

International

Sacked US man guns down five co-workers, wounds five police

‘Information that we have indicates that he was being terminated today’

CHICAGO: A US man being fired from his job shot dead five co-workers at a factory on the outskirts of Chicago and wounded five police officers before being gunned down himself, in the country's latest mass shooting. The gunfire took place at 1:24 pm (1924 GMT) at the Henry Pratt Company in Aurora, Illinois, a suburb 40 miles west of Chicago, the country's third-largest city.

Police named the suspect as Gary Martin, 45, of Aurora. He was a 15-year employee of the company and “information that we have indicates that he was being terminated today,” said Aurora Police Chief Kristen Ziman. The shooting came the day after Nancy Pelosi, the powerful speaker of the House of Representatives, said gun violence is a “national emergency” far more real than the one President Donald Trump ultimately declared Friday to build his wall at the Mexican border.

Police Chief Ziman did not have further details about why Martin was being fired, whether the killing was pre-meditated, or whether the victims were involved in his dismissal. “Five employees were located deceased inside the building,” and preliminary reports indicated they were killed before police arrived, Ziman told reporters. One other employee was wounded but his life was not in danger, she said. Responding to multiple calls about a shooting at the company, which supplies water valves and employs about 200 people, officers were immediately confronted by Martin. He shot and wounded two of them with a Smith & Wesson handgun, the chief said.

As other officers arrived they entered the building, about half the size of a football field, to hunt for the retreating gunman and rescue people. Three more officers were shot but none of the five appeared to be in a critical

condition, Ziman said. After about 90 minutes, officers inside the “vast, vast building” located the gunman who opened fire again and was killed by returning fire from police, she said. Witnesses told local media the shooter was a disgruntled employee. They said they locked themselves in nearby buildings as he began firing.

‘America is with you’

Aerial TV footage showed dozens of police cars, ambulances and fire trucks at the scene as officers with shields entered the complex. John Probst, who was in the building when the shooting began but was able to escape, told the local ABC TV affiliate he recognized the gunman as a co-worker. “What I saw was the guy running down the aisles with a pistol with a laser on it,” he said. “We were just scared.”

Nancy Caal, an employee of a nearby repair workshop, told the Daily Herald newspaper she and three others had heard numerous emergency sirens, and so “went and shut the front gate and locked all of the doors.” In a tweet, President Trump praised the “great job by law enforcement in Aurora, Illinois” and sent “heartfelt condolences to all of the victims and their families. America is with you!”

The shooting came a day after the first anniversary of the Valentine's Day shooting at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Florida, where a former pupil killed 14 students and three staff, re-igniting a push for gun control. In the year since, nearly 1,200 children still lost their lives to firearms and there have been other mass shootings including the October murder of 11 Jews at a Pittsburgh synagogue. In January a gunman killed five people at a bank in Sebring, Florida.



AURORA: Police secure the area following a shooting at the Henry Pratt Company. — AFP

Illinois Governor JB Pritzker, a Democrat, said Friday's tragedy was part of an epidemic of gun violence. “Tomorrow, the families of the victims will be less than whole. They join a group that should not exist, and yet continues to grow,” Pritzker said. A coalition of gun control advocacy groups also condemned the murderous attack, saying it was the 198th mass shooting in the last 10 years. “This is a horrifying reminder of how hard we have to work to prevent gun violence,” Holly Blastic, with Moms Demand Action for Gun Sense in America, said in a statement.

Definitions of “mass shooting” vary, but a Washington Post database has recorded 162 cases in which four or more people were killed since 1966. Many of the deadliest shootings have occurred in the last few years, the database shows. In a presidential message Thursday to mark the Parkland anniversary, Trump recommitted to “ensuring the safety of all Americans.”

“Let us declare together, as Americans, that we will not rest until our schools are secure and our communities are safe,” Trump said. — AFP

“The families of the victims will be less than whole”

Maduro blasts US for ‘stealing’ billions and offering ‘crumbs’

CARACAS: President Nicolas Maduro hit out at the United States on Friday for “stealing” billions of dollars and offering “crumbs” in return as humanitarian aid, as Washington sanctioned five officials close to the Venezuelan leader. Tons of US aid is piling up in Colombia close to the border with Venezuela as opposition leader Juan Guaido has vowed to defy Maduro's efforts to block the supplies from entering the country.

“It's a booby trap, they're putting on a show with rotten and contaminated food,” said Maduro, speaking at an event in the southeastern town of Ciudad Bolivar. “They've stolen \$30 billion and are offering four crumbs of rotten food,” added the beleaguered socialist leader, referring to the United States. Later Friday, Maduro asked the military to prepare for a “special deployment” to reinforce the border with Colombia — and make it “impregnable.”

“I am not exaggerating. In the White House, Donald Trump and Ivan Duque announced plans for war against Venezuela,” he said, referring to a meeting on Wednesday in which President Donald Trump reiterated that “all options” were on the table with regard to Venezuela. The country is in the midst of an economic crisis that has left millions in poverty and facing shortages of basic necessities such as food and medicine.

Guaido, who is recognized by 50 countries as the interim president, accuses Maduro of causing economic hardship through mismanagement. Among those countries is Costa Rica, whose foreign affairs ministry on Friday gave three Maduro-appointed diplomats “60 calendar days” to leave the country. Maduro meanwhile blames Venezuela's woes on US sanctions. The 56-year-old, the hand-picked successor to socialist firebrand Hugo Chavez, branded it the “war of the oligarchy.” US sanctions mostly target regime individuals and state oil company PDVSA, the government's main source of income, but the US Treasury announced Friday that it was imposing sanctions on five intelligence and security officials close to Maduro.

Struggle over aid

Those targeted are “aligned with illegitimate former



CUCUTA: Venezuelans take part in a protest against the government of President Nicolas Maduro at the Simon Bolivar International bridge. — AFP

President Nicolas Maduro, who (continues) to repress democracy and democratic actors in Venezuela,” a Treasury Department statement said. Among the five men is Manuel Quevedo, described by the Treasury as the “illegitimate” president of PDVSA. Humanitarian aid has become a key issue in the power struggle between Maduro and Guaido.

The opposition leader, who last month declared himself acting president, has promised to bring in the aid on February 23. Maduro refuses to let it in. And his loyal military has barricaded a border bridge between Venezuela and Colombia. The socialist leader insists the aid is just a cover for a planned US military invasion, while Guaido says 300,000 people could die without the desperately-needed aid. Speaking on Friday, Maduro said six million families had benefitted from subsidized food boxes and claimed to have bought 933 tons of medicines and medical

supplies from China, Cuba and Russia, his main international allies. “We paid for it with our own money because we're beggars to no one,” he said. Guaido accuses Maduro of being a “usurper” over his controversial reelection last year in polls widely branded as fraudulent.

Maduro says the 35-year-old National Assembly speaker is a puppet to the US, which is trying to secure access to Venezuela's gold and vast oil reserves — the largest in the world. He said Guaido's challenge to his authority is “treason.” “The worst thing is stimulating the imperial madness of an extremist Ku Klux Klan government in the White House,” said Maduro. US national security advisor John Bolton announced on Thursday that 25 countries had “pledged \$100 million in humanitarian assistance.” A US defense official said Friday that the American military will transport some 200 tons of humanitarian aid for Venezuela to Colombia in the coming days. — AFP

Republican commentators put a spell on Trump

WASHINGTON: He holds no official government position but has been called US President Donald Trump's “shadow” chief of staff. Fox News commentator Sean Hannity is one of several conservative media personalities who exert enormous influence over the president. Their clout has been on display as Trump fights to make good on his signature campaign promise — building a wall on the border with Mexico.

Having failed to secure congressional funding for the barrier, Trump's declaration of a national emergency on Friday is being viewed by many political analysts as a bid to save face with right-wing pundits. “The president could not handle being labeled a loser by conservative commentators like Laura Ingraham and Sean Hannity,” The New York Times said in an editorial.

“He wants to make sure that Sean Hannity and Ann Coulter and others on Fox News are happy so that they calm down, although some of them won't,” said David

Gergen, an advisor to four previous US presidents. “But fundamentally this is about politics of the base, that he needs to shore up his base,” Gergen said on CNN. Hannity, 57, is perhaps the most prominent voice in Trump's ear but the president also seeks counsel — and approval — from several other media figures whose shows he regularly tunes into.

Coulter, a right-wing author and blogger, and Lou Dobbs, a Fox Business Network host, have been fulminating about illegal immigration for years. Other prominent conservative media personalities pushing for tougher immigration policies include Ingraham and Tucker Carlson of Fox News and radio talk host Rush Limbaugh. Pressure from Coulter, Dobbs, Hannity and the others has been cited as one of the driving forces behind Trump's decision to shut down the government for weeks in the fight with Congress over funding for the wall.

‘They don't decide policy’

Trump was directly asked by a reporter on Friday how the conservative pundits helped shape his decision to declare a national emergency. “Sean Hannity has been a terrific, terrific supporter of what I do,” Trump said. “Rush Limbaugh, I think he is a great guy. “Laura Ingraham has been great,” Trump said. “Tucker Carlson has been great.” But, he added, “they don't decide policy.”



WASHINGTON: In this file photo taken on January 24, 2017 Fox News host Sean Hannity is seen in the White House briefing room. — AFP

Coulter has been particularly critical of Trump for failing to build the wall and she lashed out at the president for signing a government funding bill that does not include all of the \$5 billion he wanted for the barrier. “NATIONAL EMERGENCY WON'T HELP,” Coulter tweeted. “IT'S OVER IF HE SIGNS THIS BILL!” Last month, Coulter called Trump a “wimp.” “Good news for George Herbert Walker Bush: As of today, he is no longer the biggest wimp ever to serve as President of the United States,” she tweeted.

Trump responded to Coulter's criticism on Friday by saying that he “hardly knows” her, that she was “off the reservation” and he hasn't spoken to her in “way over a year.” “If I did speak to her she may be very nice,” he said. “I have nothing against her. “I like her for one reason,” Trump added. “When they asked her right at the beginning who is going to win the election, she said Donald Trump.” Hannity, the Fox News host, is seen as the most influential among the stable of conservatives cultivated by Trump.

“He's got Hannity and Coulter all these people in his head full-time — rent-free,” CNN host Chris Cuomo said. “He's incredibly persuasive and powerful.” Cuomo said of Hannity, “I would argue he is without question the most powerful person in the media because what he says the president does.” “What he says the president does,” Cuomo repeated for emphasis during an interview with Matt Gaetz, a Republican congressman from Florida who is one of Trump's biggest supporters in the House of Representatives.

“Hannity is unlike anyone else in the media now,” Gaetz agreed. “They have exchanges and robust discussions,” he said of Trump and Hannity. “I think it's good that we have a president that bounces ideas off a lot of different people,” Gaetz said. “He's not just stuck in the cocoon of the West Wing. “He seeks advice from all over the country.” — AFP

US judge issues gag order in case of Roger Stone

WASHINGTON: A US judge issued a gag order on Friday in the case against Roger Stone, the Trump advisor who has pleaded not guilty to charges stemming from the investigation into whether the president's election campaign colluded with Russia. Stone, 66, is charged with lying to Congress, witness tampering and obstruction stemming from his contacts with WikiLeaks, whose publication of Russian-hacked communications from Democrat Hillary Clinton's campaign gave a boost to Donald Trump.

US District Court Judge Amy Berman Jackson ordered government and defense attorneys to refrain from “making statements to the media or in public settings that pose a substantial likelihood of material prejudice to this case.” Stone was told not to speak to the media or to make public statements around the courthouse or in its immediate vicinity. The federal judge cited the “size and vociferousness of the crowds” attending Stone's court appearances and the “risk that public pronouncements by the participants may inflame those gatherings.”

Stone's court appearances have been rowdy affairs featuring supporters and opponents and a large media contingent. Stone, a veteran Republican consultant, pleaded not guilty in federal court in Washington last month to the seven charges against him. Stone is the sixth campaign associate of Trump indicted by Special Counsel Robert Mueller's team investigating Russian meddling in the 2016 vote.

Trump has repeatedly denied any collusion with Moscow and denounced the probe by Mueller, a former FBI director, as a “political witch hunt.” Stone, who launched his career as a campaign aide to Richard Nixon and has a tattoo on his back of the first US president to resign from office, has spent decades advising political campaigns. His association with Trump dates back to 1979, and he was one of the first to enlist when the billionaire real estate magnate launched his run for the presidency in 2015.

Stone left the campaign months later but the indictment shows he remained in active communication with Mueller's team, providing support and information. Mueller's team has indicted a total of 34 people — but so far, no charges of outright collusion between the Trump campaign and Moscow have been filed. — AFP

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