

President Trump Confirms: CIA Chief Met North Korean Leader in Pyongyang



People watch a TV screen showing file footage of U.S. President Donald Trump, right, South Korean President Moon Jae-in and North Korean leader Kim Jong Un, left, during a news program at the Seoul Railway Station in Seoul, April 18, 2018.

WASHINGTON/PALM BEACH, Fla. (Dispatches) – U.S. President Donald Trump on Wednesday confirmed his CIA director had met with North Korea’s Kim Jong Un on a secret visit to Pyongyang, ahead of a planned summit meeting between the two leaders.

“Mike Pompeo met with Kim Jong Un in North Korea last week. Meeting went very smoothly and a good relationship was formed. Details of Summit are being worked out now,”

tweeted Trump.

“Denuclearization will be a great thing for World, but also for North Korea!” he added.

Pompeo made the secret visit over the Easter weekend to discuss the planned summit with Trump, U.S. officials said.

Pompeo’s trip made him the most senior U.S. official ever known to have met with Kim and provided the strongest sign yet to Trump’s willingness to become the first serving U.S. president ever to meet a North

Korean leader.

Pompeo’s conversations fueled Trump’s belief that productive negotiations were possible with North Korea over its nuclear and ballistic missile programs, but far from guaranteed, according to a U.S. senior official briefed on the trip.

The visit, a second U.S. official said, was arranged by South Korean intelligence chief Suh Hoon with his North Korean counterpart, Kim Yong Chol, and was intended to assess whether Kim was prepared to hold serious talks.

Pompeo, one of Trump’s most trusted advisers, returned to report that it was worth continuing to pursue the possibility of a summit, but added that no site had been selected from lists of options, and consequently no logistical arrangements had been made so far, the second official said. Both officials spoke on condition of anonymity.

Trump said earlier on Tuesday the United States was engaged in direct talks at “extremely high levels” with North Korea to try to set up a summit between him and Kim.

Pompeo told his Senate confirmation hearing for the post of secretary of state this week he was optimistic a course could be set at a Trump-Kim summit for a diplomatic outcome with North Korea, but added that no one was under any illusion that a comprehensive deal could be reached at that meeting.

U.S. Report: ‘Silk Road’ to Expand China’s Influence



Chinese President Xi Jinping addresses a news conference that marked the end of the Belt and Road Forum in Beijing, May 15, 2017.

HONG KONG (AP) – A massive Chinese infrastructure program that Beijing says is aimed at promoting global trade and economic growth is actually intended to expand the country’s political influence and military presence, according to a U.S. report.

The report by U.S.-based research group C4ADS questions China’s portrayal of the trillion-dollar program, called the “Belt and Road Initiative,” as strictly meant to promote economic development. As President Xi Jinping’s signature foreign policy program, it is working to reinforce China’s links to Southeast Asia, Europe and Africa through networks of roads, ports, railways, power plants and other

infrastructure projects.

C4ADS, a nonprofit research institute that specializes in data analysis and security, examined official Chinese policy documents and unofficial reports by Chinese analysts to analyze the intentions of Beijing’s ambitious economic development program, which seeks to connect 65% of the world’s population in more than 60 countries.

Chinese officials say the initiative, also known as a modern “Silk Road” harkening back to maritime and land-based trade routes of centuries past, is driven by commercial considerations. They have rejected assertions that it is also meant to expand Beijing’s global influence.

The report analyzed 15 Chinese-funded

port projects in Australia, Oman, Malaysia, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Cambodia, Indonesia, Djibouti and elsewhere in the Indo-Pacific region. It concluded that projects aren’t driven by “win-win” economic development for the individual host countries, as Beijing claims.

“Rather, the investments appear to generate political influence, stealthily expand China’s military presence and create an advantageous strategic environment in the region,” it said.

China’s Foreign Ministry rejected the findings, saying in a statement that Belt and Road is “essentially an economic cooperation initiative” promoting common development through infrastructure.

“China is not playing a geopolitical game,” it said.

While there’s no official policy document linking Belt and Road to China’s national security interests, Chinese analysts have written that developing the program and pursuing Chinese security are “intimately linked,” the report said.

The projects shared characteristics that, taken together, pointed to China’s security intent, the report said. These include being in strategic locations such as entrances to the contested South China Sea, in an apparent effort by Beijing to ease its worries about energy imports and potential blockades. The port projects involve dual civilian-military use, Communist Party influence through the involvement of Chinese state-owned companies and control through equity stakes or long-term leases and a lack of transparency and expected profitability, it said.

Aid Groups Raise Alarm Over Rohingya Relocation

PHNOM PENH, Bangladesh (Reuters) – Bangladesh has failed to persuade aid agencies to sign up to its plan to move 100,000 Rohingya refugees to a remote island in June, internal documents show, amid fears they could be trapped there at the mercy of cyclones, floods and human traffickers.

Hundreds of thousands of refugees from neighbouring Myanmar are living in crowded camps in Cox’s Bazar district where they are threatened by flooding, disease and landslides with the monsoon season expected to start in the coming weeks.

The government of Bangladesh has for months been developing Bhasan Char island as an alternative location. However it has not allowed aid agencies to view conditions, and officials failed during an April 4 briefing to convince them it was safe.

The Inter Sector Coordination Group

(ISCG), which oversees the camps in Cox’s Bazar under the leadership of the humanitarian agencies’ Strategic Executive Group (SEG), expressed deep caution about the plan.

“Basic questions of the island’s habitability remain unanswered,” the ISCG said in an April 10 paper, which has not previously been made public.

“Given the incompleteness of information shared by the government, the SEG should avoid the appearance of premature endorsement of the island as a viable alternative,” it said.

About 700,000 refugees have crossed into Bangladesh since Rohingya insurgents attacked state security forces on Aug. 25, sparking a military crackdown. Myanmar has repeatedly rejected evidence that its soldiers targeted civilians.

Aid agencies are struggling to

accommodate the refugees, and a March assessment by the United Nations refugee agency (UNHCR) said 203,000 people at risk of floods and landslides in the largest camp should be relocated.

However, in their April 4 briefing, Bangladesh officials said that “land is very scarce” and “no suitable land is available nearby” the existing camps.

Bhasan Char, which means Floating Island, emerged over the past two decades from sediment built up at the mouth of the Meghna River. The government has budgeted \$280 million to turn it into a permanent landmass and a temporary home for refugees.

Slides from the government presentation, seen by the Thomson Reuters Foundation, noted that 120 cyclone shelters would be built, along with 13 km (8 miles) of embankments to protect the island from flooding and being washed away.

Europe to Force Tech Firms to Hand Over Users’ Data



Facebook CEO Mark Zuckerberg shakes hands with House Energy and Commerce Committee member Rep. Richard Hudson at the conclusion of a hearing on Capitol Hill.

BRUSSELS (Reuters) – Technology companies such as Google, Microsoft and Facebook will be forced to hand over users’ data to European law enforcement officials even when it is stored on servers outside the bloc, under a law proposed by the EU Tuesday.

The law would allow European prosecutors to force companies to turn over data such as emails, text messages and pictures stored online in another country, within 10 days or as little as six hours in urgent cases.

The European Union executive says the proposed law, which would apply to data stored inside and outside the bloc, is necessary because current legal procedures between countries to obtain such electronic evidence can drag on for months.

“Electronic evidence is increasingly important in criminal proceedings,” said European Commission Vice President Frans Timmermans.

“We cannot allow criminals and terrorists to exploit modern and electronic communication technologies to hide their criminal actions and evade justice.”

Digital borders are a growing global issue in an era where big companies operate so-called cloud networks of giant data centers, which mean that an individual’s data can reside anywhere. Technology

companies have found themselves torn between protecting consumers’ privacy while cooperating with law enforcement. The political pressure has intensified after terrorist attacks across Europe in recent years.

The United States recently moved to address the same problem, passing a law making it clear that U.S. judges could issue warrants for data held abroad while giving companies an avenue to object if the request conflicts with foreign law.

Prosecutors and police will have to ask a judge to approve their request for electronic evidence where it concerns more sensitive data, such as the actual content of messages, emails, pictures and videos.

They will also be able to ask companies to ensure electronic evidence is not deleted while they prepare their so-called production order.

The proposal will apply only in cases where crimes carry a minimum jail sentence of three years. In cases of cybercrime there will be no minimum penalty requirement.

Where companies find themselves in a conflict-of-law situation because the country where data is stored forbids them from handing it over to a foreign authority, they will be able to challenge the seizure request.

Strike Disrupts Train Services in France for 7th Day



Riot police are pictured clashing with protesters in Paris at demonstrations coinciding with the railway strikes.

PARIS (Reuters) -- Striking French rail workers disrupted train services for the seventh day this month on Wednesday, spurning government calls to end the industrial action over reforms at the state-owned SNCF railway company.

The rolling strikes, due to stretch on until the end of June, entered a new, more testing phase for unions a day after parliament’s lower house approved the railway reform bill they are fighting.

“Unions are free to do as they see fit ... but a majority of French people want this reform,” Labor Minister Muriel Penicaud told public television channel France 2. “There comes a time when you need to bring an end to the strikes.”

All four major unions are contesting a reform which is the biggest since nationalization of the railways in 1937 and seen as a test of President Emmanuel Macron’s determination to pursue a far broader raft of economic and social reforms during a term that runs to 2022.

SNCF management said around one in three high-speed TGV trains were running and that services were

cut to two in five trains on regional connections, while international services were down to about 75 percent of normal.

That is a marginally lower disruption rate than seen at the outset of the strike action on April 3 but not to a degree that suggested Tuesday’s resounding pro-reform vote in the National Assembly had broken the will of the unions and rail workers.

The Communist-rooted CGT union sought to raise the pressure on President Emmanuel Macron with a call for stoppages too at the Paris subway transport company, RATP, which is not targeted by the national railway reforms.

A CGT leader in the power sector warned in an interview in Le Parisien newspaper that his union could also tamper with power supplies and cause more train delays out of solidarity with rail workers.

Hallmarks of the reform include gradual phase-out of the SNCF’s passenger rail monopoly, starting with competition on high-speed lines in 2020, and an end to hiring of SNCF staff on more protective job-for-life contracts than in other sectors.



MOSCOW (Reuters) – Russian news agencies reported Wednesday that President Donald Trump’s administration had informed the Russian embassy in Washington that the United States had no immediate plans to impose new sanctions. “I can confirm that the United States has informed the Russian embassy that there will be no new sanctions for now,” TASS cited a source in the Russian foreign ministry as saying. Interfax news agency published a similar quote.

WASHINGTON (Dispatches) – U.S. Ambassador to the UN Nikki Haley has hit back at the White House, rejecting a top adviser’s claim that she was confused by saying President Donald Trump would impose new sanctions on Russia. Haley had told CBS News on Sunday that “Russia sanctions will be coming down,” noting, Treasury “Secretary (Steven) Mnuchin will be announcing those on Monday if he hasn’t already.” However on Monday, the White House denied the imposition of any new sanctions, with its economic adviser Larry Kudlow saying a day after that Haley “got ahead of the curve,” and that “there might have been some momentary confusion about that.” Haley hit back with a stunning statement, saying, “With all due respect, I don’t get confused.”

WASHINGTON (Dispatches) -- Former U.S. first lady Barbara Bush died Tuesday at the age of 92. Barbara and George H.W. Bush were married for 73 years, and the widow “of course is heart-broken to lose his beloved Barbara,” his chief of staff Jean Becker said in a statement. Funeral arrangements were due to be announced soon for Barbara Bush, who was also survived by five of her children and their spouses, 17 grandchildren, seven great-grandchildren and her brother, Scott Pierce. She was preceded in death by her second child, Robin, who died of leukemia as a toddler. Bush has long been considered the rock at the center of one of America’s most prominent political families, as the wife of a president and the mother to another -- George W. Bush -- and to Jeb Bush, a former Florida governor and onetime presidential aspirant.

ATHENS (AFP) – Greece’s top administrative court has ruled that asylum seekers should be allowed to move freely around the country, a move that could alleviate pressure on overcrowded island refugee camps. A justice source on Wednesday said the Council of State ruling only applies to asylum seekers who arrive from now on, and is not applicable to over 15,000 people already on the islands. Chronic overcrowding in island camps where migrants can spend months after landing until their asylum claims can be processed has often led to protests and outbreaks of violence. On Tuesday, hundreds of Afghan migrants demonstrated on Lesbos island over the fate of one of their fellow nationals, who was recently hospitalized with a heart ailment. The Greek government is keen to reduce tension on the eastern Aegean islands of Lesbos, Chios, Samos, Leros and Kos, especially as the busy tourist season is about to begin. Local authorities have long protested to Athens over the issue, and have blocked state efforts to expand capacity in the camps in retaliation.

BERLIN (AFP) -- The discovery of an unexploded World War II bomb will force a mass evacuation around Berlin’s central railway station Friday, covering several government ministries and a hospital, police said. Buildings and streets in a radius of 800 meters (875 yards) around the site north of the busy train station will be cleared from 0700 GMT until the 500-kilogramme (1,100-pound) explosive is safely defused, they said on Twitter Wednesday. The evacuation zone covers the central railway station, the economy and transport ministries, an army hospital and the embassies of Indonesia and Uzbekistan, a police spokesman told AFP. Police said it was not yet clear how many thousands of people would be affected but predicted to local media that “it will be big, it will be a major hassle”. The Deutsche Bahn rail company and urban transport operators prepared for large-scale disruptions around the central hub for trains, trams and buses. The bomb, which was discovered during construction work on Heidestrasse in the district of Mitte, was “safe for now”, police said, reassuring nearby residents that “there is no immediate danger”. Allied planes blasted Nazi Germany during the Second World War, and vast urban and industrial areas remain littered with unexploded bombs and other ordnance often found during construction projects.

YEREVAN (Dispatches) -- Tens of thousands of people in Armenia took to the streets in the capital Wednesday to protest the election by the parliament of former president Serzh Sargsyan as prime minister. The rally was led by opposition leader Nikol Pashinyan, with protesters chanting “Armenia without Serzh!” as they blocked major streets and bridges. “We must not allow Armenia’s transformation into an autocratic country where the same man remains in power for an indefinite time,” said one protester. Sargsyan “lied to Armenians and broke his earlier promise not to become prime minister after his presidential term expires,” said another protester. A crowd also amassed outside Sargsyan’s residence earlier in the day. Dozens of protesters have so far been detained and charged by the police, and several dozen others have been wounded in clashes with security forces. People have been protesting over the matter in Yerevan since Friday. The parliament, however, elected Sargsyan as the new prime minister on Tuesday, sparking the largest protest in the country in years: the one on Wednesday.