

Film stars in spotlight

AFP, New Delhi

Bollywood's Amitabh Bachchan and martial arts movie star Jackie Chan are among celebrities who feature yesterday in a massive leak of documents, some of which reveal hidden offshore assets.

Bollywood legend Bachchan, simply known as the "Big B" in India, was appointed director of at least four shipping companies registered in offshore tax havens and set up 23 years ago.

The authorised capital of these companies ranged from just \$5,000 to \$50,000 but they traded in ships worth millions of dollars, according to the Indian Express newspaper.

The Express is among more than 100 media groups which have investigated a massive leak of 11.5 million documents from Mossack Fonseca, a Panama-based law firm with offices in 35 countries.

Bachchan, who has long since resigned from the companies and has not commented on the documents, is not the only member of his famous family named in the leaks.

His daughter-in-law, actress Aishwarya Rai Bachchan, was also director and shareholder of an offshore company, along with members of her family, before it was

thought to have been wound up in 2008, according to the newspaper.

The media adviser of the former Miss World winner has rejected the documents as "totally untrue and false".

As with many of Fonseca's clients, there is no evidence that the Bollywood A-listers used their companies for improper purposes and having an offshore entity is not illegal.

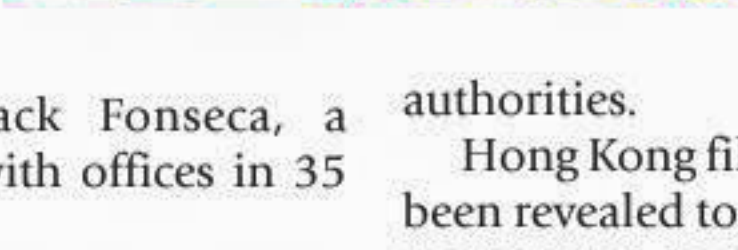
But the documents, naming more than 500 Indians including real estate tycoons in Fonseca's list of offshore companies, foundations and trusts, come at a sensitive time in India.

Prime Minister Narendra Modi's government has vowed to crack down on the "menace" of so-called black money -- vast sums stashed abroad to keep them secret from Indian tax

authorities. Hong Kong film star Jackie Chan has also been revealed to have at least six companies represented by Fonseca's firm, though he too may have used the companies legitimately for business purposes rather than for tax avoidance.

The stash of records was obtained from an anonymous source by German daily Sueddeutsche Zeitung and shared with media worldwide. The documents, from around 214,000 offshore entities, cover

PANAMA PAPERS LEAK



Migrants are escorted by Turkish police officers as they arrive in the Turkish coastal town of Dikili from Greece yesterday. Amnesty International has accused Turkey of not being a safe country for refugees by forcibly returning Syrians back home to their war-torn countries -- a charge Ankara rejects.

Greece starts deportations

Turkey will send non-Syrians to home countries; refugees continue to try to cross despite EU deal

REUTERS, Dikili

The first migrants deported from Greek islands under a disputed EU-Turkey deal were shipped back to Turkey yesterday in a drive to shut down the main route by which a million people fleeing war and poverty crossed the Aegean Sea in the last year.

Under the pact criticised by refugee agencies and human rights campaigners, Ankara will take back all migrants and refugees who enter Greece illegally, including Syrians.

In return, the European Union will take in thousands of Syrian refugees directly from Turkey and reward it with more money, early visa-free travel and progress in its EU membership negotiations.

Two Turkish-flagged passenger boats carrying 131 mostly Pakistani and Bangladeshi migrants arrived from the island of Lesbos in the Turkish town of Dikili early yesterday, accompanied by two Turkish coast guard vessels with a police helicopter buzzing overhead.

A third ship carrying 66 people, mainly Afghans, arrived there later from the island of Chios.

The EU-Turkey deal aims to discourage migrants from perilous crossings, often in small boats and dinghies, and to break the business model of human smugglers who have fuelled Europe's

biggest influx since World War Two. EU authorities said none of those deported yesterday had requested asylum in Greece and all had left voluntarily.

"We didn't see this morning unrest or riots. The operation was organised properly with the sufficient Frontex presence and with enough, very well organised security guarantees," European Commission spokesman Margaritis Schinas told a news briefing in Brussels. He was referring to the EU border management agency Frontex, which has been reinforced by national police and migration experts.

MIGRANT CRISIS

A few hours after the first boat of returnees set sail from Lesbos, Greek coast guard vessels rescued at least two dinghies carrying more than 50 migrants and refugees, including children and a woman in a wheelchair, trying to reach the island.

Altogether, more people arrived on the Greek islands in the 24 hours to yesterday morning than were transported to Turkey, Greek authorities said, putting total arrivals at 339, including 173 on Lesbos and 73 on Chios.

A group of 47 mainly Pakistani men were also intercepted by the Turkish coast guard yesterday and taken to a holding centre next to Dikili's port, a Reuters witness said.

Suicide attacks kill 25 across Iraq

More than 60 injured; IS claims responsibility

AGENCIES

Four suicide bombings targeting Iraqi security forces and civilians and mortar fire that struck houses near Baghdad killed at least 25 people yesterday, security and medical officials said.

The morning attacks also wounded at least 64 people, the sources said. In the deadliest single attack, a suicide bomber struck a street in the southern port city of Basra, killing five people and wounding 10.

Islamic State, which controls territory in northern and western Iraq, claimed several of the attacks on statements on its Amaq news agency, reports Reuters.

The Islamic State group, "after the losses it suffered in western areas, is seeking to move the battle to the southern areas," where many of the forces fighting the jihadists are from, Basra Governor Majid al-

Nasrawi told journalists.

IS overran large areas north and west of Baghdad in 2014, but Iraqi forces backed by US-led air strikes and training have since regained significant ground, most recently in the western province of Anbar.

AFP journalists saw three burned bodies at the scene of the Basra attack -- two still inside vehicles, and a third on a stretcher. The blast set vehicles alight and damaged buildings in the area, one of the journalists said.

Another bomber struck a joint police and army checkpoint in north Baghdad, while a third attacked pro-government paramilitaries in Mishahada, north of the capital, and a fourth hit militiamen in a restaurant south of the city of Nasiriyah.

And mortar fire struck houses in Abu Ghraib, west of Baghdad, killing two people and wounding at least seven, officials said.



Suu Kyi scales back Myanmar cabinet roles

AFP, Yangon

Myanmar's Aung San Suu Kyi has dropped plans to run two major ministries but will act as spokeswoman for the country's new president, a ruling party official said yesterday.

Banned from becoming president by a junta-era constitution, Suu Kyi has cemented control over the country's first civilian-led government in decades by taking on a string of senior roles in the new administration.

She has vowed to rule "above" the president, picking school friend and close aide Htin Kyaw for the role.

Lawmakers from her National League for Democracy party are also pressing for a special "state counsellor" position for the Nobel laureate, an appointment that would allow her to liaise between the presidency and parliament.

Last week the NLD said she would take on four cabinet posts -- foreign, energy, education and the ministerial position in the president's office.

But during a parliamentary session yesterday, the NLD put forward two new names for the energy and education portfolios, according to NLD spokesman Win Htein.

"Daw Aung San Suu Kyi will be the spokesperson for the president," he added, without elaborating on the rejig.

The move will free up the 70-year-old's already busy day-to-day responsibilities while reinforcing control over her proxy president Htin Kyaw.



Indian voters queue to cast their ballots in the state assembly elections at a polling station in Diphu in the Karbi Anglong district, Guwahati yesterday. Eighteen Assembly constituencies in West Bengal and sixty-five of the 126 Assembly constituencies in Assam went to the polls in the first phase.

Syrian army pushes anti-IS advance

Air strikes kill Qaeda spokesman

AFP, Beirut

Air strikes have killed several al-Qaeda-linked Al-Nusra Front members including its spokesman and regime forces have retaken a strategic town from the Islamic State group in the latest setbacks for jihadists in Syria.

Abu Firas al-Suri, whose real name was Radwan Nammous, fought against Soviet forces in Afghanistan where he met al-Qaeda leader Osama bin Laden and the founding father of global jihad, Abdullah Azzam, before returning to Syria in 2011.

Suri was meeting with other leading Islamist fighters in an Al-Nusra stronghold in Kafar Jales in northwestern Syria when the raids struck late on Sunday.

He "was an old time al-Qaeda member ... He was brought in from Yemen as an ideological counterweight" for rival jihadist group IS, said Pieter Van Ostaeyen, a historian and monitor of jihadist groups.

"His death indeed is a blow for Al-Nusra. However, that will not change a lot on the operational level," he added.

According to the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, Suri, his son and at least 20 jihadists of Al-Nusra and Jund al-Aqsa and other fighters from Uzbekistan were killed in strikes on positions in Idlib province.

US, Philippines begin military exercises

REUTERS, Manila

About 8,000 US and Filipino troops began annual military exercises yesterday against a backdrop of tension over China's greater assertiveness in the South China Sea though a Philippine commander played that down as the reason for the drills.

Over the next two weeks, the allies will test their command-and-control, communications, logistics and mobility procedures to address humanitarian and maritime security, Philippine defence officials said.

Their troops will also simulate retaking an oil-and-gas platform and practice an amphibious landing on a Philippine beach. "The Balikatan exercise is designed not to

address a particular concern but the whole lump in the spectrum of warfare," Vice Admiral Alexander Lopez, the Philippine military's exercise director, told a news conference. "China is not part of the idea."

Ash Carter, will be the first US defence secretary to observe the exercises when he arrives next week, underscoring the significance of the war games for both countries. China's more assertive pursuit of its claims in the South China Sea over the past year or so has included land reclamation and the construction of air and port facilities on some isles and reefs.

The United States has conducted what it calls "freedom of navigation" patrols in the area, sailing near disputed islands controlled by China to underscore its right

SOUTH CHINA SEA RO



Karabakh clashes enter third day

AFP, Baku

Deadly clashes between Azerbaijani and Armenian forces over the Nagorno Karabakh region continued for a third day yesterday.

Azerbaijan said three of its troops were killed overnight when Armenian forces shelled its positions using mortars and grenade launchers, taking the overall death toll in the latest surge of violence to at least 36.

The Armenia-backed separatist authorities said that Azeri troops "intensified shelling of the Karabakh army positions yesterday morning, using 152-millimetre mortars, artillery and tanks".

Rescuers race to reach victims

Thousands stranded by rains; death toll tops 55

AFP, Peshawar

Rescuers were battling yesterday to reach thousands of people stranded by floods and landslides in Pakistan's northwest and parts of Kashmir, officials said, as the death toll rose to 55.

Disaster management officials in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province, where 47 people have died since the downturn began Saturday night, said they were consulting with the military about a rescue operation there amid fears the death toll could still climb.

"We are trying to arrange a helicopter to reach the people stuck under debris of their houses," Latifur Rehman, a spokesman for the Provincial Disaster Management Authority, told AFP. The authority said it had received reports of damage to dozens of houses but had

failed to reach affected people in three districts of the northwestern province.

"We need to get bodies and the injured out from under the rubble and provide food and tents to the survivors," Rehman said, adding that four truckloads of supplies had been sent to affected districts.

"All roads leading to villages and other areas have been blocked... There is no movement at all," Khalid Khan, a courier company owner in Shangla district of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, told AFP, adding that local hospitals lack the facilities to deal with the injured.

In Pakistan-administered Kashmir's Neelum Valley, officials said thousands were stranded by landslides. At least eight people including five children died there when two houses were buried in a landslide caused by the rains, a local official told AFP.

FLOOD IN NORTHWEST PA



NEWS IN brief

Yemen president dismisses PM

AFP, Aden

Yemen's President Abedrabbo Mansour Hadi on Sunday relieved prime minister and vice president Khaled Bahah of his duties due to what he called government "failures". Bahah's surprise dismissal comes just a week ahead of a UN-brokered ceasefire planned between Yemen's warring parties, which is expected to

S Korea conducts fire exercise on East Sea

AFP, Seoul

South Korea conducted a large-scale live fire exercise yesterday on the East Sea, where North Korea has been upping tensions with a series of missile and rocket launches supervised by leader Kim Jong-Un. The drill involving K-9 self-

Philippines launches dengue vaccination

AFP, Manila

The world's first public dengue vaccination programme was launched in the Philippines yesterday as nurses began injecting the first batch of a million children with a French drug to combat the deadly disease. The Philippines had in December approved the vaccine, first to

Turkish Cypriot PM set to resign

AFP, Nicosia

The ruling coalition in the breakaway Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus (TRNC) collapsed yesterday in a dispute over economic policy, paving the way for the premier's resignation. Prime Minister Omer Kalyoncu was set to submit the resignation of his government to President Mustafa Akinci after a meeting of the ruling

Vietnam seizes Chinese oil tanker: state media

AFP, Hanoi

Vietnam's coast guard has seized a Chinese oil tanker which it claims intruded into Vietnamese waters, state media said yesterday, the latest episode in a festering territorial dispute in the South China Sea. The Qiong Yangpu was carrying 100,000 litres of oil, the official