

Hackers stole \$6m from Russian bank using SWIFT

AFP, Magnitogorsk

Unknown hackers stole 339.5 million roubles (\$6 million) from a Russian bank last year in an attack using the SWIFT international payments messaging system, the Russian central bank said yesterday.

The disclosure, buried at the bottom of a central bank report on digital thefts in the Russian banking sector, is the latest in a string of attempted and successful cyber heists using fraudulent wire-transfer requests.

The central bank said it had been sent information about "one successful attack on the work place of a SWIFT system operator." "The volume of unsanctioned operations as a result of this attack amounted to 339.5 million roubles," the bank said.

After the report's publication, a central bank spokesman said hackers had taken control of a computer at a Russian bank and used the SWIFT system to transfer the money to their own accounts.

The spokesman declined to name the bank or provide further details. He quoted Artem Sychev, deputy head of the central bank's security department, as saying this was "a common scheme".

A spokeswoman for SWIFT, whose messaging system is used to transfer trillions of dollars each day, said the company does not comment on specific entities.

"When a case of potential fraud is reported to us, we offer our assistance to the affected user to help secure its environment," said the spokeswoman, Natasha de Teran.

SWIFT says its own systems have never been compromised by hackers.

Brussels-based SWIFT said late last year digital heists were becoming increasingly prominent as hackers use more sophisticated tools and techniques to launch new attacks.

Oxfam unveils action plan after sex scandal

AFP, London

British charity Oxfam yesterday unveiled an action plan to tackle sexual misconduct following the "stain" of a prostitution scandal but the man at the centre of the allegations denied organising orgies.

The aid group said it would create an independent commission which will have the power to access records and interview staff in a bid to stamp out abuse and impose stricter controls on employees.



Oxfam will triple funding to more than \$1 million (800,000 euros) to improve safeguarding, while also doubling the number of staff in this area and increasing investment in gender training.

The new plan comes a week after revelations that Oxfam staff used prostitutes while working in Haiti following a devastating 2010 earthquake and a wave of subsequent allegations of sexual misconduct.

The charity's deputy chief executive Penny Lawrence has resigned and three Oxfam global ambassadors including South Africa's Archbishop Desmond Tutu have quit their roles as a result of the scandal.

Oxfam fired four staff members for gross misconduct and allowed three others to resign following an internal inquiry into what happened in Haiti in 2011.



Syrian boys look at shells and undetonated mines lying on a street in Raqa that were left by the Islamic State (IS) group, yesterday.

PHOTO: AFP

US, Turkey to mend ties

Turks propose joint deployment in Manbij during Tillerson meet

AGENCIES

The United States and Turkey yesterday agreed to try to rescue a strategic relationship that Washington acknowledged had reached a crisis point, with Turkey proposing a joint deployment in Syria if a US-backed Kurdish militia leaves a border area.

US Secretary of State Rex Tillerson met President Tayyip Erdogan during a two-day visit that followed weeks of escalating anti-American rhetoric from the Turkish government.

While relations between Washington and its main Muslim ally in Nato have been strained by a number of issues, Turkey has been particularly infuriated by US support for the Syrian Kurdish YPG militia, which it sees as terrorists.

Turkey launched an air and ground assault last month in Syria's northwest Afrin region to sweep the YPG away from its southern border. The United States has armed, trained and aided YPG fighters with air support and special forces, as the main ground force in its campaign against Islamic State.

"We find ourselves at a bit of a crisis point in the relationship," Tillerson told a news conference after meeting with Foreign Minister Mevlut Cavusoglu yesterday morning. He had met with Erdogan for a more than three-hour discussion on Thursday night.

"We've decided and President Erdogan decided last night we needed to talk about how we go forward. The relationship is too important."

The United States has no troops on the ground in Afrin, where the Turkish offensive has so far taken place. But Turkey has proposed extending its campaign further east to the town of Manbij, where US troops are based, potentially leading to direct confrontation with US-backed units.

Cavusoglu, the Turkish foreign minister, said Turkey would be able to take joint steps with the United States in Syria once the YPG left the vicinity of Manbij.

"What is important is who will govern and provide security to these areas," he said. "We will coordinate to restore stability in Manbij and other cities. We will start with Manbij. After YPG leaves there, we can take steps with the US based on trust."

He also said the two countries had created a "mechanism" for further talks and would meet again by mid-March to further hash out their differences.

Meanwhile, Syrian troops have uncovered a mass grave containing the remains of more than 30 people killed by the Islamic State group in Raqa province, state media reported yesterday.

It is the third such find by the army in recent months in territory formerly held by the jihadists west of their onetime bastion.

The remains were transported to the military hospital in neighbouring Aleppo province to be identified.

In late December, Syrian troops found two mass graves in the west of the province. State media later reported that more than 150 bodies had been exhumed from them.

SYRIA TENSIONS

Two sides agree to set up working groups to solve key issues

Syria troops find mass grave west of Raqa

TRAINING MISSION

Pak to deploy troops in Saudi Arabia

REUTERS, Karachi

Pakistan is sending troops to ally Saudi Arabia on a "training and advise mission", the military said, three years after it decided against sending soldiers to join the Saudi-led military intervention in Yemen.

The exact role the troops will play was unclear, but a statement from the army's press wing on Thursday stressed they "will not be employed outside" the kingdom.

Pakistan's retired army chief, General Raheel Sharif, commands the new Saudi-led Islamic military alliance to fight terrorism.

Pakistan's House voted to remain neutral to avoid being pulled into a sectarian regional power struggle, in part because the country shares a border with Iran and has a sizeable Shia minority.

FLORIDA SCHOOL SHOOTING

'President Trump, do something!'

Mother demands answers after daughter's killing

AGENCIES

President Trump, please do something! Do something. Action! We need it now! These kids need safety now!"

With tears rolling down her face, Lori Alhadeff screamed into a microphone, glared into a camera, and begged the president to address the nation's deadly gun epidemic.

Alhadeff's 14-year-old daughter, Alyssa, was one of 17 people killed during Wednesday's school shooting in Parkland, Florida. Alhadeff's grief was coupled with anger and a demand for answers.

"How do we allow a gunman to come into our children's school? How do they get through security? What security is there?" she yelled.

"The gunman -- a crazy person -- just walks right into the school, knocks down the window of my child's door and starts shooting. Shooting her! And killing her!"

The United States has once again been forced to confront its deadly distinction as the world's only developed country to be plagued by mass school shootings.

The debate over gun control in America has been polarizing and politicized. As it has gone on, with little resolution, school shootings have continued. Alhadeff challenged Trump to put a stop to the terror and heartbreak.

"President Trump, you say what can you do? You can stop the guns from getting into these children's hands," she said. "What can you do? You can do a lot! This is not fair to our fami-

Teen Killer confesses to killings, charged with 17 counts of premeditated murder



lies and our children [to] go to school and have to get killed!"

After a teenager shot dead 17 people in a Florida high school on Wednesday, there is zero indication that the United States is in any way ready to adopt major new reforms to stop such tragedies occurring again.

Trump suggested the root cause of the violence was a crisis of mental health -- and defied calls to address gun control.

The troubled shooter Nikolas Cruz has confessed to the killings at his former high school, court documents showed yesterday, as the FBI admitted it had received a tip-off about the 19-year-old gunman yet failed to stop him.

Terrified students hid in closets and under desks on Wednesday at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, texting for help as the gunman, Nikolas Cruz, stalked the school with a semi-automatic AR-15 rifle.

Cruz has been charged with 17 counts of premeditated murder, appearing Thursday afternoon via video link before a judge who ordered him held without bond. More than a dozen other people were injured in the shooting spree.

In a recurring nightmare that appalls millions of Americans and is unfathomable overseas, the Florida carnage was the 18th US school shooting since January 1. Each year, the country loses around 33,000 people to gun violence.

Israeli protesters urge Netanyahu to step down

AFP, Tel Aviv

Thousands of Israelis marched against corruption in Tel Aviv yesterday, in the first protest since police recommended that Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu be indicted for graft.

Several thousand people gathered for the protest calling on Netanyahu to step down, carrying banners reading 'Crime Minister' and 'Bye bye Bibi' -- a common nickname for the Israeli leader.

The crowd chanted "Liar! Liar!" when one speaker sarcastically repeated Netanyahu's common refrain about the allegations that "there will be nothing because there is nothing".

On Tuesday, police called for Netanyahu, 68, to be indicted for bribery, fraud and breach of public trust, in the biggest challenge yet to the right-wing premier's long tenure in power.

He has repeatedly denied the allegations,

which he says are politically motivated, and has rejected calls to step down.

Netanyahu's partners in his coalition government have so far stood by him, and a prime minister facing such police recommendations or who has been formally charged is not obliged to resign.

"Here in this square we pledge to fight you until you resign," activist Avi Binyamin told the crowd yesterday.

"We shall keep coming here for as long as it takes."

Netanyahu is being investigated over suspicions that he and his family received expensive gifts from Hollywood producer Arnon Milchan and Australian billionaire James Packer.

Between 2007 and 2016 he allegedly received cigars, champagne, jewellery and other goods estimated to be worth around one million shekels (229,000 euros, \$283,000).

BRIBERY ALLEGATIONS



Israeli protesters shout slogans and raise signs as they demonstrate against Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu in the wake of police recommendations to indict corruption, in the coastal city of Tel Aviv, yesterday.

PHOTO: AFP

US Senate rejects immigration bills

1.8m 'Dreamers' in limbo

AFP, Washington

The US Senate blocked several immigration proposals Thursday including a bipartisan compromise opposed by President Donald Trump, dashing hopes that Congress will soon decide the fate of nearly two million migrants brought to the country illegally as children.

Trump had threatened to veto the bipartisan deal, which would shield the young immigrants from deportation in exchange for \$25 billion in border security, because it did not include the restrictions on legal immigration he has sought.

The Senate's Republican leadership had set aside this week to reach an agreement on putting 1.8 million so-called "Dreamers" on a pathway to citizenship, boosting border security, and potentially tightening up existing regulations on immigration.

Their efforts failed spectacularly, leaving the entire process up in the air.

Lawmakers were heading home to their districts for 10 days to reassess, with just weeks to go before a March 5 deadline, after which thousands could be at risk of deportation.

Meanwhile, US courts may have a say in whether Dreamers get deported from that date. Two judges recently blocked Trump's order to end the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) program, which protects some 690,000 Dreamers.

Australia prime minister 'inept'

Says deputy PM as sex scandal opens rift in coalition

AFP, Sydney

Australia's parliamentary sex scandal opened a rift in the governing coalition yesterday as deputy leader Barnaby Joyce described Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull as "inept" for criticising his affair with an aide.

Joyce, 50, whose National Party rules alongside Turnbull's Liberals, admitted last week to having an affair with his 33-year-old media adviser, who is pregnant with their child.

Turnbull on Thursday harshly admonished Joyce for making a "shocking error of judgement" for the affair and said he had created a "world of woe" for his wife, four daughters and lover Vikki Campion.

Turnbull, head of the Liberal Party, acknowledged that he was powerless to remove Joyce, who holds the deputy position as leader of smaller National Party on which he relies to govern.

He instead announced that a formal ban on sexual relations between cabinet members and their staff would be added to the ministerial code of conduct.

Joyce hit back in a defiant press conference in Canberra yesterday, refusing to resign and accusing Turnbull of interfering with internal National Party affairs.

He blasted the PM's comments as "inept", "unnecessary" and causing "further harm".

"I don't believe people should be resigning in any job over personal issues," Joyce added.

He also batted away revelations he accepted a rent-free apartment from a millionaire after his marriage collapsed, saying the accommodation was just a gesture of support from a friend.

Daily media headlines about the affair have riveted the public and sparked debate about workplace culture in Australia amid the global #MeToo movement against sexual harassment.



LINK TO 2016 FAILED COUP

Turkey court jails 3 journos for life

AFP, Istanbul

A Turkish court yesterday jailed three prominent journalists for life on charges of links to the group blamed for the 2016 failed coup, state media said.

Veteran journalists and writers Nazli Ilıcak and the brothers Mehmet and Ahmet Altan were handed the life sentences at a trial in Istanbul over links to the outlawed group of US-based preacher Fethullah Gulen, the Anadolu news agency said.

A similar punishment was handed to three other suspects. Gulen denies links to the coup bid.

Ilıcak, 73, was one of the very first journalists arrested in July after the coup bid. Briefly an MP from 1999, she wrote for several dailies including Hurriyet. Ahmet Altan, 67, is a novelist and journalist who has written for some of Turkey's leading dailies including Hurriyet and Milliyet as well as founding the now closed opposition daily Taraf.

Mehmet Altan, 65, has written books on Turkish politics.

In the same case, the court gave life sentences for former Zaman newspaper marketing manager Yakup Simsek, police academy instructor Sukru Tugrul Ozsengul and Zaman layout designer Fevzi Yazici.