

"ANOTHER WAR, ANOTHER BLITZER-KRIEG." BY SUSAN J. DOUGLAS, P. 13

"THE APOCALYPTIC STYLE IN AMERICAN POLITICS" BY CHRIS LEHMANN, P. 37

IN THESE TIMES, COM JUNE 2017

UPDATE

SHOUT-OUT-OUTSIDE THE WALL
TO: PRESIDENT DONALD J. TRUMP

With Respect Mr. President, Please do NOT listen to those FAKE VOICES [whom ONLY FIGHTING WAS "END THE DRAFT !!!"] . . .

"THAT'S WHAT PEOPLE SAY" !!!

Like Rich Lowry, Toby Keith, Kid Rock, Ted Nugent, Sen. (R, N.C.) Lindsey Graham, MSNBC Brian Williams (He's STILL Tripping !!!), Id p. 13

NORTH KOREA !!!

The Leader of North Korea Can NOT "BACK DOWN" !!! It would be suicide

by his "Followers" collective hand
a'la CEASAR 100-40 B.C.]

PEACE (NOT REAL "WAR")

IMAGINE / XERO / JOHN

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— 2013

NORTH KOREA

Report: Trump warns of 'major, major conflict' with North Korea

A "major, major conflict" with North Korea is a possibility for the U.S., but the White House is trying to come up with diplomatic solutions, President Trump told Reuters Thursday.

The current standoff with the hermit nation over its nuclear and missile programs has made such diplomatic efforts difficult in recent weeks.

"There is a chance that we could end up having a major, major conflict with North Korea. Absolutely," Trump told Reuters in an Oval Office interview ahead of his 100th day in office on Saturday.

Nonetheless, Trump said he wanted to peacefully resolve the crisis.

"We'd love to solve things diplomatically but it's very difficult," he told Reuters.

Secretary of State Rex Tillerson told Fox News on Thursday that China has threatened its ally North Korea with sanctions if it does not stop carrying out nuclear tests.

He said: "We know that China is in communications with the regime in Pyongyang. They confirmed to us that they had requested the regime conduct no further nuclear test."

Trump spoke just a day after he and his top national security advisers briefed U.S. lawmakers on the North Korean threat and one day before Secretary of State Rex Tillerson will press the United Nations Security Council on sanctions to further isolate Pyongyang over its nuclear and missile programs.

Trump, asked by Reuters if he considered North Korean leader Kim Jong Un to be rational, said he has no opinion, but that he hopes Jong Un is.

Trump noted that Kim had taken over his country at an early age.

"He's 27 years old. His father dies, took over a regime," he said in the Reuters interview.

"So say what you want but that is not easy, especially at that age."

Mattis: U.S., NATO must confront Russia on Taliban

KABUL — Defense Secretary Jim Mattis on Monday said the United States and NATO will have to confront Russia over its support for the Taliban, remarks that came days after a massacre of Afghan troops inside a mosque and amid a review of the American strategy here.

Mattis was in the Afghan capital days after the insurgent attack on an Afghan army base killed more than 140 soldiers and wounded dozens more. The slaughter prompted the resignation Monday of top Afghan defense officials.

Mattis' Afghan visit, which included meetings with Afghan President Ashraf Ghani and Australian Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull, was the last leg of a tour of the Middle East and Africa. Mattis also met Monday with Army Gen. John Nicholson, the top U.S. and NATO commander, who told the Senate earlier this

year that he needs thousands more troops to advise Afghan forces. There are about 8,400 American troops here now.

The Taliban have been receiving an increasing flow of arms, including machine guns, and funding from Russia, according to senior U.S. military official who was not authorized to speak publicly. Nicholson acknowledged receiving continuing reports of Russian assistance to the Taliban.

"We're going to have to confront Russia," Mattis said, adding supplying the Taliban with weaponry would be a violation of international law.

U.S. troops are also waging a counter-terrorism war against Islamic State militants and al-Qaeda terror affiliates. Earlier this month, Nicholson attacked ISIS insurgents with one of the largest conventional munitions in the U.S. arsenal, the Massive Ordnance Air Blast, or MOAB, also referred to as the Mother of All Bombs.

Since early March, the U.S.-led coalition has killed 538 Islamic State fighters. The strikes have reduced ISIS strength from about 3,000 militants in 2015 to about 800 today, according to the military official.

But it is the Haqqani network, an extremist group affiliated with the Taliban, that is likely responsible for the attack at the army base last week. Ten attackers committed the strike on the Afghan army post.

The attackers appear to have used the ruse that they were bringing a wounded Afghan soldier to the base for treatment. That allowed them to pass through three checkpoints, the Defense official said.

They also seem to have had inside information on the best time to carry out the massacre: during prayers when most of the Afghan troops were not carrying weapons. Suicide bombers killed some of the soldiers, while others were cut down by small arms fire and grenades.

The attack on Afghans during worship shows the depravity of the Taliban, Mattis said.

"They have no religious foundation," he said. "They are not devout anything."

There has been progress in the counter-terrorism fight, Nicholson and the official said.

Nicholson's request for more troops is a reversal from the last years of the Obama administration, which had sought to end the American war here that began after the terror attacks of Sept. 11, 2001.

But a resurgent Taliban, and the presence of a number of terror groups with designs in U.S. and western targets, convinced Obama to stop the withdrawal. Mattis and President Trump will now decide if an escalation is in order.

Mattis said he would need time to reach a decision on U.S. troop levels in Afghanistan. The new administration is inheriting what the Defense official described as a stalemate between the Afghan government and the Taliban, the Islamic fundamentalist movement that governed Afghanistan until it was toppled in October 2001, shortly after the U.S. invasion.

The Taliban had sheltered Osama bin Laden, the al-Qaeda leader who coordinated the 9/11 attacks.

House oversight committee: Flynn might have broken the law

(CNN) President Donald Trump's former national security adviser did not properly disclose payments from Russia and may have broken the law, House Oversight Chairman Jason Chaffetz and ranking Democrat Elijah Cummings said Tuesday after reviewing Michael Flynn's application for a security clearance.

"As a former military officer, you simply cannot take money from Russia, Turkey or anybody else. And it appears as if he did take that money. It was inappropriate. And there are repercussions for the violation of law," Chaffetz said.

Chaffetz and Cummings announced their findings to reporters on the Hill following a classified gathering of the committee in which they reviewed documents that Cummings described as "extremely troubling."

"I see no data to support the notion that Gen. Flynn complied with the law," Chaffetz said, referring to whether Flynn received permission from the Pentagon or the State Department or that he disclosed the more than \$45,000 he was paid for a speech he gave to RT-TV in Russia.

Chaffetz said that the committee will send a letter now requesting information from the inspector general at the Department of Defense and the comptroller of the US Army to determine how they will handle news of Flynn's security clearance. One action, he said, may be seeking repayment of money from Flynn -- possibly in the tens of thousands of dollars.

Cummings noted that the security clearance states that knowingly leaving off payments from foreign governments is a felony punishable with up to five years in prison. But he and Chaffetz both said that it was not for them to decide whether Flynn committed a crime.

"We're not here to make the final determination," Chaffetz said Tuesday. Flynn's lawyer, Robert Kelner, said Tuesday that Flynn was not hiding anything, noting that he briefed the Defense Intelligence Agency on his trip to Russia.

"As has previously been reported, General Flynn briefed the Defense Intelligence Agency, a component agency of DoD, extensively regarding the RT speaking event trip both before and after the trip, and he answered any questions that were posed by DIA concerning the trip during those briefings," Kelner said in a statement to CNN Tuesday.

When asked by a reporter if the White House believed that Flynn broke the law in his SF-86 letter, White House press secretary Sean Spicer said he didn't know.

"That would be a question for him," Spicer said. "I don't know what he filled out or what he did or did not do. That all happened. He

3 1 of 13

filled that form out prior to coming here. It would be up to the committee and other authorities to look at that. I don't know." The news comes after the White House declined to provide documents related to Flynn that the panel investigating him had requested, according to a letter obtained by CNN.

White House Director of Legislative Affairs Marc Short outlined in a letter to the House oversight committee how it would not complete the request from the panel, referring some requests to the Department of Defense, saying the office doesn't have custody of some of the other documents or simply stating "we are unable to accommodate" others.

A White House aide disputed that the White House was withholding anything from the committee, saying they could not provide documents they do not have access to. The aide said that they directed oversight investigators to the appropriate agencies. The announcement about Flynn comes a week after CNN reported that Jared Kushner, Trump's son-in-law and a senior adviser to the President, has yet to detail to the federal government all of his foreign contacts, a condition of receiving his top secret security clearance, CNN has learned.

When Kushner first submitted his forms to the FBI, he left the section about foreign contacts blank -- despite the fact that he had met with a large number of foreign emissaries and leaders once Donald Trump became the president-elect and he became the point man for international contacts for the incoming Trump administration.

Rep. Gerry Connolly, a Democratic member of the House oversight committee, said on CNN's "Erin Burnett OutFront" that there is "no question" Flynn had committed a crime. Additionally, Connolly said he considers Kushner's failure to detail his foreign contacts as in the same category as Flynn's potential crime.

"We've got an outbreak here of violations of the law and nondisclosure," Connolly said.

"We need to get to the bottom of it by getting our hands on the documents we've requested from the White House."

Whether Flynn properly disclosed payments from foreign governments on his security clearance application was the subject of the House oversight committee meeting Tuesday, as members reviewed the first batch of documents related to the investigation coming from the Pentagon.

The committee gathered Tuesday morning at the Capitol to review classified material provided by the Department of Defense in response to its March 22 request for more information on Flynn, according to MJ Henshaw, a spokeswoman for House Oversight Chairman Jason Chaffetz.

The committee has sent additional requests for information about Flynn to the White House, the FBI and the Office of the Director of National Intelligence. However, Tuesday's

meeting will only include responses from the Pentagon.

Oversight investigators also revealed last month that Flynn had received \$530,000 for work his lobbying firm did that, according to the committee, likely benefited the Republic of Turkey.

The House and Senate intelligence committees have been leading the primary investigations into Russia's interference in the US elections and possible coordination with top aides to the Trump campaign. However, the House oversight panel has taken a particular focus on Flynn's work -- drilling down in a series of requests.

Flynn was forced to resign from his role as Trump's national security adviser after it was discovered he withheld information about discussions he had with Russian ambassador to the US Sergey Kislyak. Flynn is one of four former Trump aides at the center of the FBI's probe and is a top target for House and Senate investigators as well.

Since he resigned, Flynn has retained a lawyer and has offered to testify in exchange for immunity from prosecution -- an offer nobody has apparently taken him up on.

GOP drops US-Mexico wall demands as spending talks advance

WASHINGTON (AP) — Congressional negotiators on Tuesday inched toward a potential agreement on a catchall spending bill that would deny President Donald Trump's request for immediate funding to construct a wall along the Mexico border. The emerging measure would increase the defense budget and eliminate the threat of a government shutdown on Trump's 100th day in office this Saturday.

Top Senate Democrat Chuck Schumer said Republican negotiators were following the lead of Trump, who signaled Monday evening that he would not insist on \$1 billion worth of wall funding now as an addition to the \$1 trillion-plus spending bill. Trump told a gathering of conservative media reporters that he might be willing to wait until September for the funding.

Other stumbling blocks remain, but the decision by Trump and his GOP allies to back down on the wall steered the talks on the spending measure in a positive direction. Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell, R-Ky., said he was optimistic the talks would produce "an agreement in the next few days." An existing temporary funding bill expires Friday at midnight and all sides anticipated that another stopgap measure would be required to buy time for the House and Senate to process the massive spending bill, which would wrap together 11 unfinished agency spending bills through September. Trump campaigned throughout the country last year promising a wall across the entire 2,200 mile southern border, promising that Mexico would pay for it. But while the idea is a priority of Trump's most fervent supporters, it is resolutely opposed by Democrats and even many Republicans, who see it as wasteful and who prefer other steps

like new technologies and additional border agents to curb illegal immigration.

"I support additional border security funding," said Sen. Lindsey Graham, R-S.C., a GOP critic of Trump who dined with the president Monday at the White House. "But a 2,200-mile wall, I don't think there's a whole lot of support for it."

Trump vowed to fight for the wall.

"The wall is going to get built," he said at the White House Tuesday. Asked when, he said, "Soon."

Democrats vowed not to give up, either, and look forward to the fight.

"It's not a negotiation," Schumer said. "No wall."

Meanwhile, Trump appeared poised to procure about \$15 billion to boost the military. Democrats said they were satisfied with the emerging outlines of the measure, which stick closely to versions of the legislation that were being negotiated late last year.

Sen. Patty Murray, D-Wash., observed that GOP negotiators "have simply ignored" a roster of "\$18 billion in extreme cuts" offered by White House budget director Mick Mulvaney to lower the measure's cost. The measure would also maintain foreign aid accounts that Trump has targeted, along with a series of grant programs popular with lawmakers in both parties, such as community development block grants. Several issues remain unresolved. Democrats, with McConnell's help, were pushing to extend health benefits for 22,000 retired Appalachian coal miners and their families whose medical coverage is set to expire at the end of April. Democrats faced White House opposition in an uphill battle to give Puerto Rico help with its Medicaid commitment, while Republicans are pressing policy "riders" to undo new Obama-era financial regulations.

Another potential stumbling block involved a recent threat by Trump to scuttle a portion of former President Barack Obama's health law that helps low-income people afford insurance policies.

Democratic votes are invariably needed to pass catchall spending bills, which typically are resented by many tea party Republicans. That gave Democratic leaders like Schumer and Pelosi significant leverage, and the top Democrats had earlier this month taken a hard line in response to Trump's threats to deny the Obamacare payments for out-of-pocket costs for the poor, injecting the issue into the spending bill talks. Schumer, however, backpedaled on Tuesday and would no longer insist that the issue be addressed in the catchall bill and the White House sent conciliatory signals as well.

Meanwhile, House lawmakers returned to Washington Tuesday evening and faced a renewed push from the White House to revive their beleaguered health care bill in hopes of attracting enough votes to finally push it through the House.

The encounter highlights the complexity of the battle in Syria against the Islamic State and raises worries that a mistake could widen the war.

"The big concern is really a miscalculation," said Lt. Gen. Jeffrey Harrigan, commander of U.S. air operations in the Middle East. "It can happen on either side."

Coalition pilots have generally managed to avoid Syrian and Russian aircraft over Syria, despite the congested airspace.

The U.S.-led coalition is not at war with the Syrian government or its Russian allies, and the Pentagon reached an agreement to exchange information with the Russians to avoid a miscalculation in the air, but the two sides are not cooperating.

"We made it very clear to our folks from the highest levels: We're not at war with the Russians or Syrians," Corcoran said. "We're not here to shoot down Russian or Syrian airplanes."

Russia and the United States have agreed to keep some areas off limits to Russian and Syrian aircraft, which includes Hasakah, the area bombed last week by the Syrians.

The complexities have required pilots to navigate an ambiguous environment in the crowded skies over Syria.

"I'm thinking how do I de-escalate this scenario to the best of my ability and also keep us in a safe position while doing so," said the second pilot involved in last week's encounter, a 30-year-old captain.

After the Syrian bombing in the off-limits area, the United States put round-the-clock combat air patrols over Hasakah, and prepared its pilots to take action should the Syrians attack American forces.

Friday's incident, as described by commanders here, began in the afternoon, when a Syrian aircraft was spotted entering the airspace around Hasakah, and the pair of F-22s, already in the area, raced toward them.

The captain said he quickly got on a common radio frequency in an effort to reach the Syrian aircraft, asking the pilot to identify himself and state his intentions. There was no response.

U.S. commanders also contacted the Russians by phone to seek information, but the Russians were unaware of the Syrian action.

At that point the only way to get information was to have the American pilots approach the Syrian planes, Su-24 Fencers, to determine if they were armed or dropping bombs.

The American pilots asked permission to get closer to the Syrian aircraft to determine if they were carrying weapons on their wings or appeared to be attacking ground targets.

Normally pilots are under orders to keep their distance from Russian or Syrian planes to avoid a miscalculation.

Permission was granted. One of the F-22s watched as the other maneuvered behind the Syrian aircraft to get a closer look. After about 15 minutes, the Syrian jet left the area, apparently unaware it was being followed.

Moments later a second Syrian jet entered the airspace. The American pilots repeated the sequence. Neither of the Syrian planes

appeared to be carrying weapons, the pilots said.

In the air command center in Qatar, which oversees air operations in the Middle East, Maj. Gen. Jay Silveria said he was prepared to order the pilots to down the Syrian aircraft if they threatened coalition forces. "I wouldn't have hesitated," he said.

"All I needed at that point to shoot them down was a report from the ground that they were being attacked," Silveria said. "We were in a perfect position to execute that with some pretty advanced weaponry."

But reports from the ground and the American pilots confirmed that the Syrian aircraft did not drop bombs and appeared to be transiting through the area. Syria has an air base in the region, and it is not uncommon for them to fly over the area.

The F-22 is a stealth aircraft, and pilots are trained to avoid being seen by their adversaries. Commanders are considering more overt tactics in the future to send a message to the Syrians.

"From now on if it happens, it's get out to where they can visually see us," Corcoran said.

U.S. warship fires warning shots at Iranian boats

WASHINGTON (AP) — A U.S. Navy ship fired three warning shots in the direction of an Iranian boat that was approaching another American ship head-on in the North Arabian Gulf on Wednesday, U.S. officials said, in an escalation of encounters in the region this week.

According to U.S. Navy Cmdr. Bill Urban, the Iranian boat came within 200 yards of the USS Tempest and ignored several bridge-to-bridge radio calls and warning flares. It finally turned away after the USS Squall, which was with the USS Tempest, fired three warning shots from its .50-caliber gun, said Urban, a spokesman for the Navy's 5th Fleet.

"This situation presented a drastically increased risk of collision, and the Iranian vessel refused to safely maneuver in accordance with internationally recognized maritime rules of the road," said Urban.

The incident was one of three encounters that U.S. ships had with Iranian Revolutionary Guard boats in the Gulf on Wednesday. And they came a day after four small Iranian boats approached the USS Nitze at high speed in the Strait of Hormuz. The boats veered off after the U.S. fired flares.

The same Iranian boat that harassed the USS Tempest also crossed in front of the USS Stout three times at a high rate of speed on Wednesday in the same region. Urban called it an "unsafe intercept" and said the USS Stout, a guided missile destroyer, had to maneuver to avoid a collision.

In the third incident, three Iranian boats crossed in front of the USS Tempest at high speed, coming within 600 yards of the ship. The Tempest and the Squall are patrol ships. Pentagon Press Secretary Peter Cook acknowledged the three incidents Thursday, but said he did not have details. He said the U.S. ships are conducting themselves in a safe and professional manner and they will

NORTH KOREA

continue to take whatever steps they need to protect themselves.

Video of the incident involving the USS Nitze shows American sailors firing flares and sounding the warship's horn as the Iranian boats approached. A sailor can be heard saying that the weapons on the Iranian boats were "uncovered, manned."

Iran's defense minister said Thursday that his naval forces will warn or confront any foreign ship entering the country's territorial waters. The semi-official Tasnim news agency quoted Gen. Hosein Dehghan as saying that "if any foreign vessel enters our waters, we warn them, and if it's an invasion, we confront." He added that Iranian boats patrol to monitor traffic and foreign vessels in its territorial waters.

North Korea claims it's now able to nuke U.S. mainland

The nation is celebrating its first successful test of a submarine-launched missile.

The country's leader — Kim Jong Un — says the U.S. mainland is now within striking range of his nuclear weapons.

That sounds like a threat.

Joel Wit, a former U.S. nuclear negotiator with North Korea, says he's concerned, but not worried. "Because — despite this success — we're not within striking range of their nuclear weapons."

The threat to the U.S. mainland does not yet exist; there's no evidence North Korea has yet been able to miniaturize its nuclear weapons to fit into a warhead.

It's also extremely unlikely they could get a submarine within range of the U.S. coast: The new North Korean missile only appears to have a range of about 600 miles. But Wit says there is cause for concern, "because this is just one more step in terms of steady progress that North Korea is making in building nuclear weapons and building missiles to deliver them."

"I'm concerned, and I think it should be ongoing concern for everyone." The biggest concern, says Wit, is that North Korea is working to develop a working Intercontinental Ballistic Missile, or ICBM. "If they get that thing working then they will be able to reach the United States, and that, of course, is a serious concern for all of us."

He does not expect North Korea would use weapons like these aggressively, but he says they would seriously complicate relations. He says, for example, North Korea could threaten other countries in order to secure its objectives.

It could also complicate U.S. thinking when it comes to its assurances to allies like Japan and South Korea to defend them. Up to now, those promises were relatively simple, he says. But if North Korea could threaten the U.S. mainland, then that's a whole different calculation.

Wit concludes, however, by saying he has some understanding of the North Korean concerns. The United States would like to see a unified Korea that's democratic, "and if you're North Korean, that would make you fairly nervous."

4 of 13

Armenian families still living in containers from 1988 quake

Back when Armenia was still a Soviet republic, it suffered an earthquake so devastating the USSR actually asked the United States for help.

It was in December 1988. Tens of thousands died and some half a million were left homeless. After local authorities realized how overmatched they were, shipping containers full of relief supplies flooded in.

So, picture desperate families, a harsh Armenian winter, and shipping containers everywhere. An immediate solution presented itself: People moved into the containers. They were better than freezing to death, but not much better. They lacked heating, cooling, plumbing, windows and wiring. Desperate people burned toxic quake debris and trash to cook and keep warm.

The situation was supposed to be temporary. For all its faults, the Soviet Union did provide housing for many. But soon the USSR went the way of so many of its crumbled Armenian buildings. Regional conflicts flared up and new nations struggled to adapt to a completely different economic system. Some of the struggles continue, and today, there are still families living in those same shipping containers.

Armenians call them *domiks*, Russian for "little houses." In the hard-hit city of Gyumri alone, roughly 10,000 people — men, women, children, *generations* — still live in them. The domiks were barely habitable to begin with. Though some have improvised insulation and jerry-rigged wiring, they're generally worse than they were before. After almost 30 years, they've rotted and they're increasingly unstable.

Life in the domiks today

Only tremendous effort and ingenuity keep the domiks from being fatally cold in winter and ovens in summer.

As I learned through interpreters, many of the domik families share a similar story: High unemployment drove a breadwinner to work abroad, often in Russia, but for reasons X, Y or Z, the money stopped coming.

Domik resident Melina grew up in and out of orphanages. She and the other residents only wanted their first names used in the story.

Melina says she and her two children face a choice between having money for necessities and having their husband and father around. Artyom, a laborer who grew up in a domik, had been working in Russia but came back to his family when that opportunity dried up. Now he can't find work, and they're in debt. Melina says they just want their daughters to grow up healthy and have a chance at a comfortable life.

But between the various environmental factors and other symptoms of poverty, "domik kids" are sometimes stunted, often sick, and even more often ostracized at school.

And yet when I visited a cluster of domiks behind a gas station in Gyumri this summer, the families living there welcomed me into their homes.

One reason is that I'm traveling with Vahan Tumasyan. Through the Gyumri-based *Shirak Centre* aid group, he and others have been bringing domik residents firewood and food and have helped register them with authorities, so they're officially "people" (with addresses). There's no real pattern to where the domiks are, except that they're generally in undesirable spots, sometimes on land contaminated by defunct Soviet industrial plants. There are single, isolated domiks and there are larger clusters. Regardless, their inhabitants are basically squatters.

All this points to another reason — besides the generally welcoming culture — why we were invited in: When Tumasyan brings outsiders through, the domik families know they might get a new apartment.

"Twenty-eight years later the shipping containers have rotted, and they're just awful, awful living conditions, especially for the children," says Peter Abajian, director of the *Paros Foundation*, a small nonprofit working with the Shirak Centre to get the families into better housing. (Full disclosure: Abajian is married to my wife's cousin.) "Their parents have lived in them first and grown up in them," he says. "And now these children are living in them. These kids have sort of lost track of what a normal life should be."

The nonprofit partnership provides the money and paperwork needed to get families who sign agreements and meet other criteria into decent apartments. The groups also tear down vacant domiks, providing work, distributing salvageable materials and firewood, and improving the neighborhoods.

But even as Abajian hustles to raise funds from the Armenian diaspora, the numbers are daunting: It costs roughly \$20,000 to move a family from a domik to an apartment. Do the math, and that's a \$50 million problem in Gyumri alone, far more than the nonprofits take in.

So the Paros Foundation is trying something else, too, with an eye toward the long term.

'Looking forward'

"The domik kids don't need arts and crafts," Abajian says. "They need a meal so they can think, so they're not starving, so they can do some homework."

They need other things too, which is why the Paros Foundation created *Debi Arach* — "moving forward" in Armenian, a year-old youth center in Gyumri meant to improve domik kids' prospects through a holistic approach. It serves a total of 140 kids aged 6 to 17 in two groups that each come three times a week.

Housed in a rental building that used to be a restaurant and hotel, *Debi Arach* has computers, classes to reinforce school lessons, and vocational training. As Armenia modernizes, demand for IT experts is outpacing supply. Much of the training at *Debi Arach* is geared toward computer careers. "The promise is it will get you to a level where you'll take care of your family, you'll be able to rent a home and live a normal life here in Gyumri," Abajian says.

In addition to its eight teachers, the center has a nurse, a psychologist, and maybe most importantly, places where kids can safely bathe and eat healthy food.

When the center started serving meals last year, Abajian says, students didn't touch the salad. "It turns out they didn't know what it was. They know bread. They also didn't know how to sit at a table and eat together, so the teachers sat with them and created this family atmosphere they don't have in the domiks. And most of them didn't know how to use the bathrooms because a lot of their schools don't have bathrooms either."

Another thing domik kids lack is private space. "So we've made sure that each kid has a locker here," Abajian says. "They can store clean shoes to wear when they come. We've provided summer shoes and winter boots to make getting here easier."

At the end of a long day of renovations on the building and coordinating a visit from an American student service group, I ask Abajian why he does this.

"It's the kids, absolutely. We have to try to save them."

Construction 'on the cheap' may have cost lives in Italy earthquake

Contractors who reinforced buildings "on the cheap" may have run up the death toll in central Italy's devastating earthquake and could face criminal charges, a local prosecutor said Sunday.

Also Sunday, Pope Francis pledged to visit "as soon as possible" the Italian towns that took the brunt of Wednesday's temblor.

Prosecutor Giuseppe Saieva said the quake that killed at least 290 people may have been more than an unavoidable natural disaster. A quake in the region seven years ago killed more than 300 people and alerted authorities to the need for earthquake-resistant construction. Saieva said property owners who contracted shoddy work could be held responsible for contributing to the damage.

"If the buildings had been constructed as they are in Japan, they wouldn't have collapsed," he told *La Repubblica*.

Franco Roberti, the head of Italy's national anti-organized crime agency, told the Italian daily that steps must be taken to ensure that mobsters don't infiltrate reconstruction efforts. Claims of mob involvement in the 2009 reconstruction drew outrage across the nation.

"The risk of infiltration is always high," Roberti said. "Post-earthquake reconstruction is a tasty morsel for criminal organizations and business interests."

Heavy equipment was digging into rubble Sunday as hopes faded that more survivors would be unearthed amid debris from the magnitude-6.2 quake. Saieva visited a collapsed, three-story villa that he suspected "was built on the cheap with more sand than cement."

Another severely damaged building was an elementary school, empty when the quake hit, that was supposedly rebuilt to be quake-resistant four years ago. Antonio Moretti, a geologist and professor at the University of

CONT. N.K.

handle situation properly," President Trump tweeted.

Sisi ordered the armed forces to help police secure vital locations across the nation and declared a three-month state of emergency. The president also ordered three days of mourning for the victims.

The attacks came two months after the Islamic State released a video showing its militants pledging to kill Coptic Christians across Egypt. The footage included statements claiming responsibility for a December attack on a Cairo cathedral that killed 29 people.

Palm Sunday is among the holiest days on the Christian calendar, marking the triumphal entry of Jesus into Jerusalem, and churches traditionally draw big crowds. Susan Mikhail, who lives near St. George's Church in Tanta, told the Associated Press the explosion violently shook her building. "Deacons were the first to run out of the church. Many of them had blood on their white robes," she told AP. Many of the more seriously wounded were carried out by survivors and shuttled to hospitals in private cars, she said.

Al-Ahram Arabic reported that security forces also dismantled two explosive devices at Sidi Abdel Rahim Mosque in Tanta, a city of more than 400,000 about 80 miles southeast of Alexandria. The mosque is considered among the most important in the city.

In Alexandria, the ministry said a suicide bomber had planned to use an explosive belt inside St. Mark's Cathedral, but the security force assigned to protect the cathedral stopped him. At least three police officers were killed preventing the suicide bomber from entering the cathedral, Ahram Online reported. Authorities said the Coptic pope for Alexandria, Pope Tawadros II, was inside leading the prayers but was not injured.

Egyptian state television broadcast footage from the church's security cameras that appears to show the suicide bomber outside the Alexandria cathedral. The man attempts to enter the cathedral but is directed to a metal detector. The man enters the detector briefly, then takes a step back before the screen is filled with smoke.

The Coptic Church is based on the teachings of St. Mark, the apostle who brought Christianity to Egypt in the first century, a dozen years after the death of Jesus. The religion claims to have about 15 million members among Egypt's 80 million people. Egyptian officials, however, have estimated the Coptic population is just a fraction of that.

Coptic churches are scattered across the U.S., with more than 20 in New Jersey alone. Joseph Ghabour, a deacon at St. Mark's Coptic Orthodox Church in Jersey City, said several congregants of his church know people from the Tanta church.

"It seems this is going to be their game plan — to attack Christians during their

holidays," Ghabour said. "I was sad at the demented mentality of these people — that by killing innocents they are going to go to heaven, and it makes no sense to me."

In Washington last week, Trump praised hard-line Egyptian leader Sisi for doing a "fantastic job" and solicited his help in the fight against terrorism and violent extremists. Sisi led the 2013 ouster of former president Mohamed Morsi, a Muslim Brotherhood leader who was elected to replace the deposed Hosni Mubarak. Since Morsi's removal, Egypt has been plagued by militant attacks.

The U.S. Embassy in Cairo issued a statement after Sunday's attacks expressing condolences to victims their families and loved ones.

"The United States stands firmly with the Egyptian government and people to defeat terrorism," the statement said.

North Korea says Syria airstrikes prove its nukes justified

PYONGYANG, North Korea (AP) — North Korea has vowed to bolster its defenses to protect itself against airstrikes like the ones President Donald Trump ordered against an air base in Syria.

The North called the airstrikes "absolutely unpardonable" and said they prove its nuclear weapons are justified to protect the country against Washington's "evermore reckless moves for a war."

The comments were made by a Foreign Ministry official and carried Sunday by North Korea's state-run Korean Central News Agency. The report did not name the official, which is common in KCNA reports.

The airstrikes, announced shortly after Trump and Chinese President Xi Jinping wrapped up dinner at a two-day summit in Florida last week, were retaliation against Syrian President Bashar Assad for a chemical weapons attack against civilians caught up in his country's long civil war.

"Some forces are loud-mouthed that the recent U.S. military attack on Syria is an action of warning us but we are not frightened by it," the report said, adding that the North's "tremendous military muscle with a nuclear force as its pivot" will foil any aggression by the U.S.

"We will bolster up in every way our capability for self-defense to cope with the U.S. evermore reckless moves for a war and defend ourselves with our own force," it said. North Korea has long claimed that the United States is preparing to conduct similar precision strikes against its territory or even launch an all-out invasion. It claims its nuclear weapons are a necessary deterrent to the U.S. military threat.

Washington denies it has any intention of invading the North.

Tensions have been even higher than usual over the past few weeks because annual war games between the U.S. and South Korean militaries are underway. The exercises this year are the biggest ever and have included

stealth fighter training and other maneuvers that are particularly sensitive to North Korea. For its part, the North test-launched a ballistic missile just ahead of the Trump-Xi meeting and has been rumored to be preparing for a possible nuclear test.

The Korean Peninsula remains technically at war since the 1950-53 Korean conflict ended with an armistice, not a formal peace treaty. North Korea considers Syria an ally. But unlike Syria, experts warn that North Korea has a means of striking back if provoked. Along with its rapidly advancing nuclear and long-range missile capabilities, the North has its artillery and short-range missiles trained on Seoul, the capital of U.S. ally South Korea and a city of more than 10 million people.

North Korea warns it will defend itself against U.S. 'aggression'

North Korea warned it would defend itself against "reckless acts of aggression" after the U.S. deployed an aircraft carrier strike group toward the Korean peninsula.

North Korea's foreign ministry said the deployment of the USS Carl Vinson along with a missile carrier and two destroyers showed "reckless moves for invading" had "reached a serious phase," the official Korean Central News Agency (KCNA) reported Monday.

"We will hold the US wholly accountable for the catastrophic consequences to be entailed by its outrageous actions," the ministry said, according to the KCNA.

"The DPRK is ready to react to any mode of war desired by the US," it added, referring to the country's full title, the Democratic People's Republic of Korea.

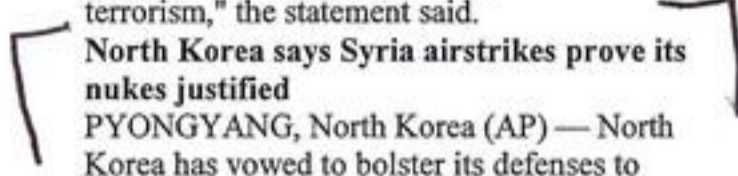
North Korea vowed to bolster its defenses over the weekend to protect itself against missile strikes such as those ordered by President Trump against an air base in Syria last week in retaliation for a chemical weapons attack that killed more than 80 civilians.

The strike group had been scheduled to leave from Singapore for port visits to Australia on Saturday, but Adm. Harry Harris, head of U.S. Pacific Command, ordered it to head north toward Korean waters instead "as a prudent measure to maintain readiness and presence in the Western Pacific."

North Korea held a one-day parliamentary meeting Tuesday to approve the budget and reshuffle the Cabinet, South Korea's Yonhap news agency reported.

The meeting comes amid speculation that Pyongyang may conduct its sixth nuclear test or fire a missile around the time of key anniversaries in April, Yonhap reported.

On Saturday, North Korea will celebrate the birthday of Kim Il Sung, the grandfather of Kim Jong Un who ruled the North for 46 years. Pyongyang test-fired a ballistic missile last week ahead of meeting between Trump and Chinese President Xi Jinping.



5 of 13

his payments via wire transfers conducted through the international banking system. "Mr. Manafort's work in Ukraine was totally open and appropriate, and wire transfers for international work are perfectly legal," Maloni said.

He noted that Manafort had never been paid in cash. Instead, he said Manafort's exclusive use of wire transfers for payment undermines the descriptions of the ledger last year given by Ukrainian anti-corruption authorities and a lawmaker that the ledger detailed cash payments.

Previously, Manafort and Maloni have maintained the ledger was fabricated and said no public evidence existed that Manafort or others received payments recorded in it. The AP, however, identified in the records two payments received by Manafort that aligned with the ledger: one for \$750,000 that a Ukrainian lawmaker said last month was part of a money-laundering effort that should be investigated by U.S. authorities. The other was \$455,249 and also matched a ledger entry.

The newly obtained records also expand the global scope of Manafort's financial activities related to his Ukrainian political consulting, because both payments came from companies once registered in the Central American country of Belize. Last month, the AP reported that the U.S. government has examined Manafort's financial transactions in the Mediterranean country of Cyprus as part of its probe.

Federal prosecutors have been looking into Manafort's work for years as part of an effort to recover Ukrainian assets stolen after the 2014 ouster of Ukrainian President Viktor Yanukovich, who fled to Russia. No charges have been filed as part of the investigation.

Hit Assad where it hurts, military analysts say, with attack planes

WASHINGTON — To hit Bashar Assad's military in Syria where it hurts, bomb his helicopters, supply depots and anti-aircraft missile defenses.

That's the assessment of Scott Murray, who from 2013 to 2015 had been in charge of intelligence for the Air Force in the Middle East. And strike them with bombs, big ones, not with Tomahawk cruise missiles, if you want to leave a mark.

"The problem with Tomahawks is their small warhead-explosive yield," said Murray, a retired colonel and career intelligence officer. "They're precise but lack a bigger bang for the efforts required to get them to a target successfully. Manned aircraft with 2,000-lb. JDAMs would have laid waste to those aircraft bunkers we're seeing on footage. There's a hole in the top and damage inside but they can be repaired."

JDAM is the abbreviation for Joint Direct Attack Munition, so-called smart bombs with far more destructive power than a cruise missile.

As always, in warfare, there is a trade off: A pilot has to fly a smart bomb through Syria's air defenses to reach the target. Or those air

defense systems need to be degraded or destroyed first, dangerous but doable for U.S. forces. Either way, it's a more intense mission, and one that's fraught with more risk.

A senior military officer acknowledged as much on Friday. The land-attack Tomahawk missiles, launched from the USS Porter and Ross in the eastern Mediterranean Sea, represented the lowest-risk option for military punishment that President Trump had to choose from. Manned flights were considered too risky, the officer said, adding that the military did not want to go into harm's way. The officer spoke on condition of anonymity, because the officials were not authorized to speak publicly.

The Tomahawks were not powerful enough to puncture the runway, a fact that Secretary of State Rex Tillerson referred to on Friday. Instead, the missiles targeted fueling facilities, hangars, planes and other support infrastructure.

"Those were the targets," he said. "The fact that planes are landing in and out of there, they're not refueling, and they're not able to initiate any activity."

Dealing Assad's forces a more powerful blow will require riskier missions that include hitting aircraft that have been dropping lethal "barrel bombs" on civilian targets, Murray said.

"If I were in charge of future targeting, I would concentrate on the Syrian helicopter logistics bases and barrel bomb factories," Murray said.

To further weaken Assad's military, his air defense and command and control facilities would have to be targeted. That list would be tough to check off without using manned aircraft, Murray said. There are only so many Navy cruise missiles and ships to fire them.

New airstrikes hit Syrian town targeted by chemical weapons

Warplanes returned Saturday to the devastated Syrian town hit by chemical weapons earlier this week, despite a U.S. missile strike on a Syrian air base that's now back in business.

The new airstrikes killed one woman and wounded one other person in Khan Sheikhoun, the Britain-based Syrian Observatory for Human Rights said. That's the same town where the gas attack took place earlier this week, killing 86 people, including dozens of children, prompting the U.S. missile launch.

"Those attacks did not reduce the regime's ability to kill civilians. They can still commit massacres at any time," Abdulrzak Khattab, a resident who said his house was damaged in Saturday's attack, told *The Washington Post*. It's not clear whether the new attack was launched from Shayrat, the base damaged by 59 U.S. Tomahawk missiles.

In a letter delivered to Congress on Saturday justifying the strike, President Trump said he wasn't ruling out additional military action.

"I acted in the vital national security and foreign policy interests of the United States,

pursuant to my constitutional authority to conduct foreign relations and as Commander in Chief and Chief Executive," he wrote. "The United States will take additional action, as necessary and appropriate, to further its important national interests."

A Syrian human rights group reported Friday that Shayrat was once again operational, with warplanes taking off. The planes carried out strikes on areas the Syrian government claims are controlled by the Islamic State in the eastern countryside of Homs, part of the Idlib province.

Despite reports that at least one runway was hit by during the U.S. attack, President Trump tweeted Saturday that missiles were aimed at more strategic targets at the air base. "The reason you don't generally hit runways is that they are easy and inexpensive to quickly fix (fill in and top)!" he said on Twitter.

Ret. Maj Gen. James "Spider" Marks told CNN on Saturday that Tomahawks likely wouldn't have been used if the strike's primary aim was grounding aircraft.

"The Tomahawk is not a weapons system to crater a runway and render that runway inoperable," said Marks, executive dean of the College of Criminal Justice and Security for the University of Phoenix. "But if the United States had chosen to do that — and certainly we've got the capabilities to crater runways — it's very easy to fill those holes back in and make a runway usable in very little time."

The U.S. missiles struck early Friday morning in Syria, targeting Shayrat's hangars, control tower and ammunition areas. The Syrian military said at least 9 people were killed and several more wounded by the U.S. strike.

President Trump said he ordered the strikes in retaliation for a nerve gas attack by Syrian President Bashar Assad's regime in Khan Sheikhoun. He tweeted his appreciation for the mission's success Saturday:

"Congratulations to our great military men and women for representing the United States, and the world, so well in the Syria attack," he wrote

Egyptian church blasts kill 44; Islamic State takes responsibility

Bomb blasts tore through crowds celebrating the holy Christian holiday of Palm Sunday in two Egyptian cities, killing at least 44 worshipers and injuring scores more.

The Islamic State claimed responsibility for bombings at Coptic Christian churches in the Nile Delta city of Tanta, where at least 27 died, and hours later in the Mediterranean port city of Alexandria, where the death toll climbed to at least 17, the Interior Ministry said.

The attacks, which injured more than 100, came less than a week after Egyptian President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi visited the White House.

"So sad to hear of the terrorist attack in Egypt. U.S. strongly condemns. I have great...confidence that President Al Sisi will

NORTH KOREA AND U.S.: "Military Action" . . . MARCH 24, 2017

Since Trump's March 4 tweets, he and aides have sought to re-define the terms of his accusations. While Trump used the term "wire tapping," he and his aides say that now refers to "surveillance" in general.

A number of Republicans have expressed skepticism about Trump's tweets on Obama. House Speaker Paul Ryan, R-Wisc., told *Fox News Sunday* that he has seen no evidence of wiretapping Trump Tower, and said he is leaving it to committees to investigate, "I want to get on with passing our agenda," Ryan said.

Despite a rising number of officials who say there is no evidence, Trump and aides have not backed down from the Obama wiretapping claim. They have often sought to buttress their case by citing news reports, many of them based on anonymous sources. During a Friday news conference with German Chancellor Angela Merkel — whose phones had been tapped by the Obama administration — Trump told his guest: "As far as wiretapping, I guess by this past administration, at least we have something in common, perhaps."

The wiretap accusation also triggered the diplomatic row with another ally, as Trump and aides cited a report by Fox News commentator Andrew Napolitano that Obama asked a British intelligence agency to tap Trump. The British government objected and the Trump administration pledged not to use the claim again. Asked about the flap, Trump said: "That was a statement made by a very talented lawyer on Fox, and so you shouldn't be talking to me, you should be talking to Fox. OK?"

Tillerson: Military action against North Korea 'option is on the table'

Secretary of State Rex Tillerson warned Friday that military action against North Korea "option is on the table," an indication that President Trump is prepared to confront the North's nuclear threat more aggressively. Tillerson made the comments during a news conference in Seoul after visiting the buffer zone between rivals North and South Korea, the world's most heavily armed border. He said that the "policy of strategic patience has ended" and that the United States was considering military, diplomatic and economic measures aimed at persuading North Korea to abandon its nuclear ambitions.

Tillerson said the U.S. does not want to use military action, "but obviously if North Korea takes actions that threaten South Korean forces or our own forces that would be met with (an) appropriate response. If they elevate the threat of their weapons program to a level that we believe requires action that option is on the table."

Trump on Friday slammed North Korea over nukes on Twitter. "North Korea is behaving very badly. They have been 'playing' the United States for years. China has done little to help!"

Tillerson is on a tour this week of China, Japan and South Korea. He vowed Thursday to take a "different approach" to North Korea, saying 20 years of "diplomatic and other efforts" had failed to dissuade Pyongyang from developing its nuclear program. Previous U.S. administrations have held the threat of military action over North Korea in response to nuclear tests or missile launches but Tillerson's remarks go much further. "North Korea must understand that the only path to a secure, economic propitious future is to abandon its development of nuclear weapons, ballistic missiles and other weapons of mass destruction," Tillerson said.

North Korea conducted two nuclear test explosions and 24 ballistic missile tests last year despite tough international sanctions. Tillerson called on China, one of North Korea's only allies, to refrain from economic retaliations against South Korea for deploying an advanced U.S. missile defense system — known as THAAD — on its soil because of threats from Pyongyang. Beijing has curbed travel to South Korea and is targeting its companies on mainland China with restrictions because of the missile system. The State Department has described Tillerson's trip to Asia as a "listening tour." Tillerson will meet with President Xi Jinping in Beijing this weekend.

The demilitarized zone between North and South Korea that Tillerson visited Friday was created as a buffer zone between the two countries after the Korean War armistice was signed in 1953. It is guarded on both sides with land mines, razor wire fence, tank traps and hundreds of thousands of combat-ready troops.

Tillerson to visit Russia, skip NATO meeting

Secretary of State Rex Tillerson will travel to Russia next month for a visit that comes as the FBI confirmed this week it is investigating whether there was any coordination between the Kremlin and President Trump's 2016 election campaign. The purpose of the visit is not clear.

Tillerson's expected itinerary means he will be in Russia at a time when Trump associates are being scrutinized for any links to alleged Kremlin-sponsored cyberattacks during the presidential campaign as well as alleged meetings between the Russian government and Trump campaign officials.

The State Department said late Monday Tillerson would hold "meetings" in Russia directly after attending Group of Seven talks in Italy in early April. He is also expected to be at Trump's Mar-a-Lago resort in Florida when Chinese President Xi Jinping visits on April 6-7. Tillerson recently met with Xi in Beijing.

Tillerson is liked by President Vladimir Putin and has years of experience working with the Russian government from his time working as a top executive at ExxonMobil. Kremlin Spokesman Dmitry Peskov said Tuesday that the U.S. intelligence committee

that heard FBI Director James Comey's congressional testimony on Monday about alleged Russian ties was "confused." "They (investigators) are trying to find confirmation of their own conclusions but can't find either proof or confirmation and are going round in circles," he said. Tillerson's Russia visit also means he will skip a NATO foreign ministers' summit on April 5-6. The NATO summit in Brussels would have been Tillerson's first as secretary of State. His decision to stay away could be interpreted as a snub to the international defense organization that Trump maintains U.S. allies are not doing enough, financially, to support and that Trump has called "obsolete."

Following talks Friday with Chancellor Angela Merkel, Trump said Germany "owes vast sums of money to NATO," an allegation the European power rejected. Only 5 out of 28 NATO nations meet the alliance's goal of 2% GDP defense spending. Germany spent 1.19% last year, but has argued for a broader definition of spending.

"Defense spending also goes into our United Nations peacekeeping missions, into our European missions and into our contribution to the fight against (Islamic State) terrorism," German Defense Minister Ursula von der Leyen said in a statement on Sunday, adding that there "is no debt account at NATO."

It is common practice for the U.S. secretary of State to attend NATO summits. The State Department said Tom Shannon, an undersecretary of state, would attend the meeting at NATO headquarters in Tillerson's absence.

NATO said that all allies are represented at ministerial meetings and that it was up to each NATO member to determine at what level they are represented. It also pointed out that NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg was due to meet with Tillerson in Washington on Wednesday as part of planned counter-Islamic State talks.

Man arrested near White House after claiming he had bomb

A Virginia man who allegedly drove a stolen car up to a White House checkpoint and said he had a bomb inside was arrested late Saturday, in what police said was the third White House incident in just over a week.

President Trump was at his estate in Palm Beach, Fla., at the time of the latest incident, but the Secret Service increased its "posture of readiness" in response to the episode, The New York Times reported.

Washington, D.C., police said the intruder stopped his car at the checkpoint just after 11 p.m., got out and declared, "There's a bomb in the trunk." The man also appeared to clasp something in this hand, according to police, and said, "This is a test."

A Secret Service officer detained him and police charged him with making false bomb threats, as well as the unauthorized use of a vehicle. Police said the car had been reported

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'Physically imposing': Here are the design specs for Trump's border wall

PHOENIX — The push to seal the U.S.-Mexico border moved ahead as federal authorities published two official requests for contractors to propose prototype segments of a border wall.

Construction of the segments will proceed quickly, with plans to begin within three months, putting the work on the wall prototypes solidly in the middle of the hot summer months in the Southwest.

The prototypes are a precursor to the border wall that was a signature campaign promise of President Trump, though the full-length wall itself is expected to be built through a separate bidding process later.

The specifics of the prototype project and the bidding process are detailed in two, nearly identical 132-page Requests for Proposals, posted Friday night to the Federal Business Opportunities website.

What kind of wall?

Each prototype will be 30 feet long and built in San Diego, according to the requests for proposals.

Beyond that, bidding contractors have much latitude in what kind of wall they propose. Under the new timeline established in the documents, interested bidders will have two weeks to create and submit a design concept of what the border-wall prototype will look like, with two design options for companies. One will be exclusively for "reinforced solid concrete" prototypes, while the second for "other" materials is more vague and does not specify the type of materials that can be used in the design.

Other requirements include:

- A "physically imposing" height of no less than 18 feet but preferably 30 feet tall.
- Anti-climbing mechanisms, either by ladder or other tools like hooks that humans may be able to get across.
- Prevent tunneling 6 feet below ground.
- For breaches to the wall (using building or cutting tools, or torches) to take at least one hour in concrete designs, and 30 minutes in the "other" designs.
- Accommodate surface draining, a particularly sensitive issue in the uneven, Arizona desert that can easily flood with heavy rains.
- Be able to accommodate "pedestrian and automated mechanized vehicle sliding gates."

Security at the US-Mexico border
The Request for Proposals for the "other" designs also says the first 12 feet must incorporate a way to see through the wall to the other side, to help "situational awareness." There is no such stipulation for concrete designs.

The documents also make no mention of wildlife or environmental concerns, other than saying that they will be taken into consideration when evaluating the proposals. Federal law already allows officials to declare exceptions to various environmental

restrictions for construction of border fencing.

Timeline

After the March 29 deadline to submit the prototype, U.S. Customs and Border Protection will take an additional two weeks to evaluate the submissions. It will then narrow the field of the applicants to "up to 20" per type, with no more than 40 combined for both categories of designs.

At that point, private contractors still in the bid process will have 30 days to create and submit a full proposal, which includes a breakdown of costs, labor hours, materials needed, a 30-day build schedule and subcontracting plans.

CBP said it will then take two weeks to evaluate the full proposals and award an unspecified number of contracts, with a 30-day construction period to follow. The contracts will be for five years and potentially worth up to \$300 million each. But CBP estimates that building the wall prototypes will cost between \$200,000 to \$500,000, according to the documents.

The two documents also detail a series of basic requirements for the wall prototype designs. Noticeably, they require that the north side of the wall, the one facing the United States, be "aesthetically pleasing in color, anti-climb texture, etc., to be consistent with general surrounding environment." They make no mention of aesthetics on the south-facing side.

During the first half of the 30-day construction period for the prototypes, each contractor must also build a 10-by-10-foot mock up of their design that CBP will test for breaches, but not for climbing or digging. Construction of the prototypes is expected to begin sometime in June, according to the timeline. Traditionally, that's just past the peak season for Border Patrol apprehensions along the southwestern U.S. border.

Trump designated \$2.6 billion in his fiscal year 2018 budget proposal to build a wall along the U.S.-Mexico border. Before Friday's officials requests, more than 640 contractors, including more than 40 from Arizona, had already expressed interest in construction of a wall prototype.

Lawmakers: No evidence to back Trump's wiretap claims against Obama

WASHINGTON — A day before a high-stakes hearing, the leaders of the House Intelligence Committee said Sunday there's no evidence to back President Trump's claims that Barack Obama wiretapped him, though the Republican chairman said investigators are looking at other types of possible surveillance of Trump and his aides during last year's campaign.

"We have a lot of surveillance activities in this country," said Rep. Devin Nunes, R-Calif., chairman of the House Intelligence Committee, speaking on *Fox News Sunday*. The panel's ranking Democrat, Rep. Adam Schiff of California, told *NBC's Meet The Press* that Trump's wiretapping claims are

"patently false, and the wrecking ball it created now has banged into" U.S. allies, including Germany and Great Britain in recent days.

"This is just how the president does business," Schiff told NBC.

Sen. Susan Collins, R-Maine, one of several Republicans who have questioned the president's allegations, said on *NBC's Meet The Press* that "I don't know the basis for President Trump's assertion," and "I do believe he owes us that explanation." Monday's hearing features testimony from FBI Director James Comey, who has asked the Justice Department to publicly rebuke Trump's claims against Obama. Schiff said he expects to Comey to also say there is no truth to Trump's statements about Obama, and "I hope we can put an end to this wild goose chase."

The House Intelligence Committee hearings is also looking into efforts by Russia to influence last year's election by hacking Democratic officials close to nominee Hillary Clinton, the subject of an ongoing investigation by the FBI.

During his Fox News appearance, Nunes said he has seen no evidence of collusion between Trump associates and the Russians during the election.

On NBC, Schiff said that "at the outset of the investigation, there was circumstantial evidence of collusion," as well as "direct evidence, I think, of deception." He did not elaborate, saying "that's where we begin the investigation."

The committee hearing comes more than two weeks after a Trump leveled his accusations against Obama in an early Saturday morning tweet storm. One tweet said: "Terrible! Just found out that Obama had my 'wires tapped' in Trump Tower just before the victory. Nothing found. This is McCarthyism!"

The charges brought furious denials from Obama aides -- who pointed out that the law forbids presidents from ordering wiretaps -- to a diplomatic flap with the United Kingdom, which protested claims by Trump allies that British allies may have been involved in the wiretapping.

Nunes said Monday's hearing would also look into the possibly illegal leaking of national security information since Trump's election in November. The intelligence committee chairman cited the case of former National Security Adviser Michael Flynn, dismissed by Trump for mis-characterizing his discussions with the Russian ambassador to the United States, a topic that surfaced publicly because of news leaks.

Trump and aides have also denied any connection to Russians who sought to hack Democratic officials during last year's election, and said opponents are leaking derogatory information against them as part of a "witch hunt" to undermine the presidency.

NORTH KOREA

Kim called the test "a great event of historic significance" for the country's indigenous rocket industry, the KCNA report said. He also said the "whole world will soon witness what eventful significance the great victory won today carries" and claimed the test marks what will be known as the "March 18 revolution" in the development of the country's rocket industry.

The report indicated that the engine is to be used for North Korea's space and satellite-launching program.

North Korea is banned by the United Nations from conducting long-range missile tests, but it claims its satellite program is for peaceful use, a claim many in the U.S. and elsewhere believe is questionable.

North Korean officials have said that under a five-year plan, they intend to launch more Earth observation satellites and what would be the country's first geostationary communications satellite — which would be a major technological advance.

Getting that kind of satellite into place would likely require a more powerful engine than its previous ones. The North also claims it is trying to build a viable space program that would include a moon launch within the next 10 years.

The test was conducted as Secretary of State Rex Tillerson was in China on a swing through Asia that has been closely focused on concerns over how to deal with Pyongyang's nuclear and missile programs.

It's hard to know whether this test was deliberately timed to coincide with Tillerson's visit, but Pyongyang has been highly critical of ongoing U.S.-South Korea war games just south of the Demilitarized Zone and often conducts some sort of high-profile operation of its own in protest. Earlier this month, it fired off four ballistic missiles into the Sea of Japan, reportedly reaching within 120 miles of Japan's shoreline.

Japan, which was Tillerson's first stop before traveling to South Korea and China, hosts tens of thousands of U.S. troops.

While building ever better long-range missiles and smaller nuclear warheads to pair with them, North Korea has marked a number of successes in its space program.

It launched its latest satellite — the Kwangmyongsong 4, or Brilliant Star 4 — into orbit on Feb. 7, 2016, just one month after conducting what it claims was its first hydrogen-bomb test.

It put its first satellite in orbit in 2012, a feat few other countries have achieved. In 2013, rival South Korea launched a satellite into space from its own soil for the first time, though it needed Russian help to build the rocket's first stage.

North Korea conducts another failed missile test: officials

North Korea conducted another failed missile launch Wednesday, U.S. and South Korean military officials said.

MARCH 24, 2017

The incident came during annual U.S.-South Korean military drills that Pyongyang believes are a rehearsal for invasion.

The missile appears to have exploded soon after it launched from close to the city of Wonsan, on North Korea's east coast, Reuters reported. It came after North Korea fired four ballistic missiles that landed in waters off Japan earlier this month.

Secretary of State Rex Tillerson said that military action against North Korea is an "option is on the table" after visiting the buffer zone between North and South Korea on Friday.

He said that the "policy of strategic patience has ended" and that the U.S. was considering military, diplomatic and economic measures aimed at persuading North Korea to abandon its nuclear ambitions.

Trump tweeted Friday: "North Korea is behaving very badly. They have been 'playing' the United States for years. China has done little to help!"

The test came three days after the North claimed a major breakthrough in its rocket development program.

Seoul's Defense Ministry said it was analyzing what type of missile was launched but gave no further details. South Korea's Yonhap news agency reported that the missile was believed to have exploded in mid-air.

South Korean media reported that the failure could mean that the missile is newly-developed and has not yet been deployed by Pyongyang.

North Korea is working to upgrade its weapons systems to cope with what it calls U.S. hostility. Many weapons experts say the North could have a functioning nuclear-tipped missile capable of reaching the continental U.S. within a few years. The North carried out two nuclear tests last year.

Mitchell Park Domes named a 'National Treasure'

MILWAUKEE (WLUK) -- An attraction in Milwaukee was named a National Treasure by the National Trust for Historic Preservation.

Last fall, the Mitchell Park Domes were named as being among America's "most endangered" historic places after the domes were closed to the public in February of 2016 after a piece of concrete fell in one of the domes.

Mesh safety netting was installed at the domes as a short term fix and a public reopening ceremony was held Dec. 1, 2016. To continue repair efforts, a plan to preserve and make further repairs on the domes will be presented to the Milwaukee County Task Force Wednesday, WITI reports.

The repair options considered range from \$14 million in cost, which would be a shorter term, incomplete fix to \$64 million for a complete replacement of the existing foundation.

The Mitchell Park Domes were built in stages between 1959 and 1967.

The pay gap could vanish for all women — sometime in the 23rd century

SAN FRANCISCO — It's a long road to pay equity.

Despite strides in the 1980s and 1990s, the pay gap between the sexes hasn't budged in more than a decade. That's even with growing research and outcry that's prompted some companies to review — and vow to fix — broad discrepancies in their own workforces.

The numbers are glaring: Women make up half the U.S. college-educated workforce but those with full-time jobs were on average paid 80 cents for every dollar earned by men in nearly every occupation for which there was sufficient earnings data in 2015, according to the non-profit Institute for Women's Policy Research (IWPR).

The gap is especially pronounced when comparing median weekly earnings and far deeper for women of color.

While women overall earned about 82% of the full-time weekly pay check of a man, black women's earnings were just 68% compared to white men and Hispanic women's were 62%, according to IWPR. Asian women fare better compared to white men, but compared to Asian men, they made only 78%.

You have to look hard to find a profession this gap isn't the case. Median earnings for women are lower than men's in 18 of the 20 most common jobs for women.

"It's been stagnant the last 10 to 15 years even though women are better educated," says Ariane Hegewisch, program director of employment and earnings at IWPR. She calculates that if the current trends continue, women on average will not receive equal pay until 2059.

For women of color, the rate of change is downright glacial — black women will wait until 2124 and Hispanic women will have to wait until 2248, Hegewisch says, compared to 2056 for white women.

Against that bleak backdrop comes the view from a growing number of companies that by failing to recruit, retain and advance women, they're missing out.

Facebook, whose advertising revenues have swelled thanks to growth in small businesses using Facebook Pages to reach customers, says 40% of its pages are women-owned pages. That's a 60% increase from last year. "You have no idea how you will do as a business unless you connect everybody," says Maxine Williams, Facebook's global director of diversity. "When you give people opportunity, and lower barriers of entry, business grows at a critical mass."

Full-scale gender equality could add 11% to 26% to the global GDP by 2025 — a staggering \$12 trillion to \$28 trillion, according to a McKinsey Global Institute study.

3-24-2017

8 of 12

Notification that Article 50, as the legislation is known, has been triggered next Wednesday will come in the form of a letter to the EU. "We are on the threshold of the most important negotiation for this country for a generation," the prime minister's Brexit Secretary David Davis said in a statement Monday.

"The Government is clear in its aims: a deal that works for every nation and region of the U.K. and indeed for all of Europe — a new, positive partnership between the U.K. and our friends and allies in the European Union," he added.

European Council President Donald Tusk said he will present the draft Brexit guidelines to the 27 nations that will remain in the alliance within 48 hours of the triggering of Article 50.

Margaritis Schinas, the spokesman for the European Commission — the EU's executive — said the body was informed in advance and was "ready to begin negotiations."

"Everything is ready on this side," he said. A majority of Britons, 52% to 48%, voted to leave the bloc when the referendum was held in June.

Syrian army retakes Damascus areas captured by rebels

BEIRUT - Syrian government forces on Monday regained control of parts of Damascus that were attacked and captured by rebels and militants the previous day, with the two-day fighting leaving dozens dead on both sides, the military and an activist group said.

The sudden rebel seizure of territory in the Syrian capital — and the manner in which the attack that took place overnight and into Sunday, with rebels sneaking into the city through underground tunnels and using car bombs — reflected the insurgents' most serious infiltration into Damascus in years. The Levant Liberation Committee, a coalition of several militant groups led by al-Qaida's branch in Syria, and the independent Failaq al-Rahman faction spearheaded the blitz that caught the Syrian military off guard.

Insurgent groups have repeatedly over the past years tried to break the defenses of Damascus, President Bashar Assad's seat of power. Sunday's incursion, however, was the most serious since 2012, when rebels captured several Damascus neighborhoods before being crushed by government forces. The rebel gains, though short-lived, came against the backdrop of months of steady losses at the hands of government forces across the country.

Sunday's fighting centered on a government-held intersection of two besieged opposition enclaves, the Jobar and Qaboun neighborhoods. The ultraconservative Ahrar al-Sham rebel faction said opposition fighters had "liberated" the area.

Syrian TV on Monday quoted an unnamed military official as saying the army "regained control of all the points that terrorists" had

infiltrated on Sunday. It also quoted Russia's ambassador to Damascus Alexander Kinshchak as saying one of the embassy's buildings was hit with a shell during the clashes.

The government-controlled Syrian Central Military Media said the Syrian air force carried out more than 25 airstrikes on Jobar and nearby areas.

Lebanon's Al-Manar TV run by the militant Hezbollah group, which is fighting along Assad's forces, reported that members of the elite Republican Guards took part in a counteroffensive against insurgents. The TV reported live from Jobar around noontime Monday as cracks of gunfire and explosions could be heard in the background of the footage.

The activist Britain-based Syrian Observatory for Human Rights said that in all, 26 soldiers and pro-government gunmen were killed as well as 21 rebels. The Observatory said fighting was still underway Monday.

The government has been trying to pressure the rebels to surrender the pockets they hold in Damascus, following victories in the northern city of Aleppo, the central city of Homs and other Damascus suburbs.

Girl steals Pope Francis' hat at Vatican greeting

VATICAN CITY (RNS) — It took a split second for him to realize what happened. As Pope Francis leaned forward to give Estella Westrick a kiss on the cheek as he greeted the faithful on St. Peter's Square, the 3-year-old from Georgia caused a sensation by reaching up and yanking his white skullcap, or zucchetto, off his head. The pope broke out into good-humored guffaws when he realized what had happened. And video of the encounter went viral on social media.

Estella was visiting Rome with her parents and was taken to meet the pontiff by her godfather, Mountain Butorac, a Catholic tour organizer who moved to Rome with his family from Atlanta three years ago. He writes the Catholic Traveler blog.

"Right before she went up she was a little nervous," Butorac told CNN. "Then she stole his hat. It was hilarious. Everyone was laughing, including the pope."

Butorac posted the footage on Twitter and Facebook with the comment: "Took my Goddaughter to meet the pope! She stole his hat!"

Footage of the lighthearted exchange with the pope attracted more than 13,000 likes on Twitter and 6,200 retweets by late afternoon. On his blog, Butorac, who runs faith-based tours of the Vatican and other pilgrimage sites in Italy, says his life in Rome revolves around the Vatican and that he has met the pope several times.

China urges U.S. to be 'coolheaded' in approach to North Korea

WASHINGTON — China's foreign minister urged the United States to soften its saber rattling against North Korea, after secretary

of State Rex Tillerson warned that military action is "on the table" as one option to stop North Korea's nuclear weapons program. Tillerson arrived in China on Saturday, where he said that tensions with North Korea had reached a "dangerous level" and urged China to help pressure Pyongyang to abandon its nuclear ambitions, according to *The Washington Post*.

China's foreign minister, Wang Yi, called for a "coolheaded" approach to the situation and urged the U.S. not to abandon diplomacy. "No matter what happens, we have to stay committed to diplomatic means as a way to seek peaceful settlement," Yi said, according to the *Post*. "We hope all parties, including our friends from the United States, could size up the situation in a coolheaded and comprehensive fashion, and arrive at a wise decision."

Tillerson is on his first trip to Asia as Trump's top diplomat, making stops in Japan, South Korea and China.

On Friday, Tillerson signaled a more aggressive approach to North Korea, saying the "policy of strategic patience has ended" and suggesting the Trump administration would consider military, diplomatic and economic measures to persuade North Korea to halt its nuclear program.

North Korea recently launched four missiles, with the apparent, and unsuccessful, aim of hitting U.S. airbases in Japan.

Tillerson stressed the need for a "results-oriented" relationship with China in comments following his meeting with Wang on Saturday.

"We renewed our determination to work together to convince North Korea to choose a better path and a different future for its people," he said.

Tillerson said Wang agreed on the need for a "course correction" with Pyongyang. Bringing North Korea "to a different place" is a matter to be approached with "a sense of urgency," he said.

Wang restated Beijing's calls for dialogue between the U.S. and North Korea and called Tillerson's visit an important step toward a meeting between Chinese President Xi Jinping and his U.S. counterpart, President Trump, expected next month.

North Korea tests new rocket engine

TOKYO — North Korea has conducted a ground test of a new type of high-thrust rocket engine that leader Kim Jong Un is calling a revolutionary breakthrough for the country's space program, the North's state media said Sunday.

Kim attended Saturday's test at the Sohae launch site, according to the Korean Central News Agency, which said the test was intended to confirm the "new type" of engine's thrust power and gauge the reliability of its control system and structural safety.

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said. "In the grandest tradition of exploration, NASA's Cassini spacecraft has once again blazed a trail, showing us new wonders and demonstrating where our curiosity can take us if we dare," said Jim Green, director of the Planetary Science Division at NASA Headquarters. The dive was the first of 22 passes the spacecraft will make between Saturn and its rings over the next five months before it hurtles into the planet on Sept. 15, a maneuver that will destroy Cassini and end the mission.

North Korea detains U.S. citizen; at least 3rd American being held

A U.S. citizen has been arrested in North Korea, raising to three the number of Americans now detained by Kim Jong Un's regime and adding to rising tensions between Washington and Pyongyang.

South Korea's Yonhap news agency reported that a former Korean-American professor was arrested at Pyongyang International Airport as he was attempting to leave the country.

Yonhap described Kim as a former professor at the Yanbian University of Science and Technology in Yanji, Jilin, China. Yonhap said Kim, in his late 50s, had been involved in aid programs in North Korea. The reason for his arrest was not immediately available. The U.S. State Department said it was aware of reports that an American had been detained but declined to reveal details.

"The protection of U.S. citizens is one of the Department's highest priorities," the State Department said in a statement. "In cases where U.S. citizens are reported to be detained in North Korea, we work with the Swedish Embassy, which serves as the United States' Protecting Power in North Korea."

The Swedish embassy confirmed to multiple news organizations that an arrest took place Saturday but did not immediately respond to a request for more information from USA TODAY.

Park Chan-mo, the chancellor of the Pyongyang University of Science and Technology, identified the man to the Associated Press as Tony Kim. Park told AP Kim had come from the Chinese school and taught accounting in Pyongyang for about a month.

Relations between the U.S. and North Korea have grown more strained in recent months, with Pyongyang continuing to conduct nuclear and ballistic missile testing in defiance of international bans. North Korea's leader has been equally outraged by massive joint military exercises conducted by the U.S. and South Korea.

Pyongyang said Sunday it was poised to destroy the USS Carl Vinson if provoked when the aircraft carrier and its armada arrive at the Korean Peninsula. The ship began exercises Sunday with Japan, the Navy said. Last week, Vice President Pence visited South Korea and Japan, warning that the U.S. response to any use of weapons by

North Korea would be "overwhelming and effective."

"The United States of America will always seek peace but under President Trump, the shield stands guard and the sword stands ready," Pence said.

On Thursday, the U.N. Security Council condemned North Korea over its latest missile earlier this month. The statement included a call for dialogue and significantly was supported by China, North Korea's closest ally.

Ahn Chan-il, director of the World North Korea Research Center in Seoul, told Yonhap that Pyongyang "seems to be intending to use professor Kim as leverage in negotiations" with the U.S.

Other Americans being held in North Korea include Ohio native Otto Warmbier, a University of Virginia student who was arrested in January 2016 while he was on a tour of North Korea, and Kim Dong Chul, who was arrested in October 2015 while in North Korea on business.

Warmbier was accused of committing a "hostile act" for allegedly trying to steal a political banner and was sentenced in March 2016 to 15 years hard labor. Kim was accused of stealing military secrets and is serving a 10-year sentence.

Warmbier's parents expressed frustration Friday at efforts to win freedom for their son. Fred Warmbier told Fox News that neither the Obama administration nor the Trump administration had given them reason to hope their son would come home soon. He said no one in the Trump administration has called them, and their main contact with the State Department was a low-level employee. "President Trump, I ask you, bring my son home," Warmbier said.

Pirate attacks rising off East Africa, Pentagon and shipping records show
CAMP LEMONNIER, DJIBOUTI — Pirates once again prowl the high seas off shore of this tiny country on the strategic Horn of Africa.

Navy Capt. Richard Rodriguez, chief of staff of the Combined Joint Task Force-Horn of Africa, said Sunday U.S. forces are monitoring of piracy in the area.

"It certainly has increased over the last eight weeks," he told reporters.

After an absence of pirate attacks on commercial vessels for five years, there have been at least four incidents in the area since April 14, according to records kept by the IMB Piracy Reporting Center. The attacks are cause for concern but not surprising given the instability in the region.

On April 16, for example, a container ship in the Red Sea was repeatedly approached by small skiffs, according to the center, which tracks the crime. Armed guards on the ship showed their weapons and fired shots, turning away the skiffs. The center reported three other pirate attacks between April 14 and 22, its records show.

Piracy is one of several security concerns in Africa among of top Pentagon officials,

including Defense Secretary Jim Mattis. He is the first Trump administration official to visit Africa. During his one-day visit, Mattis is meeting with Djibouti's leaders as well as U.S. and allied troops at this breezy, steamy base.

Piracy was a huge issue in the region earlier in the decade, with hundreds of attacks each year in waters nearby. Increased security has largely squelched the problem.

Another worry, or at least an eyebrow raiser, is China's construction of its own military base here.

China also shares concern about piracy but also seeks access to Africa's mineral wealth. For the moment, the biggest worry for the Pentagon is how crowding will affect U.S. military operations from Camp Lemonnier, according to military budget documents that call for an expansion of the base.

The U.S. presence here in the former French colony gained urgency after the Sept. 11 attacks. A small presence in the years following 2001 led to long-term leases for space at the military outpost. In 2014, officials from the U.S. and Djibouti signed a 20-year deal with an option for another decade — at the cost of about \$65 million per year — a signal that problems besetting the region are not fading.

Among them: a particularly virulent branch of al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula, which aims to attack U.S. and western targets. A Navy SEAL raid targeting the group ended badly in January with the loss of one commando, civilian casualties and the destruction of a U.S. warplane. Special operators here live and work behind a screened, fenced compound, essentially a base within the base.

And then there are those pirates. They have haunted the Gulf of Aden for years, seeking ransom in return for hostages and the commercial vessels they seize.

Djibouti's strategic position, astride the Gulf of Aden and the Red Sea, make it an ideal launching pad for responding to piracy and terrorist groups in the region.

The camp, a former outpost of the French Foreign Legion, is named for Brig. Gen. Emile Lemonnier. He was beheaded by Japanese forces in southeast Asia at the end of World War II after his garrison was overrun.

Venezuelans shut down roads and highways in protest against government
CARACAS, Venezuela (AP) — Protesters sprawled in lawn chairs, worked on math homework and played cards on main roads around Venezuela Monday as part of a sit-in against the government.

In Caracas, thousands of protesters shut down the capital city's main highway to express their disgust with the increasingly embattled socialist administration of President Nicolas Maduro. They turned the road into a kind of public plaza, with protesters laying out picnics, reading books and reclining under umbrellas they brought to protect them from the blazing Caribbean sun.

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Juan Carlos Bautista, 48, passed the afternoon playing dominos.

"We want to be free. I'm here fighting for my children and my children's children," he said.

Protesters in at least a dozen other cities also staged sit-ins Monday, with some building barricades to stop traffic. In Caracas, protesters dragged concrete slabs, garbage and even a bathtub into the road.

The protest movement is entering its fourth week, and has become increasingly deadly.

On Sunday, a 21st death was linked to the unrest that began almost a month ago over the Supreme Court's decision to gut the opposition-controlled congress of its powers.

The Interior Ministry said that Almeline Carrillo died in a hospital after being hit on the head by a frozen water bottle that someone threw from a high rise toward a pro-government rally last week.

The current unrest is the most intense the economically struggling country has seen since two months of anti-government protests in 2014 that left dozens dead. But while those protests were led by young people who built flaming barricades in the street, this month's movement is attracting huge masses of older protesters, who say they are fighting not for themselves, but for the younger generations. In Caracas, retired professor Lisbeth Colina said Monday that she had chosen to participate in the sit-in for her grandchildren. "The side that gives up is the side that loses," she said. "We must remain in the streets. I'm not scared of the repression they're throwing at us," she said.

Maduro on Sunday said he wouldn't give in to opponents and again urged them rejoin negotiations they broke off last December. But opposition leaders are rejecting calls for dialogue, and demanding immediate general elections.

"The government wants to use negotiations as a ploy to divide us, demobilize us, and win itself time," congress Vice President Freddy Guevara told reporters. "This protest is an exercise in resistance and a test of our conviction."

Europe took in 710,400 asylum seekers last year

Europe granted asylum to 710,400 migrants last year — double the number in 2015, according to European Union figures released Wednesday. The increase comes amid a sharp decline in the number of refugees attempting to reach Europe since a deal last year between the EU and Turkey closed a major route. Of those granted asylum last year, 405,600 were Syrians, according to EU statistics. They were followed by 65,800 Iraqis and 61,800 Afghans. More than 70% of the Syrians were given asylum in Germany, which also took in the most asylum seekers, 445,201. The EU granted asylum to 333,350 people in 2015. More than 1 million people filed asylum claims last year in the 28 EU nations. The vast majority of successful applications were from people fleeing conflicts in the Middle East and North Africa.

Those just looking for jobs were likely denied asylum.

Observers: Large explosion rocks Syrian capital

BEIRUT - A large explosion rocked the Syrian capital early Thursday, followed by a fire near the Damascus airport, Syrian opposition activists and a monitor said. The explosion was heard across the capital, jolting residents awake, the head of the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights Rami Abdulrahman said. He said the explosion was reported to have happened near the Damascus airport road. The dawn explosion was also reported by other activists' networks but the source was unclear. Activist-operated Diary of a Mortar, which reports from Damascus, said the explosion near the airport road was followed by flames rising above the area. A pro-government site Damascus Now said the explosion was near the city's Seventh Bridge, which leads to the airport road.

Police stop 12-year-old boy from driving across Australia

SYDNEY - Outback police have arrested a 12-year-old boy who was almost a third of his way toward driving solo across Australia. The unlicensed boy had driven more than 1,300 kilometers (800 miles) from his home in Kendall on the east coast when he was stopped by traffic police on Saturday on the Barrier Highway near the remote mining town of Broken Hill. He was pulled over because a bumper bar was dragging on the road, New South Wales police said in a statement Sunday. Officials said he was driving to the west coast city of Perth, more than 4,100 kilometers (2,500 miles) from Kendall. The boy may have avoided suspicion from others during his journey because he appears older than his age. Police Detective Inspector Kim Fehon said the boy is about 6 feet (183 centimeters) tall.

NASA audit: New spacesuit not ready, but \$200M spent

CAPE CANAVERAL — NASA is years from having a new spacesuit ready for deep space exploration missions despite spending nearly \$200 million on the project over the past decade, space agency auditors reported Wednesday. The total includes nearly \$81 million of unclear value to future spacesuit designs, spent since 2011 on a contract that NASA continued against Johnson Space Center's recommendation, NASA's Office of Inspector General found. "We question the agency's decision to continue to fund the contract after Johnson leadership recommended its termination," auditors wrote in the 52-page report. Related: There is a "significant risk," they concluded, that a next-generation suit prototype won't be available to test on the International Space Station before its potential retirement in 2024.

Trump backtracks: U.S. will not withdraw from NAFTA

President Trump reversed course late Wednesday and said he had agreed to renegotiate rather than withdraw from the

North American Free Trade Agreement with Mexico and Canada, a surprise announcement that came just hours after reports said he was considering an executive order to pull out of the trade pact and as his administration faces questions about what he has achieved in his first 100 days in office.

"It is my privilege to bring NAFTA up to date through renegotiation. It is an honor to deal with both President Peña Nieto and Prime Minister Trudeau, and I believe that the end result will make all three countries stronger and better," Trump said in a statement about his calls with the Mexican and Canadian leaders.

Early Thursday Trump added to that by appearing to claim the diplomatic upper-hand. In a tweet, the president said he "received calls from the President of Mexico and the Prime Minister of Canada asking to renegotiate NAFTA rather than terminate. I agreed ... subject to the fact that if we do not reach a fair deal for all, we will then terminate NAFTA. Relationships are good — deal very possible!"

Renegotiating or withdrawing from NAFTA, a decades-old trade deal that Trump has described as a "disaster" and says hurts U.S. workers, was one of the president's campaign pledges. Trump has already abandoned the Trans-Pacific Partnership, a 12-nation trade deal brokered by President Obama. Mexico and Canada are the U.S.'s two largest export markets. NAFTA was established in 1994 to remove taxes on goods traded between the three countries. Pulling out of the pact would send the strongest signal yet from Trump that he intends to follow through on his vow to recast years of American economic policy.

The about-face followed a Politico report that said senior White House aides were drafting an executive order to withdraw from the pact, a move that drew immediate objections from some in Congress, including Sen. John McCain of Arizona.

"Withdrawing from #NAFTA would be a disaster for #Arizona jobs & economy," he tweeted. "@POTUS shouldn't abandon this vital trade agreement."

"Scrapping Nafta would be a disastrously bad idea," Sen. Ben Sasse of Nebraska said in a statement. "Yes, there are places where our agreements could be modernized, but here's the bottom line: Trade lowers prices for American consumers, and it expands markets for American goods. Risking trade wars is reckless."

Since taking office Trump has repeatedly indicated he planned to either renegotiate or terminate NAFTA, which he and other critics blame for wiping out U.S. manufacturing jobs because it allowed companies to move factories to Mexico to take advantage of low-wage labor.

"I am very upset with NAFTA. I think NAFTA has been a catastrophic trade deal for the United States, trading agreement for the United States. It hurts us with Canada, and it hurts us with Mexico," he said in an

NORTH KOREA

on each of its six sides display an individual color.

"It's very reasonable that it could take at least an hour" to solve, said Martin Harris, who helped conceive the project in 2014 while hanging out in the College of Engineering honors office.

Trump agency recommends ending protection for 50,000 Haitians in USA

President Trump's immigration agency is recommending that the U.S. end temporary protections by next January for 50,000 Haitians allowed to remain in the United States following a series of natural disasters that have crippled the poverty-stricken Caribbean nation. James McCament, acting director of U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services, concluded in a letter last week that conditions in Haiti have improved enough to end "temporary protected status" for Haitians, according to a copy of the letter obtained by USA TODAY. The Obama administration first offered temporary protection to Haitians following the devastating 2010 earthquake. The protection has been extended several times, the latest set to expire July 22.

McCament proposed an extension to January to allow for a "period of orderly transition" but said the program should not be extended beyond then.

North Korean medium-range missile test fails, US says

SEOUL, South Korea (AP) — A North Korean medium-range missile exploded seconds after it was launched on Sunday, U.S. officials said, a high-profile failure that came hours before the U.S. vice president arrived in South Korea, and as an American aircraft supercarrier approaches the Korean Peninsula in a show of force.

The U.S. had good intelligence both before and after the launch, said a White House foreign policy adviser traveling with Vice President Mike Pence, who arrived in Seoul in the afternoon to start a 10-day trip to Asia. No planned response is expected from the Trump administration because the official, who spoke on condition of anonymity to discuss the administration's initial understanding of the launch, said there was no need for the U.S. to reinforce the failure. The official said that had it been a nuclear test, "other actions would have been taken by the U.S."

North Korea has conducted five nuclear tests, including two last year. Recent satellite imagery suggests the country could conduct another underground nuclear test at any time. The White House believes that Sunday's test involved a medium-range ballistic missile that failed within 4-5 seconds after launch, and that it did not involve an intercontinental ballistic missile, the foreign policy adviser said.

The North regularly launches short-range missiles, but is also developing mid-range and long-range missiles meant to target U.S. troops in Asia and, eventually, the U.S. mainland.

The failed launch will sting in Pyongyang because it came a day after one of the biggest North Korean propaganda events of the year—celebrations of the 105th birthday of late North Korea founder Kim Il Sung, the current leader's grandfather.

President Donald Trump was uncharacteristically quiet about the failed launch, which was attempted from the east coast city of Sinpo. In a statement, Defense Secretary Jim Mattis said Trump and his military team "are aware of North Korea's most recent unsuccessful missile launch. The president has no further comment."

Pence said North Korea's "provocation" was another reminder of the risks that U.S. and South Korean service members face every day "in the defense of the freedom of the people of South Korea and the defense of America in this part of the world."

The vice president said at a fellowship dinner at U.S. Army Garrison Yongsan in Seoul that the willingness of military members "to stand firm without fear inspires the nation and inspires the world."

North Korea's ultimate goal is to have a full array of nuclear-tipped missiles in response to what Pyongyang says is hostility by Washington and Seoul meant to topple its government. North Korea is thought to have a small arsenal of atomic bombs and an impressive array of short- and medium-range missiles.

Many outside analysts believe that North Korea has not yet mastered the technology to build warheads small enough to place on long-range missiles, though some civilian experts say it can already build nuclear-tipped shorter range missiles that have South Korea and Japan within its striking range.

The U.S. Pacific Command said in a statement that Sunday's missile exploded on launch. South Korea's Defense Ministry said it was analyzing exactly how the North Korean launch failed.

In Seoul, South Korea's presidential office convened a national security council meeting to examine security postures.

Always high animosity has risen on the Korean Peninsula in recent months, as the United States and South Korea conduct annual war games that North Korea claims are invasion preparation and the North prepared for Saturday's anniversary celebrations. A U.S. aircraft carrier, the USS Carl Vinson, is heading to waters off Korea in a show of force.

Analysts warn that even failed missile launches provide valuable knowledge to North Korea as it tries to build its weapons program. The country launched a long-range rocket and conducted the two nuclear tests last year, including its most powerful to date. Aside from improving the technology, North Korean missile and nuclear tests are seen by outside analysts partly as efforts to bolster the domestic image of leader Kim Jong Un and apply political pressure on Seoul and Washington.

Kim has overseen three nuclear tests and a string of missile and rocket launches since taking over after the death of his father, dictator Kim Jong Il, in late 2011.

Another missile test from Sinpo failed earlier this month, when the rocket spun out of control and plunged into the ocean. That launch came shortly before Trump's first meeting with Chinese leader Xi Jinping. China is North Korea's only major ally. The extended-range Scud missile in that earlier launch suffered an in-flight failure and fell into the sea off North Korea's east coast, according to U.S. imagery and assessments. Despite Sunday's failure, the North's previous claim to have used "standardized" warheads has led to worries that it was making headway in its push to develop small and sophisticated warheads to be topped on long-range missiles.

Washington sees North Korea's pursuit of nuclear weapons and ballistic missiles as a threat to world security and to its Asian allies, Japan and South Korea. The United States, South Korea and other countries have vowed to apply more pressure on the North, but so far nothing has worked to stop Pyongyang's nuclear program.

Six-nation negotiations on dismantling North Korea's nuclear program in exchange for aid fell apart in early 2009.

North Korea threatens 'super-mighty' strike on U.S.

In an escalating war of words with the U.S., North Korea warned Thursday of a "super-mighty preemptive strike" that would reduce American military forces in South Korea and the U.S. mainland "to ashes," according to The Rodong Sinmun, official newspaper of North Korea's Workers' Party. The report, carried by Reuters, also warned the U.S. and its allies "should not mess with us." The latest bellicose statement follows North Korea's weekend display of military hardware in a parade marking the birthday of its founder Kim Il Sung and two attempted missile tests, one of which failed. Read more: The U.S. has stepped up its warnings to North Korea over its missile program and nuclear weapons tests. Vice President Mike Pence, on a tour of the region, warned this week that "the era of strategic patience is over" when it comes to U.S. policy toward North Korea.

1,000-mph winds, shock waves deadliest effects of asteroid strike

The end of the world wouldn't be pretty. If a big asteroid — like the one whizzing by on Wednesday — slammed into the Earth, ferocious winds of up to 1,000 mph and intense shock waves would kill the most people, according to a study published Wednesday. Researchers looked at seven effects associated with asteroid impacts — heat, pressure shock waves, flying debris, tsunamis, wind blasts, seismic shaking and cratering — and estimated how deadly each would be. The winds and the shock waves would be the worst. In fact, these two effects would account for more than 60% of lives lost, said Clemens Rumpf, study lead author

11 of 13

and a researcher at the University of Southampton in the U.K. Shock waves from a spike in atmospheric pressure would rupture internal organs, while wind blasts would hurl human bodies and flatten forests.

Magnitude 6.2 quake shakes Chile; no damage reported

SANTIAGO, Chile (AP) — A magnitude 6.2 earthquake has shaken northern Chile, but officials say there are no reports of damage. The U.S. Geological Survey says the quake that struck at 5:19 a.m. local time (0819 GMT) was centered 42 miles (67 kilometers) east-southeast of San Pedro de Atacama in the arid north of the South American country. The epicenter was 84 miles (135 kilometers) below the surface.

Chile's National Emergency Office says there are no reports of damage to people, basic services or infrastructure.

Supreme Court bans Jehovah's Witnesses in Russia

MOSCOW (AP) — Russia's Supreme Court has banned the Jehovah's Witnesses from operating in the country, accepting a request from the justice ministry that the religious organization be considered an extremist group. The court ordered the closure of the group's Russia headquarters and its 395 local chapters, as well as the seizure of its property. The Interfax news agency on Thursday quoted Justice Ministry attorney Svetlana Borisova in court as saying that the Jehovah's Witnesses "pose a threat to the rights of the citizens, public order and public security." The Jehovah's Witnesses claim more than 170,000 adherents in Russia. The group has come under increasing pressure over the past year, including a ban on distributing literature deemed to violate Russia's anti-extremism laws.

Paris terror attack: Police search home after officer's death on Champs-Elysees
Police have searched a home in the Paris suburb of Chelles after Thursday's terror attack that left one police officer dead and two other people wounded.

Authorities believe the residence east of Paris that is home to Karim Cheurfi, 39, is linked to the shooting that took place on the Champs-Elysees, the Associated Press reported.

Cheurfi has a police record and is known to authorities, according to the Associated Press and CNN.

The Islamic State claimed responsibility for the shooting in which the assailant died in the exchange of gunfire.

The assault in the popular tourist area came just three days before a critical presidential election in which security has loomed as a major issue.

The Islamic State identified the attacker as Abu Yusuf al-Beljiki through its Amaq news agency, according to SITE Intel Group, a U.S.-based organization that monitors terrorists' activity online.

Paris police spokeswoman Johanna Primevert initially told the AP that the gunman deliberately targeted police on

guard near the Franklin Roosevelt subway station, and appeared to act alone. On Thursday evening, the *Telegraph* reported that police in Paris issued an arrest warrant for a second suspect who arrived by train from Belgium.

Interior Ministry spokesman Pierre-Henry Brandet told BFM television that a man stepped from a car and opened fire on a police vehicle. A witness told Reuters that the attacker opened fire with a machine gun. Anne Hidalgo, mayor of Paris, said via Twitter that she salutes "the dedication, bravery and professionalism of the police and rescue forces," and thanked shopkeepers who sheltered many passersby when the shooting erupted.

"In the face of this ordeal," Hidalgo tweeted, "the determination of the Parisians to defend their way of life and their values is total." "My thoughts go to the family of the killed policeman and the relatives of the wounded," French President Francois Hollande said via Twitter. "A national tribute will be given." President Trump, addressing reporters at the White House, said, "It looks like another terrorist attack. What can you say? It just never ends. We have to be strong."

Security has been high in France since Tuesday, when police apprehended two men suspected of plotting an imminent terror attack. A French station hosting a televised event with the 11 presidential candidates briefly interrupted its broadcast to report Thursday's shooting.

The first round of a hotly contested presidential election takes place Sunday, with an independent and candidates on the far-right and far-left threatening to upend mainstream parties that have ruled France for decades. A string of terror attacks over the past 18 months has become a major issue in the campaign, along with concerns about France's high unemployment and rising immigration.

Hollande is not running for another term because his approval rating is so low. As the terror attack unfolded, police blocked off key roadways in the heart of the French capital and told people to avoid the area. The broad avenues leading to the Arc de Triomphe were filled with police vehicles flashing blue lights.

French prosecutors opened a terrorism investigation into the attack. Two police officers told AP the attacker had been flagged as an extremist, but offered no further details. The officers spoke to AP on the condition of anonymity to share information about the ongoing investigation.

France has lived under a state of emergency that was declared following multiple terrorist attacks in November 2015 that left 130 dead.

Australian citizenship test to get harder, based on 'values'

SYDNEY — The Australian government unveiled sweeping new citizenship rules this week that require applicants to live here for at least four years, speak English fluently and conform to "Australian values." Applicants

will be asked whether they believe in forced marriages for children, genital mutilation, striking a spouse and prohibiting girls from school. Those questions appear aimed at Muslim immigrants, who have come here in recent years. Nearly 30% of Australia's population of 6.9 million are foreign born. "We're not defined by race or religion or culture, as many other nations are," said Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull. "We're defined by commitment to common values, political values, the rule of law, democracy, freedom, mutual respect, equality for men and women."

Why Turkey's referendum matters to the U.S.

Turkey held a constitutional referendum Sunday that would radically change President Recep Tayyip Erdogan country's system of government and give the president vast, new powers.

So, why does that matter to the United States? Here are three major reasons:

Secular democracy at stake

Opponents campaigning against the referendum say Erdogan would undermine Turkey's democracy and secular traditions and institute a religious authoritarian regime in the mostly Muslim nation, which provides a bridge between Europe and its Western values and the Middle East.

Political critics point to the government crackdown following an attempted military coup last July and pressure for women to cover up in Muslim clothing.

A more powerful Erdogan, who could be around at least another decade, worries Western leaders who have expressed concerns about his move away from democracy. That has made the European Union less receptive to Turkey's bid to become a member.

U.S. air base

The U.S. military has a vital air base in Turkey that is used for operations throughout the Middle East.

U.S. Air Force Col. John Dorrian said in January that any actions by Turkey to shut down or limit U.S. air operations out of Incirlik Air Base would be damaging for the U.S. campaign against the Islamic State — also known as ISIS — in Syria.

"It's absolutely invaluable ... for the coalition," he said. "The entire world has been made safer by the operations that have been conducted there. It's a very important base to the coalition and to the ongoing fight against (ISIS)."

Strategic U.S. ally

The NATO member is a valued ally in the fight against ISIS and the defense of Europe. In addition, Turkey is trying to keep the tide of refugees fleeing Syria and other conflict zones from flooding Europe.

Turkey has the second largest army in NATO and is key to any success in rolling back and eventually defeating ISIS in Syria and Iraq.

President Trump has spoken about the two countries' "shared commitment to combating

(Le Pen) sticks in there, she can win in 2022" (the next scheduled election).

The final day of the campaign on Friday was marked by a hacking attack and document leak targeting Macron. Macron's party, En Marche!, said real documents were mixed with fake ones. The perpetrators remain unknown.

North Korea seizes another American citizen as crisis heats up

North Korea announced Sunday that it detained another American over the weekend, raising to four the number of U.S. citizens being held by the communist nation's authoritarian regime.

Kim Hak-song had worked at the Pyongyang University of Science and Technology, the same school where American Tony Kim had worked prior to being arrested at Pyongyang International Airport two weeks ago, North Korea's state-run KCNA news agency said. Few details on Kim Hak-song or his arrest were immediately available. KCNA said he was detained Saturday on suspicion of committing "hostile acts" and that a "detailed investigation into his crimes" was underway. The U.S. State Department issued a statement saying it was aware of the detention reports. The department works with the Swedish Embassy in Pyongyang, which serves as the United States' Protecting Power in North Korea in dealing with such matters, the statement said. The U.S. has no direct diplomatic ties with Pyongyang.

"The security of U.S. citizens is one of the Department's highest priorities," the statement said.

North Korea confirmed Wednesday that it had detained Tony Kim, 55, who was seized April 22 as he tried to leave the country. Tony Kim, who taught accounting and other courses, is accused of attempting to overthrow the government.

"He was intercepted for committing criminal acts of hostility aimed to overturn the DPRK not only in the past but also during his last stay before interception," KCNA said in confirming reports of Tony Kim's arrest. DPRK is the acronym for the Democratic People's Republic of Korea.

Pyongyang University of Science and Technology is the only privately funded university in North Korea. It opened in 2010 and features several foreign teachers, unusual for North Korea. The school, which gets much of its funding from Western and South Korean charitable organizations, claims 500 undergraduate and 60 graduate students. Other Americans being held in North Korea include Ohio native Otto Warmbier, 22, a University of Virginia student who was arrested in January 2016 while he was on a tour of North Korea, and Kim Dong Chul, 62, who was arrested in October 2015 while in North Korea on business.

Warmbier was accused of committing a "hostile act" for allegedly trying to steal a political banner and was sentenced in March 2016 to 15 years hard labor. Kim was

North Korea

accused of stealing military secrets and is serving a 10-year sentence.

Relations between the U.S. and North Korea have grown more strained in recent months as Pyongyang conducts nuclear and ballistic missile tests in defiance of international bans. North Korea leader Kim Jong Un has expressed outrage at massive joint military exercises conducted by the U.S. and South Korea and an anti-missile battery the U.S. is installing in the region.

On Friday, North Korea accused American and South Korean intelligence services of plotting to assassinate Kim Jong Un with "biochemical substances" in an effort to destabilize the isolated regime. The allegation followed a near unanimous vote in the U.S. House of Representatives on Thursday to toughen sanctions on North Korea and other countries that help its nuclear and missile programs, including China. The sanctions require Senate approval before being sent to President Trump to sign into law.

World's oldest standing army has 40 new Swiss Guards

VATICAN CITY (AP) — The world's oldest standing army has 40 new members after a Vatican Swiss Guard swearing-in ceremony. Each man took a loyalty oath Saturday evening in a ritual-rich ceremony in the St. Damaso courtyard of the Apostolic Palace. The May 6 date commemorates the day in 1527 when 147 guardsmen died while protecting Pope Clement VII during the Sack of Rome.

Earlier Saturday, Pope Francis told the Guards they're called to "another sacrifice no less arduous" — serving the power of faith. The recruits, who enroll for at least two years, must be single, upstanding Swiss Catholic males younger than 30.

Wearing blue-and-gold uniforms and holding halberds — spear-like weapons — they are a tourist delight while standing guard at Vatican ceremonies. Their main duty is to protect the pope.

North Korea accuses CIA of 'vicious plot' to kill leader Kim Jong Un

North Korea accused American and South Korean intelligence services on Friday of plotting to assassinate leader Kim Jong Un with "biochemical substances," a foiled effort by "imperialists" to destabilize the isolated regime.

The detailed allegation by the ministry of state security and published by government media comes amid soaring tensions over North Korea's development of nuclear weapons and ballistic missiles to carry them — in defiance of United Nations security council resolutions.

In recent weeks, President Trump and Kim have exchanged hostile threats that have raised concerns throughout the world about a dangerous military confrontation between their two nations.

North Korea claimed that the CIA and IS — South Korea's Intelligence Service — "hatched a vicious plot" targeting Kim while

MAY 12, 2017

he appeared in public in Pyongyang for ceremonial events. North Korea frequently makes allegations about U.S. belligerent moves that cannot be verified independently as accurate.

The North Korean statement did not specify a date for the plot, but said the plotter's intention was to target Kim with a bomb while he was "at the Kumsusan Palace of the Sun and at a military parade and public procession after his return home."

The statement said a terrorist group helped coordinate the plot. It did not say how it was foiled.

Kim watched a military parade in the North Korean capital on April 15 as part of celebrations marking the 105th birthday of North Korea's founder and Kim's grandfather, Kim Il Sung, the first of three generations of the same family to rule the country as absolute dictators since 1948.

The statement laid out a plot stretching back to when President Barack Obama was in office in 2016. The CIA has a history of plots trying to kill or overthrow governments or leaders in places like Iran and Cuba, but there is no evidence of such a plot hatched recently.

According to the statement, the assassin was a North Korean identified only as "Kim," who was lured into becoming a "terrorist" by U.S. and South Korean intelligence officers. The would-be assailant's fate was not addressed.

"The murderous demons of the IS who conspired with the CIA ideologically corrupted and bribed a DPRK citizen surnamed Kim, the then worker of the timber industrial branch in the Khabarovsk Territory of Russia in June 2014, and turned him into a terrorist full of repugnance and revenge," the North's security agency said. DPRK stands for the Democratic People's Republic of Korea, the country's formal name.

It said that the "biochemical substances" included a "radioactive substance and nano poisonous substance" and that the alleged assassin was "handed over 20,000 U.S. dollars on two occasions and a satellite transmitter-receiver (that enabled) him (to) get versed in it." At one point, the alleged assassin traveled to China to meet with South Korean accomplices, according to the statement.

North Korea vowed to "ferret out and mercilessly destroy the last one (of) the terrorists of the U.S. CIA and the puppet IS of South Korea targeting the dignity of the DPRK supreme leadership." It said that the incident was a "most vicious challenge" and represented a "declaration of war."

The allegation followed a near unanimous vote in the U.S. House of Representatives on Thursday to toughen sanctions on North Korea and other countries that help its nuclear and missile programs, including China. The sanctions still need to be approved by the Senate before being sent to Trump to sign into law.

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campaign emails and financial documents. It was unclear who was behind the hack and the leak.

A campaign blackout starting minutes after the Macron team announcement means that Le Pen's campaign can't legally comment on the leak.

In a statement, Macron's En Marche movement said the hack took place a few weeks ago, and that the leaked documents have been mixed with false documents to "seed doubt and disinformation" and destabilize Sunday's presidential runoff. Hillary Clinton's U.S. presidential campaign suffered similar leaks, and also said that authentic documents were mixed with false documents.

The timing of the leak could be seen as either bizarre or inspired.

The documents' release just before France enters a roughly two-day-long blackout - during which politicians, journalists and even ordinary citizens are meant to pull back from any public election talk to avoid swaying the vote - means that the leak may have very little impact beyond the overheated world of Twitter and Reddit.

On the other hand, the messages' release just before France's political machinery shuts down for the weekend might mean that talk of the leak - regardless of its veracity - will dominate dinner table conversations as French voters make up their minds Saturday. The candidates stopped campaigning at midnight Friday to give voters a day of reflection before the election. It's a stark choice: Le Pen's anti-immigration, anti-European Union platform, or Macron's progressive, pro-EU stance.

Tensions marred the race right to the end. France's presidential voting watchdog called on the Interior Ministry late Friday to look into claims by the Le Pen campaign that ballot papers are being tampered with nationwide to benefit Macron. The Le Pen campaign said electoral administrators in several regions who receive ballot papers for both candidates have found the Le Pen ballot "systematically torn up."

Earlier in the day, anti-Le Pen crowds disrupted her visit to a renowned cathedral in Reims.

The presidential campaign has been unusually bitter, with voters hurling eggs and flour, protesters clashing with police and candidates insulting each other on national television — a reflection of the widespread public disaffection with politics as usual. Le Pen, 48, has brought her far-right National Front party, once a pariah for its racism and anti-Semitism, closer than ever to the French presidency, seizing on working-class voters' growing frustration with globalization and immigration. Even if she loses, she is likely to be a powerful opposition figure in French politics in the upcoming parliamentary election campaign.

In an interview with The Associated Press in the final hours of a hostile, topsy-turvy campaign, Le Pen said that win or lose, "we

changed everything." She claimed an "ideological victory" for her populist, anti-immigrant worldview.

"Even if we don't reach our goal, in any event there is a gigantic political force that is born," she told AP in her campaign headquarters. Her party "imposed the overhaul" of French politics and set the tone of the election, she said.

The 39-year-old Macron, too, played a key role in upending France's traditional political structure with his wild-card campaign.

Voters liked the idea, and chose Macron and Le Pen in the first-round vote, dumping the traditional left and right parties that have governed modern France. Le Pen said those parties have been "blackballed."

Many voters, however, don't like either Le Pen or Macron. They fear her party's racist past, while worrying that his platform would demolish worker job protections or be too much like his mentor, the deeply unpopular outgoing President Francois Hollande.

Students protested both presidential candidates Friday by blocking high schools and marching through Paris.

Le Pen, who was pelted with eggs Thursday in Brittany, was met by hecklers Friday at the Reims cathedral. She left via an unmarked door, putting her arms over her head as if to protect herself and diving into a black car.

Le Pen denounced her critics for disrupting a sacred place during her final campaign stop. The site has special meaning for her National Front party because it's the cathedral where Charles VII was crowned in the presence of Joan of Arc — the party's icon — at a time of war and division.

In the AP interview, Le Pen said she was confident she can bring the divided country together if elected.

"Yes. I want most of all to put democracy back in place ... we must re-weave the links among people." She said.

Macron would worsen divisions, she claimed. The pro-business Macron, who topped all vote-getters in the first-round, also has been booed and heckled frequently as he visited blue-collar workers.

Violent protests erupted in Paris earlier this week against both candidates, with several police officers injured. And critics decried the bitter tone of Wednesday night's presidential debate.

Le Pen acknowledged to AP that she became angry at the debate but said she was merely channeling the mood of France.

Macron acknowledged the French are exasperated by the government's ineffectiveness, but he dismissed Le Pen's vision of an infuriated country.

She "speaks for no one. ... Madame Le Pen exploits anger and hatred," Macron told RTL radio.

French choose centrist over right-wing rebel in historic presidential vote

PARIS — The European political establishment breathed a heavy sigh of relief Sunday, as French voters easily elected pragmatic centrist Emmanuel Macron as

president over right-wing challenger Marine Le Pen, who threatened to upend Europe's existing order.

Macron won with 66% of the vote against 34% for Le Pen, with 99% of the votes counted. Shortly after the polls closed, Le Pen called Macron to congratulate him on his victory, as did French President Francois Hollande and other European leaders.

President Trump tweeted congratulations to Macron "on his big win today."

Le Pen, of the National Front party, had threatened to curb immigration, particularly for Muslims, pull France out of the European Union and return the country to the French franc — moves that would have caused political and economic upheaval in Europe and around the world.

Macron's victory, coming on the heels of defeats for right-wing populist candidates in Austria and the Netherlands, appears to blunt the anti-establishment fervor sweeping Europe amid a backlash against economic stagnation, a flood of migrants pouring into their countries and a string of nerve-rattling terror attacks.

Macron, 39, is a former investment banker and economy minister who strongly supports the European Union. He will become France's youngest ever president, yet he has never held elected office.

"Tonight Europe and the world are looking at us. They expect us to defend the spirit of the Enlightenment," Macron said in his victory speech.

His supporters gathered outside the Louvre, waved French flags and sang, "we have won, we have won."

"It's the first time I have ever been involved in politics," said Laurence Falque, 57, a doctor from Paris who said she worked to get out the vote for Macron. "He brings people together. He is young, he is smart, pragmatic."

"This is a very important election for the French people, especially because it comes after a series of elections with unhappy endings such as the election of President Trump in the United States and Brexit," said Oumaima Bribri, 25, a Paris student.

But Bernard Cironneau, 66, a retired military officer from Paris, was disappointed that Le Pen did not win. "It's the continuity of what it was under Hollande," he said. "It's not good and terrorism will increase."

Macron's triumph does not necessarily signal the end of populism on the European continent.

"We are in a dynamic where countries are pulling inward, into their national identities," said Bruno Cautres, a political analyst at the Center for Political Research at Sciences Po, a university in Paris. "The climate in France is rather a climate that promotes Le Pen's discourse."

Nigel Farage, the former leader of the U.K. Independence Party that successfully campaigned for Britain to leave the EU, tweeted that Macron "offers 5 more years of failure, power to the EU and open borders. If

N.K. CONT

It also comes less than a week after CIA Director Mike Pompeo made a surprise visit to South Korea, where the leading candidate for president in Tuesday's election has promised to seek better ties with its volatile neighbor.

South Korea's former president, who was impeached over corruption charges, had taken a hard-line against North Korea and approved deployment of a U.S. anti-missile system in the South. The placement of the system on South Korean soil has been a controversial issue in the election campaign and has provoked complaints from China, North Korea's primary economic benefactor. Earlier this year Kim Jong-un's half-brother was killed by a lethal nerve agent in Malaysia's Kuala Lumpur airport, an episode the Malaysian government blamed on North Korea

FDA approves second drug to treat ALS
The U.S. Food and Drug Administration has approved use of a medicine proved to slow the degenerating effects of the rare disease ALS.

It's the first time in more than two decades the agency approved a treatment for the progressive disease amyotrophic lateral sclerosis -- also known as Lou Gehrig's disease -- which affects 12,000 to 15,000 people in the United States.

On Friday, the FDA gave its OK to Mitsubishi Tanabe Pharma America for the drug Radicava, or edaravone. The drug is expected to be available by August.

The FDA said the approval came after a Japanese study displayed the drug's benefits. The six-month trial tested more than 100 people and found those who used edaravone "declined less" in terms of daily functioning opposed to those who did not use the drug. Dr. Eric Bastings, the deputy director of the Division of Neurology Products in the FDA's Center for Drug Evaluation and Research, said the agency quickly encouraged the drugmaker to file to make the drug available in the U.S.

"This is the first new treatment approved by the FDA for ALS in many years," Bastings said, "and we are pleased that people with ALS will now have an additional option." Previously, the only drug approved by the FDA to treat ALS was Rilutek, according to the Mayo Clinic. Rilutek, or riluzole, was granted FDA approval in 1995.

ALS kills nerve cells connected to voluntary muscles. The disease, which gets worse over time, could inhibit vital movements such as chewing, breathing, talking and walking. The FDA said muscles eventually become weak and a person usually dies from respiratory failure with 3-5 years.

Radicava would be given by infusion for a period of two weeks to start, followed by a 14-day period without drugs. The cycles then continue in two-week intervals, followed by periods without the drug.

Radicava does have side effects. The FDA said trial participants experienced bruising and problems walking. The drug also has

caused hives, swelling, shortness of breath and allergic reactions.

The ALS Association states Radicava "is not a cure" but may help people live with the disease. It said the going price for Radicava is \$11,000 per dosage cycle, or about \$146,000 a year.

However, MT Pharma America said it will provide the drug at no cost for those without insurance and who meet certain requirements.

GM laying off 600 at Michigan SUV plant
LANSING, Mich. — General Motors' Lansing Delta Township Assembly Plant will lay off 600 workers as it is shut down for a month starting this week to prepare for the launch of the new Buick Enclave and Chevrolet Traverse crossovers.

The plant closes after second shift on Friday to phase out production of the GMC Acadia. When it resumes on June 12, the third shift will be eliminated.

Back in March, when the cuts were first announced, GM believed it might have to lay off as many as 1,100 at the plant.

"At this point, we anticipate approximately half the number of people reported in the (layoff) notice to be impacted by the shift reduction," said Erin Davis, GM's Lansing spokeswoman.

Of the roughly 600 who will be laid off, 500 could be brought back in the first quarter of 2018, Davis said, when production for the Enclave and Traverse is expected to be in full swing.

"We're advocating for additional product at the plant," said Bill Reed, president of UAW Local 602.

A third vehicle would bring back the third shift, he said.

"Right now, we're focused on making sure we have a successful launch," he said.

GM announced that the Delta Township plant would produce the new generation Traverse in January. It confirmed the new generation Enclave would be made at the plant in March, the same day the layoffs were announced. The company invested \$583 million in new tooling, equipment and an expansion at the plant for the two SUVs. The Enclave was formally unveiled last month at the New York Auto Show. It will be powered by a 3.6-liter V-6 engine with 302 horsepower, an improvement over the 288 horsepower in the previous model. It will also have a nine-speed automatic transmission instead of a six-speed transmission. The seven-passenger SUV weighs 4,358 pounds, nearly 600 pounds lighter than the previous model.

With front-wheel drive, it will get 17 miles per gallon in the city and 25 mpg on the highway. With all-wheel drive, it will get 17 mpg in the city and 24 mpg on the highway. The first-generation Enclave gets 15 mpg in the city and 20 mpg on the highway.

Historic Ford Mustang goes up for auction
INDIANAPOLIS — A 1965 Ford Mustang goes up for auction here this month, a car that represents a piece of history.

With the vehicle identification number, or VIN, of 5F07U100002, it's believed to be the first Mustang hardtop ever made.

"I know how to read Ford VIN numbers," says Bob Fria, its current owner who was able to figure out its significance. "I knew what it was when I bought it."

The Mustang was among the 150 to 180 pre-production Mustangs built between Feb. 10 and March 5, 1964. In preparation for the Mustang's launch, workers had to be trained and cars had to be built for public relations duties, according to the Mecum Auctions website. It goes on the auction block at Mecum's Indianapolis auction, May 16 to 21. The first two orders, white convertible 5F08F100001 and blue hardtop 5F07U100002, were to make the trip to Canadian Ford dealers so they would have a showroom car for the April 17 introduction day, according to the Mecum website. Like today, consecutive unit numbers didn't necessarily determine the order off the assembly line, so it is unclear what car was actually the first off the line.

The hardtop was scheduled for early assembly so it could be shipped to Brown Brothers Ford in Vancouver by April 17, according to the website. But the hardtop was misrouted and ended up at Whitehorse Motors in the Yukon Territory in May, missing introduction day.

The six-cylinder, three-speed Mustang with 13-inch tires served as a demo car for about a year before it was sold in the spring of 1965. Fria says he was living in Los Angeles when he found the car about 100 miles away in Temecula, Calif. It had been "painted the wrong color and different things had been changed" but he bought it and painstakingly returned to its original shape, including its Caspian Blue paint.

He said there had been 12 owners before he discovered it. He declines to say what he paid, but dare say it was far less than the \$450,000 to \$650,000 it is expected to fetch at auction.

"It was the car that started the 'pony car,'" Fria said. "Without it, there wouldn't have been the (Mercury) Cougar or (Chevrolet) Camaro or the (Pontiac) Firebird."

Review: BMW 5 Series sedan excels with Apple CarPlay

The redesigned 2017 BMW 5 Series is everything a luxury car should be: Engaging, comfortable and full of useful features.

In addition to a new look and new engine options, BMW also gave its midsize four-door sedan advanced technology that sets it apart. The result is a sedan that's still cutting-edge, despite a few dull spots.

I spent a week driving the entry-level BMW 530i. Yes, it has a turbo four-cylinder engine under the hood, but put away all your preconceived notions of "four-bangers" and turbo lag. BMW's new 248-horsepower, 2-liter engine felt sprightly and responsive, and I still got 24.5 miles per gallon in mixed city and highway traffic. In fact, it's such a good match for the 5 Series' new, lightweight

POSTED: BY LEON IRBY 12 of 13 DATED: MAY 12, 2017

design that I prefer it to a more powerful engine.

Some of those additions proved more impressive than others. For example, as part of the \$1,700 Driver Assistance Package, the 5 Series' Active Cruise Control took the stress out of a traffic jam by automatically following the car in front of me, braking and accelerating as needed.

The 5 Series still excels at driver communication. BMW has a knack for building cars that speak to the driver through steering feel, suspension travel, and throttle response — and the 530i proved no exception.

Some luxury cars are so silent and smooth that they isolate the driver, and some sports cars are jarringly candid with their bumps and rattles. But, as always, the 5 Series' feedback is both direct and laconic — even more so when I got used to its optional adaptive rear-wheel steering, designed to help smooth out high-speed lane changes.

When it comes to tech, we found things we things to love and loathe.

The 5 Series is the first vehicle to offer a wireless version of Apple's CarPlay smartphone integration setup.

I love how CarPlay replaces a car's often finicky built-in navigation and entertainment system. You get Apple's iOS operating system, familiar to anyone with an Apple smartphone or tablet, plus driver-focused versions of popular apps. But until now, using CarPlay required that your iPhone remain tethered to the car with a cable.

With my phone in my pocket, pulling up the Spotify app on the BMW's new touchscreen was as simple as tuning in an AM radio station on a Nash Rambler. The downside? It ran down my phone's battery — and fast.

The \$2,300 Premium Package includes a wireless charging tray in the center console. But even with that package you're not done. You need to also buy a wireless charging case or it won't charge up your phone.

Of course, things would be a lot worse if you were among the 53.2% of Americans who own an Android phone.

Since BMW refuses to add Android Auto compatibility to its iDrive infotainment system, Android users can't seamlessly navigate phone apps on a 5 Series' dashboard. So if you love your brand new Samsung Galaxy S8, you might want to shop for a brand new Audi A6, which has compability.

While the CarPlay integration is a hit, so-called "gesture control," in which you wave your hands in order to perform a function while driving, was only useful as a party trick. As its name suggests, the \$190 option lets drivers accept a phone call with a swipe of a palm, or turn up the volume with a finger twirl. After much (literal) waving of hands, I decided the sensor-based system wasn't quite ready for real-world applications.

All of this tech comes at a price — \$52,195. The price, including destination, is lot for the base model of anything, and options — such

as a \$4,200 upgraded sound system, \$600 soft-close doors, and \$2,450 Mocha Nappa Leather with contrast stitching and piping — drove the sticker on my test car to just shy of \$75,000. That doesn't include optional all-wheel drive, either.

Even though it couldn't talk with Android phones or understand hand signals, the 5 Series and I did share a mutually intelligible language. Whether it was a late-night cruise on an empty highway, a quick jaunt down a twisty country road, or a slog through rush-hour traffic, we grew to anticipate each other's reactions.

Few cars interact with their drivers as competently as the 2017 BMW 5 Series. If only it could do the same with a Google Pixel.

What Stands Out

Handling: Still the gold standard for a sporty luxury sedan

Technology: Look, ma: No hands, and no wires

Power: New turbo four is a perfect match for this BMW

2017 BMW 5 Series

What? An all-new version of BMW's driver-focused, midsize luxury sedan

Where? Made in Dingolfing, Germany

When? Available at dealers now

What makes it go? A 2-liter turbocharged inline 4-cylinder good for 248 horsepower.

How thirsty? 24 miles per gallon in the city, 34 mpg highway, and 27 mpg combined with premium fuel

How big? 16.22 feet

How much? Starts at \$51,200, plus a \$995 destination charge

Overall? Despite some high-tech misses, still the perfect sport sedan

Books: New and noteworthy

USA TODAY's Jocelyn McClurg scopes out the hottest books on sale each week.

1. Rising Star: The Making of Barack Obama by David J. Garrow (William Morrow, non-fiction, on sale May 9)

What it's about: Pulitzer Prize-winning historian Garrow interviewed more than 1,000 people for this portrait of Obama before he became president.

The buzz: "Epic... political history buffs will be fascinated," says *Publishers Weekly* in a starred review.

2. A Dog's Way Home by W. Bruce Cameron (Forge, fiction, on sale May 9)

What it's about: After a young man and his pit bull mix are separated by rules banning the breed, Bella tries to make her way home.

The buzz: Cameron's *A Dog's Purpose* climbed to the top of *USA TODAY's Best-Selling Books* list in January, propelled by the movie adaptation.

3. Since We Fell by Dennis Lehane (Ecco, fiction, on sale May 9)

What it's about: A former TV reporter who has an on-air breakdown covering the Haiti earthquake marries a man who is not who he seems to be.

The buzz: "A crafty, ingenious tale of murder and deception," says *Kirkus Reviews*.

4. Jackie's Girl: My Life With the Kennedy Family by Kathy McKeon (Gallery Books, non-fiction, on sale May 9)

What it's about: McKeon recounts the 13 years, beginning in 1964, that she spent as Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis's personal assistant and sometime nanny to Caroline and John Jr.

The buzz: Our fascination with Jackie shows no signs of waning (see *Jackie* starring Natalie Portman; *The Kennedys: After Camelot* with Katie Holmes).

5. Eleanor Oliphant Is Completely Fine by Gail Honeyman (Pamela Dorman Books/Viking, fiction, on sale May 9)

What it's about: Debut novel about the offbeat, off-putting title character, who finds a friend in the nerdy IT guy in her office.

The buzz: It's an Indie Next pick of independent booksellers and a Library Reads choice of librarians. "A compulsively readable, heartwarming story," says Kaitlin Smith of Copperfield's Books in Sebastopol, Calif.

Bill Clinton, James Patterson partner on novel

Former president Bill Clinton and author James Patterson are writing a thriller together. (Yes, really.) Expect insider details among the intrigue in *THE PRESIDENT IS MISSING*, publishers Alfred A. Knopf and Little, Brown and Company said in a release. "Working on a book about a sitting president — drawing on what I know about the job, life in the White House and the way Washington works — has been a lot of fun," Clinton said in a statement. "And working with Jim has been terrific. I've been a fan of his for a very long time." The book, out June 2018, will be Clinton's first novel. It will also be Patterson's first collaboration with a president.

'American Idol' to return ... on ABC

This ... is *American Idol*, on a new network. The singing competition, which set ratings records over a storied 15-year run on Fox but was canceled last spring, is being resurrected on ABC. The Disney-owned network confirmed the news early Tuesday, providing no details about judges, a host, timing or the duration of the series, though it's been speculated that a shortened season will begin next spring on Sunday nights. The show's previous seasons, about 20 weeks each, stretched from mid-January to mid-May. TMZ first reported *Idol* producers FremantleMedia and 19 Entertainment's talks with ABC after earlier discussions with NBC ended. As for who might be back?

Loretta Lynn hospitalized after stroke

NASHVILLE- Country music legend Loretta Lynn suffered a stroke at her Tennessee home Thursday night and was hospitalized, according to a post on her official website. Maria Malta, a publicist for Lynn confirmed Friday that the 85-year-old singer and songwriter was admitted into a Nashville hospital after suffering the stroke at her home in Hurricane Mills, the Associated Press reported. According to the Friday afternoon