

International

Trump shows no surrender in first post-election rally

US outgoing president launches another litany of allegations

VALDOSTA: President Donald Trump made clear Saturday he had no intention of relinquishing his baseless claims that last month's election was stolen from him, telling a raucous crowd at his first post-poll rally he would somehow still win. In a speech remarkable for its twisting of reality more than a month after the November 3 election, the outgoing president launched into another litany of allegations that the polls won handily by Democrat Joe Biden were rigged.

The crowd in Valdosta, Georgia for what was nominally a rally in support of two Republican Senate candidates facing a hugely consequential runoff election roared in support, at one point chanting "fight for Trump." Even with COVID-19 cases surging nationwide, there were few masks in the crowd and many ignored social-distancing rules. In a nearly two-hour speech Trump, 74, declared he would not concede, at times sticking to his script but regularly going off-the-cuff for his more incendiary claims.

"We're winning this election," Trump told the rally, which was similar to his many gatherings prior to the election, down to the soaring country song "God Bless the USA" played as he took the stage with First Lady Melania Trump. "It's rigged. It's a fixed deal." It was yet another example of Trump breaking democratic norms, engaging in conspiracy-mongering and presenting falsehoods in ways unprecedented in US history.

His stance has raised the question of how he will react when Biden's January 20 swearing-in date arrives. "The swing states that we're all fighting over now, I won them all by a lot," Trump said, falsely. "And I have to say, if I lost, I'd be a very gracious loser. If I lost, I would say, I lost, and I'd go to Florida and I'd take it easy and I'd go around and I'd say I did a good job. But you can't ever accept when they steal and rig and rob."

Huge stakes

Trump has barely left the White House since Biden was projected winner of the election on November 7, though he has made a number of trips to his nearby golf course. There had been concerns from some Republicans over whether Trump's continuing claims of fraud would drive down voter turnout among Republicans in the upcoming election,



VALDOSTA, Georgia: Supporters cheer as US President Donald Trump gestures after speaking during a rally to support Republican Senate candidates at Valdosta Regional Airport on Saturday. —AFP

making his appearance in Georgia somewhat of a gamble. The runoff election will decide which party controls the US Senate, and Trump in his speech continued his fear-mongering about rival Democrats.

"The voters of Georgia will determine which party runs every committee, writes every piece of legislation, controls every single taxpayer dollar," he said. "Very simply, you will decide whether your children will grow up in a socialist country or whether they will grow up in a free country." If Democratic challengers Raphael Warnock and Jon Ossoff defeat Republican senators Kelly Loeffler and David Perdue, the Senate will be evenly divided at 50-50, meaning Democratic Vice President Kamala Harris would cast

any deciding votes, as the Constitution dictates.

The race has drawn enormous attention. One measure of the intense interest: With donations pouring in from across the country, the candidates have already spent more than \$315 million, the AdImpact website reported, an astounding figure for senatorial races. And figures as prominent as ex-president Barack Obama, Vice President Mike Pence and now Trump himself have scrambled to boost voter turnout. But while Trump offered words of praise for the two Republicans and invited them on stage for brief comments on Saturday, he spent much of the time arguing that he had won the election. —AFP

Asteroid dust collected by Japan probe arrives on Earth

TOKYO: In a streak of light across the night sky, samples collected from a distant asteroid arrived on Earth yesterday after being dropped off by Japanese space probe Hayabusa-2. Scientists hope the precious samples, which are expected to amount to no more than 0.1 grams of material, could help shed light on the origin of life and the formation of the universe. The capsule carrying samples entered the atmosphere just before 2:30 am Japan time, creating a shooting-star-like fireball as it entered Earth's atmosphere en route to a landing site in Australia.

"Six years and it has finally come back to Earth," an official narrating a live broadcast of the arrival said, as images showed officials from Japan's space agency JAXA cheering and pumping their fists in excitement. A few hours later, JAXA confirmed the samples had been recovered, with help from beacons emitted by the capsule as it plummeted to Earth after separating from Hayabusa-2 on Saturday, while the fridge-sized probe was some 220,000 kilometers away. "We found the capsule! Together with the parachute! Wow!" the mission's Twitter account announced.

People who had gathered at a public viewing site near

JAXA's office in suburban Tokyo - despite the event taking place a few hours after midnight - also erupted with cheers. "I'm extremely happy because the capsule has returned home safely. Hayabusa-2 did a great job," a primary school boy said. The capsule was recovered in the southern Australian desert, and will now be in the hands of scientists performing initial, non-invasive analysis including checking for any gas emissions. It will then be sent to Japan.

Samples with organic material?

The samples were collected by Hayabusa-2, which launched in 2014, from the asteroid Ryugu, some 300 million kilometers from Earth. The probe collected both surface dust and pristine material from below the surface that was stirred up by firing an "impactor" into the asteroid. The material is believed to be unchanged since the time the universe was formed.

Larger celestial bodies like Earth went through radical changes including heating and solidifying, changing the composition of the materials on their surface and below. But "when it comes to smaller planets or smaller asteroids, these substances were not melted, and therefore it is believed that substances from 4.6 billion years ago are still there," Hayabusa-2 mission manager Makoto Yoshikawa told reporters before the capsule arrived. Scientists are especially keen to discover whether the samples contain organic matter, which could have helped seed life on Earth.

"We still don't know the origin of life on Earth and through this Hayabusa-2 mission, if we are able to study and understand these organic materials from Ryugu, it



This handout photograph taken and released yesterday shows recovery operations of the re-entry capsule carrying samples collected from a distant asteroid after being dropped off by Japanese space probe Hayabusa-2, following its landing in South Australia. —AFP

could be that these organic materials were the source of life on Earth," Yoshikawa said. "We've never had materials like this before... water and organic matters will be subject to research, so this is a very valuable opportunity," said Motoo Ito, senior researcher at the Japan Agency for Marine-Earth Science and Technology. Half of Hayabusa-2's samples will be shared between JAXA, US space agency NASA and other international organizations, and the rest kept for future study as advances are made in analytic technology. —AFP

Insect invaders threaten Rome's iconic pines

ROME: Rome's majestic umbrella pines are as much part of the landscape as the ruins and cobble streets, but they are under threat from a tiny insect invader-the pine tortoise scale. "If we do nothing, the pines of Rome will be destroyed by the thousands," warned agronomist Franco Milito, who estimates there are around 60,000 such trees in the city's public areas and another 30,000 on private land. "And they are really the trees of Rome, which shape the views. We must look after them." The insects, originally from North America, can kill trees already weakened by the urban environment within just two or three years, experts told AFP. "It's very serious," said Patrizio Zucca, head of the association of agronomists in Rome. "Urgent action is needed."

Little vampire

Toumeyella parvicornis, to give it its Latin name, is about three millimeters long, and its reddish-brown oval shell resembles a tortoise. It was unknown in Italy until five years ago, but after ravaging the stone pines of Naples in the south, it

has moved up the coast. The insect operates like a little vampire, sucking with its syringe-like mouth the sap from both the tree's needles and its bark. It produces a sweet white excrement, on which thick black mould develops, covering the tree and blocking the process of photosynthesis.

Massacre in Naples

In Campania, the southern region that includes Naples, although many pines succumbed, others resisted. "The scales act like agents of natural selection," said Antonio Pietro Garonna, professor of entomology at Naples Federico II university. He suspects that high temperatures, over 35 degrees Celsius (95 degrees Fahrenheit), can cause them to disperse. "If, with climate change, temperatures rise in the summer, the scales will suffer a lot," he said. But until then, "it's a massacre", laments Vincenzo Topa, an agronomist living in Posillipo, a coastal district of Naples. The area once boasted a glorious park of 1,200 pines, opened in 1931 by the Fascist leader Benito Mussolini.

He also planted pines across Rome, making them so much a symbol of Italy that they became known not by their Latin name "pinus pinea" but as "pino italico". But "out of around 10,000 pines in Naples, at least half are dead", Topa said.

No obvious solution

Authorities in Lazio, the region that



ROME: Workers prune pine trees opposite the Colosseum on Dec 2, 2020. —AFP

includes Rome, are urgently seeking a solution. One option is to inject chemicals into the trunk of each tree, but it is expensive and was effective only 20 to 30 percent of the time in Campania, according to Amadio Lancia, the local official responsible for the issue in Lazio. And many products cannot be sprayed directly on trees in urban areas for public health reasons, he added. "The only solution will be to use natural predators, but a study will take time." A predatory scale was introduced a century ago in Campania to protect against those attacking citrus fruits but "their numbers are still insufficient", Garonna said. —AFP

US notches a record number of COVID-19 cases, death

WASHINGTON: The United States notched a record number of coronavirus cases in 24 hours for the third day running, as it was reported that Britain's Queen Elizabeth II will get a vaccine within weeks. A tally by Johns Hopkins University showed the world's worst-hit country-which has seen a dramatic virus resurgence in recent weeks-reached nearly 230,000 new infections and 2,527 COVID-related deaths on Saturday alone. For two weeks, the US has regularly

topped 2,000 deaths per day, as it had in the spring at the height of the first wave of the country's outbreak. US health officials warned of a surge after millions of Americans traveled to celebrate last week's Thanksgiving holiday despite pleas from authorities to stay home. The coronavirus has now killed more than 1.5 million people and infected 66 million around the world since emerging in China last year, according to a tally from

official sources compiled by AFP.

In Britain, it was reported that the 94-year-old monarch will receive the Pfizer-BioNTech coronavirus vaccine within weeks after UK regulators granted emergency approval. The rollout of the vaccine will begin next week. The queen and her 99-year-old husband Prince Philip are in line to get the jab early due to their age and will not receive preferential treatment, the Mail on Sunday reported. —AFP

News in brief

Oxygen shortage in Pakistan

PESHAWAR: At least six COVID-19 patients died after "criminal negligence" resulted in a delayed supply of oxygen to a hospital in north-west Pakistan, officials said yesterday, as the country battles a second wave of the epidemic. More than 200 patients - including nearly 100 with coronavirus - were left for hours with limited supplies of oxygen at a government-run hospital in Peshawar. "The sad incident happened due to lack of central oxygen supply in the hospital," provincial health minister Taimur Saleem Jhagra told a press conference, confirming the deaths. "We will hold an inquiry and get to the bottom of the incident," he added, promising action against those responsible "for this criminal negligence". Hospital spokesman Farhad Khan said a disruption in oxygen supplies affected some 200 people, "including 96 COVID-19 patients". He blamed a private supplier, saying the Rawalpindi-based company had "failed to meet the growing demand". —AFP

Indonesia minister arrested

JAKARTA: Indonesia's social affairs minister was arrested yesterday for allegedly taking \$1.2 million in bribes linked to food aid for those hit by the coronavirus pandemic. Juliar Batubara was named as a suspect after Indonesian anti-corruption agents seized suitcases, backpacks and envelopes stuffed with cash equivalent to \$1.2 million in a sting operation on Saturday. He turned himself in yesterday at the anti-corruption agency's headquarters, becoming the second minister in President Joko Widodo's government to be arrested over alleged graft in recent weeks. "That's the people's money... it's aid urgently needed to help during COVID-19 and for the national economic recovery," Widodo said after Batubara's arrest, vowing he would not protect any corrupt officials. Indonesia's economy - Southeast Asia's biggest - has been hit hard by the pandemic, and the government has rolled out aid programs such as food packages to help those in need. —AFP

China docking in lunar orbit

SHANGHAI: A Chinese probe carrying samples from the lunar surface successfully docked yesterday with a spacecraft orbiting the moon, in another space first for the nation, state media reported. The manoeuvre was part of the ambitious Chang'e-5 mission-named after a mythical Chinese Moon goddess-to bring back the first lunar samples in four decades. The cargo capsule carrying lunar rocks and soil lifted off from the surface on Thursday, and docked with the orbiter yesterday morning, the official Xinhua news agency said, citing the China National Space Administration (CNSA). Xinhua said it was China's first "rendezvous and docking in lunar orbit". The cargo capsule's departure from the lunar surface on Thursday was also a first: the first liftoff of a Chinese craft from an extraterrestrial body. The capsule transferred the moon samples to the orbiter, which will separate and return to Earth, Xinhua said. —AFP

CONSUMER PROTECTION DEPARTMENT

RECALL INFORMATION

Model: GLE Class (167)

Mercedes-Benz Cars

Model year: 2019 - 2021

RECALL REASON

Mercedes-Benz AG has determined that on certain GLE-Class vehicles (167 platform) with a high-lock seat in the second row bench seat, the middle seatbelt buckle could be pushed into the gap between the vehicle body and the seat cushion in certain circumstances while buckling up. If a passenger does not fasten the seatbelt according to the Operator's Manual, the risk of injury in a crash could increase.

REMEDY

As a precautionary measure, we will adjust the positioning of the double buckle on the affected vehicles. The required work will certainly be carried out free of charge.

CONTACT

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Phone 1-887-888 at Extension 1721, 1722, 1723, 1724, 1726, 1731, 1732

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