

## International

# White House gives govt bodies 30 days to enforce TikTok ban

## Recently introduced bill in Congress would 'effectively ban TikTok' in US

WASHINGTON: The White House on Monday gave federal agencies 30 days to purge Chinese-owned video-snippet sharing app TikTok from all government-issued devices, setting a deadline to comply with a ban ordered by the US Congress. Office of Management and Budget director Shalanda Young in a memorandum called on government agencies within 30 days to "remove and disallow installations" of the application on agency-owned or operated IT devices, and to "prohibit internet traffic" from such devices to the app.

The ban does not apply to businesses in the United States not associated with the federal government, or to the millions of private citizens who use the hugely popular app. However, a recently introduced bill in Congress would "effectively ban TikTok" in this country, according to the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU). "Congress must not censor entire platforms and strip Americans of their constitutional right to freedom of speech and expression," ACLU senior policy counsel Jenna Leventoff said in a release. "We have a right to use TikTok and other platforms to exchange our thoughts, ideas, and opinions with people around the country and around the world."

Owned by Chinese tech giant ByteDance, TikTok has become a political target due to concerns the app can be circumvented for spying or propaganda by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). The company did not immediately respond to the White

House guidance. China's foreign ministry slammed the ban. "We firmly oppose the wrong practice of the United States to generalize the concept of national security, abuse state power, and unreasonably suppress firms from other countries," spokeswoman Mao Ning said Tuesday.

The law signed by US President Joe Biden last month bans the use of TikTok on government-issued devices. It also bans TikTok use in the US House of Representatives and Senate. National security concerns over alleged Chinese spying have grown over the past month after a Chinese balloon traversed US airspace and was eventually shot down.

### Canada, EU bans

The Canadian government on Monday banned TikTok from all of its phones and other devices, citing fears about how much access Beijing has to user data. Effective Tuesday, "the TikTok application will be removed from government-issued mobile devices. Users of these devices will also be blocked from downloading the application in the future," the government said in a statement. The European Commission banned the app from its equipment too.

TikTok has repeatedly rejected accusations it shares data or cedes control to the Chinese government. TikTok's breakneck rise from a niche video-sharing app to global social media behemoth has brought plenty of scrutiny, particularly over its links to China. The company was forced to admit



ByteDance employees in China had accessed Americans' data but it has always denied turning over personal information to the Chinese authorities. TikTok has moved to soothe US fears, announcing in June 2022 that it would store all data on American users on US-based servers.

Bans have not halted TikTok's growth. With

more than one billion active users it is the sixth-most used social platform in the world, according to the We Are Social marketing agency. Although it lags behind the likes of Meta's long-dominant trio of Facebook, WhatsApp and Instagram, its growth among young people far outstrips its competitors. — AFP

## Children's coffins mark tragedy of migrant shipwreck

STECCATO, Italy: The coffins of 64 victims of a devastating migrant shipwreck off Italy's southern coast were laid out Tuesday in a local sports hall, five of them small and white, containing the bodies of the youngest children that died. Flower bouquets adorned each coffin in the building in Crotona, while a toy blue car had been laid on the smallest, ready for mourners to pay their respects.

Earlier, the coffins had been opened to allow the identification of the dead, with relatives having flown in from countries including Germany and Austria. One woman let out a scream which shattered the silence of the

sports hall. A German-speaking man told reporters he was the nephew of an Afghan man who survived but lost his wife and three children aged 5, 8 and 12, after paying \$30,000 for the family to cross. A 14-year-old child survived.

Fourteen children were among the 64 people confirmed to have died when their overcrowded boat shattered in a storm on Sunday morning, the interior ministry said. Another 80 survived, while several more are believed still to be missing. It was one of the most tragic incidents in the Central Mediterranean, which tens of thousands of migrants and asylum seekers cross each year hoping to find a new life in Europe. Three men - two Pakistanis and a Turkish national - have been detained for alleged people smuggling over the incident, a police spokesman told AFP.

Bodies, shoes and debris have been

washing up along the shoreline for the past three days, with the most recent body found on the beach at Steccato on Tuesday morning, the fire service said. Divers are still searching for potentially up to 20 missing people, although it is not yet clear how many were on the boat. Up to 200 people had been on board, from Afghanistan, Iran and Pakistan, also Somalia and Syria, according to charities working with survivors.

The overcrowded wooden boat was called Summer Love and it set off last Thursday from Izmir in Turkey, survivors told Red Cross charity workers. Many of those on board were seated below deck and had difficulty breathing, they reportedly said. Survivors said they paid smugglers between five and eight thousand euros (\$5,300 to \$8,500), according to the Corriere della Sera daily. — AFP



STECCATO, Italy: A photograph taken on Feb 28, 2023 shows the coffins of migrants who died two days before after their boat sank at the Crotona Palasport, converted to a temporary funeral home. — AFP

## IAEA: Iran uranium particles enriched to nearly bomb grade

VIENNA: The UN nuclear watchdog confirmed on Tuesday it had detected particles of uranium enriched to 83.7 percent in Iran, just under the 90 percent needed to produce an atomic bomb. "Discussions are still ongoing" to determine the origin of these particles, the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) said in a report seen by AFP. Asked about the particles found in Iran, the government in Tehran said "unintended fluctuations" during the enrichment process "may have occurred".

In 2015, Iran reached a deal with world powers to limit the enrichment of uranium and allow IAEA inspectors to visit its nuclear sites, in return for the lifting of economic sanctions. But the deal stalled in 2018. Iran has been enriching uranium well over the limits laid down in the deal and the IAEA believes its estimated stockpile is more than 18 times the limit set out in that accord.

The IAEA report said that during an inspection "on 22 January 2023, the agency took environmental samples... at the Fordow (sic) plant, the analyti-

cal results of which showed the presence of high enriched uranium particles containing up to 83.7 percent U-235". "These events clearly indicate the capability of the agency to detect and report in a timely manner changes in the operation of nuclear facilities in Iran," it continued.

In the report, the United Nations' nuclear watchdog also said that Iran's estimated stockpile of enriched uranium had reached more than 18 times the limit set out in the 2015 accord between Tehran and world powers. The IAEA estimated Iran's total enriched uranium stockpile was 3,760.8 kg as of Feb 12, an increase of 87.1 kg compared to the last report in November. The limit in the 2015 deal was set at 202.8 kg of uranium.

The IAEA has also repeatedly warned it has lost its ability to fully monitor Iran's program since the Islamic republic started to restrict its access in February 2021. Iran has been enriching uranium well over the limits laid down in the landmark accord, which started to unravel when the United States withdrew from it in 2018. Talks between Tehran and world powers have stalled to revive the deal, which gave Iran much-needed sanctions relief in return for curbs on its atomic program.

Iran's stockpile of uranium enriched to 60 percent is now at 87.5 kg, up from 62.3 kg, the report said. Iran now also has 434.7 kg of uranium enriched up to 20 percent, up from 386.4 kg in the November report. — AFP

## Dozens of Iran girls hospitalised in new school poisoning

TEHRAN: Dozens of schoolgirls in Iran were hospitalised on Tuesday after a mysterious poisoning, an Iranian news agency reported, the latest in a spate of suspected attacks in the Islamic republic. Hundreds of cases of respiratory distress have been reported in the past three months among Iranian schoolgirls mainly in the holy city of Qom, south of Tehran, with some needing hospitalisation.

A government official said on Sunday that the attacks were believed to be a deliberate attempt to force the closure of girls' schools. "Today at noon, a number of students were poisoned at the Khayyam Girls' School in the city of Pardis, Tehran province," Tasnim news agency reported.

Thirty-five students had been transferred to hospital so far, Tasnim said, adding to the hundreds of cases of poisoning since November in at least two other cities including Qom. The poisonings come more than five months into protests that spread across Iran after death in custody of 22-year-old Iranian Kurd Mahsa Amini after her arrest for an alleged violation of the country's strict dress code

for women. On Sunday, students at a girls' school in Borujerd were rushed to hospital after a similar incident, the fourth in the western city within the past week. Iran's parliament held a meeting on Tuesday to discuss the suspected attacks in the presence of Health Minister Bahram Eynollahi, the official IRNA news agency reported.

It quoted speaker Mohammad Bagher Ghalibaf as saying that both Qom and Borujerd were "dealing with student poisonings". On Sunday, Iran's deputy health minister, Younes Panahi, said some people had been poisoned at a girls' school in Qom, with the aim of shutting down education for girls.

"After the poisoning of several students in Qom schools, it was found that some people wanted all schools, especially girls' schools, to be closed," IRNA quoted him as saying at the time. He did not elaborate. So far, there have been no arrests linked to the poisonings.

Activists have compared those responsible for the attacks on schools to the Taliban in Afghanistan and the Boko Haram in the Sahel, who oppose girls' education. On February 14, parents of students who had been ill had gathered outside Qom's governorate to "demand an explanation" from the authorities, IRNA reported.

The following day, government spokesman Ali Bahadori Jahromi said the intelligence and education ministries were trying to find the cause of the poisonings. — AFP

## Weight loss drug trend on TikTok...

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In early 2021, peer-reviewed research found that almost three quarters of people who used the drug lost more than 10 percent of their body weight. Novo Nordisk has since developed a semaglutide drug with a higher dosage called Wegovy specifically to treat obesity, which was approved for use in the United States in 2021, and in Europe and the UK last year. Wegovy is not yet on the market in the UK, France or several other countries, but Ozempic is available with a normal prescription.

This has led to a rise in people without diabetes obtaining prescriptions for Ozempic, as well as "falsified prescriptions", said Jean-Luc Faillie, a pharmacology specialist at France's Montpellier University. Douglas Twenefour, head of care at Diabetes UK, said on the charity's website that Ozempic "is not a medication for people who do not have diabetes or are at risk of type 2 diabetes".

France's medicines regulator ANSM has urged doctors to only prescribe Ozempic for diabetes. There has not been a particularly "sudden increase in consumption in recent months," the ANSM said, adding that there had been "supply tensions" worldwide. Novo Nordisk told AFP that "stronger than anticipated demand" for Ozempic had resulted

in "intermittent availability and period stock-outs" around the world. The company's global manufacturing facilities "are now operating 24 hours, seven days a week" to bridge the gap, it added.

Doctors have expressed concern that people with diabetes may not be able to get hold of semaglutide because of the soaring demand from people seeking to lose weight. Karine Clement, an obesity specialist at France's INSERM medical research institute, said that when Wegovy does become available, it is important that people closely follow their prescription. "It is not a magic drug," she said. "As is always the case with obesity, it must be accompanied with a comprehensive treatment plan."

Doctors have also expressed concerns about the side effects of semaglutide, which Faillie said have gone under-discussed. "Neither patients nor prescribers are motivated to report" the side effects, he said. Nausea is the most common side effect of the drug. But Faillie said "there are also rarer and more serious risks such as acute pancreatitis - which can occur even at lower doses - biliary disorders, and rare cases of severe constipation which can lead to bowel obstruction."

He also pointed to an "increased risk of thyroid cancer" following several years of treatment. While the risks were reasonable considering the benefits for people with diabetes, "there are still uncertainties, particularly in obese patients over the long term," he said. "If it is used to lose a few kilograms, then the therapeutic benefit is zero," Faillie added. "That would just be cosmetic, while the risks remain." — AFP

## Moroccans struggle to...

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transportation costs, according to the World Bank. In January, the country's consumer price index hit 8.9 percent, fueled by a 16.8 percent spike in food prices.

At the market in Sale, one full-throated stallholder hawks his potatoes at eight dirhams a kilogram - almost \$1. But Abdessalam El Mahdaoui, a retired 63-year-old, said prices were out of control. "We used to be able to buy a whole basket of veg for 100 dirhams," he said. "Today, even 300 dirhams won't buy you that - people's buying power has been cut by half."

That is in a country where the minimum monthly salary comes to just 2,770 dirhams (around \$265). One stallholder said prices were fluctuating by the day. "Tomatoes are going at eight dirhams a kilo today, down from 12 dirhams two days ago," he said, adding that he couldn't explain why. But overall, prices are surging upwards, accompanied by bitter criticism from the opposition, trade unions and even some media outlets.

Several large cities have seen protests, albeit limited and often cut short by the authorities. The government has blamed the price rises on fraud, speculators and "price manipulation". Government spokesman Mustapha Baitas says

authorities have carried out over 64,000 checks and found 3,000 offences from price-fixing to fiddling with the quality of food.

The situation has been made worse by a crisis facing the agricultural sector, which makes up 14 percent of gross domestic product. The worst drought in four decades has been compounded in recent weeks by a snap of unusually cold weather. "The drought has forced farmers to give up on cultivating their land this season," not to mention the high cost of seeds and fertilizers, said agricultural policy expert Abderrahim Handouf.

Morocco's independent Economic, Social and Environmental Council has called for reforms to how agricultural products reach the market, saying current supply chains suffer from "excessive and poorly controlled intermediaries, encouraging speculation". The government has boosted subsidies on some basic products such as sugar, flour and cooking gas, as well as doling out support to struggling transport sector workers. Authorities have also temporarily banned exports of vegetables to West Africa.

But the World Bank says these moves have done little to help the poorest families. "Despite these measures, it is low-income and vulnerable households that continue to suffer the most from the impact of the inflationary surge in food prices," it said. Fouzi Lekjaa, an ex-football administrator now in charge of Morocco's budget, said in October authorities planned to gradually replace subsidies with direct cash payouts to the poorest households. — AFP