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Ex-Banker Gives Data on Taxes to WikiLeaks

By RAVI SOMAIYA and JULIA WERDIGIER

LONDON — A former senior Swiss bank executive said on Monday that he had given the WikiLeaks founder, Julian Assange, details of more than 2,000 prominent individuals and companies that he contends engaged in tax evasion and other possible criminal activity.

Rudolf M. Elmer, who ran the Caribbean operations of the Swiss bank Julius Baer for eight years until he was dismissed in 2002, refused to identify any of the individuals or companies, but he told reporters at a news conference that about 40 politicians and “pillars of society” were among them.

He told The Observer newspaper over the weekend that those named in the documents come from “the U.S., Britain, Germany, Austria and Asia — from all over,” and include “business people, politicians, people who have made their living in the arts and multinational conglomerates — from both sides of the Atlantic.”

Mr. Elmer handed two computer disks to Mr. Assange at the news conference, the first significant public event the WikiLeaks founder has held since he was arrested in London in early December after Swedish prosecutors sought to have him extradited on charges of sexual crimes there. He has denied the charges but was briefly jailed last year before bail was granted.

Wearing the same dark blue suit he has worn through his legal battles, Mr. Assange said that WikiLeaks would verify and release the information, including the names, in as little as two weeks.

He mentioned possible partnerships with financial news organizations and suggested he would consider turning the information over to Britain’s Serious Fraud Office, which investigates financial corruption.

Mr. Elmer, who previously provided documents from his former employer to national tax authorities including the Internal Revenue Service in the United States, said he had turned to WikiLeaks to “educate society” about what he considers an unfair system that serves the rich and aids those who seek to launder money.

His recent offers to provide further data to universities and governments were spurned, he said, and he thought that the Swiss media had failed to cover the substance of his accusations.

“The man in the street needs to know how this system works,” he said, referring to the offshore trusts that many “high net worth individuals” around the world use to evade taxes.

Bank Julius Baer, a 120-year-old institution that is usually noted for its intense privacy, said in a statement that it denied all wrongdoing and suggested that Mr. Elmer was pursuing a “vendetta” to “discredit Julius Baer as well as clients in the eyes of the public.”

It accused him of using falsified documents, spreading baseless accusations and passing on “unlawfully acquired, respectively retained, documents to the media, and later also to WikiLeaks.”

On Monday, Mr. Elmer declined to say how he had obtained the documents. He was detained for 30 days in 2005 in connection with allegations that he falsified documents, violated Swiss banking secrecy laws and tried to coerce his former employers by threatening to disclose information. He faces trial in [Switzerland](#) on Wednesday, said his Swiss

lawyer, Ganden Tethong Blattner, [for the latter two charges](#) and faces a possible sentence of eight months' probation and a fine of \$8,200.

WikiLeaks and Bank Julius Baer previously clashed in early 2008 when the antisecrecy organization published hundreds of documents pertaining to its offshore activities. The bank succeeded, briefly, in gaining a court order to shut down the WikiLeaks.org Web site. The injunction was subsequently overturned and the case was dropped.

The [offshore banking](#) industry has come under increasing pressure in recent years amid accusations that places like the Caribbean, with looser financial laws, allowed investors to avoid taxes and that some banks helped to create complex webs of companies and trust funds there to confuse tax authorities abroad.

In 2009, Bradley Birkenfeld, a former private banker for [UBS](#), disclosed some of the industry's illegal tactics and forced the bank to turn over details of several thousand client accounts to the I.R.S. as part of a legal settlement. UBS agreed to pay a \$780 million fine and admitted criminal wrongdoing.

Still, Mr. Assange said in London on Monday, financial institutions usually "operate outside the rule of law" because of their economic power. WikiLeaks itself has been "economically censored," he said, by companies like [Visa](#) and [MasterCard](#), which stopped processing donations to it late last year in response to its release of hundreds of thousands of classified United States documents on the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq and thousands of State Department cables.

WikiLeaks, perhaps signaling a new focus, has also said it would release information from an American bank, thought to be from a [Bank of America](#) executive's hard drive, early this year. But, Mr. Assange said, the site is not fully "open for public business" owing to the weight of the existing leaks it is struggling to process.

At the news conference, Mr. Assange declined to comment on the accusations of sexual abuse, brought by two women in Sweden, which have occupied much of his time in recent months. But he has strenuously denied any wrongdoing and has described the proceedings as "a smear campaign" meant to discredit him. He will appear in a British court for a comprehensive hearing on the matter on Feb. 7.

The United States is also thought to be investigating Mr. Assange and WikiLeaks, in connection with the release of the classified government and military information.