

Analysis

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Firms in Cuba run afoul of US banking squeeze

The bank used by a Swiss NGO operating in Cuba has refused to handle any more transfers to Havana over fears of US sanctions, a concern replicated across the international financial system when dealing with the communist-run island. "We don't know what to do," said Luisa Sanchez, coordinator of MediCuba, an NGO operating in Cuba since 1992 providing HIV, cancer and pediatric assistance. "On August 27, our bank called our accountant to inform him that from September 1, there would be no more transfers to Cuba," Sanchez told AFP in Havana.

The bank, PostFinance, was one of the last Swiss banks to accept such transactions. Contacted by AFP, the Swiss Post subsidiary confirmed it was cutting banking links to Cuba "due to the United States sanctions". "PostFinance isn't subject to US law, but it participates in global payment transactions and therefore depends on a network of correspondent banks and access to dollar operations," it said.

MediCuba is not alone. Some companies left to find other means of paying employees and rent say they are looking urgently for another bank - often private institutions that charge high commissions. Some are using Western Union money transfers while the more desperate have taken to asking travelers to bring cash into the country for them.

Excessive caution

"The banks are going into a phase of over-compliance and this affects everyone," claimed a European tourism entrepreneur, who said his bank gave him a 60-day notice to close his account. The businessman said any transfer from a foreign client, which includes the word "Cuba" in the title, is enough to set off alarm bells at international banks.

For Cuba, which depends on foreign investment to boost growth, the banking crunch is bad news. The government estimates that restrictions it faced with 140 banks during the past year has cost the country nearly three quarters of a billion dollars. Nervousness on the banks' part is nothing new in Havana. The United States has been enforcing a trade embargo on Cuba since 1962 that prohibits the communist-run island from making dollar transactions.

The US has long set a precedent of aggressively going after banks that seek to defy sanctions. Italy's UniCredit paid a \$1.3 billion fine in April for moving millions of dollars through the US banking system on behalf of Cuba, Iran and Libya. In 2014, French bank BNP Paribas agreed to pay a record \$8.9 billion penalty for conspiring to violate sanctions that prohibit transactions with Sudan and other countries.

Since the arrival of Donald Trump in the White House, Washington has toughened sanctions against Cuba, accusing it of aiding and abetting President Nicolas Maduro's government in Venezuela. French bank Societe Generale is facing a suit in Miami under the recently revived Helms Burton law for profiting from property seized by Havana in the wake of the 1959 revolution. The plaintiffs are the heirs to a Cuban bank that is now part of the National Bank of Cuba, with which the French bank conducted business.

Essential dollar

"Ninety-nine percent of banks have American interests," said Dominique Hector, a French lawyer who advises foreign companies in Cuba and Panama. Companies are vulnerable even if they don't officially have a presence on the island, she says. "In the banking system, there is always a step controlled by the United States," through the use of the dollar, the currency of reference. "I have several clients whose accounts have been closed," while others "could never receive their payments because their French bank refused to process them," said Hector.

Panama's Multibank also shut down numerous foreign accounts related to Cuba this year. At the UN General Assembly last week, Cuba's Foreign Minister Bruno Rodriguez slammed the US over increased hostility against Havana, particularly for imposing additional obstacles to foreign trade and banking and financial restrictions. But there seems little that Cuba or the banks can do to counter the problem. — AFP

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A military cadet watches rifles at the opening of the exhibition entitled "Kalashnikov, a soldier, a designer, a legend" dedicated to the 100th anniversary of the birth of Mikhail Kalashnikov, the Russian inventor of the AK-47 assault rifle, at the Victory Museum in Moscow on Sept 24, 2019. — AFP

Russians mark 100th birthday of Kalashnikov

Dozens of cadets and youngsters from Russia's Youth Army have been getting up close and personal with perhaps the world's most iconic firearm as their country prepares to mark the centenary of the birth of Mikhail Kalashnikov, maker of the legendary rifle. At Victory Museum in western Moscow, visitors including the young cadets are invited to assemble Kalashnikovs and pose for selfies at the exhibition dedicated to the famous automatic weapon.

Russia will next month celebrate the life of Kalashnikov, designer of the AK-47, with a number of events, including the museum display and a biopic. Kalashnikov, who died in 2013 at the age of 94, is seen in Russia as a national hero and symbol of the country's proud military past. His AK-47 has become a weapon of choice for both guerrillas and governments the world over. It is also a staple of early military education in Russia.

Maxim, a young cadet, said he learned to put together and take apart an AK rifle at school. "At first your fingers hurt, but then it's quite easy," he told AFP. The exhibition was put together by the Kalashnikov museum in Izhevsk, an industrial town in the Ural mountains, where the inventor worked at the Izhmash weapons factory until his retirement. Alexander Yermakov, the museum's deputy director, said he hoped the inventor's story would inspire "the next generation of Kalashnikovs".

Kalashnikov was showered with every possible major prize in the Soviet Union, and the Kremlin in 2009 gave him the highest honor - Hero of Russia. In 2017, authorities

unveiled a monument to Kalashnikov holding his weapon in central Moscow. Born in a Siberian village on November 10, 1919, Kalashnikov had a tragic childhood during which his father was deported as a "kulak" (prosperous peasant) in 1930. Wounded during a bloody battle with Nazi forces in 1941, Kalashnikov was given a leave during which he thought up the first versions of the rifle. In 1945, a prototype was entered into a competition and the design was eventually recommended for use in the Soviet army. It quickly became prized for its simplicity, cheapness and sturdy reliability.

'Deep torment'

AK-47's name stands for "Kalashnikov's Automatic" and the year its final version was designed, 1947. More than 100 million Kalashnikovs have been sold worldwide and about 50 armies use the AK-47 including those in Iraq and Somalia. Although Kalashnikov said he created the rifle to "defend the fatherland's borders," Moscow first used the gun internationally to put down riots in East Berlin in 1953 and the Hungarian Revolution of 1956, journalist C J Chivers wrote in his book "The Gun".

Chivers challenged the official narrative according to which a lone maverick inventor came up with a genius design. "The weapon was designed collectively, the culmination of work by many people over many years," Chivers wrote. The breakup of the Soviet Union in 1991 opened the floodgates for weapons trafficking, and the AK turned into the preferred weapon for guerrillas, dictators, and even

school shooters in the United States. The "kalash", as the firearm is called in Russian and French, has been used in attacks in Paris, to settle scores among gangs and poach for wildlife in Africa. In his twilight years Kalashnikov said he was tormented by the thought that his invention had caused so many deaths. In a letter to the Russian Patriarch, he asked if "because my rifle deprived people of life, then can it be that I... was to blame for their deaths?" He said that he experienced "deep emotional torment" knowing that Kalashnikovs ended up in children's hands in conflict zones.

'Everything kept secret'

During the Soviet era, Kalashnikov's work was shrouded in secrecy. The inventor once said that a US weapons historian managed to contact him by post in the 1970s asking for his biography, but the KGB forbade any contact. "From my first step along the path of a designer, I was hidden and classified," he wrote in one of his books. Nelli Kalashnikova, the inventor's daughter, grew up knowing nothing about her father's work.

Before the 1990s, "our family was kept secret, the kids were kept secret, and everything was kept secret," she told AFP. She described her father as a quiet, modest man of tremendous self-restraint. Kalashnikov became a living legend after the veil of secrecy was lifted but he barely profited financially from his inventions and lived modestly in Izhevsk. Today, Russia manufactures fifth-generation Kalashnikov rifles - AK-12 and AK-15. — AFP

Ocean plastic waste probably comes from ships

Most of the plastic bottles washing up on the rocky shores of Inaccessible Island, aptly named for its sheer cliffs rising from the middle of the South Atlantic, probably come from Chinese merchant ships, a study published Monday said. The study offers fresh evidence that the vast garbage patches floating in the middle of oceans, which have sparked much consumer hand-wringing in recent years, are less the product of people dumping single-use plastics in waterways or on land, than they are the result of merchant marine vessels tossing their waste overboard by the ton.

The authors of the study published in the Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences, or PNAS, collected thousands of pieces of waste during visits to the tiny island in 1984, 2009 and again in 2018. The island is located roughly midway between Argentina and South Africa in the South Atlantic gyre, a vast whirlpool of currents that has

created what has come to be known as an oceanic garbage patch. While initial inspections of the trash washing up on the island showed labels indicating it had come from South America, some 3,000 km to the west, by 2018 three-quarters of the garbage appeared to originate from Asia, mostly China. Many of the plastic bottles had been crushed with their tops screwed on tight, as is customary on board ships to save space, said report author Peter Ryan, director of the FitzPatrick Institute of African Ornithology at the University of Cape Town in South Africa.

Around 90 percent of the bottles found had been produced in the previous two years, ruling out the possibility that they had been carried by ocean currents over the vast distance from Asia, which would normally take three to five years. Since the number of Asian fishing vessels has remained stable since the 1990s, while the number of Asian - and in particular, Chinese - cargo vessels has vastly increased in the Atlantic, the researchers concluded that the bottles must come from merchant vessels, which toss their overboard rather than dumping them as trash at ports. "It's inescapable that it's from ships, and it's not coming from land," Ryan told AFP. "A certain sector of the merchant fleet seems to be doing that, and it seems to be largely an Asian one," he said.

Fishing nets

There are two distinct types of marine pollution. On

the one hand, there are the beaches around urban centers: the plastics that are found there come from coastal areas, and include bottles, bags and packaging. But these things sink easily and are less likely to be carried far by currents. Farther out in the oceans, the garbage patches contain fragments of objects of unclear origin, as well as items used by cargo ships and fishing fleets: Not just the bottles emptied by the ships' crews, but also nets, ropes, buoys, crates, barrels and floats. "It's an underappreciated cause of pollution," said Ryan.

Half of the great Pacific garbage patch is made up of fishing nets, by weight, according to a report published last year in Scientific Reports. Oceanographer Laurent Lebreton, one of the authors of the latter report, said that the oft-quoted figure of 80 percent of plastic pollution coming from the land does not apply to the high seas. He recalled having found huge clusters of nets created by fishing vessels in the North Pacific, known as "fish aggregating devices" to attract fish.

"Often they don't retrieve them and they are lost. We have found several tons of them," said Lebreton, of the organization The Ocean Cleanup. "Everyone talks about saving the oceans by stopping using plastic bags, straws and single use packaging. That's important, but when we head out on the ocean, that's not necessarily what we find," he said. — AFP

Forsaken in terror war, Kenyan islands await doctors by boat

Laden with medicines, the speedboat sets off before dawn, its path lit only by the full moon as it cuts between miles of thick mangroves towards Kenya's border with Somalia, where few dare to go. Two hours later at sunrise, the boat arrives at Kiangwe village, one of several remote coastal communities whose only healthcare comes from these monthly visits by the Safari Doctors mobile medical team. Volunteer doctors and nurses roll up their trousers and heave containers full of medical supplies onto their shoulders before wading ashore and hiking up a hill to a building that will serve as their clinic for a few hours.

Kiangwe and surrounding villages have been hard-hit by the Kenyan government's war with Somali extremist group Al-Shabaab, whose militants operate from within the nearby Boni Forest which straddles the border. In the distance, between stick-and-mud houses topped with palm fronds, stands a shuttered clinic that was built but never occupied. "We have several buildings lying dormant because we have personnel (professional nurses and doctors) that don't want to get posted" to the region, said Umr Omar, the 36-year-old who founded Safari Doctors four years ago. So, every month, over a few days, her voluntary team made up of both Kenyan and foreign medics

visits up to 12 villages, some of which require a last-minute phone call to check on security. However four other villages in the region are considered no-go zones and have no healthcare access at all, said Omar. Thanks to donations and fundraising, the Safari Doctors mobile medical team treats up to 800 patients a month.

Few options in emergencies

Inside the makeshift clinic, the team sets up a triage area where patients are weighed and have their blood pressure taken, before being directed to one of several desks manned by medical personnel. At one desk, a group of nurses crowd around a woman with a hard lump in her neck, believed to be a bullet lodged there from an Al-Shabaab ambush on a car she was travelling in several years ago. "I was the only one left... others had died on the spot," Bilal Abdi said of the attack, which also left her with bullet wounds in her foot.

The nurses advise her to go to Lamu to get the bullet removed. Asked how she will do so, she just shakes her head. Rufia Alio, 55, sliced his finger open while farming over a week before the mobile clinic visited, and is finally getting it bandaged up. "There are no hospitals here which is a problem. We have pregnant women here, we have the aged ones who are suffering, there are others who suffer from fever... and thus when Safari Doctors come they help by giving us medicine and injections," he said.

However once the Safari Doctors move on, there are few options. Omar tells of a young man from Kiangwe who carried a sick villager with appendicitis on a 24-hour journey by motorbike in order to get him to a hospital. That journey costs about \$30, but the road is dangerous and



Children wait on the beach for the arrival of a mobile clinic run by Safari Doctors at Kiangwe in Lamu on June 17, 2019. — AFP

prone to Al-Shabaab attacks, while communities on islands have no access to a road. Hiring a speedboat to Lamu town can cost up to \$200 - a fortune for members of this community who mostly live off the land. Omar said that for a woman in emergency labor, the bumpy speedboat ride is "something else", while some have even given birth in the middle of the ocean. In a bid to plug the gap, Safari Doctors has trained traditional birth attendants and given youth in the communities basic first aid training. Lamu County has long been one of the poorest, most underdeveloped, and marginalized areas in Kenya. Locals say their plight has only grown worse since the army in 2015 sent troops into the area to flush Al-Shabaab militants out of the forest, in what was meant to be a three-month operation, but has yet to come to an end. — AFP