

International

Facebook tightens political advert rules for Singapore

Facebook unveils virtual social space for its Oculus users

SINGAPORE: Facebook yesterday introduced strict criteria for political ads on the social network in Singapore to prevent the spread of misinformation as the city-state gears up for elections. Faced with criticism the site has been used to manipulate polls, Facebook has been tightening rules on such adverts around the world, from the United States to India.

Those advertising in Singapore about elections and politics on Facebook or its Instagram app will now have to first confirm their identity and location, and disclose who is responsible for the ad, the social network said. They must also provide information such as a phone number, email or website, said Katie Harbath, Facebook's public policy director. In addition, the new requirements will apply to those wanting to run ads related to social issues such as immigration and crime-topics that are hotly debated by Singaporeans on Facebook.

"To enable healthy discourse in Singapore, we've taken steps to reduce the spread of misinformation, help prevent foreign interference in elections, and, more recently, to bring greater transparency and authenticity to advertising," she said. Speculation has been mounting that Singaporeans could head to the polls soon after Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong convened a committee to review electoral boundaries this month, typically the first step towards a vote.

Facebook came under fire from Singapore authorities earlier this year in the run-up to the

passage of new legislation to combat "fake news", with the government accusing tech giants of being unable to police themselves. The law requires social media platforms to carry corrections or remove content the government deems to be false, but activists have warned it could be used to silence critics ahead of the elections.

Facebook is a major investor in Singapore. The firm has its Asia headquarters in the city-state and last year announced plans to build a \$1 billion data centre there, its first in the region. The Singapore government has long been accused of clamping down on civil liberties and free speech, and targeting their political opponents. The People's Action Party, which has ruled Singapore uninterrupted for more than five decades, is not seen as being at risk of losing power at the polls to a divided opposition.

Virtual social space

Facebook said Wednesday it will launch a virtual social community where users of its Oculus headgear can "explore new places" and "create their own new experiences." The Horizon virtual world set for a beta launch in 2020 represents a new initiative for the Oculus virtual reality unit of the leading social network.

Oculus users will be able to choose an avatar and interact with others in the virtual social community, Facebook said as it opened its Oculus Connect 6 conference. "Our goal is to put people at the center of computing, not



NANTES: Photo shows the logo of the US online social media and social networking service, Facebook. Facebook has removed a group of pages on its platform reportedly linked to Ukraine which featured US patriotic messages and praise for President Donald Trump, with posts seen by millions of users. —AFP

just with great hardware, but with amazing software experiences as well," Facebook said in a statement. Facebook Horizon will be "a new social experience in VR where you can build your own worlds with easy-to-use tools (no coding skills required)," the company said.

Facebook chief executive Mark Zuckerberg told the conference, "Because everyone is going to be able to create their own spaces and experiences within it, Horizon is going to have

this property where it just grows and expands and gets better and better over time." Horizon will replace earlier versions of the social VR community Facebook Spaces and Oculus Rooms. Oculus remains a small part of Facebook's services, with its core social network and other platforms reaching more than two billion people worldwide. Analysts expect sales of 1.3 million units in 2019 of the Oculus Quest, the headset unveiled last year. —Agencies

Many feared dead in Chad gold mine collapse: Minister

N'DJAMENA: Many people were feared dead, possibly 30, after an illegal gold mine collapsed in northern Chad close to the Libyan border, officials said yesterday. Defense Minister Mahamat Abali Salah told AFP the mine caved in early Tuesday in a zone beset by illicit mining and trafficking at Kouri Bougoudi in Tibesti province. There were "many deaths, for sure," Salah said. "A mine collapsed. I cannot say exactly how many fatalities there are but there are many people working in these mines, so there must be many deaths, for sure," Salah told AFP by phone.

An army officer who requested anonymity spoke of "around 30 deaths," basing the figure on witness accounts with the army yet to arrive on the scene which is in a remote small town. A local lawmaker spoke for his part of "a dozen deaths," basing his tally on what witnesses had related to him. "I cannot give you an exact tally as we rushed troops to the scene this morning," said Salah, saying he expected a report later. Tibesti, the province where the accident occurred, is largely lawless and home to numerous gangs and traffickers seeking to profit from a gold rush. Clashes in January between Arab miners from Libya and miners from Chad's Ouaddai community left "dozens" dead, according to security and mining sources. Kouri Bougoudi has itself been the scene of clashes among rival ethnic, local and foreign groups since 2012 and 2013 after the discovery of gold deposits there. —AFP

Chemical plant fire in northern France threatens Seine

CAEN: Thick black smoke billowed over the northern French town of Rouen yesterday after a spectacular fire broke out at a chemical factory, forcing authorities to close schools and warn of potential pollution risks for the nearby Seine river. After hours of battling the blaze, around 200 firefighters had brought it under control by afternoon, though officials said it could be several days at least before it is fully extinguished. "The fight they will have to wage to get the situation fully under control will take several days, maybe even weeks," Interior Minister Christophe Castaner said after arriving at the site.

The fire erupted at around 2:30 am at a storage facility owned by a Lubrizol, a manufacturer of industrial lubricants and fuel additives. Castaner said firefighters had managed to remove "the most dangerous products" that could have provoked other explosions at other nearby industrial sites. But the smoke had spread 22 kilometers and contains "a certain number of compounds which can be a health hazard," Castaner said, though there was no "particular danger" according to initial analyses.

Schools and creches nearby have been shut, and local authorities have asked people living near the factory to stay at home and everyone else to avoid unnecessary journeys. Prosecutors have opened an inquiry into the cause of the explosion and fire, which work up residents with a booming

explosion. "There was soot all over the streets, pavements and cars," said Jean-Claude Bleuzen, a deputy mayor of Preaux, a town some 15 kilometers northeast of Rouen.

Environmental threat

"The smoke is really striking and wherever you are in Rouen you can see it," Marina Andre, a 25-year-old who works in a bar near the factory said. "You can smell fuel, not really a burned smell, it's very distinctive," she said, adding that people were still going to work and even cycling near the site of the blaze on the bank of the Seine river. The factory belongs to US multinational Lubrizol, which is owned by the billionaire American investor Warren Buffett, and sits just a few kilometers from the centre of the city of around 100,000 people.

Pierre-Andre Durand, a top regional official, told reporters that the danger was an overflow of fuel or polluted wastewater from the site into the river. The Seine, one of France's biggest rivers, flows through Paris to the south and empties into the English Channel further north in Le Havre, which is home to a major fishing fleet. In January 2013, the Lubrizol factory was responsible for a giant leak of the gas mercaptan, which smells like cabbage or rotten eggs and is often added to natural gas to alert people in case of leaks.

A cloud of the gas blew all the way to Paris and across the Channel into southern England, where residents complained about the odor. And in 2015, 2,000 litres of mineral oil, which is used in lubricants, leaked from the Lubrizol site into the local sewer system in Rouen, which is famed for its cathedral. "The biggest priority is to protect the most risky parts of the factory, which could explode and then create a domino effect of other fires," Jean-Yves Lagalle, the head of firefighting in the region, told reporters. —AFP