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Two women sue Jeffrey Epstein's estate for $100 million over alleged sex abuse

Inside C2

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Amid crises, frayed U.S. ties give China's Xi political cover at home

BEIJING (Reuters) - To the outside world, China's ruling Communist Party - faced with an expanding trade war crimping an already slowing economy and spiraling protests in Hong Kong - is confronting some of its strongest political and economic headwinds in decades.

But at home, where China's elite leaders prepare for the 70th anniversary of the founding of the People's Republic this October, there are few indications that President Xi Jinping is politically embattled.

Many in Beijing believe U.S. President Donald Trump's approach to the trade war, and the Chinese government's effort to use Washington as a scapegoat for the Hong Kong unrest, provides Xi with convenient and effective short-term political cover.

This time last year, as Xi and other top officials held secretive talks at the seaside resort of Beidaihe, there was an unusual surge of criticism in official circles about economic policy and how the government had handled the trade war with the United States, sources told Reuters at the time.

With that same annual beach gathering likely wrapping up this week in China in the midst of the two deepening crises, there are no obvious dissenting voices.

"In the early months there were some criticisms on the government for not opening up so quickly," said one Chinese government advisor, speaking on condition of anonymity, referring to the rare internal dissent during the opening salvoes of the trade war last year.

FILE PHOTO: China's President Xi Jinping waits ahead of their bilateral meeting with U.S. President Donald Trump during the G20 leaders summit in Osaka, Japan, June 29, 2019. REUTERS/Kevin Lamarque/File Photo

"But right now in China, the rising consensus is that the U.S. is trying to contain China no matter what we do."

The source, who closely follows U.S.-China trade talks, said Trump's threat in early August to impose 10% duties on Sept. 1 on another $300 billion of Chinese imports was evidence to many in China that he was not sincere in wanting a deal.

On Tuesday, Trump backed off that deadline for tariffs on cellphones, laptops and other consumer goods, in the hope of blunting their impact on U.S. holiday sales.

But this month he also branded China a currency manipulator, despite the International Monetary Fund's view that the value of China's yuan was largely in line with economic fundamentals.

"Many people will feel it is worthless to negotiate with Trump," the advisor said.

'CALLED TRUMP'S BLUFF'

That message fits with the unapologetically nationalist policies that Xi has pushed since coming to power in 2012, and has found an outlet in state media, which has ramped up a daily war of words toward the United States.

"[The] U.S. trade war has greatly squeezed pro-U.S. thoughts inside China, making it easier for the Communist Party to unite Chinese society," editor-in-chief of the state-run Global Times Hu Xijin wrote on Twitter last week.

One American executive in China said he thought the manner in which Trump has handled the 10% tariffs would backfire and give Xi a boost.

"It plays right into Xi's hand as he goes into Beidaihe. He can look around the room and say, 'see, you can't negotiate with these people'. Xi called Trump's bluff," the executive said.

Jude Blanchette, the Freeman Chair in China Studies at the Center for Strategic and International Studies in Washington, said while Xi was facing a challenging external environment, particularly over the protests in Hong Kong, he was not significantly weakened at home.

"Xi Jinping is lucky insofar as he has a mercurial United States president who is making the case for him that the reason U.S.-China relations have turned in such a dire direction is because there is an unpredictable U.S. leader," Blanchette said.

In mainland China, amid tight internet censorship, there is little apparent popular solidarity for the Hong Kong protesters, whom increasingly vociferous state media have condemned as "violent radicals".

China has also painted Washington as a "black hand" fomenting months of increasingly violent demonstrations in the former British colony.

Still, Trump's unpredictability on trade has created a big headache for Chinese leaders, policy insiders said, while higher U.S. tariffs have pinched the word's second-largest economy.

Xi has few good options to deal with the trade war - seen in Beijing as one front in Washington's long-term goal to stifle China's development - or the Hong Kong protests, the more immediate shock to the country's short-term political stability.

Nonetheless, years spent consolidating his power among China's ruling elite - including the removal of terms limits to his presidency and a sweeping corruption crackdown - means analysts do not see such crises imperiling his leadership.

Island naval base, in Hong Kong, China, June 30, 2019. REUTERS/Tyrone Siu/File Photo

Blanchette said Xi could be fully secure in the office of general secretary, his post as head of the party, yet be finding it difficult to move forward with policy because he has a "scattered or unhappy coalition".

"This is precisely why you secure allies in the military and the security services, and in the central guard bureau and within the politburo, to buttress your leadership in a time of challenges," Blanchette said.

RISK TO REFORMS

Both Chinese and foreign analysts agree that the drag on the government's ability to adapt and implement needed market reforms due to tightened political controls under Xi poses a serious long-term risk that could derail the economy.

Southern DAILY Make Today Different

WORLD NEWS

Two women sue Jeffrey Epstein's estate for $100 million over alleged sex abuse

NEW YORK (Reuters) - Two women who said they were recruited 15 years ago to provide massages to Jeffrey Epstein, only to be later sexually molested by him at his Manhattan mansion, have filed a $100 million lawsuit against the financier's estate.

FILE PHOTO: U.S. financier Jeffrey Epstein appears in a photograph taken for the New York State Division of Criminal Justice Services' sex offender registry March 28, 2017 and obtained by Reuters July 10, 2019. New York State Division of Criminal Justice Services/Handout/File Photo via REUTERS

The lawsuit filed on Thursday night in U.S. District Court in Manhattan is at least the second against the estate over Epstein's alleged misconduct, following his Aug. 10 death at age 66 of an apparent suicide.

Lawyers who represented Epstein did not immediately respond on Friday to requests for comment. The plaintiffs, identified as Jane Doe 1 and Jane Doe 2, said they now live in Okinawa, Japan and Baltimore.

Prior to his death, Epstein had pleaded not guilty in July to charges of sex trafficking involving dozens of underage girls from 2002 and 2005.

Prosecutors said he recruited and paid girls to give him massages, which became sexual in nature. Attorney General William Barr said the U.S. government will continue its investigation into any possible co-conspirators.

Epstein's death deprived his alleged victims of a chance to face him at a criminal trial, leaving civil lawsuits against his estate among their legal options.

It is not known if Epstein had a will. His lawyers last month estimated his assets at about $559 million, including two private islands and four homes, and said his mansion on Manhattan's Upper East Side was alone worth $77 million.

Jane Doe 1 and Jane Doe 2 said they were aspiring models working at a restaurant off Manhattan's Union Square when they were approached in June 2004 by an unnamed female "recruiter," identified as Sue Roe, who worked for Epstein.

Lisa Bloom, the plaintiffs' lawyer, said in a statement that her clients were 18 and 20 years old at the time, without saying which was which. She did not immediately respond on Friday to a request for comment.

According to the complaint, Roe offered the plaintiffs hundreds of dollars each to massage Epstein at his Manhattan mansion.

The complaint said Roe told Jane Doe 1 that her "boss" thought Jane Doe 1 was beautiful and liked to give young girls "opportunities," and that Roe "intimated" to Jane Doe 2 that there might be opportunities to make more money.

Both plaintiffs said that despite Roe's assurances that Epstein would not subject them to unwanted touching, his conduct became aggressive during the massages, including that he forcefully touched their breasts and masturbated.

The plaintiffs said they were unaware they were victims of Epstein's alleged sex-trafficking scheme until last month when he was arrested.

Bloom said more plaintiffs will likely join the case.

On Wednesday, Jennifer Araoz, 32, sued Epstein's estate in a New York state court in Manhattan, saying Epstein sexually abused her when she was 14.

That lawsuit was made possible under the Child Victims Act, a New York state law that opened a one-year window to sue over alleged sexual abuse, regardless of when it occurred.

Thursday's lawsuit, in contrast, accused Epstein, Sue Roe and other unnamed alleged accomplices of violating the federal Trafficking Victims Protection Act.

An autopsy of Epstein found that his neck had been broken in several places, two law enforcement sources said.

Epstein had been alone in his cell when he was found hanging there. He had previously been on suicide watch.

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Editor's Choice

A boy is offered milk as he participates in a parade to mark Gaijatra festival in Kathmandu

U.S. Congresswoman Rashida Tlaib addresses her constituents during a Town Hall style meeting in Inkster, Michigan, U.S. August 15, 2019. REUTERS/Rebecca Cook TPX IMAGES OF THE DAY

U.S. President Trump rallies with supporters in Manchester, New Hampshire

A reveller takes part in an LGBT pride parade to mark Gaijatra Festival, also known as the festival of cows in Kathmandu

Members of 'Light of the World' congregation pray for their leader Joaquin Garcia, who was arrested in California and charged with crimes, in Guadalajara

Military vehicles are parked on the grounds of the Shenzhen Bay Sports Center

Premiere for the film "Good Boys" in Los Angeles, California

Boys wearing headbands reading "Japan" wait for an event to release doves at the Yasukuni Shrine in Tokyo, Japan August 15, 2019, on the 74th anniversary of Japan's surrender in World War Two. REUTERS/Kim Kyung-Hoon TPX IMAGES OF THE DAY

Southern DAILY Make Today Different

COMMUNITY

A Government Toxicology Report Found Links Between High Levels Of Nonstick Compounds In People's Blood That Caused Health Problems

FDA: Sampling Finds Toxic Nonstick Compounds In Food

Environmental Protection Agency Administrator Andrew Wheeler speaks at the National Press Club in Washington, Monday, June 3, 2019. The Food and Drug Administration's first broad testing of food for a worrisome class of nonstick, stain-resistant industrial compounds found high levels in some grocery store meats and seafood and in off-the-shelf chocolate cake. (AP Photo/Andrew Harnik)

Compiled And Edited By John T. Robbins, Southern Daily Editor

WASHINGTON (AP) — The Food and Drug Administration found substantial levels of a worrisome class of nonstick, stain-resistant industrial compounds in some grocery store meats and seafood and in off-the-shelf chocolate cake, according to FDA researchers.

The FDA's food-test results are likely to heighten complaints by states and public health groups that President Donald Trump's administration is not acting fast enough or firmly enough to start regulating the manmade compounds.

A federal toxicology report last year cited links between high levels of the compounds in people's blood and health problems, but said it was not certain the nonstick compounds were the cause.

The levels in nearly half of the meat and fish tested were two or more times over the only currently existing federal advisory level for any kind of the widely used manmade compounds, which are called per- and polyfluoroalykyl substances, or PFAS.

Environmental Protection Agency Administrator Andrew Wheeler speaks at the National Press Club in Washington, Monday, June 3, 2019. The Food and Drug Administration's first broad testing of food for a worrisome class of nonstick, stain-resistant industrial compounds found high levels in some grocery store meats and seafood and in off-the-shelf chocolate cake. (AP Photo/Andrew Harnik)

The level in the chocolate cake was higher: more than 250 times the only federal guidelines, which are for some PFAS in drinking water.

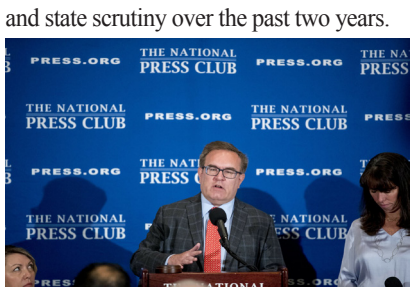
Food and Drug Administration spokeswoman Tara Rabin said Monday that the agency thought the contamination was "not likely to be a human health concern," even though the tests exceeded the sole existing federal PFAS recommendations for drinking water.

As a handful of PFAS contaminations of food emerge around the country, authorities have deemed some a health concern but not others. The agency considers each discovery of the compound in food case by case, including the kind of food, levels of contamination, frequency of consumption and latest scientific information, Rabin said.

There are nearly 5,000 varieties of PFAS, which DuPont created in 1938 and first put into use for nonstick cookware. Industries use them in countless consumer items — food packaging, carpets and couches, dental floss and outdoor gear — to repeal grease, water and stains.

The chemicals also are found in firefighting foam, which the Defense department calls irreplaceable in suppressing jet-fuel fires. Especially around military bases and PFAS facilities, decades of use have built up levels in water, soil and some treated sewage sludge used to fertilize non-organic food crops and feed for livestock.

They've been a topic of congressional hearings, state legislation and intense federal and state scrutiny over the past two years.



Environmental Protection Agency Administrator Andrew Wheeler responds to a question from the audience at the National Press Club in Washington, Monday, June 3, 2019. The Food and Drug Administration's first broad testing of food for a worrisome class of nonstick, stain-resistant industrial compounds found high levels in some grocery store meats and seafood and in off-the-shelf chocolate cake. (AP Photo/Andrew Harnik)

Last year's federal toxicology review concluded the compounds are more dangerous than previously thought, saying consistent studies of exposed people "suggest associations" with some kinds of cancers, liver problems, low birth weight and other issues.

The compounds have been dubbed "forever chemicals" because they take thousands of years to degrade, and because some accumulate in people's bodies.

The Environmental Protection Agency earlier established a nonbinding health threshold of 70 parts per trillion for two-phased out forms of the contaminant in drinking water.

The EPA has said it would consider setting mandatory limits instead after the toxicology report and after federally mandated PFAS testing of water systems found contamination. The administration has called dealing with PFAS a "potential public relations nightmare" and a "national priority."

"I know there are people who would like us to move faster" on PFAS, EPA Administrator Andrew Wheeler said Monday at the National Press Club. "We are addressing this much faster than the agency has ever done for a chemical like this."

Impatient for federal action, several states have moved to regulate the chemicals on their own, including setting standards for groundwater or drinking water.

The FDA study sampled market-basket items bought in three, undisclosed mid-Atlantic cities in 2017, testing for PFAS.

PFOS — already phased out of production in the U.S. as a health concern — turned up at levels ranging from 134 parts per trillion to 865 parts per trillion in tilapia, chicken, turkey, beef, cod, salmon, shrimp, lamb, catfish and hot dogs. Chocolate cake tested at 17,640 parts per trillion of a kind of PFAS called PFPeA.

FILE - This Thursday, Aug. 2, 2018, file photo shows the U.S. Food and Drug Administration building behind FDA logos at a bus stop on the agency's campus in Silver Spring, Md. The Food and Drug Administration's first broad testing of food for a worrisome class of nonstick, stain-resistant industrial compounds found high levels in some grocery store meats and seafood and in off-the-shelf chocolate cake, according to unreleased findings FDA researchers presented at a scientific conference in Europe. (AP Photo/Jacquelyn Martin, File)

The FDA presentation also disclosed PFAS findings — one spiking over 1,000 parts per trillion — in leafy green vegetables grown within 10 miles (16 kilometers) of an unspecified eastern U.S. PFAS plant and sold at a farmer's market.

And it previewed test levels for a previously reported instance of PFAS contamination of the food supply in the feed and milk at a dairy near an Air Force base in New Mexico. The FDA called the milk contamination a health concern.

FDA researchers discussed the results at a conference by the Society of Environmental Toxicology and Chemistry last week in Finland. The Environmental Defense Fund and the Environmental Working Group obtained the FDA presentation and provided it to The Associated Press.

"What this calls for is additional research to determine how widespread this contamination is and how high the levels are," said Linda Birnbaum, director of the National Institute of Environmental Health Sciences, in an interview. "We have to look at total human exposure — not just what's in the water or what's in the food ... or not just dust. We need to look at the sum totals of what the exposures are."

"Drinking one glass of contaminated water is unlikely to be associated with health risks, as is eating one slice of contaminated chocolate cake," said Jamie DeWitt, a toxicologist at East Carolina University who studies PFAS. "Individually, each item is unlikely to be a huge problem, but collectively and over a lifetime, that may be a different story." (Courtesy apnews.com)

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Southern DAILY Make Today Different

BUSINESS

Amazon Drivers Part Of $10 Million Theft Ring, FBI Says

Amazon vans line up at a distribution center to pick up packages for delivery on Amazon Prime Day, in Orlando, Florida on July 16, 2019.

Overview

A theft ring in Washington state sold millions of dollars' worth of stolen goods on Amazon.com in the past six years, recently unsealed federal court documents show.

Compiled And Edited By John T. Robbins, Southern Daily Editor

SEATTLE — A theft ring in Washington state sold millions of dollars' worth of stolen goods on Amazon.com in the past six years, and a pair of Amazon delivery drivers was involved, recently unsealed federal court documents show.

According to a search warrant affidavit unsealed in U.S. District Court in Seattle and reviewed by The Associated Press, two storefront businesses posing as pawnshops bought the goods from shoplifters, then had the items shipped to Amazon warehouses, where they were stored until sold online.

Entities associated with the alleged ringleader did at least $10 million in sales on Amazon since 2013, FBI agent Ariana Kroshinsky wrote in her affidavit.

No charges have yet been filed, though investigators have raided the pawnshops and the home of the man identified as the ringleader, Aleksandr Pavlovskiy, 44, of Auburn. A man who answered the door at one of the shops Wednesday identified himself as Alex and told The Associated Press his business was legitimate, that he kept good records and he should not be in any trouble.

Among those who provided stolen items to the pawn shops were two contract Amazon drivers, Kroshinsky said. Their job was to travel to Seattle-Tacoma International Airport, pick up items being returned to the company and then bring them to an Amazon warehouse south of Seattle, and to deliver items to post offices for shipping. Instead, they routinely stole the goods and sold them to the pawnshops, she wrote.

Amazon did not immediately return an email seeking comment about the case Thursday.

A pawn shop alleged to have been a front for a theft ring closed in Renton, Wash. on July 31, 2019. The FBI says the ring sold millions of dollars' worth of stolen goods on Amazon.com in the past six years, and that a pair of Amazon delivery drivers was involved. No charges have yet been filed.Elaine Thompson / AP

The investigation began last summer when a police detective in Auburn, a south Seattle suburb, was perusing a record of pawnshop sales and noticed that one man had made 57 transactions. It turned out to be one of the drivers.

He had received nearly $30,000 selling items to the pawn shops between February and July last year, the affidavit said. Police initially arrested the driver, but released him from jail to avoid disrupting their larger investigation.

The other driver, identified as Abbas Zghair, was believed to be a roommate of the first. Amazon told investigators that Zghair stole about $100,000 worth of property, including gaming systems, sporting goods and computer products — items he sold to one of the pawnshops for less than $20,000, the agent wrote.

In an unrelated case, Zghair has been charged with murder after police said he shot and killed a man in an Auburn field in March, then fled to the Canadian border, where he was arrested trying to cross with a fake ID. He's being held on $2.5 million bail.

Detectives staked out the pawnshops, Innovation Best in Kent and Thrift-Electro in Renton, and observed that they appeared to be paying shoplifters and drug users cash for new items from Home Depot, Lowes and Fred Meyer department stores.

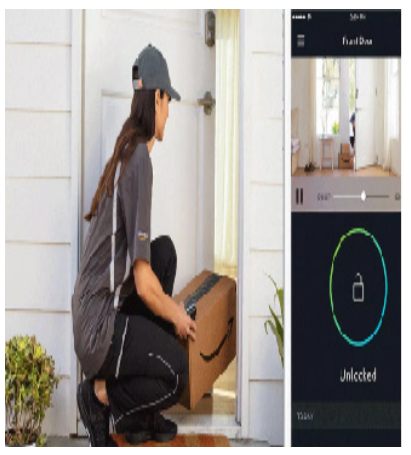
Unlike typical pawn shops, they didn't make sales; instead, the products were moved to a warehouse and to Amazon "fulfillment centers," from where they were shipped when they were sold on Amazon's website by sellers using the handles "Bestforyouall" or "Freeshipforyou," the affidavit said.

According to a database of pawnshop transactions reviewed by Auburn police, the suspect pawn shops paid more than $4.1 million to sellers who brought them nearly 48,000 items in the past six years. The items included allergy medication, razors, electric toothbrushes and tools in their original packaging. Detectives also conducted undercover operations in which they sold new items in their original packaging to the shops, which accepted them no questions asked, Kroshinsky wrote.

The FBI said it is awaiting more Amazon records to determine the full extent of Pavlovskiy's enterprise, but that "estimated revenue from Amazon sales, for entities associated with Aleksandr Pavlovskiy, was at least $10 million since 2013."

Pavlovskiy's lawyer, Cristine Beckwith, did not return a message seeking comment.

The sale of stolen or counterfeit goods on Amazon or other digital marketplaces is not uncommon, but it was not immediately clear how many other schemes had reached such a volume of sales. Last year, police raided a pawn shop in Monroe, north of Seattle, that they said had taken in $428,000 fencing stolen items, much of it on Amazon.



Jon Riley, a vice president for the digital strategy firm Publicis Sapient and previously the head of e-commerce user experience for Amazon Devices, said preventing the sale of stolen goods is a major challenge for the company, but retailers can be held liable if they don't do enough to ensure they're not selling stolen goods. Because it's impossible for Amazon to review "every Tide pod" that's sold on its site, the company will likely need to do more to vet sellers, Riley said.

"It's a little bit of an arms race for Amazon to be able to take in product, put it on the web and get it to their customers in a speedy fashion and not unwittingly sell stolen stuff at the same time," Riley said. "Ultimately what Amazon has to do is show good faith if the government comes knocking on the door and says, 'Look, you're selling stolen goods.'" (Courtesy nbcnews.com)