

More staff detained by Houthi rebels in Yemen: UN

AFP, Sanaa

Yemen's Houthi rebels have detained another group of UN personnel, a UN statement said yesterday, after 13 staff were held last June.

"Yesterday, the de facto authorities in Sanaa detained additional UN personnel working in areas under their control," the office of the resident United Nations coordinator for Yemen said.

It did not say how many were held in the latest swoop by the Iran-backed Houthis, who have detained dozens of staff from UN and other humanitarian organisations, most since the middle of last year.

Yemen is one of the world's worst humanitarian crises where more than 18 million people need assistance and protection, according to the United Nations.

The UN has now suspended "all official movements into and within" areas held by Houthis, the statement said.



Firefighters from the Growlersburg crew hike up the mountain to create a containment fire line to control the Hughes Fire in Castaic, a northwestern neighbourhood of Los Angeles County, California, US on Thursday. The newly emerged Hughes Fire continued to grow overnight, consuming 10,000 acres, but its rate of growth slowed considerably after an explosive first few hours.

PHOTO: AFP

WHO chief to cut costs, reset priorities after US exit

REUTERS, Geneva

The World Health Organization (WHO) will cut costs and review which health programmes to prioritise after President Donald Trump announced he was withdrawing the US from the WHO, the agency's chief told staff in an internal memo seen by Reuters.

Trump made the move on the first day of his second term in office, accusing the UN health agency of mishandling the Covid-19 pandemic.

"This announcement has made our financial situation more acute..." WHO Director-General Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus said in the memo dated January 23. It said the WHO planned to significantly reduce travel expenditure and halt recruitment, except for critical areas, as part of cost-saving measures.

Kyiv receives bodies of 757 killed Ukrainian troops

AFP, Kyiv

Kyiv said yesterday it had received the bodies of hundreds of Ukrainian troops killed in battle with Russian forces, in one of the largest repatriations since Russia invaded.

The exchange of prisoners and return of their remains is one of the few areas of cooperation between Moscow and Kyiv since the Kremlin mobilised its army in Ukraine in February 2022.

The repatriation announced by the Coordination Headquarters for the Treatment of Prisoners of War, a Ukrainian state agency, is the largest in months and underscores the high cost and intensity of fighting ahead of the war's three-year anniversary.

"The bodies of 757 fallen defenders were returned to Ukraine," the Coordination Headquarters said in a post on social media.

Meanwhile, the Kremlin said yesterday it wanted to resume nuclear disarmament talks with US President Donald Trump's

administration "as soon as possible", after tensions over the Ukraine conflict left negotiations at an impasse.

Moscow pulled out of the last remaining arms control agreement with Washington, called "New START", in 2023 amid a sharp deterioration in relations between the two countries.

Ukrainian drones strike Russian oil site, electronics plant in the Ryazan region

Both have indicated they will unilaterally adhere to the warhead limits outlined in the treaty until 2026, but they are yet to agree on a replacement and talks have stalled for months.

"We are interested in starting this

negotiation process as soon as possible," Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said.

"The ball is in the Americans' court, who have stopped all substantive contacts."

In the war zone, the Ukrainian military confirmed yesterday that Kyiv had launched an overnight drone attack on Russia, claiming to have struck an oil refinery, power station facilities and an electronics plant.

Moscow had earlier said that its air defence systems shot down 121 Ukrainian drones over 12 regions and the occupied Crimean Peninsula.

The Ukrainian General Staff said Ukrainian drones had struck "one of the largest oil refineries in Russia" in the Ryazan region south of Moscow and facilities at a thermal power plant in the same region.

It said in the same statement on social media that the damaged microelectronics plant was located in the western Bryansk region bordering Ukraine.

Asylum 'universally recognised' right

Says UN after Trump halts arrivals

AFP, Geneva

The United Nations stressed yesterday that seeking asylum is a "universally recognised" human right, following decisions by President Donald Trump to suspend all refugee admissions and halt the US asylum programme.

"All states are entitled to exercise their jurisdiction along their international borders (but) they need to do so in line with their human rights obligations," UN rights office spokeswoman Ravina Shamdasani told reporters in Geneva when asked about the decisions.

"The right to seek asylum is a universally recognised human right."

Her comment came after Trump, on his first day back in office on Monday, declared a national emergency at the US southern border and vowed to deport "millions and millions" of migrants.

The White House has also halted an asylum programme for people fleeing authoritarian regimes in Central and South America, leaving thousands of people stranded on the Mexican side of the border.

In addition, Trump signed an executive order suspending all refugee admissions as of January 27. That move also halted "all previously scheduled travel of refugees to the United States", according to a State Department email to groups working with new arrivals, seen by AFP.

Taliban reject ICC move to arrest top officials

AFP, Kabul

Afghanistan's Taliban government said yesterday an arrest warrant sought by the International Criminal Court (ICC) for its leaders was "politically motivated".

It comes a day after the ICC chief prosecutor said he was seeking warrants against senior Taliban leaders in Afghanistan over the persecution of women — a crime against humanity.

"Like many other decisions of the (ICC), it is devoid of a fair legal basis, is a matter of double standards and is politically motivated," said a statement from the Foreign Ministry posted on social media platform X.

"It is regrettable that this institution has turned a blind eye to war crimes and crimes against humanity committed by foreign forces and their domestic allies during the twenty-year occupation of Afghanistan."

It said the court should "not attempt to impose a particular interpretation of human rights on the entire world and ignore the religious and national values of people of the rest of the world".

Bahar: the patron of Cumilla's goons

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involved in the murder of Sharif, a JaSoD-Chhatra League leader from Dishaband village, in late 1973, said leaders of the Jatiya Samajtantrik Dal (JaSoD). Sharif was among three people killed in a firing on a procession at Rajaganj Sonali Bank Mor.

Delwar Hossain, a former organising secretary of Cumilla District BCL, was murdered on November 26, 2018. Police have submitted the charge sheet against ward 26 Councillor Abdus Sattar, a vice-president of Swechhasebak League's Cumilla City Unit and follower of Bahar.

Another follower of Bahar, ward-27 Councillor and president of the AL's ward unit, Abul Hasan, was made prime accused in a case over the murder of local AL leader Zillur Rahman Chowdhury on Nov 11, 2020.

Both councillors Abdus Sattar and Abul Hasan reportedly run smuggling syndicates along the border with India. The fortunes they made from illegal businesses thrust them into top posts in the AL despite having any past affiliation with the party.

Before Zillur's murder, a local businessman named Akter Hossain was killed in an attack on July 10, 2020 allegedly by ward-23 Councillor Alamgir Hossain, then joint convener of Cumilla City Jubo League who was close to Bahar. Alamgir was able to monopolise the land business at Kotbaria since he was blessed by Bahar, locals said.

On November 22, 2021, Councillor Syed Mohammad Sohel and Awami League activist Haripada Saha were shot dead in broad daylight. Three of the accused — Shah Alam, Sabbir Hossain and Sajon — were supporters of Saiful Alam Rony, husband of Bahaduddin Bahar's daughter Tahsin Bahar Suchona. The three accused were killed in so-called gunfights with police later.

The latest victim of violence by Bahar's followers is Jamil Hasan Arnab, a staffer at the Satata

Paribahan counter in Cumilla's Shashongachha bus stand. He was on his way to the counter when a bullet snatched his life during clashes between rival groups over control of the stand on March 15, 2024. Both groups were reportedly backed by Bahar.

INTOLERANT

To establish his sole authority over extortion, land-grabbing, illicit drug trade and tender manipulation, Bahar took control of the Awami League and its affiliated bodies by appointing his relatives and followers to the top posts and making it difficult for his rivals in the party to carry out political activities.

His followers in the party controlled the 27 wards under the city corporation and six unions of Adarsha Sadar upazila.

In 2022, Bahar was elected as president of Cumilla City Awami League. Arfanul Haque Rifat, a Bahar loyalist, was elected general secretary, and daughter Suchona organising secretary of the committee. Bahar also filled the other posts with his followers.

Suchona was nominated by the Awami League as its candidate for Cumilla City Corporation mayor's post in 2024. Suchona won the election, but the other candidates alleged widespread voter intimidation. Bahar's armed cadres were seen patrolling areas surrounding the polling stations.

Nur Ur Rahman Mahmud Tanim, an Awami League leader and former vice-president of Cumilla Victoria College Students' Union, said, "MP Bahar did not give any chance to his rivals in the committees or elections because he could not tolerate any dissent."

TENDER EXTORTION

Contractors in Cumilla alleged they had to pay commissions to Bahar after winning tender bids.

Local Awami League leader Masudur Islam, who is loyal to Afzal Khan's daughter and former reserved seat MP Anzum Sultana Sheema, was injured in an attack after attempting to submit his tender bid at the Education Engineering

Department on April 1, 2024.

The attackers were allegedly led by Bahar's followers Jahirul Islam Rintu and Sadekur Raham Pias, president and general secretary of Cumilla Swechhasebak League, respectively.

Masudur, who was bedridden for months after the attack, said, "They broke my hands and legs for not giving a 10 percent commission."

GRABBING PROPERTIES, BUSINESSES

Bahar and his people occupied different public and private properties in Cumilla city allegedly by using muscle power or unjust contracts. They were reportedly involved in illegal sand extraction from the Gomti river.

He constructed a four-storey market on Town Hall's land under a 30-year contract. As the lessee, Bahar has been paying only Tk 2 lakh per year.

A trader of the Town Hall Super Market, requesting not to be named, said, "The actual rent of the market should be several crore taka a year. The commercial value of the property has been neglected in this contract."

Recently, the district administration took control of the Town Hall market and asked the traders to deposit rent to the Town Hall's account.

Bahar also tried to demolish the old Town Hall building and construct a high-rise there.

His political rival late Afzal Khan's daughter Sheema alleged that Bahar illegally occupied Cumilla Modern High School and Bangabandhu Law College established by Afzal.

"He [Bahar] did it only over political rivalry. He abused his power," Sheema said.

Former Jatiya party MP Ansar Ahmed and former schoolteacher Monindra Babu were allegedly forced to give up their land for Bahar's 12-storey market in Monohorpur.

Another landowner, Rashedul Rusel, alleged Bahar forcefully shut down his shops as Rusel refused to give his land. "He [Bahar] harassed

me by making me accused in different cases in the last six years."

The ten-storey building housing Cumilla City Awami League office at Ramghatla was known to be allotted to Cumilla District Muktiyoddha Sangsad.

District Muktiyoddha Commander Shafiqul Alam Babul alleged they were forced to hand over the land under pressure.

Bahar also targeted the famous Liberty Cinema Hall at Kandirpar. Several cases were filed over land ownership dispute and documentation fraud centring the building.

Monzur Kader Moni, councillor of ward-10, who was close to Suchona's husband Rony, made a fortune with bribes taken for building plans as he was appointed as a member of the Building Plan Committee of the city corporation.

No one dared to counter Moni in the last city polls as Rony threatened others who had planned to submit nominations.

Besides controlling tenders in different department, Rony also grabbed cable TV and internet businesses in Cumilla. He allegedly built teen gangs to establish his control.

Cumilla AL General Secretary Rifat and Abdullah Al Mahmud, who were loyal to Bahar, were listed as top drug dealers in Cumilla under Chattogram division.

The Prime Minister's Office sent a letter along with the list of top drug dealers of Chattogram division to the home ministry in January 2018, requesting investigation and action against those on the list.

After the fall of the AL government, several cases have been filed against Bahar, Suchona and Bahar's followers on charges related to fatal attacks on protesters during the student-led mass uprising in July-August last year.

The Anti-Corruption Commission filed a case against Bahar on January 20, accusing him of acquiring illegal wealth worth Tk 67.43 crore. Suchona was also sued on charges of acquiring Tk 3.05 crore illegal wealth.

Chhatra Dal leader held; supporters 'attack' police

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The two traders were attacked with sharp weapons by a group of criminals, including top criminal Sanjivul Haque Emon, following their refusal to meet extortion demands.

A case was filed by Wahedul, who is also the elder brother of Imamul Hasan Helal, alias Pichchi Helal, a notorious criminal from Mohammadpur.

The FIR alleges that after August

5, the accused began demanding money from traders in the Multiplan Centre, leading to the violent attack when the traders resisted.

Meanwhile, Chhatra Dal has suspended Mithun and Riyazul Hasan Rasel, assistant general secretary, over allegations of breaching party discipline.

A press release was issued by the Chhatra Dal Central Committee last night announcing the decision.

Jeweller shot, robbed of 50 bhoris gold

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A case has been filed over the incident with Kamrangirchar Police Station, said Officer-in-Charge (OC) Amirul Islam.

The OC, quoting the case statement, said that the muggers snatched a bag containing 50 bhoris of gold and Tk 3.5 lakh in cash.

Efforts are underway to apprehend those responsible, he added.

Earlier on November 23 last year,

two to three muggers attacked a gold trader's employee in Noyabazar area in the capital and snatched 250 bhoris of gold. The victim was hospitalised.

Three days later, near the Judge's Court in Old Dhaka, another gold trader's employee carrying 86 bhoris of gold was robbed by two men.

Two separate cases were filed over the two incidents with Bangshal and Kotwali police stations.

Violence in West Bank

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But the UN rights office raised the alarm over the killing of what it said were mostly unarmed people, calling for an immediate end of the violence and a halt on expanding settlements.

"Our office has verified that at least 12 Palestinians have been killed and 40 injured by Israeli security forces since Tuesday, most of them reportedly unarmed," Al Kheetan told a televised briefing.

Meanwhile, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's office said yesterday the Israeli army will not complete its withdrawal from southern Lebanon by a Monday deadline, saying Lebanon has not yet fully enforced the ceasefire agreement.

The deal, brokered by the United States and France, ended more than a year of hostilities between Israel and the Iran-backed Hezbollah. The fighting peaked with a major Israeli offensive that displaced more than

1.2 million people in Lebanon and left Hezbollah severely weakened.

In Gaza, the daily deliveries have surged tenfold since the Sunday deal, according to UN data, surpassing the 600 trucks a day target set out for the first seven weeks of the ceasefire.

Muhannad Hadi, UN Humanitarian Coordinator for the Occupied Palestinian Territories, told Reuters late on Thursday that funding shortages may affect the UN's ability to maintain aid flows at target levels throughout the ceasefire deal.

Hadi described scenes of widespread joy and relief across the enclave, with many Gaza civilians smiling and eager to return to the remnants of their homes and find work.

"I've received clear messages from the people: they don't want to continue depending on humanitarian aid. They want to rebuild their lives... We can't afford to let them down."