



Saima Wazed Put on Leave from WHO Amid Corruption Allegations



Saima Wazed Putul: collected picture

Saima Wazed Putul, the regional director of the World Health Organization's South-East Asia Regional Office (SEARO), has been placed on indefinite leave following corruption allegations, effective 11 July.

The decision comes after Bangladesh's Anti-Corruption Commission (ACC) filed multiple cases against her, accusing her of fraud, forgery, and abuse of power. According to Health Policy Watch, WHO Director-General Dr Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus informed staff via email that Putul had been sent on leave with immediate effect. Dr Catharina Boehme, WHO Assistant Director-General, will act as officer in charge of SEARO and is expected to arrive in New Delhi on Tuesday (15 July).

WHO has not yet issued a public statement on the matter or commented on Putul's future with the organization.

Saima, the daughter of former Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, assumed the WHO role in January 2024 after a controversial election process. Her appointment drew criticism from international health experts and publications over allegations of nepotism and political influence.

On 23 September 2023, The Lancet published a report titled "Criticism over WHO Regional Director Nominee", highlighting concerns about transparency, lack of competition in the election, and possible violations of WHO's ethical standards. According to WHO's own Rules of Procedure (Rule 49), candidates for regional director must possess strong public health credentials and leadership experience. While Saima holds an MSc in clinical psychology and received an honorary doctorate from Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujib Medical University (BSMMU), she lacks formal medical or public health degrees. Her experience has mostly been limited to mental health and autism-related advocacy.

Only two candidates contested the SEARO post, a rare occurrence compared to other WHO regional races. Saima's rival, Dr Shambhu Prasad Acharya of Nepal, who has over 30 years of experience in WHO and a doctorate in public health, reportedly faced diplomatic pressure from Bangladesh to withdraw his nomination. Professor Mukesh Kapila, a former WHO director and global health expert, told Himal Southasian that Bangladesh had been "bullying nations" to ensure an uncontested path for Saima.

These concerns were echoed by The Lancet, which warned that Saima's candidacy could undermine the credibility of both the election and the WHO's regional leadership. The journal pointed out the inherent conflict of interest in her position, as she would be responsible for offering impartial health policy guidance to the government led by her own mother.

The Financial Times also highlighted criticisms, quoting a senior Bangladeshi health policy expert who said her appointment reflected growing politicisation in the country's health sector. "She came from a political family, and her mother is prime minister. Every single work that she does is highlighted [by the government]," the expert said.

The Anti-Corruption Commission formally opened its investigation in January and filed two cases in March. According to ACC Deputy Director Akhtarul Islam, Saima is accused of submitting false academic information during the nomination process, in violation of Sections 468 and 471 of the Penal Code, which address forgery and use of forged documents. She also allegedly misrepresented her professional affiliations, falsely claiming an honorary role at BSMMU, which the university later denied.

Additionally, the ACC alleges that Saima used her influence to collect approximately \$2.8 million from various banks under the name of the Shuchona Foundation, which she previously led. The foundation has reportedly been found to have no actual existence at its listed address. These allegations fall under Section 420 (cheating) and Section 5(2) of the Prevention of Corruption Act of 1947.

Since the charges were filed, Saima has reportedly avoided travel within the WHO's South-East Asia region due to the risk of arrest, particularly if she returns to Bangladesh.