Saudi reports first coronavirus death as infections spike

AFP, *Riyadh*

Saudi Arabia on Tuesday reported its first death from the new coronavirus as the total number of infections spiked to 767, according to the health ministry.

An Afghan resident in the western city of Medina died from the virus, the ministry said, while reporting 205 new infections -- the biggest jump in the kingdom in a single day.

Saudi Arabia, which has reported the highest number of infections in the Gulf, began implementing a nationwide dusk-to-dawn curfew on Monday to limit the spread of the deadly COVID-19 illness.

The Arab world's biggest economy has also closed down cinemas, malls and restaurants, halted flights and suspended the year-round umrah pilgrimage as it steps up efforts to contain the virus.

King Salman warned on Thursday of a "more difficult" fight ahead against the virus, as the kingdom faces the double blow of virus-led shutdowns and crashing oil prices.

Last week, the kingdom unveiled stimulus measures amounting to 120 billion riyals ($32 billion) to support businesses and said it plans to raise borrowing to 50 percent of gross domestic product (GDP).

Similar restrictions and stimulus measures have been reported by other countries in the Gulf, where more than 2,100 coronavirus infections have been reported so far.

In the neighbouring United Arab Emirates, authorities said that a two-week suspension of all passenger flights and transits announced a day earlier would begin at 11:59 pm (1959 GMT) on Tuesday.

Dubai's international airport is the busiest in the world for international passengers, with 86.4 million travellers passing through last year.

Prices

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novel coronavirus.

Operations of all passenger trains, launches, buses, minibuses, CNG-run auto-rickshaws, and domestic flights have been suspended since Tuesday.

While visiting Mohammadpur Town Hall market, a correspondent saw long queues of cars and huge crowds of people buying daily essentials.

"It seemed people rushed to the market, like it was an Eid holiday," said a vendor at the market.

"Taking advantage of the huge demand, prices of many items were increased many times," said Mohammad Ajam, a resident of Tajmahal Road in Mohammadpur, while talking to The Daily Star.

"The crowd in the market is huge today [yesterday], even more than any occasion, like Eid. However, it is less than what it was the last few days. Vendors have taken this opportunity to sell all products at higher prices," he added.

In different kitchen markets, it was seen that people were defying healthcare professionals' advice of maintaining social distancing.

Although many of them were seen wearing facemasks, vendors didn't bother to wear any protective gear, posing health risks to themselves and their customers.

While keeping several bags full of kitchen and other essential items in his car, Anisur Rahman said he would not come out of his house in the next 10 days, unless there was an emergency.

"There is no guarantee when the situation will get back to normal," he said.

People were seen thronging other markets as well, including Jigatola, Karwan Bazar, and Mohammadpur Krishi Market, to buy daily essentials ahead of the 10-day holiday. However, they did not bother to maintain social or physical distancing.

While talking to a correspondent, Shariful Alam, a private company official, said he went to the market wearing a facemask.

"But so many people are roaming around in the market, which poses health risks as we don't know whether any of us are a carrier of coronavirus."

While visiting different markets, it was seen that price of different kinds of rice, including Nazirshal, Miniket and Paijam, had increased by Tk 8-10 a kg within a week.

Price of Miniket rice was Tk 58-60 a kg, which was Tk 50 last week.

Price of each kg of potatoes has increased by Tk 6, price of ginger by Tk 15-20, and garlic by Tk 10-15.

Prices of a few items including onion, however, decreased by Tk 10 to Tk 15 per kg.

Prices of most vegetables, however, doubled.

"I came to Karwan Bazar hoping that prices will be cheaper here than other markets. But prices of vegetables is costly here as well," said Tania Ahmed, a resident of the capital's Tejgaon area.

People were also seen buying different household items and toiletries, including soap, bleaching powder and hand sanitizer at high prices.

Afghan security forces keep watch near the site of an attack in Sikh religious complex in Kabul yesterday. At least 25 people were killed in the attack on the complex where worshippers were offering morning prayers, the latest brutal assault claimed by the Islamic State group. PHOTO: REUTERS

Zero incidents of virus transmission

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A study from the National Institutes of Health (NIH), Centers for Disease Control (CDC), UCLA, and Princeton University scientists published last week in the New England Journal of Medicine showed the varying stability of the coronavirus on different surfaces. Across aerosols, plastic, stainless steel, copper, and cardboard, the lowest levels of coronavirus transmission possibilities were via copper because of its atomic makeup and cardboard — presumably because of its porous nature.

Emphasising that the virus spreads when transmitted by aerosols, researchers duplicated these droplets and measured how long they stayed infectious on surfaces.

The coronavirus lasts longest on smooth, non-porous surfaces. Researchers found the virus was still viable after three days on plastic and stainless steel.

The virus was not viable after 24 hours on cardboard — and the good news here, like plastic and stainless steel, is lower and lower potency when exposed to air.

For newsprint, which is much more porous than cardboard, virus viability is presumably even shorter.

Cornell University infectious disease expert Gary Whittaker told The Washington Post it typically takes "an army of viruses going in" to break through the natural defenses of a human being -- meaning surface transmission is a low likelihood of transmission.

A virologist at John Innes Centre George Lomonossoff, who uses molecular biology to understand the assembly and properties of viruses in the United Kingdom, debunked the idea of transmission through newsprint: "Newspapers are pretty sterile because of the way they are printed and the process they've been through. Traditionally, people have eaten fish and chips out of them for that very reason. So all of the ink and the print makes them actually quite sterile. The chances of that are infinitesimal."

HOW PUBLISHERS ARE REACTING AND COMMUNICATING

News publishers (internationally) are reacting in different ways to concerns about newsprint.

Home delivery: On a basic level, they are providing hand sanitisers and wipes to home delivery staff and leaving newspapers outside buildings.

Single-copy distributors: I'm hearing stories of publishers providing gloves, masks, and sanitisers to newsstands, distributors, and street sellers ostensibly for the protection of its workers -- yet I suspect equally to reassure the public when buying print newspapers and magazines.

Notices about print processes: The Wall Street Journal put a fixture in its print edition starting this week referencing its paper production process is mostly automated and the risk is low.

Don't forget our replica: Out of an abundance of caution, publishers are emphasising their digital replica services for those still worried about newsprint -- something already being promoted to hotels.

In other words, in addition to the scientific research about porous surfaces and the particular sterility of newsprint, publishers are taking extra steps to ensure print newspapers are touched by no unprotected hands by the time the product reaches the customer.

What's not clear to me is whether it's best to proactively communicate to customers this "non-transmission via print" news. There are a few incidents of publishers sending reassuring communications to readers -- only to see cancelled print subscriptions as a result. I can only assume that readers had never thought about transmission until the publisher brought it up. Instead, I'm hearing publishers developing talking points for when readers ask about print transmission.

(This is a concise version of the original article that was published on The Earl Blog.)

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A mad scramble to get home

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to collect food, medicine or receive treatment.

Besides, the health ministry on many occasions asked people to maintain social distance.

But soon after the announcement of the public holiday on Monday, a huge number of city dwellers started leaving the capital using buses, trains, and launches, forcing the government to change its earlier decision not to shut down public transport completely.

Experts fear the government decision to close down offices, without adequate measures to make people stay indoors, could further help spread the virus throughout the country.

"The objective with which the government closed offices was not successful. The virus could spread across the country, as so many people, who left for homes, crammed in buses, trains and launches," Prof Nazrul Islam, virologist and former vice chancellor at Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujib Medical University, told The Daily Star on Tuesday.

SITUATION WORSENS

Pressure of passengers mounted on roads yesterday due to the suspension of operations of train and launch services, said Khondaker Enayet Ullah, secretary general of Bangladesh Road Transport Owners Association.

Thousands of people left Dhaka, ignoring the risk of being infected with the coronavirus, Enayet, also the owner of ENA Transport Ltd, told this correspondent yesterday.

He added that they would suspend bus operations from today as per the government directive.

Apart from long-route buses, people travelled in local buses and even in pickups and trucks, turning the situation similar to Eid rush, transport operators said.

An acute traffic jam was created on the Dhaka-Tangail highway at Mirzapur and Kalihati upazilas of Tangail for 16 hours from Tuesday evening, causing immense sufferings of the home-bound people as well as transport workers.

The gridlock on the highway that connects Dhaka with northern districts started to ease after 11:00am yesterday, police said.

On the other hand, most of the passengers were travelling without wearing adequate protective gears to keep themselves safe from coronavirus infection.

Except the huge pressure of vehicles, poor condition of the highway at several points and construction work of an underpass at Kodim Dhalla made the gridlock acute, saidMohammad Moniruzzaman, officer-in-charge of Gorai Highway Police Station.

Truck driver Chan Lal said they started for Rajshahi from Dhaka around 7:00pm on Tuesday, but the vehicle remained stuck at Postkamuri in Mirzapur for three hours.

Faruk Hossain said he was travelling to Rajshahi on a pickup as he did not get any bus.

In another development, ferries running on the Shimulia-Kathalbari route in the Padma faced the increasing pressure of passengers on Tuesday as the authorities suspended operations of launch and speedboat services.

The authorities were forced to stop vehicles from getting into ferries, and only passengers were allowed to board them.

The situation improved very little yesterday as over 500 vehicles, mostly smaller ones, were stranded at the Shimulia end around 2:00pm, a staff of the ferry terminal said. "Still, we are mostly carrying passengers."

Risking their lives, a good number of people used trawlers to cross the river,he said wishing anonymity.

At Paturia-Daulatdia ferry terminal, around 300 vehicles got stuck there at around 4:00pm yesterday.

An angry passenger asked, "Why did not the government shut down public transport before announcing holiday?"

Our correspondents in Tangail and Manikganj contributed to this report.

8 killed in road crashes

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in Bogura's Shibganj upazila, Sohel Islam, 17, son of Rashidul Islam from Majali village in Nilphamari's Jaldhaka upazila and Zahangir Alam, 40, son of Siam Uddin from Gatiasan village in Kurigram's Rajarhat upazila, said Aktarul Islam, sub-inspector of Kundarhat Police Outpost.

Police are trying to identify the rest of the dead, he said.

Najir Hossan, a passenger of the truck told The Daily Star that at least 25 people boarded the truck, which was coming from Chattogram, from Dhaka's Abdullapur area.

All of them were sitting on top of the salt sacks, he said, adding that many of them jumped off the truck immediately before the collision and landed in a roadside paddy field.

But the truck also veered of the road after crash and ended up in the same field, killing four people on the spot, Najir said.

The injured are currently receiving treatment at Shaheed Ziaur Rahman Medical College Hospital.

Meanwhile, one man was killed and four others injured in Sherpur upazila.

The dead, Mridul Hossain, 22, was the son of Rafiqul Islam from Kechra village in Joypurhat's Panchbibi upazila.

The accident took place when a bus and truck coming from opposite directions collided around 5:30pm in Mohipur Jamtal area on Dhaka-Rangpur highway, police said.

In a separate accident in the upazila, a man was killed in crash between a lorry and microbus in Betgaru area on Dhaka-Rangpur highway.

The microbus driver, Nahid Hasan, 35, died on the spot, police said, adding that he was from Narsingdi's Shibpur upazila.

Free Bangladesh

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establishing socialism in Bangladesh and presents his nationalisation scheme. The prime minister solemnly pledges to rebuild and reconstruct free Bangladesh and assures that fruits of independence will be reaped and enjoyed by 75 million people of Bangladesh and not merely by a handful of opportunists.

Explaining the salient features of his nationalisation plan, Bangabandhu names the following sectors of economy to be nationalised immediately: Banking (excluding branches of foreign banks), insurance (both life and general), jute manufacturing industry, sugar industry, major portion of coastal transport sector, all abandoned and absentee enterprises with fixed assets above Tk 15 lakh, Bangladesh Biman and Bangladesh Shipping Corporation. It is proposed to eventually nationalise the entire foreign trade.

Bangabandhu declares that the government is working on policy measures giving workers the scope of participation in the management of these enterprises. About the private sector, the prime minister says that they will be encouraged to stay and operate their enterprises efficiently and profitably within the framework of the government policy.

GREETINGS FROM WORLD LEADERS

The president and prime minister have received messages of good wishes on the occasion of the celebration of the first Independence Day anniversary of Bangladesh from Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II, V. Podgorny, Chairman of the Presidium of the Supreme Council of the USSR, Sir Jaul Hasluck, Governor General of the Commonwealth of Australia, President VV Giri of India, Indian Prime Minister Indira Gandhi, General Ne Win, Chairman of the Revolutionary Council of Burma and other world leaders.

WOMEN WILL ENJOY EQUAL RIGHTS

Bangabandhu appeals to women of the country today to participate in the task of building a society free from exploitation. He says that women will enjoy equal rights and privileges in Bangladesh.

Speaking as the chief guest at a sports function at Azimpur Girls School, Bangabandhu regrets that in the past, half of the nation had been confined within the four walls of their houses owing to social prejudices. "Religion had been exploited for enslaving our mothers and sisters," he says. He hopes that in free Bangladesh men and women will work shoulder to shoulder in the coming years.

SUBDIVISIONS RAISED TO DISTRICT STATUS

Bangabandhu announces today the raising of all subdivisions of Bangladesh to the status of districts. At present, there are 19 districts and 51 subdivisions in Bangladesh.

SOURCES: March 27, 1972 issues of Dainik Bangla, The Daily Ittefaq, Azad, Morning News, The Bangladesh Observer and Purbodesh.

Love in the days of war

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"I used to attend meetings and processions on the university campus during the early weeks of March as I was waiting for the Master's final viva exam," she said.

She described how those political activities later inspired her to join the war.

However, her father brought her home to Jhalakathi when the exam date became uncertain after March 7.

Following the crackdown on March 25, Jhalakathi too became unsafe. Roma's family then took shelter at her uncle's house in Swarupkathi (now Nesarabad).

"In Swarupkathi, we used to spend most of the time of the day hiding in the dense guava grove, where one had to reach by boat," she said.

During that time, Rama received arms training from Captain (retd) Mahafuz Alam Beg at a camp he had set up at Kuriana Arya Sommilini School in Pirojpur district.

"About seven to eight women took training there along with men," she recalled. But soon the refuge of the grove was lost.

Local razakars, on the Pakistani army's order, started to burn parts of the grove, making it difficult for people to hide there.

Rama, along with her family, then escaped to West Bengal crossing the border through Bagdha and took shelter at her uncle's house in Tollygunge.

However, she could not stand her life as a refugee at someone else's mercy.

"I did not like when they [people of West Bengal] would sometimes make fun of us. They named an eye infection 'Joy Bangla' because many of the refugees contracted the disease," said Rama, recalling how offended she felt.

"I started thinking that it is better to join the war rather than living like this [as a refugee]." She said the programmes aired on the Swadhin Bangla Betar Kendro also inspired her.

As Rama shared her thoughts with an aunt, she took her near the border area in Hasnabad, West Bengal.

"When we got off a bus, I saw Captain Beg. He was on a motorbike running some errands there," she reminisced.

"He was surprised to see me and informed me that Parthasarathi was there too at the headquarters of sector nine," Rama said. The ecstasy in her voice could still be heard after 49 years.

"At that time, I did not know that Parthasarathi had joined the war because we did not have any communication with each other since leaving the country," she explained.

Rama told Captain Beg that she too wished to join the war. He took her to sector commander Major MA Jalil, who was looking to form a women's unit in sector-9 Taki camp.

"Major Jalil made me the leader of the unit. Initially, there were only six to seven women in the group and we used to live on a two-storied well-guarded building, away from the men's camp. Only the Major and trainers could visit us," she said.

In addition to receiving training on guerrilla warfare, including espionage, she and the other female freedom fighters had to visit the refugee camps to recruit more members, talk to journalists, and broadcast speeches about the camp's activities on Swadhin Bangla Betar.

"Major Jalil eventually wanted to turn the female unit into a suicide squad," she claimed.

Soon the number of the group members increased to 47, she said, adding how they would convince parents and encourage young women to fight for the country.

"Parthasarathi, who had a close relationship with Major Jalil, would sometimes obtain permission to visit me at the camp for only an hour," she remembered.

During his first visit, he requested Rama to go back. "He was against it [Rama's decision to join the war]," she said.

He tried to persuade her to go back to her relative's house and marry someone else, noting that he had vowed to sacrifice his life for the country.

But Rama argued that she too has taken the same vow. "Driven by the passion of youth, I refused to heed his advice," she said.

Asked if she wasworried about her fiancé, who fought at the frontiers, she said Parthasarathi never shared any information of his activities with her.

"But once he went on an operation and there was no news from his group for about three days. When I heard about it, I started crying," she narrated.

Rama broke down so much that when Parthasarathi returned, Major Jalil decided to keep him at the sector headquarters instead of sending him to the war frontiers.

Although being worried about her fiancé's life, Rama did risk hers to enter occupied Bangladesh in disguise to reconnoitre the area occupied by the Pakistan army.

"I would put on a burkha and go out on the street pretending to shop for essentials. Meanwhile, I would take note on the whereabouts of the Pakistan army," she reminisced.

Porimal Chandra Ghosh, a freedom fighter at Sector-9, had accompanied Rama's unit during a number of such missions.

"Disguised as a beggar, I went to Satkhira with Rama and others several times to reconnoitre," he remembered.

Sub-sector commander Captain (retd) Mahafuz Alam Beg said, "The main responsibility of the female unit was to collect information from inside Bangladesh. They travelled all the way to Jashore and Satkhira at least four to five times and brought information."

Freedom fighter Bithika Rani was in this group. She was also a hero and participated in a number of operations, he added.

Rama and Parthasarathi's love story took a positive turn as the country, they fought for, became liberated on December 16, 1971. They tied the knot two days later by exchanging garlands at Kolkata's Kalighat.

Rama retired from a girls' high school at Jhalakati and the couple now lives with their son in Old Dhaka.

Wash your hands after stroking your pet, say French experts

AFP, *Paris*

A French medical body urged pet owners on Wednesday to take precautions like washing hands after stroking dogs or cats, saying the risk of catching COVID-19 from animals "cannot be ruled out".

Even though there is no evidence yet that domestic animals can transmit the virus to humans or get sick from it, there could be a potential risk, said the French Academy of Medicine, which advises the government on epidemics and has set up a dedicated COVID-19 monitoring group.