

Fight climate change like coronavirus

Urges UN on 50th anniversary of Earth Day

AFP, Geneva

The world should fight climate change with the same determination it is showing in the battle against the new coronavirus, the United Nations said yesterday.

The UN's World Meteorological Organization said it was time to flatten the curve on climate change as well, with its impact on the planet "reaching a crescendo" in the past five years -- the hottest on record.

The trend is expected to continue, the WMO said yesterday, as it marked the 50th anniversary of Earth Day -- an annual event to demonstrate support for environmental protection.

Carbon dioxide levels at one key global observing station are about 26 percent higher than in 1970, while the average global temperature has increased by 0.86 degrees Celsius in that time, the WMO said.

Temperatures are also 1.1 Celsius warmer than the pre-industrial era, it added.

The agency said the COVID-19 crisis was exacerbating the socioeconomic impacts of climate change -- for example, making it harder to keep people safe from tropical cyclones.

However, the WMO's climate monitoring programme has recorded a reduction in key pollutants and improvements in air quality as a result of the industrial downturn during the

pandemic.

"We estimate that there is going to be a six percent drop of the carbon emissions this year because of the lack of emissions of transportation and from industrial energy production," WMO Secretary-General Petteri Taalas said.

But he said the drop would only be temporary and "in the most likely case we will go back to normal next year", adding that failure to tackle climate change could threaten people's wellbeing, ecosystems and economies "for centuries" to come.

"We need to flatten both the pandemic and climate change curves," he said.

"We need to show the same determination and unity against climate change as against COVID-19," calling for action not only in the short-term "but for many generations ahead".

- 'Immediate threat' - Swedish climate activist Greta Thunberg echoed the sentiment during a talk in Stockholm, stressing the need to handle "two crises at once".

She said climate change "is an immediate threat, even if it may not be as immediate as the coronavirus it will still impact ourselves and especially other people in other parts of the world".



People desperate for food try to get hold of a pack of relief materials kept inside a bus which was heading to another area. The photo was taken in Shonir Akhra area of the capital yesterday.

PHOTO: ANISUR RAHMAN

Session jams loom large

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of all students. Moreover, many of our students do not have internet access as they are now in their village homes," Dhaka University Pro-Vice Chancellor Prof Muhammad Samad told The Daily Star.

"If we start it [online education], those who have no internet could feel left out," he added.

Pro-VC Samad said the DU is considering holding classes on public holidays and weekends once it reopens, and if possible it will shorten the summer vacation in June.

All the 46 public universities have been closed since March 24 and the government has now extended the closure till May 5, in a bid to stem the further spread of Covid-19.

"Our residential students are now far away from us and we cannot say whether they have internet access or not. Besides, our education is practical and laboratory-based -- we cannot give instruction online. This is a big hurdle," said Bangladesh University of Engineering and Technology (Buet) Registrar Prof SM Mahbubur Rahman.

The registrar of Comilla University, Abu Taher Bhuiyan, and registrar (in-charge) of Islamic University, Kushtia, Abdul Latif, said their universities were

not equipped to take online classes.

"Most departments are not digitally equipped," said Abdul Latif. **LACK OF INTERNET CONNECTION, DEVICES**

Educators said many students, especially those living in rural areas, lack the steady internet connection or the devices to be able to learn remotely.

Because of this, authorities of Chittagong University, Rajshahi University, and Jahangirnagar University said, they are not capable of taking online classes.

"Internet service is not available in many villages. If we go for online classes, most of the students will miss it due to no internet access," said CU VC Prof Shireen Akhter. Barisal University VC Prof Sadequ Arefin said they have no plan to start online classes. "Many of our students are from poor families, they do not have access to internet or laptops," he said.

The Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics' Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey 2019 found only 37.6 percent of households in the country has access to the internet by any device from home. It also found only 5.6 percent of households have a computer or tablet.

Telecom insiders said there is 30

percent smartphone penetration in Bangladesh. There are a total 10 crore SIM cards -- of these, around four crore are unique users.

EXCEPTION, NOT THE RULE

So far, of the public universities, only SUIT in Sylhet has started online classes through the Zoom app, in the last week of March.

"We eliminated academic session jam after years of hard work and don't want to fall in the problem again," said VC Prof Farid Uddin Ahmed.

At the beginning, around half the teachers started taking online classes, but this number increased day by day. The VC hopes that in a few more days, all teachers will start taking online classes.

"Till regular life resumes, this online class method will help us face this situation and continue academic activities."

While at first, many students complained about problems with access, no one is raising the issue any more, he added.

[Our correspondents in Sylhet, Cumilla, Kushtia, Barishal, Jahangirnagar University, and Rajshahi University, have contributed to this report]

World on brink

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Even before the pandemic hit, parts of East Africa and South Asia were already facing severe food shortages caused by drought and the worst locust infestations for decades.

"We could be facing multiple famines of biblical proportions within a short few months," he said. "The truth is we do not have time on our side."

The worst-case scenario could see famine in some three dozen countries, Beasley said.

The impact of lost tourism revenues, falling remittances and travel and other restrictions linked to the coronavirus pandemic are expected to leave some 130 million people acutely hungry this year, adding to around 135 million already in that category.

"COVID-19 is potentially catastrophic for millions who are already hanging by a thread," said Arif Husain, chief economist and director of research, assessment and monitoring at WFP.

"It is a hammer blow for millions more who can only eat if they earn a wage," he said in a statement. "Lockdowns and global economic recession have already decimated their nest eggs. It only takes one more shock - like Covid-19 - to push them over the edge. We must collectively act now to mitigate the impact of this global catastrophe."

WFP expects to need \$10-\$12 billion to fund its assistance programmes this year compared to a record \$8.3 billion raised last year, Husain added. It plans to pre-position food stocks over the coming months in anticipation of growing needs.

Meanwhile, a World Bank

report yesterday said pandemic-hit developing nations' economies would suffer another blow as remittances are expected to plunge by about 20 percent globally this year.

"Remittances are a vital source of income for developing countries," World Bank Group President David Malpass said in a statement. "The ongoing economic recession caused by COVID-19 is taking a severe toll on the ability to send money home and makes it all the more vital that we shorten the time to recovery for advanced economies."

In some countries, payments from workers abroad amount to a quarter or even one-third of GDP, including South Sudan, Haiti, Nepal, Kyrgyz Republic, Tajikistan, Montenegro and Tonga.

As the WFP warned of potential famine, Group of 20 agriculture ministers pledged to ensure "sufficient" global food supplies for "the poorest, the most vulnerable, and displaced people."

But the global markets, on which the severity of the crisis will depend, remain under intense pressure because of the pandemic. Extraordinary stimulus measures worth trillions of dollars gave some boost to stock markets, but have failed to lift the overall mood on trading floors.

Like with the food crisis warning from the WFP, the biggest impact of the loss of jobs and the overall economic downturn is being felt by the most disadvantaged.

They include the millions of migrant workers from South Asia and elsewhere that toil in the Middle East to send money back home to their families.

Later on, Hasan, Badal, Minu and Parvin appealed to the Appellate Division of the Supreme Court against the HC verdict. Shahidul filed a jail appeal.

On August 2 in 2016, the Appellate Division granted the appeals of Hasan, Badal, Minu and Parvin and dismissed Shahidul's appeal. On March 5, 2017, the apex court rejected Shahidul's petition for review of the verdict. He sought presidential mercy, which was turned down by the president. He was executed on November 29.

Shazneen's father Latifur Rahman, chairman of Transcom Group, and mother Shahnaz Rahman, have requested all relatives, friends and well-wishers to attend the milad mehfil.

Shazneen's

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hanged at Kashimpur High Security Prison in Gazipur in 2017.

A Special Tribunal for Prevention of Women and Children Repression delivered the verdict in September 2003, sentencing six accused to death for the rape and murder.

They are domestic help Shahidul, a contractor renovating the house Syed Sajjad Mainuddin Hasan and his assistant Badal, housemaids Estema Khatun Minu and her sister Parvin and carpenter Shaniram Mandal.

After the lower court verdict, the death reference reached the High Court for confirmation of the sentence. At the same time, the accused appealed to the HC against their convictions and sentences. The HC acquitted Shaniram.

Silent carriers cause for alarm

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According to Centre for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), 25 percent of the infected people might not have symptoms.

As of yesterday, 120 people died and 3,772 people were detected with coronavirus, according to Directorate General of Health Services.

But many experts believe that the number is much higher as the country has yet to ensure testing at a massive scale.

Dr Jahidur Rahman, virologist and assistant professor of Shahid Suhrawardy Medical College, said, "Around 40-50 percent of Covid-19 patients may be asymptomatic as various journals are saying. This is really alarming as asymptomatic coronavirus can spread fast and cause death."

He said that along with other reasons, this was also another big reason that Italy was badly hit by the virus.

"The sooner the people are tested, the better it will be for the society," he said.

lockdown is not working and transmission continuing," Prof Nazrul Islam, noted virologist and former vice chancellor of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujib Medical University, told The Daily Star.

"It appears that the outbreak in the city is heading towards its peak," he said, adding that the future may be grim, and eventually people would gain herd immunity.

Prof Ridwanur Rahman, medicine and infectious diseases specialist, said, "With the current number of daily tests, it is not possible to get the real picture."

He suggested introducing widespread tests across the country within two weeks to detect and isolate all hidden cases. "During this period, no one will be allowed to move anywhere."

Transmission in Dhaka remains

uncontrolled due to lax restrictions and inadequate tests. At one point, people will gain herd immunity, he added.

Prof Nasima Sultana yesterday said 10 people died from the coronavirus in 24 hours before 2.30pm yesterday, taking the toll to 120.

Of the victims, seven were men and three women; seven were from Dhaka and one each from Narayanganj, Tangail and Mymensingh.

Three of them were above 60, two were 51 and 60, three between 41 and 50 and two 21 and 30.

"Young people should not feel that the disease will not harm them," Nasima said.

During the same 24 hours, five Covid-19 patients recovered, taking the total to 92.

Yesterday's announcements came after 3,096 samples were tested across

'I can't even cry, need to stay strong'

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10,000 people died in New York, and of them, at least 170 were of Bangladeshi origin.

New York is home to nearly four lakh Bangladeshis most of whom live in Queens, one of five boroughs of the city.

Fulkumari, who moved to New York from Bangladesh seven years ago, has been dealing with Covid-19 patients since early March at the 545-bed public hospital, which is now overburdened by such patients.

"Initially, I was afraid of how to handle these patients. But in a couple of days, I got used to it. It became clear to me that I am the one who has to take care of them," the 51-year-old nurse told this correspondent on April 20.

She has to watch over the patients with utmost care and extreme caution. She has to put on personal protective equipment (PPE) and also help the patients wear it.

"I have often seen patients breaking down, panicking and crying. In such cases, I give them moral support and courage, saying there is nothing to fear and that they will be okay."

She helps the patients with exercise, and routinely notify the doctors of their health status.

"I also educate them about what to do and what not to do," said Fulkumari who did her BSC from Dhaka Nursing College and post-graduation from the National Institute of Preventive & Social Medicine in Dhaka.

A staggering 85pc cases in Dhaka

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She mentioned that most of those who died from the virus in New York were aged between 60 and 80, and had complications including heart diseases and diabetes.

Another factor was that they went to hospital at the last stage of infection. Most of those who sought medical help at the early stage of infection recovered, she said.

Fulkumari recalled that a Bangladeshi couple at Bronx, where she lives, died of Covid-19 recently, and the state has taken the responsibility of their two children.

"This is so sad," said Fulkumari, a mother of two, hoping such a tragedy doesn't befall anyone.

She said she strictly maintains physical distancing and hygiene practices both at her workplace and home because any mistake at this trying time could have serious consequences.

"My husband and children didn't want me to continue my job. But I said I couldn't do that. I took a vow to serve people when they are sick. It's my holy duty."

She even told her family members that if they wanted, she could stay away from home until the pandemic is over. Eventually, her family members submitted to her determination.

"I maintain physical distance at every stage -- all the way from the hospital to my apartment."

Fulkumari said she leaves her uniform at the hospital where it is

disinfected every day. She disinfects herself before leaving the hospital for home.

On the way back home, she keeps physical distancing while travelling by public bus. It takes her one and a half hours to reach home.

"Minutes before I reach my apartment, I call my husband and ask him to keep all the doors open so that I don't need to touch any of the door knobs."

"Outside my apartment, there is a plastic box where I leave my jacket, shoes and bag. Then I directly go to the bathroom."

She then washes her used clothes, takes a shower, and puts on fresh clothes.

"I don't go near any of my children or husband. My younger child, a 12-year boy, often wants me to hug him, but I refuse."

"I sleep in a separate room," Fulkumari said.

Asked how she feels about this physical distancing, she said, "We know that things will get back to normal once the pandemic is over. I just don't want to bring troubles by making any mistake at this difficult time."

Asked if she has any advice for the health workers in Bangladesh, she said, "I would say they must not avoid their responsibilities, but the authorities have to ensure their safety. They must be provided with PPEs."

"Who will take care of the patients if the frontline fighters are not protected?"

Gonoshasthaya

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demands," he said, urging the government to ensure speedy testing of the kits by the Directorate General of Drug Administration.

A team of Gonoshasthaya-RNA Biotech, a sister concern of Gonoshasthaya Kendra, developed the kits called Rapid Dot Blot, which can detect coronavirus infection in 15 minutes. It was facing trouble in importing reagents for the kit, but after the government approval, they imported from China and England.

The veteran physician said earlier this month that they collected five blood samples of Covid-19 patients, but the kit production was not possible due to technical glitches at their factory. With the government support, the glitches were fixed.

Gonoshasthaya Kendra again applied to the DGHS for blood samples of Covid-19 patients on April 12, but did not get any response until April 21.

He said he then contacted the Prime Minister's Office. Eventually, they received a response to the letter around 11:00am yesterday.

"We expect the government to help us smoothly go for production of the kit," he said, stressing that more tests are urgent to identify and isolate Covid-19 patients as that would be the most effective way to prevent transmission.

"It's a matter of time that we can go for the mass production of the kit," said Mohib Ullah Khondoker, managing director of the Gonoshasthaya-RNA Biotech Ltd.

Shutdown

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shutdown after it first announced the closure of all public and private offices from March 26 to April 4. The first announcement was made on March 23.

On April 1, the government extended the shutdown from April 5 to 11 as the situation had not improved and on April 5 it extended the shutdown from April 12 to 14. Later, on April 10 it was extended till April 25.

However, emergency services remained out of the purview of the shutdown.

Utility services such as water, electricity, gas, fire service, telephone and the internet have also remained operational.

Transportation of agricultural products, fertilisers, insecticides, foods, goods, medical equipment, daily essentials and media, kitchen markets, restaurants and drug stores and hospitals remain out of the purview of the shutdown as well.

Amid a sharp rise in the number of Covid-19 cases in the country, a high profile meeting held on Tuesday also decided to extend the shutdown for at least one week.

DGHS yesterday said 10 people died of coronavirus infections in the last 24 hours, taking the death toll to 120. Besides, 390 people tested positive for Covid-19 in the same period. With this, the total number of infected has reached 3,772.

India gives

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Mosleuddin is believed to be one of the conspirators who shot down Sheikh Mujibur Rahman.

Both assassins were reportedly living in West Bengal for over two decades. Abdul Majid was picked up from near his home in south Kolkata late February. Mosleuddin was detained in Bongaon, some 70 km away.

Abdul Majid had been passing himself off as a teacher while Mosleuddin ran a small herbal medicine shop. According to easternlinks.com, a news portal that broke the story, Majid revealed Mosleuddin's whereabouts before he was hanged.

Both are among at least a dozen others who were convicted of the assassination of Mujibur Rahman by the Bangladesh Supreme Court in 2009. Five of the convicted men were executed in 2010. At least four convicts are still at large.

The reported intelligence operation to track Mosleuddin was conducted under deep cover by top agencies and even the West Bengal police was unaware of the operation, sources say.

When initial reports about the operation emerged along with photos and videos of the suspect, there was a lot of confusion because some sources claimed the man in the photo - who was allegedly Mosleuddin - had died a few years ago.

According to some reports, Bangladesh used highly sophisticated facial recognition technology to confirm that the man being handed over was indeed the fugitive.

Official confirmation of the operation is awaited both in India and Bangladesh.

S African president unveils \$26b virus relief plan

AFP, Johannesburg

South African President Cyril Ramaphosa on Tuesday announced a \$26 billion relief package to support the economy and the vulnerable during the coronavirus pandemic.

In a special address to the nation, Ramaphosa announced "a massive social and economic support package of 500 billion rand (\$26.3 billion), which amounts to about 10 percent of our GDP."

Standing in line in Bangkok's historic quarter for food donations of rice, noodles, milk and curry packets, Chare Kunwong, a 46-year-old masseur said: "If I wait for the government's aid then I'll be dead first."

Among the hardest hit economically were also millions of migrant workers from South Asia and elsewhere who toil in the Middle East to send money back home to their families.

The pandemic shutdowns mean even their bodies cannot be sent home, and are instead being buried or cremated in the country where they die -- often without any loved ones present.

NOBODY SAYS GOODBYE