

Surge in deaths rings alarm

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Till last night, Italy reported 168,941 confirmed cases with 22,170 deaths, according to worldometer.

Globally, scientists have found eight strains of the coronavirus. Different strains are dominating different regions, Prof Saif said.

He also pointed out that Bangladesh had reported no transmission of the coronavirus after many came from China, where the virus originated.

"There is no scientific evidence, it is just a scientific hunch," he said adding, "Although it is premature to comment without scientific base, we have to take initiatives considering certain issues."

At the daily briefing on the country's coronavirus situation yesterday, Health Minister Zahid Maleque said, "Nearly 80 percent of the Covid-19 patients don't require any treatment. But some people might need oxygen support and medicines."

He said the virus spread to 40 out of the 64 districts and that most of the infected ones contracted the disease from those from Dhaka and Narayanganj, which is now dubbed the epicenter of the coronavirus outbreak in Bangladesh.

On Thursday, the government declared that the entire country was at risk amid the coronavirus outbreak.

The minister said some 2,190 samples were tested in 24 hours till 2:30pm yesterday.

With it, the total number of samples tested in 17 labs across the country reached 19,193. Overall, 9.5 percent of all samples have tested positive. It was 9.2 percent the previous day.

Of the infected cases, the minister said, some 500 received treatment at hospitals, which is 33 percent of the total cases. The rests were receiving treatment at home.

Nine people recovered in the 24 hours, taking the total number of recovery cases to 58, he said.

Expressing dissatisfaction at many still roaming outside, the minister said they were ignoring social distancing, which is crucial in containing the spread of the deadly virus. "This negligence is putting everyone in danger."

He also urged everyone to do corona

test if they showed symptoms of the disease.

"If we try to stay indoors till April 25, we'll succeed [in fighting the virus]."

To win the fight, experts have, however, suggested that the government analyse how the ongoing lockdown has impacted curbing the virus' transmission since the number of deaths and infections is on the rise.

"There should be an evaluation of the effectiveness of the lockdown. Any steps taken by the authorities must have a goal. Otherwise, all measures may turn futile," Prof Saif Ullah said.

YOUTHS MOST AFFECTED
Providing additional information on the countrywide infection, Meerjady Sabrina Flora, director of the Institute of Epidemiology, Disease Control and Research (IEDCR), said 21-30 was the worst affected age group.

About 21 percent of the total cases are aged between 21 and 30, while 19 percent between 31 and 40, and 15 percent between 41 and 50 years, she said.

Of all cases of infection, 46 percent were reported in Dhaka city, 20 percent in Narayanganj and the rest elsewhere.

Gazipur is another district with growing number of coronavirus cases, followed by Chattogram and Munshiganj, she said.

The highest number of cases in Dhaka has been reported in Mirpur area.

Out of the total patients in Dhaka, 11 percent were from Mirpur. Mohammadpur, Wari and Jatrabari areas had 4 percent patients each, Prof Flora said.

She also said among the total infected, 68 percent were taking treatment at their homes while 32 percent were admitted to different hospitals.

"Not all the 32 percent of the Covid-19 patients, who are receiving treatment at hospitals, required hospitalisation," she said, adding that many had to be admitted to hospitals in face of social pressure.

She emphasised that if a patient was in a stable state, it was best for the person and the health authorities that the individual was given treatment at his home in complete isolation.

8 special flights

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Many Bangladeshis there are suffering from an acute financial crisis as most of the banks and money exchange booths in India are closed due to the lockdown, making transactions from Bangladesh extremely difficult, if not impossible.

About the concerns related to fare, Kamrul of US Bangla Airlines says, "There is no scope of comparing usual airfare to the fare of these special flights. We shall fly empty aircraft to Chennai and Kolkata. Although the seating capacity of every aircraft is 164, we shall have to fly to Dhaka even if we get only 10 or 50 passengers. So, we had to consider these factors before determining the fare."

However, according to Bangladeshis stranded in Chennai and its nearby town Vellore, there are at least 1,000 of them and six flights would not be enough to take them all back to Bangladesh.

There are hundreds of Bangladeshis in Bangalore and Hyderabad, who are also willing to return to Dhaka via Chennai.

Mahtab Hossain, a Bangladeshi stranded in Chennai says, "The airline is giving priority to those who booked tickets earlier but had their flights cancelled due to the lockdown. Chances are little that we shall be able to get the tickets."

Even if they get tickets, they are not certain if they would be able to board the plane.

Due to strict lockdown, all inter-state and intra-state transports are banned in India whereas these passengers will have to travel to the airport on their arrangements.

"It's almost impossible to arrange transport to Chennai from Vellore, Bangalore or Hyderabad unless we get support from Bangladesh High Commission in India," said Kamal, another Bangladeshi stranded in Vellore.

Moreover, many Bangladeshis have been held hostage by the hotel and rest house owners as the latter are reluctant to clear them without full payment of rents.

Md Idris Hasan, a Bangladeshi

stranded in Vellore, said, "Tamil Nadu government ordered the guest house and hotel owners to waive 100 percent of the rents from March 25 to March 31 and 50 percent from April 1 until the end of the lockdown. However, most of the owners are not abiding by this order."

"When we informed the local police station, they told us to talk to the high commission. If we cannot pay the rent, they will not allow us to leave the hotel and we shall not be able to take the flights."

According to a press release issued by Bangladesh High Commission in India on April 15, the high commission is working with the Indian government to solve the transport and house rent issues. The commission has asked all the Bangladeshis to wait and to be patient until further notice.

On April 3, the foreign ministry of Bangladesh issued a statement, saying that nearly 2,500 Bangladeshi citizens, including 1,000 students are currently stranded in India due to the Covid-19 outbreak.

The government is firmly committed to bringing them back quickly, who got stuck in India and other countries, once the situation becomes convenient, said the statement.

Bangladesh brings back 48 from Thailand

Meanwhile, Forty-eight stranded Bangladeshis who went to Thailand for taking treatment, returned to Dhaka yesterday afternoon from Bangkok.

Carrying the Bangladeshi citizens, a special flight of US-Bangla Airlines landed at the Hazrat Shahjalal International Airport at around 4:20pm, said Kamrul Islam.

Apart from them, the dead body of a Bangladeshi who died at a Bangkok hospital was also brought back in the same flight, Kamrul also said.

All the 48 Bangladeshi citizens were allowed to go to their homes on condition that they will stay in self-quarantine at their houses for 14 days as all of them submitted medical certificates that they were tested negative for Covid-19, said Md Jahirul, a doctor at the health desk of HSA.

RMG factories not opening

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factories would not be reopened as per the previous plan.

"It is being observed that there are some misleading information circulating in social media regarding opening of the BGMEA factories," she told The Daily Star in a WhatsApp message.

"The position of BGMEA is very clear on this. We need to be safe first before we operate. If the situation improves, Inshallah, we will when the time is right. But for now, the first and only priority is the health and safety of our workers."

"The BGMEA was planning to open factories subject to Covid-19 situation and after yesterday's official declaration, the BGMEA will wait and observe the situation and plan accordingly," Rubana said.

Earlier, BGMEA and Bangladesh Knitwear Manufacturers and Exporters Association (BKMEA) in a joint statement urged the member factories to shut down the factories to prevent the spread of coronavirus.

However, the BGMEA and the BKMEA in the statement said if any factory wanted to stay open for paying salaries to its workers for the month of March, they must seek permission from the associations and industrial

police. On the other hand, the government's Department of Inspection for Factories and Establishments (DIFE) in a statement on Tuesday said the factories can be kept open if they have work orders from the international retailers and brands, and the factories which are engaged in production of Personal Protective Equipment, masks and goods related to coronavirus prevention.

The DIFE also said the government would take legal actions like filing cases and suspend the renewal of factory licences if any factory owners failed to pay the workers by April 16.

It will send a list of factories which failed to pay the workers within the deadline to the labour and employment ministry on April 20.

Meanwhile, garment workers in Gazipur's Sreepur yesterday took to the streets, demanding their last month's salaries.

The workers of MHC Apparels Ltd blocked the Dhaka-Sreepur highway in the morning. Around its 3,000 workers withdrew the blockade following assurances of payment around noon.

KDM Global Apparels Ltd workers also demonstrated for the same demand, reports our Gazipur correspondent.



A vegetables vendor on Nazimuddin Road in Old Dhaka wears a full body protection suit and mask as he sells to his customers. He, however, forgot about protecting his left hand. The photo was taken a couple of days ago.

Saving lives, helping the vulnerable vital

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Mia Seppo: The magnitude of the current health crisis is so severe that even countries with strong health systems are currently overwhelmed and facing enormous challenges in responding to high number of cases. Currently, Bangladesh is facing clusters of cases and high-risk areas have been put in lockdown. Physical distancing measures are important because they can slow the spread of the virus, but they will not stop the pandemic. While in the majority of cases the virus isn't deadly, it's vital to act now to slow its spread and ensure healthcare systems can cope.

Furthermore, physical distancing is a defensive measure. To win, we need to attack the virus with aggressive and targeted tactics -- finding cases, isolating and caring for every confirmed case, and tracing and quarantining every close contact. In summary; to turn the pandemic around, countries need to invest in comprehensive, innovative and localised approaches.

TDS: Joblessness or lack of business opportunities have become major worries for Bangladesh. What would be your suggestions in addressing it?

Mia Seppo: As the (UN) secretary general said, we must tackle the devastating social and economic dimensions of this crisis, with a focus on those most affected: women, older persons, youth, low-wage workers, small and medium-sized enterprises, the informal sector and vulnerable groups. The recovery from the Covid-19 crisis must lead to a different economy. Everything we do during and after this crisis must be done with a strong focus on building more equal, inclusive and sustainable economies and societies that are more resilient in the face of pandemics, climate change and the many other global challenges we face.

The Bangladesh government was quick to announce extra support, especially food, for those struggling during the holidays. As the crisis is still progressing in Bangladesh, we have to wait for some time for a fuller understanding of the impacts it

will have. For creating jobs, a major short-term impetus could come from ramping up public investment and public works. Importantly, the government and the private sector could strategise to ensure security, safety, adequate finance, transportation and trade logistics so that the closed factories and enterprises can recover and rebuild.

TDS: Bangladesh has some 10 million migrant workers spread mostly across the Middle East and Southeast Asia. Many are losing jobs and distressed. How can the UN help in this regard?

Mia Seppo: This virus has shown that it does not discriminate, and we are all vulnerable to the effects of it. However, some in our global society are more vulnerable to the economic and social impacts it is having and will have. Covid-19 can be controlled only if there is an inclusive global approach which protects every individual's rights to life and health, including migrants regardless of their migratory status. Migrants and refugees are disproportionately vulnerable to exclusion, stigma and discrimination, particularly when undocumented. The UN has been advocating for governments around the world to do all they can to protect the rights and the health of everyone. Further, it is important that migrants are included in measures that are being introduced to mitigate the economic downturn caused by Covid-19.

TDS: UN prepared a plan to support Bangladesh in the fight against Covid-19. Can you please detail it?

Mia Seppo: The plan looks at key areas for enhancing government capacity: surveillance and laboratory support, contact tracing and screening, case management and infection prevention control, risk communication and community engagement, logistics and procurement, preserving social cohesion. At this stage, the top priority is scaling up testing capacities, equipping the health care system for a potential influx of severe

and critical Covid-19 cases. This includes sourcing relevant PPE, other medical equipment and supplies, training for health staff, and urgent communications with the general population about Covid-19.

The nature of the global pandemic, global competition over scare resources and the potential far-reaching consequences of the pandemic are reverberating around the world. Now more than ever it's important for all governments, including here in Bangladesh, to utilise all capacity available in the country to address this crisis, something the Bangladesh government has already been working on with support from the UN, civil society and partners.

TDS: Isn't it a time of global solidarity in real sense?

Mia Seppo: UN Secretary-General António Guterres has recently urged warring parties across the world to lay down their weapons in support of the bigger battle against Covid-19: the common enemy that is now threatening all of humankind. This is a time of and for global solidarity. The virus has shown that it does not discriminate, and we are all vulnerable to its effects. We know that developing countries are much more likely to bear the brunt of health and economic impacts of Covid-19.

Despite the challenges all countries are facing, we've also seen them working together to support each other as best they can whether through supplying much needed equipment and supplies, treatment facilities, or even manpower.

My hope is that when the threat of Covid-19 reduces and we move to recovery, socially, economically and mentally, we will see the difference it made to have a multilateral approach at the global level, unified responses at the country level and communities and individuals coming together. My hope is that we will learn the importance of pulling together. The response to Covid-19 is only as strong as its weakest link, as the weakest health system. Therefore, more than ever, we cannot leave anyone behind.

just to celebrate the occasion."

BACK IN COX'S BAZAR

"In Cox's Bazar, we have around 4,000 volunteers and some 2,300 staffers. Around 2,000 are on the frontline," Hasina said of her current undertaking.

Hasina praised the speed at which authorities in Cox's Bazar have been working, especially when it came to inter-agency coordination.

"Physical distancing measures are in place from our side when it comes to those visiting our healthcare or information centres or when food is being distributed, but it is still a challenge to make the community understand and follow all the instructions."

"When I heard our workers were cleaning around 4,400 metres of the drainage systems, I asked how they were doing it while maintaining distance. They sent me pictures. They had even fashioned a scale to measure how far to stand from each other," she said, the pride evident in her voice.

Asked how she responded to being summoned to the Ebola crisis in 2019 and how she feels in the current situation, she said, "With Ebola we knew how it was transmitted. This time, we are not fully sure..."

Asked what being in the thick of things meant, she said, "The thing is, in the line of war, we can only see what's in front. Nothing else matters." Nervousness. Fears. They aren't there. Nothing exists but the here and the now, she said.

"When I look back and realise what I had been through, I ask myself, 'Really?'"

The full story is on www.thedailystar.net

Schoolgirl raped in Pabna

OUR CORRESPONDENT, Pabna

A man allegedly raped a schoolgirl in the toilet of Dharbila community health centre in Pabna around noon on Thursday.

Police arrested accused Abdur Rahman, 40, from Dharbila village on Thursday night after the victim's father filed a rape case.

Yesterday, a local court sent the arrestee to jail after police produced him before it.

Mohaiminul Islam, sub-inspector of Pabna Police Station, said the girl was playing near her house which is not far away from the health centre.

He said Rahman took the seven-year-old girl, a first grader at a local school, to the toilet by tempting her with toys around 12:30pm on Thursday.

The accused raped the girl when the health centre was empty, the SI said.

As the victim screamed for help, Rahman fled the spot. Later, the girl's family members rescued her, Mohaiminul added, quoting the case statement.

The SI said the girl would be sent to a local hospital today for medical examinations.

7 die

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focal person at the hospital's flu corner.

The boy, who was admitted to KMCH on Thursday night, passed away around noon yesterday, the physician added.

In Rangpur, a 29-year-old man, who returned from Narayanganj 13 days ago, died of coronavirus-like symptoms at his village home in Khashti area of Pirganj upazila.

In Chattogram, an 18-year-old, who had been undergoing treatment at the isolation unit of a local health complex for the last couple of days, passed away at Chattogram Medical College Hospital. A resident of Rangamati's Baghaichhari upazila, the youth was suffering from cold, cough and fever.

In Rangamati, a 21-year-old garment worker, died of coronavirus-like symptoms at his village home in Bangalhalia area of Rajasthali upazila on Thursday night. He worked at a garment factory in Chattogram.

In Bagerhat, a 65-year-old man passed away at Bagerhat Sadar Hospital on Thursday evening. He was receiving treatment at the isolation unit of the hospital for respiratory problems.

In Satkhira, a 22-year-old youth died while offering Johr prayers at a mosque in Arialkhali village around 1:30pm on Thursday, said OC Asaduzzam of Satkhira Sadar Police Station, quoting the youth's family members.

A worker at a brickfield in Dhaka, the youth returned home about two weeks ago. He suffered from vomiting a couple of days ago, said local health officer Dr Mahbubur Rahman, quoting the youth's neighbours.

His death caused panic among the villagers. Samples from his body were collected for Covid-19 test, the physician added.

In Madaripur, the administration enforced lockdown of the district from 10:00pm on Thursday.

The administration in Pirojpur put the district on lockdown on Thursday night.

In Barisal, the medicine unit-3 of Sher-e-Bangla Medical College Hospital was put on lockdown on Thursday after a patient tested positive for Covid-19.

At least 24 health workers, including doctors, nurses and staffers, of the hospital were sent home to quarantine themselves.

Besides, five more coronavirus cases were reported in the district on Thursday, raising the total number of Covid-19 patients to 15.

In Kishoreganj, 11 people, including three doctors, tested positive for coronavirus yesterday.

Our correspondents in Mymensingh, Khulna, Dinajpur, Rangamati, Bagerhat, Satkhira, Faridpur, Pirojpur, and Barishal contributed to this report.

ASI arrested

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Another victim Moin Uddin, 32, of Kaliakoir is being treated at Enam Medical College Hospital in Savar with two bullet injuries to his stomach, he added.

Minister Mozammel told reporters that he asked the authorities to fire the suspect from his job because he seemed to have committed the crime in cold blood.

Quoting witnesses and the suspect, OC Alamgir said Kumar and the two men used to be friends and often hung out and sometimes took drugs.

Kumar recently started suspecting that Moin was having an affair with his wife, Alamgir said, adding that Kumar and his wife had been fighting over the issue a lot.

On Thursday night Kumar asked both men to come and hang out with him at a quiet place in Kutubdia area.

Around 9:45pm, Kumar arrived at the scene on a motorcycle and started shooting at both men as soon as he saw them, the OC added.

But he fled in a hurry as people in the neighbourhood heard the gunshots and started coming to the scene, the officer said.

It appears that Kumar had planned to kill the men, Alamgir said.

On information, police recovered Shaheed's body and sent Moin to a hospital.

Russel Sheikh, additional superintendent of police in Gazipur, said Kumar was arrested in Ashulia with a pistol and six bullets. He was on leave during the crime.