

Rights groups urge Lanka not to use force on protesters

AGENCIES

International human rights groups have urged Sri Lanka's new president to immediately order security forces to cease all unlawful use of force against protesters, who have been demonstrating over the country's economic meltdown.

Armed troops and police arrived in trucks and buses on Friday to clear the main protest camp near the president's official residence in the capital, Colombo, a day after President Ranil Wickremesinghe was sworn in.

Even though protesters had announced they would vacate the site voluntarily after staging a sit-in for more than 100 days, the troops moved in and started attacking demonstrators with batons and removing tents and blocks along the roads leading to the president's House.

Security forces arrested 11 people, including protesters and lawyers. Two journalists and two lawyers were also attacked by soldiers in the crackdown.

Human Rights Watch said the incident "sends a dangerous message to the Sri Lankan people that the new government intends to act through brute force rather than the rule of law".

"Urgently needed measures to address the economic needs of Sri Lankans demand a government that respects fundamental rights," Meenakshi Ganguly, South Asia director at Human Rights Watch, said in a statement yesterday.

"Sri Lanka's international partners should send the message loud and clear that they can't support an administration that tramples on the rights of its people," she added.

Amnesty International also condemned the use of force, saying "it is shameful that the new government resorted to such violent tactics within hours of coming to power".

"The protesters have a right to demonstrate peacefully. Excessive use of force, intimidation and unlawful arrests seem to be an endlessly repetitive pattern in which the Sri Lankan authorities respond to dissent and peaceful assembly," said Kyle Ward, the group's deputy secretary general.

Wickremesinghe, who previously served as prime minister six times, was sworn in as president a week after his predecessor, Gotabaya Rajapaksa, fled the country as protesters stormed his residence. Rajapaksa later resigned while exiled in Singapore.

Sri Lankans have taken to the streets for months to demand their leaders step down to take responsibility for the economic chaos that has left the nation's 22 million people struggling with shortages of essentials, including medicine, fuel and food.



PHOTO: AMRAN HOSSAIN

Buses are parked near Saidabad level crossing yesterday leaving just one lane for traffic but that too is blocked by rickshaws travelling on the wrong side of the road. Such disregard for traffic rules is becoming all too common on Dhaka streets.

Monkeypox outbreak a global health emergency

Declares WHO, triggering its highest alert

AFP, Geneva

The World Health Organization on Saturday declared the monkeypox outbreak, which has affected nearly 16,000 people in 72 countries, to be a global health emergency -- the highest alarm it can sound.

"I have decided that the global #monkeypox outbreak represents a public health emergency of international concern," WHO chief Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus said at a press conference.

He said a committee of experts who met yesterday was unable to reach a consensus, so it fell on him to decide whether to trigger the highest alert possible.

"WHO's assessment is that the risk of monkeypox is moderate globally and in all regions, except in the European region where we assess the risk as high," he added.

Monkeypox has affected over 15,800 people in 72 countries, according to a tally by the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) published on July 20.

The first symptoms of monkeypox are fever, headaches, muscle pain and back pain during the course of five days. Rashes subsequently appear on the face, the palms of hands and soles of feet, followed by lesions, spots and finally scabs.

A surge in monkeypox infections has



Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus

been reported since early May outside the West and Central African countries where the disease has long been endemic.

On June 23, the WHO convened an emergency committee (EC) of experts to decide if monkeypox constitutes a so-called Public Health Emergency of International Concern (PHEIC) -- the UN health agency's highest alert level.

But a majority advised Tedros that the situation, at that point, had not met the threshold.

The second meeting was called on Thursday with case numbers rising further, where Tedros said he was worried.

"I need your advice in assessing the

immediate and mid-term public health implications," Tedros told the meeting, which lasted more than six hours.

A US health expert sounded a grim warning late on Friday.

"Since the last #monkeypox EC just weeks ago, we've seen an exponential rise in cases. It's inevitable that cases will dramatically rise in the coming weeks & months. That's why @DrTedros must sound the global alarm," Lawrence Gostin, the director of the WHO Collaborating Center on National and Global Health Law, said on Twitter.

"A failure to act will have grave consequences for global health."

A viral infection resembling smallpox and first detected in humans in 1970, monkeypox is less dangerous and contagious than smallpox, which was eradicated in 1980.

Ninety-five percent of cases have been transmitted through sexual activity, according to a study of 528 people in 16 countries published in the New England Journal of Medicine -- the largest research to date.

Overall, 98 percent of infected people were gay or bisexual men, and around a third were known to have visited sex-on-site venues such as sex parties or saunas within the previous month.

Ansar man killed by colleague in Manikganj

OUR CORRESPONDENT, Manikganj

An Ansar member killed his colleague by slitting his throat at the force's office in Manikganj's Ghior upazila early yesterday.

The deceased, Kuddus Mia, 40, was from Bara Hatkora village in the district's Daulatpur upazila.

Police later called Ansar member Md Shahin, 26, to the office and arrested him after he confessed to committing the murder, said Ghior Police Station OC Riaz Uddin Biplab.

The OC said Shahin killed his colleague because of a dispute over a financial transaction.

Shahin killed Kuddus around 3:30am and stashed the body in a sack before leaving the Ansar office.

"We recovered the body around 6:00am and sent it to the district general hospital morgue for an autopsy," the OC added.

A murder case was lodged with the police station in connection with the incident.

Four die of Covid, 446 new cases logged

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Four Covid-19 patients died in 24 hours preceding 8:00am yesterday, taking the total fatalities from the virus in the country to 29,262.

During the same period, the Directorate General of Health Services (DGHS) reported 446 new cases after 4,415 samples were tested countrywide.

The positivity rate was 10.1 percent.

Of the four deceased, three were males.

One of the dead was aged below 10 while one each was aged between 21 and 30, 31 and 40 and 51 and 60.

No ceasefire without recovering land lost to Russia: Zelensky

REUTERS

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky said a ceasefire with Russia without reclaiming lost territories would only prolong the war, according to an interview with the Wall Street Journal on Friday.

He warned that a ceasefire that allows Russia to keep Ukrainian territories seized since the invasion in February would only encourage an even wider conflict, giving Moscow an opportunity to replenish and rearm for the next round.

Zelenskiy also spoke about US-supplied high mobility artillery rocket systems (HIMARS), saying, "the Western supplies of Himars, while making a material difference, are much lower than what Ukraine needs to turn the tide."

"Freezing the conflict with the Russian Federation means a pause that gives the Russian Federation a break for rest," the Wall Street Journal reported, citing comments by Zelenskiy.

He said, "Society believes that all the territories must be liberated first, and then we can negotiate about what to do and how we could live in the centuries ahead".

"A more pressing need is air defense systems that could prevent Russia from raining long-range missiles on otherwise peaceful cities hundreds of miles from the front lines," Zelenskiy added.

Floods over, not the struggles

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The next day, everything Rowshan owned was already under water.

She and her family of four are now living with their relatives.

After record-breaking rainfall in Meghalaya, water from the upstream caused fierce currents in the Khasiamara river, resulting in the destruction of embankments and homes.

Visiting the village, this correspondent found that people of at least 19 villages, who used to live on the riverbanks, have lost their homes to erosion.

At least 700-800 houses of the union were completely damaged in the consequent floods, authorities concerned said.

Most of the families of the village, who depend on farming, have lost their paddy and seeds.

Arable lands have been covered in sand after the recession of water, and for this, farmers will find it difficult to grow rice in the coming seasons.

Fazlul Haq, a farmer, said he cultivated Aus before the flood hit the village.

"We have around 120 decimals of land. Last year, I was able to harvest 32 maunds of rice. But this year, the flood destroyed all my crops."

Zahirul Haq, chairman of the union, said that out of 24 villages there, 21 were completely submerged under four to five feet water.

Arable lands were the worst affected.

"A few thousand acres [of arable land], where people grew paddy just last year, now look like a desert," he said.

The livelihoods of hundreds have been washed away in the floods, and there is no guarantee when the farmers will be able to farm again, authorities said.

A total of 32,000 people live in 24 villages of the union.

Most of them are now dependent on government relief as they have lost all their grains and belongings.

Zahirul further said, "I have so far distributed eight tonnes of rice among the villagers. But they need more

Repayment may pose a challenge

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situation in check," he said while commenting on several mega projects.

The debt repayment period of the loans taken for the power plants is 2024-2054.

Rooppur Nuclear Power Plant project is being implemented by the Bangladesh Atomic Energy Commission while the rest are by the Power Division.

The biggest chunk of the debt is due for repayment in 2054 for the first phase of Matarbari coal power plant project.

The second and third largest chunks of debt repayment are to be made by 2035 and 2037 for four power plants.

The biggest amount, Tk 47,070 crore, will have to be paid to Japan International Cooperation Agency (Jica). The money was borrowed for the construction of five plants.

Tk 15,060 crore will be paid to the Export-Import Bank of China for Patuakhali 1320 MW coal-fired power plant. This debt needs to be repaid by 2035.

Exim Bank India is owed Tk 12,800 crore for Rampal Power Plant. The debt is to be repaid in 27 instalments from March 31, 2024, to March 31, 2037.

Two other major lenders, the World Bank and Asian Development Bank, have to be repaid between 2028 and 2038.

Fitness farce

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"It is a hassle to take my car to the BRTA office. So, I give Tk 3,000 to a broker and he manages the fitness clearance for me," said one of the vehicle owners requesting not to be identified for fear of reprisal.

Although the number of vehicles has increased manifold in the last few years, the headcount of staffers, including vehicle inspectors, who play a major role in giving fitness clearance, has remained almost the same.

A low number of vehicles are tested at the Vehicle Inspection Centre at Dhaka's Mirpur office, with the majority tested manually by inspectors. At present, 120 inspectors are struggling to ensure fitness for tens of thousands of vehicles.

As a result, there are long queues of vehicles every day for fitness certificates. "So, many car owners want to avoid the hassle through brokers," said an official wishing not to be named.

In fiscal 2020-21, they checked the fitness of 6.75 lakh vehicles.

As of January, more than 5 lakh registered vehicles were on the road without a fitness certificate.

Contacted, BRTA Chairman Nur Mohammad Mazumder said they have given strong directives upon all field offices not to give fitness certificates without inspecting vehicles at the

BRTA office.

Even after the strong directive, Toha went ahead and signed off on the vehicle's fitness without getting anywhere near it.

"So, we have taken immediate and stern action against him," he told The Daily Star yesterday.

He was suspended and closed at the BRTA headquarters, as per an order on Thursday.

Recently, a vehicle inspector was suspended and departmental action was taken against two staffers of BRTA's Circle office at Ekuria following the same allegation.

"We are trying our best to prevent such incident and already given a strong message to all officials said stern action would be taken if anyone found involved in such incident," Mazumder added.

Odessa port

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Oleg Nikolenko said Russia would bear "full responsibility for deepening the global food crisis" if the assault jeopardised the agreement.

The first major accord between the countries since the February invasion of Ukraine aims to ease the "acute hunger" that the United Nations says faces an additional 47 million people because of the war.

West Bengal minister, aide arrested

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seized gold worth Rs 89 lakh and foreign currency from Arpita's flat.

ED officials said they were also focusing on seven houses Chatterjee reportedly built in Bolpur and a plush residential school in Birbhum district.

"Chatterjee was not cooperating with our officers who had been questioning him since Friday morning. So, he was arrested," an ED official said.

Chatterjee was arrested after nearly 26 hours of intense questioning that began on Friday and lasted until yesterday morning.

ED officials said the cash found in Arpita's flat in Diamond South City housing society in Tollygunj is suspected to be the proceeds of crime related to what has come to be known as the School Service Commission (SSC) recruitment scam.

Chatterjee, who is also TMC secretary general and has been associated with the TMC (set up in 1998) since 1999, was the state's education minister when the scam took place between 2014 and 2021.

Among the 13 locations where the ED conducted searches were the houses of Chatterjee and Minister of State for Education Paresch Adhikary.

On Friday, raids were carried out in houses of some top former and present officials attached to the state education department.

The probe into the scam was ordered by the Calcutta high court in March.

The Calcutta High Court on December 6, 2021, formed a committee to probe alleged irregularities in appointments by West Bengal School Service Commission. The 68-page report, submitted in March, found that irregular and illegal appointments were made by West Bengal School Service Commission. Irregularities were also found in the recruitment of primary and assistant teachers in West Bengal government-run schools in 2019 after the expiry of a committee that was originally formed in 2016 to fill up vacancies.

Soon after Chatterjee's arrest, several senior BJP leaders mounted an attack on the Mamata Banerjee-led West Bengal government.

"This is evidence of the fact that how people's money is being sacrificed for corruption in Bengal. People will get to completely know about it, I am confident," news agency ANI quoted Union Minister Jyotiraditya Scindia as saying.

Addressing a press conference, India's federal minister Rajeev Chandrasekhar said, "Yesterday, the country and the people of West Bengal in particular, saw the shameful sight of a mountain of cash being unearthed during a raid by ED on a close colleague of a West Bengal minister. This throws a spotlight on political corruption in West Bengal."

"It leads to a question, or rather answers it, about Mamata Banerjee's leadership... of abusing ED, leading attack of disinformation against investigative agencies, and giving a political colour to investigation and prosecution of political corruption," he was quoted by ANI.

"Mamata Banerjee speaks against ED and CBI but remains tight-lipped whenever these agencies expose political corruption. She tries to intimidate law enforcement agencies to thwart their investigation, so no case of corruption in her government comes to light," he said.

West Bengal's opposition BJP's national vice president Dilip Ghosh said, "The CM must issue a statement over the arrest of a cabinet minister. The arrest proves that the TMC is mired in corruption."

Hours after Chatterjee's arrest, the TMC said it would take action against Chatterjee if he was found guilty.

"We have all faith in the judiciary. After the judiciary gives its verdict, we will be able to make a decision. The All India Trinamool Congress will not tolerate any malpractice in the party or the government. After the judiciary comes out with its verdict, then only the Trinamool Congress will act," TMC leader Firhad Hakim told reporters in Kolkata.

He said the TMC "believes the BJP is behind the play. Whoever has switched to BJP has been untouched and whoever has stayed back is being harassed."