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WASHINGTON: Former Special Prosecutor Robert Mueller (lower left) testifies before Congress yesterday in Washington, DC. —AFP

# 'No,' Trump was not exonerated: Mueller

## NO COLLUSION, NO OBSTRUCTION! Trump tweets again

WASHINGTON: Robert Mueller said yesterday he did not exonerate Donald Trump in his two-year Russian meddling investigation but also told lawmakers he will not say if the president committed a crime, as he launched into a marathon day of congressional testimony. Three months after releasing the final report on his probe into the 2016 election, much of the American public remains unclear about the former special counsel's findings on whether Trump criminally obstructed justice and whether his campaign colluded with Russians.

With Trump declaring he was "exonerated" in the probe and Democrats saying the report supplied ample evidence for impeachment, the notoriously taciturn Mueller answered questions for the first time in front of two separate, Democrat-run committees in the House of Representatives. Mueller—who made a few public remarks at a press conference on May but did not take questions and has resisted testifying—reiterated that he would "stay within the text" of his report, and was visibly uncomfortable once the question period began. "Based on Justice Department policy and principles of fairness, we decided we would not make a determination as to whether the president committed a crime. That was our decision then and it remains our decision today," Mueller said in his opening remarks. But when asked at the start of the hearing before the House Judiciary Committee if his report completely cleared the president of wrongdoing, Mueller said "no."

"The president was not exculpated for the acts he allegedly committed," Mueller said, adding that it was "true" that Trump could be prosecuted for obstruction of justice after he leaves office. As the questioning

volleyed back and forth from Democratic to Republican committee members, the tension mounted and ebbed. Mueller offered many one-word answers and repeatedly referred lawmakers back to the report.

Trump insisted this week he would not watch the nationally-televised testimony but half an hour before it was to start, he let loose with an angry Twitter tirade, complaining among other things about the fact Mueller specifically NOT agreed to, and I would NEVER have agreed to it. The Greatest Witch Hunt in US history, by far!" Trump wrote in one of a half dozen tweets.

The cryptic legalese used in Mueller's report allowed the president and his allies to claim the investigation was a politically charged witch hunt that found nothing of substance. "NO COLLUSION, NO OBSTRUCTION!" Trump tweeted again on Tuesday. Democrats nevertheless hoped Mueller would make clear to the public why he did not bring charges despite damning evidence outlined in the 448-page report—and potentially offer explanations of Trump's conduct that would damage him in the run-up to the 2020 election. "Every American deserves to know the crimes and corruption exposed in the Mueller Report," said Democratic Representative Ted Lieu.

### Collusion, obstruction alleged

Mueller's report documents extensive contacts between the Trump campaign and Russians, including attempts to cooperate or collude, neither of which is a specific crime. Mueller ruled in the end that there was not enough evidence to recommend charges of criminal conspiracy, the main legal charge he could make use of. The veteran prosecutor and former FBI director also laid out in detail 10 instances when Trump allegedly tried to obstruct the investigation.

But he said he was prevented from recommending charges against Trump because Justice Department rules prohibited him from lodging criminal charges against a sitting president. He reiterated that position in yesterday's testimony. That left it to Congress to determine whether Trump committed a crime, and a minority of Democrats are pressing for the House to impeach the president.

### Justice Department rules

Mueller, veteran of some 88 trips to Capitol Hill over a long career in government, is notorious for saying as little as possible. But he also made clear he thinks the American public does not fully understand the extent and consequences of Russia's campaign to meddle in



The Greatest Witch Hunt in US history



WASHINGTON: US President Donald Trump addresses the Turning Point USA's Teen Student Action Summit 2019 in Washington, DC, on July 23, 2019. —AFP

the election, which the president has repeatedly refused to acknowledge.

Trump's Justice Department meanwhile weighed in late Monday with a statement demanding that Mueller stick only to what he wrote in his report, in hopes of containing any fallout from his testimony. "It's incredibly arrogant of the department to try to instruct him on what to say," Jerry Nadler, the chairman of the House Judiciary Committee, said on CNN Tuesday. "It's part of the ongoing coverup by the administration to keep information away from the American people." —AFP

## Google goes Nigerian with 'informal' transit routes and local accent

LAGOS: Commuters making their way through Nigeria can now hear travel advice in a local voice on Google Maps under new features aimed at attracting more users in Africa that were unveiled by the company yesterday. The local accents feature, unveiled at an event in the commercial capital Lagos and also available on Google Assistant, is the first move by the US technology giant to offer such a service in Africa.

Rapidly expanding populations, increased mobile phone penetration and crowded cities that are often poorly signposted have led technology firms to identify African countries as potential growth areas. They are now offering transport features from detailed maps to motorcycle ride-hailing services. Google's motorcycle directions will also be available in Benin Republic, Ghana, Rwanda, Togo and Uganda from yesterday, the company said. The technology behemoth owned by Alphabet Inc said it is aiming to capture new users and expand its appeal beyond just drivers.

"There are 10 million (motorcycles) in Nigeria, it's hugely

popular," said Ramesh Nagarajan, Google's director of product management. "We're going market by market based on popularity." In the coming months, the maps feature will also allow users in Lagos to seek directions on what it calls "informal transit" — such as yellow danfo minibuses that ply virtually every road in Lagos, but about which it is difficult for outsiders or even Lagosians travelling to a new neighborhood to find information.

Google partnered with local startup Road Preppers Technologies Ltd to gather data on the different routes available, and aims to tell users the best options available based on traffic, weather and road conditions. "What we're really hoping is for people who might be making a trip to an unfamiliar town, maybe a journey they don't usually take, to be able to discover the info they need to make that journey," said Jeff Albertson, a Google senior product manager who worked on the development.

The map will include information on the expected fare, travel time and even photos of the bus stops to help guide commuters. Outside Lagos, Google is expanding street view imagery to Abuja, Benin City, Enugu and Ibadan. Google has worked hard to expand in West Africa, especially Nigeria, the continent's most populous country with an estimated 190 million citizens. Last year it unveiled WiFi hotspots across Lagos, and in 2017 it launched a program to train millions of Africans in tech skills to make them more employable. Google declined to say what sort of investment it was putting into the new developments. —Reuters

## A priest, car crash, bags full of stolen parish money

LOS ANGELES: Emergency workers responding to a car crash in a California town last month found a priest with a fractured hip and, much to their surprise, bags of cash he allegedly stole from the local parish. The Diocese of Santa Rosa, north of San Francisco, said in a statement on Monday that \$18,000 in church collections were found in Father Oscar Diaz's car at the time of the accident on June 17.

It added that further investigation revealed "a prolonged history of theft," with more than \$95,000 stolen from parishes where the 56-year-old Diaz had served over the past 15 years. "I am deeply grieved that this has happened and am deeply saddened that the parishes he was sent to serve have been harmed." Bishop Robert

Vasa said in a statement.

"The full extent of the theft is not known and may never be fully known but the Diocese is committed to determining as fully as possible the extent of the theft from each of these parishes," Vasa said that Diaz, who has been a priest for 25 years, told the emergency responders at the time of the crash that the bags of cash were his salary. But a hospital employee uncomfortable with the amount of money Diaz brought into the emergency room contacted police, who alerted the diocese.

Vasa said a search of Diaz's office and the rectory where he lived uncovered a large number of collection bags containing cash. A further probe revealed that Diaz had also deposited a number of checks made out to parishes into his personal bank account. Vasa said Diaz had admitted to stealing church collection bags for some time. "Father Oscar is presently suspended from priestly ministry," he said. "There are no plans at this time for ministry in the Church and his future is uncertain." He said the diocese was not planning to pursue criminal prosecution at this time, in part because of the cost involved.—AFP