

Nations agree ‘in principle’ to tackle future pandemics

REUTERS, Geneva

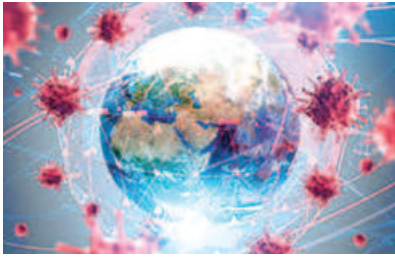
Members of the World Health Organization are close to a deal on a treaty to prepare for future pandemics, sources involved in the talks told Reuters on Saturday, with a WHO spokesperson saying discussions had been paused until Tuesday.

The pact, which has been arduously negotiated for three years and which would be legally binding, is intended to shore up the world's defences against new pathogens after the Covid-19 pandemic killed millions of people in 2020-22.

“They (the talks) went overnight until 9:00am but didn’t manage to resolve the final issues,” one source involved in the discussions in Geneva said.

A diplomatic source in Geneva added that “big advancement was made ... almost all the treaty was agreed upon with few outstanding yet crucial issues”.

The talks missed a key deadline last year despite several rounds of late-night talks.



The negotiating body's co-chair had earlier told the AFP that it had reached an agreement “in principle”.

The United States, which was slow to join the early talks, left the discussions this year after new President Donald Trump issued an executive order in February withdrawing from the WHO.

The other 192 members of the WHO who joined the discussions would be free to ratify the deal or not after it is formally adopted.

One of the most contentious issues between wealthy countries and developing states is how to share drugs and vaccines fairly to avoid the mistakes of the Covid era.

The negotiations have been vexed throughout by allegations from right-wing commentators, including in the US but also Britain and Australia, that they could undermine national sovereignty by giving too much power to a UN agency.



Mexican authorities and residents try to control a forest fire in Santo Domingo Tomaltepec, Oaxaca, yesterday.

PHOTO: REUTERS

US in hurry for nuclear deal

Says Iran after high-stakes, ‘constructive’ talks in Oman

AFP, Muscat

The United States wants a nuclear agreement “as soon as possible”, Iran said after rare talks yesterday, as US President Donald Trump threatens military action if they fail to reach a deal.

Foreign Minister Abbas Araghchi, who briefly spoke face-to-face with Trump's special envoy Steve Witkoff during the indirect meeting in Oman, said the talks would resume next Saturday.

“The American side also said that a positive agreement was one that can be reached as soon as possible but that will not be easy and will require a willingness on both sides,” Araghchi told Iranian state television.

“At today's meeting, I think we came very close to a basis for negotiation... Neither we nor the other party want fruitless negotiations, discussions for discussions’ sake, time wasting or talks that drag on for ever,” he added.

Oman's foreign minister acted as intermediary in the talks in Muscat, Iran said. The Americans had called for the

meetings to be face-to-face.

However, the negotiators also spoke directly for “a few minutes”, Iran's foreign ministry said. It said the talks were held “in a constructive and mutually respectful



atmosphere”.

The long-term adversaries, who have not had diplomatic relations for more than 40 years, are seeking a new nuclear deal after Trump pulled out of an earlier agreement during his first term in 2018.

Araghchi, a seasoned diplomat and key architect of the 2015 accord, and Witkoff, a real estate magnate, led the delegations

in the highest-level Iran-US nuclear talks since the previous accord's collapse.

The two parties were in “separate halls” and were “conveying their views and positions to each other through the Omani foreign minister”, Iran's foreign ministry spokesman Esmail Bagaei posted on X.

Iran, weakened by Israel's pummelling of its allies Hezbollah in Lebanon and Hamas in Gaza, is seeking relief from wide-ranging sanctions hobbling its economy.

Tehran has agreed to the meetings despite baulking at Trump's “maximum pressure” campaign of ramping up sanctions and repeated military threats.

Meanwhile, the US, hand-in-glove with Iran's arch-enemy Israel, wants to stop Tehran from ever getting close to developing a nuclear bomb.

Yesterday's meetings followed repeated threats of military action by both the US and Israel.

“If it requires military, we're going to have military,” Trump said on Wednesday when asked what would happen if the talks fail.

Military needs extensive reforms

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in horrifying crimes like enforced disappearances.

The event was a seminar on keeping the armed forces free from politicisation organised by the Retired Armed Forces Officers' Welfare Association (RAOWA) at the RAOWA Club in the capital's Mohakhali DOHS.

RAOWA Chairperson Col (retd) Mohammad Abdul Hoque asked why the Directorate General Forces Intelligence (DGFI) had a political wing.

The DGFI should never be involved in politics, he said.

Brig Gen (retd) Dr Abdullah Al Yusuf proposed that supervisory power over the military be decentralised so that it cannot be made to pander to any party's political interests anymore.

“It is dangerous for one person to have complete control over the state's military and civil intelligence agencies. This opens up avenues for abuse. Under the current system, the intelligence agencies are directly answerable to the

head of the government.

“We have seen how in the past, the defence adviser and the head of the government have abused the intelligence agencies. Instead of doing their mandated duty, they were used as political pawns to repress opposing political thoughts. Instead of protecting national security, they were protecting the political security of a party.”

Yusuf believes it's not enough to have just one defence adviser. “Instead, we also need a national security council and a separate secretariat. All of the intelligence agencies will be under that council. The council will have representatives from all ministries, such that the national security adviser cannot override them and advise the head of state.”

He stressed the need for a national security reform commission comprised of experts who would recommend the reforms necessary in the national security policy and the security forces.

Maj Gen (retd) Nayeem Ashlaque Chowdhury said, “The current system is not meritocratic. The weaker the intelligence agencies are, the more vulnerable we are.”

He said that politicisation has damaged discipline in the army and affected postings and even the military judiciary system.

Rear Admiral (retd) Mustafizur Rahman said the military's own judicial system is questionable and politicised and proposed that the system be reformed.

Dr ASM Ali Ashraf, chairman of Dhaka University's international relations department, said, “The head of state has previously used the military to doctor elections. We have never monitored our national security forces. We need a separate parliamentary standing committee focused on the intelligence agencies.”

Addressing the seminar as chief guest, Col (retd) Oli Ahmed cautioned against getting RAOWA involved in politics and told all military

personnel to remember their duty to the nation.

Speaking as a special guest, Mahmudur Rahman, editor of Daily Amar Desh, recommended that all military officers be removed from the Rapid Action Battalion.

“Military officers should be kept away from civil duties as much as possible. No serving army officer should have commercial ventures because it presents a conflict of interest.”

Echoing other speakers, he also demanded that all military personnel who have been accused of human rights violations be investigated and brought to justice.

“Actions like maintaining ‘Aynaghar’ or allowing for Indian intervention in our national affairs should be considered as anti-state activities.”

He also called for transparency in defence budgeting and said that a special parliamentary standing committee should be created to review the budget for defence.

Trump backs away from tech tariffs

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that make iPhones and other premium products in China, and will generally narrow the impact of the staggering 145 percent tariffs Trump has imposed this year on Chinese goods entering the United States.

Washington and Beijing's escalating tariff battle has raised fears of an enduring trade war between the world's two largest economies and sent global markets into a tailspin.

The fallout has sent particular shockwaves through the US economy, with investors dumping government bonds and the dollar tumbling.

Nevertheless, Trump insisted Friday on his Truth Social platform that “we are doing really well on our tariff policy,” even after Beijing announced its latest hike.

Daniel Ives, senior equity analyst at Wedbush Securities, called the US exemptions “the best news possible for tech investors.”

“US tariff exclusions will apply to computers, smartphones, and chip-making equipment which takes (away) a huge black cloud overhang for now over the tech sector,” he added in a note.

Without these exemptions, he said, “the US Tech industry would be taken back a decade and the AI Revolution thesis would have been slowed significantly.”

Many of the exempted products, including hard drives and computer processors, generally are not made in America.

While Trump has referred to tariffs as a way to bring manufacturing back to the United States, analysts say it

will likely take years to ramp up domestic production.

Trump has specifically targeted China with his “reciprocal” tariffs meant to address practices Washington deems unfair.

And even with Washington and Beijing going toe-to-toe, the White House insists Trump remains “optimistic” about a deal with China.

His Chinese counterpart Xi Jinping gave his first major comments on the tensions Friday, with state media quoting him as saying his country was “not afraid.”

Economists warn that the disruption in trade between the tightly integrated US and Chinese economies will increase prices for consumers and could spark a global recession.

China's Commerce Minister Wang Wentao told

the head of the World Trade Organization (WTO) that US tariffs will “inflict serious harm” on poor nations, according to a ministry statement released yesterday.

“The United States has continuously introduced tariff measures, bringing enormous uncertainty and instability to the world, causing chaos both internationally and domestically within the US,” Wang told WTO chief Ngozi Okonjo-Iweala in a call, the statement said.

Beijing also indicated Friday that it would ignore any further levies by Trump because it said it no longer makes economic sense for importers to buy from America.

China also said it would file a lawsuit with the WTO over the latest round of levies.

BTRC dismantles

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undermined the original International Long-Distance Telecommunications Services (ILDTS) policy and inflated intermediary costs without adding value.

Instead of promoting healthy competition, the policy favoured select operators, resulting in higher costs for terminating operators and a loss of potential revenue for the state, Hossain added.

Originally, international calls were terminated by mobile operators. However, in 2008, the government introduced an additional layer in an effort to curb the VoIP business.

As per the ILDTS policy, a specific network topology was established, setting a three-year framework for international voice call services such as IGWs.

Initially, IGWs brought calls through international telecom operators before routing them to mobile or landline users through another set of operators known as ICXs.

In 2014, the cartel proposed an experimental system called the IGW Operator Switch, which placed control of the common network switch for interconnection and call termination in their hands.

That year, the BTRC approved the experimental network topology without amending the ILDTS policy, in clear violation of regulations.

The government subsequently approved it a year later, paving the way for members of the cartel to benefit from higher revenue and dominate the market.

Although the directive was issued on an experimental basis in 2015, it continued for years.

The revocation comes as part of the reforms the BTRC has undertaken since Md Emdad Ul Bari was appointed the chairman in September last year.

The IOF unilaterally amended the commission-approved agreement without authorisation, violating

BTRC directives.

There was also a lack of transparency in the expenditure of funds collected under the name of Market Development Expenses (MDS).

As part of its agreement, the IOF has collected a total of Tk 631 crore as Market Development Expenses (MDS) from all IGW operators.

More than 95 percent of this amount has been received and spent non-transparently under a single account: Beximco Computers.

Due to the lack of transparency in handling such a large sum through a single entity, the BTRC decided to refer the matter to the Anti-Corruption Commission for further review and investigation.

The Daily Star made multiple attempts to reach Beximco Computers, a sister concern of Salman F Rahman's Beximco Group. However, the contact number listed on the website remained unreachable.

Considering these issues, the commission has revoked the approval of the operational agreement between the IOF and IGW operators for call exchanges under the government-approved network topology.

The existing IOF-related guidelines issued by the commission will be repealed, and a revised directive will be issued, requiring all IGW operators to operate as IGW (IOS), establish inter-operator connections and implement overall management of call exchanges, including technical, financial and monitoring aspects.

The following measures will be implemented for new international call operations: designation of a common point, collection of liquid bank guarantees, implementation of dipping operations using a single MNP server, equitable distribution of international calls, and implementation of international call exchange and monitoring systems.

Repeal Special Powers Act

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from her profile soon afterwards.

However, the footage was downloaded by social media users who posted it again.

An officer from Bhatara Police Station, requesting anonymity, said officers took her to the Detective Branch (DB) office on Minto Road after detaining her. A Chief Metropolitan Magistrate's Court in Dhaka sent her to jail on Thursday night.

Amid criticism on social media, Dhaka Metropolitan Police issued a statement on Friday, refuting allegations that she had been abducted.

The statement said Meghna was held in accordance with the law, but made no mention of the time of her detention.

The statement added that she was accused of trying to deteriorate the relations between countries by spreading lies about an important person, hampering national security and being involved in a conspiracy to damage the economy.

Police also arrested an associate of Meghna on charges of blackmailing a foreign diplomat.

The Gonotantrik Odhikar Committee said that the stated reasons for Meghna's arrest were “vague and misleading”.

“If a citizen is targeted using state forces because of a foreign diplomat's personal agenda, it undermines the sovereignty of the country,” the group said.

The rights body described this as an “alarming abuse of power”, adding that using state forces in this way reflected an “ongoing pattern of authoritarian control” over the justice system, even after an uprising.

The platform said that the Special Powers Act is a fascist law which several advisers of the current government have spoken about at various times. However, this law is being used to cover up the “wrongdoing” of a foreign diplomat and to “legitimise his action by attacking a woman at her home”.

It also urged the government to investigate the role of the foreign diplomat involved and take appropriate diplomatic steps if allegations of misconduct are proven.

Barrister Jyotirmoy Barua, speaking to The Daily Star, said, “They violated the procedure of arrest. The High Court has given clear directives on the steps that should be followed when arresting without a warrant.”

According to the HC directives, arrests without a warrant must be based on credible information, officers must disclose their identity and record reasons for the arrest, and the arrested person must be allowed to consult a lawyer or meet their relatives.

“Meghna was arrested on a prejudicial suspicion under Section 3 of the special powers law. Yet her actions do not fall under the definition of a ‘prejudicial act’ as stated by that very law,” said Barua.

A “prejudicial act” as defined by the law refers to any action intended or likely to harm Bangladesh's sovereignty, security, public order, or international relations. It also includes acts that incite hatred, disrupt law and order, essential services, or the economy, or cause public fear or alarm.

“This was a personal matter, and they have violated her fundamental rights under article 43 of the constitution which states that every person has the right to be secured in their home against entry, search and seizure,” said Barua.

M a n a b a d h i k a r Shongskriti Foundation demanded the repeal of the law and the release of the model. “The law enforcement

kept her in detention for two days, and then produced her at court at night. We strongly criticise the arrest and incarceration of this woman when there are no specific cases or charges against her,” it said in a statement.

Another civic platform, Janovassyo, also demanded the repeal of repressive laws like the Special Powers Act of 1974. In a statement yesterday, the platform said that Meghna's detention has severely undermined public trust in state institutions.

The harassment she faced, along with the attempt to malign her character with false claims about her personal life, is unacceptable, the statement said.

They called it a resurgence of fascist tactics and demanded a high-level, impartial, and swift investigation into the incident and strict punishment for all those found guilty. “Meghna must be released immediately and her safety ensured.”

‘ASSOCIATE’ HELD

Detectives have arrested Dewan Samir, 58, owner of the manpower agency Sanjana and CEO of Japanese cosmetics e-shop Kawaii, on charges of blackmailing a Saudi diplomat using women.

Samir was produced before a Dhaka court yesterday, where police sought a 10-day remand for further interrogation. The court granted a five-day remand.

Earlier, DB chief Rezaul Karim Mallik told this correspondent that Samir is an associate of Meghna.

According to the forwarding letter submitted to the court, Ariful Islam, a sub-inspector of Bhatara Police Station, said that a fraud syndicate, allegedly led by Samir, has been using attractive women to lure diplomats and affluent individuals into romantic relationships for extortion.

“Since January 2024, the group had been targeting the Ambassador of Saudi Arabia to Bangladesh, Essa Bin Youssef Alduhailan. They trapped him in a personal relationship and subsequently demanded five million dollars,” the forwarding letter said.

Acting on a tip-off, a team from the Detective Branch raided a flat in Bashundhara Residential Area around 10:25pm on Thursday and arrested Samir.

Police claimed that on April 8, around 1:30pm, Samir and his cohorts attempted to extort money at his residence.

“This was part of a larger conspiracy against the state aimed at tarnishing Bangladesh's image abroad,” it said. Police said that it has also been learned that the accused and his associates may possess critical anti-state information.

Talking to The Daily Star on Friday night, Meghna's father Badrul Alam said his daughter has been involved with Miss Bangladesh Foundation since 2020, focusing on empowering women and representing them on global platforms.

He claimed that during her work, she developed a close relationship with the Saudi diplomat, which allegedly led to their engagement a few months ago.

But she recently learned that the man already had a wife, Badrul claimed, adding that Meghna contacted the diplomat's wife and ended the engagement.

Angered, the diplomat reportedly raised concerns with the home ministry, claiming the situation could harm diplomatic relations, Badrul said.

Badrul also said they believed the matter was on the way to being resolved, as they had held meetings with high-ranking law enforcement officials.

Bangladeshi man

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days, I heard he occasionally travelled to India. On April 8, he and several others crossed the border. While returning, the BSF chased them. The others escaped, but Wasim was caught. We've come to know that he was beaten to death.”

His father, Ramzan Ali, added, “I've learned from various sources that the body found in the river was of my son. I demand that the authorities recover his body immediately.”

Lt Col Rafiqul