

International

Google pulls Russia's opposition app under 'extraordinary duress'

Telegram messenger blocks opposition bot during vote

SAN FRANCISCO: Google blocked new downloads of a Russian opposition voting app under "extraordinary duress," sources close to the matter said, as international outrage and concern built over the decision. The company faced public threats from the Russian government and private threats of serious criminal charges and incarceration of local staff, the source added, similar to pressure that hit Apple before it pulled the app. Allies of jailed critic Alexei Navalny accused the tech giants of "censorship" after they said a "Smart Voting" app advising supporters on how to vote out Kremlin allies had been removed from the companies' app stores.

Earlier Friday a source close to Apple's decision told AFP the iPhone maker had relented after authorities made arrest threats against its workers in Russia. Polls opened across the vast country on Friday after a year that saw a sweeping crackdown on President Vladimir Putin's opponents, with Russians given the option of voting online. The election for seats in the lower house State Duma, which runs until Sunday, comes after a year that has seen Navalny jailed, many of his allies arrested and his organizations banned.

Telegram blocks bot

In another development, jailed Kremlin critic Alexei Navalny's "Smart Voting" bot has disappeared from the Telegram messenger app following similar moves by Apple and Google on Friday at the start of a three-day parliamentary vote in Russia.

The bot, which instructed Navalny supporters which candidate they should back to unseat Kremlin-aligned politicians, was removed after Telegram announced it would "limit the functioning of bots associated with election campaigns."

Telegram's Russia-born founder Pavel Durov said he was following Apple and Google, which "dictate the rules of the game to developers like us". In a post on his Telegram channel, he said the tech giants had "already this year" urged the encrypted messenger widely popular in Russia to remove information that violates the laws of individual



Navalny accuses tech giants of 'censorship'

countries or face exclusion from their app stores.

He said that removing election-related bots was related to Russia's ban on campaigning during voting. "We consider this practice legitimate and urge Telegram users to respect it," Durov wrote late Friday. But he added that "the blocking of applications by Apple and Google creates a dangerous



MOSCOW: A woman casts her ballot at a polling station during the second day of the three-day parliamentary and local elections in Moscow yesterday. — AFP

precedent that will affect freedom of speech in Russia and around the world." The election for seats in the lower house State Duma, which runs until Sunday, comes after a sweeping crackdown this year on President Vladimir Putin's opponents.

Navalny, who was detained in January and has seen his allies arrested or flee the country and his organizations banned, has nonetheless aimed to dent the Kremlin's grip on parliament from behind bars. His allies on Friday accused Apple and Google of "censorship", while sources told AFP that the companies had faced public threats from the

Russian government and private threats of serious criminal charges and incarceration of local staff.

After Telegram removed the "Smart Voting" bot, a Twitter account associated with Navalny posted links to Google Docs with recommended candidates, saying they were their last "remaining" tools. Yesterday, Navalny's team said that Google had demanded they delete the documents following a request from Russia's media regulator Roskomnadzor and would do so itself if they did not comply. Google did not immediately respond to a request for comment from AFP. — AFP

World on 'catastrophic' path to 2.7C warming

PARIS: A failure to slash global emissions is setting the world on a "catastrophic" path to 2.7 degrees Celsius heating, UN chief Antonio Guterres warned Friday just weeks before crunch climate talks. His comments come as a United Nations report on global emissions pledges found instead of the reductions needed to avoid the worst effects of climate change, they would see "a considerable increase". This shows "the world is on a catastrophic pathway to 2.7-degrees of heating," Guterres said in a statement.

The figure would shatter the temperature targets of the Paris climate agreement, which aimed for warming well below 2C and preferably capped at 1.5C above pre-industrial levels. "Failure to meet this goal will be measured in the massive loss of lives and livelihoods," Guterres said. Under the landmark 2015 Paris deal, nations committed to slash emissions, as well as to provide assistance to the most climate-vulnerable countries. But the window for action is narrowing as nations slow-walk their responses.

Last month a bombshell "code red" for humanity from the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) warned that Earth's average temperature will be 1.5C higher around 2030, a decade earlier than projected only three years ago. "We have to act, all of us, we have to act now," said US President Joe Biden on Friday, urging the world to bring its "highest" ambition to the UN climate conference in Glasgow in November. "Those who have not yet done so, time is running out," Biden said in the White House at the start of a virtual summit with nine foreign leaders.

'Wrong direction'

With only 1.1C of warming so far, the world has seen a torrent of deadly weather disasters intensified by climate change in recent months, from asphalt-melting heatwaves to flash floods and untamable wildfires. The IPCC says emissions should be around 45 percent lower by 2030 compared with 2010 levels to meet the 1.5C goal. But current pledges by 191 countries would see emissions 16 percent higher at end of the decade than in 2010 - a level that would eventually cause the world to warm 2.7C.

"Overall greenhouse gas emission numbers are moving in the wrong direction," said UN climate chief Patricia Espinosa in a press conference. But she said there was a "glimmer of hope" from 113 countries that had updated their pledges, including the United States and European Union. These new pledges, known as Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs), would see their emissions reduced 12 percent by 2030 compared to 2010.

Big emitters

The Paris deal included a "ratchet" mechanism for countries to review and toughen up their climate pledges every five years. Despite an end of 2020 deadline, many major emitters have yet to issue new targets. That includes China - the world's biggest emitter - which has said it will reach net zero emissions by 2060, but has not yet delivered its NDC to spell out emissions reductions by 2030.

Meanwhile updates from Brazil and Mexico were actually weaker than pledges they submitted five years ago, according to an analysis by the World Resources Institute. The UN report was a "damning indictment" of global progress on climate, particularly by G20 nations, responsible for around 80 percent of emissions, said Mohamed Adow, who leads the think tank Power Shift Africa. "They are the countries which have caused this crisis and yet are failing to show the leadership required to lead us out of this mess," he said. — AFP

Moderna vaccine edges Pfizer in new US research

WASHINGTON: A new study released by the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) on Friday is the latest to suggest the Moderna COVID vaccine confers better long-term protection against hospitalization than Pfizer. CDC researchers conducted an analysis of nearly 3,689 adults who were hospitalized with severe COVID from March 11 to August 15, 2021 - a period that precedes and includes the dominance of the Delta variant. Overall, 12.9 percent were fully vaccinated with the Moderna vaccine, 20.0 percent were vaccinated with Pfizer-BioNTech, and 3.1 percent were vaccinated with Johnson & Johnson.

Over the entire period, the Moderna vaccine was 93 percent effective against hospitalization, Pfizer



NORWOOD: Moderna vials sit on a table before they are loaded into syringes at a mobile COVID-19 vaccination clinic in Bridgeport, Connecticut. — AFP

was 88 percent effective, and J&J was 68 percent effective. The loss of efficacy against hospitalization for Pfizer was particularly pronounced: it fell from

91 percent in 14-120 days after vaccination to 77 percent more than 120 days after vaccination. By contrast, Moderna fell from 93 percent to 92 percent when comparing the same two periods.

The study also included a separate analysis of the levels of different types of antibodies provoked by the vaccines, taken from 100 volunteers. The Moderna vaccine elicited higher levels of antibodies compared to Pfizer and J&J for a key part of the virus' spike protein, which it uses to invade cells. There is accumulating research suggesting the Moderna vaccine's superiority over the Pfizer vaccine, including a previous CDC study released last week.

The reasons aren't fully clear, but it could be because the dosage levels are higher - 100 micrograms against 30. It could also be tied to the dosing interval, with the Pfizer shots given three weeks apart versus Moderna, which are given four weeks apart. The Food and Drug Administration was holding a meeting of leading independent experts on Friday to weigh the question of giving third doses of Pfizer to the general population, not just immune compromised people. — AFP

10,000 migrants packed under Texas bridge

DEL RIO: The mayor of Del Rio, Texas declared a state of emergency Friday after more than 10,000 undocumented migrants, many of them Haitians, poured into the border city in a fresh test of President Joe Biden's immigration policy. Del Rio Mayor Bruno Lozano said that the migrants were crowded in an area controlled by the US Customs and Border Patrol (CBP) beneath the Del Rio International Bridge, which carries traffic across the Rio Grande river into Mexico.

Video footage showed thousands under and around the flyover, adults and families. Many were Haitians hoping to stay in the United States as their country suffers after a large earthquake and continuing political turmoil, Lozano said. Hundreds continued to flow into Del Rio Friday, boosting up the number that Lozano put at 10,503 under the bridge late Thursday. All were awaiting processing, and hopefully a chance to remain in the United States, by the CBP, which has been overwhelmed by migrants crossing the border from Mexico as well as tens of thousands of refugees from Afghanistan. "The border patrol right now is so overwhelmed with the influx of migrants in the Del Rio sector," Lozano said.

Biden mum

The White House remained silent on the issue as political pressure mounted on Biden to address the influx. Both Republicans and Democrats called for quick action from Biden, whose administration recorded and mostly expelled more than 200,000 migrants at the border in both July and August, the

Beating video puts Bulgaria police violence in spotlight

SERGUEVA: A series of blows and then blackness: Bulgarian student Evgeni Marchev was taking part in his first demonstration in Sofia when police detained and beat him until he lost consciousness. The incident in July 2020 passed largely unnoticed until last month when CCTV footage of it was shown in parliament and then published in the media.

Despite a long history of police violence going unpunished in the EU country, the images have caused deep shock. Marchev's case - like others before it - may well have remained overlooked. Since 2000, the Strasbourg-based European Court of Human Rights (ECHR) has condemned Bulgaria in 46 cases related to the use of force by police or



AMBOASARY: A general view of the landscape along the National Road 13 (RN13) near Amboasary Atsimo on the RN13. The RN13 that links the city of Fort-Dauphin on the Southeast coast and the city of Toliara on the Southwest coast. — AFP

highest numbers in more than a decade.

Some said Biden's decision in late July - after Haitian president Jovenel Moise's assassination - to allow Haitians without US visas at the time to remain in the country offered an incentive for others to come. "10,503 illegal aliens are under this bridge tonight because Joe Biden made a political decision to cancel deportation flights to Haiti," Texas Republican Senator Ted Cruz tweeted on Thursday.

Meanwhile Democratic Representative Ilhan Omar, herself an immigrant, also pressed Biden to act. "This needs an urgent response from the Biden administration that is comprehensive and includes a cross-agency collaboration," she said in a statement. "Let's help these folks who are stranded there and act swiftly before this gut-wrenching situation grows to unmanageable level."

Haitians from South America

The number of Haitians crossing the southwest border into the United States has been surging for

inadequate investigation of alleged abuses. Only Romania, whose population is three times bigger than Bulgaria's 6.9 million people, did worse, with 64 condemnations.

However in response to police violence during mass anti-graft protests just over a year ago, Bulgaria's parliament has set up a committee to look into it. Thousands rallied mainly in Sofia against three-time prime minister Boyko Borisov who has been in office for almost a decade. He has since been unable to clinch another term after two elections this year returned a fragmented parliament with no one party able to form a coalition government. A snap poll has been set for November to try to resolve the political crisis.

'You will die'

On July 10, 2020, Marchev attended one of the big anti-Borisov demonstrations with friends in front of the prime minister's office. When suddenly bottles were hurled at police, they responded by grabbing the 23-year-old and other protesters from

months. Many come from South America, where they may have migrated to years ago, especially after the country's January 2010 earthquake. More are on the way. In Chiapas in southern Mexico earlier this week, Domingue Paul, a 40-year-old Haitian, told AFP he had traveled from Chile where he lived for five years, and was hoping to join a sister living in the United States.

Lozano's emergency declaration said the city expected thousands more migrants in the coming weeks and they were taking a toll on city resources and heightened the COVID-19 danger. It allows the city to request federal financial aid, and it also called on the state to deploy law enforcement officials to help with the situation. In a statement, the CBP said it was sending extra personnel and resources. "To prevent injuries from heat-related illness, the shaded area underneath Del Rio International Bridge is serving as a temporary staging site while migrants wait to be taken into Border Patrol custody," it said. — AFP

The video shown in the committee and released to the media "sincerely shocked" the country, Hadjigenov said. Sofia prosecutors responded saying a probe had been opened in late 2020 into three out of 15 initial complaints of police violence during the protests. The chief prosecutor Ivan Geshev also denounced the "unacceptable violence", although he had previously defended police actions during the protests that also targeted him personally. — AFP