

TRUMP'S BROMANCE WITH RUSSIA'S PUTIN APPEARS TO BE COOLING

WASHINGTON: With his administration on the defensive over investigations into alleged Russian meddling in last year's election, US President Donald Trump is no longer tweeting praise for his Kremlin counterpart. Less than five weeks after he took office, the chances of a spring thaw in relations between Washington and Moscow - once buoyed by an apparent "bromance" between Trump and President Vladimir Putin during the US political campaign - are looking much dimmer, US officials say.

His top foreign policy advisers have started talking tougher on Russia, and the apparent cooling of Trump's approach follows the resignation last month of his first national security adviser, Michael Flynn, a vocal advocate of warmer ties with Moscow. He was replaced by Army Lieutenant General HR McMaster, who is more hawkish on Russia and allied with Defense Secretary Jim Mattis, a retired Marine Corps general.

In one other sign of a stiffening attitude, two officials said the administration had offered the job of top Russia adviser at the National Security Council to Russia scholar Fiona Hill, a leading Putin critic. Her books include "Mr Putin, Operative in the Kremlin", an allusion to the Russian leader's past as a KGB officer. It was not immediately known whether she had accepted the post.

Pressure also has come to bear from Trump's fellow Republicans in Congress, long wary of his campaign overtures to Putin, and from European allies anxious over any sign that the president might prematurely ease sanctions imposed on Russia after its annexation of Crimea and support for pro-Russian rebels in Ukraine. Posing fresh obstacles to rapprochement with Russia, analysts say, is mounting evidence that Attorney General Jeff Sessions, the president's son-in-law Jared Kushner, and other members of Trump's team communicated with Russian officials during and after the presidential campaign.

The mushrooming inquiry - which is now focused on Sessions and his contacts with Moscow's ambassador to Washington - has fueled calls for expanded investigations into allegations that Moscow sought to sway the election's outcome. "There is so much panic in the US political establishment over Russia right now that Trump will be boxed in on what he can do," said Matthew Rojansky, a Russia expert at the Wilson Center think tank in Washington. White House officials say there were no improper contacts, and Russia denies any meddling. —Reuters

RAILROAD THEFTS AND GUNS: A DEADLY MIX IN CHICAGO

CHICAGO: When street-gang thieves slipped with ease into a Norfolk Southern rail yard on Chicago's South Side and ripped locks off one train, they likely expected to see merchandise like toys or tennis shoes. What they beheld instead was a gangster's jackpot: box after box of brand new guns. The guns had been en route from New Hampshire weapon maker Sturm, Ruger and Co. to Spokane, Washington. Instead, the .45-caliber Ruger revolvers and other firearms spread quickly into surrounding high-crime neighborhoods.

Along with two other major gun thefts within three years, the robbery helped fuel a wave of violence on Chicago's streets. The 2015 heist of the 111 guns, as well as one in 2014 and another last September from the same 63rd Street Rail Yard highlight a tragic confluence. Chicago's biggest rail yards are on the gang- and homicide-plagued South and West sides where most of the city's 762 killings happened last year. Chicago's leaders regularly blame lax gun laws in Illinois and nearby states that enable a flow of illegal weapons to the city's gangs and criminals.

But community leaders and security experts say no one seems to be taking responsibility for train-yard gun thefts. Only 16 of the stolen Rugers have been recovered since the 2015 break-in, according to hundreds of recent court records. One was used in a Jan 22, 2016, shooting. Police woke an attempted-murder suspect and found one by his bed. Another was in a dealer's home alongside 429 bags of heroin. Police recovered another during a traffic stop; the driver said his friend had just been shot 10 times and he had to protect himself. —AP



NEW YORK: In this file photo, people carry posters during a rally against President Donald Trump's executive order banning travel from seven Muslim-majority nations, in New York's Times Square. —AP

TRUMP'S NEW TRAVEL BAN DELAYED URGENCY OF NEW TRAVEL BAN FADES

NEW YORK: President Donald Trump was barely in office when he signed an executive order restricting immigration from seven Muslim-majority nations. There was not a moment to waste, he said, because any delay would allow the "bad dudes" to rush into the US. Then federal courts struck down his ban. The White House said a new version would be coming. That was a month ago. The urgency seems to have faded. There has been no further legal appeal.

And announcement of a replacement order has been repeatedly postponed, a reflection of legal difficulties, shifting administration priorities and politics. It now won't be unveiled until next week at the earliest, says a White House official. "The holdup flies in the face of the mythology as to why they needed to rush the bill in the first place," said Doris Meissner, who was head of the Immigration and Naturalization Service for President Bill Clinton.

"It was a contrived argument and a reflection of inexperience and a rush to fulfill a campaign promise." The delay stands in stark contrast to the ban's rollout, a swift action designed as the centerpiece of a barrage of executive orders to set a bold tone for the Trump administration's first days. Trump signed it late on a Friday afternoon, prompting widespread protests at the nation's airports while hardening battle lines between the president's supporters and opponents.

But the rushed order, composed with little outside consultation, drew fierce bipartisan criticism as federal agencies, foreign governments and travelers were left confused to its con-

tents, creating chaos at airports and leaving the White House to defend the rollout by saying that its speed was necessary. "If we waited five days, 10 days, six months to begin establishing the first series of controls, we would be leaving the homeland unnecessarily vulnerable," said senior policy adviser Stephen Miller who, along with chief strategist Steve Bannon, was the architect of the ban.

But the unveiling of a new order has been postponed at least three times since then, and the White House has shifted its tone on the ban - in part by not talking about it. Shifting priorities, Trump has spent more time at events meant to boost his economic agenda and on Thursday appeared on an aircraft carrier to tout his plans for a military buildup. During his first speech to Congress on Tuesday, he did not specifically mention the ban, merely saying that the administration "will shortly take new steps to keep our nation safe."

After Trump received high marks for that speech, aides scuttled plans to sign the new travel ban the next day, not wanting the controversial measure to overtake some of the best headlines of the young administration. Moreover, public opinion has shifted against the ban. A Quinnipiac poll conducted in early January, before details were known, found that Americans supported "suspending immigration from 'terror prone' regions" by 48 percent to 42 percent.

But a follow-up poll after the ban was implemented found a 12 point net swing against the idea of a travel ban. "This didn't go right the first time: The optics at the airports were bad and

constituents flooded their lawmakers with calls," said Linda Fowler, professor of government at Dartmouth College. "The White House must know it has to get it exactly right this time. When this ban is released, more lawsuits are coming. To lose a second time would be devastating."

Government lawyers who defended the ban in court the first time made its speed a crucial part of their argument. August Flentje, special counsel to the US attorney general, told judges on the Ninth US Circuit Court of Appeals that the need to quickly enforce the ban prevented the administration from gathering evidence that citizens from the seven countries, including refugees, pose a serious threat of terrorism, a claim the judges did not buy.

When the court rejected the ban, the White House vowed to immediately and simultaneously appeal the decision and craft a new order, though Trump later acknowledged that delaying the first order might have helped it surmount legal challenges. "Now if I would've done it in a month, everything would have been perfect," the president said in mid-February. "The problem is we would have wasted a lot of time, and maybe a lot of lives because a lot of bad people would have come into our country."

But the government didn't pursue its appeal. And the Pentagon and State Department have fought the White House about which countries should be included in the plan. And weeks have passed without the release of the new order, even though White House press secretary Sean Spicer said last week it was "finalized." The next rollout, he said, would be "flawless." —AP