

Mueller refutes report that Trump told Cohen to lie, gets prez's praise

Rare Remark From Spl Counsel Came As Dems Planned A Probe

Washington: Special counsel Robert Mueller's office has issued a rare public statement disputing the accuracy of BuzzFeed News' report that President Donald Trump's former attorney told Mueller that Trump directed the lawyer to lie to Congress.

"It was a total phony story and I appreciate the special counsel coming out with a statement last night. I think it was very appropriate that they did so," Trump told reporters at the White House on Saturday. BuzzFeed, citing two unidentified law enforcement officials, reported that Trump directed lawyer Michael Cohen to lie to Congress about a Moscow real estate project and that Cohen told Mueller the president personally instructed him to lie about the timing of the deal.

The report said Mueller's investigators learned about

Trump's directive "through interviews with multiple witnesses from the Trump Organization and internal company emails, text messages, and a cache of other documents". The report said Cohen acknowledged Trump's instructions when he was interviewed by the Mueller team.

The statement by Mueller's office on Friday night doesn't cite any specific errors. Spokesman Peter Carr said that "BuzzFeed's description of specific statements to the special counsel's office, and characterization of documents and testimony obtained by this office, regarding Michael Cohen's congressional testimony are not accurate."

BuzzFeed spokesman Matt Mittenenthal said the publication stands by its reporting and urged readers to "stay tuned" as they worked to determine what Mueller was deny-



'GREAT DAY FOR COUNTRY': Soon after the special counsel's statement, Trump retweeted several posts that called the story fake news. He later tweeted: 'A very sad day for journalism, but a great day for our Country!'

ing, Ben Smith, editor-in-chief of BuzzFeed News, also said the publication stands by its reporting and the sources who informed it. "We urge the special counsel to make clear what he's disputing," Smith said.

Immediately after the special counsel's statement was issued, Trump retweeted several posts that called the story fake news. He later tweeted: "A very sad day for journalism, but a great day for our Country!" The extraordinary statement from Mueller's office came

after congressional Democrats had pledged to investigate whether the report was true. Any evidence that Trump directed a witness to lie to investigators would place him in the greatest political and legal jeopardy yet.

Cohen pleaded guilty in November to lying to Congress to cover up that he was negotiating the Trump Tower project on Trump's behalf during the heat of his presidential campaign. The charge was brought by Mueller and was the

result of Cohen's cooperation with that probe.

Cohen admitted that he lied when he told lawmakers he had never agreed to travel to Russia in connection with the Moscow project and when he said that he'd decided by the end of January 2016 that the "proposal was not feasible for a variety of business reasons and should not be pursued further".

He was sentenced to three years in prison for crimes that included arranging the payment of hush money to conceal his boss' alleged sexual affairs, telling a judge that he agreed to them and again to cover up Trump's "dirty deeds" out of "blind loyalty".

Lanny Davis, a Cohen adviser, declined to comment. Cohen is scheduled to testify publicly before the House Oversight and Reform Committee on February 7. The top Democrat on the Senate Intelligence Committee, Mark Warner, said on Friday that he expects Cohen to talk to that committee in February. AP

An end to shutdown in sight?

Washington: President Donald Trump will propose a deal on Saturday meant to end a 29-day partial government shutdown, offering a compromise with Democrats on immigration but sticking to his demand for funding for a border wall, a source familiar with his plans said.

In a speech, Trump will continue to demand \$5.7 billion in wall funding, but also offer backing for legislation to protect young undocumented immigrants known as "Dreamers," as well as temporary protected status (TPS) holders, the source said, confirming a report by Axios. Vice President Mike Pence, White House chief of staff Mick Mulvaney and Jared Kushner, Trump's son-in-law and a senior White House adviser, have been instrumental in crafting the deal, the source said.

Trump is to make the announcement in a 4pm EST (2.30am IST) speech. The source said Trump does not plan to declare a national emergency along the US-Mexico border, a step he threatened to take earlier in his struggle with Congress over the shutdown triggered by his wall-funding ultimatum.

Declaration of an emergency would allow Trump to bypass Congress to pay for a wall, although such a step would likely prompt a legal challenge over constitutional powers from congressional Democrats. Trump is under pressure to end the shutdown with Americans increasingly blaming him for refusing to sign spending bills that would provide paychecks for 800,000 federal workers. REUTERS

Alaska town reels as Coast Guard weathers on without pay

Thomas Gibbons-Neff

Kodiak: The morning after more than 40,000 Coast Guard members missed their first paycheck, and the federal government's shutdown stretched into its fourth week, Eleanor King placed an empty jar next to her diner's cash register. In scribbled black marker, a sign on the jar, written in all capital letters, read: Donation Coast Guard. By 9 am on Wednesday, nearly an hour before a rainy winter sunrise, the jar held \$120 — money with which patrons were effectively buying meals for members of the maritime force.

While the shutdown has affected hundreds of thousands of federal workers across the US, halting paychecks and furloughing those who have been deemed nonessential personnel, it has brought a particular chill to Kodiak, a small town of 6,300 on an isolated island in the Gulf of Alaska. Roughly a quarter of the island's population is either an employee or dependent family member of the Coast Guard, which has now had to scale back some of its operations in one of the world's most dangerous waterways.

"This impacts everyone," King said. Like some of the other businesses in Kodiak, her diner is giving a 10% discount to Coast Guard mem-



The shutdown entered its 29th day on Saturday. About 4.6 lakh workers are working without pay, while about 3.4 lakh of them have been furloughed

George W Bush treats his Secret Service detail to pizza to thank them

Former President George W Bush treated his Secret Service detail to pizza to show his appreciation for their service without paychecks during the partial government shutdown. A photo posted on Bush's Instagram and Facebook pages shows him delivering pizzas to the detail. Bush posted that he and wife Laura "are grateful to our Secret Service personnel and the thousands of federal employees who are working hard for our country without a paycheck". He said "it's time for leaders on both sides to put politics aside, come together, and end this shutdown". Bush spokesman Freddy Ford said the photo was taken on Friday in Florida. AP



bers; the donations from her jar help pay for meals. Locals are donating fish and game from their freezers. Big Al's Take and Bake, another restaurant in the area, sent more than 30 pizzas to a food bank on the Coast Guard base. They quickly disappeared.

But eventually, said Mayor

Patricia Branson, if the government does not reopen soon, the business owners and landlords will have to find a way to get paid. "I think it's important that the people in the faraway land DC understand what's going on in a small town. And how people are affected by all this nonsense." NYT

Trump to meet Kim next month as nuclear deal remains elusive

Mark Landler & David E Sanger

Washington: President Donald Trump will meet with North Korea's leader, Kim Jong-un, in late February, the White House announced on Friday, renewing a diplomatic dialogue that has eased tensions with a rogue nuclear state but has shown no progress in eliminating its nuclear arsenal.

A White House official said the date and the location of the meeting would be announced later, suggesting either the Trump administration was seeking concessions from the North Koreans before Trump commits to the meeting or the two sides were still haggling over logistical details. Vietnam, Thailand and Hawaii have all been mentioned as potential settings.

The announcement came after a 90-minute meeting between Trump and Kim Jong-chol, a former North Korean intelligence chief, who has acted as the top nuclear negotiator for Kim. Trump, who had made a celebratory appearance after a session with the intelligence chief last June to announce his first meeting with Kim, this time stayed out of sight.

Trump's press secretary, Sarah Huckabee Sanders, said, "We've continued to make progress." The US, she said, will keep sanctions against North Korea in place until Kim agrees to surrender his arsenal. She added the North had shown "good faith" in releasing imprisoned Americans. NYT

Mexico blast kills 66 after 'thieves' rupture pipeline

76 People Hurt; Rescuers Look For 85 Still Missing

Tlahuelilpan: At least 66 people were killed after a pipeline ruptured by suspected fuel thieves exploded in Mexico, authorities said on Saturday, as President Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador defended the army despite its failure to clear the site before the blast. More than 85 other people on Saturday were listed as missing as relatives of the deceased and onlookers gathered around the scene of carnage.

Dozens of burned bodies lay in the charred field where the blast occurred on Friday by the town of Tlahuelilpan in the state of Hidalgo in what was one of the worst incidents to hit Mexico's troubled oil infrastructure in years. Forensic experts inspected and photographed the remains while soldiers and other military personnel guarded the cordoned-off area that was littered with half-burned shoes, clothes and containers used by people to collect fuel.

At a news conference with Lopez Obrador, Hidalgo State Governor Omar Fayad said 66 people were killed and 76 people injured in Friday evening's explosion, which happened as local residents tried to fill buckets and drums with fuel. Veteran leftist Lopez Obrador launched a crackdown on fuel theft on Decem-



Firefighters at the blast scene in Tlahuelilpan, Mexico, on Friday. The explosion took place as locals tried to fill buckets and drums with fuel

ber 27 and ordered pipelines to be closed temporarily to stop illegal taps draining billions of dollars from the heavily-indebted state oil firm Petroleos Mexicanos (Pemex).

Video on social media of people filling buckets from the pipeline during daylight hours in the presence of the armed forces. But Lopez Obrador, who vowed to continue the crackdown on fuel theft, defended the army against questions about why soldiers failed to prevent the tragedy. "We're not going to fight fire with fire," he said. "We think that people are good, honest, and if we've reached these extremes ... it's because they were abandoned."

Backing comments made earlier by his minister for public security, Lopez Obrador

said the army had been right to avoid a confrontation due to the number of people seeking to benefit from free fuel at the pipeline site. The priority, he said, was to eradicate the social problems and lack of opportunities that had prompted people to put their lives at risk to get at the fuel — a few litres of which are worth more than the daily minimum wage in Mexico.

Much of the rush to siphon off fuel and the chaos of the explosion was captured on mobile phones and began quickly circulating on social media. Mexico's top federal prosecutor Alejandro Gertz said the pipeline was tapped deliberately, but that the investigation was complicated because everyone right at the blast site died. REUTERS

FB may have to pay record fine over 'privacy breach'

Cecilia Kang

Washington: The Federal Trade Commission is in the advanced stages of its investigation into whether Facebook violated privacy rules and is expected to seek large fines from the company, according to two people familiar with the inquiry.

The five members of the commission met in mid-December to discuss the investigation, according to the people, who would speak only on the condition of anonymity. The meeting is a sign that the investigation is far along, the people said, because the commissioners rarely meet in the early stages of a probe.

The investigation, which began in late March, is continuing, and the commissioners and staff have not reached a final conclusion, including how much the agency might seek in fines, the people said. Consumer protection and enforcement staff members have provided updates on what they believe is evidence of privacy violations, but they have not



The highest financial penalty imposed was Google's \$22 million settlement in 2012 for privacy violations. Members of US Federal Trade Commission are said to have discussed a higher fine for the company submitted a final report.

The commissioners would vote on any recommendations from the staff, including whether to pursue fines or other penalties. They do not always approve staff recommendations.

The highest financial penalty imposed on a tech company was Google's \$22 million settlement in 2012 for privacy violations. In the December meeting, the commissioners discussed a higher fine for Facebook, the people said. The FTC declined to comment. Facebook, which has repeatedly defended its actions, also declined to comment. NYT NEWS SERVICE

Myanmar army kills 13 Rakhine rebels in clashes

Naypyitaw: Myanmar's army has killed 13 rebel fighters in the western Rakhine State, a military spokesman said on Friday, as government troops battle to contain a new insurgency in the troubled region.

Fighting between security forces and the Arakan Army, an ethnic armed group seeking greater autonomy for Rakhine, has forced some 5,000 civilians to flee their homes since early December, according to the United Nations.

The military also announced on Friday that the Arakan Army has been classified a terrorist organisation after the recent attacks. The violence has brought fresh turmoil to the region and represents another setback for the Buddhist-majority country's embattled peace process.

"Between January 5 and 16, 2019, there were eight clashes and five landmine explosions," said Major General Tun Tun Nyi, speaking at a rare press conference in the capital, Naypyitaw.

"Thirteen enemy bodies and three weapons were seized, and some soldiers died and were injured on our side," he said. He declined to elaborate on the number of government troops killed. AGENCIES

New car at Prince Philip's doorstep hrs after crash

Prince Philip won't have to wait for insurers to assess his damaged Land Rover — there's another one waiting on the driveway at Sandringham.

Hours after being given the all clear at the Queen Elizabeth Hospital in King's Lynn, Norfolk, royal aides took delivery of another black Land Rover Freelander, driven into the Sandringham Estate inside a delivery truck. The Land Rover is an exact replica of the one Philip was driving before Thursday's drama where his two-ton armoured 4x4 collided with a Kia people carrier before overturning.

Norfolk Police are investigating as legal experts suggested the Duke could be prosecuted for driving without due care and attention, with an unlimited fine. But Nick Freeman, a lawyer who speci-



LICENCE TO RIDE

alises in motoring offences, said the most likely scenario is that he will agree to surrender his licence and agree not to drive on public roads.

The crash has provoked a discussion about whether Britain should stop older people from driving. The country will have 1 million drivers older than 85 by 2025, doubled from a few years ago. And those drivers are more vulnerable to crash injuries because of their frailty. DAILY MIRROR & AGENCIES

Will work till end for orderly Brexit: Merkel

Chancellor Angela Merkel framed Brexit as a historic test of the EU's ability to withstand crises, saying both sides are responsible for avoiding a risky no-deal departure. Merkel's comments suggest an opening after PM May made phone calls to EU leaders, including the German chancellor, in the days after she suffered a parliamentary defeat this week of the withdrawal deal.

Vowing to work until the "last day" to guarantee an orderly divorce, Merkel signalled that responsibility doesn't lie solely with May to show EU leaders her cards. "We also have a responsibility to shape this separation process in a responsible way, so that people don't look back in 50 years... and say we weren't in position to make a compromise". BLOOMBERG

Afghan Taliban reject talks with US in Pak

Omer Farooq Khan | TNN

Islamabad: The Afghan Taliban have denied media reports that they would hold talks with the US special representative for Afghan reconciliation in Islamabad and reiterated their refusal to meet officials of the Afghan government.

"We want to clarify that we will not hold any meeting with Zalmay Khalilzad (the US representative) in Islamabad," Taliban spokesman Zabihullah Mujahid said. Following Khalilzad's meeting with Pakistani officials, media reported on Friday that militants had agreed to meet Khalilzad-led US officials and that they would send a 12-member delegation to Pakistan.

According to Taliban leaders, Islamabad had indeed asked them to meet Khalilzad

and also include Afghan government officials in talks. "We have rejected Pakistan's approach and suggestion. We are clear that Kabul's puppet regime is not in position to fulfill our demands," said a senior Taliban representative, requesting anonymity.

Khalilzad and senior US officials have been in Pakistan for past three days. They want the Pakistani authorities to arrange a meeting with the Afghan Taliban in Islamabad. Ambassador Khalilzad reached Islamabad on Thursday and met Pakistan Prime Minister Imran Khan and foreign minister Shah Mehmood Qureshi. Visit of the US special envoy is taking place in the background of a deadlock in talks between the US and the Taliban over the start of a reconciliation process.

Selfie-taking Satan statue divides a town in Spain

Paiko Karasz

The devil was set to come to the historic city of Segovia, Spain, but Catholic residents who object to those plans are seeking to run Satan out of town. Officials had invited the devil, in the form of a 5-foot bronze statue created by artist José Antonio Abella. Abella portrayed his paunchy, smiling devil as frozen while taking a selfie.

The local council commissioned the statue, inspired by a local legend, last year to try to

lure tourists to a less-popular part of Segovia's Old Town, a Unesco heritage site. The city of 52,000 is known for its 16th-century Gothic cathedral, a Moorish castle called Alcázar and a 2,000-year-old Roman aqueduct. The statue was to be placed on a wall above the Old Town, and the presentation appeared to be a marriage of modern culture and ancient myths. But the dispute is raising new questions about the coexistence of religion and artistic freedom in Spain.

A group of Catholics in Se-



The proposed design for the statue. It may be installed in the Spanish city of Segovia. But some locals have objected, saying a 'friendly' devil amounted to 'glorifying evil'

govia were outraged by plans for the statue, saying that a friendly devil amounted to "glorifying evil" and would be offensive to Catholics. A petition to get rid of the statue gathered over 5,000 signatures in three months. The San Miguel and San Frutos Association sought a court injunction to stop the installation. "We found it repulsive... we don't think that this statue is suitable to represent the city," Maria Esther Lazaro, a founder of the association, said.

The artist said he was hurt by the controversy. To Abella,

the statue has nothing to do with religion. It refers to a Segovia myth that the devil, not the Romans, gave the city its famous aqueduct, which towers over the Old Town of Segovia. According to legend, the devil offered a deal to a girl who was tired of dragging water through the city's steep streets: He would get the water to her home before dawn, in return for her soul. As devil laboured to build the aqueduct, she prayed. A storm came, holding up the devil's work, and he lost his bid by one stone. NYT NEWS SERVICE

AROUND THE WORLD



WOMEN MARCH ON: Protesters participate in Women's March in Washington, DC, on Saturday. Demonstrators gathered for 80 events across 31 cities, including London, Berlin and New York, to protest violence against women and the gendered impact of austerity

The show must go on... 2019 Oscars may not have a host

Hollywood's biggest night — the Oscars — is set to take place next month without a host for the first time in 30 years, after comedian Kevin Hart pulled out of the gig and no suitable replacement was found. Though organisers have yet to confirm the plans, entertainment insiders say the show's producers are forging ahead with preparations for the 91st Academy Awards on February 24 with no emcee. If all goes ahead, it would be the

first ceremony without a host since the 1989 gala — one seen as one of the most embarrassing ever. As gala organisers struggle to overcome a steady decline in viewership, many say the failure to find a host is actually good news.

Pak exports over 100,000kg of human hair to China Pakistan has exported to China over 100,000kg of human hair valued at \$132,000 over the last five years. The ministry of commerce and textile told the National Assembly that 105,461kg of human hair was exported to China in the last five years, the Dawn reported. Demand for human hair has increased in China due to growth in the

makeup industry.

Thai cave rescue turned into film, out on mission anniversary A Thai-born director who took just weeks to shoot the first film about the dramatic cave rescue of the "Wild Boars" football team says his focus is on authenticity and the mission's "unsung" heroes, with book publishers and Hollywood studios jostling to make their versions of the saga. Tom Waller says "The Cave", which is aiming for Thai release for the July anniversary of the operation, will be a "genuine" retelling of the gripping mission to extract the 12 boys and their coach from the waterlogged Tham Luang cave.