



INVESTIGATIVE REPORT Bloomberg's White House campaign used prison labour

AFP, Washington

Billionaire US presidential hopeful Michael Bloomberg used prison labour to make calls for his campaign, investigative website The Intercept reported on Tuesday.

Bloomberg called the report "fundamentally accurate" and said his campaign had already ended its relationship with the company involved.

The Intercept reported that the former New York mayor's campaign contracted, through a third-party vendor, the ProCom call center company based in New Jersey.

ProCom runs call centers in New Jersey as well as Oklahoma, where two of its call centres operate from state prisons, The Intercept said.

In at least one of those Oklahoma prisons, a minimum-security women's facility, inmates were contracted to make calls on behalf of the Bloomberg campaign, according to the report.

Bloomberg said his campaign only learned about this situation when the reporter on the story called them.

"But as soon as we discovered which vendor's subcontractor had done this, we immediately ended our relationship with the company and the people who hired them," he said in a statement.

Months after frontrunners Joe Biden and Bernie Sanders, Bloomberg announced in late November his candidacy for the Democratic Party nomination to challenge Donald Trump in next year's presidential election.

Bloomberg has a net worth of more than \$54 billion, according to Forbes.



Police react as anti-government protesters throw an umbrella at them after a protester (C on ground) was detained in a shopping mall in the Tsim Sha Tsui district of Hong Kong yesterday.

PHOTO: AFP

ALLEGED CASINO BRIBES

Japanese lawmaker Akimoto arrested

AFP, Tokyo

A Japanese lawmaker was arrested on suspicion of accepting bribes worth tens of thousands of dollars from a company that wanted to build a casino, Tokyo prosecutors said yesterday.

Tsukasa Akimoto, a former member of Prime Minister Shinzo Abe's ruling party, received three million yen in cash in 2017 (\$27,400 at the current rate), prosecutors said in a statement without identifying the company.

The arrest could put pressure on the Abe administration, which legalised casinos in 2018 despite bitter opposition.

Akimoto, who denied the allegations in a tweet, was the senior vice minister in charge of overseeing the government's casino policy.

Prosecutors alleged he received the money "knowing the company provided it for the purpose of asking for favourable arrangements" for casino projects.

Prosecutors also arrested three employees of Chinese betting company 500.com, which allegedly bribed Akimoto, according to public broadcaster NHK.

Akimoto resigned from Abe's Liberal Democratic Party after his arrest.

Prosecutors also alleged he was "invited on a trip to Hokkaido... and received the financial benefits worth around 700,000 yen including airfare and accommodation".

Japan's government has long pushed for the construction of mega resorts that integrate casinos, entertainment venues, restaurants, hotels and conference facilities, similar to Las Vegas.

The policy's supporters argue that casinos will boost the stagnant economy by bringing in tourists and business, similar to regional gambling hubs like Macau.

Pope defends migrants

Appeals for peace in many of the world's flashpoints

REUTERS, Vatican City

Pope Francis urged the world to let the light of Christmas pierce the "darkness in human hearts" that leads to religious persecution, social injustice, armed conflicts and fear of migrants.

In his "Urbi et Orbi" (to the city and the world) Christmas Day message, the 83-year-old pope called for peace in the Holy Land, Syria, Lebanon, Yemen, Iraq, Venezuela, Ukraine and several African countries caught up in conflicts.

The common thread of his address to tens of thousands of people in St. Peter's Square and millions watching or listening around the world was that change starts in the hearts of individuals.

"There is darkness in human hearts, yet the light of Christ is greater still," Francis said, as he marked the seventh Christmas of his pontificate.

"There is darkness in personal, family and social relationships, but the light of Christ is greater. There is darkness in economic, geopolitical and ecological conflicts, yet greater still is the light of Christ," he said.

Francis singled out the persecution of Christians by militant groups in Burkina Faso, Mali, Niger and Nigeria,

asking God to console those who suffer for their faith.

On December 1, at least 14 people were shot dead in an attack on a church in eastern Burkina Faso, where an Islamist insurgency has ignited ethnic and religious tensions.

Pope Francis, in his Christmas Eve homily late Tuesday, said the celebration of Jesus's birth reminded humanity to love us all, even the worst of us.

Francis, who has been scorned by populist politicians because of his defence of refugees and migrants, dedicated a section of his address to their plight.

"It is injustice that makes them cross deserts and seas that become cemeteries. It is injustice that forces them to endure unspeakable forms of abuse, enslavement of every kind and torture in inhumane detention camps," Francis said.

This month, Francis called for the closing of migrant detention camps in Libya.

"It is injustice that turns them away from places where they might have hope for a dignified life, but instead find themselves before walls of indifference," he said.

CHRISTMAS MESSAGE

"God continues to love us all, even the worst of us": Pope Francis

He singles out persecuted Christians by militants



Ready to handle N Korean 'Christmas gift': Trump

China urges US to take concrete steps on nuke deal

REUTERS, Palm Beach

US President Donald Trump on Tuesday brushed off North Korea's warning of a "Christmas gift," saying the United States would "deal with it very successfully," amid US concerns that Pyongyang might be preparing a long-range missile test.

China, North Korea's most important backer, meanwhile, urged Washington to take "concrete steps" as soon as possible to implement agreements reached during last year's summit between Trump and North Korea leader Kim Jong Un in Singapore.

Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi, in comments relayed on Twitter by the foreign ministry in Beijing, called on North Korea and the United States to work out "a feasible roadmap for establishing a permanent peace regime & realizing complete denuclearisation on the (Korean) Peninsula."

North Korea warned this month of a possible "Christmas gift" for Washington after Kim gave the United States until the

end of the year to propose new concessions in talks over his country's nuclear arsenal and reducing tensions between the adversaries.

"We'll find out what the surprise is and we'll deal with it very successfully," Trump told reporters at his Mar-a-Lago resort. "We'll see what happens."

"Maybe it's a nice present," he quipped. "Maybe it's a present where he sends me a beautiful vase as opposed to a missile test."

In issuing his warning, North Korea accused Washington of trying to drag out denuclearisation talks ahead of Trump's re-election bid next year and said it was "entirely up to the US what Christmas gift it will select to get."

US military commanders have said that the North Korean response could involve the testing of a long-range missile, something North Korea has suspended, along with nuclear bomb tests, since 2017.

Trump has repeatedly held up the test suspensions as evidence that his policy of engaging with North Korea works.



Modi unveils plan to tackle water shortages in India

OUR CORRESPONDENT, New Delhi

Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi yesterday launched a Rs 6,000-crore groundwater management scheme change and said his government has set a target to deliver clean drinking water to 15 crore homes in the next five years through pipes.

The groundwater management scheme aims at bringing about behavioural changes at the community level for sustainable groundwater resource management in Gujarat, Haryana, Karnataka, Madhya Pradesh, Maharashtra, Rajasthan and Uttar Pradesh.

The implementation of the scheme is expected to benefit nearly 8,350 gram panchayats in these states.

Speaking on the occasion, Modi said that in 70 years, only three crore out of 18 crore rural households have access to piped water supply.

He requested the people of every village to make a water action plan and create a

water fund. Farmers should make a water budget where groundwater is very low.

Modi said "water crisis is worrying for us as a family, as a citizen and as a country also it affects development. New India has to prepare us to deal with every situation of water crisis. For this, we are working together on five levels."

The Prime Minister emphasised that the Jal Shakti (formerly Water Resources) Ministry freed water out of compartmentalised approach and laid stress on a comprehensive and holistic approach.

Out of the total outlay of Rs 6000 crore to be implemented over five years (2020-21 to 2024-25), 50 percent will be in the form of World Bank loan and the remaining through Indian government assistance from regular budgetary support.

According to UK-based charity WaterAid, about 163 million people in India - roughly 12% of the population - do not have access to clean water close to home.

The groundwater scheme aims to deliver clean water to 15 crore homes in 5 yrs



Madhya Pradesh state Chief Minister Kamal Nath (C) holds an Indian flag as he takes part in a protest rally against India's new citizenship law in Bhopal yesterday.

PHOTO: AFP

Taliban kidnap 27 local peace activists

Taliban militants have kidnaped 27 peace activists from a highway in Afghanistan's western Farah province, local officials and peace activists said yesterday. Massoud Bakhtawar, the deputy governor of Farah, said the activists were traveling with six cars from Herat to neighbouring Farah on Tuesday evening when their convoy was stopped by the Taliban on a main highway and taken to an unknown location. Bismillah Watandost, a member of the group, said the activists had planned to travel to various parts of Farah to call for peace and a ceasefire between the warring parties in Afghanistan. The group, People's Peace Movement, was formed to protest violent attacks after a car bomb exploded at a sport stadium in southern Helmand province last year killing 17 civilians and wounding 50 others.

Single Chinese woman sues over egg freezing

A single woman in China has gone to court challenging rules that forbid unmarried women from freezing their eggs in the first case of its kind in the country. Teresa Xu said she was prompted to take legal action after a top hospital in Beijing declined to freeze her eggs last year, and instead told her to "get married, and have a child soon". "There is a huge demand among young women in China -- whether married or single -- to freeze their eggs as they delay the decision to have a child," Xu told AFP. "But clinics refuse single women, because of unfair laws." Chinese regulations forbid unmarried women from freezing their eggs unless they have a health reason, such as cancer.

Notre-Dame misses Xmas mass for first time since 1803



Notre-Dame Cathedral in Paris was unable to hold Christmas Eve Mass for the first time in more than 200 years -- after a fire ravaged its structure in April. With heavy hearts, French Catholics instead gathered at the nearby church of Saint-Germain l'Auxerrois, a few hundred metres away, for a service celebrated by the cathedral's rector Patrick Chauvet. "It isn't the same feeling but it's still a Christmas Mass," said 16-year-old Juliette, who had made the 700-kilometre trip from Aix with her family. "There will be a thought for Notre-Dame tonight, that's for sure."

SOURCE: AFP, REUTERS

Protesters: a cross-section of society

Majority Hindus, low-caste Dalits, Parsis are joining in to show their solidarity and condemn the legislation

AFP, New Delhi

Tens of thousands of Indians have taken to the streets in recent days to voice their anger over a new citizenship law that they say discriminates against the minority Muslim community. But it is not just Muslims who are protesting -- majority Hindus, low-caste Dalits and Parsis are joining in to show their solidarity and condemn the legislation across the country of 1.3 billion people.

The law allows people of six religions from Muslim-majority Pakistan, Bangladesh and Afghanistan an easier path to citizenship but not if they are Muslim. AFP spoke to five protesters who took part in a demonstration in New Delhi on Tuesday.

Kersi, a 32-year-old Parsi who works in the tech sector joined the march called by students from Jamia Millia Islamia University where police smashed into the campus and tear-gassed students following violent protests earlier this month. Kersi, who gave only one name, said he was worried because the country's secular foundations had been shaken like never before.

"The new law threatens it more than anything in the past. It's a step too far. It's a fundamental change they are trying to impose which I don't agree with and which we should try and prevent," he said. Mansi, 29, an upper-caste Hindu settled in the US but in Delhi

on holiday, was accompanied by her 64-year-old father who was carrying a cut-out of Bhimrao Ambedkar, a revered social reformer and architect of India's constitution.

"There have been laws in the past that have been extremely controversial but what they are trying to do now is alter the right to citizenship which sits at the foundation of democracy," she said.

"This according to me is much too far-reaching than any single law affecting any single community. You are altering the identity of the nation and by definition who gets to exercise their vote to decide the future of the country. It is the moral responsibility of the majority to stand up for the marginalised minorities."

Nandini, a professor at Delhi University who is a Hindu, said she was appalled by the alleged police brutality against students of Jamia University and wanted to show she was standing up for them.

"I feel enough is enough. It is important that we are given the space to express our dissent. It doesn't mean we are anti-state. We are actually asking the state to bring in policies that are equal for all and not divisive and discriminatory," she said. Pranav Yadav, 20, a student from one of India's lower caste communities, lied to his parents and joined the protest march because he "could not simply sit at home and do nothing when my country is under attack from fascist forces".

INDIA'S DIVISIVE CITIZENSHIP ACT



'Fine' now but lost memory after fall

Says Brazilian president

AFP, Sao Paulo

Brazilian President Jair Bolsonaro temporarily lost his memory after hitting his head in a fall at his official residence, he said in an interview on Tuesday.

The 64-year-old slipped Monday night in a bathroom at the Alvorada Palace, the latest health scare for the Brazilian leader who was wounded in a knife attack in September 2018 while campaigning for the presidency.

"At that moment I lost memory," he said of the fall.

"The following day, this morning, I managed to get back a lot of things and now I am fine," Bolsonaro said in a telephone interview with Band television.

"I didn't know, for example, what I did yesterday." Bolsonaro spent the night at the Armed Forces Hospital in Brasilia under observation and was released Tuesday "with the recommendation that he rest," his office said in a statement.

A cranial CT scan detected no anomalies, the statement said.

"I slipped and fell on my back. It was a nasty enough blow but I'm going to take care of myself," Bolsonaro said in the interview.