

## Sessions carries on with Justice Department tasks, despite Trump criticism

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Stung by attacks from the president, Attorney General Jeff Sessions kept a low profile this week, letting the Justice Department's work speak for itself as the agency rolled out initiatives aimed at battling international gangs and cracking down on illegal immigration.

Mr. Sessions traveled Thursday to El Salvador to meet with law enforcement and announce the arrest of hundreds of MS-13 gang members. The trip had been planned two weeks ago, before Mr. Trump began airing his disappointment with his attorney general, but touched on a key goal of reducing gang-related crime that the president will highlight during a trip Friday.

Back in Washington, a top Sessions deputy joined other administration officials at the White House to announce the arrests.

"It speaks volumes that the attorney general himself has traveled to the nerve center of MS-13 and is standing in solidarity with our partners in Central America," said Robert K. Hur, the Justice Department's principal associate deputy attorney general, speaking at the White House announcement.

Mr. Sessions' future has been hotly debated since he became the target of his boss last week. Mr. Trump told The New York Times he wished Mr. Sessions had said beforehand that he would recuse himself from the department's Russia investigation, because then the president would have picked someone else.

Since then, Mr. Trump has leveled a series of other complaints at Mr. Sessions, including blaming him for not pursuing leakers and for not demanding a probe of Democratic presidential nominee Hillary Clinton.

Mr. Sessions has indicated he intends to remain in the post as long as the president wants him to serve. Speaking from San Salvador, he told Fox News that Mr. Trump's comments were "kind of hurtful" but that the president is a strong leader.

"He has had a lot of criticisms and he's steadfastly determined to get his job done and he wants all of us to do our jobs," Mr. Sessions said. "And that's what I intend to do."

This week that job has entailed bringing smuggling charges against a trucker who authorities say transported as many as 200 illegal immigrants in an unventilated trailer. Ten of them died.

On Tuesday, Mr. Sessions issued a new warning to so-called sanctuary cities, saying they must prove they fully cooperate with immigration agents in order to claim Byrne Justice Assistance Grant money.

For groups that support Mr. Sessions' agenda, it's a sign that the attorney general is continuing to conduct the routine business of the Justice Department unscathed by the criticism.

"I trust him to be operating with the right priorities and seeking the right goals and I don't need press releases to that effect every day," said Mark Krikorian, executive director of the Center for Immigration Studies. "Hopefully it will cool the president's anger about this."

Republican senators warned that any effort to fire Mr. Sessions will be met with stiff resistance. Sen. Lindsey Graham said Thursday "there will be holy hell to pay" if the attorney general is pushed out.

Some lawmakers fear Mr. Trump may try to oust Mr. Sessions in order to exert more control over Special Counsel Robert Mueller, who is probing Russian interference in the election and possible coordination with members of the Trump campaign.

"This effort to marginalize and humiliate the attorney general is not going over well in the Senate. I don't think its going over well in the conservative world," said Mr. Graham, South Carolina Republican. "If you believe Jeff Sessions should be fired, use the power you have and accept the consequences."

Mr. Graham said he intends to introduce legislation that would provide protection for Mr. Mueller's investigation, making any attempts to fire him subject to judicial review.

Sen. Charles E. Grassley, Iowa Republican and Judiciary Committee chairman, has warned that if Mr. Sessions is ousted, his panel won't hold confirmation hearings this year for any hypothetical Sessions replacement. And Republicans signaled they'll resist if Mr. Trump tries to use a recess appointment to replace Mr. Sessions during Congress' August vacation.

His fellow senators' support has likely helped Mr. Sessions stay focused because he hasn't had to worry about defending himself, said Jonathan Blanks, research associate on criminal justice at the Cato Institute.

"Sessions probably understands he's in the stronger position because the Senate would not tolerate it if he was fired," Mr. Blanks said. "I think he feels protected."

While unpleasant, the attorney general couldn't have been completely blindsided to become the target of the president's scorn, said Ken Blackwell, a former domestic policy adviser to Trump transition team.

"This is not the attorney general's first rodeo. He's been through tough political storms before," Mr. Blackwell said, noting Mr. Sessions became well acquainted with the president after becoming the first senator to endorse his campaign. "I think Jeff Sessions is going to come out of this stronger and better prepared to take on the enormously complicated and important task as attorney general."

