



TRANQUILLITY.. Amidst the ravages of a virtual lockdown, a semblance of serenity has come upon the streets of Dhaka. The pandemonium of traffic, air pollution and twenty million people pushing and shoving ahead of one another has been replaced with an unfamiliar stillness, with the rustling of fallen leaves blowing in the wind often the only whisper on the once-chaotic thoroughfares. The photo was taken recently from in front of the High Court premises.

PHOTO: FIROZ AHMED

'Help Bangladesh meet demand for ventilators' during pandemic

Save the Children calls for int'l assistance

DIPLOMATIC CORRESPONDENT

Save the Children has made an urgent call for international assistance to help Bangladesh meet a surge in demand for ventilator machines to cope with the Covid-19 outbreak, and to help avert a humanitarian disaster in the country.

The call comes at a time when a total of 164 confirmed coronavirus cases have been reported in the country, including 17 deaths, raising fears that the number would go up in the coming days.

In a statement, Save the Children Australia yesterday said most of the country's intensive care beds and ventilators are installed at hospitals in major urban centres including the capital Dhaka, making it difficult for remote communities to access those.

There are reportedly 1,769 ventilators in Bangladesh at this moment or in the pipeline, which means an average of

one ventilator available for every 93,273 persons.

The international rights organisation also expressed concerns for the estimated 3.3 million people who live in the southwestern district of Cox's Bazar, one million of whom are Rohingya refugees living in cramped conditions with limited access to hygiene and health facilities.

"The acute scarcity of ventilators in the district means lives will be lost when Covid-19 starts to spread more widely in the community," it said.

Save the Children is calling for a single global plan to help confront one of the biggest threats to global health and security in modern times, the statement said.

"This plan must be underpinned by debt relief, increased financing for public health, liquidity and safety nets for the most vulnerable, and effective coordination.

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Urge anti-tobacco organisations

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Twenty anti-tobacco organisations yesterday urged the government to temporarily ban the sale of cigarettes during the coronavirus pandemic.

In a press release they demanded the withdrawal of a directive on cigarette sale and manufacturing which was issued by Ministry of Industries (MoI) recently.

"Two multinational tobacco companies have been allowed to continue cigarette manufacturing, marketing and purchasing tobacco leaves amid the worsening pandemic situation," said the press release. They claimed that this decision will undoubtedly create frustration among the public.

Anti-tobacco organisations said, after World Health Organization (WHO) expressed concern that smokers are likely to be more vulnerable to Covid-19, South Africa imposed ban on the sale of cigarettes and alcohol. In the Philippines, one local government has temporarily banned cigarette sales.

"In Bangladesh, 37.8 million adults use tobacco and 41 million people fall victim to secondhand smoke in their own homes. They are all currently at grave risk of severe

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'Dial 333 for food assistance'

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

The government has launched a national hotline, 333, for providing humanitarian assistance and food to the needy during the nationwide shutdown amid the coronavirus outbreak.

The service was launched on April 5.

The hotline has already received over 5,000 calls in the last two days, said Anir Chowdhury, policy adviser to the Access to Information (a2i) Programme of the Prime Minister's Office.

He made the comments while attending an online discussion, "E-commerce calls in the service of humanity", organised by the E-Commerce Association of Bangladesh (e-CAB) yesterday to celebrate E-commerce Day.

Earlier, the government used the short code to disseminate necessary information among people.

"After the inception of the short code, we began receiving calls from people who had no food. Immediately, the calls were transferred to the respective upazila nirbahi officers who took immediate steps to send them relief," said Chowdhury.

Without any publicity, the short code

is getting huge response while local administrations are addressing the callers' needs, he said.

Commerce Minister Tipu Munshi, Post and Telecommunication Minister Mustafa Jabbar, ICT secretary NM Zeaul Alam, among others, also took part in yesterday's discussion.

"We are in a tough situation in terms of running trade and commerce as coronavirus has put a restriction on everything. E-commerce can play a vital role in this regard," said the commerce minister.

Meanwhile, the Access to Information (a2i) programme under the ICT division has identified 3.70 lakh unique callers who have queried on different hotline numbers about Covid-19 and can use the data to find out how many people are at risk, said Anir Chowdhury, at a press conference on April 2.

In the last couple of weeks, people have called either 333, 16263 or relied on the government's *3332# hotlines to know about the coronavirus and now the Directorate General of Health Services (DGHS) is analysing the data gained,

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Anchored to an unknown port



PHOTO: TITU DAS

Kalu passed his days content from the money he made selling bottled water at Barishal Launch Ghat. But just like everything else, the novel coronavirus changed this too. Now the boy spends most of his time sitting around the ghat.

SUSHANTA GHOSH

His Friday mornings are spent looking at the Kirtankhola river, sitting along Barishal Launch Ghat pontoon, waiting for launches to arrive, with a weariness on his face. The moment one arrives, he will hop on-board or wait near the exit to sell water bottles to passengers.

Before the coronavirus pandemic hit, selling water would suffice for him to get through the day. Back during normal times, he would have no time to sit on the pontoon as launches kept arriving and departing all day.

His name is Kalu; just Kalu, nothing before or after. He looks like he's 10 to 12 years of age. This guess is all that this correspondent could muster, for the boy has no idea about the time or place of his birth.

Kalu could only vaguely offer some details of his parents. His mother had died several years ago and the last time they saw each other, his father was a rickshaw-puller in Brahmanbaria.

The boy made his way to the banks of Kirtankhola around a year ago, and somewhat completely by chance. One day, a friend wanted to go to Dhaka's Sadarghat from Brahmanbaria and Kalu just went along with him. From there, they boarded a Barishal-bound launch and that was that.

From then, he has been living at the ghat -- no house, no address, nothing. "I live here and sleep on the pontoon," Kalu said. Anyone who comes to the

ghat regularly has probably seen Kalu going up and down the place all day.

"What about food?" this

correspondent asked.

"If I get food, I eat. If not, I don't," Kalu answered.

Asked about his father Kalu said he has no information on him but knows that he's not looking for him.

Somewhat bizarrely, the boy who sleeps on a pontoon has somehow made a name for himself as a cook among his peers. Sometimes, he will cook whatever he can and share it with his fellows at the ghat. Though the menu may not be full of delicacies, the occasions surely bring some joy to the children from nowhere.

And Kalu likes living like this too. He boldly told this correspondent about his love for the river, launches and how he would rather not be anywhere else.

Though he doesn't know letters, he knows the names of all the launches and their routes -- a little out of necessity, and a little out of affection.

"I want to stay here -- it makes me happy," he said, somewhat emphatically.

This correspondent could only make the time to talk to Kalu, and look at all the stories that came out of this one conversation.

With around 200 street children living at the launch ghat, imagine how many more stories wander through the place every day.

Ctg General Hospital gets 10 ventilators, ICU beds

STAFF CORRESPONDENT, Ctg

With the coronavirus situation taking a turn for the worse in the country, a sigh of relief has come to port city residents, as Chattogram General Hospital (CGH), the oldest and second-largest government hospital in the city, is getting ready to open an Intensive Care Unit (ICU) soon.

Authorities of the hospital received 10 ventilators and 10 ICU beds from the health ministry yesterday afternoon.

CGH is one of three hospitals in Chattogram that have been designated by the government for treating Covid-19 patients, and a 100-bed isolation ward has been opened at the hospital. A confirmed coronavirus-positive patient has been undergoing treatment at the hospital since Thursday.

"A technical team from Dhaka would come to the hospital soon to set up the instruments and logistic facilities including central oxygen supply system and negative air pressure," Dr Asim Kumar Nath, superintendent of CGH, told The Daily Star yesterday.

Mamunur Rashid, an associate professor of Clinical Tropical Medicine at Bangladesh Institute of Tropical and Infectious Diseases (BITID), told The Daily Star that most Covid-19 patients die due to respiratory failure, and a hospital designated for treating such patients should have ICU facility.

Among the government hospitals in Chattogram, at present only Chattogram Medical College Hospital (CMCH) has a 12-bed ICU.

Prof Dr Masood Ahmed, former head of ICU at CMCH, told this newspaper that an ICU in a government hospital

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A cow quenches his thirst from a makeshift water tank, originally meant for handwashing. The photo was taken at Barishal city's Sadar Road recently.

PHOTO: TITU DAS

TENURE OF LIFE IMPRISONMENT

Over 5,000 prisoners' fate in the balance

ASHUTOSH SARKAR

Around 5,000 prisoners, who have been convicted and sentenced to life imprisonment, are yet to know how long they will have to serve in jails, as the Supreme Court has not delivered its verdict on the long pending review petition involving the dispute over the tenure of life imprisonment.

The dispute has been created after a bench of the SC's Appellate Division headed by the then Chief Justice Surendra Kumar Sinha in a verdict on February 14, 2017 had ruled that life imprisonment means jail sentence until natural death of the convict.

But Ataur Mridha, a prisoner whose death sentence was commuted by the SC to life imprisonment, challenged the apex court verdict delivered by Justice Sinha-led bench through filing a review petition with the same court.

In the review petition, he said under Section 57 of the Penal Code, life sentence refers to 30 years' prison term, which becomes 22.5 years after the seven-and-a-half years' remission.

On July 11 last year, a seven-member

bench of Appellate Division headed by Chief Justice Syed Mahmud Hossain concluded hearing arguments on the review petition of Mridha, and said that it will deliver its verdict any day on the matter.

The same day, the apex court bench kept the review petition as "curia advisari vult", meaning the verdict will be delivered any day.

The Appellate Division bench is yet to deliver its verdict on the review petition. Meantime, one of the seven judges of the bench has retired.

Contacted, Attorney General Mahbubey Alam told The Daily Star on March 30 that the SC has not yet delivered its judgement on the petition relating to the dispute over the meaning and tenure of a convict's life imprisonment.

"I had argued before the Appellate Division that the life imprisonment means the imprisonment till rest of life of such a convict.

The court will decide whether it will deliver the verdict and then it will be known how long prisoners, who have been convicted and sentenced to life imprisonment, will have to serve in jails," he said.

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PREVENTING SPREAD OF COVID-19

Youths leading the fight in Ctg

MOSTAFA YOUSUF, Ctg

As life has almost come to a halt due to shutdowns triggered by the coronavirus pandemic, lower income people across the country are left to languish.

In such dire circumstances, several youth organisations in Chattogram are coming forward like rays of hope. They are raising funds, running awareness programmes and disinfecting poverty-stricken areas to help out those in need as much as they can.

The activities are being carried out all across port city. For example, distribution of relief and hygiene items by youth organisations has been seen at Kazir Dewri, Alonkar Mor, Agrabad, Bakalia and Bayazid areas.

Sajid Kabir Saji, an organiser of youth platform "SomeWhereInEarth", said the organisation made 1,000 hand sanitiser bottles and masks for lower income groups to help them stay safe from the virus.

"We distributed these items over the last three days (near the end of March) and tried to raise awareness over the risk of going outside unless it's absolutely necessary," he said.

Amin Munna, a social worker who has been carrying out disinfection work along with other volunteers, said



Youths spraying disinfectant in port city's Bakalia area.

PHOTO: COLLECTED

he and 40 others have joined hands to sanitise their Dakshin Madarsa area by spraying antivirus liquid daily.

What's more heartening is that the equipment that the band of youth are using for the disinfection work are provided by locals, who lent them their mobile irrigation machines. Munna and team use the machines to spray antivirus liquid made of bleaching powder all over the locality.

Other than them, at least 50 other youths were seen disinfecting streets and vehicles across Bakalia, Rahattarpul, Chawkbazar and Boro Mia Masjid areas by spraying similar kinds of chemical solutions.

Md Munir Uddin Chowdhury, organiser of the initiative, said they were disinfecting one area each day and handing over masks to rickshaw pullers and auto rickshaw drivers.