



Migrants, part of a caravan of thousands trying to reach the US, look through the border fence between Mexico and the United States, in Tijuana, Mexico on Wednesday. Hundreds of Central Americans arrived at the United States's southern border Wednesday, defying threats from US, as the rest of a migrant caravan dramatically accelerated its pace to join them.

Allies owe each other respect

Macron tells Trump

AFP, Paris

President Emmanuel Macron said Wednesday that "allies owe each other respect", after he was assailed on Twitter by US President Donald Trump after his visit to France for World War I commemorations.

"I think he's doing this for American politics," Macron said in a televised interview on board France's Charles de Gaulle aircraft carrier in the Mediterranean Sea.

"At every crucial moment in our history, we have been allies," he said citing France's role in America's independence fight as well as US participation in two world wars and the joint fight against jihadists after the September 11, 2001 attacks.

"And allies owe each other respect, and so I don't want to hear all the rest," he said.

"I think that's what the French expect from me, not to respond to tweets but to remain committed to pursuing this important history," he added.

Macron apparently drew Trump's ire by starkly rejecting nationalism during the WWI ceremony at the Arc de Triomphe last Sunday, an implicit critique of the "America First" policies which have led Trump to pull out of several key international agreements.

On Tuesday, Trump fired off a caustic series of tweets against his weekend host and renewed his frequent charge that America's European allies in NATO spend too little on defence.

"The problem is that Emmanuel suffers from a very low Approval Rating in France, 26%, and an unemployment rate of almost 10%. He was just trying to get onto another subject," Trump posted.

But Macron said the flap would not shake the strong cooperation between the two countries, in particular their joint military actions, in particular against jihadist terrorism.

Republicans block Senate bid to protect Mueller probe

AFP, Washington

Republican leaders on Wednesday blocked a bipartisan US Senate effort to protect special counsel Robert Mueller, leaving his Russia investigation exposed amid new moves interpreted as threats to the probe.

Lawmakers across the political spectrum have spoken out about the need to maintain the integrity of the investigation into Moscow's interference in the 2016 US elections.

But one week after Trump sacked attorney general Jeff Sessions and installed the ousted official's chief of staff Matthew Whitaker as acting attorney general, Senate Republican leaders refused to allow a vote on legislation that would protect Mueller.

Whitaker has publicly criticized the probe, and Democrats fear he could see to bring it to a halt.

When Republican Senator Jeff Flake, a critic of the president, and Democratic Senator Chris Coons introduced their measure and sought a swift unanimous consent vote on the floor, Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell objected.

"The president now has this investigation in his sights and we all know it," Flake told colleagues after McConnell's objection.

"This is not a moment for our national leadership to be weak or irresolute or compromised in any way."

Flake, who is retiring from the Senate next January, said he and Coons will try "again and again" to bring the legislation to the floor.

Flake also threatened to withhold his votes on dozens of judicial nominees awaiting confirmation on the Senate floor or movement in the Judiciary Committee, until there is a floor vote on his Mueller protection bill.

Republicans have repeatedly said they believe Mueller and his investigation are safe.

Given Trump's repeated actions and statements, including declarations that the probe is a witch hunt, Coons said, "why pose this risk, when a simple vote on the floor of the Senate could move this towards enactment?"

ROW OVER BARRING OF REPORTER FROM WHITE HOUSE

Media groups, Fox back CNN

AFP, Washington

Media groups including Fox News joined CNN's legal battle Wednesday to restore the White House pass of a banned chief correspondent, as Donald Trump's administration argued it had a broad right to allow or deny press access to the US president.

Fox, which is controlled by Trump ally Rupert Murdoch and often draws praise from the president, said the revoking of Jim Acosta's pass -- after he locked horns repeatedly with the US leader -- raises concerns over press freedom.

"Fox News supports CNN in its legal effort to regain its White House reporter's press credential," the news channel's president Jay Wallace said in a statement issued hours ahead of a federal court hearing on the case.

"We intend to file an amicus brief with the US District Court. Secret Service passes for working White House journalists should never be weaponized. While we don't condone the growing antagonistic tone by both the president and the press at recent media avails, we do support a free press, access and open exchanges for the American people."

Others backing the CNN arguments in court included the Associated Press, Bloomberg, First Look Media Works, Gannett, the National Press Club Journalism Institute, NBC News, The New York Times, Politico, Press Freedom Defense Fund, EW Scripps Company, USA Today and The Washington Post.

"Whether the news of the day concerns national security, the economy, or the environment, reporters covering the White House must remain free to ask questions," the media groups said in a joint statement.

"It is imperative that independent journalists have access to the president and his activities, and that journalists are not barred for arbitrary reasons."

CNN -- part of the WarnerMedia division of AT&T -- has sued to restore the press pass of Acosta, its chief White House reporter who was barred after a testy exchange with Trump at a White House news conference.

Trump's administration initially said Acosta was banned for inappropriately touching a White House female intern as he struggled to hold on to a microphone. Trump later said journalists might be barred if they were not "respectful."

Free speech activists have warned the case has important implications, and that public officials should not be able to bar access to journalists if they dislike news coverage.

The White House has dismissed CNN's complaint as "grandstanding" and vowed to "vigorously defend" against the lawsuit.



New York Times, Politico, Press Freedom Defense Fund, EW Scripps Company, USA Today and The Washington Post.

No double standards!

Pence says White House media spat incomparable with Myanmar jailings

AFP, Singapore

US Vice President Mike Pence yesterday said there were no double standards at play when he criticised Myanmar for jailing two Reuters journalists, given the White House's own combative relationship with Washington media.

President Donald Trump routinely criticises reporting he dislikes as "fake news" and often labels journalists "enemies of the people".

In the administration's latest spat with the media the White House pulled the credentials of a CNN correspondent, promoting a court challenge by major news networks.

During a summit in Singapore, Pence took Myanmar's de facto leader Aung San Suu Kyi to task for the jailing of two reporters for seven years for breaching the Official Secrets Act.

Wa Lone, 32, and Kyaw Soe Oo, 28, were arrested over their coverage of a massacre of Rohingya men during an army operation last year.

In his Wednesday meeting with Suu Kyi Pence called on the Nobel Peace Prize laureate to pardon the pair, calling their prosecution and jailing "deeply troubling".

The following day, when asked about the White House's own repeated clashes with the media, Pence said the administration has "stood strong on a free and independent press... and defended the freedom of the press on the world stage."

"There is no comparison whatsoever between disagreements over decorum at the White House and the imprisonment of two reports in Myanmar," he told reporters.

Media groups -- including CNN and its arch-rival Fox News -- are taking the revocation of the press pass of correspondent Jim Acosta to court.

The White House has dismissed CNN's complaint as "grandstanding" and vowed to "vigorously defend" against the lawsuit.



WHITE HOUSE RESHUFFLE

Trump pushes out senior advisor after Melania row

AFP, Washington

An angry Donald Trump pushed out a senior advisor Wednesday after First Lady Melania Trump demanded her sacking, with more heads set to roll in a White House reshuffle triggered by infighting and setbacks in the midterm elections.

Melania Trump made the extremely rare demand for deputy national security advisor Mira Ricardel to be fired on Tuesday, saying "she no longer deserves the honor of serving in this White House."

The protocol-busting move followed a falling out that press leaks say was partly linked to a dispute over seating arrangements on the plane that took the first lady for a tour of African countries in October. Ricardel was also reportedly blamed for negative news coverage of Melania Trump.

The first lady at least partially got her way Wednesday when presidential spokeswoman Sarah Sanders announced that Ricardel "departs the White House to transition to a new role within the Administration."

The start to the second half of Donald Trump's first term is enveloped in gloom as the president surveys the damage from the midterms, tension with some of America's closest allies, and now turmoil inside the administration.

The biggest name on the chopping block, according to multiple US media reports, is chief of staff John Kelly.

Nick Ayers, a 36-year-old chief of staff to Vice President Mike Pence and renowned political consultant, is reportedly high on the list to replace Kelly.

Another expected reshuffle casualty is Homeland Security Secretary Kirstjen Nielsen, a Kelly ally who oversees the politically sensitive task of carrying out Trump's crackdown on illegal immigration.



Pro and anti Brexit protesters with their placards, mingle outside the Palace of Westminster in central London yesterday, as inside lawmakers discuss the draft withdrawal agreement negotiated between the European Union and the United Kingdom.

Toll hits 59; 130 still missing

AFP, Paradise

The toll in the deadliest wildfires in recent California history climbed to 59 on Wednesday as authorities released a list of 130 people still missing.

Most of those unaccounted for are from the Butte County town of Paradise, in northern California, which was virtually erased from the map by the so-called "Camp Fire" blaze that erupted last week.

Butte County Sheriff Kory Honea told journalists Wednesday evening that 461 search and rescue personnel and 22 cadaver dogs were involved in the effort to locate those missing and DNA testing was being expedited to identify the victims.

"Beginning Thursday, anyone who believes a family member perished can provide a DNA sample" to the sheriff's office, Honea said.

Paradise, a town of around 26,000 in the foothills of the Sierra Nevada mountains, was popular with retirees and many of those reported missing by the sheriff's office are elderly -- in their 70s, 80s and 90s.

Virtually every home in Paradise, located 80 miles (130 kilometers) north of the state capital Sacramento, was destroyed by the fast-moving fire fueled by high winds.

At least 59 deaths have been reported so far from the devastating wildfires and body recovery teams were going house-to-house with cadaver dogs in Paradise on Wednesday.

Fifty-six deaths have been reported from the "Camp Fire," mostly in Paradise, while three people have died in the "Woolsey Fire."

The "Camp Fire" has ravaged 135,000 acres (54,632 hectares) of land and is 35 percent contained, according to Cal Fire.

It has destroyed some 7,600 homes and 260 commercial properties. The "Woolsey Fire" has razed 97,620 acres (39,505 hectares) and has been 47 percent contained.

CALIFORNIA WILDFIRES



WAR IN YEMEN

Saudi alliance halts Hodeidah attack

AJ JAZEERA ONLINE

The Saudi-UAE military alliance says it is halting its offensive on the western Yemeni city of Hodeidah, after nearly two weeks of fierce air and ground assault to push out Houthi rebels from the strategic city.

A source in the military alliance told the Reuters news agency on Thursday that "the coalition has instructed forces on the ground to halt fighting inside Hodeidah" -- which is the port of entry for most food, aid and commercial goods.

A non-military source with knowledge of the decision said the coalition was responding to international requests for a ceasefire to ensure the Houthis attend planned peace talks.

Between November 3 and 12, there had been more than 200 air attacks on the city, with the fighting killing at least 600 Houthis according to an AFP tally.

A number of countries had recently called for a cessation ahead of renewed UN-led peace efforts to end the war which has pushed Yemen to the brink of famine. Among them were the United States, Britain and France, three countries that provide the coalition with military equipment, intelligence and logistics.

The UAE's Minister of State for Foreign Affairs, Anwar Gargash, said the Emirates supported UN plans to hold peace talks in Sweden by the end of the year.

Yemen's exiled president said late on Wednesday that he backed UN-proposed talks to end the fighting but vowed to "liberate" the port city regardless of the peace process.

US could lose in war with China or Russia: panel

AFP, Washington

The United States is facing a national security and military crisis and could lose in a war against Russia or China, a bipartisan congressional panel warned in a report Wednesday.

Congress had tasked the National Defense Strategy Commission to look at President Donald Trump's sweeping National Defense Strategy (NDS), which highlights a new era of "Great Power competition" with Moscow and Beijing.

The panel, run by a dozen former top Democratic and Republican officials, found that just as the US military faced budget cuts and diminishing military advantages, authoritarian nations like China and Russia are pursuing buildups aimed "at neutralizing US strengths."

"America's military superiority -- the hard-power backbone of its global influence and national security -- has eroded to a dangerous degree," the commission said.

In their report, the panel found America's focus on counter-insurgency operations this century resulted in it slipping in other warfighting areas such as missile defense, cyber and space operations, and anti-surface and anti-submarine warfare.

"Many of the skills necessary to plan for and conduct military operations against capable adversaries -- especially China and Russia -- have atrophied," the report states.

It lambasts "political dysfunction and decisions made by both major political parties," especially budget control measures implemented in 2011.

The commission also said that across Asia and Europe, American influence is being steadily eroded and military balances have shifted in "decidedly adverse" ways that have raised the risk of conflict.

"The US military could suffer unacceptably high casualties and loss of major capital assets in its next conflict," the commission found.

"It might struggle to win, or perhaps lose, a war against China or Russia. The United States is particularly at risk of being overwhelmed should its military be forced to fight on two or more fronts simultaneously."