

Independence Day programmes cancelled

Special JS session postponed

UNB, Dhaka

The government has cancelled the Independence Day programmes, including placing wreaths at the National Memorial in Savar on March 26, amid the rise in coronavirus cases.

Besides, the civic reception at the Bangabhaban marking the Independence Day and the Swadhinata Padak, the highest state award, distribution programme have also been cancelled.

The decision was taken after Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina held a meeting with President Abdul Hamid at the Bangabhaban yesterday evening, said president's Press Secretary Joyal Abedin.

He said the PM paid a courtesy call on the president. During the meeting, they discussed the country's overall situation.

Hasina apprised Hamid of various steps taken by her government to fight coronavirus.

Joyal said both the president and the PM urged the people to remain alert to coronavirus instead of getting panicked.

SPL JS SESSION POSTPONED
The two-day special session of parliament, scheduled to begin on Sunday on the occasion of Mujib Borsho, was postponed yesterday.

The president's press secretary informed reporters about the development.

President Abdul Hamid postponed the special session in public interest to avoid gatherings for prevention of coronavirus infection.

The president was scheduled to deliver his speech on Bangabandhu at the outset of the special session, which would have been the seventh session of the current parliament.

The Jatiya Sangsad went into special sittings on two occasions -- January 31 and June 18 in 1974, which were addressed by former Yugoslav president Marshal Josip Broz Tito and then Indian president VV Giri.



Participants at a roundtable titled "Corona Pandemic: Tasks Ahead" at The Daily Star Centre in the capital yesterday. The Daily Star organised the discussion in collaboration with Unilever Bangladesh Limited. PHOTO: STAR

Put all suspected cases in institutional quarantine

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healthcare professionals," Prof MA Faiz, former director general of the Directorate General of Health Services (DGHS), told the roundtable.

He said the government should prepare assuming that the Covid-19 situation in the country may turn as such as in China or Italy.

Termining the decision to place suspected cases in home-quarantine a "big mistake," Prof Muzaherul Huq, a former regional advisor of WHO South East Asia Region, said, "Apart from tracking and tracing people who might have contracted the virus, the government can implement institutional quarantine [for all suspected cases]. It is now very easy for the government and they should be strict; they have to mobilise law-enforcement agencies for this."

Renowned medicine specialist Prof AMB Abdullah, personal physician of the prime minister, stressed the need for ensuring personal protective equipment for all healthcare professionals, who might come in contact with suspected coronavirus patients.

"Unless the doctors and nurses are provided with protective gears, how will they treat the patients? They must be supplied with the required protective gears," he said.

Dr Mustafa Jalal Mohiuddin, president of Bangladesh Medical Association (BMA), said, "There are 70 thousand doctors in the country. Their safety is a major concern."

Brac Bangladesh Executive Director Asif Saleh emphasised on decentralisation of testing arrangements. "The government should prioritise the decentralisation of testing facilities. If people are diagnosed with the virus, they should be quarantined effectively."

Mentioning that home-quarantine is not possible in slums, he said,

"Poor people, who cannot be home-quarantined, should be taken to the government's quarantine facilities and provided with livelihood support so that after two weeks of isolation, they can return to regular economic activities."

"Next two-three weeks are crucial for us [Bangladesh]. After that we could be able to understand the level of transmission. So we have to prepare accordingly."

Dr Bardan Jung Rana, WHO country representative in Bangladesh, spoke of how misinformation and rumour affect all efforts badly and suggested key measures for Bangladesh.

"Misinformation and rumours -- these are the things which are scarier than the virus. These are hampering efforts by countries in mitigating and containing this spread [globally]," he said.

Citing experiences from different countries that successfully controlled the outbreak, Dr Rana said, "Physical distancing measures are very useful; it has been proved that it can slow the transmission ... To control the epidemic, we should intensify measures to trace, isolate, test and provide treatment."

Unilever Bangladesh CEO Kedar Lele said, "Acknowledging the problem can lead us to the solution. The government should form a centralised command centre so that all initiatives can be implemented in a coordinated way."

He stressed on ensuring that people's livelihood is protected in case of any emergency.

"It is extremely important to maintain uninterrupted flow of essential commodities in the neighbourhood. It's because consumers will start panic-buying if they find that commodities like rice, pulse, and oil are not available in the nearest stores. In our opinion,

unlike the last global crisis, the epicentre of this crisis will not be financial institutions, it will be livelihood.

"So, what the government needs to do is to ensure livelihood for people, whether they are daily wage earners, whether they are working with companies or they are government employees. When you force people into practising social distance and not going to work, how would they earn?"

"If consumers, people and citizens do not get their financial support, you might see a pandemic resulting into violence. These are the things we should focus on."

Prof Nazrul Islam, former vice chancellor of BSMMU, talked about ensuring critical care facilities at all district and local hospitals. "There should be separate counters for receiving patients with respiratory illness. Protection of health professionals is also very crucial."

He opposed the idea of lockdowns during emergency situations. "Lockdown or emergency -- these are the favourite words of the politicians. Why would we do these? We have to face the situation, have to sort out the infected people. Maybe they are spreading infection in a village or in a certain area. Why would we lock down the whole country for this?"

Dr Fazle Rabby Mohammad, representative from Square Hospitals, said they were dealing with an "unusual" increase in the number of patients with respiratory illness.

"Patients often hide their travel history and it poses threat to all of us. As we have no testing facilities, we are unable to know the reality. The government should permit us to test Covid-19 infections," he said.

Mahfuz Anam, editor and publisher of The Daily Star, moderated the discussion.

Flights to 10 countries

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However, air communications with the UK, China, Hong Kong and Thailand will remain open, the minister told reporters at the state guesthouse Padma.

Meanwhile, Civil Aviation Authority of Bangladesh Chairman Air Vice Marshal M Mafidur Rahman yesterday at a press briefing said air communications with the four countries could be suspended anytime if the regulatory authority "thinks risk factor regarding Covid-19 with those countries increase."

So far, the authorities have found the existing routes not risky, he added.

He also said if necessary the authorities would shut down the country's all three international airports.

Biman Bangladesh Airlines has suspended its flights to 15 out of the 17 international destinations it serves. The two existing routes are Dhaka-London and Dhaka-Manchester.

The national flag carrier incurred a loss of around Tk 300 crore in the last one and half months, said Tahera Khandaker, deputy general manager, public relations of Biman.

Talking to reporters at the state guesthouse, the foreign minister said the government would take required measure if any foreign mission official working in Bangladesh wishes to leave the country amid the outbreak.

"There are certain openings. You can take the opportunity," he said.

The government would also take steps to bring back expatriate Bangladeshis if they are found in a precarious condition abroad, the minister said, responding to a query.

He asked all to make sure that the Bangladeshi expatriates who have returned from abroad stay indoors for 14 days.

Anyone who finds a returnee not being quarantined should notify local

administration, he said.

"We are putting stamp with inerasable ink on each returnee's hand so that they can be traced easily," he said, urging relatives to remain cautious.

China has been successful in reducing the virus' spread by applying effective measures, the minister said.

He said his ministry has directed chiefs of Bangladesh missions abroad to notify expatriate Bangladeshis to delay their homecoming.

"There is a crisis all over the world, not only in our country," he added.

He urged expatriate Bangladeshis to remain careful abroad and follow local laws and regulations.

The ministry has talked to different foreign missions about expiry of their visas. They have assured the government about visa extension and suggested not to worry, he added.

TESTING KITS AND PPE
The minister said the government would soon import 10,000 testing kits and as many personal protective equipment (PPE) from China to fight the spread of coronavirus.

"The kits and equipment are ready. Those will be brought in by a chartered flight soon," he said.

Some private companies are also working to import such kits and equipment. If required the government would arrange chartered flights for them, he added.

He said the government cancelled the leave of all government officials involved in essential services, including the health and foreign ministry, police and field-level administration.

Pointing to the low number of reported cases of infection, he said, "If we can take protective measures, then it will not spread [in Bangladesh]."

Joint effort, from the government and the people, is required to fight the disease, he said.

Another death

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Between March 1 and March 18, at least 2,36,620 people arrived in Bangladesh. An overwhelming majority of them were not placed in quarantine or isolation.

Health Minister Zahid Maleque said, "Our situation is better than that of many European countries. However, we are not sitting idle ... We are watching the changes happening around the world and taking measures accordingly."

He, however, was criticised by many observers for holding the press conference in a crowded room, violating his own ministry's advice on social distancing.

STRICTER MEASURES

The minister said officials had collected particulars of returnees and sent those to the authorities concerned to track down the ones who went into hiding and then properly quarantine them at their homes.

Besides the already prepared hospitals, the Sheikh Rasel Gastroenterology Institute and Hospital and Sheikh Hasina National Institute of Burn and Plastic Surgery are being readied for treating Covid-19 patients, he said.

Bangladesh Army was given the charge of quarantining people in Uttara's Diabari and Tongi Ijtima ground, he added.

To detect the virus, eight devices are being used at the Institute of Epidemiology Disease Control and Research. "Seven new devices have arrived. They would be installed. But it may not be possible [to install] overnight."

Officials are working to prepare 100 ICU beds and eventually 400 beds would be readied, he added.

China has been providing masks, testing kits and other necessary equipment, he said.

If the prime minister approves, the authorities may hire Chinese experts who have experience in dealing with the epidemic in Wuhan. They will train Bangladeshi doctors

and nurses and detect loopholes in the preparations made here, the minister said.

30 FAMILIES IN ISOLATION IN MIRPUR

The families are residents of a building in the capital's Mirpur where the latest victim lived.

"The family members of the 73-year-old have self-quarantined while the other residents of the building have reduced their movement to save themselves and others," said Mostaq Ahmed, deputy commissioner (Mirpur Division) of Dhaka Metropolitan Police.

"They asked for help and we are assisting them," he added.

They agreed that they would not leave home unless necessary. Only one member may leave taking proper safety measures and return home as quickly as possible, he added.

3 EXPATS DEAD

A Bangladeshi man in Italy's Milan died after being tested positive for Covid-19, Foreign Minister AK Abdul Momen said yesterday.

He is the first Bangladeshi Covid-19 patient to die there.

The man, aged over 50, was from Noakhali and had other health conditions.

Two other Bangladeshis died in New York, reports Somoy TV.

Khan Shawkat, who works at the New York Police Department, said two elderly Bangladeshis, including one of his close friends, died from coronavirus on Thursday.

He said one Bangladeshi died in Astoria and the other in Wood Side areas.

WASFIA TESTED POSITIVE

Wasfia Nazreen on her Facebook page yesterday said she tested positive for coronavirus.

"I am now in quarantine (which I was already practicing after I flew into LA) with strict measures and watch over my breathing. I will just have to fight it out. Every day is a struggle," read her post.

Dharmasen Mohathero passes away

Bss, Dhaka

D h a r m a s e n Mohathero, the highest Buddhist religious leader in Bangladesh, passed away at a hospital in Chattogram city early yesterday.

The 92-year-old leader had long been suffering from old-age complications.

He left behind a large number of disciples and a host of relatives to mourn his death.

Dharmasen was ordained as a novice monk in 1942. He was coronated as 12th Sangaraja, the highest abbot of Supreme Sanga Council (monastic order), in 2004. He authored four books.

The highest Buddhist leader was conferred with four international awards for his contributions to Dharma, humanity, peace and monastic leadership.

His mortal remains will be preserved at Unainpura Lankaram Monastery in Chattogram's Patiya upazila, of which he was the life-long chief.

The mortal remains will be kept preserved by placing into a casket for cremation ceremony at a convenient time.

Meanwhile, President Abdul Hamid and Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina in separate condolence messages expressed deep shock and sorrow at the death of Dharmasen.

They prayed for the salvation of the departed soul and conveyed sympathy to the bereaved Buddhist community.

Don't hoard

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"Farmers are producing their crops... plenty of vegetables are being produced in the fields...we have a huge salt production, too. So, please don't get panicked... just collect whatever you need. The prices may go up if you put pressure on the market," the PM added.

About the foreign currency reserve, Hasina said she had a meeting with the finance minister, her finance adviser and the Bangladesh Bank governor. "With our current reserve, we can procure food for the next one year. So there is no need to be panicked."

She asked those who have returned from abroad recently to strictly follow the health rules and the 14-day quarantine procedure. "Please don't go here and there...you shouldn't put others' lives in danger."

Mentioning that an unusual situation was prevailing across the world due to the coronavirus outbreak, Hasina said this virus has spread to 181 countries.

"We took all-out measures when it was seen in China... we checked all people whoever came from abroad; we put them in quarantine in case of any suspicion."

Briefly describing various measures taken by the government to contain the spread of coronavirus, the PM said, "We have taken safety measures for doctors, nurses and others who are working there. We are collecting whatever is needed from home and abroad. We also provided security materials for the immigration police."

Hasina said the government has suspended all the programmes of the birth centenary celebration of Father of the Nation Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman due to coronavirus. "We have to stop mass gatherings so that this virus cannot spread."

She said the government has planned to cancel the programmes marking the upcoming Independence Day.

The PM cast her vote by using an Electronic Voting Machine (EVM) at 9:10am. Her daughter Saima Wazed Hossain was present.

The JS by-elections to Dhaka-10, Gaibandha-3 and Bagerhat-4 was held yesterday.

A billion confined to homes

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"Today I have a message for young people: you are not invincible. This virus could put you in hospital for weeks -- or even kill you," WHO chief Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus said.

"Even if you don't get sick, the choices you make about where you go could be the difference between life and death for someone else."

China yesterday reported no new local infections for a third straight day, and the WHO said the central Chinese city of Wuhan, where the virus emerged late last year, offered a glimmer of "hope for the rest of the world."

But there are growing concerns of a new wave of "imported" infections in the region, with Hong Kong reporting 48 suspected cases on Friday -- its biggest daily jump since the crisis began. Many of them have a recent history of travel to or from Europe.

Italy reported its worst single day death toll yesterday, adding another 793 fatalities and taking its reported total to 4,825 despite efforts to stem the spread.

The nation of 60 million now accounts for 36 percent of the world's coronavirus deaths and its death rate of 8.6 percent among confirmed infections is significantly higher than in most other countries.

France, Italy, Spain and other European countries have ordered people to stay at home, threatening fines in some cases, while Bavaria

became the first region in Germany to order a lockdown.

Britain, falling in line with its EU neighbours, also announced tougher restrictions, telling pubs, restaurants and theatres to close and promising to help cover the wages of affected workers.

Australia's famed Bondi beach was also ordered shut after sunbathers crowded the hotspot in defiance of government orders to avoid non-essential outdoor gatherings.

With virus fears gripping the United States, its largest state California -- with over 1,000 cases and 19 deaths -- told its 40 million residents to stay at home.

New York state, which has reported over 7,000 cases and 39 deaths, followed suit on Friday, ordering its nearly 20 million residents to do the same from today.

Trump applauded the New York and California decisions, but said he did not think a nationwide lockdown was needed.

"Those are really two hotbeds," he said. "I don't think we'll ever find (a US-wide lockdown) necessary."

Shortly after the president spoke, the governor of Illinois ordered residents of the midwestern state to stay at home and the Connecticut governor did the same.

The restrictions so far imposed in seven states cover around 100 million people, with the country's three most populous cities -- New York, Los Angeles

Some pvt hospitals feel they too can

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currently one of its 18 members.

He said the IEDCR should accept all cases with flu-like symptoms referred by clinicians to figure out whether community transmission is happening.

"The first hundred or so cases need to be controlled for containment measures. After that, it should be decentralised to other institutions but they should be centrally controlled or coordinated by the government," he suggested.

IEDCR has tested a total of 469 cases as of yesterday.

"From a public health point of view, testing should be at government or government allied-testing facilities. So, private hospitals or organisations can be included but they also must report back to IEDCR so that 'contact cases' can be traced," said Prof Mahmudur.

Additionally, the tests must continue to be free of cost, he added.

The authorities of several private hospitals told this correspondent that they have the capacity to test for COVID-19.

The World Health Organization (WHO) recommends that suspected

coronavirus cases should be screened with nucleic acid amplification tests (NAAT), such as RT-PCR (Reverse Transcription- Polymerase Chain Reaction).

Dr ASM Alamgir, principal scientific officer of the IEDCR, told The Daily Star that nasal and throat swab samples from the patient are taken and then processed through real-time RT-PCR.

Since the 2019 novel coronavirus is an RNA virus, so the RNA (ribonucleic acid) from the sample is extracted and then converted to cDNA (complementary DNA) which is further synthesised to detect the virus, he explained.

"The process requires strict temperature control and absolutely contamination-free environment. Otherwise, the specimens can show false positive and false negative results," he added.

According to the WHO, the testing must be done in a laboratory deemed Biosafety Level 2 (BSL-2) adhering to a handful of strict protocols. For instance, it must have the correct equipment to safely carry out the tests and clinicians, handling contagious

samples, must always wear Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) within the lab.

Crucially, a Biosafety Level 2 Lab must have equipment such as Biological Safety Cabinets within which Covid-19 testing can be done with minimal risk and autoclaves, where equipment used in handling infectious samples can be safely decontaminated.

The laboratory at IEDCR is BSL-2 as per the WHO's recommendations, Dr ASM Alamgir, principal scientific officer of IEDCR, told The Daily Star.

Apollo Hospitals Dhaka informed The Daily Star that they too have a BSL-2 laboratory and can start doing Covid-19 tests as soon as the government allows testing in private facilities.

"We have one PCR machine and a molecular laboratory and we are willing to start testing," stated Dr Arif Mahmud, senior general manager of Apollo Hospitals Dhaka.

Similarly, Labaid Specialized Hospital has a molecular lab adhering to BSL-2 and are eager to start testing for Covid-19, claimed Labaid Groups' Public Relations Officer Chowdhury Meher-E-Khuda.

Also, ICDDR, B (International Centre for Diarrhoeal Disease Research, Bangladesh) has offered to help the government, and are waiting for their response, informed high officials at the organisation.

"We have multiple PCR machines all capable of doing the test and BSL-2 laboratories. We have cooperated with the government during the SARS and Nipah virus outbreaks as well and can do so again," stated an official requesting anonymity.

The whole process can be centrally coordinated by the government and hospitals can be made to report details of patients to track contact cases, the official said.

BIRDEM General Hospital can also test for Covid-19 and has a BSL-2 laboratory, said Prof Shahidul Alam, a microbiologist at the hospital.

"However, we will need help procuring Personal Protective Equipment to protect the doctors collecting swabs," he added.

All doctors interviewed said that allowing other laboratories to start testing will contribute to flattening the epidemic curve.