

Impeachment fight escalates as Trump calls probe a 'coup'

WASHINGTON: Donald Trump and Congress traded threats yesterday in a growing impeachment scandal that threatens to engulf the White House in what the president claimed is a "coup". The power struggle between Trump - accused of leaning on Ukraine's president to dig up dirt on one of his main 2020 election rivals - and congressional Democrats entered ever more volatile territory. Adam Schiff, the Democrat leading the impeachment probe in the lower chamber of Congress, told reporters there is a "real sense of urgency" to press forward.

Trump fought back with language that would once have been inconceivable for a president, including his claim late Tuesday on Twitter that this is "not an impeachment, it is a COUP". Yesterday, he tweeted that Schiff was "sick" and should resign. Earlier, he had called for Schiff's arrest. Trump insists that he did nothing wrong in a phone call with Ukrainian leader Volodymyr Zelensky and yesterday got support from Russia's President Vladimir Putin, who said he saw "nothing compromising" in the conversation.

Given Trump's controversial history with Putin, it was unlikely that the Kremlin leader's backing would do much to calm waters back in Washington. After keeping pronouncements mostly to Twitter over the last week, Trump gave a news conference alongside visiting Finnish President Sauli Niinisto.

Trump is accused of having pressured Zelensky to help him by opening a corruption investigation against leading Democratic presidential candidate Joe Biden in a July 25 phone call. He is alleged to have suggested that military equipment Ukraine sought to beef up its defenses against Russia would be contingent on him getting that favor. A whistleblower, so far only identified as someone from the intelligence services, went to the

authorities with concerns about the phone call, triggering the impeachment inquiry.

Trump has likened the whistleblower to a spy and called for his or her identity to be made public, although by law whistleblowers are protected. He has also retweeted a warning that his removal from office could trigger "civil war". Schiff yesterday called Trump's comments about the whistleblower a "blatant effort to intimidate witnesses". The State Department's inspector general was due to brief congressional committees yesterday on what it said were documents "related to the State Department and Ukraine."

It was not clear what that would entail, but the State Department is closely caught up in the probe, with Secretary of State Mike Pompeo confirming Wednesday previous reports that he listened in during the Zelensky call. Earlier, Pompeo meanwhile accused Democrats of trying to "intimidate" and "bully" State Department employees. Democrats said he was "stonewalling" their investigation.

Pompeo and Trump's controversial personal lawyer Rudy Giuliani have been subpoenaed to provide documents. Five diplomats have so far been summoned to testify. Pompeo suggested that the committees could be forced to subpoena the five officials, and that the State Department and White House could seek to limit what they can talk about. "I will use all means at my disposal to prevent and expose any attempts to intimidate the dedicated professionals whom I am proud to lead," Pompeo said.

News reports said the State Department's former special envoy to Ukraine, Kurt Volker, would testify Thursday and that the ex-ambassador to Kiev, Marie Yovanovitch, would appear behind closed doors on



WASHINGTON: Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi answers questions with House Select Committee on Intelligence Chairman Adam Schiff at the US Capitol yesterday. — AFP

Oct 11. Volker had been sought by Giuliani to help pressure Zelensky, while Yovanovitch was removed earlier this year as ambassador after she reportedly resisted that effort.

Pompeo himself risks greater pressure after the Democratic heads of the three investigating congressional committees said his being in on the phone call

made him "a fact witness". The Democrats say that subpoenas could also be issued to force White House compliance with their demands for documentation. "We're not fooling around here," Schiff said. "We don't want this to drag on months and months and months, which appears to be the administration's strategy." — AFP

Bezos attends first anniversary memorial of Khashoggi murder

ISTANBUL: Amazon founder and Washington Post owner Jeff Bezos joined activists in Istanbul yesterday for a memorial service outside the Saudi consulate where journalist Jamal Khashoggi was murdered a year ago. International rights groups renewed calls for a full United Nations investigation into the killing. Saudi journalist Khashoggi, a columnist for the Post, was strangled and dismembered at Saudi Arabia's consulate on Oct 2, 2018 when he went to obtain documents required for his marriage to Turkish citizen Hatice Cengiz.

She unveiled a memorial to Khashoggi in front of the consulate. "After the worst year of my life I stand here broken but proud," she said in a speech. "I still seek justice. I want to know what happened to his body. I want his friends to be released from jail. I want those in power to be held accountable for their actions." Bezos gave a short speech directed at Cengiz, saying: "You need to know that you are in our hearts. We are here and you are not alone."

Eleven suspects have been put on trial in Riyadh over Khashoggi's murder, five of whom face the death penalty, but hearings are held behind closed doors and the names of the defendants have not been released. International human rights groups used the anniversary to renew calls for a UN-led investigation. The Saudi crown prince has denied any involvement but tells PBS in a forthcoming



ISTANBUL: Hatice Cengiz, the fiancée of murdered Saudi journalist Jamal Khashoggi, CEO of Amazon and Washington Post owner Jeff Bezos, Yemeni Nobel Prize winner Tawakkol Karman and participants stand near a memorial stone during an event marking the one-year anniversary of the assassination of Khashoggi yesterday. — AFP

documentary that he accepts responsibility for the killing, because it happened "under my watch".

The grisly details of Khashoggi's murder, which emerged largely from Turkish sources, sparked a global outcry. Dozens of top global executives boycotted the Saudi showcase business conference, the Future Investment Initiative, last year. But the outrage has since dissipated and the Washington Post reported that global firms including Goldman Sachs, JPMorgan Chase and Citigroup were planning to send top executives to this year's event later this month. — AFP

well as urban areas. "Latrine ownership increased from about 35 percent to about 70 percent... That did accelerate the reduction of open defecation," said Sangita Vyas from the Research Institute for Compassionate Economics (RICE). "But in December 2018 we estimated about half of people in the states of Bihar, Madhya Pradesh, Uttar Pradesh and Rajasthan still defecated in the open," she told AFP. She doubts the shortfall has been made up since. Those four states are home to more than 450 million people.

For instance across from Modi's office, on the other side of New Delhi, Vijaya relieved herself next to the tracks near Hazrat Nizamuddin railway station early in the morning. "There is no toilet (where we live). We all go out in the open," she told AFP. "We have been here for years and nobody has constructed a toilet, despite our repeated pleas." Kaveri, a domestic helper, said in her nearby home in the poor neighborhood of Barapullah. "We go out in the public and it's not safe, but what do we do?" said the mother-of-three.

Many of the toilets that have been constructed are often locked, used for storage, or some other purpose. Cultural barriers, engrained habits or a lack of knowledge about sanitation also create barriers to more widespread usage. "If you're going to change the behavior of rural folk on a sustainable, long term, permanent basis, the only way you're going to be able to do it would be by first focusing on behavior change," said Santosh Mehrotra, a development economist at Jawaharlal Nehru University. — AFP

Protests over the same issues engulfed the southern city of Basra last summer and effectively ended Abdel Mahdi's predecessor Haider Al-Abadi's chances of a second term. Abdel Mahdi now faces a similar challenge. He convened his national security council for an emergency meeting yesterday, after paying tribute to the security forces and blaming the violence on "aggressors who... deliberately created casualties".

Interior ministry spokesman Saad Maan told state media on Tuesday that "infiltrators were behind the violent acts in the protests today". Their statements drew widespread online criticism, as some other politicians had thrown their weight behind the protesters. Nationalist cleric Moqtada Al-Sadr called for a "fair investigation" into the events in Tahrir Square. Parliament, too, has ordered a probe into the violence and its human rights committee criticized security forces for their "suppression" of the demonstrations. — AFP

Eye-watering onion prices...

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usual. Since the ban, countries such as Bangladesh have turned to the likes of Myanmar, Egypt, Turkey and China to increase supplies in a bid bring prices down, government officials and traders said.

But the hefty volumes lost will be hard to replace. India exported 2.2 million tonnes of fresh onions in the 2018/19 fiscal year ended March 31, according to data from India's Agricultural and Processed Food Products Export Development Authority. That's more than half of all imports by Asian countries, traders estimate.

Rising prices of alternative supplies will add to the headache for importers trying to get the vegetable from elsewhere, said Mohammad Idris, a trader based in Dhaka. In the Bangladesh capital, consumers are now being asked to pay 120 taka (\$1.42) per kilogram for their prized onions - twice the price a fortnight ago and the highest since December, 2013. "Prices are going up elsewhere in Asia and Europe," said Idris. "Other exporting countries are taking advantage of the Indian ban" to raise their asking price.

In response to the crisis, the government of Bangladesh has initiated sales of subsidized onions through the state-run Trading Corporation of Bangladesh (TCB). "We are looking for all possible options to import onions. Our target is to import in the shortest possible time," said TCB spokesman Humayun Kabir. But the shipments from elsewhere - Iran and Turkey are also potential suppliers - that authorities in countries across the region are investigating will all take time. "It takes one month when it comes from Egypt and about 25 days from China, while it takes only a few days from India," said Dhaka trader Idris.

One of the operators of the 35 trucks selling the cheaper onions, Mohammad Rafique, told AFP he distributed 400 kilograms of onions yesterday to around 250

people. "But we had to send back at least 50 to 60 people empty-handed as we ran out of supply," he said. One frustrated buyer left with a bitter taste was Bangladeshi banker Raihan Aziz. "I spent my entire lunch break standing here. But all my efforts have come to nothing," Aziz told AFP. "It seems we have to change our eating patterns, omitting onion from curries and our daily menu."

The eye-watering prices have also forced some restaurants to chop the bulb from their menus. "We used to give free onion with green salad to our customers. But we no longer do it," a Dhaka restaurant waiter told AFP. Meanwhile consumers have accused wholesalers of hoarding the vegetable to jack up prices, a charge they deny.

The need for alternative imports is so severe, though, that countries like Sri Lanka have already placed orders with Egypt and China, said G Rajendran, president of the Essential Food Commodities, Importers and Traders Association. Onion prices in Sri Lanka have risen by 50 percent in a week, to 280-300 Sri Lankan rupees (\$1.7) per kilogram.

For other countries, there may be little option but to sit tight and hope for the best. Malaysia, the second-biggest buyer of Indian onions, expects the ban to be temporary and sees no reason to panic, said Sim Tze Tzin, deputy minister of agriculture. But even India has been importing onions from Egypt in an effort to calm prices. And there won't be any meaningful drop in prices before summer-sown crops start to hit the market, said Ajit Shah, president of the Mumbai-based Onion Exporters' Association.

That's not expected until mid-November, meaning the export ban isn't going away in the near term. "India could resume exports once prices drop, but it will take time," said Shah. "Until India resumes exports, supplies will remain limited in Asia." For now, consumers like Kathmandu shopper Pokharel are having to change habits across Asia. "I went to buy 5 kilograms of onions for our five-member family but ended up buying only 3 kilograms due to higher prices," said Afroza Mimi, a Dhaka housewife on a shopping expedition the day after India imposed the export ban. "They (traders) are selling old stock nearly at double the price. This is crazy." — Agencies

Modi hails toilet 'milestone' on...

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lack access to a toilet, and that because of old habits many of the new facilities that have been built are not being used. Modi acknowledged that challenges remained, saying "we have to continue the journey to make India clean. We have to make this change in behavior permanent". "We have to make sure that the toilets are used for the purpose for which they have been built. People who are still left out must be connected to (them)."

Modi, who stormed to a second term in office in May, also pledged to embark on another major project - to eradicate the country of single-use plastic. "Plastic is a big danger to health, environment and cleanliness. We must achieve the target of making India plastic free by 2022," he said, reiterating a recent promise. While some states have already banned the use of such plastics, enforcement of the rules has been lax. "I know that the use of plastic bags has already come down. Millions of households have taken a decision not to use single-use plastics," he said. "This will benefit the environment. Roads and sewers won't get blocked. Cattle and marine life would be saved."

Modi's claim that India is 'open-defecation free' has been questioned by experts, who cite data from rural as

Seven killed as protests against...

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Unusually for Iraq, no political faction had explicitly called for Tuesday's protest, which appeared to be largely spontaneous. The liberal newspaper Al-Bayana Al-Jadida said the protests were, "for the first time without flag, without poster or party slogan". They follow months of simmering frustration with Abdel Mahdi over a perceived lack of progress on corruption, unemployment or services. Routine power cuts leave consumers without mains electricity for up to 20 hours a day and, according to the World Bank, youth unemployment runs at around 25 percent, or double the adult rate.

Rouhani didn't take Trump call...

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Macron used his 48 hours in New York to see Trump three times and Rouhani twice, urging them to engage directly. The source said Macron made a last-ditch attempt before flying back to Paris, with French technicians installing a secure phone line linking Trump's Lotte hotel and the Millennium, hosting the Iranian delegation.

The plan involved Trump calling at 9 pm despite doubts over the Iranian reaction. Macron went to the Millennium to ensure the phone call took place. Trump made the call, but Rouhani informed the French president he would not take it, the source said. "The discussion continued to founder on the Iranians first wanting US sanctions lifted. Donald Trump wants Iran first to make commitments on its nuclear (ambitions) and ballistic and regional activities," the source said.

The French diplomatic source's comments come after US reports emerged earlier this week about Macron's initiative to get the leaders to talk. Tensions have been escalating between Iran and the United States since May last year when President Donald Trump pulled out of the nuclear accord and began reimposing sanctions that have crippled the Iranian economy. Britain, France and Germany have repeatedly said they are committed to saving the deal that gave Iran relief from sanctions in exchange for curbs on its nuclear program, but their efforts have so far borne little fruit.

Yesterday, Rouhani said during a cabinet meeting that was broadcast live on state TV that a plan for talks presented to the US and Iran by Macron is broadly acceptable to the Islamic Republic. He said some wording needed to be changed in the plan, which would require Iran not to pursue nuclear weapons and to help

the security of the region and its waterways, while Washington would have to remove all sanctions. It would also allow Iran to immediately resume oil sales.

But Rouhani also told the cabinet that mixed messages about sanctions received from the United States while he was attending the United Nations General Assembly in New York last week had undermined the possibility of talks. He said it was unacceptable for Trump to say publicly that he would intensify sanctions while European powers told Iran in private that he was willing to negotiate.

"The American president on two occasions ... said explicitly that we want to intensify sanctions. I told these European friends, so which part should we accept? Should we accept your word that you say America is ready?" Rouhani said. "Or the words of the president of America who in 24 hours said explicitly twice ... that I want to intensify sanctions? [The Europeans] didn't have a clear answer."

European powers were continuing efforts to arrange talks, Rouhani said. Germany, Britain and France were among signatories to Iran's 2015 nuclear pact with world powers, which Trump quit last year. Iran's foreign minister Mohammad Javad Zarif said Macron's four-point plan for talks was "presented in his words and does not contain our viewpoints" but that work would continue. "It's necessary that these negotiations continue until the issues are presented in a clear way. We will continue these contacts," Zarif was quoted as saying by the official IRIB news agency, insisting that Iran is not pursuing nuclear weapons.

Separately, Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei said Iran would continue reducing its commitments under the 2015 nuclear deal until it reaches a "desired result", according to his official website. "We will continue the reduction of commitments and must continue with complete seriousness," he told a meeting of commanders of the elite Revolutionary Guards. Iranian officials have said they will reduce their commitments under the nuclear deal until the remaining signatories fully meet their commitments. — Agencies