

NATIONAL SECURITY AIDE SEBASTIAN GORKA LEAVES WHITE HOUSE

WASHINGTON: Sebastian Gorka, a national security aide whose hardline views on immigration and terrorism caused discord inside and outside the White House, is the latest official to exit President Donald Trump's administration. Gorka told The Associated Press Friday that he had resigned from his position. A White House official, however, said Gorka did not resign but "no longer works at the White House." That official was not authorized to discuss the matter publicly and spoke on condition of anonymity.

A former editor for the conservative Breitbart News website, Gorka joined the administration as a counterterrorism adviser. But he operated outside of the National Security Council and his exact responsibilities were not clearly outlined, though he was a prominent advocate for

Trump on television news. Gorka declined to discuss the reasons he left the White House, but pointed toward excerpts

from his resignation letter that were posted Friday evening by The Federalist website. Gorka wrote that "the individuals who most embodied and represented the policies that will 'Make America Great Again,' have been internally countered, systematically removed, or undermined in recent months." He criticized Trump's recent speech on Afghanistan, writing, "The fact that those who drafted and approved the speech removed any mention of Radical Islam or radical Islamic terrorism proves that a crucial element of your presidential campaign has been lost."

He also wrote, "the best and most effective way I can support you, Mr President, is from outside the People's

House." Gorka's exit follows the departure of chief strategist Steve Bannon, a key adviser in Trump's general election campaign, but a contentious presence in a White House divided by warring staff loyalties. Bannon quickly returned to his post at Breitbart News. Bannon left the White House after the arrival of new chief of staff, John Kelly, who had embarked on a personnel review of West Wing staff.

Kelly has sought to impose discipline on a chaotic West Wing, limiting dissenting voices, restricting access to the president and "stacking the deck" on major decisions to guide Trump toward an outcome. The administration has seen a number of high-profile exits in recent months, including Trump's first press secretary, Sean Spicer, and his first chief of staff, Reince Priebus.—AP



WASHINGTON: In this file photo, deputy assistant to President Trump, Sebastian Gorka, talks with people in the Treaty Room in the Eisenhower Executive Office Building on the White House complex in Washington during a ceremony commemorating Israeli Independence Day.—AP

DONALD TRUMP PARDONS EX-SHERIFF JOE ARPAIO

US PRESIDENT CALLS ARPAIO A PATRIOT

WASHINGTON: US President Donald Trump on Friday pardoned controversial former Arizona sheriff Joe Arpaio, who was convicted last month of criminal contempt for illegally targeting Hispanic immigrants. In his first act of presidential clemency, Trump pardoned the deeply divisive 85-year-old who ignored a federal court order that he stop detaining illegal migrants. "He kept Arizona safe!" Trump tweeted, calling Arpaio a "patriot!"

The move earned immediate scorn from Democrats, some Republicans and rights groups, who accused the Republican billionaire of seeking to divide the country which is still reeling from Trump's controversial remarks on racial unrest in Charlottesville. In a statement, the White House said Arpaio—who made detainees wear pink underwear and housed them in tented desert camps—had "more than fifty years of admirable service to our nation."

The former sheriff of Maricopa County, who revealed in his reputation as "America's toughest sheriff," had been due to be sentenced in October. Arpaio tweeted that he was "incredibly grateful" to Trump, and suggested his conviction was "a political witch hunt by holdovers in the Obama justice department!" He also asked supporters to donate to his legal defense fund.

Worthy of pardon

According to the White House, as sheriff Arpaio protected "the public from the scourges of crime and illegal immigration." Arpaio is "a worthy candidate for a presidential pardon," it added. Trump had hinted that a pardon was coming during a meandering speech in Arizona earlier this week, when he suggested Arpaio was convicted for "doing his job" and predicted that "he's going to be just fine." The announcement still came as a shock for many. Republican Arizona Senator John McCain said officers of the law "should always seek to be beyond reproach" in their commitment to fairly enforce the law. And he noted that Arpaio "was found guilty of criminal contempt" for illegally profiling Latinos living in Arizona "based on their perceived immigration status in violation of a judge's orders." Trump "has the authority to make



IOWA: In this file photo, Republican presidential candidate Donald Trump, left, is joined by Maricopa County, Arizona, Sheriff Joe Arpaio during a news conference in Marshalltown, Iowa.—AP

this pardon, but doing so at this time undermines his claim for the respect of rule of law as Arpaio has shown no remorse for his actions," McCain's statement read. Arizona's other senator, Republican Jeff Flake, wrote on Twitter: "Regarding the Arpaio pardon, I would have preferred that the President honor the judicial process and let it take its course."

Presidential endorsement of racism

Others were more forceful in their denunciations. "Joe Arpaio is a bigot who targeted the Hispanic community for years. He should have served his time," said Democratic Congressman Joaquin Castro. The American Civil Liberties Union, a leading civil rights group, expressed outrage. "With his pardon of Arpaio, Trump has chosen lawlessness over justice, division over unity, hurt over healing," said the ACLU's deputy legal director Cecilia Wang. "Once again, the president has acted in sup-

port of illegal, failed immigration enforcement practices that target people of color and have been struck down by the courts. "His pardon of Arpaio is a presidential endorsement of racism." UnidosUS, the largest Hispanic rights advocacy group in the country, decried the pardon as "obscene." "Sheriff Joe Arpaio was the instigator of racial profiling and made official a policy of harassment and abuse based on the color of one's skin in Maricopa County," said UnidosUS president Janet Murguia.

"And tonight, president Trump gave the blessing of his administration to pursue those disgraceful and unlawful policies in every state and locality in the land." The US constitution offers the president almost unlimited pardon powers. Conservative commentator Bill Kristol suggested the pardon "gets people used" to the idea of presidential pardons as the FBI investigation into the Trump campaign's alleged collusion with Russia deepens.—AFP



LONDON: A young girl adds finishing touches to paper hearts adorning a fence in Kensington, near the burnt-out remains of Grenfell Tower in London ahead of the Notting Hill Carnival.—AFP

NOTTING HILL CARNIVAL TURNS GREEN FOR TOWER FIRE TRAGEDY

LONDON: In the shadow of charred Grenfell Tower, Londoners are preparing decorations for this weekend's Notting Hill Carnival to commemorate the victims of the fire that killed at least 80 people. Volunteers are busy cutting out paper hearts, painting banners and inflating balloons ahead of Europe's biggest street festival today and tomorrow in the same streets where the tragedy unfolded in June.

"Green is a beautiful color, of healing, of growth, and strength in adversity," said Toby Laurent Belson, who works at a donation centre filled with piles of clothes for victims of the fire. "The plan is to turn the carnival green for Grenfell," he said. The decorations "remind people of what's happened and show solidarity." The color was chosen by local schoolchildren as a way of paying homage to their friends lost in the blaze. Hundreds were left homeless by the fire, in a working-class enclave of Britain's richest borough where multi-million pound mansions stand just a short walk from dilapidated public housing.

Protest and celebrate

The appeal for volunteers to help make decorations travelled far beyond the neighborhood, thanks to social media. It is also a way of communicating the anger many feel against the local authorities they hold responsible for the fire. "It's an opportunity

for the communities to come together and combat a lot of the negative images we see on social media and through the news," said Swazy Macaly, 24, a radio presenter from east London.

"I think there's a lot of anger because the tragedy should never have happened... And so people are angry and their anger is just, but it needs to be channeled." The Caribbean-style festival in filled with piles of clothes was started in the 1960s following a series of race riots between new arrivals from former British colonies and local whites. "Carnival was born through suffering. The beauty of carnival is the ability to be able to protest and celebrate," said Ursula Parvex, a 37-year-old local teacher who was wearing a green t-shirt.

Painter Sabrina Rowan Hamilton said it was "a way of celebrating multicultural London", symbolized by Grenfell Tower itself where 34 languages were spoken. Hundreds of thousands of people are expected over the two days of the carnival—where there will also be more solemn moments to commemorate a tragedy that has scarred the local community. A minute's silence will be held during the colorful, ear-splitting parade on both days and in the area immediately around the tower there will be a reflection zone for people to come and pay their respects.—AFP

VENEZUELA TO STAGE WAR GAMES IN WARNING TO TRUMP

CARACAS: Venezuela kicks off two days of military drills yesterday in response to US President Donald Trump's threat of military action and newly announced sanctions on the crisis-stricken nation. Trump warned on August 11 that the United States was mulling a range of options against Venezuela, "including a possible military option if necessary." His Vice President Mike Pence later played down the threat, insisting that Washington was prioritizing a diplomatic solution and economic sanctions.

National security advisor HR McMaster followed suit, saying "no military actions are anticipated in the near future." But tension only surged again when the White House made good on the sanctions threat on Friday, unveiling its first-ever sanctions to target Venezuela as a whole, rather than just Maduro and his inner circle. The measures ban trade in new bonds issued by the Venezuelan government or its cash-cow oil company, PDVSA.

That could choke off access to New York debt markets and substantially raise the likelihood of Venezuela being forced into default. Venezuela called the measures the "worst aggression" yet. "We will protect our people and the people of the republic, the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela, are going to stand up," said Venezuelan Foreign Minister Jorge Arreaza.

Trump's threat of military force has bolstered Maduro's oft-repeated claim that Washington is plotting to topple him and wants to grab control of Venezuela's oil—the largest proven reserves in the world. Maduro is under international pressure over his handling of an economic and political crisis. The socialist president is resisting oppo-



CARACAS: Militia members' line up to return rifles after military training in Fort Tiuna, Caracas, Venezuela.—AP

sition calls for early elections to replace him. The center right-led opposition and international powers including the US say he is turning Venezuela into a dictatorship.

Maduro's opponents accuse military police and pro-Maduro militia of beating and killing anti-government protesters. Protest clashes have left 125 people dead so far this year, according to prosecutors. Maduro says the violence and the economic crisis are a US-backed conspiracy.

Military loyalty

Maduro, the political heir to the late Hugo Chavez, has managed to

hang onto power through it all, despite food shortages and social upheaval. His grip is largely thanks to the support of the military, which holds vast powers in his government, including over food distribution. The opposition has repeatedly called on the army to abandon Maduro-so far to no avail. He has only faced low-level dissent, such as from the two rebel officers who staged a raid on an army base this month.

On Thursday, the president issued a stern warning to the armed forces not to break ranks. "We must be clear, especially for the youth in the military, that we

must close ranks within the homeland—that this is no time for any fissures and that those with doubts should leave the armed forces immediately," he said in a speech to the top military brass.

"You are with Trump and the imperialists, or you are with the Bolivarian national armed forces and the homeland," he added. "Never before has Venezuela been threatened in such a way." Maduro's critics accuse him of coopting the military with top cabinet posts, as well as hijacking state institutions, such as by installing a new constituent assembly packed with loyalists.—AFP

TRANSGENDER TROOPS CALL BAN STEP BACKWARD FOR CIVIL RIGHTS

SAN DIEGO: Active-duty transgender troops say a policy change that puts them at risk of being removed and indefinitely bars transgender people from enlisting in the military is a step backward for civil rights that will promote inequality in the armed forces. President Donald Trump on Friday directed the Pentagon to extend a ban on transgender individuals joining the military but gave the Pentagon the authority to decide the future of openly transgender people already serving. Trump appeared to leave open the possibility of allowing some transgender people who already are in uniform.

The guidance from the White House contradicts Trump's words, Army Capt. Jennifer Sims said, pointing out that he just praised the military for its tolerance when he told veterans in Nevada on Wednesday that those in uniform come from all walks of life and are united by shared values and a shared sense of duty. Days earlier, Trump, speaking to thousands of soldiers at the Army's Joint Base Myer-Henderson Hall, in Arlington, Virginia, denounced prejudice, bigotry and hate in the wake of violence

that erupted at a rally organized by white supremacists in Charlottesville, Virginia. "It's going to create this situation where there is a complete inequality in how transgender troops are treated," said Sims, 28, who is based in Germany and is taking pills to prepare for her transition surgery. That is not the military's problem, said Elaine Donnelly, president of the Center for Military

Readiness, which has opposed allowing transgender people to serve. "The armed forces are not just another equal opportunity employer," Donnelly said in a statement. The military's limited funds, she added, should not be used "to indulge transgender demands." Transgender people have been allowed to serve openly in the military since June 2016. Trump, in a series of tweets on July 26, announced that he planned to end that policy.

The government "will not accept or allow transgender individuals to serve in any capacity in the US military," he tweet-

ed, contending that their service entailed "tremendous medical costs and disruption." A 2016 study by the RAND Corp. estimated it would cost the military \$2.4 million to \$8.4 million a year to provide gender transition-related coverage, an increase of 0.04 percent to 0.13 percent in health care spending for active-duty members. Researchers estimated 29 to 129 active-duty service members annually would seek such treatment.

Meanwhile, it would cost hundreds of millions of dollars to discharge thousands of transgender personnel, according to a study released this month by the Palm Center, an independent research institute. The new guidance, as described by an official familiar with its contents but not authorized by the White House to discuss it publicly, appears to be less rigid than the complete ban that Trump tweeted about.

The official said the guidance puts a stop to recruitment of transgender individuals and prohibits the use of federal funds to pay for sexual reassignment surgery, except in cases where it's deemed necessary to protect the health of an individual who has already begun the transition. But it would give Defense Secretary Jim Mattis six months to determine circumstances in which those currently in uniform who are openly transgender might be permitted to continue serving.

Equal treatment

Jennifer Levi, an attorney with the LGBT-rights group GLAD, said that current policy "requires equal treatment of transgender service members, including that they are subject to the same standards of deployment as other soldiers." GLAD and another LGBT-rights organization this month sued in U.S. District Court in Washington on behalf of five transgender service members with nearly 60 years of combined military service. They had hoped to get a swift court decision on Trump's tweet that could prevent a ban from taking effect. "Any special or different rule for transgender soldiers is discrimination, plain and simple," she said. "It also harms the military and, ultimately, the safety of our nation." — AP