

Austria plunged into crisis over 'Ibiza affair'

● **Strache promised public contracts in return for campaign help from a fake Russian backer.**

Vienna, Austria

Just days before key EU elections, Austria's coalition government was plunged into crisis yesterday as far-right party leader and Vice-Chancellor Heinz-Christian Strache came under huge pressure to resign after explosive revelations from a hidden camera sting.

Media reports emerged on Friday alleging that Strache promised public contracts in return for campaign help from a fake Russian backer.

Germany's Der Spiegel and Sueddeutsche Zeitung published hidden-camera recordings of a sting operation they say took place in a luxury villa on the island of Ibiza a few months before 2017's parliamentary elections in Austria.

In the recordings Strache and his party's group leader in parliament Johann Gudenus are seen discussing with a woman purporting to be the niece of a Russian oligarch how she can invest in Austria.

She says she specifically wants to gain control of the country's largest-circulation tabloid, the Krone Zeitung.



FPÖ leader Heinz-Christian Strache in Ibiza in 2017. (Courtesy of Spiegel)

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Strache is seen suggesting that new owners could make staff changes at the Krone and use the paper to help his Freedom Party (FPÖ) in its election campaign.

He goes on to suggest the woman would then be able to gain access to public contracts.

According to the newspapers, Strache says that there would be no resistance among the Krone's editorial staff as "journalists are the biggest whores on the planet".

Both the newspapers that published the footage say they don't have any firm information over who set up the elaborate sting.

Chancellor Sebastian Kurz is due to give a press conference on Saturday morning where he will give his reaction to the scandal.

Austrian media report Strache is also expected to speak.

He has already admitted the meeting took place but denies any wrongdoing.

He told the Sueddeutsche Zeitung that "a lot of alcohol was consumed as the evening progressed" and that there was a "high language barrier" during the conversation.

Elsewhere in the video Strache evokes the possibility of privatising part of Austria's public broadcaster ORF and says he would like Austria's media landscape to resemble that in neighbouring Hungary.

Hungary's right-wing nationalist Prime Minister Viktor Orban has overhauled the country's

public media into a government propaganda organ while allies have steadily bought up swathes of the private media sector.

The FPÖ has mounted repeated attacks on the ORF's coverage, accusing it of being biased against the party.

Strache also appeared to hint at possible ways political donations could be made to a foundation linked to the FPÖ and not to the party directly, apparently in order to escape legal scrutiny.

In recent weeks Kurz has already had to defend his decision to enter government with the far-right after a string of revelations about extremist sympathies in the FPÖ's ranks.

The putative link to Russia in the scandal is particularly embarrassing as the FPÖ has a cooperation agreement with Russian President Vladimir Putin's United Russia party, leading many to accuse the FPÖ of an overly close relationship with Moscow.

The FPÖ's lead candidate in next week's elections, MEP Harald Vilimsky, cancelled a planned trip to Milan on Saturday where he was due to take part in a campaign event with far-right Italian Interior Minister Matteo Salvini.

Strache, 49, succeeded the mercurial Joerg Haider as leader of the party in 2005.

He himself flirted with neo-Nazism in his youth, but as leader sought to clean up the party's image and make it more electable.

First exit polls indicate Labor win in Australian election

Sydney, Australia

The first exit polls from Australia's climate-dominated election Saturday showed a victory for the opposition Labor party.

A Nine-Galaxy poll showed Labor beating the governing Liberal coalition 52-48, which would signal a clear parliamentary majority.

It would see former union leader Bill Shorten become prime minister after six years of conservative government.

'Save the Pacific to save the world'

Port Vila, Vanuatu

UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres said it was vital "to save the Pacific to save the world" as he wrapped up his brief South Pacific tour in Vanuatu yesterday.

Guterres has spent the past week in the region pushing for urgent action ahead of a UN summit in September billed as a last chance to prevent irreversible climate change.

According to the UN, Vanuatu is the world's most at-risk country from natural hazards, but Guterres said it was also "leading the way" with its resilience.

Life goes on under cloud of smog in Mexico City

Mexico City, Mexico

Scientists say breathing the heavily polluted air in Mexico City these days is like smoking somewhere between a quarter- and a half-pack of cigarettes a day.

But that has not stopped Oscar Chong from going out for his daily workout, despite four days of warnings from the authorities to avoid strenuous physical activity outside.

"I'm addicted to exercise. If I don't work out on a daily basis, I don't feel well. It actually helps release my creativity, among many other things. If I just stayed home, I'd be staring at the walls, staring at my computer screen, and ideas are never born that way," Chong, a graphic designer, told AFP.

The trim 51-year-old was taking a break from his interval workout in the capital's largest park, the Bosque de Chapultepec

-- which the authorities actually closed at one point this week, to hammer home the message that running or cycling in the middle of an air pollution alert was not a good idea.

The sprawling city -- a metropolitan area of more than 20 million people -- has been blanketed in a thick cloud of smog since last weekend.

Authorities blame the problem on dozens of wildfires that have broken out across central Mexico in recent weeks, and the lack of wind or rain to disperse the resulting particles.

However, experts agree the city's chronic pollution problems are also at fault.

Mexico City is prone to air pollution, both because of the mountains that surround it -- trapping smog overhead -- and its more than five million cars.

But the wildfires have undoubtedly made matters worse. They have sent the levels

of PM2.5 soaring -- tiny particles produced by any fire that are the deadliest air pollutant.

Authorities declared a pollution alert from Tuesday to Friday, after the micro-particle level hit 158 micrograms per cubic meter.

That is the equivalent of smoking more than seven cigarettes a day, according to a widely cited study by US doctors Richard and Elizabeth Muller. "every age group."

'Feels horrible'

The gray cloud of smog has scrambled people's routines in the sprawling mega-city.

Officials are urging residents to avoid physical activity outdoors, and children, the elderly and those with respiratory illnesses to remain inside.

They have canceled school and sporting events. The football league moved a key semi-fi-

nal match to Queretaro, some 200 kilometers (125 miles) to the northwest.

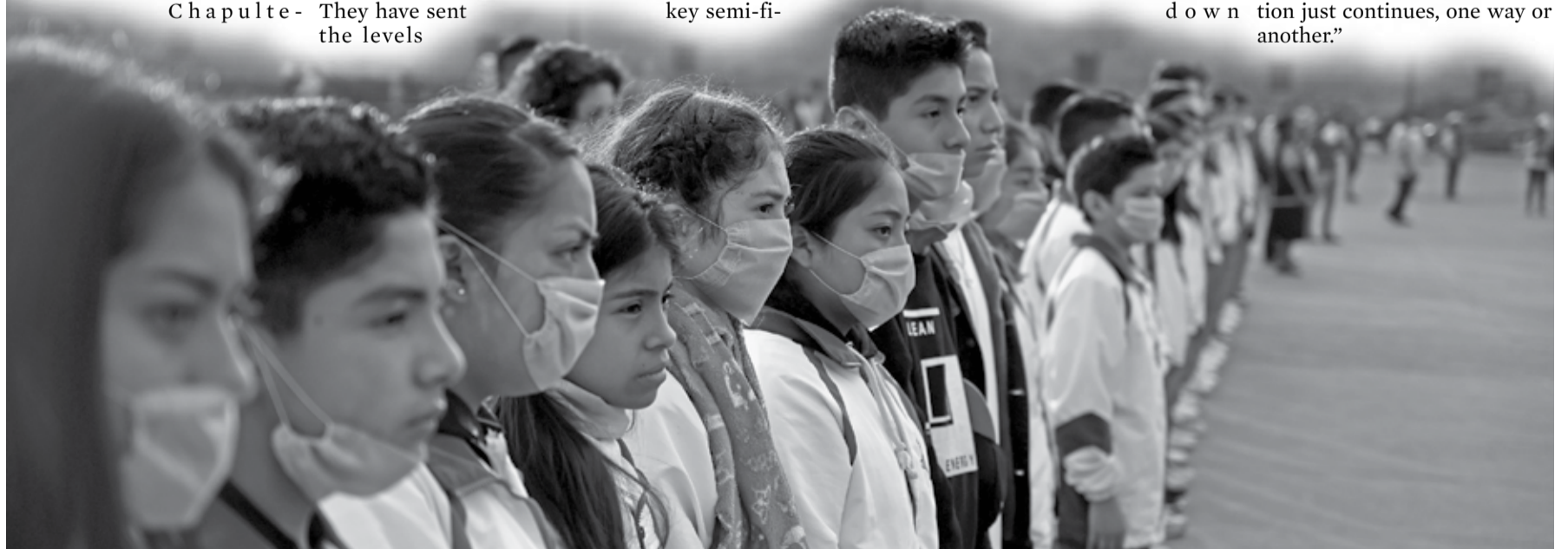
Many residents who can afford it have decided to do the same, skipping town until the pollution dies down -- though many traditional getaway spots outside the city are polluted, too.

That includes the picturesque colonial city of Puebla, 135 kilometers to the southeast, which is dealing with an extra dose of pollution thanks to the nearby Popocatepetl volcano, which has been spewing ash into the sky.

Other residents have little choice but to ride out the smog, which stings many people's eyes and throats.

"I've been trying not to go out. It smells like something burned," Nicté Muñoz, 38, said from behind a surgical mask on her way to the environmental organization where she works.

Authorities have shut



A group of students wear face masks during a ceremony at Zocalo Square in Mexico City