

NEWS IN brief

13 killed in Vietnam apartment fire

Thirteen people were killed and several injured when a fire broke out at an apartment complex in Vietnam's southern commercial hub of Ho Chi Minh City early yesterday, authorities said. The fire in the Carina Plaza highrise building started around midnight on the lower floors of the building and soon spread to the upper floors.

US slaps sanctions on Iranians for hacking

The United States yesterday unveiled charges against nine Iranians for their alleged involvement in a massive state-sponsored hacking scheme which targeted hundreds of universities in the US and abroad and stole "valuable intellectual property and data." Ten Iranians were also hit with sanctions along with an Iranian company, the Mabna Institute, which engaged in computer hacking on behalf of Iran's Revolutionary Guards, the US Treasury Department said. Since 2013, the Mabna Institute carried out cyber intrusions into the computer systems of 144 US universities and 176 more in 21 foreign countries, it added.



Catalan separatists face rebellion charges

Spain's Supreme Court yesterday said it would prosecute for "rebellion" 13 Catalan separatists, including ousted leader Carles Puigdemont and his nominated successor, over their role in the region's failed breakaway bid. Judge Pablo Llarena accused Puigdemont, who is in self-imposed exile in Belgium, of organising the independence referendum in October last year despite a ban from Madrid.

APPOINTMENT OF 'THE HAWK'S HAWK' AS US NATIONAL SECURITY ADVISER

Trump 'war cabinet' raises fears

Bolton's move to White House signals aggressive turn on North Korea, Iran, Syria

US President Donald Trump on Thursday named hardline Fox News pundit and former UN ambassador John Bolton as his new national security advisor, ousting embattled army general HR McMaster.

Trump took to Twitter to announce the latest in a cascade of staff changes, one which calls the future of a landmark deal to curb Iran's nuclear program into serious doubt.

Bolton will start his new job on April 9. The announcement came just days after he moved to replace secretary of state Rex Tillerson with another Iran hawk, CIA director Mike Pompeo.

Bolton, a hawkish neoconservative, has advocated war with Iran and a pre-emptive strike on North Korea, and remains an unapologetic supporter of the Iraq War despite the flawed intelligence used to justify the US invasion.

His appointment had been fiercely opposed by many within Trump's inner circle, most notably the coterie of military officers who have experienced the brutality of war first hand.

For many, the concern is that the appointment of Bolton -- exactly the kind of advocate for US overseas intervention that Trump lobbied on the campaign trail -- marks a belligerent turn for the Trump administration that could doom attempts to save the Iran nuclear deal, increase the possibility of a clash with North Korea and ratchet up tensions with Moscow.

Bolton drew praise from some Republican

senators, including South Carolina's Lindsey Graham, who said the Yale law school graduate will do "an outstanding job," but a veterans group called the appointment "frightening" and advocacy groups warned that Trump was assembling a "war cabinet."

The national security adviser's job is to act as a synthesizer of security issues across the administration, coordinating and summarising for the commander in chief the various policy sugges-



John Bolton HR McMaster

tions that come from the Pentagon, the State Department and other agencies.

A national security adviser offers his or her own analysis, and then conveys the president's policy decisions back down the chain and makes sure they're carried out.

But many express doubt that Bolton is wired to put aside his own views and offer the kind of impartial summary of diverse policy views that would help a president weigh all options, instead of emphasising the more hawkish positions he prefers.

"I think my long-standing hope for a fix to the Iran deal just died," Mark Dubowitz, the CEO of Foundation for Defense of Democracies, tweeted Thursday.

His appointment also unnerved some US's allies in Asia.

"This is worrisome news," said Kim Hackyong, conservative lawmaker and head of the national defence committee of South Korea's parliament. "North Korea and the United States need to have dialogue but this only fuels worries over whether the talks will ever happen."

Democratic Senator Edward Markey described the appointment as "a grave danger to the American people and a clear message from President Trump that he is gearing up for military conflict."

"Let there be no mistake -- there is no war for regime change, anywhere, that John Bolton wasn't for," said Jon Soltz, an Iraq War veteran who serves as chair of VoteVets. "We are undoubtedly closer to a war in Korea now, and a war with Iran, with John Bolton as national security adviser and with Mike Pompeo as the nominee for secretary of state."

The Eurasia Group, a risk consultancy, said Bolton's appointment makes US foreign policy "America First on Steroids."

"This very hardline, strident figure will stoke President Donald Trump's hardest-line instincts. Bolton will want to implement very tough policies, and limit Trump's use of them as negotiating tactics," it said.

Bolton, it added, is "the hawk's hawk."

Russian strikes kill 37 in E Ghouta

AFP, Harasta

Russian air strikes killed 37 civilians in the Arbin area of the shrinking rebel enclave of Eastern Ghouta near Damascus overnight, the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights said yesterday.

Eastern Ghouta's six-year rebel rule was in its dying moments as fighters evacuated one of the Syrian enclave's three remaining pockets and a deal was reached for another.

A blistering regime assault since February 18 on the last opposition bastion outside Damascus has splintered remaining rebel territory into three shrinking pockets, each held by different factions.

Damascus and its ally Moscow have implemented a "leave or die" strategy with deadly air strikes on the enclave.

For the second consecutive day yesterday, rebels quit one pocket for while state media said a deal had been reached for the evacuation of a second one.

The deal provides for "the transfer of nearly 7,000 people, fighters and their families" from an area in the south of the enclave held by the Islamist group Faylaq al-Rahman, state television said.

It will empty a southern area of Eastern Ghouta that includes the towns of Zamalka, Arbin and Ain Tarma, it said, with evacuations set to begin at 9:00 am (0700 GMT) today.

A deal, struck with another group for the smaller pocket of Harasta, began on Thursday and talks are under way for the third and final pocket, which includes Douma.

Faylaq al-Rahman group, which agreed to a ceasefire late Thursday following another wave of deadly air strikes, did not immediately confirm the agreement.

More than 1,600 civilians have died in Eastern Ghouta since the regime launched a blistering assault on the last rebel bastion near Damascus on February 18.

SYRIA WAR
Another Ghouta rebel group agrees evacuation deal

Russia arming Afghan Taliban

Says top US general

IANS, Washington

General John Nicholson, the head of the US forces in Afghanistan, has claimed that Russia is supporting and supplying arms to the Afghan Taliban.

In an interview to the BBC, General Nicholson said he had seen "destabilising activity" by the Russians and weapons were smuggled by Moscow across the Tajik border to the Taliban.

However, citing lack of evidence, Russia has denied such US allegations in the past.

"We see a narrative that's being used that grossly exaggerates the number of Islamic State group fighters here," General Nicholson said.

"This narrative then is used as a justification for the Russians to legitimise the actions of Taliban and provide some degree of support to the Taliban," he was quoted as saying by the BBC yesterday.

He also claimed that Russia conducted a series of exercises on the Afghan border with Tajikistan. "These are counter terrorism exercises, but we've seen the Russian patterns before: they bring in large amounts of equipment and then they leave."

Russia, meanwhile, denies providing weapons or funds to the Taliban but has admitted that it has had talks with the militant group. It justified that on the basis of the shared opposition to the Islamic State group, which has been trying to establish a base in the north-east of Afghanistan.



A Syrian child lies on a hospital bed next to another wounded man after being treated for injuries sustained during air strikes in Zamalka, one of the few remaining rebel-held pockets in Eastern Ghouta, on the outskirts of the Syrian capital Damascus. Picture was taken on Thursday. PHOTO: AFP

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ROW OVER EX-SPY POISONING

EU unites behind UK Mulls expelling Russian diplomats as Kremlin regrets decision

AFP, Moscow

Russia yesterday accused Britain of trying to force London's allies to take "confrontational steps" after EU members states decided to recall the bloc's envoy from Moscow and mulled further diplomatic action over a nerve attack row.

Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov slammed Britain for garnering EU support over the poisoning of a former double agent, suggesting that London's focus was now on making "the crisis with Russia as deep as possible".

At a summit in Brussels, EU leaders united behind British Prime Minister Theresa May in blaming Russia for the nerve agent attack on former spy Sergei Skripal and his daughter in England, and agreed to recall their ambassador to Moscow for consultations.

EU states are now considering whether to follow Britain's lead in expelling Russian diplomats and even take other steps, with Lithuania and France among those indicating willingness to take action.

President Vladimir Putin's spokesman Dmitry Peskov said Russia did not know what "precise information the British side used when it discussed the topic of the Skripals with its colleagues".

Russia's top diplomat Lavrov for his part slammed Britain, saying its top officials "are feverishly trying to force allies to take confrontational steps".

"We still do not see any facts," state news agency RIA Novosti quoted him as saying on a visit to Hanoi.

EU agrees Brexit talks guidelines

AFP, Brussels

European Union leaders yesterday laid the ground for the next phase of Brexit talks after British Prime Minister Theresa May urged them to seize a "new dynamic" in the negotiations.

The 27 leaders meeting in Brussels adopted negotiating guidelines for talks on the future relationship with Britain and approved a deal for a 21-month transition period.

Britain is leaving the EU in March 2019, but negotiators this week agreed a transition deal that effectively maintains the relationship -- although London will have no voting rights -- until December 2020.

Britain's May, who attended the summit before leaving early yesterday when the talks turned to Brexit, welcomed the approval, saying the transition deal brought "certainty".

However, there are some key issues that still need to be resolved as part of the agreement that led to the transition deal, notably the future of the Irish border after Brexit.

"I looked at him and

Trump tried to pay for sex

Says Ex-Playboy model

AFP, Washington

A Playboy model who says she had a months-long affair with Donald Trump a decade before his election as president told CNN that he tried to pay her for sex.

Karen McDougal wants to be released from a \$150,000 deal she made in 2016 with American Media Inc, the company that owns the National Enquirer tabloid, an agreement she alleges was aimed at keeping her story under wraps.

"After we had been intimate, he tried to pay me. And I actually didn't know how to take that," McDougal told CNN's Anderson Cooper of her first sexual encounter with Trump, which she said took place in a bungalow at the Beverly Hills Hotel.

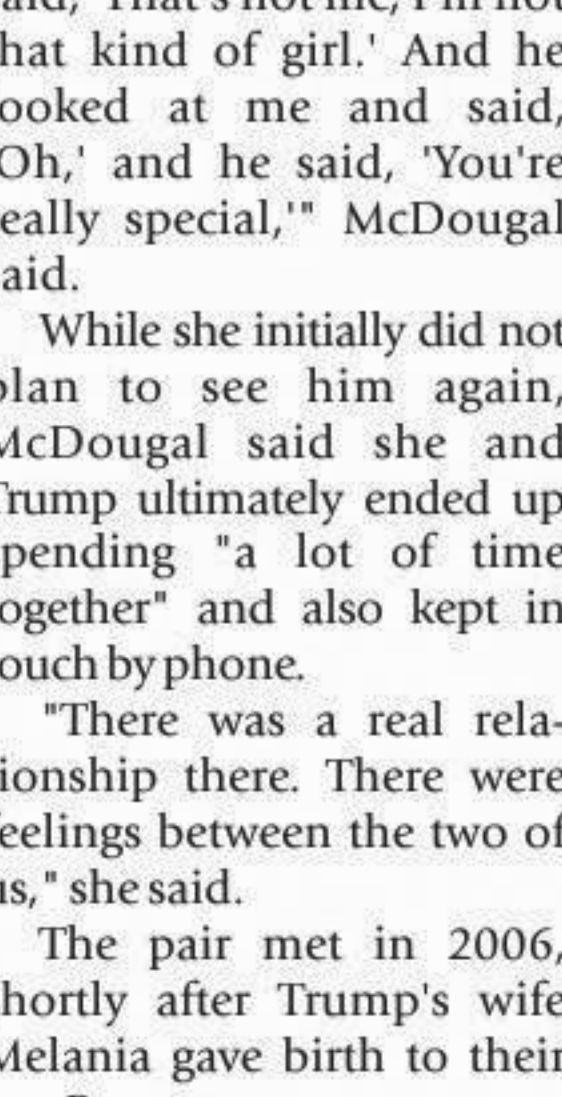
"I looked at him and

said, 'That's not me, I'm not that kind of girl.' And he looked at me and said, 'Oh,' and he said, 'You're really special,'" McDougal said.

While she initially did not plan to see him again, McDougal said she and Trump ultimately ended up spending "a lot of time together" and also kept in touch by phone.

"There was a real relationship there. There were feelings between the two of us," she said.

The pair met in 2006, shortly after Trump's wife Melania gave birth to their son Barron.



Crown Prince Salman bragged Kushner 'in his pocket': report

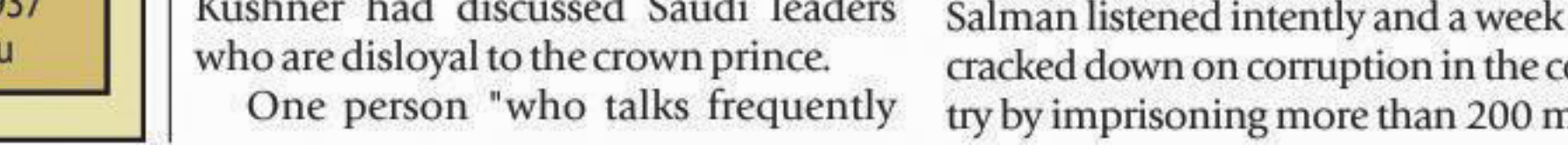
US approves proposed \$1bn arms sale to Saudi Arabia

REUTERS, Cnn

Jared Kushner, tasked by his boss and father-in-law, President Donald Trump, with mediating Middle East peace early in the administration, has so far staked a bulk of those efforts on the ascendant Saudi crown prince, Mohammed bin Salman.

And according to a new report, the Saudi prince -- known casually by his initials, MBS -- took advantage of that power.

When Kushner, Trump's senior aide, made an unannounced trip to Riyadh last year, the Intercept -- citing three sources -- reported Wednesday, MBS told confidants after the meeting that Kushner had discussed Saudi leaders who are disloyal to the crown prince. One person "who talks frequently to confidants of the Saudi and Emirati rulers" told the Intercept that MBS bragged to United Arab Emirates Crown Prince Mohammed bin Zayed that Kushner was "in his pocket."



Members of the country's ruling class inside the confines of the Ritz-Carlton hotel in Riyadh, charging each with corruption. A spokesman for Kushner declined to comment on the allegation. Meanwhile, the US State Department on Thursday said it had approved the possible sale to Saudi Arabia of TOW anti-tank missiles, part of a bigger \$1 billion package that also includes helicopter maintenance and spare parts for military vehicles. Saudi Arabia requested to buy 6,600 TOW missiles and an additional 96 for training for a total of \$670 million, the State Department said in a statement. In addition, the State Department said it had also approved the possible sale worth \$300 million of parts for Saudi Arabia's fleet of Abrams tanks and armored vehicles.

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