New global rules to fight health threats come into force

AFP, *Kuala Lumpur*

Revised International Health Regulations (IHR) enter into force on Friday, aiming to boost the world's capacity to deal with the growing threat that infectious diseases such as bird flu can spread globally.

The rules will ensure "faster and better detection and evaluation of health emergencies with an international scope, those that have the potential to cross frontiers," said Guenael Rodier, the World Health Organisation's IHR coordination director.

The WHO said the emergence of SARS (Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome), the deadly Ebola Virus in Africa and human cases of bird flu in recent years demonstrated the speed with which lethal diseases could appear and spread.

"SARS was a wake-up call for all of us. It spread faster than we had predicted and was only contained through intensive cooperation between countries which prevented this new disease from gaining a foothold," said WHO Director General Margaret Chan.

"Today, the greatest threat to international public health security would be an influenza pandemic."

"The threat of a pandemic has not receded, but implementation of the regulations will help the world to be better prepared for the possibility of a pandemic," she added.

The rules bolstering international cooperation to stifle health emergencies were agreed by the World Health Organisation's 192 member states in 2005.

Countries will have an obligation to alert the WHO about health threats that might have international implications, ranging from disease to contaminated food, chemical agents or radioactive material, the WHO said.

It also lays out action like quarantines, surveillance of travellers and a requirement for a 24 hour, seven day a week alert system.

The revision was partly motivated by fears that easier global air travel can help spread infections far and wide in short space of time.

SARS reached seven countries on three continents within the space of weeks in 2002 and 2003, and eventually blossomed to 8,096 cases in 29 countries before it petered out, according to the WHO.

The previous regulations last updated 1969 in were limited in scope to four named diseases -- cholera, plague, yellow fever and smallpox -- while the revised ones are open-ended and place individual countries under greater pressure to provide transparent information.

"The world is such now that these events cannot be obscured," said Michael Ryan, the WHO's director of epidemic alert and response.

In recent years, several countries including China were criticised for being slow or lacking transparency in the initial phases of SARS and bird flu, amid claims they failed to reveal the onset of then largely unknown illnesses to their neighbours.

PHOTO: STAR

Businessmen dry sharees that were drenched in the recent heavy rain on the roof of Chittagong Shopping Complex in the port city yesterday.

Budget size, financing sources not unrealistic

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prevailing in the country for private sector investment.

Former finance minister M Syeduzzaman chaired the dialogue where Executive Director of CPD Debapriya Bhattacharya gave an overview of the state of Bangladesh economy and budget evaluation by the independent think tank.

The BB governor pointed out that the rate of letter of credit (LC) opening increased recently.

He thanked the migrant workers for sending huge remittance as the foreign currency reserve of the central bank reached $4.75 billion mark.

Saleh Uddin Ahmed admitted that the BB has been facing some challenges including rising inflation but hoped to address it properly. He emphasised attracting foreign direct investment and portfolio investment instead of depending on bank borrowing.

He also suggested that exporters be more competitive as the government fund for assisting them is very limited.

Political leaders, former lawmakers, former bureaucrats, and business leaders attending the dialogue emphasised making zero tariff on computer import, power pump, reduction of duty on milk powder, giving attention to thrust sectors, special allocation for jute sector and reaching the agriculture subsidy to the farmers.

Responding to the speakers' demand for protection of domestic industries, Mirza Azizul Islam reminded them that all the export-oriented sectors get different types of subsidy and protection in other forms.

The finance adviser said the money that has been extracted from corrupt people would help the government to meet the deficit in the budget allocation.

He said the government has taken some short and medium term measures for curbing price hike of essentials.

Regarding implementation of annual development programme (ADP), the finance adviser said the officials were given instructions to start implementation process from the very beginning of the next fiscal year.

He said the government's revenue expenditure has gone up due to interest payment of previous debts and salary hike of the government officials.

President of Federation of Bangladesh Chambers of Commerce and Industry Mir Nasir Hossain said the new tariff structure in the budget would make negative impact on the import of capital machinery.

There are some anomalies in the budget that may hamper private sector development, he said, adding that poverty alleviation heavily depends on employment generation and private sector is the main tool for creating new employment.

Metropolitan Chamber of Commerce and Industry President Latifur Rahman said the budget proposal gave attention to import of finished products but the import of raw materials should also get due attention for sustaining the economy.

BGMEA President Anwarul Alam Chowdhury said the garments owners were almost ready to give minimum wages to the workers but the workers agitations last year harmed the sector and many orders were diverted to other countries due to it, he said.

There is 25-30 per cent labour shortage in the RMG sector and it would be able to generate 10-12 lakh employment in next couple of years reaching the export figure to $15 billion, he said.

The BGMEA president demanded permanent solution to the power crisis, tax holiday and bank loan with seven per cent interest for setting up effluent treatment plant in the textile sector for maintaining proper environment.

Former minister Dr Osman Farouque said this is for the first time people are evaluating the budget in an objective way unlike one-sided criticism in the previous years.

Terming the budget highly ambitious, former lawmaker Dr Abdur Razzaq said it would be very difficult to implement. The revenue expenditure went up due to maintenance of many unnecessary agencies in the government, he added.

Debapriya Bhattacharya in his analysis said resource mobilisation and financing will be two major issues in the budget. He said a number of thrust sectors did not get attention in the proposed budget but the matter needs to be addressed.

He also proposed imposing fine on garment factories that would not implement the minimum wage structure. Debapriya opposed the government fund for skill development of the garment workers, saying that it would be a mere wastage of public money.

Former commerce secretary Sohel Ahmed termed the budget a 'good document' but opposed the idea of market stabilising through import of essential items by public sector body Trading Corporation of Bangladesh.

He proposed formation of a fair trade company in collaboration with private sector for import and selling of essential items.

CNG-RUN AUTORICKSHAWS

314 cases filed against owners, drivers in city

UNB, *Dhaka*

A mobile court in separate drives in the city over the last 21 days filed 314 cases against the owners and drivers of CNG-run auto-rickshaws for taking additional deposits and realising excess fares.

Three owners were fined, two drivers sent to jail, 60 vehicles seized and Tk 4,50,000 realised in fines during the drive conducted by Metropolitan Magistrate Delwar Hossain and BRTA with the assistance of the joint forces, said a handout.

The drive was carried out to prevent the drivers form realising extra fares and extra deposits.

Bush plunges to new low in poll

AFP, *Washington*

US President George W. Bush's approval rating plunged to a new low of 29 percent in the Wall Street Journal/NBC News poll, the Journal reported yesterday.

With the public disenchanted by his Iraq strategy, and in the wake of a White House defeat on a landmark immigration bill, Bush hit his lowest level in six years as president in the WSJ/NBC poll -- the previous low approval rate was 34 percent in December 2006.

Two-thirds of Americans say they disapprove of how he is leading the country, up from 61 percent also last December.

Tariff proposals to hurt industry

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The signatories of the statement were Mahbubur Rahman, president of International Chamber of Commerce-Bangladesh (ICC-B), Latifur Rahman, president of Metropolitan Chamber of Commerce and Industry (MCCI), Masih Ul Karim, president of Foreign Investors' Chamber of Commerce and Industry (FICCI), Hossain Khaled, president of The Dhaka Chamber of Commerce and Industry (DCCI), Anwar-ul-Alam Chowdhury, president of Bangladesh Garment Manufacturers and Exporters Association (BGMEA), Md Fazlul Hoque, president of Bangladesh Knitwear Manufacturers & Exporters Association (BKMEA), Jahangir Alamin, acting president of Bangladesh Textile Mills Association (BTMA) and Saifuzzaman Chowdhury, president of Chittagong Chamber of Commerce and Industry (CCCI).

They in the statement said the imports of 400 items, mostly raw materials used in domestic industries, were denied the zero tariff facility and have been subjected to 10 percent tariff in the proposed budget. About 1,200 more raw materials and machinery have been subjected to 100 percent increase in tariff rates. Their tariffs have increased from five percent to 10 percent, in the proposed budget, the statement said.

They said import of all finished products has been given significant tariff concessions by withdrawing the four percent infrastructure development surcharge as well as reduction in supplementary duties.

"The proposed increase in duty of raw materials, intermediate inputs and capital machinery will affect domestic industries across the board, particularly the textile sector, which has been providing increasing backward-linkage facilities to the country's most dominant export products--readymade garments," the statement said.

"Similarly, exorbitant price escalation [by more than 100 percent] of steel products and its intermediate products in international market demand rationalisation of tariff [specific duty] to save local industries and the poor to have CI [corrugated iron] sheet prices within their reach," it added.

However, the leaders of eight bodies very much welcomed different features of the new budget like allocations for different sectors, financial assistance and subsidies to agriculture, the changes made in income tax administration and better safety-net for the poor.

It said 57 percent of the overall budget has been allocated to projects linked to poverty reduction. Similarly, the setting up of Tk 1 billion SME Fund (small and medium enterprise fund) and Tk 0.23 billion Trust Fund along with the provisions for help for research and development in the agriculture sector, allocation of Tk 7.5 billion in diesel subsidy and Tk15 billion in fertilizer subsidy for the firms are equally commendable, the statement said.

The joint statement said in formulating the tariff rationalisation, the budget seems to have followed the trade policy prescriptions, which remained on the table for quite sometime in the form of structural adjustment programme.

This prescription has been framed seemingly to enable the developing countries and the least developed countries (LDCs) to take advantage of the benefits of multilateral trade liberalisation because of limitations of their trading capacity and their trade policy framework marked by maintenance of high unbound tariffs.

"It is claimed that unbound tariffs create 'disincentives to enter international markets'," the statement said.

The statement said it is needless to mention that tariff policy reforms need to be pursued in the interest of the national economy keeping in mind that structural adjustment programmes are more often a reflection of the economic interests of the donors than the development priorities of aid receiving countries.

According to several studies, it said, trade liberalisation in itself does not automatically lead to growth and improved competitiveness. In fact, most of the developing countries have not been able to fully benefit from trade because they either lack tradable products or have limited capacity to tap market access opportunities.

"It is, therefore, extremely necessary to extend tariff concessions to local industries to help them grow and be competitive. In extending such help, it appears that different provisions proposed in the budget needs to be reconsidered in order to reconcile the interests of the industries with those of the consumers and the revenue income of the government," the statement concluded.

Iraq surge a failure

Top Democrats tell Bush

AFP, *Washington*

Top US congressional Democrats bluntly told President George W. Bush Wednesday that his Iraq troop "surge" policy was a failure, as the Pentagon submitted a report saying early results of the strategy were mixed.

Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid and House of Representatives Speaker Nancy Pelosi challenged the president over Iraq by sending him a letter ahead of a White House meeting later on Wednesday.

The escalation "has failed to produce the intended results," Reid and Pelosi wrote, saying that the larger US force "has had little impact in curbing the violence or fostering political reconciliation.

"It has not enhanced America's national security. The unsettling reality is that instances of violence against Iraqis remain high and attacks on US forces have increased.

"In fact, the last two months of the war were the deadliest to date for US troops."

The letter appeared to preview a fresh showdown over Iraq between anti-war Democrats and the president, just a few weeks after Bush forced his foes to strip troop withdrawal timelines from a 100 billion dollar emergency war budget.

Pelosi and Reid also told Bush that they planned to send him new legislation to "limit the US mission in Iraq, begin the phased redeployment of US forces, and bring the war to a responsible end."

The United States is sending 30,000 more troops into Iraq as part of a strategy announced by Bush in January to bring down violence in Baghdad and the restive, Sunni-majority Al-Anbar province.

The reinforcements are being sent over several months with the last combat brigade due to be operational later this month, raising the US military contingent in Iraq to 160,000.

Bush, speaking at a fundraising dinner for Republican congressional candidates in Washington, said he had talked Wednesday to the commander of US forces in Iraq, General David Petraeus, about the surge.

"The final troops have just arrived," Bush said, reporting "some progress and some setbacks."

The Pentagon report submitted Wednesday to Congress, which covers the period between February and May 2007, said the surge was "a greatly increased effort to secure turbulent areas to give Iraqis political space to implement reforms and pursue reconciliation among competing factions."

It added: "It is too soon to assess results."

"Positive indicators include a decrease in civilian murders and sectarian violence in Baghdad and in total attacks in Anbar province, while negative indicators include the rise of high-profile attacks and expanded use of explosively formed projectiles."

India could see first-ever female president

AFP, *New Delhi*

India's ruling Congress party yesterday chose a woman as its candidate in a presidential vote next month, raising the prospect that the country could see its first female head of state.

Congress chief Sonia Gandhi announced at a press conference that the governor of the desert state of Rajasthan, Pratibha Patil, had been chosen as its candidate to succeed President Abdul Kalam.

"It's a historic moment," said Gandhi, the Italian-born widow of former prime minister Rajiv Gandhi.

The post of president holds limited authority over day-to-day affairs, but can play a crucial role in government formation at state and federal levels, making the selection a battleground as it has been this year.

The post is chosen by an electoral college of state and federal legislators. They are due to vote on July 19 and the counting of votes is scheduled for July 21, chief election commissioner N Gopalaswami said Wednesday.