WORLD IN BRIEF

Associated Press

Trump signs budget deal, government reopens

WASHINGTON — President Donald Trump today signed a $400 billion budget deal that sharply boosts spending and swells the federal deficit, ending a brief federal government shutdown that happened while most Americans were sleeping and most government offices were closed, anyway.

The House and Senate approved a bill to keep the government funded through March 23, overcoming opposition from liberal Democrats as well as tea party conservatives to endorse enormous spending increases despite looming trillion-dollar deficits. The House voted 240-186 to approve the bill just before dawn Eastern time, hours after the Senate had approved the measure on a 71-28 vote.

Trump tweeted this morning that he had signed the bill, writing that the U.S. military "will now be stronger than ever before." The budget bill "also means JOBS, JOBS, JOBS!" Trump tweeted.

The twin votes put to rest a brief federal freeze that relatively few would notice. Many who did quickly labeled it a pointless, head-scratching episode. The shutdown was the second partial government shutdown in three weeks.

The breakdown came largely in the Senate, when after a day of inaction, Republican Sen. Rand Paul of Kentucky went rogue and stalled a vote in protest over his party's willingness to bust the budget. But Democrats also had their divisions and wrangling, largely with liberals upset the measure were not tied to any plans to assist the "Dreamer" immigrants.

In the end, 73 Democrats voted in favor of the bill in the House, while 67 Republicans opposed it.

There was far less drama in the Senate, where the measure sailed through by a 71-28 tally once Paul's protest ran its course.

US stocks struggle to stabilize after entering 'correction'

Stocks struggled to stabilize today as investors sent prices climbing, then slumping in unsteady trading a day after the market entered its first correction in two years.

The up-and-down swings came a day after the market entered a correction, or a drop of 10 percent from a recent peak. Major U.S. indexes set their latest record highs just two weeks ago.

The Dow Jones industrial average slumped nearly 300 points in midday trading after surging more than 349 points earlier in the day. The blue chip average suffered its second 1,000-point drop in a week on Thursday.

Other major indexes also veered lower, piling losses to the weeklong sell-off that has pummeled stocks. The Standard & Poor's 500 index, the benchmark for many index funds, was on pace to finish its worst week since January 2016.

Losses in restaurant chains, cruise lines, department stores and other consumer-focused companies accounted for much of the market's decline. Industrial and energy companies also posted steep losses that outweighed modest gains in technology stocks and other sectors. Oil prices were also headed sharply lower.

U.S. stocks started to tumble last week after the Labor Department said workers' wages grew at a fast rate in January.

Investors worried rising wages will hurt corporate profits and could signal an increase in inflation that could prompt the Federal Reserve to raise interest rates at a faster pace, putting a brake on the economy.

Kim Ju-sung/Yonhap

South Korean President Moon Jae-in, left, shakes hands with North Korean leader Kim Jong Un's younger sister, Kim Yo Jong.

Koreas share historic handshake at Olympic opening ceremony

PYEONGCHANG, South Korea — It was a historic moment, and it happened even before the Pyeongchang Winter Olympics had officially begun.

As South Korean President Moon Jae-in and his wife greeted VIPs in their dignitary box to watch the opening ceremony, they turned to shake hands with North Korean leader Kim Jong Un's younger sister, who arrived earlier in the day on an unprecedented visit to the South by a member of the North's ruling Kim family. All broke out in broad smiles.

Kim's sister, Kim Yo Jong, was at the opening ceremony with North Korea's nominal head of state, 90-year-old Kim Yong Nam. They are part of an extraordinary diplomatic push by the North aimed at using the Olympics to ease tensions with Seoul and bolster unity between the two Koreas after a year that has been marked by escalating fears of war and increasing angry rhetoric between Pyongyang and Washington.

U.S. Vice President Mike Pence and his wife arrived after the handshakes. They were seated beside the Moons and next to Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe and his wife. His office said he did not interact with the North Koreans.

The Moons, Nam and Kim all stood again as athletes from both Koreas marched together behind a blue-and-white "unification" flag for the first time since 2007. There was another handshake.

The Pences did not stand for the unified Korean team's entrance. During the parade of nations, they stood only for the U.S. team.

US flu season still worsening; now as bad as 2009 swine flu

NEW YORK — The flu has further tightened its grip on the U.S. This season is now as bad as the swine flu epidemic nine years ago.

A government report out today shows 1 of every 13 visits to the doctor last week was for fever, cough and other symptoms of the flu. That ties the highest level seen in the U.S. during swine flu in 2009.

And it surpasses every winter flu season since 2003, when the government changed the way it measures flu.

This season started early and has been driven by a nasty type of flu that tends to put more people in the hospital and cause more deaths than other more common flu bugs.

But its long-lasting intensity has surprised experts, who are still sorting out why it's been so bad. Flu usually peaks in February.

Some doctors say this is the worst flu season they've seen in decades. Some people are saying that, too.

Last week, 43 states had high patient traffic for the flu, up from 42, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention reported. Flu remained widespread in every state except Hawaii and Oregon and hospitalizations continued to climb.

So far, however, deaths this season from the flu and flu-related pneumonia have lagged a little behind some recent bad seasons. There are as many as 56,000 deaths connected to the flu during a bad year.

Kelly getting scrutiny after senior aide's resignation

WASHINGTON — Pressure mounted on White House chief of staff John Kelly as questions swirled today about his defense of a senior aide he fought to keep in a highly sensitive West Wing job despite accusations of spousal abuse from two ex-wives.

White House staff secretary Rob Porter, a member of President Donald Trump's inner circle and arguably Kelly's closest aide, cleaned out his desk on Thursday. But the aftershocks of his resignation reverberated amid concerns about his access to classified information and about how long senior staffers knew about the allegations.

Porter has denied the allegations, calling them "outrageous" and part of "a coordinated smear campaign."

Though the accusations against Porter became public this week, Kelly learned last fall that something was amiss with the staff secretary's attempts to get a security clearance, according to an administration official who insisted on anonymity to discuss internal matters.

The chief of staff had sought information about the status of security clearance applications for top aides, and it was then he learned there were allegations against Porter from his ex-wives, said the official. Porter and Kelly later discussed the allegations. Meanwhile, White House counsel Don McGahn was apprised of at least some of the accusations at least four times, including in January 2017, the official said.

That includes in November, when one of Porter's ex-girlfriends called McGahn to describe allegations of domestic abuse against him.

The person stressed that the FBI had at no point revoked Porter's security clearance, which they could have done.