

## Gulf states urged to unblock internet calls in response to pandemic

AFP, Dubai

Human rights groups urged three Gulf Arab states yesterday to lift bans on free internet calls to help their large migrant workforces stay in touch during the coronavirus pandemic.

Oman, Qatar and the United Arab Emirates have long blocked many voice and video calling apps on the grounds of protecting the commercial interests of state-owned telecoms utilities.

"This has caused serious problems for the people living in those countries, especially the majority of migrant workers and foreign national residents who need to connect and communicate with their families and communities overseas," the rights groups said.

A majority of the estimated 17 million people living in the three Gulf states are expatriates, most of them low-paid workers from Asia.

In response to the Covid-19 pandemic, the UAE and Oman have relaxed restrictions on some calling apps but on a temporary basis.

They have unblocked apps that allow for distance learning such as

Microsoft Teams, Skype for Business, Google Hangouts, and Zoom. Microsoft Teams and Zoom are also available in Qatar.

State-owned telecom firms in the UAE have also introduced a new app, UAE Voice, that allows for free video and audio calls.

But popular apps such as WhatsApp, Skype and FaceTime remain blocked despite persistent calls for a change of policy to face the pandemic, Human Rights Watch and 28 other civil society groups said in a joint statement.

"Denying the Gulf population access to these platforms puts people at serious risk, as this cuts them off from their communities abroad and the resources they need in times of such crisis," they said.

Despite its ambition to become a major technological power, the UAE has harsh cybercrime laws and maintains what civil society groups call a high level of online restrictions and surveillance.

In December, the New York Times accused the UAE intelligence services of using popular new app ToTok to spy on users.



People wearing protective clothing and masks arrive at Hankou Railway Station in Wuhan, to board one of the first trains leaving the city in China's central Hubei province early yesterday. Chinese authorities lifted a more than two-month ban on outbound travel from the city where the global pandemic first emerged.

PHOTO: AFP

## Enforce total lockdown

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"It is my projection that the number of infections in Dhaka city would reach five lakh within a month unless a complete lockdown is enforced," said Prof Mozaherul.

The ongoing lockdown has slowed down the virus transmission slightly. "But the existing lockdown strategy will not be able to stop the transmission. To get the full benefit, there should be a complete lockdown of Dhaka city."

Complete lockdown means no one will be allowed to step out of home for 14 days. "The ward councilors will supply daily necessities with the help of local volunteers," he added.

Meanwhile, locals in different neighbourhoods in the capital closed the entry gates and discouraged outsiders from entering their localities.

In some areas, police have imposed restrictions on movement of people and vehicles by putting up makeshift gates.

"Police requested us not to venture out unless it's really necessary after a coronavirus case was detected in my area. They also put up barricades [on Narinda road] so that no vehicle can pass," said Mohammad Aslam, a resident in the capital's Wari.

Dhaka Metropolitan Police on Tuesday put 52 areas under lockdown after 15 new coronavirus cases were detected in the capital.

The move came following the cabinet meeting on Monday. Civil administration and law enforcement agencies have been asked to ensure lockdown in a coordinated way with the help of public representatives in the areas.

Contacted, LGRD Minister Tajul Islam said if anyone does any excesses in the name of lockdown in any area, legal action will be taken against the person.

PRESS BRIEFING

Dr Meerjady Sabrina Flora, director of the Institute of Epidemiology, Disease Control and Research (IEDCR), briefed the media about the new cases through videoconferencing yesterday.

Among the 54 new cases, 33 are male and 21 female.

Age-wise, five are between 11 and 20, 15 between 21 and 30, 10 between

31 and 40, 14 are between 41 and 60, and the rest above 60, the IEDCR director said.

The new cases were detected after testing 981 suspected cases -- 622 in nine labs in the capital and 359 in seven labs outside, she mentioned.

So far, 5,164 samples have been tested for coronavirus infection in the country since the IEDCR started conducting tests on January 28.

Narayanganj saw the second highest number of new cases -- 8. The total number of reported cases in the district is now 46, she said.

About the government's preparations, Prof Saniya Tahmina, additional director general of the Directorate General of Health Services (DGHS), said, "We have extended test facilities to 16 places in and outside the capital."

"We have distributed 474,774 PPEs [personal protective equipment] to those who are carrying out tests and providing healthcare [to Covid-19 patients]," she said, adding that they have a stock of more than two lakh pieces of PPE.

There are 112 intensive care units and 7,693 isolation beds across the country, she mentioned.

"All the ministries are working. Yet we would say, your safety is in your hands."

LOCKDOWN

The Principal Branch of Agrani Bank in the capital's Motijheel area has been put under lockdown yesterday after one of its employees tested positive for Covid-19.

The employee, aged around 30, last came to work on Sunday, Mohammad Shams-Ul Islam, managing director of Agrani Bank, told The Daily Star.

Eighty-three employees of the branch have been kept in home quarantine, he added.

Meanwhile, Cox's Bazar was put under lockdown yesterday to contain the spread of the virus.

No one can enter or exit the district from now on, said Md Kamal Hossain, deputy commissioner of the district.

The lockdown will be in force until further notice, he added.

## Fear not, WHO says it's okay

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A group of such volunteers has performed a namaz-e-janaza and funeral services for a Covid-19 victim in a village of Naria in Shariatpur, he added.

The World Health Organisation (WHO) provided an interim guideline on March 24 saying, "To date there is no evidence of people becoming infected from exposure to the bodies those who died from Covid-19."

Yet, the fear of transmission has made many reluctant in preparing the body for and performing the burial.

The guidance further reads that the safety and well-being of everyone who tends to bodies should be the first priority, and before attending to a body, people should ensure that the necessary hand hygiene and personal protective equipment (PPE) supplies are available.

The dignity of the dead, their cultural and religious traditions, and their families should be respected and protected throughout; and hasty disposal of a dead from Covid-19 should be avoided, it also says.

The guidelines include detailed recommendations about the burial procedure for the managers of healthcare facilities and mortuaries, religious and public health authorities, and families, who tend to the bodies of those who have died of suspected or confirmed Covid-19. It also says that people who have died from Covid-19 can be buried or cremated.

The Islamic Foundation of Bangladesh requested all to follow the WHO guidelines for the namaz-e-janaza and burial of the victims of Covid-19.

Dr Zafrullah Chowdhury, founder of Gonoshasthaya Kendra, also said in a press release that Muslims who have died of Covid-19 can be buried

as per Islamic rules without any fear of infection. The followers of other religions can arrange a proper burial or cremation according to their customs.

He also said the coronavirus cannot survive or multiply in a dead body.

Officials of Institute of Epidemiology, Disease Control and Research (IEDCR) had also earlier confirmed that Covid-19 cannot be transmitted from a dead body.

Speaking to this correspondent, Gazi Yakub said that he has already spoken to a few doctors and gone through the WHO guidelines and international practices regarding the funeral of a Covid-19-affected person.

"We are trying our best to abide by the directives of healthcare organisations so it [the funeral services] can be carried out properly and safely," he said.

Engineer Forkan Bin Kashem and a doctor, who wishes to remain anonymous, has provided the volunteer group with the required number of PPEs. The volunteers in Dhaka have already trained at least 22 people on burial work.

"On Monday, we got a call from the Birdem after a Covid-19 patient had died. We offered his namaz-e-janaza, but could not bury him, as his family wanted to bury him at his hometown in Noakhali," Yakub said.

They got another call from the Tilpa Para area of Khilgaon on Tuesday, but the family had left the city before the team reached the place.

Yakub said if anyone can ensure their transport facilities, it would be helpful for them to move easily in this shutdown.

"It has become difficult for us to manage transport to reach our destinations. It would be appreciated if someone could help us in this regard."

## No room for suspected coronavirus cases?

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When someone from IEDCR hotline finally answered, I told them about my mother's condition. They too told me to go to Kurmitola and didn't suggest testing her at all," she added.

At Kurmitola, a doctor in PPE immediately attended to Rokhsana, and found signs of respiratory distress after carrying out an X-ray.

"The doctor told me the best he could do was to admit my mother at the isolation ward, but they could not provide any ICU support," Tajkia recounted.

"At this point, my family members called multiple private hospitals, all of which refused to treat my mother after hearing her symptoms. The doctor at Kurmitola learned of my mother's history and suggested further treatment at home. I agreed to that because there is medical equipment at the house for my father, and we know home healthcare workers."

Brig Gen Jamilur Reza, director of Kurmitola General Hospital, told this correspondent that they cannot admit any patient to ICU before confirming whether or not they have Covid-19.

After reaching home from Kurmitola around 6:45pm that day, Tajkia went out of the house to get an extra oxygen cylinder. "After I returned, I couldn't detect my mother's pulse, and her pupils were not reacting. I was under severe distress, consulting as many people as I could to figure out what to do next."

"A friend from CMC managed to get through to Kuwait-Maitree Hospital's control room, and they said they would receive my mother," Tajkia said.

After a 40-minute wait, an ambulance finally reached their house.

"The hospital's gates were closed. There was no emergency facility. I found two doctors on the other side of the gate and asked them to assess my mother," said Tajkia.

"The doctors went inside and didn't return for a long while. Meanwhile my cousin called the hospital's control room again, asking them to assess her," she added.

In this time, a team arrived from IEDCR at the spot, after Rokhsana's family members had been calling the hotlines repeatedly. The team collected her sample.

"I waited there [Kuwait-Maitree] for 40 minutes. Finally, the control room called me and said they could admit my mother to the ICU, but there was already a Covid-19 positive patient there. I kept asking them to assess her first, which they never responded to," Tajkia said.

"Frustrated and distressed, we went back to Crescent Hospital and found no doctor in the emergency room. I started screaming for a doctor there, then the staff asked to take my mother's files to the doctor, who initially refused to see her because we had come earlier too."

"Then he sent a messenger saying he was having dinner. After 30 minutes of waiting and screaming for medical attention, the doctor came to check my mother's body in the ambulance and declared her dead."

A hospital management staff of Crescent Hospital spoke to this correspondent under the condition of anonymity.

## Global trade may plunge by a third

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some six percent.

Germany's economy, the biggest in Europe, is also expected to fall into a "serious recession" and contract by nearly 10 percent in the second quarter, leading researchers warned.

Despite some early signs of downward trend in cases in Europe, health experts stressed it is too early to loosen restrictions.

They say premature moves could accelerate the spread of a disease that has already infiltrated every layer of society, from refugees to royal of Britain's Prime Minister Boris Johnson, who was reported to be "stable" during his third day in intensive care.

"Now is not the time to relax measures. It is the time to once again double and triple our collective efforts to drive towards suppression with the whole support of society," said the World Health Organization's Europe director Hans Kluge.

In the ground-zero Chinese city of Wuhan, which led the world with its unprecedented lockdown in January, strict measures appear to have paid off.

## 15 more die in 24 hours

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issues at Kurmitola General Hospital yesterday afternoon while an elderly person died in Kaliakair upazila with the similar symptoms. Their samples were collected for tests.

In Manikganj, a man died with cold, fever and breathing complications in Saturaia upazila yesterday. Health officials collected his sample for tests. The dead's house and few other adjoining houses were locked down to prevent the virus spread.

In Rangpur, a 30-year-old woman of the sweeper community died with Covid-19 symptoms at Bottola village in Kaunia upazila yesterday. Sample from her body was collected for tests. In Sunamganj, a 22-year-old man died with Covid-19 symptoms at Boktarpur village in Dowarabazar upazila on Tuesday night.

In Panchagarh, a 13-year-old girl died with Covid-19 symptoms in Debiganj upazila on Tuesday afternoon. Health officials collected her sample for tests.

After a months-long travel ban was finally lifted, tens of thousands of people fled the city in joyous scenes that contrasted with the macabre mood around much of the world -- even if some passengers were travelling in hazmat suits.

Medical staff around the world are bearing a heavy physical and emotional toll as they work in packed intensive care units and makeshift hospitals erected in sports stadiums, on ships and even in a New York cathedral.

In Spain, home to the world's second deadliest outbreak, another 757 deaths were reported yesterday, bringing the toll up for a second day after several days of decline.

Hundreds are still passing away daily in worst-affected Italy although the peak of the crisis appears to have passed, with the rise of infections falling to a new low.

Britain, meanwhile, was tense after a record 786 deaths Tuesday, while the prime minister's hospitalisation underscored the seriousness of the disease for many in a country that was slow to react.

The 55-year-old British leader

"Our ICU was being fumigated at the time so it wasn't available, that is why we could not treat her. We provided all primary treatment, including for her respiratory symptoms," he said, adding that at night there is always just one doctor in the emergency room and it is not always possible to see patients immediately.

Dr Shehab Uddin, coordinator at Kuwait-Maitree Hospital, told this correspondent over phone that he is aware of the incident, and acknowledged that there was a delay in attending to the patient. "However, I believe the patient and her attendant were misdirected by the previous hospitals when they were sent here, and our doctors were not responsible for the death."

Tajkia also said in her Facebook status that Kuwait-Maitree Hospital was not responsible for her mother's death. "But the previous two hospitals are," she alleged.

Shehab also said, "We can admit patients if they are confirmed to have coronavirus, but our hospital cannot at the moment tend to all emergencies."

On April 2, just a day after Rokhsana's death, IEDCR's test revealed that she did not have coronavirus. "We called multiple private hospitals, all of them refused to treat her because she was 'suspected' to have Covid-19. And the designated hospitals couldn't treat her because it wasn't confirmed that she had Covid-19. Meanwhile, all hotlines were extremely difficult to reach, how could we get her tested in time?" Tajkia questioned.

"Where is the protocol? Who tends to 'suspected' cases and how?"

was "clinically stable" and "responding to the treatment", his spokesman said, adding he was in "good spirits".

The US also faced a punishing 24 hours, with another 1,939 deaths recorded according to a tally by Johns Hopkins University, bringing the nation's death toll to nearly 13,000.

A staggering 81 percent of the world's 3.3 billion-strong workforce has been affected by "the worst global crisis since the Second World War", according to the UN's International Labour Organization.

Governments around the globe are rolling out unprecedented stimulus measures, including a \$1-trillion package in Japan.

The eurozone is also mired in bickering over a bailout plan for its hard-hit members that would come on top of measures enacted by individual governments.

Finance ministers were unable to bridge divides after 16 hours of talks that will now resume today.

The markets continued their volatile movement, with Wall Street stocks rising at the start of trade on Wednesday.

similar symptoms at his residence in Bancharampur upazila. A 45-year-old farmer of Bancharampur upazila died with coronavirus symptoms at Dhaka Medical College Hospital's isolation ward on Tuesday evening.

In Bagerhat, an 83-year-old man and his 75-year-old wife died in Morrelganj municipality area yesterday morning. The district health officials did not collect their samples and said the duo died of natural causes.

In Joyprhat, three families of Akkelpur Upazila were put in isolation yesterday as a 30-year-old man with Covid-19 symptoms returned home from Narayanganj on Sunday. His sample was collected for tests.

Our Correspondents from Brahmanbaria, Gazipur, Bagerhat, Manikganj, Dinajpur, Sylhet, Thakurgaon, Moulvibazar, Pirojpur and Pabna Correspondents contributed to the story.

## US navy chief out over handling of ship virus outbreak

AFP, Washington

US Acting Navy Secretary Thomas Modly resigned Tuesday over his mishandling of an outbreak of the coronavirus on the USS Theodore Roosevelt aircraft carrier, Defense Secretary Mark Esper announced.

Modly stepped down five days after removing the Roosevelt's captain, Brett Crozier, for writing a letter -- that was leaked to the media -- describing the virus-struck vessel's dire situation and alleging the Pentagon was not paying adequate attention to it.

The removal of Crozier, respected in the military and popular with his crew, was seen as heavy-handed and decided too quickly, before an investigation was carried out.

Modly sparked outrage Monday after he flew from Washington to Guam, where the warship is docked, to defend his actions to the crew.

In a forceful, profanity-laced speech, he accused Crozier of "betrayal," called him "too naive or too stupid" and suggested the sailors' love for him was misplaced.

Hours later, back in Washington, Modly issued an apology, but President Donald Trump publicly questioned Crozier's treatment and said he would get directly involved.

Modly "resigned of his own accord, putting the Navy and the sailors above self so that the USS Theodore Roosevelt, and the Navy as an institution, can move forward," Esper said in a statement.

Esper said Modly's replacement as acting Navy secretary will be current Army Undersecretary Jim McPherson, a retired admiral.

Modly was the second navy chief to depart in just over four months.

In November, Esper fired Navy secretary Richard Spencer after he pushed back against Trump's protection of Navy SEAL Edward Gallagher, who had been charged with war crimes and convicted of lesser charges.

## Teetering

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Just a month after the first case of Covid-19 was identified in the country, the authorities have confirmed a total of 218 patients and 20 deaths.

"We are heading towards stage-4. Lockdown of a particular area is one of the strategies to contain the spread. But at the same time, all suspected cases in that area should be tested," said Jahidur Rahman, virologist and assistant professor at Shahid Suhrawardy Medical College.

"We cannot keep an area under lockdown for a long time because of its economic impact. We have to test the suspected cases, isolate the positive ones and quarantine the rest."

"If we fail to act wisely right now, the situation will not be good ...," he warned.

At least 10,000 tests should be performed each day, he said.

IEDCR started coronavirus testing on January 28, when the virus was wreaking havoc in China. For over a month, only IEDCR had the ability to run the tests.

The testing facilities have been expanded over the past couple of weeks to 14 laboratories -- nine in Dhaka and five elsewhere.

## Death warrant

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read it out to Majed, who was present in the dock.

During the hearing, Majed told the court that he was not involved in the killing.

After passing the order, the court sent back Majed to Dhaka Central Jail with the death warrant. The jail authorities will again read out the death warrant to him once it reaches the jail, said Mosharraf Hossain Kajol, one of the prosecutors.

The death sentence will be executed between 21 and 28 days of its issuance, the lawyer added.

Dhaka District Public Prosecutor Khandakar Abdul Mannan submitted the petitions after receiving the copy of the order from the Chief Metropolitan Magistrate Court on Majed's arrest.

On November 19, 2009, the Supreme Court upheld a High Court verdict, confirming capital punishment of 12 people, including Majed, for killing the Father of the Nation and most of his family members on August 15, 1975.

Although all the courts across the country remain closed until April 14 due to the outbreak of coronavirus, District and Sessions Judge Md Helal Chowdhury, as per the instruction of the Supreme Court, opened his court yesterday only to hear the petition.

On Tuesday, Chief Metropolitan Magistrate of Dhaka sent Majed to Dhaka Central Jail after a team of Counter Terrorism and Transnational Crime unit of Dhaka Metropolitan Police arrested him in the capital's Mirpur.

## Shab-e-Barat

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"Pray at home on Shab-e-Barat for the people's safety during the crisis time of pandemic," said a press release of Islamic Foundation.

It also urged people not to visit graveyards and shrines on the occasion to contain the spread of coronavirus.