

Panama braces for 'Pandora Papers'

ICIJ promises to reveal 'most expansive expose of financial secrecy yet'

AFP, Panama City

Panama fears the publication of a new expose about financial secrecy in global tax havens could again taint its reputation, which was seriously damaged by the "Panama Papers" scandal, according to a government letter released by local media.

"The damage could be insurmountable," the Panamanian government said in the letter, sent through a law firm to the International Consortium of Investigative Journalists (ICIJ).

The letter warns that "any publication" reinforcing "a false perception" of the country as a possible tax haven "will have devastating consequences for Panama and its people."

The ICIJ tweeted that it would release yesterday 1630 GMT its "most expansive expose of financial secrecy yet," based on the leak of 11.9 million documents "covering every corner of the globe."

The "Pandora Papers" investigation is the result of work by more than 600 reporters in 117 countries, the ICIJ said.

The letter from the Panamanian government also references some of the reforms that the Central American country has made in recent years, although it remains on the EU list of tax havens.

It also indicates that since 2016 the registration of more than 395,000 companies and foundations has been suspended, around half of those existing at that time.

The government fears that Panama will again be the epicenter of a new global tax havens scandal like the one that followed the ICIJ's disclosure of the "Panama Papers" in 2016.

That massive data leak exposed widespread tax avoidance and evasion using complex structures of offshore shell companies and caused an international outcry.

The leak, linked to the Panamanian law firm Mossack Fonseca, damaged Panama's international image, despite the fact that most of the companies involved were overseas.

The investigation revealed the concealment of properties, companies, assets, profits and tax evasion by heads of state and government, political leaders and personalities from finance, sports and the arts.

Since then, Panama has carried out various legal reforms to strengthen banking controls and penalize tax evasion with jail time.

The Panama of 2016 "is nothing like the Panama of today," the government said in its letter.



Supporters of Trinamool Congress (TMC) party celebrate the win of West Bengal's chief minister and the leader of TMC Mamata Banerjee in Bhawanipur legislative assembly seat bypoll, in Siliguri, yesterday.

PHOTO: AFP

Quote of the day



"The way forward for our country is not to just pull the big lever marked uncontrolled immigration, and allow in huge numbers of people to do work ... we are moving away from that. ... There will be a period of adjustment, but that is I think what we need to see."

UK PM BORIS JOHNSON SAYS HE WILL NOT RETURN TO 'UNCONTROLLED IMMIGRATION' TO SOLVE FUEL, GAS AND CHRISTMAS FOOD CRISES

Afghanistan on verge of collapse

Warns EU; Taliban hold victory rally as they consolidate rule; Pak PM Imran Khan says US 'sooner or later' must recognise Taliban

AGENCIES

Afghanistan is facing a breakdown of its economic and social systems that risks turning into a humanitarian catastrophe, the European Union's foreign policy chief said yesterday.

Avoiding the worst-case scenario would require the Taliban to comply with conditions that would enable more international assistance, Josep Borrell wrote in a blog post.

"Afghanistan is experiencing a serious humanitarian crisis and a socio-economic collapse is looming, which would be dangerous for Afghans, the region and international security," Borrell wrote.

"If the situation continues and with winter approaching, this risks turning into a humanitarian catastrophe," he wrote, adding that this could trigger mass migration into neighbouring states.

His comments came as Taliban supporters and senior figures held their first mass rally outside Kabul on Sunday, in a show of strength as they consolidate their rule of Afghanistan.

No foreign government has yet recognised the Islamist former rebels' rule, but their hold on power within the country is all but unchallenged seven weeks after they took the capital.



Yesterday's official victory gathering in Kohdaman township in the hilly outskirts of the capital was attended by 1,500 men and boys.

"This is the day we waited for," said Khalil Haqqani, the new minister for refugees who in 2011 was named as a designated terrorist by the United States with a \$5 million bounty on his head. He is a prominent leader of the Haqqani militant network founded by his brother Jalaluddin.

"We have achieved our goal, but it requires protection," he said, with his rifle leaning against the lectern, boasting that the country has a "bright future" despite being shunned by international donors.

"My advice to the world is that they leave Afghanistan to Afghanistan."

Food prices in the country have jumped more than 50% since the Taliban took power in August as the freeing of \$9 billion of Afghanistan's assets held in foreign central bank reserves and the withdrawal of foreign income stokes inflation.

Widespread reports of human rights abuses and the exclusion of girls from schools have dented optimism that the Taliban's approach has changed since it first ran Afghanistan between 1996 and 2001.

Meanwhile, Pakistan's PM Imran Khan has said the United States government will "sooner or later" have to recognise the Taliban, which now rules Afghanistan.

In a televised interview with the Turkish-state affiliated TRT World, Khan stressed that if the US does not unfreeze the Afghan reserves, the country could face a "chaotic situation", and that the US has to come up with a solution.

Khan revealed that his government is currently in peace talks with some of the groups within the Pakistan Taliban, known by the acronym TTP, and he further revealed that the talks are being held in Afghanistan and if reconciliation is achieved, members of the organisation would be "forgiven".

MORE NEWS

Disappointment in Qatar as no women candidates elected

Women voters voiced disappointment yesterday after none were elected in Qatar's first legislative polls with all eyes on whether the emir will use his powers to appoint 15 lawmakers to boost representation. Thirty men were elected to Qatar's Shura Council at Saturday's polls despite more than two dozen women standing for the body which is seen as a nod to democracy rather than a fully-fledged parliament. As well as counting no women amongst their number, the 30 victorious candidates were older men mostly from prominent families, many of whom had backgrounds in business or government. If as expected by many analysts the emir does directly appoint women to improve the gender balance it would follow what happened in Bahrain's legislative election. Official sources had confirmed to AFP this was a likely outcome in the event no women succeeded at the ballot box in Qatar.



Blast kills at least 2 civilians near Kabul mosque

An explosion outside a mosque in the Afghan capital killed at least two people yesterday, senior Taliban officials said. The blast struck near the entrance of the large Eid Gah Mosque in Kabul, spokesman Zabihullah Mujahid said on Twitter, adding that "a number of civilians" died. A spokesman from the interior ministry, Qari Sayed Khosti, told AFP: "Our initial information shows two civilians were killed and three wounded in the blast." A prayer ceremony for Mujahid's mother, who died last week, was being held at the mosque yesterday afternoon. AFP journalists in two locations in the capital also heard the blast and shooting.

Israel indicts Palestinian jail breakers

Six Palestinian prisoners who made a daring escape from an Israeli prison in September were formally indicted yesterday, Israel's justice ministry said. The men were charged with escaping from the high-security Gilboa prison in northern Israel while five others were accused of assisting them, a statement said. The inmates -- five from the Palestinian Islamic Jihad militant group and one belonging to the armed branch of the Palestinian Authority's Fatah faction -- had been held for attacks against Israel. They escaped by digging a tunnel under a sink using spoons, plates and even the handle of a kettle. The six were recaptured in batches during a major Israeli manhunt in September.

SOURCE: AFP, REUTERS



Supporters of Tunisian President Kais Saied rally in support of his seizure of power and suspension of parliament, in Tunis, Tunisia, yesterday. The president's critics have called the termed those moves as a coup. PHOTO: REUTERS

Algeria recalls French envoy over 'interference'

Bans French military planes from airspace

AFP, Algiers

Algeria has rejected "inadmissible interference" in its affairs, hours after recalling its ambassador from Paris following comments by French President Emmanuel Macron reported by the French and Algerian media.

The statement, from the Algerian presidency, said it had withdrawn its ambassador following media reports of the French leader's comments, which had not been denied.

The French daily Le Monde reported that Macron had made critical remarks about the former French colony during a meeting Thursday with descendants of figures from the war of independence.

Macron reportedly said the country was ruled by a "political-military system" and described Algeria as having an "official history" which had been "totally re-written", the paper reported.

He said this history was "not based on truths" but "on a discourse of hatred towards France", according to Le Monde -- though he made clear that he was not referring to Algerian society as a whole but to the ruling elite.

It is the second time that Algeria has recalled an ambassador from France.

Algiers also recalled its ambassador in May 2020 after French media broadcast a documentary about the Hirak.

Yesterday, the Algerian government banned French military planes from its airspace, the French army said.

France's jets regularly fly over Algerian territory to reach the Sahel region of western Africa, where its soldiers are helping to battle jihadist insurgents as part of its Barkhane operation.

Algeria was also angered last week after France said it would sharply reduce the number of visas it grants to citizens of Algeria, Morocco and Tunisia.



OCTOBER 04

1957 - The Soviet Union became the first nation in space, launching the Sputnik-1 satellite into orbit 500 miles above the Earth.

1958 - The first transoceanic passenger jet service was inaugurated between New York and London by the British Overseas Airways Corporation.

2002 - Nepal's King Gyanendra dismissed prime minister Sher Bahadur Deuba and took over the government.

SOURCE: WEBSITES

TENSIONS ALONG DISPUTED BORDER

India matching Chinese troop build-up: army chief

AFP, New Delhi

India's army chief has said China is sending troops to their disputed border in "considerable numbers", prompting a matching deployment by New Delhi in a development he called a "concern".

Tensions have been high between the nuclear-armed neighbours following a deadly border battle in June last year in the strategically important Galwan river valley in India's Ladakh region, near Tibet.

The world's two most populous nations poured tens of thousands of extra troops into the high-altitude region in the Himalayas after the clash.

General Manoj Mukund Naravane told reporters in Ladakh on Saturday that the Chinese troop presence along the 3,500-kilometre border had increased in "considerable numbers" and it was a "matter of concern".

Naravane said the Indian military was building up its forces along the border in response.

"We have also inducted advanced weaponry. We are strong, quite well-poised to meet any eventuality," the Times of India newspaper quoted him as saying.

India and China have been holding high-level military talks since the June clash and Naravane said another meeting was expected next week.

His comments came days after Chinese foreign ministry spokesperson Hua Chunying accused Indian soldiers of illegally crossing the border into Chinese territory, a charge that New Delhi said had "no basis in facts".

India and China, which fought a full-scale border war in 1962, have long accused each other of trying to take territory along their unofficial border known as the Line of Actual Control.

COALITION TALKS IN GERMANY

Merkel calls for compromise

AFP, Frankfurt

Outgoing German Chancellor Angela Merkel dropped a hint for political leaders to overcome their differences, as talks between the parties to choose her successor got under way yesterday, following last week's election.

Speaking at celebrations in the eastern city of Halle to commemorate German reunification in 1990, Merkel said the country once again had the opportunity to shape its future.

"We can argue over exactly how in the future, but we know that the answer is in our hands, that we have to listen and speak with each other, that we have differences, but above all things in common," Merkel said.

"Be prepared for new encounters, be curious about others, tell your own histories and tolerate differences," Merkel said. "That is the lesson from



31 years of German unity."

In what was billed as perhaps her last major speech as chancellor, Germany's long-serving leader seemed to deliver a message to the politicians haggling to form the next government.

Merkel will leave office after 16 years in power once a new coalition can be formed after the outcome of last week's election in which her coalition partners, the Social Democrats (SPD) came out on top.

The SPD and its candidate Olaf Scholz narrowly won last week's vote on 25.7 percent, with Merkel's CDU-CSU alliance plunging to an all-time low of 24.1 percent under the beleaguered leadership of Armin Laschet.

The two parties begin talks yesterday with the Greens and liberal FDP, with which they need to strike an agreement to grab the top job for themselves.

"We sometimes take our democratic accomplishments too lightly," Merkel said in her speech, asking the public to "reject radicalisation", referring to a neo-Nazi attack on a synagogue in the city where she was speaking two years previous.

"Diversity and difference" were not threats to society, Merkel added, as Germany had shown in the years since the fall of the Berlin Wall.