

Japanese authorities vow to tighten immigration rules after Carlos Ghosn's escape

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Japanese officials on Sunday criticized Carlos Ghosn's escape from the country as "unjust" and vowed to tighten immigration rules in their first public remarks since the former auto executive fled for Lebanon a week ago.

Ghosn left Japan "illegally by unjust methods," said Justice Minister Masako Mori, the country's top judicial official. She said that authorities have no official record of Ghosn's departure from Japan, and that prosecutors are investigating the case.

Mori also said she has ordered the country's immigration department to "further tighten" rules for leaving the country "so that the same situation won't be repeated."

Mori's statement — along with a similar one published Sunday by a Tokyo prosecutor — marked the first time Japanese authorities addressed Ghosn's stunning escape last week. Government offices in the country had been closed all week for the New Year holiday.

Ghosn — the former chairman of Nissan and Mitsubishi Motors, and former chairman and CEO of their alliance partner, Renault — had been awaiting trial in Japan on charges of financial wrongdoing. As a condition of his release on bail, Ghosn was required to stay in Japan. But the case was upended after Ghosn revealed that he had fled Japan for Lebanon to escape what he called a "rigged" justice system.

Mori defended the country's justice system on Sunday, adding that it assured "fundamental human rights" and set out to "find out the truth of the case."

She also said that Ghosn's bail has been "canceled," and confirmed that the Japanese government asked Interpol, the international police agency, to issue a "red notice" for Ghosn. Lebanon said last week that it had received that notice, confirming that Ghosn is wanted by police.

Takahiro Saito, Tokyo's deputy chief prosecutor, said in his own statement Sunday that Ghosn "deliberately ignored" Japan's justice proceedings by fleeing the country, even though his bail barred him from overseas travel. Saito added that Ghosn's escape "could be a criminal act."

"Ghosn broke his own promise to attend the court and run away from Japan," Saito said. Both he and Mori called the event "regrettable."

Ghosn was arrested in November 2018 and has since faced a litany of charges, including allegations that he understated his income for years and funneled \$5 million of Nissan's money to a car dealership he controlled. He was ousted from his posts at Nissan and Mitsubishi Motors following his arrest in November 2018, and later resigned from Renault. He has denied the charges against him.

Ghosn's Japanese lawyer, Junichiro Hironaka, said Saturday that the defense team would resign after contacting Ghosn this week. Hironaka had earlier told reporters that Ghosn's escape was a "complete surprise."

Authorities, meanwhile, have been scrambling to figure out how Ghosn pulled off the escape. Prosecutors in Tokyo raided the home where he had been staying last Thursday.

Ghosn has denied reports that his family were involved in helping him flee. Last week, a Turkish company that charters private jets confirmed that two of its planes were used "illegally" to transport Ghosn without the knowledge of company management. That company, MNG, said it has filed a criminal complaint.

-- *Yoko Wakatsuki reported from Tokyo, Akanksha Sharma reported from Hong Kong and Amy Woodyatt wrote from London.*