

OVERHAUL OF HK'S POLITICAL SYSTEM

China passes new 'patriot' polls law

AFP, Beijing

Chinese leaders endorsed a sweeping overhaul of Hong Kong's electoral system yesterday, creating powers to vet anyone standing for public office and slashing the number of directly elected politicians.

The new measures, which bypassed Hong Kong's legislature and were imposed directly by Beijing, are the latest move aimed at quashing the city's democracy movement after huge protests.

President Xi Jinping signed the new law after it was unanimously approved by China's top decision-making body. One of the most dramatic changes is the introduction of a committee that will vet anyone hoping to enter Hong Kong politics for their patriotism.

The body will include background checks by Hong Kong's new national security apparatus and its decisions cannot be legally challenged.

When Hong Kongers are allowed to vote in limited local elections, they tend to do so overwhelmingly for pro-democracy candidates, something that has rattled authoritarian Beijing.

Under the new measures, Hong Kong's legislature will be expanded from 70 to 90 seats. But only 20 of those seats will now be directly elected, down from 35. That brings direct representation down from half to less than a quarter of seats.

The majority -- 40 seats -- will be chosen by a reliably pro-Beijing committee. The remaining 30 will be chosen by "functional constituencies" -- bodies representing certain industries and special interest groups that have also been historically loyal to Beijing.



Hindu devotees take part in 'Huranga', a game played between men and women a day after Holi, the festival of colours, at Dauji temple near the northern city of Mathura, India, yesterday. India's Covid-19 situation is turning from "bad to worse," a senior government official said yesterday, as infections surge across several states.

PHOTO: REUTERS

West doubts virus origin report

India sees surge in cases; world pushes for pandemic preparedness treaty

AGENCIES

The United States led a chorus of concern from a group of nations yesterday over a WHO-backed report into the origins of the coronavirus in China, with accusations swirling that Beijing failed to give proper access to the investigators.

The US released a statement with 13 of its allies -- Britain, Japan and Australia among them -- saying the inquiry had lacked the data and samples it needed.

World Health Organization chief Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus had earlier made a similar criticism, saying the international team he dispatched to Wuhan had found it difficult to get raw data during the mission.

The expert report on the origins of Covid-19 concluded that the virus probably came from bats and jumped to humans from another animal.

The experts judged it "extremely unlikely" that the virus was grown

in a lab, and were also unimpressed by Beijing's theory that the virus did not originate in China at all but was imported in frozen food.

The pandemic has killed nearly 2.8 million people worldwide since it first emerged in Wuhan in late 2019, with several countries now battling new waves of infection and being forced to

COVID-19 PANDEMIC

take drastic measures.

India's health secretary yesterday bluntly told the 28 federal states to get a grip on lax coronavirus prevention measures "right now" to prevent healthcare systems being overwhelmed by a surge in infections.

India's current caseload of 12.1 million ranks third behind only the United States and Brazil, with testing unable to keep up with demand. The daily rise in cases has quadrupled in the space of a month.

Yesterday, India recorded 56,211 new cases, a slight dip after a reduction in testing over a long weekend.

Italy yesterday said it would impose a five-day quarantine on travelers arriving from other EU countries, while Germany will beef up checks along land borders to ensure people arriving have negative Covid tests.

Meanwhile, world leaders yesterday called for a new international treaty to better fight future outbreaks and for countries to be ready if -- or when -- another hits.

"Together, we must be better prepared to predict, prevent, detect, assess and effectively respond to pandemics in a highly coordinated fashion," they urged.

More than 20 countries -- including Germany, France, South Korea and South Africa -- signed up to the plea.

Tedros had earlier urged the world to not waste any time in preparing for the next contagion.

EFFECT OF INDIA'S EXPORT CURBS ON COVAX

Asian countries seek alternative sources

REUTERS, Seoul/Manila

Several Asian countries sought alternative sources for Covid-19 inoculations after export restrictions by manufacturer India left a World Health Organization-backed global vaccine sharing programme short of supplies.

The export curb deepens the problems facing the Covax scheme, relied on by 64 poorer countries, and adds to previous setbacks that include production glitches and a lack of funding contribution from wealthy nations. The Serum Institute of India was due to deliver 90 million vaccine doses to Covax over March and April.

South Korea, Indonesia, the Philippines and Vietnam are among countries to be hit by shipment delays to vaccines they have been promised under the Covax programme.

Both the Philippines and Indonesia are currently relying heavily on vaccines from China's Sinovac Biotech to run their inoculation drives. The Philippines and Vietnam have both approved Russia's Sputnik V vaccine, along with more than 50 other countries, mainly developing nations. The Philippines expects to receive its first batch of Sputnik V in April.

Nepal yesterday said it was set to restart Covid-19 inoculations after receiving 800,000 doses of China's Sinopharm vaccine from China.

Pakistan said it will import more coronavirus vaccines made by China's CanSino Biologics next month, equivalent to 3 million doses.

Buses, trains to ply at half

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The government took similar measures last year to contain the spread of the pandemic. But there were allegations against bus and launch owners of operating over 50 percent capacity at that time.

A passenger's platform said it would be difficult to implement the decision of carrying 50 percent passengers in buses, especially city buses, while most offices, companies and factories are still open.

"The decision would rather increase passengers' sufferings," Mozammel Hoque Chowdhury, secretary general of Bangladesh Jatri Kalyan Samity, told The Daily Star yesterday.

A special committee to fix public transport's fare proposed a 60 percent hike in bus fares on Monday and sent it to the road transport and bridges ministry.

The committee, led by Nur Mohammad Mazumder, chairman of Bangladesh Road Transport Authority, made the decision at an emergency meeting when transport owners proposed either giving subsidies or increasing bus fare like before in light of the new directives.

Road Transport and Bridges Minister Obaidul Quader yesterday said 60 percent hike in bus fare will come into effect from today on condition that buses carry 50 percent passengers and follow the health safety guidelines.

The minister said this at a regular media briefing from his residence.

The hike in the fare will be applicable for a certain period and the previous one will be reinstated once the coronavirus situation is under control, he added.

The government in June last year increased bus fares by 60 percent when operation of public transport resumed after more than two months' suspension to curb the Covid-19 infections.

But authorities reinstated the previous bus fare in September last year when the restriction was withdrawn.

The government last increased the inter-district bus fares in May 2016 at Tk 1.42 a kilometre.

With the new hike, for example, it will cost a passenger Tk 700 (excluding tolls) to travel

to Barishal from the capital's Gabtoli via Faridpur. The existing fare is Tk 438.

Bus fares on routes inside the capital were last increased in September 2015 at Tk 1.70 a km.

Now, one has to pay Tk 53 instead of Tk 33 to travel to the Mirpur Zoo from Notre Dame College.

Contacted, BRTA Chairman Nur Mohammad yesterday said they already sent copies of a letter to transport leaders, divisional commissioners and authorities concerned to execute the new directives.

TRAIN, LAUNCH SERVICES
Bangladesh Railway yesterday started selling 50 percent of available tickets, its Director General Dharendra Nath Mazumder told this correspondent.

BR headquarters has given necessary instructions in this regard, he said.

However, it may take a few days to implement the government instructions to maintain 50 percent occupancy because many advance tickets have already been sold, said BR officials.

Half of the 50 percent tickets will be sold at counters and the rest online, said Jahangir Hossain, general manager (east) of BR. They may consider selling all tickets online if the Covid-19 situation worsens further, he added. Ticket price will remain the same, he added.

Mihir Kanti Guha, general manager (west) of BR, said many advance tickets have already been sold, so it may take a few days to fully execute the decision of carrying 50 percent passengers of the capacity.

The BR also took similar steps last year. Bangladesh Inland Water Transport Authority (BIWTA) Chairman Commodore Golam Sadeq said as per the government's directives, they instructed the launch owners not to take passengers at more than 50 percent of their capacities on deck.

Passengers using the cabin usually maintain health safety guidelines, so the restriction was not imposed on launch cabins, he added.

"They [launch owners] have been instructed to implement it from today [Tuesday]. We will take action if they fail," he told this paper yesterday. Launch fare will also remain the same, he added.

Govt moves to raise number

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Zahid said it would take 10-15 days to make the DNCC market functional as a healthcare facility.

The minister said his ministry would hold a meeting with the owners of private medical college hospitals today to discuss increasing the number of beds at their facilities too.

"We would request them to raise the number of beds though they are already crowded with patients."

The minister also asked people to take patients to district hospitals having facilities for Covid-19 patients so that pressure on Dhaka hospitals is reduced.

"There are some medical facilities in Cumilla, Gazipur, Manikganj and some other districts around Dhaka. Patients should be admitted to those hospitals and they should not to come to Dhaka."

He also said containment of the virus is the most important factor. "Everyone has to follow the health guidelines. Otherwise, the situation would go out of control. Besides, people have to understand that the resources are limited."

Contacted, Dr Farid Hossain Miah, director

(hospitals and clinics) at the Directorate General of Health Services, said they were expecting to add another 2,000 Covid-19 beds in Dhaka within around two weeks.

"We are also expecting to add about 100 ICU beds in the capital," he added.

Farid said apart from 51 ICU beds at the makeshift hospital at the DNCC market, Shaheed Suhrawardy Medical College and Hospital, Kurmitola General Hospital and Kuwait Bangladesh Friendship Government Hospital would have 10 ICU beds each.

Asked about additional workforce, he said if needed, they would mobilise resources from districts around Dhaka.

According to DGHS statistics, there are 2,461 Covid-19 general beds and 108 ICU beds in government hospitals in Dhaka now.

Yesterday, 45 people died from the virus in the country in 24 hours till 8:00am and the daily infection rate rose to 18.94 percent.

On Monday, the daily infection rate was 18.38 percent and the number of fatality was 45.

The infection rate started going up from the second week of March after staying below 5 percent for about two months.

Institutional

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will be allowed to leave if the results come out to be negative, it said.

Passengers from other countries will have to be in home quarantine for 14 days. They must follow this rule strictly, the statement said. "They will be screened at the airport. If any Covid-19 symptoms are suspected or detected, they too will have to stay at the government facilities or government-approved hotels for the 14-day quarantine period," it said.

Caab also said whether or not passengers got vaccine shots, they must show the airport authorities PCR-based Covid-19 negative certificates while arriving or departing from the country.

The test must be done within 72 hours of the flight's departure.

On December 28 last year, the government had decided that all UK returnees must be in a 14-day institutional quarantine in the wake of the spread of a new variant of Covid-19 in the United Kingdom.

Later, the duration of quarantine was reduced to seven day.

NEWS IN BRIEF

Kim's sister slams South's Moon as US 'parrot'

Kim Yo Jong, the sister of North Korean leader Kim Jong Un, slammed South Korea's president as "a parrot raised by America" for calling the North's recent missile test "concerning", state media KCNA reported yesterday. North Korea launched two ballistic missiles into the sea near Japan last week, underscoring steady progress in its weapons programme and ramping up pressure on the United States. Following the launches, South Korean President Jae-in Moon said the South, the North and the United States should make efforts to continue dialogue. Kim Yo Jong called Moon's remarks disgraceful for agreeing with the United States. "Such illogical and brazen-faced behaviour of South Korea is exactly the same as the gangster-like logic of the US," Kim Yo Jong said in a statement carried by KCNA.

Nepal's schools close as air pollution hits alarming levels

Nepal has ordered schools to close for four days after air pollution climbed to hazardous levels, forcing millions of students to stay home across the country. Over the weekend, pollution levels hit their highest in the capital, Kathmandu, since the government began keeping records in 2016, government official Shankar Paudel told Reuters. Education ministry spokesman Deepak Sharma said about eight million students have been affected by the closures. The 24-hour average level of PM2.5, fine particulate matter that can reach deep into the lungs, was 214 micrograms per cubic metre in the upscale area of Bhaishapati in Kathmandu on Sunday, Department of Environment data showed. That compares with the government's standard level of 40 micrograms per cubic metre. People must stay safe indoors and not come out except for emergencies, the health ministry said. manufactured by the firm at US ports of entry.

Thai billionaire charged with royal insult over vaccine video



A billionaire Thai opposition figure was charged yesterday with defaming the monarchy after he questioned the government's alleged over-reliance on coronavirus vaccines from a company linked to the royal family. Thanathorn Juangroongruangkit, founder of the now-dissolved Future Forward Party, posted a video on Facebook in January in which he queried whether Thailand was leaning too heavily on Siam Bioscience for its vaccination campaign. The company is owned by the Crown Property Bureau, which manages the royal family's multi-billion-dollar fortune. A Bangkok criminal court yesterday charged Thanathorn with lese majeste and a computer crime over that video. Those convicted under Thailand's strict royal defamation laws can face up to 15 years in jail per charge.

Forced labour: US to seize gloves made by Malaysia firm

The United States will seize products made by Malaysia's Top Glove after concluding the firm uses forced labour, officials said, dealing a fresh blow to the world's biggest surgical glove maker. Top Glove's profits and stock price surged last year as countries worldwide rushed to buy protective gear during the Covid-19 pandemic. But the firm, which can produce more than 96 billion gloves a year, has been rocked by a series of scandals including a virus outbreak in dormitories that infected thousands of migrant workers. US Customs and Border Protection (CBP) had already banned gloves from two of Top Glove's subsidiaries last year after saying it suspected the company was committing labour abuses. It went a step further on Monday, announcing it had "sufficient information" to conclude that Top Glove uses forced labour. The federal agency said it would seize any gloves manufactured by the company.

SOURCE: AFP, REUTERS

জরুরী বিজ্ঞপ্তি

সম্মানিত গ্রাহকদের অবগতির জন্য জানানো যাচ্ছে যে, ব্যাংকের সিস্টেম আপগ্রেডেশনের জন্য আগামী ০১ এপ্রিল ২০২১ইং রোজ বৃহস্পতিবার হতে ০৩ এপ্রিল ২০২১ইং রোজ শনিবার পর্যন্ত ব্যাংকের প্রধান কার্যালয়, সকল শাখা, উপশাখা, কার্ড সার্ভিস, এটিএম বুথ এবং এজেন্ট ব্যাংকিংসহ সকল প্রকার ব্যাংকিং কার্যক্রম বন্ধ থাকবে। ০৪ এপ্রিল ২০২১ইং রোজ রবিবার হতে ব্যাংকের সকল কার্যক্রম পুনরায় চালু হবে।

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