

Israeli president grilled over sex scandal

Former justice minister also faces a similar charge

AFP, Tel Aviv

Israeli President Moshe Katsav was being grilled by police yesterday over sexual harassment allegations in the latest scandal to hit the leadership, already reeling over failures in the Lebanon war.

Allegations of sexual shenanigans and that his office granted unlawful pardons may cost the Iranian-born head of state his job, which could make him Israel's second consecutive president to resign amid scandal.

A team of investigators arrived at his Jerusalem residence in the morning to question Katsav about what the Maariv daily said were the criminal offences of prohibited sexual relations, exploitation of status and possibly even rape.

"I can confirm that the investigators are there at the president's residence," said police spokesman Micky Rosenfeld. He said the questioning would last for a couple of hours, but provided no details on their nature.

Wednesday marks the first time that 61-year-old Katsav has been grilled by investigators since the damaging allegations first surfaced a few months ago.

Two days ago, police raided his home and office, confiscating computers and documents in what is fast becoming the biggest of a

series of sexual and financial scandals compromising senior Israeli state figures.

Maariv said that, according to one senior police officer, investigators already have enough evidence to indict Katsav.



Moshe Katsav

One woman, a former senior employee in Katsav's office, has testified to being coerced into sex with the president after he hinted she would otherwise lose her job, Maariv said. She was reported to have passed a lie-detector test.

The case allegedly came to light when a woman tried to blackmail Katsav for money and a job, threatening to file sexual harassment charges, at which point the president alerted Attorney General Menachem Mazuz.

Mazuz on July 12 then ordered a preliminary investigation into harassment charges, the same day Israel's war against Shiite militia Hezbollah erupted.

Katsav also faces allegations that his office granted illegal pardons to prisoners at the request of associates, local media reported.

MPs have already begun to demand that the president, a former transport and tourism minister, step down.

A simple request by 20 MPs could see him summoned before a parliamentary commission where a three-quarters majority could lead to a hearing before the full parliament. A vote by 90 of the 120 MPs could see him forced to resign.

Formerly leader of the opposition Likud party, Katsav emigrated to Israel shortly after the Jewish state was founded in 1948 and was elected the largely ceremonial head of state in 2000 as the first conservative to hold the post.

Scandal forced his predecessor, the late Ezer Weizman, to resign after revelations that he received around 450,000 dollars as "gifts" from French millionaire Edouard Saroussi in the 1980s, when Weizman was an MP and minister.

A string of contemporary scandals, also implicating Prime Minister Ehud Olmert, tarnished the credibility of the government already weather-

ing stormy waters over public anger at perceived mismanagement of the Lebanon war.

Justice Minister Haim Ramon resigned on Sunday after the attorney general decided to indict him over sexual harassment accusations from a woman soldier.

Tzahi Hanegbi, another senior member of Olmert's Kadima party and chairman of parliament's foreign affairs and defense committee, is under investigation for fraud, perjury and breach of trust as environment minister three years ago.

Olmert, who has seen his approval ratings plummet in the three months since he took office, also faces a possible property deal probe.

Ramon was yesterday formally charged in the Tel Aviv district court but he did not attend the hearing and no date for the start of his trial was fixed, a judicial source said.

Ramon resigned after Attorney General Menachem Mazuz decided to indict him over accusations of sexual harassment.

The soldier reportedly said the justice minister had tried "to kiss her in an aggressive manner" during a social gathering at the defence ministry in Tel Aviv, days after Israel launched its 34-day war in Lebanon.



PHOTO: AFP

Pakistani railway officials use a crane to remove an engine after they derailed it to avert possible disasters. A suspected Indian national yesterday stole the engine in Karachi and tried to drive it into a passenger train in an attempted terror attack, police said.

'West's support for Musharraf makes Pakistan seedbed of terrorism'

AFP, London

The West's support for Pakistan's military leader General Pervez Musharraf has made the country a "seedbed" of terrorism, according to former prime minister Benazir Bhutto.

Writing in The Guardian yesterday, Bhutto asks: "Why is it that the terrorist trail always seems to lead back to Pakistan?"

"Why are second-generation Pakistani emigrants far more attracted by this pattern of terrorism than other disillusioned Muslims in the west?"

"What is it about Islamabad that puts it at the centre of terrorist plots?"

Pakistan's first, and so far only, female premier wrote that Musharraf has "played the west like a fiddle" by offering support in the so-called "war on terror" to keep the United States and Britain "off his back as he proceeded to arrest and exile opposition leaders, decimate political parties, pressure the press and set back human and women's

rights by a generation." "The Musharraf dictatorship does outstentable support in the war on terror to keep it in the good graces of Washington, while it presides over a society that fuels and empowers militants at the expense of moderates."

Bhutto, who twice governed Pakistan in 1988-1990 and 1993-1996, said the message sent by military dictatorship in Pakistan, both Musharraf's and that of Mohammed Zia-ul-Haq between the late 1970s and late 1980s, was that "might is right".

"The West, by supporting the suppression of the democratic aspirations of Pakistanis, has enabled the dictatorship to permeate this message among a new generation of Muslim youth."

She concludes that the country has to embark along the road of democratic reform, writing: "A democratic Pakistan, free from the yoke of military dictatorship, would cease to be the Petri dish of the pandemic of international terrorism."

India extends ceasefire with Assam rebels

AFP, New Delhi

The Indian government yesterday extended a ceasefire in the northeast by 15 days in a bid to jumpstart talks with the region's dominant separatist group.

The move came after the outlawed United Liberation Front of Assam, which has been fighting for an independent homeland, announced an indefinite ceasefire at the weekend.

"We've decided to extend the suspension of army operations against the United Liberation front of Assam (ULFA) for 15 days," Home Secretary V.K. Duggal said.

The government began the ceasefire on August 13. The outlawed group responded by announcing a "cessation of hostilities" - its first such declaration since it launched its armed campaign 27 years ago that has claimed more than 15,000 lives.

First crack in Indian ruling coalition

PALLAB BHATTACHARYA, New Delhi

In the first crack in India's ruling Congress-led United Progressive Alliance, a small regional party, one of its constituents, quit the combine on Tuesday night protesting "delay" in carving a new state out of the southern state of Andhra Pradesh.

Andhra Pradesh-based party Telangana Rashtra Samithi (TRS) pulled out of UPA and withdrew support to the combine after two of its representatives in Prime Minister Manmohan Singh's government sent their resignation Tuesday evening.

The representatives are TRS chief K Chandrasekhar Rao, who held Labour portfolio, and his party colleague A Narendra who was minister of state for Rural

Development.

However, the withdrawal of TRS, which has just five members in Parliament, would not at all affect the stability of the UPA government which enjoys the support of more than 340 MPs even without TRS support in the 542-member Lok Sabha.

The is the first fissure in UPA since the alliance was cobbled after BJP-led NDA's defeat in parliamentary elections in May 2004.

The TRS had about six months back pulled out of Congress-led government in Andhra Pradesh to press their demand for a Telangana state but it did not affect the state government as Congress has overwhelming majority in the legislative assembly.

The TRS had fought the 2004

general elections and assembly polls in Andhra Pradesh on the plank of Telangana state, an impoverished region, and had a pre-poll tie-up with Congress.

The TRS had been threatening to pull out of UPA for the last two years unless its demand was met. As a last-ditch effort to TRS leaders to remain in UPA, leaders of the alliance had met them yesterday.

Congress maintained the stand that Telangana could not be carved out in present situation as several constituents of UPA and supporting parties, particularly the Left, are opposed to it. Besides, Andhra Pradesh Chief Minister Y S Rajasekhara Reddy was said to be opposed to Telangana.

Israel buys N-subs 'to counter Iran threat'

AFP, Jerusalem

In a bid to boost its military arsenal against a perceived threat from arch-foe Iran, Israel has signed a contract with Germany to buy two submarines capable of carrying nuclear weapons, a newspaper report said yesterday.

Under the contract signed in July, the two Dolphin-class submarines, called U212s, will be assembled in Germany and fitted with a propulsion system allowing them to remain underwater for far longer than submarines already in use by the Israel navy, the Jerusalem Post said.

The state-of-the-art submarines, manufactured by Howaldtswerke-Deutsche Werft AG, will be bought by Israel for 1.27 billion dollars, a third of which will be financed by the German government, the English-language daily said.

The U212s are designed for a crew of 35, have a range of 4,500 kilometers and can launch cruise

missiles carrying nuclear warheads, the paper quoted the Jane's Defense Weekly as saying. Israel's defense ministry said it was unable either to confirm or deny the report.

The navy already has three German submarines - the most expensive weapon platforms in Israel's arsenal that are also thought to be able to carry nuclear weapons.

Israel has never acknowledged possessing a nuclear arsenal although it is widely believed to have one.

Germany donated the first two submarines after the 1991 Gulf War and split the cost of the third with the Jewish state.

The Jerusalem Post also said the navy was considering installing an underwater sonar system off the coast to detect foreign submarines.

In November 2004, Israel spotted a mystery submarine in its territorial waters, which a naval official said was a foreign vessel on a spying mission.

Thai police arrest 175 N Korean migrants

AFP, Bangkok

Thailand has arrested 175 North Koreans who illegally entered the country and were found hiding in an abandoned home in Bangkok, police said yesterday.

The 136 women and 39 men were held on charges of illegal entry after failing to produce passports and visas, the head of Thai immigration police told AFP.

"They entered Thailand at a border point somewhere in the north and have been in the kingdom around two months so far," Lieutenant General Suwat Thamongsrisakul said.

"Since their arrest late Tuesday, they have been detained at the immigration office in downtown Bangkok," he said.

"The police charged the North Koreans with illegal entry, and they will be taken to court within 48 hours. After that they could be deported back home," he said.

A Thai immigration officer said that the men, women and children

had come via China, then travelled through Myanmar or Laos before entering Thailand in north.

A charge of illegal entry is punishable by a fine of up to 20,000 baht (533 US dollars) and two years in prison, police said.

The immigration officer said that 134 of the North Koreans would be sent to court on Thursday. This excludes 25 of the group who were children, and 16 who have refugee certificates from the United Nations refugee agency.

The officer said that if the North Koreans were unable to pay the fine for illegal entry, they could face jail. An official at the North Korean embassy in Bangkok said police had not informed them of the arrests.

"We don't have this kind of news or information. We have not been contacted by immigration, then we can not confirm about this," he said.

"We will do nothing, we will not contact the immigration bureau to clarify this information," he added.

Just because of our appearance

Muslim student pulled off British plane says

AFP, London

One of two Muslim students pulled off a British charter flight at gunpoint because other passengers feared they were terrorists said yesterday they were victimised because of their appearance.

Khurram Zeb, 22, told the Daily Mirror newspaper he felt sorry for those people on board the Monarch airlines flight who thought they were terrorists but did not blame anyone for what happened.

Just because we're Muslim

does not mean we are suicide bombers," he was quoted as saying. Zeb and his friend Sohail Ashraf were escorted from the plane at Malaga airport in southern Spain after other passengers voiced concern to cabin crew about the appearance of the men who were presumed to be speaking Arabic.

The Urdu-speaking pair - both students at Manchester University, in northwest England - were questioned by police for several hours before being put up in a hotel

and allowed to fly back the following day.

Ashraf, also 22, appeared to laugh off the incident, telling the newspaper: "We might be Asian, but we're two ordinary lads who wanted a bit of fun. Just because we're Muslim does not mean we are suicide bombers."

In the hotel after questioning, he recalled: "We sat on our beds and Khurram said, 'You don't look like a terrorist'. I said, 'Neither do you'. Then we both collapsed with laughter."

"I suppose we were a bit hysterical. It all felt very odd. We've never experienced racism before so it was very unnerving."

The incident - nearly a week after a major alert in Britain over an alleged plot to blow up aircraft bound for the United States that led to unprecedented airline and airport security - was condemned by British Muslim leaders.

One group said it demonstrated the "increasing Islamophobia" in Britain.

Iraq war was not part of war on terrorism

Most Americans now believe

AFP, Washington

For the first time since it began, most Americans believe the Iraq War is not part of the war on terrorism, as US President George W. Bush's keeps insisting, a New York Times/CBS News poll published yesterday found. Fifty-one percent of the 1,206 adults surveyed August 17-21 believed the two wars were separate, while 44 percent saw a link. In June the opinion was split evenly at 41 percent.

Going to war in the first place was considered a mistake by 53 percent, up from 48 percent in July; 62 percent said US efforts to stabilize Iraq were going badly; 65 percent were disappointed in how their president was handling the situation.

And 46 percent said Bush had focused too much on Iraq and not enough on terrorists elsewhere, while 42 percent said the balance was about right.

Immigration issue grabs British front pages, divides opinion

AFP, London

News that more than 400,000 people from eight EU member states in eastern Europe have come to work in Britain since May 2004 dominated front pages of newspapers in Britain yesterday and divided opinion over whether migrants have had a positive impact on the country.

The Independent, a left-of-centre newspaper, dedicated its first six pages of news to the story that about 427,000 eastern Europeans have come to Britain since May 2004, when they joined the EU.

The figures do not include self-employed workers, a category believed to cover many eastern Europeans in the building trade, and by some accounts, that contributes to making the overall number closer to 600,000. The government had initially predicted that about 20,000 would move to Britain for work.

The news has led to a widespread debate in Britain over whether it has accepted too many

migrants, and whether it should leave its doors open to more.

The country's main opposition Conservative Party has called on the government to curb immigrant workers from Bulgaria and Romania when they join the EU, potentially as early as January next year.

Britain has yet to decide whether to slap restrictions on workers from Bulgaria and Romania when the two nations join the European Union, a spokeswoman for Prime Minister Tony Blair said Monday.

While The Independent makes clear its support for the inflow of migrants - on its front page, it features a map of Britain covered in various national flags, accompanied by the words, "we celebrate the people who have come here from all parts of the world to make Britain what it is today" - other newspapers are less in favour of the large numbers moving over.

At the other end of the spectrum from The Independent sat the Daily Express, which dedicated its front page to the story, under the head-

line: "Get ready for the Romanian invasion".

Right-of-centre newspaper The Daily Telegraph worries for the strain migrants, and their dependants, will place on Britain's public services, commenting: "However hard-working, well qualified and virtuous many of the new migrant groups have proved themselves to be, they and their families need housing and healthcare, and their children need schooling."

"Bearing the brunt of this unexpected responsibility are local councils and council taxpayers."

The Sun, a right-of-centre tabloid, echoed The Daily Telegraph's concerns, calling on the government to "absorb the migrants we have before accepting any more", referring to the possibility of Bulgaria and Romania joining the EU.

Unlike most other EU member states, Britain has treated citizens from the newest EU member states like those from anywhere else in the bloc, respecting the right to free movement of workers over borders,

and has yet to decide on whether to place restrictions on migrants from Bulgaria and Romania.

The Guardian, a left-of-centre paper, counsels against restrictions on workers from the two new member states, however, noting Britain's "waiving of immigration restrictions in 2004 strengthened east European alliances."

"Consigning Romania and Bulgaria to second-tier status would jeopardise these achievements."

"It should not be done lightly." The Financial Times and The Times echo the views of The Guardian, with the former commenting: It would be a mistake for the UK to run scared just when other states are starting to see they have little to fear.

"The best outcome - both for the UK and the EU - is that as many states as possible open their doors to Romania and Bulgaria."

The Times, meanwhile, sums up its argument succinctly: "In short, immigration is working."