

Twitter's Trump ban 'problematic'

AGENCIES

Twitter's decision to impose a permanent ban on US President Donald Trump's account has sparked some consternation in Europe, with German Chancellor Angela Merkel calling it "problematic".

The move, prompted by fears of "further incitement of violence" after last week's attack on the US Capitol building that was partly blamed on the US president, reignited debate over regulation of social media.

Facebook, Instagram and Snapchat have all now issued their own bans, triggering a flood of reactions from around the world.

Facebook on Monday said they don't have any plan to lift the suspension.

Twitter also announced it has suspended "more than 70,000 accounts" linked to the QAnon conspiracy theory following the attack on the US Capitol.

European commissioner Thierry Breton, who has introduced two EU proposals that would place more restraints on digital giants, saw Twitter's decision as a total break from the past, calling it "the 9/11 moment of social media" in an op-ed published by Politico.

US internet giants have often been accused of holding too much power over social media, and many governments have called for them to face more regulation.

Merkel's spokesman Steffen Seibert said she "considers it problematic that the accounts of the US president have been permanently blocked".

He added: "It is possible to intervene in the freedom of expression, but in accordance with limits defined by the legislator, and not through a decision by company management."

French Economy and Finance Minister Bruno Le Maire agreed, telling state-run France Inter radio: "The regulation of digital giants cannot be done by the digital oligarchy itself."

Russian opposition figure Alexei Navalny also denounced -- on Twitter -- what he branded "an unacceptable act of censorship" based on "emotion and personal political preferences".

Digital law specialist Florence G'sell, calling Twitter's decision an "earthquake", said the social media giants "have greatly profited from the polarisation." He urged for a unified laws to control them.

US social media have regularly cited Section 230 of the US Communications Decency Act when they claim to simply host accounts but not bear responsibility for the content.



BID TO REMOVE TRUMP FROM OFFICE

Pence signals disapproval

Meets president as Democrats vote to invoke US Constitution's 25th Amendment

AGENCIES

President Donald Trump and Vice President Mike Pence met on Monday for the first time since rioters stormed the US Capitol last week, signaling a united front as Democratic efforts to impeach Trump gain momentum.

The meeting in the Oval Office -- described as "a good conversation" by a senior official -- came ahead of a critical 48-hour period when Pence will come under pressure to break from the president and initiate his removal.

Just eight days before his term ends, and nearly a week after a failed insurrection scarred the seat of America's democracy, Trump headed to Texas yesterday in one of his final trips as president, desperate to reach friendlier territory so he can tout his administration's successes.

In Washington, though, he is the target of efforts to remove him from power, including a historic second impeachment, this time for "incitement of insurrection" over his supporters' deadly breach of the Capitol building.

First, the House of Representatives was scheduled to vote later yesterday on a longshot bid to get Pence and the cabinet to invoke the US Constitution's 25th Amendment, which would declare Trump unfit to perform his duties and install Pence as acting president.

Pence's meeting with Trump appeared to quash any prospects of that outcome.

Democrats will then follow up with impeachment proceedings, including a House vote expected today.

The move -- which threatens to torpedo any hopes of a political future for Trump -- could make for a tense culmination of four



Members of the National Guard arrive on Monday to the US Capitol to secure the site amid threats of violence ahead of U Biden's inauguration on Jan 20. PHOTO: REUTERS

years of controversy ahead of Joe Biden's January 20 inauguration.

Trump has been largely silent in recent days, making few statements and holding no news conferences. He has been banned from Twitter, his favored public platform, for language that could incite violence.

Trump has privately blamed 'Antifa people' for storming the US Capitol, Axios reported. Trump made the remark in a 30-minute-plus phone call Monday morning with House Minority Leader Kevin McCarthy, Axios reported. However, McCarthy told Trump in the call, which according to Axios was tense and aggressive at times, "It's not Antifa, it's MAGA. I know. I was there."

The attack on Congress shook the

core of American democracy and drew international condemnation. Trump is accused of whipping up the mob into storming the chambers as lawmakers certified Biden's election win.

Trump was already impeached once by the Democratic-controlled House in December 2019 for pressuring Ukraine's president to dig up political dirt on Biden. He was acquitted by the Republican-majority Senate.

The same outcome looms large again.

Although two Republican senators have publicly called on Trump to resign, Democrats are unlikely to muster the two-thirds majority needed to convict Trump in the 100-member Senate and remove him from office.

US rebrands Cuba as terror sponsor state

AFP, Washington

President Donald Trump's outgoing administration on Monday returned Cuba to the US blacklist of state sponsors of terrorism, the latest in a slew of last-minute actions to hinder President-elect Joe Biden's diplomacy.

The terror designation severely hampers foreign investment and can only be removed after a formal review by the Biden administration, meaning it may remain in force for months and slow efforts to ease tensions.

With 8 days left in office, Secretary of State Mike Pompeo cited Cuba's ties with Colombian rebels, alliance with leftist Venezuela and sanctuary to several US fugitives in justifying the blacklisting.

It is the latest in a blitz of decisions by Pompeo in his final days in office.

Barack Obama in 2015 delisted Cuba as a state sponsor of terrorism as he moved to normalize relations and declared the half-century US effort to isolate the communist island to be a failure.

Biden has indicated he wants to return at least to some engagement started under Obama and blocked by Trump, including allowing Cuban-Americans to visit family and send money.

INDONESIA PLANE TRAGEDY

Flight data recorder retrieved

REUTERS, Jakarta

Indonesian divers yesterday retrieved from the sea bed the flight data recorder (FDR) of a Sriwijaya Air plane that crashed into the Java Sea with 62 people on board at the weekend, officials said.

Divers had also found a separate radio beacon, raising hopes that the cockpit voice recorder (CVR) it was connected to could soon be found and reveal what caused the plane to lose control moments after takeoff.

"We are sure that, because the beacon that was attached to the cockpit voice recorder was also found around the area, so with high confidence, the cockpit voice recorder will soon be found," military chief Hadi Tjahjanto said at a news conference.

With few immediate clues on what happened after takeoff, investigators will rely heavily on the flight recorders to determine what went wrong.

The Boeing 737-500 plane plunged into the sea on Saturday, four minutes after it departed from Jakarta's main airport and disappeared off radar screens.

It was the second major air crash in Indonesia since 189 people were killed in 2018 when a Lion Air Boeing 737 MAX plunged into the Java Sea soon after taking off from Jakarta. The jet that crashed on Saturday was of a largely different design.

The National Transportation Safety Committee (KNKT) expects to download the FDR data within two to five days, its chief Soerjanto



Officials inspect a part of the retrieved black box of Sriwijaya Air flight SJ 182, which crashed into the sea off the Jakarta coast on January 12. PHOTO: AFP

Tjahjono said.

"Hopefully we will be able to unveil the mystery of what caused this accident ... so this becomes a lesson for all of us to avoid this in the future," Soerjanto said.

Earlier yesterday, more human remains were found at the crash site, as well as personal effects, such as wallets containing identification cards.

The plane had been headed to Pontianak on Borneo island, about 740 km (460 miles) from Jakarta.

The KNKT's initial findings showed the plane's engine was running when it hit the water, based on jet parts retrieved from the sea.

"The damage on the fan blade

showed that the engine was still working on impact. This is consistent with the hypothesis that the plane's system was still working at 250 feet altitude," Soerjanto said.

Indonesia's transport ministry said earlier yesterday the jet, which was grounded during the early months of the coronavirus pandemic, had passed an airworthiness inspection on Dec. 14 and had returned to service shortly after.

The Sriwijaya Air plane was nearly 27 years old, much older than Boeing's problem-plagued 737 MAX model.

Older 737 models are widely flown and do not have the stall-prevention system implicated in the MAX safety crisis.

FARMER AGITATION IN INDIA

SC orders stay on new farm laws

REUTERS, New Delhi

India's Supreme Court yesterday ordered an indefinite stay on the implementation of new agricultural laws that have triggered widespread protest from farmers, saying it wanted to protect farmers and would hear their objections.

For more than a month, tens of thousands of farmers have camped on the outskirts of New Delhi, the capital, to protest against reform measures that they say benefit large private buyers and harm growers.

Chief Justice Sharad Bobde told a hearing the Supreme Court would set up a panel to hear the farmers' grievances.

"We have the power to make a committee and the committee can give us the report," he said, ordering the stay for an undisclosed period on the laws passed in September. "We will protect farmers."

Farm leaders said their demand for a full repeal of the laws remained unchanged. They thanked the top court for positive review.

India says the laws aim to modernise an antiquated farming system, bedevilled by wastage and bottlenecks in the supply chain. But farm leaders say the reforms are an attempt to erode a longstanding mechanism that ensures farmers a minimum support price for their crops.

The government has said there was no question of dropping the reforms and eight rounds of talks have failed to find common ground. The two sides are set to meet again on Friday.



ONE PLANET SUMMIT

Save biodiversity to save planet

AFP, Paris

A UN-backed summit of political leaders and CEOs pledging to reverse the accelerating destruction of the natural world was long on promises and short on cash.

The French-led One Planet Summit, backed by the United Nations and the World Bank, saw more than 50 nations support a plan to create protected areas covering 30 percent of global lands and oceans.

The so-called "30-30" initiative could become the cornerstone of a critical biodiversity meet in Kunming, China, postponed last year due to the coronavirus pandemic.

While Beijing has yet to announce a new date, sources involved in the preparations say it is likely to take place in early October.

"Until now, we have been destroying our planet, abusing it as if we had a spare one," UN chief Antonio Guterres told the Paris meeting via a video link from New York. "We have been poisoning air, land and water, and filling our oceans with plastic. And now nature is striking back," he said, pointing to the Covid crisis as a case in point.

So far, efforts to restore nature on a global scale have failed spectacularly.

The planet is on the cusp of a mass extinction event -- only the sixth in half-a-billion years -- in which species are disappearing at 100 to 1,000 times the normal "background" rate, most scientists agree.

A landmark 2019 UN report warned that one million species, about one-in-eight, are threatened, mostly due to habitat loss and our ever-expanding appetites.

The impact of climate change has only recently started to kick in. Roughly a football pitch of old-growth tropical forest is felled or goes up in smoke

every six seconds.

A score of biodiversity targets set a decade ago by the world's nations have all been badly missed, Guterres noted.

At risk are the clean air, drinkable water and healthy ecosystems upon which our species -- and most living things -- depend for survival.

The emerging consensus that protecting nature is also essential for the fight against climate change was a dominant theme at the one-day meeting.

"Obviously it is right to focus on climate change," said British Prime Minister Boris Johnson, who will host a critical climate summit in Glasgow come November. "But we won't achieve a real balance with our planet unless we protect nature as well," he added, speaking from London.

The One Planet gathering saw \$10 billion dollars earmarked for the Great Green Wall, a project to restore degraded lands in the Sahel along an 8,000-kilometre band from the Atlantic to the Red Sea.

Some green groups say the 30-30 plan doesn't go far enough, while others caution against unintended consequences.

Swedish climate activist Greta Thunberg threw cold water on the Paris meet in tweet, under the heading "LIVE from #OnePlanetSummit".

"Bla bla nature, Bla bla important, Bla bla ambitious, Bla bla investments, Bla bla opportunity, Bla bla green growth..." she wrote.

Also participating in the summit were German chancellor Angela Merkel, European Central Bank president Christine Lagarde, Canadian prime minister Justin Trudeau, and European Commission president Ursula von der Leyen.



"Bla bla nature, Bla bla important, Bla bla ambitious, Bla bla investments, Bla bla opportunity, Bla bla green growth..."

Swedish climate activist GRETA THUNBERG

China ties 'disturbed', US ties on upswing

Says Indian FM, eyes talks to solve border crisis

REUTERS

India's Foreign Minister Subrahmanyan Jaishankar yesterday said that trust with China had been deeply impaired after last summer's border clash which resulted in the first combat deaths in 45 years.

Ties with the United States, on the other hand, were converging and were likely to expand under the new administration in Washington, India's top diplomat told the Reuters Next conference.

Tensions with China erupted in June, when 20 Indian soldiers were killed in brutal hand-to-hand fighting, while China suffered an unspecified number of casualties in the clash on a disputed section of the border in the western Himalayas.

Both sides have deployed heavily in the contested area, and the escalation poses the most serious military crisis between the nuclear-armed neighbours for decades.

"After 45 years, you've actually had bloodshed on the border. And that's had a huge impact on public opinion and politically... really the impact of trust and confidence in India where China and their relationship is concerned. That has been profoundly disturbed," Jaishankar said.

The two countries fought a border war in 1962, but until last summer they had largely kept a lid on tensions along the Line of Actual Control, the de facto border, while expanding commercial ties.

"Now last year, for reasons which are not clear to us, the Chinese really brought

an enormous military force to one part of the border. And then at the Line of Actual Control, obviously we moved up when we saw them coming and that has sort of created, friction points along the Line of Actual Control," Jaishankar said.

Several rounds of military and diplomatic negotiations have taken place but there has been no pullback of forces from the frontline. India expects the talks to lead to an amicable solution, the Indian army chief Manoj Mukund Narvane said yesterday.

Jaishankar said relations with the United States were on the upswing and he was confident about its direction under the incoming Biden administration.

"When I look at many of the challenges we face, the US is going to be much more open looking for partners and I'm confident about where we are going with the relationship."

India has built close defence ties with Washington, buying more than \$20 billion of weapons over the last 15 years, as it diversifies away from traditional supplier Russia.

Together with US allies Japan and Australia, it has participated in naval exercises in the Indian Ocean which security analysts say is part of attempts to balance China's assertive actions in the region.

"Structurally the relationship with the US is very very sound, it has very unique elements, there is political convergence, growing security and defence convergence," Jaishankar said.

NEWS IN BRIEF

Yemen's Huthis defiant as US labels rebels 'terrorists'

Yemen's Huthis were defiant Monday after Washington said it will designate the Iran-backed rebels as terrorists, a last-ditch move under President Donald Trump that the UN and US lawmakers warned would worsen the humanitarian crisis. Unless Congress blocks the decision, the Huthis will be blacklisted on January 19 -- one day before the inauguration of President-elect Joe Biden, whose aides had hoped to push to end Yemen's devastating six-year war. The decision, announced by US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, could complicate Biden's promised efforts to restart diplomacy with Iran and reassess Washington's alliance with Saudi, which has led a bloody offensive in Yemen.

State Dept prematurely announces Trump departure

The US State Department's website prematurely announced that President Donald Trump had left office Monday, sending social media into a tailspin on what happened. "Donald J. Trump's term ended 2021-01-11 19:49:00," Trump's official biography page said briefly on Monday before being taken down, with internet users instead seeing a message that there was a technical error. The State Department did not immediately respond to a question on whether the incident was the result of hacking or a glitch. But it appeared clear that Trump -- who remains president on the White House website -- had not found an uncharacteristically subtle way to quit through a hard-to-find page.

China will give Myanmar some free Covid vaccines

China will give Myanmar a batch of coronavirus vaccines for free, the Chinese foreign ministry announced yesterday, as the government's top diplomat wrapped up a two-day visit to Myanmar. "China will continue to provide anti-epidemic materials according to Myanmar's needs. We shall give a batch of coronavirus for free and will continue discussions on vaccine cooperation," the ministry said in a statement. The ministry also said that when top diplomat, Wang Yi, met the commander-in-chief of the Myanmar military, Senior General Min Aung Hlaing, he sought the support of the military for a China-Myanmar Economic Corridor. The corridor is a network - some of it existing and some planned - of transport and other infrastructure projects passing through areas where ethnic minority factions battle each other and government forces. After leaving Myanmar, Wang Yi, China's state councillor and foreign minister, will visit Indonesia, Brunei and the Philippines before returning to China on Jan. 16.

Gorillas at San Diego zoo test positive for Covid-19



At least two gorillas at California's San Diego Zoo have caught the coronavirus, the first known instance of natural transmission to great apes, officials said Monday. Two primates began coughing last week and have since tested positive for Covid-19, while a third is showing symptoms, Governor Gavin Newsom said. They are thought to have contracted the virus from an asymptomatic zoo worker, though this has yet to be confirmed. Gorillas share up to 98 percent of their DNA with humans, and studies have found that some non-human primates are susceptible to Covid-19 infection. It is not yet known if the gorillas will have a serious reaction to the disease that has killed 1.94 million humans, or if other troop members have also been infected.

SOURCE: AFP, REUTERS