

UN concerned over rights abuses in Bangladesh

Expresses worry with situations in India, Pakistan, Myanmar

DIPLOMATIC CORRESPONDENT

UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Michelle Bachelet has expressed concern over the continuing allegations of torture, arbitrary arrests and extrajudicial killings in Bangladesh last year.

"Continuing allegations of torture, arbitrary arrests and almost 400 extrajudicial killings last year are concerning, as are reports of intimidation of human rights defenders, journalists and trade unionists, and constraints in the context of recent local elections," she said while addressing the 43rd session of the UN Human Rights Council on Thursday.

She also called for reforming the Digital Security Act, which was criticised by rights groups and journalists who feared the act would curb independent journalism and freedom of speech.

The UN human rights chief encouraged action to strengthen the independence and impartiality of the judiciary and National Human Rights Commission of Bangladesh.

She also lauded the country for its commendable record of working with the UN -- particularly in receiving the Rohingya refugees.

Some 750,000 Rohingyas fled brutal military crackdown since August 2017, joining some 300,000 others who had fled waves of violence, especially after Myanmar denied citizenship of the Rohingyas through a citizenship law in 1982.

Talking about a recent report on Myanmar, Bachelet said discrimination and exclusion against religious and ethnic minorities have characterised many of the laws and policies of Myanmar for over half a century.

They have contributed to and perpetuated violence, extreme poverty, exploitation and dispossession. Notably, the 1982 Citizenship Law rendered stateless a significant proportion of the Rohingya and other Muslims, compounding their vulnerability, she said.

"Moreover, ethnic and religious minorities across the country have to varying degrees, suffered serious

human rights violations at the hands of the military, whose counter-insurgency policies and tactics have at times included the deliberate targeting of civilians," said Bachelet.

Democratic deficits in Myanmar, as well as entrenched impunity, weak rule of law, and the lack of civilian oversight over the military, have been major enabling factors, she said.

"The recent upsurge of xenophobia and violence can also be partly attributed to the stresses and uncertainties of Myanmar's current transition from decades of authoritarian rule.

"The dramatic expansion of public access to social media has enabled extremist and ultra-nationalist movements to propagate messages inciting hatred and violence, fueling communal tensions."

The UN human rights chief urged the Myanmar government to take action to address escalating prejudice and incitement against Rohingyas and other minority communities.

Bachelet also expressed concern over the Citizenship Amendment Act of India and the reports of police inaction in the face of attacks against Muslims by other groups, as well as previous reports of excessive use of force by police against peaceful protesters.

At least 42 people have lost their lives and more than 250 were injured as armed mobs rampaged through parts of northeast Delhi from Sunday till Tuesday, looting and burning buildings and attacking residents.

"I appeal to all political leaders to prevent violence," she said.

She mentioned that religious minorities in Pakistan continue to face violence, repeated attacks on their places of worship, and discrimination in law and practice.

The government, despite recommendations from international human rights mechanisms, has not amended or repealed blasphemy law provisions, which have led to violence against religious minorities, as well as to arbitrary arrests and prosecution, the UN human rights chief added.



Demanding the government increase the age limit from 30 to 35 years for entering civil service, some job seekers stage a unique protest in front of the Jatiya Press Club yesterday. They sit inside a net holding placards reading "Skills imprisoned in the net of 30". The demonstration was held under the banner of Bangladesh Shadharan Chhatra Parishad.

PHOTO: STAR

Coronavirus spreads in three continents

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"We have now increased our assessment of the risk of spread and the risk of impact of COVID-19 to very high at global level," World Health Organization (WHO) chief Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus told reporters.

TIME FOR ACTION

But as the outbreak eases in China it is surging elsewhere. Four more countries reported their first cases, taking the number of countries and territories outside China with infections to 55, with more than 4,200 cases killing about 70 people.

Countries other than China now account for about three-quarters of new infections.

An Italian man who arrived in Nigeria was confirmed as the first coronavirus case in Africa's most populous country. And a person who returned on a flight from Iran became the first in New Zealand.

In eastern Europe, Belarus and Lithuania reported their first cases.

World Health Organization (WHO) Director General Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus said all nations should prepare.

"This virus has pandemic potential," Tedros said in Geneva. "This is not a time for fear. This is a time for taking action to prevent infection and save lives now."

DECISIVE

Mongolia, which has yet to confirm a case, placed its president, Battulga Khaltmaa, in quarantine as a

precaution after he returned from a trip to China, state media reported.

A Chinese official called the epidemic the most difficult health crisis in the country's modern history. Another said some recovered patients had been found to be infectious, suggesting the epidemic may be even harder to eradicate.

In addition to stockpiling medical supplies, governments ordered schools shut and cancelled big gatherings to try to halt the flu-like disease known as COVID-19.

All pets of people in Hong Kong infected with the coronavirus will be quarantined, with one dog already in isolation, the city's authorities said yesterday.

US President Donald Trump's administration was considering invoking special powers to expand production of protective gear.

In Europe, France's reported cases doubled, Germany warned of an impending epidemic and Greece, a gateway for refugees from the Middle East, announced tighter border controls.

The death toll in Italy, Europe's worst-hit country, rose to 17 and those testing positive increased by more than 200 to 655.

Germany has nearly 60 cases, France about 38 and Spain 23, according to a Reuters count.

Tedros told reporters that Iran, Italy and South Korea were at a "decisive point" in efforts to prevent a wider outbreak.

OLYMPIC DOUBTS

South Korea has the most cases outside China. It reported 571 new infections yesterday, bringing the total to 2,337. The outbreak, which has killed 13 people in South Korea, has also dented President Moon Jae-in's popularity, a poll showed.

The head of the WHO's emergency program, Dr Mike Ryan, said Iran's outbreak may be worse than realised. It has reported the most deaths outside China - 34 from 388 reported cases.

US intelligence agencies are monitoring the spread of coronavirus in Iran as well as India, where only a handful of cases of have been reported, sources said.

Japan is scheduled to host the 2020 Olympics in July but Ryan said discussions were being held about whether to go ahead.

Organizers will decide next week on the ceremonial torch relay. It is due to arrive on March 20 for a 121-day journey past landmarks including Mount Fuji and Hiroshima's Peace Memorial Park.

As of yesterday, confirmed cases in Japan topped 200, with four deaths, excluding more than 700 cases and five more deaths from a quarantined cruise liner, Diamond Princess.

Prime Minister Shinzo Abe had called for schools to close and vowed to prevent a severe blow to an economy already teetering on the brink of recession.

Mexico court jails man over murder of journalist

AFP, Cuicatlan

One of the murderers of acclaimed journalist and AFP contributor Javier Valdez Cardenas was sentenced Thursday to 14 years and eight months in prison by a Mexican court.

Heriberto Picos Barraza, nicknamed "El Koala", was one of the perpetrators of the crime committed in the northwestern city of Cuicatlan in May 2017, according to the prosecution.

He had served as a driver for two men, Juan Francisco Picos Barreto and Luis Idefonso Sanchez, who shot Valdez outside his office.

A co-founder of the weekly newspaper Riodoce, Valdez, 50, was one of the most prominent chroniclers of Mexico's deadly drug war in a state where notorious kingpin Joaquin "El Chapo" Guzman once reigned.

The public prosecutor's office ordered the accused to pay 9 million pesos (around 420,000 euros, \$460,000) to the journalist's family. The sum will be covered by the Executive Commission for Victim Assistance (CEAV), a branch of the interior ministry.

The prosecution argued that the assassination was ordered by Damaso Lopez Serrano, the son of a drug trafficker, who was furious at having been criticized in an article by Riodoce.

Lopez Serrano, who allegedly paid 100,000 pesos for the killing and supplied the weapons, has always denied the claims.

Dhaka airport security at risk

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nothing had been done in this regard. It strongly recommended installation of cameras in the asphalt at four gates so that vehicles entering the airport could be scanned from underneath.

The team in the report said they in 2012 recommended stopping movement of people on the embankment in Baunia and building an underpass or tunnel there but nothing had been done since then.

The confidential report also said a huge number of people go to Baunia area to see planes land and take off from Runway 14 and at night some use lasers. All of these are threats to pilots, planes and airport security.

There were dark areas in the 1,298-acre airport as the 57 floodlights could not cover every corner, it said, adding that CCTV coverage was also inadequate and many of them did not have night vision capabilities.

It recommended installation of night-vision CCTV cameras at

a number of places and those be monitored strictly.

The report said there were many bushes inside the airport that prevent security officials from seeing far away. It recommended trimming them at regular intervals.

Mahbub Ali, state minister of civil aviation and tourism ministry, told The Daily Star that they were trying to overcome the situation and took many initiatives to beef up security at the airport.

"We will not tolerate any sort of negligence of duty. Professionalism is must. No compromise on security of airport will be tolerated," he said.

Captain Sajjadul Haq, former general secretary of Bangladesh Pilot Association, said the airport seems poorly illuminated but as the airport extension project was going on, hopefully things would improve.

He said lasers were very dangerous as a pilot could be temporarily blinded by them during approach. He recommended people be made aware of the matter.

Cops arrest over 500

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maintained strict vigil in view of Friday prayers at mosques. Shops and other establishments opened in some places and more private vehicles were seen on roads.

Autos and e-rickshaws also began plying in some of the violence-hit areas as people stepped out of their homes to get back to work or catch up on essential errands.

Police has appealed to people residing in north-east Delhi that if they had witnessed violent incidents, they should come forward and share their ordeal and videos with the police.

Local mosques appealed for peace and harmony and put out announcements asking people not to fall prey to rumours and cooperate with police, reports Times of India.

The violence began over a citizenship law that Prime Minister Narendra Modi's Hindu nationalist government introduced in December providing a path to Indian citizenship for six religious groups from neighbouring countries, but not Muslims.

Critics say the law is discriminatory

and comes on top of other measures such as withdrawal of autonomy for Muslim-majority Jammu and Kashmir that has deepened disquiet about the future of India's 200 million Muslims, reports Reuters.

Critics of the government however blamed this week's violence on members of Modi's Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), which was trounced in local Delhi elections at the beginning of the month. The BJP has denied the allegations.

Ultimately, the violence morphed into street battles between groups with the police largely ineffective in controlling the situation.

The Organisation of Islamic Countries (OIC) has condemned the violence against Muslims and vandalism of mosques and Muslim-owned properties.

US Democratic presidential hopeful Bernie Sanders accused President Donald Trump of failing on the issue of human rights after he refused to be drawn into criticising New Delhi for its handling of unrests in the capital. Trump was on a state visit to India when the violence broke out.

Now Wasa water gets dearer

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On February 26, the Local Government Department issued an order approving the tariff hikes proposed by Wasa.

The latest move has drawn flak from city dwellers, with some residents and experts saying hikes in water prices would be a further burden on people as it comes just after the hike in power tariffs.

They termed the Wasa move illogical as residents of many neighbourhoods have been living with foul-smelling tap water and that people of different areas face severe water crisis during summer.

"The tap water we are getting is stinky. Now we have to pay more for this? Wasa must ensure safe water before prices are hiked," said Mohammad Sabuj, a resident of Sobhanbagh, in his reaction to the Wasa move.

On Thursday, the energy regulator increased the retail electricity prices by 5.3 percent from the current rate. Each unit of electricity will be Tk 7.13, announced Bangladesh Energy Regulatory Commission.

Consumers rights activists say the hikes in the utility services will affect the living standards of many city residents, especially those from the middle- and limited-income brackets, since their income has not increased in line with the high cost of living.

Already hit hard by soaring prices of essentials, this new rise in water tariffs would lead to a hike in house rents, they said.

From the costs for education and medical treatment to personal care products -- prices of everything has continued to increase sharply in the last several years.

"The first thing which is going to happen is the increase in the

house rent," said Rakibul Islam, an employee of a private company in the capital.

"From the first day of this year, we have been getting news of price hikes. First, the prices of liquefied petroleum gas cylinder, then the electricity tariffs and now water tariffs. Where would we go?"

"My salary increased by just five percent last year while my cost of living, I believe, increased two to three-fold," he added.

A recent study of Consumers Association of Bangladesh (CAB) shows the living cost in Dhaka increased by 6.5 percent last year due to the rising prices of essential commodities and services.

And the trend may continue this year as consumers have been paying more to buy daily essentials and there is no sign of a let-up in price hikes anytime soon.

CAB President Ghulam Rahman said government steps to hike prices of water, electricity and gas disadvantage the lower- and middle-income people.

"Such hike in prices of daily services will put extra financial pressure on the lower and lower middle class. ... it affect their standard of life," he said.

"Repeated hikes in the prices of gas, electricity and water will increase inflation," he warned as many city dwellers, especially lower-income people are struggling to provide for their families.

"The government is active in giving benefits to the rich, but it is putting pressure on people of the lower rungs of the social ladder," he said.

In a recent report, Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics said there was a 6.30 percent non-food inflation in January, the highest since December

2015. People living in rural areas are hit the hardest due to the spiralling prices of goods and services other than food.

PROTESTS

Different political parties have protested the move to increase water and electricity prices.

Workers' Party of Bangladesh (WPB) said due to the increase in water and electricity prices, manufacturing industries, especially the garment industry, will face severe loss.

In a statement, WPB President Rashed Khan Menon and General Secretary Fazle Hossain Badsha said, "Factories will be shut. Economic growth will be hindered."

They also opined that the further hike in power would create an economic pressure as well as shoot up living costs.

National Committee for Protection of Oil-Gas and Mineral Resource, Electricity Sector and Ports, said the power prices have been increased as part of a "wrong government move".

The price of power is on the rise due to excessive illogical subsidies to the quick-rental power plants and the supply of gas to private sectors, instead of to state-run power generation companies, it said in a press release.

The government is protecting the interests of some local and foreign companies. As a result, the prices are going up, it said.

"Repeated increase in gas and power prices has become a burden on the country's economy. The latest rise will once again enhance manufacturing costs, house rent and prices of goods, including agricultural products, and reduce the country's competitiveness on the global market," it added.

Russia restricts Iran, S Korea travellers over virus

AFP, Moscow

Moscow yesterday announced new restrictions on travel to Russia from Iran and South Korea, two countries hit hardest by the outbreak of the new coronavirus.

In a statement, Prime Minister Mikhail Mishustin announced a temporary suspension of visas for Iranians travelling to Russia for education, employment, tourism and transit.

A separate decree imposed restrictions on travel to Russia from South Korea, with exceptions including members of official delegations.

Moscow on Wednesday advised Russians against travel to Italy, Iran and South Korea, amid a spike in infections.

South Korea yesterday reported 315 new cases of the virus, bringing the total to 2,337, including at least 13 dead.

Iran said Thursday it had recorded an additional 106 cases, bringing the total in the Islamic Republic to 245, of which 26 had proven fatal.

Blast hurts 3

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box was badly damaged in the explosion. Police were collecting footage from CCTV cameras installed in the area.

Amena Begum, additional commissioner (administration) of CMP, said they collected evidence from the spot.

"Our bomb disposal unit is working alongside a SWAT team. A bomb disposal team from Dhaka will be here. Officials of the Police Bureau of Investigation have also come."

She said they issued an alert for the policemen across the city.