

Giuliani cautions no Trump-Russia interview decision soon

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US President Donald Trump. (AP Photo/Evan Vucci/Files)

New York: President Donald Trump and his lawyers likely won't decide whether he will answer questions from Russia probe investigators until after his summit with North Korean leader Kim Jong Un next month, according to the president's legal team.

Rudy Giuliani, the president's new attorney, said in an interview with The Associated Press on Friday that any preparation with Trump for a possible interview with federal investigators would likely be delayed until after the June 12 summit in Singapore because "he wouldn't want to take his concentration off something far, far more important."

Giuliani, who also suggested that special counsel Robert Mueller's team had indicated it would not attempt to indict Trump, said he had hoped to resolve the question of a possible interview by May 17, the one-year anniversary of Mueller's appointment, but that was no longer feasible.

"Several things delayed us, with the primary one being the whole situation with North Korea," Giuliani said. "The president has been very busy. It really would be pretty close to impossible to spend the amount of time on it we would need."

The president's lawyers have not decided whether it would be in Trump's best interest to sit for an interview. Giuliani warned that it could be a "perjury trap" and suggested that "lies told by others" could land the president in legal trouble, though he said that Trump himself would not close the door entirely on an interview.

"The president would probably like the resolution," the former New York City mayor said. "If we were convinced it would speed up the process, we may do it. If we believed they would go into it honestly and with an open mind, we would be inclined to do it. But right now, we're not there."

Mueller's investigation has operated largely in secrecy, with the public getting only glimpses into its operation through witnesses who are questioned or when indictments and guilty pleas are unsealed. But Giuliani suggested that a recent conversation with Mueller's team led him to believe that the special counsel, citing a Justice Department opinion, had ruled out the possibility of trying to indict a sitting president.

Mueller has floated the idea of issuing a grand jury subpoena for Trump to answer questions, former Trump attorney John Dowd has said, though it is unclear how serious prosecutors were about such a move. Even if Mueller's team decided to subpoena Trump as part of the investigation, the president could still fight it in court or refuse to answer questions by invoking his Fifth Amendment protection from self-incrimination.

Giuliani said Friday that if a subpoena were issued to get Trump to appear, the president's legal team would oppose it unless they could "reach agreement on the ground rules." He argued that Trump could invoke executive privilege, and the team would point to Justice Department opinions in fighting a subpoena and "on both law and the facts, we would have the strongest case you could imagine." He noted the handover of 1.2 million documents as

evidence of cooperation.

He also indicated that the president's lawyers may be "more likely" to agree to an interview if Mueller's team narrowed the scope of what it was investigating. Though Giuliani would not provide an exact date for when a determination would be made about the interview, he said it probably "would be silly to make a decision" much before the highly anticipated summit. He said that the demands on Trump's time meant that his legal team had "not done a lot" in terms of preparing the president for a possible in-person interview.

"It would take a while and he's focused on North Korea," said Giuliani.

A number of Trump allies, including Vice President Mike Pence this week, have stepped up calls for Mueller's investigation to wrap up, suggesting it was interfering in the president's ability to do the country's business. Mueller's team is investigating Russian interference in the 2016 election and possible coordination with Trump associates as well as whether the president obstructed justice. So far, the special counsel's office has charged 19 people _ including four Trump campaign advisers _ and three Russian companies.

Both Trump's former national security adviser, Michael Flynn, and his deputy campaign chairman, Rick Gates, have pleaded guilty and are now cooperating with the probe. A number of other former White House and campaign staffers, including Reince Priebus and Steve Bannon, as well as Inauguration Day committee chairman Tom Barrack, have been interviewed.

Trump's longtime personal attorney, Michael Cohen, had his office and home raided by federal agents and, this week, was revealed to have been selling his insight into Trump to corporations. Giuliani said the arrangement "looks bad" but insisted there was no crime.

Giuliani demurred when asked if Trump would consider it a "red line" for his children to be interviewed. Ivanka Trump and her husband, Jared, Kushner, both worked on the campaign and are senior advisers at the White House, while Trump's adult sons, Don Jr. and Eric, were also leading figures on the campaign. Giuliani said he did not expect those interviews with Mueller to take place.

"Our understanding is that he's pretty much finished," Giuliani said. "As far as we know, we're basically the last witness."

The special counsel's office has not outlined the duration of the probe.

Some of Trump's recent tweets revealed the president's anxiety about how the investigation could sway voters as they decide whether to keep congressional Republicans in power or force him to face an aggressive Democratic majority. Giuliani repeated his call for the probe to end soon but suggested that if it lasted until November's midterms, "it would be helping Republicans."

"It makes the campaign feel it's about impeachment," the former mayor said. "I think the Democrats would be making the same mistake we did back during Clinton."

In 1998, months after Clinton was impeached, voter backlash cost the Republicans' chance to pick up seats in both Houses of Congress.

- AP