

## Switzerland pledges Tk 25cr support

4 envoys provide food assistance

DIPLOMATIC CORRESPONDENT

Switzerland has announced assistance of 2.8 million Swiss francs (Tk 25 crore) for Bangladesh as an immediate response to the coronavirus pandemic, which is taking a toll on people's health and the economy amid the shutdown.

The fund will be used through local and international partner organisations, said a statement of the Swiss embassy in Dhaka.

"As nations around the globe suffer from challenges posed by the Covid-19 pandemic, Switzerland stands by Bangladesh in facing this crisis and implementing an effective response," it said.

In collaboration with Bangladesh, civil society, development partners and donor organisations, Switzerland continues

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Two local volunteers splash disinfectant-mixed water on the streets of Kathalbagan yesterday around 12pm.

PHOTO: PALASH KHAN

EASING OVERCROWDING AT JAILS

## Govt mulling release of petty criminals, long-term convicts

RAFIUL ISLAM

Apart from over 3,000 petty criminals, the government is planning to release 1,413 inmates who were sentenced to life-term imprisonment and have already served more than 20 years in jail, amid the coronavirus outbreak in the country.

The aim of releasing around 5,000 prisoners is to lower the chances of coronavirus transmission in crowded jails, said sources.

The home ministry has sent a proposal to law ministry for its opinion.

Contacted, Home Minister Asaduzzaman Khan said, "We have sent the recommendations to the law ministry. We will scrutinise everything after getting a response."

"We are thinking of releasing those who served more than 20 years in jail, but are stuck due to the new definition of life imprisonment given by former chief justice SK Sinha. Besides we are thinking of releasing some disabled prisoners," the minister told The Daily Star yesterday.

According to prison and home ministry sources, there are more than 5,000 prisoners, who have been convicted and sentenced to life imprisonment, in different jails.

Of them, 1,413 were named in the list for release as they have served more than 20 years in prison and there were no pending cases against them either; the ministry is planning on releasing them without condition, they added.

The release of many of them stopped after former Chief Justice Surendra Kumar Sinha in a judgment in February 2017 said life imprisonment means jail sentence until natural death of the convict.

A review petition against the judgement is still pending. A prison official said as per the home ministry's order, they sent on

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## Stepping up for the city's animals

Activists, volunteers feed strays amid shutdown

HELEMUL ALAM

The streets of Dhaka have been deserted by humans, but one thing has remained constant there even during the shutdown. The city's resident strays are still roaming the streets, some scampering about by themselves, some sprinting in groups.

Their usual source of food, however, has disappeared. Dogs, cats and birds relied on scavenging food from leftovers dumped by restaurants, shops etc. But currently, almost all establishments are closed, so food is scarce for animals.



Starved stray animals in the city have been dependent on the kindness of humans across the country, and the scene in Dhaka is no exception.

PHOTO: COLLECTED

As we stand by people in need during this crisis, helping stray animals is also necessary, as they need us now more than ever. Keeping this in mind, several volunteer organisations and many individuals have come forward to provide them with food.

A lot of residents are preparing meals for cats and dogs at home and distributing them to animals at different parts of the capital.

Tahia Reza Prapti and her husband Ashrafur Islam Razib, with the help of a local youth, have been feeding strays for

the last few days at Mirpur's Rupnagar Residential Area.

Unfortunately, due to the spread of misinformation, many had stopped this practice, fearing that they might get infected by animals.

However, individual effort alone is not enough to feed so many animals. This is where volunteer organisations come in with a larger scope of impact.

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## PADMA BRIDGE 28th span installed, 4.2km now visible

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

The 28th span of the much-anticipated Padma Bridge was installed yesterday, bringing into view 4.2 kilometres of the structure.

The span linking the 20th and 21st pier was installed around 9am yesterday, Dewan Md Abdul Kader, project manager (main bridge), told The Daily Star.

The span was taken to the spot on the river from the construction yard-1 yesterday, he said.

The 20th pier falls under the purview of Munishganj while the 21st under Madaripur, meaning the span linked two districts, Kader added.

The development came at a time when the country is facing a virtual lockdown with operation of all types of passenger transports suspended, and public and private offices closed.

Besides, 20 to 30 percent of the local workers involved in the project left the workplace due to the coronavirus situation, a project official said.

"However, the number of local workers has increased now as many of them have returned," he said, wishing anonymity.

All 667 Chinese nationals involved in the main bridge works are now working, he added.

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## Public transports to stay put till April 25

Emergency vehicles, goods-laden trucks out of purview

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

The government has extended the ongoing suspension of all types of public transport operations till April 25 -- to contain the spread of coronavirus.

The Road Transport and Highways Division took the decision yesterday, said Abu Naser, deputy chief information officer of Road Transport and Bridges Ministry.

However, all goods-laden vehicles and vehicles transporting emergency services including daily essentials, fuel, medicine and media outfits will remain out of the purview of this suspension, he said.

No goods-laden vehicle would be allowed to carry passengers.

This is the second time the government extended the suspension on the operation of public transports in line with closure of all public and private offices.

At first stage, the government closed all public and private offices from March 26 to April 4 and operation of public transports was also suspended for the same period.

With the number of coronavirus cases increasing, the government on Friday extended the shutdown till April 25.

In addition, suspension of Bangladesh's air-communications with 16 countries has been extended till April 30.

The countries are the UK, UAE, Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, Bhutan, India, Hong Kong, Kuwait, Malaysia, the Maldives, Oman, Qatar, Sri Lanka, Singapore, Thailand and Turkey, Civil Aviation Authority of Bangladesh said yesterday.

Flights to different domestic destinations will also remain suspended until April 30, CAAB said in a statement.

Operations of cargo flight, air

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## Shortage of manpower, logistics hampers Covid-19 testing in Ctg

ARUN BIKASH DEV, Cg

With the number of samples increasing everyday for testing Covid-19 in Chattogram, the lone laboratory of Bangladesh Institute of Tropical and Infectious Diseases (BITID) is struggling to cope with the demand.

Located in Faujdarhat, BITID is the only hospital dedicated by the government for testing coronavirus in the division. Samples collected from at least eight districts are being tested in the laboratory, putting immense pressure on healthcare service providers.

At present, BITID has only one virologist and eight technicians to run the laboratory. With the existing logistics support, the laboratory can test around 40 samples a day. But now it has to test around 100 samples per day, said BITID officials.

For example, the hospital collected 140 samples on Thursday but could test 104 of those on that day. On Friday, 94 samples were tested.

"I have to work for 14 hours a day in the lab. I come at 8am and leave around 10pm," said Prof

Dr Shakil Ahmed, in-charge of BITID laboratory. "The lab has a capacity to test 40 samples a day but currently the number has increased to over 100 every day."

"We have only eight technicians who not only work in the lab but also collect samples," said Prof Shakil, also a virologist. "We do not have an office assistant to type reports, so we cannot deliver those to patients on time. We are all working at least three shifts," he said.

Prof Shakil said he requested the authorities for providing at least two microbiologists and four technicians along with two office assistants to increase the capacity of the laboratory. "More hospitals and laboratories in Chattogram can be included for Covid-19 tests to reduce our load."

Prof Shakil suggested engaging Chattogram Medical College Hospital (CMCH), Chattogram Veterinary and Animal Sciences University, and Chittagong University's Biotechnology and Genetic Engineering and Microbiology departments in this regard.

"All the institutions have ideal laboratories,

and if needed, we will arrange a training programme for them," he said.

Asked, BITID Director Prof Dr MA Hasan said they have been working to increase the capacity of the laboratory so that it can cope with the demand.

"We have already brought a PCR machine from the Genetic Engineering department of CU along with four research students of the department," he said.

Also, he added, "I have talked to the Chattogram divisional director of Directorate General of Health Services this morning [Saturday] and requested him to provide us with at least two microbiologists."

Contacted, Dr Hasan Shahriar Kabir, Chattogram divisional director of DGHS, said reinforcement will be provided to BITID soon to handle the increasing demand.

More laboratories in Chattogram will be added for this purpose very soon, he said, adding that CMCH will be engaged in a day or two for testing Covid 19.

## Ensure TV journos' health security, pay their dues, salaries

Info minister urges owners

UNB, Dhaka

Information Minister Dr Hasan Mahmud urged journalist leaders and managing committees of television channels to ensure health security and clear dues of journalists working for private channels.

He made the call while speaking to leaders of Broadcast Journalist Centre at his residence in the capital yesterday.

During this global crisis, journalists have been working under immense risk to their personal health, Mahmud said while talking about media workers who have contracted the coronavirus, while some have been sent to quarantine.

Informed by Broadcast Journalist Centre that some TV channels were not paying due salaries, Mahmud urged the authorities to clear the dues "even if you face any problems during this situation."

Among others, Broadcast Journalist Centre President Rezwanaul Haque Raja and Secretary Shakil Ahmed were present.

Earlier in the day, 47 employees of Independent TV, who had been in isolation, completed their quarantine. They were sent to home-quarantine on April 3 after one of their colleagues tested positive for coronavirus.

## Fire breaks out at Ulon grid substation

UNB, Dhaka

A fire at grid substation at Ulon in Rampura area led to power cuts in the southern parts of the capital yesterday.

According to official sources at Power Grid Company of Bangladesh (PGCB), the fire broke out at the 132/33kV grid substation around 4pm, but the reason was not clear immediately.

Several units of Fire Service and Civil Defence rushed to the spot, and brought the fire under control at about 4:50pm, sources said.

A PGCB official said electricity supply to Motijheel, Rampura, Jatrabari, Lalbagh and Dhanmondi were severely disrupted following the fire.

"We're trying to restore electricity supply to the areas," a PGCB official said.

He said the substation was recently handed over to Dhaka Power Distribution Company (DPDC). "But still both the PGCB and DPDC officials were jointly in the operation of substation," he said.

## Unilever pledges Tk 200m in fight against Covid-19

CITY DESK

Unilever Bangladesh Limited (UBL) has pledged Tk 200 million to help the nation in its fight against the novel coronavirus.

The commitment includes wide-ranging measures such as product donations, creating awareness, improving health infrastructure, protecting its people and livelihoods of those who work across the value chain such as extended distribution and supply chain, said a press release.

Ever since the outbreak, UBL has been donating hygiene and household products such as Lifebuoy soap, Surf excel and Wheel detergents, and Domex cleaner.

So far, UBL has donated products worth Tk 10 million and will continue its contribution by partnering with several organisations in order to reach out to the people in need.

Unilever Bangladesh is collaborating with organisations such as Brac, WaterAid, Unicef, Ek Takay Ahar to create awareness.

The company has already spent Tk 10 million in these efforts, according to the press release.



Few are out and about to notice it these days, but nature progresses nonetheless. Mango trees across the country are adorned with green mangoes, as they ripen toward their exquisite final form as the king of the fruit. This photo was taken yesterday.

PHOTO: PRABIR DAS