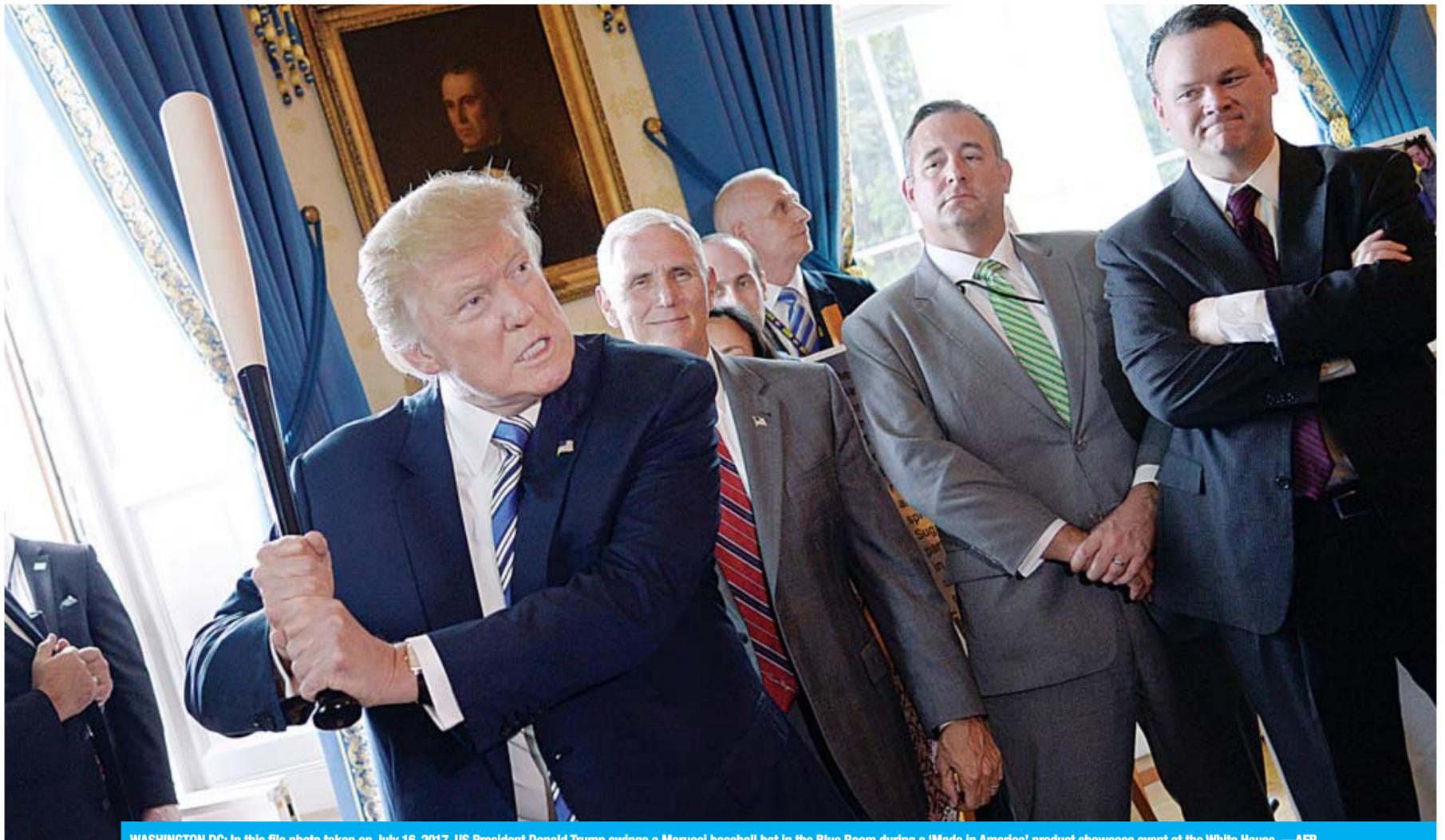




Half a million attend protest against India's Modi: Police

No serious injuries to Prince Philip after car crash



WASHINGTON DC: In this file photo taken on July 16, 2017, US President Donald Trump swings a Marucci baseball bat in the Blue Room during a 'Made in America' product showcase event at the White House. —AFP

Mueller disputes explosive Trump report

Buzzfeed report considered 'inaccurate' as President celebrates victory over shoddy journalism

WASHINGTON: Special Counsel Robert Mueller's office took the rare step Friday of disputing a news report on his Russia investigation, saying a BuzzFeed article alleging that US President Donald Trump directed his former lawyer to lie to Congress is "not accurate." Trump's lieutenants had already strongly pushed back against the report, which said that the president ordered Michael Cohen to lie about a Russian skyscraper project they pursued during the 2016 election.

"BuzzFeed's description of specific statements to the Special Counsel's Office, and characterization of documents and testimony obtained by this office, regarding Michael Cohen's Congressional testimony are not accurate," spokesman Peter Carr said in a statement. Mueller's investigation into Russian interference in the 2016 vote and possible collusion between Trump's campaign and Moscow is the subject of frequent articles and even more frequent speculation. But it is extremely rare — if not unprecedented — for Mueller's office to issue such a statement.

BuzzFeed's editor-in-chief however said the news organization stood by its work. "We stand by our reporting and the sources who informed it, and we urge the Special Counsel to make clear what he's disputing," Ben Smith tweeted. The statement was nevertheless a cause for celebration for the president, who retweeted

numerous supporters slamming BuzzFeed and later wrote it was "A very sad day for journalism, but a great day for our Country!"

"Fake News is truly the ENEMY OF THE PEOPLE!" he added, a now familiar refrain when talking about critical media. Trump's lawyer Rudy Giuliani had earlier called the allegation in the BuzzFeed report "categorically false" in a comment sent to several White House reporters, while Deputy White House Spokesman Hogan Gidley labeled the report "ridiculous." He said Cohen is someone "who now quite frankly has been proven to be a liar."

Democrats in Congress had pledged to investigate the report to see if the president had committed an impeachable felony. "These allegations may prove unfounded, but, if true, they would constitute both the subornation of perjury as well as obstruction of justice," said Adam Schiff, the chairman of the House Intelligence Committee. BuzzFeed reported late Thursday that Cohen, who worked for Trump for more than a decade, has told investigators that the president personally instructed him to lie about the Moscow Trump Tower plan in testimony in 2017 to the House and Senate Intelligence Committees.

The BuzzFeed article was based on interviews with two anonymous "federal law enforcement officials" who

are familiar with Cohen's testimony to the investigation led by Mueller. "Any suggestion — from any source — that the president counseled Michael Cohen to lie is categorically false. Michael Cohen is a convicted criminal and a liar," Giuliani said in a statement quoted by New York Times reporter Maggie Haberman. "Lying to reduce his jail time!" Trump said on Twitter of Cohen, who was convicted last year of fraud and perjury.

A plea deal

No other media have confirmed BuzzFeed's reporting. It came two months after Cohen pleaded guilty in a New York court to making "false, fictitious and fraudulent" written testimony to the House and Senate intelligence committees in August 2017 in connection with the Moscow project. A statement of the facts in his November 29 plea deal with Mueller's prosecutors suggested that his testimony had been prepared in consultation with unnamed people in the White House.

Cohen had told the two committees that the Moscow project talks ended in January 2016, when in fact, as he later admitted, they went on at least six months longer, to June 2016 when Trump had already secured the Republican nomination for president. Cohen had also testified that others in the campaign, including Trump, were not informed about the project. But in the

November plea deal, Cohen also admitted the project had been discussed with Trump — designated "Individual 1" in court documents — several times in early 2016. "Cohen made the false statements to minimize links between the Moscow project and Individual 1... in hopes of limiting the ongoing Russia investigations," prosecutors wrote.

Trump's right-hand man

Cohen was the president's right-hand man for years at the Trump Organization, the umbrella company, often relied upon to quietly fix difficult problems and negotiate deals for the real estate mogul. But he turned on his former boss after he was charged with giving hush money to women alleging affairs with Trump ahead of the 2016 election — payments that violated campaign finance laws. Cohen, who has been sentenced to three years in jail, said Trump ordered him to make the payments, and now says he regrets his work for the president.

While Democrats could not confirm the BuzzFeed report, they said they were poised to further probe the allegations. "Our committee is already working to secure additional witness testimony and documents related to the Trump Tower Moscow deal and other investigative matters," said Intelligence Committee chairman Schiff. —AFP

Top Republican urges slow US pullout until IS 'truly defeated'

ANKARA: A senior Republican senator yesterday urged President Donald Trump to slow down the withdrawal of US ground troops from Syria until jihadists were defeated to avoid a "nightmare" for Washington's allies. "I would hope that President Trump would slow the withdrawal until we truly destroy ISIS," Lindsey Graham told a press conference in Ankara, using an acronym for the Islamic State extremist group.

He warned any hasty pullout could lead to a "nightmare" scenario for Israel because of increasing Iranian influence in the war-torn country and for Turkey because of its national security concerns. The South Carolina lawmaker was in Turkey from Friday for a two-day visit during which he met Turkish officials including President Recep Tayyip Erdogan and Foreign Minister Mevlut Cavusoglu. His talks with Erdogan lasted for over two hours after which he was invited by the Turkish leader to a concert on Friday night by pianist Fazil Say.

Ankara welcomed Trump's announcement last month that the US would pull out its 2,000 military personnel from Syria but

American officials and security experts have been more cautious, worried about withdrawing too early. Graham, who as a member of the Senate Armed Services committee has frequently visited US troops in combat zones, said he believed the "goal of destroying ISIS is not yet accomplished". Their defeat had been "accomplished territorially" but there were "thousands of ISIS fighters that lurk in Syria", Graham warned.

Four Americans, including two service personnel, were among those killed in a suicide attack this week claimed by the group in the key city of Manbij in Syria's north. Washington has also expressed concern over Turkey's plans to launch a cross-border military operation against the US-backed Syrian Kurdish People's Protection Units (YPG) militia. Trump last weekend warned of devastating economic consequences for Turkey over any attack on Kurdish forces.

US support for the YPG has caused tension with Ankara which views the militia as a "terrorist offshoot" of the outlawed Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK). The PKK, which has waged an insurgency inside Turkey since 1984, is blacklisted as a terrorist organization by Ankara, the US and the European Union. Graham previously warned that "Kurds will get slaughtered" if the US withdrew immediately. But yesterday, the senator said the YPG's political branch, the Democratic Union Party (PYD), "is interlinked with the PKK" as he acknowledged Turkey's concerns over the militia. —AFP

Houthi finance war with fuel from Iran: UN

UNITED NATIONS: Fuel loaded from ports in Iran has generated revenue to finance the Yemen Houthi rebel war effort against the Saudi-backed government, according to a report by a UN panel of experts seen by AFP. The findings are expected to again raise questions about Iran's support for the Houthis in the war that has pushed Yemen to the brink of humanitarian catastrophe.

In its final report for 2018, the panel said it had "identified a small number of companies, both within Yemen and outside, which operated as front companies," using fake documents to conceal fuel donations. The fuel was "for the benefit of a listed individual" who is on a UN sanctions blacklist, it added. "The revenue from the sale of this fuel was used to finance the Houthi war effort," said the 85-page report sent to the Security Council.

The panel found that the "fuel was

loaded from ports in the Islamic Republic of Iran under false documentation" to avoid UN inspections of the cargo, it added. The experts have in past reports pointed to a possible Iranian link to missiles fired by Houthi rebels at Saudi Arabia, after they traveled to Riyadh to examine weapons debris.

In a previous report, the experts said they were investigating monthly fuel donations from Iran valued at \$30 million. Iran has repeatedly denied that it is providing military support to the Houthis, who seized the capital Sanaa in 2014, prompting the Saudi-led coalition to intervene a year later to push back the rebels.

Saudi coalition bombings

The Houthis control the city and key port of Hodeida, a main entry point for imports to Yemen that pro-government forces had planned to capture in a new offensive launched in June. A ceasefire in Hodeida was agreed during UN-brokered talks last month in Sweden and UN monitors are on the ground to oversee a pull-back of forces from the port.

"Throughout the reporting period of 2018, Yemen continued its slide

toward humanitarian and economic catastrophe," said the panel, which described the country as "deeply fractured" with a broken economy. The war in Yemen continues to appear unwinnable. Government forces and the coalition have made "significant progress" on the ground against the Houthis, but "the aim of restoring the authority of the government throughout Yemen is far from being realized," said the report. The panel reported on its investigations of five airstrikes in Houthi-controlled areas, including the August 9 bombing of a bus carrying children and a shelling attack.

It found that the Saudi-led coalition was responsible in four cases, including the bus bombing that killed 43 people and wounded 63 others, the majority of whom were children. The panel said the coalition was "likely responsible" in another incident in April 2018 involving the bombing of a building in Hodeida that killed 14 civilians, including seven children. The coalition has admitted mistakes were made in two cases and has acknowledged that legal procedures could be taken in the case of the bus bombing, but the panel said it was unaware of any prosecution by any state. —AFP