



Putin pardons Khodorkovsky

AFP, Berlin

Russia's most famous prisoner and Kremlin critic Mikhail Khodorkovsky yesterday arrived in Germany as a free man after more than 10 years behind bars, in a whirlwind release hours after his surprise pardon by President Vladimir Putin.

The former oil tycoon was quietly escorted out of his prison in northwestern Russia in a low-key operation, depriving journalists of any image of the former convict leaving his remote penal colony.

In a dizzying succession of events, the father of four then boarded a plane to Germany, the prison service said. The German foreign ministry later said he had landed at Berlin's Schoenefeld airport.

"After his release he flew to Germany where his mother is undergoing treatment," the prison service said in a statement, saying he had requested permission to travel abroad.

Later in the day Khodorkovsky met with one of his lawyers, Anton Drel, said spokespeople for the tycoon without providing any details.

Putin pardoned Khodorkovsky, once Russia's richest man, after stunning the country on Thursday by saying his fierce critic had asked for clemency on humanitarian grounds as his mother was ill.

"Guided by humanitarian principles, I decree that Mikhail Borisovich Khodorkovsky... should be pardoned and freed from any further punishment in the form of imprisonment," said the decree signed by Putin yesterday.

Less than three hours later, his lawyers said Khodorkovsky, 50, had left his prison colony in the town of Segezha in the Karelia region.

The ruthless efficiency of the lightning-fast release pointed to the likely involvement of security services and resembled past spy exchanges between Russia and the West.

The release drew the curtain on the highest profile criminal case in post-Soviet Russia which has harmed the country's investment climate and become a symbol for the selective persecution of Kremlin foes under Putin.

What role Khodorkovsky will play in Russia after his release is unclear, but it appears certain that Putin would never had allowed his freedom if he was seen as a threat.

Times have changed

Angry India tells US after it refuses to drop charges against Devyani

AGENCIES

India yesterday angrily brushed aside fresh efforts by the United States to defuse a row over the arrest and strip-search of one of its diplomats, warning Washington that "times have changed".

Diplomatic sources said Nancy Powell, the US ambassador to New Delhi, was holding talks with senior foreign ministry officials as part of efforts to resolve the crisis sparked by the December 12 arrest of Devyani Khobragade, India's deputy consul general at its mission in New York.

Powell's olive branch comes after top State Department officials called their Indian counterparts for the third time in two days to try to draw a line under the controversy over accusations that Devyani underpaid her maid in New York.

Subsequent revelations that Devyani was stripped by US Marshals and subjected to an invasive body search have caused outrage in India, whose government wants Washington to drop the case and offer an apology.

US Secretary of State John Kerry has expressed "regret" and stressed the issue should not be allowed to derail a "vital

relationship" -- a message amplified in a phone call Thursday by State Department number three Wendy Sherman to Indian Foreign Secretary Sujatha Singh.

"What we're focused on now ... is working to move the relationship forward," State Department deputy spokeswoman Marie Harf told reporters.

However, Harf said US will not drop charges against the Indian diplomat. Harf answered in the negative when asked if Devyani would go "scot free" and the US courts would be asked to drop the charges against her.

Despite the US efforts, there was no sign that the calls had placated the government in New Delhi yesterday which sees itself as an emerging power that should be treated with respect by an ally such as the US.

"They should tender a clear apology. We will not accept this conduct against India under any circumstances," Parliamentary Affairs Minister Kamal Nath told reporters.

"The US has to understand that the world has changed, times have changed and India has changed... The conduct and attitude that the US has shown

regarding the Devyani issue is a matter of concern not only for India but also for all countries and everyone should raise their voice."

Foreign Minister Salman Khurshid said he expected to talk with Kerry later in the day in what is likely to be a tense phone call.

Keen to project a muscular image ahead of a general election due in May, the ruling Congress party has taken a strikingly hard line in the dispute.

On Wednesday, angry MPs from several Indian parties called on the government to take tough action against the US and Prime Minister Manmohan Singh described Devyani's treatment as "deplorable".

According to documents filed in a New York court, Devyani, who is now free on bail, wrote on a visa application that the maid would be paid \$4,500 (£2,746) a month.

But investigators said she instead paid only \$573 per month - less than the New York state minimum wage.

If found guilty, Devyani faces a maximum sentence of 10 years for visa fraud and five years for making false statements.

THE STORY SO FAR...

- 23 JUNE**
Maid Sangeeta Richard goes missing. Devyani informs New York police.
- 8 JULY**
India revokes Sangeeta's passport, says she's staying in the US illegally; Devyani accuses her of theft and attempt to blackmail.
- 4 SEPTEMBER**
US State Department asks Indian embassy to inquire into Sangeeta's allegations disputing her terms of employment.
- 19 NOVEMBER**
A Delhi court issues warrant for arrest of Sangeeta.
- 6 DECEMBER**
India forwards the warrant to the US embassy in Delhi.
- 10 DECEMBER**
Sangeeta's husband and children fly to the US.
- 12 DECEMBER**
Devyani arrested in New York, produced in court and released on a \$250,000 bond.



What is diplomatic immunity?

A form of legal immunity that ensures diplomats are exempt from prosecution under the host country's laws. This was agreed as international law in the Vienna Convention on Diplomatic Relations (1961). Under the Vienna Convention on Consular Relations (1963) a consul is afforded a variation of diplomatic immunity called consular immunity which guarantees immunity from the host country's laws only with respect to acts related to consular duties.



People run for cover following gunshots in the Combattant neighborhood in Bangui, yesterday. Inset, a child falls to the floor following the gunshots. The Central African Republic has spiralled into chaos since a March coup by the mainly Muslim Seleka rebel group overthrew president Francois Bozize, with deadly violence pitting Muslims against Christians. PHOTO: AFP

Ceiling collapses at London theatre; 88 hurt

REUTERS, London

Emergency services said nearly 90 people were injured on Thursday when part of the ceiling collapsed during a performance at a packed London theatre, bringing the city's West End entertainment district to a standstill.

The audience was showered with masonry and debris following the incident at the Apollo Theatre, where about 720 people including many families were watching the hugely popular play "The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time".

Emergency services said 88 people were injured. They described 81 as "walking wounded", many with head injuries, while seven others were taken to hospital with more serious injuries.

Nick Harding from London Fire Brigade said a section of ornate plaster ceiling, measuring about 10 metres by 10 metres, had fallen onto the audience watching the evening show. Police said there was no suggestion that it was the result of any

NEWS IN brief

US Congress passes defence bill

AFP, Washington

A sweeping defense bill that authorizes Pentagon spending passed Congress late Thursday, assuring funding through 2014 while easing detainee transfers from Guantanamo and cracking down on sexual assault in the military.

'Not enough evidence for Kenyatta trial'

AFP, The Hague

International Criminal Court prosecutor Fatou Bensouda admitted Thursday she no longer had enough evidence to try Kenya President Uhuru Kenyatta for crimes against humanity, calling for a delay after witnesses pulled out. Kenyatta's is charged with masterminding violence after a 2007 election that left

Singapore deports South Asian workers

AFP, Singapore

Singapore yesterday said it had deported 53 South Asian workers allegedly involved in the city-state's first riot in four decades, while four others awaited repatriation later in the day. Officials on Tuesday had said they were deporting the 53 men -- 52 Indians and one Bangladeshi -- and pursuing criminal charges against 28 others for their role in the December 8 rampage which left 39 persons injured.

South Sudan at precipice: Obama 3 Indian peacekeepers killed

AFP, Juba

US President Barack Obama has warned that South Sudan stands at the "precipice" of civil war amid spiralling violence, with the UN launching a rescue mission after three Indian peacekeepers were killed.

The United Nations Security Council readied emergency consultations on the crisis in the world's youngest nation, amid fears that fighting between rival army factions could escalate into full-scale civil war.

The UN said incidents of fighting or civil unrest, which began a week ago in the capital Juba, had now spread to 14 separate sites -- including in the powder-keg eastern state of Jonglei -- and that 34,000 terrified civilians were seeking protection in or around UN bases.

Obama, who announced Thursday he had deployed 45 troops to the violence-wracked country, called for an immediate end to the unrest which has so far left close to 500 dead, most of them civilians.

India's UN envoy Asoke Mukerji said three Indian peacekeepers were "targeted and killed" during Thursday's attack by ethnic Nuer youths on a base at Akobo in Jonglei state, an area awash with guns and home to several large rebel armies.

President Salva Kiir has blamed the bloodshed on a coup bid by his perennial rival Machar, who was sacked as vice president in July.

Obama would veto Iran sanction bill

AFP, Washington

The White House warned Thursday that President Barack Obama would veto a bill threatening new sanctions on Iran, because it could sink a final deal to stop Tehran getting a nuclear bomb.

Twenty-six US senators introduced new Iran sanctions legislation earlier Thursday, despite an intense White House lobbying campaign, which has included the president himself and warnings that the alternative to diplomacy is a new war in the Middle East.

The legislation would impose new sanctions on Tehran if it violated a six-month interim nuclear agreement reached last month or if no final deal is reached.

The White House appears alarmed that the move could undermine the Iranian negotiating team or offer the

Modi promises Ram Rajya Accuses Nehru-Gandhi family for poverty in India

TNN, Lucknow

Gujarat chief minister Narendra Modi, who after being elevated as BJP's prime ministerial candidate had avoided any direct reference to Hindutva in his speeches at rallies in Uttar Pradesh, but yesterday not only paid a visit to ancient temples in Varanasi but also addressed the rally in the district with a big picture of Lord Shiva along with BJP's election symbol lotus in the backdrop.

In response, BJP leaders exhorted people in the rally to raise slogan 'har har Modi'. The slogan has been lifted from the prayer 'har har Mahadev' chanted in praise of Lord Shiva.

Dressed in saffron kurta, in his speech in Varanasi he spoke of bringing Ram Rajya (good governance) in the country and cleaning of river Ganga, which he described as mother for people and not just a river. Deftly mixing development and Hindutva, Modi said that people need a government which can work for development and bring Ram Rajya.

He blamed Nehru-Gandhi family of the Congress responsible for the poverty and misery in the country. "Congress party

thinks about poor only during elections and forgets later after getting votes," he added.

Modi said that the anti-poor mindset of the UPA leaders is reflected from their statement that a tea vendor (Modi) cannot become prime minister of India.

Modi said that BJP's victory in recent assembly elections in four states shows that people are happy and satisfied with the governance of the BJP governments. He said that now people will have to work for Congress-mukt Bharat (free India from Congress).

He said the 2014 parliamentary polls will be fought by the people of India and every voter will fight.

DMD rules out alliance with BJP Dismissing media reports suggesting DMK would align with BJP, party chief M Karunanidhi yesterday clarified that his party would contest the Lok Sabha polls with existing partners in the alliance.

In an exclusive interview to TOI on Thursday, the DMK leader, when asked about Modi, said, "My personal opinion is Modi is a good person and has taken much care about the development of his state. But whether he is fit to rule the nation, it has to be decided

Musharraf vows to face justice in Pakistan

AFP, Islamabad

Pakistan's former military ruler Pervez Musharraf Thursday vowed to face justice and not flee the country in his first interview since being placed under house arrest eight months ago.

Musharraf has faced a range of criminal cases dating back to his 1999-2008 rule after returning to Pakistan from self-imposed exile in March, including the murder of former prime minister Benazir Bhutto.

He has been granted bail in the four main cases against him but remains under guard because of threats by Taliban insurgents to his life.

There have been persistent rumours that a deal would be struck to allow Musharraf to leave the country without standing trial to avoid a clash between the government

Angels have no wings

AFP, Rome

Angels exist but do not have wings and are more like shards of light, at least according to a top Catholic Church "angelologist" who says the heavenly beings are now back in vogue thanks to New Age religions.

"I think there is a re-discovery of angels in Christianity," Father Renzo Lavatori told AFP on the sidelines of a conference on angels in a lavishly-frescoed Renaissance palace in Rome. "You do not see angels so much as feel their presence," said Lavatori, adding: "They are a bit like sunlight that refracts on you through a crystal vase."

The clergyman was taking part in a debate on angelic art by the Fondazione Archivio Storico organised in the Vatican-owned Palazzo della Cancelleria.

He said the popularised image of angels is a necessary result of their being "back in fashion" but is dismissive of all the angel art around Christmas.

"There is space for that, but you have to understand that these are not real representations. Angels do not have wings or look like cherubs," he said.



Pakistani policemen stand guard as Jamaat-e-Islami activists protest outside the Bangladeshi embassy in Islamabad, yesterday against the execution of Jamaat-e-Islami Bangladesh's leader and convicted war criminal Abdul Quader Molla. PHOTO: AFP

Thai protesters march to oust Yingluck govt

REUTERS, Bangkok

Anti-government protesters resumed marches in Bangkok yesterday, trying to energise supporters in the centre of the Thai capital before a planned mass rally at the weekend to put pressure on Prime Minister Yingluck Shinawatra to step down.

Yingluck called a snap election last week when the protests reached their height. She remains caretaker premier until the February 2 vote but has refused to push back the date to allow the drawing-up of political reforms demanded by the protesters.

About 160,000 protesters surrounded Yingluck's office on December 9 but momentum has waned since then.

The National Security Council said there were about 3,000 people at yesterday's march, about half the size of the crowd when the latest round of marches kicked off on Thursday.

The Election Commission (EC) dismissed suggestions it would postpone the vote. "We are ready to hold elections on February 2," said commission member Teerawat Terarotwit, following a meeting between Yingluck and EC members.