

International

Frustrated Trump lashes out at impeachment probe

President takes to Fox to air long, incoherent list of grievances

WASHINGTON: An irate Donald Trump said Friday he welcomes the prospect of an impeachment trial, as the US leader lashed out at "crazy" and "corrupt" opponents probing potential abuse of presidential power. After a week of dramatic impeachment testimony from current and former administration officials, an embattled Trump took to a favorite broadcaster to air a long, occasionally incoherent list of grievances - against the FBI, his political adversaries, impeachment inquiry leaders, the "deep state," and more.

"These people are sick," Trump raged down the telephone line to Fox at the start of a 53-minute tirade that showed how angered and unsettled he has been by an impeachment inquiry that threatens his presidency. Multiple witnesses, in often damning testimony under oath, buttressed charges the president conditioned much-needed military aid and a coveted White House meeting on Ukraine investigating his political rivals.

But with many Republicans seemingly unmoved, Trump bashed the testimony as "total nonsense" and said he relished the chance to defend himself. "Frankly, I want a trial," Trump told morning show Fox and Friends. The House Intelligence Committee has not formally concluded its role

in the inquiry, possibly waiting for a court ruling on Monday that could empower members to force senior Trump aides to testify.

But Democrats appear determined to hold an impeachment vote in the House of Representatives by the end of the year, which could see Trump go on trial in the Senate in January. Removing him from office would require conviction by a two-thirds majority in the Republican-controlled upper chamber.

'Crazy as a bedbug'

The increasing prospect of becoming only the third US president formally impeached, after Andrew Johnson and Bill Clinton, has riled the brash New York billionaire, and he fired off multiple attacks against rivals leading the effort. His main Democratic nemesis in Congress, House Speaker Nancy Pelosi, is "crazy as a bedbug" for pressing a "scam" impeachment, he fumed.

House Intelligence Committee chairman Adam Schiff, who has presided over the public phase of the inquiry? A "nutjob" and a "sick puppy" who should be sued for having "lied" about the president's "flawless" Ukraine call, Trump added. Trump was quick to say he "hardly" knows

several of the witnesses, including his own ambassador to the European Union Gordon Sondland, who said Trump sought a quid pro quo from Ukraine.

But he rushed to the defense of his personal lawyer Rudy Giuliani, who has emerged in many accounts as having orchestrated the shadow policy to pressure Ukraine. "Rudy is a great crime fighter," Trump said, giving an unqualified endorsement to one of the most controversial figures in the Ukraine saga. "He is a friend of mine. He is a great person, an iconic figure in this country," he said of the former New York mayor. Trump also repeated the conspiracy theory that Ukraine, not Russia, interfered in the 2016 US election - just a day after a former National Security Council expert, Fiona Hill, denounced that in testimony as a "fictional narrative" advanced by Russia to harm the United States. "They have the server from the DNC - Democratic National Committee," Trump said of Ukraine, claiming that Democrats gave the computer to "a company owned by a very wealthy Ukrainian".

The claim appeared to alarm Fox hosts, including Steve Doocy. "Are you sure they gave it to Ukraine?" a skeptical Doocy asked Trump. "That's what the word is, and that's what I asked actually in my phone call," Trump responded,

referring to his July 25 conversation with Ukrainian counterpart Volodymyr Zelensky at the heart of the impeachment inquiry. Trump mentioned his political rival Joe Biden to Zelensky and pressed the new president to investigate a Ukrainian firm where Biden's son worked while his father was vice president. Democrats argue that Trump's demand that a foreign leader investigate his potential adversary in the 2020 presidential election is impeachable conduct. Trump has said he was merely pressing Ukraine to ramp up its anti-corruption efforts. But he also claims the Bidens were involved in corruption.

There is no evidence to back up the assertion, but Trump nonetheless repeated it on Fox, saying "you have to say Joe Biden is corrupt". Biden, who leads the Democratic 2020 nomination race, has said Trump has smeared him with corruption allegations because he fears a Biden candidacy. Polls show American voters believe Biden would have the best shot at defeating Trump. But Trump seized on polling released this week that shows him winning in hypothetical matchups against Biden and other Democrats in battleground Wisconsin, a state Trump flipped in 2016 but which Democrats aim to retake. "I'm going through the roof," Trump boasted. — AFP

Trump gives blessing for Pompeo exit

WASHINGTON: US President Donald Trump said Friday he would support Secretary of State Mike Pompeo if he quit to run for Senate, as the top US diplomat becomes increasingly embroiled in the impeachment drama. Trump's blessing for his close ally's potential departure marks the first public confirmation that Pompeo is considering the Senate race next year in his home state of Kansas.

Always careful not to upset Trump, Pompeo has been coy in his statements on a Senate bid even as his repeated trips to Kansas and regular interviews with media in the Great Plains state increasingly left little doubt. In an interview with "Fox and Friends," Trump said that Pompeo told him, "Look, I'd rather stay where I am" but that he "loves Kansas". "If he thought there was a chance of (the Republican Party) losing that seat, I think he would do that, and he would win in a landslide because they love him in Kansas," Trump said. Kansas is heavily Republican and has not elected a Democrat to the Senate since 1932, the longest streak that any state has shut out one of the two major US parties. But neither



WASHINGTON: In this file photo taken on Oct 21, 2019, US President Donald Trump listens to US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo during a Cabinet Meeting at the White House. — AFP

party is taking chances on next year's election, in which Trump is seeking a second term. Kansas elected a Democrat as governor last year and the Republican candidates for the Senate nomination include Kris Kobach, a fire-brand anti-immigration activist who is unlikely to appeal to centrists.

Harboring future ambitions

Just in September, Pompeo emerged as the king of US foreign policy after the departure of John Bolton, Trump's hawkish national security adviser who was considered a master of inside-Washington maneuvering. But a Senate victory would ensure continued influence for the 55-year-old Pompeo regardless of whether Trump

wins next year - or if Trump, despite all his public statements, suddenly sours on him, as the mercurial president is wont to do with people around him. Pompeo, an evangelical Christian former congressman with roots in the populist Tea Party movement, is widely seen as harboring ambitions to run for president himself in 2024. And then there is Ukraine. Pompeo, who cast himself as a defender of the State Department when he arrived in March 2018, has come under fire for not vigorously defending diplomats caught up in the scandal.

Pompeo declined, for example, to offer any support for career diplomat Marie Yovanovitch, whom Trump removed as ambassador to Kiev, bad-mouthed to Ukraine's president and assailed by Twitter while she was appearing before Congress. Pompeo is also increasingly implicated personally in the scandal. He acknowledged that he was on the July 25 call in which Trump asked Ukraine's president, Volodymyr Zelensky, for "a favor" - an episode that triggered the impeachment inquiry.

Gordon Sondland, the US ambassador to the European Union, said under oath that Pompeo was kept in the loop of what the envoy considered an improper effort by Trump to force Ukraine to announce an investigation into domestic political rival Joe Biden. In strikingly harsh language, Thomas Friedman, the longtime foreign affairs columnist of The New York Times, accused Pompeo of failing to heed lessons from his classes at the elite West Point military academy, where Pompeo graduated first in his class. — AFP

23 die as violent unrest in Chile enters 5th week

SANTIAGO: The death toll from violent unrest in Chile rose to 23 yesterday as the country entered its fifth week of social unrest. Looting and demonstrations took place in cities across the South American nation, and an agreement on a political roadmap that will see Chile draft a new constitution has halted neither the anger, nor the bloodshed. Furious Chileans have since October 18 been protesting social and economic inequality, and against an entrenched political elite that comes from a small number of the wealthiest families in the country, among other issues.

The crisis is the worst in three decades of Chilean democracy and has led to around 2,000 injuries, including some 280 people who suffered eye damage from shotgun pellets. The latest death was a 13-year-old boy who an interior ministry official said was run over by a van during protests in Arica, about 1,300 miles north of the capital Santiago. Thousands of people gathered again on Friday in Plaza Italia, the center of the demonstrations in Santiago and the site of weekly rallies that have seen massive turnout since the social upheaval broke out.

"We cannot ease up. We have to keep expressing ourselves because we have not achieved anything, because the repression continues and also (the government) keeps signing fake agreements, like the peace deal," Claudia Ortolani, a young protester said. Nearby, hooded men were squaring off against police, who broke up the crowd with tear gas and water cannons. Meanwhile, about a hundred people protested outside the Costanera Center, the largest mall in South America, as around twenty riot police guarded the entrance to the building.

While protests earlier in the week had not been huge, the outbursts of violence multiplied in the capital's metro area on Thursday and Friday. The anger in the streets had eased after last week's agreement by Congress to draft a new Constitution. But with people back on the streets in force again, President Sebastian Pinera's government again appealed for calm. — AFP



SANTIAGO: A demonstrator is held while riot police are hit by a petrol bomb during clashes at a protest against the government on Friday. — AFP



BOGOTA: Demonstrators confront riot police during a protest a day after a nationwide strike by students, unions and indigenous against the government of Colombia's President Ivan Duque on Friday. — AFP

Duque promises social reforms as 3 dead in protests

BOGOTA: Protesters picketed the home of Colombian President Ivan Duque on Friday, defying a curfew and the leader's promises of a "national conversation" on social policies following massive anti-government demonstrations that have left three dead and dozens wounded. "Starting next week, I will launch a national conversation to strengthen the current social policy agenda, working in a united way with medium- and long-term vision, which will allow us to close the social gaps," Duque has said in a televised speech earlier in the day.

"This conversation will take place regionally with all the social and political sectors. I will use electronic media and participatory mechanisms... so that we can all build a meaningful path of reform." The popularity of Duque's right-wing government - a key ally of the United States - has been on the wane since his election 18 months ago, as it deals with hosting 1.4 million refugees from neighboring Venezuela's economic meltdown as well as the complex fallout of a 2016 peace deal with FARC rebels and rampant drug trafficking.

Hundreds of thousands of Colombians took to the streets in Bogota and other cities on Thursday to protest Duque's economic, social and security policies, as part of a nationwide general strike. There were arrests and clashes as trade unions, students, opposition parties and the South American country's indigenous organizations vented their anger. The protests come

amid social upheaval across South America, as a wave of unrest over the past two months has battered governments in Chile, Bolivia and Ecuador.

Duque's statement Friday came shortly after Bogota mayor Enrique Penalosa declared a nighttime curfew in the capital, following clashes between protesters and police in the southern part of the city of seven million earlier in the day. The president said he was stepping up the police presence and ordering the "deployment of joint patrols of police and army in the most critical places." But that didn't stop hundreds of people from showing up outside the president's house in Bogota, singing the national anthem while banging pots and pans in a form of protest that is common in parts of Latin America, though not in Colombia. The protesters dispersed peacefully about one hour after the 9:00 pm (0200 GMT on Saturday) curfew began.

Hundreds of demonstrators protested in cities across the country earlier in the day, following protests in the western Valle del Cauca department on Thursday that Defense Minister Carlos Holmes Trujillo told reporters had left three dead. Penalosa said 76 bus stations were attacked during the violence in Bogota, some of which were totally destroyed, and 79 busses were vandalized. Some 230 people were arrested, he added. The violence and looting paralyzed the public transport system, forcing hundreds of people to hoof it to their homes or offices. There were also 122 civilians wounded, 151 security forces hurt and 146 people detained, the government said. Defense Minister Carlos Holmes Trujillo announced late on Friday that vandalism had been brought under control in Bogota and the curfew was being mostly successful. — AFP

Trump, Reps give voice to Ukraine conspiracy theories

NEW YORK: They have been viewed as bogus for months, but President Donald Trump and his Republican supporters are giving unprecedented publicity to conspiracy theories as they fight Democratic Party attempts to impeach him. Analysts say the repetition of debunked claims could have damaging long-term consequences for American democracy, particularly since Democrat supporters are not immune from peddling conspiracy theories of their own.

The Republicans' conspiracy theories currently center on Ukraine. They have claimed repeatedly that it was that country - not its neighbor Russia - who interfered in the 2016 US presidential election. Kiev hacked Hillary Clinton's emails, not Russian operatives, the theories go, and it is Ukraine who is in possession of a Democratic National Committee server.

Former National Security Council expert Fiona Hill denounced the theories as a "fictional narrative" advanced by Russia to harm the United States. "These fictions are harmful even if they are deployed for purely domestic political purposes," she told lawmakers during her testimony on Thursday. Republicans constantly allege that Trump's potential 2020 challenger Joe Biden may have acted corruptly in Ukraine.

On Tuesday, former US special envoy to Ukraine Kurt Volker called that "not credible." Republicans continue to use them as a mantra anyway. Devin Nunes, the most senior Republican on the committee that is conducting the impeachment hearings, repeatedly cites them, as does Donald Trump Jr and conservative Fox News anchor Sean Hannity. Trump himself often relays these long debunked stories to his 67 million Twitter followers.

Tactical

Conspiracy theories have prospered online for decades, but they are no longer on the sidelines. Analysts say that the election of Trump has brought them into the highest spheres of public consciousness.

The hearings, broadcast live on television, are testament to that. Joseph Uscinski, an associate professor of political science at the University of Miami, says other presidents, notably Richard Nixon, have flirted with conspiracy theories but never referenced them so openly.

"Trump seems to be just the opposite, where he's just very forward with these theories and he uses them to motivate people who are sort of outside of the party mainstream." He also uses the conspiracy theories to deflect criticism. Uscinski told AFP. Conspiracy theories are not new. Polls regularly indicate that a majority of Americans believe Lee Harvey Oswald was not the only shooter in the November 1963 assassination of President John F. Kennedy. Eric Oliver, professor of political science at the University of Chicago, argues that conspiracy theories have spread more widely since the rise of the Christian right in the 1970s. "These are people often times who have a very intuitionist worldview and by that they sort of really draw on their gut feelings as a guide to what's going on." They are also entertaining a lot of supernatural beliefs and apocalyptic beliefs and this type of thinking coincides well within a conspiratorial viewpoint," he said.

Oliver conducted a poll recently in which 18 percent of respondents said they believed Ukraine tried to manipulate the 2016 vote. He says fact-checking, which has become very popular in recent years owing to the large amount of information disseminated online, fails to have any impact on Americans with strong beliefs. "When people often encounter facts that are inconvenient to their prior beliefs, they just simply dismiss the facts and they think about something else," he said. Uscinski sees similarities among some Democrats, particularly supporters of left-winger Bernie Sanders. "His entire campaign is built around a conspiracy theory. That the one percent of the richest people control all politics and the entire economy, which isn't true," he said. — AFP

CONDOLENCES

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Express our heartfelt condolences
on the sad and unfortunate demise of
Our Dear Friend



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Managing Director
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Passed away on 19 November 2019

May his soul Rest in Peace