

International

US indicts 13 Russians for vote interference, secret campaign

Facebook faces big challenge to prevent meddling

WASHINGTON: The US special prosecutor investigating Moscow's meddling in the 2016 presidential election has indicted 13 Russians for allegedly running a secret campaign to tilt the vote, prompting claims of vindication from President Donald Trump. The indictment—which includes the first charges laid by special counsel Robert Mueller for election interference—detailed a stunning operation launched in 2014 in a bid to sow social division in the US and influence American politics “including the presidential election of 2016.” Mueller alleges that by mid-2016, the campaign—under the direction of Yevgeny Prigozhin, a close ally of Russian President Vladimir Putin—became focused on boosting Trump and demeaning his rivals including Democrat Hillary Clinton. It allegedly involved “hundreds” of people working in shifts and with a budget of millions of dollars. Three companies were also indicted. Moscow dismissed the allegations as “absurd.”

According to the indictment, members of the group posed as US citizens on Facebook, Twitter, YouTube and Instagram, posting content that reached “significant numbers” of Americans. The group was allegedly in contact with “unwitting” members of the Trump campaign, but had a broader “strategic goal to sow discord in the US political system.” Content created by the group was retweeted by the president's two eldest sons Don Jr and Eric, as well as other top campaign officials and members of Trump's inner circle. “There is no allegation in this indictment that any American was a knowing participant in this illegal activity,” said Deputy Attorney General Rod Rosenstein. He added that there was also no judgment on whether the campaign “altered the outcome.”



13 accused of running secret campaign to tilt the vote

ble-edged sword for Trump, who has repeatedly dismissed claims of Russian interference as “fake news” and a “hoax” designed to take away from his election victory.

On one hand, they confirm Russia interference, but they also seem to clear his campaign of knowing involvement with at least a portion of Moscow's efforts to influence the contest. Russia is also suspected of hacking and leaking embarrassing Democratic emails. Four Trump campaign officials, including his campaign manager Paul Manafort and his national security advisor Michael Flynn, have already been indicted as part of Mueller's broader investigation. Trump has publicly mulled firing the former FBI director and has repeatedly sought to influence his investigation through public warnings. On Friday, Trump seemed to say that the new indictments should put an end to allegations of campaign collusion. “It's time we stop the outlandish partisan attacks, wild and false allegations, and far-fetched theories, which only serve to further the agendas of bad actors, like Russia,” he said in a subsequent statement issued by the White House.

Troll farm

The group was said to be based in Putin's home town of Saint Petersburg,

but some of the accused traveled to the United States for political intelligence gathering. Stops included Nevada, California, New Mexico, Colorado, Illinois, Michigan a pivotal state in the election-Louisiana, Texas, Georgia and New York, according to the indictment. An unnamed Texas-based American political operative is said to have instructed them to focus on so-called “purple states”—which swing between Republican and Democratic control.

The group organized pro-Trump rallies in Florida, New York and North Carolina, but much of its work was focused on producing material that was damaging to Clinton and Trump's Republican rivals Ted Cruz and Marco Rubio. The group purchased ads on social media and other websites either “expressly advocating for the election of then-candidate Trump or expressly opposing Clinton,” the indictment said. Other ads encouraged blacks and Muslims not to vote, and alleged voter fraud in



WASHINGTON: US Deputy Attorney General Rod Rosenstein announces the indictment of 13 Russian nationals and 3 Russian organizations for meddling in the 2016 US presidential election. —AFP

several states. Two of the firms are said to have Russian government contracts.

Facebook's challenge

The Russian influence operation designed to tamper with the 2016 US presidential election used a combination of old-school espionage tactics and 21st-century technologies that will not be easy to stop, even now that the methods have been exposed, experts said. Social media companies, especially Facebook Inc and Twitter Inc, have been under heavy pressure to find ways of stopping what is often referred to as “information warfare” on their services.

The indictment of 13 Russian nationals on Friday, announced by US Special Counsel Robert Mueller, made extensive use of records from Facebook and Instagram, according to people familiar with the matter. Yet the combi-

nation of tactics revealed in the indictment, including the use of shell corporations and stolen IDs, deployment of virtual private networks to avoid online detection, and payments to unwitting Americans, suggests even a company as powerful as Facebook could struggle to stop such activities by itself as they happen. US spy agencies have said Russia would try to interfere in the 2018 midterm elections, again by using social media to spread propaganda. “They can't out of hand stop it, because it's very difficult for them to trace those things,” said Ann Ravel, a former member of the US Federal Election Commission. The clandestine purchase of advertising on the site through fake personas was particularly alarming, she said. To know the identities of ad buyers, internet companies might need to duplicate the “know your customer” practices of banks and regularly share information with authorities, Ravel said. —Agencies

Murder, outrage, impasse: How gun crime bedevils US

WASHINGTON: The United States has once again been forced to confront its deadly distinction as the world's only developed country to be plagued by mass school shootings. After a teenager shot dead 17 people in a Florida high school on Wednesday, there is zero indication that the United States is in any way ready to adopt major new reforms to stop such tragedies occurring again. In a recurring nightmare that appalls millions of Americans and is unfathomable overseas, the Florida carnage was the 18th US school shooting since January 1. Each year, the country loses around 33,000 people to gun violence. Yet each time, the event unfolds in the same way.

First come the horrified reactions, then unity in the face of tragedy, followed by outrage, political polarization and then impasse. If the debate rings hollow, it's because both sides are immutable. At one end stand those who oppose any gun control in the name of the second amendment to the US Constitution, which provides for the right to bear arms. They argue that no law can prevent deranged individuals and criminals from obtaining a weapon, nor from opening fire in a school. Given the dangers, law-abiding citizens might as well be armed to protect themselves.

On the other side stand the likes of former Democratic president Barack Obama, who issued a new appeal for action on Thursday, insisting “we are not powerless.” “Caring for our kids is our first job. And until we can honestly say that we're doing enough to keep them safe from harm, including long overdue, common-sense gun safety laws that most Americans want, then we have to change,” he tweeted. But many gun control advocates have given up hope of meaningful, national reform in a majority-led Republican Congress where Obama failed to enact curbs amid partisan rancor.

Access to guns

Instead reformers concentrate their fight on local politics, trying to convince elected officials in a greater number of states to make criminal and psychiatric background checks compulsory before any gun sale. But even this is often unachievable in a country that places the gun at the heart of its mythology—that of a nation born in the blood of its revolution and which remains proud of its Wild West heroes.

Politicians bankrolled by the National Rifle Association, the powerful lobby group that endorsed Donald Trump's presidential run, refuse even to accept that a firearm is by definition a lethal object and that widening access is risky. On Thursday, Trump delivered a televised address to declare the United States a country in mourning—but avoided all mention of guns. He portrayed the Florida massacre as the act of someone mentally disturbed, without mentioning how the shooter could have acquired an assault rifle at 19, an age at which most Americans cannot legally buy alcohol. —AFP

Britain pleads for 'urgent' EU security deal

MUNICH: British Prime Minister Theresa May pleaded yesterday for an urgent deal with the European Union on post-Brexit security cooperation, warning that citizens' lives were at stake. In a speech at the Munich Security Conference, she acknowledged that no deal currently exists between the EU and a third country “that captures the full depth and breadth of our existing relationship.”

But she said there was no reason both sides could not come up with practical ways to create a “deep and special partnership” on security. “We cannot delay discussions on this,” May said. She also warned European partners not to put politics above cooperation against crime and terrorism. “This cannot be a time when any of us allow competition between partners, rigid institutional restrictions or deep-seated ideology to inhibit our cooperation and jeopardise the security of our citizens,” May told an audience that included European Commission chief Jean-Claude Juncker.

The premier warned that if there was no deal on security by the time Britain leaves the bloc in March 2019, speedy extraditions under the European Arrest Warrant “would

cease”. And if the UK were no longer part of Europol, the EU's law enforcement agency, information sharing would be hampered—undermining the fight against terrorism, organised crime and cyberattacks. “This would damage us both and put all our citizens at greater risk,” May warned, urging European leaders to show “some real creativity and ambition” in coming up with a bespoke UK-EU security pact. “We must now move with urgency to put in place the treaty to protect all European citizens wherever they are in Europe,” May said. Some experts have warned that cooperation on police and security matters could be limited by Britain's refusal to accept the jurisdiction of the European Court of Justice (ECJ) after Brexit. May appeared to respond to those concerns by saying that the UK would “respect the remit” of the ECJ when working with EU agencies, in return for “respect for our unique status as a third country”. “But as a country outside the European Union, we will have our own sovereign legal order, so the European Court of Justice will no longer have jurisdiction in the United Kingdom.”

'Substantial disagreements'

May has in the past drawn criticism for appearing to link security—in which Britain is a major player—with her hopes for a new trade deal with the EU. But there was no hint of that in yesterday's address, the latest in a clutch of speeches by senior British officials recently as the government seeks to clarify its ambitions for Brexit. There has been little progress in recent months in Britain's negotiations with the EU on the



MUNICH: British Prime Minister Theresa May gives a speech during the Munich Security Conference yesterday in Munich, southern Germany. —AFP

island nation's future relationship with the bloc. EU negotiator Michel Barnier warned last week that there were “substantial disagreements” with Britain on a post-Brexit transition period. May's comments came a day after the heads of key British, French and German spy agencies warned in a rare joint appearance that intelligence sharing and cooperation must continue even after Britain leaves the EU. —AFP

Pressure mounts on FBI director to quit

PARKLAND: Pressure is mounting on the FBI director to resign after his agency admitted it failed to investigate a warning that the man accused of killing 17 people at a Florida high school possessed a gun and the desire to kill. The disclosure spread angry disbelief among residents of the Miami suburb of Parkland where Wednesday's massacre unfolded, and led Florida's governor Rick Scott to call for FBI chief Christopher Wray to resign. “The FBI's failure to take action against this killer is unacceptable,” Scott, a Republican, said in a statement. “We constantly promote ‘See something, say something’, and a courageous person did just that to the FBI. And the FBI failed to act.”

Scott's comments came after the Federal Bureau of Investigation said in a statement that a person described as someone close to accused gunman Nikolas Cruz, 19, called an FBI tip line on Jan 5, weeks before the shooting at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School, to report concerns about him. “The caller provided information about Cruz's gun ownership, desire to kill people, erratic behavior, and disturbing social media posts, as well as the potential of him conducting a school shooting,” it said. That information should have been forwarded to the FBI's Miami field office for further investigation, but “we have determined that these protocols were not followed”, it said.

US Attorney General Jeff Sessions said he has ordered a review of FBI procedures following the shooting, carried out by a gunman armed with an AR-15-style assault rifle and numerous ammunition cartridges. “We have spoken with victims and families, and deeply regret the additional pain this causes all those affected by this horrific tragedy,” Wray said in a statement. The FBI has also separately been criticized by some Republicans over its investigation of allegations of Russian meddling in the 2016 presidential election, heaping further scrutiny on the agency led by Wray since President Donald Trump fired James Comey last year. Russia denies any involvement.



LAS VEGAS: People hold up candles during a vigil put together by the Route 91 Foundation at the Las Vegas Community Healing Garden for victims of Wednesday's shooting at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Florida. —AFP

Safety rally

The mishandled information followed a tip-off to the FBI in September about a YouTube comment in which a person named Nikolas Cruz said: “I'm going to be a professional school shooter.” The FBI said it investigated that comment but was unable to trace its origins, closing the inquiry until Cruz surfaced in connection with Wednesday's shooting. Broward County Sheriff Scott Israel told a news conference his office had received about 20 “calls for service” in the last few years regarding Cruz and would scrutinize all of them to see if they were handled properly. But Israel said law enforcement should not be held responsible for Wednesday's tragedy. “The only one to blame for this killing is the killer himself,” he said.

More vigils and funerals will be held over the weekend in and around Parkland. Two gun shows and a rally calling for the firearm safety legislation are due to be held nearby. “We

cannot have one more family, one more student, one more life taken because of a failure to hear and enact comprehensive firearm safety legislature in Florida,” said organizers on Facebook of the rally to be held at the federal courthouse in Fort Lauderdale yesterday. Organizers of the gun shows to be held in Boca Raton and at the Miami-Dade County's fairgrounds could not be reached by Reuters.

The massacre has raised concerns about potential lapses in school security and stirred the ongoing US debate pitting proponents of tougher restrictions on firearms against advocates for gun rights, which are protected by the US Constitution's Second Amendment. Some political leaders including Trump have said mental illness prompted the shooting. Cruz had been expelled for undisclosed disciplinary reasons from the school where the attack occurred. Former classmates have described him as a social outcast trouble-maker with a fascination for weaponry. —Reuters