Tree

Australian company’s rare earths project would harm sensitive habitat, critics say.

BY ALEX WIGGLESWORTH

An Australian company has launched a rare earths mining project just outside Joshua Tree National Park in critical desert tortoise habitat, an area the company’s director refers to as an “emerging heavy rare earth district.”

The company, Dateline Resources Ltd., says that historical sampling of the area in the Pinto Mountains south of Twentynine Palms found geological enrichment in elements key to

powering electric vehicles, wind turbines and defense systems.

The United States depends heavily on China for its supply of these critical minerals, a major national security vulnerability that the Trump administration has sought to address through a series of regulatory changes and financial incentives aimed at shoring up domestic production.

The project is in its early stages, and it’s unclear whether further testing will confirm the presence of rare earth elements across a broad enough area to warrant extracting them. The site is roughly 100 miles southwest of the nation’s only fully functional rare earths mine — Mountain [See Mining, A6]

## Gen Z travelers are opting for ultrashort trips abroad

BY KAILYN BROWN

One Friday night last year, Akylah Cox and her boyfriend took a red-eye flight from Pennsylvania to Dublin for a whirlwind adventure. The trip lasted less than 30 hours. They hit up an impressive number of spots: the Guinness Storehouse, the Book of Kells experience at Trinity College, Ha’penny Bridge, Capel Street for thrifting (“I gave myself only 30 minutes to do this, but it had to get done,” Cox says) and the Celtic Nights dinner and show.

They were back home on Sunday and went to work the next day.

She shared her experience on TikTok with the caption, “Was this crazy?!” The responses varied.

“I would be tired the rest of the week,” one person commented with two woozy-face emojis.

“This inspired me!” another said.

“I’m tryna be this level crazy,” commented another.

For Cox, who was working full time in engineering and pursuing an MBA while her boyfriend was completing his medical residency,

creating an ultra-compacted itinerary was the only possible way to travel. And she loves the practice. On TikTok, she shares her itineraries for “microtrips” — short, usually international trips lasting 24 to 72 hours.

“You can just leave,” says Cox, who lives in Chicago. “You can have that quick break, that quick reset.”

She’s part of a new wave of travelers, particularly Gen Z, opting for these types of trips over extended vacations, according to an Airbnb trend report. Partly [See Microtrips, A11]

### Pluses, minuses of delaying school

Holding back younger children from kindergarten may not always pay off, a new report says. LEARNING, A8

### Smoglandia: L.A. fights its dirty air

Part 3 of a series finds Angelenos in a quandary, working to curb smog without giving up cars. CALIFORNIA, B1

Weather  
An afternoon shower.  
L.A. Basin: 69/56. B6



GINA FERAZZI Los Angeles Times

### DÍAZ’S ROLE INSTRUMENTAL

Dodgers reliever is already boosting bullpen, to the tune of trumpeted walk-in music. SPORTS, B10