Russia downplays plague reports as Trump offers help

WHO says risks low

AFP, *Moscow*

Russian authorities yesterday denied that they were imposing anti-plague measures after a laboratory technician reportedly died of the disease, as Washington called on Moscow to be "transparent" about the situation.

It was reported last week that a worker at an anti-plague institute in Siberia's Irkutsk region died of pneumonic plague.

But the authorities say the cause of death is not confirmed and health watchdog Rospotrebnadzor has denied claims circulating in a document online that special measures had been put in place.

"We wish to clarify that the document and information in question do not originate from official sources and are untrue," it said on Telegram.

Russian news outlet People of Baikal reported on Friday that the dead woman -- named as 28-year-old Darya Shipilova -- may have contracted pneumonic

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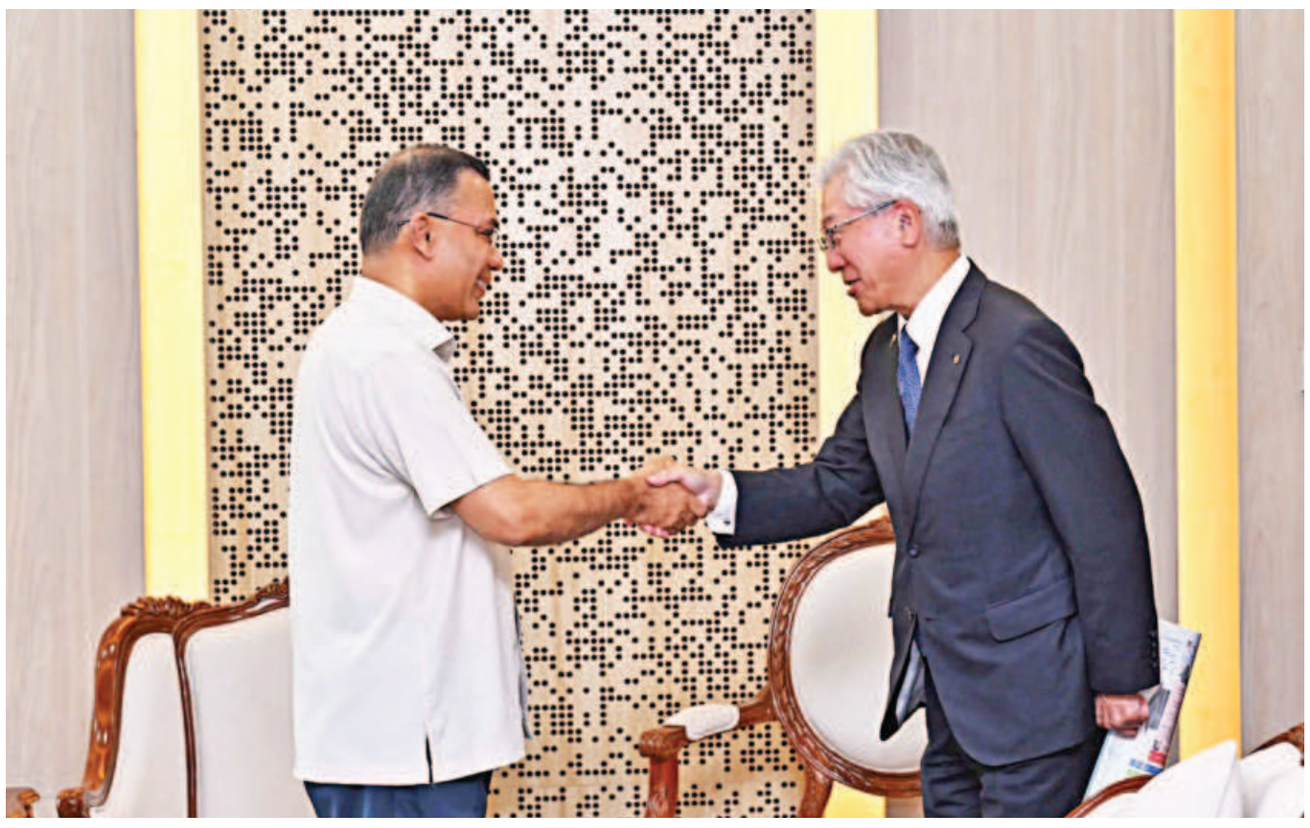


PHOTO: BNP MEDIA CELL

Prime Minister Tarique Rahman greets Toyota Tsusho Vice Chairman Ichiro Kashitani at his Secretariat office yesterday.

Toyota wants to build cars in Bangladesh by 2029

PM welcomes interest as its delegation meets him

UNB, *Dhaka*

Toyota is eyeing to launch vehicle manufacturing in Bangladesh, as a high-level delegation of the Japanese company briefed Prime Minister Tarique Rahman on its investment plans yesterday.

The delegation, led by Toyota Tsusho Vice Chairman Ichiro Kashitani, met the prime minister at his office in the Secretariat and informed him of the company's plan to establish a Toyota vehicle manufacturing plant in Bangladesh, said PM's Deputy Press Secretary Shahadat Hossain Shadhin.

The delegation said the initiative will contribute to employment generation, industrialisation expansion, technology transfer and the development of skilled human resources in the country.

The two sides also discussed expanding Toyota's operations in Bangladesh, potential investment opportunities and the company's long-term business plans.

Tarique welcomed Toyota Tsusho's interest in expanding its investment and operations in Bangladesh.

He said the government is working to ensure a stable, competitive and investment-friendly environment for both domestic and foreign investors.

The prime minister said the government is committed to providing necessary policy support, infrastructure facilities and other opportunities to foreign investors.

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Halzen wins Nobel physics prize for 'ghost particle' hunt

REUTERS, *Stockholm*

The Belgian-American Francis Halzen won the 2026 Nobel Prize in Physics for his work creating an Antarctic observatory of ice to detect high-energy neutrinos, elusive subatomic particles that can reveal otherwise inaccessible information about the cosmos.

Halzen, 82, realised that pristine ice at the South Pole could be used to track such neutrinos, sometimes known as "ghost particles" for the way they pass through the Earth without a trace, only interacting with matter extremely rarely.

"The messengers bring information from the cosmos," Eva Olsson, of the Royal Swedish Academy of Sciences, told a press conference. "They open the door to distant galaxies and tell us about the processes of exploding stars."



The interactions registered by the IceCube observatory provide information about how high-energy neutrinos are created and may even reveal previously unknown phenomena, the Academy said.

In 2014, the US-based Smithsonian magazine dubbed Halzen "Neutrino Man" when giving him one of its Ingenuity Awards, acclaiming him for an "amazing experiment (that) heralds the beginning of a new era in astronomy".

It even published a comic illustrating his life: "How One Physicist's Pursuit of the Cosmos Took Off in Antarctica".

The observatory -- in effect a telescope that shows neutrinos instead of light -- is set in a cubic kilometre of Antarctic ice, which extends to a depth of 2,500 metres below the surface near the Amundsen-Scott South Pole Station.

More than 5,000 sensors await blips from the nearly massless high-energy neutrinos, which unlike other particles do not lose energy or change direction, in the hope of tracing their paths back to exploding stars, gamma-ray bursts, and cataclysmic phenomena involving black holes and neutron stars. They can expect to register about one per day.

6.2cr people one shock away from poverty: WB

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THE FISCAL PARADOX

Beyond the immediate macroeconomic shocks, the report highlights a structural crisis within Bangladesh's fiscal framework, which ultimately penalises the most vulnerable.

"In a context of tight fiscal constraints, Bangladesh cannot afford support systems that absorb substantial public resources without effectively protecting those most affected by economic shocks," the World Bank said.

Spending on subsidies and transfers supports poor households, but the overall fiscal system fails to protect them. Based on 2022 data, progressive direct taxes and transfers reduce inequality and poverty: the Gini coefficient, a standard measure of inequality, falls from 52.4 to 50.7, and the poverty rate from 19.6 percent to 18.8 percent. But regressive indirect taxes offset these gains. They raise the Gini to 51.4 and push poverty to 20.6 percent, higher than if there were no taxes or benefits at all, according to the World Bank.

Poorer households are therefore net payers to the government once the taxes they pay are set against the cash transfers and subsidies they receive.

MIDDLE EAST WAR FALLOUT

The World Bank highlighted the impact of the ongoing US war on Iran on Bangladesh's economy.

It said structural weaknesses in finance, revenue, energy, and public investment have curbed growth and resilience.

"Higher energy prices and elevated global uncertainty, resulting from the ongoing conflict in the Middle East, have amplified these underlying weaknesses and further exposed the fragility of the economy," the report said.

Import costs have also risen as the war pushed up global commodity prices, particularly energy and fertiliser. Bangladesh's petroleum import bill rose 107 percent, while fertiliser imports increased 42 percent.

If the war continues, import costs, particularly for energy, will remain elevated, putting further pressure on fiscal accounts through higher subsidy requirements, the World Bank said.

A prolonged deterioration in energy supply could also delay the recovery of private investment and industrial activity, further constraining growth.

In South Asia, except Bangladesh, inflation has generally remained within or below the central banks' target ranges, the World Bank noted.

FLAWED SAFETY NET

To help households cope, Bangladesh currently relies on a patchwork of instruments, primarily heavy energy and fertiliser subsidies alongside various social protection programmes. Together, they form a "de facto system of social support". Yet, each faces structural limitations.

Bangladesh's social safety net challenge is no longer a question of aggregate scale, but of deep administrative inefficiency. In 2026, the government administers a sprawling network of 90 separate social protection programmes spread across 25 different ministries.

"This breadth comes at the cost of depth: benefit adequacy is very low, and coverage of the poorest remains a challenge," the World Bank said.

The system remains "fragmented". Disjointed eligibility rules, overlapping beneficiary lists, and convoluted delivery arrangements generate high transaction costs. Crucially, the majority of social protection spending is not explicitly directed towards poor or vulnerable households.

Despite explicitly prioritising poor and vulnerable households, these programmes exclude 62 percent of households in the poorest quintile while including 18 percent of those in the richest. For example, the richest urban quintile alone captures nearly half of total electricity subsidy spending. Moreover, energy and fertiliser subsidies are not only fiscally costly, but also distort incentives by encouraging excessive consumption and reducing incentives for efficiency and conservation.

However, the World Bank highlighted the government's flagship cash-transfer initiative, the Family Card, as an "opportunity to establish a common platform for household assistance." But its effectiveness depends entirely on its ability to correct, rather than inherit, existing targeting failures, according to the World Bank.

Illustrative simulations suggest the Family Card could strengthen the impact of social protection on poverty. Existing programmes reduce poverty by about 3.05 percentage points. Introducing the card, with the same targeting errors as existing cash programmes, would cut poverty by a further 0.95 points, or about 15.8 lakh people. Combining the card with better-targeted old age and widow allowances and a single food assistance programme would cut poverty by 1.72 points, or about 28.5 lakh people, at an extra cost of 0.21 percent of GDP.

ENERGY SUBSIDIES

The fiscal drain is most heavily concentrated in the energy sector, which sits at the heart of Bangladesh's development ambitions and current economic vulnerabilities. For years, electricity tariffs have increasingly diverged from the actual cost of supply, necessitating a rapid expansion in state intervention.

Total power and gas subsidies have skyrocketed over the past decade, rising from Tk 8,580 crore (0.5 percent of GDP) in FY14 to a staggering Tk 83,600 crore (1.5 percent of GDP) in FY25. Of this sum, between 70 and 90 percent is allocated exclusively to the electricity sector.

Currently, the average retail electricity tariff stands at Tk 10.63 per unit. However, when upstream gas support is included, the estimated cost-recovery tariff is significantly higher at Tk 15.16 per unit. The resulting shortfall of Tk 4.53 per unit translates into an electricity fiscal support burden equivalent to roughly 1.1 percent of Bangladesh's GDP.

These subsidies disproportionately favour the wealthy. Residential consumers absorb around 72 percent of the estimated electricity support. Astonishingly, the richest 20 percent of households capture 33.0 percent of this support—more than double the 15.4 percent that reaches the poorest quintile. The bottom 40 percent of the population collectively receives just 30.0 percent of electricity subsidies.

Yet, because their incomes are so low, the relative importance of these benefits is immense for the poor. Combined direct benefits (lower utility tariffs) and indirect benefits (lower market prices for goods produced using subsidised electricity) equate to 18.1 percent of pre-fiscal income for the poorest fifth, compared with a negligible 2.3 percent for the richest.

World Bank simulations suggest that the full removal of electricity subsidies without a compensatory safety net would trigger a 2.8 percentage point spike in the poverty rate. This would instantly push an estimated 47 lakh people into poverty and raise the Gini coefficient by 1.6 points due to surging household utility bills and higher production costs.

TARIFF DILEMMA

Reliable and affordable access to energy is essential for industrial production, export competitiveness, private capital investment, and large-scale job creation.

Despite substantial historical gains in total generation capacity, the sector's foundation has steadily eroded due to weak governance and compounding policy failures. Domestic gas production—long the bedrock of Bangladesh's energy system—has experienced a steady decline as mature fields depleted and exploration failed to keep pace with demand.

Consequently, Bangladesh has undergone a drastic transformation. Fully self-sufficient in natural gas as recently as 2017, the country now relies on imported liquefied natural gas (LNG) to meet one-third of its total gas demand. While power generation capacity expanded rapidly through a growing network of private producers—whose share of total electricity generation recently stood at 43 percent—the sector remains crippled by critical constraints in fuel availability and severe transmission bottlenecks.

Editors' Council condemns attacks on journalists

FROM PAGE 1

The council placed five demands: prompt and impartial investigations into all recent attacks, threats and harassment against journalists; exemplary legal action against those involved, regardless of their identities or political affiliations; a safe working environment for journalists covering political programmes, university events, court proceedings, administrative offices and other public gatherings; an immediate end to obstruction, intimidation and harassment while journalists perform their professional duties; and clear commitments from political parties, their affiliated organisations and others to journalists' safety and independent journalism.

The council said journalists' safety was not a special privilege but an essential condition for a free, democratic and accountable society, adding that independent journalism could not function in an atmosphere of fear, threats and violence.

It urged the government, law enforcement agencies, political parties, educational institutions and other concerned parties to take prompt, visible and lawful action against attacks on journalists and adopt effective measures to prevent such incidents in future.

Meanwhile, the Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ) called on Bangladeshi authorities to promptly and transparently investigate the attack on four journalists at Rajshahi University and prosecute those responsible.

In a statement published on CPJ Asia's Facebook and X accounts yesterday, the media rights watchdog expressed concern that university authorities had filed a case with police on October 5 against "unidentified persons", despite reports that video footage clearly identified those involved.

"Bangladeshi authorities must ensure journalists can report from university campuses safely and without fear of violence, and hold those responsible to account," it said.

The attack took place on Sunday night in front of Shaheed Ziaur Rahman Hall, leaving at least 10 people, including four student journalists, injured. It was allegedly carried out by activists of Jatiyatabadi Chhatra Dal, the student wing of the ruling BNP.

According to witnesses, the violence erupted around 8:30pm when a group of JCD activists marched to the hall carrying machetes, hockey sticks, pipes and bats over an ongoing Facebook dispute with a student union leader.

Witnesses identified several JCD leaders among the attackers, including RU unit vice-presidents Ahsan Habib and Shariful Islam, joint general secretary Hasibul Islam, and assistant office secretary Shahriar Alam.

Mob storms

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Mofakkharul said some of the group appeared to have taken part in an earlier protest demanding the VC's resignation.

Campus sources said the protest came amid allegations of irregularities in university appointments and other activities. The VC had previously denied these allegations.

Speaking to The Daily Star, Jawadul said some of those who entered his office appeared to be linked to local contractors, while others were outsiders allegedly backed by political groups.

He said they shouted slogans calling him an "Awami League collaborator" and accused him of awarding university contracts to Dhaka-based firms rather than local contractors.

"At one point, they forced me to sign a resignation letter, drove me out of my office and locked it," the VC said.

He added that he had already informed the local administration of the incident and filed an online general diary.

"I have also informed local BNP leaders, and they assured me they would identify those involved and take action against them."

BNP focusing on its polls promises

FROM PAGE 1

Ar-Rahim" before the preamble of the constitution.

The words "nationalism, socialism, democracy and secularism" were replaced with "Absolute trust and faith in the Almighty Allah, nationalism, democracy and socialism meaning economic and social justice", Mahmudul wrote.

The change was incorporated into the constitution through the fifth amendment in 1979.

The 15th amendment, passed during the Awami League regime in 2011, removed "Absolute trust and faith in Almighty Allah" and restored that part of the constitution to the original 1972 wording.

Salahuddin pointed out that the principle of faith in the Almighty was also enshrined in article 8 as a fundamental principle and said even the opposition agreed on the matter.

PLEDGES AND NOTES OF DISSENT

In line with the July charter and its manifesto, the BNP pledged an "election-time, neutral caretaker government" to ensure free and fair national polls and give the system a permanent constitutional and institutional form.

While the caretaker framework is to be settled through discussions based on the July charter, BNP is opposed to involving the judiciary and the president in the system.

The July charter sets out a series of steps for appointing the head of the caretaker government. The process begins with the formation of a five-member panel comprising the prime minister, opposition leader, speaker, deputy speaker from the opposition and a representative of the second-largest opposition party. The panel will select a caretaker chief from a list of nominees submitted by political parties and independents.

If the panel fails to reach a decision, the charter provides for a second step. At one stage, it proposes bringing in an Appellate Division judge and a High Court judge, turning the panel into a seven-member body to vote on a shortlist.

Several parties, including the BNP, objected to this provision.

The BNP also pledged that a person could serve as prime minister for a maximum of 10 years, whether consecutive or non-consecutive.

The July charter, however, says the prime minister cannot simultaneously serve as the party chief, a provision opposed by BNP and its allies.

The party further pledged to ensure a balance of power between the president and prime minister and to strengthen judicial independence.

It proposed introducing a 100-member upper chamber of parliament, with seats distributed in proportion to the number of seats parties secure in the lower house.

Most other parties, however, agreed that the upper chamber should be constituted in proportion to the percentage of votes secured by parties in the national election.

BNP also promised to amend article 70 to allow MPs to vote against their party line except in cases involving no-confidence motions, money bills, constitutional amendments and national security, including wartime situations.

The July charter does not list constitutional amendments or national security as exceptions.

The BNP pledged to enact necessary laws for the formation of the Public Service Commission and Anti-Corruption Commission and for appointments to the Office of the Comptroller and Auditor General. It also proposed transforming the Public Service Commission into a stronger institution for recruitment in education, health and other sectors.

The governor of Bangladesh Bank and the chairperson and members of the Bangladesh Energy Regulatory Commission would be appointed by the government in accordance with law.

A majority of parties in the July charter agreed that the president should appoint the chiefs of the National Human Rights Commission, Information Commission, Bangladesh Press Council, Law Commission and Bangladesh Energy Regulatory Commission, as well as the governor of Bangladesh Bank.

The BNP pledged that the president would appoint the chief justice from among the two most senior judges of the Appellate Division, in accordance with the constitutional provision.

A majority of the parties in the July charter, however, agreed that the president should appoint the senior-most Appellate Division judge as chief justice.

The BNP also proposed appointing an Ombudsman. The "Tax Ombudsman", introduced during a previous BNP tenure, was widely considered effective. The July charter proposes that a search committee headed by the speaker recommend names to the president for appointment as the Ombudsman.

BNP'S OTHER PLEDGES

BNP's manifesto promises that one of the deputy speakers in each chamber of parliament would be nominated from the opposition.

It also pledged that opposition MPs would chair the Public Accounts Committee, Privileges Committee, Estimates Committee and Committee on Public Undertakings of the National Parliament. Chairpersons of other standing committees would also be appointed from the opposition in proportion to the number of seats they hold in parliament.

The BNP pledged that the Supreme Court would have a permanent seat in the capital, while the chief justice could establish permanent benches in each division. It also proposed further strengthening the Supreme Judicial Council and expanding its jurisdiction.

Necessary constitutional amendments would be made to place control over the service terms and conditions of subordinate court judges entirely with the Supreme Court.

A permanent prosecution/attorney service would gradually be established at the district level through law.

On the president's power of pardon, the BNP proposed adding a constitutional provision stating that the president may grant pardon, reprieve and respite for any sentence and remit, suspend or reduce any sentence, but must exercise that power in accordance with standards, principles and procedures prescribed by law.

Local government elections would be held under the direct supervision of the Election Commission, with necessary laws enacted for the purpose.

Appropriate laws would govern the financial management of local government institutions to ensure their effective autonomy, while the relationship between local government bodies and government officers and employees working with them would also be determined by law.

The BNP proposed forming a police commission to ensure professionalism and accountability and make police services more people-friendly. The relevant ordinance would be reviewed, reformed and enacted as appropriate law.

It also proposed reviewing in parliament the formation of an independent criminal investigation service.

Existing laws would be properly applied in investigating and prosecuting corruption in the private sector. Subject to parliamentary approval, Bangladesh would join the Open Government Partnership.

Although income tax returns are private documents, BNP proposed allowing the Anti-Corruption Commission or another authorised body to summon them through the court.

The party also pledged to form an independent inquiry commission to identify officials involved in state terror and repression during the July uprising, and to punish officials found responsible for vote rigging and corruption.

It further promised legal and constitutional protection for those who participated in the historic July student-mass uprising of 2024.