

# Trump Probe Reaches Deeper Into White House



In this Oct. 29, 2019 file photo, Army Lt. Col. Alexander Vindman, a military officer at the National Security Council, center, arrives on Capitol Hill in Washington.

WASHINGTON (AP) — Two top national security aides who listened to President Donald Trump's July call with Ukraine's president testified Tuesday at House impeachment hearings as the inquiry reached deeper into the White House.

Lt. Col. Alexander Vindman, an Army officer at the National Security Council, and Jennifer Williams, his counterpart at Vice President Mike Pence's office, say they had concerns as Trump spoke on July 25 with the newly-elected Ukraine president about political investigations into Joe Biden.

"I found the July 25th phone call unusual because, in contrast to other presidential calls I had observed, it involved

discussion of what appeared to be a domestic political matter," Williams says, in opening remarks.

Vindman, who arrived at Capitol Hill in military blue with a chest full of service medals, has said he alerted the NSC's lead counsel to his concerns.

In all, nine current and former U.S. officials are testifying as the House's impeachment inquiry accelerates. Democrats say Trump's pressure on Ukraine to investigate his Democratic rivals as he withheld U.S. military aid to Ukraine may be grounds for removing the 45th president.

Trump says he did no such thing and the Democrats just want him gone.

The Democratic chairman leading the

probe, Rep. Adam Schiff, noted that Trump tweeted against Williams over the weekend and Vindman has seen "far more scurrilous attacks" on his character by the president's allies.

Schiff, who has warned that the president's attacks on others in the impeachment inquiry could be seen as intimidation, said the witnesses "are here because they were subpoenaed to appear, not because they are for or against impeachment. That question is for Congress."

Vindman and the other witnesses have testified in earlier, closed-door sessions. Their depositions have been publicly released, and they'll face direction questions from lawmakers on Tuesday.

"I did not think it was proper to demand that a foreign government investigate a U.S. citizen," said Vindman, a 20-year military officer and an immigrant who arrived in the U.S. as a child with his family from Ukraine. He said there was "no doubt" what Trump wanted from Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky.

It wasn't the first time Vindman, a decorated Iraq War veteran, was alarmed over the administration's push to have Ukraine investigate Democrats, he testified.

Earlier, during an unsettling July 10 meeting at the White House, Ambassador Gordon Sondland told visiting Ukrainian officials that they would need to "deliver" before next steps, which was a meeting Zelensky wanted with Trump, the officer testified.

# Sweden Drops Rape Charges Against Assange



In this May 1, 2019 file photo, WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange is taken from court, where he appeared on charges of jumping British bail seven years ago, in London.

STOCKHOLM (AFP) — Sweden on Tuesday dropped its investigation into an alleged rape by WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange, who is currently in prison in Britain.

Assange, who is battling extradition to the United States which accuses him of publishing secret documents related to his WikiLeaks work, has been facing potential charges in Sweden since 2010. The 48-year-old has denied all allegations against him.

Prosecutor Eve-Marie Persson said the case was being dropped because "the evidence has weakened considerably due to the long period of time that has elapsed since the events in question."

The decision follows a June 10 ruling by a Swedish court that Assange should not be detained. Two months earlier, Assange was evicted from the Ecuador Embassy in London where he had been holed up since 2012. He was immediately arrested and is currently serving a 50-week sentence in Britain for jumping bail in 2012.

Kristinn Hrafnsson, WikiLeaks editor-in-chief, said in a tweet that the focus should now move onto the "threat" that Assange has been "warning about

for years: the belligerent prosecution of the United States and the threat it poses to the First Amendment."

Assange has been battling potential charges in Sweden since August 2010, when an investigation began after two women accused Assange of sexual offenses during a visit to Stockholm. Sweden asked Britain to extradite Assange for questioning, and in June 2012 he sought refuge in Ecuador's London embassy to avoid arrest. That was granted two months later.

After that, the investigation stalled. Swedish prosecutors dropped cases of alleged sexual misconduct when the statute of limitations ran out in 2015, leaving only the rape allegation.

While denying the sexual misconduct allegations in Sweden, he sought asylum for protection from possible extradition to the U.S. on charges.

Ecuador withdrew Assange's asylum status in April 2019. Assange was arrested by British police and sentenced in May to 50 weeks in prison for jumping bail in 2012. He remains in prison after authorities ruled he was a flight risk and faces an extradition hearing next year to the U.S. to face spying charges.

# Three People Killed in Shooting in Oklahoma



Law enforcement forces work at the scene where two men and a woman were fatally shot, Nov. 18, 2019, outside a Walmart store in Duncan, Oklahoma.

DUNCAN (AFP) -- Three people were killed in a shooting early Monday outside a Walmart store in Oklahoma, including the assailant, police said -- the latest in a string of deadly gun attacks at the popular supermarket chain.

Danny Ford, the police chief in the town of Duncan, said the shooting -- an apparent domestic dispute -- took place shortly before 10:00 am (1600 GMT) in a parking lot in front of the store.

"We have three individuals that are deceased. We have two white males and a white female. Two of the

victims are inside the vehicle, one is outside the vehicle," said Ford.

A handgun was also found at the scene, police said.

Witnesses told local news channels that the shooter approached his victims while they were inside the vehicle, opening fire on them.

He then turned his weapon on himself when a fourth man reportedly pulled out a firearm and challenged the shooter, they said.

Family members at the scene said the shooting was a domestic dispute between a husband and his wife, a local Fox news affiliate reported.

A Walmart spokeswoman told Fox that no staff members were involved in the incident in Duncan, a town of 22,000 inhabitants some 75 miles (120 kilometers) south of Oklahoma City, the state capital.

Schools in the area had been placed on lockdown temporarily before being given an "all clear" by local police, the local school district said in a statement.

At the start of this month, a new permitless carry law came into effect in the central US state, allowing anyone over 21 and without a felony conviction to carry a gun without a permit or a license.

A gunman killed 22 people in a Walmart store in August in El Paso, Texas, while another Walmart store in Mississippi was the scene of a shooting in late July, when a disgruntled employee killed two co-workers and wounded a police officer.

In the El Paso shooting, the 21-year-old gunman said he had launched the deadly attack in response to what he called a "Hispanic invasion" of Texas.

Walmart said in the wake of the two shootings inside its stores within a week of each other that it would limit sales of guns and ammunition.

# South Korea, U.S. Halt Talks Over Military Costs



U.S. President Donald Trump has lunch with troops on Nov. 7 at the American military's Camp Humphreys in Pyeongtaek, South Korea. |

SEOUL, South Korea (AP) — U.S. and South Korean officials on Tuesday publicly acknowledged the allies remain far apart in negotiations for increasing South Korea's contributions to the costs for maintaining the American military presence on its soil.

U.S. negotiator James DeHart said the U.S. side decided to cut short a meeting that lasted less than two hours because Seoul's proposals "were not responsive to our request for fair and equitable burden sharing."

Seoul's Foreign Ministry said Washington has been calling for a "drastic increase" in South Korea's contributions which the country finds unacceptable.

The turbulent negotiations come at a delicate time for the allies, which face a growing North Korean threat and have squabbled over Seoul's declaration to terminate a 2016 military intelligence-sharing pact with Japan amid a bilateral row.

"We look forward to resuming our negotiations when the Korean side is ready to work on the basis of partnership and the basis of mutual trust," DeHart said, reading out a prepared statement in front of reporters.

Jeong Eun Bo, a South Korean negotiator, told reporters that the countries have scheduled their next round of talks, but didn't specify when.

Jeong refused to say how much the Americans were asking for. But he said Washington has demanded Seoul cover a broader range of costs than what it has been providing, which includes the wages of South Korean employ-

ees at U.S. bases and costs for facility construction and logistics support.

"It is true that there is a considerable difference between the proposals by the U.S. and the principles we are putting forward," Jeong said. "We will continue to make efforts with patience so that we reach a mutually acceptable agreement."

Despite their differences over how much South Korea should pay, the allies have not discussed the possibility of reducing the U.S. military presence in the country, Jeong said. The United States stations about 28,500 troops in South Korea, mainly to deter aggression from the North.

Washington and Seoul in February signed a new cost-sharing deal for 2019 that required South Korea to pay about 1.04 trillion won (\$890 million), shortly before a summit in Vietnam between President Donald Trump and North Korean leader Kim Jong Un that collapsed over disagreements on exchanging sanctions relief and disarmament. South Korea in 2018 provided about \$830 million, covering roughly 40 percent of the cost of the U.S. troop deployment that year.

The Trump administration has been pushing for South Korea to pay more. During a visit to South Korea last week, Pentagon chief Mark Esper pressed Washington's case that South Korea must pay a bigger share of the costs for maintaining U.S. troops in the country.

"This is a very strong alliance we have, but Korea is a wealthy country and could and should pay more to help offset the cost of defense," he said.

# Dangerous Smoke Haze Blankets Sydney

SYDNEY (AFP) -- Sydney was shrouded in dangerous haze Tuesday as smoke from bushfires blazing along Australia's eastern seaboard sent pollution levels soaring in the country's biggest city.

Official data showed that pollution had reached "hazardous" levels across Sydney, with the highest readings of PM 2.5 particulates in the city's northwest reaching 186 parts per million on the air quality index -- comparable to Delhi -- and residents warned to avoid outdoor exercise.

The usually blue skies of the harbor city turned a miserable grey, with world-famous landmarks the Sydney Opera House and Harbor Bridge dulled against the skyline.

Although the smog had begun to ease under the midday sun, it increased again on Tuesday evening, the Bureau of Meteorology said.

"Sydney is also known as the 'big smoke' and is living up to the nickname today," the weather forecaster tweeted.

The New South Wales state weather forecast director Richard Broome said the fine particles in smoke could irritate the respiratory system and aggravate existing lung and heart conditions.

Much of the smoke is being blown from a huge out-of-control bushfire burning across two national parks that is just 100

kilometers (62 miles) northwest of central Sydney at its closest point.

The blaze, which has been raging for several days, has already burnt through almost 140,000 hectares of bushland.

Six people have been killed and hundreds of homes destroyed in bushfires across New South Wales and Queensland since September, when an unusually early fire season began across drought-stricken regions in the east of the country.

Cooler weather brought some respite for firefighters in recent days, but higher temperatures, gusting winds and low humidity are expected to raise the bushfire threat again on Wednesday.

More than 110 fires are currently burning across Australia's east, with dozens of the blazes still uncontained.

Sydney woke up to a thick blanket of smoke as New South Wales warns residents of severe fire danger.

In South Australia state, a ban on lighting fires is in place ahead of predicted "catastrophic" fire danger on Wednesday, when temperatures are expected to soar to about 40 degrees Celsius (104 degrees Fahrenheit).

Bushfire-prone Australia has experienced a horror start to its fire season, which scientists say is beginning earlier and becoming more extreme as climate change pushes temperatures higher and saps moisture from the environment.

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# News in Brief

PETERBOROUGH, England (Reuters) -- A sex scandal surrounding Prince Andrew has damaged the standing of Britain's royal family, Brexit Party leader Nigel Farage said on Tuesday. Andrew, Queen Elizabeth's second son, denies an allegation that he had sex with a 17-year-old girl procured for him by his friend Jeffrey Epstein, who killed himself in a U.S. prison in August while awaiting trial on sex trafficking charges. Andrew's explanations in a disastrous TV interview aired on Saturday left many viewers incredulous. "It was the fact that he didn't show any regret for that (friendship with Epstein) or sort of almost any sympathy at all for the people who had been trafficked," Farage said during a visit to the English city of Peterborough. Asked whether Andrew had damaged the royal family's standing, Farage said: "They are all trying to do that apart from the queen." "I think the queen just becomes this ever more exalted figure and the public are beginning to look at those who come afterwards with quite a degree of scepticism at the moment," he said. Buckingham Palace declined comment on Farage's remarks.

SEOUL, South Korea (AP) -- North Korea said Tuesday it won't consider a recent U.S. decision to postpone a joint military exercise with South Korea a major concession that can bring it back to nuclear talks. Senior North Korean official Kim Yong Chol said the U.S. must completely scrap that military drill and abandon its hostility against his country if it wants to see the resumption of the nuclear negotiations. Kim's comments were the first direct response to an announcement Sunday by U.S. Defense Secretary Mark Esper and his South Korean counterpart that the allies have indefinitely postponed the annual Vigilant Ace training in an "act of goodwill" toward North Korea. The moves were regarded as an effort to convince North Korea to revive the nuclear talks that largely have stalled since the February collapse of a summit between President Donald Trump and North Korean leader Kim Jong Un. "The U.S. tries to make a good impression as if it contributes to peace and stability on the Korean peninsula, considering the suspension (of the aerial drill) as 'concession for and concession' to someone," Kim Yong Chol said in a statement carried by state media. "But we demand that the U.S. quit the drill or stop it once and for all."

SARAJEVO (Reuters) -- Bosnia's tripartite inter-ethnic presidency agreed on Tuesday to nominate economist Zoran Tegeltija, a Serb, as prime minister-designate 13 months after an election, a spokesman for the Serb ruling SNSD party told Reuters. Tegeltija was proposed a year ago by Bosnia's presidency Serb member Milorad Dodik, who is also the SNSD head, but the Bosniak and Croat members on the body have been delaying his approval over differing views on Bosnia's NATO path. The presidency has yet to confirm the nomination. Tegeltija, who had served as a finance minister of Bosnia's autonomous Serb Republic, needs to be approved by the national parliament.

KIEV (Reuters) -- Ukraine wants to negotiate a clear timeline for the return of its territories and people from Russia at a four-way summit on the Donbass conflict in December, President Volodymyr Zelensky told reporters on Tuesday. Usually clean-shaven, Zelensky was sporting facial hair and said he would not shave until he saw with his own eyes the return of three ships captured in a skirmish with Russia last year. Russia handed back the ships on Monday. "I would like to have results," Zelensky said about the summit between Ukraine, Russia, France and Germany. "We need to agree on the return of our territories. I'm talking first about some clear timelines."

MADRID (Reuters) -- Amnesty International on Tuesday called for the immediate release of two jailed Catalan leaders, saying that what it described as a "vague" and "overly broad" interpretation of sedition could have a chilling effect on protests across Spain. Last month, Spain's Supreme Court sentenced nine separatist leaders from the region of Catalonia to between nine and 13 years in prison for sedition over their role in a failed 2017 bid for independence. The sentences set off weeks of protests in the northeastern region, at times erupting in violent clashes that saw projectiles fired, cars torched and barricades set alight in the regional capital of Barcelona. "It is clear that the Supreme Court's interpretation of the crime of sedition was overly broad and resulted in criminalizing legitimate acts of protest," said Daniel Joly, a senior policy advisor with Amnesty International. The report homed in on the cases of Jordi Sanchez and Jordi Cuixart, two rights activists who were sentenced to nine years in prison for ignoring court orders by leading a protest against a police operation designed to halt the referendum.

LAHORE, Pakistan/ISLAMABAD (Reuters) -- Former prime minister Nawaz Sharif left Pakistan on Tuesday in an air ambulance to seek medical treatment in London, his party said, a month after the three-time premier was released on bail from a seven-year prison sentence for corruption. Sharif, 69, was accompanied by his younger brother and personal physician, leaders of his Pakistan Muslim League (Nawaz) Party said. Despite the convictions for corruption, Sharif remains popular among many Pakistanis, and his health has dominated newspaper front pages and TV channels in recent weeks.