

PROVIDING CARE TO BANGLADESHIS ABROAD
Dhaka seeks support of foreign countries

Foreign minister briefs diplomats at state guesthouse Padma, urges all to stay united to fight coronavirus pandemic

DIPLOMATIC CORRESPONDENT

Bangladesh has sought support from other countries to provide safety and care to the Bangladeshis residing abroad while assuring that foreigners in Bangladesh would be taken care of during the global coronavirus outbreak. Briefing foreign diplomats at state guest house Padma yesterday evening, Foreign Minister AK Abdul Momen called on all countries to stand united and support each other in all possible ways in addressing this enormous public health challenge that can paralyze the whole world.

"Our missions in your countries are observing the situations closely. They are in constant touch with the local administrations and are fully cooperating with them.

"We request the governments of your countries, through you, [your] excellencies, to extend necessary support to the embassies and consulates of Bangladesh in your countries so that they can perform their duties in this challenging time," Momen said.

There are more than one crore Bangladeshis working and residing abroad, mostly in the Middle East. Many Bangladeshi expatriates also live in Europe, especially Italy and the UK, and even in the USA and Canada.

He assured the foreign diplomats stationed in Bangladesh that the government will stand beside all foreigners living in this country and will support and care for them in case of any issue related to Covid-19.

"Let me also take this opportunity to reassure you that diplomats working here in Bangladesh are our honoured guests, and we will take all necessary steps to ensure your safety and

wellbeing in this difficult time," the foreign minister said.

The coronavirus pandemic has now spread to 143 countries, killing some 6,000 people and infecting almost 154,000 people all over the world.

Europe has been declared the epicentre of Covid-19 now.

Authorities in Bangladesh detected eight positive cases of Covid-19, but nobody has died. Among various measures, Bangladesh has suspended flights from all of Europe, except for England, and closed all schools from today until March 31.

Momen briefed the diplomats of the measures taken by the health authorities in Bangladesh to prevent Covid-19 and take care of those infected.

Noting Bangladesh's decision not to allow people coming from Europe into Bangladesh for the time being, he said the authorities have taken this measure on a purely temporary basis -- till 31st March 2020. He pointed out that this measure is not applicable to people with diplomatic passports or laissez-passeurs posted in Bangladesh. Also, people are allowed to leave Bangladesh for Europe.

Bangladesh believes in working together with all countries -- regionally and globally, he said, adding that Bangladesh is also engaged regionally under the SAARC Mechanism to prevent the spread of Covid-19 and to address the situation and issues arising out of it.

Minister Momen, state minister for foreign affairs Shahriar Alam and foreign secretary Masud Bin Momen, along with foreign diplomats, flew balloons on the occasion of the yearlong Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman's birth centennial celebrations beginning today.

Europe to shut its borders

EU to curb all non-essential travel to contain spread of virus; Italy entering riskiest weeks, warns PM as the country records 1,809 deaths; Spain sees 1,000 new cases

AGENCIES

The European Union will close its borders to all non-essential travel "for an initial period of 30 days" as it attempts to contain the ongoing spread of the coronavirus on the continent.

The temporary restrictions could be prolonged beyond the 30 days, European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen announced yesterday. She appeared confident that the European Council will sign off on the restriction in a vote today.

Family members of European nationals, essential staff such as doctors and nurses, and people transporting goods to the EU will be exempted from the upcoming measures.

"The less travel, the more we can contain the virus," von der Leyen said during a press conference, which followed a video conference between G7 leaders.

The announcement comes as Spain went under partial lockdown in an attempt to stem the worst coronavirus outbreak in Europe after Italy, whose Prime Minister Giuseppe Conte warned yesterday that his country was entering "the riskiest weeks" and urged a coordinated European response to the coronavirus pandemic.

"European coordination on health and economic measures is needed," Conte told the Corriere della Sera newspaper ahead of a planned videoconference between Group of Seven (G7) leaders.

"It is time for courageous choices and Italy can offer a significant contribution as the country that was the first in Europe to have experienced such a wide spread of the virus," he said.

Italy was the first EU member state to shutter schools and almost all businesses to try to slow a global pandemic that has killed 1,809 people in the Mediterranean country since last month.

It has recorded more than half the deaths officially reported outside China. "Scientists tell us that we have not yet reached the peak. These are the riskiest weeks and we need the utmost precaution," said Conte.

Italy is facing two simultaneous threats to its healthcare system. World-class hospitals in the richer north where the overwhelming majority of the deaths and infections have been reported are running out of beds and relying on overstretched staff.

But Conte fears that medical centres in the poorer south, which has largely avoided contagion, will be unable to cope should it be hit just as hard.

"We can no longer afford behavioural errors," said Conte. "Things like people leaving Milan on weekends to spend time with their family or at their residences in the south must absolutely stop."

The virus "is our most important challenge of the past decades," Conte said.

The number of cases globally stood

at 168,250 with 6,501 deaths, across 142 countries and territories yesterday, according to a tally compiled by AFP from official sources.

Turkey yesterday suspended collective mosque prayers, including the important Friday prayer, until further notice to limit the spread of the new coronavirus.

Meanwhile, India last night shut down all educational institutions, gyms, museums, cultural and social centres, swimming pools and theatres till March 31 to contain the spread of coronavirus, our New Delhi correspondent reports.

Students have been advised to stay at home and online education be promoted. India also banned the entry of passengers from member-countries of the European Union, the European Free Trade Association, Turkey and the United Kingdom with effect from March 18 till March 31.

1,000 NEW CASES IN SPAIN

Spain has registered nearly 1,000 new Covid-19 infections over the past 24 hours, raising the total number of cases to 8,744, the health ministry said yesterday.

Over the same period, the number of deaths rose by nine to 297, the ministry's emergencies coordinator Fernando Simon said.

The figure for new cases was lower than weekend numbers, when 2,000 infections were detected between Saturday and Sunday and the number of deaths rose by around 100.

Of the total number, Madrid remains the worst-affected region, with 4,665 cases.

In order to rein in the virus, Spain has declared a state of alert, shutting all but essential services and ordering its population of 46 million people to stay at home. People are only authorised to go out to buy food or medicine, to go to work or to get medical treatment.

European Union leaders will take part in a crisis videoconference today to coordinate actions to fight the spread of the coronavirus.

Germany yesterday introduced border controls with Austria, Denmark, France, Luxembourg and Switzerland in a bid to stem the coronavirus outbreak.

Only those with a valid reason for travel, like cross-border commuters and delivery drivers, are allowed through, officials said.

COVID-19 VACCINE TRIAL

A clinical trial to test a coronavirus vaccine on human subjects will begin next week, according to a US official.

The first participant was set to receive the experimental vaccine yesterday in order to test for any potential side effects -- but they will not be infected with the virus itself.

The trial is being funded by the National Institutes of Health and will take place in Seattle, the official told the Associated Press. It will begin with 45 healthy volunteers at the Kaiser Permanente Washington Health Research Institute.

But even if the tests go well, experts say it could take more than a year to develop and fully test a vaccine.



Students of Dhaka University's Kabi Sufia Kamal Hall leaving the dormitory yesterday. Earlier in the day, the university authorities suspended all academic activities for 11 days from tomorrow amid coronavirus scare.

PHOTO: PRABIR DAS

CORONAVIRUS SCARE

All educational institutions closed till March 31

Cinemas shut till April 2; no sports events this month

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Amid concern from guardians and falling attendance, the government yesterday announced that all educational institutions would remain closed from March 17-31 as a preventive measure against possible spread of novel coronavirus in the country.

The primary and mass education ministry postponed today's Mujib Borsho celebration programmes marking the birth centenary of Father of the Nation Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman. However, the education ministry would organise programmes on a limited scale.

The decision came amid fears of the spread of novel coronavirus as three more Bangladeshis were tested positive for the virus yesterday, raising the number of infected people in the country to eight.

Media reports said many parents recently stopped sending their children to schools, leading to a drop in students' attendance.

Many guardians hailed the government's decision of shutting the educational institutions.

Rezwana Parvin, guardian of a schoolchild from the capital's Mohammadpur, said the decision came as a relief for them.

Education Minister Dipu Moni and State Minister for Primary and Mass Education Zakir Hossain, announced the closure of educational institutions at separate press conferences at their offices at the secretariat.

Speaking at the press conference at her office, the education minister said the decision was taken as a precautionary measure.

"Everyone has to make sure that students stay at home. It is the cabinet's decision. Educational institutions of all levels -- from pre-primary to higher studies -- will remain closed."

She said coaching centres would also remain shut. "Students should stay at home. This closure is not for attending coaching classes or go on holidays."

The education ministry oversees 41,906 schools, colleges, madrasas, and universities, which have 1.94

crore students and 5.59 lakh teachers, according to the Bangladesh Bureau of Educational Information and Statistics (BANBEIS).

Dipu Moni said any decision regarding the upcoming HSC exams, scheduled to begin on April 1, would be taken when the exam date would get nearer. She said there was no reason for taking the decision now.

The minister said all the school would observe their scheduled programmes marking Mujib Borsho. "Teachers will plant saplings without holding any gathering."

Earlier, the ministry had decided that each school would plant 100 saplings in and around its campus on March 17.

MUJIB BORSHO EVENTS POSTPONED

State Minister Zakir Hossain said today's programmes marking Mujib Borsho were postponed.

The primary and mass education ministry cancelled the programme of reading out Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina's letter, written to all primary students on Mujib Borsho, by the students.

He also said all classes would remain closed until March 31.

According to BANBEIS, the ministry oversees over 1 lakh primary schools, madrasas, and kindergartens, which have over 1.74 crore students and 4.26 lakh teachers.

PUBLIC UNIVS SHUT

The Dhaka University authorities yesterday announced that the educational institution would remain closed from March 18-28.

"All academic activities will remain suspended from March 18 to 28 to ensure safety of our students," DU Vice-Chancellor Prof Md Akhtaruazzaman said at a press briefing on the campus yesterday morning.

Prof Md Amir Hussain, pro vice-chancellor (administration) of Jahangirnagar University, said the university would remain closed from March 18 to April 2.

All its students have been asked to vacate the residential halls by 11:00am on Thursday.

Authorities of Bangladesh University of Engineering and

Technology (Buet) closed the institution until March 31.

In a notice, they asked all students to leave the campus as the residential halls would remain shut from tomorrow afternoon.

The authorities of Jagannath University, Rajshahi University, Shahjalal University of Science and Technology and Islamic University said their institutions would remain closed from March 18-31.

NU, PSC EXAMS SUSPENDED

In a notice issued yesterday, the National University said it suspended all examinations from March 17-31.

Bangladesh Public Service Commission also suspended all exams from March 17 to 31, said a statement.

The Unesco said an unprecedented number of children, youths and adults are not attending schools or universities because of Covid-19. Governments in 73 countries have announced or implemented the closure of educational institutions in an attempt to slow down the spread of the disease.

According to Unesco monitoring, 56 countries have closed schools nationwide, impacting over 516.6 million children and youths.

CINEMAS CLOSED

Mia Alauddin, adviser to Bangladesh Motion Picture Exhibitors Association, said all cinemas across the country would remain closed from March 18 to April 2.

He, however, said cineplexes would remain open during the period.

Meanwhile, State Minister for Youth and Sports Zahid Ahsan Russel told The Daily Star that all domestic and international games and sports events would remain suspended until April 30 and March 31 respectively.

UNB adds: Labour and Employment Secretary KM Ali Azam yesterday said no decision was taken yet over closing mills and factories amid coronavirus fears.

Speaking to reporters after attending a programme at the secretariat, he said the factory authorities were asked to grant leave to those workers whose relatives returned home from abroad recently.

'Mugger' killed in 'gunfight' with cops

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

A suspected mugger, who allegedly killed a woman while mugging her in the capital's Mugda area last month, was killed in a "gunfight" with the Detective Branch of Police (DB) in Khilgaon area early yesterday.

Asaduzzaman, deputy commissioner (east division) of the detective branch of Dhaka Metropolitan Police, said that the dead -- Abdul Mannan alias Mona, 35, -- was the alleged leader of the mugging gang that was responsible for the death of a woman who fell from a rickshaw after muggers snatched her bag.

Earlier on Sunday, police arrested four muggers from the Mugda Stadium area and told media that they were looking for their gang leader Mona.

Later, based on the arrestees' information, police raided Khilgaon's Nagdarpar area around 3:00am yesterday to arrest other members of the gang, the DC said.

"Sensing the presence of police, the muggers opened fire. This prompted the law enforcers to fire back, triggering the gunfight during which Mona was shot," the DB official claimed.

Mona was sent to Dhaka Medical College Hospital where doctors declared him dead.

On February 29, Tarina Begum Lipi, 38, died after falling off a rickshaw when a group of muggers attempted to snatch her bag.

Two arrested over rape of schoolgirl

OUR CORRESPONDENT, Tangail

Two people were arrested in a case filed in connection with the rape of a schoolgirl in Tangail's Bhupapur upazila on Sunday night.

Police arrested them after the victim's father, who pulls rickshaws in the capital, lodged the case with Bhupapur Police Station against four people that night.

One of the arrestees, Mohammad Zakaria, 20, is from Polshia village in the upazila.

According to the case statement, a classmate of the victim, who is 16 and a 10th grader, used to stalk her on her way to school. He proposed forming a relationship with her. Being refused, he was angry with the girl.

On the night of March 9, the 16-year-old boy, along with his three friends Jibon, 20, Sujon, 23, and Zakaria picked up the girl from in front of her house as she was going to the toilet.

They took her to adjacent Sirajkandi village where Sujon and Zakaria raped her, according to the case statement.

They then let the girl go after threatening her that they would kill her if she disclosed the incident.

After returning home, the girl notified her family members of the incident.

Rashidul Islam, officer-in-charge of Bhupapur Police Station, told The Daily Star that during primary interrogation, the arrestees admitted their involvement in the crime.

The girl was sent to Tangail General Hospital yesterday for medical tests, he said.

Tanvir Ahmed, court inspector in Tangail, told The Daily Star that Senior Judicial Magistrate's Court of Tangail recorded statements of the two arrestees and later sent them to jail.

Another Tangail court recorded statements of the victim, he added.

The Daily Star is withholding the name of the schoolboy as he is not an adult.

His legacy is our beacon of hope

FROM PAGE 1

Sheikh Mujibur Rahman was the epitome of courage. In the collective memory, he will always be etched as that towering figure under whose magnificent shadow Bangladesh became a sovereign country.

Tall for an average Bangalee, he had all the traits that underline the making of a political giant. He was a thinker, a strategist and a tough negotiator. His smile radiated confidence and instilled courage in people.

It was his lifelong devotion to the cause of the toiling masses that made him Bangabandhu. He united the nation more than anybody else, first for language and then for political and economic autonomy and finally for independence.

The courage and clarity with which he was steering us to independence gave us a new self-confidence that was hitherto missing.

The greatest Bangalee of a thousand years was born on this day in 1920 to Sheikh Lutfar Rahman and Sheikh Sayera Khatun in Tungipara village under the then Gopalganj subdivision.

His political life began as a humble activist while he was still a student.

Having completed studies from Islamia College in Calcutta in 1947, he took admission in law at Dhaka

University. However, his active involvement in politics led to his expulsion from the university in 1948.

It was also in 1948 when he went to jail, twice. That was but the beginning of a political career that would lead to innumerable spells in incarceration for the future founder of Bangladesh.

In fact, during his lifetime, he spent nearly one-fourth of his time or 4,682 days in prison.

By 1954, Sheikh Mujibur Rahman had transformed himself into an activist politician thanks to his involvement in the formation of the Awami Muslim League in June 1949.

In the provincial elections of March 1954, the Awami League played a pioneering role in the creation of the Jukto Front.

Following Huseyn Shaheed Suhrawardy's death in 1963, Sheikh Mujib revived the Awami League in January 1964. It was a move which clearly demonstrated his desire to mould the party along the lines he thought would turn it into a voice of the Bangalee masses.

In February 1966, he announced the Six-Point programme of regional autonomy at a conference of Pakistan's opposition parties in Lahore.

In May that year, he was arrested under the Defence of Pakistan Rules.

While in prison, he was charged, in January 1968, with conspiracy to break up Pakistan through what was given out as the Agartala Conspiracy Case.

At the height of the Agartala conspiracy trial in 1968, he coolly told a western journalist that the Pakistani authorities would not be able to keep him incarcerated for more than six months.

He was freed in seven months.

A mass upsurge forced the withdrawal of the case on February 22, 1969. The next day, at a huge rally at the then Race Course Maidan, Sheikh Mujib was officially honoured by a grateful Bangalee nation as Bangabandhu -- Friend of Bengal.

Bangabandhu led the Awami League to a decisive victory in Pakistan's first general elections in December 1970.

However, as the Yahya Khan regime and Zulfikar Ali Bhutto began to conspire against the Awami League to deny it the right to form a government at the centre, Bangabandhu went before the nation on March 7, 1971 and delivered what clearly was the finest speech of his career.

He called the struggle one of emancipation and independence. His speech changed the course of the

history of struggle for independence and gave millions of Bangalees a new sense of direction.

As the Pakistan army launched its genocide on March 25, 1971, Bangabandhu declared Bangladesh's independence early on March 26. He was arrested soon afterward by the army and flown to West Pakistan, to be put on trial on charges of treason.

After a trial in-camera, he was sentenced to death by a military tribunal in early December 1971. An all-out guerrilla war began against the Pakistani oppressive regime and victory achieved on December 16, 1971. It was his political inspiration and moral persuasion that made mass people sacrifice their lives.

Pakistan's defeat in Bangladesh and the emergence of the Bangalee nation saw him return home a hero on January 10, 1972.

Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman had just fulfilled his life's dream of freeing his people and giving them an independent country before he was assassinated, along with most of his family members, in a bloody coup in the pre-dawn hours of August 15, 1975.

Bangabandhu was our own. He is our emancipation -- for today and the days to come. The greatest treasure of the Bangalee nation is his legacy.