

DATA PRIVACY GRILLING FB chief turns down British MPs request

AFP, London

Facebook chief Mark Zuckerberg yesterday turned down a request by British lawmakers to appear before them to respond to concerns about data privacy as the European Union set a deadline for the US social media giant to respond to its own questions. Zuckerberg instead offered to send one of his deputies as the US company comes under new pressure from the EU to disclose more details about how up to 50 million users' data are alleged to have been taken from Facebook and used in political campaigns.

In a letter to the British parliament's digital, culture and media committee,



A Syrian evacuee from Eastern Ghouta carries an infant after arriving with others in the village of Qalaat al-Madiq, some 45 kilometres northwest of the central city of Hama, yesterday as evacuations continued following a deal with the regime that was announced earlier in the week.

PHOTO: AFP

Major expulsions of Russian diplomats over 4 decades

The expulsion of more than 100 Russian diplomats from the United States and several European countries Monday over the poisoning of an ex-spy in Britain follows a series of such measures against Russia. Here is a look back at some of the other major expulsions of diplomats or agents from Russia and its predecessor, the Soviet Union, over more than 40 years.

DURING THE COLD WAR

September 1971: Britain expels 105 Soviet diplomats and officials after Moscow refuses to clarify the activities of 440 of its citizens in Britain. Two weeks later, Moscow kicks out 18 Britons.

April 1972: Bolivia expels 49 members of the Soviet embassy in La Paz as diplomatic relations deteriorate sharply two years after being established.

April 1983: France throws out 47 Soviet diplomats in the midst of the so-called Farewell Affair involving Soviet double agent Vladimir Vetrov, posted in Paris from 1965 to 1970, who passed to France the identities of Soviet spies.

November 1983: The Caribbean island of Grenada kicks out 49 Soviet diplomats shortly after the intervention of American troops following a coup.

September 1985: Moscow and London engage in a six-day exchange of spy expulsions, with 31 kicked out on each side in total. This follows the defection to Britain of the KGB's London station chief, Oleg Gordievsky.

Late 1986: The United States under president Ronald Reagan and Mikhail Gorbachev's Soviet Union carry out tit-for-tat expulsions over several weeks.

In mid-September Washington demands the departure of 25 members of the Soviet mission at the United Nations and Moscow replies by expelling five American diplomats.

A month later Washington expels 55 more Soviet diplomats. The Soviet Union responds by expelling five US diplomats and withdrawing all Soviet personnel working at US missions in the country.

June 1988: Canada expels, or declares personae non gratae, 19 Soviets. Moscow takes similar measures against 13 Canadian diplomats.

AFTER SOVIET UNION FALLS

March 2001: Washington throws out 50 Russian diplomats, four of whom are declared personae non gratae. The move follows the arrest of Robert Hanssen, an FBI counterintelligence expert who spied for Moscow for 15 years as one of its most valuable ever agents. Russia retaliates by expelling a similar number of Americans.

December 2016: US President Barack Obama expels 35 Russian intelligence operatives as part of a barrage of retaliatory measures against Moscow who intelligence agencies accused of meddling in the US election.

Russian President Vladimir Putin rules out tit-for-tat measures, a move that wins plaudits from then president-elect Donald Trump.

SOURCE: AFP

POLITICAL PARTY APPS

Indian EC to probe alleged data leaks

THE HINDU ONLINE

The Social Media Hub of the Election Commission of India will look into allegations of harnessing user data through mobile apps of political parties and personalities, Chief Election Commissioner O P Rawat said yesterday while announcing the Karnataka Assembly poll dates.

Twitter user and French security researcher Elliot Alderson had found that when a user creates a profile of either the Narendra Modi app or the Congress' app, personal data is sent to third parties without obtaining the user's consent.

Alderson also tweeted that the Narendra Modi app had changed its privacy policy without notifying its users. The Congress' app, Alderson later tweeted, had been taken off the Android Play Store. "The URL for membership on the INC app has been defunct for a while now. Our membership is through the INC website," tweeted the Congress' social media head Divya Spandana.

Congress President Rahul Gandhi tweeted, "Modi's NaMo App secretly records audio, video, contacts of your friends & family and even tracks your location via GPS. He's the Big Boss who likes to spy on Indians. Now he wants data on our children. 13 lakh NCC cadets are being forced to download the APP."

He also accused the Prime Minister of misusing his position to build a database. "Modi misusing PM position to build personal database with data on millions of Indians via the NaMo App promoted by Govt. If as PM he wants to use tech to communicate with India, no problem. But use the official PMO APP for it. This data belongs to India, not Modi," Rahul tweeted on Monday.

EXPULSION OF RUSSIAN DIPLOMATS

Nato joins 2 dozen nations

Moscow blames US pressure on allies, vows retaliation

AFP, London

Nato joined two dozen governments around the world yesterday in expelling Russian diplomats in response to a nerve agent attack in Britain, marking what London called a "turning point" in the West's relations with Moscow.

The US-led military alliance expelled seven Russian staff and denied accreditation to three more, bringing the total number of suspected Russian spies expelled to almost 150, including the 23 initially dispatched by Britain.

"This will send a clear message to Russia that there are costs and consequences for their unacceptable pattern of behaviour," Nato chief Jens Stoltenberg said in Brussels.

In an unprecedented act of coordination, at least 24 countries have echoed Britain's action in response to the March 4 attack on former Russian double agent Sergei Skripal and his daughter in the English city of Salisbury.

London and its allies have blamed Moscow, citing the use of a Soviet-designed nerve agent Novichok, Russia's record of targeting dissidents and its history of aggression in recent years, from Crimea to cyber-attacks.

British Foreign Secretary Boris Johnson

said the mass expulsions were "a blow from which Russian intelligence will need many years to recover".

It "could become a turning point", he wrote in The Times newspaper, adding: "The Western alliance took decisive action and Britain's partners came together against the Kremlin's reckless ambitions."

Skripal, a Russian military intelligence officer imprisoned by Moscow for passing on information about Russian agents in various European countries, came to Britain in a 2010 spy swap.

Moscow has fiercely denied any involvement in his attempted murder, instead pointing the finger at London.

It responded to Britain's expulsions with its own, and the closure of the British Council cultural organisation -- and yesterday promised it would hit back against the coordinated moves.

"We'll respond, have no doubt! No one wants to put up with such loutish behaviour and we won't," Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov said on the sidelines of a conference in Uzbekistan.

Lavrov said the coordinated response was the result of "colossal pressure, colossal blackmail" from the United States.

NEWS IN brief

Powers seek to boost Afghan peace effort

AFP, Tashkent

The five permanent members of the United Nations Security Council and more than a dozen other national delegations yesterday declared their support for the peace process in Afghanistan after talks that the Taliban did not attend. The more than 20 signatories of a declaration, including the US, Russia, China, France and Britain, committed to a peace process "Afghan-led and Afghan owned".

Pakistan defends nuke safety record

REUTERS, Islamabad

Pakistan has defended its record on nuclear safety after the United States sanctioned seven Pakistani companies over alleged links to the nuclear trade, saying the suspicions over the companies should not be used to discredit it. Ties between the US and nuclear-armed Pakistan have frayed in recent years over Pakistan's suspected support for Islamist militants waging war in Afghanistan, something Pakistani officials deny.

Qatar jets intercept civilian flights: UAE

AFP, Abu Dhabi

The United Arab Emirates said two Qatari fighter jets "dangerously approached" two UAE passenger flights on Monday, sparking a swift denial by Doha in the third such incident between the Gulf rivals. Qatar and the Emirates have rowed repeatedly over alleged airspace violations this year, as a diplomatic crisis in the Gulf enters its 10th month.

Anger mounts in Russia over deadly mall fire

Putin blames criminal negligence for death toll

REUTERS, Kemerovo

President Vladimir Putin flew to the scene of a deadly shopping mall fire in Siberia that killed 64 people and promised angry residents yesterday that those responsible for what he called criminal negligence would be harshly punished.

The fire, at the Winter Cherry mall in the city of Kemerovo, killed 41 children, according to the Interfax news agency, and the calamitous way it was handled has stirred anger and focused attention on corruption and lax fire safety standards.

Putin, re-elected only this month, laid flowers at a memorial to the victims in the coal-producing region about 3,600 km (2,200 miles) east of Moscow, before chairing a meeting and declaring a national day

of mourning be held today.

"What's happening here? This isn't war, it's not an unexpected methane explosion at a coal mine. People came to relax, children. We're talking about demography and losing so many people," Putin angrily told officials.

"Why? Because of some criminal negligence, because of slovenliness. How could this ever happen?," he added. "The first emotion when hearing about the number of dead and dead children is not to cry but to wail. And when you listen to what has been said here, speaking honestly, other emotions arise."

Investigators said fire exits had been illegally blocked, the public address system had not been switched on, the fire alarm system was broken, and children had been locked inside cinemas.



A Catalan flag and banners that acclaim to free Carles Puigdemont are attached to the fence of the prison of Neumuenster, northern Germany, where former Catalan regional president Carles Puigdemont is kept in custody. Puigdemont will "remain in detention for the time being, until a decision is made concerning the extradition procedure," the regional court in Kiel announced yesterday.

PHOTO: AFP

New Zealand can't find Russian spies to expel

AFP, Wellington

New Zealand said yesterday it would like to expel Russian spies in retaliation for allegedly poisoning an ex-agent in Britain -- only it can't find any Moscow operatives in the remote South Pacific nation.

Scores of Russian diplomats have been ordered from the United States, Canada, Australia and various European countries in the wake of the nerve agent attack on Sergei Skripal and his daughter in Salisbury.

New Zealand, a former British colony and staunch London ally, offered in-principle support but admitted a lack of Russian spy activity meant there was little action it could take.

"We have done a check in New Zealand. We don't have Russian undeclared intelligence officers here. If we did, we would expel them," Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern told state radio.

"When there's a range of international interests ... does it surprise me New Zealand is not top of their list? No, actually."

Ardern said New Zealand "will keep under review what further actions it can take to support the international community over the Salisbury attack".

Russia has denied it was behind the attempted assassination.

Egypt's Sisi cruises towards victory amid slow voting

REUTERS, Cairo

Egyptian authorities yesterday pressed for a high turnout on the second day of a presidential election designed to give President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi a sweeping victory against no real competition in a contest dismissed by critics as sham.

In an effort to dispel voter apathy, the state news agency reminded Egyptians that voting is mandatory by law and those who do not, face a fine of 500 pounds (\$28) or less - a sanction that in previous elections has not been enforced rigorously.

Sisi says he is seeking a second term to repair the economic damage from years of political turmoil, defeat Islamist insurgents and revive Egypt's role as a pre-eminent Arab power.

Sisi's only opponent is an obscure politician loyal to Sisi. More serious challengers were forced to step down and several opposition politicians called for a boycott of the

vote, saying repression had removed credible challengers.

But authorities hope that over three days it can mobilise a strong turnout. The president still has many admirers, although austerity measures in recent years and a fierce crackdown on Islamists, secularists and liberals have reduced that support.

Brigadier General Ali Hareedi, head of the government's central elections operations room, said that the first day of voting produced a high turnout "which proves the Egyptian people's awareness". He gave no figure.

Pro-Sisi media described ballot centres flooded with voters.

Two sources monitoring the election, including one from the National Election Commission, said about 13.5 percent of 59 million eligible voters cast ballots on Monday. If that rate is repeated today, the turnout would be 40 percent.



Israel 'critically ill' under Netanyahu Warn six former spymasters

REUTERS, Jerusalem

Six former Israeli spymasters yesterday accused Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu of jeopardising the country's future as it prepares to celebrate the 70th anniversary of its founding next month.

The surviving ex-Mossad intelligence agency chiefs voiced their opinion of the fourth-term, right-wing leader in a joint interview excerpted on the front page of Yedioth Ahronoth, Israel's best-selling newspaper and a regular Netanyahu critic.

Netanyahu had no immediate response, but a senior member of his governing coalition brushed off the censure.

Danny Yatom, who headed the Mossad during Netanyahu's first stint in office in the late 1990s, called for his ouster, accusing him and his aides of "putting their interests ahead of national interests" as corruption investigations deepen. Police questioned Netanyahu on Monday over his alleged dealings with the country's largest telecommunication company, one of three cases weighing on his political future. Netanyahu has denied any wrongdoing and opinion polls show his popularity is still high.

Yatom also voiced concern about "the inertia in the diplomatic sphere, which is leading us toward a bi-national state (with the Palestinians), which would spell the end of (Israel as) a Jewish and democratic state".