

NEWS IN BRIEF

Iran leader Twitter account posts warning to Trump

The Twitter account of Iran's Supreme Leader yesterday carried the image of a golfer resembling Donald Trump apparently being targeted by a drone, vowing revenge over the killing of a top Iranian general in a US drone attack.

TV audience for Biden inauguration tops Trump's

Roughly 40 million people watched live coverage of Joe Biden's inauguration as US president on six TV networks, according to Nielsen data released on Thursday, a 4% increase over the number that tuned in for Donald Trump's swearing-in four years ago.

At least five mine workers killed in blast in Karnataka

At least five mine workers were killed in southern India when their trucks carrying blasting material exploded, officials said yesterday. Local media said the toll could be higher.

Rapid virus test prices 'halved' for poorer nations

Poorer countries will have access to hundreds of millions more rapid Covid-19 tests following a deal to slash prices in half and boost production, Unitaid said yesterday.

NEW START TREATY WITH RUSSIA

Moscow hails Biden's extension proposal

AFP, Washington

Moscow yesterday welcomed US President Joe Biden's proposal to extend New START with Russia by 5 years, days before the expiration of the last nuclear reduction treaty between the two powers.

The announcement on the first full day of Biden's presidency is intended to prevent a nuclear arms race but makes clear he will not attempt a "reset" of relations as attempted in varying forms by every post-Cold War president.

The accord restricts the former Cold War rivals to a maximum of 1,550 deployed warheads each, a cut of about 30 percent from a limit set in 2002, and 800 launchers and bombers -- enough to blow up the world many times over.

The treaty expires on February 5. Talks last year stalled over Trump's insistence that China also become a party to the agreement, even though Beijing said it would not participate.

"The United States intends to seek a five-year extension of New START, as the treaty permits," White House press secretary Jen Psaki told reporters.

But she said that the new intelligence chief, Avril Haines, would also start an investigation into Russia's suspected poisoning of Kremlin critic Alexei Navalny as well as on Russia's alleged election interference and on whether it was behind the massive SolarWinds hack that shook the US government and corporations.

"We can only welcome the political will to extend this document," Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov told reporters. He said Moscow needed more time to study the US administration's offer.



A colleague of the crew of Sriwijaya Air flight SJ 182, which crashed into the sea, throws flowers and petals from the deck of Indonesia's Naval ship KRI Semarang as they visit the site of the crash to pay their tribute, at the sea off the Jakarta coast, Indonesia, yesterday. The plane crash killed all 62 on board.

PHOTO: REUTERS

What will survive of US MidEast policy under Biden?

REUTERS

Trump Heights, Trump Square, Trump train terminal: Israel isn't shy about honouring Donald Trump, who is widely admired among Israelis for his staunch support of their country.

In four years, Trump overturned decades of US policy in the Middle East. Joe Biden will want to undo many of those changes during his presidency, but his freedom of manoeuvre will be limited.

Biden and his team have said they will restore ties with the Palestinians that were cut by Trump, resume aid and reject unilateral actions, such as construction of Israeli settlements on occupied territory.

At his Senate confirmation hearing on Tuesday, Biden's choice for secretary of state, Antony Blinken, said the US embassy in Israel would remain in Jerusalem, which Trump recognised as Israel's capital.

Four Trump-brokered diplomatic deals between Israel and Arab states are also likely to remain - they have bipartisan support in Washington.

So too is Trump's acceptance of Israeli sovereignty over the occupied Golan Heights, which Israel captured from Syria in a 1967 war and annexed in a move not recognised internationally.

Blinken also signalled that countering Iran would be central to Biden's Middle East agenda.

By imposing crippling sanctions, Trump was able to cripple Iranian economy to such extent that, to some critics, it will be impossible for Biden to reverse the actions.

And Blinken said the United States was "a long way" from rejoining the 2015 pact with Iran - restraining Tehran's nuclear programme - which the United States quit under Trump.

Reflecting the uncertainty over new US administration's Iran policy, newspapers in Arab states of the Gulf gave a cautious welcome to Biden.

Saudi Arabia's Foreign Minister Prince Faisal bin Farhan voiced optimism that relations between Riyadh and Washington will be "excellent" under Biden. His comments come despite Biden's pledge during his election campaign to treat the kingdom as a "pariah" over its human rights failings and to end US support to a Saudi-led military campaign in war-ravaged Yemen.

Despite Biden is expected to continue the path of his former boss president Barack Obama, his administration's actions in the coming months will set the course of US's Middle East policy.



SOURCE: AFP, REUTERS, CNN



Protesters affiliated with a faction of the ruling Nepal Communist Party take part in a rally against the dissolution of parliament, in Kathmandu, Nepal yesterday.

PHOTO: REUTERS

ROW OVER MEDIA LAW

Google threatens to block Australians

REUTERS, Sydney

Alphabet Inc's Google yesterday said it would block its search engine in Australia if the government proceeds with a new code that would force it and Facebook Inc to pay media companies for the right to use their content.

Google's threat escalates a battle with publishers such as News Corp that is being closely watched around the world. Australia is on course to pass laws that would make tech giants negotiate payments with local publishers and broadcasters for content included in search results or news feeds.

"Coupled with the unmanageable financial and operational risk if this version of the Code were to become law, it would give us no real choice but to stop making Google Search available in Australia," Mel Silva, managing director for Australia and New Zealand, told a senate committee.

Google's comments drew a sharp rebuke from Australian Prime Minister Scott Morrison who said the country makes its rules for "things you can do in Australia."

"People who want to work with that in Australia, you're very welcome. But we don't respond to threats," Morrison told reporters.

Google has called the code overly broad and said that without revisions, offering even a limited search tool would be too risky. The United States government this week asked Australia to scrap the proposed laws and suggested Australia should pursue a voluntary code instead.

India's national security 'thoroughly compromised'

Says Sonia on TV anchor's chats on Balakot strikes

NDTV ONLINE

The government's silence over the leaked WhatsApp chats of TV anchor Arnab Goswami on the Balakot strikes is "deafening", Congress president Sonia Gandhi said yesterday, alleging that national security had been "thoroughly compromised".

In her opening remarks at a meeting of the Congress Working Committee (CWC), Sonia Gandhi also took on the government over the farmer protests, alleging "shocking insensitivity and arrogance" and what she called a charade of consultations between the centre and protesters.

"Very recently there have been very disturbing reports on how national security has been so thoroughly compromised. I think just a few days back, Antony-ji (former Defence Minister AK Antony) had said that leaking of official secrets of military operations is treason. Yet the silence from the Government's side on what has been revealed has been deafening," Sonia

Gandhi said in her virtual address.

"Those who give certificates of patriotism and nationalism to others now stand totally exposed."

In its investigations into a TV ratings scam, Mumbai Police has submitted to a court WhatsApp transcripts of chats between Republic TV's Arnab Goswami and Partho Dasgupta, the former CEO of ratings agency BARC, which reveal the TV anchor as saying three days before the Balakot strike that "something big will happen", that it would be "bigger than a normal strike" and "the government is confident of striking in a way that people will be elated."

The conversation is dated February 23, 2019, three days before India sent Air Force fighter jets to Balakot in Pakistan to destroy a Jaish-e-Mohammad terror base in retaliation for the terror attack in Pulwama, in which over 40 soldiers were killed.

The CWC meeting also decided that a new Congress president will be elected in June after five state elections.



'BEST' CARBON CAPTURE TECH Musk offers \$100m prize

REUTERS

Tesla Inc chief and billionaire entrepreneur Elon Musk on Thursday took to Twitter to promise a \$100 million prize for development of the "best" technology to capture carbon dioxide emissions.

Capturing planet-warming emissions is becoming a critical part of many plans to keep climate change in check, but very little progress has been made on the technology to date, with efforts focused on cutting emissions rather than taking carbon out of the air.

countries are to meet net-zero emissions targets.

"Am donating \$100M towards a prize for best carbon capture technology," Musk wrote in a tweet, followed by a second tweet that promised "Details next week."

Musk, who co-founded and sold Internet payments company PayPal Holdings Inc, now leads some of the most futuristic companies in the world.

Besides Tesla, he heads rocket company SpaceX and Neuralink, a startup that is developing ultra-high bandwidth brain-machine interfaces to connect the human brain to computers.

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