

Trump: Ex-Secretary Tillerson 'Dumb as a Rock'



U.S. President Donald Trump (L) has said former secretary of state Rex Tillerson was "was dumb as a rock and I couldn't get rid of him fast enough".

WASHINGTON (AFP) -- Former U.S. secretary of state Rex Tillerson said Donald Trump was "undisciplined" and repeatedly wanted to break the law -- leading the U.S. president to respond that his onetime cabinet member was "dumb as a rock."

Tillerson, who was fired in March, made no attempt to deny his poor relationship with Trump during a rare interview as part of a charity dinner in his native Texas.

"I think part of it was obviously we are starkly different in our styles. We did not have a common value system," Tillerson told veteran journalist Bob Schieffer of CBS News, which broadcast an excerpt of the interview. "I'd have to say to him, 'Well, Mr. President, I understand what you want to do, but you can't do it that way -- it violates the law, it violates a treaty.'"

"He got really frustrated," he said. "I think he grew tired of me being the guy every day that told him you can't do that and let's talk about what we can do."

Trump voiced anger hours later in a harsh tweet, saying that Tillerson "didn't have the mental capacity needed" to be the top U.S. diplomat.

"He was dumb as a rock and I couldn't get rid of him fast enough. He was lazy as hell. Now it is a whole new ballgame, great spirit at State!" Trump wrote from Air Force One as he returned from a conference in Kansas City about crime.

Trump praised Tillerson's successor, the brusque former congressman and CIA chief Mike Pompeo, for "doing a great job."

He becomes the latest cabinet member on which Trump has turned his knives. He repeatedly denounced

attorney general Jeff Session, who was ousted last month, as "very weak" for not blocking a probe into whether the Trump presidential campaign colluded with Russia.

Tillerson, a former chief executive of oil giant ExxonMobil, had no government experience and had never met Trump when his nomination was promoted by Republican Party insiders, who hoped for a stable figure who could nonetheless appeal to the tycoon-turned-president with his outsider status and business background.

But Tillerson immediately struggled to fit in, focusing on internal State Department streamlining rather than broader foreign policy goals and avoiding the press as his rapport frayed with Trump.

"It was challenging for me coming from the disciplined, highly process-oriented ExxonMobil Corp to go to work for a man who is pretty undisciplined, doesn't like to read, doesn't read briefing reports, doesn't like to get into the details of a lot of things," Tillerson said at the event in Houston.

Trump is proudly anti-intellectual, saying that he succeeds by following his instincts and knows better than experts.

Asked about his reading habits in an interview shortly after taking office, Trump said he was "looking at a book" but was distracted by phone calls every time he tried to get started.

When he selected him, Trump offered a vastly different assessment of Tillerson than on Friday, saying his "tenacity, broad experience and deep understanding of geopolitics" made him an "excellent choice."

Merkel Ally Wins Race to Succeed Her as Party Leader



Annegret Kramp-Karrenbauer (L) will succeed Angela Merkel as CDU leader.

BERLIN (AFP) -- Annegret Kramp-Karrenbauer, a close ally of Angela Merkel, won a tight race to succeed her as party leader, seeing off a longtime rival of the German chancellor.

The contest, which required a runoff vote to secure a 52-percent majority for AKK as she is known, is expected to increase the likelihood that Merkel will be able to see out her fourth term until 2021.

AKK, 56, pledged to maintain continuity after 18 years of Merkel at the helm while opening up the Christian Democratic Union (CDU) to more grassroots democracy.

In a brief, upbeat address before the vote that brought many delegates to their feet, she called on the party to

reject the politics of fear as the far-right makes inroads in Germany and Europe.

"We must have the courage to stay the course against the Zeitgeist," she said.

AKK beat corporate lawyer Friedrich Merz, 63, who had quit politics in 2009 after losing a power struggle to Merkel and long nursed a grudge against the more centrist chancellor.

The third candidate -- vocal Merkel critic and current health minister Jens Spahn -- lost in the first round.

Merkel, 64, had earlier mounted a staunch defense of her moderate course since becoming chancellor in 2005.

Accepting a lengthy standing

ovation from delegates, many tearful and holding "Thanks, boss" placards aloft, a visibly moved Merkel said the party had won four national elections under her by holding fast to its principles.

Pointing to the rise of populism worldwide and what she called a breakdown of shared Western values, Merkel acknowledged the order she had championed was at risk.

"Whether it's the rejection of multilateralism, the return to nationalism, the reduction of international cooperation to deal-making or threatened trade wars... hybrid warfare, destabilization of societies with fake news or the future of our EU -- we Christian Democrats must show in the face of all these challenges what we've got," she said.

Handpicked by Merkel as general secretary of the party in February, AKK was immediately seen as the chancellor's anointed crown princess.

Her modest style, even temper and largely middle-of-the-road policies mirror Merkel's, while both women are respected for the flash of steel they have shown at decisive moments.

While she has called for tougher policies on refugees who commit crimes, AKK firmly backed Merkel's fateful 2015 decision to welcome more than one million asylum-seekers from crisis zones such as Syria and Iraq.

Thousands Descend on Poland for Climate Protests

KATOWICE, Poland (AP) -- Several thousand people gathered Saturday amid a heavy police presence in southern Poland for a "March for Climate" to encourage negotiators at climate talks to set ambitious goals.

Activists from around the world gathered in the main square of the city of Katowice where delegates from almost 200 countries are holding a two-week meeting on curbing climate change.

Some of them were dressed as polar bears, some as orangutans, animals that are facing extinction from man-made global warming

and deforestation. They joined in chants of "Wake up, it's time to save our home," and held banners including one reading "Defend our Rights to Food, Land, Water," as large police units and mounted police looked on.

Earlier Saturday, campaign group Climate Action Network said that one of its employees has been allowed to enter Poland after earlier being stopped by border guards citing unspecified security threats.

The group, an alliance of hundreds of organizations from around the world, said Polish

authorities gave Belgium-based activist Zanna Vanrenterghem permission to continue to the U.N. climate summit in Katowice.

The Belgian ambassador in Poland, Luc Jacobs, said Polish border guards had provided him with no details about the case but confirmed that Vanrenterghem was admitted into Poland overnight.

CAN had no immediate information about 12 other activists deported or denied entry to Poland in recent days. Poland introduced temporary random identity checks ahead of the conference, arguing they were needed for security.

Japan Plans Record Military Spending Amid U.S. Pressure



A Ground Self-Defense Force Type-10 tank fires its gun at a target during an annual live-firing exercise at Higashi-Fuji training range in Gotemba, Shizuoka Prefecture, in August 2016.

TOKYO (Dispatches) -- Japan plans to increase its military spending to a record high level over the next five years amid heightened U.S. pressure to buy more American military equipment and join Washington to counter China.

Japan's largest financial daily the Nikkei reported on Saturday that the country's defense ministry sought to spend at least \$240 billion between April 2019 and March 2024.

During the period, the military budget will rise an average 1.1 percent per year compared with the 0.8-percent growth over the five years through fiscal 2018, it said.

The paper said the proposed spending was in response to security challenges in the region and to narrow trade surplus with the U.S. through additional purchases of American equipment.

Payments on military equipment and personnel expenses currently account for 80 percent of military spending in Japan, according to the Nikkei.

The Japanese Cabinet aims to approve the new program in mid-December.

Earlier this month, the business paper reported that Japan was poised to buy 100 F-35 stealth jets from the U.S. at a cost of more than \$8.8 billion, a move that suggested Tokyo might be developing aircraft carriers for the first time since World War II.

Japan's cabinet last December approved the deployment of the U.S. military's ground-based Aegis missile interceptor system in an alleged attempt to counter purported threats from North Korea missile strike and China's growing air and sea power in the waters around the country.

Later in January, the U.S. also approved a \$133.3 million sale of anti-ballistic missiles to Japan.

Besides the Aegis system, Washington had already equipped Tokyo with Patriot and Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) missile systems.

The administration of U.S. President Donald Trump has been pushing Japan to buy more American goods, including military gear, while threatening to impose tariffs on Japanese auto imports to cut a trade deficit with Tokyo.

China Launches Probe to Explore Dark Side of Moon



A Long March-3B rocket carrying Chang'e 4 lunar probe takes off from the Xichang Satellite Launch Center in Sichuan province, China December 8, 2018.

BEIJING (AP) -- China launched a ground-breaking mission Saturday to land a spacecraft on the largely unexplored far side of the moon, demonstrating its growing ambitions as a space power to rival Russia, the European Union and the U.S.

A Long March 3B rocket carrying a lunar probe blasted off at 2:23 a.m. from the Xichang Satellite Launch Center in Sichuan Province in southwestern China, the official Xinhua News Agency said.

With its Chang'e 4 mission, China hopes to be the first country to make a soft landing, which is a landing of a spacecraft during which no serious damage is incurred. The moon's far side is also known as the dark side because it faces away from Earth and remains comparatively unknown. It has a different composition than sites on the near side, where previous missions have landed.

If successful, the mission would propel the Chinese space program to a leading position in one of the most important areas of lunar exploration.

China landed its Yutu, or "Jade Rabbit," rover on the moon five years ago and plans to send its Chang'e 5 probe there next year and have it

return to Earth with samples -- the first time that will have been done since 1976. A crewed lunar mission is also under consideration.

Chang'e 4 is also a lander-rover combination and will explore both above and below the lunar surface after arriving at the South Pole-Aitken basin's Von Karman crater following a 27-day journey.

It will also perform radio-astronomical studies that, because the far side always faces away from Earth, will be "free from interference from our planet's ionosphere, human-made radio frequencies and auroral radiation noise," space industry expert Leonard David wrote on the website Space.com.

It may also carry plant seeds and silkworm eggs, according to Xinhua. Chang'e is the goddess of the moon in Chinese mythology.

China conducted its first crewed space mission in 2003, making it only the third country after Russia and the U.S. to do so. It has put a pair of space stations into orbit, one of which is still operating as a precursor to a more than 60-ton station that is due to come online in 2022. The launch of a Mars rover is planned for the mid-2020s.



ROME (Reuters) -- Six people, including five young teenagers, were crushed to death in the early hours of Saturday following a stampede at a packed nightclub near Ancona on Italy's Adriatic coast, officials said. The deaths occurred when a walkway leading out of the Lanterna Azzurra nightclub in the town of Corinaldo collapsed, causing dozens of people to fall into a trench below. Three girls, two boys and a mother who had accompanied her child to the event died in the crush. Police said the teenagers were aged between 14 and 16, while the dead woman was 39. More than 100 other people were injured, 13 of them seriously, officials said. The local fire brigade said someone might have sprayed a substance like pepper spray into the crowd, triggering a panicked rush to the emergency exits. Deputy Prime Minister Matteo Salvini, who also serves as interior minister, said early indications suggested there were many more people than permitted inside the club, where popular Italian rapper Sfera Ebbasta had been due to perform.

Charlottesville, Va. (Reuters) -- A white nationalist who drove his car into a crowd protesting against a white supremacist rally in Charlottesville, Virginia, last year, killing one of the counterdemonstrators, was found guilty of first-degree murder and nine other counts. The jury deliberated for about seven hours before convicting James Fields, 21, of all charges stemming from the deadly attack that occurred after police had declared an unlawful assembly and cleared a city park of white supremacists gathered for the "Unite the Right" rally. Fields, who did not take the witness stand to defend himself, faces a maximum penalty of life in prison. The 12 members of the mostly white jury -- seven women and five men -- were to return to court on Monday for the start of the penalty phase of the trial. Wearing a light-blue sweater and eyeglasses, Fields sat expressionless between his two attorneys as the verdict was pronounced, glancing briefly at spectators in the crowded courtroom.

WASHINGTON/NEW YORK (Reuters) -- U.S. prosecutors said on Friday President Donald Trump directed his personal lawyer to make illegal hush payments to two women ahead of the 2016 election, and also detailed a previously unknown attempt by a Russian to help the Trump campaign. In court filings, federal prosecutors in New York and those working for Special Counsel Robert Mueller made the case for why Trump's former personal lawyer, Michael Cohen, and his former campaign chairman, Paul Manafort, deserved prison time. The documents turned up the heat on Trump by confirming prosecutors' belief of his involvement in a campaign finance violation, while adding to a growing list of contacts between campaign aides and Russians in 2015 and 2016, legal experts said. "In total, the prosecutors seem to be saying the president was more aware than he has claimed to be," former federal prosecutor Michael Zeldin said.

LONDON (WP) -- WikiLeaks publisher Julian Assange has rejected a bilateral deal that would involve leaving the Ecuadorian Embassy in London after six years and surrendering to British authorities, his lawyer said. Ecuadorian President Lenin Moreno told reporters that Assange should leave the embassy because the UK has agreed to "guarantee his life, and guarantee he wouldn't be extradited to any country where his life would be in danger." Barry Pollack, a lawyer representing Assange in the U.S., told The Telegraph that the proposal was rejected because it still provided for the possibility of extradition. "The suggestion that as long as the death penalty is off the table, Mr. Assange need not fear persecution is obviously wrong," Pollack said. "No one should have to face criminal charges for publishing truthful information."

BUDAPEST (Reuters) -- Thousands of Hungarians protested in Budapest on Saturday against a proposed new labor law that allows employers to ask for up to 400 hours of overtime work per year, a move its critics have billed as the "slave law". Members of trade unions and their supporters gathered under gray winter skies and marched waving banners like "we protest against the slave law" and "force your mother to do overtime". Prime Minister Viktor Orban has ruffled feathers in Europe and built a system his critics see as autocratic, forcing his will on business, academia, the courts and the media, but he has rarely angered large voter groups at once. The last move that struck a nerve with so many people that it forced Orban to backtrack was a planned tax on internet data traffic, abandoned in late 2014 after tens of thousands marched against it.

YEREVAN (AP) -- Armenians are set to vote in snap parliamentary polls this Sunday that is expected to cement the rule of the new prime minister who spearheaded the massive protests earlier this year that forced the resignation of his predecessor. The charismatic 43-year-old Nikol Pashinian, who took office in May, pushed for the elections in a bid to win control of a Parliament that was dominated by his political foes. Pashinian, a former journalist turned politician, has tapped into public anger over widespread poverty, high unemployment and rampant corruption in the landlocked former Soviet nation of 3 million that borders Georgia, Azerbaijan, Turkey and Iran. His fiery rhetoric and easy style have helped cement his popularity. Opinion polls have indicated that Pashinian's My Step alliance is set to sweep the vote, while the Republican Party that controlled the old parliament is trailing far behind.