

International

Sink-or-swim showdown beckons for fractious Italian coalition partners

League and 5-Star split over autonomy reform

ROME: Italy's fractious coalition partners are gearing up for a showdown this week that is likely to determine if the government will collapse, triggering autumn elections, or survive to the end of the year. The far-right League and anti-system 5-Star Movement have been at each other's throats for months, but tensions have risen even further this month with each accusing the other of betrayal and ill faith.

League leader Matteo Salvini warned last week he would quit the 14-month-old government unless 5-Star dropped its opposition to projects close to his party's heart, including a drive to hand greater autonomy to the League's wealthy northern heartland. With 5-Star fearing the planned reform would cut funding to its bastions in the poorer south, the issue has become a major flashpoint. League leaders deny they are favoring the north, and say 5-Star is using the reform to tarnish their reputation. "I am deeply offended that these charlatans are portraying us as fraudsters scamming the country and the south," Attilio Fontana, the League chief in the rich Lombardy region, said on Saturday.

Prime Minister Giuseppe Conte is due to

hold another round of consultations yesterday and has said he hopes to present a final proposal on the reform to a cabinet meeting penciled in for Friday. "Either (Conte) puts forward a proposal or else he throws in the towel. If he does that, then everything will blow up," said Luca Zaia, the League head of the northeastern Veneto region. The dispute dominated Italy's newspapers at the weekend: "Government blocked," financial daily *Il Sole 24 Ore* said in a frontpage headline. "Close to a breakdown," said *Il Messaggero*.

Rising far right

Salvini has promised to see 5-Star leader Luigi Di Maio to discuss the tensions, but no date has been set for the meeting. Almost all national papers said the League chief was facing mounting pressure to bring down the coalition, with his closest advisers arguing the party's surging popularity would see it triumph in any early election.

An opinion poll in *Corriere della Sera* newspaper on Saturday showed the League at 35.9%, more than double what it won at an inconclusive national election last year, while

support for 5-Star has almost halved to 17.4%. The poll put the far-right Brothers of Italy, which is not part of the ruling coalition, on 6.0%, suggesting it could win an election in alliance with the League, a long-time ally.

Brothers of Italy leader Giorgia Meloni called yesterday for immediate elections. "It would be an historic opportunity to give Italy one of its very few governments capable of surviving five years," she told *La Verita* newspaper. Salvini has stayed quiet this weekend and aides said he was considering his options. If he does not move swiftly, the window for an early vote will close as budget discussions take centre stage, making it almost impossible to dissolve parliament.

Italy has never held a national election in autumn or winter. Besides autonomy, Salvini is also preoccupied by allegations that his party sought funds via an illicit oil deal with Russia. He has dismissed the accusations and is expected to address the scandal in parliament on Wednesday in a debate initiated by Conte - a move that angered the League leader who had argued that the question did not warrant scrutiny by the legislature. — Reuters



HELSINKI: Italy's Interior Minister and deputy Prime Minister Matteo Salvini arrives for an informal meeting of EU ministers for Home Affairs in Helsinki. — AFP

Washington girds for Mueller's testimony

WASHINGTON: Special Counsel Robert Mueller will submit to questions for the first time Wednesday on his explosive report detailing numerous links between President Donald Trump's 2016 campaign and Russian election meddling, and Trump's efforts to obstruct his investigation. The stakes are high with the next presidential election 16 months away. With a huge national television audience expected, Democrats want Mueller to help swing public opinion against the president, with some lawmakers hoping he will provide more firepower for an impeachment case against Trump.

But the former FBI director's deep reticence to become embroiled in politics, and Republican plans to turn the hearings into a reality TV-like partisan brawl, threaten to leave Americans no less confused than when Mueller's dense, 448-page report was released in April. "The public has a right to hear the truth, from Mueller himself, about Trump's misconduct and ongoing national security risks," said Adam Schiff, chair of one of the two House committees hosting Wednesday's marathon testimony.

Was Trump exonerated or not?

The final report of Mueller's investigation detailed extensive Russian interference in the 2016 election to boost Trump, and multiple instances of attempted collusion between the campaign and Moscow's agents. But in the end Mueller, a veteran federal prosecutor, found no crime in that - simple collusion is not a criminal offense, and his team concluded there was not enough evidence to support charges of criminal conspiracy with the Russians. They also enumerated at least 10 instances where Trump sought to impede the investigation, with strong evidence in support of obstruction of justice allegations.

But Mueller declined to recommend obstruction charges, saying he was blocked from doing so by Department of Justice policy that says a sitting president cannot be charged. That allowed Trump to declare that he was "exonerated" by Mueller and say the investigation was always a political "witch hunt," claims that have gone far in convincing much of the public that it was much ado about nothing. "This Witch Hunt must now end. No more Do Overs. No Collusion, No Obstruction. The Great Hoax is dead!" Trump tweeted in early July.

Margaret Taylor, a governance expert at the Brookings Institution think tank in Washington, said the hearings are an opportunity to clarify Mueller's findings. "I don't think that Americans fully understand the systemic attempts by the Kremlin to interfere, and how the Trump campaign reacted to that," she said in an interview. "The vast majority of Americans did not read the report," she said. "I think there is a large portion of the country who hears the president say 'no collusion, no obstruction' and that's the end of the story for them."

Getting Mueller to talk

The much-anticipated hearings will unroll on Wednesday, starting at 8:30 am before the House Judiciary committee and then moving to Schiff's House Intelligence Committee at 12 noon. Both parties were reportedly rehearsing their tactics in the week before to blunt each other's efforts. Democrat and Republican committee members will likely alternate for five minutes of questions each, a format which will challenge Democrats to deliver to the television audience a coherent narrative of collusion and obstruction, while Republicans try to disrupt it and change the subject.

Democrats need to figure out how to get the cagey and disciplined Mueller to say in clear terms that Trump likely broke obstruction laws, while Republicans are expected to try and undermine Mueller's credibility and the original basis of the investigation. Mueller, much-trusted in Washington circles but with a sphinx-like image, has already signaled he will be a tough nut to crack.

"Any testimony from this office would not go beyond our report," he said on May 29, as he announced the closure of the special counsel's investigation. "The work speaks for itself. And the report is my testimony." "What he won't do is go beyond the four corners of the report, as he's already said," former FBI deputy director Andrew McCabe, who has worked closely with Mueller, told CNN. But McCabe said that cannily phrased questions could draw Mueller out - especially on the issue over whether he personally believes Trump broke the law. — AFP

Gargantuan heat wave bakes central, eastern US with sweaty night

NEW YORK: A gargantuan heat wave hunkered down over the central and eastern United States on Saturday, sending residents to cooling centers and inflicting on Washington a heat index of 106 degrees F (41 C) with even steamier conditions in the forecast. "It's pretty hot right now from the Plains states all the way through the Mississippi Valley to the East Coast," said Alex Lamers, a meteorologist with the National Weather Service's Weather Prediction Center.

Heat is the deadliest of all weather phenomena, according to the weather service, and cities from Chicago to New York urged residents to seek refuge at cooling centers set up in locations ranging from libraries to shopping malls. Tourists visiting the monuments and museums on the National Mall in Washington endured temperatures approaching 100 degrees F (37.8 C).

About 250 senior citizens returned home on Saturday a day after having to leave a retirement community in

Philadelphia when a power failure disabled the air conditioners, forcing many of them into a shelter at West Philadelphia High School, said city spokeswoman Deana Gamble. Nighttime temperatures have remained so high in the heat wave, which started midweek in the Midwest, that Rockford, Illinois, for the first time since 1918 matched its all-time record by failing to fall below 80 degrees F (27 C) on Friday.

High temperatures combined with high humidity make it feel even hotter, called the heat index. "Heat stress tends to have a cumulative effect so if you're not recovering at night, especially if you don't have an air conditioning unit, you'll accumulate more heat stress," Lamers said. "When it stays warm overnight, it provides a higher launch for temperatures the next day," he added.

By midday Saturday, Boston's heat index was 102 F (39 C) and forecast to rise to 105 F (40 C) by late afternoon. New York's heat index was 100 F (38 C) and forecast to rise to 110 F (43 C), and Washington's was 106 F (41 C), expected to climb to 111 F (44 C), Lamers said.

Some outdoor activities, including the New York City Triathlon and a running race outside Washington, were canceled. Others bent their rules to keep attendees cool and safe, including Yankee Stadium, which allowed fans to bring their own bottled water and shading umbrellas and offered hydration stations on all levels of the ballpark.



NEW YORK: People cool off near the fountain at Washington Square Park during a hot afternoon day in New York City. — AFP

Sizzling temperatures were expected to persist through Sunday, but relief is in sight, Lamers said. "A cold front north of us will start shifting south and by Sunday evening, it will make progress toward Boston, Pittsburgh, St. Louis. By Monday morning, it might be reaching Washington, Cincinnati with some rain and thunderstorms," he said. — Reuters

Meddling, collusion, obstruction: What the Mueller probe found

WASHINGTON: Special Counsel Robert Mueller's 448-page report capped an investigation that began in July 2016 after the FBI took alarm at Russian meddling in the presidential election battle. It expanded to include obstruction of justice allegations against President Donald Trump after Trump fired FBI director James Comey, who had overseen the investigation. Mueller was then named to lead the effort in May 2017.

Mueller's investigation charged in total 34 people. Six were deeply involved in Trump's presidential campaign, including his personal lawyer Michael Cohen, campaign chairman Paul Manafort and national security advisor Michael Flynn. But only Russians were charged for election meddling, the focus of the investigation: Americans were charged mostly with lying to investigators or wrongdoing unrelated to the election. The first volume of his report detailed the investigation into Russian meddling and explained why Russians were charged with criminal conspiracy but not Americans. The second volume examined the obstruction allegations.

Russian election meddling

The report says that as early as 2014, arms of the Kremlin and Russian intelligence, at the instigation of President Vladimir Putin, began actively interfering in US politics. One operation, by the Russian Internet Research Agency, involved manipulating social media to influence American voter views, aiming to damage Democratic frontrunner Hillary Clinton and boost Republican Trump.

The second operation involved hacking by the GRU, Moscow's military intelligence agency, into election systems and campaign computer networks. The hackers obtained large volumes of documents and communications from Clinton's campaign that were leaked online, primarily through WikiLeaks, during the race to harm her campaign. The report lays out detailed evidence backing the decision to charge 12 GRU agents and 13 from the Internet Research Agency with conspiracy against the United States.

Collusion with Russians

The report details scores of willing contacts between the Trump campaign and Russians, including efforts to obtain dirt on Clinton, negotiations for a massive Trump Tower real estate deal in Moscow, liaising with WikiLeaks on the materials stolen by the GRU, secret calls with the Russian ambassador to Washington, sharing campaign data with a Kremlin-linked businessman, and talks on arranging a



AMENDOA: Firefighters monitor the progression of a wildfire at Amendoa in Macao, central Portugal yesterday. — AFP

Firefighters battle Portugal wildfires

AMENDOA: Planes and helicopters joined more than a thousand firefighters in central Portugal Sunday to battle huge wildfires in a mountainous region where over 100 people died in huge blazes in 2017. By 12:30 pm, one of the biggest mobilizations ever seen in the area - including 1,300 firefighters and 400 vehicles - had been deployed to fight the blazes in the heavily forested Castelo Branco region, 200 kilometers north of Lisbon, the rescue services said.

Around 20 people were injured in the blaze, including eight firefighters and 12 civilians, according to interior ministry figures. One badly burned civilian was evacuated by helicopter to Lisbon. The biggest effort - 800 firefighters, 245 vehicles and 13 planes and helicopters - battled to douse flames in the municipality of Vila de Rei, which had spread nearly 25 kilometers.

"Only the fire at Vila de Rei remains active," Interior Minister Eduardo Cabrita told a news conference. Authorities were looking into whether the fires may have been started deliberately, Cabrita said. "The cause of the fires is being investigated... there's something strange. How is it that five such large fires broke out in areas that are so close to each other?" he asked.

The commander of the Civil Protection for the region, Luis Belo Costa, said that "given the difficult terrain, we have not succeeded in getting the fire in Vila de Rei under control, but have only contained about 60 percent of it, despite a lull in the wind." The army said it was dispatching 20 soldiers and machinery to open routes "to facilitate access" for the firefighters.

In a message, President Marcelo Rebelo de Sousa expressed his "solidarity with the hundreds fighting the scourge of the fires". Two other forest fires reported on Saturday have since been brought under control. While a number of small villages were evacuated as a precaution overnight, no additional measures were planned on Sunday. But that could change "if the situation deteriorates," Belo Costa said. Five regions of central and southern Portugal were on maximum fire alert Sunday because of the dry weather and winds.

Inaccessible terrain

However, temperatures are currently below the threshold of 41 degrees Celsius (105 Fahrenheit) at which a red alert is triggered. The fires, fanned by strong winds, had broken out on Saturday afternoon in the more inaccessible areas in the Castelo Branco region. The centre of Portugal is hilly and covered in dense forest and is regularly ravaged by fires, including the deadliest in the country's history where 114 people died in two separate blazes in June and October 2017.

Portugal is still traumatized by those deaths, with authorities taking extra precautions. Much of the population in the area is elderly, as young people move to the cities. The forests are largely eucalyptus, a highly flammable wood used in the paper industry. Despite the combustion risks, the trees are planted because they are fast-growing and represent an important source of income for locals.

With fields and pastures abandoned, the forests are poorly maintained, with the dense undergrowth facilitating the spread of the fires. According to the EU's European Forest Fire Information System, more than 250,000 hectares of land were destroyed by fire across Europe between January and April this year, more than the 181,000 hectares recorded for the entire fire season in 2018. — AFP



WASHINGTON: Street art of former special counsel Robert Mueller is seen outside a construction site in Washington, DC. — AFP