



# Zelensky negotiator had secret FBI talks

Contacts with Patel and deputy spark alarm as U.S. presses Kyiv on deal

BY JOHN HUDSON, SIOBHÁN O'GRADY AND PERRY STEIN

Secret meetings between Ukraine's top peace negotiator and FBI leaders have injected new uncertainty into the high-stakes talks to end the war there, according to diplomats and officials familiar with the matter.

Over the last several weeks, President Volodymyr Zelensky's lead negotiator, Rustem Umerov, flew to Miami three times to meet with President Donald Trump's top envoy, Steve Witkoff, and discuss a proposal to end the nearly four-year conflict with Russia.

But during his time in the United States, Umerov also held closed-door meetings with FBI Director Kash Patel and Deputy Director Dan Bongino, according to four people, who like some others spoke on the condition of anonymity to discuss confidential conversations.

The meetings have caused alarm among Western officials who remain in the dark about their intent and purpose. Some said they believe Umerov and other Ukrainian officials sought out Patel and Bongino in the hopes of obtaining amnesty from any corruption allegations the Ukrainians could face. Others worry the newly established channel could be used to exert pressure on Zelensky's government to accept a peace deal, proposed by the Trump administration, containing steep concessions for Kyiv.

Ukrainian Ambassador to Washington Olha Stefanishyna confirmed Umerov's meeting with the FBI and told The Washington Post he "only covered national security related issues" that could not be disclosed publicly.

An FBI official said the Umerov  
SEE UKRAINE ON A13

# Democrats release batch from trove of Epstein photos

BY MATT VISER, KADIA GOBA AND AARON SCHAFER

Democrats on the House Oversight Committee on Friday released a batch of photos of Jeffrey Epstein, Donald Trump and other prominent officials and public figures, a small portion of what they said were thousands of images recently provided by Epstein's estate.

Committee members said the panel received more than 95,000 photos from the estate of the deceased convicted sex offender. The initial batch of 19 released images — several of which have previously been made public — also includes photos of former president Bill Clinton, Microsoft co-founder Bill Gates, filmmaker Woody Allen and conservative media figure Stephen K. Bannon.

The photos are undated and lack other context, such as where they were taken. Epstein does not appear in many of them. Several were taken on private jets, but it is not known whose airplanes are depicted. Four show sexual items with no identifiable people

SEE EPSTEIN ON A4

# A severe winter storm deals another blow to battered Gaza



MAHMOUD ISSA/REUTERS

A displaced Palestinian man clears muddy water in Nuseirat, in the central Gaza Strip, on Friday. More than a dozen people were killed as heavy rains and strong winds flooded camps and caused buildings damaged by Israeli strikes to collapse. **Story, A11**

# National Trust sues to block huge ballroom's construction

Lawsuit marks the first major legal challenge to the White House project

BY DAN DIAMOND AND JONATHAN EDWARDS

Historic preservationists begged President Donald Trump in October not to rapidly demolish the White House's East Wing annex for his ballroom project, urging him to wait for federal review panels and allow the public to weigh in. Now a group charged by Congress with helping to preserve historical buildings is asking a judge to block construction until

those reviews occur, arguing that the ongoing project is illegal and unconstitutional.

The lawsuit from the nonprofit National Trust for Historic Preservation, which was filed Friday in the U.S. District Court for the District of Columbia, represents the first major legal challenge to Trump's planned 90,000-square-foot addition and is poised to test the limits of his power. The organization argues that the administration failed to undergo legally required reviews or receive congressional authorization for the project, which Trump has rushed to launch in hopes of completing it before his term ends in 2029.

"No president is legally allowed to tear down portions of the White  
SEE BALLROOM ON A8

# D.C. police chief created 'culture of fear,' report says

Justice Dept. probe says Smith's leadership style led to crime data issues

BY JENNY GATHRIGHT, EMMA UBER AND MEAGAN FLYNN

A Justice Department investigation into the D.C. police found that Police Chief Pamela A. Smith created a "coercive culture of fear" that may have incentivized the manipulation of crime statistics, according to a draft of a report obtained by The Washington Post.

Citing a review of thousands of police reports and interviews with

more than 50 witnesses, the seven-page report concludes that D.C. police crime statistics were "likely unreliable and inaccurate" because of misclassifications, errors and purposefully downgraded crime classifications.

Though it does not cite specific examples of the chief requesting that a crime be downgraded to a lesser offense, the report ties Smith to the alleged misclassifications by saying they were enabled by her leadership style.

"While witnesses cite misclassifications and purposely downgraded classifications of criminal offenses at MPD for years prior, there appears to have been a significant increase in pressure to reduce crime during Pamela A.  
SEE REPORT ON A18

# The Taliban had big plans for Bagram. It's sitting idle.

Satellite images show regime makes limited use of base, which Trump wants to reclaim

BY RICK NOACK AND AMAYA VERDE

For two decades, Bagram Airfield was the nerve center of the U.S.-led counterterrorism campaign across Afghanistan and the main hub for Special Operations troops.

But as U.S. forces were withdrawing from Afghanistan in August 2021, the Afghan military that they had armed and trained collapsed.

The Taliban regained control of the country and, within weeks, the network of military bases the United States had occupied over 20 years of war was lost.

In September, President Donald Trump made a surprise demand for the regime to hand Bagram back. He described the facility as "one of the biggest air bases in the world" and suggested it was "an hour away from where China makes its nuclear weapons."

His comments drew a quick rebuke from the Taliban. Even before Trump's remarks, the regime had deployed soldiers and spies to guard the airfield outside Kabul and other former U.S. facil-

## Minor military activity following the U.S. withdrawal



Sources: Satellite imagery analysis conducted by William Goodhind, investigator and researcher at Contested Ground. Satellite images from Google Earth.



ities. After retaking control of Afghanistan in 2021, the Taliban announced plans to turn the former U.S. bases into hubs for their own soldiers and into special economic zones. In propaganda footage posted on social media, the Taliban have depicted a flurry of activity at the bases, including troop exercises, aircraft maintenance and military parades.

But a Washington Post analysis of satellite images, open-source data and interviews with regional officials suggests that the cash-strapped and isolated regime has managed only limited use of many of the bases. Officials now acknowledge they have virtually no economic use for the bases, but they maintain that their military is using the facilities.

The Post reviewed more than three dozen satellite images provided by Planet Labs and Vantor that were taken between early 2021, when the U.S. still controlled the facilities, and this fall, four years into Taliban rule. While they reveal efforts at several bases to salvage spare parts for

SEE BAGRAM ON A12

# VA plans deep cuts to health workforce

AS MANY AS 35,000 UNFILLED POSITIONS

Already stretched system faces further contraction

BY MERYL KORNFELD, HANNAH NATANSON AND LISA REIN

The Department of Veterans Affairs plans to abruptly eliminate as many as 35,000 health care positions this month, mostly unfilled jobs including doctors, nurses and support staff, according to an internal memo, VA staffers and congressional aides.

The cuts come after a massive reorganization effort already resulted in the loss of almost 30,000 employees this year.

Agency leaders have instructed managers across the Veterans Health Administration, the agency's health care arm, to identify thousands of openings that can be canceled. Employees warn that the contraction will add pressure to an already stretched system, contributing to longer wait times for care.

The decision comes after Veterans Affairs Secretary Douglas A. Collins, under political pressure from Congress, backed away from a plan to slash 15 percent of the agency's workforce through mass firings. Instead, VA lost almost 30,000 employees this year from buyout offers and attrition.

The agency hopes that the cuts will reduce the health care workforce to as little as 372,000 employees, a 10 percent reduction from last year, according to a memo shared with regional leaders last month and obtained by The Washington Post. Details of the cuts came into focus in recent days, according to 17 staffers at VA and congressional aides who spoke on the condition of anonymity because they didn't have permission to share plans.

VA spokesman Pete Kasperow-  
SEE CUTS ON A4

# 'A rifle to your head': Systemic ransom and death in Sudan

BY KATHARINE HOURELD AND HAFIZ HAROUN

NAIROBI — Sudanese paramilitary forces have carried out mass kidnappings after overrunning the western city of El Fashir, holding thousands of civilians for ransoms and executing those who cannot pay — often in front of horrified family members — according to survivors, rights groups and relatives of hostages.

The Rapid Support Forces (RSF) paramilitary besieged El Fashir for a year and a half beginning in 2024 and routinely killed and kidnapped those who attempted to escape. When the Sudanese army abandoned its final positions in late October and the city fell to the RSF, its fighters seized civilians en masse, including some women and children. Prisoners were subjected to torture and deprivation, survivors said, and then forced to call their families to beg for cash.

The Washington Post spoke to nine kidnapping victims, family members and activists for this story. Although individual accounts could not be independent-

SEE SUDAN ON A14

## IN THE NEWS

**Trump defies GOP critics** He signed an order allowing federal lawsuits against states that introduce regulations on AI technology. A7

**Another U.S. attorney departs** Julianne Murray in Delaware has resigned, citing a 3rd Circuit ruling that disqualified Alina Habba in New Jersey. A2

**THE NATION** **Republicans** in Indiana declined to redraw congressional maps, in a rare Trump rebuke. A3  
**To combat** students using AI to cheat, professors are returning to oral exams. A5

**THE WORLD** **Nobel Peace Prize** laureate Maria Corina Machado made a dramatic escape from Venezuela on a fishing boat on rough seas before taking a flight from Curaçao to Oslo. A14

**THE ECONOMY** **Air taxis** are being embraced by federal officials, with a pilot program set to explore how to integrate them into the aviation system. A15  
**Rivian** plans to add more autonomous features to its electric vehicles, with full self-driving as a goal. A15

**STYLE** **With pull-ups**, Cabinet secretaries raise the bar for measuring American masculinity. B1  
**SPORTS** **Sherrone Moore**, the fired Michigan football coach, was arraigned on three charges, including third-degree felony home invasion. B7

**THE REGION** **A federal judge** said U.S. immigration authorities cannot re-detain Kilmar Abrego García, a day after he was ordered freed. B13  
**The Smithsonian** will display a rare dinosaur skull that was a "dream" find at the Museum of Natural History. B13

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