

UN rights chief laments 'shift in direction' in United States

AFP, Geneva

The UN rights chief yesterday voiced deep concern over the United States' "fundamental shift" in direction since Donald Trump returned to power, and decried the "unchecked power" of "unelected tech oligarchs".

Addressing the United Nations Human Rights Council, Volker Turk voiced his strongest rebuke to date of the dramatic about-face seen in the United States in recent weeks.

"We have enjoyed bipartisan support from the United States of America on human rights over many decades," he said, before adding: "I am now deeply worried by the fundamental shift in direction that is taking place domestically and internationally".

Without naming Trump, he decried that "policies intended to protect people from discrimination are now labelled as discriminatory".

"Progress is being rolled back on



gender equality. Disinformation, intimidation and threats, notably against journalists and public officials, risk undermining the work of independent media and the functioning of institutions."

Turk also lamented that "divisive rhetoric is being used to distort, deceive and polarise".

"This is generating fear and anxiety among many," he warned. "On these issues and more, my office will continue building on our long history of constructive engagement."

Since returning to the White House on January 20, Trump has signed a whopping 79 executive orders touching on issues from foreign policy to transgender rights.



PHOTO: REUTERS

Firefighters work at the site of an apartment building hit by a Russian drone strike in Kharkiv, Ukraine, on Sunday night. Ukrainian officials also reported an unspecified number of fatalities from a Russian missile strike on a military training ground.

Israel worked to 'collapse' Gaza deal

Says Hamas; Israeli fire kills 2 Palestinians in the enclave

AGENCIES

Palestinian group Hamas yesterday accused Israel of working to "collapse" a ceasefire agreement for Gaza and evade a continuation of the truce amid an impasse over its implementation.

"Violations of the agreement during the first phase prove beyond a doubt the (Israeli) occupation government was interested in the collapse of the agreement and worked hard to achieve that," senior Hamas official Osama Hamdan said in a video statement.

Meanwhile, Israeli fire killed at least two people in Rafah and

injured three others in Khan Younis in the south of Gaza, raising fear among Palestinians that the ceasefire could collapse altogether after Israel imposed a total blockade on the shattered enclave.

Gaza stores emptied and price of sack of flour more than doubles

Two Israeli government officials said mediators had asked Israel for a few more days to resolve the standoff.

Israel raised the stakes on Sunday by imposing a total blockade on all supplies, including food and fuel, to sustain 2.3 million Gaza people living among the ruins after the 15-month conflict.

Hundreds of lorries carrying supplies were backed up in Egypt, denied permission to enter. Gaza residents said shops had been swiftly emptied of all supplies and the price of a sack of flour had more than doubled overnight.

"Where will our food come from?" said Salah al-Hajj Hassan, a resident in Jabalia, where families returned to destroyed homes to live in the rubble.

GERMAN CITY

Two dead, several hurt as car hits crowd

AFP, Berlin

A car driven into a crowd in the German city of Mannheim yesterday killed two persons and injured several, police said, adding that one person had been arrested.

"We can now confirm that a car was driven into a pedestrian zone and that two persons were killed," said a police spokesman. "We can confirm that one suspect was arrested," he said, adding that "the investigation is continuing".

MYANMAR CONFLICT

Junta chief heads for meeting with key ally Putin

AFP, Yangon

Myanmar's junta chief yesterday departed for talks with President Vladimir Putin in Russia, a key ally and arms supplier for the isolated state struggling to quell violent opposition to military rule.

Min Aung Hlaing, who seized power in a 2021 coup, left the capital Naypyidaw with a retinue of high-ranking officials, according to the junta's information service, and is due to meet Putin today.

Analysts say Moscow's support has become vital to the military administration, particularly its air force, as it battles an array of ethnic minority armed groups and pro-democracy guerrillas on multiple fronts.

The junta suffered significant territorial losses after a 2023 rebel offensive but its air power has been pivotal to arresting the advance of opposition forces.

"Russia has been invaluable in helping them keep their air fleet afloat," Morgan Michaels, research fellow at the International Institute for Strategic Studies think tank, told AFP.

Of big wins and bigger surprises

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nominations with 13 nods, walked away with only two awards. Its wins came in the Best Original Song and Best Supporting Actress categories. However, the night was less kind to the films that had hoped to claim more, as "The Substance" and "Conclave" each took home just one award, while "Wicked" and "Dune" both bagged 2 awards apiece.

The evening's biggest winner was "Anora", which dominated with five awards, including a surprising Best Actress win for Mikey Madison. Despite a strong performance in "The Substance" by Demi Moore, who had been the frontrunner following

wins at the Critics' Choice, Screen Actors' Guild, and Golden Globe awards, it was Madison's performance in "Anora" that stunned the crowd and took home the coveted golden statue. Moore was left empty-handed, making Madison's win one of the most talked-about moments of the night.

Another historic achievement occurred when Sean Baker won an unprecedented four major awards in a single evening – Best Director, Best Original Screenplay, Best Editing, and Best Picture.

This groundbreaking feat solidified Baker's place as one of the most innovative filmmakers of his generation.

Crime rate has not gone up

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"My first effort was to unearth the real picture from beneath the rubble and make people's daily lives easier. That was my initial focus. Then gradually, I started thinking about the future -- where we should be heading."

His priority was institutional reforms to prevent a repeat of past "fascist" rule, corruption and electoral malpractices.

"From the ruins where we started, a new shape is emerging. We have made the economy more accessible and we have gained trust both domestically and internationally. No one can question whether we have failed to earn the trust of any country."

About his government's plan for institutional reforms, he said a "July Charter" would compile agreed-upon points between political parties regarding necessary changes.

"The political parties only need to specify their positions. Based on that, we will determine which recommendations have consensus. Those will be compiled into a

separate document highlighting the agreed-upon points."

He reiterated that elections would take place within the year, as previously announced.

Yunus dismissed claims that the neutrality of the interim government was in question.

Asked about BNP acting chairman Tarique Rahman's claim that doubts had emerged among the public regarding the government's neutrality, Yunus said: "Among the public, or is it just him who has doubts?"

He also denied any state involvement in the newly formed political platforms.

The interim government continues to enjoy full cooperation from the military, he said.

Asked about the army chief's statement suggesting that Bangladesh's independence and sovereignty could be at risk if all sectors did not work together, Yunus acknowledged that threats to stability persisted.

The threat was coming from the Awami League, he said.

"They are making every effort to unsettle the situation. This threat is constant -- it is present at all times and in all places. They are issuing addresses, calling on people to rise up and take action, giving various directives like calling for strikes and so on. How do you think people will react to that? Do you think all of this will just pass peacefully?"

However, the AL's political future would be decided by consensus, he said, adding that those who had committed crimes must be held accountable.

The country's relationship with India is "very good" and has not deteriorated following the ouster of the India-aligned AL government.

"There is no alternative to good relations between Bangladesh and India. Our relationship is close, our mutual dependence is significant, and historically, politically and economically, we are so close that we cannot diverge from this path."

Any tensions were due to misinformation and were being addressed.

Foreign ministry

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influence in the decision-making process," it said in a statement.

Addressing the White House Governors Working Session on February 20, Trump claimed that the \$29 million USAID fund landed with an obscure firm that he said was "a little outfit" with just two employees.

"Two people! They're very happy. Very rich. They'll be on the cover of a top business magazine -- for being great scammers," quipped the US president.

At another event on February 21, Trump again accused the agency of funneling \$29 million to prop up a "radical left communist" in Bangladesh -- triggering question among public mind.

Following that, the foreign ministry investigated the matter and issued the statement.

It said a USAID-funded project in Bangladesh -- Strengthening Political Landscape (SPL) -- was implemented with a budget of \$29 million.

During President Trump's first term, USAID selected Democracy International (DI), a US-registered organisation -- to implement the project. Multiple international organisations participated in a competitive bidding process, and USAID made its decision transparently. The contract was signed in March 2017, and DI subsequently began implementation.

Initially, SPL was a five-year project with a budget of \$14 million. It was managed by USAID and co-funded by the UK's development agency DFID (now FCDO), which committed \$10 million.

The project aimed to reduce political violence, foster peaceful coexistence among political parties, enhance their capacities, improve internal democratic practices, and promote representative leadership. DI also conducted survey activities in Bangladesh under the project.

The statement said USAID projects are subject to strict US government financial management policies, including rigorous auditing and record-keeping for years after completion. If necessary, re-audits are conducted.

The investigation confirms that DI implemented the SPL project in Bangladesh during President Trump's first term, and the claim that the project was awarded to a privately owned Bangladeshi organisation is false.

'Ensure safety or step down'

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to no action taken against perpetrators.

They specifically condemned the inaction against local extortionist Rinku, reportedly affiliated with the Jubo League, who allegedly incited the Lalmatia mob incident.

The protesters carried placards with slogans such as "Stop Slut-Shaming!" "Law for Women, But Where is the Law for Men?" and "Ensure Safety or Step Down!"

Addressing the crowd, Adrita Roy, a student of Jahangirnagar University, said, "Two days ago, two female students were attacked by a mob in Lalmatia. Even after the formation of the interim government and changing the home affairs adviser, incidents of rape, torture, and abuse of women have only increased. We fought at the frontline during the July uprising, but those in power are failing to ensure our safety."

It's crucial for due process

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minorities," he said, while sharing a global update at the 58th session of the Human Rights Council in Geneva.

Turk said Bangladesh last year experienced a paroxysm of violence as the government of the time "brutally suppressed" a student movement that carried human rights as its torch.

"The country is now charting a new future," he said, adding that their recent independent fact-finding report on the grave human rights violations that took place is an "important contribution" to this journey.

UN Resident Coordinator in Dhaka Gwyn Lewis on Sunday informed Chief Adviser Prof Muhammad Yunus that Türk will brief the member states about its findings on March 5 during the 55th session of the Human Rights Council.

Yunus stressed documenting all "atrocities" committed during the regime of ousted Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina.

The atrocities, including the crackdown on protesters at Shapla Chattar, police brutalities against protesters after the verdict against Delwar Hossain Sayeedi, and extrajudicial killings over the years.

"There is a need for proper documentation of all atrocities committed against the people of this country. Unless this documentation is done, it is difficult to know the truth and ensure justice," said the chief adviser.

He made the comment when UNRC Lewis and Senior Human Rights Adviser at the UN Resident Coordinator's Office in Bangladesh Huma Khan, called on him at the

She said, "We protested against the ongoing rape and repression and marched towards the home ministry. Yet, the police -- who fail to arrest rapists, control mobs, or catch thieves -- obstructed our procession. Some of our protesters were injured as a result. We later organised a torch procession, giving the home adviser a 24-hour ultimatum to resign and apologise. He has failed to do so. Now, he must be removed."

Lamia Islam, a student of Prime University, echoed these demands, accusing the home adviser of "inciting the mob" with his remarks.

"Smoking in public is a civil offence at best. But physical assault is a criminal offence. How can a home adviser justify such a crime?" she asked.

Following the rally, protesters marched through Lalmatia before gathering near the National Parliament building, where they set fire to an effigy of the home adviser.

6,531 pry teachers get their jobs back

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Following the SC order, there is no legal bar for the government to recruit qualified candidates to the posts of assistant teachers at government primary schools, Barrister Muntasir Uddin Ahmed, a lawyer for the primary education department, told reporters after the court hearing.

At the hearing, Attorney General Md Asaduzzaman prayed to the SC bench to allow the leave to appeal petition and to stay the HC verdict as there is a crisis of around 32,000 assistant teachers for the government primary schools across the country.

The 6,531 candidates have qualified through written examination and interviews under the then relevant system and they need to be appointed to the posts, he said.

Writ petitioners' lawyers Miftah Uddin Choudhury, Mohammed Belayet Hossain and Kamruzzaman Bhuiyan opposed the leave to appeal petition.

Senior lawyers Salahuddin Dolon

and Md Ruhul Quddus Kazal argued for the teachers.

On February 6, the HC scrapped the government decision to grant appointment letters to 6,531 candidates who qualified for the post as their recruitment process was completed under the 84 percent quota system, which was scrapped by the Appellate Division in July last year.

In July last year, the apex court stipulated that 93 percent of the civil service jobs would be on merit and 7 percent would be reserved for quota.

Also on February 6, the HC ordered the authorities concerned to appoint the candidates to the posts in line with the apex court verdict, the writ petitioners' lawyers Barrister Mohammad Belayet Hossain, Advocate Mohammad Shishir Manir and Barrister Foyez Uddin Ahmed told The Daily Star that day.

The HC bench of Justice Fatema Najib and Justice Sikder Mahmudur Razi came up with the directives

following a writ petition filed by 31 candidates challenging the legality of the government decision to grant appointment letters to 6,531 candidates who qualified in the third phase for the post of assistant teachers of government primary schools last year.

The appointment letters were supposed to be given to the 6,531 teachers from November 20 last year, but a day earlier the HC had stayed the decision to grant the letters following the same writ petition, said Barrister Foez Uddin Ahmed.

The final results for the third phase of the government primary school assistant teacher recruitment exams for Dhaka and Chattogram divisions (excluding the three hill districts) were published on October 31 last year. As many as 6,531 candidates passed.

Later on, the primary education department filed the leave to appeal petition with the Appellate Division seeking a stay on the HC verdict.

Monirul Islam Khan.

The state and the ACC filed three separate leave-to-appeal petitions in January and February, seeking a stay on the High Court verdict. In the petitions, they prayed to the apex court to stay the HC verdict, saying they would move separate appeals before this court against the HC judgement.

SC upholds acquittal of Khaleda

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graft case, in which she was sentenced to seven years' imprisonment by a lower court.

The ACC filed the case with the Tejgaon Police Station on August 8, 2011, accusing Khaleda and three others of abusing power to raise funds for the trust from undisclosed sources.

A Dhaka court, on October

29, 2018, convicted Khaleda and sentenced her to seven years imprisonment in the case.

The other three convicted accused were Khaleda's then political secretary Harris Chowdhury (now deceased), Harris Chowdhury's then private secretary Ziaul Islam Munna, and private secretary to former mayor of the Dhaka City Corporation