

SPREAD OF DISINFORMATION

Facebook part of the problem: Pelosi

AFP, New York

The top Democrat in the US Congress on Friday joined in criticism against Facebook for allowing disinformation to spread over the social media platform, saying it was "part of the problem."

Nancy Pelosi, speaker of the House of Representatives, made the comments in response to a question about efforts being made by tech giants against disinformation spreading online during the presidential election won by Democrat Joe Biden.

"I'm not a big fan of Facebook," Pelosi told journalists. "I don't know what they have been doing but I know they've been part of the problem, all along."

Since US news media projected Biden the winner over Republican incumbent Donald Trump on Saturday, the outgoing president and his supporters have been spreading claims of massive electoral fraud without evidence.

Facebook and Twitter have slapped warning messages on many recent posts by Trump and others.

Facebook and Google have also decided to maintain their bans on political advertising in the United States pending certification of the results.

However, social media companies have been accused by a wide range of voices of not doing enough and allowing false information and hate speech to spread for too long.

Many from the right wing allege censorship when it comes to the warning messages and other actions taken by tech companies.

The incoming Biden administration will likely face questions over whether action is needed to address the issue. One issue being debated is a section of a law that exempts social media companies from legal action for content posted by their users apart from certain exceptions.



People wait to be rescued as they stand on a roof of a building, after Typhoon Vamco resulted in severe flooding, in the Cagayan Valley region in the Philippines, yesterday. Inset, Residents try to move to a safer place following floods in Rodriguez, Rizal province. Vietnam was bracing for Vamco to make landfall in the country's central coast early today, as the death toll in the Philippines rose to 53 from that country's deadliest storm this year.

PHOTO: AFP

INDIA, CHINA BORDER STANDOFF

Plan devised to ease tensions

REUTERS, New Delhi

India and China are formulating a plan that involves creating no-patrol zones, pulling back tanks and artillery, and using drones to verify the withdrawal, as the nuclear-armed Asian rivals seek to end a dangerous military standoff in the western Himalayas, Indian officials say.

Tensions have run high since June when at least 20 Indian soldiers were killed after being attacked by Chinese troops using rocks and clubs. Indian officials say the Chinese troops had intruded across the disputed border in a remote valley. China said the Indian soldiers' actions had been provocative.

Since then, the nuclear-armed Asian neighbours have deployed tens of thousands of troops on the rugged frontier between India's Ladakh region and the Chinese-held Tibetan plateau, raising the risk of further confrontation even while looking for ways to de-escalate.

After months of fitful progress, the two sides are discussing a staggered

disengagement from the high-altitude desert where temperatures have dipped to 18 degrees below Celsius, three Indian government officials told Reuters.



"We have a firm plan for disengagement on the table, it is being internally discussed on both sides," said one of the officials, speaking on condition of anonymity because of the sensitivity of the situation.

Under the plan that was shared during a meeting of top commanders last Friday, both sides will pull back from the contested Pangong Tso lake area and establish a buffer zone.

Chinese soldiers will dismantle

defence structures on several hilly spurs overlooking the lake and pull back, the officials briefed on the discussions said.

India, which has occupied heights on the lake's south bank, will also withdraw. Both sides will cease patrolling certain sections.

The 3,800-km (2,100 miles) long India-China border is undermarked, and the two countries went to war in 1962.

India's defence and foreign ministries declined to comment on the specifics of the latest negotiations.

The three officials said that military commanders from both sides could meet within a week for further discussions on disengagement.

There was no immediate comment from China, but the state-controlled Global Times newspaper cited unnamed sources saying a disengagement plan was under discussion where India would first withdraw troops who had "illegally crossed lines" south of Pangong Tso.

Pompeo starts 7-nation tour after polls debacle

AFP, Washington

Secretary of State Mike Pompeo faces an elephant in the room as he begins a seven-nation trip to US allies -- they have congratulated President-elect Joe Biden on his victory and he most certainly has not.

With President Donald Trump refusing to concede and making unsubstantiated claims of fraud, Pompeo, one of his most loyal aides, has dug in with him.

World leaders have shown no doubt about the election. Leaders who have called Biden to offer congratulations include French President Emmanuel Macron, who will see Pompeo tomorrow in Paris.

Macron is receiving Pompeo at the secretary of state's request and "in full transparency with President-elect Joe Biden's team," a French official said, adding that contacts with Biden are "established and operational."

Pompeo heads after Paris to Istanbul, where his trip has already caused friction. He has no meetings booked with officials in Turkey, with the State Department official blaming scheduling issues, despite a complex relationship between the NATO allies on issues including Syria, maritime tensions with Greece and Ankara's growing military cooperation with Russia.

In Jerusalem, Pompeo will see Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu. According to Israeli newspaper Haaretz and news site Axios, Pompeo will become the first secretary of state to visit one of Israel's settlements in the occupied Palestinian territories, which are considered illegal by virtually all other countries, and also tour the Golan Heights, whose annexation by Israel was recognized by Trump.

Pompeo will also visit Saudi Arabia, on which Biden has vowed to press harder on human rights, as well as fellow Gulf allies the United Arab Emirates and Qatar. He will in addition visit Georgia.

NEWS IN BRIEF

New covid outbreak hits US Secret Service: media

The US Secret Service, which guards President Donald Trump, President-elect Joe Biden, and the White House, has been struck by an outbreak of Covid-19, US media reported Friday. The Washington Post said that more than 130 Secret Service agents were infected by coronavirus or in quarantine due to contact with infected people. The outbreak came after numerous agents traveled to campaign rallies with Trump where many officials and most of the attendees went maskless. It also follows several White House events in the past three weeks led by Trump, including an election night party November 3, where most of those present also did not wear masks.

Thousands of protesters call for ouster of Thai PM



Thousands of people protested in Bangkok yesterday demanding the resignation of Prime Minister Prayuth Chan-ocha, a former junta leader, in the latest in months of anti-government demonstrations that have also called for reforms to Thailand's powerful monarchy. A few kilometres away, thousands of royalists gathered in yellow shirts and waved Thai flags as they waited to greet King Maha Vajiralongkorn, who was expected to attend a local event. Some 2,500 protesters gathered at Democracy Monument in Bangkok, according to police, putting on songs and dances mocking the government.

Libyans to hold national polls in December 2021

Libyans at UN-led talks agreed Friday to hold national elections in December next year, the United Nations said, raising hopes for an end to a brutal decade-old conflict. Friday's announcement came on the fifth day of political talks in Tunisia, involving 75 delegates from existing state bodies and groups from across Libya's political and social spectrum. Participants at the talks agreed that national elections should take place on December 24, 2021, acting UN envoy Stephanie Williams told journalists in a virtual news conference. She said Libyans feared an entrenched foreign presence in their country and "very much want to reclaim their sovereignty." "You can restore it through the ballot box," she said.

SOURCE: AFP, REUTERS



A devotee lights an oil lamp at a hindu temple to mark the Diwali festival, amidst the Covid-19 pandemic, in Colombo, Sri Lanka, yesterday.

PHOTO: AFP

Brexit architect Cummings quits as UK PM's top aide

AFP, London

Dominic Cummings, the controversial brains behind the 2016 campaign for Britain to leave the European Union, will step down as Prime Minister Boris Johnson's top aide, a government source said.

Cummings, a divisive figure who carved out a uniquely powerful role in government, said Thursday he expected to leave at the end of the year, following the final stage of Brexit.

But he was seen leaving Johnson's 10 Downing Street office on Friday carrying a cardboard box.

The government source said Cummings would officially be employed until mid-December, but news outlets including Sky News and the BBC reported he would no longer be reporting for duty.

Cummings' departure then would have coincided with the end of the Brexit transition period, when Britain embarks on life outside of European Union rules and regulations on January 1.

His premature departure led fellow

Brexit champion Nigel Farage to tweet that "seeing him leave Number 10 carrying a cardboard box tells me a Brexit sell-out is close", as trade talks between Britain and the EU reach crunch time.

Cummings was appointed chief adviser by Johnson when he took power in July 2019. He helped to secure a thumping election victory last December but his reportedly controlling style and frequent clashes with colleagues are said to have led to persistent tensions.

The news comes just a day after the resignation of Johnson's communications director Lee Cain, a close Cummings ally.

The less high-profile, Cain had been offered the post of chief of staff.

But a subsequent backlash among some Conservatives and within the prime minister's inner circle instead led to him to quit.

The departure of both men, alongside the launch of US-style daily televised press briefings, could herald a shift in tone and strategy from Johnson's government.

Israel killed Qaeda No 2 leader in Iran: NYT

REUTERS, Washington

Al-Qaeda's second-in-command, accused of helping to mastermind the 1998 bombings of two US embassies in Africa, was killed in Iran in August by Israeli operatives acting at the behest of the United States, the New York Times reported, citing intelligence officials.

Abdullah Ahmed Abdullah, who went by the nom de guerre Abu Muhammad al-Masri, was gunned down by two men on a motorcycle in the streets of Tehran on Aug 7, the Times reported on Friday.

Masri, one of al-Qaeda's founding leaders, was killed along with his daughter, the Times reported. She was the widow of former Qaeda chief Osama bin Laden's son.

The killing of Masri, who was seen as a likely successor to al-Qaeda's current leader, Ayman al-Zawahiri, was kept secret until now, the newspaper said.

Iran yesterday denied the report. A Foreign Ministry spokesman said in a statement that the United States and Israel sometimes "try to tie Iran to such groups by lying and leaking false information to the media in order to avoid responsibility for the criminal activities of this group and other terrorist groups in the region".

Tigray conflict widens Two missiles target Ethiopian airports

REUTERS, Addis Ababa

Two airports in Ethiopia's Amhara state which neighbours Tigray where federal troops are fighting local forces were targeted by rocket fire late on Friday, the government said, as an 11-day conflict widened.

The airport in Gondar in Amhara state, which neighbours Tigray, was hit on Friday, while another rocket aimed at the Bahir Dar airport missed the target, the government said.

The ruling Tigray party, the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF), said the Tigray Defence Forces conducted missile strikes in military bases in Bahir Dar and Gondar in retaliation for air strikes conducted by Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed's forces in various parts of the state.

Abiy sent the national defence force on an offensive against local troops in Tigray last week, after accusing them of attacking federal troops. Hundreds of people have been killed.

The prime minister has said government warplanes were bombing military targets in Tigray, including arms depots and equipment controlled by the Tigrayan forces. The government says its military operations are aimed at restoring the rule of law in the mountainous state of 5 million people.

More than 14,500 people have fled into neighbouring Sudan, with the speed of new arrivals "overwhelming the current capacity to provide aid", the UN refugee agency said on Friday.

Ethiopia's Human Rights Commission, appointed by the government but independent, said it was sending a team of investigators to the town of Mai Kadra in Tigray, where Amnesty International this week reported what it said was evidence of mass killings.

Amnesty International said on Thursday scores and possibly hundreds of civilians were stabbed and hacked to death in the region on Nov 9, citing witnesses. It said it had not been able to independently confirm who was responsible, but said the witnesses had blamed fighters loyal to Tigray's local leaders. The Tigray state government denied involvement in the reported killings.



A patient is transported outside of Tisch Hospital in New York, on Friday. Bars and restaurants were shut on Friday in New York under fresh curbs designed to slow soaring Covid-19 infections as the number of daily deaths across the globe topped 10,000 for the first time since the pandemic began.

PHOTO: AFP