

Kerry, Albright slam Trump travel ban

AFP, Washington

A group of prominent Democrats including former secretaries of state John Kerry and Madeleine Albright yesterday called for a federal appeals court to continue blocking President Donald Trump's travel ban, saying it harms national security.

In a brief submitted to the US Court of Appeals for the Ninth Circuit, the former top officials argued that the executive order signed by Trump on January 27 was "ill-conceived, poorly implemented and ill-explained."

Trump's ban barred all refugees and travellers from Iran, Iraq, Libya, Somalia, Sudan, Syria and Yemen from entering the United States.

On Friday, following a lawsuit filed by the state of Washington challenging the ban, a federal judge in Seattle temporarily suspended Trump's order pending a wider legal review.

The Trump administration appealed over the weekend to the Ninth Circuit court, where a flurry of legal filings were flooding in early yesterday.

They included a brief from the prominent Democrats, who included Kerry, Albright and several top aides to ex-president Barack Obama.

Among them were national security advisor Susan Rice, CIA chief and defence secretary Leon Panetta, and homeland security chief Janet Napolitano.

"We view the Order as one that ultimately undermines the national security of the United States, rather than making us safer," they argued.

"Reinstating the Executive Order would wreak havoc on innocent lives and deeply held American values."

Specifically, the brief said Trump's travel ban could endanger US troops in the field and disrupt counterterrorism cooperation.

It also feeds Islamic State group propaganda that the United States is at war with Islam, it said.

Trump remarks draw fire

Republicans, Democrats condemn US president for saying he respects 'killer' Putin in Fox Super Bowl interview

AFP, Palm Beach

President Donald Trump is drawing fire from Republicans and Democrats alike after playing down political assassinations in Russia and Moscow's invasion of Ukraine.

Trump -- now two weeks into his four-year term -- showed no signs of yielding to demands from within his own Republican Party to distance himself from President Vladimir Putin's regime, instead plunging himself into a fresh political firestorm.

"I do respect him. Well, I respect a lot of people, but that doesn't mean I'm going to get along with them," Trump said in an excerpt of an interview with Fox News's Bill O'Reilly that aired before the Super Bowl on Sunday.

When pressed in relation to Putin's alleged links to the extrajudicial killing of journalists and dissidents, Trump said, "we've got a lot of killers. You think our country's so innocent?"

"Take a look at what we've done too. We've made a lot of mistakes." Trump's fellow Republicans, including Senate leader Mitch McConnell, were quick to criticize the president's remarks.

"I don't think there is any equivalency with the way the

Russians conduct themselves and the way the United States does," McConnell said.

"He is a former KGB agent, a thug, not elected in a way that most people consider a credible election," he told CNN.

That criticism was echoed by Michael McFaul, a former ambassador to Russia and advisor to president Barack Obama, who described Trump's comments as "disgusting."

"This moral equivalency that Trump continues to draw between the USA and Russia is disgusting (and inaccurate)," he said on Twitter.

Mainstream Republicans have repeatedly called on Trump to distance himself from Putin, with little impact.

Meanwhile, Kremlin yesterday urged US network Fox News to apologise after its presenter called Russian President Vladimir Putin "a killer" while interviewing Trump.

"We consider such words from a Fox News correspondent unacceptable and offensive," Putin's spokesman Dmitry Peskov told journalists in a conference call.

"To be honest we would prefer to receive an apology addressed to the president from such a respected television company," the Kremlin spokesman added.



The Kremlin demands an apology from Fox News over what it said were 'unacceptable' comments one of the channel's presenters made about Russian president in an interview with Trump



Back to the future

US passed immigration ban 100 years ago

CNN ONLINE

President Donald Trump has dismissed as "ridiculous" a federal judge's decision to halt his controversial executive order denying certain refugees and immigrants entry into the United States.

Many Americans are up in arms. But in fact, keeping out desperate souls seeking entry into America has deep roots. On this day 100 years ago, the United States passed the strictest immigration law of its time: the Immigration Act of 1917.

The law restricted the immigration of "undesirables," including many people from the Middle East and Asia, through increased taxes, tests and outright bans.

Trump's ban, which has prompted nationwide protests and widespread condemnation, is eerily similar -- targeting some of the same people and imposing tests in the form of "extreme vetting," according to observers.

"In some ways this is kind of back to

the future," said Kevin Johnson, an immigration law expert and dean at the UC Davis School of Law.

The Immigration Act barred an ambiguous and long list of people from entering the country.

According to the law, these included "all idiots, imbeciles, feeble-minded persons, epileptics, insane persons ... persons with chronic alcoholism; paupers, professional beggars," and those with tuberculosis and other contagious diseases. It barred felons, polygamists, prostitutes and their traffickers, and -- similar to Trump's ban -- it blocked

entry to those who "advocate the overthrow by force or violence of the Government of the United States, or of all forms of law" and anyone who would "advocate or teach the duty, necessity, or propriety" of killing of US officers or officials. To keep these people out, the law raised the tax imposed on most adult entrants. It also imposed a literacy test, requiring newcomers older than 16 to demonstrate basic reading test.



'All negative polls are fake news'

Trump rails against media outlets

INDEPENDENT.CO.UK

Donald Trump has hit out at recent polls suggesting he has one of the worst early approval ratings in US history, saying that "any negative polls are fake news".

A CNN/ORC International poll released on Friday found Trump had the lowest approval rating of any new President, at 44 percent.

Trump wrote on Twitter: "Any negative polls are fake news, just like the CNN, ABC, NBC polls in the election. Sorry, people want border security and extreme vetting."

In a second tweet he continued to rail against the "FAKE NEWS media" which he accused of spreading "lies".

"I call my own shots, largely based on an accumulation of data, and everyone knows it," he wrote.

Another survey carried out over the weekend by Gallup, which has polled for every US president since Dwight D Eisenhower, put his approval rating even lower, at 42 percent.

His disapproval rating also jumped from 50 to 53 percent. Gallup said it was a record low for a president just two weeks into office.

By comparison, Barack Obama polled around 76 percent after his first 14 days in charge -- the highest of any recent president -- while George W Bush was on 58 percent and Bill Clinton achieved 59 percent.

Trump faced an angry backlash to a string of executive orders he signed in the first days of his presidency, with opposition to his travel ban on seven majority-Muslim countries and the promise to build a wall between the US and Mexico triggering the fiercest public outrage.

The CNN poll also found that the number of people who disagreed "strongly" with the new President's actions was almost as large as the total number who approved.



Twelve-year old Eman Ali of Yemen (C) and her father Ahmed Ali (R) arrive at San Francisco International Airport, reuniting with her family for the first time in six years, in San Francisco, California, on Sunday. Ali and her father were blocked entry into the United States after Trump's executive order on immigration. Inset, Yemeni Ali Alghazali, 13, who was previously prevented from boarding a plane to the US, embraces his mother Morsaleh Alghazali, upon Ali's arrival at JFK airport in New York.

Queen marks 65 yrs on British throne

AFP, London

Queen Elizabeth II, the world's longest-reigning monarch, set a new record yesterday as the first British sovereign to reach their sapphire jubilee, marking 65 years on the throne.

The head of state, now 90, became queen aged 25 upon the premature death of her father, king George VI, in 1952.

As usual on Accession Day, Queen Elizabeth was at her country estate in Norfolk, eastern England.

"The queen is spending the day privately at Sandringham House," a Buckingham Palace spokesman told AFP.

The monarch was working on the "red boxes" -- the red briefcases of official government papers -- and reflecting on her father's passing.

On Sunday, she was seen smiling as well-wishers gave her flowers outside church.

Prime Minister Theresa May said the country would join in giving thanks for the queen's lifetime of service to Britain and the wider Commonwealth. "It is a testament to her selfless devotion to the nation that she is not marking becoming the first monarch to reign for 65 years with any special celebration but instead getting on with the job to which she has dedicated her life," she said.

"She has truly been an inspiration to all of us and I am proud, on behalf of the nation, to offer our humble thanks and congratulations."



IS besieged in last bastion

Says monitor; Russia, Turkey, Iran discuss ceasefire implementation in Astana talks

AGENCIES

The Islamic State group is "completely besieged" in its last major stronghold in Syria's Aleppo province, a monitor said yesterday, as pro-regime forces piled pressure on the jihadists on several fronts.

IS fighters were cut off in Al-Bab after forces loyal to the government of President Bashar al-Assad severed a road into the northern town, the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights reported.

"Al-Bab is now completely besieged by the regime from the south, and the Turkish forces and rebels from the east, north and west," said the Britain-based monitor.

It came after "the regime's forces and allied militia seized the only and last main road used by the jihadists between Al-Bab and Raqa," Observatory chief Rami Abdel Rahman told AFP, referring to the jihadists' de facto capital in Syria.

Regime forces were backed by fighters from Lebanese Shia movement Hezbollah and by Russian artillery, said the

Observatory, which relies on a network of sources on the ground for its reports.

The town of Al-Bab, 25 kilometres (15 miles) south of the border with Turkey, is seen as a prize by nearly all sides in the complex war.

Since December, Turkey-backed rebel fighters known as the Euphrates Shield alliance have edged towards Al-Bab from the north.

In January, Turkey's air force began carrying out joint bombing raids around Al-Bab with Assad's ally Russia. The two parties back opposing sides in the war but have joined forces in recent months to try to bring an end to the conflict.

Experts from Russia, Turkey, Iran and the United Nations held a technical meeting in Kazakhstan's capital, Astana, to discuss in detail the implementation of the Syrian ceasefire agreement, Kazakhstan's Foreign Ministry said yesterday.

He said the agenda included reviewing the implementation of the cessation of hostilities, discussing a proposal from the Syrian armed opposition about the ceasefire, and determining options about how to implement it.

WAR IN SYRIA

SOUTH CHINA SEA DIPLOMACY

China welcomes Mattis' emphasis

REUTERS, Beijing

China yesterday welcomed US Defense Secretary Jim Mattis' suggestion that diplomacy should be the priority in the South China Sea, and that major US military action was not being considered to contend with China's assertive behaviour there.

Mattis, speaking in Tokyo on Saturday, blamed China for "shredding the trust of nations in the region", but also playing down any need for US military manoeuvres in the disputed waters of the South China Sea and instead called for open lines of communication.

The comments, his most complete on the issue to date, came after analysts had said other remarks made by President Donald Trump's administration had suggested the possibility of US military action, or even a naval blockade.

Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesman Lu Kang told reporters at a regular briefing that Mattis' emphasis on using diplomatic means of resolving disputes in the South China Sea was "worthy of affirmation" and that the situation there was normalising.

"This accords with the common interests of China and all countries in the region, and we hope that countries outside of the region can respect the joint interests and wishes of countries in the region," Lu said.

NEWSIN brief

Indian commandos go missing en masse

AFP, New Delhi

Dozens of trainee commandos from India's elite jungle warfare unit have gone missing on the eve of their first deployment to a restive region considered a stronghold of left-wing rebels. The soldiers were on their way to India's eastern Bihar state by train on Sunday when they took an unexpected late-night detour without informing their commander, the Press Trust of India reported yesterday.

Romania govt feels heat after demos

AFP, Bucharest

Pressure intensified on Romania's government yesterday after half a million people joined the biggest nationwide protests in almost three decades, with many calling for it to quit. Demonstrators vowed no let-up as a no-confidence opposition motion was set for its first reading in parliament, although the government's majority means it is unlikely to pass.

Thailand blames PM threats on exiled group

AFP, Bangkok

Thailand's national security chief said yesterday that a group of Laos-based Thais wanted for spreading anti-monarchy messages had made death threats against the prime minister and his deputy. The allegation comes as Thailand seeks to extradite the group for slandering the royal family -- an offence punishable by up to 15 years in prison per count.



Greek Immigration Minister Yiannis Mouzalas (C) holds a slightly injured boy as he faces dozens of angry migrants who barred entry to the Hellinikon camp in Athens in protest at poor living conditions yesterday. The demonstration broke out at the former Hellinikon airport's camp, which houses hundreds of predominantly Afghan migrants who had announced a hunger strike hours earlier.

Israeli PM welcomes Trump's Iran sanctions

Says world must respond to Tehran's aggression

CNN ONLINE

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has welcomed new sanctions imposed by the Trump administration on Iran, saying its continued nuclear weapons program posed a threat to the world.

Speaking in London as he met British Prime Minister Theresa May yesterday, Netanyahu said Iran sought to "conquer the Middle East" and had to be reined in.

He called for "responsible nations" to follow the lead of the US, which last week imposed fresh sanctions in response to Iran's latest ballistic missile test.

Iran "seeks to conquer the Middle East, it threatens Europe, it threatens the West, it threatens the world. And it offers provocation after provocation," Netanyahu said.

Addressing May, Netanyahu added: "That's why I welcome President Trump's insistence on new sanctions against Iran. I think other nations should follow suit,

certainly responsible nations, and I'd like to talk to you about how we can ensure Iran's aggression does not go unanswered."

Iran denies the January 29 test violated a UN resolution, saying that it had a right to carry out such exercises in defense of its country.



Netanyahu has been staunchly opposed to a nuclear deal with Iran, brokered by the Obama administration, that saw sanctions on the country relaxed in exchange for a dramatic downsizing of Iran's nuclear program. The Israeli leader has called the accord "weak."