

RMG owners

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Personal Protective Equipment (PPE), the production of which is crucial.

This led thousands of workers to head to Dhaka and its adjoining areas like in Savar, Ashulia, Maona, Gazipur, Tongi, Narayanganj and Mirpur.

Most of the factories were closed on March 26 when the 10-day closure to slow down the coronavirus outbreak began.

A few factories continued production as the BGMEA and DIFE both had said that the factories could run if they had work orders or were making masks or other protective gear.

Shibnath Roy, inspector general of the DIFE, said "The DIFE did not ask for the closure of all factories even in the second circular published on April 1."

They had always said factories could run if they took proper safety measures, he said.

"The situation could have been avoided had the factory owners notified the workers about the extension of the government's general holiday up to April 11."

He said the factory owners had the time to do so but they could not reach a consensus in this regard. Some influential owners were in favour of implementing health and safety measures and continuing production, he told The Daily Star over phone.

The BGMEA and Bangladesh Knitwear Manufacturers and Exporters Association (BKMEA) leaders, and officials of DIFE had a meeting in Teigaon on Saturday afternoon but failed to agree on closing the factories.

Some RMG factory owners wanted to reopen their units from yesterday.

But by Saturday evening, things turned south for the owners, BGMEA and DIFE as widespread criticism poured in. It was only then the BGMEA and BKMEA requested their members to shut down their units.

Rubana Huq, president of the BGMEA, said she on March 20 wrote to the labour ministry seeking measures about shutdown of factories.

A meeting was held on March 21 and many owners said their factories could stay open implementing health and safety measures, she said.

"Even then, the BGMEA went ahead and recommended closure on March 26. We made no announcement from the BGMEA to reopen factories... After seeing the procession of people, we again recommended closure," Rubana said.

"We are urging all our members to pay the workers their March salaries as soon as possible."

She said some 190 factories under the BGMEA membership were open yesterday.

Talking to The Daily Star, Mohammad Hatem, vice-president of BKMEA, also hinted at a division between factory owners.

He said many factory owners had told them that they had emergency shipments pending and could not close their units. Most factories were, however, closed.

Regarding Saturday's coming back of the workers, Hatem said they came mainly for salaries.

"It was really difficult for us to reach a consensus," Hatem told The Daily Star over phone. He said 60 percent of the knitwear factories were running yesterday.

He claimed that most of the workers who came to Dhaka came for their salaries.

Both Hatem and Rubana said that Commerce Minister Tipu Munshi at a meeting last week said the factories could run if safety of the workers was ensured.

Around 100 garment factories in Savar and Ashulia restarted yesterday but most were closed.

Most of the workers returned to Dhaka fearing they would lose their jobs.

Murshid Ali, a sewing machine operator at a garments factory in Savar, yesterday said, "After shutdown of my factory on March 25, I went home in Kumarkhali of Kushtia.

"I had to come back and suffer on the road as a factory official called me and told me to join work on April 5 or get fired," he said.

"I returned to save my job, otherwise I would not have returned," he said, adding, "I had to walk for two and half hours and change five vehicles to reach Savar. I spent Tk 1,500 in fares."

When he reached his factory yesterday, he learnt it was closed until April 11.

"I am worried about when my salary would be paid as the factory authority did not say anything about that," he added.

Kohinur Begum, who works for a factory in Ashulia, said, "A factory official told us that they would pay our salaries by April 7."

Her factory restarted.

Azizul Haque, assistant general manager (admin) of Winter Dress Ltd in Savar, said his factory restarted yesterday.

"We restarted as we have some urgent work orders pending."

RAK Liton, general manager (HR) of AR Jeans Producer Ltd in Ashulia, said, "We have declared our factory closed till April 10 due to coronavirus outbreak. We made the decision to protect our workers."

He said they were sending the workers' salaries via mobile banking channels.

Abdus Sobhan, general manager of Dhaka Export Processing Zone, said there were 100 factories in DEPZ and 50 restarted.

Citing poor work performance, two garment factories in Savar fired around 173 workers yesterday. The factories said the workers' dues would be paid by April 30.

Nazma Akter, president of Sammilito Garment Sramik Federation, said, "Thousands of workers went to the factories on foot, risking their health and the spread of coronavirus. They need salaries and livelihood but many factories laid off workers and fired them without pay."

She said what was being done to the workers was appalling. "How would the workers and their families survive with no jobs and healthcare?" she said.

"Global unions, ITUC, Industrial, UNI, AFLCIO, other unions, should make a joint call on the government, the BGMEA, and brands to ensure workers' pay and put an end to their sufferings," Akter said.

Transparency International Bangladesh in a statement yesterday protested the factory owners' decisions that led to the sufferings of garment workers.

In Chattogram, at least 133 garment and other export-orientate factories were operational yesterday.

Two lakh workers were working in those factories. Most of them came from different parts of country on Saturday suffering a lot on the road.

Factory owners claimed that they opened their factories to keep the work order of buyers.

MA Salam, first vice-president of the BGMEA, told The Daily Star, most buyers cancelled or postponed of their orders due to the Covid-19 pandemic. However, some buyers from the Fareast were waiting for their goods.

He said 38 out of 421 BGMEA-registered factories in Chattogram zone were running. The factories are manned by around 1 lakh workers.

He said there were some factories running outside the EPZs and some were not registered with the BGMEA.

At least 30 factories registered under the BKMEA, 65 factories in three EPZs of Chattogram, producing non-garments goods, opened yesterday.

Trump warns

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said Iraqi volunteer Mustafa Issa, referring to the Islamic State jihadist group that swept through a third of the country in 2014.

TIDE TURNING IN ITALY?

At the Vatican, Pope Francis yesterday appealed for courage in the face of the pandemic.

There was, however, some encouraging news from Europe over the weekend. Worst-hit Italy cheered after seeing its number of intensive care virus cases drop for the first time -- from 4,068 on Friday to 3,994 on Saturday.

Even some of the most cautious Italian health officials seized on the figures as evidence that the tide may be turning in the deadliest disaster the country has faced since World War II.

"This is a very important data point," said civil protection service chief Angelo Borrelli, adding that it "allows our hospitals to breathe."

The daily rise in new infections across Italy has also slowed. It reported 681 new deaths on Saturday, down from a peak of almost 1,000 just over a week ago, reports AFP.

WE NEED YOU

New York state, the US epicenter, saw a record 630 deaths in a single day and Governor Andrew Cuomo warned the worst was yet to come. The state has recorded a total of 3,565 deaths.

Cuomo also cautioned that already strained hospitals were not prepared. New York City appealed for licensed medical personnel to volunteer their services.

"Anyone who's not already in this fight, we need you," Mayor Bill de Blasio said.

Trump said 1,000 military personnel, mostly doctors and nurses, would be deployed to help in the city, which he described as "the hottest of all the hot spots."

U-TURN ON MASKS

Several Western countries including the US, Germany and France have in recent days encouraged the use of masks in public despite earlier saying that only carers needed to cover their faces.

The U-turn has angered and confused some citizens, and spurred a flurry of online tutorials for DIY masks.

The advice came after some studies suggested the new coronavirus can be spread through speaking and breathing, not just coughing and sneezing.

US authorities said wearing a simple homemade mask or scarf could help stem rocketing infection rates.

The World Health Organization is reviewing its guidance but has said it worries that masks could give "a false sense of security," leading people to be more casual about hand washing and social distancing.



Officials wearing personal protective equipment announce a lockdown at Purba Lamapara in Narayanganj. The measure came after a resident of the neighbourhood tested positive for coronavirus yesterday. PHOTO: SANAD SAHA

It's there, but confined to 5 clusters

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are under IEDCR surveillance after 9 and 11 residents respectively of the areas were detected, she said.

They were infected from "cluster transmission", she said, adding that samples of many residents of the areas are being collected for tests.

Another cluster is located in Gaibandha.

Besides, The Daily Star gathered that six members of a family were infected with Covid-19 in Sabujbagh area in the capital.

"An elderly couple, their two daughters and two granddaughters -- one two-and-half-year old and another only six months -- have tested positive," said Mahbub Alam, officer-in-charge of Sabujbagh Police Station.

"We are warning once again: please avoid mass gatherings. Otherwise,

the transmission which is limited in clusters would spread everywhere," Prof Flora said.

Prof Abul Kalam Azad, DG of the Directorate General of Health Services, said 46 people were in isolation and treated at hospitals. Three patients recovered in the 24 hours before 12:00pm yesterday, he said. So far, 33 people recovered from Covid-19.

Prof Mozaherul Huq, former regional advisor of World Health Organization's (WHO) South East Asia region told The Daily Star yesterday.

Prof Mozaherul Huq, former regional advisor of World Health Organization's South East Asia region told The Daily Star: "We should not think of small clusters. Start from a big radius, and then approach a small one. We have to think of putting an entire

district in lockdown immediately after a case is detected, then the upazila, the unions and the wards.

"No dillydallying will work. We need rigorous action to prevent and control transmission, and clinical management of the infected people should be there. All people need to be engaged in the activity."

Speaking at the briefing, Prof Abul Kalam Azad said, "We don't know how long this situation will persist. We have to take decisions considering the economic aspects and other issues."

"If we cannot maintain the [social distancing], we will not be able to tackle the situation with our preparations."

Prof Kalam also expressed concern about the rush of garment workers, which may "transmit infection of the virus."

3 die after showing virus-like symptoms

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with Covid-19-like symptoms, he said.

In Netrakona, a 45-year-old woman died of fever, cold and respiratory disease at Kalihor Joardarpara village in Purbadhala upazila early yesterday.

Later, local health officials collected samples from the body, said Tajul Islam Khan, civil surgeon of the district.

Few hours after her death, some 50 houses in the locality were locked down, said Umme Kulsom, upazila nirbahi officer (UNO) of Purbadhala.

In Cumilla, a 60-year-old man died with flu-like symptoms in Chokrotola village of Daudkandi upazila yesterday.

He had been suffering from cold, fever, cough and respiratory disease for the last couple of days and died around 7:00am yesterday, said Shahinur Alam, medical officer of Daudkandi Upazila Health Complex.

Meanwhile, the local administration has locked down seven houses of the area suspecting that they might have contracted the virus, said Kamrul Islam Khan, UNO of Daudkandi.

In Manikganj, local administration locked down Singair municipality area of the district from early yesterday after a man there tested Covid-19 positive.

In Mymensingh, a rickshaw puller and his family members of Kachimpur village under Ishwarganj upazila were home-quarantined yesterday as the man was suffering from Coronavirus-like symptoms.

Our Faridpur, Mymensingh, Cumilla and Manikganj correspondents contributed to this report.

No entry, exit of people from capital

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Besides, all government and private offices, except for those providing emergency services, remained closed since March 26 and it would remain in force until April 14.

The release said police had been working to ensure the implementation of social distancing and try to keep people at home as per the government instructions.

"Other than the emergency services as required for the smooth continuation of daily life of people, all individual and group movements are prohibited. We are working to ensure it," it read.

Meanwhile, the government yesterday extended the ongoing shutdown until April 14 to contain the spread of novel coronavirus, according to a public administration ministry circular.

Earlier, the government announced closure of all public and private offices from March 26 to April 4 which was later extended until April 11.

However, utility services such as water, electricity, gas, telephone, and internet will be operational during the shutdown.

Transportation of agri products, fertiliser, insecticides, newspapers, food, goods, medical equipment, and daily essentials will be outside the

purview of the suspension.

Besides, kitchen markets, restaurants, drugstores, and hospitals will also remain open, the circular added.

Offices can be opened in case of urgent need, and pharmaceuticals and export-oriented mills and factories will remain open if necessary.

The Supreme Court is going to issue a notification today extending holidays at all the courts until April 14, sources at the SC told The Daily Star.

All educational institutions will also remain closed until April 14, said an education ministry top official. On March 16, the government shut down all educational institutions from March 17 to 31 and later extended it until April 9.

In another development, the government yesterday stretched the ongoing suspension of air communications with all European and 16 other countries until April 14.

The 16 countries are: Bahrain, Bhutan, Hong Kong, India, Kuwait, Malaysia, Maldives, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Sri Lanka, Singapore, Thailand, Turkey, the UAE, and the UK.

Flights on all domestic routes will also be suspended until further notice, said Mohibul Haque, senior secretary of civil aviation and tourism ministry.

However, air communications

with China as well as the special and scheduled cargo flight operations will be continuing.

Mokabbir Hossain, Biman managing director and CEO, yesterday said the national flag carrier would continue the suspension of its flight operations on all the 17 international routes as well as on domestic routes until April 14 in line with the government decision.

Meanwhile, Bangladesh Road Transport Authority (BRTA) yesterday directed its field offices to take necessary steps for stopping carrying of passengers on goods-laden vehicles, defying the government ban.

A letter was sent to its all assistant directors across the country, Lokman Hossain Mollah, director (engineering) of BRTA, told this newspaper.

The government has suspended operations of all public transport until April 11 to slow down the spread of coronavirus in the country and banned carrying of passengers on goods-laden vehicles, reads the letter.

But it was seen that some goods-laden vehicles were carrying passengers, which is a punishable offence, it added.

"In this situation, you [assistant directors] are requested to take steps in consultation with the district administrations and police to stop the carrying of passengers on goods-laden vehicles," it added.

Tk 72,750cr bailout plan

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"I hope our economy will rebound and we could reach near the desired economic growth, if the stimulus packages, the previous and the fresh ones, could be quickly implemented," she said.

The premier said the government simultaneously took four programmes under the work plan to be implemented in phases categorised as "immediate, short and long".

"The four programmes are: increasing public expenditure, formulating a stimulus package, widening social safety net coverage and increasing monetary supply," she said.

In the four new packages, Sheikh Hasina said her government would provide working capital of Tk 30,000 crore for the Covid-19 affected industries and service sector institutions.

The commercial banks will provide the loans from their own resources to the industries or business entities concerned on the basis of bank-client relationship.

The interest rate of this loan facility will be nine percent, of which the loan takers will provide 4.5 percent while the government will provide the rest of the interest to the respective banks as subsidy.

In the second package, which will be for the small and medium industries, the government will provide Tk 20,000 crore as working capital.

The commercial banks will provide the loans from their own resources to the industries or business entities concerned on the basis of bank-client relationship.

Here, the interest rate will be the same as nine percent, but the four percent interest will be borne by the loan-taking industries while the rest of the money will be paid by the government to the respective banks as subsidy.

In the third package, the Bangladesh Bank will expand its EDF (Export Development Fund). Aiming to increase the facility for importing raw materials under the back-to-back LC system, the central bank will enhance its EDF facility from \$3.5 billion to \$5 billion.

As a result, some Tk 12,750 crore, equivalent to \$1.5 billion, will be added to the respective fund.

The current interest rate of the EDF is LIBOR (London Inter-Bank Offer Rate) + 1.5 percent (which is 2.73 percent in total). It will be decreased to two percent, she said.

For the last package, the PM mentioned that Bangladesh Bank will introduce a new loan facility system titled "Pre-shipment Credit Refinance Scheme".

The amount of this loan facility will be Tk 5,000 crore in total where the interest rate will be seven percent.

While addressing the nation on March 25 on the occasion of the

Independence and National Day 2020, Hasina announced a stimulus package of Tk 5,000 crore for export-oriented industries to fight the adverse impact of coronavirus on the economy. This money will be used for providing the salaries and wages of workers and employees only.

"The total amount of these stimulus packages will be Tk 72,750 crore which will be 2.52 percent of the GDP," she said.

Hasina hoped that the country's economy would bounce back if the stimulus packages are implemented quickly. "And we'll be able to go close to the desired economic growth, Inshallah."

She also put emphasis on giving special attention to local products beside the export-oriented sector to overcome the possible global and domestic economic crisis.

In this connection, the prime minister urged all to increase production and the use of local products.

On Thursday evening, Hasina held a high-level meeting at the Gonobhaban in this regard.

Finance Minister AHM Mustafa Kamal, PM's Principal Secretary Ahmad Kaikaus, Bangladesh Bank Governor Fazle Kabir, Finance Ministry Senior Secretary Abdur Rouf, and PMO Secretary Md Tofazzel Hossain Miah were present at the high-level meeting.

Doomed

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"Whatever money I have, I will spend on food. After that I will walk back to my village," he said. He has been told that he will get his salary when the factory reopens.

Moshiul Azam (Shajal), managing director of Posmi Sweaters Ltd and vice president of Bangladesh Garment Manufacturers and Exporters Association (BGMEA), denied that the workers had been asked to come back. He asked why the workers had gone home in the first place.

"That was irresponsible on their part. We are trying our best to keep our workers safe."

Ronny was asked why he had gone back to his village in the first place. "Five of us live in one room. We sleep side-by-side on the floor. When we first heard of the virus and that we would have to stay at home, I thought going to the village would be a better choice."

The stories are the same all over. Most garments workers had left to avoid the squalid, overcrowded living quarters thinking it would help protect against the virus. They came back because they were told that factories would open and they would be paid.

Rana who works in Diraj Ltd in Jamgora, Ashulia had to set off before dawn yesterday. "I live deep in the hills of Madhupur. Nobody called me and told me that the factory will be closed. I walked from my village to Madhupur, and then took a rickshaw to Elega in Tangail. After that I walked from Elega to Chandora in Gazipur. Then I took a rickshaw again till Jamgora." This is a distance of around 100km.

"I had gone home because three of us live in a room that is 10 haat long. I came back because I needed the money. If I had known the garments would be closed I would have left my seat in the room for the month and just stayed back in the village."

BGMEA Vice President Azam said that discussions about whether the factories should remain open or not happened until the wee hours of yesterday morning. "We communicated the decision when it was taken," he said, adding that reorienting factories to tackle the shutdown has been a trying exercise.

When asked why the decision to extend the factory closures was taken the night before the factories were meant to reopen, he said coordinating everything has taken some time.

Meanwhile, as workers were rushing back to the factories yesterday, Dhaka Metropolitan Police completely locked down the city borders. "Nobody would be allowed in, and those inside will not be allowed out," said a statement circulated by the police.

On Saturday night, incoming garments workers were stopped at Keraniganj by the police, and they took refuge at the police station. The Keraniganj police called on Bidyananda Foundation to help feed the hungry garments workers who had been travelling all day.

"We got a call from the police late in the night saying that garments workers are stranded at Keraniganj and needed food. We fed around 500-600 people, and even then around 50-100 people were left hungry. There might have been some locals in the crowds too, but garments workers made up most of the hungry people," said Aronno Arafat, a volunteer in the team.

Garments Shramik Samhati Federation slammed the lack of coordination in a press statement circulated yesterday. "How can there be two policies in the same country? Keeping the factories open has led to an inhuman situation," stated the press release.

Not allowed in, going back home Yesterday, the Shambhuganj Bridge in Mymensingh city was teeming with workers making their way back home.

Md Moti Miah, town sub-inspector who was on duty at the bridge area, said they had been announcing since early morning that the factories have been declared closed but many did not listen and went on ahead to Dhaka.

Hailing from Rowmari upazila of Kurigram, Neela Akter and Momota Begum, along with their husbands, were returning to Gazipur yesterday as they had been asked by the authorities to join their garment factories to receive their wages.

"We have to receive the salary in cash tomorrow [today]," said Neela, who was returning to her factory in Sreepur of Gazipur from Kurigram via Sherpur and Mymensingh. The factory was open yesterday but they were not able to reach in time.

"We had to face at least 20 stops by taking rickshaws, vans, human haulers from Rowmari just to reach Mymensingh," said Momota.

Twenty five-year-old Mannan Mia from Mymensingh's Tarakanda upazila reached his garment factory in Bagerbazar in Gazipur around 11:00pm on Saturday night, contacted with his supervisors, and was informed the factory would be open from yesterday.

"But just an hour and a half later, we were informed about the closure of factories until April 11," said Mamun while talking to our Mymensingh correspondent at the Shambhuganj Bridge area.

As the government tried to stop garments workers in their paths, they closed down the ferries. Garments workers were seen hitching aboard trawlers to cross the Padma river, reports our Faridpur correspondent.

"The worker's name has been changed."

Shaheen Mollah contributed to the report.