

PENSION PROTESTS

King Charles’s France visit postponed

REUTERS, Paris

Britain’s King Charles yesterday cancelled a state visit to France after social unrest over President Emmanuel Macron’s new pension law erupted into some of the worst street violence seen in years across the country.

The postponement will be a major embarrassment to Macron, who had hoped the monarch’s visit would mark a symbolic step in the two countries’ efforts to turn a page after years of poor relations post-Brexit.



Charles had been due to travel to France on Sunday for three days before moving on to Germany, an itinerary that had been seen as a win for the French leader who has sought to position himself as Europe’s de facto leader.

The king’s visit had been due to include a lavish banquet at the Palace of Versailles and the postponement will pile further pressure on Macron to find a way out of a crisis over his plans to raise the retirement age, which has seen some of France’s worst unrest since the “Yellow Vest” rebellion of 2018-2019.

A source in British Prime Minister Rishi Sunak’s office said Macron had asked for the visit to be cancelled.

Black-clad anarchists fought street battles with police for several hours in the French capital on Thursday, ransacking a McDonald’s restaurant, smashing up bus shelters and setting alight mounds of garbage that have piled up during strikes.



Russian support for Myanmar junta ‘destabilising’ SE Asia: US envoy

REUTERS, Bangkok

Russia’s backing for Myanmar’s military rulers is unacceptable and destabilising, with its supply of weapons helping to fuel a conflict that has become a catastrophe for the country, a top US official said on Thursday.

The United States is concerned about the wider impact of the escalating crisis in Myanmar since a coup in 2021 and advancement of the junta’s ties with Russia, which could seek to establish military bases in the country, US State

Department Counselor Derek Chollet told Reuters.

“Anyone who is talking to Moscow needs to tell them that their continued military support for the junta is unacceptable. It’s destabilising,” he said in an interview during his trip to Southeast Asia.

“And it’s not only a problem for Myanmar, it’s a problem for this region.” Myanmar has been in turmoil since the coup that ended a decade of tentative democracy, with about 1.2 million people displaced by fighting,

US AIR STRIKES

11 pro-Iran fighters killed in Syria

AFP, Beirut

Eleven pro-Iran fighters were killed in US air strikes on Syria carried out in retaliation for a drone attack that left an American dead and wounded six others, a war monitor said yesterday. A US contractor was killed, and another contractor and five US service personnel were wounded, when a kamikaze drone “of Iranian origin” struck a maintenance facility on a base of the US-led coalition near Hasakeh in northeastern Syria, the Pentagon said. In response, US Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin said Thursday that, at President Joe Biden’s direction, he had ordered “precision air strikes tonight in eastern Syria against facilities used by groups affiliated with Iran’s Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps”. “The air strikes were conducted in response to today’s attack as well as a series of recent attacks against coalition forces in Syria by groups affiliated with the IRGC,” Austin said. Iran-backed militias have a heavy presence across Syria, especially around the border with Iraq and south and west of the Euphrates in Deir Ezzor province, where the latest strikes took place.

N Korea tests new nuke-capable drone

AFP, Seoul

North Korea yesterday claimed it had tested an underwater nuclear attack drone able to unleash a “radioactive tsunami”, as it blamed recent US South Korea exercises for a deteriorating regional security situation. Pyongyang carried out military drills of its own in response this week, the official Korean Central News Agency said, including test-firing a new nuclear-capable underwater drone. The weapon’s mission is to “stealthily infiltrate into operational waters and make a super-scale radioactive tsunami ... to destroy naval striker groups and major operational ports of the enemy,” it said. The new weapon, called Haeil, “can be deployed at any coast and port or towed by a surface ship for operation,” the report said.

Two tonnes

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Controller said on March 21, an OMS truck went in front of the office of councillor Abdul Karim Babu with two tonnes of rice.

Saddam, the dealer, could not be reached.

His father Akter Hossain Babul told The Daily Star that though his son’s name is on the list of dealers, he is the one who oversees the business.

He further said the price of the rice was paid by the councillor who stored the rice at Adarsha Girls School and College.

Principal Mizanur Rahman said more than 50 sacks of rice were kept in those rooms last Tuesday.

Abdul Karim Babu refuted the allegation, saying that he distributed the rice among people from 10:00am to 12:30pm on March 21.

“I buy rice with my own money for those who cannot buy it,” he said.

Contacted, city corporation CEO Shahidul Islam, Food Controller Asma ul-Hosna, and Deputy Commissioner Monjurul Hafiz said action will be taken if the allegations are found to be true.

Webb telescope

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The telescope detected both larger and smaller silicate dust grains within these clouds.

Co-author Beth Biller, of the University of Edinburgh, said: “The finer silicate grains in its atmosphere may be more like tiny particles in smoke. The larger grains might be more like very hot, very small sand particles.”

The researchers found that the planet has low gravity compared to more massive brown dwarfs, which means its silicate clouds can appear and remain higher in its atmosphere where Webb can detect them.

5 more lives lost

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The dead is Ibrahim Hossain, 37, supervisor of the bus, said police.

The Kaliganj-bound bus started from Jashore. The driver lost control of the bus in Keyabagan Bus Stand area around 1:30pm, said Monjur Alam, officer-in-charge of Barobazar Highway Police Station.

[Our Cumilla, Jhenidah, and Pirojpur, correspondents contributed to this report.]

Eight involved

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improper handling of the USB drive that contained the exam question papers.

The bodies recommended action against the 41 officials, and that the officials not be included in future recruitment test committees.

Biman MD Zahid and Major Taiz, deputy general manager of security of Biman, were removed based on the probe reports, said sources in Biman.

When asked about the issue, Biman MD Shafiu Azim didn’t make any comment.

Requesting anonymity, a top Biman official said some officials involved in leaking question papers have been co-opted to the administrative work related to the examination.

Happy with outcome

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signed and votes were being cast at that time.

Momtaz: It never happened.

TDS: There is an allegation that no discussion was held on the appointment of a new election subcommittee convenor after the resignation of Munsurul.

Momtaz: The article 15/6 of the rules clearly states that the executive committee will decidethis.

TDS: If the convenor steps down, the most senior lawyer will be tasked with the duty. Isn’t that the case?

Momtaz: There is no rule that says the most senior person should be chosen. Any senior lawyer can take the role.

TDS: The seven-member committee was formed unanimously. Wasn’t it necessary to seek the pro-BNP lawyers’ opinion or to hold a discussion with them?

Momtaz: There was no need for a discussion. The executive committee takes decisions in such cases. We did everything as per the rules.

I believe journalism is like a mirror of the society. You should watch all video footage of this election.

TDS: So why did the police beat up the journalists?

Momtaz: When a scuffle broke out between lawyers on that day, at one stage I fell on the floor. I don’t know

‘We don’t even consider it an election’

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that he was “biased”. During discussion on vote counting, Munsurul proposed counting ballots using machine. We said that we have no objection to this. But Mumtaz Uddin stressed that ballots should be counted manually.

As Momtaz Uddin kept on behaving badly with Munsurul, the latter said, “This is a voluntary job. You cannot humiliate me. If you continue behaving like this, I will step down.”

Momtaz Uddin in reply said if he wanted to resign, he could.

Just a day before the polling, we came to know that Munsurul resigned.

TDS: Did the main problem start from there?

Mahbub: Let me clarify it. Had things happened as per rules, no complexities would have arisen. In such a situation, the decision should have been taken in a meeting of the 14-member executive committee as per rules. If the six-member committee was to continue discharging its responsibility, then the most senior person should have been made the convenor. But the chairman gave the responsibility to Muniruzzaman, who was the fifth among the six in terms of seniority.

As per rules, Muniruzzaman cannot be made the convenor. The decision was taken without holding any meeting of the executive committee and also without informing anyone. When we heard

whether the lawyers were beaten by the police. However, I saw the video footage of the journalists. If the police beaten up someone, legal action will be taken accordingly.

TDS: According to media reports, the election was held after the pro-BNP lawyers and journalists were beaten and driven out of the SCBA auditorium.

Momtaz: No such incident happened.

TDS: At what stage of the violence did you call in the police?

Momtaz: A letter was sent to the police beforehand. They came after hearing about the chaos.

TDS: As per the documents of the case filed with Shahbagh Police Station, police talked to the law minister, the attorney general and many others. Also, it is mentioned there that General Secretary Abdun Nur Dulal and you called the police and sought their cooperation.

Momtaz: I can’t comment on the documents without seeing those. Police already had the letter.

TDS: We are not talking about the previous letter. When the pro BNP lawyers were trying to prevent voting, police were called and it was you who called them.

Momtaz: I have to check the facts before making any comment.

TDS: Why do you think the police attacked the journalists?

about his appointment, we went there and found him signing ballots. We saw three-four others stamping ballots. They were casting votes on the night before the polling day like what happened in the last national election. We challenged Muniruzzaman and asked him on what authority he was signing the ballots; and why votes were being cast.

Munsurul’s name was printed on the ballots. But his name was being erased before those being stamped with the name of Muniruzzaman. After being challenged, all ballots were taken away. That very night, Muniruzzaman filed a case accusing me and several others.

TDS: Why were you trying obstruct from the start of the polling in the morning?

Mahbub: On the polling day, we again challenged discharging of duties by Muniruzzaman as the convenor. When an argument was going on, scuffles took place four-five times inside the auditorium.

All of a sudden, Momtaz Uddin rushed out and brought in cops. Police came, but they didn’t stay for long.

They again brought in police. This time several hundred cops entered the auditorium. They attacked the lawyers and beat them up, leaving many of them injured. Police attacked lawyers, both men and women. They even didn’t spare the journalists. Police took control of the entire area and the voting began around 1:00pm.

Momtaz: I didn’t see the attack when it took place.

TDS: But you saw the video.

Momtaz: I saw it later. Journalists informed me that police have beaten up Javed. It hurt me. I personally know NTV’s Javed. Initially, I couldn’t believe that they have beaten Javed. I met him the next day and came to know that it was not him but another person with the same name, who was assaulted.

TDS: It has been alleged that journalists were beaten up and driven away because they were witnessing and filming everything.

Momtaz: That may be true.

TDS: Are you satisfied after being elected SCBA president, considering the process of this year’s election?

Momtaz: Yes, I am satisfied. At least the election has taken place.

TDS: Media reports said when the pro-BNP lawyers went to meet the chief justice, he told them that he didn’t call the police.

Is there any rule that stipulates that the police cannot enter the Supreme Court premises without the chief justice’s permission?

Momtaz: When the security on the Supreme Court premises is breached, the police must step in. I don’t know whether the chief justice granted permission. I cannot comment on this.

TDS: Why did the police assault journalists?

Mahbub: Journalists were filming and taking photos of this illegal voting. They were beaten up and driven out of the SCBA premises to keep them from collecting any more information about the illegal election.

TDS: There are allegations that pro-BNP lawyers vandalised the marquee.

Mahbub: The general lawyers did this after being frustrated at so many irregularities in the election.

TDS: The election is over. What will you do now?

Mahbub: We don’t even consider it an election. We filed a case against the police action. We met the chief justice regarding the election. He told us that he would discuss the issue with the attorney general. He mentioned it clearly that he didn’t permit the police to enter the Supreme Court premises.

TDS: Who granted the permission?

Mahbub: Police filed a case in connection with the incidents of that day. In the case statement, they mentioned that they entered the electoral area on the Supreme Court premises following requests from Momtaz Uddin Fakir, Abdun Nur Dulal, Attorney General Abu Mohammad Amin Uddin and Law Minister Anisul Huq.

TDS: Can police do that?

Mahbub: They can’t. Only the chief justice can give such an order. Because he is the custodian of the Supreme Court.

Russian wanted by US ‘goes missing’ in Italy

AFP, Rome

The son of a senior Russian official arrested in Italy at Washington’s request disappeared the day after a court approved his extradition to the United States, media reports said yesterday.

Following his arrest at Milan Malpensa Airport on October 17, Artyom Uss was held at his residence near Milan but required to wear an electronic bracelet.

US authorities accuse Uss, the son of a Siberian governor, of having illegally sold US technologies to Russian arms companies.

On Tuesday, an Italian court agreed to his extradition to the United States — but the following day, he disappeared, media reports said.

According to La Repubblica newspaper, police checked on Uss early Wednesday but around lunchtime his electronic bracelet sounded the alarm, and he has not been seen since.

Build a society free

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In her message, Hasina said, “We have recognised March 25 as Genocide Day. We have sheltered more than 1.1 million displaced Rohingyas who escaped with their lives from genocide in neighbouring Myanmar. ...”

President Abdul Hamid also issued a message on this occasion.

“The observance of Genocide Day is a recognition of the great sacrifices made by three million Bangalees in the liberation struggle

of Bangladesh,” he said.

It is also a symbol of protest against the genocide committed by the then Pakistani aggressors, the president added.

Political parties have taken up programmes in observance of the day.

Bangladesh Betar and Bangladesh Television as well as private television channels and radio stations will air special programmes while national dailies will publish supplements marking the day.

BNP doubts EC’s intention

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Several senior BNP leaders told this correspondent that they are wondering why the commission suddenly sent the letter after the party rejected such invites several times in the past.

The commission is trying to improve its image, especially since there is pressure from the western countries over the national election.

A recently published US State Department report on human rights mentioned for the first time that the last national election in Bangladesh was neither free nor fair.

Thursday’s letter to the BNP came at a time when diplomats stationed in Dhaka held meetings with the Awami League and BNP about the election.

Several BNP policymakers said the commission sent the letter to appear sincere and impartial.

“It is a strategy of the ruling party and the Election Commission is implementing it,” said Amir Khasru Mahmud Chowdhury, a standing committee member of the party.

The BNP has no interest in talks with a commission that does not have the right to hold an election, he said. “It is a commission of the government. It acts on behalf of the government and does not serve the people’s interest.”

Other senior leaders said the ruling AL will be quick to criticise the BNP for turning down the invite and try to take advantage.

“How the [AL’s] strategy can be countered will be discussed at the party’s standing committee meeting on Monday. It is clear that they want to make the issue linger,” a senior leader said.

Thursday’s letter said even after the BNP repeatedly rejected the ECs invites for talks, a views-exchange meeting could be held over the 12th parliamentary election. “I invite you to the Election Commission. Dates can be discussed and fixed... Waiting to get a reply,” reads the letter.

The letter also said the BNP repeatedly expressed its decision not to participate in elections without a non-partisan government. The EC has no comment on the party’s political decisions and strategies.

Political analyst Hasanuzzaman said the wording in the letter is not appealing and may create a barrier to build confidence. “It seems that the commission wants to show that it is cordial.”

Prof Shantanu Majumder of political science at Dhaka University, however, said sending such letters was routine work for the EC, and there was nothing special in it.

“The Election Commission has a responsibility to bring all political parties to the election. Through this letter, the commission may have tried to brighten its image,” he said.

The BNP and eight opposition political parties skipped the talks organised in July last year regarding the next general election. They said they didn’t believe the commission would be able to hold a free, fair, and participatory election. The BNP and several other parties also skipped a previous round of talks organised to discuss the use of EVMs.

Besides, the BNP also did not join President Abdul Hamid’s initiative on formation of the Election Commission.