

EU announces virus help for Balkans after criticism

AFP, Brussels

The EU yesterday announced nearly 40 million euros to help Western Balkan countries deal with the coronavirus, after Brussels came under fire for not doing enough for its neighbours.

A further 140 million euros was announced for the European Union's "eastern partner" countries -- Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine.

The moves come as the EU seeks

to fight back in a publicity battle with China and Russia, who have made a great show of their gestures of support to countries struggling with the Covid-19 crisis.

In the Western Balkans, 38 million euros will go to governments to cover the immediate healthcare needs: four million each for Albania and North Macedonia, seven million for Bosnia and Herzegovina, three million for Montenegro and five million for Kosovo.

Ambulances drivers fearful

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training to the drivers and their assistants amid the looming crisis. But it has not received any response yet.

According to the association, there are more than 7,500 private ambulances across the country.

So, around 15,000 people -- at least one driver and an assistant for each ambulance -- are providing services to the people even in this tough time, it said.

"We hear many talking about the safety of doctors and nurses, but no one is talking about the ambulance drivers and their assistants," Alamgir Hossain, president of Dhaka Mohanagar Ambulance Malik Somobay Samity Ltd, told The Daily Star.

Apart from the privately-run ambulance services, the country has nearly 1,000 ambulances at different public hospitals.

Talking on the issue, Prof Muzaherul Huq, a former adviser of WHO's South East Asia region, said ambulance drivers and their assistants are an integral part of health services.

Like doctors and nurses, they too should be provided with necessary safety gears. Otherwise, apart from the drivers and the helpers, others, including their family members and other patients, might contract the virus, he warned.

He also said the authorities should ensure dedicated ambulance services for carrying patients with coronavirus-like symptoms.

At least five people have died with and 49 tested positive for coronavirus in the country, warranting several steps by the government to contain spread of the deadly virus.

Although ambulance drivers are providing services in this risky situation, there were at least two instances where ambulance drivers refused to carry patients with corona-like symptoms, a leader of the association told this correspondent, wishing not to be named.

The Dhaka-based organisation of ambulance owners provides services across the country with its 2,080 ambulances. The services can also be availed by calling 999, a toll-free national emergency helpline run by the police.

In the absence of any national platform, the association maintains contact with other ambulance owners elsewhere in the country.

In a letter sent to the director general of the Directorate General of Health Services (DGHS) on March 22, the Somobay Samity sought training, awareness campaign and safety equipment for drivers and their assistants.

It said although ambulance owners and workers are ready to work along with the government to tackle the crisis, most of the drivers and their

assistants lacked awareness on coronavirus.

The awareness and the equipment they have are not enough, it said.

If any ambulance worker gets infected and all know about it through any news report, it will be difficult to continue the services, it added.

"In the given situation, the government should urgently provide necessary training, sanitisers, masks and other safety gears to the drivers and their helpers."

Beside, the letter mentioned that an additional deputy inspector general of police, who is in charge of the 999 service, also recommended taking such measures.

"Seven days have passed, we have not got any response from the authorities," Sariful Alam Mehdi, an adviser to the Samity, told The Daily Star on Sunday.

In absence of any government support, ambulance owners provided drivers and their assistants with some masks, gloves, and sanitisers which is very inadequate, Mehdi said.

Drivers and their assistants, in many cases, have to help patients get on and off ambulances. Thus, they are at risk, he said.

If the government provides them with safety gears and necessary training, the risk will be lesser, he said.

"So, the government should seriously consider the demands," he said.

Alamgir, president of the Samity, said Grameen Bank promised to provide them with 2,000 personal protective equipment (PPE) and that they were hopeful about getting some those soon.

However, it would be inadequate, he added.

Contacted, Aminul Hasan, director (hospital) at the DGHS, said they would provide PPEs to all who are involved in providing health services, including ambulance drivers and their assistants.

Asked when they would start the distribution, he said, "We are sending PPEs to the government hospitals now ... they would get PPEs shortly."

He said only ambulance drivers and assistants at government hospitals would get PPEs for now due a shortage of supply. "We will provide PPEs to private ambulance drivers and assistants when we will have enough stock," he told The Daily Star last night.

Meanwhile, demand for ambulance services declined sharply as a huge number of people left Dhaka after the government announced a nationwide shutdown from March 26 to April 4.

Alamgir said they usually received 10 to 12 calls every day, but now it has come down to five or six. "Demands for ambulance came down to 50 percent due to the shutdown," he said.

Shutdown likely

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During the video conference, the PM may come up with a directive on the extension of the shutdown.

According to sources, the government will reopen public and private offices in phases so that all those people who left the capital for village homes before the shutdown don't have to rush to the capital at the same time. Educational institutions will reopen in the last phase.

Contacted, Shaikh Yusuf Harun, secretary at the public administration ministry, said they were yet to get any directive in this regard.

"If we get any such directives, we will prepare a proposal and send it to the Prime Minister's Office for approval," he told this newspaper yesterday.

So far five people have died from Covid-19 in the country. The number of infected people now stands at 49 with one tested positive for the virus yesterday, according to the Institute of Epidemiology, Disease Control and Research (IEDCR).

On March 23, the government announced closure of all public and private offices from March 26 to April 4 to contain the spread of the virus.

Hospitals, kitchen markets, drug stores, media outlets and emergency services remained outside the purview of the closure.

The following day, the government decided to suspend all public transport services, inching closer to enforcing a lockdown.

Following the announcements, people in droves left the capital for their village homes, ignoring the government advice to stay at home.

The homebound rush increased the risk of spreading the virus across the country, experts said.

It is very difficult to know how many people left the capital after the government announcement. However, data from transport and mobile phone

operations gives a hint about it.

According to mobile phone operators, 1.28 crore subscribers left the capital in three days after the announcement. However, one person may have more than one SIM card while many don't have mobile phones.

Transport operators said they see such rush of people only ahead of the Eid vacation. An estimated 80 lakh holidaymakers leave the capital for their homes by bus, train and launch ahead of the vacation.

WHAT EXPERTS SAY

Prominent physician Prof ABM Abdullah said the government should extend the ongoing shutdown for at least five days.

"The extension will allow those who left the capital to complete their 14-day quarantine period," he told this newspaper last night.

"After that, the government should decide on the next course of action, considering the situation at that time."

Prof Md Nazrul Islam, former vice chancellor at Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujib Medical University, said this is a very crucial week which will end on April 4.

"The government should decide on reopening offices after evaluating the situation at the end of this period," said Nazrul, also a prominent virologist.

Prof Muzaherul Huq, former adviser (Southeast Asia region) of the World Health Organization, said the shutdown should be extended up to two weeks, and it must be enforced "effectively".

"Community transmission is going on. People with coronavirus symptoms should be segregated and tested. Those who will test positive for the virus must be kept in isolation.

"I think the shutdown should be extended for at least two weeks," he added.



Children at an orphanage at the capital's Azimpur watch TV. These children hardly have any protection amid the deadly coronavirus outbreak. The photo was taken yesterday.

PHOTO: SK ENAMUL HAQ

Hunger, not virus, is their biggest worry

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five brinjals and four shrivelled tomatoes. In another bag, he carried about a kilo of rice. The rice was mixed with dirt, clearly visible through the plastic bag.

"I begged from a shop owner and he gave me this," said Rajib, who was accompanied by his 12-year-old friend Rassel.

While the rest of the nation, gripped with the fear of the virus, is largely confined to homes, these floating people are wondering where their next meal will come from.

"Can I really do anything if the virus attacks? Hunger is bigger problem than the virus," said Rajib.

BEGGARS SUFFER SIMILARLY

During the conversation with Rajib, The Daily Star correspondents were surrounded by some elderly women who said they previously lived on alms.

"But now there is no scope to go to people's houses and beg for alms," said Mazeda Bibi. She has a son in Jamalpur but he does not provide for her.

"The situation is so grave that people even refuse to give drinking water now."

In her small polythene hut on the footpath adjacent to Motijheel Model School, all she had in the way of food was some chopped potato in a pot.

Vision-impaired Morium said her husband is also disabled. "We get food

but not regularly."

WHAT AUTHORITIES THINKING?

AS Mahmood, director of Bangladesh Shishu Adhikar Forum (BSAF), "We are asking people to stay inside their homes as a protective measure against the virus but we are not thinking about those who have no homes at all.

"Street children are among the most vulnerable groups and if one or two are already infected, then a big disaster awaits us.

"It may not yet be too late and the government should take immediate steps to bring these children under observation as we do not know about their health condition."

Meanwhile, the Department of Social Services is planning to provide temporary accommodation facilities for street children at primary schools for their safety.

Sayda Akhtar, deputy director of the vagrancy programme of the social services department, told The Daily Star yesterday that they have accommodation facilities for street children referred by mobile courts and other organisations.

However, the present situation is not ideal and there are a large number of children living outside the shelter home, she said.

"We held an emergency meeting on Saturday to ensure street children's safety, she added.

Little souls left exposed

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"Due to the shortage of masks and hand sanitisers in the market, we could not adequately provide these to our students," he said.

"So, we did not want to take risks. Upon suggestion from the local authorities, we asked the guardians to take them home. However, we made sure that the guardians are taking their wards willingly and asked them to treat them well."

At Salimullah Muslim Orphanage, one of Dhaka's oldest orphanages, 70 out of 250 children are still living there. Officials said the institution is short of manpower in dealing with coronavirus prevention and preparedness.

"With our manpower, it is not possible for us to ensure whether the children are washing their hands and maintaining hygiene properly. We also don't have a registered doctor to check our children's health," said Md Jahir Uddin, member of the executive committee of the orphanage.

The orphanage is now seeking donations of hygiene products and medical support for the children from individuals and organisations.

In any case, orphanages are apprehensive of future support in such bleak times.

"Most orphanages in Bangladesh are run by donations from home and abroad. Very few receive government grants," said Professor Abdus Samad, superintendent of Muslim Mission Orphanage in Faridpur.

"Due to the coronavirus outbreak, many donations have stopped. In this deadlocked situation, we are also unable to look for new donors. If the situation does not improve, many orphanages in our country will not be able to feed their children," said Prof Samad.

Many private orphanages rely on collections by its staff in public spaces and before and after prayers at mosques.

Import 1,000 ventilators immediately

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According to the Directorate General of Health Services (DGHS), there are 508 ICU beds in government hospitals and 737 private ones.

Shamim said health service providers in the private sector want to join the government efforts to fight the spread of coronavirus.

"It is time the public and private sectors came together and formed an alliance against Covid-19."

It will be needed to tackle an outbreak, Shamim said, adding that the government could offer a health insurance package for doctors, nurses and other medical employees.

Referring to the reports of shortage of safety gear for medical personnel,

Shamim suggested the safety gear be collected and distributed by a single authority.

"Private hospitals may purchase the equipment from the government. This will ensure smooth supply of the safety gear."

Shamim suggested that coronavirus testing facilities be decentralised and scaled up among private hospitals.

"If private hospitals can perform coronavirus tests, people's hassles will reduce. The hospitals will collect the kits from the government."

Shamim said there were around 400 hospitals across the country with over 50 beds.

"The government should give them a monetary incentive for smooth

"As the shelter homes have no capacity to provide accommodation to a large number of street children, we planned to write to the education ministry for primary schools to be temporarily allocate as accommodation for street children during this time."

The social services department also plans to build some temporary tents in vacant spaces at the shelter homes for the children's accommodation, she added.

"We have already sent the meeting outcome to the [education] ministry and it is working on it," she said, adding the Unicef has also agreed to partially help with the initiatives.

The department is providing hotchpotch (khichuri) or biriyani to street children once a day and also in slums around the city with the help of NGOs, she said.

State Minister of the Ministry of Social Welfare Md Ashraf Ali Khan Khasru told The Daily Star yesterday that the social services department has shelter homes for street children but a large number of the children do not want to stay in the homes and live on the streets.

The ministry has already taken initiatives and allocated Tk 60.56 crore to ensure their food and safety, said Khasru.

"We are also providing food in different areas of the country daily."

And it is not surprising that at a time of such uncertainty, private donations are drying up as people worry about their personal finances.

While government-run children's homes enjoy regular funding, they too are affected by a lack of staff at this time.

At Sarkari Shishu Paribar, Tejgaon, a home for female orphans, an "aunt" looks after every 10 girls. There is also a medical assistant and a part-time doctor.

However, due to closure of government offices, caregivers and other staff are not coming to work regularly.

"Under these circumstances, we cannot force our employees to come to work regularly as public transport is off and parts of the city are shut down," said Jhama Zahin, deputy superintendent of the children's home.

"On the other hand, we have the responsibility to look after these children. In this situation, we are facing difficulties in maintaining hygiene in the home but we are trying our best. It's a difficult situation and we have informed the authorities about it," she said.

Md Sazzadul Islam, deputy director of the Department of Social Services, said, "We have developed a duty roster for the employees. All employees of the children's homes will stay on the premises by rotation."

Apprehending that the situation may deteriorate, the department is planning to develop an emergency helpline for destitute children, with support from Unicef.

"Through this programme, if you see a sick or malnourished child on the streets, you can inform us by dialling 1098, a toll-free number. Our team of social workers will reach out to the child. Unicef will support this program; however, it's still in the planning phase," added Sazzadul.

operation over the next three months. Private hospitals will surely return the money in instalments."

Randomly setting up hospitals may not be the solution, he said.

"Currently, there are around 1.5 lakh beds in private hospitals. The government could utilise these facilities."

Labaid has 300 beds, he said, adding, "If government asks, we can dedicate 150 for coronavirus patients. We have the establishment, trained personnel and other equipment. This would be a more feasible approach."

Referring to reports of people not getting treatment at different hospitals, Shamim said the problem would be solved if hospitals are dedicated for coronavirus patients only.

Facebook offers \$100m to help virus-hit news media

AFP, Washington

Facebook said yesterday it was donating \$100 million to support news organizations globally hurting from the coronavirus pandemic, citing the need for reliable information about the crisis.

"The news industry is working under extraordinary conditions to keep people informed during the Covid-19 pandemic," said Facebook's news partnerships director, Campbell Brown.

"At a time when journalism is needed more than ever, ad revenues are declining due to the economic impact of the virus. Local journalists are being hit especially hard, even as people turn to them for critical information to keep their friends, families and communities safe."

Six die

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recovered," Flora said in the daily videoconference briefing from the Directorate General of Health Services (DGHS) headquarters.

Among the four recovered yesterday, one is a doctor and one a nurse. The two others were treated at home.

Currently, 25 Covid-19 patients are under treatment while the total number of deaths with confirmed coronavirus so far is five.

Prof Flora informed that 24,113 people were in quarantine across the country while 346 others in isolation.

In Chattogram, Bangladesh Institute of Tropical and Infectious Diseases (BITID) tested 28 samples until Sunday and found no positive case, said Mamunur Rashid, deputy director of BITID.

SIX DEAD WITH COVID-19 SYMPTOMS

In Kushtia, a 51-year-old man suffering from cold, cough, fever and breathing problems for the past three days died at Kushtia General Hospital yesterday morning.

Nasal swab of the deceased was collected for testing in IEDCR, HM Anwarul Islam, civil surgeon of Kushtia, said.

Local administration has locked down the residence of the man.

In Dinajpur, at least 150 people of 30 families have been home-quarantined after a 30-year-old man from Tofshi village under Birampur upazila died with Covid-19-like symptoms early yesterday.

Thirty families of that village have been quarantined, said Tauhidur Rahman, upazila nirbahi officer (UNO) of Birampurupazila.

In Sunamganj, a 55-year-old woman died at home early in the morning yesterday after suffering from fever, cough and respiratory problem.

Her husband, exhibiting similar symptoms, was sent to the Corona Isolation Centre at Sylhet Saheed Shamsuddin Ahmed Hospital while other family members have been kept in home-quarantine.

In Jashore, a 12-year-old girl died at the isolation ward of Jashore General Hospital early yesterday.

The girl suffering from cold, cough and fever, said Arif Ahmed, residential medical officer (RMO) at the hospital.

Earlier, the IEDCR dismissed the necessity of collecting samples from the child, said Sheikh Abu Shaheen, civil surgeon (CS) of Jashore.

In Chandpur, two persons with flu-like symptoms died in separate hospitals in Dhaka since Saturday.

A 50-year-old man with fever and breathing problems from Hajiganj was admitted to Shaheed Suhrawardy Medical College Hospital in Dhaka around five days ago, and died yesterday.

However, doctors of the hospital told his family members that he died after suffering a cardiac arrest, said his son.

Besides, a banker of Puranbazar area in Chandpur died on Saturday in Kurmitola General Hospital in Dhaka after 16 days of treatment.

He also exhibited Covid-19 symptoms -- fever and respiratory problems.

The hospital authorities informed his family members that he died from a cardiac arrest, his family said.

[Our Correspondents from Kushita, Dinajpur, Benapole, Thakurgoan, Chandpur and Bagerhat contributed to the report]

US death toll

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received what he called the "most accurate" or "most comprehensive" study today about the potential death toll from Covid-19.

He said there could be up more than 2 million cases if "we did nothing" but he did not give more details on the exact number. Fauci told CNN earlier Sunday that the US could see millions of cases of coronavirus in the US.

"When I heard the number today. First time I heard that number, because I have been asking the same question to some people. I felt even better about what we did last week with the \$2.2 trillion dollars," Trump said in reference to the historic stimulus package passed by Congress last week.

"Because you are talking about a potential of up to 2.2 million and some people said it could even be higher than that. You are talking about 2.2 million deaths. 2.2 million people from this," Trump said.