

TENSION WITH WASHINGTON

Germany, France quit WHO reform talks

REUTERS, Berlin

France and Germany have quit talks on reforming the World Health Organization in frustration at attempts by the United States to lead the negotiations, despite its decision to leave the WHO, three officials told Reuters.

The move is a setback for President Donald Trump as Washington, which holds the rotating chair of the G7, had hoped to issue a common roadmap for a sweeping overhaul of the WHO in September, two months before the US presidential election.

The United States gave the WHO a year's notice in July that it is leaving the UN agency - which was created

to improve health globally - after Trump accused it of being too close to China and having mishandled the coronavirus pandemic.

The WHO has dismissed his accusations. European governments have also criticised the WHO but do not go as far as the United States in their criticism, and the decision by Paris and Berlin to leave the talks follows tensions over what they say are Washington's attempts to dominate the negotiations.

"Nobody wants to be dragged into a reform process and getting an outline for it from a country which itself just left the WHO," a senior European official involved in the talks said.

No alternative to healthcare

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Presenting the keynote, Prof Asif Nazrul of Dhaka University analysed the trend of the Covid-19 situation, the government's response to it and the recent scams centring the pandemic.

"Imposing fees for coronavirus testing and hiking fares of public transport have put a heavy burden on the poor people. Also, the government has shifted the burden of infection prevention to the general people by avoiding institutional quarantine," said the DU teacher.

He said the overall Covid-19 situation in the country has deteriorated due to inadequate testing and treatment, lack of clarity of information on the pandemic situation, non-coordination, corruption, and politicisation. The Covid-19 patients not getting proper treatment is a gross violation of their human rights, he observed.

About the government data on Covid-19, Nazrul said, "The death figure is questionable. There is a lack of transparency."

He said the actual number of deaths from Covid-19 is around twice the official figure. Referring to a recent report by Centre for Genocide Studies, he said a total of 1,984 people died after showing Covid-19 symptoms till August 1.

Till yesterday, the official death toll was 3,365.

Iftexharuzzaman, executive director of Transparency International Bangladesh, said, "The health minister has said they are doing well [in tackling Covid-19]. As a result, the government officials are hiding information because they are hoping that the situation is good."

He said decisions taken based on wrong information fail.

Shujon Secretary Baduil Alam Majumdar said, "The collapse of the country's health care sector is just a tip of the iceberg. In fact, our ruling system has collapsed."

He said the situation has deteriorated in all sectors due to politicisation of all (government) organisations.

Supreme Court lawyer Barrister Sara Hossain said there is a relationship between getting healthcare services and enjoying freedom of speech and right to information.

"Arbitrary arrests, censorship of the press and the people's opinion, threats to life, livelihoods and reputation are the tools being used by the state. Some political leaders are using these tools to silence and suppress the people even in the Covid-19 situation," Sara said.

Speakers also stressed on decentralising and reforming the country's healthcare system.

"Serving a population of 18 crore with healthcare is not possible without decentralising the healthcare system," said Syeda Rizwana Hasan, executive director of Bangladesh Environment Lawyers Association.

She also stressed the need for setting up a "health commission" which would work for reformation of the health sector.

"Providing healthcare services cannot be a business... Without reform, the situation will not change and we need to set up a commission to make it happen," Shahdeen Malik said.

Taufiq Joarder of Public Health Foundation and some rights activists also took part in the discussion.

She helped

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The PM was addressing a programme marking the celebration of the 90th birth anniversary of Bangamata.

She said Bangamata had taken the right decision by turning down the proposal of Bangabandhu's release on parole for holding a roundtable discussion (in West Pakistan) after putting her life at risk.

"That correct and timely decision had forced Ayub Khan to withdraw the [Agartala conspiracy] case and it changed the course of Bangladesh's political history as well."

Hasina said Bangamata used to guide the organisation with competence and giving right decisions.

The premier joined the programme, organised by the women and children affairs ministry, from the Gono Bhaban through a virtual platform. The other participants were connected to the event from Bangladesh Shishu Academy, the Prime Minister's Office and Gopalganj.

The PM recalled that the Pakistani military dictators had tried to include Bangamata's name in the Agartala Conspiracy Case for which Pakistani intelligence agencies interrogated her several times.

"She knew it and I as her elder daughter also knew it. But she never lost her courage," the PM said.

About the historic March 7 speech of Bangabandhu, Hasina said the speech was not written and he did not rehearse it before joining the mammoth rally at the then Race Course Maidan.

"Before the speech, my mother

suggested Bangabandhu to say whatever comes in his mind, and there was no need to pay heed to the points of others... to say about the history of oppression on the Bangalees."

Today, the premier said, this historic March 7 speech of Bangabandhu has made its place into the World Documentary Heritage by Unesco and it is also one of the greatest speeches of all times.

Mentioning that Bangamata had great efficiency in building struggle and movement, the PM said she played a huge role in waging massive movements in favour of the 6-point demand and against the Agartala Conspiracy Case as she knew how to mobilise public opinion.

From Bangladesh Shishu Academy premises, Awami League Presidium member Matia Chowdhury presented the keynote paper, highlighting the life and works of Bangamata.

State Minister for Women and Children Affairs Fazilatun Nessa Indira presided over the function.

A documentary was screened highlighting the life and works of Bangamata.

The PM distributed Tk 26 lakh, Tk 2,000 among each of 1,300 distressed women, thorough the electronic medium as per the enrolment of the beneficiaries provided by deputy commissioners of 64 districts.

Born on August 8 in 1930 in Gopalganj's Tungipara, Bangamata was brutally killed by the assassins of Father of the Nation Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman on the fateful night of August 15 in 1975.

Relations with Delhi

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historic while Bangladesh has economic ties with China. We must not compare," he said.

The minister made the remarks after visiting Mujibnagar Mukhtijuddha Memorial Complex where he paid tributes placing a wreath. His wife Selina Momen, among others, was present.

Momen said Bangladesh is focusing on its own development and both India and China are its big trading partners. He said Bangladesh wants more trade benefits from India.

"Our victory means India's victory. Our development means India's development."

The minister said Dhaka-Delhi relations are very strong now and nothing can create problems in the growing relations.

UNRESOLVED ISSUES

Momen said Bangladesh and India

resolved major bilateral issues, achieved progress on water-sharing issues and the other pending issues would also be resolved.

Asked about trial of a novel coronavirus vaccine in Bangladesh, the minister said many countries like India and Pakistan went for collaboration.

"We have not gone for collaboration yet. It's regrettable. We should also go for collaboration."

BANGABANDHU'S KILLERS

The minister reiterated that the government was working to bring back convicted killers of Bangabandhu, at least one more during the ongoing Mujib Barsho, to execute them to implement the court verdict.

Momen also sought support from Bangladeshi expatriates living abroad to bring back the remaining five fugitive convicted killers of Father of the Nation Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman.



The usually busy footpath in front of Baitul Mukarram National Mosque wears a deserted look as the hawkers have yet to return to the capital after the Eid.

PHOTO: ANISUR RAHMAN

Health ministry fares badly

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SLOW IMPLEMENTATION

There have been several examples of the health ministry going slow with ADP implementation in projects.

The 4th Health, Population and Nutrition Sector Development Programme under the HSD could be a case in point.

Funded by donor agencies, Directorate General of Health Services (DGHS) is implementing the Tk 36,220 crore project, supposed to run from January 2017 until June 2022. It has 29 components for developing the health sector and making it more efficient.

Till February this year, the project authorities, however, could spend Tk 13,314 crore, although more than two-third of the project tenure is already gone.

In the revised ADP for the last fiscal year, the project got Tk 7,736 crore, but the project authorities could spend only Tk 2,247 crore till February. Then Covid-19 hit the country, which slowed down almost all the development projects.

In another project, the DGHS started building the National Institute of Laboratory Medicine and Referral Centre (NILMRC) at Sher-E-Bangla Nagar in the capital in July 2010, with the deadline June 2013.

The aim of the project was to facilitate manpower training in laboratory medicine at hospital and community levels; establishing a network among diagnostic laboratories across the country; set up a reference centre for pathology

services; provide accreditation for diagnostic labs; offer post-graduate courses and research; and earn revenue.

Ten years have gone by, but the project is yet to be completed.

The deadline was extended for the fifth time in October last year. The initial cost of the project was estimated at Tk 138.14 crore, which has been increased by 41 percent to Tk 194.32 crore, with the last deadline expiring in June this year.

A total of Tk 96 crore has been spent till February this year. In the revised ADP for the last fiscal year, the project got Tk 85 crore, but only Tk 72 lakh could be spent till February, show ADP documents.

The Daily Star tried to reach Health Services Division Secretary Abdul Mannan over phone for comments on the ADP implementation rate in the sector, but he did not receive the call.

VICIOUS CYCLE OF UNDERFUNDING & UNDERUTILISATION

Zahid Hussain, former lead economist of the World Bank's Dhaka office, said the underperformance of the health sector in budget implementation year after year explains why the health system was so ill-equipped to face the Covid-19 pandemic.

"The infrastructure and human capital deficiencies in health were known long before this pandemic. Yet the sector remained stuck in a vicious cycle of underfunding and underutilisation of funds," he told The Daily Star yesterday.

The Covid-19 also unraveled the endemic governance problems in

the sector, which suggest that even the money that was spent did not bring much value, he said. "We cannot get out of this vicious cycle of underfunding and underutilisation if we do not recognise the gravity of the problem."

The economist said investments in health capacity building would not pay off if public health policies were not based on scientific principles, and the conduct of the business of public health was not liberated from corruption.

"Corruption is the deepest cause of the government and market failures in the provision of health services," he added.

Prof Dr Muzaherul Huq, former regional adviser, WHO, South East Asia Region, said there was a lack of health management skill and skilled manpower -- both at the health ministry and the DGHS -- to properly utilise allocated money for the sector.

"Besides, there is a lack of proper strategic planning. But whatever planning is done, the implementation [of those plans] is not properly monitored and supervised. People are not getting benefit of whatever budget is allocated," he told The Daily Star yesterday.

Besides, the sector is riddled with rampant corruption and misuse of assets in infrastructure development and procurement of medical equipment and accessories, said Muzaherul, adding, "A proper plan on procurement after assessing the need and requirement is absent. So people are not enjoying benefits even after a huge amount of money is spent."

Many students out of the frame

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and there is almost no signal in my home to connect to the internet. I have to get on a boat and find a quiet place with better signals to attend the classes," Sanwar Hossain said from his village in Netrakona's Kendua.

The philosophy student of DU told The Daily Star yesterday that some of his classmates were in even worse conditions.

Final year student Zahidul Islam Chapal, who is in Jamalpur, said, "Most of our district is now under water and there are frequent power cuts. I fail to join the classes most of the time. But I used to be someone who almost never missed a class."

Teachers of business studies and science faculties said their departments saw about 60 to 65 percent presence in classes.

Contacted, DU Pro vice-chancellor Prof ASM Maksud Kamal said additional classes on weekends and vacations might compensate for the losses once the situation became normal.

In May, a survey by the University Grants Commission concluded that

at least 13 percent of the public university students did not have a smartphone.

Journalism teacher Shiblee Noman of Jahangirnagar University (JU) said many of his students could not be contacted at all.

Anthropology Prof Mirza Taslima Sultana said students' presence has been declining since the classes started in July.

JU Journalists' Association in a survey on 1,200 students found that 68 percent of them faced problems with access to a mobile device and paying for the internet.

"JU has formed a technical committee and we are talking with different companies about ensuring cheaper internet," said Pro-vice Chancellor Prof Nurul Alam.

Rajshahi University also started online classes from July. According to the faculty offices, around 50 percent students have been joining the classes of business studies, law, arts, social science and agriculture departments.

Anthropology teacher Bokhtiar Ahmed said many parents have had their earnings cut due to the

pandemic. "But we have to ensure their access. The government should provide them with whatever is needed for them to join the classes."

Proctor Prof Lutfor Rahman said the University Grants Commission was informed about the issue.

Rajshahi University of Engineering and Technology (RUET) started online classes on June 6. Its classes have been attended by 40 to 50 percent students.

Vice-chancellor Prof Rafiqul Islam Sheikh said the presence was becoming thinner by the day. "Many of our students can't afford the equipment or they live in an area with no reliable internet."

Hands-on training has been postponed altogether, he added.

Buet VC Satya Prasad Majumder said that they are holding online classes for post-graduate students only.

Pro VC Sekendar Ali of Sher-e-Bangla Agriculture University said it has not been measured how many students were attending the classes.

Other teachers said most of their students were from rural areas and they were struggling.

NZ PM Ardern launches 'Covid election' campaign promising jobs

REUTERS, Wellington

New Zealand Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern yesterday launched her re-election campaign promising a "laser-like" focus on boosting jobs and economic growth hit by the Covid-19 pandemic.

The charismatic 40-year-old leader is on track for a comfortable victory in the Sept. 19 election, according to opinion polls, having won global praise for her leadership during the coronavirus pandemic.

It has been 99 days since New Zealand had any domestic transmission of Covid-19, a rare achievement as the pandemic rages globally, and it has re-opened the economy after undergoing a complete shutdown to eradicate the coronavirus.

"When people ask, is this a Covid election, my answer is yes, it is," Ardern told her supporters gathered in Auckland for the launch of her Labour Party's re-election campaign.

In her first campaign speech, Ardern pledged a NZ\$311 million (\$205.32 million) scheme aimed at getting 40,000 Kiwis back in work, if her party wins the Sept 19 polls.

The funding will allow businesses a subsidy of on average NZ\$7500, and up to NZ\$22,000, to hire unemployed New Zealanders.

"The new Flexi-wage scheme is a key plank of our economic plan to support businesses to recover and to provide jobs to those who have lost work due to Covid," Ardern said.

New Zealand has been an envy of the world, having eliminated Covid-19 from its shores and successfully re-opening its economy when most of the world is still shuttered.

Recent data suggests unemployment due to Covid-19 was not as dire as expected, and business confidence had improved due to the government's hard and early response to the pandemic.

Introduced to the stage by her partner and fiancé Clark Gayford, Ardern spoke of her unexpected rise to power in 2017, and her handling of a series of tragedies -- a mass shooting at Christchurch mosques, the deadly White Island volcanic eruption and the coronavirus this year.

"If you had told me then that our launch in 2020 would be in the midst of a global pandemic with our borders closed -- I would have found that very hard to fathom," she said.

Eight dead as blast rocks military base in Somali capital

REUTERS, Mogadishu

A huge blast rocked a military base in Somalia's capital Mogadishu near a stadium yesterday, killing at least eight people and injuring 14, emergency workers said, and the militant group al Shabaab claimed responsibility.

Soldiers opened fire after the explosion which sent clouds of smoke into the sky, said Halima Abdulsalan, a mother of three who lives near the area.

"We ran indoors in fear," she told Reuters. "Soon I could see a military pickup speeding and carrying many soldiers covered with blood. I do not know if they were all dead or injured."

Army officer Major Abdullahi Mohamud said it was an attack. "It must be a suicide car bomb, I am now transporting casualties," he said.

Claiming responsibility for the incident, the military operations spokesman of the al Shabaab group, Abdiasis Abu Musab, said: "We conducted a successful martyrdom operation on a major apostate military base in Mogadishu."

"The enemy suffered many casualties and wounded, military vehicles destroyed."

Somalia has been embroiled in deadly violence since 1991, when clan warlords overthrew leader Siad Barre and then turned on each other.

Competition stiff for getting into reputed colleges

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and quality classroom teaching by qualified teachers," Harun said.

According to Dhaka education board officials, among the capital's reputed colleges, Rajuk Uttara Model College has 1,660 seats for freshmen, Viharunnisa Noon School and College 2,380 seats, Ideal School And College, Motijheel, has 1,045 seats, Dhaka Residential Model College has 1,066 seats, SOS Hermann Gmeiner College has 110 seats, Dhaka College has 1,200 seats, Dhaka City College has 3,762 seats, Dhaka Commerce College has 4,200 seats, BAF Shaheen College has 1,675 seats, Shamsul Hoque Khan School and College has 1,100 seats, Government Science College has 1,230 seats, and Udayan Uchcha Madhyamik Bidyalya has 420 seats.

Beside Notre Dame College has 3,230 seats, Holy Cross College has 1,330 and St. Joseph Higher Secondary School 740 has seats.

Board officials also pointed out that when top ranking colleges will see huge rush of admission seekers,

many seats of colleges and madrassas in rural areas will remain vacant in lack of students.

Harun said, "There are about 25 lakh seats at colleges and madrassas but about 16.90 lakh students passed the SSC and equivalent exams. Some students will drop out after the level and some will opt for technical education," he said.

He also said that many colleges show more seats than their capacities so the number of total seats reaches 25 lakh.

"Last year many colleges did not get any student," said Harun, but could not give the exact number of such colleges instantly.

STARTING LATE

Class XI admission seekers will have to submit their online applications between August 9 and 20 in the first phase. The results of the first phase of online applications will be published on August 25.

The second round of applications will be taken from August 31 to September 2 and its outcome will be

published on September 4.

The third phase will run between September 7 and 8 and its results will be out on September 10.

During the three-phase admission process, students can apply to a maximum of 10 colleges or madrassas, with a fee of Tk 150 for each, said officials.

Usually, after the three-phased admission process, a new academic year for HSC and equivalent courses begins on July 1. But this year it was different due to coronavirus situation.

Education boards expected starting of the online admission process on May 10, but they could not do so as results of Secondary School Certificate (SSC) and equivalent exams were published on May 31.

This year the admission process will be completely online. Until last year, students used to apply for admission to colleges through online and SMS.

The SMS-based system will not be available from this year.