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CARIBBEAN CONFLICT

HEGSETH WON'T MAKE BOAT STRIKE VIDEO PUBLIC



JOSE LUIS MAGANA, ASSOCIATED PRESS

Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth walks Tuesday before briefing members of Congress on military strikes near Venezuela at the Capitol in Washington.

Defense bill mandates footage be released to lawmakers

STEPHEN GROVES, LISA MASCARO
AND BEN FINLEY
Associated Press

WASHINGTON — Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth said Tuesday the Pentagon will not publicly release unedited video of a U.S. military strike that killed two survivors of an initial attack on a boat allegedly carrying cocaine in the Caribbean, as questions mounted in Congress about the incident and the overall buildup of U.S. military forces near Venezuela.

Hegseth said members of the Armed Services Committee in the House and Senate would have an opportunity this week to review the video, but did not say whether all members of Congress would be allowed to see it as well, even though a defense policy bill demands that the footage be released to lawmakers.

“Of course we’re not going to release a top-secret, full, unedited video of that to the general public,” Hegseth told reporters as he exited a closed-door briefing with senators.

President Donald Trump’s Cabinet members overseeing national security were on Capitol Hill on Tuesday to de-

fend a campaign that has killed at least 95 people in 25 known strikes on vessels in international waters in the Caribbean and eastern Pacific.

Overall, they defended the campaign as a success, saying it prevented drugs from reaching American shores, and they pushed back on concerns that it is stretching the bounds of lawful warfare.

Secretary of State Marco Rubio told reporters the campaign is a “counter-drug mission” that is “focused on dismantling the infrastructure of these terrorist organizations that are operating in our hemisphere, undermining the security of Americans, killing Americans, poisoning Americans.”

Lawmakers have been focused on the Sept. 2 attack on two survivors as they sift through the rationale for a broader U.S. military buildup in the region.

On the eve of the briefings, the U.S. military said it attacked three more boats believed to have been smuggling drugs in the eastern Pacific Ocean, killing eight people.

Lawmakers in the dark
Senate Democratic leader Chuck

Schumer said Hegseth came “empty-handed” to the briefing, without the video of the Sept. 2 strike.

“If they can’t be transparent on this, how can you trust their transparency on all the other issues swirling about in the Caribbean?” the New York Democrat said.

Senators on both sides of the aisle said the officials left them in the dark about Trump’s goals when it comes to Venezuelan President Nicolás Maduro or sending U.S. forces directly to the South American nation.

“I want to address the question, is it the goal to take him out? If it’s not the goal to take him out, you’re making a mistake,” said Sen. Lindsey Graham, a South Carolina Republican who defended the legality of the campaign and said he wanted to see Maduro removed from power.

The U.S. deployed warships, flew fighter jets near Venezuelan airspace and seized an oil tanker as part of its campaign against Maduro, who insists the real purpose of the U.S. military operations is to force him from office.

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Trump chief of staff criticizes Bondi’s handling of Epstein case

Wiles defends president’s aggressive tactics in second administration

DARLENE SUPERVILLE AND BILL BARROW
Associated Press

WASHINGTON — Susie Wiles, President Donald Trump’s chief of staff, criticized Attorney General Pam Bondi’s handling of the Jeffrey Epstein case and broadly defended the president’s aggressive second administration in a series of interviews published Tuesday in Vanity Fair.

Wiles told the magazine in a wide-ranging series of conversations that she underestimated the scandal involving Epstein,

the disgraced financier, but sharply criticized how Bondi managed the case and the public’s expectations.

After the story was published, Wiles disparaged it as a “disingenuously framed hit piece on me and the finest President, White House staff, and Cabinet in history.”

“Significant context was disregarded and much of what I, and others, said about the team and the President was left out of the story,” she wrote in a social media post.

Wiles did not deny the comments that were attributed to her.

In her rebuttal, Wiles claimed Trump accomplished more in 11 months than any president had in eight years because of his “unmatched leadership and vision.”

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EVAN VUCCI, ASSOCIATED PRESS

White House chief of staff Susie Wiles listens Feb. 4 as President Donald Trump meets with Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu in the Oval Office of the White House.