

West ignored Russia's security concerns: Putin

AFP, Moscow

Russian President Vladimir Putin yesterday told his French counterpart Emmanuel Macron that the West had ignored Moscow's security concerns over Nato expansion and Ukraine, the Kremlin said.

The United States and Nato earlier this week delivered a response to sweeping security demands put to them by Russia, that called on the West to promise never to admit Ukraine to the US-led security alliance.

A Russian troop build-up close to the border with eastern Ukraine has raised Western fears the Kremlin is planning to invade its pro-EU neighbour. Russia denies any plans to invade.

"The US and Nato responses did not take into account Russia's fundamental concerns including preventing Nato's expansion and refusing to deploy strike weapons systems near Russia's borders," Putin told Macron, the Kremlin said in a statement.

The Kremlin said the two leaders had spoken at length, with Putin telling Macron he will "carefully" study the US and Nato's responses "after which he will decide on his further actions".

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Fishermen dry sea fish in Barishal city's Port Road area. The fish was preserved for about three months to be dried by fishermen when they would have a poor catch. They would consume dried fish while fishing at sea. The photo was taken yesterday.

PHOTO: STAR

Asia hunkers down as Omicron pushes West to reopen

AGENCIES

As Omicron pushes Western countries towards reopening, Asia is hunkering down, sharpening an East-West divide on the balance between public health, the economy and basic rights and freedoms.

While the highly transmissible coronavirus variant is accelerating the move toward living with Covid-19 in Europe and North America, life in much of the Asia Pacific is little less restricted – and in some cases even more restricted – than at the start of the pandemic.

The widening divide comes even as many Asia Pacific countries boast vaccination rates higher than those of their Western counterparts.

The region's ultra-cautious stance two years into the pandemic raises questions about its endgame as border controls and strict social distancing rules, although credited with achieving some of the world's lowest death tolls, inflict growing social and economic costs.

"There is a certain level of Covid-related mortality that the society is willing to accept," Cho Sung-il, a professor of epidemiology at Seoul National University in South Korea, told Al Jazeera.

"Individually, there is a certain level of Covid-related risk one is willing to accept, to balance against what one has to pay for it, in terms of social distancing plus vaccination. Asians may be valuing life over freedom, if culture matters at all. Maybe because we don't have the strong memory of civil revolutions risking life for freedom."

In mainland China, authorities have doubled down on a zero-tolerance approach that has resulted in the near-total shutdown of international travel and the imposition of harsher and more frequent lockdowns.

Hong Kong, which is grappling with its biggest outbreak

of the pandemic, has closed schools, bars and gyms and banned dining in at restaurants after 6:00pm.

The Chinese-controlled territory, long branded "Asia's World City," ranks among the most isolated metropolises due to some of the toughest quarantine and border rules on earth.

In Japan, which is reporting close to 80,000 daily cases, borders remain closed to all non-residents, while "quasi-emergency" measures restricting opening hours for bars and restaurants are in place in 34 out of 47 prefectures.

South Korea, which like Japan has avoided full-scale lockdowns throughout the pandemic, requires arrivals to undergo 10 days of quarantine, limits private gatherings to six people, and banned restaurants, bars and gyms from operating after 9:00pm. Authorities, which yesterday reported more than 16,000 cases, are set to review the measures on February 6.

Unlike in most of Asia, Europe and North America are largely open to quarantine-free travel for those who are vaccinated.

Meanwhile, Merck & Co Inc and partner Ridgeback Biotherapeutics said yesterday six lab studies showed their experimental oral Covid-19 drug molnupiravir was active against the fast-spreading Omicron variant, reports Reuters.

The data evaluated the antiviral activity of molnupiravir and other Covid-19 antiviral agents against Covid-19 variants of concern. Molnupiravir is yet to be studied against Omicron in human studies, the companies said.

The coronavirus has killed at least 5,635,702 people globally since the outbreak emerged in China in December 2019, according to an AFP tally compiled from official sources yesterday.

Japan pledges \$2m for Rohingyas in Bangladesh

UNB, Dhaka

Japan will contribute \$2 million in emergency grant aid for supporting the Rohingyas living on Bhasan Char.

This contribution includes \$1 million to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees and \$1 million to World Food Programme, according to the Embassy of Japan in Dhaka.

This support will allow implementing humanitarian assistance activities for the displaced Rohingyas, who are in need of urgent assistance in Bhasan Char in areas such as food and health, said the embassy press release yesterday.

"Resolving Rohingya issues is of utmost importance for the peace and stability of the region. I appreciate the Bangladesh government's efforts to protect the Rohingya people and the dedicated work of the international organisations," said Japanese Ambassador to Bangladesh Ito Naoki.

Japan supports the steady and smooth operations of the international organisations under the MoU signed between the Bangladesh government and the United Nations in October 2021, "which is a basic framework of assistance for Bhasan Char", the release said.

Tiger found dead in Sundarbans canal

OUR CORRESPONDENT, Bagerhat

The forest department recovered a tiger carcass from a Sundarbans canal yesterday afternoon.

The tiger, aged between 15 and 16, bore no signs of injury. It may have died of old age, said Belayet Hossain, divisional forest officer at the Sundarbans east forest department.

He said a tiger usually live up to 15-18 years.

Forest rangers found the carcass floating in Rupa canal adjacent to Dublar Char in the Sharankhola range and recovered it, Belayet said.

The carcass was taken to Sharankhola range office this morning. An autopsy will be conducted on the tiger's

body to know the cause of its death, he added. In February 2020, another tiger carcass was recovered from the Sundarbans, the habitat of the famous Bengal Tiger.

The carcass was found on Kabarkhali canal bank in Sharankhola range.



Sust students thank PM

Hope for rapid implementation of govt promises

OUR CORRESPONDENT, Sylhet

The protesting students of Shahjalal University of Science and Technology thanked Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina yesterday for bearing all medical expenses of those who were injured in police attack and became sick in hunger strike.

At a press briefing, a spokesperson of the protesting students, said the prime minister also arranged critically injured student Shourav's treatment in Dhaka.

"As per the government's instructions, the Education Minister Dr Dipu Moni assured us to fulfill our key demands and other problems of the university," he said.

"We are eagerly waiting for the prompt fulfillment. We are inviting the education minister to visit Sust and sit in a discussion," he added.

On Thursday, the protesting students organised an open discussion on "what type of SUST we want".

In the programme, the students discussed issues that they have been suffering for years. That evening, they also painted graffiti on roads of the campus.

Cold wave

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degrees Celsius today, said meteorologist Bazlur Rashid.

He said the temperature would start to increase after two to three days and another cold wave may hit the country later.

Lowest temperature in the country was recorded at 6.1 degrees Celsius in Kurigram yesterday, which has been the lowest temperature this season. The lowest temperature in Dhaka was recorded at 13 degrees Celsius yesterday.

A chilling cold wave has been blowing over the capital since early yesterday, affecting the poor, especially those who sleep under open sky.

Ashivering cold paralysed everyday life in Dinajpur and other districts in the northern part as the mercury dropped in a big notch yesterday.

The temperature went down by seven degrees Celsius in a day in Kurigram, said the Met office.

Tofazzal Hossain, in-charge of Dinajpur Meteorological Department, said the adverse weather was to continue for a couple of days in the region.

Around 200 people, mostly children, have been hospitalised in Dinajpur with cold-related diseases. Of them, 100 children were being treated at Arabindu Shishu Hospital in Dinajpur town, said Dilip Saha, its executive member.

Country logs

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The country registered the highest daily Covid caseload of 16,230 on July 28 last year, while the highest number of daily fatalities of 264 was logged on August 10 last year.

BR's poor show yet again

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was supposed to get \$280 million in non-concessional loans from two foreign banks in this regard.

The project, however, got stalled since the loan agreement could not be signed.

After the project authorities sought opinions from the Economic Relations Division on the draft loan agreement, the ERD in August last year forwarded the Finance Division's opinion on the matter.

The Finance Division opined that soft loans from South Korea or other sources should be managed, instead of taking the non-concessional loans which come with higher

interest rates.

When the project authorities asked Hyundai to manage the soft loans, it declined it. It also said it would cancel the contract.

On January 4 this year, the project implementation committee decided to take opinions from the

Implementation Monitoring and Evaluation Division and the Central Procurement Technical Unit in this regard, said a BR official.

THE FOUR OTHER PROJECTS

In July 2019, the government approved the technical assistance project – worth Tk 45 crore – for carrying out feasibility studies and detailed designs for four establishments, including a workshop for

diesel-electric multiple unit (DEMU) trains.

The Asian Development Bank was supposed to give Tk 31.36 crore in loan for the work. The deadline for the project was set for June 2021.

A consultant was also selected, but the project steering committee, led by the rail secretary, decided in November 2020 not to build the workshop for DEMU trains and drop this portion from the work scope of the consultant.

Besides, the deadline was extended till June 2022.

But the ADB asked to cancel the bidding process and later informed authorities that it would no longer finance the project.

In such a situation, the railways ministry asked

said, "We heard there is Arsa in the Rohingya camps but we did not find any identified Arsa member in the camps."

He, however, said it was not an issue as to who is an Arsa or Arakan Army member. "Whoever engages in criminal activities will be brought to book," the minister told The Daily Star.

Arsa riddle needs to be solved: experts

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"This particular arrest will be critical for investigating the death of Rohingya leader Mohib Ullah and finding evidence regarding Arsa's external linkages across the border," said Prof Shahab Enam Khan of Jahangirnagar University's Department of International Relations.

Former foreign secretary Touthid Hossain said it was generally believed that there was Arsa presence in the Rohingya camps and they were responsible for many of the crimes there.

"There are followers of Arsa in the camps, particularly among the criminal elements who oppose the repatriation.

I believe that intelligence activities should increase in the camps to identify and check them with appropriate action."

Contacted, Naimul Haque, commander of 14th Armed Police Battalion (APBn), which is in charge of security of a portion of Rohingya camps, said, "We did not say Shah Ali is an Arsa member, we said he is a so-called Arsa member."

He said Shah Ali told law enforcers that he went to Saudi Arabia but his visa was cancelled because he is the brother of Ataullah.

"Then he got married here and stayed here," said Naimul.

Home Minister Asaduzzaman Khan Kamal

said, "We heard there is Arsa in the Rohingya camps but we did not find any identified Arsa member in the camps."

He, however, said it was not an issue as to who is an Arsa or Arakan Army member. "Whoever engages in criminal activities will be brought to book," the minister told The Daily Star.

On its verified twitter handle, Arsa claimed, "Shah Ali, a former low-key member of Arsa, was diagnosed with heart disease and suspected of suffering from cancer as well. He was thus relieved of all scopes of duties indefinitely since two and a half years ago on the

ground of incapability."

Touthid Hossain said, "Why the government is still denying it is not clear to me. I believe that Arsa is an agent of the Myanmar military, and it provided the pretext to Tatmadaw for committing ethnic cleansing both in 2016 and 2017."

On August 25, 2017, Arsa claimed responsibility for attacks on police posts across northern Rakhine. The Myanmar military used the attacks as a pretext to carry out a massive clampdown on the Rohingyas, resulting in the region's most severe refugee crisis in decades.

All 34 Rohingya camps in Cox's Bazar are hubs of

21 MG locomotives at a cost of Tk 242.14 crore to solve BR's engine crisis. June 2022 was set as the deadline.

PD Tabassum Binte Islam said they floated tender thrice over the last three years. Except for the first, no one submitted any proposal. The submitted proposal, however, did not meet the requirements, she said.

"PIC [Project Implementation Committee] members in a meeting [in November last year] opined that the project should be ended," she said.

PIC's opinion would be placed before the project steering committee, which will take the final decision, she also said.

"As Shah Ali was arrested, there are surely other leaders of Arsa living in the camps. They should also be arrested soon."

Mohammad Nur, a resident of Kutupalong unregistered Rohingya camp, said since Mohib Ullah's killing, the law enforcers regularly launch drives in the camps but still Arsa continued to carry out criminal activities in the camp at night.

Nazim Uddin, general secretary of Amra Cox's Bazarbashi, an organisation of citizens advocating for the repatriation of Rohingyas in Bangladesh back to Myanmar, said, "It should be investigated seriously

The two other projects – Tk 14,250.61 crore Joydebpur-Ishwardi double-line project and the Tk 16,104.45 crore Akhaura-Sylhet dual gauge project – were approved three years ago.

Chinese contractors were selected through the direct procurement method without any competitive bidding. Deadlines of the projects are December 2024 and June 2025 respectively.

But the Prime Minister's Office, following a committee's review, in November 2020 directed the BR to slash Tk 1,495.52 crore from the costs of the Joydebpur-Ishwardi project.

The PMO also directed the BR to reduce the costs

of the Akhaura-Sylhet project by Tk 3,354.31 crore.

But contractors of both projects declined to proceed. The Chinese government too declined to provide loans for the Joydebpur-Ishwardi project.

The ministry in November last year wrote to ERD asking it to search for alternative fund sources for both the projects following the directives of PMO.

BR officials said Japan has shown interest in financing the Joydebpur-Ishwardi project. But even if Japan is on board, it will take three years to start the physical work, they said.

There has been no development regarding the other project's funding, the officials added.

"To know how he [Shah Ali] got the NID card? Who is sheltering him? Who are the people behind him?"

Naimul Haque said after Mohib Ullah's killing, they have arrested around 300 "so-called" Arsa members at different times.

The commander of 14th APBn, however, said many of the so-called Arsa members got bail from the court, engaged in criminal activities and got arrested again.

"The law and order situation in the camp is very good right now. The circular road centring the camps is almost completed and we have ensured patrolling through watch towers," he added.