

US negotiator upbeat on Afghan peace talks

AFP, Washington

The US negotiator on Afghanistan voiced optimism Monday that the Taliban and government would begin peace talks and said President Donald Trump could pull US troops ahead of schedule if all goes well.

The Afghan government has been speeding up the release of prisoners, a key condition for the Taliban, after a ceasefire for the Eid al-Fitr holiday followed by a continued lull in fighting.

"There's been a lot of progress in the last few days," said Zalmay Khalilzad, the US envoy who negotiated a deal with the Taliban in which Washington plans to end its longest-ever war.

"A lot of people have been pessimistic that we could get to this place where we're discussing where and when inter-Afghan negotiations would begin and that there would be enough progress on the prisoners issue," he told reporters.

But he did not set a date and cautioned that "still more needs to be done" on freeing prisoners.

Abdullah Abdullah, who heads the government council on the talks, said Saturday he was ready for talks "at any moment."

Under the agreement with the Taliban, the United States will pull troops out of Afghanistan by mid-2021 in exchange for the insurgents' commitments to keep out Al-Qaeda and other foreign extremists.

US officials have said that the withdrawal is already ahead of schedule due to coronavirus concerns and The Wall Street Journal reported last week that the Pentagon had drafted plans for Trump to leave late this year -- coinciding with the US election.

Khalilzad said the withdrawal was "the prerogative of the president, and if he thinks that the conditions have been met, then we could do it faster, but the key thing is whether the conditions have been met."



People travelling in a human haulier without maintaining social distancing, putting themselves and their fellow passengers at risk of contracting the novel coronavirus. The photo was taken in the capital's Sadarghat area yesterday.

PHOTO: AMRAN HOSSAIN

Cases may double

FROM PAGE 1

The country recorded the highest daily spike in Covid-19 cases yesterday, two days after a shutdown to contain the spread of the deadly virus imposed on March 26 was relaxed.

As many as 2,911 people were reported coronavirus positive in 24 hours till 2:30pm yesterday. With it, the total number of cases hit 52,445, according to the DGHS.

Thirty-seven people died over the same period, taking the death toll to 709.

A total of 12,704 samples were tested in 52 labs across the country in those 24 hours.

Till yesterday, Bangladesh stood 21st in terms of total number of confirmed cases, surpassing Netherlands, a severely hit European country.

More than 50 percent of the cases in Bangladesh were detected in the last two weeks. Experts attributed the rise in infections to increased public movement linked to people swarming shopping malls, leaving the capital for Eid, and reopening of garment factories.

Before the shutdown was relaxed, the National Technical Advisory Committee (NTAC) on combating the coronavirus outbreak had suggested not to ease it unless the daily number of cases showed downtrend. But it was not headed.

"We had suggested not to lift the shutdown until a declining trend starts. But the government has gone for the reopening because of disruptions in economic activities. Although it took some measures, we need to see how those measures are maintained," Prof Shahidullah, who heads the committee, told The Daily Star.

A member of the committee said, "We placed each recommendation in details on how to withdraw of the shutdown. But those were not taken into consideration. If they [the authorities] had read the full report, decisions would have been different," said the member.

According to the National Institute of Health, USA, and WHO, such shutdowns can be relaxed if the number of cases continues to go down for at least two weeks.

WHO says any government that wants to start lifting restrictions must first meet six conditions. Those are: Transmission of Covid-19 is under control; health systems and public health capacity are able to detect, test, isolate and quarantine every case and trace every contact; hot spot risks are minimised in highly vulnerable places, such as nursing homes; preventive measures such as physical distancing and hand washing in workplaces have been established; and populations are fully engaged and empowered to live under a new state of "normality".

'HERD IMMUNITY A FAR CRY'

Experts said because of inadequate data, it is not possible to predict when the outbreak will hit its peak and how long will it take to acquire natural herd immunity.

Tk 2,492cr projects

FROM PAGE 1

chair. The PM joined the meeting through video conference from the Gono Bhavan.

Briefing reporters after the meeting, Planning Minister MA Mannan said the World Bank and the Asian Development Bank will provide \$100 million each for the two projects to be implemented between April 2020 and June 2023.

The PM directed the ministries and officials concerned to closely monitor the Covid-19-related projects for quick implementation, he mentioned.

She also asked officials to ensure uninterrupted supply of high-pressure oxygen to district hospitals for Covid-19 patients, Mannan said.

About the two projects, he said the first one -- the Covid-19 Emergency Response and Pandemic Preparedness Project -- will involve Tk 1,128 crore, of which Tk 850 crore will come from the WB and the rest from the government.

The project will be implemented nationwide to help upgrade selected health facilities and laboratories to

detect, manage and treat Covid-19 cases.

Besides, designated laboratories will be provided with skilled staffers as well as diagnostic equipment and test kits.

The other project -- Covid-19 Response Emergency Assistance -- involving Tk 1,365 crore is aimed at enhancing the government's capability to fight the pandemic. It will help meet the government's immediate needs to curb further spread of the virus.

The ADB will provide Tk 850 crore and the rest will come from the government.

Under the project, infection prevention and control units will be set up at 492 upazila health complexes across the country.

Besides, crucial medical equipment and supplies will be purchased with the funds, said an official of the planning ministry seeking anonymity.

Under the project, 19 microbiology testing labs will be set up at 10 medical colleges, five hospitals and four specialised health institutions.

Bangladesh will forge ahead

FROM PAGE 1

She urged all to abide by the health guidelines so that people do not suffer.

Briefing reporters after the meeting, held at the National Economic Council in the city's Sher-e-Bangla Nagar, Planning Minister MA Mannan said an American think tank has highly praised the PM and included her in the list of eight successful women heads of state and government in the world for her sincere efforts to contain the novel coronavirus in Bangladesh.

He said the PM used her common sense as she is a daughter of this land. That's why she knew how to handle the situation, the minister added.

She has a comprehensive idea of the culture of this territory and that's why it was easy for her to tackle the situation, Mannan told reporters.

Turned away by 6 hospitals, woman dies

FROM PAGE 1

12:15 midnight, we reached Al Haramain Hospital with an ambulance. The duty doctors refused to treat her and told us to go to another hospital," he said.

"Over the next two hours, we visited Oasis Hospital, North East Medical College Hospital, Maa O Shishu Hospital, Park View Medical College Hospital and Jalalabad Ragib-Rabeya Medical College Hospital, one after the other."

He added that after she was denied treatment at those hospitals, they finally reached SOMCH around 2:20am where the on-duty doctors declared her dead.

"During such harassment, we were only given an oxygen cylinder from Maa O Shishu Hospital as our ambulance's cylinder had emptied and Jalalabad Ragib Rabeya Medical College also conducted a quick x-ray to assess her condition right before they referred us to SOMCH," he said.

He further said, "She was buried at her home in Beanibazar upazila's Kashadighirpar yesterday morning. Her family members, mostly expatriates, wanted her to get the best treatment at a private hospital -- but instead she was denied treatment at all the notable private hospitals in the city."

THE HOSPITALS' SAY

Dr Nahian Chowdhury, assistant director of Al Haramain Hospital, said, "We are operating with 80 beds, including specialised flu corner for suspected Covid-19 patients. But all beds, including those in the CCU and ICU facilities, were occupied that night."

"We have no intention to refuse anyone but we had to refuse at least five patients that same night," he said.

Monsur Alam, assistant manager of Oasis Hospital, said, "We have

three bed flu corners for patients with Covid-19 symptoms. But, as far I know, we didn't refuse treatment to anyone that night. If someone alleges that, it's false information."

Dr Nazmul Islam, director of North East Medical College Hospital, said, "We are dedicating a building of our facility for the treatment of Covid-19 patients and for that, we were shifting general patients from that building to another."

"As we were unprepared to admit suspected patients, we refused admitting her. But we will be admitting all types of patients from today [Tuesday] afternoon."

Murshedur Rahman, general manager of Sylhet Maa O Shishu Hospital, said, "They reached here at night but we had no advanced facilities to treat such a patient. But we provided an oxygen cylinder for her as her previous cylinder was almost empty."

Dr Tonmoy Bhattacharjee, deputy director of Park View Medical College Hospital, said, "We have eight ICU beds but only two ventilators and both of those were occupied. Her oxygen saturation that time was below 60 percent and we couldn't treat her without a ventilator. That's why we had to refuse admission."

Dr Tarek Azad, director of Jalalabad Ragib-Rabeya Medical College Hospital, said, "When they arrived, our on-duty doctor and ICU in-charge visited her. As she was suspected to be a Covid-19 patient, the doctor and our ICU consultant conducted an x-ray in the hospital's lab promptly."

"They then referred her to Sylhet Saheed Shamsuddin Ahmed Hospital, a dedicated hospital for such patients. But they went to SOMCH and the woman died on the way."

Speaking at the meeting, Hasina directed the authorities concerned to monitor and implement the projects on Covid-19 rapidly.

She directed them to set up ICUs at 64 district hospitals to provide quality healthcare services to patients under the Covid-19-related projects.

The PM also asked them to ensure high pressure oxygen service in those hospitals to address the lack of treatment options for Covid-19 patients.

Hasina urged the local administrations concerned to help farmers market their fruit crops.

Mentioning that shrimp hatcheries were damaging embankments in the country's coastal areas, she directed the authorities to undertake a joint initiative to protect the embankments during natural disasters.

"What happened, is unfortunate. We should have been more careful. I ordered our doctors to admit any patient from now on, even if the patient is suspected for Covid-19. If the test reports come positive, we could refer them to Covid-19 designated hospital."

GOVT OFFICIALS' SAY

Following several instructions of the respective departments, the Health Services Division (HSD) of the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare, circulated an order on May 24 to start separate treatment facilities for Covid-19 and non Covid-19 patients at all government and private hospitals with 50 or more beds.

Dr Anisur Rahman, assistant director of Sylhet Divisional Health Office, said, "Following the directives of the HSD, Sylhet's civil surgeon had earlier ordered all hospitals to oblige and we also circulated the order to all hospitals yesterday [Monday]."

"As an unfortunate incident has occurred, we could've taken serious steps if the family filed a formal complaint with us. But they denied to do so. However, following the incident, we are issuing warning letter to all the hospitals involved so that no such incident occurs in future," he said.

Dr Himangshu Lal Roy, deputy director of SOMCH, said, "Admitting a patient to any hospital of choice is completely a personal matter of the family, but this government facility is always open for all -- round the clock with maximum facilities."

"Doing business all year long and during this global crisis, it is unfortunate that private hospitals refuse patients. There are instructions from the government to admit all kind of patients and that order must be followed."

Trump vows to bring in military

FROM PAGE 1

Trump, a Republican, has condemned the killing of George Floyd, a 46-year-old African American who died after a white policeman pinned his neck under a knee for nearly nine minutes in Minneapolis on May 25, and has promised justice.

But, with marches and rallies for racial equality and against police brutality having turned violent late each day in the last week, he said rightful protests could not be drowned out by an "angry mob."

"If a city or state refuses to take the actions that are necessary to defend the life and property of their residents, then I will deploy the United States military and quickly solve the problem for them," Trump said.

Houston police chief Art Acevedo in an interview with CNN advised Trump to "keep mouth shut" after the US president advised all the governors to "dominate" the ongoing protests.

"Let me just say this to the President of the United States, on behalf of the police chiefs of this country: please, if you don't have something constructive to say, keep your mouth shut," he said.

He added, "It's not about dominance, it's about winning hearts and minds." He also requested Trump to not put the lives of young people at risk.

A popular black restaurateur was fatally shot in Kentucky early on Monday as police and National Guard troops fired weapons while dispersing a crowd protesting against police killings

of African Americans. Details were not immediately available about the circumstances of death.

The UN rights chief said yesterday the coronavirus pandemic's disproportionate impact on ethnic minorities in the US and the protests triggered by George Floyd's death were exposing "endemic inequalities" that must be addressed.

"This virus is exposing endemic inequalities that have too long been ignored," Michelle Bachelet said in a statement.

Floyd's death has reignited simmering racial tensions in a politically divided country that has been hit hard by the coronavirus pandemic, with African Americans accounting for a disproportionately high number of cases.

Democratic Illinois Governor J.B. Pritzker yesterday urged patience, saying Americans could work through these tough issues. He pledged to take legal action if Trump carried out his military threat.

"We can bring down the temperature, but not when the president... is standing up calling for troops, and law and order, and domination," he told MSNBC. "We will fight him, and we will take it to federal court."

Washington, DC, Mayor Muriel Bowser, in a separate MSNBC interview yesterday, said there were no signs of active duty US military in the city overnight.

CRITICISM OF CHURCH VISIT

After his address, Trump posed for

pictures with his daughter, Ivanka, and US Attorney General William Barr at St John's Episcopal Church near the White House.

The presiding bishop of the Episcopal Church diocese in Washington DC, Michael Curry, was among those who criticized Trump's use of the historic church for a photo opportunity, reports Reuters.

"In so doing, he used a church building and the Holy Bible for partisan political purposes," he said on Twitter. The church suffered minor fire damage during protests on Sunday night.

Trump was scheduled to visit the Saint John Paul II National Shrine in Washington yesterday.

In New York, television images showed crowds smashing windows and looting luxury stores along Fifth Avenue in Manhattan before the city's 11:00 pm curfew. Mayor Bill de Blasio said the curfew would be moved to 8:00 pm.

In Hollywood, dozens of people were shown in television images looting a drug store. Windows were shattered at a nearby Starbucks and two restaurants.

A man who allegedly brought explosive materials to the demonstrations in Minneapolis from Illinois has been charged with inciting riot.

AUTOPSIES

A second autopsy ordered by Floyd's family and released on Monday found his death was homicide by "mechanical asphyxiation," meaning physical force interfered with his oxygen supply.

Massive thermal plant fuel leak pollutes Siberian river

AFP, Moscow

Local authorities in Siberia have declared a state of emergency after 20,000 litres of diesel fuel seeped into a river sparking concerns from environmentalists.

The World Wildlife Fund environmental group yesterday praised local efforts to contain the spill with a floating dam, blocking dangerous pollutants from flowing into a lake near the Arctic city of Norilsk.

Satellite images published by the WWF showed large red spillages in the Ambarnaya river and residents nearby posted videos on social media showing polluted water.

The spill was caused last week by a leaking diesel fuel tank at a thermal power plant several kilometres west of Norilsk.

Russian mining conglomerate Norilsk Nickel, which owns the facility, said the tank was damaged when supporting pillars that had "held it in place for 30 years without difficulty" began to sink.

Norilsk is constructed on permafrost and its infrastructure is threatened by melting ice caused by climate change.

Norilsk Nickel has been guilty of spillage in the past. In 2016 it admitted pollutants from a "filtration dam" at its plant washed into another local river, colouring it bright red.

It was fined less than \$1,000 for the incident.

The Prosecutor of the Krasnoyarsk region said yesterday a state of emergency had been declared locally and opened an investigation into fuel leakage.

The Investigative Committee, which probes serious crimes, said at least 20,000 litres of oil had spread over 350 square meters.

Norilsk Nickel company director Sergei Lipin said 500 cubic meters of pollutants had been removed by a team of 90 workers whose cleanup efforts were ongoing.

The state environmental watchdog said groundwater was not polluted and the WWF called on it to monitor water quality downstream to prevent toxic products from spreading to nature reserves.

Docs denied

FROM PAGE 1

shifts at the hospital and then isolate themselves at the CSS Ava Center for a 14-day quarantine. Even the district administration tried to ensure their stay at the hotel but they also failed, he added. The doctors and nurses were later shifted to the Hotel Ambassador.

The medical staff of KMCH have been staying at the Millennium since April but the hotel authorities suddenly decided that the doctors will be no longer allowed there, without any notice, said Dr Munshi.

Speaking on condition of anonymity, a hotel management staff said they want to run it as before now that the government shutdown has been lifted. They need to renovate, he claimed, adding that doctors staying there will be a deterrent to other guests.

Sharifuzzaman, who owns the hotel building, said he rented out the hotel to a person called Mahbub, who the district administration made the arrangements with.

"For the last two months, there has been no service staff at the hotel. Only two guards and doctors were staying here," he said.

"Now, who will take the responsibility if some accident takes place or something happens? So, we decided not to allow the doctors to stay here."

Sharifuzzaman said he informed the DC office and the local police station about it.

Contacted, Khulna DC Mohammed Helal Hossain said they locked down the hotel on Monday night. They will decide on the matter later, he added.

Women less

FROM PAGE 1

women, they could not fight well against the novel coronavirus," he said.

Be-Nazir also added that the increasing number of Covid-19 cases were due to the government's mismanagement from the day one.

BRIEFING

Prof Dr Nasima Sultana, additional director general (administration) of DGHS, said a total of 12,704 samples were tested in 52 labs across the country in the last 24 hours.

Meanwhile, 523 Covid-19 patients have recovered since yesterday, taking the total number of recoveries to 11,120 and the recovery rate to 21 percent, the DGHS official added.

A total of 388 people were put under isolation in 24 hours, she added.

Among the deceased, 10 were from Dhaka, 15 from Chattogram, four from Sylhet, three from Barishal, two from Rajshahi, two from Rangpur and one from Mymensingh division.

Of them, one was between 21 and 30 years old, four between 31-40, one between 41-50, 10 within 51-60, nine between 61-70, 10 between 71-80 years old and the other two between 81-90, Dr Nasima also said.