

FBI probed whether Trump secretly worked for Russia

AFP, Washington Dc

The Federal Bureau of Investigation opened an inquiry in 2017 into whether US President Donald Trump was working on behalf of Russia, The New York Times reported on Friday.

The investigation -- a dual counterintelligence and criminal probe -- was launched after the president fired FBI director James Comey in May 2017, the Times said, citing anonymous sources.

The counterintelligence aspect consisted of determining whether Trump was knowingly or unknowingly working for Moscow and whether he was a threat to national security, the newspaper reported.

It added the criminal portion related to Trump's firing of Comey.

The FBI investigation was soon folded into Robert Mueller's inquiry into Russian interference in the 2016 vote and possible collusion between his campaign and Moscow, it said, adding that it was unclear if the counterintelligence aspect was still being pursued.

The Times said that the FBI had been suspicious of Trump's ties to Russia during the 2016 campaign.

But it held off on opening an investigation until the president sacked Comey, who refused to swear his allegiance and roll back the nascent Russia investigation, which is now being spearheaded by Mueller.

Trump has repeatedly criticized the Mueller investigation as a "witch hunt" and views it as a stain on the legitimacy of his presidency.

But while Trump has slammed the probe as baseless, Mueller has issued dozens of indictments and steadily chalked up convictions of some of the president's close associates -- including his former national security advisor, his former personal lawyer, and his ex-campaign chief.

The ex-national security advisor, Michael Flynn pleaded guilty to lying to investigators about his Moscow ties.



The lawyer, Michael Cohen, has been sentenced to three years in prison for multiple crimes, including felony violations of campaign finance laws he undertook, prosecutors alleged, under Trump's direction.

And Trump's former presidential campaign chair, Paul Manafort, has been convicted in one case brought by Mueller and pleaded guilty in another, over financial crimes related to his work in Ukraine before the 2016 campaign, and for witness tampering.

Cell phone records show that Cohen was near Prague during the summer of 2016, supporting claims that he met there with Russian officials during the presidential election campaign, McClatchy news service has reported.

Cohen, who will testify in Congress on February 7, insists that he has never been to Prague, but added in a tweet: "#Mueller knows everything!"

As for Manafort, two pro-Russia Ukrainian oligarchs were the intended recipients of US polling data that Manafort admitted to sharing with a Russian during the 2016 presidential race, CNN reported.



Firemen work at the site of an explosion in a bakery shop in the 9th District in Paris, France, yesterday.

PHOTO: REUTERS

'GAS EXPLOSION' AT PARIS BAKERY

2 killed; 50 injured

REUTERS, Paris

Two firefighters died and nearly people 50 were injured in a massive gas explosion that gutted the ground floor of a building in a central Paris shopping district yesterday, authorities said.

The accident occurred with Paris under security lockdown for a ninth consecutive Saturday of "yellow vest" protests, with large parts of the French capital blocked off by riot police.

"As firemen were looking for a gas leak in the building, a dramatic explosion took place," Interior Minister Christophe Castaner said, adding that one of the firemen had been buried under debris for several hours.

Castaner said on his Twitter feed that two firefighters had died, and that 10 people, including one firefighter, had serious injuries. Another 37 people had lighter injuries, he said. Earlier he had told reporters that two civilians had also died.

Just hours after the blast, thousands of yellow vest protesters marched noisily but peacefully through the Grands Boulevards shopping district of northern Paris, just a few hundred metres (yards) from the scene of the explosion.

Developments: Building explodes as firefighters look for gas leak

Blast comes with Paris in lockdown for yellow vest protest

In recent years, France has suffered a string of deadly Islamist militant attacks in Paris, Nice, Marseille and elsewhere but authorities quickly ruled out foul play.

"A this stage we can say it (the gas blast) is clearly an accident," Paris prosecutor Remi Heitz told reporters.

A police source said the explosion tore apart a bakery on the rue Trevisé and witnesses said the force of the blast shattered nearby storefronts and rocked buildings hundreds of metres away.

More than 200 firefighters joined the rescue operation and two helicopters landed on the nearby Place de l'Opera to evacuate victims. Ambulances struggled to access the blast area because of police barriers set up to contain any violence by yellow vest protesters.

An eyewitness at a hotel nearby said he saw flames envelop the ground floor of the building blown out by the blast.

"There was broken glass everywhere, storefronts were blown out and windows were shattered up to the third and fourth floors," said 38-year-old David Bangura.

He said that as he approached the scene, a woman was crying for help from the first floor of a building: "Help us, help us, we have a child".

Israel hits Damascus airport warehouse

REUTERS, Beirut

The Syrian state news agency said Israeli warplanes fired a number of missiles toward the Damascus area on Friday, triggering Syrian air defences that shot down most of them.

"The results of the aggression so far were limited to a strike on one of the warehouses at Damascus airport," the SANA news agency cited a military source as saying. The attack took place at 11:15 pm (2115 GMT), it said.

Syrian state media broadcast footage of what it said were the air defences firing, with bright lights seen shooting across the night sky. Explosions were heard in one of the videos.

Israel has mounted attacks in Syria as part of its effort to counter the influence carved out there by Iran, which has supported President Bashar al-Assad in the war that erupted in 2011.

The last Israeli attack reported by Syrian state media was on Dec. 25, when a missile attack wounded three Syrian soldiers.

A senior Israeli official said in September Israel had carried out more than 200 attacks against Iranian targets in Syria in the last two years.

Iranian and Iran-backed groups including Lebanon's Hezbollah have deployed into Syria in support of President Bashar al-Assad's government during the war.



Protesters wearing yellow vests wait to participate in an anti-Brexit demonstration march in central London, Britain, yesterday.

PHOTO: REUTERS

Monster snowstorm to blanket more than half of United States

REUTERS, New York

A massive winter storm hit the US Rockies and Plains on Friday then punched east, with snow set to assault a 1,800-mile (1,609 km) corridor through the weekend, creating transportation "havoc" in the middle of the country.

The system started as rain from Mexico and turned to snow as it met icy air. Up to 18 inches (45 cm) of snow were expected in the Sangre de Cristo mountains south of Denver, according to the National Weather Service.

As the storm heads east, up to 16 inches (41 cm) of snow were likely in western Missouri and St. Louis. Areas to the east could get about 6 inches (15 cm) with ice developing in Kansas, and Arkansas, and up to 4 inches (10 cm) of snow in Washington, DC, before the system heads out to sea late on Sunday, AccuWeather said.

"The storm is expected to create havoc over the central part of the country, then extend eastward into the Mid-Atlantic states," said Randy Adkins, an AccuWeather meteorologist.

The FlightAware.com flight tracking website reported 1,431 flight cancellations on Friday and 12,465 delays, with problems at snow-hit airports like Denver causing knock-on effects around the country.

While the storm will spare the heavily popu-

lated Northeast, it likely will disrupt air and auto travel from Kansas City to Indianapolis, and will bring the heaviest snowfall so far this winter to Cincinnati and the Ohio River Valley, said AccuWeather meteorologist Paul Walker.

Although the Kansas City area is expected to get up to 6 inches of snow, it should be over by the time the Kansas City Chiefs begin their National Football League playoff game against the Indianapolis Colts on Saturday afternoon. St. Louis emergency management officials are bracing for auto travel disruptions and possible power outages, but based on current forecasts, are not expecting to be overwhelmed, spokeswoman Tracy Panus said.

"This is not the first storm we've had in the St. Louis area," Panus, who is with the St. Louis County Police Department of Emergency Management, said by telephone.

As the system moves eastward, it will hand off to a second coastal storm on Sunday that will bring 2 to 4 inches (5 to 10 cm) of snow to the Washington, D.C., area before it moves off the coast that night, Walker said.

"There could be a period of ice that we're concerned about across portions of central North Carolina and back into the mountains," he added.



Canada PM chastises China over detention of two citizens

REUTERS, Toronto

Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau on Friday chastised China again over the detention of two Canadians and defended his country's arrest of a senior Chinese executive at the request of the United States, which has sparked a diplomatic row between Canada and China.

"It is unfortunate that China has arbitrarily and unfairly detained two Canadian citizens," he told reporters in the western Canadian city of Regina in Saskatchewan.

The two Canadians were held last month after the arrest of Meng Wanzhou, the chief financial officer of Huawei Technologies Co, in Vancouver on Dec. 1.

In an article in the Ottawa-based Hill Times newspaper on Wednesday, Ambassador Lu Shaye said Canada's demands for the release of the two men reflected "double standards" born of "Western egotism and white supremacy".

Trudeau, asked about the comments, said Canada had simply acted in accordance with the rule of law. Meng has been released on bail and is living in her Vancouver home awaiting further extradition proceedings.

"Canada is a country of the rule of law. This is something that we know and we value," Trudeau said. "We have a justice system that is not subject to political interference."

Democrat Gabbard to run for US president in 2020

REUTERS, Washington

Democratic US Representative Tulsi Gabbard of Hawaii said in remarks aired by CNN on Friday that she will run for president in 2020, becoming the latest member of her party to pursue a challenge to Republican President Donald Trump.

"I have decided to run and will be making a formal announcement within the next week," Gabbard, a liberal 37-year-old Iraq War veteran as well as the first Hindu and first Samoan-American elected to the US Congress, told CNN.

US Senator Elizabeth Warren of Massachusetts on Dec 31 announced she had formed an exploratory committee for a White House run in what is expected to be a crowded Democratic primary field before the November 2020 presidential election.

Gabbard said "the issue of war and peace" would be the main focus of her campaign.

Her office did not immediately respond



Tulsi Gabbard

to a request for comment.

The Democratic presidential field could eventually include Senators Kamala Harris, Cory Booker and Kirsten Gillibrand, as well as former Vice President Joe Biden. Julian Castro, former President Barack Obama's housing secretary, also formed an exploratory committee in December.

In the race to pick a candidate to run against Trump, Democrats will grapple with the tension between the party's establishment and liberal wings that flared during the 2016 state-by-state nominating contests between former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton and Senator Bernie Sanders, an independent who ran under the Democratic banner.

Gabbard remains popular with some liberals. Gabbard has also drawn criticism for secretly meeting with Syria's President Bashar al-Assad, whose removal from power she opposes, during a 2017 trip to the war-ravaged country.

Ready to assume presidency

Says leader of Venezuela Congress a day after Maduro starts second term

REUTERS, Caracas

The leader of Venezuela's opposition-led congress said on Friday he was prepared to assume the country's presidency on an interim basis and call elections, just one day after leftist President Nicolas Maduro was sworn in for a disputed second term.

Juan Guaido, a lawmaker from the hard-line Popular Will opposition party who was elected to head the National Assembly on Jan 5, said he would only take office with support of the armed forces. He also called for protests on Jan. 23, the anniversary of the fall of a military dictatorship in 1958.

"It should be the people of Venezuela, the armed forces, and the international community that give us a clear mandate to assume" the presidency, Guaido said in a speech to supporters outside the United Nations (U.N.) program office in Caracas.

Maduro was re-elected last year in a

vote that was widely dismissed as fraudulent, and countries around the world have called his continued leadership illegitimate. Ruling Socialist Party leaders have described the criticism as colonialist interference led by the United States.

The Supreme Court and an all-



powerful legislature called the Constituent Assembly have stripped Congress of its powers, meaning it does not have the capacity to remove the president as would a legislature in many countries.

Guaido's comments, however, caused some confusion.

Luis Almagro, head of regional diplomatic group the Organization of American States, tweeted that Guaido had assumed the interim presidency of Venezuela. Guaido did not respond to a message seeking clarification.

The country's perennially fractured opposition has made numerous failed attempts over the past 20 years to remove the ruling socialists. Now, opposition leaders have disavowed Maduro's second term as illegitimate, and have called for the National Assembly to declare the presidency vacant.

The country's constitution says a presidential vacancy can be filled by the head of the legislature, and some opposition activists have called on Guaido to assume the presidency.

US national security adviser John Bolton said in a statement that the United States "resolutely supports" the National Assembly, which he called "the only legitimate branch of government duly elected by the Venezuelan people."