

NEWS IN BRIEF



Navalny network added to Russian extremist list

Russia yesterday added Alexei Navalny's political network to its database of terrorist and extremist organisations, as Moscow moves closer to shutting down the jailed opposition politician's movement against President Vladimir Putin. The network appeared on a list maintained by Russia's financial monitoring service. The network of Navalny's regional offices had disbanded Thursday in anticipation of the move. Organisations on the list include the Islamic State group and al-Qaeda. The groups are banned in Russia, with members and supporters facing lengthy jail terms. Navalny, 44, was arrested in January on his return to Russia from Germany, where he spent months recovering from a poisoning attack he says was orchestrated by Putin. The Kremlin denies the claim.

Three-quarters of female journo face online abuse

Nearly three-quarters of female journalists say they have been victims of harassment online and for 20 percent this has transferred into offline attacks, according to a UNESCO study published yesterday. The violence ranged from abusive language (49 percent) to threats of physical violence (25 percent) and sexual assault (18 percent). Also included were threats to damage their professional reputations, digital security attacks and the use of manipulated images. "These methods of attack are growing more sophisticated and evolving with technology such as Artificial Intelligence," said the report, based on a survey of 901 journalists across 125 countries. Many women resorted to self-censorship because they felt poorly protected by their companies, the report added.

Palestinian elections delayed

Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas yesterday postponed planned parliamentary elections amid a dispute over voting in Israeli-annexed East Jerusalem and splits in his Fatah party. Abbas, 85, blamed Israel for uncertainty about whether it would allow the legislative election to proceed in Jerusalem as well as in the occupied West Bank and Gaza. The decision came three months after he announced the first national elections for 15 years in what was widely seen as a response to criticism of the democratic legitimacy of Palestinian institutions, including his own presidency. European Union foreign policy chief Josep Borrell called the decision "deeply disappointing" and said a new election date "should be set without delay."

SOURCE: AFP, REUTERS

COUP, CORONAVIRUS PANDEMIC IN MYANMAR

25m face poverty: UN

AFP, Yangon

Half of Myanmar's population could be living in poverty next year, driven by the combination of the pandemic and the political crisis sparked by the military coup, the UN said yesterday.

The dire warning came as renewed fighting between the Myanmar military and armed ethnic rebels sent more refugees fleeing across the jungle border with Thailand.

Myanmar -- already hit hard by coronavirus -- was plunged into turmoil when the military seized power on February 1, ousting the civilian government of Aung San Suu Kyi.

The coup sparked a massive protest movement calling for a return to democracy, which the security forces have sought to quell with a brutal crackdown.

More than 750 civilians have been killed, according to a local monitoring group, while a widespread anti-junta civil disobedience movement has throttled large parts of the economy.

The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) said that by early 2022 as many as 25 million people, or nearly half the population, could be living below the poverty line.

UNDP Administrator Achim Steiner said the crisis could reverse progress made since 2005, which has seen Myanmar halve the number of people living in poverty.

"Without functioning democratic institutions, Myanmar faces a tragic and avoidable backslide towards levels of poverty not seen in a generation," Steiner said in a statement.

The junta's crackdown on protests has drawn the ire of some of Myanmar's myriad ethnic armies, many of which have been battling the military for decades in border regions in the country's north and east.

Clashes between the military and the Karen National Union (KNU), one of the leading rebel groups, have escalated since the coup. Violence has also flared in northern Kachin state between the military and the Kachin Independence Army. Local officials said there were fresh air strikes and fighting yesterday on both fronts.

Iran welcomes Saudi prince's olive branch

AFP, Tehran

Iran welcomed a "change of tone" from Saudi Arabia that could clear the way to a new era of cooperation between the rival regional powers.

The Islamic republic "welcomes the change of tone from Saudi Arabia", said foreign ministry spokesman Saeed Khatibzadeh.

Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman called Tuesday in a TV interview for "a good and special relationship" with Tehran, after sources said the two countries had held secret talks in Baghdad.

Khatibzadeh, in a statement, said that "by adopting constructive stances... the two countries... can enter a new chapter of interaction and cooperation to reach peace, stability and regional development, by overcoming differences".

'Your vote changed the world'

Biden marks 100th day in office with Georgia rally

AFP, Duluth

President Joe Biden marked his 100th day in office Thursday with a trip to the crucial electoral state of Georgia to promote multi-trillion dollar spending plans that he says can transform the United States.

Addressing a drive-in rally at a Duluth, Georgia, car park, Biden praised the state for beating the odds last November and sending two Democrats -- Raphael Warnock and Jon Ossoff -- to the Senate.

Those two upset wins secured the narrowest of congressional majorities for Biden, allowing him to push through a \$1.9 trillion stimulus package soon after taking office and begin planning for another \$4 billion in spending on infrastructure, social safety nets and education.



"Your vote changed the world," Biden told the socially distanced crowd to honks and cheers.

In the brief, upbeat speech, Biden echoed many of his themes from a major address on Wednesday to Congress.

Biden ran through his three mega-spending programs and said that getting them passed by Congress would result in "millions of good paying jobs" for ordinary Americans.

"Wall Street didn't build this country. You did. The middle class did and unions built the middle class," Biden said. Arguing for higher taxation of top earners to offset the cost of his latest spending package -- the \$1.8 trillion American Families Plan -- Biden said "it's about time the very wealthy and corporations started paying their fair share."

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'MOUNT MERON DISASTER' IN ISRAEL

Stampede kills 44 pilgrims

AFP, Meron

A massive stampede at a densely packed Jewish pilgrimage site killed at least 44 people in Israel yesterday, blackening the country's largest Covid-era gathering.

The nighttime disaster struck after pilgrims thronged to Meron at the site of the reputed tomb of Rabbi Shimon Bar Yochai, a second-century Talmudic sage, where mainly ultra-Orthodox Jews mark the Lag BaOmer holiday.

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, who was helicoptered in to the scene in Israel's far north, said the "Mount Meron disaster" was "one of the worst to befall" the country since its foundation seven decades ago.

"What happened here is heartbreaking. There were people crushed to death, including children," he tweeted.

Closed last year due to coronavirus restrictions, this year's pilgrimage drew tens of thousands of people who were seen packed together joyfully singing, dancing and lighting bonfires before the deadly crush.

In a cruel irony, the BaOmer holiday celebrates the end of a plague that killed thousands of Talmudic students at the time of Rabbi Bar Yochai.

"This year, as we continue to inch closer to the



end of a modern-day plague, I encourage everyone to find meaning and joy in celebrating the end of a different plague that occurred many years ago," a rabbi wrote in the Jerusalem Post before yesterday's tragedy.

Witnesses pointed a finger of blame at police. "There is an iron ramp going down from the site of a bonfire... It was very crowded... people had to walk down on this ramp in order to exit," said Shmuel, an 18-year-old.

The police "closed it (the ramp). Then, more people arrived, and more and more... and police wouldn't let them exit, so people started to fall on top of each other", he told AFP.

Britain, France and the EU offered their condolences.

'Second wife' sues Mamunul for rape

FROM PAGE 1

After the divorce, the Hefajat leader allegedly tricked her into coming to Dhaka.

"He then started having a physical relationship with me after alluring me with promises of marriage," the woman said in the statement.

Over the last two years, Mamunul took her to different hotels and resorts in Dhaka and adjacent areas, the case statement said.

"As I talked about marriage, he would waste time by giving false assurances," the woman added.

On April 3, Mamunul took her to Sonargaon resort and allegedly raped her there again, she mentioned in the case statement adding that locals detained them at the resort while followers of Mamunul attacked the establishment and took them away.

After the incident, Mamunul kept her confined in the house of an acquaintance and did not allow her to contact her parents and children, she alleged.

"Later, I secretly informed my eldest son about my condition and asked him to take legal steps to rescue me from captivity."

In the case statement, the woman mentioned that her son is 17 and she is 27.

When the Detective Branch of police rescued her from a house in Dhaka's Mohammadpur area on April 27, she came to know that her father had already filed a general diary with Kalabagan Police Station in the capital to rescue her.

The case statement added that she faced threats from the followers of

Mamunul. She also consulted with her family members. That is why the filing of the case got delayed.

While talking to the media yesterday in Narayanganj, the woman said Mamunul had been deceiving her for a long time.

She demanded justice.

"I've got a new life. My last words are I want justice. He [Mamunul] fooled me by taking advantage of my simplicity. I demand justice from the state," she said.

After the case was filed, Sonargaon police took her to Narayanganj District Civil Surgeon's Office for medical examinations. From there, she was taken to Narayanganj General Hospital.

Talking to this newspaper, the Narayanganj SP said that they would seek Mamunul's remand in court tomorrow to interrogate him in this case.

Police arrested Mamunul on April 18 from Jamia Rahmania Arabia Madrasa in Dhaka's Mohammadpur.

On April 19, a Dhaka court placed him on seven-day remand in a vandalism case filed with Mohammadpur Police Station last year.

After the expiry of the remand period, he was put on seven-day remand in two cases over Hefajat's mayhem in the capital in May 2013 and March this year, filed with Motijheel and Paltan police stations respectively.

HEFAJAT MEN ARRESTED
Police yesterday arrested a top Hefajat leader, Mufti Maulana Masood, in Sylhet's Zakiganj.

Masood was the general secretary of the dissolved committee of Zakiganj Upazila Hefajat-e-Islam, officials

said. He was also the vice principal of Shahbagh Jamia Madania Qasimul Uloom Madrasa and the leader of Jamiat-e-Ulama Islam.

Zakiganj Police Station Office-in-Charge Abul Quasem said Masood was arrested in connection with a case filed on April 20 with the police station.

On April 19, despite government imposed Covid-19 restrictions, a procession was brought out from Maizgram Jame Mosque in Barhal union of Zakiganj demanding release of the arrested Hefajat leaders and activists.

The next day, police filed a case against 30 to 35 leaders and activists of BNP, Jamaat, Shibir and Hefajat.

OC Quasem said, "Mufti Masood was not named as an accused in the case, but we've found his involvement [in the incident] during the investigation."

So far, seven leaders, including Masood, have been arrested in the case.

Meanwhile, police arrested five more people in the last two days from different parts of Brahmanbaria in connection with violence and arson attacks by Hefajat activists and supporters in the district last month.

With the latest development, the total number of arrestees over the violence now stands at 394.

Md Roish Uddin, additional superintendent of police in Brahmanbaria, told The Daily Star that 56 cases were lodged with different police stations in the district over the violence.

Some 414 people have been named as accused in the cases. Besides, the cases have more than 39,000 unnamed accused.

Nearly half of them remain jobless

FROM PAGE 1

According to the report, 19 percent migrants said they returned home because of losing jobs, whereas 16 percent were forced to return, 16 percent returned for fear of Covid-19, 12 percent returned permanently, two percent due to illness, and 35 percent came home on leave.

Also, 28 percent respondents said they have debts now. Of them, 61.95 percent borrowed money after returning home, and 25.05 percent had debts previously.

Seventy-two percent of the respondents said they want to migrate again while the rest showed no interest in re-migration.

The report mentions that neighbours of 29.24 percent returnees showed a non-supportive attitude towards them.

Thirty percent respondents feel social stigma towards them still remains regarding the spread of Covid-19 in the country.

The report says the overall psycho-social picture of the respondents

could be observed from the fact that the satisfaction of economic life had deteriorated marginally over the period since the lockdown was imposed.

Following the Covid-19 outbreak, both the government and Brac launched different support initiatives for the migrant workers, it adds.

The study recommended that a sustainable reintegration project, including psycho-social support, should be launched for the returnees assessing their short- and long-term vulnerabilities. It suggested making loan products easily accessible to the returnees to engage them in income-generating activities.

The government should extend social protection coverage and safety net programmes to prevent their fall into poverty, it says.

Brac further suggested that the government should increase budgetary allocation for the expatriates' welfare and overseas employment ministry to ensure the welfare of the migrants and their family members and emphasise

their inclusion into the government programmes and policies in response to the shock of the pandemic.

Creating domestic employment opportunities for the returnees, especially in the infrastructure development and other public provisions during and after the pandemic, would cushion the employment-related stress for the migrant workers, the study added.

According to the report, nearly 5 lakh Bangladeshis returned home from abroad after the pandemic hit globally last year.

On the other hand, there is no available data on how many returnees have so far re-migrated to their countries of destination.

However, while trying to reach out to 1,360 returnees for the survey, Brac found that 207 of them had re-migrated.

Last year, Biman Bangladesh Airlines and Saudia ferried over 31,316 stranded Bangladeshi migrant workers to their workplaces in Saudi Arabia, the biggest labour market for Bangladesh, in 31 days since September 23.