

Trump defends himself against whistleblower complaint

By MARY CLARE JALONICK AND LISA MASCARO
Associated Press

WASHINGTON — President Donald Trump defended himself Friday against a whistleblower's complaint including a reported private conversation he had with a foreign leader.

The complaint, which the administration has refused to let Congress see, is "serious" and "urgent," the government's intelligence watchdog said. But Trump said he's done nothing wrong.

Some of the whistleblower's allegations appear to center on Ukraine, according to *The Washington Post* and *The New York Times*. The newspapers cited anonymous sources familiar with the matter. The Associated Press has not confirmed the reports.

In a tweet Friday, Trump did not reference Ukraine or any other country, but said "there was nothing said wrong." He tweeted about "the perfectly fine and respectful conversation."

The standoff raises fresh questions about the extent to which Trump's allies are protecting the Republican

president from oversight and, specifically, whether his new acting director of national intelligence, Joseph Maguire, is working with the Justice Department to shield the president from the reach of Congress.

It also plunged the Trump administration into an extraordinary showdown with Congress over access to the whistleblower's complaint as lawmakers press their oversight of the executive branch.

The administration is keeping Congress from even learning what exactly the whistleblower is alleging, but the intelligence community's inspector general said the matter involves the "most significant" responsibilities of intelligence leadership. A lawmaker said the complaint was "based on a series of events."

The inspector general appeared before the House intelligence committee behind closed doors Thursday but declined, under administration orders, to reveal to members the substance of the complaint.

Rep. Adam Schiff, D-Calif., the chairman of the House Intelligence Committee, said he was prepared to go to court to try to force



AP Photo/J. Scott Applewhite
House Intelligence Committee Chairman Adam Schiff, D-California, speaks to reporters after the panel met behind closed doors with national intelligence inspector general Michael Atkinson about a whistleblower complaint, at the Capitol in Washington on Thursday.

the Trump administration to open up about the complaint.

"The inspector general has said this cannot wait," said Schiff, describing the administration's blockade as an unprecedented departure from law. "There's an urgency here that I think the courts will recognize."

Schiff said he, too, could not confirm whether newspaper reports were accurate because the administration was claiming executive privilege in withholding the complaint. But letters from the inspector general to the committee released Thursday said it was an "urgent"

matter of "serious or flagrant abuse" that must be shared with lawmakers.

The letters also made it clear that Maguire consulted with the Justice Department in deciding not to transmit the complaint to Congress in a further departure from standard procedure. It's unclear whether the White House was also involved, Schiff said.

Because the administration is claiming the information is privileged, Schiff said he believes the whistleblower's complaint "likely involves the president or people around him."

Trump on Thursday dismissed it all, noting that others would be aware of the call.

"Is anybody dumb enough to believe that I would say something inappropriate with a foreign leader while on such a potentially 'heavily populated' call?"

House Democrats are fighting the administration separately for access to witnesses and documents in impeachment probes. Democrats are also looking into whether Trump lawyer Rudy Giuliani traveled to Ukraine to pressure the government to aid the president's reelection effort by investigating the activities of potential rival Joe Biden's son Hunter, who worked for a Ukrainian gas company.

During an interview Thursday on CNN, Giuliani was asked whether he had asked Ukraine to look into Biden. Giuliani initially said, "No, actually I didn't," but seconds later he said, "Of course I did."

Giuliani told CNN that Trump was unaware of his actions.

"I did what I did on my own," Giuliani said. "I told him about it afterward."

Later, Giuliani tweeted, "A President telling a Pres-

elect of a well known corrupt country he better investigate corruption that affects US is doing his job."

Among the materials Democrats have sought is a transcript of a phone call Trump had with Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy on July 25.

This new situation, stemming from the whistleblower's Aug. 12 complaint, has led to Democratic lawmakers' public concern that government intelligence agencies and the recently named acting director might be under pressure to withhold information from Congress.

Trump named Maguire, a former Navy official, as acting intelligence director last month, after the departure of Director Dan Coats, a former Republican senator who often clashed with the president, and the retirement of Sue Gordon, a career professional in the No. 2 position.

Maguire has refused to discuss details of the whistleblower complaint, but he has been subpoenaed by the House panel and is expected to testify publicly next Thursday. Maguire and the inspector general, Michael Atkinson, also are expected next week at the Senate intelligence committee.

U.S., El Salvador sign migrant asylum deal, but details vague

By COLLEEN LONG AND ASTRID GALVAN
Associated Press

NEW YORK — The United States on Friday signed an agreement to help make one of Central America's most violent countries, El Salvador, a haven for migrants seeking asylum, but provided few details about how it will unfold.

Acting Homeland Security Secretary Kevin McAleenan and El Salvador's foreign minister, Alexandra Hill Tinoco, signed the "cooperative asylum agreement" in a live-streamed press conference.

They lauded the two countries for working together to stem migration to the U.S. but provided few details about when the agreement takes effect, who is affected and how.

Instead, McAleenan, who called the agreement "a big step forward," and Hill Tinoco discussed U.S. assistance in making El Salvador a safer and more prosperous place for its citizens. Hill Tinoco talked about ending gang violence.

"I mean, those individuals threaten people, those individuals kill people, those individuals request for the poorest and most vulnerable population to pay just to cross

the street," she said, adding that her country needs more investment from the U.S. and other nations.

The agreement, first reported by The Associated Press, could lead to migrants from third countries obtaining refuge in El Salvador even though many Salvadorans are fleeing their nation and seeking asylum in the United States. A Salvadoran delegation has been in the U.S. this week to discuss the matter.

McAleenan said the agreement advanced El Salvador's commitment to developing an asylum framework, with help from the U.N. High

Commissioner for Refugees.

"This will build on the good work we have accomplished already with El Salvador's neighbor, Guatemala, in building protection capacity to try to further our efforts to provide opportunities to seek protection for political, racial, religious or social group persecution as close as possible to the origin of individuals that need it," McAleenan said.

It's the latest effort by President Donald Trump's administration to force asylum-seekers in Central America to seek refuge outside the United States. Immigration officials also are forcing more

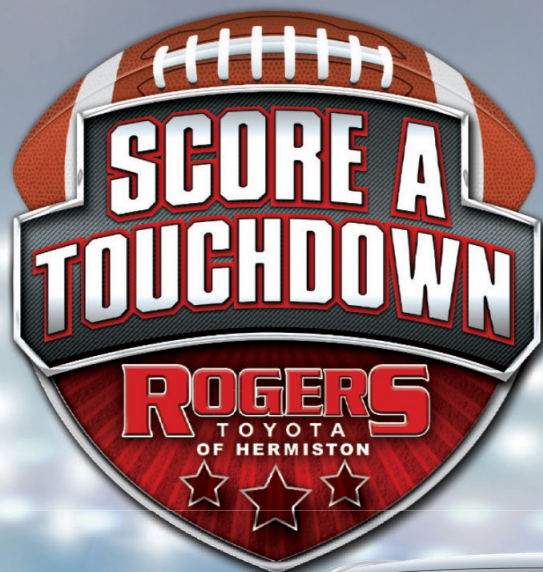
than 42,000 people to remain in Mexico as their cases play out and have changed policy to deny asylum to anyone who transited through a third country en route to the southern border of the U.S.

Condemnation from migrant and refugee advocates was swift.

"Today's announcement of a 'cooperative asylum agreement' between the United States and El Salvador is yet another example of the U.S. government's callous disregard for the safety and lives of people fleeing violence in Central America," said Alison Parker, managing director for

the U.S. program of Human Rights Watch. "El Salvador does not have the capacity to keep its own nationals safe, much less migrants from any other country." Parker added that only 18 people are seeking asylum inside El Salvador.

The agreement would be another step by the Trump administration aimed at stopping the flow of migrants into the United States. McAleenan also signed a so-called "safe third country" agreement with Guatemala, but officials in that country are still working out how it would be implemented.



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