

# Pandemic used as 'pretext' to crush dissent: UN chief

AFP, Geneva

UN chief Antonio Guterres yesterday criticised countries that are using the pandemic to justify cracking down on dissent, reining in the media and suppressing criticism.

Speaking at the opening of the United Nations Human Rights Council's main annual session, Antonio Guterres charged that authorities in a number of nations were using restrictions meant to halt the spread of Covid-19 to weaken their political opposition.



"Using the pandemic as a pretext, authorities in some countries have deployed heavy-handed security responses and emergency measures to crush dissent, criminalise basic freedoms, silence independent reporting and curtail the activities of non-governmental organisations," he said, without naming the countries.

"Human rights defenders, journalists, lawyers, political activists, and even medical professionals are being detained, prosecuted and subjected to intimidation and surveillance for criticising government pandemic responses -- or the lack thereof," he added.

In some countries, he warned, "pandemic-related restrictions are being used to subvert

electoral processes, weaken opposition voices and suppress criticism."

Speaking in a pre-recorded video message to the largely virtual meeting of the Geneva-based body, the UN chief also decried widespread misinformation around the world about the coronavirus and the pandemic.

In a number of cases, he said, "access to life-saving Covid-19 information has been concealed, while deadly misinformation has been amplified, including by those in power."

Guterres dedicated much of his annual speech before the UN's top rights body to the wide-ranging effects of the pandemic, which "hit the world without mercy."

"Covid-19 has deepened pre-existing divides, vulnerabilities and inequalities, as well as opened up new fractures, including fault-lines in human rights," he said.

He pointed to the hundreds of millions of families who have seen their lives "turned upside down" due to job losses and soaring debt.

At the same time, he said, "the disease has taken a disproportionate toll on women, minorities, persons with disabilities, older persons, refugees, migrants and indigenous peoples."



Protesters take part in a demonstration against the military coup in Yangon, Myanmar yesterday. A general strike against military rule shut businesses in Myanmar yesterday and huge crowds gathered peacefully despite fears of violence after authorities warned that confrontation could be deadly.

PHOTO: AFP

## NEWS IN BRIEF

### WHO slams rich states for hogging vaccines

The World Health Organization yesterday blasted wealthy countries for not only hogging Covid vaccines but in doing so, hindering the pathway for poorer nations to get them too. WHO director-general Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus said some rich countries' direct deals with manufacturers had meant that previously-agreed vaccine allocations for poorer countries, via the Covax programme, were being reduced. He said the money was there to procure doses for some of the poorest countries, following fresh contributions from US, Germany -- but it was worthless if there was nothing to buy.

### US top court allows release of Trump tax returns



The US Supreme Court yesterday paved the way for a New York City prosecutor to obtain former President Donald Trump's tax returns and other financial records as part of a criminal investigation, a blow to his quest to conceal details of his finances. The justices without comment rebuffed Trump's request to put on hold an Oct. 7 lower court ruling directing the former Republican president's longtime accounting firm, Mazars USA, to comply with a subpoena to turn over the materials to a grand jury convened by Manhattan District Attorney Cyrus Vance, a Democrat. "The work continues," Vance said in a statement issued after the court's action. Vance had previously said in a letter to Trump's lawyers that his office would be free to immediately enforce the subpoena if the justices rejected Trump's request.

### Gunmen kill four female aid workers in Pakistan

Four women aid workers were gunned down yesterday in a restive part of northwestern Pakistan, police said, as a fresh wave of extremist violence rattles the Afghan borderlands. The aid workers were ambushed by two gunmen as they were driving through a village in North Waziristan district, according to local police chief Shafiqullah Gandapur, who said just one passenger survived the assault. "No one has claimed responsibility for the attack so far but it was surely an act of terrorism," he told AFP. Gandapur said the aid workers were affiliated with a programme run by a local institute to develop household skills for women.

SOURCE: AFP, REUTERS

## 'Significant achievement'

Iran hails visit by UN nuclear watchdog chief, temporary deal on nuclear site inspections for three months

AFP, Tehran

Iran yesterday hailed a visit by the UN nuclear watchdog chief and a temporary agreement on site inspections as a "significant achievement", amid international efforts to salvage its troubled nuclear deal.



US President Joe Biden, European powers and Tehran are trying to keep alive Iran's 2015 nuclear agreement that has been on the brink of collapse since Donald Trump withdrew from it almost three years ago.

Tehran demands Washington take the first step by scrapping sanctions Trump reimposed since 2018, while Washington insists Iran first return to all its nuclear commitments, some of which it has backed away from.

In the standoff, Iran's parliament last year demanded that Tehran by today this week limit some inspections by the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) if sanctions were not lifted by a deadline two days before then.

IAEA chief Rafael Grossi on Sunday held last-ditch talks in Tehran, where the two sides hammered out a temporary technical deal for up to three months that is in line with the Iranian parliament's demands. They confirmed that Iran will continue to allow access to UN inspectors to its declared nuclear sites.

But Iran will temporarily suspend so-called "voluntary transparency measures" -- notably inspections of non-nuclear sites, including military sites suspected of nuclear-related activity.

Tehran will also deny the IAEA real-time access to footage from surveillance cameras installed at some sites and, if sanctions are not lifted within three months, delete it, Iran's Atomic Energy Organization has said.

Grossi said afterwards that under the new temporary understanding "there is less access" but that the IAEA will be able to "retain the necessary degree of monitoring and verification work".



PHOTO: REUTERS

A man is carried by police and demonstrators during a protest marking two years since the start of a mass protest movement demanding political change, in Algiers, Algeria yesterday.

## Papul finally loses his JS membership

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Sources at the EC told The Daily Star that they have received the gazette and will take necessary measures, including a by-election in the constituency.

Earlier on February 19, Zafar Ahmed Khan said the parliament is going to take a decision on membership of Papul within two to three days, around three weeks after the Kuwait court sentenced him to four years in prison in a bribery case.

Papul's wife Selina Islam, also a lawmaker from reserved seats for women in parliament, was fined 1.97 million Kuwaiti dinars (Tk 55 crore) by the court in the case on January 28.

The copy of the verdict on his conviction reached Jatiya Sangsad Speaker Shirin Sharmin Chaudhury on February 18.

On February 19, Foreign Minister AK Abdul Momen told media that his ministry received the 61-page verdict -- both in Arabic and English -- and sent it to the Jatiya Sangsad speaker and the Ministry of Home Affairs.

Kuwait's criminal court had delivered the verdict around eight months after Kuwait's Criminal Investigation Department arrested Papul, the managing director and CEO of Marafie Kuwaitia Group.

He was accused of human trafficking, money laundering and

bribing Kuwaiti officials with millions of dollars to recruit Bangladeshi workers and get contracts for his company, labour exploitation and also violation of the residence law.

The others sentenced in the case include Kuwait interior ministry's Assistant Under-Secretary Maj Gen Mazen Al-Jarrah, and Nawaf Al-Mutairi, Hassan Al-Khader and Papul's associate Mohammad Rashidul Islam, a Bangladeshi.

Papul faces two more cases -- one for human trafficking and the other for money laundering -- in Kuwait.

He is also being investigated by Bangladesh's Anti-Corruption Commission for allegedly amassing Tk 1,400 crore by trafficking people to Kuwait and laundering money to different countries.

### 'CRIMES, POWER ABUSE' BY PAPUL

Quoting Arabic newspaper Al Qabas, Kuwaiti news portal The Times reported that Papul is estimated to have obtained KD (Kuwaiti Dinar) 5 million in assets in Kuwait. During investigations, all his bank accounts and those of his company were frozen.

According to sources in Kuwait and Lakshampur, Papul went to Kuwait in 1989 as a worker and eventually started working as a recruitment broker and later established companies. He ran four

companies involved in providing cleaners through government contracts in Kuwait, employing 9,000 workers.

Sources in Kuwait and Lakshampur said he had no involvement in politics back home before 2016 but earned a fortune by then through illegal means.

Papul invested crores of taka to prevent other potential candidates in the Lakshampur-2 constituency and became an independent MP in the 2018 national election. His wife Selina Islam did the same to become an MP from the reserved seats for women.

According to witness accounts in the case against Papul, he was part of an "organised gang" made up of two Kuwaitis and himself. They used a company to recruit workers from Bangladesh through fraudulence in exchange for payments ranging between KD 2,500 and KD 2,700 for each, reported The Times.

The trio occupied sensitive positions in three major companies that took over 20,000 Bangladeshi workers to Kuwait in exchange for more than KD 50 million. Although the company was closed due to legal violations, the workers landed in Kuwait to discover their visas were fake. They were forcibly employed in another company owned by Papul.

Eleven Bangladeshis taken to

Kuwait by Papul testified to the court about the exploitation. The workers were charged money for renewing residential visas and even forced to work against their will for long working hours in inhumane working conditions without wages or were provided with inadequate housing facilities.

Papul also allegedly attacked those who objected to his views and threatened them with false cases.

Back home, in response to a complaint filed on February 16 last year, the Anti-Corruption Commission opened an inquiry into an allegation against Papul for amassing Tk 1,400 crore by trafficking people to Kuwait and laundering the money to different countries.

On December 28, a Dhaka Court ordered the freezing of 617 bank accounts and 92 deeds of immovable properties of Papul, following a petition filed by the ACC.

Speaking to this correspondent, Iftekharuzzaman, executive director, Transparency International Bangladesh said, "The action was obvious and long expected. But it should not be treated as the end of the road to justice of a former MP whose crimes, especially money laundering and human trafficking, have brought on so much disrepute to the country, his political peers and of course the parliament."

## Modi attacks Mamata over 'cut money'

PTI, Hoogly

Launching a frontal attack on the Mamata Banerjee government, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi alleged yesterday it has perpetuated "syndicate raj" in all spheres of life in West Bengal where no work gets done without common people having to pay "cut money".

He accused the TMC government of pursuing "appeasement politics" to protect its vote bank while neglecting its cultural heritage and icons.

"The state government's cut money culture has vitiated the atmosphere to such an extent that you cannot even take a house on rent without paying it... you cannot rent a house without the syndicate's permission," he said.

He attacked the Mamata-led government for not allowing central schemes like the PM Kisan Samman Nidhi and Ayushman Bharat, depriving farmers and the poor of its benefits. He also accused the TMC government of neglecting industrial development.

## CURBING SPREAD OF DISINFO

# Global tech firms launch new code of practice in Australia

AFP, Sydney

Global tech firms in Australia unveiled a new code of practice yesterday to curb the spread of disinformation online, following pressure from the government.

The lobbying group DIGI -- representing Facebook, Google, Twitter, Microsoft, TikTok and Redbubble -- committed under the code to a range of actions including labelling false content on their platforms, demoting fake content and prioritising credible sources of information.

They also agreed to suspend or disable offending and fake accounts, including "bots" that automatically disseminate information across their platforms.

The measures -- which largely codify existing practices -- are said to target paid and political advertising as well as content shared by users.

"All signatories commit to safeguards to protect Australians against harm from online disinformation and misinformation, and adopting a range of scalable measures that reduce its spread and visibility," the group said in releasing the 29-page code.

The voluntary code was developed in response to an Australian government inquiry into the role of online platforms in the spread of misinformation and disinformation.

The problem became particularly acute during historic bushfires that swept the country in late 2019 and 2020 and during the coronavirus pandemic, when social media platforms were flooded with false information on the origins of the disease and efforts to curb its spread.

The government's Communication and Media Authority (ACMA), which will oversee the code's implementation, said yesterday that in 2020 more than two-thirds of Australians expressed concern over the extent of online misinformation.

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**e-Tender Notice No. 22/2020-2021**

Memo No. 35.01.1213.406.14.259.16-380 Date: 18/02/2021

e-Tenders are invited in e-GP System Portal (<http://www.eprocure.gov.bd>) by Executive Engineer, RHD, Road Division, Brahmanbaria for the procurement of:

Sl. No.	Package No.	Tender ID	Name of the works
1.	22/e-GP/EE/RHD/Brahmanbaria/2020-2021	549352	Emergency supplying & fitting fixing of different size of shape overhead directional signboard at different location of Cumilla (Mainamas)-Brahmanbaria (Sarat) Road (N-102) & Sultanpur-Chinair-Akhaura Road (Z-1216) and Road Marking Work at Ch. 00+000m to Ch. 06+400m of Kaska-Kut Road (Z-1201) under Brahmanbaria Road Division during the year 2020-2021.

This is an online tender, where only e-Tenders will be accepted in e-GP Portal and no offline/hard copies will be accepted. To submit e-Tender, please register on e-GP System Portal (<http://www.eprocure.gov.bd>). e-Tender details can be downloaded from 17/02/2021 to 04/03/2021 & Time 17:00 on e-GP System Portal <http://www.eprocure.gov.bd> for purchase. e-Tenders will be accepted only up to 07/03/2021 & Time 14:00. Accepted tenders will be opened online immediately after 07/03/2021 & Time 14:00.

Pankaj Bhowmik  
ID No. 602209  
Executive Engineer (c.c), RHD  
Road Division, Brahmanbaria

GD-347

**Rajshahi City Corporation**  
Engineering Department  
Nagar Bhaban, Rajshahi

Memo No. 46.12.5081.006.07.167.2021.110 Date: 18/02/2021

**Invitation for Tenders (IFT)**  
03/2020-21

e-Tender is invited in the National e-GP System Portal (<http://www.eprocure.gov.bd>) for the procurement of the following goods:

Sl. No.	ID No.	Reference No.	Brief description of goods	Tender document last selling time & date
1.	550097	46.12.5081.006.07.167.2021.111	Supply & Installation of Street Lighting at Kalpona Cinema Hall to Talaimary Mour in Rajshahi City.	12.30pm on 22-March-2021

This is an online tender, where only e-Tender will be accepted in the National e-GP Portal and no offline/hard copies will be accepted. To submit e-Tender, registration in the National e-GP System Portal (<http://www.eprocure.gov.bd>) is required. The fees for downloading the e-Tender documents from the National e-GP System Portal have to be deposited online through any registered banks branches. Further information and guidelines are available in the National e-GP System Portal and from e-GP help desk ([helpdesk@eprocure.gov.bd](mailto:helpdesk@eprocure.gov.bd)).

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GD-346