

## International

# British police warning to media over leaked memos stirs anger

## UK counter-terrorism police hunting leaker

LONDON: Senior British politicians, including one of the contenders to be the next prime minister, joined journalists yesterday in criticizing police for warning media not to publish leaked government documents, saying it was a "dangerous road to tread". Last week, a Sunday newspaper published leaked memos from Britain's Washington ambassador that provoked a serious diplomatic spat with US President Donald Trump and ultimately led to the envoy announcing his resignation.

Britain's most senior counter-terrorism officer, Neil Basu, said on Friday police would investigate who was responsible but also warned journalists and publishers they too could be in breach of the law if further documents were leaked. "I would advise all owners, editors and publishers of social and mainstream media not to publish leaked government documents that may already be in their possession, or which may be offered to them, and to turn them over to the police or give them back to their rightful owner, Her Majesty's Government," Basu said. His comments provoked anger and criticism from journalists, editors and politicians who said it risked infringing the freedom of the press.

"The state threatening media freedom is a dangerous road to tread," Health Minister Matt Hancock said on Twitter. George Osborne, editor of the London Evening Standard and a former finance minister, described the remarks as a "very stupid and ill-advised statement from a junior officer who doesn't appear to understand much about press freedom". His view was echoed by both men battling to replace Theresa May as prime minister when she steps down on July 24 because she failed to deliver Britain's exit from the European Union.

### 'That is their job'

Foreign Secretary Jeremy Hunt and his predecessor Boris Johnson said the leaker should be found but the press should not be targeted. "It cannot be conceivably right that newspapers or any other media organization publishing such material should face prosecution," Johnson, also a former mayor of London, told an event in central England.

Hunt wrote on Twitter: "I defend to the hilt the right of the press to publish those leaks if they receive them & judge them to be in the public interest: that is their job." The Mail on

Sunday newspaper last week published cables from Kim Darroch, Britain's ambassador to the United States, in which he called the Trump administration "inept", prompting the president to label him "very stupid" and "wacky".

The spat has become one of the central issues of the contest for the leadership of the governing Conservative Party and the next prime minister that will be decided by about 160,000 members of the Conservative Party. A diplomatic source told Reuters that the lack of backing from the frontrunner, Boris Johnson, had been a factor in Darroch's decision to resign. Johnson himself acknowledged his comments had been partly responsible but denied he was to blame.

Not all politicians, though, felt the police were wrong. Security minister Ben Wallace said members of the public were bound by parts of the Official Secrets Act. "If (journalists) are receiving stolen material they should give it back to their rightful owner and they should also be aware of the huge damage that's already been done and the potentially even greater damage that could be done," former defence minister Michael Fallon told BBC radio. — Reuters



WASHINGTON: The British Embassy is seen in Washington, DC, following the resignation of British Ambassador to the US Kim Darroch, after US President Donald Trump said he would no longer deal with him after he called Trump 'inept.' — AFP

## French minister mired in lobster dinners scandal

PARIS: A senior French cabinet minister has defiantly vowed to stay in his job despite fresh claims he used the public purse to fund an extravagant lifestyle including lobster feasts. Environment Minister Francois de Rugy has endured a torrid week after the Mediapart investigative website said he hosted lavish dinners — allegedly for friends — while serving as parliament speaker. Piling on the pressure, Mediapart published a new report saying that Rugy rented a council flat with subsidized rent in western France, even though his salary was "far higher" than the maximum allowed for such aid.

But Rugy, who also holds the portfolio of minister of state which makes him the government number two after Prime Minister Edouard Philippe — insisted he was not shifting, even if he had considered that option. "Of course, you feel like giving up" when "you're attacked morning, noon and night," he said, close to tears in an interview on French TV channel BFM. But he added: "I won't do that because I'm very angry when I read an article which claims I live in a council house."

"I have absolutely no reason to resign. That is what I have told the prime minister who has absolutely not called on me to do so," insisted Rugy, who had a two-hour meeting Thursday with Philippe. The revelations come as the centrist government of President Emmanuel Macron looks to recover from six months of anti-government protests sparked by economic inequality and claims that French leaders are out of touch with ordinary people.

### 'Shellfish allergy'

Mediapart said that the dinners hosted by Rugy included luxuries like lobster, champagne and vintage wines from parliament's cellar. Most damagingly, it alleged that the dinners had little connection to his function and were essentially social gatherings hosted by his wife, a journalist with the people magazine Gala, and funded by the taxpayer. On a visit Thursday to the central town of Deux-Sevres, the minister was met by a giant inflatable lobster and protesters brandishing slogans like "were the lobsters organic?"

Rugy has not denied the existence of the dinners. Mediapart listed a dozen between October 2017 and June 2018 — but insisted they were linked to his work, defending the gatherings as "informal working dinners". He told BFM he has "never paid more than 30 euros for a bottle of wine", doesn't eat lobster because of a "shellfish allergy", and avoids champagne, which "gives him a headache". In another blow, French daily Le Parisien reported Friday that Rugy's wife used public money to buy herself a golden hairdryer worth 499 euros (\$561). He said the claim was a "lie". Rugy suggested someone had an axe to grind against his wife, slating Mediapart for indulging a "fantasy of lopping off heads" in seeking to portray her as a kind of "Marie-Antoinette." Whoever that person was, he said, was looking to "settle scores".

Rugy said he was the victim of "a machine launched to attack me" but pledged to "pay back every euro disputed". He also did not deny renting the apartment near Nantes in western France, but insisted his landlord and letting agency never told him it was social housing. "Never in my life have I applied for a council flat," he said. Philippe's office said Thursday it had asked for an enquiry into a separate Mediapart report into 63,000 euros (71,000 dollars) worth of renovations in Rugy's townhouse in Paris' chic seventh district. — AFP



NIORT: French Environment Minister Francois de Rugy visits a farm operation as part of his trip to Niort on the theme of water management. — AFP

## \$5 billion US fine set for Facebook on privacy probe

WASHINGTON: US regulators have approved a \$5 billion penalty to be levied on Facebook to settle a probe into the social network's privacy and data protection lapses, the Wall Street Journal reported Friday. The newspaper said the Federal Trade Commission approved the settlement in a 3-2 vote, with the two Democratic members of the consumer protection agency dissenting.

According to the report, the deal, which would be the largest penalty ever imposed by the FTC for privacy violations, still needs approval from the Justice Department before it is finalized. Although details have not yet been released, the deal will likely include restrictions on how Facebook is able to use personal data. Charlotte Slaiman of the consumer group Public Knowledge thinks it is unlikely the restrictions will be overly harsh.

"We don't yet know key aspects of the settlement: whether Facebook must make any changes to its business model or practices as a result," said Charlotte Slaiman, the

group's Competition Policy Counsel. "By itself, this fine will not be sufficient to change Facebook's behavior." The outlook was more optimistic at the Center for Democracy and Technology, whose president Nuala O'Connor said the fine underscored the importance of "data stewardship" in the digital age. "The FTC has put all companies on notice that they must safeguard personal information," O'Connor said. Facebook did not immediately respond to an AFP query on the agreement.

### Unlikely to hurt

The FTC announced last year it reopened its investigation into a 2011 privacy settlement with Facebook after revelations that personal data on tens of millions of users was hijacked by the political consultancy Cambridge Analytica, which was working on the Donald Trump campaign in 2016. Facebook has also faced questions about whether it improperly shared user data with business partners in violation of the earlier settlement.

The leading social network with more than two billion users worldwide has also been facing inquiries on privacy from authorities in US states and regulators around the world. The settlement would be in line with Facebook's estimate earlier this year when it said it expected to pay \$3 billion to \$5 billion for legal settlements on "user data practices." The fine is unlikely to hurt Facebook, which logged a profit of \$2.4 billion on revenue that climbed 26

percent to \$15.1 billion in the first three months of this year. Facebook's stock value increased 1.8 percent after the fine was announced, closing at nearly \$205, the highest it has been all year.

### Break up Facebook

Some Facebook critics have argued the company should face tougher sanctions including monitoring of its data practices, or that chief executive Mark Zuckerberg should be personally liable for penalties. Faced with criticism, Facebook's head of global affairs, Nick Clegg, called on governments to do more to regulate social networks, instead of leaving the work to companies. "It's not for private companies, however big or small, to come up with those rules. It is for democratic politicians in the democratic world to do so," Clegg said in a June 24 interview with the BBC.

But there are increasing calls to dismantle the massive social network. In May, one of Facebook's co-founders called for the social media behemoth to be broken up, warning that Zuckerberg had become far too powerful. "It's time to break up Facebook," said Chris Hughes in an editorial for The New York Times, saying it had become necessary to separate the social network from Facebook's Instagram and WhatsApp services. Zuckerberg's "focus on growth led him to sacrifice security and civility for clicks," said Hughes. — AFP



PORT-AU-PRINCE: A woman carries clean water in a bucket in her neighborhood of Port-au-Prince. — AFP

## Raped and widowed: Haiti's slum women abandoned to gangs

PORT-AU-PRINCE: As the first bursts of gunfire rang out, the women from La Saline slum grabbed their kids and fled for cover. Shootings are common here, but this time, there was no outrunning the full-on battle between five rival gangs in the heart of the Haitian capital. The turf war that broke out last November lasted 14 hours and ended with more than two dozen people dead, women and girls gang-raped and scores of dwellings razed to the ground.

There is not much left of Lovely Saint-Pierre's home, aside from some slabs of concrete and two sheets of rusty metal which provide scant protection from the blazing sun as she recounts the nightmare that began eight months ago. "When the shooting started, my husband stayed behind," the 32-year-old said matter of factly. "We just have walls made of sheet metal. The bullet went straight through and killed him." Around 5,000 people live in La Saline, which has long been plagued by turf wars between gangs battling for control of one of the largest marketplaces in Port-au-Prince.

A United Nations report on the November violence said at least 26 people were killed and 12 reported missing. Haitian human rights groups put the death toll at 71. The horror of the slum's denizens was magnified when the gangs decided to follow up on the gun battle by setting fire to their meager dwellings. "They occupied our neighborhood for three days. I don't know why and I have no idea why they decided to burn everything," said Valioa Jean-Charles, 42.

"We called the fire department but when they showed up the gangs opened fire on them, so all our houses burned down," she said. Her husband dead, her

tiny shop a smoking ruin. Lovely Saint-Pierre found herself destitute. "I left my three older kids with my sister. I can't live with her myself, she has a husband and I am older than her," she said, trying to explain her plight. Instead, she has spent the past eight months sleeping in a nearby market.

### No help for rape victims

Among the survivors of the massacre are 11 girls and women who were gang-raped, some in front of their own young children, human rights groups said. They have received no medical support or psychological counseling. La Saline and other slum districts in the heart of the capital are regularly subjected to gang shoot-outs. The underfunded police do nothing, even though bursts of automatic gunfire erupt less than a kilometer from the presidential palace.

The residents of these poor areas are increasingly left to fend for themselves as fellow countrymen ignore their plight. "Some people simply refuse to consider these people, who are from a lower social class, as citizens. Since it's a reality that doesn't affect them directly, they don't worry about it," said Evelynne Trouillot, a writer and member of the Gathering for a Dignified Haiti movement.

The inhabitants of La Saline push back against stereotypes held by many who are better off than they are all somehow affiliated with violent gangs. "I've nothing to do with these gangs, neither me nor my son," said Josette Magloire who lost her 24-year-old son in the massacre. "When I think about what I've lost, I feel so bad." "They have destroyed my life," she said. — AFP

## For Palestinian family, tunnel under Israel barrier leads home

AL WALAJAH: On one side of the Israeli separation barrier sits the Hajajla family's home. The Palestinians' house is cut off from the rest of their village that lies on the other side, with only a tunnel connecting the two. Endless trouble has followed, they say. Their situation made the news again when Israeli authorities locked the gate leading to the tunnel linking their home to their village of Al-Walajah in the occupied West Bank.

For more than a week, 10-year-old Mohammed Hajajla had to walk six kilometers in the blazing sun as part of his route to school due to the closure, the family says. Israeli authorities say the closure was because the family was suspected of allowing illegal crossings into Jerusalem from the West Bank through the Israeli-built tunnel.

The family denies it and says it is another example of harassment from Israeli authorities they have faced over the years. "I already refused to bend. I will not be discouraged," said the father of the family, Omar Hajajla. The brick house sits on a hill, across the valley from the Israeli settlement of Gilo on the outskirts of Jerusalem. Their problems date back to 2010, when construction of Israel's separation barrier cutting off the West Bank reached their area.

### Doorbell dispute

Israel began constructing the barrier in 2002, during the bloody second Palestinian intifada. For Israel, the barrier is for security reasons. Palestinians see it as an "apartheid wall", a potent symbol of the Israeli occupation. Israeli authorities gave the family a choice: leave or see their home cut off by a fence. Other village land was also isolated by the barrier's construction.

Omar Hajajla says they offered him large amounts of money to move, but he refused and took the case to court. In 2016, an

agreement was reached with Israeli authorities on strict conditions for his family's use of the tunnel, whose gate can be opened by remote. Hajajla said he later installed an electric doorbell at the other side of the tunnel to make it easier for family members to come and go, especially since his children don't have mobile phones. But an Israeli police officer spotted it in May.

"They said to me, 'This bell is in the (Israeli military's) security zone,'" the 53-year-old said. Hajajla said he was taken for questioning for four hours and the gate was padlocked. For eight days, the family was only able to get out by a clandestine side exit, he said. Mohammed and his brother's route to school included walking six kilometers. "We left very early in the morning and came back late," said Mohammed. The family threatened to take the case to court again and the lock was eventually removed, the family says.

But later Omar lost his Israeli-granted permit to cross a checkpoint into Israel and Jerusalem, where he works. "Each time they invent a new excuse to force us to leave the house," he said. Israel's military referred questions on the issue to police, who did not respond to requests for comment from AFP. In a statement to Israeli newspaper Haaretz, police said Omar Hajajla "is suspected of taking advantage of the gate to improperly bring Palestinians through it and was therefore taken in for questioning." "All investigations that involve suspicion of security-related crimes of Palestinians result in the revocation of entry permits into Israeli territory until the suspicions can be clarified and/or an indictment filed." Palestinians say the family's situation is another example of the troubles posed by Israel's separation barrier. — AFP



AL WALAJAH: Palestinian Omar Hajajla poses next to the tunnel connecting his home in Jerusalem to Al-Walajah, his village in the occupied West Bank. — AFP