

Trump denies he demanded Assad's killing

AFP, Washington

US President Donald Trump denied Wednesday having discussed wanting to kill Syria's President Bashar al-Assad, a key claim in a new book by Washington Post journalist Bob Woodward.

"That was never even contemplated," Trump told reporters in the Oval Office as he met with the emir of Kuwait.

Trump's comments came as he warned Damascus that "the world is watching" Syrian troops massing on the edges of the rebel-held province of Idlib, raising fears of a humanitarian disaster.

"I just tell you that they will hopefully be very, very judicious and careful," Trump said of the Syrian regime.

"Because the world is watching. That cannot be a slaughter. If it's a slaughter, the world is going to be very, very angry. And the United States is going to be very angry, too."

In his new book "Fear: Trump in the White House," Woodward recounts that the president told Defense Secretary Jim Mattis that he wanted to have Assad killed



A displaced Syrian girl who was wounded by shelling sits at a camp in Kafr Lusin near the Bab al-Hawa border crossing with Turkey in the northern part of Syria's rebel-held Idlib, yesterday. PHOTO: AFP

NERVE AGENT ATTACK ON EX-RUSSIAN SPY

Putin to blame: Britain

Moscow says London's accusation 'unacceptable'

AFP, London

Britain pointed the finger at Russian President Vladimir Putin yesterday for a nerve agent attack on a former Russian spy in England -- a charge that Moscow rejected as "unacceptable".

London has accused two members of Russian military intelligence of using Novichok to try to kill former Russian double agent Skripal and his daughter Yulia in March.

Security Minister Ben Wallace said that Putin was "ultimately" responsible for the poisoning in the southwestern city of Salisbury -- prompting an angry response from Moscow.

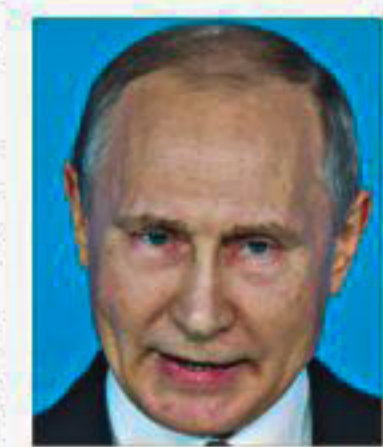
"For us any sort of accusation regarding the Russian leadership is unacceptable," Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov told journalists.

Britain has previously accused Russia of orchestrating the attack, but Moscow denies any involvement and insists it is ready to cooperate in any investigation.

"Neither Russia's top leadership nor those in the ranks below, nor any official representatives have anything to do with the events in Salisbury," Peskov said.

London and its allies expelled dozens of Russian diplomats after the poisoning, prompting a tit-for-tat response from Moscow and plunging relations to a new low.

In a major new development, Prime Minister Theresa May announced Wednesday that police



had issued international arrest warrants for the two suspects, identified as Alexander Petrov and Ruslan Boshirov.

She said they were members of Russian military intelligence and acted on orders from a "high level", but Wallace went further when asked if Putin had responsibility.

"Ultimately he does in so far as he is the president of the Russian Federation and it is his government that controls, funds and directs the military intelligence, the GRU, via his ministry of defence," Wallace told BBC radio.

He added: "I don't think anyone can ever say that Mr Putin isn't in control of his state... And the GRU is without doubt not rogue."

"It is led, linked to both the senior members of the Russian general staff and the defence minister, and through that into the Kremlin and the president's office."

Britain will brief the UN Security Council later yesterday on its latest findings, with the meeting due to open around 11:30am (1530 GMT).

The US ambassador to London, Woody Johnson, and the Australian government have offered support for Britain's stance against Russia.

The United States imposed fresh sanctions on Russia in the wake of the Salisbury attack. Britain is meanwhile looking at working with EU allies on a sanctions regime relating to chemical weapons use, officials said.

Hundreds of civilians flee Idlib

Syria, Russia hit rebel stronghold as west, Turkey fear of 'bloodbath'

AFP, Idlib

Hundreds of Syrian civilians fled Idlib province yesterday as the presidents of Russia, Iran and Turkey readied for last-ditch talks on the fate of the last rebel bastion.

Government forces and their allies have been massing around Idlib, where aid groups fear what could be the last major battle of Syria's seven-year civil war may also prove the deadliest.

Western powers have warned against a bloodbath but Damascus and Moscow seem adamant that an offensive is needed to root out the jihadists who dominate the province.

Russia yesterday vowed to continue to kill "terrorists" in Idlib and elsewhere in Syria to bring back peace.

"We have killed, we are killing and we will kill terrorists...whether that be in Aleppo, Idlib or other parts of Syria. Peace must return to Syria," said foreign ministry spokeswoman Maria Zakharova in comments reported by Russian agencies.

"This is a question of our security," she

Russia says 'has killed, will kill terrorists' in Syria



added.

Sporadic bombardment has targeted armed groups on Idlib's fringes in recent days, with fresh Syrian artillery and Russian air bombardment of the southeast of the province yesterday, the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights said.

The attacks prompted terrified residents to flee before a fully-fledged assault gets under way, the monitor said.

"Around 180 families, or some 1,000 people" have fled their homes since Wednesday night towards rebel territory further east, said Observatory head Rami

scrambling to avert an assault from which it has much to lose.

Russia wants Turkey to exert its influence in Idlib to rein in jihadist and other fighters, but Ankara's progress has been slow and HTS remains the strongest force in the province.

"We can work together to render those (radical groups) ineffective. The solution is not to bomb or attack all over Idlib, without any distinction," Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlut Cavusoglu said on Wednesday.

Turkey already hosts three million Syrian refugees and fears a large scale military operation in Idlib will push more over its border.

The fate of the province, which has been used as a relief valve for tens of thousands of fighters and civilians evacuated from other parts of the country following surrender deals, could be decided in Tehran today.

The presidents of Russia, Iran and Turkey -- the three main power brokers in Syria -- are due to meet as part of the ongoing Astana process aimed at ending the conflict.

Four dead in Cincinnati bank shooting

AFP, Chicago

A gunman opened fire at a bank building in the US city of Cincinnati yesterday, fatally wounding three people before police shot and killed him, authorities said.

The incident occurred after 9:00 am local time (1300 GMT) at the lobby and loading dock of the 30-story Fifth Third Bank building in the city's downtown business district.

"An individual entered the loading dock area, began firing shots," Cincinnati Police Chief Eliot Isaac said at a news conference.

The gunman then went to the lobby of the building, where police engaged the suspect in a shootout and killed him, the chief said.

"At least three or four of our officers did engage the suspect," Isaac said.

Three people died of their wounds and two others remained hospitalized.

The shooter's identity or motive were not released.

Cincinnati Mayor John Cranley said the shooting could have been "much worse," had it not been for the quick response of police officers in the area.

"He was actively shooting innocent victims it appears," Cranley said. "Police were there within seconds, literally."

One unnamed eyewitness, a construction worker, told WLTW television that he heard at least six gunshots before police arrived.

"I just seen people running out of the building," the eyewitness said.

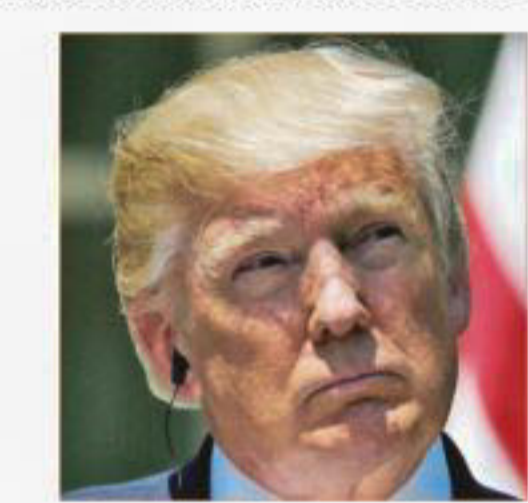
"There's guys with suits laying on the ground, hiding behind big flowerpots," he said.

The office tower where the shooting occurred remained on lockdown more than an hour after the incident, as police swept the building.

Police cordoned off a portion of the city's downtown.

"There was a senseless act of gun violence on the streets of Cincinnati this morning," Ohio Governor John Kasich said on Twitter.

"I commend the law enforcement, fire and (emergency medical) personnel who swiftly responded to the scene and share my deepest sympathies with the innocent victims of this violent attack."



after he carried out a chemical attack on civilians in April 2017.

"Let's f*****g kill him! Let's go in. Let's kill the f*****g lot of them," Woodward quotes Trump as saying.

He writes that Mattis told the president he would "get right on it" but then came back later with plans for a more limited air strike.

Trump and White House aides have assailed the book as a full of "made up" stories, and in a tweet on Wednesday morning the president wondered why Congress doesn't change the laws on libel.

"The book means nothing. It's a work of fiction," Trump told reporters in the Oval Office, noting that Mattis and White House chief of staff John Kelly had both issued statements rejecting the book's account.

YEMEN WAR

Uncertainty looms over peace talks

AFP, Geneva

Scheduled peace talks in Geneva between Yemen's government and Huthi rebels hung in the balance yesterday as both sides traded ultimatums and a UN envoy scrambled to mediate.

The rebel delegation, still in Sanaa, insisted the UN must meet a list of conditions before it will travel to Switzerland, prompting government representatives already in Geneva to give the Huthis a 24-hour deadline or it "will leave".

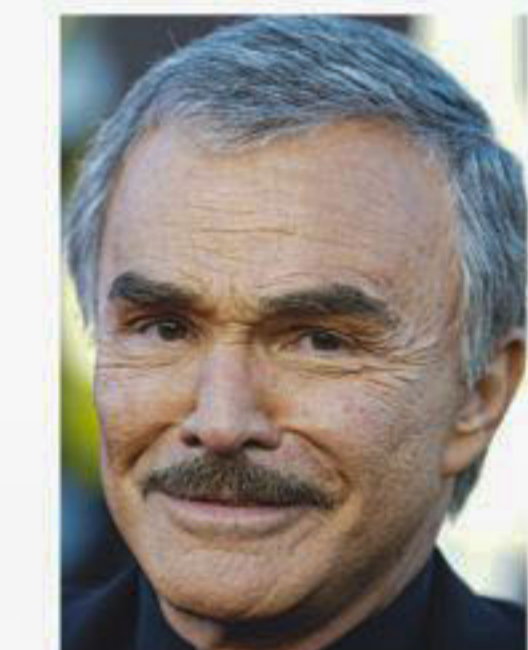
The Geneva talks are meant to be the first since 2016, when 108 days of negotiations between the government of Abedrabbo Mansour Hadi and rebels failed to yield a deal.

The Huthis control the capital Sanaa and much of northern Yemen, while a Saudi-led coalition which backs Hadi's government controls the country's airspace.

Led by Foreign Minister Khaled al-Yamani, a Yemen government delegation arrived in Switzerland on Wednesday.

But on what was meant to be the first day of talks, the rebels issued an ultimatum from Sanaa yesterday, saying they would not join the talks until the UN meets conditions that include transporting their wounded to Oman for treatment and a guarantee they will be allowed to return home after the talks.

The conflict has left nearly 10,000 people dead and pushed the Arab world's most impoverished country to the brink of famine.



Star Burt Reynolds passes away

REUTERS

Burt Reynolds, whose good looks and charm made him one of Hollywood's most popular actors as he starred in films such as "Deliverance," "The Longest Yard" and "Smokey and the Bandit" in the 1970s and '80s, died yesterday at the age of 82, The Hollywood Reporter said, citing his manager.

At the peak of his career, Reynolds was one of the most bankable actors in the film industry, reeling off a series of box office smashes until a career downturn in the mid-1980s. He rebounded in 1997 with a nomination for a best supporting actor Academy Award for "Boogie Nights" and won an Emmy Award for his role in the 1990-1994 TV series "Evening Shade."

With his trademark mustache, rugged looks and macho aura, he was a leading male sex symbol of the 1970s. He appeared naked reclining on a bearskin rug with his arm strategically positioned for the sake of modesty - in a centerfold in the women's magazine "Cosmopolitan" in 1972.

Reynolds' personal life sometimes overshadowed his movies, with marriages that ended in divorce to actresses Loni Anderson and Judy Carne and romances with others, including Sally Field and Dinah Shore.



US Supreme Court nominee Brett Kavanaugh prepares to testify during the third day of his confirmation hearing before the Senate Judiciary Committee on Capitol Hill in Washington, yesterday. Kavanaugh raised questions as a White House aide more than a decade ago about whether the 1973 high court ruling legalizing abortion was settled law, the New York Times reported yesterday, citing leaked emails. PHOTO: REUTERS

Nauru leader demands China apology over 'crazy' envoy

AFP, Yaren

Nauru's president has demanded China apologise for a top diplomat's "crazy" behaviour at the Pacific Islands Forum and lashed out at Beijing's "arrogant" presence in the region.

"They're not our friends. They just need us for their own purposes," President Baron Waqa told reporters.

"Sorry, but I have to be strong on this because no one is to come and dictate things to us," said Waqa, whose country backs self-ruling and democratic Taiwan over arch-rival China in their battle for diplomatic recognition.

This year's annual Pacific summit, which wraps up in Nauru yesterday, has been one of the most contentious in the event's 49-year history.

The diplomatic spat pits Nauru -- with a population of 11,000 and an area of just 21 square kilometres (eight square miles) -- against the Asian superpower.

It erupted on Tuesday when the head of China's delegation Du Qiwen attempted to address a meeting but Waqa refused to let him speak until island leaders had finished.

The Chinese delegation then stormed out, with Du reportedly striding around the room to emphasize his displeasure before leaving.

"Would he behave like that in front of his own president? I doubt it," Waqa said at a press conference late Wednesday. He's not even a minister and he's demanding to be recognised and to speak before the prime minister of Tuvalu. Is he crazy?"

China rejected his calls for an apology, instead calling on Nauru to reflect on its actions.

"I want to sternly warn Nauru, and whom ever is behind this farce: the 'one China' principle is an unstopable historical trend," said foreign ministry spokeswoman Hua Chunying at a regular press briefing.

"It should stop this unreasonable fuss and stop humiliating itself."



ALLEGED STIFLING OF FREE SPEECH AND POLITICAL BIAS

US to probe tech giants

AFP, Washington

President Donald Trump's administration warned Wednesday of a possible legal crackdown on big technology companies over competition or political bias, in a bombshell announcement that came as social media executives were defending their policies before lawmakers.

The Justice Department statement appeared to escalate a war between the administration and Silicon Valley after a series of attacks by Trump claiming tech firms were biased against conservatives.

According to the statement, Attorney General Jeff Sessions will convene a meeting of state attorneys general later this month "to discuss a growing concern that these companies may be hurting competition and intentionally stifling the free exchange of ideas on their platforms."

The suggestions of legal or regulatory action caught many tech industry observers by surprise and came as law-

makers were holding hearings on foreign influence campaigns on social media and "transparency."

Daniel Castro, of the Information Technology and Innovation Foundation, said the intent of the statement was not clear, but that it was worrisome.

"Social media platforms have the right to determine what types of legal speech they will permit on their platforms," Castro told AFP.

"The federal government should not use the threat of law enforcement to limit companies from exercising this right. In particular, law enforcement should not threaten social media companies with unfounded investigations."

Legal analysts have noted the government would have little recourse against any political bias even if proven because of constitutional free speech guarantees.

While antitrust concerns against Google and Facebook are to be expected, Eric Goldman of the High Tech Law Institute at Santa Clara

University said it would be troublesome to use antitrust law as a guise for regulating speech.

"This (statement) makes me think antitrust is not the real goal, that the real goal is censorship," Goldman said.

"This could be broad action by the government to try to subvert the First Amendment."

The administration statement came at the conclusion of a Senate Intelligence Committee hearing at which Twitter chief executive Jack Dorsey and Facebook chief operating officer Sheryl Sandberg testified.

Dorsey said the messaging service was set up to function as a "public square" but had failed to deal with "abuse, harassment, troll armies, propaganda through bots."

Sandberg repeated Facebook's acknowledgements about failing to crack down on influence campaigns stemming from Russia that interfered with the 2016 US presidential election.