

But who'll run the tests?

No medical technologists appointed at govt hospitals in last 11 years

ASIFUR RAHMAN

With coronavirus positive cases increasing in the country, many are expressing dissatisfaction over the small number of tests being conducted every day and wondering about the possible reason behind this.

The reason is quite shocking. No medical technologists (MT), entitled with the duty of testing and analysing body fluids at laboratories, were appointed at government hospitals in the last 11 years.

According to health professionals, due to the shortage, the number of coronavirus testing in the country is still low compared to other countries. Even those working as MTs at laboratories are not well trained, they added.

There is only one MT against four doctors in Bangladesh whereas at least five should be appointed against each doctor, as per World Health Organization guidelines.

Also, against every 10,000 people, there are only 0.32 MTs, which means only one MT is in charge for over 30,000 people.

The latest health bulletin of Directorate General of Health Services (DGHS), published in November 2018, reported that a total of 2,736 MT posts (of the total 7,920) are lying vacant at the country's medical college hospitals.

'FEUD DELAYING HIRING'

A feud between DGHS and the Board of Technical Education is allegedly delaying the recruitment for the past 11 years.

A series of inter-ministerial meetings were held, new laws were introduced, two writ petitions and an appeal were filed with the High Court and a verdict was also delivered, but still the process of recruitment remained halted.

As a result, despite the 17 laboratories in and outside Dhaka having the ability to conduct more than 4,000 tests a day; they could test only 1,000 samples, said health officials, seeking anonymity.

"It is not possible to collect samples from community clinics with the least amount of manpower and test those," Selim Molla, former secretary general of Bangladesh Medical Technologist Association, had said in a statement recently.

In this situation, it will be easier to appoint unemployed MTs who passed from various public-private institutions under the Ministry of Public Health to collect and test the samples, Molla told The Daily Star.

The health ministry has no such plans.

Additional Secretary (Administration) Habibur Rahman Khan said, "We have manpower crisis, challenges in collecting samples. That's why we are providing online training to health workers. But we

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People queue up to buy essentials from a Trading Corporation of Bangladesh (TCB) truck at Mirpur's Shewrapara, with little regard for social distancing. The truck sells groceries at a low price, and some people had been waiting since morning for it to show up. The photo was taken yesterday afternoon.

PHOTO: RASHED SHUMON

Take special measures for the marginalised

Development orgs urge govt

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

A coalition of leading development organisations yesterday called on the government and other development actors to prioritise needs of the marginalised by taking comprehensive, inclusive and far-sighted measures to protect them amid the evolving coronavirus situation.

Special consideration needs to be given to 11.3 percent extreme poor population in rural and urban areas, with a focus on geographically marginalised population in haor and char areas of Bangladesh, the coalition "Leave No One Behind" said in a statement.

"The coronavirus emergency is primarily a health crisis, but it has the potential to have severe medium and long term negative socioeconomic impact on every segment of the society. It is the poorest and marginalised of Bangladesh who will be

the hardest hit," it said.

Particularly, women and children of vulnerable communities will severely suffer from the economic and social impacts, it added.

The coalition comprises of Brac, Save the Children in Bangladesh, Plan International, ActionAid Bangladesh, Transparency International Bangladesh, Islamic Relief, international Christian development organisation CBM, and Voluntary Service Overseas.

Praising government's measures to stop coronavirus infections and the stimulus packages, the coalition said it was important to remember the already vulnerable, marginalised and poorest communities are living in the fringes of society.

People with disability, ethnic minority groups, transgender communities, sex workers and people with sexually

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Four flights to take UK citizens home

UNB, Dhaka

Four special flights will be operated from Dhaka to London between April 21 and 26 to take back British citizens and their direct dependants.

British visitors currently in Sylhet will also have the option to book domestic transfer from Sylhet to Dhaka ahead of each of these flights, said the British government.

Up to 150,000 British nationals visit Bangladesh every year. There are currently no commercial options available for them to return to the UK due to flight restrictions announced by the Bangladesh government.

British High Commissioner to Bangladesh Robert Chatterton Dickson said in a video message, "I'm very pleased to announce the start of our charter programme taking British visitors home from Bangladesh to the UK."

He said they have worked very hard to keep the cost of these flights as low as they can. "The price per head will be £600, whether you're starting from Dhaka or Sylhet."

Interested British citizens can book these flights through Corporate Travel Management (CTM) or travel management partner.

"I'm very pleased that we've this charter programme up and running. Thank you for your patience, and I'm delighted that you'll now have the opportunity to return home very soon," said the British high commissioner.

The watermelon divers of Kirtankhola

SUSHANTA GHOSH

Like the kingfisher dive-bombs into rivers to prey on small fish, these boys plunge into the Kirtankhola to collect stray watermelons every day of the season.

Flowing from the west bank of Barishal city, Kirtankhola plays host to watermelon traders from all around the region. Every day, hundreds of trawlers from Bhola, Patuakhali, and Barguna anchor at Port Road's watermelon trade hub.

The trawlers are filled to the brim before they set sail, and it's almost expected that a few of the green-goodness will be lost to the river. This is where our boys come in.

Jasim (12) and Ibrahim (10) are siblings from nearby Rasulpur slum area. They go to a local primary school, to fifth and fourth grades respectively. Their father is a daywage worker and mother works as a house help.

During watermelon season, the boys get to work at noon. Like other children of the Rasulpur slum, the brothers know how to swim, and they're not afraid to take on the waves. They get on their styrofoam rafts and pick-up stray watermelons, even if they are floating in the middle of the river. They have done this for so long that they might have really developed kingfisher like scoping abilities -- they say nothing escapes their eyes!

Although the coronavirus shutdown is negatively affecting almost everyone else's lives, for the boys, the leisure is but an

opportunity to grab even more.

Watermelon is a big fruit, so any number they get is a good number. Once they feel like they have enough, they bring it home and share with the family. For a cash-strapped family like theirs, delicacies are hard to come by, and so these melons bring a lot of extra happiness.

In fact, it's not just watermelons. When the melons are out of stock, the boys collect everything from coconuts, lime, betel gourd, pumpkin, guava, lemon. Basically any and everything that plies the river and drops into it.

The river is like a companion to the children who grow up in Rasulpur, the Barishal City Corporation councillor of the area said. So much so, that some of them harbour dreams to spend the rest of their lives with it. Like Jasim, who said he wants to grow up to be a "pilot" of a passenger launch.

"I like the river. If I get to become a pilot, my family can live in more comfort, and we won't have to pick-up watermelons from the river."

But wait, does this mean he doesn't like doing this? Turns out, that's not the case at all.

"No, no, that's not to say I don't like this. It is my pleasure to dive for watermelons and all the other fruits and vegetables. It has become something of a hobby and it brings me a lot of joy," Jasim corrected himself with a smile.

Law ministry opens legal aid helpline

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

The law ministry has opened a national helpline -- 16430 -- to provide legal aid to the poor, especially the labourers, without any cost during the ongoing crisis.

The ministry is providing the service through its National Legal Aid and Services Organisation (NLASO) and its district legal aid offices across the country.

Masuda Yeasmin, assistant director of NLASO, told The Daily Star yesterday that the toll-free number is open 24 hours a day. Anybody can call to get legal advice from NLASO any time during the current coronavirus outbreak free of charge, she said.

Replying to a question, Masuda said several helpless people from across the country communicate with the NLASO office through the helpline everyday and the office gives them legal support and solve their problems either through the district legal aid office or over phone.

Law Minister Anisul Huq is looking over the helpline activities, and also giving necessary directives to the offices concerned in order to ensure the legal aid, she added.

SPAWN OF CARP EGGS

Pollution-free Halda raises breeders' hopes

Worries remain over transportation due to shutdown

MOSTAFA YOUSUF, Ctg

Around a thousand fish egg collectors at Halda river, a unique natural breeding ground for carp fish in South Asia, are hoping for a high yield this year due to drop in pollution following the countrywide shutdown to tackle Covid-19.

However, they are worried about selling their possible haul because of the current situation.

Md Elias (55), a seasoned egg collector from Chattogram's Hathazari upazila, told The Daily Star that they were praying for a late spawning season, ideally in May.

"As pollution and human activity have dropped significantly, we're hoping for a big haul," he said.

He also urged the government to take steps so that the eggs do not get ruined.

Prompt vigilance by local administration, shutdown of key pollution sources last year and the shutdown have helped the river detoxify itself, said Prof Manzoorul Kibria, eminent Halda researcher and zoology professor at Chittagong University.

He said recent efforts and the coincidental shutdown is a boon for the river, raising hopes for a big haul.

However, the first phase of collection (locally known as "joe"), which was from April 7-13, did not see any spawning.

Now, collectors are optimistic of the second joe, expected to run from April 18-24. If gusty winds, downpours and thunderstorms occur during the timeframe, brood fish will lay eggs, as the environment is congenial for spawning.

When the first phase does not see much spawning, the second phase provides good yield, said the professor.

Prof Kibria said due to the shutdown, transportation of eggs might be restricted, so the government has to provide a resolution.

Ruhul Amin, Hathazari upazila nirbahi officer, told The Daily Star that they were planning to set up a temporary egg market, maintaining social distancing, to resolve the matter.

A restaurant-turned-community kitchen

Abinash Bangla feeding dozens of low-income people every day in capital

MATHEWS CHIRAN

As the clock hits 12:30pm, a group of people can be seen busily organising meal-plates at the Mazaa restaurant in front of Mohammadpur Tajmahal Road's Krishi Market.

Seeing this, one might wonder why and how a restaurant is staying open during the ongoing countrywide shutdown to contain the spread of the novel coronavirus. One might also wonder why there are a number of people from lower-income groups gathered there.

"Although my restaurant is closed, I keep the kitchen open so that needy neighbours can come have a lunch prepared by volunteers," said Sadaf Hasnaen Manzoor, owner of the restaurant and founder of Abinash Bangla Foundation -- a volunteering organisation.

Since April 4, around a hundred people have been eating at this community kitchen every day, under an initiative called "Madhyanno Bhoj Eksho" (Lunch for a hundred people). At the start



The volunteers do not see this as charity work. They say they're merely looking out for their neighbours.

PHOTO: COLLECTED

of the programme, the Abinash Bangla team enlisted around 25 families of the area to provide them healthy and fulfilling meals.

All of these families depend on incomes from professions that have been severely affected by the shutdown -- tea stores, makeshift vegetable shops, low-cost garment business etc. As the shutdown hit, these traders became jobless overnight.

"We wanted to officially launch

our foundation on April 14 so that we can start our activities on the first day of the Bengali New Year. But as the Covid-19 crisis hit, we decided to start early considering the needs of the less privileged (of the area)," said Mahmud, one of the members of the foundation.

The organisation chose Tajmahal Road as the starting point as most of its 11 committee members live here and have liaison with poor families of the area.

"We know every one of the families as we live nearby. They are our neighbours, who are currently out of jobs or going through a rough patch with their businesses. We are trying our best to help them out during such a time," Mahmud said.

But the initiative is not limited to just these 25 families. Often, people from outside the list -- primarily rickshaw-pullers -- walk in and ask for meals, and the volunteers don't refuse them.

"We know providing one meal a day is not enough, so we are trying to raise more funds. A lot of people are helping us by providing cash or groceries. A lot of individual donors have contributed everything from Tk 100 to sacks of rice," Mahmud continued.

It is mandated that only one person from each family come. "As one person from each family comes collect the meal, we don't have trouble maintaining social distance," Mahmud explained the distribution process.

The diners come in with boxes,

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Narcotics dept staff sell alcohol, assault journo

Barishal district admin officials recover 180 litres of locally-made liquor from the spot

OUR CORRESPONDENT, Barishal

Some employees of Department of Narcotics Control (DNC) yesterday assaulted a journalist while they were selling locally-brewed alcohol at its Barishal office, defying the ongoing shutdown.

Video journalist Kamal Hossain of private TV channel Bangla Vision said seeing a crowd, he entered the DNC divisional office and attempted to record the scene.

"At that time, DNC employees started beating me and damaged my camera and phone," he said, adding that later they fled the scene.

Hearing about the incident, journalists from different media outlets rushed to the spot and demanded punishment for the assaulters. This correspondent was also present there.

On information, Assistant Commissioner and Executive Magistrate of Barishal District Administration Md Saiful Islam rushed to the spot, seized 180 litres of alcohol and ordered to destroy those.

The executive magistrate said he sent a letter to DNC to take departmental action against those involved in assaulting the journalist and selling narcotics creating a crowd during the shutdown.

One of the staffers named by Kamal as an attacker, was reached by this correspondent, but he denied assaulting the journalist. "I just dragged him into the room," he said.

Md Hafizul Islam, additional director of DNC in Barishal division, said some 70 people with alcohol buying permits -- all of them conservancy workers -- gathered there without prior permission.

He said action would be taken against the DNC staff who were involved in the incident.

Sunil, one of the persons present at the premises, said he went there after he was told they would be given their allotted "quota" of liquor.

Another conservancy worker, wishing not to be named, said they buy local liquor from here every month.

Two others present there said Sunil asked them to go there.



PHOTO: TITU DAS

Brothers Jasim and Ibrahim are like apex predators of Kirtankhola, only that they prey on stray fruit dropped by traders' boats. The photo was taken last week.