

“All the News
That’s Fit to Print”

The New York Times

THE WEATHER
Today, mostly cloudy, breezy, morning flurries, high 34. **Tonight**, mostly cloudy, flurries late, low 25. **Tomorrow**, clouds and sun, brisk, a flurry, high 29. Weather map, Page B12.

VOL. CLXXV No. 60,750

© 2025 The New York Times Company

WEDNESDAY, DECEMBER 31, 2025

Prices in Canada may be higher

\$4.00



TYLER HICKS/THE NEW YORK TIMES

A commander with Ukraine’s 59th Assault Brigade in Mezheva. Because of Russian bombardments, the city is nearly abandoned.

IN FIRST, U.S. HITS A VENEZUELA PORT

C.I.A. Drone Strike Puts Pressure on Maduro

This article is by Julian E. Barnes, Tyler Pager and Thomas Fuller.

The C.I.A. conducted a drone strike on a port facility in Venezuela last week, according to people briefed on the operation, a development that suggests an aggressive new phase of the Trump administration’s campaign against the Maduro government.

The strike was on a dock where U.S. officials believe Tren de Aragua, a Venezuelan gang, was storing narcotics and potentially preparing to move the drugs onto boats, the people said.

No one was on the dock at the time, and no one was killed, they said on Monday.

The strike, the first known American operation inside Venezuela, comes amid an increasingly militarized pressure campaign intended to remove Nicolás Maduro, the leftist autocratic leader of Venezuela, from power.

The U.S. military has been building a large naval force in the Caribbean Sea in recent months. Since Sept. 2, U.S. forces have carried out 30 strikes against boats in the Caribbean and the eastern Pacific Ocean that the Trump administration says were smuggling drugs. The strikes have killed more than 100 people.

President Trump is also pursuing a blockade of certain oil tankers doing business with Venezuela. One tanker, the Bella 1, is fleeing U.S. forces in the Atlantic Ocean after having escaped an attempt by the U.S. Coast Guard to intercept it en route to Venezuela. The crew of the Bella 1 recently painted a Russian flag on the vessel, apparently trying to claim Russian protection, two American officials said on Tuesday.

American officials have not publicly explained why the Coast Guard is waiting to board the tanker, which is not capable of outrunning U.S. vessels.

But boarding the fleeing Bella 1 would require a specialized boarding team capable of securing a moving vessel with a potentially hostile crew. It is unusual for civilian tankers to flee from such operations. The crews of two other tankers intercepted by U.S. forces near Venezuela this month both agreed to be boarded.

One Dec. 20, the Coast Guard stopped and boarded a Panama-flagged ship, the M/V *Albatross*, which was carrying a large amount of oil. The ship was found to be carrying oil from Venezuela, and the crew was arrested. *Continued on Page A8*

Key Stratagem in Ukraine War: Steering Trump

By CONSTANT MÉHEUT
KYIV, Ukraine — As President Volodymyr Zelensky of Ukraine traveled back from Florida on Monday, he could breathe a sigh of relief. His meeting with President Trump to discuss a peace plan seemed to have passed without drama — the American leader had neither berated him nor echoed Kremlin talking points, at least publicly. By the standards of past encounters, that counted as progress.

But while Mr. Zelensky was en route home, President Vladimir V. Putin was on the phone with Mr. Trump, introducing a new twist. Mr. Putin claimed that a Ukrainian drone attack had targeted one of his residences in Russia overnight. “I don’t like it,” Mr. Trump later told reporters, as he recounted the call. “It’s not

Both Sides Maneuver to Gain Leverage in Peace Talks

the right time to do any of that. I was very angry about it.” The accusation was just the sort that could derail Ukraine’s diplomatic effort. Mr. Zelensky swiftly denied it, describing the claim on social media as “a complete fabrication” designed “to undermine all achievements of our shared diplomatic efforts with President Trump’s team.” Ukrainian negotiators discussed the claim with American counterparts, Mr. Zelensky added, and his foreign minister also weighed in.

Continued on Page A7



FRIEDMAN-ABELES, VIA BILLY ROSE THEATER DIVISION, NEW YORK PUBLIC LIBRARY

Sammy Davis Jr.’s Broadway Triumph

The entertainer, who was born 100 years ago, reinvented himself in 1964 in “Golden Boy.” Page C1.

G.O.P. Supporters of Visas for Afghans Fall Silent

By MEGAN MINEIRO
and ADAM SELLA

WASHINGTON — Back in 2021, as Kabul fell to the Taliban after the chaotic U.S. military withdrawal from Afghanistan, Republicans in Congress were among the loudest voices in Washington arguing that the United States had to throw open its doors to Afghans who had assisted Americans in two decades of war.

Trump Halted Program After D.C. Shootings

At the time and in the years since, G.O.P. lawmakers have pressed for the expansion of a special visa program for Afghan allies, insisting in letters to the administration, in hearings and in news conferences staged outside

the Capitol that it be expanded.

And then Rahmanullah Lakanwal, an Afghan man who enlisted in a paramilitary force that worked with Americans and who was evacuated by the U.S. military in 2021, was charged with shooting two National Guard members in downtown Washington just before Thanksgiving, killing one and severely wounding the other.

Continued on Page A15

A Government Upended By a Decimation of Jobs

Under Trump, a Lean Federal Work Force Results in Less Efficient Services

By EILEEN SULLIVAN

WASHINGTON — In his first year back in office, President Trump has made unparalleled changes to the federal government, shrinking its footprint both in the services it provides and the size of its work force.

The extent of the effect on the public so far is unclear. Some of the White House’s moves are stalled by a mountain of litigation — more than 200 lawsuits have been filed challenging the firings of federal workers and the freezing of grants and elimination of programs, a vast majority of which are still pending. And agencies have not fully detailed the number of staff members and services that have been cut, making it difficult to discern the full scope of the difference between today’s federal government and the one from a year ago.

Mr. Trump pledged in February to make the government “smaller, more efficient, more effective and a lot less expensive.”

By one specific standard, Mr. Trump can claim a degree of success: The work force is definitely smaller.

The number of civilian federal employees declined by about 10 percent this year, according to

government data. After weathering months of threats and anxiety, many federal workers resigned or took early retirement. Others were laid off. In all, there are now about 249,000 fewer people on the government payroll than there were in the beginning of the year.

However, there are indications that the president’s other goals have not yet been achieved.

Even after Elon Musk’s bureaucracy-shrinking initiative upended agencies across the government, an analysis by The New York Times found it misstated its claims of large savings and failed to reduce federal spending.

And many current and former officials and people who routinely interact with the federal government say that it is far less efficient and less dependable in the services it provides to the American public.

Take the Agriculture Department, which lost 20,000 workers, nearly one-fifth of its staff.

Many farmers have found they cannot get critical information about the grants and conservation projects they had incorporated into their business plans, said Wes Gillingham, a farmer in upstate New York.

Continued on Page A14

Fees and Poor Work Conditions Undercut a U.S. Visa Program

By AMY JULIA HARRIS

One group paid its leader more than \$500,000 a year while shipping foreign trainees to American jobs where they said they felt like slaves.

Another put the wife, daughters and son-in-law of the chief executive on the payroll, netting the family more than \$1 million in the past two years alone.

A third sent young people to work at a farm owned by the family of one of its executives and a winery owned by a board member.

All of them cashed in on a State Department cultural exchange program, the J-1 visa, that has become plagued with profiteering and conflicts of interest — because the U.S. government has failed to rein it in.

The groups, known as sponsors, are tasked with helping to advance

diplomacy and spread the virtues of American culture. They are supposed to serve as guides and protectors for the more than 150,000 young people they bring in from overseas every year, placing them with reputable employers and ensuring they are safe while in the United States.

Instead, a New York Times investigation has found, some sponsors have charged unwitting visa-seekers steep fees, struck deals with employers they were supposed to oversee and ignored evidence of unsafe or abusive working conditions.

The executive of one group was paid more than \$1 million a year, nonprofit tax filings show. Other sponsors have created health insurance companies and other side businesses.

Continued on Page A15

CARMEN DE LAVALLADE, 1931-2025

Do-It-All Dancer Who Glided Past Barriers of Race and Age

By JULIE BLOOM

Carmen de Lavallade, a dancer who defied boundaries of race and age and touched almost every realm of the performing arts in a career of over six decades, died on Monday in Englewood, N.J. She was 94.

Her death, in a hospital after a short illness, was confirmed by her son, Léo Holder.

Long and willowy in flowing jersey skirts and with elegantly slicked-back hair — Duke Ellington once called her “one of the most ravishing women in the world” — Ms. de Lavallade continued to dance through her 80s.

She worked in theater, opera, nightclubs, film and television alongside 20th-century luminaries like Alvin Ailey, Lena Horne, Agnes de Mille, Harry Belafonte, Josephine Baker and her husband of 59 years, the artist, actor and dancer Geoffrey Holder.

Ms. de Lavallade began her career in Los Angeles, where she studied with Carmelita Maracci and the modern dance pioneer Lester Horton and performed with Mr. Horton’s company, one of the first multiracial troupes in the country.



ANDREA MOHIN/THE NEW YORK TIMES

Carmen de Lavallade’s career of six decades spanned the arts.

She came up in an era when Black artists faced enormous challenges. She was one of the few Black dancers in the country.

Continued on Page A22



INTERNATIONAL A4-12

Caught in Japan-China Fight

Yonaguni, a tiny Japanese island near Taiwan, is getting soldiers, radar and missiles, leaving some worried. PAGE A4

Extreme Hunger in Gaza

Hoda Abu al-Naja, 12, who had celiac disease, spent months seeking the food and care she needed. PAGE A10

NATIONAL A13-17

Brutal Beating or an Accident?

An inmate says that no one wanted to listen when he tried repeatedly to confess to killing a man in a Mississippi jail known for its violence. PAGE A13

Controversial Cup of Cheer

An American Heart Association report contradicted studies that found consuming any alcohol harmful. PAGE A17

OBITUARIES A18-19, 22

A Yearlong Procession of Giants

The world lost them in 2025, but they touched lives through art, science, politics, sports and more. PAGES A18-19

BUSINESS B1-7

Fed Chair Contender’s Path

Kevin Hassett’s shift from conservative economist to defender of the president’s economic agenda raises questions on how he’d lead the central bank. PAGE B1

The Year in Business

Volatility, technology and politics shaped the global economy in 2025. Our photographers covered it all. PAGES B6-7

FOOD D1-8

The Taste of Good Fortune

Need a little luck, Southern style, in the coming year? Consider trying out our recipe for black-eyed peas. PAGE D2



SPORTS B8-12

Gaming a Spending Cap

Many top Power 4 football programs are finding ways to get coaches like Lane Kiffin roster money. PAGE B8

Thankless, Not Tank-less

The N.B.A. continues to try to fix the lottery because the lottery continues to fail at what it’s supposed to do. PAGE B9

ARTS C1-8

Who Says Rock Is Dead?

In 2025, rock was still hanging in there. As A.I. infiltrates music, the genre’s natural flaws remain crucial. PAGE C1

A Puritan Production

The Met Opera’s leader describes the new staging of Bellini’s “I Puritani” as a compelling “retro move.” PAGE C1

OPINION A20-21

Christina Greer

PAGE A21

