

Trump scaring critics into silence: Brennan

The ex-CIA chief hits back after the US president revokes his security clearance

REUTERS, Washington

Former CIA Director John Brennan said yesterday he would not be silenced by Donald Trump, a day after the US president revoked the Obama-era official's security clearance and said the move was directly tied to the ongoing Russia investigation.

The Republican president said in a statement on Wednesday that he revoked Brennan's authorisation for making what he called "unfounded and outrageous allegations" about his administration and was evaluating whether to strip clearances from other former top officials. Brennan and the others have been critical of the president.

Trump later told the Wall Street Journal his decision was connected to the ongoing federal probe into alleged Russian interference in the 2016 election and allegedly collusion by his presidential campaign. "I call it the rigged witch hunt, (it) is a sham," Trump said in an interview with the newspaper on Wednesday. "And these people led it."

"It's something that had to be done,"



Trump added.

The president has denied any collusion. Russia has said it did not interfere, contrary to the US intelligence community's findings.

Brennan, who led the Central Intelligence Agency under Democratic President Barack Obama, yesterday called Trump's denials "hogwash" and vowed not to be silenced.

"The only questions that remain are whether the collusion that took place constituted criminally liable conspiracy, whether obstruction of justice occurred to cover up any collusion or conspiracy, and how many members of 'Trump Incorporated' attempted to defraud the government by laundering and concealing the movement of money into their pockets," Brennan wrote in an op-ed published in the New York Times.

Former US Director of National Intelligence James Clapper, another critic whose clearance Trump said he might target, cautioned that Brennan was expressing "an informed opinion." It remained up to Special Counsel Robert Mueller, who is leading the probe, to make a final conclusion, Clapper said.



Turkey 'ready to talk' with US to solve row

Says foreign minister

ALJAZEERA ONLINE

Turkey has said it is willing to speak with the US to resolve an ongoing dispute between the two Nato allies, as the White House appeared to reach up pressure on Ankara.

Speaking to a group of foreign ambassadors in Ankara on Wednesday evening, Foreign Minister Mevlut Cavusoglu appeared to extend an olive branch to US President Donald Trump's administration.

"Despite everything, we are ready to talk about everything to solve the existing problems as equal partners," he said. "I speak openly but only on one condition - no threatening, no dictating."

Cavusoglu also called on the US to "take into account our frustrations" with American policies.

His conciliatory remarks came as Washington said that tariffs on Turkish steel and aluminium were unrelated to the case of Andrew Brunson, a Christian evangelical pastor held in Turkey on terrorism charges, and would remain even if he were to be released.

"The tariffs that are in place still would not be removed with the release of Pastor Brunson," White House press secretary Sara Huckabee Sanders said.

"The tariffs are specific to national security," she said, without specifying the nature of the national security concerns.

Last week, Trump announced the doubling of tariffs on Turkish steel and aluminium to 50 and 20 percent respectively.

It followed the imposition of sanctions on two Turkish government ministers earlier this month that Sanders said were directly related to Brunson and "others that we consider are being held unfairly".

As well as Brunson, Turkey is holding US consular staff who are Turkish nationals as well as US citizens.

INCITEMENT TO PROTESTS

Vietnam activist gets 20 yrs in jail

AFP, Hanoi

An outspoken activist in Vietnam was jailed for 20 years yesterday for allegedly calling for an election boycott and inciting environmental protests in the one-party state that has little tolerance for dissent.

The communist country is notorious for jailing its critics but the harsh sentence was the heaviest in years as a hardline administration in charge since 2016 intensifies its crackdown against activists.

Le Dinh Luong was convicted for "attempting to overthrow the state" in a half-day trial against the 52-year-old who appeared gaunt and grey-haired in court in central Nghe An province.

The swift trial was conducted with none of his witnesses allowed to testify, which the court mysteriously blamed on "health reasons", his lawyer Ha Huy Son told AFP.

"I asked for a cancellation because witnesses were not allowed to speak, but they were not brought to court," Son said, confirming the 20-year jail term.

A prominent activist in the region, Luong was accused of posting clips online inciting people to join months-long protests following a toxic leak by a Taiwanese steel firm that caused mass fish deaths in 2016.

Luong was also blamed for calling for an election boycott that year, according to state media.

His wife told AFP yesterday he had been unfairly targeted for trying to help people.

"My husband is innocent. He has only acted on behalf of the poor and victims of injustices," Nguyen Thi Quy said.

Human Rights Watch slammed the charges against Luong ahead of yesterday's verdict.

"Locking people up for simply exercising their rights isn't working, and more activists will continue to step forward," deputy Asia director Phil Robertson said.



A girl poses for a photo on a giant waterlily leaf during an annual leaf-sitting event in Taipei, Taiwan, yesterday.



Students place candles around a painting featuring India's former prime minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee to pay him homage in Mumbai, yesterday.

'Right man in wrong party'

OUR CORRESPONDENT, New Delhi

"The right man in the wrong party"—that was how Atal Bihari Vajpayee, who died here yesterday after battling long illnesses, was often described by his political rivals and the Indian media.

And there are good reasons for this. His views on some issues were often at variance with most of the top leaders in his Bharatiya Janata Party, including his close friend Lal Krishna Advani with whom he often used to watch movies in their formative years.

For instance, Vajpayee never agreed with the RSS that India's history should be re-written to rid of alleged Leftist bias. Secondly, he was among the few BJP leaders who had unequivocally condemned the demolition of the Babri mosque on December 6, 1992 and described it as the saddest day of his life. He at times tried to appeal to Muslims and other minority groups and he was a reassuring figure for India's mainly secular establishment.

Vajpayee was not merely a politician but a statesman who strode the



Indian political scene like a colossus for close to five decades.

One of India's most charismatic leaders whose oratory was legendary, Vajpayee would be remembered for making bold initiatives reaching far beyond his BJP's nationalist political agenda. One of the key components of his oratory was the ready wit and ability to laugh at himself.

Once asked about his bachelor status, Vajpayee jocularly told a group of children that he hadn't got married because no woman was willing to marry him. His love for poetry, music and cinema added to

his image as a charming and multi-dimensional personality.

Vajpayee, who was India's longest-serving PM outside of the once-dominant Congress party, was often described as the moderate face of the BJP and had a wider appeal than his more hawkish colleagues.

Undeterred by party hawks who accused him of embarking on a charm offensive to Pakistan in 1999, Vajpayee as PM undertook a bus ride to Lahore from Delhi, flagging off the first passenger service between India to Pakistan in February 1999.

On India's eastern front, he

unleashed another bus diplomacy by jointly launching with Sheikh Hasina the Dhaka-Kolkata bus service, the first between India and Bangladesh, in June 1999.

Vajpayee never hesitated to describe Indira Gandhi as Goddess Durga for her role in Bangladesh Liberation War in 1971. Just four years down the line, during the Emergency declared by Indira Gandhi in 1975, he was jailed as were most prominent Opposition leaders.

To secure the backing of more secular groups for his coalition, Vajpayee had to put on the back burner some of the basic ideological tenets of BJP like uniform civil code, Ram temple construction in Ayodhya and special constitutional status for Jammu and Kashmir.

It was a reflection of his politics and statesmanship that politicians across the spectrum rushed to Delhi to pay their respects to the veteran. When he was brought to AIIMS hospital in June, one of the first to check on him had been Rahul Gandhi of the Congress.

ATAL BIHARI VAJPAYEE

Three times PM, a great orator

NDTV ONLINE

Born on December 25, 1924 in Gwalior, Vajpayee was elected 10 times to the Lok Sabha. He got an early start in public life when he got involved in the Quit India Movement of 1942 and was arrested for it. He was already a member of the Rashtriya Swayamsewak Sangh (RSS) since 1939, and after finishing Masters in Political Science from Kanpur, he began to work full-time for the RSS.

One of the founding members of the Jan Sangh in 1951, Vajpayee became its president in 1968 upon the death of Deendayal Upadhyaya, its co-founder. The movement against the Emergency declared in 1975 saw Vajpayee and the Jan Sangh join forces with the Janata Party, and in the 1977 polls, he was elected to the Lok Sabha and appointed as Minister for External Affairs.

In his 47 years in parliament, the former prime minister captivated the nation with his dry wit and oratory, proving that no one could work the room quite like he could.

"Satta ka khel chalega (the game of power will go on). Governments will come and go. Parties will be made and unmade. This country should survive, its democracy should survive," Vajpayee said in a speech before his government faced a trust vote in May 1996. His 13-day government fell soon after.

"We bow to majority and we will not rest until we fulfill our national mission. Mister Speaker, here comes my resignation," Vajpayee said in the memorable speech that remains hugely popular on YouTube.

Vajpayee, who rose to spectacular heights, was no stranger to rock-bottom in his political journey. In 1984, after Indira Gandhi's assassination, the BJP that he set up with his long-time friend and colleague LK Advani managed to win just two seats in the 545-member parliament. Vajpayee also lost in Gwalior, his birthplace.

In the 1990s, the party captured the nation's attention with the "Ram Janmabhoomi movement" for a temple at the site of the 16th century Babri mosque in Ayodhya that many Hindus believe was built on the birthplace of Lord Ram.

Vajpayee was the only voice in his party who called it the "worst miscalculation" when karsewaks or volunteers razed the mosque in 1992.

Having steadily raised the score since 1984, Vajpayee formed his third government in 1999. It was to last a full term.

Sometime after the Kargil conflict ended in 1999, some BJP leaders suggested that the prime minister approve their proposal to honour Atal Bihari Vajpayee with the country's highest civilian award for the nuclear tests. Atal Bihari Vajpayee, the prime minister, would have none of it.

The Bharat Ratna did come to him 16 years later. By then, he had retreated from politics and was barely ever seen in public.

After he lost power in 2004, he still attended Lok Sabha but gradually withdrew from public life. A stroke in 2009 saw him withdraw completely.



MANAFORT TRIAL

The jury begins deliberations

AFP, Alexandria

The jury began deliberations yesterday in the tax and bank fraud trial of Donald Trump's former campaign chief Paul Manafort after 12 days of riveting testimony featuring hidden bank accounts, betrayal and lavish spending on homes, cars and clothes.

Judge TS Ellis delivered final instructions to the six-man, six-woman jury before they retired to consider the 18 charges facing the once high-flying Republican political consultant.

"You may deliberate as long or as little as you like" Ellis told the jurors before they filed out of the federal courtroom in Alexandria, Virginia, clutching their black notebooks.

Manafort, 69, is accused of providing fraudulent statements to secure bank loans and failing to pay taxes on tens of millions of dollars he earned while advising Russian-backed politicians in Ukraine between 2005 and 2014.

The case stems from Special Counsel Robert Mueller's investigation into Russian interference in the 2016 presidential election.

Manafort is not charged with any crimes related to his brief time as Trump's campaign chief, but the trial is seen as an important test for the Mueller probe.

NORTH KOREA SANCTIONS BREACH

US blacklists Russian, Chinese companies

REUTERS, Washington

The United States imposed sanctions on a Russian port service agency and Chinese firms for aiding North Korean ships and selling alcohol and tobacco to Pyongyang in breach of US sanctions.

The US Treasury said in a statement on Wednesday that China-based Dalian Sun Moon Star International Logistics Trading Co Ltd and its Singapore-based affiliate SINSMS Pte Ltd had netted more than \$1 billion a year by exporting alcohol and cigarette products to North Korea.

The department also sanctioned Russian-based Profinet Pte Ltd and its director general, Vasili Aleksandrovich Kolchanov, for providing port services on at least six occasions to North Korean-flagged ships.

Kolchanov was personally involved in North Korea-related deals and interacted directly with North Korean representatives in Russia, the department said.

"The tactics that these entities based in China, Singapore, and Russia are using to attempt to evade sanctions are prohibited under US law, and

all facets of the shipping industry have a responsibility to abide by them or expose themselves to serious risks," US Treasury Secretary Steven Mnuchin said in the statement.

The sanctions mandate that no US citizen can deal with any of those designated in the order, and any of their properties in the United States "must be blocked", the Treasury said.

The United States has been pressuring North Korea via sanctions to give up its nuclear weapons programme.

China's Foreign Ministry said in a statement that Beijing has always strictly enforced UNSC resolutions on North Korea and did not allow Chinese firms to engage in activities that violated them.

"At the same time, China's position on opposing countries enacting unilateral sanctions on other countries and 'long-armed jurisdiction' is consistent and clear," it added.

China's official Xinhua news agency said the US needed to back off pressuring North Korea if it was serious about wanting lasting peace on the Korean Peninsula.