

# Quarantined China returnees go home

MOUJUDUD AHMED SUJAN

The day when all of the 312 returnees from Chinese coronavirus hit city of Wuhan entered the Ashkona Hajj Camp for a mandatory 14-day quarantine was a “horrendous” day for them.

Now, they are in a euphoric sense of freedom as the authorities yesterday cleared them to leave the camp.

“That was a horrendous situation for us! Now I am free to go home,” one of the female returnees told The Daily Star over phone yesterday evening.

On February 1, these Bangladeshis who were stranded in China’s Wuhan -- the epicentre of the COVID-19 [initially was named as novel corona virus] outbreak -- were flown back home in a chartered flight.

As the new deadly virus can sustain up to 14 days without showing any symptom in the host, a 14-day quarantine is the current global practice for anybody who visits Wuhan or gets in touch with anybody infected.

As part of the process, authorities kept all of these returnees quarantined inside the camp for the last 14 days.

The health staffers started the final screening process at four desks set up at the camp around 5:00pm yesterday.

The authorities also provided a health certificate to all of them after no symptoms were found in them during the screening.

The Institute of Epidemiology, Disease Control and Research (IEDCR) supervised the process.

“We have screened all of the returnees in the camp. None of them had any symptoms. They are free to leave the camp now,” Dr ASM Alamgir, principal scientific officer at the IEDCR told The Daily Star last night.

“But those who want to stay here at night for any reason will be provided accommodation till tomorrow (today) morning,” he added.

The IEDCR will keep contact with the returnees for a few more days.

Meanwhile, Prof Meerjady Sabrina Flora, director at the IEDCR, informed that they have tested samples from 62 people, including a Chinese citizen, in their laboratory.

None of them were tested COVID-19 positive, she said

“Bangladesh is not among the high risk countries for COVID-19 outbreak, though we have some risks. However, we have nothing to worry,” Prof Flora said.

She also said that the IEDCR is able to provide test result within two to three hours as they have collected new reagents for detecting COVID-19 recently.

Besides, the center for disease control (CDC) under the directorate general of health services (DGHS) has officially asked for ten thermal scanners to World Health Organisation.

“We have sent a demand letter. Our capacity would increase once we receive these machines,” Dr Shahnila Ferdousi, director of CDC told The Daily Star recently.

## 8 of 9 UK coronavirus sufferers leave hospital

AFP, London

Eight of the nine people diagnosed with the new coronavirus in Britain have left hospital having now tested negatively twice for the virus, NHS England said yesterday.

“I want to stress that any individuals who are discharged from hospital are now well and do not pose any public health risk,” said Health Secretary Matt Hancock.

The final person is still being treated at Guy’s and St Thomas’s Hospital in central London.

In addition, all 94 people who were quarantined at Arrowe Park hospital in north west England after being flown back from Wuhan have now left the site.

# Special tribunals

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Dhaka in an email response to The Daily Star on January 20.

“Either Bangladesh must show significant and increased efforts to meet the minimum standards to eliminate trafficking in persons and achieve a Tier 2 ranking or risk an automatic downgrade to Tier 3,” it mentioned.

Any country ranked in Tier 3 is subject to severe restrictions and even full curtailment of non-humanitarian, non-trade-related assistance as set forth in Section 110(d)(1) of the US Trafficking Victims Protection Act (TVPA), it said.

Additionally, the US president may also withhold funding for Bangladesh government officials or employees for participation in educational and cultural exchanges.

He can also instruct the US executive director of each multilateral development bank and the International Monetary Fund to vote against, and use his or her best efforts to deny, any loans or other uses of the institutions’ funds to Bangladesh. Only the president himself can waive these restrictions.

However, US foreign assistance to support the people of Bangladesh through NGOs and other civil society organisations is not restricted under the TVPA, the embassy noted.

### WHAT’S TIP?

US law defines TIP as the recruitment, harbouring, transportation, provision, or obtaining of a person for labour or services, through the use of force, fraud, or coercion for the purpose of subjection to involuntary servitude, peonage, debt bondage, or slavery.

It also includes a situation where a commercial sex act is induced by force, fraud, or coercion, or in which the person induced to perform such an act has not attained 18 years of age.

“A victim need not be physically transported from one location to another for the crime to fall within this definition,” according to the US State Department annual TIP report, published in June 2019.

It ranks countries in four categories. Tier 1 rank means the countries fully compliant with the minimum standards in protecting trafficking victims; Tier 2 means the countries not fully compliant but making significant efforts.

Tier 2 list means the countries not fully complying with the minimum standards in protecting trafficking victims; the absolute number of victims of severe forms of trafficking is very significant and there is a failure to provide evidence of increasing efforts to combat severe forms of trafficking.

Tier 3 means the countries not making significant efforts to combat trafficking.

### POSITION OF BANGLADESH

Bangladesh has been ranked in Tier 2 for the last three years, with the TIP report of 2019 saying the country does not fully meet the minimum standards for the elimination of trafficking.

However, it says the country is making significant efforts to do so. The efforts included adopting a national action plan to combat trafficking, convicting traffickers, initiating an investigation into a police officer accused of child sex trafficking, and continuing to investigate some potential trafficking crimes against the Rohingya refugees.

However, it said, the government

did not demonstrate overall increasing efforts compared to the previous reporting period. The government identified significantly fewer trafficking victims and did not consistently refer victims to care, and reports of it doing so were far fewer than the number of victims identified.

It also says victim care remained insufficient; Rohingya and foreign trafficking victims could not access protective services, and the government did not have shelter for adult male victims.

According to the TIP report, official complicity in trafficking crimes remained a serious problem, and the government did not report taking any action against some high-profile allegations.

Also, it says, the government continued to allow employers to charge high recruitment fees to migrant workers and did not consistently address illegally operating recruitment sub-agents, which left workers vulnerable to trafficking.

Quoting observers, the report said some police took bribes and sexual favours to ignore potential trafficking crimes at brothels, and some labour attaches, local politicians, judges, and police requested bribes from victims and their families to pursue cases.

Some officials from district employment and manpower offices allegedly facilitated human trafficking, and some traffickers in rural areas had political connections that enabled them to operate with impunity, it said.

Campaigners say though the government enacted the Prevention and Suppression of Human Trafficking Act in 2012, it has not yet established the special tribunals as suggested by the act.

As per the law, the investigation of alleged traffickers will complete in 90 days and the trial in 180 days, but that is hardly complied, they say.

According to an analysis by Brac Migration Programme, 4,529 cases were filed under the law between 2012 and February 2019, but only 103 were settled -- demonstrating the extremely low rate of conviction.

Human rights lawyer Salma Ali said it is good news that the government is going to establish special tribunals.

“However, so far, the main problem that we have observed is the poor investigation,” she said.

“The masterminds of the trafficking gangs remain untouched. Basically, some aides of the trafficking gangs came under investigation.”

Law Minister Anisul Huq said, “We hope we can come out of the situation as we are setting up special tribunals for this.”

The US Embassy in Dhaka said Bangladesh has to significantly increase prosecutions and convictions for trafficking offenses, particularly of labour traffickers and complicit government officials, while strictly respecting due process if it wants to improve its ranking.

Bangladesh also has to take steps to eliminate recruitment fees charged to workers by licensed labour recruiters and ensure recruitment fees are paid by employers and improve identification of trafficking victims -- male and female within Bangladesh or repatriated from abroad -- and referral to care, it said.



A woman looking at a wall that appears to be an incarnation of the classified advert page of a newspaper yesterday. Owner of the property in the capital's Shantibagh said all attempts to keep the wall clean have been futile.

PHOTO: ANISUR RAHMAN

# Justice Dept drops probe of ex-FBI official McCabe

REUTERS, Washington

The US Justice Department on Friday dropped its criminal investigation of a top target of President Donald Trump, former No. 2 FBI official Andrew McCabe, at the tail end of a week in which the US law-enforcement agency has come under extraordinary pressure from the president.

Since he was fired by former Attorney General Jeff Sessions in March 2018, McCabe has often been a punching bag for Trump, and the department's decision not to charge him could further stoke Trump's ire.

Trump has spent the week criticizing prosecutors, jurors and the judge in a separate case involving his longtime political adviser, Roger Stone, raising questions about whether Trump is eroding the independence of the U.S. legal system.

Trump was irked by the decision, said a source close to the White House. He did not comment as he left Washington for his Mar-a-Lago resort in Florida.

McCabe criticized the Justice Department for taking two years on the case, which examined whether he misled investigators about his decision to share internal communications with a reporter during the 2016 presidential election. Prosecutors had been indicating since July that the investigation was largely complete.

“It is an absolute disgrace that they took two years and put my family through this experience for two years before they finally drew the obvious conclusion and one they could have drawn a long time ago,” he said on CNN.

US Judge Reggie Walton said at a hearing in September that the delays

made it seem like the department was facing political pressure.

A lifelong Republican who worked at the FBI for 20 years, McCabe played a crucial role in the bureau’s investigations of Democratic presidential candidate Hillary Clinton and Russian interference in the 2016 US election.

In campaign speeches, interviews and tweets, Trump accused McCabe of conflicts of interest because his wife Jill McCabe, a Democrat, received donations for an unsuccessful 2015 Virginia state senate campaign from a Clinton ally.

McCabe questioned whether the decision to drop the investigation had anything to do with the ongoing fracas over Stone, a veteran Republican operative who was found guilty in November of lying to Congress, obstruction and witness intimidation.

# Europe reports its first death

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the ruling Communist Party with a huge challenge in curbing its spread while minimising damage to the world's second-largest economy.

Beijing's latest figures showed 66,492 cases and 1,523 deaths, mostly in Hubei. Outside mainland China there have been more than 500 cases in some two dozen countries and territories, with four deaths - in Japan, Chinese-ruled Hong Kong, the Philippines and France.

Egypt reported its first case on Friday, the first in Africa.

In the French case, the Chinese man died at the Bichat hospital in Paris of a lung infection due to the flu-like virus, authorities said.

“We have to get our health system ready to face a possible pandemic propagation of the virus, and therefore the spreading of the virus across France,” said Health Minister Agnes Buzyn.

Robin Thompson, an expert in mathematical epidemiology at Britain's University of Oxford, said that with nearly 50 cases in Europe, a death was not surprising. “The most important thing to point out, however, is that there still hasn’t been sustained person-to-person transmission in Europe,” he added.

After an extended Lunar New Year holiday, China urgently needs to get back to work. But some cities remain in lockdown, streets are deserted, employees are nervous, and travel bans and quarantine orders are in place around the country.

Those returning to Beijing from the holiday have been ordered to undergo a 14-day self-quarantine to prevent the virus’ spread. Many factories are yet

to re-open, disrupting global supply chains for everyone from smartphone makers to car manufacturers.

While there has been some hope expressed this week that the disease may be peaking in China, numbers keep rising and a trend has been hard to discern, especially after a reclassification that widened the definition of cases.

The biggest cluster outside China has been on a cruise ship, the Diamond Princess, quarantined off Japan's Yokohama. Out of about 3,700 passengers and crew on board, 285 people have tested positive and been sent to hospital.

The United States said on Saturday it plans to send an aircraft to pick up American passengers and take them back home where they face another two weeks of isolation “out of an abundance of caution”.

Passengers on another cruise ship, which finally docked in Cambodia after being rejected by five other countries, were taking their saga in good heart.

“Everyone says ‘poor you’. But there was no poor you. We had free internet and free wine. We had three-course meals. There was so much choice,” said Zahra Jennings, a retired staff nurse from Britain who had been on the MS Westerdam with more than 2,300 passengers and crew.

The United States has imposed some of the toughest curbs on travellers from China, going beyond World Health Organization (WHO) recommendations and offending Beijing.

WHO on Friday defended China following US claims of a lack of transparency in Beijing’s response to

the outbreak.

Larry Kudlow, head of the US National Economic Council, had said on Thursday: “We’re a little disappointed in the lack of transparency coming from the Chinese”.

Kudlow also said that Chinese President Xi Jinping had assured US President Donald Trump that Beijing would accept US help, but “they won’t let us”.

But Michael Ryan, head of WHO’s health emergencies programme, listed various ways in which he said China had collaborated with the international community.

“From our perspective, we have a government that’s cooperating with us... I’m finding it hard to square that with Kudlow’s comments,” Ryan told reporters in Geneva.

In Hong Kong, which has seen months of anti-Beijing protests, hundreds marched yesterday to demand full closure of the border with mainland China and to oppose plans to turn some buildings into quarantine hubs.

The sickness, now officially labelled Covid-19, has killed around 2% of those infected. Cases have spread faster than other respiratory viruses this century.

A senior Chinese official sought to project optimism.

“The impact of the epidemic on the Chinese economy will be short term and temporary,” foreign affairs vice minister Qin Gang said at the Munich Security Conference.

“When the epidemic is over, the subdued consumer demand will be released rapidly and the economy will rebound strongly.”

# Work hindered by plastic waste

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Karnaphuli.

The four-year-project is supposed to be completed in 2022, said CPA sources.

In October 2018, excavation began with three small dredgers. But dredging was hampered by the polythene stockpiled in the riverbed, said Commander M Arifur Rahman, chief hydrographer at the CPA and director of the project.

The contractor had been facing problems from the beginning as the cutter blades were getting stuck due to the large volume of polythene.

“It slowed down the work progress as we could dredge for only an hour a day whereas we were supposed to dredge for 18 hours,” Arifur said.

“At present, the dredging is being conducted with a local grab dredger,” he said, adding that around 18 percent works of the project have been completed so far.”

Arifur said polythene bags dumped in 37 canals of the city eventually end up in Karnaphuli river.

So, the dredging would be of no use in the long run if dumping polythene in the canals cannot be stopped, he added.

This correspondent visited Chaktai Khal found it to be chock-a-block with polythene and plastic wastes. The layer of waste was so thick that anyone could mistake it for a landfill.

The Chaktai Khal which begins from Bahaddarhat in the city and flows along Chawkbazar and Bakalia areas to meet Karnaphuli river in Chaktai area.

Residents in these areas suffer due to waterlogging every year during the rainy season as the canal cannot contain the flow of water as it remains almost filled with polythene and plastic wastes, said the residents.

Raju Barua, a resident of Ghasia Para, said he did not see the Chattogram City Corporation (CCC) cleaning the canal in the last six months.

“The canal should be cleaned up once a month but the CCC officials do not even clean it twice a year,” he said.

Contacted, Mohammad Shamsuddauha, chief executive officer

at the CCC, said it is true that a layer of polythene has been stored in the Karnaphuli riverbed but those were not stored merely in the last two or five years.

Asked why they do not clean the canals on a regular basis, he said they do not have enough logistic support and manpower to do so.

“In many areas, banks of canals are grabbed. So, our vehicles cannot go through these areas,” he said.

The CCC CEO said as the Chattogram Development Authority (CDA) has undertaken a project to reduce waterlogging in the city, it is their responsibility to clean up the canal.

Although CDA has initiated the project, Bangladesh Army has been implementing it.

Contacted, Lt Col Md Shah Ali, project director, said last year they cleaned most of the canals, including Chaktai canal, but those have been filled with polythene again.

“Cleaning up the canals is not the ultimate solution, people will have to be conscious,” he said.

## Aviation takes a hit

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The carrier to cancel its flight twice during the time.

A plane of China Eastern flew to China from Dhaka without any passenger and had to cancel two other flights, officials said.

Dragon Air also cancelled five flights from Dhaka to China from January 21-February 4, officials at Hazrat Shahjalal International Airport (HSIA) said.

“However, the number of people coming from China has increased recently,” said Kamrul Islam, general manager (public relations), at US-Bangla Airlines.

Talking to reporters in Sylhet, Mesbah Uddin Ahmed, CEO of US-Bangla Airlines, said, “We are aware of the risks, but we will continue our flight operation, considering the interest of Bangladeshi citizens who want to return to the country.”

US-Bangla Airlines use a 164-seat Boeing 737 to fly between Dhaka and Guangzhou. According to HSIA officials, US-Bangla Airlines operated a total of 13 flights on the Dhaka-Guangzhou route from January 25-February 4. The airlines carried about 128 passengers against the capacity of 2,132.

In the thirteen flights returning from Guangzhou, the airlines carried around 1,156 passengers.

According to HSIA sources, China Eastern Airlines carried around 15 passengers on an average in each flight from Dhaka during the period.

Aviation expert Kazi Wahidul Alam said before the outbreak, around 6,000 people travelled to China every week.

International Civil Aviation Organisation (ICAO) on Thursday reported that 70 airlines have cancelled all international flights in and out of China and 50 others have reduced their operations.

Taslim Amin Shovon, CEO of tour operator Bizcon Holidays and former director of Tour Operators Association of Bangladesh, told The Daily Star that he was forced to cancel several trips in Sikkim, Bhutan, Darjeeling in February and March.

Abdus Salam Aref, former secretary general of Association of Travel Agents of Bangladesh, said number of outbound passengers had reduced by around 70-80 percent while the number of inbound passengers had reduced by 35-40 percent.

“We had plans to visit Sikkim and Thailand in March. But now safety of my family members is the priority to me,” said Akbor Hossain, a businessman and resident of capital’s Jigatola.

“The effect of coronavirus has spread throughout the world. We can’t deny the fact that it will have some impact on Bangladesh,” Mohibul Haque, senior secretary of the civil aviation and tourism ministry, said on February 13 while talking to reporters at his office.

## Academicians

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anytime, anywhere, but do they stop anything?”

Asked if there was skilled manpower for managing the task, he said, “Experienced university teachers will conduct the exams. No one needs further training. Computers were introduced for checking copies back in 1997 when I was the dean, many had reservations at that time but they could not stop the process.”

About whether the UGC will form a committee to conduct the central admission tests, he said, “Yes. We hope to speed up the process [of forming a committee] in March.

“Admission tests are not the UGC’s responsibility. We are just facilitating it to serve a national interest. We will come up with a formula after considering different aspects through committee meetings.”

Dr Tanzimuddin pointed to the overall situation of governance in Bangladesh. “It becomes visible that PEC, JSC, SSC and HSC exams are marred by corruption and question leaks.”

“What if a student is sick on the day of the exam? He or she will not get the chance to study at a public university ever again,” he said.

“I believe that centralised exams cannot be held for universities because not all universities teach the same subjects. How will these things be coordinated? It’s true that a student needs to spend extra money to attend multiple university entrance exams... Question is, can the UGC make such a big decision showing this as a logic? Have they done any research? Have they taken up any pilot project? ‘We will solve problems when they occur’ -- is not an appropriate way to make decisions related to the education system of the country,” Tanzimuddin said.

He added, “It might be disastrous, not for well-off students, but what about those who struggle to prepare for the exams? The matter should not be taken lightly.”

“Perhaps, first, they can take a group of universities of a particular region or those of the same nature and see how it goes,” suggested the academician.