

International

# Trump and the US media just can't let go of 'Sharpie-gate'

The bizarre episode has taken on an even more bizarre mascot

WASHINGTON: It's been six days and Donald Trump and the US media can't seem to let go of a tit-for-tat involving the danger Alabama faced during Hurricane Dorian. The bizarre episode has taken on an even more bizarre mascot — a Sharpie marker used to alter a map of the storm's trajectory. Trump has insisted via Twitter to his more than 60 million followers that he was correct about the danger the southern US state had faced. He has brandished a mysteriously altered weather map in the Oval Office. He has deployed a rear admiral.

And the US media has lapped it up. On Friday — a day when survivors in the Bahamas and other places where the hurricane actually did hit were trying to rebuild their lives — the US president once more took to Twitter to argue about Alabama. The media "went Crazy, hoping against hope that I made a mistake (which I didn't)," he wrote. "Still without an apology."

The spat might seem insignificant as one of the most powerful Atlantic hurricanes on record wheels up the edge of the US east coast after pulverizing the Bahamas. But in terms of attention given by Trump, what's become known as "Sharpie-gate" is no sideshow. The strange tale began when Trump tweeted on Sunday that Alabama was among the states facing damage from the still approaching Dorian and would "most likely be hit (much) harder than anticipated."

Minutes after Trump's alarming tweet, the National Weather Service (NWS) counter-tweeted: "Alabama will NOT see any impacts from #Dorian. We repeat, no impacts from Hurricane #Dorian will be felt across Alabama. The system will remain too far east." By Friday, however, the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA), the agency in charge of the NWS, seemed to vindicate Trump.

"From Wednesday, August 28, through Monday, September 2, the information provided by NOAA and the National Hurricane Center to President Trump and the wider public demonstrated that tropical-storm-force winds from Hurricane Dorian could impact Alabama. This is clearly demonstrated in Hurricane Advisories #15 through #41," it said. Furthermore, it stated, "The Birmingham National Weather Service's Sunday morning tweet spoke in absolute terms that were inconsistent with probabilities from the best forecast products available at the time."

**Back down? Double down?**

Opponents of Trump pounced on the topic. Trump, as he usually does, doubled down. Over and over this week he kept talking about Alabama, even when no other officials did, and he raged at the media for pointing out that Alabama still hadn't been hit and, in fact, never had been in real danger. On Wednesday, the back-and-forth took a still more curious turn.

In the Oval Office, Trump showed off a weather map showing an earlier — now completely out of date — forecast of Dorian's track that predicted the storm passing right across Florida, rather than turning up the coast. Added to the end of the path? A large bulge, apparently drawn in black Sharpie marker, that extended the storm deep into Alabama. Facing even more derision from TV comedians, satirists and Democratic opponents, Trump once more doubled down.

Late Thursday, the White House sent out the copy of a somber letter by Rear Admiral Peter Brown — Trump's counter-terrorism adviser — saying that back on Sunday he'd been the one to brief the president on Alabama being a possible target. On Friday, Trump accused the media of being "fixated" on the issue.



WASHINGTON DC: In this file photo taken on September 4, 2019, US President Donald Trump and Acting US Secretary of Homeland Security Kevin McAleenan update the media on Hurricane Dorian preparedness from the Oval Office at the White House. —AFP

"This nonsense has never happened to another President," he said. But the icing on the cake came in the form of an item now for purchase on the Trump 2020 campaign merchandise website: a set of "Official Donald J. Trump Fine Point Markers." "Buy the official

Trump marker, which is different than every other marker on the market, because this one has the special ability to drive @CNN and the rest of the fake news crazy! #KeepMarkersGreat," Trump 2020 campaign manager Brad Parscale tweeted. —AFP

## Hard-won 2015 Iran nuke deal

TEHRAN: Iran agreed with major world powers in 2015 to freeze its nuclear program in return for the lifting of punishing international sanctions. But in 2018, President Donald Trump pulled the United States out of the agreement, later reimposing sanctions. Despite consistent denials from Tehran, the US and Israel continue to accuse Iran of seeking a nuclear weapon. Here is a look back.

**Long road**

Tough negotiations start in June 2013 between Iran and the five permanent members of the UN Security Council—Britain, China, France, Russia and the United States—plus Germany. The final deal is reached in Vienna on July 14, 2015, bringing an end to a 12-year international row over the Iran nuclear issue.

**The aim**

The goal of the deal is to render it practically impossible for Iran to build an atomic bomb, while at the same time allowing it to pursue a civil nuclear program. As part of the agreement, Tehran pledges to reduce its nuclear capacities for several years.

The accord caps Iran's enrichment of uranium at 3.67 percent, sufficient for power generation but far below the more than 90 percent level required for a nuclear weapon. Iran agrees to slash the number of its enrichment cen-

trifuges from more than 19,000 to 5,060, and to maintain that level for a decade. It also agrees to use only its less efficient, first-generation centrifuges. It undertakes to modify its heavy water reactor in Arak to make it impossible to produce plutonium for military use. The deal comes into effect on January 16, 2016.

**Inspectors, sanctions relief**

The International Atomic Energy Agency is charged with regular inspections of facilities such as uranium mines and centrifuge workshops for up to 25 years. The accord also paves the way for a partial lifting of international sanctions on Iran, opening the door to foreign investors. French energy giant Total and carmakers PSA and Renault all strike deals. UN embargoes on the sale of conventional arms and on ballistic missiles to Iran are however maintained up to 2020 and 2023 respectively.

**US exit**

But on May 8, 2018, Trump announces the US is pulling out of the agreement and will reimpose sanctions on Iran as well as all companies with ties to the Islamic republic. On August 7, it imposes sanctions that target access to US banknotes and key industries such as cars and carpets. A second tranche of sanctions kicks in on November 5, targeting Iran's vital oil sector and central bank transactions. From May 2, 2019, Washington ends temporary sanctions waivers it had granted to the eight main purchasers of Iranian oil, raising the pressure on hold-



BUSHEHR: In this file photo taken on February 25, 2009, Iranian technicians walk outside the building housing the reactor of Bushehr nuclear power plant at the Iranian port town of Bushehr, 1200 Kms south of the capital Tehran. —AFP

ers China, India and Turkey to find other suppliers.

**Deal unravels**

Responding to the sanctions, Iran announces on May 8 it will stop observing restrictions on its stocks of enriched uranium and heavy water agreed under the deal. It also gives the European Union, China and Russia until July 7 to help it circumvent US sanctions and sell oil, saying it would otherwise abandon more of the terms. Hours later Trump announces new measures on iron, steel, aluminum and copper.

On June 24, the US imposes financial sanctions on Iran's supreme leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei and senior Iranian military leaders. It comes as tensions rise

after Iran's downing of a US drone over sensitive Gulf waters and a series of tanker attacks that Washington blames on Tehran, despite its denials.

On July 1, Iran says it has exceeded the limit on its enriched uranium stockpiles set by the deal. On July 7, Iran announces it is set to breach the 3.67 percent cap on uranium enrichment stipulated in the deal and threatens to abandon more nuclear commitments in "60 days". On September 4, Iran lifts all restrictions on nuclear research and development. On September 7, Iran says it has fired up advanced centrifuges to boost its enriched uranium stockpiles, adding, however, that it will continue to give UN inspectors access to monitor its nuclear sites. —AFP

## Tunisia airs first 'great debate' ahead of presidential poll

TUNIS: Days before the first round of Tunisia's presidential election, the fledgling democracy is holding three nights of televised debates between the candidates, a rare event in the Arab world. The showdown between the 26 hopefuls, starting Saturday, is seen as the highlight of the campaign and a turning point in Tunisian politics ahead of the vote a week today.

Called "The road to Carthage: Tunisia makes its choice", the programs will be broadcast on 11 TV channels, two of them public, and some 20 radio stations. "We won't be able to escape it," said a smiling Belabbes Benkreddda, founder of the Munathara Initiative which promotes open debate in the Arab world and helped organize the event.

The first hour-and-a-half debate on Saturday night will include several "heavyweight" candidates, pitting Abdelfattah Mourou of the Islamist-inspired Ennahda party against passionate secularist Abir Moussi, head of a group with roots in the party of former dictator Zine El Abidine Ben Ali. There will also be an empty space for

the controversial media mogul Nabil Karoui, currently detained on money laundering charges. Organizers considered having him take part in the debate by phone from his cell, but whether or not he will be able to is up to the courts.

**15 minutes to convince voters**

The stage, at the studios of public TV channel Wataniya, places candidates in a semi-circle with two journalist moderators at the centre. The questions were set by the journalists and will be randomly selected and allocated to candidates on Friday. Each candidate will have 90 seconds to respond to a question and can be asked a follow-up question or interrupted.

At the end of the show, candidates will have 99 seconds to outline their manifestos and campaign promises. The number of questions has not been specified, but each candidate will have 15 minutes of speaking time during the program. "We are going to be extremely strict on time. It's the rule of the game, you are in front of the people and you each have the same amount of time to convince them", said Lassad Khedder, head of a private TV channel syndicate in Tunisia, who expects "very rich and heated debates".

**Open competition**

Beyond the organizational and technical elements, organizers highlighted the rare nature of the event. "Often in the Arab world, when we speak of competition we know who wins at the end,



TUNIS: Electoral posters of Tunisian presidential candidates Nabil Karoui (up), and Youssef Chahed, are pictured along a road in the capital. —AFP

with 99.99 percent. Today, we don't know who is going to win", Khedder said. Indeed, the plethora of candidates, political programs and issues, has led to an uniquely unpredictable election.

Many Tunisians say they are counting on the debate to help them make their decision. "It's unprecedented! As a Tunisian journalist, I am proud and impatient to see this," said Monia Dhoub, a member of the organizing committee. The debates are not entirely unprecedented in the region. In 2012, 15 months after the overthrow of Hosni Mubarak, Egypt organised a historic

televised debate between two favorites among the 13 candidates running for president.

The winner of that election, the Muslim Brotherhood's Mohamed Morsi, was deposed by the army following massive protests a year after he took office. Munathara Initiative's Benkreddda said "the culture of debate doesn't yet have a place in the Arab world". But he noted that the Tunisian debates will also be broadcast by channels in Iraq, Algeria and Libya. The hope is, he said, that this "first step will serve as inspiration" for other Arab countries. —AFP

## Mexico says migration crackdown working ahead of key US talks

MEXICO CITY: Mexico said Friday it has slashed undocumented migration to the United States by 56 percent since May, aiming to dodge the threat of tariffs under a deal the two countries are set to review next week. America's southern neighbor agreed in June to crack down on migration, mainly from poor countries in Central America, under the threat of import tariffs from President Donald Trump, who is seeking reelection on a largely anti-immigration platform.

"I do not think there will be a threat of tariffs because there is a 56 percent reduction" from May to August in apprehensions of undocumented migrants on the US side of the border, said Foreign Minister Marcelo Ebrard, who is due to travel to Washington next week to review the migration deal with the Trump administration 90 days in. The foreign ministry cited US Customs and Border Protection as the source of the figure, though that agency has not yet published data for August on migrant apprehensions at the border.

Ebrard repeated Mexico's refusal to become a so-called safe third country, which Trump has pressed for. Under such an arrangement, it would agree to make migrants who cross its territory seek asylum in Mexico rather than the United States. "The Mexican strategy is working. We will not agree to be a safe third country ... because it goes against our interests," the minister said. "It is unfair to our country."

Ebrard said he will tell Vice President Mike Pence and Secretary of State Mike Pompeo when he meets with them Tuesday that the way to fight undocumented migration from Central America is to reduce the poverty and violence that are prompting people to leave in the first place. He said that would include pushing Washington to fulfill its economic aid commitments to the region. "The United States promised \$2 billion, but we're still waiting for... a little more than \$1 billion" of that, he told a news conference. —AFP

## Israel strikes Gaza after rocket attack

JERUSALEM: Israeli forces attacked Hamas positions in Gaza after rockets fired from the Palestinian enclave hit the Jewish state, the military said early yesterday. The exchange came hours after two Palestinian teenagers were killed by Israeli fire during clashes on the Gaza border. Late Friday, "five projectiles were launched from the Gaza Strip towards Israel," the army said.

The projectiles hit open fields in southern Israel, an army spokesman told AFP. In response, an "aircraft and tank struck a number of Hamas military targets in the northern Gaza Strip, including a post and military positions," the army said in a statement. A Hamas security source said there were no casualties resulting from the Israeli strikes. Later Saturday, a drone launched from southern Gaza crossed into Israeli airspace, the army said in a separate statement.

It "dropped what seems to be an explosive device" near the security fence, damaging a military vehicle before returning to Gaza. In response, an Israeli "aircraft targeted the squad which launched the drone," the army said. There were no reports of casualties in Gaza. During border clashes on Friday, two Palestinians aged 14 and 17 were shot dead by Israeli forces, the Gaza health ministry said, with another 46 Palestinians wounded.

The Israeli army said thousands of Palestinians took part in "especially violent" demonstrations along the border fence, which included throwing "fire bombs and explosive devices" at soldiers. Palestinians have been holding regular mass protests along the fortified border since March 2018. The protesters have called on Israel to end its crippling siege of the coastal enclave and demanded the right to return to lands their families fled during the war that accompanied the creation of Israel in 1948. —AFP