

International

Top US prosecutor who probed Trump allies fired

Berman steps down, ending stand-off with Barr

WASHINGTON/NEW YORK: A stand-off over the independence of one of the country's most important prosecutor's offices ended on Saturday when Geoffrey Berman agreed to step down as US Attorney for the Southern District of New York, the office that had been investigating President Donald Trump's personal lawyer, Rudolph Giuliani.

Berman's confirmation of his departure came after Attorney General William Barr told him he had been fired by Trump at Barr's request, and that Berman's hand-picked No. 2, Deputy US Attorney Audrey Strauss, would become Acting US Attorney until a permanent replacement is installed. Under Strauss' leadership, Berman said the office could continue its "tradition of integrity and independence."

Berman's office, which is known for prosecuting the most high profile terrorism cases, Wall Street financial crimes and government corruption, has not shied from taking on figures in Trump's orbit. It oversaw the prosecution of Michael Cohen, Trump's former personal lawyer, indicted two Giuliani associates and launched a probe into Giuliani in connection with his efforts to dig up dirt on Trump's political adversaries in Ukraine. Giuliani has not formally been accused of any wrongdoing.

The standoff with Berman follows the latest in a series of moves by Barr that critics say are meant to benefit Trump politically and undermine the independence of the Justice Department. It also comes as Trump has sought to purge officials perceived as not fully supporting him. In recent weeks he has fired a series of agency watchdogs, including one who played a key

role in Trump's impeachment earlier this year.

Berman, a Republican who held a position in Trump's transition team and was once a law partner of Giuliani, has also pursued cases against tycoon sex offender Jeffrey Epstein, who was found dead in his Manhattan jail cell last year. The row with Berman began late Friday, when Barr unexpectedly announced that Berman was stepping down and would be replaced by US Securities and Exchange Commission Chairman Jay Clayton. Berman, however, issued a statement of his own, saying he had no intention of stepping down until the Senate confirmed his suc-

cessor. Southern District prosecutor, who spoke on condition of anonymity, said Barr's initial decision to install Carpenito was a "huge departure" from normal practice.

In the letter, Barr said he was "surprised and quite disappointed" by Berman's statement late on Friday night in which he refused to quit his job, and he accused Berman of choosing "public spectacle over public service." "I have asked the President to remove you as of today, and he has done so," Barr said.

'I don't get involved'

Trump told Fox News Channel he approved Barr's request, and said he did not know Giuliani was being investigated by Berman, although he had read that recently. "If (Barr) wants to do something ... I don't get involved," Trump said in an interview. "But the president has to sign a document, where I guess you give it your OK. And he wants to run his operation, and that's okay with me." Asked if Barr said why he wanted to fire Berman, Trump said: "We spent very little time talking about it, but I have a lot of respect for Attorney General Barr."

Although Berman agreed to step down on Saturday, it did not end the political controversy swirling around his highly unusual firing. It comes after Barr intervened in February to scale back a sentencing recommendation for Trump's longtime friend Roger Stone over the advice of career prosecutors. Then in May, Barr asked a federal judge to dismiss the criminal case against Trump's former national security adviser Michael Flynn, again prompting questions about



Geoffrey Berman

whether he was acting in the president's personal interest.

Jerrold Nadler, the Chairman of the Democrat-controlled House Judiciary Committee, said he has launched an investigation into Berman's termination. US House Speaker Nancy Pelosi said the firing appeared to have "base and improper motives," while the top Democrat on the Senate Judiciary Committee, Diane Feinstein, urged the panel's chairman, Republican Senator Lindsey Graham, to launch an investigation into "political interference in the work of the Justice Department." Senate Democratic Leader Chuck Schumer urged the Justice Department's inspector general to launch an investigation into "blatantly corrupt DOJ interference". — Agencies



Democrats launch investigation

and that his office's investigations would continue.

On Friday, Barr said he had picked Craig Carpenito, the US Attorney for the Southern District of New Jersey, to serve as Acting US Attorney until Clayton's confirmation. But in a letter on Saturday to Berman, Barr back-tracked from that plan, saying Strauss would take over in an acting capacity. One former

Judge allows release of Bolton's book

WASHINGTON: A US judge refused Saturday to block the release of a tell-all book in which President Donald Trump's former national security advisor describes him as corrupt and incompetent. With John Bolton's book already widely shipped to stores for sale next week, Judge Royce Lamberth wrote that it is too late for a restraining order sought by the Trump administration to halt the process.

The DC district court judge said Bolton appeared to have failed to obtain written White House agreement that his memoir contained nothing classified. "While Bolton's unilateral conduct raises grave national security concerns, the government has not established that an injunction is an appropriate remedy," the judge wrote. He said a review of passages that the government contends contain classified material had persuaded him that Bolton "likely jeopardized national security through publication".

Despite failing in the attempt to have the book halted, Trump quickly took to

Twitter to hail a "big court win" against Bolton. "Obviously, with the book already given out and leaked to many people and the media, nothing the highly respected Judge could have done about stopping it...BUT, strong & powerful statements & rulings on MONEY & on BREAKING CLASSIFICATION were made. Bolton broke the law and has been called out and rebuked for so doing, with a really big price to pay."

Bolton's attorney, Charles Cooper, welcomed the judge's ruling but disputed the finding that his client did not fully comply with his vetting obligation. "The case will now proceed to development of the full record on that issue. The full story of these events has yet to be told – but it will be," Cooper said in a statement. The book, entitled "The Room Where It Happened", was widely shipped ahead of its Tuesday release date and many of its more damning allegations against Trump have already been reported in the media.

It is Bolton's portrait of 17 months up close with Trump, until he was fired in September, although Trump characterizes the work as "fiction". Bolton, a lifelong Republican who stands firmly on the right of the party, contends that Trump is not "fit for office". He describes Trump "pleading" with Chinese President Xi Jinping during trade negotiations to boost the US president's chances of reelection in November by buying more



WASHINGTON: In this file photo taken on April 9, 2018, US President Donald Trump shakes hands with National Security Advisor John Bolton during a meeting with senior military leaders at the White House. — AFP

products from US farm states. Bolton also reports that Trump, a real estate tycoon who never held office before winning the White House, thought Finland was part of Russia.

Bolton, moreover, backs up the allegations at the center of Trump's impeachment last year that he pressured Ukraine to dig up dirt to weaken his expected Democratic presidential rival Joe Biden. Trump also committed other "Ukraine-like transgressions" in his wielding of foreign policy for personal gain, Bolton alleges. In an interview to be broadcast

Sunday, Bolton told ABC News Trump had committed what "did feel like obstruction of justice to me" in his dealings with Turkey. Trump was said to be receptive to Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan who brought up the criminal charges against one of his country's largest banks over violating US sanctions on Iran. Trump told Erdogan that "he would take care of things", explaining that New York prosecutors handling the case were appointed by former president Barack Obama and could be replaced, Bolton writes in his book. — AFP

Coronavirus drives Malawi tobacco farmers to brink

LILONGWE, Malawi: During his 15 years as a Malawian tobacco farmer, Boniface Namate has had to overcome many difficulties growing the plant that is the country's biggest export earner. Namate had banked on a bumper crop this year and had hoped the proceeds would enable him to buy a new car and even build a new house. However, the coronavirus pandemic has seen the 56-year-old's dreams go up in smoke.

Due to restrictions imposed to control the spread of the virus in Malawi – one of the world's poorest countries, and one of the top 10 tobacco producers – growers were barred from physically attending the auctions where prices are set. That has left farmers feeling cheated by buyers. "We are not operating normally as there is no interaction between the buyer and the grower," said Betty Chinyamunyu of the National Smallholder Farmers' Association of Malawi. "Because of this, there are trust issues," she said.

When the auction season opened in April, Namate and other small-scale farmers said their earnings had indeed evaporated. "The prices that came from the auction are not what we expected. We are devastated", said Namate. Burley leaf from Malawi makes up 6.6 percent of the world's tobacco exports. Known locally as "green gold", it is Malawi's top crop in terms of employment.

It also accounts for over 50 percent of foreign exchange earnings and 23 percent of tax revenues. So, when its 50,000 growers suffer, the country has every reason to be worried. Last November, the United States restricted tobacco imports from Malawi over allegations of worker exploitation and child labor. And the coronavirus has turned up the heat on farmers even more. — AFP

Greece extends lockdown of migrant camps

ATHENS: Greece announced on Saturday another extension of the coronavirus lockdown on its teeming migrant camps, hours after some 2,000 people protested in central Athens to mark World Refugee Day and denounce the government's treatment of migrants. The migration ministry said confinement for residents of reception and identification centers across the country would be extended to July 5. It was due to have ended on Monday.

Greece was quick to introduce strict confinement measures on migrant camps on March 21 and imposed a more general lockdown on March 23. While no known coronavirus deaths have been recorded in the camps so far and only a few dozen infections have surfaced, the measures have since been extended a number of times. Rights groups have expressed concern that migrants' rights have been eroded by the restrictions.

Earlier on Saturday, members of anti-racist groups, joined by refugees from migrant camps, marched in central Athens, holding banners proclaiming "No refugee homeless, persecuted, jailed" and chanting slogans against evictions of refugees from temporary ac-

commodation in apartments. Thousands face homelessness as Greek authorities plan to move more than 11,000 people to make room for other asylum seekers currently living in dismal island camps.

Refugees used to be able to keep their accommodation for up to six months after receiving protected status. The new conservative government of Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis has reduced this to just a month. The government insists that it is doing everything necessary "to assure a smooth transition for those who leave their lodgings". The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) has voiced concern, stressing that many of the refugees do not have effective access to social benefits and support.

In a message for World Refugee Day, the Ministry for Migration and Asylum said Greece has found itself "at the center of the migration crisis bearing a disproportionate burden". "The country is safeguarding the rights of those who are really persecuted and operates as a shield of solidarity in the eastern Mediterranean," it added. Government officials have repeatedly said Greece must become a less attractive destination for asylum seekers. The continued presence of more than 32,000 asylum seekers on the islands – over five times the intended capacity of shelters there – has caused major friction with local communities who are demanding their immediate removal. An operation in February to build new camps on the islands of Lesbos and Chios had to be abandoned due to violent protests. Rights groups have repeatedly criticized unhygienic and unsafe living conditions in existing camps. — AFP



ATHENS: Migrants and solidarity groups carry a banner as they participate in a rally on Saturday marking World Refugee Day, as they demand rights and housing for refugees and migrants in Greece. — AFP

Lenin statue unveiled in west Germany

GELSENKIRCHEN, Germany: A divisive new monument to Soviet leader Vladimir Lenin was unveiled in Germany on Saturday, in the middle of a global row over the controversial background of historical figures immortalized as statues. More than 30 years after the post-World War II communist experiment on German soil ended, the tiny Marxist-Leninist Party of Germany (MLPD) installed Lenin's likeness in the western city of Gelsenkirchen.

A few hundred gathered for the ceremony, marked by fluttering red flags and the smell of grilled sausages. "Criticism of capitalism and the search for social alternatives is everywhere. We're criticizing that there's no public discussion of socialism as an alternative," MLPD chair Gabi Fechtner said. The MLPD says it is the first such statue ever to be erected on the territory of the former West Germany, decades after the eastern German Democratic Republic communist state collapsed along with its deadly Berlin Wall and Stasi secret police. "The time for monuments to racists, anti-Semites, fascists, anti-communists and other relics of the past has clearly passed," said Fechtner in an earlier statement. "Lenin was an ahead-of-his-time thinker of world-historical importance, an early fighter for freedom and democracy."

Not everyone in Gelsenkirchen, a center of the former industrial and mining powerhouse Ruhr region, has welcomed the over two-meter likeness, produced in former Czechoslovakia in 1957. "Lenin stands for violence, repression, terrorism and horrific human suffering," representatives from mainstream parties on the district council in Gelsenkirchen-West said in a resolution passed in early March.

The council "will not tolerate such an anti-democratic symbol in its district," it added, urging "all legal means" be used to block its installation. But later in March the upper state court in Muenster rejected an attempt to stop the statue that it argued would impact a historic building on the same site. The MLPD trumpeted interest from as far away as Russia, but urged guests to maintain social distancing and wear nose and mouth coverings against coronavirus infection.

Paint-splattered Bismarck

The worldwide Black Lives Matter movement following the death of African-American George Floyd at the hands of police in Minneapolis on May 25 has found some echo in Germany. Unknown people splattered red paint on a statue of Otto von Bismarck in Hamburg's Altona district this week. The "Iron Chancellor" behind Germany's unification in 1871 is also known for hosting the Berlin Conference of 1884, which became a byword for the carving up of Africa between European colonial powers.

Berlin itself has been a hub of activism against commemorations in public space of colonialists, with much ire directed at street names honoring 19th-Century figures in the so-called "African Quarter". But political decisions to rename roads named after figures like Adolf Luederitz, a merchant who played a key role in colonizing Namibia, or Carl Peters, a colonialist behind German expansion in eastern Africa, have met with resistance from locals. In decades of experience addressing the country's Nazi and communist pasts, "things have always been done properly, it all seems very German" with official applications to local authorities and orderly dismantling of monuments, said Urte Evert, head of Berlin's Spandau Citadel museum where many old statues are on display. — AFP