

\$25m frozen by tax dept ahead of polls

Says India's Congress

REUTERS, New Delhi

India's main opposition Congress party said yesterday its bank accounts with 2.1 billion rupees (\$25.3 million) in deposits had been frozen by the income tax department in connection with a dispute, months before national elections.

The party called the action "a deep assault on India's democracy", adding that an income tax tribunal had allowed the party to partially operate its accounts until February 21. Congress treasurer Ajay Maken told reporters the party had filed a complaint against the tax department after it told banks to freeze funds in its accounts. "We got information two days back that cheques being issued by us were not being honoured by banks... We don't have money to pay electricity bills, to pay salaries to our employees," Maken said.

Russians close in on Avdiivka

Outnumbered Ukrainian troops fight fierce battles

REUTERS, Kyiv

Outnumbered Ukrainian defenders were fighting fierce battles inside the small eastern city of Avdiivka yesterday, commanders said, as Russian forces closed in on the strategic location.

"The pressure is permanent," said Rodion Kudriashov, deputy commander of the elite Third Separate Assault Brigade, describing Russian assaults round the clock with some Ukrainian units forced to hold "a defence of 360 degrees".

Russia has been trying to encircle and capture Avdiivka since late last year and Kyiv's foothold in the town appears increasingly shaky, with supply lines threatened.

Capturing the city is key to Russia's aim of securing full control of the two provinces that make up the industrial Donbas region.



Palestinians mourn near the bodies of loved ones at al-Najar hospital following Israeli bombardment over Rafah in the southern Gaza Strip yesterday.

PHOTO: AFP

Putin's critics: dead, exiled

AFP, Paris

Russian opposition leader Alexei Navalny, who died yesterday at the Arctic prison colony where he was serving a 19-year term, is the latest critic to fall foul of President Vladimir Putin. Others have been killed, narrowly escaped death or been exiled. Here are Putin's best-known critics and where they are now:

DIES IN PRISON

Navalny, 47, Russia's most prominent opposition leader, was jailed in early 2021 after returning to Russia from Germany, where he was recuperating from a near-fatal poisoning attack with Novichok, a Soviet-era nerve agent.

He was sentenced to 19 years in prison on charges widely condemned by independent rights groups. Late in 2023 he was moved to a remote Arctic prison colony in Russia's Yamalo-Nenets region in northern Siberia, where he died on Friday after losing consciousness after going for a walk.

KILLED

In 2015 Boris Nemtsov, a Kremlin critic and a former deputy prime minister, was shot dead as he walked home across a Moscow bridge near the Kremlin. Five Chechen men were convicted of killing Nemtsov but the mastermind of the murder was never found.

Nemtsov's allies have pointed the finger at the Kremlin and at Chechen leader Ramzan Kadyrov, who has denied the accusation.

Nemtsov, a charismatic speaker, had criticised Putin's annexation of Crimea from Ukraine in 2014 and regularly taken part in opposition protests. He was 55 at the time of his death.



JAILED

Opposition politician Vladimir Kara-Murza, 42, was jailed for 25 years in April 2023, in the harshest sentence so far over comments critical of the Kremlin and the Ukraine offensive.

He was jailed on charges of treason, spreading "false" information about the Russian army and being affiliated with an "undesirable organisation". He suffers from

serious health problems which his lawyers say were due to two poisoning attempts in 2015 and 2017.

Opposition politician Ilya Yashin was jailed for eight and a half years in December 2022, for spreading "false" information about the Russian army, under legislation criminalising criticism of the Ukraine offensive. In July 2023 Lilia Chamsheva, Navalny's ally in the central Bashkortostan Republic, was handed seven and a half years in prison.

EXILED

Some of Putin's high-profile critics have been in exile for years. They include former oil tycoon Mikhail Khodorkovsky, who spent a decade in prison after challenging the Russian leader early in his rule. Khodorkovsky lives in London and has financed media projects critical of Kremlin.

'FOREIGN AGENTS'

The epithet, "foreign agent" which has Stalinist-era overtones, has been used by authorities to mount administrative pressure on critics. Many journalists and Russia's main independent media outlets have been branded "foreign agents", making it much harder to operate.

Among those given the title are exiled former prime minister Mikhail Kasyanov, the chief editor of Novaya Gazeta, Dmitry Muratov and Oleg Orlov.

BY-ELECTIONS

UK Conservatives suffer double polls defeat to Labour

AFP, Wellingborough

Britain's ruling Conservatives lost two more parliamentary seats to Labour in by-elections yesterday, highlighting the mountain Prime Minister Rishi Sunak must climb to win a general election due this year. The losses capped a dire week for the UK leader, struggling to revive support for his beleaguered party, as official data showed Britain is in recession after economic contraction for two successive quarters. In power since 2010, the Conservatives are widely tipped by pollsters to lose the nationwide vote that 43-year-old Sunak has said will be held in the second half of the year. The main Labour opposition secured its second largest by-election swing away from the Conservatives in one of Thursday's contests, held after a Tory MP quit and another faced a recall petition over bullying his staff. "People want change and are ready to put their faith in a changed Labour Party to deliver it," said its leader Keir Starmer as he hailed the "fantastic results". Sunak said the circumstances surrounding the by-elections were "particularly challenging".

CRITICAL REPORTING

Leaving India after expulsion threat

Says French journo

AFP, New Delhi

A French journalist said yesterday she was leaving India, where she had worked for more than two decades, after authorities threatened her expulsion for what they termed "malicious and critical" reporting. Critics say that media freedom in the world's biggest democracy is increasingly under attack, with journalists who touch on sensitive topics often subjected to government rebuke. Vanessa Dognac, a contributor to several French-language publications including the weekly magazine Le Point, had worked in India for 23 years. The home ministry sent her a notice last month saying that her work was "inimical" to national interests and said it had provisionally decided to cancel her permanent residency. "Leaving is not my choice," Dognac said in a statement announcing her departure. "I am unable to work and have been unfairly accused of prejudicing the interests of the state. It has become clear that I cannot keep living in India." Dognac reported on a number of flashpoint topics. The home ministry notice accused her of journalism that was "critical in manner" that created a "biased perception about India".

Alarm over fate of Gaza

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hospital complex.

Yesterday, it said Israeli forces had taken into custody more than "20 terrorists" suspected of involvement in the October 7 attack at the hospital.

A witness who declined to be named out of fear for their safety told AFP the army had shot "at anyone who moved inside the hospital". The health ministry also raised fears over the fate of six other patients in the intensive care unit and three children.

Medical charity Doctors Without Borders described a "chaotic situation" at the hospital, with one employee

unaccounted for and another detained by Israeli forces.

At least 28,775 Palestinians have been killed, including 112 in 24 hours, and 68,552 wounded in Israeli strikes on Gaza since October 7, according to the health ministry in Gaza yesterday.

Meanwhile, Egypt is preparing an area at the Gaza border which could accommodate Palestinians in case an Israeli offensive into Rafah prompts an exodus across the frontier, four sources said, in what they described as a "contingency" move by Cairo, reports Reuters.

US President Joe Biden on Thursday again told Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu that Israel should not proceed with the Rafah operation without a plan to ensure the safety of the people sheltering there.

US secretary of state and foreign ministers from UK, Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Qatar and Jordan were scheduled to join Israel at security conference in Germany's Munich later yesterday.

Western leaders are hoping a round of meetings at the security conference will put overwhelming pressure on Israel not to press ahead with a ground offensive in Rafah.

Jailed Russian opposition leader

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said. Attempts to resuscitate him failed, it said.

The Kremlin said Putin, who was visiting factories in the Ural mountains, had been informed.

Navalny's wife, Yulia, said she could not be sure her husband was dead because "Putin and his government... lie incessantly".

But if her husband were indeed dead, she said, speaking at the Munich Security Conference, Putin and his entourage "will be punished for what they have done to our country, for what they have done to my family, for what they have done to my husband".

"His death in a Russian prison and the fixation and fear of one man only

underscores the weakness and rot at the heart of the system that Putin has built. Russia is responsible for this," US Secretary of State Antony Blinken said shortly before meeting Navalny's wife in Munich.

Navalny's team, who have fled abroad, said it had no confirmation of his death but cast the prison service's statement as a murder confession.

13 hurt as BCL factions clash again at CU

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Medical College Hospital for better treatment," said Abu Tayab, chief medical officer of the CU medical centre.

Contacted, Saidul Islam, a leader of Sixty-Nine, said, "An activist of CFC insulted a senior member of our group without any reason. However,

we are trying to resolve the issue."

CFC group leader Sadaf Kabir Khan told reporters that a member of his group was attacked by Sixty-Nine members. "Later our members chased them," he added.

Contacted, CU Proctor Nurul Azim Sikder said the university authority will take action against the attackers.

To bring the situation under control, additional police forces have been deployed on campus, he added.

Earlier on Thursday night, these two groups engaged in a clash over sitting at a tea shop on campus. At least nine people were injured in the clash, said police.

Cold wave kills 281 on average every winter

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news of four national daily newspapers from 2000 to 2019 and crosschecked it with other related reports.

The six researchers -- four from Dhaka University's Institute of Disaster Management and Vulnerability Studies, and two from Faculty of Medicine and Health Sciences, University of Oviedo, Spain -- analysed the data to obtain the spatiotemporal trends and characteristics of cold wave mortality in Bangladesh.

"Our initial target was to do mortality mapping. We found that cold wave duration and frequency was increasing over the 20-year study period," Md Khalid Hasan, associate professor at Institute of Disaster Management and Vulnerability Studies, told The Daily Star yesterday.

He also said a total of 5,610 people died due to the cold wave during the study period. In terms of mortality, Rangpur division remains at the top, followed by Rajshahi.

Experts said it was tough to say how many people died due to cold-

related ailments as autopsies were not done.

"From my experience, I can say that pollution is one of the key causes for such deaths as asthma patients and the elderly become vulnerable in winter," Prof Abul Bashar Mohammad Khurshid Alam, director general of Directorate General of Health Services, said yesterday.

He also said air pollution must be curbed to reduce cold-related deaths.

Pollution caused over 2.15 lakh premature deaths in Bangladesh in 2019, according to a study published in the medical journal The Lancet in 2022.

It found that poor air quality was the main contributor to such deaths, while water and lead pollution and occupational hazards were the other causes.

The study found that more children and adult males died due to cold waves than adult females in Bangladesh.

"We did not differentiate male and female when it came to children," said Khalid, the lead researcher of the

study.

Mentioning that the northern and northwestern districts in Bangladesh were more vulnerable to cold waves, the study found that about 58 percent of cold wave spells and 58.5 percent of cold wave mortality occurred in January, followed by 22 percent in December.

The highest district-wise mortality rate was found in Kurigram -- 163.63 deaths per million people per year.

Khalid said the study findings would serve as a foundation for future research and policy development to establish cold wave management guidelines and reduce the risk of cold wave exposure among vulnerable people.

Renowned medicine specialist Professor Ahmedul Kabir said environmental pollution must be curbed to reduce cold wave induced deaths.

He stressed on finding more accurate information on cold-related deaths, which would help the government formulate policy in this regard.

Imran Khan's PTI to sit in opposition

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candidates had won, but the results were changed in the Form-47s.

He said the party was making contact with political parties on Khan's orders, and that is why a delegation led by Asad Qaiser visited the QWP secretariat.

Saif said that the 2024 polls, which he said were "rigged", created political unrest in the country and resulted in wide-scale complaints from the political parties, and those "who had the right" and who had got the votes of the people.

"People's votes were tampered with," he asserted.

Saif said that some people would be cheering that they got to form the government, but this celebration would be short-lived.

"If we see this in the long term, this is a huge problem for the nation, the country, and the parliamentary democracy in Pakistan because the

coming generations have to bear the brunt of such incidents," the lawyer-turned-politician said while referring to the alleged rigging in polls.

He said that PTI wants "harmony and an environment of reconciliation" in the country.

Sharing the details about the meeting with QWP, Saif said that PTI requested the party leaders to join on the agenda to protest the alleged polls-rigging.

At this, QWP leader Sikandar Sherpao told PTI that they would announce their course of action after sharing PTI's proposal with the party's committee.

Pakistan staged the biggest election of its history on February 8, which was extraordinary in various aspects. However, the outcome of the polls did not turn out to be as expected by the political actors, as none of them got a simple majority. While the PTI-affiliated

independent candidates dominated the election results, Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N) claimed to have enough numbers to form the government as some independents joined the Nawaz Sharif-led party post-polls.

Ancient viruses

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all of the diversity of modern vertebrates that we know of, and the size they've achieved: elephants, giraffes, anacondas, bullfrogs, condors wouldn't have happened," senior author and neuroscientist Robin Franklin of Altos Labs Cambridge Institute of Science told AFP.

Brad Zuchero, a neuroscientist at Stanford University not affiliated with the research, said it "fill(s) in a major piece of the puzzle about how myelin came to be during evolution," calling the paper "exciting and insightful."