

CORONAVIRUS: WHAT MINISTERS, LEADERS SAID



"Corona is dangerously strong, but together we are stronger."

ROAD TRANSPORT AND BRIDGES MINISTER
OBAIDUL QUADER



"The country is free from corona under the competent leadership of the prime minister."

AWAMI LEAGUE PRESIDENT MEMBER
MOHAMMED NASIM



"To combat corona, hospitals like [the ones] in China will be built."

FINANCE MINISTER
AHM MUSTAFA KAMAL



"Corona is not a deadly disease, it's a like a flu and fever."

FOREIGN MINISTER
ABDUL MOMEN



"Bangladesh is better prepared to prevent coronavirus than the developed countries."

INFORMATION MINISTER
HASAN MAHMUD



"Coronavirus is not a deadly disease, it's contagious."

HEALTH MINISTER
ZAHID MALIK



"Coronavirus will not be able to do anything to us as long as Sheikh Hasina is there."

STATE MINISTER FOR SHIPPING
KHALID MAHMUD CHOWDHURY

3 PARLIAMENTARY CONSTITUENCIES

By-elections today amid virus scare

UNB, Dhaka

Amid coronavirus fears, three parliamentary constituencies -- Dhaka-10, Gaibandha-3, and Bagerhat-4 -- are going to by-elections today.

There are over 10 lakh voters in the three constituencies. The voting will begin at 9:00am and continue until 5:00pm without any break.

Electronic Voting Machines (EVMs) will be used in Dhaka-10 and traditional ballot papers in Gaibandha-3 and Bagerhat-4.

The Awami League and the Jatiya Party are taking part in all the three by-polls, but another major political party BNP is running in two constituencies -- Dhaka-10 and Gaibandha-3.

The BNP has no candidate in Bagerhat-4 as its candidate's nomination paper was declared invalid there.

There are 321,275 voters under 117 polling centres in Dhaka-10 (Dhanmondi and Lalbagh).

Six candidates, including Md Shafiqul Islam (Mohiuddin) from the AL and Sheikh Robiul Alam from the BNP, are running in the Dhaka-10 by-polls.

The four other contestants are JP's Hazi Md Shahjahan, Bangladesh Muslim League's Nabab Khawza Ali Hasan Askari, Bangladesh Congress' Mizanur Rahman Chowdhury and PDP's Abdur Rahim.

At a regular media briefing on Covid-19 at the Institute of Epidemiology, Disease Control and Research (IEDCR) in Mohakhali yesterday, Additional Director General of the Directorate General of Health Services Prof Nasima Sultana said voting in EVMs carried the risk of novel

coronavirus contamination.

However, GM Shahatab Uddin, returning officer of Dhaka-10 by-polls, said they took precautionary measures following the coronavirus outbreak.

"There'll be hand sanitisers and tissue papers at every polling booth. Banners will be there urging voters to wash hands before pressing the EVM button to cast votes," he said.

The Dhaka-10 fell vacant as AL MP Sheikh Fazle Noor Taposh resigned on December 29 to contest the Dhaka South City Corporation election.

There are 435,211 voters under 132 polling stations in Gaibandha-3 (Sadullapur-Palashbari upazilas) constituency that fell vacant following the death of AL lawmaker M Eunus Ali Sarkar on December 27.

Four candidates, including Umme Kulsum Smitri from the AL and Moynul Hasan Sadik from the BNP, are contesting the by-election. The two other contenders are JP's Mainur Rabbi Chowdhury and Jasod's SM Khademul Islam Khudi.

Some 316,510 people have voting rights under 143 polling centres in Bagerhat-4 (Moreganj and Shrankhola upazilas) constituency that fell vacant after the death of AL MP Mozammel Hossain on January 10.

AL candidate Amirul Alam Milon and his rival from JP Sajon Kumar are competing in the race.

On February 6, the Election Commission announced the by-election schedules for the three constituencies.

There is a constitutional obligation for the EC to complete a parliamentary by-election within 90 days after the constituency concerned falls vacant.

Death toll crosses 10,000

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cases, followed by Spain with 1,002 deaths and 19,980 cases, and France with 372 deaths and 10,995 cases.

Since 1900 GMT Thursday, Peru announced its first fatality, while Haiti, the US Virgin Islands and the Caribbean island nation of Saint Lucia have reported their first cases.

However, accurate figures are difficult to come by as many of those who die are suffering from other illnesses and infection rates are uncertain because of a lack of testing in many countries.

The United States is showing signs that it is ramping up its efforts on all fronts, fast-tracking antimalarial drugs for use as a treatment against the virus and promising a \$1 trillion emergency relief package to combat the economic turmoil.

The package -- coupled with a European Central Bank plan to buy 750 billion euros in bonds -- saw stock markets rebound yesterday with exchanges up throughout Asia and Europe.

US President Donald Trump, who has come under fire for his response to the crisis, said on Thursday that US officials would make antimalarials chloroquine and hydroxychloroquine available "almost immediately".

Experts are divided over whether the drugs are suitable though, having undergone only the briefest of clinical trials.

German and American drug firms are frantically trying to synthesise treatments for the disease and Chinese scientists are also carrying out clinical trials, though no studies have yet been published.

Trump also sparked an international row after he accused the Chinese of being secretive over its initial spread and severity, saying the world is now "paying a big price".

Chinese foreign ministry spokesman Geng Shuang hit back, saying "some people" were trying to "stigmatise" China's fight against the virus.

"This approach ignores the great sacrifice made by the Chinese people to safeguard the health and safety of humankind, and slanders China's major contribution to global public health," he said.

The White House Thursday said Trump will cancel an in-person meeting of G7 leaders at Camp David in June because of the coronavirus and will hold a videoconference instead.

Meanwhile, Saudi Arabia has suspended the holding of daily prayers and the weekly Friday prayers inside and outside the walls of the two

mosques in Makkah and Medina to limit the spread of coronavirus.

Earlier, on Tuesday, Saudi Arabia had suspended congregational prayers in other mosques in the country except Masjid al-Haram and Masjid an-Nabawi, in Mecca and Medina respectively.

Across Europe, governments continued to rigorously enforce lockdown measures.

France announced more than 4,000 people were fined on the first day of its confinement and ministers branded those breaking the rules as "idiots".

France and Italy have both said they will most likely extend the confinement beyond the initial periods, while British schools will close indefinitely yesterday.

As Europeans battle to cope with the isolation, technology companies have begun to hint at the strain being put on their systems.

Both Netflix and YouTube, which both say they have experienced a surge in demand since lockdowns began, have promised to reduce the default image quality of streaming video in Europe to ease pressure on the internet.

The restrictions are also ironically bringing communities together in some places.

In sparsely populated rural Spain -- a country that ranks fourth in the world for coronavirus infections -- neighbours are pulling together to help the old and the vulnerable.

Sergio Caminero, 30, who lives in Lovingos, a hamlet of just 50 people north of Madrid, went to pick up some shopping for an elderly neighbour.

"She's older and is quite frightened and tense," he told AFP.

The strain on public health and education systems as well as the economy is likely to deepen in the coming weeks.

The shadow of the virus is lengthening across Africa, which is no stranger to deadly outbreaks, but it has reported little more than 700 out of the nearly quarter million cases worldwide.

The global sporting calendar, shredded by the spread of the pandemic, still has one major event coming up that has not yet been called off -- the Olympic Games, set to take place in Japan in the summer.

Japan Olympic Committee member Kaori Yamaguchi broke ranks with the official line, telling the Nikkei daily: "It should be postponed under the current situation where athletes are not well prepared."

Returnees' apathy let virus spread

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in institutional quarantine and 30 in isolation at hospitals.

Nasima urged the people to strictly follow the rules of self-quarantine to prevent the spread of coronavirus.

Ironically, the local administrations across the country do not have traces of the expatriates who have returned home recently.

For instance, about 10,303 people have returned to Barisal division from abroad this month so far. Of them, only 764 could be traced by the health department and were forced into self-quarantine.

Dr Basudeb Das, director of DGHS in Barisal division, said two other returnees were sent into isolation.

"We have informed the district administrations that many returnees were not following self-quarantine rules and asked them to operate mobile courts," he said.

Meanwhile, the authorities of Hazrat Shahjalal International Airport (HSIA) have started stamping quarantine information on the inbound passengers. The seal bears the date until when they will have to be in home quarantine.

The authorities adopted the measure on Thursday, the officer-in-charge (immigration) at the airport told The Daily Star, wishing not be named.

In another development, a Bangladeshi passenger was hospitalised yesterday with high fever after he arrived at Dhaka airport from abroad around 1:00am, said Dr Johirul of the health desk at the airport.

With him, 10 returnees were sent to hospitals with high fever in the last 48 hours.

DGHS ISSUES DIRECTIVES
The DGHS has issued letters to its divisional directors, district civil surgeons and upazila health and family planning officers, directing them to take legal actions through operating mobile courts to monitor self-quarantine and tackle the spread of coronavirus.

Under the Infectious Disease (prevention, control and elimination) Act, 2018, they can hand out punishments of six months imprisonment or a fine of Tk 1 lakh or both to those concealing information about any infectious disease.

Besides, if anyone refuses to follow instructions or obstruct officials from carrying out their duties, the offenders can be sentenced to imprisonment for more than three months or fined Tk 50,000 or handed both the punishments.

Dr Mahmudul Hasan, upazila health and family planning officer in Shariatpur's Jajira upazila, said

he received a letter in this regard yesterday.

GOVT MULLS SUSPENDING BUS, TRAIN SERVICES

Amid the increase in the number of Covid-19 cases in the country, the government may suspend bus, train and launch services if the situation deteriorates, reports UNB quoting ministers.

Railways Minister Nurul Islam Sujan said they took some precautionary measures at railway stations as per the directives of the health ministry to prevent the spread of coronavirus.

"If the situation gets worse, the government will take initiatives to stop train services for a certain period," he told the news agency.

State Minister for Shipping Khalid Mahmud Chowdhury said, "We are now discouraging people from travelling by launches and steamers. If the situation worsens, movement of all river vessels will be suspended."

Road Transport and Bridges Minister Obaidul Quader said preventive measures have been taken as per the health ministry's directives and bus owners have been asked to follow the directives.

"Bus owners have been asked to disinfect their vehicles before carrying passengers in those," he told UNB.



A poultry shed is being built on the forest department's land in Sal forest of Mymensingh's Bhaluka upazila. Locals said some influential people were grabbing the forest department's land after the land ministry recorded it as khas and private land. The photo was taken last month.

PHOTO: ABU BAKAR SIDDIQUE

16,000 acres of forest at risk

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declared protected forest and handed over to Forest Department with gazette notifications published in phases under the Forest Act, 1927.

As the Bangladesh Survey ended in 1995, only 7,226.75 acres of the land in six mauzas was recorded as forestland, the letter mentioned, also stating, "we have noticed huge mistakes in the survey report".

Out of the rest 15,851.51 acres in 24 mauzas, around 8,008 acres were recorded as khas land in favour of Mymensingh's deputy commissioner and 4,661.72 acres as private land while the fate of the rest 3,181.85 acres remained unknown.

The letter also mentioned that it would encourage land grabbing and multiplicity of suits. It will also leave negative impact on biodiversity, wildlife and environment.

"Besides, it will increase land related cases and clash among people in those areas," it read.

As the land is a government property, it is a duty of all the government agencies to record Forest Department's land in its name, the letter mentioned.

According to Forest Department officials, the negligence of survey officials was so severe that they even recorded a national park -- Kadigarh National Park -- as a private property.

"They saw it was a national park with huge greenery under the forest

department, still they recorded it as a private property," said one official.

Meanwhile, Chief Conservator of Forest Mohammed Shafiqul Alam Chowdhury wrote another letter to the director general at the Directorate of Land Record and Survey on October 20, 2019.

In the letter, it was mentioned that the forest department is eligible to conduct resurveys of any land for the greater interest of the government as per the State Acquisition and Tenancy Act, 1950 and Tenancy Rules 1955.

In response, on November 11, 2019, Deputy Secretary of the Directorate of Land Record and Survey, Moniruzzaman, said the land record was published following the directives of the Ministry of Land in nine mauzas of Bhaluka.

The letter also mentioned that they were working on to publish records of 21 more mauzas. It was not possible for them to conduct resurvey.

Meanwhile, seeking anonymity, an official who worked for the forest department in Mymensingh said, "They [officials of Directorate of Land Record and Survey] recorded land in the name of anyone who submitted documents to them. But they did not check whether those documents were fake or not."

"We wanted to know about that remaining 3,181.85 acres but that could not be known as they have not informed us about it properly."

Asked, ABM Fazlur Rahman, director of land record and survey department, said although the land was recorded in the name of Forest Department in Cadastral Survey (ended in 1940), it was not mentioned in the State Acquisition (SA) record.

And the Forest Department did not fix it, he added.

He said, "Our field surveyor recorded the land in favour of possessors of the land. The Forest Department did not raise their objections when our field surveyors were conducting the survey."

Currently the authorities of land record and survey is under process of publishing the survey report of the rest 21 mauzas, said Fazlur Rahman.

"Even after publishing the report, the Forest Department will be able to appeal to the Survey tribunal. Even they can move to the High Court and Supreme Court," he added.

However, a top official from the department of forest said, it was a very difficult process to recover the land by filing cases as it takes lots of time and the government officials are also transferred from their stations.

Once upon a time, vast areas of Cumilla, Gazipur, Mymensingh and Tangail were covered with Sal forest. But only a few last patches of the forest still survive, hosting varieties of wild animals including fishing cat, rhesus monkey, fox, mongoose, snake and different birds.

Govt should

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The Daily Star contacted at least three top officials of the Institute of Epidemiology, Disease Control and Research (IEDCR) yesterday, but none of them could give any exact figures.

Between March 1 and 18, 2,36,620 people arrived in Bangladesh from various countries, and most of them were not placed in strict quarantine.

Stressing on the importance of contact tracing in the fight against coronavirus, experts said the government could not afford to act slow now since there was a "gaping hole" in the quarantine arrangements.

They said contact tracing is relatively painstaking, but it is potentially life-saving in the fight against viral epidemics. It was handy in containing previous outbreaks of Ebola in Western Africa and the SARS scare of the early 2000s.

The experiences from Hubei province, Covid-19's ground-zero in China, and Italy, which has so far more than 4,000 deaths, showed that failure to act quickly could turn disastrous, they warned.

They pointed out that some Asian countries, including Hong Kong, Singapore and Taiwan, appear to have brought the coronavirus situation under control, using heavy disease surveillance, including effective contact tracing.

Contact tracing is also a key part of the United States' coronavirus containment strategy, they said.

Muzaherul Huq, a former regional adviser of WHO's South East Asia region, said contact tracing in Bangladesh had so far been a "complete failure."

"Who is monitoring the people? In our cultural and social context, contact tracing is very tough," he said, adding, "Those supposed to be in quarantine are mixing with people and those people are mixing with others."

He claimed that the virus has already spread to the community level, going beyond the "family transmission level".

Replying to a query, Be-Nazir Ahmed, former director (disease control) of the DGHS, said there were some attempts of contact tracing at the beginning and that the authorities must intensify its efforts immediately.

"I cannot say that it is happening in a good way. A huge number of people arrived in Bangladesh from abroad in the last two months, but we don't seem to have details of all the returnees."

"If we do not know the contacts, then how will we trace them?"

Contacted, Prof Abul Kalam Azad, director general of the Directorate General of Health Services, said, "Whenever we get a positive patient, we ensure contact tracing to find those who might have come in his or her contact. We talk to them and try to reach out the last person."

He could not say how many people have exactly been tracked down so far.

"If you see, you will find that the corona positive cases have remained limited to the families of those previously infected. We repeatedly told them to follow quarantine rules within the families. But it's not possible for us to monitor everything at the family level."

THE BHUTAN CASE

Talking about the contact tracing method, experts lauded Bhutan for its efforts in this regard.

On March 6, the country announced its first positive case of the novel coronavirus -- a tourist from the US. Until yesterday, the country did not report any new case.

Soon after the first patient was detected, Bhutan authorities created a map of his contacts, tracking down at least 90 people who might have come in his contact.

Three of the patient's close contacts -- his partner, the driver of a car and the tourist guide -- are now in quarantine. Eight Indian nationals on board his flight from Guwahati were also put in quarantine.

Experts believe these measures helped Bhutan slow the spread of the virus.

Italy closes ports to cruise ships

AFP, Rome

Italy has closed its ports to foreign cruise ships and suspended the operation of its own services in response to the coronavirus pandemic.

The transportation ministry said late Thursday that Italian ships already at sea will have to return to port and undergo tests on all crew and passengers.

Those not positive for COVID-19 will be asked to self-isolate and to monitor their health.

The notice runs until April 3.

Prime Minister Giuseppe Conte said Thursday that all Italian restrictions -- including the shutdown of most businesses and a ban on public gatherings -- will have to be extended well into next month.

Italy has a thriving cruise industry that employed 120,000 people and was Europe's largest in 2017.

Several cruise ships have experienced coronavirus outbreaks that saw them blocked from various ports during the virus crisis.

The Diamond Princess cruise ship that was quarantined at a port in Japan was under the command of Italian captain Gennaro Arma.