

INTERNATIONAL

SPY CHARGES

Russia starts trial for WSJ reporter

REUTERS, Yekaterinburg

A shaven-headed Evan Gershkovich went on trial behind closed doors yesterday in a Russian court where the US journalist is facing accusations of espionage.

Prosecutors say the Wall Street Journal (WSJ) reporter gathered secret information on the orders of the US Central Intelligence Agency about a company that manufactures tanks for Russia's war in Ukraine. If convicted, he faces a sentence of up to 20 years.

Gershkovich, his newspaper and the US government all reject the allegations and say that he was just doing his job as a reporter accredited by Russia's Foreign Ministry to work there.

"His case is not about evidence, procedural norms, or the rule of law. It is about the Kremlin using American citizens to achieve its political objectives," the US embassy in Moscow said in a statement, calling for Gershkovich's immediate release.

PROTESTS IN KENYA

President backs down on tax rises

REUTERS, Nairobi

Kenya's president yesterday withdrew planned tax rises, bowing to pressure from protesters who had stormed parliament, launched demonstrations across the country and threatened more action this week.

William Ruto said he would not sign a finance bill including the hikes a day after violent clashes between police and protesters at the assembly and nationwide left at least 23 people dead and scores wounded, according to medics.

"Listening keenly to the people of Kenya who have said loudly that they want nothing to do with this finance bill 2024, I concede. And therefore, I will not sign the 2024 finance bill, and it shall subsequently be withdrawn," he said in a televised address.

New finalists

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maiden wins in T20Is against both sides -- from the competition this time to reach their first-ever semifinal in an ICC event. The Afghans thrashed the Black Caps by 84 runs in the group-stage and then blew the Super Eight Group 2 wide open with a stunning win over Australia.

An inspired all-round display from Rashid sealed a thrilling win over Bangladesh in Antigua on Tuesday and cemented Afghanistan's spot in the semifinals.

"I think the semifinal is going to be a massive, massive inspiration for the youngsters back home in Afghanistan," said skipper Rashid. "It's an unbelievable feeling. We are capable -- but as long we keep the things very simple."

In the second semifinal, India, who have also won all their matches barring a washout against Ireland, look the part to lift the trophy owing to a formidable run much like their lead-up to the 2023 ODI World Cup final but will take on defending champions England who knocked the Men in Blue out of the semis in the 2022 edition of the tournament.

The two teams have had contrasting pathways to the final four as while India cruised, England laboured through the group stage battling fears of early elimination and finally hit top gear in the Super Eight when they thrashed West Indies. But they were dealt a blow in a narrow defeat at the hands of South Africa.

With Australia out of the picture, if India had to choose between South Africa or England, they probably would've wanted to face Jos Buttler's side who have so far blown hot and cold.

Delhi for early

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"Discussed our deep concern at the impact of continuing violence and instability in Myanmar on our border. India is open to engaging all stakeholders in addressing this situation," Jaishankar wrote on X.

He also said he called for an early return to the path of democratic transition in Myanmar, days after the Indian ambassador to Myanmar met the chief of the junta administration's election commission this week.

A junta spokesman did not respond to calls from Reuters seeking comment.



Palestinian children gather to receive food cooked by a charity kitchen, amid food scarcity, in Khan Younis in the southern Gaza Strip yesterday.

PHOTO: REUTERS

'There are no safe centimetres left in Gaza'

UN aid worker narrates trauma of desperate civilians

AFP, Geneva

A UN humanitarian worker described the suffering she witnessed first-hand in Gaza, where she saw children mutilated and families bombed out of their homes, in an emotional testimony Tuesday.

Speaking to journalists in Geneva following a three-month stint in the territory, Yasmina Guerda of the UN humanitarian agency OCHA described the desperation from the viewpoint of civilians under the Israeli military's assault.

"You have 10-15 minutes to evacuate your building because it's going to be bombed. Your little kids are sleeping... You wake them up," she said. "You take one last look at your room and say a permanent goodbye, because you know it will be dust."

As horrifying as that sounds, she stressed that this is the "best-case scenario", since many others are not warned before an attack.

Guerda met people whose homes were destroyed by Israel's operation in the Nuseirat

refugee camp to secure the release of four hostages earlier this month. Gaza's health ministry said at least 274 Palestinians were killed during the operation.

The next day at a hospital, Guerda met children who lost limbs in the attack. "Many of whom reminded me of my own two little toddlers. They were staring into the void, too shell shocked to produce a sound or a tear," she said.

For Guerda, there are no "living conditions" there. "What they have... are survival conditions, and barely. They are holding on by a thread."

She said aid workers were trying to "quantify the suffering with figures", looking at the total number of displaced people, the litres of water they get per day, or the truckloads of aid that make it across the border.

"But it doesn't matter," she said. "Those numbers, they're never near enough... (for) a population that has lost nearly everything." The fighting has displaced much of Gaza's 2.4 million population. "There are no safe centimetres left in Gaza," Guerda added.

Heavy rains in Nepal kill 20 amid landslides

REUTERS, Kathmandu

Heavy rainfall triggered landslides and flash floods in Nepal, killing at least 11 people, with another nine killed by lightning strikes over the past two days, officials said yesterday.

Landslides swept away three houses overnight in Lamjung district, about 125 km (80 miles) west of Kathmandu, killing four people including two children, district administrator Buddha Bahadur Gurung said.

In Morang district about 500 km southeast of the Nepali capital, flooding has taken the lives of four people since Tuesday, district official Tek Kumar Regmi said.

US seeks deeper ties with Maldives

Blinken tells his Maldivian counterpart

REUTERS, Washington

US Secretary of State Antony Blinken met with his counterpart from the Maldives on Tuesday and said Washington sought a deeper partnership with the Indian Ocean island state and stood with it in ensuring a free and open Indo-Pacific region and in dealing with climate change.

Maldives Foreign Minister Moosa Zameer's Washington visit comes two months after the party of President Mohamed Muizzu won a landslide in elections. Muizzu has pivoted ties towards China and away from India, a key US regional partner in standing up to China in the Indo-Pacific.

The US opened an embassy in Male in 2023 to boost engagement with the low-lying archipelago of about half a million people in the face of China's efforts to spread its regional influence.

After the April election, Washington said ties were being strengthened in areas including economic development, education, security cooperation, and climate crisis response.

"For us, the Maldives is an important partner, and we want to make sure that we're a good partner to the Maldives," Blinken told Zameer. "We stand together in working to make sure that we have a free and open Indo-Pacific region," he said.

Trump policies will fuel inflation

Say 16 Nobel Prize-winning economists

REUTERS



Sixteen Nobel prize-winning economists signed a letter on Tuesday warning that the US and world economy will suffer if Republican presidential candidate Donald Trump wins the US presidential election in November.

The jointly signed letter says the economic agenda of US President Joe Biden, a Democrat, is "vastly superior" to Trump's, the former Republican president seeking a second term. The economists say Trump's economic plans would reignite inflation, in part because of his pledge to impose stiffer tariffs on Chinese imports, which they say will hike prices on many goods bought by US consumers.

"While each of us has different views on the particulars of various economic policies, we all agree that Joe Biden's economic agenda is vastly superior to Donald Trump," the economists state in their letter.

Assange back home

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husband would one day be pardoned.

Australia Prime Minister Anthony Albanese, who has lobbied for years to free Assange, said he had spoken to him by phone after his plane landed.

Assange's arrival ends a saga in which he spent more than five years in a British high security jail and seven years in asylum at the Ecuadorian embassy in London battling extradition to Sweden on sexual assault allegations and to the US, where he faced 18 criminal charges.

Those charges stemmed from WikiLeaks' release in 2010 of hundreds of thousands of classified US military documents on Washington's wars in Afghanistan and Iraq - one of the largest breaches of secret information in US history.

During a three-hour hearing held earlier in the US territory of Saipan, Assange pleaded guilty to

one criminal count of conspiring to obtain and disclose classified national defence documents but said he had believed the US Constitution's First Amendment, which protects free speech, shielded his activities.

"Working as a journalist I encouraged my source to provide information that was said to be classified in order to publish that information," he told the court.

"I believed the First Amendment protected that activity but I accept that it was... a violation of the espionage statute."

Chief US District Judge Ramona V Manglona accepted his guilty plea, noting that the US government indicated there was no personal victim from Assange's actions.

She wished Assange, who turns 53 on July 3, an early happy birthday as she released him due to time already served in a British jail.

While the US government viewed

Assange as reckless for putting its agents at risk of harm by publishing their names, his supporters hailed him as a hero for promoting free speech and exposing war crimes.

Assange's British and Australian lawyer Jennifer Robinson thanked the Australian government for securing Assange's release. His father, John Shipton, told Reuters he was relieved.

Assange had agreed to plead guilty to a single criminal count, according to filings in the US District Court for the Northern Mariana Islands.

The US territory in the western Pacific was chosen due to his opposition to travelling to the mainland US and for its proximity to Australia, prosecutors said.

Politicians in Australia who had campaigned for his release raised concern about the guilty plea on US soil, saying he was a journalist who had been convicted for doing his job.

Rahul Gandhi vows MPs

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for his right-wing Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), allowing his government to drive laws through parliament with only cursory debate.

"We would like the house to function often and well. It is very important that the voice of the opposition is allowed to be represented in this house," Rahul told veteran BJP lawmaker Om Birla, the Speaker in

the previous parliament, who was reelected yesterday to the post.

Modi and Rahul exchanged a polite handshake following the election of Birla as the Lok Sabha Speaker.

The two leaders, along with Union minister Kiren Rijiju, accompanied Birla to the Speaker's chair after a motion moved by Prime Minister was adopted through voice votes, reports TNN.

Legal issues delaying

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Responding to a question from independent MP Md Abdullah, the premier said the government has primarily decided to adopt a policy to recycle e-waste.

"The data collection process [in this regard] is going on and [the policy] will be finalised after taking opinions from the stakeholders."

Plants will be built for recycling e-waste, she added.

Replying to a question from AL

MP Ali Azam from Bhola-2, Hasina said that 33,50,274 specially abled people have been identified and given registration and identity cards (Golden Citizen Card). Among them, 13,12,594 are women.

Responding to another query from Farida Yasmin, the PM said that Tk45.23 crore from the Journalist Welfare Trust has been distributed among 13,582 journalists and journalist families as welfare grants and financial assistance during the Covid-19 pandemic.

A moronic end to a daring jailbreak

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Speaking to The Daily Star, an officer involved in the search and arrest, said the four managed to make a hole in the ceiling using only a small screwdriver and an iron-sheet scrap for 20 days.

During this time, they did not allow any cleaners into their cell, he said, adding that police found the screwdriver and the iron scrap hidden about their person.

About how they may have gotten the tools, Additional Inspector General (Prisons) Col Sheikh Sujaur Rahman, who visited Bogura Jail yesterday, said, "We're currently investigating all the jail personnel and officers here to know if they had any role to play. Once the probe is complete, appropriate actions will be taken."

Bogura SP Sudip Kumar Chakraborty yesterday told reporters that the four inmates managed to escape at 3:05am. "The jail authorities informed us at 3:56am."

"After getting the information, all police outposts and patrol teams were put on high alert, and police managed to find and arrest them from the Chashi Bazar area around 4:30am."



Sub-inspector Khorshed Alam, who led the search, said, "They were planning to cross the Korotoa river through Chelopara bridge."

However, before police could reach the spot, the four convicts were initially apprehended by a group of young men.

Describing the incident, Parimal Chandra Das, councillor of Bogura

Municipality Ward-6, told The Daily Star, "Around 3:50am, a group of boys were sitting on the rail tracks near Chashi Bazar, as there was no electricity in their homes and it was very hot last night. Suddenly, they noticed a pack of dogs surrounding four individuals. The boys - Saeed, Rabbi, Kabya, Dukhu, Nayan, Tinku and Bappi - suspected that the four

men were criminals and apprehended them then and there. They then called SI Khorshed Alam and informed him."

Police sources said Nazrul Islam and Amir Hamza were sentenced to death on February 16, 2021. Farid Sheikh received the death penalty on July 10, 2023, and Zakaria, son of Kahaloo upazila mayor and upazila BNP's acting president Abdul Mannan, was sentenced to death on January 15, 2017.

Combined, the four had five murder cases and seven other cases on various charges against them, filed at different times in separate districts. They were also brought to Bogura jail at different times, but sent to the condemned cell together on June 1.

Bogura Deputy Commissioner Saiful Islam told The Daily Star that a six-member probe committee, led by the additional district magistrate, has been formed. He also requested the jail authorities to place six more security posts in front of and behind the jail building.

About the jail's vulnerable security system, Additional IG Col Sujaur told this correspondent, "The jail was built in 1833. The security came

into question only today [yesterday] after the incident. We will check the system."

Speaking to The Daily Star, Inspector (Investigation) Shahinuzzaman Shaheen, of Bogura Sadar Police Station, said a case was filed yesterday afternoon against the four for escaping.

Bogura Sadar Outpost Inspector Sujau Mia, the investigating officer of the case, told this correspondent that the four were produced before a court and then sent back to jail. "We're thinking about whether they can legally be remanded as they are already death row convicts."

Meanwhile, Bogura jail authorities last night took action against eight prison guards who were on duty during the incident.

Speaking to The Daily Star, Jail Super Anwar Hossain said, "Three prison guards were dismissed while a departmental case was recommended against three others and a show-cause notice was issued to the other two. Further measures will be taken according to the recommendations from higher authorities."

He, however, did not name the guards.