

STOCKS		COMMODITIES		ASIAN MARKETS				CURRENCIES			
DSEX	CSCX	Gold	Oil	MUMBAI	TOKYO	SINGAPORE	SHANGHAI	USD	EUR	GBP	CNY
Closed	Closed	\$1,623.90 (per ounce)	\$22.96 (per barrel)	▲ 4.61%	▼ 1.57%	▼ 4.45%	▼ 0.90%	BUY TK 83.95	89.67	98.12	11.69
				28,440.32	19,084.97	2,416.24	2,747.21	SELL TK 84.95	93.47	101.92	12.29

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DHAKA TUESDAY MARCH 31, 2020, CHAITRA 17, 1426 BS • starbusiness@thedailystar.net

TAMING CORONAVIRUS RAMPAGE

Running out of ventilators is a real possibility. And Walton comes to rescue.

SOHEL PARVEZ and MUHAMMAD ZAHIDUL ISLAM

For weeks now, the nation has been obsessed with one set of numbers: how many confirmed cases of coronavirus and how many have died?

But there is a whole other set of numbers the public needs to start paying attention to: how many ventilators do we have in this country?

Ventilators blow oxygen into the lungs of patients suffering from severe pulmonary stress and are essential for saving the lives of the sickest COVID-19 patients.

Bangladesh has just 1,250 ventilators -- 500 in public hospitals and 750 in the private ones -- according to Md Aminul Hasan, director for hospitals and clinic at the Directorate General of Health Services.

If the pandemic spreads, the country with more than 16 crore population will need at least 25,000 ventilators, said AM Shamim, managing director of Labaid Group, which owns a chain of private hospitals.

But ventilators are in short supply at the moment, given the rate at which the lethal, pneumonia-like virus is spreading across the globe. And in recent weeks, countries around the world have been scrambling to build and buy as many of them as possible.

Although regular manufacturers like Medtronic, Philips, Draegerwerk and Getinge said they have boosted their production, big names of other industries such as General Motors, Airbus, McLaren and Dyson have offered their engineering expertise or factory lines.

At the time of writing, the total number of confirmed cases of coronavirus around the globe stand at 740,157 and the total number of deaths 35,097.

One of the options available to Bangladesh is to explore scope of getting the device brought in from China, where the number of COVID-19 cases have dropped.

And another way is to explore the scope of making ventilators locally and develop manpower by training to run the devices properly.

The government is on this course and has enlisted the service of local tech giant Walton to manufacture it with support from Medtronic.

"We have already had a huge chat with the Medtronic team, which is run by an iconic Bangladeshi expatriate Omar Ishrak, and they have assured us to help in manufacturing ventilators in our country," said Zunaïd Ahmed Palak, state minister for the ICT division, yesterday in an online press conference.

Palak with this team attended a video

conference on Saturday with the research and development team of Medtronic and they have assured to share their source code.

"We are very hopeful to get their source code and patent by Wednesday and might go for manufacturing within the shortest possible time."

The junior state minister said he has already informed the prime minister of the development and spoke with the health minister over phone.

"It will be a huge mileage for Bangladesh," Palak added.

Access to Information (a2i) programme under ICT division is coordinating the

production anytime soon is undecided.

But the government though is planning to buy another 300 ventilators without further ado, according to Hasan.

"We are getting a lot of call. But none have the device anymore now," said Mohamad Saifur Rahman, manager monitoring and analytics therapeutic care of Philips Bangladesh, adding that all five portable ventilators its distributors had were sold recently.

Medical equipment sellers said nearly a dozen firms import and market ventilators made mainly by manufacturers based in the US and Europe.

critical and they may need ventilator support.

"Let us not think of the worst," he added.

The biggest preparation should be to prevent the spread of the disease by getting people to stay in, said Mohammad Mushtuq Husain, adviser of the Institute Epidemiology, Disease Control and Research (IEDCR).

The government should provide support to the needy so that they do not need to get out of their homes, he added.

Shamim says ventilators can still be managed if the government provides support to the private sector.

The government has given Tk 100 crore



issue and with its help Walton has already applied before the directorate general of health services yesterday. Golam Murshed, executive director of Walton, told The Daily Star.

Other than ventilators, Walton said it is planning to manufacture a few other medical devices like UV disinfectant, goggles, shield, respiratory mask, oxygen concentrator and PAPER.

Walton has also applied to import the components for the life-saving machines.

About 50 local engineers have already started work on this project, Murshed said, adding that the company can begin manufacturing the goggles and protective shield from the first week of April and the other equipment after that.

Another group of local engineers and physicians have developed a ventilator named Spondon recently too, said a press statement.

Whether they would go into

And because of slow demand and relatively high cost, ranging from \$10,000 to \$25,000, they usually do not maintain a large inventory.

"We usually do not have ready stock. And it is supplied mainly based on order," said Shahidul Islam, director technical of Widespread Solutions, a medical equipment supplier and marketer in Bangladesh.

It may take seven to 15 days to import the devices into the country if the manufacturer has available stock.

However, getting supply from the US is unlikely right now as demand is through the roof there, he said.

But Md Maniruzzaman Bhuiyan, president of the Bangladesh Private Clinic Diagnostic Owners Association (BPCDOA), is not too worried about the shortage of the lifesaving equipment.

"Only a small portion of COVID-19 patients will need ventilator support."

Some 80 per cent of the patients recover normally. Of the remaining 20 per cent, the condition of five per cent among them may be

for the health sector and if the state bears half the prices of each ventilator the private sector will import a lot.

"We will import 1,000 ventilators in 15 days if the government provides subsidy," he added.

As of now, the Directorate of Drug Administration (DGDA) requested the National Board of Revenue to remove all duty and taxes on import of ventilators, said Director of DGDA Md Mostafizur Rahman.

Arif Mahmud, head of medical of Apollo Hospital that is set to be renamed as Evercare Hospital, said the hospital is in the process of adding 20 more ventilators to its existing 56.

Md EE Yousuf Siddique, chief administrative officer of Square Hospital, however said having the equipment only will not be helpful.

"It requires trained manpower including trained intensivist respiratory therapists and trained nurses to run the machines," he said, adding that Square can help train human resource to run the machines.

Corporate giants join in fight

JAGARAN CHAKMA and AHSAAN HABIB

Despite being hit by the fallout of the coronavirus, Bangladesh's corporate giants are not sitting idle as they have joined the government's efforts by enhancing supplies to the ill-equipped health sector and extending helping hand to the low-income people who are facing existential crisis because of the lockdown.

Major businesses are providing personal protective equipment (PPE), medicines and test kits to hospitals as well as essentials to the needy.

Akij Group is building a 301-bed specialised hospital for coronavirus patients at the heart of the capital, while Bashundhara Group has handed over its sprawling International Convention City Bashundhara to the government for converting into a hospital.

Their efforts come as the government announced a ten-day countrywide lockdown until April 4 to slow the spread of the deadly virus.

Pran-RFL Group is seeking approval from the Drug Administration for its 20-bed isolation centre in its Amzad Khan Memorial Hospital in Natore.

"The centre is almost ready as we have a hospital there. People will be treated there once we get the nod," said Kamruzzaman Kamal, Pran's director for marketing.

The company has also provided 4,500 surgical masks and 500 bottles of hand sanitisers to public hospitals in Dhaka and given away 40,000 packs of noodles and 1,000 packs of biscuits for the poor through two volunteer organisations.

Square Pharmaceuticals has donated 10,000 PPEs to the Directorate General of Drug Administration, while Sheltech Group will provide 5,000 PPEs to two hospitals.

"It is our responsibility to stand by the government at this critical moment. We should not think about business now. Rather saving lives should be our priority," said Tanvir Ahmed, Sheltech's MD.

The group is providing food to 1,000 low-income people in Dhaka and the initiative will continue until the recovery from the pandemic. Besides, it has a plan to provide ration containing lentil, rice, milk, edible oil and soap to 5,000 families.

PHP Family will provide Tk 2 crore to the Prime Minister's Relief and Welfare Fund, said Dilshad Ahmed, its head of media and public relations.

Sufi Mohammad Mizanur Rahman, chairman of PHP Family, has also donated honorarium of the Ekushey Padak to the treatment fund of the Chattogram Medical College and Hospital.

Youngone Group in Chattogram would donate 25,000 PPEs to hospitals and has formed a coordination committee to assess the need of the hospitals.

Premier Cement distributed masks and sanitisers among 6,000 people, said its MD Mohammed Amirul Haque.

Beximco has donated Tk 15 crore to provide PPEs, medicines and test kits for healthcare workers.

The coronavirus crisis has to be fought on all fronts involving both private and public sectors, said Beximco Group Vice-Chairman Salman F Rahman in a statement.

ACI Pharmaceuticals donated 5,000 PPEs and will provide masks in large volumes for doctors and nurses, said M Mohibuz Zaman, its chief operating officer.

Confidence Group donated 4,000 PPEs to a number of organisations, such as the Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujib Medical University, the Kuwait Bangladesh Friendship Government Hospital, the police force, the Chittagong Medical College Hospital, the Dhaka Medical College Hospital and the Fire Service and Civil Defence.

The 9pc lending rate from next month seems unlikely

AKM ZAMIR UDDIN

Banks' capacity to provide loans at 9 per cent interest has shrunk even before the government-fixed ceiling is implemented as both individuals and corporate institutions are withdrawing deposits to protect themselves from the ongoing economic fallout of the coronavirus pandemic.

The Bangladesh Bank instructed banks on February 24 to set a maximum 9 per cent interest rate on all loan products save for credit cards from April 1.

Although the central bank has already slashed both the policy rate and the cash reserve ratio (CRR), this is not enough to bring down the interest rate for loans.

The banking sector has got an additional fund of Tk 6,400 crore through slashing of the CRR by 25 basis points to 5.75 per cent.

But corporate clients have recently been forced to take out a large amount of money to pay wages and salaries to employees at a time when their production has come to a halt.

Similarly, individuals are cashing out fixed and deposit pension schemes prematurely fearing the impending health and financial risks.

"Banks in Bangladesh will face liquidity pressure like lenders in other countries. How can banks lend smoothly then if they do not have adequate loanable funds?" said

Syed Mahbubur Rahman, chairman of the Association of Bankers, Bangladesh.

Lenders have been implementing 6 per cent interest rate on fixed deposit schemes since February as part of their preparation to provide loans at 9 per cent interest from next month.

"But the economy is in meltdown. We will have to give our all-out effort to mobilise deposits when the lockdown is lifted."

Banks will face hurdles in attracting depositors at 6 per cent interest, which will create a stringent situation for implementation of the single-digit lending rate, Rahman added.

The lending rate could be brought down to single-digit if the central bank implements quantitative easing as per its announcement, said Ahsan H Mansur, executive director of the Policy Research Institute.

On March 22, the BB said it would buy Treasury bills and bonds from banks and non-bank financial institutions to tackle the imminent economic slowdown.

Quantitative easing (QE) is a form of unconventional monetary policy in which a central bank purchases longer-term government securities or other types of securities from the open market in order to increase money supply and encourage lending and investment.

The central bank rarely purchases T-bills and bonds from banks.

The BB will have to set a roadmap on the amount of cash it will inject into the money market within a certain period.

Otherwise, the banking sector will not get the confidence to lower the interest rate on lending, Mansur said.

"Lending rate should be brought down in the interest of the private sector, which has been struggling to get their desired funds for long."

Small and medium enterprises will have to be given more support through loans under refinancing schemes as they are being hit hard by the ongoing crisis, said Mansur, also a former official of the International Monetary Fund.

Rahman, also the managing director of Mutual Trust Bank, echoed the same as Mansur.

He feared that defaulted loans would go up further after June when the central

bank's moratorium period for borrowers ends.

Inflation will not be fuelled if the central bank injects money into the market, said Arif Khan, managing director of IDLC Finance.

Both global and local demand have dried up and the declining petroleum price is a harbinger of the trend, he said.

"Borrowers are now unable to repay loans, adding an extra pressure on lenders. We are not permitted to violate the central bank's instruction to give out loans at single-digit."

Against the backdrop, many lenders may adopt a go-slow policy on loan disbursement, putting an adverse impact on the private sector, Khan said.

"Banks' profitability will see a sharp decline if they give out loans at single digit without managing deposits at 6 per cent," said Emranul Huq, managing director of Dhaka Bank.

The loan-deposit ratio should be relaxed along with quantitative easing measure in order to widen banks' capacity to disburse loans, he added.

The BB has yet to backtrack from its stance, said its spokesperson Md Serajul Islam.

"We are closely monitoring both global and domestic financial state of affairs. And the central bank will take decisions when the lockdown is lifted."

WEIGHTED AVERAGE LENDING RATES

SOURCE: BB

