

Politics

WH infighting spills into open

Trump 'ousts' Priebus, Kelly new chief of staff

WASHINGTON, July 29, (AFP): US President Donald Trump ousted his beleaguered chief of staff Reince Priebus on Friday, replacing him with Homeland Security Secretary and former general **John Kelly** after vicious White House infighting spilled into the open.

Only hours after a humiliating defeat on health care reform had underlined his tenuous control over his party in Congress, Trump announced a second shake-up of his inner circle in barely a week.

Since entering the White House six months ago, Trump has parted company with his national security advisor, deputy national security advisor, FBI director, press secretary, communications director, acting attorney general, deputy chief of staff and now chief of staff, a turnover of top officials that is unparalleled in US political history.



Kelly

Priebus has been under fire for months, seeing one White House ally after another resign or leave, culminating in the departure of press secretary Sean Spicer a week ago. His exit appeared inevitable when Trump did not intervene as his new communications director Anthony Scaramucci publicly described Priebus as a "paranoid schizophrenic" in a foul-mouthed tirade that also saw him savage another top Trump aide.

Trump announced the switch on Twitter as he landed in Washington after a day trip, on which he was accompanied by both Priebus and Scaramucci.

"I am pleased to inform you that I have just named General/Secretary John F Kelly as White House Chief of Staff," Trump tweeted.

"He is a Great American... and a Great Leader. John has also done a spectacular job at Homeland Security. He has been a true star of my Administration."

Force

As the tweet began to reverberate around Washington, Priebus exited Air Force One into the pouring rain and loaded into a black suburban with senior White House aides Steven Miller and Dan Scavino.

Moments later, Miller and Scavino got out and entered another van. Priebus's vehicle then left the presidential motorcade.

White House spokeswoman Sarah Huckabee Sanders said discussions about Priebus's departure had been taking place for weeks.

Priebus later said he resigned on Thursday, but referring to his departure admitted that he and Trump "talked all the time about this subject."

Kelly will be sworn in to his new post Monday. His Department of Homeland Security is responsible for enforcing border security and has taken a tough line on immigrants inside the United States.

The move likely signals a greater focus on law and order issues and will put further strain on relations between Trump and the Republican establishment.

Both Priebus and Spicer were part of the Republican National Committee, and the bridge that linked the party to Trump.

"I think we've still got a good relationship, we're going to continue working with the party," said Sanders, trying to discount notions of a rift.

The announcement of Priebus's departure came after three Republican senators defied White House pressure to vote against health care reforms, which experts predicted would have left millions more Americans without coverage.

The party rebellion -- led by Senators Susan Collins, Lisa Murkowski and John McCain -- is a deeply ominous sign for Trump, whose political brand is defined by his dealmaking acumen and a take-no-prisoners approach to politics.

There are growing signs that Trump's threats against skeptical Republicans are losing potency, when Republicans not only killed efforts to dismantle Obamacare, but joined Democrats in supporting a new sanctions regime against Russia.

The sanctions bill -- which also includes measures targeting North Korea and Iran -- is designed to restrict Trump's ability to lift punitive measures on Moscow.

Trump now faces a choice between swallowing a bill he deeply opposed and refusing to do so -- a move that would intensify suspicions about his attitude to Russia and likely bring a humiliating veto override.

The grim news from Congress came as an outburst from Scaramucci highlighted divisions within the Trump administration.

In an eye-watering exchange with a New Yorker reporter published late Thursday, Scaramucci described Priebus as a "paranoid schizophrenic" and chief White House strategist Steve Bannon as trying to build his own brand off Trump.

Vowing

Scaramucci, a millionaire New York financier who is going through a divorce, arrived at the White House vowing to serve Trump's interest and right a badly faltering administration.

He did not apologize for the tirade, but said he would try to clean up his language in the future.

"I sometimes use colorful language. I will refrain in this arena but not give up the passionate fight for @realDonaldTrump's agenda," he tweeted.

Meanwhile, John Kelly, US President Donald Trump's new chief of staff, is a retired Marine Corps general who had been serving as secretary of the immense Department of Homeland Security after 45 years in uniform.

Kelly, 67, has a reputation for straight talk and will need to bring all of his toughness and organizational talent to bear in his new job as he seeks to right a White House which has frequently given the appearance of being in disarray.

Trump, in a series of tweets announcing that he had named Kelly to replace Reince Priebus as chief of staff, described him as a "Great American and a Great Leader."

Kelly will go from leading the fight against Islamic extremists and illegal immigration to running a White House which has been plagued by political intrigue and under a cloud because of allegations of election collusion with Russia.

Kelly is one of a number of former generals chosen by Trump for high-ranking positions in his administration.

Kelly capped his military career as head of the US Southern Command, an assignment that immersed him in border security issues, migrant flows and counter-drug operations in the Caribbean and Central and South America.

That experience prepared him well to take charge of the Department of Homeland Security, a sprawling bureaucracy responsible for border protection and internal security.



The Capitol is seen during a heavy rain in Washington, on July 28. The White House and the Capitol sit two miles apart, but this week, they might as well have been two worlds away. Republicans labored over healthcare while White House officials labored to save their jobs amid a public -- and sometimes shockingly

vulgar -- feud between senior staff. (Inset): Tourists walk through heavy rain on the grounds of the US Capitol building, in Washington, DC.

Heavy rain was forecasted and flash flood warnings were issued for certain areas. (AP/AFP)

Policy

Moscow orders US to cut diplomats

Trump to sign Russia sanctions

WASHINGTON/MOSCOW, July 29, (Agencies): US President Donald Trump will sign legislation that imposes sanctions on Russia, the White House said on Friday, after Moscow ordered the United States to cut hundreds of diplomatic staff and said it would seize two US diplomatic properties in retaliation for the bill.

The US Senate had voted almost unanimously on Thursday to slap new sanctions on Russia, forcing Trump to choose between a tough position on Moscow and effectively dashing his stated hopes for warmer ties with the country or to veto the bill amid investigations in possible collusion between his campaign and Russia.

By signing the bill into law, Trump can not ease the sanctions against Russia unless he seeks congressional approval.

Moscow's retaliation, announced by the Foreign Ministry on Friday, had echoes of the Cold War. If confirmed that Russia's move would affect hundreds of staff at the US embassy, it would far outweigh the Obama administration's expulsion of 35 Russians in December.

The legislation was in part a response to conclusions by US intelligence agencies that Russia meddled in the 2016 US presidential election, and to further punish Russia for its annexation of Crimea in 2014.

Late on Friday, the White House issued a statement saying Trump would sign the bill after reviewing the final version. The statement made no reference to Russia's retaliatory measures.

Russia had been threatening retaliation for weeks. Its response suggests it has set aside initial hopes of better ties with Washington under Trump, something the US leader, before he was elected, had said he wanted to achieve.

Relations were already languishing at a post-Cold War low because of the allegations that Russian cyber interference in the election was intended to boost Trump's chances, something

Moscow flatly denies. Trump has denied any collusion between his campaign and Russian officials.

The Russian Foreign Ministry complained of growing anti-Russian feeling in the United States, accusing "well-known circles" of seeking "open confrontation".

President Vladimir Putin had warned on Thursday that Russia would have to retaliate against what he called boorish US behaviour. Putin's spokesman, Dmitry Peskov, told reporters on Friday that the Senate vote was the last straw.

Russian foreign minister Sergei Lavrov told US Secretary of State Rex Tillerson by telephone that Russia was ready to normalise relations with the United States and to cooperate on major global issues.

Lavrov and Tillerson "agreed to maintain contact on a range of bilateral issues", the Russian Foreign Ministry said.

Diplomatic

The ministry said the United States had until Sept 1 to reduce its diplomatic staff in Russia to 455 people, the number of Russian diplomats left in the United States after Washington expelled 35 Russians in December.

It was not immediately clear how many US diplomats and other workers would be forced to leave either the country or their posts, but the Interfax news agency cited an informed source as saying "hundreds" of people would be affected.

A diplomatic source told Reuters that it would be for the United States to decide which posts to cut, whether occupied by US or Russian nationals.

An official at the US Embassy, who declined to be named because they were not allowed to speak to the media, said the Embassy employed around 1,100 diplomatic and support staff in Russia, including Russian and US citizens.

Earlier, US Ambassador John Tefft "expressed his strong disappointment and protest" at the development, a

spokesperson at the embassy in Moscow told AFP.

The spokesperson declined to comment on the current number of US diplomats and staff in Russia, but Russian wires cited "informed sources" saying hundreds of people would have to leave.

The punishment announced by Moscow closely resembled punitive measures announced by then president Barack Obama in December. That was over an alleged Kremlin hacking and influence campaign to sway the 2016 US elections in favour of Trump.

Obama ordered out 35 Russian diplomats and closed down two embassy summer houses that Washington said were being used by Moscow to spy on the US. At the time, Putin made the surprise choice not to respond to the US move, saying that he was waiting to see how Trump handled the situation once he came to power.

Trump repeatedly insisted during his election campaign that he wanted to improve ties with Russia, sparking hope in the Kremlin for an improvement.

Moscow is already the subject of tough US sanctions over its annexation of Crimea from Ukraine and support for a bloody insurgency in the country.

But allegations from the US intelligence community that Putin interfered in the US elections to get Trump elected have made any concessions to Trump politically toxic.

The White House had opposed the new sanctions package that curbs Trump's ability to lift the punishment, but the near-total support in the US Senate and House put him in a major bind.

Even if Trump had decided to veto the bill, Congress could likely have mustered enough votes to override him.

Despite tensions over alleged Russian interference into the US election, Moscow and Washington have worked closer together on Syria.

The two countries thrashed out a ceasefire in the south of the war-torn nation despite being on opposing sides of the conflict.



US Supreme Court Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg talks about her tote bag, at the annual Utah State Bar convention in Sun Valley, Idaho, on July 28. Ginsburg spoke about the evolution of the women's rights movement, what it's like to be interrupted on the bench and life as a pop culture icon during a presentation to a group of lawyers and judges. (AP)



King Abdullah



Quackenbush

America

Trump speaks with Jordan's king: US President Donald Trump spoke by phone with Jordan's **King Abdullah** on Friday to discuss regional events of the past two weeks and both leaders said they were "encouraged by the efforts taken to de-escalate tensions and by the progress that has been made," the White House said in a statement.

King Abdullah demanded on Thursday that Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu put on trial an embassy security guard who shot dead two Jordanians on Sunday, and said relations between the neighboring states were at risk.

Trump also "emphasized Jordan's important role in regional security," the White House statement said. (RTRS)

9/11 museum draws 10m visitors:

New York's museum dedicated to the Al-Qaeda attacks of Sept 11, 2001 has drawn more than 10 million visitors in just over three years, staff said Friday.

The museum, which opened on the World Trade Center site in May 2014, averages 9,000 visitors a day, the National Sept 11 Memorial and Museum announced.

The accompanying memorial in an outdoor public plaza has been visited by more than 33 million people since opening in September 2011, it added.

"Reaching this monumental milestone demonstrates the 9/11 Memorial Museum's commitment to providing an educational and meaningful experience for thousands of people every day," said board chairman and former New York mayor Michael Bloomberg.

Americans from all 50 US states have visited, together with people from more than 160 countries -- primarily Britain, Germany, Canada, France, the Netherlands, Spain and Australia.

The memorial, which consists of two reflecting pools in the footprints of the original Twin Towers, and the museum honor the 2,983 people who were killed in the 2001 attacks and the Feb 26, 1993 World Trade Center bombing.

More than 2,750 people were killed in 2001 when two passenger jets destroyed the Twin Towers, the symbol of New York's financial wealth and confidence. The remains of only 1,640 people have been identified. (AFP)

Case vs psychologists stays: A federal judge ruled Friday that a jury should decide whether two psychologists who helped design the CIA's harsh interrogation methods used in the war on terror should be held accountable for the suffering that at least one detainee suffered under the program.

US District Judge Justin Quackenbush

refused to immediately rule in favor of the American Civil Liberties Union, which brought the lawsuit on the behalf of three former detainees and argued the psychologists were the architects of what became the CIA's torture program following the Sept 11 attacks. The men were subjected to physical assaults and sleep deprivation, forced to stand for days in diapers with their arms chained overhead, doused with icy water and stuffed into boxes.

Quackenbush said the evidence warrants a trial on the issues. The trial is set for Sept

5.

The case will move forward for the representatives of the estate of Gul Rahman, who was "starved, sleepless and freezing" before he died of hypothermia while chained in a prison cell following extended interrogation.

Quackenbush, however, said he has reservations regarding the evidence as it applies to the two living detainees: Suleiman Abdullah Salim and Mohamed Ahmed Ben Soud.

The judge said he would review the case and issue a written ruling regarding his position on the other two men. He also granted



Prime Minister Justin Trudeau speaks with members of the media on the waterfront during a visit to Kenora, Ontario, on July 28. (AP)

the ACLU's request to use at trial the Senate Intelligence Committee Study on the CIA Detention and Interrogation Program, completed in 2012 and made public in 2014.

Quackenbush closed the hearing by urging the lawyers to try to settle the case and avoid a costly trial. He noted that the contract psychologists James Mitchell and John Jessen had with the government indemnified them for any judgments. The psychologists' lawyers being paid out of a pot of money provided by taxpayers and established in an indemnity contract.

Their lawyers argued that the psychologists should not be punished for the CIA's actions.

When the CIA sought help with interrogating the agency's first prisoner, Abu Zubaydah, a high-value detainee, Mitchell provided methods, lawyer Brian Paszarnik told the judge. Simply providing a memo does not make them guilty of aiding and abetting torture, he argued.

Didn't Mitchell in his book "describe himself as the architect of the enhanced interrogation program?" Quackenbush asked. "What does it mean to be an architect?" Paszarnik responded. The psychologist prepared a 2002 memo for the CIA, but had no control over what happened next, he said.

The CIA set up the prisons, chose the detainees, decided who conducted the interrogations and who was present, Paszarnik said. The psychologists designed the program for a high value detainee and didn't know the government would use it on middle value and other detainees, he said.

"Everything was the absolute direct control of the US government through the CIA," another of the psychologists' lawyers, Jim Smith, said. (AP)