

Hiding info on COVID-19 patients punishable offence

DGHS says in circular; health minister asks expats not to return home for now

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Citing "the Communicable Diseases (Prevention, Control and Eradication) Act, 2018", the Directorate General of Health Services (DGHS) yesterday published a circular that said hiding information about any COVID-19 patient is a punishable offence.

The circular was published a day after the World Health Organization (WHO) announced that the COVID-19 is a global pandemic.

The law also allows any officials in-charge to visit any outbreak area and take measures accordingly.

The measures include announcing the area as an "outbreak zone", controlling or stopping people's movement, suspending vehicular movement, keeping people in quarantine, and isolating infected people if necessary.

Besides, the act also permits the officials to order the owner of any vehicle to disinfect it.

"Many returnees from abroad or people who came in close contact with them are not maintaining the condition of quarantine... The DGHS is requesting everyone involved to perform responsibilities accordingly. Otherwise, certain punishable sections of the act would be implemented," said the circular signed by DGHS Director General Prof Abul Kalam Azad.

In case of any violation of the law, the person will be penalised for not more than two months in jail or pay a fine of not more than Tk 25,000, or both.

The DGHS boss also urged all (commercial) organisations to make masks.

"The three-layered mask could be made using poplin material. It could be reused after washing with soap-water," he said referring to suggestions from the experts.

The DGHS, in a press release, also informed that some 1,350 beds have been prepared in 14 hospitals in Dhaka, Chattogram, Sylhet, Barisal, and Rangpur cities for the isolation of coronavirus patients.

It also urged all inbound passengers to self-quarantine for 14 days and contact IEDCR before going to

hospital if anybody shows symptoms. **DO NOT RETURN HOME IF NOT URGENT**

Meanwhile, Health Minister Zahid Maleque yesterday urged Bangladeshi expatriates not to return home right now in a bid to contain the spread of coronavirus in the country.

The minister reiterated his call while giving a brief on the latest situation at his secretariat office in Dhaka yesterday, a day after the WHO announced the coronavirus outbreak as a global pandemic.

He also informed that two of the three COVID-19 patients are now free from the infection.

Others who came in close contact with them are also well.

"The two patients tested novel coronavirus negative in last two tests," the minister said.

He also said the government has brought 10 more thermal scanners to be installed at strategic points at ports where travellers' body temperatures are being checked using hand-held infrared thermometers.

Summit Group handed five thermal scanners over to the ministry yesterday. Earlier on Tuesday, the government supplied five more to different ports across the country.

"We will send these scanners to airports, land ports and sea ports within the next few days to increase its capacity," the minister said, adding that it also have spares.

About the number of infected patients, the health minister said out of three corona virus patients, two have already recovered and will be released any day.

The health ministry also said they did not get any news of any new coronavirus case in Bangladesh but many people have been quarantined. Addressing a press conference on March 9, the minister also urged Bangladeshi citizens staying abroad, especially in Italy and China, not to return home.

Meanwhile, a total of 617 people has been kept in quarantine in different districts, according to reports from our correspondents.

Of them, 496 are in Chandpur, 109 in Manikganj, and one each in Noakhali and Dinajpur.

Carriers call off trips to India

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acknowledgement that the outbreak was a pandemic.

The decision will come into effect at 12:00 GMT today at the port of departure, reads a communique issued late Wednesday night after a meeting headed by Indian Health Minister Harshvardhan.

"In view of existing spread of COVID-19, Government of India has decided that all valid visas issued by the High Commission of India or the Assistant High Commissions of India in Bangladesh on or before 12/03/20 will remain suspended from 13/03/20, 6pm till 15/04/20. No new visas shall be issued from 13/03/20," reads notice on the official website of Indian High Commission in Dhaka.

However, Indian nationals in Bangladesh and Bangladeshis in India would be allowed to go to their countries, an official at the high commission in Dhaka told The Daily Star.

In 2019, India issued 1.5 million visas to Bangladeshis, the most in history. And it has been beneficial for India's economy, reports The WIRE. Of all Indian high commissions in the world, the one in Bangladesh issues the largest number of visas.

The Indian government's announcement dealt a double blow to Biman Bangladesh Airlines which had to cancel around 198 flights on different international routes since January, incurring a loss of around Tk 217 crore, said Mohibul Haque, senior secretary at the civil aviation ministry.

Biman suspended its Dhaka-Kolkata and Dhaka-Delhi flights from today until April 15, said Tahera Khandaker, deputy general manager of public relations at Biman.

She said Biman used to operate 14 Dhaka-Kolkata and six Dhaka-Delhi flights a week.

However, a few flights to India may carry only Indian citizens from Bangladesh to their country, Biman sources said, adding that the flights may also bring back Bangladeshis who are currently in India.

US-Bangla Airlines, Novair and Regent Airways would also suspend their flights to India, officials said.

The three airlines have contacted Indian authorities for permission to operate a few flights to bring back their passengers stranded in India.

US-Bangla Airlines used to operate 26 flights on Dhaka-Kolkata and Dhaka-Chennai routes every week, said Kamrul Islam, general manager of public relations at the leading private airlines of the country.

Novair and Regent Airways

each used to operate seven flights to Kolkata a week.

Biman earlier suspended its Dhaka-Doha flight until further notice after the Qatar government last week imposed a travel ban on people from 14 countries, including Bangladesh.

On Saturday, the Kuwait government announced a seven-day travel ban on people from Bangladesh and six other countries. Biman then cancelled its flights to Kuwait for two weeks.

Around 28 airlines used to carry between 20,000 and 25,000 passengers to and from Dhaka airport a day. The number has significantly fallen, said Group Captain Touhid-Ul-Ahsan, director of Hazrat Shahjalal International Airport.

No bus would leave the country for India from today, transport sector insiders said.

The last bus of Shyamoli NR Travels left for India yesterday, its Managing Director Suvener Ghosh Rakesh told The Daily Star. Shyamoli NR Travels operates buses on the five cross-border routes: Dhaka-Kolkata-Dhaka, Dhaka-Agartala-Dhaka, Dhaka-Sylhet-Shillong-Guwahati-Dhaka, Agartala-Dhaka-Kolkata-Agartala and Dhaka-Khulna-Kolkata-Dhaka.

Rakesh said people who bought tickets would get a refund.

Bangladesh Railway was yet to get any message from their Indian counterpart regarding the restrictions until 9:45pm last night, officials said.

"So, we did not cancel any trains," Mia Jahan, additional joint director general of Bangladesh Railway told The Daily Star.

Liton Chandra Dey, manager of Dhaka Cantonment Station, said many passengers had contacted them to know whether they would operate their Friday's trip to Kolkata.

"We told them that we did not change or cancel tomorrow's [Friday's] trip," he told this newspaper yesterday.

Currently, Maitree Express operates between Dhaka and Kolkata on Saturdays, Mondays, Tuesday, Wednesdays, and Fridays.

Maitree Express has 456 seats and in peak season, the train leaves Dhaka full of passengers while at other times it leaves with at least 300 people, Liton said.

But, the number of passengers fell significantly in the last 15 days, he added.

The operation of Dhaka-Kolkata train service resumed on April 14, 2008, ending the 43-year pause, as two passenger trains named Maitree Express started simultaneously from Dhaka and Kolkata.



Travellers queue at an Air France ticketing desk at Paris Charles-de-Gaulle airport yesterday in Roissy en France, after US president announced a 30-day ban on travel from mainland Europe over the coronavirus pandemic that has sparked unprecedented lockdowns, widespread panic and another financial market meltdowns.

PHOTO: AFP

How prepared are schools?

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The authorities of at least five schools they asked students not to show up if they had any of the cold-related symptoms.

But many teachers fear that such steps -- taken following the issuance of government directives -- might fall short of the expectations, in case any of the teachers or students gets infected.

On Tuesday, the Directorate of Secondary and Higher Education (DSHE) asked all students of secondary schools and colleges to wash their hands frequently and avoid any kind of gathering as preventive measures to curb the spread of coronavirus.

Some of the teachers said the directive was "impractical" as the schools would not be able to ensure handwashing arrangements for all students and teachers throughout the day for fund crunch. They insisted that the government immediately allocate separate funds for the institutions in this regard.

"It's really tough for us to ensure adequate handwashing arrangements for around 600 students. Who will monitor it?" asked a teacher at Mohammadpur Commercial Institute Government High School.

"We put soaps at 18 toilets, but we ran out of the soaps within two hours," she said.

Contacted, Deputy Education Minister Mohibul Hassan Chowdhury said, "The absence of handwashing arrangements is not abnormal, this is why parents should take steps. We're trying to raise awareness among all."

He also said the government had not yet allocated any funds for buying antiseptics, antibacterial handwash and soaps.

"The IEDCR has not advised us, why would we think about it?" he asked, when he was queried whether the government was planning to give money to schools for buying liquid or soaps for hand wash.

"Government data shows the situation over coronavirus has not yet turned epidemic in our country," he said, adding that two of the three coronavirus patients have recovered.

At Motijheel Ideal School and College, many students were found wearing masks. The school authorities held its assembly in classrooms.

But a lack of hygiene was evident at many places.

For example, there was a toilet next to the prayer room where a small zone was designated for washing hands. A tap was hanging from a wall with no plaster and covered in algae.

Doors get shut

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The virus has so far infected more than 131,460 people globally and killed over 4,923, according to an AFP tally.

Since 17:00 GMT on Wednesday, India, Algeria, Austria, Azerbaijan, Guyana and Poland announced their first deaths, while Cuba and Jamaica confirmed the first coronavirus cases on their territory.

B Sriaramulu, health minister for Indian Karnataka state, said a 76-year-old man who recently died tested positive for the novel coronavirus, marking the country's first fatality from the virus.

The World Health Organization has classified the outbreak as a pandemic, but its chief Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus yesterday assured the outbreak was "controllable", even as cases and fatalities surged in Iran and Spain.

Meanwhile, EU yesterday reacted strongly to the US announcement of travel ban on the block. European Union chiefs Ursula von der Leyen and Charles Michel swiftly rebuked Washington's "unilateral action" without consultation, calling for cooperation to fight the pandemic.

Trump's unexpected move -- which excludes the United Kingdom and Ireland -- pummeled stock markets as traders fretted about the economic impact of the outbreak that is on a seemingly relentless march across the planet.

Trump, who has been criticised for his response to the outbreak in the US, blamed the EU for a lacklustre response to the virus.

"This is the most aggressive and

The toilets and basin for the students were unhygienic and there was no soap anywhere.

The toilets for the teachers, however, seemed fine.

"The school does not provide us any soap. I brought a soap from home and am sharing it with my friends," one of the students told The Daily Star.

Asked, Shahan Ara Begun, the principal, said they do not put soaps in the toilets as they fear those "would fall on the ground and make it slippery, posing risks of accidents."

"We've over 25,000 students at three branches ... it's impossible to ensure soap for them all the time, especially when there is a crisis of soaps and handwash in the market."

She said the school authorities suggest that students carry soaps from home for their personal hygiene.

Jahan Ara, mother of a student at Vigarunnisa Noon School and College (VNSC), said, "My daughter told me that soaps are not regularly provided at washrooms [in her school]."

Asked, VNSC Principal Fougia said they ran out of soaps fast due to increased use. "We have bought enough soaps."

Responding to a query, Fougia said students' presence at the institution went down in the coronavirus fallout.

Motijheel Government Girls High school also saw a thin presence of students in the last couple of days.

"I was not sending my daughter to school. But she went there today [yesterday] to take a class test," said Aftab Ahmed, a banker. He said he gave his daughter a hand sanitiser in her schoolbag.

Headmaster of the school, Nazmun Nahar Shahin, said teachers were educating students about hygiene as a precaution against the virus.

Teachers at Birshreshtha Munshi Abdur Rouf Public College said the college authorities were not holding any assembly, sports and cultural programmes. Students were advised not to show up at the college if they felt sick.

They also said handwashing arrangements at the institution were inadequate.

Principal Lt Col Hafez Md Zonayed Ahmed said the college has around 8,000 students in two shifts and it was hard for them to ensure handwash for all the pupils throughout the day.

"The day we started keeping liquid hand soap, it ended within an hour," he said.

'CLOSE SCHOOLS' Talking to The Daily Star, at least 10 teachers and a dozen guardians

said the government should close all schools for a certain period to tackle any possible spread of coronavirus in the country.

"I don't understand why the authorities are not shutting down the schools. WHO has announced the coronavirus outbreak a pandemic," said a teacher at Mohammadpur Commercial Institute Government High School.

"Many guardians are contacting us every day and asking us why we're running academic activities as usual," he said.

Another teacher at the school said, "We have been told that everyone should maintain a distance of three feet from others. But here, three students have to share a small bench at classrooms."

Rokshana Yesmin Tithi, a guardian of a student at Saint Francis Xavier's Girls' School and College in Old Dhaka, said the government should close all schools for at least 15 days.

"The government of Jammu and Kashmir has shut down all primary schools after two confirmed coronavirus cases were reported. Dhaka is more densely populated than Jammu," she said.

Due to the coronavirus outbreak, 39 countries have announced or implemented school and university closures as of March 11. Of them, 22 countries have shut schools nationwide, impacting almost 372.3 million children and youth, according to Unesco.

Replying to a query on the possibility of closing schools, Mohibul Hassan Chowdhury said, "Such reactions stem from panic ... It's the IEDCR's call, not ours. They are the proper authorities [to take any decision in this regard]."

"The government does not run [its activities] based on people's panic. It operates as per the advice of relevant specialists and scientific data when it's about any disease."

NEW DIRECTIVE

The DSHE yesterday instructed schools and colleges across the country to hold their daily assembly inside classrooms to prevent any spread of coronavirus, said its Director General Md Golam Faruk.

It also asked the school authorities to suspend all cultural, sports and other activities until further notice.

The Directorate of Primary Education issued a separate directive on Wednesday, asking all students of primary schools to wash their hands frequently and avoid any kind of gathering.

Teachers were asked to read out the directive to students at classrooms.

Permanent bail

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January this year extended the bail of Khaleda for a year in the defamation case lodged in Narail, and the bail would expire in January next year.

Therefore, there is no urgency of granting permanent bail to Khaleda, she said, adding that the BNP chief's lawyer AJ Mohammad Ali was present during the judgment recall.

On August 12, 2018, the HC granted a six-month bail to Khaleda in the defamation case and also issued a rule asking the government to explain why she could not be granted permanent bail. The hearing on the rule was yesterday.

Later, the court extended her admirer bail several times.

On December 21, 2015, the BNP chief at a discussion at the Institution of Engineers, Bangladesh, raised questions about the actual number of Liberation War martyrs, saying, "There are controversies over how many were martyred in the Liberation War. There are also many books and documents on the controversies."

Reacting to Khaleda's remarks, Raihan Farooque Imam of Narail's Naragati filed the case with the cognisance court on December 24 that year.

The BNP chief landed in jail on February 8, 2018, after a special court sentenced her to five years in the Zia Orphanage Trust corruption case.

On October 30 that year, the HC enhanced her punishment to 10 years in the case after dismissing her appeal.

The same special court jailed Khaleda and three others for seven years in the Zia Charitable Trust corruption case on October 29 that year.

The HC rejected her bail petition three times in the graft case and the SC once.

All will have

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"Clean Village-Clean Town" programme on the occasion of Mujib Borsho.

The Local Government Division has taken up the programme aiming to build a clean Bangladesh by inspiring all to keep their surrounding areas neat and clean to prevent diseases, including mosquito- and water-borne ones.

Hasina said if anyone suspected that he was infected with coronavirus or developed any symptom of the virus, the person would have to receive treatment from physicians immediately.

"We have kept hospitals and health centres ready in this regard in every district and upazila as well."

The PM suggested that the returnees from foreign countries should keep themselves isolated from others for some days to see whether they develop any symptoms.

Mentioning that the people of the country were less aware of health issues, she said they should not spit here and there. They should wash their hands with soap after returning home from outside, she added.

She urged people to keep their homes and workplaces neat and clean and dump waste in designated places to prevent the transmission of infectious viruses.

Hasina directed all concerned to develop a waste management system up to the village level to build a clean Bangladesh.

"There must be designated places for dumping waste at every village, ward, union, upazila, district and elsewhere," she said.

Later, the PM exchanged views with people from Rajshahi, Jashore, and Mymensingh about the clean-up campaign.

Leader of the Opposition Raushan Ershad also spoke at the programme.

that the Trump travel ban did not apply to goods or cargo, the markets still took fright.

"Travel restrictions equal slower global economic activity, so if you need any more coaxing to sell, sell, sell after a massively negative signal from overnight trading in US markets it just fell in your lap," said AxiCorp's Stephen Innes.

The carnage on stock markets spread to Europe, with London, Frankfurt and Paris all losing almost six percent approaching the half-way mark.

The European Central Bank yesterday unveiled fresh stimulus measures in bid to ease the economic fallout from the worsening coronavirus crisis.

As the crisis deepened in Europe, China appeared to be making headway against the outbreak, which has infected and killed more people in the country than anywhere else in the world.

Another 11 people died in China yesterday, bringing their toll to 3,169 deaths -- but it was the lowest daily increase since late January.

In outbreak epicentre Wuhan, just eight new cases were recorded yesterday, the first time it has been in single figures since figures started to be reported in January.

"The peak of the epidemic in China has passed," said National Health Commission spokesman Mi Feng.

WHO chief Tedros also sounded a warning, urging countries not to give up the fight to stop the virus spreading. "We are deeply concerned that some countries are not approaching this threat with the level of political

commitment needed to control it," he said in Geneva yesterday.

"The idea that countries should shift from containment to mitigation is wrong and dangerous."

Hotspots have rapidly emerged elsewhere including in South Korea and Iran, which announced 75 new deaths yesterday bringing the total to 429 with more than 10,000 infections.

Hollywood superstar Tom Hanks yesterday announced that he and his wife Rita Wilson had tested positive for the virus, joining the ranks of politicians and sports stars that have come down with the infection.

The Hollywood pair were in isolation in a hospital in Australia, where Hanks was shooting a film.

Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau and his wife announced they were self-isolating yesterday as she undergoes tests for the new coronavirus after returning from a speaking engagement with "mild flu-like symptoms."

The pandemic also continued to disrupt cultural and sporting events.

The NBA on Wednesday suspended the season after a Utah Jazz player tested positive for the virus, while spectators were banned from Ancient Olympia in Greece to witness the lighting of the Olympic flame for the 2020 Tokyo Games, which are due to begin in July.

Spain suspended top flight football matches for two weeks as Real Madrid went into quarantine.

This weekend's opening Formula One race in Melbourne is still on although McLaren have withdrawn after a team member tested positive.