

TRUMP TO ROLL BACK SOME OF OBAMA'S CUBAN OUTREACH

WASHINGTON: US President Donald Trump has vowed to revisit all of his predecessor's diplomatic successes and failures, but is he ready to slam the door on Cuba? Tomorrow, he is expected to unveil a new policy on relations with Cuba after Barack Obama painstakingly restored ties with the communist-run island. Although many Americans support the decision and the US business community has welcomed moves to reopen trade, Trump's hardline campaign rhetoric won him support among influential Cuban exiles in Florida.

The White House has not let much slip, but a radical turnaround such as a renewed break in diplomatic relations does not yet appear to be on the cards. Instead, Trump may announce a return to restrictions on US tourists heading to Cuba and businesses signing partner-

ships with Cuban firms. That would be meant to press Raul Castro's government toward democratic reform and appease Cuban-American voters, many of whom fled communist rule.

US Secretary of State Rex Tillerson on Tuesday acknowledged that increased cooperation helps both countries and provides opportunities for downtrodden Cubans. But he also cited the "dark side" of Cuba's regime, saying Trump's review had concluded that some renewed business relations help fund the regime. "Cuba has failed to improve its own human rights record. Political opponents continue to be imprisoned. Dissidents continue to be jailed," he told senators. "And as we're enjoying the benefits on the economic and development side, are we inadvertently or directly providing financial support to the regime?" "Our

view is: 'we are,'" he added, answering his own question.

That view resonates with Cuban-Americans such as Senator Marco Rubio, the son of anti-Castro immigrants, who has long warned that detente is moving too fast. "I am confident the president will keep his commitment on Cuba policy by making changes that are targeted and strategic and which advance the Cuban people's aspirations for economic and political liberty," he said. Trump accused Cuba of "cruel despotism" in May, vowing to support its people's hopes for democracy, which raised ironic cheers from rights supporters more used to his cozying up to Saudi Arabia, Turkey and other autocratic states.

But watchdog groups such as Human Rights Watch are skeptical of a return to the terms of the half-century Cold War

stand-off, with its total trade embargo and no diplomatic ties. "The previous administration was right to reject a policy that hurt ordinary Cubans and did nothing to advance human rights," said Daniel Wilkinson, the group's managing director for the Americas. "The fact that Obama's approach hasn't led to political reform in Cuba after just a few years isn't reason to return to a policy that proved a costly failure over many decades."

Tourism boom

On the economic front, business interests on both sides of the Florida Straits are wary of a return to a rigorous enforcement of the still-active US sanctions legislation. Some 50 female Cuban entrepreneurs who have benefited from the island's limited free-market opening have even written to Trump's daughter

and adviser Ivanka. Inviting her to the island to see for herself, the women insist that "millions of Cubans" now benefit from increased tourism and trade. "A setback in the relationship would bring with it the fall of many of our businesses and with this, the suffering of all those families that depend on them," they wrote.

The previous US administration softened many of the restrictions lifting American travel to Cuba, triggering a tourism boom. Some 285,000 people visited the Caribbean country in 2016, up 74 percent over 2015, with Americans the third biggest group after Canadians and Cuban expats. Engage Cuba, a group lobbying for an end to the embargo, estimates that 10,000 US jobs in aviation and the cruise business already depend on Cuba. —AFP



WASHINGTON: US Attorney General Jeff Sessions testifies before the Senate Intelligence Committee on Capitol Hill on Tuesday. —AFP

SESSIONS BRANDS RUSSIA COLLUSION 'DETESTABLE LIE'

WASHINGTON: US Attorney General Jeff Sessions on Tuesday vehemently denied any collusion with Russia to tilt last year's election in Donald Trump's favor, branding the suggestion an "appalling and detestable lie". In closely-watched congressional testimony, Sessions angrily denounced allegations he acted improperly during meetings with Russian officials - or that he knew of any attempt at collusion by members of the Trump campaign team. And he repeatedly refused to reveal whether he had spoken to the president regarding James Comey's handling of the probe into Russian election meddling - which the former FBI director believes to be the reason he was fired.

A Trump loyalist and early backer of the billionaire businessman's presidential bid, the 70-year-old Sessions has recused himself from all ongoing Russia investigations. But the nation's top law enforcement official - who recommended Comey's dismissal last month - has himself become a focal point in the crisis roiling the White House. Sessions kicked off his testimony before the Senate Intelligence Committee by asserting that he had "never met with or had any conversations with any Russians" about interference in the 2016 presidential race.

"I have no knowledge of any such conversations by anyone connected to the Trump campaign," he said. "The suggestion that I participated with any collusion, that I was aware of any collusion with the Russian government to hurt this country... is an appalling and detestable lie." The appearance was Sessions's first sworn public testimony since being confirmed as attorney general in February.

During the two-and-a-half hour hearing, he engaged in testy exchanges with several senators who pressed him for details on his discussions with Trump - which he refused to provide in the name of confidentiality. Some Democrats grew impatient, warning Sessions was stonewalling on vital issues. "You are obstructing that congressional investigation

by not answering that question," charged Senator Martin Heinrich. "Your silence... speaks volumes." Sessions responded: "I am not stonewalling. I am following the historic policies of the Department of Justice."

'Innuendo'

Testifying last week before the same committee, Comey recalled that Trump had asked him to "let go" of a probe into onetime national security advisor Michael Flynn - exposing the president to accusations of obstruction of justice, a potentially impeachable offense. Flynn was sacked two weeks into the job amid concerns he lied over his Russian contacts, becoming the first high-profile victim of the scandal that has overshadowed Trump's young presidency.

Trump has recently expressed frustration with Sessions, who has come under pressure over his own Russia contacts. While the Justice Department has said Sessions recused himself in March because of his involvement in Trump's campaign, Comey testified that the FBI knew of information that would have made it "problematic" for Sessions to be involved. But the attorney general pushed back hard when asked what those problematic matters could be, retorting: "There are none. I can tell you that for absolute certainty. This is a secret innuendo being leaked out there about me, and I don't appreciate it," he added.

'No knowledge' of Russia probe

Barely a month after Trump dismissed Comey, rumors have been circulating that he may yet seek to sack Robert Mueller, the special counsel appointed following the FBI chief's ouster to head the agency's Russia investigation. Sessions declined to comment on those reports, stating only that he had "confidence" in Mueller and would not be involved in any effort, should it arise, to fire the special counsel. Following the hearing, a White House spokeswoman said Trump "has no intention" of dismissing Mueller.

VENEZUELA RENEGADE ATTORNEY GENERAL GOES AFTER JUDGES

CARACAS: Venezuela's attorney general raised the stakes in her standoff with the government Tuesday by demanding eight Supreme Court judges loyal to President Nicolas Maduro be put on trial. A staunch figure of the ruling party, Attorney General Luisa Ortega, 59, is the highest public official to break ranks with Maduro over the country's deadly political crisis. She has accused him and his allies of acting unconstitutionally in their standoff against the opposition in recent months of anti-government protests.

In her latest maneuver to pressure the socialist president, she told reporters she'd filed a case accusing the eight judges of allowing "a breakdown in constitutional order". The charge refers to a ruling by the court in late March that seized power from the opposition-controlled National Assembly legislature. The court later revoked the decision under international pressure, but it sparked a series of protests that has continued ever since. Clashes between demonstrators and police have left 67 people dead, according to prosecutors.

Ortega said in a radio interview on Monday that intelligence officials had been threatening and harassing her family. Pro-government lawmaker Pedro Carreño filed a motion in the assembly calling for the court to order that Ortega be examined by a psychologist. "It is clear that this lady is not in her

right mind," he told reporters. He called for experts to declare she was suffering from "insanity" and should be fired.

A stubborn fight against president

Former Supreme Court judge Blanca Rosa Marmol told AFP the assembly was the only body legally entitled to remove an attorney general from her post. Analysts say Ortega's legal challenges to the government could widen divisions in Maduro's camp, making it harder for him to stay in power. Last week, she filed a challenge against his effort to rewrite the constitution, branding it undemocratic. The court dismissed the appeal on Monday, but Ortega promptly responded with a new series of legal challenges against the judges.

Maduro is accused of controlling the Supreme Court, which has fended off numerous legal and legislative moves against him over the past year and a half. Protesters blame him for an economic crisis that has caused desperate shortages of food and medicine in the oil-rich country. Maduro says the crisis is a US-backed conspiracy. He retains the public backing of the military. "Whether it rains, thunders or lightens on July 30 there will be elections," Maduro said, referring to the constitutional assembly he wants to rewrite the document to expand his powers. —AFP

TRUMP ALLIES BEGINNING TO QUESTION MUELLER PROBE

CRITICISM NO LONGER OUT OF BOUNDS

WASHINGTON: Criticism of special counsel Robert Mueller used to be off limits. No more. Some of President Donald Trump's closest allies - including one of his sons - have begun questioning whether Mueller's wide-ranging probe is becoming too political, as the investigation into Russian meddling in the 2016 election intensifies. The White House finally said Tuesday evening that Trump has "no intention" of firing Mueller, amid speculation and concern that he was weighing that option.

The effort to muddy the waters surrounding the investigation is coming amid growing White House concern that the probe could detract from the president's agenda for months or years to come. Senators on Tuesday questioned both Attorney General Jeff Sessions and Deputy Attorney General Rod Rosenstein on how the inquiry is being handled. Until now, Mueller had drawn widespread praise from Republicans and Democrats alike. Trump, who isn't typically shy about leveling criticism, especially on Twitter, hasn't commented on the longtime former FBI director. And leading Republican legislators on Tuesday waved off the idea of firing Mueller, with House Speaker Paul Ryan saying that his advice was to "let Robert Mueller do his job" and Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell voicing confidence in the special counsel.

But expressions of discontent with Mueller are bubbling up nonetheless. Former House Speaker Newt Gingrich led one line of attack with a tweet that said "Republicans are delusional if they think the special counsel is going to be fair." He added that fundraising records show some of the lawyers whom Mueller selected for his team have contributed to Democrats. "It makes sense to point out any level of bias, to highlight any biases inherent in Mueller and this probe in order to force him to be transparent," Gingrich said. He said Trump had called him Monday night and the two discussed Gingrich's concerns about the probe.

Tuesday morning, Trump supporter Ari Fleischer, who served as President

George W. Bush's press secretary, again highlighted the issue of Mueller's probe being handled by attorneys who have donated mostly to Democrats, a message that Donald Trump Jr. quickly retweeted to his own 1.7 million followers. Peter Carr, a spokesman for Mueller, declined to comment on the issues Gingrich and others have raised. In general, it is impermissible to ask prospective government hires about their political leanings, including whether they've made donations. Both Fleischer and Gingrich had previously vouched for the

Tuesday night for the White House to actually dispute Ruddy's suspicion.

On Trump's plane ride home after a trip to Wisconsin, Sarah Huckabee Sanders told reporters he "has no intention" of firing Mueller, even though she maintained that "the president has the right to". A person close to Trump's legal team said earlier Tuesday that there have been no discussions about firing Mueller with the legal team. The person spoke on condition of anonymity to discuss private conversations.



Robert Mueller

character and integrity of Mueller, who was appointed FBI director by Bush and whose term was extended an extra two years by Democratic President Barack Obama. Anxiety about the probe - and fresh concerns about the political leanings of some of the attorneys involved - is percolating in the West Wing of the White House.

Chris Ruddy, a Trump friend and the CEO of the conservative website Newsmax, raised the possibility of the president considering terminating Mueller, a potentially explosive option. White House officials said late Monday that Ruddy was at the White House that day, but said he hadn't met with the president and never spoke with him about the issue. Still, it took until

'Conflict'

But Ruddy opened a new line of questions about Mueller's impartiality - the fact that Trump had considered Mueller for the FBI director's job before he was named special counsel. Trump interviewed Mueller for the director's position days before Rosenstein picked Mueller as special counsel for the Russia probe, Sanders confirmed Tuesday. The interview was first reported by PBS. Other Trump supporters homed in on the sequence of Mueller's job interviews.

Sam Nunberg, who worked for Trump's presidential campaign, said it "could seem to be a conflict" for Mueller to first interview with the president to be a possible replacement for fired FBI

Director James Comey and then days later to be named as the special counsel heading an investigation that could look into Comey's firing.

But Stephen Gillers, a New York University professor who specializes in legal and judicial ethics, said the Mueller interview with Trump presented "no conflict whatsoever". It would be hard to make the case, he said, that the experience of interviewing for FBI director would make it impossible for Mueller to fairly exercise the broad discretion afforded to prosecutors. Trump has repeatedly denied colluding with Russia during the presidential campaign, and Comey and others have testified that there is no evidence to the contrary. Still, Gingrich said any special counsel with an agenda can "all of the sudden find something procedural and technical to latch onto."

With few exceptions, Trump's allies are urging him not to move to dismiss Mueller, which would be both politically and technically complicated. Rosenstein would be the one to fire Mueller, which he repeatedly assured senators Tuesday he would not consider without "good cause". Rosenstein is charged with Mueller's fate because Attorney General Jeff Sessions recused himself from all matters having to do with the Trump-Russia investigation. Sessions told senators on Tuesday that he'd recused himself because he was part of Trump's campaign.

Gingrich and Ruddy said it would be a "mistake" for Trump to remove Mueller, although both said they see the probe as unnecessary. Barry Bennett, a GOP strategist who served as an adviser to Trump's campaign, said he believed it would be too damaging for Trump to try to remove Mueller, but that he had concerns about the appearance that the probe was being politicized. "I think that he should be more cognizant of making sure that the people who come to work with him are non-partisan, for his own credibility," Bennett said of Mueller. Still, he said: "Bob Mueller did a great job as FBI director. I don't question his integrity at all, but he has to be careful not to create the impression of partiality." —AP

MANHUNT SPARKED BY SLAYING OF PRISON GUARDS, INMATES' ESCAPE

SAVANNAH, Georgia: Two Georgia inmates serving long prison sentences and "dangerous beyond description" overpowered and killed two guards on a prison bus before fleeing in a stolen car, authorities said. The deadly escape happened about 6:45 am. Tuesday as the guards drove 33 inmates between prisons, and it set off a massive manhunt involving local, state and federal officers, Putnam County Sheriff Howard Sills said. Sills was emotional as he described the scene. "I saw two brutally murdered corrections officers, that's what I saw," he said. "I have their blood on my shoes."

Donnie Russell Rowe, serving life without parole, and Ricky Dubose, who has prominent tattoos on his face and neck, overpowered, disarmed and killed Sgt Christopher Monica and Sgt Curtis Billue and then carjacked a driver who happened to pull up behind the bus on a rural highway, Sills said. They got into the "grass green", four-door 2004 Honda Civic with the Georgia license plate number RBJ-6601 and drove west on state Highway 16 toward Eatonton, southeast of Atlanta.

"We are still desperately looking for these two individuals. They are armed with 9 mm pistols that were taken from these correctional officers. They are dangerous beyond description. If anyone sees them or comes into contact, they need to call 911 immediately," the sheriff said. The two inmates got a head start by taking and tossing the Honda driver's cell phone and leaving the other 31 prisoners locked inside the bus, Sills said. "My biggest worry is they're going to kill somebody else," Sills said.

Later Tuesday, the manhunt shifted about 40 km to the north to the city of Madison, where Sills said the two men burglarized a house and then two men fitting their descrip-

tions were reportedly seen in a Family Dollar store less than a mile away. Authorities had no further signs of the inmates and had no reason to believe they had split up, Sills said. Multiple agencies contributed to a reward of \$60,000 for information leading to the arrests of the two inmates, Georgia Bureau of Investigation spokeswoman Nelly Miles said.

Monica and Billue were both transfer sergeants at Baldwin State Prison. Monica had been with the Georgia Department of Corrections since October 2009 and Billue



Ricky Dubose Donnie Russell Rowe

since July 2007. How the two inmates managed to reach and overpower the guards remains under investigation, Sills said. "They were inside the caged area of the bus," he said. "How they got through the locks and things up to that area I do not know."

Protocol is to have two armed corrections officers on the bus, but the officers don't wear bulletproof vests during transfers, Corrections Commissioner Greg Dozier said. "We lost two of our fellow officers, two of our kin. We see our officers as our family," Dozier said. Monica was 42 and leaves behind a wife, Dozier said. Billue was 58 and is survived by his father, five sisters, two brothers and two sons, said Jim Green, an

attorney who's speaking for the Billue family.

"Officer Billue's family asks for prayers for all of those who are now placing their own lives at risk to bring these men to justice and asks anyone who has information that may assist in apprehending these perpetrators to please contact law enforcement," Green said in an email. The guards were moving the inmates to a diagnostic prison in Jackson, where their next placement was to be determined, Dozier said, adding that inmates do not know their transfer dates ahead of time.

Georgia Gov Nathan Deal pledged every state resource necessary to catch the pair. "The selflessness and courage of these two brave souls will not be forgotten, nor will their sacrifice and service," Deal said in an emailed statement. US Deputy Attorney General Rod Rosenstein said federal resources are being committed to help catch the fugitives. The FBI and US Marshals have joined the investigation, Sills said. "An attack on any American law enforcement officer is an attack on every American law enforcement officer and the principles we all believe in," Rosenstein told a Senate budget panel in Washington Tuesday morning.

Both escaped inmates were serving long sentences for armed robbery and other crimes. The Department of Corrections said Rowe, 43, has been serving life without parole since 2002, and Dubose, 24, began a 20-year sentence in 2015. A photo released by the sheriff's office in Elbert County, the site of his most recent conviction, shows Dubose with prominent tattoos. He appears to have a crown tattooed above his right eyebrow, writing above his left eyebrow and large letters covering the entire front of his neck. "They need to surrender before we find 'em," Sills said. —AP