

International

Eyeing power, Merkel protegee starts high-stakes defense job

Kramp-Karrenbauer sworn in as German defense minister

BERLIN: Chancellor Angela Merkel's protegee, Annegret Kramp-Karrenbauer, pledged yesterday to push for increased military spending "in our own interests" as Germany's new defense minister - a role likely to make or break her chances of succeeding her mentor. Kramp-Karrenbauer, who lacks high-echelon government experience, grabbed the defense role to build her credentials for the chancellor - a high-stakes move that will demand she build up a military many Germans remain uneasy about deploying.

Merkel, who turned 65 a week ago, is aiming to stage-manage her gradual exit from politics and hand over power to Kramp-Karrenbauer, who replaced her as chair of their Christian Democrats (CDU) in December. At a swearing-in ceremony yesterday, Kramp-Karrenbauer - known as AKK after her initials - began the tricky task of promising to seek spending hikes that the CDU's Social Democrat coalition partners want to limit.

At the same time, she stressed that shaping up the Bundeswehr (armed forces) was in Germany's own interests - presenting thinly veiled resistance to US President Donald Trump's demands that Berlin boost its military budget. "To speak

quite plainly, this is not about wishes from abroad, this is not about an arms build-up, it is about equipment and personnel - it is about our Bundeswehr," she told lawmakers to loud applause.

"It is about a Bundeswehr that can fulfill the tasks we give it - it is about our own interests. If the Bundeswehr is to demonstrate the capabilities (that) we demand and expect of it, then the defense budget must rise." The defense job, vacated last week when Ursula von der Leyen quit to become president of the European Commission, will raise Kramp-Karrenbauer's profile and give her a chance to reverse her declining popularity with a view to succeeding Merkel by 2021.

But her move into a role dubbed "the ejector seat" - such is the career damage to recent incumbents - risks backfiring as she inherits the task of reviving a demoralized and under-equipped Bundeswehr dogged by scandals and right-wing extremism. With the defense job, she also ties herself to the binds of cabinet loyalty - while as CDU chair she must still mastermind the party's strategy for three autumn regional elections in Germany's east, in which success is crucial to her prospects.

Floundering popularity

She immediately ran into trouble last week after giving a lacklustre television interview and saw her public support - already floundering - take a further dip. Kramp-Karrenbauer brings no defence experience, but comes with a track record - albeit brief - of pushing the military's case. In March, she said Germany's credibility with its NATO partners was at stake unless it raised defence spending.

She underlined Germany's NATO commitment to boost military spending towards a target of 2% of economic output, adding: "We are a reliable ally, bearing a fair share of the joint duties." Aiming to make a better fist than von der Leyen of cleaning up the armed forces and boosting morale and military readiness, she paid tribute to the service of Germany's armed forces: "This service needs respect, this service needs support," she said.

In 2017, von der Leyen criticized "weak leadership" in the armed forces, provoking dismay among soldiers' representatives, after an officer was arrested on suspicion of planning a racist attack to frame refugees. Adding to the challenges Kramp-Karrenbauer faces, the Social Democrats are wary of committing to Britain's plan for



BERLIN: Germany's new Defense Minister Annegret Kramp-Karrenbauer talks to German Chancellor Angela Merkel (left) after taking her oath during her swearing in ceremony at the main hall of the Paul-Loebe-Haus parliamentary annex yesterday. — AFP

a European-led naval mission to ensure safe shipping through the Strait of Hormuz. "We must always examine scrupulously requests

for support from our partners - we mustn't affirm hastily, nor issue knee-jerk rejections," she said. — Reuters

Scans on diplomats show 'something' happened to the brains

WASHINGTON: Brain scans of about 40 US diplomats injured in mysterious circumstances in Cuba reveal visible differences compared to those in a control group, researchers who analyzed them said Tuesday. The study, published in the *Journal of the American Medical Association* and led by professors at the University of Pennsylvania, does not draw any conclusions about the cause of the symptoms suffered by the diplomats from late 2016 into May 2018.

But the MRIs of the patients confirm that "something happened to the brains of these people," Ragini Verma, a professor of radiology at U-Penn and co-author of the study said. "It's not imagined," she said. "All I can say is that there is a truth to be found." Verma added: "Whatever happened was not due to a pre-existing condition, because we test for that."

From late 2016, diplomats posted in Havana and some of their family members suffered unexplained symptoms ranging from poor balance and vertigo to lack of coordination, unusual eye movements, anxiety and what victims called a "cognitive fog." The United States recalled most of its diplomatic personnel from the Cuban capital in September 2017. Some of them have recovered and returned to work, but others are still undergoing rehab, according to Verma.

The US government never publicly explained the cause of the mysterious illnesses. It neither confirmed nor denied the possibility of attacks using some sort of acoustic weapon, as some US media reported, without offering proof. Cuba has denied all responsibility for the incidents, which also affected at least 14 Canadian citizens. Ottawa also ended up recalling most of its diplomats from Havana in January. At the request of the State Department, 44 diplomats and family members were sent from mid-2017 to U-Penn's brain trauma center to undergo MRI (magnetic resonance imaging) exams.

Researchers compared those results with scans from 48 comparable subjects in two control groups. The differences are statistically significant and relate to the brain's white matter as well as the cerebellum, the part of the brain that controls movement. A State Department spokesman welcomed "the medical community's discussion on this incredibly complex issue. The Department's top priority remains the safety, security, and well-being of its staff." Verma said it was vital to follow the diplomats and their families over time "to see whether these changes evolve or change."

Cuba rejects the study

Responding to the report, Havana again denied all responsibility in the affair. The study by the U-Penn professors "does not allow clear and final scientific conclusions to be reached," said Mitchell Valdes-Sosa, head of the Neuroscience Center of Cuba. Valdes-Sosa told reporters that the study "does not show, contrary to what has been speculated... that the group of diplomats suffered brain damage during their stay in Cuba." A senior foreign ministry official in charge of US affairs, Johana Tablada, said that as of now "no evidence exists of any type of attack" against the US diplomats, and called on Washington to stop using that term in such an "irresponsible" way. Tablada urged the White House to stop using the issue "as a pretext to impose increasingly aggressive new sanctions" against the Cuban people. — AFP

US finally gets a new Pentagon chief Esper

WASHINGTON: Former soldier Mark Esper was sworn in as US secretary of defense Tuesday after earning Senate confirmation, filling America's longest-ever Pentagon leadership vacuum as Washington faces mounting tensions with Iran and struggles to end the long-running Afghanistan war. President Donald Trump's second Defense Department chief takes over nearly seven months after the shock departure of Jim Mattis, the deeply respected career US Marine who broke with Trump over policy on the Middle East and Afghanistan.

Two others were made acting defense secretary this year to fill the void-including Patrick Shanahan, who served a six-month temporary stint but resigned for family reasons in June and withdrew from consideration for the full-time top post. Esper sailed through the confirmation process at lightning speed. He earned broad bipartisan support and was confirmed by a vote of 90 to 8.

Later Tuesday, he was sworn in at an Oval Office ceremony attended by several Senate Republicans and Trump, who called it "a very important day" for the nation. "There is no one more qualified to lead the Department of Defense," the president said. Esper's confirmation brings ballast to a Pentagon destabilized by the leadership revolving door since late December, and comes as the world's primary military power is engaged in conflicts in countries including Afghanistan and is being tested by Tehran.

Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell, the top Republican in Congress, hailed Esper, who served a two-year stint as secretary of the US Army beginning in 2017, as "a thoroughly well prepared nominee" who has the respect of the national security community and can hit the ground running. "The world is full of serious threats to America, to our allies and to our interests, not least among them obviously is Iran's insistence on continuing to ratchet up tensions in the Middle East," McConnell said in a Senate floor speech Monday. "Having a Senate-confirmed secretary of defense, especially one of this quality, could not come a moment too soon."

Hunger looms for Venezuela migrants as aid falls short

RIOHACHA: It is mid-morning and the Rancheria community kitchen in northern Columbia is already full of families queuing for a free meal of pasta with chicken, bread and guava juice. Hundreds of Venezuelan migrants rely on the community kitchen for survival, among them Marbellis Atencia, 39, who comes here every day with her three children. But a funding shortfall threatens its future - even as Venezuelans' desperate exodus over the border continues.

"There was no food in Venezuela," said Atencia, who has been searching for a job since her family arrived in Colombia nearly a year ago. "When I try to find a job, I'm asked if I'm from Venezuela. And if I answer yes, they say, 'No then, you come here to steal our jobs,'" the former housekeeper told the Thomson Reuters Foundation. Services like these are desperately needed - the 18 community kitchens the United Nations' World Food Program (WFP) operates in the desert-like La Guajira region bordering Venezuela fed nearly 100,000 migrants in June.

The agency has calculated it needs \$76 million in 2019 to respond to the Venezuelan migration crisis in Colombia alone, but it is facing a \$35 million funding gap. Country director Carlo Scaramella told the Thomson Reuters Foundation that as demands on its services grew, WFP could be forced to reduce rations, help fewer people - or both. "Donor support will continue to be critical to ensure that

WFP can continue to provide assistance at scale to vulnerable migrants and local communities during the second part of the year and well into 2020," he said.

'Protracted emergency'

Venezuela's economic collapse has unleashed the biggest migratory crisis in recent South American history, with 4 million people leaving. Funding shortfalls are also hitting other countries across Latin America hosting Venezuelan migrants and refugees. In December 2018, a UN-led appeal by nearly 100 aid agencies requested \$738 million to help the fleeing Venezuelans, but less than a quarter has been funded.

But Colombia has taken the highest share, with 1.3 million migrants settling there, according to government data. "Colombia has been extremely generous... But the situation can become more complex and stressed if resources are not available," WFP's Scaramella said, calling the situation "the beginning of a protracted emergency". Across Colombia, Venezuelan migrants can be seen on street corners and at traffic lights, appealing for work or spare change. Many said they had fled economic and political crisis at home only to find themselves relying on handouts.

Aid workers pointed out that the crisis came at a difficult time for Colombia, which signed a peace agreement with the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) rebels in 2016 after half a century of fighting. Alan Bojanic, representative in Colombia for the UN Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), said the country needed substantial funding. "For a country that is still trying to solve problems of the war, like the 7.8 million people who were displaced within Colombia because of the violence, to have this on top... it's a complicated scenario," he said.

Colombian Foreign Minister Carlos



WASHINGTON: Mark Esper (left) is sworn-in as Defense Secretary by Associate Justice Samuel Alito (right) before his wife Leah Esper in the Oval Office at the White House on July 23, 2019. — AFP

Combat experience

Esper has significant Middle East experience. He fought in Iraq during the Gulf War in 1991, and was part of the US Army's famed 101st Airborne Division known as the "Screaming Eagles." He is also close to Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, with whom he studied at the prestigious West Point Military Academy. Both men graduated in 1986.

On the political front, he served as an advisor to several lawmakers on Capitol Hill, including Republican senator Chuck Hagel, who later became secretary of defense under Democratic president Barack Obama. But his links with the defense industry drew criticism during his confirmation process. Democratic Senator Elizabeth Warren was among five 2020 presidential candidates who voted against Esper. Warren highlighted his potential conflicts of interest due to his affiliation with defense contractor Raytheon, for whom he was a lobbyist when Trump tapped him for the army secretary post.

"At the age of 18, I went to West Point, and I swore an oath to defend this Constitution, and I embraced a motto called duty and honor and country," he told Warren during his confirmation hearing. "And I've lived my life in accordance with those values ever since then," he said, adding: "I went to war for this country." Number two Senate Democrat Dick Durbin suggested he voted for Esper as a way to help keep an impulsive president in check.

Esper "has a special responsibility to advise a President who has no experience in national security," Durbin tweeted. "I believe that Dr. Esper is up to the task." Trump raised eyebrows recently with a series of imprudent comments. Afghanistan's leaders sought clarification from the White House after Trump said Monday could easily and swiftly win a war in which "Afghanistan would be wiped off the face of the Earth." He also told reporters he was feeling less inclined to deal with Iran because "they behave very badly," and that Washington was "ready for the absolute worst" with the Islamic republic. — AFP



MARACAIBO: A boy drinks water as another fills jerry cans from a makeshift intake set up on a sidewalk for people to collect water in Maracaibo, Zulia State, Venezuela. — AFP

Holmes Trujillo has promised his country will not close its doors, but has asked for international help as its health and education systems come under strain. The community kitchen already provides sanitation, health and nutrition advice and help for pregnant and nursing mothers as well as meals. WFP field monitor Irma Diaz, who works there, spoke of the "desperation" of the pregnant women she meets.

"They do not know where to go... So we accompany them to the doctors and re-direct them to the health system," she said, recalling a woman who gave birth a week after arriving. Atencia said she still wanted to go back to Venezuela if she could - though that is unlikely to happen soon. Her mother, who had just arrived from their home town of Maracaibo, told her there was no electricity or public services there. Phil Gunson, senior analyst

for the Andes region with the International Crisis Group, said Colombia had been "as accommodating as it can be" of the migrants.

But he said the country did not have the resources to deal with an influx on such a scale, warning it risked creating a backlash. "That will lead to political consequences that may be beyond the control of the current administration, and it is a matter of great urgency that the resources be found to assist Colombia with a problem not of its own making," he said. Meanwhile staff at the Rancheria community kitchen say they are still seeing about 400 new arrivals every week. "We have funding until the end of the year... but I don't think this situation is going to slow down or end by then," said WFP field monitor Diaz. "The numbers are stable and the needs will not decrease." — Reuters