

POTENTIAL FOR VIOLENCE FROM FAKE NEWS TROUBLING

WASHINGTON: The bizarre rumors began with a leaked email referencing Hillary Clinton and sinister interpretations of references to pizza parties. It morphed into fake online news stories about a child sex trafficking ring run by prominent Democrats operating out of a Washington, DC, pizza joint. On Sunday, it culminated in violence when police say a North Carolina man fired an assault rifle inside the Comet Ping Pong restaurant as he attempted to "self-investigate" the conspiracy theory known in the Twitterverse as "Pizzagate."

No one was hurt and the man was arrested. But the shooting alarmed those from neighboring businesses all the way to the White House about the real life dangers of fake news on the internet. One of those people posting on the conspiracy theory is the son of President-elect Donald Trump's proposed national security adviser. On Monday, White House Spokesman Josh Earnest, asked about the shooting, said, "There's no denying the corrosive effect that some of these false reports have had on our political debate, and that's concerning in a political context. It's deeply troubling that some of those false reports could lead to violence."

Edgar Maddison Welch, 28 of Salisbury, North Carolina, was arrested Sunday afternoon outside the popular eatery in an affluent neighborhood of the nation's capital, police said. At his initial appearance Monday in DC Superior Court, Welch was ordered held pending a hearing scheduled for Thursday. The public defender he was assigned didn't immediately respond to an email seeking comment. Court records made public Monday state Welch fired an AR-15 assault rifle multiple times inside the restaurant but later walked out with his hands up and unarmed, leaving his weapons inside.

He told police "he had read online that the Comet restaurant was harboring child sex slaves and that he wanted to see for himself if they were there." He said he "was armed to help rescue them" and "surrendered peacefully when he found no evidence that underage children were being harbored in the restaurant." Welch was charged on multiple counts, including assault with a dangerous weapon. Authorities recovered the AR-15 assault rifle and a handgun from the restaurant, court paperwork said.

'Pizza party'

Police said an additional weapon was recovered from his vehicle. The precise origins of the conspiracy theory Welch said he went to investigate are murky, though it seems to have started gaining momentum in the week before the election. Some elements trace back to hacked emails from Clinton Chief of Staff John Podesta that were released by Wikileaks that refer to pizza parties, with online commentators speculating that "pizza party" is a code word for something more nefarious.

By Nov 3, Comet Ping Pong - so named because patrons can play ping pong on tables in the back of restaurant - had been pulled into the conspiracy. "Let me state unequivocally: These stories are completely and entirely false, and there is no basis in fact to any of them. What happened today demonstrates that promoting false and reckless conspiracy theories comes with consequences," Comet's owner, James Alefantis, said in a statement Sunday night.

At least one person who isn't ready to give up on the conspiracy theory is prominently connected to Trump's transition team. Michael Flynn Jr is an adviser to his father, Michael Flynn, whom Trump

selected to serve as national security adviser. Flynn Jr has sent numerous posts on Twitter about the Pizzagate conspiracy theories. Flynn Jr, who has accompanied his father to presidential transition meetings inside Trump Tower and lists the presidential transition website as part of his Twitter bio, tweeted Sunday night that, "Until #Pizzagate proven to be false, it'll remain a story." Trump's team had no immediate response to questions about the conspiracy theory or the younger Flynn's role in the presidential transition.

On Monday, at an address listed for Welch in Salisbury, a woman drove out as a reporter was approaching and asked him to leave. She then hammered a "no trespassing" sign on a stand by the private driveway. Comet Ping Pong was closed Monday, but neighbors brought flowers and cards to the storefront saying "We support Comet" and "we love you and stand by you." Wiktorja Skrzypinska lives a few blocks from Comet. She said she had heard the rumors about Comet but was shocked to learn that somebody had become so enmeshed in the conspiracy theory to enter the restaurant with an assault rifle. — AP

FRENCH INTERIOR MINISTER CAZENEUVE APPOINTED PM

VALLS QUILTS TO RUN FOR PRESIDENT

PARIS: French Interior Minister Bernard Cazeneuve was appointed as the new prime minister yesterday after Manuel Valls resigned to seek the Socialist nomination in next year's presidential election. Cazeneuve, who has overseen the security forces' reaction to a string of jihadist attacks that have killed more than 230 people in France over the past two years, will take control of the Socialist government until the election in May.

The widely-respected former lawyer was named to the post after President Francois Hollande accepted Valls's resignation yesterday. Cazeneuve, 53, has served in various government roles, including budget minister and minister in charge of European affairs, before becoming interior minister in April 2014. Bruno Le Roux, leader of the Socialists in the lower house of parliament, will take over the

interior portfolio. The mini-reshuffle comes after Valls, who has been prime minister for the past two-and-a-half years, said on Monday he would step down to contest a leftwing primary in January. The 54-year-old quit the government to devote himself to the presidential race, in which polls currently show him trailing in fifth place overall. Announcing his candidacy on Monday, he vowed to take on the conservative Republicans and the far-right National Front led by Marine Le Pen. His announcement came four days after Hollande said he would bow out after a single term, paving the way for his divisive premier to try to become the left's new standard bearer.

Far-right 'at the gates'

"My candidacy is one of reconciliation," Valls said in a speech from his political base in the

gritty Paris suburb of Evry. The far right, which was beaten in Austria's presidential election at the weekend, was "at the gates of power" in France with a nationalist program that would "ruin" the poor, he warned. Polls show Le Pen and conservative candidate Francois Fillon far out in front in the opening round of the election on April 23, with Fillon expected to beat Le Pen in May's second round.

Valls would crash out with 10 percent if he won the nomination-behind Fillon. Le Pen, centrist former economy minister Emmanuel Macron and the Communist-backed Jean-Luc Melenchon, an Ifop-Fiducial poll showed yesterday. On Monday, Valls attacked Fillon, a self-declared Thatcherite, accusing him of rehashing "the old recipes of the 1980s." "We're told that Francois Fillon is the next president of the Republic. Nothing is set in stone," he said defiantly.

Crowded field

Spanish-born Valls, whose family fled Franco's dictatorship to France when he was a teenager, faces an uphill battle to unite his camp. He will go up against seven other candidates in the two-round primary on January 22 and 29, including Arnaud Montebourg, another former economy minister from a leftist Socialist faction. Many on the left see Valls as a rightwinger after he used decrees to force through labor reforms and called for dual-national terror convicts to be stripped of their French nationality. His stern line on secularism and Islam has also turned off many lifelong Socialists. Last summer, he waded into the debate on the Islamic "burkini," declaring the full-body swimsuit "not compatible" with French values. But the blackest mark on his candidacy could be his government's bleak economic record. Le Pen has dismissed him as the unpopular Hollande's "double." When Valls last sought the Socialist nomination five years ago, he garnered only 5.6 percent. Former education minister Benoit Hamon, one of his challengers in the primary, said yesterday that faced with a rising hard right, the Socialists needed to pick someone who represented "a proper left." "It seems to me that he (Valls) cannot embody the future of the left," Hamon said. — AFP

Circumventing the boss?

The daily Sueddeutsche Zeitung said Merkel's lock on re-election as party leader should not be viewed as an indication that there is no dissent. It said that in the background, key members were starting to think beyond her. "That's particularly obvious in terms of refugee policies," it said, noting that "much to Merkel's disappointment, the motion put to the congress has been toughened up by the party's federal chiefs."

These included praising the decision by governments in the Balkans to shut down a route used by asylum seekers—something that had previously been sharply criticized by Merkel. And others want to go further, with CDU deputy chairman Thomas Strobl leading the charge through a demand to ease the deportation process for rejected asylum-seekers. "We can't just put a notice for departure in people's hands and then not follow through with the law," he said, warning it would "substantially erode" public confidence in the rule of law. — AFP



PARIS: French Prime Minister Manuel Valls (left) and French Interior Minister Bernard Cazeneuve leaving the weekly cabinet meeting at the Elysee presidential Palace in Paris. French Interior Minister Bernard Cazeneuve was appointed as the new prime minister yesterday after Manuel Valls resigned to seek the Socialist nomination in the presidential election. — AFP

GERMAN CHANCELLOR DRAWS BATTLE LINES AHEAD OF 2017

ESSEN: German Chancellor Angela Merkel will outline her battle strategy yesterday to counter a wave of populism that has consumed key allies abroad, as she launches into campaign mode for next year's elections. Merkel, who has led Germany for 11 years, last month confirmed she would run for a fourth term but acknowledged that the election would be "more difficult" than any other she has contested. Party faithful from her centre-right Christian Democratic Union (CDU) gathering for a two-day annual congress in the western city of Essen are expected to overwhelmingly re-elect Merkel as party chief, rallying behind her bid to stay in power.

During the last party vote in 2014, Merkel garnered 96.7 percent of support and this week's ballot will be closely scrutinized for any sign of dissent. "I'm counting on an honest result," she told public broadcaster ARD, as national media suggested that any score below 90 percent would be a slap in the face. Crucially, she will also be grilled on how she plans to stop the populist anti-Islam AfD from further eroding the party's supporter base. The CDU has suffered setbacks in five consecutive state polls as voters punish Merkel for her liberal refugee policy, with more than a million people seeking asylum in Germany last year.

There have been questions about whether the 62-year-old has fresh ideas to offer in a world upended by Brexit, the surprise election of Donald Trump and the departure of Italian Prime Minister following a crushing referendum defeat championed by populists. There is concern within CDU rank and file, because Merkel has said she "will stand again, without saying how she will change her policies in the future", Hans Pistner from the Thuringia regional government told regional broadcaster MDR.

Close the gaps

Merkel's CDU and its Bavarian sister party CSU secured a decisive win of 41.5 percent at the last election in 2013 - its best result since national reunification in 1990, on the back of strong approval for her tough stance on austerity for

debt-stricken EU nations. Three years on, there are rumblings of discontent—even within her own party—following her September 2015 decision to let in refugees fleeing war in mostly-Muslim nations, in a move that has deeply polarized Europe's biggest economy.

Although Merkel has since moved to slow the influx, including through a highly controversial deal with Turkey, the AfD has gained a firm footing as a protest platform for disgruntled voters. The AfD now enjoys around 12 percent support, while at the last general election it fell short of the five-percent threshold to ensure representation. Merkel's supporters will take heart from a recent survey showing that two in three Germans approve of her bid to stand again. But with nine months or more to go before the elections, CDU deputy chair Julia Klöckner said the party must not leave any gaps for the AfD to exploit. "If we only talk about healthcare for refugees, but not about the shortage of doctors in the country, then the mood will sour," she warned in an interview with Spiegel magazine.



ESSEN: German Chancellor Angela Merkel gestures after addressing delegates during her conservative Christian Democratic Union (CDU) party's congress in Essen, western Germany yesterday. German Chancellor Angela Merkel launches into campaign mode for elections taking place in 2017. — AFP



In this file photo, US President Barack Obama hugs Shigeaki Mori, an atomic bomb survivor; creator of the memorial for American WWII POWs killed at Hiroshima, during a ceremony at Hiroshima Peace Memorial Park in Hiroshima, western Japan. — AP

WORLD LEADERS FACE THE RISKS IN RECONCILING WITH PAST ENEMIES

WASHINGTON: Reconciliation can be tricky. It took 70 years for an American president to visit the site of the US atomic bombing of Hiroshima, and nearly 75 for a Japanese leader to announce he would visit Pearl Harbor, as Prime Minister Shinzo Abe did Monday. Abe is likely to receive a warm reception later this month at the memorial for more than 2,300 Americans who died in the Japanese attack on the Hawaiian naval base. That hasn't always been the case for other world leaders visiting similar sites, particularly when memories are fresher.

Reagan in Bitburg

US President Ronald Reagan and German Chancellor Helmut Kohl stirred a global outcry in May 1985 when the American leader visited a German military cemetery that included the remains of 49 members of Adolf Hitler's Waffen SS troops. Reagan stuck to his promise to visit the cemetery in Bitburg despite a torrent of criticism from Jewish groups, US veterans and others. He added a stop at the Bergen-Belsen concentration camp to his trip. Kohl defended the invitation as a "demonstrative gesture of reconciliation."

Clinton in Vietnam

US President Bill Clinton received a rock-star welcome in Vietnam in November 2000. Clinton was the first American president to visit after the Vietnam War, which ended in 1975 and claimed the lives of more than 3 million Vietnamese and 58,000 American soldiers. Clinton remains popular in Vietnam because the United States normalized relations with its former foe in 1995 while he was president. Relations were completely normalized in May with US President Barack Obama announcing the lifting of a ban on weapons sales to Vietnam during his visit to the country.

Ahmadinejad in Iraq

Iran's hard-line President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad visited Iraq in March 2008, becoming the first leader to travel there after the two bordering nations fought a bloody war that killed 1 million people in the 1980s. His visit came five years after a US-led invasion toppled Iraqi leader Saddam Hussein, who started the 1980s conflict. The influence of Iran in Iraq has grown in the time since, with Iranian-backed Shiite militias now leading the fight in some battlefields against the extremist Islamic State group.

Vucic in Srebrenica

Anger boiled over in July 2015 when Serbian Prime Minister Aleksandar Vucic attended a commemoration 20 years after the slaughter of Muslims in Srebrenica, Bosnia-Herzegovina. Tens of thousands came to mark the anniversary of Europe's worst massacre since World War II, the killing of 8,000 Muslims by Bosnian Serbs. Vucic, once an ultra-nationalist, came to represent Serbia at the commemoration in an apparent gesture of reconciliation. Thousands booed and whistled as he entered the cemetery to lay flowers. Protesters threw water bottles and other objects as he hastily left. His glasses were broken, but there were no serious injuries.

Obama in Hiroshima

US President Barack Obama risked criticism at home when he decided to visit the memorial to the 140,000 killed in the atomic bombing of Hiroshima in World War II. Japanese generally welcomed his visit and praised his speech, which called on humankind to prevent war and pursue a world without nuclear weapons. He didn't apologize for the bombing, and Japan didn't ask for an apology. Just visiting Hiroshima would have been politically difficult, if not impossible, for previous US presidents to do. — AP

MERKEL'S DECISIVE MOMENTS

ESSEN: As German Chancellor Angela seeks the blessing from her party to run for a fourth consecutive term in general elections next year, here are seven pivotal moments in her career.

Spokeswoman to Chancellor

Merkel, the daughter of a pastor, became politically active when opposition to the East German government grew in 1989. She briefly served as a deputy spokeswoman for the first democratically elected East German government, before winning election in 1990 to the reunified German parliament as a member of the Christian Democratic Union (CDU) party. Chancellor Helmut Kohl named Merkel minister for women and youth in 1991, but disparaged his youngest cabinet member with the patronizing nickname, "das Maedchen" (the girl). Merkel steadily climbed to the CDU leadership and Kohl's insult came back to haunt him when "the girl" was the only one with the guts to tell him to quit when he got bogged down in a political slush fund scandal. She was elected party chief in 2000 with more than 95 percent of the vote. On November 22, 2005, Merkel became Germany's first woman chancellor and has since won re-election

twice. In the last round of elections in 2013, she led the CDU to its best ever score since reunification.

Nuclear power? Nein danke

Merkel stunned the world when she announced after the Fukushima nuclear meltdown in 2011 that German nuclear reactors would be phased out by 2022. Germany continues to use coal-fired plants until it can ramp up green energy initiatives. The country has invested heavily in solar and wind power, and aims to provide 80 percent of its needs with renewable sources by 2050.

'Madame non'

All eyes turned to Merkel when Greece plunged into a sovereign debt crisis in 2010. She was vilified as a heartless penny-pincher as together with Finance Minister Wolfgang Schaueble, she took a hard line against forgiving Athens' massive debt. She backed three international rescue packages worth more than 300 billion euros (\$320 billion) but only in exchange for deep budget cuts and steep tax increases. As the euro-zone struggled to kickstart growth, Merkel came under intense pressure to boost government spending. — AFP