

Michael Flynn in talks with Congress, wary of prosecution

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — Former National Security Adviser Michael Flynn is in discussions with the House and Senate intelligence committees on receiving immunity from “unfair prosecution” in exchange for agreeing to be questioned as part of ongoing probes into possible contacts between Donald Trump’s presidential campaign and Russia, his attorney said Thursday.

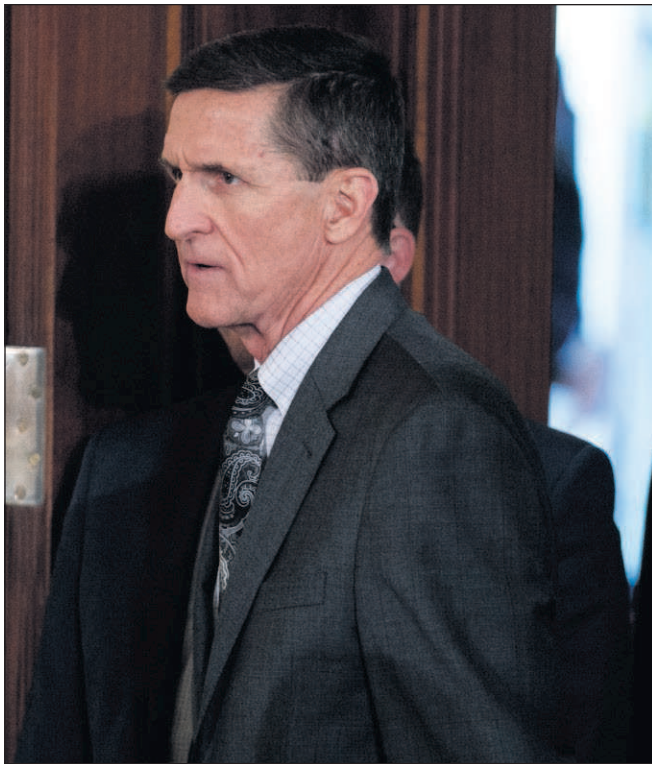
“General Flynn certainly has a story to tell, and he very much wants to tell it, should the circumstances permit,” said Flynn’s attorney, Robert Kelner.

Kelner said no “reasonable person” with legal counsel would answer questions without assurances that he would not be prosecuted, given calls from some members of Congress that the retired lieutenant general should face criminal charges.

Flynn’s ties to Russia have been scrutinized by the FBI and are under investigation by the House and Senate intelligence committees. Both committees are looking into Russia’s meddling in the 2016 presidential election and any ties between Trump associates and the Kremlin.

Since July, the FBI has been conducting a counter-intelligence investigation into Russia’s interference in the election and possible coordination with Trump associates.

Kelner released a statement after The Wall Street Journal first reported that Flynn’s negotiations with the committee included discussions of immunity. The lawyer described the talks as ongoing and said he would



In this Feb. 13 photo, Mike Flynn arrives for a news conference in the East Room of the White House in Washington.

not comment on the details.

A congressional aide confirmed that discussions with the Senate intelligence committee involved immunity. The aide spoke on the condition of anonymity to discuss private conversations.

House intelligence committee spokesman Jack Langer said Flynn has not offered to testify to the committee in exchange for immunity.

Four other Trump associates have come forward in recent weeks, saying they would talk to the committees. As of Wednesday, the Senate intelligence committee had asked to interview 20 people as part of the probe.

In his statement, Kelner said the political climate in

which Flynn is facing “claims of treason and vicious innuendo” is factoring into his negotiations with the committees.

“No reasonable person, who has the benefit of advice from counsel, would submit to questioning in such a highly politicized, witch hunt environment without assurances against unfair prosecution,” Kelner said.

In September, Flynn weighed in on the implications of immunity on NBC’s “Meet the Press,” criticizing Democratic presidential candidate Hillary Clinton and her associates in the FBI’s investigation into her use of a private email server.

“When you are given immunity, that means that you have probably

White House tells Russia probers: Come see intel yourselves

WASHINGTON (AP) — The White House refused Thursday to say whether it secretly fed intelligence reports to a top Republican lawmaker, fueling concerns about political interference in the investigation into possible coordination between Russia and the 2016 Trump campaign.

Fending off the growing criticism, the administration invited lawmakers from both parties to view classified material it said relates to surveillance of the president’s associates. The invitation came as The *New York Times* reported that two White House officials — including an aide whose job was recently saved by President Donald Trump — secretly helped House intelligence committee chairman Devin Nunes examine intelligence information last week.

Nunes is leading one of three investigations into Russia’s attempt to influence the campaign and Trump associates’ possible involvement.

committed a crime,” Flynn said during the interview.

Flynn was fired from his job as Trump’s first national security adviser after it was disclosed that he misled the vice president about a conversation he had with the Russian ambassador to the U.S. during the transition.

Trump to sign executive orders targeting trade

WASHINGTON (AP) — President Donald Trump talked tough on trade on the campaign trail, vowing to renegotiate a slew of major deals and to label China a

currency manipulator on “Day One.”

Now his administration appears to be taking a more cautious approach.

On Friday, the president will sign a pair of executive orders aimed at cracking down on trade abuses, according to top administration officials. The first calls for the completion of a large-scale report to identify “every form of trade abuse and every non-reciprocal practice that now contributes to the U.S. trade deficit,” said Commerce Secretary Wilbur Ross.

Officials will have 90 days to produce a country-by-country, product-by-product report that will serve as the basis of future decision-making by the administration on trade-related issues, Ross told reporters at a Thursday night briefing.

“It will demonstrate the administration’s intention not to hip-shoot, not to do anything casual, not to do anything abruptly, but to take a very measured and analytical approach, both to analyzing the problem and therefore to developing the solutions for it,” he said.

While Trump has long

argued that trade deficits imperil U.S. workers, Ross cautioned that they aren’t necessarily all bad. In some cases, for instance, the U.S. simply can’t

produce enough of a product to meet domestic demand. In others, foreign countries may make products substantially cheaper or better than in the U.S. They can also mean that foreign countries and entities are investing in U.S. assets.

Still, Ross argued, the U.S. has the lowest tariff rates of any developed country. The report, he said, will examine whether deficits are being driven by things like cheating, specific trade agreements, lax enforcement and World Trade Organization rules.

Ross said the report would not focus extensively on currency manipulation, which is under the purview of the U.S. Treasury Department, despite Trump’s campaign rhetoric.

The second order will focus on stepping up the collection of anti-dumping and countervailing duties, which are levied against foreign governments that subsidize products so they can be sold below cost.

Peter Navarro, the director of the White House National Trade Council, said the U.S. is leaving billions of dollars on the table as a result of lax enforcement.



AP Photo President Donald Trump at the White House Thursday.

Deposed S. Korean president arrested, jailed

SEOUL, South Korea (AP) — South Korea’s disgraced former President Park Geun-hye was arrested and jailed Friday over high-profile corruption allegations that have already ended her tumultuous four-year rule and prompted an election to find a successor.

A convoy of vehicles, including a sedan carrying Park, entered a detention facility near Seoul before dawn after the Seoul Central District Court granted a prosecutors’ request to arrest her.

Many Park supporters waved national flags and shouted “president” as Park’s car entered the facility. An opponent held up a mock congratulatory ribbon with flowers that read “Park Geun-hye, congratulations for entering prison. Come out as a human being after 30 years.”

Prosecutors can detain her for up to 20 days before formally charging her.

The Seoul court’s decision is yet another humiliating fall for Park, South Korea’s first female president who



Ousted South Korean President Park Geun-hye arrives at the Seoul Central District Court for hearing on a prosecutors’ request for her arrest for corruption, in Seoul, South Korea, Thursday.

was elected in 2012 amid overwhelming support from conservatives, who recall her dictator father as a hero who lifted the country from poverty in the 1960-70s despite a record of severe human rights abuses.

Prosecutors accuse Park of colluding with a confidante to extort big businesses, take a bribe from one of the

companies and commit other wrongdoing. The allegations led millions of South Koreans to protest in the streets every weekend for months before lawmakers impeached her in December and the Constitutional Court ruled in March to formally remove her from office.

It made Park the country’s first democratically elected

leader to be forced from office since democracy came here in the late 1980s. South Korea will hold an election in May to choose Park’s successor. Opinion surveys say liberal opposition leader Moon Jae-in, who lost the 2012 election to Park, is the favorite.

Prosecutors can charge Park without arresting her. But they said they wanted to arrest her because the allegations against her are “grave” and because other suspects involved the scandal, including her confidante Choi Soon-sil and Samsung heir Lee Jae-yong, have already been arrested.

The Seoul court said it decided to approve Park’s arrest because it believes key allegations against her were confirmed and there were worries that she may try to destroy evidence.

Park’s conservative party described her arrest as “pitiful,” while the liberal politician favored in polls to succeed her said the country took a step toward restoring “justice and common sense.”

Pedestrian deaths spiked in 2016, distraction cited

(AP) — Pedestrian deaths are climbing faster than motorist fatalities, reaching nearly 6,000 deaths last year — the highest total in more than two decades, according to an analysis of preliminary state data released Thursday.

Increased driving due to an improved economy, lower gas prices and more walking for exercise and environmental factors are some of the likely reasons behind the estimated 11 percent spike in pedestrian fatalities in 2016. The figures were prepared for the Governors Highway Safety Association, which represents state highway safety offices.

But researchers say they think the biggest factor may be more drivers and walkers distracted by cell-phones and other electronic devices, although that’s hard to confirm.

Walking and miles driven are up only a few percentage points, and

are unlikely to account for most of the surge in pedestrian deaths, said Richard Retting, safety director for Sam Schwartz Transportation Consultants and the author of the report. Meanwhile, texting and use of wireless devices have exploded, he said.

“It’s the only factor that that seems to indicate a dramatic change in how people behave,” Retting said.

The report is based on data from all states and the District of Columbia for the first six months of 2016 and extrapolated for the rest of the year. It shows the largest annual increase in both the number and percentage of pedestrian fatalities in the more than 40 years those national records on such deaths have been kept, with the second largest increase occurring in 2015.

Pedestrian deaths as a share of total motor vehicle crash deaths increased from 11 percent in 2006 to 15 percent in 2015.

BRIEFLY

SpaceX launches its first recycled rocket in historic leap

CAPE CANAVERAL, Fla. (AP) — SpaceX successfully launched and then retrieved its first recycled rocket Thursday, the biggest leap yet in its bid to drive down costs and speed up flights.

The Falcon 9 blasted off from Florida’s Kennedy Space Center, hoisting a broadcasting satellite into the clear early evening sky on the historic rocket reflight.

It was the first time SpaceX founder Elon Musk tried to fly a booster that soared before on an orbital mission. He was at a loss for words after the booster landed on the bull’s-eye of the ocean platform following liftoff, just off the east Florida coast.

Musk called it an “incredible milestone in the history of space” after the booster touchdown.

He added: “This is going to be a huge revolution in spaceflight.”

China’s Xi to meet Trump, who predicts ‘difficult’ meeting

BEIJING (AP) — U.S. President

Donald Trump will meet with his Chinese counterpart Xi Jinping for the first time on April 6-7 at Trump’s Florida resort. China’s Foreign Ministry announced Thursday, amid a range of pressing issues including trade, North Korea and territorial disputes in the South China Sea.

Trump predicted “a very difficult” meeting in a tweet just hours after both governments announced the summit. He wrote in part: “We can no longer have massive trade deficits and job losses. American companies must be prepared to look at other alternatives.”

China’s immediate response to Trump’s tweet was diplomatic, with Vice Foreign Minister Zheng Zeguang telling reporters Friday morning that “both sides look forward to a successful meeting so that a correct direction can be set for the growth of bilateral relations.”

“China will continue to work with the United States to think creatively and keeping pushing for greater balance in China-U.S. trade,” Zheng said.

The relationship between the world’s No. 1 and No. 2 economies has been uncertain following the election of Trump, who accused

China during his campaign of unfair trade practices and threatened to raise import taxes on Chinese goods and declare Beijing a currency manipulator.

Massive fire crumbles Atlanta interstate bridge; none hurt

ATLANTA (AP) — A massive fire caused an interstate bridge to collapse during rush hour Thursday in Atlanta, just minutes after witnesses said police halted traffic and turned cars away from the crumbling overpass. However, officials said no one was hurt despite dramatic images of massive flames and towering plumes of smoke.

The Atlanta Journal-Constitution reports (<http://on-ajc.com/2nl88ef>) the fire burned for more than an hour under I-85 northbound near Piedmont Road, spewing large plumes of black smoke skyward. The interstate — a major artery for the U.S. South that runs through the heart of Atlanta — was closed indefinitely.

The impact on traffic long-term was not immediately known, but traffic was bumper to bumper on

nearby surface streets Thursday night as people scrambled to find alternate routes.

All Rose Diggs told The Atlanta Journal-Constitution that she lives less than a mile from the fire site but couldn’t get home because of blocked surface streets. She said she was told to walk despite being disabled, “but it’s raining and dark.”

Capt. Mark Perry of the Georgia State Patrol told the newspaper that the agency doesn’t know what started the fire but that terrorism is not suspected.

Venezuela court says it can take over congress’ powers

CARACAS, Venezuela (AP) — Venezuela’s Supreme Court ruled it can take over the powers of congress in what opponents of socialist President Nicolas Maduro as well as foreign governments denounced as the latest step toward installing a dictatorship in this South American nation.

In a decision late Wednesday, the magistrates said that as long as lawmakers remain in contempt of past court rulings nullifying all legislation coming out of the

opposition-controlled National Assembly, the high court can step in and assume congressional duties itself.

Peru’s government immediately recalled its ambassador in protest while condemnations poured in from governments across Latin America. The head of the Organization of American States called for an emergency meeting to deal with what he called a “self-inflicted coup d’etat” by Maduro against the congress. Some hard-line Venezuelan opposition members went on social media to appeal for the military to intervene, and a few protests broke out in the capital.

The U.S. State Department reiterated its call for immediate elections to resolve Venezuela’s political crisis, saying the decision to “usurp” the National Assembly’s powers represented a “serious setback for democracy in Venezuela.”

“This rupture of democratic and constitutional norms greatly damages Venezuela’s democratic institutions and denies the Venezuelan people the right to shape their country’s future through their elected representatives,” the U.S. statement said.