

Russia meddling in election to boost Trump, lawmakers told

AFP/PTI
Washington, 21 February

Russia is interfering in the 2020 campaign to try to get US President Donald Trump re-elected, US intelligence officials have warned lawmakers in a briefing that infuriated the president, who then replaced his intelligence chief, US media reported. Trump erupted in anger at acting director of national intelligence (DNI) Joseph Maguire when he learned of the February 13 session with the House Intelligence Committee, *The Washington Post* and *New York Times* said Thursday.



US President Donald Trump replaced his intelligence chief after learning about intelligence officials' briefing, according to US media reports

Maguire aide Shelby Pierson reportedly told lawmakers Russia was once again meddling in the US election on Trump's behalf. Trump complained that the Democrats would use the information against him, the reports said.

The president was also annoyed by the presence of Adam Schiff, the Democratic head of the investigation that led to Trump being impeached for abuse of power and obstruction of Congress, according to *The New York Times*. Maguire had been a favorite to be nominated for the permanent DNI post but Trump soured on the official, *The Washington Post* said, when he heard about the classified election security briefing. The president berated Maguire in an Oval Office showdown last week for the "disloyalty" of his staff, *The Post* reported, effectively thwarting his chances of becoming a permanent hire.

Trump announced on Wednesday he was replacing Maguire with Richard Grenell, 53, the ambassador to Germany and a Trump loyalist.

The president was impeached in December over accusations that he tried to coerce ally Ukraine into helping him

US, Taliban plan to sign deal on Feb 29

The US and the Taliban will sign an agreement on February 29 the end of a week-long period of violence reduction in Afghanistan, US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo and the Taliban said on Friday. The agreement could represent a chance for peace after 18 years of war and a US troop presence that dates back to 2001, as well as boosting US President Donald Trump's hopes of pulling US forces out of Afghanistan. However, past attempts at negotiating peace agreements have been scuttled by Taliban attacks on international forces. The reduced violence period, to be observed by Afghan, international and Taliban forces, will begin at midnight (1930 GMT), an Afghan official and Taliban leaders said.

Trump has been at odds with much of the national security establishment since he took office and claims, without providing evidence, that a "deep state" is working against him. Since he was acquitted by the Republican-led Senate, an emboldened Trump has been purging the Justice Department, National Security Council and Pentagon of staff he considers disloyal. Casualties have included NSC staffer Lieutenant Colonel Alex Vindman and EU ambassador Gordon Sondland — witnesses in the impeachment inquiry — Vindman's twin brother, an NSC lawyer who wasn't involved, and Pentagon policy chief John Rood.

Democrats have voiced outrage over the appointment of Grenell, who has no relevant background or top-level management experience for the post in which he will supervise 17 agencies, including the CIA. "He is committed to a non-political, non-partisan approach as head of the Intelligence Community, on which our safety and security depend," White House press secretary Stephanie Grisham said in a statement Thursday.

Grenell said on Twitter he would not serve permanently and that Trump would "soon" select someone else.

Trump has declined to hire a permanent replacement for Dan Coats, who stepped down as DNI in August after standing firm on the intelligence community's conclusion that Russia interfered in 2016 to back Trump over Hillary Clinton. Grenell has cast doubt on the extent of Russia's efforts, saying that Moscow's activities were nothing new. Senator Ron Wyden, a Democrat on the intelligence committee, accused Trump of prioritising "unquestioning obedience over the safety of the American people."

win the 2020 election, withholding military aid considered vital to the former Soviet republic in its war with Russia.

Democratic congressman Bennie Thompson said that by firing Maguire over the briefing "the president is not only refusing to defend against foreign interference, he's inviting it." Schiff tweeted late Thursday that if Trump was interfering in the sharing of intelligence information with Congress, it appeared

that he was "again jeopardising our efforts to stop foreign meddling." US intelligence concluded that Russia interfered in the 2016 election, especially through manipulation of social media, to support Trump.

The real estate tycoon-turned-president has however repeatedly called it a "Russia hoax" and has instead promoted a debunked conspiracy theory that Ukraine intervened instead.

Aramco set to gain unconditional EU nod for SABIC deal

REUTERS
Brussels, 21 February

World No. 1 oil producer Saudi Aramco is set to gain unconditional EU antitrust approval for its \$69 billion buy of a 70 per cent stake in petrochemicals group Saudi Basic Industries Corp (SABIC), people familiar with the matter said on Friday.

SABIC, the world's fourth largest petrochemicals group, has operations in over 50 countries

Aramco announced the deal to acquire the controlling stake from sovereign investor Public Investment Fund (PIF) in March last year, a move key to its diversification into refining and petrochemicals.

Riyadh-headquartered SABIC, the world's fourth

largest petrochemicals group, has operations in over 50 countries. The European Commission, which is scheduled to decide on the case by February 27, declined to comment.

Competition watchdogs in India and a number of other countries have already given the green light without demanding concessions. Aramco's downstream expansion strategy tracks rivals such as Exxon Mobil, BP, Total and Shell, which have over the years transformed themselves from merely oil companies to energy companies with extensive upstream and downstream operations.

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US lawmakers to introduce bill that threatens encryption

REUTERS
Washington, 21 February

US legislation will be introduced in the coming weeks that could hurt technology companies' ability to offer end-to-end encryption, two sources with knowledge of the matter said, and it aims to curb the distribution of child sexual abuse material on such platforms.

The bill, proposed by a bipartisan group of lawmakers, aims to fight the distribution of such material on online platforms like Facebook and Alphabet's Google by making them liable for state prosecution and civil lawsuits. It does so by threatening a key immunity the companies have under federal law called Section 230.

This law shields certain online platforms from being treated as the publisher or speaker of information they publish, and largely protects

them from liability involving content posted by users.

The bill threatens this key immunity unless companies comply with a set of "best practices," which will be determined by a 15-member commission led by the Attorney General.

The move is the latest example of how regulators and lawmakers in Washington are reconsidering the need for incentives that once helped online companies grow, but are increasingly viewed as impediments to curbing online crime, hate speech and extremism.

The sources said the U.S. tech industry fears these "best practices" will be used to condemn end-to-end encryption — a technology for privacy and security that scrambles messages so that they can be deciphered only by the sender and intended recipient. Federal law enforcement agencies

FATF warns Pakistan, keeps it on 'Grey List'

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA
New Delhi, 21 February



With Pakistan's continuation in the Grey List, it will be difficult for the country to get financial aid from the IMF, the World Bank, the ADB and the European Union

Global terror financing watchdog FATF on Friday decided continuation of Pakistan in the 'Grey List' and warned the country of stern action if it fails to check flow of money to terror groups like the LeT and the JeM, sources said.

The decision was taken at the Financial Action Task Force (FATF) plenary in Paris. The FATF has also warned Pakistan that if it does not complete a full action plan by June, it could lead to consequences on its businesses, a source said.

The plenary noted that Pakistan addressed only a few of the 27 tasks given to it in controlling funding to terror groups like the Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT), the Jaish-e-Mohammad (JeM) and the Hizbul Mujahideen, which are responsible for a series of attacks in India.

The FATF said Pakistan has to swiftly complete its full action plan by June, the source said. With Pakistan's continuation in the Grey List, it will be difficult for the country to get financial aid from the IMF, the World Bank, the ADB and the European Union, thus further enhancing problems for the nation which is in a precarious financial situation.

If Pakistan fails to comply with the FATF directive, there is every possibility that the global body may put the country in the Black List along with North Korea and Iran.

India has been maintaining that Pakistan extends regular support to terror groups like the LeT, the JeM and the Hizbul Mujahideen, whose prime target is India, and has urged the FATF to take action against Islamabad.

Pakistan is believed to have received strong backing from Malaysia but failed to impress western nations due to India's consistent efforts by providing materials and evidence on Pakistan's inaction to check funding to terror groups operating from its soil. Pakistan needed 12 votes out of 39 to exit the Grey List and move to the White List. To avoid the Black List, it needs the support of three countries.

The Grey Listing of Pakistan came three days after a sub-group of the FATF recommended continuation of the country in it.

The FATF meeting, from February 16 to 21, was held a week after an anti-terrorism court in Pakistan sentenced Hafiz Saeed, the mastermind of the 2008 Mumbai attack and founder of the

Watchdog places Iran on terror financing blacklist

A global dirty money watchdog on Friday placed Iran on its blacklist after the country failed to comply with international anti-terrorism financing norms. The decision comes after more than three years of warnings from the Paris-based Financial Action Task Force (FATF) urging Tehran to enact terrorist financing conventions.

However, the FATF appeared to leave the door ajar for Iran saying "countries should also be able to apply countermeasures independently of any call by the FATF to do so."

US sanctions have crippled Iran's economy, slashing its oil exports and increasingly isolating it from the international financial system. Iran's leaders have been

divided over complying with the FATF. Supporters say it could ease foreign trade with Europe and Asia when the country's economy is targeted by US penalties aimed at its isolation.

Hardline opponents argue that passing legislation toward joining the FATF could hamper Iran's support for its allies, including Lebanon's Hezbollah.

Iran's action plan to meet with the FATF requirements, implemented in 2016, expired in January 2018.

Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif this week appeared resigned to the FATF blacklisting, accusing the US using its maximum pressure campaign to exert influence at the FATF.

Women will be hit hard by UK's new immigration rules, warn experts

With its minimum salary requirements, the new system would affect female migrants

CEYLAN YEGINSU
21 February

The British government's plan for a post-Brexit immigration overhaul was designed to wean the economy off its reliance on cheap foreign labour. But in the process, women's groups have warned, women will suffer disproportionately.

The new points-based system will give precedence to occupations in which women are underrepresented, favor male migrants over female and deepen gender inequality, according to the Women's Budget Group, an independent network that promotes gender equality. "The new immigration system roundly fails to understand the lived experience of women, many of whom are prevented from accessing paid work by the weight of unpaid work - caring for children, older people and those with disabilities - that successive governments rely upon them to do," said Sophie Walker, the chief executive of the Young Women's Trust, a British feminist organization.

Under the new rules, which will be implemented next January, applicants will be required to receive a job offer with a salary of at least 25,600 pounds, about \$33,300. The salary threshold will be lower in special cases where there might be a shortage in skills, such as in nursing.

By and large, however, that

requirement will work against women, who are more likely to work in sectors like home and senior care that are relatively poorly compensated, even though the skill levels of such women are relatively high, women's advocates say.

"Care workers' average annual salaries stand at just £17,000, not because care work is 'low-skilled,' but because the work force is 80 per cent female and therefore undervalued and underpaid," says Mandu Reid, the leader of the Women's Equality Party.

Imposing the salary requirement would mean "shutting out care workers, piling pressure on women to take on yet more unpaid care, and widening the existing social care gap between need and provision," she said.

Women are also four times more likely than men to leave paid work to shoulder unpaid caring responsibilities for children and older relatives. This is one cause of the gender pay gap and gender inequality, the Women's Budget Group found. As a result of these inequities, major industries like food production, hospitality, health and social care that rely on female migrant workers are likely to see staff shortages after the new measures are put into place.

In the points-based system, the government gives top priority to scientists, engineers, academics and graduates in science,



Industries like food production, hospitality, health and social care that rely on female migrant workers are likely to see staff shortages after the new measures

technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) once again to the detriment of women because of the gender disparities in those professions.

"There is a great emphasis on wanting to attract scientists to the UK under the new system, but it is another well-known fact that women are underrepresented in the sciences," said Adrienne Yong, a lecturer in law at the City Law School in London. "That the UK will give a Ph.D. in STEM subjects 10 more

points than Ph.D.s in other subjects already puts women on a back foot," she said, "as there is already a problem with female students doing STEM subjects, much less continuing further education to a doctoral level with that specialism."

On Wednesday, the cabinet minister responsible for migration policy, Priti Patel, suggested that around eight million "economically inactive" people in Britain could be trained to fill such shortages. Experts say

many of those people are women who are already providing full-time care for children and families.

"It feels like they just want us to fill the badly paid jobs while the men and foreigners will get the higher-paying jobs," said Amy Pears, a mother of three who left her job as a professional caregiver and went on benefits in 2015 because she could not afford child care. "My mother is disabled, so between her and the three children I have my hands

full." The Women's Equality Party says that without substantial government investment in child and elder care, women are put into a position where they simply cannot work.

"These shortsighted plans are in fact more likely to exacerbate the shortages in formal care, leaving it to women to pick up unpaid and increase the number of 'economically inactive' full-time carers," Reid said.

Women's groups warned that shutting out foreign workers would put more pressure on women who are already in Britain, particularly caregivers. "Without extra colleagues from abroad, UK carers are going to have even less time to do the job they're employed to do and offer people the dignity they deserve," Walker said. "This policy makes it an inevitability that this exhausted system will come under further strain, while female family members will increasingly be expected to pick up the pieces as the system continues to erode."

Pears said that many of her European friends and former colleagues, who played important caregiving roles, would be locked out of the new system because they did not qualify for the salary threshold or education qualifications.

"These people are carrying a huge burden for our country, and the truth of the matter is we need them," she said. "Without them we are putting our services at risk."

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UK economy is picking up after Brexit

The UK economy extended a run of better-than-expected growth in February, more evidence of a rebound after fourth-quarter stagnation. While the expansion continued apace, there were also signs of a hit to supply chains from coronavirus, according to IHS Markit's flash purchasing managers index.

The virus's outbreak weighed on manufacturers' input stocks, which fell at the fastest pace in more than seven years. Some orders from clients in Asia were canceled and extended shutdowns in China proved a headwind. Nevertheless, manufacturing output grew the fastest in 10 months, offsetting a small downward move in services. Growth expectations in the private sector edged up slightly, the report showed. The pound held gains after the report and traded at \$1.2922 as of 9:31 am in London.

"The recent return to growth signaled by the manufacturing and services PMIs provides a clear indication that the UK economy is no longer flat on its back," said Tim Moore, an economist at IHS Markit. The expansion is running at a 0.2 per cent pace in the first quarter, he said. Firms noted that a reduction in political uncertainty since the December election translated into higher business activity and more spending by clients.