

International

Thousands march in Colombia to maintain pressure on Duque

Public transport shut down, shops and offices closed

BOGOTA: Colombian unions marked their second general strike in a week on Wednesday as tens of thousands poured onto the streets in protest against the government of right-wing President Ivan Duque. Public transport was largely shut down and shops and offices closed in the center of the capital as a series of protests that began with a 250,000-strong march last Thursday continued for a seventh consecutive day.

Some protesters banged pots and pans as they made their way through the streets. Large demonstrations were also held in Cali and Medellin. "We are outraged by so much mistreatment and so much corruption," said David Martinez, a 50-year-old public employee who joined a march in Bogota dressed as a clown. "I'm dressed as a clown because that's how the government sees us. People have risen up in Ecuador, Chile, in Bolivia, now it's our turn to say: No More!" Martinez told AFP.

The protests have been largely peaceful but sporadic violence has left four dead - including a young man who died Monday after being wounded in clashes with riot police on Saturday. Some 500 people have been injured. Police said 184 people had been detained in the protests since last week. "They have turned Colombia into a democracy where they favor a minority of businessmen and bureaucrats, while the vast majority must try to hang on to their privileges,"

teachers union Fecode said in a statement.

Duque, under fire over his economic policies and corruption, launched a "national dialogue" Sunday with mayors and other officials in a bid to assuage popular anger. However, protest leaders reacted angrily when they were initially omitted from direct talks.

US support

US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo voiced "steadfast support" for Duque's government in a phone call to the beleaguered president on Wednesday, the State Department said. Pompeo "welcomed the national conversation that President Duque has convened in Colombia in response to recent demonstrations," it said. A Gallup poll published on Nov 7 showed Duque's approval ratings at 26 percent in October, the lowest since he took office in Aug 2018, while 70 percent of respondents believe the country is heading in the wrong direction.

The National Strike Committee - which groups unions, students, university lecturers and indigenous groups - presented a list of 13 demands to the government, including the withdrawal of Duque's proposed tax reforms, and full compliance with the 2016 peace deal with FARC guerrillas. But perhaps the most controversial is the call to dismantle the feared ESMAD riot police, after the death Monday of 18-year-old pro-



BOGOTA: People shout slogans during a demonstration against the government of Colombian President Ivan Duque during a national strike on Wednesday. — AFP

tester Dilan Cruz, who was hit in the head by a tear gas canister.

Duque has yielded to some of the demands on tax reform, announcing the return of value added tax to the poorest 20 percent of the population and benefits for companies that hire

young people. "This government is open building towards the future, but it must be done with the whole of society," Duque said in an interview with Colombia's W Radio, insisting that many of the protesters claims were based on disinformation or "false premises". — AFP

Trump strips away truth with hunky topless photo tweet

WASHINGTON: Days after causing alarm with an unscheduled trip to the hospital, US President Donald Trump tweeted a photo-shopped image of himself Wednesday as a rippling, bare-chested boxer. The president is furious over media speculation following his sudden trip to a government hospital outside Washington last Saturday and the startling tweet was his latest attempt to put talk of ill health to rest. In the picture, Trump's head is superimposed on the hulking body of a boxer - an image taken from the publicity poster for the Sylvester Stallone movie "Rocky III".

The montage, in which a distinctly airbrushed version of the 73-year-old president's face is used, comes without comment. Not that the Republican real estate tycoon is shy on the subject. He rarely misses a chance to talk up his own physical prowess and often makes unscripted comments - flattering or derogatory - about the physique of other men, often to their face during official events.

On Tuesday, while giving a reelection campaign speech in Florida, Trump fumed at length in a bizarre rant about his recent hospital visit. He claimed, wrongly, that major media outlets were reporting he'd had a "massive" heart attack when he was taken, without prior notice, to the Walter Reed military hospital.



WASHINGTON: This image shows a screen grab of the Twitter account of US President Donald Trump with his face superimposed on a picture of Sylvester Stallone's Rocky III boxing movie on Wednesday. — AFP

In fact, most media questioned the unusual circumstances of the visit, which would usually have been flagged in advance. The White House said afterward that Trump had simply decided to do part of his annual physical exam early, in order to save time later. According to his last medical exam, in February, Trump is technically obese but in good health. He rarely exercises, other than playing golf - as he did at his Mar-a-Lago resort in Florida on Wednesday. — AFP

Envoy key in Trump impeachment accused of sexual misconduct

WASHINGTON: A US ambassador nominated by President Donald Trump who provided key testimony in his impeachment hearings was accused Wednesday of sexual misconduct by three women. Gordon Sondland, the US envoy to the European Union, denied the allegations, with his lawyer alleging that the accusers were trying to taint his credibility in the inquiry. The Portland Monthly published named accounts by three women who said that Sondland, a wealthy hotel owner from Seattle, retaliated against them professionally after they rejected him sexually.

One of the women, Jana Solis, said she met Sondland in 2008 when she was seeking work in her position as a safety expert for hotels. She said Sondland met her for lunch and offered her a job as "my new hotel chick" before slapping her rear. She said Sondland later invited her to his Portland home to evaluate his personal art collection - which included a picture of himself with then president George W Bush - and that he exposed himself in the pool house. She said Sondland at a later meeting also forcibly kissed her.

Another woman, Nicole Vogel, said she met Sondland in 2003 over dinner to seek investment in a new magazine. He then took her to a hotel he owned and invited her to see a room, where he requested a hug and then "grabs my face and goes to kiss me", she said. Vogel said she refused and left. She pointed to an email afterward in which Sondland declined funding for her project.

Sondland in a statement rejected all the accu-



Gordon Sondland

sations and accused Vogel of "underhanded journalism" out of anger that he did not invest in the magazine. "These untrue claims of unwanted touching and kissing are concocted and, I believe, coordinated for political purposes," he said. "They have no basis in fact and I categorically deny them," he said.

Vogel owns the Portland Monthly, which published the article. The magazine said that, due to her implication in the story, it teamed up with ProPublica, a respected non-profit news group known for investigations. A lawyer for Sondland told the magazine the article was timed to damage the ambassador's credibility in the impeachment inquiry. Sondland donated \$1 million to Trump's inauguration and was afterward named ambassador to the European Union. — AFP