

US 'assault' on UN has done 'lasting damage'

Says former WHO chief

AFP, Geneva

US President Donald Trump's all-out assault on the United Nations is doing "lasting damage" to international cooperation as the world faces a range of "existential threats", a former WHO chief warned Friday.

Gro Harlem Brundtland, a former Norwegian prime minister who served as head of the UN health agency from 1998 to 2003, said she was

deeply concerned about concerted efforts by populist leaders in the US and elsewhere to tear down vital multilateral systems.

She pointed to Trump's recent decision to withdraw the US from the World Health Organization as it attempts to coordinate the response to the global coronavirus pandemic as "perhaps the most astonishingly and transparently counter-productive of all these moves."

Freedom of expression

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and unconditional release of the detained journalists, teachers, writers, cartoonists and others, and stopping such undemocratic harassment in order to protect the constitutional right to free expression. They also demanded avoiding the path of arbitrariness.

It expressed deep concern over the recent attacks, lawsuits, and threats against various classes and professions across the country, especially writers and journalists, due to sharing various irregularities through news, cartoons, photographs or social media content.

"Such arbitrariness must be prevented from being normalised," the statement added.

According to media reports, journalists, teachers, writers and cartoonists across the country have been accused in cases for collecting or publishing news on various issues, especially on the irregularities in relief distribution and in tackling the Covid-19 pandemic.

TIB Executive Director Dr Iftekharuzzaman said that in most of the cases, the charges are so-called "spreading rumours", "spreading false information", "criticising the government", "tarnishing image", "threatening to kill", "defamation" etc. on the news and social media. Such cases are undermining the citizens' freedom of speech and expression.

"Unconstitutionally, many have been tortured and sent to prison in unjust cases, which are not only a threat to free speech, but is also normalising arbitrariness in the country," said the TIB official.

He added that the authorities concerned should respond to the criticism of their work, and control the alleged irregularities and corruption with due importance given to published information.

"Do not walk the path of [taking] undemocratic and arbitrary [measures] by controlling the flow of information

Probe body goes soft

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In an official statement, JMI then said it was a packaging mistake.

Later, a government probe body has found that JMI supplied "research-stage N95 masks" manufactured with "unapproved imported raw materials" against the demand for regular ones.

But it did not say what steps should be taken against the supplier.

The Daily Star has obtained the summary of the probe report, submitted to the health ministry on April 27, which is yet to be made public.

The Health Services Division formed the probe committee on April 19, the day before Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina in a video conference expressed her annoyance over the PPE and face-mask controversies.

The committee, headed by M Saidur Rahman, additional secretary (development) to the Division, was asked to submit the report within three days. Later it was given seven more days.

THE REPORT

The probe body made three recommendations.

Firstly, the committee said, it is necessary to take action against the officials concerned who received the mask delivery without informing the director of CMSD, even after suspecting that those were not genuine N95 masks.

Secondly, skilled manpower has to be increased to identify the demand and distribution process of personal protective equipment (PPE).

Thirdly, the authority concerned needs to be more cautious in approving, manufacturing and marketing N95 masks, it said.

In the opinion part of the summary report, the committee also mentioned three points.

"The company supplied research-stage N95 masks against the demand of regular ones; the supplied research-stage N95 masks were manufactured with unapproved imported raw materials, and the CMSD director directed the supplier to give explanation and take back the products."

The Daily Star shared a copy of the undisclosed report with Bangladesh Medical Association's Secretary General Ehteshamul Haque Chowdhury.

He said the report is not substantial. "This report may have aimed to allow someone to escape. None was held responsible or accountable specifically in this report."

Ehteshamul, a former director of DGHS (admin), also said, "In my long career, I have never seen such a type of report. The message is not clear in the report."

The Daily Star approached several health ministry officials about the probe report, but they declined to make any comment.

Contacted on June 10, the probe committee head, M Saidur Rahman, said, "The committee has submitted the report within the stipulated timeframe, and I will not say anything about the content of the report."

When told that The Daily Star has obtained a copy of the probe report and

or suppressing dissent. We demand the immediate withdrawal of such motivated and preventive cases and the release of those unjustly arrested," Zaman said.

TIB also demanded exemplary punishment of those involved in the alleged corruption by bringing them under the purview of the law and conducting thorough investigations in this regard.

He said instead of solving the mystery of journalist Shafiqul Islam Kajal's disappearance, authorities were busy arresting him in an apparently fabricated case of illegal entry into his own country.

"Such behaviour in the face of various disclosures or criticisms of corruption and irregularities is on the one hand contradictory to the prime minister's declaration of 'zero tolerance' against corruption and, on the other, against the constitutional right to free expression."

In particular, where prosecuting a citizen on charges of independent expression or publishing news is preventive, the harassment of detainees in such cases is the ultimate violation of civil rights, the TIB Executive Director said, citing the inhuman harassment of Kajal.

Criticising the arrests of different individuals in over 50 cases under the Digital Security Act this year, Zaman said, "The state should have created an environment in which the media could publish information in an independent, impartial and objective manner. Because if there is a deficit in the normal flow of information, [further] rumours and mistrust will develop, he said.

TIB said it considers the process of arresting and torturing journalists and other citizens in these cases to be tantamount to institutionalising arbitrariness by violating commitment to the rule of law in a democratic country.

that the committee did not recommend any punishment against the supplier, he said: "I will not say anything about the content. You claimed you have got the report. So, you know everything. Then why are you embarrassing me asking such a question?"

The government transferred the CMSD director last month, and health secretary and another additional secretary of the health ministry earlier this month.

JMI Managing Director Md Abdur Razaq in April issued a press statement saying they had started the process of manufacturing masks of N95 standard. The initiative would have been at the final stage by now if there was no global lockdown due to the pandemic.

"When any product is at the stage of research and development [R&D], we prepare cartons, packets and leaflets in advance... If the product does not get approval, we destroy those cartons or packets."

JMI employees mistakenly supplied 20,600 regular masks in N95 packets kept for R&D, he said.

"We did not notice it and we did not even submit any bill for N95. So, we did not get any work order for N95 masks and we did not supply any such," he said.

No official of the JMI could be contacted for comment on the latest developments.

In late April, the then CMSD director Shahidullah told this newspaper that JMI was not supposed to supply N95 masks.

He also said JMI had long been supplying surgical masks. The company was asked to supply regular surgical masks and they delivered accordingly, but wrongly labelled those as N95.

WHAT IS N95, ACTUALLY?

Experts say an N95 mask is a particulate-filtering face-piece respirator that meets the "N95 classification" of the US National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH) for air filtration, meaning it filters at least 95 percent of airborne particles.

In other words, N95 means a respirator that blocks at least 95 percent of very small -- 0.3 micron -- airborne particles. A micron is one-millionth of a metre, and viruses are in the range of 0.3 microns.

However, types of N95 masks vary from one manufacturer to another.

Since Covid-19 was first detected in the Chinese city of Wuhan in December last year, and subsequently spread across the world including to the United States and Europe, N95 masks have become scarcer and pricier.

On the other hand, FFP2 masks are European and KN95 are Chinese standard for respirators.

Prof Muzaherul Huq, former adviser (Southeast Asia Region) at the World Health Organisation, earlier told The Daily Star, "As we failed to collect N95 masks, we have to accept the KN95 and FFP2 masks."

"But we have to ensure that the quality is checked."



PHOTO: PALASH KHAN

Labourers travel crammed on the bed of a truck on Dhaka-Aricha highway in Hemayetpur area. Many people with low income cannot afford to abide by the physical distancing rules. The photo was taken yesterday.

DGHS has no clue about half of them

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was available to officials as of June 8.

The IEDCR provides this data to the WHO Bangladesh office weekly under the International Health Surveillance protocol.

"It seems a large amount of data is missing," Prof Mohammad Shahidullah, president of the National Technical Advisory Committee on Covid-19, told The Daily Star, adding, "Maybe many of the laboratories are not providing all the information."

Infectious diseases specialist Prof Ridwanur Rahman said, "If we do not know the location of the patients, how would we be able to control transmission through lockdowns?"

Lockdown, testing, tracing and isolating are the keys to controlling the outbreak. "Accurate data is the main tool for success here."

THE REASONS

An official linked to the DGHS told

The Daily Star that nearly 3,000 people tested everyday are tested for the second time.

Besides, data from all laboratories are not sent to the DGHS on time. "There is a shortage of human resources at the laboratories," the official said requesting anonymity.

A team of the ICT ministry under its a2i project is trying to locate the patient from their phone numbers, according to Prof Abul Kalam Azad.

An official admitted that the project did not have location data of around 30-40 percent of the confirmed cases.

However, many of the patients are often found not to be at the location of their phone numbers, officials said.

DAILY BRIEFING

Since January 28, a total of 5,96,579 samples were tested. Of them, 1,08,775 tested positive including yesterday's 3,240 new cases.

The rate of positive cases was around 21 percent yesterday.

Prof Nasima Sultana, additional director general of DGHS, did not answer when asked yesterday about the proportion of second tests.

Prof Ridwanur Rahman said, "If the number of second-time tests is included in the count of daily tests, it will not represent the actual picture. No plan will work out with this faulty data."

At yesterday's daily briefing, Prof Nasima Sultana said 37 Covid-19 patients died in the 24 hours preceding 2:30pm, taking the tally to 1,425. The mortality rate was at 1.31 percent.

On the other hand, a total of 1,048 Covid-19 patients recovered in those 24 hours, taking the tally to 43,993. The recovery rate was 40.44 percent.

A total of 628 people were put under isolation in the last 24 hours, Prof Nasima added.

WB injects \$1b to help cushion

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The government has been compelled to seek additional financing from abroad after domestic revenue generation crashed and the flow of exports and remittances -- the country's two major sources for foreign currencies -- dropped sharply because of the fallout of the pandemic at home and abroad.

And the multilateral lenders seem to be rallying behind Bangladesh in this hour of need.

Earlier, the World Bank's sister concern International Monetary Fund has sanctioned \$732 million in emergency funding to meet the urgent balance-of-payments and fiscal needs arising from the coronavirus outbreak in the country.

The Asian Development Bank has approved \$500 million and the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank sanctioned \$250 million.

And all stand ready to inject more funds if needed.

Economists are in favour of the government turning to external financing instead of dipping its hand into the domestic banking system, which can go on to crowd out private sector investment when the economic recovery eventually happens.

Besides, the interest burden for external funds is substantially lower than for domestic borrowing given

the historically low-interest rates prevailing in the Western world for a while now.

The latest round of fund injection from the WB came for three projects to help the country create quality jobs, accelerate economic recovery from the coronavirus pandemic and build resilience to future crises.

The projects will help the people and the economy bounce back by creating more and better jobs and promoting direct private investment in specialised economic zones while enhancing the foundations for a digital economy, according to Tembon.

The \$500 million Private Investment and Digital Entrepreneurship (PRIDE) Project of the WB will promote and attract about \$2 billion direct private investments and strengthen social and environmental standards in selected public and private economic zones and software technology parks.

It will also create 150,000 jobs, of which about 40 percent of the jobs in software parks and 20 percent of jobs in Economic Zones will be for women.

The \$295 million Enhancing Digital Government and Economy (EDGE) Project will establish an integrated, cloud-computing digital platform for all government agencies

and improve cyber-security, which will result in savings of \$200 million in the public sector's IT investments.

Further, it will build resiliency during future crises, whereby the platform will enable the government to operate virtually and deliver critical public services to citizens and businesses.

The project will create 100,000 jobs, with a special focus on women, train 100,000 youth in digital and disruptive technologies, and establish a digital leadership academy and centres of excellence.

The \$250 million Second Programmatic Jobs Development Policy Credit will create fiscal space to support the government's response to the COVID-19 crisis, while helping recovery and building resiliency of the economy, of workers and vulnerable populations to future shocks.

The financing will help Bangladesh to create large-scale jobs for citizens, including women, youth, and migrant workers.

The project -- which is the second one in a programme of three -- supports reforms to modernise the trade and investment regime, build a stronger system of expanded safety nets and labour protections, and help vulnerable population access better jobs, especially during crises.

'We can't leave the battlefield'

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medical professionals of the hospital got infected by the virus.

They include 50 doctors, 74 nurses and 91 other medical staff, Zakiul Islam, assistant director of MMCH, told this correspondent on June 16.

Of the infected medical personnel, 35 doctors, 55 nurses and 23 staff have recovered and rejoined work while the rest are recovering at home isolation, he added.

The physician said they are reeling under severe pressure both physically and mentally to maintain the duty rosters. Even the pregnant and lactating doctors and nurses have been assigned for regular non-coronavirus wards or tele-medicine service.

At present, 1,727 health professionals, including 311 doctors, 1,003 nurses and 413 other medical staff, are working at the hospital, which has 135 vacant posts for doctors, according to MMCH sources.

Some 42 physicians are assigned for duty at the 70-bed isolation ward for Covid-19 patients at the SK Hospital, a British-era facility now part of MMCH.

Besides, a unit with 150 isolation beds has been dedicated for Covid-19 patients in MMCH's new building. But it is not yet operational.

"We made the duty roster for three shifts a day -- morning, evening and night -- at the isolation ward with 14 doctors and 14 nurses covering each shift," said the assistant director.

Each team of medical staff continues the roster for a week, then goes into 14-day quarantine while a fresh team takes over by rotation, he added.

Deputy Director Laxmi Narayan said they have already asked the higher authorities to fill up the vacant posts soon.

"We are the most vulnerable section of the community but we can't leave the battlefield," said Mohiuddin Khan Moon, registrar of the Medicine Department at MMCH.

One of his colleagues, assistant professor Md Emdadullah Khan of the department, was referred to Sheikh Russel Gastro Liver Hospital in Dhaka in a critical state on June 13. He tested positive the following day and is currently recovering.

Nursing Superintendent Umme Saifun shared how at times it becomes difficult to work while risking coronavirus infection as many of them have young children at home.

Hossain Ahmed Golandaj, secretary of Bangladesh Medical Association's Mymensingh unit, held patients, who got admitted at hospitals concealing their health ailments, responsible for the high number of Covid-19 positive cases amongst health professionals, starting early April.

He also said, "The doctors and medical staff might not have been supplied with standard personal protective gear at the early stage of

the coronavirus contagion. It could be another reason for the large number of cases."

ABM Mashiul Alam, civil surgeon of Mymensingh, told this correspondent that around 268 medical professionals were tested positive in the district as of June 16.

About tele-medicine service, he said, "There are five hotline numbers at every upazila health complex for treatment seekers to contact directly. We receive around 250 calls per day and the assigned doctors provide necessary advice."

"We have already opened mobile medical service in Tarakanda, Phulpur and Muktagachha upazilas and the service will be extended to other upazilas soon," he added.

Mymensingh Divisional Director (Health) Md Abul Kashem said 448 health professionals, including 107 doctors and 108 nurses, got infected by the virus in the division as of June 16.

Sources from his office yesterday said in entire Mymensingh division, MMCH and SK Hospital are the only government facilities with ICU.

There are 10 ICU beds for Covid-19 patients and 10 for non-Covid-19 patients at MMCH, and seven, all for Covid-19 patients, at SK hospital.

The division has 1,228 isolation beds in total. The sources could not give any information on the number of ICU beds at private hospitals and clinics in the division.

Mashrafe

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elected Member of Parliament from Narail-2, relayed a positive message and sought prayers for a quick recovery.

"Today [Saturday] I tested positive for COVID-19. Seeking everyone's prayers so that I can recover quickly."

The number of infected [in the country] has already surpassed 1 lakh and we need to be careful. Let's

not step outside unless necessary. I am receiving treatment at home and following all the guidelines. We

must not be afraid, instead we need to be aware," read Mashrafe's post, which included a picture of him wearing a mask alongside a digital copy of his test report.

The charismatic leader, who had been involved in various philanthropic activities during the pandemic,

had his samples tested at the Child Health Research Foundation laboratory.

Earlier, Mashrafe's brother Morsalin Bin Mortaza informed the media that the pacer had been suffering from fever for the past few days.

"Mashrafe had a fever for the past two days. His sample for the coronavirus test was collected on Friday

and it came back positive today [Saturday]. He has a slight fever with body aches. As he has no other

symptoms, Mashrafe is currently receiving treatment at home. He is staying in isolation and is doing well at the moment and his family is also fine," informed Morsalin.

The pacer's family was hit by the coronavirus earlier this week as two of his relatives -- his mother-in-law and his wife's niece -- contracted the virus on June 15.

Bangladesh's cricket fraternity overall was also hit hard by the coronavirus yesterday as left-arm spinner

Nazmul Islam and former opener Nafees Iqbal confirmed that they had tested positive.

Nazmul informed that he had been feeling unwell since his trip to Narsingdi for relief work last week.

Nazmul, who did his test on Wednesday, received the result yesterday and has kept himself in isolation.

Earlier yesterday, Nafees, who is the older brother of Bangladesh ODI skipper Tamim Iqbal, sought

prayers for a quick recovery and informed that he was in good health despite testing positive.

Ashikur Rahman, a development coach of the Bangladesh Cricket Board (BCB), was the first detected Covid-19 positive case in Bangladesh cricket. Ashikur, who had tested positive on May 9, recovered and was released by the hospital on May 29.

Tk 5k grant

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Many non-MPO teachers and staffers have not received any salary since the government closed down all educational institutions on March 17 to stem the novel coronavirus contagion.

Considering their hardship, the education ministry sent a proposal to the Prime Minister's Office last month seeking an allocation for providing a one-time grant to the non-MPO teachers and staffers within June. The PMO forwarded the proposal to the finance ministry.

"The finance ministry has approved in principal the incentive proposal," Deputy Education Minister Mohibul Hassan Chowdhury told The Daily Star.

Finance ministry officials said they are likely to give a one-time grant of Tk 5,000 to each non-MPO teacher and Tk 2,500 to each staffer.

A ministry official said, "Money will not be a problem. The money will be disbursed among teachers and staffers of educational institutions which remain outside the purview of the MPO facilities."

Those listed under MPO get 100 percent basic salary from the national exchequer. "But the process will be finalised only after the final approval by the Prime Minister's Office," the official added.

According to education ministry statistics, 151,325 teachers and 85,217 staffers of non-government schools, colleges, madrasas, and technical institutions are not covered under the MPO scheme.

For providing the financial assistance, the government will require around Tk 97 crore.

Top education ministry officials said they have prepared two alternative proposals. Under the first one, each non-MPO teacher would get a one-time grant of Tk 8,000 and each staffer Tk 4,000. The amounts would be Tk 5,000 and Tk 2,500 respectively under the second proposal.

INTERIM MECHANISM NOT ENOUGH

Binoy Bhushan Roy, general secretary of the Non-MPO Educational Institutions' Teachers and Employees Federation, and Nazmul Islam Rony, spokesperson of MPO Bhukto Shikkha Protisthan Jatiyakoron Liaison Forum, said teachers' backs were against the wall.

They said non-MPO teachers are making ends meet. They are usually ill-paid which is as low as Tk 4,000 a month. They give private tuition to enhance their earnings. Now with schools closed and students mostly staying at home, they lost both the means of earning.

Although the pandemic-induced general holiday ended on May 31, all educational institutions will remain closed until August 6.