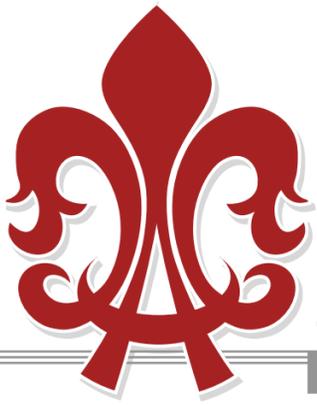




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DOJ prosecution failures ‘unprecedented’

Cases against Trump targets collapse

Aysha Bagchi
USA TODAY

Dismissed indictments; two grand juries refusing to issue new charges; a judge blocking key evidence from being used for a fresh case: In trying to prosecute key targets of President Donald Trump, the Justice Department has faced failures on a scale rarely seen in federal prosecutions.

The most dramatic recent setback was a second federal grand jury's refusal on Dec. 11 to indict New York Attorney

General Letitia James, after an earlier grand jury rejected the Justice Department's proposed charges last week. Abbe Lowell, a prominent lawyer who represents James, described the repeat failure as "unprecedented."

Shortly before that, earlier indictments against James and former FBI Director James Comey were thrown out, and a judge ruled the DOJ can't use evidence — at least for now — that was key to its first indictment against Comey.

The latest developments exacerbate the mounting struggles Trump admini-

stration lawyers have faced in trying to prosecute Comey and James. The president called for prosecuting both of them, as well as Sen. Adam Schiff, D-California, in a Sept. 20 social media post.

"This is an embarrassment," Neema Rahmani, a former federal prosecutor, told USA TODAY. "The last thing you want to be as a prosecutor is to be on the defensive, and that's exactly what's happening here."

A DOJ investigation into Schiff has stalled, according to an NBC News report, which cited four anonymous sources familiar with the matter. Multiple media reports suggest federal inves-

tigators are now probing how the Schiff investigation has been handled.

The Justice Department declined to comment about its record in cases against Trump's targets.

A federal grand jury charged Comey on Sept. 25 with lying to Congress and obstructing a congressional proceeding during testimony he gave to a Senate committee Sept. 30, 2020. A separate federal grand jury charged James on Oct. 9 with bank fraud and making false statements to a financial institution.

Trump's vendetta against both of them goes back years. In 2017, he fired

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ANALYSIS



President Donald Trump has accused Venezuela's President Nicolas Maduro of being a drug trafficker, sending fentanyl that has contributed to the American opioid crisis and blaming the country for a wave of immigration.

LEONARDO FERNANDEZ VILORIA/REUTERS FILE

Trump unveils new sanctions on Venezuela

Why is U.S. hardening stance against nation?

Kathryn Palmer
USA TODAY

President Donald Trump is continuing to ratchet up pressure on Venezuela, after United States military forces seized an oil tanker off the South American country's coast and unveiled new sanctions on it.

The Dec. 10 seizure is the latest escalation in a stand-off between the American president and Venezuelan President Nicolás Maduro. Trump has been vocal about his desire for the Venezuelan president to step down, and has accused Maduro's government of drug trafficking and terrorism.

The administration plans to

transport the tanker to a U.S. port and claim the oil it's carrying, the White House said.

"Largest one ever seized, actually. And other things are happening," the president said. "I assume we're going to keep the oil" from the ship, he added later.

White House Press Secretary Karoline Leavitt told reporters during a Dec. 11 news conference the oil tanker is currently under a forfeiture process. U.S. officials are aboard the vessel interviewing crew members and seizing evidence, she added.

"There is a legal process for the seizure of that oil and that legal process will be followed," Leavitt said.

Leavitt said the oil tanker seizure was an example of Trump delivering on his campaign promise to stop the flow of illicit drugs into the country. The press secretary also said the Department of Justice obtained a warrant to seize the vessel that's part of Iran's shadow fleet, known for carrying black market, sanctioned oil to the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps.

Attorney General Pam Bondi confirmed on Dec. 10 that the tanker was used to take sanctioned oil from Venezuela and Iran.

The Venezuelan government has called Trump's position a "colonialist threat," and in response to the tanker seizure, accused the United

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Abrego Garcia released from facility

Michael Collins
and Natalie Neysa Alund
USA TODAY

In a whiplash series of events, a federal judge on Dec. 12 blocked an effort to have Kilmar Abrego Garcia returned to custody a day after his release from Immigration and Customs Enforcement detention.

On Dec. 11, District Judge Paula Xinis ordered the immediate release of Abrego Garcia, the Salvadoran migrant at the center of a case that has spotlighted President Donald Trump's hard-line immigration policies.

Xinis said the Trump administration had no legal basis to expel him from the country and misled her at a November hearing.

Abrego Garcia left the detention facility in Pennsylvania at 4:45 p.m. ET Dec. 11, said his attorney, Simon Sandoval-Moshenberg. He was en route to his family in Maryland.

However, an immigration judge then filed a new order saying Abrego Garcia must report back to ICE custody by 8 a.m. Dec. 12.

Abrego Garcia's lawyers asked the judge to issue a temporary restraining order to block the new detention order. Xinis did so, preventing immigration authorities from re-detaining Abrego Garcia.

It was the latest turn in a labyrinthine series of events for Abrego Garcia, a sheet metal worker who entered the United States illegally in 2012. He was living with his wife and three children in Beltsville, Maryland, when he was detained by ICE agents on March 15.

Abrego Garcia was deported even though an earlier order prevented him from being returned to his home country. In El Salvador, he was held in a notoriously violent prison, where he said he endured severe beatings and psychological torture.

The Justice Department blamed his deportation on an administrative error but insisted he was a member of the MS-13 gang, which he has denied.

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