

Raul Castro receives US lawmakers on visit to Cuba

AFP, Havana

Cuban President Raul Castro Tuesday received a bipartisan delegation of US lawmakers, who are visiting the island with the alleged "acoustic attacks" against US diplomats on their agenda.

"During the meeting they discussed matters of interest to both countries," the Cuban government said in a statement.

The delegation, led by Democratic Senator Patrick Leahy of Vermont, arrived in Cuba Sunday to address various issues including the mysterious supposed attacks in Havana.

The issue has hit US-Cuba relations, with Washington withdrawing half of its diplomats from Cuba and expelling 15 officials from the Cuban embassy in the US capital.

The Cuban foreign ministry's US Trump is the featured speaker Friday at the Conservative Political Action Conference.

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The newly inaugurated president received a hero's welcome when he addressed the conference last February. A year earlier Trump was considered too controversial to attend. But such has been the rightward shift within the conservative movement that CPAC's organizers have invited French anti-immigrant champion Marion Marechal-Le Pen, a hardliner tipped as possible future leader of France's anti-immigrant National Front (FN), to speak shortly after Pence.

The 27-year-old former member of parliament, whose aunt, FN leader Marine Le Pen, was nearly endorsed by Trump last year in France's presidential race, is to mark her return to the public eye nine months after she said she was withdrawing from politics.

The move triggered a firestorm on Twitter, with mainstream Republican group The Reagan Battalion blasting CPAC for inviting "(Russian President Vladimir) Putin apologist and Nato hater" Le Pen.

US conservatives gather as Trump faces pressure on multiple fronts

AFP, Washington

Russian meddling, national mourning for school shooting victims, the chaotic state of Donald Trump's presidency: US political turbulence forms a dramatic backdrop as conservatives gather near Washington for their often controversial annual confab.

Thousands of Republican activists, party heavyweights and national politicians -- not to mention a scion of France's ultra-nationalist movement -- converged on a Maryland convention center yesterday to tout the health of a populist revolution that rocked American politics to its core in 2016 and ushered in the Trump era.

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The conference comes at a time of

heightened sensitivities on multiple fronts, including accusations that Trump's 2016 presidential campaign was illegally coordinating with Moscow.

Last Friday US special prosecutor Robert Mueller unveiled bombshell indictments against 13 Russians for allegedly running a secret campaign to tilt the 2016 US election in Trump's favor.

Trump repeatedly denies any collusion with Russia. But four Trump campaign officials have been indicted as part of Mueller's broader investigation, and attendees and speakers at CPAC will be watched closely on the issue.

They will also be faced with the scourge of US gun violence, after the latest in a string of deadly school shootings prompted national soul searching.

Trump strongly backs the constitutional right to bear arms. But he recently expressed support for legislation that would expand background checks for gun purchases, and ban devices which can turn legal semi-automatic weapons into machine guns.

Gun rights are front and center at CPAC -- two panels will address the issue on Saturday.

But while the National Rifle Association usually addresses CPAC, the country's largest pro-gun lobby is toning down its presence this year following last week's Florida massacre.

NRA Executive Vice President Wayne LaPierre was not listed on CPAC's schedule, but the gun group assured that he would address the conference.

Several Trump cabinet members, Republican lawmakers and combative former Milwaukee sheriff David Clarke are scheduled to speak.

Absent from the list: Mitt Romney, the 2012 Republican presidential nominee and recently announced US Senate candidate from Utah.

CPAC organizer Matt Schlapp declared him not conservative enough to attend.

The event will also be without rightwing provocateur Steve Bannon, the strategist who harnessed the populist insurgency that propelled Trump to victory, but was ousted from the White House last year.

FEBRUARY 21 26 fined for not hoisting national flag

UNB, Jhenidah

A mobile court yesterday fined 26 business houses Tk 8,600 in the district town for not hoisting the national flag on the occasion of the International Mother Language Day.

Acting on a complaint that some business houses didn't hoist the national flag, the mobile court, led by Additional District Magistrate Asaduzzaman, conducted the drive and collected the fine from the businesses.

The businessmen were also warned not to make such mistakes in future.

Sharif

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lower house of parliament. Winning control of the Senate too would allow the PML-N to change the constitution to make Sharif eligible to hold office again when the party contests a national election due later this year.

Sharif is also being tried by a separate anti-corruption court on other charges - proceedings ordered by the Supreme Court last July - and could face jail when that trial winds up as soon as next month.

Wednesday's order overturned a legal amendment by PML-N lawmakers allowing Sharif to remain party president despite being disqualified from public office by the Supreme Court for failing to declare monthly income of 10,000 Emirati dirham (\$2,723) from a company owned by his son.

"The Election Commission is directed to remove the name of Nawaz Sharif as president of PML-N from all official records," Chief Justice Saqib Nisar said from the bench.

"As a result, all steps taken, all orders passed by Nawaz Sharif are also declared to be as if they had never been taken."

Sharif denies any wrongdoing and has said his family fortune was obtained legally.

Sharif's party retains a majority in the National Assembly and has vowed it will be vindicated in elections held this year, in which his brother will be the prime ministerial candidate.

While the national election is voted upon by the public, the Senate election is conducted by members of the National Assembly and the local assemblies of Pakistan's four provinces.

"DISGRACE"

The legal cases against Sharif have been spearheaded by opposition politician Imran Khan, a former international cricketer whose party cheered Wednesday's decision as a victory against corrupt politics.

Members of Sharif's party were defiant on Wednesday.

"This is Pakistan. Nawaz Sharif will run PML-N even if he is in a jail cell," said a government official from Sharif's party, speaking on condition of anonymity.

"It will send an impression among people, and in our party that these actions are being taken to pressure Nawaz Sharif," Zafrullah Khan, Sharif's ruling party legal adviser, said to Geo TV. "It will benefit us."

Sharif has said his removal from office was part of a political conspiracy against him, and his party and the judiciary have engaged in an escalating war of words.

Sharif has served as prime minister twice before and each time was removed from office - in 1993 by presidential order and in 1999 by a military coup that saw him jailed and later exiled before returning when General Pervez Musharraf stepped down.

Faisal Chaudhry, a lawyer for one of the 17 opposition party petitioners who sought Sharif's removal as party head, said the court decision invalidated all of Sharif's decisions since last July, including the candidates he nominated for the Senate election.

"My understanding is that the candidates can still contest but as independent and not as Nawaz Sharif's party ticket holders," Chaudhry said.

Khan's party praised the ruling, saying it was a "disgrace to the constitution to appoint a person who has been disqualified by the court for dishonesty and corruption".

Govt official

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sub-inspector Ashiqur Rahman in uniform boarded a Bangkok-bound flight without any travel documents, said airport officials.

He was later handed over to Dhaka range police.

The flight was supposed to depart at 2:00am but had to be delayed for 30 minutes, said the officials.

Schoolteacher

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after the girl's mother filed a case with Jatrabari Police Station accusing him of sexual misconduct.

The mother alleged that the incident took place when the girl went to Ayub's house for private lessons.

Improving the lives

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line, her centres in Dhaka and Manikganj are now home to more than 500 children with disabilities.

Apart from Khalamma, she quite correctly calls herself a professional beggar, because she shuttles between houses and organisations to raise funds for the children. Besides, she has to convince her donors about the needs of the children.

But what motivates her to do this in a country some 7,600km away from home?

Antoinette tells the story.

It was 1992. She was not enjoying her job back home.

"I felt I had to do something else."

She took her bicycle and set out for Indonesia. But she returned to the Netherlands via some other countries on her bicycle in a bid to collect funds for physically disabled children.

In the later part of 1992, she arrived in Bangladesh.

"Here I met a boy whose name was Sayeed. Sayeed was a normal child up to five years of his age, but due to an attack of Meningitis he got paralysed."

"The boy had a lovely pair of eyes and enchanting smile. I was immediately in love with the boy," she said.

But when she went back home, she always remembered that she promised Sayeed something.

"I have to do something with my promise. I tried to raise funds, but everyone was saying that we can give you money but you have to go to Bangladesh otherwise we don't think the boy really would be benefitted."

So she came back to Bangladesh and continued working for children with disabilities.

"When I started I had 10 children and now I have more than 500 children under my project," she said.

Initially the challenge she faced was that people would think that she would give them some injection or special kind of medicine that would heal them.

"But things don't work like that. I had to always try to convince them that I could help them heal to some extent, help them flourish through some games and therapies," she said.

"But they didn't believe that only games and some therapies might help. They always asked for injections or medicines."

During her stay in Bangladesh in 1995, a schizophrenic man stabbed Antoinette in her back. She was paralysed and received treatment in the Netherlands. But she returned to

Bangladesh again.

"I learnt a lot during that period as a number of my kids are paralysed."

"That's why I never think some horrible things had happened to me. I think God has given me more experience to understand the feelings of my children," said Antoinette, a mother of two.

She adopted two more children from Bangladesh, one of them has severe disabilities.

Niketan Foundation has three centres in Bangladesh -- two in Baniyajuri and Ghior of Manikganj and the other in Badda in the capital.

For her work, Antoinette needs volunteers and funds.

"The funds could be anything. It could be rice, clothes, money, toys anything. We do need a lot," she said.

Banana

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The bananas mature quickly, leading to thin, pliable — and edible — skins. Mongee bananas were developed from the Gros Michel variety.

It was the main variety in global circulation from the early 1900s until the 1950s, when plantations in Central America were wiped out by fusarium wilt which became more commonly known as Panama disease.

A newer strain of the soil-borne fungus, Panama TR4, is now affecting Australian Cavendish banana crops.

Setzuo Tanaka's desire to cultivate tropical Gros Michel bananas in the cold climate of Japan was driven by his own memories of eating them as a child when they were classed as a luxury food.

The company is against genetic modification and the Mongee banana plants are not treated with any chemicals, which allows the skin to be eaten safely.

"We do not use chemical fertiliser and there are no natural enemies of banana in Japan, so it is non-pesticide cultivation," Tanaka said.

The fruit itself is extremely sweet, with sugar content recently measured at 25.8 grams per 100 grams.

In comparison, Cavendish bananas, which are today's main commercial variety, have about 18 grams of sugar per 100 grams.

According to Tanaka, eating both the fruit and the skin provides extra nutrients.

"Banana peel can contain vitamin B6 and magnesium and is rich in tryptophan and there is also potassium, polyphenol, but there are many water soluble vitamins, zinc in particular," he said.

Long wait gets longer

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When The Daily Star visited the area on 6 February this year, it was observed that a good number of families from the three affected villages of Tintila Para, Manikjowr Chara and Battye Para either still live on the Manikjowr Chara school rooftop or continue to take refuge in the nearby Buddhist monastery.

Yet others, perhaps the majority, have scrambled together temporary dwellings of their own, of bamboo, wood and tents, either perched atop the ashes of their former homes or set up in jungle verges. Understandably, fear of the approaching rainy season is common.

Local officials blame the delay on rehabilitating the victims on the tender process. "The final date for submission for a tender to provide housing for Longadu arson victims was 28 December last year," says the Upazila Nirbahi Officer Mosaddek Mehdi Imam.

"Unfortunately no contractor participated. So there will be a delay. A few days ago we circulated a new tender notice for a larger number of houses. I think this time the contractors will be interested. We also want to see victims in their new homes at the earliest possibility, before the rainy season," he said.

Rangamati Deputy Commissioner Mohammad Manzarul Mannan said, "A tender to build housing for 176 families has been offered twice. There was some dispute over the price of

4 killed

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Dhaka-Dinajpur route, left Kamalapur Railway Station in the capital Tuesday evening. Witnesses and passengers said around 12 people were travelling on the roof for a free ride. Three of them got down at different stations, they added.

Akbar Hossain, officer-in-charge of Santahar Government Railway Police, said the accident occurred when the train was passing Raninagar Railway Station around 3:25am.

All four of the deceased fell off the train and died on the spot, he added.

On information, police recovered the bodies around 8:30am. The injured were badly hurt in their heads, said the OC.

The bodies were handed over to their family members after autopsies. Such incidents are often reported at Raninagar of Naogaon and Akkelpur of Joypurhat because of low girders of foot bridges connecting the platforms.

Rezaul Karim, stationmaster of Raninagar Railway Station, filed an unnatural death case with Santahar police.

The railway authorities cannot prevent such risky travels because of shortage of staff, he said.

Indian police arrest six as inquiry widens into bank fraud

AFP, Mumbai

India's federal police have arrested six people, including employees of a billionaire jeweller, as an inquiry into one of the country's biggest bank scams widens, investigators said yesterday.

The Central Bureau of Investigation is looking into allegations that Nirav Modi, a jeweller to Hollywood stars including Kate Winslet and Naomi Watts, was involved in scamming India's second-largest state bank of almost \$1.8 billion.

Modi and his uncle and business partner Mehul Choksi, a diamond merchant, have been accused by investigators of defrauding the Punjab National Bank of 2.8 billion rupees (\$43.8 million), part of the total losses.

The CBI has carried out raids on luxury diamond vendors and properties connected to the pair and has contacted Interpol to track down Modi, who is believed to be abroad.

Investigators said senior associates from Modi's Firestar Diamond company and Choksi's Gitanjali group were among those detained in the latest arrests Tuesday evening.

"We have arrested five people connected to both Nirav Modi and Mehul Choksi's companies, and they will be produced in CBI court today," CBI spokesman Abhishek Dayal told AFP.

He said the manager of the bank's branch in Mumbai where the alleged fraud occurred was also detained.

"We will intensify our investigations," Dayal said.

The CBI has arrested a dozen bank officials and employees linked to the high-profile jewellers since the PNB announced last week it had detected fraud of almost \$1.8 billion at the Mumbai branch.

Several of those arrested are suspected of facilitating fraudulent lines of credit to companies linked to Modi and Choksi, investigators have stated.

Modi, the third generation of his family to go into the diamond trade, is worth \$1.73 billion according to Forbes, placing him 85th on India's rich list.

The 47-year-old's high-end eponymous Nirav Modi brand has stores in several of the world's major cities.

Top experts warn against 'malicious use' of AI

AFP, Paris

Artificial intelligence could be deployed by dictators, criminals and terrorists to manipulate elections and use drones in terrorist attacks, more than two dozen experts said yesterday as they sounded the alarm over misuse of the technology.

In a 100-page analysis, they outlined a rapid growth in cybercrime and the use of "bots" to interfere with news gathering and penetrate social media among a host of plausible scenarios in the next five to 10 years.

"Our report focuses on ways in which people could do deliberate harm with AI," said Sean O hEigeartaigh, Executive Director of the Cambridge Centre for the Study of Existential Risk.

"AI may pose new threats, or change the nature of existing threats, across cyber-, physical, and political security," he told AFP.

The common practice, for example, of "phishing" -- sending emails seeded with malware or designed to finagle valuable personal data -- could become far more dangerous, the report detailed.

Currently, attempts at phishing are either generic but transparent -- such as scammers asking for bank details to deposit an unexpected windfall -- or personalised but labour intensive -- gleaming personal data to gain someone's confidence, known as "spear phishing".

"Using AI, it might become possible to do spear phishing at scale by automating a lot of the process" and making it harder to spot, O hEigeartaigh noted.

In the political sphere, unscrupulous or autocratic leaders can already use advanced technology to sift through mountains of data collected from omnipresent surveillance networks to spy on their own people.

"Dictators could more quickly identify people who might be planning to subvert a regime, locate them, and put them in prison before they act," the report said.

Likewise, targeted propaganda along with cheap, highly believable

fake videos have become powerful tools for manipulating public opinion "on previously unimaginable scales".

An indictment handed down by US special prosecutor Robert Mueller last week detailed a vast operation to sow social division in the United States and influence the 2016 presidential election in which so-called "troll farms" manipulated thousands of social network bots, especially on Facebook and Twitter.

Another danger zone on the horizon is the proliferation of drones and robots that could be repurposed to crash autonomous vehicles, deliver missiles, or threaten critical infrastructure to gain ransom.

"Personally, I am particularly worried about autonomous drones being used for terror and automated cyberattacks by both criminals and state groups," said co-author Miles Brundage, a researcher at Oxford University's Future of Humanity Institute.

The report details a plausible scenario in which an office-cleaning SweepBot fitted with a bomb infiltrates the German finance ministry by blending in with other machines of the same make.

The intruding robot behaves normally -- sweeping, cleaning, clearing litter -- until its hidden facial recognition software spots the minister and closes in.

"A hidden explosive device was triggered by proximity, killing the minister and wounding nearby staff," according to the sci-fi storyline.

"This report has imagined what the world could look like in the next five to 10 years," O hEigeartaigh said.

"We live in a world fraught with day-to-day hazards from the misuse of AI, and we need to take ownership of the problems."

The authors called on policy makers and companies to make robot-operating software unhackable, to impose security restrictions on some research, and to consider expanding laws and regulations governing AI development.