

***Trump Welcomes Najib Razak, the Malaysian Leader, as President, and Owner of a Fine Hotel***

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**By MARK LANDLER**

WASHINGTON — When President Trump welcomed Malaysia’s prime minister, Najib Razak, to the White House on Tuesday, he thanked him for “all the investment you’ve made in the United States.”

Mr. Trump did not single out Mr. Najib’s patronage of his hotel two blocks from the White House, but he could have: the Malaysian leader was spotted entering and exiting the Trump International Hotel, with his entourage, on Monday and Tuesday.

The White House denied that Mr. Najib had picked the hotel at Mr. Trump’s behest. “We certainly don’t book their hotel accommodations,” the press secretary, Sarah Huckabee Sanders, said, “so I couldn’t speak to the personal decision they made about where to stay here in D.C.”

Whatever the motivation, the choice of lodgings added to the awkwardness of a meeting already replete with ethical questions. Mr. Najib is under investigation by the Justice Department, part of a corruption scandal that critics said he has fended off by firing investigators and dismissing negative news reports about him as “fake news.”

In these respects, he is not unlike Mr. Trump. So it was perhaps not a surprise that the two leaders skipped a news conference, kept their public remarks brief, and stayed on the safe ground of trade and counterterrorism.

“We’re talking about trade – very large trade deals,” Mr. Trump said to Mr. Najib, during a photo opportunity before they met in the Cabinet Room. “Malaysia is a massive investor in the United States in the form of stocks and bonds.”

A grateful Mr. Najib replied, “We come here with a strong value proposition to put on the table.” He talked about buying Boeing planes and General Electric jet engines but did not mention that he had just come from the Trump hotel.

Behind closed doors, the prime minister urged the United States to put pressure on neighboring Myanmar — including Daw Aung San Suu Kyi, the de facto leader of the elected civilian government — to stop the systematic persecution of the Rohingya, its minority Muslim population.

Mr. Trump, a senior administration official said, expressed anger over the military crackdown and discussed ways to pressure authorities in Myanmar. There are no current plans for Mr. Trump to call Ms. Aung San Suu Kyi, this official said, but he did not rule out a future conversation.

American presidents have long done an awkward dance with the leaders of Malaysia, a Southeast Asian country that is a valuable trading partner and dependable counterterrorism ally of the United States but is ruled by a corrupt, entrenched Malay elite.

That tension is even more acute with Mr. Najib, who is under investigation by the United States and others for an estimated \$3.5 billion that investigators believe he and his associates diverted from a Malaysian government fund that he headed. Among other things, the money was used to buy jewelry, real estate and the rights to Hollywood films.

The White House insisted that the Justice Department inquiry had no relevance to the meeting and would not figure in the conversation. "That investigation is apolitical and certainly independent of anything taking place tomorrow," Ms. Sanders said on Monday.

But the White House did move a picture-taking session from the Oval Office, denying Mr. Najib the customary photo with the president before the fireplace, under George Washington's portrait.

Before their meeting, Mr. Trump credited Mr. Najib with cutting off business ties between Malaysia and North Korea. The Malaysian capital, Kuala Lumpur, has served as one of the hubs for North Koreans seeking to buy or sell nuclear-related technology or trade weapons.

Relations between the two countries ruptured after Malaysia accused the North Korean government of assassinating Kim Jong-nam, the half brother of Kim Jong-un, in a bizarre attack at Kuala Lumpur's international airport. Each country temporarily barred the other's nationals from leaving.

"He does not do business with North Korea any longer, and we find that to be very important," Mr. Trump said.

Mr. Najib presented a detailed list of purchases and investments – with dollar signs attached – that seemed tailored to Mr. Trump's balance-sheet emphasis in dealing with other nations. Malaysia, he said, had committed to buying 25 Boeing 737's and eight 787 Dreamliners for its national airline.

In addition, Mr. Najib said, one of Malaysia's largest pension funds planned to invest between \$3 billion and \$4 billion in the Trump administration's effort to rebuild American infrastructure. And another sovereign wealth fund planned to increase its existing \$400 million investment in Silicon Valley.

"Great," Mr. Trump interjected, each time Mr. Najib reeled off a figure.

For Mr. Najib, who faces an election and has been under unrelenting pressure at home, the meeting qualified as a major victory. It demonstrated to critics that he could travel to the United States without fear of being detained.

For Mr. Trump, the payoff was less obvious. Administration officials view Malaysia as a counterweight to China and say it has been steadfast in the fight against the Islamic State. But the president broke arguably the strongest bond between the two countries when he pulled the United States out of the Trans-Pacific Partnership, a regional trade pact that includes Malaysia.

Mr. Trump's predecessor, President Barack Obama, once praised Mr. Najib as a reformer and played golf with him in Hawaii in 2014. But after the cloud of corruption allegations took hold, Mr. Obama only met the Malaysian leader at regional conferences. Last year, when the two were together at a summit meeting at the Sunnylands estate in Rancho Mirage, Calif., Mr. Najib did not earn a repeat invitation for golf with Mr. Obama.

Mr. Trump, however, seems comfortable with Mr. Najib, a suave figure who speaks impeccable English. In 2014, they played golf at Mr. Trump's club in Bedminster, N.J. Mr. Trump gave his guest a photo of the two of them, inscribed, "To my favorite prime minister."

Mr. Trump has not hesitated to meet with autocratic leaders — or leaders with legal problems. He invited the Philippine president, Rodrigo Duterte, to the White House, despite what critics said was his record of ordering extrajudicial killings of drug dealers.

Still, human-rights advocates criticized this meeting because of the signal they said it would send.

"It's a strange meeting," said John Sifton, the Asia advocacy director at Human Rights Watch. "Clearly, President Trump has repeatedly shown that he is willing to host authoritarian leaders. But this meeting, in some respects, marks a new low. Najib has been engaged in a broad crackdown against journalists, civil society, even cartoonists."

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