



'It's a coup, it's spying'

Trump says FBI in 2016 tried to unsettle his govt

CNN ONLINE
President Donald Trump called 2016 texts between former FBI officials evidence of an attempted "coup" after a news report showed they were discussing people inside the Trump administration who they could "develop for potential relationships." Trump was responding to a Fox News report about the texts exchanged between former FBI lawyer Lisa Page and former FBI agent Peter Strzok. The President immediately claimed the text messages were evidence of a plot against him, but the Fox News report notes that it "was not clear from the messages whether Strzok and Page merely sought to build bridges with the incoming administration, or wanted to engineer the briefings to investigate Trump and his associates." "Really it's a coup, it's spying," Trump told Fox News in an interview, adding that Strzok and Page, were "trying to infiltrate the administration." In congressional testimony last summer, Strzok defended a text message he sent about Trump potentially being elected, saying "we will stop it." Strzok said the text was "in no way, unequivocally, any suggestion that me, the FBI, would take any action whatsoever to improperly impact the electoral process, for any candidate." Trump said Page and Strzok "were dirty cops" and "sick people" and claimed, "this was an attempted overthrow of the United States government." "I think it's far bigger than Watergate, I think it's possibly the biggest scandal in political history in this country, maybe beyond political," Trump said.

Xi vows transparency

Says his global infrastructure project will have 'zero tolerance' for corruption

AFP, Beijing

Chinese President Xi Jinping yesterday sought to bat away concerns about his ambitious Belt and Road Initiative, saying his global infrastructure project will have "zero tolerance" for corruption while vowing to prevent debt risks.

In a speech kicking off a BRI summit, Xi also offered soothing remarks to the US over subsidies, the yuan and trade as the two sides head into fresh high-level talks next week.

Xi's signature foreign policy aims to reinvent the ancient Silk Road to connect Asia to Europe and Africa through massive investments in maritime, road and rail projects --

BELT AND ROAD FORUM

- Initiative attracted controversy over debt concerns
- Xi offers soothing remarks to the US over subsidies, trade
- Pak PM calls for creation of an office for anti-graft co-op



with hundreds of billions of dollars in financing from Chinese banks.

It offers to bring much-needed modern infrastructure to developing countries, but critics say it is riddled with opaque deals favouring Chinese companies while saddling nations with debt and environmental damage.

"Everything should be done in a transparent way and we should have zero tolerance for corruption," Xi said at the gathering of 37 world leaders which ends today.

China has also rejected accusations that Belt and Road is a "debt trap" and a geopolitical tool for Beijing's

ambitions of becoming a global superpower.

"The Belt and Road is not an exclusive club," Xi said.

China is presenting a debt sustainability framework at the forum -- a move welcomed by International Monetary Fund chief Christine Lagarde.

Calling for a "BRI 2.0", Lagarde said in a speech the scheme needs "increased transparency, open procurement with competitive bidding, and better risk assessment in project selection."

Pakistani Prime Minister Imran Khan, who said his country was an

"enthusiastic" supporter of Belt and Road, called for the creation of an office for anti-corruption cooperation.

The two countries are building the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), a multi-billion-dollar project linking China's northwest to the Arabian sea port of Gwadar.

Amid warnings that some of the massive projects are causing environmental damage in Asia, Xi said China will also promote "green" development.

Khan, Russian President Vladimir Putin and Italian Prime Minister Giuseppe Conte, whose country became the first G7 member to sign up to Belt and Road, are among the leaders attending the summit.

EU powers France and Germany, which have taken a careful stance about BRI, sent cabinet members Washington has not dispatched any officials.

Putin called for a global response against protectionism, unilateral sanctions and "trade wars" -- veiled criticisms of the United States.

US officials have dismissed BRI as a "vanity project" and rebuked Rome for signing up to the scheme.



Support for Malaysia PM drops: opinion poll

Fewer than half of Malaysians approve of Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad, an opinion poll showed yesterday, as concerns over rising costs and racial matters plague his administration nearly a year after taking office. The survey, conducted in March by independent pollster Merdeka Center, showed that only 46 percent of voters surveyed were satisfied with Mahathir, a sharp drop from the 71 percent approval rating he received in August 2018. Mahathir's Pakatan Harapan coalition won a stunning election victory in May 2018, ending the previous government's more than 60-year rule. But his administration has since been criticised for failing to deliver on promised reforms and protecting the rights of majority ethnic Malay Muslims.

Mozambique reels from Cyclone Kenneth; 1 killed

Cyclone Kenneth killed at least one person and left a trail of destruction in northern Mozambique, destroying houses, ripping up trees and knocking out power, authorities said yesterday. The cyclone brought storm surges and wind gusts of up to 280 km per hour (174 mph) when it made landfall on Thursday evening, after killing three people in the island nation of Comoros. It was the most powerful storm on record to hit Mozambique's northern coast and came just six weeks after Cyclone Idai battered the impoverished nation, causing devastating floods and killing more than 1,000 people across a swathe of southern Africa.

Russian 'agent' Butina faces US sentencing

Alleged Russian agent Maria Butina faces sentencing in Washington yesterday over her open effort to build a network of high-level Republican contacts via ties to the NRA gun lobby. While prosecutors have asked for 18 months in prison for the 30-year-old Siberian redhead, she could be deported immediately, after already spending nine months in a US jail. A key variable, analysts say, could be how her case is linked to Russia's recent arrest of American former Marine Paul Whelan on spying charges. The Justice Department alleged that although she lacks ties to Moscow's espionage agencies, Butina was part of a broad Russian plot to infiltrate and disrupt US politics -- which included meddling in the 2016 election. But Butina argued that her five-year effort building a network with Republicans -- bringing her into contact with President Donald Trump in 2015 -- was no more than a private endeavor to build US-Russian friendship.



SOURCE: REUTERS, AFP



Soldiers stand guard outside a mosque ahead of the Friday noon prayer in Colombo yesterday, following a series of bomb blasts targeting churches and luxury hotels on Easter Sunday in Sri Lanka. Inset, A policeman frisks a Muslim devotee as he arrives at a mosque. Zahran Hashim, head of a local extremist group, who is at the heart of Sri Lanka's Easter suicide bombings, died in the attacks, the country's president said yesterday.

PHOTO: AFP

US acting in 'bad faith'

Says Kim, warns North Korea is ready for any situation as he leaves Russia

AFP, Vladivostok

Kim Jong Un has accused the US of acting in "bad faith" in talks on its nuclear arsenal, North Korean state media said yesterday as he left Russia following his first summit with President Vladimir Putin.

Kim's armoured train departed the Far Eastern port city of Vladivostok a day after talks that saw Putin back the North's need for "security guarantees" in its standoff with the United States. The official Korean Central News Agency reported that Kim told Putin the US had adopted a "unilateral attitude in bad faith" at a summit with US President Donald Trump two months ago in Hanoi.

"Peace and security on the Korean peninsula will entirely depend on the US future attitude, and the DPRK will gird itself for every possible situation," Kim was quoted as saying.

- Kim says peace, security depend on US attitude
- Analysts say summit with Putin strengthens Kim's ahead of possible negotiations with US
- Putin accepts Kim's invitation to visit North



The Kim-Trump summit broke down in late February without a deal, after cash-strapped Pyongyang demanded immediate relief from sanctions but the two sides disagreed over what the North was prepared to give up in return.

Russia has called for the sanctions to be eased, while the US has accused it of trying to help Pyongyang evade some of the measures -- accusations Moscow denies.

Just a week ago, Pyongyang

demanding the removal of US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo from the stalled nuclear talks, accusing him of derailing the process.

On Thursday, Putin emerged from the meeting saying that like Washington, Moscow supported efforts to reduce tensions and prevent nuclear conflicts.

But he also insisted that the North needed "guarantees of its security, the preservation of its sovereignty".

It was "what the North has been

saying all along" said Kim Keun-sik, professor of North Korean Studies at Kyungnam University, adding that Putin's support for Pyongyang's stance was the "biggest prize" Kim won in Vladivostok.

The summit saw both leaders saying they were looking to strengthen ties that date back to the Soviet Union's support for the founder of North Korea, Kim's grandfather Kim Il Sung.

Kim said he hoped to usher in a "new heyday" in ties between Pyongyang and Moscow.

The North Korean strongman invited Putin to visit "at a convenient time" and the invitation was "readily accepted", KCNA said.

On Wednesday, a South Korean lawmaker said that North had replaced Kim's right-hand man Kim Yong Chol who steered nuclear talks with the US, apparently blaming him for a failed summit between the two countries.

Saudi Arabia executed convicts after forced confessions: CNN

AGENCIES

Long before Saudi Arabia announced it had carried out one of the largest mass executions in its history earlier this week, some of the men condemned to death said they were innocent and their confessions had been written by the same people who had tortured them, a media report said yesterday.

While making impassioned pleas to the courts in a bid to save their lives, the men claimed to have evidence of their abuse at the hands of their interrogators, the CNN report said.

However, none of these arguments swayed the judges overseeing their trials in 2016, and the suspects were convicted of terror-related crimes and sentenced to death.

On Tuesday, Riyadh announced that 37 men had been executed, including three who were minors when the Kingdom said they carried out their crimes. One of the men was crucified after his execution, strung up and put on display as a warning to others.

33 of the executed men were Shias, reported AFP.

CNN has obtained hundreds of pages of documents from three 2016 trials involving 25 of the men whose executions were announced this week.

Eleven were found guilty of spying on behalf of Iran and another 14 were convicted of forming a "terror cell" during anti-government protests in the largely Shia city of Awamiya in 2011 and 2012.

When the UN raised concerns in 2017 that torture had been used to obtain the confessions in that case, the Saudi government responded with a letter denying the claims and stating that the men had stood by their admissions of guilt in court.

But the documents obtained by CNN show that some of the men in the Awamiya case repeatedly told the court that the admissions were false and had been obtained through torture.

Saudi Arabia is yet to comment on this development.

According to Amnesty International and some Saudi activists, families were not informed in advance of the executions. Saudi Arabia has one of the highest death penalty rates in the world.

Extremism must be defeated

Prince William tells NZ mosque massacre survivors

AFP, Christchurch

In an emotional meeting with survivors of the New Zealand mosques massacre, Britain's Prince William yesterday appealed for "extremism in all forms" to be defeated.

About 160 people gathered at the Al Noor mosque in Christchurch to meet the prince who had earlier told first responders to the March 15 carnage that when "a good friend" is in need "you travel to their place and you put your arms around them."

Six weeks to the day from when a self-styled white supremacist killed 50 people and wounded just as many in two Christchurch mosques, the prince said he stood with the people of New Zealand, the people of Christchurch and the Muslim community.

"An act of violence was designed to change New Zealand, but instead, the grief of a nation revealed just how deep your wells of empathy, compassion, warmth and love truly run," the prince said after arriving at the mosque from a meeting with hospital staff who had

tended to the wounded.

"In a moment of acute pain, you stood up, and you stood together. In reaction to tragedy, you showed something remarkable."

"I stand with you in gratitude to what you have taught the world in these past weeks. I stand with you in optimism... I stand with you in grief. I will support those who survive."

"May the forces of love always prevail over the forces of hate... Extremism in all forms must be defeated."

As armed police stood guard outside the mosque and a police helicopter circled overhead, the prince was welcomed to the mosque by the Imam Gamel Fouda, Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern and attack survivor

Farid Ahmed whose wife was among those killed.

Ahmed, who became the face of the Muslim community when he said he loved and forgave the gunman, told the prince: "We have to keep up hope and not surrender to hatred".



Medical staff and rescue team personnel move Malaysian climber Chin Wui Kin on a hospital bed after being airlifted to Mid-Citi hospital in Lalitpur, on the outskirts of Kathmandu, yesterday. He was rescued on Thursday after being stranded in the open for two nights on one of the world's most treacherous mountains, expedition organisers said. Climbing experts said it was a "miracle" that 48-year-old Chin Wui Kin survived the freezing conditions on Mount Annapurna for so long.

PHOTO: AFP