

## International

# White House rules out cooperation in Democrats' impeachment probe

## Trump's administration calling it 'constitutionally invalid'

WASHINGTON: The White House slammed the door in a letter yesterday on any cooperation by President Donald Trump's administration with the Democrats' impeachment probe, calling it "constitutionally invalid." The eight page letter to Democratic leaders, signed by White House counsel Pat Cipollone, rejected the entire process underway in the House of Representatives, which is examining whether Trump abused his office by seeking a corruption probe in Ukraine of 2020 election rival Joe Biden.

"President Trump cannot permit his Administration to participate in this partisan inquiry under these circumstances," the letter said. "Your inquiry lacks any legitimate constitutional foundation, any pretense of fairness, or even the most elementary due process protections," the letter said. The White House said it objected especially to the fact that the lower house had not held a formal vote to launch the impeachment inquiry.

That "has never happened," a senior administration official, speaking on condition of anonymity, told reporters. He accused Democrats of "purporting simply to proceed on the basis of a news conference." Democrats say that no formal House vote is needed because the impeachment process is in its earliest stages, equivalent to gathering evidence for an indictment. Only then would the Democrats call for a vote on whether to impeach, passing the matter on to the Republican-controlled Senate for a trial.

The decision means no members of the Trump administration will be authorized to testify in Congress and will ignore subpoenas, the official said. He insisted that the White House was "definitely avoiding saying there's no way we'd ever cooperate." However, he gave no explanation of how a change might come. The letter had been awaited for several days as part of Trump's strategy of stonewalling investigators and focusing on undermining

the credibility of Democratic leaders with his voter base.

Earlier Tuesday, the White House prevented the US ambassador to the European Union, Gordon Sondland, from showing up to testify. "He would be testifying before a totally compromised kangaroo court," Trump said on Twitter. In slightly more measured terms, the letter asks Democrats to drop the entire process. "We hope that, in light of the many deficiencies we have identified in your proceedings, you will abandon the current invalid efforts to pursue an impeachment inquiry and join the President in focusing on the many important goals that matter to the American people," it said.

### 'Russia helped Trump'

Meanwhile, a Senate Republican-led investigation said in a report Tuesday that Russia indeed sought to help President Donald Trump in the 2016 election, contradicting persistent White House claims to the contrary. The Senate Intelligence Committee's 2016 election investigation report said a sweeping social media manipulation campaign by the St. Petersburg-based Internet Research Agency (IRA) represented "overt support of Russia's favored candidate in the US presidential election."

"The committee found that the IRA sought to influence the 2016 US presidential election by harming Hillary Clinton's chances of success and supporting Donald Trump at the direction of the Kremlin," it said. "IRA social media activity was overtly and almost invariably supportive of then-candidate Trump," it said. The committee, led by Republican Senator Richard Burr, issued its report as Trump continues to insist that the story of Russian meddling is "fake news" and a "Russian witch hunt hoax" peddled by Democrats. Trump and allied Republicans meanwhile are pressing an unsubstantiated theory that Ukraine colluded with Democrats to undermine Trump in 2016.



WASHINGTON: The US Capitol is seen in Washington, DC. Donald Trump yesterday called for outing the whistleblower behind the impeachment inquiry threatening his presidency and sought to transform the entire scandal into a boost for his 2020 reelection campaign. —AFP

The collision of the two versions of what happened in the 2016 vote are at the center of the newest allegations that Trump has sought Ukraine's help to find dirt on his possible 2020 Democratic election challenger Joe Biden. Trump is facing possible impeachment in the House of Representatives for seeking to involve Kiev in next year's election, and allegedly holding up military aid for the country to induce its help against Biden. Democrats called the moves a repeat of 2016, when Trump's campaign allegedly sought Moscow's support to defeat

Democrat Clinton.

Special Counsel Robert Mueller's investigation into that election found numerous instances of attempted collusion between the campaign and Russians, but inadequate evidence of an illegal conspiracy to do so. The committee warned of a possible repeat of Russian meddling in next year's election. "The executive branch should, in the run up to the 2020 election, reinforce with the public the danger of attempted foreign interference in the 2020 election," the report said. —Agencies

## Lebanon skies a 'death trap' for migratory birds

AGHBEH: Bird protection groups called Tuesday for urgent action to save endangered migratory species that are being decimated by illegal hunters over Lebanon. For the 41 species in Lebanon listed as particularly endangered, "the situation is really critical," said Fouad Itani, president of the Association for Bird Conservation in Lebanon. "If nothing is done, their numbers will continue to drop and some species will simply disappear," he said.

According to official figures, 2.6 million birds from close to 200 species were killed illegally in the country in 2014. Itani believes the numbers killed have risen since then. Lebanon lies on one of the world's most important migration routes and for many species - such as storks, lesser spotted eagles and pelicans - the most dangerous part of their journey is flying over the small Mediterranean country. "Hundreds of thousands of white storks are killed in Lebanon every year," Itani said.

Bird protection groups have successfully raised awareness in some regions but the situation in the north remains "out of control", according to a joint statement by the Association for Bird Conservation in Lebanon and the Committee Against Bird Slaughter, based in Germany. The statement was released after a field visit organised for



EGHBE: Slaughtered birds of prey are displayed by activists from the Committee Against Bird Slaughter (CABS) at their birds observation camp in the village of Eghbe in the Lebanese mountains, northeast of Beirut. —AFP

Lebanese and foreign officials Tuesday. Itani said poachers in the north "are shooting for fun, big numbers. They shoot even at night, using spotlights... They have WhatsApp groups to track the birds together."

Countries such as Poland and others along migratory routes have pressured Lebanon to take action. Killing of birds has been reduced

in some areas this year through the awareness campaigns and in cooperation with authorities, the statement said, but improved bird protection laws have yet to be enforced by the security forces. The joint statement called for the creation of a professional and dedicated wildlife crime unit to curb poaching during migration periods. —AFP

## Belgium outrage over woman punched in burger advert

BRUSSELS: Belgium's advertising regulator said yesterday it has clocked up hundreds of complaints over a viral hamburger ad showing a comic-book version of a man punching a woman for handing him the wrong sandwich. Consumers and politicians called the online ad "sickening" and "irresponsible", saying it went directly against public campaigns denouncing domestic violence.

The ad, published on Facebook, aimed to publicize a Belgian hamburger brand, Bicky Burger. Its cartoon style borrowed from 1950s and 1960s American pop-art made famous by artist Roy Lichtenstein and by a panel from a 1965 comic showing Batman slapping his sidekick Robin that has been reworked into a long-running internet meme.

The Bicky Burger ad depicts a man in a suit swinging his fist to violently hit a buxom blonde woman carrying a fast-food container as he exclaims: "Seriously, a fake Bicky?" The head of Belgium's regulatory Advertising Council, Sandrine Sepul, said the agency had received 300 complaints from the public in 24 hours. She told AFP that a Dutch food company, Izico, commissioned the advertisement and her agency had transmitted the



BRUSSELS: Photo shows an ad published on Facebook aimed to publicize the Belgian hamburger brand, Bicky Burger, and depicting a man in a suit swinging his fist to violently hit a buxom blonde woman carrying a fast-food container as he exclaims: 'Seriously, a fake Bicky?'. —AFP

complaints to its counterpart in the Netherlands.

Izico was ordered to explain itself, she said, adding that possible punishment could be decided "in a few weeks". Belgian media ran indignant reports on the controversy, which led to the ad being pulled from Facebook - but it was relayed thousands of times in individual social media posts. Le Soir newspaper asked how such an advertising campaign could be created in 2019 when, in Belgium, "every 10 days a man kills his wife

or his ex. And every day a number of women are humiliated, raped, beaten."

Two regional politicians in charge of gender equality for Brussels and for the Wallonia part of Belgium said they had also called on the country's Advertising Council to act. One of them, Nawal Ben Hamou, said on her Facebook page she found the ad "sickening and totally irresponsible". The other, Christie Morreale, echoed that in a tweet saying that "using violence towards women in an ad is irresponsible". —AFP

## Wealthy couple gets prison terms for US admissions scam

BOSTON: The founder of a food and beverage packaging company and his wife were each sentenced to one month in prison on Tuesday for their roles in what prosecutors say is the largest college admissions scam uncovered in the United States. Gregory and Marcia Abbott received lighter sentences than the eight-month terms sought by federal prosecutors in Boston after they admitted to paying \$125,000 to have a corrupt test proctor secretly correct their daughter's answers on college entrance exams.

The couple's sentence by US District Judge Indira Talwani also includes a requirement that they each pay a \$45,000 fine. They previously pleaded guilty in May to conspiracy to commit mail fraud and honest services mail fraud. Lawyers for the Abbotts did not immediately respond to a request for comment.

The Abbotts are among 52 people charged with participating in a vast scheme in which wealthy parents conspired with a California college admissions consultant to use bribery and other

forms of fraud to secure the admission of their children to top schools. William "Rick" Singer, the consultant, pleaded guilty in March to charges that he facilitated cheating on college entrance exams and helped bribe sports coaches at universities to present his clients' children as fake athletic recruits.

The 35 parents charged in the investigation include executives and celebrities, such as "Desperate Housewives" star Felicity Huffman and "Full House" actress Lori Loughlin. Huffman was sentenced to 14 days in prison on Sept. 13 after pleading guilty to engaging in the college exam cheating scheme. Loughlin has pleaded not guilty. Prosecutors said the Abbotts in 2018 arranged through Singer to have an associate pose as a proctor for their daughter's ACT and SAT exams to correct her answers at a test center Singer controlled through bribery.

The proctor was Mark Riddell, a former counselor at a Florida private school who pleaded guilty in April to secretly taking SAT and ACT college entrance exams in place of Singer's clients' children or correcting their answers. Prosecutors said the Abbotts' goal was to improve their daughter's prospects for gaining admission to Duke University, Marcia Abbott's alma mater. In papers, the Abbotts' lawyers said they were good people who made an "aberrational, terrible decision." They argued the couple deserved a term of probation. —Reuters

## California set to end private prisons and immigrant camps

LOS ANGELES: America's largest state prison system is moving to quit the practice of farming out inmates to lockups following a nationwide decline in the for-profit incarceration business. California Governor Gavin Newsom is expected to sign legislation this week designed to effectively ban private, for-profit corporations from running prisons or immigration detention facilities.

Sponsors of the measure say it will end a brief but hapless experiment in privately outsourced incarceration begun as a means to ease overcrowding - an endeavor Newsom branded an outrage when he took office in January. Bill supporters say private prisons, driven to maximize shareholder profits, lack proper oversight or incentives to rehabilitate inmates, and have contributed to a culture of mass incarceration by making it cheaper to lock up people.

They point to research cited in a 2016 US Justice Department Office of Inspector General report that found private prisons spend less on personnel, and are less safe, than public institutions. "This is a total and complete failure, and it's hurting and abusing Californians," said state Assemblyman Rob Bonta, a chief author of the bill. The facilities at

stake are low-security lockups operated by one of two leading US private prison companies, Florida-headquartered GEO Group or Tennessee-based CoreCivic.

Defending their business model, the companies say they provided a vital service when detentions in California's prisons more than doubled the system's capacity, sparking lawsuits that led to court-ordered cuts to inmate populations. "For 10 years, we provided safe, secure housing and life-changing re-entry programming for inmates that had faced extreme overcrowding," CoreCivic spokeswoman Amanda Gilchrist said. Separately, GEO Group cited its record as "an innovator in the field of rehabilitative services" and said the bill worked against the state's goal of lowering inmate recidivism.

### Significant loopholes

Inmate advocacy groups say the legislation does not go far enough, pointing to what they call significant loopholes, including an exemption for facilities that provide "educational, vocational, medical or other ancillary services" to inmates. "I cannot think of any prison that does not provide those services," said Kara Gotsch, director of strategic initiatives for the Sentencing Project, a criminal justice reform group. Several states, including New York, Illinois and Nevada, have adopted similar bans on private prisons, and nearly half of all states have no such facilities, Gotsch said. The bill sets the stage for the three remaining private prisons in California, collectively housing about 1,400 inmates, to close four years from now, when their contracts with the state Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation expire. —Reuters