

Obama slams travel ban

Says American values are at stake, rejects faith-based discrimination against individuals

AFP, Washington

Former US president Barack Obama expressed his objections Monday to any faith-based discrimination, in an apparent dig at his successor Donald Trump's ban on nationals of seven Muslim-majority countries entering the country.

"With regard to comparisons to president Obama's foreign policy decisions, as we've heard before, the president fundamentally disagrees with the notion of discriminating against individuals because of their faith or religion," his spokesman Kevin Lewis said in a statement.

The statement -- Obama's first on politics since leaving the White House on January 20 -- came amid an uproar over Trump's order on Friday to tighten controls on immigrants from the seven countries and to temporarily halt all resettlement of refugees.

The former president is "heartened" by protests that have taken place across the country, Lewis said.

"Citizens exercising their constitutional right to assemble, organize and have their voices heard by their elected officials is exactly what we expect to see when

American values are at stake," the statement added.

The statement came after the White House defended its policy, which saw more than 100 travelers detained at US airports and hundreds more blocked abroad, as essentially the same as previous rules implemented during Obama's presidency.

Former Obama national security spokesman Ben Rhodes said in a series of tweets that the tight vetting of Iraqi refugees in 2011 was not the same as an executive order (EO) like Trump's banning immigrants from Iraq.

"There was no ban on Iraqis in 2011. Anyone pushing that line is hiding behind a lie because they can't defend the EO," Rhodes said.

"More inter-agency vetting of Iraqi refugees in response to threat is standard process. EO banning people from several countries is not."

Former presidents traditionally do not weigh in publicly on a current president's statements or policies. Before Obama left office, he said any effort to enforce systematic discrimination, erode voting rights, muzzle the press or round up young immigrants, would cause him to speak out.



Noor Hindi (L) and Sham Najjar (R) who were born in the US of Syrian parents, demonstrate against the immigration ban imposed by President Trump at the Los Angeles International Airport, California, USA on Monday. Protests are taking place at airports across the country in opposition to the ban.

100 refugees in Bangkok cut off

AFP, Bangkok

More than 100 refugees, including a teenager who had been on the verge of reuniting with his mother, have been left in limbo in Bangkok by Donald Trump's refugee resettlement freeze, a UN official said yesterday.

The widely condemned order signed by the US president on Friday unleashed chaos and confusion across the globe after it abruptly suspended all refugee arrivals for 120 days, with Syrian refugees barred indefinitely.

The United Nations' refugee agency UNHCR estimates that more than 20,000 people worldwide were slated to be resettled in the US during that window.

Among them are more than 100 living in the shadows in Bangkok, the capital of a country whose porous borders and air links draw refugees from around the globe yet does not recognise the right to asylum.

Thailand does not differentiate between illegal immigrants and refugees, leaving asylum-seekers vulnerable to arrest and deportation as they endure years-long vetting processes for resettlement in third party countries.

"We have a couple hundred refugees who were supposed to go the US" over the next 120 days, Jennifer Bose of UNCHR Thailand told AFP yesterday.

They hail from strife-torn countries around the globe and include a teenage boy who is being held in a detention cell and was set to join his mother and relatives in the US in the coming weeks.

Bose declined to reveal his nationality but said the boy hailed from one of the seven Muslim-majority countries -- Iran, Iraq, Libya, Somalia, Sudan, Syria and Yemen -- that Trump's order placed separate temporary travel bans on.

'Muslim ban' could be just the beginning: Amnesty

Rights group issues urgent call for UK to do more to fight Trump ban

INDEPENDENT.CO.UK

Donald Trump's ban on travellers from seven Muslim-majority nations could be just the beginning of a broader crackdown on Muslim immigration, Amnesty International has warned.

The rights advocacy group issued an urgent call for Britain to do more to fight the policy, which effectively bans citizens from three African and four Middle Eastern countries from entering the US. It was accompanied by a 120-day suspension of all US refugee programmes.

Trump pledged in December 2015 to enforce a "total and complete" shutdown on Muslim immigration into the US, before revising this to promising "extreme vetting" once he became the Republican Party's candidate.

Amnesty fears the immigration ban announced by executive order on Friday could "become permanent" and extend to more countries.

Kate Allen, director of Amnesty International UK, told The Independent: "This ban is shocking and appalling. Although President Trump says that this is a temporary ban, we fear it may become permanent and that other countries will start to follow it.

"We are in the worst refugee crisis since the Second World War and we have seen the United States closing its doors. We need to stand up for the values that we support, and that is why we call on our [UK] Government to do everything in its power to change this policy and to oppose it."

On Sunday, White House chief of staff Reince Priebus told CBS News's Face the Nation programme that the ban, which targets Syria, Libya, Iraq, Yemen, Sudan, Somalia and Iran, could be taken further.

Priebus said: "The reason we chose those seven countries was [that] those were the seven countries both Congress and the Obama administration identified as being the seven countries that were most identifiable with dangerous terrorism taking place in their country.

"Now, you can point to other countries that have similar problems, like Pakistan and others. Perhaps we need to take it further."

The original text of Trump's executive order defines his seven-country banned list as a temporary measure, to be enforced until the Department of Homeland Security has conducted a review into its visa security controls.

It includes a clause that, once that review is complete, Trump's ministers can "at any point" extend the list with "the names of any additional countries recommended for similar treatment".



EU chief warns of Trump 'threat'

Calls on Europeans to stay together

AFP, Brussels

EU chief Donald Tusk warned yesterday that US President Donald Trump's administration was a "threat" facing the bloc along with China, Russia and radical Islam.

In a strongly worded letter to EU leaders ahead of a summit in Malta, Tusk said the bloc must take "spectacular steps" to stay together and should take advantage of Trump's isolationism to boost trade with other countries.

The former Polish prime minister said in the wake of the Brexit vote the European Union faced "three threats" that made the 28-nation bloc's situation "more dangerous than ever before".

"The first threat, an external one, is related to the new geopolitical situation in the world and around Europe," European Council president Tusk said in the letter obtained by AFP.

"An increasingly, let us call it, assertive China, especially on the seas, Russia's aggressive policy towards Ukraine and its neighbours, wars, terror and anarchy in the Middle East and in Africa, with radical Islam playing a major role, as well as worrying declarations by the new American administration all make our future highly unpredictable," Tusk said.

"Particularly the change in Washington puts the European Union in a difficult situation; with the new administration seeming to put into question the last 70 years of American foreign policy," Tusk added.



US Muslim leaders sue Trump

AFP, Washington

US Muslim leaders filed suit against President Donald Trump Monday over an immigration order that they said was a "fear-mongering" attempt at keeping members of their religion out of the country.

Nihad Awad, executive director of the Council on American-Islamic Relations, joined 26 others as plaintiffs in the lawsuit alleging that Trump's temporary ban on immigrants from seven Muslim-majority countries was in fact a "Muslim exclusion order" that violates the US constitution's religious freedom protections.

"Donald Trump's executive order is not based on national security, it is based on fear-mongering," Awad said Monday.



Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau, his wife Sophie Gregoire Trudeau and others lay flowers in honour of the victims of a shooting in a mosque in Quebec City, Quebec on Monday night.

QUEBEC MOSQUE ATTACK

Shooting suspect is a fan of Trump

INDEPENDENT.CO.UK

The French-Canadian student charged in connection with a shooting spree that killed six people at a Quebec City mosque was a supporter Donald Trump and far-right French politician Marine Le Pen.

Described by one former classmate as a "nerdy outcast", Alexandre Bissonnette is the sole suspect in the shooting.

The 27-year-old was charged with six counts of first-degree murder and five counts of attempted murder with a restricted weapon. Police said he acted alone.

Bissonnette's online profiles show a wide variety of interests. On his Facebook page, he indicated he liked Le Pen, US President Donald Trump, the separatist Parti Quebecois as well as Canada's left-wing New Democratic Party, the Israeli Defense Forces, heavy metal band Megadeth and pop star Katy Perry.

"I wrote him off as a xenophobe. I didn't even think of him as totally racist, but he was enthralled by a borderline racist nationalist movement," Vincent Boissoneault, a fellow Laval University student, told The Globe and Mail newspaper. He said they frequently clashed over Bissonnette's opinions about refugees and support for Le Pen and Trump.

The University Laval confirmed on Monday that Bissonnette was a social science student there.

NEWS IN brief

Duterte pulls police off drug war
AFP, Manila

Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte said yesterday he had ordered all police to stop prosecuting his deadly war on drugs as he sought to cleanse the force of widespread corruption. However the crack down, which has seen more than 6,000 people killed in seven months, was set to continue, with Duterte ordering the military and a drug enforcement agency under his office to carry on.

UN court orders Turkey to release jailed judge
AFP, The Hague

A UN court yesterday ordered Turkey to release a judge detained in a crackdown after last year's attempted coup so that he can resume his work on an appeals case. Turkey was ordered "to cease all legal proceedings against Judge Aydin Sefa Akay and to take all necessary measures to ensure his release... no later than 14 February," the tribunal said.

Two Saudis killed in Yemen rebel sea strike
AFP, Riyadh

Yemeni rebel "suicide" boats attacked a Saudi warship on patrol in the Red Sea, killing two sailors in a rare naval clash in the nearly two-year-old war, the Saudi-led coalition said. The assault off the rebel-held port city of Hodeida came as government forces backed by the coalition pressed a deadly drive up the Red Sea coast despite mounting international pressure for a ceasefire.

Terminate Muslim ban: Arnold

INDEPENDENT.CO.UK

The New Celebrity Apprentice host Arnold Schwarzenegger is the latest public figure to take aim at Muslim ban.

The actor was pretty vocal against the new President during his campaign trail but advised Americans to "stop whining" following Trump's election. It seems the new ruling has thankfully given the actor a change of heart.

"To go and ban people who have a green card, that means that the United States of America has given you permission to work here permanently and you are on the way to permanent citizenship - I was in that position - It's crazy," the former Governor of California stated to Extra (via Variety).

2008 MUMBAI ATTACKS

Pakistan detains top suspect Hafiz Saeed

AFP, Lahore

A militant group held protests in Pakistan's major cities yesterday after its leader, one of the alleged masterminds of the 2008 Mumbai attacks, was put under house arrest following years of foreign pressure.

Firebrand cleric Hafiz Saeed, who heads the Jamaat-ud-Dawa (JuD) group and has a \$10 million bounty on his head, was placed under "preventative detention", according to an order from the interior ministry.

Police took Saeed away from a mosque in Lahore late Monday and escorted him to his residence, hours after Interior Minister Chaudhry Nisar had hinted action against him was imminent.

But India yesterday expressed scepticism at the move. "Exercises such as yesterday's orders against Hafiz Saeed and others have been carried out by Pakistan in the past also," a foreign office statement said.

"Only a credible crackdown on the mastermind of the Mumbai terrorist attack and terrorist organisations involved in cross-border terrorism would be proof of Pakistan's sincerity."

JuD, listed as a terror outfit by the United Nations, is considered by the US and India to be a front for Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT), the militant group blamed for the attack on India's financial capital which killed more than 160 people.

British MPs take first step to starting Brexit

AFP, London

British MPs yesterday took a key step towards leaving the European Union, launching a debate on a bill that would empower Prime Minister Theresa May to trigger Brexit.

Brexit minister David Davis presented the bill to parliament, giving MPs their first discussion on giving the government the power to trigger Article 50 of the EU's Lisbon Treaty, which opens two years of negotiations on leaving the bloc.

While the bill is expected to pass the lower House of Commons, it could be delayed in the upper House of Lords as May's Conservative Party does not have a majority there.

Iran test-fires missile

Claims US, calls UNSC to hold emergency meeting

AFP, Tehran

Iran yesterday warned the United States against "creating new tensions" over its ballistic missile tests as Washington called for urgent talks at the UN Security Council on the issue.

The row comes against a backdrop of already-strained relations over US President Donald Trump's travel ban on citizens from Iran and six other Muslim-majority countries.

The European Union appealed to Tehran to refrain from activities such as the missile tests "which deepen mistrust".

But the diplomatic push by the West quickly ran into trouble as Russia said a missile test would not breach a UN resolution on Iran's nuclear programme.

Moscow, which is fighting alongside Tehran's forces in Syria, said the demand for emergency talks at the Security Council was aimed at "heating up the situation".

Tehran has neither confirmed nor denied firing any missiles over the weekend.

US President Donald Trump has sharply criticised the nuclear deal that led to a lifting of international sanctions against Iran, which used the occasion of a visit by France's foreign minister to express its discontent with Washington.

"We hope that Iran's defence programme is not used by the new US administration... as a pretext to create new tensions," Iran's Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif said at a press conference with Jean-Marc Ayrault.

Iran says its missiles do not breach United Nations resolutions because they are for defence purposes and not designed to carry nuclear warheads.

"We have always declared that we will never use our weapons against others except in our defence," Zarif added.

And he slammed the new US administration's "shameful act of denying entry to people holding legal visas" for the United States.

Speaking at the same news conference, Ayrault said France had made clear its disquiet over the missile tests.

Tehran warns Washington not to create new tensions

Russia says missile test does not contravene UN resolution