

International

Trump turns on Supreme Court nominee's accuser Blasey Ford

New bombshell revives debate on Trump fitness for office

WASHINGTON: The woman whose sexual assault allegation threatens to bring down Donald Trump's Supreme Court nominee rejected an ultimatum Friday for testifying in the Senate after the US president turned against her, claiming her accusation could not be true. The increasingly ugly fight over the fate of Trump's bid to put conservative judge Brett Kavanaugh into the lifetime position on the Supreme Court appeared to be nearing its end game, though still with no clarity on whether the woman at the center of the row will testify.

Christine Blasey Ford, a California professor who says Kavanaugh carried out a violent sexual assault against her when he was 17 and she was 15, insists she is ready to testify under oath before the Senate Judiciary Committee. However, she rejected a Friday evening deadline imposed by the committee's Republican leader to agree to his terms for the hearing, which he said should take place next Wednesday.

If she didn't agree, committee chairman Chuck Grassley said he would go ahead and schedule a vote on confirming Kavanaugh on Monday, but without her testimony. A statement by Ford's lawyers carried by CNN asked for one more day to respond, calling the deadline "arbitrary." "Its sole purpose is to bully Dr. Ford and deprive her of the ability to make a considered decision.... Our modest request is that she be given an additional day to make her decision."

Ford has said she wants to testify Thursday at the earliest and to be able to call as a witness a man who she says was present during the assault, when they were all teenagers attending private schools near Washington. The committee's Republican leadership has turned down those demands. But late Friday, in a tweet addressing Kavanaugh directly, Grassley said he had given Ford more time to decide. "Judge Kavanaugh I just granted another extension to Dr Ford", he wrote, adding Ford should decide "so we can move on." "I want to hear her. I hope u understand", he added. "It's not my normal approach to b indecisive".

Presidential pressure

After several days of maintaining a relatively neutral posture, Trump took off the gloves Friday to declare that Ford could not be believed. The aggressive stance reflected Trump's fear that time is running out to get his hand-picked judge confirmed—thereby tilting the Supreme Court firmly to the right for years to come—before November elections when Republicans risk losing control of Congress. "TAKE THE VOTE!" Trump tweeted, blaming "radical left wing politicians" for the controversy. Trump rejected the credibility of Ford's claim that a drunken Kavanaugh tried to pin her down and remove her clothes, muffling her cries, in the early 1980s.

According to Trump, the fact that Ford remained silent until now shows the incident probably never happened—even if this runs counter to what experts say is the typical

reaction of sexual assault victims afraid or embarrassed to report. "I have no doubt that, if the attack on Dr Ford was as bad as she says," Trump wrote, "charges would have been immediately filed with local Law Enforcement Authorities by either her or her loving parents." "Why didn't someone call the FBI 36 years ago?" The senior Democrat in the Senate, Chuck Schumer, called Trump's

Latest bombshell to rock troubled administration

logic "a highly offensive misunderstanding of surviving trauma."

New bombshell

Meanwhile, Donald Trump faced a new challenge to his authority Friday after US media reported that his deputy attorney general had discussed ways to force him from office on grounds of incompetence, just months into his presidency. In the latest bombshell to rock the troubled administration, The New York Times and The Washington Post reported that Rod Rosenstein in May 2017 had suggested secretly recording Trump for evidence of White House dysfunction—and using that to formally remove him from power.

Coming on the heels of an explosive book by respected White House chronicler Bob Woodward, the reports added to mounting evidence indicating that numerous people in Trump's own government have serious doubts



WASHINGTON: Activists walk through the Hart Senate Office Building to the office of Republican US Senator and Chairman of the Senate Judiciary Committee Chuck Grassley during protests against Supreme Court nominee Judge Brett Kavanaugh. —AFP

about his fitness for office—and have actively worked to undermine him. As the number two Justice Department official, Rosenstein oversees the probe into whether Trump's 2016 election campaign colluded with Russians in defeating Democrat Hillary Clinton.

The Time and Post reports were both based on secret memos by a former FBI director—which some speculated may have been leaked in order to undermine Rosenstein, and in turn the Russia special prosecutor Robert Mueller. Rosenstein branded the reports "inaccurate and factually incorrect." And the Justice Department released a statement by a former senior official—who would not be identified—saying that he was "in the room" at the time and

that Rosenstein was only joking. "The statement was sarcastic and was never discussed with any intention of recording a conversation with the president," said the former official.

Trump's son Donald Trump Jr held up the reports as evidence of disloyalty among the president's entourage. "Who are we kidding at this point?" he tweeted, above a link to the Times article. "No one is shocked that these guys would do anything in their power to undermine @realdonaldtrump." Trump's Republican ally Mike Huckabee meanwhile urged Attorney General Jeff Sessions to fire Rosenstein—or for Trump to fire them both if he refuses. —Agencies

Journalist murdered in Mexico; 9th in 2018

TUXTLA: Gunmen on Friday killed a Mexican journalist who had received threats after reporting on corruption in the southern state of Chiapas, his newspaper said, in what was at least the ninth murder of a reporter in the country this year. Mario Gomez, a reporter with El Heraldo de Chiapas, is the latest victim in a wave of violence against the press in Mexico, the second-deadliest country in the world for journalists after war-torn Syria, according to the watchdog group Reporters Without Borders.

"He had recently filed a complaint because he was receiving threats," a colleague at the paper told AFP on condition of anonymity. Gomez, 35, had also been threatened in 2016 for publishing articles on corruption by two state officials, according to the media rights group Article 19. El Heraldo said Gomez, a general news correspondent in the town of Yajalon, was leaving his house to go to work when two unidentified men arrived and "murdered him in cold blood" with a series of shots to the abdomen at point-blank range.

Gomez was taken to the hospital but died of his wounds, said the paper, where he had worked for the past eight years. "We call for an exhaustive investigation to find those responsible for this crime," his colleagues wrote in an editorial published on the newspaper's website. The state prosecutor's office said in a statement it would "follow all lines of investigation to shed light on this reprehensible crime and bring those responsible to justice."

Dangerous place to work

Racked by violent crime linked to its powerful drug cartels, Mexico registered a record number of murders last year: 28,702. That included at least 11 murdered journalists. Asking questions about the multibillion-dollar narcotics trade, government corruption or the links between the two can be a deadly job in Mexico. Including Gomez, at least nine journalists have been murdered so far this year in the country in possible retaliation for their work. More than 100 have been murdered in Mexico since 2000. The vast majority of the cases have gone unpunished—as do more than 90 percent of violent crimes in Mexico. It was not immediately clear whether Gomez was enrolled in the Mexican government's protection program for journalists and human rights activists, launched in 2012 in a bid to stop such crimes.

The program provides bodyguards, panic buttons and other protective measures to people at risk. But it suffers from under-funding and has failed to stop several high-profile murders. It risks running out of funding in January, if the government does not bridge a budget gap. Gomez's murder "saddens and burdens us, just as we're facing the lack of resources for the government's protection program for at-risk journalists," said Balbina Flores, Mexico representative for Reporters Without Borders. "We demand a full investigation and a guarantee of security for his family." —AFP

Britain's PM faces new resistance in Northern Ireland

DUBLIN: British Prime Minister Theresa May's renewed pledge to deliver Brexit without dividing the UK was met with contradictory ultimatums Friday from Northern Ireland's unionist and nationalist parties. May returned from a bruising EU summit in Salzburg to deliver an impassioned televised address in which she blamed Brussels for the impasse and demanded "respect" for the UK.

The embattled prime minister said EU negotiators were offering a deal that would keep the North "effectively" in the EU customs union and separate it from Britain. "It is something I will never agree to—indeed, in my judgment it is something no British prime minister would ever agree to," she said. May is in a difficult negotiating position because her slender majority in parliament relies on the support of Northern Ireland's pro-Brexit Democratic Unionist Party.

DUP leader Arlene Foster vowed on Friday to veto any deal that sets up a

regulatory trade barrier between her region and the rest of the UK. "Any new regulatory barrier would be a matter for the Northern Ireland Assembly, where the DUP would veto any attempt to undermine the economic or constitutional integrity of the United Kingdom," she said in a statement. "Our red line from day one of these negotiations has been that there can be no border between Northern Ireland and Great Britain."

But Sinn Fein—the party favoring Irish unification—said it would fight any Brexit divorce deal that does not include the "backstop" proposed by the EU. A "backstop" would ensure the boundary between the North and the Republic is free of a hard border by keeping Northern Ireland effectively in the EU. This would honor the Good Friday Agreement of 1998 that ended a period of conflict in the region by devolving power and giving legitimacy to both unionist and nationalist views. The EU proposal would keep the North separate from the rest of the UK for a transition period during which more customs mechanisms could be defined.

"There can be no withdrawal agreement without a backstop for the North,"

Nigerians vote to elect governor of southwest state

OSOGBO, Nigeria: Voters in the southwestern Nigerian state of Osun went to the polls yesterday to elect a new governor amid growing concerns about free and fair voting, six months ahead of a presidential election. The Osun vote is seen as a litmus test for President Muhammadu Buhari's popularity as he seeks a second term in February. The 75-year-old retired general who led a military regime in the 1980s was elected in 2015.

Voting opened in most polling booths in Osun around 8.00 am with long queues of voters in Osogbo, the state capital, and other towns and villages across the state. "You can see that people are already exercising their civic responsibility," electoral official Sodipo Oladapo said in the capital. "All those on the queue will be accredited and allowed to vote until 2:00 pm when the exercise will end," he said.

According to the Independent Electoral Commission of Nigeria (INEC), 1.2 million voters are eligible to vote for the candidates of 48 political parties participating in yesterday's vote. Osun is part of Nigeria's southwest which includes the economic capital Lagos and

a region crucial to Buhari's re-election as he faces a formidable challenge from an array of high-profile opposition candidates. The leading candidates jostling for the Osun governor's seat include Gboyega Oyetola of Buhari's All Progressives Congress (APC) and Ademola Adeleke, nicknamed "the dancing senator" because of his penchant for dancing in public.

'Votes for peanuts'

Adeleke is the candidate of the main opposition Peoples Democratic Party (PDP). He is also an uncle of Nigerian Afropop star Davido, whose real name is David Adedeji, and from a wealthy and political family in Ede. Both were to vote in the town, some 20 kilometers from the state capital. The winner of the election will replace APC Governor Rauf Aregbesola, who is stepping down after two four-year terms, the legal maximum. Osun INEC chief Olusegun Agbaje said voting materials and personnel had been distributed to all the 30 local government areas for a "hitch-free exercise" and security provided for election officials, materials and voters was adequate.

He urged voters to come out and avoid any form of financial inducement. "The commission has done a lot to put things in place. People should be free to exercise their franchise. Any act of vote-buying will be met with the appropriate sanctions," he said, adding that offenders risked up to one year in jail.



LONDON: Britain's Prime Minister Theresa May leaves after making a statement on the Brexit negotiations following a European Union summit in Salzburg. —AFP

said Sinn Fein's Brexit spokesman David Cullinane. "This is a red line issue and one that cannot be allowed to become a bargaining chip in the weeks and months ahead." May hinted in her speech that "regulatory barriers" may be introduced between Northern Ireland and the rest

of the UK if "the Northern Ireland Executive and Assembly agree". But the Northern Irish Assembly at Stormont—the executive body May referred to—dissolved in January 2017 after a power sharing accord between the DUP and Sinn Fein fell apart. —AFP



OSOGBO, Nigeria: A billboard displays an image of songwriter Innocent Ujah Idibia popularly known as '2Face' - part of a campaign against politicians who allegedly offer money to youths to foment trouble during elections. —AFP

National deputy police chief Habila Joshak said some 18,500 police, plus equipment, had been deployed to prevent irregularities. "We have enough men on ground to deal with those willing to sell their votes for peanuts," he warned. Local and foreign observers are monitoring the vote and have also raised concerns about inducement.

The last gubernatorial vote in the southwestern state of Ekiti in July led to widespread concerns about vote-buying by the leading political parties. The

Nigeria Civil Society Situation Room coalition of civic groups said on Friday its monitors were already in Osun to ensure a hitch-free and credible vote. "We urge INEC to implement the laws on vote-buying," by punishing offenders, said its leader Clement Nwankwo. The Transition Monitoring Group (TMG), an election lobby body, said it had information that politicians were doing out gifts, cash and food ahead of the vote, describing the trend as "inimical to the credibility of the electoral process." —AFP