

TRUMP IMPEACHMENT PROBE

Ukraine aid tied to Biden probe

Admits top ally of US president

AFP, Washington

A top ally of President Donald Trump admitted he told a Ukraine official that US military aid was contingent on Kiev investigating Trump's Democratic rival Joe Biden, testimony released Tuesday showed.

In some of the most damning evidence yet to the House impeachment inquiry of Trump, Gordon Sondland, the US ambassador to the European Union, said he told a senior Ukraine official that military aid would likely not be released until Kiev made clear it would investigate Biden and his son's ties to Ukraine energy firm Burisma.

Sondland, in amended testimony that reversed his earlier denial, admitted he laid out the allegedly illegal quid pro quo in a September 1 discussion with Andriy Yermak, a top advisor to Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky.

Sondland said it was the culmination of months of pressure placed on Kiev, primarily via Trump's personal lawyer Rudy Giuliani, to open "anti-corruption" investigations into the Bidens and into Trump's unfounded belief that Ukraine assisted the Democrats in the 2016 election.

Sondland told Yermak "that resumption of US aid would not likely occur until Ukraine provided the anti-corruption statement that we had been discussing for weeks," he told investigators.

The White House has repeatedly denied there was any link between the aid and any demands by Trump, despite the evidence from the summary of a July 25 phone call -- just one week after aid was frozen -- in which Trump sought a "favor" from Zelensky and referred directly to Biden and the 2016 issue.



A member of the Syrian Civil Defence, also known as the White Helmets, carries the body of a girl who died in a reported air strike in the Syrian village of al-Sahharah in the countryside west of the northern city of Aleppo, yesterday. PHOTO: AFP

NEWSIN brief

Militants attack Tajik border post, 17 killed

REUTERS, Dushanbe

Masked Islamic State militants attacked a border post on the Tajik-Uzbek border overnight, triggering a gun battle that killed 15 of the militants, a guard and a policeman, Tajik authorities said yesterday. There was no immediate announcement from the militant group, which has claimed responsibility for a series of assaults in Tajikistan in recent months. Five of the gunmen were captured after the attack on the Tajik side of the border, Tajikistan's National Security Committee said.

15 killed in 'rebel attacks' in Thailand

AFP, Yala

At least fifteen people were gunned down in an ambush by suspected Muslim militants in Thailand's violence-wracked south, an army spokesman said yesterday, one of the bloodiest days in the 15-year insurgency. Thailand's three southernmost provinces have been in the grip of a conflict that has killed more than 7,000 people, as Malay-Muslim militants fight for more autonomy from the Thai state. Despite the high death toll, the highly localised unrest garners few international headlines.

Three tourists among 5 hurt in Jordan stabbing

AFP, Amman

Five people, including three tourists, were wounded in a knife attack in Jordan yesterday, a security spokesman said, adding that the assailant had been apprehended. "Around noon, a man attacked tourists, a tour guide and a security officer who tried to stop him in Jerash", a popular attraction 50 kilometres (30 miles) from the capital Amman, a spokesman for the public security directorate said in a statement.

'Untold sufferings' ahead

11,000 climate scientists warn of existential threat to humanity

AL JAZEERA ONLINE

More than 11,000 scientists have "clearly and unequivocally" declared a climate emergency that could bring "untold suffering" unless there are significant transformations in the way humans live.

"Scientists have a moral obligation to clearly warn humanity of any great existential threat," the signatories, who hail from 153 countries, said in a paper published in BioScience magazine on Tuesday.

"To secure a sustainable future, we must change how we live ... [This] entails major transformations in the ways our global society functions and interacts with natural ecosystems."

The signatories suggest six steps that would lessen the worst effects of climate change: replacing fossil fuels with low-carbon renewables; reducing the emissions of pollutants such as methane; protecting the Earth's ecosystems; eating mostly plant-based foods and fewer animal products; creating a carbon-free economy and stabilising the human population.

In their statement, the alliance of scientists, led by William Ripple and Christopher Wolf of Oregon State University in the United States, said the climate crisis is "accelerating faster" than most researchers expected.

"Despite 40 years of global climate negotiations, with few exceptions, we have generally conducted business as usual and have largely failed to address this predicament," they wrote.

"Especially worrisome are potential irreversible climate tipping points and nature's reinforcing feedbacks (atmospheric, marine, and terrestrial) that could lead to a catastrophic 'hothouse Earth', well beyond the control of humans," they said.

The scientists say they are "encouraged by a recent surge of concern" over the climate crisis, demonstrated by the student-led Fridays for Future movement and other grassroots campaigns.

"As the Alliance of World Scientists, we stand ready to assist decision-makers in a just transition to a sustainable and equitable future," the paper concludes, adding that humanity should "act to sustain life on planet Earth, our only home".

Thomas Newsome, one of the authors of the report, said that even though some of the effects of climate change are already evident, the scientists still believe there is time to reduce greenhouse gas emissions "and hopefully change the trajectory of the graphical indicators that we presented in the paper".



Strong rebuke for Trump, GOP ahead of 2020 election

AFP, Washington

US President Donald Trump and his Republican allies suffered stinging defeats Tuesday as Democrats were projected to win closely-watched elections in two states, results that signal troubling headwinds for his 2020 re-election campaign.

The Republican Governor Matt Bevin in deep-red Kentucky was ousted by his Democratic challenger Andy Beshear, who led by less than half a percentage point with 100 percent of the vote counted, the official overseeing the election declared.

Doubling the hurt, Trump's party also lost control of both chambers of the legislature in increasingly blue Virginia, US media including The New York Times projected.

"We have called it for Attorney General

Beshear to be the Kentucky governor-elect," Secretary of State Alison Lundergan Grimes said on CNN.

The US president tweeted that Bevin "picked up at least 15 points in last days, but perhaps not enough (Fake News will blame Trump!)." Beshear, whose father was the last Democratic governor in the state, claimed victory, but Bevin did not throw in the towel.

"This is a close, close race. We are not conceding this race by any stretch," the governor said.

Should Bevin's loss be certified, it would be a shock defeat for a conservative in a southern state that Trump won by 30 percentage points in 2016.

In Virginia, Democrats will now hold all major statewide offices and rule the state assembly, a comprehensive consolidation of power not seen in the state since the 1990s.

Democratic challenger set to oust Republican governor in deep-red state of Kentucky

Republican Party loses control of both houses in Virginia

Wife of Baghdadi captured by Turkey: Erdogan

Turkey has captured a wife of former IS leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan announced yesterday. Erdogan didn't name the woman, and Baghdadi, who died during a US raid on his compound in northern Syria late last month, was believed to have had several wives. "The US said that Baghdadi killed himself in a tunnel and started a serious PR campaign. We captured his wife but we didn't make a fuss, I'm declaring this for the first time," Erdogan said, referring to US President Donald Trump's televised address in which he revealed details of the raid. Trump said two of Baghdadi's wives were killed during the operation.

Dengue cases soar to record high in Pakistan

A record-breaking 44,000 people have been infected with mosquito-borne dengue in Pakistan this year, a senior health official said yesterday, as increased outbreaks linked to rising temperatures and erratic rainfall ravage other parts of Asia. Dr Rana Safdar, a senior official at the National Institute of Health (NIH), told AFP the figure is a huge leap from the previous record of 27,000 infections in 2011. He blamed climate change for the surge, but would not elaborate. The government was "employing all available resources at its disposal to contain the problem", he said.

Cyclist who flipped off US president wins local polls



A cyclist who was fired after flipping the bird -- making a rude single-fingered gesture -- to US President Donald Trump's motorcade has been elected to local office in Virginia. Juli Briskman, whose one-handed salute was captured in an AFP photograph that went viral, beat the Republican incumbent to a seat on the Loudoun County Board of Supervisors in state elections that saw Trump's Republican party suffer a series of stinging defeats. The single mother of two teens lost her job as a marketing analyst for a United States government and military subcontractor after the snapshot of her gesture spread across media and the internet in 2017, bringing her insults and threats.

SOURCE: AFP, CNN



Activists from India's main opposition Congress party shout slogans as they are stopped by police during a protest against what the activists say is economic slowdown in the country, in Guwahati, India, yesterday. PHOTO: REUTERS

Delhi schools reopen despite unhealthy air

REUTERS, New Delhi

Schools in India's capital New Delhi reopened yesterday after closing for two days due to a spike in air pollution that triggered a public health emergency and prompted protests by residents and environmental groups.

Children, many wearing face masks, returned to schools in New Delhi and its surrounding cities even as air pollution stayed at "unhealthy" levels in most parts of northern India, including the capital city.

India's weather office forecast light rains yesterday and a downpour today. While drizzle could lead to a further deterioration in air quality, torrential rains tend to bring down pollution levels, which hit their highest levels of the year on Sunday.

The overall air quality across the city showed some improvement for the second consecutive day thanks to stronger winds which helped blow away some of the pollutants hanging in the atmosphere.

Authorities in New Delhi banished cars with number plates ending in an odd number on Monday in a bid to reduce the pollution, although politicians in the city of more than 20 million people, bickered over the causes of the pollution and who should take the blame for it.

Environmental experts say any increase in the burning of crop stubble in Punjab and Haryana states - part of India's farm belt that borders Delhi - would lead to an increase in pollution levels. The burning of crop residues has helped turn India's capital into the most polluted major city in the world.

On Tuesday night, more than 1,500 people gathered at India Gate, the war memorial at the centre of Delhi, to protest persistently high pollution levels and demand action from the federal and the state governments.

Iran restarts Fordow nuke site

Injects uranium gas into its 1,044 centrifuges

REUTERS, Dubai

Iran has stepped up work at its underground Fordow nuclear facility, state TV reported yesterday, a move France said showed for the first time that Tehran explicitly planned to quit a deal with world powers that curbed its atomic work.

Russia also voiced alarm at Iran's decision to start injecting uranium gas into centrifuges at Fordow, a move that further distances Iran from the accord. A central aim of the agreement was to extend the time Iran would need to build a nuclear weapon, if it chose to, to a year from about 2-3 months.

"With the presence of inspectors from International Atomic Energy Agency, Iran started injecting (uranium) gas into centrifuges in Fordow," TV reported.

The deal bans nuclear material from Fordow, and with the gas entering its centrifuges the facility will move from a permitted status of research plant to being an active nuclear site.

A spokesman for Iran's Atomic Energy Organization, Behrouz Kamalvandi, however told state TV later that the injection of uranium gas would start at midnight.

"We have put the 2,800 kg cylinder including 2000 kg uranium

being an active nuclear site.

Macron says move shows Iran plans to quit accord

Russia urges Iran to fulfil commitments under deal

Fordow would soon fully resume uranium enrichment work.

"Iran's 4th step in reducing its commitments under the JCPOA (the 2015 nuclear deal) by injecting gas to 1,044 centrifuges begins today. Thanks to U.S. policy and its allies, Fordow will soon be back to full operation," Rouhani tweeted.

Speaking on a visit to China, French President Emmanuel Macron called Iran's move "grave", saying it explicitly signalled Iran's intent for the first time to quit the deal.

"I think that for the first time, Iran has decided in an explicit and blunt manner to leave the JCPOA (nuclear) agreement, which marks a profound shift," said Macron, who has been at the forefront of European efforts to salvage the deal after the United States withdrew from the agreement.

In Moscow, Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov said events unfolding around the nuclear deal were extremely alarming and called on Iran to fulfil the terms of the deal.

TIT-FOR-TAT POLITICAL VIOLENCE

Pro-Beijing lawmaker stabbed in Hong Kong

AFP, Hong Kong

A firebrand pro-Beijing politician in Hong Kong was stabbed by a man pretending to be a supporter yesterday, the latest tit-for-tat political violence in a city engulfed by seething pro-democracy protests.

The attack came as the Hong Kong's unpopular leader Carrie Lam said her resolve to crack down on the protesters had been bolstered by a recent meeting with Chinese President Xi Jinping.

Yesterday, she condemned the stabbing at a press briefing in Beijing and said regardless of political stand, "any violent action... should not be tolerated by any civilised society".

The international finance hub has been convulsed by five months of huge and increasingly violent protests calling for greater democratic freedoms and police accountability.

With Beijing and Lam refusing to offer a political solution to the protesters' grievances, violence has spiralled on both sides of the ideological divide.

In the latest incident, a man holding a bouquet approached pro-Beijing lawmaker Junius Ho yesterday morning as the politician was campaigning in his constituency near the border with China.

Footage posted online showed the man handing Ho the flowers and asking for a picture. He then pulled a knife from his bag before striking Ho in the chest.

Police said three people were wounded in the incident, including the attacker, who was subdued by Ho and his aides as he shouted in Cantonese: "Junius Ho, you scum!"