

New Pegasus Spyware Use in Europe 'Tip of Iceberg'



NSO software has been used to spy on prominent European leaders such as Spanish Prime Minister Pedro Sánchez and French President Emmanuel Macron, as well as political groups in Poland, Hungary and Spain.

OTTAWA (AFP) -- Recent allegations that Pegasus spyware was used against three Polish government opponents are likely the "tip of the iceberg," said a cyber expert Wednesday who helped identify the phone taps.

Evidence of the hacking, which has become a major scandal in Poland, was reported by the Canada-based cyber-security watchdog Citizen Lab.

"We think this is just the tip of the iceberg and there'll be more discoveries to come," John Scott-Railton, a senior researcher with the group, told AFP.

"It's shocking and it looks very bad," he said. "Pegasus is a tool of dictators. Its use in these cases point to an authoritarian slide" in

Poland. Smartphones infected with Pegasus are essentially turned into pocket spying devices, allowing the user to read the target's messages, look through their photos, track their location, and even turn on their camera without their knowledge.

One of the victims, lawyer Roman Giertych, who is involved in several cases against the ruling Law and Justice (PiS) party, told Polish daily Gazeta Wyborcza that the government was using the spyware "to fight the democratic opposition."

Ewa Wrzosek, a prosecutor and opposition figure, also said the spyware had been used against her, adding that she was first alerted by Apple.

Scott-Railton confirmed Wednesday that Citizen Lab had also advised Senator Krzysztof Brejza of the opposition party Civic Platform, that his smartphone was repeatedly infected over a six-month period during the 2019 election.

"Their lives were under close monitoring -- this was very invasive," Scott-Railton said.

The hacking allegations have been dubbed by Polish media as a "Polish Watergate" -- referring to the scandal that emerged after former U.S. president Richard Nixon's reelection campaign, which ultimately led to his resignation in 1974.

Poland has rejected accusations that it had used Pegasus spyware for political ends.

But Stanislaw Zaryn, spokesman for the ministry in charge of the country's secret services, did not confirm or deny if Poland used Pegasus.

In July, controversy erupted around Pegasus, after a collaborative investigation by several media outlets reported that governments used Pegasus to spy on activists, journalists, lawyers and politicians.

U.S. authorities last month blacklisted the NSO Group, the Israeli owner of Pegasus, by restricting exports to it from American groups over allegations the firm "enabled foreign governments to conduct transnational repression."

Polish opposition leader Donald Tusk on Tuesday said recent reports that the government spied on its opponents represented the country's biggest "crisis for democracy" since the end of communism.

Tusk, a former EU Council president, also called for a parliamentary inquiry into the allegations.

Swedes Worry Major Shift With NATO Membership



Swedish soldiers take part in the changing of the guard ceremony in the courtyard of the Royal Palace in Stockholm, Sweden, February 24, 2024.

STOCKHOLM (Reuters) -- Sweden's final hurdle to joining NATO was swept away after hold-out Hungary's ratification, ending 200 years during which Stockholm's military self-reliance helped it build a global brand as neutral peacemaker and human rights champion.

Swedes worry it signals a fundamental shift in identity.

"Sweden's historically strong voice on the issues of peace and disarmament seems to be going silent," said Kerstin Bergea, chairperson of the Swedish Peace and Arbitration Society, a prominent peace movement since 1883.

"The cause of peace has been part of our DNA," she added.

From UN Secretary-General Dag Hammarskjöld's efforts to promote peace in 1960s Congo to Hans Blix's role as chief UN weapons inspector in the lead up to the Iraq war, Sweden's neutrality has allowed it to play an influential role in global conflicts, often punching above its weight.

Sometimes that came in the form of blistering criticism of Western policy, such as former Prime Minister Olof Palme's comparison of U.S. bombings in the Vietnam War to mankind's worst atrocities, including Nazi Ger-

many's death camps, damaging diplomatic relations with Washington for years.

Veteran diplomat Jan Eliasson, a former foreign minister and UN deputy secretary-general, said he was able to mediate in a number of global conflicts "because Sweden was neutral".

Like many Swedes of his generation, Eliasson said he was proud of his country's reputation as a moral force, epitomized by Palme, a vocal supporter of South Africa's anti-apartheid struggle who was assassinated on a Stockholm street in 1986.

While neighbor Norway, a founding member of NATO, has maintained its role as peacebroker, NATO skeptics fear joining the alliance will limit Sweden's options and force it to toe a common line with its allies.

Securing Turkey's approval for its NATO membership has already led Stockholm to take a tougher stance on Kurdish separatists in Turkey, Syria and Iraq and resume arms exports to Ankara previously suspended as a result of human rights concerns.

Membership of nuclear-armed NATO also sits uncomfortably with Sweden's support for nuclear disarmament.

India to Probe Western Fast-Food Chains After McDonald's Subterfuge



People dine inside a McDonald's restaurant in Mumbai, February 26, 2024.

MUMBAI (Reuters) -- India's western state of Maharashtra will inspect outlets of global fast-food brands to check if they use cheese alternatives in products wrongly promoted as containing real cheese, widening scrutiny beyond a crackdown on McDonald's, a top official said.

The checks threaten to cause a headache for global brands after recent inflationary pressure hit consumption of burgers and pizzas that are pricey for many Indian consumers, prompting firms to launch of discounted offerings.

McDonald's biggest India franchisee, Westlife Foodworld, has been defending its use of "real cheese" after media reported that state authorities last year found some products made use of so-called cheese analogues of vegetable oil, rather than real cheese.

The McDonald's franchisee disagreed with the findings, but in December it dropped the word "cheese" from the names of many burgers and nuggets it sells statewide, letters seen by Reuters show.

It renamed a "corn and cheese burger" as an "American vegetarian burger", for example.

Inspectors of the state's Food and Drug Administration will now visit all McDonald's outlets, as well as those of other major brands, to check for similar violations of display and labeling

rules, its chief, Abhimanyu Kale, told Reuters.

"We are planning to check all outlets of McDonald's," he said. "We will also take action on other well-known and frequently visited global fast-food chain outlets," he added, but declined to identify the brands being targeted.

Another senior state government official, who sought anonymity, said inspectors would visit Indian franchisee outlets of brands such as Domino's, Pizza Hut, Burger King and KFC.

Indian state authorities have the power to suspend the licenses of restaurants found to have infringed food and safety regulations in a way that misleads consumers.

India's western state of Maharashtra is its second most populous. Home to the financial capital Mumbai and many urban cities, it is a key market for global fast-food brands.

In the McDonald's case, state food inspectors suspended the license of one outlet east of Mumbai in November for allegedly using analogues in products promoted as containing cheese.

The suspension was later revoked on appeal by Westlife, the McDonald's franchisee.

The company reassured many consumers online who voiced concerns about its cheese offerings, saying on social network X that it uses "globally approved gold-standard suppliers".

Pakistan Court Indicts Ex-PM Khan, Wife on Graft Charges



Former Pakistan PM Imran Khan, right, and Bushra Bibi, his wife, speak to the media in Lahore July 2023.

ISLAMABAD (Reuters) -- A Pakistani court indicted jailed former Prime Minister Imran Khan and his third wife Bushra Bibi on Tuesday on charges that they allegedly received land as a bribe by misusing his office during his premierships, his party said.

The latest charges follow a string of convictions against Khan in the months leading up to the Feb. 8 national election, where his supporters won the most seats overall.

Khan, 71, has been in jail since August in connection with other cases, and has previously denied the allegations.

He had already been convicted in

four cases with sentences of as much as 14 years in prison - including two on graft charges, that also disqualified him from taking part in politics for 10 years.

His trials are being held on a jail's premises on security grounds.

The couple pleaded not guilty to the indictment charges, Khan's Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) party said.

Candidates backed by the PTI won the largest number of seats in parliament in the election earlier this month by defying all odds and what it says was a military backed crackdown.

His supporters ran as independents

instead of as a single bloc after his party was barred from the polls.

But his opposition parties led by the Sharif and Bhutto dynasties cobbled together an alliance to form a minority coalition government.

The latest indictment is related to Al-Qadir Trust, which is a non-governmental welfare organization set up by Khan and his third wife Bushra Bibi in 2018 when he was still in office.

Prosecutors say the trust was a front for Khan to receive a valuable 60 acres (24 hectares) of land in a district outside Islamabad and another large piece of land close to Khan's hilltop mansion in the capital as a bribe from a real estate developer, Malik Riaz Hussain, who is one of Pakistan's richest and most powerful businessmen.

Hussain, who hasn't appeared before an anti-graft agency to submit his reply to summons issued to him late last year, has denied any wrongdoing.

The PTI condemned the indictment. "Trials conducted behind prison walls (are) only meant to pave the way for miscarriage of justice," it said in a statement, terming them politically motivated cases to keep Khan behind bars.

The PTI party has rejected the election results, alleging widespread fraud.

South Africa: 500 Rhinos Killed by Poachers Last Year

JOHANNESBURG (AFP) -- Almost 500 rhinos were killed by poachers in South Africa last year, up 11 percent on 2022, despite government efforts to tackle the illicit trade in horns, ministers said Tuesday.

The country is home to a large majority of the world's rhinos and a hotspot for poaching, which is driven by demand from Asia, where horns are used in traditional medicine for their supposed therapeutic effect.

The environment ministry said 499 of the thick-skinned herbivores were killed in 2023, mostly in state-run parks.

The lion's share were poached in eastern KwaZulu-Natal province, with the Hluhluwe-Imfolozi park -- Africa's oldest reserve -- alone losing 307 animals.

"This is the highest poaching loss within this province," said Environment Minister Barbara Creecy. "Multi-disciplinary teams continue to work tirelessly in an attempt to slow this relentless pressure".

In recent years, authorities have tightened security particularly around the Kruger National Park, a tourist magnet bordering Mozambique that has seen its rhino population fall drastically over the past 15 years.

This has resulted in lower losses there -- 78 rhinos were killed in 2023, 37 percent fewer than in 2022.

But it has also pushed poachers towards regional and private reserves like Hluhluwe-Imfolozi.

Law enforcement agencies arrested 49 suspected

poachers in KwaZulu-Natal last year, Creecy said.

Across the country, 45 poachers and horn traffickers were convicted in court, she added.

Among them was a former field ranger sentenced to 10 years behind bars for killing a rhino he later claimed had charged him.

As of 2023, the national parks authority requires new employees to take a lie detector test amid concerns that some workers might be in cahoots with poachers.

Rhino horns are highly sought in black markets where the price per weight rivals that of gold and cocaine.

Nevertheless, in September last year the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) reported that thanks to conservation efforts rhino numbers had grown across Africa.

Nearly 23,300 specimens roamed the continent at the end of 2022, up 5.2 percent on 2021, IUCN said, adding the increase was the first bit of "good news" for the animals in over a decade.

About 15,000 live in South Africa, according to a separate estimate by the International Rhino Foundation.

"While these updated IUCN populations figures provide hope, these gains remain tenuous as long as the poaching crisis continues," Jeff Cooke of the World Wildlife Fund said Tuesday.

And he described the spike in killings in South Africa's KwaZulu-Natal, in particular, as "of grave concern".



MOSCOW (Reuters) -- Russian Security Council Secretary Nikolai Patrushev, a top ally of President Vladimir Putin, has met Cuba's former leader Raul Castro to discuss security cooperation, the Interfax news agency reported. "Various issues of Russian-Cuban cooperation in the field of security were discussed," Russia's security council said in a statement cited by Interfax. "Nikolai Patrushev assured Raul Castro that Moscow remains committed to the spirit of strategic partnership between the two countries," it said. The war in Ukraine has triggered the worst crisis in Russia's relations with the West since the 1962 Cuban Missile Crisis, according to Russian and U.S. diplomats. After the West slapped what U.S. and European leaders cast as the toughest sanctions ever imposed on a major economy, Russia has turned away from Europe and the United States and has boosted ties with countries in Asia, the Middle East, Africa and Latin America. Putin has an invitation to visit Cuba.

ROME (AFP) -- Italian Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni's hard-right government suffered its first electoral setback Tuesday since coming to power, with the narrow victory of the center-left opposition in regional elections in Sardinia. Alessandra Todde, an MP from the Five Star Movement allied with the Democratic Party (PD), defeated Paolo Truzzu, a member of Meloni's far-right Brothers of Italy party representing the coalition government, with 99 percent of votes counted Tuesday morning. Her victory was by a whisker -- 45.3 percent of the vote against 45 percent for Truzzu -- but represents the first electoral defeat for Meloni since she took office in October 2022. Todde's election for a five-year term comes just four months ahead of European Parliament elections, a fresh test for Meloni and her coalition partners, Matteo Salvini's far-right League and the centre-right Forza Italia.

TBILISI (Reuters) -- A court in Grozny, capital of the Russian region of Chechnya, on Tuesday sentenced a Russian man to three-and-a-half years in prison for burning a copy of the Qur'an, Russian state news agency TASS reported. Nikita Zhuravel, 20, was detained in May 2023 under a law against offending religious believers' feelings after he burned a copy of the Muslim book outside a mosque in Volgograd, 800 km (500 miles) from Grozny. Russian investigators transferred his case to Chechnya. The Investigative Committee, which handles serious crimes, said this was because they received many messages from Chechnya residents asking to be designated injured parties. TASS reported that Zhuravel pleaded guilty to the charges, repeatedly apologized in court, and said he had not thought about the consequences of his actions. The Investigative Committee has said that he was paid to burn the Qur'an by Ukrainian intelligence. Russia introduced its law against offending the feelings of religious believers in 2013 as part of the Kremlin's turn towards conservative social values.

WELLINGTON (Reuters) -- New Zealand's Maori Health Authority will be shutdown by June 20, the health minister said on Tuesday, as the centre-right government winds back indigenous policies of previous governments. The Maori Health Authority, or Te Aka Whai Ora, was established in 2022 to improve health outcomes of Maori, which lag the broader population. Maori make up 17% of the country's population. Prime Minister Christopher Luxon's centre-right coalition, which took office in October, has promised to undo policies of previous governments, particularly those promoting the official use of the Maori language and seeking to enhance Indigenous living standards and rights. The move is seen by many indigenous groups as undermining their rights and status and has sparked protests. Luxon says his policy is aimed at giving all New Zealanders equal rights. Jacqui Harema, chief executive of the largest Maori public health entity Hapa to Hauora, said Maori knew better how to look after their own people and to improve their outcomes and for the Maori Health Authority to be disestablished was alarming.

TOKYO (AFP) -- DNA analysis has confirmed that a 70-year-old man who confessed on his hospital deathbed last month to being one of Japan's most-wanted fugitives was indeed the suspect, police said Tuesday. Satoshi Kirishima, a former member of a Japanese radical leftist group behind deadly bomb attacks in the 1970s, was wanted for nearly 50 years, with his bespectacled, smiling mugshots almost omnipresent outside police stations across Japan. The saga took a sudden twist last month when a terminally ill man hospitalized near Tokyo declared on his deathbed that he was Kirishima -- prompting hospital staff to alert police -- only to die a few days later.

SEOUL (Reuters) -- President Yoon Sun Yeol vowed on Tuesday to go ahead with a plan to increase the number of students admitted into medical schools to improve healthcare in South Korea, and said there was no justification for the protests this reform had triggered. More than 9,000 young doctors, or about two-thirds of the total number of physician trainees in South Korea, walked off the job last week because of the plan, saying the healthcare sector was not short of doctors, and the government should address pay and working conditions first. Several ministers have threatened the protesters with legal action, including suspending their licenses, while also inviting the doctors to hold talks to end the dispute.