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Sudan generals and protesters in crunch talks on ruling body

In India election, a \$14 tool helps overcome WhatsApp controls

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WASHINGTON: National Security Advisor John Bolton listens while US President Donald Trump speaks to the press before a meeting with Hungary's Prime Minister Viktor Orban in the Oval Office of the White House on May 13, 2019. —AFP

Bolton beats war drums in US-Iran standoff

When it comes to Iran, White House seems to be bristling for conflict

WASHINGTON: War drums are beating louder in Washington's long-festering standoff with Iran and National Security Advisor John Bolton, a veteran champion of regime change, is the bandmaster. With his bushy mustache and beloved yellow legal pad, Bolton cuts a colorful figure at the White House. He's also something of an oddity. President Donald Trump ran on the promise to pull the United States out of unwinnable post-9/11 wars - from Afghanistan to Syria - that have consumed American lives and military budgets. That retreat remains one of Trump's strongest points in his pitch to be the outsider president.

But Bolton, in the most powerful government position he has ever held, is working in exactly the opposite direction. Iran is only the latest country in his crosshairs. At 70 and with a resume listing federal jobs back to the Ronald Reagan era, Bolton could easily have sidestepped into academia by now or continued taking paychecks from any number of think tanks. He's worked with a bunch of them.

Instead, he's in the heart of government and looking like he's having the time of his life. In Cuba, Venezuela and North Korea, there's no shortage of battlegrounds for Bolton's crusade against leaders he sees as tyrannical enemies. Communists and their ilk are one thing. But it's the

Middle East that really stirs Bolton's geopolitical adrenaline.

'Unrelenting force'

In the run-up to what is now widely acknowledged to have been the disastrous 2003 Iraq invasion, Bolton - then the under-secretary of state for arms control and international security affairs - was one of Washington's most energetic pro-war cheerleaders. Now, analysts say, he's showing similar enthusiasm for action with respect to longtime US, Israeli and Saudi foe Iran. The Pentagon's dispatch to the region over the last few days of an aircraft carrier group and nuclear-capable B-52 bombers was not meant to be subtle.

Bolton warned of "unrelenting force" in response to any attack by Iran. But sending planes and ships would pale in comparison to Bolton's latest demand, reported by The New York Times - the possible deployment of 120,000 troops to the Middle East. Whether Trump would accept that, ditching his mantra of no more "stupid wars", is far from clear. On Tuesday, Trump branded the Times' report "fake news" - but went on to add that he wouldn't rule out sending "a hell of a lot more" troops one day. What's certain is that Bolton, at a minimum, is getting heard. "Bolton is in ascendancy at

White House. He appears tough and strong - two things Trump values," said Robert Guttman, at the Johns Hopkins University's Center for Advanced Governmental Studies.

Slide to war?

No one would appear more unlikely than Trump to target another Middle Eastern quagmire. He's talked repeatedly, in remarkably undiplomatic tones, about the tragedy of sending US forces to die in places that Americans could barely find on a map. But when it comes to Iran, the White House seems to be bristling for conflict. Trump pulled out of an international agreement regulating Iran's nuclear activities, ramped up sanctions crippling the country's economy, and now has added the threat of firepower to increase the pressure.

Having backed Iran into a corner, the Trump administration is warning of severe consequences should Tehran harm US interests. On Sunday, mysterious attacks by unknown assailants against four ships, including two from Saudi Arabia, sent war talk up another notch. Paul Fritz, a foreign policy expert at Hofstra University, said the outside world will be "extraordinarily skeptical" about the White House narrative on Iran as a growing menace. After all, the US-led

invasion of Iraq was based on false accusations - supported by Bolton - against Saddam Hussein. "It does ring awfully similar to the Iraq war. There's good reason to be skeptical," Fritz said.

Trump decides?

Some fear that Bolton and his fellow hawks are out of control. "Sixteen years after the US invasion of Iraq, we are again barreling toward another unnecessary conflict in the Middle East based on faulty and misleading logic," senators Tom Udall and Dick Durbin, both Democrats, wrote Sunday in The Washington Post. But the unpredictable president may never graduate from bluster to bombs, analysts say. Trump himself said last week that he's used to reigning in Bolton's "strong views". "I actually temper John," Trump said. Barbara Slavin, an Iran specialist at the Atlantic Council, said there have been discrepancies between Trump and Bolton on "numerous occasions". Even if Bolton "has been advocating bombing Iran for as long as I can remember," she said Trump probably doesn't want a new war. "On the other hand, I don't think the president minds this idea of looking tough and of putting more pressure on Iran," she said. —AFP

Israeli accused of spitting at Polish ambassador

JERUSALEM: A 65-year-old Israeli man has been arrested for allegedly spitting at the Polish ambassador, police said yesterday, adding to tensions between the two countries. Israel's envoy to Poland Anna Azari was summoned to the Polish foreign ministry in Warsaw over the incident, Polish foreign ministry spokeswoman Ewa Suwara said. Poland's Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki called it a "xenophobic act of aggression".

Polish ambassador Marek Magierowski was sitting in his car on Tuesday when a man approached and "spat at him", police spokesman Micky Rosenfeld said. Police arrested a 65-year-old from Herzliya, a city north of Tel Aviv, on Tuesday, Rosenfeld said. The suspect appeared before the Tel Aviv magistrates' court yesterday, where he was ordered to remain under house arrest for another day, Rosenfeld said. He was also banned from approaching the Polish embassy in Tel Aviv for 30 days.

The alleged incident came a day after Poland cancelled a visit by Israeli officials over their intention to raise the issue of the restitution of Jewish properties seized during the Holocaust, a matter Warsaw insists is closed. The Polish premier condemned the "racist attack". "Violence against diplomats or any other citizens should never be tolerated," Morawiecki tweeted yesterday. Israeli foreign ministry spokesman Emmanuel Nahshon expressed "our fullest sympathy to the ambassador and our shock at the attack."

According to Israel's Yediot Aharonot daily, Magierowski was also verbally accosted by the suspect in Hebrew, but did not understand anything except for the word "Pole" directed at him. Anti-Semitic concerns regarding Poland have recently resurfaced. Last year, Warsaw passed a law that made it illegal to accuse the Polish nation or state of complicity in Nazi German war crimes. The move sparked an outcry from Israel, which saw it as an attempt to ban testimonials on Polish crimes against Jews.—AFP

San Francisco bans facial recognition use by police, govt

SAN FRANCISCO: San Francisco has banned the use of facial recognition by police and government agencies, the first US city to take such a step as privacy fears mount in the country's technology capital. Backers of the legislation argued that using software and cameras to positively identify people is, as city councillor Aaron Peskin put it, "not ready for prime time". All but one of the nine members of San Francisco's board of supervisors endorsed the legislation, which will be voted on again next week in a procedural step not expected to change the outcome.

"The propensity for facial recognition technology to endanger civil rights and civil liberties substantially outweighs its purported benefits," read the legislation passed Tuesday. Facial recognition could "exacerbate racial injustice and threaten our ability to live free of continuous government monitoring," it added. The ban was part of broader legislation setting use and auditing policy for surveillance systems, creating high hurdles and requiring board approval for any city agencies.

"It shall be unlawful for any department to obtain, retain, access, or use any Face Recognition Technology or any information obtained from Face Recognition Technology," read a paragraph tucked into the lengthy document. The ban did not include airports or other federally regulated facilities. San Francisco is known as "the tech epicenter of the world," and its Bay Area is home to giants such as Facebook, Twitter, Uber and Google parent Alphabet. A similar ban is being considered across the bay in the city of Oakland. Worries about the technology include dangers of innocent people being misidentified as wrongdoers and that systems can infringe on privacy in everyday life.

'Keep the door open'

But supporters of the technology argue that facial recognition systems can help police fight crime and keep streets safer. Stop Crime SF, a local group, said facial recognition "can help locate missing children, people with dementia and fight sex trafficking". "Technology will



SAN FRANCISCO: Pedestrians walk along Powell Street on Tuesday.—AFP

improve and it could be a useful tool for public safety when used responsibly and with greater accuracy. We should keep the door open for that possibility," it said in a statement.

The technology has been credited with helping police capture dangerous criminals, but also criticized for mistaken identifications. Facial recognition "can be used in a passive way that doesn't require the knowledge, consent, or participation of the subject," the American Civil Liberties Union warned. "The biggest danger is that this technology will be used for general, suspicionless surveillance systems." Chinese authorities are using a vast system of facial recognition technology to track its Uighur Muslim minority across the country, according to a recent story in the New York Times. Beijing has already attracted widespread criticism for its treatment of Uighurs in the northwest region of Xinjiang, where up to one million members of mostly Muslim Turkic-speaking minority groups are held in internment camps, according to estimates cited by a UN panel.

But according to the Times article, facial recognition technology - integrated into China's huge networks of surveillance cameras - has been programmed to look exclusively for Uighurs based on their appearance and keep records of their movements across China. It is thought to be the first known example of a government intentionally using AI for racial profiling.—AFP

Alabama senate passes toughest abortion bill in US

MIAMI: The Alabama senate has passed the most restrictive abortion bill in the United States, which places a near-total ban on the termination of pregnancy - even in cases of rape and incest - and could punish doctors who perform the procedure with life in prison. The text passed by the Republican-led senate Tuesday has been sent to Governor Kay Ivey's desk for signature into law and, if approved, is expected to trigger a legal battle which its supporters hope will reach the Supreme Court.

Under the bill, performing an abortion is a crime that could land doctors who perform it in prison for 10 to 99 years. Abortions would only be legal if the life of the mother is in danger or the fetus has a fatal condition. The largest human rights defense organization in the United States, the ACLU, promised to file a lawsuit to block its implementation, saying the vote showed "how little they (conservative lawmakers) regard bodily autonomy". "This bill punishes victims of rape and incest by further taking away control over their own bodies and forcing them to give birth," it added.

The National Organization for Women called the bill "unconstitutional" and said its passage would "send women in the state back to the dark days of policymakers having control over their bodies, health, and lives". The Republican-led senate approved the measure by 25 votes to six on Tuesday. Governor Ivey has not yet said whether she will sign the bill. Unlike the doctors carrying out the procedures, women who undergo abortions would not be prosecuted.

Attempts to introduce an amendment providing exceptions for pregnancies conceived due to rape or incest were shut down by the state senate. "You just raped the state of Alabama yourself," state senate Democratic leader Bobby Singleton said after senators eliminated the amendment. "You're saying to my daughter you don't matter in the state of Alabama... It's ok for men to rape you and you're gonna have his baby if you get pregnant," he added, his voice sometimes breaking with emotion.—AFP