



The lifeless parking lot of the Hazrat Shahjalal International Airport bears testament to the standstill in air communications across the world. *Inset*, a digital display shows the long list of flights that would have plied on a normal day, but have been cancelled in light of the coronavirus pandemic.

PHOTO: JAMIL MAHMUD

A forsaken territory

Dhaka airport deserted as passenger flights remain suspended

JAMIL MAHMUD and RASHIDUL HASAN

A plane departing Hazrat Shahjalal International Airport is a rare sight these days, as the country's busiest airport has turned almost deserted due to air communication suspensions over global Covid-19 outbreak.

Around noon yesterday, the electronic display boards -- both at the airport's arrival and departure terminals -- were showing all but one upcoming flights have been cancelled.

The parking space in front of Terminal-2, usually crammed with cars, is gathering dust.

Some cleaners were seen sweeping the area.

"I have never seen the airport this empty before," said Mohammad Shahjahan, an electrician, who has been working at the airport for six years.

The arrival floor of the airport, that remained crowded 24 hours a day, has also been mostly deserted for the last few days, he added.

Normally around 28 airlines used to operate 130 flights carrying around 20,000 passengers to and from Dhaka on a daily basis, Air Vice Marshal M Mafidur Rahman, chairman, Civil Aviation Authority of Bangladesh (CAAB), told this newspaper, recently.

However, an unprecedented situation has been unfolding in the aviation sector across the globe following the coronavirus outbreak -- declared a pandemic by World Health Organization.

The governments have also taken strict precautionary measures to restrict air communications.

Dhaka has kept only four of its international routes open -- the UK, China, Hong Kong and Thailand.

Upon a visit to the Dhaka airport, this newspaper yesterday found that only a handful of security personnel and some staffers were on duty.

One or two vehicles arrived and departed the airport, most of which carried staffers and security men.

At the Dhaka airport's cargo complex as well, only a few staff members were seen working.

Talking to this newspaper, one of them said cargo handling has reduced drastically in the past few days, as traders who are responsible for receiving the imported goods, have not showed up.

The number of cargo flights -- both arrival and departure -- have also dipped, he said, preferring not to be named.

National airliner Biman Bangladesh Airlines has stopped operations on all 17 of its international routes.

Last week, the national flag carrier also suspended its operations to all the seven domestic routes for an indefinite period, said airport sources.

SUSPENSION OF FLIGHTS TO 10 COUNTRIES EXTENDED FOR A WEEK

The government yesterday extended the suspension of passenger flights to 10 countries till April 7.

Dhaka had suspended air communications with 10 countries till March 31 with effect from March 22, as a precautionary measure to stop the spread of coronavirus in the country.

The countries are Qatar, Bahrain, Kuwait, SEE PAGE 4 COL 2

Secondary students' TV classes go on air today

Parents welcome move, but skeptical of its reach

MOHIUDDIN ALAMGIR

Authorities are all set to provide education to secondary students through television from today, aiming to minimise the loss of the academic session due to closure of educational institutions.

Authorities of the Directorate of Primary Education said that they also took the decision on principle to provide education to students through television, and are taking necessary preparations.

Many guardians welcomed the government move to broadcast recorded lectures of renowned teachers for students from Class VI to Class X through Sangsad Television.

They, however, were skeptical about the effectiveness of the mode of transmission.

The Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey (MICS) 2019 of Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics shows that 50 percent households of the country do not have television sets.

"We will start broadcasting classes of students of Class VI to X through Sangsad TV from March 29 [today]," secondary and higher education secretary Mahbub Hossain told The Daily Star.

Directorate of Secondary and Higher Education (DSHE) Director General Prof Syed Md Golam Faruk said they took the initiative to minimise lapse of studies due to closure of educational institutions following the coronavirus pandemic.

He said that they have contacted Sangsad TV and have recorded lectures of renowned teachers of respective subjects to air the lecture.

DSHE also uploaded a routine for five days on its web site. On the first day, English class for sixth-graders will be aired from 9:05am till noon. The classes will be repeated from 2pm to 5pm every day.

According to the DSHE official, there are about 90 lakh students currently enrolled in sixth to tenth grades in schools across the country.

The government on March 16 closed down all schools till March 31 and on Tuesday extended the closure till April 9. Several DSHE officials said with the Covid-19 situation evolving every day, this closure might be prolonged.

They said in an almost lockdown situation, it is critical to provide help to children at home, who are turning restless in home confinement. Such class work might bring them some relief, their parents as well as other caregivers.

Prof Shahedul Khair Chowdhury, director (college and administration) of DSHE, said if the programme is successful, the government will consider airing lecture for students of 11th and 12th grade soon.

Parliament Secretariat Broadcasting and Information Technology Wing Director General Ashok Kumar Debnath, who oversees Sangsad Television, told this newspaper earlier this week that they are ready to start broadcasting

Today, English class for sixth-graders will be aired from 9:05am till noon through Sangsad TV. The classes will be repeated from 2pm to 5pm every day.

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General patients steer clear of hospitals

STAR REPORT

The number of patients at public hospitals and health complexes in different districts has sharply reduced, with many avoiding the facilities in fear of contracting coronavirus.

Doctors and caregivers are also apprehensive of inspecting patients, as they don't have sufficient personal protective equipment (PPE), or testing kits to detect coronavirus.

Our correspondents report on the prevailing situation at such healthcare institutions:

In Barishal, the number of patients has significantly reduced at Sher-e-Bangla Medical College Hospital. Only those in most urgent need or suffering from severe illnesses are going to the hospital.

During a recent visit, our correspondent found around half of the 1,000 beds vacant there.

Normally, around 1,800 to 2,000 patients visit to the hospital's outpatient department daily. But, the figure has come down to 600 to 700 in the last several days, said hospital director Dr Bakir Hossain.

Besides, a total of 1,614 patients were admitted there on March 17; 1,538 on March 18 and 1,506 on March 19. But the number dropped sharply to 984 on March 22; 857 on March 23; 657 on March 24 and 600 on March 25, said the director.

Sahidul Islam (60) was admitted to the medicine ward around a week ago. But he decided to get released on March 25, claiming that he was not getting proper healthcare.

Talking to this newspaper, several doctors said most physicians are scared of treating patients due to a shortage of personal protective equipment (PPE).

Contacted, Dr Bakir Hossain said PPE and Covid-19 testing kits will reach the hospital soon.

In Moulvibazar, Kulaura Upazila Health Complex has worn a deserted look as the number of patients and visitors has sharply fallen, amid fear of being infected with the virus.

Upon a recent visit, to the health complex, doctors, nurses and other staff were seen sitting idle.

The authorities said only nine patients visited the outpatient department on March 25.

During the visit, no patient was found at the male ward on the second floor of the healthcare facility. There were only two patients in the female ward.

Bosu Miah, a resident of Notun Bosti in Tilagaon area

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10-DAY CLOSURE FOR CORONAVIRUS

Sales drop at bazaars around Dhaka



Traders at this bazaar in the city's Badda area set up shop yesterday, but few customers showed up amid the coronavirus outbreak.

PHOTO: STAR

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

After the government shut down malls and banned unnecessary gatherings to contain the spread of coronavirus, people have also limited the number of trips to kitchen markets.

The bazaars were not ordered closed, but people are rarely leaving home now. According to traders, daily customer turnout has nearly halved from 150 on a normal day at bazaars, while meat sellers said number of customers has decreased to 20-30 per day from 40-50.

Visiting bazaars at Uttar Badda, Satarkul, Nurachala and Middle Badda, this correspondent spoke with traders about the business.

Md Rahim (60) was selling each kilogramme of padma and tilapia at Tk 400 and Tk 200 at Satarkul. Even on Friday, his sales weren't satisfactory.

"Usually all fish would be sold out by 12pm, but its 2pm now and I still have a lot left. If this continues I need to stop the business for a couple

of days. Customer turnout is very low," lamented Rahim.

Same goes for vegetable seller Borhan Mia (60). He was waiting for customers at Uttar Badda kitchen market.

"I am selling everything for the usual price: per kg brinjal at Tk 30, bean at Tk 50 and cucumber at Tk 25. But there are not enough people out buying vegetables," said Borhan.

The situation persists at meat markets. Forty-year-old Rustom Ali, a butcher in Middle Badda, said, "On a normal day I'd sell five to six maunds of beef, but now it's difficult to sell just one maund." He was selling per kg of beef at Tk 550.

Most traders were seen wearing masks and gloves as a precautionary measure against coronavirus. They said magistrates and police are coming to check if they are maintaining precaution.

"We all bought these ourselves. We are letting

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PADMA BRIDGE

27th span installed

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

The 27th span of much-anticipated Padma Bridge was installed yesterday, making more than four kilometres of the bridge visible.

The span was installed linking 27th and 28th pier at Janjira end around 9:20am yesterday, Dewan Md Abdul Kader, project manager (main bridge), told The Daily Star.

The span was taken to the spot on the river from Kumarbhogh Construction Yard-1 a day earlier, he added.

The development came when the country is facing virtual lockdown with operation of all types of public transports suspended, and public and private offices closed.

Moreover, 60 to 70 local workers involved in the project left workplace due to the coronavirus situation, a project official said.

"Our works are going on with limited workers," he said, wishing anonymity. Out of 667 Chinese nationals involved in the main bridge works, more than 550 are now working, he added. The 6.15km bridge would have a total of 42 piers and 41 spans. Of them, construction work of 41 piers have already been completed.

Asked about the last incomplete pier, Kader said they are hopeful to complete the work within mid-April.

Thirty-nine spans have arrived from China, 27 of which have been installed now.

But the company in China constructing the remaining two spans remained closed for a long time due to the Covid-19 outbreak. About the rest two spans, Kader said, "The ships carrying those are expected to start from China on April 20."



The newly-installed 27th span of the Padma Bridge. With this, more than four kilometres of the much-anticipated bridge has become visible.

PHOTO: COURTESY

No defective kits sent to Bangladesh

Says Chinese embassy

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

The Chinese embassy yesterday confirmed that none of the 40,500 coronavirus test kits donated to Bangladesh is from Shenzhen Bioeasy Biotechnology -- the company questioned by the Spanish government on Thursday for supplying "faulty" kits.

A Chinese embassy statement said: "The test kits provided by China to Bangladesh does not include any product, component or element from Shenzhen Bioeasy Biotechnology Co Ltd. All the medical supplies from China were purchased through standard procedures and from qualified suppliers."

The Spanish government has withdrawn thousands of coronavirus testing kits supplied by Shenzhen Bioeasy after it was revealed that those had a 30 percent detection accuracy rate, according to media reports.

The Chinese government and Jack Ma, one of the richest men in Asia and founder of Alibaba Foundation, has so far donated 40,500 test kits for Covid-19 to Bangladesh.

The Chinese embassy, in the statement, said it observed news reports saying that test kits bought by Spain from China failed to work properly, which raised some concerns among the people of Bangladesh.

"Shenzhen Bioeasy Biotechnology Co, Ltd, the Chinese company in question, has not been granted a seller's permit by the National Medical Products Administration (NMPA)

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