

CONTAINING NOVEL CORONAVIRUS

Modi proposes jt strategy for Saarc countries

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

STAR REPORT

Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi 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 healthy."

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

India has already reported 75 positive cases and one death due to the virus, reported our New Delhi correspondent.

Around 1,500 people who came in 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.

Meanwhile, Prime Minister Sheikh 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 COVID-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.

PHOTO: COLLECTED

Expats lose jobs, face bleak future

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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 country.

"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 Rome.

He 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 named.

Bangladeshis living in Germany, especially in the state of North-Rhine Westphalia where coronavirus cases are high, are also panicked, said Zobaer Ahmed, a Bangladeshi journalist 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.

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

Europe now epicentre of virus pandemic

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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 rates.

Spain yesterday declared state of emergency as more countries announced nationwide or partial lockdowns to prevent the spread of virus.

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 yesterday.

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.

The 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 ahead.

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

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 not change soon.

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

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

Contacted, Labour Welfare 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 hope the situation will improve soon," he said.

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 welfare counsellor at the mission's Riyadh office, said they took the step as a precautionary measure.

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

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.

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 to the notice.

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

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

The Bangladesh mission in Doha also suspended its two pre-scheduled services related to passport issuance dated for March 13 and March 20, according to a notice issued by the mission recently.

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

The Bangladesh mission in South Korea too suspended its pre-scheduled consular service dated for Sunday, according to a notice.

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 lifted 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 checkpoints out of 37.

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

With the 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 "gunfight" with police beside Dhaka-Chattogram highway in Cumilla's Chandina upazila early yesterday.

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 Khairul Alam Sadhon, a Jubo League 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 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", he continued.

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

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 the coronavirus pandemic is now so 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 and Iran.

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-year-old 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 dredged at places to ensure proper water flow round the year. Otherwise, people and the environment would continue to suffer.

Contacted, Main Uddin, executive engineer of WDB in Manikganj, said river dredging began in many rivers in 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.