



VP Pence used private email as governor

Says US media report

AFP, Washington

US Vice President Mike Pence used a private email account for matters of public business as governor of Indiana, US media reported Thursday. Emails obtained by that state's daily Indianapolis Star newspaper showed that Pence used the private account -- which the paper said was hacked last summer -- to at times discuss "sensitive matters" and "homeland security issues."

The Star, which obtained the emails in a public records request, said that in response to its investigation the vice president's office confirmed that "Mike Pence maintained a state email account and a personal account."

"As Governor, Mr. Pence fully complied with Indiana law regarding email use and retention," his office told the paper. "Government emails involving his state and personal accounts are being archived by the state consistent with Indiana law, and are being managed according to Indiana's Access to Public Records Act."

As US President Donald Trump's running mate on the 2016 campaign trail, Pence criticized the Republican's rival Hillary Clinton for using a private email server for official communications -- a scandal that haunted her throughout the race. The reporter who broke the story, Tony Cook, told CNN that Pence's spokesman had "downplayed any comparisons to Hillary Clinton's use of a private email server and email account."

Indiana law does not bar public officials from using personal email, but generally does require that messages connected to official business be kept for public information purposes.



An Iraqi Army officer (R) uses his mobile phone to film a rocket launched towards Islamic State (IS) militants during a battle in Mosul yesterday. Thousands of civilians fled Mosul overnight as Iraqi forces advanced north of a sprawling military base near the city's airport. PHOTO: REUTERS

WAR IN SYRIA'S PALMYRA

Rebels liken battle to 'Tom and Jerry' show

AFP, Geneva

Syria's opposition yesterday refused to hail the Damascus regime's recapture of Palmyra from the Islamic State group, calling both sides terrorists and saying it was like watching cartoon characters Tom and Jerry.

The High Negotiating Committee (HNC), the main opposition group at UN-sponsored peace talks in Geneva, recalled that the historic city has now been seized from IS fighters twice in the last year.

"As for congratulating (Syrian President) Bashar al-Assad, if we do then we would also have to congratulate (Islamic State) in the future if they take over Palmyra," HNC delegation chief Nasr al-Hariri told reporters.

"Both are terrorists. Bashar al-Assad is a terrorist in accordance with international law," he added, when asked if he would hail the Damascus achievement.

Noting that it was the second such "handover", he said: "This is being obviously used for political reasons."

"You as expert professional journalists should be aware of it: if we want to follow the game of Assad and Palmyra it will be like watching Tom and Jerry," the cartoon cat and mouse foes.

He was speaking after Syrian troops backed by Russian jets completed the recapture of Palmyra, following a battle through the desert for weeks to reach the city.

The oasis city has traded hands several times during Syria's six-year civil war and become a symbol of IS's wanton destruction of priceless cultural heritage in areas under its control.

Syrian regime and opposition negotiators have been in Geneva for the last week in the fourth round of UN-sponsored talks, but there has been little progress and no direct talks between the delegations themselves.

More Trump advisers disclose Russia talks

Senior aides Kushner, Flynn sat down with ambassador

CNN ONLINE

President Donald Trump's senior aide Jared Kushner and ousted adviser Michael Flynn met with the Russian ambassador to the United States at a time when the Trump administration's relationship with the Russians was under close scrutiny.

Kushner and Flynn sat down in December at Trump Tower with Sergey Kislyak, according to a senior administration official, who described it as an "introductory meeting" and "kind of an inconsequential hello."

The meeting lasted for about 10 minutes, the official added.

Flynn was fired from his role as a national security adviser after he misled the administration about his conversations with Kislyak, and Attorney General Jeff Sessions on Thursday said he would recuse himself from investigations into the Trump campaign relationship with Russia after news emerged that he too had spoken privately with the ambassador.

Kushner's involvement in a meeting was

first reported by The New Yorker, and Flynn's by The New York Times.

The administration official disputed the idea that accepting a meeting with the Russian ambassador could be cause for concern in light of the discussion about Russian meddling in the US election, characterizing the meeting as merely an attempt to meet key international players during the transition to power. The official added that Kushner met with dozens of other ambassadors.

Another national security adviser to the Trump campaign, J D Gordon, also disclosed Thursday that he had met with Kislyak, this time during the Republican National Convention in Cleveland in July. That meeting was first reported by USA Today.

Gordon told CNN that along with national security advisers Carter Page and Walid Phares, Gordon stressed to the Russian envoy that he would like to improve relations with Russia. Gordon added that at no time did any inappropriate chatter come up about colluding with the Russians to aid the Trump campaign.



Russia, Nato hold first talks over past years

AFP, Moscow

Senior Russian and Nato military chiefs yesterday held their first phone talks since ties between the two sides collapsed over the crisis in Ukraine, the defence ministry in Moscow said.

The chairman of the Nato Military Committee Petr Pavel called Russia's chief of staff Valery Gerasimov to discuss the possible restarting of military coordination and avoiding clashes, a statement from the ministry said.

"This is the first high-level military contact since the Nato council took the decision to freeze relations with Russia," it said. "The two sides exchanged opinions about current security issues, the prospects of reestablishing military cooperation and avoiding incidents."

Moscow said Gerasimov used the opportunity to complain about "the significant increased military activity of the alliance near the Russian border."

US steps up war on Qaeda

AFP, Aden

US fighter jets pounded al-Qaeda targets in Yemen for a second straight day yesterday, security and tribal sources said, as Washington steps up its air war against the jihadists.

The Pentagon said it had carried out more than 20 strikes on Thursday targeting al-Qaeda positions in the southern provinces of Shabwa and Abyan and the central province of Baida.

Yemeni officials said at least 12 suspected militants were killed in those strikes, which came barely one month after a botched US commando raid against the group left multiple civilians and a Navy SEAL dead.

In yesterday's strikes, US warplanes hit three houses in the Yashbam Valley before dawn, one of them the home of al-Qaeda's Shabwa province commander, Saad Atef, the tribal sources said.

The valley is a jihadist stronghold and was one of the targets of Thursday's strikes. Jihadists retaliated with anti-aircraft fire, security officials and tribal sources said.

Tribal sources said that there were casualties and that they included women and children. One resident said it had been a "terrifying night."

US President Donald Trump faced broad

criticism at home after he authorised the January 29 commando raid during which Navy SEAL Ryan Owens was killed and multiple civilians perished.

As many as eight women and eight children were killed, a Baida provincial official said, drawing condemnation of the raid from human rights groups.

Al-Qaeda has exploited a power vacuum created by two years of war between Yemen's government and Shia rebels who control the capital to consolidate its presence, particularly in the south and east.

Pentagon spokesman Navy Captain Jeff Davis said al-Qaeda had taken advantage of ungoverned spaces in Yemen to plot, direct, and inspire terror attacks against America and its allies.

He said Thursday's strikes targeted al-Qaeda militants, equipment and infrastructure. Another US official said they had involved both fighter jets and drones.

Successive US administrations have kept up a drone war against al-Qaeda in Yemen since soon after the September 11, 2001 attacks.

Washington regards the Yemen branch as the jihadists' most dangerous and holds it responsible for several plots to carry out attacks in the West.

YEMEN CRISIS

- 20 air strikes hit militants' positions: Pentagon
- 12 suspected Qaeda men killed in the strikes
- Jihadists retaliated with anti-aircraft fire

'Keep up the fight for truth'

Tom Hanks gifts espresso maker to White House press

AFP, Washington

US actor Tom Hanks gave White House journalists a new espresso machine Thursday, calling their caffeine-addled plight to cover the news a fight for "truth, justice, and the American way."

The actor's gift comes amid President Donald Trump's feud with the US media, which he frequently blasts with insults and accuses of bias.

Hanks has previously brought the White House press corps espresso machines -- once under George W Bush when the actor learned the journalists had no such apparatus and again in 2010 under Barack Obama when he learned the first had worn out.

But this time, he left the press corps with a special note of encouragement including an illustration at the top of American troops soldiering on.

"To the White House Press Corps," the

note said. "Keep up the good fight for truth, justice, and the American way. Especially for the truth part."

Since his campaign days, Trump has repeatedly slammed the media, calling it "dishonest" and accusing major news outlets of fabricating sources and stories, while branding journalists "the enemy of the people."

Trump announced Saturday he will skip this year's annual White House Correspondents Association Dinner, a longstanding tradition that began in 1921 in which journalists invite the US president for a light-hearted roast.

The last time a president missed the event was in 1981, when Ronald Reagan was recovering after being shot in an assassination attempt. Reagan, however, phoned in with friendly remarks.

Richard Nixon, who despised the media, skipped the event in 1972.



Indonesian President Joko Widodo (R) watches as former president Megawati Sukarnoputri and her daughter Puan Maharani, a minister in his cabinet, take a selfie with Saudi Arabia's King Salman (C) at the presidential palace in Jakarta, Indonesia, on Thursday. PHOTO: REUTERS

NEWS IN brief

N Korean arrested in Kim killing released

AFP, Kuala Lumpur

Malaysia issued an arrest warrant for a North Korean airline employee yesterday over the assassination of Pyongyang's leader, after frustrated police had to release their only other suspect from the isolated nation. Ri Jong-Chol is among eight North Koreans suspected of involvement in the dramatic killing of Kim Jong-Nam, the half-brother of the reclusive nation's leader, who was poisoned with a banned nerve agent at Kuala Lumpur International Airport.

Man held over US Jewish centre threats

AFP, New York

The Federal Bureau of Investigation yesterday arrested a man in St Louis, Missouri suspected of phoning in bomb threats to Jewish community centers and schools around the United States. The Justice Department said Juan Thompson, 31, was thought to be behind at least eight of more than 100 threats made in recent weeks that have stirred fears of a rise in anti-Semitism.

Mubarak acquitted over protester deaths

AFP, Cairo

Egypt's top appeals court on Thursday acquitted Hosni Mubarak of involvement in the killing of protesters during a 2011 revolt, ending the final trial for the strongman who ruled for 30 years. Mubarak had been sentenced to life in 2012 but an appeals court ordered a retrial, which dismissed the charges two years later.

Artificial 'embryos' created in the lab

REUTERS, London

Scientists in Britain have for the first time created a structure that resembles a mouse embryo using a 3D scaffold and two types of stem cells - research which deepens understanding of the earliest stages of mammalian development.

Publishing their results in the journal Science on Thursday, the team based at Cambridge University said that while the artificial embryo closely resembled the real thing, it would be unlikely to develop further into a healthy mouse foetus.

For research purposes, however, the scientists were able to show how the artificial embryo followed the same pattern of development as a normal embryo - with the stem cells organising themselves in the same way. Magdalena Zernicka-Goetz, a professor at Cambridge's department of Physiology, Development and Neuroscience who led the work, said the success with mouse cells should pave the way for similar work with human cells, helping scientists overcome a major barrier to human embryo research - a shortage of embryos.

Currently, human embryos for research are developed from surplus eggs donated through fertility clinics, but Zernicka-Goetz said it should in future be possible to make artificial human embryos for study. "This will allow us to study key events of this critical stage of human development without actually having to work on embryos," she said. "(And) knowing how development normally occurs will allow us to understand why it so often goes wrong."

BBC reporters attacked in China

AFP, Beijing

A crew of BBC reporters in China was attacked by a mob and later forced to sign a police confession for attempting an "illegal interview", the British broadcaster said yesterday.

The journalists were trying to reach a woman in Xinhua county in southern Hunan province, who claims her father was killed during a land dispute, when a group of men confronted them on Sunday, in an incident later condemned by China's foreign correspondents' association.

"As soon as we arrived in Yang Linghua's village it was clear they were expecting us," correspondent John Sudworth wrote in an online article, referring to their intended interview subject. "The road to her house was blocked by a large group of people and, within a few minutes, they'd assaulted us and smashed all of our cameras," Sudworth wrote.

Later, police and local government officials forced them to delete video footage "under the threat of further violence" and sign a confession apologising for "behaviour causing a bad impact".

China launches cruise ship tour to Paracels

REUTERS, Beijing

A new Chinese cruise ship has embarked on its maiden voyage to the disputed Paracel Islands in the South China Sea, state news agency Xinhua said yesterday, the latest effort by Beijing to bolster its claims in the strategic waterway.

The Changle Princess sailed from Sanya on the southern Chinese island province of Hainan on Thursday afternoon with 308 passengers on a four-day voyage, Xinhua said. The new ship can carry 499 people and has 82 guest rooms with dining, entertainment, shopping, medical and postal services on board, it added.

Tourists will be able to visit the three islands in the Crescent group of the Paracels, Xinhua said.

China has previously said it plans to build hotels, villas and shops on the Crescent group and has also said it wants to build Maldives-style resorts around the South China Sea, though it is unclear if foreigners will ever be allowed to visit.

China claims 90 percent of the potentially energy-rich South China Sea. Brunei, Malaysia, the Philippines, Vietnam and Taiwan lay claim to parts of the sea, through which passes about \$5 trillion of trade a year.

Countries competing to cement their rival claims have encouraged a growing civilian presence on disputed islands in the South China Sea. The first cruises from China to the Paracel islands were launched by Hainan Strait Shipping Co in 2013.

