

Trump ballroom renovation allowed to proceed, for now

Washington, United States

A federal appeals court has ruled US President Donald Trump's \$400 million White House ballroom renovation can proceed, albeit temporarily, and called for a district judge to clarify national security-related questions.

The project aims to construct a massive ballroom on the site of the White House's East Wing -- previously best known for housing the First Lady's offices. It was demolished in September.

A three-judge panel of the US Court of Appeals for the DC Circuit ruled 2-1 to give the administration until April 17 to continue working on the project and "seek Supreme Court review," in the court order released Saturday.

The order also calls on the federal district court Judge Richard Leon to clarify questions on White House safety and security raised in earlier proceedings.



The White House spans six floors and contains 132 rooms, making it one of the world's most recognisable residences.

Indonesian president to meet Putin in Russia for oil talks

AFP | Jakarta, Indonesia

Indonesia's President Prabowo Subianto will depart for Russia yesterday for talks with counterpart Vladimir Putin on oil, Prabowo's office said.

The presidency in Jakarta confirmed to AFP that Prabowo would leave Sunday evening.

Foreign Minister Sugiono said Saturday that oil, which is "of strategic importance for the Indonesian nation", would be on the agenda.

"He will meet with President Putin and will also discuss global geopolitics and, certainly, the energy situation," said Sugiono, who like many Indonesians has only one name.

Prabowo, who recently travelled to South Korea and Japan, has defended his foreign travels.

"Brothers and sisters, it's to secure oil, I have to go everywhere," he said in an address to his cabinet last week.

Artemis crew urges unity on 'lifeboat' Earth

AFP | Houston, United States

Artemis II astronauts expressed awe on Saturday over their record-setting lunar flyby mission, urging unity on Earth after witnessing the planet's isolation like a "lifeboat" in space.

The crew spoke at a news conference as NASA took a victory lap following the success of the mission.

The astronauts did the first slingshot around the Moon in more than 50 years and traveled deeper into space than any humans before -- culminating in a smooth splashdown Friday off the coast of California.

Flanked on stage by mission commander Reid Wiseman, Victor Glover and Jeremy Hansen, astronaut Christina Koch called for people on Earth to embrace their shared humanity.

"What struck me wasn't necessarily just Earth, it was all the blackness around it. Earth was just this lifeboat hanging undisturbedly in the universe,"



NASA's Artemis II mission astronauts Canadian Space Agency's Jeremy Hansen, Christina Koch, Victor Glover and commander Reid Wiseman react during a welcoming ceremony at Ellington Field Joint Reserve Base in Houston, Texas

said Koch.

"There's one new thing I know and that is: Planet Earth -- you are a crew."

Hansen called on fans of the Artemis mission to see themselves in the crew of four, who marked a series of milestones: Glover was the first person of color to fly around the Moon,

Koch was the first woman, and Canadian Hansen the first non-American.

"I would suggest to you that when you look up here, you're not looking at us. We are a mirror reflecting you," Hansen said.

"And if you like what you see, then just look a little deeper. This is you."

While hurtling through deep space and zipping around the Moon, the Artemis astronauts took thousands of photographs, amassing a stunning portfolio of images.

They also witnessed a solar eclipse along with extraordinary meteorite strikes on the lunar surface.

"Artemis II will always be remembered. It was the moment we all saw the moon again, where childhood dreams became missions. You helped the world start believing again, and this is something no one's ever going to forget," NASA administrator Jared Isaacman said.

Artemis II was the inaugural crewed mission of NASA's program aiming to install a sustained presence on the Moon, including the eventual construction of a base that could be used for further exploration including to Mars.

NASA is hoping it can put boots on the lunar surface as soon as 2028.

War takes a bite out of Filipino street food vendors

AFP | Manila, Philippines

Filipinos like their "pares", a traditional beef stew, served hot -- but the soaring cost of liquefied petroleum gas has made that prospect increasingly difficult since war erupted in the Middle East.

To save a few pesos 20-year-old Eric Garcia delicately turned a knob to adjust the flame under his warming trays to the lowest setting as he grapples with fuel costs that have nearly doubled in price.

While sticker shock at petrol stations has garnered the biggest headlines since the war forced the partial closure of the Strait of Hormuz, the rising price of LPG has hit the import-dependent archipelago's humble street food vendors.

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A day before speaking to AFP, Garcia said he had been forced to raise the price of a bowl of pares to 65 pesos (\$1.08) after fuel costs reduced his daily earnings by a quarter.

"I'm only earning 1,500 pesos (per day), because the rest is spent on LPG," he said.

Garcia, who begins cooking at 3 am every morning before hauling his stew to a middle-class neighbourhood on a converted motorbike, said an 11 kilo tank of fuel, which typically lasts four days, that once cost 870 pesos (about \$14.50) now costs 1,600 pesos.

"It's the highest price of LPG that I've ever seen since I started here," said Carlo Manalad, a supervisor at a store selling tanks of the gas, 90 percent of which is imported.

"If (our suppliers') prices are high, we also raise our prices. Our profit is still the same," the 64-year-old told AFP.

Many of the capital's street-side food sellers, however, have no such luxury.

"If we raise our prices, our customers will buy from other

stalls," said Ronilo Titom, who has run a curbside canteen that

caters call centre workers and jeepney drivers, for two years.

Even while holding the line on prices, Titom said he had noticed his customer base slowly shrinking since the war erupted.

"Many of them have started to bring packed lunches instead (to save money)," said the 48-year-old who, like Garcia, is using his LPG ever more judiciously.

"Sometimes we let the soup get cold," he admitted, noting that the cost of ingredients for his dishes had also been on the uptick since the war broke out.

'Very difficult for us'

The Philippines revealed Tuesday war-driven inflation figures that showed food prices had increased nearly twice as fast in March as the month before.

French fry vendor John Mark Abella, 25, who has also upped his prices by five pesos to compensate for LPG costs, told AFP he believed inflation was put-

ting the squeeze on his mostly student customers.

"I think we've got fewer customers ... because they're limiting their expenses because of the high prices of fuel and food," he said.

Sam Natividad, a 25-year-old call centre worker, said that was no illusion.

"I'm limiting my expenses because... I also have to pay bills at home. I don't have a big budget for my meals here," she told AFP at a roadside canteen, adding it was "understandable" if street vendors had to raise their prices.

Near Garcia's pares stall, Allan Palong, a driver for a motorbike ride-hailing app, said he understood the vendor's need to charge five pesos more for a bowl of stew, even if his own earnings were being crippled by fuel price hikes.

"It's very difficult for us now, all prices have gone up ... the five-pesos mean a lot," he said, while calling on the government to slash the excise tax on imported fuel.

Easter truce between Russia and Ukraine falters

AFP | Kharkiv, Ukraine

Ukraine's military command accused Russia of repeatedly violating a truce to mark the Orthodox Easter Saturday with nearly 470 incidents ranging from air strikes and drone attacks to shelling.

Russian President Vladimir Putin ordered the ceasefire on Thursday, more than a week after Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky first made the proposal.

Both sides had agreed to observe it.

The ceasefire had been due to last for 32 hours, from 4:00 pm (1300 GMT) on Saturday until the end of the day on Sunday, according to the Kremlin.

Yet by late Saturday, Ukraine's military said in a Facebook post that "469 ceasefire violations were recorded, namely: 22 enemy assault actions, 153 shelling attacks, 19 strikes by attack drones... and 275 strikes by FPV drones."

In total, the Ukrainian military said Saturday had seen Russia carry out 57 air strikes and drop 182 guided aerial bombs, along with deploying 3,928 drones and conducting 2,454 shelling attacks "on populated areas and positions of our troops".

In Russia's Kursk region, which borders Ukraine, Governor Alexander Khinshtein also accused Kyiv of breaking the truce by attacking a gas station in the town of Lgov with a drone, injuring three people, including a baby.

In his evening address on Saturday, Zelensky called for a longer ceasefire.

"We have put this proposal to Russia, and if Russia again chooses war instead of peace, this will once again demonstrate to the world, and to the United States, who really wants what."

Residents of Kharkiv, a city near the Russian border and targeted by daily attacks, had been wary of the truce.

"It's not for long, a day and a half, so maybe it will hold," hoped Oleg Polyskin, 65.

"But even if you're going to church, there is no 100-percent guarantee that everything will be peaceful... you shouldn't trust Putin and his government," he added.



People hold photographs of their missing or captured relatives and friends as released Ukrainian prisoners of war (POW) arrive after a prisoner exchange in the Chernihiv region