



Authorities in San Diego and Tijuana have issued warnings to frequent border-crossers to avoid becoming unsuspecting smuggling participants



A U.S. Customs and Border Protection officer with a K-9 patrols the Ready Lane at the San Ysidro Port of Entry on Thursday in Tijuana. Frequent border-crossers are being targeted by smugglers to blindly transport drugs and people. **ALEJANDRO TAMAYO / U-T**

Reports of ‘blind mule’ drug couriers grow in border region

By Alexandra Mendoza & Alex Riggins
UNION-TRIBUNE

Every morning for the past two months, a husband and wife from Tijuana have started their border commute by inspecting their vehicle. First, the husband checks the trunk, then he checks the underside of their SUV, which is usually parked overnight on the street of their gated neighborhood. At one point, they had browsed Amazon looking for a long-handled mirror to make it easier to search underneath the vehicle.

Whatever it takes to make sure there are no drugs — or people — hidden inside.

The couple, who requested anonymity due to safety concerns, started this daily routine in July



The Tijuana Public Safety Department reported on Sept. 16 that a man called the police after finding a GPS tracker and packages of drugs taped under his vehicle. **TIJUANA PUBLIC SAFETY DEPARTMENT**

when their neighbor, who also crosses the border often, warned them that she had spotted someone messing with her car. She later found a GPS device attached to the car and reported it to police, suspecting that traffickers might be trying to track her border-crossing habits to use her as an unwitting smuggler, also known as a “blind mule.”

“I don’t cross the border without checking first anymore,” the wife said recently. “Once we’ve done that, I feel more comfortable. But I still drive straight from my house to San Diego.”

The use of blind mules to sneak drugs into the U.S. is not a new tactic — and it’s also not one that is often publicly acknowledged by

See **DRUGS** on Page A6

County’s major legal payouts add up

More than \$158M in settlements reached since January 2020

By Lucas Robinson
UNION-TRIBUNE

In 2019, suspecting one of their sons of vandalism, San Diego County sheriff’s deputies burst into the Najarros’ Vista home without a warrant, then punched, choked, fired a Taser gun at and threatened to shoot different members of the

family before arresting them all, the family said in a lawsuit.

The family posted bail, and no criminal charges were ever filed against them. In 2021, San Diego County paid them \$225,000 in public money to settle their civil lawsuit over the episode.

In 2019, a decades-long Potrero Library employee suffering from pancreatic cancer sued the county for firing her after she told library officials a co-worker was discriminating against Black children, calling them “dirty” and using gloves to

touch them and things they had touched.

Taxpayers footed the bill for the county to settle her lawsuit for \$195,000 in 2023.

A \$10 million payout to a construction contractor here, \$500,000 in settlements of sexual harassment allegations against a sheriff’s lieutenant there, and the price tag for San Diego County to resolve the legal claims against it begins to add up.

Disputes like these and dozens of others have created

mounting legal bills for the county as it pays out more money in judgments and settlements to those who allege physical harm, financial damages and even death at the hands of county personnel and its facilities.

The San Diego Union-Tribune tallied every settlement and judgment the county paid out between January 2020 and May 2025 totaling \$25,000 or more, the threshold that

See **PAYOUTS** on Page A8

President authorizes troops for Portland, ICE sites

Trump allows for use of ‘full force’ to protect immigration facilities

By Michael Birnbaum, Dan Lamothe & Todd C. Frankel
THE WASHINGTON POST

President Donald Trump said Saturday that he will send troops to Portland, Ore., and to immigration detention facilities around the country, authorizing “Full Force, if necessary” and escalating a campaign to use the U.S. military against Americans that has little modern precedent.

Trump said in a social media post that he was directing Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth to provide troops to what he dubbed “War ravaged Portland” as well as “any of our ICE Facilities under siege from attack by Antifa, and other domestic terrorists.”

Saturday’s announcement appeared likely to set up a first test for a White House effort targeting left-wing protest groups. It came just days after Trump signed an executive order directing the nation’s full counterterrorism apparatus against domestic political opponents despite long precedent restricting such a move.

Right-wing politicians have long criticized Portland for the way it has handled racial-justice protests as well as its homeless population, tolerating encampments in the central part of the city.

But Trump will again encounter the dynamic he faced when he deployed the National Guard in Los Angeles — a military activation in a state run by a Democratic governor who objects to the decision and

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A portion of “A Day in the Sun,” a series of mosaics, by Amy Ellingson. **K.C. ALFRED /**

ARTS & CULTURE

A look at the artwork in the new Terminal 1

From sculpture and textiles to lights and mosaics, the San Diego International Airport’s new Terminal 1 has an impressive display of art both inside and outside. Even its windows are a work of art. Tiffany Wai-Ying Beres, the airport’s manager of arts and customer experience, discusses some of the terminal’s signature installations and The Studio, its gallery for local artists. **E6-E7**

Downtown Horton Plaza ripe for rescue

Some insiders contend foreclosed-on campus might be an opportunity in disguise



The E Street entrance to the Campus at Horton, which remains fenced off and unfinished after its lender foreclosed last month. **ANA RAMIREZ / U-T**

By Jennifer Van Grove
UNION-TRIBUNE

A beacon of opportunity when it opened in 1985, the former Horton Plaza mall now finds itself the symbol of a serious downtown slump. A 7-year-old promise — that the mall’s conversion into a mixed-use office campus would bring new life to the city’s center — is within view but firmly locked away behind fences.

Last month, the property, now called the Campus at Horton, was foreclosed on by the developer’s lender. AllianceBernstein took back the asset in its unfinished state from developer Stockdale Capital Partners after a public auction that garnered no bids.

The change seems to set back even further Stockdale’s original vision to introduce new jobs, boost attractions and break

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A PATH FORWARD STEVEN P. DINKIN

Death of Charlie Kirk reveals challenging road ahead

The assassination of conservative political activist and social media personality Charlie Kirk has me thinking a lot about circles.

Here is my view: Americans inhabit three concentric circles. (Geometrically speaking, concentric circles are a pattern of two or more circles that share the same center point but have different radii, creating a nested appearance.)

The inner circle is the largest, by far, representing nearly 70% of us. That notion was first expressed in “The Hidden Tribes of America,” published in 2018. The authors described this group as the “exhausted majority” whose moderate voices are largely unheard during times like these, when political polarization is intense. The inner circle represents the middle ground.

The outer circle — what I would call the fringe —

is the smallest, but loudest. It’s been described as the political wings, liberal and conservative, representing 14% of us. But in today’s America, the outer circle is smaller but scarier, made up of people who say violence to achieve political goals can be justified (a disturbingly high 11% of U.S. adults, according to a recent YouGov poll).

That means roughly one in five (19%) of us fall somewhere in between.

Kirk’s death — and the aftermath — crystalized two things for me. When it comes to the outer circle, the best we can hope for is the opportunity for a conversation, to share our points of view. And while people in this circle are not immediately persuadable, the optimist in me believes that over time — and as circumstances change — their thinking may evolve. The messaging is worth

the effort. At the National Conflict Resolution Center, we frame it this way: Do you want to win, or do you want to be heard? Most of us want to be heard (if we can’t have both).

Along with opportunity, we have an obligation: to ostracize the voices of hate and division emanating from the outer circle, be they from the left or right, and to isolate the people encouraging violence.

Kirk’s death also illuminated the vulnerability of the 19% of Americans who are somewhere in the middle, in the circle that sits between the majority and the fringe.

There is a tug of war underway for their hearts and minds. It’s playing out loudly on social media (where half of U.S. adults get at least some of their news, according to Pew Research Center) and in settings across the country, from

college campuses to the halls of government.

And so, we have a second obligation — a challenge, really: to do whatever we can to expand and give voice to the inner circle, so we can change our political culture. In a tug of war, it’s incumbent upon this group to do what they can to move persuadable Americans to the moderate center.

In his return to late-night television on Tuesday, Jimmy Kimmel shared a list of issues, like affordable health care, that matter to him and that “most Americans support.” He spoke to the ways we are more alike than different. Kimmel said, “Let’s stop letting politicians tell us what they want and tell them what we want.”

His message of unity was heartening. But the reaction to Kirk’s murder suggests we have a long way to go. In a recent interview with

Peter Savodnik of The Free Press, Utah Gov. Spencer Cox commented on the “not insignificant portion of our country that was happy or, at least, not sad that this happened.” Speakers at Kirk’s memorial service took it a step further, blaming “the whole left” for his assassination.

To Cox, it’s indicative of a bigger problem: a hole in our hearts. To fix it, he said, we need to build a culture “that is very different than what we are suffering through right now — not by pretending differences don’t matter, but by embracing our differences and having those hard conversations.”

The idea of disagreeing better — a core tenet of our work at NCRC — has fueled Cox for a while now. In 2023, while he was running the National Governors Association, he launched an initiative called Disagree Better, designed to help

Americans bridge the partisan divide and promote civil discourse. Twenty-three governors from both parties joined the initiative.

As much as I’ve been thinking about circles, I’ve also been thinking about baseball. After all, my Milwaukee Brewers have the best record in the league, nearing 100 wins. Sitting at a Brewers game recently, I was reminded of the unifying power of sports. I had no idea which circle the person in front of me or down the row inhabited.

And that was just perfect.

Dinkin is president of the National Conflict Resolution Center, a San Diego-based group working to create solutions to challenging issues, including intolerance and incivility. To learn about NCRC’s programming, visit ncrconline.com

THEATER REVIEW

Old Globe’s ‘Huzzah!’ is a wacky Ren fair adventure

By Pam Kragen
UNION-TRIBUNE

You know you’re in for a good time at the new Renaissance fair-themed musical comedy “Huzzah!,” when the pre-curtain speech is performed live, with bassoon and tambourine accompaniment, advising audience members to turn off thy cell phones, chat not with thy neighbors and don’t kiss or feed ye actors.

The funny, exuberant and lavishly staged musical opened Thursday in its world premiere at The Old Globe in Balboa Park. It’s the story of two estranged American sisters who must overcome their differences to save their family’s olde English-style historical festival.

The book, lyrics and score were co-written by Nell Benjamin and Laurence O’Keefe, the married creative team who wrote the music and lyrics for the Broadway musical “Legally Blonde.”

Their 18-song “Huzzah!” score incorporates a wide variety of musical styles and sharply clever lyrics, with standout songs including the sisters duet “Dragons,” the mysterious sword-maker’s lovely ballad “The Weight in Your Hand” and the rousing and eye-opening ensemble number “The World We Live In.”

As a theater and history lover who visited many Southern California Renaissance fairs in my teens and early 20s, I admire the research that went into the writing of this musical’s book, including the colorful characters who work these events, the elaborate costumes, competitions, roasted turkey legs, guild rivalries, smelly outdoor privies and anachronistic visitors, like the fairy and Star Wars bounty hunter who turn up at the family’s King’s Bridge Fair in “Huzzah!”

Liisi LaFontaine, an endearing actor with a lovely singing voice, leads the cast as Gwen, the brainy accountant sister who left the fair a decade ago but still oversees its finances. When the fair’s bank account is unexpectedly drained, Gwen returns to discover



Liisi LaFontaine as Gwen, left, and Cailen Fu as Kate in the Old Globe’s world premiere musical “Huzzah!” **JIM COX**

ers that her father, Johnny, is retiring and leaving the business 50-50 to Gwen and her sister, Kate, the fair’s longtime leading lady who resents Gwen’s presence. Cailen Fu is a perfect fit for the role of Kate.

Hoping to restore the festival’s past successes, Johnny (played gently by sweet-voiced Lance Arthur Smith) has spent all of the fair’s payroll to hire famed swordsman Sir Roland Prowd, who’s amusingly played by Leo Roberts. Roland becomes a big box-office attraction, but his controlling nature and demand for absolute period authenticity divides the fair’s performers and vendors, as well as the smitten sisters.

The show’s book could still use some shaping. The first act is formulaic and its plot direction and obvious romantic couplings are forecast from the start. But the shorter and better second act throws in some clever and unexpected twists for a satisfying and crowd-pleasing finale.

There’s a nice theatrical callback by the “Huzzah!” co-creators in the casting of Broadway veteran Kate Shindle as the festival’s fiercely deadpan Anne Bonny the Pirate Queen. Shindle is even wearing the same black bob-style wig she wore as Vivienne in “Legally Blonde.” But she feels a little under-used in this story.

Some of the other actors who stand out in the production are Peyton Crim as swordsmith Wayland Smith and

‘HUZZAH!’

When: 7 p.m. Tuesdays, Wednesdays and Thursdays; 8 p.m. Fridays; 2 and 8 p.m. Saturdays; 2 and 7 p.m. Sundays. Through Oct. 19.
Where: Old Globe Theatre, 1363 Old Globe Way in Balboa Park, San Diego
Tickets: \$55 and up.
Phone: 619-234-5623
Online: theoldglobe.org

Anthony Chatmon II as festival attorney Gareth.

Director Annie Tippe keeps the show’s action, one-liners, visual sight gags and sword battles moving along swiftly in a fun, colorful and engaging way. I especially appreciated the maypole ribbon-braiding scene and the swordfights.

The physical production, which reminded me of a Shakespeare play in the Globe’s outdoor festival theater, has been luxuriously designed with Haydee Zelideth’s wonderful period costumes, Todd Rosenthal’s two-story festival gates scenic design where the show’s orchestra performs from the balcony, lively dance choreography by Katie Spelman and fight choreography by Jacob Grigolia-Rosenbaum. Jeff Croiter designed lighting and Connor Wang designed sound.

“Huzzah!” looks like a show that’s destined for Broadway, but its premiere at the Globe features a cast generously stocked with many San Diego-based actors and alumni, including Josh Breckenridge, Michael Louis Cusimano, Berto Fernández and Lance Arthur Smith.

Son of former drug kingpin gets 4 years for trafficking

By Alex Riggins
UNION-TRIBUNE

SAN DIEGO — The son of a former Colombian paramilitary drug-cartel kingpin was sentenced Friday in San Diego federal court to four years and three months in prison for an international cocaine trafficking conspiracy.

Sebastian Meneses Toro, 26, was extradited from Colombia to San Diego in June 2024, two years after federal prosecutors in San Diego secured a three-count indictment against him. Colombian national police reportedly arrested Meneses in August 2022, two months after he was indicted, at an international airport in the Colombian capitol of Bogotá. Meneses pleaded guilty to one count of the indictment in March.

He is the son of Daniel “Don Mario” Rendon Herrera, who is serving a 35-year sentence in a federal prison in Texas. Federal prosecutors in New York said that before Rendon’s arrest in 2009, he was the leader of the Clan del Golfo, a violent transnational drug-trafficking organization that evolved from a paramilitary group. Rendon pleaded guilty to a charge related to leading that group and also admitted that he conspired to provide material support to its paramilitary wing, which the U.S. has designated a foreign terrorist organization.

Few specifics about Meneses’ case have emerged in court documents or were discussed Friday in court. He admitted in his plea agreement that beginning in at least 2019, he conspired to traffic cocaine totaling more than 450 kilograms — or nearly 1,000 pounds — from Colombia to Mexico and Costa Rica, with the purpose of bringing it into the U.S.

Specifically, Meneses admitted that he distributed more than 440 pounds of cocaine in March 2019 and nearly 380 pounds in November 2019.

At the time of his extradition, Latin American news outlets reported that Meneses was both the youngest drug trafficker ever extradited from Colombia to the U.S., and that his extradition marked the first time ever a father and son had been extradited from Colombia to the U.S. on similar charges.

It’s unclear exactly how Meneses followed his father into the world of drug trafficking, given that he was about 10 years old when his father was arrested. The criminal activity that Meneses pleaded guilty to started about a decade after his father’s arrest and about a year after his father was extradited to the U.S.

His attorney declined to comment after Friday’s hearing.

In court, defense attorney Matthew Lombard told the judge that Meneses’ mother

is a psychologist in Colombia, that she tried to keep him away from his father’s bad influence and that his mother and father are “on opposite ends of the spectrum.” Lombard said Meneses has a loving and supportive family — four family members were in court Friday — and that he’s learned his lesson and won’t return to the drug world.

“I’m not even 1% of the person who entered prison a few years ago,” Meneses told the judge through a Spanish interpreter. He apologized to his family and to society for the harm he caused.

The Gulf Clan that Meneses’ father once led emerged from Colombia’s convoluted paramilitary movement that came to prominence in the 1980s, according to the think tank InSight Crime. Rendon was reportedly a finance chief for a wealthy paramilitary faction and one of the founding leaders of the Gulf Clan before taking full control in 2007 for about two years before his arrest, according to InSight Crime.

At the time of his 2022 sentencing in the New York case, prosecutors described Rendon as “once the most feared narco-terrorist in Colombia” and “one of the most prolific drug traffickers to ever operate in Colombia.”

U.S. District Judge Cynthia Bashant followed the government’s recommendation in sentencing Meneses to 51 months in prison.

EXHIBIT

From Page 1

years following World War II and the contributions of Black miners in Julian, including Frederick Coleman, a rancher and miner who discovered gold in Julian in the late 1860s.

The exhibition also educates visitors on the policies that shaped — and threatened — neighborhoods. Residents faced challenges with discriminatory housing policies such as redlining and restrictive covenants that prevented Black families from living in White neighborhoods. And as the years went on, gentrification and development fragmented their own neighborhoods.

A large section of the exhibition focuses on residents in southeastern San Diego and their fight against the devel-

opment of state Route 252 in the 1970s and 80s. Caltrans proposed the highway through the predominantly Black and brown neighborhood, but residents were successful in pushing off the freeway’s construction.

A centerpiece of the exhibition is the story of the former Martin Luther King Jr. Way. The San Diego City Council voted in 1986 to change the name of Market Street to Martin Luther King Jr. Way to honor the civil rights leader nearly 20 years after he was assassinated.

But a year later, the decision was recalled when voters passed a proposition calling for the name Market Street to be reinstated.

“Everyone thought it would be permanent, but it was not,” said Michel Anderson, a San Diego Parks Foundation board member who spoke to an audience at the exhibition’s open-

ing reception on Thursday.

Anderson also co-chaired a committee in 1987 to preserve the street name as Martin Luther King Jr. Way.

The “Lost Neighborhoods” exhibition took about two and half years to curate, Finnie said. UC San Diego students helped research the material and residents living in San Diego today provided interviews for oral testimonies of the historical events.

Finnie says that Black and brown communities in San Diego are still trying to rebuild to what they once were. He hopes that the exhibition will serve as a sign of the neighborhoods’ resilience and the impact they’ve had on San Diego.

“You cannot erase the resilience. You cannot erase the memory,” Finnie said at the exhibition opening. “You cannot erase the people who refuse to be forgotten.”

CAMPS

From Page 1

have taken everything from clothing to sleeping bags, at a time when there are nowhere near enough shelter beds for everybody who is asking.

San Diego officials responded that the paper warnings distributed in encampments ahead of a cleanup — usually at least 24 hours in advance — allow people to pack up before trash trucks arrive. What remains is mainly unwanted debris, they maintain.

“Code Compliance Officers will often impound items out of an abundance

of caution in case they were inadvertently left behind,” city spokesperson Matt Hoffman wrote in an email. “In practice, we find that the vast majority of individuals collect their personal belongings.”

The work is not cheap. In the two years since San Diego passed a camping ban, in summer 2023, the city spent more than \$13.5 million clearing tent camps.

The paper notices warning of upcoming cleanups have a phone number for people to call when belongings are taken, and the city is supposed to hold onto that property for at least 90 days before it is thrown away.

The system works for some.

Richard Clason, a 40-year-old in an encampment by Interstate 5, recently said he was once able to retrieve a tent filled with clothes.

Yet in only four cases last year did people recover belongings, records show. It was not clear if there were instances when people tried and failed to locate their property.

One argument for clearing encampments is they can pose risks for both people sleeping outside and those in nearby homes. Some sites include piles of needles and other hazardous material. Debris pollutes waterways, cooking fires may spread, and the District Attorney’s Office

has documented how homeless residents are more likely to be victims of crime.

There are also voluntary storage options available. After the city was sued back in 2009 over how it conducted encampment sweeps, officials created storage facilities in and near downtown San Diego where people could keep belongings in bins. The local nonprofit Think Dignity additionally has filing cabinets in Kearny Mesa for storing sensitive documents.

But those places aren’t allowed to hold medication, and some individuals don’t want to lose sight of their most treasured possessions,

such as urns with the ashes of dead loved ones.

City policy says an item should be stored if has “apparent utility” and can be “safely retrieved from the site,” among other criteria. For example, a “cordless drill in working condition” is to be saved. A “wet yearbook that can’t be properly dried out” may be tossed.

All “storage apparatuses (such as containers, backpacks, and purses) that are safe to inspect are checked for personal items,” added Hoffman, the spokesperson. “Any belongings found that meet” San Diego’s “storage requirements are impounded and stored.”

City records note that the items preserved last year included three wallets, five surfboards, “legal documents,” a social security card, a triathlon medal, a PlayStation, seven sets of medication, a “weathered” paycheck and at least seven bicycles.

Cristina Jaimez, the 60-year-old who lost her kidney medication, said that in the days after the sweep her body swelled and she had been wracked with pain. (Jaimez spoke in Spanish while her son translated.) A doctor was eventually able to write another prescription, and from her tent she showed off a stack of cardboard sheets that held the new pills.