



ERIC THAYER Los Angeles Times

FINALLY, HELP AGAINST THE SLIDES

Officials in Rancho Palos Verdes will receive almost \$2.3 million in federal funds for two landslide mitigation projects almost three years after the land shifts began expanding and accelerating. **CALIFORNIA, B1**

As an American, pope well suited for this fight

Facing Trump's barbs, Leo finds clout in his Midwestern grasp of U.S. culture and talk.

BY CATHERINE LUCEY

Addressing reporters on a recent flight to Algeria, Pope Leo XIV invoked the Gospel, called himself a peacemaker and pledged to keep speaking out on behalf of the downtrodden.

"Too many people are suffering in the world today," he said. "Too many innocent people are being killed, and I think someone has to stand up."

Pontiffs have a tradition of weighing in on global strife, and Leo's words were in keeping with long-standing church teaching. Appearing in front of reporters in this fashion was also not new: Pope John Paul II began taking questions from journalists on the papal plane in the 1970s.

But the first American pope was in fact wading into an unprecedented political tempest — responding to a series of broadsides from President Trump that drew Leo into debates over the war with Iran, immigration policies and more, all while Catholics in the U.S. and around the world looked on.

With no permanent peace deal in sight to end the war, two of Trump's top lieutenants — Vice President JD Vance and Secretary of State Marco Rubio, both Catholics and potential 2028 presidential candidates — have also been pulled into the fray. On Thursday, Rubio met Pope Leo at the Vatican in what he said was a long-planned diplomatic visit. Next month, Vance will release a memoir, "Communion: Finding My Way Back to Faith," detailing his 2019 conversion to Catholicism.

Trump's invective has not abated, even in the week his chief diplomat met the pontiff. Ahead of Rubio's visit, Trump repeated his claim that Leo was "just fine" with Iran developing a nuclear weapon. In response, Leo said that his critics should go after him "truthfully," noting that the Catholic Church has spoken out against all nuclear weapons.

Against the backdrop of this sparring, Rubio sought to downplay the drama after his official visit to the Holy See, which lasted about two hours. On X, he said the meeting with Leo focused on their "shared commitment to promoting peace and human dignity."

The episode has revealed [See Pope, A3]

The cartel wars behind an unusual indictment

A remarkable U.S. case against a governor in Mexico is entwined with a kingpin's kidnapping

By Keegan Hamilton

The indictment is remarkable in its detail, laying out a web of corruption at the highest levels of the Mexican government.

At the center, according to the U.S. Department of Justice, is Sinaloa Gov. Rubén Rocha Moya, accused of allowing his state's eponymous cartel to operate with impunity after its leaders guaranteed his election by sending gunmen to intimidate rival candidates, steal ballots and threaten voters at the polls.

Rocha Moya, who maintained he'd done nothing wrong as he took leave as governor this month to address the charges, is allegedly in league with "Los Chapitos," a cartel faction led by four sons of the infamous Joaquín "El Chapo" Guzmán.

While prosecutors in the Southern District of New York described damning

evidence, the indictment was equally notable for all that was not mentioned. One name in particular was conspicuously absent: Ismael "El Mayo" Zambada, a long-time partner of El Chapo with a reputation as the Sinaloa cartel's most powerful godfather.

The charges against Rocha Moya and nine other current and former Sinaloa officials have roiled Mexican politics and heightened scrutiny of the cases of Zambada and two Chapitos already in U.S. custody.

Beyond a ledger of monthly bribe payments to top Sinaloa officials that prosecutors said was "recovered from Mexico" during the investigation, the indictment appeared to rely on evidence that had to have been obtained through extraordinary surveillance — or from people int-

[See Sinaloa, A3]

Animals pay price as funding woes hit SoCal rescue shelters

BY HANNAH FRY

Villa Chardonnay Horses With Wings, a sprawling animal sanctuary tucked into the Cuyamaca Mountains in San Diego County, billed itself for years as a place where unwanted animals could find love and a second chance at life.

A video tour of the

sanctuary posted in 2023 showed horses grazing and galloping across a vast expanse of the 40-acre property in Julian and a cattery where felines lounged in cat condos.

But rescue organizations that seized hundreds of domestic and farm animals from the property this month painted a different picture of the operation —

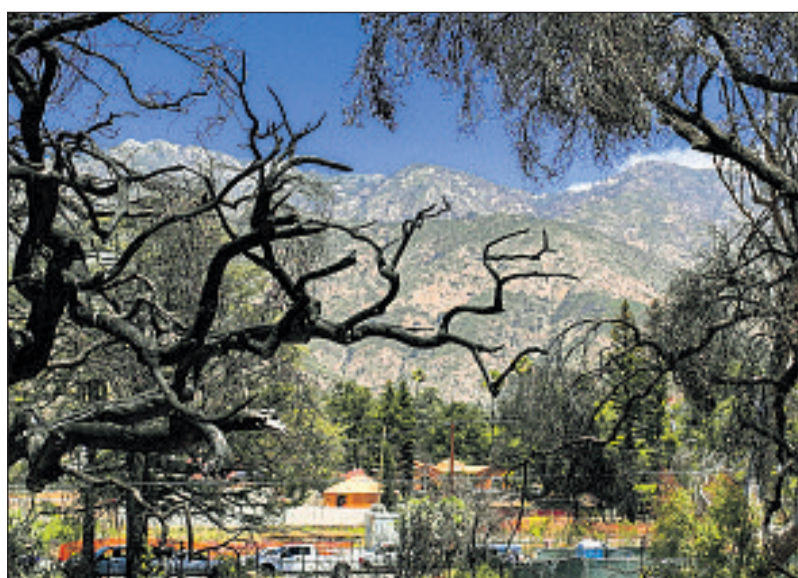
one where animals suffered from severe neglect, malnutrition, emaciation, untreated open wounds and contagious infections.

"It truly is appalling," Dr. Gary Weitzman, president and chief executive of the San Diego Humane Society, said in a statement. "There is no question at all about the neglect, at the very least, [See Animal rescue, A7]

Trees that survived fires are now vanishing

Advocates blame government neglect and contractors. They seek to save what's left.

By Noah Haggerty



ROBERT GAUTHIER Los Angeles Times

CHARRED TREES remain standing after the Eaton fire. An estimated 20% of the street trees that survived the 2025 fires are gone.

The deadly fires that devastated homes in Pacific Palisades and Altadena also laid waste to a lush canopy of leaves and pine needles that had cooled and shaded residents here for generations.

Now, more than a year later, trees that had survived the flames are disappearing at a troubling rate.

Roughly 20% of the street trees that survived the January 2025 fires are gone, according to preliminary results from a University of California research team.

Many of the hundreds of missing trees probably would have recovered from the damage they suffered in the fires, experts say.

The results from the survey of about 500 trees in the Palisades and 1,500 in Altadena — including conifers, palms, Chinese elms and carrotwoods — seem to confirm patterns observed by arborists and local volunteers in the burn areas, who said losses will probably continue for years to come.

Several factors appear to be at work.

Even as the Palisades and Altadena rebuild, local governments undertook only limited efforts to wa-

[See Trees, A7]

Fears of an AI leap may revive U.S.-China talks

Trump administration, once eager to rule over tech, is weighing a what-if scenario.

BY MICHAEL WILNER

CHONGQING, China — Three years ago, in the idyllic town of Woodside south of San Francisco, the United States and China held their first high-level talks on the dangers posed by artificial intelligence. President Xi Jinping and his longtime foreign minister appeared serious in their conviction that a channel should be established between Beijing and Washington — a red phone for AI in case of emergencies.

They authorized a diplomatic effort that would begin in 2024 in Switzerland, only months before the U.S. presidential election. A large U.S. delegation arrived with high hopes that were abruptly dashed, according to four sources who attended the talks. The Chinese contingent dismissed American concerns over runaway AI as academic, almost theoretical, quickly turning the conversation to

export controls seen in Beijing as yet another U.S. effort to hold China back.

"They naturally view any American diplomatic initiative involving limitations or restrictions of one flavor or another on a capability as being a trap," Jake Sullivan, U.S. national security advisor under President Biden, said in an interview.

Despite the distrust — and Democrats losing the White House to Donald Trump — an accord was struck in November of that year in Peru, where both sides agreed to keep AI out of the command and control of nuclear weapons.

"It was a breaking of the seal that we could actually do something on AI," Sullivan said. "In the transition, I told the incoming Trump team that they should really pick up that dialogue. But the Trump administration's view was just far more laissez-faire, and they didn't seem particularly interested in it."

"That's all changed in the past few weeks," he added.

A Trump administration once eager to gun for technological supremacy is now, for the first time, reckoning [See AI talks, A4]

Porter struggles to regain her edge

Questions about her temperament cling to her candidacy. Some see a double standard.

BY NICOLE NIXON

In Congress, Katie Porter's blunt, combative style helped rocket her to progressive stardom. It has also become her biggest vulnerability as she campaigns to be California's next governor.

Her brusque approach, prosecutorial instincts and suburban mom appeal fueled Porter's rise during her three terms in the U.S. House of Representatives, where she rattled CEOs and Trump administration leaders and batted away GOP challengers in a competitive Orange County district.

Her tack, however, made her a polarizing force within her own party, where fidelity remains an essential currency of success and power. In Congress, Porter clashed with then-House Speaker Nancy Pelosi and Rep. Maxine Waters (D-Los Angeles).

The same rough edges that endeared Porter to many voters have also alienated some Democratic insiders and interest groups whose support could prove critical in the race to replace outgoing Gov. Gavin Newsom.

"She came in [to the governor's race] as an outsider, as a mom, as a fighter. She wasn't pulled into the establishment," said Lorena Gonzalez, president of the California Federation of Labor Unions. "I think that's why she's popular with voters, because they want somebody who's going to fight, and sometimes that ruffles feathers."

In the campaign for governor, Porter, a single mother of three, has struggled to convert grassroots popularity into broader institutional support. Even after former Rep. Eric Swalwell dropped out of the race amid allegations of sexual assault, she has yet to see a major surge in support or endorsements from Democratic power brokers.

A pair of embarrassing videos continue to hang over [See Porter, A6]

Thousands flee cartel violence

A criminal group attacks mountain towns in Mexico with drones, unleashing "days of terror." **WORLD, A4**

Why gas prices won't fall fast

Michael Hiltzik explains the "rocket-and-feathers" effect in the gasoline supply chain. **BUSINESS, A10**

Artists enliven new Metro stops

A guide to the creators and their artworks lighting up the D Line extension stations. **ENTERTAINMENT, E1**

Weather Sunny

L.A. Basin: 80/58. **B5**

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