

Peru's president tells Trump he prefers 'bridges to walls'

LIMA, Peru (AP) — The first Latin American president to visit Donald Trump at the White House told the U.S. leader Friday he prefers "bridges to walls," sending him a gentle rebuke of his controversial proposal to build a wall along the border with Mexico.

Peruvian President Pedro Pablo Kuczynski, a U.S.-educated former Wall Street banker, has emerged as an unlikely leader in Latin America, taking a strong stand against Trump's "America First" agenda while many in the region remain silent.

Kuczynski, 78, characterized his meeting with Trump as "cordial and constructive" and said he told Trump he was interested in the free movement of people — "legally," he emphasized — and also spoke about trade and economic development.

Kuczynski harshly criticized Trump during the U.S. presidential campaign, joking he would cut diplomatic relations with the U.S. "with a saw" if Trump followed through on his pledge to build a wall with Mexico, which he compared to the Berlin Wall. On Friday, he made a point of saying "we prefer bridges to walls."

Leaders in the region, even staunch critics of the U.S. like Venezuelan President Nicolas Maduro, have largely avoided rallying to Mexico's side for fear of jeopardizing their own relations with the Trump administration.

Despite such past criticism, it will be hard for Trump to dismiss Kuczynski's advice, said Brian Winter, vice president of the regional group Council of the Americas.

Kuczynski, who renounced U.S. citizenship to run for Peru's presidency, speaks Trump's language, not just flawless English but that of a successful businessman



AP Photo/Pablo Martinez Monsivais
President Donald Trump meets with Peruvian President Pedro Pablo Kuczynski in the Oval Office on Friday.

with deep influence in the power circles of New York, where he lived and worked for years.

He is also bolstered by Peru's standout performance creating jobs and growth. Buoyed by high metal prices, Peru's economy has boomed an average 5 percent each year since 2000 — almost twice the regional average.

"This is the positive side of the Latin American story that Trump may be unaware of," said Winter. "Because of his biography, but also the success of Peru, Kuczynski may have more credibility than any other president in Latin America to talk straight to Trump."

In brief remarks in the Oval Office before their meeting, Trump said the two men have known each for some time and that it was an honor to welcome him to Washington.

"Peru has been a fantastic neighbor," Trump said. "We've had great relationships, better now than ever before."

Trump also announced that he would authorize the sale of U.S. military vehicles to Peru — though Kuczynski later downplayed the purchases, saying his government's priority is not acquiring military equipment but providing clean water to all Peruvians.

Peru is among a handful of South American nations with a free trade agreement with the U.S. and Kuczynski has not hid his admiration for the United States. But despite being ridiculed at home as a "gringo," Kuczynski has said he worries the U.S. has been taking Latin America for granted. Not for nothing, his first trip abroad after taking office last July was to China.

One area where the two men likely see eye-to-eye is Venezuela — though Kuczynski said the topic only came up tangentially in their conversation.

Kuczynski has been outspoken criticizing Venezuela's socialist government, calling for humanitarian aid to the country and giving visas to exiles.

Within 30 days of taking office, Trump has already slapped sanctions on Venezuela's vice president for his alleged role in facilitating large cocaine shipments to the U.S., and met with the wife of the country's most-prominent political prisoner.

If Kuczynski manages to earn Trump's respect, it could pay bilateral dividends. Earlier this month, Kuczynski telephoned Trump to ask him to deport former President Alejandro Toledo, who is believed to be in the San Francisco area.

Vote on UN Syria sanctions could come soon; Russia vows veto

UNITED NATIONS (AP) — Nations urging the U.N. to ban helicopter sales to Syria and impose other sanctions over chemical weapons use are pressing toward a Security Council vote shortly, saying the body needs to take action after attacks the U.S. envoy called "barbaric." But Russia is vowing a veto.

Britain's deputy U.N. ambassador, Peter Wilson, said after a closed-door Security Council meeting Friday that a vote will come "as soon as possible." He'd said that diplomats aimed to advance the measure "in the coming days."

Britain, France and the United States have been seeking sanctions after an investigation by the United Nations and an international chemical weapons watchdog organization determined last year that the Syrian government was behind at least three attacks involving chlorine gas in the civil-war-ravaged country.

The probe also found the Islamic State group was responsible for at least one involving mustard gas.

President Bashar Assad's regime denies using chemical weapons in the war, which has killed hundreds of thousands of people and displaced millions since it began in March 2011. Russia, Syria's closest ally, has questioned the investigation's conclusions linking chemical weapons use to Syrian government, and Russian deputy ambassador Vladimir Safronkov said Friday that his nation would veto the sanctions measure if it came up for a vote.

"It's a provocation," he said outside the Security Council chamber.

In a sharp retort, U.S. Ambassador Nikki Haley said the measure "needs to happen."

"How much longer is Russia going to continue to babysit and make excuses for the Syrian regime?" she said. "People have died by

being suffocated to death. That's barbaric."

The remarks were the latest signals that new President Donald Trump's administration aims to confront Russia on some issues, while also expressing interest in improving relations. Earlier this week, Haley reiterated that U.S. sanctions on Russia over its 2014 annexation of Ukraine's Crimean Peninsula will continue until the region is returned to Ukraine.

Despite the promised Russian veto, backers of the proposed U.N. sanctions see them as a moral and institutional imperative. Previous council resolutions called for "measures," under a U.N. charter chapter that authorizes sanctions, if chemical weapons are used.

"On the scale of the threats to peace and security, we are at 10 here," French Ambassador Francois Delattre said before Friday's meeting.

BRIEFLY

Paris mayor fires back at Trump for insulting her city

PARIS (AP) — Paris Mayor Anne Hidalgo has pushed back at U.S. President Donald Trump for insulting the City of Light in a speech.

Trump evoked his friend Jim, "a very, very substantial guy," in an address Friday at the Conservative political Action Conference. Jim used to be a regular visitor to Paris, Trump said, but hasn't made the trip in four or five years because "Paris is no longer Paris."

Hidalgo tweeted a photo of herself alongside Mickey Mouse and Minnie and said: "To Donald and his friend Jim, from the Eiffel

Tower, we're celebrating the attractiveness of Paris with Mickey and Minnie."

In another tweet, with the hashtag #Donald&Jim, Hidalgo said American tourist reservations are up 30 percent in 2017 so far compared to last year.

Nigerian kidnappers demand \$200,000 for German scientists

KADUNA, Nigeria (AP) — Kidnappers are demanding a ransom of 60 million naira (about \$200,000) for a German archaeologist and his associate abducted this week from a northern Nigerian village, a worker at the excavation site said. Two villagers were shot and killed in

the kidnapping, police confirmed Friday.

The worker said he heard a man make the demand in a telephone call Thursday to the site's supervisor.

The caller warned him not to involve police or security forces, said the worker, who spoke on condition of anonymity because he was not authorized to speak to reporters.

Police special forces and a special investigative team for kidnappings have been searching around the village of Jenjela in the state of Kaduna, where gunmen on Wednesday abducted Professor Peter Breunig and his associate, Johannes Behringer, and walked with them into the bush.

Brazil's Carnival kicks off with parades and parties

RIO DE JANEIRO (AP) — Revelers all over Brazil were getting Carnival celebrations started Friday, taking to the streets to dance samba, drink beer and other spirits, and blow off steam at a time of economic angst and fury with politicians over a sprawling corruption scandal.

In Rio, home to the world's most famous Carnival bash, several so-called block parties were underway by the afternoon. Thousands of revelers danced amid 90-degree heat with high humidity, standard during the Southern Hemisphere summer.

At the "Camelitas" block party, revelers dressed up as nuns in Rio's bohemian neighborhood of Santa Teresa. Many carried signs with statements ranging from insults against politicians to calls for the legalization of drugs.

"The lord says: you will try all the herbs that came from the seeds," read one banner.

"Carnival is a very nice and democratic party," said partygoer Nilse Azevedo. "Whoever wants to pray, prays. Whoever wants to have fun in the street has fun."

At the sambadrome, where top league samba schools begin competing on Sunday, thousands poured in expecting the traditional handing over of the city's key to "Rei Momo," or the king of carnal delights. This was always done with great fanfare by former Mayor Eduardo Paes.

However, Marcelo Crivella, a retired Pentecostal bishop who took power Jan. 1, has been coy in recent weeks about whether he would participate in Carnival, or how he might do so.

Holding the symbolic key was Maria Cristina, who appeared like somebody who had been stood up.

"I would also like to know what is going on," she said when asked by an Associated Press reporter about what she would do with the key.

Cristina said the mayor's



AP Photo/Silvia Izquierdo
Costumed patients from the Nise da Silveira Mental Health Institute wait for the start of their Carnival parade in the streets of Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, Thursday.

office had told her and the symbolic key-holding group to come, but hadn't said more about the plans.

The mayor "should separate religion from

politics at our Carnival," said Marisol Portela, a homemaker who had come to the sambadrome. "He will not be missed. We will throw our party anyway."

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In Sao Paulo, where samba school competitions got started Friday night, there was heavy rain and thunder.

The annual Carnival celebrations come at a difficult time for many Brazilians. The economy is mired in recession, leading to daily announcements of job cuts and much angst about the future. Many states, including Rio de Janeiro, are so broke that thousands of public workers are being paid months late, if at all.

Latin America's largest nation is also recovering from a brutal impeachment fight last year that led to the removal of President Dilma Rousseff for illegal mismanagement of the budget.

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