



'Don't open the door':  
 Activists to thwart ICE

Bangladesh couple challenge wedding tradition



IOWA: Guests arrive at an LGBTQ presidential forum at Coe Colleges Sinclair Auditorium on September 20, 2019 in Cedar Rapids, Iowa. The event is the first public event of the 2020 election cycle to focus entirely on LGBTQ issues. —AFP

**Digital threats multiply ahead of US elections**

The newest threat may be 'deepfake' video and audio

WASHINGTON: It could be a manipulated video embarrassing a candidate. Or a computer voting system locked by ransomware. Or doubts about electronic voting machines with no paper backups. As Americans prepare for 2020 elections, digital threats to election security are multiplying, stoking fears of a tainted outcome. Worries are running high following revelations of a wide-ranging misinformation campaign on Facebook and other social platforms, largely directed by Russian operatives, in 2016.

This was described in detail by special counsel Robert Mueller, whose office obtained several indictments for election interference. Cyber interference and disinformation operations surrounding elections "are part of a much larger, ongoing challenge to democracies everywhere," said a report from Stanford University's Cyber Policy Center. Maurice Turner, an election security specialist with the Washington-based Center for Democracy & Technology, said these threats could lead to "a negative impact on voter confidence" in 2020.

**Deepfakes, nudes**

The newest threat may be "deepfake" video and audio manipulated with artificial intelligence which can put words in the mouths of candidates. It might even show "unflattering or abusive images of women and minority aspirants in an effort to discredit them," said Darrell West with the Brookings Institution's Center for Technology Innovation, in an online report.

"It is easy to manipulate still images or video footage to put someone in a compromising situation," West wrote. Danielle Citron, a Boston University online safety expert,

told a recent TedSummit talk that deepfakes "can exploit and magnify the deep distrust that we already have in politicians, business leaders and other influential leaders." Deepfakes "can reinforce an idea for those who want to believe it and be a distraction in the news cycle" even if they are debunked, Turner said.

**Hardening defenses**

Social media platforms like Facebook and Twitter will be closely scrutinized on how well they counter misinformation. Experts say it will be increasingly difficult to counter automated accounts or "bots" that can amplify false news. The failure to take a hard stand against manipulation in 2016 has likely "emboldened Russia to try again in 2020," wrote Stanford professor and ex-Facebook security chief Alex Stamos. Other efforts might come from China, Iran or North Korea, he said.

Facebook, Google, Microsoft and Twitter security teams met this month with FBI, homeland security and intelligence officials to discuss collaboration on election threats. It will be important to anticipate new threats, and not simply use methods from the past. Facebook's visual platform Instagram could become the most important "disinformation magnet" in 2020, a report by New York University's Center for Business and Human Rights suggests.

The report also said Russian organizations may try to recruit "unwitting" Americans to help spread propaganda. The researchers called on social platforms to remove "provably false" information - a delicate task for platforms seeking to avoid becoming truth "arbiters." It is

"tremendously difficult" to moderate content "at scale that allows users to speak freely and have that vigorous public discourse," Turner said. Rights group Freedom House warned that it's hard to prove content is "unequivocally false," and that banning all foreign content "could harm press freedom."

**Digital suppression**

Some interference is aimed at "voter suppression," or dissuading people from voting through intimidation or lies, a technique likely to rise in 2020. The Kremlin-linked Internet Research Agency ran Facebook ads to suppress non-white voter turnout in 2016 by urging people to "boycott the election," arguing that neither presidential candidate would serve black voters, according to research led by University of Wisconsin professor Young Mie Kim.

Some messages gave the wrong election date, encouraged people to bring guns to the polls, or suggested improbably that people could vote by text message. It's a daunting task to weed out fake and foreign accounts, Kim said. "There are still a lot of groups that don't have a verifiable online identity" and may be controlled by foreign actors, Kim said. "If we identify the foreign sources, and deal with those, it would be much easier than discussing what is false and how we correct it," she said.

**Vulnerable voting machines**

Electronic voting machine vulnerabilities have been known for years, but at least eight US states will have paperless machines which might not be auditable if results are questioned, according to NYU's Brennan Center. "We



IOWA: Volunteers for former Vice President and Democratic presidential candidate Joe Biden make pancakes during the Democratic Polk County Steak Fry in Des Moines. —AFP

will have a patchwork of strengths and weaknesses, and attackers who want to discredit the election will pick the weakest places," said University of Michigan election security specialist Alex Halderman.

Many local governments use aging computer systems, so threats of hacking voter databases and ransomware which locks up election rolls are also worrisome. Without paper backups and forensic audits it might be impossible to tell if some electronic voting machines were tampered with. "A well conducted attack that changed the result wouldn't necessarily raise alarm bells." —AFP

**Amazon rainforest burns as world leaders gather**

RIO DE JANEIRO: The fires that burned through the Amazon rainforest last month sparked international outcry and offers of help, but as world leaders meet in New York, the planet's largest rainforest remains engulfed in flames. The latest satellite data from Brazil's National Institute for Space Research (INPE) shows 131,600 fires burning since January within the country, where 60 percent of the Amazon lies.

The fires, which are mostly caused by humans with the goal of clearing land for farming and cattle ranching, are having a grievous effect on the forest: the rate of deforestation in the Amazon has nearly doubled since far-right President Jair Bolsonaro came to power on January 1, with the equivalent of 110 football fields of land being cleared every hour.

"It's sad to see Brazilians attacking me for fires in the Amazon, as if they hadn't always existed," Bolsonaro wrote on Facebook Thursday. "We remain below the average of the last 15 years. But I'm accused of being a Nero, who sets fires everywhere." Yet fires are at a seven-year high, according to INPE data, and despite a slight drop at the start of the month, the number of active fires recorded in Brazil

from the start of the year to September 19 was up 56 percent over the same period in 2018. Nearly half of the blazes are in the Amazon.

Bolsonaro is a climate change skeptic, but last month he sent soldiers to help put out fires in the Amazon region after Brazil came under criticism at the G7 summit, with the host French President Emmanuel Macron among the most outspoken detractors. Under that deployment, which was renewed Friday for another month, nearly 7,000 soldiers and 16 aircraft are fighting both the flames and "deforestation and illegal mining," Brazil's defense ministry said.

**'I'm going to get hit'**

Marcio Astrini, a Greenpeace official in Brazil, said the deployment is making little difference. "We did a lot of fly-overs. We did not see anything happening on the ground, apart from the deforestation that is progressing. It's tragic," he said. Experts sent by the United States, logistical equipment from Japan, and four aircraft from Chile are all fighting the blazes, while firefighters sent from Israel have departed, the defense ministry said.

Bolsonaro however has blanching at other international offers to help put out the fires, rejecting \$20 million from the G7 and accusing members France and Germany of "buying" Brazil's sovereignty. Today, Macron will launch a "call for mobilization" on the Amazon together with his counterparts Sebastian Pinera of Chile and Ivan Duque of Colombia during a meeting on the sidelines of the UN General

Assembly in New York.

Brazil won't attend the meeting, but Environment Minister Ricardo Salles, also a climate change skeptic, will appear at the UN's climate summit today, before traveling to Europe. Tomorrow, Bolsonaro will make the opening speech at the UN General Assembly, in which he is expected to focus on the Amazon. "I am preparing a rather objective speech, unlike my predecessor," he wrote on Facebook, adding, "I'm going to get hit, you can be sure. The media always finds something to complain about."

**No end in sight**

Environmental groups have little faith that Bolsonaro will change tack. The government "wants to show that it is doing the best for the forest. In fact, it is doing its utmost for deforestation," said Greenpeace's Astrini. "Brazil is running a campaign to show that it is taking care of the Amazon. It's a lie," he said. And there's little to suggest that the fires are abating.

Between September 18 and 19, the number of forest fires in Rondonia state jumped to 242 from 12 just the day before, an increase of 1,915 percent, according to the INPE. Fears are also rising over the number of blazes in the Cerrado savanna, which account for a third of all the fires in Brazil. And on Friday the World Wide Fund for Nature warned of an "emergency situation in the biome" of the Pantanal wetland. Fires have risen 351 percent since January in the Pantanal region, some 90 percent of which were set illegally.—AFP



MUMBAI: Activist Dadarao Bilhore stands wearing a dress made from banana leaves and flowers found in the Aarey forest as he protests against the destruction of Aarey forest which they call 'Mumbai's Amazon', after the government approved cutting down 2,700 trees for constructing a metro train car shed, in Mumbai yesterday. —AFP