

International

Trump defends Supreme Court justice over 'misconduct claim'

Controversial judge faces calls for an investigation over fresh allegations

WASHINGTON: US President Donald Trump mounted an angry defense of Supreme Court Justice Brett Kavanaugh yesterday as the controversial judge faced calls for an investigation over fresh allegations of sexual misconduct. Trump blasted the media and "Radical Left Democrats" after a former Yale classmate of Kavanaugh alleged that the jurist-one of the most senior judges in the land-exposed himself at a freshman year party before other students pushed his genitals into the hand of a female student.

The latest allegation in The New York Times came after Kavanaugh denied sexual misconduct accusations leveled against him by two women during his confirmation to the Supreme Court last October. "Now the Radical Left Democrats and their Partner, the LameStream Media, are after Brett Kavanaugh again, talking loudly of their favorite word, impeachment," Trump tweeted.

"He is an innocent man who has been treated HORRIBLY. Such lies about him. They want to scare him into turning Liberal!" The new allegations came from Max Stier, who runs a non-profit in Washington. His concerns were reported to the FBI during Kavanaugh's 2018 confirmation process but not investigated, according to the Times.

Stier has not spoken publicly about the incident but his story was corroborated by two officials, the Times said. It is the latest in a string of accusations of unwanted sexual contact or assault against Kavanaugh since Trump nominated him to the Supreme Court.

'Shame'

Christine Blasey Ford testified before Congress that Kavanaugh sexually assaulted her in the 1980s. The latest allegation surfaced during a 10-month investigation by Times reporters Robin Pogrebin and Kate Kelly, and features in their upcoming book, "The Education of Brett Kavanaugh: An Investigation." Trump called on Kavanaugh to take legal action over the claims, suggesting also that the Department of Justice should intervene on the judge's behalf and "come to his rescue."

But Democrats seeking to be Trump's opponent in the 2020 election called for the judge to be investigated. "Brett Kavanaugh's confirmation is a shame to the Supreme Court. This latest allegation of assault must be investigated," former housing secretary and Democratic presidential candidate Julian Castro tweeted. Minnesota Senator Amy Klobuchar, a member of the Senate Judiciary Committee who was involved in a heated exchange with Kavanaugh during his confirmation, described the process as a "sham."

"I strongly opposed him based on his views on executive power, which will continue to haunt our country, as well as how he behaved, including the allegations that we are hearing more about today," she told ABC's "This Week." Republican Senator Ted Cruz dismissed the new allegation, however, as "the obsession with the far left with trying to smear Justice Kavanaugh by going 30 years back with anonymous sources." — AFP



WASHINGTON: In this file photo US President Donald Trump, right, pats Associate Justice of the US Supreme Court Brett Kavanaugh, left, on the back during a ceremonial swear-in at the White House in Washington, DC. — AFP

New Italy government lets rescued migrants disembark

ROME: Italy on Saturday allowed rescue ship Ocean Viking to disembark 82 migrants on Lampedusa, in a reversal of the hardline policy under the country's ex-interior minister Matteo Salvini. Far-right leader Salvini was forced out of office last month after bringing the government down, and the new coalition has been trying to forge its own migrant stance. It is the first time in 14 months that Italy has given a migrant rescue ship a safe port, although it took Rome six days and European guarantees to redistribute the migrants before it did so.

The migrants were transferred from the ship operated by SOS Mediterranee to an Italian coastguard vessel and taken to shore in Lampedusa, Italian television images showed. French Interior Minister Christophe Castaner said there had been an "ad hoc" agreement to divide the migrants between five countries—Italy, France, Germany, Portugal and Luxembourg. France and Germany have agreed to take 25 percent of the migrants each, with Italy to take 10 percent. "We now need to agree on a genuine temporary European mechanism," Castaner added.

The Italian coastguard will send a vessel to pick up the migrants at sea in order not to disturb port operations, Italian media reported. Under far-right leader Salvini, charity vessels with rescued migrants on board faced fines of up to a million euros as well as the arrest of the captain and impounding of the boat. "Having been designated a place of safety that qualifies as such is good news," said Nicola Stalla, search and rescue coordinator aboard the Ocean Viking. "After disembarkation, the Ocean Viking should head back to her search and rescue mission... because people continue to die in these waters where no rescue ship is currently present," Stalla said in a statement.

Refugee camp of Europe

Salvini pulled the plug on the previous government in August in the hope of snap elections. His move backfired and the League leader is now in opposition after previous ally the Five Star Movement and the centre-left Democratic Party agreed a coalition. "Here we go, ports open without limits," Salvini tweeted after the safe port announcement. While Salvini spent much of his time as minister launching diatribes against migrants and rescue charities, his replacement is a civil servant and immigration expert, Luciana Lamorgese.

Italian foreign minister and M5S leader Luigi Di Maio, Salvini's former ally, told Italian television that "the safe port was assigned because the European Union agreed to our request to take most of the migrants". Culture Minister Dario Franceschini hailed the "end of Salvini's propaganda on the backs of desperate people at sea. Politics and good international relations are back to tackle and solve the migration problem."

Medecins Sans Frontieres (Doctors Without Borders), which runs the ship jointly with SOS Mediterranee, said the group included 18 minors. Italy is trying to set up an automatic system for distributing migrants rescued in the Mediterranean between European countries, diplomatic sources said recently.

Such a deal would put an end to the case-by-case negotiations over who will take in those saved during the perilous crossing from North Africa, which has seen vulnerable asylum-seekers trapped in limbo at sea for lengthy periods. France and Germany have reportedly given their green light to the new system, which could also involve Luxembourg, Malta, Portugal, Romania and Spain.

Painful process

Italian Prime Minister Giuseppe Conte is expected to discuss the plan with France's President Emmanuel Macron when the latter visits Rome on Wednesday. It will then be studied in more detail at a meeting of interior ministers on September 23 in Malta, ahead of a European summit in October in Luxembourg. — AFP

Humberto dumps rain on Bahamas

MIAMI: Tropical Storm Humberto lashed the Bahamas with rain and wind on Saturday, possibly slowing down relief efforts in the wake of the devastation wrought less than two weeks ago by Hurricane Dorian. The US National Hurricane Center said the center of the storm, packing maximum sustained winds of 60 miles per hour, was passing Saturday evening about 85 miles north of Great Abaco Island, one of the areas hardest hit by Dorian.

Humberto was moving away from the Bahamas on a path taking it well off the east coast of Florida this weekend and early next week, the NHC said. The storm is expected to strengthen into a hurricane today but is not forecast to impact the Bahamas or the US by that point. "Significant storm surge is not expected in the northwestern Bahamas from this system," the Miami-based NHC said—good news for residents of Abaco and Grand Bahama still trying to get back on track after Dorian swept through early this month.

But about two to four inches (five to 10 centimeters) of rain were expected in most areas, with isolated flooding in low-lying areas, the Bahamian National Emergency Management Agency (NEMA) cautioned. "I know this is not something people in Abaco and Grand Bahama would like to hear at this time, but it's out there and the storm will bring heavy downpours over the Bahama islands," Shavon Bonimy, senior meteorologist in Grand Bahama, told The Nassau Guardian. "So we have to be prepared."

NEMA spokesman Carl Smith told reporters on Friday that the storm would likely "slow down logistics" of relief efforts, but added: "We have contingency plans in place." "Fuel and water remain the biggest needs in Abaco," Smith said. So far, the death toll from monster storm Dorian is at 52, but officials say that number is likely to go up. About 1,300 people are still unaccounted for, but Smith said officials are working to cross-reference new data and locate the missing. Former Bahamian prime minister Hubert Ingraham said earlier



IN SPACE: This satellite image obtained from NOAA/RAMMB, shows Tropical Storm Humberto as it moves near the Bahamas. — AFP

this week he feared the final death toll could be in the hundreds.

Climate crisis

Meanwhile 71 people were staying in shelters on Grand Bahama island and 2,037 in shelters in New Providence, where Nassau is located, Smith said. "I just came back from Abaco. I must say (I) was horrified. I've never seen such a level of systematic devastation." UN Secretary General Antonio Guterres said Saturday after traveling to the islands the day prior. "Hurricane Dorian has been classified as category five. I think it's category hell."

Guterres said Dorian demonstrated the need to address climate change. "It was not powered by the devil. We have always had many hurricanes, but now they are more intense, and they are more frequent, and they are powered by climate change," he said. "We need to make sure that we reverse the present trend where climate change is running faster than what we are." While he congratulated the Bahamian and other governments along with aid agencies who responded to the hurricane, he warned recovering from the disaster "will require a large investment" and said the country deserved the support of the international community. — AFP

Ocean Viking set to return to Libya rescues

ROME: Charity rescue vessel Ocean Viking is preparing to return to rescuing shipwreck survivors off Libya after disembarking 82 migrants in Italy following a reversal of government policy in Rome. Italian authorities identified and carried out medical checks on the sub-Saharan African migrants after they disembarked overnight on southern island Lampedusa after more than six days at sea.

Under an ad hoc European deal, Italy, France and Germany will take 24 migrants each, Portugal will take eight and Luxembourg two, Italian media reported. "After disembarkation, the Ocean Viking should head back to her search and rescue mission in the Central Mediterranean, because people continue to die in these waters where no rescue ship is currently present in the area," Nicola Stalla, the vessel's search and rescue coordinator, said on Saturday.

European leaders are trying to thrash out an automatic mechanism that would see rescued migrants who are brought to Italy or Malta swiftly redistributed around Europe. It is not yet clear how many countries will sign up to the scheme. Italy's new government, sworn in last week, is forging its own migrant policy after 14 months of former interior minister Matteo Salvini's hardline stance against charity vessels and migrants.



SICILY: The Ocean Viking rescue ship sails off the coast of the island of Lampedusa in the Mediterranean Sea. — AFP

The far-right leader, now in opposition, hit out at a rally in northern Italy at the German captain of another charity rescue vessel, the Sea Watch 3. Salvini lashed out at Carola Rackete as "a pampered communist" and "someone who nearly killed five soldiers while on duty". Rackete, 31, was arrested in June 2019 and held for several days after the Sea-Watch 3 hit an Italian police speedboat while entering Lampedusa port despite a ban on entering Italy's waters.

Her arrest was overturned by a court and she was released, but the ship was seized. Italy and Malta say that they bear disproportionate responsibility for migrants making the perilous Mediterranean crossing as they are the closest European

Union states to Libya, from where they mainly depart. Italian Prime Minister Giuseppe Conte is expected to discuss the plan with France's President Emmanuel Macron when the latter visits Rome on Wednesday.

It will then be studied in more detail at a meeting of interior ministers on September 23 in Malta, ahead of a European summit in October in Luxembourg. Former Democratic Party prime minister Matteo Renzi has called for "a great Marshall plan for Africa. More cooperation, more investment," he tweeted. According to intelligence reports cited by Italian media yesterday, an estimated 5,000-8,000 migrants are waiting to leave Libya via the Mediterranean. — AFP

Spain breaks up drugs ring run by 'Messi of hashish'

MADRID: Spanish police said yesterday they had broken up a major drugs ring run by a Moroccan known as the "Messi of hashish", who is now on the run. The operation began in February, when police on the British territory of Gibraltar found a boat that was about to sink with its three crew on board—and 84 bales of hashish.

Gibraltar sits off the south coast of Spain at one of the shortest crossing points to north Africa. Since then, Spanish police have arrested 45 people and issued warrants against another 16, including the leader, El Haj. Police had arrested Abdellah El Haj in November 2017 before releasing him on bail last March, since when he has been untraceable, said a spokesman for Spain's Guardia Civil force.

"Messi" has been on the run for a long time and runs the network from the outside, but several of his lieutenants have fallen," he added. A statement from the force said the arrests so far had effectively broken up one of the most active drugs networks operating on the Guadalquivir river.

The river, which comes out into the North Atlantic Ocean just north of Cadiz and not far from north Africa, is considered the main route for gangs smuggling Moroccan hashish into Spain.

Police have seized five boats, 17 vehicles, more than half a million euros and several weapons. They also dismantled a shipyard that was building the go-fast boats used to smuggle the drugs across from Morocco. Spain has over the last year stepped up its campaign against drug trafficking in southern Spain, having boosted police numbers there last year. Between July 2018 and July 2019 they have seized 143 tons of hashish and 5.4 tons of cocaine in and around Gibraltar, said the interior ministry. — AFP