

International

'160 attempts daily' to access online porn in UK parliament

Britain's Northern Ireland minister resigns over ill-health

LONDON: Around 160 requests a day were made in late 2017 to access pornography websites from computers within the Houses of Parliament, Britain's Press Association (PA) reported yesterday. A total of 24,473 attempts were made since last June's general election from devices connected to the parliamentary network, according to data obtained by a PA Freedom of Information (FOI) request. Prime Minister Theresa May is already reeling from a wave of sexual misconduct allegations in Westminster. She was forced to dump minister and long-time friend Damian Green last month after he apparently misled police over claims pornography was found on computers in his Westminster office in 2008.

The parliamentary internet network is used by MPs, Lords in the upper house and their staff. Authorities claim most attempts are not deliberate and point to a decrease in recent years. Parliament blocked 113,208 attempts in 2016, down from 213,020 the previous year. "All pornographic websites are blocked by parliament's computer network," a parliamentary spokesman told PA. "The vast majority of 'attempts' to access them are not deliberate. "This data also covers personal devices used when logged on to parliament's guest Wi-Fi."

Minister resigns

In another development, Britain's Northern Ireland Secretary James Brokenshire resigned from his post yesterday due to ill-health, nearly a year to

the day since the collapse of the once-troubled province's semi-autonomous government. Brokenshire resigned in a letter to Prime Minister Theresa May saying he needed surgery, on the same day the premier plans a wider reshuffle of her cabinet.

"I have a small lesion in my right lung which needs to be removed. Clearly, my long term health and my family are my priorities and I intend to proceed with surgery at the earliest opportunity," he wrote. Brokenshire, 50, has hosted repeated unsuccessful negotiations between republicans Sinn Fein and the Democratic Unionist Party to form a power-sharing executive in British-ruled Northern Ireland. Following the breakdown of talks, the province is on the brink of direct rule by civil servants in London who have already been managing its budget.

The prime minister backed Brokenshire's decision to step down at "an important moment for politics in Northern Ireland", thanking him for his efforts with a letter in which she urged the parties to re-establish the power-sharing government. The administration collapsed in January last year after Sinn Fein pulled out over a scandal involving a renewable energy funding scheme. The government was set up as a result of the 1998 Good Friday agreement, which brought to an end three decades of mostly sectarian conflict in Northern Ireland that claimed the lives of 3,500 people.

Talks are still stalled on two key demands from



LONDON: British Prime Minister Theresa May (center) walks out of 10 Downing street with newly appointed chairman of the Conservative Party Brandon Lewis (4th left) and deputy James Cleverly (2nd right) in London yesterday. British Prime Minister Theresa May began a major reshuffle of her cabinet by replacing the chairman of her Conservative Party, ahead of more ministerial changes. —AFP

Sinn Fein, which backs the legalization of same-sex marriage and legal protection for the Irish language. Tensions have been raised further after the DUP struck a power deal with May's ruling Conservatives after a general election in June, in which she lost her

parliamentary majority. Sinn Fein argues that the deal gives the DUP unfair influence over British government policy in Northern Ireland, including over Brexit negotiations that will have major implications for Ireland's economy. — Agencies

Pentagon, diplomats urged to play bigger role on arms sales

WASHINGTON: The Trump administration is nearing completion of a new "Buy American" plan that calls for US military attaches and diplomats to help drum up billions of dollars more in business overseas for the American weapons industry, going beyond the assistance they currently provide, US officials said. President Donald Trump as early as February is expected to announce a "whole of government" effort to ease export rules on purchases by foreign countries of US-made military equipment, from fighter jets and drones to warships and artillery, according to people familiar with the plan.

Trump is seeking to fulfill a 2016 election campaign promise to create jobs in the United States by selling more goods and services abroad to bring down the US trade deficit from a six-year high of \$50 billion. The administration is also under pressure from US defense contractors facing growing competition from foreign rivals such as China and Russia. But any loosening of the restrictions on weapons sales would be in defiance of human rights and arms control advocates who said there was too great a risk of fueling violence in regions such as the Middle East and South Asia or arms being diverted to be used in terrorist attacks.

Besides greater use of a network of military and commercial attaches already stationed at US embassies in foreign capitals, senior officials who spoke on condition of anonymity said another thrust of the plan will be to set in motion a realignment of the International Trafficking in Arms Regulations (ITAR). It is a central policy governing arms exports since 1976 and has not been fully revamped in more than three decades.

This expanded government effort on behalf of American arms makers, together with looser restrictions on weapons exports and more favorable treatment of sales to non-NATO allies and partners, could bring additional billions of dollars in deals and more jobs, a senior US official said, without providing specifics. The strategy of having the Pentagon and the US State Department take a more active role in securing foreign arms deals could especially benefit major defense contractors such as Lockheed Martin and Boeing Co.

"We want to see those guys, the commercial and military attaches, unfettered to be salesmen for this stuff, to be promoters," said the senior administration official, who is close to the internal deliberations and spoke on condition of anonymity. A State Department official, asked to confirm details of the coming new policy, said the revamped approach "gives our partners a greater capacity to help share the burden of international security, benefits the defense industrial base and will provide more good jobs for American workers." The White House and Pentagon declined official comment.

Defense industry officials and lobbyists have privately welcomed what they expect will be a more sales-friendly approach. It is unclear how deeply the diplomats and military officers overseas will delve into dealmaking and what guidelines will be established, said officials in the administration. Trump, a Republican, has the legal authority to direct government embassy "security assistance officers," both military personnel and civilians, to do more to help drive arms sales. Administration officials see this group, which already has duties such as managing military aid overseas and providing information to foreign governments for buying US arms, as underutilized by previous presidents.

"Back seat" for human rights?

One national security analyst said that easing export restrictions to allow defense contractors to reap greater profits internationally would increase the danger of top-of-the-line US weapons going to governments with poor human rights records or being used by militants. —Reuters

With a renewed vigor, US Supreme Court scrutinizes curbs on voting

WASHINGTON: Government officials across the United States try to maintain accurate voter rolls by removing people who have died or moved away. But a case coming before the US Supreme Court tomorrow explores whether some states are aggressively purging voter rolls in a way that disenfranchises thousands of voters. The justices will hear arguments in Republican-governed Ohio's appeal of a lower court ruling that blocked its policy of erasing from voter registration lists people who do not regularly cast a ballot.

Under the policy, such registration is deleted if the person goes six years without either voting or contacting state voting officials. "Voting is the foundation of our democracy, and it is much too important to treat as a 'use it or lose it' right," said Stuart Naifeh, a voting rights lawyer with liberal advocacy group Demos, which is representing plaintiffs challenging Ohio's policy along with the American Civil Liberties Union.

Voting rights has been an important theme before the Supreme Court during their nine-month term that began in October, in particular the question of whether actions by state leaders have disenfranchised thousands of voters either by marginalizing their electoral clout or by prohibiting them from voting. Two other cases could have a big impact on US elections. At issue is whether Republican-drawn electoral districts in Wisconsin and Democratic-drawn districts in Maryland were fashioned to entrench the majority party in power in such an extreme way that they violated the constitutional rights of certain voters. The practice is called partisan gerrymandering.

The conservative-majority court also could take up other voting rights disputes this term including a bid by Texas to revive Republican-drawn electoral districts that were thrown out by a lower court for discriminating against black and Hispanic voters. Most states periodically

Bannon backs away from remarks that drew Trump's ire

WASHINGTON: Former Donald Trump adviser Steve Bannon on Sunday sought to back away from incendiary remarks quoted in an explosive new book that have landed him in hot water with the president he helped elect. Bannon has found himself in dire straits since excerpts of Paul Wolff's "Fire and Fury: Inside the Trump White House" - an explosive behind-the-scenes account that questions the president's fitness for office - were first published on Wednesday.

He has been abandoned by financial patrons, condemned by erstwhile political allies and ridiculed by Trump himself over his reported comments in the book, which he has not denied making. In the book, Bannon is quoted as saying a pre-election meeting involving son Donald Trump Jr. and a Kremlin-linked Russian lawyer was "treasonous," and that prosecutors investigating possible collusion between the Trump campaign and Russia would "crack Don Junior like an egg on national TV."

In a statement to the Axios news website, Bannon, who was a senior Trump

adviser until he was ousted in August, said: "Donald Trump Jr is both a patriot and a good man. He has been relentless in his advocacy for his father and the agenda that has helped turn our country around." His criticism, Bannon said, was aimed at one-time Trump campaign chairman Paul Manafort, "a seasoned campaign professional" who "should have known (the Russians) are duplicitous, cunning and not our friends."

'I regret my delay'

But in "Fire and Fury," Bannon is quoted as saying that "the top three guys in the campaign" - Manafort, Donald Jr and Trump's son-in-law Jared Kushner attended the meeting he described as "treasonous." The closest Bannon came to an actual apology was saying he regretted the timing of his response. "I regret that my delay in responding to the inaccurate reporting regarding Don Jr has diverted attention from the president's historical accomplishments."

Trump on Sunday continued his daily assault on "Fire and Fury" and its author, tweeting that the book - which paints him as disengaged, ill-informed and unstable, with signs of serious memory loss - was a "Fake Book, written by a totally discredited author." A day earlier, seeking to refute Wolff's suggestion that he lacked stability, Trump called himself a "very stable genius." Senior Trump policy adviser Stephen Miller treated the book derisively while insisting that his boss was in fact "a



WASHINGTON: Photo shows the US Supreme Court in Washington, DC. —AFP

cleanse their voter rolls to prevent irregularities, such as someone voting more than once on Election Day. Ohio is one of seven states, along with Georgia, Montana, Oklahoma, Oregon, Pennsylvania and West Virginia, that purge infrequent voters from registration lists, according to the plaintiffs who sued Ohio in 2016. "Among those, Ohio is the most aggressive. It has the shortest timeline for removing people for non-voting," Naifeh said.

'Efficiency and integrity'

Republican Ohio Secretary of State John Husted noted that the state's policy has been in place since the 1990s under Republican and Democratic secretaries of state. "Maintaining the integrity of the voter rolls is essential to conducting an election with efficiency and integrity," Husted said when the court agreed to hear the case last

May. In Ohio, registered voters do not vote for two years are sent registration confirmation notices. If they do not respond and do not vote over the following four years, they are purged.

Democrats have accused Republicans of taking steps at the state level, including laws requiring certain types of government-issued identification, intended to suppress the vote of minorities, poor people and others who generally favor Democratic candidates. A 2016 Reuters analysis found roughly twice the rate of voter purging in Democratic-leaning neighborhoods in Ohio's three largest counties as in Republican-leaning neighborhoods. The 6th US Circuit Court of Appeals in Cincinnati ruled in September 2016 that Ohio's policy ran afoul of a 1993 law that prohibits states from striking registered voters "by reason of the person's failure to vote." — Reuters



WASHINGTON: A man holds a copy of the book 'Fire and Fury: Inside the Trump White House' by Michael Wolff after buying it at a bookstore in Washington, DC. — AFP

political genius," in an interview with CNN on Sunday. Wolff, Miller said, "is a garbage author of a garbage book." He assailed Bannon, reportedly a key source for the author, as "vindictive" and "out of touch with reality."

'Not going to succeed'

Wolff defended his work on Sunday, telling NBC he "absolutely did not" violate any off-the-record agreements in his

reporting but conceding, of the total three hours he said he spent with Trump, that the president "probably did not think of them as interviews." He also portrayed a high level of concern in the White House over whether Trump risks being removed from office as unfit, as is possible-if difficult under the constitution's 25th Amendment. Almost daily, he said, White House aides would say, "We're not at a 25th Amendment level yet." —AFP