

Top Democrat threatens to hold Attorney General Barr in contempt

WASHINGTON (Reuters) - A senior U.S. congressional Democrat on Thursday threatened to hold Attorney General William Barr in contempt of Congress for ignoring a subpoena to provide Special Counsel Robert Mueller's full report on the Russia inquiry, and accused President Donald Trump's administration of a growing attack on democracy.

Barr canceled his scheduled appearance on Thursday before the House of Representatives Judiciary Committee after clashing with Democratic Chairman Jerrold Nadler over the hearing's format. Barr testified on Wednesday to the Republican-led Senate Judiciary Committee, stoutly defending the Republican president in the wake of the release of Mueller's report on Russian interference in the 2016 election.

"We will have no choice but to move quickly to hold the attorney general in contempt if he stalls or fails to negotiate in good faith," Nadler said at the outset of a brief committee session held in place of Barr's testimony.

Nadler painted the confrontation with Barr in stark terms.

"Ladies and gentleman, the challenge we face is that the president of the United States wants desperately to prevent Congress, the co-equal branch of the government, from providing any check whatsoever to even his most reckless decisions," Nadler said.

"He is trying to render Congress inert as a separate and co-equal branch of government. The challenge we face is that if we don't stand up to him together today we risk forever losing the power to stand up to any president in the future. The very system of government of the United States - the system of limited power, the system of not having a president as a dictator - is very much at stake," Nadler said.

Nadler's comments indicated that the Democrats, who control the House, prepared to escalate a showdown with Trump's administration, which has resisted their demands for documents and information on a wide range of topics, from

Trump's taxes to his potential financial conflicts of interest.

"I am certain that there is no way forward for this country that does not include a reckoning with this clear and present danger to our constitutional order," Nadler said.

Representative Doug Collins, the committee's top Republican, blamed Nadler for the standoff, saying the only reason Barr did not appear to testify as planned was that Nadler had made demands about the format of the hearing. The panel adopted an aggressive format with an extra hour of questioning from its own lawyers, in addition to those from the committee's lawmakers.

'POLITICAL STUNT'

Collins called the move a "political stunt."

"They want it to look like an impeachment hearing because they won't bring impeachment proceedings," Collins said, referring to the process laid out in the Constitution for removing a president from office.

"The reason Bill Barr is not here today is that the Democrats decided they didn't want him here today," Collins added.

The Justice Department said on Wednesday it would not comply with a subpoena issued by Nadler's committee seeking an unredacted copy of Mueller's report and evidence gathered in the 22-month investigation. Democrats have said they may issue a subpoena to try to force Barr to testify before their committee.

Barr, whose on April 18 released a version of the report with parts blacked out to protect sensitive information, spent more than four hours at a Senate hearing on Wednesday defending his handling of the report on Russia's interference in President Donald Trump's favor and whether Trump subsequently tried to obstruct Mueller's probe.

The report detailed extensive contacts between Trump's 2016 presidential campaign and Moscow and the campaign's expectation that it would benefit from Russia's actions, which included hacking and propaganda to boost Trump and harm Democratic candidate Hillary Clinton. The report also detailed a series of actions Trump took to try to impede the investigation.

Mueller, a former FBI director, concluded there was insufficient evidence to show a criminal conspiracy and opted not to make a conclusion on whether Trump committed obstruction of justice, but pointedly did not exonerate him. Barr has said he and Rod Rosenstein, the Justice Department's No. 2 official, then determined there was not enough evidence to charge Trump with obstruction.

Barr is under fire for how he characterized the Mueller report's main conclusions in a letter to lawmakers on March 24, weeks before the report was released. Trump seized on Barr's summary to declare he had been fully exonerated.

Democrats have said Barr gave misleading testimony to Congress about criticism he received from Mueller over the handling of the disclosure of the report's conclusions.

Former U.S. Vice President Joe Biden, among those seeking the Democratic Party's 2020 presidential nomination, on Wednesday night called for Barr's resignation, the Washington Post reported.

Lawmakers are also seeking testimony from Mueller as soon as this month.

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