



**Duterte praises police killings of 32, urges more**

INDIA, CHINA TROOPS IN HIGH-ALTITUDE CLASH



**NEW YORK: US President Donald Trump delivers remarks following a meeting on infrastructure at Trump Tower on Tuesday. Standing alongside him (from left) are Director of the National Economic Council Gary Cohn, Treasury Secretary Steve Mnuchin, Transportation Secretary Elaine Chao and Director of the Office of Management and Budget Mick Mulvaney. — AFP**

**DEFIANT TRUMP AGAIN BLAMES ‘BOTH SIDES’**

REPS BALK, DEMS AGHAST, AIDES SHOCKED AT PRESIDENT’S ABOUT-FACE

**NEW YORK:** US President Donald Trump defiantly blamed “both sides” for the weekend violence between white supremacists and counter-demonstrators in Virginia, seeking to rebuff the widespread criticism of his handling of the emotionally-charged protests while showing sympathy for the fringe group’s efforts to preserve Confederate monuments.

In doing so, Trump used the bullhorn of the presidency to give voice to the grievances of white nationalists, and aired some of his own. His remarks Tuesday amounted to a rejection of the Republicans, business leaders and White House advisers who earlier this week had pushed the president to more forcefully and specifically condemn the KKK members, neo-Nazis and white supremacists who took to the streets of Charlottesville.

The angry exchange with reporters at his skyscraper hotel in New York City laid bare a reality of the Trump presidency: Trump cannot be managed by others or steered away from damaging political land mines. His top aides were stunned by his comments, with some - including new chief of staff John Kelly - standing by helplessly as the president escalated his rhetoric. Standing in the lobby of Trump Tower, Trump acknowledged that there were “some very bad people” among those who gathered to protest Saturday. But he added:

“You also had people that were very fine people, on both sides.” The rally was organized by white supremacists and other groups under a “Unite the Right” banner. Organizers said they were initially activated by their objections to the removal of a statue of Confederate Gen. Robert E Lee, but the larger aim was to protest what they saw as an “anti-white” climate in America. In his remarks, Trump condemned bigoted ideology and called James Alex Fields Jr, who drove his car into a crowd of counter-protester killing a 32-year-old woman, “a disgrace to himself, his family and his country.” But Trump also expressed support for those seeking to maintain the monument to Lee, equating him with some of the nation’s founders who also owned slaves. “So, this week it’s Robert E Lee,” he said. “I noticed that Stonewall Jackson’s coming down. I wonder, is it George Washington next week and is it Thomas Jefferson the week after? You really do have to ask yourself, where does it stop?” He continued: “You’re changing history. You’re changing culture.”

The president’s comments effectively wiped away the more conventional statement he delivered at the White House a day earlier when he branded the white supremacists who take part in violence as “criminals and thugs”. Trump’s advisers had hoped those remarks

might quell criticism of his initial response, but the president’s retorts Tuesday suggested he had been a reluctant participant in that cleanup effort.

Once again, the blowback was swift, including from fellow Republicans. Sen Marco Rubio of Florida said Trump should not allow white supremacists “to share only part of the blame.” House Speaker Paul Ryan declared in a tweet that “white supremacy is repulsive” and there should be “no moral ambiguity,” though he did not specifically address the president. Trump’s remarks were welcomed by former Ku Klux Klan leader David Duke, who tweeted: “Thank you President Trump for your honesty & courage to tell the truth.” Some of the president’s comments Tuesday mirrored rhetoric from the far-right fringe. A post Monday by the publisher of The Daily Stormer, a notorious neo-Nazi website, predicted that protesters are going to demand that the Washington Monument be torn down.

**Troubling questions**

Trump’s handling of the weekend violence has raised new and troubling questions, even among some supporters. Members of his own Republican Party have pressured him to be more vigorous in criticizing bigoted groups, and business leaders have begun abandoning a

White House jobs panel in response to his comments. White House officials were caught off guard by his remarks Tuesday. He had signed off on a plan to ignore questions from journalists during an event touting infrastructure policies, according to a White House official not authorized to speak publicly about a private discussion. Once behind the lectern and facing the cameras, he overruled the decision.

As Trump talked, his aides on the sidelines in the lobby stood in silence. Chief of staff John Kelly crossed his arms and stared down at his shoes, barely glancing at the president. Press secretary Sarah Huckabee Sanders looked around the room trying to make eye contact with other senior aides. One young staffer stood with her mouth agape.

Kelly was brought into the White House less than a month ago to try to bring order and stability to a chaotic West Wing. Some Trump allies hoped the retired Marine general might be able to succeed where others have failed: controlling some of Trump’s impulses. But the remarks Tuesday once again underscored Trump’s insistence on airing his complaints and opinions. Democrats were aghast at Trump’s comments. Virginia Sen Tim Kaine said on Twitter that the Charlottesville violence “was fueled by one side: white supremacists spreading racism, intolerance & intimidation. Those are the facts.” Sen Brian Schatz of Hawaii said on Twitter that he no longer views Trump as his president. “As a Jew, as an American, as a human, words cannot express my disgust and disappointment,” Schatz said. “This is not my president.”

When asked to explain his Saturday comments about Charlottesville, Trump looked down at his notes and again read a section of his initial statement that denounced bigotry but did not single out white supremacists. He then tucked the paper back into his jacket pocket. Trump, who has quickly deemed other deadly incidents in the US and around the world as acts of terrorism, waffled when asked whether the car death was a terrorist attack.

“There is a question. Is it murder? Is it terrorism?” Trump said. “And then you get into legal semantics. The driver of the car is a murderer and what he did was a horrible, horrible, inexcusable thing.” Trump said he had yet to call the mother of crash victim Heather Heyer, but would soon “reach out.” He praised her for what he said was a nice statement about him on social media. As he finally walked away from his lectern, he stopped to answer one more shouted question: Would he visit Charlottesville? The president noted he owned property there and said - inaccurately - that it was one of the largest wineries in the United States. — AP

**LEBANON SCRAPS REVILED RAPE LAW**

**BEIRUT:** Lebanon’s parliament yesterday scrapped a controversial law allowing rapists who marry their victims to go free, official media and activists said, after a high-profile campaign for its repeal. A proposal to repeal Article 522 of the penal code - which deals with rape, assault, kidnapping and forced marriage - was introduced last year and approved by a parliamentary committee in February. On Wednesday, it was ratified by the full parliament, the official National News Agency and activist group ABAAD said.

“Congratulations to women in Lebanon,” the NGO wrote in a statement on its Facebook page. “Today’s win is a victory for the dignity of women,” it added. “It is no longer possible to escape punishment for rape and sexual acts carried out by force and coercion,” said the group, which has spearheaded the campaign to repeal the much-reviled article. The article, which also dealt with the rape of minors, allowed for the perpetrator of sexual assault to avoid prosecution by marrying their victim. There are no precise figures on how many rapists marry their victims to avoid punishment, but activists say the practice mainly took place in rural areas. Lebanon’s decision comes just over two weeks after Jordan’s parliament passed a similar article in its penal code. — AFP



**BEIRUT:** In this March 15, 2017 file photo, an activist from the Lebanese NGO Abaad stands in a golden cage dressed as a bride while during a protest in front of a government building in downtown Beirut. — AP

**ISRAEL TV: IRAN BUILDING ROCKET FACTORY IN SYRIA**

**JERUSALEM:** An Israeli television report said yesterday that Iran is building a facility in northwest Syria to manufacture long-range rockets, and showed satellite images it said were of the site under construction. Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu warned last week that Iran was strengthening its foothold in its ally Syria as Islamic State fighters were being displaced, and said Israel was watching developments and would act against any threat.

“Our policy is clear: We vehemently oppose the military buildup by Iran and its proxies, primarily Hezbollah, in Syria and we will do whatever it takes to protect Israel’s security,” he said in a speech. The Channel 2 television news report showed images it said were taken by an Israeli satellite showing a site in northwest Syria near the Mediterranean coastal town of Baniyas, saying some of the construction indicated explosives would be stored there.

It compared images of buildings it said were of a rocket factory near Tehran to structures at the Syrian site, and said there was a strong

resemblance between them. Netanyahu has been harshly critical of a 2015 deal that six world powers including the United States under then-president Barack Obama struck with Iran to curb its nuclear program in return for an end to multilateral sanctions.

Iran is Israel’s avowed enemy, and Israel argues that the agreement fails to prevent Iranian weapons posing a threat to its very existence. Iran says its nuclear program is for peaceful purposes only. The United States last month slapped new economic sanctions on Iran over its ballistic missile program and said Tehran’s “malign activities” in the Middle East had undercut any “positive contributions” from the 2015 accord curbing its nuclear program.

US President Donald Trump has frequently criticized the agreement as being too soft on Tehran, which remains subject to a UN arms embargo and other restrictions. US news reports have said that Israeli intelligence officials will discuss the situation in Syria and Lebanon with US counterparts in Washington this week. — Reuters