VOA NEWS

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From Washington, this is VOA news. I'm Tommie McNeil reporting.

Four laboratories linked to the international chemical weapons watchdog have confirmed Britain's findings that a nerve agent was used last month to poison a former Russian spy and his daughter.

The world's chemical weapons watchdog has backed Britain's analysis of the nerve agent used to poison a Russian former spy last month.

The OPCW said Thursday Sergei Skripal and his daughter, Yulia, were poisoned with military-grade Novichok.

Britain has blamed Russia for the attack in the English town of Salisbury. But while the OPCW agreed that the state was likely involved, it didn't assign blame.

Yulia Skripal, meanwhile, has turned down an offer of assistance from the Russian embassy.

That's Reuters' Lucy Fielder reporting.

U.S. President Donald Trump's nominee for secretary of state, CIA Director Mike Pompeo, received intense questioning about the ongoing Russia probe, his relationship with the president and hotspots around the globe during his confirmation hearing Thursday before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee.

The president has criticized the Iran nuclear deal. That's something Pompeo was asked about.

"And if there's no chance that we can fix it, I will recommend to the president that we do our level best to work with our allies to achieve a better outcome and a better deal."

And regarding his relationship with the president, he said [that], "I'm with the president an awful lot. He's never asked me to do anything that I considered remotely improper."

U.S. President Donald Trump Thursday ordered his top economic and trade advisers to look into rejoining the Pacific-rim trade pact with 11 other countries that he abandoned last year three days after he assumed power.

During opening statements at the meeting before Mr. Trump shooed out reporters, he assured the lawmakers that he intends to negotiate better trade deals for the American farmer in the face of threatened new Chinese tariffs.

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President Trump says that a U.S. response to the recent alleged chemical weapons attack in Syria will be "made fairly soon."

If the president does order an attack, House Democrats want to know if it's legal without specific approval from Congress.

At a hearing on the Pentagon's budget, lawmakers peppered defense chief Jim Mattis about striking Syria in response to an alleged chemical weapons attack.

"What is the legal authority, the precise legal authority?"

Mattis told California's John Garamendi it's based on self-defense. There are U.S. forces in the field.

"I don't think we need to wait until they are under chemical attack when the weapons are used in the same theater we are operating in."

Mattis would not talk about military plans because he says an attack is "not yet in the offing."

???, at the White House.

China has complained about how difficult it has been to establish trade relations with the United States.

China's ambassador to Peru also issued a warning to the U.S. on Wednesday, saying Washington should avoid dragging Latin American countries into its trade dispute with Beijing.

Before the White House said this week Trump would skip a summit in Peru, a U.S. official told reporters the president planned to argue for the U.S. to remain the partner of choice for Latin America.

On Thursday, Beijing officials also reiterated they haven't held any negotiations with the U.S. on trade. It said it wasn't a matter of Beijing being willing to talk with Washington, it's a matter of the U.S. not showing sincerity.

Ryan Brooks reporting for Reuters.

U.S. President Trump is pushing back against a *New York Times* report that said that he had late last year considered firing special counsel Robert Mueller, who is heading the criminal investigation into Russian meddling in the 2016 U.S. presidential election.

He said on Twitter, "If I wanted to fire Robert Mueller in December, as reported by the Failing New York Times, I would have fired him." He also said, "Just more Fake News from a biased newspaper!"

Trump has regularly vented his ire at Mueller's nearly yearlong probe, especially this week after Federal Bureau of Investigation agents raided the New York office and residence of Mr. Trump's personal attorney, Michael Cohen. Agents were searching for financial records and documents related to hefty hush payments shortly before the election to two women who claimed to have had affairs with the president.

Amnesty International reports that the number of executions around the world continued to fall last year, with a 4 percent drop in executions and a significant decline in the number of new death sentences.

In an annual report on executions and the death penalty released Thursday, the human rights organization said that there were at least 993 executions in 23 countries last year. That's down 4 percent from 2016, down 39 percent from 2015.

I'm Tommie McNeil, VOA news.

That's the latest world news from VOA.