

Myanmar shuts internet in Rakhine

REUTERS, Yangon

Myanmar authorities ordered telecoms companies to shut down internet services in conflict-torn western Myanmar, a leading operator said yesterday, amid heightening tensions in the region, where government troops are fighting ethnic rebels.

Telenor Group said the Ministry of Transport and Communications directed all telecoms companies to "temporarily" suspend internet services in nine townships in Rakhine and neighbouring Chin states, citing "disturbances of peace and use of internet activities to coordinate illegal activities".

At a press conference yesterday, a military spokesman said the army had no information about the shutdown.

"We didn't do it. We don't know about that," said Brigadier General Zaw Min Tun.

The shutdown went into effect late on Friday, the Telenor statement said.

"Telenor Myanmar has been asking for further clarification on the rationale for the shutdown and emphasized that freedom of expression through access to telecom services should be maintained for humanitarian purposes," the group said.

A spokesman for the transport and communications ministry declined to comment, referring questions to another spokesman who did not answer phone calls.

Rakhine state came to global attention after about 730,000 Rohingya Muslims crossed into Bangladesh fleeing a military crackdown in response to militant attacks in 2017.

Venezuela should release jailed opponents: UN

AFP, Caracas

UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Michelle Bachelet called on Venezuela to release jailed dissidents Friday and said the crisis-racked country faced a "serious" humanitarian situation.

Her comments came at the end of a three-day visit to the country on the invitation of embattled President Nicolas Maduro, who has faced allegations of cracking down on political opponents amid rampant hyperinflation and shortages of basic goods.

"I call on the authorities to release all those who are detained or deprived of their liberty for exercising their civil rights in a peaceful manner," said Bachelet, referring to the hundreds of Maduro government opponents who are currently incarcerated.

The UN rights chief met relatives of these detainees, many of whom are accused of "conspiracy" to overthrow the government. She also spoke with relatives of people who died during the anti-Maduro protests of 2017.

Rights groups had pushed Bachelet to raise the issue of 715 people they say have been jailed for political reasons, a claim Maduro's government rejects.

Maduro, meanwhile, said he would respect the recommendations made by Bachelet, a former Chilean president.

"I told her that she can count on me, as president, to take her suggestions, her

recommendations and her proposals seriously," Maduro said, adding that people accused of human rights abuses would be prosecuted.

Bachelet also said she had appointed delegates to remain in the country with the mandate "to provide assistance and technical advice, but also, very importantly, to continue to monitor the human rights situation across Venezuela."

The high commissioner's visit came amid the country's ongoing economic and political crisis that the UN says has caused some four million Venezuelans to flee since 2015 amid collapsing government services and shortages of food.

Bachelet has previously criticized the government's response to the crisis and called for Caracas to respect "everyone's fundamental right to peaceful assembly and freedom of expression."

Yet it was the Maduro government who invited her to Venezuela, saying the visit would be an opportunity to show its adherence to human rights and the "negative repercussions" of sanctions that prevent it from selling its oil to the United States.

Bachelet has also been critical of US sanctions against Maduro imposed by President Donald Trump, raising concerns that restrictions on trade with Venezuela could have negative repercussions for the general population in a country where 96 percent of the budget is based on oil.

Ex-UN chief

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visits could not be known immediately.

Ban Ki-moon, a former foreign minister of South Korea, has contributed a lot to alleviate the situation of global poverty and climate change while working as the secretary general of the UN, Momen said.

The minister said Bangladesh has a lot to learn from South Korea, which turned into a developed country from a situation that was much worse than that of Bangladesh after its independence.

South Korea had a law that would penalise the project directors for failing to implement projects on time or for not performing well. On the other hand, those who performed better and completed projects on time would get promotions, the minister said.

He also suggested to follow the examples of South Korea to perform better in implementing projects.

He pointed out that delays in project completion increase the cost of projects in Bangladesh.

Talking to reporters after the event, Momen also said Rohingya crisis would be a major issue during Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina's visit to China from July 1 to 4.

"Myanmar has great respect for China. We hope the Rohingya issue will be resolved quickly if Beijing requests Nay Pyi Taw," he said.

"We've prepared a biometric list of Rohingyas as per their [Myanmar's] requirements and they've verified it," the foreign minister said.

"Myanmar has promised to take back Rohingyas, but the process is yet to start."

"We want a peaceful solution... we hope Myanmar will take back their people through discussions," the minister added.

Lawmakers blast

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domestic product] for the health sector," said Jatiya Party lawmaker Rustum Ali Faraji.

"Out-of-pocket health expenditure [private spending] in Bangladesh is 66 percent. Poor people are suffering," he added.

The finance minister has proposed allocating Tk 23,383 crore in the pro-posed budget. Compared to the total budget, the share has decreased from the current year's 5.39 percent to 5 percent.

Faraji also said the allocation for education was insufficient to ensure quality and international-standard education. "You should not term allocation for education a waste. Rather, it is an investment for the future," he added.

The allocation in the sector is only 2 percent, which was much lower than the recommendation from the Unesco, he said. The finance minister has proposed Tk 61,118 crore for education for the next fiscal year.

Faraji said that the banking sector and the share market were going through a bad time and a vested quarter was trying to cash in on the situation through conspiracies.

"The finance minister had earlier promised to tackle loan defaulters with an iron fist, but in reality he has provided 'discounts' for loan defaulters in the budget," he said.

The lawmaker then proposed forming a banking commission to bring discipline to the sector.

Awami League MP Bazlul Haque Haroon demanded inclusion of educational institutions in the Monthly Pay Order scheme under which the government pays basic salaries of teachers of non-government institutions.

Actress-turned-lawmaker Suborna Mustafa said cultural activists were "stunned" and "frustrated" at the meagre budgetary allocation for culture in the proposed budget.

The allocation for the cultural affairs ministry is Tk 575 crore, which is 0.10 percent of the total budget. The amount is Tk 50 crore less than that of last year's revised budget.

Another lawmaker from the ruling party, AKM Sarwar Jahan, proposed taking up a universal pension scheme.

Information Minister Hasan Mahmud said the BNP and the Centre for Policy Dialogue were making similar criticism of budget for the last 10 years. Both said the budgets would not be implemented, he said.

He also claimed that the media was fully free and expanding in the country. Ten years ago, there were 750 daily newspapers, now the number is 1,350, he said. The number of television channels was 10. It is now 33, he added.

'Region will be set on fire'

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Tehran's shooting down of an unmanned drone.

Under pressure to respond to the high-stakes incident near the strategic Strait of Hormuz, Trump said the US was prepared to hit "3 different sites" Thursday night but that he scrapped the strikes "10 minutes" before they were to have been launched.

"I asked, how many will die. 150 people, sir, was the answer from a General," the president tweeted, saying he concluded it would not have been "proportionate to shooting down an unmanned drone."

According to excerpts of an interview with NBC's "Meet the Press" conducted Friday morning at the White House, Trump said he had not given final approval to strikes against Iran, and that no planes were in the air.

"But they would have been pretty soon. And things would have happened to a point

where you wouldn't turn back or couldn't turn back," he said.

He added that he did not want war with Iran, but if it came to pass, there would be "obliteration like you've never seen before."

The US president had struck a combative tone in initial comments Thursday about the downing of the Global Hawk surveillance aircraft, but as the pre-dawn incident whipped up fears of open conflict, Trump moved to dial back tensions.

Trump yesterday said that he would be Iran's "best friend" and that the Islamic republic could be a "wealthy" country if it renounced nuclear weapons.

"We're not going to have Iran have a nuclear weapon," Trump told reporters outside the White House as he prepared to depart for Camp David for meetings on the situation with Iran, which downed a US drone earlier this week.

"Everyone was saying I'm a war-monger, and now they say I'm a dove," Trump said Saturday as he was peppered with questions about the Iran drama.

"I think I am neither, if you want to know the truth. I'm a man with common sense, and that's what we need in this country, is common sense."

Tehran insists that the drone violated its airspace -- something Washington denies -- but was prepared to accept on Friday that it might have done so by accident.

The drone could have entered Iran's airspace over a mistake by "a general or some operators," the commander of the Revolutionary Guards' aerospace arm, Brigadier General Amir Ali Hajizadeh told state news agency IRNA yesterday.

"Nonetheless, this was an act of trampling international aviation laws by a spy aircraft, which met our natural response," Hajizadeh added.

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Congress moves to slap sanctions

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stranglehold on Burma's economy, including the gemstone sector.

"The Rohingya, who have been suffering at the hands of the Burmese military since the horrific attacks in 2017, shouldn't have to wait for justice any longer," Engel said.

Some 741,000 Rohingya fled the military crackdown in Myanmar's Rakhine state since August 2017.

In a report last year, UN investigators demanded top military commanders in Myanmar be investigated and prosecuted under the international law for the "gravest" crimes, including genocide, against civilians.

The crimes committed include killings and rape of Rohingyas and burning down their homes -- acts that the rights bodies termed genocide. The UN termed the military crackdown a textbook example of ethnic cleansing.

Since early this year, conflicts between the Myanmar army and the Ara-kan Army, an ethnic Buddhist rebel group demanding greater autonomy in Rakhine and Kachin, have escalated, forcing thousands of people in the two states to be displaced.

Despite a deal signed between Myanmar and Bangladesh, Rohingya re-patriation did not start as the refugees who fled to Bangladesh say they don't feel Rakhine was safe and that they had no guarantee for citizenship in Myanmar, where they have been denied citizenship and other basic rights since 1982.

Engel said, "The Burmese military is waging similar violence against other minorities, employing the cruel and inhumane tactics the Burmese army has used for decades. There needs to be relief from the violence and suffering."

"There needs to be accountability for those who have carried out the genocide against the Rohingyas and the ongoing horrors against other ethnic minorities. My legislation would provide new tools to help reach those goals."

He added, "I hope this bill moves swiftly through the House and if it reaches the Senate, I hope that body's leadership will see the dire need to get this measure across the finish line."

The US House of Representatives on December 13 passed a resolution with an overwhelming bipartisan support declaring the violence against Myanmar's Rohingya genocide.

The legislation, similar to the BURMA Act, overwhelmingly passed by the House in the 115th Congress as a floor amendment to the National De-fense Authorisation Act. That

provision was not taken up by the Senate and ultimately did not become law.

Diplomatic sources say once the US Congress passes a bill, the country remains committed to take concrete actions against the perpetrators.

The new US move comes when the Organisation of Islamic Conference led by Gambia has agreed to take Myanmar's atrocities against Rohingyas to the International Court of Justice.

Prosecutors of The International Criminal Court visited Rohingyas camps in March this year as part of their investigations into the alleged genocide.

Myanmar has neither allowed the UN investigators nor the ICC prosecutors into its territory.

It also denied the accusations that Rohingyas faced genocide or ethnic cleansing, but labelled the military crackdown as a response to the "terrorists" of Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army that had attacked some police posts.

Myanmar Commission of Enquiry waits to visit Bangladesh

Meanwhile, Channel News Asia on Friday reported that Myanmar's Independent Commission of Enquiry (ICOE), tasked by State Counsellor Aung San Suu Kyi last July to investigate the allegations of human rights abuse in the Rakhine State, has told CNA that it is now waiting to enter Bangladesh to complete its findings.

ICOE said its chairperson Rosario Manalo, a Philippines diplomat, wrote to Bangladesh's Foreign Minister AK Abdul Momen on January 10, requesting a courtesy call, which was then followed up on May 28.

The Commission also wanted to have a meeting with the foreign minister.

ICOE said that with Bangladesh's approval, it hopes to conduct enquiries in Cox's Bazar, where the Rohingyas refugee camps are situated, "for as long as allowed, depending on the ground situation and what can be observed."

The Commission aims to record statements, collect evidence and information from witnesses residing in Cox's Bazar, it said.

Contacted, Foreign Minister Momen said after receiving the request from the Commission, the ministry wrote back to it inquiring about terms and conditions of the investigation and sampling framework, and the people involved in the investigation etc.

About holding a meeting with the

ICOE, he said, "I informed them that we'll hold it at a mutually convenient time. The dates that we proposed were not convenient for them. Thus, the meeting has not been held yet."

The foreign ministry has not received any response since then, he added.

Rights bodies, however, criticised the formation of the ICOE.

On August 17 last year, Human Rights Watch said Myanmar's "independent commission of inquiry" will not be a serious and impartial investigation.

"Concerned governments should treat the commission with heavy skepticism and make sure Myanmar's government doesn't use this commission to shield itself from the critical scrutiny it deserves," it said.

The ICOE has not demonstrated any reasonable prospect of meeting international standards of independence, impartiality or effectively contributing to justice or accountability for human rights violations constituting crimes under international law, said the International Commission of Jurists on March 11.

"The ICOE is not transparent about how its information gathering will, if at all, shed light on the truth, or contribute to accountability and redress, while protecting individuals it comes into contact with," it said.

Mysterious

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camera lens flare or sunlight reflecting on rocks.

The Curiosity rover landed on the surface of Mars in 2012, and is armed with 17 cameras. Since then it has roamed all over the planet, beaming back huge amounts of data along with vast quantities of photographs. Many other pictures it has captured have featured anomalous lights too.

The rover has two mounted "navcams" on its mast, which act as a stereo pair of cameras -- a bit like eyes. The black and white images capture panoramic 3D imagery and each has a 45 degree field of view, giving ground control crews a detailed view of the planet's terrain.


The image in question was taken by the right navcam. Unfortunately, the left camera wasn't looking in the same direction, and photos from the same set and time show it having swivelled down to take some kind of space selfie, showing parts of the craft over rocks and dust on the ground.

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