

Testing facilities

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Dhaka who are long experienced in collecting respiratory samples,” Dr ASM Alamgir, principal scientific officer of IEDCR, told The Daily Star.

He said the samples are then processed through real-time reverse transcription polymerase chain reaction (RT-PCR), a laboratory technique for the in vitro qualitative detection of novel coronavirus -- which is only available at the IEDCR.

“The detection of virus from the specimens is a complex process. As the 2019 novel coronavirus is an RNA virus, we have to extract the RNA [ribonucleic acid] and then convert it to cDNA [complementary DNA] which is further synthesised to detect the virus.

“The process requires strict temperature control and absolutely contamination-free environment otherwise the specimens can show false positive and false negative results,” he added.

Experts say any breach in laboratory safety can release the virus in the atmosphere and lead to an epidemic.

The US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention recommends using BSL 3 (Biosafety level) laboratory while working with live virus.

IEDCR is conducting tests in a BSL 2 laboratory.

According to Dr Alamgir, a BSL 2 laboratory is more than sufficient for pathological investigations, as they work only with dead viruses there.

However, working in a BSL 2 laboratory also requires strict training in maintaining safety, quality control, and hygiene protocol, he added.

“In IEDCR, we have a pool of experienced professionals who have been working in this environment for a long time. This is also a reason why we are not expanding the diagnosis facility to other hospitals,” he said.

Noted physician Dr ABM Abdullah concurs that keeping the diagnostic process centralised for the moment is the right decision.

“In case of a massive outbreak, there is no doubt that IEDCR will have to expand facilities to district-level hospitals. But for now, this is the right decision,” he told The Daily Star.

“Since COVID-19 is a completely new phenomenon, we don’t have the

sufficient manpower and technology to detect it,” said Abdullah.

Besides, if a diagnostic centre conducts this test, they might not be able to quarantine the patients and their contacts immediately which IEDCR is doing by coordinating with local hospitals, he added.

Dr Alamgir said the country’s health system is well prepared to tackle an outbreak, with the institute regularly conducting training for district level physicians.

If the disease spreads in the country, it will not be necessary to conduct test for all patients, he said.

“Thanks to our trainings, doctors will be able to detect coronavirus patients by observing symptoms and give symptomatic treatments. So far, this is our plan for a massive outbreak,” he added.

PREPARATION FOR DMCH'S ISOLATION UNIT STILL UNDERWAY

Over a month ago, Dhaka Medical College Hospital (DMCH) opened an isolation unit for coronavirus patients, but it still lacks certain facilities essential for treating patients carrying the virus.

Located on the ground floor of DMCH Building-2, the hospital authorities transformed its acute medicine unit into a 12-bed isolation unit.

A special laboratory, capable of conducting tests like ultrasonography, endoscopy, and X-rays, has been attached to the unit.

However, the unit does not yet have life support and artificial respiration facilities.

“We have sufficient amount of personal protective equipment (PPE) for our staff. We are also in the process of procuring more equipment,” Brig Gen AKM Nasiruddin, director of the hospital, told The Daily Star.

At present, the unit is ready to receive patients, he said, adding that, “We are working to turn this unit into an independent, fully-equipped corona-care unit.”

On January 26, the IEDCR sent a letter to all divisional and district hospitals, asking them to set up such isolation units.

“We are fighting an invisible enemy and we still don’t know much about its nature ... we are preparations,” added the DMCH director.

Bolsonaro says virus threat is ‘overstated’

AFP, Miami

Brazil President Jair Bolsonaro on Monday minimized the threat of the new coronavirus -- which has killed nearly 4,000 people in more than 60 countries and tanked global financial markets -- saying its destructive power has been “overstated.”

The fall of world markets “basically has to do with the price of oil, which sank 30 percent, and with the coronavirus issue too,” said the ultra-right wing president to a crowd of about 200 Brazilian supporters in Miami, where he is visiting in an effort to drum up foreign investment.

“In my opinion, that virus’s destructive power is overstated. Maybe it is even potentially being exaggerated for political reasons,” Bolsonaro said.

The Sao Paulo exchange plummeted more than 12 percent Monday, its biggest fall since 1998, and shares of Brazilian state-controlled oil giant Petrobras dropped more than 31 percent, as model investors panicked in the face of the spread of the new coronavirus and plunging oil prices.

Tigers eye

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have the luxury to tinker with the playing eleven today and it was learned that experienced opener Tamim Iqbal may be rested to provide an opportunity to young opener Mohammad Naim.

Tamim, along with Liton Das, has been in prolific form since the ODI series. The opening duo registered a record 92-run opening stand in the first T20I on Monday as Bangladesh reached the 200-mark in the shortest format for the third time, riding on fifties from Liton and Soumya Sarkar.

The team management may also want to have a look at few other players, such as young pacer Hasan Mahmud and left-arm spinner Nasum Ahmed.

On the other hand, Zimbabwe will be desperate to get some positives from their dismal tour and skipper Sean Williams will be desperate to win the game and at least end on a high.

But with the way things have shaped up for the visitors, it will be a tough task for Zimbabwe and their senior players like Sikandar Raza, Craig Ervine, Brendan Taylor and the skipper himself will have to step up and take responsibility.



Syeda Fahima Begum, a teacher of Willes Little Flower School and College in Dhaka, is being stretchered to an operation theatre at the capital's Sheikh Hasina National Burn and Plastic Surgery Institute yesterday afternoon, hours after she was badly injured in a road crash on Dhaka-Khulna highway in Gopalganj's Pathaliya area. Fifteen students of the school were also hurt in the accident.

PHOTO: COLLECTED

Study tour turns into nightmare

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Samanta Lal Sen, chief coordinator of the institute, said Fahima’s left arm was severed below the elbow. She also had injuries to her right hand, head and some other parts of her body.

Fahima’s colleagues said she lives with her family at the capital’s Shantinagar. She, along with more than 100 students, nine teachers and some staffers of Willes Little Flower School and College, was going to Gopalganj from Dhaka.

Fahad Arfin Ananta, an injured student, said they started from the capital’s Kakrail for Tungipara on six

buses and a microbus.

“The driver of our bus lost control of the vehicle, which led to the accident,” he added.

Talking to The Daily Star, Director Prof Abul Kalam of the Burn and Plastic Surgery Institute last night said blood circulation to the patient’s left arm was normal after the surgery.

Fahima was shifted to the ICU of the institute, he said, adding that it would take five days for them to tell whether the operation was successful.

Our Faridpur correspondent contributed to this report.



A health worker scans a homebound passenger for signs of fever at the medical desk, set up by Brahmanbaria civil surgeon's office, at Akhaura Land Port yesterday. Officials say the number of passengers at the port has come down to around 400 a day against the usual figure of about 1,400, largely due to the coronavirus situation.

PHOTO: STAR

Screening flimsy at 5 land ports

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The form contains information on passengers, including their recent travel history and whether they have fever, shortness of breath, nausea, headache or cough.

The Directorate General of Health Services (DGHS), however, maintains that all the airlines and land ports were directed to provide those forms to passengers and instruct them to submit those to the health desks.

It was evident that the few health workers were struggling with the screening when a large group of travellers arrived at a time.

Besides, some health staffers were not wearing any hand gloves or disposable apron.

When virologists’ attention was drawn to the matter, they said the health workers run the risks of getting infected with coronavirus. The virus then may also spread to others.

In several land ports, those travelling in inter-border goods-laden vehicles were not going through the screening at all, posing risks of coronavirus transmission.

Osmani International Airport in Sylhet and Shah Amanat International Airport in Chattogram had one arway thermal scanner each, but those were out of order, The Daily Star correspondents found during their visit on Monday.

Health officials at the airports were seen using hand-held infrared thermometers to check passengers’ body temperature.

The health ministry, however, sent three thermal scanners each to the two international airports and Benapole Land Port yesterday.

Our correspondents also did not see any sort of disinfection activity at the land ports and the two airports.

BENAPOLE

During the visit, The Daily Star found that the lone digital thermal scanner at the Benapole port had been out of order for a long time. Medical teams were conducting health tests on passengers with the lone hand-held infrared thermometer.

SONAMASJID

There was no screening equipment except a hand-held infrared thermometer at Sonamasjid land port.

Medical staffers expressed fear of a possible health risk as they were not using any safety gears whatsoever. They said they did not have any personal protective equipment, including masks, gowns, gloves and hexisol hand rub.

HILI

Health officials were checking body temperature of passengers with the lone hand-held infrared thermometer at this port in Hakimpur upazila of Dinajpur. Wishing anonymity, one of the officials said the thermometer does not work properly all the time.

BURIMARI

The authorities were yet to set up thermal scanners at the Burimari land port in Lalmonirhat’s Patgram upazila to detect any suspected coronavirus patient travelling from India, Nepal and Bhutan.

SHAH AMANAT INT’L AIRPORT

The lone thermal scanner at Shah Amanat International Airport in Chattogram had been out of order for the last two years.

Airport sources said it might take a couple of days for the new one to start functioning.

The airport also has a shortage of medical personnel to screen all incoming passengers, who were now being screened with an Infrared Thermometer Gun, said airport sources.

detected that they had fever. The couple returned in a flight from Saudi Arabia, said Dr Shamima, who works at the airport health desk.

With the two, five people -- including a two-year-old child -- were hospitalised after being diagnosed with fever by the airport authorities, following their return from abroad.

In Noakhali, a youth, who returned home from Qatar on Monday, is in quarantine as he was suffering from fever. He was admitted to Hatiya Upazila Health Complex.

His brother-in-law, who accompanied him, was also advised to be in self-quarantine.

Noakhali deputy commissioner said they contacted the IEDCR for collecting the youth’s blood samples.

In Chandpur, an Italy returnee is kept in isolation. He returned home on March 5 and was hospitalised with fever on Monday.

An expert team from IEDCR collected his blood sample on Monday night, reports UNB.

In Jashore, a woman, who returned from Saudi Arabia on Saturday, has been quarantined as she complained of sore throat and cough two days later.

The administration of Patuakhali set up 17 isolation beds at seven hospitals.

In Manikganj, 59 people, who returned to Bangladesh from Italy, South Korea, and Saudi Arabia, are quarantined at home.

Twelve beds are kept for

Contacted, MZA Sharif, assistant airport health officer of the Chattogram airport, told The Daily Star: “We face a huge problem when some 300 to 400 passengers land at a time.”

So far, the novel coronavirus has hit more than 111 countries with 1,13,000 confirmed cases of infection. Among the infected, over 4,000 have died and 63,000 have recovered, according to media reports.

Most of the cases were reported in China. Outside China, Italy has faced the worst outbreak with 7,500 confirmed cases and 366 deaths.

Bangladesh has so far three confirmed cases -- two males and a female. Two of them returned from Italy recently.

Covid-19 -- the seventh strain of the virus that was first detected in China’s Wuhan city in December -- can hide inside human body for up to 14 days without showing any symptom, according to WHO.

Unlike in Bangladesh, some of the major international airports have taken preventive safety measures against the spread of Covid-19.

Termin screening measures at different land ports and airports lax, experts said any loophole could be costly.

“The screening process should be vigorous. A slight oversight could turn costly,” Prof Muzaherul Huq, former regional director of WHO’s South East Asia region, told The Daily Star.

Despite repeated attempts, DGHS Director General Prof Abul Kalam Azad could not be reached over phone for comments.

(Our correspondents in Benapole, Dinajpur, Brahmanbaria, Sylhet, Lalmonirhat, Chapainawabganj and Chattogram Bureau office contributed to this report)

coronavirus patients at Manikganj 250-bed hospital.

Meanwhile, the Directorate General of Health Services yesterday gave five new thermal scanners to international airports and ports across the country.

It handed over two thermal scanners to Hazrat Shahjalal International Airport, one each to Shah Amanat International Airport in Chattogram, Osmani International Airport in Sylhet and Benapole land port, Dr Shahnila Ferdousi, line director of centre for disease control at DGHS, told The Daily Star.

The lone thermal scanner at Hazrat Shahjalal International Airport became dysfunctional last night.

It has already started working after it was repaired, said the director.

ENVOYS MEET HEALTH MINISTER

In another development, Health Minister Zahid Maleque yesterday held a meeting with the envoys of 30 countries at his house to discuss coronavirus outbreak across the globe, reports UNB.

Envoys of countries including the US, China, South Korea, Japan, Italy, Iran, India and India were present in the meeting. They described the current coronavirus situation in their countries.

Directorate General of Health Services Prof Abul Kalam Azad was also present.

[Our correspondents from Noakhali, Patuakhali and Manikganj contributed to this report.]

Whole of Italy

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In the Middle East there were also signs of a deepening crisis, with Iran -- the worst-affected in the region -- registering 54 new deaths -- the highest single-day toll so far in the country with the third deadliest outbreak in the world.

- ‘Just the beginning’ -

Strict lockdowns and travel restrictions were apparently successful in China but faced a rocky start in Italy, where Prime Minister Giuseppe Conte told residents they should travel only for the most urgent work or health reasons.

While squares in Milan and Rome were emptied of their usual bustle and traffic, some residents were confused as to whether they were even allowed to leave their homes for everyday tasks like shopping.

Queues formed outside supermarkets from Naples to Rome.

“I’m not scared of anything in particular but there is a general worry,” 85-year-old Grazia told AFP as she waited for groceries in the capital.

The confusion forced the government to clarify its decree and warn against panic-buying.

Pope Francis also seemed to muddy the waters, holding a mass in which he urged priests to go out and visit the sick -- something specifically discouraged by Conte.

Governments elsewhere in Europe were also scrambling to balance their responses between restrictions and pushing out accurate information to avoid panic.

Italy’s northern neighbour Austria declared it would no longer admit people other than Austrians travelling from Italy unless they show medical need, one of the most severe steps taken by any European government.

Sport schedules have been wrecked across Europe, with Barcelona’s Champions League football match against Napoli next Wednesday the latest to fall prey to the virus -- it will be played behind closed doors.

In a rare glimmer of positive news, the remaining guests at a hotel in Spain’s Canary Islands on lockdown left the building after a 14-day quarantine, to the cheers and applause of hotel workers and medical staff.

But President Emmanuel Macron provided a reminder of Europe’s plight, warning that France was “just at the beginning” of its outbreak, Europe’s second most acute with more than 1,400 infected and 25 dead.

- Officials at risk -

In the United States, reports have suggested President Donald Trump could be vulnerable after several senior Republicans quarantined themselves because they had been in contact with a virus sufferer.

The White House insisted Trump had not been in contact with anyone confirmed to have COVID-19, but Vice-President Mike Pence did little to dampen concern when he conceded he did not know whether the president had been tested.

There are concerns that the US could become another hotspot, with at least 26 deaths and 605 confirmed infections so far.

Trump said he would propose “very substantial” economic measures to Congress yesterday including tax relief and aid for workers in the gig economy who worry about calling in sick.

In New York, the UN closed its headquarters to the public, while major US universities have been forced to cancel classes and move lessons online.

On the West Coast -- where most of the US deaths have occurred -- the Grand Princess cruise ship has docked at California’s port of Oakland, for more than 2,400 passengers to be taken into treatment or placed in quarantine, in a delicate, days-long operation.

‘Criminal’ killed in ‘gunfight’ with rivals

Say police

OUR CORRESPONDENT, Bogura

A suspected criminal was killed in a “gunfight” between two rival gangs in Bogura town early yesterday, police said.

The deceased, Kabir Hossain Minko, 38, was a resident of Chak Farid Colony, said, Aslam Ali, officer-in-charge of Detective Branch of Police.

Hearing gunshots, multiple police teams rushed to Maltinagar Bhatkandi Bridge area around 1:30am and found the victim lying on the ground with a bullet injury on his chest, said Sonaton Chakraborty, additional superintendent of police (Bogura Sadar Circle).

He was taken to Shaheed Ziaur Rahman Medical College Hospital where doctors declared him dead, said the additional SP.

Locals present at the hospital identified the deceased as Minko, who was accused in more than 15 cases, including murder, extortion, and arms cases, Sonaton said.

Police recovered two firearms, eight bullets and two sharp weapons from the spot.

Speaking to correspondents at the hospital morgue area yesterday, Minko’s brother-in-law Zahirul Islam Khokon said, he left home on Monday afternoon after receiving a phone call from his friend Tofazzal Hossain, a businessman of the Betgari Banani area.

And since then, his mobile was found switched off, Zahirul said, adding that Tofazzal, when contacted, denied that Minko had met him.

Failing to find him, the family lodged a general diary with Sadar Police Station around 11:00pm on the day, said the family members.

Police, however, denied that any such general diary was filed.

The Daily Star could not independently verify either of the claims.