CONTAINING NOVEL CORONAVIRUS

## Modi proposes jt strategy

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yesterday proposed a strong joint strategy involving SAARC countries to fight the coronavirus threat in the

region.
"I would like to propose that the leadership of SAARC nations chalk out a strong strategy to fight Coronavirus. We could discuss, via video conferencing, ways to keep our citizens healthy," Modi said in a series of posts on his official Twitter handle.

Together, we can set an example to the world, and contribute to a healthier planet," he said in his post.

The Indian prime minister said, "Our planet is battling the COVID-19 Novel Coronavirus. At various levels, governments and people are trying their best to combat it.

"South Asia, which is home to a significant number of the global population, should leave no stone unturned to ensure our people are

South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) comprises Bangladesh, India, Pakistan, Nepal, Bhutan, Sri Lanka, Afghanistan and the

cases and one death due to the virus, reported our New Delhi correspondent.

contact with the 75 coronavirus-infected people are under observation while over 30,000 people across the country are under community surveillance, our correspondent also reported quoting Indian health ministry officials.

Hasina agreed with the proposal of her Indian counterpart Narendra Modi for adopting a strong strategy by SAARC nations to fight the lethal coronavirus.

According to a BSS report, Foreign Minister AK Abdul Momen yesterday said, "Our honourable prime minister termed the proposal of Indian premier Narendra Modi as a good one and gave her consent to join a videoconference with other heads of SAARC countries to chalk out a strong strategy to combat the COVIT-19.

Hours after Modi's tweet, Indian High Commissioner in Dhaka Riva Ganguly Das went to the Bangladesh foreign minister's residence to hand over the formal proposal of the Indian premier about the videoconference, reported BSS.

Momen said, "I conveyed the message to honourable prime minister and she told me that if all the South Asian countries' leaders participate, she is willing to join the videoconference.

"When the Indian High Commission here confirmed that all SAARC member states, including Afghanistan and Pakistan, gave their positive notes about the videoconference, our prime minister gave her consent to join it.

Momen said it would be the show of political solidarity to handle the coronavirus and protect the people of South Asia.

Asked when the videoconference will take place, the foreign minister said the date and time were yet to be finalised but it would be held soon.

In response to Modi's tweet, leaders of four South Asian nations -- Nepal, Bhutan, Sri Lanka and the Maldives

expressed their support towards collective efforts against the coronavirus pandemic that had spread over 121 countries and territories killing 5,120 people and infecting 139,637 others.



Rina Akther sits in her room in Rome yesterday. A domestic help in the Italian capital, the woman from Shariatpur's Naria upazila has been jobless for weeks as the European country is grappling with a coronavirus outbreak. Rina, now in Italy for seven years, is clueless about what to do as she has to financially support her mother, siblings, and husband at home in Bangladesh.

## Expats lose jobs, face bleak future

A majority of the undocumented workers are street hawkers, who have been hit the hardest, The Daily Star learnt talking to nearly a dozen Bangladeshi expatriates in the European

"We don't know how long this situation will continue. And if it prolongs, it will put us in grave trouble," said Afzal Hosen Roman, who has been living in Italy for the last nine years. Currently, he works at a restaurant in

said Bangladeshis with valid job contracts might get some compensations, but the others would be in a "bigger trouble".

"Many families depend on the money these people send home. If they can't earn any money, how will they manage to pay their house rent in Italy and pay for the educational expenses of their children and take care of their old parents in Bangladesh?" he asked.

Another Bangladeshi expatriate named Palash Rahman, who lives in Venice, said all the hotels cancelled their reservations immediately after the coronavirus situation worsened.

The city, which attracts thousands of tourists every day, has turned almost empty, he said.

He also said there were some 12,000 Bangladeshis in the city in northeastern Italy. "They used to do decent jobs or business, but almost of them are now unemployed," he said, adding, "Some of them have already gone back to Bangladesh after it became impossible for them to maintain their costs.'

Talking to these correspondents, another Bangladeshi, an undocumented worker living in Venice for nearly six years, said people there were facing a crisis of food and toiletries.

"People in their numbers are thronging the food stores and competing with each other to take what they need," he said, wishing not to be

Bangladeshis living in Germany, especially in the state of North-Rheine Westphalia where coronavirus cases are high, are also panicked, said Zobaer Ahmed, a Bangladeshi working at Deutsche Welle. He said sanitisers and storable food

items were sold within hours at many supershops. "Bangladeshis living here are also storing food, including rice, lentil and canned food.

Another Bangladeshi expatriate living in Berlin said they too were facing a shortage of food and commodities like toilet tissue and napkins.

Bangladeshis especially students left for their country since the situation started to turn bad," he said.

A couple of days ago, Germany's Chancellor Angela Merkel warned that up to 70 percent of the country's population -- some 58 million people could contract coronavirus.

Talking about the issue, Prof CR Abrar, executive director of Refugee and Migratory Movements Research Unit, said no one was prepared for such an unforeseen development. "It would have a devastating impact on our remittance if the situation prolongs.

Although it is not an easy task, the Bangladesh government should extend its support to the expatriates and get engaged with the authorities of the coronavirus-hit countries.

According to Bangladesh's Wage Earners' Welfare Board, there are some 1.20 crore Bangladeshis working across the globe. They send home around \$15 billion in hard-earned money, a lifeline of Bangladesh's economy.

Experts fear the remittance flow would be hit hard if the situation did

In another development, the Bangladesh mission in Italy suspended its consular services until further notice on Tuesdav

The previous day, the mission asked Bangladeshis to communicate with it via phone in case of any emergency.

Labour Welfare Contacted, Counsellor Arfanul Hoque of the mission's Rome office said they urged the Bangladeshi expatriates to make phone calls for any services.

If the mission feels any expatriate has any emergency, the person will be asked to visit in person, he said.

On an average, some 250 to 300 Bangladeshis seek consular services from the Rome office every day and another 100 to 150 from the consulate general office in Milan, Arfanul said.

Under the consular services, the mission provides services, including issuance and renewal of passports, visas and different certificates, he said.

"These services have been suspended for now," he said. Expatriates Welfare and Overseas Employment Minister Imran Ahmed

told The Daily Star that the situation was difficult for everybody "There is a limitation that we cannot

go there and they also cannot come here. Even after that, we've alerted the local embassies to take steps," he said. Replying to a question, Foreign

Minister AK Abdul Momen said, "Of course there will be an economic impact. But the fact is that we don't know how long the problem will persist." It is a very difficult time. So it is

tough to say anything right now. But we

At least four Bangladesh mission offices abroad suspended their different services, which limited expatriates' access to various needs and opportunities for the time being. SITUATION IN OTHER COUNTRIES

A few days ago, Kazi Mamun, a Bangladeshi expatriate in Saudi Arabia, wrote on social media that he submitted his passport to the embassy for renewal, but was now facing problem in getting it.

"I want [to] go to home, [its] emergency," he said.

He wrote this after the Bangladesh embassy in Riyadh suspended its consular service tours for the months of March and April on the instruction of the Saudi foreign ministry.

In a notice issued on Tuesday, the mission discouraged service-seekers to visit the office in person and urged them to communicate by phone. Mohammad Ashaduzzaman, labour

Riyadh office, said they took the step as

He, however, said they were working to provide such service via expatriate's digital centres (EDCs) located in various

The consular service tour takes place on Fridays and Saturdays when mission officials provide firsthand services, including issuance of passport, wage earner's card and consultation on legal issues, to service seekers.

to the notice.

outbreak.

Contacted, Golam Moshi, Bangladesh ambassador in Saudi Arabia, told this newspaper by phone that the Gulf country was very cautious about the outbreak.

services related to passport issuance dated for March 13 and March 20, according to a notice issued by the

Bangladesh missions in Malaysia, the United Arab Emirates and Iraq also issued separate notices in the past few days, urging expatriate Bangladeshis

The Bangladesh mission in South Korea too suspended its pre-scheduled consular service dated for Sunday,

welfare counsellor at the mission's a precautionary measure.

In the changed situation, Bangladeshis have been asked to submit their receipts for passport to the EDCs. The EDC officials will collect the passports and hand those over to the owners, he said, referring

He also said the Saudi authorities closed schools as a precautionary measure against the coronavirus

The Bangladesh mission in Doha

mission recently.

to take precautionary measures.

#### hope the situation will improve soon," according to a notice. Europe now epicentre of virus pandemic

FROM PAGE 1

Since the novel coronavirus first emerged in late December in China, 140,720 cases have been recorded in 124 countries and territories, killing 5,347 people, according to an AFP tally compiled at 1300 GMT yesterday based on official sources.

The worst affected countries are mainland China, with 3,176 deaths, Italy, 1,016 deaths, and 514 in Iran, the three countries with the highest death Spain yesterday declared state

of emergency as more countries announced nationwide or partial lockdowns to prevent the spread of Governments and central banks

readied more emergency measures to tackle the economic impact of the coronavirus, helping financial markets spare some of their steep losses, while more major events were cancelled or postponed. Meanwhile, US lawmakers and the

White House neared agreement on a coronavirus economic aid package, with House Speaker Nancy Pelosi saying she hoped to announce a deal later vesterday. Bloomberg, citing sources, yesterday

reported that President Donald Trump would declare a national emergency over the fast-spreading coronavirus, opening the door to providing more federal aid to fight the disease. White House did not

immediately respond to a request for comment on the report. The WHO warning came as global

experts yesterday warned that health authorities around the world are underprepared to face the challenges US Congresswoman Rashida Tlaib

Thursday warned that between 70 to 150 million people in the United States could eventually be infected with the novel coronavirus. She made the remarks during a hearing of the House the president's coronavirus task force, confirming earlier reports by US media outlets including Axios and NBC News. Earlier, a government report in UK

said up to 10,000 people might have been infected in the country so far. On Wednesday, German Chancellor Angela Merkel warned that up to 70 percent of Germans risk being infected. Meanwhile, France yesterday said

the G7 will hold an extraordinary meeting via videoconference next week to bolster the international response to the coronavirus outbreak. The meeting of the Group of Seven nations will seek to coordinate action against the virus in the spheres of health, economy, finance and research, the presidency said.

Prime Minister Pedro Sanchez yesterday said Spain would declare a 15day state of emergency from Saturday. He said the number of cases could top 10,000 by next week - more than double the current level - and asked citizens to play their part. Spanish media said authorities has decided to close bars and shops - apart from supermarkets and pharmacies - in the capital and the surrounding region from Saturday.

Spain has the second-highest number of coronavirus cases in Europe after Italy. The current Spanish tally stands at 4,209, up by about 1,000 cases from Thursday and seven times as much as on Sunday. About 120 people have died.

Schools have already closed across Spain, as have cinemas, theatres and playgrounds. Several regions have also suspended trials.

Switzerland, France, Portugal yesterday joined the list of countries closing their schools to tackle the pandemic. Ireland too closed all schools and universities

Lanka took more drastic measures to halt the epidemic. India, which has reported 85 cases

so far, yesterday reported its second

death linked to the virus. A 68 years old

In South Asia, India, Pakistan, Sri

of Representatives with members of woman, who had high blood pressure and diabetes, died in New Delhi, reported our New Delhi correspondent. India on Wednesday suspended

all tourist visas until April 15 and said it would quarantine travellers arriving from seven virus-hit countries. Several states have shut schools, public buildings, and cinemas. The Indian Premier League,

the world's most lucrative cricket competition, yesterday postponed the start of this year's tournament amid mounting anxiety in India over the coronavirus pandemic.

Pakistan too yesterday shut all its schools and land borders and decided to limit international flights and discourage large gatherings to try to halt the spread of the coronavirus.

Pakistan borders China and Iran, both of which have been hit hard by the virus. Pakistani authorities has reported 21 cases of the coronavirus but no deaths.

In Sri Lanka, which has reported 4 cases, government on Thursday shut schools as a precautionary measure.

In Latin America, Venezuela and Bolivia suspended flights to and from Europe for a month. Paraguay ended them until further notice, as does Peru. Argentina suspended flights from the most hard hit countries for a month.

Meanwhile, Iran yesterday said the security forces will clear the streets nationwide within 24 hours so all citizens can be checked for coronavirus its toughest measure yet to combat the outbreak.

In china, the outbreak has slowed markedly amid strict transport curbs on movement and lockdowns. Just five new cases were reported

on Friday in the provincial capital of Wuhan, where the virus was first detected in December, and no locally transmitted infections were reported in the rest of China. AFP later put the total cases in China at 20 without giving any breakdown.

### INDO-BANGLA ROUTES Delhi halts train, bus services till April 15

Our correspondent, New Delhi

India yesterday said cross-border movement of passenger trains and buses to and from Bangladesh will remain suspended until April 15.

The restriction might be lifter

earlier, health ministry officials told a press conference in New Delhi. India has 81 coronavirus cases and announced a sweeping travel ban on

foreigners. Trains and buses operate on multiple cross-border routes.

The Indian government also decided to allow international traffic only through 19 border checkposts out of 37.

However, the health officials maintained coronavirus is not a health emergency and that there is no need to panic.

World Health Organisation declaring coronavirus outbreak a pandemic, the officials said 42,000 people in India are under community surveillance.

### 'Robber' killed in 'gunfight'

Our Correspondent, Cumilla

A suspected highway robber was killed in a "gunight" with police beside Dhaka-Chattogram highway in Cumilla's Chandina upazila early esterday.

The deceased, Md Khokon, 45, was from Barguna's Fultola upazila, said Porimal Das, sub-inspector of detective branch (DB) of police in Cumilla. Khokon was accused of killing

leader from Cumilla's Muradnagar upazila who got killed on January 12, he said. Being tipped off that a gang was preparing for a robbery, two teams of

Khairul Alam Sadhon, a Jubo League

police and DB raided the spot around 1:50am, the DB official said. Sensing police presence, the robbers opened fire on them, forcing them to fire back that triggered a "gunfight",

Later, police rescued Khokon with a bullet injury and took him to Cumilla Medical College Hospital where doctors declared him dead, SI Porimol

Police recovered a firearm, two bullets and several sharp weapons from the spot, he added.

#### Australia tells citizens to reconsider all foreign travel

AFP, Sydney

Australia yesterday warned citizens also suspended its two pre-scheduled | the coronavirus pandemic is now widespread that they should reconsider all foreign travel, as the government stepped up measures to slow the spread of the disease.

> "We now advise all Australians to reconsider your need to travel overseas at this time, regardless of your destination, age or health," Prime Minister Scott Morrison said.

The government had previously advised against travel to regional epicentres in China, Italy, South Korea

#### Kaliganga river

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1960s, said locals. The river is originally 78km long

and 242 metres in width, said officials of Manikganj Water Development Board. But now, numerous chars have appeared across the river.

Speaking to The Daily Star, 80-yearold Sufia Begum from Tora village in Ghior said once the river flowed beside her home, but now she needs to walk for at least 15 minutes to take a bath there. "All the ponds in our area have also dried up."

Sixty-five-year old farmer Abdul Mazid, another local, said they face a severe crisis of water for irrigation.

Talking on the issue, Nazrul Islam, a member of Bangladesh Nodi Bachao Andolan (Save the River Movement, Bangladesh), said farmers in the area lacked water for growing crops.

He said the river was its death throes in places due to mindless grabbing by sand filling by some influential quarters. It has continued to happen for

years right under the nose of the administration, said Nazrul, also general secretary of Bangladesh Krishak Samity. He also said the river needs to be

water flow round the year. Otherwise, people and the environment would continue to suffer. Contacted, Main Uddin, executive engineer of WDB in Manikganj, said iver dredging began in many rivers in

dredged at places to ensure proper

the district. "The government has taken an initiative to dig the rivers to restore their original water flow. It also has plans to restore the Kaliganga's water flow," he said.

Asked about the encroachment, he said steps would be taken against the grabbers to save the river.

#### There were significant limitations on freedom of speech. Some journalists

# for Saarc countries

Hasina welcomes it, agrees to join video confce with other heads of Saarc nations

Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi

India has already reported 75 positive

Around 1,500 people who came in

Meanwhile, Prime Minister Sheikh

'improbably lopsided' Says US report; Dhaka rejects it

2018 national election

Terming the last parliamentary election in Bangladesh "an improbably lopsided" election, the United States on Thursday said it was not considered free and fair and was marred by reported irregularities, including ballot-box irregularities, including ballot-box stuffing and intimidation of opposition

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polling agents and voters. The US Department of State in its report styled "2019 Country Reports on Human Rights Practices" said political affiliation often appeared to be a factor in claims of arrest and prosecution including through spurious charges under the pretext of responding to

national security threats. "During the campaign, there were credible reports of harassment, intimidation, arbitrary arrests and violence that made it difficult for many opposition candidates and their supporters to meet, hold rallies, and campaign freely," said the report. According to the report, significant

human rights issues in 2019 included unlawful or arbitrary killings, forced disappearance, torture, arbitrary or unlawful detentions by the government or on its behalf, harsh and lifethreatening prison conditions, arbitrary or unlawful interference with privacy, arbitrary arrests of journalists and human rights activists, censorship, site

blocking and criminal libel.

said 466 incidents of alleged extrajudicial executions occurred in 2018, a three-fold increase from the previous year, and the highest number of incidents reported in any single year by local human rights organisations. domestic human rights

organisation, Odhikar, reported security

Citing a report of Amnesty

International, the US state department

forces killed 315 individuals in crossfire incidents from January September.' The report said the government made limited efforts to prevent or investigate

kidnappings allegedly committed by

security services.

The government did not respond to a request from the UN Working Group on Enforced Disappearances to visit the country, it added. According to the report, Bangladesh's security forces reportedly enjoyed widespread impunity last year for

their abuses against people, including unlawful killings, forced disappearance, torture, and unlawful detention. It also accused the government of taking few measures to bring the abusers to justice. "There were reports of widespread impunity for security force abuses. The government took few measures to investigate and prosecute cases of abuse and killing by security

The US state department said the Special Powers Act of 1974 was widely cited by law enforcement agencies in justifying their arrests. The judiciary did not always protect

to corruption, partisanship, and weak human resources, the report said. It also mentioned that the government sometimes failed to respect the rights to freedom of speech, including of the press.

the right to a fair and public trial due

self-censored their criticisms of the government due to harassment and fear of reprisal, the report said. "Civil society organisations said

political interference influenced the licensing process, since all television channel licenses granted by the government were for stations supporting the ruling party.' According to the report, independent journalists and media outlets alleged that there were instances of influencing

financially important government advertising and pressing private of members of opposition parties, companies to withhold their advertising as well. The government penalised media that criticised it or carried messages of the political opposition's activities and statements. Media outlets deemed critical of the government and the Awami

media outlets in part by withholding

revenue, and they practiced some selfcensorship to avoid adverse responses from the government, it added. The report stated that some senion civil society representatives reported

League were subjected to government

intimidation and cuts in advertising

harassment and delays at the airport when departing the country. The ruling Awami League-affiliated organisations, such as their student wing Chhatra League, reportedly carried out violence and intimidation around the country with impunity, including

against individuals affiliated with opposition groups, read the report. It said credible human rights organisations agreed that the first half of the year saw an alarming increase in rape cases, with ASK, the Human Rights Support Society, and the Bangladesh Mahila Parishad (BMP) estimating 630-

738 women raped between January and June, figures higher than in the same period of the previous year. In comparison, the BMP reported a total of 942 women were raped in all

of 2018. There were reports of sexual violence with impunity. Incidents of vigilantism against women occurred, sometimes led by religious leaders enforcing fatwas. The incidents included whipping, beating, and other forms of physical violence,

the report mentioned. GOVT REJECTS REPORT Meanwhile, Information Minister Hasan Mahmud yesterday termed the US state department's report "one-

one-sided and unacceptable. In fact, people across the globe have rights to know about the prevailing human rights situation in the United States," he said. The minister was speaking at an

extended meeting of Rangunia upazila

Awami League in Chattogram, reports

"The report [on human rights] is

sided and unacceptable".

Hasan, also the joint general secretary of AL, said the organisations that provided information and data to prepare the report have lost their credibility among the people. "They [the organisations concerned

reports on the situation of Bangladesh in the past," he said. The minister said more than 100 people died in different incidents in the USA on January 1 this year.

also submitted this kind of one-sided

Many people were being shot dead by law enforcers in the USA every year,