

PHONE HACKING SCANDAL

Murdochs bows to pressure to face MPs

AFP, London

Media mogul Rupert Murdoch and his son James backed down in the face of threats of jail from British lawmakers Thursday and agreed to testify to a parliamentary committee on the phone-hacking scandal.

Rebekah Brooks, the head of Murdoch's British newspaper publishing arm, has accepted the invitation to appear before the Committee next week.

In another dramatic day in the saga that has killed off the News of the World tabloid and wrecked Murdoch's takeover bid for pay-TV giant BSkyB, the Murdochs reversed their earlier refusal to give evidence to MPs on Tuesday.

Police also arrested Neil Wallis, a former News of the World executive, but were later forced to admit that Scotland Yard itself had previously employed him



Rupert Murdoch Rebekah Brooks

as an advisor, raising fresh concerns about police corruption in the case.

The Murdochs' climbdown came only five hours after parliament's media select committee formally summoned them to attend, having received letters from the pair saying they were "unable" to attend but giving no reasons.

Committee chairman John Whittingdale had said that if the Murdochs did not answer the sum-

mons then the matter would be dealt with by the House of Commons, which can then order the person to attend.

"If that is not obeyed then it becomes a matter of contempt of parliament and there are penalties," he said, adding: "I understand that it can include imprisonment."

For the tabloid's ex-editor Brooks, it promises to be a tough session.

In Australia, the birthplace of Murdoch's global empire, Prime Minister Julia Gillard said yesterday she would be open to an inquiry into media regulation and ownership after the "disgusting" scandal engulfing News Corp.

In Washington, Democratic senators Jay Rockefeller and Barbara Boxer urged US Attorney General Eric Holder and the Wall Street watchdog Securities and Exchange Commission to launch investigations into the scandal.

Father-son differed on BSkyB deal

AFP, New York

Media titan Rupert Murdoch overruled his son and likely heir in the decision to back out of the BSkyB deal as a family drama unfolded behind the scenes, the New York Times reported yesterday.

The Times cited people close to the discussions as saying that Murdoch's son James had pressed for seeking regulatory approval of the deal.

But Murdoch and News Corp.'s chief operating officer Chase Carey overruled him, the report said.

According to one insider, Rupert Murdoch still holds out hope that the deal could be concluded once public anger over the phone-hacking scandal at his recently shuttered News of the World dies down, the Times reported.

MURDOCH'S MEDIA

From gutter to sewer

SYED BADRUL AHSAN from London

The unanimity of opinion between Britain's governing coalition and the Labour opposition on the urgent requirement of probing the activities of Rupert Murdoch's News International illustrates the ruffled sensitivities that unprincipled journalism can cause.

The folding of the News Of The World following revelations of the phone hacking of individuals, including those dead or murdered, has not been enough for News Corp to stem the flood of condemnation it has been running into over the past nearly two weeks. Its former editor Andy Coulson was placed under arrest; a former reporter, having earlier served a spell in jail, was rearrested; and its chief executive Rebekah Brooks continues to be under fire for not resigning when all other staff of the NOTW have been made redundant with the closure of the paper.

The times, in light of what Murdoch and his cronies have been up to, are critical for the media as a whole in the United Kingdom. The government has announced an inquiry into a broad range of press-related issues, the specific purpose being to inquire into the matter of whether ethics and generally accepted rules of social behaviour are being observed or violated by the media.

In essence, Rupert Murdoch and his News Corp have through their shady acts now created a condition where things might change forever for the media not just in Britain but elsewhere as well. The fact that some US senators have already called for investigations into probable phone hacking of Americans by News International is a pointer to the possibility of a redefined code of behaviour coming in for the media, at least in the West. In broad measure, however, it may well be that one aspect of the fall-out of the News Of The World scandal will be serious rethinking over the presence or otherwise of journalistic professionalism in the Third World. To what extent the dark acts of the Murdoch empire end up causing bigger tremors in the global media is what one will simply have to watch out for.

The enormity of the unethical practices resorted to by Murdoch and his people boggles the mind. Journalists at the News Of The World were not merely content to hack the phones of political figures but also extended their reach into

the world of the dead, such as the young Milly Dowler. It has now emerged that even former prime minister Gordon Brown was a target of the NOTW and so was Prince Charles. Brown was blistering in his attack on the Murdoch establishment in the House of Commons on Wednesday. He called the acts of News International criminality on an industrial scale. "In their behaviour towards those without a voice of their own," said Britain's former leader, "News International descended from the gutter to the sewer. The tragedy is that they let the rats out of the sewer."

For his part, Labour leader Ed Miliband continued to hammer away at Prime Minister David Cameron over the latter's hiring of Andy Coulson as his communications chief at 10 Downing Street (Coulson has since quit) despite clear disapproval of the appointment from such individuals as Deputy Prime Minister Nick Clegg. For all the tough talk on Wednesday, however, both government and opposition cheerfully came together in what could properly be called a move to put Murdoch in his place. The media magnate has for now been thoroughly humiliated, not just by the politicians but by citizens across the spectrum as well.

And the Murdoch empire is hurting. It has already called off its move to buy in totality BSkyB, where it currently has 39 per cent ownership. Miliband has described the retreat by News Corp as a victory of the people. Rupert Murdoch could be facing trouble elsewhere as well. The Times newspaper, which he owns, runs on subsidies. The Sunday Times, as an academic who teaches journalism at the University of Kent pointed out the other day, only makes marginal profit. It all adds up to one conclusion: Whoever and whatever is today associated with Rupert Murdoch and his sleaze operations runs the risk of public repudiation.

One has not heard the last of the story yet. Even so, expectations in Britain, at this point, centre on the thought that at long last Rupert Murdoch is getting his comeuppance. His arrogance and the immorality of his media empire are swiftly being pushed aside by a public and a political class grown weary of the deprivations News International has for years subjected journalism to. Yellow journalism now bites the dust.

NEWS IN brief

Pirate attacks on the rise

AFP, London

Attacks on the world's seas are soaring as armed and dangerous pirates become increasingly emboldened, seizing more ships than before and taking even bigger risks, an international body said yesterday.

In the first six months of 2011, there were 266 piracy attacks compared with 196 incidents over the same period last year, and 60 percent of them were carried out by Somali pirates, the International Maritime Bureau (IMB) said.

At the end of June, Somali pirates were still holding 20 vessels and 420 crew, and demanding millions of dollars for their release, the IMB's piracy reporting centre said.

South Sudan admitted to UN as 193rd member

REUTERS, United Nations

The General Assembly admitted South Sudan yesterday as the 193rd member of the United Nations, sealing the new African country's independence after decades of conflict.

The assembly vote, by acclamation, followed South Sudan's independence proclamation in the capital Juba on Saturday, after its people voted in a January referendum to break away from Sudan -- a decision accepted by Khartoum.

Applause broke out in the assembly as South Sudan became the first country to join the world

Kidnapped Estonian cyclists freed in Lebanon

AFP, Beirut

Seven kidnapped Estonians were freed in Lebanon yesterday, almost four months since being abducted by armed men as they entered the country on a bicycle tour from neighbouring Syria.

Estonia's foreign ministry confirmed the seven men had been released and were being cared for at the French embassy in the Lebanese capital Beirut.

A police official in Beirut told AFP the Estonians had been freed in the town of Sahel al-Taybi in the eastern

Israel strikes Gaza after rocket attack

AFP, Gaza City

Israeli jets bombed three sites in Gaza overnight after rockets were fired from the coastal strip, Palestinian officials and the Israeli military said yesterday.

The Israeli air strikes were the second in as many days, as rocket fire from Gaza into Israel increased suddenly after months of relative quiet.

In a statement, the Israeli military said its aircraft targeted three tunnels, two used for smuggling in southern Gaza and one "used for terrorist activity" in the north of the Palestinian territory.

"The tunnels were targeted in response to the firing of rockets at Israel's southern communities during the previous day," the military said.

Kurdish rebels kill 13 Turkish soldiers

AP, Ankara

Separatist Kurdish rebels killed 13 Turkish soldiers and wounded seven others yesterday in a rare daytime ambush in southeastern Turkey, the deadliest attack on troops in more than three years.

The ambush near the village of Dolapdere in southeastern Diyarbakir province prompted Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan to hold an emergency meeting in the Turkish capital of Ankara with top military and intelligence officials.

A Kurdish rebel ambush in October 2007 had left 12 soldiers dead along the Turkish-Iraqi border and triggered a weeklong air and ground assault in early 2008 against Kurdish rebel bases in northern Iraq. That was the last major incursion by the Turkish military.

Kurdish rebels periodically cross the border to stage attacks in their war for autonomy for Turkey's predominantly Kurdish southeast. Nearly 40,000 people have died in the conflict since the rebels launched their first armed attack in 1984.

NTV television, without citing sources, said at least five Kurdish rebels were also killed in the clashes, and military helicopters were ferrying more troops to the area.

At least two of the wounded soldiers were in critical condition, Anatolia reported.

The attack is expected to escalate tensions in the Kurdish-dominated southeast, where frequent clashes and violent protests have undercut reconciliation efforts.

Gaddafi has plan to blow up capital: Russian envoy

AFP, Moscow

Libyan leader Muammar Gaddafi has a "suicidal plan" to blow up the capital Tripoli if it is taken by rebels, the Kremlin's special envoy to Libya told a Russian newspaper yesterday.

"The Libyan premier told me: if the rebels seize the city, we will cover it with missiles and blow it up," Kremlin envoy Mikhail Margelov said in an interview with the Izvestia daily.

Margelov met Libyan Prime Minister Baghdadi al-Mahmudi last month.

"Imagine that the Gaddafi regime does have such a suicidal plan," he added, saying that



Gaddafi still had plentiful supplies of missiles and ammunition.

But Margelov, who has had rare access to senior Libyan officials, questioned reports that Gaddafi could be running out of arms in the draw-out conflict.

Gaddafi had still not used a single surface-to-surface missile, he argued.

"Tripoli theoretically could lack ammunition for tanks, cartridges for rifles. But the colonel has got plenty of missiles and explosives."

Margelov met the Libyan prime minister on June 16 in Tripoli after holding talks in Benghazi earlier the same month. He has not met Gaddafi himself.

Mass graves found in Sudan

AFP, Khartoum

New satellite images support eyewitness accounts that mass graves were dug in the capital of Sudan's South Kordofan state to bury 100 or more people killed last month, US monitors said yesterday.

"Based on an analysis of DigitalGlobe satellite imagery and eyewitness reports obtained by the Satellite Sentinel Project, SSP has identified a site consistent with mass graves in Kadugli," said the monitoring group set up by Hollywood star and rights activist George Clooney.

Eyewitnesses say the Sudanese Armed Forces and government-aligned militias conducted house-to-house searches, systematically killing suspected supporters of the ex-rebel Sudan People's Liberation Army of the south.

The conflict between the two sides, which first erupted on June 5, has showed no signs of abating, and Kadugli itself has been the scene of some of the fiercest fighting.

E AFRICA DROUGHT

Long-term solution needed

AFP, Nairobi

A widespread drought in East Africa has left millions of facing starvation, but experts argue that while dry spells are cyclical the humanitarian catastrophes they are causing are avoidable.

Seasons of failed rains in southern Ethiopia, northern Kenya, Somalia and parts of Djibouti have struck the region with its worst drought in decades, with around 10 million people in dire need of relief aid.

"The droughts are cyclical, they are inevitable," said Alexander Matheou, the regional representative of the International Federation of the Red Cross. "What is not inevitable is that every time it turns into a humanitarian crisis," he said.


Thousands of Somalis are fleeing daily into neighbouring Ethiopia and Kenya to seek relief from the effects of drought and war.

Relief groups are struggling to cope with the crisis as Western governments pledge funds to come to the rescue of the devastated millions.

While drought remains a natural disaster, failure or inability by regional governments to prepare for crises, and to establish and effect long-term measures to lessen human suffering, worsens the consequences.

Governments should invest more in agricultural research to develop drought resistant crops and fodder for livestock and donors should support measures to curb the effects of drought.

Resolving Somalia's long-running civil war is also a key.



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