

Fighting intensifies in Sudan

UN agencies' warehouses looted, hindering relief work

AGENCIES

Shelling rocked greater Khartoum yesterday, as fighting between Sudan's warring generals intensified despite US sanctions imposed after the collapse of a US- and Saudi-brokered truce.

Witnesses reported artillery fire around the state television building in the capital's sister city of Omdurman, just across the Nile.

For nearly seven weeks, deadly fighting between the regular army and the paramilitary Rapid Support Forces has gripped Khartoum and the flashpoint western region of Darfur despite repeated efforts to broker a humanitarian ceasefire.

The army announced it had brought reinforcements to the capital from other parts of Sudan to participate in "operations in the Khartoum area".

Sudan analyst Kholood Khair said the army was "expected to launch a massive offensive" to clear the paramilitaries from the streets of Khartoum.

The UN's World Food Programme and its refugee agency UNHCR said continued looting was disrupting their efforts to help Sudanese, calling on all parties to respect humanitarian work.

The WFP said it had recorded losses of more than \$60 million since the fighting began. The UNHCR said two of its offices in Khartoum were pillaged and its warehouse in El Obeid was targeted on Thursday, reports Reuters.

Washington slapped sanctions on the warring parties Thursday, holding them both responsible for provoking "appalling" bloodshed.

Analysts question the efficacy of sanctions on Sudan's warring sides, both of which amassed considerable wealth during the rule of longtime dictator Omar al-Bashir, whose government was subjected to decades of international sanctions before his overthrow in 2019.

So far neither side has managed to gain a decisive advantage. The regular army has air power and heavy weaponry, but analysts say the paramilitaries are more mobile and better suited for urban warfare, reports AFP.



Police question a local journalist at Victoria Park in the Causeway Bay district of Hong Kong yesterday, the venue where Hong Kong people traditionally gather annually to mourn the victims of China's Tiananmen Square crackdown in 1989 which the authorities have banned and vowed to stamp out any protests on the anniversary.

PHOTO: AFP

CONFERENCE IN CAPE TOWN

BRICS ministers put on show of strength

Raise questions over potential Putin visit for Aug summit

REUTERS, Cape Town

BRICS foreign ministers on Thursday asserted their bloc's ambition to rival Western powers but their talks in South Africa were overshadowed by questions over whether Russia's president would be arrested if he attended a summit in August.

South Africa's foreign minister Naledi Pandor said her country was mulling options if Vladimir Putin, the subject of a war crimes arrest warrant issued by the International Criminal Court (ICC), came to the planned BRICS summit in Johannesburg.

As a member of the ICC, South Africa would theoretically be required to arrest Putin, and Pandor was bombarded with questions about that as she arrived for a first round of talks with representatives from Brazil, Russia, India and China.

"The answer is the president (Cyril Ramaphosa) will indicate what the final position of South Africa is. As matters stand an invitation has been issued to all (BRICS) heads of state," she said.

At a news conference later, the ministers



side-stepped a barrage of questions about the Putin issue.

The ICC accused Putin in March of the war crime of forcibly deporting children from Russian-occupied territory in Ukraine. Moscow denies the allegations. South Africa had invited Putin in January.

Putin has not confirmed his plans, with the Kremlin only saying Russia would take part at the "proper level".

The ministers sought to focus attention on their ambition to build up their influence in a multi-polar world.

India's Subrahmanyam Jaishankar spoke of the concentration of economic power

which he said "leaves too many nations at the mercy of too few", and of the need to reform global decision-making including by the United Nations Security Council.

"Old ways cannot address new situations. We are a symbol of change. We must act," he said.

Once viewed as a loose association of disparate emerging economies, BRICS has in recent years taken more concrete shape, driven initially by Beijing and, since the start of the Ukraine war in February 2022, with added impetus from Moscow.

The bloc launched a New Development Bank in 2015, though that has stopped funding projects in Russia to comply with sanctions imposed by Western countries following the invasion of Ukraine.

Pandor said a senior executive from the bank had briefed the ministers about "the potential use of alternative currencies to the current internationally traded currencies".

She said the aim was "to ensure that we do not become victim to sanctions that have secondary effects on countries that have no involvement in issues that have led to those unilateral sanctions".

WASHINGTON VISIT

Rahul takes a dig at Modi over China

REUTERS, Washington

Indian opposition leader Rahul Gandhi on Thursday criticised Prime Minister Narendra Modi's handling of relations with China, saying Beijing was "occupying our territory," while also taking a dig at the Hindu nationalist leader over the country's religious polarization. "The fact of the matter is China is occupying our territory. It's an accepted fact," Gandhi, who belongs to the opposition Congress party, said in remarks at The National Press Club in a visit to Washington. "It's absolutely unacceptable. Prime Minister seems to believe otherwise." India's embassy in Washington did not immediately respond to a request for comment. Gandhi's trip comes weeks ahead of Modi's scheduled US visit later this month. China and India have been uneasy neighbors for decades following a war on their disputed Himalayan frontier in the early 1960s. After deadly border clashes in 2020 that killed 20 Indian soldiers and four Chinese troops, China this year ramped up tension by renaming 11 locations in India's eastern state of Arunachal Pradesh, which China calls southern Tibet and claims as its territory.



Modi invited to address meeting of US Congress on June 22

REUTERS, Washington

US congressional leaders yesterday invited Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi to address a joint meeting of the House of Representatives and Senate on June 22, one of the highest honors Washington affords to foreign dignitaries. "During your address, you will have the opportunity to share your vision for India's future and speak to the global challenges our countries both face," House Speaker Kevin McCarthy, Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer, Senate Republican Leader Mitch McConnell, and House Democratic Leader Hakeem Jeffries said in a letter to Modi. The speech would be Modi's second to a joint meeting of the US legislature, a rare honor for a leader once denied a visa to enter the United States over human rights concerns. President Joe Biden is eager to deepen ties with the world's largest democracy as part of his bid to win what he has framed as a contest between free and autocratic societies, especially China. The White House announced last month that Modi was invited for an official state visit, despite advocacy groups' concerns over what they see as a deteriorating human rights situation under his Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party. The State Department's annual report on human rights practices released in March listed "significant human rights issues" and abuses in India.

No measures

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percent growth in remittance amid the Covid-19 pandemic.

The government had credited its measures with this growth. Experts, however, said the growth came as hundreds of thousands of returnee migrant workers sent their savings home after losing jobs abroad.

As inward remittance started to decrease, the government increased the cash incentive from two percent to 2.5 percent in January last year. This was also aimed at further encouraging remitters to use formal channels.

However, the country saw the remittance income decline by 15.12 percent in 2021-2022.

Bangladesh last year sent abroad about 11.35 lakh migrant workers, shows data of the Bureau of Manpower, Employment, and Training (BMET).

Of them, about 78.64 percent lacked skills, according to a report of the Refugee and Migratory Movements Research Unit.

In the first four months of this year, another 4.01 lakh Bangladeshi workers flew abroad for jobs, says BMET.

Syed Saiful Haque, chairman of Warbe Development Foundation, said a lack of skilled migrant workers and the migrant workers' preference of informal channels are depriving the country of a good amount of remittance.

He said apart from incentivising migrant workers to send money through formal channels, the government should monitor and track down those involved sending remittances through informal channels to ensure robust growth in remittance income.

"This will help the government address the foreign exchange reserve crisis," Saiful told this newspaper over the phone.

He also suggested improving the migrants' skills training programmes and making separate allocations for different ministries concerned to ensure their welfare.



People try to escape from toppled a compartment, following the deadly collision of two trains, in Balasore, India yesterday. This screen grab is obtained from a video.

PHOTO: REUTERS

At least 50 killed

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Rescue operations were underway at the site and "all possible assistance" is being given to those affected, Prime Minister Narendra Modi said in a tweet.

Rescue teams have been mobilised from Odisha's Bhubaneswar and

Kolkata in West Bengal, federal Minister for Railways Ashwini Vaishnav said in a tweet.

The National Disaster Response Force, state government teams and the air force had also mobilised to respond to the incident, he added.

No clear directions

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The chief of Bangladesh Garment Manufacturers and Exporters Association (BGMEA) said he was hopeful about the proposed budget.

He said he would be able to say more specifically on the budgetary measures after the proposed budget is passed by parliament on June 26.

Faruque said the government would be able to collect more tax from the apparel sector if the customs rules of the National Board of Revenue were more business friendly.

The BGMEA chief said the existing facilities for the sector should remain unchanged so that the RMG exporters can boost their exports during the crisis stemming from high inflation and Russia-Ukraine

war.

He demanded the government cut the tax at source on exports to 0.50 percent from 1.0 percent for the next five years.

Faruque also pressed the government for 10 percent cash incentive on exports of garment made from the non-cotton fibre so that businesses can grab more global market share.

He also demanded withdrawal of all kinds of taxes on solar panels, and recycled yarn and fabrics so that businesses can have more market share of these types of products.

The government should not impose 10 percent tax on receipts of cash incentives on export earnings, he observed.

Prospects for job creation gloomy

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opportunities across the country.

It has established the Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujib Shilpa Nagar Mirsharai, an upazila in Chattogram, with a plan to create employment for about 5 lakh people. But the process is still ongoing and investors are yet to start operation of their mills and factories there.

In his budget speech last year, the finance minister promised to launch initiatives for the growth of micro, cottage, small and medium enterprises for job creation, but many of such initiatives are struggling to stay afloat amid the ongoing economic volatility.

The Department of Employment has been created for the purpose of generating new employment and creating a central database on employment, education and training. Besides, the ongoing trend of providing skills development training through the Department of Youth Development will continue. This includes micro-credit-based self-employment programmes for the youth, said Kamal in his budget speech on Thursday.

Employment opportunities for 20 lakh people have been created in IT freelancing, the software and hardware industry, business processing outsourcing, e-commerce, ride-sharing, fintech, education technology, and internet services sectors. The number of these people will be increased to 30 lakh by 2025, he said.

The government has provided training to 6 lakh people in the past seven years under the Skills for Employment Investment Programme. Of them, 423,000 are employed in different areas, with 35 percent being women.

Sayama Haque Bidisha, a professor of the Department of Economics at the University of Dhaka, said although the government committed to implementing some programmes

on job creation last year, the plans have not come to fruition.

"For instance, many of the economic zones are yet to be developed," she said.

Still, the total number of unemployed people declined from 27 lakh in 2017 to 26.3 lakh in 2022, according to data from the Labour Force Survey conducted by the Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics. This brings the unemployment rate to 3.6 percent, says the survey.

According to the estimate of the International Labour Organisation, Bangladesh's unemployment rate was 5.2 percent in 2021.

Ahsan H Mansur, executive director of the Policy Research Institute, thinks the underemployment rate is about 25 percent as many people have lost jobs in the past couple of years owing to the economic crisis.

Achieving the targeted employment is quite challenging.

Md Saiful Islam
President of MCCCI

"The unemployment rate of the BBS may be right in its own standard."

He said employment is a result of investments but this year will be different for the employment sector owing to declining foreign direct investments, the fall in credit rating of Bangladesh, the persisting energy and power problem, and a higher bank borrowing by the government.

Mansur suggested retention of jobs in 2023-24.

Kamal has set a deficit financing target of Tk 261,785 crore for FY24. Of the amount, Tk 132,395 crore will come from the banking system.

"This might slow the flow of funds to the private sector," said Selim Raihan, executive director of the South Asian Network on Economic Modeling.

"Under such a situation, the

creation of new jobs is difficult," he added.

Md Saiful Islam, president of the Metropolitan Chamber of Commerce and Industry, thinks the creation of new jobs depends on private sector investment and the growth in export.

"Achieving the targeted employment is quite challenging," he said.

Rashed Al Mahmud Titumir, chairman of the Department of Development Studies at the University of Dhaka, said employment is not being generated at an expected level as investment is not taking place.

Rizwanul Islam, a former special adviser for the employment sector at the International Labour Office in Geneva, said the number of workers was supposed to increase in the manufacturing sector but their number is declining.

The number of workers in the agricultural sector is growing, he said, adding that the creation of decent jobs is a challenge.

More than 85 percent of the country's total workforce is engaged in the informal sector, meaning the country faces an uphill battle in ensuring a safe workplace for them and protecting their rights.

Faruque Hassan, president of the Bangladesh Garment Manufacturers and Exporters Association, said that amid the current export trend of garment items, retaining existing workers and generating new jobs is quite difficult.

BGMEA members account for 85 percent of the country's national exports.

In April, garment exports fell 15.4 percent year-on-year to \$3.32 billion. The shipment, however, rose 9 percent to \$38.57 billion in the July-April period of the current fiscal year.

Bangladesh's overall export receipts grew 5.38 percent to \$45.67 billion in the first 10 months of the outgoing fiscal year.