

US judges block Trump's new travel ban

AFP, Honolulu

Federal judges halted Donald Trump's revised executive order to temporarily close US borders to refugees and nationals from six Muslim-majority countries, dealing the president a humiliating defeat.

The rulings trigger a nationwide freeze on enforcement of a ban on entry by nationals of Iran, Libya, Somalia, Sudan, Syria and Yemen for 90 days. They also halt a 120-day suspension of the US refugee admissions program. Trump's restrictions had been due to go into effect Thursday.

On Wednesday, US District Judge Derrick Watson ruled that the state of Hawaii, in its legal challenge, had established a strong likelihood that the ban would cause "irreparable injury" were it to go ahead.

Early Thursday in Maryland, US District Judge Theodore Chuang issued a similar nationwide injunction on a separate complaint filed by advocacy groups claiming that the amended order discriminates against Muslims.

Chuang ruled that the plaintiffs "are likely to prevail on the merits, that they are likely to suffer irreparable harm in the absence of injunctive relief and that the balance of the equities and the public interest favor an injunction."

Trump vowed to fight the "flawed" ruling all the way to the Supreme Court if necessary, describing it as "unprecedented judicial overreach."

"The law in the Constitution gave the president the power to suspend immigration when he deems it to be in the national interest of our country," he said Wednesday in Nashville, Tennessee, adding: "We are going to win."

However, the court in Honolulu indicated that it would not stay its decision in the event of an appeal, meaning the ban cannot go ahead as planned on Thursday regardless of any action the White House takes.



Cars burnt and destroyed by clashes are seen on a street during a battle between Iraqi forces and Islamic State militants, in Mosul, Iraq, yesterday. Iraqi authorities yesterday said that more than 150,000 people have fled fighting in and around west Mosul since security forces launched an operation to retake it from jihadis last month.

PHOTO: REUTERS

Trump slashes foreign aid

Funds to environmental and arts, science projects slashed in proposed budget

AFP, Washington

President Donald Trump proposed drastic cuts in spending on the arts, science, foreign aid and environmental protection yesterday, in a security-focused budget blueprint that could struggle to pass Congress.

Translating hardline campaign promises into dollar-and-cent commitments, the Republican leader proposed scrapping dozens of programs like public broadcasting and climate funding, while boosting Pentagon spending by \$52 billion.

Trump, in the preface to the spending proposal, described it as "a budget that puts America first," and that makes safety and security the "number one priority -- because without safety, there can be no prosperity."

The State Department and the Environmental Protection Agency would be the biggest losers, seeing their funding reduced by around a third.

That could be a harbinger of steep reductions in foreign aid and funding

to UN agencies, with knock-on effects around the world.

The national endowments for the arts and humanities would be scrapped and funding for the National Institutes of Health -- a biomedical research facility -- would be cut by almost \$6 billion.



The Pentagon would be the major winner if Trump's proposed spending priorities go through, with a nearly 10 percent boost -- which would create a defense budget already bigger than that of the next seven nations combined.

Separately, around \$4 billion will be earmarked this year and next to start

building a wall along America's border with Mexico.

Trump has repeatedly claimed that Mexico will pay for the wall -- which will cost at least \$15 billion, according to estimates by Bernstein Research, a consulting firm.

The text will be heavily revised and fleshed out by Congress, before a full budget is released around May.

The budget may also be seen as a signal to the world that Trump's United States will be less engaged internationally and will put "America first."

Diplomats and some former defense officials have already warned that less spending on areas like democracy promotion and humanitarian aid will spell more trouble, and military spending, down the road.

More than 120 retired generals and admirals recently signed a letter warning "that many of the crises our nation faces do not have military solutions alone."

'Holy wars will soon begin in Europe'

Erdogan accuses EU of launching 'crusade'

AGENCIES

A Turkish minister has claimed "holy wars will soon begin" in Europe, in spite of the defeat of far-right leader Geert Wilders in the Netherlands elections.

Mevlut Cavusoglu, Turkey's foreign minister, did not welcome the victory for Prime Minister Mark Rutte's centre-right People's Party for Freedom and Democracy (VVD).

"Now the election is over in the Netherlands...when you look at the many parties you see there is no difference between the social democrats and fascists Wilders," he said according to a translation by Hurriyet.

"All have the same mentality. Where will you go? Where are you taking Europe? You have begun to collapse Europe. You are dragging Europe into the abyss. Holy wars will soon begin in Europe."

Wilders attempted to capitalise on an ongoing diplomatic row between the Netherlands and Turkey during his election campaign, leading a small protest outside the country's



Cavusoglu

embassy and calling Erdogan a "dictator".

His anti-Islam Party for Freedom came second in the Dutch election with 20 seats, compared to 33 for Mr Rutte's VVD, and is likely to be excluded from coalition talks.

The dispute over political campaigning for a constitutional referendum in Turkey has intensified since a rally to be held by Cavusoglu in Rotterdam was cancelled on Saturday.

Dutch authorities withdrew permission for the foreign minister's plane to land when he vowed to visit the country regardless, sparking a series of tit-for-tat sanctions.

President Recep Tayyip Erdogan and prominent ministers have called the Dutch government "fascists" and "Nazis", while EU leaders have called the allegations offensive and "detached from reality".

Yesterday Erdogan accused the EU's top court of starting a "crusade" against Islam after a ruling allowing European companies to ban employees from wearing religious or political symbols including the Islamic headscarf.

'Now is not the time'

UK PM rejects Scots independence vote

AFP, London

British Prime Minister Theresa May yesterday rejected the Scottish government's call for a second referendum on independence before Britain leaves the EU -- but did not entirely rule out a vote.

"Now is not the time," she said, arguing that all of Britain's energies should be put into the forthcoming Brexit negotiations, with the withdrawal process due to begin later this month.

Scottish First Minister Nicola Sturgeon has been sharply critical of May's plan to pull Britain out of Europe's single market, and on Monday said Scots should have a choice whether to follow that path or go it alone.

The Scottish National Party (SNP) leader suggested the referendum could take place between autumn 2018 and spring 2019 -- before Britain is expected to leave the EU.

"Right now we should be working together, not pulling apart. We should be working together to get that right deal for Scotland, that right deal for the UK," May said.

"That's my job as prime minister and so for that reason I say to the SNP: now is not the time."

However, the Conservative leader refused repeated questions about when the right time might be, leaving the door open for a vote further in the future.

Sturgeon responded with a string of angry tweets, saying May's refusal was "undemocratic" and proof that "the Tories fear the verdict of the Scottish people".

The Scottish leader will seek approval next Wednesday for a new vote in the devolved Scottish Parliament in Edinburgh, but May's government has the right to block the request.

Trump, Saudi Arabia in mutual embrace

AFP, Riyadh

US President Donald Trump may not be popular in much of the Muslim world but he has been embraced by Saudi Arabia and, in turn, has reached out to the oil-rich kingdom.

A meeting Tuesday in Washington between Trump and the powerful Saudi Deputy Crown Prince, Mohammed bin Salman, confirmed that the new government in Washington sees Riyadh as a critical partner for both security and investment, analysts say.

Prince Mohammed, 31, whose country is the birthplace of Islam, was one of the first foreign leaders to visit Trump, who has vowed to fight "radical Islamic terrorism".

His trip followed a series of laudatory comments towards the new administration from Saudi Arabia, whose relations were increasingly frayed under former president Barack Obama.

Trump "recognises the Saudi leadership as the primary conduit to the Muslim world," said Salman al-Ansari, president of the Saudi American Public Relation Affairs Committee (Saprac).

The Washington meeting was an affirmation by Trump's team that the main source "for Middle Eastern stability, security and untapped mutual economic prosperity is Saudi Arabia," Ansari told AFP from Washington.

His committee is a private initiative to strengthen Saudi-US ties.

Anwar Eshki, a retired Saudi general and founder of the independent Middle East Centre for Strategic and Legal



Protesters take cover from municipal guards during a national strike against the government's social welfare reform bill which seeks to extend the time of contributions and raise the minimum age required to obtain full retirement benefits, in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, on Wednesday. PHOTO: AFP

Eight hurt in French school shooting

AFP, Grasse

A heavily armed pupil injured his head teacher and seven other people during a shooting at a French high school yesterday, rattling nerves in a country repeatedly the target of jihadist attacks, police and officials said.

The 17-year-old pupil was arrested afterwards in possession of a rifle, two handguns and two grenades after the attack at the Tocqueville high school in the sleepy hillside town of Grasse in southern France, police told AFP.

The head of the regional government, Christian Estrosi, told AFP that the shooting was "not at all" being seen as a terror attack at this stage, adding that the principal and two other pupils were lightly injured in gunshot.

Studies in Jeddah, said Trump invited Prince Mohammed "to make the plan for the Middle East" together.

He said they want to counter both Shia Iran and the Islamic State group of Sunni extremists who control territory in Syria and Iraq and have claimed attacks in other countries.

Leaders in Sunni-dominated Saudi Arabia have welcomed the Trump administration's views toward their regional rival Iran.

US Defence Secretary Jim Mattis has described Iran as "the biggest destabilising force in the Middle East".

Trump has opposed the July 2015 nuclear deal between world powers and Iran that saw international sanctions lifted in exchange for guarantees that Tehran will not pursue a nuclear weapons capability.

Riyadh regularly accuses Tehran of interference throughout the region, including in Syria where it backs the regime of President Bashar al-Assad, and in Yemen.

Eshki said Trump's administration could step up military assistance for the Saudi coalition to help pressure the rebels into returning to peace talks.

River recognised as 'legal person'

AFP, Wellington

A New Zealand river revered by Maori has been recognised by parliament as a "legal person", in a move believed to be a world first.

Under legislation passed Wednesday that combines Western legal precedent with Maori mysticism, the Whanganui river has been formally declared a living entity.

"(It) will have its own legal identity with all the corresponding rights, duties and liabilities of a legal person," Attorney-General Chris Finlayson said.

"The approach of granting legal personality to a river is unique."

The river, known by Maori as Te Awa Tupua, is the third longest in New Zealand.

Finlayson said the local Maori iwi, or tribe, had been fighting to assert their rights over the river since the 1870s, in New Zealand's longest-running legal dispute.

"This legislation recognises the deep spiritual connection between the Whanganui iwi and its ancestral river," he said.

It deems the river a single living being "from the mountains to the sea, incorporating its tributaries and all its physical and metaphysical elements".



Twitter president

AFP, Washington

President Donald Trump is defending his frequent -- and often incendiary -- use of Twitter by saying that the social media platform lets him bypass the "dishonest" press.

"Maybe I would not be here if it wasn't for Twitter," Trump said in an interview with Fox News late Wednesday.

"I get such a fake and dishonest press," he said, singling out the CNN news channel and the three main US networks -- ABC, CBS and NBC.

But Trump said he was "not including Fox because I think Fox has been fair to me."

Much of the press "is not honest... I have close to 100 million people watching me on Twitter, including Facebook and Instagram," he said.

"I have my own form of media."

The @realDonaldTrump account on Twitter has just over 26 million followers.

Trump said: "Twitter is a wonderful thing for me."

Trump also directed ire at the NBC.

"I made a fortune for NBC with 'The Apprentice,'" he said, referring to the TV show he once hosted. "I was on for 14 seasons."

And now, "You see what happens when I am not on? It was a disaster."