

TRUMP'S TOUGH CUBA LINE SCORES BIG IN LITTLE HAVANA

MIAMI: US President Donald Trump's new measures restricting some trade and travel with Cuba did not go very far in practical terms, but they made a big noise in the place most eager to hear it: Miami's Little Havana neighborhood. In

return, the Cuban-Americans who turned out to welcome him to the symbolic heart of the exile community rewarded Trump with what in turn he seems to want the most: wild applause. Hundreds packed the rickety Manuel

Artime Theater - from recently arrived dissidents fleeing Raul Castro's rule, to older veterans of failed CIA covert operations and the new generation of Cuban-American US lawmakers. Back in Washington, Trump's critics warned that his clampdown on dealings with Cuban military-run tour firms and on private US travel to the communist-run island would only impoverish ordinary Cubans and threaten diplomatic rapprochement.

American private sector firms and business groups warned that he was cutting off avenues for investment that could only provide more opportunities for Cubans - and profits and jobs for companies north of the Florida strait. Still other observers noted that - for all the hype about the reversal of the painstaking efforts towards rapprochement by Trump's predecessor Barack Obama - the new measures amounted to little more than a commitment to enforce existing laws.

But here, the resounding speeches by Trump, Vice President Mike Pence and Florida Senator Marco Rubio struck home. The crowd chanted "Viva Cuba Libre," sang "God Bless America" and cried out: "Thank you Mr President. We

love you." Before his election campaign last year, Trump had no history of supporting the cause of Cuban freedom - and since coming to power he has embraced other authoritarian regimes without much pause to consider their human rights records.

But during the 2016 race to the White House he met veterans of Brigade 2506, the units of exiled Cubans covertly trained by the CIA to launch the ill-fated 1961 Bay of Pigs invasion in a failed bid to oust then Cuban strongman Fidel Castro. The veterans were again at the theater - named after one of their own - on Friday to welcome Trump and cheer as he made good on his promise to them to revise Obama's outreach strategy and demand Cuba make good on democratic reform.

"The change is not radical. Trump did not reverse Obama's policy, but made adjustments. Much of Obama's policy remains the same," said Sebastian Arcos, associate director of the Cuban Research Institute at Florida International University. For Arcos, Trump was making a gesture to a community that came behind him in the election and a lot of the hype around his visit was whipped up by local leaders for political reasons -

but his decision carried symbolic weight. By putting his decision in terms of service to US values and human rights, while taking a practical measure to defund Cuban state entities he is trying to recast the embargo as a measure against Raul Castro and government - not the Cuban people. This is a message that has some support, even among those in the once monolithic Cuban community who had begun to doubt the embargo and cautiously welcomed Obama's efforts to mend the half-century-old divide.

It's not hard in the scruffy streets of Little Havana, where old men play dominos in parks between Cuban diners and up-and-coming jazz bars, to find hardliners who spit on the "communist Obama" and his supposed sell-out to Castro. But there are also those who see the value in opening up business links and making family travel easier, giving Cubans back home economic freedom while they wait for politics to catch up - but even they sympathize with Trump's measures.

The domino park locks its gates at 6:30 pm, but on this muggy early summer evening Gerardo Diaz, 65, and his friends are in no hurry to head home, and happy to argue politics with reporters. —AFP



MIAMI: A man holds signs referencing US President Donald Trump's policy on Cuba on Friday. —AFP

VENEZUELA MOBS KICK, BURN THIEVES IN LYNCHING EPIDEMIC

CARACAS: Swearing in fury, the crowd strips the man naked and stomps on his head as he sprawls on the ground. "You want things that come easy? Then take this, you b****d!" In Venezuela, this is what robbers get when they are caught by passers-by. It is not just the country's economy and political system that are sick, but society itself, experts say. An epidemic of lynchings is one of the most gruesome symptoms.

'Justice'

AFP journalists filmed a lynching close-up in a busy street in the capital Caracas. A witness says he stopped the man who had tried to rob a woman at gunpoint in a bakery. Then the mob took over. "You're lucky we didn't burn you," a voice yells, as police lug the man, limp but still breathing, into the back of their car. The crowd yells in satisfaction - but not at the man's arrest. They think they are the ones who have done justice here. "Their aim is to kill the person before the police arrive," says Marco Ponce, coordinator of the Venezuelan Social Conflict Observatory (OVCS).

The body says some 60 people were recorded as killed in lynchings in the first five months of this year alone. Last year there were 126 such killings - a surge from the 20 reported in the previous year, coinciding with the worsening of political tensions and economic chaos. "In lynchings, citizens let out their anger in the face of a state that is not defending their right to justice," says Ponce. "They think they are dispensing justice, and they do so with anger, so they go as far as killing the person."

No pity

Caracas resident Damaso Velasquez recalls taking part himself in a separate lynching. "I didn't feel pity for that person because I knew he was a criminal," he tells AFP. "I felt rage and hatred towards that person... I saw him committing a robbery.

That makes you feel furious, so whatever happens to him, it's alright," he goes on. "The government grabs him, puts him in jail and then they let him go again. There is disorder here in Caracas - starting with the government."

Venezuela has one of the highest annual murder rates in the world - 70 for every 100,000 inhabitants in 2016, according to the state prosecution service. Yet only about six crimes out of every 100 here result in a sentence, says criminologist Fermin Marmol. "People feel that the state is not protecting them, so they opt to defend themselves," says Freddy Crespo, a criminologist at the University of the Andes. "Their fear turns into anger."

'Social breakdown'

Ponce sees the rise of lynchings as a sign of a "social breakdown" in Venezuela. President Nicolas Maduro suggested that a man who was set on fire during a demonstration in May was targeted for being a government supporter. Witnesses said the crowd accused him of thieving. Maduro broadcast a chilling video of the 22-year-old man running in flames after being doused in fuel and set alight. The man died in hospital two weeks later. In another case, a man was set on fire by a crowd who thought he had committed a robbery, but it turned out he had been trying to help the victim.

A man was sentenced to six years in jail in March for taking part in that killing. For some Venezuelans, the lynchings inspire as much terror as the criminals they are meant to punish. "The state is supposed to provide you with civil and judicial security, which we are totally lacking," says one Caracas resident, Maria Hernandez. "But I don't think it is just for me to come and kill or burn you just because you have robbed," she adds. "That way I would turn into someone more barbaric than you." — AFP



ST PAUL, Minnesota: Supporters of Philando Castile hold a portrait of Castile as they march along University Avenue, leaving a vigil at the state Capitol on Friday. —AP

US OFFICER ACQUITTED OVER SHOOTING OF BLACK MOTORIST

PROTESTS ERUPT AFTER ACQUITTAL, MARCHERS BLOCK TRAFFIC

CHICAGO: A Minnesota police officer was acquitted Friday in the shooting of a black motorist whose dying moments were captured on Facebook video in a case that shocked the nation. Jeronimo Yanez, 29, was found not guilty of all three charges he faced in the death of 32-year-old Philando Castile: Second-degree manslaughter and two felony counts of intentional discharge of a dangerous weapon for endangering the safety of Castile's girlfriend, Diamond Reynolds, and her four-year-old daughter.

Both were in the car when the officer shot Castile during a traffic stop on July 6 of last year. After the verdict, Castile's family reacted with anger outside the courthouse in Saint Paul, Minnesota. An evening protest was planned at the state capitol. "I'm mad as hell right now. Yes, I am," Castile's mother Valerie told a group of reporters. "The system continues to fail black people."

Glenda Hatchett, a lawyer who represented Valerie Castile, said her son had suffered a "tragic, tragic, needless death." "This time we had to get it right," she said. "This time we had a young man who had no criminal record," she said. "This time there should have been, in our opinion, a very, very different outcome." The immediate aftermath of Castile's shooting was captured on video recorded by Reynolds and broadcast on Facebook Live. In it, Castile can be seen bleeding to death in the driver's seat.

The footage sparked protests across the

United States and further exposed tensions between US police and African Americans. Yanez had initially singled out Castile for a traffic stop because the officer thought he bared a resemblance to a robbery suspect. Castile volunteered that he was legally carrying a gun. He said, "Sir, I have to tell you that I do have a firearm on me." The officer asked Castile not to pull out the handgun. But moments later Yanez fired seven shots while Castile was still buckled into his seat. Reynolds, the girlfriend, said Castile had been trying to pull out his wallet.

Yanez said he feared for his safety and thought Castile was reaching for the gun. But Ramsey County Attorney John Choi, who filed charges against the officer, declared such fear unreasonable. "He made a horrible mistake," Choi said after the verdict, referring to the officer. "I know if he could, he would take back what he did," he said.

Community activists expressed anger and disappointment, while officials appealed for calm.

"It was a clear-cut case," Jaylani Hussein, chief of the Minnesota chapter of the Council on American-Islamic Relations, said on local TV station KSTP. "It sends a very harsh message that we still have major race issues in this country."

'Egregious'

The mayor of Saint Paul quickly announced a series of community meetings to discuss the verdict. "I urge each of us to move forward in a way that is peaceful and respectful of everyone - resi-

dents, demonstrators and police officers alike," Mayor Christopher Coleman said in a statement. The jury in the case spent approximately 30 hours over five days deliberating, and asked the judge to re-examine the Facebook video and the video from the police car dashboard camera, along with Yanez's testimony on the stand. The dashcam video has not been made public, pending the outcome of the case.

US prosecutors have found it difficult to make criminal charges stick in police shooting cases. All six Baltimore officers charged over the 2015 death of Freddie Gray, due to spinal cord injuries suffered in the back of a police van, were eventually cleared. Sherrilyn Ifill, who heads the NAACP Legal Defense Fund, said the acquittal "highlights how difficult it is to prosecute an officer for killing a person." "This incident seemed so egregious," she said in a statement, "that we hoped that this time... justice might be served."

Hundreds of demonstrators gathered outside the state capitol in St Paul on Friday evening, and a series of speakers demanded justice for minorities in the American judicial system and stronger accountability measures for police. Many people waved signs and chanted in unison "stand up, fight back" and "if we don't get no justice, they don't get no peace." After the rally, police said roughly 2,000 people marched peacefully down streets in St Paul, at times blocking traffic at intersections and then on Interstate 94, a major highway. Marchers also blocked commuter trains at one point and chanted "Yanez Guilty." — Agencies



CARACAS: This photo taken on May 20, 2017 shows opposition demonstrators setting an alleged thief on fire during a protest against the government of President Nicolas Maduro. — AFP

DISMEMBERED BODIES, SHOOTOUT ROCK MEXICAN RESORT CANCUN

CANCUN, Mexico: Three dismembered bodies stuffed in suitcases were found Friday in Cancun, hours after the Mexican resort town was rocked by a shootout and police chase that left one gunman dead. It was unclear whether there was a link between the grisly discovery near the Caribbean beach and the dramatic shootout Thursday night, which terrorized the downtown area. Cancun, a tourist paradise popular with foreign travelers, has seen a surge in violence in recent months that authorities blame on warring drug cartels.

The dismembered bodies, which have not yet been identified, were found near a mangrove at the edge of the hotel zone, a local security official who was not authorized to talk about

the case told AFP on condition of anonymity. Some six hours earlier, a police operation went awry when a group of suspects opened fire on officers who had come to arrest them. They then led police on a high-speed chase through the city center, a hail of bullets terrifying residents and passersby. One suspect was killed. Four others were arrested.

The incidents come as Cancun prepares to host foreign ministers from around the region next week for a meeting of the Organization of American States. In April, authorities deployed 1,000 police and army reinforcements in Cancun and the nearby resort town Playa del Carmen in response to a string of multiple shootings. — AFP

MEME HUMOR HELPS BRAZILIANS COPE

SAO PAULO: Political corruption, economic crisis, rampant crime - the headlines in Brazil are grim, so locals have taken to online memes that often go viral to relieve the stress. A flurry of memes - funny images or video coupled with text that are spread online - making light of the country's bleak situation have taken the internet by storm in a country that has the world's second largest number of Facebook users. One popular meme has tourists taking pictures near a leaning Tower of Pisa with the face of the deeply unpopular president Michel Temer on it.

Another has Tite, the coach of the national football team, being proclaimed president. Sandro Sanfelice says that the meme creators are like the orchestra aboard the Titanic: They'll keep playing even as the country sinks under a flood of scandal and corruption. Sanfelice, a 28-year-old who works for a phone company in the southern city of Curitiba, has 1.3 million followers on his specialty Facebook page Capinaremos. He claims that some of his memes have reached five million users.

To keep up with the fast pace of news in Brazil, Sanfelice last year created "Capina Meme Factory," a closed Facebook page that gathers meme pro-

ducers. Any member can propose a meme, and if it meets the group's ethical standards and seems funny, one of the group's 10 volunteer moderators will publish it. Once in cyberspace, the meme, like a passing comet, will likely have a bright but limited lifespan.

Top news stories "end up becoming memes almost instantly, from something banal to the electoral court decision" that recently cleared Temer of election wrongdoing, said Sanfelice. One of the group's biggest nights was on May 17, when the media group O Globo published a recording of Temer supposedly discussing a hush money payment to a jailed politician. Soon pictures satirizing Temer in every way possible - as well as pictures of his political nemesis, former leftist president Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva and Dilma Rousseff, laughing uproariously - spread online like wildfire.

Presidential warning

Not everyone was amused, apparently. A few days later the meme creators received an email from the presidency "telling us that the official pictures of Temer could not be used for any purpose

other than journalism", Sanfelice said. That wrist-slapping gave them pause, but the humorists decided nevertheless to continue publishing memes featuring Temer. The president's office later sent an email stating that the message was a reminder that they needed prior authorization to use official images for commercial purposes.

For Viktor Chagas, a professor at the Universidad Federal Fluminense in Rio de Janeiro, the message was clear. "Politicians are not accustomed to losing control over their image. With the Internet it's increasingly easy for this to happen, and that worries them," said Chagas, a specialist on the news media. Chagas, along with a group of students and professors, created in 2015 a "Museum of Memes," a project dedicated to the study and archiving of this new form of expression. "We cannot look at this phenomenon only from the point of view of fake news or post-truth, as if all this content deserves to be discarded," Chagas said. "People are gaining access to a debate that they previously did not have, and that is also transforming social reality," he said. Brazilian humor focuses on tearing down the powerful, with a heavy dash of self-parody, Chagas said. —AFP