



Trump reverses abortion policy

Bans funding for int'l health group
AFP, Washington

President Donald Trump on Monday signed a decree barring US federal funding for foreign NGOs that support abortion, relaunching a battle that has long divided Americans.

"The president, it's no secret, has made it very clear he's a pro-life president. He wants to stand up for all Americans, including the unborn," White House spokesman Sean Spicer said.

"The reinstatement of this policy is not just something that echoes that value, but respects taxpayer funding as well."

The restrictions prohibit foreign non-governmental organizations that receive US family planning assistance from using non-US funding to provide abortion services, information, counseling or referrals.

They are also barred from engaging in advocacy to promote abortion.

The move comes just two days after women led a massive protest march in Washington -- with satellite rallies across the country and around the world -- to defend their rights, including to abortion.

And it also comes a day after the 44th anniversary of Roe v. Wade, the landmark US Supreme Court decision that legalized abortion in 1973.

Trump's move deepened concern among already apprehensive US family planning and women's rights organizations.

"The world's most vulnerable women will suffer as a direct result of this policy, which undermines years of effort to improve women's health," said Planned Parenthood president Cecile Richards.



Gina Miller speaks outside the Supreme Court following the decision of a court ruling that Theresa May's government requires parliamentary approval to start the process of leaving the European Union, in Parliament Square, central London, Britain, yesterday.

'La La Land' leads Oscar nominations

REUTERS, Los Angeles

Romantic musical "La La Land" led the Oscar nominations yesterday with 14 nods, including the top prize of best picture and best actor nominations for its stars, Ryan Gosling and Emma Stone.

It will contend with sci-fi movie "Arrival" with eight nods; war movie "Hacksaw Ridge"; modern western "Hell or High Water"; and dramas "Manchester by the Sea," "Moonlight," "Hidden Figures," "Lion" and "Fences."

The 14 nominations of "La La Land" for the highest honors in the movie industry equaled the record held by 1997 blockbuster "Titanic" and the 1950 film "All About Eve."

In the best actor category, Gosling will compete with Casey Affleck, who plays a grieving father in "Manchester by the Sea"; "Fences" star Denzel Washington; British actor Andrew Garfield of "Hacksaw Ridge" and Viggo Mortensen's unorthodox dad in "Captain Fantastic."

In a key difference from 2106 and 2015, seven people of color were among the acting nominees, and four of the five best picture contenders told African-American or Indian stories.

They included supporting actor nominees Dev Patel for "Lion," and Mahershala Ali and Naomie Harris for "Moonlight," the tale of a young boy struggling with his sexual identity in an impoverished Miami neighborhood.

"Hidden Figures," about three black female mathematicians working on the U.S. space program in the 1960s, brought a supporting actress nod for Octavia Spencer.

US to stop China taking isles

Vows Trump's White House; Beijing urges Washington to act cautiously

REUTERS, Washington

The new US administration of President Donald Trump vowed on Monday the United States would prevent China from taking over territory in international waters in the South China Sea, something Chinese state media has warned would require Washington to "wage war."

The comments at a briefing from White House spokesman Sean Spicer signaled a sharp departure from years of cautious US handling of China's assertive pursuit of territorial claims in Asia, just days after Trump took office on Friday.

"The US is going to make sure that we protect our interests there," Spicer said when asked if Trump agreed with comments by his secretary of state nominee, Rex Tillerson. On Jan 11, Tillerson said China should not be allowed access to islands it has built in the contested South China Sea.

"It's a question of if those islands are in fact in international waters and not part of China proper, then yeah, we're going to make sure that we defend inter-

national territories from being taken over by one country," he said.

China responded yesterday, saying the United States was not a party to dispute in the South China Sea.

"We urge the United States to respect the facts, speak and act cautiously to avoid harming the peace and stability of the South China Sea,"



Chinese foreign ministry spokeswoman Hua Chunying told a regular news briefing in Beijing.

Tillerson's remarks at his Senate confirmation hearing prompted Chinese state media to say at the time that the United States would need to "wage war" to bar China's access to the islands where it has built military-length air strips and

installed weapons systems.

Tillerson was asked at the hearing whether he supported a more aggressive posture toward China and said: "We're going to have to send China a clear signal that, first, the island-building stops and, second, your access to those islands also is not going to be allowed."

The former Exxon Mobil Corp chairman and chief executive did not elaborate on what might be done to deny China access to the islands.

But analysts said his comments, like those of Spicer, suggested the possibility of US military action, or even a naval blockade. Such action would risk an armed confrontation with China, an increasingly formidable nuclear-armed military power. It is also the world's second-largest economy and the target of Trump accusations it is stealing American jobs.

Spicer declined to elaborate when asked how the United States could enforce such a move against China, except to say: "I think, as we develop further, we'll have more information on it."

Pompeo sworn in as new CIA director

Senate panel narrowly backs Tillerson for top diplomat

AFP, Washington

The US Senate on Monday confirmed Mike Pompeo as CIA director and advanced the nomination of Rex Tillerson to be secretary of state, taking key steps toward filling President Donald Trump's cabinet.

Pompeo, a Republican congressman on the House Intelligence Committee, becomes only the third member of Trump's cabinet to take his post, as the president's Republican Party has pushed hard to speed up confirmation of his nominees.

Secretary of Defense James Mattis and Homeland Security Secretary John Kelly were sworn in Friday, Inauguration Day.

The Republican-led Senate confirmed Pompeo, a 53-year-old US Army veteran, by a vote of 66 to 32, with significant support from Democrats.

"He will be an excellent CIA director," said House Speaker Paul Ryan, who tweeted his congratulations to his House colleague.

While Pompeo faced some Democratic pushback, many in the opposition party acknowledged his keen understanding of intelligence issues, especially the cyber threat facing the nation.

Pompeo "has committed to following the law regarding torture (and) promised to provide objective analysis of Iran's compliance with the nuclear agreement," said veteran Senator Dianne Feinstein.

Meanwhile, a Senate panel greenlighted Tillerson, the former ExxonMobil chief whose nomination has been a source of controversy in large part because of his lack of government or diplomatic experience. The move cleared the way for a confirmation vote by the full chamber.

The vote in the Senate Foreign Relations Committee was 11 to 10, along strict party lines, setting up a period of debate and subsequent vote on an as-yet-undetermined day in the Republican-controlled Senate.



Trump confuses translators

INDEPENDENT.CO.UK

French translators have had a tough time translating Donald Trump's speeches into the language of Molière.

Translator Bérengère Viennot believes the new US President is difficult to translate because "he seems not to know quite where he's going," she told the LA Review of Books.

The first step for a translator is to be able to "get into someone's mind," explained Viennot, but it's not always easy to understand the point Trump is trying to make.

"Trump's vocabulary is limited, his syntax is broken; he repeats the same phrases over and over, forcing the translator to follow suit," she said.

"It's as if he had thematic clouds in his head that he would pick from with no need of a logical thread to link them."

BOTCHED TERROR RAID IN PHILIPPINES

Duterte blames CIA

AFP, Manila

Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte said yesterday the US Central Intelligence Agency secretly orchestrated a botched raid targeting an alleged Islamic terrorist that left 44 Filipino policemen dead two years ago.

Police commandos killed Zulkifli Abdir, who was on the US government's list of "Most Wanted Terrorists", in the raid in remote farmland in the southern Philippines, where various Muslim separatist rebel groups and more hardline militants are based.

However Muslim gunmen ambushed the attacking police commandos and killed 44 of them in a day-long battle, with a Philippine Senate investigation blaming poor planning and coordination for the deaths.

The raid was carried out during the term of Duterte's predecessor Benigno Aquino. It derailed Aquino's efforts to forge a peace pact with the nation's main Muslim separatist group, the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF), to end a decades-long rebellion.

"It was an American adventure with the cooperation of some, and apparently with your blessing," Duterte said, referring to Aquino.

"Why was it kept under wraps? It was actually an operation of the CIA," Duterte made the allegations in a speech to widows and other relatives of the 44 policemen killed in the raid, after receiving them at the Malacanang presidential palace.

Duterte has during his seven months in office sought to loosen the Philippines' longtime alliance with the United States while forging closer ties with China and Russia.



US President Donald Trump calls departing reporters back into the room as United Brotherhood of Carpenters General President Doug McCarron (R) begins to compliment him on his inaugural address, during a roundtable meeting with labor leaders at the White House in Washington, US on Monday.

NEWS IN brief

Indian troops kill 3 militants in Kashmir

AFP, Srinagar
Police and troops killed three militants in two separate gunbattles in Indian-administered Kashmir yesterday, one of them near the de facto border with Pakistan, officers said.

Israel approves 2,500 WB settler homes

REUTERS, Jerusalem
Israel's Defence Ministry yesterday announced plans to build 2,500 more settlement homes in the West Bank, the second announcement of new construction in the occupied territory since President Donald Trump took office.

Everest's true height to be re-measured

AFP, New Delhi

Scientists will take the tape measure to Mount Everest to determine whether a massive earthquake in Nepal really did knock an inch off the world's tallest peak.

India's top surveyor said yesterday a team of scientists would be sent to neighbouring Nepal to measure Everest in the hope of putting to rest a debate about the true height of the towering mountain.

A deadly 7.8-magnitude earthquake struck Nepal in 2015, killing thousands and altering the landscape across the Himalayan nation.

Satellite data at the time suggested the impact of the quake reduced Everest's peak -- which officially stands at 8,848 metres (29,029 feet) above sea level -- by anywhere between a few millimetres and an inch.

But lingering doubt among the scientific community has prompted a fresh expedition to size up the peak, said India's surveyor general Swarna Subba Rao.

"We will remeasure it," Rao was quoted as saying by the Press Trust of India (PTI) news agency, adding the team would set off in two months.

"Two years have passed since the major Nepal earthquake and there's doubt in the scientific community that it did in fact shrink."

Joint 'mechanism' agreed

Political negotiations set to take place next month in Geneva

AFP, Astana

Russia, Iran and Turkey, the sponsors of peace talks between Syrian rebels and Damascus, agreed yesterday to establish a joint "mechanism" to monitor the frail truce in the war-torn country.

The sides will "establish a trilateral mechanism to observe and ensure full compliance with the ceasefire, prevent any provocations and determine all modalities of the ceasefire," according to a final statement read by Kazakh Foreign Minister Kairat Abdrakhmanov following the talks in Astana.

Rebel backer Turkey and regime allies Russia and Iran also support the presence of the armed opposition at political negotiations under UN auspices set to take place next month in Geneva, the statement said.

The rebel delegation said earlier that they would agree to have Russia serve as a guarantor of the current ceasefire but not Iran, another backer of President Bashar al-Assad.

chief negotiator Bashar Ja'afari said yesterday, expressing support for a joint statement by Iran, Turkey and Russia.

"Finally we have a consensual paper agreed upon by everybody," he told reporters, referring to the joint statement.



A member of the rebel delegation speaks to the media at Astana's Rixos President Hotel yesterday.

A ceasefire brokered by Russia and Turkey has been in place since late December but both rebels and Damascus have complained of repeated violations.

what could have been their first face-to-face talks with the Syrian regime since the conflict erupted in 2011.

They said they would not engage in direct negotiations with the regime because of its continued bombardment and attacks on a flashpoint outside the Syrian capital Damascus.

The latest diplomatic push to end bloodshed in Syria comes one month after regime forces, aided by allies Russia and Iran, retook full control of Aleppo, dealing the rebels a heavy blow.

More than 310,000 people have been killed and more than half of the country's population displaced since Syria's conflict erupted in 2011 with protests against Assad's rule.

Meanwhile, UN agencies and aid groups appealed yesterday for \$4.63 billion in 2017 to help Syrians who have fled their country's war and sought refuge in neighbouring countries.

The appeal is on top of the \$3.4 billion that the UN estimates is needed this year for the 13.5 million people still in Syria who have been affected by the conflict.

RECENT MYANMAR VISIT

UN rights expert fears reprisal

DIPLOMATIC CORRESPONDENT

Yanghee Lee, the United Nations Special Rapporteur on human rights situation in Myanmar, yesterday warned the people she met during her official visit about possible reprisals.

"There is one word that has hung heavily in my mind during this visit -- reprisals," the expert said as she visited Myanmar on January 9-21.

"I am deeply concerned about those with whom I met and spoke, those critical of the government, those defending and advocating for the rights of others, and those who expressed their thoughts and opinions which did not conform to the narrative of those in the position of power," she said. She mentioned the increasing use of section 66 (d) of the telecommunications law against many "merely for speaking their minds."

"It is particularly alarming to learn that security forces' counter operations in the villages of Maungdaw north in Rakhine state has reportedly been resumed following a brief lull, with raids conducted in several villages including nearby the villages I visited," Lee said.

There are further allegations of arbitrary arrests and detention in relation to the latest reported raids, she added.

She was especially dismayed to note the feelings of optimism and hope appearing to slowly fade among the ordinary people just after one year when the whole country was elated with the outcome of the last general elections, according to a UN press release issued in Geneva.