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The US administration leaned on African nations

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IN EARLY February, Sharon Cromer, US ambassador to Gambia, went to visit one of the country's Cabinet ministers at his agency's headquarters, above a partially abandoned strip mall off a dirt road. It had been two weeks since President Donald Trump took office, and Cromer had pressing business to discuss.

She needed the minister to fall in line to help Elon Musk.

Starlink, Musk's satellite internet company, had spent months trying to secure regulatory approval in the impoverished West African country. As head of Gambia's communications ministry, Lamin Jabbi oversees the government's review of Starlink's licence application. Jabbi had been slow to sign off and the company had grown impatient. Now the top US government official in Gambia was in Jabbi's office to intervene.

Musk's Department of Government Efficiency loomed over the conversation. The administration had already begun freezing foreign aid projects, and early in the meeting, Cromer said something that rattled Gambian officials in the room. She listed the ways that the US was supporting the country, according to two people present and contemporaneous notes, noting that key initiatives – like one that funds a \$25 million project to improve the electrical system – were currently under review.

Jabbi's top deputy, Hassan Jallow, told ProPublica he saw Cromer's message as a veiled threat: If Starlink doesn't get its licence, the US could cut off the desperately needed funds. "The implication was that they were connected," Jallow said.

In recent months, senior State Department officials in both Washington and Gambia have coordinated with Starlink executives to coax, lobby and browbeat at least seven Gambian government ministers to help Musk, records and interviews show. One of those Cabinet officials told ProPublica his government is under "maximum pressure" to yield.

In mid-March, Cromer escalated the campaign by writing to Gambia's president with an "important request". That day, a contentious DC meeting between Musk employees and Jabbi had ended in an impasse. She urged the president to circumvent Jabbi and "facilitate the necessary approvals for Starlink to commence operations", according to a copy of the letter obtained by ProPublica. Jabbi told confidantes he felt the ambassador was trying to get him fired.

The saga in Gambia is the starkest known example of the Trump administration wielding the US government's foreign policy apparatus to advance the business interests of Musk, a top Trump adviser and the world's richest man.

Since Trump's inauguration, the State Department has intervened on behalf of Starlink in Gambia and at least four other developing nations, previously unreported records and interviews show.

As the Trump administration has gutted foreign aid, US diplomats have pressed governments to fast-track licences for Starlink and arranged conversations between company employ-

ees and foreign leaders. In statements, US officials have said that for their foreign counterparts, helping Starlink is a chance to prove their commitment to good relations with the US.

In one country last month, the US embassy bragged that Starlink's licence was approved despite concerns it wasn't abiding by rules that its competitors had to follow.

"If this was done by another country, we absolutely would call this corruption," said Kristofer Harrison, who served as a high-level State Department official in the George W Bush administration. "Because it is corruption."

Helping US businesses has long been part of the State Department's mission, but former ambassadors said they sought to do this by making the positive case for the benefits of US investment. When seeking deals for US companies, they said they took care to avoid the appearance of conflicts or leaving the impression that punitive measures were on the table.

Ten current and former State Department officials said the recent drive was an alarming departure from standard diplomatic practice – because of both the tactics used and the person who would benefit most from them.

federal workers, cancelled billions of dollars in programmes and dismantled the US Agency for International Development, which supported humanitarian projects around the world. African nations have been particularly hard-hit by the cuts. At the same time, Musk continues to run Starlink and the rest of his corporate empire. In past administrations, government ethics lawyers carefully vetted potential conflicts of interest. Though Trump once said that "we won't let him get near" conflicts, the White House has also suggested Musk is responsible for policing himself. The billionaire has waved away criticisms of the arrangement, saying "I'll recuse myself" if conflicts arise. "My companies are suffering because I'm in the government," Musk said.

In a statement, the White House said Musk has nothing to do with deals involving Starlink and that every administration official follows ethical guidelines. "For the umpteenth time, President Trump will not tolerate any conflicts of interest," spokesperson Harrison Fields said in an email.

In internal cables, State Department officials have said they are eager to help Musk get ahead of foreign satellite companies.

collection and a private zoo. When the dictator was ousted, the economy was in tatters. Today Gambia is one of the poorest countries in the world, with about half the country living on less than \$4 a day.

In this fragile environment, the telecoms industry that Jabbi oversees is vitally important to Gambian authorities. According to the government, the sector provides at least 20% of the country's tax revenue. Ads for the country's multiple internet providers are ubiquitous, painted onto dozens of public works – parks, police booths, schools.

It's unclear why Starlink's efforts in Gambia, a tiny market, have been so intense.

Gambia is not the only country being leaned on. Since Trump took office, embassies around the world have sent a flurry of cable messages to DC documenting their meetings with Starlink executives and their efforts to cajole developing countries into helping Musk's business. The cables all describe a problem similar to what happened in Gambia: The company has struggled to win a licence from local regulators. In some countries, ambassadors reported, their work appears to be yielding results.

The US embassy in Cameroon wrote that the country could prove its commitment to Trump's agenda by letting Starlink expand its presence there.

In the same missive, embassy officials discussed the impact of US aid cuts and deportations and cited a humanitarian official who was reckoning with America's shifting foreign policy: "They may not be happy with what they see, but they are trying to adapt as best they can."

In Lesotho, where embassy officials had spent weeks trying to help Starlink get a licence, the company finalised a deal after Trump imposed 50% tariffs on the tiny landlocked country. Lesotho officials told embassy staff they hoped the licence would help in their urgent push to reduce the levies, according to Mother Jones.

A major multinational company complained that Starlink was getting preferential treatment, embassy documents obtained by ProPublica show, since Musk's firm had been exempted from requirements its competitors still had to follow.

In cables sent from the US embassy in Djibouti this spring, State Department officials recounted their meetings with the company and pledged to continue working with "Starlink in identifying government officials and facilitating discussions."

In Bangladesh, US diplomats pressed Starlink's case "early and often" with local officials, partnered with Starlink to "build an educational strategy" for their counterparts and helped arrange a conversation between Musk and the nation's head of state, according to a recent cable. The embassy's work started under Biden but bore fruit only after Trump took office.

Their efforts resulted in Bangladesh approving Starlink's request to do business in the country, the top US diplomat there said last month, a sign-off that Musk's company had sought for years.

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WORKING
closely with
executives at
Starlink, the US
government
has made a
global push
to help
expand Elon
Musk's business
empire in the
developing
world. | AFP



"I honestly didn't think we were capable of doing this," one official told ProPublica. "That is bad on every level." Kenneth Fairfax, a retired career diplomat who served as US ambassador to Kazakhstan, said the global push for Musk "could lead to the impression that the US is engaging in a form of crony capitalism."

The Washington Post previously reported that Secretary of State Marco Rubio has instructed US diplomats to help Starlink so it can beat its Chinese and Russian competitors. Multiple countries, including India, have sped up licence approvals for Starlink to try to build goodwill in tariff negotiations with the Trump administration, the Post reported. During the Biden administration, State Department officials worked with Starlink to help the company navigate bureaucracies abroad. But the agency's approach appears to have become significantly more aggressive and expansive since Trump's return to power, according to internal records and current and former government officials.

Foreign leaders are acutely aware of Musk's unprecedented position in the government, which he has used to help rewrite US foreign policy. After Musk spent at least \$288 million on the 2024 election, Trump gave the billionaire a powerful post in the White House. In mere months, Musk's team has directed the firing of thousands of

Securing licences in the next 18 months is critical for Starlink due to the growing competition, one cable said last month. Senior diplomats have written that they hope to give Musk's company a "first-mover advantage".

Africa represents a lucrative prize. Much of the continent lacks reliable internet. Success in Africa could mean dominating a market with the fastest-growing population on earth.

As of last November, Starlink had reportedly launched in 15 of Africa's 54 countries, but it was beginning to spark a backlash. Last year, Cameroon and Namibia cracked down on Musk's company for allegedly operating in their countries illegally. In South Africa – where Starlink has so far failed to get a licence – Musk exacerbated tensions by publicly accusing the government of anti-white racism.

Now Musk's campaign of cuts has given him leverage inside the State Department. A Trump administration memo that leaked to the press last month proposed closing six embassies in Africa. The Gambian embassy was on the list of proposed cuts.

An 8-year-old democracy, Gambia's 2.7 million residents live on a sliver of land once used as a hub in the transatlantic slave trade. For two decades until 2017, the nation was ruled by a despot who had his opponents assassinated and plundered public funds to buy himself luxuries like a Rolls-Royce