

Turkey PM vows action against 'fake' recordings

AFP, Ankara

Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan yesterday condemned leaked recordings of him and his son allegedly discussing how to hide large sums of money as a "vile attack" by rivals, as calls mounted for his beleaguered government to resign.

"What was done is a vile... and a treacherous attack against the prime minister of the Republic of Turkey. It will not go unpunished," Erdogan told his ruling party lawmakers in parliament.

The phone conversations, posted on YouTube, allegedly reveal Erdogan asking his son Bilal to turn millions of euros in cash stashed at several houses into "zero".

Bilal at one point can be heard saying: "There is 30 million (\$41 million) euros more."

The leaked discussions, which could not be independently verified, were said to have taken place on December 17, the same day key Erdogan allies were caught up in police raids linked to a corruption investigation that has rocked the government.

In one conversation, Erdogan can supposedly be heard briefing Bilal about the raids, which saw top businessmen and the sons of former cabinet ministers detained on allegations of bribery, gold smuggling and illicit dealings with sanctions-hit Iran.

The premier's office said the wiretapped conversations were fabricated and vowed to take legal action against those behind "this dirty setup".

"The recordings... are the product of an immoral montage and completely untrue," Erdogan's office said in a statement late on Monday after the material was leaked online.

Erdogan has come under intense pressure since the corruption scandal erupted, throwing up the biggest challenge yet to his 11 years in power ahead of key local elections in March.

He has blamed his ally-turned-rival, US-based Muslim cleric Fethullah Gulen, for instigating the graft probe, accusing him of seeking to create "a parallel state" in Turkey.

The leaked recordings appear to be the latest fallout from their feud,

after the Turkish government on Monday said thousands of influential people, including the premier, cabinet ministers and journalists, had been wiretapped by Gulen supporters in the police and the judiciary.

Local media said the widespread surveillance was discovered by prosecutors who were appointed following a mass purge of the police and prosecution service in response to the corruption probe.

Erdogan, whose speech in parliament was repeatedly interrupted by party loyalists chanting "Turkey is proud of you!", said his government would not fall into traps set by rivals.

"We are not scared of anyone, any country... We are not scared of any traitor," he said.

But the controversy prompted fresh calls from the opposition for the government's resignation.

"The government has lost its legitimacy... and must resign immediately," Haluk Koc, a spokesman for the main opposition Republican People's Party, told a news conference late Monday.

Not united even after such tragedy

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Intriguingly, most of her party's policymakers yesterday told The Daily Star they were not aware of any such information on the mutiny, in which 74 people including 57 army officers were killed.

Contacted by The Daily Star on Sunday, six standing committee members of BNP said they did not know anything about the party chief's claim that "foreign spies" or the government's men were involved.

All of them said the issue was discussed briefly at a meeting of the party's highest policymaking body after the mutiny, but who were responsible did not come to their discussion.

"To my knowledge, she [Khaleda] had never discussed who were involved in the BDR carnage," a BNP standing committee member said, adding that everyone should show restraint in making comments on this sensitive issue.

BNP senior leader Khandaker Mosharraf Hossain said, "Our stance on BDR mutiny remains the same. We demanded that the government make public the probe report on BDR mutiny. But the administration partially revealed the report. That's why we are not convinced if the government identified and punished the real culprits."

The rights chief said changes to the constitution by different autocratic regimes have damaged the fundamentals of the '72 constitution, and thus put the religious minorities under security threats through incorporating provisions that prioritise a certain religion.

"This has been reflected in the communal attacks on the religious minorities during and after the last parliamentary polls," he mentioned.

Law Minister Anisul Haque said the incumbent government will bring back the fundamental spirit of the '72 constitution gradually if it can continue in power for five years.

It is critical to maintain constitutional process in the country, and the January 5 national election was part of that effort, he added.

Eminent columnist Syed Abul Maksud, Ajnabi Shamannay Parishad convenor Abdul Baset Majumder and lawyers' leader MA Taher addressed the programme, chaired by BDLA president MA Kuddus.

They are Eskander Mirza Bacchu, organizing secretary of Badolgashana unit of AL under Naogaon, and its treasurer Shamsul Alam Khan, Mymensingh sadar upazila AL leaders Afaz Sarker, Faizur Rahman Fakir, Manikganj sadar upazila president Jalal Uddin Ahmed, women affairs secretary Saleha Islam, Soaimuri upazila under Noakhali district AL leader Ruhul Amin.

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