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# Immigration courts fast-track hearings for Somali asylum claims

FEBRUARY 9, 2026 · 12:41 PM ET

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People wait in a line before being led into a downtown Chicago building where an immigration court presides on Nov. 12, 2024, in Chicago.

Charles Rex Arbogast/AP



Dozens of asylum cases filed by Somali migrants in immigration courts were suddenly rescheduled and recategorized over the weekend, according to four lawyers interviewed by NPR.

NPR has learned that lawyers across at least three states, Minnesota, Illinois and Nebraska, received notices starting Friday night that moved up hearings for their clients to later this month and next month. Some of these hearings were previously scheduled to take place by 2028; others hadn't yet been scheduled.

More than 100 cases have been affected, based on interviews conducted by NPR, but attorneys NPR spoke with said the count is likely higher.

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NPR spoke with the four attorneys on the condition of anonymity out of fear of reprisals for their clients. They argue that this appears to be a coordinated effort between the Executive Office for Immigration Review and the Department of Homeland Security to reject Somali asylum applications without court hearings. Such a move would fast-track their deportation and limit due process. (The Executive Office for Immigration Review is an agency inside DOJ that houses immigration courts.)

President Trump's rhetoric toward Somali immigrants, as well as his administration's emphasis on deportations, raises concern that the notices represent the first step toward the removal without due process of Somali asylum applicants in the country.

There are about 3,254 pending cases from Somali immigrants in immigration court, according to the latest data from the Transactional Records Access Clearinghouse, and nearly half are out of Minnesota, home to the largest Somali community in the country. Lawyers who spoke with NPR said in all of their rescheduled cases, the clients were Somali citizens who entered the U.S. between 2018 and 2024.

Some of their clients have Temporary Protected Status. In November, the Trump administration terminated TPS for Somalis, setting the program to expire on

March 17. Unless recipients are able to adjust their status through avenues including immigration court, those with TPS will be subject to deportation after the program expires.

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"There's a lack of historical precedent for an entire docket to be created for one nationality, one lawyer said, noting that the Trump administration has also politically targeted Somali immigrants. The cases appear to have been referred to a set of immigration judges who grant asylum at lower rates than the national average, according to an NPR review of EOIR data. "This is the first time EOIR has been so obviously a political tool," the lawyer said.

Typically, lawyers said, the scheduling of cases is sped up either by attorneys working for Immigration and Customs Enforcement or by the immigrants themselves. The lawyers note that their records do not show any legal motions or requests from ICE to reset or reschedule these cases. To illustrate the change, the

attorneys said they went from having as few as zero hearings on their calendar to dozens.

The flurry of rescheduled cases comes as Jim Stolley, the chief counsel for ICE in Minnesota, retired "from public service" at the end of last week, NPR confirmed.

When asked about the rescheduling, EOIR spokeswoman Kathryn Mattingly said the agency does not comment on cases before the courts it runs.

Lawyers spent the weekend scrambling with the sudden notices. In several cases, the lawyers told NPR they were scheduled for multiple conflicting hearings on the same date and time before different judges and in states as far away as Louisiana, Illinois and Texas. EOIR has noted that any immigration judge can hear any case at any time throughout the country to assist with caseloads.

"I haven't seen a demographic pull like this where they are targeting specific nationalities," said David Wilson, a Minnesota immigration attorney with a dozen affected cases, in an interview with NPR. Another attorney in his office has about a dozen affected cases, he said.

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Wilson has one such rescheduled hearing Monday. He's representing a client with Temporary Protected Status who has been ready for an individual hearing to discuss the merits of their asylum claim since July. These hearings, he said, are typically scheduled in advance to allow attorneys and individual immigrants to

adequately prepare. The accelerated schedule, he fears, will adversely affect his client's case.

"This feels like a setup," Wilson said. "To rush these particular cases with judges who may not be familiar with them – it's disappointing that their system isn't going to give them their full day in court."

### Different types of hearings

There are generally two kinds of hearings in immigration court: master calendar and individual merits hearings. Immigrants often have their first appearance in court in master calendar hearings. Judges could see dozens of people during one

master calendar session. They could sign ICE's intent to remove the person, provide instructions on how to fill out asylum applications and set a date for either another master or an individual merits hearing; the latter often a year or more out.

Those seeking relief from deportation, including asylum, do so at an individual merits hearing.

Some cases scheduled for individual hearings are now rescheduled for a master calendar hearing.

Separately, some previously unscheduled cases in Minneapolis now have a court date. Lawyers say they fear that the quick turnaround on these hearings could mean their clients are at risk.

"In some of the cases, it's probably legit to schedule a master calendar," another lawyer said. "But the others, I am just afraid that they are being set up" for applications to be denied.

Last spring, a memo sent to EOIR staff encouraged immigration judges to deny "legally deficient asylum cases without a hearing." In recent months, attorneys for ICE, who prosecute immigration cases at EOIR, increasingly relied on the strategy of filing motions to "pretermite" asylum cases – essentially requesting that judges deny the case at hand without a hearing on the case's details. Pretermisions can take place if a case is incomplete or legally deficient.

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A separate strategy increasingly used to "protecting" asylum cases involves ICE attorneys offering to send migrants to third countries they may not have ties to, such as Uganda.

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### Trump targets Somali immigrants

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Minnesota's Somali community has repeatedly faced verbal attacks and threats from Trump. He characterized Somali immigrants as "garbage" during a Cabinet meeting in early December, adding, "they contribute nothing. I don't want them in our country."

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The issue garnered additional attention last December after the administration sponsors, provide social media features, and analyze NPR's traffic. This information is shared with social media, sponsorship, analytics, and other vendors or service providers. amplified an unfounded allegation that was largely spread by right-wing social media influencers. Just days into the new year, DHS announced it was deploying roughly 2,000 federal immigration agents and officers to Minneapolis, a surge that resulted in the deaths of two U.S. citizens.

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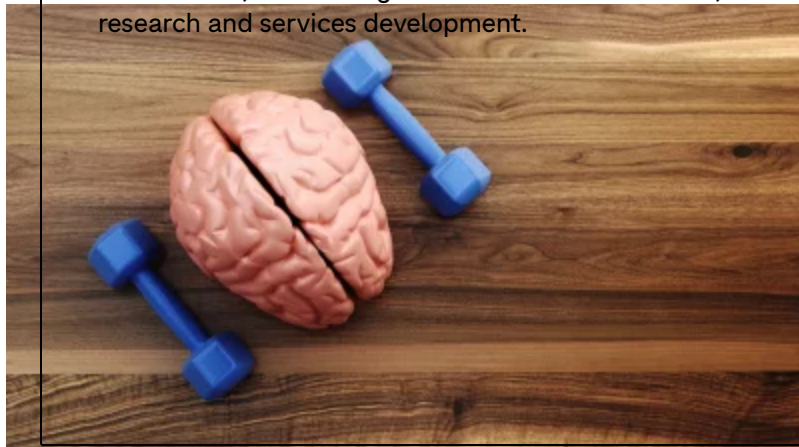
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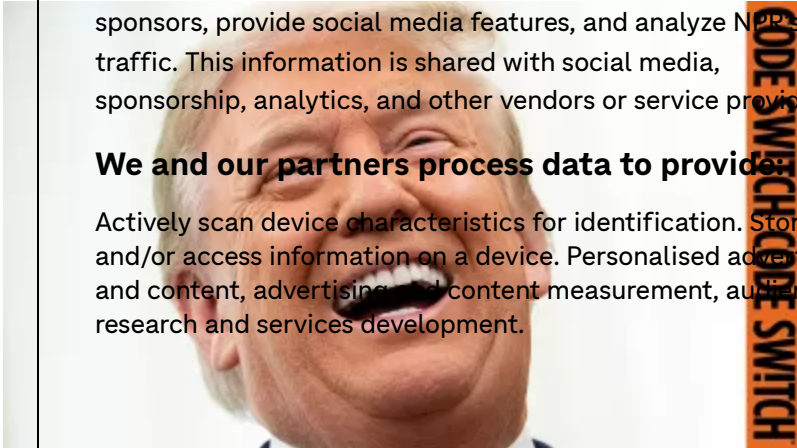
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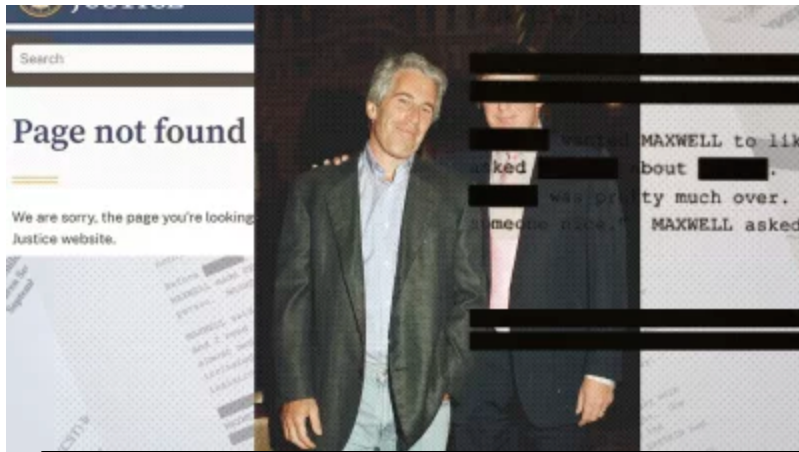
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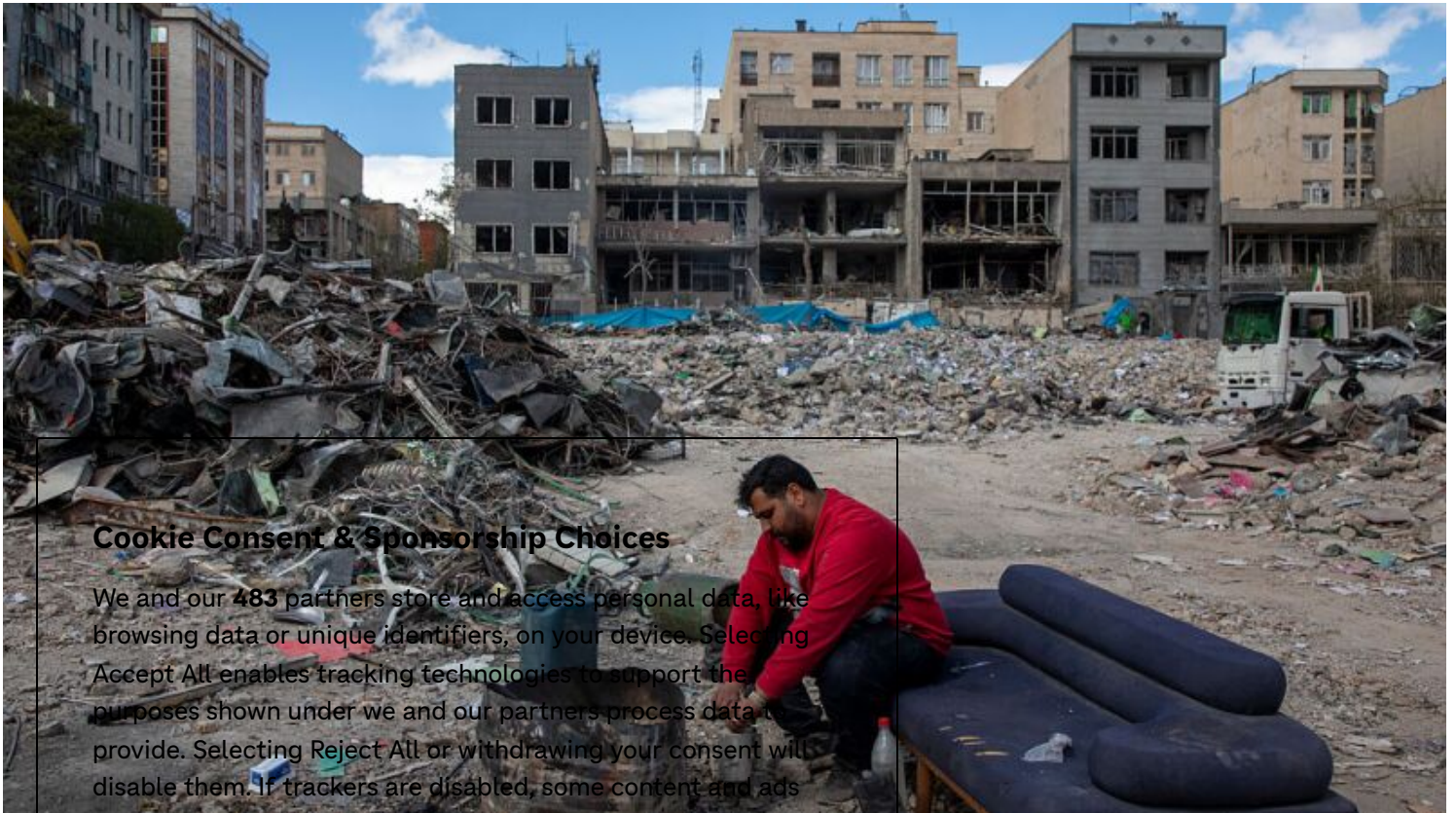
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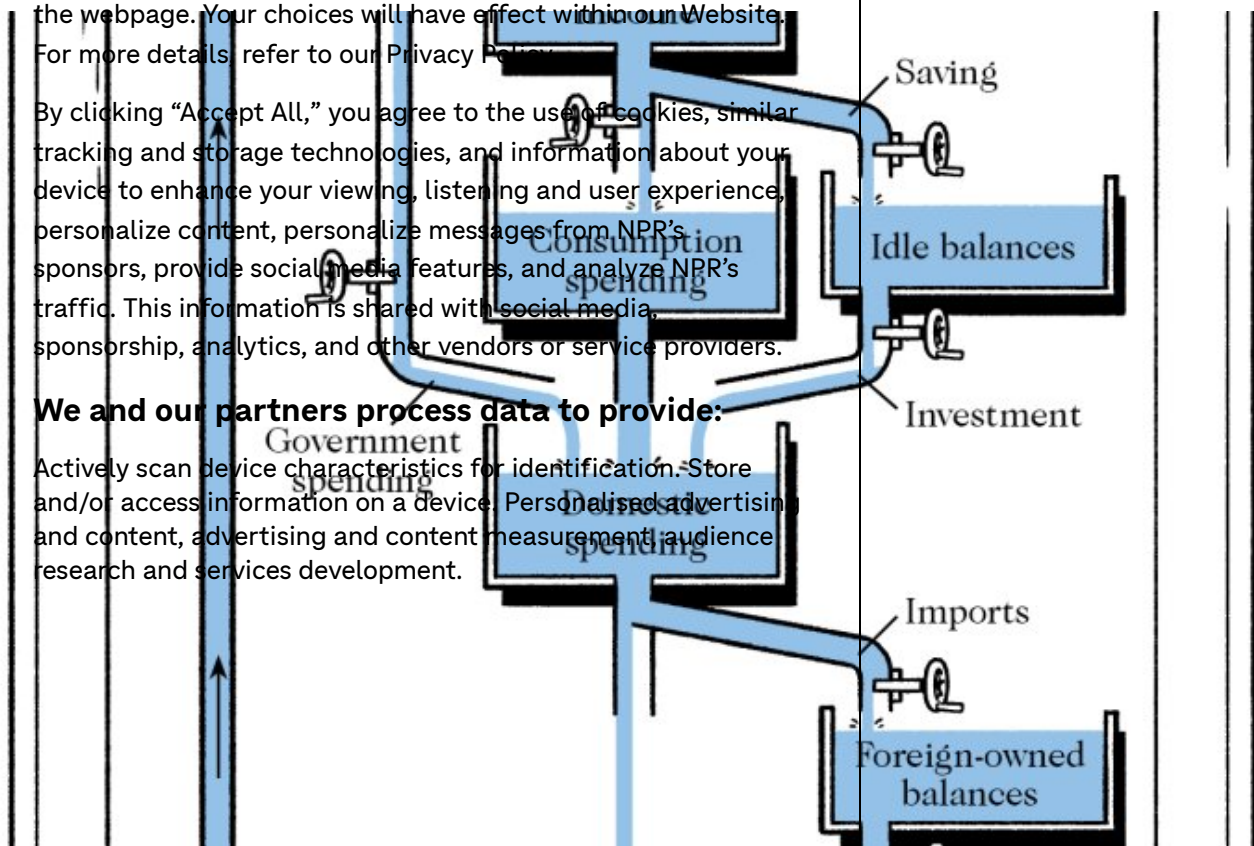
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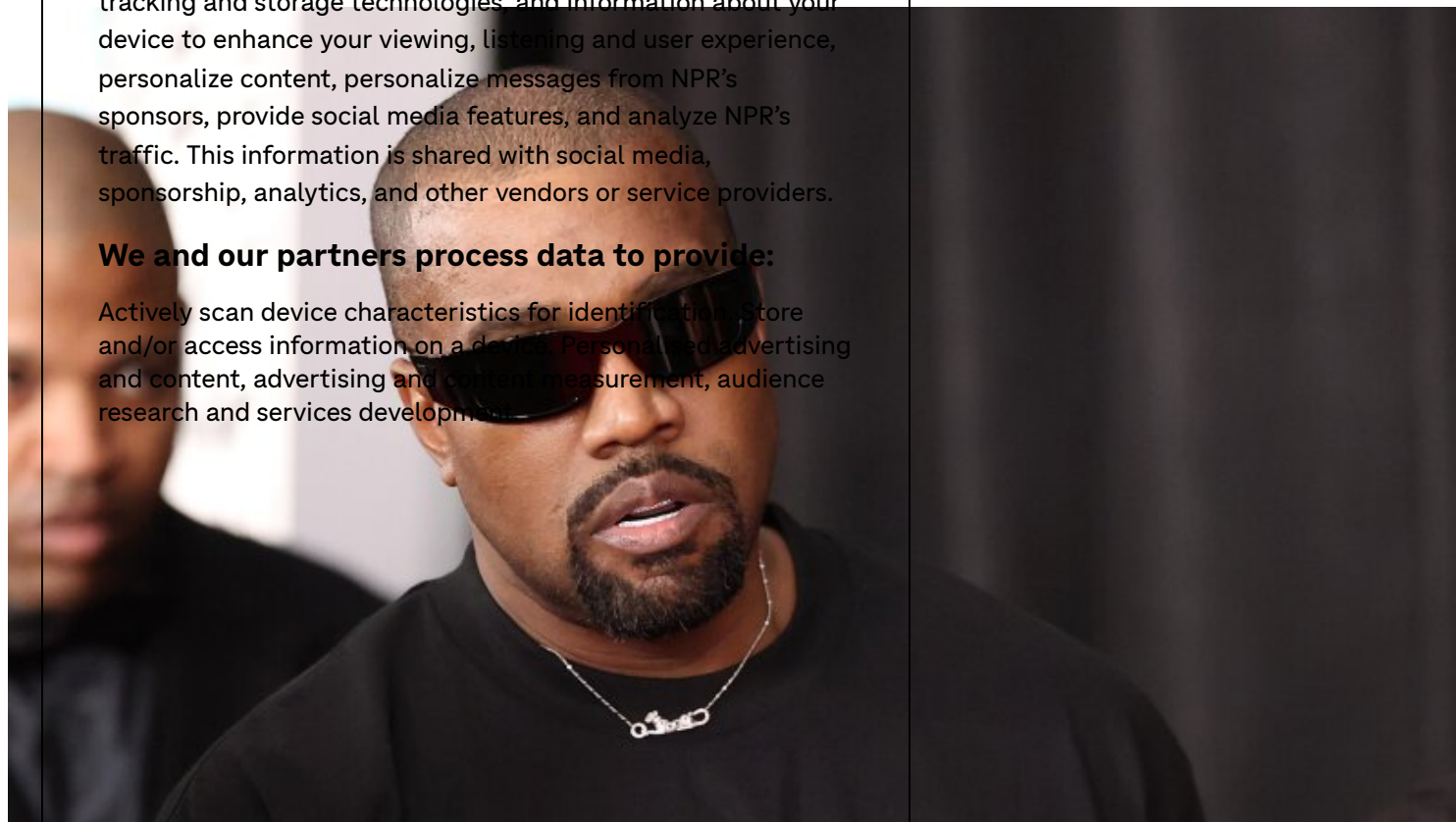
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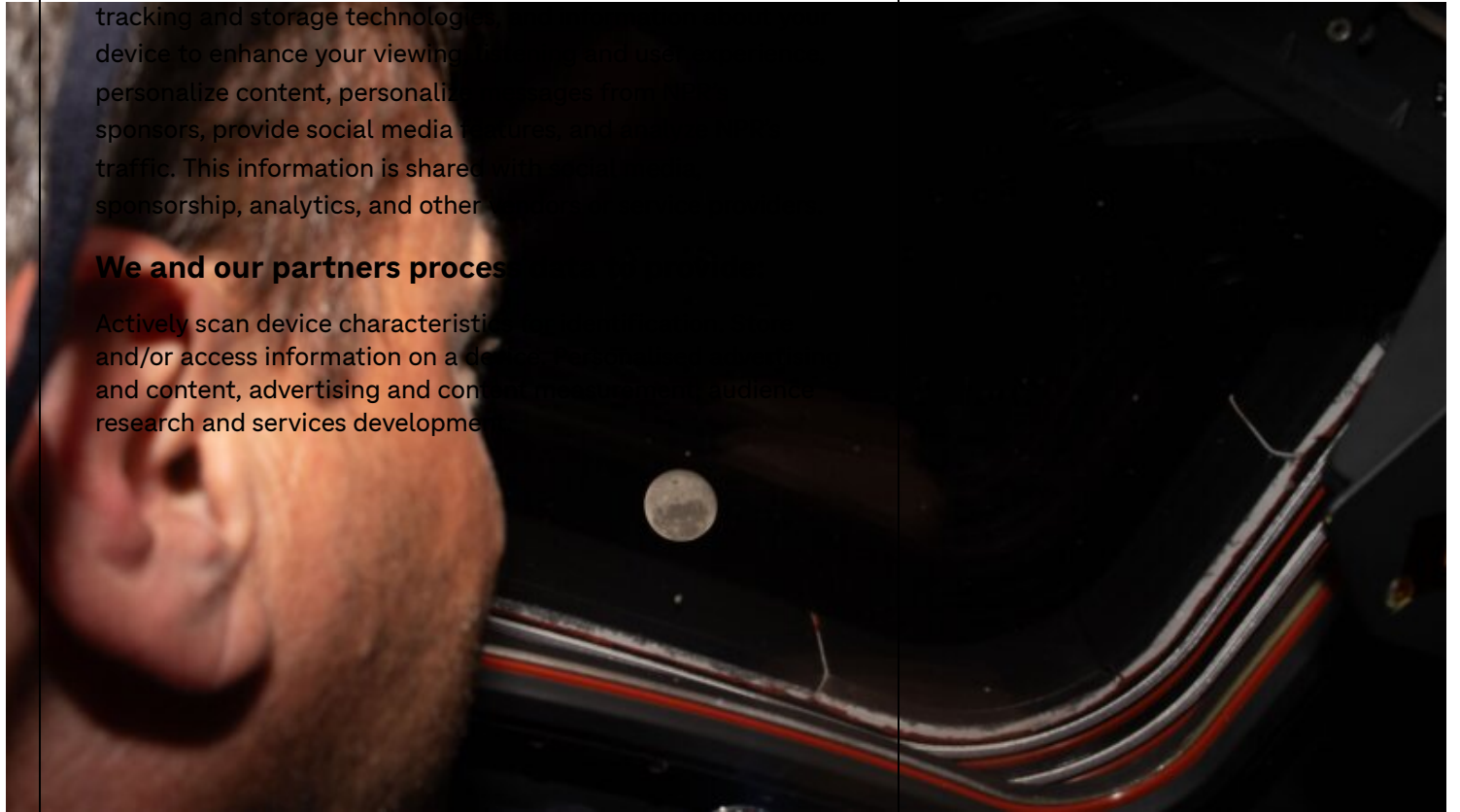
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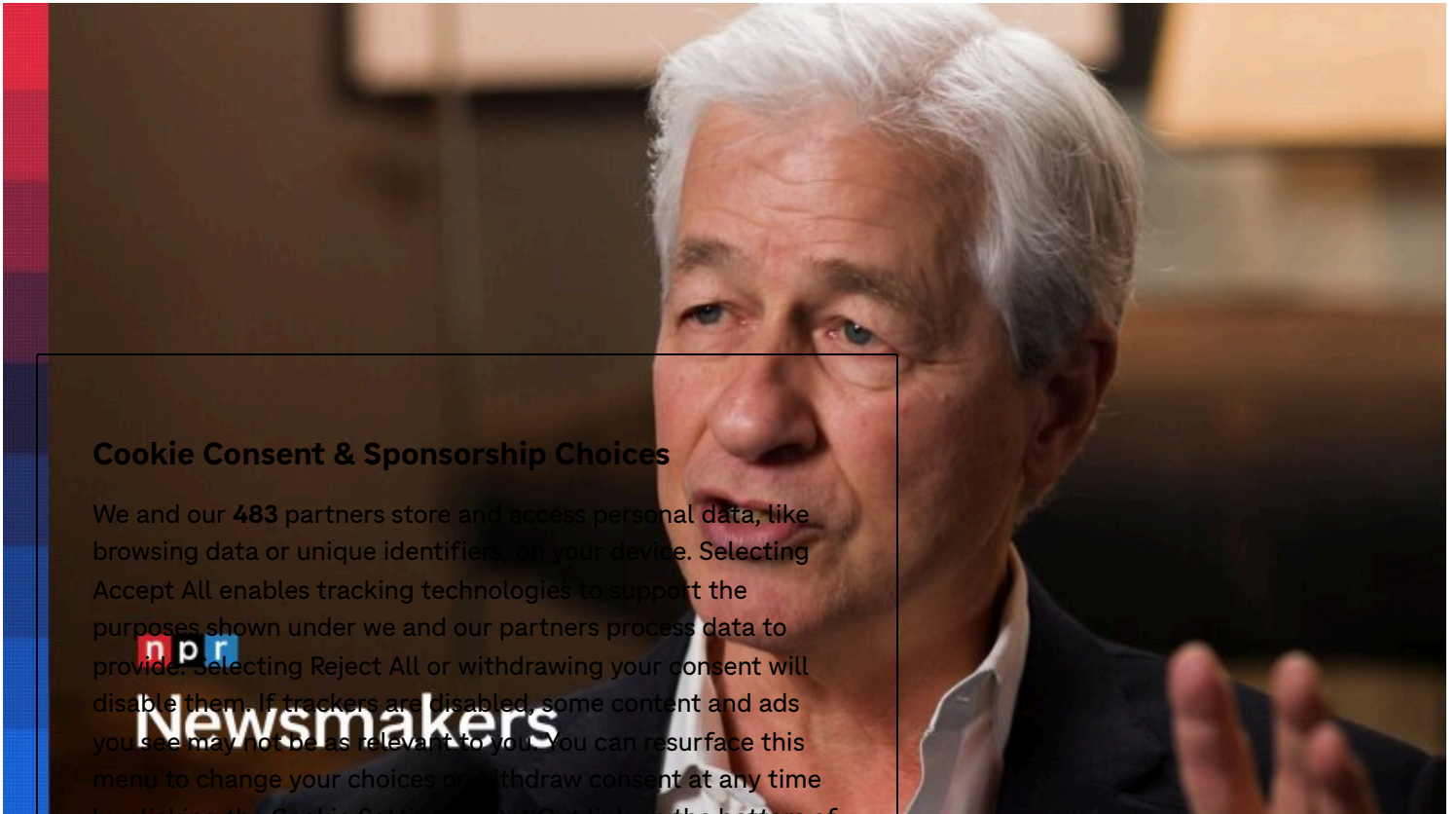
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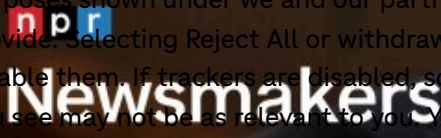
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