



KENT NISHIMURA/REUTERS

Survivors of Jeffrey Epstein's abuse respond Wednesday after being asked who has been unable to meet with the Justice Department.

Combative Bondi lobs insults under questioning

Democrats accuse her of botching Epstein files, heeding Trump's whims

BY PERRY STEIN
AND JEREMY ROEBUCK

Attorney General Pam Bondi combatively defended her leadership at the Justice Department to House lawmakers on Wednesday amid sharp criticism that she botched the release of the Epstein files and has

wielded the nation's most powerful law enforcement agency to heed President Donald Trump's calls to prosecute his political foes.

In exchange after exchange, Bondi lobbed brash insults when Democratic lawmakers questioned her decisions and repeatedly portrayed the expansive Justice Department as unfairly maligned by Democrats and those who dislike Trump.

In her opening remarks before the House Judiciary Committee, Bondi — highlighting her allegiance to the president — thanked Trump for his invest-

ment in fighting violent crime and said the Justice Department is working to advance the president's priorities. The attorney general blamed the Biden administration for politicizing the department and, echoing claims from conservative activists, said it is fighting against "liberal activist judges" working to stymie the president's agenda.

"America has never seen this level of coordinated judicial opposition to a presidential administration," Bondi said.

Wednesday's hearing played out at a pivotal moment for the Justice Department, which in

recent months has drawn criticism from Democrats and others over its handling of the congressionally compelled release of millions of documents from its investigation of sex offender Jeffrey Epstein, its deployment of thousands of agents across the country to assist in immigration enforcement and its continued efforts to prosecute Trump's perceived political adversaries.

The attorney general did not buckle in her defense of the department and frequently attempted to shift attention to its

SEE HEARING ON A2

Major opera left Kennedy Center after a forced face-off

Artistic director went scorched earth after Trump's takeover put group's future in peril

BY GEOFF EDGERS,
KELSEY ABLES
AND JANAY KINGSBERRY

Back in November, Washington National Opera artistic director Francesca Zambello figured out exactly how she would blow up the opera company's 44-year relationship with the John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts.

She did not warn anyone ahead of time — not her board of trustees or even her closest professional confidant, the opera's general director, Timothy O'Leary — because Zambello knew what they might say:

Don't do it, Cesca. Be more cautious.

She just did it, without asking. Between rehearsals one day, Zambello gave a candid interview to the Guardian, divulging the traumatic effect of President Donald Trump's polarizing takeover of the arts center: empty seats, plunging donations, supporters so upset they were ripping up the opera's mailed brochures and sending them back to her with angry notes.

"They say things like: 'I'm never setting foot in there until the "orange menace" is gone,'" Zambello said.

SEE OPERA ON A6



GUGLIELMO MANGIAPANE/REUTERS

A gold medal and delayed satisfaction

U.S. speedskating star Jordan Stolz, shown above in action Wednesday during the men's 1000m competition at Milano Speed Skating Stadium in Milan, set an Olympic record in winning his first gold medal, but he had to wait for a competitor to take a second skate. **Story, B1**

BY JOANNA SLATER

One evening last summer, Donna Hughes-Brown was handcuffed and led into a filthy holding cell somewhere in Kentucky, where insects crawled out of a drain and feces streaked the walls.

The Missouri grandmother's life had taken an unrecognizable turn days earlier, when federal

agents pulled her off an arriving flight at Chicago's O'Hare International Airport, arrested her and told her she would be deported.

Her crime? Writing two bad checks, for a combined total of less than \$75, more than a decade earlier.

Hughes-Brown, a lawful permanent resident of the United States since she was a child,

would go on to spend 143 days — nearly five months — in detention. She was only released at the end of last year after an immigration judge granted an application to stop her removal. Her story underscores just how far the Trump administration is willing to go in its quest to boost deportations, extending its dragnet to people who are legally present in the country with minor offenses

from years earlier.

For those swept up in the expanding deportation drive, it is also increasingly difficult to win release, resulting in lengthy detentions such as the one Hughes-Brown experienced. In November, the number of people released from Immigration and Customs Enforcement detention into the U.S. fell about 70 percent from a year earlier, according to a

recent report from the American Immigration Council.

When asked about Hughes-Brown, Tricia McLaughlin, assistant secretary at the Department of Homeland Security, defended her agency's handling of the case. A conviction for passing bad checks does "not make for an upstanding lawful permanent resident," McLaughlin said in an

SEE DETAINEE ON A8

IRS improperly shared immigrant tax data with DHS

AGENCY ONLY RECENTLY DISCOVERED ERROR

Thousands of taxpayers' files inadvertently disclosed

BY JACOB BOGAGE,
JEFF STEIN
AND PERRY STEIN

The Internal Revenue Service improperly shared confidential tax information of thousands of individuals with immigration enforcement officials, according to three people familiar with the situation, appearing to breach a legal fire wall intended to protect taxpayer data.

The erroneous disclosure was only recently discovered, the people said. The IRS is working with officials from the Treasury Department, Justice Department and Department of Homeland Security on the administration's response.

The IRS confirmed The Washington Post's reporting in a court filing Wednesday afternoon. Dotie Romo, the tax agency's chief risk and control officer, wrote in a sworn declaration that the IRS provided confidential taxpayer information even when DHS officials could not provide sufficient data to positively identify a specific individual.

Federal law mandates strict

protections of the identities of taxpayers, including the sharing of data within the federal government. Undocumented immigrants have for years paid taxes with assurances from the federal government that doing so would not result in them being targeted by immigration enforcement.

But in a controversial decision, Treasury, which oversees the IRS, in April agreed to provide DHS with the names and addresses of individuals the Trump administration believed to be in the country illegally, pursuant to DHS requests.

Federal courts have since blocked the data-sharing arrangement, holding that it violates taxpayers' rights, though the government appealed those rulings.

Before the agreement was struck down, DHS requested the addresses of 1.2 million individuals from the IRS. The tax agency responded with data on 47,000 individuals, according to court records.

When the IRS shared the addresses with DHS, it also inadvertently disclosed private informa-

SEE IRS ON A2

Vance pursues trade deals in Russia's sphere

His visits to Armenia and Azerbaijan illustrate transactional diplomacy

BY MARY ILYUSHINA

Making a striking foray into the South Caucasus, a region Russia has long viewed as in its sphere of control, Vice President JD Vance this week offered Armenia and Azerbaijan a slew of trade and security deals that could loosen dependence on Moscow and shrink the sway of neighboring Iran.

During a two-day swing through Yerevan and Baku — capitals no sitting U.S. president or vice president had visited — Vance trumpeted plans for a new transit corridor that would transform a derelict stretch of Soviet-era railway into the Trump Route for International Peace and Prosperity (TRIPP) — a 26-mile trade link through Armenia, connecting Azerbaijan to its Nakhchivan exclave and to Turkey while bypassing Russia and Iran.

The project was at the heart of a Washington-brokered peace framework signed by Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan and Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev at the White House in August, which President Donald

Trump billed as an end to an "unendable war" between the two countries, which had fought for decades over the disputed territory of Nagorno-Karabakh.

While Trump has hailed the agreement as proof of his peace-making acumen, the fighting effectively ended in 2023 with decisive military action by Azerbaijan and a surrender by Armenia. What the framework illustrates well is Trump's transactional view of diplomacy, and how in his embrace of 19th-century style great power politics, he is willing to wield not only military might but also economic muscle to elbow out rivals and claim the spoils of conflicts for America.

Mahammad Mammadov, an analyst with the Topchubashov Center, a Baku-based think tank, said that Vance's trip may have undermined hopes in Moscow that Trump's military action in Venezuela meant he would respect Yalta-style spheres of influence and concede Russia's dominance in its own backyard.

"Vance's high-profile visits to Armenia and Azerbaijan cut against this logic, underscoring ... brewing great power competition over the region's connectivity and strategic resources," Mammadov said.

Joshua Kucera, a senior analyst with International Crisis

SEE VANCE ON A11

IN THE NEWS

Flight stoppage A 10-day restriction on flights around El Paso was issued late Tuesday and lifted hours later following a breakdown between the Pentagon and the FAA. **A4**

No indictments A D.C. grand jury declined to charge six Democratic lawmakers who advised troops to reject "illegal orders." **A3**

THE NATION **Federalized** National Guard troops have been quietly withdrawn from some U.S. cities. **A4**
The House opened the door to challenging the "emergency" underpinning Trump's tariffs. **A5**

THE WORLD **Several Democrats** are seeking to boost their 2028 profiles by speaking in Munich. **A11**
At least nine people in Canada were killed in shootings at a school and a home. **A9**

THE ECONOMY **U.S. employers** added 130,000 jobs in January, revealing an unexpected boost in hiring, but large revisions diminished gains in 2024 and 2025. **A12**
The FDA declined to review Moderna's bid for the first mRNA-based flu vaccine. **A13**

SPORTS **Vermont native** Ben Ogden wins silver and becomes the first male American cross-country Olympic medalist since Bill Koch in 1976. **B1**
STYLE **Compass Coffee**, a D.C. chain, had sweeping ambitions. Here's how it unraveled. **B1**

THE REGION **D.C. Mayor** Muriel E. Bowser (D) painted a bleak picture of the challenges ahead in the upcoming budget. **B13**

LOCAL LIVING **How to write** a love letter: The analog expression of affection goes a long way in the digital age.

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