

US, MEXICO HUNT CORRUPT, DRUG-PUSHING OFFICIALS

MEXICO CITY: Crooked cops, greedy governors and pusher-prosecutors: Corruption and drug crime reach to high places in Mexico, which is getting a jolt from US efforts to hunt down top suspects. Analysts say officials have been getting away for decades with corruption in a country dominated by big, powerful drug gangs. "There is a systemic problem of corruption among the local and state-level authorities," said Alejandro Hope, a former Mexican intelligence agent who is now a security consultant. In the latest high-profile case grabbing headlines this week, the former Tamaulipas state governor Tomas Yarrington was arrested in Italy on Sunday. In 2000 he posed smiling with the then-governor of Texas and future US president, George W Bush.

Expelled in December from Mexico's governing Institutional Revolutionary Party, Yarrington is wanted on charges of drug-related crimes by both Mexico and the United

States. Mexican authorities offered \$800,000 for Yarrington's capture. But analysts say what most speeded up his arrest was pressure from up north. "His detention has happened because the United States wanted it to, not so much because the Mexican government made a decisive decision," says Hope. Opposition lawmaker Jorge Lopez Martin of the National Action Party called for Yarrington to be judged in the United States and not Mexico, "so that there can be no room for impunity."

Impunity -

An "impunity index" study last year by the University of the Americas Puebla found that fewer than five percent of crimes reported in Mexico end up being punished. "There is so much corruption, so much impunity, the judicial system is so easily corrupted and the penal system is so useless that it not only allows the drug trade but actually encourages many peo-

ple to commit crimes," said Jose Antonio Crespo, a political analyst at the Economic Research and Teaching Center. "They know that the likelihood of being punished is minimal and that with a bit of luck they can buy off the judge and escape." Police in California last month arrested the chief public attorney of the western Mexican state of Nayarit, Edgar Veytia, accused of trafficking cocaine, marijuana and methamphetamine. "They grabbed him there. Over here no one knew about it," Crespo said. "Often it is the United States that puts an end to impunity. Here, they turn a blind eye."

Drugs

Federal authorities have vowed to crack down on crime, but corruption makes that difficult. The Federal Police last week acknowledged apparent wrongdoing by a senior agent in its drug squad: Ivan Reyes Arzate, who was serving as a liaison with US police.

Reyes turned himself in to police in Chicago after learning that he was being investigated for warning drug gangs when they were infiltrated or spied on. The force's commissioner Manelich Castilla vowed to crack down on dodgy officers. "There will be no place in the Federal Police for those who betray the ideals of this institution and the ideals of the country," he told a news conference. "They will be pursued and punished."

Embezzlement

Mexicans know the cost of drug crime, which has killed thousands. But corruption angers them even more, Hope says. One recent case involved the fugitive former governor of the violence-stricken eastern state of Veracruz, Javier Duarte. He was found to have left behind a store of artworks, antiques, luxury goods and even school and medical supplies apparently intended for social programs. — AFP



MOSCOW: Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov (center) Syrian Foreign Minister Walid Moallem (left) and Iranian Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif arrive to attend a news conference following their talks focused on Syria in Moscow yesterday. — AP

RUSSIA, IRAN AND SYRIA ISSUE WARNING TO US

RUSSIA BLAMES REBELS FOR CHEMICAL ATTACK

MOSCOW: Russia, Syria and Iran strongly warned the United States yesterday against launching new strikes on Syria and called for an international probe into last week's chemical attack there. Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov, who hosted his Iranian and Syrian counterparts at a trilateral meeting in Moscow, denounced last week's US attack on Syria as a "flagrant violation" of international law and warned that any further such action would entail "grave consequences not only for regional but global security." Syrian Foreign Minister Walid Moallem said the meeting sent a "strong message" to Washington. Iran's Mohammad Javad Zarif emphasized that the participants warned that any unilateral action by the US is unacceptable.

The US has blamed the Syrian government for launching a deadly chemical attack in Khan Sheikhoun that killed over 80 people on April 4, and responded by striking a Syrian air base. Russia has alleged that the victims were killed by toxic agents released from a rebel chemical arsenal and warned against putting the

blame on Damascus until an independent inquiry has been conducted. Moscow vetoed a Western draft UN resolution Wednesday, saying it failed to mention the need to inspect the area of the attack.

Lavrov yesterday accused the US and its allies of what he described as attempts to stymie an international probe into the attack. He expressed strong skepticism about a preliminary investigation conducted by the UN chemical weapons watchdog, saying that its experts have failed to visit the site and it has remained unclear to Russia where the samples have been taken and how they have been analyzed.

In Russia's view, the probe conducted by the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons should be widened to include experts from many nations, he said. "If our US colleagues and some European nations believe that their version is right, they have no reason to fear the creation of such an independent group," Lavrov added. "The investigation into this high-profile incident must be transparent and leave no doubt that someone is trying to hide something."

Lavrov said the US strike on the Syrian base has undermined peace efforts in Syria and reflected Washington's focus on ousting Syrian President Bashar Assad's government. "Such attempts won't succeed," Lavrov said. The three ministers also discussed the beefing up of US forces on Jordan's border with Syria. Moallem said. He added that Russia, Iran and Syria have "common procedures against any aggression," but wouldn't offer any specifics.

Lavrov that Moscow has asked Washington about the purpose of the buildup and received assurances they were there to cut supply lines between the Islamic State group factions in Syria and Iraq. "We will keep monitoring the issue, since the only possible reason for using military force on the territory of Syria is to fight terrorism," Lavrov said. Russia has staunchly backed Assad's government throughout a civil war that has dragged into a seventh year. It has conducted an air campaign in Syria since September 2015, saving Assad from imminent collapse and helping reverse military fortunes. — AP

TRUMP FLIPFLOPS ON NATO, CHINA, RUSSIA, SYRIA, TRADE

WASHINGTON: Donald Trump has long been seen as mercurial, but maybe never quite so much as this past week. The US president in recent days abandoned a series of campaign promises and strident world views that were held for months and, in some cases, years. From China to Syria, trade to the dollar, a rapid succession of 180 degree reversals has left Washington, foreign capitals and Trump's own fans with a nasty case of political whiplash.

Just 87 days ago Trump declared NATO "obsolete." On Wednesday he proclaimed "it's no longer obsolete," a seemingly miraculous rediscovery of purpose for the usually slow-moving alliance. After talks and a slice of chocolate cake at Mar-a-Lago, China's Xi Jinping was no longer responsible for the "rape" of the US economy. Instead, Xi was a leader with whom Trump enjoyed good "chemistry" and "bonding." Others were not so lucky-falling on the wrong side of Trump's list of good guys and bad guys.

Syrian President Bashar Al-Assad went from tolerated leader to political dead man walking, after Trump saw images of toddlers suffocating from a suspected sarin attack blamed on Damascus. "That's a butcher. That's a butcher," Trump said, adding there was no place for Assad in Syria's future politics. "There is a moral affront and there is maybe a personal anger, even a humiliation for Trump," said Hussein Ibish of the Arab Gulf States Institute. Russian President Vladimir Putin's refusal to end his support for Assad has resulted in another dramatic about face.

It was "certainly possible" Putin knew about the sarin attack, Trump said. "Right now, we're not getting along with Russia at all. We may be at an all-time low in terms of relationship with Russia," Trump said pensively. He may have omitted the Cuban Missile Crisis and much of the Cold War, but it was an unmistakable message and a far cry from the praise Putin got from Trump during the campaign. Almost simultaneously, Trump also reversed his opposition to the Export-Import Bank, said he might renominate Fed chair Janet Yellen after all and proclaimed the dollar too strong. And his budget guru quietly declared that a promise to eliminate the deficit was just "hyperbole."

The Trump doctrine?

For White House spin doctors, these were not policy U-turns at all, but evidence Trump is bending the world to his will. "If you look at what's happened, it's those entities or individuals in some cases, or issues, evolving towards the president's position," said White House press secretary Sean Spicer. On issues like NATO turning its attention to terrorism to China abandoning currency manipulation from the White House perspective, things are just getting better in the Age of Trump.

In reality, China stopped weakening the yuan years ago and NATO has been fighting jihadist groups for the better part of a decade. Part of the explanation for Trump's reversal may come from inside the White House, where radicals like Steve Bannon, Mike Flynn and KT McFarland have been sacked or notably sidelined. —AFP