



Afghan security forces arrive at the site of attack on British charity Save the Children office in Jalalabad, yesterday. *Inset*, Vehicles are seen on fire following the attack on the charity which killed at least 3 people and claimed by Islamic State militants.

PHOTO: REUTERS

TRUMP CAMPAIGN-RUSSIA COLLUSION PROBE

5 NEW DEVELOPMENTS

Tuesday saw a flurry of new developments in the special counsel probe led by former FBI Director Robert Mueller, each adding to what the public knows about the investigation hanging over the Trump administration. From a marquee interview that occurred last year to a potential presidential one in the works, here are five things that became public on Tuesday about the probe:

MUELLER LOOKING TO TALK TO TRUMP

Sources told CNN on Tuesday that Mueller has indicated interest in questioning President Donald Trump about his dismissals of former FBI Director James Comey and former national security adviser Michael Flynn. The sources cautioned against presuming the president would sit down with Mueller in the next few weeks, saying there is much to be negotiated still. The Washington Post previously reported Tuesday that Mueller is seeking to interview Trump. Sources told the Post that Trump's legal team could soon try to present terms to the special counsel, seeking to have Trump's testimony come only in part through a face-to-face interview.

MUELLER EXAMINING FOR A 'PATTERN' OF TRUMP BEHAVIOR

The Post report on a looming sit-down with the president cited one source who said Mueller had expressed interest in Trump's "efforts to remove" Attorney General Jeff Sessions. The source said Mueller is trying to find out if there is a "pattern" of behavior from the president. Trump has voiced his displeasure with Sessions publicly for months. He said he would not have picked Sessions if he knew the Alabama Republican would recuse himself from the Russia probe, and in a year-end interview, Trump maintained he thought it was "too bad" Sessions had recused.

COMEY QUESTIONED LAST YEAR, SESSIONS RECENTLY

After The New York Times reported Sessions faced special counsel investigators, Justice Department spokeswoman Sarah Isgur Flores confirmed on Tuesday the attorney general was questioned last week. Trump told reporters on Tuesday afternoon that he is "not at all concerned" about what Sessions told the special counsel team. Just as word was getting out about Sessions' testimony, news broke that Comey had spoken with special counsel investigators last year. The New York Times reported Comey was asked about memos he wrote on discussions he had with Trump. After Comey's sudden firing last May, it became public that he had kept contemporaneous memos on conversations



where he said Trump asked him to let go of an investigation into Flynn. Trump has denied Comey's account, but the dispute has been central to discussions about potential obstruction of justice.

WRAY THREATENED TO QUIT

A report from Axios Monday night said newly minted FBI Director Chris Wray threatened to resign after Sessions pressed him to fire FBI Deputy Director Andrew McCabe, another target of Trump's ire. A source familiar with the conversation told CNN on Tuesday that Sessions had suggested to Wray that McCabe and James Baker, who was FBI general counsel at the time, should go and that Wray threatened to quit if McCabe lost his job. On Tuesday, Trump denied Wray threatened to resign.

TRUMP PROSECUTOR NOW FBI-BOUND

On Tuesday, news came that Baker's successor would be Dana Boente, a career prosecutor who announced plans last year to step down from his role as US attorney and acting head of the national security division of the Justice Department. Last year, Trump named Boente the new interim Justice Department chief after he sacked then-acting Attorney General Sally Yates for refusing to enforce a Trump order imposing a travel ban on several majority Muslim countries. Boente remained the acting attorney general until Sessions' confirmation, and when Sessions announced his recusal from campaign related investigations, Trump named Boente the top Justice Department official overseeing what he had recused himself from, namely the Russia investigation. Boente remained in that role until Rod Rosenstein was confirmed as deputy attorney general, and near the end of April 2017, CNN reported Boente would be acting head of the national security division, a high-profile position that oversaw the Russia investigation. SOURCE: CNN ONLINE

WAR IN YEMEN

Clashes, Saudi-led raids kill dozens

AFP, Dubai

Clashes in the Yemeni rebel heartland of Saada province have killed 40 rebel fighters, Saudi media said yesterday, while the rebels reported nine civilians among 22 dead in Saudi-led air strikes.

The rebels were killed in clashes over the past 24 hours with a pro-government alliance backed by Saudi Arabia, which controls several pockets of the province along the Saudi border, the kingdom's state-run Al-Ekhbariya television reported.

An official of the province's rebel-run health department said four children were among the nine civilians killed in air strikes over the past 24 hours.

The rebels' Al-Masirah television said a single strike on the province on Tuesday night killed nine people, four of them civilians.

The uptick in fighting came as Saudi Foreign Minister Adel al-Jubeir held talks on the conflicts in Yemen and Syria with his British, US and United Arab Emirates counterparts in Paris on Tuesday. Saudi Arabia and its allies have come under mounting international pressure over the humanitarian impact of their nearly three-year military intervention.

More than 9,200 people have been killed in Yemen since the intervention began, most of them civilians. More than three-quarters of Yemen's 29 million population are in need of humanitarian aid, with some 8.4 million at risk of famine.

Twin blasts kill 35 in Libya

87 injured as car bombs strike Benghazi mosque

REUTERS, Benghazi

A double car bombing in the east Libyan city of Benghazi left at least 35 people dead and dozens more wounded, including senior security figures and civilians, officials said yesterday.

The twin explosions shattered the relative calm that had recently returned to Libya's second city, scene of more than three years of warfare from 2014 until late last year.

The first blast struck outside a mosque in Benghazi's central Al Salmani district as worshippers were leaving evening prayers.

Some 10 to 15 minutes later, after security and health officials had arrived on the scene, a second, more powerful blast was detonated from a Mercedes parked on the opposite side of the street, hitting an ambulance and causing a higher number of casualties.

One of those killed was Ahmed al-Feitouri of the investigation and arrest unit attached to the general command of east Libyan security forces. A senior intelligence official, Mahdi al-Fellah, was among around 60 wounded, officials said.

Health officials said the toll could rise because some of the wounded were in critical condition.

It was not immediately clear who was responsible.

Forces loyal to eastern-based commander Khalifa Haftar prevailed in Benghazi's conflict after protracted urban battles against Islamists and other opponents that left parts of the port city in ruins.

There were several bombings during the latter stages of the conflict targeting figures linked to Haftar's Libyan National Army (LNA), but Tuesday's casualty toll was far higher than usual.

The LNA claimed victory in Benghazi in July, but sporadic clashes dragged on until last month, when it took control of its rivals' final holdout.

It has imposed strict military controls on Benghazi and other parts of eastern Libya.

The fighting in Benghazi was part of a broader conflict that developed in Libya after former ruler Muammar Gaddafi was



removed from power and killed in a Nato-backed uprising in 2011.

The North African nation has had competing governments aligned with rival military factions based in Tripoli and the east since 2014.

The eastern government, which is aligned with Haftar's LNA and opposes an internationally backed government in the capital, declared three days of mourning after Tuesday's attack.



DAVOS SUMMIT

US not turning its back on the world: Mnuchin

AFP, Davos

The United States insisted yesterday it was not turning its back on the world as President Donald Trump prepared to sell his "America First" message to sceptical fellow leaders in Davos.

European leaders including French President Emmanuel Macron and German Chancellor Angela Merkel were set to take the stage at the World Economic Forum later yesterday in advance of Trump's surprise visit, to defend the liberal international order after a year-long assault by the US president.

The protectionist Trump, fresh from angering China and South Korea with new tariffs on solar panels and large washing machines, will close the annual conference with a speech on Friday. Top US officials said this trip was intended to defend US interests while also promoting international partnerships.

"This is about an America First agenda but America First does mean working with the rest of the world," Treasury Secretary Steven Mnuchin told reporters at the gathering of heads of government, business tycoons, campaigners and celebrities.

"It just means that President Trump is looking out for American interests, no different than other leaders look out for their own," he added.

US Commerce Secretary Wilbur Ross, also in Davos, staunchly defended Monday's tariffs announcement.

TRUMP'S MEXICO WALL FUNDING

US Democrats rescind offer

REUTER, Washington

Democrats said on Tuesday they had withdrawn an offer to fund US President Donald Trump's border wall, as tough negotiations over the future of young illegal immigrants known as "Dreamers" resumed in the Senate.

A day after the end of a government shutdown linked to wrangling over immigration, Senate Democratic leader Chuck Schumer said he pulled the offer because of what he said was Trump's failure to follow through on the outlines of an agreement the two men discussed on Friday.

"So we're going to have to start on a new basis and the wall offer is off the table," Schumer told reporters. An aide said the offer was withdrawn on Sunday.

Trump said on Twitter late on Tuesday night: "Cryin' Chuck Schumer fully understands, especially after his humiliating defeat, that if there is no Wall, there is no DACA. We must have safety and security, together with a strong Military, for our great people!"

Trump said during the 2016 election campaign Mexico would pay the cost of building a wall along the southwestern border of US to keep out illegal immigrants. Mexico has rejected the idea. As a result, Trump has been forced to ask Congress for US taxpayer funds for the wall.



PADMAAVAT ROW

Indian protesters stop a commuter train from moving during a protest on train tracks against the Bollywood film 'Padmaavat' in Mathura in Uttar Pradesh, yesterday. *Inset*, Charred remains of motorcycles are seen at the Himalaya Mall in Ahmedabad. Hindu hardliners rampaged through several Indian cities yesterday protesting the release of the film, as violent mobs clashed with police, torched vehicles and vandalised malls. PHOTO: AFP

Powers blame Russia, regime

Moscow rejects accusations as 24 nations seek justice for victims

AFP, Paris

Two dozen countries agreed Tuesday to push for sanctions against perpetrators of chemical attacks in Syria, with US Secretary of State Rex Tillerson saying Russia "ultimately bears responsibility" for such strikes.

Twenty-four nations approved a new "partnership against impunity" for the use of chemical weapons, just a day after reports they were used in an attack that sickened 21 people in rebel-held Eastern Ghouta, which Tillerson said was suspected to involve chlorine.

"Whoever conducted the attacks, Russia ultimately bears responsibility for the victims in East Ghouta and countless other Syrians targeted with chemical weapons since Russia became involved in Syria," Tillerson said after the international meeting in Paris, and ahead of further talks with ministers from several countries on ending the conflict.

"There is simply no denying that Russia, by shielding its Syrian ally, has

breached its commitments to the US as a framework guarantor" overseeing the destruction of Syria's chemical weapons stockpiles, as agreed in September 2013, he added.

Despite its pledge to destroy such weapons, the Syrian regime has been repeatedly accused of staging chemical

150 IS fighter killed in Syria airstrikes: US

Erdogan defiant amid US pressure to end Afrin push

attacks, with the United Nations among those blaming it for an April 2017 sarin gas attack on the opposition-held village of Khan Sheikhun which left scores dead.

There have been at least 130 separate chemical weapons attacks in Syria since 2012, according to French esti-

mates, with the Islamic State group also accused of using mustard gas in Syria and Iraq.

But the Kremlin yesterday accused Washington of trying to complicate international efforts to probe the use of chemical weapons in Syria and rejected accusations it was responsible for recent attacks.

Meanwhile, President Recep Tayyip Erdogan yesterday vowed to press Turkey's offensive against a Kurdish militia in Syria until "the last terrorist" was killed, as the US ramped up its concerns over the campaign.

Erdogan said the offensive was "continuing successfully", adding that Syrian opposition fighters and Turkish forces were "step by step taking control of Afrin". "Until the last terrorist is neutralised, this operation will continue," he vowed.

In another development, the US-led coalition said it has killed as many as 150 Islamic State fighters in an operation in the middle Euphrates River Valley in Syria.

THIRD FODDER SCAM CASE

Lalu Prasad Yadav gets 5 years in jail

OUR CORRESPONDENT, New Delhi

A special court in India yesterday handed down five-year imprisonment to senior opposition politician and Rashtriya Janata Dal (RJD) supreme Lalu Prasad Yadav after convicting him in a third graft case pertaining to fraudulent withdrawal of Rs 37.62 crore from a government treasury when he was chief minister of eastern state of Bihar in 1990s.

CBI judge S S Prasad in eastern Indian city of Ranchi also found another former chief minister of Bihar Jagannath Mishra and others guilty in the case.

Lalu Prasad Yadav, 69, is currently in a high-security jail in connection with two other fodder scam cases.

Soon after yesterday's verdict, Lalu's son Tejashwi Yadav said the special CBI court order was not final and he would appeal in the High Court and, if necessary, in the Supreme Court. Tejashwi Yadav accused Chief Minister Nitish Kumar and BJP of framing his father.

On January 6 this year, the RJD chief was sentenced to three and half years in jail and fined Rs 10 lakh by another CBI judge in a fodder scam case relating to fraudulent withdrawal of Rs 89.27 lakh from a government treasury 21 years ago.

On September 30, 2013, Lalu had been convicted in the first fodder scam case involving withdrawal of Rs 37.7 crore from another treasury and given five years prison term.

NEWSIN brief

Venezuela calls early election

AFP, Caracas

Venezuela will hold a presidential election by the end of April, the ruling Constituent Assembly said Tuesday, pulling forward a vote in which President Nicolas Maduro hopes to triumph over a divided opposition and win a second term. The 55-year-old Maduro said he is ready to run if he receives the party's nomination.

Thousands more flee Philippine volcano

AFP, Legazpi

Thousands more have fled an erupting volcano in the Philippines, relief workers said yesterday, as foreign tourists arrived to watch the flaming lava and giant cauliflower clouds spurring from its crater. More than 56,000 residents are now crammed in schools and other buildings two weeks after Mayon volcano began showing signs of unrest.

Brazil braces for ruling that could bar Lula

REUTERS, Porto Alegre

An appeals court was scheduled to decide yesterday whether to uphold the corruption conviction of Brazil's most influential politician, former President Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva, a decision that would likely bar him from running in the presidential race this year. Tens of thousands of supporters rallied in the streets of Porto Alegre on Tuesday to protest against what they see as the political persecution of the leftist icon, who was sentenced to nine and a half years in prison for accepting a bribe.