

International

Philippines' Ressa says 'business as usual' despite news outlet's shutdown order

Marcos Jr's presidency could worsen situation for human rights and freedom of speech

MANILA: Philippine journalist Maria Ressa's news company Rappler was continuing to work "as usual", the Nobel Peace Prize winner said on Wednesday, after it was ordered to shut down by authorities ahead of President Rodrigo Duterte's last day in office.

Ressa has been a vocal critic of Duterte and the deadly drug war he launched in 2016, triggering what media advocates say is a grinding series of criminal charges, probes and online attacks against her and Rappler.

The latest blow was delivered by the Philippine Securities and Exchange Commission. In a statement Wednesday, it confirmed the "revocation of the certificates of incorporation" of Rappler for violating "constitutional and statutory restrictions on foreign ownership in mass media".

Rappler said the decision "effectively confirmed the shutdown" of the company and vowed to appeal, describing the proceedings as "highly irregular". But Ressa was characteristically defiant, vowing the news site would continue to operate as they followed the legal process.



'Let the law take its course'

government accused it of violating a constitutional ban on foreign ownership in securing funding, as well as tax evasion. It has also been accused of cyber libel—a new criminal law introduced in 2012, the same year Rappler was founded.

Duterte has attacked the website by name, calling it a "fake news outlet", over a story about one of his closest aides. The news organisation is accused of allowing foreigners to take control of its website through its parent company Rappler Holdings' issuance of "depository receipts".

Under the constitution, investment in media is reserved for Filipinos or Filipino-controlled entities.

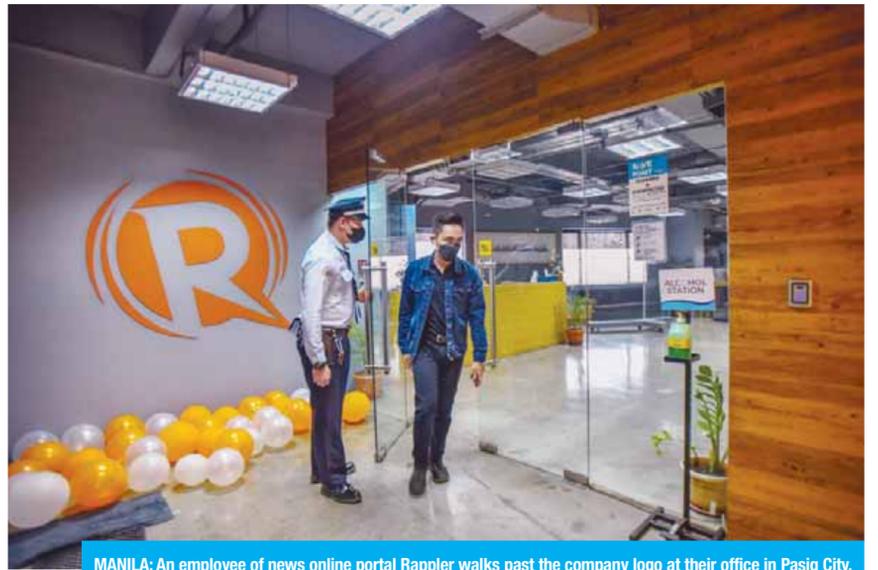
The case springs from a 2015 investment from the US-based Omidyar Network, which was established by eBay founder Pierre Omidyar. Omidyar Network later transferred its investment in Rappler to the site's local managers to stave off efforts by Duterte to shut it down.

"Let the law take its course, and allow the Securities and Exchange Commission (to) perform its mandate," presidential spokesman Martin Andanar said. "Rappler may avail of remedies accorded to it by law."

Ressa, who is also a US citizen, and Russian journalist Dmitry Muratov were awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in October for their efforts to "safeguard freedom of expression". Ressa is fighting at least seven court cases, including an appeal against a conviction in a cyber libel case, for which she is on bail and faces up to six years in prison. Rappler faces about eight cases, Ressa said.

'Legal harassment'

Human Rights Watch said the website was facing



MANILA: An employee of news online portal Rappler walks past the company logo at their office in Pasig City, suburban Manila on June 29, 2022. —AFP

"retaliation for its fearless reporting". The International Center For Journalists (ICFJ) urged the Philippine government to reverse its order to shut down Rappler. "This legal harassment not only costs Rappler time, money and energy. It enables relentless and prolific online violence designed to chill independent reporting," ICFJ said on Twitter.

The future of Rappler and its battle in the country's highly politicised legal system under Marcos Jr's presidency is uncertain. The president-elect has given few clues about his views on the website and

the broader issue of freedom of speech.

He has largely shunned media interviews and press conferences, preferring to communicate via his press secretary and through social media. US Second Gentleman Douglas Emhoff, who is heading a delegation to the Philippines for Marcos Jr's inauguration, would not comment on the Rappler case.

He told reporters in Manila that the US administration had a "deep commitment towards freedom of speech, freedom of expression, human rights". —AFP

Far-flung Hong Kong diaspora linked by 'shared destiny'

HONG KONG: Looking back on her decision to leave Hong Kong with her family just before the city's handover from Britain to China 25 years ago, Mary still believes she made the right call. "We just didn't trust the Chinese government," she told AFP, using a pseudonym. She was not the only one.

Government estimates show hundreds of thousands of people quit Hong Kong in the years that preceded the handover for a new life overseas—many citing fears of a future under Beijing's thumb. As the territory celebrates the handover's 25th anniversary on Friday, with citywide posters proclaiming "a new era of stability, prosperity and opportunity", another exodus is under way. Under the One Country, Two Systems principle set out with Britain, China agreed that Hong Kong would maintain a high degree of autonomy and independent judicial power and that the city's leader would be appointed by Beijing on the basis of local elections or consultations. Beijing's imposition of a sweeping national security law has helped propel a new wave of emigrants across the world, swelling the diaspora of those who feel dispossessed by Chinese rule. "Hong Kong people in different parts of the world will have differ-

ent definitions of Hong Kong," said Fermi Wong, who moved to Britain in 2020. "But we share a strong sense of community, with shared destiny." "The thing that connects us may be something indescribable, some kind of temperament—I can always recognise Hong Kongers walking down a street." Mary, now 59, has lived in Britain ever since she boarded a one-way flight with her husband and two sons in April 1997. She adapted quickly to life abroad, never really feeling homesick.

Years later though, Mary said she found herself transfixed watching news of the huge pro-democracy protests that engulfed her city in 2019. "I was watching every night and I was crying," she said. "The young people were just saying how they felt." Beijing's response to the protests—the national security law to crush dissent, as well as electoral reforms that effectively disqualify most opposition—has turned Hong Kong into a place she no longer recognises.

Voting with feet

It was the security law that prompted Wong, who had worked as an advocate for ethnic minorities in Hong Kong for more than two decades, to leave. Since the law came into force in 2020, critics



HONG KONG, China: File picture shows family and friends gathering at the departure gates at Hong Kong International Airport, as the city recorded a net outflow of 123,700 residents in 2020 and 2021. —AFP

say the premise of One Country, Two Systems has been comprehensively eroded, and many of the freedoms it promised have been eviscerated.

"We will never believe in it ever again," said Wong. She was part of the net outflow of 123,700 residents that Hong Kong recorded in 2020 and 2021, and one of many who went to Britain. More than 92,000 British Nationals Overseas visas have been issued since London started accepting applications in 2021, explicitly linking the permit's introduction to the political changes.

Canada and Australia, which also have

"lifeboat schemes", have accepted 47,000 and 8,900 arrivals from Hong Kong, respectively since 2019. In an interview with the South China Morning Post, Hong Kong's main English-language newspaper, even pro-establishment politician Jasper Tsang said Hong Kongers were "voting with their feet". The government, however, maintains the outflow represents "normal movement", with outgoing leader Carrie Lam accusing other countries of "disguising their grab for talent" with a political pretext. Her successor John Lee has warned emigrants they might regret missing opportunities if they leave. —AFP

Iran says guard killed at Afghan border

TEHRAN: An Iranian border guard was killed in an "incident" in the country's southeast at a border crossing with Afghanistan, Iran's foreign ministry said Wednesday. "The dimensions of this unfortunate incident in the Milak border area, which led to the martyrdom of the dear border guard of the Islamic Republic of Iran, are being investigated by the authorities and will be announced as soon as the issue is clarified," ministry spokesman Nasser Kanani said.

He expressed condolences to the family of Mohammad Sayyad who was killed at Milak crossing in Sistan-Baluchestan province. Afghan officials told AFP there had been no clashes between Iranian and Afghan forces near the border.

"Officials in Afghanistan's caretaker government are expected to take serious action to clarify the dimensions of the issue, punish the perpetrators and

take the necessary measures to prevent similar incidents," Kanani added.

Iran, like many other nations, has so far not recognised the new government formed by the Taliban after it took power amid a hasty withdrawal by US-led foreign forces in August. While Iran insists that the Taliban form an inclusive administration, the Islamic movement has formed an all-male cabinet made up entirely of members of the group, and almost exclusively of ethnic Pashtuns.

Water rights issues have also increased tensions between the two neighbours. In January, demonstrators in Sistan-Baluchestan rallied at a border crossing for a protest over water from the Helmand River.

Last year, then Afghan president Ashraf Ghani inaugurated Kamal Khan Dam on the river, announcing that Afghanistan would no longer supply "extra" water to Iran for free but instead exchange it for oil. Iran has hosted millions of Afghan refugees for decades, but fresh waves have flooded the country since the Taliban's return to power.

The two nations have the Persian language in common—known as Farsi in Iran and Dari in Afghanistan—but a majority of Afghans are Sunni

capital — which sits only 1.5 metres (five feet) above sea level and is perennially beset by flooding — earning time off their sentences.

But fears of spreading the virus meant the gutter-diving work has been done by city authorities and workers, until now. "It is a pretty tough and exhausting job," said one 33-year-old prisoner, who was not permitted to give his name, adding — not unsurprisingly — that the work was "smelly".

He is one of roughly 80 inmates shipped in from three prisons to an eastern Bangkok suburb and set to labour, earning money and a day off their sentences for each day worked. "I still want to do this



MILAK, Iran: File photo shows Iranian soldiers keep watch at a drug trafficking patrol post in Milak, southeastern Iran, near the Afghan border. An Iranian border guard was killed in an "incident" at a border crossing with Afghanistan. —AFP

Muslims compared to their mostly Shiite neighbours. Iran has long had testy relations with the Taliban, who raided Tehran's consulate in the northern Afghan city of Mazar-i-Sharif in 1998 killing 10 diplomats and a journalist. —AFP

job, so I can return home to my family earlier," explained the man, wearing a bright blue baseball cap and a dark blue prison uniform.

After hauling up the concrete slabs covering the drains, the inmates — wearing protective waders and heavy-duty gloves — drop down and scabble out the grime, filling large iron tubs with stinking slop. They work through the day, fuelled by donations from grateful shopkeepers pleased to see the drains outside their stores finally cleared.

"This is the first time since the pandemic" that the drains have been cleared by prisoners, said a Bangkok Remand Prison guard, who declined to be identified

AU urges restraint over Ethiopia, Sudan tensions

ADDIS ABABA, Ethiopia: The head of the African Union Commission voiced concern on Wednesday over "escalating military tension" between Ethiopia and Sudan, calling for restraint and dialogue.

The comments by Moussa Faki Mahamat follow claims by Khartoum that the Ethiopian army had executed seven Sudanese soldiers and a civilian in an incident in a volatile border region last week—allegations denied by Addis Ababa. Faki "is following with deep concern the escalating military tension between the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia and the Republic of Sudan and deeply regrets the loss of life at their common border," the AU said in a statement.

"The chairperson appeals for complete refrain from any military action whatever its origin and calls for dialogue between the two brotherly countries to solve any dispute." Sudan accused Ethiopia of capturing the soldiers on June 22 in Al-Fashaqa, a fertile strip at the centre of a bitter border dispute between the two neighbours.

Khartoum recalled its ambassador to Addis Ababa on Monday and vowed to lodge a complaint with the UN Security Council and regional organisations. Addis Ababa said Tuesday that Sudanese forces had crossed into Ethiopian territory and the casualties resulted from a skirmish with a local militia, denying its soldiers were in the area at the time. The Sudan Tribune newspaper reported that the Sudanese army had launched an attack Tuesday on Ethiopian troops in the Al-Fashaqa area but this was denied by army spokesman Nabil Abdalla. "We have not attacked anyone and we will not and we are not planning that. But we will not allow any armed force from another country that wants to cross our international border. It's our right legally to deal with it," he told AFP in Khartoum.

Relations between Khartoum and Addis Ababa have soured over Al-Fashaqa, which is close to Ethiopia's restive Tigray region. Al-Fashaqa has long been cultivated by Ethiopian farmers but claimed by Sudan, and the dispute has sparked sporadic clashes between the Sudanese and Ethiopian sides, some fatal. The rift over Al-Fashaqa feeds into wider tensions over land and water between the neighbours, particularly stoked by Ethiopia's mega dam on the Blue Nile. Sudan and Egypt, both downstream countries, have been opposed to the Great Ethiopian Renaissance Dam and pushed for an agreement on the filling of its reservoir and the dam's operations. —AFP

Thai prisoners clean Bangkok sewers after pandemic delay

BANGKOK: Flecked with sewage, a Thai prisoner grapples with an overflowing bucket as he and his fellow inmates clean Bangkok's congested drains for the first time in two years. Pre-pandemic, convicts could volunteer to clear the sewers of Thailand's

as he was not authorised to speak to the press. Once dubbed the "Venice of the East", the capital endures flooding during the rainy season — from roughly July to October — with backed-up drains contributing.

"The increased cleaning when the rainy season starts will help the drains (remove water) quicker," said a Bangkok Metropolitan Administration official. And for at least one of the prisoners, who had less than a year remaining to serve, cleaning the sewers helped him feel better about his past. "We have made mistakes in life so we end up in jail," he said. "Having a chance to come out and help the public makes me feel very good." —AFP