

International

British PM's lockdown party shame inflames Tory tensions

Johnson gives lackluster apology for a boozy lockdown party

LONDON: UK Prime Minister Boris Johnson's Conservatives descended into open political warfare yesterday after he gave a lackluster apology for a boozy lockdown party that has outraged the public.

Most cabinet members rallied round Johnson after his mea culpa-but the backing given by some such as powerful Finance Minister Rishi Sunak was distinctly lukewarm. The prime minister himself went to ground yesterday, cancelling a planned trip to northern England after a close relative came down with COVID, in scrupulous adherence to his government's rules.

While expressing "heartfelt apologies", Johnson on Wednesday sparked ridicule by saying he had believed the May 2020 gathering was a work event and urged all sides to await the findings of an internal inquiry. Douglas Ross, the Conservatives' leader in Scotland, joined at least four Tory backbench MPs in calling for Johnson to quit after he admitted to joining the party in his Downing Street garden, when Britain was under a strict lockdown.

Cabinet member Jacob Rees-Mogg dismissed Ross as a "lightweight figure" in the ruling party, earning a rebuke from senior backbencher Tobias Ellwood, who called the remark "unhelpful". Ellwood welcomed Johnson's apology, while telling Times Radio: "But this is far from over, we need to address the wider issues here. There's understandable, real anger that this has generated."

Northern Ireland Secretary Brandon Lewis insisted Johnson had been "very, very sincere" in his apology, amid warnings that Conservative MPs could be mobilizing for a no-confidence vote. "He

does recognise the anger and upset and frustration that people feel at what they perceive happened at Number 10. He recognizes that and takes responsibility," Lewis told BBC radio.

'Come clean'

But Lewis was forced to play down reports that Johnson had told Tory MPs, after his House of Commons apology, that he did not believe he had done anything wrong. For the opposition Labor party, senior MP Lisa Nandy told BBC television that the prime minister's position was "untenable".

"What he's not done is come clean about all the parties (in 2020) that were attended not just by him but by other members of the cabinet—he told us over and over again that no rules had been broken," she said. Relatives left bereaved by COVID and unable to say their final goodbyes felt "appalled, horrified and re-traumatized" by Johnson's attendance at the party. Nandy added on ITV, urging the police to investigate. On Wednesday, Labor leader Keir Starmer for the first time joined other opposition leaders in demanding that Johnson resign.

London's Metropolitan Police have not ruled out a criminal probe into the party, which occurred at a time when Britons were banned from outdoor socializing. But for now Johnson's fate appears to lie in the hands of senior civil servant Sue Gray, whom he has commissioned to look into the May 2020 event and other Downing Street gatherings that year.

Gray's report is not expected to land before next week and in any case it is likely to present a factual summary of events that does not single out individ-



LONDON: Britain's Prime Minister Boris Johnson (center) is driven away from the House of Commons, after attending Prime Minister Questions (PMQs), in central London. —AFP

uals for blame.

Chancellor of the Exchequer Sunak, who was noticeably absent from the House of Commons on Wednesday, said Johnson had been right to apologize and urged "patience" pending Gray's report.

Sunak is a likely contender should Johnson be forced out. Another, Foreign Secretary Liz Truss, also took hours to issue any public backing but said she stood "100 percent" behind the prime minister. —AFP

Tense Ukraine talks underway in Vienna

VIENNA: The world's largest security body met in Vienna yesterday, hoping to push Russia and the West towards dialogue to defuse a mounting crisis on Ukraine's border where Russian troops have massed, sparking fears of war.

The United States and its European allies have accused Russia of deploying tanks, artillery and about 100,000 soldiers on Ukraine's war-torn eastern border in recent weeks, in what NATO says is preparation for an invasion. But Moscow says this is a response to what it sees as the growing presence of NATO in its sphere of influence, where it fiercely opposes the expansion of the Atlantic alliance.

Moscow and Washington have already underlined their "fundamental" differences on European security during tense talks in Geneva and Brussels this week. Helga Schmid, the secretary general of the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), said the situation in the region was "perilous", noting "the urgent need to reinvigorate the debate on European security".

"It is imperative we find a way through diplomacy to deescalate and begin rebuilding trust, transparency and cooperation," she said, opening the Vienna-based body's first meeting of its permanent council this year, attended by all 57 member states including Russia and the US. But Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Sergei Ryabkov cast a dampener yesterday, saying: "I do not see reasons to sit down in the coming days, to gather again and start the same discussions".

'Risk of war'

Foreign Minister Zbigniew Rau of Poland, which chairs the OSCE this year, said the tensions posed a "challenge" for the organization, a multilateral forum for East-West discussions founded during the Cold War's detente phase. "It seems that the risk of war in the OSCE area is now greater than ever before in the last 30 years," he said. The US has admitted no breakthrough is expected at Thursday's OSCE meeting. "We must decisively reject blackmail and never allow aggression and threats to be rewarded," Michael Carpenter, US ambassador to the OSCE, told the meeting. Earlier Carpenter had told independent Russian TV channel Dozhd that he didn't expect any "concrete results this week". "Our main goal is, in principle, to establish a dialogue... Yes, our positions are polar, but this does not mean that there are no elements and areas on which we cannot agree," he said. The challenge, he said, will be to "determine in what forms it is generally possible to deepen the dialogue on this issue in the next few months or even a year." —AFP

10 years on, survivors haunted by Italy cruise ship disaster

ROME: On the evening of January 13, 2012, Umberto Trotti heard the terrified cries of his wife and baby in the lifeboat below, and threw himself off the capsizing Italian cruise ship. The Costa Concordia, a vast, luxury liner, had run aground off Italy's Giglio island and was toppling over into freezing waters, in a disaster that would leave 32 people dead.

There had been no room for Trotti in the lifeboat that took his wife Fjorda and two young children, but on hearing their panic as the vessel was lowered into the water, he leaped to join them.

"It was instinct, my family needed me. I jumped, three or four meters (10 or 13 feet). I landed on a big German, poor man," Trotti told AFP. The family were unsure whether to go back to Giglio for a ceremony Thursday and a candle-lit procession marking 10 years since the disaster.

Ship horns will sound and church bells ring at 9:45pm (20:45 GMT) to mark the moment the liner, owned by Costa Crociere, subsidiary of US based giant Carnival, struck an outcrop, after captain Francesco Schettino ordered a sail-by "salute" to the Tuscan island. Trotti, 44, and Fjorda, 33, had been on their honeymoon.

"It was supposed to be the best experience of our lives," he said. "Those not onboard will never understand. I

was so in shock, I was walking like a zombie."

'Hellish'

The liner, carrying 4,229 people from 70 countries, ran aground while many passengers were at dinner. Schettino, later sentenced to 16 years for the shipwreck, delayed sounding the alarm.

Evacuation began over an hour after the collision, by which point the lifeboats on one side were unusable. "We were saved by a chef," Trotti says. They had been in the blue and gold Ristorante Milano when the ship hit land. Paolo Maspero, still in his chef's hat, "took my six-month old son in his arms. The water was coming in". "If he hadn't come to get us we would have died," said Trotti, who could not swim. Images shot later by the coastguard would show divers in the sunken restaurant, battling through flotsam, searching for victims. People in the Vienna Bar were listening to pianist Antimo Magnotta, who fell off his stool as the ship lurched. He found himself surrounded by terrified passengers demanding answers.

"A woman came up to me carrying two very small children. She was like a tiger, a lion, she almost attacked me. She said 'you have to tell me what to do to save my children'," he told AFP.

Magnotta, who has written a book called "The Pianist of Costa Concordia", said he did as he was trained to do, and reassured passengers the captain would make an announcement. "I promised them. But Schettino never spoke. It was a huge betrayal," he said. The electricity failed and as it became increasingly difficult to walk on the rolling ship, a series of "hellish" blackouts began.

US OKs release of five more Gitmo detainees

HAVANA: The US government has approved the release of five more prisoners from the Guantanamo Bay military prison, according to documents posted online this week by the Defense Department.

Three of the five detainees were from Yemen, one was from Somalia, and the fifth from Kenya. They have spent a collective 85 years in the prison opened two decades ago for so-called "war on terror" detainees in the wake of the September 11, 2001 Al-Qaeda attack on the United States.

Never charged, detainees now approved for release—decided after case reviews in November and December—total 18 of the 39 men still held in the prison facility at the US Naval Base in Cuba. Those newly approved for release are Somali Guleed Hassan Ahmed (also called Guled Hassan Duran); Kenyan Mohammed Abdul Malik Bajabu; and Omar Muhammad Ali al-Rammah, Moath Hamza

al-Alwi, and Suhayl al-Sharabi of Yemen. The Pentagon's Periodic Review Board found that all did not present, or no longer presented, a threat to the United States.

But like the others approved, their releases could be delayed as Washington seeks arrangements with their own or other countries to accept them.

Repatriation challenge

Currently the United States will not repatriate Yemenis due to the civil war in the country, or Somalis, whose homeland is also mired by domestic conflict. The release approvals indicated an accelerated effort by the administration of President Joe Biden to resolve the situations of the 39 in Guantanamo, after his predecessor Donald Trump effectively froze action.

Tuesday marked the 20th anniversary of the opening of the Guantanamo prison, and brought calls from international human rights groups to shut it down, accusing the United States of arbitrary detention of hundreds of people and the illegal torture of dozens. On Monday a group of UN human rights experts called for Washington to "close this ugly chapter



In this file photo, during an escorted visit and reviewed by the US military shows a US Army soldier walking at unused common detainee space in "Camp 6" detention facility at the US Naval Station in Guantanamo Bay, Cuba. —AFP

of unrelenting human rights violations."

Writing on the Lawfare website, US Senator Dianne Feinstein said those detainees facing trial, including September 11th mastermind Khalid Sheikh Mohammed, could be tried in US civilian

courts rather than the secretive and troubled military commissions system.

"Now that the US's war in Afghanistan is over, it's time to shut the doors on Guantanamo once and for all," Feinstein said. —AFP

Gunmen kill villagers, torch homes in volatile Nigeria state

JOS: Gunmen attacked a mainly Christian village in a volatile Nigeria state, killing as many as 18 people and burning down two dozen homes, a community leader, a resident and local authorities said on Wednesday. Plateau State has struggled for years with tit-for-tat violence between Muslim herders and Christian farmers though authorities often blame recent attacks on criminal gangs.

Attackers hit the Ancha community in Bassa local government area of Plateau late on Tuesday, residents and authorities said, sending villagers fleeing. "The attackers came shooting sporadically with guns at night... They took long time doing what they did, up till the time when security arrived," Ancha resident Dickson Auta told AFP by telephone.

"Hearing heard gunshots some of us managed to run

into the bush and that was how we escaped."

Local Irigwe community leader Davidson Malison and Auta said 18 people were killed in the attack, though authorities gave no official death toll. "The attack which lasted for over two hours... led to the killing of 18 people with six others injured," Malison said in a statement.

More than 24 households were burned and vehicles, motorcycles and harvested food crops were destroyed, he said. Malison blamed Muslim Fulani herders for the violence. Plateau State Governor Simon Bako Lalong said the attack "left many dead and properties destroyed" but did not give a toll for the attack, calling it part of "unending cycle of violent attacks" in the area. Nigeria's army said troops mobilised to the village, though attackers had fled by the time they arrived.

"Houses were destroyed and some villagers lost their lives," the army statement said.

Authorities did not blame any group for the violence. Muhammad Nuru Abdullah, chairman of a local cattle herders association, condemned the attack on Ancha but dismissed accusations the Fulani community was responsible. —AFP

US vows action if Somalia misses new poll deadline

WASHINGTON: The United States on Wednesday brandished the threat of sanctions if troubled Somalia misses its latest deadline for elections. Somali leaders on Sunday announced that elections that were due to be concluded last year will take place by February 25.

"Somalia's elections are more than a year behind schedule. The US is prepared to take measures against spoilers if the new National Consultative Council timeline is not met," the State Department's Africa bureau said in a Twitter post. The mandate of President Mohamed Abdullahi Mohamed, better known

as Farmajo, expired in February 2021 and was controversially extended in April, triggering deadly gun battles in the streets of Mogadishu.

World powers have voiced fear that election delays, as well as the ongoing feud between Farmajo and Prime Minister Mohamed Hussein Roble, could set off new troubles for a country that has lacked stable governance for three decades.

Somalia is battling a deadly insurgency by Al-Shabaab jihadists and is in the grip of a drought that has left one in four people facing acute hunger, according to UN estimates. Several people were killed on Wednesday in a suicide car bomb blast in Mogadishu, which was claimed by Al-Shabaab. The government said in a statement on Twitter that the blast killed four people and injured six others, while a local government security officer had earlier told AFP that at least six people were killed. —AFP