

Sri Lanka bans strikes as unions cripple govt hospitals

AFP, Colombo

Sri Lanka's president banned strikes in the health and electricity sectors yesterday as trade union action that has crippled state-run hospitals entered its sixth day.

President Gotabaya Rajapaksa invoked a 1979 law prohibiting stoppages in the two sectors, declaring all related work "essential public services", his office said.

The tough regulations allow courts to hand down five-year jail terms and confiscate the assets of those refusing work. The move followed health unions ignoring a court order Thursday instructing them to suspend their strike pending a hearing of a petition against their action.

Sri Lanka is in the grip of a foreign exchange crisis that has crippled the economy, and the unions are demanding better promotional prospects, restructuring of their pay scales and higher allowances.

The government has refused, saying the current economic situation did not allow it to increase the salaries budget.

Thousands of health workers have been taking part in the strike action, leaving only emergency services functioning at state hospitals and many routine services put off.

Electricity sector workers are not on strike, but they too have threatened trade union action if the government goes ahead with plans to sell a thermal power plant to a US company.



Thousands of protesters march towards the parliament building in Canberra, Australia, yesterday, to decry Covid-19 vaccine mandates, the latest in a string of rallies against pandemic restrictions around the world. A French "freedom convoy" of cars and vans began arriving in Paris yesterday for a protest over coronavirus restrictions, but the police moved quickly to prevent a Canadian-style blockade of the capital by issuing hundreds of fines.

PHOTO: AFP

US accused of 'theft'

Advocates decry Biden's decision to seize and split Afghan funds

AL JAZEERA ONLINE

President Joe Biden's decision to effectively seize the Afghan central bank's funds in the United States and repurpose half of the money as compensation to the victims of the 9/11 attacks has drawn rebuke and accusations of "theft" against Washington.

Biden issued an executive order on Friday that would split \$7.1bn belonging to Da Afghanistan Bank (DAB) almost evenly between humanitarian assistance to the struggling country and funds to cover judgements from lawsuits that 9/11 victims and their families had filed against the Taliban in US courts.

"The people of Afghanistan had nothing to do with 9/11; that is an undeniable fact," Bilal Askaryar, an Afghan-American activist, told Al Jazeera.

"What Biden is proposing is not justice for 9/11 families, it is theft of public funds from an impoverished nation already on the brink of famine and starvation brought on by the United States' disastrous withdrawal."

The US-backed Afghan government collapsed in August of last year, with the Taliban capturing Kabul amid the pullout of US troops from the country after a 20-year war.

Washington, which had negotiated its withdrawal with the Taliban, quickly moved to freeze DAB's US-based assets. The 9/11 victims' families then sought the money through the courts. One particular case that had obtained a default judgement against the Taliban in 2012 became central in that effort.

Halema Wali, cofounder of Afghans for a Better Tomorrow, a US-based advocacy

group, stressed that the money in the Afghan central bank belongs to the people of Afghanistan, who are experiencing a dire humanitarian crisis.

With skyrocketing inflation and the state institutions in shambles, the Afghan economy - which has depended on foreign aid - is all but falling apart. The UN World Food Programme has warned that 23 million people are facing "severe hunger" in the country.

"It's absolutely egregious," Wali told Al Jazeera of Biden's move.

It remains unclear how that money would be dispensed with several lawsuits making claims to the funds.

Another issue that adds to the uncertainty surrounding the fate of the funds is that Washington does not recognise the Taliban as the government of Afghanistan.

KARNATAKA HIJAB ROW

India rejects US criticism

OUR CORRESPONDENT, New Delhi

India yesterday reacted sharply to the comments coming from some countries on the hijab controversy in the southern state of Karnataka and said "motivated comments" on its internal issues "are not welcome". India's Ministry of External Affairs spokesperson Arindam Bagchi said the matter was under judicial examination by the High Court of Karnataka. "Our constitutional framework and mechanisms, as well as our democratic ethos and polity, are the context in which issues are considered and resolved. Those who know India well would have a proper appreciation of these realities. Motivated comments on our internal issues are not welcome," he said. On Friday, the US Ambassador At Large for International Religious Freedom had said Karnataka should not ban hijab in schools as it "violates religious freedom". Protests over the hijab issue spread beyond Karnataka's educational institutions to other cities like Aligarh, Hyderabad and Vijayawada on Friday, according to a PTI report.

China conditionally okays Pfizer Covid pill

AFP, Beijing

China yesterday said it had given "conditional" approval for Pfizer's Covid-19 drug Paxlovid to treat adults with mild to moderate illness and a high risk of developing severe disease. The drug has so far been authorised in about 40 countries including the United States and Israel, while the European Union has permitted member states to use it ahead of formal approval as an emergency measure against the rapidly spreading Omicron variant. Unlike Covid-19 vaccines, Pfizer says that preliminary studies show that Paxlovid does not target the ever-evolving spike protein the coronavirus uses to invade cells, meaning it should theoretically be more variant-proof. China's National Medical Products Administration yesterday said further research on the drug needed to be undertaken and submitted to the regulator. Beijing has not yet approved any foreign-made coronavirus vaccines. Earlier this week, Pfizer, whose vaccine developed with Germany's BioNTech was the first approved in the US, forecast more than \$50 billion in 2022 sales for its coronavirus jab and therapeutic treatment.

What's up Tariqat's sleeve this time?

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Tariqat, an electoral ally of the ruling Awami League, had put forward five names to the search committee, led by Justice Syed Mahmud Hossain. The two others were - former secretary Ali Kabir and Prof Zeenat Huda of Dhaka University.

The National Awami Party, another component of the AL-led 14 party alliance, had also recommended the name of Nurul Huda for chief election commissioner.

The names of two other commissioners - Kabita Khanam and Mahbub Talukdar - were proposed by the Awami League and BNP respectively.

The Tariqat is now hopeful that President Abdul Hamid will pick two or three of its 10 nominees

this time as well.

The search committee will send names to the president by February 24 to appoint the CEC and four election commissioners.

The tenure of the current EC expires tomorrow.

"Five years ago, we had recommended names for the CEC and other commissioners after conducting an extensive research. We tried our best to find eligible candidates and recommended their names. The president picked names from our list," Tariqat Federation Chairman Syed Nazibul Bashar Maizbhandari told The Daily Star.

"This time we have sent names of the fittest individuals. We hope the president will pick some names from our list this time again as we prepared

the list impartially after doing the groundwork to find out individuals acceptable to all," he added.

The search committee on February 6 sought names from political parties to form the Election Commission.

The Tariqat on Friday submitted its list containing names of 10 persons, two for each post. The name of former senior secretary Kazi Habibur Awal topped the list, said sources in the party.

Habibur served as secretary of the law and defence ministries and also of the parliament secretariat.

The other names proposed by the party are: former principal secretary and former Palli Karma Sahayak Foundation managing

director Md Abdul Karim, former senior secretary Kazi Rowshan Akhter, former senior secretary Md Abdus Samad, former secretary and member of Public Service Commission Shahjahan Ali Mollah, former senior secretary to Public Security Division Mostafa Kamal Uddin, Professor Nazma Shaheen of Dhaka University's Institute of Nutrition and Food Science, former vice-chairman at Bangladesh Telecommunication Regulatory Commission Brig Gen (retd) Ahsan Habib Khan, former EC joint secretary Abul Kasem, and former senior district and sessions Judge Khan Mohammad Abdul Mannan, also a former inspector general of the Directorate of Registration.

to disperse protesting students who confined the VC inside an academic building.

At least 40 students, several teachers and policemen were injured.

Students started a movement demanding the resignation of the VC after the police action that day.

SUST VC says sorry after 27 days

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university, I am deeply sorry for the untoward incidents. I would like to express my gratitude to the faculties, students, officials and staffers of the university who have been working tirelessly to overcome the stalemate situation caused by the

incident."

The statement came a day after Education Minister Dipu Moni advised the VC to apologise.

Contacted, the vice-chancellor told The Daily Star that he apologised during a television interview on January 18, but this was his first written

apology.

He, however, refused to comment on the demand for his resignation, students' protest and credibility of such movement against him.

On January 16, police charged truncheons, shot rubber bullets and blasted sound grenades on campus

by the High Court in 2009 and Appellate Division in 2013.

Following his arrest, State Minister for Foreign Affairs Shahriar Alam on Thursday said the Malaysian home ministry wrote to Dhaka informing that Khairuzzaman was arrested for violating immigration law.

"Khairuzzaman is at a deportation centre in Malaysia right now. As far as I understand, there is scope to interrogate him again and investigate him," Shahriar told reporters at the foreign ministry.

The Bangladesh High Commission in Kuala Lumpur could not be reached for comment at the timing of filing the report.

UNHCR asks KL not to deport

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spokesperson of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, in an e-mail response to The Daily Star.

The principle of non-refoulement prevents states from expelling persons to a territory where their life or freedom would be threatened.

"This is recognised as customary international law, which is binding for all states, regardless of whether or not they have signed the 1951 Refugee Convention," the spokesperson said, while declining to comment specifically on Khairuzzaman's case for protection and confidentiality reasons.

Meanwhile, on Friday, the arrestee's wife, Rieta Rahman, filed a habeas corpus application with the Malaysian High Court seeking a halt to the deportation until a hearing is held on the petition.

A habeas corpus is a writ requiring an arrestee to be brought before a court especially to secure the person's release unless lawful grounds are shown for the detention.

The court is scheduled to hear the appeal tomorrow.

There is no specific allegation against her Khairuzzaman, who suffers from hypertension, Rahman told the correspondent from New York.


The 70-year-old was acquitted in the courts of

Bangladesh and has been living legally in Malaysia on a UN refugee card.

"Therefore, there is no ground for his arrest. The arrest and the initiative to deport him to Bangladesh was challenged at the Malaysian High Court," she said.

In another development, Malaysian Human Rights Commission wrote to the ministries of home and foreign affairs suggesting that Khairuzzaman should not be deported to Bangladesh, Gerald Joseph, a commissioner, told The Daily Star.

Khairuzzaman, also a former army major, was acquitted in the 1975 jail killing case in 2004. The acquittal order was upheld



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