

Sadullapur’s UNO panel for lockdown

Gaibandha DC says he is yet to decide; civil surgeon says no lockdown advice was given

TUHIN SHUBHRA ADHIKARY and WASIM BIN HABIB

Confusion spread over the decision to put Sadullapur upazila of Gaibandha under lockdown yesterday, after a upazila committee to contain coronavirus, led by the UNO, made the recommendation to do so in a letter to the district administration.

Upazila Nirbahi Officer Nabinewaz of Sadullapur wrote the letter to the deputy commissioner asking for necessary steps to be taken to institute the lockdown.

Abdul Matin, deputy commissioner of the district, and Civil Surgeon ABM Abu Hanif, said the lockdown decision was never taken.

“There was a misunderstanding caused by a letter. We have seen the letter and we will take necessary action against the person who issued the letter,” Abdul Matin said.

The UNO had sent the letter to the DC yesterday noon and forwarded a copy to the superintendent of Police and the civil surgeon.

A copy of the letter was leaked on social media and some private television channels ran a news about the lockdown.

In the letter, the UNO said two US expatriates attended a wedding reception at a house in Habibullahpur village under Bonogram Union of Sadullapur upazila. Some 400-500 people were present at the reception.

“Later, the duo tested positive for coronavirus,” reads the letter.

Then on March 22, the by-polls of Gaibandha-3 [Sadullapur-Palashbari] was held, and many voters turned out to vote, it said.

“In this circumstances, there is a possibility that the virus might spread fast. Therefore, the committee...has unanimously taken the decision to lockdown the upazila for the safety of public health,” the letter said.

However, the letter did not mention the date of the wedding reception, which was on March 13. Neither did it have details about when and where the two US expatriates tested positive.

Speaking to The Daily Star, Nabinewaz said, “Actually, we have sent the letter as a proposal of locking down the upazila considering the fact that the virus may spread.

“Now it is up to the DC and the higher authorities to take the decision over lockdown.”

The UNO said they had already placed in home quarantine five members of the family which hosted the reception.

They also proposed to the higher authority to test the five for the virus.

Talking to The Daily Star, DC Abdul Matin said, “No decision of locking down Sadullapur was taken. And no patient has been detected [with coronavirus in Sadullapur] here yet.”

Talking to other reporters, the DC said two persons -- a mother and her son -- were detected with Covid-19 in the Sadar and both of them are US

returnees.

But the situation in Sadullapur is normal and there was no lock down enforced here, he said.

The DC insisted that no local was detected with the virus in Sadullapur. “Two US-returnees visited a house. That’s why we have placed members of the household in quarantine.”

Civil Surgeon ABM Abu Hanif echoed the DC.

“Yes, it’s true that two persons were detected. But I will not share the details about them,” he said.

Shahria Khan Biplob, chairman of Sadullapur upazila, said they came to know yesterday that the two US expats who took part in the wedding tested positive for Covid-19.

At the same time, one elderly person of the family which hosted the reception fell ill nearly a week after the reception, he said.

“Following the development, we held the meeting of the committee and wanted to quarantine the house first. Then we thought of a lockdown for the entire village and upazila headquarters, which is close to the village, if anybody showed similar symptoms,” Biplob, also the adviser of the upazila committee, told The Daily Star.

“There might be some mistakes while writing the letter as we did not take a decision to lockdown the entire upazila. Besides, this decision will have to come from higher authorities,” he said.

76,000 PEOPLE IN SHIBCHAR UNDER “CLOSE OBSERVATION”

The local administration in Madaripur’s Shibchar have kept 76,000 people of six areas under “close observation” to fight the spread of the virus, reports our Faridpur correspondent.

“We have deployed 250 police officers around the restricted area to ensure that no one enters or leaves. Our 20 tag officers have been working in 19 unions and one municipality to help the people,” said Shibchar Upazila Nirbahi Officer Md Asaduzzaman.

Locals are requested to avoid public gatherings to prevent coronavirus infection, he said.

Public transport has been suspended in the entire upazila and all shops, except pharmacies and groceries, are shut down, he added.

“There are 664 foreign returnees, including those from Italy, in Shibchar upazila. Among them, 261 are now in home quarantine and others have already spent 14 days of quarantine. So, we keep a close eye on all who came from abroad and the people they interacted with,” he said.

Md Shofikul Islam, civil surgeon of Madaripur, said, “Recently, 3,000 returnees came to Madaripur and among them 298 are in home quarantine. Three people are in isolation and three others are in official quarantine.”

Tests to start

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appoint new technicians at the district hospitals within a week.

Currently, the Institute of Epidemiology, Disease Control and Research (IEDCR) is the country’s lone facility for testing Covid-19.

Experts, however, said that the government should act more aggressively to bring more people within the purview of testing facilities, which would help better understand the situation.

They said more tests should be conducted to find out the real scenario.

Mahmudur Rahman, former director of the IEDCR, also said the surveillance system has to be beefed up to better understand the situation.

“We heard that on several occasions the IECDR refused to collect samples even after the hospital authorities had approached them,” he said, adding that the IECDR must collect samples in such cases.

Mahmudur said currently the government is examining the expatriates and the people who came into the contact of those people.

“But according to WHO protocol, those who are facing respiratory problems should also be tested,” he added.

There have been several allegations that the hospitals are not treating the patients with respiratory problems suspecting coronavirus infection.

Health officials said they were fearing because of the lack of protective gears.

“If I don’t get my protective gear, why should I risk my life? I am a doctor and at the same time a human being. I have every right to get proper safety gears before giving treatment,” said a physician at Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujib Medical University, wishing not to be named.

He said 10 doctors were sent to quarantine at a time when only 24 patients have been tested positive.

Government officials also acknowledged the problem saying

the situation would be improved soon.

“The situation calls for a lot of motivation and we are motivating the physicians,” Azad said.

Be-Nazir Ahmed, former director (disease control) of the DGHS, said “home management” is the most effective way to contain the outbreak. “If every household protects their house from the spread of coronavirus, the situation will improve.”

Muzaherul Huq, former regional adviser of WHO’s South East Asia region, shared a different version saying the government should encourage people to go for a voluntary self-quarantine.

“Indeed, everyone will not follow it but if we can impose a strict monitoring system, it will work.

“A huge number of expatriates have already arrived in Bangladesh and the union parishad members are supposed to be aware of the foreign returnees in the areas of their jurisdiction,” he said.

He suggested that the government should hold the union parishad members accountable and responsible for failing to ensure the quarantine of the returnees.”

Huq believes that the virus has already transmitted to the community level and recommended that makeshift hospitals or quarantine zones should be set up at the stadiums in every district to treat the coronavirus patients.

Meanwhile, three more people in the country were tested positive for coronavirus, raising the cases of total infected to 27, said Prof Meerjady Sabrina Flora, director of the IEDCR.

Of the 27 cases, five were released after treatment, two died and 20 others are currently undergoing treatment at different hospitals.

The first coronavirus cases were confirmed in the country on March 8 and the first death on March 18. The second person died from coronavirus on Saturday.



While most of the world is concerned about the growing coronavirus outbreak, the virus is not the biggest worry for 45-year-old day labourer Ayesha Begum, pictured here in Badda yesterday. “What will I eat?” she asked after having been out of work for the last four days.

PHOTO: RASHED SHUMON

Tests too few

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Besides, 40 suspected patients are in isolation in different government facilities. In the 24 hours until 10:00pm yesterday, three people who came from abroad were sent to Kuwait-Bangladesh Moitree Hospital in the capital from Dhaka airport. They had high temperature, said Group Captain Touhid-ul-Ahsan, director of the airport.

The country’s first coronavirus case was confirmed on March 8 and the first death on March 18.

The IEDCR is yet to find out how the second person who died got infected, officials admitted.

Iqbal Abdullah, son of the second victim, told The Daily Star: “None of our family member recently visited us. I asked my father whether he came into contact with any potential Covid-19 patients. He said no. We don’t know how he got infected.”

‘NO COMMUNITY TRANSMISSION’
The IEDCR director claimed that there was no community transmission.

“We are collecting information about the second victim. We will

reveal the result when we reach a conclusion. In all the cases, we try to identify the source of infection. Community transmission means that we have not been able to identify the source,” she said, adding that IEDCR officials oversaw the second person’s funeral.

She claimed that IEDCR was testing every case that could be considered suspected coronavirus infections as per the WHO definition.

“We have collected samples from different hospitals and homes. In the last 24 hours, we tested 65 samples and found three positive cases. We also tested 40 atypical pneumonia cases from different hospitals. None of them were positive for Covid-19.

“Community transmission is the next level for us. After we get enough evidence, we will term it community transmission,” she said yesterday afternoon.

According to WHO definition, community transmission refers to countries or areas or territories experiencing larger outbreaks of local transmission defined through an

4 lakh PPEs to be made in Bangladesh

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The five organisations are funding the initiative, under which two to four lakh PPEs will be produced primarily.

“Pay it forward, BUET Alumni and Manusher Jonno Foundation came together with the idea and requested us to provide support in sourcing and the manufacturing process. We gave it some thought and started developing the idea. Later some generous people and organisations came forward to help. We got together with them and took the decision to produce PPEs,” he said.

“We are providing technical support of the product, managing production lines and monitoring sample to

production; we are not involved in the funding, which is being provided by the five organisations and the general public.”

The M&S finance head, however, warned it will take some time to produce the PPEs because they are working hard to ensure standard production.

Following the confirmation of coronavirus cases in Bangladesh, the demand for PPEs rose sharply.

Many public hospitals across the country have set up isolation units for possible coronavirus patients, but a lot of them lack adequate resources and equipment to provide necessary services.

Many doctors, nurses and staff

Shops, malls to close from Wednesday

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The decisions came as the country yesterday recorded three more Covid-19 cases, taking the total number to 27. So far two persons have died from the virus.

Last night, Helal Uddin, president of Bangladesh Shop Owners’ Association, said they decided to shut markets and shopping malls as the number of customers dropped sharply amid coronavirus scare.

However, the decision will not be applicable to kitchen markets, grocers’ shops and medicine stores. Those will remain open as usual.

“Sales have plummeted. As a result, overhead costs are rising,” Helal told The Daily Star.

Besides, many of the salespersons are unwilling to work due to the virus scare, he mentioned.

Helal said there are around 250 markets in the capital and about 5,500 across the country.

In a statement, the association said, “We made the decision so that shop owners and staffers don’t contract the virus.”

It also urged all retailers and wholesalers not to increase the price of any product.

The association mentioned that all

shopping malls and markets, including the New Market, in the capital will be shut from March 25 to 31.

Zakir Hossain, general secretary of Bangladesh Supermarket Owners’ Association, said the superstores will remain open.

“We have not taken any decision to shut superstores... We will close those only if the government asks us to do so.”

“People buy groceries and essentials there. If those are closed, they will be affected,” he mentioned.

HSC EXAMS POSTPONED
“We have postponed the HSC and its equivalent examinations scheduled for April 1,” Ziaul Haque, chief of the Inter-board Coordination Committee, told The Daily Star.

“New schedule will be published soon,” added Ziaul, also chairman of Dhaka Education Board.

Abul Khair, senior information officer at the education ministry, said the next dates for the exams will be announced in the first week of the next month.

Earlier on March 16, the government had closed all educational institutions and coaching centres across the country till March 31 as part of efforts to contain the

48 in just 24 hours to 281 people, with more than 5,600 confirmed cases. Those who died in England were aged between 18 and 102, The DailyMail cited authorities as saying.

Hours earlier, there had been appalling scenes as Britons across the UK flocked to beaches and parks up

assessment of factors including, but not limited to large numbers of cases not linkable to transmission chains, large numbers of cases from sentinel lab surveillance, multiple unrelated clusters in several areas of the country or territory or area.

WHAT EXPERTS SAY

Experts, however, said the tests that IEDCR did were not enough to know the level of transmission.

They added that many people who returned from abroad are roaming in different parts of the country and most of them should have been institutionally quarantined.

“Unless the number of tests is increased, we will not be able to grasp the situation. And the response programme will be misguided,” Prof Nazrul Islam, virologist and former vice-chancellor of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujib Medical University told The Daily Star last night.

The IEDCR should not jump to a conclusion based on these tests, he said, adding, “Maybe there were issues that forced officials to let the people coming from abroad to go home.

members are finding it difficult to continue work owing to the growing risk of infection.

This has also resulted in protests at some hospitals. Nearly 200 interns of Rajshahi Medical College Hospital on March 19 halted their services until the hospital provided them with protective gear. They pointed out that patients with fever and cough come on a daily basis and some of them could be affected by COVID-19, which exposes all health workers if they are not safeguarded with the personal protective equipment.

The US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention detailed an outline for what constitutes as a standard PPE.

For gowns, it is important to

PM to address nation on Wednesday

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina is set to address the nation in the evening of March 25.

Bangladesh Radio and Bangladesh Television will telecast the programme, said sources at the Prime Minister’s Office.

Coronavirus patient’s doctor tests positive

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

The medical officer who treated a coronavirus patient at the capital’s Delta Medical College Hospital recently also tested positive for the virus.

The young doctor had received the patient at the emergency centre of the hospital, Dr Md Saiduzzaman, a member of the Foundation for Doctors’ Safety & Rights, told The Daily Star yesterday.

Another doctor who assisted him to treat the patient from Tolarbagh is in home-quarantine with five other family members, Dr Das of Kuwait Maitree Hospital said.

Saiduzzaman said the doctor was taken to Kuwait Maitree Hospital, SEE PAGE 13 COL 1

But many of them are defying the advice of quarantining themselves. The authorities must find them and institutionally quarantine them now.”

Prof MA Faiz, former DG of the Directorate General of Health Services (DGHS), said, “The government needs to estimate how many people may get infected, how many may need hospital care, ICU and other special interventions, and the number of protective gear for healthcare professionals.”

IEDCR STRUGGLING WITH MANPOWER

According to IEDCR officials, only 44 epidemiologists have been coordinating the tasks -- ranging from responding to calls at hotline numbers to sample collection and from laboratory research to contract tracing.

“We have officials in 17 offices across the country. It is tough to manage everything, especially during this crisis. We need more human resources,” IEDCR consultant Prof Mushtuq told The Daily Star last night.

have sufficient overlap of the fabric so that it wraps around the body to cover the back (ensuring that if the wearer squats or sits down, the gown still protects the back area of the body).

While the transmissibility of Covid-19 is not fully understood, gowns are available that protect against microorganisms. The choice of gown should be made based on the level of risk of contamination, according to CDC’s guidelines on PPE.

For the full guideline on PPEs, which include gloves and respirators, visit: <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/hcp/respirator-use-faq.html#gowns>

said Bangladesh Railway Director General Md Shamsuzzaman.

He also said no decision on suspending the services had been made yet.

The railway DG mentioned that the number of passengers dropped by 25 to 30 percent due to virus scare.

Meanwhile, Bangladesh Road Transport Authority suspended till march 31 taking biometric data on vehicle owners for registration of their vehicles, according to a BRTA circular.

NO LATE FEE FOR GAS, ELECTRICITY BILLS

The power, energy and mineral resources ministry has instructed Bangladesh Energy Regulatory Commission (BERC) to allow consumers to pay in May the electricity bills for three months from February without any late fees and surcharge.

It also asked the BERC to allow people to pay gas bills in June for four months from February without late fees and surcharge.

In its circulars, the ministry asked people not to crowd banks to pay bills.

celebrate Mother’s Day via Skype and other remote communications.

In a tough message to the public from Downing Street this afternoon, Mr Johnson said that even though he understood the physical and mental health benefits of open spaces, he would take drastic steps to protect health.