



US Attorney General Jeff Sessions bows out of Russia investigation over contact with ambassador

US Attorney General Jeff Sessions on Thursday, March 2, 2017, recused himself from any investigation of Russia's alleged interference in the 2016 US presidential race but reserved the right to make decisions "on a case-by-case basis" about other issues involving Russian hacking.

"I have decided," Sessions told the press, "to recuse myself from any existing or future investigations of any matters related in any way to the campaigns for President of the United States."

During his confirmation hearing on January 10, Sessions was asked about contact between the Russian government and now-President Donald Trump's campaign. He responded, "I did not have communications with the Russians." However, he met twice with Russian ambassador Sergey Kislyak, whom the US Justice Department considers a spy. A spokesperson for Sessions said those meetings, like meetings he had with other ambassadors, were in his capacity as a Senator and member of the Armed Services Committee and not as a member of the Trump campaign, which is why he feels his answer was not truly misleading.

House Minority Leader Nancy Pelosi has called for Sessions to resign entirely. Democrats want a special prosecutor to investigate the Russians' role in the election, but there are not enough of them in Congress to force this. Sessions' statement delegated his duties to his acting deputy, Dana Boente.

"Jeff Sessions is an honest man. He did not say anything wrong. He could have stated his response more accurately, but it was clearly not intentional [...]" said President Trump in an official statement defending Sessions. "[The Democrats] lost the election and now, they have lost their grip on reality. The real story is all of the illegal leaks of classified and other information. It is a total witch hunt!"

Although Sessions has recused himself from any such investigation, it was not disclosed to the public whether the Justice Department is, in fact, conducting one. The US Federal Bureau of Investigation has done some exploration and House Intelligence Committee has commissioned an inquiry, but Sessions' statement reads "This announcement should not be interpreted as confirmation of the existence of any investigation or suggestive of the scope of any such investigation."

Earlier this year, National Security Advisor Michael Flynn resigned, also over concerns of impropriety related to contact with the Russian ambassador.

Politically concerned movie Zootopia wins Academy Award for Best Animated Feature Film

On Sunday, February 26, 2017, Disney's *Zootopia* won the Oscars award for the Best Animated Feature Film at the 89th Academy Awards ceremony held at Los Angeles. Pixar's animated short *Piper* won the Oscar for Best Animated Short Film and Disney's *The Jungle Book* won for Visual Effects.

Others competing with *Zootopia* in the category were *Kubo and the Two Strings*, *My Life as a Zucchini*, *The Red Turtle*, and

Disney's *Moana*. This was the first Oscar for directors Byron Howard and Rich Moore who were previously nominated for, respectively, *Bolt* and *Wreck-It Ralph*.

In the acceptance speech, director Byron Howard said, "About five years ago, almost six now, [...] we got this crazy idea of talking about humanity with talking animals in the hopes that, when the film came out, it would make the world just a slightly better place." The Disney movie addresses several social problems such as racism, sexism, prejudice, stereotyping, and fear. *The New York Times* said the parental guidance (PG) rated movie was "Funny, smart, thought-provoking — and musical, too."

Before announcing the award, Mexican actor Gael Garcia Bernal said, "As a Mexican, as a Latin-American, as a migrant worker, as a human being, I'm against any form of wall that wants to separate us." The movie was released in March, during the 2016 US presidential race.

In an interview with *Variety*, the directors of *Zootopia* said movies about bias and discrimination haven't been Disney's main focus, but during its production, "Things were not great in the world. [...] It was more like we had our finger on something important right now and we really need to do our best to portray this as honestly as we can. Then with the election and the campaign, the real move towards governing by fear [...] I don't think we could have predicted it any closer with this film."

With this win, the Walt Disney Company has won nine out of ten Best Animated Feature Film Oscars in the last decade, with Pixar Animation Studio winning six out of them. *Zootopia* also won Best Animated Film at the Annie Awards and the Golden Globe Awards.

Siti Aisyah and Doan Thi Huong to be charged with murder of Kim Jong Nam with VX nerve agent

Malaysian Attorney General Mohamed Apandi Ali has announced Siti Aisyah and Doan Thi Huong will be formally charged on Wednesday, March 1, 2017, with the murder of Kim Jong Nam, who was killed in Kuala Lumpur International Airport on February 13.

After weeks of speculation, both the US and South Korean authorities have stated Kim was the target of a political assassination on the orders of the North Korean government, which is currently headed by his half-brother, Kim Jong Un. North Korea has continued to deny involvement, calling these "false reports."

CCTV footage showed Kim Jong Nam was approached in the airport by two women, one of whom distracted him while the other applied a VX nerve agent, which is classified as a weapon of mass destruction by the United Nations. He died on the way to the hospital. Both Siti Aisyah and Doan Thi Huong have stated they thought they'd been hired to spray Kim with harmless baby oil for a televised prank show, but the Malaysian police say they do not believe this.

South Korean foreign minister Yung Byung-se told the press North Korea has large stockpiles of VX and other agents, saying, "The recent assassination is a wake-up call to all of us to North Korea's chemical weapons capability and its intent to actually use them."

In other developments, North Korean diplomats arrived in Malaysia today to negotiate the release of one of their citizens, Ri Jong Chol, who was arrested shortly after Doan and Aisyah, and to claim the remains, which they still assert may not be those of Kim Jong Nam. Malaysian authorities have said they will not release the remains without a Kim family DNA sample, promising police protection to any of Kim's relatives who come to Malaysia to provide one.

Malaysian authorities are still pursuing seven other suspects, all North Koreans,

some affiliated with the North Korean government.

Siti Aisyah and Doan Thi Huong may see trial as early as two months from now.

Invited or not, news outlets criticise White House decision to pick and choose their peers

On Friday, February 24, 2017, White House Press Secretary Sean Spicer held an informal "gaggle" press briefing but made a point of excluding certain news outlets. The White House's decision has drawn ire from across the field, including organisations invited to the briefing, such as Fox News and *The Wall Street Journal*.

The New York Times and CNN, as well as the BBC, *The New York Daily News*, *Al Jazeera*, the *LA Times*, BuzzFeed, *The Hill*, and *The Daily Mail*, were all barred from attending the meeting, while Reuters, NBC, ABC, CBS, Fox News, Bloomberg, and the heavily conservative news outlets Breitbart News, One America News Network, and *The Washington Times* were admitted. *Time*, the Associated Press, and some other outlets were invited to the briefing but refused to attend in protest.

Spicer held the meeting in his office rather than the usual briefing room. He told the press the smaller gathering was because Trump had already made a large speech earlier in the day. "We want to make sure we answer your questions, but we don't need to do everything on camera every day." However, he also criticised media coverage of the Trump administration, which President Trump has cited as unfair. "We're going to aggressively push back," one reporter recorded him saying at the gaggle. "We're just not going to sit back and let, you know, false narratives, false stories, inaccurate facts get out there."



Sean Spicer, from file.
Image: VOA. (CC0 1.0/ Public Domain)

This meeting took place the day after CNN issued a report claiming the White House had asked high-level employees at the US Federal Bureau of Investigation to rebut a story in *The New York Times* about the Trump administration's alleged ties with Russia and Vladimir Putin.

"Apparently this is how they retaliate when you report facts they don't like. We'll keep reporting regardless," said CNN in a statement.

"Nothing like this has ever happened at the White House in our long history of covering multiple administrations of different parties," said *New York Times* executive editor Dean Baquet. "We strongly protest the exclusion of *The New York Times* and the other news organisations. Free media access to a transparent government is obviously of crucial national interest."

"While we strongly object to the White House's apparent attempt to punish news outlets whose coverage it does not like," said BuzzFeed editor-in-chief Ben Smith, "we won't let these latest antics distract us from the work of continuing to cover this administration fairly and aggressively."

BBC bureau chief Paul Denahar was more formal: "We understand there may be occasions when, due to space or circumstances, the White House restricts press events to the established pool. However, what happened today did not fit into that pattern. On this occasion selected media were allowed to attend the briefing and the selected media, including the BBC, were not."

National Review contributor David French also criticised the decision: "The only reason to exclude a news organisation from a press briefing should be space available, with space

allocated on a viewpoint-neutral basis. [...] It's one thing to bash the press. It's another thing entirely to take steps to deny access to disfavored outlets. When it comes to access, Trump needs to be better than Obama, not worse." He combined these remarks with a discussion of the Obama administration's relationship with Fox News.

Some of the news organisations invited to Spicer's meeting also opposed the exclusion of their peers:

"Some at CNN and *New York Times* stood with Fox News when the Obama admin attacked us and tried to exclude us," said Fox anchor Bret Baier via Twitter, "a White House gaggle should be open to all credentialed orgs."

"*The Wall Street Journal* strongly objects to the White House's decision to bar certain media outlets from today's gaggle," added a representative for the newspaper. "Had we known at the time, we would not have participated and we will not participate in such closed briefings in the future."

The White House Correspondents' Association took a milder view: "We're not happy with how things went today," said association president Jeff Mason. "I don't think that people should rush to judgment to suggest that this is the start of a big crackdown on media access."

Donald Trump has stated the mainstream media portrayed the first month of his presidency unfairly, calling some of their reports "fake news" and the press themselves the "enemy of the people" and insisting they refrain from using anonymous sources. "I'm against the people that make up stories and make up sources," he told the Conservative Political Action Committee in Washington DC.

"President Trump's calls for an end to anonymous sources was alarming. It is not the job of political leaders to determine how journalists should conduct their work, and sets a terrible example for the rest of the world, where sources often must remain anonymous to preserve their own lives," said Joel Simon of the Committee to Protect Journalists.

Syrian peace talks begin in Geneva

On Thursday, February 23, 2017, peace talks between the Syrian government and its opposition officially began in Geneva, Switzerland. The talks, organised by the United Nations, aim toward a political solution to the Syrian Civil War that has lasted for more than five years.



From file, Staffan de Mistura at related talks last month in Astana, Kazakhstan.
Image: VOA. (CC0 1.0/Public Domain)

The peace conference is being held at the United Nations Office at Geneva. After an opening ceremony which the opposition delegation nearly missed due to internal disagreements, the UN envoy to Syria Staffan de Mistura formally announced the start of the first day of talks. The government and opposition delegations sat opposite each other with a UN assembly serving as a mediator.

The two sides, however, failed to directly talk to the other and no negotiations took place on the first day. Staffan de Mistura separately spoke to the opposing representatives. "I ask you to work together. I know it's not going to be easy to end this horrible conflict and lay the foundation for a country at peace with itself, sovereign and unified", he told the assembly.

The Syrian government delegation was led by Bashar Jaafari, the Syrian representative to the UN. He attended several previous Syrian peace talks.

The opposition delegation mainly consisted of the High Negotiations Committee (HNC), led by Naser al-Hariri. "Today, the real opposition that represents the Syrian people is the HNC. This delegation and the HNC, extends its hand to any national partner that adopts the will of the Syrian people", he said. The HNC is based in Saudi Arabia. However, two other opposition groups also attended the conference, supported by Russia, which is also a major supporter of the Syrian government.

In addition to the two political delegations, a group of several Syrian women were also in Geneva. Some of them had relatives arrested, abducted, or otherwise missing during the war.

The talks are held on the basis of United Nations Security Council Resolution 2254, adopted in December 2015, which called for a ceasefire and a political transition in Syria.

This conference takes place nearly a year after the previous round of Syrian peace talks in Geneva collapsed in 2016. "We do know what will happen if we fail once again — more deaths, more suffering, more terrorism, more refugees", said de Mistura.

Google performs first successful collision attack on SHA-1 security algorithm

On Thursday, February 23, 2017, Google announced that it had performed a successful collision attack on the popular SHA-1 cryptographic hash function for the first time — that they know of. The collision attack demonstrated an algorithm for making two distinct inputs map to the same hash output, putting at risk the usage of SHA-1 for verifying data integrity. Google published a blog post and made a website about the collision attack.

A successful attacker would be able to add a malicious file to the system to damage a backup relying on SHA-1 for checking data integrity, deliver a malicious update to clients using SHA-1 to verify the update file, attack and decrypt an encrypted connection to a website where the user's browser is using SHA-1 to identify the connection certificate, replace a file revision history using SHA-1 to identify commits, and perform other actions that would substitute for valuable files with something seemingly identical but misleading or malicious in practice. Similar systems not using SHA-1 would not be affected.

To demonstrate the success of the algorithm, Google published two distinct Portable Document Format (PDF) files with identical SHA-1 hash. Google recommended everyone who uses SHA-1 to switch to SHA-256 or SHA-3, stronger cryptographic hash functions.

The group started with a paper published by Marc Stevens in 2013 in which the authors proposed a theoretical algorithm for the collision attack. They chose PDF files as the basis for their attack. They wrote a PDF file prefix on both files and PDF contents which hashed to the same SHA-1 digest. Then they used the Google computing infrastructure to perform more than nine quintillions (upwards of 9,223,372,036,854,775,808) SHA1 computations. They described this as 6,500 years of CPU time distributed in the first phase, then 110 years of graphics processing unit (GPU) time total in the second phase of the attack to reach full collision. They said this new algorithm was 100,000 times faster than the brute-force attack and 50 times faster than a collision attack algorithm proposed in 2005.

The cryptology group at the Centrum Wiskunde & Informatica (CWI) institute, Netherlands, collaborated with the Google Research Security, Privacy and Anti-abuse Group to achieve the collision. According to a press release, Marc Stevens and Elie Bursztein were the initial leaders of the initiative, Ange Albertini developed the PDF attack code, Pierre Karpman developed the cryptoanalysis, Yarik Markov and Pierre Karpman developed the distributed graphical processing unit (GPU) code, and Clement Baisse checked the reliability of the programs.

Google also provided a collision detector online, where users can upload a PDF file to test whether it was tampered with for reaching a collision. Alex Petit Bianco developed the online file collision detector. Following its security policy, Google set a 90-day delay before the release of the source code for the attack.

Operating systems and software rely on SHA-1 for verifying the file integrity when distributing updates to its users and in ISO checksums. Developers use SHA-1 in their file revision control systems, such as git, to verify the files' integrity. Many people install programs

that use SHA-1 for detecting duplicate files on storage media and for verifying backups' integrity. People surfing the web see SHA-1 used for verifying the integrity of HTTPS certificates to verify the users' connection with the website is not subject to a man-in-the-middle attack. People also use SHA-1 in email PGP/GPG signatures.

Since January, Google Chrome does not trust SHA-1 certificates. Mozilla Firefox stopped trusting them yesterday.

SHA-1 was introduced more than twenty years ago.

This article is also available in Polski language.

Break-in attempted at mortuary housing remains of Kim Jong Nam

Malaysian police on Wednesday, February 22, 2017, reported an attempted break-in at the morgue where the body of Kim Jong Nam was being held. Kim, the half-brother of North Korean leader Kim Jong Un, was killed on February 13 in Kuala Lumpur International Airport in what authorities are treating as a murder case. The police have increased security at the morgue.

"We knew there were attempts by someone to break into the hospital mortuary. We had to take precautions. We will not allow anyone to tamper with the mortuary," Inspector-General of Police Khalid Abu Bakar told the *Malay Mail*. He went on to say that the officers investigating the break-in knew who had done it but declined to share that information with the *Mail*: "We know who they are. No need to tell you," Khalid said.

Malaysian police official Noor Rashid Ibrahim announced on Sunday authorities were cooperating with Interpol in the search for four other North Korean nationals suspected of involvement in Kim's death. According to Ibrahim, the four left Malaysia the day Kim Jong Nam was killed. Yesterday, Chief Khalid said two other people, an Air Koryo employee named Kim Uk Il and a North Korean embassy employee

named Hyon Kwang Song have "been called in for assistance."

Ibrahim cautioned listeners against assuming Kim Jong Nam's death was necessarily ordered by his half-brother's government: "the four hold North Korean nationality, that is all."

Four suspects have already been detained: Ri Jong Chol, a North Korean; Siti Aishah, an Indonesian; Muhammad Farid Bin Jalaluddin, a Malaysian; and Doan Thi Huong, who was carrying a Vietnamese passport. According to CCTV footage, two women, ostensibly Aishah and Doan, approached Kim Jong Nam in Kuala Lumpur International Airport. One of them distracted him while the other administered a fast-acting poison. Kim fell ill and died before he could reach a hospital. One was wearing an "LOL" t-shirt at the time. Aishah told police she thought she had been hired to play a prank for a television show, but Chief Khalid disputed this, saying the two had been trained for their mission and told to wash their hands after handling the liquid.

Kim Jong Nam had once been his father Kim Jong Il's heir apparent but fell out of favor and has been living in Macau with his family.

The Indonesian consulate requested access to Aishah but was refused. According to Malaysian law, no one may speak to the suspects while the investigation is ongoing. The North Korean government has called for the release of Ri Jong Chol and issued a statement saying the two women are also "innocent" and should be released as well. The North Korean ambassador to Malaysia has questioned both the identity of the dead man and the reliability of the Malaysian investigation. Malaysia recalled its ambassador from North Korea on Monday amid increasing tensions between the two countries.

Inspector-General Khalid continued to refer to the deceased as "Kim Chol," one of two names on passports he had with him. Malaysian authorities have refused to release Kim's body to North Korea without a DNA sample from a family member. Khalid has promised police protection for any relative coming to Malaysia to do so.

Events from the last week on Wikinews

Malaysian authorities arrest fourth suspect in killing of Kim Jong Nam, half-brother of North Korean leader

Malaysian authorities on Friday, February 17, 2017, arrested North Korean man Ri Jong Chol, 46, on suspicion of involvement in the murder of Kim Jong Nam, the half-brother to Kim Jong Un, leader of North Korean leader. He died in Malaysia on Monday morning. According to South Korean officials, he was killed by a fast-acting poison administered by two women who approached him in Kuala Lumpur International Airport.

Modern radio drama 'Paranoria, TX' releases 100th episode

Paranoria, TX, a modern radio drama hosted at internet-based AstroNet Radio, released its 100th episode. The episode is titled The People's Choice and aired on Monday, February 13, 2017.

The station's website describes the show as "old school radio theatre with a new and outrageous geeky spin!" In its early days, the show was featured solely at the long-running internet radio site TogiNet Radio, a site focused on talk radio. In late 2015, TogiNet established AstroNet Radio as a subsidiary station. The show originally featured amateur voice actors, local to East Texas. After some time, professional actors/talent came to be featured intermittently.

Adele and David Bowie each win five Grammys

On Sunday, February 12, 2017, British singer Adele won five Grammy Awards at the 59th Grammy Awards event in Los

Angeles. David Bowie posthumously won five Grammys.

Adele won Song of the Year, Best Pop Solo and Record of the Year for her song Hello, and Album of the Year for her album 25, becoming the first singer to win the Song of the Year, Record of the Year, and Album of the Year twice.

David Bowie was nominated in five categories — three for his album Blackstar in Best Alternative Music Album, Best Engineered Album, NonClassical, and Best Rock Performance; and two for his song Blackstar, Best Rock Song and Best Rock Performance. Days after releasing his 25th album, Blackstar, Bowie passed away in January 2016, due to cancer. Before Blackstar, Bowie won a Grammy for his music video Jazzin' for Blue Jean, and Lifetime Achievement Award in 2006, never winning the award in a major category before.

Michael Flynn resigns as National Security Advisor to Trump administration

On Monday night, February 13, 2017, US retired Lieutenant General Michael Flynn resigned from his position as National Security Advisor at the request of President Donald Trump in response to a Justice Department report indicating the Russian government could blackmail Flynn over untrue statements he'd made to Vice President Pence.

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