

US travel ban not anti-Islam

Says UAE foreign minister

US President Donald Trump's travel ban on citizens of seven Muslim-majority nations is not anti-Islam, the United Arab Emirates foreign minister said yesterday.

Sheikh Abdullah bin Zayed al-Nahyan, whose country like neighbouring Saudi Arabia is a close ally of Washington, said it was "wrong to say" that the decision by the new US administration was "directed against a particular religion".

"The United States has made... a sovereign decision," he said at a joint press conference with his Russian counterpart, Sergei Lavrov, pointing out that it was "provisional" and did not apply to "the large majority" of the world's Muslims.

In his defence of the ban which has stirred widespread protests across the globe, Sheikh Abdullah also said that some of the countries on the blacklist had "structural challenges" on the security front that they still had to overcome.

Trump's controversial executive order on Friday singled out citizens from Iran, Iraq, Libya, Somalia, Sudan, Syria and Yemen to prevent "radical Islamic terrorists" from entering the United States.

But the 90-day ban, which could still extend to other states, has exempted Muslim-majority nations associated with major attacks in the West.

Out of the 19 hijackers of planes used in the September 11, 2011 attacks on the United States, 15 came from Saudi Arabia, also the birthplace of Al-Qaeda founder and attack mastermind Osama bin Laden.

The other four included the Egyptian plot leader, two Emiratis and a Lebanese.



Protesters rally outside the Supreme Court against President Donald Trump's Supreme Court nominee Neil Gorsuch in Washington, US, on Tuesday night. Inset, members of the League of Social Democrats of pro-democracy party Avery Ng (C) and other activists take part in a protest against US President Donald Trump and his recent immigration and refugee restrictions, in Hong Kong yesterday.



PHOTO: REUTERS, AFP

REUTERS/IPSONS OPINION POLL

More Americans support travel ban

INDEPENDENT.CO.UK

Americans are sharply divided over President Donald Trump's order to temporarily block US entry for all refugees and citizens of seven Muslim countries, with more approving the measure than disapproving, according to new opinion poll.

The 30 to 31 January poll found that 49 percent of American adults said they either "strongly" or "somewhat" agreed with Trump's order, while 41 percent "strongly" or "somewhat" disagreed and another 10 percent said they don't know.

But the responses were split almost entirely along party lines. Some 53 percent of Democrats said they "strongly disagree" with Trump's action while 51 percent of Republicans said they "strongly agree."

Trump, who campaigned on a promise to bring what he called "extreme vetting" to the nation's immigration system, said the order he signed on Friday was meant to protect the country and its borders. "This is not a Muslim ban," he said.

But confusion over who was covered by Trump's order left travellers, airlines and foreign governments scrambling to get clarity from US officials, many of whom were also bewildered.

The Reuters/Ipsos poll found 31 percent of Americans feel "more safe" because of the ban, compared with 26 percent who said they felt "less safe." Some 38 percent said they felt the United States was setting "a good example" of how best to confront terrorism, while 41 percent said the country was setting "a bad example."

Trump picks Gorsuch for SC

Top Democrats reject the choice for top court, plan procedural hurdles against the nominee in Senate

AGENCIES

US President Donald Trump on Tuesday nominated Neil Gorsuch for a lifetime job on the US Supreme Court, picking the 49-year-old federal appeals court judge to restore the court's conservative majority and help shape rulings on divisive issues such as abortion, gun control, the death penalty and religious rights.

The Colorado native faces a potentially contentious confirmation battle in the US Senate after Republicans last year refused to consider Democratic President Barack Obama's nominee to fill the vacancy caused by the February 2016 death of conservative justice Antonin Scalia.

The Senate's top Democrat, Chuck Schumer, indicated his party would mount a procedural hurdle requiring 60 votes in the 100-seat Senate rather than a simple majority to approve Gorsuch, and expressed "very serious doubts" about the nominee, reports Reuters.

Liberal groups called for an all-out fight to reject Gorsuch while conservative groups and Republican senators heaped praise on him like "outstanding," "impressive" and a "home run."

Massachusetts Senator Elizabeth Warren accused the nominee of siding with large companies over American workers. House Democratic Leader Nancy Pelosi called Trump's

nominee "a very hostile appointment" and "a very bad decision, well outside the mainstream of American legal thought".

Former Democrat presidential contender Bernie Sanders said Judge Gorsuch "must explain his hostility to women's rights, support of corporations over workers and opposition to campaign finance reform".

Announcing the selection to a nighttime crowd in the White House East Room flanked by the judge and his wife, Trump said Gorsuch's resume is "as good as it gets."

"Judge Gorsuch has outstanding legal skills, a brilliant mind, tremendous discipline, and has earned bipartisan support," Trump told an audience that included Scalia's widow.

Gorsuch is considered a conservative intellectual, known for backing religious rights and writing against euthanasia and assisted suicide, and is seen as very much in the mold of Scalia, a leading conservative voice on the court for decades.

"I respect... the fact that in our legal order it is for Congress and not the courts to write new laws," Gorsuch said, as Trump looked on. "It is the role of judges to apply, not alter, the work of the people's representatives. A judge who likes every outcome he reaches is very likely a bad judge, stretching for results he prefers rather than those the law demands."



Judge Neil Gorsuch speaks with Trump after he was nominated for the Supreme Court. PHOTO: AFP

TRUMP IMMIGRATION ORDER 'Certainly there is worry': Vatican

REUTERS, Vatican City

The Vatican said yesterday it was worried about US President Donald Trump's moves on immigration, in the Holy See's first comment since his executive order banning travel into the United States by citizens of seven majority-Muslim countries.

"Certainly there is worry because we are messengers of another culture, that of openness," the Vatican's deputy secretary of state, Archbishop Angelo Becciu, told an Italian Catholic television station in answer to a question about Trump's order.

Becciu, who ranks third in the Vatican hierarchy, was asked about the executive order as well as Trump's promise to build a wall on the US border with Mexico.

"Pope Francis, in fact, insists on the ability to integrate those who arrive in our societies and cultures," he told TV2000.

Some Roman Catholic leaders in the United States have criticised Trump's executive order. Cardinal Blase Cupich of Chicago said on Sunday it was "a dark moment in US history" and that it was "contrary to both Catholic and American values".

Last February, while returning from a trip to Mexico, Pope Francis said then-candidate Trump's view about building walls was "not Christian".

"A person who only thinks about building walls, wherever they may be, and not building bridges, is not Christian," the Buenos Aires-born pontiff said when asked about Trump's now infamous promises to erect a wall aimed at keeping Mexicans out of the US.



Trump ban 'divisive and wrong': May

AFP, London

UK Prime Minister Theresa May yesterday told British lawmakers that US President Donald Trump's temporary immigration ban was "divisive and wrong", five days after she initially refused to condemn the move.

"On the policy that President Trump has introduced, this government is clear that that policy is wrong," May told MPs after being pressed by opposition leader Jeremy Corbyn in parliament.

"We believe it is divisive and wrong," she said, speaking to MPs for the first time since the travel ban came into force.

Trump's executive order bars refugee arrivals for at least 120 days and suspends visas from seven Muslim-majority countries - Iran, Iraq, Libya, Somalia, Sudan, Syria and Yemen - for 90 days.

The prime minister was keen to emphasise she had no advance notice of Trump's plans.

"If he (Corbyn) is asking me whether I had advance notice of the ban on refugees, the answer is no. If he is asking me if I had advance notice that the executive order could affect British citizens, the answer is no."

"If he is asking if I had advance notice of the travel restrictions, the answer is we all did, because President Trump said he was going to do this in his election campaign."

Imposed on Friday, the same day the prime minister visited the White House, the ban sparked global mass protests and was swiftly condemned by the United Nations.

But the following day, May failed to condemn the policy despite being asked three times, saying the US was responsible for its own refugee policy.

Mattis heads to Asia

Seeks to underscore alliance with Japan, S Korea

AFP, Washington

New Pentagon chief James Mattis yesterday headed to South Korea and Japan, where he will seek to reassure the key US allies about American security commitments in the region.

The defense secretary's visit marks the first overseas trip of any senior official in the government of President Donald Trump, and comes after the new US leader suggested while campaigning that America's long-standing role in Northeast Asia could change.

"The trip will underscore the commitment of the United States to our enduring alliances with Japan and the Republic of Korea, and further strengthen US-Japan-Republic of Korea security cooperation," the Pentagon said in a statement.

On the campaign trail, Trump raised the possibility of Japan and South Korea arming themselves with nuclear weapons, and accused Seoul of not paying its fair share for the 28,500 or so US troops stationed on the Korean Peninsula.

Mattis's visit comes amid heightened concerns around North Korea's nuclear

ambitions and a simmering row between Tokyo and Seoul over the use of sex slaves during World War II.

According to South Korea's defense ministry, defense chief Han Min-Koo and his new US counterpart vowed Tuesday to push ahead with a plan to deploy a US anti-missile system this year, despite angry protests by China.

The two allies last year announced the plan to deploy the Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) system following a series of atomic and missile tests by nuclear-armed North Korea.

The THAAD plan has infuriated China, which fears it will undermine its own ballistic capabilities and has slapped a series of measures seen by Seoul as economic retaliation.

Mattis will begin his trip in South Korea, where he will meet Han and other senior officials.

Anthony Ruggiero, a North Korea expert from the Foundation for Defense of Democracies, said Mattis could also push for US-South Korea military exercises to go ahead as planned, despite Pyongyang's expected complaints.



People take part in a funeral ceremony for the seven Ukrainian servicemen, who were recently killed during a military conflict in the east of the country, in Independence Square in central Kiev, Ukraine, yesterday.

PHOTO: REUTERS

Ban abandons South Korea presidency bid

AFP, Seoul

Former United Nations secretary-general Ban Ki-moon abruptly ended his attempt to seek South Korea's presidency yesterday, dropping a lifetime of diplomacy to denounce his country's political establishment.

Ban returned home last month after a decade in New York and was widely expected to run in elections due this year, but his putative candidacy ran into a series of stumbles and he struggled for backing.

"I will give up my pure intention to bring about a change in politics under my leadership and to unify the country," he told reporters at a hastily arranged press conference. "I'm sorry for disappointing many people."

"I was very disappointed by the parochial, selfish attitudes of some politicians," he said yesterday. "I reached a conclusion that it would be meaningless to move forward with them."

Although he never officially declared he was running, the former UN chief embarked on a series of public appearances and repeatedly spoke of the need to bring about a "change in politics" in the country.



Israel plans 3000 new homes

REUTERS, Jerusalem

Israel announced plans for 3,000 more settlement homes in the occupied West Bank, the third such declaration in eleven days since US President Donald Trump took office.

Trump has signaled he could be more accommodating toward such projects than his predecessor Barack Obama.

A statement from the Israeli Defence Ministry, which administers lands Israel captured in a 1967 war, said the decision was meant to fulfill demand for housing and "return to life as usual".

The late Tuesday announcement came as Israeli police began evicting dozens of hardline Jewish settlers from a wildcat outpost in the West Bank yesterday. The Supreme Court had ruled that the Amona outpost must be evacuated by Feb 8 because it was built illegally on privately-owned Palestinian land.

Police arrested four protesters and distanced dozens of others from Amona, with seven of the families so far evacuating peacefully with their children.

Youths confronted the forces with chants such as "How will you feel tomorrow after you evacuate a Jew from his

home?" and "Today it's me, tomorrow it will be you," as police began evacuating them from the area.

Earlier, some women holding children left their homes, as youths barricaded themselves inside, reports AFP.

Trump and Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu are due to meet in Washington on Feb 15. The president's chief spokesman said last week the two leaders would discuss settlement building.

The muted response from the Trump White House so far on Israel's settlement announcements has been a clear departure from Obama, whose aides routinely criticized settlement construction plans.

An announcement a week ago by Israel that it would build some 2,500 more homes in the West Bank drew rebuke from the Palestinians and from the EU. It followed approval of more than 560 new homes in East Jerusalem days before.

Palestinians want the West Bank and Gaza Strip for an independent state, with its capital in East Jerusalem. Israeli troops and settlers withdrew from Gaza in 2005.

Most countries consider settlements illegal and an obstacle to Israeli-Palestinian peace as they reduce and fragment the territory Palestinians need for a viable state.

WB SETTLEMENT EXPANSION



Help stop spike in Ukraine violence

Nato head Stoltenberg urges Russia

AFP, Brussels

Nato chief Jens Stoltenberg yesterday urged Russia to use its influence with pro-Moscow rebels in eastern Ukraine to halt what he called the worst upsurge in fighting in a long time.

"We call on Russia to use its considerable influence with the rebels to bring the violence to an end," Stoltenberg told reporters in Brussels.

"In Ukraine, we see the most serious spike in violence in a long time," he added, citing more than 5,600 ceasefire violations in the past week.

There have been periodic surges in the fighting in eastern Ukraine but the latest clashes come just after US President Donald Trump took office promising to try to improve ties with Russia, including a possible relaxation of the sanctions.

Trump talked with Russian President Vladimir Putin at the weekend in a call the White House described as a "significant start" to improving ties.

The death toll rose to 19 yesterday as Ukraine government forces and the rebels exchanged mortar and rocket fire for a fourth day around the flashpoint eastern town of Avdiivka, just north of the rebels' de facto capital Donetsk.

Kiev said three of its soldiers died overnight while the rebels said four civilians had been killed.