

Barr stays away from House hearing

Attorney-General was not amenable to its format, specifically the Democrats’ desire to use legal counsel

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WASHINGTON

U.S. Attorney-General Bill Barr did not appear before the House of Representatives Judiciary Committee for a hearing that was scheduled for 9 a.m. on Thursday morning. Mr. Barr had already announced his decision to stay away from the hearing on Wednesday, a day when he was grilled for five hours by the Senate Judiciary Committee. The House could now hold Mr. Barr in contempt.

Congressional Democrats are probing whether a four-page letter Mr. Barr sent lawmakers on March 24, days after he had received the Mueller report, misrepresented Special Counsel Robert Mueller’s findings on whether U.S. President Donald Trump obstructed the investigation into whether Russia meddled in the 2016 presidential elections.

An empty chair
Mr. Barr was not amenable to the format of the House hearing on Thursday, specifically the Democrats’ desire to use legal counsel (in addition to Representatives) to question him.
The Attorney-General’s

chair remained conspicuously empty at the House hearing which started at 9 a.m. as planned and adjourned shortly after opening remarks were made by House Judiciary Committee Jerrold Nadler.

During Wednesday’s Senate hearing, Mr. Barr frequently defended the President’s conduct and attempted to mitigate concerns raised by the Mueller report. He was questioned on the Mueller investigation’s revelations that Mr. Trump had called former White House counsel Don McGahn twice in June 2017 to get Mr. McGahn to interfere in the investigation.

As per the Mueller report, Mr. McGahn recalled the President saying, “Mueller has to go,” and “Call me back when you do it.” Mr. McGahn had said he had planned to resign rather than comply with the President’s requests. Mr. Barr said that the President was just trying to get Mr. McGahn to bring up a conflict of interest issue in the Mueller probe with Deputy-Attorney-General Rod Rosenstein, who was overseeing the investigation.

Mr. Trump had also asked Mr. McGahn to write a letter



Attorney-General William Barr testifying before the Senate Judiciary Committee in Washington on Wednesday. ■AP

denying the incident. Mr. Barr said it could be that Mr. Trump wanted to correct media accounts of what had transpired.

Mr. Barr also told the Senate during the hearing that the President had the authority to fire Mr. Mueller and that made it difficult to prove that obstruction of justice had occurred. “In this kind of situation, where you have a facially innocent act that’s authorised by the Constitution, it’s hard to establish beyond a reasonable doubt that it’s corrupt,” he said.

The Mueller report did not conclude that Mr. Trump obstructed justice but at the same time it did not exonerate him, as the President has

claimed it did. In fact, the report reads, “If we had confidence after a thorough investigation of the facts that the President clearly did not commit obstruction of justice, we would so state.”

Mr. Barr called “a bit snitty” a letter Mr. Mueller had written to him in late March complaining that the latter’s four-page “did not fully capture the context, nature, and substance” of the Mueller probe. The letter was made public the day before the Senate hearing. Mr. Barr also suggested that the letter had been written by one of Mr. Mueller’s staffers. Democrats have accused Mr. Barr –

whose job it is to be the nation’s lawyer – of acting as

Mr. Trump’s personal counsel. Senate Republicans questioned the motivation behind the investigation and hearings. Josh Hawley, a Montana Republican, said unelected officials had tried to overturn the results of the 2016 presidential election. Senate Judiciary Committee Chairman Lindsay Graham, a South Carolina Republican and Trump ally, chose to open Wednesday’s hearing by focussing on Hillary Clinton’s use of a personal server for her official emails when she was Secretary of State.

The next phase of the Bill Barr post-Mueller saga is expected to unfold in the House, where Mr. Nadler said he would give Mr. Barr another day or two to hand over the full Mueller report along with its underlying evidence to his committee, failing which he would seek a contempt citation against the Attorney-General (Eric Holder, Barack Obama’s Attorney-General, received one from the Republican controlled House in 2012).

Some Democrats have called on Mr. Barr to resign, and others want to start impeachment proceedings.

(With inputs from *The New York Times*)

A leak that cost the British Defence Secretary his job

Govt. decision to give Huawei 5G contract was leaked out

VIDYA RAM
LONDON

In an episode of ‘Yes Minister’, the iconic political comedy, Sir Humphrey Appleby, the infamous civil servant, assures his often-anxious colleague Bernard Wooley, concerned about a potential leak inquiry being threatened by Downing Street, that there was nothing to worry about as they were only ever set up and rarely resulted in anything substantive.

When such an inquiry was announced last month after details of a meeting of the National Security Council were leaked to *The Daily Telegraph*, many believed it was a route to nowhere. However, critics were quickly proven wrong when just under a week later, Prime Minister Theresa May sacked Gavin Williamson as Britain’s Defence Secretary (Minister), citing “compelling evidence,” that he was involved in the leak.

In a letter to Mr. Williamson, the Prime Minister expressed her disappointment with his conduct. The investigation provided “compelling evidence” of Mr. Williamson’s responsibility, she said. “No other, credible version of events to explain this leak has been identified.”

He was replaced as Defence Secretary by Penny Mordaunt, who has become the first woman to hold that position.

Security meeting
The disclosure centred on an April 23 meeting of the U.K.’s National Security Council to discuss top level intelligence matter. In the meeting, the Prime Minister agreed to let Huawei, the



Gavin Williamson. ■AP

Chinese telecom firm at the heart of a diplomatic storm in the U.S., to be involved in building Britain’s 5G network, with restrictions placed on what it would have access to.

The meeting was meant to be confidential, but on April 24, *The Daily Telegraph* carried a story reporting both the decision and the objections voiced by Cabinet members during the meeting.

The U.S. has made no bones about expressing its objections to Huawei taking up this role, telling the U.K. that such a move could jeopardise intelligence sharing between the two partners.

Leaks have been pervasive amid the Brexit battles, but the leak from the NSC has been seen as being in a different league – raising concerns about national security and the integrity of the key intelligence-sharing forum. Adding to the concerns is the contest to replace Ms. May as Prime Minister. She has said she will step down for the next stage of Brexit negotiations.

The drama has not stopped there. Mr. William-

son himself has flatly denied being the source of the leak – on his children’s lives – and has accused Downing Street of mounting a witch-hunt against him. “I strenuously deny that I was in any way involved in this leak and I am confident that a thorough and formal inquiry would have vindicated my position,” he wrote in a letter to Ms. May.

The government has attempted to bring an end to the controversy. Cabinet Office Minister David Lidington told the House of Commons on Thursday that the Prime Minister considered the matter closed, and that the Cabinet Secretary (who launched the inquiry) did not consider it necessary to refer the matter to police.

Ministerial code
Mr. Williamson had not been accused of any criminal offence under the Official Secrets Act, but the Prime minister had simply acted in line with the ministerial code, sacking him after losing confidence in him, he insisted. Nevertheless, the government has faced a backlash. The Labour Party has called for a criminal inquiry. “In what world is it acceptable that the Prime Minister should be the arbiter of whether a politician she believes is guilty of criminal conduct in office should face a criminal investigation?,” asked its deputy leader Tom Watson in Parliament on Thursday.
Even some Conservative MPs have rounded on the Prime Minister, with one accusing her of subjecting Mr. Williamson to a “kangaroo court” with no chance to properly defend himself.

I do not wish to surrender myself for extradition: Assange

AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE
LONDON

WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange told a court on Thursday he would oppose extradition to the U.S. as the legal process began in London, a day after he was jailed for breaching his bail conditions in a former case.

He appeared via videolink at Westminster Magistrates Court, where a lawyer for

the U.S. authorities briefly set out his alleged involvement in the release of classified documents.

“I do not wish to surrender myself for extradition for doing journalism that has won many awards and protected many people,” Mr. Assange told the judge, who set the next hearing for May 30.

The Australian was jailed on Wednesday for 50 weeks

for breaking his bail conditions in 2012, when he fled to Ecuador’s London Embassy to avoid extradition to Sweden.

He was accused of sexual assault and rape but strongly denied the claims.

The U.S. indictment charges him with “conspiracy” for working with former U.S. Army intelligence analyst Chelsea Manning to

crack a password stored on Department of Defence computers in March 2010.

The charge carries a maximum jail term of five years.

A lawyer for the U.S. government, Ben Brandon, told the court on Thursday that investigators had found chatroom conversations between Mr. Assange and Ms. Manning in March 2010.

He said they “engaged in

real-time discussions regarding Chelsea Manning’s dissemination of confidential records to Mr. Assange”.

In a letter read out in court on Wednesday, Mr. Assange apologised for skipping bail seven years ago. “I did what I thought at the time was the best or perhaps the only thing that I could have done,” he said, adding: “I apologise unreservedly.”

ELSEWHERE



Maduro asks military to fight ‘any coup plotter’

CARACAS
Venezuelan President Nicolás Maduro on Thursday called on the armed forces to oppose “any coup plotter” after a failed military uprising by forces supporting Opposition leader Juan Guaidó. “Yes, we are in combat, keep morale high in this fight to disarm any traitor, any coup plotter,” he said at an event with the military high command. ■AFP

Abe ready to meet Kim ‘unconditionally’

TOKYO
Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe has offered to meet North Korean leader Kim Jong-un in a bid to restore diplomatic ties between the historic foes, *Sankei Shimbun* daily said on Thursday. In an interview, Mr. Abe said: “I want to meet chairman Kim Jong-un unconditionally and talk with him frankly with an open mind.” ■AFP

Sri Lanka mass cancelled over fears of fresh attack

There were threats against 2 locations

AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE
COLOMBO

Sri Lanka’s Catholic Church scrapped plans to resume Sunday services following a “specific threat” against two religious locations after the deadly Easter attacks.

The Archbishop of Colombo, Cardinal Malcolm Ranjith, said on Thursday that a “reliable foreign source” had alerted him to possible attacks this weekend. “The information we have from a reliable foreign source is that attackers are planning to hit a very famous church and a Catholic institution,” the Cardinal said in a statement. He did not name the source. He al-



Cardinal Malcolm Ranjith, the Archbishop of Colombo. ■AFP

so said that Catholic schools which were due to re-open after an extended Easter vacation on Monday would now remain shut “until further notice”.

‘Xinjiang surveillance app targets lawful behaviour’

Report details 36 categories of activities

AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE
HONG KONG

Chinese authorities are using a mobile app designed for mass surveillance to profile, investigate and detain Muslims in Xinjiang by labelling “completely lawful” behaviour as suspicious, a Human Rights Watch report said on Thursday.

Human Rights Watch has previously reported that Xinjiang authorities use a mass surveillance system called the Integrated Joint Operations Platform (IJOP) to gather information from multiple sources. But the new study, entitled “China’s Algorithms of Repression”, worked with a Berlin-based

security company to analyse an app connected to the IJOP, showing specific acts targeted by the system.

Xinjiang authorities closely watch 36 categories of behaviour, including those who do not socialise with neighbours, often avoid using the front door, don’t use a smartphone, donate to mosques “enthusiastically”, and use an “abnormal” amount of electricity, the group found.

The app also instructs officers to investigate those related to someone who got a new phone number, or related to others who left the country and have not returned after 30 days.