



The ever-bustling Kamalapur Railway Station looked more like an abandoned place yesterday morning after train services were cancelled amid concerns over the spread of coronavirus in the country. *Left*, a man pulls a push cart along an eerily empty platform -- a scene seen never before. *Top right*, an inter-district train lies idle at the station. *Bottom right*, with no one to tend to, a railway staff spends his time reading newspaper.

CORONAVIRUS SPREAD Police headquarters, home ministry form monitoring cells

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

The Police Headquarters (PHQ) formed a special control and command centre yesterday to monitor the situation of Bangladesh and ensure coordinated law enforcement support during the spread of coronavirus.

The control room was set up at the ground floor of NCOM building of PHQ. Sohel Rana, assistant inspector general of PHQ, told The Daily Star yesterday.

Officials will remain on duty at the control center round the clock in three shifts, he said.

Every shift will be led by an additional superintendent of police. An inspector, a sub-inspector (SI) and a computer operator will assist the additional SP, said AIG Rana.

The PHQ already appointed 16 additional SP, 16 inspectors and SI, and five computer operators for the control centre, according to officials.

The control centre will collect full database of the virus-affected and deceased persons. Upon data collection, the centre will send information to police high officials including the inspector general of police (IGP) twice a day, said PHQ officials.

The centre will provide instruction to field level officials about their activities as per directives of the police chief and high officials, they added.

The control centre numbers are; 01769695080, 01769695081 and 01769695082.

Meanwhile, the home ministry yesterday also formed a special 'coordination cell' to provide support to law enforcers to prevent coronavirus during the ten-day general holiday.

Four senior assistant secretaries and six deputy secretaries of the ministry along with their staff will perform duty by rotation from March 26 to April 4, according to a home ministry statement signed by its deputy secretary Mohammad Habibur Rahman.

India sends masks, S'pore testing kits

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

India yesterday provided 30,000 surgical masks and 15,000 head covers to Bangladesh to help its efforts in combating the coronavirus pandemic.

Indian High Commissioner Riva Ganguly Das handed over the equipment to Foreign Minister AK Abdul Momen at the ministry office, according to a press release of the High Commission.

On March 15, leaders of Saarc -- led by Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi -- held a video conference and created the Saarc Emergency Fund to tackle the virus under a common regional strategy.

Already, India has committed its contribution of \$10 million, Sri Lanka \$5 million, Bangladesh \$1.5 million, Afghanistan and Nepal \$1 million each, Maldives \$200,000 and Bhutan \$100,000 -- to combat covid-19.

Preparations are underway to hold video conferences between medical professionals and other stakeholders in India and Bangladesh for discussing specific measures and exchanging

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An eerie calm

WASIM BIN HABIB

One of the most densely populated cities in the world has been reduced to an eerie look of emptiness.

An unusual calm reigned over the capital for the last couple of days, as novel coronavirus fears prompted thousands of city dwellers to leave for their villages homes, and many others to stay indoors.

Yesterday, the day before the government's 10-day shutdown, the otherwise crowded and chaotic city quietened down amid a thin presence of traffic in most thoroughfares.

It was a weekday yesterday, yet most people refused to venture out unless for any urgent need. There were limited activities at government and private offices, and many establishments. A large number of shops kept their shutters down.

As morning gave way to afternoon, the empty feeling in the city only seemed to increase. In the evening, the entire capital city wore a deserted look.

For many, it was hard to come to terms with the stillness.

"It seems that coronavirus fear forced the city into slumber. It's a scary situation," said Anwar Hossain, who works in a bank in Dhanmondi.

He said many people did not come out of homes out of fear of getting infected by the virus.

The global coronavirus pandemic has taken a grim toll around the world -- more than 427,940 confirmed cases and 19,246 deaths in 181 countries according to an AFP tally compiled at 11:00 GMT Wednesday.

The country has confirmed 39 active cases and five deaths -- but public health experts fear that the low count is the result of limited testing. The country has only conducted about 794 tests so far, partly because of a shortage of testing kits.

However, the government has already responded with drastic measures and made repeated calls to citizens to stay home to stem the spread of the virus. It suspended passenger trains, launches and

domestic flights. Buses, minibuses, and human hauliers will be off the roads from today.

With all modes of transport coming to a halt today, thousands of people yesterday hit the bus stations to get to their village homes in crammed buses, creating traffic jams on a number of highways.

In Dhaka, the city corporations asked dwellers through loudspeakers not to come out of homes unless urgent.

And true to the instruction, a handful of people were seen out on the streets.

Other than those who are still required to work, such as shopkeepers or retail workers, and those working in health and medical care, the city looked far from its usual self yesterday.

Usually packed places like Motijheel, Gulistan, Jatrabari, Mouchak, Moghbazar, Rampura, Karwanbazar, Mirpur, Mohakhali, Gulshan, and Banani remained free from any traffic congestion.

Only a handful of vehicles were seen plying the roads in the morning. Apart from a few buses, the number of private vehicles, including cars and microbuses, were also very thin.

There were also very few vehicles of app-based ride-sharing companies available, and people were seen preferring rickshaws for commuting.

"It almost resembles the look during Eid holidays. It took me only 20 minutes to come to office in Farmgate area from Shankar," said Mohammad Abedin, an employee of a private firm.

He said his office asked almost all the employees to work from home.

But not all offices have work-from-home options, and this is especially a challenge for many who work in the informal sector -- including domestic help, street vendors and daily wage workers.

"I heard about the dangers, but I have no choice. I have to pull my rickshaw, otherwise my family would go unfed," said Rafiq, a rickshaw puller, wearing a look of gloom on his face.

Fire service, police, city corporations disinfecting city

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

The two city corporations, Dhaka Metropolitan Police and Fire Service sprayed disinfectants in different parts of Dhaka city yesterday, as a part its ongoing effort to prevent the novel coronavirus.

Dhaka North City Corporation (DNCC) yesterday sprayed around 80 thousand litres of antiseptic in different parts of the city, including Uttara, Mirpur, Moghbazar, Banglamotor, Gulshan, Basundhara, Aminbazar, Gabtoli and Agargaon.

"We are also spraying insecticides at foot overbridges and passenger sheds," said an official of DNCC, adding that they are also spraying antiseptic in public transports and terminals.

Dhaka South City Corporation (DSCC) also started spraying antiseptic in its areas since yesterday. "We have sprayed disinfectants at different important places like bus stoppages, Sadarghat terminal, kitchen markets and railway station through eight browsers," said an official.

Meanwhile Dhaka Metropolitan Police (DMP) sprayed disinfectants at various places under its 50 police stations.

Eight water cannons will spray 96 liters of disinfectants each twice every day until further notice, police said.

Bangladesh Fire Service and Civil Defence also initiated a disinfection programme yesterday.

An official said their initiative would cover Bangabhaban area, secretariat area, Prime Minister's Office, Siddiqbazar and Sadarghat of Old Dhaka with eight units in operation. Gradually, other areas of the city will also be covered.

Brac starts production of reusable masks

CITY DESK

Brac has begun manufacturing over 2 lakh pieces of reusable masks for community use as part of its extensive campaign against Covid-19.

It is also examining production process of personal protective equipment (PPE) and hopes to go into production very soon, said a press release on Tuesday.

Asif Saleh, executive director of Brac, said, "Alongside operating mass awareness campaigns, we have started production of protective wear. Once our production process is perfected, we hope to go into large-scale production [of PPE]. We then want to partner with BGMEA and other entities under the government's guidance."

Meanwhile, over 50,000 healthcare providers of Brac have started implementing its awareness campaigns to reach people in 61 districts.

Brac has also stopped collecting installments of its microcredit borrowers from March 24 to April 2.

It is also running campaigns at Rohingya camps and host communities in Cox's Bazar.



People line up to take a bus for Cumilla in front of the Bangabandhu National Stadium yesterday morning. As most residents of the capital started staying indoors, commerce and work opportunities have come down drastically, forcing many to go to their hometowns. Another factor is the government-declared holiday in effect from March 26 to April 4. This photo was taken yesterday.

PHOTO: PRABIR DAS

HAJJ REGISTRATION Deadline for hajj reg extended again

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Amid lukewarm response from aspirant hajis, the religious affairs ministry yesterday extended the deadline for registration till April 8 to perform hajj this year.

State Minister for Religious Affairs Sheikh Mohammad Abdullah came up with the announcement while talking to reporters at his office at the secretariat.

This was the second time the government extended the deadline for hajj registration, as only 35,000 prospective hajis registered till the last deadline of yesterday.

The registration process, that began on March 2, was supposed to close on March 15.

Due to low response from intended hajis, the ministry extended the deadline to March 25.

The state minister yesterday said aspiring hajis will get their money back if they fail to perform hajj this year due to the coronavirus outbreak.

A total of 1,37,198 Bangladeshis are scheduled to perform hajj this year which is likely to be held in July 31, depending on sighting of moon.

Of the total hajis, 17,198 are scheduled to perform hajj under government management, while the rest are scheduled to perform hajj under private management.

Due to the outbreak of Covid-19, hajj aspirants are unsure whether the holy congregation of Muslims will be held this year.

Hajj flights are scheduled to start from June 23.

Bangladeshis who wish to perform hajj will have to spend more for the pilgrimage this year, mainly due to the increase in airfare and visa fees.

The government on February 24 approved three draft hajj packages. Hajis will have to pay Tk 4.25 lakh for package-1 and Tk 3.60 lakh for package-2 under government management, which are Tk 6,500 and Tk 16,000 more than the corresponding packages of the previous year.

With affordability in mind, the government has also introduced package-3 for the first time, which hajis can avail at a cost of Tk 3.15 lakh.