

BANGLADESH UPDATE

1,163
New cases in 24hrs507,265
Total cases7,398
Deaths448,803
RecoveriesGLOBAL UPDATE
1,752,197
Deaths79,894,218
Total cases

Russian role in C Africa grows ahead of weekend vote

AFP, Libreville

Russia's growing role in the volatile Central African Republic was in the spotlight this week, after Moscow dispatched military instructors following a rebel threat to disrupt Sunday's elections.

Moscow has led a diplomatic and financial offensive in the deeply troubled nation since 2018 in return for concessions given to its companies to exploit the country's mineral wealth, especially gold and diamonds.

Russia has sent arms and is an open supporter of incumbent President Faustin Archange Touadera who is on course to win a second term in the legislative and presidential elections.

Touadera's government recently signed a military cooperation agreement with Russia, while Moscow opened a military office in the country last year and sent four generals to oversee it.

The mining concessions have been farmed out to companies associated with Yevgeny Prigozhin, who is very close to Russian President Vladimir Putin.

Prigozhin is suspected to be the main financier of the private Russian security firm Wagner, whose men have been deployed across the country, according to experts, diplomats and non-governmental organisations.

At least 175 "military instructors" have been sent since 2018 to train the country's soldiers and ensure Touadera's safety.

But a week ago, when three main rebel groups threatened to march on the capital Bangui in what the government said was a coup attempt, Russia sent giant Antonov carriers packed with at least 300 military instructors to help the regular forces.

Moscow initially denied this but

later admitted to dispatching the troops.

The Russian foreign ministry said it was "seriously concerned that the events of recent days have led to a sharp degradation of the security situation" in the CAR.

The actions of the three rebel groups had been "well coordinated and fed from the outside" and aimed at "disrupting the electoral process," it said.

Several witnesses and NGOs have reported that the "instructors" were at the front fighting rebels.

In the middle of October, armoured vehicles draped in the Russian and CAR flags patrolled the streets of Bangui.

The Russian instructors have been housed in Berengo, about 60 kilometres (40 miles) from the capital of the former French colony.

"The Central African Republic is not of great interest to Russia," said Roland Marchal, a CAR expert at Paris's prestigious Sciences Po.

"But this allows them to needle the French," with whom they are at odds, especially in Syria and Ukraine, he said.

A civil war erupted in March 2013 in CAR when mostly Muslim rebels in a coalition called Seleka stormed the capital and removed Francois Bozize, a Christian and former general who had seized power a decade earlier.

France sent in some 2,000 soldiers under a UN mandate. In 2014, the UN sent its own mission, MINUSCA, and in 2016 elections were held, won by Touadera, a technocrat educated in France.

France has since redeployed its troops to fight jihadists in the Sahel region.

OCCUPIED WEST BANK

Israel arrests Palestinian over settler murder

AFP, Jerusalem

Israel on Thursday arrested a Palestinian man in connection with the murder of a Jewish settler in the occupied West Bank, in a case that raised tensions in the area.

Esther Horgan, a 52-year-old mother of six and a French-Israeli dual national, was found dead Monday in a forest near the Tal Menashe settlement in the north of the Palestinian territory.

Relatives said she had gone out jogging on Sunday and never returned.

A statement from Israel's domestic security agency, the Shin Bet, said: "a suspect in the murder of the late Esther Horgan... has been detained, following a coordinated effort involving the agency, the army and police."

It described the detained man as "a Palestinian suspect from the Jenin area," who it said was being

interrogated by Shin Bet agents.

Israel's army said in a statement later Thursday that its soldiers in the same area had "apprehended additional suspects involved in the murder for further questioning".

A number of suspects have been apprehended for assisting and facilitating the murder of Esther Horgan" following the joint operation over the past two days, an army official was quoted as saying.

Defence Minister Benny Gantz said Israel had "used every means at the disposal of the Israeli security forces to swiftly find and take into custody a suspect in the shocking murder of Esther Horgan".

Earlier this week, the army had reinforced its presence in the West Bank in response to surging tensions partly linked to Horgan's murder.

A promise tangled up

FROM PAGE 1

Just two months ago, at the 50th DG-level conference, BSF DG Rakesh Asthana promised to bring down the border killings to zero.

According to ASK, around 33 Bangladeshis were killed in the first eight months of the year.

At the latest 51st conference, both sides agreed to conduct joint patrols at night in key areas in order to prevent border killings, reads a joint statement issued yesterday.

During the conference, BGB Director General Maj Gen Md Shafeenul Islam expressed "grave concern" over the killings and beating up of unarmed Bangladeshi nationals by BSF men as well as Indian civilians near the borders.

The people of Bangladesh always appreciate the existing excellent relationship between the two border guarding forces and expect that BGB and BSF will take necessary measures to bring down the deaths to zero," the BGB chief said, according to the joint statement.

Maj Gen Shafeenul further urged his counterpart to uphold human rights and make efforts to apprehend the criminals and bring them to book instead of killing them.

The BSF chief then assured that deaths on the border will be reduced significantly in near future, reads the statement.

Both sides also agreed to take precautionary measures along the border by increasing coordinated patrols, intensifying public awareness programmes, undertaking appropriate socio-economic development programmes in vulnerable areas and sharing real time information.

BGB chief Maj Gen Shafeenul led the 11-member Bangladeshi delegation in the 51st DG-level conference in Guwahati in Indian state of Assam. BSF DG Rakesh led a 12-member delegation.

The BGB chief also expressed concern that Indian nationals and BSF personnel were often trespassing into Bangladesh, violating the existing norms or rules.

He sought BSF's cooperation in upholding the friendly relationship of both the border guarding forces.

The joint statement read that both sides agreed to continue to sensitise the border populace to refrain from illegal crossing or violations and at the same time assured maintenance of the sanctity of the border by the members of both forces.

The BGB chief also voiced his concern that armed miscreants of regional parties of Chattogram Hill Tracts had camps in the Indian state of Mizoram and requested BSF to destroy those camps.

The BSF chief assured that, if found, appropriate actions will be taken against those camps.

The BGB chief also expressed concerns over trafficking of drugs, fire arms, contraband items, cattle and gold across the border.

The BSF officials said drug trafficking and drug addiction on both sides is a real danger that needs to be tackled effectively.

Both sides agreed not to undertake any development work within 150 yards of the international border without prior information. They also agreed to hold the next DG level conference in Dhaka, preferably by the 2nd week of April 2021.



Workers unloading free government textbooks for the 2021 academic year from a truck at the Jibon Singh Union Model High School in Barishal's Bakerganj upazila. The photo was taken on Thursday.

PHOTO: TITU DAS

Harmful yet no hurry

FROM PAGE 1

However, following concerns noted by the Bangladesh Crop Protection Association (BCPA) and importers, the BFSA extended the deadline for mandatory testing of imported pesticides to July 1 this year before a further extension of a year.

M Sayeduzzaman, chairman of BCPA, a body of business enterprises involved in import, formulation and marketing of plant protection chemicals, said while the association agrees there should be a standard permissible limit of pesticides, the state of pesticides in the country cannot be determined until there is one.

"We have asked the ministry to allow continuing imports until the adoption of a permissible limit for heavy metals in pesticides," he added.

Claiming the level of heavy metals found in pesticides to be "ignorable", he said, "We mainly import pesticides from other countries. Future policy must be adaptive to the international standards. Otherwise, we will not be able to import pesticides and this, in the long run, will affect our food production."

BFSA Chairman Quaiyum said, "We do not want something entering the country harming the environment -- the agriculture department does not want that too. But we also do not want agricultural production to be hampered. There must be a balance between both."

"We are yet to get any update from them [the DAE]," he added.

NOMINAL TESTING OF PESTICIDES

The DAE -- the apex pesticide regulatory body -- held its last meeting on the matter in February and formed an advisory committee to prepare a guideline on the permissible limit of heavy metals in pesticides.

But the committee is yet to submit its report, according to DAE officials, and since then, there has been no progress till date.

Responding to a query on whether the nine months were not enough to prepare the guideline, the BFSA chairman said, "This is an issue related to them, you better ask the agricultural ministry or the department [DAE]."

The maximum allowable limit for heavy metals in fertilisers used in the country is defined by the Fertiliser (Management) Regulation, 2007.

For heavy metals in pesticides, there is no maximum allowable limit -- either nationally or globally.

However, according to clause 15.2 of the Bangladesh Pesticides Act, 2018, if any pesticide is found to be adulterated or incorrectly or misleadingly tagged, the government may control and ban further import of that pesticide into the country.

But the import of pesticides currently takes place without having to undergo testing anywhere as long as the importers are registered with the DAE.

The country's annual usage of pesticides is nearly 38,000 tonnes -- the majority of which, around 90 percent, is imported from China -- according to the DAE. There are 5,500 registered pesticide products in the country.

Over 300 companies registered with the DAE usually import crop

protection chemicals from China, the USA, Germany, Australia, India, Indonesia, and Singapore in bulk; they then repackage them in smaller units in their facilities before marketing them at the farmers' level.

The companies, however, need to have their formulations approved by the DAE before marketing the pesticides.

The DAE only conducts minimal testing such as the efficiency of the pesticide in killing pests and weeds and examining its toxicity on fish.

Asked if the presence of heavy metals in pesticides is adulteration, Dr Md Joynul Abedin, member-secretary of the DAE advisory committee, said, "If there was any set limit, we could say it is adulteration."

Aminur Islam, additional deputy director of pesticide quality at the DAE, however, disputed this.

"The chemical composition of pesticides is submitted at the time of application for registration. There is no chance of containing any pollutant beyond that. They [applicants] mention a hundred percent composition."

To reach a conclusion about the limit, he said, will need a controlled condition study.

Asked about the timeline for preparing a guideline on the permissible limit of heavy metals in pesticides, Joynul Abedin on Wednesday said, "The advisory committee is yet to hold a meeting. They will sit in January-February to discuss the guideline."

TEST FINDINGS

The presence of heavy metals in the food chain has raised concern countrywide over the last few years.

In that context, the BFSA tested samples of 63 pesticides and 4 fertilisers available in the market at the BAEC laboratory between November 2019 and January this year. BAEC has been an internationally accredited lab since 2015.

At least 55 of these were also tested at a private lab. Both labs followed the standard F-AAS (Flame Atomic Absorption Spectrometry) testing method.

The test results, a copy of which The Daily Star obtained, showed 63 out of the 67 tested pesticides and fertilisers contained significant levels of cadmium, chromium or lead, or all three.

The level of heavy metals in some pesticide samples was alarming.

For instance, BAEC's investigators found the highest level of lead, 12.70mg per kg, in an anti-fungal pesticide powder.

Of the 47 samples in which lead was found, less than one third (14) contained lead below the detection limit of 0.02mg/kg while more than half contained lead ranging from 0.24-2mg/kg. Eight were found to contain more than 2mg lead per kg.

Chronic exposure to lead at relatively low levels can result in damage to the kidneys and liver, and to the reproductive, cardiovascular, immune, hematopoietic, nervous, and gastrointestinal systems, according to the Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO).

Furthermore, short-term exposure to high amounts of lead can cause

gastrointestinal distress, anaemia, encephalopathy, and death.

Reduced cognitive and intellectual development in children is the most critical effect of low-level lead exposure.

FAO recommends farmers avoid using compounds that contain lead or may be contaminated with lead in agricultural areas.

BAEC's test also found that a commonly used liquid pesticide contained 15.74mg chromium per kg.

In another liquid pesticide, the BAEC test found around 7.19mg chromium, less than 0.06mg cadmium, and around 6.49mg lead per kg.

While the test results from the private lab varied from BAEC's ones, both labs suggested the majority of the pesticides contained these heavy metals.

BAEC also separately tested four commonly used fertilisers for only the level of cadmium.

Of these, a fertiliser known as TSP was found to contain 13.96mg cadmium per kg -- more than the maximum allowable limit of 10ppm (1ppm is equivalent to 1mg/kg) mentioned in the Fertiliser (Management) Regulation, 2007.

WHAT THE EXPERTS SAY

Experts said no heavy metals should be present in pesticides, adding that its contamination of the food chain through pesticides is a serious threat and long-term exposure may lead to public health risks.

Although there is no maximum allowable limit for heavy metals in pesticides, a number of experts

The Daily Star talked with said the presence of heavy metals, even minimal amounts, in pesticides is harmful.

"Heavy metals are not elements of pesticides; therefore, these should not be in pesticides. If there is, the source of contamination should be checked," Prof Dr Quazi Forhad Quadir of Bangladesh Agricultural University, told The Daily Star.

"Pesticides themselves are harmful. Heavy metals -- even in small amounts -- have an accumulation effect," he added.

Imrul Hasan, country lead of USDA/USAID funded Food Safety Capacity Development for Bangladesh project, told The Daily Star, "If pesticides contain heavy metals, these will enter the food chain -- whether in small or big amounts."

Another expert said some companies might be using heavy metals as residue in substandard and cheap imported pesticides to earn more profits.

Abdul Kaim, assistant professor of agricultural chemistry at Sher-e-Bangla Agricultural University, said,

"The quality of pesticides depends on the price of its active raw materials, or ready products are imported. In our laboratory analysis, we found many pesticides have 50 percent fewer active ingredients than the description on the packets. Instead, these contain more impurities like heavy metals."

"There are major loopholes in surveillance -- from importing to marketing. This, ultimately, is harming the food chain."

Afghan women's rights activist shot dead

AFP, Kabul

Gunmen on a motorbike shot dead a women's rights activist and her brother north of Afghanistan's capital Thursday, interior ministry spokesman Tariq Arian told reporters.

Kabul provincial governor Abdul Latif Murad told AFP that the shooting had taken place near Kohistan's home and that her brother was also killed in the attack.

No group has claimed the attack so far.

Kohistani, who had campaigned for veteran leader Abdullah Abdullah during last year's presidential election, had enjoyed a relatively large following on social media, and regularly organized

civil society events in Kabul calling for women's rights.

Abdullah said Kohistani was