

International

Chinese tycoon and Xi critic jailed for 18 years for corruption

Ren embezzled almost 50 million yuan (\$7.4 million) of public funds

BEIJING: A Chinese tycoon who called President Xi Jinping a clown and criticised his handling of the coronavirus outbreak was jailed for 18 years yesterday for corruption, bribery and embezzlement of public funds. Ren Zhiqiang — once among the ruling Communist Party's inner circle — disappeared from the public eye in March, shortly after penning an essay that lambasted Xi's pandemic response. His outspokenness had earned the former chairman of state-owned property developer Huayuan Group the nickname "Big Cannon".

Yesterday's verdict said Ren embezzled almost 50 million yuan (\$7.4 million) of public funds and accepted bribes worth 1.25 million yuan, according to a statement from the Beijing No. 2 Intermediate People's Court. It said the 69-year-old "voluntarily and truthfully confessed all his crimes", and would not appeal the court's decision. He was also fined 4.2 million yuan (\$620,000). Rights campaigners accuse Xi and the Communist Party of using corruption charges to silence dissent. Beijing has stepped up its crackdown on civil society since Xi took power in 2012, tightening restrictions on freedom of speech and detaining hundreds of activists and lawyers. Yesterday's verdict claimed that Ren also "abused his power" in his role at Huayuan Group, which caused more than 116 million yuan of losses to the state-owned holding company and more than 53 million yuan worth of property losses for the group.

'Clown'

The Communist Party's disciplinary watchdog launched an investigation into Ren in April, and the trial opened at a Beijing court on September 11 with a handful of supporters outside and a heavy police

presence. One supporter told AFP they backed Ren because he "dares to speak the truth". Ren's essay, from earlier this year, has been scrubbed from



Abused his power

China's internet — which regularly censors content that challenges the authorities — but was shared online outside China. "This epidemic has revealed the fact that the Party and government officials only care about protecting their own interests, and the monarch only cares about protecting their interests and core position," Ren wrote, without naming Xi.

"Standing there was not an emperor showing off his new clothes, but a clown stripped of clothes who insisted on being an emperor," he wrote. Ren's influential blog on the Twitter-like Weibo platform attracted millions of followers before his account was closed by authorities in 2016 after he repeatedly called for greater freedom of the press.

Online reaction to Ren's sentencing was also being rapidly scrubbed yesterday. "The only real-estate tycoon who dares to tell the truth in China has been censored," read one comment on Weibo.

"He was born in 1951 and is 69 years old this



BEIJING: This photo taken on November 18, 2013 shows Ren Zhiqiang, the former chairman of state-owned property developer Huayuan Group, speaking at the China Public Welfare Forum in Beijing. A Chinese tycoon who called President Xi Jinping a clown and criticised his handling of the coronavirus outbreak was jailed for 18 years yesterday for corruption, bribery and embezzlement of public funds. — AFP

year... maybe he won't live to see the day he gets out of jail," said another. The son of a former vice-commerce minister and a Communist Party member for decades before he was expelled in July, Ren was well connected with party elites. He wrote in his memoir that he had been friends with vice-president and former anti-corruption chief Wang Qishan

since they were teenagers, when Wang was assigned by their school to mentor the younger Ren. He is also a controversial figure, particularly over his defence of China's soaring house prices — once telling Chinese media that people who had been unwilling to invest in real estate before the boom "now deserve to be poor". — AFP

Taiwan president praises pilots who intercepted jets

PENGHU: Taiwan President Tsai Ing-wen praised yesterday the "heroic performance" of air force pilots who have been intercepting Chinese jets that have approached the island, as its armed forces held drills to simulate repulsing an attack.

Tension between China and the democratic island Beijing claims as sovereign Chinese territory have spiked to their highest in years, with Taiwanese fighters jets scrambling to intercept the Chinese aircraft last week.

Visiting a major air force base on Penghu in the sensitive Taiwan Strait that divides the two sides, Tsai told pilots and engineers she was aware of their "heroic performance" when intercepting and driving away Chinese aircraft.

"I have a lot of confidence in you. As soldiers of the Republic of China, how could we let enemies strut around in our own airspace?" she said, using Taiwan's formal name.

"I'm aware that facing the provocative behaviour of the communist planes that have encircled the island and damaged regional peace in recent days, your duty at the front line of the airspace in Penghu must be even heavier."

The base, now home to F-CK-1 Ching-kuo Indigenous Defence Fighters (IDF) which first entered service in 1997, is at the front line of Taiwan's response to Chinese military intrusions. Wang Chia-chu, one of the senior officers of the "Heavenly Colt" IDF squadron, told Reuters there is just five minutes' time to scramble fighters once Chinese aircraft are spotted.

"We will defend our airspace in real time as long as there's a threat," Wang said. Another senior officer, speaking on condition of anonymity, told Reuters the Penghu-based IDFs are now scrambling "almost every day" as tension runs high.

The air force also put on display its new Wan Chien air-to-ground cruise missiles that entered service in 2018 and can be fired from IDFs at targets about 200 km (125 miles) away, putting Chinese facilities or approaching ships in their sights. Separately, Defence Minister Yen Teh-fa oversaw drills simulating a response to an air attack, involving all Taiwan's air bases as well as naval and surface-to-air missile units, the ministry said. "The enemy threat grows by the day," it cited Yen as saying. "On no account allow the enemy to step out of line, and defend the country's sovereignty, democracy and freedom."

Crossing the mid line

Unusually, Chinese aircraft last week breached the mid line of the Taiwan Strait, an unofficial barrier for combat aircraft of both sides, though they have not flown over mainland Taiwan. On Monday, China's foreign ministry said the line did not exist, drawing condemnation from Taiwan Foreign Minister Joseph Wu. In Taipei yesterday, Wu called the line an important "symbol" for avoiding military clashes.

"We demand the international community strongly condemns China's words and actions and demand the Chinese government stops everything that it has been doing," he added.

China has been angered by stepped-up US support for democratic Taiwan, including a visit to Taipei last week by US Undersecretary for Economic Affairs Keith Krach. Taiwanese fighters have scrambled many times this year to intercept Chinese aircraft. — Reuters

Chinese death-row inmate digs tunnel to escape jail

TANGERANG: A Chinese drug trafficker on death row escaped from a jail near Indonesia's capital after digging a 30-metre (100 feet) tunnel from his cell, police said.

Cai Ji Fan, sentenced to death in 2017 for trafficking 110 kilograms (230 pounds) of metham-

phetamine, broke out of Tangerang prison in Banten last week via the narrow tunnel, which connected to a sewer, officials said. "This is the second time he escaped," said Tangerang police's chief Sugeng Hariyanto, adding he also managed to get out of the National Police Criminal Investigation Department cells in Jakarta while on remand.

Officials said Cai had invited his cellmate to join him, but he had declined. Authorities said they had recovered a crowbar, chisel, screwdriver and other tools used to dig the hole, speculating he may have got them from building work being done on a prison kitchen. Cai's first escape was in January 2017 via a hole he made in a bathroom wall using an iron rod.

Along with other prisoners, he then climbed a 2.5-metre (eight-feet) wall, but was recaptured in West Java three days later. Although rare by foreigners, jailbreaks are common in Indonesia, where most prisons are overcrowded and poorly staffed. In 2018, some 90 inmates escaped a prison in Banda Aceh after tearing down a fence during a prayer gathering. A year earlier more than 400 inmates broke out of an overcrowded prison in Riau province.

Also in 2017, four foreigners dug their way to freedom from Bali's notorious Kerobokan jail.

A Bulgarian and Indian were captured in East Timor a week later, but an Australian and Malaysian were never found. — AFP

After Lebanon blast, future lawsuits pile up against the state

BEIRUT: Elie Hasrouty, who lost his father to the August 4 Beirut port blast, is one of at least 1,228 grieving Lebanese preparing to file a lawsuit against the state. The young computer engineer said going to court won't bring his father back, but it could go some way towards preventing similar disasters from happening again.

"We are pursuing legal action (for) us, the people who remain in this country and who want to live in it with dignity," he told AFP. Hasrouty's father, Ghassan, was among the more than 190 people killed in the mega-blast, caused — the authorities say — by a large stockpile of ammonium nitrate blowing up. The explosion, one of the largest non-nuclear blasts in history, also wounded at least 6,500 people, and ravaged swathes of Beirut. Ghassan worked for most of his life in a control room in the shadow of the port's giant silos, right next to the epicentre of the explosion.

He was buried so deep under rubble, wheat and corn that the foreign rescue teams who rushed to the scene never stood a chance of pulling him out alive. His body was found two weeks after the blast.

His son said the point of legal action was not "retaliation" against the authorities, whose negligence and corruption are widely blamed for the blast, but rather to address the underlying conditions that led to the disaster.

"We need to determine who is responsible as well as all behaviour that led to this situation, so that the issue is addressed and proper measures are taken to deter similar conduct in the future," he said.

"What's the use of... prosecuting those who will be found guilty if (official) conduct does not change?" he asked.

'Only want justice'

The Hasrouty family is one of at least 1,228 families who have turned to the Beirut Bar Association to file complaints they hope will become lawsuits against the state, as Lebanese law does not allow for class action procedures.

The Beirut Bar Association is offering its services pro bono as part of an accountability drive it launched after the blast, assigning a lawyer to each



BEIRUT: Candles light-up pictures of victims of August's deadly Beirut blast during a commemoration concert in the gardens of the damaged 19th-century Surssock Palace in Achrafieh in Lebanon's capital. — AFP

of the cases it is currently handling. "We can't stand by idly in the face of a tragic crime of this kind," Melhem Khalaf, the head of the association, told AFP. "We are not seeking revenge in any way. We only want justice."

With an army of 400 volunteer lawyers and 200 legal aides, the Beirut Bar Association has set up seven makeshift centres in blast-hit districts in the aftermath of the explosion, Khalaf said.

They have been backed by more than 450 real-estate appraisers who helped assess the cost of damages suffered by the claimants.

Starting at a computer at the association's Beirut headquarters, lawyer Ali Jaber gave a break-down of the cases. So far, more than 82 percent of all cases brought to the Beirut Bar Association involve people whose complaint focuses on material losses as a result of the blast, according to Jaber.

Those who sustained injuries as well as material losses make up around seven percent of future claimants, while those whose complaint centred solely on injuries accounted for three and a half percent, he said. A little over one percent have lost a relative to the blast. Jaber said claimants would seek first to establish responsibility through a ver-

dict before any second lawsuit for compensation from the cash-strapped state, as Lebanon grapples with its worst economic crisis since the 1975-1990 civil war.

A long history of high-level impunity in Lebanon has pushed many of the country's citizens at home and abroad to call for an international probe into the blast — a demand now backed by Western powers and rights groups.

But Lebanese authorities have rejected such a proposal, favouring instead a local investigation that has so far yielded the arrest of some 25 people. They include the head of the Beirut port and its customs director, but not a single official in government or parliament. The US Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) and French experts have been assisting Lebanese authorities in a probe that has yet to establish a cause for the blast almost seven weeks later. Amnesty International this month said an "international fact-finding mechanism" is the only way to "guarantee victims' rights to truth, justice and remedy". But the government has instead referred the investigation to "the Judicial Council, a court... whose proceedings inherently lack independence and impartiality". Amnesty said. — AFP

Father, son jailed over bomb blast at Vietnam police station

HANOI: Twenty people, including a father and son, were jailed yesterday for the bombing of a police station in Ho Chi Minh City that injured three people, state media said.

Authorities said the June 2018 attack was orchestrated by "terrorists" connected to Trieu Dai

Viet, a Canada-based Vietnamese group seeking to overthrow the communist state.

Nguyen Khanh, the architect of the attack, was sentenced to 24 years in prison for "terrorism against the people's administration" and "illegally fabricating, storing and trading explosives", according to state media. His son Nguyen Tan Thanh was sentenced to three years in jail, while 18 accomplices will serve from two to 18 years.

Khanh was charged with giving explosives to two accomplices, who detonated them in a bomb on a motorcycle in front of the police station on the outskirts of the city. The blast shattered the glass facade of the building near the site of violent

protests against a proposed economic law days earlier. It injured two police officers and a cook.

The attack came after huge — and rare — rallies erupted in several cities across Vietnam against a draft law on special economic zones that would grant investors 99-year leases.

It sparked fears that China would take over investment zones, igniting popular and deep-seated resentment against Vietnam's powerhouse neighbour. Weapons and explosives are not widely available in Vietnam, and violent politically linked attacks are rare. Some 15 people were convicted in 2017 on terrorism charges over a failed bomb plot at Vietnam's largest airport in Ho Chi Minh City. — AFP