

International

US businesswoman refuses to answer questions about intimacy with UK PM

Arcuri: I never asked for help or favors from Johnson

LONDON: US businesswoman Jennifer Arcuri repeatedly refused to answer questions yesterday about whether she had an intimate relationship with British Prime Minister Boris Johnson when he was mayor of London. The Sunday Times has reported that when Johnson was mayor he failed to declare close personal links to Arcuri, who received thousands of pounds in public business funding and places on official trade trips.

Speaking to ITV, Arcuri said she had bonded with Johnson, who was mayor of the British capital from 2008-2016, over classical literature, that they discussed French philosopher Voltaire and shared a love of William Shakespeare. But asked repeatedly whether she had an affair with Johnson or intimate relations with him, she either sidestepped the question or openly refused to answer. "I really am not going to answer that question," Arcuri told ITV. "It's really categorically no one's business what private life we had or didn't have."

"And categorically more important, Boris never ever gave me favoritism, never once

did I ask him for a favor, never once did he write a letter of recommendation for me." Asked about the allegations, Johnson has said everything was done with full propriety and that there was no interest to declare. When asked for comment yesterday, he said: "I have really said everything I want to say about that." The Greater London Authority (GLA) said last month it had referred Johnson to Britain's police watchdog for potential investigation over allegations of misconduct involving Arcuri.

The GLA said the allegations were that Johnson had a friendship with Arcuri and as a result of that friendship allowed her to participate in trade missions and receive sponsorship. The crime of misconduct in public office carries a maximum sentence of life imprisonment. The second most powerful man in the opposition Labor Party, John McDonnell, said Johnson had a duty to declare his friendship with Arcuri. "Regardless of the exact nature of his relationship with Arcuri, it is clear that she and Boris Johnson were close," McDonnell said. "The prime minister is unfit for office."

Arcuri told ITV that after they first bonded over literature and discussed venture capital for the technology sector, she and Johnson began sending text messages and then he would visit her office at her apartment in London, sometimes on his way home. In her phone, she entered Johnson-whose first name is Alexander-as "Alex the Great". "There was plenty of office space for him to come visit," Arcuri said. He visited around five or perhaps 10 times, she said. "I didn't think it was awkward at all."

She quipped that she once offered Johnson the chance to have a go on her dancing pole but he refused. "He sat down with his tea and started muttering," she said. When asked again about the nature of their relationship she said: "Because the press have made me this objectified ex-model pole dancer model, I really am not going to answer that question." Asked if she loved him, she said: "I care about him deeply as a friend and do we share a very close bond. But I wish him well, I want him to be happy." — Reuters



WATFORD: Britain's Prime Minister Boris Johnson speaks to mental health professionals during his visit to Watford General hospital in Watford, north of London yesterday. — AFP

EU hopes for new UK move as Brexit clock runs out

BRUSSELS: European officials warned yesterday that Britain's latest Brexit deal proposal doesn't go far enough to allow a breakthrough before next week's Brussels summit. Prime Minister Boris Johnson has insisted he will not ask for another delay to Britain's planned October 31 departure from the European Union. But he may be forced to do so by a British law passed to prevent a chaotic no-deal divorce, with European negotiators warning time is running out for talks.

Johnson's envoy, senior diplomat David Frost, was in Brussels yesterday for more "technical talks", and Brexit minister Stephen Barclay travelled to the Hague to meet Dutch officials. But both heard that the latest British plans to impose alternative customs arrangements on Northern Ireland, to be reviewed every four years by the provincial assembly, is unlikely to convince. "I think we all agree we need a workable solution now and not something based on untried and revocable arrangements that would be left to negotiation during the transition period," EU spokeswoman Mina Andreeva said.

"As we have also recalled, the UK proposals presented last week do not meet at present the objectives of the protocol on Ireland and Northern Ireland," she said, referring to negotiating terms agreed in 2017. "This is also the shared view of European Parliament, but also all member states," she added. Meanwhile, after a "frank and honest" discussion with Barclay, Dutch foreign minister Stef Blok said "more realism and clarity" would be needed if this



LONDON: An arrangement of newspapers photographed as an illustration in London shows a full-page advertisement taken out by the UK Government in several daily newspapers as part of its public information campaign to get the public and business owners ready for Brexit. — AFP

week's talks are to go much further. And, in an interview with Le Monde, chief EU negotiator Michel Barnier warned that if London "does not come back with new proposals on the two serious problems we have indicated to them, I cannot see how we can move forward". Despite the divisions, Frost is still meeting with EU officials for technical talks, but doubts remain that a workable Brexit deal text will be available by Friday. If it is not, European officials warn, there will be no time to get member states to sign off on it before October 17 and 18, the last scheduled European summit before Brexit day.

Britain insists its offer represents significant concessions and now the EU must show similar flexibility, but Brussels is adamant it will not agree to any plan that undermines its single market or leaves Ireland exposed. In London, a Number 10 spokesman said: "We are ready to

talk with the EU at a pace to secure a deal so that we can move on and build a new partnership between the UK and the EU. "But if this is to be possible the EU must match the compromises that the UK has made," he warned.

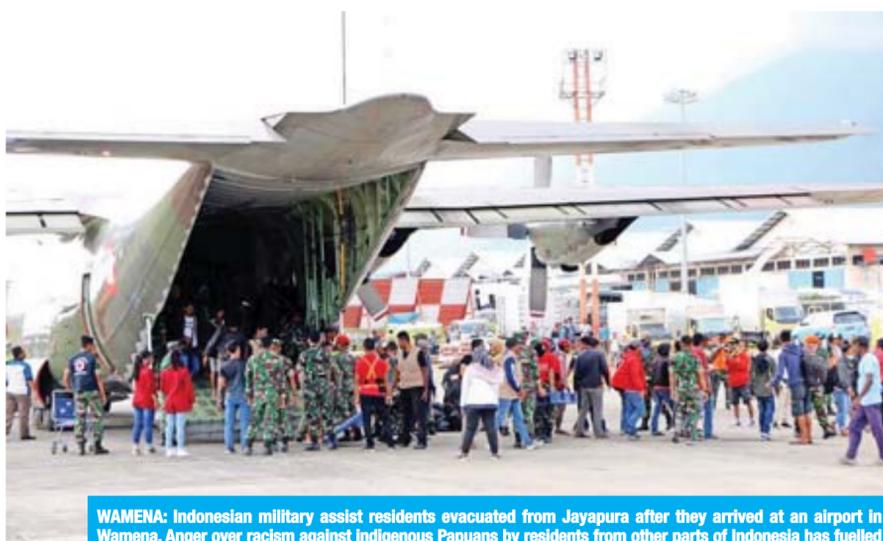
'Landing zone'

On Sunday, Barclay suggested London could be willing to soften its position on Northern Ireland, describing last week's suggestion as "a broad landing zone" rather than a final take-it-or-leave-it offer. But, during telephone talks with Johnson on Sunday, French President Emmanuel Macron made it clear that the EU would decide by the end of this week whether a deal is possible.

The British proposals submitted to Brussels last week centre on how to manage the post-Brexit border between Northern Ireland and Ireland. Johnson wants Northern Ireland's devolved assembly - which has been suspended for almost three years - to vote every four years on whether to maintain EU rather than British regulations there.

He has also proposed the province leaves the EU's customs union along with the rest of the UK, with checks on trade to rely on untried technology and to be carried out away from the sensitive border. Brussels has said these plans are not a basis for an agreement. Talks continued as a judge at Scotland's highest civil court, the Court of Session, was expected to rule on whether Johnson can be forced to send a letter to Brussels requesting an extension if no deal can be reached by October 19.

Anti-Brexit campaigners have brought the case amid speculation that Johnson will try to find a loophole in legislation requiring him to do so, including by asking another EU member state to veto a demand for more time. The government has said in documents submitted to the court that Johnson will abide by the law but he has also said he will take Britain out of the EU by October 31 come what may. — AFP



WAMENA: Indonesian military assist residents evacuated from Jayapura after they arrived at an airport in Wamena. Anger over racism against indigenous Papuans by residents from other parts of Indonesia has fuelled weeks of angry protests in the impoverished region. — AFP

Over 16,000 flee unrest in Papua

JAKARTA: More than 16,000 scared residents have fled an unrest-hit city in Indonesia's Papua region, the military said yesterday, as one of the deadliest eruptions of violence in years sparked calls for an independent probe. Several dozen people were killed when violence broke out in Wamena city last month, with some victims burned alive when buildings were ablaze, and others stabbed in the chaos, according to authorities.

Since mid-August, Papua has been hit by waves of mass protests and violence fuelled by racism against indigenous Papuans by Indonesians from other parts of the archipelago, as well as calls for self-rule in the impoverished region. The majority of Papuans are Christian and ethnic Melanesian with few cultural ties to the rest of Muslim-majority Indonesia.

Yesterday, the air force said about 11,400 people - mostly migrants - had been evacuated aboard military aircraft. Several thousand more have left aboard commercial aircraft since late September, it added. Also yesterday, Human Rights Watch called for a probe into 33 deaths during the Wamena riots to be led by the Southeast Asian country's National Commission on Human Rights.

Sparked by racist comments

"The Indonesian government should also immediately allow the United Nations human rights office unfettered access to (Papua) to investigate the situation," the rights group said in a statement. The violence in Wamena was reportedly sparked by racist comments made by a local teacher towards students, but police have disputed that account. Since then, thousands of residents - both Papuans and non-Papuans - have been evacuated, as news of looming violence circulates on social media. However, there were signs that Wamena was returning to normal with many shops and schools reopened - although most students have stayed home - while government offices have also been operating since last week, according to an AFP reporter. In August, protests broke out across Papua and in other parts of the country after the arrest, racial abuse and tear-gassing of dozens of Papuan students, in the city of Surabaya.

Migrants have become an influential minority in Papua, moving there from other parts of the country in pursuit of opportunities in the mineral-rich region - home to the world's biggest gold mine. A low-level separatist insurgency has simmered for decades in the former Dutch colony - which shares New Guinea island with the independent nation of Papua New Guinea - after Jakarta took over in the 1960s. A UN-sponsored vote to stay within the archipelago in 1969 was widely viewed as rigged, and Jakarta has long refused to consider another referendum. — AFP

Cameroon's Biya seeks to douse crises with surprise concessions

YAOUNDE: Cameroonian ruler Paul Biya's surprise decision to free hundreds of detained opponents after a stinging crackdown on separatists is seen by some experts as a way to ease tensions but short of a major policy shift. Main opposition leader Maurice Kamto walked free from jail Saturday after a military court ordered his release at the behest of Biya, who has firmly ruled the west African country for nearly 37 years.

The conciliatory gesture comes as the president faces a number of domestic crises, including a two-year secession drive by anglophone separatists which has claimed some 3,000 lives, and international criticism over political freedoms. He also ordered talks last week on the crisis in the Francophone country's two English-speaking regions which ended with a proposal to give them more autonomy. The announcements "surprised everybody", said political analyst Stephane Akoa, adding: "Why now... when for three years Mr Biya has been toying a hard line?" Even up until August, the government cracked the whip, sentencing separatist leader Julius Ayuk Tabe to life in a high security prison in the capital Yaounde.

But on September 10, the government announced a five-day "national dialogue" aimed at ending the anglophone crisis. Held last week, it was shunned by the majority of separatist leaders but ended with a proposal for more autonomy for the two regions - home to most of the country's anglophones, who account for about a fifth of the country's 24 million population that is overwhelmingly French-speaking. "In terms of public relations, the dialogue was a success for the government which gave the impression of completely changing its strategy," said Akoa.

"However, it's not clear if it's going to settle many things. It's hardly likely that these measures will reassure those who have taken up arms against Yaounde." The anglophones complain of discrimination and marginalization, especially in education, the judiciary and economic opportunities. "This doesn't correspond to the expectations of the majority of anglophones who want federalism at the least," said Cindy Morillas from the French research centre Les Afriques dans le monde (Africa In the World).

International pressure

Morillas said that Biya reacted to international pressure "as well as from domestic civil society and he just had to move." Since the start of the year, the US, European Union and even France had been pressuring Biya to assume a softer approach in dealing with separatists and calling for Kamto's release. Kamto, 65, was arrested in late January after months of peaceful opposition protests over the results of an October 2018 presidential election in which he came in second.

More than 100 people in detention are also now set for release "if they have not been detained for anything else", the military court said. The move drew immediate applause. UN Secretary General Antonio Guterres said in a statement that he "encourages the Cameroonian authorities to continue to adopt further confidence-building and reconciliation measures". The United States called it a constructive step towards easing political tensions, while Amnesty International hailed it as "a welcome step towards ending the long repression of dissenting voices in Cameroon".

But the organization also called on authorities to "go further by releasing all other individuals arbitrarily detained for having exercised their right to freedom of expression and peaceful assembly". Morillas said the measures were slightly "grandiloquent" but underscored that they "were a small step forward." Cameroonian newspapers were divided on Monday on what it spelt for the future. The pro-government Cameroon Insider daily spoke of "The entire Nation in Peace Mode" while the Mutations newspaper tempered the titled with the question "Resolutions... and then?" — AFP

Fake news triggers panic among quake victims in Indonesia

JAKARTA: Thousands of Indonesians are still in shelters nearly two weeks after a deadly earthquake sparked a stream of fake news and hoaxes warning that an even bigger disaster was looming, the government said yesterday. The local government has declared a state of emergency until tomorrow, with nearly 135,000 people in evacuation shelters and tents.

Many displaced people are too scared to return to their homes in the remote Maluku islands after the area suffered more than 1,000 aftershocks following a 6.5-magnitude quake on September 26 that killed dozens and damaged scores of homes and other buildings, the agency said. Terrified residents ran into the streets following the quake, which sparked landslides that buried at least one of the victims.

The strong jolt killed 37 people, including several young children, and injured dozens of others. More than 6,000 houses were damaged, according to official figures. Fears about aftershocks have been aggravated by a stream of hoaxes and fake news - mostly on WhatsApp and other messaging services - that warned a tsunami-generating quake was about to strike. "It's up to you if you want to believe me or not, but I talked with my relative and apparently Ambon is going to sink in the next few days," said one message circulated on WhatsApp.

National disaster mitigation agency spokesman Agus Wibowo said the fake news was making a bad situation worse. "There are so many hoaxes about a bigger earthquake and tsunami," he said. "People are scared and so they chose to stay in shelters," Wibowo added. Even some whose houses weren't damaged in the quake have refused to go home despite efforts to convince them it was safe, Wibowo said. "Many people also thought they're not allowed to go back during the state of emergency, which is actually false," he added.

The Southeast Asian nation is one of the most disaster-prone nations on Earth. It experiences frequent seismic and volcanic activity due to its position on the Pacific "Ring of Fire", where tectonic plates collide. Last year, a 7.5-magnitude quake and a subsequent tsunami in Palu on Sulawesi island left more than 4,300 people dead or missing. In 2004, a devastating 9.1-magnitude earthquake struck off the coast of Sumatra and triggered a tsunami that killed 220,000 throughout the region, including around 170,000 in Indonesia. — AFP