

Factories can run

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international work orders and the factories producing Personal Protective Equipment (PPE), masks, handwash, gloves, sanitisers and drugs related to coronavirus can remain open, said the statement signed by DIFE Inspector General Shihbath Roy.

The factories must strictly follow the health department instructions, it said.

The management must measure workers' temperatures with thermal scanners. If a worker has symptoms of Covid-19, they must be quarantined immediately and the management must ensure treatment of the worker, it added.

Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina on Wednesday announced a Tk 50,000-crore stimulus package for the export-oriented sectors of Bangladesh. She also called for protecting the workers' health.

The BGMEA in another statement yesterday echoed the DIFE regarding which factories could remain open.

"If they decide to keep it open, they will have to ensure maximum safety and hygiene for their workers and will have to take responsibility for their workers," BGMEA President Rubana Huq said.

Meanwhile, Bangladesh Knitwear Manufacturers and Exporters Association yesterday asked its members to keep their factories shut until April 4.

BKMEA President AKM Salim Osman in a statement asked the workers to stay where they are during the closure.

Law enforcers have been patrolling the streets across the country to ensure that people stay home and social distance is maintained, he said.

Besides, one worker infected with the coronavirus can spread the disease among many, he added.

Two doctors

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health ministry, and local administrations to contain the spread of the virus.

Earlier, IEDCR had a control room for addressing the queries of the people, but it has now control rooms in every district and upazila to help the people and make them aware, she said.

On top of that, a combined control room was launched, under the supervision of Directorate General of Health Services where different organisations are working to mitigate the crisis.

Reiterating that testing services are being extended, the IEDCR director said despite limitations, they were trying their best to fight the disease.

Besides IEDCR, three more organisations, including Institute of Public Health, Dhaka Shishu Hospital, and Bangladesh Institute of Tropical and Infectious Diseases of Chattogram, are now carrying out tests.

Ensuring personal protective equipment for all people concerned is a huge challenge, Prof Flora said several national, international organisations, NGOs, and local businesses were helping them to arrange PPEs for all.

Eleven people out of 48, who tested positive, were released from hospitals and five died from the virus so far.

Now 32 people are undergoing treatment at different hospitals, the IEDCR director added.

On March 8, the IEDCR confirmed the first case of coronavirus infection in the country. After a six-day gap, two more Covid-19 cases were confirmed.

Since then, the number of Covid-19 patients has been increasing. In the last 24 hours, 3,374 people was sent to quarantine. Over 50,000 people have so far been kept in quarantine, Prof Flora added.

Meanwhile, a 70-year-old man died yesterday after suffering from fever

in Kagojpukur village in Jashore's Benapole, reports our Benapole correspondent.

Family members said he came back from India a week ago.

Police hoisted a red flag at the house, suspecting that the man had coronavirus infections.

Shubhankar Kumar Roy, medical officer at Sharsha Upazila Health Complex, said they were not sure whether the elderly man died of Covid-19.

In Noakhali, a 24-year-old man breathed his last on Thursday night at Chowmuhani after vomiting blood and suffering from fever, reports our correspondent there.

Following the death, police imposed restrictions on entering and coming out of the building the victim was residing in.

Police also imposed similar restrictions on two adjacent buildings, said Harun-ur-Rashid, officer-in-charge of Begumganj Police Station.

Police said the victim was an office assistant at a local dental clinic.

He returned home from Dhaka with fever three days ago. Later, he took primary treatment, police added.

Asim Kumar Das, Begumganj upazila health and family planning officer, said the man had no coronavirus symptoms.

He said they collected samples and sent those to IEDCR for test.

In another development, fearing coronavirus infections, a 16-year-old boy was admitted to Chandpur General Hospital yesterday with cold, cough, and breathing problems, our district correspondent adds.

He was kept in isolation, said Sujauddaula Rubel, the hospital's resident medical officer (RMO).

Another RMO Asibul Hasib and two ward boys, who provided treatment to the patient, were sent to home quarantine, he said.

A plea from the valley of death

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According to reports, the death toll from coronavirus in Italy is over 8,000 and there are over 80,000 confirmed cases. One Bangladeshi died of Covid-19 in Milan and 10 other Bangladeshis tested positive in the European country.

The Bangladeshi man was buried in the presence of four other men from his country. They, however, could not see the body as it was wrapped.

Seeing the developed country's health system get overwhelmed has shocked the world.

Ignatius said when Covid-19 was first detected in Italy, the government imposed restrictions on movement and asked shops to shut down. However, the instruction was not taken seriously. And many people violated it.

The number of infections for the first two weeks was not alarming, but then it went up dramatically and the hospitals were unable to treat everyone in need, he said.

Ignatius, a native of Nature, went to Italy over a decade ago. He has become a restaurant executive and

is now a permanent resident of the country. His wife and two children also live there.

"The cases of infection and deaths in Bangladesh at present are nothing compared to those in Italy. However, Bangladesh is a heavily-populated country with a health system not even comparable to that of Italy."

A lockdown is yet to be fully enforced in Bangladesh and people are still roaming about, he said.

"The way people thronged bus and launch terminals to go home from Dhaka is scary. If there are even a few infected people in those stations, the virus will spread like wildfire."

He is already shocked at the deaths in Italy and will not be able to bear it if something like this happens in his homeland.

"I appeal to everyone in Bangladesh, please stay home, don't go outside unless it is really essential. And, when you go out, please take all safety measures."

"I am saying this because you are yet to see the tragedy unfold in Bangladesh. Please take it very seriously."

Foreigners flying back

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He also said, "We will take the best possible care of the foreigners who live in Bangladesh. However, people generally want to stay close to their families at their homes during such pandemics."

No ambassador of the foreign missions in Bangladesh is returning to their homeland, Khalilur affirmed.

An official of the Malaysian High Commission in Dhaka said, "Some 240 Malaysians left Bangladesh on March 24. Over 200 more are going on March 28 [today]."

Malaysian authorities are chartering their flights for the Malaysian citizens, mostly students studying in medical colleges in Bangladesh.

"Colleges have remained shut. Besides, businesses are closed. So, they thought it was better for them to spend time with their families. They will return as the situation normalises," the official of the Malaysian High Commission told The Daily Star.

Some Sri Lankan and Bhutanese citizens also left for their homes this week.

Some employees of European Union countries, the US and UK have also flown to their homelands, while some are planning to fly, according to the officials of the foreign missions concerned.

"In a case of emergency, State Department gives options for its officials to return. This is not evacuation in anyway. Some officials

are opting to go back, but most others are not," said a diplomatic source without being able to give any figure of those leaving Bangladesh.

British High Commission in Dhaka has advised UK citizens to leave Bangladesh using Biman Bangladesh Airlines flights that are still operating on the Dhaka-London and Dhaka-Manchester routes. Flights of these routes will be suspended from March 30.

Meanwhile, the UK government has asked all its citizens abroad to return, said an official at the high commission.

The coronavirus pandemic has infected 532,696 people globally. At least 24,075 people have died.

Italy has been the worst hit by the COVID-19 after China. In Bangladesh, 48 were infected and five of them died until yesterday.

Bangladesh has declared a general holiday for most public and private offices from March 26 to April 4, shut down the educational institutions and suspended all the flights of Biman, except for Manchester and London routes.

Public buses, railways and domestic flights were also suspended to check movement of people and thus halt the spread of the deadly virus.

According to the home ministry, about 2.5 lakh foreigners from 44 countries are employed in more than 20 trades in Bangladesh.



PHOTO: ANISUR RAHMAN

An army truck sprays disinfectant on a road near the Zero Point in the capital's Gulistan area yesterday. The army has been assisting the civil administration in fighting novel coronavirus since Wednesday.

Story of a 'circular' and its withdrawal

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increased bureaucratic interference in the work of private TV channels, hampering their regular work.

Why did such monitoring of private TV channels become a necessity and the information ministry had to take it up in such a hurry? Have our private TV channels shown irresponsibility by broadcasting unfounded news? Can the information ministry cite an example of irresponsible reporting that triggered the need for this monitoring?

So why this decision to "monitor"? It is nothing but a reflection of a mindset that fundamentally mistrusts the media and refuses to see and acknowledge the positive outcome of the role it plays. Take the present coronavirus crisis for example. All our TV channels are broadcasting awareness programmes and other related stories literally round the clock. So are the print and digital media. We humbly claim that in all social crisis like floods, cyclones, dengue, etc. media have always played a highly praiseworthy and responsible role.

The ministry must know that we, as journalists, receive hundreds of so-called "news". Do we rush to broadcast or publish them? Of course not. Each of us does our due diligence -- investigate and confirm from reliable sources -- before we even consider using them. Once the decision is made, with appropriate vetting, to use a story, it is written by professional reporters and edited by another set of well-trained sub-editors. Only after this process is complete is a story broadcast and published.

The formation of such a monitoring committee misses the fundamental point that TV channels -- like every professional media house -- when they broadcast a programme, they take full responsibility as to its authenticity. In fact, there are established laws that hold the media liable for publishing

news that is not authentic. I applaud the overall performance of our private TV channels who, in all challenging circumstances, have acted responsibly and professionally. Making such "monitoring cells" and empowering it to interfere in the day to day functioning of private TV channels is fundamentally antithetical to the principles of a free media.

If has mostly been a few Facebook posts that have caused havoc in Bangladesh by raising communal situations like in Ramu (2012), Pabna (2013), Nasir Nagar in Brahmanbaria (2016), Rangpur (2017) and Bhola (2019). These are the type of things that the government should monitor, and to the best of our knowledge, it does. Even here, there are reasonable grounds to believe that these incidents did not occur accidentally but were contrived and orchestrated by vested groups. How many of them have been punished till date?

I repeat that mainstream media in Bangladesh are mostly run by trained professionals and that they seldom broadcast or published anything that necessitates the setting up of a "monitoring cell". We in the media have never shied away from admitting that inevitable errors do occur in our work as we need to publish under strict deadline. But there are established channels of correcting them as and when mistakes occur.

Instead of forming "monitoring cells", the information ministry will be far better advised to work out "cooperation efforts". The information minister should sit with the media -- print, broadcast, digital -- and work how best we can all work together to serve the country most effectively at this moment of unprecedented challenge. We are doing it already on our own. We would be happy to come forward to assist the

government in any way we can.

From our own work ethics and to maintain our own credibility with our viewers and readers we, in the media, are far more concerned and alert about any misinformation or rumours being broadcast or published as "news". There is no need for any monitoring. In fact, such a move will be counterproductive as it will put the media and the government on opposite sides when in fact we need to work together.

Post script.

A few days ago, an assistant professor and a lecturer belonging to two government colleges in two different districts were temporarily suspended pending departmental inquiry. Their crime? They have allegedly made "undesirable" and "provocative" (translation from Bangla ours) Facebook posts. Without prejudicing the departmental inquiry, we would like to ask to what extent people in government employ surrender their fundamental right of freedom of expression? From our reading of the two posts nothing was said against the government. One was a rhetorical outburst against the general state of corruption and other an expression of concern for the healthcare personnel who were not receiving personal safety gears on time. In neither case was the government criticised. And yet the two have been temporarily suspended. We have two points to make: 1) is it good for the government to suppress personal views in such a manner? Do government service rules disempower educated professionals -- they are both teachers and not bureaucrats -- from expressing concern about the country that we all profess to love; 2) couldn't a demand for explanation suffice, instead of temporary suspension?

Why is there such propensity to "punish" and "harm" instead of to engage?

Govt needs to do more, faster

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According to Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics, 20.5 percent of the country's population of 16.6 crore are poor. Of them, more than half fall under the extreme poverty line.

Recently, the government has announced some initiatives taking the plight of these people in consideration, including measures to reach food to them, and to encourage them stay indoors.

The Department of Disaster Management (DDM), under the Ministry of Disaster Management and Relief, has a stock of about 24,717 metric tonnes of rice. It also has an allocation of Tk 7.58 crore under its Humanitarian Assistance Programme to deal with the crisis.

On March 24, the department allocated 6,500 metric tonnes of rice and Tk 5.5 crore to the deputy commissioners of the 64 districts so that the DCs can help those in need.

The DCs along with the Upazila Nirbahi Officers and local government representatives are now preparing lists of those in need of support in their respective districts, said sources at the DDM.

Economists, however, said the government must start distributing relief materials immediately among the marginalised ones.

"The government needs to prepare a map with details of the beneficiaries and the places they live," noted economist Hossain Zillur Rahman, also the executive chairman of Power and Participation Research Centre, told The Daily Star yesterday.

Another important thing is that the government must ensure that the initiatives do not get stuck in bureaucratic tangles.

Therefore, it has to be done immediately with coordination among DCs, city governments, NGOs and volunteer organisations, he added.

Prof Mustafizur Rahman, distinguished fellow at the Centre for Policy Dialogue (CPD), said since a large number of people have already moved to the villages from urban areas, their names might not be on the lists being prepared by the local administration.

"These people will have to be included in the list immediately so that they too get the relief materials," he said.

One major challenge would

be to identify those who lost their homesteads to floods or river erosions and shifted to the cities and other urban areas, he noted.

That section of people could not go back to their homes, said Prof Mustafizur, adding that the city corporations with help from other organisations should identify them and create a database so that they don't remain left out.

Volunteer organisations can play a big role here, he added.

Senior Secretary Shah Kamal at the disaster management and relief ministry said they would sit in a meeting next week to find out what else could be done.

He said the DCs were asked to send demand lists. "Once they send those, we will make arrangements," he said.

DCs AT HEART OF RELIEF EFFORTS
"The DCs are the centre of the government relief efforts. They will work in coordination with the local government bodies to distribute relief materials among the poor," Shah Kamal told The Daily Star.

According to estimates of the local administrations, there are nearly 9.5 lakh day labourers in the country, he said.

He also said the DCs were preparing packets of relief materials -- each containing 10kg rice, 5kg potato, one kg lentil, one kg salt, one litre soybean oil, and a piece of soap -- for the distribution.

The relief materials will be sent to the homes of the beneficiaries as part of government efforts to ensure social distancing, which is vital to slow the spread of coronavirus.

Shah Kamal said they have already allocated 2,000 tonnes of rice and Tk 55 lakh for the poor people living in Dhaka and Chattogram cities. Of the amount, Tk 30 lakh has been allocated for those in the capital.

Of the allocated rice, 1,200 tonnes are for those in Dhaka while the rest for Chattogram, he said.

The secretary also said they were giving topmost priority to the villages as a huge number of people have already left for their village homes.

In Dhaka, the DC office and the city corporations will soon start working to distribute relief items among slum dwellers and day labourers.

Dhaka DC Abu Saleh Mohammed Ferdous Khan said they had already

received a support of Tk 20 lakh and 200 tonnes of rice from the DDM.

"We are still preparing the list of the needy people. Those who are in dire needs will be given priority," he told The Daily Star.

This newspaper reached the DCs in several other districts for comments.

Satkhiria DC SM Mostafa Kamal said, "We're making a list of rickshaws and van pullers, auto-rickshaw drivers, cobblers, porters and day labourers."

"Our primary target is to give relief materials to 200 people in the municipality area and 100 marginalised people in each upazila," he said. Satkhiria has six upazilas and a municipality.

He said they were likely to begin the distribution today.

The district administration of Gaibandha also received Tk 20 lakh and 200 tonnes of rice. DC Abdul Matin said he instructed the UNOs to prepared lists of the marginalised people.

"We'll send the relief packets to people's home directly to avoid any sort of crowd," he added.

As part of the efforts to help the poor, the government is planning to lower the price of per kg rice to Tk 10 from current Tk 30 at the open market sale (OMS), said several sources.

Asked, Mosammad Nazmanara Khanum, secretary at the food ministry, however, said they were yet to get any instruction in this regard.

Sarwar Mahmud, director general of the Directorate General of Food, said they had an adequate stock of rice -- around 18 lakh tonnes.

"If the government says, we have our manpower ready to distribute rice among the people," he said.

Only 17.84 percent of the poor people living in towns and cities receive support from the government's social safety schemes, whereas 35.77 percent of the poor people in rural areas get the benefits, according to a World Bank report released last year.

In the meantime, people in need want the government to distribute the relief without any further delay.

"I earned only a few bucks yesterday. There is hardly any passenger on the street," said Md Firoz, a rickshaw puller in the capital.

"What will I eat if things don't change soon?" he asked.

[Our Staff Correspondent Shaheen Mollah contributed to this report]

Man killed in 'gunfight' between two gangs

Claim police

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

A man was killed in what police said was a gunfight between two gangs in Satkhiria Sadar upazila early yesterday.

The dead was identified as Wahed Ali Gazi, said Sharif Enamul, sub-inspector of Satkhiria Sadar Police Station.

He said based on information that heavy fire was being exchanged between two rival groups, a team of police went to Chelardangi village around 2:00am.

They found the body of Wahed lying on the ground as other criminals fled away.

Later, the body was sent to Satkhiria Sadar Hospital for an autopsy, the SI said, adding that Wahed was accused in six cases, including two murder case.

Wife of the deceased said he was out of the house since July last year.

They used to communicate over the phone, she added.

Locals and police said the deceased was on the run to avoid arrest.

He was accused in a case filed for vandalism after the International Crimes Tribunal handed down death penalty to Jamaat leader Delwar Hossain Sayeedi in 2013.

Wahed allegedly shot dead a local Awami League leader Nazrul Islam in July last year.

He was also accused in the case filed over the murder of Nazrul's nephew and Jubo League leader Kabir in 2017.

Indonesia virus plans 'in tatters' as infections surge

AFP, Jakarta

Indonesia's coronavirus crisis is far worse than being officially reported and the government's response is "in tatters", the country's doctors association warned yesterday as the death toll climbed to 87.

The world's fourth-most populous country only reported its first confirmed infection this month but by Thursday, that had ballooned to over 1,000.

Indonesia's 87 confirmed coronavirus deaths are the highest toll in Southeast Asia, with public health and diplomatic officials warning that its weak health system is being rapidly overwhelmed.

"The government's plans are in tatters and they appear to be avoiding a lockdown," said Indonesian Doctors' Association spokesman Halik Malik.

"Our health system is not as strong as other countries."

A London School of Hygiene & Tropical Medicine study warned this week that cases in Indonesia -- with a population of more than 260 million people -- could be vastly underreported.

The government's virus task force has estimated as many as 700,000 people were at risk of infection nationwide.

Build stronger

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department at the National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH), in a conversation with The Daily Star, said, "The more we establish mental attachments with others, the more we feel relieved."

"It will make us feel that we are not alone. It will boost our mental strength."

To restrain the outbreak of highly contagious COVID-19, people across the globe have been maintaining social distance following recommendations of health experts.

In the wake of coronavirus spread, the government suspended all public and private offices and urged citizens to stay at their homes.

To enforce the homestay and other precautionary measures, army personnel started assisting the local administration at divisional cities and district towns.

Mekhalha said it was unfortunate that the pandemic created a severe crisis across the country but it also had some positivity.

"We now have leisure time in hand to finish our pending tasks, pass quality time with children and other family members, play indoor games like Ludo and Carrom, and do many more things that we usually fail to manage time for," she said.

Mentioning the risks of anxiety disorder among the people who are panicked and over thinking, she suggested that breathing exercise and physical activities could help people fight anxiety.

"We have to keep communicating with the people through mobile phone and social media," she said, adding, "We have to think positively. This bad time will end soon."

The noted psychiatrist suggested that people should not be always thinking of COVID-19 as it could shatter people mentally.

"We should fix a time in a day to get updates on the virus. We must not always think of it," she said.