

Donald Trump goes after the Democrat who surfaced his immigration remark

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File photo of US president Donald Trump.

Washington: President Donald Trump turned his Twitter torment on Monday on the Democrat in the room where immigration talks with lawmakers took a famously coarse turn, saying Sen. Dick Durbin misrepresented what he had said about African nations and Haiti and, in the process, undermined the trust needed to make a deal.

On a day of remembrance for Rev. Martin Luther King Jr., Trump spent time at his golf course with no public events, bypassing the acts of service that his predecessor staged in honour of the civil rights leader on the holiday. Instead Trump dedicated his weekly address to King's memory, saying King's dream and America's are the same: "a world where people are judged by who they are, not how they look or where they come from."

That message was a distinct counterpoint to words attributed to Trump by Durbin and others at a meeting last week, when the question of where immigrants come from seemed at the forefront of Trump's concerns. Some participants and others familiar with the conversation said Trump challenged immigration from "shithole" countries of Africa and disparaged Haiti as well.

Without explicitly denying using that word, Trump lashed out at the Democratic senator, who said Trump uttered it on several occasions.

"Senator Dicky Durbin totally misrepresented what was said at the DACA meeting," Trump tweeted, using a nickname to needle the Illinois senator. "Deals can't get made when there is no trust! Durbin blew DACA and is hurting our Military."

He was referring to the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals program, which protects young people who came to the U.S. illegally as children. Members of Congress from both parties are trying to strike a deal that Trump would support to extend that protection.

Durbin said on Monday the White House should release whatever recording it might have of the meeting.

Republican Sen. Lindsey Graham of South Carolina, one of the six senators in the meeting with Trump on Thursday, supported Durbin's account. As well, Durbin and people who were briefed on the conversation but were not authorized to describe it publicly said Trump also questioned the need to admit more Haitians. They said Trump expressed a preference for immigrants from countries like Norway, which is overwhelmingly white.

Republican Sens. David Perdue of Georgia and Tom Cotton of Arkansas, who also attended, initially said they did not hear Trump utter the word in question, then revised their account to deny he said it at all. Trump said Sunday: "I'm not a racist."

Durbin addressed reports that Trump might have said countries of Africa were "shithouse" nations instead of "shithole" ones - and that such a distinction might have given Trump's defenders a narrow out to dispute reports of the meeting.

"I am stunned that this is their defense," he told WBEZ. "I don't know that changing the word from 'hole' to 'house' changes the impact."

The reverberations kept coming on Monday.

Martin Luther King III, King's elder son, said: "When a president insists that our nation needs more citizens from white states like Norway, I don't even think we need to spend any time even talking about what it says and what it is."

He added, "We got to find a way to work on this man's heart."

A sizeable crowd of expatriate Haitians, waving their country's flag, gathered near the foot of a bridge leading to Trump's Mar-a-Lago estate in Palm Beach, Florida, to jeer at Trump as the motorcade returned from the golf club where the president capped his weekend before returning later Monday to Washington.

The Haitians and their supporters shouted, "Our country is not a shithole," according to video posted by WPEC-TV, and engaged in a shouting match with the pro-Trump demonstrators who typically gather on the other side of the street.

On Sunday, Vice President Mike Pence, who worshipped at a Baptist church in Maryland, listened as the pastor denounced Trump's use of vulgarity.

Maurice Watson, pastor of Metropolitan Baptist Church in Largo, called the reported remark "dehumanising" and "ugly" and said "whoever made such a statement ... is wrong and they ought to be held accountable." Worshippers stood and applauded as Watson spoke.

Durbin said after the Oval Office meeting that Trump's words to the senators were "vile, hate-filled and clearly racial in their content."

A confidant of Trump told The Associated Press that the president spent Thursday evening calling friends and outside advisers to judge their reaction to his remarks. Trump wasn't apologetic and denied he was racist, said the confidant, who wasn't authorised to disclose a private conversation and spoke on condition of anonymity.

Afterward Trump insisted in a tweet that he "never said anything derogatory about Haitians other than Haiti is, obviously, a very poor and troubled country. Never said 'take them out.' Made up by Dems." Trump wrote, "I have a wonderful relationship with Haitians."

The contentious comments came as Durbin was presenting details of a compromise immigration plan that had money for a first installment of the president's long-sought border wall.

Trump took particular issue with the idea that people who'd fled to the US after disasters hit their homes in places such as El Salvador, Guatemala and Haiti would be allowed to stay as part of the deal, according to the people briefed on the conversation.

When it came to talk of extending protections for Haitians, Durbin said Trump replied, "We don't need more Haitians."

"He said, 'Put me down for wanting more Europeans to come to this country. Why don't we get more people from Norway?'" Durbin said.

Word of Trump's comments threatened to upend delicate negotiations over resolving the status of the hundreds of thousands of immigrants who were brought to the country illegally as children. Trump announced last year that he will

end the Obama-era program unless lawmakers come up with a solution by March.

- AP