



Worshippers perform the evening (Isha) prayers near the Kaaba, Islam's holiest shrine, in the Grand Mosque in the holy city of Makkah on Friday, a week prior to the start of the annual hajj pilgrimage in the holy city. — AFP

## IRANIANS UP IN ARMS AS APPLE REMOVES TOP APPS

**TEHRAN:** Iranians were joined by two ministers yesterday in protesting after Apple removed popular apps from its store, a move the American company says was made to comply with US sanctions. "Today, respecting consumers' rights is a basic principle which Apple has not followed," Information and Communication Technology Minister Mohammad Javad Azari Jahromi tweeted, promising to "legally pursue" the case. "IT should be used for making human life better and comfortable not a tool for discrimination between countries," he wrote.

Jahromi said later yesterday on Instagram that he and Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif were working together to address the issue. The hashtag #StopRemovingIranianApps has been trending on Iranian social media for several days, after Apple removed at least 10 of the country's most popular apps from its online store. Those now missing include Amazon-style shopping apps Digikala and Bamilo, ride-hailing apps Snapp and Tap30, discount store Takhfifan and a brunch delivery service called Delion.

"We are unable to include your app on the App Store," a message sent to some of those companies reportedly said. "Under the US sanctions regulations, the App Store cannot host, distribute, or do business with apps or developers connected to certain US embargoed countries."

The United States lifted some sanctions on Iran, particularly in the aviation sector, under a 2015 nuclear deal that saw Tehran limit its atomic program. But American individuals and companies are still barred from doing any business with Iranians because of

much older and non-nuclear related sanctions on the Islamic republic.

### 'On the right track'

"There are removed apps which did not have financial transactions, and due to sanctions, some of them were registered in countries other than Iran too," Azari Jahromi tweeted. "The US does not sanction our weak points. They sanction our points of strength... This should make us country officials support this field," he said in a video published on the government's website. "The recent action by the US shows we are on the right track... because they fear us and are removing these (apps)". Some Iranian apps in the same category of those that have been removed are still available on the app store. Iran's youthful and well-connected population own some 40 million smart phones, six million of them iPhones, the government-owned Iran Daily newspaper reported. "Apple has not provided any clear answers to our messages," the daily yesterday quoted Mehdi Taghizadeh, vice chairman at Delion, as saying. More than 4,500 Iranian netizens have signed an online petition urging Apple chief executive Tim Cook "to recognize our rights as Apple customers".

"I've always been an Apple user, but despite preferring them... I'm now going to switch to Android," a user going by the name Xerxes wrote on Twitter. "Technology is best when it brings people together. We shouldn't limit or keep others from using and developing it!" tweeted Ferial Govashiri, who used to work as a personal assistant to former US president Barack Obama and is now at Netflix. — AFP

## IRAN DRONES POSE RISING THREAT IN ARABIAN GULF

**ABOARD THE USS NIMITZ:** High above the Arabian Gulf, an Iranian drone crosses the path of American fighter jets lining up to land on the USS Nimitz. The drone buzzes across the sky more than a mile above the massive aircraft carrier and is spotted by the fighters. It is unarmed. But for the senior Navy commanders on the ship, the presence of the enemy drone so close is worrying. Their biggest fear is the surveillance aircraft will start carrying weapons, posing a more direct threat to US vessels transiting one of the world's most significant strategic and economic international waterways.

"It's just a matter of time before we see that," said Navy Rear Adm Bill Byrne, commander of the carrier strike group that includes the Nimitz. He said the Iranian drone activity has "generated a lot of discussion" and was becoming an increasingly pressing matter of concern. If, at some point, Byrne believes a drone is threatening his ship, he and his staff would have to carefully proceed through the required responses - efforts at communication, sounding the horn, firing flares and warning shots, and flying a helicopter close to the unmanned vehicle. If all those efforts fail and he still perceives a threat, Byrne said it would be his duty, his "responsibility," to shoot down the Iranian drone.

So far, it hasn't come to that. But the drones have become an even more dangerous security risk as US carriers in the Persian Gulf like the Nimitz play a key role in Iraq and Syria. Planes from these ships are regularly flying to each country to bomb militants fighting with the Islamic State group and other targets. From the Nimitz alone, US fighter jets flew missions resulting in at least 350 bombs being dropped on IS militants just in the last month.

Iran has routinely challenged US ships and aircraft across the Gulf, asserting at times that the entire waterway is its territory. Navy commanders say Iran's unpredictable behavior is the biggest safety hazard. "Iranians don't always follow the rules," Byrne said. "There is a well-established set of norms, standards and laws. They don't tend to follow them."

### 'Real challenge'

To counter the threat, Pentagon experts are searching for new ways to deter, defeat or disable the drones.

According to Byrne and Cdr Dave Kurtz, the Nimitz's executive officer, Iranian drones fly over the carrier strike group almost daily. They said the danger is that as the F/A-18 fighters return from their missions in Iraq and Syria, they circle overhead, lining up for their turn to land on the carrier. Even if the Iranian drones are only meant to annoy, their buzzing across the American flight paths risks an accident.

Up in the carrier's control room, a book on Iranian naval and maritime forces sits above the radar screen. Commanders on the ship announce when a drone appears. Then, they go through a careful, planned response of attempted radio calls and warnings. Gen Joseph Votel, the top US commander in the Middle East, visited the Nimitz on Thursday, also stopping on the nearby USS Vella Gulf, a guided missile cruiser. The drone, he said, also flew over that ship. "The proliferation of drones is a real challenge," said Votel, who was finishing his 10-day trip to the Middle East and Afghanistan. "It's growing exponentially."

Speaking with traveling reporters, Votel said the Pentagon has sought to devise more high-tech ways to handle the drones through the Joint Improvised-Threat Defeat Organization, originally set up in 2006 to counter improvised explosive devices used by insurgents in Iraq and Afghanistan to kill and maim American troops. Much as it did with that decade-old roadside bomb battle, the organization now focuses on how to deal with Iran's drones, Votel said. He didn't provide details, but he acknowledged that US cyber capabilities could be used to defeat a drone or the network controlling it.

The military is training troops on drone response, he said. But right now, said Byrne, they're still following their normal procedures. And he still hasn't been forced to shoot one down. Byrne described how a helicopter from the Nimitz flew by the drone to ensure it wasn't weaponized. In the month the Nimitz has been in the Gulf, efforts to speak with the drone operators have been hit or miss, he said. "Sometimes they answer, sometimes they don't," he said, echoing experiences American forces have had with small Iranian fast boats that pose a similar threat of coming too close by sea. When the Iranians do answer, Byrne said, they often "challenge our assertion that they are flying into danger." — AP

## SCORES FLEE AS HURRICANE WREAKS HAVOC...

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We had businesses and homes that are completely destroyed, and certainly a number of lives that have been disrupted significantly," said CJ Wax, the mayor of Rockport. "We have cross-functional teams that are out trying to assess the damage and determine what is needed to begin the recovery process, but it is still tropical storm-force winds and blinding rain," he told MSNBC.

Rockport's local airport was among the places to suffer major damage, with a light aircraft crushed by a building collapse. Homes were also burnt to the ground as power cables caught fire. Around 190,000 customers were without power in Rockport and the nearby town of Corpus Christi while another 62,000 were without power in Houston, the state's largest city.

While most residents did heed advice to flee the worst-hit areas, some hunkered down for the night in Corpus Christi, in buildings that seemed to bend in the wind. "I've never seen anything like this. We do have strong winds - we're right next to the bay - but nothing like last night," Brandon Gonzalez, who owns a store in the town, told AFP. "I mean, I was even a little bit terrified of what was going to happen. Our building was just shaking back and forth. It really got bad. I think we held up pretty good though."

While the damage in Houston was less extensive, the suburb of Sienna Plantation suffered an apparent tornado hit which knocked down walls and tore tiles off roofs, according to the local KTRK network. While there were no immediate reports of casualties, the Coast Guard was responding to Mayday calls from three tugboats near Port Aransas. "Coast Guard Air Station Corpus Christi directed the launch of two MH-65 Dolphin helicopter aircrews that are en route for rescue," it said in a statement.

Brain McNoldy, a hurricane expert at the University of Miami, said a strong ridge of high pressure was preventing the storm from dispersing. "You would expect the hurricane to just keep going inland over Texas, but that ridge coming into place there is just stopping everything from moving and that's what's going to keep Harvey in place for the next days," he told AFP. "A tropical cyclone - it could even be a depression it

doesn't matter - makes a lot of rain, so if that sits over you for one day, two or three or four you just keep accumulating rain. It may stay three or four days, and even up to six days. There's no sign of it really moving in a foreseeable future."

The NHC warned of likely "catastrophic and life-threatening flooding" due to the massive rainfall forecast and the huge storm surge, which could reach nearly four meters in some places. Trump granted Texas Governor Greg Abbott's request to declare a "major disaster" zone in the state to speed federal aid to the millions in harm's way. Abbott in turn activated more than 1,000 National Guardsmen to help with evacuation and recovery.

After authorities issued a series of alerts about the dangers from the storm, supermarket aisles were stripped bare, while homes and shops had boarded up windows. Coastal Texas is a fast-growing area, with some 1.5 million people moving into the region since 1999. It is also home to a large number of oil refineries. US authorities said about 22 percent of crude production in the Gulf of Mexico, accounting for more than 375,000 barrels a day, was shut down as of Friday. Harvey is the most powerful hurricane to hit the mainland since Wilma struck Florida 12 years ago. 2005 was a huge year for hurricanes - before Wilma, Hurricane Katrina pummeled New Orleans, leaving more than 1,800 dead.

The then-president Bush faced severe criticism after federal authorities appeared unprepared for the devastating damage inflicted by Hurricane Katrina. Wary of any accusation of complacency, Trump said he was fully engaged with relief efforts. "Closely monitoring #HurricaneHarvey from Camp David. We are leaving nothing to chance. City, State and Federal Govs. working great together," he wrote on Twitter.

Many residents who fled the worst-affected areas headed for the city of San Antonio, where temporary shelters are run by the fire department. "I felt like I didn't want what happened to the guys in New Orleans... I didn't want that to happen to me," Michael Allen, an evacuee from Corpus Christi, told AFP. "I only got what you see me with. Everything I had, I had to leave. Everything. It was, bring it with me or lose my life and I felt like I should save my life." — AFP



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