

NEWS IN BRIEF

Malawi president fires minister over Covid-19 funds

Malawi President Lazarus Chakwera on Sunday fired Labour Minister Ken Kando for diverting \$800 worth of Covid-19 funds to pay for a government trip, part of a wider embezzlement scandal. In a televised address to the nation, Chakwera said the minister was named in an audit report as having listed the funds in his allowances for the travel to South Africa. "I have dropped him from my cabinet accordingly. Even though the minister has since returned the money, his usage of the funds means that the money was unavailable for its intended purpose when it was needed most," Chakwera said. "I cannot have in my cabinet any individuals who either spend money budgeted for one thing on something else or do not ask tough questions to ensure that the money they are spending on something was budgeted for that purpose."

Nasa successfully flies small helicopter on Mars

Nasa successfully flew the Ingenuity helicopter on Mars yesterday, according to data and images sent back to Earth. "Altitude data confirms that Ingenuity has performed its first flight -- the first flight of a powered aircraft on another planet," announced an engineer in the Jet Propulsion Laboratory as the control room cheered. A short clip sent back by the Perseverance rover showed the four-pound chopper grounded at first, hovering three meters above the Martian surface, then touching back down. Ingenuity itself sent back a still black-and-white image from its downward-pointing camera, showing its own shadow cast on the surface. "We can now say that human beings have flown a rotorcraft on another planet!" said lead engineer MiMi Aung to her team. "We've been talking so long about our Wright brothers moment on Mars, and here it is," she added. Nasa had originally planned the flight for April 11 but postponed it over a software issue that was identified during a planned high-speed test of the aircraft's rotors. The issue was later resolved through the help of a software update and tweak in coding.

Radical Pak party releases 11 police hostages after protests

Eleven Pakistani police officers seized by supporters of a radical Islamist group as part of their campaign to get the French ambassador expelled have been released, officials said yesterday. The officers were grabbed as hostages Sunday by supporters of the Tehreek-e-Labbaik Pakistan (TLP) during violent protests in Lahore. Video circulating on social media -- and confirmed unofficially by police as genuine -- showed some of them bloodied and bruised, with bandages around their heads. Interior Minister Sheikh Rashid Ahmed said the police had been released early yesterday after "negotiations" with the TLP, which the government banned last week after effectively labelling it a terrorist organisation. The officers had been held at a TLP mosque stronghold in Lahore, which is now packed with supporters and surrounded by police.

SOURCE: AFP, REUTERS



Families are reunited as travellers arrive on the first flight from Sydney, in Wellington yesterday, as Australia and New Zealand opened a trans-Tasman quarantine-free travel bubble.

PHOTO: AFP

Threat 'moved' from Afghanistan

Blinken defends US decision of troop withdrawal, says Washington needs to refocus resources on challenges such as China, Covid

AFP, Washington

Secretary of State Antony Blinken on Sunday defended the US decision to withdraw from Afghanistan, saying the terror threat had moved elsewhere and that Washington needed to refocus resources on challenges such as China and the pandemic.

President Joe Biden announced last week that the United States would withdraw all forces from the country before this year's 20th anniversary of the September 11 attacks.

The unconditional withdrawal -- four months later than a deadline agreed with the Taliban last year -- comes despite a deadlock in peace talks between the insurgents and the Afghan government.

CIA head William Burns and US generals including the former armed forces chief David Petraeus have argued that the move could plunge the country deeper into violence and leave America more vulnerable to terror threats.



"The terrorism threat has moved to other places. And we have other very important items on our agenda, including the relationship with China, including dealing with everything from climate change to Covid," Blinken told ABC's "This Week."

"And that's where we have to focus our energy and resources." Blinken met Afghan President Ashraf Ghani as well as senior US officials in Kabul last week and briefed them on Biden's announcement Wednesday that he was ending "the forever war," which began in response to the September 11, 2001 attacks.

Blinken told ABC the United States had "achieved the objectives that we set out to achieve."

"Al-Qaeda has been significantly degraded. Its capacity to conduct an attack against the United States now from Afghanistan is not there," he said.

The Pentagon has around 2,500 troops in Afghanistan from a high of more than 100,000. Thousands more serve as part of a 9,600-strong Nato force, which will withdraw at the same time.

The delay in withdrawal -- even by just over four months -- has angered the Taliban, who have threatened to resume hostilities against US forces.

Blinken said, however, that Washington would be able to see any move by the Taliban "in real time" and take action.

"So if they start something up again, they're going to be in a long war that's not in their interest either," Blinken said.

ASTRAZENECA JAB PRODUCTION**India to fund capacity boost at Serum Institute**

REUTERS, New Delhi

India is set to accept the Serum Institute of India's (SII) request for a 30 billion rupee (\$400 million) grant to boost its capacity to make the AstraZeneca Covid-19 vaccine, a government source with knowledge of the matter told Reuters.

SII, the world's biggest vaccine maker, sought the funds to increase its monthly capacity to more than 100 million doses by the end of May, from up to 70 million currently.

The country has administered more than 112 million doses of the shot so far, the highest in the world, despite concerns about some people overseas developing blood clots after receiving the vaccine.

The Indian government is in fact struggling to meet demand for the drug from many states as

infections spread rapidly.

"We are clear that we will give whatever support is necessary to develop and boost the availability of vaccines in the country," the source said on Sunday, declining to be identified as he was not authorised to speak publicly on the matter.

A finance ministry spokesman declined to comment. SII, which will soon also start making the Novavax Covid-19 vaccine, did not respond to a request for comment.

India has so far injected 123 million vaccine doses, including nearly 11 million of a domestically developed shot known as Covaxin.

The government is also trying to boost output of Covaxin and has also changed rules to fast-track imports of vaccines developed by Pfizer, Moderna and Johnson and Johnson.

HC decline to hear petition

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The SC lawyer told The Daily Star that he would move a petition before the HC for an order on the government to conduct an enquiry into the incident and to take necessary action against the magistrate and police.

Meanwhile, Bangladesh Medical Association (BMA), Swadhinata Chikitsak Parishad's Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujib Medical University (BSMMU) and Bangladesh Police Service Association (BPSA) yesterday issued separate statements over the incident.

BMA's President Mostafa Jalal Mohiuddin and its Secretary General Md Ehteshamul Hoque Chowdhury in their statement said the doctors and health workers, as frontliners, are being harassed and disturbed by law enforcers, which is both frightening and disappointing.

BSMMU's Associate Prof Sayeda Shawkat Janny was humiliated when she was at the capital's Elephant Road area on April 18 by being confined to her car after being pressured to prove her identity, despite having a car sticker

and hospital gown to validate her profession as a health worker, the BMA leaders said, adding that such conduct from law enforcers was disappointing.

They requested the authorities concerned to find out the people responsible for the incident by conducting an enquiry and punish them accordingly.

Swadhinata Chikitsak Parishad's BSMMU unit in their statement, signed by its Convener Prof Abu Nasar Rizvi and its Member Secretary Ariful Islam Joardar Tito, demanded the BSMMU authorities lodge a complainant against the police personnel responsible.

Meanwhile, Bangladesh Police Service Association (BPSA) President Md Shafiqul Islami and its General Secretary Mohammad Zayedul Alam in their statement said every member of the Bangladesh police was shocked at the "unprofessional conduct and misbehaviour" of a doctor, who was not on duty.

They strongly demanded that the department concerned takes appropriate action against the doctor.

MEDIATION OVER KASHMIR**Pak, Indian FMs in crossover visits to UAE**

AFP, Dubai

The foreign ministers of India and Pakistan made crossover visits to the United Arab Emirates this weekend, after it was revealed the Gulf nation has been mediating between the hostile neighbours.

"Good to be in the #UAE," Pakistan's Shah Mahmood Qureshi tweeted late Saturday, after announcing a three-day trip which ended yesterday.

His Indian counterpart Subrahmanyam Jaishankar visited the emirate of Abu Dhabi on Sunday, a spokesman for New Delhi's ministry of external affairs tweeted.

Pakistan's foreign ministry said there was no scheduled meeting between the two ministers.

Islamabad suspended trade and diplomatic ties with India in 2019 after New Delhi revoked the special status of the part of divided Kashmir that it rules.

But in February, Islamabad and New Delhi pledged to end all firing along the disputed frontier, after months of violence between the nuclear-armed rivals.



Drummers perform during the "Black & Yellow" Asian solidarity rally dedicated to Daunte Wright and George Floyd, in Minneapolis, Minnesota, US on Sunday. The rally promoted unity and solidarity among Asian and Black communities.

PHOTO: REUTERS

Testing tumbles despite spread

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daily tests crossed 30,000 this month for the first time. Last week, however, it was stagnant around the 20,000 mark daily.

Otherwise, the number of daily tests was around 15,000 on an average, which too decreased to its lowest in January and February this year.

The high level of positive results means that there are many more undetected individuals, who are unknowingly spreading the infection, experts said.

Bangladesh has so far done 31 tests per 1,000 people -- the lowest even among South Asian countries. Meanwhile, the Maldives has done 1,272 tests per 1,000, according to the ourworldindata.org.

Among other South Asian countries, Bhutan is in second position with 853 tests per 1,000 people, India third with 191, Sri Lanka fourth with 115, Nepal fifth with 80, and Pakistan sixth with 50 tests.

Globally, Denmark is on top of the list with 4,166 tests followed by United Arab Emirates with 4,160 per 1,000 people. The USA has done 1,193 tests and the UK 2,008, according to the ourworldindata.org. Bangladesh started witnessing the second

spike in Covid-19 cases from the second week of March. The positivity rate, since then, had risen to 23 percent last week.

As of yesterday, the reported death toll was at 10,497, which is 1.45 percent of all confirmed cases in the country.

"The number of daily tests should be raised until the positivity rate falls below seven or six percent and it [tests] should be multiplied to more than double, compared to the positivity rate, to detect and isolate the hidden cases," Mushtaq Hussain, consultant of the Institute of Epidemiology, Disease Control and Research, told The Daily Star recently.

The NIAC, meanwhile, has recommended that testing fees in private facilities be revised as the price of Covid-19 testing kits in the market has decreased notably.

"It will contribute to increasing the number of tests and to the affordability for more people. Besides, this will also contribute to reduce the pressure on the government-run testing laboratories," the committee said, adding, "This way, isolation of infected patients can be ensured faster, which is important to control the transmission."

Questions over rationality of police firing

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indicates that there was a gap in sharing intelligence between district police high officials and the local police," said a police officer.

He said law enforcers could have dispersed the crowd by using batons or teargas if additional policemen were deployed. In that case, the casualties would have been much lower.

District police officials said around 50 police personnel used to perform duties at the power plant project in Gandamara.

Asked about the rationale for firing, Nessar Uddin Ahmed, SP (planning and project) at Chattogram Deputy Inspector General's (DIG) Office, said they were yet to record statements of all police personnel who were at the spot.

"You don't judge the situation by PRB rules as police take action based on the prevailing situation at a particular place. Before saying anything clearly, we have to talk with all the sides concerned which would take time," said the SP, also a member of the probe committee formed by the police.

Some workers told the probe body that they heard gunshots, but they did not see directly

what happened at that time, Nessar said.

He said they were collecting CCTV footage, still photos, video clips, and related information. "After analysing those and witnesses' statements, we will say what actually happened."

However, workers alleged that police opened fire on them without any warning. None of the protesters were employees of S Alam Group or its Chinese partner Shandong Electric Power Construction Corporation III.

Instead, the joint venture company outsourced labourers from 27 subcontracting firms, workers told The Daily Star.

Chattogram Superintendent of Police SM Rashidul Haque said around 2,500 to 3,000 workers had gathered at the project site and tried to attack the Chinese workers. They even assaulted some fellow workers and police personnel and set some project properties on fire, he added.

"Considering the circumstances, police opened fire to protect Chinese workers and properties, and that led to the casualties," said the SP, who had visited the project site after the incident.

Rashidul said actions will be taken if the investigators find any negligence on the part of police. "We have formed a probe committee and the investigation report will make it clear."

However, police are yet to interrogate Chinese workers in connection with the incident.

The SP said they would talk to the Chinese workers and officials of the project.

Banshkhali UNO Saiduzzaman Chowdhury said around 1,000 Chinese workers are employed in the project.

S Alam Group is installing the 1,224 megawatt coal-fired power plant at Pchsim Gandamara of Banshkhali.

SS Power I Plant is a joint venture of six companies of S Alam Group (holding 70 percent of the equity), SEPCOIII Electric Power Construction Corporation, China and HTG Development Group Co Ltd, China, according to the official website of S Alam group.

Police filed a case with Banshkhali Police Station accusing 2,500 unidentified people on charges of attacking law enforcers, while the power plant authorities lodged another case accusing 22 named and 1,040 unnamed people over setting vehicles on fire during the incident.