

All of reality

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64,000, which is 31 percent of the 200,000 tests it conducted, according to www.worldometers.info.

In Belgium, around 26 percent of all who were tested turned out to be infected. France conducted over 200,000 tests as of April 2, and it had 59,000 confirmed cases, which is 26.4 percent of all the tests.

For India and Pakistan, the rate of positive cases for the first 10,000 tests could not be known.

However, it was 4.67 percent (7,703) of 1,64,773 people tested in India as of Saturday, according to Indian Council of Medical Research. In Pakistan, the rate was 8.3 percent (4,788) of 57,836 people tested as of Friday, according to Pakistan government data.

Like most countries across the world, the authorities in Bangladesh are using the PCR technique, a gold-standard technology for Covid-19 confirmation, which detects pieces of the coronavirus through analysing sputum or mucus samples collected from the human body -- nasal and throat.

Talking to The Daily Star on Sunday, Prof Nazrul Islam, a noted virologist and former vice chancellor at the BSMMU, said the high number of positive cases detected at the lab there "reflects there might be some issues in case selection at the other labs".

"If samples are not collected from the actual suspected patients, test results will be negative," he said, warning that in the absence of proper detection, many Covid-19 patients might not be diagnosed and spread the virus to others.

Several other experts echoed his views.

Although the lab-or-region-wise rate of positive cases is uncertain, The Daily Star analysed data on positive cases found at different labs.

From April 1 to 12, the BSMMU lab detected 136 positive cases from 369 samples. It means around 34 percent of all the samples tested positive. This rate was higher than those of all the other 15 labs combined, shows DGHS data.

Take another example. On Thursday, the authorities reported 62 new cases in Dhaka city. The BSMMU tested 59 samples and found 40 to be positive. The eight other labs in the city detected the other 22 positive cases.

With more than 80 identified infected areas, the city so far accounts for almost half the Covid-19 cases detected across the country. But the percentage of positive cases at different labs provides a confusing picture about the transmission level, said experts.

On March 25, the Institute of Public Health (IPH) in Dhaka tested 650 samples and found only seven Covid-19 cases. In Chattogram, the Bangladesh Institute of Tropical and Infectious Diseases (BITID) tested 89 individuals' samples in 24 hours till Friday afternoon and detected just three positive cases, records show.

THE REASONS?
According to WHO interim guidance for Covid-19 tests, a number of factors could lead to a negative result in an infected individual.

Those include: poor quality of the specimen, containing little patient material, the specimen was collected late or very early in the infection, the specimen was not handled, shipped appropriately, and technical reasons inherent in the test.

So, the sample collection requires trained hands to collect high-quality sputum or nasopharyngeal swabs, located at the back of the nose that meets the top of the throat containing sufficient amounts of viral RNA.

The amount of the viral RNA in the sample can vary within the same patient depending on the timing of the test, according to different scientific papers.

Moreover, different types of specimen show different percentage of positive result: bronchoalveolar lavage fluid shows 93 percent positivity, fibro bronchoscope brush biopsy 46 percent, sputum 72 percent, nasal swabs 63 percent, pharyngeal swabs 32 percent, faeces 29 percent, blood 1 percent and urine zero percent, according to Journal of American Medical Association.

Currently, all but the BSMMU lab

collect nasal and throat swabs for the test, according to officials.

The BSMMU lab collects sputum samples, source said.

Case selection is done mainly in two ways -- from symptomatic patients coming to hospitals, and responding to calls to the given hotline numbers.

Besides, Covid-19 hotspots usually get more importance in sample collection, the sources said.

Medical technologists and other staffers at every upazila are currently collecting samples, after they were trained up online last month, according to the DGHS.

Besides, the IEDCR has its own team for sample collection.

"Another problem is that our sample collectors [often fail to collect] quality samples. Maybe they are not putting the swab stick as deeper as required," Prof Moudud Hossain, an expert assigned to advise the government on Covid-19 control and prevention activities in Rangpur division, told The Daily Star on Saturday.

He said positive cases can go undetected if samples are not collected properly. "It makes us worried."

In a daily briefing last week, Prof Abul Kalam Azad, director general of the DGHS, also admitted that many of those collecting the samples lacked the skill.

Other than these reasons, Prof Saif Ullah Munshi, chairman of virology at BSMMU, focused on the case selection procedure.

"But even if sample collection procedure is done correctly, the swab may produce a false negative because the virus passes from the upper to the lower respiratory system as the disease develops step by step," he said.

Any Covid-19-like symptoms could be categorised into three types -- suggestive, suspected, and confirmed case.

Prof Munshi said, "Our trained clinicians find out the suspected cases based on detailed history and symptoms. If we would consider the suggestive cases, we would get more negative cases. But it would be the waste of resource."

He thinks the entire testing activity needs to be brought under a uniformed mechanism.

"Otherwise, tests results will not reflect the real situation," he added.

IN DARK, IN DANGER
Experts said if the real situation of the coronavirus transmission is not acknowledged, the ongoing shutdown might be futile.

"The transmission of the virus is ongoing. Here, case identification is important if we want to make the lockdown effective," Prof Mushtaq Hussain, consultant at the IEDCR, told The Daily Star.

Prof Nazrul Islam said, "There has been havoc in Narayanganj. But we do not know how many samples they have collected from there ... There is no consistency between the test data and what they say."

"How much value could the data have if the procedures were wrong?"

2 'robbers' killed in 'gunfight'

UNB, Munshiganj

Two suspected robbers were killed in a "gunfight" with Rapid Action Battalion in Bejgaon bus terminal area of the district's Sreenagar upazila on Tuesday.

Enayet Hossain Mannan, superintendent of police of Rab-11 in Munshiganj, said the duo committed a robbery in Shariatpur's Gosairhat upazila a few days ago.

The "gunfight" broke out on the Dhaka-Mawa Highway around noon when members of Rab-2 were pursuing the robbers, he added.

Hedayetull Islam Bhuiyan, officer-in-charge of Sreenagar Police Station, said the two men were going to Dhaka on a battery-run auto rickshaw.

They opened fire on the approaching Rab team, triggering the "gunfight" which left the two dead, the OC said.

Asaduzzaman, additional SP (Sreenagar-Louhajang Circle), said the bodies were sent to Munshiganj General Hospital.

Tk 10/kg rice

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holder will be able to buy 5kg rice at a time.

"We have 50 thousand tonnes of rice for this programme. But we do not know how long we have to support people. So probably we will get more rice under this if this situation prolongs," the secretary said.

Asked about the alleged theft of OMS rice across the country, she said, OMS rice was not misappropriated much. Mostly the rice distributed for food friendly programme was theft, she said.

However, the secretary added, the government asked the local administrations and law enforcers to take stern action against those who are involved in this graft.

The ministry issued separate letters to law enforcers and district administrations to investigate the allegations of rice theft and cancel dealerships of those engaged in the misappropriation, officials said.

Law enforcers since march 30 recovered a total of 281.5 tonnes of

rice (5,681 sacks containing 50kg each) and arrested 43 people in 40 upazilas in this connection. Also they have recovered 6,480 litre soyabean oil in Rangpur, 18 sacks of sugar, 25 sacks of chickpeas from Narail.

The local administrations and police seized over six tonnes and over 260 sacks of government rice and arrested seven persons on charges of irregularities in eight districts since Monday.

Record new cases

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About the lockdown, he said, "It is not possible to extend the lockdown again and again. You know, the lockdown will be enforced till April 25. It is urgent that we stay at home during this period."

DGHS Director General Prof Dr Abul Kalam Azad and Additional Director General (admin) Prof Nasima Sultana also addressed the online briefing.



Youth harvesting Boro paddy in Brahmanbaria's Sarail upazila as an acute shortage of labourers gripped the area over Covid-19 outbreak. The photo was taken near Dharanti haor on Tuesday.

PHOTO: MASUK HRIDYO

Save Boro first, then Aush

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he said. However, farmers and agriculture experts do not agree with this.

Except for the haor region in Sylhet division, where Boro harvest has already begun, the Boro paddy fields in other parts of the country are still in need of irrigation before the crop is harvested next month, according to officials of Department of Agricultural Extension (DAE) and Bangladesh Rice Research Institute (BRRI).

A government cushion from beginning of this month would have saved small and marginal farmers from going broke with debt due to exorbitant irrigation costs, said the officials.

Boro cultivation starts in November-December. Up to one week before harvest, the fields require irrigation, farmers and agriculturists said.

In 2018-19, of 3.64 crore tonnes of rice produced in the country, Boro was 54 percent, Aman 38 percent and Aush only eight percent, from BBS data.

This year, the DAE is expecting two crore tonnes of Boro from 47.54 lakh hectares of land and 34 lakh tonnes of Aush from around 14 lakh hectares.

THE INCENTIVES
On April 12, Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina unveiled a stimulus package of Tk 5,000 crore to support agricultural sectors such as horticulture, fisheries, poultry, dairy and livestock.

Entrepreneurs who directly buy crops and cereals from farmers to sell in the market are also among the beneficiaries of the package, to be disbursed by banks through loans within September 30 at a maximum interest rate of four percent.

However, the package leaves out all crop and cereal farmers including those cultivating Boro.

A Bangladesh Bank circular detailing the package states that banks can lend a maximum of Tk 14,500 crore in the current fiscal year to crop and cereal farmers under an existing scheme, whose interest rate is nine percent.

The agriculture ministry also left out Boro farmers from their recent stimulus package declared on April 8 allocating Tk 9.29 crore for distributing free seeds and fertilisers for Aush cultivation, scheduled to begin early next month.

In a few days, the government is likely to send directives about reduction of irrigation charges that are controlled by two major water providing institutions under the ministry -- Barind Multipurpose Development Authority (BMDA) and Bangladesh Agricultural Development Corporation (BADC), said Md Nasiruzzaman, secretary of the agriculture ministry.

"We mainly want to provide the facility to Aush crop and encourage the farmers for an increased cultivation and thus confirm a surplus production of

rice," the secretary said.

Agriculture experts say increasing Aush production has become important for Bangladesh to avoid a food crisis as coronavirus might impact import of crops from other countries, but Boro should have been included in the support too.

A top agriculture official, wishing anonymity, said immediate support could have helped many Boro farmers. He said Boro cultivation used to account for around 60 percent of total rice output in previous years, but was reduced last year for lack of support.

Since Boro farmers had low paddy prices last year, several agricultural institutions including BRRI, DAE, BADC and BMDA, sent proposals to the ministry for waiving irrigation charges in full, he said.

But the farmers did not get the waiver this season.

Meanwhile, the government's allocation of Tk 200 crore to help farmers buy agricultural machinery, including combine-harvester and reaper with subsidy, is not helping farmers either, said Naogaon's farmer Rezaul Hasan.

"The combine harvesters do not work well in small plots of land. It also damages the hay, which many farmers sell to recover loss from sale of paddy. Only the threshing machine truly benefits the farmers," he said.

FARMER'S PLIGHT
Rezaul, who is cultivating Boro on 30 acres of land Niamatpur upazila, spends around Tk 1,400 to Tk 3,500 per 0.4 acres to irrigate his cropland.

Although he qualifies for an agriculture loan from banks, he goes without one. He claimed borrowers often have to bribe middlemen to obtain the loan.

Khoka Pramanik cultivating 1.2 acres of land in Manda upazila said small farmers don't get bank loans. "I had to borrow from a microfinance institution to cultivate my land."

Alamgir Hossain of Noihati village in Khulna's Rupsha upazila had to sign a crop sharing contract with his irrigation provider to irrigate 2.8 acres of land, where he cultivated Boro.

Boro harvest is expected to start the second week of May in Khulna and farmers must water their fields at least 10 days before the harvest, he said, adding that he also cannot find labour to tend his field.

"I can see another loss waiting for me. I will never cultivate paddy again other than for my own consumption," said Alamgir. He had borrowed Tk 2.30 lakh from a local cooperative society during last Aman cultivation and incurred a loss.

Anil Ekka of Shahanapara in Rajshahi's Godagari upazila had to sell

two of his lambs for Tk 4,000 to finance Boro cultivation on 0.8 acres of leased land.

He still needs 10,000 for fertiliser, insecticides and water.

He would have earned the money toiling as a day labourer otherwise, but the shutdown imposed to stem coronavirus transmission cancelled his earning strategy.

"I've borrowed most of the money. I have no cash at hand now. I don't know how I shall manage water for the rest of the days [of cultivation]," Anil said on April.

According to BBS data, of the country's 16,562,974 farmers, 78.62 percent are small farmers while 6.83 percent are marginal.

A study by Bangladesh Institute of Development Studies categorises marginal farmers as owning 0.51 acre to 1.0 acres of land, small as 1.01 acres to 2.5 acres of land, medium owning 2.51 acres to 5.0 acres, and large with ownership of more than 5.0 acres of land.

Many small and marginal farmers, operating in less than 1.5 acres of land, raise their expenditures by working at temporary jobs in cities and towns. Due to the shutdown, this opportunity is unavailable.

To make matters worse, this year the irrigation cost has risen because of the dry weather, said Aminul Haque, another farmer.

On behalf of Barind Multipurpose Development Authority, Aminul sells prepaid cards each costing Tk 2,500 for irrigation among 135 farmers cultivating Boro on 129.37 acres of land in Rajshahi's Tanore upazila's Komla union. He gets commission on the sale card sales.

He sold at least 128 prepaid cards at Tk 3.20 lakh this season against last year's sale of 95 cards at Tk 2.37 lakh.

"Most farmers had to borrow to pay off the irrigation cost," he said.

BMDA officials say the organisation collected Tk 200 crore in irrigation charges from farmers in Rajshahi and Rangpur divisions in 2018-2019.

BADC collects around Tk 12 crore annually providing irrigation to 5.29 lakh hectares of land across the country, said Ziaul Haque, chief engineer of its small irrigation wing.

Other than BMDA and BADC, private companies also provide irrigation to 42.39 lakh hectares of land in the country, but decisions about their irrigation charges have not been made yet, agriculture ministry officials said.

"Farmers now deserve full protection, free irrigation and a loan at no interest," said Prof Mohammad Saidur Rahman of Bangladesh Agricultural University.

"They're providing us with food that will determine our future survival," he added.

First doctor

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condolences, saying, "One of our co-fighters has died; it feels like I have lost a brother."

Moyeen was a specialist of medicine and heart diseases, said Nirupam Das, chief administrator of Bangladesh Doctors Foundation.

According to a tally of the foundation, around 100 healthcare workers, including 54 doctors, in the country have been infected with the virus, he said.

Moyeen will be buried at his village home in Sunamganj's Chhatak upazila, said Ihteshamul Haque Chowdhury, secretary general of Bangladesh Medical Association.

The doctor went into self-isolation with Covid-19 like symptoms in the last week of March and his sample was collected on April 4, according to the doctors of SOMCH.

His test results came the next day and he was admitted to the Covid-19 isolation centre in Sylhet Shaheed Shamsuddin Ahmed Hospital on April 7.

On April 8, Moyeen wanted to get admitted at the ICU of SOMCH. But as the hospital authorities refused to admit him, he wished to be transferred to a hospital in Dhaka.

Upon his request, doctors referred him to KGH the same day.

The authorities could not even manage an ambulance with ICU facilities, let alone an air ambulance, forcing his family to bring him to Dhaka all by themselves on the night of April 8.

Asked about the matter, Himangshu Lal Roy, deputy director at SOMCH, said, "There is a two-bed makeshift ICU at the isolation centre of Sylhet Shaheed Shamsuddin Ahmed Hospital. But Moyeen wanted to be placed at the ICU of Osmani Medical College Hospital."

"As per the instruction of the ministry, no Covid-19 patient was supposed to be admitted at regular hospitals other than the isolation centres dedicated for such patients," he said.

He claimed that they tried to arrange an air ambulance but failed.

Asked why they could not manage an ambulance with ICU facilities, he said, "There is no such ambulance in government hospitals."

Professor AFM Nazmul Islam, head of the department of medicine of Sylhet MAG Osmani Medical College, said, "We are shocked to lose our colleague. This is a desperate time and doctors are highly exposed to the virus."

But how could a Covid-19 patient -- be him a doctor or a general patient -- not be treated at the ICU of SOMCH, he questioned.

"To treat emergency patients is the purpose of an ICU. But we let him go to Dhaka instead of treating him here," he said.

"We could have tried our best to treat the doctor we have just lost."

However, Prof Abul Kalam Azad, director general of Directorate General of Health Services, yesterday claimed they took all the measures for Moyeen as per the instruction of the health minister.

During a daily briefing on Covid-19 update through videoconferencing, he said Moyeen had contracted the disease while treating Covid-19 patients.

He said the prime minister assured that the government would take full responsibility of Moyeen's family.

The family will soon receive the special health insurance for doctors which has been announced recently, the DG also said quoting the PM.

Premananda Mandal, civil surgeon of Sylhet, said 12 people, including family members and a few colleagues of Moyeen, were tested, but no one was found positive.

Hailed from Nadampur village, Moyeen studied at Dhaka Medical College and joined the government service under health cadre.

The demise of the generous doctor has also shocked his villagers who used to visit the medicine specialist for free every weekend.

Askir Miah, a resident of Nadampur, said, "Moyeen used to come to the village almost every weekend and used to treat people free of cost. He used to give away free medicine to the people in need."

she said.