

Protests Continue Across U.S. Against Syria Strike



People participate in a demonstration against the recent U.S. strike in Syria, in New York, April 7, 2017.

WASHINGTON (Dispatches) -- Anti-war protesters have held new demonstrations in cities across the United States to condemn the U.S.-led airstrikes on Syria, where the government of President Bashar al-Assad in fighting foreign-sponsored terrorists.

Demonstrations were held in New York City, Atlanta, Minneapolis, Chicago, Oakland and Washington, DC, on Sunday, a day after similar protests were staged in several American cities, including Los Angeles and San Francisco.

Protesters also demonstrated outside the homes of Democratic Senators Dianne Feinstein and

House Minority Leader Nancy Pelosi in San Francisco.

“We want both Feinstein and Pelosi to speak out against the bombing and the continued war,” said Eleanor Levine, an organizer of anti-war group Code Pink Women for Peace. “We disrupted neighborhoods and people in Syria. It’s our goal to bring this struggle to their neighborhoods.”

“Our demand is that we have no right to have a military presence in Syria,” said Levine.

Demonstrations were held placards in support of peace and against America’s interventionist foreign policy.

U.S. President Donald Trump this

weekend ordered American forces to launch missile strikes in Syria. on Saturday morning, the armed forces of the U.S., Britain and France launched a barrage of cruise missiles on three different targets in Syria, saying it was the right thing to do to deter the further use of chemical weapons.

The U.S. and its allies had been threatening Damascus with military action since April 7, when a suspected chemical attack on the Syrian town of Douma, Eastern Ghouta, reportedly killed 60 people and injured hundreds more.

Russia said the chemical attack was staged by desperate militants to provoke further intervention in the conflict by the West.

Trump on Saturday declared “mission accomplished” in the strike and argued that it “could not have had a better result.”

“A perfectly executed strike last night,” Trump tweeted Saturday. “Thank you to France and the United Kingdom for their wisdom and the power of their fine Military. Could not have had a better result. Mission Accomplished!”

Trump’s declaration was widely seen as premature and narrow-minded, an echo of former President George W. Bush landing on an aircraft carrier to declare “mission accomplished” in Iraq 15 years ago.

Sexual Scandal Shakes Japanese Government



Reporters await Junichi Fukuda, center back, as he leaves Finance Ministry.

TOKYO (WSJ)-- Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe, reeling from record-low polls, suffered a new setback on the eve of a trip to the U.S., with the Finance Ministry opening an investigation into sexual-harassment allegations against a top official.

Abe is set to depart Tuesday for a summit meeting with President Donald Trump in Florida, but he faces a mounting challenge to remain in power past a party leadership election in September.

Allegations of cronyism and government cover-ups, including at the Finance Ministry, have

dogged Abe for months, forcing him to spend much of his time facing questions over his conduct in parliament.

Abe says he and other government officials have done nothing wrong, but public opinion polls show an erosion of trust in the administration.

One survey conducted over the weekend by Nippon TV found support for Abe’s cabinet had fallen to 26.7%, the lowest level reported by the broadcaster since the prime minister took office for a second time in 2012.

Almost half of those who said they didn’t support Abe’s cabinet said

they couldn’t trust him personally. His critics, including within his own party, say he is too focused on personal goals such as altering the nation’s constitution. Opposition leaders accuse him of providing favors for friends, charges he denies.

Former Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi said over the weekend it was unlikely Abe, a former protégé, would survive the party leadership poll later this year. If he runs and loses, he’ll have to step down as prime minister.

A new problem for Abe surfaced last week when a weekly magazine reported that Administrative Vice Finance Minister Junichi Fukuda asked to kiss and touch the breasts of a female reporter while drinking with her at a bar. The reporter wasn’t named.

The magazine also released an audio recording of a man asking the same questions in a noisy bar-like setting. On Monday, Fukuda denied the allegations and said he didn’t recognize the audio recording.

But in an unusual step, the ministry said it had appointed four outside lawyers to investigate the case and asked female reporters who might have had experiences with Fukuda like those detailed in the magazine article to provide testimony for the investigation.

Slovak Interior Minister Forced to Resign Amid Protests

BRATISLAVA (Reuters) -- Slovak Interior Minister Tomas Drucker said Monday he would resign, after just three weeks in office, amid mass public protests demanding the sacking of the police chief following the murder of a journalist.

February’s killing of Jan Kuciak, who focused on corruption in business and politics, has led to the biggest public protests in decades against what people see as widespread graft. The demonstrations had already forced the resignation of long-serving prime minister Robert Fico last month.

The three-party coalition led by

Fico’s Smer party formed a new cabinet where Drucker, a political independent, took the Interior Ministry instead of Fico’s close long-term ally Robert Kalinak.

Drucker said he had not found any justification to fire Police President Tibor Gaspar, but felt that the issue was still causing deep divisions in society.

“I am leaving because I couldn’t calm the situation and the polarization remains,” Drucker told reporters. “I don’t think Gaspar’s departure would calm it down.”

Tens of thousands of Slovaks have

held protests demanding Gaspar’s removal as a reassurance that Kuciak’s murder would be investigated thoroughly.

Some of Kuciar’s reporting dealt with deals between the government and Slovakia’s biggest privately-owned security firm, whose owner is related to Gaspar. The police chief has denied any wrongdoing.

President Andrej Kiska, a long-time adversary of Fico’s, said when appointing the new cabinet last month that he had agreed with Drucker that a change in the police leadership was needed.

Trump ‘Morally Unfit’ to Be President: Ex-FBI Chief



President Donald Trump announces military strikes on Syria while delivering a statement from the White House in Washington, April 13, 2018.

WASHINGTON (AFP) -- Donald Trump is “morally unfit” to be president of the United States, former FBI director James Comey told ABC in an interview broadcast on Sunday.

“I don’t buy this stuff about him being mentally incompetent or early stages of dementia,” Comey said of Trump, according to a transcript from ABC.

“I don’t think he’s medically unfit to be president. I think he’s morally unfit to be president,” he said.

“Our president must embody respect and adhere to the values that are at the core of this country. The most important being truth. This president is not able to do that,” he said.

Trump fired Comey in May 2017, citing the FBI’s behavior in investigating Democrat Hillary Clinton and its probe into possible Trump campaign collusion with Russia to tilt the 2016 presidential election.

Just 11 days before the election, Comey announced that the FBI would reopen an investigation into Clinton’s possible misuse of a private email server while she was

secretary of state -- a move she has said played a part in her loss to Trump.

The president lashed out at Comey in a series of tweets earlier Sunday, saying that the email probe was handled “stupidly” and calling Comey a “slime ball.”

On Sunday, Trump unleashed a torrent of rage against Comey over his forthcoming book, calling him “slippery,” insisting he never asked him for loyalty and labeling him “the WORST FBI Director in history, by far!”

Trump fired off a series of tweets ahead of Comey’s interview with ABC, which was set to air in full Sunday evening.

Trump also pushed back again against Comey’s claims that Trump sought his loyalty, saying it was “Just another of his many lies. His ‘memos’ are self-serving and FAKE!”

He also suggested Comey should be imprisoned, saying “how come he gave up Classified Information (jail), why did he lie to Congress (jail).” There is no indication Comey is under investigation for doing either.

Chinese President ‘Opposed’ to Life-Long Rule



Xi Jinping arrives for the opening of the first session of the 13th National People's Congress at the Great Hall of the People in Beijing in March.

BEIJING (FT) -- Chinese President Xi Jinping has said that he is “personally opposed” to life-long rule, adding that foreign observers have “misinterpreted” a recent constitutional amendment that revoked the two-term limit on the presidency.

Xi expressed his views at three recent meetings with foreign dignitaries and Chinese officials, according to people who either attended the meetings or were briefed on the discussions.

They added that Xi justified the decision in terms of needing to align the country’s three top government and Communist party jobs. Xi’s two more powerful posts — party general secretary and chairmanship of the party’s Central Military Commission — are not subject to term limits.

Two people said Xi had surprised his guests by raising the issue himself. “President Xi said he was ‘personally opposed’ to (lifetime rule) and the outside world had ‘misinterpreted’ the amendment,” one of the people said.

Xi did not say at the meetings whether he intended to serve as president, party general secretary and CMC chairman for three or more terms.

On February 25, the official Xinhua news agency announced that the Communist party’s Central Committee had recommended scrapping the two-term limit on China’s presidency, paving the way for Xi to remain president for life if he wishes.

The Central Committee’s “recommendation” to revoke the presidential term limit was taken at a closed-door meeting in mid-January but kept secret for more than a month.

Mao’s successor, Deng Xiaoping, had term limits written into China’s constitution in an effort to bring more predictability to leadership transitions in the world’s most populous country.

Defenders of the amendment argue that streamlining the technically separate party and government administrative structures will help Xi tackle difficult financial and economic reforms on which his administration made little headway during his first term in office.

“There isn’t really a line between the party and government,” said one Chinese government official. “That separation was always very superficial and unnecessary.”

After the amendment was first announced in February, a commentary in the People’s Daily newspaper argued that it did not mean Xi would rule for life, as party leaders would still have to step down if incapacitated by illness or advanced age. But Xi himself has not commented publicly on the issue.

Xi also remains genuinely popular across China because of the success of his anti-corruption campaign and nationalist foreign policies, with many people welcoming the prospect of him remaining in office for three or more terms.



BERLIN (Reuters) -- German Europe Minister Michael Roth called for the European Union to adopt a united front against Russia with the aim of reducing tensions, warning that “anti-Russian reflexes” were as dangerous as naïveté about Russia’s “nationalist” course. Roth’s intervention, in an article for Die Welt newspaper, came amid signs that under conservative Chancellor Angela Merkel and Social Democrat (SPD) Foreign Minister Heiko Maas, Germany’s position towards Russia is hardening, especially since a poison attack in Britain, widely blamed on Russia. Roth, in remarks that seemed designed to reflect the more pro-Russian views of the SPD’s members, said Europe’s sanctions against Russia should be maintained, but with the aim of bringing Russia to the negotiating table. “Sanctions aren’t a goal in themselves,” he wrote. “They should encourage people back to the negotiating table to work on reasonable solutions ... Anti-Russian reflexes are just as dangerous as naively relativizing the nationalist-tinged policies of the Russian leadership.”

MOSCOW (Dispatches) -- Russia’s state telecommunications regulator said on Monday it had begun blocking access to Telegram messenger after the company refused to comply with an order to give Russian state security access to its users’ secret messages. The watchdog, Roskomnadzor, said in a statement on its website that it had sent telecom operators a notification about blocking access to Telegram inside Russia. Roskomnadzor was implementing a decision handed down on Friday by a Russian court, which ruled that Telegram should be blocked because it was in violation of Russian regulations. Telegram has repeatedly refused to comply with requests to give Russia’s Federal Security Service (FSB) access to its users’ encrypted messages. The FSB has said it needs such access to guard against security threats such as terrorist attacks. But Telegram said compliance would violate users’ privacy.

NICOSIA (Dispatches) -- Greek Cypriot protesters gathered in front of the entrance gates of a British air base to denounce U.S.-led airstrikes on Syria. Protest leader Akis Poullos told the Associated Press that demonstrators are demanding the closure of RAF Akrotiri, from where four British Tornado warplanes took off to take part in Friday night’s missile strike. Poullos said the demonstration also wanted to send the message to the Greek Cypriot administration not to lend any assistance to “imperialist attacks” on Syria and to demand an end to the war in the country. Protesters used red paint to write “NATO killers go home” on a nearby wall outside the base’s gate. Former colonial overseer Britain retained RAF Akrotiri and another military base on Greek Cyprus after the east Mediterranean island gained independence in 1960. The Greek Cypriot administration said that it wasn’t given any forewarning about Saturday’s airstrikes.

WASHINGTON (Dispatches) -- Barely a week since accepting his new job, U.S. President Donald Trump’s newly-appointed National Security Adviser John Bolton, is considering far more changes to the national security team at the White House than he has already made. Since taking office last Monday, Bolton has fired or forced to retire four senior aides on the National Security Council (NSC) and officials aware of the situation have revealed that more changes will come as soon as the veteran Republican forms his own team. Speaking on condition of anonymity, current and former administration officials told the Hill that although Bolton has already made most of the big changes that he wanted, there were many mid-level aides who expected to get the axe from him. This is the second major reshuffle of the NSC in the past 15 months, after Bolton’s predecessor, General H. R. McMaster, turned upside down the council’s lineup.

TORONTO (The Canadian Press) -- Tens of thousands of people across southern and central Ontario remained without power Monday morning as the province’s massive ice storm transitioned to drenching rain. The mix of snow, freezing rain, ice pellets, rain and powerful winds that battered the region Saturday and Sunday made driving treacherous, with provincial police reporting more than 1,450 non-fatal crashes over the two days. The poor conditions also prompted bus and school cancellations in parts of the province Monday. The storm also played havoc with air traffic, with more than 600 flights cancelled at Toronto’s Pearson International Airport and many others delayed -- often for hours. Toronto’s downtown Billy Bishop airport cancelled all departing flights on Sunday and received only one arrival all day.

AMSTERDAM (Reuters) -- Dutch prosecutors said Monday they had arrested four men suspected of planning an attack on the Turkish consulate in Rotterdam. In a statement, the national prosecutor’s office identified the four as Moroccan-Dutch, and evidence of their plot had surfaced from a wiretap of a different man arrested in 2017. Three of the men are to be brought before a judge this week, while the fourth was arrested in Belgium and will be extradited, prosecutors said.