

White House Defends Contacts with FBI over Russia Reports

WASHINGTON - The White House on Friday defended chief of staff Reince Priebus against accusations he breached a government firewall when he asked FBI Director James Comey to publicly dispute media reports that Trump campaign advisers had been frequently in touch with Russian intelligence agents.

President Donald Trump's spokesman, Sean Spicer, argued Priebus had little choice but to seek Comey's assistance in rebutting what Spicer said were inaccurate reports about contacts during last year's presidential campaign. The FBI did not issue the statement requested by Priebus and has given no sign one



is forthcoming. "I don't know what else we were supposed to do," Spicer said.

The Justice Department has policies in place to limit communications between the White House and the FBI about pending investigations. Trump officials on Friday not only confirmed contacts between Priebus and the FBI, but engaged in an extraordinary public airing of those private conversations.

Spicer said it was the FBI that first approached the White House about the veracity of a New York Times story asserting that Trump advisers had contacts with Russian intelligence officials during the presidential campaign. Spicer said ... (More on P4)...(23)

Iraqi PM Meets Saudi FM in Baghdad over Anti-IS Fighting

BAGHDAD - Iraqi Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi on Saturday met with Saudi Arabian Foreign Minister, who paid an official visit to Baghdad, to discuss boosting bilateral ties and to support Iraq in its fighting against Islamic State (IS) group in the northern city of Mosul. The Iraqi government said.

In a statement by his office, Abadi received in his office the Saudi Minister Adel bin Ahmed Al-Jubeir and the two sides "discussed means to enhance bilateral relations in all fields, in ad-

dition to the fight against terrorist gang of Daesh (IS group) and recent push of the Iraqi forces into the right side (western bank) of Mosul."

For his part, Jubeir confirmed his country's "support to the Iraq in fighting against terrorism and expressed the readiness of Saudi Arabia to support restoring stability in the liberated areas," according to the statement. The visiting Saudi minister also met with his Iraqi counterpart Ibrahim al-Jaafari and ... (More on P4)...(24)

Hollande Fires Back at Trump over Paris Comments

PARIS - French President Francois Hollande fired back at Donald Trump on Saturday after the U.S. president remarked in a speech that a friend thought "Paris is no longer Paris" after attacks by Islamist militants.

Hollande said Trump should show support for U.S. allies.

"There is terrorism and we must fight it together. I think that it is never good to show the smallest defiance toward an allied country. I wouldn't do it with the United States

and I'm urging the U.S. president not to do it with France," Hollande said.

"I won't make comparisons but here, people don't have access to guns. Here, you don't have people with guns opening fire on the crowd simply for the satisfaction of causing drama and tragedy," Hollande said, responding to questions during a visit at the Paris Agric fair.

During a speech at the Conservative Political Action Conference on Friday, Trump repeated his criticism of Europe's handling



of attacks by Islamist militants saying a friend "Jim" no longer wanted to take his family to Paris. More than 230 people have died in a series of assaults

in France since the beginning of 2015, and the country has been under a state of emergency rules since November the same year. (Reuters)

UN Relief Chief to Travel to Yemen, Somalia, Kenya

UNITED NATIONS - Stephen O'Brien, the UN under-secretary-general for humanitarian affairs, will travel from Oslo to Yemen, Somalia and Kenya between Feb. 26 and March 5 to meet people most affected by humanitarian crises, a UN spokesman said here Friday.

"In all three countries, Mr. O'Brien will meet people most affected by humanitarian crises, which are caused chiefly by conflict and drought," Stephane Dujarric said at a daily news briefing here.

"Millions of people in Yemen and Somalia face

the very real risk of famine over the coming six months if aid efforts are not rapidly scaled up," the spokesman said.

In Yemen, more than 7 million people are severely food insecure and 460,000 children are suffering severe acute malnutrition, while in Somalia nearly 3 million people urgently need food assistance, he said.

Kenya declared a drought emergency on Feb. 10, with at least 23 counties affected, he said, adding that the number of food insecure people in ... (More on P4)...(25)

Merkel Formally Nominated for German Election Run

BERLIN - Angela Merkel's conservatives have formally nominated the German chancellor as her party's top candidate for the September parliamentary election in the region where she has her political base. The dpa news agency reported that Merkel won the support of 95 percent of delegates at a convention of the Christian Democrats' branch in northeastern Mecklenburg-Western Pomerania state Saturday. Merkel has held her parliamentary constituency in Stralsund since



1990. Polls show Merkel facing an unexpectedly strong challenge from the center-left Social Democrats, who have been

boosted by their choice of former European Parliament President Martin Schulz to challenge her. Merkel didn't mention

Schulz in her speech Saturday. But she did make a point of praising the economic reforms enacted ... (More on P4)...(26)

Boosting Erdogan Powers will Make 'Strong Turkey': PM

ANKARA - Prime Minister Binali Yildirim urged Turks to approve constitutional changes to boost President Recep Tayyip Erdogan's powers on Saturday, saying it would make Turkey stronger.

Yildirim spoke at the ruling party's first rally ahead of a key April 16 referendum, when the public will vote on whether to approve the changes creating an executive presidency.

"For a strong Turkey, lasting stability, our choice is 'yes'. This is our wish, it will come," Yildirim told the gathering in Ankara of



party members and supporters from the country's 81 provinces.

In the boisterous, packed arena, campaign songs floated over the flag-waving crowd with lyrics

endorsing a "yes" vote as a tribute to the "July martyrs" killed during last year's failed coup. The coup featured heavily in another video screened ... (More on P4)...(27)

OPEC Says it, Non-OPEC Producers in Right Track to Cut Oil Production

VIENNA - OPEC and non-OPEC producers achieved their oil production cut goal in a conformity level of 86 percent, a cartel said in a press release on Friday.

The Joint OPEC-Non-OPEC Ministerial Monitoring Committee said that the Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) and Non-OPEC oil producer are on the "right track towards full conformity" with the crude production cut goal. The report said the in January, the producers achieved a conformity level of 86 percent over the output cut agreement, in order to rebalance the global oil market.

OPEC members and non-OPEC producers such as Russia agreed to jointly cut the oil production since January 1, therefore, the sides are closely monitor the reduction process. OPEC will discuss if the cartel should continue ... (More on P4)...(28)

Iraqi Forces Facing Stiff Resistance in Western Mosul

SOUTH OF MOSUL, Iraq - Iraqi forces pushed deeper into western Mosul Saturday amid stiff resistance from entrenched Islamic State fighters, a commander on the scene said.

Special forces Lt. Gen. Abdul-Wahab al-Saadi said that his troops are "moving very slowly" and that IS fighters are responding with car bombs, snipers and dozens of armed drones. Hundreds of civilian have fled the conflict zone, he said.

The drones have caused relatively few deaths, but have inflicted dozens of light injuries that have disrupted the pace of ground operations.

Al-Saadi said he expects the pace to increase after Iraqi forces retake territory and infrastructure on Mosul's southwestern edge - which will allow them to shorten supply lines and link up with forces in the city's east.

On the edge of a small village south of Mosul, dozens of families gathered against a crude cinderblock wall. Many said they were from villages outside Mosul and had been forced to march to the city more than four months ago to serve as human shields.

"We've been through terrible times," said Juri Fathi, a mother of six who was forced to live in a school in Mosul for three months. "I had to burn my children's clothing just for warmth."

Groups of men were screened at the site against a database of IS suspects and two prisoners were dragged past the crowd and into an abandoned building.

"We brought them directly from inside Mosul," said an Iraqi special forces soldier from inside the ... (More on P4)...(31)

Guterres Mulls New UN Plan to Fight Against Cholera in Haiti

UNITED NATIONS - UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres has asked all the 193 UN member states to inform him by March 6 if they intend to make voluntary financial contributions to the efforts to carry out a new UN plan to tackle cholera in Haiti, UN spokesman Stephane Dujarric said here Friday.

Under the new approach, the United Nations is intensifying support to the Haitian government in building sound water, sanitation and health systems - the best long-term defence against cholera and other water-borne diseases, Dujarric said. The world body is ... (More on P4)...(29)

Attack on Syrian Security Forces in Homs Kills Dozens, Prompts Airstrikes

BEIRUT - Suicide bombers stormed two Syrian security offices in Homs on Saturday, killing dozens with gunfire and explosions including a senior officer and prompting airstrikes against the last rebel-held enclave in the western city.

The jihadist rebel alliance Tahrir al-Sham said in a social media post that five suicide bombers had carried out the attack, which it celebrated with the words "thanks be to God", but stopped short of explicitly claiming responsibility.

Although the government of President Bashar al-Assad has controlled most of Homs since 2014, rebels still control its al-Waer district, which warplanes bombed

on Saturday, said the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, wounding 50.

The attack comes as government and opposition delegations join peace talks in Geneva sponsored by the United Nations. Tahrir al-Sham opposes the talks and has fought with factions that are represented there.

Saturday's jihadist assault in Homs began with clashes near a branch of military security in al-Mohata district and a branch of state security in al-Ghouta district before suicide bombers struck in both locations, state media reported.

The head of military security, General Hassan Daaboul, ... (More on P4)...(30)

Nieghbor News

China Overtakes U.S. as Germany's Main Trade Partner: German Data

BERLIN - China has overtaken the United States to become Germany's most important trading partner last year, according to data from the Federal Statistics Office (Destatis) released on Friday.

Data showed that goods with a value of 170 billion euros (about 180.3 billion U.S. dollars) were traded between China and Germany in 2016.

France was the second most important trade partner with total trade with Germany valued at 167 billion euros in the same year. The United

States was relegated to third place, with total trade volume with Germany amounting to 165 billion euros.

Nevertheless, the United States remained the most important export destination for German goods, with 107 billion euros "made in Germany" products making the transatlantic journey.

The United States only held the crown of Germany's most lucrative trade relationship in 2015. Before that France had been the most important partner for every year since 1975. (Xinhua)

Iran Requests 950 Tonnes of Uranium from Kazakhstan

TEHRAN - Iran's nuclear chief said Saturday that the country had asked to buy 950 tonnes of uranium concentrate from Kazakhstan over the next three years to help develop its civil reactor programme.

The request has been made to the body that oversees the nuclear deal signed between Iran and world powers in 2015.

Ali Akbar Salehi, head of Iran's Atomic Energy Organisation, told the ISNA news agency that the purchase was supposed to happen "within three years".

"650 tonnes will enter the country in two consign-

ments and 300 tonnes will enter Iran in the third year," he said.

Salehi said the final shipment of concentrate, known as yellow cake, would be turned into uranium hexafluoride gas and sold back to Kazakhstan - its first international sale of the compound which is used in the uranium enrichment process.

Under the nuclear deal, many of Iran's centrifuges were mothballed but it has the right to enrich uranium to a level of 3.5 percent and sell it abroad. Nuclear weapons require uranium enriched to 80 percent or more. (AFP)

Pakistan to Host 13th ECO Summit

ISLAMABAD - The 13th Economic Cooperation Organisation Summit will be held in Islamabad on Wednesday, reported the state-run radio service.

Briefing the media persons in Islamabad on Saturday, Adviser to Prime Minister on Foreign Affairs Sartaj Aziz said, "Most of the member states have already confirmed participation at Heads of State or Heads of Government level."

The summit would be preceded by the two days senior officials' meeting from Sunday and Foreign Ministers' Meeting on Tuesday, the report said.

The theme of ECO Summit is "Connectivity for Regional Prosperity," Sar-

taj Aziz said. The summit will deliberate and decide on ways and means to augment cooperation in the areas of connectivity, trade, energy, tourism, investment, industry, economic growth, productivity, social welfare and environment.

ECO Observers and special guests have also been invited to attend the summit, he said.

The Adviser said China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) is an excellent example of the summit's theme of connectivity and this project will connect with the existing and the planned transit and energy corridors in the ECO region for greater progress. (Monitoring Desk)

Uzbek-Kazakh Partnership Developing Dynamically: President

TASHKENT - There is positive dynamics in development and strengthening of the Uzbekistan-Kazakhstan strategic partnership, in trade and economy as well, Uzbek President Shavkat Mirziyoyev said as he received Kazakh First Deputy Prime Minister Askar Mamin.

Mamin arrived in Tashkent for a meeting of the joint intergovernmental

commission on the Uzbekistan-Kazakhstan cooperation.

During the meeting, Mirziyoyev noted that a number of promising projects are being worked out jointly with Kazakhstan.

The Uzbek president noted the importance of building fruitful and mutually beneficial cooperation, primarily through ... (More on P4)...(32)

Regional Curators Appointed in Turkmenistan

ASHGABAT - President of Turkmenistan Gurbanguly Berdimuhamedov signed a decree appointing a number of deputy prime ministers to supervise the country's regions.

Batyr Atdayev will be a curator of the Ahal region, Bayram Annameredov will curate the Balkan region and Recep Bazarov will curate the Dashoguz region.

Also, Batyr Ereshov was appointed as the curator of the country's Lebap region, Byashim Hojamammedov - curator of the Mary region and Dadebay Amangeldyev - curator of Ashgabat.

The document states that this will increase curators' responsibility for the socio-economic development of the country. (Trend)