

Covid pandemic not over yet

Says WHO chief

AFP, Geneva

The head of the World Health Organization on Thursday tempered his assertion that the end of the Covid-19 pandemic was near, warning that declaring the crisis over was “still a long way off”.

Last week, Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus told reporters that the world had “never been in a better position to end the pandemic... The end is in sight.”

And US President Joe Biden went further in an interview broadcast Sunday, declaring that the pandemic in the United States “is over”.

But speaking to the media again Thursday from the sidelines of the UN General Assembly in New York, Tedros appeared less upbeat, making clear that “being able to see the end, doesn’t mean we are at the end.”

He reiterated that the world was in the best position it had ever been in to end the pandemic, with the number of weekly deaths continuing to drop – and now just 10 percent of what they were at the peak in January 2021.

Tedros pointed out that two-thirds of the world’s population has been vaccinated, including three-quarters of health workers and older people.

“We have spent two-and-a-half years in a long, dark tunnel, and we are just beginning to glimpse the light at the end of that tunnel,” he said.

But, he stressed, “it is still a long way off, and the tunnel is still dark, with many obstacles that could trip us up if we don’t take care.”

“We’re still in the tunnel.”

In its latest epidemiological update, the WHO said over 9,800 fatalities were reported last week, down 17 percent from a week earlier, while 3.2 million new cases were reported.

The UN health agency has warned that the falling number of reported cases is deceptive, since many countries have cut back on testing and may not be detecting less serious cases.

Maria Van Kerkhove, the WHO’s technical lead on Covid, told reporters the virus is still “circulating at an intense level,” although the situation varied in different countries.



An organiser places garlands on idols of deities at the Raj Mondir in Kobutarkhali village of Pirojpur’s Mathbaria upazila yesterday as part of final preparations for the Durga Pura. The biggest Hindu festival will begin on October 1.

PHOTO: STAR

Russia proxies in Ukraine hold breakaway polls

UN probe accuses Moscow of committing ‘war crimes’

AFP, Kyiv

Voting on whether Russia should annex Kremlin-controlled regions of Ukraine opened yesterday as the West denounced the referendum that has dramatically raised the stakes of Moscow’s seven-month invasion.

The voting began as UN investigators accused Russia of committing war crimes on a “massive scale” in Ukraine, listing bombings, executions, torture and sexual violence, but said it was too soon to prove crimes against humanity.

As polling got underway, Ukrainian forces said they were clawing back territory

from the Moscow-backed separatists, contesting territory the Kremlin seeks to control.

The votes in four regions are the latest shock development in a ferocious war that UN investigators said had seen violence – like executions and torture – that amounted to war crimes.

The referendums in the eastern Donetsk and Lugansk regions, as well as in the southern Kherson and Zaporizhzhia regions have been dismissed as a “sham” by Kyiv’s Western allies.

And even diplomats from Russia’s closest ally since the war began, Beijing, told Ukraine that the “sovereignty and

territorial integrity of all countries must be respected”.

Earlier this month, Ukrainian forces seized back most of the north-eastern Kharkiv region in a huge counter-offensive that has seen Kyiv retake hundreds of settlements that had been under Russian control for months.

On Friday, Russian news agency TASS showed officials in Donetsk alerting residents to the polls by loudspeaker, surrounding one local as he voted.

Denis Pushilin, a pro-Russian separatist leader in the Donetsk region – part of the industrial Donbas region – said on Telegram that “Donbas is Russia”.

Audit fails to determine Evaly’s dues

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The auditors traced transactions amounting to Tk 48,000 crore through seven bank accounts of Evaly in 2018 and 2019 but there is no paperwork at the company’s end, Manik told The Daily Star on Thursday.

“Why people deposited those sums, who deposited them, who withdrew money and why they were withdrawn... there is no clue in Evaly’s office.”

Evaly, which began its journey on December 16, 2018 amid an advertising blitzkrieg and unbelievable discounts, did not keep any log of who its vendors and customers are, let alone what sum they are owed or what they have paid.

“So, we are suspecting money laundering might have taken place,” Manik said.

For instance, the board found some copies of cash cheques but there is no mention of who were those issued to and for what purpose.

Similarly, the audit found many vouchers were dispensed but there is no mention of why those were made and for whom.

“This was their modus operandi for fraud. Evaly was started with the intent

of fraud. They knew that they would wind up the company after making a fortune through fraud,” he said, adding that it is not possible to conclusively determine how much Evaly owes.

To keep up its pretence, the company furnished fake audit reports on the letterhead of chartered accountancy firm SR Islam & Co.

“We have confirmed it with the firm – they said they didn’t audit Evaly,” Manik said.

The audit could not determine whether further transactions took place beyond the seven bank accounts.

For instance, Evaly disbursed its payroll in cash.

“They were shown a salary of Tk 1 lakh but were given Tk 65,000 in cash. There was no tax deduction.”

Meanwhile, Tk 25 crore currently lies in different escrow accounts belonging to Evaly and another Tk 25 crore worth of goods lies in its two warehouses.

“This amount is a drop in the ocean when compared to the claims made against the company.”

Asked if there is any possibility of the customers and merchants getting their money back, he said that Evaly does not

have the means to pay back the sums.

“However, if any investor comes on board, then there are some possibilities,” Manik added.

But for Manik and his board, they must feel they have done the best they could given the chaotic circumstances.

“I handed over the responsibility on Wednesday. We are no longer involved with Evaly,” Milon told The Daily Star.

That baton has been passed to a new board that includes Shamima Nasrin, the original chairwoman of Evaly and the wife of Evaly founder Mohammad Rassel, her mother Farida Talukdar Lily and her sister’s husband Md Mamunur Rashid, as per an HC order on August 24.

The order came following three separate applications filed by the trio.

In April, Nasrin walked out of jail on bail after her arrest on September 16 last year by the Rapid Action Battalion along with Rassel in a case filed by a customer over an undelivered order. Several other cases followed suit.

Although Rassel secured bail in nine embezzlement cases, he is yet to be freed as he has other cases pending.

AFP, Busan

A US aircraft carrier arrived in South Korea yesterday for the first time in nearly five years, ahead of joint drills in a show of force aimed at the nuclear-armed North.

The nuclear-powered USS Ronald Reagan and vessels from its strike group docked in the southern port city of Busan, part of a push by Seoul and Washington to have more US strategic assets operating in the region.

South Korea’s hawkish President Yoon Suk-yeol, who took office in May, has vowed to beef up joint military exercises with the United States, after years of failed diplomacy with North Korea under his predecessor.

“The deployment of the carrier USS Ronald Reagan to Busan demonstrates the strength of the South Korea-US alliance,” a South Korean defence ministry official told

AFP.

The visit aims to “deter North Korea’s nuclear and missile threats”, the official added.

Pyongyang has conducted a record-breaking blitz of weapons tests this year, and earlier this month revised its nuclear law, enshrining a “first strike” doctrine and vowing never to give up its nukes.

The US Navy said the USS Ronald Reagan is accompanied on the South Korea visit by two vessels from its strike group – the USS Chancellorsville, a guided-missile cruiser, and the USS Barry, a guided missile destroyer.

They will take part in joint drills of South Korea’s east coast this month, the Yonhap news agency said, adding that the nuclear-powered submarine USS Annapolis is also expected to participate.

The carrier’s visit comes after months of warnings from South Korean and US officials that North

Korean leader Kim Jong Un is preparing to conduct another nuclear test.

The isolated regime has tested nuclear weapons six times since 2006. Its last and most powerful one in 2017 – which Pyongyang claimed was a hydrogen bomb – had an estimated yield of 250 kilotons.

Washington is Seoul’s key security ally and stations about 28,500 troops in South Korea to protect it from the North.

The two countries have long carried out joint exercises, which they insist are purely defensive but North Korea sees them as rehearsals for an invasion.

Last month, the United States and South Korea staged their biggest combined military drills since 2018 – the resumption of large-scale training sessions that had been scaled back due to Covid-19 and the bout of failed diplomacy with Pyongyang.

US aircraft carrier arrives in S Korea to ‘deter’ Pyongyang

US can be ‘our most robust partner’: PM

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policy, and full repatriation of dividends, capital on exit.

“Let us once again join our hands for a mutually inclusive partnership for sustainable economic growth,” Hasina told the businesspeople.

Hasina said Bangladesh is establishing 100 special economic zones (SEZs) and several hi-tech parks in different parts of the country. Having more than 6,00,000 freelancing IT professionals, Bangladesh is the right destination for IT investments, she added.

“Moreover, skilled human resources at a competitive wage is an added advantage in Bangladesh. Even if required, we would be happy to offer a dedicated Special Economic Zone for the US investors.”

She said the US-Bangladesh Business Council can play a significant role in this regard.

Noting that Bangladesh will graduate from the LDC status by 2026, the PM said the country needs adequate support to enhance its global competitiveness and export basket. “I am sure that the United States can be our most robust partner in this challenging endeavour.”

The premier said Bangladesh is a pioneer in South Asia in regional connectivity. Bangladesh’s location offers tremendous potential for the

country to become the economic hub of the region.

The proximity of Bangladesh to India, China, and Southeast Asian countries means it is in the middle of a combined market of 4 billion people, she said. “Technology and innovation are the keys for fast-track economic growth. Thus, Bangladesh has become the second largest RMG exporter, third largest producer of vegetables, fourth largest producer of rice, and fifth largest producer of inland fisheries in the world.”

Hasina said Bangladesh would consistently pursue economic diplomacy with its neighbours and global players, including the United States. “We’re continuously improving our physical, legal, and financial infrastructure and enhanced connectivity in the country.”

She said completion of the Padma Bridge has enhanced both the domestic and regional connectivity, while Dhaka Metrorail Project is expected to open in December, which would enable faster domestic mobility.

The PM said Bangladesh made socioeconomic strides in the last 13 years, particularly in the fields of women empowerment, poverty alleviation, nutrition, maternal and child health, primary education, and ICT. Continuity of government,

investment in the rural economy, and women empowerment were the keys to success.

“Bangladesh is set to graduate into a middle-income country by 2026 and on track to become a developed country by 2041,” she added.

She noted that Bangladesh is in the process of transforming “Digital Bangladesh” into a “Smart Bangladesh”, where ICT is playing a significant role.

She said the Bangladesh government recognises the necessity of ensuring labour rights in the country. The ILO Roadmap provides a clear plan of actions and timeline to address the concerns and suggests remedial measures in the labour sector.

“My government is adequately engaged with the United States and other development partners for continuous improvements in this sector,” she said.

The PM informed that 102 percent of the targeted population (121 million) received at least two doses of Covid vaccines in Bangladesh. “Thus, our economy has shown great resilience in the face of the pandemic.”

She deeply appreciated the US government for donating more than 75 million Covid vaccines to Bangladesh through COVAX.