

HRW eyes treaty banning 'killer robots'

AFP, Geneva

Human Rights Watch said Monday it was seeking a new international treaty to halt the race towards fully autonomous weapons, claiming a growing number of countries wanted an outright ban.

The non-governmental organisation (NGO) said 30 countries are now explicitly seeking a ban, after compiling an overview of 97 nations with a stated position on the use and development of what it termed "killer robots".

Most of the 97 want a treaty "to retain human control over the use of force", said New York-based HRW.

"Weapons systems that select and engage targets without meaningful human control are unacceptable and

need to be prevented," HRW said in its summary of the overview report, released in Geneva.

"All countries have a duty to protect humanity from this dangerous development by banning fully autonomous weapons. Retaining meaningful human control over the use of force is an ethical imperative, a legal necessity, and a moral obligation."

HRW's "Stopping Killer Robots" overview was prepared in time for a Convention on Certain Conventional Weapons (CCW) meeting scheduled to open in Geneva on Monday.

However, the UN body's gathering has now been put off until much later in the year.

Govt may scrap PEC, JSC exams

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the PEC exams and 2.5 million are expected to sit for JSC.

"We are preparing the proposal and will send it to PMO early next week," said Akram.

He said they are working on keeping different alternatives regarding the PEC and other exams.

"But whatever we decide, we will ensure students can achieve grade-based fundamental competence."

Mahbub Hossain said the education ministry is also working with different scenarios in mind.

"NCTB [National Curriculum and Textbook Board], education boards and experts are working on the issue under the supervision of our ministry, but everything will depend on when schools will reopen," he said.

Top officials of both ministries also said if the exams are cancelled this year, they will take a school-based final exam on the syllabus already covered and students will receive scholarships based on their performance in the exam.

The government closed all educational institutions since March 17 to curb the spread of coronavirus. The closure has been extended to August 31 and it is yet uncertain when schools will reopen.

Campaign for Popular Education (CAMPE) Executive Director Rasheda K Choudhury said that government is on the right track as they are considering cancellation of exams.

"Many students were out of the coverage of online and TV education introduced to minimise the education loss of students, [so] their results could be a debacle," she said.

She proposed that the government evaluate PEC and JSC examinees based on their performances in prior classes.

If the government cancels the exam it will be the first time any public examination will be cancelled since the liberation of Bangladesh,

said Prof Mazharul Hannan, teacher union leader since 1972 and now the president of Bangladesh Principals' Association.

Meanwhile, the Bangladesh Examination Development Unit (BEDU) had earlier this month sent a set of proposals regarding JSC exams to the Dhaka education board, which was forwarded to the education ministry.

It proposed cutting the JSC syllabus and placing priority on ensuring minimum basic competencies of students if schools reopen in September.

If schools do not reopen by October, it suggested that exams of 50 marks be held with multiple choice questions, and recommended that no exams be held if schools do not reopen at all this year. In that case, BEDU said important lessons of this year should be adjusted with the next classes' syllabus.

The National Academy of Primary Education (NAPE) was meanwhile working to cut the syllabus after assessing how many classes students can have if their schools reopen in September or November.

"Exams will be held based on the syllabus already covered. If we do not get any time to hold classes, we may cut exam marks [currently 100 for each subject]," NAPE Director General Shah Alam said.

Holding this year's Higher Secondary Certificate and its equivalent exams has been deferred for an indefinite period. The exams were scheduled to start on April 1. More than one million students are expected to take the exams.

Dhaka education board secretary Tapan Kumar Sarkar said they are preparing to hold the HSC exams maintaining health protocols as soon as possible. "We are planning that one student will sit on one bench, for that we will need to increase the number of exam centres."



A devotee worships Sri Krishna at the Dhakeshwari Temple in the capital's Palashi area yesterday marking the Janmashtami, the birth anniversary of Lord Sri Krishna. Sitting on the stage, a priest blesses another devotee, not in picture. This year, the rituals and programmes of the Janmashtami were observed on a limited scale due to the pandemic.

PHOTO: PRABIR DAS

Pandemic leaves them hanging

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courier service charges to send academic credentials and visa fees, we have to spend minimum Tk 1.50 lakh for the entire process. Besides, to get scholarship, we have to achieve a very good score in GRE and English language exams beating hundreds and thousands of competitors from other countries. After overcoming so many obstacles, when I see I am losing such a hard-earned opportunity, I feel really hopeless," said Rahman.

In addition to all these hurdles, many students are now required to spend additional tuition fees for online classes, which in many cases are not covered by the waivers and scholarships.

Farhana Hasan got a PhD admission offer with tuition fee waiver from a university in the USA. However, due to the pandemic, the university will launch online classes in October and Farhana is required to pay 1,000 USD in fees for the online classes, which are not waived.

"Nevertheless, I have to join the university by March 2021 to continue my study. Now, if I pay the fee for online classes and cannot join the university in March as there is no sign of improvement of the coronavirus situation, I will be in deep trouble," said Farhana.

Students like Farhana and Rahman

number in the tens of thousands in Bangladesh and the figure is increasing every year.

According to Unesco's report titled "Global Flow of Tertiary Level Students", around 60,000 Bangladeshi students went abroad for higher education in 2017-18.

In terms of the number of outbound students from Bangladesh, the top five destinations were Malaysia (20,811), USA (7,028), Australia (4,986), United Kingdom (2,536) and Germany (2,311).

However, this preference changes depending on the availability of educational opportunities for Bangladeshi students in different countries. For instance, in 2013, the UK was the first choice for Bangladeshi students followed by the USA, Australia, Malaysia and Canada.

Unesco's report further states that the number of outbound tertiary level students in Bangladesh is on the rise. According to the report, in 2000, just over 7,900 students pursued higher education abroad, which increased to 60,000 in the span of 17 years.

According to Foreign Admission and Career Development Consultants Association of Bangladesh (FACD CAB), in 2019, the admission consultants of the country provided services to more than 100,000 students and last year at least 70,000 students

went abroad for higher education. However, in 2020, they provided services to just over 3,000 students in the last eight months, mostly through online platforms.

Kazi Faridul Haque Happy, president of FACD CAB, said, "We are stuck in an unprecedented crisis. We are trying to assist our students but what can we do if the countries do not take visa appointments. It's absolutely their sovereign decision."

"Like our student-clients, we are also immensely affected by the Covid-19 crisis. More than 40 out of 400 of our member organisations have closed their operations as they cannot provide services to the students. Many more will follow suit if the situation does not improve in the near future."

In this situation, students are appealing to the international community to relax restrictions at least for tertiary level students and researchers.

"We appeal to the host countries to grant visas to tertiary level students under special provisions. Because, after joining universities, we engage in research on various fields of knowledge which will be beneficial for the entire humanity and the countries as well. On the contrary, shrinking research funds and making higher education inaccessible will adversely affect the entire world," said Farhana.

Nearly one in 10 infected in city

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On the contrary, 538 individuals from those households which had no symptomatic members were tested.

Of them, eight percent tested positive.

Additionally, 720 households in six slums in Dhaka city were also surveyed and six percent individuals under the study were found to be infected.

Overall, nine percent among all individuals in Dhaka city was estimated as RT-PCR positive, according to the preliminary study.

The authorities have not shared the study details yet.

"We will sit to discuss [the study outcome] soon and then we will plan the next step. We will inform you [media] everything," Prof ABM Khurshid Alam, acting director general of the health directorate, told The Daily Star yesterday.

According to the health directorate testing data, the transmission of Covid-19 appeared to have stabilised across the country throughout the month of July.

However, from August 5, numbers of new patients seem to have an increasing trend.

In Dhaka city, around 1,000 new patients were being added to the daily tally. Between July 19 and 29, the total

number of confirmed cases rose to 48,322 from 38,324, which is about a 10,000 rise in 10 days.

Yesterday, the number of confirmed cases in Dhaka reached 67,135, nearly a 19,000 rise in 13 days since July 29.

"We are observing that the confirmed cases are rising by more than 50 a day in at least 38 districts. In Dhaka and other big cities, this number is higher. It proves that the transmission has started to increase again after seven days of Eid-ul-Azha," Mushtaq Hussain, consultant of the IEDCR, told The Daily Star yesterday.

"The transmission may continue to increase in the days to come, I think," he added.

About the IEDCR's study, he said, "It can be assumed that people carrying the virus are everywhere. So, making sure masks are used is urgent, along with case detection and isolation."

Echoing him, Prof Ridwanur said, "The virus transmission will not stop by itself. Active intervention is a must."

During the last one month, the every day positivity rate has increased. Positivity rate is the percentage of infections of the people tested.

On July 5, the positivity rate was 19.57 percent which reached 25.23 percent on July 15 and has stayed over 20 percent since then.

Yesterday, this rate was 20.22 percent.

ANTIBODY TEST

Experts said case detection and isolation was the key to control transmission and there was no alternative to antibody testing.

"It is not possible to bring all people under RT-PCR testing as it is costly and time-consuming. On the contrary, antibody tests can identify which people have developed antibodies within a minute. The government should permit the use of antibody test kits immediately," said Prof Ridwanur.

The immediate past DGHS DG Prof Abul Kalam Azad had also said they were planning to permit antibody testing.

The national technical advisory committee on Covid-19 also recommended antibody and the antigen-based rapid tests.

DAILY UPDATE

In yesterday's briefing, Prof Nasima Sultana, additional director general of the DGHS, said that more 33 Covid-19 patients died in the 24 hours until 8:30am.

With this, the death toll reached 3,471, around 1.32 percent of all the 2,63,503 confirmed cases.

Some 2,996 people of 14,820 tested were found infected during the same period.

Questions over three witnesses

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Baharchhara union, and also a leader of the Ward Awami League.

The two, however, returned to their houses later and talked to a television channel. They claimed that they were not witness to anything, but police took their signatures on blank papers.

According to the FIR prepared by police, on the day Sinha was shot dead, he was first spotted by Nurul in the woods of Marishbunia village in Baharchhara union.

The Teknaf police claimed that Amin, a member of the community police, apparently saw a beam of a flashlight in the woods on the hills and informed Nizam Uddin, another

member of the community police, about it.

Nizam then went to the nearby mosque and announced over loudspeakers that robbers were seen prowling about. As the head of the community police, Aiyas was made aware of the fact, said the FIR.

It also claimed that Amin called the Baharchhara Investigation Centre, whose in-charge was Inspector Liaqat Ali, to report the presence of "robbers".

Acting on that information, Liaqat and his team had stopped Sinha's car at Shaplapur on Marine Drive, following which the former major was killed in police firing.

Stop assault on freedom

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Videos seen by Amnesty International suggest that the police suppressed the human chain violently without any provocation from the protesters.

"People's rights to freedom of expression and peaceful assembly must be urgently upheld in Bangladesh. The authorities must allow people to express their critical views without fear of reprisals, and must immediately stop their campaign of forcibly disappearing those perceived to be critical of the government."

"All those incidents must be promptly and effectively investigated in an impartial and independent manner, and all those found responsible must be brought to justice in fair trials without recourse to the death penalty," said Sultan Mohammed Zakaria.

As background, the Amnesty International press release said that there has been a "crackdown on the rights to freedom of expression and peaceful assembly in recent years". It mentioned arrests made in cases filed under what it termed the "draconian" Digital Security Act -- 1,325 people in 2019, or three detentions per day. The release added that in the first half of 2020 alone, DSA detentions have crossed the 500 mark.

"In recent weeks, authorities have arrested dozens of students, teachers, cartoonists, and human rights defenders for their critical social media posts, writings and even caricatures," the release concluded.

Increasingly on the rise in Bangladesh since the current regime assumed power in 2009," Amnesty International said.

Referring to the disappearance of Ashraf Uddin Mahdi, a 27-year-old student at Egypt's Al Azhar University and a student activist, the statement said Mahdi was held in an unknown location for 48 hours, during which he could not communicate with anyone, before being released amid intense pressure from civil society organisations.

Mahdi told Amnesty International that the abductors released him on the condition that he would stop writing critical posts on social media about a few individuals affiliated with the "regime".

"There is a disturbing pattern of enforced disappearances emerging in Bangladesh in recent years, mainly targeting people who express their dissenting political opinions. Ashraf Uddin Mahdi was forcibly disappeared from the centre of the capital as a brazen tactic to silence him," said Sultan Mohammed Zakaria, South Asia Researcher at Amnesty International.

Student activists have also faced violence from groups closely associated with the ruling party to silence criticism of the authorities.

The press statement also included Barguna police's attack on a human chain organised to demand the release of Shahadul Islam Sefat, a graduate student of Stamford University.

Bamna OC withdrawn for slapping ASI

OUR CORRESPONDENT, Patuakhali

Officer-in-charge of Barguna's Bamna Police Station Elias Ali Talukder was withdrawn yesterday for slapping an on-duty ASI at a human chain programme.

Mofizul Islam, additional superintendent of Barguna police and also the chief of the committee formed to investigate the incident, said the OC was withdrawn and attached to Barguna police lines in line with the instructions of Barishal DIG office.

"During investigation, we found the allegation of slapping the ASI true. Therefore, we recommend in the report taking departmental action, including withdrawal of OC Elias," the police officer said, adding that they submitted the report to the Barguna SP office on Monday night.

On Saturday, OC Elias slapped the ASI (who wished to be unnamed) in front of hundreds of people during a human chain in Bamna upazila town, demanding the release of Stamford University student Shahadul Islam Sefat, who was arrested (now on bail) from the site where Maj (ret'd) Sinha Mohammad Rashed was shot dead by police in Cox's Bazar on July 31.

Sefat is from Bamna. The incident drew widespread criticism when it went viral.

On Monday, the ASI was also withdrawn from Bamna Police Station and attached to Barguna police lines.

Indonesia starts human trials of China-made virus vaccine

AFP, Jakarta

Indonesia yesterday launched human trials of a Chinese-made coronavirus vaccine with some 1,600 volunteers slated to take part in the six-month study.

The vaccine candidate, produced by Sinovac Biotech, is among just a few in the world to enter Phase 3 clinical trials, or large-scale testing on humans -- the last step before regulatory approval.

The treatment, known as CoronaVac, is already being tested on 9,000 health workers in Brazil, the second-hardest-hit country in the coronavirus pandemic after the United States.

Indonesia, the world's fourth most populous country, has been struggling to contain its mounting virus cases, with more than 127,000 confirmed infections and over 5,700 deaths.

But the true scale of the public health crisis is believed to be much bigger, given the Southeast Asian nation's low testing rates.

The governor of Indonesia's most populous province, West Java, was among 1,620 volunteers slated to take part in clinical testing, which was set to wrap up in February.

If the vaccine proves safe and effective, Indonesian officials said, there were plans to produce up to 250 million doses for the sprawling archipelago of nearly 270 million, although they gave few details of the tentative roll-out.

Yesterday, Indonesia's President Joko Widodo toured a factory in Bandung city, operated by state-owned pharmaceutical firm Bio Farma, where production would begin.

"Once again I want to highlight that the Covid-19 threat will not end until all people in Indonesia are vaccinated," Widodo said ahead of the tour.

Sudan says 13 killed in ethnic clashes in Port Sudan

AFP, Khartoum

Sudan said yesterday 13 people were killed and 42 injured in days of clashes between rival ethnic groups in its Red Sea port, state media reported.

Violence broke out in the eastern city of Port Sudan on Sunday evening, the SUNA news agency said, quoting medics who had treated the wounded.

Police sent in reinforcements and have imposed a night-time curfew, the statement added.

Fighting began when protesters from the Nuba people, demonstrating against a new governor, entered a district of the Beni Amer group.

There is long standing hostility between the groups.

The Nuba originate from the South Kordofan region, an area that suffered from the decades of civil war.

The Beni Amer people come from eastern Sudan.

Russia claims 1st Covid-19 vaccine

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But only about 10% of clinical trial are successful, and the speed at which Russia has moved, approving a vaccine before the final stages of trials to test safety and efficacy are over, has worried some scientists, who fear Moscow may be putting national prestige before safety.

Speaking at a government meeting on state television, Putin dismissed those concerns, saying the vaccine, developed by Moscow's Gamaleya Institute, was safe and that it had even been administered to one of his daughters.

"I know that it works quite effectively, forms strong immunity, and I repeat, it has passed all the needed checks," said Putin.

He said he hoped mass production would start soon.

The World Health Organization (WHO) and Russian health authorities are discussing the process for possible WHO prequalification for its newly approved Covid-19 vaccine, a WHO spokesman said yesterday.

"We are in close contact with Russian health authorities and discussions are ongoing with respect to possible WHO prequalification of the vaccine, but again prequalification of any vaccine includes

the rigorous review and assessment of all required safety and efficacy data," WHO spokesman Tarik Jasarevic told a UN briefing in Geneva, referring to clinical trials.

PHASE III TRIAL

The vaccine's approval by the Russian health ministry comes before the start of a larger trial involving thousands of participants, commonly known as a Phase III trial.

Such trials, which require a certain rate of participants catching the virus to observe the vaccine's effect, are normally considered essential precursors for a vaccine to receive regulatory approval.

The Moscow-based Association of Clinical Trials Organizations (ACTO), a trade body representing the world's top drugmakers in Russia this week urged the health ministry to postpone approval until that final trial had been successfully completed.

In a letter to the ministry, it said there were high risks associated with registering a drug before that happened.

"It is during this phase that the main evidence of a vaccine's efficacy is collected, as well as information on adverse reactions that could appear in certain groups of patients: people with weakened immunity, people with

concomitant diseases and so forth," it said.

Some international experts have also questioned the speed at which Russia approved its vaccine.

"Normally you need a large number of people to be tested before you approve a vaccine," said Peter Kremsner from the University Hospital in Tuebingen, currently testing CureVac's Covid-19 vaccine in clinical trials.

"In that respect, I think it's reckless to do that (approve it) if lots of people haven't already been tested."

Duncan Matthews, a professor of intellectual property law at Queen Mary University of London, said news of a potential Covid-19 vaccine was to be welcomed, "but safety must be the priority".

The US Food and Drug Administration (FDA) and the European Medicines Agency (EMA) have fast-track approval procedures for emergency humanitarian use and we need to see evidence that Russia is adopting an equally prudent approach," Matthews said in an emailed comment.

More than 100 possible vaccines are being developed around the world to try to stop the Covid-19 pandemic. At least four are in final Phase III human trials, according to WHO data.