

Give details of contingency plan

HC asks govt over coronavirus concerns

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

The High Court yesterday sought detailed information on the steps taken by the government to contain any possible outbreak of coronavirus in the country.

The court asked Deputy Attorney General Abdullah-Al-Mahmud Bashar to collect information from the director general of the Directorate General of Health Services (DGHS) and the health ministry and submit a report to it by Monday.

It asked DAG Bashar to get information on whether there was adequate equipment to screen people for coronavirus at the ports, treatment facilities at the hospitals across the country and steps taken by the government to create awareness among the people about the virus.

The HC bench of Justice FRM Nazmul Ahasan and Justice KM Kamrul Kader passed the order on a suo moto move, following a report run by Bangla daily Prothom Alo yesterday on the risk

of a coronavirus outbreak.

Supreme Court lawyer Ishrat Hasan placed the report before the HC bench and sought its necessary order.

The government finalised an emergency preparedness plan to tackle any possible spread of coronavirus in the country.

The move comes as coronavirus continues to spread across the world, claiming lives every day.

Experts say Bangladesh also faces risks of coronavirus spread as many other countries in the region have already reported such cases. They pointed out that people from those countries were travelling to Bangladesh, where preparations to tackle the virus seem inadequate.

The US State Department on Tuesday put Bangladesh and 24 other countries in a list of "high-priority countries" in the coronavirus fallout. It also announced a commitment of \$37 million to help the countries address the threat of COVID-19 (coronavirus), according to its website.



Two tourists from Argentina wearing respiratory masks walk while holding a tourist map in Piazza Duomo in Milan yesterday. Italy has closed all schools and universities until March 15 to help combat the spread of the novel coronavirus crisis.

PHOTO: AFP

Russian planes targeted in wave of bomb threats

AFP, Moscow

Three Russian passenger planes flying domestic routes were targeted with anonymous bomb threats while airborne, local media said yesterday.

Anonymous messages were passed to emergency services and a Moscow airport warning that the planes had a bomb on board, Russian news agencies said.

One plane was flying from Saint Petersburg to the Crimean city of Simferopol for Rossiya airline, Interfax news agency reported.

Threats also targeted Aeroflot planes flying from Moscow's Sheremetyevo airport to the northwestern city of Syktyvkar and the Siberian city of Omsk.

Crews opted not to divert the planes, which landed safely at their destinations, and no bombs were found on board.

President Vladimir Putin's spokesman Dmitry Peskov said the

security services were working to identify the culprit.

"Let's hope that sooner or later they will be caught and punished in accordance with the law," Peskov told reporters.

A spokesman for Sheremetyevo airport refused to comment to AFP on the bomb threats and spokespeople for Russia's Transport Police said they were unaware of the incidents.

On Tuesday, two Russian planes flying to Moscow from the far eastern city of Vladivostok and the Siberian city of Novosibirsk made emergency landings while en route due to anonymous bomb threats.

In recent months Russia has seen a raft of bomb hoaxes that forced the evacuation of courts, schools and malls.

The warnings of planted bombs, all of them false, have been sent to numerous Russian cities, targeting the capital in particular.

Independence

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exaggeration "if we say that the whole country was shocked by the Pirojpur court incident".

He added that the judiciary would have to face consequences for this.

Lawyer Jyotirmoy Barua said what happened in the Pirojpur court was unimaginable and unprecedented. "This is a clear instance of the government's interference in the judiciary."

In a press release on Wednesday, Transparency International Bangladesh said it considered the incident rare in the history of the country's judiciary.

The stand release order was issued on Tuesday, hours after Judge Mannan ordered the authorities to send Awal and his wife to jail in the three graft cases filed by the ACC last year.

The incident triggered a storm of criticism across the country as well as in social media.

Meanwhile, supporters of Awal, also president of Pirojpur district AL, yesterday brought out a procession in Pirojpur town, demanding withdrawal of the graft cases against Awal and his wife, president of district Mohila Awami League.

After the procession, local AL leaders and supporters of Awal at a rally said the cases was ill-motivated and aimed at destroying the couple's political careers.

A section of lawyers, who allegedly back Awal, yesterday boycotted Pirojpur court as Judge Mannan did not leave Pirojpur. The court did not go into session, reports our Pirojpur correspondent.

Awal, the former MP of Pirojpur-1, is accused in all three cases filed for obtaining lease of khas (government) land using fake documents. His wife is an accused in one of the cases.

On December 23 last year, the ACC approved the cases against the couple. The following day, the anti-graft watchdog asked the Special Branch of police to take steps so that the couple cannot leave the country.

On January 7, Awal and his wife got ad-interim bail from the HC for eight

weeks.

After the end of their bail tenure, the couple on Tuesday appeared before the court of Judge Mannan with bail prayers.

After their bail prayers' rejection, Awal's lawyers declared that they would boycott the court for an indefinite period. His supporters also took to the streets.

Hours after the order, Judge Mannan was stand released and attached to the law ministry.

Joint District and Sessions Judge Nahid Nasrin, who was given the responsibility of acting district and sessions judge of Pirojpur, granted them bail later in the day after the couple moved a review petition.

A day after his bail, Awal alleged that being influenced by SM Rezaul Karim, Pirojpur-1 lawmaker and also the fisheries and livestock minister, Judge Mannan "illegally rejected their bail prayers".

At a press briefing in Pirojpur, he also alleged that the ACC had filed the cases being influenced by Rezaul.

Contacted, Rezaul told this newspaper that the allegations brought against him were completely false.

The HC on Wednesday questioned the legality of the government decision.

It also issued a rule asking the law secretary to explain within a week as to why the decision about Judge Mannan should not be declared illegal.

Meanwhile, describing the Pirojpur judge's stand release as an issue of the law ministry, AL General Secretary Obaidul Quader yesterday said the government believes in the rule of law and independence of the judiciary, reports UNB.

"If there's any misunderstanding between the law ministry and the judiciary, they will have to resolve it themselves. We won't comment as a party," he said at a views-exchange meeting with leaders of AL Dhaka city north unit at the party chief's Dhanmondi office.

Kuwait won't require

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The expatriates, who are scheduled to fly to Kuwait within the next couple of weeks, went to the Gulf country's Dhaka embassy. But the embassy officials referred them to the IEDCR for certificates.

Visiting the IEDCR office in Mohakhali, the expatriates learnt that it was not responsible for issuing any health certificate.

Speaking to The Daily Star, Kamal Hossain from Manikganj said, "We went to the embassy and now we are here [IEDCR office]. But the officials are saying that they don't know anything. Where should we go now?"

Kamal is scheduled to fly to Kuwait on March 12.

Md Haris from Feni demanded an immediate solution to the problem. He said he would be in deep trouble if he could not take a flight to Kuwait tomorrow night.

Like Kamal and Haris, many others expressed concern as their dates of departure were not far away.

Meanwhile, Biman Bangladesh Airlines yesterday said passengers bound for Kuwait must obtain certificates from any of the 38 medical centres, approved by the Kuwait embassy in Dhaka, mentioning that they were free from coronavirus.

In a press release, the national carrier said passengers must show the certificates before being issued boarding cards at the airports.

Response slack, inadequate

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and sea ports. The scanners have not been purchased yet.

Since the novel coronavirus emerged in the Chinese city of Wuhan in December, it has spread to 90 countries and claimed over 3,000 lives, mostly in China.

Also on Sunday, the health ministry formed 11-member committees led by deputy commissioners in every district, and 10-member committees led by upazila nirbahi officers in every upazila. The committees were formed to implement the government's emergency response plan. The district- and upazila-level committees also are yet to hold a meeting.

"There might be other pressing matters for the government. However, the [coronavirus] issue should be prioritised," said noted virologist Prof Nazrul Islam.

The former vice chancellor of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujib Medical University said the inclusion of top policymakers in the national committee was a good initiative, but several independent experts and journalists should also be in the committee.

Talking to The Daily Star, Mahmudul Helal Hossain, deputy commissioner of Dinajpur, said they would hold a meeting on Sunday.

A national plan was drawn up mentioning four levels of emergency. The country is on level one, meaning there is no confirmed coronavirus case. If the situation deteriorates and the country has 10 confirmed coronavirus cases, the level would be raised to two, DGHS Director

General Prof Abul Kalam Azad said.

In that situation, all the coronavirus patients would be isolated and treated in hospitals.

The emergency level-3 means the number of confirmed cases is more than 10 with some of them infected within the country. If that is the case, Prof Azad said, the government would lock down certain areas, where infections would be reported.

Level-4 means there is an epidemic. "In such a condition, local administrations would lock down more areas having high number of patients and quarantine the suspected cases."

However, three experts told The Daily Star last night that they were skeptical about the government's ability to implement the plan.

"The first task is to prepare the people to execute the plan. Campaigns should be launched immediately. We have not seen any such initiative yet," Prof Muzaherul Huq, founder of the public health foundation of Bangladesh, told The Daily Star.

He added that the hospitals themselves posed the risks of spreading the virus. "This virus is highly contagious. A single coronavirus patient will put other patients of the hospital at risk. It is a faulty and risky plan."

Anyone who is arriving in Bangladesh from any countries with an outbreak must be quarantined for a certain period, he said.

"A makeshift hospital can be set up on Tongi Ijtema ground or at the army stadium."

He urged the government to be

more transparent in this situation.

Prof Saif Ullah Munshi, chairman of virology department at BSMMU, said, "Many countries suffered more because they hid information about the outbreak and did not take the outbreak seriously from the beginning. We should not make those mistakes."

Shahnila Ferdousi, line director of Centre for Disease Control at DGHS, yesterday told The Daily Star that the government in last November distributed around 1,000 protective gowns for medical personnel at different hospitals. The DGHS last week wrote to the ministry seeking to purchase 1 lakh more.

The DGHS also sought more masks, heavy-duty glasses, gloves, and hand sanitisers. She claimed that the stock for the equipment was large enough.

Considering the global situation, experts suggested the government give the issue the highest priority.

Asked about the national committee's progress so far, Prof Azad said, "The inter-ministerial meeting will be held soon."

He added that health ministry held a meeting with the divisional chiefs of the administration.

On preparations at Kuwait Moitree hospital, he said it would be completed by tomorrow.

The Daily Star called Health Minister Zahid Maleque and Health Secretary Ashadul Islam several times, but they didn't answer the phone.

Meanwhile, the High Court yesterday asked the government to inform it by Monday the measures taken prevent a coronavirus outbreak.

290.5m students out of school

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members developed symptoms.

Switzerland reported its first death from the outbreak yesterday, while Bosnia and South Africa confirmed their first cases and Greece's cases surged after 21 travellers recently returned from a bus trip to Israel and Egypt tested positive for the virus.

The vast majority of global deaths and infections are in China, where the virus first emerged late last year, prompting the country to quarantine entire cities, temporarily shut factories and close schools indefinitely.

As the virus has spread, other countries have also implemented extraordinary measures, with Unesco saying Wednesday that 13 countries have closed schools, affecting 290.5 million children, while nine others have implemented localised closures.

While temporary school closures during crises are not new, Unesco chief Audrey Azoulay said, "the global scale and speed of the current educational disruption is unparalleled and, if prolonged, could threaten the right to education."

Italy on Wednesday ordered schools and universities shut until March 15, ramping up its response as the national death toll rose to 107, the deadliest outbreak outside China.

South Korea -- second to China in terms of infections with cases jumping past 6,000 yesterday -- has postponed the start of the next term until March 23.

In Japan, nearly all schools are closed

after Prime Minister Shinzo Abe called for classes to be cancelled through March and spring break, slated for late March through early April.

Schools have also shut in Iran, where 107 people have died from the disease -- alongside Italy, the deadliest outbreak outside China.

ECONOMIC THREAT

Infections are now rising faster abroad than they are in China, where 31 more deaths and 139 new cases were reported yesterday. China's toll now stands at 3,012, with over 80,000 infections.

AFP reporters saw a handful of people trickling back into Wuhan, the quarantined city at the centre of the epidemic, at the train station this week.

Beijing is now concerned about importing cases, with 20 infections brought from abroad so far -- prompting several cities to require people arriving from hard-hit countries to self-quarantine.

Japan announced yesterday that a state visit by Chinese President Xi Jinping this spring had been postponed because containing the epidemic was "the biggest challenge" for the two countries.

China, the world's second largest economy, has been badly hit by the outbreak, which has also rumbled global stock markets, with Europe's major exchanges sinking again yesterday.

The IMF said it was making \$50 billion in aid available for low-income and emerging-market countries to fight

the epidemic, which it sees as a "serious threat" that would slow global growth to below last year's 2.9 percent.

"At a time of uncertainty... it is better to do more than to do not enough," IMF chief Kristalina Georgieva said.

In the United States, lawmakers reached a deal to provide more than \$8 billion to fight the outbreak.

Thousands of people were stranded on the Grand Princess off the California coast Wednesday as officials delayed its return to carry out tests on people on board.

A 71-year-old man who had been aboard the same ship during its previous voyage to Mexico died after contracting COVID-19.

The vessel belongs to Princess Cruises, the same company which operated a coronavirus-stricken ship held off Japan last month on which more than 700 people on board tested positive, with six dying from the disease.

The US and other governments have taken extraordinary measures to contain the outbreak.

Japan will quarantine all arrivals from China and South Korea for two weeks, while the United Arab Emirates warned its citizens to "avoid travelling".

New measures in Italy -- where 11 towns with 50,000 have been under quarantine -- include a month-long nationwide ban on fan attendance at sports events, and advising people to avoid greetings like kissing on the cheek or shaking hands.

CORONAVIRUS FEARS

Australian man tasered in toilet paper scrap

AFP, Sydney

A fight over toilet roll ended with a man being tasered, Australian police said yesterday, as coronavirus concerns drive panic buying.

Police were called to a store in the New South Wales town of Tamworth, about four hours drive north of Sydney, after the man allegedly lashed out and attacked another customer and a worker.

Over 50 people have been confirmed to have the virus in Australia so far with the latest cases including an eight-month-old baby in Adelaide.

Coronavirus fears have triggered runs on several products, including hand sanitisers and face masks, with images of shoppers stacking trolleys with toilet rolls spreading on social media.

Captain Mashrafe

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time the captain fantastic leads Bangladesh out onto the field. Mashrafe confirmed yesterday that he is stepping down from the captaincy, but will still fight it out for his place and that he is not done yet as a player.

His teammates will be looking to give a perfect send-off by winning the 50th match under his leadership, which saw them become a formidable squad from 2015 up until 2019. Bangladesh reached the quarterfinals of the 2015 ICC World Cup in Australia, won series against India, Pakistan and South Africa at home and also reached the semifinal of the ICC Champions Trophy in England in 2017. Now also a member of parliament, Mashrafe has also been the iconic image in Bangladesh for his leadership qualities both on and off the field.

Bangladesh, who have already won the series by virtue of winning the first two games, will be looking for a clean sweep against a rather demotivated Zimbabwe side.

Mashrafe, since 2010, has led Bangladesh in ODI in two stints and is the most successful, having won 49 of 87 matches. In his first tenure in year 2010, the right-arm pacer led Bangladesh to three wins in seven matches against England in Bristol, Ireland and then against New Zealand at home. With around three years' gap Mashrafe was again given charge to lead Bangladesh in ODIs in 2014 and has since led in 46 wins in 80 games.

Meanwhile, the Bangladesh team management will tinker the playing eleven as pacer Mustafizur Rahman and all-rounder Mohammad Saifuddin are set return for today's game, replacing two under-performing pacers in the second ODI, Al-Amin Hossain and Shafiqul Islam.

Shafiqul, however, left the Tigers' camp to be with his ailing father who was admitted to the ICU yesterday morning. Meanwhile, there was talk of resting the experienced Mushfiqur Rahim for the third and final ODI as the team management wanted to give opportunities to players who will be touring Pakistan for the lone ODI.

But it will be interesting to see whether Mushfiqur finally plays the game today, as Mashrafe hinted that Mushfiqur should be given full priority for his contributions behind the wins of Bangladesh.

Zimbabwe, on the other hand, will also look to win the last ODI and draw confidence from their performance in the second ODI which the visitors went agonisingly close to winning in chase of a huge target of 323 runs, falling short by just four runs.

It is expected to be a full house at the north-eastern city after the attendance in the first two ODIs remained low.

Modi confirms

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Vardhan Shringla's two-day visit to Dhaka ended.

Hasina invited Modi to attend the launch of the birth centenary celebrations of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman during her visit to Delhi in October last year.

"Our Prime Minister has accepted the invite and he will undertake the visit to Bangladesh," Kumar said.

He said, "We will share more details [of the Indian PM's visit] in due course."

There have been speculations on Modi's visit against the backdrop of Delhi's violence over protest against the Citizenship Amendment Act. Some leftist and Islamic political parties had demanded that the government cancels Modi's visit.

However, the government has firmly said that India had made major contributions to the liberation war of Bangladesh and is the biggest friend of Bangladesh. It said that Modi's visit to the birth centennial of Bangabandhu is a must, and that the government will pay him the highest honour.

Meanwhile, the Indian PM's visit to Brussels in Belgium, for the India-European Union Summit has been postponed due to the worldwide outbreak of coronavirus, Kumar said.

The health authorities of India and Belgium suggested that travelling must not take place at present, he said, adding, "So, it has been decided that the summit will be rescheduled on a mutually convenient date."

Elizabeth Warren's White House bid misfires

AFP, Washington

Elizabeth Warren rose in the Democratic presidential nomination race on policy strengths but in recent months her campaign slipped into political quicksand, overshadowed by two rivals: one a radical populist, the other more moderate.

On Tuesday, the 70-year-old Massachusetts senator, a combination of ebullient campaign trail charm and schoolmarmish determination, suffered her worst setback yet, a multi-state thrashing at the polls by fellow candidates Bernie Sanders and Joe

Biden.

With 18 of 50 statewide contests complete -- 14 of them on Super Tuesday -- Warren placed first or second in none of them, including her home state of Massachusetts, a clear embarrassment.

Onetime nomination rival Andrew Yang, a tech entrepreneur who quit the race last month, weighed in on Twitter: "Elizabeth Warren deserves to be doing better than this."

Her transparency about her campaign's costly health care plan may have spooked voters. Perhaps her debate stage evisceration of Michael

Bloomberg made her appear too strident, as critics claimed.

Some may have rejected her about-face on accepting donations from deep-pocketed political groups. Or are Americans just not ready to elect a woman president?

There are several possible reasons why Warren surged into the top tier of candidates last summer only to flounder at the voting booth for the past month.

Kyle Kondik of the University of Virginia's Center for Politics pointed to one of the clearer hypotheses: she was squeezed from both sides.