

James Murdoch's testimony questioned

British MPs seek police probe

AFP, London

British lawmakers demanded answers from James Murdoch yesterday after executives who used to work for his father's newspapers accused him of misleading parliament over the phone-hacking scandal.

James Murdoch, the heir apparent of Rupert Murdoch's media empire and chairman of its British newspaper division, News International, is being challenged over evidence he gave to a parliamentary committee on Tuesday.

During a tense appearance alongside his father, the 38-year-old denied knowing about an email suggesting hacking was widespread at the now-defunct News of the World before authorising a payout to a victim in 2008.

In his evidence to the committee on Tuesday, James Murdoch said he was "not aware" of the email.

But Myler, who lost his job when the



News of the World closed, and Crone, who resigned last week, said they had informed him of the email before he authorised the settlement.

"We would like to point out that James Murdoch's recollection of what he was told when agreeing to settle the... litigation was mistaken," they said.

News International paid Gordon Taylor, the chief executive of the Professional Footballers' Association, a reported £700,000 (now 790,000 euros, \$1.14 billion) after he brought a damages claim against the News of the World.

"I stand behind my testimony to the Select Committee," James Murdoch said in response to the assertion of his two former employees.

John Whittingdale, chairman of the culture, media and sport select committee, told AFP yesterday that James Murdoch now had questions to answer.

"Clearly the statement by Tom Crone and Colin Myler does conflict with what James Murdoch told the committee," Whittingdale said.

Another lawmaker on the committee, Labour's Tom Watson, demanded more action. He said it was "the most significant moment of two years of investigation".

It puts the spotlight back on the Murdochs, a day after the row appeared to be spreading beyond his newspapers when it emerged the police had asked a regulator for files exposing the use of private investigators by other titles.



PHOTO: AFP

A girl plays at the public sprayground at Memorial Park on Thursday in Oklahoma City, Oklahoma, USA. Temperatures in Oklahoma City exceeded 37 degrees Celsius for 30 days straight making life difficult for inhabitants.

Somali rebels maintain aid ban

Say famine declaration politically motivated

AFP, Mogadishu

Somalia's al-Qaeda-inspired insurgents said yesterday that a ban on foreign aid groups remained in force and rejected a UN declaration that parts of the country had been hit by famine.

The announcement by Shebab spokesman Sheikh Ali Mohamud Rage will likely scuttle plans by aid groups to deliver emergency supplies to the rebel-held regions, weeks after the insurgents said they had lifted the ban.

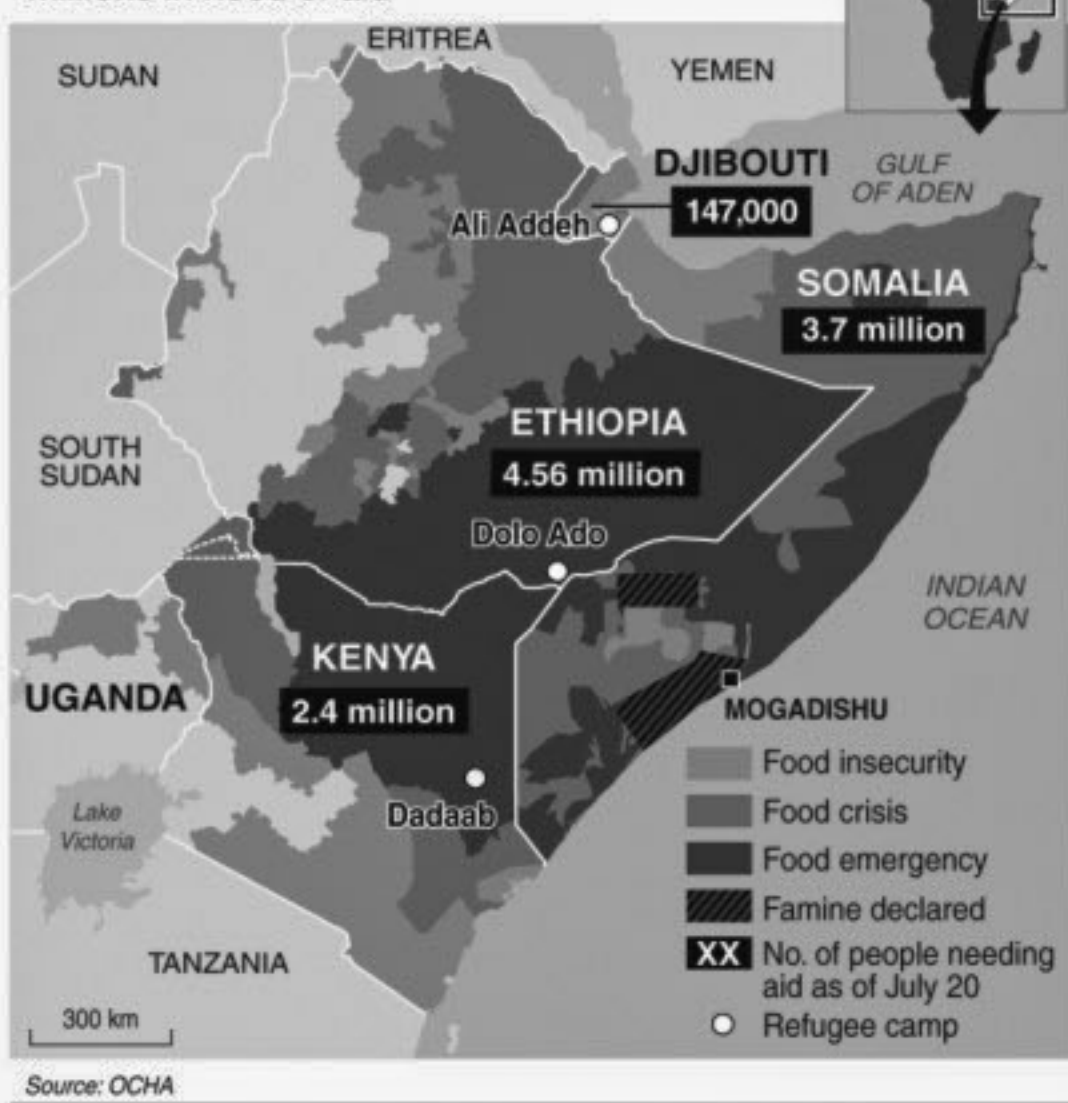
Relief groups had welcomed the easing of the two-year-old ban when the rebels appealed for help.

"Those earlier banned groups are not welcome to serve in our area of control," Rage said in a broadcast on the Islamist Al Furqaan radio.

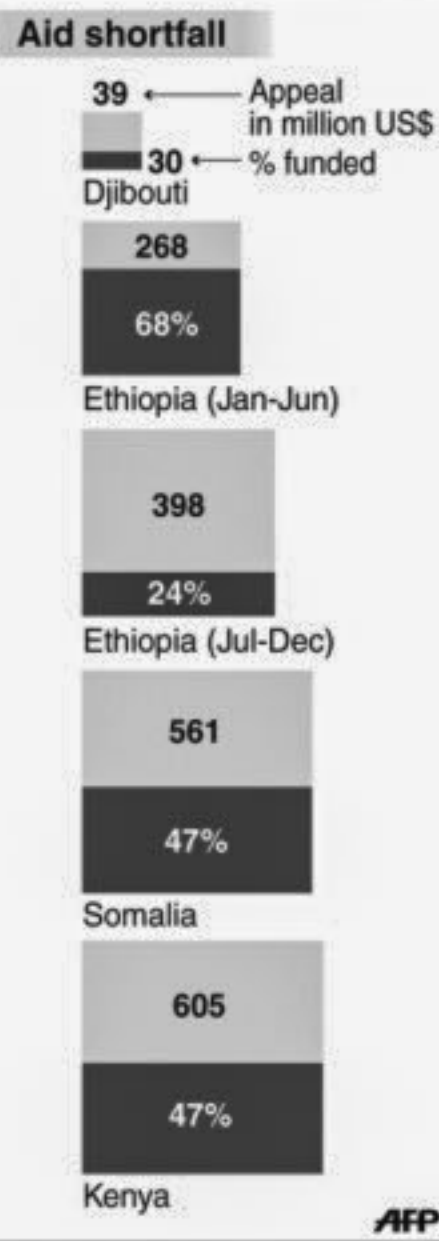
"There is drought in Somalia but not famine -- what is declared by the UN is 100 percent false," Rage said. "The declaration of famine is political and is a lie with hidden agendas."

East African drought and famine

Tens of thousands dead in emergency, millions in need of aid



The headline rebels banned several foreign aid agencies from 2009, accusing them of being Western



spies and Christian crusaders. They include the World Food Programme, United Nations

Development Programme, UN Department of Safety and Security, the UN Political Office for Somalia and UN Mine Action.

Somalia is the worst affected country in the drought-hit Horn of Africa region, with malnutrition rates the highest in the world.

Tens of thousands have already died in Somalia and thousands fled to neighbouring Ethiopia and Kenya in recent months, according to the UN's Food and Agriculture Organisation.

Some 12 million people in the Horn of Africa are facing starvation triggered by a prolonged drought described as the region's worst in decades.

Shebab armed men yesterday abducted a newly-appointed women's minister, 32-year-old Asha Osman Aqil in Balad, a day after she was named in an 18-member cabinet in which she is the only female.

US swelters under deadly heatwave

AFP, Washington

A heatwave and stifling humidity battered the central and eastern United States Thursday, leaving residents searching for the coolest oasis to fend off record temperatures that have left over 20 dead.

The New York Times reported that across the country the deaths of 22 people had been attributed to the heatwave, which has left some 17 states from Texas to Michigan battling temperatures over 37 degrees Celsius.

Weather experts predicted that heat index values across parts of the Midwest, Ohio Valley and Mid-Atlantic could reach between 40 degrees to 46 degrees Celsius till next week.

LIBYA TRANSITION PLAN No Gaddafi role designed

REUTERS, London

A UN peace envoy is suggesting a cease-fire in Libya, to be followed by the immediate creation of a transitional authority made up equally of the government and rebels while excluding Muammar Gaddafi and his sons, a senior European diplomat said.

The authority would appoint a president, control the police, armed forces and security services and would supervise a round-table reconciliation process, leading to elections to a national assembly which would write a constitution, the diplomat said.

The diplomat, who asked for his name and location to be withheld, was outlining ideas he said were being canvassed by UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-Moon's special envoy to Libya, Abdul Elah al-Khatib.

Khatib, a Jordanian senator, is seeking a political solution to a conflict that erupted in February between Gaddafi's forces and rebels based in the east. He has visited both sides several times.

Meanwhile, Gaddafi yesterday ruled out talks with the rebels, casting doubt on a flurry of diplomatic efforts to end the conflict.

The European diplomat said that under Khatib's transition proposal, Gaddafi would have to step down, but rather than being a precondition it would be part of the process.

As soon as the transitional authority was created and Gaddafi no longer had control of the security forces, Libyans in Tripoli would no longer fear him and at that point his rule would in effect end, the diplomat said.

Gaddafi and his sons would be excluded from the transitional authority, the diplomat said, since the rebels would never accept such a role for Gaddafi family members.

France said on Wednesday that Gaddafi could stay in Libya if he gave up power, an apparent softening of the West's stance in a new effort to find a diplomatic end to the war.

Hadzic heads to The Hague court

AFP, Belgrade

Former Croatian Serb leader Goran Hadzic, the last fugitive wanted for war crimes in the former Yugoslavia, was flown out of Serbia yesterday to stand trial at the UN court in The Hague.

Hadzic was bundled aboard a plane at Belgrade airport after being granted a final wish to visit his ailing mother and other family members under police escort earlier yesterday.

"At this moment his plane is on its way to The Hague," Serbian Justice Minister Snezana Malovic told a press conference.

Hadzic, 52, captured Wednesday, is the last of 161 people indicted by the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY) for their role in bloody 1990s wars that tore apart the former Yugoslavia. He is expected to arrive in The Hague around 2h30pm (1230 GMT).

Hadzic faces 14 counts of crimes against humanity and war crimes dating back to the 1991-95 Croatian war when troops under his command allegedly committed mass murder and deported non-Serbs.

Nato raid kills 50 in Afghanistan

CNN ONLINE

A coalition operation against militants in southeastern Afghanistan has left at least 50 insurgents dead as Afghan and Nato forces swept through a "known Haqqani network" area.

The encampment was considered a staging ground for Haqqani and foreign fighters, Nato's International Security Assistance Force reported yesterday.

The Haqqani network is an insurgent group loosely affiliated with the Taliban, and is believed to be based in Pakistan's lawless frontier territories. They operate along the porous Afghan-Pakistan border regions.

The group has been responsible for "several high-profile attacks against the Afghan government and its citizens," ISAF reported.

The coalition operation -- which included Afghan special forces -- engaged "multiple groups of insurgents," who were armed with rocket-propelled grenade launchers and heavy machine guns.

The firefight took place against multiple insurgent groups, who were holed up in areas that included caves and fortified bunker positions, ISAF reported.

NEWS IN brief

British artist Lucian Freud dies aged 88

AFP, London

Realist painter Lucian Freud, grandson of the inventor of modern psychoanalysis Sigmund Freud and widely seen as Britain's top contemporary artist, has died in London aged 88, his lawyer said.

Freud was known for his signature nudes and self-portraits such as the powerful 1993 work of himself as a naked older man waving his brush like a weapon. His 1995 Portrait "Benefits Supervisor Sleeping" fetched 33.6 million dollars at a Christie's auction in New York -- a world record for a living artist.

Born to architect Ernst Freud, Sigmund's youngest son, in Berlin in 1922, Lucian moved to England with his family aged 10 to escape Nazism and became a British citizen in 1933.

Ex rebel chief gets 377-year sentence in Spain

AFP, Madrid

A court in Spain yesterday sentenced the former head of the Basque separatist group ETA, Garikoitz Aspiazu, to 377 years in prison for 20 attempted terrorist assassinations.

Considered a leader of ETA's hardline wing, Aspiazu, known as "Txeroki", was arrested in a pre-dawn raid on a rented apartment in the French Pyrenees spa resort of Cauteret in November 2008.

He was transferred to Spain in May of this year on a temporary basis to face trial.

Pentagon set to end 'Don't Ask, Don't Tell'

AFP, Washington

Seven months after the repeal of "Don't Ask, Don't Tell," the Pentagon is set to announce that it will officially end the ban on gays openly serving in the military, a US official told AFP on Thursday.

The "certification" is set to take place yesterday. On December 18, the Senate voted to repeal the controversial law, which since 1993 has required those in the military to conceal their homosexuality or risk being discharged.

After the new law was passed repealing the ban, Pentagon officials had requested time to prepare military troops for the arrival of openly homosexual soldiers.

Malawi riots death toll rises to 18

AFP, Blantyre

More than 275 people were arrested across Malawi during two days of rioting that killed 18 people, in the deadliest protests since the beginning of democracy in 1994, police said yesterday.

About 200 were arrested alone in the capital Lilongwe for looting, the epicentre of the riots, police spokesman Davie Chingwalu told AFP.

On Wednesday and Thursday, police used tear-gas and fired live ammunition to disperse protesters across the country who took to the streets accusing President Bingu wa Mutharika of mismanaging the economy and trampling on democratic rights.

Forces kill 8 in Syria

AFP, Damascus

Syrian security forces killed at least eight civilians yesterday as more than 1.2 million protesters swarmed cities in the north and east to protest against President Bashar al-Assad's rule, activists said.

Activists had called for Friday's demonstrations to show support for the flashpoint city of Homs.

More than 50 people have been killed since Saturday in central Homs. Activists have accused the regime of sowing sectarian strife among the city dwellers.

More than 1.2 million Syrians took to the streets in the eastern oil hub of Deir Ezzor and Hama in the north, activists told AFP.

Security forces and pro-government agents used violence to disperse demonstrators with deaths reported in Homs, Aleppo, Idlib and around the capital Damascus, activists said.

Bhutan spreads happiness to United Nations

BBC ONLINE

This week the General Assembly adopted a non-binding resolution that aims to make happiness a "development indicator" as proposed by Bhutan.

Bhutan's ambassador Lhatu Wangchuk told the BBC the next step was to help UN members better understand the concept.

He admitted some were sceptical when Bhutan started lobbying for the resolution 10 months ago. But ultimately it won 66 co-sponsors, including the UK.

The idea is based on Bhutan's model of GNH, or Gross National Happiness, which measures quality of life by trying to strike a balance between the material and the spiritual.

The resolution invites member states to draw up their own measures of happiness and contribute them to the UN's development agenda.

"It's basically an approach," said Mr

Wangchuk. "Our initial idea was to bring the concept of happiness to the consciousness of the UN membership... because we know that GDP indicators are inadequate to address human needs."

But given the conflicts that divide so many member states, isn't one country's happiness often another's unhappiness?

Wangchuk maintained that wars and disputes do not indicate happiness or otherwise. They are caused by the egos and interests of leaders, he said.

He admitted his vision is Utopian, but "if you don't have a dream you'll have nothing to work on".

Asked if he thought UN diplomats were a happy bunch, he said many were overworked and needed to make better use of their time, one of Bhutan's happiness indicators.

"I tell them they must have sleeping time, time with their families," he said.

NORWAY BLAST World condemns attacks

AFP, Brussels

Western governments lined up to condemn yesterday's twin attacks in Norway, saying the "cowardly" perpetrators who killed at least 11 people had demonstrated a complete lack of humanity.

With Norway involved in both the Afghan and Libya campaigns, Nato's chief said the alliance stood united against the "heinous" acts of violence. Washington described the attack as "despicable".

"We condemn these despicable acts of violence," State Department spokesman Heide Bronke Fulton told AFP. Rasmussen's words were echoed by Herman Van Rompuy, the president of the European

Union, who spoke of his "deep shock" at the killings.

European parliament president Jerzy Buzek expressed his solidarity with the Norwegian people over the "regrettable and despicable" acts.

British Foreign Secretary William Hague also offered his condolences to all those bereaved or injured as a result of a "horrific" bomb attack in Oslo, saying he condemned all forms of terrorism. French President

Attacks in Scandinavian countries

- June 28, 1999: Three were wounded in a car explosion in Stockholm.
- Oct 11, 2002: Suicide blast on a shopping mall in Helsinki killed seven people.
- Dec 31, 2008: A Palestinian shot dead one Israeli and injured another in Denmark.
- Sept 10, 2010: An attack planned on the Jyllands-Posten paper in revenge of publishing cartoons of the Prophet Mohammad went wrong as the bomb blasted while on the making in Copenhagen.
- December 11, 2010: A Iraq born Swedish blew himself up in Stockholm, injuring two.

Nicolas Sarkozy condemned what he said was an "odious and unacceptable act" of violence. Dutch Prime Minister Mark Rutte said that the attackers had "shown a total lack of respect for human life."