

International

Biden urges safe Thanksgiving amid coronavirus; Trump pardons ex-aide

Trump again touts false claim of stolen election

WILMINGTON: President-elect Joe Biden pleaded with Americans on Wednesday to take steps to remain safe over the Thanksgiving holiday as COVID-19 cases soar, while President Donald Trump pardoned a former aide who twice pleaded guilty to lying to the FBI. Biden gave a presidential-style speech acknowledging people's fatigue with restrictions amid the coronavirus pandemic, but urged them to exercise caution as caseloads surge.

"I know the country has grown weary of the fight. We need to remember - we're at war with the virus, not with one another," Biden said as he urged Americans to forgo the type of big family gatherings normally associated with Thursday's holiday, wear protective masks and maintain social distancing. The Democratic former vice president again said he would take immediate steps to address the coronavirus pandemic when he takes office on Jan. 20. During the campaign, Biden accused Trump, a Republican, of panicking and surrendering in the face of a public health crisis.

Shortly after Biden spoke, Trump pardoned his former national security adviser Michael Flynn, who had pleaded guilty to lying to the FBI about his contacts with the former Russian ambassador in Washington. It marked the latest in-

stance in which Trump has used his power of executive clemency to benefit a friend or associate. Prominent Democrats responded quickly and angrily. "President Trump's pardoning of Michael Flynn, who twice pleaded guilty to lying to the FBI about his dealings with a foreign adversary, is an act of grave corruption and a brazen abuse of power," House of Representatives Speaker Nancy Pelosi said in a statement.

More than 261,000 Americans have died from COVID-19, with the daily toll on Tuesday surpassing 2,000 for the first time since May, as infections and hospitalizations surge nationally. The United States leads the world in COVID-19 cases and deaths. Biden said the United States faced "a long hard winter" but that it was during the most difficult circumstances that "the soul of our nation has been forged." He said he hoped the recent positive news on vaccine development - the first shots potentially could be made available to some Americans within weeks - would serve as an incentive for people to take simple steps to get the virus under control.

Since winning the Nov. 3 election, Biden has offered a message of healing and reconciliation after Trump's tumultuous term, while the president still refuses to concede and falsely claimed



WASHINGTON: In this file, former US National Security Advisor General Michael Flynn arrives for his sentencing hearing at US District Court in Washington, DC. —AFP

again on Wednesday that Biden's victory was stolen. Without mentioning Trump, Biden addressed the messy aftermath of the vote. "Our democracy was tested this year," Biden said. "In

America, we have full and fair and free elections and then we honor the results. The people of this nation and the laws of the land won't stand for anything else." — Reuters

Different 'super spreader': Facebook struggles with election disinformation

SAN FRANCISCO: The US presidential election is finished: votes cast, the transition - though delayed - begun. But on Facebook, the fight against election misinformation continues, thanks to "super spreaders" - accounts that disseminate rumors and fabrications, falsely spreading the idea that the 2020 election was beset by organized, extensive fraud by the Democratic Party.

The US nonprofit Avaaz has identified 25 pages in particular, including those of Donald Trump Jr and Eric Trump - the president's sons - White House press secretary Kayleigh McEnany and combative conservative commentators Dan Bongino, Lou Dobbs and Rush Limbaugh, along with pro-Trump organizations such as Turning Point USA. These are sowing doubt about the President-elect Joe Biden's White House win earlier this month - taking their lead from the building's current resident, who has also taken to social media to tweet that he will not "concede" and to outline his so-far unfounded claims that the election was "stolen."

Unproven allegations of fraud from these accounts have been "liked," commented on and shared more than 77 million times since November 3, according to a study from Avaaz. And that doesn't take into account the Facebook accounts of the "super-spreader" in chief, Donald Trump himself, nor that of his former adviser Steve Bannon, which was recently removed by the network. The social media giant has increased efforts to stop the spread of disinformation. It restricted and in some cases banned the publication of some political ads, highlighted reliable sources of information and tackled foreign manipulation campaigns.

Going viral

Thanks to those measures and others, Facebook was able to avoid a repeat of the 2016 presidential campaign, when organized disinformation campaigns permeated the network ahead of Trump's election. But these efforts were not enough to stop run-of-the-mill rumor circulation. "The superspreaders in this list, with the helping hand of Facebook's algorithm, are central to creating this flood of falsehoods that are now defining the political debate for millions across the country," explained Fadi Quran, Avaaz campaign director. Private Facebook groups have also contributed to the far-reaching spread of misinformation, according to Avaaz.

Such groups - often made up of Trump supporters or those who also believe his allegation of a "stolen" vote - have exploded in the aftermath of the election, Avaaz reported, and they can be difficult to monitor and manage. Facebook on November 5 suspended a group called #StopTheSteal, which had attracted some 350,000 members in 48 hours. "The false rumors about election fraud continue as they being passed through these networks. So it's less big accounts... it is more the millions of people who continue to push this narrative to one another," said Claire Wardle, US director of the First Draft NGO.

Fact-checking

AFP works with Facebook's fact-checking program in almost 30 countries and nine languages. Around 60 media work worldwide on the program. Content rated "false" by fact-checkers is downgraded in news feeds so fewer people will see it. If someone tries to share a post found to be misleading or false, Facebook presents them with the fact-checked article. But Facebook has been widely criticized for its reluctance to take a more rigid stance, including by some employees, according to the US publication The Information. According to an article published Tuesday, the site in 2018 compiled a list of 112,000 government and political candidate accounts that should be exempt from verification efforts, but says it is unclear if the list remains active, and Facebook has not confirmed its existence. — AFP

US blacklists Libya rebel militia tied to murders, torture

WASHINGTON: The US Treasury announced sanctions Wednesday on a Libyan rebel militia loyal to eastern strongman Khalifa Haftar which is allegedly behind multiple murders, kidnapping and torture. The Treasury said Mohamed al-Kani and the Kaniyat militia "is responsible for the murder of civilians recently discovered in numerous mass graves in Tarhuna." Libyan government forces discovered 11 mass graves in June around Tarhuna, southeast of Tripoli. Tarhuna was the main staging point for Haftar's abortive offensive aimed at seizing the capital from the UN-recognized Government of National Accord.

On November 7 the government's missing persons authority said it had unearthed 17 bodies from a newly-discovered mass grave near the town. Government forces have blamed Al-Kani's militia, and have said that victims showed signs of being tortured and burned, and some buried alive, according to the Treasury. "Mohamed al-Kani and the Kaniyat militia have tortured and killed civilians during a cruel campaign of oppression in Libya," Treasury Secretary Steven Mnuchin said in a statement. The sanctions seek to freeze any property of those named under US jurisdiction and to block their access to the world trade and banking system. — AFP