



Lebanese security forces try to remove anti-government demonstrators blocking a road in a central neighbourhood of the capital Beirut yesterday. Demonstrators tried to block key roads after a weekend of mass rallies confirmed that political promises had failed to extinguish the unprecedented protest movement. PHOTO: AFP

Pak embassy in Kabul closes visa section amid tensions

AFP, Kabul

Pakistan's embassy in Kabul said Sunday it was indefinitely closing its consular office in the Afghan capital due to security reasons, amid mounting tensions between the neighbouring countries.

Closure of the visa section will come as a huge blow for many Afghans, hundreds of whom apply daily for permits to travel to Pakistan where they seek medical treatment, goods and university educations.

A message shared on WhatsApp by an embassy spokesman said the consular section would be closed as of Monday "until further intimation".

The spokesman told AFP that the consular section typically processes about 1,500 visa applications a day.

In Islamabad, Pakistan's foreign ministry said the Afghan charge d'affaires had been summoned to "convey serious concerns over the safety and security of the diplomatic personnel of the embassy of Pakistan, Kabul, and its sub-missions."

In a statement, the ministry said embassy staff were being harassed.

"They were obstructed on the road and the embassy vehicles were also hit by motorcycles while going towards the embassy," the statement read.

Protests outside the Pakistani embassy are common, sometimes triggered by people unhappy about visa wait times or security while standing in long queues.

Relations between Afghanistan and Pakistan, both Islamic republics, have long been fraught, with Afghans blaming Islamabad for any number of woes including allegedly supporting the Taliban.

Pakistan denies it helps the insurgent group.

Tensions have soured further in recent days amid clashes along the border in Afghanistan's eastern province of Kunar.

Both sides have accused each other's troops of cross-border shelling.

The Pakistani foreign ministry has said six Pakistani troops were wounded October 27 and 28 in "unprovoked mortar and heavy weapon firing" by Afghan soldiers.

Pakistani consular services remain open in Herat, Jalalabad and Mazar-i-Sharif, according to the embassy spokesman, who recommended that applicants travel to Jalalabad if they needed a visa urgently.

El Salvador expels Venezuela envoys in challenge to Maduro

AFP, San Salvador

El Salvador ordered Venezuela's diplomats to leave the country in a challenge to President Nicolas Maduro, prompting his government to respond by expelling Salvadoran envoys in Caracas on Sunday.

El Salvador under its new President Nayib Bukele is one of more than 50 countries that have declared Maduro's government illegitimate.

The country has switched its recognition to Maduro's lead rival, national assembly speaker Juan Guaido, who has declared himself Venezuela's acting president.

Bukele said El Salvador had ordered "the diplomatic corps from the regime of Nicolas Maduro" to leave the country within 48 hours, in a statement posted on his Twitter account late Saturday.

In response, the Venezuelan foreign ministry said in a statement on Sunday that it had declared each of the Salvadoran diplomats in Caracas "persona non grata" and gave them 48 hours to leave.

Maduro's leftist government has jailed opposition leaders and is accused of using torture and arbitrary arrests as it struggles to hold on to power amid a collapsing economy.

But his government still has support from Russia and China.

On a visit to Cuba, Maduro shot back at the Salvadoran leader, saying: "You can't save yourself from history, Bukele."

"Your place in history as a traitor and puppet of the United States awaits you," Maduro said.

Before his election in June, Bukele said he would maintain a "distant" relationship with Caracas and close ties with the United States, Maduro's biggest diplomatic foe.

US Ambassador Ronald Johnson reacted warmly to El Salvador's decision.

"We applaud the government of President Nayib Bukele for ensuring that El Salvador is on the right side of history," he said on Twitter.

US President Donald Trump was one of the first leaders to recognize Guaido when the opposition leader mounted a bid to oust Maduro in April.

US accuses Beijing of intimidation

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accusing it of ratcheting up tensions in the waters, a key global shipping route.

Beijing lays claim to huge swaths of the sea where it is accused of building military installations and fake islands, and ramming fishing vessels.

The US has long accused it of bullying fellow claimants -- Vietnam, Taiwan, Philippines, Malaysia and Brunei -- calling for freedom of navigation in the area.

US national security adviser Robert O'Brien doubled down on America's rhetoric against China yesterday, speaking at the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (Asean) summit.

"Beijing has used intimidation to try and stop Asean nations from exploiting their offshore resources," he said, addressing an Asean meeting yesterday.

"Big countries should not bully other countries," he later told reporters.

China's deputy foreign minister Le Yucheng meanwhile accused some outside countries of "meddling" in the sea, answering a question on US comments about the waters.

"Some non-regional countries cannot live with calm waters in the South China Sea and have come all this way to make waves," he said in an apparent jab at the US.

In return, O'Brien later said "we don't think we're meddlers."

"We always come when we're invited, unlike other countries," he said after Le's comments emerged.

Tensions have flared in the flashpoint waterway in recent weeks after China deployed a survey ship to waters claimed by Hanoi.

Though the communist neighbours have long feuded over the sea, Hanoi fought back with fiery language after the most recent incursion.

The ship left after a few weeks, but Vietnam could seek tougher language in the final Asean communique expected to be delivered later yesterday.

Vietnam is pushing for mention of "specific incidents" in the document, "while the other sides rather want a general statement", Philippines' finance secretary Sonny Dominguez told reporters earlier.

China's premier Li Keqiang said Sunday Beijing was committed to progress on a Code of Conduct agreement, which it has repeatedly delayed since talks first started in 2002 while carrying out its expansionist strategy in the sea.

Iran announces

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Iranian Consulate in Karbala, Iraq, a holy city for Shias, saw a mob attack it overnight.

Trump retweeted posts by Saudi-linked media showing the chaos outside the consulate. The violence comes after the hard-line Keyhan newspaper in Iran reiterated a call for demonstrators to seize US and Saudi diplomatic posts in Iraq in response to the unrest.

The collapse of the nuclear deal coincided with a tense summer of mysterious attacks on oil tankers and Saudi oil facilities that the US blamed on Iran. Tehran denied the allegation, though it did seize oil tankers and shoot down a US military surveillance drone.

The US has increased its military presence across the Mideast, including basing troops in Saudi Arabia for the first time since the aftermath of the September 11, 2001 terror attacks.

Both Saudi Arabia and the neighbouring United Arab Emirates are believed to be talking to Tehran through back channels to ease tensions.

Sonagazi OC filmed Nusrat's statement

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Later, the footage was circulated on social media through a mobile application without her consent, Badi said. Defence lawyer then cross-examined him on different points.

Two friends of Nusrat -- Nishat Sultana and Nasrin Sultana Furti -- also gave their statements yesterday before the tribunal.

Nishat in her statement, said Nusrat was violated by Principal Siraj Ud Doula on March 27. After the incident, police went to the madrasa and took her, along with Nusrat, Furti and Siraj, to Sonagazi Police Station.

"We all went to the OC's room, but Principal Siraj was taken to a separate room. OC Moazzem then asked me to wait in another room."

"After 10 minutes, the OC called me to his room and asked me about the incident. When I asked him why he was videoring my statement on his mobile, he said it was for the sake of investigation," Nishat said.

Later I came to know that the OC also had filmed the statements of Nusrat and Furti, said Nishat, adding that a few days later she saw the video on Facebook and YouTube.

Furti gave an almost identical statement before the tribunal.

Later they were cross-examined by the defence lawyer on different points.

Judge Ash Sams Joglul Hossain of Dhaka Cyber Tribunal recorded their statements for two hours and fixed November 11 for the next hearing of the case.

The tribunal asked the investigation officer of the case to appear before it on that scheduled date to narrate what he found in his probe.

Earlier, the tribunal recorded statements of eight prosecution witnesses, including complainant of the case.

Dhaka air unsafe even before winter

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Talking to The Daily Star, Prof Abdus Salam of Dhaka University said, "Previously, there were some air pollution hotspots in Dhaka. But in the recent years, such areas have widened to almost the entire city as roads see traffic jams throughout every working day. The situation becomes worse due to some ongoing mega projects."

According to breathelife2030.org, the air in Dhaka was 5.7 times above the safe pollution level, set out by the World Health Organization, yesterday. The breathelife2030.org is a platform which combines public health and climate change expertise on implementing solutions to air pollution.

A recent study published in the journal Nature Sustainability said expectant mothers face an increased risk of "silent" miscarriage due to air pollution.

The pollution is already known to raise the risk of premature birth, low birth weight and life-threatening health complications for pregnant women, like preeclampsia, which is marked by high blood pressure, or gestational hypertension.

THREAT TO PUBLIC HEALTH

Studies show that Dhaka's air is contaminated not only with heavy metals like lead, chromium, cadmium, nickel, arsenic, manganese and copper, but also with other poisonous particles.

The presence of pollutant particles

DHAKA AIR QUALITY INDEX 2014-18							
AQI	CATEGORY	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	
0-50	Very good	22	25	63	18	15	
51-100	Good	86	101	94	113	74	
101-150	Caution	62	66	68	89	76	
151-200	Unhealthy	57	54	30	52	50	
201-300	Very unhealthy	22	53	53	44	80	
301+	Extremely unhealthy	86	66	46	49	67	
>151		Number of days above unhealthy	165	173	129	145	197

SOURCE: CASE PROJECT

in the air even on a normal day, except for those in the rainy season, is more than three to four times higher than the desirable limit.

The level of air pollution in Dhaka is so alarming that it is often ranked among the top 10 most polluted cities in the global Air Quality Index.

Indoor and outdoor air pollution led to 1.23 lakh deaths in Bangladesh in 2017, according to the State of Global Air 2019 report published recently by US-based organisation Health Effects Institute and Institute for Health Metrics and Evaluation.

It said air pollution was the fifth highest mortality risk factor globally.

Ziaul Haque, director of Air Quality at the DoE, said it would be tough to control the city's air pollution if the construction works

and movement of vehicles were not kept within a limit.

He said they would launch a drive against the polluters soon.

9 sailors abducted by suspected pirates off Benin

AFP, Cotonou

Nine sailors who were waiting in the harbour of the port of Cotonou in Benin have been abducted by suspected pirates, port authorities said Sunday.

"The Autonomous Port of Cotonou regrets to inform you that Saturday morning, November 2, 2019, an act of piracy took place in the harbour area," authorities said in a statement.

Trump calls for whistleblower's unmasking

AFP, Washington

US President Donald Trump called Sunday for the unmasking of the anonymous whistleblower whose complaint launched the House impeachment investigation, attacking the process against him as a "scam."

Trump's demand comes amid an intensifying effort by Republicans to expose the whistleblower and attack his or her credibility as public impeachment hearings loom and support for the president erodes.

Described only as an intelligence official who once worked at the White House, the whistleblower was the first to raise concerns about Trump's attempt to pressure Ukraine to investigate political rival Joe Biden.

On Twitter and in comments to reporters at the White House, Trump sought to give fuel to speculation in conservative media about the whistleblower's identity, urging it be revealed.

"What they said is he's an Obama person, he was involved with Brennan, Susan Rice -- which means Obama. But he was like a big, a big anti-Trump person, hater Trump," the president told reporters, adding that he didn't know if the reports were true or not.

He also dismissed other officials who defied the White House by testifying about the Ukraine episode as "never Trumpers."

"So, you know, it's a whole scam. It's an impeachment scam," he said.

"The Whistleblower got it sooo wrong that HE must come forward," Trump said earlier on Twitter. "Reveal the Whistleblower and end the Impeachment Hoax!"

Trump's escalating attacks on the whistleblower comes as new polls underscore his growing vulnerability as the inquiry gains momentum.

An NBC/Wall Street Journal poll out Sunday found that 49 percent of Americans believe he should be impeached and removed from office, and 53 percent approve the impeachment inquiry.

A Fox News poll also found that 49 percent wanted Trump impeached and removed from office, and 60 percent believe he asked foreign leaders to investigate his opponents, with two-thirds saying that would be inappropriate.

A parade of current and former diplomats and national security officials have corroborated the essence of the whistleblower complaint -- that Trump attempted to pressure Ukraine to investigate the president's Democratic opponents.

At issue is whether Trump ordered the withholding of nearly \$400 million in crucial military aid to Ukraine to get its new president to investigate Biden and his son Hunter.

The whistleblower's lawyer, Mark Zaid, said on Twitter Sunday that his client had made a direct offer to Republican lawmakers to answer their questions in writing, while remaining anonymous.

Govt not scrimping

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In a densely populated country like Bangladesh, any radiation release from a nuclear facility would be a major disaster.

Earlier in September, the Kudankulam Nuclear Power Plant (KKNPP) in Tamil Nadu, India, became a target of cyberattack.

VirusTotal, a virus scanning website owned by Google's parent company Alphabet, has indicated that a large amount of data from the KKNPP's administrative network has been stolen.

If this is true, subsequent attacks on the nuclear power plant could target its critical systems more effectively.

One of the ambitious mega projects of the current Awami League-led government, construction on the \$12.65 billion-power plant began in November 2017 in Rooppur in Pabna's Ishwardi upazila by the Russian Rosatom State Atomic Energy Corporation.

It is expected to be complete by 2023 and would generate 2,400 megawatts of electricity through two units.

Small fine for 1st-time

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Responding to a question, he said the law would be strictly implemented on the traffic rules' violators without any consideration of their positions or designations.

People can appeal against the fines if they think they were penalised without any reason, he added.

Answering another question, the city police chief said authorities would take firm action if any police official take bribe from traffic rule violators instead of penalising them with fine.

"We will take departmental action if any traffic police violates law," he said.

Around 800 officials of DMP's Traffic Division have already been trained on the new law. They will fine the law violators manually until their Point of Sale machines get updated, Commissioner Shafiqul said.

Meanwhile, announcements are being made through loudspeakers at significant bus terminals and intersections to raise awareness on the new law.

The much-talked-about Road Transport Act, 2018 came into effect on November 1. It was passed by the parliament on September 19, 2018.

According to the law, maximum penalty for driving without licence is a fine of Tk 25,000 or a six-month jail term or both. Maximum punishment for driving vehicles without registration is six months' jail sentence or Tk 50,000 fine or both.

The highest punishment for honking banned horns is three months' jail term or Tk 10,000 fine or both.

The law says the maximum punishment for illegally modifying vehicles' body parts is three years' jail sentence or Tk 300,000 fine or both.