

World News Roundup

Probe

Kushner loses access

Manafort pleads not guilty, faces Sept trial

WASHINGTON, Feb 28, (Agencies): US President Donald Trump's former campaign manager **Paul Manafort** pleaded not guilty on Wednesday to a new indictment brought against him in the investigation into alleged Russian meddling in the 2016 election and will face trial in September.

Special Counsel Robert Mueller, who is running the Russia probe, is dialing up the legal pressure on Manafort, who has opted not to cooperate with investigators.

Manafort's former business partner Rick Gates, another Trump ex-campaign official, decided last week to cooperate with the investigation.

Manafort is facing two separate indictments on an array of charges, including conspiracy to launder money, filing false tax returns, bank fraud, and failing to register as a foreign agent despite lobbying in the United States for the pro-Kremlin Ukrainian government of former President Viktor Yanukovich.

Manafort's trial is expected to last for several weeks, and could stretch on through November's midterm elections — making headlines at a time when Republicans are fighting to maintain their majority in the US House of Representatives and Senate.



Manafort

US District Court Judge Amy Berman Jackson set the trial to start Sept 17 in Washington, D.C.

Prosecutors allege that Manafort, with Gates' assistance, laundered more than \$30 million and duped banks into lending money. They say the pair used funds from secret offshore accounts to enjoy a life of luxury.

None of the charges against the pair make reference to alleged Russian interference in the 2016 election nor accusations of collusion between Moscow and Trump's campaign.

Mueller, appointed by the Department of Justice last year to investigate Russia's role in the election and possible collusion by the Trump campaign, has a broad mandate that allows him to look into any wrongdoing he uncovers in the probe.

Meanwhile, Trump's son-in-law and senior aide Jared Kushner has lost his top-level security clearance, sources familiar with the matter said Tuesday, a decision with potentially profound implications for the US administration.

Two sources, who could not speak on the record because the status of security clearances is classified, confirmed US media reports that the 37-year-old White House aide will no longer be able to access America's most closely guarded secrets.

The White House — up to and including the president himself — refused to comment on the record, but officials insisted that the decision would not impact Kushner's role.

Still, Kushner's loss of access to "Top Secret/SCI (Sensitive Compartmented Information)" data casts serious doubt on his status as a powerbroker inside the White House and his ability to negotiate Middle East peace.

Kushner had been an integral part of Trump's election campaign and, among White House advisors, is seen as something like a first among equals.

The soft-spoken aide is married to the president's daughter Ivanka and has been a leading figure in efforts to reach a peace deal between Israelis and Palestinians.

He has also been a strong proponent of Washington's intensified support for the government of embattled Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu.

Politico and CNN first reported that his clearance may have been rescinded late last week.

The decision comes just days before Netanyahu visits the White House.

Former US negotiator Aaron David Miller said Kushner now risks losing "credibility" with interlocutors in the Middle East.

Aide

Hope Hicks, a close aide to President Trump, declined to answer questions about the administration on Tuesday from members of the US House of Representatives Intelligence Committee investigating Russia and the 2016 US election, lawmakers said.

Hicks, the White House communications director, was Trump's spokeswoman during the 2016 election campaign.

The president seemed to defend her shortly before her House appearance, taking to Twitter early on Tuesday to say: "WITCH HUNT," a phrase he has used in the past to describe the Russia investigations.

Trump renewed his attacks on his attorney general Wednesday, describing as "disgraceful" his handling of Republican complaints that the FBI abused its surveillance power during the early stages of the Russia probe.

Jeff Sessions said Tuesday that the Justice Department's inspector general will evaluate whether prosecutors and agents wrongly obtained a warrant to monitor the communications of a Trump associate. This is in response to pressure from congressional Republicans who, like Trump, have been fuming about what they believe to be bias within the FBI.

But to Trump, who has spent the past year berating his attorney general, that step apparently did not go far enough.

Meanwhile, President Trump has not yet ordered his spy chiefs to retaliate against Russian interference in US elections, the head of the National Security Agency told lawmakers Tuesday.

"We have not opted to engage in some of the same behaviors we are seeing," said Admiral Michael Rogers, who heads both the NSA — the leading US electronic eavesdropping agency — and the new US Cyber Command, the military body charged with online combat.

Asked in a Senate Intelligence Committee hearing if he had received orders from Trump to fight back against Moscow's meddling, Rogers said: "No, I have not." Rogers denied claims that the agency is doing nothing to push back against Russian hacking, theft of US cyber secrets and other activities.

However, he acknowledged: "They have not paid a price that is sufficient to change their behavior."

Rogers echoed the comments he and five other US intelligence chiefs made two weeks ago at the House Intelligence Committee, where all said they had not been ordered by Trump to counter the Russians.

US intelligence had evidence that voter registration systems or websites in seven states — Alaska, Arizona, California, Florida, Illinois, Texas and Wisconsin — were compromised by Russian-backed operatives before the 2016 election but never told the states, NBC News reported on Tuesday.



Johnny C. Taylor Jr (left), pauses as he speaks as President Donald Trump and Education Secretary Betsy DeVos (stand right), during an event in the Roosevelt Room of the White House in Washington, on Feb 27, to announce Taylor as chairman of the president's board of advisors on Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCU). (AP)

Immigration

Over 150 arrested in Calif raids

Judge rejects challenge to Trump's 'wall'

LOS ANGELES, Feb 28, (Agencies): An American judge whose impartiality was questioned by Donald Trump because of his Hispanic origins on Tuesday rejected a legal challenge to the president's planned wall on the Mexican border.

The state of California and various environmental group had argued that waivers to environmental regulations, which were granted so construction of border wall prototypes and the replacement of existing border fencing could proceed, exceeded authority granted by Congress, were unconstitutional, or both.

Gonzalo Curiel ruled in favor of the US government, but also made clear that the decision was separate from the underlying issue of whether or not the wall — the cost of which could run into the tens of billions of dollars — should be built.

"Court is aware that the subject of these lawsuits, border barriers, is currently the subject of heated political debate in and between the United States and the Republic of Mexico as to the need, efficacy and the source of funding for such barriers," he wrote.

"In its review of this case, the Court cannot and does not consider whether underlying decisions to construct the border barriers are politically wise or prudent."

Trump took to Twitter to hail the ruling, terming it a "big legal win."

"Now this important project can go forward!" he tweeted.

During his 2016 campaign for the presidency, Trump took aim at Curiel's Mexican heritage, saying it should disqualify him from ruling on a fraud lawsuit involving the now-defunct Trump University.

"He's a Mexican," Trump said of Curiel, who was born and raised in the United States. "We're building a wall between here and Mexico."

"I have a Mexican judge. He's of Mexican heritage. He should have recused himself, not only for that, for other things," Trump said.

Building a wall on the border with Mexico was one of Trump's main campaign promises.

But while the president said that Mexico would pay for its construction, it seems increasingly likely that American taxpayers will be footing the bill.

Proposed

Meanwhile, Trump said on Wednesday that the parts of a proposed border wall he says California wants will not be built until the entire southern wall is approved, although state officials have said they are strongly opposed to the plan.

"I have decided that sections of the Wall that California wants built NOW will not be built until the whole Wall is approved," Trump said in a tweet.

A US-Mexico border wall, a key item promised by Trump to his political base of supporters, has become a sticking point in talks to keep alive a federal program protecting young people brought to the United States illegally as children from deportation.

In related news, federal immigration agents arrested more than 150 people in California in the days after Oakland's mayor gave early warning of the raids, it was announced Tuesday.

US Immigration and Customs Enforcement officials announced that agents made the arrests in a three-day sweep starting Sunday that covered cities from Sacramento in the north to

Stockton in the Central Valley. About half of those arrested for being in the country illegally had criminal convictions, the agency said.

On Saturday, Oakland Mayor Libby Schaaf warned residents that "credible sources" had told her a sweep was imminent, calling it her "duty and moral obligation" to warn families.

The warning "was meant to give all residents time to learn their rights and know their legal options," she said in a statement Tuesday night reported in the San Francisco Chronicle.

California lawmakers from Gov. Jerry Brown down to local mayors have resisted a Trump administration immigration crackdown that they contend is arbitrarily hauling in otherwise law-abiding people and splitting up families that include US-born children.

Acting ICE Director Thomas Homan lambasted Schaaf and her city in a statement that suggested the sweep targeted so-called "sanctuary cities" that limit cooperation between ICE and local law enforcement.

"Sanctuary jurisdictions like San Francisco and Oakland shield dangerous criminal aliens from federal law enforcement at the expense of public safety," Homan said. "Because these jurisdictions prevent ICE from arresting criminal aliens in the secure confines of a jail, they also force ICE officers to make more arrests out in the community, which poses increased risks for law enforcement and the public."

Defenders of sanctuary city practices say they actually improve public safety by promoting trust among law enforcement and immigrant communities and reserving scarce police resources for other, more urgent crime-fighting needs.



A picture of Boris Nemtsov is seen where the Washington, DC city council officially renamed a street in front of the Russian embassy in honor of the slain critic of Russian President Vladimir Putin in Washington, DC on Feb 27. (AFP)



Lesko



Boyd

America

Trump urges prison reform: The White House on Tuesday urged US lawmakers to move ahead with legislation to help prisoners prepare for life after release, but stopped short of calling for broader reforms such as changing mandatory minimum sentences for drug crimes.

Arguing that a wider overhaul lacks congressional support, the Trump administration recommended more prison work programs, more partnerships with businesses to help ex-prisoners find jobs and more funding for programs to reduce state prison recidivism.

No proposal was offered on sentencing reform — an issue that divides the Republican Party between "law and order" hardliners and moderates. That leaves Republican President Donald Trump stranded in the middle and, as is the case on other issues such as gun control and immigration, not firmly in either camp. (RTRS)

Lesko wins primary: A former Arizona state senator won a special Republican primary on Tuesday, sending her into a general election for a seat vacated by a former US representative who resigned amid sexual misconduct allegations.

Debbie Lesko won the party's nomination for the Phoenix-area House of Representatives seat with 36 percent of the vote, well ahead of 11 other candidates, according to the voting tallies on the Arizona Secretary of State website.

"This was a team effort and I am so thankful, I am so blessed," Lesko told an enthusiastic crowd, including former Arizona governor Jan Brewer, who stood by her side. "Wow, this is sweet."

Former state senator Steve Montenegro and former state representative Phil Lovas, who were also front-runners, conceded on Tuesday night. (RTRS)

US bill holds websites liable: US lawmakers on Tuesday passed legislation aimed at holding website owners liable for human trafficking, but critics say it could undermine free speech on the internet.

The bill passed by a large majority in the House of Representatives, but must be reconciled with Senate legislation and approved by that body before heading to the president's desk to be signed.

US assistant attorney general **Stephen Boyd** sent a letter to the House on Tuesday supporting the intent of the law, but warn-

ing that part of it might violate the US Constitution.

"We applaud House and Senate legislative efforts to address the use of websites to facilitate sex trafficking and to protect and restore victims who were sold for sex online," Boyd said in the letter. (AFP)

Brawl over Trump Panama hotel:

Rival teams of security guards grappled in a stairwell Tuesday as a business dispute for control over the Trump luxury hotel in Panama mounted.

Cellphone video of the confrontation obtained by The Associated Press showed a security official working for President Donald Trump's family hotel business screaming "Out!" in Spanish as condo owners attempted to enter a room filled with computer equipment.

Men in suits wrestled in a stairway before a large man aligned with the Trump Hotel team slapped the phone out of the hand of the person recording the confrontation.

Panama City police responded to calls about the scuffle, which took place in an area belonging to a condo association that operates independently of the hotel but shares the building. One of Trump's guards was escorted by police off the property after the incident, though not arrested, according to officers on the scene. (AP)

DC names plaza after Nemtsov:

Three years after prominent Vladimir Putin critic Boris Nemtsov was assassinated in Moscow, the liberal politician's supporters gathered on Tuesday to name a plaza outside Russia's Washington embassy in his honor.

In the years since opposition champion Nemtsov was shot dead on a bridge over the walls of the Kremlin, US politics has been poisoned by debate over Moscow's alleged covert backing for President Donald Trump's rise to power. (AFP)

Read
ARAB TIMES
PDF

ARAB TIMES
BID TO BLOCK IRAN PERMANENCY IN SYRIA

www.arabtimesonline.com

arabtimeskuwait

arabtimeskuwait

arabtimeskuwait