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Southern DAILY

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Trump wounded by border wall retreat in deal to end shutdown

WASHINGTON (Reuters) - President Donald Trump, who famously vowed to negotiate big deals in the White House, came out of a government shutdown battle on Friday politically wounded and outmaneuvered by U.S. House of Representatives Speaker Nancy Pelosi.

With Americans exasperated over the 35-day shutdown's impact on everyday life, including air travel, Trump finally gave in and agreed to reopen the government until Feb. 15, without getting the \$5.7 billion he had demanded for a border wall.

In a speech in the Rose Garden, he did not admit to backing down. But behind the scenes at the White House, there was a recognition that he had lost this round. "Perhaps he lost the short-term battle," one senior administration official said.

True to form for this administration, the outcome was uncertain until the last minute. On Thursday night, Vice President Mike Pence and senior adviser Jared Kushner, the president's son-in-law, presented Trump with four options, including declaring a national emergency right away, which would let him fund the building of border a wall without congressional approval but guaranteeing a court challenge.

Trump slept on it. On Friday morning, an air of uncertainty hung over the White House as Trump pondered. Aides prepared the Rose Garden event without knowing for sure what he would say. He opted to let lawmakers fully reopen the government for three weeks and try again to craft a mutually agreeable border security package, the senior administration official said.

A key factor for Trump, the official said, were stories of law enforcement officials unable to adequately do their jobs because of the shutdown that had left 800,000 federal workers at home on furlough or working for no pay.

"We don't think we caved," said another senior White House official. "We have been consistent that we want to go through the process. The president wants to give this one more shot."

Several officials said the struggle was not entirely over. They said Trump has grown increasingly confident that more Democratic lawmakers will support border security funding in weeks ahead, despite Pelosi's flatly telling him that under no circumstances would she allow wall money to emerge from the House of Representatives that her fellow Democrats control after sweeping to a majority in the November mid-term elections.

The shutdown battle left scars on Trump. His administration looked out of touch with ordinary Americans when Commerce Secretary Wilbur Ross wondered aloud in a CNBC interview why federal workers who missed two paychecks didn't just get loans.

Trump's job approval ratings drooped from an already anemic 40 percent down into the mid-30s, a troubling sign as he looks ahead to a 2020 re-election battle, already clouded by the prospect of more headlines from a Russian election meddling probe. That was driven home on Friday by the arrest of long-time Trump friend Roger Stone in an FBI dawn raid in Florida.

Gaining the advantage, at least for now, was Pelosi. As House speaker, she is now Trump's main foil in Washington.

Trump earlier had been among the first to say Pelosi earned her position. "I think she deserves it," he said then.

The two leaders tangled repeatedly through the shutdown fight. Pelosi rescinded her invitation to Trump to deliver his State of the Union speech in the House chamber on Jan. 29, citing security concerns due to the shutdown. Trump then refused to let Pelosi use a military plane for an overseas trip.

Trump agrees to end partial government shutdown

The senior administration official said Pelosi, in taking on the president so directly, might have hurt some of her fellow Democrats in districts won by Trump in 2016. Some of them had wanted her to negotiate earlier, the official said.



House Speaker Pelosi and Senate Minority Leader Schumer speak after deal was reached to end partial government shutdown on Capitol Hill in Washington

Foreign troops to quit Afghanistan in 18 months under draft deal: Taliban officials

KABUL/PESHAWAR, Pakistan (Reuters) - Taliban officials said U.S. negotiators on Saturday agreed a draft peace deal stipulating the withdrawal of foreign forces from Afghanistan within 18 months of the agreement being signed.

The details were given to Reuters by Taliban sources at the end of six days of talks with U.S. special peace envoy Zalmay Khalilzad in Qatar aimed at ending the United States' longest war.

U.S. peace envoy Khalilzad heads to Afghanistan after 'significant progress' in talks with Taliban

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While neither side released an official statement, Khalilzad tweeted later that the talks had made "significant progress" and would resume shortly, adding that he planned to travel to Afghanistan to meet government officials.

"Meetings here (in Qatar) were more productive than they have been in the past. We have made significant progress on vital issues," he wrote, adding that numerous issues still needed work.

"Nothing is agreed until everything is agreed and everything must include an intra-Afghan dialogue and comprehensive ceasefire," he said in the tweets.

A U.S. State Department spokesperson declined further comment.

It was not clear if the draft described by the Taliban sources is acceptable to both sides or when it will be completed and signed.

According to the sources, the hardline Islamic group gave assurances that Afghanistan will not be allowed to be used by al-Qaeda and Islamic State militants to attack the United States and its allies — a key early demand of Washington.

They said the deal included a ceasefire provision but they had yet to confirm a timeline and would only open talks with Afghan representatives once a truce was implemented.

Up until now, the Taliban has repeatedly rejected the Afghan government's offer of holding talks, preferring instead to talk directly to the U.S. side, which it regards as its main enemy.

"In 18 months, if the foreign forces are withdrawn and ceasefire is implemented then other aspects of the peace process can be put into action," a Taliban source said, quoting from a portion of the draft.

More talks on the draft are expected in February, again in the Qatari capital Doha, the Taliban sources said.

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NEAR-DAILY ATTACKS

Other clauses in the draft include an agreement over the exchange and release of prisoners, the removal of an international travel ban on several Taliban leaders by Washington and the prospect of an interim Afghan government after the ceasefire is struck, the Taliban sources said.

The suggestion to appoint an interim government in Afghanistan comes at a time when top politicians including Ghani have filed their nominations for the presidential polls in July this year. Ghani has repeatedly rejected the offer to agree to the formation of an interim government.

U.S. to start returning asylum seekers to Mexico
News of progress on a deal comes as the Taliban continues to stage near-daily attacks against the Western-backed Afghan government and its security forces.

Despite the presence of U.S.-led foreign forces training, advising and assisting their Afghan counterparts 17 years after the U.S.-led an invasion to drive them from power, the Taliban controls nearly half of Afghanistan.



U.S. Military troops prepare for deployment with U.S. Customs and Border Protection agents during a large-scale operational readiness exercise at the San Ysidro port of entry with Mexico in San Diego, California, U.S., January 10, 2019. REUTERS/Mike Blake

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Editor's Choice



Pope Francis consecrates an altar with oil during a mass at Church Cathedral Basilica Santa Maria La Antigua during World Youth Day in Panama City, Panama January 26, 2019. REUTERS/Alessandro Bianchi



A French police officer in riot gear holds a flashball gun as protesters wearing yellow vests take part in a demonstration by the "yellow vests" movement at Place de la Bastille in Paris



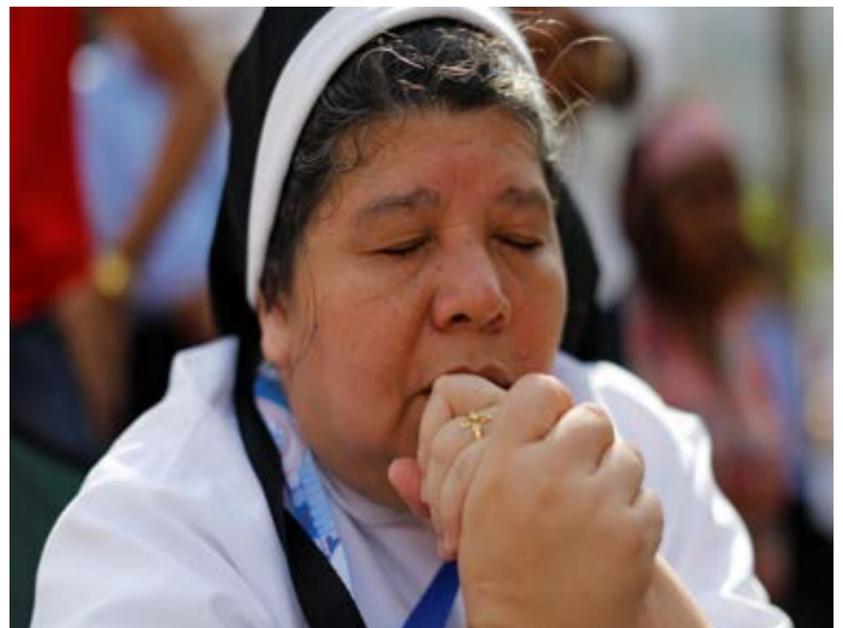
Sisters of Palestinian Ehab Abed mourn during his funeral in Rafah in the southern Gaza Strip



Anti-Brexit campaigners, Borders Against Brexit protest in Carrickarnan



Protesters wearing yellow vests react to the tear-gas canisters fired by police during a demonstration of the "yellow vests" movement in Nantes



A nun prays outside as Pope Francis holds a mass at Church Cathedral Basilica Santa Maria La Antigua during World Youth Day in Panama City



A masked protestor throws a projectile towards police during a demonstration of the "yellow vests" movement in Nantes



FILE PHOTO: A rescue worker is seen after a dam, owned by Brazilian miner Vale SA, burst in Brumadinho

U.S. Cites Human Trafficking, Overstaying For Ban
U.S. Announces A One-Year Ban On Temporary Work Visas For Filipinos

MANILA, Philippines – The US Department of Homeland Security has banned issuing visas for new Filipino workers seeking agricultural and non-agricultural jobs in the country for a year.

In an announcement posted January 18, the department announced that the Philippines will no longer be eligible to participate in the H-2A and H-2B programs due to high overstay rates.

The H-2B visa is issued to foreign workers in the US for temporary non-agricultural services while the H-2A visa allows foreign workers for temporary or seasonal agricultural work

This ban will take effect from Jan. 19, 2019 to Jan. 18, 2020, according to the DHS.

The ban on the Philippines stems from the nearly 40 percent overstay rate of H-2B visa holders.

U.S. Embassy in Manila issues most T-derivative visas

The US agency noted that the US Embassy in Manila issues the largest number of T-derivative visas, which are reserved for certain members of principal T-1 nonimmigrants or certain victims of a severe form of human trafficking.



The DHS and [Department of State] are concerned about the high volume of trafficking victims from the Philippines who were originally issued H-2B visas and the potential that continued H-2B visa issuance may encourage or serve as an avenue for future human trafficking from the Philippines," the DHS said.

The US Embassy in Manila has issued an estimated 40 percent of the total T-derivative visas issued worldwide from 2014 to 2016, according to the DHS.

Approximately 60 percent of those who were granted T-1 statuses, whose spouses were also issued T-2 visas in the same period, have been identified to have been victims of trafficking to the US through H-2B visas.

The US government considered the rates of overstay and human trafficking severe



The US Embassy in Manila issued approximately 40 percent of the total T-derivative visas issued worldwide from 2014 to 2016, according to the US Department of Homeland Security.
Compiled And Edited By John T. Robbins, Southern Daily Editor

enough to remove the H-2A visa program for Filipinos as well. The DHS noted that there was also an increase in H-2A visa applications from Filipinos between 2015 to 2018.

"The Philippines' continued inclusion creates the potential for abuse, fraud, and other harm to the integrity of the H-2A or H-2B visa programs," the DHS said.

Aside from the Philippines, the Dominican Republic and Ethiopia were also deemed ineligible for the program due to overstay rate and being "at risk of non-compliance," respectively. The three countries have been removed from the eligibility lists for H-2A and H-2B for 2019 but nationals may still be beneficiaries of approved petitions upon request of the petitioner determined by the US Citizenship and Immigration Ser-



vices. (Courtesy philstar.com.)

Related
Fewer U.S. Immigrant Visas For Pinoys

The Post newspaper in an analysis of State Department data said the most affected were Muslim-majority countries, but the number of immigrant visas granted to people from the Philippines, Mexico, China, India, Vietnam, Dominican Republic, Haiti, Bangladesh, Jamaica, Pakistan and Afghanistan has also declined.

The analysis does not include temporary visas such as H-1B visas for skilled workers and H-2B visas for seasonal workers or student visas.



The Post report published last Tuesday comes on the heels of a public out-

cry against Trump's efforts to discourage illegal immigration at the US-Mexico border, separating children from their parents awaiting proceedings for removal or improper entry.

Following the outcry, Trump signed an executive order last month that replaced the controversial measure with a policy of detaining entire families together with their children.

Some public officials and immigration experts have expressed concerns that the administration's approach on immigrant visas targets certain nationalities, discriminating those from poorer and non-white countries.

Trump has consistently emphasized his intention to transform the US immigration system into one based on merit rather than family ties, which he has labeled as chain migration.

The Post noted that during president Barack Obama's eight years in office,

immigrant visas surged to 617,752 – the highest level in decades. The surge occurred almost entirely in the last two years of the Obama presidency.

It is unclear, The Post said, if part of the drop in immigrant visas reflected a declining interest in immigrating to the US or a tightening of the vetting process.



Ten Philippine missions throughout the US offer consular services. Each mission covers a specific geographic region. A Philippine consulate office has also been opened in Houston, Texas.

On another front of the immigration debate, democratic activists alleged that the government was holding up the naturalization applications of eligible permanent residents or green card holders to prevent them from voting in this year's midterm elections.

Newly naturalized citizens generally vote for Democrats.

The conservative The Washington Times said in a report last Tuesday that there was no evidence of a slowdown in processing naturalization applications.

It estimated the pending cases at fewer than 730,000 as of the end of last year.

The number of visas granted to people from countries that typically receive the largest number of immigrant visas from the US, including the Philippines, has declined and is on pace to drop 12 percent in US President Donald Trump's first two years in office, The Washington Post said.



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The flow of legal immigrants from Europe, however, has increased slightly. (Courtesy philstar.com)

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OVERVIEW

Environmentalists are warning the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) that its draft plan to continue allowing oil and gas companies to dump unlimited amounts of fracking chemicals and wastewater directly into the Gulf of Mexico is in violation of federal law.

In a letter sent to EPA officials, attorneys for the Center for Biological Diversity warned that the agency's draft permit for water pollution discharges in the Gulf fails to properly consider how dumping wastewater containing chemicals from fracking and acidizing operations would impact water quality and marine wildlife.

The attorneys claim that regulators do not fully understand how the chemicals used in offshore fracking and other well treatments — some of which are toxic and dangerous to human and marine life — can impact marine environments, and crucial parts of the draft permit are based on severely outdated data. Finalizing the draft permit as it stands would be a violation of the Clean Water Act, they argue.

The EPA is endangering an entire ecosystem by allowing the oil industry to dump unlimited amounts of fracking chemicals and drilling waste fluid into the Gulf of Mexico," said Center attorney Kristen Monsell. "This appalling plan from the agency that's supposed to protect our water violates federal law, and shows a disturbing disregard for offshore fracking's toxic threats to sea turtles and other Gulf wildlife." Earlier this year, lawsuits filed by the Center and another group won a temporary moratorium on offshore fracking in the Pacific Ocean, and the groups are currently preparing to challenge fracking in the Santa Barbara Channel under the Endangered Species Act.



Offshore fracking involves pumping water, chemicals and sand at extremely high pressure into undersea wells

Environmentalists Are Warning The Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) That Its Decision Is In Violation Of Federal Law

The EPA Plans To Allow Unlimited Dumping Of Fracking Wastewater Into The Gulf Of Mexico

Compiled And Edited By John T. Robbins, Southern Daily Editor

to break up rock and sand formations and clear pathways for oil and gas. Offshore drillers also treat wells with corrosive acids, such as hydrochloric acid, in a process known as "acidizing."

The technologies have been used hundreds of times to enhance oil and gas production at hundreds of Gulf wells in recent years, and environmentalists say use of the technology could increase in the future as the industry seeks to maximize production in aging offshore fields. Still, little was publicly known about these "well treatments" until Truthout and environmental groups began filing information requests with federal regulators. Regulators and the fossil fuel industry say offshore fracking operations have a good safety record and tend to be smaller in size compared to onshore operations, but environmentalists continue to worry about the chemicals used in the process because many of them are known to harm marine wildlife. Plus, dolphins and other species in the Gulf are still suffering from the lingering effects of the 2010 BP oil spill.

Under the EPA's current and draft permits, offshore drillers are allowed to dump an unlimited amount of fracking and acidizing chemicals overboard as long as they are mixed with the wastewater that returns from undersea wells. Oil and gas platforms dumped more than 75 billion gallons of these "produced waters" directly into the Gulf of Mexico in 2014 alone, according to the Center's analysis of EPA records.



These large volumes of wastewater cannot contain oil and must meet toxicity standards, but oil and gas operators are only required to test the waste stream a few times a year. Monsell said these tests could easily be conducted at times when few or no fracking chemicals are present in the wastewater.

The EPA expects these chemicals to have little impact on the environment because the large volumes of wastewater and the ocean dilute them, but the Center points out that much of the EPA's data on the subject comes from studies prepared in the 1980s and 1990s. Offshore production technology has

advanced since then and hundreds of frack jobs have occurred in the Gulf in the past five years alone.

"All they have to do is ask the Interior Department for this information, because they just compiled it all for us," said Monsell, referring to the thousands of documents recently released to Truthout and the Center under the Freedom of Information Act.

These documents, released under a legal settlement between the Interior Department and the Center, show that regulators approved more than 1,500 frack jobs at over 600 Gulf wells between 2010 and 2014 with permit modifications that were exempted from comprehensive environmental reviews.

Monsell said the EPA's permit is just another example of a federal agency "rubber-stamping" permits for offshore fracking without taking a hard look at how the technology impacts the environment. The EPA, she argues, should prohibit the dumping of hazardous fracking chemicals and other wastes directly into ocean altogether.

"It's the EPA's job to protect water quality from offshore fracking, not rubber-stamp the dumping of the wastewater from this dangerous, disgusting practice," Monsell said.

The draft permit does prohibit the dumping of oil in the Gulf and proposes a new rule that would require oil and gas operators to keep an inventory of the fracking and acidizing chemicals kept on board. This inventory must be made available to regulators upon request. The government's most up-to-date list of offshore fracking chemicals is now 15 years old, and the Interior Department regulators are currently working to update it. (courtesy walkingtimes.com)

Related Does Offshore Fracking Put Endangered Species at Risk?



Environmental groups in California are preparing to file lawsuits against federal regulators for allegedly approving the use of offshore fracking at 23 oil and gas platforms in sensitive Pacific waters without consulting wildlife officials about the potential harms to endangered species, such as sea otters and whales.

The Environmental Defense Center (EDC) and the Santa Barbara Channelkeeper announced last week their intent to sue the two US Interior Department agencies that regulate offshore oil and gas production, alleging that regulators violated the Endangered Species Act when they decided to lift a moratorium on using offshore fracking and other "well stimulation techniques" in the Pacific. Another environmental group, the Center for Biological Diversity, announced on Wednesday that it would file a separate lawsuit against the agencies on similar grounds. That decision to lift the moratorium was made in May after the regulators completed an assessment of the potential environmental impacts of offshore fracking and subsea acid washes, which are used to stimulate oil and gas production in aging offshore wells. Despite protests from environmental groups, the regulators concluded that offshore fracking is not expected to have a "significant impact" on the environment.



Offshore hydraulic fracturing or "fracking" involves injecting water and chemicals into aging undersea wells at high pressure to break up rock and release remaining oil and gas. Acid washes are also used to dissolve rock and make it easier for oil and gas to flow. Federal regulators allow the chemicals used in both processes, some of them toxic, to be dumped directly into the ocean if they are mixed with the wastewater that flows back from undersea wells.

Environmentalists now say that the environmental assessment of these "stimulation techniques" is incomplete because the regulators failed to consult with wildlife agencies, including the US Fish and Wildlife Service, about the potential impacts that well stimulation technologies could have on at least 25 endangered species, including whales, sea otters, fur seals, sea turtles, birds, fish and abalone.

"The government's own analysis identifies potential threats from fracking and acidizing to many threatened and endangered species," said Maggie Hall, a staff attorney at EDC. "Local wildlife risk exposure to toxic chemicals in [fracking flowback fluids], collisions with vessels delivering chemicals to offshore platforms, and harm caused by the heightened risk of oil spills, among other concerns."



The groups are particularly concerned about wildlife in the Santa Barbara

Channel, where offshore oil and gas platforms operate near marine wildlife protection areas, and the memory of a massive oil spill in 1969 still weighs heavily on the public mind. Offshore fracking and acid treatments extend the life of oil and gas wells, they argue, which also extends the amount of time that spills and accidents can occur before production shuts down altogether. Environmentalists and beachgoers in California are on high alert because an oil pipeline near Santa Barbara ruptured last year, leaving beaches covered in oil and bringing back painful memories of the 1969 disaster. "These practices will extend the life of existing oil platforms in a sensitive marine environment, which is still recovering from the May 19, 2015, Plains All American Pipeline rupture that devastated California's coastline," said Kira Redmond, executive director of Channelkeeper. "We need information to understand the potential impacts of these practices so that appropriate measures can be implemented to protect the diverse web of marine life off our coast."



Offshore fracking has been highly controversial in California, where it is unpopular among environmentalists. However, the technology has been most widely used in the Gulf of Mexico.

A recent Truthout investigation found that, under the Obama administration, federal regulators approved more than 1,000 permit modifications for offshore fracking jobs in the Gulf, and virtually all of these were excluded from the kind of environmental review that environmentalists and regulators are now fighting over in California. (courtesy truthout.org)

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