

Pence denies eye on 2020 presidential bid

AFP, Washington

US Vice President Mike Pence angrily rejected a report Sunday that he is laying the groundwork for a possible 2020 run for the presidency, calling it "absurd" and "categorically false."

The New York Times reported Sunday that the turmoil around the presidency of Donald Trump -- including investigations into links between his presidential campaign and Russia -- had prompted several top Republicans, including Pence, to begin "what amounts to a shadow campaign for 2020."

It is extremely rare for politicians of a president's party -- let alone his own vice president -- to begin preparing just six months into his first term for the possibility he will not run for a second.

A statement tweeted by Pence minced no words.

"Today's article in the New York Times is disgraceful and offensive to me, my family and our entire team," it said.

"The allegations in this article are categorically false and represent just the latest attempt by the media to divide this administration."

Pence said he would focus all his efforts on seeing Trump re-elected, adding that "any suggestion otherwise is both laughable and absurd."

Pence's pushback had begun even earlier, with his chief of staff, Nick Ayers, tweeting that the Times article was a "total lie" and "#fakenews."

The Times article suggested that Pence was the "pacesetter" among a group of Republican "political opportunists" preparing to move in if Trump draws blame for the party suffering serious losses in next year's midterm elections.



Jordan's King Abdullah II (R) and Palestinian president Mahmoud Abbas (L) observe the honour guard during a visit in the West Bank city of Ramallah yesterday. Abdullah II began a rare visit to the occupied West Bank to meet with Palestinian president, amid shared tensions with Israel over a flashpoint Jerusalem holy site.

AFP, Washington

Trump says he is 'working hard' at golf club

Three days into a two-week golf getaway at his New Jersey country club, President Donald Trump assured Americans via Twitter yesterday that he remains focused on managing the country.

"Working hard from New Jersey while White House goes through long planned renovation," Trump said as part of a long batch of tweets mostly aimed at bashing critics.

"Going to New York next week for more meetings," he added.

With critics assailing him over the frequency of his golf outings six months into his presidency, Trump insisted Saturday that he was not on holiday.

"This is not a vacation - meetings and calls!" he stressed.

During the previous administration, Trump regularly bashed president Barack Obama for playing golf and not working enough.

US, Russia can ease tension

Says Tillerson after meeting Lavrov on sidelines of Asean forum

REUTERS, Manila

US Secretary of State Rex Tillerson said yesterday he believes Washington and Russia can find a way to ease tensions, saying it wouldn't be useful to cut ties over the single issue of suspected Russian meddling in the US election.

Tillerson said Russia had also expressed some willingness to resume talks about the crisis in Ukraine, where a 2015 ceasefire between Kiev's forces and Russian-backed separatists in the eastern part of the country is regularly violated.

"We should find places we can work together... In places we have differences we're going to have to continue to find ways to address those," Tillerson told reporters.

Tillerson met his Russian counterpart, Sergei Lavrov, on the sidelines of an international gathering in Manila on Sunday, where he also asked about Moscow's retaliation against new US sanctions.

Tillerson said he told Lavrov the United States would respond to the Kremlin's order for it to cut about 60 percent of its diplomatic staff in Russia by September 1.

"We have not made a decision on how we will respond to Russia's request to remove US diplomatic personnel. I asked several clarifying questions... I told him we would respond by September first," Tillerson said.

The meeting was their first since President Donald Trump reluctantly signed into law the sanctions that Russia

said amounted to a full-scale trade war and ended hopes for better ties.

Lavrov on Sunday said he believed his US colleagues were ready to continue dialogue with Moscow on complex issues despite tensions.

Tillerson said he discussed Russia's suspected meddling in the 2016 US presidential election with Lavrov to "help them understand how serious this incident had been and how seriously it damaged the relationship" between the two nations.

But Tillerson said that should not irreversibly damage ties.

"The fact that we want to work with them on areas that are of serious national security interest to us, and at the same time having this extraordinary issue of mistrust that divides us, that is just what we in the diplomatic part of our relationship are required to do," Tillerson said.

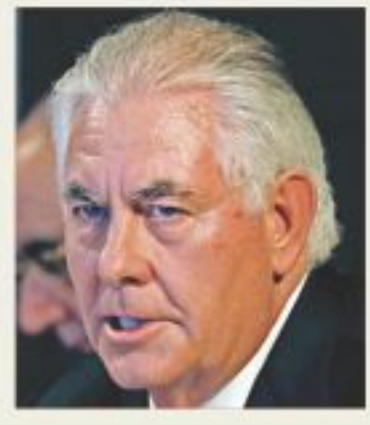
The United States sent its special representative on Ukraine, Kurt Volker, a former US envoy to Nato, to Ukraine last month to assess the situation in the former Soviet republic.

Washington cites the conflict as a key obstacle to improved relations between Russia and the United States.

"We appointed a special envoy to engage with Russia but also coordinating with all parties. This is full visibility to all parties. We are not trying to cut some kind of deal on the side," Tillerson said.

Moscow's meddling in US election created 'serious mistrust'

US will respond by Sept 1 to Russia's request to remove diplomats



North Korea warns US of retaliation after sanctions

AGENCIES

North Korea vowed yesterday that tough new United Nations sanctions would not stop it from developing its nuclear arsenal, as it rejected talks and angrily warned the United States of retaliation.

The message of defiance was the first major response to the US-drafted sanctions, which the UN Security Council unanimously approved over the weekend and which could cost North Korea \$1 billion a year.

The North's sole major ally China, accused by the United States of doing too little to rein in Pyongyang, piled on the diplomatic pressure by vowing to fully implement the new sanctions, reported AFP.

"We will under no circumstances put the nukes and ballistics rockets on (the) negotiating table," North Korean Foreign Minister Ri Yong-Ho said in a statement released in the Philippine capital Manila where he was attending a regional security forum.

"Neither shall we flinch even an inch from the road to bolstering up the nuclear

forces chosen by ourselves unless the hostile policy and nuclear threat of the US against the DPRK (North Korea) are fundamentally eliminated."

For his part, US Secretary of State Rex Tillerson ruled out a quick return to dialogue with North Korea, saying Washington would only consider talks if Pyongyang halted its ballistic missile programme.

"The best signal that North Korea could send that they're prepared to talk would be to stop these missile launches," Tillerson told reporters.

Beijing's top diplomat said yesterday China is "100 percent" committed to enforcing the latest round of sanctions against North Korea. "China will for sure implement that new resolution 100 percent, fully and strictly," Foreign Minister Wang Yi told reporters.

Pyongyang's fiery statement via KCNA yesterday also hit out at Beijing and Moscow.

North Korea warned that nations which "received appreciation from the US" for supporting the resolution would also be "held accountable".

CHINA SAYS WILL ENFORCE SANCTIONS '100 PERCENT'

TILLERSON RULES OUT QUICK RETURN TO DIALOGUE WITH NORTH

Violence creating 'lost generation' of ME men: study

AFP, Miami

Suicide and murder take 10 times as many lives as war does in the Middle East and nearby regions, creating a "lost generation," particularly among men, researchers said yesterday.

These violent acts accounted for 1.4 million deaths in 2015 in the Eastern Mediterranean region, which includes 22 nations such as Afghanistan, Iran, Saudi Arabia, Pakistan, Somalia, Sudan, Syria and the United Arab Emirates, said the report in the International Journal of Public Health.

Wars in the Eastern Mediterranean region -- home to 600 million people -- took an additional 144,000 lives.

"Intractable and endemic violence is creating a lost generation of children and young adults," said lead author Ali Mokdad, director for Middle Eastern Initiatives at the Institute for Health Metrics and Evaluation (IHME) at the University of Washington.

"The future of the Middle East is grim unless we can find a way to bring stability to the region."

Researchers also found a "sharp increase" in mental health conditions such as depression, anxiety, bipolar disorder, and schizophrenia in the Eastern Mediterranean.

"In 2015, nearly 30,000 people in the region committed suicide and another 35,000 died from interpersonal violence, representing increases of 100 percent and 152 percent, respectively, over the past 25 years," said the report.

"In other parts of the world during the same period, the number of deaths from suicide increased 19 percent and interpersonal violence by 12 percent."



African migrants are detained by police as they are discovered hidden inside a travelling amusement park truck on their way to cross Spanish mainland city of Algeciras from Spain's North African enclave of Ceuta yesterday.

Halt crackdown on migrant workers

SE Asia lawmakers urge Malaysia

AFP, Kuala Lumpur

Southeast Asian lawmakers yesterday urged Malaysia to halt a crackdown on migrant workers that has seen more than 6,000 foreigners detained and sparked alarm among rights groups.

Relatively developed Malaysia is a magnet for migrant workers from across Asia in sectors ranging from construction to agriculture, but several million are believed to be undocumented.

Authorities started rounding up illegal workers after an official programme to register undocumented foreigners ended on June 30.

The latest official figures show 6,038 undocumented workers have been arrested in raids. The two largest groups represented were from Indonesia and Bangladesh, with substantial numbers also from Myanmar, the Philippines and Vietnam.

MPs from a group that brings together Southeast Asian lawmakers pushing for better human rights visited Malaysia on a fact-finding mission, and at the end of the trip made a plea for authorities to end the crackdown.

"This inhumane action must be halted," Philippine Congresswoman Emmi De Jesus told reporters in Kuala Lumpur at the end of the visit.

"Many migrants are living in constant fear. Poor treatment by law enforcement, including indefinite detention in abysmal conditions, are urgent concerns."

Italian firefighters 'caused fires for cash'

AP, Rome

Fifteen firefighters in Sicily are suspected of deliberately setting fires or having friends or family call in false alarms so they could be called to work and earn money, police said yesterday, announcing the arrest of the alleged ringleader.

The 15 firefighters are volunteers, but when called in off-duty they receive 10 euros (nearly \$12) an hour in compensation from the Italian government.

Ragusa, Sicily, police official Antonino Ciavola said the fire department's command center tipped off authorities that one squad of off-duty firefighters was being disproportionately called to fight fires.

"Compared with 40 interventions from one squad, these volunteers were doing 120, sparking grumbling among some and the desire to join them by others, so they could get more money," Ciavola said in a statement.

One of the 15 was put under house arrest, while the others were allowed to stay free.

Police said sometimes the suspects called the national phone number for fire emergencies; other times they enlisted friends or relatives. Other times, the suspects allegedly set fire to trash containers or land in the countryside.

But Ciavola said the suspects were so greedy, they became careless, using their own phones to report fires. Other times, he said, relatives and friends used the same phone number to call in fires, but gave operators different names.

Turkish troops hold exercises in Qatar

REUTERS, Doha

Qatar held joint military exercises with Turkish troops yesterday, Qatari media reported, showcasing their strategic alliance two months into a boycott by Arab neighbours which accuse Doha of supporting terrorism.

The manoeuvres are aimed at preparing Qatar's armed forces to defend "vital economic, strategic and infrastructure facilities," state-owned newspaper Al-Sharq reported.

Turkey's parliament fast-tracked legislation on June 7 to allow hundreds of troops to be deployed to a military base in Qatar, set up as part of an agreement signed in 2014, in a show of support for Qatar, which is also home to the biggest US air base in the region.

No First Lady for France!

Petition against President Emmanuel Macron's wife reaches over 200,000 signatures

INDEPENDENT.CO.UK

Almost 200,000 people have signed a petition to prevent Brigitte Macron, wife of the French President, from being given the official position of "First Lady".

The move to block Macron from taking up a formal role at the Elysée Palace was triggered by Emmanuel Macron's decision to push forward with controversial "morality" laws, which would ban parliamentarians from employing family members, in an effort to tackle corruption.

The role of First Lady does not currently exist in the French constitution, and any expenses the President's wife incurs are taken from the general budget for the Elysée.

Although Macron will not be paid for the role, she would likely receive an office, additional staff and a separate budget.

"When you're elected president of the Republic, you live with someone, you give your days and nights, you give your public life and your private life," Mr Macron told

French broadcaster TF1.

"So the person who lives with you must have a role and be recognised in that role."

The decision is particularly controversial because of cuts the President has already proposed to housing benefits and military spending.

Last month saw the biggest decline in popularity for a French president since Jacques Chirac in 1995.

Actor and author Thierry Paul Valette launched the petition on change.org, which had gained 198,700 supporters by yesterday morning.

He wrote: "There is no reason for the wife of the head of state to get a budget out of public funds. Brigitte Macron currently has a team of two or three employees, as well as two secretaries and two security guards. That is enough."

"If this issue is to be decided, it must be done in the context of a referendum. Moreover, more than 65 per cent of the French do not favour the creation of a special status for Brigitte Macron."



NEWSIN brief

Australia finds crashed US military aircraft

AFP, Sydney

A US military aircraft that crashed off the Australian coast has been found, authorities said yesterday, with divers preparing to try and locate three missing marines. The MV-22 Osprey turboprop went down on Saturday off Shoalwater Bay in Queensland.

Two journo in two days murdered in Philippines

AFP, Zamboanga

Two journalists have been shot dead in two days in separate incidents in the Philippines, officials said yesterday. Broadcaster Rudy Alicaway and columnist Leo Diaz were the third and fourth journalists to be killed since President Rodrigo Duterte took office last year.

Zuma faces secret no-confidence vote

AFP, Cape Town

A parliamentary vote of no confidence in South African President Jacob Zuma will be held by secret ballot, it was announced yesterday, a move that could encourage some ANC lawmakers to vote to oust him. The vote, scheduled for today, has become a test of African National Congress (ANC) unity.

Floods, landslides kill 26 in Vietnam

AFP, Hanoi

Floods and landslides caused by torrential rains have killed 26 people and left 15 missing in Vietnam's mountainous north, authorities said yesterday. Since the start of August, flash floods have caused widespread destruction in the provinces of Dien Bien, Yen Bai, Son La, Cao Bang and Lai Chau.