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Bondi, a Trump loyalist, out as attorney general

SHAKE-UP | No. 2 at Justice Department, president's former lawyer, is interim chief.

By ALANNA DURKIN RICHER, ERIC TUCKER, MICHAEL BALSAMO AND MICHELLE L. PRICE
The Associated Press

WASHINGTON — President Donald Trump said Thursday that Pam Bondi is out as his attorney general, ending the contentious tenure of a loyalist who upended the Justice Department's culture of independence from the White House, oversaw large-scale firings of career employees and moved aggressively to investigate the Republican president's perceived enemies.

The departure followed months of scrutiny over the Justice Department's handling of files related to the Jeffrey Epstein sex trafficking investigation and failed efforts to meet Trump's unwavering demands for criminal cases against his adversaries. As Trump's own frustrations mounted, he began privately discussing firing Bondi, people familiar with the matter say.

"Pam Bondi is a Great American Patriot and a loyal friend, who faithfully served as my Attorney General over the past year," Trump said in a statement. He added, "We

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TIERNEY L. CROSS / THE NEW YORK TIMES

Attorney General Pam Bondi, who was fired Thursday, called the job "the honor of a lifetime."

Washington's timber industry feels like it's on the chopping block

KEVIN CLARK / THE SEATTLE TIMES

Raw timber is loaded at Hampton Lumber's mill in Morton, Lewis County, last month. Trade wars and policies restricting access to state trust lands have put pressure on the private sector, which harvests the majority of Washington's wood.

By MEGAN ULU-LANI BOYANTON
Seattle Times business reporter

MORTON, Lewis County — Countless logging trucks rumbled through timber country, their drivers headed toward Hampton Lumber's sawmill in Morton. Low-hanging clouds touched the tops of the rolling foothills, with patches of land bald from timber harvesting.

"We take our logs and get every bit out of it that we possibly can. And we replant, and we grow the forest back again," said plant superintendent Tony Gillispie, as machinery whirred throughout the sawmill on a March afternoon. "We want this to last for hundreds of years."

But will Washington's timber industry overcome its ongoing slump and endure for centuries? Myriad issues are at play, with fingers pointing in every direction.

The private sector, which harvests the majority of Washington's wood, feels squeezed by policies restricting its access to state trust lands in the fight against climate change. Major employers are eyeing the American South for what they consider business-friendly climates.

Meanwhile, the state government points to the residual effects of trade wars, particularly with China, after Washington's exports of forest products hit a 21-year low in 2025. Local demand for lumber has also dropped in line with the recent slowdown in construction activity across the state.

"The U.S. market is depressed. The export market kind of went away," said Kent Wheiler, director of the Center for International Trade in Forest Products at the University of Washington. "A combination of all those things are making it a really tough time right now for people in the forest products industry."

The threat of private landowners throwing in the towel on forest management and mills closing up shop looms.

"If we don't provide an economic incentive to manage the forest properly, people will

See > TIMBER, A6

Iran war is disrupting Seattle-area home sales

By ALEXIS WEISEND
Seattle Times business reporter

Last year, high hopes for spring to revive the Seattle-area housing market were dashed as sweeping tariffs shocked the stock market and disrupted home sales.

Once again, the start of this typically prime homebuying season has coincided with another sudden, global economic event: the Iran war.

Following the attack by the United States and Israel on Iran on Feb. 28, mortgage rates reversed their downward trend and the stock market tumbled. The economic stress hit some parts of the Seattle-area home market in the form of fewer deals and softening prices last month, according to data from the Northwest Multiple Listing Service released Thursday.

Last month, King County's closed and pending sales for

See > HOME SALES, A15

Layoffs not letting up at Seattle tech companies

By ALEX HALVERSON
Seattle Times business reporter

Layoffs at tech companies are continuing at a blistering pace this year as the industry navigates emerging artificial intelligence trends and the ballooning costs associated with them.

The tech sector, which includes Seattle's Amazon and Redmond's Microsoft as well as thousands of smaller firms, announced more than 18,700 job cuts in March for a total of 52,050 this year, according to a recent report from outplacement firm Challenger, Gray & Christmas.

That's most for the first three months of a year since 2023, according to the report. After the financial markets soured on tech companies in 2022, following a pandemic-induced boom, tech companies like Amazon and Microsoft announced sweeping layoffs in 2023.

Those tallies don't include

See > LAYOFFS, A6

Russian immigrant wants to leave voluntarily, but he's stuck in Tacoma ICE detention center

By NINA SHAPIRO
Seattle Times staff reporter

A Russian man held in Washington's Immigration and Customs Enforcement detention center went on a hunger strike for the third time in March. His plea: Let him leave the U.S.

You would think that would be no problem for the Trump administration, which has stressed over and over again it wants to remove millions of immigrants living illegally in the U.S.

But Yury Saaryan, who came to the U.S. nearly nine years ago on a tourist visa and overstayed, has been detained at the Northwest ICE Processing Center in Tacoma ever since he went to a U.S. ICE office in August asking for help getting back to Russia, according to both Saaryan and ICE.

Saaryan is not the only person who under the Trump administration has languished in detention despite being ready to leave the U.S. Removing immigrants, it turns out, can be complicated.

The administration has moved with lightning speed on some cases. Witness a California woman whom a court ruled was wrongly deported to Mexico within a day of being detained in February. But the administration's push to arrest and detain large numbers of people seems to be straining its capacity to manage all of its cases.

In November, an immigration judge granted Saaryan's request for voluntary departure, which allows people to leave the country without a removal order on their record that may bar them from returning to the U.S. for up to 10 years. Still, ICE did not arrange for him to leave.

An ICE officer assigned to Saary-

See > ICE, A7

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**

FROM THE FRONT PAGE

< Timber

FROM A1

convert it to parking lots," Wheiler said.

Worries over 'biggest step forward'

Wood is big business for Washington.

The state has around 23 million acres of forestland.

While 53% of it is restricted forests that cannot be harvested, 47% is working forests, which are managed to produce the commercial wood supply, according to trade association Washington Forest Protection Association.

Several parties — private landowners, the state government, the federal government and the tribes — handle the local timber harvest.

Since 2000, private and state players have delivered the bulk of the Washington timber harvest. Currently, the Washington State Department of Natural Resources makes up 20% to 25% of the state's lumber market, said Duane Emmons, the agency's assistant deputy for state uplands.

However, the timber harvest has suffered a steady decline in recent decades, and it's nowhere near the heyday of the last century.

That spells trouble for private companies — and they're placing blame on the government.

"The single biggest challenge facing Washington's timber industry is the continued restriction of timber supply, driven by policy and management decisions," said Kristin Rasmussen, director of public affairs and communications at Hampton Lumber. The family-owned forest products company was founded in 1942 in the Pacific Northwest, with three Washington locations.

DNR is in charge of over 2 million acres of forested trust lands. These lands are meant to generate revenue for schools, counties and other public services through timber harvests and agricultural land leases, according to the agency.

But Rasmussen argued a recent move by the state government that limited access to that forestland has worsened instability for the industry.

In August, Dave Upthegrove, the state's commissioner of public lands, announced the decision to set aside 77,000 acres of older state-owned forests, including more than 10,000 acres managed for timber, to prevent climate change.

"This is the biggest step forward in forest conservation in our state in a generation," Upthegrove said. "It will enable us to nurture and steward these forests in innovative, diverse ways to do more for our climate, for habitat and for the communities we serve."

Because older forests store carbon, the commissioner aims to sell carbon credits and buy replacement timber lands, per the August news release.

Conservationists, like nonprofit Washington Conservation Action, celebrated the effort. "This is a big win for people and for nature," CEO Alyssa Macy said in a statement at the time.

However, the private industry condemned it.

"You can't do that when you're a fiduciary manager of state and county trust lands," said Cindy Mitchell, senior director of public affairs at the Washington Forest Protection Association, a trade group that represents private forest landowners.

Other small changes tied to natural disturbances like wildfires and environmental actions have pared down the annual harvest over time.

"There have been a number of small restrictions," UW's Wheiler said, "but it's the cumulative effect of all those things that end up having a reduction in available timber."

With the shifting landscape, some companies are eyeing expansion outside Washington — and into the South. The region "is picking up a lot of steam" in the timber industry, DNR's Emmons said.

Hampton Lumber announced in June that it will build its first southern sawmill in South Carolina.

Local policy and management issues "make it increasingly difficult to justify that kind of investment in Washington today," Rasmussen said.

Domestic, foreign markets

Domestic and foreign markets aren't offering much relief to the timber industry.

The domestic market depends heavily on housing starts, said UW's Wheiler. "The problem we have — and we've had for a while — is that we're just not building houses."

While Washington incentivizes new housing to meet growing needs, roadblocks, such as steep interest rates and climbing manufacturing costs, continue to stifle progress.

In the western U.S., housing starts steadily fell to a low of 300,000 last year from 401,000 in 2021, according to the National Association of Home Builders. That aligns with the gradual plunge in housing starts tracked across the U.S. over the past five years.

Washington can't look overseas for reprieve either.

Last year, the state exported the lowest amount of forest products, at around $542 million, in 21 years, according to the U.S. Agriculture Department.

It's a far cry from the peak of $1.9 billion in 2013.

Washington used to export mainly to Japan, Wheiler said.

Asia's demand for imported wood is driven by economic growth, as the region's countries use timber for construction, per forest investment manager New Forests.

However, European nations have met much of Japan's needs, Wheiler said, and its government is subsidizing the use of domestic timber.

"We hardly export anything to Japan anymore," Wheiler said.

President Donald Trump's trade wars have also hurt exports. DNR noted the remaining confusion around tariffs.

"Not only are the tariff levels uncertain, but their ultimate effects are uncertain," the agency wrote in its most recent quarterly forecast. "Reciprocal tariffs are being placed by other countries on U.S. timber and lumber, decreasing export demand and leaving more for the domestic market — decreasing prices."

Emmons, at DNR, explained that tariffs affect market players that export raw logs and finished products.

China, a major export market for U.S. forest products, suspended its imports of American logs in March 2025. While the Asian country lifted the ban in November, the impact of the eight-month embargo rippled through American producers.

Seattle-based Weyerhaeuser, the continent's largest private timberlands owner, was in the early stages of reestablishing its log export program in late January, chief financial officer David Wold said in the fourth quarter earnings call.

Weyerhaeuser declined to comment for the story.

The company only expected to deliver one vessel to China in the first quarter of 2026.

Small landowners in Washington may postpone their plans to harvest timber and wait for a recovery, Emmons said.

'Everybody needs a home'

Given the state of the market, some landowners may even consider moving on from the profession.

"Will the next generation keep tree farming?" Mitchell, at the Washington Forest Protection Association, said. "When it becomes too expensive or too hard or too impossible to manage timber, then they look to convert."

The ones in King County experience particular pressure, due to demand for land, Mitchell said.

But mills don't have the option of delaying harvests.

Instead, they require a steady flow of logs to turn into lumber, Rasmussen said, though falling lumber prices can make it hard for a mill to stay competitive.

Plants could close, Rasmussen said, which means suffering for the rural economies that rely on them.

In Centralia, a sawmill owned by NWH, formerly known as Northwest Hardwoods, announced the permanent closure of its facility in March, laying off all 70 employees, according to the worker adjustment and retraining notification.

Employment in the U.S. sawmill and wood preservation sectors continues to slip, with around 85,000 employees — the lowest point since 2013, per the National Association of Home Builders. Over almost two decades, the current downturn is far from the peak of more than 105,000 employees in 2008.

"In Seattle, you can go down the street and maybe get a different job," Mitchell said. "Not so in these rural communities."

Gillispie, plant superintendent at Hampton Lumber in Morton, has depended on his job at the sawmill since 1982. He started in the cleanup crew and worked his way up the ranks.

"Oh, I have seen so many changes," he said, such as Hampton Lumber's acquisition of the sawmill in 1999.

But some aspects remain the same: steam from the kiln rising above piles of lumber, the buzzing of saws reverberating through the plant, Douglas fir wood chips in nooks and crannies.

Many in the community still rely on the mill for their livelihoods, too.

Most of the plant's 162 employees are local to Lewis County. Gillispie lives up the road from the plant.

For him, the decadeslong call to cut lumber is as simple as putting roofs over the heads of Washingtonians.

"Everybody needs a home to live in," Gillispie said, "and most of the homes we live in are made of wood."

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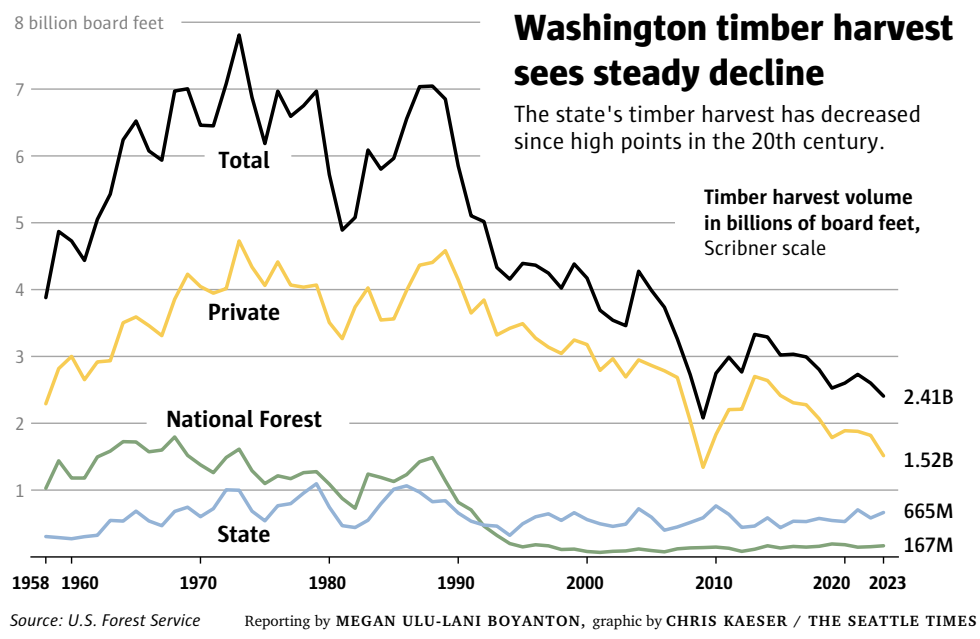
KEVIN CLARK / THE SEATTLE TIMES

A mill worker discards a board for the chipper at the Hampton Lumber mill last month. Employment in the U.S. sawmill and wood preservation sectors is slipping, with around 85,000 employees — the lowest point since 2013, according to the National Association of Home Builders.



Source: U.S. Forest Service Reporting by MEGAN ULU-LANI BOYANTON, graphic by CHRIS KAESER / THE SEATTLE TIMES

< Layoffs

FROM A1

Meta layoffs announced last week and Oracle layoffs disclosed on Tuesday, which have affected hundreds of employees in the Seattle area.

Artificial intelligence, the technology powering valuations growth for many tech companies, was the leading cause of workforce reductions across the economy, according to the report. About a quarter of all job cuts tracked across multiple industries were blamed on AI.

That may feed fears that rising automation is displacing workers in industries like health care, media, finance and even tech, although experts are skeptical that the masses of laid-off workers are being replaced by robots.

Caroline Walsh, a managing vice president in research firm Gartner's human resources practice, said she isn't seeing AI-related productivity boosts driving mass layoffs.

"These layoffs may be more related to AI costs," Walsh said. "We're not seeing large companies lay off people just because of productivity gains."

RICHARD DREW / ASSOCIATED PRESS

Oracle representatives ring the New York Stock Exchange opening bell in February. This week, Oracle laid off close to 500 Seattle employees.

Walsh was referring to the massive increase in spending by some of the tech industry's titans.

Companies like Microsoft, Amazon, Meta and Oracle — all of which have laid off thousands of workers over the past year — are reporting unprecedented capital expenditure figures each quarter. Capital expenditures are investments the company makes separate from the daily costs of doing business. Most of the billions of dollars tech companies have recently spent on capital expenditures has been toward data centers and computer chips to support new AI models.

"Companies that are betting on generative and agentic AI are looking to find transfusions of cash to keep up with the costs," Walsh said. Cutting "human capital is a quick answer, but it's not always the long-term answer."

After spending record amounts on capital expenditures in 2025, tech companies aren't showing signs of slowing down in 2026.

Meta anticipates it will spend between $115 billion and $135 billion this year. After spending more than $88 billion in its 2025 fiscal year, which ended in June, Microsoft spent an additional $72.4 billion in the first half of its 2026 fiscal year.

Each quarter, tech leaders justify the rising investments to Wall Street analysts, saying demand for AI models and products is rising, especially from large companies.

But Wall Street is looking for returns on investment and efficient growth, and finding too little of either.

"Wall Street is getting impatient with the tech giants," said Jean Atelsek, a senior research analyst for S&P Global Market Intelligence. "There's not enough income flowing to the folks that are spending. Everyone was full-speed ahead a year ago, but patience is wearing thin."

Oracle's stock price is down 25% on the year, Microsoft's is down 21%, Meta's is down 11% and Amazon's is down 7%. All of those companies are spending billions on AI infrastructure each quarter, and all have had mass layoffs over the past year.

Aside from controlling costs amid an AI spending boom, some tech companies are telling employees they're restructuring the corporate ranks by flattening layers and trimming teams that overhired during the pandemic.

Walsh, the managing vice president at Gartner, said those quick cost-cutting efforts like workforce reductions are often shortsighted.

"We're seeing people cut who then come back as contractors because the work still needs to be done," she said.

A report from Gartner in October found that cost-cutting efforts at large companies are usually neutralized in a few years, as staff are rehired or retrained and demand higher salaries.

"Although 65% of organizations have engaged in multiple rounds of cost cutting in recent years, only 11% of organizations managed to sustain their cost reductions into a third year," the report said.

The need for talent battling the need for savings creates some slight optimism in a labor market that can feel bleak.

Sara Eide, a Pacific Northwest regional director with recruiting firm Robert Half, said there is an ongoing reset in the tech industry but companies aren't shying away from hiring.

"Many employers are hiring but they are more selective," Eide said. "Recent research from us showed that 60% of employers were planning to add permanent staff this year. They still have critical roles they need filled."

Eide's advice for job seekers in a crowded talent pool who are battling open jobs is to upskill. Machine-learning engineers, data analysts and data scientists are among the tech roles that need filling.

"Those with in-demand skills are finding opportunities," Eide said. "The layoff headlines are scary and we keep hearing there's a collapse in demand, but there's not yet."

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FROM THE FRONT PAGE

< Bondi

FROM A1

love Pam, and she will be transitioning to a much needed and important new job in the private sector, to be announced at a date in the near future."

Trump named Deputy Attorney General Todd Blanche, one of his former personal lawyers, as the acting attorney general. Three people familiar with the matter told The Associated Press on Thursday that he has privately discussed Lee Zeldin, the head of the Environmental Protection Agency, as a permanent pick.

In her own statement, Bondi called the job "the honor of a lifetime" and said she would be working over the next month to transition the position to Blanche.

Bondi came into office 14 months ago, pledging that she would not play politics with the Justice Department. But she quickly set out to do Trump's bidding, heaping lavish praise at congressional hearings and White House events, firing prosecutors deemed insufficiently loyal to the president, and opening investigations into his political foes. The intense turmoil contributed to the resignations of hundreds of employees, with the norm-breaking actions stirring concern that the department was being wielded as a tool to advance Trump's personal and political interests.

"Pam Bondi oversaw an unprecedented weaponization of the Justice Department that brought our nation's rule of law to its knees," said Sen. Adam Schiff, a California Democrat.

Bondi rejected accusations that she politicized the Justice Department and said her mission was to restore the institution's credibility after overreach by President Joe Biden's Democratic administration, which included two federal criminal cases against Trump. Bondi's defenders have said she worked to refocus the department to better tackle illegal immigration and violent crime and brought much-needed change to an agency they believe unfairly targeted conservatives.

Embracing president

Bondi's public embrace of the president, however, marked a sharp departure from her predecessors, who generally took pains to maintain an arm's-length distance from the White House to protect the impartiality of investigations and prosecutions. Bondi postured herself as Trump's chief supporter and protector, praising and defending him in congressional hearings and placing a banner with his face on the exterior of Justice Department headquarters.

She called for an end to the "weaponization" of law enforcement that she said occurred under the Biden administration, even though Biden's attorney general, Merrick Garland, and Jack Smith, the special counsel who produced two cases against Trump, have said they followed the facts, the evidence and the law in their decision-making.

Bondi's critics, meanwhile, said she was the one who had politicized the agency.

"You've turned the People's Department of Justice into Trump's instrument of revenge," Rep. Jamie Raskin of Maryland, the top Democrat on the House Judiciary committee, said at a February hearing.

Bondi delivered a combative performance but few substantive answers at that hearing, as she angrily insulted her Democratic questioners with name-calling and praised Trump for the performance of the stock market — "The Dow is up over 50,000 right now!" — and openly aligned herself as in sync with a president whom she painted as a victim of past impeachments and investigations.

Even Republicans began to challenge her, with the GOP-led House Oversight Committee last month issuing a subpoena to her to appear for a closed-door interview about the Epstein files.

Under Bondi's leadership, the department opened investigations into a string of Trump foes, including Federal Reserve Chair Jerome Powell, New York Attorney General Letitia James, former FBI Director James Comey and former CIA Director John Brennan. The high-profile prosecutions of Comey and James were short-lived as they were quickly thrown out by a judge who ruled that the prosecutor who brought the cases was illegally appointed.

Trump repeatedly praised and defended Bondi publicly but also showed flashes of impatience with his attorney general's efforts to meet his demands to prosecute his rivals. In one extraordinary social media post last year, Trump called on Bondi to move quickly to prosecute his foes, including James and Comey, telling her, "We can't delay any longer, it's killing our reputation and credibility."

Bondi oversaw the exodus of thousands of career employees — both through firings and voluntary departures — including lawyers who prosecuted violent attacks on police at the U.S. Capitol on Jan. 6, 2021; environmental, civil rights and ethics enforcers; counterterrorism prosecutors; and others.

Epstein files

Bondi struggled to overcome early stumbles over the Epstein files that angered conservatives eager for government bombshells about the case, which has long fascinated conspiracy theorists. She herself had fed the conspiracy theory machine with a suggestion in a 2025 Fox News Channel interview that Epstein's "client list" was sitting on her desk for review. The department later acknowledged that no such document exists.

Bondi was ridiculed over a move to hand out binders of Epstein files to conservative influencers at the White House, only for it to be later revealed that the documents included no new revelations. And despite promises that more files were going to become public, the Justice Department in July said no more would be released, prompting Congress to pass a bill to force the agency to do so. Ultimately, the department said it had complied with its obligations by releasing millions more records.

Jess Michaels, an Epstein survivor who traveled to the U.S. Capitol last year to press for the files' release, said she was optimistic when Bondi took office but lost faith after Bondi distributed the binders at the White House.

"I think she had this opportunity to be a hero and to really do right by survivors of sexual violence and trafficking, and she chose not to," Michaels said by phone. "It is outrageous, the volume of miscalculation she has made."

The Epstein files fumbles led to a stunning public criticism from White House chief of staff Susie Wiles, a close friend of Bondi's, who told Vanity Fair that the attorney general "completely whiffed." The Justice Department's release of millions of pages of Epstein files did little to tamp down criticism, prompting a House committee, with the support of five Republicans, to subpoena Bondi to answer questions under oath.

Bondi, who defended Trump during his first impeachment trial, was his second choice to lead the Justice Department, picked for the role after former Rep. Matt Gaetz of Florida withdrew his name from consideration amid scrutiny over sex trafficking allegations.

< ICE

FROM A1

an's case told the Russian immigrant's lawyer, Hilary Smith, that for 40 days he had been on special assignment in Minneapolis, the site of a massive monthslong surge of federal agents ending in February. The officer added that "the entire time he was gone none of his cases got touched," Smith recalled.

Someone granted voluntary departure used to leave the U.S. within weeks, said Elizabeth Benki, a directing attorney for the Northwest Immigrant Rights Project. Recently, she said, "we've seen people waiting several months."

COURTESY OF YURY SAARYAN

Yury Saaryan has been trying to leave the U.S. since August, and in November received a voluntary departure order from an immigration judge. But he remains detained at the Northwest ICE Processing Center in Tacoma.

Immigration attorney Adam Boyd said one client who had been issued a supposedly fast-track "expedited removal" order waited in detention at the Tacoma facility for more than a year to be deported. Although the client had initially sought asylum in the U.S., he was ultimately resigned to leaving the U.S. and frustrated by the long wait in detention, Boyd said.

British tourist Rebecca Burke was actually leaving the U.S. and trying to enter Canada last spring when she was turned around because of incorrect visa paperwork and sent by U.S. authorities to the Tacoma detention center. She was kept there for nearly three weeks.

Immigrant detention centers such as the Northwest ICE Processing Center resemble jails, though many held in them have never been convicted of crimes. Complaints about conditions at the roughly 1,600-bed Tacoma facility, as elsewhere, are legion. Human rights groups, local government agencies and people who have been detained have cited foul-tasting drinking water, irregularly delivered food sometimes served raw, inadequate medical care and erratic access to the outdoors.

Confinement there is "a little easier to wrap your mind around … when you have an end date," Boyd said. "But when you have no idea, it's difficult."

It's particularly devastating to people who have decided not to fight their case precisely because they want to get out of detention and end up stuck there anyway, Benki said.

To Claire Trickler-McNulty, a former ICE official who last served under the Biden administration, the delays illustrate one reason "why this massive expansion of detention doesn't necessarily make sense."

The number of detained immigrants nationwide hit a record high of more than 70,000 in January. And the administration plans to spend billions of dollars on increasing detention space, in part through buying warehouses across the county to be used for that purpose.

Yet, Trickler-McNulty pointed out, detaining people is just one step in the process.

> **"(Confinement is) a little easier to wrap your mind around … when you have an end date. But when you have no idea, it's difficult."**
>
> ADAM BOYD
> *Immigration attorney*

ICE often has to arrange travel documents from destination countries. Many people don't have a valid passport, so they need a document verifying their identity and right to enter a country. That might not be straightforward because some countries only accept a limited number of people deported by the U.S., Trickler-McNulty noted.

The administration also needs planes to take people away, she said. While sometimes using commercial flights, it relies to a great extent on a limited number of charter company planes, using 35 for removals in January and February, according to ICE Flight Monitor, a project of the national nonprofit Human Rights First. That includes 21 planes also used to shuttle people between detention centers and deportation staging facilities around the U.S.

Deportation flights go frequently to some countries, such as Guatemala and Honduras, while such flights are rare to other countries, including Russia, noted Savi Arvey of Human Rights First.

Much of the logistical challenge falls on ICE "deportation officers" whose workload likely increased as the detained population ballooned. And they may be called away to other duties the administration views as more of a priority, as in Saaryan's case.

In some cases, people may be considered stateless because, for instance, they were born in a country that no longer exists, like the U.S.S.R., or that has split in two, like Sudan, according to Boyd, the immigration attorney. ICE may have released them from detention years ago because it had no country to send them to. Under Trump's mandate to get arrest numbers up, the agency has nonetheless been rearresting some at required ICE check-ins.

"ICE will detain them without really showing that they have the ability to deport that person, and so then they sit in detention for a really long time," Boyd said.

The Department of Homeland Security and ICE did not respond to general questions about delays for this story. In a previous statement, an ICE spokesperson said the agency "is committed to safe and orderly removals" but acknowledged "delays may occur because travel documents must be issued by foreign governments, which can take time and require additional verification. Removal logistics, such as flight scheduling and compliance with regulations, can also impact timing."

The administration in January said it had deported more than 675,000 people, a high number that nevertheless falls short of the Biden administration's record in its final year and Trump's goal of deporting a million people a year, according to the Migration Policy Institute.

Saaryan, talking by phone from the detention center through an interpreter, said he made up his mind to leave the U.S. last year. Living in the Seattle area for years and working most recently for a moving company, he had enjoyed much about this country, including what he described as Americans' kindness and openness.

But he said he felt something shift after the last presidential election and missed his family in Russia, including his 12-year-old daughter. He had hoped to bring her to the U.S. after he settled here but that proved impossible, Saaryan said.

It was a "very hard period for me," he said.

Saaryan faced an obstacle to returning home quickly: His passport had expired. He decided to try and explain the problem to ICE agents at their regional headquarters in Tukwila. He said he thought they could smooth the way.

When he went to the ICE office in late August, he was detained.

Three months later on Nov. 25, it seemed he might be heading to Russia soon when a judge granted him voluntary departure. But he still needed a travel document, which ICE usually arranges for someone in detention.

He received no updates as time went by and grew increasingly concerned. The judge had given Saaryan until March 25 to take advantage of voluntary departure. After that, he could be subject to a removal order.

A friend tried to help by contacting the Russian Embassy in December and again in February. The friend was told both times the embassy could issue a travel document in approximately two days if Saaryan went there in person, according to a sworn declaration.

Asked about Saaryan's case, the Department of Homeland Security initially said it would be dangerous to let Saaryan "roam free" because "his criminal history includes lewd and lascivious acts involving a child." The department did not provide details of the alleged acts.

A report from the Garfield County sheriff's office shows Saaryan was arrested in Utah in 2021 but no child was directly involved. He peed at the side of a grocery store on a November night, according to the report. Working as a truck driver then, Saaryan said, he couldn't find a restroom to use. It was dark, he said, and he didn't see anyone around. But the report said families were walking in and out of the store.

He was charged with "lewdness involving a child," a misdemeanor, but ultimately convicted of disorderly conduct, according to court records. He paid a $150 fine. Pressed for details, an ICE spokesperson confirmed the arrest it had referred to happened in Utah and said it concerned "lewdness involving a child plus disorderly conduct," this time omitting the word "lascivious."

Smith, Saaryan's lawyer, said an ICE officer made no mention of the charge when approached in mid-March at the Tacoma detention center. The lawyer asked if there is any way her client could be released to go to the embassy. "He's willing to be under supervision, on an ankle monitor, whatever you see fit," she told him.

"That's not something we can do for people in our custody," the officer said, according to Smith.

The officer also told her ICE first requested a travel document for Saaryan in February — three months after the judge's voluntary departure order — and hadn't heard anything back yet. In his experience, Russian travel documents take a while, he added. He promised ICE would extend Saaryan's voluntary departure deadline, which is within the agency's authority.

Meanwhile, Saaryan resorted to hunger-striking. He lasted a week, about the same length as two previous hunger strikes this year. He said he ended it March 20 because his blood pressure had plummeted and he felt like he could die.

But nothing had changed: He still felt like he had no answers about when he might be allowed to leave and helpless to do anything about it.

ICE said Wednesday it is still trying to get a travel document for Saaryan and hopes to carry out his removal "soon."

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