

UN chief calls for lifting travel ban

AFP, United Nations

UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres on Wednesday called for lifting a US ban on travelers from seven Muslim-majority countries, saying the measures would not prevent terrorists from entering the United States.

"I think that these measures should be removed sooner rather than later," Guterres told reporters. "Those measures indeed violate our basic principles and I think that they are not effective if the objective is to, really, avoid terrorists to enter the United States," he said.

The appeal to end the travel ban came amid a mounting international outcry over the 90-day US entry restrictions on citizens from Iran, Iraq, Libya, Somalia, Sudan, Syria and Yemen.

US President Donald Trump signed an executive order on Friday enacting the immediate ban and also suspending the arrival of all refugees for a minimum of 120 days while Syrian refugees were barred indefinitely.

Addressing the US suspension of refugee resettlement and the ban on Syrians, Guterres again appealed to the US administration to reverse course.

Resettlement is the must from the point of view of refugee protection," said Guterres, who served as UN refugee chief for 10 years before his election as secretary-general.

"I strongly hope that the US will be able to re-establish its very solid refugee protection in resettlement and I hope that the Syrians will not be excluded in that process," he said.



People hold up signs during a protest against US President Donald Trump's immigration rules at the Reagan National Airport in Arlington, Virginia on Wednesday night. Inset, US Secretary of State Rex Tillerson speaks after being sworn in in the Oval Office at the White House. PHOTO: AFP



US judge rules in favour of Yemenis

AFP, Los Angeles

In yet another challenge to President Donald Trump's travel ban, a California federal judge has issued a court order barring the US government from preventing more than two dozen Yemenis with valid visas from flying to Los Angeles.

US District Judge Andre Birotte handed down his temporary restraining order and preliminary injunction Tuesday following an emergency motion filed by immigration attorney Julie Goldberg and her associate Daniel Covarrubias-Klein on behalf of 28 plaintiffs.

"These are people escaping war, I have people who are injured, people who aren't getting proper medical care, children that have died (while awaiting their visas)," Goldberg, who is currently in Djibouti, where her clients are held up in transit, said by telephone.

"These are the women and children of US citizens and I need to get that message across," she added, clearly frustrated by the plight of her clients, some of whom are living in a house she rents in the tiny African nation.

Birotte's ruling comes on the heels of similar orders issued by judges in several other US states, including New York, Virginia and Washington.

Among those left in limbo in Djibouti because of Trump's temporary travel ban is a Yemeni man whose wife and daughter are US citizens, but whose three-year-old son is an immigrant visa applicant with a passport stuck at the US embassy in Djibouti.

Another is an elderly woman who planned to join her son -- a US citizen -- and his family, and a six-year-old child whose mother is a US citizen.

Goldberg, who has law offices in New York and Los Angeles, said she has some 214 Yemeni clients who have been affected by the travel ban and who are now stranded in Djibouti, unable to return to their war-ravaged country.

Trump puts Iran on notice

Slams nuke deal; Iran rejects baseless warning

AFP, Washington

President Donald Trump yesterday said Iran was now formally "on notice" after a recent missile test, while also claiming the Islamic Republic was on the brink of collapse when it signed an international nuclear deal.

"Iran has been formally PUT ON NOTICE for firing a ballistic missile. Should have been thankful for the terrible deal the U.S. made with them!" Trump tweeted, echoing similar comments by National Security Advisor Michael Flynn the day before.

But there has been scant detail from the White House as to what the warning actually means in practical terms. It remains to be seen if the White House will push for sanctions this time around.

Flynn insisted that Sunday's missile test was "in defiance of UN Security Council Resolution 2231," which calls on Iran not to test missiles capable of delivering nuclear weapons.

Iran's ballistic missile program has been a bone of contention with the West since the nuclear deal took effect in January last year.

A previous, while controversial, test was not found to be in breach of the UN guidelines.

A senior Trump administration official said that it was clear the missile was capable of carrying a nuclear payload, while a second official said it was not considered a breach of the nuclear deal.

Iran, meanwhile, rejected warning from Trump's administration over its latest missile test as unfounded and "provocative".

"Claims made by US President Donald Trump's National Security Advisor are baseless, repetitive and provocative," Iranian foreign ministry spokesman Bahram Ghasemi said, quoted by state news agency IRNA.

"Iran was on its last legs and ready to collapse until the U.S. came along and gave it a life-line in the form of the Iran Deal: \$150 billion," Trump said in a second pre-dawn tweet.

He was referring to an estimate of the value of sanctions relief that Iran obtained from the White House -- then under president Barack Obama -- in exchange for signing the deal.



Trump wall inside NSC

Reports say US president's team plans to rely on a new layer of hand-picked aides

POLITICO ONLINE

President Donald Trump's national security adviser is planning to rely on a new layer of hand-picked aides to serve as a "barrier" between the professional staff of the National Security Council and top White House officials, according to two sources with direct knowledge.

Such a move by retired Lt. Gen. Mike Flynn is stoking fears of an even more insular decision-making process than reigned during the Obama administration, which was roundly criticized for micro-managing national security and eroding the influence of the Pentagon, State Department and other agencies. And it is prompting some frustrated career staffers in the primary policymaking body inside the White House, who had been asked to stay on under Trump, to consider departing instead, say the sources.

"You will not have the experts in the room when the principals are having these discussions," worries

one NSC veteran who has heard complaints from White House officials this week. The person, like others, agreed to speak on condition of anonymity.

"They are not being used," added another source with direct knowledge of the developments, who similarly expressed concern that the Trump team is "doubling down on

cutting out the professional experts."

"They have been emasculated and have no authority," the source added. "But they are still getting hammered by agencies and allies and don't know what to tell them. ... Many are heading for the exits."

The concerns come after Trump granted his political strategist Steve

Bannon, who is separately constructing his own power center inside the West Wing, membership of the highest rung of the National Security Council, traditionally reserved for Cabinet chiefs. Permitting a political operative to participate in the high level meetings was seen by many as a dangerous break with tradition and prompted at least one member of Congress to recommend the 1947 law that created the body be changed.

The staffing deliberations also come after reports that the president and his senior aides did not fully consult with his secretaries of Homeland Security and Defense before issuing a controversial executive order temporarily banning travel to the United States from seven majority-Muslim countries.

The small coterie of advisers would be under Flynn -- and above the senior directors of the NSC staff who are organized around regions of the worlds and security threats such as terrorism or weapons of mass destruction.

Source with direct knowledge of the developments expressed concern that the Trump team is 'doubling down on cutting out the professional experts'



Riot police detain protesters during a protest in front of the government headquarters against controversial decrees to pardon corrupt politicians and decriminalize other offenses in Bucharest on Wednesday night. Over 100,000 people in Bucharest rally for a second day in a row after a controversial law giving pardon to corruption crimes was adopted by emergency order late evening on Tuesday. PHOTO: AFP

Ensure full freedom of expression in Turkey

Merkel urges Erdogan ahead of charter change

AFP, Ankara

German Chancellor Angela Merkel yesterday urged Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan to ensure full freedom of expression in Turkey ahead of a crucial referendum on constitutional change.

Making her first visit to Turkey since July's failed coup, Merkel was seeking to keep a key partnership alive after a series of crises in recent months.

Her visit -- which has caused controversy at home and in Turkey -- comes as the country prepares for a referendum expected to be held in April on constitutional changes to give Erdogan greater powers.

"I emphasised from my side that in this far-reaching change the separation of powers and freedom of expression must be ensured," Merkel said after talks with Erdogan at his

presidential palace in Ankara. Merkel added she had also passed on concerns over press freedom and the accreditation of German journalists in Turkey, several of whom have not received approval to work in 2017.

"We spoke in detail over freedoms for journalists," she said.

Merkel said the referendum on constitutional change could be monitored by a delegation from the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) "so that what the people want is guaranteed".

Erdogan responded that a separation of powers would remain in place under the new constitution, with other centres of power along with the presidency.

"The legislative is still there. So is the executive and the judiciary. Their dissolution... is out of the question," said the Turkish president.



WAR IN SYRIA

Regime advances against IS in Aleppo

AFP, Damascus

Syria's military said yesterday it had captured a string of towns and part of a key highway from the Islamic State group in the northern province of Aleppo.

Since launching a broad offensive against the jihadists nearly three weeks ago, the army has taken around 250 square kilometres (100 square miles) of territory, it said in a statement carried by official news agency SANA.

It said the area includes more than 32 towns and fields. "This achievement widens the security perimeter around Aleppo city and forms a launching pad for developing military operations against Daesh," the army said, using an Arabic acronym for IS.

Forces loyal to President Bashar al-Assad have steadily advanced in Syria's north since announcing they had retaken full control over Aleppo city in late December.

It was the biggest blow to IS's rebel movement since the uprising against Assad erupted in March 2011.

Syria's army yesterday also said it had seized a 16 kilometre-stretch (10 miles) of highway linking Aleppo city to the IS-held town of Al-Bab.

Al-Bab, 25 kilometres (15 miles) south of the Turkish border, is the last remaining IS bastion in Aleppo province and is seen as a prize by nearly all sides of Syria's complex war.

Clinton writing book of essays on her life

AFP, New York

Hillary Clinton is putting her shock electoral defeat to Donald Trump behind her by publishing a book of essays reflecting on her life, the bruising 2016 campaign and the future.

Publishing house Simon and Schuster said the currently untitled book would be published in the fall and was inspired by favorite quotations collected by the former secretary of state for decades.

Clinton has largely retreated from public view since Trump's upset win in November shattered her hopes of becoming the first female commander-in-chief of the world's most powerful democracy.

"These quotes have helped me celebrate the good times, laugh at the absurd times, persevere during the hard times and deepen my appreciation of all life has to offer," she said in a statement released by her publishers.

Clinton is the author of five previous books, most recently "Hard Choices" pub-

lished in 2014, as well as "An Invitation to the White House" and "It Takes a Village" all published by Simon and Schuster.

Foreign editions of the new volume will be published in Australia, Britain, Canada and India, and the essays released in audio-book format. Simon and Schuster said it had first discussed the collection of quotations with Clinton in 1994, when she was first lady.

"We are delighted that Secretary Clinton finally thinks the time is right to share the words and thoughts that nourished and enriched her, and defined the experiences of her extraordinary life," said president and CEO Carolyn Reidy.

The 69-year-old defeated Democratic presidential nominee has made few public appearances or pronouncements since the November 8 election, but did attend Trump's inauguration in Washington.

The Republican president led a standing ovation for her, saying he was "honored" that she and her husband, former president Bill Clinton, had attended.



Bill Gates could become world's first trillionaire

MAIL ONLINE

Bill Gates is already the world's richest man but that's chump change compared to what he could be in the next 25 years: the world's first trillionaire.

The Microsoft cofounder is already worth \$85 billion, according to Forbes. But if Gates' wealth continues to appreciate at the rate of return it has been for the past decade, then by the time 61-year-old Gates hits his 86th birthday, he should be worth a trillion dollars.

The ultrarich have been enjoying an average rate of return of 11 percent since 2009, says the poverty-research group, which recently broke the stunning news that eight billionaires have as much wealth as the 3.6 billion people who make up the poorest half of the world's population, says CNBC.

If Gates' investments continue at that growth rate, then Gates, or perhaps another billionaire close to his level, will become the world's first trillionaire. That's even with the billions Gates has given away to charity.

"If billionaires continue to secure these returns, we could see the world's first trillionaire in 25 years," said the Oxford report. "In such an environment, if you are already rich you have to try hard not to keep getting a lot richer."

At least one journalist thinks the claim is "ludicrous" and picks apart the charitable organization's numbers.

