

Turkey probes cryptocurrency exchange for possible \$2B fraud

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ANKARA: Turkish prosecutors launched an investigation into a cryptocurrency exchange Thursday over allegations it may have defrauded some 390,000 investors of an estimated \$2 billion.

The office of Istanbul's chief prosecutor said it was probing the Thodex cryptocurrency exchange following complaints from users unable to access their assets.

Thodex owner Faruk Fatih Ozer deactivated his social media accounts and is believed to have fled Turkey for Tirana, Albania, Turkish broadcaster Haberturk reported.

Ozer could face possible charges of fraud and forming a criminal organization, Haberturk said, adding that a police cybercrimes unit searched Thodex's Istanbul offices on Thursday.

Meanwhile, the country's financial crimes investigation agency blocked all Thodex's funds, the state-run Anadolu Agency reported.

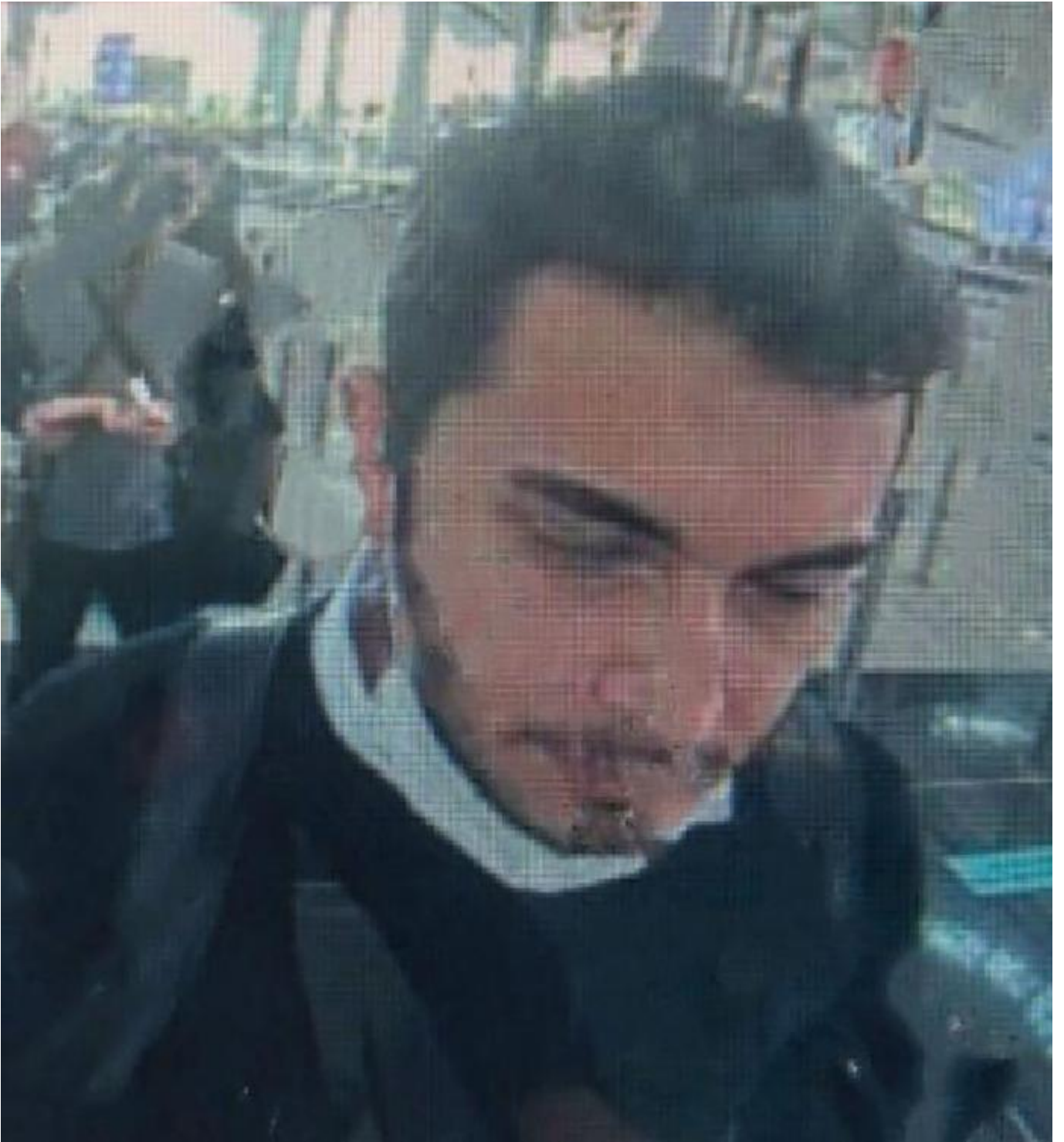
In a written statement carried by Haberturk and other Turkish media, Ozer denied the allegations of fraud and said he had left Turkey to hold meetings with foreign investors. He said he would return to Turkey within "a few days" to cooperate with the Turkish authorities.

Ozer also maintained that access to the cryptocurrency exchange was temporarily closed down to allow Thodex to investigate an alleged cyberattack.

Earlier in the week, Thodex notified users that it would halt operations for six hours for maintenance and later extended that period to 4-5 days.

Last week, Turkey's central bank announced that it was banning the use of cryptocurrencies for the payment for goods, saying they presented "irrevocable" risks.

The decision came as many in Turkey have turned to cryptocurrencies to shield their savings from rising inflation and the Turkish currency's slump.



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Acclaimed Turkish actor sued for 'insulting president' with Twitter posts
Top Turkish court reverses ban on news outlets

Deals signed to make coronavirus vaccine in Egypt

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Thu, 2021-04-22 16:38

CAIRO: Two agreements have been signed between the Egyptian Holding Company for Biological Products and Vaccines (Vacsera), and the Chinese company Sinovac Biotech for biopharmaceuticals, to manufacture the coronavirus vaccine in Egypt.

The signing of the agreements comes as part of efforts to achieve technical cooperation in this vital field.

The plan is to take advantage of the vaccine developed by the Chinese company Sinovac, a leader in research, development, production and marketing in pharmaceutical preparations, and exchange experiences to support Vacsera, a specialist in the manufacture of vaccines in Egypt.

The move is expected to contribute to limiting the spread of the virus.

Both agreements were signed by Heba Wali, Vacsera head and Sinovac Biotech vice president.

The first agreement concerns the manufacturing technology for the coronavirus vaccine, Egyptian Health Minister Hala Zayed said.

Under this deal, the Chinese company Sinovac gives Vacsera a limited license to use manufacturing technology and technical knowledge for the purpose of manufacturing the local final product of the COVID-19 vaccine, in Vacsera's manufacturing sites inside Egypt – using the ready-made product of the vaccine provided by Sinovac.

This agreement also stipulates that the Chinese company will provide Vacsera with all technical information related to the vaccine and provide technical assistance.

It includes examining the manufacturing places of Vacsera, and manufacturing the local final product using the ready-made product provided by Sinovac.

This is in addition to testing the local end-product, manufacturing methods and technical processes used, as well as equipment, tools or machines, repair and maintenance of Vacsera's manufacturing facilities.

Quality management and quality control are also part of this process.

The second agreement relates to the local manufacture of the COVID-19 vaccine, Zayed said.

It provides for the Chinese company, Sinovac, to grant a permit to Vacsera to refill, package and manufacture the local final product of the COVID-19 vaccine in Vacsera's own facilities.

It provides for Vacsera obtaining regulatory approvals, manufacturing technology and technical knowledge for the use of the ready-to-fill product provided by Sinovac, Zayed added.

The agreement stipulates that Vacsera will equip its current facilities or construct, build and equip new facilities to serve as manufacturing facilities.

An effective quality-management system will be set up for each step of production.

It enables the local manufacturer to meet the requirements, specifications and standards of operating procedures of Sinovac.

Sinovac will provide technical support and assistance to Vacsera in building and equipping manufacturing facilities to meet the required standards.

The agreement also stipulates that Sinovac is ready, at the request of Vacsera, to provide the necessary training for Vacsera employees in manufacturing facilities in Egypt or at its own facilities in Beijing, regarding final packaging and final quality-control operations.



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on currency-trading investigation

Author:

Wed, 2021-04-21 21:44

BEIRUT: A Lebanese judge on Wednesday raided the offices of Mecattaf money exchange company in Awkar for a third time, a day after the Supreme Judicial Council referred her to the Judicial Inspection Authority (JIA).

Judge Ghada Aoun, Mount Lebanon's public prosecutor, was accompanied by supporters of the Free Patriotic Movement (FPM). She was previously dismissed from an investigation into possible breaches of currency export rules.

"What is happening is a rebellion that will duly be dealt with," a judicial source told Arab News.

Other sources revealed that the head of the JIA, Judge Barkan Saad, called Aoun as she was forcing her way into the business's premises and asked her to leave, but she refused to comply.

"What Judge Aoun is doing goes against the statements she made during her hearing before the Supreme Judicial Council and this is unacceptable," the judicial source said.

"We will act accordingly and she could be referred to the Disciplinary Council, meaning that she could be prosecuted, because what she is doing falls under the judges' crimes section. If the judiciary moves forward with this measure, she will be prosecuted by the prosecutor general."

Mecattaf is one of the largest money and gold-trading companies in Lebanon. Aoun arrived at its offices in Awkar, Beirut, with her bodyguards, who are members of State Security, and broke the locks on metal gates at the entrance as her supporters cheers and shouted: "May God be with you, Ghada Aoun."

They sat on the ground in the yard outside the building while Aoun entered it accompanied by a financial expert. The Internal Security Forces cleared the yard of protesters but allowed them to remain on the street outside.

Journalists were prevented from accompanying Aoun into the building but before she did so she told them: "I was prohibited from entering the company with my car, so I entered on foot. I was not allowed to enter because the company's data exposes the people that smuggled their money abroad. I ask the judiciary to stand with me because these are the rights of the people, not my own.

"What was issued by the Supreme Judicial Council is just a statement, not a decision, and I have yet to be informed of it. Preventing me from entering with my car is a recognized crime and I call on the security forces and the president to intervene."

Lebanon's prosecutor general, Ghassan Oueidat, previously transferred the financial-transactions case that Aoun was handling to Judge Samer Lishaa.

Aoun refused to abide by the decision and continued her investigation. She is backed politically by President Michel Aoun and his political bloc, represented by the FPM.

There are fears that the issue will become a political battle that will lead the international community to believe that while some officials are trying to fight corruption in Lebanon, others are attempting to prevent this.

“Judge Aoun is saying that Mecattaf Company possesses data with the names of all those who smuggled their money abroad before the decision to block deposits in dollars in Lebanese banks was issued in 2019,” a judicial source told Arab News. “However Michel Mecattaf, the director and one of the company’s shareholders, confirmed that his company is abiding by the Code of Money and Credit, meaning that it is subject to banking secrecy.”

Mecattaf has also stated that he is following the law “and a witness in this case, not a suspect.”

Groups of Judge Aoun’s supporters, using the names United Alliance and Cry of the Depositors, issued a statement in which they said: “Mecattaf’s representatives and the employees of his company are suspiciously refusing to hand over the remaining data, bearing in mind that the data extracted so far shows loopholes in the chains of (US dollar) transactions abroad during a crucial period from before the October Revolution in late 2019 to early 2020.

“This has pushed Judge Aoun to head to the company’s headquarters again, as the requests of the financial expert to obtain the accounting records and the documents related to money transactions were denied.”

In February last year, Mecattaf said that “shipping (of currency) is done under prior authorization from the Central Bank and under the supervision of the Banking Control Commission. The money we ship is ours, whether in dollars, pounds sterling or euros.

“So if we want to ship money abroad from Lebanon, we buy it as a commodity and transfer it aboard. Most importantly, money shipping is done exclusively from and to a banking or financial institution. There are no limits to shipping but we are not allowed to transfer money to a third party.”

Mecattaf also said: “Since the beginning of 2019, I have been receiving more than 100 calls daily from most of the politicians, bankers and rich people, asking me to transfer their money abroad. This went on for months.

“Carrying out such a thing is very difficult. It cannot be done unless a large majority of bank directors and employees are a part of it,” otherwise transactions that violate rules will not go unnoticed, he added.



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Defiant Lebanese judge stages second raid on money exchange

[Egypt-Libya direct flights resume, key pacts signed](#)

Wed, 2021-04-21 21:04

CAIRO: Egyptian Prime Minister Mostafa Madbouly has announced the return of direct flights to Libya from Wednesday after high-level meetings in Tripoli.

He has also announced a plan to ensure the return of Egyptian workers to Libya to contribute to its reconstruction and development.

During his visit to the capital, Madbouly and Abdel-Hamid Al-Dabaiba, the head of the Libyan National Unity Government, oversaw the signing of 11 documents to enhance cooperation.

Egypt's Ministry of Aviation has issued instructions to allow the immediate reception of flights from Libya at Cairo airport, Madbouly said.

He added that the parties agreed to reopen the Egyptian Embassy and Consulate in Libya after Eid Al-Fitr.

He said the return of direct flights from Libyan airports to Cairo "is an important factor for cooperation in other economic fields."

The agreements included deals on cooperation in transport, implementing road and infrastructure projects, and cooperation in the health sector.

Other agreements were signed on investment in international connectivity, raising capacities in the fiber optic system.

Libya and Egypt issued a joint declaration at the end of Madbouly's high-level visit, highlighting discussions on political and economic issues of common interest.

The two sides emphasized the importance of continued coordination and the possibility of unifying their positions on several issues. They stressed the importance of Libya's protection of its sovereignty over its territories, political unity, and independence.

Both leaders showed determination to facilitate the political process ahead of Libya's general elections on Dec. 24.



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Deals signed during Egyptian PM's Libya visit
Egypt continues to push for political solution in Libya

Lebanese ration cards considered despite no data on number of poor families

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Wed, 2021-04-21 20:32

BEIRUT: Subsidized food commodities are disappearing from store shelves minutes after being replenished, as people rush to stores amid talks about lifting subsidies by the end of Ramadan.

Caretaker Finance Minister Ghazi Wazni said in early April that the Lebanese Central Bank Gov. Riad Salameh informed him that "Lebanon's mandatory reserves to fund basic imports will run out by the end of May."

He also warned that "delays in launching a plan to reduce subsidies are costing the country \$500 million a month."

On Wednesday, a debate emerged about giving ration cards to struggling families. The card would accompany the lifting of subsidies to provide social safety.

President Michel Aoun met with a joint delegation of the Parliamentary Committee for National Economy, Trade, Industry and Planning and the Economic and Social Council.

The delegation handed Aoun a policy paper that considered an "entry point to redirect subsidies."

The paper was written with the participation of some ministers and other representatives of parliamentary blocs and political parties.

According to Aoun's media office, the paper suggested two strategies. It said the government should "enforce a number of urgent measures for 12 months, addressing gasoline, fuel oil, gas, medicine, wheat, electricity, and the rest of products, as well as working on reducing the public sector's expenditures in dollars and shifting the current subsidy policy into providing direct cash assistance, in line with the measures to gradually lift subsidies."

The media office added that the paper said the government must focus on "implementing rapid complementary actions that accompany the start of the gradual lifting of subsidies," in line with agreements with the International Monetary Fund and "based on an integrated government rescue, rehabilitation and recovery program, and implementing the required reforms so that the

social protection strategy becomes part of the program.”

A source at the Finance Ministry told Arab News that the debate was “a precursor to a basic requirement: Providing data and financing.”

Until now, the Ministry of Social Affairs has not provided data on the poorest families which could be used for the issuing of ration cards.

The source added: “Lebanon’s caretaker Prime Minister Hassan Diab visited Qatar two days earlier to ask for financing. However, and despite Qatar’s empathy toward supporting Lebanon, funding needs agreements, which are unavailable as long as there is no statistical data about the needy people.” The national currency has lost 85 percent of its value since the end of 2019, resulting in more than half the population falling into poverty.

Politicians have not agreed on a rescue plan or a new government since the resignation of Diab’s cabinet in August 2020.

The source said that the state’s obligatory reserves stand at \$15 billion, which is made of the hard currency deposits that local lenders have placed at the Central Bank.

Lebanon has spent \$1 billion on subsidies.

The source added: “Any next steps require a government decision. The Central Bank governor cannot act alone as he is following the government’s instructions in this context.”

Participants in the policy paper have estimated that the number of needy families ranges between 750,000 and 800,000. They said that if subsidies are lifted and the ration cards adopted, \$6 billion will be saved from the annual expenditure.

The paper comes as fears grow over the financial collapse leading to further hunger and unrest.

The Crisis Observatory at the American University of Beirut said in a report obtained by Arab News that “the weekly monitoring of the prices of 17 goods chosen as an approximate sample of food constantly needed by Lebanese families from vegetables, fruits, grains, meat, oils and dairy products, prices have significantly increased from January 2020 to April 2021, with the exception of flour.”

It added: “There is a continuous and significantly growing increase in the prices of oils, meat, sugar, fruits and vegetables, and the prices are prominently related to the dollar exchange rate in the black market, even when it comes to local produce such as vegetables, fruits, eggs, olives oil and dairy products.”

Head of Syndicate of Food Importers in Lebanon Hani Bohsali – who previously headed the delegation of importers that met with Salameh – told Arab News that the Central Bank governor “assured us that the products that were approved for subsidization will be subsidized, noting that subsidized products have lately diminished from 300 to 100 products, and not all of them are products that people need on a daily basis.”

Bohsali noted that “traders import unsubsidized goods which are required in the market, and we still import from the same sources. However, some traders are importing goods that are cheaper for consumers, in line with people’s purchasing capacity.”



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