

PANDORA PAPERS

World leaders scramble to limit damage

AFP, New York

Governments yesterday moved to limit the fallout from a release of millions of documents detailing how leaders have used offshore tax havens to stash assets worth hundreds of millions of dollars.

Some 35 current and former leaders are featured in roughly 11.9 million documents leaked from financial services companies across the world that include reports of luxury homes on the French Riviera, Monte Carlo and California. The documents, known as the "Pandora Papers," were obtained by the International Consortium of Investigative Journalists (ICIJ) and released in stories by media partners including The Washington Post, the BBC and The Guardian. Allegations range from corruption to money laundering and tax avoidance.

Although holding assets offshore or using shell companies is not illegal in most countries, the revelations are embarrassing for leaders who have pushed austerity measures or campaigned against corruption.

Russian leader Vladimir Putin is not named but he is linked via associates to secret assets in Monaco, particularly a waterfront home acquired by a Russian woman reported to have had a child with him. "This is just a set of largely unsubstantiated claims," Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said.

Jordan was also keen to play down the revelations, which exposed how King Abdullah II created a network of offshore companies and tax havens to amass a \$100 million property empire from California to London.

The country's royal court said the properties were funded with the king's personal wealth and were used for official and private visits.



An activist of India's Youth Congress is being detained by police during a demonstration in New Delhi yesterday, a day after clashes involving farmers who were protesting against the agricultural reforms at Lakhimpur in India's Uttar Pradesh state in which at least nine people were killed.

PHOTO: AFP

DEADLY FARMERS CLASH IN INDIA

Tensions run high

Police ban gatherings, cut off mobile internet services in UP protest sites

AFP, New Delhi

Demonstrators torched a police vehicle in India yesterday as tensions boiled over after clashes involving protesting farmers killed at least nine people.

The incident on Sunday in Uttar Pradesh state was the deadliest in more than a year of protests by farmers in northern India against new agricultural reforms.

Farmers said that a convoy belonging to a government minister, his son and the state's deputy chief minister ran over and killed four people at a demonstration.

The minister said later that a driver lost control of his vehicle after being pelted by demonstrators.

Angry protesters set fire to several cars and at least five more people, four of them supporters of the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), were killed.

Yesterday, the protesters kept the bodies of the four dead farmers in glass cases for display around the protest site.

Police banned gatherings, cut off mobile internet services, sent extra forces and detained several opposition figures on their way to the scene including Priyanka Gandhi from the Congress party.

In state capital Lucknow, dozens of police detained local Congress chief Akhilesh Yadav outside his home.

Dozens of opposition supporters staged a protest in the city and set fire to at least one police vehicle, television pictures showed.

Protests organised by opposition parties also took place in New Delhi and Bangalore. Agriculture has long been a political minefield and employs some two-thirds of India's 1.3 billion population.

Prime Minister Narendra Modi's government says the reforms will infuse much-needed energy and capital in the sector.

Farmers, many of whom have camped outside New Delhi for over a year, fear the changes will leave them at the mercy of big corporations.

'A betrayal of democracy'

Whistleblower says Facebook put profit before reining in hate speech

AFP, Washington

The whistleblower who shared a trove of Facebook documents alleging the social media giant knew its products were fueling hate and harming children's mental health revealed her identity Sunday in a televised interview, and accused the company of choosing "profit over safety."

Frances Haugen, a 37-year-old data scientist from Iowa, has worked for companies including Google and Pinterest -- but said in an interview with CBS news show "60 Minutes" that Facebook was "substantially worse" than anything she had seen before.

She called for the company to be regulated. "Facebook over and over again has shown it chooses profit over safety. It is subsidizing, it is paying for its profits with our safety," Haugen said.

"The version of Facebook that exists today is tearing our societies apart and causing ethnic violence around the world," she said.

The world's largest social media



platform has been embroiled in a firestorm brought about by Haugen, who as an unnamed whistleblower shared documents with US lawmakers and The Wall Street Journal that detailed how Facebook knew its products, including Instagram, were harming young girls, especially around body image.

US Senator Richard Blumenthal responded to the interview ahead of Haugen's appearance to testify in Congress next week, saying in a statement: "Facebook's actions make clear that we cannot trust it to police

itself. We must consider stronger oversight."

In the "60 Minutes" interview Haugen explained how the company's News Feed algorithm is optimized for content that gets a reaction.

The company's own research shows that it is "easier to inspire people to anger than it is to other emotions," Haugen said.

"Facebook has realized that if they change the algorithm to be safer, people will spend less time on the site, they'll click on less ads, they'll make less money."

During the 2020 US presidential election, she said, the company realized the danger that such content presented and turned on safety systems to reduce it.

But "as soon as the election was over they turn them back off, or they change the settings back to what they were before, to prioritize growth over safety, and that really feels like a betrayal of democracy to me," she said.

IS cell destroyed after mosque blast in Kabul: Taliban

AFP, Kabul

The Taliban said yesterday they had destroyed an Islamic State cell in the Afghan capital, hours after a suspected IS attack on a mosque killed five people.

After overrunning Kabul seven weeks ago the hardliners have set up an interim Afghan government, but still face attacks from the regional branch of the Islamic State.

The Taliban's chief spokesman Zabihullah Mujahid said fighters carried out the operation in the north of Kabul on Sunday evening.

"As a result of the operation, which was very decisive and successful, the IS centre was completely destroyed and all the IS members in it were killed," Mujahid said on Twitter.

Witnesses and AFP journalists heard blasts and gunfire in the capital at the time of the raid, and images posted to social media showed a large explosion and a fire at the scene.

Kabul resident and government employee Abdul Rahaman told AFP that a "large number" of Taliban special forces attacked at least three houses in his neighbourhood.

"The fighting continued for several hours," he said, adding the sound of weapons kept him awake all night.

"They said they were after Daesh (IS) fighters in the area," Rahaman said.

"I don't know how many were killed or arrested but the fighting was intense."

At the scene yesterday, AFP saw several Taliban gunmen standing guard, denying people access down the road to the property. Police pick-up trucks could be seen driving towards the site, one of which came back laden with household items including furniture, a carpet and kitchen appliances.

The operation took place within hours of a deadly attack targeting a prayer ceremony at the Eid Gah mosque in memory of Taliban spokesman Mujahid's mother, who died last week.

War crimes committed in Libya: UN probe

Report says migrants, detainees particularly exposed to violations

AFP, Geneva

War crimes and crimes against humanity, including the use of child soldiers, have been committed in Libya since 2016, a United Nations investigation revealed yesterday.

The Independent Fact-Finding Mission on Libya, commissioned by the UN Human Rights Council, said migrants and detainees were particularly exposed to violations.

Landmines have killed or maimed many people; Europe-bound migrants face abuse in detention centres and at the hands of traffickers; detainees languishing in horrific conditions in prison are tortured; while prominent women have been killed or have disappeared, the mission's report said.

"There are reasonable grounds to believe that war crimes have been committed in Libya, while violence perpetrated in prisons and against migrants there may amount to crimes against humanity," the mission said in a statement.

The unrest in the north African country has had a dramatic impact on Libyans' economic, social and cultural rights, as borne by attacks on hospitals and schools.

"All parties to the conflicts, including third states, foreign fighters and mercenaries, have violated international humanitarian law, in particular the principles of proportionality and distinction, and some have also committed war crimes," said Mohamed Auajjar, who chaired the three-person mission.

The mission said it had identified individuals and groups -- both Libyan and foreign -- who may bear responsibility for the violations, abuses and crimes.



Children play in floodwaters in a neighbourhood in Ayutthaya, Thailand yesterday, after tropical storm Dianmu caused flooding in 31 provinces across the country.

PHOTO: AFP

MORE NEWS

Ethiopia's Abiy sworn in for new term

Ethiopian Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed was sworn in for a new five-year term yesterday, but the milestone risked being undermined by growing alarm over the war in the north. "I, Abiy Ahmed Ali, today in the House of People's Representatives, accept the appointment as prime minister, as I pledge to undertake responsibly and with faith to the constitution the responsibility placed upon me by the people," he said while being sworn in by Supreme Court Chief Justice Meaza Ashenafi. Abiy's Prosperity Party scored a landslide win in June elections that federal officials touted as the high-water mark of democratic reforms he initiated upon taking office in 2018.

NZ drops 'Covid zero' goal after Delta outbreak

Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern admitted yesterday that New Zealand's widely praised "Covid zero" strategy had failed to halt a stubborn outbreak in Auckland and said a new approach was needed. The hardline elimination policy had largely protected the country from the pandemic, with residents enjoying a near-normal domestic life alongside tight restrictions on international borders. But an August outbreak prompted a seven-week lockdown in its main population centre that has failed to curb infection rates. Ardern said the highly transmissible Delta variant had proved a "game-changer" that could not be eliminated.



Hydrogen needs \$1.2t for zero emissions goal: IEA

Governments must step up investment in low-carbon hydrogen to unlock its potential and help the world achieve net zero emissions, with \$1.2 trillion needed by 2030, the International Energy Agency said yesterday. Governments with hydrogen strategies have committed \$37 billion so far, while the private sector has announced \$300 billion, said the IEA, which advises developed countries on energy policies. Only three countries -- France, Japan and South Korea -- had hydrogen strategies in 2019, but 17 do now and 20 others are working on one, the IEA said in its Global Hydrogen Review for 2021. There are pilot projects to produce steel and chemicals with low-carbon hydrogen, the report noted.

SOURCE: AFP, REUTERS

Quote of the day



"We are disappointed that the Myanmar authorities have not cooperated with the Special Envoy of the Asean on Myanmar. Unless there is progress, it would be difficult to have the Chairman of the SAC at the Asean Summit."

SAIFUDDIN ABDULLAH
MALAYSIAN FM

Myanmar's Suu Kyi tired

Seeks less court time over 'strained health'

REUTERS

Myanmar's detained former leader Aung San Suu Kyi yesterday asked a judge to reduce the frequency of her court hearings due to strained health, her lawyer said, but assured the public there was no concern about her condition.

Suu Kyi, who is on trial and attending court sessions in multiple cases since her overthrow in a February 1 coup, requested hearings in each case be handled every two weeks, not every week, chief lawyer Khin Maung Zaw told media.

Asked by Reuters about the status of her health, he said Suu Kyi, 76, was suffering from tiredness from her busy schedule and there was no indication of illness.

"She is tired. At her age, it is not convenient to sit for hearings every day of the whole week," Khin Maung Zaw said by phone.

"She doesn't have any disease nor specified sickness. It is not a concerning situation. She is just tired."

The health of the Nobel laureate is closely watched in Myanmar, where she spent many years in detention for challenging its military rulers. She is charged with a litany of offences, including

breaking coronavirus protocols, illegally importing and possessing two-way radios, incitement to cause public alarm and violating the Official Secrets Act.

The cases are being handled by courts in several cities and her allies fear the multiple legal cases, which they dismiss as nonsense, could tie her up in proceedings for years.

Suu Kyi has also been accused in court by a former politician of accepting big bribes and gold bars, allegations she yesterday told the court were "all absurd", according to her lawyer.

Suu Kyi last month was unable to appear for one session in court, complaining of feeling dizzy and unwell, which her legal team dismissed as motion sickness.

Meanwhile, Malaysia's foreign minister yesterday expressed disappointment at Myanmar's failure to cooperate with an Asean envoy, warning that the country's junta chief could be excluded from an upcoming summit of the bloc, reports AFP.

The Association of Southeast Asian Nations (Asean) has been under pressure to address a February coup in Myanmar and subsequent crackdown on dissent that has killed more than 1,100 people.

EASTER SUNDAY BOMBINGS

Sri Lanka indicts IS 'mastermind'

AFP, Colombo

Sri Lankan prosecutors yesterday indicted the alleged mastermind of the 2019 Easter Sunday suicide bombings along with 24 men they say were co-conspirators in the island's worst single terror attack.

Almost three hundred people including dozens of foreign nationals were killed in the April 21 attacks on three churches and three luxury hotels, in a wave of killings targeting Sri Lanka's Christian community.

Prosecutors have brought over 20,000 charges against the suspects, three of whom have already been accused of terrorism by the US Justice Department.

The suspects are in police custody, but one of them did not appear in court yesterday as he was suffering from Covid-19, officials said, adding that hearings will begin on November 23.

Prosecutors told the court that US and Australian forensic experts assisted investigators in tracking down the backers of the eight-member suicide squad responsible for the attacks.

Sri Lanka authorities have accused their ringleader, Mohamed Naufar, of being the mastermind of the deadly suicide bombings and of being a member of the Islamic State group.