

TRUMP ORDERS 'GREAT REBUILDING' OF US MILITARY

WASHINGTON: President Donald Trump signed an order Friday to begin what he called a "great rebuilding" of the US armed services, promising new aircraft, naval ships and more resources for the military. "Our military strength will be questioned by no one, but neither will our dedication to peace. We do want peace," Trump said in a ceremony at the Pentagon. Trump predicted that Congress, which sets the expenditures for the government, will "be very happy to see" the White House's new spending request for the military.

Trump made clear during last year's presidential campaign and in recent weeks that he wants

to enlarge the ranks of the military services and expand its fleets of aircraft and ships. For example, he said he envisioned a naval fleet of 350 vessels, up from the navy's current 274 and more than its 310 vessel target. And Trump excluded the military from a hiring freeze across the rest of the government that he ordered just after being inaugurated president on January 20.

He is also expected to order his new defense secretary, James Mattis, to intensify operations against the Islamic State group in Iraq and Syria with more US soldiers and military hardware like artillery and attack helicopters. Another expected

move is to review and the strengthen the country's ability to defend itself against cyberattacks and to conduct offensive cyberattacks itself. The order Trump signed Friday was less specific, calling for a sweeping 30-day readiness review of the US military, with the aim of preparing new budget requests to improve readiness. But he has also pressured the Pentagon to cut costs on some of its most expensive programs.

Earlier, Mattis ordered financial reviews of the costs of two major defense programs—the \$400 billion F-35 fighter jet project and the \$4 billion development of a new Air Force One presiden-

tial jet. Trump had complained that both were too costly. The Pentagon needs to find ways "to significantly reduce the cost" of the F-35 program, Mattis said, even weighing the competitiveness of the rival F-18. The F-35 is built by Lockheed Martin, while the F-18 is built by Boeing. Trump signed the new order at a ceremonial swearing-in of Mattis as defense secretary, lavishing praise on the retired Marine general. "Secretary Mattis has devoted his life to serving his country. He is a man of honor, a man of devotion, and a man of total action. He likes action," Trump said. — AFP



CALIFORNIA: The California State flag flies outside City Hall, in Los Angeles, California. A campaign by Californians to secede from the rest of the country over Donald Trump's election is gaining steam with supporters given the green light to start collecting signatures for the measure to be put to a vote. — AFP

CALIFORNIANS EYE CALEXIT

CALIFORNIA CAMPAIGN TO SECEDE GAINS MOMENTUM

LOS ANGELES: A campaign for California to secede from the rest of the country over Donald Trump's election is gaining momentum, with supporters allowed to start collecting signatures for the measure to be put to a vote. California's Secretary of State Alex Padilla gave the green light on Thursday for proponents of "California Nationhood"—also known as Calexit—to start collecting the nearly 600,000 signatures needed for the measure to qualify on the November 2018 ballot.

The 585,407 signatures required by July 25 represent eight percent of registered voters in California—the most populous state in the country with nearly 40 million residents and the world's sixth-largest economy. Should the initiative make it on the ballot, a "Yes" vote would

repeal clauses in the California Constitution "stating California is an inseparable part of the United States and that the United States Constitution is the supreme law of the land," a statement by Padilla's office said. Voters would then need to decide in another referendum in 2019 whether California should become a separate country.

Padilla said the independence measure—deemed highly unrealistic—would have a deep impact on the state and would likely face legal challenges. "Assuming that California actually became an independent nation, the state and its local governments would experience major, but unknown, budgetary impacts," he warned. "This measure also would result in tens of millions of dollars of one-time state and local election

costs." Calexit enthusiasts, whose campaign is called Yes California, are pushing for independence on grounds the state is out of step with the rest of the US and could flourish on its own.

"In our view, the United States of America represents so many things that conflict with Californian values, and our continued statehood means California will continue subsidizing the other states to our own detriment, and to the detriment of our children," according to their website. The idea of independence became very appealing to many Californians following Trump's shock election. Democratic candidate Hillary Clinton easily beat Trump in the progressive state, winning by more than 4.2 million votes, almost double the number of ballots cast for Trump. — AFP

BRACING COLD CAN'T CHILL SPIRITS OF US ANTI-ABORTION MARCHERS

WASHINGTON: They came by the busload, from cities in places like Iowa, Louisiana and North Dakota. Some felt inspired to march for the first time, while others were veterans of the annual event. The 44th March for Life took place in the heart of the US capital on Friday, and the bracingly cold weather couldn't chill the spirits of the many thousands of anti-abortion advocates. "I think it's important to show the rest of the United States that we're not backing down after 43 years," said Christina Erb, a 19-year-old student at the University of Mary in Bismarck, North Dakota.

"I think it's always important to show our support for the unborn. It's making an impact on the nation and it's important to continue that and grow the community," Erb, who was marching for the third time, was part of a 400-strong delegation from her school. They traveled 31 hours straight in a seven-bus caravan to get to the march. The university group was leading this year's march through downtown Washington, parading alongside the National Mall to the Capitol and the Supreme Court. The school could be easily spotted in the crowd by their matching bright blue and orange beanies.

Despite the seriousness of the topic, the day had a convivial atmosphere. Vendors selling "March for Life" t-shirts set up shop near the entrance to the rally next to the Washington Monument, as did an enterprising street hawker with a pile of large pretzels. As the event warmed up, Christian music and songs like Kelly Clarkson's "Heartbeat Song" blared from speakers set up around the stage. Priests, nuns and a group of Franciscan friars in brown robes

could be spotted in the crowd, with school groups making up a significant portion of the turnout.

'More youthful'

"(The pro-life movement has) always been energized but it's definitely becoming more youthful... everyone you see here is almost all high school and college age and it's just really breathtaking, actually. I love it," Erb said. The young protesters waved signs with messages like "I am the pro-life generation" and "Babies can feel joy in the womb," next to a photo of an adorable smiling infant. Fourteen-year-old Claire Taylor, from outside Baltimore,

Maryland, was marching for the first time with her mother and sister.

She clutched a colorful homemade sign with a Ronald Reagan quote: "I've noticed that everyone who is for abortion has already been born." "It should not be legal to destroy somebody who has nerves and can feel pain," she said. As for the location of the rally, with-in sight of the White House, Taylor said it was perfect for reaching the people she wants to hear her message. "We are trying to get the people making all the important decisions to make the better one," she said. The rally featured speeches by Vice President Mike Pence, senior

White House advisor Kellyanne Conway and religious leaders—and an ear-splitting performance of electronic dance music.

The crowd wound its way to the Supreme Court, where the future of abortion in the United States could be decided. There is currently one opening on the high court, and President Donald Trump has pledged to nominate a firmly anti-abortion justice. If he appoints a second conservative justice during his tenure—should there be another opening on the bench due to retirement or death—there is a real possibility that the US law legalizing abortion could be overturned. — AFP



WASHINGTON: Pro-life activists converge in front of the Supreme Court in Washington during the annual March for Life. — AP

VOICES FROM THE US ANTI-ABORTION RALLY

WASHINGTON: Anti-abortion advocates rallied in Washington on Friday, marching through the heart of the US capital as the White House pledged its full-throated support to their efforts. Upbeat and optimistic despite the biting cold, here are some of the voices from the 44th annual March for Life event, which bills itself as the world's largest "pro-life" rally.

'Human lives'

Roofer Jeremiah Caskey, 29, of tiny Nancy, Kentucky, came after learning about the march from his pastor two days ago. "I figured if I came here, maybe other people would come to show support for life. It is real human lives we're talking about." "This right here is probably the most important thing that I've done in my life."

'A bullet'

High school student Bridget O'Keefe, 18, called abortion "a poison on our culture." "I've heard these arguments of cases of rape, cases of poverty. Abortion doesn't do anything to solve those issues. It's just a Band-Aid on society. When these women have had a bullet to the heart, it's nothing. All it has done is it's ruining our society."

'A purpose'

Annette Vaske, a teacher at a Catholic high school in the small city of Algona, Iowa, came to Washington with a group of about 50 students and chaperones. They arrived at 7:00 am Friday after 20 hours on a bus. "I lost a mom pretty early and it just makes you more aware of pro-life at both ends, not just the unborn but the elderly as well... Everybody has a purpose, even if you are stuck in a wheelchair and unable to talk, there's a purpose for everything and we need to value all of that."

Murder

Katelyn Goodwin, a 17-year-old high school student from Birmingham, Alabama, came to the rally with her church youth group. It was her second time at the march and she brought a life-sized cutout of the

pope. "I'm looking for abortion to be illegal because I believe abortion is murder."

Feminist

Andrea Dorman, 35, a stay-at-home mother of three young children, was holding a sign with a picture of suffragette Susan B. Anthony and the message "Susie B. The original gangsta. Pro-life feminist." "I am progressive, I am a feminist. And I think there are a lot of women out there who do think like me. I think there are a lot of women who think abortion is barbaric and more than that it harms women... But I also realize we have to be very progressive in teaching young kids how sex works, we have to educate them. I believe in birth control pills."

'Infuriated'

Brenda Kresak, a 40-year-old mother of six boys, brought her family to the march from Charlotte, North Carolina. She said she was inspired to join a march for the first time after following news coverage of the previous week's Women's March in Washington, which drew hundreds of thousands opposing Trump's attacks on a progressive agenda, including access to abortion services. "We're 44 years a silent march... I think you're going to see a lot more people here, a lot of women like me that are infuriated by the so-called Women's March when it wasn't a women's march. We're all here because we're going to stand and make our stand for a cause—not 'I'm so mad that my candidate didn't win'—but for our cause for life."

'So happy'

Peter Fagan, a 27-year-old seminary student from the Archdiocese of Hartford, Connecticut, marching for the first time. "I came to stand up for the unborn and to, like the vice president said, show our voice in support of a culture of life in the United States. I'm so happy, it's awesome. I feel like the White House is supporting our efforts. It feels like something is happening, like the government is open to life, to supporting life in the United States." — AFP



WASHINGTON: Anti-abortion demonstrators arrive on Capitol Hill in Washington on Friday, Jan 27, 2017, during the March for Life. The march, each year in the Washington marks the anniversary of the 1973 Supreme Court decision legalizing abortion. — AP

DIPLOMATIC DEBUT: TRUMP MAKES UNEVEN ENTRY ONTO WORLD STAGE

WASHINGTON: One week into office, President Donald Trump was trying to clean up his first international incident. The president shifted a jam-packed schedule Friday to make room for an hourlong phone call with Mexican President Enrique Peña Nieto, who had abruptly snubbed the new president by canceling a visit. Trump's team had appeared to respond by threatening a hefty border tax on Mexican imports.

By the end of the conversation, Trump had tasked his son-in-law and senior adviser, Jared Kushner - a real estate executive with no national security experience - with managing the ongoing dispute, according to an administration official with knowledge of the call. The episode, an uneven diplomatic debut, revealed the earliest signs of how the new president plans to manage world affairs. In a matter of days, he both alarmed and reassured international partners. He picked fights, then quickly backed away from them. He talked tough, and toned it down. And at each step, Trump relied on the small clutch of advisers that guided his norm-breaking campaign, a group with scant foreign policy experience but the trust of the president.

Much of the foreign policy decision-making has rested with Kushner and Steve Bannon, the conservative media

executive turned White House adviser, according to administration officials and diplomats. Rex Tillerson, his nominee for secretary of state, is still awaiting confirmation. Officials at the National Security Council, an agency Trump has described as bloated, are still seeking marching orders from the new administration.

Early diplomatic moves

Some of Trump's early diplomatic moves have followed standard protocols. He scheduled early phone calls with friendly allies, including Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau and Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, who both plan to meet Trump at the White House next month. Additional calls were planned Saturday with German Chancellor Angela Merkel and French President Francois Hollande, key European partners.

But Trump also moved swiftly to announce a new era. He declared an end to efforts to pursue multi-nation trade deals and used his first executive action to withdraw the US from a sweeping Pacific Rim pact. He also effectively closed off the United States to refugees, at least temporarily, and risked angering the Arab world by halting visas for people from seven majority Muslim nations for at least three months. — AP