

Ex-Murdoch aides face bribery charges

LONDON, UK: British prosecutors charged the former head of News International Rebekah Brooks and the prime minister's former spokesman Andy Coulson on Tuesday (20 November) with paying bribes for information on the royal family and the military.



Three other people also face charges over allegations that staff at Rupert Murdoch's market-leading British tabloid *The Sun* and the now-defunct *News of the World* newspaper made illegal payments to British officials.

The charges are the latest to stem from the phone-hacking scandal which shut down the *News of the World* in 2011, caused a firestorm in British politics and plague Murdoch's empire to this day.

Brooks, who is a close friend of Prime Minister David Cameron, and Coulson, the premier's media chief until last year, already face trial on hacking charges. Brooks has also been charged with obstruction of justice.

The Crown Prosecution Service said in a statement that Coulson, a former editor of the *News of the World*, and Clive Goodman, the tabloid's ex-royal reporter, face two charges of conspiracy to commit misconduct in a public office.

They made payments in exchange for a Buckingham Palace phone book called the *Green Book* which contained "contact details for the Royal Family and members of the royal household", said Alison Levitt, the principal legal advisor to the Director of Public Prosecutions.

The person they paid remains unidentified, the CPS said.

Brooks, former *Sun* chief reporter John Kay, and Bettina Jordan-Barber, a Ministry of Defence employee, face one charge each of conspiracy to conduct misconduct in a public office.

The charges relate to payments of around £100,000 that were made to Barber in exchange for information between 2004 and 2011 for stories in *The Sun*, Levitt said.

All five will appear in court in London at a later date.

Coulson issued a statement saying he was "extremely disappointed" and that he would "fight the charges in court."

News International in London declined to comment when contacted by *AFP*. Brooks and Coulson, both 44, are due to go on trial on the other charges in September 2013. It was not immediately clear if the latest charges will be dealt with at the same time.

The only person to have previously been charged in the investigation into illegal payments, code-named *Operation Elveden*, is Scotland Yard detective April Casburn.

It is one of three linked British police investigations, along with *Operation Weeting*, which deals with phone-hacking, and *Operation Tuleta*, which relates to the hacking of emails and handling of stolen mobile phones.

A judge-led public inquiry into the ethics of the British press, which was set up by Cameron last year, is due to issue its findings by the end of this year.

Senior judge Brian Leveson is widely expected to recommend statutory regulation of newspapers.

Murdoch closed the *News of the World*, Britain's top selling paper, in July 2011 after it emerged it had hacked the phones of a murdered schoolgirl and other crime victims, as well as politicians and celebrities.

Police say the phone hacking charges filed so far involve the hacking of 600 people's voice-mails, including Hollywood stars Brad Pitt and Angelina Jolie and Manchester United footballer Wayne Rooney.

News International, the British newspaper arm of Murdoch's US-based News Corp. conglomerate, has paid out millions of pounds to hacking victims.

Brooks had a meteoric rise through the ranks of Murdoch's empire, editing the *News of the World* from 2000 to 2003, then *The Sun* from 2003 to 2009, before becoming chief executive of News International, News Corp.'s British newspaper wing.

At one time she moved in the highest circles of British politics and at the Leveson inquiry it emerged that she had exchanged flirty text messages with Cameron, who was a school friend of her husband.

Coulson edited the *News of the World* from 2003 until 2007. He resigned after Goodman and a private eye were jailed for what the paper said were isolated cases of phone-hacking.

Coulson went on to become Cameron's media chief from 2007 until 2011 when he stood down.

Source: *AFP* via I-Net Bridge