

Trump fires State Dept watchdog said to be probing Pompeo

AFP, Washington

A government watchdog fired suddenly by Donald Trump was investigating Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, said a Democratic lawmaker who accused the president of committing a potentially illegal act of retribution.

Trump sacked State Department Inspector General Steve Linick late on Friday in his latest abrupt dismissal of an official tasked with monitoring wrongdoing inside a government agency.

Eliot Engel, who heads the House Foreign Affairs Committee, said he had learned that Linick had opened an investigation into Pompeo.

"Mr. Linick's firing amid such a probe strongly suggests that this is an unlawful act of retaliation," the congressman said in a statement.

A Democratic congressional aide, speaking on condition of anonymity, said Linick was probing complaints that Pompeo misused a political appointee to perform personal tasks

for himself and his wife.

Washington's top diplomat has raised eyebrows for frequently traveling the world on his government plane with his wife Susan Pompeo, who has no official role.

CNN reported last year that a whistleblower had complained that Diplomatic Security, which guards US missions overseas as well as the secretary of state, had been assigned questionable tasks for the Pompeos such as picking up the family dog and takeout food.

The State Department confirmed Linick's firing but did not comment on the reason or on whether Pompeo was under investigation.

A State Department spokesperson said the new inspector general will be Stephen Akard, a former aide to Vice President Mike Pence from his home state of Indiana.

Akard since last year has led the State Department's Office of Foreign Missions, which handles relations with diplomats in the United States.

12 densely packed

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Babubazar, two in Badda, three in Chawkbazar, six in Jatrabari, eight in Lalbagh, two in Moghbazar, two in Mohakhali, eight in Mohammadpur, one in Mugda, and two in Tejgaon.

The infection had spread exponentially in the last two weeks.

Talking to the Daily Star, Prof Muzaherul Huq, former adviser (Southeast Asia Region) of the WHO, said, "It is necessary to identify the infected and then do the contact tracing immediately to prevent the spread. An infected person spreads the virus on an average to three others in a day."

It was really necessary for the authorities to effectively lockdown the areas with more infected people, he added.

An official of the National Bank who lives in Mugda, told this

correspondent that he often found it difficult to enter the kitchen markets because of the crowds.

"Sometimes, it becomes difficult to walk on the streets due to auto-rickshaws full of people. They are not following the restrictions," he added.

Electrician Jamal Hossain, who lives in Bhulta of Narayanganj, has been coming to his workplace in Jatrabari four days a week.

Asked about the potential risks, he said, "I don't want to be bored at home."

Talking to the Daily Star, former director of Disease Control at DGHS Be-Nazir Ahmed suggested the government completely stop public movement in the areas that can be deemed as hotspots.

He also agreed with Prof Muzaherul's view about enforcing stricter restrictions.

WFP appeals for \$320m

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daily wage earners like rickshaw drivers, day labourers who now find themselves unable to meet their basic needs," said WFP spokesperson Elisabeth Byrs.

Under WFP's scheme, the funding will ensure food security for families in rural areas and urban slums, as well as day labourers.

In the meantime, the UN agency has maintained national distributions of fortified rice, cash transfers and nutrition programmes, to complement government assistance.

It has also begun building storage areas for food and non-food items necessary for the Covid-19 response, including personal protective equipment, and is helping other humanitarian agencies by moving supplies into and around Bangladesh.

This coming August marks three years since the Rohingyas fled to Cox's Bazar escaping a violent persecution in Myanmar's Rakhine state.

After confirmation that the first cases of Covid-19 infection have been identified in overcrowded Rohingya camps in Cox's Bazar, UN humanitarians on Friday announced additional measures and appealed for funds to prevent the disease from spreading.

In Geneva, UN refugee agency (UNHCR) spokesperson Andrej Mahacic relayed government

confirmation that one Rohingya had tested positive for the new coronavirus in the Kutapalong settlement in Cox's Bazar, along with an individual from the local Bangladeshi host community on Thursday.

"There are serious concerns about the potentially severe impact of the virus in a densely populated refugee settlement, sheltering some 860,000 Rohingya refugees," he said, speaking via video conference.

"Another 400,000 Bangladeshis live in the surrounding host communities. These populations are considered to be among the most at risk globally in this pandemic."

CONCERTED UN ACTION

The UN agencies have already put in place a series of concerted Covid-19 contingency measures in Cox's Bazar, including the International Organization for Migration (IOM).

It has provided upgraded triage areas in 35 primary care facilities along with three isolation and treatment centres, said the UN.

Also nearing completion is a quarantine centre, large enough to accommodate 465 people and 250 beds for people suffering from severe acute respiratory infection.

The pandemic adds further pressure on extremely vulnerable individuals preparing for the approaching monsoon season.

Two doctors donate blood

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around 30 to 45 patients will be given plasma therapy, said this noted physician, who has been co-opted as a member to the National Technical Advisory Committee (NTAC) formed to combat coronavirus pandemic.

As there is no drug to treat Covid-19, doctors in multiple countries are using CPT -- extracting blood plasma from an individual who has recovered from Covid-19 and transfusing it into a patient. This technique is still under trial.

The two doctors who donated blood yesterday are Dildar Hossain Badol of Shaheed Shuhrawardy Medical College Hospital and Rawnak Jamil of Salimullah Medical College Hospital. They recovered on May 9 and May 5 respectively.

On April 18, the health ministry formed a technical committee headed by Prof MA Khan to conduct feasibility of this method for treating Covid-19 patients.

A protocol the committee submitted to the Bangladesh Medical Research Centre (BMRC) is yet under evaluation.

The committee started collecting plasma yesterday after the DMCH authority ethically permitted the the trial.

"The Directorate General of Health Services also gave permission for this. There are few more processes -- testing antibody, matching blood groups, etc. We have collected kits from Spain for this, with fund donation by a private organisation," Dr Khan said.

"We will complete primary research with this support. We will need funding from the government for this," he added. He urged those who have recovered

from Covid-19 to come forward to donate plasma.

Initially, the therapy will be administered on the ailing patients at the Covid-19 unit of DMCH and also at Kuwait-Moitree Hospital.

Once it will be proved fruitful, the therapy will be used massively.

A RAY OF HOPE

On April 28, the World Health Organization (WHO) published a report mentioning use of 33 drugs and around 200 types of treatment methods which are being applied on Covid-19 patients across the globe.

Plasma therapy is one of those methods. Multiple countries including China, the United State, and United Kingdom have started it and got positive outcomes.

The blood from people who've recovered is called convalescent plasma. Plasma is the liquid portion of the blood.

Researchers hope that convalescent plasma can be given to people with severe COVID-19 to boost their ability to fight the virus.

It also might help keep people who are moderately ill from becoming more ill and experiencing COVID-19 complications.

China is the first country which used this therapy on ten patients under a clinical trial.

Of the patients, eight recovered from their illness.

Considering potentials, the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) has allowed clinical research on plasma therapy.

Many hospitals in the world are now conducting research on this method and receiving positive result.



A grieving family takes the body of a man out of Mugda General Hospital premises. They said the 60-year-old man died with breathing difficulties and fever but they failed to get him admitted to hospital despite waiting there for several hours.

PHOTO: ANISUR RAHMAN

Eid may tick it up this month

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In January, \$163 crore was remitted while in February the remittance inflow was \$145 crore, said BB sources.

As widespread lockdowns were imposed due to the pandemic, the remitted money in March this year stood at \$128 crore, a 12 percent decline from what was remitted in March last year.

In April this, expatriates remitted \$108.10 crore.

As Eid is nearing, the remittance flow, however, has risen in May.

In the first two weeks of May alone, \$62.4 crore was received in remittance, said Sirajul Islam, spokesperson for the central bank.

Of the state-owned banks, the highest amount of remittance is received by Agrani Bank.

Asked about the latest situation, Agrani Bank Managing Director Mohammad Shamsul Islam said in March last year, \$133 million in remittance was received by the bank. In March this year, the amount, however, increased to \$156 million, he said.

But remittance flow declined in April this year compared to what was received in April last year, he added.

Whereas \$141 million was remitted through the bank in April last year, the amount stood at \$90 million this April, he added.

"There is no doubt that the drop in remittance flow is linked to the coronavirus pandemic," he said, adding that many houses used for sending remittance were now closed in different countries.

He said they have launched an app to make remitting money easier for the expatriates. Now, expatriate Bangladeshis in Singapore can use the app to send money home.

He hoped that the remittance flow will increase as Eid is nearing.

Bangladesh earns the highest remittance from Saudi Arabia. The Gulf country hosts about 15 to 20 lakh Bangladeshis. In the last fiscal year, more than \$3 billion was earned in remittance from Saudi Arabia alone.

However, many Bangladeshis there are now passing days in hardship.

Electrical mechanic Mohammad Ali of Natore has been running a small shop in Saudi Arabia for the last two decades. Five Bangladeshis work at the shop.

They said they were having

limited work opportunities since the coronavirus crisis emerged.

They added that although some were still able to send money home from their savings or by borrowing, others were not that fortunate.

Another reason why the remittance flow has declined is that many of the houses for facilitating remittance by expatriates are now closed.

Selim Shahriar of Chattogram's Anwara works in a ship owned by a Japanese company.

He said he sent money from Singapore via his company.

Asked about the amount he remits, he said he has parents, wife, and two children back home.

They can meet their expenses for two to three months if \$1,000 is sent, Selim said, adding that he, however, sent an additional amount due to the crisis and Eid. Also, one of his family members is sick.

The top 15 countries, from where Bangladesh earns remittance, are Saudi Arabia, the UAE, the United States, Kuwait, the United Kingdom, Malaysia, Oman, Qatar, Italy, Bahrain, Singapore, South Africa, France, South Korea, and Jordan.

In terms of earning remittance, Bangladesh is among the top 10 countries.

Meanwhile, as the remittance flow continued, the central bank's foreign exchange reserves has increased to \$3,311 crore, despite the fact that the pandemic caused the income of the expatriates to go down, if not stop.

World Bank projected the global remittance flow will see a 20 percent decline this year due to the coronavirus pandemic. Bangladesh will see a 22 percent drop in its remittance earnings.

Already, the downturn has started to become visible.

Zahid Hossain, lead economist of World Bank Bangladesh, said the countries from where Bangladeshi expatriates send remittance were still experiencing lockdown situation.

He said many expatriates got infected with coronavirus. Besides, many others have been left without work opportunities while many of them have returned home.

He said remittance earnings, however, may increase this month due to Eid-ul-Fitr.

"However, the overall remittance earning this year will decline," he

added.

Asked how the crisis could be tackled, Zahid said, "Diplomatic efforts can be taken so that expatriates don't have to return home after losing jobs. The countries where expatriate Bangladeshis are living have to be convinced that they will need foreign workers in future."

Apart from six state-owned and two specialised banks, 40 private banks, their branch offices across the country, agent banking, mobile financial service (MFS) providers and different other private organisations reach expatriates' hard-earned money to their family members.

Special incentive has been rewarded since July 1 last year to increase remittance flow through the authorised channel.

Now, expatriates receive Tk 2 as incentive for remitting Tk 100. As a result, remittance flow has been on the rise since July.

Recently, the Bangladesh government has announced giving 2 percent cash support without scrutiny for sending \$5,000 or Tk 5,00,000 to overcome the downturn in remittance flow caused by the pandemic.

Earlier, the government provided such cash support against up to Tk 1,50,000.

On May 12, Bangladesh Bank issued a gazette in this regard.

Ahmed Munirul Saleheen, secretary at expatriates' welfare and overseas employment ministry, said migrant workers are a lifeline for Bangladesh's economy.

He said they send their hard-earned money. They stand by the country both in good and bad days.

He said the expatriates were continuing to remit money despite facing various obstacles and that the government wanted to stand by them in this time so difficult.

"For this, we have created a Tk 200 crore fund from which they can get soft loan," he added.

Saleheen said Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina also announced a further Tk 500 support, which would be disbursed through Expatriates' Welfare Bank.

He urged all expatriate Bangladeshis currently living abroad to have patience. "Good days will come once the crisis is over."

[The writer is head of migration programme at Brac and a freelance journalist]

Man killed in 'gunfight' in Teknaf

OUR CORRESPONDENT, Cox's Bazar

An alleged criminal was killed in a "gunfight" with police in Teknaf upazila of Cox's Bazar early yesterday.

The dead Ariful Islam, 22, son of Nurul Islam, former ward member of Teknaf Sadar Union, was accused in five cases including one of murder, said police.

Pradip Kumar Das, officer-in-charge of Teknaf Police Station, claimed that they conducted a raid around 3:00am in the upazila's Moheshkhalia Para on information that Ariful and his cohorts were staying there.

241 cops reported

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There are around two lakhs members in the country's police force in against a population of around 17 crore.

The total infected population across the country was 20,955 until yesterday, meaning nearly 12 percent of the infected were police members.

Of the infected police personnel, 1,041 are from Dhaka Metropolitan Police (DMP).

Eight of infected police personnel have died so far, while 361 others have recovered till yesterday, according to the PHQ tally.

Police officials said they have made all arrangements for the treatment of their infected colleagues. Authorities recently booked a private hospital to treat its members as the Central Police Hospital was struggling to deal with the huge number of patients.

Sohel Rana, assistant inspector general (Media) at the PHQ, said it was quite difficult for the police personnel to carry out their duties without coming in contact with the people due to its nature of work.

Meanwhile, the traffic police constable of Chattogram Metropolitan Police who died with Covid-19 symptoms on early Friday was tested positive for the virus.

Samples of Naimul Haque, 38, was collected after his death and the test results came out yesterday, according to a press release of the PHQ.

Pay half of bonus

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"We agreed with this proposal. We demanded the bonus as per the labour law, which means the festival bonus is equivalent to one month's basic payment," she told The Daily Star by phone after the meeting.

The tripartite meeting decided on 100 percent bonus, but the payment will be made in two phases, she added.

Aminul Haque Amin, president of National Garment Workers Federation, also said they agreed with the decision.

China said as per the proposal of the owners at the meeting in Dhaka's Srama Bhaban, a grade seven worker will receive Tk 2,050 as bonus as his basic is Tk 4,100.

Earlier at another tripartite meeting held on Thursday in Srama Bhaban, in Dhaka, Monnujan Sufian, state minister for labour and employment, asked the owners to pay 100 percent bonus.

Monnujan, Rubana Huq, president of Bangladesh Garment Manufacturers and Exporters Association (BGMEA), Shaful Islam Mohiuddin and Abdus Salam Murshed, two former BGMEA presidents, and AKM Salim Isman, president of Bangladesh Knitwear Manufacturers and Exporters Association also spoke at the meeting.

"We are in a trouble now because of coronavirus. We will pay 50 percent bonus before Eid and remaining 50 percent after Eid," said a leader of the trade body, preferring anonymity.

China Rahman said the three-day holiday for Eid in the garment sector was finalised and the payment of May's salary in first 10 days of June was finalised. The workers will stay at their residences near their respective workplace areas this Eid as there is no transports due to shut down.

the fear that they will have to return empty after the transport of agricultural products.

"Due to all these reasons most of the produced fruits and vegetables are being wasted in the field. Marketing of agricultural products has now become the biggest challenge amid Covid-19 situation," he also said, adding his ministry is working relentlessly considering these issues very seriously.

Razzaque said seasonal fruits including mango, litchi, pineapple and jackfruit have already started coming in the market. If these seasonal fruits are not marketed properly, the farmers will suffer financially.

Matia Chowdhury said initiatives should be taken to make the movement of trucks and other transports uninterrupted.

"Fuels of fruit laden vehicles can be subsidized to reduce fare," she said, adding, "There would be no problem in mango marketing if the seasonal fruit could be bought from farmers and then supplied to various government offices including police barracks, army barracks, hospitals and jails."

She also stressed so that farmers get fair price of their products.

Sadhan Chandra Majumder said in this time of plenty of seasonal fruits, steps can be taken to reduce the import of fruits like apples and grapes.

Khalid Mahmud Chowdhury said the commerce ministry should be involved so that farmers can export their delicious seasonal fruits.