

Covid-19 threatens nearly 20 million African jobs

AFP, Addis Ababa

Millions of lost jobs, mounting debt woes and plunging remittances are among the economic hardships African countries can expect because of the COVID-19 pandemic, the African Union said in a study published Monday.

12 die in 48 hours

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village in Chunarughat upazila with similar symptoms.

In Dhaka, a 60-year-old man, from Narayanganj's Jamtola Brothers' Road area, died at Kurmitola General Hospital on Sunday.

He was tested positive for Covid-19 while undergoing treatment at the hospital, said Sheikh Mostafa Ali, health officer of Narayanganj City Corporation.

In Cumilla, a 60-year-old man died at Bijoypur high school under Cumilla Sadar Dakkhin upazila yesterday.

The man, hailing from Brahmanbaria, was a day labourer in a Cumilla farmland. When the government enforced the shutdown, he along with 55 other workers were stranded and took shelter at the school.

Two houses in the same district were locked down as a man showed Covid-19 symptoms. His sample has been sent to IEDCR for tests.

In Mymensingh, an 80-year-old man died in Haluaghat upazila on Sunday afternoon.

In Kishoreganj, a 45-year-old man died in Karimganj upazila on Sunday night, said Dr Md Mujibur Rahman, civil surgeon of the district.

In Sirajganj, a 20-year-old garment worker, who returned from Dhaka around a week ago, died at Sorappur village in Tarash upazila yesterday noon.

In Joypurhat, a 28-year-old man died at Binnipara village in Panchbibi upazila yesterday afternoon, said Civil Surgeon Dr Selim Mia.

"Nearly 20 million jobs, both in the formal and informal sectors, are threatened with destruction on the continent if the situation continues," said the study, which noted that countries relying heavily on tourism and oil production stand to be hit especially hard.

In Tangail, a local Awami League leader, 55, died in Gopalpur upazila yesterday.

In Barishal, a 50-year-old man died at the coronavirus isolation unit of Sher-E-Bangla Medical College Hospital yesterday, said Dr Bakir Hossain, director of the hospital.

All the victims' samples were sent to IEDCR and other hospitals for tests, while their respective houses were locked down.

In Dinajpur, three people, including a woman, were admitted at the coronavirus isolation unit at Birampur Upazila Health Complex over the last three days.

In Patuakhali, local administration locked down a mosque with nine members of Tabligh Jamaat on Sunday night at Bhallavpur village under Sadar upazila.

In Noakhali, local health professionals yesterday collected a sample of an 11-year-old boy at a village of Char Ishwar union in Hatia upazila to test for Coronavirus.

In Manikganj, 54 Tabligh Jamaat men and three others from Singair municipal area were taken into institutional quarantine as a member of the Tabligh Jamaat was found coronavirus positive.

(Our Correspondents from Gazipur, Narayanganj, Faridpur, Moulvibazar, Cumilla, Mymensingh, Pabna, Dinajpur, Tangail, Barisal, Patuakhali, Noakhali and Manikganj contributed to the story.)

Draw up strategy to contain it

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They talked about India for an example. The country is currently enforcing a strict lockdown of communities or neighbourhoods of Covid-19 positive clusters.

But there has been no such strategy in Bangladesh yet and it is almost entirely up to the local administration to handle the situation as they see fit, they said.

Talking to The Daily Star, Be-Nazir Ahmed, former director of (disease control) at the Directorate General of Health Services (DGHS), said the government should act immediately and strictly to bring the cluster transmission to zero.

"Lockdown should be enforced but at the same time epidemiological intervention is a must," he said.

He suggested that geographic quarantine, social distancing measures, enhanced active surveillance, testing all suspected cases, isolation of all cases, quarantine of contacts and a well thought out strategy should be adopted.

"If this intervention is successful then it can be replicated in other places or if there is any error that can be addressed. But the point is if we fail to contain it at the cluster level, the situation will be out of control," he warned.

In India, the health ministry adapted to a cluster containment strategy to contain the disease within a defined geographic area by early detection of cases, breaking the chain of transmission and thus preventing the spread of the virus.

Replying to a query, DGHS Director General Abul Kalam said, "We are learning new things every day. We will do whatever needed to contain the spread of Covid-19."

Asked whether any strategy was already adopted aiming at the cluster

level, he said, "Not yet, but [it] will be soon."

Officials at the DGHS and the IEDCR declined to say how many people were traced and tracked as suspected cases following identification of confirmed Covid-19 patients.

Prof Mozaherul Huq, former regional adviser of World Health Organization's (WHO) South East Asia region, said the immediate need now is to lockdown certain areas and then trace and track those who might come in contact with coronavirus patients.

"Following enforcement of the lockdown, all the people in that area should be tested. If anyone tests positive, that person should be sent into quarantine. For the cluster system, institutional quarantine is must," he said.

Many countries have discovered a large cluster and in most of them, the number of Covid-19 cases shot up after identification of the infected and contact tracing began.

Till April 4, South Korea has mapped 83 percent of its cases to some clusters. More than 51 percent of the country's cases originated from the Shincheonji Church of Jesus. And most of the infections were allegedly brought to the church by a 61-year-old woman who ignored her symptoms and attended the church, according to international media.

In Austria, the Ischgl Ski Resort is said to have been linked to 600 cases.

A funeral in George Town, Albany, US may have resulted in more than 600 infections.

The Osaka Live Music Venue in Japan is directly linked to 80 cases.

A dinner party in Singapore is linked to 43 cases, according to media reports.

and the administration have been directed to take measures for stricter implementation of the directives to maintain social distancing."

He said since the coronavirus situation has worsened, it would in no way be possible to keep the situation under control without the wholehearted support of the people.

Sources told The Daily Star that Hasina also asked Home Minister Asaduzzaman Khan to take measures so that prisoners who have served a long time could be released.

An official of the home ministry told The Daily Star yesterday that the ministry had prepared a list of over 3,000 inmates. "We will send the list to the law ministry soon to scrutinise legal issues," the official said wishing anonymity.

Hours after the PM's directive to lockdown Dhaka city, Dhaka Metropolitan Police (DMP) in a circular asked all shops, kitchen markets, superstores, and business centres that sell essentials to open at 6:00am and close at 7:00pm every day until further notice.

It also asked convenient stores to close by 2:00pm.

It said pharmacies and emergency service providers would be outside the purview of the restrictions.



Vehicles ply a street near old Ramna police station in the capital's Moghbazar yesterday. Many city dwellers continue to use their vehicles for essential travel amid the nationwide shutdown. The capital had gone quite after the shutdown was imposed on March 26 to stem the spread of coronavirus.

PHOTO: ANISUR RAHMAN

Worrisome leap in deaths, infections

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In the morning, Health Minister Zahid Maleque said four people died from coronavirus and 29 others tested positive. Asked about the difference in the numbers, Prof Azad said, "The number of deaths in the past 24 hours is three. There was confusion regarding the misspelled name of a deceased. Later, it was confirmed that three people had died, not four."

He added that reports of six more patients were submitted later.

At the briefing, Prof Meerjady Sabrina Flora, director of the Institute of Epidemiology, Disease Control and Research (IEDCR), said among the new cases, 11 are aged between 41 and 50 and six are 21 and 30. Thirty of them are male, she said.

Of the detected patients, the authorities have been able to trace the source of infection of 88. How the others got infected remains unknown, she said.

The capital has the highest number of infections. Of the 123 cases, 64 are in Dhaka. The second highest cases, 23, are in Narayanganj.

Prof Azad said the evidence of cluster transmission was found in five places.

"We've found cases in 15 districts. We consider the places where many patients have been identified as a cluster. We've found such clusters in Dhaka city," he said.

In Dhaka, such clusters are in Mirpur and Bashabo. The other clusters are in Narayanganj, Gaibandha and Madaripur.

The DG said they were putting a place under lockdown when cases were detected there.

HEALTH MINISTER HELPLESS?

Zahid Maleque is the chief of the National Committee on Covid-19.

"I have been made the chairman of the national committee as the health minister. However, the decisions are taken on behalf of the committee without our [health ministry] knowledge," he told a discussion of healthcare professionals.

"Other than the health issues, nothing is discussed with us. Even decisions like the closure of factories, prayers at the mosques and suspension of transportation are not discussed with

us.

"I cannot reply to journalists' questions... I am blamed for not knowing anything despite being the head of the national committee."

He said he had asked the health secretary to ask other officials to discuss the issues with the health ministry. The ministry is facing problems while enforcing lockdown, he said.

"Other countries are enforcing lockdowns, but there is dilly dallying in the enforcement in our country. You will see people thronging in markets every day. Vehicles, rickshaws and vans are on the roads. You will find no shortage of people in markets in the morning and afternoon."

About garment workers trudging back to Dhaka in hordes, he said, "We do not want to see such a thing in the future again. And decisions should be taken after coordinating with us in the future."

"If transmission spreads to all places, we will not be able to accommodate [patients in the hospitals]. So, we have to be sincere and make specific decisions."

25 hurt as RMG workers, police clash in M'singh

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workers were terminated who did not join the work, said the ASP. But their claim could not be verified as the workers failed to give details about the terminated workers.

On information, police rushed to the spot and talked to the workers.

Superintendent of Industrial Police Saheb Ali Pathan met the factory authorities, and it was finalised that the workers' salaries would be paid on March 8. But the workers refused it and continued their agitation, said the ASP.

They then began throwing brick chunks at police and the factory, and police went for action to bring the situation under control around 9:00am, said the police official, adding that 24 teargas shells and 34 rubber bullets were fired during the incident.

Some workers alleged that a group of outsiders, believed to be loyal to the factory authorities, and security men and staffers of the factory attacked them with bamboo sticks.

They also claimed over 20 workers were injured in police action and they took treatment at local clinics.

Police official Nabi said three constables -- Masud Rana, Sanjoy Kumar Borman, and Tanvir Ahmed -- were admitted to Bhaluka Upazila Health Complex.

The outsiders also snatched the mobile phone, camera, and ID card of Johirul Islam Jewel, Bhaluka upazila correspondent of Daily Jugantor. Police rescued and handed over those to the journalist.

Talking to The Daily Star, Zakaria Sohel, general manager (Admin, HR and Compliance) of the factory, said they opened the factory on Sunday. But following the central decision, they announced closure of the factory

from yesterday, he said.

He added that they talked to the workers in the morning and convinced them to take their salaries on April 8.

But they suddenly became agitated, which might be fuelled by some outsiders, alleged the official. But he denied any attack on garment workers by their men.

RMG FACTORIES REMAIN OPEN

More than 130 garment units were open in Savar and Ashulia areas yesterday, according to industrial police.

The factory owners have been operating their units over two reasons, including finishing the work orders for emergency shipments and paying salaries to their workers.

Mahmud Naser Jony, additional superintendent of police of Dhaka Industrial Police-1, told The Daily Star that 130 factories were operating in Savar and Ashulia areas. About 10 of the factories were large, he said.

He told this newspaper over phone that workers of Ha-Meem group attacked factory staffers and vandalised its two units at Ashulia's Norshingapur, demanding closer of factories and salary.

During the incident, some police personnel were injured, he said, adding that the factories were closed later.

Additional police have been deployed in the area, he added.

Talking to The Daily Star, a factory owner at Ashulia, said he kept open his unit mainly for two reasons, including finishing the work orders and completing the process of payment of the workers for the month of March.

He said his buyer was putting pressure on him for completion of work orders and quick shipment.

"So, I kept open my factory and completed work orders of nearly \$3.5 million," the factory owner said, asking

not to be named.

"At the same time, I have also finished the process of paying salaries to the workers. My factory usually pays salaries to the workers on the seventh and the eighth of each month," he said.

Rubana Huq, president of Bangladesh Garment Manufacturers and Exporters Association (BGMEA), in a WhatsApp message yesterday said in line with the government shutdown, the BGMEA and the BKMEA were recommending closure of all factories until April 14.

Factories making PPE and having urgent shipment will need to inform their respective association for continuing operations after complying with full health and safety requirement, she said.

Authorised dealer bank branches will operate special hours as requested by the associations. So, all factories are requested to pay salary by April 16, she said.

AKM Salim Osman, president of Bangladesh Knitwear Manufacturers and Exporters Association (BKMEA), said it was not possible to say the exact number of opened factories.

A good number of knitwear units were open yesterday, he said by phone. Salim added that the factory owners were running their units despite issuing closure notice because some of them had emergency shipments and had to give salaries to their workers.

The Department of Inspection for Factories and Establishments (DIFE) could not be reached by phone for comments on closing factories.

Earlier, the DIFE in a circular said the factories could run their operations if they had work orders from the international retailers and brands with adequate health safety measures for the workers, and the factories

Boko Haram bombers kill 7 in Cameroon

AFP, YAOUNDÉ

Seven people were killed when two suicide bombers, suspected to be members of Nigeria's Boko Haram jihadist group, attacked a village in northern Cameroon on Sunday, police and a local official said.

"Two Boko Haram bombers blew themselves up at around 8pm" in the attack on Amchide, on the border with Nigeria, a policeman said Monday, while a local official said a village chief and two teenagers were among the dead.

Offer namaz

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The religious affairs ministry in an urgent notice, however, said in a bid to continue Jamaat in mosques, a maximum of five mosque staff, including Imam, Muajjin, Khadem and Khatib, will be able to offer daily prayers.

In case of the Juma prayers, the number will not be more than 10.

Asked, Anis Mahmud, director general of Islamic Foundation, told The Daily Star that those 10 will have to be staffers of the mosque.

"But no outsider will be allowed to enter mosques, neither for the five-time daily prayers nor for the Juma," he also said.

"We want that people from outside or mosque staffers not to come into contact with each other and pose risk of transmission of fast-spreading coronavirus or Covid-19," he added.

No religious gatherings like waj mahfil, milad, tafsir mahfil and tabligh gathering will be allowed, said the notice.

Meanwhile, the death toll from coronavirus rose to 12 in the country, which reported three more confirmed deaths yesterday. So far, 123 people have been infected in Bangladesh, 35 in the last 24 hours alone.

In a number of cases, it was found that people are getting infected with Covid-19 after going to mosques for prayers.

In the notice, the religious affairs ministry said Saudi Arabia has stopped the entry of foreign Muslims into the Holy Makkah Al-Mukarramah and Medina Munawara temporarily following the opinions of Muslim scholars after the outbreak of Covid-19 in the country.

After a cabinet meeting, Cabinet Secretary Khandker Anwarul Islam in a video message urged Muslims to offer namaj on Shab-e-Barat next Friday at their respective houses, instead of mosques, saying it is a nafl prayer.

which produce Personal Protective Equipment and masks could also continue their operations.

Talking to this newspaper, many RMG workers at Ashulia and Savar expressed anger over keeping their factories open.

Jasmine Tara, a factory worker in Ashulia which was open yesterday, said it was not possible to work at the factory maintaining social distancing as they had to work very closely with each other.

"I am in fear of being infected with coronavirus, thinking that some of my colleagues have joined the work after returning their village homes," she said.

Abdur Rahman, another garment worker at Ashulia, said there was no public transport on roads. "In this situation, we have to come to the factory on foot."

He added that the factory authorities told them that they had emergency shipments for which they reopened the factory, but they were yet to set the date when their salaries would be paid.

Khairul Mamun Mintu, general secretary of Garment Workers' Trade Union Centre, said a countrywide shutdown was going on to slow down the transmission of coronavirus.

In this situation, the factories owners should not open the factories. "If any worker is infected with coronavirus, it will be difficult to control the situation," he said.

Khairul urged the factory owners to close the factories and save the lives of workers.

As of Sunday, \$3.04 billion worth of garment export orders were cancelled by international retailers, according to data compiled by the BGMEA.

Our Mymensingh and Savar correspondents contributed to this report.

Press out of purview

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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.

Earlier, a circular signed by cabinet division secretary was issued on March 24 which cited the newspapers and essential services will remain out of the purview of the shutdown until April 4.

The government announced the closure of all public and private offices from March 26 to April 4 after which all public transport services were suspended.

On April 1, the government extended the ongoing shutdown until April 11.

Later on Sunday, the shutdown was further extended until April 14.

Cases drop in EU hotspots

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compiled by Johns Hopkins University. More than 1.2 million declared cases have now been registered around the world since the epidemic first emerged in China in December.

About three quarters of all deaths have been clocked in Europe, and the US now has the most recorded cases of any country -- along with a steadily rising death toll.

"This is going to be the hardest and the saddest week of most Americans' lives, quite frankly," US Surgeon General Jerome Adams told Fox News ahead of what is expected to be a tough week for already hard-pressed American healthcare providers.

"This is going to be our Pearl Harbor moment, our 9/11 moment, only it's not going to be localised."

In Tokyo, Prime Minister Shinzo Abe said hospitals in Japan face a "critical situation" and that an emergency could be declared as early as today.

"We're currently seeing rapid increases of new infections particularly in urban areas like Tokyo and Osaka," he said.

But there was hope in parts of Europe after a weekend that saw Italy reporting its lowest death toll in two weeks and France its fewest dead in a week.

"The curve has started its descent and the number of deaths has started to drop," said top Italian health official Silvio Brusaferro, adding the next phase could be a gradual easing of a strict month-long lockdown.

In Spain, nurse Empar Loren said: "The situation is more stable. The number of patients in intensive care is not growing much anymore, and we are starting to discharge quite a few."

Hard-hit Spain recorded deaths down for a fourth straight day yesterday-- but still logged 637 fatalities.

The effective mothballing of the global economy is beginning to hit

hard with analysts warning millions of jobs will be lost despite unprecedented stimulus programmes.

Germany announced that the government would guarantee loans for small businesses but France was gloomy, with Finance Minister Bruno Le Maire estimating that the 2020 crunch would be "far beyond" the previous post-1945 worst case.

Iran, whose economy has suffered the double blow of the virus and punishing US sanctions, said it would allow "low-risk" economic activity to resume as daily infection rates fell for a fifth straight day.

But some in poorer countries are already chafing against curfews destroying their livelihoods.

"How can anyone stay home without anything to eat?" asked Garcia Landu, a motorcycle taxi driver in Angola's bustling capital, Luanda.

"Better to die of this disease or gunshot than to starve to death."