

Telegram chief Pavel Durov arrested at French airport

AFP- Telegram chief executive Pavel Durov is expected to appear in court Sunday after being arrested by French police at an airport near Paris for alleged offences related to his popular messaging app, sources told AFP.

The Franco-Russian billionaire, 39, was detained at Le Bourget airport north of the French capital on Saturday evening, one of the sources said, speaking on condition of anonymity.

Durov had arrived from Baku, in Azerbaijan, another source close to the case said.

France's OFMIN, an office tasked with preventing violence against minors, had issued an arrest warrant for Durov in a preliminary investigation into alleged offences including fraud, drug trafficking, cyberbullying, organised crime and promotion of terrorism, one of the sources said.

Durov is accused of failing to take action to curb the criminal use of his platform.

"Enough of Telegram's impunity," said one of the investigators, adding they were surprised Durov came to Paris knowing he was a wanted man.

– Platform of 'privacy' –

The encrypted messaging app, based in Dubai, has positioned itself as an alternative to US-owned platforms, which have been criticised for their commercial exploitation of users' personal data.

Telegram has committed to never disclosing any information about its users.

In a rare interview given to right-wing talk show host Tucker

Carlson in April, Durov said he got the idea to launch an encrypted messaging app after coming under pressure from the Russian government when working at VK, a social network he created before selling it and leaving Russia in 2014.

He said he then tried to settle in Berlin, London, Singapore and San Francisco before choosing Dubai, which he praised for its business environment and “neutrality”.

People “love the independence. They also love the privacy, the freedom, (there are) a lot of reasons why somebody would switch to Telegram,” Durov told Carlson.

He said at the time that the platform had more than 900 million active users.

By basing itself in the United Arab Emirates, Telegram has been able to shield itself from moderation laws at a time when Western countries are pressuring large platforms to remove illegal content.

Telegram allows groups of up to 200,000 members, which has led to accusations that it makes it easier for false information to spread virally, as well as for users to disseminate neo-Nazi, paedophilic, conspiratorial and terrorist content.

Competitor messaging service WhatsApp introduced worldwide limits on message forwarding in 2019 after it was accused of enabling the spread of false information in India that led to lynchings.

AFP