

# Covid-19 pandemic ‘accelerating’

Warns WHO; UN to create fund to prevent spread of virus, support treatment of patients worldwide; death toll in Italy rises to 6,078

AGENCIES

The new coronavirus pandemic is clearly “accelerating”, the World Health Organization warned yesterday, but said it was still possible to “change the trajectory” of the outbreak.

The remarks came as the number of deaths soared past 15,000, with more than 350,000 people infected worldwide, according to a tally compiled by AFP from official sources.

“The pandemic is accelerating,” WHO chief Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus told journalists in a virtual news briefing.

He said it took 67 days from the beginning of the outbreak in China in late December for the virus to infect the first 100,000 people worldwide.

In comparison, it took 11 days for the second 100,000 cases and just four days for the third 100,000 cases, he said.

The number of cases is believed to represent only a fraction of the true number of infections, with many countries only testing the most severe cases in need of hospitalisation.

## Govt shuts down offices from Mar 26

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The country’s top bureaucrat came up with the announcement within an hour after the IEDCR said another coronavirus patient died and six more people tested positive for the virus.

The number of deaths from Covid-19 now stands at three while the number of infected people 33 in the country, according to the Institute of Epidemiology, Disease Control and Research (IEDCR).

Besides, an itinerant Muslim imam from Bangladesh died due to coronavirus in The Gambia, AFP reported yesterday.

In another development, Bangladesh Bank said all private and public banks would remain open from 10:00am to 1:30pm on regular working days from March 26 to April 4, according to BB spokesperson Sirajul Islam.

During that period, services at the banks will remain limited and the banks will only conduct cash transactions, which would be made between 10:00am and 12:00pm.

The move came after BB was directed to issue necessary directives on ensuring limited bank operations during the holidays.

At the press conference, the cabinet secretary said the prime minister yesterday met with Enamur Rahman, state minister for disaster management and relief, and top bureaucrats, including her principal secretary, to discuss ways of containing the spread of the virus. Khandker Anwarul was also present.

Before the meeting, the prime minister held another meeting with Chief of Army Staff General Aziz Ahmed, he said, adding the PM gave the directives taking the overall situation into consideration.

Khandker Anwarul said March 26 is a public holiday while March 27 and 28 and April 3 and 4 are weekends. He announced March 29 to April 2 public holidays. “The government has taken

## Patients left in quandary

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Even if they are coronavirus patients, the hospital is duty-bound to treat them, he said.

“After the late evening prayers, the locals came to the hospital and beat up the staff, locked the gates of the road, and did not let an ambulance through. That ambulance was carrying a patient in labour but they thought it was a coronavirus patient. The gate is still locked,” he said.

A point of contention was the lack of PPE for the staff and doctors at the hospital, said the administration officer. This fed the locals’ fears of community transmission.

The officer-in-charge of Uttara West station had to arrive at the scene with a team to calm down the situation, informed Sub-inspector Baten of the police station.

“The hospital and the locals have not come to an agreement yet,” said Baten.

Meanwhile, a 27-year-old entrepreneur had a hard time finding a hospital who can give his father life-saving chemotherapy because they had travelled back from India on March 21.

“My father has cancer. We discovered this when we were in India for his treatment. We completed one chemo session there and the doctor advised us to come back home and finish the rest of the sessions here,” said the 27-year-old.

“His next chemotherapy session was supposed to be today but we are struggling to find a hospital who will treat him. We went to one of the hospitals for treatment, but they refused to meet my father because he has just travelled back and needs to be quarantined,” he said.

The man informed this correspondent that the doctor told him that there is a strict restriction from management to the hospital personnel to not talk to patients with travel history.

“Even if something happens to me or my father, whether it be for his cancer treatment or coronavirus, where do we go?” asked the concerned son.

Kamrul Hassan ran around with his

“We are not helpless bystanders. We can change the trajectory of this pandemic,” Tedros said.

The WHO chief acknowledged that a number of countries were struggling to take more aggressive measures due to a lack of resources and access to tests.

Meanwhile, Norway yesterday said the United Nations would create a fund to prevent the spread of coronavirus and support the treatment of patients worldwide, reports Reuters.

The purpose of the fund is to assist developing countries with weak health systems in addressing the crisis as well as to tackle the long-term consequences. The UN could make a formal announcement this week.

Norway, which suggested the fund, has not committed how much money it would put into the initiative, similar to a 2014 United Nations Ebola Response Fund.

“We want to make sure that the efforts are as unified as possible and as early as possible so that we can answer up to the demands that countries will have, especially the poorest countries,” Norwegian Foreign Minister Ine

the decision to control the spread of coronavirus.”

During that period, different offices and courts would discharge duties online and only the government offices deemed necessary would remain open, he said.

People needing to use public transport must take necessary precautions. Drivers and their helpers must wear masks and gloves, he said.

He said the army would start assisting the local administrations in divisional and district towns from today to ensure people are maintaining social distancing and taking precautionary measures.

In coordination with district magistrates, the army would monitor the treatment of corona patients and the quarantine facilities for suspected cases in districts and divisions.

The army will also monitor whether any person returning from abroad is neglecting the mandatory self-quarantine rules, he said, adding that district magistrates would request the local army commander in line with the law for evaluating the situation.

In a press statement yesterday, Inter-Services Public Relations Directorate (ISPR) said the navy would assist the civil administration in coastal areas while the air force will engage in carrying medical supplies to hospitals and other emergency transportation.

The cabinet secretary also said if low-income people, facing hardship in cities due to the coronavirus outbreak, want to go back to their village home, the government would provide assistance to them under the “Ghare Fera Karmasuchi”.

Deputy commissioners would take necessary measures in this regard, he said.

For this purpose, the government has taken adequate steps to ensure housing and livelihood of people at Bhashanchar of Hatiya upazila in Noakhali, he noted.

He urged anyone interested to take the “opportunity”, saying DCs were

coughing sister all day yesterday looking for a hospital who would agree to see her.

“My sister works in a hotel and is routinely coming in contact with people who have recently travelled. She has had a persistent cough for 5-6 days and I wanted her checked out,” said Hassan.

He first went to Kurmitola General Hospital where he found the admission counter empty. A nurse told him to wait outside for a doctor, but none came.

After waiting for long, he went to Kuwait Maitree Hospital, where he claimed he found the emergency section closed indefinitely.

“There were no doctors or nurses. A member of the law enforcement agency guarding the gate told us that they only take in people referred by the IEDCR,” said Hassan.

However, when he went back to Kurmitola Hospital and pleaded his case again, he was able to see a doctor.

But not many were as lucky, as has been evident by some widely-shared social media posts.

The son of the second patient who died of coronavirus faced a very difficult time finding a hospital to take his father, who had pneumonia.

The son, Fuad Abdullah Al Faruque, described his experience on Facebook.

“IEDCR initially refused to test my father because he did not have a travel history. I nevertheless took him to a private hospital in Shyamoli, where they prescribed medication and requested him to recover at home.”

Home recovery was not an option for this patient -- he had to be taken to the emergency again the next day as his condition deteriorated, the son wrote. “They said my father needed the ICU, but they would not be able to accommodate him.” He then called a private hospital in Mohammadpur, which asked him to come but 15 minutes after arriving told them to leave, he claimed.

He then transferred his father to another private hospital in Kalyanpur which too could not provide ICU

Eriksen Soereide told Reuters.

Italy has suffered the world’s deadliest outbreak of the respiratory pandemic with at least 6,078 people dead as of yesterday. European nations continued to choke people movement, with Greece yesterday morning to follow Italy, Spain and France in imposing a nationwide lockdown.

GLOBAL EFFORTS RAMPED UP

Global emergency efforts to slow the coronavirus pandemic ramped up yesterday with more nations and cities imposing extraordinary lockdowns.

From Germany banning gatherings of more than two people, New Zealand announcing a four-week lockdown and Hong Kong shutting its borders to all non-residents, the new round of containment efforts highlighted a deepening sense of panic around the world.

German Chancellor Angela Merkel on Sunday announced the ban on gatherings of more than two people. She did so while in quarantine herself because she had met an infected doctor.

given directives in this regard.

The DCs were also directed to provide poor people, whose income would be hit hard, with food and financial assistance.

The secretary then said the prime minister had already directed the Bangladesh Medical Association [BMA] to make a list of 500 doctors, who would discharge duties in the fight against coronavirus.

He also said the government has imposed ban on all types of social, political and religious gatherings. “Those who are ill or have fever or cough or cold have repeatedly been asked not to go to the mosque. But one defied the directive and went to a mosque in Mirpur, which ultimately infected another.

“In this regard, the pious ones were specially requested to strictly follow the advises of Islamic Foundation and religious leaders.”

Meanwhile, Information Minister Hasan Mahmud yesterday told The Daily Star that media outlets would continue to operate normally during March 29-April 4, but mass gatherings should be avoided.

The state-owned BTV would cut down on televising new programmes and instead air previous programmes, he added.

THE PRESS CONFERENCE

At the press conference, Dr Ahmad Kaikaus, principal secretary at the Prime Minister’s Office, said people still have two days to complete their necessary activities before the holidays.

He said a disaster management coordination and relief activities monitoring cell under the PMO office was working round the clock to provide assistance to people.

He also said doctors were working relentlessly to fend off the crisis.

On enforcing lockdowns, he said it has no impact from the scientific point of few.

support. Meanwhile he kept calling other private hospitals and all gave him non-committal answers -- except Delta Hospital in Mirpur.

“Delta agreed to take my father and had the ICU ready,” he said. His father was moved to Delta at 4:00am, after having been shifted from hospital to hospital the whole day. Up until that point, he had not been able to convince IEDCR to test his father, he claimed. It was after his father had to be put on life support that they got him tested. But it was much too late and his father passed away at Delta Hospital.

One Nurun Nahar Noshin’s father, a pneumonia patient, was turned away from several private hospitals and died while waiting for his IEDCR test results. He tested negative and the daughter took a photo of the test result and expressed her grief on Facebook.

EMPTY HOSPITALS

Never before has the emergency ward of Dhaka Medical College Hospital (DMCH) been this eerily empty. Not even on Eid days.

The silence speaks volumes about the current health crisis of the country.

Speaking to the admissions counter, our correspondent was informed that while the hospital saw approximately 450-500 people being admitted per day before the crisis, the number has come down to about 200.

DMCH has a unique brand of staff called “trolleyman” -- they are freelance staffers who make a living by pushing patients on trolleys for Tk 50.

They sat around, waiting for work. “If more patients do not show up then I will not be able to buy food for home,” said one.

Prof Mujibur Rahman from the Department of Medicine said that if patients show up with normal flu, they are asked to go home and recover.

Similarly Shaheed Suhrawardy Hospital’s director Uttam Kumar Barua told this correspondent that their number of patients have been halved. “We used to have 1200-1300 inpatients every day. This has gone down to 500-600.”

# 100 foreigners on board five ships quarantined at Bay

Entry of scrap ships banned till April 7

MOSTAEF YOUSUF

The industries ministry yesterday banned the import of scrap ships until April 7 and asked around 100 foreigners on five ships, anchored at the deep sea of Sandeep channel of the Bay of Bengal, to be in quarantine for 14 days.

In a circular, the ministry also said it stopped issuing no objection certificates to the owners of ship breaking yards.

Speaking to The Daily Star, Additional Secretary AKM Shamsul Arefin of the ministry said they issued the circular in the wake of the coronavirus crisis.

He said five ships from South Korea and China anchored at the deep sea of Bay of Bengal in the first week of this month. There were around 100 foreigners, including captains, cabin crew and other staff members, on board.

“Considering the prevailing situation, we asked the foreigners to be in quarantine for 14 days. During this period, the ships will not move towards the shore,” he added.

At least 35,000 workers are employed by 70 ship breaking yards in Chattogram’s Sitakunda upazila, Shamsul said.

## Govt has enough test kits

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He said his ministry was getting the test kits from local sources and that some private companies assigned were making them.

The minister said they have around 2 lakh PPE in stock and the consignment of 2 lakh more, procured from different countries, would arrive this month. The ministry is distributing 20,000 to 30,000 PPE a day to hospitals across the countries, he said.

Zahid said that they were well-prepared and that nobody makes PPE beforehand. China, which manufactures PPE, did not have enough PPE during the coronavirus outbreak.

The minister said they wanted to get PPE from China long before Bangladesh recorded its first Covid-19 case, but China refused.

He claimed that there was no necessity of PPE now but the government was producing thousands.

“I don’t know whether any state has thought about it three months ahead.

“No one can prepare for everything in advance,” the minister said.

Experts, however, said there was no room for complacency and that health workers’ demand for PPE rose sharply after the first Covid-19 case was confirmed in the country.

Many public hospitals across the country set up isolation units for possible coronavirus patients but lacked necessary resources and equipment.

Doctors, nurses, and hospital staffers were finding it hard to keep working, they said.

Health workers staged protests at some hospitals over the last few weeks.

Nearly 200 interns of Rajshahi Medical College Hospital on March 19 halted work and said they would not work unless the hospital gave them protective gear.

Prof Nazrul Islam, virologist and

## Tolerbagh goes into isolation

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“It’s not a lockdown. We are requesting residents not to leave home. We are allowing one person from each family to leave home for things like groceries and medicines,” Tofayel Ahmed, officer-in-charge of Darussalam Police Station, told The Daily Star.

Besides, two mosques have stopped holding prayers and local volunteers are not allowing anyone to enter the neighbourhood without washing their hands and feet.

Rafiqul Islam, president of Tolarbagh Social Welfare Organisation, told reporters that the residents welcomed the measures.

“The two people who died used to go to the same mosque regularly. We requested the mosque committees to stop holding prayers there,” he said.

Locals said four people came to the neighbourhood from Australia and China in the last 15 days.

Rab and policemen patrolled the streets near Delta hospital and restricted people’s movement yesterday. Only grocery and drug stores were allowed to open.

According to the welfare organisation, the 25 buildings in the neighbourhood are home to over 20,000 people.

In another part of the city, Buett authorities yesterday evening isolated Dhakeswari Teachers’ Quarter and asked everyone to quarantine themselves for two weeks after a teacher’s mother, who returned from India, tested positive for coronavirus.

Over 150 teachers and their families live in the quarter.

At Block-B in Mirpur-10, officials ordered residents of a six-storey building to quarantine themselves

## Together we’ll fight Covid-19

Modi to Hasina, thanks her for pledging \$1.5 million for Saarc emergency fund

UNB, Dhaka

Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi has thanked Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina for announcing \$1.5 million as contribution to the Saarc Covid-19 Emergency Fund.

“Grateful to Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina of Bangladesh for announcing \$1.5 million as contribution to the Covid-19 Emergency Fund. Through solidarity and working together, we will overcome challenges posed by Covid-19, he tweeted yesterday

On Sunday, Bangladesh announced that it would contribute \$1.5 million to the Saarc Emergency Fund proposed by Modi to fight coronavirus in the region.

There are commitments from other countries, too, an official told UNB confirming Bangladesh’s contribution.

On March 15, Modi said the emergency fund could be based on voluntary contributions from all of them and India can start with an initial offer of \$10 million for this fund.

Nepal will contribute \$1 million, Afghanistan \$1 million, Bhutan \$100,000, the Maldives \$200,000, said the official.

The aim of the fund is to help any of Saarc nations meet the cost of immediate actions to combat this pandemic.

Foreign secretaries of the Saarc countries will finalise the concept of the fund and its operations.

Earlier, Modi proposed a strong strategy by South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (Saarc) member countries to fight the coronavirus threat in South Asian region.

Hasina welcomed Modi’s proposal and had constructive dialogue with her Indian counterpart and other heads of state and government and discussed way forward at this testing time for the region and the world.

## Another child dies of measles in Rangamati

SANJOY KUMAR BARUA

Another Tripura child died of measles in a remote area of Rangamati’s Baghaichhari upazila.

Podorani Tripura, 9, passed away at her home in Lungleigh Para early yesterday, said Dr Istekhar Ahmed, upazila health and family planning officer.

Earlier, five indigenous children from remote Arun Tripura Para had died of measles since February 26. They all were from the Tripura community.

Local public representatives said children contracted measles in five paras of Sajek union early last month.

Around 130 children, aged between one and 15 years, of Tripura and Chakma communities have got infected with measles, said Harin Joy Tripura, a health assistant of Baghaichhari Upazila Health Complex.

The affected areas are Arun Tripura Para, Lungleigh Tripura Para, Tarun Tripura Para, Kamalapur Chakma Para, and Kaikhya Tripura Para.

“A child named Sagorika Tripura died of measles in Arun Tripura Para on February 26. The four other children passed away on February 27, March 15, 16 and 17,” said Harin Joy.

Community leaders alleged that neither doctors nor community health service providers visited their paras as those were very remote areas. It takes around 10 hours to reach there from Rangamati town on foot. There is no other communication link between the town and the five paras.

Mithun Joy Tripura, karbari of Lungleigh Para, said most of the children at their para were infected with measles. He said the villagers were panicked now.

Dr Istekhar said the sick children were still not out of danger as they were suffering from severe malnutrition.

Rangamati Civil Surgeon Bipash Khisa said they had a meeting with the programme manager of Expanded Program on Immunisation (EPI) in Baghaichhari yesterday. The meeting drew up a work plan to address the measles situation.

He hoped the situation would improve soon.

Meanwhile, locals in Bandarban claimed that a child died of measles and around 40 other people, including 33 children, were infected with the virus in a remote area of the hill district.

However, health officials claimed that the child died of an unknown disease.

In 2017, nine children from the Tripura community had died of measles in Chattogram’s Sitakunda upazila.

This year, the campaign to vaccinate 34 million children, aged between 9 months and 10 years, against measles and rubella was scheduled to begin on Wednesday. But the programme was postponed over the coronavirus situation.