

INTEL SHARING ROW WITH RUSSIA

Did Trump commit a crime?

Allegations that President Donald Trump revealed top secret intelligence to a high-level Russian delegation to the White House have raised questions as to whether any crime was committed, and what the legal consequences might be.

WHAT WAS SHARED?

According to the Washington Post, Trump disclosed highly-classified details about an Islamic State plot to plant explosives on laptops with a view to blowing up commercial airliners, and named the city in Syria where an intelligence source is believed to have gathered the information.

DID TRUMP COMMIT A CRIME?

The president has broad powers to declassify secret material, experts agree. Some argue that just by repeating classified intelligence, the president effectively declassifies it, so no crime has been committed. "I don't think he has done anything illegal. The president generally has the power to declassify material. But you could argue he has been reckless," said Cristina Rodriguez, Samuel Ruben Visiting Professor at Columbia Law School.

WHAT RULES HAS TRUMP BROKEN?

Some experts argue that divulging material that is so highly classified that the US intelligence community had not even divulged it to allies, let alone an adversary power such as Russia, could constitute a violation of the presidential oath of office. The president swore to "preserve, protect and defend" the US Constitution, and sharing highly sensitive information with Moscow -- accused of interfering with the US election last year -- could be seen as a breach of that.

WHO MIGHT INVESTIGATE?

Any probe, or instigation of impeachment proceedings, would have to be launched by Congress. David Golove, a professor of law at New York University, said it would be one thing if Trump "just blabbed it in his inimitable manner" -- which could be construed as recklessness -- and quite another if he did it as a "sign of good faith" to build relations with Moscow: "That could be considered his judgment as a commander-in-chief, even if it might seem stupid or wrong," he said.

WILL CONGRESS IMPEACH TRUMP?

Republicans are by and large standing by the president, so there is little chance of impeachment proceedings being launched. Public anger may put pressure on Mitch McConnell, the Republican Senate leader, who will have to weigh that against the political interests of his party. "As long as Trump is protected by the Republicans there is really no accountability," said Golove.

WHAT IMPACT ON INTELLIGENCE GATHERING?

Critics fear that America's allies will be loath to share sensitive material with US intelligence agencies if they fear the information could end up in the wrong hands. The New York Times reported the material came from Israel, and Russia has intelligence ties to the Jewish state's arch-enemy Iran. There were also fears that Russia could exploit the information it obtained to track the source itself and prevent it being used against their own activities in Syria.



WIKILEAKS SOURCE Manning walks free after seven years

Chelsea Manning, the transgender army private jailed for one of the largest leaks of classified documents in US history, was released from a military prison yesterday after seven years behind bars. The 29-year-old walked free from a maximum-security facility in Kansas thanks to a commutation of her sentence by president Barack Obama before he left office.

Manning "has been released from the United States Disciplinary Barracks" at Fort Leavenworth, US Army spokeswoman Cynthia Smith said in a brief statement.

In July 2010, Manning -- then a male soldier known as Bradley -- was arrested over the release of a huge trove of more than 700,000 classified military and diplomatic documents via WikiLeaks.

Without Obama's parting gift, the army private, who served as an intelligence official in Iraq, would have remained behind bars until 2045, after serving a 35-year sentence.

Supporters of Manning -- who attempted suicide twice last year alone -- said they feared she would not have been able to survive the long sentence. Now, she can complete her transition as a free, openly transgender woman.

"Two more days until the freedom of civilian life," Manning tweeted Monday. "Now hunting for private #healthcare like millions of Americans."

Macron unveils new French cabinet

Newly inaugurated centrist French president Emmanuel Macron chose his government yesterday, appointing a mix of political hues to the top jobs as part of his promise to bridge the right-left divide.

Having already made conservative Edouard Philippe, a member of The Republicans (LR) party, his prime minister earlier in the week, Macron picked Bruno Le Maire a pro-European, German-speaking rightist, also from The Republicans, as his economy minister.

As interior minister, he picked Gerard Collomb, the mayor of Lyon who was one of the first Socialists to be a vocal supporter of Macron.

Jean-Yves Le Drian, outgoing Socialist defence minister and a close friend of ex-President Francois Hollande, was named foreign minister and minister for Europe.

Sylvie Goulard, a centrist EU lawmaker, was named defence minister.

The government appointments are part of a delicate balancing act Macron has to perform ahead of the mid-June legislative elections.

By becoming president with no established party backing he has already thrown traditional party loyalties into the air, and early poll predictions show his start-up Republic on the Move (REM) party will come from nowhere to have more lower house seats than any other.

'High possibility' of war Warns South Korean president, urges military to adopt 'watertight defence posture' as tensions mount over N Korea's weapons ambitions

Tensions between Washington and Pyongyang have ramped up in recent weeks with the Trump administration saying military action was an option under consideration and the North threatening massive retaliation.

Left-leaning Moon favours engagement with the North to bring it to the negotiating table, but after Sunday's missile launch said dialogue would be possible "only if Pyongyang changes its behaviour".

The North claimed the rocket was capable of carrying a nuclear warhead, although there are doubts whether the country could build a warhead small enough to fit into a missile.

The two Koreas -- technically still at war after the 1950-53 conflict ended only with a ceasefire instead of a peace treaty -- have occasionally clashed along the border.

The North's shelling in 2010 of the southern border island of Yeonpyeong killed four people in the first attack on civilians since the war, sparking brief fears of an all-out conflict.

The flashpoint border on the Yellow Sea also saw a South Korean naval submarine sinking with the loss of 46 lives in 2010. Seoul blamed a torpedo attack by the North, which angrily denied involvement.

The North has staged two atomic tests and dozens of missile tests in its quest to build a missile capable of delivering a nuclear warhead to the US mainland.

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A displaced Iraqi man pushes his mother in a wheelchair during a battle between Iraqi forces and Islamic State militants in western Mosul, Iraq, yesterday. Islamic State militants are planting bombs near front doors in Mosul to prevent civilians leaving, a federal police commander and witnesses said yesterday, as Iraqi forces make their final push against the jihadists after seven months of fighting.

Trump didn't pass secrets Scams reaching 'Watergate scale'

Says Putin, claims he has transcript of conversation to prove it

Russian President Vladimir Putin yesterday said that Moscow could provide a recording of a controversial exchange between Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov and US President Donald Trump that has plunged the White House into turmoil.

His comments were the first since Trump was hit with accusations that he shared secrets while meeting Lavrov in Washington, the latest crisis to hit the White House amid existing investigations into whether Trump's aides colluded with Moscow during the campaign.

Putin said he was pleased with Lavrov's visit to Washington last week but mocked the idea that Trump had shared secrets during the meeting, calling the allegations "political schizophrenia" and saying people spreading them are either "dumb" or "corrupt."

"We can see that political schizophrenia is rampant in the United States," Putin told reporters after talks with Italian Prime Minister Paolo Gentiloni in the southern Russian city of Sochi.

"I cannot otherwise explain the accusations of the president that he handed Lavrov some sort of secrets," Putin added.

"If the US administration finds it possible, we are ready to provide a recording of the conversation between Lavrov and Trump to the US Congress and Senate," Putin said.

Although Putin used the Russian word for audio recording at the press conference, his foreign policy aide Yuri Ushakov said that "audio is not made" at such meetings.

"There is a recording kept by a special person present at conversations," Ushakov clarified to Russian news agencies.

Citing unnamed sources, the Washington Post reported that Trump had shared intelligence with Lavrov regarding an Islamic State group terror threat related to the use of laptop computers on airplanes.

According to sources cited in the report, that intelligence came from a US ally who had not authorised Washington to pass it on to Moscow.

A US administration official confirmed to AFP on condition of anonymity that the original intelligence came from Israel, which was initially reported by the New York Times.

Putin mocked the idea that Trump went off-script to share secrets with the Russians, saying he could issue a "reprimand" to Lavrov since the minister hadn't passed on the information.

Trump's National Security Adviser HR McMaster denied the president caused any security lapses while Trump himself insisted he had the "absolute right" to share "facts pertaining... to terrorism and airline flight safety" with Russia.

Putin also slammed critics who spread allegations about Trump's ties with Russia.

"What else will the people generating such drivel and nonsense think of next?" he said. "They are shaking up their internal politics while using anti-Russian slogans."

Several other Republican lawmakers too expressed concerns over the developments inside the White House.

Republican Sen. John McCain invoked the biggest scandal in modern political US history on Tuesday when finding a comparison for recent reports about President Donald Trump.

"We've seen this movie before. It's reaching Watergate size and scale," McCain said at a dinner for the International Republican Institute. "This is not good for the country."

The New York Times reported on Tuesday that Trump in February had asked James Comey, then the FBI director, to end the FBI's investigation into national security adviser Michael Flynn.

Trump unexpectedly fired Comey last week, in a move Trump acknowledged making at least in part because of Comey's handling of the FBI investigation into whether the Trump campaign colluded with Russia to meddle in the 2016 election.

"I've known this guy (Russian Foreign Minister Sergei) Lavrov for 30 years, he's an old KGB apparatchik stooge, and Putin is a murderer and a thug," McCain was quoted as saying by the Daily Beast.

"And to have Lavrov in the Oval Office and be friendly with the guy whose boss... sent aircraft with precision weapons to attack hospitals in Aleppo, I just think it's unacceptable," said McCain.

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WAR IN SYRIA

UN offers way forward to draft charter

Rival Syrian delegations yesterday weighed a UN proposal on developing a new constitution for the war-ravaged country, as a new round of peace talks entered a second day.

The sixth round of UN-backed negotiations in Geneva is the latest drive to bring a political solution to the conflict which rages since 2011.

Syria's government delegation were yesterday expected to discuss UN proposal to create a "consultative" committee of civil society activists and technocrats tasked with setting a roadmap to a new constitution.

The opposition High Negotiations Committee (HNC) has said it has "reservations" about the draft, which it were expected to discuss with UN envoy de Mistura later yesterday.

Scams reaching 'Watergate scale'

AGENCIES

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NEWSIN brief

Trump, Erdogan vow friendship

Presidents Donald Trump and Recep Tayyip Erdogan stood side by side at the White House on Tuesday and promised to strengthen strained ties despite the Turkish leader's stern warning about Washington's arming of a Kurdish militia.

Erdogan came to the Oval Office with complaints about US support for Kurdish fighters and what Ankara says is Washington's harboring of the mastermind of a failed coup.

Myanmar's army sues jurnos for article

Myanmar's military yesterday sued two local journalists using a controversial censorship law over an article they wrote criticising the top brass as fears grow over curbs on press freedom.

The latest story to anger the military, published in The Voice newspaper in late March, took aim at a propaganda film called "Pyi Daung Su Thit Sar" (Faithful to the Union) lauding the army's victories over armed ethnic groups.

Venezuela death toll hits 42: prosecutors

A 17-year-old boy and two men died in Venezuela after being shot during anti-government protests, prosecutors said Tuesday, bringing to 42 the number of people killed in six weeks of unrest.

The latest deaths made the recent wave of clashes almost as deadly as the last such disturbances in 2014, when 43 people were killed in anti-government protests.



Demonstrators clash with riot police during a 24-hour general strike against the latest round of austerity in Athens, Greece, yesterday. Thousands of Greeks yesterday demonstrated against a new round of austerity cuts in a 24-hour general strike that disrupted travel and shut down public services.

Fat but fit is a big fat myth: study

INDEPENDENT.CO.UK

It is not possible to be overweight and healthy, a major new study has concluded.

The study of 3.5 million Britons, carried out by researchers at the University of Birmingham and presented at the European Congress on Obesity in Porto, Portugal, found that even "metabolically healthy" obese people are still at a higher risk of heart disease or a stroke than those with a normal weight range.

Metabolically healthy obesity -- or more colloquially 'fat but fit' -- is defined as those who are clinically obese by having a BMI of more than 30 kg/m2 but do not have the complications that are normally associated with obesity such as high blood pressure, diabetes or poor blood sugar control.

The researchers analysed the electronic GP health records of 3.5 million Brits over 18 from 1995 to 2015. All the Brits studied were initially free from cardiovascular disease. They were divided into groups according to their BMI and whether there was a presence absence of three metabolic abnormalities which were added together to create a metabolic abnormalities school.

The authors then compared whether the risk of developing either coronary heart disease, a stroke, heart failure or peripheral vascular disease (PVD) was different for normal weight people or people who were metabolically healthy obesity.



South Korean President Moon Jae-In warned yesterday there was a "high possibility" of military clashes along the border with North Korea as tensions mount over Pyongyang's weapons ambitions.