

International

Rebuke for Trump in races seen as barometers for 2020 election

In Virginia, Democrats will now hold all major statewide offices

WASHINGTON: US President Donald Trump and his Republican allies suffered stinging defeats Tuesday as Democrats were projected to win closely-watched elections in two states, results that signal troubling headwinds for his 2020 re-election campaign.

The Republican Governor Matt Bevin in deep-red Kentucky was ousted by his Democratic challenger Andy Beshear, who led by less than half a percentage point with 100 percent of the vote counted, the official overseeing the election declared. Doubling the hurt, Trump's party also lost control of both chambers of the legislature in increasingly blue Virginia, US media including The New York Times projected. "We have called it for Attorney General Beshear to be the Kentucky governor-elect," Secretary of State Alison Lundergan Grimes said on CNN.

The US president tweeted that Bevin "picked up at least 15 points in last days, but perhaps not enough (Fake News will blame Trump!)." Beshear, whose father was the last Democratic governor in the state, claimed victory, but Bevin did not throw in the towel. "This is a close, close race. We are not conceding this race by any stretch," the governor said. Should Bevin's loss be certified, it would be a shock defeat for a conservative in a southern state that Trump won by 30 percentage points in 2016.

In Virginia, Democrats will now hold all major statewide offices and rule the state assembly, a comprehensive consolidation of power not seen in the state since the 1990s. Democratic leadership swiftly portrayed the night as a massive boost for the party heading into next year's monumental battle against the president. "This historic victory should send a chill down the

spines of Donald Trump and every Republican," Democratic National Committee chairman Tom Perez said in a statement.

"Democrats are competing in every election and every state, running on our values, and channeling unprecedented energy into the voting booth — that's how we won tonight, that's how we'll beat Trump" in 2020. Tuesday's elections — including a governor's race in Mississippi that US media projected Republican candidate Tate Reeves would win — were tests of enthusiasm ahead of 2020 for Trump, who is deeply unpopular nationwide and is the subject of an impeachment investigation.

'Really bad message'

Trump hailed the Mississippi results, congratulating Reeves on Twitter and claiming that his support was key. "Congratulations to @tater Reeves on winning Governor of the Great State of Mississippi. Our big Rally on Friday night moved the numbers from a tie to a big WIN. Great reaction under pressure Tate!" Trump wrote. With Washington swept up in the impeachment saga, results in Kentucky, Mississippi and Virginia were being closely watched for how the crisis is influencing their voters, how strong the support is for Trump in Republican bastions, and whether Democrats are wielding increasing influence in the suburbs. The Kentucky result — boosted by strong Democratic turnout in suburban districts outside Lexington and other major cities — is all the more humiliating for Trump because he flew there Monday night to hold a large rally and implore his base to come out to the polls.

"If you lose, it sends a really bad message," he said.



LOUISVILLE: Apparent Gov.-elect Andy Beshear celebrates with supporters after voting results showed the Democrat holding a slim lead over Republican Gov. Matt Bevin at C2 Event Venue. — AFP

"You can't let that happen to me." Also on that night, he blasted Democrats for recently voting to bring the impeachment probe to a new, public phase. "The Democrats' outrageous conduct has created an angry

majority that will vote the do-nothing Democrats the hell out of office," Trump said. Instead, the opposite occurred. Bevin was in lockstep with Trump, as was Reeves in Mississippi. — AFP

Trump calls for 'war' on cartels

BAVISPE: President Donald Trump offered Tuesday to help Mexico hunt the killers of nine Mormon women and children shot dead in a lawless border area, and said the United States stood ready to back its southern neighbor in a "war" on drug cartels. Gunmen ambushed the members of the LeBaron family — a large clan of Mormons who emigrated to Mexico in the late 19th century — on Monday on a rural road between the states of Sonora and Chihuahua, which border the United States.

Three women and six children were killed, including a set of twin babies, said relatives and Mexican officials. Another six children were also injured — two seriously — in the attack, which left the family's cars riddled with bullets and one badly charred. Mexican Security Minister Alfonso Durazo said the family may have been mistakenly targeted or caught in the crossfire in turf wars between rival drug cartels.

"If Mexico needs or requests help in cleaning out these monsters, the United States stands ready, willing & able to get involved and do the job quickly and effectively," Trump wrote in a tweet. He praised Mexican President Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador for prioritizing the fight against drug trafficking, but said "the cartels have become so large and powerful that you sometimes need an army to defeat an army!"

"This is the time for Mexico, with the help of the United States, to wage WAR on the drug cartels and wipe them off the face of the earth," Lopez Obrador said he would accept "all necessary cooperation" to get justice for the victims, all of whom lived on the Mexican side but



LEXINGTON: In this file photo taken on November 4, 2019 US President Donald Trump gestures as he speaks during a rally at Rupp Arena. — AFP

had dual nationality. But the left-wing populist, who has declared an end to Mexico's "drug wars," said he was not looking for a new one. "We don't agree (with Trump) on that," he told a news conference. "War is synonymous with irrationality."

He later tweeted that he had thanked Trump for his support in a phone call. The White House said the presidents had spoken about the "growing violent behavior" of drugs cartels and other criminal gangs. "President Trump made clear that the United States condemns these senseless acts of violence that took the lives of nine American citizens and offered Mexico assistance to ensure the perpetrators face justice," said spokesman Hogan Gidley.

Devastated members of the LeBaron family took to social media to call for prayers and

condemn the lawless violence gripping much of the border region. "It was a massacre," Julian LeBaron, an activist who has denounced criminal groups in the area, told Mexican radio network Formula. He said the women were on their way to the airport with their children when their SUVs were attacked at Rancho Las Moras, in Bavispe, Sonora.

Several children managed to escape and return home on foot, he added. Another, a three-month-old baby, was found wounded but alive beneath her mother's body. An eight-year-old girl was also missing for about 24 hours, before being found unharmed several kilometers away. Relatives said the children were all deeply traumatized. Five wounded children were airlifted for medical treatment in Phoenix, Arizona. — AFP

Egypt water crisis builds as temperature rises

FAYOUM: Ahmed Abd-Rabo used to get all the water he needed to feed his crops in northern Egypt. Then the canal linking his seven acres to the River Nile started drying up and he had to abandon half the plot. His smallholding is one of the victims of a creeping water crisis, exacerbated by Egypt's growing population and the impacts of climate change.

Egypt fears things could get even worse as Ethiopia starts filling the reservoir behind a giant dam upriver. On Wednesday, the United States is hosting talks between the countries and their fellow Nile-user Sudan to try to restart stalled talks over the hydropower project. But even if Washington succeeds where years of trilateral negotiations have failed, Egypt will still have broader water problems that have left it struggling to sustain food production.

"There is very little Nile water," said Abd-Rabo, standing next to the plot where he grows wheat and fodder in Fayoum, about 100km south of the capital, Cairo. "In winter, sometimes there's a bit more, but mainly because the land doesn't need a lot of water in the winter. But in the summer, we don't get any." Egyptian officials say they currently have around 570 cubic meters of water per person per year - hydrologists con-

sider a country to be facing water scarcity if supplies drop below 1,000 cubic meters per person per year.

Mud and soil

Egypt's figure is expected to drop to 500 cubic meters by 2025. That is without taking into account the impact of the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam, which Egypt says will lower water levels further, though Ethiopia says it has taken the needs of Egypt and Sudan into account. The stakes are high. Talk of physical conflict between the countries along the Nile has receded, but Egypt sees the dam as an existential threat that could decimate farming and damage power supplies.

More than 80% of its water is used for agriculture, but scarcity means Cairo already imports about half its food and is the world's largest wheat importer. The government is urging farmers to use more efficient irrigation and plant seeds with shorter life spans that require less water. It is also trying to recycle more water. But the water management and irrigation schemes have not reached everyone.

"We are still using old irrigation techniques, which use mud and soil, and waste water," said Aref Mohamed, a farmer near the southern city of Luxor. Fines to stop farmers planting water-intensive rice in the northern Nile Delta are not being as strictly enforced as last year, locals say. The area under rice cultivation has shot up to 1.75 million acres from about 800,000 acres over the same period, according to irrigation ministry estimates. — Reuters

UN Palestinian agency head steps aside amid probe

JERUSALEM: The head of the UN agency for Palestinian refugees has stepped aside temporarily as an internal probe into alleged mismanagement at the organization proceeds, it said yesterday. Pierre Krahenbuhl, commissioner general of the agency known as UNRWA, will be replaced on an interim basis by the agency's acting deputy chief Christian Saunders, it said. The agency said findings in the probe so far "revealed management issues which relate specifically to the commissioner general."

"The commissioner-general has stepped aside until the completion of the process," it said. An internal ethics report has alleged mismanagement and abuses of authority at the highest levels of the agency, which has also faced a financial crisis after US funding cuts. UN investigators have been probing the allegations in the confidential report, a copy of which was obtained by AFP.

The report describes "credible and corroborated" allegations of serious ethical abuses, including involving Krahenbuhl, a Swiss national. It says the allegations include senior management engaging in "sexual misconduct, nepotism, retaliation, discrimination and other abuses of authority, for personal gain, to suppress legitimate dissent, and to otherwise achieve their personal objectives." Krahenbuhl himself was alleged to have been romantically involved with a colleague appointed in 2015 to



KHAN YUNIS: Palestinian protesters wave their national flags during clashes with Israeli forces following a demonstration along the border with Israel east of Khan Yunis. — AFP

a newly created role of senior adviser after an "extreme fast-track" process, the report says.

That enabled her to join him on international business class flights, the report alleges. UNRWA came under heavy financial constraints after the United States suspended and later cut all funding for it in 2018. US President Donald Trump's administration, along with Israel, accuses UNRWA of perpetuating the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. The agency disputes that and says the services it provides would otherwise not be available to Palestinians.

A number of other countries suspended their contributions pending the outcome of the probe into alleged mismanagement.

UNRWA was set up in the years after more than 700,000 Palestinians were expelled or fled their lands during the 1948 war surrounding the creation of Israel. It provides schooling and medical services to millions of impoverished refugees in Jordan, Lebanon and Syria as well as the Palestinian territories. It employs around 30,000 people, mostly Palestinians, and its UN mandate is set to be debated later this year. A European diplomat speaking on condition of anonymity said he was "grateful for all (Krahenbuhl) did to stabilize the organization during a difficult time, but stepping aside now is the correct decision." — AFP

Cyprus to strip citizenships after uproar over passports

ATHENS: Cyprus yesterday said it had started a process to strip 26 individuals of citizenship they received under a secretive passports-for-investment scheme, admitting it had flaws. The Mediterranean island has been rattled by disclosures of its investments scheme since Reuters exclusively reported last month a list of Cambodian beneficiaries, including its police chief and finance minister.

Rescinding citizenship is highly unusual, and the move came after authorities launched a probe in the wake of the report. "The Council of Ministers today affirmed the will of the government for strict adherence to the terms and conditions of the Cyprus investment program," Cypriot Interior Minister Constantinos Petrides told journalists after a four-hour cabinet meeting. Petrides did not disclose nationalities or identities of those affected. However, Cypriot sources said the group included nine Russians, eight Cambodians, five Chinese nationals, two Kenyans, one Malaysian and one Iranian. They involved nine investment projects, whereby groups of foreign investors in partnership can benefit from the scheme. Cyprus has had a citizenship for investment plan in place since 2013, under which a minimum 2 million euro (\$2.2 million) investment can buy

a passport and visa-free travel throughout the European Union.

Advertising the scheme is now banned, but at least one law office used to distribute pamphlets resembling passports to visitors at the island's main airport. Authorities say the program has gone through several transformations, and was overhauled in February 2019 with five different due diligence layers, compared to one in 2013. In five years between the inception of the citizenship scheme and 2018, the Cypriot government approved 1,864 citizenship applications. Including family members, the number was more than 3,200, and is close to 4,000 today.

"If there were nine investment cases, concerning 26 people among 4,000 applications, it is logical that some would be problematic when controls weren't strict," Petrides said. "There were mistakes, it was a mistake not to have criteria, for instance, for high-risk persons." The Reuters investigation showed that influential police, business and political associates of Cambodia's long-time ruler had overseas assets worth tens of millions of dollars.

Recently, Cypriot newspaper Politis reported Malaysian fugitive financier Low Taek Jho, accused of a multibillion dollar theft at state fund (Malaysia Development Berhad (MIDB)), was another beneficiary of a passport. Hun Sen has previously denied opposition allegations that members of his inner circle had other passports and lived the high life overseas. Some 70 percent of Cambodians live on \$3 a day, according to the Asian Development Bank. Petrides, whose ministry signs off on passport applications, said the individuals concerned had the right to appeal. — Reuters