

Trump charged with 34 felony counts in hush money scheme



Former U.S. President Donald Trump arrives at Manhattan Criminal Courthouse, after his indictment by a Manhattan grand jury, on April 4, 2023.
● BRENDAN MCDERMID/REUTERS

Former President Donald Trump was charged on Tuesday with 34 felony counts of falsifying business records in a historic case over allegations he orchestrated hush-money payments to two women before the 2016 U.S. election to suppress publication of their sexual encounters with him. Prosecutors in Manhattan accused Trump, the first sitting or former U.S.

president to face criminal charges, of trying to conceal a violation of election laws during his successful 2016 campaign. "Not guilty," Trump, 76, said when asked by the judge in court how he pleaded. The front-runner in the race for the Republican nomination in 2024, Trump responded with answers like "yes" when the judge asked him if he understood a right.

Prosecutor Chris Conroy said: "The defendant Donald J. Trump falsified New York business records in order to conceal an illegal conspiracy to undermine the integrity of the 2016 presidential election and other violations of election laws." While falsifying business records in New York on its own is a misdemeanor punishable by no more than one year in prison, it

is elevated to a felony punishable by up to four years when done to advance or conceal another crime, such as election law violations. The two women in the case are adult film actress and former model. He flew home to Florida where he addressed family, friends and supporters on Tuesday night, delivering a litany of grievances against investigators and prosecutors and rival politicians.

"Victim of election interference"

Trump described the New York prosecution as election interference. He lashed out at New York prosecutor Alvin Bragg for bringing criminal charges against him and declared himself the victim of election interference without offering evidence. "I never thought anything like this could happen in America," Trump told supporters. "The only crime that I've committed has been to fearlessly defend our nation against those who seek to destroy it." Prosecutors during the arraignment said Trump made a series of social media posts, including one threatening "death

and destruction" if he was charged. The judge asked the parties to "please refrain from making statements that are likely to incite violence or civil unrest." He faces a separate criminal probe by a county prosecutor in Georgia into whether he unlawfully tried to overturn his 2020 election defeat in the state. He also faces two U.S. Justice Department investigations led by a special counsel into attempts to overturn the 2020 election results and his handling of classified documents after leaving office. Despite launching a tirade against prosecutors, he did not call for new protests from his supporters. And while he is expected to return to the campaign trail soon, he gave no details of that. Trump reached deep into his well of personal grievances to declare himself hounded by political opponents using the legal system against him to try to stop him from winning back the White House in 2024. "They can't beat us at the ballot box so they try to beat us through the law," Trump said.

NEWS IN BRIEF

Macron warns Europe must not 'separate' from China economically



● REUTERS

AFP - French President Emmanuel Macron said Wednesday that Europe must not "separate" from China economically, as he kicked off a three-day visit to Beijing to reinforce ties with a key trading partner. "We must not disassociate ourselves, separate ourselves from China," Macron told a gathering of the French community in Beijing, saying France would "commit proactively to continue to have a commercial relationship with China".

US, S. Korea hold air drills



AFP - South Korea and the US on Wednesday staged joint air drills involving at least one US nuclear-capable B-52H strategic bomber, Seoul's military said. North Korea views such exercises as rehearsals for invasion, and has responded to other recent drills with a spate of increasingly provocative banned weapons tests.

IAEA chief discusses Ukraine nuclear plant in Russia



AP - The head of the U.N.'s atomic energy watchdog met with Russian officials in Kaliningrad on Wednesday for negotiations on the safety of Ukraine's Zaporizhzhia nuclear power plant, currently held by Russian forces. International Atomic Energy Agency chief Rafael Grossi's trip to the Russian exclave came a week after he visited the plant, which is the largest nuclear power plant in Europe.

Israel strikes Hamas positions after troops storm Al-Aqsa Mosque

International Desk

Israeli warplanes carried out a fresh round of airstrikes against the besieged Gaza Strip early on Wednesday, hours after Israeli forces carried out assault on dozens of Palestinian worshippers inside Al-Aqsa Mosque in Al-Quds' Old City. The Israeli occupation army bombed the "Abu Jarad" site, west of Gaza City, in addition to the "Areen" site, northeast of the Nusseirat refugee camp, in the central strip, drawing retaliatory rocket fire from Palestinian resistance fighters in the impoverished coastal enclave. Explosions were heard west of Gaza City after the Israeli army's drones targeted a resistance site in that area, Press TV reported.

On Tuesday night, dozens of heavily armed Israeli forces stormed the al-Aqsa Mosque compound before firing tear gas and stun grenades into the Qibli prayer hall, where hundreds of men, women, elderly people and children were staying overnight to pray. Some eyewitnesses said rubber-coated steel bullets were also fired. Israeli officers then beat worshippers with batons and riot guns, wounding many, before arresting them.

"Inhumane nature of Israel"

Iran has censured Israeli forces' vicious assault on dozens of Palestinian worshippers inside the mosque, where they were peacefully observing the holy month of Ramadan,

saying that the violent raid attests to the inhumane nature of the Tel Aviv regime. "The brutal attack by the usurping Zionist regime's military on Palestinian pilgrims and worshippers inside al-Aqsa Mosque has once again laid bare the criminal and inhumane nature of the regime before the eyes of the world," Iranian Foreign Ministry spokesman Nasser Kan'ani tweeted on Wednesday. "This crime is strongly condemned, and deserves the immediate reaction of the Muslim world, freedom-loving people around the world as well as responsible international bodies," he added. On Wednesday, rocket sirens were activated in the settlements around the Gaza Strip, warning of the

firing of a missile salvo from the strip, which followed the raids launched by the Israeli warplanes on resistance sites in Gaza. In a statement, a spokesman for the Israeli occupation army confirmed that nine rockets were launched from Gaza in two waves, noting that the Iron Dome system intercepted only four of them. Meanwhile, the Palestinian resistance in the Gaza Strip responded to the Israeli aggression by launching surface-to-air missiles at the warplanes. Hamas spokesman Hazem Qassem said that "the Zionist bombing of the Gaza Strip this morning is a failed attempt to prevent Gaza from continuing to support our people in Al-Quds and the West Bank by all means."



● MOHAMMED SALEM/REUTERS

Arab countries condemn ferocious attack

Moreover, several Arab countries have condemned the attack against Muslim worshippers and said they are following up the developments with concern. The Saudi Foreign Ministry said in a statement that the kingdom condemns the incursion and expresses its categorical rejection of such practices, which undermine peace and are contrary to international principles and values that call for respect of religious sanctities. The Egyptian Foreign Min-

istry also said in a statement that such hateful and reprehensible scenes and repeated Israeli violations of the sanctity of the holy places fuel feelings of anger among all Palestinians and Muslim nations. Jordan's Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Expatriates also strongly condemned the ferocious assault and called on Israel to stop such acts against worshippers, which it said violate international principles. Smoke rises amid buildings during Israeli airstrikes in Gaza, on April 5, 2023.

US signals for diplomatic engagement

The request for Tehran's assistance in the Yemeni peace process should be viewed in this context, as Washington's return to diplomacy from a position of pride, without acknowledging its failure to prevent the diplomatic alliance of Iran, Saudi Arabia, and China. In contrast, the formation of

the aforementioned alliance is driven by the unique interests of the three countries. Iran aims to ease regional tensions, reduce dependence on the West, and evade sanctions. Meanwhile, Saudi Arabia seeks not only economic benefits from cooperation with Iran but also wants to protect its economic and security

interests from possible friction with the US or Israel. China, in a world weary of war and its aftermath, sees an opportunity to play a more significant role and safeguard its economic interests. If this diplomatic alliance with its distinct objectives advances and if Iran and Saudi Arabia can assuage

each other's concerns and transform their 7-year antagonism into a mutually beneficial strategic depth, Iran may even gain a more robust position in a détente with the West. It appears that Iran and Saudi Arabia have learned their lessons from the 7-year rift and the heavy costs it imposed on them

and the region, as they now seek to amend their relationship. The restoration of peace in Yemen could be the first significant step in normalizing relations between the two countries, with the added assurance that the US is also signaling its intent to return to diplomatic negotiations with Iran.