

Trump praises Barr for taking over Stone case

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Reuters | Washington

U.S. President Donald Trump yesterday praised Attorney General William Barr for “taking charge” of the case against long-time Trump adviser and friend Roger Stone, as Democrats threatened to investigate the Justice Department’s actions.

The Justice Department



U.S. President Donald Trump reacts to a question from a reporter following a signing ceremony for the Supporting Veterans in STEM Careers Act inside the Oval Office of the White House in Washington, U.S.

yesterday reversed course and sought a lighter sentence for Stone after prosecutors a day earlier recommended that the veteran Republican operative face sentencing within federal guidelines of seven to nine years.

The highly unusual move, which came hours after Trump complained about the recommended sentence on Twitter, prompted all four U.S. prosecutors on the case to quit and Democrats to accuse Barr of political interference.

Trump later told reporters that he did not discuss Stone’s case with the department but called the sentencing recommendation “ridiculous.” A senior Justice Department official called the timing of Trump’s initial tweet and the department’s actions a coincidence.

Stone is scheduled to be sentenced on Feb. 20 after being found guilty in November on

seven counts of lying to Congress, obstruction and witness tampering stemming from the government investigation into Russian interference in the 2016 U.S. presidential election.

In a new court filing, the department on Tuesday said the initial recommendation on Monday was “excessive and unwarranted” but did not make a formal sentencing recommendation.

“Congratulations to Attorney General Bill Barr for taking charge of a case that was totally out of control and perhaps should not have even been brought,” Trump tweeted early Wednesday.

House Judiciary Committee Jerrold Nadler has said he would probe the reversal, while Senate Democratic Leader Chuck Schumer has asked the Justice Department’s internal watchdog to investigate.

Venezuela opposition leader Guaido returns home, fighting erupts

AFP | Caracas

Opposition leader Juan Guaido returned to Venezuela on Tuesday after an international support-building tour and called on the people in the crisis-racked nation to keep pushing back against President Nicolas Maduro.

Guaido -- who had defied a travel ban to visit Colombia, the United States, Canada and several European nations -- was greeted by a throng of cheering supporters at the international airport outside the capital Caracas.

“We’re in Caracas now. I bring back with me the commitment of the free world, ready to help us regain democracy and freedom,” Guaido wrote on Twitter, before tweeting a picture of himself at passport control that was captioned “HOME.”

Shortly before his arrival, fighting broke out between his followers -- including several lawmakers -- and Maduro’s sup-



Venezuelan opposition leader and self-proclaimed acting president Juan Guaido returned to Caracas after a trip abroad to drum up support from foreign governments

porters.

“Guaido, fascist!” shouted employees of the state-run airline Conviasa, which was subjected to US sanctions last week, who had entered the area where the 36-year-old’s backers were waiting for him. Several diplomats were present.

Videos circulating on social

media appear to show Guaido sprayed with soda by an airline worker. The opposition leader seemed to laugh it off.

Security escorts flanked the opposition leader -- wearing a white shirt and a wooden cross around his neck -- as he got into a white vehicle to head to Caracas. After his trip abroad



A supporter of Venezuelan President Nicolas Maduro (C) confronts a reporter (2nd L) as Venezuelan opposition leader Juan Guaido arrived home in Caracas

-- including a meeting with US President Donald Trump, who threatened to “smash” Maduro’s regime -- Guaido promised new sanctions “against the dictatorship” would be coming soon, and called for renewed protests.

“We came to work and leave the rest, to do what is necessary to accomplish the goal” of

pushing Maduro from office, Guaido later told a rally attended by about 500 people.

His office said late Tuesday that a relative traveling with Guaido had vanished after being held by airport officials.

‘A new moment’

In a veiled reference to Guai-

do’s return, Maduro called on his supporters to focus on “defending Venezuela.”

“Let’s not get distracted by stupidities, by dummies, by traitors to the homeland,” he said at a ceremony broadcast on state television.

Guaido rose to prominence in January 2019 when he declared himself the country’s acting president in a direct challenge to Maduro.

He derived such authority from his position as the speaker of the National Assembly, after the legislature declared Maduro’s 2018 re-election invalid following a poll widely denounced as rigged.

Lawmakers called Maduro a “usurper” while more than 50 countries recognized Guaido as interim president.

However, Maduro retains the support of Venezuela’s powerful military and has resisted Guaido’s challenge, even as the United States ramps up the pressure.

Dubai court rules against superyacht freeze order in divorce battle

Reuters | Dubai

A Dubai appeal court has dismissed a freezing order on a \$436 million superyacht belonging to a Russian billionaire at the center of one of the world’s costliest divorce battles, according to a copy of the final ruling reviewed by Reuters.

But it is still not clear whether superyacht M.V. Luna, impounded in 2018, will be able to depart Dubai after a British court’s freezing order was dismissed on Feb. 5.

Oil and gas tycoon Farkhad Akhmedov was ordered to pay about 40 per cent of his fortune to his former wife Tatiana Akhmedova by London’s High Court in 2016, in one of the largest divorce settlements in legal history.

But he failed to pay the 453 million pound (\$588 million) divorce bill and the London court granted a worldwide freezing order, under which Akhmedov’s yacht was impounded in the Gulf Arab emirate.

A spokesman for Tatiana Akhmedova, who is trying to



Superyacht Luna owned by Russian billionaire Farkhad Akhmedov is docked at Port Rashid in Dubai, United Arab Emirates. Inset, Farkhad Akhmedov

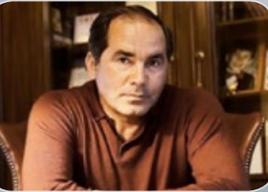
enforce the freezing order, said an injunction from the Marshall Islands prevents the yacht from setting sail.

The vessel was still moored on Wednesday, according to Refinitiv ship tracking data.

Luna, an expedition yacht built for Russian billionaire Ro-

man Abramovich before Akhmedov bought it in 2014, has at least nine decks, space for 50 crew, two helipads, a vast swimming pool and a mini-submarine.

The Dubai court of appeal’s final decision, English and Arabic copies of which were provided to Reuters by Akhmedov’s law-



yers, came after two years of legal battles in the emirate over the freezing order.

Lawyers acting for Akhmedova said on Wednesday they would not comment on possible next steps until they assess the reasons for the court ruling, but said the yacht still could not sail.

“An injunction imposed by the Marshall Islands authority, the flag state of the yacht, prevents it from doing so. That injunction has never been challenged and demonstrates the undoubted rights of [her] position,” said the lawyers’ statement, provided by the spokesman.

Akhmedova began divorce proceedings in Britain in 2012. Akhmedov said he and his wife had already divorced in Russia in 2000, but various Russian and British courts have found no evidence to support this assertion.

Akhmedova is using London-listed litigation funder Burford capital. Burford did not immediately respond to a request for comment.

Forbes estimates Akhmedov’s net worth at \$1.4 billion. The US Treasury Department has put him on a list of sanctioned Russian state-owned companies and so-called “oligarchs”, identified as close to President Vladimir Putin.

Tatiana Akhmedova

