

## International

# US lawmaker seeks whistleblowers, some MAX 737 orders in jeopardy

## Flight control system MCAS at centre of investigations

WASHINGTON: A US lawmaker has urged current or former Boeing Co and Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) employees to come forward with any information about the certification program for the 737 MAX, which has suffered two fatal crashes in five months. Boeing and the FAA are under global regulatory scrutiny over software and training on the signature aircraft. Boeing risked losing a \$6 billion order for the jet on Friday, its first since the world's entire fleet was grounded last week.

Indonesian airline Garuda said it plans to scrap its order because some passengers are afraid to board the plane, although industry analysts said the deal was already in doubt. In the United States, the chairman of the US House Transportation and Infrastructure Committee Peter DeFazio urged people to use the committee's whistleblower web page.

"It is imperative we continue to ensure we have the highest level of safety for the traveling public," DeFazio said. American Airlines pilots were preparing to test Boeing's planned software upgrade for an anti-stall system on MAX simulators this weekend, saying they want their own safety guarantees on the software fix. The 737 MAX was Boeing's fastest selling jet before an Ethiopian Airlines crash near Addis Ababa on March 10, which followed a Lion Air crash in Indonesia on Oct 29.

Ethiopian and French investigators have pointed to "clear similarities" between the two crashes, which killed 346 people, putting pressure on Boeing and US regulators to come up with an adequate fix. No direct link has been proven between the crashes but attention has focused on whether pilots had the correct informa-

tion about the "angle of attack" at which the wing slices through the air. Ethiopia has shared limited information with foreign investigators, Reuters reported on Thursday, and an industry source said Boeing had not yet received any black box and voice recorder data.

Meanwhile, US Senator Richard Blumenthal, a Democrat, on Friday raised concerns in a letter to the FAA about regulations that allow aircraft manufacturers to effectively self-certify the safety of their planes and "left the fox guarding the henhouse." The FAA declined to comment. The US Justice Department opened a separate investigation this week.

The FBI has declined comment. Garuda CEO Ari Askhara told Reuters on Friday: "Many passengers told us they were afraid to get on a MAX 8." However, the airline had been considering its order for 49 of the narrowbody jets before the Ethiopian crash, including potentially swapping some for widebody Boeing models.

Southeast Asia faces a glut of narrowbody aircraft like the 737 MAX and rival Airbus A320neo at a time of slowing global economic growth and high fuel costs. "They have been re-looking at their fleet plan anyway so this is an opportunity to make some changes that otherwise may be difficult to do," CAPA Centre for Aviation Chief Analyst Brendan Sobie said. Indonesia's Lion Air has also said it might cancel 737 MAX aircraft, though industry sources say it is also struggling to absorb the number of planes on order.

### Retrofits

Boeing now plans to make compulsory a light to alert pilots when sensor readings of the angle of attack do



### Boeing and FAA employees urged to come forward



RENTON: A Boeing 737 MAX 8 airliner takes off from Renton Municipal Airport near the company's factory in Renton, Washington. — AFP

not match - meaning at least one must be wrong -, according to two officials briefed on the matter. Investigators suspect a faulty angle-of-attack reading led the doomed Lion Air jet's computer to believe it had stalled, prompting its anti-stall system, called MCAS, repeatedly to push the plane's nose down.

Norwegian Air played down the significance of the compulsory light, saying that, according to Boeing, it would not have been able to prevent erroneous signals

that Lion Air pilots received before their new 737 MAX plane crashed in October. Boeing must be cautious with how it characterizes the safety alert, risking legal claims by saying it could have made a difference in the crash while not wanting to suggest that the retrofit is meaningless, legal experts said. The Lion Air plane did not have the warning light installed, and Ethiopian Airlines did not immediately comment on whether its crashed plane had the alert.—Reuters

### News in brief

#### China tour bus fire kills 26

BEIJING: Twenty six people were killed and 30 injured after a tourist bus caught fire in central China, local officials said. The vehicle burst into flames as it drove through Hunan province Friday with 56 people on board-including 53 passengers, two drivers and a tour guide-according to local authorities. The injured, including five in a critical condition, were rushed to hospital for treatment. The two drivers were detained and an investigation into the cause of the accident is under way, according to a statement posted on the city of Changde's official social media account on Weibo. Grizzly car accidents are common in China, where transport authorities struggle to enforce safety regulations, which are often flouted. Some 58,000 people were killed in traffic accidents across the country in 2015, the latest year for which the data is available publicly.—AFP

#### Germany foils 'Islamist plot'

BERLIN: German police arrested 11 people accused of having planned an "Islamist terrorist attack" using guns and a vehicle, prosecutors said. The suspects, whose nationalities were not specified, had plotted to "kill as many 'non-believers' as possible," Frankfurt prosecutors said in a statement. Some 200 police commandos carried out raids in the states of Hesse and Rhineland-Palatinate. The chief suspects were two brothers aged 31 from the city of Wiesbaden and a 21-year-old from Offenbach. They had allegedly made contact with various arms dealers, rented a large vehicle and amassed cash to cover the expenses. Police were investigating 10 of those detained for terror-financing and criminal conspiracy. They were aged between 20 and 42 and lived in Frankfurt, Offenbach, Wiesbaden and Mainz.—AFP

#### Blasts hit Afghan ceremony

KANDAHAR: At least three people were killed and 30 wounded in twin explosions inside a stadium hosting an agricultural show in southern Afghanistan yesterday, officials said. The blasts happened in Lashkar Gah, the capital of volatile Helmand province, as people marked Farmers' Day as part of Persian New Year celebrations, provincial government spokesman Omar Zhwak said. People had put their agricultural products on display in the city's main stadium when the explosions happened, said witness Omidullah Zaheer. "First a small explosion happened inside a tent in the stadium. People started to run towards the gates, when a second blast hit the crowd," he said. "I saw some wounded people taken out of the stadium," he said. Zhwak said the casualties from the second blast had been minimal as people fled the area after the first.—AFP

#### Dozens dead in Burkina Faso

ABIDJAN: An offensive by Islamists in northern Burkina Faso has left dozens of civilians dead and forced tens of thousands to flee their homes, Human Rights Watch said yesterday. "Atrocities by Islamist armed groups in Burkina Faso's northern Sahel region and by security forces during counterterrorism operations have left scores dead and created widespread fear and displacement," the group said in a 62-page report. "The violence has forced tens of thousands of villagers to flee since early 2019," it said. "Scores of people have been murdered in what amounts to a dramatic deterioration in the rights situation in northern Burkina Faso," said Corinne Dufka, Sahel director at Human Rights Watch. "Villagers are living in fear as both armed Islamists and government forces have demonstrated utter disregard for human life."—AFP

## Accepting Golan annexation, Trump risks new precedents

WASHINGTON: US President Donald Trump is again breaking diplomatic norms in backing Israel's capture of the Golan Heights, with experts warning that he risks justifying expansionism by other countries. Israel conquered the Golan from Syria in the Six-Day War of 1967 and annexed it in 1981, but until now, the international community has not accepted the move, hoping the territory could serve as a bargaining chip in a future peace deal between the countries.

But Trump on Thursday turned to Twitter for the abrupt diplomatic turnaround, saying that after 52 years, "it is time for the United States to fully recognize" Israeli sovereignty. The move - which came as Trump's ally, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, faces elections - has caused dismay

## Conspiracy, collusion: What Mueller's probe has said us so far

WASHINGTON: Special Counsel Robert Mueller has remained silent for nearly two years about his Russia meddling and collusion investigation, which wrapped up on Friday. But a vast story of conspiracy, possible collusion and obstruction has been told in documents that have emerged from the probe, particularly court filings in Mueller's indictment of 34 individuals and convictions of five former Trump associates. Here's what we have learned up until now:

### The Russian conspiracy

In two conspiracy indictments Mueller described a cohesive effort under the auspices of Russian President Vladimir Putin to interfere in the 2016 presidential election to undermine Democrat Hillary Clinton and aid Republican candidate Donald Trump. One charged 12 hackers of the GRU military intelligence agency with stealing specifically Democratic Party materials and leaking them to WikiLeaks.

The hackers "targeted over 300 individuals affiliated with the Clinton Campaign, DCCC, and DNC," it said, referring to two key national Democratic bodies. The second indictment named 13 Russians with the Internet Research Agency (IRA), a St. Petersburg troll farm controlled by Evgeny Prigozhin, a close associate of Putin. They were accused of running a massive "fake news" campaign on social media targeting US voters beginning in 2014.

The IRA "had a strategic goal to sow discord in the US political system.... By early to mid-2016, defendants' operations included supporting the presidential campaign of then-candidate Donald J. Trump... and disparaging Hillary Clinton." WikiLeaks was not charged, but court filings said it actively communicated with the GRU hackers offering to help publish the stolen Democratic materials.

### Trump campaign collusion with Russia

The investigation showed frequent, willing contacts between members of the Trump campaign and Russians or intermediaries with Moscow, more than 100 by some counts. Trump campaign aides made multiple efforts to arrange a pre-election meeting between him and Putin and to obtain Russian "dirt" on Clinton. "I have been receiving a lot of calls over the last month about Putin wanting to host him and the team," foreign policy advisor George Papadopoulos told an unidentified senior campaign official in an April 2016 email.

even among US allies, with Britain and France both saying they still considered the Golan Heights to be "occupied" by Israel. Richard Haass, president of the Council on Foreign Relations, feared the consequences of walking away from UN Security Council Resolution 242, which stressed the "inadmissibility of the acquisition of territory by war." The measure was passed after the Six-Day War. "This is the most fundamental principle of international order and was the basis of US opposition to Saddam's conquest of Kuwait and Putin's of Crimea," Haas said, referring to the 1991 Gulf War in which a US-led coalition freed Kuwait and Russia's 2014 seizure of the Ukrainian peninsula.

It is not the first time that the real-estate mogul turned president has brazenly dismissed international conventions. In December 2017, Trump recognized passionately contested Jerusalem as Israel's capital, fulfilling a major goal for the Jewish state. In a television interview Secretary of State Mike Pompeo rejected the suggestion that the United States was using a double standard by recognizing Israeli sovereignty in the Golan while imposing sanctions on Russia for annexing Crimea.

"What the president did with the Golan Heights is recognize the reality on the ground and the security situation necessary for the protection of the Israeli state. It's that



GOLAN HEIGHTS: Israeli soldiers prepare at the Quneitra border crossing of the Israeli annexed-Golan Heights yesterday. — AFP

simple," he told Sky News. Pompeo characterized the US as a "force for good" in the region, with "noble" intentions. "We want good outcomes... for all nations in the Middle East, and the decision the president made will increase the opportunity for there to be stability throughout the region," he said.—AFP

## Trump drops N Korea sanctions because he 'likes' Kim Jong Un

WASHINGTON: President Donald Trump on Friday abruptly announced the cancellation of sanctions imposed by his own Treasury Department to tighten international pressure on North Korea. "It was announced today by the US Treasury that additional large scale Sanctions would be added to those already existing Sanctions on North Korea. I have today ordered the withdrawal of those additional Sanctions!" Trump said in a tweet.

He appeared to be referring to measures unveiled Thursday that targeted two Chinese companies accused of helping North Korea to evade tight international sanctions meant to pressure Pyongyang into ending its nuclear weapons program.

But The Washington Post reported, citing Trump administration officials, that the president's tweet referenced future sanctions that had not been announced and were scheduled for "the coming days." The Thursday sanctions were the first new sign of pressure since talks between Trump and North Korean leader Kim Jong Un broke down in Hanoi less than a month ago.

However, Trump, who has previously spoken of "love" for the totalitarian leader, appears to retain hope that his strong personal relationship will bear fruit. "President Trump likes Chairman Kim and he doesn't think these sanctions will be necessary," the president's spokeswoman, Sarah Sanders, said. Adam Schiff, a Democrat who heads the intelligence committee in the House of Representatives, blasted Trump for cancelling sanctions "imposed only yesterday and championed by his own national security advisor, because he 'loves' Kim."

"Foolish naivete is dangerous enough. Gross incompetence and disarray in the White House make it even worse," Schiff tweeted. On Thursday, Trump national security advisor John Bolton had tweeted that the sanctions were meant to put an end to "illicit shipping practices" by North Korea. "Everyone should take notice and review their own activities to ensure they are not involved in North Korea's sanctions evasion," he said.

China complained, saying that it did enforce all UN resolutions and opposed "any country imposing unilateral sanctions and taking long-arm jurisdiction against any Chinese entity according to their own domestic laws." This was Trump's second major, unexpected foreign policy announcement by Twitter in two days. On Thursday, he sent a tweet reversing decades of US policy and pledged to recognize Israeli sovereignty over the hotly contested Golan Heights border area with Syria.—AFP



WASHINGTON: The sun begins to rise behind the US Capitol building yesterday in Washington, DC. Yesterday special counsel Robert Mueller delivered his report on alleged Russian meddling in the 2016 presidential election to Attorney General William Barr. — AFP

He also told the campaign the Russians proposed to give him information damaging to Clinton. The investigation also revealed the June 9, 2016 Trump Tower meeting between top members of the campaign and a Russian lawyer offering dirt on Clinton. "If it's what you say I love it," Trump's son Don Jr wrote in an email to the publicist who arranged the meeting.

The indictments detailed secret communications between Trump national security advisor Michael Flynn and Russian ambassador Sergey Kislyak. In them Flynn urged cooperation that effectively would undermine the policies of still-president Barack Obama. Court documents also showed campaign chairman Paul Manafort sharing polling data with a man with Russian intelligence links. And two associates of the campaign, Roger Stone and Jerome Corsi, communicated with WikiLeaks about its plans for releasing hacked communications from Clinton's operations.

### Obstruction

Mueller's team meanwhile investigated actions by Trump that could support charges of obstruction of justice. That began with Trump's pressing FBI director James Comey in early 2017 to pull back on the investigation, and then his firing of Comey that May. Trump also reportedly repeatedly pressured then attorney general Jeff Sessions to reverse his decision to recuse himself from the Mueller probe; sought several times to have Mueller fired; and allegedly encouraged associates to lie about Russia contacts and other behavior. Trump also allegedly dangled pardons to indicted associates to prevent them from providing evidence against him.—AFP