

TOGETHER

# Cookie crowned

Festive showdown narrows list to reveal readers' favourite treat **A17**

TRUTH AND RECONCILIATION

# Coming home

Indigenous artifacts from Vatican collection return to Canada **A3**



PROUDLY CANADIAN OWNED SINCE 1892

# SUNDAY STAR

WEATHER HIGH -2 C | LIGHT SNOW | MAP A20 SUNDAY, DECEMBER 7, 2025

THE DAMASCUS DOSSIER

# Mass torture in Syria

Leaked photos reveal new evidence of horrors under the Assad regime



**SHREE PARADKAR**  
INVESTIGATIVE REPORTER  
**GHADA ALSHARIF**  
IMMIGRATION AND WORK  
REPORTER

Ahmet Alrahmo sat awake in his apartment in Waterloo, Ont., eyes fixed on the news coming out of Syria, the country he once called home. It was December 2024, just hours after the fall of Bashar al-Assad's regime. Alrahmo watched as the gates of the notorious Sednaya

Prison in Damascus were forced open by opposition forces after more than a decade of civil war. Freed prisoners stumbled into the daylight. Families descended on the country's jails in a desperate search for their missing loved ones. Mass graves were unearthed across the country. Every new image brought hope that somewhere in those crowds he would see the unmistakable dimples that marked the smiling face of his eldest son, Omar Alrahmo. Omar was 22 years old when he

vanished in 2013 in Aleppo, minutes after he told his fiancée by phone that he thought someone was following him. For the families of Omar and tens of thousands of others who were arbitrarily arrested or forcibly disappeared under the Assad regime, the unknown fate of their loved ones remains an open wound. They have lived with the unbearable uncertainty of a disappearance with no trace, no body and no end. A global project has obtained **SEE SYRIA, A16**

**Ahmet Alrahmo holds a photograph of his son, Omar, who vanished from the streets of Aleppo, Syria, in 2013.**

PETER POWER  
FOR THE  
TORONTO STAR

WORLD CUP

# Schedule kicks up soccer fever in Toronto

BMO Field will host six matches in 2026 tournament

**MARK COLLEY  
AND SADEEN MOHSEN**  
STAFF REPORTERS

It took Anne-Marie Seessle all of three hours to pull the trigger on a ticket. She couldn't exactly pass this opportunity up. After all, there will likely never be another occasion in her lifetime that Germany, the team she's been cheering for since she learned how to walk, will play in the World Cup in Toronto. "It's one of the most exciting moments of my life," Seessle said moments after FIFA announced Saturday that Germany would face the Ivory Coast in Toronto in June 2026. "It kind of makes me emotional, honestly." BMO Field, which will be called Toronto Stadium during the World Cup, will play host to six matches during the tournament — five of which were finalized Saturday in a FIFA ceremony in Washington, D.C. In addition to Germany and the Ivory Coast, Toronto will host Ghana and Panama, Panama and Croatia, and Senegal and one of Iraq, Suriname or Bolivia. FIFA already announced Friday that Canada would face the winner of a four-team European playoff — potentially Italy, but also possibly Northern Ireland, Wales or Bosnia and Herzegovina — at Toronto Stadium in the Canadian World Cup opener on June 12. **SEE SCHEDULE, A3**

EDUCATION

# Changes in works to boost EQAO

Province's review should look beyond test scores, experts say

**KRISTIN RUSHOWY  
AND ISABEL TEOTONIO**  
STAFF REPORTERS

EQAO is going to be put to the test. With less-than-impressive gains in the provincial assessments of reading, writing and math — and with results that vary among schools, boards, and the public, Catholic and French systems — Education Minister Paul Calandra has

ordered a close examination of what's behind the numbers. Experts and educators say the review is a chance to look not only at the so-called EQAO tests — administered by the arm's-length Education Quality and Accountability Office — but also what changes could be made to better support teachers, principals and students. "As Ontarians, we all want the very best for our kids, so the best possible

thing to do would be to try and understand better what accounts for the differences," said Kelly Gallagher-Mackay, an associate professor at Wilfrid Laurier University who studies education policy. "If there are things we can learn, let's try and learn them." Veteran educator Avis Glaze, who was part of Ontario's Royal Commission on Learning in the 1990s, **SEE EDUCATION, A10**

FULL  
INDEX  
**A2**  
ON0  
7 71412 00007 9

FINCH WEST LRT

# Worth the long wait?

Expectations are high as trains hit the rails for opening day Sunday morning **A11**



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