



Community renewed by refugees embraces Trump



WISCONSIN: US President Donald Trump holds a baby while greeting well wishers after arriving on Air Force One at General Mitchell International Airport. — AFP

TRUMP HAS EMBRACED AUTOCRATIC LEADERS

FROM EGYPT'S STRONGMAN TO IGNORING CHINA'S HUMAN RIGHTS RECORD

WASHINGTON: President Donald Trump congratulated Turkey's president for sweeping up more power. Trump hailed Egypt's strongman as a "fantastic guy." When China's president visited the United States, Trump cited a burgeoning friendship and made no public mention of Beijing's dismal human rights record.

Since taking office, Trump has displayed a striking willingness to embrace autocrats as potential partners in his "America First" agenda, even if it means ignoring their heavy-handed tactics and repression at home. It's a posture that Trump also took toward Russian President Vladimir Putin until a dispute over Syria led Trump last week to declare US-Russian ties at an "all-time low."

Trump is hardly the first US president willing to look the other way in dealings with governments that flout democratic values. For decades, Republican and Democratic administrations have cooperated closely with Saudi Arabia and China. President Barack Obama opened new diplomatic channels with Iran and Cuba, despite concerns about their repressive rulers. But rarely are US presidents as warm and unabashed about their relationships with autocrats.

Trump's comfort level seems to stem in part from his background in business, where the details of a deal mattered more than the negotiating partner and flattery can get results. When they were forced to deal with imperfect allies, Trump's predecessors, including Obama and President George W. Bush, made a point of using the moment to promote American ideals. They often followed

meetings with statements about human rights or gathered separately with advocates or opposition leaders.

Looking past abuses

On Monday, as international monitors and European allies voiced concerns about what they said was a slanted political playing field in Turkey's referendum, the White House said Trump called Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan to congratulate him on a victory that grants Erdogan more power. The message was at odds with Trump's own State Department, which expressed unease about a referendum that allows Erdogan to fulfill his long-held ambition for a presidency with executive powers.

Erdogan's government has imprisoned scores of Turkish journalists. Since a failed coup last year, Turkey has arrested thousands of others accused of possible involvement. "The president's number one job is to keep Americans safe," Trump spokeswoman Sarah Huckabee Sanders said Tuesday. "And if he needs to work with countries like Turkey and others to do that, that's his priority and what his focus is."

The White House's readout of the Trump-Erdogan call focused its concerns on the Islamic State group and Syria's civil war, which the US and Turkey are coordinating efforts on. Turkey is a US key ally against IS, even if Turkey's poorly controlled border has been a contributing factor in the group's expansion across Syria and Iraq.

Turkey's foreign minister, Mevlut Cavusoglu, said yesterday that Erdogan and

Trump are planning to meet before next month's NATO summit in Brussels. The White House confirmed that it's in discussions with the Turkish government about arranging a meeting between the leaders. Rachel Rizzo, a NATO and Europe expert at the Center for a New American Security, said the Trump administration sees its Turkey relationship "purely as a national security issue in terms of needing their help fighting ISIS and with the migration crisis in Europe." "It seems they're willing to look past human rights abuses," she said. Trump has praised Chinese President Xi Jinping since hosting him at his Palm Beach, Florida, resort; as a candidate, Trump sharply criticized China's economic policies. He has linked his warmer approach toward Xi with his effort to secure greater help from Beijing in stopping North Korea's nuclear program. "A trade deal with the US will be far better for them if they solve the North Korean problem!" Trump said on Twitter, recounting what he told Xi. Trump has locked arms with Egyptian President Abdel-Fatah el-Sissi, a former general who toppled the democratically elected President Mohamed Morsi, a Muslim Brotherhood member. Obama never outwardly condemned el-Sissi's takeover. But Obama kept Egypt's leader at arm's length, assailing Egypt's human rights record and suspending some US military aid.

Different relationship

After winning November's presidential election, Trump offered el-Sissi a different relationship. When el-Sissi visited Washington this month, Trump told reporters the

Egyptian president would be someone "very close to me." A post-meeting statement cited their mutual commitment to fighting terrorism and strengthening Egypt's economy. It made no mention of el-Sissi's crackdown on domestic opponents that has been widely condemned by international rights monitors.

The pattern may have been set by Trump's vociferous support for Putin. As a candidate and in his first weeks as president, Trump said Putin had been a strong leader and expressed a desire to work closer with Moscow, despite the cloud of an FBI investigation into allegations of Russian meddling in the US presidential election.

Even before this month's Syrian chemical weapons attack and retaliatory US cruise missile strike, Trump's administration had been souring on the Kremlin. Last month, it condemned Russia's crackdown on anti-government protesters last month that included 1,000 arrests. "Detaining peaceful protesters, human rights observers and journalists is an

affront to core democratic values," a statement said at the time.

But Trump's tack on Turkey appeared to undermine his own State Department, which before the Erdogan phone conversation with Trump spoke of "irregularities" in the Turkish referendum and "an uneven playing field during the difficult campaign period." The White House's statement on Trump's call to Erdogan made no mention of those concerns. Turkey's strategic location between Europe and the Middle East, and its unique role as the only Muslim-majority NATO member, have long made it an indispensable American partner. Obama, too, sought a close relationship with Erdogan, viewing him as a possible model for a new generation of Muslim leaders. He traveled to Turkey in his first year in office and spoke frequently with the Turkish leader. But as Erdogan moved to consolidate power in Turkey, his relationship with Obama soured. —AP

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GEORGE HW BUSH SENIOR HOSPITALIZED IN HOUSTON

HOUSTON: Former US President George HW Bush has been readmitted to a Houston hospital for treatment of a mild case of pneumonia, his second bout of that respiratory illness in three months, but "is going to be fine," his spokesman said yesterday. Family spokesman Jim McGrath said the 92-year-old former president was hospitalized on Friday "for observation due to a persistent cough that prevented him from getting proper rest."

"It was subsequently determined he had a mild case of pneumonia, which was treated and has been resolved," McGrath said in a statement. "President Bush is in very good spirits and is being held for further observation while he regains his strength." McGrath furnished no immediate additional information except to say that Bush was at Houston Methodist Hospital, where he had spent more than two weeks in January after developing pneumonia.

Bush spent much of that time in the hospi-

tal's intensive care unit. His wife, former first lady Barbara Bush, 91, had an overlapping stay at the same hospital for treatment of bronchitis. The couple marked their 72nd wedding anniversary on Jan 6. Bush, the nation's oldest living ex-president, served a single term in the Oval Office as America's 41st commander-in-chief from 1989 through 1992. He is the father of former President George W. Bush, who served two terms in the White House from 2001 through 2008, and former Florida Governor Jeb Bush, who unsuccessfully sought the 2016 Republican nomination for president. The elder Bush, a Republican like his sons, also served as vice president for eight years during Ronald Reagan's two terms as president before being elected to the White House himself, defeating former Massachusetts Governor Michael Dukakis, the Democratic nominee, in 1988. He lost his 1992 re-election bid to Democrat Bill Clinton. —Reuters

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