

BUSINESS

BRIEFCASE

LONDON Chicken shortage shuts KFCs across Britain

Fast-food fans were in a flutter Monday after most of the 900 KFC outlets in the U.K. and Ireland were forced to close because of a shortage of chicken.

The company apologized to customers, blaming "teething problems" with its new delivery partner, DHL.

KFC first apologized for the problems on Saturday. In an update Monday, it listed almost 300 stores as open, but did not say when the rest might join them.

It said those branches that remained open were operating a limited menu or shortened hours.

When DHL announced in October that it had won the KFC contract alongside logistics firm QSL, it promised to "re-write the rule book and set a new benchmark for delivering fresh products to KFC in a sustainable way."

BRUSSELS Spanish finance minister backed for leading ECB job

Finance ministers from the 19-country eurozone on Monday endorsed Spain's Luis de Guindos for the coveted post of European Central Bank vice president, after Ireland withdrew the only other candidate.

European Union leaders are expected to anoint de Guindos at a summit on March 22-23, after seeking the opinion of EU lawmakers and the ECB, which oversees the euro currency.

Once that is done, de Guindos will replace Vitor Constancio on June 1 and serve a non-renewable eight-year term.

The Associated Press

Banker: 'Nightmare' dodging extortion attempts in Latvia

By Carlo Piovano
The Associated Press

LONDON — Latvia's top banking official, a key member of the European Central Bank, has been accused by local bank Norvik of seeking kickbacks, trying to launder Russian money and retaliating against the bank when it refused to play by the "rules of the game."

In a high-stakes drama for the tiny Baltic country, Ilmars Rimsevics was detained Saturday by Latvian anti-corruption authorities and questioned for hours into the night. State TV showed him walking free on Monday, without charges, though he is still being investigated for suspected bribery.

Norvik bank has filed an international legal complaint against Latvia in which it alleges that a "Senior Latvian Official" repeatedly sought "to extort monetary bribes," and threatened the bank when its owner and chairman, Grigory Gusehnikov, refused to pay up.

"The high-level official mentioned in our request for arbitration is Rimsevics," Norvik's CEO, Oliver Bramwell, told The Associated Press. Gusehnikov confirmed that it was Rimsevics.

Rimsevics' lawyer told Latvian TV that he promises to provide more information about the case on Tuesday. The ECB declined to comment on Rimsevics' status.

The threat of criminal charges against the man who has been at the top of the country's banking sector since 1992, in the wake of the Soviet collapse, has plunged the small Baltic nation into turmoil.

Rimsevics' detention is particularly sensitive as he sits on the top policy-making council of the ECB, Europe's most powerful financial institution, and is privy to the state secrets of Latvia, NATO and

the European Union.

Any connections to money laundering would raise concerns of the risk of blackmail from Russia's secret services or organized crime, and come at a time when Latvian security services warn that Russia is actively trying to obtain state secrets from Latvian officials to weaken the European Union and United States.

Gusehnikov said he first met Rimsevics in 2015 after he was introduced to a man called Renars Kokins, who was said to know the country's legal and political landscape well. Kokins invited Gusehnikov to a meeting in a large villa in the suburbs of the capital. Soon after Gusehnikov got there, another man arrived, on foot, and entered without knocking: it was Rimsevics.

He was brief and to the point. He told Gusehnikov he could help him because the nation's financial regulator was loyal to him personally. All he had to do was "cooperate" with Kokins, Gusehnikov recalled.

Rimsevics left 10 minutes later and Kokins sat Gusehnikov down at a table. He pulled a pen out and wrote on a piece of paper: "100,000 per month."

Kokins did not use the word "payment." He explained to the banker that all Latvian banks "cooperate" in this manner, Gusehnikov says.

In the following weeks, Gusehnikov tried to stall but found that every time he refused to pay, his bank would get hit with new regulatory measures.

Gusehnikov says he met with Kokins and Rimsevics a few more times to try to clarify his position. Rimsevics took great care to not be seen at these meetings, Gusehnikov says.

On one occasion, Kokins drove Gusehnikov around the capital, Riga, for almost two hours before parking in front

of a Chinese restaurant in the city outskirts. Kokins left the car and minutes later, Rimsevics entered it and sat behind Gusehnikov, in the back seat, to speak, Gusehnikov said.

"It was a nightmare for me for years," said Gusehnikov, who is 41. "You can't understand how to get out of this dirty environment without reputation damage. That is why I decided to go out publicly and legally with my case. I can lose the bank, my money, but I will never become part of it."

Latvia has become infamous for money laundering since the high-profile Magnitsky scandal, in which \$230 million in Russian taxpayers' money was siphoned off, largely through Latvian banks, according to U.S. and European authorities. Whistleblower Sergei Magnitsky was imprisoned in Russia in 2008 and allegedly beaten and denied medical care, leading to his death. The U.S. and EU sanctioned Russian individuals over the case.

In 2014, a trove of leaked documents, the so-called Laundromat reports by the Organized Crime and Corruption Reporting Project, detailed how \$20 billion was sent from Russia, largely through Latvia, in 2010-2014.

Latvian banks then went through an independent audit last year, after which Latvian regulators levied fines against three banks for a total of 640,000 euros.

One week later, France fined Latvian bank Rietumu 80 million euros for money laundering. Major global banks, meanwhile, have stopped making dollar transactions with Latvian banks after the Laundromat's leaked documents illustrated how dirty money had reached firms like Deutsche Bank by way of Latvian banks.

European shares drift lower as traders take a breather

The Associated Press

LONDON — European shares drifted lower Monday as investors paused for breath following a sizeable rally last week. Despite the move lower, there are few signs of the turmoil that gripped stock markets earlier this month. U.S. stock markets are closed for Presidents Day.

KEEPING SCORE: In Europe, Germany's DAX was down 0.3 percent at 12,412 while the FTSE 100 index of leading British shares fell 0.3 percent to 7,276. The CAC 40 in France was 0.2 percent lower at 5,269.

CALM DOMINATES: Earlier this month there were real concerns that global stock markets were poised for a sustained period of weakness. However, sentiment has recovered over the past week or so, with many traders adjusting to the altered economic environment.

ANALYST TAKE: "So far, global equity markets seem to be adjusting to the prospect of higher inflation, presumably on the basis that increases in corporate pricing power will be positive for earnings rather than of the cost-push kind that dents profit margins and result in a stagflationary economy," said Neil Mackinnon, global macro strategist at VTB Capital.

BOLSTERING THE WORKFORCE

Youth career expo helps students see future employment opportunities



Udonis Morrison, 17, a senior at Marion Technical Institute, who is in the law academy, looks through a pair of goggles set up to simulate an eye condition which could lead to blindness at the Florida Center For The Blind table during the Youth Career Expo at the Circle Square Cultural Center at On Top of the World in Ocala on Wednesday. [STAFF PHOTOS BY BRUCE ACKERMAN]



Tevyn Barry of the Ocala Police Department, left, shows Jesse Langley, 16, a freshman at Lake Weir High School, right, a SWAT Team vest during the Youth Career Expo at the Circle Square Cultural Center at On Top of the World.



High School students look over different tables set up by businesses during the Youth Career Expo at the Circle Square Cultural Center at On Top of the World in Ocala on Wednesday.