



South Korea hails successful launch of homegrown rocket

FRIDAY, MAY 26, 2023

Top US official warns on child social media use

Page 6

Page 7

DeSantis announces White House bid

Launch plagued by Twitter meltdown • Trump, Biden mock glitches



MIAMI: Demonstrators gather outside the Four Seasons Hotel on May 24, 2023 as Florida Governor Ron DeSantis holds fundraising events ahead of his presidential candidacy announcement. — AFP

WASHINGTON: Florida governor Ron DeSantis's long-awaited entry into the 2024 presidential campaign descended into a fiasco on Wednesday as the opening of the live Twitter event intended to announce his candidacy was derailed by glitches. The conversation repeatedly crashed as the platform's servers were apparently overwhelmed, and many of the 400,000-plus users who were hoping to listen in missed the 44-year-old conservative throwing down the gauntlet to Republican primary front-runner Donald Trump.

DeSantis finally began speaking after almost half an hour of confusion and chaos — although what should have been an exultant launch had been thoroughly overshadowed by the time he was able to make his case for the Republican nomination. "I am running for president of the United States to lead our great American comeback," he told the listeners, although tens of thousands had abandoned Twitter by that point.

As the website struggled to get the event back on track, its owner Elon Musk, performing hosting duties, could be heard noting the "massive number of people online" who had caused the servers to begin "straining somewhat". While organizers sought to highlight the event's populari-

ty — the DeSantis camp said it had raised \$1 million online in one hour — Biden's team was quick to capitalize on the glitches, tweeting a link to a fundraising page and stating: "This link works." Trump joked on his Truth Social platform that "My Red Button is bigger, better, stronger, and is working" — an oblique reference to a war of words he once had with North Korea's Kim Jong Un. The conversation eventually went on for more than an hour, but technical gremlins persisted — a setback mocked as encapsulating the downward turn the governor's image has taken of late.

'War on woke'

Long viewed as the most formidable challenger to twice-impeached Trump, DeSantis boasts deep midwestern roots, a large campaign fund, a list of ultra-conservative legislative wins and an unblemished record of election victories. While Trump has dominated headlines with his legal woes, DeSantis has presented himself as the tip of the spear in the struggle of ordinary Americans against progressive values he sees as authoritarian and divisive.

The governor gave a more traditional interview — minus the setbacks — on conservative TV network Fox News after the Twitter event, and tried to reclaim his rep-

utation for order and competence. "If you nominate me, I pledge to you that on January 20, 2025, at high noon, I'll be the guy on the west side of the Capitol with the left hand on the Bible and the right hand in the air, taking the oath of office as the 47th president of the United States," he said. "No more excuses — we've got to get this one done."

DeSantis has used his position as Florida's chief executive to stack up a litany of conservative accomplishments, signing off on some 80 state laws targeting "woke indoctrination" in schools and other public institutions. They include a ban on discussing gender identity and sexual orientation in schools, a block on funding efforts to promote diversity at public universities and one of the most restrictive abortion laws in the country. "The woke mind virus is basically a form of Cultural Marxism. At the end of the day, it's an attack on the truth, and because it's a war on truth, I think we have no choice but to wage a war on woke," he told Fox News.

Trump on the attack

Refraining from explicitly criticizing Trump, the governor used the event to draw a distinction between his record of getting policy initiatives into the statute books and the

former president's reputation for legislative inertia and chaos in his personal and professional life. But DeSantis lacks the frontrunner's national profile and the launch comes with his ratings in decline, as a number of policy missteps have prompted disquiet about his readiness to take on Trump. He now faces the daunting task of closing an enormous polling gap, with Trump posting leads of close to 40 percentage points, despite being indicted on felony financial charges and being found liable for sexual abuse in a New York civil trial. Behind the scenes, the Trump and DeSantis camps have been jostling to secure endorsements from state lawmakers while, at the national level, Florida's congressional delegation has broken heavily for Trump.

But DeSantis is seen as lacking the natural charm needed to peel away some of the 14 million voters who backed Trump in the last competitive Republican primary, in 2016. Trump has not posted on Twitter since his two-year ban over the 2021 US Capitol riot ended in November, but has been using his own social network to attack DeSantis almost daily. In a Wednesday morning post, Trump said the governor "desperately needs a personality transplant and, to the best of my knowledge, they are not medically available yet". — AFP

Sunak vows to cut immigration as UK figures hit new high

LONDON: Net migration in the UK hit a record 606,000 in 2022, official figures showed on Thursday, heaping pressure on the government, which has pledged to cut dependency on foreign labor. Responding to the figures, Prime Minister Rishi Sunak described legal immigration levels as "too high". "It's as simple as that and I want to bring them down," he told ITV in an interview.

Measures announced earlier this week to tighten the number of international students allowed to bring their families with them would have a significant impact, he added. Immigration has long been a key political issue in the UK and was one of the main battlegrounds of the Brexit referendum in 2016, which saw the country leave the European Union. In 2021, net migration — the difference between the number of people leaving the UK and those arriving — was 488,000.

Jay Lindop, director of the center for international migration at the Office for National Statistics (ONS), said world events such as the end of the COVID-19 pandemic and Russia's invasion of Ukraine played a part in the increase. China's squeeze on civil rights in Hong Kong, which led to the UK relaxing entry rules for holders of British overseas passports, also had an impact. "A series of unprecedented world events throughout 2022 and the lifting of restrictions following the coronavirus pandemic led to record levels of international immigration to the UK," said Lindop.

Skills shortage

Brexit brought an end to the policy of free movement of people from EU member states, which many businesses have since blamed for a shortage of workers. Among those hardest hit have been agriculture, and the health and social care sector, prompting the government to relax immigration rules to try to plug the gap.

The main opposition Labour party's home affairs spokeswoman, Yvette Cooper, called the latest figures "extraordinary" and said it showed the government had "no plan and no grip" on the issue. "Ministers have completely failed to tackle skills shortages or help peo-

The Turkish leader is now the strong favorite, capping a remarkable turnaround. Seething anger at the government's stuttering response to the February disaster, in which more than 50,000 died, put Erdogan in the unfamiliar position of issuing public apologies.

But Berk Esen, an associate professor at Istanbul's Sabanci University, called Erdogan's election rebound "not very surprising". Esen argued that the region is filled with pious voters who trusted Erdogan's explanation that the massive toll resulted from an unavoidable act of nature — not state negligence over lax building standards. In addition, "the opposition did not campaign heavily in the area and could not offer an alternative, credible message," Esen told AFP.

'Depot for migrants'

Instead of giving up, Kilicdaroglu is radically changing course. Ditching his embracing vows to heal Turkey's social divisions, Kilicdaroglu has struck a stridently nationalist tone, pledging to expel millions of Syrians and other migrants. The message resonates in Syria-border cities such as Antakya, a mountain-rimmed cradle of civilizations once known as Antioch.

Kilicdaroglu has plastered Antakya with posters declaring: "The Syrians will go". "We will not turn Turkey into a depot for migrants," the 74-year-old said on a visit to Antakya on Tuesday. The tough talk



LONDON: Pedestrians walk past Union flags at Oxford Circus on May 25, 2023. — AFP

ple back into work after COVID," she added.

Sunak is under pressure from within his own Conservative ranks to restrict immigration, with right-wingers arguing that the current numbers are unsustainable. Adding to his woes is a growing backlog in the Home Office's processing of asylum claims, particularly of migrants crossing the Channel from northern Europe in small boats. Attempts to send failed asylum seekers to Rwanda, prompted by an unprecedented 45,000 arrivals last year, have been stuck in the courts. — AFP



HATAY, Turkey: Women walk past the ruins of buildings on May 22, 2023 in one of the cities worst affected by the devastating earthquakes that hit southern Turkey earlier in the year. — AFP

pleased Mehmet Aynaci, 20, who blames Syrians for local housing problems. "Before the earthquake, if you looked for a flat, there were a lot of Syrians," Aynaci said. "Of course they must go," added Atilla Celtik, who like Aynaci is one of the few who has not left the almost completely deserted city. "They will be asking for our land in the future," he said. "We are worried." — AFP

Wagner says handing Bakhmut to army, Japan scrambles jets

MOSCOW: The head of Russia's Wagner mercenary group said on Thursday his troops had started transferring their positions in the flashpoint eastern Ukraine city of Bakhmut to the Russian military. Japan said it had scrambled fighter jets after detecting Russian "intelligence gathering" planes off its coastline, while Moscow announced China's special envoy would discuss Ukraine with Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov on Friday.

In Bakhmut, Wagner said it began pulling out its fighters after claiming to have fully captured the destroyed city at the weekend. Ukraine, which denies that Bakhmut has fallen to Russia, insisted it still controlled a "micro district" of the ruined city and said it was still advancing on the flanks. The battle for Bakhmut has raged for nearly a year, leveling the city and decimating waves of Wagner recruits who have led Russia's assault on the industrial hub.

"We are withdrawing units from Bakhmut today. We are handing over positions to the military, ammunition and everything," Wagner boss Yevgeny Prigozhin said in a video. "We pull back, we rest, we prepare and then we will get new tasks," added Prigozhin, who was dressed in tactical body armor and a military helmet. Earlier this week, he conceded that around 10,000 prisoners he had recruited to fight in Ukraine had been killed on the battlefield. The 61-year-old Kremlin ally toured Russian prisons last year to persuade inmates to fight with Wagner in exchange for a promised amnesty on their return — should they survive.

Wagner's announcement came days after Moscow's military said it had deployed jets and artillery on Russian soil against a "sabotage" group that crossed from Ukraine. In Kyiv, President Volodymyr Zelensky accused Russia of terrorizing Ukrainians by launching a new wave of Iranian-made attack drones at targets across his country. "The enemy continued to terrorize Ukraine by launching 36 Shaheds. None reached their target," Zelensky said on social media. "I'm grateful to our air defense forces for the 100-percent result."

The Ukrainian military said Russia was probably targeting key infrastructure and military facilities in western Ukraine. Russia subjected Ukraine to a campaign of aerial bombardments on infrastructure including energy facilities during the winter months but these attacks recently diminished. Kyiv has become increasingly adept at taking down waves of Russian cruise missiles and drones after appealing to Western allies for greater air defense capabilities. — AFP

Turkey quake victims rally around Erdogan

ANTAKYA: Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan stares down from a campaign poster at the earthquake ruins of Antakya, inspiring confidence in Ahmet Gulyildizoglu ahead of Sunday's election runoff. Millions across the ravaged region defied expectation and voted for the man who has ruled Turkey for two decades and fell just short of securing another five-year term on May 14.

Erdogan's secular rival, Kemal Kilicdaroglu, "does not fill you with hope", Gulyildizoglu said in front of a debris-strewn expanse once occupied by his six-floor apartment building. "On the other hand, you have an alliance that keeps their promises," the pensioner added, referring to Erdogan's Islamic-rooted party and its far-right allies.

Erdogan's ability to maintain support across Turkey's southeastern disaster zone contributed to Kilicdaroglu's disappointing showing in the first round, which he ended trailing by nearly five points.