

Putin accuses West of 'insulting' Russia over WWII legacy

AFP, Moscow

President Vladimir Putin has accused the West of "mean" attempts to insult Russia by re-writing World War II history as Moscow prepares to commemorate Soviet victory with a Red Square parade.

In a lengthy article in the National Interest, a conservative US magazine, Putin warned against "historical revisionism," saying downplaying

the role of the Soviet Union in World War II helped undermine the current world order.

"Desecrating and insulting the memory is mean," he wrote in the article published late Thursday.

Some official declarations commemorating the 75th anniversary of the end of the Second World War "mention all participants in the anti-Hitler coalition except for the Soviet Union," he complained.

Global funding

FROM PAGE 1

to be complicated given the reality of the pandemic and its impact on the economy," he told The Daily Star yesterday.

Another challenge is the intensification of the fighting between the Arakan Army and the Myanmar military as far as the repatriation is concerned, he said.

According to a Brussels-based International Crisis Group (ICG) report, the armed conflict in Western Myanmar is currently the most serious among the country's decades-old internal wars.

After the conflict escalated significantly in early 2019, the government ordered a tough military response and designated the Arakan Army as a terrorist organisation.

"These measures have exacerbated the grievances underlying the conflict and made a negotiated end to the fighting more difficult to attain," the ICG said.

Dhaka University International Relations Prof Imtiaz Ahmed said, "Myanmar may use the fighting as pretext for not repatriating the Rohingyas. If Myanmar does it, then it is the time for the international community to intervene."

He said it was the time for deployment of international forces to stop the fighting and ensure safety and improve the conditions in Rakhine.

Both Prof Imtiaz Ahmed and Humayun Kabir said that the pressure on Myanmar for Rohingya repatriation must continue.

Several efforts of repatriation has failed over the last three years as the Rohingyas said there is no guarantee of safety, citizenship and freedom of movement in Rakhine.

"If Covid is shown by Myanmar an issue blocking repatriation, Bangladesh should demand that Myanmar clear all the names of the Rohingyas for repatriation during this time," said Humayun Kabir.

Myanmar should also amend its laws as required by the Rohingyas for their equal rights back in Rakhine and provide a roadmap of granting them

citizenship, the international relations analyst said.

Meanwhile, a vessel with about 500 Rohingyas has been stranded in the Malaysian sea for about two months, waiting to reach the shores of the Southeast Asian country.

They might have started the journey from the coast of Bangladesh sometime in March.

Chris Lewa, coordinator of The Arakan Project, said a vessel sailed from the Bay of Bengal with more than 800 on board in early April.

Then the smugglers divided the passengers into two boats. One of these boats with 269 on board was rescued off Malaysia on June 7 and the other one is still at the sea.

Khin Maung, a coordinator of Free Rohingya Coalition, said he heard from the relatives of those in the sea that traffickers were demanding money for releasing them to Malaysian coast.

"I am extremely worried over the situation of the Rohingyas at the sea - if they are starving to death. Malaysia says it won't accept the Rohingyas because of the coronavirus pandemic," he told The Daily Star.

"How can human life be so cheap and pushed into sheer uncertainty?" he asked, comparing the situation of the Rohingyas at the sea to the rest of their community considering the sheer uncertainty they are facing.

Maung, also the executive director of Rohingya Youth Association, said they had been living in Rakhine and it was nothing less than a prison.

They had no freedom of movement, basic rights like health and education and then they began another camp life in Cox's Bazar where they were too restricted since they fled a brutal military campaign in 2017.

"Now, with the coronavirus pandemic, we are under lockdown. There are huge risks of coronavirus infection in the congested camps. We fear many may die in the camps," he said.

Until June 18, a total of 42 Rohingyas have tested positive and three have died.

DMCH struggles to meet

FROM PAGE 1

Prof Mujibur said they have treated about 3,000 coronavirus positive and suspected Covid-19 patients so far and the recovery rate is 80 to 85 percent.

"The death rate is not high considering the number of critical patients coming to Dhaka Medical College Hospital from all over the country. Earlier, there was ten percent death in medicine wards. The current situation is not depressing."

Asked about reported negligence in treating Covid-19 patients, Alauddin Al-Azad said, "Although there were some problems in the beginning, the system has improved a lot."

He hopes the doctors will do better in the future.

The authorities said the hospital's doctors are doing their best to handle this critical situation. Every night, a virtual meeting is held on how to manage and discharge patients and admit new arrivals.

INCREASED DEMAND FOR OXYGEN

Doctors at DMCH said many patients

come with oxygen level below 40 percent. It is difficult to raise it above 80 percent with the central oxygen supply, and in that case, they need ICU supports.

Prof Dr Mujibur Rahman said the demand for oxygen gas has increased at hospitals, giving an example of a ward.

"Out of 80 Covid-19 patients admitted here, 60 need oxygen support," he said on June 8.

All these severe patients need oxygen supply with high-flow nasal cannula (HFNC) with which oxygen can be given with a flow-rate of 60 litres per minute. At present, DMCH has only two such equipment.

The hospital's deputy director said they have asked for 20 more HFNCs -- two for children and 18 for adults.

"We hope to get the supply in next week as those are being brought from New Zealand," he said, adding that these would work as an alternative for ICU to treat patients with severe shortness of breath.

Approve rapid test kits swiftly

FROM PAGE 1

Director General Maj Gen Md Mahbubur Rahman said the kit would be promptly registered if it got a positive report.

"That's really logical. We are awaiting the drug administration's decision," he said, adding that he hopes no time will be wasted in the process.

The kit can trace the coronavirus in 11 percent of the cases in the first week of infection and in 40 percent of the cases in the second week. BSMMU recommended that the kit could be used for testing in places where the standard RT-PCR facilities were not available. It could also be used on those who did not test positive for coronavirus in the RT-PCR tests despite showing symptoms.

The BSMMU also recommended that the antibody kit be used to assess the proportion of the population which got infected and recovered. The information is useful in terms of plasma distribution and in deciding when to enforce or lift restrictions.

Covid-19 infections and deaths are rising every day and people should make the best use of the kit, leaving behind the differences in opinions, Zafullah said.

The BSMMU vice chancellor said the kit was not efficient in detecting Covid-19 for treatment purposes.

Zafullah later told The Daily Star the efficiency of the kit was a matter of scientific discussion.

"Development of the kit is a

continuous process. We seek continuous assistance from the BSMMU," he said.

"We hope they will soon complete the performance trial of Gonoshasthaya antigen kit."

Antigen kit's performance trial was suspended as Gonoshasthaya, in a letter to the BSMMU on June 2, sought its suspension after a joint team of scientists from the BSMMU and Gonoshasthaya identified that there were discrepancies in collecting samples.

Gonoshasthaya developed a device to collect samples. Those devices will be supplied to the BSMMU at the soonest for starting the antigen kit's trial, Zafullah said.

Gonoshasthaya Kendra scientists say combined tests of antibody and antigen can ensure more than 90 percent accuracy in detecting the coronavirus.

Dr Bijon Kumar Sil, leader of the team of scientists who developed the kit, said, "We hope drug administration will soon implement the recommendations of the BSMMU. That's our expectation."

He also urged the BSMMU to conduct the performance trial of the antigen kit at the earliest.

Zafullah told The Daily Star: "It was a great achievement of both Gonoshasthaya and Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujib Medical University Hospital. However, there was no celebration though a national organisation developed a kit and it was successful."



A man washes hands at a makeshift hand washing facility at an entrance to East Rajabazar near the capital's IBA Hostel yesterday. The authorities have set up such facility at the entrances to the area, which has been put under lockdown since June 10 on an experimental basis to curb the spread of Covid-19. PHOTO: PRABIR DAS

Tricked into deathtrap

FROM PAGE 1

one of those Southeast Asian countries.

Yasin's sudden loss of job also triggered him to take the risk. "I used to work for an NGO where I could get Tk 4,200 per month. But at the beginning of this year, I lost the job as the NGO's project had ended. I became a bit desperate to find another means of income," he said.

So, these two brothers were easy pickings for Syed Ahmed, a local trafficker, who was looking for "potential candidates" for a voyage from Teknaf to Malaysia.

Syed, who is now on the run, managed to convince the two brothers that they will get jobs as soon as they reach the Malaysian coast.

"I was apprehensive in the beginning," said Jubair. "We know people who could not reach Malaysia and were turned back. We heard about their hardship during the voyage. However, we were assured by Syed Ahmed that this time, a large ship has been procured for us and the ship has been stocked up with a month's provision, whereas it takes around only seven days to reach Malaysia."

In fact, the trafficker had charged extra fare for a better and larger ship and better amenities. Previously, it would cost around Tk 10 to 12 thousand per person to reach Malaysia. But Syed took Tk 30,000 to Tk 60,000 from each person for the illegal voyage this time, he said.

"We paid him Tk 30,000 per person. But from other passengers, we learned that many of them even paid Tk 40,000 to Tk 60,000," Yasin said.

On the second week of February, the local trafficker and his agents took Yasin, Jubair and 12 other Rohingyas, two of whom were women, to the Teknaf jetty. They boarded a sampan boat which took them to the deep sea, where a large wooden vessel was waiting for them.

"It was not a ship. It resembled a large fishing trawler. It was for carrying goods, not humans," Jubair recalled.

With passengers on board, the vessel started its engine but not for Malaysia. Instead, it started to move around the Bangladeshi coast to take more Rohingyas, who also wanted to go to Malaysia.

"In this way, around 500 people got on to the vessel that was spacious enough to take only around 100 people. All the men were gathered at the lower deck while women were taken to the upper deck. The lower deck was so cramped that we could not even stretch our legs," Yasin said.

After taking passengers for seven days, the vessel finally started for Malaysia.

THE PROMISED LAND TOO FAR From the very beginning of the voyage, Jubair and Yasin started to realise that they have been tricked. For the first seven days, they were given only three plates of rice and a small quantity of lentil every day. They were allowed to drink only three mugs of fresh water a day.

Heat, suffocation and exhaustion made many Rohingyas severely ill within the first few days of the voyage.

"We were pushed to the limit of our endurance. But we tolerated the suffering only because we hoped that if we could reach Malaysia, all of our sufferings would end," said Jubair.

However, when they reached near the Malaysian coast, they were informed by the vessel's crew members that a disease named novel coronavirus had spread in Malaysia and that Malaysian navy has doubled their patrol to drive back any Rohingya boat in fear of further spread of the virus.

"It was the first time we heard about coronavirus. Till that time, we could not realise the gravity of the situation. We were told that the vessel would wait near the coast of Thailand and when the disease would go, they would make another attempt to take us ashore," Yasin said.

The vessel was moving to and fro near the coast of Thailand for several weeks to avoid arrest by Malaysian

and Thai navy. Meanwhile, the vessel's already dwindling supply was almost finished.

"We were told that the vessel was supplied with one month's provision but it was only enough for around 100-200 people. Again, the vessel delayed at least a week in Bangladesh to take passengers. As a result, when we were near to the Malaysian coast we were given only one plate of plain rice and a mug of water every 24 hours. And, when we were waiting near the Thai coast, we were literally starving," he recounted.

People started to become ill due to thirst and starvation. "We used to soak our shirts with sea water and tried to drink it. It was terrible but we had no other choice," said Jubair.

Then one day, when they made another attempt to reach the Malaysian coast, they were caught by the Malaysian Navy. They vehemently refused any entry and threatened the crew, saying they would seize the boat and arrest them.

Seeing that it would be impossible to reach Malaysia, the Rohingya refugees started to panic. In desperation, many of them were thinking of attacking the Myanmar crew.

"We were panicked because we thought those Burmese people would starve us to death. They were eating regularly but they were not giving us any food. So we had no alternative to attacking them and seizing their food," said Jubair.

Sensing unrest among the refugees, one day, the vessel's captain said to them, "If you kill us, you will not be able to return. You will die in the sea. But if you maintain order, we will manage provisions from Cambodia and take you back to Bangladesh."

THE RETURN JOURNEY

Next day, a Cambodian fishing trawler provided some supplies and the vessel started the return journey. After several days, when the vessel reached the Myanmar coast, its crew members started to act suspicious.

"They were moving around the Myanmar coastline. By then, the supplies had finished. We learned that the captain was fearing arrest by the Bangladesh coast guard, so he was thinking of leaving the vessel or taking us to Myanmar," said Yasin.

The Rohingyas refugees, many of whom escaped genocide at the hands of the Myanmar army a few years earlier, became extremely frightened.

One day, while the vessel was anchored in the deep sea, a Myanmar Navy warship arrived and the Myanmar seamen boarded the vessel. They flogged the vessel's crew and threatened to shoot all the refugees.

"Then, some of the sailors of our vessel seized all our possessions like money, mobile phones and some ornaments which we were taking with us to restart our lives in Malaysia. They bribed the Myanmar navy officers with our belongings and managed to flee from the Myanmar territory," Yasin recounted.

"Meanwhile, one of our fellow passengers, who was already very sick, died at night after vomiting. He probably could not tolerate the foul sea water we had to drink. One of us, who knew the verses of the Quran, led the funeral prayers and threw the body in the sea," narrated Yasin.

However, from that night, death following vomiting and loose motion became a common occurrence in the vessel. Every day and night one or two passengers succumbed to their illness.

According to Yasin, seeing them very weak and dying one after the other, one of the vessel's crew members tried to grab one of the women aboard to molest her.

That sparked outrage in the vessel. Some of the refugees, who were strong enough, caught the crew member and killed him instantly. The rest of the crew members became frightened and sailed the vessel towards the Bangladesh coastline.

TRAGEDY NEAR BANGLADESHI COAST

When the vessel was near Bangladeshi

waters, the captain again told the refugees that they were waiting for sampans to ferry them to the coast. Because, if he took this vessel to the coast, he would be arrested and the vessel would be seized.

"We waited for week after week but there was no sign of any sampan, while our people were dying. Some of us saved our lives by storing and drinking rain water," said Jubair.

For many youths like Jubair, waiting so close to home was too much to bear. Tying himself to a barrel, Jubair jumped into the sea.

"I was too weak to swim. I hoped that I would be drifted ashore or rescued by a fishing boat. Even if I was arrested, at least I would be able to eat and drink something," he said.

Following Jubair, many other refugees jumped into the sea. While Jubair was rescued and taken back to the vessel by his brother Yasin, most of the Rohingya refugees who jumped off never returned.

According to them, at least 50 refugees died during the voyage due to illness, starvation or by jumping into the sea.

Then, one day, a fishing trawler approached the drifting vessel and provided the Rohingyas with some rice, fuel and water. However, the captain and most of the crew boarded the trawler leaving only two crew members to take the vessel to Teknaf.

While sailing towards Teknaf, the vessel and its unfortunate passengers were rescued by the Bangladesh Coast Guard.

RESCUE AND RETURN

According to Bangladesh Coast Guard, on April 15 around 9:00pm, the vessel carrying the refugees was rescued. At that time, there were 396 people on board (150 men, 182 women and 64 children). Lieutenant Hayat Ibna Siddiqui of Bangladesh Coast Guard said, "With support from local police and Bangladesh Border Guard, we rescued the Rohingya refugees, the Myanmar citizens. They were sick and extremely malnourished. We provided them with food and primary medical care and then turned them over to UNHCR."

Mostafa Mohammad Sazzad Hossain, assistant communication/public information officer, UNHCR, said in a statement, "At the request of the Government of Bangladesh, UNHCR, the UN Refugee Agency, and partners in Bangladesh provided shelter and assistance to close to 400 Rohingyas refugees who disembarked from a boat in the Bay of Bengal."

"In line with established procedures and in adherence with government directives for all individuals entering Bangladesh, they received a full medical screening and were monitored and quarantined for two weeks. They have all completed the required quarantine period and have returned to their families within the camps. All began their journey at sea from Bangladesh, where they have been living for some time. None had shown any symptoms of Covid-19 infection," said the statement.

"When we returned to the refugee camp, many of us found that our houses have been occupied by other people. But we are all extremely happy. We got a new life. We want to thank Bangladesh Coast Guard and UNHCR because without their support, we wouldn't be here today," Yasin said.

5 more die

FROM PAGE 1

with fever and breathing problems while being treated at Faridpur Medical College Hospital around 2:30am yesterday.

In Moulvibazar's Kulaura, a 70-year-old man died with fever and breathing problems at his home in Mansur village around 3:00am yesterday.

Officials said samples had been collected for tests in all the cases and the bodies were buried following guidelines.

Our Faridpur and Moulvibazar correspondents contributed to the report.

UN nuclear watchdog passes resolution criticising Iran

AFP, Vienna

The board of governors at the UN nuclear watchdog has passed a resolution critical of Iran, diplomats said yesterday, the first of its kind since 2012.

The resolution calls on Tehran to provide inspectors from the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) with access to two sites in Iran in order to clarify whether undeclared nuclear activity took place there in the early 2000s.

Iran has been blocking access to the sites for months.

The resolution was carried by 25 votes in favour versus two against, with seven abstentions.

Russia and China, both of which had spoken out against the prospect of a resolution earlier this week, voted against.

It had been put forward by France, Germany and Britain and supported by the United States, even though the American ambassador the UN in Vienna had said "the text could be strengthened".

DGHS boss

FROM PAGE 1

"It'll stay more than two, three years or longer. Though in our view, the magnitude of infection will lessen."

His remarks drew flak from different quarters with public health experts decrying it, saying that such a statement would create confusion and panic.

Earlier in the day yesterday, Road Transport and Bridges Minister Obaidul Quader joined in the criticism, asking the top DGHS officials to refrain from making "short-sighted and irresponsible" remarks.

"At a time when the government is working tirelessly to retain spirit among the people, the short-sighted and irresponsible remarks over the duration of coronavirus by some top officials of the health directorate is creating frustration," Quader said at a regular briefing at his residence yesterday.

"I ask them to refrain from making such short-sighted and uncoordinated speech. During these sensitive times, it is not right for someone responsible to make irresponsible comments," he added.

The DG's remarks came at a time when the country is grappling with surging Covid-19 cases and deaths with the caseloads crossed the grim milestone of 100,000 in just over three months after the authorities detected the first patient.

Yesterday, 45 people died and 3,243 tested positive in 24 hours till afternoon. This brought the death toll to 1,388 and the number of infections to 1,05,535.

Be-Nazir Ahmed, former director of disease control at the health ministry, said it is not possible to predict how long the novel coronavirus will stay in the country.

"If we make a six-month target and take all-out measures, it is possible to contain the infection much earlier," he added.

Prof Muzaherul Huq, former Southeast Asia regional director of World Health Organization, said if the people involved in Covid-19 management followed WHO guidelines properly and took actions on right time, then it would have been possible to control transmission within four months.

He said since Bangladesh does not have the capacity to carry out PCR tests on a massive scale, the antigen and antibody test could be fruitful.

"It takes only about 15 minutes and it is affordable. Through this, we can effectively find out infected persons and enclose them within a periphery," he said.

The experts suggest the government should implement the zoning system across the country immediately to contain the spread of the infection.

"Implementing the zoning system in a scattered way will not bear any fruit. If we can enforce a zoning system all over the country at once, then it is possible to contain the spread within four months," said Prof Muzaherul Huq.

YESTERDAY'S BRIEFING

A total of 15,045 samples were tested across the country in the 24 hours, said Prof Nasima Sultana, additional director general (administration) of DGHS, at yesterday's briefing.

She said they have so far carried out 5,82,584 tests.

Among the newly deceased, 32 were men and 13 women. Most of them were from Dhaka and Chattogram divisions.

Of them, one was aged between 11 and 20, three between 21 and 30, four between 31 and 40, 10 between 41 and 50, nine between 51 and 60, 11 between 61 and 70, four from 71 and 80, and the other three were aged between 81 and 90, Nasima added.

Meanwhile, 2,781 Covid-19 patients have recovered during the same period. The total number of recoveries has reached 42,945 and the current recovery rate is 40.69 percent, the DGHS official added.

She said 684 people were put under isolation in 24 hours till 2:30pm yesterday.