



Democrats flee Texas to thwart House GOP

Risky tactic is an effort to block redistricting plan to add 5 Republican seats

BY PATRICK MARLEY

Democrats in the Texas legislature fled the state Sunday to block a redistricting plan backed by President Donald Trump aimed at preserving the GOP's slim House majority, escalating tensions as a broader fight over congressional district lines unfolds throughout the country ahead of the 2026 midterms.

Texas Democrats have twice deployed the same tactic to combat legislation in the 22 years since Republicans have controlled all of state government, but their efforts ultimately failed. This time, Democrats plan to stay away for two weeks to run out the clock on a special legislative session called by Gov. Greg Abbott (R) to draw a map that would give Republicans five more House seats.

The Texas House can conduct business only when two-thirds of its 150 members are present. At least 51 of the chamber's 62 Democrats will need to boycott the session to prevent Republicans from acting on the new map. The lawmakers could return a couple of days before the special session ends Aug. 19 and use other stall tactics, but any success could be short-lived as Abbott can immediately call another 30-day session.

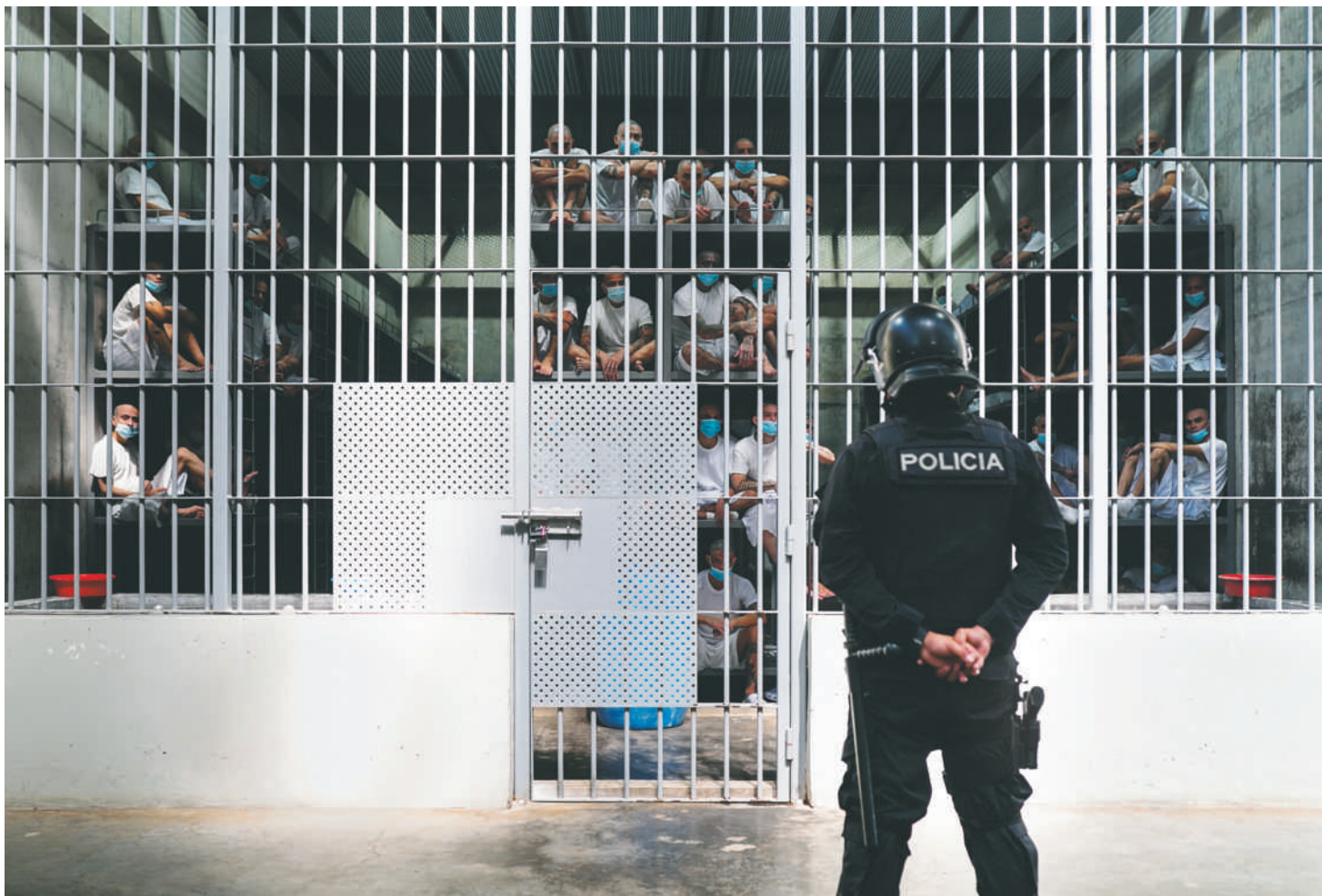
The Democrats, who said they were flying to Chicago, are making a risky bet. They could each face \$500 daily fines and political blowback. As part of the special session, lawmakers are considering legislation to respond to last month's deadly floods, and blocking action on that issue is likely to be unpopular. Texas Attorney General Ken Paxton (R) has threatened to arrest legislators who break quorum, but he won't have jurisdiction over them if they stay out of state.

"We're not walking out on our responsibilities," state Rep. Gene

SEE TEXAS ON A5

'WELCOME TO HELL'

Inside the megaprison where the U.S. deported migrants



CAMILO FREEDMAN

A guard stands next to a cell in El Salvador's Terrorism Confinement Center (CECOT) during a media tour in January.

Interviews with 16 former detainees of El Salvador's Terrorism Confinement Center offer the most complete view yet of conditions at the notorious prison

One detainee was beaten unconscious. Others emerged from the dark isolation room covered in bruises, struggling to walk or vomiting blood. Another returned to his cell in tears, telling fellow detainees he'd just been sexually assaulted.

"Let's hit him like a piñata," guards shouted amid the beatings, detainees recalled, the blows echoing against the metal walls.

They called it "La Isla" — The Island — the cell where Venezuelans deported from the United States by the Trump administration said they suffered some of the worst abuse of their 125 days in El Salvador's Terrorism Confinement Center, or CECOT.

The matching firsthand accounts across multiple interviews offer the most complete

This article is by Samantha Schmidt, Helena Carpio, María Luisa Paúl, Silvia Foster-Frau, Teo Armus and Aaron Steckelberg

view yet of conditions inside the megaprison, where inmates are denied access to lawyers and almost all contact with the outside world — and where about 14,000 Salvadorans remain incarcerated. Few detainees have ever left CECOT, and fewer have spoken publicly of their experience there.

The Washington Post interviewed 16 of the more than 250 men who were deported by the United States to CECOT, held there for four months and then released last

month to Venezuela as part of an international prisoner swap.

The Venezuelans, rounded up in President Donald Trump's mass deportation campaign, told The Post they were subjected to repeated beatings that left them bruised, bleeding or injured. They said prison staff restricted medical care for detainees suffering from diabetes, high blood pressure or kidney failure.

The men slept on metal bunks — usually with no cushions — in group cells where overhead lights blazed 24 hours a day. They were expected to bathe and relieve themselves using a water tank and toilets that offered no privacy from cellmates. They were rarely allowed out of their cells.

SEE VENEZUELA ON A10

Child sex abuse allegations shake Ala. community

Some in Bibb County are finding their faith tested by the horrific charges

BY HOLLY BAILEY

CENTREVILLE, ALA. — Inside a small Presbyterian church off the courthouse square, a few dozen people packed the pews on a hot summer evening, their faces a mix of sweat and tears. There were Baptists and Methodists and some who claimed no denomination at all, heads bowed and eyes closed in a rare show of interfaith unity amid criminal allegations considered so evil that some openly wondered if Satan himself had taken up residence here.

Days earlier, just across the street, Bibb County Sheriff Jody Wade said his office had uncovered an alleged child sex trafficking ring operating from a concrete bunker behind a home on the dusty outskirts of Brent, an adjacent town of about 3,000 people located an hour south of Birmingham. At least 10 children between the ages of 3 and 15 were allegedly victimized.

Over a period spanning at least



WWTM 13

Authorities allege that a child sex trafficking ring operated in a concrete structure behind a home.

three years, the children had been taken to the bunker, a structure on the edge of a wooded area that had been originally built as an underground storm shelter in a region known for destructive tornadoes.

But that refuge of safety was transformed into a den of horrors, according to Wade. The children were allegedly drugged and abused in an operation that included sex trafficking, torture and acts so cruel that Wade said

they led to him to question humanity. Seven people were arrested and charged with a laundry list of crimes, including numerous charges of rape, sexual abuse, trafficking and kidnapping. The

SEE ALABAMA ON A4

People turn to AI tools to memorialize the dead

What happens when the new trend in death care gets stuff wrong?

BY DREW HARWELL

Two days after Jeff Fargo's mother died, he lay in bed, crying, at home in Nevada and opened his laptop to ChatGPT.

Her friends had asked about an obituary, so for nearly an hour he typed about her life: that she had been a single mom in a male-dominated world, that she never got the credit she was owed, that she was loved.

After a few seconds, the chatbot offered its condolences and a short passage memorializing her as an avid golfer known for her "kindness and love of dogs." After it was published in her community's newspaper, her friends said it captured her beautifully.

"I just ... emptied my soul into the prompt," said Fargo, 55. "I was mentally not in a place where I could give my mom what she deserved. And this did it for me."

Artificial intelligence tools are

not just reshaping how we work, learn and live. They're also changing what happens after we die, as families and funeral homes seek help in creating tributes and eulogies to define a loved one's life.

Funeral directors are increasingly asking the relatives of the deceased whether they would prefer for AI to write the obituary, rather than take on the task themselves. Josh McQueen, the vice president of marketing and product for the funeral-home management software Passare, said its AI tool has written tens of thousands of obituaries nationwide in the past few years.

Tech start-ups are also working to build obituary generators that are available to everyone in their time of grief, for a small fee. Sonali George, the founder of one such tool called CelebrateAI, said the AI functions as an "enabler for human connection" because it can help people skip past an overwhelming task and still end up with something that can bring their family together.

"Imagine for the person who just died, [wouldn't] that person want their best friend to say a heartfelt tribute that makes everybody laugh, brings out the best,

SEE AI ON A2

IN THE NEWS

Hispanic Republicans GOP members of the House say they are increasingly concerned mass deportations could backfire with Latino voters, eroding inroads made in 2024. A3

Jeanine Pirro confirmed The Trump loyalist and former Fox News host won Senate approval to serve as U.S. attorney for D.C. C7

THE NATION

Two former interpreters for U.S. forces in Afghanistan face deportation and possible retribution from the Taliban despite following immigration processes, their attorneys said. A3

THE WORLD

In a Ukrainian hospital's maternity ward, a Russian missile delivered death. A7
A Palestinian clan leader has come to represent an Israeli initiative to weaken Hamas. A8

THE ECONOMY

Geoffrey A. Fowler drafted 65 community notes, Meta's new crowdsourced system to fight falsehoods. It failed to make a dent. A13

STYLE

Botox has gone from a niche beauty treatment to a blockbuster phenomenon. B1

SPORTS

From TikTok to ESPN, 22-year-old Katie Feeney is the future of sports media. C1

THE REGION

The wild pony swim across the Assateague Channel along Virginia's Eastern Shore was held for the 100th year. C7

After a technical issue

led to delayed financial updates, Howard University students are fighting back against a threat to send overdue balances to collections. C7
A jury awarded a group of nursing students in Virginia \$1.6 million in a fraud case against their program. C7

BUSINESS NEWS.....A13
COMICS.....B4
OBITUARIES.....C9
OPINION PAGES.....A14
TELEVISION.....B6
WORLD NEWS.....A7

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