

Duke of York's friend could be back in US courts

Lawyers to question Prince Andrew's sex offender associate.

By Jonathan Owen

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The Duke of York's attempts to quell the furore surrounding his relationship with the billionaire sex offender Jeffrey Epstein appeared doomed this weekend when it emerged that more lurid details are to be aired in a US court within the next two weeks.

Buckingham Palace was forced to deny that the Duke of York had postponed plans for a trip to Saudi Arabia next week, because of negative media coverage, amid reports in some media that the controversy had made him "toxic". A spokesman said: "Buckingham Palace has never announced any overseas visits for the Duke of York."

The issue refuses to die down, with two Lib Dem ministers breaking rank last night and privately suggesting they think Prince Andrew should quit as trade envoy. One said: "If he was a politician doing this, he would have gone by now, and rightly so." Another added: "That in the 21st century we should be putting up with this is obscene. It is incredibly difficult for the Government, more so the Tory side, but it cannot carry on."

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Even attempts by supporters to rally to his cause have been of mixed benefit. The Duchess of York's apology for a "gigantic error" of money from Epstein only served to fuel reporting, as did reports of the Prince's links to Kazakhstan and the socialite Goga Ashk had been involved in the sale of the Duke's home to Kazakh oil billionaire Timur Kulibayev. There was also criticism last week when a MP lobbied MP Mark Field this week to help to boost UK exports to oil-rich Azerbaijan, a country with a questionable human rights record.

Now US lawyers hope to use a legal dispute between Epstein and Brad Edwards, a Florida attorney, to insist that Epstein reveal the prince. Epstein will be questioned on allegations he procured sexual favours from minors for friends and forced to answer allegations about girls. Many of the most damaging recent headlines about the Duke of York have centred around a photograph of him with his ex-wife who was abused by Epstein.

Jack Scarola, one of the lawyers close to the case, said: "We are in the process of scheduling a further deposition of Mr Epstein and him regarding the details of his child abuse, including all circumstances in which he may have been involved in procuring sexual favours from profile friends."

Asked whether the duke was with Epstein when minors were present, he said: "The details of that relationship will be a subject of testimony is taken." The FBI is said to be ready to reopen its criminal investigation into Epstein, convicted in 2008 for soliciting a number of women are challenging a plea bargain deal which allowed the billionaire to avoid trial. Epstein, 58, was sentenced to prison for admitting two sex offences.

None of this will help Prince Andrew's attempts to damp down coverage questioning his judgement and his choice of associates as commercial envoy for the UK.

Additional reporting by Andrew McCorkell, Emily Dugan and Matt Chorley



*Prince Andrew's
Epstein, Goga Ashk
York, his ex-wife*

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