

IEDCR reports five new cases

Three of them contracted coronavirus thru' community transmission

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

The Institute of Epidemiology, Disease Control and Research yesterday reported five new cases of Covid-19. Three of the five were cases of community transmission.

This takes the total confirmed cases in the country to 44.

Yesterday, the IEDCR urged people who left Dhaka in recent days to be in home quarantine.

"Of the five patients, one recently returned from abroad, three got infected locally. We are unsure how the fifth person got infected," Prof Meerjady Sabrina Flora, director of IEDCR, said in her daily briefing via videoconference.

Out of the 44 coronavirus patients in the country, 11 recovered and were released from hospitals. Five died and 28 are being treated.

TEST FACILITIES EXTENDED

Prof Flora yesterday said coronavirus infection testing facilities were now available at Institute of Public Health (IPH), Dhaka Shishu Hospital, and Bangladesh Institute of Tropical and Infectious Diseases in Chattogram.

"Such facilities will be initiated within days in divisional headquarters too," she added.

INFECTED ABROAD

At least 65 Bangladeshi expatriates living in different countries have been infected and five of them have died.

The five Bangladeshis died in four countries, including the US.

Of the infected, most were in Italy and Spain.

2 DEATHS SPARK PANIC

In Khulna and Khagrachhari, two

people died reportedly showing Covid-19 symptoms yesterday.

They had not been tested but panic gripped the localities following their deaths, reports our correspondents there.

A 45-year-old man died in Khulna Medical College Hospital (KMCH) with fever and breathing difficulties. He was from Helatala area in the city.

ATM Monzur Morshed, director of KMCH, said the patient had been in the same ICU of a hospital in Dhaka where a coronavirus patient had died.

The patient was advised to be in home quarantine after being released from the hospital in Dhaka.

Monzur said the patient did not follow the advice and had tried to hide the information from doctors at the KMCH.

He said they were in touch with the IEDCR about having the deceased tested. Over 15 doctors, nurses, and helping hands of KMCH were sent on home quarantine.

In Khagrachhari, a 20-year-old worker of a Chattogram ship-breaking yard died with coronavirus infection-like symptoms at Matiranga upazila early Wednesday.

Panic gripped the area after his death. Family members buried him within hours of his death instead of cremating him according to his religion.

"We asked other family members and locals of the area to be in home quarantine," said Bivishan Kanti Das, Matiranga upazila nirbahi officer.

"We couldn't collect his blood sample as we have no protective gear," said Khayrul Alam, Matiranga upazila health and family planning officer.



Dhaka is now a different city altogether. With educational institutions, offices, shops, and cinemas closed to slow down the spread of coronavirus, its roads are almost empty and the kitchen markets hardly see any customers. Clockwise from top left, the Moghbazar-Muchack flyover is devoid of traffic. Two delivery men of online stores carry products on bicycles on Kazi Nazrul Islam Avenue. A worker takes a nap at Karwan Bazar. A volunteer uses a megaphone to instruct people not to come out of home. A trader sits idle at his shop at the wholesale chicken market in FDC area as there is no customer around. The photos were taken yesterday.

PHOTO: RASHED SHUMON, ANISUR RAHMAN, FEROZ AHMED

In stillness of shutdown

FROM PAGE 1

"We've never seen the capital so still. It's scary. It looks like a ghost town. We don't know how this will stay so," said Moazzem Hossain, a man who came out to buy eggs, told The Daily Star in the capital's West Razabazar area around 10:30am.

Police and army personnel patrolled the city streets to ensure people stay indoors and maintain social distancing, as part of measures to tackle the coronavirus situation.

If they found anyone outside, they asked them why did they come out of their home.

Some incidents of police excesses, however, were reported at a few places. Some law enforcers beat up people with sticks to force them go home.

Novel coronavirus continues to take its toll on the world with more than 4,81,300 cases of infection and 21,873 deaths as of yesterday.

Bangladesh has so far reported 44 cases and five deaths. But many fear things may deteriorate quickly mainly due to densely populated localities, a lack of hygiene and a poor healthcare system.

Public health experts said the reportedly low number of detected cases was a result of limited testing facilities.

The IEDCR, the lone authority to do the tests, have carried out 924 tests so far, partly due to a shortage of kits. It, however, has started decentralising the testing facilities.

In its fight against the Covid-19 outbreak, the government recently announced a 10-day shutdown and suspended all passenger transport services. It also closed down public and private offices.

Schools, colleges and other educational institutions are also closed till April 9.

The government asked the people to stay indoors and maintain social distancing. People were requested to go out only for emergency purposes, like buying groceries or medicines.

Hospitals, drugstores and other emergency services, meanwhile, remain open. Ambulances, vehicles carrying

food and newspaper and cargo vessels are also out of the restrictions.

But before the shutdown came into effect, a huge number of people left the city for their village homes, ignoring the government advice to stay home and exposing themselves to the risk of contracting the virus and spreading it to others.

At different signals and roads of the city yesterday, vehicles, including police cars and ambulances, were seen moving very cautiously.

Police put up barricades on many points to check whether more than two people were travelling in one vehicle.

Police personnel and Dhaka city corporation staffers were seen asking people to go home and not to move around in groups.

The busiest areas of the city like Farmgate, Karwan Bazar, Shahbagh, Motijheel, Gulshan, Banani, Mohakhali, and Mirpur were eerily silent.

"The reason for this stillness of the city is that people in their thousands have left it while the others preferred to stay indoors," said Yasin Ali, who went to Karwan Bazar kitchen market to buy groceries. He was wearing gloves and face mask to protect himself from coronavirus infection.

Many also woke up to the fact that they were left with no job during the 10-day shutdown. A large number of people in the city live from hand to mouth, depending on their daily income for survival.

Solaiman Mia, a vendor, goes from door to door selling different food items in Mohammadpur area. His income has dipped drastically in the last few days. "Feeding my family has become difficult," he said.

Forty-five-year-old rickshaw puller Sumon Mia, 45, lives in a small room he shares with four others at Boubazar in Farmgate area. He said he was overcome with anxiety over his earning in the next few days.

"I have a family back home. They depend on my income. I don't know how will I send money to them," said a worried Sumon Mia.

Scarce ICU beds a big worry

FROM PAGE 1

health conditions such as diabetes and hypertension are very vulnerable to coronavirus infection. If they get infected, a large portion of them will need intensive care and ventilation.

According to a 2018 report of Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics, the country has a population of 16.46 crore. Of them, 1.30 crore are above 60.

There has been concern over treatment facilities for elderly Covid-19 patients in the country as all the five persons who died from the virus were aged between 60 and 75.

The first was a 70-year-old man who contracted the disease after coming into contact with a returnee from abroad. He had chronic obstructive pulmonary disease, hypertension, heart disease and diabetes. He died at the ICU of Apollo Hospital.

The other four victims had also been suffering from various medical complications.

Experts say dedicated intensive care facilities should be arranged for coronavirus patients because an infected person cannot be kept with other patients in hospitals.

On March 21, Health Minister Zahed Maleque said a hundred ICU beds would be installed in public hospitals to deal with coronavirus patients.

The minister further said 300 more

ICU beds would gradually be set up. He, however, did not give any time frame.

Be-Nazir Ahmed, former director (disease control) of the DGHS, said there is a huge gap between demand and supply in terms of intensive care facilities.

"But the most important thing is that ICU management in the country is very poor."

There have been reports that patients admitted to ICUs contracted new diseases while receiving treatment, he told this newspaper yesterday.

The former DGHS director said the ICUs in private hospital are not up to the mark for a lack of necessary equipment and skilled manpower.

He said the government should take immediate steps to increase intensive care facilities across the country, and set up a specialised hospital with 100-200 ICU beds to treat coronavirus patients.

Prof Muzaherul Huq, former adviser (Southeast Asia region) at the World Health Organisation, said Covid-19 patients should be treated in a designated hospital, and ventilation and other facilities at the ICU should be there.

According to the DGHS, the first ICU in the country was set up at the National Institute of Cardiovascular Diseases in 1980.

Grim faces dot empty roads

FROM PAGE 1

By 3:30pm, he was unable to recover his costs -- a contrast to previous days, when he saw a mad rush to buy vegetables as many city dwellers stockpiled food.

By the same time on Tuesday, he had had many customers crowding his van and had earned Tk 300 on top of his investment of Tk 1,200 for the vegetables.

"This is the worst day in the past week. Now I am worried whether I will be able to realise my investment," said Monirul on Wednesday while waiting for customers. He earned only Tk 900 from sales and a good quantity of vegetables remained unsold.

"There weren't many people, even in the morning. People have gone home."

As demand drops, it means a loss of income for small traders who depend on daily customers buying fresh produce.

"People are not buying," said Babul, who was selling vegetables on a van on Zakir Hossain Road of Mohammadpur.

By early afternoon on Wednesday, he was unable to sell half of the potatoes and onions he had sold on Tuesday.

Traders at the Mohammadpur Town Hall kitchen market and Karwan Bazar kitchen market had similar experiences.

Shopper turnout has declined -- easing pressure on the stock of essential commodities in the market and thus, on prices.

Since early this week, panic buying and stockpiling by many residents fearing possible supply disruption and an imminent lockdown pushed up the prices of most essential foodstuffs except of packaged salt.

The price of onions, on the downturn for the past several weeks after arrival of a fresh harvest, edged up.

Farmers completed the potato harvest in February. Yet, its price too went up amid rising customer demand along with prices of staples rice, flour, edible oil, and lentils.

"The market had earlier been on the upward trend because of higher number of purchases by customers. Prices have now stabilised," said Dhiren Chandra Ghosh, owner of Madanipur Rice Store at the Mohammadpur Town Hall kitchen market.

Ruhul Amin, who mainly sells onions and potatoes, said customer flow dropped from Tuesday.

"We bought onions at higher prices and it appears that we will have to incur losses if the customer demands continue to remain low," he said.

Customers are decreasing day by day, said Delwar Hossain Kusum, a seller at Karwan Bazar kitchen market. He himself didn't venture to the market yesterday as a result.

Shoppers' presence at superstore retail chains such as Meena Bazar and Shwapno was also limited.

Yet both retail chains had put limits on sale of some key commodities, in a measure that was introduced by retailers recently in order to discourage stockpiling seen earlier in the week.

For example, a customer is able to buy 15kg of rice and five kilogrammes of onion in one go at Shwapno.

"It is madness to try to survive by hoarding. I know I won't be able to hoard anything enough to survive for an indefinite period," said Hasan Tarique

Countries wasted time

FROM PAGE 1

They also pledged to work swiftly with multilateral bodies such as the International Monetary Fund, the World Health Organization and regional banks to deploy a "robust" financial package to support developing nations.

With the disease tearing around the globe and three billion people locked down, countries are desperate to find ways to stop its terrifying spread and deal with an economic shock that could surpass the Great Depression.

Cases continued their upward spiral Thursday, with Europe, now the hardest hit continent, clocking over 250,000 infections and nearly 15,000 deaths while fatalities in the US hit the four-figure mark.

With a third of the world's population under lockdown, air travel practically halted and borders shut, economists say the restrictions could cause the most devastating recession in recent history.

In a sign of the economic impact, some 3.3 million people in the US filed unemployment claims last week -- the highest number ever recorded -- the Labor Department reported yesterday. The US has close to 70,000 cases and 1,050 deaths, and numbers are rising daily.

The global lockdown -- which also hemmed in India's huge population this week -- tightened further yesterday as Russia announced it was grounding all international flights, while Moscow's mayor ordered the closure of cafes, shops and parks.

Tokyo's millions of citizens have been told to stay home too, just days

after the city was forced to postpone the 2020 Olympic Games for a year.

Tourism-dependent Thailand has shuttered its borders while China, where the disease was first detected in December, said it was drastically cutting international flights as imported cases threatened to cause a resurgence.

European and leading Asian stock markets were back in the red amid fears of the economic impact yesterday despite US senators finally passing a gargantuan \$2 trillion stimulus package.

Singapore offered a major warning for the world, suffering its biggest contraction since the financial crisis during the first quarter, while France's lockdown has slashed economic activity by a huge 35 percent, its statistics office said.

But in Europe, the World Health Organization offered a glimmer of hope, saying there were "encouraging signs" after Italy reported a lower rate of new infections.

Italy now has the highest death toll in the world with 7,503 fatalities and nearly 75,000 infections.

Though it has seen a slight drop in new cases in recent days, it is "still too early to say whether the pandemic is peaking" there, WHO Europe director Hans Kluge cautioned yesterday.

In Britain, the National Health Service said London's hospitals are facing a "continuous tsunami" of seriously ill COVID-19 patients, despite a lockdown imposed this week. Prime Minister Boris Johnson has said the country could be just a few weeks behind Italy's curve.

A CITY IN SLUMBER

Nat'l Day

FROM PAGE 1

pour onto the streets across the country to celebrate the day.

In yesteryears, the national memorial in Savar became the main centre for celebration. Hundreds of thousands of people gathered there to pay homage to the martyrs of 1971.

Yesterday, the main gate of the memorial remained closed and the authorities refused entry to people who gathered there in the morning.

No floral wreaths were placed in remembrance of the heroes who laid down their lives for the country. All state functions were suspended to prevent public gatherings.

On March 26, 1971, Father of the Nation Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman declared Bangladesh's independence following a crackdown on unarmed Bangladeshes at midnight by the Pakistani occupation forces.

After the nine-month Liberation War, Bangladesh achieved its cherished independence on December 16, 1971, with the supreme sacrifices of three million people.

A special munajat was held at the Baitul Mukarram National Mosque yesterday after Zohr prayers to mark the day. Prayers were offered seeking eternal peace of the departed souls of the martyrs of 1971 and Bangabandhu and his family members who were killed on August 15, 1975.

Prayers were also offered seeking relief from the coronavirus pandemic.

Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina addressed the nation on Wednesday on the occasion of Independence and National Day 2020.

The reception at the Bangabhaban marking the day and the Swadhinata Padak award ceremony were also cancelled this year.

Info ministry

FROM PAGE 1

secretary and assistant secretary, would monitor two televisions.

If the officials find that any television channel is airing any propaganda or rumour regarding the coronavirus issue, they will immediately inform the ministry to stop the propaganda or rumour, read the circular.

The decision to monitor televisions came at the first meeting of a publicity-related committee to prevent coronavirus infection. The meeting was held on March 24, it added.

The move drew a huge criticism from the journalist community and social media users, with many demanding withdrawal of the circular.

Rejoanul Haq, chairman of Broadcast Journalist Centre, a platform of journalists working at different television channels, strongly protested the government's move and demanded withdrawal of the circular.

Speaking to The Daily Star, Rejoanul said the mainstream media was actually working to thwart any propaganda.

For example, he said private television channels worked intensively when propaganda on shortage of salt was spreading in the country.

"Journalists are now working at the field level without any proper safety gears to make sure that people can get authentic information."

On the contrary, the government

put the TV media under suspicion which is unfortunate, added Rejoanul, also the head of news of Maasranga TV.

Bangladesh Pratidin Editor Naem Nizam said journalists had worked with courage and sincerity during any previous disaster.

"We are now going through a hard time due to the coronavirus outbreak and the journalists are again working with sincerity and responsibility," said Naem, also the CEO of News24.

He said the mainstream media does not spread any propaganda.

Terming the government's decision unfortunate and unexpected, Naem hoped that the government would withdraw it.

In a statement issued last night, Broadcast Journalist Centre demanded withdrawal of the "monitoring cell". It also urged the information ministry to come out of such negative attitude towards the private TV channels.

Asked about the criticism before the issuance of the new circular, Mizan Ul Alam, additional secretary (broadcast) of information ministry, said there was a mistake in the circular and they were going to change it.

"In fact, the officials will not only monitor the private television channels, but also all other media, including the social media," Mizan, also the convener of the publicity-related committee, told The Daily Star last night.