

ALLEGED RUSSIAN MEDDLING IN US 2020 ELECTION

‘Hoax number 7!’

Trump fumes at intel report; Sanders slams Moscow after ‘Russian help’ reports

AFP, WASHINGTON

Bernie Sanders on Friday warned Russia not to meddle in the Democratic presidential race, as Donald Trump angrily dismissed assertions that Moscow was again seeking to boost his election chances.

Trump has come under fresh fire for removing US intelligence chief Joseph Maguire, replacing him with a loyal partisan with no direct experience in the field, days after Maguire’s staff told lawmakers that Russia was again interfering in a US election to support Trump.

Sanders, a self-described socialist who is leading the race for the Democratic nomination to challenge Trump in November, told reporters that US officials briefed him “about a month ago” of efforts to interfere in the 2020 race.

“Unlike Donald Trump, I do not consider (Russian President) Vladimir Putin a good friend. He is an autocratic thug who is attempting to destroy democracy and crush dissent in Russia,” Sanders said in a statement.

His comments came moments after The Washington Post reported that US intelligence told Sanders that Russia was seeking to help his campaign.

An exhaustive report by former FBI chief Robert Mueller found that Russia backed Trump’s 2016 campaign, including by manipulating social media, but did not find that the campaign colluded with Moscow.

“Another misinformation campaign is being launched by Democrats in Congress saying that Russia prefers me to any of the Do Nothing Democrat candidates who still have been unable to, after two weeks, count their votes in Iowa,” Trump wrote on Twitter.

“Hoax number 7!”



Medical workers wearing protective gear carry a patient infected with the COVID-19 coronavirus at a hospital in Chuncheon, yesterday.

PHOTO: AFP

Xi writes thank you note to Bill Gates for virus pledge

Chinese President Xi Jinping has written a letter expressing thanks to the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation for the organisation’s “generosity” and support tackling a deadly virus epidemic, state media said yesterday. Earlier this month the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation committed up to \$100 million for the global response to the outbreak. “I deeply appreciate the act of generosity of the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation and your letter of solidarity to the Chinese people at such an important moment,” Xi wrote in the letter, according to official news agency Xinhua. The foundation said it would direct \$20 million to organizations like the World Health Organization, the US Centers for Disease Control and Protection, the National Health Commission of China and the Chinese Center for Disease Control and Prevention.

UK police charge homeless man with mosque stabbing

London police yesterday charged a 29-year-old homeless man with causing grievous bodily harm and possessing an illegal knife he used to stab a mosque leader during prayers. Suspect Daniel Horton stabbed London Central Mosque’s muazzin Raafat Maglad during daily prayers on Thursday. London police quickly ruled out a terror motive. Maglad was treated at a London hospital and returned to the mosque for Friday’s evening service with his arm wrapped in a sling. “I forgive him. I feel very sorry for him,” Maglad told reporters on Friday. “To me, as a Muslim, I don’t need to put any hatred in my heart.” Several regulars at the Regent’s Park area mosque in northwest London said they had seen Horton attend a few services in the past year. Horton will appear at Westminster Magistrates’ Court for a preliminary hearing later yesterday.



Harry and Meghan to stop using ‘Sussex Royal’ brand

Prince Harry and his wife Meghan will no longer use the “Sussex Royal” label when they begin their new life outside the royal inner circle in the spring, their spokeswoman said Friday. The couple will formally step down as senior royals from March 31 and will no longer carry out duties on behalf of Queen Elizabeth II after that date. Harry, the 35-year-old second son of the heir apparent Prince Charles, will remain sixth in line to the throne, with no change in the line of succession. Harry will also keep his military ranks of major, lieutenant commander and squadron leader in the army, navy and air force, the spokeswoman announced. He and Meghan, 38, will continue to be known as the Duke and Duchess of Sussex.

SOURCE: AFP

WEEK-LONG ‘REDUCTION IN VIOLENCE’ IN AFGHANISTAN

Hopes high as truce begins

AFP, Kabul

A week-long, partial truce appeared to be largely holding across Afghanistan yesterday, with jubilant civilians celebrating in the streets to mark a potentially historic turning point in the war, even as isolated attacks threatened to undermine the process.

The Taliban, US and Afghan forces have all agreed to a so-called “reduction in violence” marking only the second lull in fighting since 2001.

“It is the first morning that I go out without the fear of being killed by a bomb or suicide bomber. I hope it continues forever,” Kabul taxi driver Habib Ullah said, while in other parts of the country people danced in the streets after the truce kicked in at midnight.

However in Balkh province in the north, Taliban fighters attacked a district headquarters near the provincial capital of Mazar-i-Sharif, killing two Afghan soldiers, a local official told AFP. There were also reports of a separate incident in central Uruzgan province.

General Scott Miller, who leads US and Nato forces in Afghanistan, did not directly address those incidents, but stressed that Western forces would continually monitor the situation.

“We’ve stopped our offensive



operations as part of our obligations,” Miller told reporters.

In the event of any breaches of the truce, Miller said the US would communicate with the Taliban through various channels set up in Doha, where the insurgents have a political office.

“As more days go on we will have a better understanding of what trends are,” Miller said.

The partial truce is expected to set the conditions for Washington and the insurgents to sign a deal in Doha on February 29 that could, ultimately, pull US troops out after more than 18 years and launch war-weary Afghanistan into an uncertain future.

A successful week would show the Taliban can control their forces and demonstrate good faith ahead of any signing.

Meanwhile, the UN’s Afghanistan mission yesterday said that more than 10,000 people had been killed or wounded in the war in 2019 alone.

Washington has been in talks with the Taliban for more than a year to secure a deal which would see it initially reduce troop levels from approximately 12-13,000 to an expected total of about 8,600.

In return, the Taliban would give security guarantees and a promise to hold peace talks with the government in Kabul.

TERROR FINANCING

Global watchdog puts Iran back on blacklist

Says Pakistan not doing enough, gives it June deadline to change course

AFP, Paris

A multinational financial crimes watchdog on Friday faulted Iran for not doing enough to counter a “terrorist financing risk” and announced the reinstatement of punitive measures against the country.

In a statement issued after a meeting in Paris, the Financial Action Task Force (FATF) said it was rescinding a suspension of the measures, granted in 2016, to give Tehran time to work on reforms.

The FATF “fully lifts the suspension of counter-measures” it said, citing Iran’s failure to enact the UN’s 2001 Palermo Convention against organised crime and the Terrorist Financing Convention.

It also urged FATF member states and “all jurisdictions to apply effective counter-measures”.

Iran is alone with North Korea on an FATF blacklist, which severely restricts their access to loans and international aid. The agency has 37 nations and two regional organisations as members.

The watchdog also raised the pressure on Pakistan, threatening to put it on its blacklist unless the government completes an anti-terror financing action plan by June.

“Otherwise, should significant and sustainable progress especially in prosecuting and penalising terrorism financing not be made... the FATF will take action,” the statement said.

This could include calling on its members to advise their financial institutions “to give special attention to business relations and transactions with Pakistan,” a measure that could in effect limit its access to the global banking system.

Regarding North Korea, the FATF expressed “serious concerns with the threat posed by the DPRK’s illicit activities related to the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction.”

Terrorists are ‘generally Muslims’: Ryanair CEO

Muslim men should be profiled at airports as terrorists will “generally be of a Muslim persuasion”, Ryanair CEO Michael O’Leary said in an interview published yesterday, sparking accusations of racism. “Who are the bombers?” the budget airline’s controversial chief executive said while discussing airport security in the interview with the Times newspaper. “They are going to be single males travelling on their own... If you are travelling with a family of kids, on you go; the chances you are going to blow them all up is zero.” “You can’t say stuff, because it’s racism, but it will generally be males of a Muslim persuasion. Thirty years ago it was the Irish.” The Ryanair CEO is known for his controversial views and has floated proposals to charge fliers to use the toilet during Ryanair flights and a “fat tax” on obese passengers.

UK to start issuing post-Brexit blue passports

Britain will issue blue passports next month for the first time in almost three decades following its departure from the European Union, the government said yesterday. The new blue cover passports will be issued and delivered early next month, said the interior ministry, replacing the burgundy passports that were introduced in 1988. The colour change is a return to the original appearance of the British passport, with the colour first used in 1921.



Dalai Lama marks 80 years as Tibet’s spiritual leader

The Dalai Lama yesterday marked the 80th anniversary of his enthronement as the spiritual leader of Tibet, a position held almost entirely in exile and as a target of constant vilification by the Chinese state. Hundreds of miles from Lhasa’s imposing 1,000-room Potala Palace, the sandal-wearing monk now ministers to his fellow Tibetan exiles from Dharamsala in the foothills of the Indian Himalaya. Though he remains the universally recognised face of the movement for Tibetan autonomy, Beijing accuses the 84-year-old of wanting to split China, and regularly refers to him as a “wolf in a monk’s robe”. His office said there would be no commemoration of the anniversary.

SOURCE: AFP



Thai students and supporters react as they protest against a court’s decision that dissolved the country’s second largest opposition Future Forward party, less than a year after an election to end direct military rule, at Thammasat University in Bangkok, Thailand, yesterday.

PHOTO: REUTERS

CORONAVIRUS OUTBREAK

Russia spreading alarm with disinformation: US

AFP, Washington

Thousands of Russian-linked social media accounts have launched a coordinated effort to spread alarm about the new coronavirus, disrupting global efforts to fight the epidemic, US officials say.

The disinformation campaign promotes unfounded conspiracy theories that the United States is behind the COVID-19 outbreak, in an apparent bid to damage the US image around the world by seizing on health concerns.

State Department officials tasked with combatting Russian disinformation told AFP that false personas are being used on Twitter, Facebook and Instagram to advance Russian talking points in multiple languages.

“Russia’s intent is to sow discord and undermine US institutions and alliances from within, including through covert and coercive malign influence campaigns,” said Philip Reeker, the acting Assistant Secretary of State for Europe and Eurasia.

“By spreading disinformation about coronavirus, Russian malign actors are once again choosing to threaten public safety by distracting from the global health response,” he said.

The claims that have been circulating in recent weeks include allegations that the virus is a US effort to “wage economic war on China,” that it is a biological weapon manufactured by the CIA or part of a Western-led effort “to push anti-China messages.”

Sanders riding high as Nevada votes

AFP, Las Vegas

From glitzy Las Vegas casinos to dusty desert crossroads, Nevada Democrats were set to vote yesterday for who should challenge President Donald Trump in November’s election, with leftist firebrand Bernie Sanders riding high in the saddle.

The western state, home to three million people, is the third contest in the race for the Democratic presidential nomination.

Nevada’s vote may serve to entrench Senator Sanders’s status as frontrunner before the deluge of “Super Tuesday” on March 3, when people in 14 states troop to the ballot box.

Or it could provide a much-needed boost for one of the moderate candidates desperate to halt his rise.

On the eve of the vote, Sanders was hit with published revelations from US officials that Russia -- which interfered in the 2016 US elections in a bid to boost Trump -- was actively trying to help his own presidential bid.

Sanders immediately rejected any help that might come from Vladimir Putin’s government or allies, instructing the Russian president to “stay out of American elections.”

The Democratic race is entering an urgent phase. Any momentum from results in Nevada, and then South Carolina which votes on February 29, could prove decisive, while poor showings are almost certain to close the door on some campaigns.

Of the eight contenders still seeking the Democratic presidential nomination, Sanders leads in polling in Nevada and nationally by about a dozen points over second-place Biden.

UN warns of Syria ‘bloodbath’

Fighting escalates; Erdogan urges Putin to restrain regime in Idlib

AGENCIES

The United Nations warned on Friday that escalating fighting in northwest Syria could end in a “bloodbath” as Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan phoned Russia’s leader to discuss the quickly deteriorating situation.

The Kremlin said Russian President Vladimir Putin and Erdogan agreed to intensify talks on Syria’s Idlib region to reduce tensions and implement a ceasefire.

Putin told Erdogan he was “seriously concerned” by the “aggressive actions” of rebels in Idlib.

“The necessity of unconditional respect for the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Syria was underlined,” the Kremlin statement said.

Erdogan told Putin the solution was to return to the Sochi agreement they signed in 2018, which allowed Turkey to establish military posts across Idlib designed to prevent a Syrian government assault. That deal has been increasingly set aside as Syrian forces advance steadily into the region.

“The president during the call stressed that the regime should be restrained in Idlib and that the humanitarian crisis must be stopped,” the Turkish presidency said in a

statement after the two leaders spoke.

Erdogan also asked his French and German counterparts to provide “concrete” support in ending the burgeoning humanitarian crisis in Syria’s Idlib region, Turkey’s presidency said. Erdogan said attacks in Idlib - where a Russia-backed Syrian government offensive has displaced nearly one million people and brought Ankara, Moscow and Damascus to the brink of confrontation - must be stopped.

Idlib is the final stronghold of rebels fighting Syrian President Bashar al-Assad’s government during a nine-year war that has killed hundreds of thousands of people and displaced millions.

Some 60 percent of the 900,000 people who have fled their homes but are trapped in a shrinking space are children, the UN’s office for humanitarian coordination said.

spokesman Jens Laerke told a Geneva news briefing. The “relentless violence” must stop before it degenerates into “what we fear may end in a bloodbath” for civilians, he said.

UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres said on Friday the “man-made humanitarian nightmare” in Syria’s Idlib province must end now, but he did not offer any specific plan for curbing the bloodshed in the final rebel holdout.

