

Millions voted illegally

Says Trump, pledges fraud investigation; House Speaker Paul Ryan sees no evidence to support illegal voting claim

REUTERS, Washington

President Donald Trump said yesterday he would seek a "major investigation" on voter fraud in the November election, despite an overwhelming consensus among state officials, election experts and politicians that voter fraud is rare in the United States.

"I will be asking for a major investigation into VOTER FRAUD, including those registered to vote in two states, those who are illegal and...even, those registered to vote who are dead (and many for a long time). Depending on results, we will strengthen up voting procedures!" Trump said on Twitter.

He did not elaborate beyond the two Twitter posts.

State officials in charge of the Nov 8 election have said they found no evidence of widespread voter fraud and there is no history of it in US elections. House of Representatives Speaker Paul Ryan, the most senior Republican in Congress, repeated on Tuesday he had seen no evidence to support Trump's claims.

Republican Trump won the Electoral College that decides the presidency and gives smaller states more clout in the outcome. However, he lost the popular vote to Democratic rival Hillary Clinton by about 2.9 million.

Trump has bristled at references to the popular vote results, which, combined with allegations of Russian tampering in the election on his behalf, has led to criticism that his victory was not legitimate.

The former New York businessman has never substantiated his claim of widespread voter fraud.

His announcement on Twitter follows a White House press briefing on Tuesday in which his spokesman Sean Spicer confirmed that Trump continued to believe that millions of illegal immigrants voted in the Nov 8 election.

Spicer did not provide any evidence to support those beliefs. Asked if Trump would initiate an investigation if he thought there had been such a large-scale assault on a bedrock American democracy, he said none was planned.

After persistent questioning he said "maybe we will... anything is possible."



Opponents of the Keystone XL and Dakota Access pipelines hold a rally as they protest US President Donald Trump's executive orders advancing their construction, at Lafayette Park next to the White House in Washington, DC, on Tuesday. Inset, police arrest a protestor who was demonstrating against Trump.



US considers India a true friend: Trump

AFP, New Delhi

Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi yesterday pledged to work closely with Donald Trump after the new US president invited him to Washington, looking to ensure an uptick in ties survives a change at the White House.

After their first phone call since Trump's inauguration, the leaders of the world's two largest democracies both indicated they had had a warm conversation and extended mutual invitations to their respective capitals.

Writing on Twitter, Modi said he "had a warm conversation" with the new US president and that they had both "agreed to work closely in the coming days to further strengthen our bilateral ties".

"Have also invited President Trump to visit India," Modi added after the White House revealed Washington had extended a similar invite.

During the call, Trump emphasised that the United States "considers India a true friend and partner in addressing challenges around the world," according to a White House readout of the call.

"The two discussed opportunities to strengthen the partnership between the United States and India in broad areas such as the economy and defense.

"President Trump looked forward to hosting Prime Minister Modi in the United States later this year."

During his election campaign, Trump courted Indian-American voters and even released a campaign advertisement in Hindi for Diwali, the Hindu festival of lights - albeit in a thick US accent.

Trump admin seeks to censor agency staff

AFP, Washington

Donald Trump's administration moved quickly Tuesday to muzzle federal government workers, apparently keen to keep the army of bureaucrats in line with the White House message.

While Trump has sought to project power from the White House, allies fanned out across government departments to impose his writ.

As Trump was sworn into office Friday, staff at the Interior Department were ordered to cease regular communications with outside groups, according to a memo obtained by AFP.

The one-page document required officials to refer any correspondence from Congress, governors, environmental groups or industry organizations to staff at the Office of the Executive Secretariat (OES).

"All incoming congressional and gubernatorial correspondence as well as correspondence from Indian or Alaska tribal leaders and leaders from national level environment/recreational and industry organizations must be forwarded to OES prior to responding,

regardless of addressee or signature level," the document states.

"No correspondence should be cleared to go to Congress or to any Governor until it has been reviewed by the Acting Chief of Staff and/or Senior White House Advisor."

Certain meetings, regulations and environmental notices were also to be

reported to senior staff.

The Interior Department manages most federally controlled land, relations with tribal authorities and controls access to some natural resources.

US media have reported that the Trump administration has also moved to limit officials at the Environmental Protection Agency, the Interior

Department and the Agriculture Department from posting on social media and contacting journalists.

Those departments are on the front line of Trump's promise to repeal a swath of rules designed to protect the environment. Trump has argued the regulations curb jobs and provide unnecessary red tape.

On Tuesday, he resurrected two pipeline projects that had been put on hold over concerns about the environment.

White House spokesman Sean Spicer said he was not aware of any explicit orders for the EPA, but said "I don't think it's any surprise that when there's an administration turnover, that we're going to review the policies."

The Interior Department memo was copied to all bureaus, including the National Park Service.

The park service was forced to freeze its Twitter account over the weekend after posting images that unfavorably compared the size of crowds at Trump and Obama's inaugurations.

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Syria girl pens letter to Trump

Appeals to help war affected children

AFP, Istanbul

Seven-year-old Syrian girl Bana al-Abed, who came to international attention with her tweets giving a tragic account of the war in Aleppo, has written an open letter to new US President Donald Trump.

In her letter Bana, who was evacuated from the besieged city to Turkey in December, appealed to Trump to help the children of Syria, the BBC reported Tuesday.

"I am part of the Syrian children who suffered from the Syrian war," she wrote, according to a transcript of the letter her mother sent to the BBC.

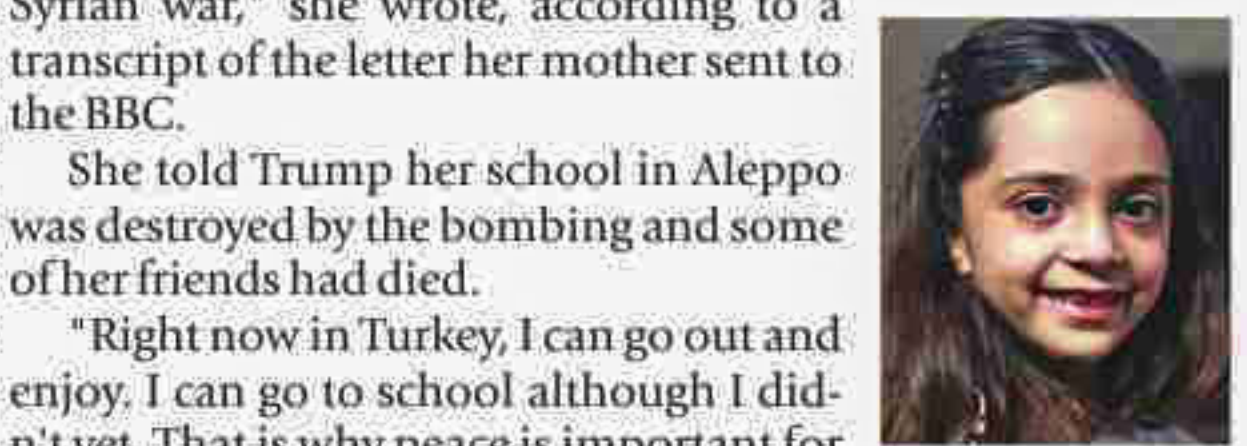
She told Trump her school in Aleppo was destroyed by the bombing and some of her friends had died.

"Right now in Turkey, I can go out and enjoy. I can go to school although I didn't yet. That is why peace is important for everyone including you."

"However, millions of Syrian children are not like me right now and suffering in different parts of Syria," she wrote.

"You must do something for the children of Syria because they are like your children and deserve peace like you."

At least 15,000 children are among the more than 300,000 people who have been killed in Syria's six-year war between President Bashar al-Assad's regime and rebel forces.



A still from a Reuters TV video shows a secondary explosion after a suspected suicide car bomb rammed into the gates of a hotel in Mogadishu, Somalia, yesterday. Shabaab insurgent group claimed responsibility for the car bomb attack that killed at least 28 people, government officials said.

Munira becomes the face of Trump resistance

AGENCIES

Munira Ahmed, a Bangladeshi American had a photo taken of her covered in an American flag hijab back in 2007.

Now, a decade later, the image has become a symbol of the Women's Marches that took place across the globe, according to a report published in Mashable.

Munira, a 32-year-old New Yorker and Bangladeshi Muslim-American who has worked in digital media, told Mashable in a phone interview on Monday that it has been a "surreal" but "humbling" experience becoming one of the red-white-and-blue faces of Shepard Fairey's inauguration posters.

The artist who created the iconic "Hope" poster for Barack Obama's campaign released a series of posters in time for Inauguration Day last week and the

Women's Marches held the day after. The posters are part of a "We the People" campaign spearheaded by the nonprofit Amplifier Foundation.

Fairey's images show a diverse group of people resisting what they see as the hate, fear and racism connected with the new Trump administration. The posters were available to print for the Women's March in Washington, DC, and beyond last Saturday.

Munira, who made it down to DC for the march, saw posters of herself everywhere. "I needed to be there, it was important to me," she said.

The picture is from a 2007 photoshoot for the cover of Muslim-American magazine Illume by photographer Ridwan Adhami.

Munira heard that Fairey even received a call from Obama praising the work, which Munira was thrilled to hear.



NEWS IN brief

Nikki Haley confirmed as US envoy to UN

AFP, Washington

The US Senate on Tuesday overwhelmingly confirmed Nikki Haley, the governor of South Carolina, as US ambassador to the United Nations, delivering new President Donald Trump one of his most potent diplomatic tools. The nomination of Haley, the daughter of Indian immigrants, sailed through the Senate by a vote of 96 to four.

Pak female lawmaker harassed in House

AFP, Karachi

A Pakistani female lawmaker threatened to self-immolate after she was harassed by male colleagues in parliament, telling AFP that the widely-publicised incident shows how laws to protect women are not being enforced. Nusrat Sahar Abbasi, an MP in Sindh province, spoke of her fury after provincial minister Imdad Patafi invited her to his private chambers on the floor of the assembly Friday in comments seen as sexual harassment in conservative Pakistan.

Kuwait hangs seven people including royal

AFP, Kuwait City

Kuwait yesterday hanged seven people including a member of the ruling family and a woman who burned dozens of people to death at a wedding party, the authorities said. The three women and four men are the first to be executed in the oil-rich Gulf state since mid-2013. They included two Kuwaitis, two Egyptians and one each from Bangladesh, the Philippines and Ethiopia.

India, UAE sign pack to build oil reserves

TNN, New Delhi

India yesterday signed 14 agreements with the United Arab Emirates, including a deal allowing the Gulf nation to fill the country's strategic storage facility in southern India.

India and UAE also decided to elevate the bilateral relationship to a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership.

India in 2014 began talks to lease part of its strategic storage to Abu Dhabi National Oil Co (ADNOC). Under such a deal, India would have first rights to the stored crude in case of an emergency, while ADNOC would be able to move cargoes to meet any shift in demand.

The deal was signed by oil minister Dharmendra Pradhan and a representative of ADNOC after a meeting between Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Abu Dhabi's Crown Prince Sheikh Mohamed bin Zayed Al Nahyan.

The UAE contributes significantly to India's energy security and was the fifth largest supplier of crude oil to India in 2015-16.

"Our energy partnership is an important bridge in our linkages. It contributes to our energy security," PM Modi said. The two sides had discussed ways to advance their energy ties through specific projects, he added.

"In this regard, long-term supply contracts and establishment of joint ventures in energy sectors can be beneficial," Modi said.

US scientists raise bar for sea level by 2100

AFP, Miami

In the last days of Barack Obama's administration, US government scientists warned even more sea level rise is expected by century's end than previously estimated, due to rapid ice sheet melting at the poles.

The report by the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) set the "extreme" scenario of global average sea level rise by 2100 to 8.2 feet (2.5 meters), up half a meter from the last estimate issued in 2012.

"We raised the upper limit of our scenarios," lead author William Sweet told AFP.

"It is possible. It has a very low probability. But we can't discount it entirely."

The figures are among the highest ever issued by the US government, and take into account new scientific studies on the disappearing ice cover in Greenland and Antarctica.

"Recent (scientific) results regarding Antarctic ice sheet instability indicate that such outcomes may be more likely than previously thought," said the report, released on January 19.

It also revised the lower end of the anticipated range, saying nearly one foot (0.3 meters) is expected by 2100, up from four inches (0.1 meters) previously.

This put the NOAA report closer in line with the 2013 United Nations Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, which said global sea levels would likely rise from one to three feet by the end of the century.

The US space agency Nasa has also warned that significant sea level rise is "unavoidable," given mankind's continued burning of fossil fuels like oil and gas that contribute to warming the planet.



British PM will open Brexit plan to MPs

AFP, London

British Prime Minister Theresa May said yesterday she would publish her Brexit plan in parliament so that MPs can scrutinise it, but insisted the government's timetable was on track.

The announcement is a concession to lawmakers angered at what they say is the lack of detail so far in May's proposals for leaving the European Union.

It also came a day after Supreme Court judges ruled against May's government and said the prime minister must win parliamentary approval before starting formal talks to exit the bloc.

The Conservative leader said MPs would be presented with a "white paper" policy document outlining her negotiating strategy, though she did not say when it would be published.

"I recognise that there is an appetite in this house to see that plan set out," she told parliament's lower House of Commons in her weekly questions session. White papers outline proposals for future legislation and form a basis for consultation and discussion.

"I can confirm to the house that our plan will be set out in a white paper published in this house," May said.

However, the white paper was a "separate issue" from a draft law that is expected this week and which will give MPs a vote on formally beginning the Brexit process.

