



WASHINGTON (Reuters) -- U.S. President Donald Trump had an affair with a Playboy model at the same time he was in a relationship with a porn star and the National Enquirer tabloid paid the model \$150,000 to prevent her story being made public, the New Yorker reported on Friday. The magazine's account of the relationship was based on notes handwritten by the model, Karen McDougal, who was Playboy's 1998 Playmate of the Year. The New Yorker reported that McDougal confirmed that she had written the notes. The account had similarities with descriptions that adult-film actress Stephanie Clifford, also known as Stormy Daniels, and other women have given of sexual encounters with Trump, including private dinners and offers to buy them real estate.

The magazine reported that American Media Inc, publisher of the National Enquirer, paid McDougal \$150,000 in 2016, soon after Trump became the Republican presidential nominee, for exclusive rights to her story, which it never published. The article noted that American Media head David Pecker has described Trump as a "personal friend."

MEXICO CITY (Reuters) -- Thirteen people, including three children, were killed when a cabinet minister's helicopter crash-landed on the way to the epicenter of an earthquake, state officials said Saturday. The military helicopter that went down late Friday carried Interior Minister Alfonso Navarrete and Oaxaca state Gov. Alejandro Murat, who were unharmed. But five women, four men, and the three children were killed, the Oaxaca prosecutor's office said. Another victim died on the way to hospital.

A prolonged magnitude-7.2 quake that rocked Mexico on Friday left nearly a million homes and businesses without power in the capital and south. At least 50 homes suffered damage in the southern state of Oaxaca, which, along with Mexico City, is still reeling from earthquakes that caused widespread damage in September. The epicenter was about 145 km from Pacific coast surfer resort Puerto Escondido in Oaxaca and had a depth of 24.6 kilometers, according to the U.S. Geological Survey.

VATICAN CITY (AP) -- Pope Francis has revived his lapsed sex abuse advisory commission by naming new members, after coming under fire for his overall handling of the scandal and his support for a Chilean bishop accused by victims of witnessing and ignoring their abuse. Saturday's announcement of the new membership of the Pontifical Commission for the Protection of Minors came on the same day that a Vatican investigator will take the testimony in New York of one of the main whistleblowers in the Chilean cover-up scandal. The initial three-year mandate of commission members had lapsed on Dec. 17. Francis named nine new members Saturday and kept seven from the initial group. A Vatican statement said survivors of abuse are included in the group, but didn't identify them to protect their privacy.

BERLIN (AP) -- German Chancellor Angela Merkel wants the European Union to make progress on a common asylum system, warning that member states who expect financial support from the bloc need to show solidarity when it comes to migrants too. Merkel said in a video address Saturday before next week's informal meeting of EU leaders that the issue is one of her priorities and she hopes it can be advanced by June. Germany has taken in over 1 million people seeking shelter from war and persecution in recent years, putting a heavy strain on the country's budget and boosting an anti-migrant party. While some other European countries, such as Sweden, Greece and Italy, have also borne a heavy load, several EU members in the east refuse to take in large numbers of migrants.

BEIJING (AFP) -- China on Saturday warned it would take necessary measures to protect its interests if the U.S. imposes tough trade sanctions against its steel and aluminum exports. The U.S. Commerce Department on Friday recommended imposing heavy tariffs on China and other countries to counter a global glut in steel and aluminum, laying out an array of possible options in a report to President Donald Trump. The move gives Trump the opportunity to strike a highly public blow for his "America first" trade policy - he is due to decide on the measures next month - but has stoked fears of retaliation and a trade war between the world's two largest economies.

MUNICH (Reuters) -- Britain and the European Union should resolve trade and other issues related to Britain's exit from the bloc separately from discussions about a security pact with the UK, European Commission chief Jean-Claude Juncker said Saturday. "We need a security alliance between the U.K. and the EU, but we can't mix that question up with other questions relating to Brexit," Juncker told the annual Munich Security Conference. "I wouldn't like to put security policy considerations with trade policy considerations in one hat. I understand why some would like to do that, but we don't want to," he said.

Takfiri Bombings Kill At Least 20 in Nigeria



People walk at the internally displaced people camp on the outskirts of Makurdi, capital of Benue State in north-central Nigeria on January 3, 2018.

MAIDUGURI, Nigeria (Dispatches) -- A trio of suicide bombers detonated in a crowded fish market in northern Nigeria, killing at least 20 people, police said Saturday.

Borno state police spokesman Joseph Kwaji confirmed the Friday night attack to The Associated Press. Hospital officials said two patients later died from their injuries.

The bombers, all believed to be female, left dozens wounded at the fish market in Konduga, just outside the state capital, Maiduguri. The city is the birthplace of the Boko Haram Takfiri insurgency and has been a frequent target.

Musa Bulama, 32, said he was lucky to have survived the blasts. "I came to the night market to buy fish for dinner when I heard a

loud bang some meters behind me and I saw myself on the ground, and before I could pick up myself another one went off then, the third one again," he recalled. "I couldn't stand any longer and just laid down but everywhere was in total confusion."

He added: "From the wailings, one can tell that there are many casualties."

Boko Haram continues to carry out deadly terrorist bombings in Borno state and other parts of northern Nigeria as part of its violent campaign to establish a Takfiri state in the West African nation.

The terrorists have increasingly used women and youth as bombers, often after abducting and indoctrinating them.

Ethiopian Defense Minister Rules Out Military Takeover



Demonstrators chant slogans while flashing the Oromo protest gesture during Irreecha, the thanksgiving festival of the Oromo people, in Bishoftu town, Oromia region, Ethiopia, October 2, 2016.

ADDIS ABABA, Ethiopia (AP) -- Ethiopia's defense minister has ruled out a military takeover a day after the East African nation declared a new state of emergency amid the worst anti-government protests in a quarter-century.

Siraj Fegessa on Saturday also ruled out a transitional government. Prime Minister Hailemariam Desalegn remains in the post for now after making the surprise announcement Thursday that he had submitted a resignation letter to help planned political reforms in one of Africa's best-performing economies succeed.

The state of emergency will last for six months with a possible four-month extension, similar to one lifted in August, the defense minister said.

The new state of emergency, which effectively bans protests, will be presented for lawmakers' approval within 15 days. Siraj said security forces have been instructed to take "measures" against those disturbing the country's functioning, with a new special court established to try them.

Ethiopia's cabinet on Friday

cited deaths, ethnic attacks and mass displacement as reasons for the latest state of emergency. The announcement followed crippling protests in towns across the restive Oromia region on Monday and Tuesday that called for the release of political prisoners and urged the government to carry out rapid reforms.

Similar protests have taken place across Ethiopia since late 2015, leading the government to declare a state of emergency in October 2016 after hundreds of people reportedly had been killed. A stampede at a religious event southeast of the capital, Addis Ababa, that month claimed the lives of several dozen people.

That state of emergency led to the arrest of more than 22,000 people and severely affected business.

Rights groups alleged that people were beaten and subjected to arbitrary detentions. The government said those arrested by mistake were released and those who unwillingly took part in the unrest were released after what it described as "trainings."

U.S. Leads South Asia's Largest Military Drill



U.S. Marines join in an ongoing U.S.-Thai joint Cobra Gold U.S.-Thai joint military exercise on Hat Yao beach in Chonburi province, eastern Thailand, Feb. 17, 2018.

SATTAHIP, Thailand (Dispatches) -- Troops from South Korea joined their Thai and U.S. counterparts on Saturday in an amphibious vehicle landing drill as part of Southeast Asia's largest multinational military exercise.

The 300 soldiers from South Korea who joined 2,000 U.S. Marines and Thai soldiers in eastern Thailand marked the highest numbers participating from the East Asian country since it joined the Cobra Gold exercise in 2010, and comes at a time when tensions are particularly high on the Korean Peninsula.

"Our friends in the Republic of Korea, South Koreans, we stand by them. We work with them," said Gen. Robert Neller, commandant of the U.S. Marine Corps. "We are allies. We continue to coordinate and keep pressure on

Hopefully through diplomatic means we would be able to come to some successful resolution of the problem."

Some 11,075 service members allegedly from 29 countries are taking part in this year's exercise, with Thailand, the U.S., Singapore, Japan, South Korea, Indonesia and Malaysia the seven main participants. There are 6,800 U.S. troops attending the exercise.

Ships taking part in Saturday's exercise included the U.S. amphibious assault ship USS Bonhomme Richard and the South Korean landing ship Cheon Ja Bong.

The weeklong exercise, centered around the Sattahip Royal Thai Marine Corps Base in the eastern province of Chonburi, includes humanitarian components such as evacuation drills, as well as traditional military exercises

such as the amphibious landing.

On Saturday, a Navy officer aboard a mammoth U.S. aircraft carrier brimming with F18 fighter jets said American forces will continue to patrol the South China Sea when asked if China's newly built islands could restrain them in the disputed waters.

Lt. Cmdr. Tim Hawkins told The Associated Press aboard the USS Carl Vinson that the U.S. Navy has carried out routine patrols in the strategic waters for 70 years to guarantee the unimpeded flow of trade that's crucial for Asian and U.S. economies.

Hawkins said, "International law allows us to operate here, allows us to fly here, allows us to train here, allows us to sail here, and that's what we're doing and we're going to continue to do that."

His remarks came after the navy admiral nominated to be the next U.S. ambassador to Australia told Congress that America must prepare for the possibility of war with China.

Harry Harris said Beijing's "intent is crystal clear" to dominate the South China Sea and that its military might could soon rival American power "across almost every domain."

Harris, soon to retire as the head of U.S. Pacific Command in Hawaii, told the House armed services committee, that the U.S. and its allies should be wary of what he described as Beijing's military expansionism in the region.

The admiral hit out at China over its foreign influence operations and accused it of predatory economic behavior and coercion of regional neighbors.

South Korea's Outreach to North Faces U.S. Hurdle



In this Feb. 9, 2018 file photo, South Korean President Moon Jae-in, right, talks with Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe during their meeting in Pyeongchang, South Korea.

PYEONGCHANG, South Korea (Dispatches) -- South Korean President Moon Jae-in said Saturday that he hopes his efforts to engage rival North Korea at the Olympics will also lead to better ties between the North and its other major rival, Washington, as well as help set up talks on ridding the North of its nuclear bombs.

But Moon wouldn't answer a question from The Associated Press about what needs to happen before he'll

take North Korean leader Kim Jong Un up on his invitation for a summit. He earlier said "let's not get too far ahead" on a summit, according to his office.

Moon has yet to accept the North Korean offer, which was delivered Feb. 10 by Kim's younger sister, Kim Yo Jong. He's only said that the Koreans should "create an environment" for talks.

There's a reason for his caution: the United States.

Moon likely wants his talks with the North to be accompanied with warming ties between Pyongyang and Washington so there's less chance of alienating the South's most crucial ally, which keeps 28,500 troops in South Korea.

The U.S. claims that North Korea's friendly overtures to Seoul are meant to push Washington farther away from its southern rival. This, U.S. politicians say, will ruin President Donald Trump's policy of "maximum pressure," which is focused on slapping more isolating sanctions on the most sanctioned country on earth.

"We are hoping that the ongoing talks between the South and North will lead to talks between the United States and North Korea and eventually to (North Korean) denuclearization dialogue," Moon told reporters at the Olympics media center in Pyeongchang.

Moon said Saturday that a women's hockey team of both North and South Koreans and an opening ceremony that saw both Koreas march together under a flag that showed a single Korea have moved Koreans and people around the world.

He also noted that "a consensus is starting to build that there's also a need for talks between the United States and North Korea."

Lavrov: U.S. Charges of Russian Meddling 'Claptrap'

MUNICH (USA Today) -- Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov dismissed U.S. charges of Russian meddling in U.S. elections as baseless "claptrap."

Lavrov, at a security conference in Munich, was asked in a Q-and-A for his reaction to the indictment of 13 people and three Russian entities issued Friday by U.S. special counsel Robert Mueller.

"I have no response," Lavrov said. "You can publish anything, and we see those indictments multiplying, the statements multiplying."

He argued that U.S. officials also have said no country influenced the U.S. elections. "Until we see the fact, everything else is just claptrap," he said.

Some news media translated his pungent "claptrap" description as either "blather" or "blabber."

Lavrov's comments were similar in tone to remarks he made on Friday to Euronews TV in which he addressed the general charges of Russian interference in U.S. elections, but did not mention the indictments.

"There's much talk about state interference in the electoral process but I haven't seen a single fact to date," Lavrov said, according to the Tass news agency.

He suggested if there were any truth to the allegations, they would have leaked during the past year of investigations. "The situation where no facts have leaked the public sphere over almost half-a-year that the investigation is in progress is simply impossible for the U.S.," Lavrov said. "If

there were at least some smoldering, smoke would be seen at once."

He also suggested that U.S. authorities had "cornered themselves" by making statements about Russian meddling in the past and "now they are trying to at least some retroactive justifications but still they are floundering."

Lavrov said that he hopes the noise will "fade away" in Washington, but suggests that is unlikely until November. "It's clear though this shouldn't be expected before the midterms in November because the struggle for seats in the U.S. Congress and gubernatorial positions is already in full swing," he said.

Lavrov's comments about the absence of facts of Russian state involvement in any meddling reflects the fact that the new indictments did not single out any Russian government agencies, neither the intelligence services nor Russian President Vladimir Putin.

The Mueller team, however, may well have left out any charges of direct Kremlin ties because such links would be difficult to prove in court without revealing U.S. intelligence methods for finding that information.

Lavrov also pointedly rejected the notion, as spelled out in the indictments, that Russian meddling was aimed at advancing the candidacy of President Trump.

"Moscow is prepared in all cases to cooperate with a president and a government that is elected by the people in any country," Lavrov said